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Daniel Halpern. Versions of Dante's Inferno: Translations by 20 Contemporary Poets. Pp. xiii, 199. ISBN: .

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You know, when you walk into the long, tunnel-like portal at the Dakota, that John Lennon was shot to death there. The stone monument, the plaque with its flirting-with-irony inscription, "Imagine", is just across the street, at the entrance to the lovely stretch of park the widow Ono makes sure is tended to as "Strawberry Fields". Again, the poignant irony lies just beneath the surface. But at the entrance to the Dakota itself, where he was actually shot, there is a conspicuous lack of visible marker. The monument is visible only in our memories, and it thus has --unlike the public monument across the street --the sharper sting of personal memory: the strong poetry it marks is visible in the same way our own pasts are, sometimes. You don't have to be told to imagine, you feel with the merest flicker of your eye down the little tunnel, the grief at the death, the sweetness of some first kiss, probably to some song he wrote, the color of the sky the day you first heard Sgt. Pepper.

The other inescapably visible traces of the murder of Lennon amid those very cold stones are at the same time reminders that all writing is writing over and above and beyond other things, that life and songs and poetry do, as all the clich s tell us, go on: the security, to get beyond the tunnel and into the

courtyard, and thus into this most poetic of New York buildings, is ferocious. Most strikingly, though, the Dakota has just been cleaned, and the building that, in your memory, is a wonderfully glum and scary black, is now erased, restored to the blankness it had when it was the frontier, the Dakota of the Wild West, that Upper West Side of New York that once looked out over its own prairies, just about a century ago. If memory has to do with the past, this is a purification, erasing the stain of the tragedy from the walls of the haunted building.

But if memory is the future, then it is merely that the first century was finished, the century when Dakota went from being the frontier to being the heartland, and now it is time to write again on it, write the next century. The rich life of the Dakota's story in its second century will certainly include, in the handbooks of poetry, the charming little story that it was there that a bunch of poets had dinner after they read their covers of Dante out loud, for nearly four hours, to an entranced audience of New Yorkers. It was an audience in which many, perhaps most, were there not because of the poet dead for not one but seven centuries, but because of the spectacular gathering of living ones. In the world of poetry this was a great deal like the Bob Dylan tribute that had dazzled other New Yorkers just a few months before: Dylan is as canonized as if he were dead and what people really went for was the conspicuous display of the lyrical present, the twenty or so rockers who came out and did their covers of Dylan songs. In both cases the charm and the power come from the exquisite dance of the living with those who would otherwise be dead. In poetry, as in its kindred lyric, music, you die when no one does versions of you anymore, you die inside the cultures where no one translates you, you die when the only version heard is the authentic and the original one, the perfect, classical version. To have had Dylan come out and do his own songbook --especially if he could somehow have done it so that each song sounded like its classical studio version --to have had Dante's Inferno read through in its gorgeous and often heart-breaking Italian original --these would be performances of superb nostalgia, they would provoke both awe and piety, but they would be far less a part of the land of the living than the two that did take place.

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Daniel Halpern performed the epic job of arranging both performances, the one that is the volume itself and the one that took place at the 92nd Street Y on a picture-gorgeous New York spring evening, mid-way through April. Nineteen of the twenty poets that wrote versions of the Cantos were present and, as Rebecca Sinkler noted in her description of the affair in her New York Times Book Review, if someone had tossed a grenade at the stage, Carolyn Forche, the single no-show, would have been the last living American poet. A slightly vicious line, of course, but it conveys some of the lustrousness involved. And a stunning performance it was, with the sheer abundance and almost unabsorbable variety of presences and voices creating just that impression of baroque richness that is one of the hallmarks of the Commedia, especially the Inferno, itself. Indeed, the many voices, which one can safely predict will be a focus of some academic criticism of the volume is, instead, part of the appropriateness of the tribute, it is a distinct part of a plurilingualism that is Dantesque in a number of ways. In part, this great variation is the necessary reflection of the sheer livingness of the thing, it could not be otherwise. But, in equal measure, the plurality of voices creates a version of the effect of the many languages of Dante, his enormous pleasure and struggle with the many languages of Italy itself. Indeed, for someone who knows that in crucial ways the Commedia arises out of Dante's powerful, impassioned, theoretical and practical struggle to establish the living and thus always mobile language as the legitimate language of poetry, to finally really replace Virgil's long-dead,

sacralized tongue, there could have been few openings more dramatic and moving than having Seamus Heany with his unstinting Irish brogue begin the evening's incantation: "In the middle of the journey of our life/ I found myself astray in a dark wood/ where the straight road had been lost sight of...." And the rest of the evening's many accents reflected not accident (nor, even less, mere gaudy showiness of star-power) but the precise kind of love of the life of language --and this must always mean variation and lack of uniformity, lack of fixedness -- that drove Dante. It was and is difficult to avoid an invidious comparison with the way most of us Dantisti, the academic keepers of the tradition, most commonly deal with the poet --and it was no surprise that, to the naked eye there seemed to be no more than the smallest handful of pilgrims from that universe there. There is, in fact, very little in common between the two universes. Giuseppe Mazzotta, in his afterword in the volume, points to the crucial difference between Dante in the Italian tradition, within which he is a fixed monument, "the institutional custodian of of the ethos of the past," and in the refreshingly impertinent American tradition, which has always seen Dante as just another one of the company, another poet, to play with, travel with, have intercourse with, to reshape and influence as he reshapes and influences. But within what we might loosely call the American tradition, the obvious schizm is between the academic world and the world of contemporary literature, especially poetry, and Dantisti, by and large, play by the Italian rules of monumentalization, we believe in a Dante who lived many centuries ago.

This volume, on the other hand, is quite the opposite of reverence or ancestor-worship: the vigorous voice of Dante "himself" is intextricably bound to those of these poets and it is thus we can glimpse his undiminshed vigor in the poetic tradition of Longfellow and Eliot and Pound. Indeed, among the most difficult questions raised by this volume is the one implicit in much of Pound's work in both translation and in "making it new"--that is, when and where the two, the new and the old in a new form, can really be separated from each other. But this marriage (or rather these twenty marriages) of strong voices does not lend itself to such facile distinctions --although perhaps, since we are more used to the far more "anonymous" translations of scholars and/or professional translators, we might tend to underestimate the greater difficulty of composing these new Cantos for writers who are not only not professional translators but who had their own powerful voices to engage gracefully with the older poet's. ( Halpern, in his preface, tells us that the initial enthusiasm quickly became a "translation nightmare.") In this volume admiration is more like sex and procreation and its ties are with the present and the future, tonight, tommorrow. Indeed, one can only hint at --guess at --the range and varieties of what we tend to petrify by calling "influence": Seamus Heany's versions of the opening three Cantos are as much a part of the history of his own poetry as his other, well-known, interactions with Dante; Robert Pinsky, who read powerfully his uncompromising version of Canto 28, has just finished a full Inferno of his own and will be doing the other two Canticles; and it is hard to open Mark Strand's new volume, Dark Harbor, and not see Dante's smile behind this poem, too, with its three-line stanzas and the irregular lengths of each small canto-like section and the poet starting out on a journey into high-woods, in a night without end.

For those of us deeply immersed, for many years, in the land of the cult of Dante, the night of the Dante reading was profoundly instructive. While much of what we read and write is essentially unintelligible unless you are an inhabitant of that same land, and it is, in the end, a very small country, the lovely auditorium at the 92nd Street Y was filled, to the last seat, with hundreds of people who have never read a line of any of that exegesis, and who laughed and cried and held their breaths for four hours, four hours during which 20 of the Inferno's 34 Cantos were read out loud. Rebecca Sinkler

remarked that it was astonishing that no one left after the intermission. You would not loose the bet that very few would have left if the rest of the Cantos had been read and it had been another four hours. However, one of the remarkable effects of the reading is that it seemed very much that the whole of the Inferno itself was being read, and not truncated excerpts from it. In some measure this was because of the almost-faultless selection and pacing of the Cantos chosen to be read, one per poet except the last bit. This was Robert Haas, firm, but with real tenderness in his voice, who did both a breathtaking Ugolino and the end of 34, until the poets could see the stars again. Purists, no doubt, would argue with all this --but this was not, as I have just suggested, an evening for purists of any sort. The other effect of having this Canticle of the Commedia read --no, not read, performed --was to re-establish firmly the powerful fluidness and orality of the text, the ways in which it is richer when it is performed and acted out and heard. It is a text, of course, that lies at that historic crossroads, when much poetry, especially that in the fluid vernaculars, was shifting from the powerful instability of orality to the ambiguous virtues of fixed, written forms. And Dante's text is written, of course, but yet strikingly performative, very vulnerable to the transforming power of performance, as Petrarch (notoriously petrified of the ravages of the un-fixed life or text) points out in his infamous letter on why writing in the vernacular, and the Commedia in particular, is such a foolish and perilous activity. Petrarch would not have loved that night's reading, and certainly wouldn't have been caught dead at it --although, characteristically, he would have been violently envious at the attention to the rival.

For the Dante annals, it cannot go unsaid that Jorie Graham's reading of Canto XI was so starkly powerful that pins were heard dropping in the charged blanks between her many short lines. A small way into her reading, the riveted silence of the audience woke Dante himself up and he came up out of his grave. At first, he looked a bit like Farinata, bolted up out of his own tomb, hovering about, unhappy his own Canto, the previous one, had been skipped just before this point --and this omission, indeed, was the single real flaw in the programming. But if Farinata rose up to quarrell blindly with Dante, Dante came summoned by Miss Graham's rich and passionate voice, to stand with her, to admire her riveting beauty, to dwell in her soul for a bit while she brought him to life. At the end of her Canto, which no one there would have wanted to see end, you could hear nothing but the voice that had seduced everyone there to follow: "....But follow me for now it pleases me to go, the patterns of the stars are quivering, near the horizon now, the north wind's picking up, and farther on there is the cliff's edge we must reach to start down from...."" (This passage also illustrates Graham's approach to the translation: she stretches the text out as she goes --in this case, these verses are her rendering of the single 3-verse stanza in terza rima, plus that final single verse.The effect, almost overwhelming when read aloud, was of great sparseness, since, by not tying herself to a one-for-one line equivalent with Dante, she was actually able to make each line of poetry resonate of the tautness and powerful sparseness of the Italian.)

To do a decent recounting of that Dante-night, which must certainly end up being counted as among the most luminous in the continuous life of Dante, I would have to do a version of the (now-proverbial) Pierre Menard rewrite. The volume itself, of course, is something of a Menardian recording, but, paradoxically, it cannot, in its fullness and permanence and nascent monumentality, do justice to the evanescence of its almost-sung fragments and the many timbres of Dante, when he has become such a kaleidoscope of voices. Like the Dakota, emblem of that communion between comunal poetry and sharp personal memories, between the stone monument and the vision of the ghost, the evening itself was one of those rare spaces in which the dead do come back, even if just for a night, and rewrite the blanks in the land of the living.