

A NEW VERSE TRANSLATION

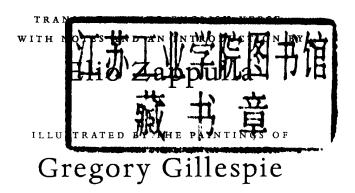
with Notes and an Introduction by

ELIO ZAPPULLA

An unexpected and glorious gift.... The love of Dante comes through in the text ... every line carefully, beautifully translated." —Wallace Fowlie

INFERNO

DANTE ALIGHIERI



VINTAGE CLASSICS

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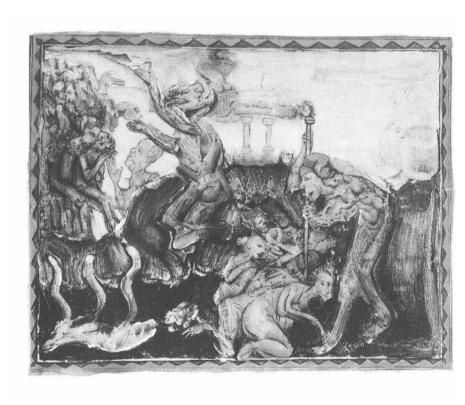
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PREFACE

n view of the quantity of English translations of the Inferno already in existence, many will ask what possible excuse there can be for yet another. One answer, quite simply, is that, since no one who attempts to render the complex simplicity of Dante's Italian into English (or into any other language) will succeed in capturing much more than the atmosphere of the poem, though each translation will undoubtedly have its unique virtues, the challenge to create a version that pleases the palate and yet nourishes is ever present. Accepting the challenge, I have aimed at creating a clear, readable English version of Dante's epic that nevertheless retains some of the poetry of the original. Whether or not I have achieved my purpose will be for the reader to judge, of course. Another possible answer is more speculative: perhaps at the heart of the permanent, restless imperative to render Dante into accessible, contemporary speech is the impulse to recover for the present the fusion of the lyrical with the epic within an unforced vernacular that once can be said to have established Western literature's claims to authority and underwritten literature's assertion of a psychologically convincing universalist ethos. Every new translation, then, in effect registers the distance we have traveled from that fusion and measures it differently.

I have chosen to render the *Inferno* into blank verse—iambic pentameter unrhymed—the form that seems most congenial to poetry of a high order in the English language: Milton chose iambics for *Paradise Lost*; Wordsworth, for his *Prelude*; and Shakespeare, for nearly all his plays. Its long and distinguished tradition in our language, its broad and noble

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sweep, its approximate equivalency to Dante's hendecasyllabic line make it the logical choice.

A well-known Italian saw pithily pronounces: *Tradutore, traditore* ["Translator, traitor"]. The present version of *Inferno* may not be as loyal to the original as purists would prefer, but I hardly think it is traitorous, for my intention has been to remain faithful to the spirit of Dante's poem while eschewing an insipid and fatal literalness. That intention has sometimes led me to alter, insert, or (rarely) omit a word or phrase in order to clarify some obscure idea for modern readers or make some knotty point resonate more vibrantly with them, without committing *lėse-majesté*. My hope is that I will have done a small service to those readers who may find Dante more accessible in this version, its many failings notwithstanding.

By contrast with many other writers, whose works often present the reader with linguistic hurdles that must be cleared before comprehension can set in, Dante usually employs a language of striking limpidity and immediate comprehensibility. His style in the *Commedia* frequently approaches the conversational, as if he wishes to engage the reader in intimate dialogue. True, his vocabulary is wide-ranging: often we are greeted with some abstruse term from moral philosophy or theology; nevertheless, the vast majority of his words are common ones. His similes, for example, are usually grounded in easily understood language:

Like one who's rescued from the angry waves, Then, breathless, stands ashore to stare in awe And terror at the cruel sea, my soul, Still fugitive, turned back to scan the wood That none before had ever left alive.

(INFERNO I:22-26)

Or:

Like cranes who chant their cries across the sky In never-ending lines, so did they seem Who wailed in winds that bore them darkly on.

(INFERNO V:40-42)

Nor is he averse to using vulgar words with which everyone would be familiar (and which would have been less shocking to Dante's contemporaries than to later, more Puritanical, ears), e.g., merda ["shit"] or puttana ["whore"]. What difficulties do arise, for the modern Italian reader, involve changes that have occurred in the Italian language over the centuries. For his contemporaries, however, the meanings of Dante's words were, for the most part, readily grasped. To be sure, not all of the Commedia was intended for Everyman, but the bare narrative and the emotions it conveys, though perhaps not its theological, anagogical, or allegorical elements, were not difficult to follow. In an English version of Dante, therefore, it would seem wise to shun an excessively academic vocabulary-except here and there when doing so appears to be unavoidableand to employ more ordinary words as often as possible if the reader is to have some sense of the impact of the Commedia on fourteenth-century readers. In my translation, therefore, I have tried to avoid the overuse of learned words, although there were more than a few instances, of course, when only a more learned or more scholarly word seemed the appropriate, if not the inevitable, choice.

The paintings by the contemporary artist Gregory Gillespie included in this translation powerfully complement Dante's words. They possess an analogous, unblinking, even shocking, intensity of attention to the observed world; at the same time, they record a profound, recognizably related, modern-day allegorical engagement with the visionary.

This translation has clearly benefited from the fine work of previous translators, each of whom undoubtedly journeyed through his or her own Purgatory in the struggle to squeeze the magnificent tercets of Dante into a pair of English shoes. Of particular help to me as I wrestled to pin down the right word were the poetic versions of John Ciardi and Dorothy L. Sayers; the very accurate prose translations by John Sinclair and Charles D. Singleton; the precise nineteenth-century iambic rendering by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow; and the indispensable century-old literal translation by William Warren Vernon. The fine notes in those editions were also very useful to my own attempt to annotate each canto. The very greatest assistance, both for the translation and the notes, was

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provided by the densely annotated editions of the *Commedia* prepared by Italian scholars: Enrico Bianchi, Ernesto Bignami, Natalino Sapegno, G. A. Scartazzini, Pietro Vetro, and others: anyone who seriously studies Dante cannot ignore the work of the Italians. Useful, too, though dated in so many ways, were the classic editions of Dante by Carlyle-Okey-Wicksteed and Charles H. Grandgent. The *Enciclopedia Dantesca* and Paget Toynbee's *Dictionary of Proper Names and Notable Matters in the Works of Dante* were indispensable. Other books were of significant assistance to me; at the end of this volume, I have listed a Select Bibliography of works that may be helpful to anyone wishing to delve more deeply into the life, the era, and the works of the great Florentine.

ELIO ZAPPULLA Stony Brook, New York March 1997

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Although I must live with the fear that I may inadvertently omit some names, I want to express my thanks to a number of people. First among them is Peter Dimock, my editor at Pantheon Books, who had faith in the translation from the very beginning. I shall not forget his unshakable confidence in me or his many excellent suggestions, welling up from an extraordinary intellect, for improving my original manuscript.

I am indebted to several colleagues at Dowling College who read portions of the early cantos and encouraged me from the very outset: Professors Miriam Baker, Andrew Karp, Stephen Lamia, Susan Rosenstreich, James O. Tate, and William Thierfelder. Dr. Frank Littlefield, an historian with an encyclopedic knowledge of history, read an early draft of my Introduction and made helpful suggestions for changes.

I owe a special debt to an extraordinary human being, my late colleague at Dowling, Aaron Kramer. One of our fine American poets, possessed of an infallible ear and exquisite taste, Aaron scrutinized two of my early cantos and, while always encouraging me, pointed out, ever so gently, a number of limping lines and infelicitous phrasings. I am profoundly grateful to him for sharpening my sometimes blurred vision and fine-tuning my occasionally dull ear. Like all who knew Aaron, I will miss, above all, his decency and his humanity.

I am obliged to Dowling's President Victor P. Meskill, to Provost Albert E. Donor, to Dean James E. Caraway, and to the members of the Committee on Long Range Planning and Development of Dowling for grants of released time to work on this project and for other assistance

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and encouragement. The library staff at Dowling were often helpful in obtaining materials for me.

To Wallace Fowlie, one of America's great teachers and an old friend and colleague with whom I have had many a good talk about Dante's language over the years, I am grateful for so many profoundly stimulating comments about Dante, to whom, as a noted writer on modern French literature, he brought an excitingly fresh perspective. Particularly useful to me at a few difficult moments was his *Readings on the Inferno*, a sparkling introduction to Dante. How very fortunate several generations of Duke University students have been to have studied the *Commedia* in translation in Professor Fowlie's legendary Dante course!

I am indebted to George Hoffman for his thoughtfulness: he sent me to the right person at the right time. Greg Hanscon's efforts did not go unrecognized. I want to thank David Frederickson, who copy-edited my book, and Grace McVeigh, production editor at Pantheon, for their good work.

My son David gave excellent suggestions for improving my manuscript; my daughter Eve helped generously with the typing; my son Robert lent much encouragement; Debbie and Stuart Hoffman gave frequent loving support; to all I am deeply thankful.

Mere words of thanks are completely inadequate, however, to express what I owe to my wife, Lynette, without whose love, patience, encouragement, and marvelously critical eye and ear this book would clearly never have been completed. She has been, in so many ways, and in every aspect of my life, my very own Beatrice.

Of course, I alone am responsible for whatever shortcomings this book contains.

I cannot conclude these acknowledgments without saying a word about my father, who was the greatest impetus for this translation. Giuseppe Zappulla was a gifted Italian poet and journalist, and an excellent translator from English into his native Italian. During World War II, he served the United States (where he had arrived in 1922 from Sicily as a poor, self-educated twenty-one-year-old immigrant) by writing Italian radio scripts for the U.S. Office of War Information and broadcasting

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them to Italy, helping Italians see the war—and America—from a non-Fascist perspective and encouraging resistance to the Fascist regime. There was something quite Dantean about my father: his fierce pride; his intolerance of mediocrity (especially in literature); his tremendous love both for his native land and his adopted country. It was his abiding interest in Dante, in literature and history, and in the study of languages that greatly influenced my own choice of career.

My one great regret is that I began this translation many years after my father's death. I only wish he could have been alive to see this book come to light; I like to imagine that it would have pleased him.

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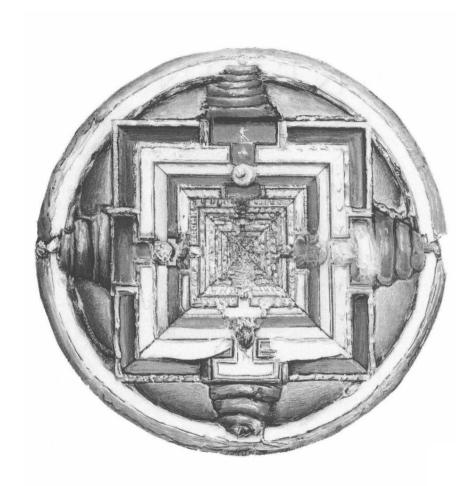
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INFERNO



INTRODUCTION

"Reader, garner fruit / From what you read. . . ."
INFERNO XX:20-21

he *Inferno* is great poetry and great drama. Once we have read this tale of a journey through Hell, we can never forget the dark wood of sin and death; the horrible inscription over the gate of Hell; the murdered lovers, Paolo and Francesca; the wrath of Filippo Argenti; the gentle Brunetto Latini; the towering figure of Farinata, that striking emblem of scorn and arrogance; the ever-inquisitive, self-deceiving Ulysses; the pathetic Ugolino gnawing the head of an archbishop; the sinners bobbing up and down in rivers of excrement or rivers of blood, metamorphosed into trees, supine in a lake of ice, entwined by snakes, dazed and disemboweled: all naked, all in agony, all existing forever without a shred of hope; and the figure of Satan himself, half buried in ice, mindlessly beating his six enormous bat's wings and chewing in his horrible triple mouth the three men whom Dante believed to be the chief sinners of the human race.

It is an unforgettable work, a difficult work. Above all, it is a poem of the highest and deepest ethical value—yes, even for the sophisticated reader of our times. For the poem's highest purpose is to make us ask ourselves the age-old question: How shall I lead my life? To Dante the answer is clear: love God, shun evil, let every action originate not in self-interest but in the knowledge of what God has told us is right. It is an answer that we all know but that we often ignore. In his supreme achievement, Dante replies to the question vividly and memorably.

The Divine Comedy, of which the voyage through the Inferno is the first part, is a strange and unique epic, whose relatively simple language masks a deeply complex structure. It describes a journey through Hell,

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Purgatory, and Heaven that the poet, Dante Alighieri, the protagonist of his own poem, tells us he took in the year 1300 A.D. The poem has achieved an international fame matched only by Homer's epics and the plays of Shakespeare, and its reputation continues to grow as the centuries roll on. Consider, as one barometer of the interest it still generates, the vast number of critical books and articles that have been written about it, especially in the twentieth century. And the flow of English translations alone shows no sign of diminishing; the Bible and Homer's poems may be the only other books that continue to be translated with such frequency into our language. These facts tell us something about the enduring power of this highly original poem that continues to haunt, to fascinate, to charm, even to instruct, for it is surely, after the Bible, one of the most significant moral works of literature in the Western canon.

It was during his years of exile, from 1302 until the end of his life, that Dante composed his masterwork. Called, in Italian, La Divina Commedia, and originally entitled simply La Commedia (the adjective Divina having been supplied by others more than two centuries after Dante's death), it is divided into three parts, called canticles (in Italian, cantiche): Inferno, Purgatorio, and Paradiso; these parts are sometimes published as separate books. Each canticle is divided into cantos, which vary in length, averaging about 145 lines each. Inferno has thirty-four cantos; Purgatorio and Paradiso, thirty-three each, for a total of one hundred.

The poem's meter is the immensely variable hendecasyllable, meaning "eleven syllables," each marked by anywhere from two to five stresses. The Commedia's 14,000 lines have an intricate rhyme scheme called, in Italian, terza rima: aba bcb cdc ded, etc. Even to attempt to replicate such a scheme in English (it has been done) is an undertaking that commands admiration. Dorothy Sayers uses this rhyme scheme in her version, although with varying success (for English is a rhyme-poor language). Perhaps John Ciardi was wiser to have used a modified form of terza rima that gives at least the flavor of the original rhyme. Most translators (including me) have opted for blank verse, or unrhymed iambic pentameter, as being the form most suitable to the English language. It is, of

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course, the form that has been used for poetry of the highest order in English.

The word Commedia (stress on the e)—originally spelled Comedia, with the stress on the i), may be puzzling: after all, a reading of it (especially of Inferno) does not make one want to laugh. Clearly, by "comedy" is meant something other than a work designed to provoke amusement in the reader. What the word signified, according to Dante, was a work written in a less grand, more down-to-earth style than that which characterized poetry of a higher, more "tragic" order, though few now would view the Commedia as anything less than just that. (Furthermore, in order to reach the ears of all his countrymen, Dante wrote his poem in Italian: Latin was regarded as the language to be used for poetry of a high order, such as Virgil's Aeneid). Also, a comedy could be a work in which the hero, after suffering through adversity, achieves his goal and, perhaps, happiness. In Dante's poem, the hero, having witnessed the terrors of Hell and having undergone the painful, though far less terrifying, process of purgation of sins on the mountain of Purgatory, reaches Heaven and stands before the ineffable God, Creator of the universe. Such an ending is certainly happy: could any ending, in fact, be happier?

At the outset of the *Commedia*, Dante finds himself in a dark wood. He is subsequently escorted through the bowels of Hell and up the mountain of Purgatory by the spirit of the poet Virgil (whose works Dante deeply admired), and through part of Purgatory and all of Heaven by the soul of his beloved Beatrice, who had already been dead for many years when the poem was completed, until he looks into the face of God Himself in the last canto of *Paradiso*. Along the way, Dante sees thousands of souls and converses with, or listens to, many dozens of them: great sinners, ordinary people, great saints; the famous and the infamous; the mythical and the real. Many of the souls he encounters are Italians, especially Florentines, some of whom had recently died, some of whom he had known personally, and as they speak with Dante, the reader learns not only about their individual lives—especially their sinful or their virtuous deeds—but also about contemporary Italian politics and history.