

Translating Dante

Hums 452

Fall, 2020

Prof. Virginia Jewiss

PROVISIONAL SYLLABUS

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

Dante Alighieri is celebrated for *The Divine Comedy*, his epic journey through Inferno, Purgatory, and Paradise, in which he moves from despair to bliss, watched over by his beloved Beatrice. Yet the story of Beatrice begins well before the *Divine Comedy*, in a powerful and problematic text called the *Vita nuova* (New Life). Here Dante recounts how his life was changed - made new - by his youthful encounter with her. Simultaneously a profound exploration of the power of love and an elaborate experimentation with poetic form, this early work is essential to our amorous and literary traditions. It is also a meditation on translation: of life to text; of prose to verse; of the divine to human, and vice versa. A moving reflection on beginning - and beginning again - in the face of loss, this medieval work invites us into the past yet is freshly relevant in our current historical moment. We will analyze the text through a comparative analysis of several translations before turning to relevant moments in the *Divine Comedy* and a selection of modern and contemporary works that the *Vita nuova* has inspired. This course offers a rare opportunity to read deeply Dante's most enigmatic, restless work, to study its influence, and to participate in the making of a new translation of Dante's *New Life*.

The course is arranged in three units:

-Translating Dante

We will read a range of English translations, from Emerson's to the instructor's own work-in-progress version for the Penguin Classics series, which we will workshop as part of our analysis. In addition to gaining a rich understanding of the *Vita nuova*, students will come to appreciate the challenges and nuances of translation (with particular emphasis on lyric poetry) more broadly, and to evaluate various approaches and accomplishments. As we study Dante's "little book," we will also consider what goes into the making of a new edition of a classic.

-Dante Translating

We will expand the topic of translation to include the *Divine Comedy*. A careful study of key passages in the *Divine Comedy* - in which Dante “translates” himself, other lyric poets, Homer, Virgil, and the Bible - will help us understand his creative, integrative process. This unit will consider broader questions of originality, appropriation, transformation, and visionary and revisionary writing.

-New Lives

Finally, we will consider how others “translated” Dante’s *Vita nuova* and made it their own, giving new life to the text. Works will include poetry by Charles Baudelaire, Robert Penn Warren, and Louise Gluck; Elizabeth Alexander’s memoir; short stories by Jorge Luis Borges and Allegra Goodman; an aria by Patrick Cassidy, and a music video by Christine and the Queens.

ASSIGNMENTS:

Attendance and active participation in all class meetings is required.

Critical and creative readings will be enhanced by paintings, sculpture, music, and online lectures and interviews.

Students will write three short responses during the semester, which will lead to a final presentation and paper.

ASSESSMENT:

Class participation throughout the semester: 20%

Short written assignments: 45%

Final project: 35%

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY:

Students will be encouraged to exchange ideas. That said, plagiarism is a serious offense and will not be treated lightly. You must acknowledge all your sources (it is better to err on the side of generosity), and document all material you consult. Please refer to the Yale College Writing Center website:

<https://poorvucenter.yale.edu/writing/using-sources/understanding-and-avoiding-plagiarism>

[\(Links to an external site.\)](#)

*No knowledge of Italian required.

SYLLABUS

Week 1 - TRANSLATING DANTE

Introduction: The *Vita nuova*

Watch: Prof. Giuseppe Mazzotta: *Vita nuova*

<https://oyc.yale.edu/italian-language-and-literature/ital-310/lecture-2>

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w3CX2kIC4Kg>)

Week 2

“Incipit vita nova”

Dante: *Vita nuova* I-IX

Emerson, Rossetti, Reynolds, Frissardi, Slavitt, Jewiss translations

Andreas Capellanus: *The Art of Courtly Love*, selections

Watch: Prof. David Wray, U of Chicago: “On Reading Dante’s *Vita nuova*”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G-lyfnll150>

[\(Links to an external site.\)](#)



Week 3

Dante: *Vita nuova* X-XXII

Charles Williams: *The Figure of Beatrice*

Denis de Rougemont: *Love in the Western World*, selections

Edith Grossman: “Translating Poetry” in *Why Translation Matters*, pp. 89-120

Week 4

Dante: *Vita nuova* XXIII-XXXIII

1. Eliot: "What Dante Means to Me"

--Writing assignment due

Week 5

Dante: *Vita nuova* XXXIV-XLII

W.H. Auden: *The Vision of Eros*

Week 6 - DANTE TRANSLATING

Longfellow, Norton, Sayers, Pinsky, Mandelbaum, Durling, Musa, Kirkpatrick translations

Inferno 1-5; 26

Robert Pinsky: Introduction to *Inferno*

Week 7

Purgatorio 2,11

Purgatorio 24-26, 30-33

WS Merwin: Introduction to *Purgatorio*

Week 8

Paradiso 1, 31-33

-- Writing assignment due

Week 9- NEW LIVES

Charles Baudelaire: *Fluors du mal*, selections

Jorge Luis Borges: "The Aleph"

Week 10

Robert Penn Warren: *True Love*; *Tell Me a Story*; *Mortal Limit*

Louise Gluck: *Vita nova*; *The Seven Ages* (selections)

-- Writing assignment due

Week 11

Allegra Goodman: *La Vita Nuova*

TS Eliot: Ash-Wednesday

Patrick Cassidy: *Vide Cor Meum* (aria) and its use in two Ridley Scott films

Christine and the Queens: *La vita nuova* (music video)

Week 12

Elizabeth Alexander: *The Light of the World*

Week 13

Student presentations

NB: the third unit on the syllabus may change so as to incorporate other works inspired by the *Vita nuova* that the class would like to study.

I recommend ordering the following books:

Dante: *Vita nuova*, translation by Mark Musa (Oxford, 2008)

-*Inferno, Purgatorio, Paradiso*, translation by Allen Mandelbaum (Bantam, 1982) – but other translations are welcome and encouraged

Louise Gluck: *Vita nova*

Elizabeth Alexander: *The Light of the World*

All other readings, videos, and music will be available online or on Canvas.

Baudelaire: La Béatrice: <https://fleursdumal.org/poem/185>

[\(Links to an external site.\)](#)

L'invitation au voyage: <https://fleursdumal.org/poem/148>

[\(Links to an external site.\)](#)

A' une passante: <https://fleursdumal.org/poem/224>

[\(Links to an external site.\)](#)

Jorge Luis Borges: "The Aleph," <https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/borgesaleph.pdf>

[\(Links to an external site.\)](#)

Christine and the Queens: La vita nuova (music video):

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EldSORj_dd0

[\(Links to an external site.\)](#)



Allegra Goodman: *La Vita Nuova* (*The New Yorker*, April 26, 2010)

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/05/03/la-vita-nuova>