Dante in the Digital Age: Revitalizing the *Divina Commedia* Through Media Translation

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In contemporary culture, Dante and his *Inferno* represent the emblematic sign of the increasingly blurred division between high and popular culture. On one side, Dante exerts a major influence in the literary world as he is recognized as one of the crucial figures of the Western Canon (Harold Bloom 46), who has shaped the modern artistic, social, cultural, and political landscape. Moreover, Dante and his works have been studied, researched, and discussed by a vast number of scholars from all over the world and his *Divina Commedia* has contributed to define the modern conception of Hell (Marchiò 129).

On the other side, Dante is a cultural icon, who just like Shakespeare, Mona Lisa, and Michelangelo (Marchiò 117), has made the "cross-over" into popular culture (Iannucci 3). The *Divina Commedia*, in particular the *Inferno*, has inspired many artists, producers, musicians, and writers to create adaptations, parodies, and other forms of "derived creativity" that proliferate in various contemporary media, such as videogames, comics, movies and graphic novels (Marchiò 118).

Although some might argue that these modern adaptations degrade and reduce the *spessore culturale* of the Classics, Marchiò points out that the cultural power of a work does not lie in the work itself, but in the creative expressions that are generated from it, as they all contribute to transform the canon text in a "*monumento letterario*" (120).

So, what is the appeal of the *Divina Commedia* that makes it such a popular source of inspiration? First of all, Dante's work contains universal themes (such as the battle of Good versus Evil, freedom, love, political injustice, and the meaning of the human existence) that are relatable to past, present, and current generations of readers as they represent common *topoi* that constantly recur in the history of humanity. In this way, Dante is able to create an ongoing dialogue with people from different generations and time periods, who are all connected by the universality of the human experience.

Secondly, the *Commedia* possesses the two qualities of a "producerly" text, which, according to Fiske, "combines the televisual characteristics of a writerly text with the easy accessibility of the readerly"[1] (95). Indeed, the *Commedia* is a visual poem with strong and clear images that can be easily read and understood by the public, and, it also exhibits a polysemic nature, which "allows it to be read in a host of different ways and to speak to audiences that differ socially, culturally and historically- from the illiterate to the most educated and pedantic" (Iannucci 4). It is, therefore, this malleability, this "producerly" quality, that allows the *Divina Commedia* to be reworked and readapted in a variety of different media and myriad ways (Iannucci X).

The *Divina Commedia*, therefore, is still relevant and appealing to the modern public, but the classic paperback format is outdated, especially for a young audience which is used to the multimedia language and, sometimes, regards high culture as intimidating and tedious (Marchiò 125). Therefore, since the current cultural landscape is dominated by images, sounds, videos and is moving towards digitalization, translating old texts into a format that is familiar and appealing to young adults represents an innovative way to encourage them to rediscover these masterpieces and to give new life to early pieces of Literature. This process, which Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin call "remediation" (1998), helps to keep alive the memory of the author and supports the cultural afterlife of a work, while, at the same time, it confirms the text's universality and favors its diffusion among modern readers.

Caparezza's music video "Argenti Vive" and some posts of the Facebook page "Se I Social Network Fossero Sempre Esistiti" are two compelling examples of contemporary remediations of Dante's *Inferno* which were developed with the target audience of young adults in mind. The first part of the essay is devoted to the analysis of Caparezza's song, focusing, in particular, on the representation of Filippo Argenti and Dante in the music video and the portraits of these two characters which emerge from the *Inferno* episode. The second part, instead, analyzes the gags[2] about Dante on the Facebook page "Se I Social Network Fossero Sempre Esistiti" as a way to resurrect the poet and give new life to his poem. Using the *Twittérature* example of @DanteSommoPoeta as a starting point, the analysis shifts to the Facebook page, and after considering the various types of Dante gags and the implications of the use of classical literature in the social media world, it concludes with a reflection on the positive and negative aspects of the modernization of literary classics.

Argenti and Dante, *Due Facce Della Stessa Medaglia*

From the 1970s on Dante's *Divina Commedia* has been a strong and active presence in the songs of many artists belonging to various musical genres, ranging from pop to metal music. Most of the artists are Italian singers, such as Luciano Ligabue[3], Gianna Nannini[4] and De André[5], who have been inspired by the Florentine poet and made allusions to Dante's poem in their musical creations. While, most of these songs tend to just recall general themes of the *Divina Commedia* and cite some verses (such as "*Amor ch'a nullo amato amar perdona*," *Inf*.5.103), Caparezza's song "Argenti Vive" stands out from the rest as the rapper dedicates the entire musical piece to the arrogant Florentine knight of Canto VIII of the *Inferno*, Filippo Argenti.

In the fifth circle of the *Inferno*, while crossing the muddy and malodorous river Styx, Dante meets, among the wrathful, his neighbor and political enemy whose actual name is Filippo Cavicciuli (or Cavicciuoili) degli Adimari, a Florentine family belonging to the black guelphs' party. According to Bocaccio, the rich knight earned the nickname of Argenti because he had his horse shod in silver and he was "*un uomo di persona grande, bruno e nerboruto e di maravigliosa forza e, più che alcuno altro, iracundo, eziandio per qualunque menoma cagione*" (cited from the commentary to *Inferno* 8.61 by Giovanni Boccaccio [1373-75], *Dartmouth Dante Project*). The arrogant character of Argenti also emerges both in the novella VIII of the *giornata* IX of the *Decameron* and in the novella CXIV of Sacchetti's *Trecentonovelle* which suggests that Argenti took revenge on Dante by sending him to exile (Donno 614). Other early sources reveal that the

strong animosity between Argenti and Dante was caused by a quarrel between the two Florentines, and by the fact that a close relative of Argenti acquired the exiled poet's property, so the Cavicciuli family probably played a major role in obstructing Dante's return for personal interest (Donno 614).

This political and personal enmity with Argenti seems to better explain the reasons behind Dante's harsh and cruel behavior towards this character in Canto VIII. This episode of the *Inferno* is particularly relevant because it represents the first instance of "an outburst of violent passion in Dante's heart" (Borgese 184). In the preceding circles, the pilgrim reacted with compassion or fear to the condition of the damned souls, but in this Canto, there is no trace of pity as Dante wishes to see his enemy dunked in the marsh and praises God for giving him the pleasure to see Argenti attacked by the other wrathful.

Borgese recognizes a sort of symbiosis between Dante and the wrathful, pointing out that "*si vis me flere flendum est ipsi tibi*" (184), meaning that Dante must inject a dose of madness in his own brain in order to "stage a mad dog like Argenti" (184). Moreover, the rage and violence of the fifth circle seems to be contagious, affecting not only Dante, but also his wise guide. Virgil, indeed, approves Dante's brutal behavior as, according to Donno, it shows that the pilgrim is finally understanding the meaning of Divine Justice and reacting in the appropriate way to the punishment of the damned souls (618). Therefore, most critics, such as Isidoro Del Lungo, Vittorio Rossi, and Ettore Romagnoli, condemn the cruelty that the poet displays in Canto VIII and support the idea that Dante uses the *Inferno* as "an instrument to personal vendetta" (Donno 612).

The unusual vindictive and violent behavior that Dante exhibits towards Argenti is exactly what attracted Caparezza to write a song about this episode. In an interview with *Artribune*, the rapper reveals that, when in 2005 he started re-reading the *Divina Commedia* for the first time since studying it in high school, the figure of Filippo Argenti caught his attention because he could not understand why Dante's neighbor, a commoner, was placed next to famous politicians and popes. According to Caparezza, Dante decides to condemn the insolent knight to eternal damnation "*per togliersi un sasso dalla scarpa, per dirla in termini hip-hop un* dissing" (Sala, "Museica. Con Caparezza a Lezione di Storia Dell'Arte").

The song "Argenti Vive " represents Argenti's comeback to Dante's Canto VIII and, through the voice of Caparezza, the Florentine knight can *rispondere per le rime* to the poet and right the wrongs of his legacy. The music video is dominated by the monologue of Argenti who, throughout the song, keeps threatening and insulting Dante. The violent and heavy music of this video perfectly reflects the furious spirit of Argenti and the lyrics really help to convey the arrogance and ferocity of this character ("*Sono dannato ma te le dò di santa ragione! Così impari a rimare male di me, io non ti maledirei, ti farei male agli ***!*").

"Argenti Vive" constitutes a modern rewriting of the *Inferno*'s Canto VIII: the setting is an abandoned building, Dante travels in a car with the license plate *Flegias*, and, although in the beginning and end of the song, Caparezza cites verses from the *Inferno*, there are some lexical variations that make the text more comprehensible for a modern listener. For example, "*corravam la morta gora*" (*Inf*.8. 31) becomes "*solcavamo l'immobile palude*", and "*attuffare*", (*Inf*.8.53) is changed to "*immergere*". Moreover, Dante seems to have lost the rage that burns in his heart in Canto VIII, and, in the music video, he appears weak and frightened.

Differently from the episode of the *Inferno*, in Caparezza's music video Argenti triumphs over Dante and, throughout the song, he keeps screaming that "*Il mondo non è dei poeti, il mondo è di noi prepotenti*", and that, at the end, the next generations are going to resemble more to him than to Dante. With these lyrics and this ending Caparezza allegorically represents the defeat of poetry, as he realizes that today's world is now dominated by violence and brutality (Francesco Sala, "Museica. Con Caparezza a Lezione di Storia Dell'Arte"). This cynical message that the rapper sends through this song reflects the origins and function of rap music: this musical genre has its roots in the African oral tradition and served as "the voice of an otherwise underrepresented group" to reveal and denounce the evils of the human society (Becky Blanchard, "The Social Significance of Rap & Hip-Hop Culture"). Nowadays artists use rap as a form of expression to speak out against injustices and raise social issues, as the pounding rhythm of this musical style lend itself well to criticize and bring to light the contradictions of our current reality.

The artistic choice of Caparezza to play both Dante and Argenti in the music video raises an interesting question: Is the rapper saying, just like the critic Borgese, that, at the end of the day, these characters are similar? In the video, several clues suggest that Dante and Argenti have something in common, such as in the scene where Dante sees the reflection of Argenti, surrounded by flames, in the mirrors placed in a long gallery, and in the lyrics "*Ti chiami Dante Alighieri, ma somigli negli atteggiamenti a... Filippo Argenti*". This hypothesis is confirmed by a Rai News interview in which Caparezza reflects on Dante's human nature and explains the reason for this choice: "*Dante lo (Argenti) inserisce nella palude dello Stige, gli fa veramente fare una fine orrenda. Chiede a Virgilio che venga annegato nella palude, preso a pugni, schiaffi, calci e morsi dagli altri demoni e, in più, mentre lui affonda è costretto a mordersi egli stesso le carni. Cosa mostra Dante? Di essere un violento*" (Pellegrini, Il "professor" Caparezza spiega Dante. E lancia il suo nuovo tour").

The music video of Caparezza can be found on YouTube, the most popular media platform among the younger generations. According to O' Kane, 95% of teens between 13 and 17 uses YouTube (Caitlin O'Kane, "YouTube Is the Most Social Media Platform Among Teens, Followed by Tik Tok-and 35% Say They Are Using at Least One App or Site 'Almost Constantly'"), spending on average 34% of their time watching videos (Nathan McAlone, "Young People Spend Twice as Much Time Watching Netflix as Live TV, And Even More Time on YouTube"). According to Trier (2007), there are two essential characteristics that make this medium flexible and versatile, fitting the needs of the young customers of the digital age: YouTube is "time shifting," meaning that users can watch videos whenever they want, and is "space shifting," so videos can be watched anywhere (Trier 411). Therefore, taking into account its specific properties and its popularity among young people, YouTube appears as an excellent medium through which Caparezza can spread his music and reach his fans.

Moreover, by stripping Dante's work from its textual rigidity and poetic solemnity, and by adapting the poet's words to the language of rap/hip hop music, which is the world's top genre according to Spotify (Cristopher Hooton, "Hip-hop Is the Most Listened to Genre in the World, According to Spotify Analysis of 20 Billion Tracks"), the rapper was able to create a dialogue with the young generations and, potentially, spark an interest for the *Divina Commedia*. Therefore, with "Argenti Vive," Canto VIII is brought outside of the academic environment of the classroom and pushed into the musical world of the youth, breathing new life.

Dante and Social Media: The Rebirth of the Great Minds of the Past in the Web 2.0

"*Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita/ Mi ritrovai ad aprir l'utenza Facebook/ Sperando che la cosa sia gradita*". This is one of the famous tweets coming from the Twitter account @DanteSommoPoeta, who, since October 2011, has been rewriting the *Divina Commedia* in *terzine* using the modern language of social media. While the identity of the creator of the account remains unknown, it appears clear that the aim of the author of these tweets is to resurrect the figure of Dante and to give him a new voice through Twitter.

Most of the tweets show that, while maintaining the essential traits of his personality and staying true to his beliefs, Dante 2.0 knows very well the contemporary political, religious, and social landscape. For example, just like in the *Inferno* Dante was not afraid to criticize the corruption of the Church and, in the *Monarchy,* he supported the separation of the temporal and spiritual powers, so @DanteSommoPoeta condemns the papacy's thirst for wealth and the intromission of Cardinal Bagnasco, the president of the Conferenza Episcopale Italiana (CEI), in the Italian State affairs (Lazzarin 35):

"*Luogo è in inferno detto Vaticano*

fatto di corvi, serpi e malelingue

e dove il Dio denar regan sovrano. #Vatileaks"

[3 November 2015]

"La Chiesa d'esternare il suo parere

ha il suo diritto, ma di non udirlo

lo Stato ha inalienabile il dovere.

#Bagnasco"

[23 August 2015]

The case of @DanteSommoPoeta is not an isolated one, but it is part of a broader literary phenomenon called "*Twittérature*", a term formed by the fusion of the words "Twitter"+ "*littérature*", which according to the website of the ITC, the Institut de Twittérature Comparée, describes the "*ensemble des textes littéraires publiès dans Twitter sous forme de gazouillis (tweets)*" ("the collection of literary texts published on Twitter in form of tweets", Dupuis).

Twitter is not the only social media platform that has been used to bring back to life great writers and their literary works, but Facebook also proliferates with pages created for this purpose. "Se I Social Network Fossero Sempre Esistiti" is a Facebook page that uses the platform 2.0 to give new life to the most important intellectuals of the past. The page, which has 1.3 million likes, was born in 2014 from a casual conversation between friends, but now the main administrator and

creator is Francesco Dominelli, a 30 years old digital entrepreneur. The posts of the page are called "gags" and they consist in ironic tweets, Facebook posts and conversations on WhatsApp or through text messages between great writers, philosophers, and artists who form a sort of *circolo letterario virtuale*.

One of the key elements that accounts for the page's success is the fact that it was designed by young adults for young adults. Indeed, in an interview with *Tgcom 24*, Dominelli reveals that the age of their target market ranges from 19 to 24 years old, and, most their fanbase is a "*mix tra nostalgici dei tempi della scuola e appassionati di letteratura*" (Interview with Dominelli by Daniela Zinni, Tgcom24 FaceKult, "Se I Social Network Fossero Sempre Esistiti").

The posts of the Facebook page can be interpreted, therefore, as postmodernist expressions as they revisit the great figures of the past with irony, which is a crucial element of postmodernism, evoking also a sense of nostalgia, which is another component of the postmodernist movement. While looking at the gags, the fans of this page are taken back to the past, which is often idealized through memory and desire (Hutcheon 20), and remember those "good old days" when they were studying literature in high school.

Through the use of parody, however, Dominelli does not only want to create irony and entertain the readers, but he also aims to criticize the "*lente deformante dei social*." Indeed, according to the creator of these posts, Facebook tends to accentuate the oddities and egocentric spirit of the users, who, without realizing it, become parodies of themselves (Interview with Dominelli by Daniela Zinni, Tgcom24 FaceKult, "Se I Social Network Fossero Sempre Esistiti").

In the page "Se I Social Network Fossero Sempre Esistiti," we can find several tweets by Dante, who as father of the Italian language, takes on the task to give grammar lessons to the Italian society and criticizes those who commit grammatical mistakes, showing no mercy even for important politicians such as the Prime Minister of Italy (see figures 1, 2 and 3).

In another tweet, instead, Dante translates into modern terms the most famous line of Ulysses' speech in Canto XXVI, referring, in particular, to a low-quality Italian talk show, *Uomini e Donne*, dominated by drama and petty fights between the contestants (figure 4).

The tweets share some similarities with those of @DanteSommoPoeta, and could fall in the category of *Twittérature*, as they use the brief, sarcastic language of Twitter and comment on current news and events, which as Menduni points out, it is one of defining traits of this social network: "*[I]l sito di "microblogging" rappresenta uno dei maggiori esempi della convergenza tra ciò che accade nel mondo e la sua comunicazione in tempo reale*" (Menduni et al. 37). The limit to 140 characters (spaces included) also constitutes another fundamental characteristic of the works of *Twittérature*, as the writers are forced to concentrate the meaning of their message which makes the conversation rapid and effective (Menduni et al. 39-40).

Apart from the tweets, the page also contains many screenshots of text conversations between Dante and various characters of the *Divina Commedia* (such as God, Caronte, Beatrice ecc.) covering various topics, but the most recurrent ones involve the duo Dante/Virgilio. In these conversations, Dante condemns modern sinners of society by placing them in existing circles or planning to create new ones, while Virgilio takes notes (see figures 5, 6, and 7*).

From these various kinds of gags, a modernized version of Dante and the *Divina Commedia* emerge: while the poet maintains the defining traits of his persona and the poem preserves his characters and general structure, Dante uses an ironic tone and slang expressions, typical of the youth language, to talk about different aspects of the modern life, making references to contemporary political figures, tv shows, and songs that are popular among Italian young adults and teenagers. So, the language and the content of the gags are extremely familiar and relatable to a young audience, and the format (such as tweets, Facebook posts, text conversations on WhatsApp and iPhone) is also very well known by this target market, making Dante and the *Divina Commedia* very approachable for the young generations.

Therefore, the posts of "Se I Social Network Fossero Sempre Esistiti" represent another brilliant example of remediation. By transforming Dante and the *Divina Commedia* into gags, which are appealing to a young audience and shared on social media (which is a popular platform for this target market), the Facebook page contributes to give new life to the poet and to stimulate a wider circulation of his poem among young adults and teenagers.

In general, both the works of *Twittérature*, such as the tweets of @DanteSommoPoeta, and the Facebook page "Se I Social Network Fossero Sempre Esistiti" show the need of updating and modernizing the classical works of Literature in order to make them more understandable to the contemporary society. The goal of these remediations, therefore, consists in "humanizing" the great intellectuals of the past and bring them closer to those readers who are either intimidated by high culture or who remember them as rigid and boring figures from the academic books.

However, some scholars point out that when reducing the Classics to their essential elements and their authors to their basic traits, there is an inevitable "*svuotamento semantico e formale*" (Lazzarin 42) which leads to an impoverishment of the great works and to a simplification of the psychological complexity of the intellectuals. Lazzarin also recognizes that, in order to reach the young generations or a less educated audience, the content and formal structure must be lowered, and the lexicon and vocabulary must be simplified (42).

A similar argument could be made for Caparezza's "Argenti Vive": even if the rapper takes inspiration from the episode of Canto VIII, the tone, language, and content does not have the same *spessore culturale* of the *Divina Commedia*. So, is this the price to pay for modernizing the Classics? Is it worth destroying the greatest works of Literature to make them more accessible to the new generations?

In order to answer these questions, we must take a step back and look at the current cultural environment in which we live. The boundary between high and low culture has become very blurred and almost nonexistent. As Frederic Jameson points out in *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), mass culture has been incorporated into art and high culture, while high culture has become a commodity. Both Caparezza's "Argenti Vive" and the posts of "Se I Social Network Fossero Sempre Esistiti" represent two cases in which high culture (Dante's *Divina Commedia*) meets low culture (rap music in the first example and gags in the second one). When the fusion between these different levels of culture occurs, it always creates upsides and downsides. In the cases analyzed, however, the positive effects seem to outweigh the negative ones.

As we can see from this essay, these hybrid cultural remediations produce two important results: on one side, they help to perpetuate the afterlife of the *Divina Commedia* and to keep the memory of the poet alive; on the other side, by making the text more accessible and appealing, they favor its diffusion among young people.

In relation to the latter aspect, in recent years, some professors have started realizing the educational value of these modern adaptations of the *Divina Commedia*. The Italian professor Trifone Gargano, for example, has assigned to his high school students Caparezza's video as a visual and musical reading for Canto VIII. He also adds that "Argenti Vive" was a useful starting point to debate on the theme of violence (Trifone Gargano, "Il Mondo Non È Dei Poeti: Caparezza Remixa Dante"). Francesco Dominelli, instead, reveals that, when his book collecting the most popular posts of the page came out, he received many pictures from professors who used his gags to introduce writers and historical events (Interview with Dominelli by Daniela Zinni, Tgcom24 FaceKult, "Se I Social Network Fossero Sempre Esistiti").

Therefore, even if these remediations might reduce the deep meaning and complexity of literary works, they do bridge the gap between high culture and young generations and keep literature alive, accessible, and relevant for the modern reader.
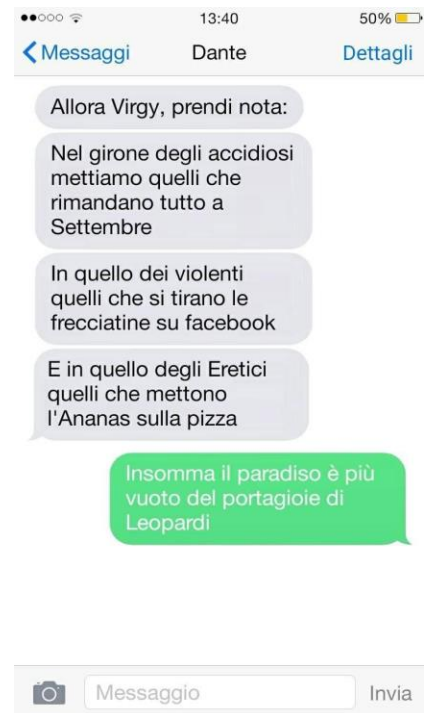
Images

FIGURE 1.

FIGURE 2.

Dante Alighieri
@O'Bischeri

Quando invece di continuare a ripetere "Prima gli italiani" dovresti studiare Prima l'Italiano. #LaSituazioneèGrammatica #SiSalviniChiPuò

← Reply   ⟲ Retweet   ★ Favorite   ••• More

Salvini: 'Tolgo la parola Nord al nome della Lega, non mi attacco all'avverbio" Il video

L'annuncio (con gaffe) del leader del Carroccio durante trasmissione di La7, «Piazzapulita». «Nord» non è un avverbio ma un **sostantivo**

FIGURE 3.

Dante Alighieri
@O'Bischeri

Ho scritto
"Fatti non foste per vivere come
bruti ma per seguire virtute e canoscenza"
perché
"Leggete un libro ogni tanto invece
di fottervi il cervello con Uomini&Donne"
pareva brutto
#DivinaCommediaTradotta

FIGURE 4.

FIGURE 5.

FIGURE 6.

FIGURE 7[6].

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[1] According to Barthes (1970), a readerly text encourages readers to take a passive role and to find pleasure in reading a well-crafted story. A writerly text, instead, invites readers to look for meaning and become active participant in the interpretation of the text.

[2] Gag is a term used by Francesco Dominelli, the creator and administrator of the Facebook page, to describe the ironic social media posts he creates.

[3] The pop rock singer Luciano Ligabue quotes the first verse of the *Divine Comedy* ("Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita") in his song "Siamo chi siamo*".*

[4] In the lyrics of her song "Ogni Tanto", Nannini writes "*Amor che nulla hai dato*", evoking the famous *Inferno*'s verse "*Amor ch'a nullo amato amar perdona*" (*Inf.*5.103).

[5] De André mentions the most famous lovers of the *Inferno* in his song "Al ballo mascherato" and praises the poet for its ability in potraying their love as extraordinary: "*Dante alla porta di Paolo e Francesca/ spia chi fa meglio di lui:/ lì dietro si racconta un amore normale/ma lui saprà poi renderlo tanto geniale.*"

[6] In this conversation, Dante is referring to the hit song "Despacito", by Luis Fonsi feat Daddy Yankee, that played non-stop in summer 2017

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