# Dante’s Birthday



It’s a big year for Dante, but then, it always is, even in countries that speak English. As an international Italian, Dante is up there with Michelangelo, Verdi, Sophia Loren and Silvio Berlusconi.

Most people in the English-speaking countries who have any concern with culture know Dante’s name, whereas they don’t know the name of, say, Guido Cavalcanti, who was his close friend, and a fine poet, but we don’t think we need him in our big picture of the literary past.

Dante we think we need, but we also need to be told why, because we can’t just pick him up off the railway station bookstall and read him in the original. He would have liked us to. His triple-decker magnum opus, The Divine Comedy, was aimed straight at the reader. Italian readers of Dante hear their own language at its intoxicating best, the way we hear ours when we read Shakespeare.

For the English-speaking translator of Dante, that’s the first task. Important as it might be to make available a medieval verbal map of Hell, Purgatory and Heaven, with all the corridors and elevators meticulously listed, what counts initially is to bring out the poetic quality in Dante that packs the same enchanting punch as Juliet telling Romeo to come back tomorrow.

The trouble is, the same ideas don’t always sound as good in English as they do in Italian. We all know Longfellow’s version of the killer line inscribed above the gate of Hell – “Abandon hope all ye that enter here” – because it’s one of the few times in the poem when one of Dante’s profundities matches up with one of our sonorities.

Fifty years ago, long before I myself contemplated chewing up a chunk of my life by translating the poem, my wife, already on her way to becoming a Dante scholar of high repute, took me through some of his most famously beautiful lines and showed me how they sounded. I noticed straight away that very few of them could be given an English equivalent.

But there was at least one line that was too beautiful to leave alone. It was in the first canto of the middle section, Purgatory, and in the original it goes *Dolce color d’oriental zaffiro*.  For sheer music, it sounds as good as Juliet telling Romeo that it wasn’t the lark he just heard, “It was the nightingale.”

Transliterated into English, it means something like “Sweet colour of eastern sapphire.”  But forty years had to go by before I felt capable of taking a crack at translating it as “The sweet clear tint of sapphire in the east”.  That, I hope, brings in some of the music with which he expresses the idea. But the job wouldn’t be worth trying if some of his ideas were not permanently important.

It doesn’t matter, now, that Dante thought the appropriate punishment for a bad pope should be to bury him upside down in a pit of fire. Nor does it matter, now, that when he contemplated the utter collapse of all his political hopes he felt almost as bad as Ed Miliband felt a fortnight ago. But beneath the rage, the hopes and the disappointments there were the real ideas, and for some of those the word “idea” will scarcely do.

Dante, with his powers of observation  joined to his powers of expression, could show you why art and

science are essentially the same thing. There is a breath-taking moment when a piece of paper burns, and at the edge of the advancing flame the paper turns a colour less than black before it turns black.

And almost all the rest of the poem’s moments of illustration are as breath-taking as that, so that you practically need to be on oxygen to read the thing right through. Dante, still often thought of as an abstruse theology wonk full of long-obsolete ideas, was in fact the great precursor of the modern scientific attitude. His concentrated gaze was everywhere, and a mile deep.

The whole known world was his laboratory. And of course it was also his paradise, though it never occurred to him that the only paradise, and the only hell, were here on Earth. Not even he was ready to guess that.

Shakespeare guessed it, but that came later. Dante, for his time, was as comprehensive as a poet could be; and still, for all time, the quality of his poetry is as vividly beautiful as words can be made to sound. For that very reason, foreign translators will go on killing themselves as they attempt to tell the world what Italy already knows.

My own translation of The Divine Comedy has been out now for a couple of years and I can’t complain about how it has been received in the scholarly and critical world. There were a couple of its learned reviewers that I would have like to consign to one of the lower chambers of Dante’s hell without benefit of room service, but they might have been right.

Luckily nobody else agreed with them. But in a few days the book will come out in paperback, and about that I’m genuinely nervous, because as any writer knows: when your book gets into paperback, that’s the real publication. You are trying to snare the attention of people who are not specialists, but general readers. If what you have written doesn’t leap off the page, it will dive out of the window, and never be heard of again.

But Dante himself faced the same prospect. Unless he had wanted to reach the public, he would have contented himself with writing a learned treatise, and today there would be power-point lectures about it at the occasional academic conference, but not much more. Instead, he went for the mass market. He was Silvio Berlusconi with a brain, and without the hair transplant. Nice set of laurels, though.

--Times, May 30, 2015