

INTERVIEW

MY DANTE. A CONVERSATION WITH THEODORE CACHEY ON AMERICAN DANTE STUDIES

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Theodore J. Cachey Jr. is one of the major representatives of the new American Dante Studies. This article proposes a conversation with the scholar on various aspects of his work and personal experience in the American Dante studies between the 1980s and recent years.

Keywords: Dante, Theodore Cachey, American Dante Studies, Dante Scholarship

NV: *Even today, for many Italian students and scholars, hearing about Dante Studies in America still sounds a bit strange. What is the relationship between Dante's work and American literary culture?*

TC: I experienced what Dante studies in Italy is as I never had before when I was the director of the Notre Dame center in Rome between 2014 and 2017. I had many opportunities to meet Italian colleagues and interact with them and follow their work in the making so to speak. It was a revelation for me, extremely impressive, especially as far as the philological aspects of the study of the *Commedia* and the "other works" is concerned. I'm referring to the recent editions of and commentaries on all of Dante's works: —the NECOD (Nuova Edizione Commentata delle Opere di Dante) series published by Salerno editrice, and the Mondadori *Opere* respectively, as well as the editions and publications of the Società Dantesca Italiana. Whether it's Fenzi's edition of the *De vulgari eloquentia* or Tavoni's in the Mondadori series, or Gorni's edition of the *Vita nova* in the Mondadori series or Pirovano's edition of the *Vita nuova* in the NECOD, it is the proverbial

embarrassment of riches. Personally, I find toggling back and forth between the Gorni and Pirovano editions of the *VN* to be very stimulating from a critical point of view, without regard to the philological disputes about the chapter numbering. What Italian Dante studies has accomplished in the last generation is a major renovation of the textual and interpretive foundations for the interpretation of Dante's works. This is what has engaged and is continuing to engage the energies of "the best and the brightest" of the last generation of Italian Dante studies. (The second volume of Marco Grimaldi's edition of the *Rime* has just been published in the NECOD.)

On the other hand, over the course of three years of living and working in Italy, I came to realize that our colleagues there, with few exceptions, still regard Dante studies in the United States as a rather exotic phenomenon, at best an intriguing province. (And this in spite of the fact that important books by American Dante scholars are available in translation, from Singleton to Freccero to Mazzotta to Barolini to Ascoli and, more recently, Steinberg.) Leaving aside a detailed account of the current scholarly relations between Italian and American Dante scholarship, I think the aloofness of Italian scholars from the tradition of Dante studies in the U. S. that has produced such a vital literary and critical legacy is perhaps understandable. How could Dante be an American classic as much or more than Dante is an Italian classic? It's a situation that is perhaps unique in world literature. However improbably, Dante is present from the beginning of the history of American literature and culture. There has been important work on this topic, for instance, the volume of *Dante Studies* from several years back dedicated to Dante and Longfellow edited by Giuseppe Mazzotta comes to mind,¹ as well as more recent contributions, such as Igor Candido's edition of Emerson's translation of the *Vita nuova* (Aragno editore, 2012). I'm sure there is much more to come, especially with 2021 around the corner. Zyg Baranski and I are planning a series of lectures and a volume on "Dante in America," and we have invited our colleague at Notre Dame Laura Walls, author of an award-winning biography of Thoreau (Chicago, 2017), to contribute a lecture and a chapter on "Dante and the transcendentalists." The roots of Dante studies in the U.S.A. go back to the beginning of American literature and culture, and this explains why Dante studies occupies a distinctive position internationally. The United Kingdom has, of course, a very long and distinguished history of Dante studies, and Germany and France have their own

¹ *Dante Studies* 128 (2010).

illustrious traditions, but only in the United States is Dante so deeply ingrained in the culture, and not just literary culture. I began my slideshow talks in Italy on “Dante in America” by introducing Dante, South Dakota, founded 1908, pop. 84, which never failed to amuse the public (fig. 1). A tour of the town on my Harley Davidson really helped to illustrate how broad and deep the roots of Dante in America are (fig. 2). Originally called Mayo after the owner of the general store (fig. 3), when the railroad arrived at the beginning of the twentieth century, a more dignified name was mandated, and Mayo is said to have responded sarcastically, “You can call it Dante’s *Inferno* for all I care,” and the name stuck.



Figure 1.



Figure 2.



Figure 3.

NV: *What was your first approach to Dante studies?*

TC: It started when I was still in high school on the southwest side of Chicago and my friend Kevin Carney gave me an edition of the *Divine Comedy* he had found in a used bookstore. He charmingly dedicated the book: “To Ted: hot blooded wop and reader extraordinaire” (fig. 5). Edited by C.H. Grandgent, Charles Eliot Norton’s heir at Harvard, the edition was first published in 1909 in the Heath Modern Language Series in Italian with an introduction and notes in English, evidently to be used in the study of Dante at American universities (fig. 4). I couldn’t read it when I was in high school since I didn’t know Italian, but I took the book with me when I went to college at Northwestern, where I signed up to take Italian 101. Over the next several years I read Dante in my copy of Grandgent’s edition several times, filling the margins with annotations, virtually every line (fig. 6). I still have it, and I would like to thank my friend Kevin, who today is a physician in Chicago, for getting me started.

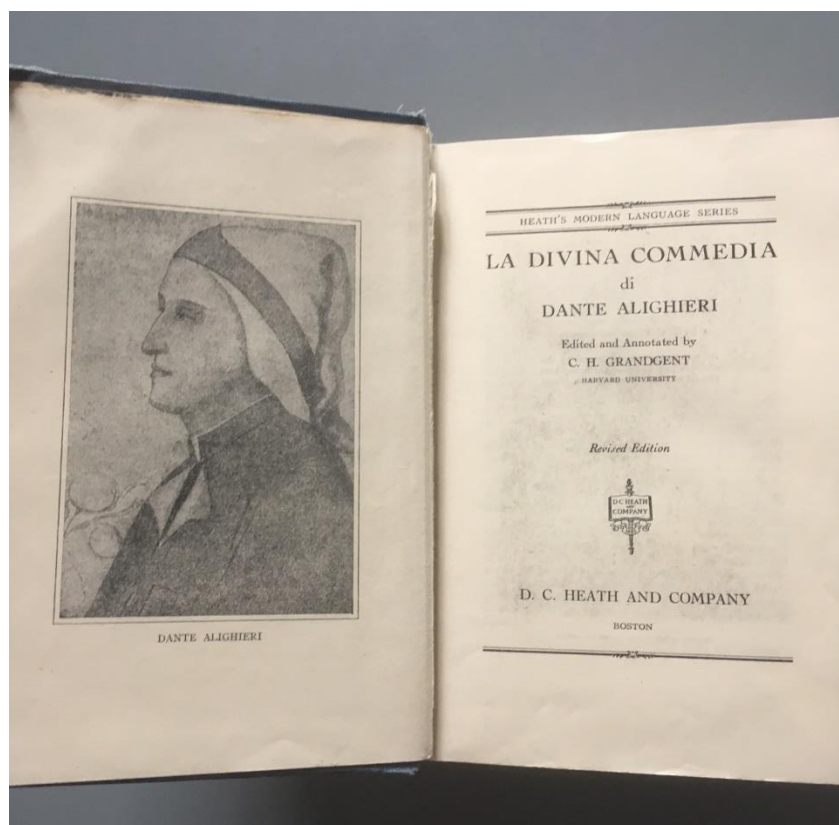


Figure 4.

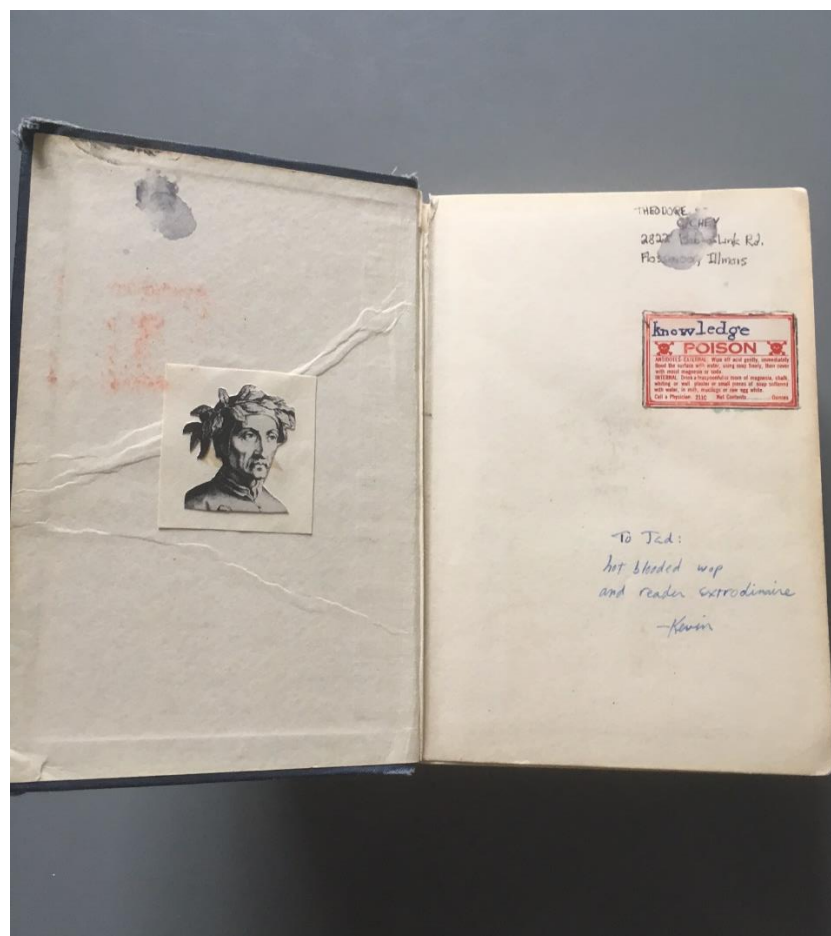


Figure 5.

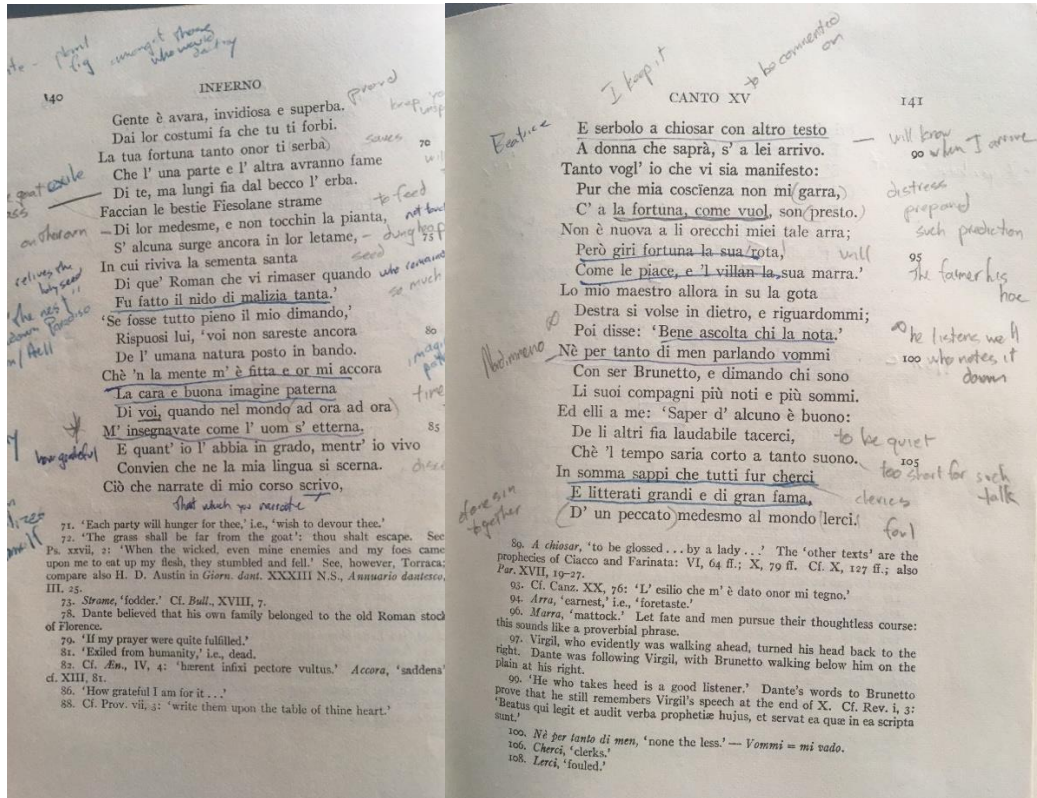


Figure 6.

This was my first approach to Dante, which was perhaps not as unusual as it sounds. I would not want to compare myself to Ezra Pound or T.S. Eliot (or William Blake for that matter), but like them and many others, I think I can truthfully say I learned Italian in order to read Dante. And, of course, this is something that is still true today of many undergraduate students at colleges and universities across North America and at Notre Dame. I ended up an English major in college, with a second major in Italian. I had wonderful teachers at Northwestern who introduced me to the study of languages and literatures: for example, Fiora Bassanese and Bill Paden in French and Italian, and Jean Hagstrum in English. Each was inspirational in a different way. One is lucky to have even one or two good teachers in college I've always thought, so I was very fortunate to have several. Reading Dante in the original was a very important part of growing up for me. The poet Charles Olsen wrote that "Dante makes you think seriously about your own life. He makes you want to have your own life, and to do the best you can with it."² It was something like this for me, although I would not have known how to express it so well. Reading Dante was a big challenge for me. It was something that I wanted to accomplish,

² *The Poets' Dante*, eds. Peter S. Hawkins and Rachel Jacoff (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 263.

to be able to read and understand Dante because I recognized that the *Commedia* was another dimension of literature that required another level of reading. It came naturally to decide to continue to study the poem in graduate school. I have to give credit to my parents, who had no clue what I was up to, for not opposing more forcefully than they did my plan to study Italian in graduate school. They even helped me during the years it took to get my degree. I think they were quite amazed when, in the end, I found a teaching job. I am myself amazed at my own good fortune in so many respects, starting with the fact that I get paid to teach Dante, which I started to do in 1984 at Arizona State University (fig. 7), after graduate studies at Yale and UCLA and under the auspices of UCLA at the University of Padua.

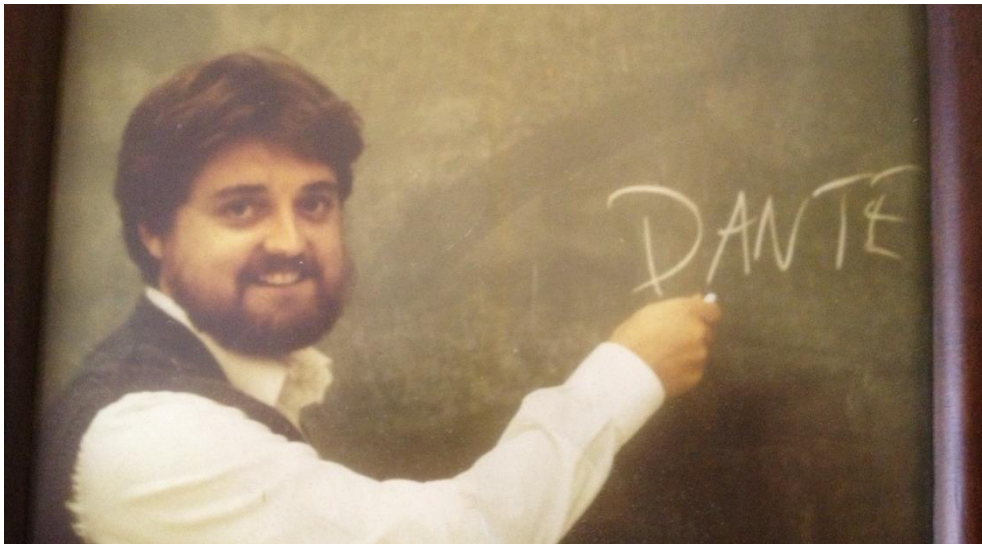


Figure 7.

NV: *When you were a student, what were the main themes of Dante studies in the US?*

TC: The people and the relationships between scholars and students that I had the good fortune to come into contact with as a student, and when I was starting out, come to mind more than specific themes. Someone should try to write a “geografia e storia” of the study of Dante in America from the perspective of recent generations and especially the relationships between teachers and students and students who became teachers and so on. Having spent over thirty years in what is now called “Flyover country,” I am perhaps more sensitive to the geographical distribution of the field than most. Although as a student, as I mentioned, I spent time on both coasts. In fact, I took my first formal Dante class in 1978 with

Giuseppe Mazzotta, who was visiting professor at Yale and about to publish *Dante Poet of the Desert* (Princeton, 1979). I was 22 and it was the discovery of a new world for me. I went on to UCLA where I became a student of Fredi Chiappelli, another great Dante scholar, although of a different generation and temperament. Chiappelli was one of a group of leading italianists who had emigrated from postwar Italy and were teaching Italian literature and culture in the United States at major universities. (UCLA was already a major center for Italian studies at the time. I studied there with Franco Betti, Giovanni Cecchetti, Marga Cottino-Jones, Pier Maria Pasinetti, and Edward Tuttle). Chiappelli was outside the American school of Dante studies associated with Charles S. Singleton, although he was very attentive to North American Dante studies, and he reviewed the new voices and trends in the field in print on several occasions appreciatively and with great respect, albeit with the kind of Tuscan aristocratic detachment that distinguished his personal style. In addition, there were a number of important scholars of Dante working outside of the Singletonian paradigm, including Glauco Cambon at the University of Connecticut, Ruggero Stefanini at the University of California, Berkeley, and Tibor Wlassics at Pittsburgh and then Virginia, among others. The pages of the journal *Lectura Dantis* that Wlassics edited with great style and verve were generously open to younger scholars just getting started. (The editor's "endpapers" were little gems, oscillating in style and content between acute insights and intemperate opinion).

In other words, there were many different "Dantes in America" when I was a student and starting out. The situation was well described by Zyg Baranski in a chapter he wrote at the time, "Reflecting on Dante in America: 1949-1990" for a volume of Dino Cervigni's *Annali d'Italianistica* that was dedicated to Dante in America (Vol. 8, 1990). (*Annali*, still going strong, had emerged as an important journal in the field by this time). Baranski recognized in that essay that the situation of American Dante studies was changing and that, while between the end of the 1950s and the mid 1980s Singleton and his followers had dominated and defined the field of American Dante scholarship, the situation within Dante studies was changing so that "neither Singleton nor anyone else holds sway." It was around that time that I met Baranski who was a new voice coming out of the Italian Studies department at the University of Reading founded by Luigi Meneghello, and where he worked together with Giulio Lepschy, Christopher Duggan and Christ Wagstaff, among others. Since I moved to Notre Dame in

1990, with the help of many friends in the field in North America and abroad, and especially together with Zyg Baranski, who eventually moved to ND in 2011, and with Christian Moevs who has been teaching at ND since the mid-1990s, we have been working on developing Dante and Italian studies as a project that includes undergraduate and graduate educational degree programs, outreach, library acquisitions, scholarly publications and so on. In the meantime, I have admired what I think would be considered by any measure to be a great flourishing, even a golden age of Dante Studies between the late 1980s when I got started and today. I am thinking of the books and essays of scholars such as John Freccero, Robert Hollander, Joan Ferrante, Giuseppe Mazzotta, Lino Pertile, Teodolinda Barolini, Peter Hawkins, Robert Durling, Rachel Jacoff, Ron Martinez, Albert Ascoli, and the list could go on. It has been a period of tremendous advancement, such that it seems to us now that it would be hard to equal. What distinguished the period, from my point of view, was how these scholars individually and collectively were pursuing “un’idea di Dante,” to use Gianfranco Contini’s phrase, and how the focus was firmly centered on the interpretation of Dante and his poem.

NV: *Your words convey all the enthusiasm that characterized that period of innovation and rediscovery of Dante. It really seems that that was a kind of golden age for American Dante Studies. But if we wanted to draw a parallel between the past and the current situation, what are the main differences between Dante studies then and the new trends of this field?*

TC: “Interdisciplinarity” plays an increasingly important role. In general, I think that finding the right balance between disciplinary identity and interdisciplinary forces and trends represents one of the big challenges facing the field of Italian Studies.³ That said, I think that the expansion of interdisciplinary approaches has had a very salutary effect on Dante studies which has always been, arguably, the most conservative and resistant to outside influences of our sub-fields. (I realize that it might seem paradoxical to speak of the study of Dante, the most encyclopedic and canonical of medieval authors as suffering from a deficit of interdisciplinary perspectives....) “Interdisciplinarity” has come into Dante studies, especially since the

³ Theodore J. Cachey, Jr., “America amica-amara: sugli studi di letteratura italiana nell’America del nord,” *La rassegna della letteratura italiana*, 120 (2016): 159-185 (167-168).

1990s, around the time that Italian Studies began to emerge as a paradigm, and it has had the effect of putting Dante studies into greater communication with the broader humanities environment in the United States. “Dante and Music” for example, the topic of *Bibliotheca Dantesca*’s first volume, and of Francesco Ciabattini’s recent *Dante’s Journey to Polyphony* (Toronto, 2010), are good examples of the current emphasis on interdisciplinary approaches. These are also developing internationally (see, for example, the new on-line journal *Dante e l’arte*, of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona.⁴ Other stateside examples of this trend that come to mind include Gary Cestaro’s *Dante and the Grammar of the Nursing Body* (Notre Dame, 2003), Christian Moevs’ *The Metaphysics of Dante’s Comedy* (Oxford, 2005), and Justin Steinberg’s *Dante and the Limits of the Law* (Chicago, 2013). Then there is the whole world of Dante reception studies which has expanded exponentially since the 1990s, and here one can think of many examples ranging from Dennis Looney’s *Freedom Readers* (Notre Dame, 2011) to the website *Dante Today: Citing and Sightings*, curated by Arielle Saiber and Elizabeth Coggeshall. But perhaps an even more important trend is the increasing internationalization of the field. For example, the Devers Program in Dante Studies and our graduate programs at Notre Dame, largely thanks to the presence of Zyg Baranski, enjoy very close collaborative relations with groups of scholars working in the United Kingdom and in Italy. The focus of these collaborations has been on Dante and theology and on Dante’s intellectual formation, something that Baranski has been working on for decades. It’s a very lively and diversified field at the moment, viewed from an international vantage point, and quite different from the previous period. Times change. With 2021 around the corner it is a good time to begin assessing the current situation and future prospects.

NV: *In American universities, is the study of medieval Italian literature limited only to the “three crowns” or does it extend also to the so-called “minor” authors?*

TC: Important studies of authors other than the Three Crowns have recently been published, yet, I think that there are good reasons why the Medieval Italian literature that we study in US universities continues to be centered around the works of Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio. Jane Tylus’s fine *Reclaiming Catherine of*

⁴ <https://revistes.uab.cat/dea>

Siena (Chicago, 2009) is, perhaps, an exception that proves the rule. I'm sympathetic to David Wallace's promotion of the idea of Five Crowns, including St. Bridget of Sweden in addition to Catherine, although it will take time, and it won't be easy to rewrite six or seven centuries of literary history! In Italy it's possible to study a "minor" author and/or to publish a philological edition of a text outside the canon of the Tre Corone. In the United States, on the other hand, there are good reasons to stay close to the major authors of the Italian medieval tradition since they are among the most important authors of world literature, and their literature is what students of the humanities in the United States primarily need to know about.

I think there continues to be a lot of interest in lyric poetry, as might be expected. In the US there is a strong tradition of the philological and critical study of the vernacular lyric tradition that continues to be central to graduate teaching and research. (I'm thinking of Chris Kleinhenz, Wayne Storey, Fabian Alfie, among others.) It's surprising to me that there is not more work on Petrarch's poetry, although I am keeping the faith and regularly teach graduate seminars on the second of the Three Crowns. In terms of religious literature, we published in the Devers series in "Dante and Medieval Italian Literature," whose remit we expanded a few years ago, a book by Sarah McNamer that won an MLA prize, the *Meditations on the Life of Christ*. (And we have recently received a proposal for a translation and edition of Domenico Cavalca.) With regard to the Three Crowns I think it is encouraging to see how work on Boccaccio in North America has increased since the centenary in 2013. There is important work that has recently appeared on Boccaccio by some of the most interesting young and mid-career scholars in the fields of Italian and Medieval Studies. The American Boccaccio Association has emerged in the last ten-fifteen years as one of the most vital and productive scholarly associations in the field of Italian Studies, alongside the DSA, the oldest of all U.S. scholarly associations. The *Boccaccisti* have been organizing successful collected volumes, conferences, and several important monographic studies have appeared.

NV: *Of course, one of the crucial challenges in teaching Italian literature, and particularly Dante, is the issue of translation. How do you deal with the original text and how is it possible to convey part of its beauty to non-Italian speakers?*

TC: I'll never forget the time when the Irish poet and translator, Ciaran Carson, who, sadly, just passed away in October, visited Notre Dame in 2003. He came together with Seamus Heaney to participate in the International Dante Seminar, and had just published his translation of the *Inferno* (Granta, 2002). Carson was an accomplished musician and introduced his reading *ex abrupto* by playing a little tune on a tin whistle, which unsettled the room a bit, that was packed with rigid unsmiling international Dantists. And then he went on to say: "You know, I don't know very much about Dante. I've read a few books... an article or two by Professor Hollander..." (and Bob Hollander was sitting right there in front of him). The Irishman was very informal. It was beginning to become a little uncomfortable, and you could see some of the distinguished Dantists starting to get their backs up. At that point Carson began reading his translation of cantos 24 and 25 of the *Inferno*. In his sly way, like Dante when he wrote those cantos, the poet was showing off what he could do. It was a tour de force, and by the end of the reading he had them in the palm of his hand. Carson was, indeed, a remarkable poet, and his translation of those cantos transmits something essential of the energy and the sheer writerly brilliance of the original Italian. Carson's performance that afternoon brought home to me how translation of Dante can be an important form of Dante interpretation in its own right, as authoritative as any essay by any Dante scholar.

This ought to be obvious, I suppose, but too often the translation of Dante is approached in more banal terms. Dante translations are not, generally speaking, considered to be very important literary artefacts. Nonetheless, I think the translation of Dante is potentially and increasingly an important subject for Dante studies, in light of the development of the field of translation studies, especially in the U.K. (I am thinking, for example, of the research project "Transnationalizing Modern Languages" co-led by the Italianist Loredana Polezzi who is at Cardiff.)⁵ One of my first Dante publications was a chapter on American translations of Dante in that 1990 volume on Dante in America edited by Dino Cervigni that I mentioned earlier, and I've continued to be interested in the topic. David Lummus and I, on behalf of the ND Devers Dante Program are organizing together with Jacob Blakesley, one of the too few Italianists who works seriously in the field of translation studies, and Federica Pich who together head the Leeds Dante Centre a conference to be held in Leeds in October of 2021, "*Per legame musaico*: On the Impossible Necessity of Translating Dante into

⁵ <https://www.transnationalmodernlanguages.ac.uk>.

English,” and a volume. We have invited colleagues from both Italian studies, such as Martin McLaughlin, and translation studies, such as Susan Bassnett. Our aim is to give a fresh and comprehensive look at how Dante’s text has been “translated” into English over the past couple of centuries by analyzing and contextualizing prominent translations within their respective historical contexts with special attention to the specific literary forms of the translations—*terza rima*, blank verse, free verse, prose, and other forms, and how the translations have been critically received.

Currently, with respect to my own teaching practice, I use the Hollander edition for the *Inferno* while my colleague Christian Moevs uses the Durling-Martinez translation for *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*, complemented by frequent reference to Alison Cornish’s excellent commentary on the *Paradiso*. The Durling-Martinez translation is certainly rich with intriguing and original critical perspectives, yet what I like about Robert Hollander’s commentary for an introductory course is the way in which it invites and encourages students to join the conversation about Dante that has been going on for 700 years. I find the choral characteristic of the commentary to be very engaging, as do the students. I love the way the opinion of Benvenuto da Imola regarding a controversial passage is cited alongside the perspective of an undergraduate student once taught at Princeton or Dartmouth. The students quickly learn to engage the conversation and even, on occasion, to disagree with Professor Hollander, which I certainly encourage them to do. It goes without saying that every semester one student or another comes up with a completely original and insightful observation, worthy of the *secolare commento*, and thus offering further demonstration, if any was needed, of the poem’s infinite, inexhaustible capacity for signifying something new.

As far as the beauty and complexity of the language is concerned, I let the text speak for itself as far as I am able. I use the translation to get back to the original, as a bridge or crib. We have the great advantage of teaching the *Commedia* in a facing-page translation, a situation which, while we have come a long way from Grandgent’s edition of the poem, still speaks to the enduring reverence with which the original is rightly held. We read the Italian original out loud in almost every class meeting. I’m fortunate that at Notre Dame there will be eight or ten students in a class of thirty who know enough Italian to read the text out loud. I teach them the basic prosody, which is fairly straightforward. Most students know a second language, usually a Romance language, so almost everyone can start to make out the original. I remember well when

I started reading Dante as a student and I first began to learn how to make out the text—to begin to construct the syntax, and to appreciate the complexities of rhythm, sound and meaning ... the wonder of it. I'm still wondering and I'm still learning.