

of Dante painted by some clever wag over the doors of the engineering building at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. (I still wonder who wrote them and whether the author pursued engineering, a career in Italian literature, or maybe dropped out.)

## 5. ADJECTIVES IN DANTE AND IN LIBRETTI

An interesting parallel exists between Dante and opera composers and librettists in the use of adjectives.

The following verses from the opening lines of Dante's *Inferno* are typical. Context: Dante is alone in a dark forest, which he uses as a symbol for the spiritually lost place in which he finds himself. He describes this forest as terrifying and shameful:

"Nel mezzo del cammìn di nostra vita  
*In the middle of the path of our life*

mi ritrovai per una selva **oscura**  
*I found myself in a forest dark*

Ah, quanto a dir qual' era è cosa **dura**  
Ah, how much to say what it was is (a) thing hard  
(i.e. How hard it is to say what it was like.)

questa selva **selvaggia** ed **aspra** e **forte**  
*this forest wild and harsh and strong*

tant'è **amara** che poco è più morte." (I, 7)  
so bitter that little is more death.  
(i.e. that death itself is little more bitter).

This fearful atmosphere is created largely by the atmospheric adjectives which are similar to those discussed in Chapter six, part iii.

–**oscura**: “buio (dark), tenebroso (shadowy); ignoto (unknown); cattivo (evil)”, etc., Zingarelli.

–**dura**: “resistente (resistent); doloroso; difficile; ostinato (obstinate);

aspro (bitter)", etc., Zingarelli.

–**selvaggia**: "di bosco (of the woods); che vive fuori d'ogni civiltà (living outside any civilization); che vivono quasi come fiere (those who live almost like wild beasts)", etc., Zingarelli.

–**aspra**: "selvatico (wild), duro (hard), impraticabile, crudele, intrattabile" (Zingarelli).

–**forte**: "potente (powerful), resistente (resistant), duro (tough or hard), severo, difficile", etc., Zingarelli.

–**amara**: "crudele, aspro (sour, harsh), funesto, tristo", Zingarelli.

The verses above conjure up anguish and fear in much the same way as *Stridea la Vampa* in *Il Trovatore* (see end of Chapter six). In the Dante passage this fearful atmosphere is enhanced by the harsh and threatening sounds of the words themselves: "oscura", "dura", "selvaggia", "aspra", "forte", "amara". Those "r's" and "g's and 's's" are so expressive! Such sounds help to convey the meaning and then both the meaning and the sounds work together with a kind of synergy to achieve an overall effect.

Overall, the *Divina Commedia* is an allegory and here the forest is symbolic of evil forces: fierce animals suddenly leap out threateningly at Dante and block his way: a lynx, (symbolizing, according to critic Niccolò Tommaseo, envy; a politically-divided Florence); a lion, (the sin of pride; the French monarchy); and a she-wolf (avarice; the Papacy). The poem has a great deal to say about religion, politics and famous people, not just in Dante's time but throughout history.

In the passage above Dante suggests that he has lost all hope and that he lives in constant fear. The background to this is complex and I can only touch on it here. Suffice it say that Dante was connected to the Ghibelline (pro-Emperor) party and this party was beaten by the Guelphs, who favored political rule by the popes. Because of this connection Dante was exiled from Florence for life. The sentence started in 1300. Dante was assured that he would be burnt at the stake if he ever returned to Florence. He never returned, but spent the rest of his

life wandering from place to place, from host to host, eating “il pane amaro” (the bitter bread) of exile. He finally died in Ravenna, where his remains lie to this day.

## 6. DANTE’S USE OF THE SIMPLE PAST TENSE

We have seen (Ch. 13) how the simple past or “passato remoto” tends to be forceful and dynamic and dominates in opera libretti. Dante had used this tense with great effectiveness centuries before opera was invented in 1600. He provided the earliest and greatest example of how to use it.

The following passage comes just after Dante enters the “selva oscura”. Virgil suddenly appears before him and offers to guide him through the dark regions of Hell. Virgil introduces himself to Dante in good Tuscan seasoned with a few Latin touches (“omo”, “sub Julio”) thrown in for realism. Dante uses the simple past to achieve great economy of expression and create something of the epitaph style that I mentioned in connection with *Vissi d’arte*. Here are Virgil’s lines:

Non omo; omo già **fui**  
*Not man; (a) man formerly I was*

e i parenti miei **furon** lombardi,  
*And my parents were Lombards,*

mantovani per patria ambedui.  
*Mantuan by fatherland, both of them.*

**Nacqui** sub Julio, ancor che fosse tardi,  
*I was born under Julius, albeit (it) was late (in Caesar’s life)*

e **vissi** a Roma sotto il buon Augusto,  
*And I lived in Rome under the good Augustus.*

al tempo degli dei falsi e bugiardi.  
*At the time of the gods false and lying.*

Verbs in the simple past:

–**fui**: from “essere”, to be.

–**furon**: also from “essere”.

–**nacqui**: from “nascere”, to be born.

–**vissi**: from “vivere”, to live.

–**fosse** (verse 4): past descriptive subjunctive, which is required after “ancora che”. (See Chapter 16).

–“**degli**”: a variant of “dei”, probably used to avoid the awkward sounds of “dei dei” (of the gods).

– As noted, irregular verbs abound in Italian; all five in the above passage are irregular. Verbs play a major role in Dante’s great poem, providing (as they do in opera) the impetus necessary to propel the narrative and sweep the reader along.

– “Omo” (verse one) is interesting: in Latin it is “homo”; in modern or operatic Italian it is “uomo”. Dante uses both “omo” and “uomo” because he is writing at a time before Italian had been standardized into a definite form.

– In Dante’s time Virgil was considered (based on the fourth *Eclogue*) a Christian ‘before the letter’. This would explain Virgil’s seeming contempt for the pagan gods of Rome (“dei falsi e bugiardi”). These are powerful adjectives, especially “bugiardi”. †

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† “Bugiardi” is used with similar effectiveness by Ferrando in the campfire scene at the opening of “Il Trovatore” when he explains the violent background (There is a long footnote here which I am omitting).