

Interview with George Cochrane
by Simone Casini

Dante's *Inferno*, illustrated and handwritten by George Cochrane is a great undertaking. On the one hand, it seems to be consciously linked to the illustrious fourteenth-century tradition of illuminated manuscripts of the *Commedia*. On the other hand, it inevitably confronts the great history of iconography and figurative representation of the *Commedia*, which over the centuries has witnessed the work of so many masters. The result is a refined art book, which Thornwillow Press, a fine book publisher, published in a limited edition utilizing different bindings, some with additional hand-coloring by the artist.



First we ask George Cochrane: how and when was the idea born to make an illustrated manuscript of *Inferno*?

In 2014 I was put in contact with Thornwillow Press by a collector of my Artist Books. The collector would publish upcoming chapters of *Long Time Gone* (my Graphic Novel in-progress) in addition to my Artist Books and prints. He wanted me to work with T.W.P. in the creation of prints related to the next chapter of *Long Time Gone*, “Hades High,” in which Dante is a central character who guides me around my hellish high school as I confront aspects of my past.

When I began to make the work, the publisher at T.W.P., observing my subject matter, informed me that the following year would be the 750th anniversary of the poet’s birth (2015). He then had the idea to publish in letterpress a new illuminated manuscript of the *Commedia*. I agreed instantly, though it would take time to understand precisely what I’d accepted.

At the beginning of the project, was there a figurative idea, an image, a visual or visionary nucleus, from which the larger project was developed? Or, what was the first drawing inspired by Dante's *Inferno*?

Not exactly. When the publisher made the proposal, and I agreed, I sought to understand what a contemporary illuminated manuscript might look like, as I had no knowledge whatsoever of the book form.

At first, I needed to dive simultaneously into different branches of research: Dante’s work and biography, the text of *Inferno*, the history of illuminated manuscripts in general, and the history of artistic responses to the poem. I read as widely as I could to create a “backdrop” before focusing on *Inferno* exclusively. I quickly realized the need to read Virgil before even getting to Dante, and I got through the *Georgics* and *Aeneid*. Then I read some of Dante’s early courtly poems, *Vita Nuova*, *De Vulgari Eloquentia* and bits of *Convivio*. At that point I had time for nothing but *Inferno* and related criticism.

During this period, when I was lettering the text, (which took more than two years) the Dantesque iconography that I was becoming familiar with crept into my drawings, paintings, and Artist Books, as well as into the writing of “Hades High.”

Only after the lettering was completed did I begin the process of “illuminating” the text.

WHEN SHE HAD FINISHED SPEAKING TO ME SO,
SHE TURNED HER GLISTENING EYES BRIGHT WITH TEARS—
WHICH MADE ME ALL THE READIER TO GO,
AND SO I CAME TO YOU AS SHE DESIRED,
RAISING YOU FROM THE BEAST THAT FACED YOU DOWN
AND STOLE FROM YOU THE SHORTEST WAY UP THE HILL.
WHAT IS IT, THEN? WHY STAND HERE, WHY DELAY?
WHY LET SUCH COWARDICE COME TAKE YOUR HEART?
WHY ARE YOU NOT AFIRE AND BOLD AND FREE,
SEEING THAT THREE SUCH LADIES, BLESSED IN HEAVEN
CARE FOR YOUR HEALING FROM THEIR COURT ABOVE,
AND WHAT I TELL YOU HOLDS FORTH SO MUCH GOOD?
AS LITTLE FLOWERS SHUT SMALL AND BOWED BENEATH
THE FROST OF NIGHT, WHEN THE SUN BRIGHTENS THEM,
RISE OPEN—PETALS ON THEIR STEMS UPRIGHT,
SO DID MY WEARY COURAGE SURGE AGAIN,
AND SUCH SWEET BOLDNESS RUSHED INTO MY HEART
I CRIED OUT AS A MAN AT LAST SET FREE,
O LADY OF COMPASSION AND MY HELP!
AND YOU MOST GRACIOUS WHO OBEYED HER WISH
SOON AS YOU HEARD THE TRUTH SHE SPOKE TO YOU!
YOUR WORDS HAVE PUT MY HEART IN ORDER NOW,
KINDLING SO GREAT A LONGING TO SET ON
YOU'VE TURNED ME TO OUR FIRST INTENTION—GO!
GO, FOR WE TWO NOW SHARE ONE WILL ALONE,
YOU ARE MY GUIDE, MY TEACHER, AND MY LORD."
SO DID I SAY TO HIM, THEN WE SET FORTH,
TAKING THE DEEP AND SAVAGE-WOODS PATH.
CANTO III

I AM THE WAY INTO THE CITY OF WOE,
I AM THE WAY INTO ETERNAL PAIN,
I AM THE WAY TO GO AMONG THE LOST:
JUSTICE CAUSED MY HIGH ARCHITECT TO MOVE:
DIVINE OMNIPOTENCE CREATED ME,
THE HIGHEST WISDOM, AND THE PRIMAL LOVE.
BEFORE ME THERE WERE NO CREATED THINGS
BUT THOSE THAT LAST FOREVER—AS DO I.
ABANDON ALL HOPE YOU WHO ENTER HERE,
I SAW THESE WORDS OF DARK AND HARSH INTENT
ENGRAVED UPON THE ARCHWAY OF A GATE.
"TEACHER," I SAID, "THINK SENDS IS HARD FOR ME,"

POSCIA CHE M'ESSER RAGIONATO QUESTO,
LI OCCHI LUCENTI LAGRIMANDO VOLSE.
PER CHE MI FECE DEL VENIR PIÙ PRESTO.
E VENNI A TE COSÌ COM'ELLA VOLSE:
D'INANZI A QUELLA FIERA TI LEVAI
CHE DEL BEL MONTE IL CORTO ANDAR TI TOLSE.
DUNQUE CHE È T PERCHÈ, PERCHÈ RESTAI,
PERCHÈ TANTA VILTÀ NEL COR ALLETTÈ,
PERCHÈ ARDIRE È FRANCHIZZA NON HA,
POSCIA CHE TAI TRÈ DONNE BENEDETTE
CURAN DI TE NE LA CORTE DEL CIELO.
E 'L MIO PARLAR TANTO BEN TI PROMETTE!
QUALI FIORETTI DAL NOTTURNO GELLO
CHINATI E CHIUSI, POI CHE 'L SOL LI 'MBIANCA,
SI PRIZZAN TUTTI APERTI IN LORO STIBO,
TAL MI FÈC' IO DI MIA VIRTÙDE STANCA,
È TANTO BUONO ARPIRE AL COR MI CORSE,
CH'Ï COMMINCIAI COME PERSONA FRANCA!
OH PIETOSA COLPI CHE MI SOCCORSE!
E TE CORTÈSE CH'ARBITRI TOSTO
A LE VERÈ PAROLÈ CHE TI FORSE!
TU 'M'HAI CON DISPERIO IL COR DISPOSTO
SI AL VENIR CON LE PAROLÈ TUE.
CH'Ï SON TORNATO NEL PRIMO PROPOSTO.
OR VA, CH'UN SOL VOLERE È D'AMBEDUE:
TU DUCA TU SIGNORE È TU MARSTRO."
COSÌ LI DISSÌ: È FOI CHE MOSSO FUI,
INTRAI PER LÒ CAMMINO ALTO È SILVESTRO.
CANTO III

PER ME SI VA NE LA CITTÀ DOLENTE,
PER ME SI VA NE L'ETERNO DOLORE,
PER ME SI VA TRA LA PERDUTA GENTE.
GIUSTITIA MOSSE IL MIO ALTO FATTORE;
FECEMI LA DIVINA PODESTATE,
LA SOMMA SAPIENZA È 'L PRIMO AMORE.
D'INANZI A ME NON FUIOR COSE CREATE
SE NON ETERNE, E IO ETERNO DURO.
LASCIA TE OGNE SPERANZA, VOI CH'INTRATE
QUESTE PAROLE DI COLORE OSCURO
"DIP' IO SCRITTE AL SOMMO D'UNA PORTA:
4 PER CH'IO: 'MABSTRO, IL BENSÒ LOR M'È DURO"



Is the illustration of *Inferno* an autonomous and concluded work, or is it part of a larger project that also includes *Purgatory* and *Paradise*?

I'd like to do all three canticles, as was my intention at the start. However the work was much more demanding than I could have imagined, and so at this point I'll looking to find a way to make the next two.

I have begun to letter the Italian text, but this time I'm using an alternate source-text. My idea is to copy from different manuscripts in facsimile for *Purgatory* and *Paradise* underscoring the textual instability derived from the lack of autograph. Likewise I'll select English versions by different translators to emphasize the impossibility of creating a definitive translation.

For *Inferno* I used Giorgio Petrocchi's well-established text, even if its critical esteem has diminished in the years since its publication (1966-67). The Codice "Landiano" ("il più antico"), the oldest datable manuscript (1336), provides the text for "Purgatory." To my knowledge it has never been transcribed, while the Codice *Trivulziano 1080* (1337) was transcribed into modernized Italian by Antonio Lanza in 1996 and will provide the source-text for *Paradise*.

I've begun work transcribing *Purgatory* from a facsimile (I have one of only 175 produced in 1921 on the 600th anniversary of the Poet's death). I enjoy ruminating on typographical differences found in the text written only 15 years

after Dante died, and I'm fascinated by the experience of reading a text closer to what Dante would have produced (without modern, standardized spelling and punctuation). I also wish to give the native Italian reader a new experience not only of the poem, but of the language itself.

Once I became aware of the difference between Italian versions of Dante's text, I wanted to learn more. Preliminary research led to Petrocchi's text as the most widely disseminated and generally accepted one. This seemed as good a place as any to start the project. Thus *Inferno* follows his version.

As I looked deeper, I became familiar with the raging debates over Petrocchi's opaque methodology and the paucity of the manuscripts he consulted (less than 30 of more than 600 extant manuscripts) and the "faultiness" in his reasoning. I then tried to grasp more recent scholarly disagreements, and look more into recent editions (Antonio Lanza's *Trivulziano 1080* transcription, Giorgio Inglese's update of Petrocchi's base-text, and Federico Sanguineti's version from which uses different manuscript stems).

In the case of these three versions, none seemed to solve the problem of the "most correct" text. The primacy of *Triv. 1080* is based on it being dated 1337 and written in Florence by a scribe of highest quality. (The fact that Dante didn't write the *Commedia* in Florence means that the text of *Inferno*, *Purgatory* and *Paradise* would have needed to "travel" considerable distance from the different cities of their composition, inviting textural corruption/pollution by the regional scribal cultures.) I have a facsimile of *Triv. 1080* and will use it for *Paradiso* as it differs in form from the the modernized version Lanza presents. In fact I "preview" the use of *Triv.1080* as I present the inscription on the Gates of Hell in the drawing at the start of Canto III using *Triv. 1080* while placing Petrocchi's on the same page for comparison.

Inglese's text works from Petrocchi's. It's not apparent to me how his version sought to "correct" the original limitations (too few manuscripts consulted, opaque apparatus). Meanwhile Sanguineti's version has a controversial reliance and emphasis on a "new" stem, making central the reading of *Urbinate 378* (from the second half of the 14th Century, later in fact, than the manuscripts consulted by Petrocchi). I have tried to understand the reasoning behind Sanguineti's choices (included by reading into Paolo Trovato's great, but extremely challenging book *Nuove prospettive sulla tradizione della "Commedia" Una guida filologico-linguistica al poema dantesco*). However the appendix to Sanguineti's text is simply a bibliography offering as little explanation as do his introductory notes.

So in order not to wade into such murky and disputed waters, I decided to do what was done before me: copy a text by hand, "errors included."

That I chose the "Landiano" for *Purgatory* and *Triv. 1080* for *Paradise* is the result of a few factors: what early manuscripts exist in facsimile ("Landiano"

and *Triv. 1080* both published in 1921 in Florence to celebrate the anniversary of the poet's death), and what are known to be very early mss (that would allow the reader to get "closer" to the experience of reading Dante's text in a form he would have written/read it himself). The "Landiano" has been called "il più antico" as the date 1336 is inscribed within. The manuscript *Ashburnham 828* (also called "l' Antichissimo") that can perhaps be dated two years earlier, has its own problems and is not reproduced in facsimile. I decided against trying to copy a text I don't have access to.

Another goal of presenting the poem in its "original" form means that a native Italian reader will encounter the familiar text in a new way, and may open a window into the written history of the language itself. To read the antique form also requires perhaps a more active reading, which is what Dante may have wished for.

When did you read Dante's *Commedia* for the first time, and what is your relationship with Dante? What does it mean, or what did it mean to you?

The first time I encountered Dante was as a university student in Florence, where I was studying studio art, language, art history, literature, and Italian history. Dante was not part of our academic studies, but I bought a copy of the *Commedia* and tried to read it. I did not get very far. The copy I happened to buy had almost no explanatory notes, and without help, it was too difficult. I soon gave up.



Then, twenty years later while working on *Long Time Gone*, I read a book that examines Dante's influence on James Joyce in which Joyce proclaimed that Dante is greater than Shakespeare. As a native English speaker, I was incredulous as we are "conditioned" to regard Shakespeare as the "greatest" (Joyce has also stated the opposite)... I simply could not believe that a native English speaker could say something so shocking. (Even if I knew that, according to Italo Svevo, they could speak three forms of Italian: medieval, Tuscan, and the Triestine dialect.) I decided to look into Dante's work anew and realized that I needed a better copy with extensive footnotes.

Now, having arrived at “the middle of the way” in my life, (and with a good copy of *Inferno*) suddenly the world of Dante began to open up to me – somehow I felt he was communicating directly with *me*. The Dantesque landscape seemed more vital, real, and pertinent than abstract or intellectual.

Finally, the idea came to me to translocate the *Inferno* into the setting of my high school in “Hades High,” with Dante as my Virgil, leading me around through my past. It was at this point that I began a deeper study. For me, Dante’s work represents a nexus that allows me to hold onto a variety of different interests: human history, Italian language, art and art history.

A fundamental line of your figurative and expressive research is the connection between the "classics" and the tradition of the Graphic Novel. What were your previous experiences? In particular, is there a relationship to your *Long Time Gone*, the large autobiographical and "Joycean" undertaking on which you have worked?

As an artist, I’ve always wanted to find an artistic form into which I could put “all” of myself. My first artistic experiences were in the theater, poetry, and music, and in the end, nothing “stuck.” When I discovered painting in my last year of high school, I realized that this could be a way forward, even if it were lacking in some creative aspects I held dear. (Above all, the inability for painting to “tell a story” was an issue that the Graphic Novel addressed. Of course, painting has attempted to deal with the inevitable singularity of image and time in a variety of means - one thinks of medieval images in which a single character appears simultaneously in multiple locations. Perhaps the most successful are fresco cycles - functioning pictorially as does a Graphic Novel.)

I grew up reading *Tintin*, and much later encountered the Graphic Novel form in high school. There I read some suggested books (*Watchmen*, *The Dark Knight Returns*, *Batman: Year One*). Many years later I was overseeing a university student’s independent study of comic books, when it struck me that I’d like to make one myself.

As a creative person, I know well that the inspirational “EUREKA!” moment is very elusive, and that often one thing leads to the next in an almost mechanical rhythm. However, this time it was different. In a flash, it was all there in front of me. I saw the whole thing, almost all at once: I would make a new Graphic Novel directly from my own experiences, while retelling an old story (so I need not to worry too much about the plot).

... As a way to try to bridge the inevitable chasm between my work and family life, I decided to collaborate with my then 5 1/2 year old daughter, Fiamma. The ideas rapidly exploded: I would use the 24 books of Homer’s *Odyssey* as a

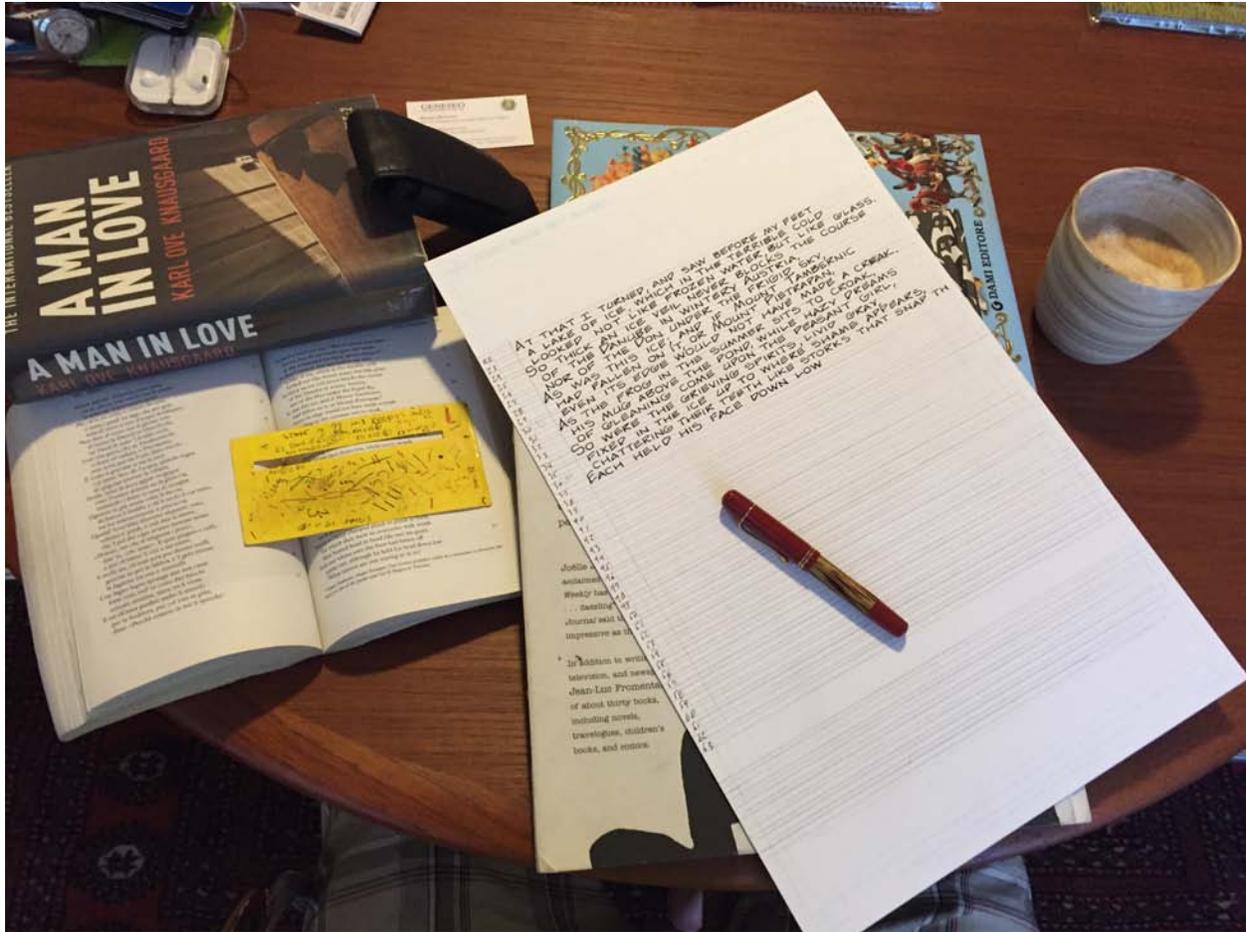
structural model for my 24 hour day (told in 24 chapters of an hour duration), thereby enfolding Joyce's *Ulysses* - a retelling of the same story in one day in Dublin in 1904. I looked only to the corresponding books and episodes to draw on from for my own. By borrowing from other interrelated canonical texts by Chapter, Scene, or Canto, I expanded the field. Chapter One, "Bird Gets the Worm," includes reference to "Genesis," *Hamlet*, *Moby Dick*, *Inferno* (in addition to the history of early American comics, and the music of Bob Dylan, Charlie Parker, and Lester Young).

The prospect seemed absurd at first: I did not read comics or Graphic Novels. I told myself years ago that I had no business writing; my handwriting was completely illegible, and my art practice was virtually entirely built around painting, with almost no drawing except as studies for paintings.

I had been "lost" in my own creative woods for some time, when suddenly a form appeared, one that is open and completely plastic. Unlike the other art forms, Graphic Novels have a short history: the first wordless picture books appear in the 1910s (Franz Masereel, Lynd Ward, Otto Nückel) and the form is named in the 1970's with Will Eisner's *Contract With God*. There are, of course, many ways in which people have put words and pictures together to tell a story: from Mayan and Egyptian Hieroglyphics, to medieval illuminated manuscripts, fresco cycles, and more.

To become conversant with the medium, I began my research at the dawn of American Comics (1900-1930s), and slowly worked my way through a "golden age" which took place at E.C. Comics late 1940's - mid '50's, into the Superheroes of the 1960's, and beyond into Graphic Novels. Simultaneously I began to study the art of lettering and copied many different historical styles into the first chapters, creating a multitude of voices. Eventually my hand and eye fell into a style that owes much to Frank Engli's work on *Terry and the Pirates* (1934-46) and Ben Oda's work on E.C. Comics *Mad*, *Frontline Combat*, *Two-Fisted Tales*. This was the manner of lettering I used for the T.W.P. edition of *Inferno*, one that emphasized the similarities between an illuminated manuscript and the comics.

Finally, I found the form to do what I'd always wanted: something to put everything I've experienced and I'm interested in into the work. In a way, to me, encountering Joyce or Dante or Dylan is really like just receiving a window into the entire recorded history of humanity. I just need to read everything they read (or listened to) and then enjoy the connections that stretch across centuries and cultures and connect directly to me through the experiences of my life.



The United States and New York, Italy and Florence. What were the places of your life, and how did they influence your path?

Travel had altered the trajectory of my life, and places hold very strong resonances for me. I grew up in the very small town of Dublin, New Hampshire, and began to travel as soon as I could. My formative travel experiences happened early: during a summer in high school, I drove with a friend across America. Later, I spent a year before going to college, wandering around Europe with no plan whatsoever (ultimately being drawn to Italy and Florence). During college I worked, studied, and lived in Venice, Florence, and Madrid for more than a year.

My experiences on the American road (long before cell phones and G.P.S.), gave me my first taste of the infinite aspects of life. That particular youthful sense of the possible opened within me and before me. All I wanted to do was to experience *more*. Having had a series of traumatic experiences in school, I was not looking forward to college, and knew that taking a year abroad could turn that feeling around when the time came to attend university. Despite having no

language skills, (and being told in school that I had no capacity for living languages, and that I should stick to Latin), I struck off without any real idea of what I would do once there. During that year, I lived for extended periods in Oxford and Northampton (England), Sterling (Scotland), Paris, Amsterdam, Berlin, and Florence. I managed somehow by hitchhiking, staying in youth hostels, and through the kindness of friends and strangers. In Oxford, I washed dishes and pretended to be a student, attending classes on Keats - no attendance taken! I worked as an au pair and gave English lessons in Paris, and later studied painting in Florence. By the time I left, I was determined to return to Europe to spend as much time as I could during college.

I was very fortunate to have the opportunity to live in Venice and work as an intern at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection for four months, before the academic year began in Florence. Though I had studied Italian for my first two years, I was lost upon arrival. Fortunately, I quickly made a close friend who did not speak English (nor I her Spanish) and I was forced to speak Italian. Venice, it goes without saying, is a magical place, and I am forever grateful to have had enough time there to develop a deeper connection. Dipping into a church on your way to “work” to see a Tintoretto is an inexplicable joy. The Venetian dialect never fails to bring a huge smile to my lips.

Florence, of course, is the locus of so much of my “fabricated” self: there is nothing in my Scottish and British ancestry or New England background that would suggest an affinity for, indeed a need, to try to enter the Italian culture through its art, language, and poetry. Yet, somehow, I needed to make this other self, the one that could speak Italian and took an interest in all things Italian, and endeavored to access the greatest works of art and poetry with the additional insight that might come from such study. Also, having been told by “language experts” in school that I would never speak another language was simply grist for my mill.

In creating a new *Inferno* I have realized my desire to connect anew at the deepest, most challenging, and satisfying artistic levels imaginable.

How did your work unfold on Dante's *Inferno*? How did you proceed? Was there a plan? And from a technical point of view, what choices did you make?

The work broke into three parts: the Italian text, which came first, then the English translation, and lastly the artwork on the pages. The manuscripts each took about a year to finish (and more time to revise and edit). I made the illustrations for the whole book in six weeks, working under deadline.

Before getting started, I experimented with the layout of the text in relation to the “blank” space surrounding it that needed to be ample enough draw on. I



experimented with different papers and pens. I needed to be able to letter wherever I went to keep the project moving, so the commonly available Comic Boards (Bristol-paper boards) and a Pelikan fountain pen were my solution. I drew the pencil guide-lines using a common comics lettering tool.

From the start, the project was conceived in the three different parts that would be assembled in the printing process. When the texts were finished, I had Thornwillow Press prepare sheets with the printed texts, surrounded by the correct margins, in the largest size they could. I created the art on those text mock-ups in India ink with a pen and brush.

Which figurative models did you keep in mind? For example, some drawings seem to recall the tradition of illuminated manuscripts: which ones could you consult? And among the great illustrators of the *Commedia*, which ones do you prefer and which have you kept in your work?

Feeling uneasy about the task before me, I tried to take in the entire history of artists interacting with Dante's work. It was an impossible task, but nonetheless that impulse informed my *modus operandi*.

Illuminated manuscripts of Dante's have circulated in the form of full or partial facsimile for over 100 years. Via the Internet, I met the facsimile expert Giovanni Scorcioni of Facsimile Finder, who helped guide my nascent collection. Through him, I acquired copies of the *Poggiali 313*, the *Estense*, the *Codice*

Filippino, and Antonio Grifo's hand-colored copy of the "Landino" edition (1491). This joined the *Codex Altonensis, Trivulziano 1080*, and "Landiano" to form some of my manuscript reference works.

Additionally I looked into many of the well-known artists who have responded to Dante's world: Botticelli, Michelangelo, Federico Zuccari, Francesco Scaramuzza, Giovanni Stradano (Jan van der Straet), Gustave Doré, Joseph Koch, William Blake, and John Flaxman, as well as the lesser-known Manfredo Manfredini, Ebba Holm, and Antonio Zatta.

I have a deep appreciation for Botticelli's incredible treatment of the entire *Commedia*, Dante and Beatrice, Geryon, and his imaginative forms of the "bolge." Botticelli's (and Doré's) depictions of Dante's world seem to have cemented for many what Dante *should* look like. While I labored to wriggle out from underneath these influences, inevitably they both inform my vision. Michelangelo offers too few examples to work from, but I was sure to work in his Minos from the "Last Judgement" fresco in the Sistine Chapel in Rome. (Like Botticelli, he illustrated the entire *Commedia*, but his was lost when the ship that was carrying it *sunk!*).

A constant goal of mine was fidelity to the text (though I am bound to have made my own mistakes). Unlike Blake or Robert Rauschenberg, both Zuccari and Scaramuzza hold very closely to the literal words of Dante. I freely mixed from all these sources as long as they "got it right." For example, Doré has the Simoniacs in Canto XIX in the correctly shaped holes in the ground, but he draws the fire as coming out from below the ground with rising smoke. Instead, Dante states "Fuor de la bocca a ciasun soperchiava / d'un peccator li piedi e de le gambe / infino al grosso, e l'altro dentro stava. / le piante erano a tutti accese intrambe" ["Out of the mouth of every hole there stuck / a sinner's feet and legs up to the fat / above the knee; the rest remained inside. / And everywhere the soles were set afire" -Antony Esolen translation]. Therefore, in mine, I borrow Doré's baptismal font-shaped openings and in my version, only the feet are on fire.

Antonio Grifo's hand-illuminated and colored copy (likely a wedding gift for Galeazzo Sanseverino and Bianca Sforza) charmed and inspired me in different ways. His delightfully dressed characters in Limbo populate my pages, and his Pluto sits inside a shell-like cave on a stool decorated in his manner before bags of money marked with the *florin* symbol – a visual joke referencing the comic character of Scrooge McDuck (*Zio Paperone*) and his bags with dollar signs. I wanted to bring forward forgotten artists like Manfredini, whose etchings capture the vastness of the infernal landscape. I borrowed from his sweeping vistas for the arrival of a Botticelli-inspired Geryon, and other scenes.

In the process of visual research, I encountered fascinating examples of artistic activity that lay outside of the artistic cannon and were entirely unknown to me,. For instance, there was an exhibition in Florence in 1901, featuring 31

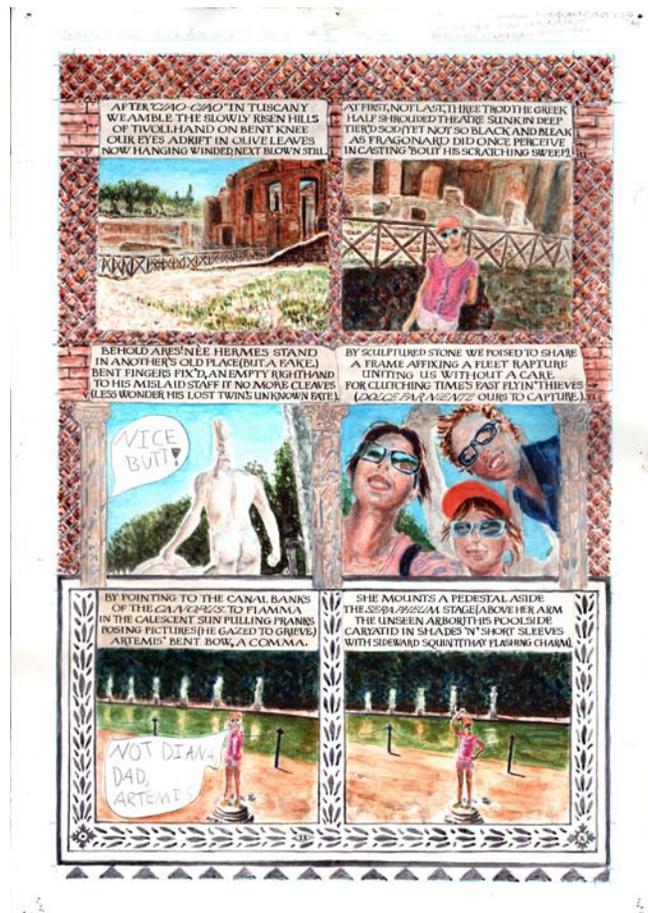
contemporary artists interpreting the poem (perhaps the best known is Giovanni Fattori), presented at different locations associated with the *Società fiorentina delle Belle Arti*. From this collection (published in splendid books by Fratelli Alinari in 1902), the paintings of Ernesto Bellandi and Giovanni Buffa found their way into my drawings.

The hand-written transcription of the text - Italian and English to begin with - was probably a very difficult undertaking, but it repeated and "relived" the experience the *scriptores* of Dante's time. How was the idea born? And what "font" did you use or elaborate on? In fact, it seems to use letters from the modern comic strip, more than a traditional type of character.

Handwriting the entire *Inferno*, in English and Italian, was the publisher's idea. Initially, I tried different fonts, including a version of "Roman" letters that I had developed in the "Hadrian's Villa" section of Chapter 5 of *Long Time Gone*, "Lost in Lotusland." Eventually I decided that the "antique" lettering style seemed anachronistic, and therefore in danger of becoming kitch. When the publisher at T.W.P. saw the letters I used in my comics, he and I decided to use that font. As I

mentioned before, the style owes much to comic letterers Frank Engli and Ben Oda.

The experience of creating the manuscripts was indeed singular. Every day, for a little more than two years, I would wake up thinking about how I could get at least one page lettered that day. On average, 42 lines per page took an hour and ten minutes to letter. I was entirely mobile with my sheets of comic board, lettering guide, text, and fountain pen. I could letter anywhere: train stations (but not moving trains!), libraries, the kitchen table, my parent's barn, and art studios. When visiting my in-laws during the holidays I would, of course, need to letter – so I would work in my father-in-law's studio, often at five in the morning. There was a limit to how much I could do at





one time and maintain the same level of quality. I found that I could do no more than four pages a day, roughly one canto, without my hand beginning to fail. Also, I would make fewer mistakes the earlier in the day I worked.

I read about monks whose daily duties included copying manuscripts, and the consistently high quality of their work. One theory is that, because they would have to stop work every hour, leave their tables to sing or do some other task, and then return to work, it kept them ever-fresh and never weary which led to fewer mistakes. That said, I also read that at least one error of consequence is made *per page*, even with the best

scribes. From my own experience I know this to be true!

I can't speak to the reading experience of another, but I hoped that by making the letters with a kind of modern and neutral clarity, that the reader would feel more acutely the *contemporary* experience embedded in reading Dante, while rendering the text more colloquial and hopefully more approachable.

Dante's text is wonderful, powerful, full of suggestions, and allows you to imagine the individual scenes in very different ways. Each narrative situation of the journey of Dante and Virgil allows for very different figurative solutions. What are some examples?

The third canto's opening with the Gates of Hell presented me with challenges. Tracing my working method may offer an "explanation" for the forms I used and insight into my artistic process. Dante's scant description of the form of

the gate itself has allowed artists and commentators to imagine them in a variety of ways over the centuries: as a discrete opening in a rock wall, an entrance in a city wall, or a triumphal arch. I selected the last for heightened poetic resonance.

The gate's inscription has a different spelling and typography than the modern text as it is drawn from the *Codice Trivulziano 1080* (as I said, one of the earliest datable manuscripts, 1337), which appears closer to Dante's original version and underscores the ongoing debates about the elusiveness of a "correct" textural form of the poem.

Individual elements on the gate derive from a range of sources. Federico Zuccari's black and red chalk drawing (1585-88) of a triumphal arch includes the horned skull at the keystone. The *Codex Altonensis 2 Aa 5/7* (1350-1400), an early illuminated manuscript, provides the bat and owl. In Dante's time these animals were ascribed different, more ominous qualities - the "wise" owl was then considered a sinister, supernaturally silent killer. The woodcut that opens the Landiano Edition (Venice, 1491), features a griffin with a curling tail and a stick motif also found on the gate. Jack Kirby's 1972 comic character, the Demon, sits among the heads that ring the arch and foreshadows the creatures that Dante encounters later in the narrative. Gustav Doré's popular engraving of the entry at the foot of a descending grade provides the landscape's profile in the distance.

In his 1334 *Commento*, Dante's contemporary and early commentator, l'Ottimo, reflects on the gate, "Narrow is the way that leads to life and wide is the way that leads to death." (derived from St. Augustin in reference to Mathew 7:13-14), "Alla prima e seconda cosa è da sapere, che l'Autore pone in questo principio l'entrata allo 'nferno essere per una porta senza serrame, a dinotare, che l'entrata de' vizij è aperta e larga, però che quinci entrano li fanciulli, li garzoni, e grande parte della etade umana, e molta della umana generazione. Onde dice Santo Agostino: stretta è la via che mena a vita, e per opposito larga è quella che mena a morte...". ["The first and second thing to be known, that the author poses is that the principle entrance to the Inferno be for a door without locks, to denote, that the entrance of vices is open and wide, but that thence enter children, boys, and a large part of the human age, and much of the human generations. Hence Saint Augustine says: narrow is the way that leads to life, and in opposition, wide is that which leads to death ... ".]

This conceit is inverted in my illustration: a "narrow" though triumphal way leads into the vast infernal landscape. I underscored the abstract, conceptual nature of Dante's gate by placing it alone in a deserted, somewhat surrealistic landscape, thereby removing its function of separating two spaces. Importantly, all still pass through, thereby offering a subtle pun on the *triumph* of death.

One "problem" that I encountered is in the third canto when Dante encounters the "lukewarm" and sees a banner flying: "E io, che riguardai, vidi una

‘nsegna / che girando correva tanto ratta, / che d’ogne posa mi pareva indegna”
[“And I, beholding, saw a banner fly, / Whirling about and racing with such speed /
It seemed that it would scorn to stand, or pause” III, 52-54].

Despite Dante never indicating that the banner is carried by someone, every illustration I saw had a person or demon holding it aloft. Here I saw an opportunity to “correct the record” and made clear in my illustrations that the flag flies of its own volition.

First of all, can you tell us what the suggestions of the Italian words and the dantesque narrative aspects of the story have meant to you?

Mostly I tried to “tell it like it is” and follow Dante’s narrative for artistic direction, but do it from the point of view of Dante’s *character*. My rule, that I mostly adhered to, was to draw only what Dante could *see* and not what the author or reader knows. For instance, at the start of Canto IV, “Vero è che ‘n su la proda mi trovai / de la valle d’abisso dolorosa / che ‘ntrono accoglie d’infiniti guai.” [“Indeed I found myself on the brink / of the valley of the sorrowful abyss / thundering with the roar of endless woe.”]

Dante goes on to say that he cannot see the source of the cries through the dark, misty deep. So, unlike most illustrators I encountered, I left out the damned figures, giving the reader the “experience” of Dante’s “blindness.” But like any rule, I broke away at times to show things the character could not have seen. For instance, I depicted Paolo and Francesca reading in Canto V and drew the *gran veglio* from a Cretian sculpture of an old man at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

My Italian is not good enough to pick up on many of the subtleties and linguistic challenges of the *Commedia*, but where commentators have paused to examine textual uncertainty, I have endeavored to come to better understanding so that I might take an artistic position (ie. “...nazion sarà tra *feltro e feltro*” in Canto I, or the form of the Gates of Hell in Canto III). With my depiction of Geryon I came up with my own notions (see below).

In other cases I stepped into some uncertainty. For instance, in Dante’s description of the dog Cerberus in Canto VI, he makes no mention of his tail, while Virgil describes snakes around his neck in the *Aeneid*: “cui vates, horrere videns iam colla colubris, melle soportam et medicatis frugibus offam obicit” [“To him, seeing the snakes now bristling on his necks, the seer flung a morsel drowsy with honey and drugged meal”, transl. Fairclough, 6.419-21]. The British artist John Flaxman understood that Dante was modeling his scene after Virgil’s with Sibyl tossing drugged seed and honey into the three-headed dog’s throat instead of dirt

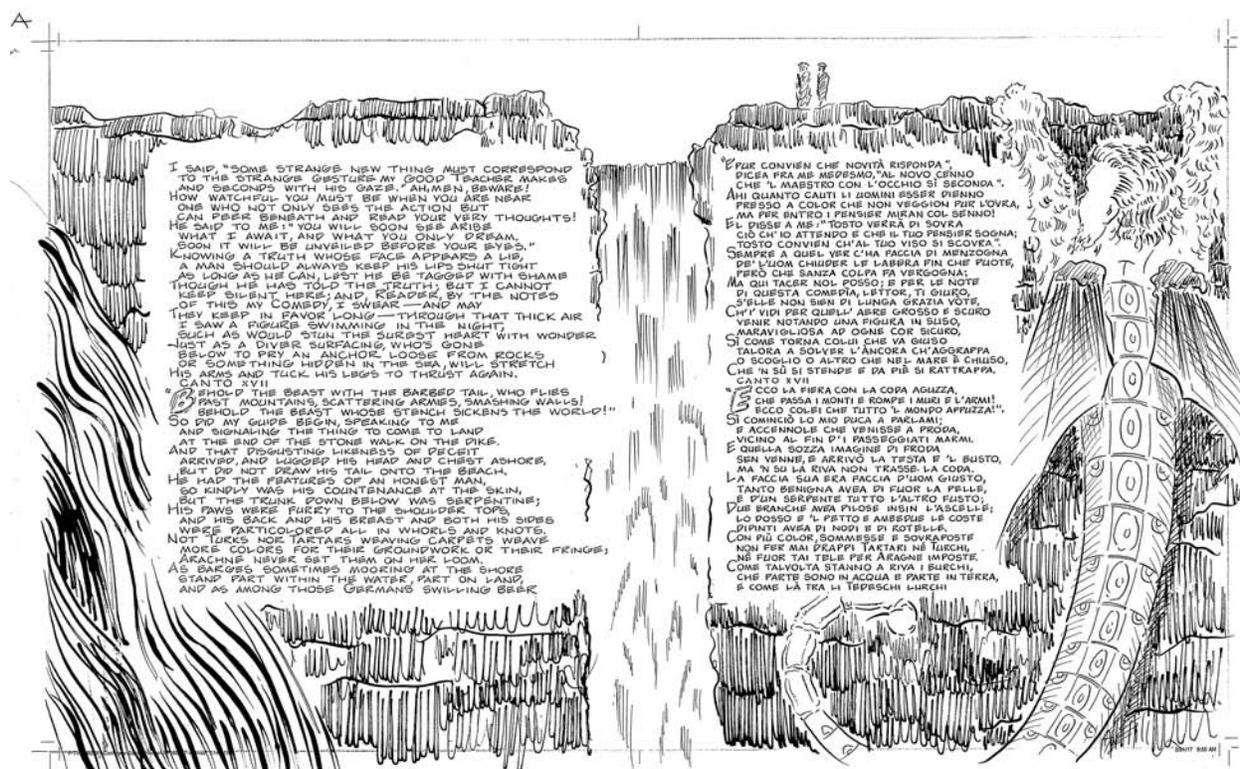
and drew his Cerberus with serpents in the tail after Virgil, *not* Dante. Following Flaxman's example, I drew the same features.

The "dark forest" in Canto I, the "Gates of Hell" in Canto III, the "forest of suicides" in Canto XIII, the *alto burrato* of Geryon in Canto XVI-XVII, the Malebolge (Canto XX- XXX) the ice in Canto XXXI-XXXIII, and finally the vision of the "stars" at the end of the infernal journey... your visions of the infernal landscapes are very strong, and often contain hidden quotations. Can you tell us something about how you imagined them, or which Dante verses or words inspired you?

I touched on this in talking about how I "built" the Gates of Hell drawing, and in my approach to the flag in Canto III, but of course there are many more examples...

In some cases, the cantos present opportunities for multiple citations that arise naturally, and the "selva dei suicidi" is a fine example. One two-page spread features the leaves of Botticelli, the trees of Scaramuzza, Zuccari, and G.B.Galizzi. The next page continues with more trees from Scaramuzza and Doré, followed by the scene of Lano da Siena and Iacapo da Sant'Andrea lifted from Luigi Markò, with one drawn in the manner of comic artist Reed Crandall, and a tree and mushrooms from Manfredini. Galizzi, Markò, and Manfredini are lesser-known artists I encountered in my research, and whose visions I find compelling and fresh. In fact, Manfredini, as mentioned before, captures the overwhelming vastness of the infernal landscape like no other, and from whom I freely borrow for the sweeping vistas of the underworld, such as the *alto burrato* where we encounter Gerione.

For the patterns on the tail and his overall form of the winged creature, I borrowed from Botticelli. However, I took some risks and liberties with my depiction, that could very well be the result of my misunderstanding Dante's text, "Nel vano tutta sua coda guizzava / torcendo in sù la venenosa forca / ch' a guisa di scorpion la punta armava." ["Out into empty space he flicked his tail, / coiling the venomous fork to keep it high, / which armed his bone point like a scorpion's tail."] Most illustrators depict the tail with a forked pincer end, as fits Dante's "venenosa forca," but I chose to look at something else. While doing internet research and looking at images of scorpion's tails, I realized that the typical form of the scorpion's tail is not forked, but rather curls in on itself with a single stinger,



as Dante writes - "la punta."

So what's the story here? Did Dante get the anatomy wrong? How could the tail be both forked *and* come to a "punta (not the plural *punte*) armava"? Was my internet search faulty? How could so many artists seemingly have gotten it wrong? As is often the case with Dante, no clear answer emerges, and a paradox remains. So I chose to approach the problem from a metaphorical, not literal, point of view about the "venomous fork." The tail of a scorpion serves two or forked purposes: one is to protect the insect by wielding deadly power, and the other is to carry its young in paternal care. Geryon is like a scorpion in Dante's world: he is both a threatening creature whom initially only Virgil can directly address, and a parent to Dante and Virgil as they safely ride on his back to the lower levels of the Inferno. I

chose to go against Botticelli, and virtually everyone else I saw, and give him a scorpion's tail, one with a single stinger.

You mention the stars at the end of the poem. That last image connects to the first as they both share the same mountain's profile, suggesting the circularity and deep symmetries in the *Commedia* as a whole. Some artists have their painterly identity connected to a mountain: Cezanne with Mount St. Victoire and Marsden Hartley with Mount Katahdin come to mind. I grew up in Dublin, New Hampshire, under the shadow of Mount Monadnock, the second most-climbed mountain in the world, as we were always told. Appropriately I drew its familiar profile. When Virgil and Dante emerge to see the stars again, they look out over the purgatorial landscape, foreshadowing the journey of *Purgatorio*. Here, I make



an “inside” or *nascosto* joke: in the distance the tower of Cathedral San Romolo can be seen on the hill of Fiesole. When I lived in Florence as a student, I lived at the foothills of Fiesole, so again, there is a personal connection to the landscape. The joke emerges because Dante expressed some harsh sentiments toward the *fiesolani* (citizens of Fiesole), and I imagine that it would strike him as appropriate to see the city located in the purgatorial realm.

From an iconographic point of view, your figures of Dante and Virgil are quite traditional (clothing, laurel and toga for Virgil, etc.). In particular, with Dante you have emphasized the expressions and reactions to the various infernal spectacles.

As you say, I often went with certain visual stereotypes of Virgil and Dante, however I made a point of not placing the olive branches on Dante's head, as Doré and many others have done. The *character* of Dante would not have been so lauded at the time of the *Inferno*. He had much of his journey yet to come, including writing the poem itself! In contrast, Virgil wore them because from Dante's perspective, he was a recognized poet of the highest order.

In many ways, Dante *is* the reader, and so I tried to give him the fullest range of displayed emotion in order to foster a stronger connection: startled, admiring, scared, prideful, angry, weak, happy, self-pitying, arrogant, sad – all of it. The visual language of comics was useful in opening up a whole new range of expressive possibilities.

In the representation of demons and infernal monsters, what figurative models have inspired you? It seems to me, that here the choice to refer to the comic book is particularly effective.

Grazie! The history of demonic figuration is rich in unbridled artistic imagination, and I looked in a number of directions for my own pages. You are right to see the comic book influence, particularly in my repeated use of Jack Kirby's *Demon* (1972). The monsters in Cantos XXI-XXII include other Kirby creatures from his 1950s monster comics work, and much earlier examples from Scaramuzza, Flaxman, Bartolomeo Pinelli, and Franz Stassen.

In Canto XXVIII when we encounter dismembered bodies, I reference classic American horror comics *Tales From The Crypt*, *Vault of Horror*, and *Haunt Of Fear* published by E. C. Comics in the 1950s, with art by such comic greats as Graham Ingles, Johnny Craig, and Reed Crandall.

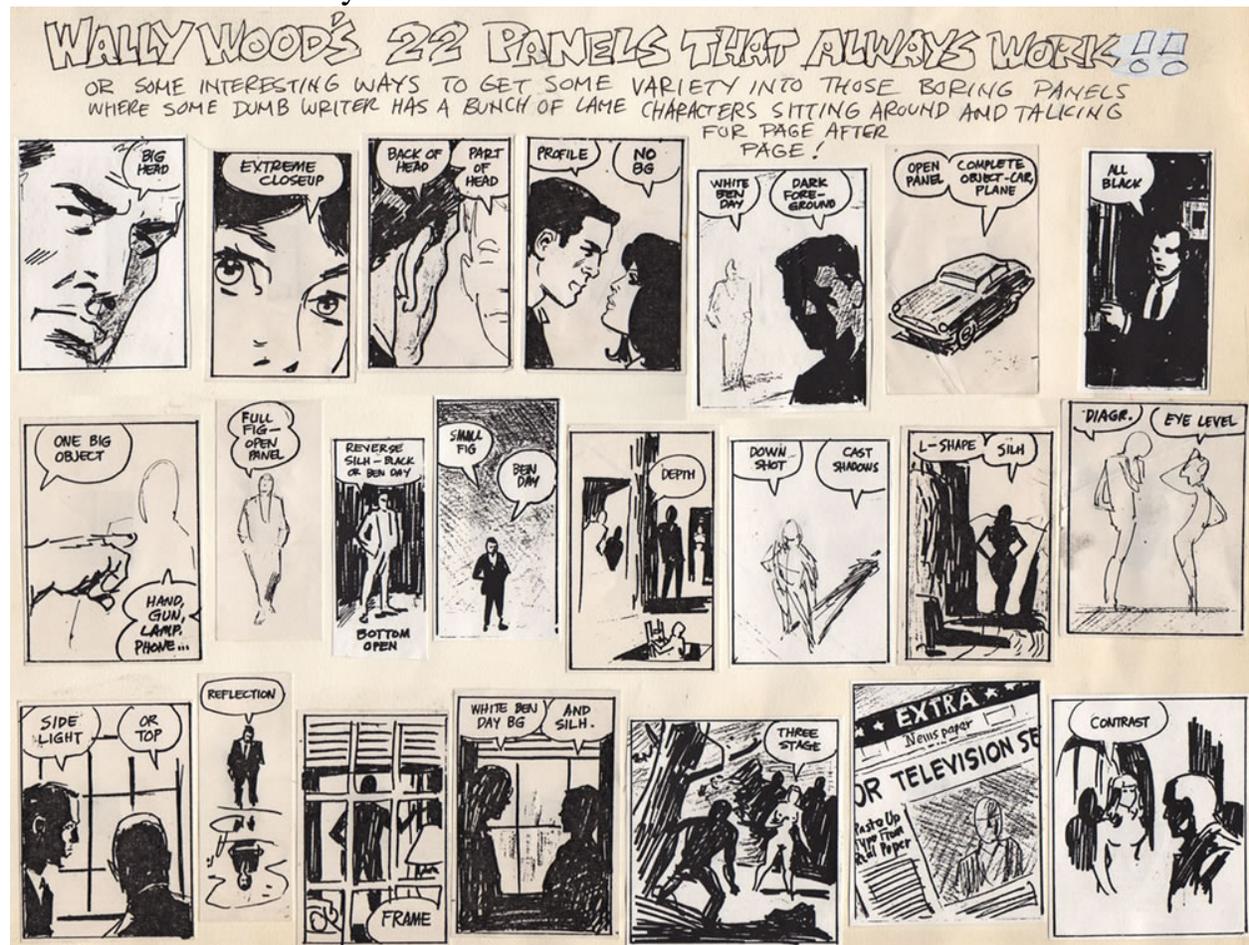
Personally, I was very impressed by your infernal landscapes and also many of your figurative representations: for example Caronte, Ciaccio seen from behind (Canto VI), the "cherici" with their boulders (Canto VII), the vision of the City of Dis (Canto VIII), the appearance of Cavalcante (Canto X), the centaurs (Canto XII), and many more. Which images gave you more imaginative and figurative problems?

There were numerous challenges, but perhaps the most difficult is in Canto XXV in which the damned turn from human to snake, and back to human again in an endless repetition of transformation. Here, without the use of comic's panel breaks, I was forced to simply rely on the reader's eyes moving from left to right across the page to express the sequence.

I tried to create an overall rhythm for the artwork that would range from detailed, full-page illustrations, to pages with drawings only on the outermost edges. Seemingly, much of the narrative content of *Inferno* involves Virgil and Dante in conversation. I referred to the comics for a solution to this visual repetition.

Wallace Wood, one of America's greatest comic artists, is a constant inspiration and fount of visual storytelling knowledge. Late in his life, his assistant gathered 24 of his panel sketches under the humorous title *Wally Wood's 22 Panels That Always Work* or *some interesting ways to get some variety into those boring panels where some dumb writer has a bunch of lame characters sitting around talking for page after page!*. They perfectly encapsulate visually engaging solutions to picturing discussion occurring between characters. Obviously, Dante is no "dumb writer," but I was frequently challenged in making the interactions fresh. Wood's solutions are a constant reference in my work, and provide insight into many of my compositional decisions.

Regarding some of the images you cite, the "cherci" (VII) are lifted directly from both Ebba Holm's 1929 woodcuts and Antonio Grifo's 1491 hand-illuminations. The city of Dite is a combination of a castle from the late 1930s



American comic *Prince Valiant* by Hal Foster with the profile of Flaxman's city. The centaurs reference Ernesto Bellandi and Scaramuzza.

With the episode featuring Calvalcante in Canto X, I wondered what the tombs might have looked like. Charles Singleton's commentaries and Dante's text ("sì come ad Arli ...") led me to look at the forms in the cemetery of Aliscamps in Arles. Unlike Doré's subterranean tombs, those at Arles are above ground, and I freely used their shapes and configuration.

The English translation by Antony Esolen, which, if I am not mistaken, was published for the first time in 2003, is very beautiful (fidelity to the text, parallel scanning of the English and Italian verse, use of a clear and modern, yet noble and elevated language). What were the considerations that led you to choose the Esolen version over other authoritative translations, widespread in the Anglo-Saxon world (from Longfellow to Bergin to Singleton to Mandelbaum, etc.)?

The text was selected following narrow parameters set by the publisher: a recent translation by a living writer, who had completed all three canticles – a truly contemporary edition. Few translations fit this description, and Esolen's was attractive for being grounded in sound scholarship, while full of contemporary phrasiology.

Singleton is my preferred translation - for his attention to linguistic and historical accuracy, and because he doesn't try to replicate Dante's *terza rima* format, but instead creates a prose text-block. English translations lack the linguistic compression of Dante's Italian, resulting in longer, more irregular lines – which I had to consider in designing the pages. Unfortunately, Singleton died some years ago.

The publisher Thornwillow Press has taken on a valuable artistic and cultural enterprise with a spirit of true patronage. How did they influence and promote your work?

Certainly, I don't think I would have had the idea to undertake such a project on my own, so I have T.W.P. to thank for presenting me with such a huge opportunity. Honestly, neither of us knew what we were getting into at first. Initially the publisher's idea was to have me make three to five full-page illustrations to place within the handwritten text. But once I saw certain illuminated manuscripts, like the Estense that has a picture on every page, I knew that I had to do the same. So five pages of illustrations grew to 230. They did not decline my

offer of the additional artwork, and I was determined to find a way to make it work.

T.W.P.'s mission is to bring new editions of important historical and contemporary literature to press, with the highest standards of hand-crafted bookmaking. So for T.W.P. to revisit Dante is not a surprise, but doing it with a comic artist is certainly more unusual.

There are very different bound editions of your *Inferno*. Also from this point of view, the enterprise is very reminiscent of the ancient illuminated codexes, each of which was different from the others. Can you describe the various choices, and possibly the different recipients?

T.W.P. has published five different versions of the book printed from the same letterpress acrylic plates, derived from the original sources: the Italian and English manuscripts, and the ink drawings. The first iteration is a paper-wrapper that has a circular version of my Map of Hell printed letterpress in heavy red paper stock. The next group is hardbound in cloth with the map on both boards, and the last are bound in half and full-leather with different designs on the cover, like the heads of Dante, Virgil, or Cerberus stamped in gold. There were also a few unique, full-leather copies with inset colored stones on different paper. Using watercolor and colored inks, I hand-colored sections of different pages within the half and full-leather copies, and in some drew an original image in ink of the *selva oscura* on the half-tile page. The half and full-leather copies, as well as the unique books have all been sold. Many are going to private collectors and university libraries, such as Harvard, Columbia, and Vassar College. At this time only the cloth and paper-wrapper copies are available from T.W.P..

Now that publication is complete, the project is going in yet another direction. I have a number of unbound copies of the book, printed on a different, heavier paper stock. With these sheets I am creating unique, fully hand-colored editions with handmade watercolor paint, that I make from ancient pigments that were available in Dante's time. Often I have purchased them from Zecchi of Florence, Italy, for added beauty and authenticity. This eliminates a large number of fabulous modern colors from my palette, including cobalt blue, and cadmium yellows and reds. I'm even going so far as to use the only the finest-grade *Lapis Lazuli*, the so-called "Fra Angelico blue", for the Virgin Mary's clothing, the title letters, and a few other select places. Real gold is also being applied where appropriate, such as Plutus's treasure, halos, and crowns.

Conceptually, I want these unique, handmade copies to present colors that "match" those found in illuminated manuscripts in Dante's own time. Hand-coloring and adding additional drawings, such as in the Grifo edition I frequently

consulted, was also a common way to add value and interest to a black and white printed edition. Many such examples survive today. This allows me to bring the project full circle - back to my hand, present on the pages.

True, my handlettering and artwork is reproduced in the book, but it is not created as a facsimile, but rather a transformed version. My line-work is inevitably slightly altered by having gone through the vectoring, a computer design process, by which my letters and art are translated into forms that then will become a raised surface for letterpress. This has an impact on the final form because many of my finest lines are lost in the process. For example, the whirlwind of flying bodies in Canto V is drawn as an accumulation of many very fine lines that become fewer and more broken in letterpress. I knew this would happen when I made the drawings. I am in no way disappointed with the transformations in print. On the contrary, I can now respond to my own work in color.

Naturally, one question arises that I didn't need to consider before – what *color* should things be? In some cases Dante's text provides answers, such as Charon's red eyes, but elsewhere we are left to speculate. What color clothing would the Virgin Mary wear? The *Bible* doesn't tell us, but historically she was painted in the most expensive pigment, *lapis lazuli*, to indicate her supreme rank in the Catholic hierarchy. Saint Lucy? Red. Beatrice? Moses? Christ? Risen, he's pictured in white. Homer? Where possible I look to history for the answers, and where historical information is scant, I look to other artist's prior color interpretations.

At the moment I am looking to place these unique copies in the hands of Dante enthusiasts, from private collectors to institutions. The library at the University of Miami recently acquired one of the unbound, fully hand-illuminated copies, and I am eager to continue to connect to those interested in the illustrated *Commedia*.

I can also imagine a trade version that could find a wider audience than the limited T.W.P. editions, and I am currently looking to reach a potentially sympathetic publisher who might see the same promise. Vediamo.



According to your experience as a reader, artist, and university professor, what does Dante mean today? In particular, what interest does he have in contemporary American culture? In what ways is he known in American schools?

As much as I have tried to learn about Dante and his work, I'm not sure if I'm able to reflect with authority on Dante's diffusion in American culture as a whole. I *can* speak from my own experience, as I was never exposed to Dante in school, at any level. Certainly there were courses of Dante studies offered at college – I simply never took one. *Inferno* is read in universities nationwide and occasionally in high school, but I doubt that the other two canticles receive much attention. Notions of Dante's "Circles of Hell" are common in popular culture and parlance, but that does not necessarily affirm a deeper familiarity with the text. His other works such as *Vita Nuova*, *Convivio*, *de Vulgari Eloquentia*, *Monarchia*, and courtly verse are not widely read, if at all.

I teach Studio Art at Fairleigh Dickinson University in Florham Park, New Jersey, and I have endeavored to bring Dante to the campus community in a series of lectures on my project. Through slide presentations and discussions at F.D.U. with an Italian language professor, a Dante scholar, and the publisher at T.W.P.,

the story of my interaction with the poet's work has become a part of the fabric of our university life. I also gave similar, solo presentations at Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville, New York, linked with an exhibition of the original artworks and manuscripts held in the library gallery last Spring.

As an artist, at times during the process of making my *Inferno*, Dante's world seemed to penetrate and overtake my own. That sensation resulted in my making a series of drawings and unique and hand-made Artist Books featuring Dante as a character, that I exhibited in Brooklyn in 2017. The quality of *judgement* that pervades the *Commedia* found form in images of Dante appearing in present-day New York: Dante sitting on my apartment stoop in Brooklyn, standing in front of Trump Tower on 5th Avenue, and at a protest march. I also recast Doré's image of Bertran de Born as Donald Trump, holding his own severed head aloft, so fitting as he has divided the nation through his traitorous acts, poisonous behavior, and repressive policies.

Reading Dante brings me into contact with the most fundamental and timeless aspects of the human condition. *Inferno's* dark tone results from its concern with the worst of human transgressions. I need look no further than Dante's condemnation of clerics and other representatives of the Church to see a reflection of the current crisis of the Church's moral bankruptcy, from the Catholic to the American Evangelical. Abuses of power, unchecked greed, and lust are seen every day in our leaders from Berlusconi to Trump. The political treachery seen in the American elections in 2016 reached levels fitting of Dante's most vociferous and contemptuous condemnation of traitors in the final cantos.

For me, there are many commonalities between Dante and Joyce. (*Ulysses* is a root-text for my own work.) For one, they both require us to fully understand their work so that we become familiar with the biographies of otherwise obscure historical individuals. In doing so, we gain a keener understanding of the human condition in both specificity *and* archetype. When witnessing contemporary figures who exhibit such traits, we come to a deeper admiration for Dante's timeless insights. As with Joyce, encountering Dante instantly connects the reader to a vast literary and historical landscape. Narrative echos resound through past events and through a range of canonical works: the *Bible*, the poems of Homer and Virgil, and writings of Aristotle and many others. A close reading requires not only a large library, but also an active readership to delve into the work's complexities.

As I struggle to tell my story in the Graphic Novel *Long Time Gone*, I often feel as if Dante's poem speaks directly to me, informing my ruminations on my own artistic ambitions: through his use of "himself" as a character; his warnings about the dangers of (artistic) pride; and his art being *nel vulgare* as the vehicle of expression.

In the end, both writers' insistence on the centrality of love and grace offer us a message of hope so badly needed in today's dark times.

You know Italy and Europe very well. What does your *Inferno* mean to Italian culture?

First, you are fortunate to have your language born at such a high level. It took some years before we got Shakespeare. As I understand, the *Commedia* is read in the *scuole medie*, and this seems to have the effect of implanting Dante into everyone to some degree. What a gift! I was speaking with an exhausted Italian friend not long ago who described what was soon to happen: "*caddi come corpo morto cade*" on his hotel bed.

This diffusion and familiarity with Dante fosters a sophisticated and knowledgeable audience. What do I have to say to an Italian reader? I can't be exactly sure, as I feel too close to my work to render an overall opinion, but I can speak to what some of my creative goals. Of course, I'm *most* curious as I begin to get feedback.

My fundamental aim was, through hand-lettering and comic-based art, to find a way to render the poem with an approachable "freshness," a visual fidelity to the text, and a sense of the Art History connected to the *Commedia*. By bridging comics and illuminated manuscripts, I wanted to add a certain lightness in making "smiling pages."

However, I worked in the constant fear that I was not *in grado* to do what I was attempting, and that it would result in a flawed work. I felt that because of my rusty Italian and spotty knowledge of the history of the *Commedia* in print, drawing, painting, and fresco, that my attempt would fall short. So in the end, I had to stop caring, and steal from everybody in an attempt to both "cover my bases" and bring a smile to readers familiar with Botticelli, Michelangelo, and others. I tried to bring out the humor and pathos everpresent in Dante and Virgil's interactions, often in comic shorthand, as a way to draw a new or old reader closer. My attempt to make the work open and approachable through the comics, is my way of insisting on the contemporary nature of the *Commedia*: that we need not be intimidated by the poem, but rather jump in to discover our world through the eyes of the *altissimo poeta*.

George Cochrane
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