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Cecco Bonanotte's Moving Illustrations of the *Divine Comedy*

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More often than I would care to admit, I have had to butcher artists for a procrustean theme. But not when seeking motion in Cecco Bonanotte's painted engravings of the *Divine Comedy*.¹ As I hope to show in this paper, the manner in which he portrays Dante's pilgrimage underscores the famous flow of that narrative, as well as the evolution of the artist's engagement with the *Commedia*. Moreover, these journeys across time intersect with a complex dialogue among continents that demonstrates some of the many ways medievalisms may travel. And the very fact that I am foregrounding these cross-cultural, diachronic interchanges testifies to recent movement in and of our field. In a circle of influences that is itself dynamic, different forms of motion operate through Bonanotte's work to reinforce each other, as even the smallest record of his movement helps advance a field that invites just such an expression of intellectual and artistic energy.

Bonanotte, who was born in 1942, executed his 103 engravings from 2000 to 2004 during a break from designing and executing the huge sculptures for which he is most famous, such as the bronze doors to the Vatican Museum.² Especially for an artist who ordinarily conceives and completes such massive projects in less than a year, he may seem to have been comparatively quiescent while devoting so many years to the *Commedia*. But I would like to suggest that, in switching to those relatively small, multimedia illustrations and then back to monumental sculpture, he moved a great deal indeed.³ And though he may have focused on a single text, he was anything but still as he produced not only these 103 illustrations but also at least 101 other *Commedia* illustrations and three bronze reliefs of Dante's text. In fact, the flux in his professional, and perhaps personal, life at that point may have played no small part in his choice to illustrate a text that is famously about process and development.

Though the *Commedia* has long served as a touchstone for tracking perceptions of the contexts from which it is believed to spring, it, like perhaps all touchstones, is paradoxically suited for that role because of its tremendous flexibility. Though one of the most descriptive texts of its day (particularly given its otherworldly setting), it is so multifaceted, selectively ambiguous, and sometimes contradictory, or at least so it seems, that, even in a pre-modern world, it was notoriously difficult to interpret with any finality and could accommodate an extraordinarily wide range of interests and viewpoints.⁴ That is to say, Dante's famous mobility in and among his roles as protagonist, narrator, and author was something of a synecdoche for his narrative as a whole.

And his movement, like that of the other figures and of the narrative as a whole, is literally and figuratively foregrounded in many of Bonanotte's illustrations. Dante is almost always shown

¹ This paper derives from my talk, "Moving Illustrations of the *Divine Comedy*," at The 29th International Conference on Medievalism, "Medievalisms on the Move," which was held at the Georgia Institute of Technology in Atlanta, October 24-25, 2014, and hosted by Leah Haught, Valerie B. Johnson, and Richard Utz. Representative examples of the illustrations can be found on-line by searching under the artist's name and/or the phrase "divina commedia." For the complete illustration cycle, see the catalog *La Divina Commedia* (Florence: Edizioni Polistampa, 2004), which commemorates their exhibition at the Cappella de' Pazzi, Santa Croce, Florence, October 9, 2004—January 9, 2005.

² For more on Bonanotte, see his official website, <<http://www.ceccobonanotte.net/>>, last accessed February 11, 2015.

³ The illustrations are dry engraved on Fabriano and Alcantara paper of natural cotton, then marked in pencil, charcoal, graphite, ink, wash, gold, silver, and lacquer.

⁴ For a database of the many fourteenth- and fifteenth-century commentaries on the *Commedia*, begin with the Dartmouth Dante Project at <<http://dante.dartmouth.edu/>>, last accessed November 4, 2014.

striding or flying just beyond the bottom edge of the frame, and when neither he nor any of the other figures are overtly in motion, they often may still be taking at least small steps, for in these instances their legs are concealed by their garments, taper to mere traces that are difficult to locate in space, or fade away all together. Indeed, in many of these cases, the figures as a whole have a flickering or wavering appearance, as if they were ghosts or flames dancing across space, the image, and the folio. Moreover, they sometimes participate in the slashing strokes that border and often tear through the images.

These vectors framing and cutting across the illustrations tend to do so from lower left to upper right or vice versa. And even the most vertical or horizontal among them curve a bit and resist the immobility associated with completely vertical and completely horizontal lines. Rather than echo the stasis of a standing or lying human figure, they embody the dynamism long associated in Western art with diagonals, and, in their echo of Western tendencies to read images from left to right, they propel the visual narrative in that direction.⁵ Though some are thicker at their right end and seem to begin there, they invite our eye to follow the figure of Dante, who, apart from an occasional hesitation or momentary retreat, inexorably advances towards the right, towards the next folio and the next image.

The vectors and Dante thus participate in a narrative flow that resembles an underground river glimpsed through holes in the ground above it. Dante's episodic telling of his supposed pilgrimage invites such an approach, as can be seen in the many fourteenth- and fifteenth-century miniatures that, despite overt borders around each one of them and despite multiple undecorated folios between them, seem to have continuous settings and action from one to the next.⁶ But Bonanotte polyvalently enhances that approach. Though his settings do not actually intersect at their borders and flow seamlessly from one image to the next, they often resemble each other and gently curve in a manner that suggests they are joined on a giant arc by the unseen passages between them. Moreover, the lack of detail in the background and elsewhere in the illustrations invites us to adopt the momentum of the curving frames and move quickly across the images and the passages between them. Though the lines that slash through the scenes may encourage us to momentarily pause and concentrate on the flickering figures in front of us, the scenes are otherwise so simple in their iconography and so liquid in their flow that they are like mere glimpses of a story in ceaseless motion.

Indeed, thanks to the fluidity of Bonanotte's style, the flow may seem particularly fast. As his brushstrokes overtly glide across the paper, they gradually run out of ink and often taper down to light, airy points. And as they roll across the page, they often flow over fields of transparent wash that themselves fade into the flat white of the paper. Long, smooth strokes combine with gentle transitions in shading to bring liquidity to the image and fill it with dynamism.

Of course, that dynamism, like the sometimes sharp contrasts between, say, the dark sky and light ground in the illustration of *Inferno* 11, also literally and figuratively foregrounds the motion of the

⁵ For more on this tendency to read images like text (which, in the West, is primarily left to right), see Meyer Schapiro's seminal "On Some Problems in the Semiotics of Visual Art: Field and Vehicle in Image-Signs," *Semiotica* 1 (1969): 223-42.

⁶ See, for example, the *Vitae Imperatorum* Master's mid-fifteenth-century miniatures now divided between Bibliothèque Nationale (Paris) MS Fonds italien 2017 and Biblioteca Comunale (Imola) MS 32, as reproduced in volume two of Peter Brieger, Millard Meiss, and Charles Singleton, *Illuminated Manuscripts of the "Divine Comedy,"* 2 vols (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969).

artist's hand. His virtuoso lines and shading with a brush that is blatantly losing ink in the course of its long, smooth passes across the folio advertise the artist's action and foreground his participation, as do his penciled captions at the edge of the images and as does his overt stippling, engraving, and other manipulation of the paper beneath those strokes. Through all of these methods he presences his media, his process, himself, the action of his hand, and the passing of his life. He reminds us that this is a work shaped by someone who is, like us, constantly in flux.

Of course, that record of physiological motion also doubles as a sign of intellectual and emotional movement. As Bonanotte physically responds to his sources, he registers his processing of the latter and records changes in that processing, in his internal responses to his sources. He shifts from a darker, more linear, more deeply engraved style for the *Inferno*, to a lighter, yet still linear approach to a *Purgatorio* filled with abrupt tonal juxtapositions, to a much brighter, often fuzzy view of a *Paradiso* where the few lines and rare juxtapositions of tone are often reserved for Dante, Beatrice, and the swooping vectors along which they travel. That is to say, Bonanotte articulates the pilgrimage of his heart and mind in relationship to Dante's own polyvalent pilgrimage as author, narrator, and perhaps protagonist. Indeed, as noted by the Vatican Museum director Francesco Buranelli in the exhibition catalog for the illustrations, "In recognizing the uniqueness and integrity of the poetic space, the work of Bonanotte listens and tries to give back the sound, the rhythm and the expressive and visionary intensity through a language and an artistic vision that is wholly personal."⁷

In the means by which Bonanotte thereby reaches back in time, he simultaneously reaches across space, for he overtly invokes his international past and lays the groundwork for acceptance of these illustrations abroad. After having been born and raised in Italy, he won an international scholarship at the age of 22 to work at the Institute of Plastic Arts in Bucharest. There, as is suggested by the similarity of his sweeping lines to those in, say, Constantin Brancusi's *Bird in Space* (1924), he spent what is described in his official (and, presumably, authorized) biography as "an important period of study and reflection" on the work of that Romanian artist.⁸ Seven years later, in 1971, his work was discovered by the Japanese collector and agent Fujii Kimihiro during a one-man show at the Galleria Schneider in Rome, and in 1975 Bonanotte had the first of dozens of exhibitions in Tokyo, Seoul, and other East Asian cities.⁹ Many of those shows required him to travel to their locations, as did the numerous commissions he received from such Asian sponsors as the Korean embassy in Tokyo and as did some of the awards he received, such as the 1996 Special Prize for "Architecture and Environment" from Japan's Institute of Architecture and Construction Science, and these trips evidently had a profound impact on his art, for his official biography claims that as early as 1983 he was "fascinated by oriental culture, with which he had developed a profound rapport over the last decade."¹⁰

Of course, it is difficult to be sure precisely what fascinated him about Asian and Pacific countries, but this "lover [. . .] of the East," as Buranelli describes him, seems to have had a very strong synchronicity with the tastes of Asian and Pacific art markets.¹¹ Annamaria Petrioli Tofani, the director of the Uffizi Museum when it acquired Bonanotte's *Commedia* illustrations, saw his work as clearly influenced by Japanese art, particularly its "clarity of the sign" and "purity of relationships

⁷ Francesco Buranelli, "Cecco Bonanotte: 'Divine Comedy,'" in *La Divina Commedia*, 20.

⁸ <<http://www.ceccobonanotte.net/>>, last accessed November 4, 2014.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Buranelli, "Cecco Bonanotte: 'Divine Comedy,'" 19.

between light and shade.”¹² And, according to the art historian Antonio Paolucci, who, as Regional Director for Cultural Heritage and Landscape of the Tuscany Region, also wrote an essay for the exhibition catalog, these and other artistic parallels to Japanese art are why Bonanotte has met with “such success” there.¹³ As Paolucci goes on to say, Bonanotte joins Japanese poets and painters in being able to recount “the ‘*harmonious stupor*’, the grace and the elegance that govern the ideogram in calligraphy, the coat of the tiger in the forest of bamboo, the structure of the snowflake, the reflection of the moon in August upon water, the ‘*light*’ and silent things that are the secret of pure beauty” (italics original).¹⁴

Yet in the eyes of these and many other critics, Bonanotte has never forsaken his Italian, much less Western, roots. After Paolucci describes illustrating the *Commedia* as an “unavoidable undertaking for all great draftsmen in the history of art,” he gives as his sole examples Botticelli, Henry Füsseli, Gustave Doré, and Renato Guttuso.¹⁵ Tofani underscores that the Uffizi is fulfilling its duty as a national symbol in acquiring Bonanotte’s illustrations.¹⁶ And Carla Guiducci Bonanni, who was the President of the Opera di Santa Croce when the works were exhibited there in 2004, claims that, as these images appear in “Dante’s church,” which she later calls “the Pantheon of Italian Glories,” they are a bridge to Italy’s past, and as she names the multiple Italian sponsors for the show, she singles out the official sponsor, Telecom Italy, for being aware of and sensitive to not only contemporary art but also “historical roots.”¹⁷

Of course, the mere fact that I am quoting these proud Italians in English from the catalog for the show at Santa Croce suggests additional international influences. English is the lingua franca, as it were, between Italy and Japan and among many other countries to which this art may be intended to appeal. But the translation of all the catalog’s introductory essays into English may also have specifically to do with an appeal to the large market of art- and book-consumers in primarily-English-speaking countries.

The show definitely had an impact on one native English-speaker--my mother. Bonanotte’s illustrations were first brought to my attention because she came across them in Santa Croce while studying Italian in Florence. She was just starting her beginner’s course, so the English of the essays may have helped attract her attention, but she also insisted that she felt a profound connection with the aesthetics of the illustrations, particularly in Santa Croce, and since she is not a particularly avid fan of modern Italian art, much less modern Asian art, there may be another influence at work on these illustrations, a connection to art from and/or for English-speaking countries. In other words, to the degree that we consider Dante medieval, these illustrations may exemplify medievalism on the move not only through their reflection of the artist’s sources and of his travels (as well as through the exhibition of these illustrations in Tokyo after the Santa Croce show), but also through their appeal to a broader international market.

Which brings me to the movement of the study of medievalism(s). The mere fact that the most recent conference of the International Society for the Study of Medievalism, as well as multiple

¹² Annamaria Petrioli Tofani, “Introduction,” in *La Divina Commedia*, 13.

¹³ Antonio Paolucci, “Cecco Bonanotte or Lightness,” in *La Divina Commedia*, 25.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Tofani, “Introduction,” 13.

¹⁷ Carla Guiducci Bonanni, “Presentation,” in *La Divina Commedia*, 9-10.

volumes of *The Year's Work in Medievalism*, *Studies in Medievalism*, and *Postmedieval*, have explicitly called for discussion of cross-culturalism reflects the tremendous expansion of our field in recent years. We are ever more a discipline on the move in our shifting concerns and growing inclusiveness. Where once we were almost exclusively concerned with chronicling instances of American and European responses to the Middle Ages, we now welcome, and in many instances privilege, non-Western references to the Middle Ages. Where once we defined that middle ages as a uniquely western phenomenon, we now allow that it may have had many other identities, parallels, and counterparts. And where once we focused on the white males among its participants and among responders to it, we now give ever greater voice to women, the disabled, and other marginalized communities among both groups, not to mention among students of medievalism(s). In fact, I would like to think we are an extraordinarily dynamic field that is finding ever new and innovative ways to shed light on the world around us by exploring the Middle Ages and past responses to it. As I hope has been demonstrated by this study of a contemporary artist's moving responses to a mobile medieval narrative about an imagined pilgrimage in the early fourteenth century, we indeed are—and, I hope, always will be—a field on the move.