

MEETING DANTE

a short excerpt



My mother's copy of Dante's *Commedia* sat for years on a shelf collecting dust – an all-too-common fate, since the English don't read much Dante, he's rarely taught in school, and is known to many only by name and a vague reputation for inventing circles of Hell filled with the torments of the damned. The hefty volume of four hundred and eighteen pages was bound in olive-green cloth, the translation attributed to three Victorian scholars: Carlyle, Okey and Wicksteed. Tissue-thin pages were printed in parallel translation, Italian on the left and English - plus footnotes - on the right. 'Date of original publication', reads the publishing data, '1472. First publication of present texts 1899-1901. First published in this edition 1933'.

Somehow or other I had inherited her *Divine Comedy*. I don't remember choosing it from our houseful of books after they died. Maybe it was simply that none of my sisters wanted it, the toss-up being whether to give it to a charity shop. But something made me claim it. All I knew was, it was one of the great works of world literature, and one day I ought to read it but probably never would - although I'd been

a bookworm as a child, my favourite place curled up on my bed with the family spaniel, a library book and as much chocolate as pocket money would allow. I liked being alone with Dinah of the silky ears. I grew to love the imagined places that reading opened up.

On the back flyleaf of that heavy volume was a memo written in pencil, in my mother's handwriting: 'La Vita Nuova'. There was a Penguin edition of *The New Life* on my father's study shelves (how the music is lost in English) and I must have said to my sisters I'd have this too if nobody else wanted it. From time to time I would have stirrings of 'I ought to read Dante' and had a go at the *Commedia*, but never got beyond a couple of pages. The translation was archaic, the size of the work daunting. I would glance at the Italian and wish I understood it because it looked so pretty, and when I read a few lines aloud it sounded like music.

Eventually it was that edition of the *Vita Nuova*, slim paperback of just a hundred pages, that would convince me that not only was Dante readable, he was unputdownable. It opened a door into Dante's world and I entered, ready at last to embark on one of the great love stories in literature. In the opening lines Dante describes how his life changed when as a young boy of nine he met Beatrice. From that time forward, 'Love ruled over my soul,' and a new life began. He was called to his vocation by 'words which my heart spoke to me with the tongue of love'. The book ends with Beatrice's premature death, and a promise to 'say of her what was never said of any other woman, who is for all ages blessed.' She is ingrained in his heart, soul and memory. *La Vita Nuova* is a book of memory, and *memory*, wrote the poet Michael Hamburger, *is the darkroom of the imagination*.

Freud teaches that memories are revived when they become attached to new experiences, they transfer their energy to them. Memory of a loved one, he continues, can be healed by transforming the experience of loss: through the process of self-knowledge, acceptance – and, Dante might add, grace – understanding the loss in a different way brings it to new life and makes it 'unlost'. But does anyone ever truly

recover from lost love? For some, it's easier to die than to remember: Romeo and Juliet, Tristan and Isolde.... Others may choose to let the memory die, not acknowledging its ongoing life in the darkroom. Or those brave enough, like Dante, will make an Odyssey in search of meaning.

Dante's journey through the three worlds of Hell, Purgatory and Heaven was impelled by memory of love for a woman who inspired his life's vision, beloved above all others. Beatrice. During this journey he had to drink of Lethe, the river of oblivion, the idea being that the road to recovery and transformation springs paradoxically from forgetting: forgetting the experience of beauty in order to develop it before exposure to the light. Processing pain in the darkroom. Memories can never be lost, says Freud, they are an underground mycelium of the mind: and by descending into that underworld we awaken ghosts to a new life.

Travelling alone to Italy one summer in an attempt to heal in the darkroom of oblivion, to recover from love betrayed (neither the first nor the last in the history of the world, but if the great love of your life betrays that love, how can you forget?) I came to Montefalco....