

CL 9500A: Fall 2021

Dante Comparatista: *Inferno*



Bela Čikoš Sesija, “Homer Teaches Dante, Shakespeare, and Goethe to Sing” (1909)

Fall/Winter Term 2021
Wednesdays 9:30-12:20pm
Room: TBA

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1. Course Description

This year (2021) marks the 700th anniversary of Dante's death (1321). In step with the many acknowledgments of this milestone around the world, this course will explore the critical reception of the *Commedia* through the centuries as a culturally vital and ever expanding context for contemplating the Poet's unique impact on the conceptualization and disciplinary development of Comparative Literature.

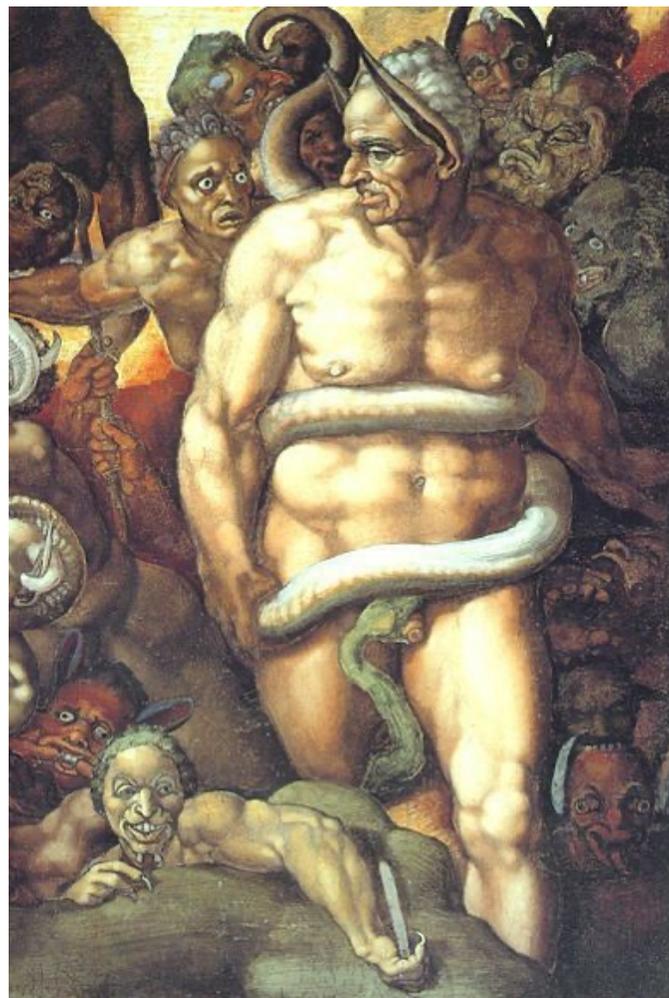
In 1909, the Croatian Symbolist painter Bela Čikoš Sesija invited the viewer of his painting "Homer Teaches Dante, Shakespeare, and Goethe to Sing" to adopt a comparatist perspective in assessing the hierarchical positioning of the four Great Poets in the Western tradition (as envisioned by classically trained nineteenth-century literary scholars). The painter represents Homer as the greatest figure in the quartet from a causal standpoint. If Homer is the teacher from whom epic song was drawn forth at its Muse-inspired origin and passed on to later singers in the succession of Great Poets in the chorus of Time, then Dante, Shakespeare, and Goethe are necessarily reduced to the status of receptive disciples. But notice how Dante is also foregrounded with Homer and seated in opposition to his ancient counterpart, suggesting not only that the reception and revival of classical song in the Middle Ages was Dante's sole achievement but also that it had earned the Florentine a seat of formal prominence ahead of the casually standing figures of Shakespeare and Goethe.

The strict Neoclassical ordering of the four Great Poets audaciously ignores the question of their historical and intertextual relations. Dante actually had no direct access to Homer's epics, and Shakespeare probably never read a word of Dante. Goethe seems to have admired the poetic form and cartographic precision of the *Commedia* but did not need to approach Homer through a medieval mediator. He could read the Homeric epics for himself in the original Greek. Despite these ironies, Sesija's painting spotlights Dante's prominent position in the imaginaire of literary comparatists at the turn of the twentieth century.

A close examination of the thirty-four cantos of the *Inferno* will reveal how Dante constructed his magnum opus to be read comparatively along many axes of mirroring analogy and inversion. His four-fold method of interpretation compels a reader to distinguish literal apprehension of travelogue "facts" from allegorical levels of understanding their significance within the sacred design of Creation while at the same time inviting meditation on their interconnections across the Sacred Poem. His pairing of Virgil (as guide) with Dante (as pilgrim) prompts intertextual analysis of the subversion of the *Aeneid* in the formation of the *Inferno*: a paradoxical process of creative destruction and destructive creation which, in turn, demands a cross-cultural engagement in the Here and Now with the values of the pagan past pitted against the promises of the Christian future.

The Poet's pairing of numerically identical cantos across the great divide between the Damned and the Saved (as mapped onto the cantica divide between *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*) challenges the *lettore*--the reader conceived as a follower in the Poet's footsteps--to chart a route of comparative understanding through the World as well as through the Poem. Just as there are guides and spirits all along the way in the wayward pilgrim's gradual transformation into the world-reforming Poet, so there will be in the hermeneutical projection of the course onto the history of Comparative Literature. A series of influential comparatists (e.g. Auerbach, Barolini, Hollander, Iannucci) will guide the class in exploring the interpretive complexities of the *Commedia* with fresh understandings of the relevance of the Poem to contemporary debates over the role of Literature and Literary Criticism in addressing the seismic schisms of Self/Other, West/East, Christian/Muslim, Male/Female, Text/Image, Sacred/Profane.

nedi cha coli fatto tormento.
 enno dannati i peccator carnali.
 che la raggion somettono al talento.
 chome gli storni ne portan lali.
 nel freddo tempo a schiera lunga e piena
 chosi quel fiato li spinti mali.



Inferno 5: 1-24

Minos: 14th century

Minos: 16th century

2. Assignments / Grade Breakdown

1. Fourfold Reading [10pp. Essay].....	30%
2. Canto Presentation [].....	20%
3. Essay [20 pp.].....	50%

3. Schedule of Readings

SEPTEMBER

Week One

Sept 8 → From the Dark Wood to the Gate

Readings: *Inferno* 1, 2, 3; Daniel Mendelsohn, *Three Rings*

Week Two

Sept 15 → From the Acheron to the Whirlwind

Readings: *Inferno* 4 and 5; Auerbach, “Figura”; Iannucci, “Dante’s Limbo”;
Carolyn Lund-Mead, “Dido Alighieri”

Week Three

Sept 22 → From the Cess-Pit to the Iron Wall

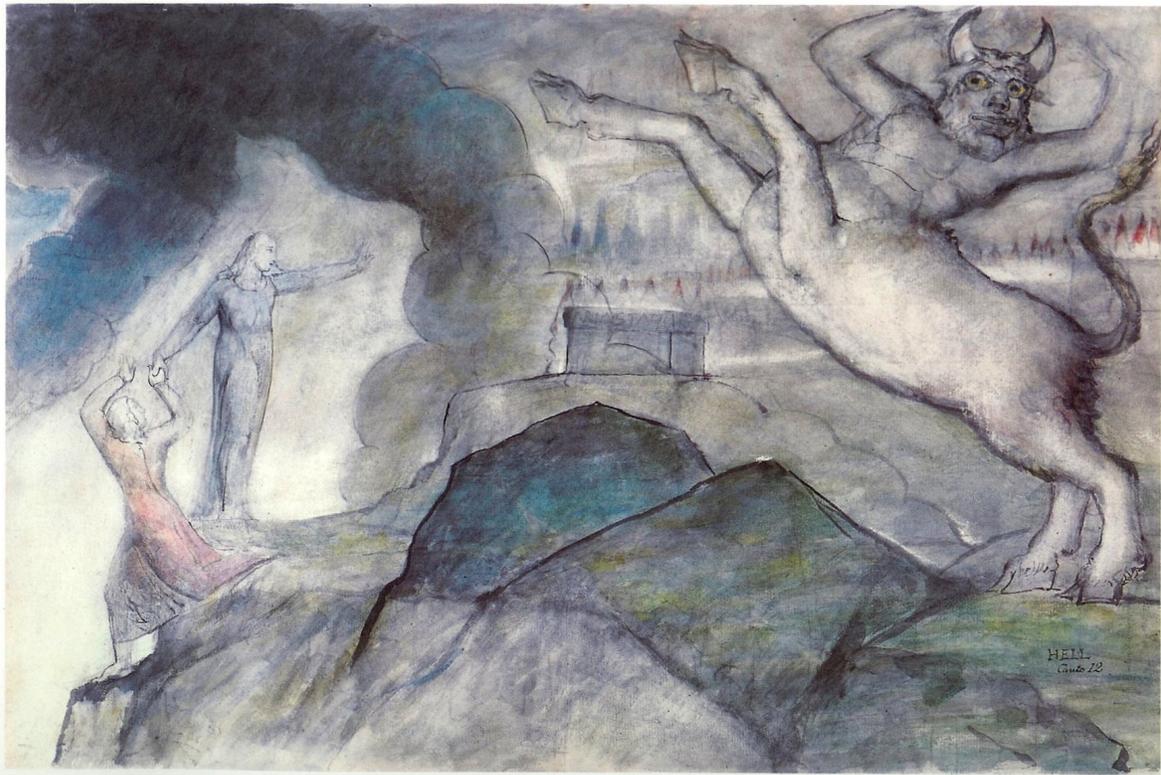
Readings: *Inferno* 6, 7, 8, and 9; Auerbach, *Dante, Poet of the Secular World*

Week Four

Sept 29 → From the Burning Tombs to the River of Blood

Reading: *Inferno* 10, 11, and 12; Auerbach, “Farinata and Cavalcante” [*Mimesis*, ch 8]

Inferno 12



Minotaur: 19th century

OCTOBER

Week Five

Oct 6 → From the Thorn Trees to the Rain of Fire

Reading: *Inferno* 13, 14, 15, and 16; Hollander, “Dante’s Harmonious Homosexuals”; Boswell, “Dante and the Sodomites”

Week Six

Oct 13 → No class

Week Seven

Oct 20 → From the Precipice to the Pope-Hole

Reading: *Inferno* 17, 18, 19; Barolini, *The Undivine Comedy*, Chapter 1, 3

Week Eight

Oct 27 → From the Pit of Tears to the Boiling Pitch

Reading: *Inferno* 20, 21, 22; Barolini, *The Undivine Comedy*, Chapter 2, 4
Midterm

Inferno 22



Bolgia of the Barrators: 15th century

NOVEMBER

[Week Nine.....Fall Reading Week]

Nov 3 → No class

Week Ten

Nov 10 → From the Sad Cloister to the Snake-Pit

Reading: *Inferno* 23, 24, 25; Miller, “Man with Snake: Dante in Jarman’s *Edward II*”
Midterm answer submitted

Week Eleven

Nov 17 → From the Vale of Flames to the Wounding Ground

Reading: *Inferno* 26, 27, 28; Schildgen, *Dante and the Orient*; Miller, “Bataille in the Ninth Bolgia.”

Week Twelve

Nov 24 → From the Abandoned Hospital to the Giants’ Well

Reading: *Inferno* 29, 30, 31; Durling, “Deceit and Digestion in the Belly of Hell”

Inferno 31



The Giants: 15th Century

DECEMBER

Week Thirteen

Dec 1 → From the Lake of Ice to the Exit Tunnel

Reading: *Inferno* 32, 33, 34

Inferno 34



Satan and the Traitors: 16th century

Required Readings

PRIMARY

Dante, *The Inferno*. Ed. Robert Hollander. Trans. Robert Hollander and Jean Hollander. New York: Random House [Anchor Books], 2002. Also available online at the Princeton Dante Project. <https://dante.princeton.edu>

Virgil, *Aeneid*, Book Six. Translation by A. S. Kline available online: <https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/VirgilAeneidVI.php>

SECONDARY

Auerbach, Erich. *Dante, Poet of the Secular World*. Trans. Ralph Manheim. New York Review Books, 2001 [first pub. 1929]

-----“Figura.” https://complit.utoronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/COL1000H_Erich_Aurbach_Figura.pdf

-----“Farinata and Cavalcante.” *Mimesis*, ch. 8. available online at JSTOR

Barolini, Teodolinda. *The Undivine Comedy: Detheologizing Dante*. Chapters 1-4. Princeton University Press, 1992. [scan]

Boswell, John. “Dante and the Sodomites.” *Dante Studies* No. 112 (1994), pp. 63-76. The Johns Hopkins University Press. Available on JSTOR.

Durling, Robert. “Deceit and Digestion in the Belly of Hell.” In: *Allegory and Representation, Selected Papers from the English Institute, 1979-80* (New Series, No. 5). Ed Stephen J. Greenblatt. Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1981, p.61-93.

Hollander, Robert. “Dante’s Harmonious Homosexuals.” available online: <https://www.princeton.edu/~dante/ebdsa/rh.html>

Iannucci, Amilcare A. “Dante’s Limbo: At the Margins of Orthodoxy.” In *Dante & the Unorthodox: The Aesthetics of Transgression*. Ed. James Miller. [scan]

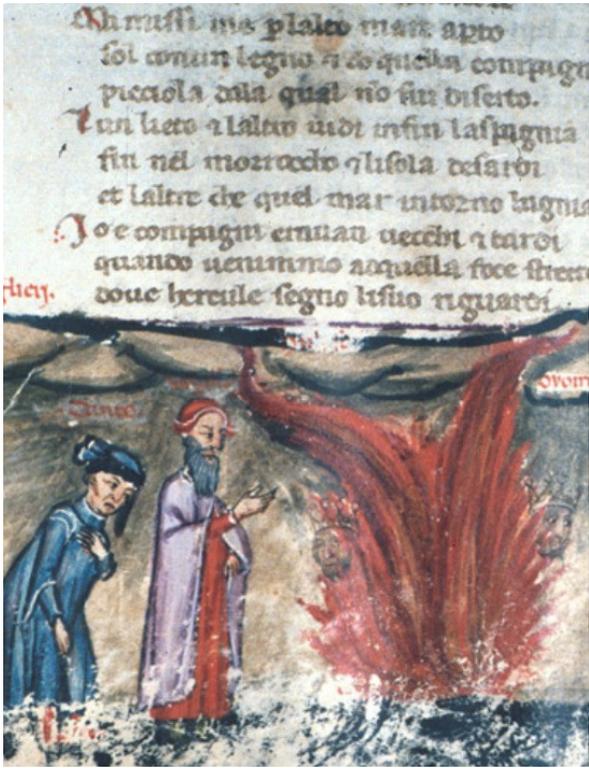
Lund-Mead,Carolynn. “Dido Alighieri: Gender Inversion in the Francesca Episode.” In *Dante & the Unorthodox: The Aesthetics of Transgression*. Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2005 [scan]

Mendelsohn, Daniel. *Three Rings: A Tale of Exile, Narrative, and Fate*. U of Virginia Press, 2020.

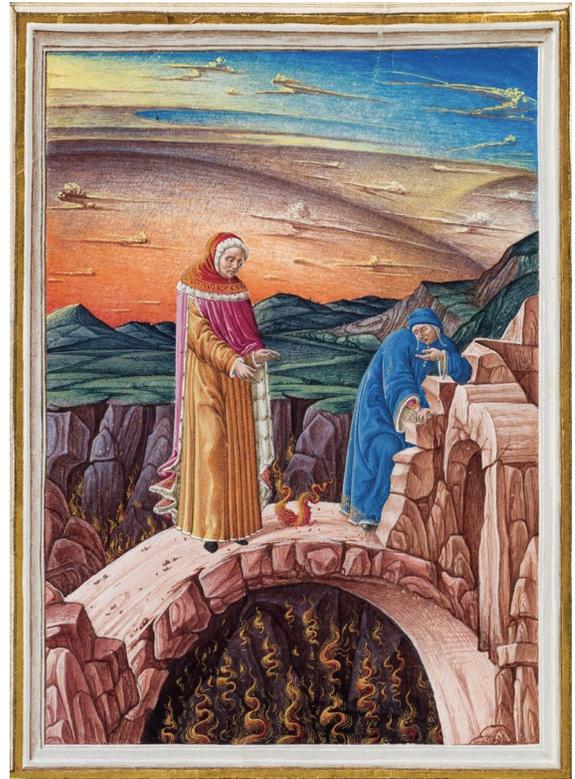
Miller, James. “Bataille in the Ninth Bolgia” In *Dante & the Unorthodox: The Aesthetics of Transgression*. Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2005 [scan]

Miller, James. “Man with Snake: Dante in Derek Jarman’s *Edward II*.” In *Metamorphosing Dante: Appropriations, Manipulations, and Rewritings in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries*, ed. [by Manuele Gagnolati, Fabio Camilletti, and Fabian Lampart, Cultural Inquiry, 2 \(Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2011\), pp. 213–34.](#) available online: https://oa.ici-berlin.org/repository/doi/10.25620/ci-02_13

Schildgen, Brenda Deen. *Dante and the Orient*. University of Illinois Press, 2002



Ulysses 14th c



Ulysses 15th c

Inferno 26

Ulysses 19th c

Ulysses 21st c

