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Our Dante seminar next summer in Siena, Italy, will run for six weeks, from Friday, June 26 through Thursday, August 6, 2009. During the seminar, we will read **Dante's Commedia** in English translation in its entirety--*Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*--in a city filled with artistic and cultural memories of Dante's world.

Rationale

The *Commedia* (or *Divine Comedy*, as it is often called in English) is one of the most “important” poems in the Western literary tradition. Important is in quotation marks because it may seem a strange word to use for a poem nearly 700 years old, but it's appropriate, given the scope of Dante's accomplishment. He synthesized aspects of both the classical and the Judeo-Christian traditions into a single narrative that has formed a basis for Western writers ever since; he did so in a demanding verse form that makes the entire enterprise one of the great virtuoso pieces of the literary canon; and he did it in Italian, rather than in Latin, a choice which would not have seemed so inevitable in his day as it does to us and one which was to have a significant effect on the development of European vernacular literatures and languages. One of the defining characteristics of the *Commedia* is its wide range of specific reference to other texts, most importantly to the Bible, to Virgil's *Aeneid*, to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and to works by St. Augustine, but also to other works from the classical and medieval literary traditions. Readers who get hooked on Dante's poem inevitably find their cultural horizons expanding as Dante's text reveals other works that “must” be read or reread because Dante seems to require this. In addition, Dante's technique is usually to call attention not only to texts in general, but to specific episodes from them which become mini-narratives that clarify, comment upon, or help define his own larger enterprise.

And yet, as much as the *Commedia* is a learned poem that puts a heavy demand on its readers, it is also surprisingly accessible for the first-time reader, because Dante is such a superb storyteller, one who makes his work immediately compelling by providing the excitement and sense of adventure that move the reader through the poem's hundred cantos. Six weeks will give us time to read the poem slowly and carefully, immersing ourselves in its complexity, depth, and artistic coherence. To use a phrase originally coined by another NEH seminar director, we will go text-crawling through Dante.

Dante is also a remarkably “visual” poet: in a way analogous to his use of literary sources, he refers throughout the poem, in general and specific ways, to the artistic environment of his world, both the achievements of contemporary medieval artists and the material remains of ancient Rome and Byzantium. Dante's historical situation was a happy one for a person with these interests, for during his lifetime (1265-1321) and the decades immediately before and after, the European tradition of visual art was in a moment of transition similar to the change he was himself helping to define in literature, and the transition was taking place in the central and northern Italy in which he lived. As we will discuss later in this letter, Siena is a city filled with art produced during these years, so that our program will be able to coordinate the study of Dante's text with the art of his world on an ongoing basis. Finally, Dante is also a remarkably

“situated” poet. He refers specifically and recurrently to Italy's hills and mountains and forests and urban spaces. Living in a city whose medieval architecture and whose town plan remain substantially intact and whose relationship with the surrounding countryside is much the same as it was in Dante's time will enable us to understand this aspect of the poem in a way possible only in an on-site program of study in central Italy. One consequence of the *Commedia's* astonishing range of references--literary, historical, artistic, environmental--is that studying the poem offers a way to examine the western cultural tradition both in microscopic depth and in telescopic breadth, and if spending six weeks doing this in one of the most beautifully preserved medieval cities in Europe sounds like an exciting prospect, then this may be the seminar for you.

Seminar Structure

Our seminar sessions will meet in a centrally-located classroom in the heart of the city. The facility has a small library of its own, and participants will have access to the research library of the Università di Siena which includes a large collection of books in English. E-mail and Internet services are available inexpensively at the “SienaWeb Internet Train,” a modern facility with several locations not far from our classroom.

Our seminar structure is an ambitious one: we want to read the poem and also to take advantage of being in Italy by going to see many parts of Dante's world at first hand. We will typically meet four times a week in three-hour sessions to discuss our reading of the *Commedia*. In addition, on one afternoon each week, we will take in-town field trips to Sienese cultural and artistic sites, and we will also take day-long field trips by public bus to Florence (three times) and San Gimignano (once) to sites important to the study of Dante and his poem.

The group will also take four out-of-town day-trips by chartered bus to sites important to our studies. (Our trips listed on the attached schedule are planned, though they are subject to change because of either positive or negative developments beyond our control or anticipation.) On one of these, we will bus into the Tuscan countryside to see examples of medieval art and architecture which, because of their relative inaccessibility, are rarely seen or studied by students of the *Commedia*. On this trip, we will also go to the eleventh-century abbey of S. Antimo, a medieval pilgrimage church where the monks continue the tradition of celebrating the Mass in Latin, allowing us to see something akin to the religious liturgy of Dante's lifetime. Our second bus trip will be to Orvieto, a city favored by many thirteenth-century Popes and therefore one with many artistic monuments of importance to Dante. In addition, we will go to the San Brizio chapel in Orvieto's Duomo, whose frescoes by Luca Signorelli are the most important Renaissance depiction of Dante's *Commedia* on public view. On the third of these day trips, we will go to Ravenna, the city where Dante spent the last years of his life and where he composed the *Paradiso*. Ravenna is a city with an extensive array of late antique and Byzantine mosaics, and the influence of these works on Dante's vision as he concluded his poem can best be understood by being there. Our final trip by chartered bus will be to Assisi, hometown of St. Francis, a thirteenth-century figure important for the study of Dante and his poem. (These trips will be partly subsidized by the NEH grant and partly paid for by participants.) Finally, we are also planning an overnight trip to Rome to study medieval monuments and sites important to Dante. This, too, will be by chartered bus and it and the hotel cost will be at participants' expense. Our Administrative Assistant will collect money periodically from members of the

seminar for a group “kitty” to cover costs of transportation and entry to historic sites and museums.

We will do considerable writing throughout the seminar, though not of the formal research type. Rather, we will ask participants to develop a continuing written account of their responses to a series of cantos, assigned near the beginning of the seminar. This will allow each participant to deepen an understanding of the poem by incorporating a growing body of detail into the analysis of the canto as the seminar goes on. This writing will also be a part of a small-group experience for the participants. As the two of us have discovered over the years, collaborative learning is a great pleasure, one that everyone in the group should experience. Participants, therefore, will be assigned to small groups to work on these cantos. They will collaborate on coming to understand their section of the poem, and they will decide together on how to lead our seminar discussion on the day assigned for those cantos. Their doing so will inform and enliven our discussion, as participants develop and share the connections between their cantos, and the cultural monuments from which Dante has drawn.

One of the great joys of these seminars is that work and play tend to merge. Members of our group--seminarians and directors--will be spending a great deal of time together, a situation likely to blur the usual distinctions between academic and non-academic pursuits. Studying Dante in this city, in this context, is likely to become a seamless experience.

Siena

Siena, about thirty-five miles south of Florence, is a beautiful city of nearly 60,000. With its medieval appearance still largely intact--a surviving circle of walls and gates, narrow winding streets with buildings connected by overhead arches, and functional thirteenth-century fountains--Siena preserves a wealth of material culture pertinent to our study. Two of its most prominent medieval monuments, which still serve the functions for which they were built, are the stunning striped-marble Cathedral (the “Duomo”) and the magnificent pink brick Town Hall (“Palazzo Pubblico”). The cathedral complex, whose architecture and associated art date primarily from the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, includes an important pulpit with sculpted narrative scenes, monumental facade sculptures, and the Maestà altarpiece (now in the Cathedral's museum), perhaps the most important European panel painting of its period, by the great Siennese painter Duccio. The Palazzo Pubblico was begun in the last decade of the thirteenth century, and with its attached tower, continues to dominate the city's skyline, along with the cathedral's bell tower. The frescoed interior walls of the Palazzo Pubblico include many paintings executed during the first half of the fourteenth century, and those by the Siennese painters Simone Martini and Ambrogio Lorenzetti are among the most important wall paintings in Western art.

This building is located on the central piazza, known as the “Campo” (mentioned by that name in the *Commedia*), one of the most beautiful urban spaces in the world. The elaborate system of neighborhoods, called *contrade*, continues to shape the city's social structure as it did in the Middle Ages. Twice each summer, the *contrade* compete in the “Palio,” a no-holds-barred bareback horse race around the Campo; our seminar will be in the city during the running of the July 2 Palio and during preparations for the second one, run on August 16. Unlike other medieval festivals in Italy that have been revived (or sometimes invented!) for the sake of tourism, the

Palio is central to Sienese civic life. By the time the seminar is over, participants, who may be humming contrada songs in their sleep, will understand the factionalism of Dante's Italy in a way that no conventional study could convey.

Living in Siena

There are advantages to being in a relatively small hill-town like Siena. It is a city with almost no violent crime, with a city center off-limits to most automobile traffic, and with (relatively) cool nights, more comfortable than other more low-lying areas of Tuscany in the summer months. It is also a city whose architectural beauty presents daily surprises and pleasures. However, there are some undeniable challenges involved in living in an Italian hill town. If you are expecting American-style accommodations (like air conditioning), this is probably not the seminar for you. If you are sensitive to noise, possible at any hour of the day or night during Palio madness, this is probably not the seminar for you. If you are not ready or able to do a great deal of walking in a very hilly town with cobblestone streets, this is probably not the seminar for you. Participants will need, above all, to have the patience, the flexibility, and the good humor to adapt to living conditions that will be less modern, less convenient, and less private than they are used to and to the different attitudes and customs of a foreign country for six weeks. If you do not take well to surprises, this is probably not the seminar for you.

About the Directors

Dante has been at the core of our teaching and scholarship throughout our careers. Moreover, we have both had an unusually strong history of collaboration in our teaching and in our scholarship, both together and with others. Even before co-directing these seminars, we have taught in each other's classes, published together (our first long Dante essay was jointly authored), have been among the most important first readers of each other's scholarship, and continue to work, both individually and in collaboration, on topics that have emerged directly from our Seminar experiences. Dante has been a central focus of our scholarly writing, and we have both had a long and fruitful involvement with pre-collegiate teachers, in the Summer Seminars for School Teachers Program and elsewhere.

Bill Stephany began teaching at the University of Vermont in 1968, and he has taught the *Commedia* in virtually every year since then in a wide range of contexts--at both the undergraduate and graduate level at UVM, in ten separate summer programs in Italy, and in NEH Summer Institutes for College Teachers at Dartmouth and at Stanford. He has published widely on Dante's *Commedia*, including a book on Canto 2 of *Inferno*, and much of his ongoing scholarship concerns Dante and the visual arts. He has also taught in a University of Vermont summer program in London, and was instrumental in establishing the University's Junior Year Abroad program at the University of Kent in Canterbury. Bill has directed fourteen previous NEH Seminars for School Teachers, twelve of them on Dante.

Ron Herzman is Distinguished Teaching Professor of English at SUNY Geneseo, where he has taught Dante almost every year since 1974. He has taught Dante to graduate and undergraduate students at Georgetown University, to Trappist Monks, and to inmates at Attica Correctional Facility. He was a visiting faculty member at the Dartmouth Dante Institute, and with his

Geneseo colleague Bill Cook has “taught” a twenty-four lecture audio/video course on Dante for the Teaching Company's “The Great Courses on Tape” Program. *The Medieval World View* (written with Bill Cook), originally prepared for students going to Italy to study Dante, reflects lessons learned from teaching in Italy since. He has also written extensively on Dante. He has also written extensively on Dante. His most recent work is on Dante and the visual arts and Dante and the Franciscans. Ron likewise has directed fourteen previous SSST Seminars, eleven of them on Dante.

Our group will also benefit from the contributions of other teacher-scholars during the summer. Christie Fengler-Stephany, for 32 years a University of Vermont Art History professor specializing in Italian late Medieval and Renaissance Art, will help us understand the visual art from Dante's lifetime. Christie is herself a former NEH Seminar director, has taught in numerous overseas studies programs, including our previous seminars in Italy, and collaborates with Bill Stephany on their joint projects concerning Dante and art. Gary Towsley of Geneseo's Mathematics Department, honored by the American Mathematics Association for undergraduate teaching, will lecture on the scientific and mathematical worldview that underlies Dante's *Paradiso*. Wes Kennison, also of Geneseo and former director of the SUNY study abroad program in Siena, will provide orientation lectures about the city, its history, and its Palio. Finally, Lynn Kennison, the Administrative Assistant for this and our previous seven Sieneese seminars, will be with us in Siena. She knows the city (and the country) well, and you will find her an indispensable resource as you negotiate the vagaries of Italian culture.

If we have learned anything from our teaching and writing about Dante over the years, it is that with every new reading the poem keeps getting more exciting. For that reason, we are delighted by the prospect of collaborating with each other and with new teacher-participants--under what we expect to be extremely rich circumstances. Like many other directors in the program, we consider these seminars to be among our greatest teaching and learning experiences.

Accommodations and Expenses

Each participant will receive a stipend of \$4,400. Because participants will need to finalize travel arrangements before the seminar begins, every attempt will be made to have the check for your stipend sent to you before your departure from the United States. Participants can expect to pay more than \$1,500 for Trans-Atlantic airfare for a flight from the East Coast and more from points further west. (Participants will want to make the most advantageous arrangement they can from their respective points of departure.) Money has been budgeted by NEH to cover bus rentals for some, but not all, of the day-trips previously mentioned, and participants will pay the difference. In addition to room and board, participants will be responsible for other program-related expenses such as transfers to and from Siena, transportation for some group field trips, overnight accommodations during our field-trip to Rome, and museum admissions. While the NEH stipend will go a long way toward subsidizing next summer's program, you will find that you need to supplement this amount from other resources to cover the program's expenses. Obviously the difference will be greater if you bring others with you.

We intend to house participants in apartments in the city, as much as possible within the city walls or within easy reach of the historic center by public transport. Estimates for the cost of housing should be clearer at a time closer to our departure, but will probably be something like \$75 per person, per day. (We are in the process of negotiating with some

new landlords, and so cannot be as precise as we would like.) As for any other expenses mentioned in this letter, estimates of this sort are approximate, since expenses will be in Euro and none of us can foresee next year's exchange rate or rate of inflation. (During the past year, the rate of the Euro has been approximately \$ 1.25 to \$1.60 per Euro.) Once the selection process is complete, you will need to tell us very quickly what your housing needs are. For example, you will need to let us know if you will be coming alone, with a partner or family member(s). By then we will have more specific details about prices and options, and we will help you make housing arrangements based on your needs. (Arrangements for guests who are coming to visit you for short periods of time will be your responsibility.)

The cost of food varies widely, from \$4.00 to \$6.00 for individual servings, such as pizza-by-the-slice or sandwiches, to \$25-35 for fixed-price "tourist menus" in moderate-priced restaurants, to high-priced gourmet meals with vintage wines. You will find that you can eat well relatively inexpensively by buying food from supermarkets and delicatessens; if you choose instead to eat frequent meals in restaurants, you will wish to budget accordingly. Unless something dramatic and unforeseen happens to the exchange rate, you can assume that your food options and expenses in Siena will be about what they would be if you were living away from home for an extended period in a medium-sized American city, or perhaps a bit more.

NEH has asked us to inform participants that attendance at all required meetings of the seminar is mandatory and that anyone who needs to drop out of the program will be required to return a pro-rated portion of the stipend.

Eligibility and Application Procedures

We hope that this seminar will draw applicants from many different fields. English, Foreign Languages, Classics, Religion, Art, History and Social Studies are some of the obvious fields, since in them a knowledge of Dante and his world can be directly helpful in the classroom. But we hope that anyone genuinely interested in studying this text will apply. Teachers of mathematics, science, vocational subjects--indeed any subject--should feel encouraged to apply as long as they can demonstrate interest in the text. And interest does not necessarily mean prior experience. Our previous NEH seminars on Dante have been made up more or less equally of participants who had and who had not studied the text before, and both groups were able to learn from each other.

The most important part of the application is your **four page (double spaced) "Description of Objectives."** This essay, as the NEH guidelines put it, should "address reasons for applying; the applicant's interest, both academic and personal, in the subject to be studied; qualifications and experience that equip the applicant to do the work of the seminar and to make a contribution to a learning community; a statement of what the applicant wants to accomplish by participating; and the relation of the project to the applicant's professional responsibilities." We would ask that in thinking about this essay you also address the question "Why this particular seminar?" In other words, it is important that the question you answer is not why you would benefit from the program in

general, but why you would benefit from, and what would you bring to, this particular seminar. You may want to answer this question in terms of your own teaching, or in terms of your general intellectual development, but the more specific your answer, the better your application.

You will also note that the application calls for **two** letters of recommendation. It is important that you ask people who know you and your teaching well. What a person has to say about you is more important than the position that person holds. Referees will send their letters to you in sealed envelopes with their signatures over the seal. You will then submit these sealed envelopes as part of your application. It will be essential, therefore, for you to receive these letters in advance of the deadline for your submission of the application.

To begin your application, go to the following NEH web site: (<http://www.neh.gov/online/education/participants/>). Follow the links to the on-line cover sheet for Seminars and Institutes, fill it out, and then print it. The completed application will consist of **three collated** copies each of the cover sheet, of your resume, and of your application essay. Because of this, and because of the high volume of applications that we expect for this seminar, **we cannot accept any application material via fax, e-mail, or as an attachment to e-mail**. Note finally that the instructions call for a detailed resume. This should be no more than **two** pages long.

Please send completed applications to:

Ron Herzman
Department of English
SUNY Geneseo
1 College Circle
Geneseo, NY 14454

Applications must be postmarked by **March 2, 2009**.