Cultural Commentary: "If You Like the Book, You'll Love the Tour": Seeing Italy with Dante

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“If You Liked the Book, You’ll Love the Tour”: Seeing Italy with Dante

by Barbara Apstein

Fans of Jane Austen journey to Derbyshire to inhabit, for a few days, the landscapes and villages where Mr. Darcy met Elizabeth Bennet. Admirers of Dan Brown’s *Angels and Demons* explore St. Peter’s Basilica and search Rosslyn Chapel in Scotland for secret signs that might direct them to the Holy Grail. Visiting the places described in favorite books is a way of extending the pleasure of reading, of delving more deeply into an author’s world.

A literary tour focusing on Dante involves some problems. Because the *Divine Comedy* was completed almost 700 years ago, very little remains of the Italy Dante knew. In addition, Dante’s account of his journey through the three realms of the Christian afterlife—hell, purgatory and paradise—can be dauntingly difficult to read. In order to understand what is going on, readers must continually interrupt the narrative flow to consult the footnotes. We must acquaint ourselves with details of 14th century Tuscan political intrigue and learn the identities of the participants, look up biblical and mythological allusions, understand the rudiments of medieval astronomy and philosophy, and note the verbal echoes of Virgil, Lucan and Statius—all of which Dante’s early readers would no doubt have grasped on their own. Virginia Woolf, who was willing to make the necessary investment of time, noted in her diary on September 24, 1930: “I am reading Dante…I take a week over one canto. No hurry.” Since the *Comedy* consists of 100 cantos, reading it at the rate Woolf suggests would take almost two years!

A trip to Italy provides a good opportunity for the beginning reader of Dante to bring some of the footnotes to life and gain a deeper understanding of the artistry of his unique poem. Dante’s remarkable visual memory and his intimate knowledge of Italian geography emerge in many parts of the *Comedy* in precise and occasionally stunning ways.

For the tourist who wants to learn about Dante, Florence, the poet’s hometown, is a logical starting point. During the Middle Ages, as we learn from the *Comedy*, the city was divided into warring factions, somewhat like contemporary Iraq, and Dante, ultimately finding himself on the losing side, was banished for life. His love for his native city and the anguish of his 20-year exile are central to the autobiographical narrative that runs through the *Comedy*.

The tourist’s challenge is to locate what remains of the Florence Dante knew in a city where almost all the famous buildings—the Uffizi Gallery, the Pitti and the other Renaissance palaces, the Duomo (cathedral), even Giotto’s campanile (bell tower)—were constructed after the poet’s death. The Medici, Michelangelo—they all came later.

The Dante-oriented visitor can get some sense of medieval Florence in the district around Via Dante Alighieri, a neighborhood of winding streets and narrow alleys. The Casa di Dante, which houses documents relating to the poet’s life and that of his family, who were members of the ancient Florentine aristocracy, was closed during my visit—tourists in Italy get used to finding the sites they’d planned to see closed for cleaning, renovations, or unspecified reasons. Just down the street, however, the tiny parish church of St. Margherita was open; it contains the tombs of members of the Portinari family including that of Beatrice, the young woman whose divine intervention, as recounted in the *Divine Comedy*, initiated Dante’s journey.

The medieval town was small—just a few blocks from Via Dante Alighieri to the center, the Ponte Vecchio, Duomo, and Baptistry. The San Giovanni Baptistery, with its white and green marble facade and the stunning mosaics within, is one of the few tourist attractions remaining that Dante mentions in his poem (he calls it “my beautiful Saint John”) and that appears today much as it would have in 1300. Ghiberti’s famous bronze doors had not yet been created. The Baptistery faced the relatively modest Romanesque church of St. Reparata, which was torn down and replaced by the black and white striped Duomo familiar to contemporary visitors.

Although it is hard to imagine the world Dante inhabited amid the congested, tourist-saturated streets of today’s Florence, the text of the *Comedy* is full of vivid and precise descriptions of many places in Italy that have changed very little. To make the unknown—the
physical realities of hell, purgatory and heaven as he imagined them—fully available to his readers, and to convey the hardship of the journey itself, Dante frequently draws on familiar landscapes. His descriptions of these places characteristically take the form of extended (sometimes called epic) similes: they begin with “Like” (in Italian, “Come” or “Qual è”) and conclude with “so” or “such was” (“così” or “cotal”). Thus, the desolate, rock-strewn slope down which Dante and Virgil, his guide, must climb to enter the seventh circle, where the Violent against their Neighbors are punished (Inferno XII) is like Li Slavini di Marco (the Slides of Mark), a landslide of fallen rocks on the bank of the river Adige, near the town of Rovereto. The rough and tangled thickets of the wood of the suicides (Inferno XIII) remind Dante of the area between the river Cecina in the Maremma and the town of Corneto, a district of marsh and forest in southern Tuscany. As Dante and Virgil complete their tour of the Violent, they hear the deafening roar of a waterfall, which is like the cataract that “thunders [the Italian verb, “rimbomba,” sounds thunderous] from the mountain in a single leap” above the monastery at San Benedetto delle Alpi about 25 miles from Florence (Inferno XVI). “You may think I’m making all this up” Dante seems to be telling his reader, “but it really happened.”

Some of the places Dante describes in these extended similes are tourist attractions, which helps explain why they have been preserved. One such site is the walled town of Montereggione (or Monteriggione), situated on a hill eight miles north of Siena. Its surrounding wall and eleven of its original fourteen square towers are intact and look much as they did in the 14th century. A steep path leads up to the town’s main gate. What Dante, even with his vivid imagination, could not have foreseen, is the large parking lot and the cafes and gift shops that surround the main square.

After he has descended to the ninth and last circle, the central pit of hell, Dante discerns, through the dark air, what appear to be the high towers of a city. Virgil informs him that they are not towers, but giants, encased in the pit from the navel downward, and Dante, drawing nearer, writes, “my error fled from me, my terror grew”

For as, on its round wall, Montereggione is crowned with towers, so there towered here, above the bank that runs around the pit, with half their bulk, the terrifying giants, whom Jove still menaces from Heaven when he sends his bolts of thunder down upon them.

—(Inferno XXXI, lines 40-45; Mandelbaum translation)
Dante’s giants originate in the Bible and in Greek mythology; they include Nimrod, King of Babylon, who was believed in the Middle Ages to have ordered the construction of the Tower of Babel, and the Greek Ephialtes and Briareus, two giants who attacked Mount Olympus. Driving or bicycling toward Montereggione today, with this passage in mind, it is easy to imagine the terror one might feel if these towers suddenly began to move and were revealed to be gigantic living creatures.

Another Dante simile refers to an even more popular tourist attraction, the Ponte degli Angeli (Bridge of Angels) in Rome. In the 8th circle, among the Fraudulent, Dante sees two lines of sinners, the seducers and pandurers, lashed by horned demons with enormous whips, moving in opposite directions. He helps us visualize this traffic pattern by comparing it to a scene he may well have witnessed:

…in the year of Jubilee, the Romans, confronted by great crowds, contrived a plan that let the people pass across the bridge, for to one side went all who had their eyes upon the Castle, heading toward St. Peter’s, and to the other, those who faced the Mount.

—(Inferno XVIII, lines 28-33)

The Ponte degli Angeli dates back to the era of the Emperor Hadrian (156 A.D.); it crosses the Tiber in front of “the Castle”—the Castel Sant’Angelo—which Hadrian originally had built as a mausoleum and which became a fortress in the Middle Ages. The bridge is now adorned with statues of twelve baroque angels, the work of Bernini added three centuries later (1667), but basically both bridge and castle are much as they would have appeared around 1300.

The event Dante refers to, the papal Jubilee, was instituted by Pope Boniface VIII to celebrate the 1300th anniversary of Christ’s birth. Boniface offered to pardon the sins of all who had confessed and were truly penitent, and who would, during the course of the year, visit continuously for 30 days the churches of St. Peter and St. Paul. (For non-Romans, only 15 days of continuous visits were required). This was an offer that few could refuse, and hundreds of thousands of people from all over Europe converged on Rome and trekked back and forth between the two churches. To go from St. Peter’s Basilica (then a much smaller and less impressive building than the present one, which was not constructed until the Renaissance) to St. Paul’s, 3 miles away, requires crossing the Tiber, and the volume of traffic was so great, according to contemporary accounts, that the bridge was divided by a barrier, with those going toward the Vatican on one side and those returning on the other. The idea of a divided highway was clearly novel enough in the early 14th century for Dante to comment on it. Standing on the bridge today, engulfed by tourists, it is easy to imagine even greater numbers crossing back and forth, confident that their sins would be forgiven.

While Dante’s comparison shows how the two files of sinners looked, his simile also raises questions in the reader’s mind. What did Dante think of Boniface’s Jubilee? Did he believe that traveling back and forth between two churches every day for two weeks could guarantee salvation? The ironically paralleled traffic patterns of the living salvation-seekers on the bridge
with those of the damned sinners below is too obvious to miss. Pope Boniface VIII is one of the Comedy’s villains; in fact, in the circle of hell where the Simoniacs (sellers of church offices) are punished, Dante the pilgrim is mistaken for Boniface himself by one of his papal predecessors, Pope Nicholas III.

Another suggestive simile evokes the Church of San Miniato al Monte in Florence. To convey the steepness and narrowness of the stairs leading from the first terrace of the mountain of Purgatory, the level of the Proud, to the second, that of the Envious, he explains:

As on the right, when one ascends the hill where—over Rubaconte’s bridge—there stands the church that dominates the well-ruled city, the daring slope of the ascent is broken by steps that were constructed in an age when record books and measures could be trusted, so was the slope that plummets there so steeply down from the other ring made easier; but on this side and that, high rock encroaches.

—(Purgatory XII, lines 100-108)

The Romanesque church of San Miniato al Monte, situated on a hill across the Arno from Florence’s historic center, provides a picture-postcard view of the city. The bridge leading most directly to the church, the Rubaconte in Dante’s time, is now called Ponte alle Grazie. The narrow staircase he refers to does not exist today; instead, there is a wide flight of steps constructed in the 19th century. But the church’s facade—its 12th century west front, with geometric motifs in green and white marble—is the same one Dante would have seen.

He would also recognize the inlaid floor and most of the frescoes and mosaics inside, although modern tourists have the advantage in viewing them: as in the chapels of other dimly lit churches, visitors can turn on an electric light for a few minutes by inserting a euro. [Dante wouldn’t, however, have seen a Volvo filled with white-robed Cistercian monks pull up in front of the church, as it did during my visit.] This passage is heavily ironic: Florence was, in Dante’s view, anything but “well ruled.” The words “record books and measures” allude to two famous scandals involving graft and corruption. In one of these, the Commissioner of Salt, a member of the noble Chiaramonte family in charge of the salt monopoly, greatly profited from selling with a dishonest measure. It is one of Dante’s many bitter denunciations of contemporary Florence, mingled with longing for an earlier, purer, time. This recurring motif is finally given full expression when Dante meets his ancestor, Cacciaguida, in paradise and is told of the decline of Florence and its noble families—the Chiaramonte included—who had once been respected.

Visiting just a few of the places described in the Divine Comedy provides the reader with new points of entry into this endlessly fascinating poem. Drawn back to Dante’s text, we re-read the footnotes, this time more slowly. We begin to see how artfully the many threads of this poem are woven into a single pattern, and we move toward a firmer grasp of the essential unity of Dante’s world, what the scholar Erich Auerbach called his “figural point of view,” through which all earthly phenomena are revealed as part of the divine plan.

Nothing is haphazard or accidental. Every soul Dante encounters has a specified place in God’s order, and the city of Florence, like all earthly creations, is ever-changing, subject to the ups and downs of Fortune. The visible foreshadows the invisible; the landscapes of earth prefigure the geography of the afterlife. The towers of a walled town, crowds of people walking across a bridge, the steep, narrow path leading to a church—Dante’s world is a forest of symbols waiting to be entered by the reader-tourist.

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