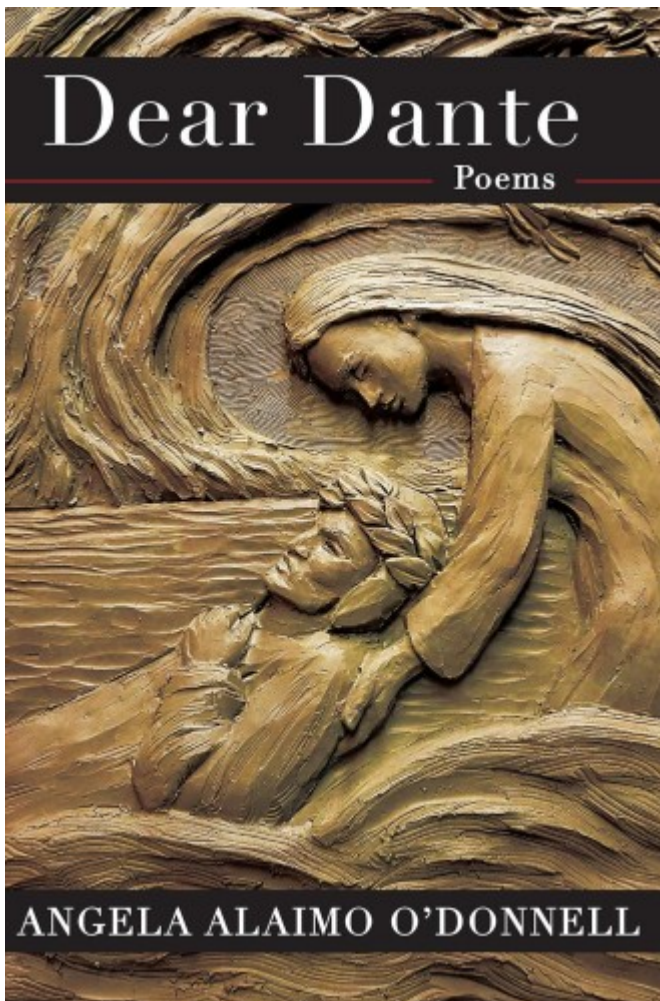


For love of Dante

Angela Alaimo O'Donnell writes, in 39 poems, a charmingly backhanded love letter to the Italian poet.

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In Review



Dear Dante

Poems

By Angela Alaimo O'Donnell

Paraclete

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RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

What makes contemporary poets so oddly, and even perversely, attracted to Dante Alighieri? Like the scores of acquaintances whom Dante imagines either burning in hell or clambering upward toward ecstasy, poets find it hard to resist tracing the pilgrim's tortured footsteps in violent times. Echoing Dante's characteristic three-line rhyme scheme in a memorable section of his *Four Quartets*, published during the Second World War, T. S. Eliot imagines himself on dawn patrol during the London Blitz, when he is stalked by a mysterious stranger who—like Dante's Virgil or Beatrice—knows more about him than he does about himself. A generation later, in *Station Island*, Seamus Heaney, haunted by a Catholic childhood in strife-torn Northern Ireland, imagines several encounters with all too familiar ghosts (and there's that Dantean rhyme scheme again) as he treads his way through the ancient Irish pilgrimage path known as St. Patrick's Purgatory.

But there are less solemn ways to encounter the long-dead poet at this beginning of the eighth century after his poem's completion. "You are the bomb," says Angela Alaimo O'Donnell in *Dear Dante*. This savvy, winsome, and disarmingly irreverent collection of poems has less in common with the solemnities of an Eliot or Heaney than with the sass of the American poet Mary Jo Bang. For Bang's slangy but sophisticated translations of Dante's poem, O'Donnell's charmingly backhanded love letter can provide an equally transgressive Virgilian guide.

O'Donnell offers 39 poems in this short book, 13 for each of Dante's three canticles (*Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*), with three additional poems as prologue or epilogue. She likes things that come in threes, mirroring Dante's trinitarian obsessions. He devised 100 cantos, divided into 33 cantos in each canticle (33 being the traditional christological age), with one extra canto at the outset functioning as a kind of prologue. O'Donnell sensibly limits her options.

Her use of Dante's famous interlocking rhyme scheme is something of a tour de force. It's much harder in English than in Italian to come up with the multiple interlocking and repeated rhymes that terza rima demands. O'Donnell manages to pull it off, sometimes awkwardly ("love / dreams of"; "*Inferno* / will know"), but often brilliantly. Her rhymed pairings, as so often in Dante's practice, link sound to sense

("sin / omission"; "Fall / appalls"), with "each hanging rhyme, pulling us / into deeper, more dangerous waters." That's as good a definition of terza rima as one can get. O'Donnell also works the occasional sonnet into her sequence (a practice more Petrarchan than Dantean, truth be told), rather oddly comparing the sonnet's 14 lines to the 14 Catholic stations of the cross. It's no accident that she teaches at Fordham with the Jesuits.

Endorse, enlarge, challenge, talk back—that's the list of intentions O'Donnell provides in her disarming introduction. She does it all well, although her laid-back diction can get a bit wearisome. Dante famously defended his use of Italian rather than Latin in writing his great poem, not hesitating to revert to streetwise Tuscan vernacular. O'Donnell attempts to do something equally bold. The technique works surprisingly well most of the time. But slang has a notoriously short shelf life. In O'Donnell's imagined pilgrimage, you might "go through Hell" and "pull it off" but still get "knocked off [your] feet." But "let's face it," "Dante gets it." So come join "Virgil's Fan Club." Enjoy Dante's "dope epic." Savor his "killer book."

Still, O'Donnell more than compensates for the occasional bathos with some striking interpretive insights, as well as with the helpful structure of the book itself. Each of her 39 poems begins with an epigraph (in Allen Mandelbaum's now-classic English translation) from the canto to which the poem responds. Those epigraphs and the poems they elicit constitute a kind of vade mecum for new readers of Dante's *Commedia*—a handbook guiding readers on a path into the canto itself and afterward guiding them out of it as they come to terms with the complexities of the journey. It's no accident that what O'Donnell teaches at Fordham is literature.

She must be very good at it. She knows when to home in on the poem's crucial moments. When the pilgrim at last encounters his beloved Beatrice at the top of the purgatorial mountain, she famously chews him out: "Dante, though Virgil's leaving you, do not / yet weep; do not weep yet; you'll need your tears / for what another sword must yet inflict" (*Purgatorio* 30:55-57). It's the only moment in the poem when Dante names himself, the fictional pilgrim now one with the exiled poet who created him. For O'Donnell, Beatrice calls out to Dante the way Christ once called out to Lazarus—a powerful analogy that illuminates the narrative of redemption about to follow: "She calls to him, as Christ called Lazarus, / urging him to leave his self-made tomb, / and sets his humble name next to hers."

Toward the end of the book, O'Donnell offers her take on one of the most astonishing—and untranslatable—of Dante's rhymes, a vision of Christ flaming forth from the cross in a way that defeats the poet's ability to write about it. Dante's solution is to make the word *Christ* rhyme with itself, occurring three times (of course) in six lines. Here's the Italian, which not even as able a translator as Mandelbaum can imitate:

Qui vince la memoria mia lo 'ngegno;
ché quella croce lampeggiava Cristo,
si ch'io non so trovare essempro degno;

ma chi prende sua croce e segue Cristo,
ancor mi scuserà di quel ch'io lasso,
vedendo in quell' albor balenar Cristo.

Cristo rhymes with *Cristo* rhymes with *Cristo*, *Christ* rhymes with *Christ* rhymes with *Christ*. It's a technical defeat but a mystical triumph. In Mandelbaum's words:

*And here my memory defeats my wit:
Christ's flaming from that cross was such that I
can find no fit similitude for it.*

*But he who takes his cross and follows Christ
will pardon me again for my omission—
my seeing Christ flash forth undid my force.*

As he must, the translator buries Christ within the lines. Mandelbaum does so regretfully, knowing full well that he is obscuring Dante's ingenious strategy, his *ingegno*.

O'Donnell, for her part, knows better than to try to translate. She knows that language itself is at stake here. At the very apex of Dante's journey toward God, when words fail before the Word, so do the best of poets:

He takes his time
trying to say what cannot be said.
Words seem worthless as they fall dead
on the page. Still he ransacks his brain,

counting the meter, shaping his lines
where Christ rhymes with Christ, every time.

It takes both chutzpah and skill for a contemporary poet to ransack her brain and set her own “humble name” next to Dante’s. With *Dear Dante*, to use language she herself might use, O’Donnell pretty much pulls it off.