

«ENGLISHING» DANTE: THREE RECENT AMERICAN POETS' TRANSLATIONS OF THE *INFERNO*

ABSTRACT

Il saggio mette a confronto tre fra le traduzioni più importanti della *Commedia* curate da poeti americani negli anni 2000, prendendo in analisi le loro strategie e tecniche traduttive e i conseguenti risultati estetici. La base del confronto sono le intenzioni traduttive dichiarate dai poeti-traduttori, il modo in cui hanno cercato di porle in pratica, e l'interpretazione dei loro risultati alla luce della teoria dei *translation studies* recente. Le idee di Lawrence Venuti sulle «versioni dei poeti» e su come leggere una traduzione, specialmente in un contesto di *world literature*, sono risultate particolarmente utili nel caso dei tentativi di questi poeti-traduttori di riscrivere un testo poetico autonomo, e di trasportare la complessità della poesia di Dante, potentemente padroneggiata, attraverso due tradizioni letterarie diverse.

The essay focuses on the three main translations of Dante's *Divine Comedy* done by American poets and published in the 21st century in order to compare their translating strategies, techniques, and aesthetic results. The grounds for comparison are the poet-translators' declared intentions, the ways in which they have tried to put them into practice, and the interpretation of their results in the light of recent translation studies theory. Lawrence Venuti's ideas about poets' versions and about how to read a translation, especially in the context of world literature, have proven particularly useful in the case of these American poets' attempts to rewrite a poetic text in its own right, and to carry Dante's powerfully mastered poetic complexity across two different literary traditions.

1. THE CORNUCOPIA OF ENGLISH AND AMERICAN TRANSLATIONS OF THE *COMEDY*

When I thought of honoring the seventh centennial of Dante Alighieri's death by devoting an essay to the latest translations of his *Comedy* done by American poets, I hadn't imagined how many translations had been produced in the English language since its first, British one in 1782, and how many, among these, were American. According to Paolo Cherchi, who in 2003 provided an account of *The Translations of Dante's Comedy in America*, the most extensive study of Dante's reception in the Anglo-American world – Gilbert F. Cunningham's critical bibliography of 1965-67 – lists 85 in his time, 22 of which are American.¹ Cherchi's supposition was that, by the time he wrote, their number had probably increased to 100. His «succinct survey» begins with the first American translation in 1843; it pauses, among the following, on

¹ CHERCHI 2003, p. 23.

those he regards as «the most significant ones»² which often opened new directions in Dante translations; and it dwells longer on those that appeared in the second half of the 20th century, because they hadn't been covered by previous studies. I rely on Cherchi's historical reconstruction of the main trends in Dante translations to pick up the evaluation of the American translations of the *Comedy* from where he left it, that is, the 21st century, and to focus on a specialized kind of translations, those created by poets.

As a quick look at a sufficiently reliable Wikipedia, simple list shows, the number of American translations exceeds, at this point, 30, adding a further turn in their trend to those indicated by Cherchi – besides parading the impressive range of adaptations that have been devoted to the *Comedy*, from classical and modern music to architecture, from movies to video games, from paintings to sculpture (let alone literature). Cherchi lists in the first place «the real founders of the great American 'dantismo'» – Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Charles Eliot Norton – who established, in the US, the initial, «classical,» strictly adherent and transparent approach to translating Dante, partly as a reaction to the more popular, first rendition of Thomas William Parson of 1843. Longfellow's 1867 smooth and elegant translation was in blank verse *terzinas*, and followed Dante line by line, closely observing his syntax, and suggesting the possibility of translating directly into prose, which Norton promptly explored in 1891-92. As Cherchi explains, this notion of translation, which prevailed for decades from the end of the 19th century to the middle of the 20th, was based on the principle of «literalism,» derived from the Romantic and Victorian aesthetics.³ This was replaced by the «formalistic» aesthetic formulated by two of the greatest 20th-century admirers of Dante, Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, which identified form with content,⁴ and pushed Dante's translators «to experiment again with the *terzina* and with a mixture of archaism, learned words, and dialectical expression,» whose best achievement was John Ciardi's «courageous rendering» of the *Comedy* in 1954-1970, that is, a «transposition» of Dante's «living language,» or a spoken, idiomatic English.⁵ The time of «modern» translations of Dante was opened.⁶ Many translators would be professors, as Charles S. Singleton, the author of one of the still most influential translations, which was done in prose, and accompanied by a commentary, in order to do justice to what was then perceived as the inherent philosophical nature of the poem.⁷ Cherchi completes his survey with another poet-professor, Allen Mandelbaum, who heightens a Miltonic pentameter with a more elevated tone than the *medietas* ideal of Mark Musa (1971-84),⁸ and Robert Pinsky (1994), a poet who – as I will argue – is fundamental to my own evaluation of the most recent poets' translations of the *Comedy*. Cherchi

² Ivi, p. 24.

³ Ivi, p. 30.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ Ivi, pp. 31-32.

⁶ Ivi, p. 34.

⁷ Ivi, p. 35.

⁸ Ivi, p. 38.

points out his boldness in experimenting with a narrative speed that almost exceeds Dante's and requires the least faithfulness to the original.⁹

2. THREE US POETS' 21ST-CENTURY TRANSLATIONS

I chose to concentrate on *poets'* translations for the purpose of selecting a body of works to compare and evaluate in the most recent US production because I share Lawrence Venuti's notion of translation as a rewriting that decontextualizes the source text and recontextualizes it «in terms that are intelligible and interesting to receptors, situating it in different patterns of language use, in different cultural values, in different literary traditions and in different social institutions.»¹⁰ The process creates a different set of intertextual and interdiscursive relations, which involves a «formal and semantic loss» but at the same time an «exorbitant gain.»¹¹ The fact that translators – and to a certain measure even *poet* translators – have started to become aware of translation theory, and to refer to it, makes it even more interesting to try to evaluate their work on its grounds. Indeed, all the poets whose translations I chose to analyze offer a foreword or an introduction, or a note in which they state their translating intentions, which is one of Venuti's most relevant recommendations to translators who want to become visible.¹² Moreover, not to skip «an introductory essay written by a translator» is also his fourth recommendation to the reader of a translation: «read it first, as a statement of the interpretation that guides the translation and contributes to what is unique about it.»¹³ Thus, in my analysis, I will compare both the poet translators' intentions, as they are expressed in their introductory writings, and their practices, as well as their aesthetic results. My case studies will be W.S. Merwin's *Purgatorio*, which in 2000 inaugurated the new century of Dante's US translations (and was re-edited in 2018, thus framing chronologically my repertory), Michael Palma's *Inferno* (2002), and Mary Jo Bang's *Inferno* (2012). Merwin's inclusion of the two cantos from the *Inferno* he had contributed to David Halpern's 1993 collective translation of the first section of the *Comedy* made my task easier, in that it allowed me to work exactly on the same material of comparison, the world's favorite *cantica* of Dante's *Comedy*, the *Inferno*, which is also the only one translated by Pinsky.

The three poet translators' statements of intentions reveal different degrees of theoretical consciousness, which correspond to different degrees of familiarity with the theory of translation studies, although Merwin and Palma appear to be closer in their positions and consequently to share their translation dominant. Merwin's poetics of translation, as we may call it, instead of a proper theoretical affiliation, is expressed in

⁹ Ivi, p. 40.

¹⁰ VENUTI 2011a, p. 236.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² VENUTI 2008.

¹³ VENUTI 2013, p. 114.

a “Foreword” that declares as a first thing, out of modesty but also as a sincere statement, the sheer impossibility of translating Dante’s *Comedy*. All the three poets share this belief, but Merwin recounts the trouble he went to, in publicly demonstrating its truth during a lecture on Dante, of «taking a single line from the introductory first canto,» and «examining it word by word,» in order to conclude: «How could that, then, be translated? It could not, of course.»¹⁴ As most poets, after expressing a radical skepticism towards the possibility of translating poetry, Merwin and Palma confess their helplessness in resisting the temptation to translate Dante, because of a typical poet’s feeling I once heard Derek Walcott describe as a sort of a positive “envy” for the feat of a colleague one is pushed to imitate. The strongest source of attraction for them appears to be Dante’s unrivalled poetic achievement, which they equal to the inextricable complexity of his poem. Merwin calls it «the integrity of Dante’s gift,» which for him consists in the «*intricate consistency of the design,*» which «seems to have been thought out beforehand,» and «is finally *inseparable* from the *passion of the narrative* and the *power of poetry.*»¹⁵ Palma, too, praises the «stunning originality, complexity, subtlety and power» of the *Inferno*,¹⁶ and declares that his translation «is a poet’s response to the poetry of the *Inferno*, and an attempt to convey to readers of English, as far as it is in my power to do so, some sense of *the integrity and the artistry of that extraordinary an inimitable work,*»¹⁷ his translating ideal being «the preservation and communication of as much as possible of *all* the elements of the original.»¹⁸

Palma displays a further level of both diachronic and synchronic theoretical consciousness in that he illustrates the range of formal options employed by American translators of the *Inferno* in the previous half-century, taking position against what he defines as «an underlying assumption in some contemporary approaches to translation,» an absolute fidelity to a supposed semantic invariant in the original poem.¹⁹ Justifying his own practice with a quotation from John Jay Chapman, Palma denounces this attribution of sacrality to the original text as belonging to critics more than to translators: the first ones seem to be ready to allow Dante all the obscurity and invention he deemed proper to creating a masterpiece, while translators are generally demanded to use their «own idiom in a conventional and flat-footed way.»²⁰ He thus rejects previous strategies aimed at «medievalizing» Dante, such as the use of archaisms and inversions of word order, and the ennobling of Dante’s «plainspokenness» by rhetorical flourishes.²¹ Palma claims for himself the liberty of pursuing that plainspokenness – which evidently works for him as a dominant within the dominant – «through rhythm and sound» (and not through «extravagant figures of speech»), in a sort of humanistic

¹⁴ ALIGHIERI 2018, p. IX.

¹⁵ Ivi, p. XII; my emphases.

¹⁶ ALIGHIERI 2002a, p. IX.

¹⁷ Ivi, p. XVII.

¹⁸ Ivi, p. XVI; my emphasis.

¹⁹ Ivi, p. XV.

²⁰ Ivi, pp. XV-XVI.

²¹ Ivi, p. XVI.

model of *imitatio* that occasionally resorts to «small, local compromises as needed in the rhyme, or the structure, or the precise literal statement.»²² His interpretant, though, ends up being «a somewhat flexible pentameter that will in places be more reminiscent of Robert Frost or late Shakespeare than of Alexander Pope.»²³ My contention is that, by pursuing Dante's plain-spokenness as a formal priority, Palma would locate himself within the present trend of US translations of the *Inferno*, in which, in fact, Mary Jo Bang seems to me to hold a steadier position.

3. «ENGLISHING» DANTE: THE PRESENT TREND OF DANTE TRANSLATIONS

This present trend was begun by Robert Pinsky's translation of the *Inferno* of 1994, which is *the* important poet's translation of the *Comedy* prior to the recent, 21st-century versions I am considering. In a note on translation he contributed to the Comparative Literature review of the University of Milan *Letteratura e letteratura*, in 2012, he described his translating process as that of «Englishing a poem.»²⁴ Starting from the assumption that no such thing as «translation,» in its etymological meaning of «carrying across» (*trans-latere*) may ever exist, «because meaning in a poem cannot be carried across, unchanged, from one language to another and from one culture to another,» Pinsky declares that his main aim has been to reproduce «the athletic, purposeful momentum of the original,» «by staying true to the nature of English.»²⁵ His way of escaping an arithmetic that was not helping him – because Italian words tend to use more syllables than English words – he decided to do the opposite of all the previous translators: instead of translating Dante line-by-line, and then create «an English grammar and syntax to hold together the lines,» he «translated each sentence of Dante's, inventing English lines of verse to hold the sentences.»²⁶ As the Macmillan Online Resource page devoted to teachers of Pinsky's *Inferno* correctly emphasizes, the poet addressed the great challenges posed by «the two essential elements of the poem's structure – the use of colloquial speech and *terza rima*,» in the attempt to «recreate Dante's poem in plain English while also conveying some of Dante's verbal music.» I would define Pinsky's approach to translating the *Comedy* as dominated by the will to reproduce the sound of Dante's language as if in an *imitatio* of his voice, by pursuing the translating dominant of a colloquial, credible and lively language. The result of Pinsky's effort is as credible, as the daring first “terzina,” which amounts in his «Englishing» to two lines, shows:

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

²² *Ibidem*.

²³ *Ibidem*.

²⁴ PINSKY 2012a, p. 17.

²⁵ *Ibidem*.

²⁶ Ivi, pp. 16-17.

Midway on our life's journey, I found myself
In dark woods, the right road lost.²⁷

I see the following translating attempts of the three poets of our century as further efforts to pursue the same approach in order to do better. I cannot quote the parallel lines from Merwin, because he translated only cantos xxvi and xxvii of the *Inferno*. In his Foreword to his *Paradiso*, he pays homage to Pinsky's translation, calling it «a clear, powerful, masterful gift not only to Dante translation in our language but to the poetry of our time,»²⁸ a decided statement of praise toward a very recent and innovative model. His own choice of a register may be inferred by his assumption that «A translation is made for the *general* reader of its own time and language, a person who, it is presumed, cannot read [...] the original.»²⁹ The same statement supports Merwin's claim of having tried to keep his translation «as close to the meaning of the Italian words as I could make it, taking no liberties» – a kind of semantic equivalence –, but also his hope of «making the translation a poem in English,»³⁰ as Dante's was in the Italian of his time. The result is a flowing, narrative rhythm conducted over a flexible iambic pentameter by a standard diction, that is colloquial but with no hint of vernacular, and certainly displays occasional literary flourishes, or formal, or old-fashioned uses (*endure vengeance, beseech, thereby*), reinforced by infrequent inversions, and by a fidelity to the syntax of the long, winding similes of Dante, as in this passage from canto xxvi of the *Inferno*:

As many fireflies as the peasant resting
on the hill during that season when
he who gives light to the world hides his face least
at the hour when the fly is yielding to the gnat
sees down the length of the valley perhaps
even there where he harvests the grapes and plows,
with as many flames as that the eighth chasm
was shining...³¹

Quante 'l villan ch'al poggio si riposa,
nel tempo che colui che 'l mondo schiara
la faccia sua a noi tien meno ascosa,

come la mosca cede a la zanzara,
vede lucciole giù per la vallea,
forse colà dov'e' vendemmia e ara:

di tante fiamme tutta risplendea
l'ottava bolgia...³²

²⁷ PINSKY 2012b, p. 15.

²⁸ ALIGHIERI 2018, p. xxii.

²⁹ Ivi, p. viii; my emphasis.

³⁰ Ivi, p. xiv.

³¹ Ivi, p. xx, lines 25-32.

³² ALIGHIERI 1968, pp. 287-88.

Notwithstanding the explicit announcement of the intention of «plainspokenness,» that is, «to make poetry in the way that Dante' does, which is, for the most part, through rhythm and sound,»³³ Palma seems to me to have missed his aim. The ambitious added task of maintaining the *terza rima* interlocking his iambic pentameters doesn't really click with the evident attempt to lower his diction, because it sometimes, necessarily, forces him to resort to less ordinary syntactical turns and vocabulary, as in the correspondent passage of canto xxvi I just quoted from Merwin may demonstrate by comparison. Here Palma seems to me to achieve a lesser result in naturalness notwithstanding his sacrifice of the large movement of the simile, which in Dante starts with the opening of the long period. In fact, the opening of the extended, winding rhetorical figure in itself is more reminiscent of a Romantic, Keatsian ode:

In the season when the light-giver turns his face
the least from us, at the hour when flies yield
to mosquitoes that have come to take their place,
as many are the fireflies revealed
to the peasant as he rests upon the height,
looking down where he harvests grapes and tills the field,
with so many flames the eighth pouch was alight...³⁴

Among our three poets, Mary Jo Bang appears to be the theoretically most conscious translator, at least on an intuitive level. She is the only one to have a separate “Note on Translation,” which reveals her awareness of the need to reflect upon her activity and to let the reader know how to receive her work. She is also the one who references her sources in translation theory precisely, quoting two classics of its repertoire, John Dryden and Walter Benjamin. Dryden founds a crucial component of her translation dominant, accessibility, because, with Dryden, Bang wants to translate «for their sakes who understand sense and poetry... when that poetry and sense is put into words which they understand.»³⁵ Benjamin provides the fundamental concept that has, indeed, since his “The Task of the Translator,” justified all translators in carrying on a practice that their thinking seemed to declare impossible, and suggest as illegitimate. This is the concept of translation as the afterlife of an original work, or, as Bang quotes from Benjamin, of «both the original and the translation [...] as fragments of a greater language.»³⁶ The discursive implication in the history of translation studies has been what Bang offers as her own assumption, that is, a notion of translation as interpretation, Venuti's hermeneutic model, which he would substitute for the traditional instrumental model many translators seem to be still following, mostly unawares.³⁷ Bang writes: «Translation is a method of bringing the past back into the present – across geographies, across different time periods, and across cultural difference – and sharing

³³ ALIGHIERI 2002a, p. xv.

³⁴ Ivi, pp. 287-89.

³⁵ ALIGHIERI 2012, p. 11.

³⁶ Ivi, p. 10.

³⁷ VENUTI 2011a, p. 234.

what is common to all,»³⁸ which at the same time recognizes the decontextualizing and recontextualizing functions of translation, and Bang's own, accompanying belief that by «universal language» Benjamin meant «a shared human experience.»³⁹ As Venuti, she comes to the conclusion that translation is at the same time both a homage and a theft; that is, translation is necessarily transformation⁴⁰ – there is no chance that the original may pass unchanged into the translation because the loss is inscribed in the act of translating – but at the same time it is also an «exorbitant gain,»⁴¹ because the translator unavoidably adds a new set of resonances and allusions to the text while trying to imitate its source.⁴²

What the exorbitant gain is, in Bang's translation, is evident, her dominant being the recontextualization of Dante's expression of human experience and morality into «the world we live in.»⁴³ What Bang wanted to stay faithful to was Dante's narrative and his characters – in other words, the drama of the *Comedy*, and the sense of the reader's intimacy with its world. This is why, I believe, she turns the contextualizing part of her paratext into a strikingly original, and entertaining, Introduction – more a creative than a scholarly piece – in which she addresses a «you» who seems to be, in turn, the reader, Dante, and finally herself as the translator of the *Comedy*. The purpose of this writing is to briefly anticipate the story that will be narrated in a way that deeply involves the reader in the protagonist's psychological experience, presenting to his/her imagination both its events and the difficult task of rendering them as real. The truth of the human experience and the moral response it requires, which Bang aspires to render faithfully, are those of Everyman's *Bildung*: the coming to one's senses in a dark forest, the realization of one's errors, the loss of hope and its renewal through the confrontation with terror and bewilderment. The gain she offers to the contemporary English reader is that of recreating Dante's intimacy with his world in the «post-modern, post 9/11, Internet-ubiquitous present» (American) world.⁴⁴ Her «desire to make it speak the language of the present»⁴⁵ has made her radically depart from the original through at least three strategies. The most conspicuous is the use of colloquial English, which unpacks Dante's syntax and puts it «into a spoken form of English that is rich with idiom, and even occasionally slang.»⁴⁶ A second prominent one is Bang's allusions to the totality of contemporary culture, which, blurring the divide between high and low, range from Susan Sontag to Sigmund Freud, from Stephen Colbert to Eric Cartman, and includes a parallel to Dante's homages to his fellow poets that lists poet-songwriters such as John Coltrane and Bob Dylan. Finally, Bang plays with the

³⁸ ALIGHIERI 2012, p. 10.

³⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁰ VENUTI 2011a, p. 241.

⁴¹ Ivi, p. 236; VENUTI 2013, p. 110.

⁴² VENUTI 2013, p. 110.

⁴³ ALIGHIERI 2012, p. 8.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁵ Ivi, p. 10.

⁴⁶ Ivi, p. 11.

rhetoric of the poem, verging on a comic and almost parodic sensibility that yields to the temptation of adventurous substitutions such as «worker for peasant, car for cart, Aero for arrow – ones where the medieval original is embodied in the modern,» but avoids the risk of a slapstick brand of humor effect by being spare of them.⁴⁷

4. A SUCCESSFUL INTERPRETANT: WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS' POETIC DICTION

Bang's interpretants in translating the *Comedy* are not Frost's or Shakespeare's blank verses – lines that can hardly hope to reproduce in the receiving context the novelty of Dante's poetic language and thought – but, on the one hand, an acknowledged tradition of artists that have tried to translate Dante into a 21st-century sensibility, and, on the other – I believe – the implicit and never mentioned 20th-century strongest influence on American poetry, the colloquial verse of William Carlos Williams. The conscious models refer to pop-Dante adaptations such as the 2005 Eternal Kool Project's album *The Inferno Rap*, punk-pop artist Gary Panter's 2006 oversized graphic novel *Jimbo's Inferno* (Fantagraphics), Roberto Benigni's 2009 improv routine *Tutto Dante*, and the videogame *Dante's Inferno*, released by Electronic Arts in 2009. Bang's own book, brilliantly illustrated by the drawings of Danish-American artist Henrik Drescher, draws inspiration from some of these intersemiotic versions, such as Marcus Sanders and Doug Harvey's 2004 illustrated *Dante's Inferno* by Chronicle Books. The unconscious, or perhaps too obvious model, already effective in Bang's own poetry, emerges in her treatment of the prosody of her «postmodern, intertextual, slant translation.»⁴⁸ As Bang states in her *Note on Translation*, she substitutes «the dominant music of contemporary poetry – assonant echoes, internal rhyme, alliteration» for the *terza rima*, keeping an occasional falling «into accentual patterns, mainly iambs and anapests,» and gesturing toward the English poetic tradition by means of the capitalization of the left margin.⁴⁹ The result is this kind of «modern music,» as Zachary Mason rightly defines it in his blurb, a language which is «richly, provocatively, movingly alive».⁵⁰

Stopped in mid-motion in the middle
Of what we call our life, I looked up and saw no sky –
Only a dense cage of leaf, tree, and twig. I was lost.

It's difficult to describe a forest:
Savage, arduous, extreme in its extremity. I think
And the facts come back, then the fear comes back.⁵¹

Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita
mi ritrovai per una selva oscura,

⁴⁷ Ivi, p. 9.

⁴⁸ Ivi, p. 11.

⁴⁹ Ivi, p. 8.

⁵⁰ Ivi; the two approving opinions – the second one expressed by Jonathan Galassi – are offered in the initial section *Praise for Inferno*.

⁵¹ Ivi, p. 15.

ché la diritta via era smarrita.

Ahi quanto a dir qual era è cosa dura
esta selva selvaggia e aspra e forte
che nel pensier rinova la paura!⁵²

As in Williams' poetry, the language is taken from American, live speech, the «dialect» that for the modernist poet was the «mobile,» «changing» and «productive phase – as their languages were to Chaucer, Shakespeare, Dante, Rabelais in their days,» that is, the phase in which it offers «new means for expanded possibilities in literary expression and, I add, basic structure – the most important of all.»⁵³ In its “zero degree” of sophistication, Williams's – and Bang's – poetic language still keeps, through a patient and devoted, invisible work of honing, a very thin, almost imperceptible melody of the voice that relies on the elementary syntax, the spontaneous thought rhythm – sometimes running over lines –, the repetitions of even very brief phrases, words, parts of words or assonantal/consonantal phonemes. The shortening of the line length, together with some sudden, incisive expressions («I was lost»), which reduce the degree of emphasis and rhetoric to the minimum, account for the sense of immediacy of the feeling or sensation described. Bang's language sounds direct, fresh, spontaneous, and makes everything real and intimately so, as it was in her and in Williams's intentions. I find the words that Cristina Campo very aptly used to describe Williams' prosody – its leaning on the lines of oral intonation – felicitously adequate to the «music» of Bang's *Inferno*, too: «[la] folle e delicata linea della sua sintassi, [la] sua metrica di irriducibile naturalezza»⁵⁴ («the mad and delicate line of his syntax, the irreducible naturalness of his prosody,» my transl.). Drescher's illustrations seem to speak the same, straightforward, language, with their powerful, direct allusions to both the past and the present (sci-fi creatures share their space with Emily Dickinson), appealing to the vivid, half-naïve and half-dreamlike, imagination of our infancy, as if in a children's book.

In sum, Mary Jo Bang seems to me to be the only translator, among the poets who have tackled a version of the *Comedy* in our century, to have chosen interpretants that escape and resist the historically predominant approach to translation – the instrumental one, based on an assumption of some kind of equivalence between the original and the translation – in favor of a hermeneutic approach, which offers her readers keys of interpretation to Dante's masterpiece that may «keep a work of literature alive by simultaneously dismantling and reclaiming it.»⁵⁵ Her translation proposes a new model, which culminates Pinsky's effort to «English» the *Comedy* markedly deviating from the previous, more formal and very often academic tradition of Dante translations. Her notes contribute to this turn in being proportionate to the average English reader's need for contextualization: they measure out the quantity and kind of information

⁵² ALIGHIERI 1968, pp. 4-5.

⁵³ WILLIAMS 1972, p. 252.

⁵⁴ CAMPO 1987, p. 173.

⁵⁵ ALIGHIERI 2012, p. 10.

about medieval Italy, Dante's design (and Bang's) and the poem. They are written in a fluent and communicative prose. The first one will serve as an example:

1-2- *in the middle / Of what we call our life*: The poem is set in the year 1300. Dante, having been born in 1265, would have been thirty-five years old – so in the middle («nel mezzo») of what was generally considered at the time to be a typical life span of seventy years. Commentators note that Dante doesn't say in the middle of *his* life but in the middle of *our* life («nostra vita»). Charles Singleton, among others, points out that this gesture of inclusiveness opens the poem up to being read allegorically (*Inferno*, 2:3-4).⁵⁶

Bang and Merwin recognize the scholarly sources of the knowledge they display in commenting the text in their notes, and the previous translations they have consulted in carrying on their own work – in the first place Charles S. Singleton's «masterful piece of scholarly summary,» his 1970 translation,⁵⁷ but also his *Commentary*,⁵⁸ and, for both of them, basically the milestone of the whole tradition of Dante translations, particularly American. Merwin's notes are more detailed than Bang's, but still unpretentious, exhaustive, but functional and – as Bang's – written in a narrative style. Palma's notes stand out as being the most scholarly in number, details, specificity and style, although his choices sometimes don't seem to follow a consistent consideration of an ideal reader. As compared to Bang's first note, for example, the only note that accompanies the opening of *Inferno* quotes «*line 1* The poem is set in 1300, when Dante was thirty-five, halfway through his biblically allotted threescore years and ten,»⁵⁹ which results in a curious mix of minimum (and already well-known) information and high-flown and archaic language. On the other hand, the note to line 30 sounds opposite in its symmetrical combination of standard English and scholarly reference to the fullest discussion of the line in John Freccero's 1986 Harvard University Press study on Dante.⁶⁰

5. DANTE TRANSLATIONS AS CANONS OF WORLD LIT

The degree of scholarship of these three translations' paratexts leads me to a further level of comparison, which is that involved in a world literature perspective. Considered the worldwide and century-long body of translations of the *Comedy*, no other work can be said to have an equal right to the status of World Lit. According to Lawrence Venuti, the reading of world lit translations «must combine distant and close reading [...] to explore the relations between canons and interpretations.»⁶¹ To do so, the study of literary translations must be redefined «in the most material ways,» by

⁵⁶ Ivi, p. 20.

⁵⁷ ALIGHIERI 2018, p. 10.

⁵⁸ ALIGHIERI 2012, pp. 8, 11.

⁵⁹ Ivi, p. 11.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁶¹ VENUTI 2011b, p. 191.

which he means the production, circulation, and reception of translations.⁶² For this reason, my last observations will concern the kind of figures our three American poets cut as national or international translators (and poets), and the policies involved in the reputations and statuses of these three translations' publishers.

Among our three authors, W.S. Merwin definitely holds the most internationally renowned position as a poet, and definitely the most renowned as a poet and a translator nationally. The note *About the Translator* in his *Paradiso* foregrounds his career as a poet, mentions an equal number of publications of poetry and translations (over twenty books), and by reporting the very long list of prizes and awards he had received by the time of the translation's new edition, reveals how his recognition as a poet was far exceeding that as a translator. Mary Jo Bang is less internationally known both as a poet and a translator. Her author bio presents her exclusively as a poet, the author of six collections of poetry – one of which won the National Book Critics Circle Award – and the recipient of a Guggenheim Award from Princeton University. Finally, the *Note about the Translator* in Michael Palma's *Inferno* foregrounds the author's status as a consecrated translator. The first paragraph lists his acknowledgments as a translator, and a much shorter second paragraph tells us of his smaller production as a poet (three collections of verse and the inclusion in anthologies). This panorama reveals the material circumstances that explain the more scholarly character of Palma's translation: Palma appears to be – and think of himself – as *firstly* a translator, who would obviously care more for the formal, near-academic, traditional approach to what seems to stand out as a *métier*.

This factor is reinforced by the coherent concomitant material circumstance of the size and tradition – and prestige – of the main agency in the circulation of his version, which is its publishing house, i.e., W. W. Norton & Company. As compared to this long-established, big, and long-consecrated publisher, who has been credited with a canonical orientation in its policies, Merwin's Copper Canyon Press and Bang's Graywolf Press occupy an alternative position as smaller, more experimental and independent, non-profit and challenging publishers. Moreover, Copper Canyon specializes in poetry. Merwin probably made its fortune, but also found in it a space for the free expression of his talent – a fact that may be corroborated by Jorie Graham's announced moving in with them from her traditional bigger publisher. All three publishers are Western (and moreover, American), i.e., dominant actors in the power economy of Pascale Casanova's «world literary field» – but the relatively more marginal positions of Graywolf and Copper Canyon allows them to act as innovative, experimental and dynamic forces from within their national literary system.

6. CODA: ROBERT AND JEAN HOLLANDER'S *COMEDY*

By way of a coda, I finally want to mention a translation I didn't deem proper to consider because it was not entirely the product of a poet, but a co-authorship of a poet and

⁶² *Ibidem*.

her academic husband, Robert and Jean Hollander's *Inferno*, by Anchor, of 2002. The translation belongs, I believe, and contributed to what I identified as the 21st main US trend in Dante translations, initiated by Pinsky at the end of last century and crowned by Bang ten years ago – that of “Englishing” Dante, or imitating the effect the language of the *Comedy* had on the coeval Italian readership, reproducing its impact on the Anglo-American present audience. It is not casual, I think, that Bang lists this *Inferno* as one of the four previous translations on which she relied as a source of suggestions «about how to better one's efforts.»⁶³ The version is being felicitously used by the Princeton Dante Project, whose aim is that of divulging Dante's world masterpiece by offering it freely to both a scholarly and a general public, that is, «to make serious study of Dante's great poem possible for students and amateur readers alike, of all levels of expertise and having various kinds of interest in the work, by means of a basic electronic edition that will make available in a single locus many of the tools a reader of this text would want to have as an aid to understanding it.»

Jean Hollander's version of Dante's *Comedy* (2002-2007) was enthusiastically received, and was awarded the Gold Medal for Dante Translation from the City of Florence. In 2007, Joan Acocella wrote about the Hollanders' *Paradiso* that the translation was more idiomatic than any other English version she knew, and, at the same time, that it was lofty, «the more so for being plain.»⁶⁴ The method may have differed from Bang's, in that Jean Hollander went for a blank verse that allowed her to follow Dante's wording more accurately, but the sound of the «modern music» of contemporary American English is, I think, as distinctly audible, as the plain diction and the natural pace of the opening *terzina* of her *Inferno* lets us hear:

Midway in the journey of our life
I came to myself in a dark wood,
for the straight way was lost.⁶⁵

Both Jean Hollander and Mary Jo Bang probably drew their thematic and formal interpretants also from their own poetic style. Hollander has been said to resemble Dante in her capacity to find «surprising, illuminating correspondences between theology and the particulars of the natural world,» and in her «layering up images that are at once soaring and intimate, capacious and humble,» thus making transcendent realities recognizably human.»⁶⁶ Her voice has been found «confident, lucid, and bright, laced with musicality and gentle humor,» especially in her invitation «to journey with her to new places—and to see old ones as we hadn't seen them before.»⁶⁷ Bang's translation, on its part, must have profited from the «linguistic energy, subtle imagery, and innovative technique» that are commonly ascribed to her poetry, and from its charac-

⁶³ ALIGHIERI 2012, p. 11.

⁶⁴ ACOCELLA 2007.

⁶⁵ ALIGHIERI 2002b, p. 3.

⁶⁶ *Jean Hollander* 2022.

⁶⁷ *Ibidem*.

teristic, pioneering, hybrid quality, stemming from her tendency to mix «philosophical or postmodern concerns with chiseled, formal control.»⁶⁸ Ultimately, given the results of these last two American poets' versions, I find the mediation, in them, of their personal intertexts to be something desirable. The close reading of the contribution of the Pinsky, "Englishing" national canon to the formation of international canons of Dante translations within the world literary space may at least for once reveal a progressive, avant-garde, instead of a conservative, action.

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⁶⁸ Mary Jo Bang 2022.

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