CHAPTER 21

Dante for Mothers

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American public interest in Dante and his Comedy comes alive in an advertisement in a Sears Roebuck and Company mail order catalogue from 1893. For forty-five cents, a reader in Wichita, Kansas could purchase the poetry of Dante along with the work of distinguished American poets such as John Greenleaf Whittier and Edgar Allan Poe. These were books destined to burnish backcountry bookshelves: printed in duodecimo format on toned paper with gilded pages, clothbound, and stamped in black and gold. This mail-order Dante marked just one of the ways that the Comedy circulated as a bound bauble, both novelty and commodity, in the midwestern United States at the close of the nineteenth century. Sears customers were not the only readers to value Dante's poem. Lest we imagine that the poem merely decorated the parlors of aspiring book-collectors, other editions imagined American mothers and their children to be the ideal recipients for the poem's message. The year before Dante appeared in the mail order catalogue, a kindergarten educator from Chicago, Elizabeth Harrison, published his poetry in The Vision of Dante. A Story for Little Children and a Talk for Their Mothers. This slim volume was printed by the same printer of the Sears Roebuck catalog, R.R. Donnelley & Sons, on behalf of the Chicago Kindergarten College.¹ A bauble of a different sort, Harrison's Story was artfully made, with woodcut illustrations by English artist Walter Crane and a softcover of creamy handmade paper featuring embossed

ornamental type. The preface announced the book's aims, calling the *Comedy* a "world poem" whose truths make "the great poem of Dante one of the masterpieces of the world of art." Then, the author adds, "May not it. . . be given to little children in a simple way?"

While today's readers of the Comedy may quickly recognize the Comedy's explicit didactic aims, less apparent is how the poem might find itself pedagogically reconfigured for a late nineteenth-century college-educated kindergarten instructors in the midwestern United States. How did Dante's Divine Comedy shed its stern habit of Thomistic scholasticism to reclothe itself with the playful trousers of kindergarten pedagogy? Dante – for mothers and their children? Really?

Along this seemingly unlikely path to early childhood education, a wide range of textual transformations emerge. With a growing number of translations, the poem provided a point of departure for all sorts of acculturations, adaptations, and transformations in the U.S., "from the most benign to the most venal." From Boston to San Francisco, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, particularly the *Inferno*, was avidly read, rewritten, adapted and repackaged in the late nineteenth century. It found its way into songs, ditties, plays, sketches, pantomimes, and lantern slide lectures. Its imagery inspired bronzes, paintings, medallions, tapestries, jewelry, bookends, wax museums, pageants and tableaux vivants. Experts and amateurs alike contributed the countless essays, articles, poems and tributes³ which appeared in periodicals ranging from the Southern Literary Messenger, the Bostonian Atlantic Monthly, the Century, the Critic, and the Dial, to the Journal of Speculative Philosophy, a publication to which we will return. The Chautauquan, a monthly news-magazine devoted to the adult education movement then sweeping the nation, featured Dante's work extensively; so too the popular Ladies Home Journal. This publication urged its readers to ignore

"the picket fence of intellectual superiority. . . erected by scholars around certain books. .

.Any bright woman of keen sympathies can read Longfellow's version of Dante's Divine Comedy. . . The beauty and the passion . . .will burn in her mind with such a pure flame that it will make the tawdry sentiment of inferior writers appear like the sputtering flame of a tallow candle."⁵

Scholars have noted how the transatlantic crossing of people and goods shaped nineteenth-century literature in ways that are insufficiently explained by the study of separate national literary traditions. Lurking behind assumptions linking people, place and culture is the Romantic idea of an organic relationship between a population, its geographic and political boundaries, and the organization of meaningful forms into something known as culture. The enduring legacy of this idea has prompted a critical reinvestigation of a number of dominant national-historical scholarly narratives, including those associated with the fieldcoverage model of departmental organization in North American higher education⁷ or the cultural capital of literature within society.8 In this latter category, both Nancy Glazener and John Guillory have explored the idea of super-canon or a transnational canon.⁹ For Guillory, the easy appropriation of Dante's Comedy into English for an American public acts as a powerful institutional buttress of an imaginary cultural continuity while suppressing the specificity of the poem's production and consumption. While we may view the Comedy as part of a deracinated transnational canon, to use Guillory's terms, its reproduction and transmission, particularly in educational contexts during the nineteenth century, inhabit unique historical and regional conditions. Harrison's pedagogical primer presents an unusual case study for exploring them.

The nineteenth century saw over four hundred editions and reprints of editions of the Comedy. If we include translations, the number quickly exceeds the total editions all of the previous centuries combined.¹⁰ Many of these relied heavily on the early print tradition of the

Comedy, particularly the 1595 Crusca edition.¹¹ Yet, textual variants propagated like daisies as more and more manuscript witnesses of the Comedy were tallied and examined.

Nineteenth-century American readers experienced Dante predominantly through Englishlanguage translations. Henry Francis Cary's blank verse translation, entitled *The Vision of Dante*, would provide Harrison with the first part of the title for her later volume. The translation was first published in England in 1814.¹² In spite of a number of competing translations in both England and the United States, it remained the dominant translation s until Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's translation was published in 1867.

As the number of material ways American readers could experience Dante grew, so too did Dante's communities of readers¹³ and Elizabeth Harrison counted herself among them.

Born in Kentucky, educated in St. Louis, Boston and Chicago, she was a pioneer in creating new professional standards and promoting early childhood education. She studied in Chicago with Alice Putnam, whose ideas on education drew from the educational theories of Friedrich Froebel, the German creator of the kindergarten. She would go on to study with Susan Blow, a pioneer in American idealist philosophy, participating in one of her advanced teacher training courses held in St. Louis. Harrison's interest in Dante was far from cursory. Her copy of the Longfellow translation, today held at the National Louis University, is littered with notes that include references to Susan Blow's commentaries and Thomas Davidson's adaptation of a Dante handbook published by the Swiss Protestant pastor, Johann Scartazzini¹⁴. Harrison's subsequent publications on early childhood education make frequent mention of Dante and the ideas associated with a philosophical movement then gaining steam in St. Louis. There, Harrison experienced firsthand the development of Blow's unique synthesis of pedagogy and philosophy, in which her study of Dante played a central role.

A major figure in what became known as the St. Louis philosophical movement, Susan Blow joined educators, regional and national policy-makers and other public intellectuals in

their interest in German idealism and their attempts to "make Hegel talk English¹⁵." In 1860, the group founded the first American philosophy periodical, the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*. In it, Blow and other intellectuals such as Anna Brackett, Bronson Alcott, Henry Brockmeyer, Thomas Davidson, Charles Sanders Peirce, and its editor William Torrey Harris, explored the Kantian aftermath in German philosophy. The group was explicit in both their attempt to transplant Hegel in the United States and to apply and adapt his philosophy to the real and practical demands of society, politics and ethics. The group held fast to their commitment to *Bildung*, supporting free public education and lifelong learning. Many held public office. William Torrey Harris, for example, first served as Superintendent of the public schools in St. Louis and would later go on to serve as U.S. Commissioner for Education, while Henry Brockmeyer would become lieutenant governor of Missouri.

Hegel never wrote a systematic theory of education, but the St. Louis Hegelians, as they were also known, posited collective life as both the product and the basis for individual action and development. Blow, with her interest in early educational theory, found the work of idealist philosopher Friedrich Froebel¹⁶ in alignment with this interpretation of idealism. When she returned to St. Louis from an extended stay in Germany, her advocacy for early childhood education took a practical turn when she founded Des Peres School in 1873. She taught children in the morning, trained fellow teachers in the afternoon, and leveraged her contact with then superintendent of schools and her editor at the journal, William Torrey Harris, at every opportunity. By 1883, every St. Louis public school boasted a kindergarten. In April 1884, Blow published the first of a series of reflections on Dante's *Comedy*. She took a Hegelian theme developed in Froebel's educational theory which resonated among the St. Louis idealists, self-activity,¹⁷ and applied it to Dante's *Inferno*. She writes, "If we try to think the creative principle of the world, we come at once face to face with the idea of self-activity. By self-activity is meant an activity that acts upon itself: as a creative principle

logically antedates all creation, it must be self-active, for the obvious reason that there is nothing but itself for it to act upon. Its acuity, therefore, begins from and comes back to itself. It is a circular process, and therefore necessarily an eternal process." And, to underscore her point, Blow quotes Longfellow's verses from Canto 33 of the Paradiso: O Light Eterne, sole in thyself that dwellest,/ Sole knowest thyself, and, known unto thyself/And knowing, lovest and smilest on thyself!" Dante's journey, as a pilgrim gaining knowledge through his journey, and as a poet retrospectively retelling it with the assimilation of that knowledge, stands as an emblem for Blow, and for Harrison, of a Hegelian "Selbsttätigkeit."

From these formative experiences with Susan Blow and the St. Louis Hegelians, Harrison began to develop her own definition of early education, one which aimed to draw out the child physically, mentally, and morally through this creative principle. She looked to literature and myth, and to the importance of the imagination. This was a daring move at a time when educational reforms, bolstered by recent scientific and analytic trends, were roiling both higher and lower educational systems in the U.S. and elsewhere. One such theory, from British scientist Herbert Spencer, drew a connection between post-Darwinian theories of recapitulation and the pedagogical directive that education repeats human evolutionary history. Applying this theory to elementary education, Spencer declared that "if there be an order in which the human race has mastered its various kinds of knowledge, there will arise in every child an aptitude to acquire these kinds of knowledge in the same order . . . and hence the fundamental reason why education should be a repetition of civilization in little." For educators embracing such a theory, the aesthetic, the poetic and the artistic, were quickly trampled by the inexorable march of the scientific, the technological and the industrial. Elizabeth Harrison found this view incongruous with her own experience. She viewed this inclination to map individual development onto an evolutionary schema as a reduction of educational theory, foreshadowing a misguided turn to vocationalism.²⁰ She

would go on to rebuke these theories in a number of pamphlets she published on the relationship of great literature to kindergarten²¹. For her, the connection between the study of the great poets of the world, on the one hand, and the nursery and the kindergarten on the other, was essential to developing children's symbolic thought. In her accompanying "Talk for Mothers," Harrison, cites Froebel, "easily a symbol teach / what thy reason cannot reach." She calls the poem a "pictured form of truth" which provides a poetic form of expression for the human soul.

For Harrison, mothers played a crucial role in mediating between children's play and symbolic thought. While the Chicago Kindergarten College aimed to prepare early childhood educators, its courses and certifications were also offered to mothers. These courses aimed at "teachers, mothers and nurses" provided "special, needed training to all women who have the care of children." Prerequisites for coursework included a high-school education or its equivalent, and first-year students were required to complete the foundational course taught by Harrison. The course drew entirely upon Froebel's method, but the focus on literature reflected the idealist philosophical movement from which it sprang: "The highest value of the great literature in the world is the portrayal of man in some form of conflict with the institutional world and the reconciliation of that conflict by the bringing the man into harmony with those laws that are greater than his individual will."²² The line from the St. Louis Hegelians to Froebel is swiftly drawn: "this is also what Froebel means by 'the unity of the laws of the world and of man." For Harrison and her colleagues, the aim of kindergarten is to educate children so that they may realize the relationships of life and the duties arising from them."²³ They view this as "the supreme object of literature" and through Froebel, they bring this to children by means of play. The study Dante – in company with Shakespeare, Homer, and others - is a crucial part of the kindergartner instructor's training, as it helps "keep alive in the heart this most important part of her work." And it was women's work, by

both mothers and teachers, united in a maternal embrace of belle-lettrism that justified the women's active, critical engagement with world poetry.

Harrison begins her "story for little children" much in the same way all stories for little children might begin, with a "once upon a time." After speaking about the importance of the poem, its age, and its influence, Harrison, in the first person, attempts to "tell it to-day as a short story." The parallels with the popular fairy tales of the Grimm brothers are pronounced, as these were familiar to young readers:²⁵ the dark forest, the three beasts, an ominous crevasse, a steady guide and the pilgrim's hope of seeing Beatrice make up the core of the expurgated narrative of the Inferno. Harrison then centers her narrative on Purgatory, where redemptive opportunities abound. Susan Blow had viewed that canticle as an extended lesson, where individual spiritual energies grow: "the more thought communicates itself, the more truly it possesses itself. . . only through membership and the communion which membership implies does man make actual his ideal nature; only in so far as he becomes universal is he in any true sense individual."26 As to Paradiso, "of this I cannot tell you," Harrison exclaims, "no words of mine could make you see that glorious vision as Dante then beheld it." She concludes her story admonishing her young listeners, "your own little hearts must be freed from all wrong thoughts, from all evil motives, from all selfish desires, must be filled with a love of others, and with generous willingness for others," so that they too may come upon a similar vision as Dante.

Harrison's epilogue, an address to children's mothers, also gets to the point quickly: "the last two centuries," she writes, "have been largely scientific and analytic. The effort has been to get away from the pictorial and symbolic, to get at the *exact facts*" (her emphasis). This is an oblique rebuke of the post-Darwinian pedagogy of rational utilitarianism espoused by Herbert Spencer and his acolytes. Harrison counters this with an alternative view for education, an extended reflection on the importance of the imagination in instructional

endeavors and how play provides insight into higher things. She references the pedagogical power of the parable and other "pictured forms of truth." For Harrison, the study of Dante underscores the value of poetry as a form of expression for human experience. She reflects on the multiple layers of interpretive meaning that are found in Dante's verses, and how politics, art and ethics intersect. She also reminds her mothers that the truth of the poem does not lie in its facts, but in its affect.

"Some commentators have explained the poem to be the political disappointment of Dante, pouring itself out in bitter through brilliant imagery. The leopard is Florence, the lion is France, the she-wolf is the Papal power of Rome. But Florence and Frances and Rome have passed out of their supremacy in the minds of men, and the Divine Comedy still keeps its hold upon the affections of mankind. Some other meaning must lie in the poem, else we would not be studying it to-day." The poem's longevity is "the picture which every great poet holds up — man's soul in a state of estrangement and the struggle to get back to the peace of God."

One year after publishing this volume, Harrison would bring a number of "kindergartners," as the teachers were known, to exhibit their work in Children's Building at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. With nearly twenty-seven million visitors coming to the fair, they had ample opportunities to demonstrate their methods of imaginative play and story-telling, and the power of "self-activity" as a means for educating the nascent freedom of the individual to the good of the community. The following year, her story of Dante would go into a second printing. In those same years, following a national trend, the Chicago Board of Education voted to incorporate ten privately sponsored kindergartens which had been operating in the public schools. Yet for a number of historians of early

education, Chicago would only emerge as the center of professionalization of the field when John Dewey began his progressive kindergarten experiment at the University of Chicago.

As Belinda Jack has noted, the history of the woman reader is the history of a neglected minority; a history of readers who have left very few traces and marks of their existence, who are downplayed as secondary and subordinate.²⁷ It is a history of denied access to education. It is also a history of staged female readership or unexamined modes of reading. Reading Harrison, reading Dante, as a "story for little children and a talk for their mothers", we see how she infused the poem with pedagogical philosophy in order to ask questions that were meaningful to her and her readers. How might early education move toward reconciling the freedom of the individual and the good of the community? What is women's role in society if tasked with delivering such an education? Dante's trajectory among such readers invites us to reread his Comedy and revise our understanding of its reception in light of the social organization of readership and the possibilities such an organization engenders. The scholarly emancipation of this woman reader of the Comedy and those who came before her not only sheds new light on reading Dante in North America, but on the important role played by Dante's poem in shaping an American education.

Notes to Chapter 21

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I would like to express my gratitude to Joe Stadolnik for his perceptive comments and spirited defense of Dewey.

¹ In the second half of the 19th century, R.R. Donnelley & Sons were one of the largest book, directory, and periodical printers in the West. The volume I refer to here is the 1892 edition, housed at Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, BEIN J18 C8512 +892Hr. My thanks to the staff there for their kind and attentive assistance.

² Bella Brodzki, *Can These Bones Live? Translation, Survival and Cultural Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007) 2. For an outline of the importance of historical

contexts, see Itamar Even-Zohar, "The Position of Translated Literature within the Literary Polysystem" in *Literature and Translation: New Perspectives in Literary Studies*. James S. Holmes, J. Lambert and R. van den Brooeck, eds. (Leuven: Acco, 1978) 117-127. Susan Bassnett has explored how an institutional emphasis on the national basis for literary production shunts translations to the wrong side of the tracks, viewing them as "immigrants, not quite worthy of the status accorded to texts produced within a given literary tradition." In her essay, "From Cultural Turn to Translational Turn. A Transnational Journey," Bassnett views the growth of world literature as an opportunity for a reappraisal of the cultural significance of translation and it is in this spirit that I offer this research. See *Literature*, *Geography, Translation*. Cecilia Alvstad et al, eds. (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011) 67-80, republished in *World Literature in Theory*. David Damrosch, ed. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2014) 234-242.

- ³ Angelina LaPiana, drawing on T.W. Koch's bibliography, lists around fifty Dantean poems published between 1881 and 1905 in *Dante's American Pilgrimage* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1948) 150-51. This of course predates the readers outlined by Christian Dupont elsewhere in this volume in his essay, "How the Young Women Take to It!" drawing upon Kathleen Verduin's 1996 article on Margaret Fuller's engagement with Dante. Any examination of Dante's reception in North America during this later period, beyond Verduin's essay on Lowell and Dupont's work in this volume, must also take into account the African American readers outlined by Dennis Looney in *Freedom Readers*, and particularly his research on the Dantean poetry of Cordelia Ray.
- ⁴ For an overview of the Chautauqua movement and the liberal tradition it embodied, see Andrew C. Rieser, *The Chautauqua Moment. Protestants, Progressives, and the Culture of Modern Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).
- ⁵ Droch's Literary Talks II -- Some Old Favorites" Ladies Home Journal; January 1897, vol. XIV, no. 2, p. 15.
- ⁶ See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983).
- ⁷ See for example, Gerald Graff's introduction "The Humanist Myth" in the anniversary edition of *Professing Literature*. *An Institutional History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 1-15. The fall 2020 decision by the English Department at Cornell University to change their name to Literatures in English might be seen as a recent salvo in exploding this myth.
- ⁸ As John Guillory has argued, "there can be no general theory of canon formation that would predict or account for the canonization of any particular work, without specifying first the unique historical conditions of that work's production and reception," in *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 85. Glazener offers an examination of the foundational components of literature and literary studies in North America, from modern literature's earliest emergence as an infrastructure, subject to market forces, public engagement, and institutionalization. See *Literature in the Making: A History of U.S. Literary Culture in the Long Nineteenth Century*. Oxford University Press, 2015. Guillory details the process of deracination from the actual cultural circumstances of a textual artifact's production and consumption.
- ¹⁰ See Giuliano Mambelli, Gli annali delle edizioni dantesche (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1931).
 Also, A. Vallone, La critica dantesca nell'Ottocento (Florence: Olschki, 1958); Colomb de Batines, Bibliografia dantesca, ossia Catalogo delle edizioni, traduzioni, codici manoscritti e commenti della Divina Commedia e delle opere di Dante, seguito dalla serie dei biografi di lui, 2 vols.
- ¹¹ La Divina Commedia di Dante Alighieri ridotta a miglior lezione dagli Accademici della

Crusca (Florence: Domenico Manzani, 1595).

- ¹² His blank verse translation of the Inferno initially appeared in 1804 with little success. The 1814 publication of all three canticles, with facing page translation, was financed by Cary himself after publisher James Carpenter refused it on the basis of the poor sales of the Inferno. For more on the Carey translation in Great Britain and its use in Romantic art and poetry, see Antonella Braida, *Dante and the Romantics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).
- ¹³ Aida Audeh and Nick Havely have noted the many "Dantes" during the long nineteenth century, each characterized by a malleability within different economies of meaning. Their overarching concern, however, is firmly rooted in the relation of these to national identity. See their introduction to the volume *Dante in the Long Nineteenth Century. Nationality, Identity and Appropriation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) 1-12.
- ¹⁴ Davidson's translation of Scartazzini's manual *A Handbook to Dante* was published in Boston in 1887 by Ginn & Company. Scartazzini had published the manual in Italy for Ulrico Hoepli, but Davidson's translation takes considerable liberties with the text, including a flurry of footnotes that express outright disagreement with the author.
- ¹⁵ See Denton J. Snider, The *St. Louis Movement in Philosophy* (St. Louis, MO: Sigma, 1920) 279. There are a number of publications on the St. Louis movement, including Michael DeArmey and James A. Good, eds., *St. Louis Hegelians*, 2 vols. (Bristol, England: Thoemmes Continuum, 2001); James A. Good, ed., *The Ohio Hegelians*, 3 vols. (Bristol, England: Thoemmes Continuum, 2004); and Dorothy G. Rogers, *America's First Women Philosophers: Transplanting Hegel*, 1860–1925 (New York: Continuum, 2005).
- ¹⁶ Freidrich Froebel's first work, *The Education of Man*, boasted two translations in the United States, one by Josephine Jarvis featuring an introduction by Elizabeth Palmer Peabody and the other by W.N. Hallman (St. Louis: International Education Series, 1892). Froebel's *Pedagogics of the Kindergarten* would also be translated by Jarvis and published by Appleton in 1899.
- ¹⁷ William Torrey Harris, in his translation of Hegel's "Selbsttätigkeit," used self-activity, that is the power of individuality to do away with the difference between subject and object. See his "Outlines of Hegel's Phenomenology" Journal of Speculative Philosophy, 3:166 (1869). For more on self-activity, and the themes associated with this form of American idealism, see Dorothy G. Rogers, *America's First Women Philosophers* (New York: Continuum, 2005).
- ¹⁸ Susan Blow, "Dante's Inferno" Journal of Speculative Philosophy, 18:121 (1884) ¹⁹ Herbert Spencer, *Education: Intellectual, Moral, and Physical* (New York: Appleton,
- ²⁰ See for example her address to the Chicago Kindergarten College's incoming class of 1891, *The Kindergarten as an Influence in Modern Civilization* (Chicago: Chicago Kindergarten College,
- ²¹ The Relationship between the Kindergarten and Great Literature: Dante (Chicago: Chicago Kindergarten College, 1893); The Relationship between the Kindergarten and Great Literature: Homer (Chicago: Chicago Kindergarten College, 1893); The Relationship between the Kindergarten and Great Literature: Shakespeare (Chicago: Chicago Kindergarten College, 1893)
- ²² From the *Chicago Kindergarten College Course Catalog*, 1892-1893, 21.
- ²³ Ibid.
- ²⁴ Ibid, 21-22.
- ²⁵ Between 1881 and 1900, dozens of editions of the fairy tales were published in English. Of note, *Grimm's Household Tales*, 2 vols. trans. and ed. Margaret Hunt (London: George Bell

and Sons, 1884); German Popular Stories and Fairy Tales, as Told by Gammer Grethel trans. Edgar Taylor (London: George Bell and Sons, 1888); Household Stories from the collection of Grimm Brothers, trans. Lucy Crane (Chicago and New York: Rand, McNally, & Company, 1889; Grimm's Fairy Tales. Volume 1, Mara L. Pratt, ed. (Boston, New York, and Chicago: Educational Publishing Company, 1892); 1894. Grimm's Fairy Tales. Part 1, Sara E. Wiltse, ed. (Boston, New York, Chicago, and London: Ginn and Company, 1894); 1894. Classic Stories for the Little Ones. Adapted from the tales of Andersen, Grimm Brothers, and others, Mrs. Lida Brown McMurry (Bloomington, Illinois: Public School Publishing Company, 1894)

²⁶ Susan Blow, "Inferno" The Journal of Speculative Philosophy 18 (1884):121-138.

²⁷ Belinda Jack, *The Woman Reader* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012)