RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

Inferno

Dante Alighieri

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About the Book

Welcome to Hell.

One evening, Dante finds himself lost in a dark and menacing wood. The ghost of Virgil offers to lead him to safety but the path lies through the terrifying kingdom of Satan, where Dante witnesses the strange and gruesome sufferings of the damned.

Written while Dante was in exile and under threat of being burned at the stake, this dramatic, frightening and, at times, sardonically humorous vision of Hell still has the power to shock and horrify.

About the Author

Dante Alighieri was born in Florence in 1265. When he was nine years old he met Bice Portinari, the Beatrice who inspired both his first work, the *Vita Nuova*, and the *Divine Comedy*. The *Inferno* is the first of the three books that make up the *Divine Comedy*. Dante had at least three children with his wife Gemma di Manetto Donati. His involvement in politics in Florence led to his exile in 1302 and he eventually settled in Ravenna where he died in 1321.

Steve Ellis, Professor of English Literature at the University of Birmingham, was born and brought up in York, and studied in Florence as part of his doctorate for London University. His frustration as a student with existing translations of Dante spurred a long-lasting desire to translate it himself. His critical works include *Dante and English Poetry: Shelley to T.S. Eliot*, a study of Eliot's *Four Quartets* and *Chaucer at Large: The Poet in the Modern Imagination*. A major Gregory Award winner, he has also published three books of poetry, *Home and Away, West Pathway* and *Spring Collection*.

ALSO BY DANTE ALIGHIERI

The Divine Comedy
Purgatory
Paradise

La Vita Nuova
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ALSO BY STEVE ELLIS

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Translated by E.B. Richmond

PRAISE FOR STEVE ELLIS'S TRANSLATION

'Excellent. Dante's vision vibrates again in all its original colour. The effect is dazzling'

Independent on Sunday

'Short, neat and easily understood, it can be read through very quickly … Ellis has gone about his task with care and commitment. If this is a door to Dante, let's do it. Let's throw it open'

Literary Review

'It's good to have a version which one can read through with excitement in a few hours. This edition benefits also from the economical but always helpful footnotes on each page … Steve Ellis deserves our gratitude … for introducing – as he surely will do – new readers to the *Inferno*'

Stephen Spender, *Sunday Telegraph*

'Steve Ellis has aimed for a tangy, stripped-down concision, and got it … simultaneously clear and energetic … This is a very physical, immediately painful hell. It makes you wince'

Guardian

'A creative transformation. Energetic, racy, rude and lyrical. A terrible delight … buy this translation and spend a damn good season in hell'

Independent

'Steve Ellis is himself a poet, a Dante scholar, an art historian, a medievalist and a specialist in modernism, an authority on Yeats, Eliot and Pound, and on what they

learned from Dante. His translation has all the directness of modern common speech, our vernacular, while giving space also to Dante’s powerful and plain rhetorical eloquence. It is a considerable tour-de-force, alive, immediate, terribly energetic, and very moving’

A.S. Byatt

TO MICHAEL CAESAR AND MICHAEL SPENDER

DANTE ALIGHIERI

Inferno

TRANSLATED, ANNOTATED AND INTRODUCED BY
Steve Ellis

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

Introduction

1 *Translating Dante*

This new translation of the *Inferno* aims at reproducing important features of Dante's style which it seems to me previous versions have obscured and misrepresented. It is first of all a colloquial version, in the type of diction, grammatical construction and speech rhythms it uses throughout, and in this it tries to recapture some of the vigour and directness of Dante's original. In the famous letter to Can Grande, lord of Verona, Dante explains how the language he uses in the poem befits its status as a 'Comedy', that is a work beginning in the horrors of Hell and ending in the joys of Paradise, for, as opposed to the high style of tragedy, comedy employs a style that is 'unstudied and lowly, as being in the vulgar tongue, in which even women-folk hold their talk'. Although the authenticity of this letter has sometimes been questioned, it is generally accepted as an accurate description of Dante's purpose and method in the *Comedy*. The *Inferno* in particular, the first of the three parts of the poem, abounds in striking idiomatic expressions, vivid homely details and comparisons, and dialect terms and phrases, not only from Dante's native Florence but from other Italian regions as well. Previous translations have not really brought out this popular emphasis and indeed have tended to convert a lively and fast-flowing original into something much more plodding, formal and prolix, keeping Dante, as a venerated 'classic', safely within the purlieus of the academy. During the 1970s and 1980s some attempt has been made, if not to recapture Dante's vigour, at least to simplify the language

of translation to a kind of plainness that might go some way towards reproducing his ‘unstudied and lowly’ style; but here again the result has often been a de-energising of Dante (under-stated long-windedness replacing stately long-windedness) that must have been fatal for the attention of countless readers. One must make an honourable exception here of Dorothy L. Sayers’s version of the *Inferno* (1949), which, whatever its faults, does aim at conveying Dante’s energy and spiritedness. Of course, this popular emphasis can go too far, and nothing dates more quickly than contemporary slang and modern notions of medieval quaintness, as Sayers’s version now shows. Dante’s poem not only has an affiliation with the language of the street but also with the language of epic tradition, with Virgil’s *Aeneid*, Statius’s *Thebaid*, Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. In what follows I have tried not to exclude these competing claims, but keeping a modern reader interested in a medieval Italian poem of over 4,800 lines has meant, for me, using primarily the language of the 1980s and 1990s.

There is a regional dimension here as well: the fact that Dante’s poem used a specifically Florentine speech and language, that is, a dialect, has allowed me to draw on my own native Yorkshire background. But I have not wanted to push this to excess: in fact I have rejected the use of individual dialect words and expressions and drawn rather on this background for the basic speech-tones which are employed; indeed some readers may be unaware of this ‘northern’ input, and it will fall very differently on different ears. For me however this translation is bonded within a particular speech-community, and my objection to other available versions of the poem might be summed up in the belief that they employ no particular language at all: rather an odd mix of the bookish and the self-consciously demotic, a strange hybrid that lives nowhere off the page (nor frequently indeed even on the page).

Many readers will want to know immediately about the ‘problem’ of *terza rima*, and I can reply equally immediately that I have simply ignored it. The familiar complaint that English simply cannot reproduce the abundance of Italian rhymes might be brought forward here, and yet I doubt that it is convincing. Suffice to say that, in my own poetry, I have always found the handling of rhyme difficult, whereas there are many accomplished rhymesters among my contemporaries: if Tony Harrison, say, turned his attention to Dante we might have a successful *terza rima* version, and Sayers’s version (which, along with H. F. Cary’s, is the only one I can enjoy reading) uses rhyme. Dante’s rhyme scheme of course provides a marvellous musical bonding that not only structures the text but also provides a fluent linkage leading the reader briskly forwards; if *terza rima* is dispensed with then some other means of stimulating readerly momentum must be found. One of the features I have been especially keen to reproduce is Dante’s concision and economy, his ability to compress much meaning into a few words, and I hope readers will find that my attempts to avoid unnecessary padding are an aid to narrative fluency. I hope not only that my translation will be found readable, but also that it will be found more accurate than others, for Dante’s meaning is often muffled or unwarrantably supplemented by the relative verboseness other translations adopt. I have wanted to be faithful (as far as possible) to both style and meaning; the only ‘liberties’ I have taken are with punctuation, often introducing a comma for Dante’s full stop in the interests of keeping the verse moving. It makes little sense, if you jettison Dante’s rhyme scheme, to keep slavishly (as some translations do) to his punctuation, and at times I have used longer verse sentences to make up for the problems with linkage that the absence of rhyme creates. I have tried to avoid making a thing of stops and starts. And although my translation is in free verse, I have attempted to impose formal constraints

upon it by regularising line length and the number of words and stresses per line.

How best to annotate Dante might itself provide enough material and debate for the entire Introduction. Even though I have aimed at keeping the annotations to a minimum, they are still fairly substantial, and I hope that readers will find them of most use in their present position, on the same page as the text. There is the danger that the reader will be continually distracted by them and I would suggest that each canto be read straight through, without interruption, before the notes are used. Often Dante himself will provide all the information needed to answer some earlier problems and puzzles in his text; the notes are mainly there to provide supplementary historical and cultural information. Readers of Dante in the original will realise that the page lay-out of this translation is based on Natalino Sapegno's celebrated edition of the *Comedy* (2nd edn, 1968); Sapegno has generally been my Bible where controversial issues of interpretation relating to Dante's text have arisen, though other editions and commentaries have been consulted, as the notes make clear.

2 *Dante's Life and Works*

Dante's writings are heavily autobiographical, and most of our knowledge about his life comes from them, though it is supplemented by a famous *Life* written by Boccaccio and a few other accounts and documents. In the *Paradise* (XXII, 115) Dante tells us that he was born under the sign of Gemini (21 May–21 June), and we can work out the year, 1265, from various places in his writings, as at the beginning of *Inferno*. His family seem to have been small landholders, settled for several generations in Florence, who eked out their income through money-lending; as a young man Dante received a good education at various

convent schools in the city, and may or may not have owed his early training in rhetoric and in classical literature to Brunetto Latini, whom he meets and salutes as his teacher in *Inferno*, canto xv (see notes to ll. 30, 84). The main works of Dante's youth are the sonnets, *ballate* and *canzoni* that he collected together in the early 1290s and to which he added a prose commentary, entitling the whole the *Vita nuova (New Life*); this famously recounts his first encounter with Beatrice at the end of his ninth year, going on to describe the course of his love for her, her early death (in 1290), and his final vow to write a major work about her (which became the *Divine Comedy*). Its importance as a poetic document is recognised in *Purgatory*, canto XXIV, where Dante has his poetic predecessor Bonagiunta da Lucca coin the famous term 'dolce stil nuovo' ('sweet new style') to sum up the *Vita nuova's* innovatory quality. Dante wrote the first of the sonnets preserved in the *Vita nuova* when he was eighteen; the whole book is a fervent, mystical and esoteric working of the *fin amour* tradition into a Christian context in which Beatrice becomes the vehicle of divine grace and of Dante's salvation, roles which she will resume in the *Comedy*, where her allegorical function is manifest (see note to *Inferno*, II, 70). As a book full of enigmas, visions and arcane symbolism, and one addressed to a circle of fellow-poets and initiates, it is well calculated to appeal to later circles of initiates like the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, with whom for the English reader it probably remains most closely associated (D. G. Rossetti's own translation can still be recommended).

The *Vita nuova* is not in any sense a 'realist' narrative; Dante never reveals Beatrice's historical identity or identifies the city in which it is set, nor does he give us any contemporary detail or context that is not part of his symbolical plan. It was left to later writers like Boccaccio to begin the romantic novelisation of Dante's book, and to tell us that Beatrice was a member of the Portinari family and

was later married to Simone di Geri de' Bardi, thus inviting us to speculate on all sorts of personal and domestic details that Dante was not concerned with. The raging nineteenth-century rejection of Beatrice as an allegorical invention now seems more to emphasise the Victorian cult of 'manly' love for a womanly woman than to inform us about Dante's book; certainly I can now take Beatrice as a convention of some kind without feeling that I am impugning Dante's sense or his sensuality. Of his life beyond Beatrice in the 1280s the *Vita nuova* tells us nothing; nothing, for example, about one of the best-known dates in the early biographies, 1289 and the battle of Campaldino, when the Florentine Guelphs defeated the Ghibelline forces headed by Arezzo, and where Dante served in the Florentine cavalry (see the opening of *Inferno*, XXII and note).

The Guelph-Ghibelline struggle raged throughout Italy during Dante's lifetime. The latter party represented the claims of the German emperors in Italy and was mainly identified with the feudal aristocracy; the Guelphs pressed the claims for independence of the various Italian cities and communes, recruited from the lesser gentry and the mercantile classes, and looked to the Pope for support. In 1260 the Tuscan Ghibellines won a great victory at Montaperti near Siena, but their subsequent control of Florence was short-lived; the Pope called on the French crown for assistance, which led to the decisive defeat of the Emperor Frederick II's son Manfred by Charles of Anjou at Benevento in southern Italy in 1266. Charles assisted the Florentine Guelphs to take over their city in 1267 and enact fierce revenge on the Ghibellines. The story of these years is given in *Inferno*, canto X, where Dante meets the soul of the great Ghibelline leader at Montaperti, Farinata degli Uberti, who died in 1264. After the Guelph ascendancy in 1267 Florence enjoyed some decades of relative stability and commercial expansion, largely through its banking, usury and wool trades, but although Dante himself

belonged to a Guelph family he looks back on this period in the *Comedy* with a good deal of misgiving; in cantos XV and XVI of *Inferno* he laments the decadence that has overtaken Florence with the quick money that can now be made there, and the accompanying influx of undesirables (see especially XVI, 73 and note). Throughout the *Comedy* Dante's nostalgia for a Florentine society of probity, discipline and aristocratic civility is recurrently contrasted with the commercial boom city it has become. Many of the figures he meets in Hell in fact seemed to exemplify the former, so that part of Dante's painful education is the discovery that they too are damned (see, for example, VI, 79 and note).

After completing the *Vita nuova* in the early 1290s Dante's philosophical studies began in earnest, leading to his immersion in writers like Boethius, Cicero and Aristotle, and to his writing *canzoni* on ethical and philosophical themes. By the mid-1290s he was also involving himself in the government of Florence, and council records report his participation on several occasions. By 1300 he had been elected one of the six priors who governed Florence for periods of two months (15 June–15 August in his case), and during his governorship the recent party feuding between the so-called Black and White Guelphs, which originated in nearby Pistoia, came to a head. Dante was a signatory to the decree of exile against the leaders of both parties, a decree that was eventually to lead to the Blacks' intriguing with Pope Boniface VIII and to their triumphant return to the city, assisted by the forces of the French king's brother, Charles of Valois (these events form the background to *Inferno*, canto VI). When the Blacks resumed control, Dante, who belonged to the White party, was away on an embassy from Florence which had been sent to treat with Boniface VIII, and in a decree of 27 January 1302 he was charged with corruption while in government, and penalised by a fine, two years' exile, and disqualification from future office

(see further the note to XXI, 2). Dante's refusal to meet these conditions led to a second proclamation of 10 March in which he was condemned with fourteen others to be burned at the stake *in absentia*; after he had set out on the embassy of 1301 he never returned to Florence again.

The last twenty years of Dante's life were years of exile in various Italian courts and cities, in which he produced the *Divine Comedy* and also a great deal of other writing. At first Dante seems to have joined in the Whites' schemes to return to Florence, but he quickly fell out with these, as *Inferno*, XV, 71 and especially *Paradise*, XVII, 61–9 indicate. This last passage is part of a famous speech by Dante's ancestor Cacciaguida in which Dante's exile is described, and its hardships: 'You'll find how salty it tastes,/other people's bread, how hard it is/going up, down, other people's stairs' (*Paradise*, XVII, 58–60). Cacciaguida 'predicts' that Dante's first refuge will be with the della Scala family, lords of Verona, and anticipates in particular the munificence of Can Grande della Scala, who was Dante's patron after 1314. In between we learn from the concluding lines of *Purgatory*, canto VIII, that Dante was received by the Malaspina family, lords of Lunigiana, around 1306, and we know that his final refuge, from 1317, was in Ravenna with Guido Novello, count of Polenta, on a mission for whom he died on 13 or 14 September 1321. He is buried at Ravenna, in spite of many subsequent Florentine attempts to get his bones returned to his native city.

In the early years of exile, from about 1304 onwards, Dante was at work on two prose treatises, the *De vulgari eloquentia* and the *Convivio*. The former is a search for a quintessential, 'standard' Italian that might underlie all the various tongues and dialects spoken throughout Italy, an Italian appropriate to a regal court if Italy actually had a political and administrative centre. Dante concludes that such an Italian language is available in the work of the

poets (i.e., himself and his contemporaries) who epitomise the cultural efflorescence of late thirteenth-century Italy. The *De vulgari* is both a study in poetics and an adumbration of political unity for Italy, set, however, against the dark background of the real state of affairs, where even in the same city people can speak two different dialects, as if in token of the prevailing civil discord. The *Convivio* (or *Banquet*) is Dante's longest prose work, written deliberately for a wider audience (and hence in Italian) who may not have the time or means actually to sit themselves at the table of Philosophy, but who may benefit from receiving some of the crumbs from the banquet, which Dante is intent on passing to them. A deeply autobiographical work, written partly with the intention of repairing Dante's reputation after the political calamities that have befallen him, it includes at the outset a picture of the poet in exile, 'wandering as a pilgrim, almost a beggar, through nearly every part to which our language extends … like a ship without sail or steering, brought to all sorts of ports and harbours and shores by the dry wind that wretched poverty breathes' (I, iii, 4–5). The *Convivio* was a planned fifteen-book work, taking the form of commentaries on fourteen of Dante's own *canzoni*; concerned with purely philosophical ideals of human behaviour and virtue, it follows a humanist programme that is enormously indebted to Aristotle and that excludes from consideration specifically Christian ideas about grace and redemption. Also, like the *De vulgari*, it frequently eulogises Virgil's *Aeneid*; if in the Latin treatise Virgil's poem is upheld as a poetic and stylistic exemplar, in the *Convivio* Dante is more concerned with treating its hero, Aeneas, as a model of humanist virtue, and with praising the Roman Empire as a divinely ordained political institution, ideas that will feed powerfully into the *Divine Comedy* itself.

The *Convivio* was broken off unfinished, after four books, and it is frequently surmised that it was the gathering momentum of the *Comedy* that led Dante to abandon his other projects. We do not know exactly when the poem was begun, and there is a theory that the early cantos at least date from before Dante's exile (see notes to *Inferno*, VIII, I and VI, 70), but most commentators would see the entire poem as a post-exile work. Dante's belief in the Empire as institution is displayed not only in the *Convivio* but also in the series of letters he wrote in support of the Emperor Henry VII's expedition into Italy, to claim imperial lordship over the peninsula, between 1310 and 1313, letters of encouragement to Henry himself, to the rulers of Italy calling on them to accept Henry, and specifically to Florence, fulminating against its resistance to the imperial claim. Henry unsuccessfully laid siege to Florence in the autumn of 1312, and was to die the following year near Siena, and with him died Dante's hopes of the imperial restoration. It was during or after Henry's campaign that Dante wrote his political treatise *Monarchia*, in which he claims that the Roman Empire was ordained by God as the optimum system of rule, and the only one capable of controlling the internecine feuds of the Italian peninsula; the ideal of Empire and Papacy working hand-in-hand, controlling humanity's temporal and spiritual welfare respectively, is developed at length here and underpins the entire scheme of the *Divine Comedy*, testifying to the passionate symmetry of Dante's imagination.

Enough has been said to indicate how Dante's life and writings are inextricably entangled, and how that life itself could be seen as having 'the quality of art', in W. B. Yeats's phrase. Yet on some personal matters Dante's works are curiously silent: on his marriage and family, for example. We do not know precisely when he married Gemma di Manetto Donati, but we do know they had at least three children who were incriminated in Florence's charges

against him, and who may have shared part of his exile (two of them, Pietro and Jacopo, later wrote commentaries on the *Comedy*). In 1315 Florence repealed this exile, and the sentence of death, but only upon Dante meeting certain conditions, which he refused to do; a letter to an unnamed friend exists in which he rejects these scornfully. We might leave the final encomium of Dante, and description of his hardships, to a well-known passage from Boccaccio's *Life*:

Studying generally requires privacy, the absence of worry and a calm state of mind … But instead of this seclusion and quiet, Dante, practically from the beginning of his life to the day of his death, experienced fierce and intolerable feelings of love, a wife, family and public responsibilities, exile and poverty.

And Boccaccio's judgement as to how Dante would have fared without these impediments is emphatic: 'io direi che egli fosse in terra divenuto uno iddio', he would have become a god on earth.

3 *The* Divine Comedy

The *Inferno* is the first of the three parts of the *Divine Comedy*, and is followed by *Purgatory*, in which Dante, still accompanied by Virgil, climbs the mountain of purgation and is reunited with Beatrice in the earthly paradise on its summit, and by *Paradise*, where Beatrice escorts Dante through the ten spheres of Heaven and towards a concluding vision of God. The entire poem (which Dante himself simply entitled the *Comedy*, the epithet 'Divine' being a sixteenth-century addition) consists of one hundred cantos, with canto I being an introduction to the whole, so that each part can be subdivided into thirty-three units (there is obvious numerological symbolism here, relating to such things as the age of Christ at his death and to the fact

that what Dante calls the ‘perfect number’ in the *Vita nuova* (XXIX, I), i.e., 10, is multiplied by itself to give the whole). Here I intend to make some very brief comments on the *Inferno*, preferring that the reader should proceed quickly to the poem itself, and given that the notes accompanying the text provide sufficiently comprehensive information.

The poem opens famously with the pilgrim lost in the ‘dark wood’, generally taken to represent Dante’s mid-life crisis in which his earlier contact with God, through the intermediary of Beatrice, has been exchanged for a fruitless immersion in the secular: local politics, civil strife, even the over-absorption in classical learning and literature. Yet this classical heritage itself richly informs the poem; Virgil is sent by Beatrice to rescue Dante by showing him the workings of the divine plan in the afterlife; many of the details of Hell are taken over from the classical Hades; the ethical categorisation itself is Aristotelian, rather than specifically Christian. Thus Virgil will explain in canto XI how the major division into ‘upper’ and ‘lower’ Hell, the latter entered by Virgil and Dante through the gates of the city of Dis in canto IX, is based on Aristotle’s distinction between sins of incontinence and of malice. Indeed, many readers new to Dante may be surprised at the relative absence of ‘theology’ in the *Inferno*, and at the concentration on secular politics that informs much of it.

Canto XI is a good example of Dante’s marvellous powers of clear and concentrated exposition, and might be set beside other notable instances of this, such as the description of the old man of Crete and of the arrangement of the rivers of Hell in canto XIV, and of the lay-out of the eighth circle, Malebolge, at the beginning of canto XVIII. As well as the celebrated graphic realism of cantos like XXI and XXVIII-XXX, these passages of technical exposition have their own brilliance and their own challenges for the translator, which can be as gratifying as reproducing Dante’s more