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War In Heaven: The Struggle For Territorial Rights Over Dante's Divine Comedy
by Lawson Taitte

Translating Dante is one of America's leading cottage industries. New versions of *The Divine Comedy* are published almost yearly. Renowned poets and industrious scholars compete to submit their efforts to the public - almost always, these days, with the original Medieval Italian opposite, whether to encourage attempts at scanning Dante's actual words or to show off their own skill at finding modern English equivalents, it's hard to say.

It was not always thus. For many centuries, educated people who wanted to read an epic were expected to learn Latin or Greek so that they could master Virgil or Homer themselves. A turning point came for the English reader with John Milton's seventeenth-century efforts to create something equally distinguished in the native tongue, *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*. These exercised enormous influence for a couple of hundred years. The first generation of romantic poets wrote directly in response to Milton's looming reputation, creating pieces as various as William Wordsworth's *The Prelude* and William Blake's *Jerusalem*.

With Blake, however, Dante directly entered the arena of English epic. As poet, Blake wrote a short epic called *Milton*, with his British forebear as the leading character. As visual artist, however, he created some of the most memorable responses to Dante ever - and Blake's verse as well owed as much to the spirit and method of Dante as it did to his English predecessor.

It was only with the rise of the high Anglo-American modernists, though, that Dante fully achieved the enormous reputation that he enjoys today. T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound could hardly create a poem without a direct quotation or translation. Eliot's first masterpiece, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," takes its epigraph from Canto 27 of *Inferno*. Among the fragments shored up against the speaker's ruin in *The Wasteland* is an ample supply of Dante bits: "So many/I

had not thought death had undone so many," is a direct translation. Eliot titled his second volume of poetry with the beginning of the Provencal words Dante wrote to put in the mouth of his great predecessor Arnaut Daniel in Canto 26 of *Purgatorio* - *Ara Vos Prec*. Eliot dedicated a book to Pound with a quote from Dante ("il miglior fabbro" - the better maker), and Pound titled works after Dante and built his lifework, the Cantos, on the inspiration of *The Divine Comedy*.

While the great modernists were claiming Dante as their own, the academy - especially the Catholic academy - was doing its best to maintain its own stake in the great Italian. Dante turns up on reading lists everywhere these days, but especially in those places where his status as the greatest of Roman Catholic poets makes him an especially valued voice.

So, currently in the American consciousness, two Dantes coexist uneasily -one beloved of the modernists, a poet of striking images and dramatic portraits and psychological acuity. The other, the poetic exemplar of a glorious past when Thomas Aquinas' scholastic philosophy and a truly catholic, unified faith engulfed Europe.

These rival claims to Dante are reflected in the gushing river of new translations. For example, in the last decade, two of our most prestigious contemporary poets of the high modern school have had a go at him. Robert Pinsky published his Inferno in 1994, M.S. Merwin his *Purgatorio* in 2000. Meanwhile, Catholic apologist, scholar and poet Anthony Esolen has been working his way through the entire *Divina Commedia*. *Inferno* appeared in 2002, *Purgatory* early in 2003, and Paradise is scheduled for publication later this fall.

Does it matter to a reader which of these two camps the poet responsible for a translation comes from? As a little thought experiment, I set out to read first Pinsky and Esolen, then Esolen and Merwin, to see.

All these editions do indeed give us the Italian original on the left-hand page, the new version on the right. My halting Italian, mostly picked up from opera libretti or carried over from equally

rudimentary Latin, Spanish and Italian, at least serves to check out both sense and music in the English poems.

Hell

At first I labored through Pinsky and Esolen canto by canto, reading one translation, then its notes, then the Italian, then the other translation, then again back to Dante himself - picking a few stanzas in each to compare even more minutely and directly.

This method of attack gave me some insights, I believed - but it wasn't giving me the Inferno. So I read longer swatches of each. When I got to Merwin and Esolen, I devoured one translation whole, then the other.

Like most literary types, I was already well acquainted with the first of the three sections of *The Divina Commedia*. The Inferno frequently crops up on student reading lists, these days even in ambitious high schools (at least Catholic ones). Sadly, most explorers of Dante's universe stop there, after 34 of the total 100 cantos of the complete poems. (I had made it through the *Purgatorio* once before, decades ago, and had never made more than a vague stab at the *Paradiso*.)

Maybe it would be useful to orient ourselves in the poem. The speaker, Dante, finds himself lost, at the turning point of his life, in a dark woods. It is Good Friday, 1300 A.D. When the speaker has almost despaired of escaping the three beasts who are stalking him, a strangely familiar figure appears. Who should it be but the dead spirit of his favorite poet, the Roman master of the epic, Virgil. A holy woman in heaven - Beatrice, Dante's muse before she died and he strayed from the path she had set him on - has sent Virgil to bring the speaker to her. But they must go the long way around. They journey down through hell, all the way to the center of the spherical earth, then back up the other side to the mystical island which is where the poem locates purgatory (the realm of the afterlife that Catholics in the Middle Ages, and many even now, believed those who die destined for salvation but still stained by sin go to purge themselves before entering heaven). In the second section of the *Commedia*, *Purgatorio*,

Virgil leads Dante up the mountain of purgatory to the earthly paradise, the original Garden of Eden, atop it. There Dante finally encounters his sainted muse, Beatrice, and Virgil simply disappears, his mission accomplished. In the third section, *Paradiso*, Beatrice draws Dante upwards on a guided tour of the heavenly realms until he sees God face to face.

Like any good Medieval poet, Dante expects us to interpret his plot on multiple levels. There are the literal story, the spiritual allegory as it applies to the reader's own internal development, the reflection of the scriptural story of Christ's own mission, and the prediction of what will happen to all men and women after death. Dante carefully lays them all out explicitly within the poem, just in case we are too dull to recognize them.

Inferno dominates the field for modern readers, obviously, because we are much more comfortable in recognizing evil than in discovering goodness. Modern literature, in fact, could be considered its own guided tour of hell.

One would thus expect that secular writers like Pinsky would be as comfortable with the Inferno as any professed Christian. This proves to be the case. Pinsky's translation, in fact, exudes a vivid muscularity that Esolen's can't always match.

Here's a sample comparison early on, the end of Canto 3. Esolen is accurate enough, but a little strained:

"He finished, and the gloomy plains of hell
shook with such might that though the terror's past,
it bathes me in a sweat to think of it.
The tear-drenched land heaved forth a sudden blast
flushing a lightning bolt as red as fire
that vanquished all my senses, and I fell
As a man falls whom sleep has overcome." (p. 31)

Pinsky is simpler in diction and grammar and grander in effect:

"…Then, the earth of that grim shore
Began to shake: so violently, I shudder
And sweat recalling it now. A wind burst up
From the tear-soaked ground to erupt red light and batter
My senses - and I fell as though seized by sleep." (p. 31)

Esolen wins some rounds on points, though. He's especially fine when a specific identification with some aspects of Dante's worldview is called for. At the very end of *Inferno*, for instance, Esolen brings out a pun latent in the Italian (as it would be in German): vermo means "serpent," but it also means worm. When Dante describes Satan at the center of the fallen world - the final destination of the journey down into hell - here's how Esolen translates it:

"…You believe
You're on the far side of the center still,
there where I grabbed the hide of the evil worm,"
said he, "who gnaws a hole into the world…" (p. 359.)

That image of the world as an apple, rotten and wormy to the core, rings true. Pinsky is merely literal:

"You imagine you are still on the other side,
across the center of the earth, where I
Grappled the hair on the evil serpent's hide
Who pierces the world. … " (p. 371)

Another strength of Esolen's translation results from his decision to render Dante's verse in the most common meter for heroic English poetry, blank verse. His rendition propels the reader forward almost compulsively. Such momentum is invaluable in making it through a poem as long as the *Commedia*.

Summing up the contest between these two translations of *Inferno*, Pinsky scores though sheer linguistic force. Esolen flows more easily and perhaps conveys more of the Medieval context.

For many, I suspect, Pinsky wins out in the end because he better conveys the psychological and stylistic freshness that makes Dante not just a poet of his time, but for all time. Later, in the *Purgatorio*, Dante himself makes an allusion to his contemporary, the painter Giotto. Sometimes it's difficult for us to remember that these two great artists lived and worked in the same era - and just how long ago that era was. Giotto took the Medieval style of depicting the world, largely flat and hieratic, and imparted a new roundness, visually and psychologically, to the people in it. Dante did much the same thing, creating individuals of unprecedented subtlety and truth into a pre-Copernican universe, itself imagined with a new specificity. Both lived a century and more before the earliest date any responsible scholar would ascribe to the beginning of the Renaissance. Yet both were creating proto-Renaissance portraits within their Medieval universes.

Dante is undoubtedly a poet of central and permanent worth, and the *Inferno* is his poem that speaks most directly to our age. But it's impossible to take leave of it without noting that its view of evil is one very hard for a modern person to identify with - and perhaps one that is in some ways inimical to current understanding of religious doctrine and moral theology. The poem's speaker, it is true, sometimes finds himself pitying those souls he encounters in that country without hope. Under Virgil's tutelage, however, he gradually comes to believe that this is a fault in himself, and as the *Inferno* draws to a close, he hardens his heart against them more and more. The idea is that, since God's justice has made its decrees, there is nothing left in these creatures that deserves love.

That's a great contrast to the attitude toward evil epitomized by two such different thinkers as Scottish preacher and writer George MacDonald (the favorite writer of C.S. Lewis on such subjects) and Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar (a favorite of Pope John Paul II). Both writers have come close - perilously close, many less

adventurous minds would say - to Universalism, the doctrine that all people might be saved. Even the present Pope himself has dared to ask whether Hell might be empty. The predominant image of the hardened sinner that MacDonald projects is a kernel of stubborn will barely able to withstand the battering winds of God's love as it urges him to repent. In fact, MacDonald seems to claim, such love, unwelcomed, is itself the fire of hell.

It's also noteworthy that almost all the sins punished in the *Inferno* are public sins (and the sinners mostly male). A sin against one's family, a modern, psychological viewpoint might claim, is among the worst sins - especially a sin against children. We find nothing of the kind here. Dante's universe seems to have almost no children in it. Inasmuch as the poem is largely, if not primarily, about the growth of the individual soul and its transformation from sin to penitence and on to glory, this emphasis is understandable. But it is a measure of its distance from our own culture and sensibilities.

Purgatory

Purgatorio begins on the shores of what feels like a new world -- reached at the end of the long climb up out of hell. M.S. Merwin says that he has kept the Italian text beside him throughout most of his adult life. He also says that he loves the piece despite his complete lack of sympathy for its worldview. Unfortunately, that gap between the poet's world and the translator's shows up throughout his translation.

The first thing we hear when new characters show up in *Purgatorio* is singing. The dead souls arriving at the shores of the mountain are chanting Psalm 113, in fact. This whole section of the *Commedia* is filled with music. Almost invariably, it's a specific hymn or psalm well known in Dante's time. Moreover, when the people Dante and Virgil encounter during their climb aren't singing, they're praying.

You have to ask yourself why a person who isn't devoted to praying and singing hymns loves this poem so much.

Merwin's rendering of the text into English is always accurate, though occasionally precious or unidiomatic in its choice of a word he believes best accords with Dante's sense. His rhythm feels syncopated to the point of choppiness. It's the opposite of Esolen's strategy. Instead of propelling us through the poem, Merwin seems to want to hold us back, to make us meditate on every line as an object of beauty in itself.

Ultimately, though, that beauty is cold - far removed from the lyrical atmosphere that wafts through the *Purgatorio*.

If the *Inferno* calls to mind both Giotto and T.S. Eliot, the Purgatorio enters a world strangely akin to J.S. Bach. As in Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, the various patternings within the work give it an artful rigor without ever compromising its gracefulness.

The *Purgatorio* exists not only in a world of prayer and hymn-singing, but in a world of art. On each level of the mountain, dedicated to rooting out one of the seven deadly sins, a ritualistic recurrence takes place. Each gets its hymn or psalm, of course, but there are also two sets of tiny narratives told for the benefit of the pilgrim Dante on each level. The first set gives examples of the virtue to be learnt, first from the life of Mary, then from classical history or myth , and then from another Bible story. The second set gives us sacred and secular stories about the sin that has been eradicated as the travelers are ready to progress to the next level.

These minute stories are charming in themselves, but the way they are communicated to the inhabitants of each level is more charming still. On the first tier up, where pride is the sin in question, Dante and Virgil first see relief sculptures carved gloriously into the stone walls. The nine stories in the second group on this level are engraved on the pavement on which the two are walking.

On the next level up, a voice of an angel passing overhead narrates the stories. For the level after that, Dante swoons and sees the tales as in an internal movie…and so on, a new method of communication on each level.

Throughout all this very human attention to the aesthetic aspect of the spiritual journey, Purgatorio is replete with long stories that reveal what we would call psychological growth in its joyously suffering inmates of the island. The poem's action includes many little acts of kindness and consideration, too.

If Merwin dissipates the poem's sweetness, Esolen comes into his own in the *Purgatorio*. He's clearly in sympathy not only with the worldview, but the people who inhabit this world. His extensive notes, too, are models of explication, while Merwin appears to have deliberately kept his annotations to a minimum. It's almost as if Merwin were so embarrassed by the ideas the poem embodies he would rather not draw attention to them.

It's easy to see why most people read only the *Inferno* these days, and why Catholic schools do their best to urge people on to the rest of the *Commedia*. *Purgatorio* must make a little sense to anyone immune either to the psalms or the artistic sensibility. For someone who's a practicing Christian, especially of a rather conservative style (not theologically so much as liturgically), it's a work of incomparable beauty. Anyone else is likely to say, "Huh?"

Heaven: Afterthoughts on the Afterlife

No contemporary poet with the clout of a Pinsky or a Merwin has yet attempted to translate the *Paradiso*. Esolen is due to publish his version soon, but so far we have just had to make do.

A new version of the *Paradiso* is a tough job, which is probably why there haven't been more takers for the assignment. *Inferno* is dark, twisted, a little scandalous. *Purgatorio* speaks deeply to anyone on a spiritual quest that relies heavily on the aesthetic. But *Paradiso* is mostly theology of a formal and old-fashioned sort, often an almost literal paraphrase of the writings of Thomas Aquinas.

A huge barrier even for those who love the two earlier sections is the degree to which Dante depersonalizes his heavenly souls. We hear

very little about their life stories. Mostly they lecture us.

None of the dead folk in the *Commedia* have bodies, of course (except for the resurrected Jesus and the assumed Mary, in heaven). In *Paradiso*, though, they have even less of a human form than in the two prior sections. Mostly they are flames or sparks. Sometimes they get together to create a big, sparkly pattern - like an eagle in the part of heaven where the just rulers live. All those twinkling lights make it a little like a celestial Las Vegas. Or like a large and grandiose bit of heavenly synchronized swimming when they all start moving together.

Perhaps when Esolen's translation appears, he will have found a way to make this part of the *Commedia* more accessible to us. Currently, perhaps the most readable translation is Allen Mandelbaum's from 1984. As Dante's matter gets more ethereal and unapproachable, his language gets more and more lyrical and beautiful. Mandelbaum manages to convey much of the music of the verse. His notes are also very helpful.

At least until Esolen's *Paradiso* comes out, and perhaps even afterward, general readers curious about a convincing and appetizing taste of the Christian heaven are more likely to find it in one of Dante's most ardent Christian admirers. C.S. Lewis' fiction, very modest in scale, achieves some amazing feats. *The Great Divorce* isn't quite set in *Purgatory*; it's really in a never-neverland on the outskirts of both heaven and hell. It's a place where people finally have to decide between the two. The little novel combines psychological penetration with genuine light from the beyond.

Two books in Lewis' *Perelandra* or "science" trilogy owe much to Dante and other Christian epic writers. The middle volume, Perlandra itself, creates an earthly paradise that brings Milton's Eden and Dante's earthly paradise startlingly up to date - on the planet Venus, of all places. The third volume, *That Hideous Strength*, introduces planetary angels with zodiacal properties quite akin to the angels in Paradiso.

Simplest and grandest of all, the last of the seven books in the Narnia series, *The Last Battle*, gives us a children's version of the Apocalypse with a final entry into heaven that is both awe-inspiring and homey.

That's what the *Purgatorio* has that *Paradiso* apparently lacks - the intimate, the personal, the humble. While Dante's ambition took him very high indeed, Lewis' vision actually got him (literarily, of course) closer to heaven by remembering that only those who become like little children can enter the kingdom.

Notes

0. Dante, *Inferno: A New Translation* by Anthony Esolen. New York: The Modern Library, 2003.
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0. Dante Alighieri, *Purgatorio: A New Verse Translation* by M.S. Merwin. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001.
0. Pinsky, Robert, *The Inferno of Dante*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997.
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