Rhymes and reasons

by Carol Zaleski in the February 19, 2014 issue

Domenico di Michelino, La Divina Commedia di Dante. 1465 fresco in Santa Maria del Fiore, Florence.

It was 700 years ago, many scholars believe—in the 12th year of Dante's exile from Florence—that the *Inferno* first saw the light of day. *Thirteen fourteen*: the year has a sprightly sound, hinting at upcoming sequels, and the Italian *l'anno mille trecento quattordici* has just the right number of syllables (11) to form the first line of a Dantean tercet. I imagine a second year following and a third year rhyming until, year by year, carried along by Dante's ingenious interlocking terza rima, we are brought to the present moment, *duemila quattordici*, still marveling at a poem that from link to link makes *paradise* rhyme with *hell*.

But does paradise rhyme with hell? Setting aside the cliché about the *Inferno* being more interesting than the *Paradiso*, any serious reader will find a deep unity of theme running throughout the hundred-canto trilogy, from Dante's promise "to treat of the good that I found there" (*Inferno* 1:8) to the final canto, which T. S. Eliot deemed "the highest point that poetry has ever reached or ever can reach." Eliot has yet to be proven wrong; the poem deserves its canonical status on a shelf below the Bible and above the ranks of merely literary classics. To borrow a word from

Dante, the *Divine Comedy*, if we are willing to read it whole, *imparadises* the mind.

Though the poem has a deep unity, the tradition of its interpretation does not; and to read the *Divine Comedy* in English—ideally with the Italian close at hand—is to step into a stream roiled by rival literary and religious movements. Romantics rescued Dante from centuries of neglect, relishing his high fantasy, symbolist theology, esoteric eroticism and political courage. Henry Cary created the definitive Victorian English *Commedia* in Miltonic blank verse, a version championed by Samuel Coleridge and cherished by John Ruskin, for whom Dante was “the central man of all the world,” perfectly harmonizing intellect, imagination and will.

But then the 20th century happened, and a very different Dante came to light, reflecting the agony of a world at war. Great War poets read *Inferno* in the trenches, finding in 1314 all the despair and hope of 1914. Laurence Binyon, whose poem “For the Fallen” is recited on Remembrance Day, produced the first major verse translation of the century, and Dorothy L. Sayers, who read *Inferno* in an air-raid shelter, followed with a terza rima version indebted to the romantic theology of Charles Williams. Ezra Pound, mentor to Binyon, created in his *Cantos* an implacably modernist *Commedia* infused with Confucian, Fascist and Neoplatonic ideas. William Butler Yeats, James Joyce, Louis MacNeice, W. H. Auden, the blind visionary Jorge Luis Borges, Malcolm Lowry and Samuel Beckett in his purgatorial *Waiting for Godot* all paid homage to Dante.

To this day, the flood of Dante translations, biographies, commentaries and tributary poems continues unabated; seemingly the whole post-Christian literary world is gathering under Dante’s big tent, as if to tackle the *Commedia* were the supreme test of one’s literary mettle. But what are we to make of this cloud of witnesses? What does it mean that so many of the finest poets and critics of our age orbit the sun of Dante’s imagination, reason and faith, however they may doubt or deny his creed?

If you watched *Mad Men* last spring, you saw Don Draper on the beach in Hawaii, reading the John Ciardi *Inferno*: “Midway in our life’s journey, I went astray / From the straight road and woke to find myself /Alone in a dark wood.” What is Dante saying to readers who love the poem but reject the message? What is their devotion to Dante saying to us? If Draper reads beyond the *Inferno*, what will he make of the promise of salvation, the joy of the penitents, the beatific vision?

Dante scholar Prue Shaw, whose new book *Reading Dante: From Here to Eternity* is an elegant thematic guide to the sound, sense and syntax of the *Commedia*, suggests one possible answer with a line from a sonnet on Dante by the ardently anti-Christian Italian poet Giosuè Carducci: “Muor Giove, e l’inno del poeta resta” (“Jove dies, and the poet’s hymn remains”). But I’d like to think that the obverse is true: as long as the poet’s hymn remains, it’s a sign that God is longed for and subliminally known.

The secret writing on the door is “Abandon skepticism, all ye who enter here.” To approach the *Divine Comedy* with an open heart is to be converted on some level, if only for the time being. The late American Dantean Charles Singleton put it this way in a retrospective essay: “It is quite conceivable to me (though I confess I do not know that it has ever happened) that an out-and-out atheist might achieve an understanding reading of the *Divine Comedy* through a willing suspension of disbelief and an imaginative and sympathetic *surrender* to the experience of the Poem.” The question is, Can one make such a surrender and remain unchanged by it? I doubt it. It seems unlikely that imagination and sympathy can be so deeply engaged without leaving traces in memory and planting seeds in reason. However that may be, the precise relationship between art and belief is a mystery and must remain so until we are imparadised with Dante.