

DANTE 2006: THE CONTEMPORARY

by David Gewanter



Michael Mazur, *Inf. III, i, Caronte*,
acquaforte e acquatinta, 1996.

The path that Dante walked in the *Commedia* first spiraled below ground, and then upward to the skies. But his *Commedia* has now circled the world and, like a seasoned traveler, it has picked up many local languages and customs. We can now find a Dante in Persian, one in Urdu, and one, perhaps, in every tongue along the Silk Road. Does each culture claim him as a local inhabitant? We know that Shakespeare's Hamlet has become a world citizen: there's a Moscow Hamlet, a Nigerian Hamlet, a yiddische Hamlet, and so forth. The *Commedia* likewise has been handed the keys to a thousand cities. America invites Dante back every few years; new translations appear even as the old ones – by Longfellow, John Ciardi, Allen Mandelbaum, or Robert Pinsky – are still being read. A cheerful monk from California named Brother Michael Meister has compiled fifty-two English-language translations of the *Inferno* – that's one for every US state, plus Puerto Rico, and Guam. In publishing terms, John Ruskin was right: there may be editions of Heaven, but there must be editions of Hell.

The *Commedia* took some time to land in English: we find no *diritta via* of Dante's influence in Chaucer, who drew instead from Boccaccio, and we find very little influence in Milton. As Ezra Pound said, «Dante's god is ineffable divinity. Milton's god is a fussy old man with a

hobby». By the 19th century, though, Dante did arrive in England, in the 1814 translation by Henry Cary, and in essays, imitations, or derived *terza rima* by major poets, from Coleridge, Shelley, and Keats to Matthew Arnold and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Dante also took up residence in Boston, hosted by Longfellow, Emerson, and their «Dante Club»; and he showed himself fully adapted for use in a modern, capitalist society. «Depending on the admirer», the editors of *The Poets' Dante* tell us, Dante was either «the father of modern poetry, the liberator of vernacular speech, the civic poet, the exile and wanderer, the prophet of nationalism or world government, the adoring lover, [or] the exacting craftsman» (xv). US President Theodore Roosevelt wrote that the streets of New York's Bowery were «haunted by demons as horrible as any...[from] the pages of the 'Inferno'». That was New York: could President Bush use such terms to describe the fires of Baghdad?

Dante is hardly a shape-shifting Hamlet; yet some aspect of his multifaceted *Commedia* speaks to crucial issues of each era, country, and person. His poem is not precisely a 'universal' work, as our schoolteachers used to say, and as T.S. Eliot said. The poem speaks not to all of us, but to *each one* of us; it becomes a companionable presence to each person, speaking to personal needs and

aspirations, echoing in familiar tones. The American poet Robert Lowell speculates that Chaucer, writing 50 years after Dante's death, had already found him out of date. Exactly so: the *Commedia* is no longer implicated solely in one time, place, or tongue; it is always distant, and always our contemporary.

As the 19th century empires fractured in the First World War, Dante became a new milk to the High Moderns. He reigns over T.S. Eliot's work from *The Waste Land* to «Little Gidding» – as a philosopher-poet, as a social and political critic, and as the mouthpiece for dozens of 'common speech' voices brought into poetry. Dante looks down upon the whole of Ezra Pound's *Cantos* – he looks down upon them, but I cannot say with a happy or unhappy gaze. The Moderns did not – did not want to – reinstate the *form* of the *Commedia* – that is, Dante's dramatic and philosophical circuits, his celestial patterns, his interlacing rhymes. But they took Dante in parts, as a companion traveling to new places. Eliot recited favorite *Commedia* passages to himself in bed, or on trains; Borges, who claimed the *Commedia* to be a lyric, read a pocket Dante – in English and Italian – on his way to work, shortly before the Dictatorship began. W.B. Yeats crammed Dante into his metaphysical prose work, *A Vision*, and wrote a rare *terza rima* lyric on his old mythic friend, the Irish hero Cuchulain, now trapped in a cowards' Hell (*Cuchulain Comforted*). Osip Mandel'stam turned from Soviet Realism to carry on feverish conversation with Dante.

One might expect that, with Dante's aquiline shadow brooding so prominently over the Moderns, that the next generations of poets would break away from him. To Sartre, Hell is other people; to Ginsberg, Hell might be found in San Francisco – neither of them needed theology. The mid-century poet Robert Lowell adapted Dante in many poems – he produced several versions just of Brunetto Latini – and praised him as generative to the «allegorical geniuses of Hawthorne and Melville». Yet Lowell also judged that Dante was not a «popular or a major influence» in American poetry, and that he was already past «the height of [his] esteem». But recent publishing history proves Lowell wrong: Daniel Halpern's (many poets) *Inferno* translation appeared in 1993; then Robert Pinsky's masterful version arrived in 1994.

Pinsky produced an astonishingly poised and lively bilingual version – a supple, natural-sounding *terza rima* English that made vivid Dante's voices, sense of detail, and impulse; his volume, with Michael Mazur's dark and luminous illustrations, became a best-seller, with over 100,000 copies sold, plus an audio tape, and dramatic readings done on two national tours. Here, as in no other time in English since Longfellow, perhaps, Dante became the poet of the moment in America. Pinsky may have achieved what Madame Mandel'stam claimed when Lowell translated her husband's poems: «the meeting of two poets writing in two different languages. There is

sudden recognition between them, as if [they] had struck up a close friendship».

One would think, then, with a resonant, living version of Dante being read, played, and watched, that the publishing field of America had become saturated, and our taste for Hell satisfied. And yet, Allen Mandelbaum's version was republished just two years after Pinsky's, in 1996; and paperback versions of *Inferno* by Charles Eliot Norton, Mark Musa, Robert Hollander, and the Irish poet Ciaran Carson have all appeared (or been republished) in the past few years. By comparison, over fifty years passed between Cary's 1814 translation and Longfellow's in 1867.

This hectic, centrifugal zeal for the *Commedia* has powered its translation into other art forms – music, film, painting, sculpture, and now, as Frank Ambrosio will show us in our festival, even computer programs. Brother Meister is putting the 52 *Infernos* on a Microsoft spreadsheet, creating a dizzy, side-by-side comparison. And Hell has reached the cartoons: there is a Trillium Edition *Inferno*, in which Lucifer sits on Los Angeles; and there is a Marvel comic book, *X-Men Inferno*. The *Inferno* has gained such traction in our culture that it even won a bit part in the American hit movie, *Twister*. Here, a woman is reading in bed, not knowing that a tornado is about to destroy her home. But we see that she is reading Robert Pinsky's *Inferno* translation, and so we realize that all Hell will break loose.

Giuseppe Mazzotta writes that Dante is a «founding father» to American poetry; if so, then some of Dante's legacy is founding, and some of it is confounding. His gifts to us include the following:

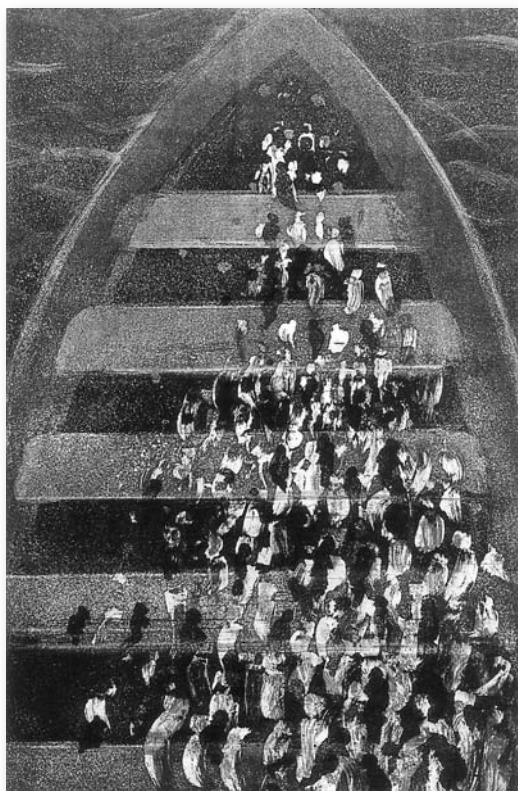
1. The *Commedia*'s art offers another court of justice, beyond the mechanisms of legal, social, or institutional justice that we experience in the world. And the justice of this court is enacted directly upon our physical bodies.
2. The *Commedia* proves that the dead continue to talk to us, that in poetry the dead have more to say than when they lived.
3. The *Commedia*'s vast, allegorical framework, its panoptic visions and contradictory human confessions, rivals the accomplishments of the modern novel, and challenges any poet to create a total vision of the world.
4. And the *Commedia* likewise challenges any English-language translator to attempt a natural-sounding *terza rima*.
5. Dante, like Ovid before him, and like Shelley, Joyce, and Josef Brodsky after, has established the rights and authority of an exiled writer to critique his city or culture.
6. Dante's *Commedia* has established a single, wonderously simple figure – the circle – as the form for the life of a person, a system of justice, a city, or a nation. Yet we find that, in terms of the growth

and death of nations, Dante's circle still cannot gain the acceptance in America that it has won in post-imperialist Europe. For as J.M. Coetzee recognized, «One thought alone preoccupies the submerged mind of Empire: how not to end, how not to die, how to prolong its era» (*Waiting for the Barbarians*).

My simple proposal in this talk is that Dante remains a perennial contemporary, as a figure living in what Wittgenstein calls «the eternal present», even as we hear him speaking in our particular time and accent. He is too abstracted from American life and language to be revered, or to be studied by rote. Thus, his authority establishes itself inside each reader with unexpected force, and under peculiar, very local circumstances.

Perhaps my own introduction to Dante – I discovered

him at college in Michigan, in 1974 – can serve as an example. There, amidst the corn fields and Vietnam war protests of this sleepy Midwest town, a zealous Canadian professor named Ralph G. Williams held an open seminar on the *Commedia* every Wednesday. It was not a class, you just came in to read a canto in Italian and in Sinclair's prose translation, to listen and talk for two hours. One canto a week. Around the table sat a physicist, several sad-eyed graduate students, a historian, and other stray folk who came year after year. Very slowly, as autumn, Nixon's impeachment, and American football tumbled outside the seminar room, we began to understand a bit of what Dante saw and said. Ever since then, that poem, and that small room have always seemed to me a whole university, a free place to explore a new world and, if we could, to sound a true note.



Michael Mazur, *Inf. III, ii, Sulla barca di Caronte*,
acquaforte e acquatinta, 1999.