# Section 3: **Screens and stages**

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# Liturgy and Theatre at the Gates of Dis. The *Divine Comedy* as a Transcodification of Medieval Performance

**Abstract:** This essay aims to apply Performance Studies to investigate some theatrical aspects of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Through this lens, the Sacred Poem emerges as a great work of transcodification that absorbs and recasts many elements of medieval theatre. This appears with evidence in Dante and Virgil's struggle against the devils at the gates of Dis (*Inferno* VIII–IX), a "sacred drama" in which the two pilgrims are no longer involved as spectators but as actors on stage within a representation that ties ritual and theatre. The analysis of this episode through the lens of performance can highlight the transcoding of theatre in literature and help reconstructing an aspect – the performative one – that appears far from secondary in Dante's poem.

**Keywords:** Divine Comedy, medieval theatre, liturgy, performance, transcodification

Performance Studies – whose main theorization is due to Richard Schechner[1] – intend to outline an interdisciplinary, open, and comprehensive paradigm. Starting with a specific focus on artistic and aesthetic performances, they developed an interdisciplinary approach that, through the methodological assumption of performance as a lens for studying the world, made them applicable even to what is not strictly defined as a performance: in this way cultural phenomena, the behaviors of everyday life, and even objects can be analyzed as performances.[2]

A performance happening in liveness can be recorded, filmed, or documented – in a word, can be *mediatized*. Still, a "mediated performance" is not a lifeless object. It can be investigated as a complex dynamic entity endowed with agency and as an event – in the sense of *Ereignis* – that intercepts the world view, the culture, and the practices of its time, influences them, and eventually offers them to the

1 See Schechner 1976, 1985, 2004, 2013. See also Turner 1982, 1986a, 1986b; Goffman 1959.

2 See Schechner 2013, 38. In the concepts of performance and performativity (terms that are "hard to pin down", Schechner 2013, 123), Schechner outlines objects of study open to theoretical and methodological extensions and redefinitions.

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ages to come.[3] In fact, a performance is a creative act, but also a mean of transmission and preservation of cultural memory. Then, a performance transcoded into performativity continues to conduct a substantial part of its original sense or may even acquire new meanings through the passage into the new medium. Thus, the distinction between what *is a performance* and what is *as a performance* does not exclude the media – whether traditional or modern – but makes them a privileged point of reference.[4]

Under this lens, it is possible to analyze how a literary text such as Dante's *Divine Comedy* treasures the "broad spectrum of performing"[5] of Middle Ages by transcoding and resemantizing it in the written page to become an ideal archive of the cultural memory of its time.[6] Referring to a traditional distinction between *artes in effectu* (that generate a physical object) and *artes actuosae* (accomplished in the act itself without leaving any product),[7] it can be acknowledged that Dante's Poem crystallizes many *artes actuosae* and translates them into literary forms. The *Comedy* mentions many performances of the late Middle Ages, such as knightly tournaments and jousts (*Inf.* XXII, 1–9), dances (*Par.* XIV, 19–21; XXIV, 13–18; XXV, 103; *Inf.* XIV, 40; *Purg.* X, 64–65), and religious sermons (*Par.* XXIX, 109–117). These become objects of a literary reinterpretation and provide material for the representation of the otherworldly kingdoms with images familiar to Dante's contemporary reader. Moreover, some episodes of the *Comedy* move towards the theatrical forms of the time,[8] as if Dante were staging real dramas within his Poem. It is noteworthy that theatricality emerges in scenes marked by a clear ritual character.

From this point of view, the episode of Dante and Virgil's struggle against the devils at the gates of the infernal city of Dis (*Inf.* VIII and IX) appears worthy of analysis.

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**3** From this point of view, Hermeneutics and Cognitive Sciences have provided acquired notions such us precomprehension, hermeneutic circle, fusion of horizons, conflict of interpretations on the one hand (see at least Gadamer 1960; Ricœur 1969, 1977, 1986), and embodied cognition, literary mind and conceptual blending on the other (see Lakoff/Johnson 1980, 1999; Varela/Thompson/Rosch 1992; Turner 1996, 2014; Clark 1997; Fauconnier/Turner 2002).

**4** Still, some of Schechner's most brilliant students affirm otherwise. E. g., see Phelan 1993, 146: "Performance's only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance".

**5** Schechner 2013, 170.

**6** On archive and repertoire, see Taylor 2003.

**7** See Tomasello/Vescovo 2021, 21; Vescovo 2015, 339.

**8** On medieval theatre, see D'Ancona 1891; Faccioli 1975; Apollonio 1981; Toschi 1982; Allegri 1988; Drumbl 1989; Pietrini 2001.

I will summarize it. First, the demon Phlegyas ferries Dante and Virgil across the river Styx. The damned soul of Filippo Argenti emerges from the water, and Dante has an intense altercation with him. Then, the pilgrims the pilgrims arrive before the city of Dis, from whose walls thousands of devils watch them and ask:

> [...] "Who is this, who is not dead,
> yet passes through the kingdom of the dead?"[9]

The devils come out to bargain: Virgil will stay with them, and Dante will find his way back alone. Virgil objects that Dante's journey is willed by God, but the devils close the doors of the city in his face. Although dismayed, Virgil still encourages Dante affirming that the devils yet tried to compete against Christ's descent into Hell. Then, the three Furies suddenly appear and invoke Medusa, bringing the sense of horror to its peak. In this impasse, a being "sent from Heaven"[10] comes in aid. He opens the gates of Dis with a small "wand"[11] and rebukes the devils for opposing the passage of the pilgrims. Finally, he comes back to where he came from without a word. Thus, Dante and Virgil can proceed "without further struggle."[12]

This episode is striking for its marked narrative and dramatic autonomy. Furthermore, it brings together both ritual and theatrical aspects, so that Umberto Bosco has defined it as a sacred drama.[13] A first consideration concerns its setting in a liminal place. In fact, the gates of Dis divide the upper Circles of Hell (Lust, Gluttony, Greed, and Wrath) and the lower ones (Heresy, Violence, Fraud, and Treachery). In the moral topography of Dante's *Inferno*, the border is drawn here between the mere incontinence and the will of pursuing evil. Thus, the gates of Dis represent a *limen* that human reason allegorized by Virgil cannot cross without God's help.

The ritual character of the episode is further clarified by the Heavenly Messenger, whose role seems to officiate a "liturgy of Christ's Harrowing of Hell", a rite that repeats the Savior's descent into the kingdom of the damned (in the same way that, on earth, the Holy Mass repeats the Last Supper).[14] Erich Auerbach

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**9** *Inf.* VIII, 85–86. The English translation of the poem is quoted from Hollander/Hollander 2000–2007.

**10** *Inf.* IX, 86.

**11** *Inf.* IX, 90.

**12** *Inf.* IX, 107.

**13** Bosco 1977, 136.

**14** Christ's Harrowing of Hell is a truth of faith that, besides indirect biblical references, finds its broadest narration in the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, a text that inspired the medieval popular theatre (traces of it can be found, for example, in the dramatic cycles of York and Wakesfield). See Izydorc-

has highlighted the Christological function of the Heavenly Messenger: his identity is not (and perhaps does not require to be) clarified but seems to coincide with his function *to perform the rite* as a figure of Christ.[15]

Thus, the entire episode makes up a fundamental rite of passage in the initiatory journey of Dante, who has to explore the lower states of Being (*Inferno*), recover the Edenic condition (*Purgatorio*) and finally reach the full metaphysical realization (*Paradiso*).[16]

Besides rituality, the episode also seems strongly marked by theatricality. The city of Dis has "mosques / [...] glowing red", "moats / dug deep", iron-like "walls",[17] a "high tower's blazing peak" and the general aspect of a "fortress".[18] Dante frames and distributes characters and scenes like in a painting[19] or a scenography. In fact, it should be noted that medieval liturgical dramas often represented hell as a fortified city. This scenography was effective precisely in the representations of Christ's descent into hell, where the Savior broke down the infernal gates.[20] Within this setting, Dante and Virgil abandon their most usual role of spectators to become actors dramatically engaged in the scene. In doing so, it is as if the poet here reiterated the uncertainty of boundaries between performers and audience in medieval theatre.[21]

The VIII *canto* offers two crucial dialogues. The first one, between Phlegyas and Virgil, follows the pattern with which the Latin poet has already imposed his authority on Charon, Minos, and Pluto:

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zyk 1997; Collura 2015. Dante could also have deepened the theological doctrine on Christ's Harrowing of Hell in Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae* (IIIa, q. 52).

**15** See Auerbach 1960, 210, n. 43.

**16** See Guénon 1925. On Guénon's interpretations of Dante, see Pizzimento 2018, 2020. The three stages exposed resemble the phases or hierarchical activities identified by Christian theology starting from Dionysius the Areopagite (*De cœl. hier.* III, 3). These phases are recognized as constituting the action of the character Dante in the poem: *purgatio*, *illuminatio* and *unio*. See Mineo 1968, 222.

**17** *Inf.* VIII, 71–72, 76–77, 79.

**18** *Inf.* IX, 37, 109.

**19** Vallone 1966, 247.

**20** Brockett/Hildy 2014, 78. On the scenography of medieval theatre, see Guénon 1964, 189: "Le théâtre, en effet, n'est pas forcément borné à représenter le monde humain, c'est-à-dire un seul état de manifestation ; il peut aussi représenter en même temps les mondes supérieurs et inférieurs. Dans les 'mystères' du moyen âge, la scène était, pour cette raison, divisée en plusieurs étages correspondant aux différents mondes, généralement répartis suivant la division ternaire : ciel, terre, enfer ; et l'action se jouant simultanément dans ces différentes divisions représentait bien la simultanéité essentielle des états de l'être."

**21** See Allegri 1988, 229.

[...] "Now you are caught, damned spirit!"
"Phlegyas, Phlegyas, this time you shout in vain,"
replied my lord. "You will have us no longer
than it takes to cross this bog."[22]

The second dialogue occurs between Dante and Filippo Argenti. It displays in a rapid sequence the identification of the damned, the aversion of Dante, and the quarrel between the two. The comic-realistic register (typical of the *tenzone* but also of the jesters' performances) marks this dialogue, while the narration is reduced to a script indicating who is speaking:

While we crossed the stagnant swamp
one cloaked in mud rose up to say:
"Who are you that come before your time?"
And I to him: "If I come, I do not stay.
But you, who are you, now become so foul?"
He answered: "As you can see, I am one who weeps."
And I to him: "In weeping and in misery,
accursed spirit, may you remain.
I know you, for all your filth."
When he stretched both his hands toward the boat,
the wary master thrust him off, saying:
"Away there with the other dogs!"[23]

The lively altercation, the exaggeration of the feelings (Argenti's pain and Dante's aversion), and the actions reduced to mere captions elicit an interpretation of these verses as a dramatic *pièce* inside the *canto.*

From this point of view, the struggle of the two pilgrims against the devils of Dis is even more interesting. It should be noted that, as Dante's journey through Hell approaches its goal, the devils become increasingly reified, devoid of intelligence, autonomy, and dynamism: they suffer a sort of regression that reaches its lowest point in the mechanic stillness of Lucifer, described as a "windmill"[24] bereft of dramatic action. Yet the devils at the gates of Dis make a partial exception to this *anticlimax.* Of course, they do not reach the dramatic autonomy of the Malebranche[25] and remain an indistinct mass. Still, they have a certain depth in comparison with the other demons in the first canticle. They resemble the lively and frightening diabolical images widespread in medieval homiletic, fiction, theatre,

**22** *Inf.* VIII, 18–21.
**23** *Inf.* VIII, 32–43.
**24** *Inf.* XXXIV, 7.
**25** *Inf.* XXI–XXIII.

and folklore. According to theology, their opposition to God is hopeless, but the narrative needs of the Poem require them to be a real danger for the pilgrims. Consistent with the martial aspect of the city of Dis, the language of the devils is based on the lexicon of war: even though their opposition is vain, their speech is an act of supreme energy and aware violence.[26] Virgil knows that it is necessary to win the "fight"[27] against them. Nor is it by chance that his hitherto undisputed authority wavers in front of them. So far, the Latin poet has faced demons of mythological origin (i. e., Charon, Cerberus, Pluto, Phlegyas) but now he must deal with those of biblical origin, against which natural reason (that he allegorizes) can do nothing without the help of God.

The impasse and the suspense are emphasized by the interruption of the VIII *canto* at the peak of the tragedy (a narrative technique so far never seen in the *Comedy*) and the beginning of the IX *canto* with the doubts of Virgil, whose authority diminished for reasons that seem more dramatic than allegorical or theological. His hesitant, broken up speech has the psychological relevance of a theatrical soliloquy:[28]

> "Yet we must win this fight," he began,
> "or else… Such help was promised us.
> How long it seems to me till someone comes!"[29]

This triplet expresses purpose, hesitation, reassurance, and uncertainty. This rapid sequence, together with the disruption of Virgil's speech, is an invention of a purely theatrical nature.[30] So, the glimpses, the pauses, and the silence are all elements held up with a vivid sense of the unspoken and ineffable.[31] All this instils in Dante – and in the reader – an agonizing doubt about Virgil's authority. Even Dante's question ("Does ever anyone from the first circle, / where the only penalty is hope cut off, / descend so deep into this dismal pit?")[32] and Virgil's answer ("It seldom happens…")[33] sounds like an expedient to make the drama more acute.[34]

As for Dante-character, here for the first time he faces a (seemingly) real danger that threatens to end his journey before time and turn him back on his traces

**26** Vallone 1966, 241.
**27** *Inf.* IX, 7. See Pizzimento 2022.
**28** Vallone 1966, 243.
**29** *Inf.* IX, 8–10.
**30** See Mastandrea 2013, 287.
**31** Vallone 1966, 243.
**32** *Inf.* IX, 17–19.
**33** *Inf.* IX, 21–33.
**34** Vallone 1966, 244.

without the escort of Virgil (i. e., to get lost in the lower states of Being). In a scene made even more terrifying by the Furies and Medusa,[35] only the Heavenly Messenger, bursting onto the scene like a *deus ex machina*,[36] can dissolve the impasse. His contemptuous words to the devils ("O outcasts of Heaven, race despised…")[37] do not aim to persuade the enemies, but but to affirm (in front of the reader/spectator) the uselessness of their opposition and the undeniable evidence of God's will. Since there is no possible competition, any tragic possibility is excluded. This causes the devils to appear more and more pathetic, so that they end up looking like "poor devils"[38] and taking on the traits of the defeated bolds typical of medieval theatre.

Thus, *cantos* VIII and IX is equally marked by the ritual character (inherent in the rite of passage and in the *pugna spiritualis*) and by the tendency towards scenic and theatrical invention. Ritual and drama establish the same relationship that existed between liturgy and sacred theatre in the Middle Ages. This relationship can be referred to Schechner's efficacy/entertainment dyad, that outlines the *continuum* of performance from ritual (in which maximum of effectiveness is given) to representation (in which maximum of entertainment is given).[39]

It should be noted that the "tragedy at the gates of Dis" presents many similarities with the "farce of the Malebranche" (*Inferno* XXI – XXXIII). Besides the conspicuous presence of devils, the two episodes are bound by the shifting of Dante and Virgil from spectators to actors, the defeat of Virgil in the face of the enemy, and the (seemingly) real risk that invests Dante. The difference in tone must be understood in terms of a parodic "intratextuality" pointed out against the characters onstage (Dante, Virgil, the devils).[40] It is as if the same story has to occur twice: the first as a tragedy and the second as a farce. In doing so, the *Comedy* almost covers the entire spectrum of the demonic manifestations – but, of course, also of the theatrical performance.

Thus, theatricality emerges as a "strong" structural element in the *Comedy*. Dante embraces in the *Comedy* the medieval broad spectrum of performing:

**35** It is to be noted that the Furies move and act like mechanical puppets (see Mastandrea 2013, 293) while Medusa is a disquieting presence offstage.

**36** In medieval theatre the angels acted in a similar way, descending from the celestial to the terrestrial *mansiones* through winches, pulleys, and machinery. See Brockett/Hildy 2014, 78.

**37** *Inf.* IX, 92 – 100.

**38** Vallone 1966, 254.

**39** See Schechner 2013, 80: "If the performance's purpose is to effect change, then […] the performance is a ritual. But if the performance's purpose is mostly to give pleasure, to show off, to be beautiful, or to pass the time, then the performance is an entertainment. The fact is that no performance is pure efficacy or pure entertainment."

**40** Barillari 2003, 64.

from the performances of everyday life to the "widespread theatricality" of his time. This volatile repertoire is transcodified in the literary medium: on the one hand, it is seized in its manifold manifestations and crystallized in – and adapted to – the writing; on the other, it is placed at the service of the "sacred poem– / [...] so shared by heaven and by earth."[41]

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**41** *Par.* XXV, 1 – 2.

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