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The Starry Sphere

by MaryPat Campbell

“Are you reading anything interesting these days?”

“Oh, just the third book of Dante’s Divine Comedy.”

I’m no scholar and am wary of showing my serious enjoyment of such reading. It took me all last winter to get through Hell, followed by the Spring and Summer to trek up the mountain through Purgatory. Now I’m faced with the daunting prospect of cloudless Paradise. What on earth do you say about Paradise?

I wondered how Dante would tackle it, and it soon became clear even to me, he had his problems. Although his language sounds exotic and convincing in Italian, we can read the English translations only. He occasionally seems disoriented, longing for the past, resisting the future, going back and forth from an ever more perfect Paradise to the familiar and troubled, warlike citizens of his own city, as if to earth himself in his everyday political and religious life in Florence. Then he comes back again to resume his dreamlike uphill journey to what he calls ‘the starry sphere’.

I’m impressed with the way Virgil starts out as Dante’s beloved guide and mentor through the first two volumes. Gradually, Dante grows into himself and becomes more confident, while Virgil steps back and quietly waves him through. I missed Virgil when he turned back at the threshold of Paradise and left Dante to go the last part of his journey, alone to begin with, and then with his beloved, if somewhat superior Beatrice.

I wondered if Dante missed him too, and thought of a few Virgil's I've had in my own life. Stepping over the threshold is a daunting prospect, whether it's at the entrance to heaven's door, or into middle age, or from one state of mind into another.

My translation has the Italian on the left hand side of the page, with the English translation on the right. I sometimes read the Italian phrases out loud, kidding myself it sounds foreign and wonderful although I don't know what I'm reading until I switch to the English on the right hand page.

I spoke to a colleague the other day who went to a posh boarding school when she was young. She was expected to be the epitome of model behaviour and reliability. She said it was worse than Purgatory. Eventually she couldn't stand it anymore and rebelled, hanging out with the bad boys.

The last straw came when they took her special prefect's badge away. Everyone was disappointed in her, but worst of all was her own disappointment in herself.

"Dreams are what you wake up from", she told me sounding unhappy and resigned, "didn't Dante say that?"

She's been wearing her prefect badge ever since.