

Essays



John Hacker – who is featured in the web supplement

W S Milne is a regular contributor to *Agenda*. He has just completed a play on the Scottish Communist, John MacLean. His play about a fishing tragedy, *Sheddaes over the Sea*, is to be published in the next issue of *Lallans* magazine.

W S MILNE

LA DIVINA COMMEDIA AND THE ART OF POETRY

E le labbra a fatica la formarò

And my lips with labour gave it form

Purgatorio XXXI

It has always seemed extraordinary to me that *The Divine Comedy* is interpreted by the majority of mainstream critics, professional *dantisti*, in every possible light except that of the art of poetry. The text has been quarried for its theological, political, judicial and hermetic implications, its demonology and angelology, its ghosts and spectres, without reference to Dante's commitment to the truth of poetry itself, as if the work were a philosophical tome rather than an imaginative text. This is to do the poem (and the poet) a great injustice – the

poetry gets lost in a clutter of needless abstractions.¹ The analysis of the place of poetry in *La Commedia*, I would argue, seems to have been overlooked, or at the very least neglected, as if there were some bloodless theory that stood apart from the worldly body of the poem itself, in grand isolation from the reader. This common stance feels like an academic attempt to make the poem more respectable than it is, to obviate what Geoffrey Hill concisely calls its ‘malign gusto’ (p.328)² showing little understanding of how the poetry is made or how it impacts upon the reader – as if it were necessary to repackage the poem to fulfil some moralistic, utilitarian end.

In his ‘Letter to Can Grande della Scala’ Dante states quite clearly that *The Divine Comedy* ‘was undertaken, not for a speculative but for a practical end’, and in the *Monarchia* he writes ‘the work proper to the human race... is always to actualize the full power of the possible intellect’, *est actuare semper totam poetentiam intellectus possibilis*. Dante’s poetics have little to do with the paraphernalia of commentaries, glossaries and notes (becoming year on year, I would say, more unmanageable)³ which attempt to deconstruct every heretic, outsider, infidel or barbarian who appears in the poem. This heavy curtain of exegesis, I would contest, makes editions which include it more or less unapproachable to the general reader.⁴

Dante takes a dogmatic system derived from Aristotle and St Thomas Aquinas and the universities of the Middle Ages and applies this common heritage of scholasticism to a poetic work, putting flesh onto (and hot Italian blood into) the cold theological frame. Dante’s early fourteenth century work, however, unlike Milton’s mid-seventeenth century *Paradise Lost*, works with the grain of dogma, rather than against it. He is not interested in upsetting the status quo, although his (admittedly infrequent) sympathy for the damned sometimes borders on the heretical.⁵ The poem, however, far from being a mere apologia for late medieval Christianity, reads more in places and at times like a prelude to Italian humanism, a burgeoning of neo-Platonism in Christian guise. In this regard I think we can take Peter Russell’s pragmatic advice to our hearts and consider *The Divine Comedy* as ‘an aesthetic and imaginative continuity rather than a doctrinal one’ (p.174). We need to attend to the fundamental features of the poem itself.

These ‘fundamental features’ present intractable difficulties and perplexities, of course, especially if, like Dante, you are attempting to describe or embody that which is by its nature extra-temporal. The poet himself acknowledges this. He assures us, with great honesty and courage, that words are dubious tokens only, *sembianza trista*,⁶ ‘a gloomy semblance’ only of

¹ For example, Thomas G. Bergin argues that ‘the *Commedia* is a synthesis of medieval learning’ (p.45); Christopher Ryan writes of the poem quite unashamedly as a ‘theological enterprise’ (p.76); Étienne Gilson’s 1948 monograph title, *Dante The Philosopher*, makes it quite clear that he regards Dante first and foremost as a thinker and not as a poet. A book title such as *Dante the Maker* (by William Anderson) seems to promise much in countering this approach, but proves very disappointing in the end: there is little in it which helps us understand the centrality of poetry in Dante’s world.

² He is referring specifically to the *canzoni* of the *Inferno*, with its landscape of pain, disease, immitigable suffering, cruelty, mutilation and sudden death – everyday medieval realities.

³ Already in 1828 Karl Witte was writing of ‘the incredible industry devoted to *The Divine Comedy*’ (p.311); he also writes of ‘the sure grip and the fervour of the poetry’ (p.22).

⁴ There are exceptions, of course, most notably Charles Williams who has written that ‘we are to prevent too great an “elevation” of Dante’s thought; we are not to suppose him a mere cerebralist’ (p.20). Helmut Hatzfeld has written of the *Purgatorio* as an ‘artistic product’ rather than as a compendium of medieval thought (p.65); Eric Auerbach has argued that Dante ‘is truly a “poet of the secular world,” of our fallen earthly realm where people laugh and conspire, love and hate, sin and triumph over sin’ (p.ix); Philip H. Wicksteed has argued that ‘while Dante habitually moved within the circle of scholastic ideas, he did not allow it to confine him when his own thought or his poetic vision broke away from its limitations’ (p.147).

⁵ On this point, see Samuel Beckett in his *Letters*, p.568.

⁶ In Canzone vii (part vi) of *Canzoniere*.

the Archetype, *l'ombra del beato regna*, phantoms at best – God alone having the ultimate word, *l'ultima parola*. Mortal discourse is broken by comparison: as Job has it ‘We cannot order our speech by reason of darkness’. At the very most our words and music are reflections or images of the real,⁷ the inspired poet ‘the needle to the star’, *l'ago alla stella*, pointing the way but never quite arriving there. All analogies fall short of God’s substance: ‘such light as human nature may receive’, *quantunque alla nature umana lece aver di lume*, Dante says, is all we can rely on. He quotes Isaiah⁸ to this end: ‘As far as the heavens are above the earth, so far are my ways above your ways’.

This problem, this feeling of recalcitrance (it feels like a depression almost, Dante walking along ‘the lost road’, *perduata strada*, ‘the lonely plain’, *lo solingo piano*), is made clear in the opening section of the *Inferno* where the gravity of the burden (*gravezza*) weighs heavily upon him, and continues intermittently throughout the poem – Dante writes, for example, of ‘the weight of Adam’s flesh’, *l'incarco/della carne d'Adam*; of ‘lying on the earth, heavy with the death-chill’, *grava alla terra per lo mortal gelo*; of ‘heavy grief’, *di grave dolor*; of ‘heavy words’, *parole gravi* – the crux of his artistic bewilderment and spiritual anxiety. It is reiterated again in *Paradiso XXIII*: ‘But whoso thinketh of the weighty theme and of the mortal shoulder which hath charged itself therewith, will think no blame if under it it trembleth’:

*Ma chi pensasse il ponderosa tema,
e l'omero mortal che se ne carica,
nol biasmerebbe, se sott' esso trema.*

He adds: ‘It is no voyage for a little barque’, *Non e pilleggio di picciola barca*.

Out with the frame of the poem, again in his ‘Letter to Can Grande della Scala’ (*Epistola X*), Dante writes of the ‘harsh complication’ of the work leading to ‘a prosperous end’ – a working definition of what he calls his ‘Comedy’, *comus*, his song in the vernacular. At an early stage of his progress as a poet, in the *Canzoniere*, he writes of poetry’s ‘great toil’, *tanto lavoro*, of ‘the dolesome path’, *per dolorosa strada*, ‘the vile mud’, *il vil fango*, he has to tread. He writes of his ‘weary fingers’, *stancato ditto*, and of his ‘weak life’, *la debole mia vita* – hinting at the drudgery of his working day. In the *Monarchia* he acknowledges that his ‘earthly hopes had sickened’ and that he was ‘astray, so that outwardly he appeared as though distraught’ – signs he was aware of the complexity of the task ahead of him, of composing *The Divine Comedy*.

In *La Vita Nuova* Dante describes his ‘great pain’, *tanto dolore*, and the inward debate in his soul, ‘the battle of divers thoughts’, *la battaglia delli diversi pensieri*. These phrases vindicate that ‘necessary labour’ Geoffrey Hill detects in the composition of the *Commedia* (p.319) and his summation that ‘Dante’s wings were suffering, study, and constant application’ (p.322) relieved only, I would say, by the inspiration of his poetic Muse.⁹ The

⁷ An alternative phrase might be: ‘At the very most our words and music are imperfect approaches to the real’. See Dante’s words towards the end of the poem: ‘Oh how scant the utterance, and how faint, to my conception!’ (*Paradiso XXXIII*, ll.121-2.)

⁸ In his Latin essay *Quaestio De Aqua et Terra*.

⁹ The thought goes back to Aretino (1369-1444) who said Dante ‘created his poetry by means of knowledge and study, by discipline, art, and forethought’ (p.91); and Boccaccio (1313-1375) ‘that [Dante] loved poetry beyond any other study... so he hoped through poetry to obtain the unusual and splendid honour of coronation with the laurel, and therefore dedicated himself to its study and composition’ (p.45). Auerbach states that ‘Dante’s poetry is a constant struggle with the object and the form it demands’ (p.xv). Sir Philip Sidney, in his ‘The Defense of Poesy’ (1595), writes that Dante ‘held Heaven and Hell under the authority of his pen.’ Dante himself writes in Canto XV of the *Inferno* of the scholar’s ‘ill-strained nerves’, *li mal protesi nervi*.

poet's challenge (and achievement) is to surmount these obstacles, creating earthly similes which will forge affinities with the supernatural order.¹⁰ Wittgenstein has written that 'It is obvious that an imagined world, however different it may be from the real one, must have something – a form – in common with it,'¹¹ and this is just what Dante manages to create, make concrete, in his great work – a correspondence with that which by its nature surpasses human telling or understanding. We can see these struggles, the poet's fighting heart, at work in the very texture of *The Divine Comedy*. There he stresses the lonely discipline of verse: 'the way is most desolate,' he says, 'most solitary,' *la più diserta, / la più romita* – and expressing 'new things', *novitadi*, difficult – like a man 'shaking himself from sleep', *si com' uom che dal sonno si slega*. It is clear from the outset that Dante is ever aware, always conscious, of the burden of his task – that the tenor of his thought, *di pensier carca*, is in dealing with refractory, obdurate words.

It is because of these technical difficulties and (to use a modern term) psychological problems that the poet requires, or calls upon, divine inspiration – poetic inspiration – to help him. It is the Muses and Memory which the poet first invokes to guide him through this 'arduous passage', *alto passo*. Inspiration is the well-source, the inward fountain (*interno fonte*), of the work, the poet stating that 'A mighty flame followeth a tiny spark', *poca favilla gan fiamma seconda*. In the repetition of key words such as *infuso* and *spira* the poet's imagination soars (as later Milton's was to do) 'over the great sea of being', *per lo gran mar dell'essere* – forging, as Dante calls it, 'a new sound', *La novità del suono*.

The structure of the poem is to be 'shining, dense, firm and polished, like diamond smitten by the sun', *lucida, spessa, solida e polita, / quasi adamant che lo sol ferisse* – 'as water receives a ray of light' is how he also phrases it, *com' acqua recepe / raggio di luce*, fusing the physical and the spiritual realms (one thinks perhaps also of Gerard Manley Hopkins' 'immortal diamond' in this context¹²). In such analogies or images (and they are plentiful in the poem) the true import of things can be discerned as in a mystical insight, 'with sparks of love', 'by feeling, more or less, the eternal breath,' *l'eterno spiro*, – 'fit matter', as Dante pithily expresses it, 'for the intellect'. The poet makes it very clear his journey is a sacred one (*il processo santo* he calls it) but that it is compromised by his mortal wits, his human failings ('the fault and shame of human wills', *colpa e vergogna dell'umane voglia*) – but some vestige of the divine light does penetrate, shine through, the secular universe – *per l'universo penetra* – however ill-understood by the human mind.

'The high task' of the poem is evident from the outset, to capture some gleams of 'the absolute Will', 'the crystalline Heaven' – but this radiance, however bright (and the intellect which moves it), is only partially revealed to mortals. It is imagination (with its attendant complexities) as much as faith which leads Dante out of his gloom (the poet 'afflicted in all his thoughts', *in tutti i suoi pensier piange e s'attrista*). He calls on those Muses 'who ever accord their notes after the melodies of the eternal spheres', *anzi il cantar di quei che notan sempre / retro alle note degli eterni giri*,¹³ to help him in the task of writing his poem, to generate the necessary 'fire within my mind' – 'Now 'tis meet', he says, 'that Helicon for me streams forth', *Or convien ch' Elicona per me versi*. On each occasion he invokes the Muses he regains his strength, 'with life fresh as the leaves of spring', to proceed in his task; they

¹⁰ Auerbach writes: 'Thus we find in the *Comedy* an image of the earthly world in all its diversity, transposed into the world of ultimate destiny and perfect order' (p.134).

¹¹ In proposition 2.0231 of *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.

¹² See his poem 'That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the comfort of the Resurrection'. William Anderson writes that 'Mandelstam describes the *Commedia* as a single crystal with 13,000 facets – each line reflecting the essential unity out of which the poem was made' (p.245). Erich Auerbach writes of the poem's 'hundred cantos, with their radiant *terza rima*, their perpetual binding and loosing' (p.xvii).

¹³ It may be that Yeats' 'gyres' had their origin in Dante's phrase.

‘awaken love in the understanding’, *a destare Amore va nella mente*, and with their sacred aid (he tells us in the *Canzoniere*) he comes to composition each time anew, ‘with fresh spurs’, *con nuovi spron*.¹⁴ Although the *agon* of the poem appears to be the poet himself, self-wrestling with what Geoffrey Hill calls his ‘high powers of attention’, it is in fact the songs of the Muses, their music, which instantiate *compatire*, that compassion which ‘melts the ice closed about the poet’s heart’, *lo gel che m’era intorno al cor ristretto* – the redemptive power which for Dante is the essence of poetry. He will call on the Holy Muses (*o sante Muse*) to help him in his work.¹⁵

The importance of poetry is clear from the start, its spiritual power capable of transporting him ‘from the deep sea to the shore’ (*del pelago alla riva*) of safety. He places poetry on a high pedestal indeed, most radically in *Paradiso* XI where he adjudges it higher than *forza* (military and political power), *iura* (the law), *sacerdozo* (priesthood), *sofismo* (philosophical quibbles and equivocations), *ozio* (leisure or ease), and *negozio* (business or trade) – a hierarchical status lost to our modern world. Poetry, for Dante, is always miraculous, likening it at one point in the poem to Amphion’s lyre forging the walls of Thebes.¹⁶ In *La Vita Nuova* he defines poetry as ‘the transfigured life’, *la nuova transfigurazione*, ‘the beloved laurel’, *l’amato alloro*, which the poet pursues – *La Divina Commedia* ‘the crowning task’, *all’ultimo lavoro*, of his life.

It is the Roman poet Virgil who leads Dante out of this darkness towards the transfigured life, untangling his mind (Virgil tells Dante that his thoughts have become *s’impiglia*, ‘knotted,’ ‘twisted’) leading him through ‘the desert strand’, *la piagga diserta*, alleviating the barrenness that has afflicted the poet’s soul. Virgil’s voice is perceived by the Italian poet as ‘that fountain which pours abroad so rich a stream of speech’, *quella fonte./che spande di parlar si largo fiume*, thereby serving as a model for Dante’s own work. (The architecture of the poem is also partially borrowed from Virgil’s *Aeneid*, particularly Aeneas’ visit to the Underworld and the episode of crossing the river Lethe with the ferryman Acheron – Aeneas’ encounter with his father Anchises in Hades may also have served Dante as a template for his own meeting with the ghost of Virgil in Hell.)¹⁷ Beatrice has related to Virgil how ‘her friend’ Dante ‘is so impeded... upon the desert shore’ (*diserta* is a key-word in the poem, suggesting desolation and alienation) that he has gone ‘astray’, *smarrito*, from the true path, the right way of thinking, and wishes him relieved of his error. Virgil guides the Italian ‘through the bitter and foul air’, *io per l’aere amaro e sozzo*, towards ‘the eternal spring’, *questa primavera sempiterna*, as a spirit of importance equal to that of Beatrice herself who is usually regarded as the vital pneuma, *lo spirito della vita*,¹⁸ of the poem.

It is Virgil (and not some religious figure) who leads Dante out of ‘the dark wood,’ *selva oscura*, of his depression (no doubt caused partly by the bitterness he feels at being exiled from his beloved city of Florence), ‘teeming with doubt’, *di dubbiar piu pregno*. Virgil appears to him out of ‘the great desert’, *nel gran deserto*, stating grandly *Poeta fui*, ‘a poet I was’. Dante asks him, in a puzzled tone, why he returns to ‘such disquiet’, *tante noia*. Virgil informs him that the Virgin Mary has sent Lucia, the spirit of Light, to Dante’s muse, Beatrice, who calls on Virgil with his powers of eloquence to persuade Dante to set forth to his redemption. This hierarchy, in which the Latin poet acts as an intermediary between

¹⁴ A good example of this can be found in the opening to the *Purgatorio*, where we find the following plea or invocation to the high Genius of the Muses: *O Muse, o alto ingegno, or m’aiutate!*

¹⁵ See the opening to *Purgatorio*, Canto I ll.7-9.

¹⁶ In the *Inferno* Canto XXXII, ll.10-12.

¹⁷ Dante tells us early on (in Canto I of *Inferno*) that he owes his style of writing to Virgil, and Virgil remarks in *Inferno* XX that Dante knows his *Aeneid* ‘*tutta quanta*’, ‘every bit of it’.

¹⁸ The phrase is from the opening of *La Vita Nuova*.

Heaven and Earth, illustrates the divine significance of verse. Virgil (representing the world's wisdom) is to persuade Dante with *parole ornata*, the power of poetry, to undertake the pilgrimage and be consoled (*consolata*) thereby.

There is a sense here in which the heavenly powers move in a realm beyond speech ('the sweet symphony of Paradise keepeth silence,' Dante writes, *si tace la dolce sinfonia di paradiso*) and require a pagan messenger (albeit an inspired one) to visit the Italian poet, leading him onward in his spiritual ascent. Beatrice has come from her 'blessed seat', *beato scanno*, to importune Virgil and his 'noble words' (*parlare onesto*) to aid Dante in his quest. It is poetry which will both persuade and support him in his spiritual pilgrimage. In the persons of Beatrice and Virgil, religion and poetry coexist in mutual harmony.

Although initially Virgil is 'hoarse from long silence' – a nice human touch which makes him appear more than just a mere wraith – it is the master-poet of the *Aeneid* who will encourage Dante in his hazardous venture. He is 'a lamp unto you', *fi vu lucerna*, Dante is told by the ghost of the Stoic philosopher Cato in *Purgatorio I – Lo duca*, 'your leader'. Virgil guides him by the hand 'into the secret things', *all segrette cose*. This phrase can be interpreted as the *technē* of poetry, the arcane skills which will enable him to overcome his religious despair, conducting him out of the inanity of 'the dark stream' (*al cieco fiume*), 'the eternal prison' (*la prigione eternal*) of Hell. Dante will vanquish this spiritual desert, 'this air forever dyed' where broken speech, *la parola tronca*, constitutes the only reality, precluding any possibility of poetry, like the Tower of Babel: 'Strange tongues, horrible outcries, words of pain,/tones of anger, voices deep and hoarse', *Diverse lingua, orribil favelle,/parole di dolore, accenti d'ira,/voci alte e fioche*.

The poet is careful to tell us he weighs his words 'ounce by ounce', *oncia ad oncia*, as if aware (literally) of the gravity of his task. He calls it 'the heavy yoke', *grave giogo*, laid upon him, considering what in *De Vulgari Eloquentia* ('Writing in the Vernacular') he calls 'the justly balanced rule of things,' reflecting a perfect state where 'the best language will be suited to the best thoughts' and 'the loftiness of the construction will agree with the weight of the subject'. This gives us an indication of that intellectual rigour which the Italian poet Aretino praised in Dante's work – that 'subtle, scholarly and polished' art he so admired (p.94).¹⁹ Most of this craft, this *intelletto*, Dante learns from Virgil, his *fida compagna*.

The vision that Dante means to convey may be ineffable but its articulation is not. There are those who fish for the truth, *chi pesca per lo vero*, Dante tells us, but have not the art, *e non ha l'arte*, to express it. They lack the necessary skills and tools (the felicitous *technē*) and their senses are too dull (*vista rude*) to chart the course. The path the two poets undertake together (Virgil as guide, Dante as student) is as much concerned with the writing of the poem as with anything else. Dante 'follows the prints of Virgil's beloved feet', *dietro all poste delle cae piante* – an early indication of that Renaissance (or at least Christian-humanist) ethos which looked to the classics for tuition. The Roman walks slowly with nobility (not with 'that haste which mars the dignity of every act') like the stately measure of his poetic rhythms – slow, steady, ordered, like a march almost, always pressing forward: 'We with this day will onward go' he says, *Noi anderem con questo giorno innanzi*, a phrase I am sure Samuel Beckett had in mind when he composed his novel *The Unnamable* ('you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on') – Dante following 'the trusty steps of his master', *co'passi fidi/del mio maestro*.

Virgil, we are told, is the 'glory and light of other poets', *O degli altri poeti onore elume*, and Dante informs his readers that he adopts his 'good style' to follow his noble example. They travel side by side as *peregrini* – pilgrims. Unlike the inhabitants of Hell and Purgatory, they walk together in a spirit of cordial good will under Virgil's careful arbitration. They

¹⁹ See footnote 4 above.

regard each other with mutual respect and admiration. Virgil calls Dante his ‘sweet son’, *dolce figlio*; Virgil is Dante’s *dolce padre*, his ‘sweet father’. It is the nobility and beauty of Virgil’s verse (serving as a virtuous example) which leads Dante out of ‘the dolorous valley of the abyss.’ He assuages Dante’s fears and doubts (‘coward fear... often encumbers men’ Virgil tells him, ‘I would not have thee afraid’, *Non vo’ che tu paventi*), prompting the Florentine to admire the Roman’s courage, forbearance and endurance – although not, perhaps, his Stoic contempt for death. At all times Dante learns from what he regards as Virgil’s visionary voice, enabling him to create a style which will shadow (but not fully embody) that divine realm where words and music cohere, *canto e nella nota*, in a ‘sweet interlacing’, *il dolce mischio* – ‘opening his heart to the waters of peace’, *d’aprir lo core al’acqua della pace*.

What Virgil did for the Latin tongue (and for the Imperium) Dante informs us he will do for the Italian language (and for the Holy Roman Empire). Virgil’s rhetoric leads Dante out of the realm of the lost, away from ‘the citizens of filth and flame’ (Geoffrey Hill’s phrase for the damned, p.328) towards Paradise, that ‘eternal place’ (*luogo eterna*) where the seraphim abide, where ‘day is added unto day’ – a kingdom beyond suffering. Virgil is praised by the Provençal poet, Sordello, in Canto VII of *Purgatorio*, as ‘gloria de’ Latin’ ‘by whom our tongue showed forth all its power,’ *per cui/mosto cio che potea la lingua nostra*, and by Dante as his ‘veracious guide’, his ‘kind master’, who ‘through the deep night hath led me from the truly dead’, *Costui per la profonda/notte mentano m’ ha da’ veri morti*.

La Divina Commedia is deeply rooted in classical tradition then, Dante at one point in the poem walking behind both Statius (a Roman poet of the first century AD) and Virgil – ‘great marshals of the world’ as Dante calls them, *del mondo si gran maliscalchi*, hearkening ‘to their discourse which gave me the understanding in poetry’, *ch’a poetar mi davano intelletto*. This is what he terms *l’usanza*, literary heritage, leading ‘towards Parnassus to drink in its caves’ – *verso Parnaso a ber nell sue grotte*. In the presence of these two Latin masters he acknowledges ‘tokens of the ancient flame’, their ‘antique spirit’, *antico spirito*, their ‘wisdom’, *savi*, guiding him on his intellectual path. We are told how centuries earlier Virgil’s ‘divine flame’, *della divina fiamma*, inspired Statius himself – Statius calling Virgil *nutrice poetando*, ‘a nurse in poetry’. ‘Every word of thine is a precious token of love to me’, *Ogni tuo dir d’amor m’ è car cenno*, he says. The verses of the *Aeneid*, he adds, ‘were the seeds of my poetic fire’, *Al mio ardour fur seme le faville*. In *Purgatorio* XXII Virgil recounts the achievements of Juvenal, Terence, Plautus, Varro – all those Latin poets ‘who once decked their brows with laurel’, *che già di lavro ornar la fronte*. Like Virgil, they too act as exemplars for Dante: ‘Thus custom there was our guide, and we took up our way with less doubt because of the assent of that worthy flame.’ Dante’s vernacular poetry, rooted in Latin custom, will provide ‘new trees refreshed with new foliage’, *come piante novele/rinnovate di novella fronda*, leading the poet out of ‘the dark wood’ – a heritage based almost entirely on ‘the toil of those who have gone before’ (the phrase is from the opening paragraph of the *Monarchia*).²⁰

Italian words for Dante are like ‘tender leaves just born’, *com fogliette pur mo nate*, the poet’s pen a ‘flaming sword’ proving the worth of the Italian language – ‘its sweetest and most attractive beauty’ (as Dante says in the *Convivio*), especially in the arena of *La Divina Commedia* which he calls ‘this last wrestling-ground’, *nell’ aringo rimaso*. Virgil, he realises, has appeared to him so that he can reinvigorate the language of the people (‘the mother tongue,’ *del paralar mento*, ‘the modern dialect’, *moderna favella*) and in consequence

²⁰ Boccaccio writes that Dante ‘knew that if he wrote in Latin metre, as previous poets had done, he would have been useful only to the learned, while by writing in the vernacular he would accomplish something that had never been done before’ (p.67). Dante, of course, did write in Latin, but only in his prose works.

renew, revitalise Italian culture: ‘But here let dead poesy rise up again’, *Ma qui la morta poesi risurga*, he says.

Dante’s artistic confidence is reinforced when Virgil informs him, on meeting Homer,²¹ Horace, Ovid and Lucan that he is ‘a sixth amid such intelligences’ (Virgil being the fifth), assuring him of poetic immortality. There is a clear sense that Virgil regards Dante as the culmination of a fine poetic tradition. (This is a very disingenuous manoeuvre on Dante’s part as it is him, after all, who is writing the poem. The reader smiles at the relish with which he places himself in such exalted company.) We are introduced to another poet, Guido Guinicelli (the founder of Italian vernacular verse based on Provençal custom) who praises Dante’s verses ‘that Lethe cannot take away’, *Lete nol può tor*²² – again elevating his sense of self-importance, his virtù. When Virgil and Dante meet the musician Casella (in Canto II of *Purgatorio*) the latter sings *Amor che ne la mente mi ragiona* (‘Love that discourses to me in my mind’), a song written in fact by Dante himself, it being the second *canzone* of his *Convivio*²³. Like most men of his age Dante was not shy about displaying his talents. (It is interesting as a sidelight to note that when Dante converses with the Florentine lyric poet Cavalcanti in Canto X of Hell, Cavalcanti disdains Virgil as ‘a mere poet’ – he has a higher regard for philosophers – a viewpoint far removed from Dante’s own appraisal of the master.²⁴ Dante is, however, ecstatic at Cavalcanti’s mention of Dante’s own ‘noble genius’, another instance of that personal vanity, that self-promoting tone, which appears from time to time in the poem.)

Virgil (very humanly) fluctuates in his opinion about Dante, at one moment praising his eloquence (for example, in Canto XIX of the *Inferno*) and then telling him off at another for what he perceives as his lack of moral judgement (for example, in Canto XX of the same *cantica*). Rivalry between poets (the question of whose work will survive and whose will not) is an issue Dante also considers in the poem, as ‘one chases another from the nest’, *caccera di nid* – one artist supplanting another in the flux of time and history, so that their fame may be obscured, *si che la fama di colvi è oscura*. Here we intimate that sense of doubt about his own worth that Dante entertains from time to time in the poem. These doubts, however, are not always to be taken seriously. When he writes of ‘the little bark of my wit’, *la navicella del mio ingegno*, one must take this with more than just a pinch of salt. False modesty does not suit him. Dante is nearly always sure of his own powers – once he gets under way.

So we see how classical poets inspire Dante’s ‘new thirst’, *nuova sete*, for knowledge and insight – ‘the natural thirst for knowledge which is never sated’, *La sete natural che mai non sazia*. But they are only part of the picture. Of equal importance is the Provençal code of mistress-worship (‘the ladies’, as he calls them in Sonetto XIV of the *Canzoniere*, ‘in the high chamber of my mind’, *Due donne in cima della mente mia*), those earthly muses who are ‘the fountain of his gentle speech’, *il fonte del gentil parlare*. This ‘gentle speech’ owes as much to the more recent (for him) troubadour tradition as it does to antiquity.

²¹ ‘That Greek to whom the Muses gave more than to any other’, *quel Greco/che le Muse lattar più ch’altro mai*; ‘the sovereign Poet’, *poeta sovrano*.

²² In *Purgatorio* XXVI Dante tells Guinicelli of his particular indebtedness to the vernacular poetry of the Provençal poet Arnaut Daniel (whom he calls *il miglior fabbro*, ‘the best smith’, a phrase famously borrowed by T S Eliot to describe his debt to Ezra Pound, in the headnote to *The Waste Land*). Erich Auerbach writes: ‘Through all the universality in the thought and feeling of [the *Commedia*], we perceive a suggestion of youthful pride, of lofty aloofness, of “slender charm or cool dignity”, which reminds one of the Provençal poets and of Dante’s youth in Florence.’ (p.68)

²³ On this point see Samuel Beckett’s *Letters*, p.482.

²⁴ Although Dante rates philosophy highly elsewhere in the poem, notably in Canto IV of *Inferno* where he encounters *en tableau vivant* the Greek philosophers Plato, Democritus, Socrates and Diogenes – amongst others.

The broad strand of *trouvère* observance (the *aubade* of ‘the breath of morning’, or of *l’ora mattutina*, ‘the trembling of the sea’, *il tremolar della marina*) which runs through *The Divine Comedy* indicates that there was no sudden break in Dante’s progress as a poet between the *Canzoniere* and the ‘sacred poem’ (*il poema sacro*) itself – that there was only a fine transition between the early works and the later poem of ‘the sedentary composer.’²⁵ His early poems then can be read (as he wished them to be) as ‘a preparation for greater things’. For example, in the *canzoni* of *La Vita Nuova*, he writes ‘Then saw I dread things many’, an early intimation of those *cantilena* in *La Divina Commedia* where he describes the denizens of hell. At the other end of the scale, also in *La Vita Nuova*, he writes of experiencing a ‘wondrous vision’ (‘There came to me a vision of Love’) that encourages him to write a noble poem – the genesis of *The Divine Comedy*, especially of the *Paradiso* cantos. Throughout the whole of *The Divine Comedy* Beatrice is appraised by Dante as a troubadour’s lady, *ma quella Donna*, in the custom of *cor gentile*, rather than as an emissary of the saints. Courtly love is just as important an element within the poem as any perceived transcendent moral order.

The Divine Comedy begins in *trovatore* fashion with seasonal songs of inspiration – in Canto I of the *Inferno* with

*Tempo era dal principio del mattino;
e il sol montava in sua con quelle stele
ch’eran con lui, quando l’amor divino*

*mosse da prima quelle cose belle...*²⁶

and in Canto II with Dante rousing himself from his faintheartedness

*Quali i fioretti dal notturno gelo
chinati e chiusi, poi che il sol gl’ imbianca,
si drizzan tutti aperti in lor stelo...*²⁷

– those ‘stems’, *stelo*, designedly close to ‘stars’, *stela*, the final word in all three sections of the poem – the ground already prepared for the mystical apotheosis at the poem’s close.

The seraphim also appear to have (blasphemous?) roots in the *trovatore* tradition, clearly seen when ‘they dance their angelic roundelay’ – *danzando alloro angelico caribo*. The Empyrean too is likened to ‘a dance and high great festival’, *il tripudio e l’alta festa grande* – a fiesta of song, dance, music and delight. It is not at all easy, it seems, for celestial beings to throw off their mortal origins; they retain some very distinct human affinities, earthly correspondences and customs.

There is as clear a debt then to the rules and practices of the chivalric code of honour, in Dante’s work, as there is to Greek and Latin learning. ‘When Love inspires me I take note’ he writes, *quando/amor mi spira noto* – like the conventional breath of inspiration invoked by the *trovatore*, helping him forge ‘his sweet new style’ – *dal dolce stil nuovo*.

²⁵ Dante writes in *De Vulgari Eloquentia* of the difference between the sedentary composer and the wandering minstrel – the composer, he argues, having more time for study, thought and structure than the itinerant *jongleur*.

²⁶ ‘The time was at the beginning of the morning;/and the sun was mounting up with those stars,/which were with him when Divine Love/first moved those fair things...’

²⁷ ‘As flowerets, by the nightly chillness bended down and closed, erect themselves all open on their stems when the sun whitens them.’

Problems, however, remain for the composer of the poem. As we saw above, words for Dante are paradigms only, shadows of reality ('distorting the vision of the infinite by the use of finite words' is how the critic Edmund G. Gardner describes it, p.41) – only a dim reflection of how things are – the art of poetry proudly searching for their best instances in common experience.²⁸ That search is extremely difficult, and Dante realises its complications. He writes in the *Epistolae*: 'For we see many things by the intellect for which there are no vocal signs, of which Plato gives sufficient hint in his books by having recourse to metaphors; for he saw many things by intellectual light which he could not express in direct speech'.²⁹ Plato's 'intellectual light' becomes Dante's 'visionary flame', *l'incendio imaginato*, a mystical *poesis* which forms part of that literary tradition which regards some of Plato's sentences as 'the purest utterance' (see Edwin Muir, p.67).

Over the course of the poem, as we follow the fluctuations of Dante's mind on his journey from the nadir of Hell, that 'sea so cruel', *a sè mar sì crudele*, to the apogee of Heaven, with its 'sweet light', *dolce lume*, we discover a man who (in the words of Gregory Vlastos on Plato) feels 'bound, incarcerated, buffeted, fooled, exiled, in the world of sense' (p.55). In seeing the Forms, the Archetypes (in Dante's case, the angels in the Christian Empyrean) 'a creature of time touches eternity, and the contact makes it possible for him to master time, to live in it as though not of it' (Vlastos, p.55). I believe this is the intellectual rationale behind the poem's creation. Before that point in the poem when Dante glimpses 'the deep pool of peace' we have the feeling that he has been living a dream of life, rather than its reality, sleepwalking as it were, operating 'with mixed assets' (the phrase again is Vlastos', p.55) – assets rooted in literary (particularly poetic) tradition – from the troubadours back to the Greek and Latin poets – mixed with the historical dogmas of the Roman Catholic Church (what Dante calls 'the Catholic orchard', *l'orto cattolico*). Now, approaching Heaven, he comes close to the arena of the mystics and saints. Peter Russell has written that archetypes ('the stamp of intrinsic value' Dante calls them, *della interna stampa*) 'require a physical vehicle' (p.175) and for Dante that 'vehicle' is poetry – 'the spirit is followed by its new form' he says in the *Purgatorio* – *segue al spirito sua forma novella* – moving towards mystical apprehension.

Edmund G. Gardner has written that for Dante, scholasticism and mysticism were two roads 'along which the soul travels towards the same goal' (p.3) – that is 'the vision of peace in God'. Gardner adds (in the context of *The Divine Comedy*) that 'to suffer darkness is the way to great light' (p.312), a comment that reminds one of the magnificent canticles of Saint Francis of Assisi or the sublime poems of St John of the Cross. Dante's three *cantiche* take the reader on a similar mystical excursus – as Dante ascends through Hell and Purgatory to Paradise. Each *cantica* strives towards the highest conception of poetry, a pilgrimage which takes the poet (and the reader) towards that light 'which takes its form in heaven', *Moveti lume, che nel ciel s'informe*, 'a vision of divine things in their true forms' as Gardner expresses it – a realm where poetry and mysticism coalesce:

*O immaginativa, che ne rube
tal volta sì di fuor, ch'uom non s'accorge,
perchè d'intorno suonin mille tube,*

chi move te, se il senso non ti proge?

²⁸ In the *Purgatorio* he writes of 'the general similitude of things, which deceives the senses', *che l'obbietto comun, che il senso inganna*, and of 'the first shaft of deceptive things', *lo primo strale/delle cose fallacy* – principles which owe much to Plotinus' neo-Platonism.

²⁹ He may have had in mind the passage in the *Phaedrus* where Plato writes that 'to recall the realities of that other world by means of the things of this world is not easy'.

*Moveti lume, che nel ciel s'informa
per sè, o per voler che giù lo scorge.*

O imagination, that at times dost so snatch us out of
ourselves that we are conscious of naught, even
though a thousand trumpets sound about us,

who moves thee, if the senses set naught before
thee? A light moves then which takes its
form in heaven, of itself, or by a will that
sendeth it down.

*Purgatorio XVII*³⁰

This is an example of what the poet calls 'perception as a creative act', *perfetto veder*, a heightened awareness ('living consciousness,' *conoscenza viva*, he calls it in Canto XXVI of *Paradiso*) which leads to glimpses of 'the miraculous spring', *mirabil primavera*, intimating *la divino intelletto*, the divine intellect.³¹ Such are the mysteries of the Ineffable, however, of the profound deeps, that the poem can be a similitude only of ultimate reality, 'the true foundation' of God – *lor verace fondamento* (*Paradiso*, XXIX).

Dante's *cantiche* are echoes of 'the divine canticle', *alla divina cantilena*. Beatrice's 'words soar so far beyond his sight', *vostra parola disiata vola*, that they make him 'pure and ready to mount to the stars' – *puro e disposto a salire ale stelle*. He has not yet arrived at the ultimate terminus, the throne of God. He is only 'ready' – he is not quite 'there' yet. He has not arrived at that place where there are 'no dark sayings', *Nè per ambage*, the kingdom where vision is fully manifest (*tulta tua vision manifesta*) – the sacred realm where all ambiguities and paradoxes are cleared up.

The structure of the work is clear to Dante from the start. In Canzone VII of the *Canzoniere* he told us 'I will descend from the whole to the detail', *Discenderò del tutto/In parte*, ensuring in practice that the overall form of the poem will cohere, that technical craft and moral judgment will coalesce. The plan (or map if you like) is outlined towards the end of *La Vita Nuova*:

After this sonnet there appeared to me a wondrous vision, wherein I beheld things that made me determine to speak no more of this blessed one until such time as I could treat of her more worthily. And to attain to this I study all I may, even as she truly knoweth. So that if it be the pleasure of him, by whom all things live, that my life persevere for some few years, I hope to write of her what hath never been written of any woman.

And then may it please him who is the Lord of grace, that my soul may have leave to go and behold the glory of its lady, to wit, of that blessed Beatrice who gazeth in glory on the face of him, *qui est per omnia saecula benedictus*.

The young poet had to apply himself to learn the difficult and complex art of poetry, to become the consummate master, *il poeta, lo fabbro* (the poet, the craftsman), of the *Commedia*.

³⁰ The imagination for Dante is not always conceived of as being so ethereal. In Canto XXXII of the *Inferno*, for instance, he likens it to a wine-press in which 'I should press out the juice of my conception more fully'.

³¹ See *Paradiso* XII where he writes of 'sweet Zephyr rising to open the new leaves', *ove surge ad aspire/Zefiro dolce le novella fronde*.

From the freneticism of hell to the beatitude of Heaven Dante travels hand in hand with poetry itself, in the person of Virgil, with an increasing consciousness of his own worth as a poet, even if he is cut off from ‘the love of his native place’, *la carita del natio loco*, exiled from his home in Florence, that ‘perverse city’ where he has been sentenced to death. Still, he says, ‘that if the dearest place be reft from me, I lose not all the rest by reason of my songs’, *sì che, se loco m’ e’ tolto piu caro,/ io non perdessi gli altri per miei carmi.*³²

Starting from early troubadour principles and practices, and studying over decades the works of his chosen classical authors, Dante arrives late in life at the apex of his mystical vision, encountering (and encompassing) the full range of human affairs, bringing together what he calls (in *De Vulgari Eloquentia*) ‘the ultimate elements of the universe’ – ‘to set forth’, as he argues in the *Monarchia*, ‘truths unattempted by others’ (a phrase borrowed by Milton when he came to compose his own epic, *Paradise Lost*). So it is that the ‘quidditas’, the *specifica virtude*, of the Italian language shines out in each word, each phrase of *The Divine Comedy* – *lucida, spessa, solida e polita,/quasi adamant che lo sol ferisse.*

Perhaps what Peter Russell calls ‘the modern positivistic mind... the fragmented phenomenality of the empirical world in our time’ (p.174) balks at the sacredness accorded to poetry by Dante, but that illustrates only our loss, the loss of what Hölderlin calls ‘the eternal clarity... the sacred thing... the poem itself.’

Note: All translations from the Italian and Latin are taken from the six volume edition of Dante’s works published by J.M. Dent in their Temple Classics series in 1906. I have used these translations as I believe their commitment to the sacred nature of Dante’s poetry places them (even though they are in prose) above any other. All quotations are from *The Divine Comedy* unless otherwise indicated.

The Hölderlin quotations in the text are from his two poems ‘Hyperions Schicksaalslied’ (‘Hyperion’s Song of Fate’) and ‘An Die Parzen’ (‘To the Fates’). (He is writing about his own poetry, not Dante’s.) The original German reads ‘Ewiger Klarheit’ and ‘das Heilge... das Gedicht.’ (See pp.64 and 14 of *Friedrich Hölderlin: Poems and Fragments*, translated by Michael Hamburger, Anvil Press, 2004.)

References

Anderson, William. *Dante the Maker*. Hutchinson & Co. London. 1980.

Auerbach, Erich. *Dante: Poet of the Secular World*. Introduction by Michael Dirda. *New York Review of Books* Publications. 2001. (First published in 1929 as *Dante als Dichter der irdischen Welt*.)

³² *Paradiso* XVII. One of the most moving scenes in the poem is when Virgil takes his leave of the Italian poet who is crying, and Beatrice consoles him with the words, “‘Dante, for that Virgil goeth away, weep not yet, weep not yet...’” – ‘Dante, perche Virgilio se ne vada,/non pianger anco, non pianger ancora...’ ‘Put by,’ she says, ‘the seed of weeping’ – *pon giù il seme del piangere* (see *Purgatorio* cantos XXX and XXXI).

Beckett, Samuel. *The Letters of Samuel Beckett (Volume IV) 1966-1989*. Cambridge University Press. 2016.

Bergin Thomas G. *An Approach to Dante*. The Bodley Head, London. 1965.

Boccaccio, Giovanni; Aretino, Lionardo Bruni; Villani, Filippo. *The Earliest Lives of Dante*, translated by James Robinson Smith. Henry Holt and Company, New York. 1901.

Gardner, Edmund G. *Dante and the Mystics*, published by J.M. Dent in 1912.

Gilson, Étienne. *Dante The Philosopher*. Translated by David Moore. London, Sheed and Ward. 1948.

Hatzfeld, Helmut. 'The Art of Dante's *Purgatorio*' in *American Critical Essays on 'The Divine Comedy'*. Ed. By Robert J. Clements. New York University Press. 1967.

Hill, Geoffrey. 'Between Politics and Eternity,' in Peter S. Hawkins and Rachel Jacoff (eds.), *The Poets' Dante: Twentieth Century Responses*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 2002.

Muir, Edwin. *The Truth of Imagination: A Collection of Reviews and Essays*. Ed. P H Butter. Aberdeen University Press. 1988.

Russell, Peter. 'Ezra Pound, Dante and the Vision of Unity', in *Agenda Special Issue 'Dante, Ezra Pound and the Contemporary Poet'*, Autumn-Winter 1996/97.

Ryan, Christopher. *Dante and Aquinas: A Study of Nature and Grace in the 'Comedy'*. Ubiquity Press, London. 2013.

Vlastos, Gregory. *Platonic Studies*. Princeton University Press. 1973.

Wicksteed, Philip Henry. *Dante and Aquinas*. J.M. Dent. 1913.

Williams, Charles. *The Figure of Beatrice: A Study in Dante*. Faber and Faber. 1943.

Witte, Dr. Karl. *Essays on Dante (Being Selections from the Two Volumes of 'Dante-Forschungen')*. Translated by C. Mabel Lawrence and Philip. H. Wicksteed. Houghton, Mifflin and Company. Boston and New York. 1898.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Dover Publications. 1988.

Tony Roberts's poems, essays and reviews appear regularly in the literary press. His fourth book of poems, *Drawndark*, appeared in 2014 (an 'important collection', 'The Sewanee Review') and his next, *The Noir American & Other Poems*, is to appear in 2018. He is also the author of an essay collection, *The Taste in My Mind* (2015), and the editor of *Poetry in the Blood* (2014). All are from Shoestring Press.

Tony Roberts

Archibald MacLeish's Star

Archibald MacLeish was a star. Few 20th American poets were as popular or successful as MacLeish (1892-1982) and few have had their readership collapse so spectacularly. Yet, particularly in his early lyric poems, he could be outstanding.

When he came to choose representative work to make up *The Human Season: Selected Poems 1926-1972*, the poet showed himself to be fully aware of the fragility of reputations (if not specifically of his own). In a foreword to the selection he reacts to the habit of anthologizing only a handful of a poet's work, by asserting that 'a poet like a novelist or a critic or anyone else hopes to be read, not tasted'. His selection for *The Human Season* is intended, therefore, to give access to his lifetime's concerns, to act as he puts it as 'not a choice *from* but a representation *of*'. He is keen to venture wider through his oeuvre to find poems that 'represent attempts to come to terms with the tragic sense of time and change which afflicted the generation of the two Great Wars'. For an outward-looking poet like MacLeish this makes perfect sense.

He arranged his selected poems under headings, rather than chronologically, in order to give some sense of their breadth of preoccupation: 'Autobiography and Omens'; 'Actors and Scenes'; 'Love and Not; "Strange Thing ... To Be an American"'; 'Illustrations'; 'The Art'; 'News from Elsewhere'. While some of us would not doubt have preferred a chronological arrangement, rather like a shadowy biography, MacLeish's works well. It did, however, encourage at least one reviewer to claim that the best poems – the often anthologized ones – were all written before 1930. I must agree that many of his best poems *are* early ones – 'Ars Poetica'; 'You, Andrew Marvell'; 'The End of the World'; 'L'An Trentiesme de Mon Eage', for example – but there are fine later ones, too, and significantly more of them than are generally chosen. The best of these bear comparison with some of the finest poems of his time and, taken with the excellent, book-length *Conquistador* (1932), are reason enough to deplore the relative eclipse of Archibald MacLeish's work.

It must be said that even in his own day MacLeish was something of a controversial poet. Partly this is connected with the man himself. Reading Scott Donaldson's excellent *Archibald MacLeish: An American Life* by (1992) it is easy to be enamoured of his subject's achievements. He was a man of staggeringly varied and enviable talent, with a lifelong commitment to public service. Yale athlete, lawyer, Parisian poet, journalist, Librarian of Congress, government director and speechwriter, Harvard professor, he was also highly competitive, ambitious and, to those his charisma failed to touch, arrogant and distant. 'Archie', as he liked to be known, also opened himself to criticism because of his tendency to take a public platform, to lecture other writers on their commitment, particularly during the Depression and in wartime ('We cannot escape our duty as political animals').

The other controversy that surrounded Archibald MacLeish was to do with his modernist poetry itself. Few failed to accept his success at writing clear and accessible verse. 'As one gets deeper and deeper into the essential, which is the human situation in the world, one is practically compelled to use simpler and simpler language', he explained. Yet there were

those who criticised him for a facility they felt superficial, even unoriginal. It was also felt by some that his excellent control of technique masked insufficient ambition as a poet. That certainly does not square with his own view of his ambition as expressed in his *Reflections* (1986): 'a poem is a means of comprehending humanity, a means of comprehending human life and to a very considerable extent, the only means we have – the only means in which you use the emotions as well as the intellect at the same time – to live understandingly, to live in a considered way the life we live'.

MacLeish's poetry at least tries to do justice to these beliefs. His single most anthologized poem is in homage to the symbiosis of emotion and intellect. 'Ars Poetica' is a poem built from metaphor which concludes with the paradox: 'A poem should not mean / But be.' This perfectly modernist position might be expected to have pleased Eliot (a great early influence on MacLeish) and his idea of the objective correlative (as with the lines, 'A poem should be equal to: / Not true.') though in one of his letters Robert Lowell quotes Eliot calling MacLeish 'a better librarian than poet', which gives a hint of the carping MacLeish met with some of his fellow poets.

'You, Andrew Marvel', probably his other most anthologized poem, addresses Marvel's *carpe diem*, 'To His Coy Mistress' (with its reference to our inability to 'make our sun/ Stand still'):

And here face down beneath the sun
And here upon earth's noonward height
To feel the always coming on
The always rising of the night

The exotic locations in the poem may be explained by the fact that MacLeish had just returned from Persia at the time of its composition. He was always captivated by notions of the place of man in the vastness of the universe, the stars and notions of eternity. His biographer, Scott Donaldson, pointed to 'the most prevalent image in MacLeish's writing: insignificant man adrift in space on the spinning earth.' The idea is captured in 'Le seul malheur est que je ne sais pas lire', where the speaker is prompted by an old sailor in a fez looking up the stars, to recognise that he cannot read into them.

Two memorable poems capture the France of the 1920s, where the MacLeish family lived for several years. 'Years of the Dog' looked back to that wonderful Paris when fame was to be had 'flushed like quail / in the / Cool dawn'. The poem remembers Joyce who lived on scraps and Hemingway ('with the supple look like a sleepy panther'), who 'Whittled a style for his time from a walnut stick / In a carpenter's loft in a street of that April city.' Though MacLeish celebrated his close friend he was also quick to point out in later life that 'what was going on in Paris was infinitely more important than the few Americans who were there.' There were the young who 'flooded' into Europe and all the artists, not only Joyce but Picasso and Stravinsky and others.

Among the most famous of the Americans in Paris and the South of France in the 1920s was the charismatic and ultimately tragic couple, Gerald and Sara Murphy. In 'Sketch for a Portrait of MME G –M –' MacLeish memorably explores the issue of identity, privacy and influence:

The room, made probable, made real, became
As strangely visible as if it were
The shape of something she was thinking of.
And there were afternoons when the snow fell
Softly across the wind and in the mirrors

The snow fell softly, flake on flake, the vague
Reflected falling in the long dim mirrors,
Faint snow across the image of the wind, —
And there were afternoons when the room remembered,
When her life passed in the mirrors of the room.

This poem, with its fascinating perspective, might be said to look back to the Augustans (or at least to T.S. Eliot) and forward to Leonard Cohen. Another poem clearly indebted to Eliot is the excellent 'L'An Trentiesme de Mon Eage'. In his thirtieth year (the title from Pound In Ezra Pound's 'Hugh Selwyn Mauberley: 'Unaffected by "the march of events", / He passed from men's memory in l'an trentiesme/ De son eage) the poem begins, 'And I have come upon this place / By lost ways' and concludes:

By words, by voices, a lost way –
And here above the chimney stack
The unknown constellations sway –
And by what way shall I go back?

Like the painfully self-conscious Prufrock, the speaker in this poem wonders too about turning back and descending the stair, except here the ways are anyway lost (and man is again mocked by the sway of 'unknown constellations').

Man's aloneness is most remarkably witnessed in 'The End of the World'. In the summer of 1924, after a year in Paris, the MacLeish family took a trip to the coastal town of Granville in Normandy, where they watched a travelling circus, the sea unquiet, and the flaming torches potentially dangerous, as the poet remembered. In MacLeish's surreal poem the octet gives us the crazy, comical hyperactivity of the circus while the sestet literally takes the roof off

There in the starless dark the poise, the hover,
There with vast wings across the cancelled skies,
There in the sudden blackness the black pall
Of nothing, nothing, nothing –nothing at all.

The final line of this powerful poem gives us the equivalent of the stunned eye-witness testimony we are used to after today's outrages, set against the realisation of life's meaninglessness. Perhaps the poem is a critique of World War 1 and of post-war European madness.

The suffering and the loss of his brother in what MacLeish saw as that unnecessary, 'commercial' war preoccupied him for some years. In 1924 he visited Kenneth's grave for a ceremony commemorating the American dead. It resulted in the poem 'Memorial Rain', which expressed his antipathy, contrasting the hyperbole and hypocrisy of the official position with the silent dead and the purifying rain. 'The Silent Slain' also memorialises MacLeish's brother's sacrifice, this time evoking the eleventh century French epic poem, 'The Song of Roland'. In his poem the speakers turn at the sound of battle to the Roncevaux Pass battlefield where they come upon the heroic dead. He also wrote 'Lines for an Internment', feeling bitter because fifteen years after the event the mood at home had changed: 'Nobody would talk about the war, and it was just more than I could bear to see the whole thing just wiped out with a wet sponge. The American Legion started parades, the whole thing became very hard to take.'

'The Young Dead Soldiers' was his one anti-war poem written during his time in Washington. In *Reflections* he recalled, 'I wrote that in seven minutes at my desk at about five minutes of eight one morning when I was called up to the Treasury and asked for something that they could use.' It was wanted for propaganda but he kept it, seeing it as a poem. It is a powerfully rhetorical piece, dependent on the repetition of the soldiers' words, their essential message being: 'They say: Our deaths are not ours; they are yours; they / will mean what you make them.' The war continued to be a part of MacLeish's imagination for many years. In 'Speech to Those Who Say Comrade', for example, he returns to it:

A French loaf and the girls with their eyelids painted
Bring back to aging and lonely men
Their twentieth year and the metal odor of danger.

Perhaps not unconnected with the war poems, another that has stirred many readers is 'Immortal Autumn'. The poem looks at the human condition with 'grave and level voice' (and gives rise to title of the selected poems). Fall is the 'human season' to the poet, in its clarity, its solitude, its spaciousness. Freed of the clutter of the year and before winter buries us, in autumn man can communicate with past and future:

It is the human season. On this sterile air
Do words outcarry breath: the sound goes on and on.
I hear a dead man's cry from autumn long since gone.

I cry to you beyond upon this bitter air.

In his 1948 collection *Actfive* the poem 'Winter is another country' has a similar plangency. Despite his great, attractive limpidity of diction and the innocence of his use of rhyme, MacLeish manages in these lyric poems to retain what Hamlet refers to as 'the heart of my mystery', so that we are tantalised by glimpses, by half-knowledge more powerful for not being spelled out:

The image seen but never seen with sight.
I could endure this all
If autumn ended and the cold light came.

There are other fine poems in the *The Human Season*, urgent public and political calls to arms, as in 'Brave New World', which dwells on 'our failure to seize the moment of triumph, to reassert our commitment to the things we really believe in, to the American Revolution':

Your countrymen who could have hurled
Their freedom like a brand
Have cupped it to a candle spark
In a frightened hand

Then there are those more personal poems, almost confessional, which have worn better, poems such as 'Broken Promises', the 'Hotel Breakfast' ('suddenly / across the table, / you.') and the fearful 'Unfinished History':

I wrote this poem that day when I thought
Since we have loved we two so long together

Byron Beynon's work has appeared in several publications including *Agenda*, *The Independent*, *London Magazine*, *Cyphers*, *Poetry Ireland Review*, *Planet*, *The Sante Fé Literary Review*, *The Yellow Nib* and the human rights anthology *In Protest* (University of London and Keats House Poets). He co-ordinated the Wales section of the anthology *Fifty Strong* (Heinemann). Collections include *The Echoing Coastline* (Agenda Editions), *Cuffs* (Rack Press) and *Nocturne In Blue* (Lapwing Publications, Belfast).

Byron Beynon

THE POET IDRIS DAVIES (1905 – 1953)

A brief introduction to his life and work

Travel north-eastwards from Swansea, along the A465, away from Dylan's “ugly, lovely town”, on through the watchful Vale of Neath, by-pass the lyrical place names of Glynneath, Hirwaun, Cefn-coed-y-cymmer, and Merthyr Tydfil, continue until you turn onto the A469, follow it to the small town of Rhymney. Founded during the nineteenth century on iron and coal, it was by the early 1900s employing thousands of workers in the town's collieries. It was there in 1905 the poet Idris Davies was born, and by the time he died in 1953 his poetry was respected and read by some of the most influential and distinguished poets of the twentieth century.

T S Eliot published Davies at Faber & Faber, writing about his work he noted “that they are the best poetic document I know about a particular epoch in a particular place, and I think that they really have a claim to permanence..... There is great integrity, I think, about his work, and his subject-matter is something that he knew from A to Z. If all poets knew their proper material as he did, there would be less futile verse in the world.”

W B Yeats, writing to Vernon Watkins in March 1938 wanted Davies' poem “William Morris” set to music. He had read the poem in the magazine “Wales” during the autumn of 1937, and went on to say “If I were a millionaire I would pay somebody to set it to music and whenever I was visited by any person who knew Morris I would pay somebody to sing it to us.”

In January 1946, Dylan Thomas, in a radio broadcast on the BBC Eastern Service, and produced by John Arlott, read Davies' poem “The Bells of Rhymney”, in a programme entitled “Welsh Poets”. Many years later the iconic American folk-singer Pete Seeger would set this poem to music, it was also recorded by the 1960s' group The Byrds, by Judy Collins, The Alarm, and many others.

By 1973, Philip Larkin, as editor of "The Oxford Book of Twentieth Century Verse" included two of Davies' poems, "The Lay Preacher Ponders" and "High Summer on the Mountains" in the anthology. Since the early 1970s Gomer Press has brought out several editions of Idris Davies' Collected Poems, keeping his work alive and available to the discerning reader. It is easy to understand why, the work is humane, dramatic, lyrical, sophisticated with a deceptive strength and a clear sense of rhythm.

In a robust introduction to the 2003 edition, Jim Perrin claimed that Davies is "the most significant and original Welsh poet to have written in English during the twentieth century". Perrin considers Davies' two long poems "Gwalia Deserta" and "The Angry Summer" as being "among the most considerable achievements in Anglo-Welsh poetry, and fully worthy of inclusion alongside other great twentieth century long poems from marginalised cultures: Patrick Kavanagh's "The Great Hunger", Hugh MacDiarmid's "A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle", Sorley MacLean's The Cuillin". "

Davies had left school at 14, worked first as a miner and was introduced to the poems of Shelley by a fellow-worker named Eddie Balman. He became acutely aware of social and political issues: "But the greatest of our battles/we lost in '26/ Through treachery and lying,/And Baldwin's box of tricks./ I began to read from Shelley/ In afternoons in May,/ And to muse upon the misery/ Of unemployment pay." (from his poem I was Born in Rhymney). 1926 was a crucial year for Davies, the year of the General Strike and the Great Coal Strike, a long period in the mining villages of South Wales of privation and suffering. He later wrote "Do you remember 1926? That summer of soups and speeches,/ The sunlight on the idle wheels and the deserted crossings,/ And the laughter and the cursing in the moonlit streets?" (from Gwalia Deserta).

He eventually escaped the mines and attended Loughborough College and the University of Nottingham, and by the end of 1932 had qualified as a teacher. He would teach in London for several years. In 1940 he lodged at 28 Haselmere Road, Crouch End, teaching at Hoxton. He kept a diary and wrote about the blitz- "Sept, 8. Sunday 11.45am perhaps one of the worst nights London has ever known. About 500 Nazi planes bombed London's dockland in the Eastern area, doing considerable damage and killing about 400 people, and injuring many more. A big fire blazed along the river for hours and the London sky was wonderfully lit-up." The next day he wrote "I travelled by tube this morning.....I have seen a good deal of damage today, most of it round Old Street Station. There's a big crater in the street, and the Maternity Hospital at the corner was hit....Hoxton has suffered severely from the raids of the last three nights. Crouch End, so far, has escaped any severe damage,"

The writer Glyn Jones, a friend of Davies, wrote an essay about him in 1968, stating that "He became a great lover of London, of Hampstead Heath, of Epping Forest and especially of the Charing Cross area with its second-hand bookshops. And he got to know many Welshmen then living in the capital, including Aneurin Talfan Davies, Keidrych Rhys and Dylan Thomas, whom he used to meet on Friday evenings." Welsh writers frequented Griff's Bookshop in Cecil Court, and in the early forties and early fifties it was kept by a man named William Griffith, who kept a representative stock of Welsh and Anglo-Welsh publications.

In 1938 Dent published his volume "Gwalia Deserta", the first of four published volumes (the next three would be published by Eliot at Faber). During the period 1939-1945, he was evacuated several times with schools from London to Northamptonshire, Hertfordshire, and to Wales. It was during this time that he wrote "The Angry Summer", a poem of 1926, expressing his feelings for his people and what they had endured. This long poem of 50 sections, along with "Gwalia Deserta" (36 sections), and his autobiographical poem "I was Born in Rhymney" plus several shorter poems such as "Waun Fair", "Capel Calvin", "Rhymney", "London Welsh", "Midnight", "Hywel and Blodwen", do I believe have that claim to permanence which Eliot noted.

By the early 1950s he became seriously ill with cancer, and just a month before his death his *Selected Poems* was published by Eliot in March 1953. Eliot had already published Davies' "The Angry Summer" (1943), and "Tonypany and other poems" (1945). Idris Davies died at his mother's house in Victoria Road, Rhymney in April 1953. Today there are no mines to employ the workers, time has brought many changes, but Davies' "poetic document" remains. There is a plaque on the house in his memory, and opposite there's the library which also remembers him with a plaque, and a display of some of his books, pens, photographs and the family Bible. Here then was a poet who had compassion for the plight of the people he had been brought up with, a poet to echo Eliot, who knew his subject matter.

* * *

In late 2016 Faber & Faber published *The Map and the Clock: A Laureate's Choice of Poetry of Britain and Ireland* edited by Carol Ann Duffy and Gillian Clarke, which includes two of Idris Davies' poems "The Bells of Rhymney" (poem xv from *Gwalia Deserta*) and "Mrs Evans fach" (poem 7 from *The Angry Summer*). His poetry is direct, it sings, and continues to be read and appreciated into the 21st century.

For further reading and sources on Idris Davies:

The Complete Poems of Idris Davies edited by Dafydd Johnston (University of Wales Press 1994)

Collected Poems (Gomer 2003)

The Dragon Has Two Tongues essays by Glyn Jones (Dent 1968)

Idris Davies of Rhymney a personal memoir by Islwyn Jenkins (Gomer 1986)

Poetry Wales – Idris Davies Special Issue (1981)



The House where Idris Davies died on 6 April 1953



Idris Davies Memorial Sculpture in Rhymney, Wales. Sculpture created by Andrew Rowe.

* * * *