

# Dante and His Influence in Australia

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Figure 1: Dante Alighieri among the Poets, *The Parnassus*, Stanza della Segnatura

## Dedication

In these difficult days our thoughts are turned to family and friends in Italy who are currently facing the worst ravages of the COVID-19 pandemic. This presentation is dedicated to the doctors, nurses and other health professionals who each day are putting themselves at risk to save human life. I would particularly like to pay tribute to those who have lost their lives in this struggle. Among them, Dr Li Wenliang who put human life first; and, in Italy, the doctors Luigi Ablondi, Giuseppe Finzi, Antonino Buttafuoco, Giuseppe Lanati, Luigi Frusciante, Franco Galli, Roberto Stella, Chiara Filipponi, Giuseppe Borghi, Raffaele Giura, Carlo Zavaritt, Mario Giovita, Ivano Vezzulli, Massimo Borghese, Francesco Foltrani, Andrea Carli, Bruna Gavalotti and Piero Lucarelli.<sup>1</sup> My condolences to those who have lost loved ones everywhere in the world.

**Released 25 March 2020**

A recording of a shortened version of this paper was prepared for the Dante Alighieri Society Canberra to mark the first national Dante Day. The recording and paper were finalised on 22 March.

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<sup>1</sup> Elenco dei Medici caduti nel corso dell-epidemia di Covid-19  
<https://portale.fnomceo.it/elenco-dei-medici-caduti-nel-corso-dellepidemia-di-covid-19/>  
accessed 21 March 2020

I would also like express my warm appreciation and thanks to the Dante Alighieri Society of Canberra for hosting this presentation to mark the first National Dante Day, and the Italian government for this year instituting this national and world observation.

Finally I acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land on which this presentation is recorded and pay my respects to their elders, past, present and emerging.

## Doorstep

We have been talking and writing about Dante for centuries. He is an inexhaustible source of conversation. But often those conversations are not about Dante at all. Often, they are about us.

Dante would approve. For when he made himself the central character in “our” journey, he wasn’t really talking about himself either. He too was speaking about us. Indeed, it is his very exploration of our shared human condition which has enabled his poetry to still speak to us centuries after his medieval world disappeared.

I will approach the topic of Dante’s influence in Australia in two ways: subjective and objective; personal and universal. The personal comes from a certain foundational truth of reality as I experience it. *I am part of the Italian diaspora*. So when I speak of Dante’s influence in Australia, at a personal level we ask: how and why Dante should matter to me and also to the more than a million Australians who carry Italian heritage.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, Dante is enormously important to Italy itself and the establishment of Dantedì also calls for reflection.

But Dante is also a household name in Australia, and his work is an icon of global culture.

And so we trace an arc from the personal to the universal: from the “I” of Dante in the dark wood of Canto I of Inferno to the universals of Canto 33 of Paradiso.

Let us begin our journey.

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<sup>2</sup> In the 2016 census, 1,000,006 Australians recorded Italian ancestry. The census allowed people to record up to two ancestries. (Department of Home Affairs 2016)

## Mid-point



Figure 2: Wide Brown Land Sculpture, National Arboretum Canberra

On the hill beyond the lake we do not find ourselves in Dante’s dark wood. Instead, the hundred carefully nurtured forests of Canberra’s National Arboretum surround us. Some of its trees are from Australia, but many are from far beyond. As we appreciate their beauty, we see that these forests can symbolise Italians in Australia,<sup>3</sup> for we are part of the diverse heritage of this continent.

Yet as our eyes turn to the ridge near the Himalayan Pines, we see a rusted monument rise from the land before us.<sup>4</sup> It is timeless, as it proclaims Dorothea Mackellar’s words “*Wide Brown Land*”. She wrote them about Australia in 1907; a young woman then far from home and the verses will be familiar:

*“I love her far horizons,  
I love her jewel-sea,  
Her beauty and her terror*

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<sup>3</sup> The National Arboretum’s collection includes at least eleven trees that are found in Italy (not all of which are native). The Oriental Hornbeam, Flowering Ash, European Larch, Olive, Norway Spruce, Aleppo Pine, Stone Pine, Plane Tree, English Oak, Cork Oak and Small-leaved Lime. National Arboretum Canberra Trees and Countries.

<https://www.nationalarboretum.act.gov.au/living-collection/trees/countries-represented-by-trees-in-the-forests-and-central-valley> accessed 21 March 2020. The Canberra Discovery Garden at the Arboretum also has many herbs and vegetables at home in an Italian “orto”.

<sup>4</sup> The Sculpture is the work of Marcus Tatton and Chris Viney, 2010.

*The wide brown land for me!”*

*Amo I suoi lontani orizzonti  
amo il suo mare che è un gioiello  
la sua bellezza e il suo terrore,  
la vasta terra bruna per me !<sup>5</sup>*

Dorothea’s fierce proclamation of love reminds us that we are here and Dante is far away; in both space and time. Dorothea spoke to her fellow Australians who always praised the “home country” but could not see the blessings of the land around them.

That conversation, that exact one, is the shared patrimony of migrant families, wherever their journey began. The conversations swing back and forth between old land and new, between young and old, without final answer, until, for most, forgetting replaces words with silence.



*Figure 3: Dorothea Mackellar dressed as one of the graces and Dante Alighieri<sup>6</sup>*

Dorothea, who is our Beatrice tonight, speaks also to us, although we will journey

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<sup>5</sup> I extend my sincere thanks to Mr Faustino Troni for this translation into Italian.

<sup>6</sup> Dorothea Mackellar dressed as one of the Graces for Mrs. T.H. Kelly’s Italian Red Cross Day tableaux at the Palace Theatre, 20 June 1918. Dante Alighieri depicted in Henry Halliday in Dante and Beatrice (1882-1884)

together with Dante Alighieri. She is, of course like Dante a poet. And her migrant journey is our migrant journey. Dorothea stands in parallel to my own children, for her Scottish grandparents, like my children's grandparents, came from other lands.

Yet we may contrast Dorothea's words with those of Sir Charles Nicholson, founding Chancellor of Sydney University, who in 1860 wrote:

*"I still sigh to see old Rome once more. Having tasted the inspiration of Italy, I cannot reconcile myself to kangaroos and gum trees ..."* (cited in, Cooper 1989, p 201)

Such contrasting visions toss us about on the winds of passion like the souls in Canto V of Inferno. Neither Dorothea nor Sir Charles are Italian Australians, yet they seem to enter our familiar conversation. Indeed, they seem to own it.

They present irreconcilable polar choices. Which of them is right? And how will our children or grandchildren navigate such questions? Does Dante Alighieri have any place in their answers? For we need also to ask a more specific question. Does Dante influence Italian Australians? As we, also, are part of Australia. Finally, what might all this mean for Aboriginal Australians?

But first, let us turn our minds to Australia more generally. And here we will find that we are in a garden of higher learning that reminds us of Dante's walled castle of poets and philosophers in Limbo.

## Australia's First Translator of Dante - Sir Samuel Griffith

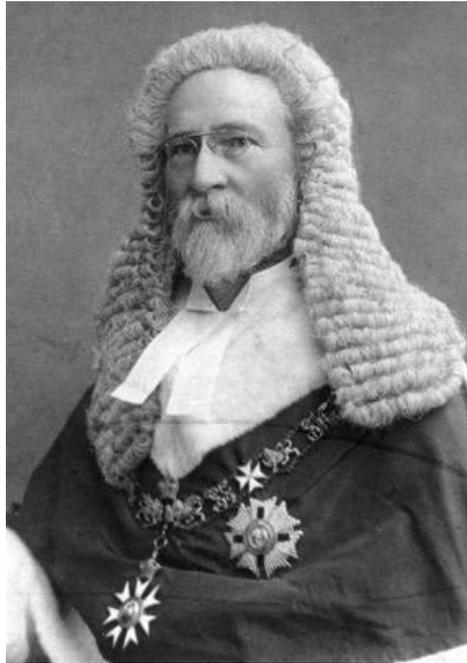


Figure 4: Chief Justice Samuel Griffith

As it happens, I'm not the first one to place Dorothea and Dante side by side. In Queensland, Burnett Heads celebrates poets and artists in its street names. There, we find Dorothea Mackellar Park and Dante Street. Nearby Shelley, Burns, Milton, Dryden Streets and others commemorate English and Scottish poets.

For Dante to appear in the asphalt of a coastal Queensland village reminds us again that Dante is one of humanity's great poets. I do not say this as a person of Italian heritage, for as Julius Braun wrote two centuries ago, the Dante the world has claimed "*... is too great to be the poet of only his nation. He belongs to the universe*". (Raffa 2015, p 568)

In such a global context, Italy and Italians, are no more than custodians of this shared cultural heritage. Dante Day is not just a day for Italy and Italians or Italian Australians. It is also for every Australian, and indeed, in the spirit of humanism of the Dante Alighieri Society, for everyone.

To explore this theme further we may note the curious fact that two prominent Australians, without apparent connection to Italy, have poured years of their lives into the task of translating Dante's *Commedia* into adequate English.

Almost as soon as Australia was born, in 1911, the first Chief Justice of the High Court of Australia, Sir Samuel Griffith, published the first Australian translation of the *Divine Comedy*.

He was, as it happens, also the first and primary drafter in 1891 of Australia's Constitution and a leading Australian jurist. His friend, also a leading Australian lawyer in 1915 jokingly asked Griffith if "he had worked on *Inferno* in Brisbane, the *Purgatorio* in Melbourne, and *Paradiso* in Sydney." (Slarke 2002, p 94)

How subtle is the interconnection of is this world that in one life, where we would never expect it, we find both origins of Italy and Australia.

Let us read Sir Samuel's translation of Dante's judge of the dead, as he was a judge himself.

*There Minos stands and snarls with dreadful aspect :  
Of sins he makes an inquest at the entrance,  
Judges, and as he girdles so despatches.  
I mean that when there comes the soul ill-fated  
Into his presence all things are acknowledged ;  
And that discerner sure of all transgressions  
Seeth what place in hell is its fit mansion.  
He with his tail so many times doth gird him  
As are the stages down he will to send it.  
Always in front of him a throng is standing :  
They go, each one in turn, unto the judgement ;  
They speak; they hear; and then they are hurled downward. (Alighieri 1911)*

In 1914 Sir William went on to publish a second translation of Dante's verses, this time a translation of *Vita Nuova*. (Alighieri 1914)

### **Australia's Second Translator of Dante - Clive James**

It took a century and two years more, before another Australian attempted what Sir Samuel had done.<sup>7</sup> The second Australian translator of the *Commedia* was Clive James. A man of our own times, he was a poet and writer himself. His translation was published seven years ago.

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<sup>7</sup> Eileen Slarke in 2002 notes that Griffith was the first and only translator of the *Divine Comedy*. (Slarke 2002, p 94)

If we turn to the introduction of James' translation, we find two great loves of Clive James' life: the causes that drove him to produce his own translation of Dante.

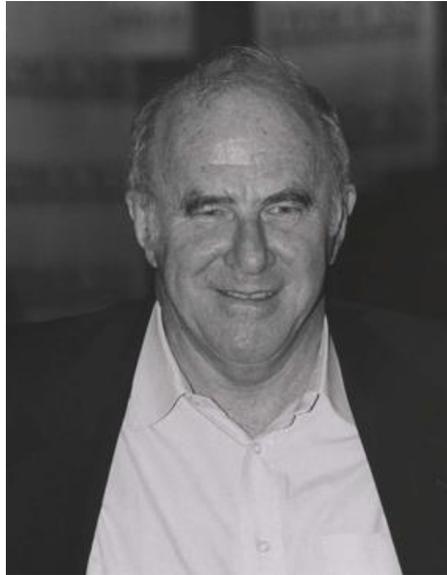


Figure 5: Clive James

The first was poetry itself. For in explaining what is wonderful about Dante, James is not concerned with Florence, nor with Guelphs and Ghibellines, much less with theology or philosophy. It is Dante's mastery of words that James loves and honours. It is the professional love of a wordsmith.

And yet, there is an entirely different love written here. James inscribes it at the very outset in the dedication to his wife: "To Prue Shaw". This dedication, he further explains. For it was not Clive James who was the Dante scholar. It was his wife who showed him the beauty of Dante. She it is, who is a noted scholar of Dante and who has devoted her life to Dante.

Every word translated by James and published when he already knew leukemia had placed him under a death sentence, was the most important work he had to complete. Dante helped him do it. The translation was his last tribute and love song for his wife: a tribute he humbly laid at her feet. Here is a love entirely worthy of Dante and Beatrice.

How strangely interconnected is our world that we find Dante here in the most intimate spaces between husband and wife.

When I last spoke to the Dante Society, we saw that Ulysses in Canto XXVI of *Inferno* was for Primo Levi, who was placed in Auschwitz to be worked to death, a precious remembered shred of his own humanity. But Dante's words have multiple meanings, and even as we admire the courage of Ulysses who led his ship beyond the pillars of Hercules and sought to reach *l'altro polo* where we stand, we see his pride and realise his journey ended in hell. He

would never again find the path home to Penelope and Ithaca. Here is how Clive James translates parts of this Canto:

*135 ... "Remember now your pedigree.  
You were not born to live as brutes. Virtue  
And knowledge are your guiding light.' I gave  
With these words such an impulse to my crew  
For enterprise that I could not, to save  
My life, have held them back. ...*

*Stars of the other pole we saw at night, ...*

*When we could see a mountain, though not soon  
Could see it clearly: distance was a mask  
That made it dim. But it was high, for sure:  
Higher than anything I'd ever seen,  
It climbed into the sky. Who could be more  
Elated than we were, had not we been  
Plunged straight away into deep sorrow, for  
The new land gave rise to a storm that struck  
Our ship's forepart. Three times the waters led  
Us in a circle. Fourth time, out of luck.  
Stern high, bow low, we wet in. Overhead  
Somebody closed the sea, and we were dead." (James 2013, p 128)*

This is also an opportune point at which to make my disclaimer that I am not an expert in Dante. It is too vast a topic unless you are a lifetime Dante scholar. We will not, like Ulysses, pridefully sail beyond the pillars, lest we too are cast into the deep. The most I can offer is a few explorations close to shore.

### **Kinsella's Goanna Judge of the Dead**

More striking than these translations, is Australian poet John Kinsella's transposition of the Divine Comedy into a twentieth-first century Perth backyard. Within this small space,

the poet enfolds life, land and small moments of our present while Dante’s ancient verses echo in the background.



*Figure 6: A racehorse goanna<sup>8</sup>*

The entire work of more than four hundred pages contains hundreds of cantos. Here we find another kind of judge of the dead: Dante’s Minos has become a goanna lizard. From Kinsella’s **Canto of Malfeasances (Minos, 5)**:

“Crepitation of leaves  
on a dead calm day  
draws me to the window

a racehorse goanna  
meticulously  
works the edges ...

With staggered sway,  
the creature: gourmet, cognoscente;  
laps up insects. Behind me,

The telephone rings. The goanna  
quickly hugs the ground,

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<sup>8</sup> Creative Commons Spikerccs / CC BY-SA (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0>)

tail slowly scanning. It can't

quite enwrap its body,  
though it flickers  
like restored film. Paranoid, ...

It seems calm. It glances  
up and studies me,  
takes a short step ...  
Goanna timing: asyndetic:

seemingly nonchalant,  
intent on food-search,  
eye-ear out: like Minos

So sure of his judgement,  
sending us down  
Where narrative is nugatory ...” (Kinsella 2008, p 294)

## Dante Studies and Dante Alighieri Societies in Australia

Of course, the Dante Alighieri Societies and the Italian diplomatic corps have long promoted Dante and Italian literature and culture. Indeed, the first Dante Alighieri Society in the English-speaking world was established in Melbourne in 1896.<sup>9</sup> (Mayne 1997, p 6, 12) This was only seven years after Giosuè Carducci founded the society in Italy in 1889. (DAS Canberra Committee, 2007). The report of the inaugural meeting is effusive in its praise.

*“Culture and beauty graced the proceedings of the founders of the Dante Society, in Melbourne<sup>10</sup> ...”*

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<sup>9</sup> Table Talk (Melbourne) 14 August 1896, p 9. However the Society lapsed as the establishment of the Society was again publicised in 1924. The Argus (Melbourne) 8 July 1924. (See also Mayne 1997, p 45)

<sup>10</sup> Table Talk (Melbourne) 14 August 1896, p 9

Further the pattern that this first Australian society established was to be repeated across Australia. It was Italy's first Consul General in Australia who acted as a catalyst for formation of the society in Melbourne. The two other major components were Australian lovers of Italian culture (many of them high society); and Italians in diaspora, who in those years were a small group. (Mayne 1997, p 28)

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Dante and Italian studies were spreading in Australia and by the era of Italian mass migration it had become ubiquitous in Australian universities. Modesto reports that "*At all of the major universities [in Australia] Dante has been taught in some form at some time.*" Further all universities have good collections on the works of Dante. Numerous conferences on Dante have been held across Australia's universities. Interest in Dante extends outside the halls of academia with the ABC broadcasting the Divine Comedy in serialised form at least twice. (Modesto 2001)

The book *Understanding Dante* published by the Western Australian Dante scholar John Scott in 2006 is one of the best introductions to the life and works of Dante available. It has been described as a "superb volume by Australia's most distinguished Dante scholar". (Glenn 2006)

In short, the Australian world of higher learning has taken Dante seriously for many decades and Australia has its own *dantisti*, who as Modesto comments have their own distinct tradition. (Modesto 2001)

## Dante in Australian Art

Artists have responded to Dante down the centuries producing countless works. A statement true which is also for Australian artists who followed the work of the artists who began to illustrate Dante in Britain in the late eighteenth century. (Pite 1994, p 39 et seq)

It is not an easy thing to represent Dante's monumental work. Australian artist Garry Shead discovered this as Ali Gripper of the Sydney Morning Herald reported. Quoting Shead, she writes:

*"... it was horrifying. Trying to illustrate a literary masterpiece like that was almost unimaginable," he says. "I was a mess. I had to work through grief, anger, fear. It was such a struggle. I just had to keep working and praying." Around him lies evidence of*

*the battle. The results of that communion – 21 paintings showing the poet's pilgrimage through hell, purgatory and heaven, guided by Beatrice and the poet Virgil – pulse with energy as they lean against the studio walls.*" (Gripper 2014)

Another even more famed Australian artist and poet, Sir Sidney Nolan wrote Australia's most difficult moments into Dante's verses. He produced two sets of thirty illustrations of *Inferno*. He based them on the incomplete set of illustrations made by Sandro Botticelli but introduced Australian themes when those ran out. He placed the Anzacs in the inferno of Gallipoli. Nolan also produced works representing Dante's Earthly Paradise in Purgatory. (Slarke 2002, p 103, 105)<sup>11</sup>

Fiona Hall is another Australian artist who has produced evocative representatives of Dante's Divine Comedy, in her twelve polaroid illustrations of Dante's work. Her work has been exhibited in NSW, Victoria and South Australia. (de Torné 1989)<sup>12</sup>

From the theatrical world we have Stephen Aitken and Zen Zen Zo Physical Theatre's presentation of *Inferno* which was undertaken in Brisbane in 2010. (RealTime 2010)

We may also recall the presence of Dante in Australia's cultural institutions. From December of 2018 in our own city, the National Gallery of Australia hosted an exhibition of works titled *Love and Desire Pre-Raphaelite Masterpieces from the Tate*.<sup>13</sup> These mid-19<sup>th</sup> century works from Britain included many by the Italian emigre Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Among them were *Paolo and Francesca da Rimini 1855*<sup>14</sup> (from *Inferno* Canto V) and *Dante's Dream at the Time of Beatrice's Death 1856*<sup>15</sup> (from Dante's *Vita Nuova*).

But almost a century before that, the National Gallery of Victoria was part of a British plan to ensure William Blake's illustrations of the *Divina Commedia* were not lost to America. It was 1918 and the collection of 102 illustrations had come up for sale in London. Britain could not afford the entire purchase. Five public museums including the Victorian Gallery

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<sup>11</sup> Gavin Fry is another Australian painter who has linked the Anzac experience with *Inferno*. (Slarke 2002, p 104)

<sup>12</sup> Another contribution that might be noted is the exhibition hosted by Eileen Slarke of the work of 30 contemporary Australian artists who interpreted Dante. The exhibition toured Australia as well as being on long term exhibition in Ravenna. (Modesto, 2001)

<sup>13</sup> National Gallery of Australia, *Love & Desire Pre-Raphaelite Masterpieces from the Tate*, <https://nga.gov.au/lovedesire/>, <https://nga.gov.au/lovedesire/tickets.cfm>

<sup>14</sup> Dante Gabrielle Rossetti, *Paolo and Francesca da Rimini 1855*  
<https://nga.gov.au/lovedesire/works.cfm?wrkirn=320925> accessed 12 March 2020

<sup>15</sup> Dante Gabrielle Rossetti, *Dante's Dream at the Time of Beatrice's Death 1856*  
<https://nga.gov.au/lovedesire/works.cfm?wrkirn=320926> accessed 12 March 2020

joined to make the purchase. Thirty-six of Blake's illustrations now have a permanent home in Australia. William Blake created his illustrations during an illness in 1824. Again ill, in 1827 and approaching death, his thoughts were of Dante. "I am too much attach'ed to Dante to think much of anything else". He was still creating illustrations for Dante's works. (National Gallery of Victoria 1953)



Figure 7: William Blake, *The Symbolic Figure of the Course of Human History*<sup>16</sup>

## Dante's Journey to l'Altro Polo

Blake's illustrations remind us that Dante's influence in Australia was not born here. It first migrated to Australia with the British colonists who came in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Sir Samuel Griffith's idea of translating Dante has a history that stretches long before his birth.<sup>17</sup>

If we look at Ford Maddox Browns representation of *The Seeds and Fruits of English Poetry* at first Italy is invisible. Yet, sometimes things hide in plain sight and this is true of the Italian thread in English literature. Forever, the words "In fair Verona" will be associated with

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<sup>16</sup> William Blake, *The Symbolic Figure of the Course of Human History* described by Virgil (1824-1827) illustration for *The Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri (*Inferno* XIV, 94-119) (held by the National Gallery of Victoria). The figure is described as having one clay foot.

<sup>17</sup> Samuel Griffith had in fact travelled to Italy in 1866-67 "to find the most beautiful in Nature, Sculpture, Painting and Architecture". He began his translation of the *Comedy* as early as 1898. (Cooper 1989)

the London's Globe Theatre and Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. As it happens, if Shakespeare's plays dealing with British history are put aside, more than half of them are set in Italy. (Roe 2011, p xiv)



Figure 8: *The Seeds and Frujits of English Poetry*, Ford Maddox Brown (pre-Raffaelite painting 1845-51)

More importantly there is nothing unusual about this outsized presence of things Italian in Elizabethan England, and indeed for near on a century from 1550-1642. (Marshall 1934, pp 5-8) As far back as Chaucer, who draws on Boccaccio, Dante and Petrarch, Italian literature influenced English literature. Indeed, Chaucer's *Monk's Tale* is a retelling of *Inferno* Canto XXXIII. (Kirkpatrick 1995, vii)

However, it was in the reign of Elizabeth I that the influence reached its height. Italian literature was admired, emulated, translated and all things Italian were "in fashion". (Marshall 1934, pp 5-8) As Marshall writes:

*"Never in the history of English drama have so many plays been laid in Italy as in Elizabethan and Jacobean times. Hardly a dramatist of note but was preoccupied with Italian psychology. For the Italian, it seemed, was a compound of the most signal virtues and vices. ... some five hundred extant plays of this period lean towards Italy, many of them being actually laid there. The dramatists who seem to have specialised in Italian characters include Shakespeare, Jonson, Marston, Torneur, "* (Marshall 1934, p 7)

In the world of poetry, novices from the "school's of Dante, Arioste, and Petrarch" "greatly polished our rude & homely mane of vulgar Poesie".<sup>18</sup> Traditional English verse gave

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<sup>18</sup> George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie*, quoted in (Fox 1997, p 29)

way to Italian poetic forms “sonnets, strambotti, sestine, canzoni and madrigals” and “iambic pentameter, ... together with *terza rima* [of course invented by Dante], *ottava rima* and ‘*versi sciolti*’ (blank verse).” (Fox 1997, pp 29-30) This period was critically formative for not only English literature but English identity and had a “crucially formative effect on English Renaissance literature.” (Fox 1997, pp 1, 16) In short, we can conclude that Italian literary DNA was from that time inseparably woven into the fabric of English literature.

The same cannot necessarily be said of Dante’s influence. For this was the period when Italians themselves had placed Dante in the shadows of Petrarch and the vernacular was less prized in the era of classical Latin revival. (Caesar 1989, p 29) In the 17<sup>th</sup> century Dante’s reputation was “at mid-winter”. (Caesar 1989, p 36) A notable exception in England itself was the poet John Milton who was thoroughly familiar with Dante and who was undoubtedly influenced by him in his poetic works such as *Paradise Lost*. (Kuhns 1898; Sills 1905)

But the words Shakespeare puts in Giulietta’s mouth in *Romeo and Juliet* come to mind: “swear not by the moon, th’ inconstant moon ... Lest that love prove likewise variable.” For the next hundred years Italy and Italians became distinctly unfashionable as England’s fortunes rose and Italy’s Renaissance was followed by centuries of colonial occupation.

France replaced Italy as the “de rigueur” model and the French communicated their own disdain of Italy to England. The English, in the second half of the seventeenth century, held Italian literature to be in poor taste. Despite this Italian architecture, art and landscape continued to be prized and wealthy Britons continued their custom of the “grand tour” which took them deep into the Italian peninsula. Yet they came now as superiors, and not just to admire ancient things.

*“In this day Englishmen seem to have become more painfully aware than ever before that they themselves, compared to most Europeans, were uniquely rich, uniquely enlightened, uniquely moral and uniquely free ... As English men gradually came to see themselves as the heirs not only of the republican virtues, but also of the imperial glories, of old Rome, their enthusiasm for Latin overflowed on all works written in that beloved language.”* (Marshall 1934, pp 12-13)

The tale is still not told. For Italy was to return to favour in England and it was ultimately the English Romantics that did it. Cracks began to appear in the 1750s. An Italian immigrant and teacher of Italian Giuseppe Baretti came to know the famous Dr. Johnson (writer of English dictionaries). Baretti, well connected, began to write books in defence of the Italian language.

Baretti, as it turned out, was a fan of Dante.

*“Englishman had almost always heard that Dante was harsh, obscure, obscene, dull, blasphemous, and too highly irregular to be classed as an epic poet at all. Now they heard an Italian speak from depths of extensive learning and feeling: “Of all our Poet Writers Dante of Alighieri is, in my opinion, the greatest.” (Marshall 1934, p 25)*

After Baretti the tide began to turn. Translations of Italian poets appeared, including Dante. With them came a new interest in Italian history. However, Baretti’s work was not done. He was also obliged to undertake a vigorous defence of the Italian character against the many calumnies made against it by previous English writers. (Marshall 1934, pp 25-85)

Increasingly the baton passed to the English themselves and in the succeeded decades Italy again became an object of admiration.

However, it was the post-Napoleonic era in which the new Italian fashion again flowed powerfully into English literature. This was of course also the era when the Australian colonies were coming into being. Italian exiles in England were a particular catalyst. Figures of the Italian literary risorgimento spent time in exile in England and communicated not only Italian culture but also Risorgimento ideals. Foscolo, Mazzini, Rossetti are among the most well-known. The Dante they taught was Dante exile, patriot, reformer, prophet of Italy. These themes resonated with English sentiment of the era. Byron’s Dante was “the poet of liberty. Persecution, exile, the dread of a foreign grave, could not shake his principles.” To Shelley “Dante was the first religious reformer ... the first awakener of entranced Europe”. (Brand 1965, p 164-167).

Two voices in particular made Dante an essential part of any cultured Briton’s repertoire: Coleridge and Ugo Foscolo. In 1818-19 Coleridge lectured on Dante and in the same years Foscolo published articles in the *Edinburgh Review*. (Pite 1994, p 1)

The Romantic age of poetry arrived in England in these years. Romantic poetry is hard to define but was immensely influence. It emphasises “feeling”, “soul” and represented a reaction to the cold rationality of the previous era. (O’Neill and Callaghan 2018, Mahoney 2011)

In the same period, after the first full translation in English of the Inferno in 1782 in 1802 the first full translation of the Comedy appeared in English. (Brand 1965, p 178) Such translations rapidly multiplied. There are today at least 93 translations of the Inferno or its three

major parts into English, this is far more than any other language.<sup>19</sup> In addition many English writers translated extracts from Dante's writings in increasing number. (Toynbee 1905, p 8 et seq) Such translations secured for Dante a "definite and even exalted place" in English literature. (Marshall 1934, p 314)

Dante indeed had a profound influence on the Romantics. It was noticed even in the early nineteenth century. "... *the modern school of poetry which has arisen in this country within the last thirty years, comes closer to the manner of Dante than any other.*" In respect of nature, metaphysics, theology, and in "*laying bare the blackest passions of the soul*", the English poets followed Dante. (Brand 1965, p 183) Shelley, in his 1840 *Defence of Poetry* cites the poet's participation in "*the eternal, the infinite, and the one*" in which "*time and place and number are not*" and gives the "*choruses of Aeschylus*", "*the Book of Job*" and "*Dante's Paradise*" as the best examples of such poetry. (Shelley 1840)

The great interest and response of Australia to Dante, which we have briefly explored, came on this long journey through the history of England literature.

In Australia, as early as 1844 we find an advertisement for sale of "rare books": a small collection of Italian literary works of Petrarch, Ariosto and Dante's *Commedia*.<sup>20</sup> The next year a lengthy biography of Dante and description of his works appeared in *The Weekly Register of Politics, Facts and Literature*.<sup>21</sup> The national celebration of Dante in Florence in 1865 was also reported in the colonial Australian press.<sup>22</sup> Longfellow's translation of the *Divine Comedy* appeared for sale in South Australia from 1867.<sup>23</sup> The speech of the Italian Consul-General Cavaliere Corte on the establishment of the Melbourne Dante Alighieri Society confirms what we have already reprised:

*"In every house one goes to, one hears quotations from Shakespeare, Byron and Milton, whose most beautiful subjects, whose best inspirations describe the glories of Italy."*<sup>24</sup>

However, a final word on influences. It was a two-way street. When we read Manzoni's *Promessi Sposi* and think about his influence in Italy and the rebirth of Italian as a living

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<sup>19</sup> The best source for a list of English translations of the *Comedy* appears to be Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English\\_translations\\_of\\_Dante%27s\\_Divine\\_Comedy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English_translations_of_Dante%27s_Divine_Comedy)

<sup>20</sup> Sydney Morning Herald, 27 April 1844

<sup>21</sup> Sydney, 22 March 1845

<sup>22</sup> Empire (Sydney), 25 July 1865

<sup>23</sup> The South Australian Advertiser, 3 December 1867, p 4

<sup>24</sup> Table Talk (Melbourne) 14 August 1896

language, we are seeing an Italian Romantic who drew on trends in England and Europe. Shakespeare and Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* were among his influences. (Manzoni 1984, pp 8 et seq)

### Dante as Symbol for Italy and Italian Australians



Figure 9: The Statute of Dante in Piazza Dante, Naples<sup>25</sup>

In launching Dante Day, the Italian Minister for Culture, Dario Franceschini said:

*“Dante è l’unità del Paese, Dante è la lingua italiana, Dante è l’idea stessa di Italia.”*  
*“Dante is the unity of the country. Dante is the Italian language. Dante is the very idea of Italy.”*

Each of these sentences could generate a book. They call us to think deeply about what Dante means.

It is in human nature that we become forgetful when life is good. But at moments of crisis, such as Italy faces today, the importance of unity is easy to see. And Dante would, I think, be happy to be seen as a symbol of unity. As his life's journey unfolded, he left behind thoughts of “Black Guelfs” and “White Guelfs” and turned his back on the revolutionaries who plotted the overthrow of the enemies who cast him out of Florence. (Reynolds 2002, pp 44-45) He looked deeper and saw disunity itself as the pandemic of the body politic. Whether in the city, across Italy or across the world he knew disunity as a blight. Thus, in *de Monarchia* he

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<sup>25</sup> Mike Steele Creative Commons image <https://www.flickr.com/photos/21022123@N04/27168313770>

taught “*perfect unity is perfect goodness*” and he lamented the divisiveness and conflicts of the human condition. (De Monarchia, 1 XV 1-3, 4, 8-10)

What, moreover, might it mean to say that “*Dante is the very idea of Italy*”? The words undoubtedly allude to Dante’s own contribution to the formation of a sense of “Italy”. But they also refer to Dante as symbol of Italy. Here the statue of Dante is not so much an image of the man as an image of Italy.

But in fairness to Dante, it is perhaps too much to ask for our exiled poet to carry within one static marble frame the entirety of Italy. In a sense, we must lend a helping hand.

Like his vision for the Italian language which he saw as a kind of mid-point of all the existing vernaculars of the Italian peninsula and Sicily, Dante’s statue will be most durable and not stand on clay feet if we understand him as marking a kind of cultural mid-point which captures all that Italy has been, is and may be.

Our vision of him can encompass far horizons in which both Guelph and Ghibelline may find a home. Dante must encapsulate the terror of Italy’s earthquakes and the beauty of her landscape and art. When we see his frozen statue, he does not stand only for high culture; Ancient Rome; Botticelli and Galileo. He stands also for the *contadina donna*, who was not as Giovanni Verga portrayed her a “*vera bestia di lavoro*” “*a veritable beast of burden*” but rather the resourceful and resilient “*madre del popolo*” “*mother of the people*”.

Dante’s Italy stretches from Michele Amari’s resurrection of Arab and Norman Sicily to Alessandro Manzoni’s *monti sorgente dell’acqua of Promessi Sposi*. Dante stands for Italy’s often bitter history and her children’s never surrendered and hard won dream of a better future. Dante must speak for the Sicilian Vespers and for the Angevin kingdom of Naples. For the people of southern Italy who drove the French from their land in 1799; and the Calabrians who fought a bitter guerrilla war against French Napoleonic occupation. For Garibaldi’s Mille and for the revolutionaries who in 1849 gathered to defend Mazzini’s Roman Republic. For Cavour and for St Francis of Assisi. For Giordano Bruno and Thomas Aquinas. For both pagan and Christian temples and shrines of the Gargano. For millennia of Christian prayers in uncounted sacred places and for Italy’s Jewish and Muslim heritage. For Dante’s “abject Italy” and for his Italy: “queen of provinces”. (Dante, Purgatorio Canto VI) For the fiercely independent city-states of the Renaissance and the unified modern Republic. For the Lombard League of the Po Valley and the long-lived Lombard realms of Southern Italy. For the Greek temples of Agrigento and the Duomo of Milan. For the Giudicati of Sardinia and the Doge of Venice. For Puglia’s Holy Roman Emperor and for Pisa’s mathematician. In Italy, Dante’s words are heard in the beautiful lyrical accents of Florence and they echo in the Neapolitan heart-deep song of

Giambattista Basile's *Pentamerone*. Dante speaks not only for Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, but also for Laura Terracina's *Chi Nemico è di Donna* (*For who is enemy to woman*). Dante stands for the Italians who left Italy and for those who remained.

For Dante now carries all those stories and many more.

## Dante in Diaspora

Paradoxically, as Italians in diaspora here in Australia, it is not obvious that Dante represents us.

There are certain general statements we can make about the post-war Italian migration. These general stories don't by any means capture every story. They do however give us the "big picture". In the post-war era Australia when most Italian Australians arrived, Australia was looking for workers, not poets.

And the new Italian Australians did indeed come, by and large, from the working classes of Italy. In the 1981 census only 2% of Italian migrants to Australia had at least a high school education. In the same era a third of Italian Australians could not read or write and many had only completed primary school. For most, their mother tongue was not Italian; but their own local dialect. Such dialects independently evolved from Latin and represent "sister" languages to Italian. Their limited formal Italian on arrival in Australia meant the migrants had to become trilingual: learning Italian and English as well as their native dialect. (See Ricatti 2018, 101, 103)

Further, when these generations left Italy, the Italy of today, with its mass media, higher living standards and universal education did not yet exist. And the moment of departure froze Italy for the Italians who arrived here.

Further, the Italians that arrived in this era were primarily from Southern Italy. Over 60% were from Calabria and Sicily alone. Most post war Italian migrants were *contadini* (agricultural workers) from Southern Italy. Even by 1991 almost 75% had no educational or vocational qualifications. 45% had left school before age 14. (Tierney 1998, Bureau of Immigration and Population Research 1991, pp 5, 20) Northern and Central Italy were also represented, but in lower percentages (25% and 8.6% respectively).<sup>26</sup> This post-war migration

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<sup>26</sup> In the years 1950-62 47.4% were from Southern Italy (not including Sicily); 8.6% from Central Italy and 25.2% from Northern Italy (predominantly the Veneto). The island accounted for 18.8% of which 18.6% were from Sicily. See (Tagliasacci, Silvia, p 68)

was the last major pulse of a vast outflow of Italians seeking better lives outside Italy. It had lasted from 1861 to 1965. Over 25,000,000 people left Italy. (Baldassar 2011)

Such broad statistics are readily recovered in personal narratives. Our parents sacrificed home and community for a better future for themselves and their children. But Dante meant very little, if anything to them. Today the second generation, like myself, who were blessed with the opportunity for education which many of our parents pressed on us, have the luxury of thinking and talking about Dante.

There was plenty of Italian culture when I was growing up, but Dante was nowhere to be found. I was blessed with many mentors who introduced me to English literature. The same was not true Italian literature. As a result, the first book I consciously read in Italian was Vicky di Villafranca's translation of J.R.R Tolkien's *Il Signore degli Anelli* (The Lord of the Rings). (Tolkien 1977) As far as Italian literature is concerned, I would not have known where to begin. And I was not in those years bothered to look, despite scouring my local library many times over for new and interesting books to read.

We see this pattern also in the history of the Dante Alighieri Society here in Canberra, which as its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary report noted:

*“At the beginning the DAS was neither seen, nor felt to be, an organisation easily accessible to a wider public because the Committee was in large part made up of eminent individuals such as academics, or those belonging to important institutions, and all the activities took place at either the university or the Italian embassy. Emeritus Prof. Molony acknowledged that such aspects inhibited wider participation of members of the Italian community, which at the time was composed mainly of workers and tradesmen.”*

The same pattern was evident in the original society in Melbourne decades earlier.<sup>27</sup> Further, Luciano Bini who was a leader in the Melbourne Dante Society commented that the Italians of the post-war era *“were ‘all contadini’, whose interests related to work rather than to intellectual pursuits.”* Indeed, the society failed to effectively reach Italian immigrants.

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<sup>27</sup> “Beneath the surface, the Società Dante [of Melbourne] was complacently content with its exclusive but all-too narrow circle of members [which it] underlined ... by maintain a restrictive annual membership fee. ... Corte conceded in 1902 that ‘The Dante Alighieri /society of Melbourne, mostly consists of English gentlemen ...’ (Mayne 1997, pp 39-40) In the post war years the society however became a home for the new post-war wave of Italian migrants, though the same ‘ivory tower’ patterns remained (Mayne 1997, p 89 et seq, 116 et seq)

Other Italian community associations and societies did. (Mayne 1997, p 117-118)

While things have changed in recent years, we can conclude that Dante's influence for most Italian Australians has been minimal.

Indeed when growing up it never occurred to me that when we were taught about the Renaissance at school, it had much to do with me at all. When we were taught of the great Roman defeat by Hannibal at the Battle of Cannae, I did not know (and did even wonder) that this world shaping event occurred less than 80 kilometres from where I was born. Almost certainly my distant relatives, Daunian allies of the Romans, fell on that battlefield. My Anglo-Australian close friend read Dante's Comedy when we were teenagers. I did not.

It was almost as if we were some other kind of Italians, to whom the greatness of Italian history did not belong.

In part, this evokes the "*questione meridionale*" in Italy. This sense of separateness was something that both northern Italian theorisation and southern Italian sentiment tended to emphasise as we can for example find in Carlo Levi's *Cristo Se Fermato a Eboli*, who speaks of "another civilisation": the timeless *contadino* civilisation of bitter struggle for survival, of magic and superstition; or the land to which Christ had refused to come (an idea Levi puts in the mouths of the local people). It is an echo of the stories which Pino Aprile's book recounts: "*Terroni. All That Has Been Done to Ensure That the Italians of the South Became 'Southerners'*".

Also it relates to a kind of colonisation of Italian history. In British eyes, as we have seen, Roman history and Italian art were but a prologue to the greatness of the British Empire. Implicitly and indeed unconsciously, this is how it was communicated in Australian schools in my era. Further, the anti-Italian racism in past decades in Australia is well documented; as are its foundations in the racist doctrines of Cesare Lombroso and Alfredo Niceforo (the last himself a southern Italian). (See, Andreoni 2003, Ricatti 2018, Chapter 4).

We may recall also the dislocation that migration can represent for the first generation of migrants, in the words of Calabrian Australians who left Italy.

*Quando unu decide di partire, è già cambiatu. Ora, né carni né pisci, sugnu.*

*"When someone decides to leave, they've already changed. Now, I am neither meat nor fish" (Marino 2019) (Though in English we might say neither fish nor fowl)*

*Non mi trovu, ancora sugnu spaesatu, e passaru cinquant'anni! Non staiu bbonu cca,*

... *e mancu dda, all'Italia, quandu tornu ogni annu.*

*I haven't really settled in, I'm still stateless, and more than fifty years have passed! I am neither comfortable at home here ... nor there, in Italy when I return every year.*

*(Marino 2019)*

So, Simone Marino speaks of double dispossession. He also notes that the story shifts for the second generation (who seek distance from the “old country”) and the third generation, for whom Italian heritage is “cool”. (Marino 2019)

For many in the first generation, like Ulysses, they have dared the straits and have seen the other pole but there will be no journey home.

Here we see five vast chasms open beyond which Dante is barely discernible for many Italian Australians. The first is the social exclusion of Italy before migration; the second is the “southern question” for Italians from the south; the third is the British colonisation of Italian literature; the fourth is the social exclusion in Australia of being “the wrong sort of Italians”; the fifth is the disruption of migration itself.

Each of these is reason enough for Italian Australians to make a claim on Dante and untangle the knot that has separated us from our own heritage. It is in a way a continuation of the journey begun by our parents in search of a better future. That Italy which they lost, must be recovered through the connections we weave with the living Italy of today.

More, Italian Australians are entitled to claim a double inheritance. As Italians, Dante is our *eredità*. As Australians, through the thread which comes through English speaking culture, we are his *heirs*. Dante here of course stands for everything Italian. As he claimed us, when he included us in the conversation he started 700 years ago, we are entitled to claim him back.

## Dante and Resistenza

There is a particular Dante who speaks to this experience. He is the Dante of *resistenza*. The word of course has a particular resonance in Italian and calls to mind the bitter lessons of World War 2 and its preceding decades but the idea can flow through Italian history. But *resistenza* is a concept which can be applied to Italian history from Dante to the twenty-first century. (Moroncini et al 2019)

Dante uses his *Inferno* (and the *Commedia* more generally) to castigate the failings of

the world around him. In this form, *resistenza* is the dream of a world better than it is. However, Dante's castigation is as much about inner life as the external world. And as much about the reform of his own inner life as the reform of ours.

The critical "mid-point" of *resistenza* in Dante's life is when the world, which had placed him high on the pedestal of power, cast him into the deep pit of exile. This was the pivot point of his life. His friend Guido Cavalcanti, who Dante himself helped to send into exile, died. (Reynolds 2007, p 38, 44, 49-50) Dante could also have died (both literally and metaphorically) as he suggests in Canto II of *Inferno* when Beatrice sends Virgil to aid him in his moment of need and anguish as Dante battles death on the shores of the torrential river. (*Inferno* Canto II, 98, 107-108)

Dante's *resistenza* was surviving that moment. Not only surviving it, but drawing forth from the depths of his human spirit, a great work of literature. He remade for himself a place in the living world. This *resistenza* was also the defeat of his own demons, each of which greet him as he passes through the levels of hell. Among them his anger, his pride, thirst for vengeance and preparedness to enter into bloodshed. *Inferno* and *Purgatory* have inscribed in them the struggles of a life lived intensely.

The Dante of *resistenza* stands also for the migrant voyage; with its sacrifice of everything in the hope of a better future. It stands for moments of national crisis, such as that which now besets Italy in the COVID-19 epidemic.

## Dante and Aboriginal Australia

This presentation has been prepared in the first year in which Dantedì has been marked in Australia's national capital. This presentation addresses the question of Dante's influence in Australia. In this context, to be silent as to what Dante might mean for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians would be to contribute to the displacement that European culture has represented for Australia's first peoples. For the British colonists not only brought with them sheep dogs and drovers, they brought European culture. Italian culture and literature too arrived with the tall ships that came in the nineteenth century. (Cooper 1889, p 200)

Further as Ricatti notes, Italian Australians have also been part of the process of racist representation of Aboriginal Australians (Ricatti 2018, 68-69).

But there is also another virtually unknown and more positive interaction between

Italian and Aboriginal Australians. Space only allows brief examples.<sup>28</sup>

*Polenta and Goanna* written by Emilio Gabrielli is a fictionalised telling of the relationships and encounter between northern Italian miners and Western Desert Aboriginal women in the early twentieth century. The author migrated to Australia in 1980 and the book arose from a meeting between the author and the Italian speaking children that arose from those unions. Originally published in Italian, the work was later translated into English. (Gabrielli 2008)

More than a century earlier we find Raffaele Carboni who participated in the Eureka Stockade uprising and wrote its only eyewitness account. After his return to Italy in 1872 he published *Gilburnia*. This pantomime ballet about Gilburnia the daughter of an Aboriginal elder of the Loddon Valley, presents Aboriginal Australians as heroes and heroines. The brutality and injustice which was they faced is the central theme the play, although it also explores issues of gender. (Ricatti 2018, 60, 69)

Carboni began work on this play in the summer of 1854-55, when he was in prison in Melbourne on trial for treason. Unlike his fellow miners, who had little interest in the traditional owners of the land, Carboni had spent time with them while working as a shepherd. He devoted his time in prison, when he knew not whether he would live or die, to writing *Gilburnia*. (Carboni, 1993, 1) It is ironic that the Eureka Stockade Flag under which Carboni fought, has in recent years been seized by racists as their symbol. (King 2004)

Also noteworthy is that in 1956 the Dante Alighieri Society of Sydney hosting an exhibition of aboriginal art which had been collected in Arnhem Land by Karel Kupka.<sup>29</sup>

*“Kupka was one of the first people to recognize Aboriginal painters’ individual talents and carefully documented each painting’s provenance from the master-painters of different regions.”* (Healey 2010)

I have been unable to find any direct reference to Aboriginal Australians drawing on Dante Alighieri’s works. There is of course no obvious reason that Aboriginal Australians should at feel obliged to.

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<sup>28</sup> See discussion in Ricatti 2018 pp 68-69

<sup>29</sup> The Dante Alighieri Society presents Aboriginal art and craft: Kupka’s collection of Arnhem land and surrounding areas. Bissietta Art Galley 1956 <https://trove.nla.gov.au/work/188054613?q&versionId=204651680> See also Rothwell 2007 where it is observed that Kupka’s work opened “a new chapter in western appreciation of Aboriginal cultures”.

However their absence (if that is indeed correct), speaks also to their deliberate exclusion from “high culture”. In the Harlem Renaissance in early twentieth century America, African Americans responded to their persistent oppression and inequality by seizing “high art” as their own: producing literature and visual arts which spoke to their own reality. (Harris and Molesworth 2008, ch. 6)

In 1977, Aboriginal poet Oodgeroo Noonuccal in 1977 said:

*“[T]he only book that the Aboriginals were allowed to be literate about was the Bible ... And I thought, My God it’s time we recorded the cries of the people and gave them a book they could call their own. So I wrote **We are Going** ...”* (Davidson 2013, p219)

Of course Aboriginal Australians have created and grown their own space in the “high culture” worlds of art, music, television and film and, although lesser known, also in literature.<sup>30</sup> Although many examples could be cited, Deborah Cheetham of the Yorta Yorta people found her calling and her connection with her own people creating an Aboriginal opera in the “*Italian bel canto style*”. (Barnett 2013, Stefanovic 2017) We may note that she took the void created by dominant culture and made of it a bridge back to identity, family and community.

Christian mystical poetry which Aboriginal writers have also produced might be a place to look (Davidson 2013, ch 7)

However, the Dante of *resistenza* is perhaps the Dante that speaks most relevantly to Aboriginal Australians. Indeed, Davidson in his book, *Christian Mysticism and Australian Poetry* uses the precise word “resistance” as one description of their poetry and literature. Adam Shoemaker has said: “if there is any ‘school’ of Aboriginal poetry, it is one of social protest.” (Čerče 2017)

We hear it in the words of Nyungar Poet Alf Taylor: “... *the only thing they didn’t do to us was stick that spear in our sides and crucify us ...*” (Davidson 2013, p 220-221)

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<sup>30</sup> Only one paper I have been able to find mentions Aboriginal Australia in connection with Dante. Two points are made. The first draws a link between European perceptions of claimed Aboriginal cannibalism, “Hell’s Gate” Pass in Queensland, “educated Europeans” and Hell’s Gate cannibalism of Dante’s *Inferno* XXXIII. The second is to draw a potential parallel between one story concerning the Rainbow Serpent which plunges into a spiralling hole in the earth, reminiscent of Dante’s *Inferno*. (Slarke 2002, p 97) If it is the case that no work has been done on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices in this space, it is surely time that this is remedied.

There are many examples that could be drawn on. The following are a few verses from the powerful poem *Are You Beautiful Today* by poet Dr Romaine Moreton of the Goernpil and Bundjulong peoples.

*Are you beautiful today?  
Are your children safe and well?  
Brother, mother, sister too?  
I merely ask so you can tell.*

...

*Are you beautiful,  
Do you create great things,  
Do you read beautiful poetry,  
And all those other  
Beautiful things,  
I think I would like to too,  
You know,  
Prose, paint and draw,*

...

*Could you take  
Your broken heart,  
And paint  
The most magnificent masterpiece  
The world has ever seen,*

*Could you take  
The blood of your sister,  
And make people  
Believe  
In a  
Dream ...*

Romaine Moreton is speaking of the experience of her people, but here are echoes of Dante's story. Aboriginal Australians have every right to claim and make their own, the universal Dante who belongs to all humankind. In a sense Dante's journey to *l'altro polo* will not be complete until an Aboriginal Boccaccio steps forth and champions Dante and makes him their own. In a sense, our own journey as Italian Australians will also not be complete until that day. And here *resistenza* represents reconciliation.

### Dorothea and Dante's Love

Time does not allow a proper consideration of Dante in the context of multicultural Australia. In one sense he is part of Australia's multicultural space. But in another he is at the centre of the Western Canon. Many have argued that such a Canon excludes other voices that should be heard.

Yet to try (again) to bury Dante seems to me a fruitless and wasteful exercise. Generations before gave us it their best shot. They failed. The best response, it seems to me, is to undertake the work of widening the circle of the canon even further. Australia's cultural canon (even if it is still largely invisible) now includes the literature of many countries and cultures and similar conversations could be unfolded about them also. We live in an interconnected world which needs greater understanding across cultures; and the capability of speaking across our cultural voids. (See discussion in Aston 2017) If the story we have traversed tells us anything, it is that poetry and culture is fruitful beyond our imaginations. It can be reborn again and again as new audiences discover it in new cultural contexts and re-imagine it in their own unique way.

Well, we have perhaps passed through *inferno* and *purgatorio*; and have certainly not come to *paradiso*. And it is now time to turn our thoughts again to our Beatrice: Dorothea and her *wide brown land*.

She draws our minds to the problem of love. Both she and Dante are concerned with it. The problem or philosophy of love was a topic of intense medieval scrutiny in which Dante joins. Dante's engages with an analysis and description of the experience of love in *Vita Nuova*. In *Purgatorio*, a central theme is misdirected love which Virgil explains to Dante in Canto XVII, at the very heart of the *Commedia*. We are moulded of love which is the divine. Yet there is the love that prefers self to neighbour; power to justice; love that is too weak or too strong; love that pursues an evil object or the love that seeks revenge. (See discussion in Camacho

2019, Wilson 2011) Thus:

*amor sementa in voi d'ogne virtute  
e d'ogne operazion che merta pene (Canto XV 104-105)*

*love, the seed within you of every virtue  
and of every deed deserving punishment*

Dorothea's verses present us, therefore, with the important question of love; although she is concerned with love of country. Like her, Dante is also on the record in his public expression of love for his native Florence. (Dante, *De Vulgari Eloquentia*)

In her youth Dorothea was clear. There was a choice. Australia was the love for her but love of English "*field and coppice*" she "*could not share*". Such a view presents us with a tyrannical "or". We must love this "or" that: implicitly *be* this or that. Love this literature or that; this place or that. It seems to me an inadequate and false dichotomy.

Much later in life, in an interview, Dorothea presented a more nuanced view. Of England she said: "*There are lots of wonderful things, especially in the older parts, but they are not the same.*" It is not the sharp rejection of her youth. (ABC 1967) Further, we will note that when we hear the intensely passionate verses which she inked for Australia; drawing forth nature's beauty and horror we hear the English Romantics, and beyond them, Dante. Try as she might she could not divorce England from her world.

For my own part, Dorothea's fierce words "*land for me*" apply equally to Italy and Australia. Both are home.

If I have been away for a time, when I drive back over the hill and enter the Goulburn plain, or Ngunnawul country I feel I have come home. It is the same when my eyes first see the Capitanata Tavoliere of Puglia spread out in her beautiful green expanse and jewel-white cities. These two tablelands are not separated by space and time.

*Southern Tableland*

*and*

*Capitanata Tavoliere*

*non sono a l'altro polo.*

*Nel stesso polo, si trovano,*

*del mio cuore.  
E anche lì, il mondo intero.*

*They are not  
at the other pole.  
Look for them  
In the same pole  
of my heart  
And find there  
the world entire.*

At least that is my answer.

A further thought. Next year will be the 700<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of Dante Alighieri. As far as I know, a book length treatment of Dante's influence in Australia has yet to be written. The topics we have briefly traversed (and others that we have not) could form the chapters of such a book. It would be, perhaps, a worthy project to mark that centenary.

To close, there are no more appropriate words than those of Homer in *Inferno* Canto IV:

*Onorate l'altissimo poeta*

*Honour the poet sublime!*

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