

Religion & Philosophy

DANTE ALIGHIERI:
Divine Comedy, Divine Spirituality.
By Robert Royal. Crossroad. 246 pp.
\$16.95

You can't say we lack tools for the study of Dante (1265–1321). Every used-book store in America has a dozen translations of the *Divine Comedy*, by everyone from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Dorothy Sayers to Mark Musa and Kathryn Lindskoog. John Ciardi's complete version deserved all the prizes it won back in the 1970s, and the first volume of Robert Pinsky's colloquial translation appeared in 1995, to considerable acclaim. And then there are all the secondary works, many of them designed to help students and general readers through Dante's poem. Just in the last few months we've had Alison Milbank's historical study *Dante and the Victorians*, Marianne Shapiro's *Dante and the Knot of Body and Soul*, Marc Cogan's superb *Design in the Wax: The Structure of the Divine Comedy and Its Meaning*, and a thin paperback entitled *Dante for Beginners*.

In other words, Royal's *Dante Alighieri*, the new introduction to the *Divine Comedy* in Crossroad's "Spiritual Legacy" series, should be an entirely unnecessary book. It should be—but it isn't. That's in part because Royal does a fine job of leading readers through the long and difficult poem, but also in part because so few prior commentators seem to believe that Dante meant what he said—that the *Divine Comedy* is genuinely about the divine, that it tells the tale of the soul's journey to God. You can work your way through thousands of pages about Dante, learning all about Italian politics, Renaissance love poetry, and medieval theology, without ever discovering what Royal emphasizes: every line of the *Inferno* aims up through the *Purgatorio* to the *Paradiso* and the mystical vision of God. If we fail to see the *Divine Comedy* as spirituality, we'll never grasp it as poetry.

A Catholic scholar in Washington, D.C., Royal is president of the new Faith and Reason Institute, the author of several previous works on literature and theology, and a man with a deeply mystical sense of Dante's purpose. Interspersing effective commentary with quotations through three chapters, each a long but helpful run through Dante's cantos, Royal conveys the sense that, however interesting the lost sinners in Hell are to moderns, the saved sim-



ners in Purgatory are even more interesting, and the saints in Heaven more interesting still.

Economic considerations seem to have forced Royal to rely on Longfellow's 19th-century translation, which has an expired copyright and not much else to recommend it. Whatever Longfellow means at the end of the *Inferno* by "The Emperor of the kingdom dolorous / From his mid-breast forth issued from the ice," it's not Dante's Italian. It's not even English. Too, all introductory commentaries have to scrimp somewhere, and this new volume never clearly presents the cosmological structure of Dante's universe—the medieval sense that when we look up at the sky we are (as C. S. Lewis once described it) looking in at the heavens rather than out at space. But in nearly every other way, Royal's *Dante Alighieri* remains a model of the kind of commentary we need, a first-rate spiritual introduction to the *Divine Comedy*.

—J. Bottum