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The Scale of Love: Jan Kemp's *'Dante's Heaven*

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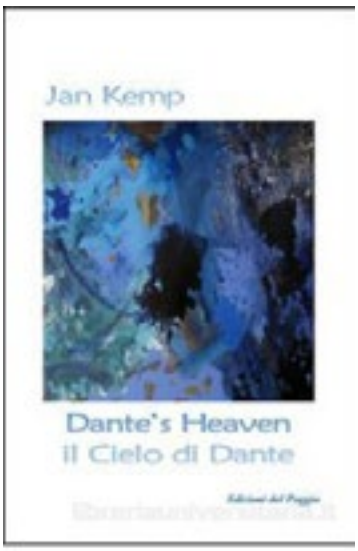

But it must once have been there
la selva oscura – the dark wood?
Yes, the one
we all take years
to come through – yes, it existed
(Kemp 2016: 118).

The New Zealand poet and thorough cosmopolite, Jan Kemp, doesn't disdain being somebody's child. In "On news of a poet's death" (88) she tells us: "I've had a few fathers since first questioning God the given". In *Dante's Heaven*, her collection of 2006, Dante Alighieri has become her parent of choice. This makes crucial Aldo Magagnino's incisive 2016 Italian translation, *Il Cielo di Dante*. Dante and with him Kemp are brought back to Italy. The operation is daunting, not least because the great Florentine has had so many different faces in English language poetry. Which one captured Kemp's imagination?

We can rule out the Dante of John Ruskin, William Morris, or the Pre-Raphaelites. For them he was a key to understanding the Middle-Ages. They stood their own age up against his and drew conclusions about how to organize society and make art. 20th Century Modernist poets looked to another Dante, which isn't Kemp's either. Distraught, as their world fell to pieces, they found solace dreaming with Dante of a complete and ordered universe. As poets, they praised the unsurpassed craftsman, but when T. S. Eliot gave Dante an edge over Shakespeare it was because Dante offered a monumental philosophic-religious system that the Elizabethan age could not provide. From within this system, Eliot could claim that Canto XXXIII of "Paradiso" was the greatest poetry ever written. It portrayed the beatific vision, the gazing upon God Himself.

Now while Jan Kemp may have embraced Dante, her purview goes beyond his Christian God. Her splendid "Beatus" (134) makes that clear. It gives substance to a Maori myth where the vision of all visions is that of a lover seeking to look on the face of her beloved. The short, sharp poem, unclouded by 13th Century mysticism, is full of the bright colour of the palpable and alive with the excitement of the situation. It reveals Kemp's ambition, which is to meld the aboriginal worldview with a classical Western one. Whether or not she succeeds in *Dante's Heaven* or whether success is possible at all, her image of Dante and Virgil rising out of Hell into a Purgatory of antipodean light won't be forgotten:

> And Dante, pilgrim, could have climbed up/
> out of the shaft, plum opposite Jerusalem, to stand/
> ankle-deep in the Pacific, on a shoal near the Kermadecs
> ("Crux Australis", 12)

> There's sky enough to dive into/
> islands in green blue water/
> to swim to.
> ("Dante's 'heaven", 16)

Kemp, like the rest of us, is a child of the Age of Identity. Our political thinkers decry it. They say that striving merely to know who we are keeps us from making the world how it ought to be. Kemp is impelled to specify her national and personal identity. Her remarkable cosmopolitan credentials may even intensify the impulse. It is all the stronger in the outgrowths of European imperialism around the world. Hardly surprising then that Kemp has glimpses of new identities for Dante and Beatrice. He is not always so truculently present: "He's evaporated / into the crowd" ("Someone kissed me", 116). Beatrice can muse, theology forgotten, perturbed like any lover: "A portrait of Dante's younger self" (112). She even has her own strategy in love: "Beatrice denies Dante her greeting" (126). She had a past that was innocent of responsibility for him. Then "she stepped thoughtless / fearless & lightly as a muse" ("Being Beatrice", 128).

Dante and love is a phrase that raises before us a grandiose flight of stairs with diverse 'amore' on each step. The last line of his 'Divine Comedy' touches the metaphysical summit when it says that it's "[God's] love that moves the sun and the other stars" (*Par*. 33. 143-145).

The second to last line is just as lofty but in the mystical heights. Dante says "My will and my desire were turned by love" (*ibid.*). In other words, he can find none to describe his beatific vision except to say that he knew his own desire was in accord with God's love.

The love evoked by the poems of *Dante's Heaven* is of a more familiar sort, grounded, always respectful and sedate: "The banal but lifted. Paradise yes, 'but earthy'" ("Eloquence", 52). It can be pious as when Kemp honours her admired dead. As a necrologist her personal touch is exquisite and always a poet's:

> what he still would have written
> I so wanted to know […]
> and it is here –
> where we must pick up the traces.
> ("On news of a poet's death", 82)

Kemp sees her role as a moral imperative, a civil, or at least a civil-artistic responsibility: "We carry the dead / and we must now be / what the lives stood for" ("Silence / speech", 102). We can speculate on how much her career as a teacher and inescapable role as representative abroad of her small country has made the poet Kemp into something of a public figure. The nature of a public figures is to be positive, and Kemp is a stranger to negativity. Evil doesn't appear in her poems. She has come through Dante's 'Inferno' unscathed. That original rogues' gallery, crowded with wrong-doing and its gruesome retribution, doesn't seem to have touched her. She applies the rod only to a rampant male or two and even then, the taps are affectionate: "No wonder she went overseas. But men / here were like that then, except for Hermes" ("Jousting", 130). As for the intimate, we have the beautiful "Love is a babe" (110). It distances the experience by evoking Beatrice but speaks very much for now. Its sense is that the poet's life is a continuous accumulation of love, citing Shakespeare's Sonnet CXV: "Love is a babe; then might I not say so / To give full growth to that which still doth grow?" "Look, look well", Jan Kemp quotes from Dante's 'Inferno' XII, 18, in her "Ming-blue fish" (60). She's exhorting a painter, but it's advice she has made her own in contemplating a world so very far from Florence and the great Florentine's dream. It's her serene world: "Everything suits, when you think of it" ("Down to the ground", 62).

Peter Byrne was born in the U.S., Chicago. He graduated from Laval University in Quebec and then from the Sorbonne in Paris where his Ph.D. thesis dealt with Félicité de Lamennais. His academic publications concern 19th century literary figures. In Italy, he taught English and Philosophy at universities in Lecce, Bari and Venice. After living for many years in Montreal, Paris, London, Sofia and Istanbul, he now resides in Lecce. He continues to contribute articles on aspects of culture to various publications. A hundred or so of his pieces can be found in the archives of Swans Commentary, an online San Francisco review.
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