

A Single Volume Bound by Love

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The Divine Comedy, by Dante Alighieri, translated by Clive James, Picador, £25, ISBN: 978-1447242192

In 1509, Pope Julius II commissioned Raphael to paint the frescos which decorate the Stanza della Segnatura in the Vatican. The result was the series of conversation pieces we know today, involving the great men (and a very few great women) of western civilisation arranged according to their own particular species of genius: the philosophers of the School of Athens; the poets clustered around Apollo on Mount Parnassus; the theologians at a heavenly altar for the Disputation of the Eucharist. In this exalted company, Dante Alighieri is unique in appearing twice. On Parnassus, he can be seen standing at Homer's right hand; but the same aquiline profile and laurel crown is also visible on the adjoining wall, where, in the company of Thomas Aquinas and Gregory the Great, he can be seen playing his part in theological debate.

Raphael's twin portraits are a tribute to the poet's range as it appeared at the beginning of the sixteenth century – canonical writer, honorary saint. But he was shortly to be reinvented. The new Protestant reformers, busily gathering material, noticed that Dante's hell was well populated with popes being punished for their misdeeds. This was a coup for the anti-papal cause. Dante was deemed a Protestant *avant la lettre* and was duly co-opted to appear in polemical texts like the bestselling *Catalogue of Witnesses to the Truth* (1556) in the pages of which he rubbed shoulders with Martin Luther and Jean Calvin. The Vatican, meanwhile, was not to be deflected from its own opinion. Certain inflammatory passages were recommended for excision from the *Commedia*, but Raphael's vision of the sanctified poet held true. In the Stanza della Segnatura, Dante continued to stand undisturbed among the saints at their centuries-long holy hour.

This potential for radical reinvention has served Dante well. It has certainly kept his translators busy. In the late eighties, Theodore Cauchey calculated that we had forty English translations of the whole *Commedia*, all fourteen thousand lines of it; twenty of the *Inferno*; eleven *Purgatorios*; six *Paradisos*. His numbers are already out of date: there are at least five new accounts of hell, including those by Ciaran Carson (2002) and Sean O'Brien (2006); and the list does not include translations of shorter excerpts or works showing a looser influence. That catalogue would start with Chaucer, and would rapidly spool from the compiler's grasp under the weight of the names: Milton, Browning, Byron, Eliot, Joyce. William Blake spent his last day on earth sketching illustrations for the *Commedia*. Mary Shelley invoked Dante in her political writings as a champion of liberty, and Éamon de Valera may have expected something similar when he set out on December 6th, 1921 to chair a paper comparing the linguistic fortunes of Dante's Tuscan with those of contemporary Irish. He was interrupted with the news that the Anglo-Irish Treaty had been signed in London that morning, but presumably, Dante continued to stand for freedom regardless. More recently, we have had the video game *Dante's Inferno* (2010), in which the muscle-bound poet cleans up the underworld; and Dan Brown has just released his *Inferno* (in which a muscle-bound Harvard professor of symbology cleans up the underworld). There is something in Dante to justify almost all of these remakings – not just in his enormous cast of characters, but in his own history. He was politician as well as poet, lover as well as scholar. He was even, like every male citizen of Florence, an occasional soldier. If he did not also find time to set up, in his more accessible works, codes warning of fiendish schemes to control the world's population through the dissemination of incurable viruses, at least someone else was on hand to make good that oversight.

Dan Brown's *Inferno* will jostle in the bookshops with Clive James's new verse translation. In a long

tradition of reimagining the *Commedia*, they both play their parts. What is perhaps unexpected is that, of the two, it is James's poem which challenges the pieties of Dantean translation. To be at the centre of a conspiracy theory is virtually a mark of literary distinction (look at Shakespeare's *Sonnets*), but the body of theoretical writing about translating Dante suggests that some of James's changes will appear more dramatic than the mere introduction of a few chase scenes through the Palazzo Vecchio.

The first of these is a question of form. The *Commedia* is written in Dante's signature *terza rima* (aba bcb cdc). He is so powerfully identified with this stanzaic structure that his followers can invoke him simply by arranging their lines in groups of three. Yeats wrote "Cuchulain Comforted" in prose, but recast it in unrhymed tercets, presumably to lend Dante's weight to his vision of Cuchulain in the underworld. True *terza rima*, however, is not easy to pull off in English – the lack of rhyme words makes it difficult to sustain. Mary Sidney employed it some time around 1600 to write her translation of Petrarch's *Triumph of Death*. The metre contorts her lines – she has to fight them into submission, where Petrarch's Italian seems to tumble naturally into rhyme. Translators of Dante have experienced similar struggles. Dorothy L Sayers retained the original form but sacrificed much of Dante's meaning to the exigencies of her metre. Longfellow, on the other hand, kept the tercets, but not the rhyme. Mark Musa, author of the Penguin Classics edition, followed Longfellow's example, producing unrhymed iambic pentameter in stanzas three lines long. Other forms have been tried, but this remains the most popular option: the tercet seems to operate throughout the world of translations as the visible guarantor of communion with Dante.

It is interesting, therefore, that James repudiates the bond. In place of trios, he gives us quatrains and a pattern of loose rhymes: abab, ababa, and other minor variations. Rhyme itself is controversial. Musa's introduction suggests that it is unwarranted: "It cannot be proved that rhyme necessarily makes a verse better: Milton declared rhyme to be a barbaric device, and many modern poets resolutely avoid it." The fact remains, however, that the experience of reading Milton is very different from that of reading Dante. Milton relies on the gravitational pull of his verse paragraphs to carry the reader along, but this effect depends on a magnificent distortion of English: he holds his sentences in suspense, and keeps the eye moving, by withholding his verbs over a page at a time. To duplicate this technique in a translation of Dante would be untrue to the effect of the *Commedia*, which is in turns more intimate, more demotic, and more obscene than anything in Milton. The conversational tone was not hampered by the demands of the rhyme scheme: for Dante, the abundance of rhyme words in Italian made *terza rima* a rhythm which could at least be made to sound unforced. Meanwhile, the interlocking pattern of sounds and echoes compelled the reader onwards through the long poem.

Clive James's quatrains are the highly effective compromise of a poet who has absorbed all of this; who is aware both of the demands of form, and of the limitations of the English language. He uses rhyme like Dante, to give movement and lightness to his five hundred pages of text, and to punctuate his points: each of the cantos, for instance, ends on a rhyming couplet, like the close of act on the Elizabethan stage. At the same time, the demands of the cross-rhymed quatrains are less strenuous than that of *terza rima*, so that his verse has a Byronic flexibility. It can accommodate lyrical hymns to the dawn as well as the detail of doctrinal exposition in heaven. It can also manage the mockery of the damned. Here Virgil, outraged that the demons have wilfully misdirected him through hell, complains to the hypocritical Friar:

My Leader stood with bent head, mortified.
"The one that hooks the sinners over there
Sold us a bill of goods," he said, whereat
The Friar grinned. "Yes, wasn't that unfair?
I think I once heard, in Bologna, that
The Devil sometimes has resort to vice.
He has been known to say what isn't true.
I've heard he isn't really very nice."

Quatrains have the quality of being, by their very nature, more capacious than the traditional tercet. In James's hands, this affords the opportunity to effect another small revolution: he folds the editorial glosses into the body of his text. Editions of Dante tend to come shored up with explanatory notes. There are early-modern copies where the verse is a small island, barely holding its ground against the encroaching waves of commentary. You can dip in for whatever Dante left unexplained: the name of the pope who made "the great refusal" by resigning the papacy (presumably no longer a mortal sin); the time of year signified by the confluence of the stars; probably, in fact, a warning about artificially created viruses designed to wipe out a tenth of the world's population unless there's a Harvard symbologist available to save the day. This sort of commentary tradition adheres to very few works – the Bible, Virgil, Ovid – and translators have generally been content to preserve the ambiguity of the text, leaving the commentators to pin down the meaning in the margins. Sometimes the alternative was dangerous: when William Tyndale was working on English Bible in 1534, he and his proof-reader came to blows over the question of whether introducing explanatory paraphrase into the body of the text represented a blasphemous meddling with scripture. They were right that the whole enterprise was risky: Tyndale was executed eighteen months later.

To judge by the reaction to the absent footnotes in certain reviews of the American edition, James should have approached his decision with no less of a *frisson*. His risk, however, has paid off: the needful information, whether it be the likeliest identifications for anonymous characters, or details for a reference grown obscure, is supplied unobtrusively and accurately. The scholarship which informs his reading of controversial points in the poem is immaculate: a necessary precaution, perhaps, in a book dedicated to his wife, Prue Shaw, one of the most distinguished Dante scholars of her generation. More remarkable is the sensitivity with which he approaches the task. Early on, for example, Dante introduces his guide through hell, the poet Virgil. He does so indirectly. The figure encountered in the dark wood says that he is the poet who sang of "that just son of Anchises". Anchises was the father of Aeneas: the shade is claiming authorship of the *Aeneid*. James adds the more telling name to the mix. In his version, Virgil announces

I sang about Anchises son, the just
Aeneas, pious, peerless.

It is one thing to have your reading interrupted while you identify Anchises in the footnotes. It is another to be deprived of the particular readerly pleasure of making connections. Dante was constantly gesturing beyond his text to a vast hinterland of literary tradition. Now, just as for the *Commedia*'s earliest readers, there is satisfaction to be gained in connecting the allusion on the page to others stored in the memory. James is not immune to its appeal. He might furnish the name of Aeneas within the text, but next to it he makes an addition. Aeneas is "pious": the Virgilian epithet which followed that hero through an entire epic. It is as "Pious Aeneas" that he fled Troy, and he continued pious as he seduced and abandoned Dido to her death in Carthage and arrived in Italy to fight Turnus. The interpolation affords us the pleasure of recognising the reference, but it also gestures towards a central theme in the *Commedia*, and offers a moment to contemplate it. Aeneas's ruthless piety is the essence of Roman virtue – loyalty to fatherland – but it is not the piety of Christians: Virgil is eventually left on the threshold of Paradise, uncomprehending. James might gloss the hard places, but he isn't going to spoonfeed us.

The properties of form and metre, however controversial, are only the accidents of translation. The crucial distinction, or so it would appear, in recent approaches to the *Commedia* lies in the conception of Dante: man for all seasons, or local bard. TS Eliot was the advocate of the universal Dante, but, he suggested, this quality was partly the result of a fortuitous fact of language as spoken in Florence around 1300:

Dante's universality was not solely a personal matter. The Italian language, and especially the Italian language in Dante's age, gains much by being the product of universal Latin. There is something much more *local* about the languages in which Shakespeare and Racine had to express

themselves.

It is true that the slippage between Virgil's language and Dante's is very slight. Dante can move from Latin to Italian in the confines of a single sentence. It may have been that quality which laid the portals of the *Commedia* open to Eliot and his immediate predecessors, the *Dantisti* of the classically educated nineteenth century, and allowed them to pluck out characters caught in the web of universal passions: Tennyson's defiant Ulysses, Rossetti's tender Francesca. Their versions, however, remain intrinsically local in spite of themselves. Ulysses' heroism is the fervour of the Victorian explorer, or the Victorian missionary, not the sublime discontent of Dante's sailor. Francesca's sweetness is the product of nineteenth century Romanticism, and not a reflection of the mendacious and bitter beauty met on the winds of hell. Even the language of the poem is far from the pure Tuscan which Eliot saw as the next best thing to Latin. In fact, the *Commedia* is a polyglot medley. We hear Virgil's classical Latin, but also snatches of the Vulgate. Arnaut Daniel addresses us from Purgatory in the Provençal of his own verse. There is a language of hell, often left unattempted by translators who simply reproduce Dante's nonsense sounds "Pape Satàn, pape Satàn aleppe!", but here rendered with aplomb "The Pope pops Satan, Satan pips the Pope". And there is the opposite of language: Dante and Virgil come to the ninth circle of hell, which is guarded by Nimrod, who built the Tower of Babel and thus oversaw the shattering of a unified human language into mutually incomprehensible fragments. Dante's Nimrod speaks one indecipherable line: "Raphèl maí amèche zabí almi", which James neatly represents with a string of words meaning "word" in incompatible tongues: "Palabra wort kotoba word parole!". Even the Italian in the poem is not homogenous. We are constantly reminded of the other dialects around him – from Sicily, Sardinia, Lombardy – because Dante moves through the poems following familiar accents, snatches of patois, the particular sounds of home.

This sense of place seems to underlie the most significant recent translations of the *Commedia*. We are perhaps more attuned to the local than we used to be. Shakespeare was once the ultimate repository of grand universal types: now we ransack him for perspectives on Captain MacMorris's Irishness. There is something intrinsically untranslatable about the local and specific, which is liberating for the translator: he or she can admit the impossibility of the task, and set about finding a set of equivalents. Derek Walcott's Caribbean epic, *Omeros*, is a poem about the aftermath of colonisation in his home, the island of St Lucia. The conceit is borrowed from Homer, but once the narrator descends into the island's underworld, his imagery comes from Dante. The *Inferno*'s Malebolge is the circle of the fraudulent, and here, Walcott bestows on it a new generation of sinners:

[the] bubbling lead erupted with speculators
whose heads gurgled in the lava of the Malebolge
mumbling deals as they rose. These were the traitors

who, in elected office, saw the land as views
for hotels and elevated into waiters
the sons of others, while their own learnt something else.

Irish writers have tended to see in the walled city of hell an image of Belfast's watchtowers during the Troubles. Ciaran Carson makes this explicit in his introduction, and his *Inferno* is set out among borders and precincts. Heaney's 1979 collection, *Field Work*, is in conversation with Dante throughout. One of the poems, "The Strand at Lough Beg", an elegy for his cousin lost in sectarian violence, begins with an epigraph from the *Purgatorio*, but the debt to Dante comes into focus in the final poem of the collection, his translation of the Ugolino episode from *Inferno*. The reader encounters Ugolino in the depths of hell, among the murderers. He is frozen in a fierce embrace with Archbishop Ruggiero, upon whose head he gnaws, as he explains through his story. Ugolino tells of being locked in a tower by Ruggiero and left to starve with his sons. They died one by one, and he, blind and starving, ate their bodies. The account is not an honest one: Ugolino leaves out his own betrayals, and his part in the internecine conflict which led to

the destruction of his family. The innocence of the victims and the manner in which a generation might be consumed by the quarrels of its fathers comes across in Heaney's spare rendering of Dante's text, but he stamps it as Irish with one interpolated image: Ugolino, gnawing the head of his enemy, is here made "a famine victim at a loaf of bread".

The truth of Dante's rage at corruption and folly is cast into clearer relief by the transplanted details of these translations, and James, in his *Divine Comedy*, shows that he recognises the power of this form of renewal. As with Heaney, the telling choices in his diction are discreet in themselves, but overwhelming in their impact. His vision of hell, for instance, emerges out of the shadow of the concentration camp. When Dante and Virgil pass through the gates to the underworld, they encounter the monster Minos, who sorts the damned into the varying circles of hell and thereby decides their fate. Minos was a classical figure, the judge of the dead in the Aeneid. James gives him a edge of more familiar horror.

Here, deciding who'll be sent
To which reception, the Selector looms
Whose name is Minos.

"Reception" is a warning, an incongruously modern word; the capitalisation of the official "Selector" brings the scene into focus. It conjures up the spectre of Josef Mengele, *Selektor* at Auschwitz, who prowled the queues of new arrivals, choosing them for labour, for medical experiment and for the gas chamber. It reflects fresh significance back on the beginning of the previous canto, where Dante, with the "naked troop" of the dead, passes through the gates to hell and looks up at the mottos carved upon them. They may not claim that "Arbeit macht frei" – if anything, they are more honest, and more sonorous in James's wonderfully monumental rendering "Forget your hopes. They were what brought you here." – but the images readily overlap. The victims of the concentration camps are not to be identified with the *Inferno*'s justly condemned sinners, but the comprehensive cruelty and barrenness of Dante's hell finds a sound equivalent here. It is an essential counterbalance to the fascination and colour of the stories which emerge from the depths: without the suffering, Dante's point is missed.

James is the right generation to have the image of the prison camp seared into the imagination. He was born in 1939, and his father was a prisoner of war who died on his flight home to Australia in 1945. The collision of these two types of hell in the poet's mind, however, may come from another source. Primo Levi, before the outbreak of war, had been a student of Dante. In 1944, imprisoned in Auschwitz, he turned to him again, reconstructing the *Commedia* from memory as a bulwark against the horrors of the camp. James has written extensively about Levi, and will know the chapter of *If this is a man* in which Levi guides another prisoner through the *Inferno*. The poem was a refuge, but it was also an apt motif: against the backdrop of the smoke and the gas, Levi and his companion are another pair of pilgrims in hell. Levi bestows his humanity and vulnerability on James's Dante; around him, the devils and the sinners suddenly look worse.

Here, as elsewhere, James undermines the distinction of a local and a universal Dante: as with Heaney and Walcott and Carson, its very specificity draws attention to its broader relevance. For the original reader, Dante must have been neither local nor universal, but both simultaneously. It is true that Dante discovered his own neighbours on the roads of hell, which must have thrilled the readers from across the way; but he also encountered a shared tradition which transcended Tuscany – the shade of Myrrha risen from her father's bed, Hecuba barking like a dog with grief, Francis of Assisi wooing poverty like a courtly lover. We can (nudged when needed by the notes) lay claim to that broader heritage – but the local dimension is not out of reach. The denizens of thirteenth century Italy have taken up residence in the townlands of our minds. We are on nodding acquaintance with Ugolino even without knowing Dante, because of introductions from Heaney and Rodin and Fuseli. This means that the experience of reading the poem has changed, even aside from questions of language and verse form. James, characteristically, grasps this. His *Commedia* is caught in the act of evolving. This is Dante in purgatory, describing scenes

of ruin:

And Troy I saw in ashes. Ilium!
Pride brought your topless towers low ...

The topless towers are anachronistic. They belong to Christopher Marlowe, who, some time around 1592, set Dr Faustus to woo Helen of Troy, possessor of the “face that launched a thousand ships / And burnt the topless towers of Ilium”. Similarly, Virgil takes his final leave of Dante while channelling WE Henley’s “Invictus”: “Of your soul / I make you captain.” The neutrals rush past on the bank of the Acheron, “their pride to have no prejudice”. This is not lazy writing. It is an act of creative fidelity to the experience of reading Dante.

The *Commedia* is an encyclopedic text. The sum of human knowledge at the cusp of the renaissance, whether astronomical, theological, philosophical, is gathered in its pages. All of Dante’s literary ancestors were contained in it. He chats with Homer and Lucan, but he also borrows their effects – so, for instance, the thieves who are constantly turning into snakes and back again are borrowed from Ovid’s catalogue of transformation, the *Metamorphoses*. To recreate that effect of all-inclusiveness, James performs another type of translation. The Troy of the modern imagination is provided with Marlowe’s topless towers, so here, they are wisely allowed in.

If the *Commedia* is a drama about salvation, it is also a poem about reading and writing. Dante constantly draws attention to both the crafts at which he is employed. He takes advice from the great poets in their little conclave in Limbo, and he contemplates the dangers of poetry when Francesca quotes his own verse back to him to justify her fall. Divine spirits form letters to spell out words of praise on the face of heaven, and each new book contains an appeal to its own muse for assistance in finding the right words for the task of describing what was to follow. Virgil reads his thoughts, and figures met along the way invite him to read their stories in the books of their faces. Translation adds a further layer of complexity to these encounters, but it does not necessarily impose a further barrier between the reader and the poem. Because it forces attention on the process of reading and writing – the choices about metrics, the decisions about equivalent turns of phrase – a good translation can also offer the reader a straight path to the heart of Dante’s design. James has translated the meaning along with the words, so that his *Divine Comedy* is, for the twenty-first century English speaker, something very close to reading Dante in 1317: not the same thing, which is impossible even in Italian, but a journey which allows the same discoveries to be made along the way. On that long road, Clive James treads before us, a trustworthy and companionable guide.

“...Thank you for what brings
My will and yours together: what I learn
From my teacher, master, leader.” So I said.
On the high, hard road I followed, and he led.

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