

Dante *Worlds*

Echoes, Places, Questions

Edited by
Peter Carravetta

Peter Carravetta, (Edited by)
Dante *Worlds*
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INTRODUCTION

Worlding

The Divine Comedy is the poem
of the world gone wrong.

John Whitfield, *Dante and Virgil*

Why, they talk Dante, write Dante,
and think and dream Dante at this moment,
to an excess which would be ridiculous,
but that he deserves it.

Lord Byron, *Diary*, Jan. 29, 1821

I.

On the 750th anniversary of the birth of Dante Alighieri, the D'Amato Chair in Italian Studies at Stony Brook University invited a group of scholars from a variety of backgrounds to examine aspects of the large impact the Florentine has left in Western culture, and the paths he has or may have furrowed that some might follow or have in fact traveled further to specific destinations.¹ Before glossing the title, let me state that the subtitle points to this intrinsic plurality of itineraries and the remapping it keeps on generating. For there is no doubt that Dante's influence and legacy in our cultures has *echoed* and been registered in innumerable contexts and in the most diverse domains, from linguistics to poetics, from theology to philosophy, from political thought to psychology, from mythology to science. Even more intriguing are the *places*, both geohistorical and with reference to particular authors' works, where his thought resonates. Aspects of Dante's polymorph *figura* have been adapted to clarify and address unforeseen historical turns centuries later,

¹ Conference "Dante Worlds" was held at Stony Brook University on December 5, 2015.

or served as a compass to navigate uncharted cultural, civil and political domains. And above all Dante's life and thought keep on raising ever new *questions* for each generation and for authors in different social, political and existential situations as they compare/contrast their world-views with that of the poet.

These general considerations about the thematics of the conference, and now of this anthology, are necessary to contextualize the short sketch of a critical outlook I envision as useful to properly grasp the sense of the nine chapters contained within these covers. For one thing, I was thinking of something beyond what in Italian would sound approximately "mondi di Dante," though that reading is not automatically excluded. The fact that "worlds" is italicized, however, signals a different critical outlook. For the author's worlds cannot be separated from the world/s of the interpreter. *Interpretation involves a necessary enabling relation*, however individually formulated and professionally formalized. A contemporary approach would begin at least from the idea that, typically, a work of art is *ab initio* an Open Work, as we learned half a century ago from Umberto Eco. But beyond the number of semiotic swerves and permutations of the messages within any number of identifiable codes, there still remains the consciousness of the reader, of that interpreter who willy-nilly appropriates something from the original, transforms it, distorts it, re-adapts to his/her world or, better, worlds. There is no such a thing as *the* world, one *mundus*: we can agree on there being one planet earth, but there seems to have existed a plurality of worlds, lived-worlds, that is, each the locus for the instantiation of an ulterior web of world-views, of histories, of existences. In the language of literary hermeneutics, the critic or the reader dialogues with the original text, listens to it, registers what makes sense *in and for that bundle of relations that make up his world*. If critique, as Starobinski wrote, is intrinsically "the history of differential relations which connect the verbal creation to the modalities of acceptance, refusal, consecration, interpretation, of objective knowledge," then the task becomes an open-ended interpenetration of views, a commitment to dis-cover, a re-writing of the original if we wish, but nonetheless an "inscription in the contemporary memory." We can imagine it as creating an alternative life-world that validates both origin and destination without totalizing any one of them. Case in point, as I will discuss in more detail further down, is Teodolinda Barolini's demonstration of how Dante's work is *avant-la-lettre* – maybe properly *avant-les-siècles!* – multicultural, trans-national, indeed heterodox when these concepts were not yet even articulated in *his* times, and some did not exist for the critical consciousness until the 20th century! Or how the question of judgment was broached by Dante with such far-ranging implications that only much later did it come to fruition, as Christopher Celenza demonstrates.

On the basis of the relational essence of interpretation, emphasizing "worlds" made me think of another possible horizon of critical interaction. This is somewhat more widely accepted already, as it focuses on how Dante *compelled* ("inspired" we used to say) other people – artists, philosophers, poets generally – to *create their own* worlds, such as the grand epics or allegories that may not even refer to Dante directly but for which we sort of know, and can demonstrate with the right tools, that the Florentine was either the spark or provided in part the fuel or a model (even if often anti-model) for others to

re-invent the universe, to create in short an entirely new or other world themselves. We can think, for example, of other major visionaries like Milton, Blake, Byron, Tennyson, Nietzsche D'Annunzio, or Pound. My view is that the best way to evaluate such a multifaceted, powerful precursor (I am not being Bloomian here) is to consider how *Dante creates worlds by making others create their own*, if/when they are up to the challenge. One can argue, by the same logic, that Virgil spurred Dante to envision the *Comedy*, which as we know is ultimately far from the *Aeneid*. Though Dante has no problem acknowledging his debt. In fact, it was a gift. However, here the critique of direct "influence" and concurrent subtle "textual re-writing" or citationism would be of little relevance to the context I am sketching. We recall Blake's famous statement: "I will create my own system or be enslaved by another man's," perhaps to overcome his obsession with Milton, and in part Dante too. But the focus here is not on any likely "precursor" of Dante, rather it concerns those who came after, and this from a contemporary sense of a "speaking to the future," as it were, which befits prophetic spirits.

The other possibility for a novel critical interaction was somewhat more theoretically challenging. Recall that Martin Heidegger introduced the notion of being-in-the-world (my emphasis) in the twenties, paradoxically echoing what Ludwig Wittgenstein, was attempting to bring under the dominion of logic: "The world is everything that is the case" (*Tractatus*, 1). However, by the fifties, both thinkers had shipwrecked (in part owing to the great revolutions in physics of the 1920s/30s). For there is no *one* world about which we can come up with a description valid for all people at all times. In fact, in some of the essays collected in the post-WWII *On the Way to Language*, Heidegger now spoke of a world inhabited by each of the fallen beings that must work upward (typically through a poem) to regain the sense of the groundless elusive Being. Here he comes up with expressions such as "language speaks" ("die Sprache spricht") and "a thing things," and suggests that a disclosure of what he calls authentic Being, which is hidden in the very ontological constitution of what it is we are thinking about, requires that we essay to recover it by listening, or by letting something come forth, and enter into its own inner luminosity. But there was nothing dialogical in this, as we will see. Nevertheless, if thinking about Being involves thinking about the appearance of beings, and things... call upon things, I felt I could try, extrapolating, the hypothesis of a (*Dante*) world (*that*) worlds!, to identify a critical function that foregrounds the power and relevance of Dante in our age. Dante makes us dantians, in some guise, for better or for worse, on earth as in heaven.

More technically, I mean the following: *Dante* (or: the possible worlds that converge in and explode from the work of Dante) *calls upon one's worlds* (or: the criss-crossings of realities that inhabit our minds) *as sites of recognition and the production of meaning* (the re-readings we set out in circulation). What should be noted is that the second term of the syntagm, originally a noun, is verbalized, yet leaving the grammatical complement (what?), or, better, the rhetorical other, the locus of the (meaning-producing) respondent (who?), blank, open, undetermined. But ready, at a precise time and place, to close the circle, and relaunch the process of signification but with an altered signature. There is no one essence but an encounter of traits that coalesce. But this is still a process of

world-making by means of a narrative, through inscriptions and translations within a culture.

By verbalizing “worlds” I am introducing a *temporal dimension* not present in the poetological myth of the almighty abstract universal but non-relational Word, nor present in Heidegger’s notion of Futurity, since neither leaves room for, or recognizes, the concrete empirical dimension of language as *discourse, a living inter-personal, intra-societal, constituent, enabling, fact of the very fiber of humanity!* Insofar as Dante is creator of a world, indeed of several of them if we apply critical categories (required when we wish to emphasize specific topics: Dante as poet, Dante as philosopher, Dante as social critic), then my idea was to read the title of the conference and now of this collection as, precisely, Dante *worlds* ... an active, generating, out-reaching dynamic that discloses other possibilities, engaging the listener/reader to relate to his/her, though necessarily still *other*, world/s. Whether Dantean or dantesque, or even antithetical, these other worlds are yet in syntony with him, developing out of some of Dante’s thoughts, actions, visions. The temporality is both historical and existential, it leverages the creative process itself, never stable, always dialectical, forever spurring the thinking-being on the way to a somewhere, giving voice to what often is unspeakable, constructing political hypotheses, perhaps shaping lives, refashioning traditions. For one does not read Dante and remain unchanged going forward. He can be a tsunami, seven centuries later. And he can be the voice of redemption and liberation at the same time.

What will be foregrounded in the papers that follow are the human agents who, relating or correlating to some aspect of Dante’s own *lived world/s*, reacted to it or them, dialogued with it or them, and then fashioned for themselves *their own perspective*, having grasped something across the centuries and forged something *in their own times and society*, shaped it in a different tongue, both literally and metaphorically.

II.

Dante worlds in a variety of styles and contexts, triggering challenges and foisting what will become paradigmatic examples of his fierce commitment to justice and to the truth of the human condition. For Teodolinda Barolini, Dante’s own world (understood in the sense of the social reality of the “trecento”) is already being exploded from within. She foregrounds the fact that, by placing in his *Comedy* some pagans and Muslims in limbo – hitherto unthinkable in the Middle Ages, – Dante lashes out a powerful critique to the reigning orthodoxy of the Church, which had provided and enforced the accepted, strongly dogmatic dictionary of ideas for most of Europe. Dante’s question was: Why should virtuous, intelligent people be denied access to God’s grace owing to their being born before Christ, and “sinful only in their culturally-induced failure to believe?” The world-picture outlook extends not only diachronically, but also horizontally, that is, geographically, as when the poet ponders why someone born “on the banks of the Indus” ought to be prevented from partaking of the gift of the Son simply because s/he did not know about it. Even more

explosive, in the *Comedy*, is Dante's "saving" of Saladin, Averroes, and Avicenna. But for Dante, if there is a true "universal justice," then there should be no scandal. Less obvious to most, but not to the eye of the expert, is the subtle radicalism manifested, for instance, in *Inferno* 17, where Dante depicts the Christian usurers with the iconography of the money-bags typically associated, at the time, with the Jews. Radical is also the manner in which, Barolini tells us, Dante places Ethiopians closer to God, on Judgment Day, than those who, implicitly hypocritical, keep on pounding their chest wailing "Christ, Christ." These cases speak to Dante's understanding and social and moral acceptance of what today we would call a multicultural society, but against which the "establishment" in his day nurtured strong prejudices if not altogether downright hatred. It takes effort to grasp the power of the reactionary politics of his day, and the connected paranoia to protect the privileges and the power of the new emerging bourgeoisie. The theologian Guido Vernani, upon reading in Dante's *Monarchia* (I.3.9) that the Arab Averroes understood Aristotle (perhaps implying that he was on par with Aquinas?), mounted an attack on Dante in 1327, that is, six years after his death, and supported John XXII's bull to have him exhumed and excommunicated *post mortem*! Surely this poet must have conceived and bandied some really dangerous ideas, if in the eyes of the blatantly corrupt Church hierarchy he deserved being burned at the stake, even *after* his death!

In this context, one must appreciate Barolini's note on how even Edward Said, in his *Orientalism*, failed fully to grasp the strong censure present in Dante's socio-political milieu, and how and to what degree Dante's thinking was innovative, heterodox, at times subversive, and I would add reformist. It's a motif that echoes my own reservations about some exponents of post-colonial criticism, where the generalizations are often ludicrous, as when they write that *all* European authors are culpable from the start, independently of large differences between colonialisms from different countries, and ignoring the specific motivations of individuals who may have chosen to participate *but were not* colonialists. Ironically, the sweeping attitude echoes the mantra about all Catholics being born with the stain of original sin! Such overgeneralizing critiques fail moreover to account for the *specific* dynamics of a given text, and neglect or refuse to see how some authors still managed – from *within* the given dominant discourses of power, patriarchy, capital, coercive possession, and institutionalized discrimination, – to *fight back* nonetheless, often as maligned exiles, fugitives, escapees, and at any rate risking and sometimes losing everything but the shirts on their backs. And yet they still proposed alternatives, and still insisted on showing possible modifications (for Dante, via his Pilgrim in the *Comedy*, but also directly in the treatises) in ethics, politics, inter-personal relations, touching the very stuff of the *polis*, in short ... the world, at least *their* world. To those who might still be tempted to stuff Dante into the one-size-fits-all suit of the dead white males of the Western colonial enterprise, Barolini's conclusion delivers a debilitating blow to some self-serving panaceas:

with his passionate and rigorous intellect, he *thought* himself out of the essentializing social constructions of his day. In the same way that he thought himself *out of* the social construction of obligatory *vendetta*, he thought himself *into* imagining a young and unal-

legorized female as an avatar of the divine, and he thought himself *into* imagining that people who lived virtuously but were cut off from the Christian dispensation are deserving of special honor, and may even be saved, and he thought himself *into* imagining that sexuality is a spectrum that accommodates the salvation of homosexuals as plausibly as that of heterosexuals. All this he did with his mind and the power of his imagination, and in this way, even if we have been slow to learn from him, he certainly helped to create the world we live in now. (pg. 31-32)

Christopher Celenza offers another approach to Dante's thought and works which shows, in the critical context sketched above, how he was worlding forward, so to speak. Going to the heart of the *Comedy*, namely Canto 16 of *Purgatory*, the critic asks: "why is it so dark in this Canto?" Because the issues confronted are two of the greatest problems that besieged societies since the beginning of time – that is, the power of the godhead and the power of the human ruler – and *vis à vis* which human reason has been, demonstrably, practically blind! Dante's response is, first: people have not made good on their unique capacity to decide on their course of action, on their freedom to make a choice. Whether in a 14th or a 21st century context, the responsibility that goes with making the right choice, with "doing the right thing" about, ultimately, anything, from deciding whether to pray or to run for public office, rests upon the proper use of reason, the light of the intellect, and should be a paramount concern, avoiding being blindsided by vices and ire and contempt. In this, Dante strikes at the very core of what it means to be human, forcing us to ask these questions again, and again, in view of *our* world as a whole, or of our specific worlds of interaction in effective reality. And, second, Dante turns to the just as vexing question concerning whose authority do human beings appeal to in order to organize and set norms for the community, in other words, who can legitimately claim the right to run a city or a country or, in Dante's day, a province, a principality, a commune, even a clan. Given that historically we dwell within the European/Judeo-Christian *oecumene*, the question turns upon whether religious authority is above, and therefore hierarchically determining, secular laws. Once again we are reminded of how Dante "worlds": for the Pilgrim goes on to ask Marco Lombardo about a distinction between Church and State, implicitly a separation of powers – so dear to us Moderns and enshrined in our US Constitution and that of the majority of nation-states today – that gets reformulated, this time explicitly, by the end of the Canto.

Many have wondered about Dante's predilection for the age of Augustus as his paradigm for making this intra-worldly distinction. Indeed, here we must reiterate that, though there is one (planet) earth, there is certainly more than one world that signifies us and that we need to contend with. Dante is working at the level of macrostructures, and despite the fact that the two realms, the religious and the secular, intersect and overlap in concrete reality, the point is a philosophical, indeed a methodological one. Dante is not an "imperialist" because he glorifies the Caesars, he is simply making a crucial point when, reading in Mark 12:17, "give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and give to God what belongs to God," he delineates a (non-religious) principle for the proper adminis-

tration of the *polis* (the commune, or the kingdom), wherein the individual's choice of creed and his/her responsibility toward the commonwealth require an awareness of two distinct realms, that of the spirit and that of the body. Two dimensions of the same world? Perhaps, but the one is concerned with the *other-worldly*, with the eternity of the after-life, while the other is concerned with living on *this here earth as mortals*, with our cares and fears and pleasures and effectively *our* worldly concerns. Thus, Dante pulls out of our *common* Western social/religious history a precept and relaunches it in *his* day, "in a time when clarity of that distinction, in its strong modern form, would have been self-evident to a few people," as Celenza notes. Furthermore, the critic reminds us that the metaphor of the two suns ought not be read – as religious ethicists have for centuries, – as meaning that one is superior to the other (i.e.: the brighter star as an allegory of the Papacy, and the lesser one, the moon, representing Empire) but, rather, that they are equal (they are, in fact, called "suns"). In other words, Dante distinguishes between two equally necessary realms of power to order and guide human beings in a society, specifically his society, in the 14th century. But no one would argue that so many elements of our lives today, as yesterday, partake of a spiritual realm, while others are best understood as belonging to the sphere of the practical organization of the polis, whatever configuration it may take.

Dante's ideas about free will and the separation of powers have metastasized over time. This serves as a reminder that the cultural unconscious of a society is potentially rich precisely owing to the often subterranean proliferation of ideas which, though unseen, are actually thriving somewhere and for someone, and at some point re-emerge, as Celenza's cited passage by J.P.A. Pocock clearly states. I would add, with a nod to Gilles Deleuze, that they re-emerge as a rhizome which – as is the case of the embedded ethical-political principle in the *Gospel* that had systematically been ignored for centuries (and by Church authorities no less), and is foregrounded in Canto XVI of *Purgatory* and in *Monarchia*, – sprouts ages later again in a different country, or city-state, and in the lives of writers tried by unforeseen tragedies or even less dramatic projects, sparking new possibilities for the organization of a markedly different world.

The notion of the rhizome, or what we might less technically call the subterranean lives of an author or a concept or a vision, marks the tenor of Paolo Cherchi's essay, which foregrounds how Dante's values re-emerge in the life and thought of Miguel de Unamuno. The great sage of Salamanca prized what he deemed the necessary dialectical co-existence of intellect and passion, the transubstantiation of earthly love into higher reasoned motifs. Dante's tapestry of "real people," Cherchi observes, "is accessible to all sorts of readers," allowing them to immerse themselves "in the depth and the force of human feelings" and "the daily world" that "manifest[s] itself in the political passion so obvious in Dante's work." In this sense, through the assimilation and metamorphoses of one of its most eloquent and engaging minds and further developed, Spain's culture can be said to have brought into the world of European Modernity principles and passions that stemmed from the Florentine's unbounded imagination six centuries earlier.

That he could inspire the pre-Raphaelites is also no surprise, insofar as Dante was indeed, also, a devotee of beauty, an aristocratic soul who expatiated between the *stilnovo*

experience and the catalogue of adjectives stacked up to describe the angelic women, Beatrice foremost. Did Rubén Darío “betray” the original? Of course, how could it be otherwise? but that is not the point, for when the light is cast towards *a* world, therefore *another* world than Dante’s, such as present at the end of the 19th century in Latin America and Spain, why would a poet want merely to reproduce and/or slavishly imitate the original? This sort of faux argument about literary history has functioned for untold decades on the mistaken or grossly metaphysical and dogmatic axiom that there is One immanent unrepeatable Origin(al) which, paradoxically, remains and must remain untouchable! For each time someone – artist as well as critic, or reader in general – attempts to say anything about it (i.e.: “interpret it”) or, worst offence of them all, “translate” it into something else (whether literary genre, or media, or even didactic material), the irsute guardians of the Canon, or of their self-styled pantheon, quickly point the finger and emit punishing critiques and condemnations, prompt banishment from the guild.

Cherchi employs the word appropriation when remarking on the Spanish Dante, but once we move onto the terrain of the “personal” or “autobiographical” perhaps the notion loses its technical (usually negative) philological sense, and becomes more psychological, as when “writing on Dante means writing about oneself,” whether it concerns art, as in the case of Unamuno, or political outlooks, as with Asturias or, especially, Ocampo. Beyond that, if we look at this issue of adopting, borrowing from, or “using” another author, from a hermeneutic perspective, from Heidegger down through Gadamer, Vattimo and many others, “appropriation” is not a threat or a danger to avoid, but actually the recognition of what happens (whether we like it or not) when we relate to a text, indeed to anything within the purview of the critical consciousness. Thus the matter rests not with “whether” we can or should take in what we perceive or read with untainted clinical gloves, but “how” and with what criteria we are going to “contaminate” the object of search and research. Nevertheless, perhaps shoring up his own critique of excessive philologism, Cherchi notes that for Ocampo Dante has in fact been hampered by the erudition of the “dantologues” who box in and taxonomize his every breath: some learning is necessary to follow the reading of Dante step by step, says the writer, but an excess of it can be just as suffocating. A different kind of relation is established between Dante and Jorge Luis Borges when the Argentine asks: if we have sinners in hell, and the whole poem is about God’s justice, a God who is good by antonomasia, are we to suppose that God created evil? Borges figures that the way out of the impasse, as Cherchi reads him, is for Dante to make himself a character in the story, the Pilgrim, who then goes on to judge in accordance with God’s sense of justice. In other words, God did not create evil, it was the individuals who are interviewed during the journey of the Pilgrim who have committed various kinds of unjust acts and therefore, according to the supreme law, must now languish in hell unto eternity. In this we see what Cherchi calls a “relationship of osmosis” between the two visionaries.

Going back to Dante’s actual sociohistorical universe, again proof that he was wordling within *his* World, Roberta Morosini reads the *Comedy* as having embedded in it a whole geography of the Mediterranean. Though no sailor or explorer in the sense of the later

Columbus and Vespucci, and journeying within a basically land-locked geography – Florence, Central Italy, Romagna, Northern Italy (and accepting speculations about his having travelled all the way to Paris), – Dante was nevertheless precise in his references. As always he summoned all the knowledge available at the time about other earthly worlds situated by seacoasts and riverbanks in order to cast a network of real places and inter-relations throughout the *Comedy*, thereby legitimating a reading of what Morosini calls “an aquatic poem.” An entire new interpretive horizon is thus disclosed, ushering forth the perspective that the sea is hardly a limit or obstacle, but rather constitutes a “living space,” a metaphorical terrain for the interaction, transmission and translation of words, objects, and peoples. In Dante’s vision we are informed of actual places and people who did in fact travel the Mediterranean, from Cyprus to Marseille to Gibraltar, and who often referred to even further away locations, from India to Ethiopia. The point appears to be that the aquatic metaphor is as much an integral part of the poet’s vision as any of the overland experiences and exploits that are described with a surveyor’s eye throughout the three canticles.

According to Morosini, the sea itself, and the Mediterranean in particular, is a panoply of many worlds of social relations, power plays, interethnic and interreligious exchanges, and ultimately a generator of master tropes concerning “human coexistence” that can fruitfully be perceived and discussed through the recently articulated critical notions of transnationalism, “liquidity,” and “hybridity.” More than that, Morosini’s reading reveals Dante’s understanding of Christianity as, at bottom, truly catholic, in the etymological sense. That is, it is inclusive rather than exclusive, a broad multi-layered polylogics within whose narratives the specific or individual worlds of characters – who themselves become *exempla* and icons of human possibilities – surface, navigate, and track a destination which is also a destiny. And they ultimately conclude either by letting the sea engulf them or, conversely, by pulling the curtain/sails around themselves.

Dante the geographer-surveyor-discoverer of his own world who prompts a re-discovery and reconfiguration of one’s cultural milieu also emerges, in an entirely different environment, through Andrea Fedi’s contribution. That Hewlett’s early 20th century travel *Guide to Tuscany* refers constantly to a 14th century traveler is remarkable proof of how the poet’s real-life descriptions of his environment as well as those scattered throughout his envisioned journey in the beyond multiply, diffract, coalesce, go dark, so to speak, or become rhizomes, and then resurface six centuries later to disclose sights, sounds, and images apt at revealing no less than “the ontological essence of Italy,” and, again philosophically, “not the envelope of the thing, but the thing itself quintessentially.” In this, Hewlett directs the reader, through Dante, to see with imaginative eyes rather than simply perceive an aesthetic object (at least as this was understood at the time), fostering an exercise in “intellectual second sight” that in a way sees “into” the very process of creating the seen. And Dante “is full of that” second sight.

Worlding also has the effect of making a reader see reality literally through the poet’s eyes, sometimes to excess, as in the case of *ekphrastic* vignettes raised to the level of the mythical when in reality they may just be simple and not so exciting village scenes. Fedi

writes that “[t]he travel writer expands upon them to transform a well-defined physical context into the stage or the background for a fictional or pseudo-historical reconstruction that has a distinctive theatrical quality.” This phenomenon, of course, does not happen with Dante’s texts only, as it is a well-known topos in travel literature. Fedi cites John Murray’s *Handbook for Travellers*, specifically the sections on central Italy, where recommendations are made to pack “compact editions” of some fifteen Italian authors. This bi-directionality text-space reaches “fanatical” levels when, against the background of early positivist anthropologists, Dante is elevated to the master paradigm of the “Tuscan type,” and the *arché* of the poet’s perspicuous capacity to move on advancing his ethical objectives. But in this, the poet gives life to – i.e., wills into a world – the very materials and features of the physical world he encounters through subtle linguistic devices, such as personification of rivers by simply subtracting the article, “as if they were persons,” for example. The landmarks are identified as familiar, giving the traveling an “interactive, reciprocal exchange,” so that one feels “as being to being, as one to whom the world at large and in detail – meadow, grove, and stream, the earth and every common sight – is either host or fellow adventurer.”

According to Fedi, the value of Hewlett’s guide to the traveler in Italy is that, for someone who preferred a singer to her song and a man to his masterpiece and, more broadly, claimed that “[I] never opened a book when I could read what I wanted on the hillside or by the river-bank,” Dante represents an exception of gargantuan proportions. For Hewlett, the Florentine takes him out of the formal literary canon and “into the field of empirical knowledge” owing to the poet’s “demonstrated ability to convey ‘the fortunes and features of his race,’ to showcase a wide ‘catalogue’ of ‘physical’ and ‘spiritual sensation[s].’” Thus Dante’s worlding conjoins text and fact, foregrounding the latter in all its complexity, so as to link the knowledge of the thing seen-experienced to the understanding of the same and, as Fedi puts it, “provide the hermeneutic principles for an understanding and recounting of the experience of travel.”

Simone Brioni and Lorenzo Mari’s paper tackles the trenchant critique of modern-day racial prejudice and insidious colonial cultural politics in Italy *vis à vis* the immigrant writers who have survived the Somali civil war. When Garane Garané cites *Inferno* 33.79 – “O Pisa, blot of shame upon the people / of that fair land where the sound of ‘si’ is heard” – and strategically changes the name Pisa to Italy, the Italian public is reminded that they may have missed Dante’s embedded catholic sensibility toward people of all stripes, as the papers by Barolini and Morosini in this collection also clearly show. What emerges is that approaching Dante’s world through the dilemmas and the dramas of the contemporary immigrant community almost automatically skews the question of tradition and filiation within the established “Canon” (not that the canon does not already contain within itself multiple series of contrasting, and some yet to be unearthed, possibilities), and highlights the direct but never cause-and-effect relationship between words and things, unleashing the polysemy of the text to grasp onto an entirely other Other. Much as we saw take place with some writers in Spanish culture, but within a substantially different geopolitical context, Naruddin and Garané, write the two young authors,

“are not interested in entertaining a close philological dialogue with the *Commedia*, but rather they read the text as an embedded fiction with political, social, and historical life, and use its symbolism to express the trauma of the destruction of Mogadishu.” And again, this is an invitation to discard the critical commonplace of a Dante bearer of the “universal” messages and values outside of the *locus of their occurrence*, inasmuch as the very idea of Universal, a quintessential philosophical *meme* of Western culture, has been coopted and instrumentalized by successive hegemonic socio-political formations, both through religion and through the rise of European colonialism. Thus the distinctive traits of “universal man,” write the authors, “are the characteristics of those who occupy positions of political dominance.” This truism may have already been said many times over by a host of philosophers throughout the intellectually turmoiled second half of the 20th century, but it bears repeating. And it is once again through “fiction” – perhaps here best understood in Vico’s sense, as *vera narratio* – that reaches to ever broader circles and nooks of a global *oecumene*, that Dante’s “message” or, better, “messages”, are (re)acquiring the potential of speaking to the real “globalized” worlds of today. A world that, despite the tightening of borders by anachronistic nation-states and the relentless noise orchestrated by a handful of super-powerful media corporations, are clearly becoming borderless, and within which a “post-colonial Middle Ages,” the authors argue, foregrounds an “heterogeneous borderland with multiple centers” that includes all the continents, not as “peripheral” but as a multitude of centers of interaction and dislocation of, once again, individuals, real people from all walks of life. In the end, it is the worlding function, the still active and (re)generating flame of the intellect of the poet-philosopher-prophet that can, and indeed has, cast light on *our*, world and that inscribes new itineraries, suggests more inclusive solutions, guards against tyrannical perspectives, and ultimately prompts strategies for our own individual *selbst-überwindung*, *auto-superamento*.

These points are also at the heart of Teresa Caligiure’s paper on the presence of Dante in the writers of Communist Albania. As made evident by Ismail Kadare and Ernest Koliqi, writes Caligiure, “Albanians’ interest for Dante’s works acquires a moral, civil, political and linguistic meaning, and is closely bound to the terrible experiences of oppression, exile, escape, tortures and murders – already characterizing the precedent of Turkish domination that lasted until 1912 – that, during the 20th century, marked the lives of generations of Albanians.” In her thorough reconstruction of the vicissitudes of a host of writers who, with their society, were basically prevented from participating in the broader conversation within and outside the West, starting after World War Two, we learn that Dante’s life and ideas were constant companions and interlocutors, and in fact furnished thematic motifs for literary expression, socio-political strategies for survival, and general perspectives on the relationship between politics and ethics, personal vocation and existential drive to survive. Almost touching are the accounts of how, through the struggles to translate him appropriately under the communist regime, and involving the diaspora located in Rome and elsewhere – where we learn that translations can be as political and as dangerous as any other more explicit revolutionary writing, – together with the efforts to teach the *Comedy* (“one of the favourite texts in Albanian schoolbooks”) wherever and

whenever possible, Dante was basically “naturalized” as an Albanian writer, impacting on the at first hidden and then explicit creation of a national canon. From this perspective, the worlding becomes, to borrow from Nelson Goodman, “worldmaking” within a country’s tattered cultural history, Albania having had such a tragic course since the Renaissance.

What counts here is the “relationship among worlds” as much as what specifically has been “appropriated” across the linguistic and cultural divide. This situation inevitably locates in the Florentine’s exiliac experience the generating impulse and in the Albanian authors *regenerating* a *topos*. Caligiure writes that “[t]he work and the character of the exiled Dante become[s] a paradigm of moral and political freedom, of speaking out, of the very role of the poet. Dante’s exile becomes a symbol mirroring the existential and historical condition of political internees, based on the pain experienced for one’s homeland devastated by violence.” Here once again only certain aspects are latched onto precisely owing to a different context where exile as *peregrinatio Dei* and its eschatological aspects are less relevant than “the political and pragmatic aspects of Dante’s exile, associating the nightmare of the dictatorship with the visions of Dantean *Inferno*.” Alternatively, in the verses of Visar Zhiti, for example, Dantean metaphors are echoed and developed, such as that of the lifeblood become a sewer. Zhiti does appeal to “universal values,” but from “below,” as it were, and the entreat is to a commitment to truth, to telling loudly and clearly the “inconvenient political message,” with reference to Peter’s invective in *Paradiso* 27: “make sure they hear this / from your mouth, not hiding what I do not hide.”

In the case of the presence and impact of Dante in the Italian immigrant community, a very complex topic if there ever was one, Martino Marazzi points out that the poet is present everywhere from the very start, but this time not so much to disclose “new worlds,” since they were already relocated in a new world, i.e., the United States, but to find ways to *understand* this new world, to engage it, to work and live in it, while struggling to redraw the contours of their now splintered cultural identity. The Italian American Dante forcefully brings out the elephant in the room when discussing culture and class. As Marazzi sees it, Dante is “a cultural product largely overlooked, and whose characteristics, I think, speak about the dignity of the popular culture of one of the huddled masses somehow shedding light on the poet himself, adopted as a beacon of both poetic and actual rebirth not by philologists, literati and Brahmins of all sorts, but for the most part by the pick-and-shovel, industrial workers of the New World.” Overlooked: and that is precisely the point. Dante enjoyed a great revival and appreciation among what came to be called “the Harvard Italophiles” by the end of the 19th century, a well-known cultural phenomenon among the *dantisti* and the *litterati*. Yet during this same time frame, with the arrival of tens of thousands of wretched and uncouth subproletarians from the hinterland of (mostly) Southern Italy, even the American bourgeoisie pinched its nose and developed a severe case of “italophobia,” as John Paul Russo once wrote. Nevertheless, among the immigrants, and particularly among those who could read and write, Dante was very present: imitated, parodied, idolized, satirized. Certainly he was invoked among those involved in the early labor union struggles and scuffles. The first generation soon

became bilingual and so linguistically the worlding played in a thousand directions like a wave against jagged rocks. In fact, rewording and paraphrasing may be the appropriate terms here. Though not explicitly Marazzi's focus, there is a whole long chapter in transnational and diasporic cultural relations *through* Dante that has yet to be written, as they involved the connection between two more broadly understood national canons and the issue of who decides about the inclusions and the exclusions, and at that on the basis of what criteria, what underlying self-legitimizing ideology or, worse, class prejudice. I do recall in past years some colleagues literally resenting that such low-class ignoramus would even dare mention and claim as their own, "in terra straniera," the great ones, Dante foremost among the various Columbus, Michelangelo, Verdi and so on.

Easier to grasp is the characterization that emerges with the second generation, which Marazzi contends begins with Pietro Di Donato, and whose "telling definition" is Dante "as brother," in this instance of the bricklayers. This also could have far-ranging implications, for we have not, for once, a Dante "padre" of anything, whether of the language or of the political unity of Italy, but rather a brother, a companion, someone to tussle with at times, but also to lean on or joke with as a fellow traveler and expatriate, in any case, an equal yet excellent partner. This speaks to a sense of "existential intimacy" that is demonstrably de-politicized, de-theologized, de-mythologized in the speech patterns of two generations which, if we allow for the deeply-seated sense of distrust of the immigrant, cherished and cultivated no ultimate lofty beliefs about the *madre patria*. If, in fact, they were not really so naïve as to not know where they had landed, where they stood in relation to the vaunted glory of their Origin, and whose self-validating pride of provenance, even if at times publicly exaggerated, was not believed to be meaningful or taken seriously by academics and educators. This conversation with Dante, especially after the Second World War, was usually hushed or humbled or episodic.

Marazzi sketches a preliminary map of how this wordling may be handled by pointing out that the Italian American Dante is "an aspiring autocephalous figure," whose "features are largely independent from the rules and language of Dante scholarship." Of course, Dante emerges as "an identitarian sign," though I would expand that to the level of "figura." In any case, as Marazzi writes, it would still be "inclusive and open-ended." And finally, again, the most revealing aspect, Dante as "a senior fellow for a journey into a different secularized world" wherein, to refer to Goodman once again, the challenge for the humble is to determine the weight, the ordering, the process of deletion (or unwitting ignoring) and supplementation. To put it in terms of another philosopher, there is always an irreducible "deformation" in the encounter or "appropriation" that occurs when worlds meet, what Gianni Vattimo theorized as *Verwindung*, an unavoidable distortion which cannot but be both, a twisting or modifying and a grafting onto something (often entirely) other, such as the new author's specific work bearing the marks of this process.

The last essay included in this collection is by bilingual poet and philosopher Rolando Pérez, who agreed to contribute a text to replace one of the original speakers, at the conference. Pérez begins by delving into Graham Harman's *Dante's Broken Hammer*, whose first point is that Dante is ultimately a phenomenologist, but with some caveats. First, un-

like Husserl's phenomenology, for which "every mental act aims at some object, whether it be an act of perception, judgment, love, or hate," for Dante, what relates to the object and brings it forth in its essential being is love. In other words, whereas for Husserl love is just one among many possible objects to engage the thetic consciousness, for Dante love surges to the level of a theoretical *primum mobile*. Now, Dante obviously could not use the metalanguage of modern phenomenology, but the process is the same, and the cited verses 22-27 of *Purgatorio* 18 make it evident, especially if we read them in Mark Musa's version, one tercet at a time:

From what is real your apprehensive power
extracts an image it displays within you,
forcing your mind [*animo*] to be attentive to it.

Here we see the passage from a naturalistic perception (v 22), to a focus on its givenness as an image (for we do not physically enter or touch the object, but register just what we see of it, its *eidōs*) (v 23), then proceed to bracketing it (Husserl's *epoché*), removing all extraneous considerations (v 24). In the next set, we read:

and if, attentive [*rivolto*], it inclines toward this,
that inclination is love: Nature it is
which is through pleasure [*piacer*] bound anew in you.

Now, "attentive" [Mandelbaum: "so turned"] denotes an act of will, an active reflecting that assesses and realizes what the mind (or Husserl's consciousness, or Dante's soul) has before it, available to the understanding, which is the inclination itself [Mandelbaum: "proclivity"], the "bending" [*piegare*] or altering force itself, what we call love. It is not yet determined, it's a potential, but here the poet adds his theoretical presupposition, which is its being a "natural kind", something that obtains in all humans. This is further strengthened by adding a feature, already present in Aristotle (and later in Freud and Merleau-Ponty), namely "pleasure" [*piacere*] (which strangely Mandelbaum renders with "beauty.") Pleasure is the goal of good living in the *polis*, yet also the visible boundaries of the larger domain of desire, so Dante's notion of love is never theoretically removed from the body in the flesh and from the deeper pulsion of want. As Pérez points out, for Harman love is intentional, and it can be directed to an ideal object, such as Beatrice, but also toward "perverse objects." That of course is a big theme in Dante, as in the same Canto, in the 16th parsed by Celenza, and elsewhere, to the point of becoming part of the infrastructure of *Purgatorio* itself. The key is figuring out, through our *libero arbitrio*, what is good, insufficient, or misplaced (evil) love. The point here, however, is not ethical but epistemological: how do we know what produces pleasure? Harman proceeds to vv 49-54 to underscore that, according to Dante, we ultimately know "substantial form" through a "force distinctly its own," in brief, through "its effects" (v 53). And this makes it a good candidate for Object Oriented Ontology.

In order to evaluate how this recent poetological current is crucial to the re-interpreted Dante, Pérez reminds us of the basic tenets of Western metaphysics (but still mindful of the crucial difference between Plato and Aristotle) driven by *ousia*, until with Descartes the search for “ultimate reality” is practically terminated and the focus, for the next three centuries turns to: “How do I know what I know?”, or: “What are ‘the contents of *my* mind?’” And here we pick up the reason for Pérez’ interest in Harman’s Dante: rather than just a mere “return” to metaphysics with its hierarchy of beings, and going even around the ego-psychology that eventually stemmed from Descartes, Pérez claims we need to replace it with a “flat ontology,” that is, by positing the hitherto privileged human being as being “alongside” other inanimate objects. Here the author makes recourse to the post-Husserlian phenomenology of Martin Heidegger, for whom there exist two modalities of essentially-there: “present-at-hand” and “ready-to-hand.” Briefly, objects (and this includes the perception of persons) present-at-hand are things which are abstract, in the sense that we do not think of their “whatness” in conceptual ways, and they eventually become “invisible,” we might say, taken for granted in the world. Yet objects become ready-to-hand when we actually use them, when they become “equipment,” and though they may withdraw from access as “real objects,” they partake of a “holistic system” of being-there’s (*Dasein*’s) relation to its world. However, the sensual qualities of such an object become “obtrusively visible to us” the moment “some event occurs that makes it visible.” And this tension “between real object and sensual qualities ‘is the most prominent source of aesthetic experience’.”

This is where the metaphor of the broken hammer in Harman’s title is finally explained. We are led through a tour de force that starts with the relation between Dante and the troubadours and the matter of the “reality” of the beloved, which is predicated on the “appearance” of the lover’s object and its untouchability. Then we move on to the *Vita Nuova*, and the Dante-Beatrice relation as a “broken” relation, insofar as it is her death that inspires him to compose “what has never been written in rhyme of any woman.” Through the rest of the essay the critic connects, in a critically creative manner, Harman’s relaunching of Ortega y Gasset’s theory of metaphor (which is counter-foisted against, as it is substantially different from, the Kant-Husserl trunk of understanding how we get to know what we know), and returns to the initial position of reevaluation of the aesthetic in a sort of “horizontal” plane where it is the “relation” with the sensual object that determines the aesthetic import. This is even more so the case when the object itself is “gone,” missing or dead, and its image must be re-activated, re-created, experienced, we might say, metaphorically, as a living “I.” The conclusion is that the metaphors bring out the “attachment” to an object, whether real or imagined. Interestingly, Pérez notes, for Harman this leads to an admission, perhaps best characterized as an existential disclosure, of a re-created world that he himself had felt and lived in the past. Specifically, his first encounter with Dante, when he was an undergraduate, and the love relation that then ensued. Perhaps at that time he swore that one day he would say something about Dante’s broken love-world in a way no one had before? Perhaps. But though Pérez seems to believe that Harman has ultimately succeeded in opening up a new or different inter-

pretive approach to Dante, he does end by suggesting, with Humean flair, that the object-oriented ontology of attachment could have also been practiced to enter more amenable worlds in other authors.

Whitestone, NY, Summer 2017

Note on the cover image

The cover of this volume originates in an oil painting on canvas board I did in an art class while I was an undergraduate at City College/CUNY, in spring, 1972. At the time, I was studying visual artists who challenged the idea of mimetic figuration and while some were splattering the canvas, others soon were pointedly avoiding “finishing” the representation of the subject by taking popular icons, like film super stars but also everyday items, highlight the contours, foreground its reproducibility, hint at regeneration, as in Allan D’Arcangelo. Two opposing currents seeking a mediation. The Dante is based on the iconic Giotto painting in the Podestà Chapel, Palazzo del Bargello. In discussing a possible cover for this anthology, my then Graduate Assistant (now PhD in Italian from the University of Warsaw), Kasia Romanowska, suggested playing with the image’s colors. Then we thought of multiplying them, in tune with the still vague notion of “Worlding,” which entails re-presentation of the image in today’s habit. The next day, she came back with the Warhol-inspired version! It was wonderful to see permutations of the classic iconic profile. I subsequently discussed it with my colleague Andrea Fedi, who touched it up electronically and developed the image to its present version. As a result, the cover is the work of three people. Plus ultimately the graphic design department at L’Erma. For the original colors, go three down and four across.

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