

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

On Dante

Robert Wood · Wednesday, December 6th, 2017

I used to have a poster of Andy Warhol's Double Elvis in my bedroom as a teenager. I did, of course, have other posters that were less sophisticated – Tom Carrol surfing, Tony Hawke skating – but Warhol, or Elvis, had pride of place above my bed. In the poster, Elvis stands legs akimbo, a caricature of a cowboy shooting from his hip, those same hips that shook the world, those beautiful, jiggly hips. I was, of course, enamoured with Elvis, something I had learnt from my father. When I visited Graceland some years later it was a moment of demystification, a moment when I saw his life less as an outsized growth of personality and more as a foretaste of eclectic suburbanisation. Graceland was smaller than I thought it would be, smaller than some houses of high school friends on our western edge. Elvis was, towards the end of his life, in some sort of nightmarish hell – caped and rhinestoned on stage, a spectacle of self-destructive genius boozed up, pilled out singing for nostalgic middle America in Vegas, that city of sin and pretence. But Graceland was somehow introspective, a private, eccentric mausoleum rather than garish and excessive like he was in his last days.



I did not realise that by having Warhol's poster above my bed I was participating in confining Elvis to how he was in youth, freeze framing him to be what was only a projection of a person not the real thing itself. It did not allow for growth. It was a jailhouse of the mediated that all of us knew and somehow thought to leave unchallenged. That was the trapping of the alienated celebrity who is only a worker in a culture industry as mindless as it is malicious and intentional. We do not know the face of his boss – the music mogul, the NBA owner, the film executive who pulls the strings.

If Vegas is an inferno for our time, an unnatural dystopian playground in the middle of a fragile ecosystem, then Elvis was the first poet in that particular limbo. He would be where Dante placed Homer, Horace, Ovid, Lucan singing their songs of the ghetto; heroes bowing down in Caesar's Palace of capital. Vegas is, of course, some distance from Perth, but it is also not that far – we have malls and air conditioning, smooth jazz and slot machines, babes in bikinis, boys with tanks, and we were also built on a hope of a gold rush in the desert just next door. But as a concept they are different, cast out on their own, isolated in distinctive ways. What is it though to be a poet who sees this landscape as a particular hell?

The person who responds to this question most of all is Dante. Dante's account of hell is still the account par excellence. Speaking of Dante now, I am reminded of Clive James' translation of Divine Comedy, when he writes:

Are you Virgil? Are you the spring, the well,
 The fountain and the river in full flow
 Of eloquence that sings like a seashell
 Remembering the sea and the rainbow?
 Of all who fashion verse the leading light?
 The man of honour? What am I to say?
 Through learning you by heart I learned to write.
 My love for your book turned my night to day.

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We do learn from our teachers, and just as Dante learns from Virgil, I can learn from James even if he is a washed up celebrity like Elvis was too. I can learn from him, a love of the book. It might not be about adaptation or translation in the way that he suggests, but about uncovering the spirit of Dante, which is to say coming to terms with the ‘world historic’. That is where invention is necessary rather than mere mimicry, however keenly affected and beautifully derivative. Dante after all refers back to Virgil and so we can go back further and further still until it is elephants on tortoises all the way down to the deepest circle of hell.

I have been to James’ Cambridge a few times, and I remember when I visited Girton College with a friend who is a literary critic. We snuck in for a meal at the fellows room, pretending all the while that we belonged there and hoping to hell that we would not be asked to leave or get caught not knowing about the East India Company. A Warhol painting looked down upon the table but I was reminded of the desert, of where Elvis saw out his days on land that is parched, wracked and ruined where casinos have made the place sparkle with false consciousness and rhinestones. This room was, like anywhere, a type of hell, a type of first circle where old men liked to read The Financial Times, but it seemed preferable to me than being outside eating chips paid for in pounds.

Of course, hell is subjective – people can be deluded and haunted by phantasms, spectres, ghosts even in the nicest circumstances. But there are material conditions that become tomorrow’s hells – violence and abuse be they rape or murder or massacre. We might name this ‘intergenerational trauma’. How one is resurrected is what matters, how one moves through the circles of the inferno to the purgatorio to heaven itself. That is the question and the hope. That is the resilience we need to find in the languages we have at home, that one finds even in descriptions of Satan, what one finds in the words Dante puts before us, that James has translated, that come to us as a harbinger of what is possible.

In that way, I like to think that poetry can be therapeutic. This is not to say it is a cure all and without critique. What I simply mean is that it can be good for us as a step towards becoming enlightened, less burdened, conscious of what it is to belong in places that seem unwelcome. Elvis does no harm, but he may not be the most certain guide in a journey such as ours. If we want a Dante maybe Warhol’s idea of celebrity is relevant if only because we have a popular script that life is even more hollow now. Standing on the shoulders of a cowboy, standing on the shoulders of Dante, I can see a new horizon – one with burning plastics and glittering diamonds. It might be a false vision, but I am duty bound to describe it, in the hope that in doing so we might somehow avoid the apocalypse that is required, and continue to find a home in the classics and the writing itself.

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