

A.N. Wilson, *Dante in Love* (Atlantic Books, 2011)

This very handsomely-produced book, replete with colour plates, sets out to offer a unique itinerary for first-time readers of Dante, even though the volume's self-professed 'travel guide' (2) and author, A.N. Wilson, admits in Chapter One to be embarking on a journey 'in unfamiliar terrain' (2). Thus at this early juncture in the initial chapter, one is tempted to point the author and his reading public in the direction of recent critical volumes for English-speaking readers of Dante, whether they be experienced scholars or novices. One such masterly work is John A. Scott's *Understanding Dante*. Scott is very aware of T.S. Eliot's claim: 'Dante and Shakespeare divide the modern world between them; there is no third' (*Selected Essays*, San Diego: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1950, p. 225) It is surprising then that while Wilson makes a claim for Dante to be considered a 'modern poet' (342), and his volume is flush with excerpts from modern translators such as Mandelbaum, Kirkpatrick and Musa, the twentieth century's abundant and incisive scholarly production of Dante critical commentary in English is sparingly attested to by the author (for example, the brief mention made of scholars such as Reynolds, Gilson, and Robert Pogue Harrison, who is erroneously referred to as Richard on page 11).

From the outset, the author informs us that his book is also intended for those who have attempted to read the *Comedy* previously but have abandoned the arduous undertaking in the face of Dante's assumptions regarding his readers' familiarity with a wealth of historical, literary, theological, political, mythological and philosophical references. Wilson has no doubt that the Dantean literary experience conveyed, above all, by the *Comedy* is a worthwhile one. In fact he terms it 'one of the supreme aesthetic, imaginative, emotional and intellectual experiences on offer' (2) and 'the boldest work of Western literature' (302). Nevertheless, the expectations made upon the reader by Dante remain a challenge. How then to convey the richness and inventiveness of the *Comedy*; this daunting poetic giant that has come down to us from the fourteenth century via numerous manuscripts in the vernacular, not to mention annotated editions and translations (although the whereabouts of Dante's original manuscript remain a mystery)?

In *Dante in Love*, Wilson approaches his task as travel guide by immersing his reader in the life and times of the Florentine poet. He skilfully recreates the vicissitudes of a young man of prodigious talent living in an era of profound economic and intellectual transformation. The latter was made possible by the emergence of a banking system and by the availability of influential Greek and Arabic texts in translation during an era noticeably influenced by the spiritual revival of leading figures such as Saint Francis of Assisi. Unfortunately for the real-life Dante, it was also a period of dangerous political unrest, both at the local level with the manoeuvrings of the *Neri* and the *Bianchi* (Black and White Guelfs) and at the level of Empire versus Church. The Papacy wielded enormous power and Dante's *bête noire*, Pope Boniface VIII, had no hesitation in crushing all opposition and obliterating his enemies when it suited him. He succeeded in sending Dante into political and financial oblivion, at least as far as his life in Florence was concerned.

Dante remained in exile from Florence for the rest of his life. However, even the wily and ruthless Pope Boniface could never have predicted Dante's emergence from the ruins and the glorious place that he would occupy as a supreme poet of love. And ultimately, as Wilson demonstrates in his genuinely impassioned encounter with Dante's major literary work, the *Comedy*, it is a poem about love, in its divine and human expression, communicated with an

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urgency of purpose by means of a taut rhyme-scheme whose 'Trinitarian significance' asserts Wilson, 'suited his purpose, but so too did its forward movement' (245).

In guiding us through his idiosyncratic engagement with the *poema sacro*, Wilson peppers his account with autobiographical snippets, anecdotes and synthetic accounts of historical and literary events of moment and import. His own *cammin* through Dante's literary output, inspired as a young man by *The Figure of Beatrice* by Charles Williams, offers an absorbing read as we are immersed in the highs and lows of Dante's biographical journey in tandem with the fictional journey occurring in the Papal Jubilee year of 1300: 'The *Comedy* is the story of one man's inner journey, against the turbulent backdrop of his times. It is also the story of Everyman' (19).

Along the way, Wilson grants us many valuable insights. Chapter XXI provides a focus on the awakening of the English-speaking world to Dante's masterwork through the efforts of Reverend Henry Francis Cary and his celebrated translation. However, having commenced the chapter with the reception of Dante's work in Italy and Jacopo della Lana's commentary, it would have been fitting for the author to mention the revival of interest in Dante in the post-Baroque period when the Florentine poet's critical fortunes in Italy were on the rise thanks to the perceptive reading of scholars such as Giambattista Vico and Gian Vincenzo Gravina.

The volume makes some odd claims about a number of factors, including Dante's mental state (for example, the reference to a 'Tourette's Syndrome Dante', 280); St Bernard of Clairvaux (the breed of dog that carries out rescue missions is actually connected to St Bernard of Montjoux, patron saint of alpinists, 308); and Dante's relationship with his real-life spouse, Gemma Donati, who was related to his political enemies, the *Neri*. Since Dante has not published any material about Gemma, one can only speculate about the true nature of their marital relationship. In addition, Wilson expresses a preference for the originality of the third canticle of the *Commedia* but I would contend that all three canticles are works of 'prodigious originality' (301), not just the *Paradiso*. Where the narrative shines is in Wilson's elucidation of his life-long passion for the *Comedy* and his ability to navigate the reader through the complexities of Dante's era of internecine political conflict: 'Dante, poet of dislocation and exile, poet of a new language, has immediate things to say to us' (342). Notwithstanding some of the critical omissions mentioned earlier, *Dante in Love* offers a vibrant and engaging encounter with Dante's obsessions, his polemics and his deep understanding of the transformative power of love.

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