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Teaching Dante: An Annotated Syllabus

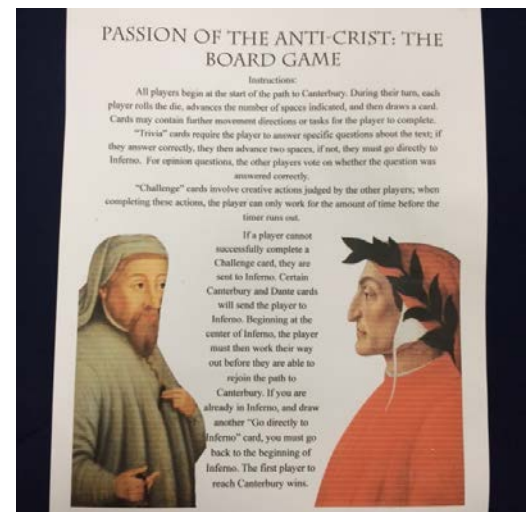
Learn Everything. You'll find that nothing will be superfluous.
--epitaph on tombstone of Leonard Boyle, 1923-1999

Organizing Principle #1: Casting a Wide Net

For me, casting the widest possible curricular net is the only way to make sense of the world. In Bible, we might explore the rabbinic notion of self-reflection and repentance with a series of Rembrandt self-portraits, we might enter a Genesis text by way of Haydn's *Creation Oratorio*, learn modern history by studying a vintage handbag and the woman who carried it, and examine theological notions of exile and exodus through Dante and texts of sacred prayer and self-examination. A decade ago, one student took a stained glass course in the evenings so she could surprise me with her vision of the bottom of Inferno. Another student's surprise greeted me one morning at the classroom door, a massive 6'X4' canvas, an oil-painting of the three-mouths of Lucifer gnawing sloppily on his prey.



As this course has evolved these last 14 years, it has managed to maintain a mystique for the group that (bravely) take the leap with me. It began as a year long course, contracted to one semester, and last year returned to its yearlong format, by request of the class, lobbying to add *Canterbury Tales* to expand their time on pilgrimage in the medieval world. Ah! Two anti-clerical texts, written in different places, voices, and languages but both journeying to a holy destination was too inviting a connection to shrug off. Their final group project was a clever board game linking the two text journeys that was clever in design and great fun to play.



Video: <https://drive.google.com/open?id=0B-jXHFMd4U5NRXpNM0dFaHQ4bThSZnlvZ2s3Sk1qUmd0aF8w>

And a few years ago I ran into a student from one of my early "experiments" in Dante teaching. Eight years had passed since that course. She asked me to come into a private



room, took off her shirt and showed me her tattoo. Who knows what we wittingly or unwittingly imprint upon those sometimes faraway faces in the room?

Students have always found artistic outlets in the class, and this past year it became a formal requirement. I employed the talents of a conceptual artist to work with my class to interpret the *Commedia* into the language of art. Her premise was to explore the idiom of graffiti art as a contemporary expression of exile and separation. We took a trip to the special exhibits of Basquiat and Vik Muniz at Atlanta's High Museum and returned to struggle with a visual translation of this text, developing our own wall. It was a process to behold.



Artists' Statement:

<https://drive.google.com/open?id=0B-jXHFMd4U5NeFozYnJCQ2JwdFU>

Organizing Principle #2: This text was written for You, too.

Course Description: <https://drive.google.com/open?id=0B-jXHFMd4U5NWF8zNU1zdDNqQmN6Wmk0QzRueFhwcWppeHRF>

<https://drive.google.com/open?id=0B-jXHFMd4U5NWF8zNU1zdDNqQmN6Wmk0QzRueFhwcWppeHRF>

I prize the feeling of being the learner, of puzzling over a problem, unsure. So I model the course on the seminar style of my own teachers. We sit around a Harkness-style table to invite the participants in. Students read and prepare three cantos each night and bring a reflection they've written exploring an idea, a word, a canto, a surprise or puzzlement in their reading. Discussion leaders rotate among class members. Where am I in this configuration? Imagine me as the driving teacher who puts the learner behind the wheel but can steer from my side seat if I see the journey off-roading. And I can also point out far-away vistas or scenery that the driver, intent with staying on course, hasn't noticed.



Organizing Principle #3: Road signs give drivers a destination

There are 6 key expectations for this course.

1. Daily preparation of three cantos and one free-form reflection prepared for each class.
2. Seminar leadership on a rotating basis
3. An agreement not to read ahead past *Purgatorio*, canto 29, in order to compose an original canto anticipating and describing the parting of Dante and Virgil, in the style of Dante. (Example included in "Representative Student Work" section.)
4. A 140-line contemporary canto, in the style of Dante, set in Inferno. (Example included in "Representative Student Work" section.)

<https://drive.google.com/open?id=0B-jXHFMd4U5NQkVXTEstWDI2Yms>

5. A major (approved) group project for each semester or an individual scholarly paper on an approved topic. (See both wall art and board game, p.1, for examples of such projects.)
6. Submission of "A Contemplation Bomb," a final response to this year's text journey. (Examples included in "Representative Student Work")

<https://drive.google.com/open?id=0B-jXHFMd4U5NVFhKcTJEWUs2THZaYmhYd204N0Zyb3pZRvJF>

Road Signs to What Lies Ahead: Syllabus for Dante's *Commedia*

Canticle 1: Inferno

In lecture + text+ art format, I deliver the first 8 "establishing" classes.

Class 1 and 2: The Bible and Reading Medieval Art and How Medieval Christians read the OT (I use images of NT understanding of Jonah as well as the exquisitely constructed 13th C. Moralized Bible, with its lunette-by-lunette OT/NT parallels).

Class 3: The narrative of the NT and iconography of medieval art, the Eucharist and Transubstantiation. (Class prepares by reading *Book of Matthew*)

Class 4: Examples of Prefiguration and Syncretism: the Binding of Isaac, The Good Shepherd(s), and Jonah and Jesus. (I use a series of images, including the St. Vitale mosaics in Ravenna and Chagall's *Binding of Isaac* to demonstrate the interpretation and iconography associated with the Binding of Isaac into a Christian narrative which anticipates the crucifixion of Jesus. I show examples of David and Jesus as Good Shepherds from the Museum of Galla Placidia and St. Vitale and of course we read the text of Ps. 23).

Class 5: Horizontal and Vertical Readings of the Ceiling of the Baptistry in Florence

This is a challenging class, because reading the ceiling horizontally we learn the narrative of Creation, Joseph, Jesus and John the Baptist and vertically we must struggle with the interplay *between* the panels This proves to be one of the classes that students remember and recall because it opens their eyes to connections and parallels they had never imagined, a foreshadowing of the *Commedia* moving horizontally but also inviting possible vertical links of cantos between canticles. This class proves an important touchstone in understanding the text.

<https://drive.google.com/open?id=0B-jXHFMD4U5NSW1mdEVPWEcxZzA>

Class 6: Florence and Dante and the Conditions of Exile

Class 7: Dante's Florence, (Church politics, Guelfs vs. Ghibellines, supplemented with maps)

Class 8 and 9: Entering the Dark Wood (Cantos 1-3)

Why Virgil? Excerpts from *The Aeneid*, Book 6, also "From the Aeneid" by Seamus Heaney

Class 10: Cantos 4-6 (Supplement: *Augustine's Confessions*, book 8)

Class 11: Canto 7-9

Class 12: Cantos 10-12

Class 13: Cantos 13-15

Class 14: Cantos 16-18

Class 15: Canto 19-21 (Supplement: frescoes in Quattro Santi dei Coronati—the Donation of Constantine)

Class 16: Cantos 22-24 (Supplement: "Poem Ending with a Line from Dante" by William Matthews, also Dan Simmons, "Vanni Fucci is Alive and Well and Living in Florence.")

Class 17: Cantos 25-27

Class 18: Cantos 29-31

Class 19: Cantos 32-33 (Supplement: "An Afterwards" by Seamus Heaney)

Class 20: Canto 33-34—Return to the Eucharist: Cannibalism and Communion—Parodying an Inverted Eucharist

Wrap-up of Inferno/Intro to Purgatory

Class 21: Cross-Liturgical Invitations (We notice the Purgatorial Soundtrack, focusing on Psalm 114. We look carefully at its OT context of this implicit act of faith in crossing the Red Sea, transforming the journey from exile to exodus. Likewise Dante approaches a parallel transformation as he faces the terraces of purification. In Jewish liturgy, psalm 114 is sung every morning in synagogue. Hebrew liturgy is often sung in minor keys that express longing, but this psalm is sung with a surprisingly joyful melody. We listen to Gregorian chants and other Jewish liturgical psalms set to music in daily prayer, and a favorite of mine, that never ceases to astound the students is taught as a discovery lesson. There we are astounded to discover the connection between the “Sanctus” of *Bach’s B minor Mass* and the *Kedushah* (meaning sacred or sanctified) at the heart of daily communal Jewish prayer; both liturgical centerpieces use precisely the same text (Isaiah 6:3). Finally, to begin class with Bach in the background! We now look forward to the soundtrack of *Purgatory*, leaving behind the incessant shrieking and whining and weeping of *Inferno*. Music welcomes students into class most days, now that we’ve reached Purgatory.

Canticle 2: Climbing the Terraces of Purgatory

The class continues in the three-canto a night, class-leader model. I will note only highlights and supplements as we move through the next canticle: Looking at **Lorenzetti frescoes**—Good and Bad Government, the Vices and Virtues of the Medieval World

Canto 1-3: What is Cato doing Here?? Pride: the root of all evil?

Canto 13-15: Love, Free Will and the Intellect compared to Inferno 15/16?

Cantos 19-21: Statius, the purpose of poetry

Cantos 30-33: Analyzing (the possible symbols and meaning of) The Pageant and the Apocalyptic Vision

Here’s a wild tangent: we pause here to discuss possible contact and conversation between Dante and Jews as he traveled, even the possibility of “500 and 10 and 5,” that mysterious number introduced as part of the pageant, containing a coded reference from Gematria. Gematria is a code that assumes every Hebrew letter embodies a number and may be manipulated to reveal a secret message. In this construct, “500 and 10 and 5” becomes “tekiah”—an unusual but oddly apt Hebrew word used only during the season of confession, signaling specifically the call to sound the blast of the shofar on the holy days of repentance in Judaism. Does the number foretell of apocalyptic horn blasts in the pageant? Far-fetched as this may be, we’re certainly primed for a lively discussion.

Canticle 3: Paradise Found

Highlight and supplements as we enter the mysteries of The Celestial Rose:

Cantos 1-3: Gaining New Eyes and Being Blinded

Canto 10-12: Francis and Dominic described by Thomas Aquinas and St. Bonaventure, respectively. We prepare by reading about each in Herzman and Cook’s *The Medieval World View*, and in addition we spend an entire class looking carefully at Giotto’s frescos on the walls of the Church of St. Francis in Assisi and the Dominican-themed fresco at the Spanish Chapel at Santa Maria Novella in Florence.

Canto 24, 25, 26: The Oral Exams:

St. Peter examines Dante in "Faith"
Saint James examines Dante in "Hope"
Saint John examines Dante in "Love"

(Supplement: "In the Evening We Shall Be Examined on Love" by Thomas Centolella)

Canto 30-33: Examining the Emissaries

Beatrice returns to her "petal", Bernard of Clairvaux takes Dante to God.

The Contemplation Bomb assignment is due by end of exam week. Students also write Final Reflections pulling together the semester or year's study.

Ending is hard. We find there a blinding light that flashes a sudden understanding of the beginning of *Inferno* and the journey we've been on. I like to end the study of the *Commedia* where we began. Once we have "ended," I ask all to close both books and eyes, and I read them, in my best "Dante," the opening cantos. This circling back reinforces that the beginning makes sense only at the end, that the best preparation for reading the *Commedia* is reading the *Commedia*, as I have certainly learned.

This past year, during the exam period, we did one more (maybe silly, maybe risky) thing. I screened *Inside Llewyn Davis* for the class. This is a Coen Brothers movie I had seen the year before. Knowing that the Coen Brothers often use classic literature as a referential jumping-off point for their scripts, I felt justified in inviting my students into that film playground and challenged them to see if they sensed any Dante echoes embedded there as I had when I first saw it. The discussion was animated. They noted that the protagonist is a hardened, prideful self-destructive folk-singer in exile, bouncing from one couch to another around Manhattan, finding only temporary refuge from night to night, traveling into cold and snowy territory, I'll leave it at that. Without giving too much away, I'll say simply that Llewyn Davis' journey is circular; at the end is where it begins. Like the *Commedia*, the ending insists we begin again.

Now we are finally ready to read the *Commedia*.

Representative Student Work from 6 Creative Assignments:

Poetry in literary magazine: Gelman

<https://drive.google.com/open?id=0B-jXHFMd4U5NRWtEM2VRS3NIM1V1WEluV2MzU21QR3ZmUGs0>

An original canto describing Virgil's departure: Cowie-Weiss

<https://drive.google.com/open?id=0B-jXHFMd4U5NQ2JDWVprWU56R0xVLWdYQkdWZHN4dGgwdnQ0>

Original contemporary canto in the style of Dante: Brown

<https://drive.google.com/open?id=0B-jXHFMd4U5NVlhvczA4SFNjN1MyRHHVuREt5d25qYWh1NlhR>

Final reflection on studying Dante: Gelman

<https://drive.google.com/open?id=0B-jXHFMd4U5NQkFYeVloa3JibElZYmF2RERwR0padWIQT2RV>

A "contemplation bomb": Shapiro

<https://drive.google.com/open?id=0B-jXHFMd4U5NRDjnZ28yTzNUbHQwUIZ6aElXVGdOOC1xSEFB>

Rules for the Inferno/Canterbury Board Game ("Passion of the Anti-Christ: The Board Game"): 2015 Dante Class

<https://drive.google.com/open?id=0B-jXHFMd4U5NTW53NnoteFh5ODhwdkthSDJaSzc2aEVKS21J>