

## FOREWORD

If a poem is not forgotten as soon as the circumstances of its origin, it begins at once to evolve an existence of its own, in minds and lives, and then even in words, that its singular maker could never have imagined. The poem that survives the receding particulars of a given age and place soon becomes a shifting kaleidoscope of perceptions, each of them in turn provisional and subject to time and change, and increasingly foreign to those horizons of human history that fostered the original images and references.

Over the years of trying to approach Dante through the words he left and some of those written about him, I have come to wonder what his very name means now, and to whom. Toward the end of the *Purgatorio*, in which the journey repeatedly brings the pilgrim to reunions with poets, memories and projections of poets, the recurring names of poets, Beatrice, at a moment of unfathomable loss and exposure, calls the poem's narrator and protagonist by name, "Dante," and the utterance of it is unaccountably startling and humbling. Even though it is spoken by that Beatrice who has been the sense and magnet of the whole poem and, as he has come to imagine it, of his life, and though it is heard at the top of the mountain of Purgatory, with the terrible journey done and the prospect of eternal joy ahead, the sound of his name at that moment is not at all reassuring. Would it ever be? And who would it reassure? There was, and there is, first of all, Dante the narrator. And there was Dante the man living and suffering in time, and at once we can see that there is a distinction, a division, between them. And then there was, and there is, Dante the representation of Everyman, of a brief period in the history of Italy and of Florence, of a philosophical position, a political allegiance -- the list is indeterminate. Sometimes he seems to be all of them at once, and sometimes particular aspects occupy the foreground.

The commentaries date back into his own lifetime -- indeed, he begins them himself, with the *Vita Nuova* -- and the exegetes recognized from the beginning, whether they approved or not, the importance of the poem, the work, the vision, as they tried to arrive at some fixed significance in those words, in a later time when the words themselves were not quite the same.

Any reader of Dante now is in debt to generations of scholars working for centuries to illuminate the unknown by means of the known. Any translator shares that enormous debt. A translation, on the other hand, is seldom likely to be of much interest to scholars, who presumably sustain themselves directly upon the inexhaustible original. A translation is made for the general reader of its own time and language, a person who, it is presumed, cannot read, or is certainly not on familiar terms with, the original, and may scarcely know it except by reputation.

It is hazardous to generalize even about the general reader, who is nobody in particular and is encountered only as an exception. But my impression is that most readers at present whose first language is English probably think of Dante as the author of one work, *The Divine Comedy*, of a date vaguely medieval, its subject a journey through Hell. The whole poem, for many, has come to be known by the *Inferno* alone, the first of the three utterly distinct sections of the work, the first of the three states of the psyche that Dante set himself to explore and portray.

There are surely many reasons for this predilection, if that is the word, for the *Inferno*. Some of them must come from the human sensibility's immediate recognition of perennial aspects of its own nature. In the language of modern psychology the *Inferno* portrays the locked, unalterable ego, form after form of it, the self and its despair forever inseparable. The terrors and pain, the absence of any hope, are the ground of the drama of the *Inferno*, its nightmare grip upon the reader, its awful authority, and the feeling, even among the secular, that it is depicting something in the human makeup that cannot, with real assurance, be denied. That authority, with the assistance of a succession of haunting illustrations of the *Inferno*, has made moments and elements of that part of the journey familiar and disturbing images which remain current even in our scattered and evanescent culture.

The literary presence of the *Inferno* in English has been renewed in recent years. In 1991 Daniel Halpern asked a number of contemporary poets to provide translations of cantos of the *Inferno* which would eventually comprise a complete translation of the first part of the *Commedia*. Seamus Heaney had already published fine versions of sections from several of the cantos, including part of canto 3 in *Seeing Things* (1991), and he ended up doing the opening cantos. When Halpern asked me to contribute to the project, I replied chiefly with misgivings, to begin with. I had been trying to read Dante, and reading about him, since I was a student, carrying one volume or another of the bilingual Temple Classics edition -- pocket-sized books -- with me wherever I went. I had read parts, at least, of the best-known translations of the *Commedia*: Henry Francis Cary's because it came with the Gustave Doré illustrations and was in the house when I was a child; Longfellow's despite a late-adolescent resistance to nineteenth-century poetic conventions; Laurence Binyon's at the recommendation of Ezra Pound, although he seemed to me terribly tangled; John Ciardi's toward which I had other reservations. The closer I got to feeling that I was beginning to "know" a line or a passage, having the words by memory, repeating some stumbling approximation of the sounds and cadence, pondering what I had been able to glimpse of the rings of sense, the more certain I became that -- beyond the ordinary and obvious impossibility of translating poetry or anything else -- the translation of Dante had a dimension of impossibility of its own. I had even lectured on Dante and demonstrated the impossibility of translating him, taking a single line from the introductory first canto, examining it word by word:

*Tant' è amara che poco è più morte*

indicating the sounds of the words, their primary meanings, implications in the context of the poem and in the circumstances and life of the narrator, the sound of the line insofar as I could simulate it and those present could repeat it aloud and begin to hear its disturbing mantric tone. How could that, then, really be translated? It could not, of course. It could not be anything else. It could not be the original in other words, in another language. I presented the classical objection to translation with multiplied emphasis. Translation of poetry is an enterprise that is always in certain respects impossible, and yet on occasion it has produced something new, something else, of value, and sometimes, on the other side of a sea change, it has brought up poetry again.

Halpern did not dispute my objections, but he told me which poets he was asking to contribute to the project. He asked me which cantos I would like to do if I decided to

try any myself. I thought, in spite of what I had said, of the passage at the end of canto 26, where Odysseus, adrift in a two-pointed flame in the abyss of Hell, tells Virgil "where he went to die" after his return to Ithaca. Odysseus recounts his own speech to "that small company by whom I had not been deserted," exhorting them to sail with him past the horizons of the known world to the unpeopled side of the earth, in order not to live "like brutes, but in pursuit of virtue and knowledge," and of their sailing, finally, so far that they saw the summit of Mount Purgatory rising from the sea, before a wave came out from its shore and overwhelmed them. It was the passage of the *Commedia* that had first caught me by the hair when I was a student, and it had gone on ringing in my head as I read commentaries and essays about it, and about Dante's figure of Odysseus. Odysseus says to Virgil:

*Io e i compagni eravam vecchi e tardi*

In the Temple Classics edition, where I first read it, or remember first reading it, the translation by John Aitken Carlyle, originally published in 1849, reads

*I and my companions were old and tardy*

and it was the word "tardy" that seemed to me not quite right, from the start. While I was still a student, I read the John D. Sinclair translation (Oxford), originally published in 1939, where the words read

*I and my companions were old and slow*

"Slow," I realized, must have been part of the original meaning, of the intent of the phrase, but I could not believe that it was the sense that had determined its being there.

The Charles S. Singleton translation, published in 1970, a masterful piece of scholarly summary, once again says

*I and my companions were old and slow*

That amounts to considerable authority, and it was, after all, technically correct, the dictionary meaning, and the companions surely must have been slowed down by age when Odysseus spoke to them. But I kept the original in my mind: "tardi," the principal sense of which, in that passage, I thought had not been conveyed by any of the translations.

When I told Halpern that I would see whether I could provide anything of use to him, I thought of that word, "*tardi*." It had never occurred to me to try to translate it myself, and I suppose I believed that right there I would have all my reservations about translating Dante confirmed beyond further discussion. As I considered the word in that speech it seemed to me that the most important meaning of "*tardi*" was not "tardy," although it had taken them all many years to sail from Troy. And not "slow," despite the fact that the quickness of youth must have been diminished in them. Nor "late," which I had seen in other versions, and certainly not "late" in the sense of being late for dinner. I thought the point was that they were late in the sense that an hour of the day may be late, or a day of a season or a year or a destiny: "late"

meaning not having much time left. And I considered

*I and my companions were old and near the end*

and how that went with what we knew of those lines, how it bore upon the lines that followed. Without realizing it I was already caught.

That canto had always been for me one of the most magnetic sections of the *Inferno*, and among the reasons for that was the figure of Dante's Odysseus, the voice in the flame, very far from Homer's hero, whom Dante is believed to have known only at second hand, from Virgil and other Latin classics and translations. Apparently Odysseus' final voyage is at least in part Dante's invention, and it allows him to make of Odysseus in some sense a "modern" figure, pursuing knowledge for its own sake. In Dante's own eagerness to learn about the flames floating like fireflies in the abyss he risks falling into the dark chasm himself.

That final voyage in the story of Odysseus is one of the links, within the ultimate metaphor of the poem, between the closed, immutable world of the *Inferno* and Mount Purgatory. It represents Odysseus' attempt to break out of the limitations of his own time and place by the exercise of intelligence and audacity alone. In the poem, Mount Purgatory had been formed out of the abyss of Hell when the fall of Lucifer hollowed out the center of the earth and the displaced earth erupted on the other side of the globe and became the great mountain, its opposite. And canto 26 of the *Inferno* bears several suggestive parallels to the canto of the same number in the *Purgatorio*. In the latter once again there is fire, a ring of it encircling the mountain, and again with spirits in the flames. This time some of the spirits whom Dante meets are poets. They refer to each other in sequence with an unqualified generosity born of love of each other's talents and accomplishments (this is where the phrase "*il miglior fabbro*" comes from, as one of Dante's predecessors refers to another) and their fault is love, presumably worldly love, and no doubt for its own sake. The end of that canto is one of Dante's many moving tributes to other poets and to the poetry of others. When at last he addresses the great Provençal troubadour Arnaut Daniel, the troubadour generously refers to Dante's question as "courteous" -- a word that, within decades of the great days of the troubadours and the courts of love, and then the vicious devastations of the Albigensian Crusade, evoked an entire code of behavior and view of the world. And in Dante's poem, Daniel's reply, eight lines of it that are among the most beautiful lines in the poem, is in Daniel's own Provençal, and it echoes one of Daniel's own most personal and compelling poems with an affectionate, eloquent closeness like that of Mozart's quartets dedicated to Haydn.

The *Commedia* must be one of the most carefully planned poems ever written. Everything in it seems to have been thought out beforehand, and yet such is the integrity of Dante's gift that the intricate consistency of the design is finally inseparable from the passion of the narrative and the power of the poetry. His interest in numerology, as in virtually every other field of thought or speculation in his time, was clearly part of the design at every other point, and the burning in the two cantos numbered twenty-six is unlikely to have come about without numerological consideration. His own evident attraction to the conditions of the soul, the "faults," in each canto, is a further connection.

The link between the Odysseus passage and Mount Purgatory was one of the things that impelled me to go on trying to translate that canto for Halpern's project. (I eventually sent him the result, along with a translation of the following canto.) Those two cantos which I contributed to his proposed *Inferno* I include here even though Robert Pinsky has since published his own translation of the whole of the *Inferno* -- a clear, powerful, masterful gift not only to Dante translation in our language but to the poetry of our time. I am beginning with my own translations of these cantos partly because they are where I started, and because they provide the first glimpse in the poem of Mount Purgatory, seen only once, at a great distance, and fatally, at the end of the mortal life of someone who was trying to break out of the laws of creation of Dante's moral universe

For in the years of my reading Dante, after the first overwhelming, reverberating spell of the *Inferno*, which I think never leaves one afterward, it was the *Purgatorio* that I had found myself returning to with a different, deepening attachment, until I reached a point when it was never far from me; I always had a copy within reach, and often seemed to be trying to recall part of a line, like some half-remembered song. One of the wonders of the *Commedia* is that, within its single coherent vision, each of the three sections is distinct, even to the sensibility, the tone, the feeling of existence. The difference begins at once in the *Purgatorio*, after the opening lines of invocation where Dante addresses the holy Muses (associated with their own Mount Helicon) to ask that poetry rise from the dead -- literally, "dead poetry [*la morta poesi*] rise up again." Suddenly there is the word "*dolce*" -- sweet, tender, or all that is to be desired in that word in Italian and in the word's siblings in Provençal and French -- and then "color," and there has been nothing like that before. Where are we?

We -- the reader on this pilgrimage, with the narrator and his guide, Virgil -- have plunged upside down into the dark frozen depths of Hell through the bowels of the Evil One, at the center of the earth, and have made our way through the tunnel of another birth to arrive utterly undone at a sight of the stars again. And we are standing on a shore seeing the first light before dawn seep into the sky, and the morning star, "*lo bel pianeta che d'amar conforta*" "The beautiful planet that to love inclines us," with all the suggestions of consolation after the horrors of the infernal world. We are seeing the sky, our sky, the sky to which we wake in our days. There is no sky in Hell. There are no stars there, no hours of daylight, no colors of sky and sea. One of the first vast differences between Hell, the region of immutable despair, and Purgatory is that the latter place, when we step out on it, is earth again, the ground of our waking lives. We are standing on the earth under the sky, and Purgatory begins with a great welling of recognition and relief.

Of the three sections of the poem, only Purgatory happens *on* the earth, as our lives do, with our feet on the ground, crossing a beach, climbing a mountain. All three parts of the poem are images of our lives, of our life, but there is an intimacy peculiar to the *Purgatorio*. Here the times of day recur with all the sensations and associations that the hours bring with them, the hours of the world we are living in as we read the poem. Tenderness, affection, poignancy, the enchantment of music, the feeling of the evanescence of the moment in a context beyond time, occur in the *Purgatorio* as they do in few other places in the poem. And hope, as it is experienced nowhere else in the poem, for there is none in Hell, and Paradise is fulfillment itself. Hope is central to the *Purgatorio* and is there from the moment we

stand on the shore at the foot of the mountain, before the stars fade. To the very top of the mountain hope is mixed with pain, which brings it still closer to the living present.

When I had sent the two cantos of the *Inferno* to Halpern, I was curious to see what I could make of canto 26 of the *Purgatorio*, which had captivated me for so long, and also of the lovely poem of Arnaut Daniel's which Dante echoed in that canto, and of at least one of the poems of Guido Guinizzelli, to whom he spoke with such reverence, as to a forebear.

Other moments in the *Purgatorio* had held me repeatedly. Almost thirty years earlier, on the tube in London, I had been reading canto 5, which was already familiar ground. It was like listening to a much-loved piece of music, hearing a whole current in it that had never before seemed so clear. I rode three stops past my destination and had to get off and go back and be late. And here once again, trying vainly to find equivalents for words and phrases, I was in the grip of the *Purgatorio*. After canto 26 I went back to the beginning.

The opening cantos that comprise the section known as the "Antepurgatorio" are among the most beautiful in the whole poem. I thought of trying to make something in English just of those, the first six in particular. I turned them over slowly, line by line, lingering over treasures such as La Pia's few lines at the end of canto 5, hoping that I was not betraying them by suggesting any other words for them (though Clarence Brown once said to me, to reassure me about another translation of mine, "Don't worry, no translation ever harmed the original") or at any rate betraying my relation to them. There were lines that had run in my head for years, their beauty inexhaustible. The morning of the first day, looking out to sea, in canto I:

*L'alba vinceva l'ora mattutina  
che fuggia innanzi, sì che di lontano  
conobbi il tremolar della marina.*

What could anyone do? My attempt ran:

*The dawn was overcoming the pallor of daybreak  
which fled before it, so that I could see  
off in the distance the trembling of the sea.*

It was, I kept saying, some indication of what was there, what was worth trying to suggest, at least, in English. I wanted to keep whatever I made by way of translation as close to the meaning of the Italian words as I could make it, taking no liberties, so that someone with no Italian would not be misled. And I hoped to make the translation a poem in English, for if it were not that it would have failed to indicate what gave the original its memorable power.

The *Purgatorio* is the section of the poem in which poets, poetry, and music recur with fond vividness and intimacy. The meetings between poets -- Virgil's with his fellow Mantuan Sordello, over twelve hundred years after Virgil's own life on earth; his meeting with the Roman poet Statius; Dante's with Guido Guinizzelli and with Arnaut Daniel and the singer Casella -- are cherished and moving moments. It is worth noting something about the current of poetic tradition that Dante had come to in his youth.

Of course there was Virgil, to whose *Aeneid* he alludes with such familiarity that he

must have long known many parts of it by heart. And Statius and other Latin poets whose work was available in late-thirteenth-century Florence.

Another dominant lineage of poetic tradition which Dante inherited and felt around him as he reached maturity, that of the troubadours and their own antecedents, was at once closer to him and more complex, but it gathers into one strand the poetic conventions that were available to him, and some essentials of his thinking about love, and a crucial directive in the development of the figure of Beatrice in the *Commedia*.

The three currents, and Dante's ideas about them, merge inextricably in the poem, as they seem to have done in the mind of its author. Beatrice, in the story as he finally made it, is the origin of the great journey itself, sending the poet Virgil to guide the lost Dante through the vast metaphor: the world of the dead which is the world of life, the world of eternity which is the world of time. The principle that binds the metaphor in all of its aspects, as we are told in one way after another, is love. After the passage around the beclouded terrace of anger, and Virgil's statement that "neither creator nor creature was ever without love," Dante asks, with considerable hesitation, for Virgil to explain (indeed to *demonstrate*, "*dimostrì*") to him what love is. Virgil's presence there itself, as a guide on this unprecedented journey with nothing to gain for himself in all eternity, and the watchful provision of Beatrice that had sent him, and is waiting for Dante the pilgrim at the top of Mount Purgatory, are of course, both of them, dramatic *demonstrations* of love; but Virgil proceeds to expound, to explain, the origins and evolution of love according to Aristotle, whose work he might have known in his lifetime, and Aquinas, whose work he could only have encountered posthumously somewhere between his own day and Dante's. In due course Beatrice speaks on the subject, and some of her sources are the same. But quite aside from the explications of the scholastics, the subject of love, including aspects of it that were being purged in canto 26 of the *Purgatorio*, was the central theme of the great flowering of troubadour poetry in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. In that surge of new poetry and feeling, the forms of love ranged from the openly sensual to the unattainably ethereal, and from such familiar treatment as may have verged upon folk poetry of the time (and is still to be found in the popular culture of our own time) to courtly, allusive, highly stylized poetry that seemed to treat love on many planes at once.

In its rapid development the tradition of troubadour poetry evolved the convention of a beloved to whom, and about whom, for whom the poems were written. Of course love poetry, both erotic and idealized in one way or another, had existed and had been important in other ages and in many -- perhaps in most -- cultures. And the figure of the beloved who is the subject of the poems and to whom they are addressed had often been evoked, whether idealized or not. But the theme and elevation of a beloved emerged with particular intensity in the tenth-century Arabic poetry of the Omayyad Moorish kingdoms of southern Spain. In the highly cultivated poetry and culture that had evolved there, a code of attitudes, behavior, gestures developed, a stylized choreography, that were clearly the matured result of an ancient tradition. Early in the eleventh century Ali ibn-Hazm of Cordova, a philosopher and literary theoretician, produced a work entitled *On Love* in thirty chapters. In the chapter "Love at First Sight" he tells of the poet Ibn-Harûn al-Ramadi, who met his beloved only once, at a gate in Cordova, and wrote all his poems for the rest of his life to her. Love in that tradition is spoken of as the greatest

of inspirations and the ultimate happiness. In Spain, Arabic philosophy absorbed the work of Plato, which the Provençal poets and then their Italian successors drew upon in turn. The forms of the Andalusian Arabic poetry were developed from, or in accord with, the songs of the folk tradition. A stanza was evolved, its measure strictly marked for chanting, and it made important use of something that had not been part of the classical languages of Europe and their Latinate descendants -- rhyme. One form in particular, the *zajal*, or "song," became the most common one in Spanish-Arabic poetry in the tenth and eleventh centuries. Out of the eleven surviving poems of the first Provençal poet whose works have come down to us, the one who is generally referred to as the first of the troubadours, Guilhem de Peitau, or Guillaume de Poitiers, three are in the form of the Hispano-Arabic *zajal*. And Count Guilhem, one of the most powerful men in Europe in his generation, was at least as familiar, and probably as sympathetic, with the courts of Arabic Spain as he was with much of northern France. So were the troubadours who were his immediate successors; and the brief-lived courts of love of Guilhem's granddaughter Eleanor of Aquitaine continued a brilliant kinship with the Moorish kingdoms to the south.

The rhymed and highly stylized poetry of the troubadours, with its allegiance to music, the codes of the courts of love, the Hispano-Arabic assimilation of the philosophy of classical Greece, were essentials of the great Provençal civilization of the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. The secular splendor of that culture and its relative indifference to the tedious imperium of the Church were in the end (1209) barbarously and viciously ruined by the wave of political ruthlessness and deadly self-righteousness known as the Albigensian Crusade, one of the great atrocities of European history. (It was a bishop, Arnaud de Cîteaux, who gave the order, at the sack of Beziers, "Kill them all. God will know His own." And they did.) Both that rich, generous, brilliant tradition and the devastation that had been visited upon it were part of Dante's heritage. The latter had taken place less than half a century before he was born; the Mantuan poet Sordello, for one, had spent a major part of his life at the court of Toulouse. The legacy of the troubadours survived even beyond Dante. Petrarch is sometimes described as the last of the troubadours. And the attention given to the manners, the psychic states, the perspectives, the ultimate power of love, the exalted beloved, the forms of verse, including rhyme, all come from the culture of Provence either directly or via the court of Frederick II of Sicily.

But Dante's beloved, Beatrice, did have an earthly original in his own life and youth. From what can be known at present she was named Bice, daughter of Folio Portinari. Dante describes his first sight of her, in 1284, when he was nineteen. She eventually married, and then died in 1290, when he was twenty-five, ten years before the ideal date of the *Commedia*. In *La Vita Nuova*, finished in the years just after Bice's death, Dante vows to leave her a literary monument such as no woman had ever had. So she led him, he tells us, to the journey that becomes the *Commedia* and his own salvation.

That love, and that representation of it, took place in a life of enormous political turmoil and intellectual ferment. Dante, as his words and the passions in them make clear, was from Florence, where he was born in May 1265. His family believed themselves to be descended from the original Roman founders of the city. An ancestor, Dante's great-great-grandfather, had died, Dante tells us, on the second



crusade. But his family ranked among the lesser nobility of the city and was not wealthy.

The Florence into which Dante was born was deeply divided into political factions. Principally, there were the Ghibellines, who were in effect the feudal aristocracy and, with the backing of the Empire, the holders of most power; and the Guelphs, the party of the lesser nobles and the artisans, bitterly opposed to the principles and conduct, the heedless self-interest of the Ghibellines. Dante was educated in Franciscan schools and at an early age began to write poetry. There were troubadours in Florence in his youth, and apparently he knew them, knew their poems, learned from them. His early friendship with the aristocrat Guido Cavalcanti led them both to develop a style and art which distinguished them from their predecessors and most of their contemporaries. Cavalcanti too had a literary beloved, named Mandetta, in his poems; he tells how he caught sight of her once in a church in Toulouse.

In his mid-twenties Dante served the commune of Florence in the cavalry. He was at the battle of Campaldino, and scenes of the battle return in the *Purgatorio*. And his studies -- the Latin classics, philosophy, and the sciences -- continued. Within the circle of those who read poetry in Florence, his poems became well known, and after the death of the woman he called Beatrice he assembled a group of them, embedded in a highly stylized narrative -- *La Vita Nuova* (1292-93). At a date now unknown he was married to Gemma di Manetta Donati, and they had at least three children, two sons and a daughter.

In 1295, in order to participate in municipal government, Dante became a member of the guild of physicians and apothecaries, and he came to serve in electoral and administrative councils, and as an ambassador of his city on a number of missions. He engaged in a Guelph campaign of opposition to Pope Boniface VIII, who had a plan to place all of Tuscany under the rule of the Church. The conflict became prolonged, bitter, and dangerous, with warnings of worse to come. The Pope's cynical proceedings became more ruthless and ominous. The opposition was no less determined. In 1301, on the occasion of Charles de Valois's meeting in Rome with the Pope, Dante was sent by the commune of Florence as one of three emissaries to the Pope to try to exact from the moment something that would help to maintain the independence of Florence. The Pope dismissed the other two emissaries and held Dante in Rome. There, and then in Siena shortly afterward, Dante learned of the triumph of his opponents, the "Blacks," in Florence, and then of their sentencing him to a heavy fine and two years' banishment, besides a perpetual ban on his holding any further public office, and charges of graft, embezzlement, opposition to papal and secular authority, disturbance of the peace, etc. Just over a month later, when he had not paid the fine, he was sentenced a second time. The new sentence stated that if ever he should come within reach of the representatives of the commune of Florence he was to be burned alive. He was then thirty-seven. There is no evidence that he ever saw Florence again.

In the subsequent years of exile he found lodging and employment in other city-states. He served as aide, courtier, and secretary to various men of power, lived for a time with the great lords of Verona. He wrote, in *De Vulgare Eloquentia*, that the world was his fatherland, as the whole sea is the country of the fish; but he

complained of having to wander as a pilgrim, almost a beggar, through all the regions where Italian was spoken.

At some point during those years in exile he conceived and began the work which, because of the plainness of its style and the fact that it moves from hopeless anguish to joy, he called the *Commedia*. It was written not in Latin, nor in the Provençal that was the literary language of his immediate forebears -- a language that he certainly knew very well -- but in his own vernacular. And the subject of most poetry in the vernacular, in his heritage, was love.

Of the later years of his exile not much is known. Several great families -- the households of the Scaligeri, of Uguccone della Faggiuola, of Cangrande della Scala -- befriended and sheltered him and provided for him. The last years of his life were spent in Ravenna, apparently in peace and relative security. Probably his children and perhaps his wife were able to join him there. He may have lectured there, and he worked at completing the *Commedia*. Shortly after it was finished he went on a diplomatic mission to Venice for Guido da Polenta, and he died on the way home, on September 13 or 14, 1321, four years short of the age of sixty.

He was buried in Ravenna, and despite repeated efforts by the city of Florence to claim them, there his bones remain.

We know as much as we ever will about what he looked like from a description by Boccaccio: a long face, aquiline nose, large jaw, protruding lower lip, large eyes, dark curly hair (and beard), and a melancholy, thoughtful appearance. None of the surviving portraits is entirely trustworthy, though two have become famous and are commonly accepted.

Since adolescence I have felt what I can only describe as reverence for him, a feeling that seems a bit odd in our age. It is there, of course, because of his poetry, and because of some authority of the imagination in the poetry, some wisdom quite distinct from doctrine, though his creed and his reason directed its form. I am as remote from his theological convictions, probably, as he was from the religion of Virgil, but the respect and awed affection he expresses for his guide sound familiar to me.

I have read, more or less at random, and over a long period, in the vast literature of Dante studies -- not much, to be sure, in view of how much of it there is. I am particularly grateful for works by Erich Auerbach, Irma Brandeis, Charles S. Singleton, Allan Gilbert, Thomas G. Bergin, Helmut Hatzfeld, Charles Spironi, Francis Fergusson, Robert Briffault, and Philippe Guiberteau. The notes to the individual cantos in the translation are above all indebted to Charles S. Singleton's lifelong dedication to Dante studies and to the notes in his own edition of the poem. But there has been no consistent method in my reading of studies about Dante. I have come upon what seemed to me individual illuminations of his work partly by chance, over a period of time, forgetting as I went, naturally. The one unfaltering presence has been a love of the poem, which has been there from the first inchmeal reading. I am as conscious as ever of the impossibility of putting the original into any words but its own. But I hope this version manages to convey something true and essential of what is there in the words of the poem that Dante wrote.

-- W. S. Merwin