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Canto XXXIII

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Canto XXXIII

by M. J. Paulus

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*The only hope, or else despair
Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre—
To be redeemed from fire by fire.*

Who then devised the torment? Love.
—T. S. Eliot, “Little Gidding,” *Four Quartets*

I.

One of the world’s greatest books, Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, begins and ends with books. In the beginning, at the edge of Hell, there are Virgil’s. At the end, in the highest heaven, there is God’s—the book that contains all ideas, forms, and the correspondences between them—the book into which Dante promises God will bind up all scattered leaves.

Unlike Dante, Virgil, or God, I am not the author of a book. I am a keeper of books and of one book in particular. I am also a keeper of particular secrets about the first book of Dante’s that appeared in Oxford. The claim that Dante was a student in Oxford was first made by Giovanni da Serravalle, Bishop of Fermo, in the preamble to his 1417 Latin translation of and commentary on the *Divina Commedia*, which was produced under the influence of a former Chancellor of the University at Oxford. The claim is doubted by most, but the record does show that Humfrey, Duke of Gloucester, presented a uniquely illuminated manuscript of Serravalle’s book to Oxford in 1444. It was cataloged about a century later, but one bibliographer claims that by 1697 there was no book of Dante’s in any of the libraries at Oxford.

I came up to Oxford just before the Second World War to read literature. But I became distracted by the war and, unable to serve in it, accepted a post at the Bodleian. Because of my facility with

languages, I was apprenticed to the keeper of rare books. One of my first responsibilities was paging these for readers. This was dreary and dirty work, but it afforded me the opportunity to explore known and unknown volumes that had been housed in the library for centuries. In the third month of my employment, I made a discovery that transformed my job into a vocation. While reshelving quartos among some of the library's earliest accessions, I found Oxford's first Dante.

The book was without markings and bound in tough and dull brown leather. Cradling the tightly bound codex in one hand, with the other I slowly turned over its stiff parchment leaves and followed the vivid illuminations of figures and events running along the lower borders of every page to the last. The penultimate image on the final leaf—a gold, filigreed illustration of the Trinity in diverse but unified figures—was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. These shimmering figures faced a final image of flashing and blinding light that spread out into colors, a throne, and a door opening up out of the book and pulling me in through it. I quickly shut the book and, with trembling hands, returned it to its secret place on the shelves.

Bibliographic records were minimal, but I became certain that I had found the Dante donated by Sir Humfrey. As I made inquiries, I heard of legends that surrounded the loss of the book—and of other losses that surrounded its loss. Some of the older librarians told me that the book had not been lost but destroyed, to prevent other destructions. Under the cover of reformations and revolutions that spilled into Sir Bodley's library, a succession of readers had suffered strange deaths associated with sudden failures of mental or physical faculties. By the end of the seventeenth century, the book was lost.

Intrigued by the history of the book, I delayed revealing my discovery of it. Initially, I was not clear about my motivations for keeping it hidden. Perhaps it was simply that war and loss were far from abstractions at that point in time, and I had an intuitive sense that the book needed to be protected. As I secretly spent more time with the book, I began to sense a compelling pattern of necessity—of the integration of understanding, redemption, and love. There was something darker, too, which seemed to precede more glorious ends. I began to imagine the book required something of me.

II.

Early during my tenure as the clandestine keeper of the Oxford Dante, I became aware that others knew about the survival of Sir

Humfrey's donation. The first person who approached me about it was the enigmatic editor and author Charles Williams. He first learned of the book through a British Academy tribute to Dante published by his employer, Oxford University Press, in 1921. Nearly twenty years later, war relocated Williams to Oxford and through some esoteric source he found his way to me.

We met in the stone corridor leading to Sir Humfrey's Reading Room. Williams arrived at the library near the end of a workday, visibly weary but intent. He told me he was a poet and that he had written a variety of books, but there remained one book—unwritten and perhaps unwritable—which eluded him. He thought Sir Humfrey's Dante could help him write or not write the great book he was contemplating. He promised he would not reveal the existence of the book, and I sensed he was someone who would not violate his word. If he did, I was prepared to add to the violent history of the book. I led him into the reading room and withdrew to retrieve the book.

When I returned, I found Williams considering, alternately, the ancient volumes stacked up around him and the diligent scholars reading beneath them, as if he were looking for manifestations of the discourses between the books that were and the books that were to come. After placing the secret Dante in his eager hands, I surreptitiously watched him during his time with the book. Williams's whole body vibrated as he connected with it, and his vitality seemed to increase as he encountered what had been incarnated in that book centuries ago. He remained with the book for hours, voraciously turning over its pages and scrutinizing its text and images, until it was time for the library to close. He did not flee the final image, which held him for a long time. When I came for the book, he quickly disengaged himself from it, politely thanked me, and said that he had seen what he had needed.

I followed Williams to a pub he frequented with his friends. Near the room where they met, I sat in a dim corner and listened intently as Williams spoke—of the danger and necessity of seeking the psalmist's pure and acceptable words, of what he called the co-inherence of the living and the dead, of the prevailing pattern of love, of Dante—but he said nothing about the book, and I retreated into the night.

A few years later, in 1943, Williams published a book on Dante called *The Figure of Beatrice*. In it he wrote about the image that Dante presents of Beatrice, who points to the way of ascent or affirmation—the way from the awful distinction, the Crucifixion, to the awful likeness, the Resurrection. Williams wrote of the comprehensiveness

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of the Dantean literary record, which encompasses experience, the environment of that experience, and its expression—the person, the place, and the poem. He wrote nothing explicitly about the secret Oxford Dante, but without his time with it he could not have written what he had.

I was present when Williams died, abruptly and prematurely, two year later. He had written many books, and approached greatness, but he had not written *the* book and I wanted to see what the end of his life would be without it—and if the Oxford Dante would require anything more from me. In his end there was nothing for me to divine, and I was left considering my own fate and the fate of the book I kept.

My encounter with Williams marked the beginning of my own work. Like Dante, I began with the physical dimension of meaning. Unlike Dante, who in innocence glimpsed the glorious Beatrice, my secret copy of Dante was at the base of my ladder of love. In the beginning, it seemed my response to it should be another kind of book. For years I struggled to write a book that was a worthy antecedent to the secret Dante. I will not waste time discussing my futile tour of hell at the peripheries of Oxford and of virtue. I consigned all the books of babble I created during that time to an earthly inferno.

As I approached the middle of my life, and found my duller and determinable passions diminished and my greater and unnamed ones achingly insatiate, I experienced an epiphany. One dark night, in the basement of an old den of iniquity, I saw in the woman slumbering beside me something more than flesh. In the arc and texture of this stranger's shoulder, there was a shock of something more—something spiritual contained in proximate flesh. Something akin to it awoke within me. It was then that I began to see the second sense of Beatrice. I knew, of course, that the literal sense of the *Commedia* was not sufficient to understand it. But I had wrongly read Dante's book as a reverse incarnation. Dante had not sought to return the Word to flesh, through vellum, but to inscriptively reincarnate it to rerelease the spirit through the letter.

I began to think the form of my work should also be spiritual, but that, too, was beyond me. In desperation, I endeavored to move toward Dante's third sense, the moral. I discovered that small and erratic acts of vigilantism, such as sabotaging the work of lazy scholars or helping degenerate students fall, were more productive than anything I could accomplish with words. Dante's splendor increasingly mocked my squalor.

III.

Thirty years after I had shared the book with Williams, I showed the Oxford Dante to the aging Argentine author Jorge Luis Borges. He also, through sources unknown, came directly to me to see the book. I knew that I was nearing the end of my life. Dante, near the end of his, finished the *Paradiso* and in it expressed his hope to return to the octagonal font of his baptism and naming: the Baptistery of St. John, the physical and spiritual core of Florence. Dante had been ready to face that font, dominated by a scene of the Last Judgment, but I was not ready to face my end. I needed to conclude my work, a work that had begun with Williams.

Borges had begun his work on Dante soon after Williams's had abruptly ended. I found Borges's insights on Dante precise and prescient, so for a second time I brought the Oxford Dante into Sir Humfrey's Reading Room. Again, I found an expectant reader pondering his surroundings. Borges was blind, and he seemed to be sniffing out rather than looking for the finite and infinite connections surrounding him. To Borges, who had been given his national library and blindness at the same time, the smells of books and people in time must have been familiar. But as I approached with this book, he seemed to sense something new. He raised his open hands in anticipation. I handed the book to him and withdrew to study him studying it.

Borges's communion with the book was as intense as Williams's, but I could not determine what he could discover through his blind contemplation of it. He looked and touched, taking time with each leaf. And he, too, allowed the final image to hold him for a long time. He was still contemplating it when his time was up. I took the book from him, he thanked me warmly, and he left with the English lecturer who was his guide.

Borges also promised discretion, but I followed him into a pub near the library. I listened from a nearby table as he told his guide and others who joined him how reading Dante was like beholding an immense, serene, labyrinthine painting—one in an exotic library, of course, he added with a smile—a painting that contains everything that was, is, and shall be. Others began to respond to Borges's words while he sat silent, a sad smile settling on his seemingly serene face. Borges eventually rejoined the conversation around him, turning the discussion to the fragmentary books of other great poets. I finished my pint, slipped out into the narrow alley fronting the pub, and hurried home.

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In 1982, Borges published a series of essays on Dante, *Nuere ensayos dantescos*, which showed the influence of the secret Dante. A few years later, after finding love as the antidote to his solipsistic fear of becoming a mere word, he abruptly moved with his lover to Geneva, where early in life he had attended the school established by Jean Calvin. At his end, Borges asked for and received visits from a Roman Catholic priest and a Reformed pastor. I was there, too, for our ends were linked.

At Borges's funeral the pastor, Edouard de Montmollin, read the opening verses of the Gospel of John. He preached about the Word—the true Word Borges had sought, the one Word that was ultimate and complete. Man, de Montmollin warned, cannot on his own discover that

Word; on his own, he becomes lost in a labyrinth. What John's Gospel declares is that the Word comes to man.

As I stood listening in that Genevan graveyard, I closed my eyes and tried to see what Dante saw at the end in the light of eternity:

In its depth I saw contained,
by love into a single volume bound,
the leaves scattered through the universe.

And, beyond that, the circular, tripartite form of the Godhead, which left Dante in a moving state of love. In that vision, Dante's book realizes a unity that comes as close as possible to God's book of creation and reconciliation. This is perhaps most clearly manifested in the copy I have hidden for a lifetime, and the awareness that I have kept this Revelation from others makes me ill.

Inspired by Dante both Williams, the poet and publisher, and Borges, the poet and librarian, had hoped to write the unwritable book, a book that represented a unity analogous to the book of God—a book that would make reality more real and right. But each, before his end, in the end could only write books that pointed to what such a complete book would be: a pattern of transformative reconciliation.

I, too, wanted to write *the* book. I, too, attempted to follow the tripartite path this trinity of poets had taken through education, spiritual enlightenment, and entering a vision of love. I, however, was neither a poet nor an author—in the literal sense. I found myself in a different literary role. This role had been suggested by John Donne, who wrote that when one dies a chapter is translated into a better language. Every chapter must be so translated. God employs many and diverse translators, and by his hand all our scattered leaves, in

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every translation, will be bound together in his Book. This was the end and Book Dante saw, represented, and joined himself. Williams and Borges saw it, too, in different degrees. In a similar way, each was translated into the Book. And I was there as the keeper of its earthly manifestation and mediator of its severe grace.

After Borges's funeral, I wandered for hours through the streets of Geneva and finally found myself in an ancient garden. Through the garden, thoroughly shaded by trees, ran the purest of rivers. A melody drifted along the river, beckoning, and I followed it. When, after some lost moments, I looked up, I saw on the other side of the river a vision from the Apocalypse. There was, it seemed, a door. And through the door I saw a great throne, from which came a blinding white light that flashed out and broke into the full spectrum of light. All of this I had seen before, and I knew what was coming. The earth beneath me shook; I fell to my knees. Unable to turn away from the terrible light, everything visible was lost to me except what appeared to be leaves of a scroll, unrolling, enveloping me.

I was surprised to wake in the world—still in the park—with a large man standing over me. It was Reverend de Montmollin, holding a small book in one hand and reaching out to me with the other. I took the hand being offered to me and, to the surprise of both of us, I also took the book in the other hand. Recovering more quickly than I, de Montmollin told me in rough English to take and eat it. I knew he wanted to say more, but fearing prophecy, condemnation, and love, I hurried away with his book in my hand and fled—the park, the city, the continent—and retreated to my small cell in Oxford. After my return, I discovered that my work had reached its end.

I, who have spent my whole life with books and the greatest book of man, have never written a book. Instead, I write these leaves to be kept in Oxford's secret archives as a record of what I have done and not done. I hope my translations have served the Book. Now that my own translation nears completion, and the Oxford Dante is destined to become lost again, it seemed necessary to reveal how it bound together these three poets and me for the sake of a justifying, redemptive, and alien love.