

## HISTORICISM, PHILOLOGY AND THE TEXT. AN INTERVIEW WITH TEODOLINDA BAROLINI

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Simon Gilson: Teo, first of all thanks for agreeing to take part in this interview which takes its starting point from your recent book, *Dante and the Origins of Italian Literary Culture*. The sixteen essays in the volume were written over twenty-two years (1983–2005), and you've now re-arranged them into four major thematic strands (A Philosophy of Desire; Christian and Pagan Intertexts; Time and Narrative; Gender) and added an introduction that is tantalizingly entitled 'Reading against the Grain'. Can I start by asking you to tell us more about the idea of reading against the grain: in what ways does this encapsulate your critical praxis?

Teodolinda Barolini: Working within Dante studies, and the Italian critical tradition in general, to 'read against the grain' means:

- 1) Resist authority, resist hermeneutic inertia: the authority of the commentary tradition, the authority of 'it must be read thus because it always has been read thus'. Put hermeneutic pressure on the text.
- 2) At the same time that I try to resist hermeneutic inertia, I don't believe in saying something provocative just for the sake of it. I try to ground my interpretation in the text. A thread through all my work is that I take the text seriously (which at times means even literally), and disregard the commentary material that tells us, implicitly and at times explicitly, not to take what the text says at face value. This most primary of my critical tenets — to which I came intuitively, even before I knew I had critical tenets, and probably through my distaste for authority — has been a hallmark of all my writing. Going back to my first book, certainly the idea

that we should take seriously the *Commedia's* negative remarks about Vergil and the *Aeneid*, remarks that are airbrushed out of the commentary tradition with its unrelenting focus on the pilgrim's filial piety, was key to *Dante's Poets*. As a narratological study of the *Commedia* that deliberately privileges the 'how' over the 'what' that has dominated Dante criticism, *The Undivine Comedy* does nothing but take the text seriously: thus, the overlooked prosaic third verse of the *Paradiso*, 'in una parte più e meno altrove', became the cornerstone of my reading of the third canticle as the dialectical struggle between the need for (Neoplatonic) oneness and similitude and the equally pressing need for (Aristotelian) differentiation and individuality. And now more than ever, as I work on a commentary to Dante's lyrics for the *Biblioteca Universale Rizzoli*, I find that taking what the poems say at face value reveals a Pandora's box of material that has simply never been noticed. There is for instance a wealth of social concerns embedded in *stil novo* poems that have been read only in terms of their ideology of love. To give but one example from volume 1 of the commentary (which I expect to be published in 2009), the two sonnets in *Vita Nuova* XXII/13, in which Dante imagines a dialogue between himself and the ladies who are mourning the death of Beatrice's father, show us a Dante at odds with the restrictive social conventions of Florentine mourning practices: he desires a level of participation — including participation in the act of weeping — that is inappropriate for him both as a non-intimate and as a man. These sonnets, *Voi che portate la sembianza umile* and *Se' tu colui c' hai trattato sovente*, testify to a poet who views Florentine society with an almost anthropological interest and also to a poet whose desire to transgress encompasses not only the poetic boundaries to which we are accustomed but social and gender boundaries as well. These reflections, based on just two, not particularly acclaimed, sonnets, suggest the massive work of social and historical contextualization that lies before us. Reading against the grain extends beyond Dante: for instance, I consider Petrarch more a metaphysical poet than a love poet. To complicate matters further, we should note that the commentary tradition has to be resisted not only in its inertia — its unwillingness to admit the presence of meaning with which it is not comfortable — but also in its aggressions: the commentary tradition frequently imports meaning that is absolutely not present in the text. To give just two examples: today's commentaries of the *Decameron* are still contaminated by Boccaccio's story of Francesca and Paolo, and today's commercial commentaries of Petrarch's *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* (*Canzoniere*) are still contaminated by those early editorial rubrics — and importations of narrative meaning — 'in vita di Madonna Laura' and 'in morte di Madonna Laura'.

- 3) Learn from the reception, with the goal of then unlearning it and seeing more clearly the warpings produced by time.
- 4) Believe in form, reject the idea of 'mere form': in the verse 'anzi è formale ad esto beato loco', 'è formale' = 'è essenziale'. Form is an essential means of signifying for these authors. It is connected to time, as Dante makes clear in his definition of *rima* in the *Convivio*, and therefore has metaphysical implications. In *Convivio* IV, ii, 6 Dante defines time, following Aristotle's *Physics*, as 'numero di movimento, secondo prima e poi'; a few chapters later, he writes that rhyme,

considered ‘largamente’, is ‘tutto quel parlare che ’n numeri e tempo regolato in rimate consonanze cade’ (*Con.* IV, ii, 12; my emphasis). I hope to pursue further the metaphysical implications of the form of the lyric sequence: one of my long-term projects is to expand my 1989 essay on time and narrative in the *Canzoniere* into a book called *Petrarch, Metaphysical Poet*. I want to look at the ‘textual metaphysics’ of the collection’s various components, such as its *sestine*, the anniversary poems, the *canzoni degli occhi*, the *canzone* series 125–129, etc. Forthcoming in a volume edited by Zyg Baranski and Ted Cachey (*Petrarch and Dante*, South Bend, IN: Notre Dame University Press) is an essay in which I start that project by analyzing the metaphysical markers embedded in the first twenty-one poems of the *Fragmenta*.

- 5) Dethologizing, which involved stepping outside of the logical world invented by Dante, allowed me to historicize. The canonizing of these texts (quite literally, in the case of the *Commedia*, as we can see from the comments of Pope Benedict XV in the Encyclical written for the 1921 centennial of Dante’s death) includes not only not taking what they say seriously — we can’t have it both ways: if we are going to put citations from *Inferno* III alongside Thomas Aquinas in the article *Inferno* in the *Enciclopedia Cattolica*, then we have obliged ourselves not to take what the text says seriously in one way, because we have taken it too seriously in another! — but also not taking their historical contexts seriously.
- 6) Finally, let me say that this program of readerly resistance has at its heart an almost militant desire to free these great texts from centuries of encrustations that conventionalize them. (I think what distressed me the most about the 2002 De Robertis edition of Dante’s lyrics is precisely the move to conventionalize him.) These authors are far from conventional; in fact, they are deeply iconoclastic. And Dante most of all. I was very moved by the description of my work given by Jacqueline Risset as Chair of the Jury of the Premio Flaiano in *italianistica* (a prize I won in July 2007), because she focused not on the *pars destruens* but on the *pars costruens*, calling the Dante that comes out of my work a ‘Dante moderno’, a Dante to whom *leggeressa* has been restored.

SG: I’d like to ask you about the essay that is probably the most polemical, that on ‘Editing Dante’s *Rime*’, which has some fascinating things to say about the cultural inflections and traditionalist leanings of Domenico De Robertis’ recent edition of Dante’s *Rime*. What struck me here — and elsewhere in the volume — is the divide that emerges between your own critical principles and the kind of philological editorial scholarship produced in Italy. Is that a fair characterization?

TB: No, I don’t think so. I would not put it that way. For instance, you might have noticed that, starting out as I did without a preconceived point of view to work through the critical tradition of Dante’s *rime*, time and again I found myself impressed by the choices of a quintessential Italian philologist, Michele Barbi (who is, along with Contini and De Robertis, also a protagonist of ‘Editing Dante’s *Rime*’): he is open, he is generous, he gives you the very material you can use to disagree with him, he does not use philology as a means of keeping out the uninitiated ... So, yes, there is a divide between my critical principles and what I see happening in the *contemporary*

areas of Italian philology with which I am familiar, which I see marked by a defensiveness, a kind of circling of the wagons. Maybe this is because the heroic days of Italian philology are behind us, in that — while there are many texts that need editing (one of my students, Davide Bolognesi, writing on Ubertino da Casale recently, was dismayed to discover that the *Arbor vitae* does not have a modern edition) — the canonical texts have been done, with the result that we are now revising, finetuning, and inevitably finding fault with, the work of the Barbis and Petrocchis ... Look at the five impenetrable volumes of Domenico De Robertis's edition; it is a moated castle, which does everything it can to make material inaccessible. I feel I did a valuable service just in going through the five volumes and extracting De Robertis's critical principles! Not only his critical principles but basic information, such as how many poems De Robertis includes in his edition, is hard to extract. And its foundational critical principle — that philology must exclude interpretation (as though it could!) — is terribly wrongheaded, and leads to flawed (interpretive) choices, most of all the choice to follow Boccaccio's ordering of the poems, because it is old and the foundation of the *tradizione* and therefore, apparently, more 'philological' and less interpretive. When of course what Boccaccio does is just as interpretive as what a modern philologist does — very likely more so, given the enormous investment Boccaccio had in forging a Dante that corresponds to what he thinks Dante should be, a Dante that he can reconcile with Petrarch. As I said at a conference on philology and interpretation held at the University of Pennsylvania just recently, I would have no problem with De Robertis's choice had he put it under the rubric 'filologia della ricezione' rather than the rubric 'filologia' *tout court*. It may be that this defensiveness reflects a desire to protect Dante from becoming definitively a 'global' author: everyone's intellectual property. I am thinking of Guglielmo Gorni's odd remark at the end of his review of De Robertis's edition, where he wonders whether the edition 'per le difficoltà che comporta, non rischi di essere mal recepito, specie all'estero e presso chi guarda alla filologia come un mondo a sé' ('Sulla nuova edizione delle *Rime* di Dante', *Lettere Italiane*, 54 [2002], p. 597). This remark is particularly odd given the sterling example of Kenelm Foster and Patrick Boyde, who as far back as 1967 (I can barely believe that it has been 40 years since their edition of Dante's *rime* came out) showed that the 'outside' world was able to understand and contribute to Italian philology. The scrupulous contribution of Foster and Boyde shows us that the tradition of the *rime* has already transcended national boundaries — as has indeed long been the case with the *Commedia*. A footnote: the essay that prompted your question, 'Editing Dante's *Rime* and Italian Cultural History', was first published in 2004 in a very Italian journal, *Lettere Italiane*. It was accepted for publication by the late Vittore Branca, despite his deep personal friendship with De Robertis. Philologists are accustomed to controversy. Your question seems to be getting at another issue, which has to do with the almost surprisingly immediate cultural ramifications of philological questions. I certainly have been surprised by the degree to which my interest in philology has led me into the living quick of cultural debate. Over the years I have been pulled incrementally but emphatically into a kind of parallel enterprise to my main enterprise. If my main enterprise is that of literary — textual — critic, the parallel enterprise is that of metacritical critic (this is true even of *The Undivine Comedy*,

whose endnotes constitute a mini-reception history), and therefore cultural critic. Fascinatingly, to me at least, the last ‘juicy’ activity drew much of its sap from what might have seemed the most ‘dry’ of my interests, namely my interest in philology. Going back to the section in my 1989 Petrarch essay where I question the empirical basis of E. H. Wilkins’ finding of nine forms of the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*, a strand of my writing has developed as a commentary on philology and culture: not only the 2004 essay that you single out, ‘Editing Dante’s *Rime* and Italian Cultural History’, but in particular my newest book, a collection of essays that I co-edited with the philologist H. Wayne Storey, *Petrarch and the Textual Origins of Interpretation* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2007). The very long title of my own essay in that volume highlights the components of what is again a cultural critique: ‘Petrarch at the Crossroads of Hermeneutics and Philology: Editorial Lapses, Narrative Impositions, and Wilkins’ Doctrine of the Nine Forms of the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*’. Please note that the chief ‘target’ of my polemics here is an American philologist, Wilkins, not an Italian (in fact I have enormous respect for both Wilkins and De Robertis). But the real point of the essay is the way that culture systematically elided the meaning of Petrarch’s collection over many centuries of (mis)interpretation, despite the existence of the philologist’s holy grail, an autograph manuscript.

SG: At the International Dante Seminar held in Ascona in 1997, you said in passing — but the phrase was telling and has stuck in the mind of some *dantisti* — that the Italian and anglophone schools of Dante studies were like the two ships in the Sinatra song, crossing as they travel in different directions. Do you think the ships have altered course since you made that comment? And can you say more about your sense of the differences (and common ground) between Italian *dantistica*, on the one hand, and your own work (and perhaps more generally Anglo-American Dante studies), on the other?

TB: I think it is less true than when I said it ten years ago, for the reasons already alluded to: the tide is running out on all national forms of (writing and) reading, and literature is increasingly one more part of the globalized economy. I don’t think everyone knows this yet, but in fact I think this change is well under way, with the usual good and bad consequences (wasn’t Augustine clever with his *in bono* and *in malo*?): on the down side, there is less clarity in the information stream, as everything mingles in the critical *gran mar de l’essere*; on the up side, the critical situation begins to reflect what we have long said, that Dante is a universal — i.e. planetary — poet.

SG: So you would not agree with those who think that Dante studies has now crossed the Atlantic?

TB: No, for the same reason as before. We are heading toward one big critical ocean so there won’t be an issue of ‘crossing’ it. This ocean will have at most national currents, no longer the recognizable land masses of the national critical traditions. This is not something that bothers me: I have never particularly identified with American *dantismo* (I have never been partial to allegory), and was very pleased with Franco Fido’s blurb for *Dante’s Poets* because it located my originality in bicultural terms (‘her blend of “historicist” Italian exegesis and American intertextual approach make

her work totally original') that reflect my own personal lifestory. And *The Undivine Comedy* too began with a transnational move, pointing out that Auerbach's *figura*, Nardi's *Dante profeta*, and Singleton's *fiction that is not a fiction* all reduce, conceptually, to the same problem. This is not a particularly strong moment for Italian *dantismo*, but I am sure that there will be new and great forms of Italian contributions to Dante studies. We already see, for instance, the resuscitation of a philological debate about the text of the *Commedia*, an issue deemed dead for decades in the wake of the Petrocchi edition, and, in a very different key, there is the new trend of popular interest evidenced by Benigni's recitations. I think Italians will adjust to the fact that Dante is a global author and that they will make great contributions as members of a great global dialogue. They are already adjusting, or they wouldn't have invited an American to do an edition of Dante's *rime*!

SG: Can you give us a better idea of how your own edition of the *Rime* will work, both textually and as a commentary, and what are critical underpinnings from which your readings emerge?

TB: I am trying to do what I talk about above: I take each poem very seriously, and I actually *read* each as a poem. I put hermeneutic pressure on each poem; I think, for instance, about mourning practices, about *brigade* of men who go hunting, about the implicitly gendered commentary that runs through many of them, etc. There are lots of issues and ideas in these poems that have never been teased out of them. These poems have been much commented on, in terms of echoes of Guinizzelli or Cavalcanti, for instance, but they have been (with the notable exception of what Contini does in his edition) very little read. I discovered this remarkable lacuna (which in many ways holds true for the Italian lyric tradition in general) while working on the remarkably complex *canzone Doglia mi reca*, on which I have written a number of essays. Also, a distinctive feature of my commentary will be to look not only to the lyric past, but to the future: I want programmatically to show how Dante's mature ideological positions are developed in his lyrics. I want to show how Dante changes and develops over time — in his language, as shown so well by Foster and Boyde, but also ideologically. I believe that the lyrics tell the story of how Dante became Dante. This is why it is so important to make the effort to try to put them in an approximate chronological/historical order — even a rough and imperfect history is better than no history. This absence of history is what is so distressing about De Robertis's edition: it is pro-tradition, but it is anti-history. We open it and see that De Robertis's index of Dante's lyrics begins with *Così nel mio parlar* (because it is the first in Boccaccio's mini-anthology of fifteen *canzoni*, which De Robertis follows), and we feel the cold shock of the arbitrary, of the flouting of history. Because in the case of *Così nel mio parlar* and the other *petrose*, we actually do have a historical hook; we can date those poems to December 1296 by the astronomical periphrasis in the first stanza of *Io son venuto*. When poems from 1296 precede an early Sicilian-style poem like the *canzone La dispietata mente* we abdicate our ability to recreate Dante's ideological and poetic history. That history is what my commentary is devoted to telling. Textually, I will certainly follow De Robertis, who has spent decades doing the *recensio* of the manuscript tradition. (And I would like to take this opportunity to mention that the excellent notes to the text are being provided by Manuele Gragnolati, adding an

Italian *and* an English dimension to the project!) Unless, that is, there is an instance where it is clear that De Robertis bases his change of the *vulgata* on *interpretive* rather than philological reasons. For instance, my *cappello introduttivo* to *Guido, i' vorrei* published in 2004 accepted, with sadness, De Robertis's revised incipit: *Guido, i' vorrei che tu e Lippo ed io*. But on closer study I realized that in that instance De Robertis actually acknowledges that his change was dictated by interpretive rather than philological arguments: 'La situazione stemmatica, se per la "formalità" dei nomi propri si potesse imporre lo stemma codicum, metterebbe senz'altro in minoranza *Lippo* rispetto a *Lapo*, vulgo *Lapo Gianni*, finora riconosciuto partecipe dell'invito e con ciò membro della società degli stilnovisti [...] Fatto sta che dopo la proposta di Gorni [...] diversi risultano i documenti segnalati di un'equivalenza *Lippo-Lapo*, più di una volta *Lippus seu Lapus* [...]. Scrivere *Lapo* è come scrivere *Lippo*: e questa variante, assolutamente indifferente, qui decisamente adottata, significa semplicemente *non Lapo Gianni*' (*Testi*, p. 306). Or as he puts it more simply in his 2005 one-volume edition for the non-initiates: 'Lippo ovvero Lapo' (*Rime* [Florence: SISMEL, 2005], p. 288). In a case where the choice of a variant is, in De Robertis's words, 'assolutamente indifferente', and the change is made for explicitly ideological reasons (to underline that he does not believe that the reference is to Lapo Gianni), I have decided not to accept the change: if it is interpretation we are engaging in (rather than philology), I will go with my own interpretation! And in fact what I think is most exciting about my commentary is not its contributions to history — since after all the historical and philological aspects of the *rime* have been greatly studied, and by very great scholars — but its contribution to interpretation. I am really an interpreter, a reader of texts, and the same kinds of attention that I have devoted to the *Commedia* I here devote to individual lyrics. In my opinion, what I can offer are a picking up of the interpretative baton (passed by Contini, whose edition dates back to 1939!) and a systematic connection of the poems to the future: in other words, to the *Commedia*. Thus, even an early sonnet like *Guido, i' vorrei* I discuss — as the subtitle to the published *cappello introduttivo* indicates: 'l'io e l'incanto della non-differenza' — in terms of the philosophical problems of the *Paradiso*.

SG: The book for which you are probably best known for is *Detheologizing Dante*: the novelist Matthew Pearl listed it recently on a Guardian website amongst the top-ten books on Dante. I wonder if you could recapitulate what it means, for you, to detheologize Dante (or to remove God from Dante if we follow the title of the Italian translation, *La Commedia senza Dio*) and can you clarify how this takes us to the heart of the poem's realism.

TB: Yes, that was kind of Matthew! My favorite compliment to *The Undivine Comedy* — *Detheologizing Dante* is the subtitle but it seems to have grabbed everyone's imagination and pushed the top title out of the way; in fact, student of reception history that I am, I have been quite intrigued to see how my coinage 'detheologizing' has had its own *fortuna* and taken on a life of its own — on the English blog, Ready Steady Book (<http://www.readysteadybook.com/Blog.aspx?permalink=20050927000000>). This means so much to me because *The Undivine Comedy* is included in lists of books that the compilers consider exemplary literary criticism, but that have nothing to do with Dante studies, or even Italian studies. Getting back to

your question, this is a point I would like to answer very clearly. First, I have never suggested removing God from Dante (*La Commedia senza Dio* was Feltrinelli's title, over which I had no control; when a major press like Feltrinelli tells a scholar how it wants to market her book, the scholar acquiesces and crosses her fingers). What I *have* suggested is removing God from our understanding of how the *Commedia* got written, by which I mean not that Dante did not believe in God or even in the truth of his vision, but that we do not believe that God actually wrote the poem. The title *The Undivine Comedy* is a compact way of saying the following: a man wrote this book, not God, and we should understand and honor that fact, and we will honor the man and his genius more if we cease to write about it as though we accepted the idea, put forward by Dante, that God is the true author of the poem, and if we see how cleverly this book succeeds in getting us to treat it as though God wrote it. 'Undivine' is the descriptor, replacing the descriptor given by Lodovico Dolce in his 1555 edition: 'divina'. It could as well be 'human' but that does not as clearly make the point that we have to unlearn a way of reading that treats the text of the *Commedia* as always already 'divine', theologically inspired, true. 'Detheologizing' is the method: the *way* in which we can handle the poem so as to deconstruct 'a textual metaphysics so enveloping that it prevents us from analyzing the conditions that give rise to the illusion that such a metaphysics is possible' (*The Undivine Comedy*, p. 20). The way is largely rhetorical and narratological: recognizing that the *Commedia* is a verbal artifact means that we can understand its manipulations lodged in rhetoric. A tiny example: consider how rhetorically manipulative is the verse, apparently so straightforward, 'Luogo è in inferno detto Malebolge' (*Inf.* XVIII, 1), where Dante implies the speech acts of the denizens of hell, and leaves unanswered — and usually unasked — the question: 'by whom, and in what conversations, is this place "detto Malebolge?"'. As I wrote in *The Undivine Comedy*: 'Detheologizing is not anti-theological; it is not a call to abandon theology or to excise theological concerns from Dante criticism. Rather, detheologizing is a way of reading that attempts to break out of the hermeneutic guidelines that Dante has structured into his poem, hermeneutic guidelines that result in theologized readings whose outcomes have been overdetermined by the author. Detheologizing, in other words, signifies releasing our reading of the *Commedia* from the author's grip, finding a way out of Dante's hall of mirrors' (p. 17). *The Undivine Comedy* is fundamentally an analysis of the *Commedia*'s narrative structures that attempts through narrative and rhetorical theory (the semiotician Michael Riffaterre's book *Fictional Truth* is a lovely example of a book I found very useful) to create a framework of readerly resistance that will move us beyond the text's masterful self-presentation of itself as 'theology' (rather than as *factio* or *inventio*). 'Detheologizing' is a coinage that means to resist the 'theologized' readings built into the text. Please note the distinction between 'theological' and 'theologized'; I use 'theologized' for texts as early as the *canzone Donne ch'avete*, pointing out in my commentary that it boasts lots of theologized language but very little accurate theology. A good example of what I mean by a theologized reading was built into the language of the reader's report sent me by PMLA in the 1970s (as response to what became the 1978 essay, 'Bertran de Born and Sordello: The Poetry of Politics in Dante's *Comedy*'): 'Why doesn't she say that Bertran de Born is in hell because he's bad and Sordello in purgatory because he's good?'. You may laugh, but that overdetermined

theologized grid — if it is in hell it is ‘bad’, problematic; if it is in heaven, it is ‘good’, problem-free — constitutes the backbone of the *secolare commento*. Detheologizing means actively realizing, for instance, that Jane Austen’s wonderful words from the end of *Northanger Abbey* — ‘my readers [...] will see in the tell-tale compression of the pages before them, that we are all hastening together to perfect felicity’ — apply just as much to the *Paradiso* as to Austen’s romance: that sublime text, written by a mortal, had to wrestle with the exigencies of form as much as any other human artifact, and in the case of the *Paradiso* therefore with the overdetermined nature of the ending. Detheologizing allows us to access Dante’s realism, because it allows us to create the conditions in which we can seek out the verbal — human, not divine — mechanisms that create it.

SG: There has always been a sense in your work of developments in critical theory — intertextuality in *Dante’s Poets*, narrative theory in *The Undivine Comedy*, and there are elements of Ricoeur in your work on temporality in Petrarch. Can you tell us more about your use of critical theory and more generally in medieval Italian studies.

TB: I am critically eclectic and open — alert to theory as that which may well help me get a better understanding of a problem about which I am probably already thinking. My problems come to me from living with the texts, but of course the person living with the texts is also reading journals and reviews, talking to students with their varied interests, and in general hearing and learning about new developments in critical discourse. I usually turn to theory to get a better handle on a problem I have already begun to formulate: noticing the poets in the *Commedia* led to reading in intertextuality; awareness of being manipulated by the form of the *Commedia* led to narrative theory; thinking about time and narrative in Petrarch’s lyric sequence led to Ricoeur, who had written a two-volume study with the title *Time and Narrative*; thinking about gender in the *Decameron* led to reading gender theory. You get the picture.

SG: It strikes me that Dante studies at least is a relatively little theorized field of study: one thinks of attempts — but not really well received ones — to read Dante in a deconstructivist key, and some interesting work by critics working in gender studies. But not that much else to my mind. Do you agree and if you do why do you think this is the case?

TB: Perhaps the text of the *Commedia* is so self-theorized that it is somewhat impermeable to the systematizing qualities of theory applied to it? I don’t know. In some ways, I feel that detheologizing is a theory ‘hand-tailored’ for the *Commedia*. But in any case I see that my students are bringing a much more theorized approach to their work than I did at their age, so I think this is a field that is changing. I have students working on gender and sexuality from a highly theorized perspective (Lynn McKenzie on the gendered language of the *De vulgari eloquentia* and *Convivio*, Vlad Vintila on non-normative sexuality in Ovid and Dante), a former student who works on philology and the history of the book with a great deal of theoretical sophistication (Martin Eisner, now at Duke University) Personally, I think the best work will be able

to bring a theorized outlook to bear while not ‘applying’ theory to the *Commedia* in a reductivist and flattening way.

SG: At several points in the recent book you talk about the need for enriched historical context. I wonder if you can say a little more about what this means and give a sense of the kinds of areas you see as being especially productive for Dante studies (and medieval Italian studies).

TB: Well, Simon, this is something I know that you personally are very keenly aware of, since science is an area in which you have worked so well to build more historical context. You can vouch for the fact that I have always urged you to continue on enriching our understanding of science in the *Commedia*! But that is only one of so many areas that need to be historically enriched. Literally all areas of our understanding of Dante’s thinking will benefit from greater historical contextualization. This goes back to the fact that the nature of the *Commedia*’s reception has been to view it as exceptional and to place it on a high peak as though above culture itself. As I wrote in ‘Medieval Multiculturalism and Dante’s Theology of Hell’ with regard to the article *Inferno* in the *Enciclopedia Dantesca*: ‘Adhering to the topic Dante scholars have traditionally labelled “la struttura morale dell’inferno”, the author treats Dante’s hell as though it were a totally self-contained and self-generated Platonic idea, uncontaminated by history’ (*Dante and the Origins*, p. 102). Of course, while the *Commedia* is exceptional, it is not isolated from history, and we can actually gauge the ways in which it is exceptional better by putting it into history: the history of hell, purgatory, paradise, visions, etc. etc. etc. With respect to philosophy, for instance, again Dante’s prestige and the desire to appropriate him that results from it have had the deforming effect of allowing ideology to trump historicized scholarship: I am thinking of the ideological swings from Dante the Thomist to Dante the Neoplatonist and so on back and forth ... One of the tasks of future Dante scholarship, in my view, will be to historicize his philosophical thought, to untie the *Paradiso*’s intellectual knots one by one, which I think will reveal that he is never simply a Thomist or a Neoplatonist or identified solely with any one position, but that he has for each problem crafted a solution that is his own unique and utterly idiosyncratic blend of philosophical elements. Also, I would like to mention my personal belief that the *Commedia* is a deeply pre-humanist text, and my aversion to the historiography that treats Dante as the ‘Summa of the Middle Ages’ and Petrarch as the ‘Father of the Renaissance’ when the two men were alive on our planet at the same time. Many historians use as their talismanic refrain proving that Dante is ‘medieval’ the fact that he places Aristotle in hell. But this is an unhistoricized view of Limbo. If instead we historicize Limbo, we recognize the utterly anomalous — and non-theological — position that Dante takes when he places adult pagans like Aristotle in his Limbo. What he does can only be understood in terms of a commitment to classical culture which is so deep and so (etymologically) enthusiastic that he flouts theological authority in order to invent a Limbo that can cloister his great pagans from contact with the rigors of hell.

SG: One whole section in the book is given over to gender. Can you say more about the essays here and the issues with which they grapple?

TB: In my own work, historicizing took me to gender. History and gender come together in the essay from 2000 that historicizes Francesca da Rimini ('Dante and Francesca da Rimini: Realpolitik, Romance, Gender') where I attempt to come to terms with the issue of gender in *Inferno* v. I start from the silence of the historical record, which does not tell Francesca's story, and from the fact — never mentioned in the commentaries — that Dante is in effect the historian of record of Francesca da Rimini. Francesca's historical insignificance is made clear by the chroniclers: Marco Battagli, in his 1352 *On the Origins of the Malatesta* alludes to the event in which she died without naming her, indeed without acknowledging her existence, except as an implicit cause of Paolo's death, which occurred 'causa luxurie'. In the context of Malatesta history I attempt to reconstruct Dante's view of the role of the dynastic wife and I reach the conclusion that Dante confers on Francesca a voice, a name (she is the only protagonist in that story to be named in the canto), a celebrity, and — through romance and reading — a personhood denied her in her life: denied her by history. Let me add that I think this was something I could do because I was dealing with a detheologized text, in the sense that I was not constrained by the notion that because Dante places Francesca in hell the only values she could possess would be moralistic and negative. The essays on gender in this volume are arranged in the order in which they were written (the last two contain much previously unpublished material). They constitute stepping stones in an argument, laid out in the last essay in the book, 'Notes toward a Gendered History of Italian Literature, with a Discussion of Dante's *Beatrix Loquax*'. My thesis is that the progressive strand of early Italian letters was constituted not by the beautiful, courtly, Platonizing poetry for which it is famous but by didactic, moralizing, and not always beautiful works that yet treat women as moral agents, such as Guittone's *canzoni* addressed to women and Dante's didactic *canzone* that speaks directly to women, *Doglia mi reca*. I also find it noteworthy that Petrarch did not write didactic *canzoni* addressed to women — he famously rewrote the Griselda story as a story of wifely obedience, but he does not create female interlocutors on women's social issues as do Guittone, Dante, and Boccaccio with their poetics of *utilità*.

SG: Dante's richly creative use of the classical tradition has always been an important strand in your work, and in some of the comments you make in your Introduction on Ovid you seem to suggest that there is much more work to be done here. Why Ovid in particular and what sort of questions need asking?

TB: I have already alluded to my thoughts on Dante's pre-humanism and on his deep commitment to the classical tradition: I consider the fact that Dante frequently imposes 'Christian corrections' on his classical authors to be on balance less significant than the fact of their existence and textual value within the economy of the *Commedia*. And within this economy, one could argue that Ovid is supreme: no poet lives longer within the *Commedia* than Ovid; the presence of Ovid becomes more vivid in the *Paradiso* and it continues on, to the very end, to the sublime image of Neptune in *Paradiso* XXXIII. I believe that Ovid is insufficiently appreciated as a philosopher-poet who probed all boundaries, all identities, all comings into being and goings from it. I further believe that Dante was a great reader of Ovid who understood him precisely in this way: he assesses Ovid in some deep way, *mutatis*

mutandis, and uniquely among his classical authors, as a visionary comrade. I think that the study that does justice to Dante's escalating use of Ovid (as compared to his diminishing use of Vergil), as the poet of transgression and metamorphosis in all senses, from the sexual to the metaphysical (*trasumanar* of course refers to the Ovidian Glaucus) has yet to be written. I would recommend to the future writer of this study to consider the word *forma*, in the first verse of the *Metamorphoses* and so important to Dante's *Paradiso*. In fact, all the words of Ovid's first verse — 'In nova fert animus mutatas dicere formas / corpora' — are deeply significant for Dante, starting with the crucial 'nova'. Finally, I would like to point out that the illustration I chose for the cover of *Dante and the Origins of Italian Literary Culture*, features Ovid. The Sienese artist Giovanni di Paolo's fifteenth-century illustration of *Paradiso* XXXIII unpacks the image in which Dante compares his wonder to that of Neptune upon looking up and seeing the shadow of the first ship, Jason's *Argo*. The result is that the icon of the Virgin Mary, emblem for the fervent prayer to the Virgin uttered by Bernard of Clairvaux with which *Paradiso* XXXIII begins (and for which Giovanni created a separate illustration), is on the same visual plane as the ship *Argo* and Neptune with his trident. Giovanni di Paolo places classical antiquity on an ancient green sea literally alongside a radiant Virgin, and in so doing he captures a great truth about Dante's poem — and about the literary culture that Dante originates, in which the classical/humanistic/secular strain is always present, always a force to be reckoned with. And if there is an author who provides the *trait d'union* between the classical and the Christian it is the poet of change, of metamorphosis, of *conversio*, of starting in one form — one species, one sex — and ending in another: Ovid.

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