A DIVINE COMEDY
Among the Danteans of Florence
By Elif Batuman

I. INFERNO

During the Dante Marathon in Florence, the entire Divine Comedy is declaimed by readers in color-coded jerseys emblazoned with their canto numbers. Readings proceed in concentric circles, with the Inferno beginning on the outskirts of the city, and Paradiso ending on the steps of the Duomo. In the spring of 2009, notwithstanding my poor Italian language skills, I participated in this marathon.

Wearing an Inferno-red 33 jersey, I read the canto in which Dante and Virgil cross the frozen floor of hell, where traitors are punished. They come across Count Ugolino and Archbishop Ruggieri: “two souls so frozen in a single hole, the head of one served as the other’s hat.” This turns out to mean that Count Ugolino is eating Archbishop Ruggieri’s head.

In real life, Ugolino and Ruggieri were collaborators in a plot to take over Pisa. Ruggieri turned on Ugolino, falsely accusing him of betraying Pisa to Florence. Ugolino and his two sons and two grandsons were locked in a tower, where they starved to death. Dante changes the sons and grandsons to four sons, all small children. When Ugolino bites his hands in chagrin, the four boys, mistaking his vexation for hunger, implore him to eat them: “You clothed us in this wretched flesh, now you strip it off.” Ugolino, making no reply, watches them die, one by one. Then he cries out for two days to their dead bodies—a classic example of the belatedness of paternal love—at which point, he tells Dante, “fasting had more power than grief.” This line has confounded scholars for centuries. Did Ugolino eat his children’s corpses? Is that why he now has to eat Ruggieri’s brains?

I first learned about the Dante Marathon from a student in a thesis-writing workshop I was teaching at Stanford. The student, an aspiring operatic soprano, was writing a thesis about vocalization in Dante. In class, she spoke in a throat-preserving, emotionless whisper. It was only much later that I heard her sing—the utterly unfamiliar voice, so pure but so knowing, unfurling like some gorgeous endless fabric out of her tiny Chinese body.

Georgia had enrolled in the marathon during a study-abroad term in Florence. Watching footage of the event on her iPhone, I was deeply impressed by the atmosphere of civic atonement. The mayor of Florence turned up and recited from the Inferno. An actor in a Dante suit was wandering around, explaining how great it was to be back home.

The Inferno opens with the poet lost in a dark wood. Being lost is a metaphor, but also Dante really was lost. He was banished from Florence in 1302 at age thirty-seven, on pain of being burned at the stake. (The written judgment doesn’t actually mention a stake; it just says “burned in the fire until he was dead.”) The poet spent the remaining nineteen years of his life wandering around Italy, never really settling down, obsessively working on his Comedy, which he completed shortly before his death in 1321.

Near the end of Paradiso, Dante wonders whether Florence, noticing that he actually wrote a pretty great poem, might someday welcome him back home to “the fair sheepfold where [he] slept as a lamb?”

With another voice then, with another fleece,
Shall I return a poet and, at the font
Where I was baptized, take the laurel crown.

Things didn’t work out that way. Dante died in Ravenna and was interred in an ancient sarcophagus: one of many to be found in that city, where Roman, Gothic, and Byzantine civilizations had left their varied rubble.

On my first evening in Florence, a friend brought me to a party hosted by a historian who had written an entire doctoral dissertation on the Dante sexcentenary of 1865. We found the historian, Mahnaz, in the middle of preparing a multicourse Persian buffet dinner for thirty guests. A small girl wearing a pink metallic costume was running circuits between the front rooms, carrying an inflatable ball about the same size as herself.

As a graduate student, I learned, Mahnaz had ridden her bike every day to the Archivio Storico del Comune to read through the documents connected to the 1865 festival. She read through thirteen file boxes encrusted with mud and algae: they had survived the 1966 flood of Florence. She read the minutes of every meeting of the Commission on the Dante Festival between February and April of 1864. During these researches, Mahnaz developed such terrible respiratory allergies that she made her landlord buy her a new bed and pillows. As it turned out, there was nothing wrong with the bed or pillows.

Mahnaz hadn’t heard about the marathon. If it had taken place in the nineteenth century, she would definitely have known about it. She said she could recognize every Dante festival of the nineteenth century. “I can look at a photograph of a nineteenth-century Dante festival and tell you, was that 1865 or 1889.”

“You’re like, ‘Oh, that’s Giuseppe? Or, ‘Oh, that’s an 1865 beard?’”

“I can tell from the weather,” Mahnaz said. She opened the oven door a crack, releasing a gust of fragrant steam.

The following morning, I went to visit Dante’s cenotaph at the Basilica of Santa Croce. As soon as you stepped out onto the street, the heat sat on your chest like a Mannerist gangway. Inside the church, hordes of furtive tourists wandered in a haphazard fashion, peering into the screens of their digital cameras. The nineteenth-century cenotaph consists of a colossal marble Dante, sitting on a colossal marble throne, gazing disconsolately at a colossal marble coffin. The coffin is flanked by the triumphant figure of Italy and the weeping Genius of Poetry. Contemporary critics derided the monument as bulky, inept—but what better technical means than this bulky ineptitude to embody the cosmic impossibility of making it up to Dante!

The marble Dante is bare-chested, with a towel-like mantle thrown over his shoulder and a turban-like laurel crown on his head. Because of his attire, because everything is white, and because the coffin is shaped a bit like a bathtub, he looks like someone who deeply wishes not to take a bath. Brought to mind of the indignities and sorrows of childhood, I recalled, too, Dante’s verses about returning to the baptismal font, so full of the visceral, uncomprehending sadness of having been sent away.

That afternoon I went to audition for the theater, a small theater a few kilometers on the other side of the Arno. I was joined by my dear friend and former graduate-school classmate Marilena. Now Marilena lived in Sicily, where she was working on a dissertation about Dante in the poetics of Osip Mandelstam. Dante was a very important poet for Mandelstam, who spent years in exile before dying in a Siberian labor camp (his last written words consist of a note to his wife asking for warmer clothes), and who often found occasion to wonder “how many ox-hide soles, how many sandals Alighieri wore out in the course of his poetic work, wandering about on the goat-paths of Italy.”

Sitting on some steps in the sunny foyer, we took turns reading our canto: Marilena, with her beautiful, severe, southern intonation, and me, with the American accent that never deserts me in any language.

“You sound scared,” the director told me.

“I am scared,” I said.

The director appeared to think over the situation. “Use your fear,” he concluded. “Use your innocence as a strength, not a weakness.”

The director had studied theater anthropology. His thesis had been on tanazismo, the culture of curing tarantula bites by dancing the tarantella. He divided up the canto between us, to read in turns. I, with my innocence, got all the lines spoken by the starving children: Gaddo’s “O father, why won’t you help me,” Anselmuccio’s “You look so strange, father! What’s wrong?” and even the unison “You clothed us in this wretched flesh, now you strip it off.”

“Emphasize ‘you,’” the director said. “You clothed us in this wretched flesh, now you strip it off.”

Jorge Luis Borges considered the invitation to this feast, delivered in the “choral manner” by all four
children at once, to be one of the very few false notes in the entire Comedy. Dante was incapable of striking such a note by accident, so he must have wanted the line to sound implausible. According to Borges, Dante wanted us to suspect that the children had said no such thing—that Ugolino had made it up. Why? Well, if he was a prospective cannibal, he might be trying “to justify (by suggestion) his future crime.”

On a side street, near the museum built on the foundations of the building in which Dante may have been born, you can visit the church where the nine-year-old poet might have caught his first glimpse of Beatrice. Some people find it strange that Dante claimed to fall in love with Beatrice when she was eight years old; they try to explain it away by saying that girls grew up faster in the old days. But I think it’s one of the most beautiful things in the Vita Nuova that Dante first sees Beatrice bundled up in her tasteful red dress, “tied with a girdle and trimmed in a manner suited to her tender age.”

Years later, after Beatrice has married a banker and died, she comes to Dante in a dream, to reproach him for thinking of other women. She comes not as the eighteen-year-old beauty he last set eyes on, but wearing her little red dress, “as young as when I first saw her.” This makes a lot of sense to me. When I’m in love, it’s always a source of great sadness to know that I will never see my beloved as a child—that I will never touch that soft hair, look into those bright eyes, or hold that little body, so bundled and dear.

Inside the tiny, stifling church, a classical-music medley was piped through invisible speakers. On the walls hung some truly terrible paintings of Dante and Beatrice, apparently of fairly recent production. Near a bulletin board with photographs of a volunteer dinner, a huge basket was overflowing with scraps of paper. These were letters to Beatrice. Marilena thought it was wrong to read Beatrice’s mail, but I couldn’t bear myself away.

“Cara Beatrice, Help me tomorrow to unfurl the whole truth to the person for whom I care very much, Walter, and to enter into his heart.”

“Cara Beatrice, My name is Agnese Bizzarri. Lately I have frequent and very upsetting quarrels with my parents. For a long time now, I have experienced no feelings of love…”

One note, scribbled in Russian, read: “Help me to meet my love—in this life.”

In the shimmering golden evening, for old times’ sake, Marilena and I walked past the house where Dostoevsky had lived while he was in Florence. Dostoevsky had an awful time in Florence. No matter where he went, he was always Dostoevsky.

On the morning of the marathon, we picked up our jerseys at a trailer near the Duomo. You were supposed to tie on the jersey over your shirt. A volunteer peered at us over her clipboard. “Didn’t anybody tell you to wear red shirts?”

We went to Zara to buy red shirts. The sportswear floor was unfathomably hot, crowded, and diabolically structured by a vast intelligence that had already looked into our souls, judged us, and caused us all to follow our own wills to our own particular miserable fates—those pursuing sleeveless leopard-print mock turtlenecks punished precisely by the pursuit of sleeveless leopard-print mock turtlenecks, while a somehow different fate, in a parallel circle of the store, awaited those in search of “nautical” shirtdresses. The air was full of elbows and the unique ringtones of a thousand cell phones. Through this turmoil we wandered, drawn to every scrap of red fabric.

An hour later, wearing, respectively, a classic red linen V-neck and a clinging red viscose tank top, Marilena and I were standing in the Piazza della Repubblica, under the full blaze of the sun, squinting at a giant television screen. It was a live broadcast of the marathon. Somewhere in the city, a very old man was reading the early cantos of the Inferno. Approving murmurs passed through the crowd: “Foà, Foà,” and, occasionally, “Foie Gras”: a nickname, I gathered, of ninety-five-year-old film star Arnoldo Foà. A few feet away from Marilena and me, the president of the University of Florence was chatting to an even more important figure identified to me as the “President of Presidents.”

The marathon was far more complicated than either of us had originally grasped. The whole Divine Comedy was going to be read not once but three times, with simultaneous readings at different places in the city, according to a spatiotemporal scheme scarcely less complex than Dante’s cosmology.

“You, Dante’s nine athletic discs,” Mendelstam called the crystalline spheres of Heaven.

Someone was talking about a famous butcher in Chianti who can recite whole cantos of the Inferno while cutting a bistecca Fiorentina from the loin of a grass-fed cow.

Heat-stricken, Marilena and I made our way through the city to the Chiostro dello Scalzo, where our reading was to take place. Frescoes by Andrea del Sarto, all in a dreamlike greenish ochre, represented scenes from the life of John the Baptist. In the desert, John was preaching to a crowd of converted Jews, their faces radiating a plantlike glow. At the back of the crowd stood the figure of Dante, unmistakable with his laurel crown, hooked nose, and grouchy expression. Whatever John was saying, it clearly had little effect on the great poet.

Soon a small group had gathered in the cloister, and del Sarto’s light reflected on their faces, too, making them seem radiant, detailed,
humane, like lovingly individuated minor characters.

We took our places at the microphones and Marilena began to read the terrible opening lines of Canto XXXIII:

He raised his mouth from his atrocious meal, that sinner, and wiped it on the hair of the very head he had been ravaging.

I took over six tercets later, when, having recounted his betrayal by Ruggieri, Ugolino goes on to describe his incarceration in the Mew with his sons:

“A little spyhole in the Mew, which now on my account is called the Tower of Hunger, where others yet shall be imprisoned, “Had through its opening shown me several moons, when, in a dreadful dream, the veil was rent, and I foresaw the future . . .”

In his dream, Ugolino sees Ruggieri leading a pack of hounds, in pursuit of a wolf and its cubs. Seem­ing to perceive “the flesh torn from their flanks by sharp incisors,” Ugo­lino wakes up—only to hear his children crying in their sleep for bread. I love this passage, partly be­cause of the several moons, the rent veil, and the vivid hunt, but mostly because of Ugolino’s summary of the scene in the tower the next morning: “Each of us was troubled by his dream.” It’s possible to glimpse in that sentence Tolstoy’s whole description of family life.

At the cloister, Marilena and I met two other readers of Inferno XXXIII: the president of the Florence airport, and the head of the city news desk at La Nazione. The two were old friends, but things weren’t always peaceful between them.

“When I decide there’s something wrong with the airport, I write it,” said the news chief, a diminutive man with olive skin, salt-and-pepper hair, and shiny pointy-toed shoes. “My passion carries me over. People think I’m a jerk.”

“It’s true! Some people really think he’s a jerk!” agreed the airport president, who was taller, with a brown beard.

“I’m like Dante. When it comes to current events, I write what I think.”

“I understand Dante, because Dante was a politician.”

“A lousy politician,” clarified the airport president.

“If there was a wrong side to choose, Dante would choose it.”

“He sided against the Pope! What can you do with someone like that?”

“As a poet, however, his instincts were unsurpassed.”

The marathon concluded with a choral reading of the last canto of Paradiso, in front of the Duomo. It took a while to cram all 650 readers, many of them schoolchildren, into four rows of bleachers, after which the festival officials thanked about a billion Italian and European sponsors. A schoolteacher in the row behind me urgently poked my back, demanding that I step down. “You’re very tall,” she complained. Pointing out that there was nowhere to step down, I offered to trade places with her. She sniffed, shook her head, and contented herself with showing her printout of Paradiso XXXIII into the back of my neck. The printouts were marked up with pauses and emphases, to make it possible for 650 people to read in unison.

Finally the director took his place, raised his hands, and brought them down in a sweeping motion. “Vergine Madre!” we all exclaimed. “Figlia del tuo figlio! Umile e alta più che creatura!” And despite the heat and the paper cut on my neck, despite the fact that, at the previous day’s rehearsal, the pauses had struck me as arbitrary and unnatural, and despite the low place accorded to both virginity and humility on my list of cultural or personal values, it was impossible not to be carried away by the beauty and mystery of the language—virgin mother! daughter of your own son!—and above all by the ghostly, high-pitched unison pronouncing, in the twilight, Dante’s deathless lines: “But now my will and my desire, like wheels revolving with an even motion, were turning with the Love that moves the sun and all the other stars.”

II. PURGATORIO

Dante put a lot of work into interfacing the afterworld with this world. Hell and Jerusalem are in the same time zone; when it’s noon in Purgatory, night has already begun to fall in Morocco. For this reason it makes a certain amount of sense that the physical location of his corpse should have become, over the centuries, an object of fierce and complex contention.

A few decades after Dante was buried in a Franciscan monastery in Ravenna, Florence began demanding the return of the body. In 1519, under pressure from Pope Leo X, Ravenna finally agreed to relinquish its favorite dead poet. But when the tomb was opened, all it contained were some bone fragments and a few withered laurel leaves. The report to Pope Leo suggested that, “as in his lifetime [Dante] journeyed in soul and in body through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise, so in death he must have been received, body and soul, into one of those realms.”

In fact, Dante’s skeleton had been removed and hidden by the Franciscans. This became known in 1865, when the monastery was prepared for the sexcentenary of his birth. At that time, a certain sacristan fell asleep in an ancient chapel adjoining the mausoleum and dreamed that a shade dressed all in red came out of the wall and identified himself as Dante. The sacristan died in May—a few days before workmen, taking down part of that same wall, discovered a wooden box embedded in the stonework. Inside the box was a human skeleton; an inscription, signed by a Franciscan friar and dated 1677, identified it as belonging to Dante. (Nobody knows where the friars kept the skeleton between 1519 and 1677.) Medical experts confirmed the identification.

After the remains had been reinterred, a sculptor collected from the carpet, where both box and bones had lain, “a few grams of grayish material.” He put this material in an envelope, had it notarized, and deposited it at
the National Library, where it was discovered quite accidentally in the 1990s, tucked between some rarely consulted seventeenth-century volumes.

Dante is, like Kafka, one of the writers for whom the law is tremendously important. What is Dante’s afterworld if not a huge judicial apparatus—a secret world, parallel to and integrated with our own—that makes judgment and justice eternally visible, correcting everything and making up for everything!

The affinity between Dante and the law is reflected in a longstanding tradition of mock trials to establish the poet’s guilt or innocence. Ostensibly concerned with the legality of Dante’s exile, the trials are essentially about who gets to keep the body.

At one such trial held a few years ago in a castle near Verona, Verona’s public prosecutor indicted Dante on charges including corruption, treason, and defamation of character. (The third charge referred to the scathing, potentially actionable writing of Popes Boniface and Clement in the Inferno.) Defense was handled by prominent Veronese criminal attorney Guariento Guarienti. A jury of scholars found in Dante’s favor and ordered Ravenna to relinquish his remains. No action appears to have followed from this ruling.

Another corpse-related trial was staged in 1989 by the Municipality of Pisa, accusing Ugolino della Gherardesca of cannibalizing his own sons. “A key witness is Dante Alighieri, born in Florence, poet by profession. But his testimony is ambiguous, perhaps one-sided, not always reliable.” Ugolino was acquitted—but which Ugolino? The historic figure or the character from Dante? And under what jurisdiction?

The descendants of the historic Ugolino remained highly conscious of the stain on the family character. In a society-page interview with the Corriere della Sera, Count Gaddo della Gherardesca did not neglect to mention the “Florentine perfidy” of Dante’s seven-hundred-year-old “slander.”

In 2001, supported by both Count Gherardesca and the Municipality of Pisa, scientists exhumed the bodies of Ugolino and his sons and grandsons, to establish whether cannibalism had taken place. The principal investigator was Francesco Mallegni, a forensic palentologist at the University of Pisa. Mallegni had made international news some years earlier by identifying what he claimed were the remains of the painter Giotto. Feculiarities of the jaw and posture of the mysterious skeleton, which had been excavated from under the Florence Duomo in the 1970s, indicated to Mallegni that the deceased had spent long periods of time holding a paintbrush-shaped object between his teeth, and looking up at the ceiling: both to be expected in someone who painted a lot of church ceilings. The skeleton also had belonged to someone whose diet was unusually high in meat. A wealthy artist, as Mallegni suggested? Or merely, as one of his detractors countered, “some fat butcher”? In any case the dead man had been short and squat, “deformed and almost a dwarf in stature”—consistent with the rumor that a certain dwarf painted by Giotto in one of the frescoes in Santa Croce was, in fact, a self-portrait.

The way Dante cursed Pisa, calling on the islands of Capraia and Gorgona to block the Arno and drown it alive, I had somehow expected it to lie a great distance away, but it was barely an hour by train from Florence. Lots of people travel that far to get their hair done.

In the biology faculty of the University of Pisa, a depressed-looking security guard, encased like a specimen behind glass, directed me to Mallegni’s office. The thing that really pulled the room together were four or five glass-fronted cabinets full of human skulls. Mounted to the walls, models of anthropologically famous skeletons gleamed dully against dirt-colored backgrounds. A poster advertised “The True Face of Brother Elias of Cortona,” reconstructed by Mallegni from the friar’s 750-year-old skull. Taped up next to some X-rays was a yellowed photograph of Mallegni with Pope John Paul II, taken on the occasion of
Mallegni's analysis of the mortal remains of St. Anthony of Padua.

A genial and dynamic person of unguessable age, Mallegni regaled me with stories of Ugolino's exhumation. At first, nobody had even known the location of his body. In a chapel in the Church of St. Francis, scientists unearthed five male skeletons. At the time of death, one of the five men had been over seventy years old, two around forty-five or fifty, two in their twenties. There was, it turned out, nothing particularly innocent or childlike about Ugolino's grandchildren; Nino, known as "the Brigand," had even killed a man. Mitochondrial DNA showed that the five subjects had been blood relatives, that the two middle-aged men shared the same mother.

"We can be 98 percent sure it's them," said Mallegni, whose findings cleared the Gherardesca name. The septuagenarian count, not having a tooth in his head, couldn't possibly have eaten a child, let alone four grown men. Furthermore, palaeonutritional analysis of the subjects' bone marrow indicated that nobody in the tomb had ingested any protein in the last months of their lives.

Months before I met him, Mallegni had achieved another Dante-related forensic triumph: a facial reconstruction based on a "bootleg model" of the poet's skull made when the skeleton was exhumed in 1921 for the sixcentenary of Dante's death. Working under cover of night, against the wishes of the Ravenna authorities, the anthropologists Fabio Frassetto and Giuseppe Sergi had obtained 297 measurements of the cranium and postcrania skeleton, plus scale photographs and a partial cast of the face and palate. (During the fascist period, Frassetto used the resulting plaster model of Dante's cranium to argue that the poet had been the "most glorious representative" of the Mediterranean racial type.)

Dreamlike images succeeded one another on the screen of Mallegni's computer: a skull pierced, voodoo-style, by hundreds of pins; the same skull, now covered in striated mus-}

cular clay; computer simulations transforming the skull into a mummy and then a head; the enormous eye sockets—Dante had extraordinarily large eye sockets—outfitted with gazeless eyes.

Mallegni discussed the problem of Dante's mandible. The problem was that the mandible was missing. To make a new mandible, you first borrowed the mandible of another skeleton with the same physical type, then used a mathematical model "to make the real person coincide with the ancient person."

"The final step of Dante's facial reconstruction," I read in an article by Mallegni and his colleagues in the Journal of Archæological Science, "was carried out by the traditional manual approach according to the Manchester protocol used in forensic anthropology. The cast was oriented in the Frankfurt plane and the 34 craniometric points (paired and unpaired) were identified. The robusticity of the masticatory muscles and muscles of facial expression, and thus their relative development, were inferred by minute observation of the muscle attachments on the maxilla, the inferior borders of the orbits, the malar bones, the zygomatic arches and the temporal line."

Mallegni used his model to calculate the accuracy of Botticelli's portrait of Dante: the inspiration for most later representations of the poet, as well as for the spurious "death masks" that proliferated in the years after Dante died. Botticelli, it appeared, had been completely wrong about the brow, chin, and nose. Far more accurate was a portrait painted in the 1330’s by Giotto. But Giotto’s Dante looks like any Renaissance youth, and Botticelli’s looks like someone who has been to hell and back.

The scientists decided to give Dante the face of a man in his fifties, with crow’s feet, brackets around his mouth, slightly sagging cheeks. The reconstructed Dante has no hair. Instead of hair he’s wearing an "authentic” crimson medieval stocking cap. It makes him look like a baby. It’s terrifying.

Some people—Milan Kundera, for example—would probably take one look at the new Dante and say that the scientists shouldn’t have bothered. I imagine Milan Kundera looking at Dante’s reconstructed head on Agence France-Presse and calling it grotesque, a reduction of the artist to the level of the merely “human” and biological. I can understand this point of view, but I don’t share it. I think it’s great that scientists worked so hard to restore Dante’s real face. Because this is one of the basic messages in Dante: nothing is ever truly lost. Dante goes to the afterworld, and everyone is there: Homer, Moses, Judas, Jesus, Brunetto Latini, Beatrice, all the thousand and one douchebags of Florence. He sees everyone again; he hears their voices. He sees his best friend’s father, stuffed in a box, still worrying about his son. In Purgatorio, Dante’s friend Casella runs up to him and tries to hug him. There is in all this some real sense that not only the soul but the body will survive.

I asked for permission to take a snapshot of Mallegni. “By all means,” he said, before, bethinking himself, he opened a desk drawer and produced a color photograph. “Here’s one all ready for you!” The picture showed Mallegni sitting on a sofa, looking a bit rakish. It had been taken at least fifteen years ago.

Mallegni spoke to me then about his impending departure from the university. He had reached seventy, the age of mandatory retirement. He already had another job lined up, as the director of a museum of natural history, where the retirement age was seventy-five.

“But that’s perfect,” I said. “It’s marvelous for the museum, and nice for you, too.”

“It’s nice, it’s nice—but it isn’t research.”

Mallegni feared he might never exhume the nineteenth-century composer Vincenzo Bellini, who died at thirty-three under murky circumstances, conceivably poisoned by his mistress.

III. PARADISO

My body hurtled toward Verona on a blindingly sun-filled train. I was headed to the Casal dei Ronchi: the estate
where Dante is believed to have worked on *Paradiso*, and where the poet's descendants have made their home for twenty generations. In the sixteenth century, Dante's last male lineal descendant, an elderly priest named Francesco, obtained a dispensation from clerical celibacy, hoping to produce an heir with one of his servants. When the subsequent union yielded only three daughters, the estate passed to Francesco's niece Ginevra, who, in 1549, married the Veronese nobleman Marcantonio Serego, and the families merged their names. In subsequent years, the Serego Alighieri became noted wine producers.

Truly, Google is like Dante's afterworld: the celestial rose that reclaims and restores all things, placing them in their true positions; a many-tiered hierarchical world where nobody is lost and everyone is found, and where we have all already embarked upon eternal life, divested of our still-living bodies—much as the soul of Branca d'Oria writhes in the Inferno while his body, on earth, continues to eat, sleep, and wear clothes. The Serego Alighieri, like everyone else, have a website. Count Pieralvise and his daughter, Massimilla, still live at the Casal dei Ronchi, where they run a combined winery and guesthouse. When I sent an email to ask if I might stop by the winery, Massimilla invited me to spend the night at the guesthouse, and even met me at the florist's stand in the Verona train station. She was younger than I had expected, with a mild expression and rumpled blondish hair, wearing jeans with a navy polo shirt and brown blazer. Outside, she squinted discontentedly into the sun, then put on a pair of sensible sunglasses.

The Count—a glamorous figure with white hair, a white mustache, and gray-green eyes that matched a subtle greenish-gray tint in his suit—was waiting for us in the driver's seat of a Toyota Corolla.

We drove through Valpolicella, along winding roads through vineyards. To my discomfiture, the Count proposed that we stop for lunch at a large hilltop hotel with a deserted terrace. The Count's heels clicked against the flagstones.
Waiters materialized, seated us in the shade, poured sparkling water into sparkling glasses. An hour earlier, listening to Guns N’ Roses in a cocoon of sunlight, I didn’t realize I was speeding toward an expensive lunch with hosts who were not only far more charming and urbane than me but were also related to Dante Alighieri, and were even some kind of counts.

Then again, there are definitely worse things in life than to sit on a shady hilltop in the breeze, watching Valpolicella’s red roofs, cypress trees, and vineyards spread out before you, dissolving near the horizon to a blue-gray haze.

Although the Serego Alighieri had been making wine in the Veneto for centuries, it was just a few years ago that they bottled their first Tuscan varietal. They called it Bello Ovile, after the epithet for Florence in Paradiso: Fair Sheepfold. This was one sense in which Dante had finally been brought home. On the other hand, in 2008, Florence’s city council had voted to officially revoke Dante’s exile and to award the Count a Gold medal of natural causes!

The gates of the estate bore the family crest, a bird’s wing on a blue background; “Alighieri” comes from the Latin aliger, “winged.” Beyond the gates stretched a shadowy avenue of cypresses, at the end of which the grounds gleamed like a bright green jewel.

Although less famous than the inferno, Paradiso represents a greater formal challenge. How do you write a poem about timeless undifferentiated beatitude?

There were rolling grounds, rambling bushes, and trees of all different sizes: solitary, miniature trees with tiny intricate branches; human-size trees standing in groups. Cypresses slanted at strange angles. A porter showed me to the guesthouse, most of which was occupied by a film crew working on a movie about wine. The director, a Swedish-Italian former professional boxer, had become a star on Swedish television with his own gastronomy show.

I followed the porter up a narrow flight of stairs to a suite under the eaves, with thick roof beams and an enormous bed. Warped glass in the windows gathered up the lawn in knots, twisting the garden chairs. A chilled bottle of white wine stood on the table. “A gift from the Count,” the porter said, gracefully withdrawing.

 fantasies to rattle on the tray.

The archives of the Serego Alighieris date to the fourteenth century and contain family diaries, contracts, and bills of service—but no manuscripts. There are no extant documents in Dante’s hand. Nobody even knows what his signature looks like. This is unusual for a writer of the period. Some believe that Dante hid a treasure trove, an original manuscript of Paradiso, somewhere on or near the estate. In 1921, the Count’s grandfather, convinced that the documents had been buried with a certain patron in Verona, succeeded in having the tomb opened. “Inside was a skeleton in a beautiful silk robe, with a long sword—and no manuscripts.” Between the two world wars, the Count’s aunt had visited a clairvoyant in Rome, accompanying a friend who desired spiritual counsel regarding an unhappy love affair. “You’re more interesting than your friend,” the clairvoyant told the Count’s aunt. “You have very great ancestors. You’re looking for something, and the thing you’re looking for is in a house owned by your family.” The aunt rushed back to Valpolicella and turned the villa upside down, but didn’t find anything.

Seers, historians, and lunatics still turned up at the estate. An old man from India, having “found something in Purgatorio,” had visited the archives to shoot some footage for a documentary about Dante and the Ganges. A numerologist had somehow added up the entire Comedy and derived two numbers: the latitude and longitude of a point on the estate where the papers were surely hidden! Then there was a man from

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Florence who claimed to have discovered Giotto’s skeleton under the floor of the Duomo. He had found the skeleton in the 1970s, using a combination of ESP and a metal detector, and then it had been identified—needless to say, by none other than Francesco Mallegni—as belonging to Giotto!

The Count invited him over. Having wandered the buildings and grounds, the Florentine pointed at a spot on the floor and said that was it, that was where the papers were hidden. “He chose probably the one spot that was the most difficult to look,” the Count recalled. “Under a solid marble floor.” Somewhere beneath the charm and humor with which he told the story ran a faint undertow of desire: in its pure form, rarely humorous.

“So I called a friend, a marble-worker. I needed someone who could lift off a marble floor in a discreet manner.” It took the marble-worker a lot of time and effort to lift off the floor. Underneath was—nothing.

Massimilla took me to see the cellar. In massive Slavonian oak barrels, the wines sleep for years. Some vintages spend a few additional months in cherrywood barrels. Massimilla poured some Bello Ovile, which is made mostly of Sangiovese grapes, as well as a pricier Amarone: lush wines tasting of about twenty unnameable things at once.

Gravel crunched beneath our feet as we walked back to the guesthouse. Massimilla had a younger sister, Marianna, who was studying economics abroad. Massimilla herself had been educated more locally, in Verona and Milan. She had studied tourism and hospitality. During her time in Milan, she had come home every weekend. “Well, it’s hard not to come home, when home is . . .” She gestured vaguely toward the gold-drenched vineyards. Now, of course, she traveled a good deal, representing the Serego Alighieri wines. Taxi drivers in Tokyo, in Mexico City, saw the name on her luggage and spoke to her of Dante.

Because she had already struck me as a Chekhovian character, I...
was startled when Massimilla mentioned her passion for the stage. She acted in an amateur group in Verona, performing plays by Goldoni and by more contemporary playwrights. She had just been cast in a stage adaptation of The Truman Show. I wondered whether Massimilla was my age, and whether she worried about marriage and children, because those things are hard enough when it’s just your own soul and not the DNA of seven centuries of Alighieris that has to be conducted somehow into the future.

We passed a solitary grapevine, climbing up against a wall, as frail as Charlie Brown’s Christmas tree. It was an 1875 Molinara: the only Italian vine, Massimilla claimed, to survive the phylloxera epidemic that wiped out most Old World vines in the late nineteenth century.

Verona has a particularly gloomy Dante monument. It stands in a stone square enclosed by gorgeous buildings whose walls, in my memory, glow orange. This must have been a trick of the sunset, the yellow plaster, the thirteenth-century brick.

In Verona it is impossible not to visit Juliet’s balcony. Signs lead you there from every corner. It’s a pinkish rectangular brick balcony. The pinkish brick wall is covered with letters to Juliet on the subject of love. I found myself wondering which made less sense: writing letters to Juliet or writing letters to Beatrice. I decided that both Romeo and Juliet and La Vita Nuova were metaphors for the same basic problem: the incompatibility of love with lived existence, which beats love down, inexorably, over a lifetime, like a driver beating a horse to death. In literature, this problem may be expressed either in a long novel, or through a metaphoric displacement.

In Romeo and Juliet, the problem is replaced by the feud between the Montagues and the Capulets. In this way, a grueling, petty, humiliating process is purified and condensed into a few brief, lethal sword fights. The lovers remain innocent. All the ugliness is displaced elsewhere, none left for each other. Before life can make liars or cowards of them, they’re both dead.

In La Vita Nuova, Dante solves the problem differently. He and Beatrice aren’t opposed by malevolent agents; they simply don’t know each other. They see each other on the street once as children, again nine years later. At a wedding, some ladies ask Dante: “To what end do you love this lady of yours, since you cannot bear her presence?” He explains that, although his love initially resided in Beatrice’s greeting him in the street, she later stopped greeting him in the street, so now he just writes poems about her.

Dante and Beatrice marry other people, Beatrice dies at age twenty-four, and Dante and his wife have four or so children. It would be the most pointless love story ever—except that the whole world in which Beatrice and Dante are barely passing acquaintances turns out to have been somehow beside the point: not an illusion, exactly, but a riddle, a presage, whose solution lies in the afterlife. When Beatrice appears in Paradiso cloaked in the Trinity and Christological significance, it’s because, if there is a God and a Heaven, the only point it can possibly have is that we will see the ones we love once more, outside of time and the beating of the horse, and that love will finally, in some unforeseeable way, be assimilated into the cosmic machinery. So that’s how it was: there were nine crystalline spheres and a giant wheeled apparatus run by Jesus Christ and Beatrice.

In his writings on Dante, Erich Auerbach explains the riddelike relationship between the world and the afterworld in terms of Christian figuration. Figuration is a mode of analysis originally devised to reconcile the Old and New Testaments. Adam, for example, was viewed as a figura of Christ, meaning that, although both Adam and Christ were real historical people, the meaning of Adam’s life was realized only in the life of Christ. You didn’t really know the meaning of God extracting Adam’s rib until you saw the soldier pierce Christ’s side on the cross. In a similar sense, Auerbach suggests, Dante’s characters’ mortal lives are figurae of their afterlives. Each person’s position and fate in the afterworld—an eternal position and fate—represents the sum and result of his life, the meaning of his existence and his character.

Figuration neatly explains the duality of historic time and eternal time—a crucial and unique feature of Dante’s work. It’s because of this duality that Georg Lukács characterized the Comedy as a work on the border between the novel and the epic. On the one hand, Dante shows us real historical individuals, with individual problems, roaming the world without guidance, and such individuals belong in the novel. On the other hand, all those individual problems are ultimately resolved and explained within a highly structured Christian afterworld. Each voice is absorbed into a heavenly chorus, and everyone who seemed to be lost only seemed that way because we couldn’t see the whole picture. Rising above the dark wood was a perfectly mapped cosmos of interlocking wheels.

For both Lukács and Auerbach, meaning and truth in Dante’s world reside in the afterlife, where figurae are fulfilled and totalities formed. Mortal existence is, by contrast, incomplete, illusory, secondary. But I think the opposite can be said, with equal accuracy: it’s the afterlife that is a tissue of illusions. Dante’s afterworld may be highly structured, but he invented that structure himself, synthesizing classical mythology, Christian theology, and medieval demonology. Dante’s afterworld, drawing attention to its own eccentricities, paradoxes, and loopholes, is not a universal afterworld—it’s Dante’s afterworld, based in his own experiences. Seen from this perspective, the only thing that’s indubitably real, the only thing everyone can see and agree on, is the stuff of this life—all the stuff that Dante himself studied with such interest and love. Is Paradise more real than all that? Is it better? Is Paradise enough to compensate for the loss of the world?

Maybe it is, and maybe it isn’t. Believe me, if that’s how the cards fall, I’ll be the first to congratulate Dante on his eternal happiness—even if I have to do it from the sixth circle in a
flaming coffin with Epicurus and the rest of the heretics. But if this world is all there is, then it's in history itself that the riddle finds its solution. The meaning of Dante's existence is revealed not by his place in the chorus of Paradise but by the fate of his corpse and his corpse in this world. Then Dante's head is a figura for Mallegni's plaster cast, and his poetry is a figura for wine, and Ugolino eating Ruggieri's skull is a figura of forensic scientists extracting Ugolino's bone marrow.

It was night when I got back to the estate. The taxi stopped at the gates and I walked up the cypress avenue in the dark. On the lawn outside the guesthouse, under the brilliant lights of a film set, the Swedish-Italian television star and his crew were unwinding after a few bottles of wine.

Upstairs in my rooms, I didn't go to bed for a long time. I was looking for manuscripts. I knocked on the walls, opened the drawers, discovered, in a wooden chest, a two-volume work titled Birds of Our Country: Their Eggs, Nests, Life, Haunts, and Identification. No autograph of Paradox was tucked between the lapwing and the wood duck.

A handsome silver corkscrew lay on the table. I picked up a bottle of Bello Ovile, a gift from Massimilla, and turned it in my hands. Voices drifted up to my window from the lawn. At certain moments, I feel very sure that the place and time exist when I will see everyone again. Marilena will have fathomed Mandelstam's soul, Francesco Mallegni will have a full head of black hair, and Vincenzo Bellini will manifest his cause of death. Georgia will lift our spirits with a song, Mandelstam himself will turn up in our rooms, and one winner will receive an iPad 2!