Part I: Preliminary Information

Joyce, Pound, and Beckett: High Modernism and the Intersection at Dante

Abstract

My thesis will explore the relationship between the three great modernists and Dante, whom they admired and imitated. The modernists’ unique socio-historical position at the center of a century of momentous change—in the artistic, political, and social spheres worldwide—established them as the artistic vanguard ushering in avant-garde “newness”. Their allusive tapestries comprise patches of literary, philosophical, and religious history and are correlatives of the systematic and encyclopedic works of the medieval authors, like Dante; these correlatives not only place the modernists in intertextual proximity with the encyclopedists of the Middle Ages, but also with each other: through the influence of Dante, modernists Joyce, Pound, and Beckett became inextricably bound with one another and with the literary epoch their misreading of the medieval encyclopedists had engendered. Using Bloom’s Anxiety of Influence as a guide, I will expose Dante as the node on which centered the complex reticulum of Modernism.

Background Statement

After having read and studied James Joyce’s *Ulysses* in an English independent study, as well as in an Irish literature class—Ireland with Borders—I continued my research of twentieth-century literature in a course on Modernism, in which I studied Beckett and Pound, as well as a course on Classical Literature, which covered key texts influential in the modernist movement, such as Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Virgil’s *Aeneid*, and Homer’s *Iliad*. In addition to these courses, I read Dante’s *The Divine Comedy*, critical texts and commentaries on Dante, Beckett, Pound,
and Joyce, as well as several books on literary criticism, including Harold Bloom’s *The Anxiety of Influence* and *The Western Canon*. The preparation alone for this study, which has also served as preparation for SURE, has brought to fruition a diverse array of well-sourced essays and has led me to many of the great books of classical, medieval, and modern literature.

Undergraduate research will afford me the opportunity to expand my body of work on Modernism and to found upon the substratum of the relationship between Dante, Beckett, Pound and Joyce the beginnings of graduate research. Furthermore, an in-depth study and close reading of the works of Dante and the modernists will hold me in good academic stead throughout my literary career. Thorough knowledge of Dante’s *The Divine Comedy* is invaluable in the literary field, as is knowledge of Pound’s *Cantos*, Beckett’s *Trilogy*, and Joyce’s *Ulysses*. Joyce and Dante wrote with profound erudition, incorporating the ideas and scholarship of multiple disciplines in their literature. Thus, study of the medieval poet or modernist novelist would be edifying for an aspiring scholar and professor.

Along with the primary texts, I will also study secondary texts on literary theory and criticism of the works of Dante and the modernists. Learning the vast topography of the critical landscape will provide me with a wealth of scholarship from which I will be able to draw for future graduate work. In studying literary theory, such as Bloom’s *Anxiety of Influence*, I will learn to examine literature from multiple perspectives, an ability that may ultimately aid me in synthesizing new scholarship in my field and providing literary works with fresh interpretations. Also, the challenge of such an undertaking—the study of some of the most complex and influential writers of literary history—will strengthen and hone my critical faculties and increase my capacity and endurance for rigorous research and study. I understand that I will be required to closely read the primary texts, search for tropes and intertextual correlatives, and adduce as
evidence my findings in a cogent, elaborate and sophisticated research essay. Conversations with my mentor will help to shape my theories and ideas to support my textual argument, as well as to contour my argument to fit as an original piece in the jigsaw of modernist and Dantean scholarship.

I hope to one day teach in the field of Comparative literature, especially on the diverse and international intricacies of Modernism and Postmodernism. Exhaustive study (which is equivalent to a lifetime of study) of James Joyce and his works will hopefully prepare me to write and publish scholarship on his canon, as well as teach *Ulysses* from a comparative perspective. The Lumen prize occasions a chance to continue my study with the aid of a financial subsidy and to engage in intensive research, from which I hope to cull new knowledge on Modernism and Dante and subsequently synthesize it into original scholarship.

**Part II: Narrative**

**Focus**

To whom did the modernists owe their existence, and what was the impetus for their ambitious works? These are the questions that have driven me to my own original enterprise, to explore the relationship between James Joyce, Ezra Pound, Samuel Beckett, and whom I believe to be their precursor and literary father, Dante Alighieri.

Harold Bloom’s influential theory of the Anxiety of Influence, which he sets forth in his eponymous book, serves as my primary critical platform in analyzing the relationship between Dante and the modernists. “Influence-anxieties are embedded in the agonistic basis of all imaginative literature,” Bloom remarks in the preface to *Anxiety of Influence*, which best describes and delineates the pathway to the agon between Joyce, Beckett, Pound and Dante (xxiv). The map of misreading—Bloom’s unique cartography—establishes a pattern of reading
and influence among canonical authors. Using Shakespeare as an example, Bloom contends that Shakespeare’s brilliance, his great comedies, and his even greater tragedies were products of his reading of and vying with Christopher Marlowe and of his intentional misreading of Marlowe’s tropes and themes (xxi). Joyce found in Dante’s Comedy a desirable taxonomy—a critical and intricate system of classification—and an encyclopedic collection of epistemologies; Dante had not only captured the essences of Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven, but had also captured or touched on many of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries’ relevant intellectual concerns. Italo Calvino, an Italian postmodern writer and critic, wrote on Dante and his influence:

> Medieval literature tended to produce works expressing the sum of human knowledge in an order and form of stable compactness, as in the Commedia, where a multiform richness of language converges with the application of a systematic and unitary mode of thought […] Joyce sets out with every intention of constructing a systematic and encyclopedic work that can be interpreted on various levels according to medieval exegetics […] (116-117)

Calvino’s observation identifies the unique organizational quality of medieval literature, with which Dante established his elaborate, multiplex theological system. The system set forth in The Divine Comedy served Joyce, who beatifies the banal, as an index for his own schematic structure governing the citizens of Dublin.

Ezra Pound, like Joyce, believed Dante to be the greatest of all poets and structured his own Cantos in a fashion similar to that of the Comedy. Yet Pound transformed Dante’s empyreal profundity into a hellish index for the twentieth century. Critic Edwin Fussell notes that Pound’s “major Dantescan detachment was to peel place (what Pound felt as place) from the Commedia and to redistribute it at large, thus achieving a kind of fluent modernity, a stereopticon simultaneity, and a good deal of textural chaos” (75). Pound’s “textural chaos” surfaces the terra incognita of the modernists’ intertextual relations, on which an elision of history and literature gives form to an apocalyptic vision of the inversion of Dante’s heavenly rapture. In
continuing his explication of the Cantos’ relationship with the Comedy, Fussell remarks that Pound could hardly wait to “visit Inferno after Dante” and construct his own unique hell that “is not amusing. Not a joke” and contained none of “Dante’s fahrting devils” (79). Pound pays homage to Dante by subjecting him to duress; he holds his muse hostage, extracting from him the secrets of his otherworldly journey, but defaces Dante’s image, scribbling on the palimpsest of the Comedy the acrimonious writings of a deranged fascist, an anti-Semitic supporter of Mussolini, but also the alluringly beautiful verse of an American poet. It is through this defacement that Pound attempts to trump Dante.

Dante for Samuel Beckett was a hero of high art, in whose works Beckett found his protagonist, the daemon of sloth and ennui Belacqua. An inhabitant of Antepurgatory too lazy to be saved in his lifetime, Belacqua lends to Beckett his pathos and occasionally his namesake, but never his a priori hope. As Walter A. Strauss observes:

Samuel Beckett’s fascination—even obsession—with Belacqua points to the relevance of the theme of expectancy to the modern spiritual dilemma and at the same time underscores the despair of the modern sensibility in the face of it. Dante’s Belacqua is bound to wait out the duration of his lifetime in the shadow of the rock; Beckett’s characters do not even have that much certitude about their spiritual destination, and thus are left in a state of complete disorientation. (251)

Beckett first employs his character Belacqua in the short story collection More Pricks Than Kicks, and later invokes the namesake in Molly, the first novel of his trilogy.

“Waiting” rather than “seeking” characterizes the Beckettian hero, who undergoes a Manichean decomposition through which he becomes a half-living mascot of nominalism. Beckett’s predilection for reduction gives rise to characters who lack almost all contingencies and to a writing style distinguished by its laconicism. He denies Dante his universals, his God, but grants him his players, who people the pages of Beckett’s texts. Strauss denominates Beckett
the “poet of vegetation,” an appropriate title for the author who attempts to subdue Dante by outwaiting him (252).

Proposed Experiences

Since my Lumen project coincides with my honors thesis, much of the work for the two projects will overlap. For this coming summer, I have applied to participate in SURE, during which I will begin my investigation of the relationship between Dante and James Joyce. I have compiled a list of monographs and literary texts to read and use as research sources. During this initial researching phase I plan to execute a close rereading of Dante’s *The Divine Comedy* and Joyce’s *Ulysses*, as well as other texts by both authors. In addition to reading these primary texts, I will also focus on critical texts relevant in graduate comparative literature programs, such as Walter Benjamin’s *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproduction* and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s *Death of a Discipline*.

At the start of the fall semester I will begin a two-credit research course, which will place emphasis on Ezra Pound’s *Cantos* in relation to the *Comedy*. During winter term I hope to travel to Italy for a course in classical art, which is highly pertinent to my project, insofar as it influenced Dante as well as the modernists. Spring semester of my junior year I will begin research on the relationship between Beckett and Dante. The following summer I hope to spend in Dublin, where I will attend James Joyce summer seminars. Fall semester of my senior year I will return to research on Joyce, whose relationship with his preceptor Dante is perhaps the crucible in which my project as a whole was born. Winter term of my senior year I will continue reading critical theory, editing research scholarship, and preparing for my project’s end and final semester. During my final spring semester, I will integrate the chapters of my thesis, concluding
with a chapter I hope to contain the germ of my own critical theory, as well as my final remarks on the literary agon between the modernists and medieval encyclopedist Dante.

**Proposed Products**

My project will comprise several final products. If I receive funding for SURE, I intend to complete the first chapter of what will be a 60-70 page thesis. This prefatory chapter will use the relationship of James Joyce and Dante to outline the critical scope of my project. I hope to present it at SURE’s final conference, as well as at SURF. My essays in the fall and spring, on Ezra Pound and Samuel Beckett respectively, will total 20-30 pages, and will additionally serve as exploratory scholarship in the field of comparative study. I will bring to fruition an essay on my accumulated research of James Joyce during the fall semester of my senior year, totaling 10-15 pages; and in my final semester I will work on the conclusion of my thesis, which will also total 10-15 pages. Throughout my project, and especially during winter terms, I will keep a journal of reflective scholarship, which I will also include in my final thesis as a gloss on my work.

**Part III: Feasibility**

**Feasibility Statement**

Though my proposal does not require the acquisition of a certain skill or present any other logistical problems, it will necessitate a cultivation of knowledge in modernist and medieval literatures, as well as in twentieth century literary theory and aesthetics. The proposal’s challenge will manifest itself in the complexity of the readings it will require and in its demand for close and *intertextual* readings of texts.
Lumen Prize Budget

- Winter Term in Italy: ca. $5500.
- *Ulysses* summer course: ca. $500.
- James Joyce Summer School in Dublin: ca. $6000.
- Books and materials: ca. $500.
- Tuition: ca. $2500.

Total: ca. $15,000.

Timeline

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<th>Proposed Experiences</th>
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<tr>
<td>Summer 2010</td>
<td>SURE: Dante and Joyce</td>
<td>• 15-20 page research paper&lt;br&gt;• Accumulation of sources for Lumen</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fall 2010</td>
<td>Two Semester Hours: Ezra Pound</td>
<td>• Greater understanding of Pound’s centrality to the Modernist movement&lt;br&gt;10-15 page “Chapter” on Pound and Dante</td>
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<tr>
<td>Winter 2011</td>
<td>• Independent research on Dante&lt;br&gt;• Winter Term trip to Italy</td>
<td>• Increased familiarity with scholarship on Dante and Modernism&lt;br&gt;Reflective scholarship on Dante and the Modern landscape</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spring 2011</td>
<td>Two Semester Hours: Samuel Beckett</td>
<td>• Greater knowledge of Beckett’s “agon” with Joyce&lt;br&gt;10-15 page “Chapter” on Beckett and Dante</td>
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<tr>
<td>Summer 2011</td>
<td>• “Ulysses” Summer Course at UNC&lt;br&gt;• James Joyce Summer School in Dublin</td>
<td>• Course work from summer course&lt;br&gt;Reflective scholarship on summer experiences</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fall 2011</td>
<td>Two Semester Hours: James Joyce</td>
<td>• A synthesis of my “Ulysses” work, a 10 page chapter solely on the immense influence of Joyce&lt;br&gt;10-15 page “Chapter” on Joyce and Dante</td>
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<tr>
<td>Winter 2012</td>
<td>Further reading and research preparation for the final chapter</td>
<td>• Notes for Final Chapter&lt;br&gt;Reflective scholarship on work so far</td>
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<td>Spring 2012</td>
<td>Two Semester Hours: Final Chapter/Dantean Modernism</td>
<td>• 15-20 page Final Chapter&lt;br&gt;Defense of Thesis</td>
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List of Sources


Personal Information and Signatures:

Name: XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX