

Dante in Translation

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The Divine Comedy, translated by C. H. Sisson, *Chicago: Regnery Gateway, 1984. 688 pp. \$8.95.*

WHEN EDMUND WILSON read *The Divine Comedy* with Christian Gauss at Princeton just after the First World War, he read it in Italian. It was not until after the Second World War that courses in Dante in translation began to proliferate in American colleges. As the sense of a saved European civilization spurred the postwar enthusiasm for Great Books, the prestige of T.S. Eliot made Dante a staple of English departments everywhere. That strange backwards process that printed into our minds lines from Shakespeare and Spenser before we knew the works they came from ("Musing upon the king my father's wreck"; "Sweet Thames, run softly till I end my song") led us right to Dante: right there in the first part of *The Waste Land* was that haunting line, "I had not thought death had undone so many." The *Four Quartets* were difficult at best, but you could not understand them at all without knowing about the white rose of paradise and Dante's meeting in hell with Brunetto Latini, though you were more likely to hear about them from your professor, as I did from F.O. Matthiessen, than to discover them for yourself. Eliot's *Selected Essays*, back then, seemed one of the necessary books, and the essay on Dante was both inspiring and encouraging. It was plain that Eliot had started, like us, at ground zero. The bits he quoted were so easy that, aided by his prose translations, we could make our way through the Italian all by ourselves. Most comforting was his assurance that we need not try to understand everything the first go round, that we could hit the high

spots, read for the vivid vignette, the exquisite image, the experience of poetic intensity.

So sooner or later we read Dante — Dante in translation. The Temple edition that had got Eliot started — no notes, Italian on the left, prose translation on the right — was not easy to come by in America, and John Sinclair's fine successor to it, which supplemented the two texts with full and eloquent commentary, was not yet available. Besides, however we might be able to manage Italian in bits, most of us depended on English for the long haul. Which to choose? The great Elizabethan age of translation had produced no Dante, and neither his "gothic" horrors nor his Catholic exaltation had appealed to the Age of Enlightenment, but Romantic sensibility initiated a flood of translations. The number now approaches one hundred, more than of any other poet — fifty since 1900. Nevertheless, the choices for the beginner forty years ago were few, and they remain few today. Cary's, the first complete English translation, which Blake had consulted as he worked on his illustrations, was still standard enough more than a hundred years later to be chosen for the beautiful Nonesuch edition with the Botticelli drawings. The Modern Library's Carlyle-Wicksteed provided prose accuracy and helpful notes, but unlike the Temple and later, Sinclair and Singleton, no Italian text. Longfellow's translation, like Cary's, was in a blank verse serviceable for its time, but it was not generally available. Binyon's translation in terza rima had appeared, and Pound had praised it; Dorothy Sayers would soon try it again. The exigencies of terza rima, however, encouraged crabbed locutions and rhyme-forced

additions, and Sayers fell all too often into what C.H. Sisson, in his preface to this latest of English Dantes, calls "the *quotha* and *forsooth* of Victorian knightly romanticism." For most of us it was John Ciardi's 1954 version, still widely available in New American Library paperback, which for the first time allowed us to read the *Comedy* as a poem — that is, to read the lines and feel "This is beautiful." Ciardi's translation made its way into courses all over the country. Ciardi had developed an approximation of terza rima which reduced (though it did not eliminate) rhyme-forcing while still giving a sense of Dante's music, and his language could stretch with Dante from the depths of infernal *merda* to the heights of paradisaical exaltation and still sound as if it belonged in our century.

Ciardi's work, however, had the defects of its virtues — more exactly, the licenses of its liberties — and it is not surprising that new translations continue to appear, nine in the last two decades. Students still crowd into Dante courses, and the issue of what translation, or combination of translations, to choose, remains crucial for teachers and for readers who are not at ease in Italian.

I am not sure what students are looking for — more, surely, than an introduction to *How They Thought Back Then* or an underpinning for Eliot and Joyce. But in a time whose pervasive relativism seems to offer no foothold for any journey, let alone ascent, Dante offers them some sense of the existence of a world of order and beauty and sure value, transcendent yet real. For some it is the reality of supreme and confident art; for others, the provisional reality of suspended disbelief, the glimpse of how it might feel to believe that order and value sustain the universe. A few make the complete ascent and find in Dante's vision the full reality that is his goal, as he prays that what he writes (in Sisson's translation) "may answer to the facts," or (in Ciardi's) "that the word may be the mirror of the thing" — *che dal fatto il dir non sia diverso*.

As seen from the above example, Sisson's translation is very plain. That is

his intent. "It is not," he writes, "in translator's language, and it can be read"; more, "the first lesson of Dante is that one should write to *convey*, not to impress." Sisson's effort, largely successful, has been to "translate into the language of one's own day." But he goes further; the translator must write "in the kind of verse which belongs to the current development of the language, and of his own technique." This seems to exclude, for Sisson, both rhyme and blank verse. His length of line varies, hovering between ten and thirteen syllables but deviating at will, so that (to look on the bright side) he need not supply even the occasional bits of filler necessitated by a loose pentameter, and (to flip the coin) he not only misses out on Dante's music but conveys the impression that it is of no importance.

Plainness serves Sisson well where Dante's content is such as might ordinarily be expressed in prose or where the poetry is inherent in the conception. His rendition of Marco Lombardo's explanation of how (to recall another line we first encountered in Eliot) "issues from the hand of God the simple soul" is moving in its awkward simplicity:

Issues from the hand of him who contemplates it

Before it is, in the manner of a child
Who laughs and weeps and behaves
childishly,

The simple little soul which knows
nothing,

Except that, moved by the gladness of
its maker,

It turns freely to that which amuses it.

I am not sure that the first tercet is in the language of our own day rather than translator's language, but we must be glad that he tried to convey *anima semplicita*, and the whole is certainly less literary than Ciardi's:

From the hand of God, whose love
shines like a ray
upon it, even before birth, comes forth
the simple soul which, like a child at
play,

cries, laughs, and ignorant of every
measure
but the glad impulse of its joyous maker
turns eagerly to all that gives it
pleasure.

One might also argue that it is less fully digested into that hypothetical English (to quote Sisson's approving citation of Dryden on his own goal in translating Virgil) that the poet "wou'd himself have spoken, if he had been born in England, and in this present Age."

When Dante's personal feeling is what calls on our response, the contrast is distinctly in Sisson's favor:

You will learn how salt is the taste
Of other people's bread, how hard the
way
Going up and down other people's
stairs.

In such a passage, Ciardi's rhyme-forced interpolations are what we neither need nor want:

You will come to learn, how bitter as
salt and stone
is the bread of others, how hard the
way that goes
up and down stairs that never are your
own.

Sisson is excellent when Statius explains to Dante the stages of human reproduction, when Beatrice explains the freedom of the will or the spots on the moon — in short, when we need exact understanding and when what we require for that exact understanding is not poetry (unless it is Dante's Italian) but what Buckminster Fuller calls "ventilated prose" — prose divided into lines so that it comes at us slowly. Sisson's clarity can be deceptive, however, when more is at issue than he realizes. *Il ben de l'intelletto* may look like "the benefit of the intellect," but Dante does not mean that the souls in hell can no longer think, but that they have lost God, the ultimate *good of intellect*, translated as such by all six of the versions on my desk at this writing. Similarly with *io te sovra te corono e mitrio*. For Virgil to tell Dante, arrived in the Earthly Paradise after the

hard climb up the Mount of Purgatory, that now that his will is free and upright "I leave you master of your body and soul" may sound more like what Sisson himself would have spoken, but it erases the climactic point for a poet for whom the harmonious relation of crown and miter, church and state, and body and soul was of supreme importance. "Lord of yourself I crown and mitre you"; Ciardi's line is accurate, and if it is difficult, the difficulty is Dante's.

Sisson is so unwilling to sound "poetic" that he does not even sound poetic. For Dante, and for most of his translators, Beatrice "emparadises" his mind. The noun turned verb must have sounded just as strange — and beautiful — to Dante's first readers as it did to Milton when he borrowed it to show Adam and Eve "emparadis'd in one another's arms," and as it does to us. "She who raised my mind to paradise" is not it at all. Sisson does not seem to want us to know that Dante is a poet. When Dante exclaims of Beatrice "How generous she was to give her assistance!" it sounds like the acknowledgments page of an academic thesis; the phrasing of "holy intelligences / which were created to fly at such altitudes" transmutes angels into 747s.

Even more irritating is his careful avoidance of familiar phrasing. Ciardi knew he could not better Eliot, so kept "I had not thought death had undone so many." We do not need to recognize the allusion, but though anachronistic it is very Dantean in a canto in which Dante himself will allude to Virgil's famous simile of autumn leaves. Sisson is not as good as he might be on picking up allusions, either in his lines or in his notes. When Dante tells Virgil, soon to disappear forever from his ken, that seeing Beatrice he (in Ciardi's words) "recognizes the tokens of the ancient flame," it may seem equally acceptable to render "power of the ancient love." But Dante, about to lose his *dolcissimo padre*, is paying him a delicate tribute in translating from his own *Aeneid*, *adgnosco veteris vestigia flammae*. Literary? Indeed, but Sisson, who like so

many of us came to Dante through Eliot, as a poet should be alive to the endless interplay of tradition and individual talent.

And what do we make of a translator so eager to avoid "Abandon all hope ye who enter here" that he gives us "No room for hope, when you enter this place"? Or of the astonishing decision to obscure perhaps Dante's most significant — and certainly most famous — structural device, the ending of each of his three canticles with *stelle*? If Sisson is going to end *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* with "stars," why end *Inferno* with the anticlimactic "And then we emerged to see the stars again"? Such unnecessary deviations from the literal are the more inexplicable in a poet who has rejected formal constraints.

Every new translation, simply because it is different, can draw our attention to points in the original which other translations have missed. Sisson will also be handy for those who want a particularly clear version of hard bits of the *Comedy* and prefer verse to prose. But its usefulness in the United States will be limited. We have Ciardi, with his musical felicity, his Dantean ability to sweep from gutter language into high poetic diction, and his intellectually challenging notes. For those who are troubled by his occasional inaccuracies and frequent poetic extrapolations, there are the recent translations by Allen Mandelbaum and Mark Musa into direct and effective contemporary blank verse. The first is adorned with Barry Moser's exquisite and thoughtful illustrations, and it has in addition the unique ad-

vantage of the Italian text set on the *right-hand* page, to tempt the eye to read it first and match it with the corresponding English line on the left. The splendid (and expensive) California volumes have no notes, but Bantam now issues this translation annotated for students. Musa too offers notes, more scholarly than Ciardi's but not as feisty. Both are better than Sisson's. Sisson offers a valuable historical time-chart, and it was a splendid idea to reproduce the Hereford *Mappa mundi* from Dante's own time; but the want of the kind of diagrams of Dante's universe provided by Musa and Ciardi will be felt acutely by exactly those common readers to whom he means to appeal. His translation seems to have been undertaken in a purely English context, to provide an alternative to Binyon and Sayers; his rather polemic preface mentions no American alternatives. It is hard lines for Sisson that Penguin has dropped Sayers for Musa, who is as American as Mandelbaum and Ciardi; when his *Paradiso* appears, a clear and accurate verse translation of the *Comedy* will be complete, available, and cheap. No translation is adequate, of course; by whichever path we enter Dante's dark wood and climb with him to paradise, we will eventually want to explore another, and another. Best of all if these paths lead us to Dante's own, the *verba ipsissima* which, fortunately for us as well as for T.S. Eliot, we can, with the help of as many translations as we have patience for, first puzzle out, then read, then love.