

## My American Dante (1947–1990): A History of a Barnard-Columbia Course

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Dante's *Divine Comedy* is the poetic product of Dante Alighieri's exile from his native Florence from the middle of his life to his death (1302–27). It can be read as a song of victory over an injustice imposed on Dante and the society around him by what can be defined oversimplifying the issue—as a political vacuum and a political abuse—the vacuum in the Italian peninsula, "garden of the Empire," the absence of the legitimate detainer of temporal power on earth, the Roman German Emperor, as the only authority who could put an end to the in-fighting of the individual city-states. The abuse is perpetrated by the Papacy, which, situated by God in Rome, as detainer of the world spiritual power, boldly and maliciously invades the Emperor's field. This is the aspect of my American Dante which is of particular interest to me today for volume III of my Trilogy whose title, "Beyond Gibraltar," echoes the words of Dante's Ulysses in *Inferno* XXVI as he, old and tired, spurs his old companions to sail on a small boat beyond the Rock of Gibraltar and face the mystery of the Atlantic Ocean.

Today I deal with Dante in America in 1951, three years after my landing. A miraculous encounter with poetry. Dante met me in America as the Poet who from the highest Paradise—the Heaven of the Fixed Stars—expresses his ardent hope to return to Florence *only as a Poet*: "Se mai continga che il Poema sacro...." That "poema sacro" was by express will of the Poet written in a new language, the Poet's maternal language, considered by all inferior to Latin.

As I look today in 2006 at my teaching of Dante at Columbia from 1951 to 1990 and my lecturing from 1990 on, I conclude that what I discovered on this shore of the Atlantic was the *miracle of a new-born language* which a Poet forged to a perfection in expressing ideas never reached by any other Poet in the Western World so far. In nuce: what I discovered on the Columbia campus in 1951 was that *the perfect language* for the experiment happens to be Italian. The perfect place for the 'miracle' Florence. The perfect historical period, the beginning of the XIVth century, one of the most intense moments in European intellectual history. The enthusiasm of this original discovery justifies in today's perspective my belonging through half a century, often against my natural inclination and professional background, to an Italian Department—from which however Dante allowed me to escape, first by creating a Medieval and Renaissance Program at Barnard with a grant from NEH, then a "Center for International Scholarly Exchange" and finally the Academy.

My contribution to our 'Conversation' could stop here by answering your questions. With your permission, I will share with you some personal reminiscences as I trace the precedents and the main line in the development of a

course which presupposes from beginning to end my faith in the power of Poetry, among the arts, the closest to mathematics and pure science. (The *Comedia* itself, parenthetically, is the *Summa* of the mathematics and the science of Dante's time.)

## I. The Precedents

When I landed on this shore in February 1947 as a war bride on the Liberty ship "General Muir" with 2,000 soldiers returning from three years of war in North Africa and Italy, I didn't carry Dante's *Comedia* in my baggage or in my soul. Trained as a classicist in a small Alpine town of what is today the Sudtyrol (in my days, under Mussolini, the "Alto Adige") and at the University of Rome closely nurtured by an old *academico d'Italia*, well known as a Latin poet, the most prestigious classicist in Italy at the time, I probably felt at the time, on that Liberty ship in 1947, as the typical Italian snobbish intellectual, whom I regard today as one of the main causes of Italy's political troubles: a snobbish intellectual who looks down at those who cannot claim a glorious classical past as their own legitimate background. In spite of the war I had signed at 22 a contract for the critical edition of a Latin Renaissance treatise (*On Pleasure*) and taught Latin and Greek in a Roman Junior College until I was arrested by the Gestapo in April 1944. On my way to America, in 1947 I was proudly carrying in my military duffle bag a letter of recommendation from my old Latin professor to his dear friend Nicholas Murray Butler, *Epic ante litteram*, President of a Columbia totally unknown to me except for its location: Manhattan. Manhattan had, however, for me at that time another more mundane attraction than Columbia: the theater district. My husband Claude Bove and I had translated, during our two years of marriage in the troublesome Venezia Giulia infested by Tito's militia, a popular play by de Filippo about Naples at war for which he had found a producer, Mr. Cowan, and a director, Elia Kazan. Butler, however, when I finally reached 116th Street, was out of business and Elia Kazan was in the hands of the authorities for un-American activities while Cowan had decided to invest his money in the launching of a cake. Thus, shortly after landing, all our glorious hopes in ashes, my husband and I slept in a basement near Columbia where he registered as a graduate student, while I spent my days in a Catholic College lost in the green pastures of New Jersey, teaching mainly *Deutsche Kulturgeschichte*. My first daughter Claudia was born in June 1948, the product of heavy commuting by subway ferry and Lackawanna Railroad and heavy teaching of two modern languages, German and French via English. That is until Dante suddenly showed up on the stage of my life.

Two years exactly after Claudia's birth, in June 1951, my American Dante was born, at difference from Claudia, in a totally effortless way, like the sun rising in a blue sky around his Mountain of Purgatory in the midst of the Atlantic Ocean. I shall never forget my interview in the office of the Barnard Dean of the Graduate Faculties, the political scientist Thomas Peardon, overlooking the garden then called the Jungle; my interview with a Search Committee that had been looking for months for someone to entrust with the revival of an Italian Department, like

me victim of WWII. The fact that during the interview I spoke German with the chairman of the German Department, French with M. Hoffherr, Chairman of the French, discussed Euripides in English with the classicist Day, prompted Peardon, who was mainly interested in my experience as a war bride with the AMG in Venezia Giulia, to ask me jokingly if I spoke Italian. I recited then the three initial tercets of the Comedia which every child in Italy knows by heart. "Nel mezzo . . ." (with translation). That's exactly where I stood at the time of the interview, I confessed. I also added that I had recently fallen in love with TS Eliot's essay "What is Dante for me" republished in 1950. Though I had not read Dante since my College years, I promised the Committee that the Department would *not* be dedicated to Homer or Goethe but to "Dante." *They should leave it up to Dante*. Everybody laughed. The choice fell on me *that very day before sunset* and I kept my promise from 1951 to 1990, in spite of the ups and downs of my personal life and of Barnard and Columbia.

As I said before, the Committee that chose me was well aware that I was a classicist who had never taught Italian before. They trusted *Dante*. Such was in 1951 the power of Dante in America.

2. The course itself from the fifties to the eighties via the Columbia riots and NEH.

Astonished that at the university level in a prestigious college like Barnard, then the women's college of Columbia, a professor was expected to teach a modern language like at the Berlitz School, in October 1951, as an Assistant Professor at Barnard, *I decided to use Dante as the ideal means to fill the three courses, elementary, intermediate and literature, which I inherited from my dead predecessor*. Though not so defined in the catalogue, those courses became as I taught them, Dante Grammar, Dante Conversation and Composition, Dante Literature. As I taught all three courses, a miracle took place: Dante spoke, as Eliot wanted to hear him, in his own language and that language acquired for me personally for the first time in my life a dignity I had never so far attributed to it. The first product of those years, as the philosopher Croce wrote in a much discussed essay that I read and reread in America, was for me the miraculous power of his Poetry. As I was struck by it, so were the girls around me. At a recitation contest I created for the first week of December in the Salone of the Casa Italiana students of Barnard recited Dante like the Our Father. One of them, Ann Vogel, got the first prize by reciting the final Canto of Paradiso. Of course my passion for the theater followed closely my passion for Dante. A person of those years shines in my memory: *Joan Ferrante*, destined to become Chairman of the English Department and President of the Dante Society of America whose interpretations of Paradiso I re-read today with enthusiasm. Joan was my student and my assistant in the first stages of my Dante at Barnard before it became Dante at Columbia College. I have her picture as the Virgin Mary in a medieval miracle play we produced at Barnard in those early stages of my American Dante: "Il miracolo del pellegrino."

It was during that period in 1960 to be precise that what I regarded as a casual event induced me to officially integrate with the approval of Barnard College, the Italian Department at Barnard with the one of Columbia College, the third department at Barnard to do so, the first ones being Mathematics and Music. A coach at the Columbia College football team asked me in the late 1950's to house in my Barnard elementary course some of his players who had failed the Modern Language requirement. With the permission of the Barnard administration I did so. The act was so successful that soon I had at Barnard most of the CC team. Soon we decided to integrate the three departments of Italian (BC/CC/GS).

Every 'Sturm und Drang period' has an end. Mine ended as I grew older and my further acquaintance with the *Comedia* revealed its complexity, which, far from deterring me from my attraction to Dante's poetry called for further study with the help of disciplines I had so far skirted. By the late fifties (after my divorce from Claude Bove and my marriage with the mathematician Ray Lorch—one of my students in "Dante composition and conversation"), the registration in the department was such as to allow the administration to give me an instructor. I chose then for the teaching of Italian language a middle-aged Hungarian, a rigorous language teacher, Mrs. Czoniczer, which some said was a mistake (fortunately, Columbia had Luciano Rebay). As I proceeded, however, in my teaching I had noticed that in my Dantean fervor I was sacrificing the rigor of Italian grammar and syntax which for students who didn't know Latin and Greek was a serious deficiency. Czoniczer certainly remedied that deficiency. On the other hand, I myself had reached by the middle sixties a stage in my professional life in which I had turned again to my original research in Latin Renaissance Humanism and was teaching regular courses at the Graduate School in Machiavelli, Ariosto and Renaissance theatre and Epic, I was limited in time and energy or teaching, as I had originally done, what should be the key course in a College Department of Italian: *Dante as an Act of Love to Poetry*.

By the sixties, I taught Dante at the Graduate School. Teo Barolini, former Head of the Italian Department and original interpreter of a de-theologized *Comedia*, Ingrid Rossellini and Rinaldina Russell are among my dearest students of my Graduate Dante. Many more are scattered through the U.S. reading Dante, besides Machiavelli and Ariosto, to American students.

While at the undergraduate level I started and ended my career with Dante, at the Graduate School it started and ended with Renaissance Humanism and Machiavelli. In 1990 my last graduate course was not on Dante but on Machiavelli's essay on the way the Duca Valentino, son of the Pope, murdered Vitellozzo da Forlì. I often asked myself why Machiavelli adored Dante. I understand it now as I work at volume III of my trilogy. Dante was a realist. In spite of what he declares in *Paradiso XXV*, as an exile at the end of his life, Dante had reached politically a global perspective (exactly the contrary of Machiavelli at the end of the Prince).

I can say at this point with pride that the original act of love for Dante's poetry that inspired my first teaching at Barnard inspired me a decade or so later in the creation of a team BC/CC course, Dante's World, which was taught uninterruptedly for over thirty years every Tuesday afternoon in Milbank Hall at Barnard. The Medieval historian Suzanne Wemple and I created Dante's World in the late sixties as the basic course in a *Medieval and Renaissance Program* for which Barnard obtained an NEH grant of ca. \$400,000. My aim in that particular course was to provide the students of Dante with the minimum indispensable historical, philosophical, theological as well as art-historical background through experts in the individual fields, in order to allow the students who didn't know Italian to *enjoy in the end Dante's poetry in the original*. In that particular course Wemple was assigned History; Cousins, Theology and Philosophy; and Howard Davis, Art History. The course covered thematically all the three *Cantica*—favoring *Paradiso*. The course met every Tuesday afternoon from 3 to 6 pm alternating lecture and seminar sessions. I assigned to myself a task that may seem difficult or impossible to achieve. By reading in ITALIAN an episode, more often a tercets, a line at times within a passage or an episode discussed by my colleagues, I did my best to lead the American students who didn't know Italian to realize what in the early fifties Barnard students were exposed to while taking Elementary Italian at Barnard. As every Poet translator of Dante confesses from Longfellow on, *the best translation of Dante is the one that leads you to the pleasure only the original can give. I never tried to publish my translations of Dante*. I remember I was grateful to a student's evaluation that compared me in that course to Tarzan who keeps us in suspense as he jumps in the jungle from tree to tree. That was my point of arrival at Columbia. The best I could do. In 1991 I began reading the *Comedia* in Italian to Michael Sovern and David Finn. My first students out of the regular classrooms—a new opening for my American Dante. I still have an ongoing project with David Finn. In the meanwhile, he has become the publisher of my first novel.