

Dante's Great "Commedia" or Poetry as a way of Knowing

 Posted on 29 April 2012 by [cjf](#)

[Dante's](#) *Commedia*, written in the early 1300s, is ostensibly an epic poem about a pilgrim who travels through Inferno (hell), Purgatorio (purgatory), and Paradiso (heaven) to encounter God face-to-face and then returns to tell us about it. More interestingly, it is a poem of learning, philosophy, and the struggles of life with more nuances, depth and perspectives than I would have thought possible had I not read it myself. To say that the *Commedia* is rich in a multidimensional way is an understatement. The *Commedia* is intricate, dramatic, thrilling, mind-blowing, cosmic, shocking, ineffable, sometimes oppressive, and altogether extraordinary!



The pilgrim is Dante himself and his guide through most of the journey is the Roman poet [Virgil](#). [Open Yale Courses](#) provides its own able guide in Giuseppe Mazzotta who presents a fascinating and deeply engaging course [ITAL 310: Dante in Translation \(videos at YouTube\)](#). Mazzotta places the *Commedia*, more commonly entitled [The Divine Comedy](#), in the encyclopedic tradition (a circle of knowledge through the liberal arts) but he also calls it an epic, romantic, autobiographical, and visionary poem. Indeed by the end of the course, I had lost track of how many different angles on the poem Mazzotta had identified: prophetic, philosophical, historical, sublime, humanistic, theological, scientific, geometrical, musical, a poetry of hope, a poetry of the future, etc., etc.!

Dante makes large claims for poetry: poetry is a way of knowing.
— Giuseppe Mazzotta

How We Worked Through the Course Materials

We ([Jeannie](#) and I) read the text of each poem, [Vita Nuova](#) (Dante's first book) and the *Commedia*, before watching the lecture covering that text. We did not read many of the notes. That allowed us to go faster, but it meant we missed a lot of background which, in hindsight, is necessary to more fully understand the poem and the lectures. The benefit was the reading had a continuity and we limited our time investment.

Mazzotta skips some cantos (major divisions in a long poem; song in Italian) in the poem, but we read both poems in their entirety. We read Mark Musa's translation from our local library. We tried to watch a video every 4 days (that is our favorite pacing: just slightly slower than the actual Yale class), but sometimes the gaps were a bit longer. There are 24 videos most of which are 75 minutes long. In all there are nearly 27 hours of video. It took four months to complete (29 Jun–29 Oct 2011). In the videos Mazzotta's gestures were full of meaning; but frankly, you could fully enjoy this course with the audio only mp3s. Only once or twice does he write something on the board and once he passes around a geometric model that might be the shape of Dante's Universe.

After watching each lecture, I posted some thoughts to FaceBook as a way to reinforce the experience and share what I was getting out of the course with friends. In preparing those notes, I typically read the transcript of the lecture and looked up a lot of Greek & Roman mythology and the relevant historical figures, places, and events in Wikipedia. I often re-read parts of the poem. The lectures were so rich and interesting, that many of my comments became substantial. We generally watch video courses for our edutainment, so I commented only on the parts of interest to me (these were not student oriented CliffsNotes!). In my comments, I tried to reflect on the poem, share my frustrations with it, and wonder about it and its meaning.

During the course, I also used the translation provided by the [Princeton Dante Project](#) (they have many additional resources on Dante). Another resource for learning more about the poem and the poet is [Saylor's ENGL409 course on Dante](#).

Reflections on the Course

The experience of working through ITAL 310 was very challenging to me. I was unfamiliar with much of the historical knowledge that provides context for understanding the poem, its subjects, and its allusions. In addition, my training in logic, mathematics, and computers may have atrophied some of the skills needed to understand metaphor and poetics (the course was, in this sense, a very healthy exercise for me!). Since I aspire to be somewhat competent in all of humanity's cultural traditions, I took the course as an opportunity to develop my poetic interpretation skills. But on first reading the poem was very "flat" to me. Mazzotta's lectures exposed the richness and depth of the text. Bridging that gap made this the most challenging on-line video course I've ever taken (it was my 11th in four years). Jeannie on the other hand enjoyed the course as pure edutainment.

I was gratified to find that by the end of the course, I was starting to see some of the allusions and metaphors! I even hazarded a few interpretations on my first reading in some of the later cantos. My herculean effort to learn some of the background history and philosophy and my reflections on FaceBook (using [hermeneutical](#) techniques) together with Mazzotta's exquisite guidance led to a small but perceptible expansion in my poetic skill. I was thrilled! But listening to Mazzotta's final lectures and re-reading my notes to prepare this review, I must admit that my poetic prowess is still one of my weaker faculties.

Another purpose for watching this course was my personal quest through a circle (encyclopedia) of learning (namely, my search for interesting on-line video courses). ITAL 310 was a wonderful addition to that project: it broadened my understanding of poetics and western civilization. Which leads me to another big benefit of free on-line courses: you can experience a subject that is outside your strengths or even outside your comfort zone! You can confront fears about subjects like mathematics, engineering, science, or even poetry(!) by taking a class without risking a bad grade or worrying about the return on investment of tuition. You may find, as I did in this course, that even with a thick skull and years of neglect, one can still turn a new leaf and strengthen a weak faculty despite feelings of inadequacy induced by one's past. I invite you to dare to experience a subject that you have long neglected or one in which you fear inadequacy: watch one of the many free on-line video courses and grow your mind with the wonders of new learning experiences!

Reflections on Dante's Poetics

Mazzotta discusses how Dante's unfinished text "On the Vulgar Tongue" plays a central role. A key element is the concept of perspectivism which Mazzotta explains as "the presence of viewpoints,

various viewpoints, which one somehow manages to control, or know, all viewpoints. ... this is the way the whole of *Inferno* is written ... Perspective means that the world that I see shifts, changes according to the position that I, the spectator, occupy in the field of vision. ... [T]he perception of reality changes according to the position we occupy.... Dante uses this perspectivism, which I repeat, really means a way of assembling various points of view.” Mazzotta suggests that the “practice of perspective” dates to Dante’s time. He calls the *Commedia* “a perspectivist story.” I am impressed and fascinated.

Mazzotta’s claim that the *Commedia* is an “encyclopedia of learning” and that poetry is a way of knowing was amply demonstrated. The poem, especially when supplemented with Mazzotta’s commentary, provides glimpses to see, feel, and think about the interconnectedness and unity of knowledge. I was especially thrilled to find Dante substantiatively treating such unusual poetic subjects as mathematics, geometry and experimental science! The astute reader might notice some influence from these ideas in my thinking about the ways of knowing in my essay [An Enquiry Concerning Scientific Understanding](#). I wonder, is it possible that Dante could help bridge the chasm some modern people wrongly imagine to exist between the humanities and the sciences?

In Canto XXIV of *Paradiso*, Dante says “faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things that are not seen.” Mazzotta’s interpretation: “He tries to make faith and reason co-extensive ... belief, knowledge and faith really belong together, they implicate each other. They are not the same thing ... it’s a way of acknowledging limitations of what one knows. ... It really means, I think, at a deeper level, that faith itself is a mode of knowledge. ... faith opens your eyes and it’s a way of showing you something about the world that the reason alone cannot do.” Interesting.

Mazzotta said, “The idea of knowledge is one that keeps changing ... knowledge keeps always expanding and including voices that had been rejected”. One of my big takeaways from this poem was coming to appreciate that Dante is very deeply open minded!

To my mind, this “encyclopedia of learning” is perhaps the greatest quality of the *Commedia*. I found it inspiring. It is gratifying to find that this broad-minded perspective is evident in medieval Christian thought. It is not a new idea, but we need it now more urgently than ever. Our problems are more complex than ever before and demand the kind of spirited breadth of vision, perspective, and ways of knowing that Dante evokes!

I was deeply impressed by the vibrancy of the culture of the late Middle Ages. This period in history should not be called the “dark ages” which I now understand to be a disparaging term originating in the arrogance of the “enlightenment”. Dante, his contemporary [Giotto](#), and many others demonstrate that the middle ages were full of intellectual and artistic vigor!

I will level one strong criticism against the *Commedia*. I found the horrific, unending stream of punishment throughout *Inferno* to offend my joy and wonder in [mistake mystique](#). This was my biggest disappointment in the poem, but it is healthy to remember for how long humanity was ignorant of the wisdom of mistake mystique.

Mazzotta suggests that the modern notion of romantic love was invented during the middle ages by poets like Dante. I was fascinated to learn that romance may be a cultural artifact that is less than 1000 years old.

Mazzotta tells of “Dante’s universe of desire. We’re impelled by desire, and desire is really what moves us. It’s love that moves us; it’s desire that impels us to go one way or the other.”



As the pilgrim rises beyond Saturn, the seventh heaven after Earth, Mercury, Venus, Sun, Mars, and Jupiter, and nearly 700 years before NASA presented Humanity with its first picture of Earth from space, Dante wrote the following visionary passage which puts Humanity in cosmic perspective (Canto XXII of Paradiso): “And all the seven, in a single view, showed me their masses, their velocities, and all the distances between the spheres, as for the little threshing-floor that makes us so fierce all appeared to me from hills to river-mouths, while I was wheeling with the eternal Twins.” The Twins refers to [Gemini](#), Dante’s astrological sign. I love the cosmic perspective! By ending here, perhaps, this image will help you ponder Dante’s cosmic perspective and his cosmic significance for a few moments longer

A big Thank You to Open Yale Courses and Giuseppe Mazzotta for a wonderful experience!

Acknowledgement. I’d like to thank [Joshua Pang](#) for making the astute observation that Mazzotta is a guide for the course, like Virgil was for the pilgrim, in his comments on [my FaceBook](#).

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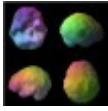
5 Responses to “Dante’s Great “Commedia” or Poetry as a way of Knowing”

1. [Joshua Pang](#) on 29 April 2012 at 6:00 pm

Dear CJ,

You’ve got Synergetics – I can see it.
Now, I’d invite you to take a peek at Sanskrit.

<http://www.americansanskrit.com/>



doesn’t have as much free learning, but there is some, and let me say that your mistake mystique is honored there.

<http://mywhatever.com/sanskrit/>

is also good.

To the Mahabharata and Ramayana,
Sanskrit and Synergetics,
Joshua

[Reply](#)

2. [cjf](#) on 29 April 2012 at 7:30 pm

Joshua,



I’d like to learn more about Sanskrit (I am not currently interested in dedicating time to learn a new language, but that could change). A course on either or both of the major Sanskrit epics you mentioned (Mahabharata and Ramayana) would be very, very interesting to me. If it was “in translation”, like the Dante course, even more so. I’m also interested in studying the Chinese Shijing. Sadly the classics of western civilization are more broadly available in current on-line course offerings. But I also want to study more mathematics and engineering. Life is just too short!

[Reply](#)

3. **Marguerite Neuhaus** on 6 May 2012 at 9:42 pm



Hello! am following the Yale Dante course thru pretty much as you did, but wanted to mention I dug out my old copy of the Inferno from my college days which was the PROSE translation by Sinclair, which I reviewed first before listening to the lecture or reading the transcript... it’s made a world of difference! Prof Mazzotta speaks of it very favorably at one point and I believe he’s absolutely right. It’s not poetry, but for a first pass esp in English, it’s very valuable.

[Reply](#)

4. [cjf](#) on 6 May 2012 at 11:40 pm

Marguerite, Mazzotta does recommend the Sinclair translation. However, I was unable to find it locally. The Musa translation seemed pretty good to me. My library also had the John Ciardi translation. After reading the first canto in both the Ciardi and Musa translations, we judged Musa to be more “true to the text”. Ciardi seemed to let his poetic exuberance (perhaps, like Mandelbaum) get the better of him. I should have commented more about the different translations in my review so that new students to Dante can find guidance. To correct that omission, let me quote Mazzotta who is a far better authority than myself:



[T]he question is, do I recommend that the students stick to the text that I mention in the syllabus or can they go on using other texts such as Mandelbaum’s translation? The answer is yes you can, it’s a very good — Mandelbaum’s translation is a very good translation. I don’t use it for one simple reason, because he’s a dear friend of mine, he probably will hear me now, everything will be on record. Poets have a weakness. When they translate they do it out of great love for the texts. Deep down this idea, look at it, I can do one better than even Dante and he lapses into that and I have told him more than once. I like this unpretentious translation by Sinclair. Prose sometimes is wrong; I will tell you when it is blatantly wrong, but you can use Mandelbaum, or if you have Singleton or you have Durling and Martinez, or if you have — actually I think is really better than all of these, Hollander’s, Robert Hollander. Actually the translation is by his wife Jean. You can use any translation you want. They are not really all that different from each other, it’s usually the sound, and of course, Mandelbaum as a poet has a sense of the rhythm in English; but absolutely.
—Giuseppe Mazzotta, [Session 2 Transcript](#)

[Reply](#)

5. [Michael Riversong](#) on 15 May 2012 at 10:01 am

Congratulations on getting through the course! There is a lot of significance throughout this work, and you certainly showed us that you got the idea. Yes, “Dark Ages” is a pejorative term. It broke up starting in the 1300s, to a great extent because Italy started getting into trade relations across the Mediterranean, and thus exposed to native Turkish ideas.



Especially love how you didn’t like the Inferno so much. Up until recently, almost all attention on this work had focused on the Inferno. I’ve known many students who read only that part and none other. If it’s any comfort, whenever anyone gets into a low level of consciousness, especially apathy, the perception of time tends to get distorted. A person in this state feels like every moment is an eternity. For those of us who study consciousness, the task at hand is doing whatever we can to help others stay out of those levels. Inferno can provide a detailed guide to helping people avoid more permanent types of mistakes.

But concentrating more on Purgatorio and Paradisio is what Dante intended. As

some segments of our society have experienced higher levels of consciousness en masse, this understanding is beginning to be more common.

Comprehension of layers within reality indeed increased at that time, world-wide. There's a musical correlation. Beginning in the early 1300s music increasingly incorporated third harmonies. Before that, fifth harmonies were predominant as in Gregorian chants. The fifth is the musical interval that brings a sense of power. The third brings a sense of harmony. These are important steps in the intellectual evolution of our society. From the sense of harmony, we were able to develop orchestras, algebra, trigonometry, and then all the inventions that depend on those processes.

Now we are beginning to comprehend the nature of the octave in music. Synergetics brings that out, but we have yet to find a literary work of equivalent power to Dante's that would bring these concepts further toward popular usefulness.

[Reply](#)

6.