

# Translating Dante's *Divine Comedy*. An Interview with Robert Hollander by Gloria Lauri-Lucente

The following interview with Robert Hollander was conducted by Gloria Lauri-Lucente in April 2008 at the University of Malta where he was invited together with Roberto Benigni as a guest of the Faculty of Arts. During a week-long celebration dedicated to Dante Studies, Hollander delivered lectures to students of the University of Malta and to the general public on the *Divine Comedy*. In the following interview Hollander discusses his translation of the *Divine Comedy* on which he worked with his wife Jean Hollander, his indebtedness to prior translators of Dante, and his friendship with Roberto Benigni.

**Lauri-Lucente:** *What was your initial relationship with prior translators of Dante when you first started working on the translation of the 'Divine Comedy' together with your wife Jean? In discussing this relationship you have stated that both you and Charles Singleton were deeply indebted to John Sinclair, but that Singleton failed to acknowledge the frequency of his exact coincidence with Sinclair.*

**Hollander:** It's a complicated story as well as a painful one. In something I wrote recently (see 'Charles Singleton's Hidden Debts to Thomas Okey and John Sinclair', *Electronic Bulletin of the Dante Society of America* [February 2006]), I acknowledge that I was turned on to Dante by Charles, who became, not quite a friend, but somebody I knew well when I was President of the Dante Society of America. Charles had quit the Society and when I learned that I was to be the President, the first thing I did was to tell him that, once that was official, I would write him

a letter asking him to rejoin. He said, 'I'll think about it.' In fact, within minutes of being informed that I had been elected, I wrote him a formal letter urging him to rejoin, asking 'What is an American Dante Society without you in it?' Charles accepted that invitation. At that point, I came close to venerating Singleton because he had changed my life. Through him, I learned for the first time that Dante wasn't what I would have been taught in an Italian 'scuola media' or even at a more advanced level, that he wasn't an allegorist, but a historian, using as his model a historical biblical text, the 'Exodus.' As a result, I've always felt a huge debt of gratitude to Charles, seeing in him an intellectual father. It was thus very upsetting when I began to realise that his translation was not entirely his, to put it mildly, although I never had really done my homework, assuming that his reviewers would have done theirs; no one had said 'this is not Singleton, it's a miscellany of the Temple Classics and of Sinclair.' Eventually, I was asked, I think in 1980, I don't remember, by Anthony Pellegrini, who was a wonderful man and the editor of *Dante Studies*, to do a review article, a long article on Singleton, on his translation and commentary. I said, 'Tony, I can't.' He asked, 'Is it that bad?' And I replied, 'Yes, it's that bad.' I still didn't know how bad it really was. Finally, I was reading a recent book on Dante; in it, the author kept mentioning that the translation used was, of course, Charles Singleton's, and that did it. I sat down and wrote that article. In doing so, I checked more closely because several people had said to me, 'you know it's not just Sinclair, it's also the Temple classics.' I decided to allow another writer to select my passages, nine in all, a good number for Dante; they all happened to be from *Purgatory*. I just opened a chapter in that book and said 'ok, at random, the first nine citations' because I didn't want to control the result in any way. These happened to be nine citations from *Purgatory*, which a British scholar named Thomas Okey had translated for the Temple Classics edition. My goodness, it turned out that, in my nine examples, a total of about five hundred words, four hundred and fifty, were, word for word, either Sinclair or Okey, roughly ninety percent. I checked the whole thing and it was clear what Charles had done: sat down with these two texts open on his work table and simply rearranged them, cut and pasted them. Now, had he said so, it would have been fine. I published this information because it represents a scandal in American Dante Studies. We all admire Singleton. I used to venerate him. I do not do so any longer.

**Lauri-Lucente:** *Setting aside this rather sad story, what influence did other translators such as the Temple Classics translators have on your work?*

**Hollander:** Well, the Thomas Okey translation, and the other Temple Classics translators, as we say in our introduction, were our starting points; we're upfront about it. Most of Sinclair is fairly correct, not always, but usually. It's literal and since that's what we wanted to achieve, we began with that. I think if you look at Sinclair and look at us, sometimes you will see a very high correlation and sometimes you wouldn't be able to see any. That was the translation that we thought we were using. We didn't know we were using Singleton and the Temple Classics because there is a lot of Temple in Sinclair too.

**Lauri-Lucente:** *In translating Dante with Jean, you had quite different roles which turned out to be complementary. You write in the 'Note on the Translation' of 'Inferno' that you were primarily responsible for the accuracy of the translation from the Italian, while Jean's responsibility was to make it sound as English verse. You also say that you consulted contemporary verse translations only after you had finished your work, so as to prevent other voices from influencing and shaping your own.*

**Hollander:** Jean, as a poet, and I, as a former poet, just didn't want to suffer the contamination of other voices. When we were doing the last draft, on the beach at Tortola, where we finished both of the first two *cantiche*, Jean had brought along about six modern translations: Robert Pinsky, Allen Mandelbaum, and four others; I don't remember all of them. When Jean and I were having a fierce debate, one of us would say: 'ok, bring out the other translations. Let's see what other people have done.' Every once in a while, we'd peek.... It is rare that we took a word from one of the others. I was trying to do a literal translation with some kind of poetic sense. Jean was trying to turn our text into an English poem; these aims made for a certain amount of tension and we kept pulling each other back. Sometimes it was Jean who corrected my sense of the Italian original. She would say 'he doesn't mean that, Bob. And you call yourself a critic?' On other occasions I would hear something that really made me cringe and I'd say 'you call yourself a poet?'

**Lauri-Lucente:** *This type of revision must have resulted in some very creative tension.*

**Hollander:** We could go on revising it for the rest of our lives. Indeed, the final version of *Paradiso* contains, I think, about a hundred changes, not a small amount.

**Lauri-Lucente:** *In making these changes, what was your approach to the interplay between fidelity to the text and freedom. My question stems from Walter Benjamin's observation in his essay on 'The Task of the Translator' that the ideal translation is one in which 'literalness and freedom are united.'*

**Hollander:** I agree with that goal, but it is very difficult to attain. Let's take Dante. He decided to write a poem in *terza rima*; he had himself to be faithful to a very difficult regimen, with freedom and precision always in conflict. Clearly, rhyme forced Dante to say things in certain ways and sometimes the result remains awkward. However, if I have to err, I would rather err against beauty than against literal sense.

**Lauri-Lucente:** *Another major challenge for the translator of Dante has to do with the 'Commedia's extraordinary visual quality which, in many ways, is deeply cinematic.*

**Hollander:** I had this wonderful conversation with Roberto Benigni about doing a translation of Dante to the screen, and Roberto said there is a book out about Dante as cinematographer. According to Roberto, the author points out, with great elegance, how carefully Dante wrote what might be considered a screen treatment. I've been saying this naively, for years, to my students. I was once working with people who tried to make a movie of the *Commedia* and I kept saying 'Look, we have a shooting script. You just put the camera where the text tells you.'

**Lauri-Lucente:** *Don't you think that students often find it harder to visualize the 'Paradiso' than the 'Inferno' or 'Purgatorio'?*

**Hollander:** Students always complain about reading *Paradiso* for the first time. I tell them to picture themselves sitting under a tree, to open the book and make believe that it's a television set. They should see those saints dancing and hear them singing, let the text come alive, because the whole thing is presented as though it had actually happened.

**Lauri-Lucente:** *Perhaps another great author whose extraordinary visual quality can be said to prefigure cinematic techniques as powerfully as Dante is Ovid. In his Introduction to the 'Metamorphoses', Italo Calvino sees in Ovid a prefiguration of such filmic devices as rapid montage and cross-cutting which make his works cinematic 'ante litteram.' As you are suggesting, because of its combination of music and singing, 'Paradiso' may also be considered as being as visual as 'Inferno' and 'Purgatorio', in its own distinctive fashion, both linguistically and conceptually. In fact you mention that the language and style of 'Paradiso' present some challenges which are dramatically different from the difficulties you encountered when translating the prior two canticles. In the 'Note on the Translation' you go on to say that "'Paradiso" is not only unique within Dante's oeuvre: it is simply unique.' You go on to eloquently describe it as 'theology set to music', which 'pushes its reader (not to mention its translators) to the limit.' Can you tell us more about the uniqueness of 'Paradiso' and the distinctive challenges you had to face when translating it?*

**Hollander:** *Paradiso* is difficult stylistically and conceptually; I'd like to keep that distinction. Stylistically, the voice you hear, as I am fond of saying—and my students seem to like the trope so I keep repeating it—the voice that you are listening to is that of Beatrice, a theology professor at the University of Paris, or maybe somebody who had studied there and has returned to Italy. The voice that you're hearing is that of St. Thomas, St. Thomas in drag. That aspect of *Paradiso* you can't get around. It is central. E.H. Wilkins, who was primarily a Petrarchan, a smart man and a good writer (by the way, he became, eventually, the President of the American Dante Society) wrote a wonderful essay, called 'Voices of the *Divine Comedy*.' He did a kind of documentary, in prose, of the contents of *Paradiso*; it's very straightforward, not postmodern criticism or anything like that (you can understand it, in other words), and he just points out the number of speakers in *Paradiso*. It's far smaller than the number in either of the other two *cantiche*. However, the speeches that they give are far longer and he specifies the numbers, he breaks them down into an imposing array of data: that array tells you a great deal about the difference between the first two *cantiche* and *Paradiso*. It has become popular, in some circles in America, to think that there is a different poetic operating for *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, *Paradiso*. I think that's wrong. The tone is different but not the technique. Poetic ability increases over the first half of the *Inferno*. I happen to think the second part of the first *cantica* is the

place where Dante really gets to know his craft with self-confidence and without his usual pride.

**Lauri-Lucente:** *Beatrice as St Thomas in drag! What an incisive and insightful description of Beatrice's voice. As for Dante's self-confidence and pride, don't you feel that he can at times be quite obnoxious?*

**Hollander:** He can be deeply obnoxious. He alone knows, he is going to do us all a favour. He's not a very good philosopher, he's not a very good historian, he's not a very good theologian, but he's a magnificent poet. And he's always smart but he's really impossible. All of a sudden he begins to relax and you can feel the self-knowledge and control of the supreme artist. I've been looking here, in Malta, at the Caravaggio who was, I think, the supreme painter of all time, the way Bach was the supreme musician of all time, and Dante was the supreme poet of all time.

**Lauri-Lucente:** *The parallel that you draw between Dante and Bach is one which struck me when reading your Introduction to 'Inferno.' You write that 'Reading Dante is like listening to Bach. It is unimaginable to think that a human being, so many years ago (or indeed ever), could make such superhuman magic. Yet there it is, beckoning, but also refusing to yield some of its secrets.' Can you elaborate on this concept of greatness which is tied to secrecy? To what extent was this secrecy intentional?*

**Hollander:** It's a sign. I take it as a sign of his greatness. However, you're right, there has to be a purpose. He could have told us the answer to all of this. The enigma, being enigmatic, is a privilege of the poet, and, also, the sign of a great one. It has to be deliberate. And he decided to be ironic too. Irony is a word we don't hear that often about Dante, if we do, we hear it about Boccaccio. Dante is an ironic writer. Irony is saying less, or anyway, that is the definition given by most people that I know, 'saying less or other than you mean.' Not more because, in classical days, the ironist was an underspeaker. Dante was very good at that.

**Lauri-Lucente:** *While being an ironist and an underspeaker, Dante also suffers tremendously from the sin of pride.*

**Hollander:** Dante knows he's got to spend a lot of time on the terrace of pride, not as long, perhaps, as Benigni says—seven hundred years—that's a long time even for Statius who had deeply troubling sins of slothfulness, in that he didn't pursue the Christ he believed in, and, prodigality; the two sins that detained him a long time, twelve hundred years in all.

**Lauri-Lucente:** *Before moving on to Roberto Benigni and your friendship with him, I would like to ask you about the Princeton Dante project—its inception, its evolution, and also its inestimable contribution in passing on this wonderful heritage of line by line commentary to so many scholars and students of Dante.*

**Hollander:** The first project, begun in 1982, was the Dante Dartmouth Project, a full-text database of commentaries that we opened in 1988. The Princeton Dante Project was opened in 1999. I had hoped to complete the project before we went online, but I am very grateful that Dartmouth's desire to open the project coincided with our need to go public, which forced our hand a little bit. We opened with—I can't remember exactly how many—with 12, 15, or 18 commentaries online. However, you could see from them that it was just a terrific tool. Last year it had over six million hits. (Two years ago we had more than five million.) I'm pleased because one of the reasons I did it was altruistic. I had some young colleagues who were starting to do serious Dante work, and in those days, in the 70's and 80's, Dartmouth had a very small Dante collection. Baker Library held about a dozen commentaries, I think, while there are, perhaps, three hundred, of which about one hundred that you'd really like to study.

In those days we had to type most of them in. After my stroke in 2004, I couldn't get to the library and I could do my own *Paradiso* commentary only because I was able to consult the commentaries online. Thus did I get paid back. It took a lot of time because we had some money to pay people to do them. I myself ended up editing, I don't know, twenty-five commentaries myself. I don't really remember. We paid some people to do editing and the editing is expensive because you have to find people who know what they're doing. Margherita Frankel, for instance, did a lot of editing for us. We had to pay her. I worked for nothing because I'm easy and stupid but, you know, it used to cost us on average twenty-five thousand dollars per commentary. Now we can do

the work much cheaper since the reproduction of data is much easier because of the Kurzweil Data Entry Machine. In those days it was hard; at one point, we had about seventy people typing in text for us over several years. As a result, you can imagine what that text looked like. I once found a single page on which there were sixty errors. And we're still doing it. Right now, actually I'm back at editing: the text of the commentary of Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi, who has had a very interesting life, and who stopped being a professional Dante reader in order to raise a family of five children and then came back to Dante. I met her, soon after she had resumed her work on Dante, with Charles Davis. They were very good friends and I went to hear Anna Maria give a lecture on Auerbach and *The Divine Comedy*. It was the beginning of the penetration of Singleton/Auerbach into Italian Dante studies. (One of the other great sins of Singleton: He never mentioned Erich Auerbach's name with respect to Dantean allegory.) Anyway, Anna Maria was able to finish her commentary and publish it. Wonderful! I admire her very much. Anna Maria has become the standard commentator, the first woman to do so. The last text we entered was that of my dear friend Francesco Mazzone whose commentaries, though only partial, are, in my mind, the best commentaries done in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

**Lauri-Lucente:** *Of the 'Inferno' in particular...*

**Hollander:** The *Inferno*, yes. He did nine cantos in all. Seven to *Inferno*, one through six and eleven. That last commentary is incredible. It's the best thing ever done on Canto 11, period! And then, *Purgatory* 31 and *Paradiso* 6 and his family is bringing out the first eleven canti, four of which I didn't know even existed. And then there is the Chiavacci Leonardi. I just saw her in Florence. I asked to include her commentary about seven years ago. With one thing and another, we never got permission; finally, we got the go ahead. And the work is being done quickly and effectively by Stephen Campbell. (It has for some time now been available in the DDP.)

**Lauri-Lucente:** *Talking about commentaries that have been standard for so many years in Italy, what do you think of the Momigliano and Sapegno commentaries?*



**Hollander:** Momigliano is impossible not to like because he writes so beautifully. He is perhaps, aesthetically, the finest commentator who ever worked. On the other hand, having said that, I find him, as we Americans say, 'pretty far out.' He's reading a totally different poem from the one I'm reading, and that poem was created by Benedetto Croce—Momigliano being the most narrowly Crocean commentator of all. I once saw Sapegno on Italian television in 1974. We were in Rome and I was impressed because I thought I'd find this really old man and instead there was this tough guy, and he was, I think, in his 70's or maybe even early 80's. I was very impressed. He was the standard commentator when we were both young, so I used him when I was starting out. His commentary begins to fail radically when you see the competition. And he was effectively (and justifiably) replaced by Bosco/Reggio.

**Lauri-Lucente:** *Before turning to Benigni, I would like to ask you about the much-debated 'Epistola to Cangrande', Dante's last surviving letter, and its authorship. Do you think we will ever know for sure who wrote it without the shadow of a doubt?*

**Hollander:** Well, I think we do. I'm certain that we do, in fact, and I've made an offer to anybody who believes that, if you can show me, not just an argument but proof that Dante didn't write the letter to Cangrande, I will not only apologize publicly, I will stop working on Dante. And then I will do a public withdrawal of everything I ever said because I am obviously not qualified to work on him. (See my study *Dante's Epistle to Cangrande*, Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 1993.) I wish more of my colleagues on the other side of the question would make that offer because I think some of them are going to have to pay up one of these days. At this point there is new evidence about the letter to Cangrande. It was published in 2002 in the *rivista L'Alighieri*. I'm just going to see the author in Milano. He happens to be a very nice person on top of being a really substantial young scholar. His name is Luca Azzetta; I believe he teaches in a liceo which is not atypical among Italian *dantisti*. One of the best commentators in the Dartmouth Dante Project is another teacher from a liceo in Torino named Nicola Fosca. Have you looked at his work? I think he's incredibly good. He's one of the best Dante commentators we've ever had. My student, who has grown up into a friend and colleague, Simone Marchesi, felt he

had to leave Italy because there was no future for him there. Italy is a country which has been eating its own children. I was there as a member of a commission reporting on conditions in Italian universities in the mid '70's, I think it was '76 or '77. (See 'Report on Italian Universities by the Italian Universities Commission of the International Council on the Future of the University', New York, I.C.F.U., 1981.) The situation looked terrible because of the stabilization of everybody in the university system, for political reasons, trade-union reasons. What they did was use up the future of the Italian educational system. We watched it happen and wrote about it, trying to tell what we knew. There was collusion between the two major parties, the Democrazia Cristiana and the Communists, who had exactly the same agenda. They succeeded, unfortunately for Italy. To be sure, America is much more corrupt than we ourselves are perhaps willing to admit. I'm really post-political now. I vote because people died to give me the right but I have not voted with enthusiasm in a really long time, which is sad. And the Italians, in recent years, are finally getting to being post-political themselves. They understand that every party, perhaps without exception, has one reason for existing, to preserve its own being. Not to serve the state. Well, in the United States, where I have more experience, I live in one of the most corrupt states, New Jersey.

**Lauri-Lucente:** *Can you tell us more about Luca Azzetta and the evidence he sets forth to prove that Dante is the author of the 'Epistle'?*

**Hollander:** Luca Azzetta has been working on Andrea Lancia, the *notaio*, who is sometimes considered the author of the *Epistle*. Azzetta says that he doesn't think that's right. It's a complicated argument, but a clear one. He is a wonderfully equipped scholar and that article in *L'Alighieri*, it's about seventy pages, is one of the most important articles on Dante published in the last twenty-five years. I read it in California one afternoon and it was like reading a poem. Azzetta demonstrates that the *Epistle to Cangrande* was discussed before 1340 as being by Dante.

**Lauri-Lucente:** *What about the early commentators and the light they shed on the Dantean authorship of the 'Epistle'? Although you argue that we will never be in a position to know for sure that the 'Epistle' is Dante's since 'final proof' lies only in the lost autographs, which are destined to never be found, you also say that the first generations of commentators recognized it as Dantean more than we currently do.*

**Hollander:** Many of the early commentators refer to the text of the *Letter to Cangrande*. How do we account for that? They don't recognise it as being by Dante, or they don't say it's by Dante until Viviani in the very early 15<sup>th</sup> century. The appendix to my first book (*Allegory in Dante's 'Commedia'*, Princeton University Press, 1969) has got sections from, I don't remember, eight or ten commentators which are clearly akin to what is being said in the *Letter to Cangrande*. My view is that we don't have the manuscript, but there was a manuscript that accompanied a text of the poem as its preface. That's my working hypothesis. That got circulated but ended up lost, so that there are these pieces of the *Epistula* lying around. Henry Kelly, my nemesis, wrote a book in which he asserts that Dante didn't write the *Letter to Cangrande*, that it was assembled by someone else. The principle argument against authenticity has been 'why doesn't any of the early commentators say that it is by Dante?' Well, for whatever reason, they didn't know. My further guess is that they were embarrassed by it because in the *Epistola* Dante explicitly says 'here I don't follow the allegory of the poets but the allegory of the theologians', which only God can authorise someone to do, which is why in the text Dante frequently makes believe or says, however you choose to put it, that God is the author of the poem, that he is merely God's scribe.

**Lauri-Lucente:** *And this is where you disagree with Francesco Mazzoni, even though you deeply admire his work. You acknowledge the originality of Francesco Mazzoni's argument that the word 'agens' does not mean 'auctor' but rather the protagonist of the work, 'il soggetto d'azione.' At the same time, however, you declare that as much as you would like to embrace Mazzoni's argument, you remain an 'agnostic' since we are unlikely to ever have the definitive proof that the 'Epistle' is Dante's.*

**Hollander:** Well, Mazzoni and I are not that far apart. He's uneasy with this. He was Casini's student and he says some things derived from Casini which are very close to his position. Mazzoni was on the edge, on the fence, of that whole question. But he proved, although various other critics tried to show he was wrong, that Dante wrote the *Epistle to Cangrande*; Francesco was a huge influence on me. I was moved to study Dante by Singleton. It was reading Mazzoni in the '70's and the '80's that showed me how to study Dante and I've always been grateful to him. He was my closest friend in Italy and I miss him a lot and didn't realise how important he was to me until he died. We were in frequent contact and now cannot be. I was always counting on his reading of my

work; he was my audience. I've imagined myself writing to Francesco, but he's not there anymore.

**Lauri-Lucente:** *The 'Epistle' also provides fascinating material for a novel on literary fraud. In fact, you say that the world of the expositors of the 'Epistola a Cangrande' often resembles the world of literary fraud which Umberto Eco captures so effectively in 'Il nome della rosa.' And you raise the possibility that its author was a 'hoodwinker, taking on the identity of Dante.' Do you really believe in this possibility?*

**Hollander:** No. But I have to allow it.

**Lauri-Lucente:** *I now would like to turn to Roberto Benigni. Yesterday, before Roberto's wonderful 'lectura dantis' of the last canto of 'Paradise', you both treated the University of Malta to a most enjoyable performance which took the shape of an exam; you pretended that you were interrogating Roberto and testing his knowledge of Dante to make sure that he deserved the 'laurea honoris causa' that had just been bestowed on him the day before. Although the performance was incredibly funny so much so that it literally brought down the house, I would describe the event as 'seriously funny', and only two people who knew Dante inside out the way you do could have had such an effect on the audience. The interaction between you was simply mesmerising. Can you tell us something about your friendship with Roberto?*

**Hollander:** It's been so enjoyable for me here, actually working with Benigni, observing that a master doesn't need anything. He knows what he's doing. He knows how to do it. At first, when we were getting to know him, I wondered, 'What does he want? Why is he bothering with me? What does Benigni need Hollander for? Nothing.' Finally, I realised that we like each other, that we have Dante in common, that we have very similar thoughts about him. We have, probably, very different interpretations, but, essentially, an identical position in trusting Dante, trusting his greatness. Dante has got all the answers and we're just trying to find them. That kind of humility, in front of Dante, is what Roberto has, in front of his own art as well.

**Lauri-Lucente:** *In the oration I delivered yesterday before the 'laurea honoris causa' was bestowed on Roberto, I referred to what I consider to be the 'intuitive affinities' between Dante and Benigni. One of these*

*affinities has to do with the lesson that Roberto draws from his reading of Dante who taught him the paradox of life. The more I think about this affinity between Dante and Roberto, the more I feel that an understanding of 'the paradox of life' is also what you and Roberto share. Let me be more specific. In your book on the 'Epistola a Cangrande' you write that 'the author of the "Epistle", like the author of the "Commedia", wants to have things both ways. What seems an apparent contradiction is instead a brilliant paradox: the poem is a comedy that can attain the stylistic height and seriousness of tragedy without being "tragic." That is such a wonderful observation which made me think about the affinity you and Roberto share with one another and with Dante. You both read Dante through the lens of the 'paradox of life'; Roberto also grasps the meaning of this paradox and conveys it in films like 'La vita è bella' and 'Pinocchio' which attain the stylistic height of seriousness of tragedy without being tragic.*

**Hollander:** I like that and I think that Roberto would too. One of the reasons we get along as well as we do—and I realise more about that this time than I think I've ever done—is that we have an intuitive similarity about not only Dante, but also about the world. I'm flattering myself now, but, we both care about people and have a sense of our own smallness. Roberto knows that he's a big shot. He knows he can have anything he wants; I don't and so I see the differences. For instance, I signed one autograph here, he signed a thousand...

**Lauri-Lucente:** *But within Dante Studies you too are also a big name.*

**Hollander:** When I found myself preparing to go on stage with him, as you can imagine, it was difficult for me, to work up to that. I had to keep enclosing it in my mind. What would happen should I have one of my mumbling moments? Nonetheless, I do have enough sense. I spend a lot of time in front of a public; this was not going to be an entirely new experience. Magnify it tenfold and you will have the Benigni experience. And I have felt something akin to this, you know, being mildly famous, in a small world. I do understand what it's like. Nonetheless, I said to him as we were leaving and I saw that they had to protect him going out, 'You know the crowd is a monster' and he just looked at me. It's dangerous and he knows that. I once said to him 'The reason one wants to have power is to help people do good things.' He just looked at me; I think that's what Roberto does with a lot of his life; I think he means to

help people. That's also the purpose of the *Comedy*. Underneath all of the getting down and crying for happy exile in Malta during Roberto's performance yesterday, you know, getting protection in exile from the real 'cavalieri' back in Italy. It's so human and so funny that we all become relaxed and accept our humanity, we accept our limitations. I think this man has a profound effect on people and he's turned all that energy not into self-promotion but into the promotion of Dante. He's like my brother and we've become really close friends.

**Lauri-Lucente:** *That closeness clearly came through when you were performing together. It was moving. Roberto Benigni the performer and Robert Hollander the Dante scholar engaged in intense dialogue. So as a close friend of Roberto, and also as a Dante scholar, what do you think makes Roberto Benigni unique? Can we define the uniqueness of his genius?*

**Hollander:** I have an exercise I used to do when teaching in the 'Great Books' course where every week, you know, it is either Homer, Virgil, Dante, or Shakespeare. The exercise was to deliver a one-word lecture. I'd ask my students, for instance, to give a one-word lecture on Ovid. I didn't care much about the answer but a great deal about the concentration that took place. It was a wonderful starter of discussion. You could see every brow frowning in concentration. For Ovid 'irony' would be my choice though, 'change' or 'montage' would be good ones as well. At any rate, the fun is in the looking not in the finding. My favourite one-word lecture for Dante, which, every once in a while, a student would get, is 'justice.' If I have one word to say what Benigni is about ... well, it's 'spontaneity.' Everybody thinks he's a comedian, an actor. He's a smart man. He never stops learning. Some of my ideas about Dante are hard to digest, especially for Italians because they've never heard them. Benigni grew up on the romantic Dante, and still has that view. But one can talk to him; he listens and thinks.

**Lauri-Lucente:** *Benigni's spontaneity is the result of years of preparation and concentration. I also noticed during your visit how he was attentively listening to you all the time. He was absorbing and cherishing every word. What is amazing is that your approach to Dante may be different, but you both ultimately feel the same way about the 'Commedia.'*

**Hollander:** I think of Roberto as a Dante person, not as a scholar. He knows Dante from the inside out, I know him from the outside in. But I think we both got there, somewhere close to the centre. I was talking to

him in his house about the fifth canto and I said 'you know, you call it the canto of Paolo and Francesca as does everyone else, but that's wrong. It should be the canto of Francesca and Paolo.' As soon as I said it, he and his wife, Nicoletta Braschi, obviously thought that it was a sound idea. The only thing against it is that no one has ever said it. I think Dante would have said 'Yes, of course, Francesca and Paolo, not Paolo and Francesca.'

**Lauri-Lucente:** *Paolo weeps only. He does not speak. And yet Dante scholars refer to the canto as the canto of 'Paolo and Francesca.'*

**Hollander:** I know. My great strength as a Dante scholar is that I wasn't trained by Dante scholars. I came to Dante myself and had to train myself, which is very dangerous. I can go askew. And many of my colleagues will tell you that's what happened to me, and perhaps they're right.

**Lauri-Lucente:** *I am sure they are not. I think you have been audacious enough to break the mould when necessary. Something which is not that easy to do. My last question has to do with the impact that Roberto's readings of Dante are having on both the general public and also on Dante scholars.*

**Hollander:** Good question. Let me translate the question into terms of reception: 'What effect will the phenomenon Benigni have, which almost everybody in Italy, a lot of people, now talk about. What effect will it have on serious studies on Dante, if any?' When we first met Roberto, I didn't want to go. It's Jean the reason that we're friends of Benigni; I owe so many good things in my life to her. I said 'Oh, come on, going to hear an actor saw his way through Dante?' I've done that with Vittorio Gasman, who is an actor I respect enormously but who is dreadful when doing Dante. It's partly the notion that it's Dante so it has to be, you know, top-level, full bore, and absolutely over the top and there's no valence lower than over the top and so the whole thing is a disaster. Benigni's recitations are things of such beauty because they don't try for effect and I can sit there listening to him recite Dante forever because it's so beautiful. On the other hand, if I suggested to him, 'this would be better if you didn't push it.' He does the last four verses of Canto Five—'Mentre che l'uno spirto questo disse, / l'altro piangea, sì che di pietade / io venni men così com'io morisse; / e caddi come corpo morto cade'—very dramatically because he has been in the voice of Francesca and he

stays there. If I were doing it—and I haven't talked about this to him yet, but I will—I would drop it down, I would turn it down one notch and be a bit drier because it is the voice of the poet...

**Lauri-Lucente:** *Not the voice of Francesca. But the voice of Dante the pilgrim, Dante the narrator.*

**Hollander:** Right. Or the voice of the protagonist. Dante the poet, who in the very next tercet, Canto 6, line 2, is going to refer to 'i due cognati' and deploys a certain ironic distance when he uses such a cold scientific word. And so he's saying 'I was terribly moved by these in-laws who should have known better.' I admire Dante very much and I trust Roberto very much. I admire Roberto very much too and I think that among all the people I've ever talked with about Dante, the one I feel most ready to listen is he. Such is my friendship with Benigni.

**Lauri-Lucente:** *Sometimes I wish that there were more people who are ready to listen to Dante and to Dante scholarship even within the Humanities itself.*

**Hollander:** But Benigni is giving me something to do, giving me a public that I never had before so both professionally and personally, in every way, I'm so glad that there is a Roberto Benigni.

**Lauri-Lucente:** *And I am so glad that there is also a Robert Hollander, along with Roberto Benigni.*

**Hollander:** I'm glad for that too, for me.

**Lauri-Lucente:** *And for Dante Studies, which has much to thank you for.*

**Hollander:** Let me say that this week in Malta has been glorious and I thank you very much for involving Jean and me.

**Lauri-Lucente:** *The pleasure was all ours. Thank you for honouring us with your presence.*

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