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MARY JO BANG'S *INFERNO**A Missile for Capturing Dante's Future(s)*

ABSTRACT: The multitude of appropriations, transformations, reinterpretations, and rewritings of Dante's *Comedy* through a variety of media and cultural productions testifies Dante's hold on modern imagination. Due to its plurilingualism, visual vividness, meticulous graphic descriptions, and polyphonic auditory allusions, this universally acclaimed masterwork has been made accessible to all ages and cultures. One recent example of controversial rewriting is Mary Jo Bang's translation of Dante's *Inferno* (2012), which includes references to contemporary (popular) culture and figures: from Mick Jagger to Freud, from Stephen Colbert to the Addams Family, from Bob Dylan to Ronald Rumsfeld and Qaddafi. Bang's version is here analyzed in the light of Edwin Gentzler's theory of post-translation studies to reflect on the translator's (sub)version and on the role of translation as rewriting in the age of digital revolution.

KEYWORDS: Mary Jo Bang, *Inferno*, Dante, Rewriting, Post-translation Studies, American Pop Culture

What is translation? On a platter
A poet's pale and glaring head,
A parrot's screech, a monkey's chatter,
And profanation of the dead.

Vladimir Nabokov
On Translating "Eugene Onegin," 1954.

Rewriting Dante's *Inferno* in the Age of Post-Translation Studies

Imagine a contemporary translation of Dante that includes references to Pink Floyd, *South Park*, Donald Rumsfeld, and *Star Trek*. Now imagine that this isn't gimmicky – this is the hardest but most important part to imagine. Imagine instead that the old warhorse is now scary again, and perversely funny, and lyrical and faux-lyrical in a way that sounds sometimes like Auden, sometimes like Nabokov, but always like Mary Jo Bang. Imagine footnotes like those Eliot wrote for *The Waste Land*, covering everything from Eliot himself, to Virgil and Ovid, Lennon and McCartney, Mad Dog 20/20, and *King Lear*. (Lazar 2012)

In his *Bomb Magazine* interview to poet and translator Mary Jo Bang,¹ American novelist Zachar Lazar invites us to an exercise in imagination. Bang's 2012 version of Dante's *Inferno*, he argues, is as an eccentric "332-pages risk" (2012). Similarly, only more explicitly, Adam Fitzgerald wonders on the license of Bang's endeavor. He admits that "she has attempted to rethink, relive, and re-envision a 21st century *Inferno*," and asks:

Is it really too taboo, too hellish to imagine re-dressing the medieval Hell of searing feces and viscera, etc., with the likes of Eric Cartman and the Rolling Stones? The problem of license and invention when it comes to the fidelity of translation is a storied and pickled one, especially given how central the subject matter is to the 20th century's endless speculation from its most important theorists, the no-less endless appropriation from its most radical artists. (Fitzgerald 2013)

Only in recent decades has translation gone from being an ancillary activity in literary and cultural productions to a crucial creative practice enriching world literature and global communication. In the age of digital revolution, texts travel fast and widely. They circulate not only by moving internationally but also intersemiotically, being transcoded from one system to other forms of creative adaptations: films, music, blogs, cartoons, games, videos, fan fiction, TV series... As a consequence, "taking an existing text and copying, pasting, tweaking, tweeting, cropping, and recaptioning have taken translation and rewriting to a new level" (Gentzler 2017, 11). And yet, text-centrality seems to be still prominent in the studies of literary translation to the point that scholars such as Edwin Gentzler have recently called for a "post-translation studies turn,"² namely a new phase in translation studies that requires a broadening of its theoretical horizons and the expansion of its traditional, self-imposed boundaries. This operation also entails the concession that those very boundaries are permeable; their porosity gets unveiled, for

¹ Born in Missouri, Mary Jo Bang is author of several collections of "hybrid" poetry praised for "its linguistic energy, subtle imagery, and innovative technique" (Poetry Foundation), including *Apology for Want* (1997), *The Downstream Extremity of the Isle of Swans* (2001), *Louise in Love* (2001), *Elegy* (2007), *The Bride of E* (2009), and *A Doll for Throwing* (2017). She has earned different degrees that attest her wide range of interests: sociology, photography, medicine, and creative writing. She was poetry co-editor at *Boston Review* (1995-2005), and recipient of numerous awards and fellowships: the Guggenheim Foundation and the Bellagio Foundation, a Hodder Fellowship from Princeton University, a Pushcart Prize, and a "Discovery"/*The Nation* award. From 2003 to 2006, Bang was director of the creative writing program at Washington University in St. Louis.

² The term "post-translation studies" was coined by Siri Nergaard and Stefano Arduini in their introduction to the first issues of *Translation*, a journal founded in 2011, where they offer new directions and push translation studies to a new phase: "We propose the inauguration of a transdisciplinary research field with translation as an interpretative as well as an operative tool. We imagine a sort of new era that could be termed post-translation studies, where translation is viewed as fundamentally transdisciplinary, mobile, and open-ended" (2011, 8).

example, when breaking the distinction between translations, adaptations, and rewritings. Gentzler aptly argues that,

... rather than thinking about translation as a somewhat secondary process of ferrying ideas across borders, we instead think about translation as one of the most important processes that can lead to revitalizing culture, a proactive force that continually introduces new ideas, forms of expressions, and pathways for change. (Gentzler 2017, 8)

Looking *beyond* translation, then, means to look at the ways texts interact with the world, while shaking crystallized beliefs and shaping innovative thinking. In this sense, the study of pre-translation conditions and post-translation effects in the receiving culture becomes fundamental to grapple with the altering power of the texts in motion (in terms of both geography and time), while raising questions around eroded concepts such as authorship and authority: “Theoretically,” Gentzler adds, “much of the discussion in adaptation studies still revolves around issues of equivalence and fidelity, terms from which translation studies scholars have long since distanced themselves” (121).

Gentzler acknowledges his debt to all those scholars whose pioneering studies on rewriting broke with the rigid paradigms and fixed hierarchical categories represented by the linguistic approach. As early as the 1990s, the “prophetic” (124) work of Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere opened the way to a ‘cultural turn’ in translation studies. In their co-edited volume *Translation, History and Culture* (2000), the two theorists strongly assert that the translation process does not take place in a void but is lodged in social and political reality that embeds ideology, cultural heritage, patronage, legitimacy, power, and renders the text vulnerable to multiple manipulations; the study of translation coincides with the study of culture. Being translation a form of rewriting in context, its primary goal is not the correspondence of words, phrases, and sentences as main translational units; neither should it be valued according to standards of accuracy and loyalty. Through translation, cultures construct ‘images’ of texts that are so powerful that the impact of the image of a literary work becomes even stronger and more affecting than its “reality” (2000, 9).

Moreover, in transdisciplinary post-translation studies, new figures get involved in the translating process: non-professional cultural operators, non-traditional researchers, and common readers cooperate to this multivocal activity, so that their contribution to the whole process cannot be neglected. This trend occurs despite the skepticism expressed by literary critics and more conservative translation agents who still believe that the source text exclusively is endowed with authority. As Susan Bassnett writes in the conclusion of her foreword to Gentzler’s volume,

Post-translation studies may annoy die-hards with overly rigid views about studying translation, but it may well prove the catalyst for taking the subject forward into a whole new stage of development

and positioning translation as a fundamental cultural condition underlying communication in the twenty-first century. (Bassnett 2017, x)

Predictably, Mary Jo Bang's transgressive translation of a world literature classic such as Dante Alighieri's *Comedy*, may "ruffle the feathers of classicists, translators and tamer poets who prefer to have the Florentine removed from the filth ... of contemporary pop culture" (Fitzgerald 2013). And yet, according to the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam, "[i]t is inconceivable to read Dante's cantos without directing them towards contemporaneity. They were created for that purpose. They are missiles for capturing the future. They demand commentary in the *futurum*" (1991, 439).

From the very first translation of the *Inferno*³ to Bang's version in 2012, we can count around two-hundred translations into English, whose strategies vary from colloquial to more elevated prose, free or blank verse, and a prevalent number in *terza rima*, a proliferation that has prompted the poet Richard Moore to state that "the attempt to represent Dante's *Commedia* in our language is one of the most consistently and conspicuously failed projects in the history of English translation" (qtd. in Smith and Sonzogni 2017, xix). The issue at stake, though, consists in the nature and scope of the project that Richard Moore has in mind. Due to its plurilingualism, visual vividness, meticulous graphic descriptions, and polyphonic auditory allusions, Dante's acclaimed masterwork has been made accessible to all ages and cultures. The multitude of appropriations, transformations, reinterpretations, and rewritings of Dante's *Comedy* through a variety of media and cultural productions⁴ testifies not only Dante's hold on modern imagination, but also the increasing role that translators and readers alike have acquired over time: "Translation ... is not just a process that happens in the translator's head. Readers decide to accept or reject translations. Different types of reader will require different types of translation" (Bassnett and Lefevere 2000, 5). Including Mary Jo Bang's (sub)version.

³ The publication of the first English version by Henry Boyd dates back to 1785. It was followed by the other two canticles in 1802. In the United States, the first complete translation by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was published in 1867. In 1862 he co-founded 'The Dante Club' (later 'The Dante Society of America') with other poets and intellectuals (Charles Eliot Norton, Oliver H. Holmes, James Russell Lowell, George Washington Green) in the attempt to promote the appreciation and study of the *sommo poeta* in America.

⁴ If in Italy the most popular example is given by Roberto Benigni's long-running comedy routine *Tutto Dante*, examples from the rest of the world include: Sandow Birk's *Comedy* (2004) set in contemporary America and later adapted into a film (2007); musical albums such as *Inferno* by German electronic group Tangerine Dream, *The Inferno Rap* (2005) by Eternal Kool Project, and *The Divine Comedy* (2013) by famous Chinese visual artist Ai Weiwei, who also made a Lego portrait of Dante (*Dante Alighieri in LEGO*, 2016); video games such as *Dante's Inferno* (2010) and *Devil May Cry* (2001-2015); graphic novels *Jimbo: Adventures in Paradise* (1988) followed by *Jimbo in Purgatory* (2004) and *Jimbo's Inferno* (2006) by punk American cartoonist Gary Panter. Some of these projects are mentioned by Bang in her introductory note.

Paratexts

Late modern and contemporary translations reflect an increasing visibility of the translator at work: introductions, prefaces, and notes are often included as paratextual devices which, according to Susan Bassnett, reflect “an increased attention to making clear the *habitus* of the individual translator along with greater willingness on the part of publishers to include such material” (2018, 75. *Italics in the text*). Although translators’ prefaces have always been present in most editions of Dante’s *Comedy* in English, Bassnett observes that they generally provide an overview of the author’s socio-political background, or information on the fortune of the poem. Few of them, instead, offer specific details on the translational choices and their relative motivations. As also argued by Jacob Blakesley, paratextual analysis is “essential to providing a diachronic vision of translation history” (2021, 373), as paratextual commentary reflects the translator’s ideological approach.

When holding Mary Jo Bang’s *Inferno* for the first time, one immediately realizes how different the book looks, as an object, in comparison to most translations of Dante’s *Comedy*. This is not a conventional literary product. Published in 2012 and selected as a Notable Book by The Academy of the American Poets (2012) and The American Library Association (2013), it is printed on quality paper, in an artbook format, and illustrated by visual artist Henrik Drescher.⁵ His full-page, black and white, thick-lined drawings open each canto and are captioned with lines taken from Bang’s text, whereas smaller icons, mainly featuring on the margins, are interspersed throughout the whole book which thus situates itself within a longstanding tradition. In fact, starting from Botticelli through Reynolds, Doré, Füssli, Delacroix, Blake, Ingres, Dalí, Raischenberg to more contemporary artists such as Mattotti, Paladino, or Panter (just to name a few), many illustrators have taken turns in rendering the visual power of Dante’s masterpiece.⁶

Dresher’s operation thus repeats the many attempts to transfer the poet’s imagery to contemporary readers’ hellish world, clearly complying with the main purpose of Mary Jo Bang’s operation: to recast the *Inferno* in a new age by using contemporary language. In so doing, without ever sacrificing their personal idioms, they both engage in a form of cultural discourse. Take for example Canto V, where Dante locates the Lustfuls. Among the many renown sinners, we can meet “lustful Cleopatra” and “Helen / whose bad-girl behavior set in motion years / Of nonstop mayhem” (55). The illustration on the margin

⁵ Henrik Drescher was born in Copenhagen in 1955. In 1967, he moved to the United States with his family. He studied at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, but he soon quit to work as a full-time illustrator. His works have been included in several children’s books and regularly appear in *The New York Times*, *Newsweek*, *The Washington Post*, *Time*, *Rolling Stones*. See his website: <https://www.hdrescher.com/>.

⁶ See Battaglia Ricci (2018).

ironically proposes a sort of Cruella de Ville, the pop culture icon from Walt Disney's *One Hundred and One Dalmatians*, that synecdochally condenses all the female characters of this canto. With her curvaceous figure framed in a skin-tight dress and fishnet stockings, together with her irreverent temperament signaled by her unabashed puffing from a cigarette holder, she is carrying around two male puppies on a leash (one of which is in fact dotted) that are half human, half dogs, and are caught while copulating. Another example is given by the opening of Canto XI, when Dante and Virgil stop to rest behind a jumble of broken boulders to become accustomed to the foul stench that rises from the lower circles. Bang translates Dante's "profondo abisso" with the dense "crowded Alcatraz" (103), while Drescher eloquently draws a man with a gas mask that evokes all sorts of historical events: from the first use of chemical gas weapons in WWI to contemporary air-pollution and environmental challenges.

The book's rich paratextual structure also includes an introduction, where the translator offers an effervescent summary of the thirty-three cantos. Each one of these is accompanied by a rich apparatus of footnotes with information on Dante's text and Medieval Italy, and abundant explanations on a plethora of cultural and political figures of our present time included in Bang's rewriting. An essential part of the book is represented by "A note on the translation," which opens with the genesis of Mary Jo Bang's ambitious project, reveals the translator's intentions, and provides all the coordinates we need to read the text "on both micro- and macro-level" (Bassnett 2018, 82), a due act that begins with the acknowledgment of the context in which the translator has made her choices.

"Craft becomes becoming"

"A Gallehaut was the Book." In her translation note, Mary Jo Bang narrates how in 2006 she stumbled in *Fig*, a collection of poems written by Caroline Bergvall, which also included "Via (48 Dante Variations)." This very unconventional poem was composed by collating the forty-seven translations archived in the British Library (up until May 2000) of the first three lines of Dante's *Inferno*. As a consequence, it is Dante's translations that become the poetic material or, in a way, the 'original' text. The different versions of the first tercet are not ordered chronologically but alphabetically by the first word or expression chosen by the translator ("Halfway...", "In the Middle of..."), whose last name, together with the year of publication, is quoted at the end of each excerpt. The baffling nature of Bergvall's poem lies in its power to locate each version within a context that has nothing to do with history and historical time; each sequence is in fact a variation of a variation endowed with an "incantatory quality" that results from an "unrelenting repetition-with-revision" (Bang 2012, 7). In this sense, we could say that "Via" evolves in a sort of *sound* progression: its constant unfolding from one translation to the other has

the purpose to capture the readers (or the spectators) and trap them in ‘a dense cage’⁷ of sounds from which they cannot escape: the fact is that they cannot continue their journey – literally – beyond the first tercet. As Bergvall argues,

Unlike the graphic causal horror of linear travel, these point-by-point interceptions spin a spiraling musicality, its horror is abstracted, a build-up of interrupted motion, pulling together into a narrative of structure, stop-start, each voice trying itself out, nothing looped, yet nothing moved beyond the first line, never beyond the first song, never beyond the first day, the forest walls, my body walls. Having to look for points of exit, further in, further down, rather than out. (Qtd in Perloff 2003)

Initially, Bergvall’s poem was conceived as a performance that first took place in the year 2000 with the participation of Irish composer Cián Maher.⁸ This dense accumulation of Dante’s matter adds to the poet’s breaths, to her pauses and silences, and finally creates a 48th invisible variation:

Using calculations set up via his software, he [Maher] unearthed an added line, an imperceptible grain, my voice’s fractals, and we let it run, hardly audible, underneath the structure of the reading voice, inextricably tied to it, yet escaping it, releasing from it a surprising beauty, magnified shrapnels of interior sound. The 48th variation.

“Via” is also a meticulous work of ‘copying,’ which raises questions on the nature of poetic creation. The translation process *per se* is not the fulcrum of Bergvall’s operation, which in fact does not invite comparison between versions. Her task, she explains in her introduction, is “Understanding translation in its erratic seriality” (Bergvall 2005, 65). Let’s take a look at the first five exemplars:

The Divine Comedy – Pt. 1 Inferno – Canto I – (1–3)

1. Along the journey of our life half way
I found myself again in a dark wood wherein the straight road no longer lay
(Dale, 1996)
2. At the midpoint in the journey of our life
I found myself astray in a dark wood For the straight path had vanished.
(Creagh and Hollander, 1989)
3. HALF over the wayfaring of our life,
Since missed the right way, through a night-dark wood Struggling, I found myself.
(Musgrave, 1893)
4. Half way along the road we have to go,
I found myself obscured in a great forest, Bewildered, and I knew I had lost the way.
(Sisson, 1980)

⁷ Mary Jo Bang translates Dante’s “selva oscura” with “a dense cage of leaf, tree, and twig.” (15)

⁸ Cfr. <https://soundcloud.com/carolinebergvall/via-48-dante-translations-mix>.

5. Halfway along the journey of our life
 I woke in wonder in a sunless wood
 For I had wandered from the narrow way
 (Zappulla, 1998)

As Marjorie Perloff remarks, the alphabetization “reminds the reader or listener that no two of the translations are exactly the same” (2003), and yet, in the process of collating the forty-eight variations, their translators – whose first names never appear – get effaced. Similarly, in her note, Mary Jo Bang concedes that “Reading the poem on the page, I was fascinated by the fact that while the simple language of the original three lines ... never changes, no two translations were identical” (7). These two similar comments reminded me of “A Translator’s Monologue,” an essay by Cynthia Ozick, where the writer argues that in order to contemplate the real possibility of translating poetry, “the translator must believe in certain impossible theses” (1991, 199) that she considers important, useful, and false. It is on the concept of falseness that Ozick prevalently focuses by reminding us of the Septuagint, the earliest complete Greek version of the Hebrew Bible, and the way it got translated (Ibid.). According to the old Jewish legend, seventy scholars were asked by King Ptolemy to translate the Torah to be included in the Library of Alexandria. The Elders “entered seventy separate chambers, and emerged with seventy copies of an identical text” (Ibid.). Ozick comments by admitting that of course this is a false tale, but that it is useful to reflect on how we assess a translated text.

Among the several false ideas about the translational process, we can find that “*Craft becomes becoming*” (201. Italics in the text), namely that the translator *becomes* the poet, i.e. that s/he feels “to *be* the poet, reborn in another language,” eventually assuming with her/him the same authority over the poem: “If a translation seems flawless, we take it to be authoritative; if it is authoritative, we trust its importance; if we can trust its importance, we know it will be useful. And by ‘useful’ I mean that a translation can serve as a lens into the underground life of another culture” (Ozick 1991, 199).

Mary Jo Bang explains that while trying “to stay scrupulously true to the narrative, and to what I took to be Dante’s intent,” she also “wrote as if I were some cyborgian hybrid, myself plus Dante’s text, the two parts behaving as if they were one mind, living in the present” in order to “allow the poem to speak with intimacy about the world we live in: the postmodern, post-9/11, Internet ubiquitous present” (Bang 2012, 8). The pleasure that she seeks in the encounter of Dante’s past with her contemporary time has the “primary role ... to demonstrate that Dante’s Hell never ages, nor do our basic human failings ever change – they only get enacted against a different background” (9). Bang’s rewriting, then, differs from Bergvall’s and Ozick’s operations in one fundamental feature that locates her work within a post-translation studies frame: she totally rejects the invisibility that translators are requested or assumed to attain and writes herself in the text.

According to Lawrence Venuti, if a translated work reads fluently, it is normally considered transparent, a desirable condition by most readers and publishers. What we normally ask a translation to do is “to efface its second-order status,” by producing “the illusion of authorial presence whereby the translated text can be taken as the original” (Venuti 1995, 7). But this process of domestication, Venuti adds, is “narcissistic,” since fluent translations provide readers with “the experience of recognizing their own culture in a cultural other” (15). Mary Jo Bang’s linguistic and cultural manipulations eventually challenge the notions of invisibility and authorship, as she produces a new text as much as the original writer did. After all, she is herself a poet and her version aptly feeds a long list of ‘translations by poets.’⁹

Mary Jo Bang’s (Sub)version and Transcreation

More than once in his book on rewriting in a post-translation studies age, Edwin Gentzler emphasizes the transformative power of subversive translations as opposed to more static processes that do not contemplate experimentation. One cultural and theoretical area that he particularly values is offered by Latin American creative writing associated with Brazilian cannibalist movement. Gentzler explains that “the translation/rewriting approach for the *antropofagistas* is not a domesticating or foreignizing one, but *both*: importing ideas and expressions via translation plus rewriting those ideas and texts in the vein of the receiving culture” (Gentzler 2017, 70). When Mary Jo Bang appropriates Dante’s *Inferno* and situates the text in the new wave of rewriting, she still wishes to respect her source and the poet’s initial intent and claims that translation is “both homage and theft . . . It is a strange collaborative camaraderie” (10). At the same time, she aligns with cannibalistic translators, being “remarkably inventive, reorganizing European ideas in a new context, playing with signs, sights, and images in a way that allows for alternative insights” (Ibid.). In this sense, by concentrating on the circulation of the text in contemporary United States, her personal ‘variation’ might be considered a “transcreation.”¹⁰ As Peter Hawkins and Rachel Jacoff write in the

⁹ The list includes, among others, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, John Ciardi, Robert Pinsky, W.S. Merwin, and Jean Hollander. Cfr. Ronald De Rooy. “The Poet Translated by American Poets. In Search of the Perfect ‘Trasmutazione musaica.’” In Ronald de Rooy (ed.), *Divine Comedies for the New Millennium: Recent Dante Translations in America and the Netherlands*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2003. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt46mzbd>. Also see: Peter S. Hawkins and Rachel Jacoff 2001.

¹⁰ The term ‘transcrição’ was coined by Brazilian concrete poet Haroldo De Campos who, together with his brother Augusto, was particularly interested in the renewal of poetry interpretation through artistic cross-fertilization. Music played a pivotal role, so much that they formed alliances with popular musicians such as Caetano Veloso and Tom Zé, and composers like Gilberto Mendes (Cfr. Jackson 2010): “Art translation holds the same tension in relation to the original as the musical interpreter does in relation to the composer. In this sense I can invoke the liberty that jazz singers and instrumentalists have, for

introduction to their volume: “Dante is known not only by people who once read his poem, but also by the far larger number who have never turned a page” (2001, xiii). Bang’s irreverent translation serves the purpose of creating a version of a classic poem that new categories of readers may appreciate: “I will be most happy if this postmodern, intertextual, slightly slant translation lures readers to a poetic text that might seem otherwise archaic and off-putting,” although she invites them, after reading it, “to seek out others” (11).

The seven-hundredth anniversary of Dante’s death has offered scholars, poets, critics, and enthusiasts from all over the world innumerable opportunities to reflect on the *Comedy*’s enormous legacy. From the several interviews that Mary Jo Bang has released during this special year, we learn that when she set out to translate the *Inferno*, she heavily relied on over two hundred accurate translations (and relative commentaries) of the poem. Trusting that she could stand on the shoulders of previous translators, the parameters of the meaning were well-established (Borio 2015; King 2013). Accordingly, she was not concerned with her lack of knowledge of the Italian language; after all, she was in good company, since other translators who preceded her were not fluent speakers. This awareness gave herself “permission to do something new that would hopefully have the effect of extending the poem into the present” (Borio 2015). The question of ‘permission’ is in fact one of the most debated by critics in relation to Bang’s work, but the poet insists that her purpose is to “liberate” translation and the discourse around it, while distancing herself from the master/slave or loyal/treason dialectic (King 2013). Since many earlier translators of the *Comedy* opted for an eighteenth-century English to mimic Dante’s fourteenth-century vernacular, archaicism is prevalent to give the illusion that the poem is an artifact of a previous era. Contemporary (especially young) English speaking readers, however, would possibly feel disheartened by this remote language. Moreover, Dante wished for his poem to last. According to Bang, the poet’s choice to write in the vernacular rather than in literary Latin – a language frozen in time that would prevent *The Comedy* to change – is an effective strategy that affects the very reception and spread of the poem. Bang takes this argument as her own and, in the attempt to bring it forward into the present time, she imagines a translation that can mirror the specific variations of the languages spoken by the different characters. As a result, Bang sets a twofold goal: on the one hand, she proposes a text whose interpretability depends on

example, to give ‘their’ version of classics such as Gershwin or Cole Porter. There is a great difference between hearing ‘Summertime’ sung by Billie Holiday or Janis Joplin, each with a personal and unique reading of the song ... It is, above all else, a question of hearing” (Qtd. in Jackson 2008, 142-143). Also, John Ciardi, in his translation note to his version (1954-1970) stresses the importance that most Dante’s poets-translators attach to their sound search and their failures in providing exact sound equivalence: “When the violin repeats what the piano has just played, it cannot make the same sounds and it can only approximate the same chords. It can, however, make recognizably the same ‘music,’ the same air. But it can do so only when it is as faithful to the self-logic of the violin as it is to the self-logic of the piano.” (Ciardi 2001, ix).

simple syntactical structures; on the other hand, she drastically drops the tone and register of the poem to make it closer to contemporary speech:

I wanted Dante's Hell to read as if it's a timeless mirror in which all of us can still see ourselves. To that end, I translated the poem into today's spoken English. I kept the story exactly the same, and the three-line stanzas exactly the same. In a way, I translated the original into the English that I thought Dante might use if he were a thirty-five year old American poet writing the poem today. (Borio 2015)

Mary Jo Bang's translation thus strives for a balance between compliance and deviation, two contradictory and yet coexisting modes of creativity.

In his "Conversation about Dante," Mandelstam stresses the relationship between form and content in *The Comedy*, and while suggesting that form drags the meaning, he also illustrates Dante's plurality of forms: "There is not one form in Dante – there is a multitude of forms. One is driven out of another and it is only by convention that they can be inserted one into the other" (1991, 13). Commenting on this idea, Bang argues that meaning might be compared to "an obstinate child and form is the insistent parent" (Borio 2015): in order to convey the same sense of forward motion made possible by the interlocking rhyme scheme of *terza rima*, she strives to reproduce the same sense of phonic inevitability by use of alliteration, repetition, assonance, and internal rhyme that could fit the established pattern. This is mainly due to the fact that English, in comparison to Italian or any other Romance language, has fewer words that rhyme; hence, her adherence to Ezra Pound's famous dictum that she adopts with a personal twist: "As regarding rhythm: [one needs] to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in [the] sequence of a metronome.' The fact is, I am always trying to replicate a voice in my head that only I hear and that voice doesn't speak in rhyming lines" (Ibid.). Her personal variation of the first tercet of Canto I, for example, runs as follows:

Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita	Stopped mid-motion in the middle
mi ritrovai per una selva oscura,	Of what we call our life, I looked up and saw no sky –
ché la diritta via era smarrita.	Only a dense cage of leaf, tree, and twig. I was lost. (15)

Despite its modernization, Bang's translation attempts at rendering the same musicality achieved by the *Sommo Poeta*, only in contemporary spoken English. The combination of "mid-motion" and "middle" in the first line reproduces the same sonic effect of Dante's text. Similarly, the "I" sound repetition provided by "life," "sky," and a few words in the following tercet, guarantees the same vowel effect of the Italian poem that Bang re-echoes by resorting to assonance. Moreover, she often plays with phonic resources in a game that is mainly graphic, such as the collocation of the word "leaf" exactly under the word "life." Worthy of note is also the last clause – "I was lost" – that Bangs decides to isolate between two full stops that become a sort of visual barriers, thus emphasizing the sense of entrapment ("a dense cage") of Dante the protagonist.

Another example that I wish to mention is offered by the opening of Canto V, where “Hideous Minos stands snarling at the entrance” (Bang 2012, 53):

<p>“O tu che vieni al doloroso ospizio,” disse Minòs a me quando mi vide, lasciando l’atto di cotanto officio,</p> <p>“guarda com’ entri e di cui tu ti fide; non t’inganni l’ampiezza de l’intrare!” (16-20)</p>	<p>Where they spin until they reach the designated ring. “Hey, you, who come to the hotel Woe,” said Minos, When he saw me, neglecting for a second his official duties,</p> <p>“Be careful where you go and who you talk to.” “Don’t be fooled by the fact that the door is always open.” (Bang 2012, 53)</p>
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Here Bang opts for economy: one line is completely effaced to permit Minos’ speech to be condensed enough to sound like street talk: his salutation – “Hey you” – could be either the verse of a song or a line in a film, and the reader is here invited to perform the same act of visual imagination that Dante wishes for his contemporary readers. And yet, Bang recognizes that her ‘transcreation’ embeds in great measure *her own* presence both as a translator and as a new original author: “Since I’m more or less ventriloquizing Dante, using the script he wrote, the characters will sound a bit like me. However, that’s true of all translation. It’s only a matter of degree” (King 2013). Again, this is a game of reflecting mirrors, and while Dante creates a parallel reality that he calls *Inferno*, his imaginary world truly reflects the harrowing world he lives in. Similarly, Bang’s new poem is a mirror of her own time and the strategy she eventually establishes is based on intertemporal references or anachronistic substitutions, a technique that infuses her version with humor, becomes a key to accessibility, but infuriates more conventional readers of Dante.

Finally, *The Comedy* thrives in intertextuality. Dante’s rich apparatus of quotations includes intellectuals, poets, kings, politicians, song-writers, and popes that Mary Jo Bang modernizes by substituting them with contemporary figures – John Coltrane and Amy Winehouse, Bob Dylan and Woody Allen, T.S. Eliot and Shakespeare, Sylvia Plath and the Addams Family, Confucius and Freud – that, in a moment of profound spiritual crisis, create a lively tapestry that needs to be read allegorically. References are made to Jell-O and Styrofoam; “Hotel California” by the Eagles and “Man of the World” by Fleetwood Mac are quoted in the poem, and in doing so not only does she pair high and low culture, but she also contemporizes Dante’s medieval state of affairs with its American counterpart: “The feuding families and corrupt clerics that kept medieval Italy in constant upheaval are identical to the partisan divisions that are fueling political deadlock and resentment in our time” (Tombasco n.d.).

One sly example comes from the much controversial and debated Canto XXI, when Dante and Virgil are about to access the eighth Circle of hell. Standing on a ridge and looking down at the pitch where hot tar is boiling, they observe a group of devils who are grabbing sinners, carrying them back and forth, and poking them with hooks and prongs:

“Tra’ ti avante, Alichino, e Calabrina”,
Cominciò elli a dire, “e tu Cagnazzo;
E Barbariccia guidi la decina.

“Come here, Killer Clown, and Ilse the Witch,”
He began. “You too, Mad Dog;
And Barbie, you be squad leader.

Libicocco vegn’ oltre e Dragagnazzo,
Ciriatto sannuto e Graffiacane
E Farfarello e Rubicante pazzo. (118-123)

Let’s have Qaddafi too, and Dragan Nikolic,
Roadhog with his tusks, and Irma the Beast,
Fubar, and Crazy Rummy. (Bang 2012, 201)

In a note, Mary Jo Bang explains that the names of the ten devils escorting Dante and Virgil in this Canto, are corruptions of names of Tuscan politicians and Dante’s enemies who banned him from his city (202). Contrary to most translators who keep the original Italian names, Bang decides for substitution. The allusions, however, are never arbitrary. For instance, in note 37, Bang explains that the devils are called Malebranche, “a combination of the word *male* (“evil”) and *branche* (“claws” – also “talons” or “clutches” or “jaws”), from which her choice to evoke the same pun with “Psycho-Clawz.” Alichino, possibly from acrobatic “harlequin,” the character of the *commedia dell’arte*, becomes Killer Clown, whose portrait (bold head, red nose, and exaggerated makeup) is reproduced by Henrik Drescher on the page margin. As we learn from her note, Bang alludes here to John Wayne Gacy, a serial killer from Chicago who, due to his profession, was also known as “killer clown.” Between 1972 and 1978 he assaulted and murdered at least thirty-three young boys and teenagers.

In the same line, we find Ilse the Witch, a war criminal whose real name was Ilse Koch while her nickname was “the Witch [or Bitch] of Buchenwald” (*Die Hexe von Buchenwald*). The wife of Nazi commandant Karl-Otto Koch, she worked as an overseer and became infamous for her cruelty epitomized by her collection of tattooed skin removed from the prisoners’ bodies. Klaus Barbie (who substitutes Barbariccia, the leader of the ten demons) is another emanation from the Nazi world. Nikolaus “Klaus” Barbie was the head of the Gestapo in Lyon and was so famous for his sadistic tortures that he earned the nickname “the Butcher of Lyon.”

In her meticulous notes, Bang offers significant biographical (and bibliographical) details that explain her choices: Qaddafi, for instance, replaces Libicocco who, in Dante’s text, “may gesture towards Lybia” (204); the brutal Dragan Nikolić, the Serbian commander of the Sušica detention camp at Vlasenica during the Bosnian War, impersonates Dragagnazzo (please, note the phonic similarities of the two names); Secretary of Defense under George W. Bush, Donald Rumsfeld (“Crazy Rummy”), is Rubicante pazzo, possibly Pazzin’ de Pazzi of Florence at Dante’s time...

Mary Jo Bang’s operation may seem too eccentric and even impudent, but is not brand new in the long history of English translations of *The Comedy*. Even the ‘faithful and literal’ translation of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow – whose objective was the accurate communication of the “diction of Dante” – we may come across references to the socio-political context of the American Civil War. His translation “refracts the world

of a war-torn nation divided by ‘traitors’” (Matthews 2012, 119). Moreover, if the translational process had a therapeutic function for Longfellow, whose second wife had recently died in very tragic circumstances, Mary Jo Bang proves the same familiarity with hell, having lost her only son.¹¹ Their opposite variations of Dante’s *Inferno* eventually come from the same grief.

Conclusion

“Does Mary Jo Bang’s updated version of Dante’s *Inferno* work?” This is, in conclusion, the question that we need to ask to assess Mary Jo Bang’s endeavor. Mark Ford, who defines Bang’s translation as “ugly and boring and irritating,” has no doubts:

No, it doesn’t – No, in Thunder, it doesn’t, I can’t help adding, in emulation of Bang’s penchant for making use of inapposite quotes on all occasions. The numerous allusions Dante makes mean that reading the *Commedia* is inevitably a somewhat interrupted process for all but scholars of late-thirteenth- and early-fourteenth-century Italian history, since we find ourselves continually having to refer to the notes to work out who’s who. Bang’s version, however, introduces whole new strata of cross-referencing to a vast range of characters and events that postdate the poem. These gimmicky allusions to all and sundry seem crowbarred into her text mainly in the hope that they will make us admire her cleverness and audacity, and the breadth of her reading. (2012)

Bang postdates Dante’s poem by including a plethora of contemporary characters that speak of *our* agonizing world, but her “gimmicky” operation *does* make us “admire her cleverness, audacity, and breath of her reading.” Her work permits many (most?) contemporary readers to have access to a fourteenth-century poem when poetry is basically considered chutzpa. A second question could be: has Dante found a better niche in the twenty-first century? With the advent of the internet, emails, WhatsApp, social media and all the other ‘devilish contraptions’ of our time, how can a ‘classic’ translation of a ‘classic’ poem like *The Divine Comedy* accommodate the new needs of ‘non-readers’? Could ‘poetry influencers’ be the answer?

If there is one thing that I believe Bang’s *Inferno* does is to prove that, far from being a binary activity between two languages, translation is a very transformative and creative act, it “ensures the regeneration of texts, the means through which ideas can be exchanged, and the processes by which languages evolve and grow.... Further, translation reaffirms such fundamental values as cultural diversity and individual

¹¹ Frances Appleton died in 1861 after an ember from the fireplace caught her dress on fire. See the obituary on *The New York Times*, 12 July 1861. <https://www.nytimes.com/1861/07/12/archives/the-death-of-mrs-longfellow.html>. Mary Jo Bang’s son, Michael, died in 2004 from prescription drugs overdose. *Elegy* (2007), her fifth collection of poems, is dedicated to him.

creativity" (Gentzler 2017, 231), all values that Mary Jo Bang's translation transmits: a missile for capturing Dante's many futures in a post-translation age.

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