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The Role of the Reader in Actualizing the *Commedia*

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ABSTRACT: Chapter 8 of Barolini's *Undivine Comedy* examines Dante's concrete, poetic representation of his immaterial nonlinguistic paradise. Exploring *Paradiso*'s content and making, its author's fashioning of self and poem within its audience, I argue that the way Dante projects the *Commedia* into its readers echoes this reconciliation of opposites. Mary Jo Bang's translations exemplify the *Commedia*'s self-perpetuation in new generations of readers, making us soundboxes in which it resonates and persists.

KEYWORDS: Dante; *Paradiso*; *Undivine Comedy*; reader response; translation; Bang, Mary Jo

The Role of the Reader in Actualizing the *Commedia*

F. REGINA PSAKI

In academia, we rarely take or have the time to revisit major works of scholarship to examine how they have lasted and unfolded, how they have influenced and changed the fields they touch.¹ Fast fashion may be the closest parallel to the ‘production’ model of academic writing that has prevailed of late, in North America at least. Academics must regularly disseminate a given number of scholarly products which display sufficient innovation, heft, and influence to make them ‘leaders’ in their field (though for all academics to be leaders is a mathematical and logical impossibility). The unintended consequences of the reward (and penalty) structure of humanities research have included overproduction, saturation, and waste (work left unread); ever more minute and aggressive differentiation (once called balkanization); and a great deal of work coming out before it is ready. The result of making academics work at a conveyor belt rather than an artisanal workbench has been an academic treadmill moving too fast to pause and recognize the actual giants among us, and the works which truly merit revisiting with the advantage of hindsight.

1 Portions of this essay were presented at the symposium entitled ‘*The Undivine Comedy Thirty Years Later*’ (October 21, 2022) and at the International Congress of Medieval Studies in Kalamazoo, MI (May 9–11, 2024). The result is greatly indebted to the organizers, interlocutors, and presiders on both occasions.

I can't think of a game-changing book in Dante Studies more deserving of such re-examination than Teodolinda Barolini's *The Undivine Comedy: Detheologizing Dante*.² The present essay collection offers the reconsideration, re-appreciation, and reframing that important works deserve, and which we need for perspective, for inspiration, and for a reminder of what excellent scholarship really looks like. I am honoured to have this opportunity to revisit Barolini's achievement in *The Undivine Comedy*. I owe a great deal to the book: it has influenced my engagement with the *Commedia* for decades, in ways I've been too fully steeped in to see with perfect clarity. As an assistant professor I was invited to review it; the assignment made me read the book in granular, even maniacal detail, and I imprinted on it early. Imprinted not only metaphorically, either: my marginal notes in *The Undivine Comedy* rival those I've scrawled in the *Divine Comedy*. I came to the book from a wide diversity of Dante mentors, from Giuseppe Mazzotta to Antonio Mastrobuono, Winthrop Wetherbee, Rachel Jacoff, and Marilyn Migiel. Barolini has been a mentor to the world at large, and I come from that world: not her student, yet still very much formed by her long-distance instruction. My understanding of the *Paradiso* in particular owes an immense debt to her book.

Chapter 8 of *The Undivine Comedy*, 'Problems in Paradise: The Mimesis of Time and the Paradox of *più e meno*', focuses on *Paradiso* 1–9 (*UDC*, pp. 166–93). It articulates the nature and necessity of Dante's juggling act in the celestial paradise between unity and multiplicity, between identity and difference, between time and eternity, between place and non-spatiality. The first third of the chapter surveys the backstory of the Platonic/Aristotelian binary in Dante's philosophical and theological background, and details how the first tercet of *Paradiso* maps out the poles of unity and multiplicity, identity and diversity, in the celestial paradise. Barolini shows that the poem is indeed fractal, self-similar at every level of magnification: the canticle's first two lines correspond to the first two cantos, and the third line to the third canto, as just one example among many. The middle third of the chapter

2 Teodolinda Barolini, *The Undivine Comedy: Detheologizing Dante* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), hereafter *UDC*. Subsequent references given in parentheses in the main text.

probes *Paradiso* 1 and 2; the last third tracks how the poet alternates between privileging unity/identity as the paradisaic mode of being, and privileging multiplicity/diversity as the necessary condition of creation, of individuality in humanity, and of the poetic *representation* of the immaterial and non-linguistic condition she calls 'heavenly homology' (*UDC*, p. 185). With her signature energy and deft precision, Barolini examines Dante's play with the contrasts and contradictions he deploys, diffuses, and most importantly defuses. She highlights his 'active pursuit of a new kind of discourse; [...] the concerted attempt to abandon straightforward narrativity for a more fractured, less discursive, less linear, ultimately more "equalized" or "unified" textuality' (*UDC*, p. 226).

The first part of this essay will examine one dimension of Barolini's detheologizing analysis of not only the *Paradiso's* content, but also its making and its poet's self-fashioning in this culminating stage of the *Commedia* as a whole. In taking in this legendarily challenging canticle, we as readers can remain enmeshed in the dimension of the plot and track the strategies and innovations that Dante the poet deploys in representing that storyline. To circumvent the limitations of human intellect, ensnared as it is in the existential and perceptual grid of time and space, the poet sets up so many devices and premises: neologism, celestial telepathy, semiotic play, analogy, metaphor in every sense, chiasmus, deep allusion and intertextuality, rhyming play *ad infinitum*. We could spend our entire working lives analysing and interpreting these representational solutions. Or, following Barolini's lead, we can also step back and foreground Dante the historical author who creates a narrator, Dante the poet, who both engages and circumvents the conundrum of reconciling the material and immaterial dimensions of being. The second half of the essay takes, as an example of this dynamic, a recent translation of the *Commedia* by American poet Mary Jo Bang, who addresses this same conundrum with and through the added filters of modernization — of technique, voicing, and frames of reference and intertext.

This historical author Barolini spotlights, and about whose compositional practice and working conditions we know so little, has given us a third mode of understanding his challenge of representing the immaterial within the material (if not concrete) medium of language.

This third mode differs from the way taken by the pilgrim in his historically unique journey through the realms of the afterlife and represented by the poet in his mighty wrestling act, more like Jacob and the angel than like the spontaneous and immediate ‘Fiat lux’, let alone the serene and simultaneous ‘In principio erat verbo’. I would describe the third mode of understanding as the assimilation of the poem into the very fibre of readers’ minds, our neural pathways (we have different terms than Dante did), where the linear sequentiality to which the poem and its readers are confined in the reading journey, can dissolve into immediacy *and* simultaneity. For some twenty years I’ve been reading the *Commedia* in full a couple of times per year; the repetition has made each line and passage resound more and more within an acoustic and conceptual *copresence* in my mind of the poem as a whole.³ With repetition, over time the poem shapes its addressee into a soundbox within which every reading resonates more immediately, deeply, and fully.

Can I legitimately infer that Dante the historical author intended this? No, and yes. I’m quite certain Dante never posited a world where books were cheap, literacy levels high, memories enfeebled, and education open to all and sundry — even women — and in the vernacular, at that, whether ours or his. A time of Dante Societies and seventh centenaries and Digital Dantes and instantaneous access to relevant primary and secondary sources and hundreds of translations in dozens of languages — a time when, somewhere in the world, the poem is always in active dialogue with someone. But I’m equally certain that Dante did posit a future in which the *Commedia* would not just be read but reread, obsessively studied and parsed, and if not memorized then at least committed to a devoted recollection, however partial and shifting. I think he foresaw readers bringing to bear on the multisensorial poem our own embodied senses — especially the aural sense — so that each renewed contact with each moment of the *Commedia* would call to mind dozens of related textual moments, telescoping across the expanse of the poem and across the time it takes to read it — to make

3 I don’t claim to know the poem as intimately as I wish, but only to know it more intimately than I used to, because of the two or three annual circumnavigations which bring me back each time to the starting point.

a resonant unity of the poem's differential components. If this sounds a bit like Joseph Frank's venerable model of spatial form, it both is and isn't.⁴ The juxtaposed moments that structure the poem in the reader's mind are intentional and universal on the one hand, like the political canto sixes, and aleatory and individual on the other — specific to the single reader whose mind and memory link them for idiosyncratic reasons. Here I will concentrate on the former, the poet's patent constellations of textual loci. These constellations are comprised by marked parallels within various categories such as addressee; theme; imagery; rhetorical strategy; frame of reference; and characters, among others.

Among the recurrent strands that organize the poem for us is Dante's explicit invocation of its readers. Direct address to us punctuates the *Commedia*, from the first re-orienting 'Pensa, lettore, s'io mi sconfortai' ('Consider, reader, my dismay'; *Inf.* 8.94) to the last integrative 's'io torni mai, lettore, a quel divoto trionfo' ('So, reader, may I once again return | to those triumphant ranks'; *Par.* 22.106–11), breaking the frame of the plot to shake the reader into looking at the mechanisms and pretexts of its construction.⁵ Dante does not of course restrict apostrophe to interpellating the reader. Apostrophized throughout the poem are abstract concepts and allegorical personae; historical figures past or recent; mythological characters; God (by name or by periphrasis); and many more. Nor does Dante restrict his invocations of the reader to apostrophe: we see ourselves strongly implicated in phrases like 'nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita' ('When I had journeyed half of *our life's way*'; *Inf.* 1.1, italics mine); 'possa lasciare a la futura gente' ('that I may leave to people of the future'; *Par.* 33.72, italics mine); and 'coloro che questo tempo chiameranno antico' ('those who will call this present, ancient times'; *Par.* 17.119–20, italics mine).

4 Joseph Frank, 'Spatial Form in Modern Literature: An Essay in Two Parts', *The Sewanee Review*, 53.2 (Spring 1945), pp. 221–40.

5 Unless otherwise noted, I quote the Petrocchi edition of the *Commedia* and the Mandelbaum translation: Dante Alighieri, *La Commedia secondo l'antica vulgata*, ed. by Giorgio Petrocchi (Milan: Mondadori, 1966–67); Allen Mandelbaum, Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. by Allen Mandelbaum, 3 vols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980–82). Both are available on the Digital Dante site: <<https://digitaldante.columbia.edu/dante/divine-comedy/>>.

But I maintain that the poet's addresses to the reader *as* reader do organize the poem in memory more pointedly and actively even than those the narrating voice makes to larger groups — such as 'superbi cristian, miseri lassi' ('O Christians, arrogant, exhausted, wretched'; *Purg.* 10.121) or 'miseri seguaci' ('sad disciples'; *Inf.* 19.1) — groups to which the reader might conceivably belong or have belonged. Naming the reader as addressee in the very act of our reading recentres our presence as foundational to the acts of poetizing and prophesying that constitute the *Commedia*. Narrating the journey is not enough: Dante must narrate it to an *us*, if he is to make it the utterly unique truth-bearing composition it claims to be.

In countless ways Dante has put us into the poem, as he's put the poem into us. And what an undertaking that is: he has made the poem teach us how to read it, how to reread it. The first canticle is a preparatory lesson in reading: *Inferno* initiates us into a cornucopia of knowledge, patterns, and procedures we need for this reading journey. In narration and dialogue Dante lays out for us not only the figures of rhetoric but their use and misuse, and their function for different residents of hell. *Inferno* teaches us to evaluate an utterance in light of its source, and to find the unmarked relations between speakers — whether sinner, demon, or guide — and their utterances. It makes us see the consequences of deception and self-deception in damned souls, while dissociating the truth-value of the poem (and the veracity of the poet) from its factuality or fictionality. Barolini expounded this unforgettably, revealing the function of Ulysses as a lightning-rod for the condemnation of deceptive speech, mendacity, hubris, and boundary violation.⁶ The very accusations that not only could be but were levelled against Dante in his own time, by Cecco d'Ascoli for example, he diverts onto a character who, unlike himself, was not divinely authorized to make his unprecedented journey.

As a self-teaching artifact, *Purgatorio* hovers in the overlap between this life and the next. The second canticle begins to delineate what in the afterlife is unlike earth, preparing the ground for the celestial paradise where earthly calculus is inadequate and misleading. It

6 Barolini, 'Ulysses, Geryon, and the Aeronautics of Narrative Transition', *UDC*, pp. 48–73.

continues the *Inferno's* practice of having the poem's protagonist be an inset figure for its readers: his perplexity and curiosity are our own, as his learning and satisfaction are ours. But while the pilgrim has to start afresh in purgatory, discarding some lessons he's picked up in hell, we readers build on what the first canticle has taught us *about* reading. The central cantos of *Purgatorio* (and thus of the entire poem) are both an adult's map to the workings of love in mortal life, and a neophyte's introduction to the workings of love in eternity — to the experience of heaven. The whole canticle abounds in such novel revelations for the pilgrim; for the reader, the poet has announced that he must up his game so that his art may be sufficient to his matter:

Lettor, tu vedi ben com' io innalzo
la mia materia, e però con più arte
non ti maravigliar s'io la rincalzo.

(Reader, you can see clearly how I lift
my matter; do not wonder, therefore, if
I have to call on more art to sustain it.)
(*Purg.* 9.70–72)

What the reader will see in the poetry goes beyond the content the pilgrim must master, to include the original and audacious poetic inventions which will multiply dramatically in the earthly paradise cantos.

The third canticle is the culmination of the author's practice of teaching the poem's protagonist truth and doctrine, as a pretext for teaching them to its readers, along with the way that poetry can vehicle them (or almost). *Paradiso* is cumulative, not supersessive, in the way it relies on every teaching and every technique purveyed in *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* while raising them to another level altogether: a mighty organ pulling out every stop, not indiscriminately but sapiently, for maximum beauty and efficacy. It requires no small mastery for Dante to train us through language to the prospect of bliss, a bliss to be gained through grace freely given — though mysteriously assisted by rectitude, humility, and love.

In other words, we readers were always on his mind. His poem is not solely a work of self-fashioning, but also a fundamentally outward-facing one. We are the receptacles into which the poem is poured: the beneficiaries of its food and drink, of the 'pan de li angeli' ('bread of

angels'; *Par.* 2.11) which we crave. That is, so long as we are those happy few, not those ill-prepared 'in piccioletta barca' ('within [a] little bark'; *Par.* 2.1), however 'desiderosi d'ascoltar' ('eager to listen'; *Par.* 2.2). Despite the *cantus firmus* of the metaphor of nourishment fed to us or laid out for us — 'Messo t'ho innanzi; omai per te ti ciba' ('I have prepared your fare; now feed yourself'; *Par.* 10.25) — Dante is not merely filling his readers but forming us.

Beyond metaphors of navigation and nourishment, it would be lengthy and superfluous to detail even the most prominent thematic threads that guide readers across the great sea of the poem. But the paths Barolini tracks become master threads, likely foregrounded in every essay in this book, along which to follow the *undivine* dimension of Dante the author's undertaking: the path and its interruptions, where protagonists or poem are forced to jump; mad flights of arrogance and their calamitous failures, like that of Ulysses; acts of artistic hubris brought low, related to us in one such act which is decidedly not brought low. The process, both concrete and conceptual, of representing *to us* nothing less than everything in the physical and metaphysical world, occurs in a poem that purports to be not merely like God's grandchild but God's co-creation.⁷

The didactic purpose of so many of Dante's strategies and rhetorical figures matches and depends on (is served by) their beauty. For example, chiasmus intensifies and multiplies, from the compact — "ingiusto fece me contra me giusto" ("made me unjust against my own just self"); *Inf.* 13.72) — to the overflowing and manifold (*Par.* 14.28–60). The canny use of exact lexical repetition, which Barolini calls 'a technique that the poet will use frequently in the third canticle, as a way of signifying the paradox of the thing that both is itself and is the other' (*UDC*, p. 178), creates patterns that are fractal, similar at every level. She examines how this paradox works in the foundational passage where the pilgrim enters the sphere of the moon:

S'io era *corpo*, e qui non si concepe
com'una dimensione altra patio,
ch'esser convien se *corpo* in *corpo* repe,

7 Dante has Virgil say that human art is almost like God's grandchild ('[...] a Dio quasi è nepote'; *Inf.* 11.105); the poet describes the co-creation by heaven and earth of this sacred poem ("l poema sacro | al quale ha posto mano e cielo e terra"; *Par.* 25.1–2).

accender ne dovria più il disio
 di veder quella essenza in che si vede
 come nostra natura e Dio *s'unio*.

(If I was *body* (and on earth we can
 not see how things material can share
 one space — the case, when *body* enters *body*),
 then should our longing be still more inflamed
 to see that Essence in which we discern
 how God and human nature were made one.)
 (*Par.* 2.37–42, italics mine)

Barolini neatly glosses the bookending strategy by which Dante establishes both a synchronic parallel (body into celestial body, both integration and integrity) and a diachronic structure with a telos:

How the pilgrim can cease to be 'other' and become 'one' with the moon while both he and it remain themselves is a question that [...] adumbrates a greater mystery, namely that of the coexistence of human nature with God's divine nature in one united being, the mystery that Dante will try to render at his poem's end. (*UDC*, pp. 177–78)

This trinity of *corpo* (body) creates a memory-hoard in the reader, a hoard that decidedly will return to us when we reach the supreme vision where the final mystery is unveiled — the mystery not in fact of the nature of the trinity, but of the incarnation and the interpenetration of independent and unlike beings. 'How can one body, one "corpo," copenetrates with another and yet remain unperturbedly itself?' (*UDC*, p. 177). While the canto explains the joining of the pilgrim and the moon, and points to a later illumination of the joining of humanity and God, it also enacts both semantically and formally the entrance of the poem into the reader, 'while both he and it remain themselves' (*UDC*, p. 177). The poem does not change for entering us, and although we are changed, we do not become other than ourselves for its entry.⁸

In addition to mnemonic repetitions of forms (figures and etyma), Dante also strategically revisits various themes and frames of reference. To recall another Barolini book, *Dante's Poets*, the *dolce stil novo* as well as the larger corpus of medieval Italian lyric is imported into the

8 Plainly the poem does change when we adapt it, or translate it, or both, as in Mary Jo Bang's project, discussed below.

Commedia beginning with Francesca's quotations in *Inferno* 5.⁹ It is recalled in the self-citations that punctuate *Purgatorio*. It suffuses the final dispositive interactions (often described as gallantry, dalliance) with Beatrice, the subject of his love lyrics in that sweet new style.¹⁰ Or the poet thematizes God's 'other book', the created world: the recurring, elegiac evocations of this bright world glimmer against the black backdrop of hell like those June fireflies of *Inferno* 26.25–33. Likewise, the poet returns over and over to the tension of Church and State, obsessively probing the paradox that, although baptism into the Christian faith is humanity's only portal to the Church, and the Church its only certain way to God, nevertheless the Church can also be led badly, whether by men timorous and ineffectual or men evil and overreaching. Such leaders, though steeped in what Dante considers sin and error, are nonetheless God's anointed representatives on earth, so they must not be harmed or toppled.¹¹ Dante's themes and frames of reference are often shorthanded by characters historical (Constantine, Frederick II), mythological (Arachne, Jason), biblical (Saul, King David), and contemporary (Boniface VIII, Corso Donati). Their return carries with them into the forefront of the reader's memory both earlier occurrences and, after many readings, references yet pending in the poem. Through such deliberately repeated invocation and patterning, the historical author can create, locate, and preserve *within* the very reader whom he thematizes so insistently throughout the poem that 'more fractured, less discursive, less linear, ultimately more "equalized" or "unified" textuality' (*UDC*, p. 226) which Barolini talked about as Dante's aim.

To prepare ourselves to absorb Dante's poem is a formidable undertaking. We can faithfully do the mental training necessary to begin, but our era and context have drifted far from those of Dante, and we are far from the parameters of his original audience. We are the 'futura gente' ('future people'; *Par.* 33.72), by definition not medieval,

9 Teodolinda Barolini, *Dante's Poets: Textuality and Truth in the 'Comedy'* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

10 The lively verb 'donnear' ('to long for'; *Par.* 24.118 and 27.88), for example, is a provocative repurposing of the register of love-lyric.

11 On destructive Church leadership see, for example, *Inf.* 4.59–60; *Inf.* 19.1–123; *Inf.* 27.85–132; *Purg.* 16.82–129; *Par.* 27.10–66.

and often neither Italian, nor Catholic, nor in many cases Christian at all. We struggle to master his language (and for most, including Italo-phones, it *is* a struggle). We painstakingly recreate a partial familiarity with the Christian doctrine and controversies that were Dante's daily bread. What we start off knowing of mediaeval science and technology you could put in a thimble and shake, and much of that understanding isn't even accurate as it rattles around in there. Most of us come to Dante's poem with not a tenth of his knowledge of classical myth, or literature, or philosophy, or history; nor have we a thousandth of his knowledge of his own times. All of these are load-bearing supports of the *Commedia*, and our distance from them makes it a challenge to meet the poem and absorb it, in its multiplicity and majesty. General readers and generalist students will not try to mediaevalize themselves by reading the poem dozens of times — and even for specialists who do, that process is very incomplete. What are they to do, then, those modern readers who *want* to know the *Commedia* but find it so effortful? Especially the third canticle, which for devotees is the summit and the payoff of the entire poem?

They can invite the poem into their present. The poem can come to them through a set of translations, adaptations, and 'tradaptations' that refer to what modern readers do know to teach them what they don't.¹² And while the slew of new Dantes can be inconsistent in usefulness, students sometimes arrive at the best of them through a fascination with the worst; and the best among them can be powerful conduits to the *Commedia* itself.¹³ In 'the best' I include new translations by poets such as Mary Jo Bang, who tries paradoxically to preserve the *Commedia* by departing from it, rather than rendering its increasingly archaic distance from us. In what follows, I offer an overview of the ways that Bang's translation enacts Barolini's focus on the visible interface between the historical author and the reader, Dante's 'futura gente', in our time and place.



12 For the coinage *tradaptation* see Katherine Gillen and Kathryn Vomero Santos, 'Shakespeare and the Politics of Tradaptation', *PMLA*, 138.3 (May 2023), pp. 715–20.

13 For a rich overview of Dante invited into our world, see Giuseppe Antonelli, *Il Dante di tutti: un'icona pop* (Turin: Einaudi, 2022).

‘Classics are perennial, but translations age and must be replaced’: I first heard this from Giuseppe Mazzotta forty-two years ago, and the adage has held up. Consulting the translations of Cary (1814), Longfellow (1867), Sayers (1949–57), even Ciardi (1954–70), it’s easy to see how thick the lens can be in places, how warped, and especially how dusty. A poem that we know well in Italian takes on overlays that blur and freeze a fluid verbal surface, and distance a narrative thrust that in its time had more immediacy and drive.

The past fifty years have seen an abundance of new English translations of the *Commedia*, and the digital revolution has enabled the circulation of many more translations than previous technologies and distribution networks had done. Scholarly translations, creative adaptations, graphic novels, adaptations in film, ballet, and opera, and — around the 2021 centenary — a plethora of impermanent revisitations of the *Commedia* have generated new analytical categories for interacting with new versions of the poem. No typology of translation has given Dante scholars a greater intellectual challenge than that of modern poets such as W. S. Merwin and Seamus Heaney, Ciaran Carson and Robert Pinsky, Lorna Goodison and Mary Jo Bang.¹⁴ Dante scholars translating the original poem are typically more committed to reproducing its content and context in translation than to capturing its early ethical and aesthetic novelty. We often struggle to value properly the poetic translations that dust off the poem for the very audiences we most want to read it: students and non-specialists, for whom the most scholarly renditions in English leave the *Commedia* remote and, if not inert, at least tightly corseted in a stately register and specialized commentary.

This remains true, I think, despite the refined work scholars have done on the Dante translations done by poets.¹⁵ Such work focuses on the window glass of new poetic translations or tradaptations, rather

14 Many translators of Dante who are also poets hew to the more scholarly side of their undertaking than the poetic side (one might think of Steve Ellis and Stanley Lombardo, for example).

15 *Dante’s Inferno: Translations by Twenty Contemporary Poets*, ed. by Daniel Halpern (Hopewell, NJ: Ecco Press, 1993); *The Poet’s Dante*, ed. by Peter S. Hawkins and Rachel Jacoff (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002); *Divine Comedies for the New Millennium: Recent Dante Translations in America and the Netherlands*, ed. by Ronald de Rooy (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2003); *After Dante: Poets*

than on the Dantean landscape to be seen through it. But this approach certainly remains an alcove of Dante studies, not the main hall; and in the context of Barolini's *Undivine Comedy* I'm looking to privilege neither the original nor the translations, neither the historical author nor his future reader, but where these converge. I visualise a Venn diagram that is not static but dynamic, one that shows the *Commedia* in motion across a great sea of being that is equally multiplex and shifting: the great poem morphing not only through its many re-envisionings, but also within horizons both collective and individual. No one has access to some notionally 'real' or even 'complete' *Commedia*; readers access facets of it through the necessarily contingent lenses of our collective cultural horizon on the one hand, and our individual experiences, minds, bodies, languages, on the other.¹⁶

American poet Mary Jo Bang's translations of the *Commedia* are superlative examples of this dynamic. Her *Inferno* appeared in print in 2012, her *Purgatorio* in 2021, and her *Paradiso* in 2025.¹⁷ I first encountered Bang's *Inferno* in a National Public Radio interview, with her musical, serious reading of the first tercet:

Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita
mi ritrovai in una selva oscura
ché la diritta via era smarrita.

(Stopped mid-motion in the middle
Of what we call a life, I looked up and saw no sky —
Only a dense cage of leaf, tree, and twig. I was lost.)
(*Inf.* 1.1–3; *MJB*)

I, too, was lost. Mesmerized. At that point I'd been in love with the poem for well over half my life, had read it through fifty-four times in Italian, countless times for some sections, in Italian and in translation.

in Purgatory: Translations by Contemporary Poets, ed. by Nick R. Havelly and Bernard O'Donoghue (Todmorden: Arc Publications, 2021).

- 16 A corollary of the *Commedia*'s multiplicity and mutability is that, while no translation is uniformly the best one, each gets some things uniquely and irreplaceably right (this is also true *in malo*).
- 17 Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, trans. by Mary Jo Bang (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2012); Dante Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, trans. by Mary Jo Bang (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2021); Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso*, trans. by Mary Jo Bang (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2025), hereafter *MJB* for Bang's translations. Subsequent references given in parentheses in the main text.

I'd never heard anything like what Bang was doing with my Dante — because she was doing something with her Dante, not mine. She aimed at a Dante for our time, in our language, through the filter of her own poetry:

How might the lines sound if I were to put them into colloquial English? What if I were to go further and add elements of my own poetic style? Would it sound like a cover song, the words of the original unmistakably there, but made unfamiliar by the fact that someone else's voice has its own characteristics? Could it be, like covers sometimes are, a tribute that pays homage to the original, while at the same time radically departing from it? (*MJB Inf.*, p.7)

While my first reading pinged between reservation and awe, my second and third not only integrated her Dante into mine, but rewired and galvanized my understanding both of what Dante was doing in his time, and what and how his poem can mean in ours.

Bang is careful in her translation principles and practice, and describes them in a 'Note on the Translation' in each of the first two canticles.¹⁸ Since Dante quotes and cites authors who are no longer vivid to moderns, Bang imports more recent ones we might recognize; the canto notes assiduously document her invocations of the corpus of English lyric, or of modern song lyrics (another poetic corpus).¹⁹ She crafts punchy modernizations of some of Dante's phrasings, which jolt the reader into our own time and our own lives.²⁰ Similarly, to balance the events of Dante's present, Bang invokes events and aspects of our own time 'to allow the poem to speak with intimacy about the world we live in: the postmodern, post-9/11, Internet-ubiquitous present' (*MJB Inf.*, p. 8). Bang doesn't replace Dante's cast of characters with

18 *MJB*, 'A Note on the Translation', in Dante, *Inferno*, pp. 7–12, and 'A Note on the Translation', in Dante, *Purgatorio*, pp. xvii–xxiv.

19 'There are lines from [...] Shakespeare, Emily Dickinson, Gertrude Stein, Allen Ginsberg, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, and Oscar Wilde, among others. There are snippets of songs from contemporary musicians, meant to echo the singers and songs Dante weaves into the poem: Bob Dylan, Cyndi Lauper, Led Zeppelin, Amy Winehouse, John Coltrane, Marvin Gaye, Talking Heads, Richie Havens, and others' (*MJB Purg.*, pp. xxi–ii).

20 'I wanted to [...] create an English-language version of the *Inferno* that would adhere to the original but would seem neither remote in time nor elevated in diction' (*MJB Inf.*, p. 8).

contemporary ones, as Sandow Birk does in his film and translation:²¹ as she says, 'The characters had to remain as they were in the original but I would toy with the poem's rhetorical surface, as well as with the allusions and similes' (*MJB Inf.*, p. 9).

[Dante] creates a tapestry of verisimilitude, a detailed world filled with everyday objects and recognizable people, architecture, and landscapes. I extended that gesture into the present by including references to such figures and objects as klieg lights and cameras, Susan Sontag and Sigmund Freud, Stephen Colbert and Eric Cartman. They all belong in any mirror that reflects this era. (*MJB Inf.*, p. 10)

She describes the sound-play she favours in place of rhyme and metre: the *sprezzatura* of her alliteration and assonance, in particular, conceals great care.²²

These various features of her approach would offer one way to organize a reflection on Bang's translations, but I wanted readers of this essay to meet at least a few sustained lines of climactic passages of her *Commedia*. The closing lines from each canticle can encapsulate her specific revelation to me of how the poem perpetuates itself ('s'eterna'; *Inf.* 15.85) in new generations of readers. The culminations of each canticle resound in repeat readers so richly as to give us a 'cammino ascoso' ('hidden road') to 'ritornar nel chiaro mondo' ('to make our way back into the bright world') as *Inferno* closes:

Luogo è là giù da Belzebù remoto
 tanto quanto la tomba si distende,
 che non per vista, ma per suono è noto
 d'un ruscelletto che quivi discende
 per la buca d'un sasso, ch'elli ha roso,
 col corso ch'elli avvolge, e poco pende.
 Lo duca e io per quel cammino ascoso
 intrammo a ritornar nel chiaro mondo;
 e senza cura aver d'alcun riposo,
 salimmo sù, el primo e io secondo,
 tanto ch'i' vidi de le cose belle

21 Sandow Birk, *Dante's Divine Comedy* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2005), and *Dante's Inferno*, dir. by Sean Meredith (Ricochet Releasing, 2008).

22 'I've relied on the less regimented phonic echoes common to contemporary English poetry: internal, slant, and sign rhyme, alliteration and assonance' (*MJB Purg.*, p. xxi).

che porta 'l ciel, per un pertugio tondo.
 E quindi uscimmo a riveder le stelle.
 (Down there, in a remote corner —
 The distance of Beelzebub's tomb times two —
 Is an area one can't find by sight in that low light
 But only by the sound of a stream that,
 As it trickles down a slight incline,
 Has carved a winding canyon through the rock.
 My teacher and I entered that secluded passage
 That would lead us back to the lit world,
 Not wanting to waste time resting, we climbed —
 Him first, then me — until we came to a round opening
 Through which I saw some of the beautiful things
 That come with Heaven. And there we walked out
 To once again catch sight of the stars.)
 (*Inf.* 34.127–39; *MJB*)

At first sight, the verbal surface Bang gives to Dante's subdued transition doesn't draw attention to itself. It is sober and straightforward, unrhymed and unmetred; as she notes, 'For his terza rima, I substituted the dominant music of contemporary poetry — assonant echoes, internal rhyme, alliteration. At times I fell into accentual patterns, mainly iambs and anapests' (*MJB Inf.*, p. 8). Its artfulness is best appreciated read aloud. The sound play can be sly ('tanto quanto' becomes 'tomb times two'; *Inf.* 34.128; *MJB*) or overt: assonance is an audibly binding element, as in long -I (*times, find, sight, light, slight, incline, winding, climbed, time, sight*). Alliteration too has a cohesive effect, as in initial w- (*one, winding, would, world, wanting, waste, we, which, with, walked*) and s- (*sight, sound, stream, slight, secluded, saw, some, sight, stars*). Bang is attentive to nuance: Dante's noun 'ruscelletto' is diminutive, her 'stream' is not, but she postposes a diminutive into the next line's verb 'trickles' (l. 131). She discards the important reiterative prefix *ri-*, diffusing it into longer phrases ('lead us back' for 'ritornar', and 'once again to catch sight of' for 'riveder'); thus she preserves both its reiterative freight, and its vital function of retrieving the opening of *Inferno* 1 ('ritrovai', 'rinova', 'ridir', 'rimirar', 'ripresi', 'ritornar'). With the verbs 'intrammo' ('entered'; l. 134), 'salimmo' ('climbed'; l. 136), 'uscimmo' ('walked out'; l. 139), Dante gives us — and Bang faithfully echoes — the very iter of the *Purgatorio* to come, and the inverse of the descent (l. 130) to the core of *Inferno*.

I have of course occasionally demurred. Bang renders 'quindi' as 'there' rather than 'thence' or 'from there' (*Inf.* 34.139; *MJB*), but so do many or even most English translations (and Bang does keep the sense properly locative, not temporal). 'Not wanting to waste time resting' (l. 135): 'waste time' is inserted, if plausible. Are disparities distracting? Not at all: they appear, only to illuminate and enrich the poem as it subsists in me, as it is part of me.

The end of *Purgatorio* is a more energetic and exhilarated, a more subjective and solitary transition than the anticlimactic close of *Inferno*.

S'io avessi, lettor, più lungo spazio
da scrivere, i' pur cantere' in parte
lo dolce ber che mai non m'avria sazio;
ma perché piene son tutte le carte
ordite a questa cantica seconda,
non mi lascia più ir lo fren de l'arte.

Io ritornai da la santissima onda
rifatto sì come piante novelle
rinovellate di novella fronda,
puro e disposto a salire a le stelle.

(If I had, Reader, a longer time to write, I would
As far as possible sing of the sweet drink
That never would've satisfied me,
But because all the cards
Of the second canticle have been laid out,
The limits of art won't let me go further.

I came back from those most holy waters
Remade, no longer past repair,
A new plant, renewed with new leaves —
Pure and ready to climb the stairway to the stars.)

(*Purg.* 33.136–145; *MJB*)

Here, too, I admire the traces of the potter's hand. Bang modernises the image of the 'carte' ('pages') of 'questa cantica seconda' ('this second canticle'), shifting them into cards in a deck that have all 'been laid out' (l. 140; *MJB*): cards in a solitaire or a Tarot display, index cards or post-its (physical or digital) in a modern writer's practise.²³ At the

23 'As I went forward, these were the kind of substitutions I allowed myself — worker for peasant, car for cart, Aero for arrow — ones where the medieval original is embodied in the modern' (*MJB Inf.*, p. 9).

same time, in making this shift she has suppressed some significant content: 'piene' ('full') and 'ordite' ('disposed'; l. 139–40) are suppressed altogether; the specific 'lo fren' — in equitation it is 'the bit'; in a mechanism, 'the brake' — is made generic, 'the limits of art' (l. 141; *MJB*). Here as well, Bang carefully renders Dante's retrievals of *Inferno's* reiterations: 'ritornai' ('I came back'; l. 142); 'rifatto' ('remade'; l. 143); 'rinovellate' ('renewed'; l. 144, italics mine). Similarly, in 'I came back [...] to climb' she preserves Dante's echo of *Inferno's* ending ('ritornar', 'salimmo', 'uscimmo'), as well as that of the abortive climb of *Inferno* 1. Dante's polyptoton with 'novelle' is compressed neatly from two lines into one: 'A *new* plant, renewed with *new* leaves' (l. 144, italics mine), but loses the elegant chiasmus of 'piante novelle | rinovellate di novella fronda' (ll. 143–44). Given the novelty of the upcoming celestial paradise, and the centrality of the chiasmus in *Paradiso*, I regret this change that de-emphasizes them.

I described the culminating moment of the second canticle as solitary, due to Virgil's pointed absence; though Beatrice and Statius are present and accompany the pilgrim 'to the stars', they disappear in the last ten lines of *Purgatorio* 33 in favour of an unexpected companion: ourselves. The poet interpellates us, imbricating us almost shockingly in the present of composition: 's'io avessi, lettore, più lungo spazio [...] non mi lascia più ir lo fren de l'arte' ('If I had, Reader, a longer time to write [...] the limits of art won't let me go further'; *Purg.* 33.136–41; *MJB*). The historical author Dante places us at the elbow of the composing poet Dante as he narrates the pilgrim Dante rising from the water renewed and ready to climb to the stars. Again, from the poem's first address to the reader to the last, these moments have functioned to shift us from our world into his, but also from his world into ours. 'Whoa whoa whoa, what's this "no longer past repair" bit', I mutter, but Bang's note clarifies that a Mark Strand poem is being invoked (*MJB Purg.*, p. 356). I invariably hear in 'stairway to the stars' the Led Zepelín song 'Stairway to Heaven', but that may be idiosyncratic: Bang doesn't specify an allusion, as she always does when one is intended.

Comparing Bang's notes on the third canticle to those of the first two reveals a heightened intention to render the depths and specificities and multiplicities of the *Paradiso*, particularly its dense weave of poetry, theology, philosophy, and history thematized in Barolini's

chapter 8. Reading along as she translated and annotated the *Paradiso* has been one of my most vivid joys of recent years. It's a privilege to have been her consultant, attended to with far more solicitude than I would have imagined. The *Commedia's* closing lines once again offer a microcosm of how the translator handles the challenges specific to this canticle.

Qual è 'l geomètra che tutto s'affige
 per misurar lo cerchio, e non ritrova,
 pensando, quel principio ond' elli indige,
 tal era io a quella vista nova:
 veder voleva come si convenne
 l'imago al cerchio e come vi s'indova;
 ma non eran da ciò le proprie penne:
 se non che la mia mente fu percossa
 da un fulgore in che sua voglia venne.
 A l'alta fantasia qui mancò possa;
 ma già volgeva il mio disio e 'l velle,
 sì come rota ch'igualmente è mossa
 l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle.

(Like the geometer who gives their all
 To squaring the circle, and still can't uncover,
 Through reasoning, the principle they need —
 That's how I was at that new sight:
 Wanting to see how the image fit the circle
 And how it in-where's itself there.

But my own wings weren't up to that,
 Had it not been that my mind was suddenly
 Struck by a bolt from the blue and I got my wish.

At that, the plug was pulled on my lofty fantasy:
 But my desire and will were already being turned,
 Just like the wheel that is equally moved,

By the love that moves the sun and the other stars.)
 (Par. 33.133–45; MJB)

There may be no locus in the poem where the stakes are higher, and Bang is both meticulous and a gambler. As always, a cohesive soundscape is created by the alliterative wash, for example, of initial -w (*was, wanting, in-where's, wings, was, wish, was, will, were, wheel*). But unlike the endings of *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, at this culmination Bang clusters modern colloquial idioms, some alliterative at that: 'a bolt out of the blue'; 'the plug was pulled'; 'I got my wish'. At the poem's climax, she

keeps the earthly and the contemporary side by side with the transcendent and the timeless, so that they re-enact the convergence of contradictory verities in which the whole canticle trades. With the serenity of Dante himself, Bang slips into her version these simultaneously coexisting impossibilia: the simile of squaring the circle; the balked craving which effort fails but revelation succeeds in satisfying; the absorption of the individual into the love that moves the entire universe. The component parts of the experiencing and the writing self — *mente, voglia, fantasia, disio, velle* — are integrated into the whole, bringing the whole of the reading self along, every time.

There is too much to say about this excerpt, but I'll conclude with the neologism 'vi s'indova' (*Par.* 33.138). The neologisms of the *Paradiso* have their detractors and their devotees, and I've fulminated against the habit of diluting or erasing them in translation, as Mandelbaum for example routinely does. At least in the notes, I've moaned, *explain 's'io mi'intuassi, come tu t'inmii'* (*Par.* 9.81, which in Mandelbaum's wretchedly pallid rendering is 'if I could enter you as you do me'). I know of no translator who has taken them in such a beautiful direction as Bang does, for example in her initial solution 'where-within-it it fit' for 'vi s'indova', and her subsequent choice 'in-where's itself there'. She has found a way to highlight these coinages that express an otherwise inexpressible, inconceivable dynamic, neither flattening them (as in Mandelbaum's bland 'found place in it') nor letting them clank awkwardly along as I would do, marking them with an unlovely literalism. Because Dante presumably coined his neologisms to confront us with novelty and complexity, to make us wrestle for meaning, and to make that awareness — of something new to us — suffuse us, concretely and not only conceptually.



In her concluding remarks to the October 2022 symposium, Barolini said that Dante's 'narrative micro-strategies burrow into the reader's mind' and create suspension of disbelief, 'never more so than in the case of a poem that creates a virtual reality based on a revealed religion.' For 'in such a case the response to the work of art is conflated in the minds of many readers with their belief in their religion.' I could not

agree more, and I maintain that Bang's translation, by bringing our present into the poem and the poem into our 'postmodern, post-9/11, Internet-ubiquitous present', exemplifies the permeability of the work of art and its reader's own worldview, with or without faith. By steeping us in his poetic creation, Dante makes of us not an audience, but an instrument; not an ear, but a soundbox; not a solitary reader bound on a single journey, but a communal and virtual incarnation of the poem. A kind of church of the *Commedia*, as communitarian and contentious as most churches seem to be. We are the volume in which the poem's leaves are bound up; we are the manuscript copies littered with marginal notes, corrections, manicules, our remembered or imagined illustrations, our errors of recollection or understanding, our palimpsested interpretations which we articulate and then overwrite. The poem is multiplied infinitely in its readers, who embody and vehicle it in flesh and blood, as powerfully as written copies do (if more intangibly, sporadically, and unreliably). We are the locus where the sequence of single sounds converges into polyphony, where the diachrony of the 'dolci note' ('sweet notes') becomes the synchrony of 'dolce armonia' ('sweet harmony'; *Par.* 6.124–26).

It is within our minds that the poem's diachrony and synchrony enact their tidal pull between the binaries Barolini examines in chapter 8 of *The Undivine Comedy*: unity and multiplicity; identity and difference; time and eternity; place and non-spatiality; permanence and contingency. That the actualization of the poem lies in the locus of reader memory is one of the gifts of *The Undivine Comedy* I've honestly grasped from no other writing. I'm grateful to Barolini for being the extraordinary expositor of Dante that she continues to be, both in her recent, current and future work, and in the lasting reverb of her earlier writing. *The Undivine Comedy* has authorised us — the 'futura gente' whose world Dante did not foresee, but whose hunger and thirst he certainly did — to be full participants in, and incarnations of, this 'lapsing, unsoilable, | whispering sea.'²⁴

24 'Ringsend', lines 21–22, in Oliver St John Gogarty, *The Poems and Plays of Oliver St John Gogarty* (Gerrards Cross, Bucks: Colin Smythe Limited, 2002), pp. 110–11 (p. 111).

F. Regina Psaki, 'The Role of the Reader in Actualizing the *Commedia*', in *A World of Possibilities: The Legacy of The Undivine Comedy*, ed. by Kristina M. Olson, *Cultural Inquiry*, 37 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2025), pp. 317–37 <https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-37_16>

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