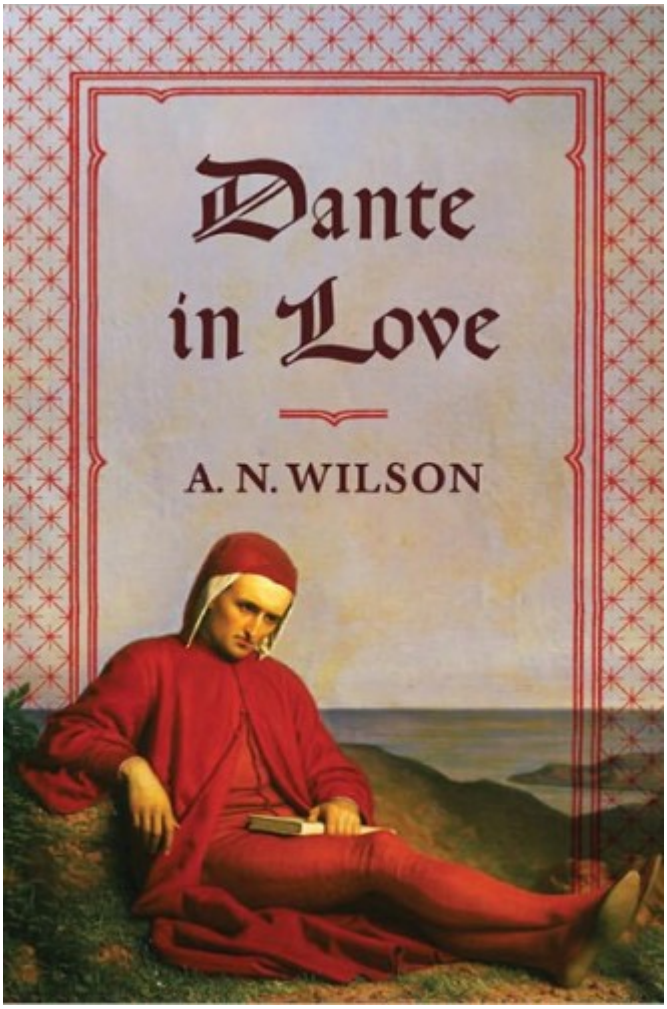
A taste for Dante

by Peter S. Hawkins in the February 8, 2012 issue

In Review



Dante in Love

By A. N. Wilson
Farrar, Straus and Giroux

T. S. Eliot famously said that the world of literature is handily divided between Dante and Shakespeare: the one is deep, the other broad. Perhaps. What is certain is that

we never seem to tire of the two. Both writers are perennially "in production," with new takes on 400-year-old plays on stage and screen and well over 20 fresh English translations of the entire *Commedia* published since World War II.

Enduring fame, however, is a mixed blessing, for a writer's outrageous good fortune inevitably has its slings and arrows. For instance, Roland Emmerich's 2011 film *Anonymous* has tried once again to take away the Bard's plays and confer them instead on the Earl of Oxford. An analogous hijacking befell Dante the year before: the poet's feckless pilgrim protagonist, scared of his own shadow and always in need of rescue, becomes in the 2010 computer game Dante's Inferno a sword-wielding action hero, and the magisterial Beatrice—his rescuer in the *Commedia*—a décolleté damsel in distress.

Despite Dante's cultural currency, both high and low—what town of any size lacks a nightspot called "Dante's Inferno"?—the poet is a harder sell than the playwright. Instead of five acts and one or two intermissions, we get over 14,000 lines of poetry with a density of reference that makes keeping track of the Houses of York and Lancaster, or who's who on the shores of Bohemia, seem easy. To be sure, contemporary editions of Shakespeare's plays have their notes and glosses, to make sure we understand the Elizabethan language and at least some of the allusions; but that is nothing like the compendium of information that weighs down most of the standard annotated editions of Dante, replete with diagrams and charts, timelines, the intricacies of politics, geography, the stars, Latin and vernacular literatures and, most daunting of all, theology. Unlike the apparatus-free Gideon Bible, which presents the extraordinarily complicated Good Book unadorned, the *Commedia* seems unable to stand on its own.

This is where A. N. Wilson enters the picture with a literary biography that aims to bridge the gap between the *Commedia* and the "intelligent audience" of nonspecialists who, allegedly abandoned by the professionals, are like sheep without a shepherd. (The several such books already aimed at the "general educated reader" have failed to fit the author's bill.)

To bring the reluctant newcomer onboard, Wilson begins by telling his personal story of discovery. A youthful Christian devotee of the poem, a self-described "amateur Dantean," and then, briefly, an Oxford lecturer in medieval literature, he fell early under the spell of Charles Williams (as had Eliot, W. H. Auden and Dorothy Sayers before him).

Williams's *The Figure of Beatrice* offered a deeply theological reading of the poem. But rather than excavating a medieval (and therefore "dated") work for its debts to Bonaventure or Aquinas, Williams treated it as a way to God that could be undertaken here and now—almost as a work of practical theology. In a book without footnotes or bibliography but only readings of the text, Williams trusted Dante's narrative to be essentially all that the reader needed. By taking that story to heart—by understanding Beatrice as the key that opens the door to the universe—a reader could learn not only about the divine love that moves the sun and the other stars, but also about the ultimate trajectory of the love we have for one another—and especially for those with whom we are "in love."

Was all of this too rich for Wilson's blood? He doesn't say. He only reveals that after a time, Williams's theology of romantic love became an "all-pervading influence" he needed to escape. It turned out to be an escape not only from Williams the man (spoofed in Wilson's five *Lampitt Chronicles*) but also from his Christianity.

A reluctant convert to atheism, Wilson nonetheless remained haunted by what he had left behind. In the preface to *Jesus: A Life* (1992) he tells his readers that biblical criticism, and the probability that Paul "invented" the Christian religion, finally made it impossible for him to address Jesus as if he were alive, or recite creeds affirming him as Lord and Judge of the universe. Others might reconcile their disbelief with religious practice—pretend in good faith—but not him: "I did not feel it was honest to continue to call myself a Christian." He was, therefore, among the many who found that the Sea of Faith was at permanent ebb and themselves at a profound loss.

Wilson tells the background of this story in *God's Funeral* (1999), an exploration of God's "death" in 19th-century England, when people continued to build and attend churches but no longer believed in what they stood for. In place of a vital Christianity, what remained was "a new imaginative order of unbelief" and with it "a devastating sense of loss extending to our own times." Wilson was among the mourners.

But that was 20 years ago. The author of *Dante in Love,* who dedicates his book to the archbishop of Canterbury and his wife, is someone who has come back to the faith—a return announced as "Why I Believe Again" in the *New Statesman* (April 2, 2009). The news caused hubbub and derision: to the cultured despisers of religion he was a fuddy-duddy throwback who had reneged on the cold hard truth for the old lie. The new convert was himself taken aback by his spiritual about-face. As if

surprised that his end should also be his beginning, Wilson found himself not only worshiping at a parish in London—and writing about what it felt like, for instance, to participate in a Palm Sunday procession—but doing so in the same Anglo-Catholic church that Charles Williams had once called his own.

Wilson's book is by no means an update of *The Figure of Beatrice,* however. His overriding interest is neither theological nor focused on Dante's beloved, despite his title. Rather, he is interested in the poet's context: the historical, political and cultural world in which the poem was written and to which it was first addressed. Annotated editions of the *Commedia* give names and dates in footnotes, a piecemeal view. Wilson wants to give the Big Picture—to invite the reader on an adventure that follows Dante through the little we actually know of his life: the vicissitudes of his Florentine political involvements, the pain of his two-decade exile, and the preoccupations that made him (although he had neither power nor position) a 14th-century "public intellectual."

It's a fascinating story. Dante wrote in Latin about the potential of the vernacular for eloquence, about empire as a solution to city-state civil war, about philosophy as a way that men and women equipped only with Italian could gain access to a celestial Athens of the enlightened.

And then he wrote the *Commedia,* the *ultimo lavoro* that would consume his life for more than a decade and involve reappraisal (and often revision) of almost everything he had written beforehand. It was some time after 1307 that Dante began work on what would be his taskmaster until death, a poem in which all the unfinished business of his exilic prose was transfigured into a vision of the universe as God might see it. Some have seen it as an account of Dante's own midlife conversion.

Unlike Williams, Wilson says comparatively little about the poem itself, which is subordinated to the sketching of "Dante and his age." At least when it comes to *Inferno* and *Purgatorio,* he offers no sustained reading—perhaps because the first two canticles are deemed sufficiently straightforward and engaging not to need a critic's special pleading. *Paradiso,* however, is another story: prodigiously original, a challenge to follow in the blaze of its metaphoric light shows and dense with doctrine. Attention must be paid. The final canticle must be courted, savored, if the reader is find him- or herself in a "new dimension," inside the experience of the divine that the entire poem is moving toward.

At this point, in a chapter aptly titled "*In Paradisum,*" the often tart literary biographer formerly burdened by doubts and reservations about his subjects, from C. S. Lewis to St. Paul, becomes something like a Dante evangelist. To be sure, he acknowledges Dante to be, at least in part, "the poet of hate, the poet of vengeance, of implacable resentment and everlasting feuds." But not in the end—despite the poet's ongoing anger that turns even the heavenly kingdom red with rage, so that Beatrice's final words are a denunciation of Florentine politics and papal bad faith. What matters to Wilson is that the *Paradiso* is "the boldest work of Western literature, since, if it achieves its effect, it will have ceased to be an imaginary narrative and will have led the reader to the vision experienced by the pilgrim-poet. Its aim is nothing less than to enable us to see God."

Actually, as Wilson admits, the work falls short of that enabling. All that the *Paradiso* can do is create the desire for such a vision, not deliver it. The entire canticle, then, is a sublime "tease," a realm of metaphor where likenesses are constructed only to evaporate before our eyes or be openly dismissed by the wordsmith himself as inadequate. What does it mean to see God face to face? If such a sight could be revealed or expressed, there would be a 101st canto. Instead we get the resonant failure of the poem's magnificent close.

Wilson's final chapter, "Dante's Afterlife," reconstructs the long reception history of the *Commedia* and its author, which handily shows the ups and downs of critical opinion. The church was initially wary if not outright hostile: it couldn't help noting the poet's theological liberties, his excoriating treatment of the contemporary papacy, his opposition to ecclesiastical involvement in power and politics. By the 20th century, however, all of this would change: pope after pope has declared the alleged heretic to be "the most eloquent singer of the Christian idea" (Benedict XV in 1921), an ornament to the church as her beloved son (Paul VI in 1966) and a visionary of love whom the present pontiff counts as an inspiration for his own pontificate. What a turnaround, from being "the Devil's vessel" (according to a Dominican polemicist in 1327) to being Vatican poet laureate for Benedict XVI.

Wilson focuses on the roller coaster of Dante's literary rather than his religious reception. He tracks these changes in taste with a witty (and withering) assortment of quotes. The *altissimo poeta* of Boccaccio and Chaucer became in the Renaissance "a poet for bakers and cobblers," his poem a "piece of bungling plagiarism." Held in contempt in the 16th century, barely read (or published) in the 17th, Dante was scorned in the Enlightenment with special vehemence: neoclassical standards of

decorum and a loathing of all things "Gothick" judged him unreadable.

In 1738 Horace Walpole, showing all the prejudices of the Establishment, described the author of the *Commedia* as "absurd, disgusting, in short a Methodist parson in Bedlam." Twenty years later Voltaire was equally dismissive. Anyone "with a spark of good sense ought to blush at that monstrous assemblage in Hell, of Dante and Virgil, of St. Peter and Madonna Beatrice"; it was all "stupidly extravagant and barbarous."

With his expertise on the 19th century, Wilson is especially good on Dante's rehabilitation in the English-speaking world after the appearance of *The Vision of Dante,* Henry Francis Cary's 1814 translation of the *Commedia.* Cary had the good luck of being noticed and then publicized by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Among the English Romantics who shared Coleridge's esteem were Blake, Keats, Shelley and Byron—all of them caught up in the new "Dante mania." So too were Victorians the likes of Tennyson, Browning, the Rossettis and Ruskin. On the Continent there were Italian nationalists who found in the poet their *pater patriae,* and German enthusiasts like Jacob Burckhardt, for whom Dante was simply without equal: "In the whole spiritual or physical world there is hardly an important subject that the poet has not fathomed, and on which his utterances—often only with a few words—are not the most weighty of his time." Nor was the New World far behind. In Cambridge, Massachusetts, a Dante Club gathered around Emerson, Charles Eliot Norton and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, whose translation of the *Commedia* marked an American fascination with the poet that remains unabated. (See, for instance, the Dante Today website, http://learn.bowdoin.edu/italian/dante.)

In the English-speaking world of the 20th century Dante continued to be *the* poet. The list of those who have been in ongoing conversation with him is both diverse and lengthy; it is also particularly rich in Americans, including James Merrill, Robert Lowell and W. S. Merwin. Dennis Looney's 2011 *Freedom Readers* sheds new light on how Dante assumed a position of importance in African-American culture from the late 1820s to the present. No less remarkable is Dante's importance as a displaced person and "home exile" to Soviet-era Russians like Osip Mandelstam, Anna Akhmatova, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Joseph Brodsky.

Against the backdrop of Dante mania over the past 200 or so years—and one could say more about the poet's impact on the visual arts and music as well as on literature—Wilson brings his book to a rushed conclusion. He speculates about the poet's chances to speak meaningfully to our sad time, fragmented as it is into "a

million million separate emptinesses." People are lonely despite the easy connections of the Internet and disillusioned by institutions both sacred and secular. Wilson speaks personally at this point. "If the lifetime experience of one reader is anything to go by," the poem is "more than just a book"; it has the power transform the one who attends to its pages, "to make its own version of us." In this light, the *Commedia* becomes for him a kind of scripture—centuries old, perennially new—in the way it can teach us how to read our world critically, counterculturally and therefore afresh.

In a hastily sketched series of "What ifs"—"What if the quest for the Just Society, the quest for the Ideal Lover, the quest for God could be found in some grand imaginative coalitions?"—Wilson wonders how the poet might perform this regenerative function. These brief interrogative conjectures come fast and furious, as if Wilson were not yet certain what he wanted to say. The book ends with a kind of altar call to the reader, the "you" who has been with him over the course of the book:

> Whether you are losing your faith or returning to it (or a version of it); whether you are utterly disillusioned with politics or hopeful of political solutions to the injustices of the world; whether your deepest experience of love happened during childhood or is part of your sexual life as an adult, Dante, in his vast *Summa* of all these concerns, not only speaks of them more articulately than any other modern poet, but actually is a modern poet.

Reading this passage, I thought of the famous moment in the *Confessions* when a distraught Augustine hears an enigmatic cry coming from next door—*Tolle, lege,* "Take it and read." He decides that it is a command to be obeyed, a summons to retrieve the text he had just put aside. When he then opens the Epistle to the Romans at random, he discovers a verse that seems written just for him, a scripture to challenge and change his entire existence. After a lifetime of reading, he suddenly finds what he needed: "In an instant, as I came to the end of the sentence, it was as though the light of confidence flooded into my heart and all the darkness of doubt was dispelled."

Wilson never says that the *Commedia* played such a role in his conversion, but at least this reader suspects that what he discovered in his immersion in Dante was a good deal more than "a modern poet." Perhaps he will turn from literary biography to autobiography and, in a confession all his own, tell that fuller story.