
Moderno Uso

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WHAT WOULD DANTE THINK? This may not be the first question for most people perusing the new three-volume book adaptation of the *Commedia* by Sandow Birk and Marcus Sanders.* It was, however, the one that occurred to me, a professional *dantista*, when I stumbled on its precursor, Birk's March 2003 *Inferno* installation, in a Los Angeles gallery. Dominating the show was the brilliantly colorful painting that now forms the cover of the large-format paperback—an “adaptation” of a spectacular nineteenth-century luminist canvas by Frederick Church that affords a vision of Hell as if it were Los Angeles on a *very* bad day. (A mangled Golden Gate Bridge is incongruously thrown in for good measure.) Two-way, multi-lane traffic right out of a Piranesi nightmare snakes along a ruined freeway. Fast food signs are jumbled together with junked cars; there are oil rig dinosaurs and telephone poles heavy with crows; and, just to one side, a classical death's head reminds us of what we already know. The scale is vast, the detailing gem-like, the suffused gold and orange gorgeous. This may be Hell, but who can turn away? In the left foreground, two tiny figures perched above the radiant abyss—Virgil and Dante—take it all in.

I then moved from that monumental painting to examine the book-size illustrations of all thirty-four of *Inferno*'s cantos displayed at eye-level around the gallery. It required an adjustment to a more intimate scale, and a shift from painterly color to the engraver's black and white; it also invited a conversation with yet another nineteenth-century

*Sandow Birk and Marcus Sanders, *Dante's Inferno* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2004), 240 pages, \$22.95. *Purgatorio* is due to appear in June and *Paradiso* in September, 2005.

artist, Gustave Doré. In each of Birk's pictures, I recognized the high drama of Doré's operatic art: its carefully arranged poses, neo-classical allusions, and shadowy architectural settings. All that swirling Romanticism, however, has been morphed into the lowlife of a Los Angeles that was at once banal and menacing: strip malls, car dealerships, vandalized phone booths, back alleys and highway overpasses. This urban wasteland is populated by the contorted gymnasts of Doré's *Inferno*, who look less like ravaged sinners than like denizens of a gym gone haywire on steroids. It is an extraordinarily layered scene: Dante's damned souls as Doré imagined them, placed within an anti-heroic City of Angels, and conjured by a postmodernist with a wicked sense of humor.

In a smaller room adjacent to this display, I found thirty-four cameos, each one presenting a different canto number, usually in Roman numerals (fig. 1). The identification sometimes appeared scrawled as graffiti on storefronts and bathroom walls, sometimes with the propriety of street signs or advertising logos, sometimes like messages left by someone for nobody in particular. Often you had to hunt down the canto indicators, so much were they part of an urban scene that the eye takes for granted or immediately edits out. The full-page illustrations I had first seen played with the contrast between the serious grandeur of Dante and Doré and the "out there" dimension of LA: the two-storey inflated Fred Flintstone flanking a megastore escalator is Birk's version of the giant, Antaeus, who deposits Virgil and Dante in Hell's lowest circle (fig. 2). The cameos, however, were realistic snapshots, miniature glimpses of city life that did not cry out for attention. Yet to discover the canto's number, you had to take the scene seriously enough to find "CANTO VI" painted on the underside of a skateboard, or "CANTO XII" inscribed on a Super Size fries packet, or an alley door marked "CANTO XX" that might best be left unopened. It was as if Birk were saying that to locate your whereabouts in Dante's poem, you have to take a long hard look at the metropolitan ephemera



Fig. 1 *Inferno* 4 (©2004 Sandow Birk, courtesy of the artist).

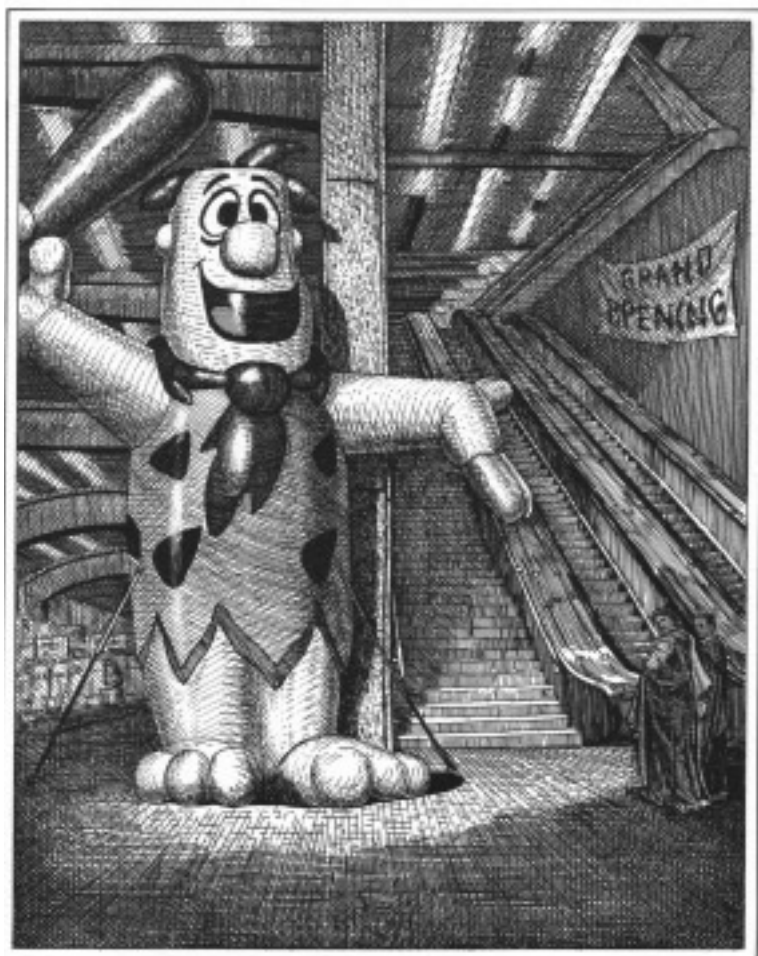


Fig. 2 *Inferno* 31 (©2004 Sandow Birk, courtesy of the artist).



Fig. 3 *Inferno* 26 (©2004 Sandow Birk, courtesy of the artist).



Fig. 4 *Purgatorio 10* (©2005 Sandow Birk, courtesy of the artist).

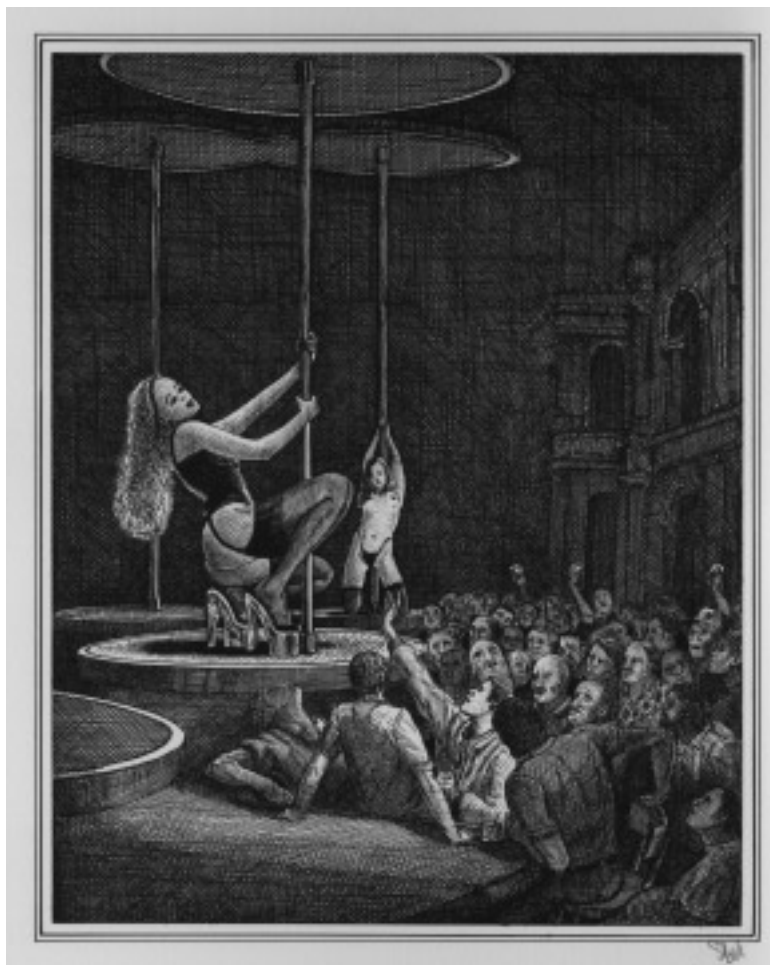


Fig. 5 *Purgatorio* 28 (©2005 Sandow Birk, courtesy of the artist).

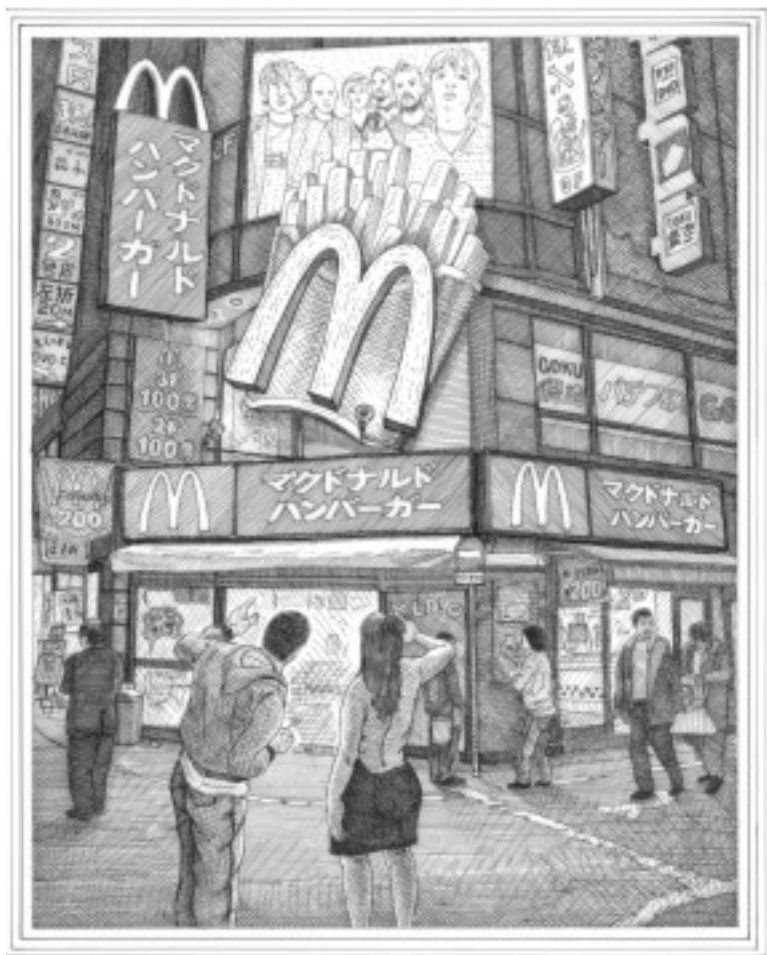


Fig. 6 *Paradiso 18* (©2005 Sandow Birk, courtesy of the artist).



Fig. 7 *Paradiso* 14 (Gustave Doré).

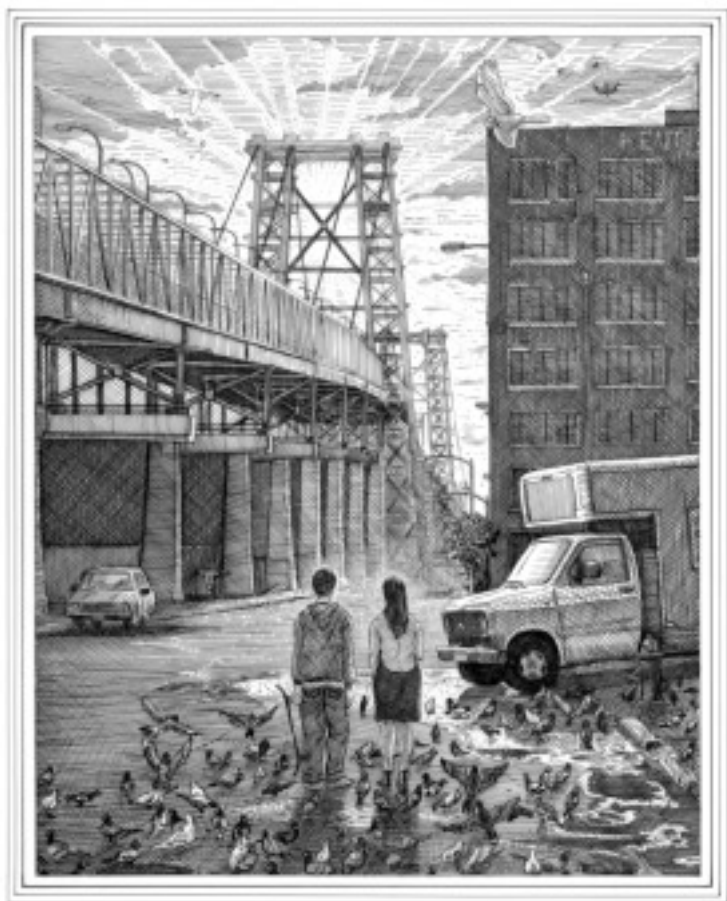


Fig. 8 *Paradiso 14* (©2005 Sandow Birk, courtesy of the artist).

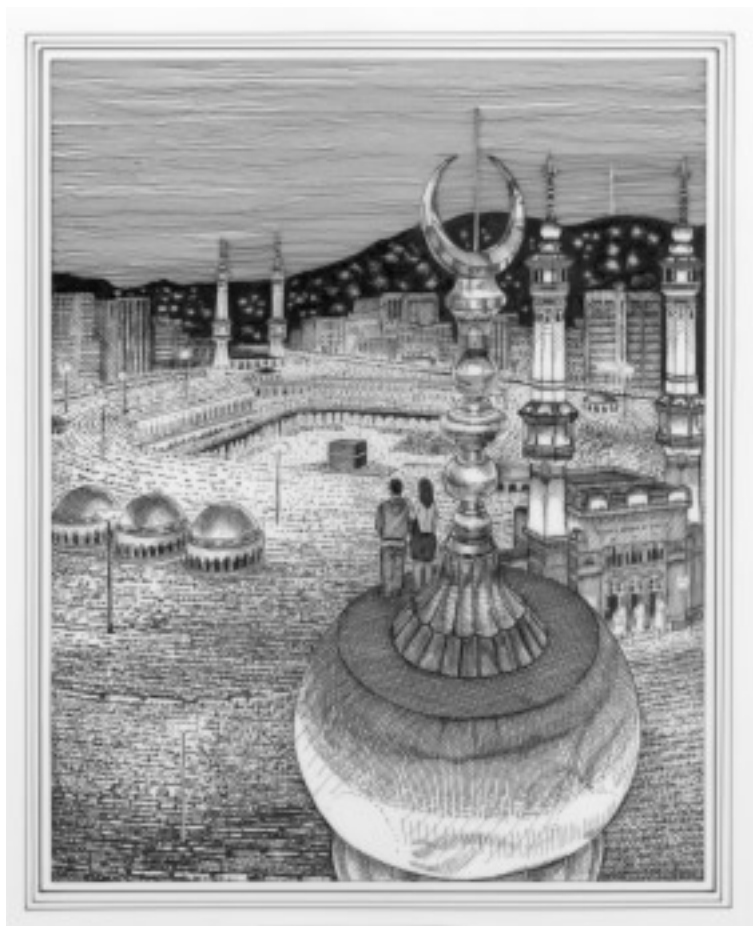


Fig. 9 *Paradiso 30* (©2005 Sandow Birk, courtesy of the artist).



Fig. 10 *Paradiso* 30 (Gustave Doré).

all around you. Despite the throwaway character of this world, not everything was, in fact, disposable.

What was it about the show that kept a Dante scholar's attention for two hours and provoked me to bother the gallery owner until she gave me the wherewithal to contact the artist? To begin with, the boldness of Sandow Birk's undertaking. At the outset of the new millenium, here was someone taking on a poem that inspired illustration almost from its appearance in the early-fourteenth century. Along with the anonymous illuminators of the Quattrocento manuscripts, and in addition to Doré, these include Sandro Botticelli, William Blake, Salvator Dali, Leonard Baskin, Robert Moser, Robert Rauschenberg, Marcel Dzarma, and Monika Beisner. What distinguished Sandow Birk from this venerable company was his brash irreverence not so much for the *Inferno* itself, but for the sage and serious Dante who had been constructed over the centuries.

And then there was Birk's comprehension that, even though technically a journey through the Catholic afterlife, the *Commedia* is an exploration of the here and now. As Erich Auerbach famously recognized, Dante is the poet of the "secular world." The great tradition of Dante illustration has usually taken the poem out of our world and presented it as an alternative universe unto itself. Birk, however, takes his clue from the poet, who constantly made the *Inferno* vivid and relevant to his contemporary readers by referring them to places they knew: *this* crowded Roman bridge with two-way traffic, *that* listing Bolognese tower, or the Arsenale in Venice, whose shipyard workers spend the winter months using hot pitch to make boats seaworthy for spring. Birk's *Inferno* comes to us via the sleazy parts of LA, and presents a vision of a post-industrial America that, like Dante's *Inferno*, is relentlessly urban and decayed. Looking for Hell? It's here and now.

As I worked my way through the exhibit I found myself circling back to Birk's illustration of *Inferno* 26 (fig. 3). This is the famous canto of Ulysses, in which the honey-tongued

spinner of falsehood, reduced to a tongue of fire, draws the pilgrim like a moth to a flame. Dante first sees Ulysses in a crowd of other lights that stretch out below him like fireflies flickering in a summer's meadow. What seems straightforward and benign at first, however, proves to be pure deception: each of the lights conceals a false counselor who once used the gift of language to manipulate and destroy. Birk borrows much of Doré's rendering: the massive rocky ledge where the toga-clad Virgil holds on to Dante, the crevice into which they peer, the shining light that draws the pilgrim into its depth. To this scene Birk, however, brings two new elements. He adds the field of fireflies that Doré ignores, that here becomes the myriad lights of Los Angeles sparkling across the city's basin as seen from above. Then there is the rocky outcrop on which Virgil and Dante stand, that turns out to be the steep hillside on which steel girders prop up the nine massive letters of the Hollywood sign—one of the great icons of the city and indeed the "sign" of its major industry. These LA touches do more than add local color or inspire a laugh of recognition: they suggest (in a humorous rather than a moralistic way) that Hollywood's vast metropolis is all about manipulation of words and images, all about honey-tongued spinners of falsehood.

Less than a year after I saw this exhibit there was a copy of the *Inferno* in my hands, an "adaptation" of the poem by Sandow Birk and his colleague Marcus Sanders. Neither of them knows Italian, and so instead of a fresh translation, they have taken the work of others and made a prose paraphrase set out on the page like free verse. This format has continued in the *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* volumes. At times the text reads like a streamlined, poor man's version of translators John Ciardi and Robert Pinsky. Details that appear in these editions as footnotes are now brought succinctly into the poetry, no doubt to make the text less threatening and to afford the convenience of "one stop" reading. Birk and Sanders cut through many a textual thicket, sometimes by ignoring the jungle altogether, some-

times by reducing a complicated description to its plain sense. Lost is the incredible richness of a poem which repays endless re-reading; gained is a clear idea of what is going on at any given moment, even in discourse as knotty as Statius on embryology in *Purgatorio* 25 or Beatrice on moon spots in *Paradiso* 2.

In addition to simplifying the text, Birk and Sanders have also come up with California-inflected youth speak that has been variously described by reviewers as “guy inarticulate-ness,” “Valley girl,” “laid back,” “street slang,” and “flat, vernacular, profane, irreverent stoner poetry.” Italianists and keepers of the flame are sure to be outraged; on the other hand, young people (along with anyone who prefers their vernacular vulgar) will have a good time—as did an Italian couple I came upon in a bookstore who, after being forced the official Dante in high school, were thrilled to discover Birk and Sanders. “Could it be translated into Italian?” they asked.

These authors speak of their work as an “adaptation”; I think of it as a paraphrase on the order of the 1960s *Cotton Patch* New Testament, which took liberties with another “sacred” text in order to make it accessible to people who would not otherwise pick up the Good Book. There’s an “as told to” quality to this venture, or better yet, a sense when reading it that someone has cornered you in a bar or a coffee shop with a tale to tell. This kind of living language can have a very short shelf life, and it may well be that the frequently employed “whatever” in this text will go the way of “as if” in the 1990s, and therefore appear embarrassingly out of touch to next year’s *futura gente*. Nonetheless, the effect of their chatty orality is to orient the entire poem in the direction of what critics have called Dante’s “addresses” to the reader, that is, to generalize the urgent, immediate sense of those discrete moments in the *Commedia* when Dante speaks directly to the person turning his page in order to counsel, encourage, or chide. Their overall tone is urban “Down Home” or good-natured “No Shit.”

What Would Dante Think? The poet produced a treatise, *De vulgari eloquentiae*, in scholarly Latin in order to argue the potential glories of the vernacular; he also famously chose to write his enormous poem not in Latin but in the dialect of Florence—not what the learned of the day expected of someone so talented and so ambitious. His frame of reference embraced the depths as well as the heights of human experience, and one can as readily find a fart and an asshole in the *Inferno* as plumb the sublime in the *Paradiso*. Not that the poet's diction is always so easy to place: high up in the celestial spheres, for instance, Dante's great-great grandfather reassures him that if people don't like his truth-telling, then "lascia pur grattar dov' è la rognà" (*Par.* 17.129)—let them go scratch where they have the itch. (Oddly, this is an opportunity to register Dante's own pungency that the adapters miss with their "let those who are / bothered by it deal with it however they want.")

Twice in the poem Dante uses the phrase *uso moderno* either to indicate the normal manner in which things are done now (*Purg.* 16.33), or to refer, in a specifically linguistic context, to the feel of contemporary language (*Purg.* 26.113). This conversational "middle flight" (to invoke the register that Milton said he would *not* employ in his *Paradise Lost*) keeps the narrative rolling along. It can diverge into street talk or into conversational banter; it certainly does not shy away from heavy-going theology or sheer verbal pyrotechnics; but the default diction of the poem is colloquial. This quality of a "modern" living speech is miraculously enhanced by the intricate *terza rima* scheme (aba, bcb) which, rather than imposing a rigid form on the Italian, seems instead to release its energies.

The "middle flight" developed by Birk and Sandow moves back and forth between two registers, as we find at the beginning of *Paradiso* 1. The opening lines, an easy paraphrase of the Italian text, are neither more nor less colloquial than the original:

The glory of God is everywhere and shines in all things, flowing through the universe, glowing stronger in some places and less in others.

Much changes just a few lines later, however, when Dante addresses Apollo, the classical god of inspiration and father of the Muses:

Apollo, I'm calling on your help to finish off this part.
I'm going to need your inspiration if I'm ever going
to deserve to wear your laurel crown. So far I've
only been asking the Muses up on Mt. Parnassus
to help me write this thing, but I'm gonna need
your help to write about Heaven's arena.
I'll need your music to flow through me like
when Johnny won the golden fiddle in that
Devil Went Down to Georgia country-western song.

Dante's text, in Allen Mandelbaum's translation, goes like this:

O good Apollo, for this final task
make me the vessel of your excellence,
what you, to merit your loved laurel, ask.
Until this point, one of Parnassus' peaks
sufficed for me; but now I face the test,
the agon that is left; I need both crests.
Enter into my breast; within me breathe
the very power you made manifest
when you drew Marsyas out from his limb's sheath.

Birk and Sanders make these lines conversational, guy to guy. From the get-go, they drop the vocative "O" that signals high rhetoric, and then down shift stylistically: "finish off this part," "to write this thing, I'm gonna need / your help." Whereas Dante left the Muses to be inferred from the mention of Mount Parnassus, their home, Birk and

Sanders bring them on stage in order to make sure they are in the reader's mind without requiring a footnote's explanation.

What is most noteworthy in these lines is the substitute simile they offer at the end of the passage. Here the classical baggage represented by the ghastly story of Marsyas—flayed alive by Apollo for having challenged the god to a musical duel—is rejected outright, probably because it presents too much back story and poses too many ambiguities to handle at once. (Why, after all, would a poet ask to be taken out of himself as gruesomely as Marsyas was? Why add the transgressive note at this point in the poem?) Instead of retaining the Ovidian reference—one in a chain of such figures running throughout the *Commedia*—we get a vernacular artist (“Johnny”) being filled with a power beyond himself; we are given in the golden fiddle a country-and-western equivalent to the laurel crown; and we are referred to a “native” musical idiom that may well strike a chord with the c&w aficionado (although someone not in the know may be as lost as I was by *Devil Went Down to Georgia*).

The prize Johnny covets is a golden fiddle or maybe a Grammy. The idea that Dante aspired to something impossibly grander (and infinitely riskier) than such triumphs goes against the grain of this entire venture. The goal is to deflate, democratize, and bring the reader on board, preferably laughing. Laughter is very often the case, perhaps more for the seasoned reader who realizes what's being played with than for the first timer who doesn't know quite how funny that turn of phrase really is. But because of the sustained joculariry, much of the poem vanishes, especially in the second two canticles. The tragic Marsyas becomes unimaginable, whereas Johnny doing *Devil Went Down to Georgia* is right at home.

Irony is the natural element for Birk and Sanders, and therefore they are home free in the *Inferno*, where their exuberant spin on Los Angeles corresponds to Dante's own bittersweet (bordering on savage) relationship to his own basin

city, Florence. Hell is meant to be a hall of funhouse mirrors, and nobody (despite the deceptive first take) is supposed to look good for long. *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*, however, present major problems for the ironist: so much in these canticles asks to be taken straight, to be seen as beautiful and good. To be sure, the city states of Italy and kingdoms of Europe are still witheringly invoked, warts and all; on the seven terraces of the Mountain we also see how the penitence fits the sin, as when the Proud carry on their backs the stony burden of their egos (depicted by Sandow Birk as men ascending a staircase, doubled over by appliances—fig. 4). Yet Dante's Purgatory is not another exercise in infernal absurdity but Hell turned inside out and right side up. In the poet's rendering, it is a mountain where pain means gain; it is all outdoors, bathed in sunshine and in the light of stars. Extraordinary natural beauty is matched by the hyper-realistic art work of God, the "better craftsman" who orchestrates the whole process of transformation through intaglio murals, carved pavements, pageants and processions, and dramas that appear to the mind's eye alone. The hard climb culminates in Eden, a pastoral dream come true, the human "nest" once lost and now regained.

When illustrating the second canticle of the poem, as well as in the paradisaical third, Birk continues the urban reference of his *Inferno*: his afterlife will always be here and now, in mundane America. Instead of remaining in Los Angeles, however, the city of choice for his Purgatory is San Francisco. This marks a visual upgrade: some use is made of its hilly typography, and there are occasional vistas that open up to the Golden Gate Bridge or the Transamerica Building. But by and large this "second kingdom" is still gritty and urban, kept low to the ground, and alluded to in details that wittily suggest the Bay Area rather than the Los Angeles basin—we find BART rather than the freeway; there are more Asian take-outs than Latino.

Yet, surprisingly for a location that boasts the glorious Golden Gate Park, Birk finds in San Francisco—America's

most beautiful city—no analogy to Dante’s paradisiacal groves and sparkling waters. Instead, his “Garden of Eden” turns out to be a strip joint in some place that has not yet seen gentrification (fig. 5). Matelda in bikini and heels writhes in a pole dance; the three theological virtues are a trio of hotties named Faith, Hope, and Charity; and the divine Beatrice—Dante’s “girl,” chubby in a little black dress—walks these mean streets with a come-hither attitude. The Dante scholar is puzzled by these choices. Is Eden placed on the wild side of the tracks because the pastoral no longer speaks to us? Does the theological romance that Beatrice represents in the *Commedia* appear too idealized and highfalutin for our *moderno uso*? Are we more likely to entertain the notion of a golden-hearted hooker than imagine a beloved who is at one and the same time herself and Christ? Is our all too solid flesh compelling, reliable, *real* in ways that the spirit (or whatever) is not? Birk’s (e-mail) response to my questions reveals what motivated him to transform Dante’s earthly paradise into a red light district: “Beauty and goodness might be found in a strip bar, inspiration in a sunrise; contemplations on the nature of the soul can happen with a homeless person, and the fictional muses of Faith, Hope, and Charity might just as well be represented by the ‘hotties’ of today as by the ‘hotties’ of yesterday that we find in Romantic painting.”

The third volume of Birk’s *Commedia* marks his radical reinvention of Dante’s vision. In his *Paradiso* we see most clearly that he is not interested in illustrating Dante but rather in using him as a starting point for his own vision of present twenty-first century. Instead of a Beatrice who gets progressively more beautiful as the journey ascends the ladder of being, Dante’s “girl” remains the strangely plump figure she was in *Purgatorio*, not getting any more lovely (let alone more ineffable) as she carries on: “In any *American* ‘Divine Comedy’ there have to be fat people.” Here beauty lies in the eye of her lover rather than in any beholder of these images. The blessed souls, invisible in *Paradiso* because of their effulgence, are rendered by Birk as ordinary folk

likely to be found on a New York subway hurtling through Manhattan for destinations in Queens or the Bronx. They are meant to remind us of those who surround us now, ordinary folk without haloes or harps: “the fat, the young, the old, the hip-hop youth and Asian shopkeeper, the garbage truck driver, the business man.” In this paradise the blessed appear as what they were in life, not as the invisible creatures of light Dante encounters, planet by planet, in a succession of abstract luminous configurations: circumscribed circles in the Sun, a cross in Mars, an imperial eagle in Jupiter, a ladder in Saturn, a meadow of flowers in the Heaven of the Fixed Stars. They look like us, no better, no worse. The irony and wit that characterized Birk’s *Inferno* carry on in beatitude, though with less bite. For instance, in the spirit of the Hollywood sign riding high above Hell’s false counselors, Dante’s Eagle of Justice in *Paradiso* 17–19 becomes a supersize McDonald’s *M* over a street corner—*signum imperii* of America’s global empire (fig. 6). The six souls who make up its eye are a TV billboard in Tokyo flashing the “corporate” image of a rock band. As on earth, so in heaven.

Doré attempted to capture the ineffable Emyrean through dense swirls of indistinct angels, “ten thousand times ten thousand,” revolving around a central luminosity—an empty space, perhaps corresponding to the divine excess that the poet cannot finally articulate. In this image he was considerably more successful than elsewhere in his *Paradiso*, whose illustrations have none of the energy and invention of his *Inferno* and largely dissolve into the pious cliché of his times: a plaster saint Beatrice, a surfeit of diaphanous robes and angel wings. Birk will have none of this. His vision of the cross that Dante glimpses when he ascends to the heaven of Mars (*Paradiso* 14) is not Doré’s crucifix held aloft by a swarm of angels, before which the pilgrim poses reverently on the priedieu of a cloud (fig 7); it is, rather, the sun setting through the crossed supports of the Williamsburg Bridge, seen by Dante and Beatrice from a trash-strewn vacant lot. Paradise is Now, as close as Brooklyn and the Lower East Side (fig. 8).

Most astonishing of all, however, is Birk's rendering of the City of God (fig. 9). For the realm of the imageless ineffable, Dante constructs a metaphoric impossibility that can be "seen" only in motion, in the switching back and forth between antithetical images—an immense white rose and a Coliseum-like amphitheater. In this blurring of quite different worlds of symbolic discourse, the flower of Venus and of Mary, the New Jerusalem and a New Rome "where Christ is a Roman," everything comes together before fading into the lightning flash that concludes the poem. How to depict this extraordinary synthesis that can last only a moment before language fails, the *Commedia* ends, and the poet finds himself carried into an experience he cannot talk about? Birk's sense of an ending borrows Doré's view of the Empyrean as a swirl of circles around an apparently empty vortex (fig. 10). But in perhaps his most remarkable rethinking of his sources—of Dante's poem as well as of Doré's engravings—the still point of the Empyrean's turning world becomes the Kaabah at the heart of Mecca. We have all seen the photographs: a myriad of the white-robed devout circle the black stone shrine at the center of a plaza, within which lies a sacred black stone said to have been given to Abraham by the archangel Gabriel. This holiest of objects draws faithful pilgrims from all over the world, who direct their prayers toward it five times a day wherever they may be, and who make Mecca the destination of an obligatory once-in-a-lifetime pilgrimage.

What would Dante think? The poet is notoriously hateful toward Islam, which he saw as an aberration of Christianity that divided the Body of Christ and prevented a unified world empire. Hell's most disgusting punishment is in fact reserved for Mohammed and his son-in-law Ali, who are found in *Inferno* 28 among grotesque Schismatics. They tear into their own bowels and rip open their chests: "See how fucked up I am now!" shouts The Prophet in the Birk-Sanders rendering. Dante's afterlife does not take kindly to other religions. And so the poet consigns the pagan worthies

of the ancient pre-Christian world to Limbo, the first circle of Hell, and affirms through the Eagle of Justice that no one ever came to paradise except by believing in Christ either before or after his Incarnation.

Nonetheless, there appear to be loopholes in his well-wrought theological system. Two medieval Moslems take their place in Limbo along with virtuous Greeks and Romans; Cato, a pagan suicide, is guardian of Purgatory; and a Trojan comrade of Aeneas, Ripheus, keeps company with King David in the Heaven of Justice. Perhaps in giving us his paradisaical Mecca as the centerpiece of the City of God, Birk is pushing Dante's own envelope, moving him farther along a path he had just begun to blaze in the *Commedia*. There are hints of this earlier on, when the angel who guards the entrance to Purgatory appears against a Hindu temple backdrop or when the cameo for canto 22 evokes the religion of the Aztecs.

In one sense, of course, the artist is having fun with any form of religious absolutism: "Wouldn't that be a twist if when the Catholics get to heaven, it's a Muslim place?" He is also having fun with the Dante who is presumptuous enough to place his "girlfriend" high in the heavenly hierarchy, only a seat or two away from the Virgin Mary! Beatrice's inclusion in *Paradiso* is one of the poet's more unorthodox (not to mention audacious) moments; as such, it may invite the opening of doors that Dante otherwise closed tightly or only left ajar. For all the tweaking, Birk's intent is serious: "I would like to imagine a heaven where everyone can go—the Jews, the Muslims, even 'the people from near the Ganges' who have never heard of Jesus."

There is something Dante-esque about this taking of liberty with a source. The poet never scrupled to make use of other writers without particular regard for the integrity of their work, just as he invariably re-wrote what he read when it suited him. We see this almost every time he borrows or even quotes from the *Aeneid*. Again and again we are told that Virgil is Dante's revered mentor in art, that his text is

the flame that ignites other poets, that he is a fountain that pours forth like the Muses' Helicon; but this in no way stops the poet from refuting Virgil's essentially tragic vision by writing a Virgilian *Commedia* or from transforming the master's despairing pagan text into a hopeful Christian one. It is not that he misunderstood what Virgil had so beautifully imagined and expressed; it is, rather, that he used an old world to construct something new, something that answered the call of *moderno uso*. So too with the efforts of Birk and Sanders: the point should not be to focus on what the adaptation "got wrong" about Dante, but rather to pay attention to what this new world of image and text has to reveal.