

THE
VISION;
OR,
HELL, PURGATORY,
AND
PARADISE,
OF
DANTE ALIGHIERI.

TRANSLATED BY
THE REV. H. F. CARY, A.M.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

London:
PRINTED FOR THE AUTHOR,
BY J. BARFIELD,
Printer to his Royal Highness the Prince Regent.

1814.

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of | Dante Alighieri. | Translated by | the Rev. H.F.
Cary, A.M. | [double line] | In three volumes. | Vol. I. |
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Three volumes, 16mo. (page size approx. 11.7 x 7.1 cm.),
half-titles, errata leaf in vol. I.



These three tiny volumes were the first time that the entirety of Dante's Divine Comedy was made available to an English-speaking audience, becoming a favourite inspiration and source-book for the Romantics, none more so than Coleridge, who revered it as "Mr. Cary's incomparable translation of Dante."

Despite its far-reaching influence, this original issue as printed for the author in 1814 is remarkably rare, as the work only became popular after it was reissued several years later by the influential publishers Taylor and Hessey, who bought up the remainder stock from Cary himself and added a new title-page with their imprint. By tradition, they are said to have purchased almost the entire run, which would explain the first issue's great rarity.

The work was the magnum opus of Henry Francis Cary (1772—1844). Educated at Rugby and Christ Church, Oxford, Cary took orders after his graduation, but his passion was French and Italian poetry. He published a translation of the *Inferno* in two volumes in 1805—1806 which was a commercial failure, but Cary pressed on, finally finishing his full translation in 1812, but still no publisher would take it on: he ultimately felt compelled to publish entirely at his own risk, "which he could ill afford" (ODNB) and which led to him choosing this remarkably small format to keep costs down. The book was clearly ready by late 1813 as Cary is on record as sending early copies to the booksellers Price in Tamworth, Bagster in the Strand and Colburn in Conduit Street in late December, the book being formally published on 1 January 1814 (Cary, *Memoir*, vol. I., p. 283).

Despite a belated but positive notice in the *Monthly Review* (March 1815, pp. 322—324), which included a memorable crack about the minute format being hard on the eyes of "we aged and conscientious readers," the work was published to almost complete indifference, despite finding favour with some readers. None was more significant than the banker and poet Samuel Rogers (1763—1855). Rogers had early success with his *The Pleasure of Memory* (1792) and continued to versify throughout his very long life, but is now known chiefly as the witty conversationalist who reconciled Byron and Moore after the *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* debacle, and for encouraging the work of J.M.W. Turner, who illustrated Rogers's last major work, *Italy: a Poem* (1830). Rogers, who made an extensive Grand Tour of Italy in 1814—1815, was a lifelong enthusiast for Italian art and literature, and a serious book-collector as well (when Cary and he became friends in the 1820s he borrowed books from Rogers on recherché Italian subjects).

The evidence would suggest that Rogers first became aware of the work in the Summer of 1816, not that long after his return from Tour. In August

1816, Rogers visited the poet Thomas Moore for the best part of a week before leaving to make a walking tour of the Lake District, later recalling that he first became aware of Cary's work after his friend Moore "mentioned the work to me with great admiration" (Maltby, *Recollections*, p. 282). This connection is completely plausible, especially given that Moore is on record as calling Cary's book a "tour de force" (Moore, *Memoirs*, VII, pp. 137—138). Rogers was clearly reading the book during his holiday, spending time with his old friend Wordsworth, who later wrote a fond letter remembering how they had "parted in a shower near the Turnpike Gate of Keswick" and asking "do you and Dante continue as intimate as heretofore?" (Hill (ed.), *Letters*, vol. III, p. 382).

As he travelled, Rogers recalled, he was often freezing cold and wet – this is Byron's 1816, the year without a summer, after all – and, by his own admission, stayed most nights in inns with ample time to read. Two years later Keats popped his second issue of Cary's Dante in his knapsack for his own walk through the Lake District. Rogers had clearly already had the same idea. That Rogers was obsessed with Dante at this time is confirmed by the fact that soon after he returned to London he met the expatriate Italian scholar Ugo Foscolo, the pair immediately bonding on the shared love of "everything Italian" (Clayden, *Rogers and his Contemporaries*, p. 224).

By mid-1817 the two had agreed to write companion pieces on Dante for the *Edinburgh Review*, Foscolo to produce a broad-ranging essay and Rogers a specific review of Cary's *Vision*; the diarist Crabb Robinson, who met them both around this time, said the pair could talk of little else. The two essays, awkwardly sandwiched together to appear as if written by a single anonymous author, finally appeared in February 1818 (Corrigan, 'Foscolo's Articles,' pp. 212—215). It was Rogers, that is, who gave Cary's work its first review of note, describing it in print as "a great acquisition to the English reader" just a little over four years after the book had first appeared. Cary finally read the review in May 1818 but did not know "to whom I am indebted for it" and was still in the dark in January of the following year beyond knowing, correctly, that the writer of the review was a member of the Holland House set (Cary, *Memoir*, vol. II, pp. 29; 38—39).

Utterly by chance, Rogers's review of Cary's book coincided with a project of Coleridge's. In late 1817, Coleridge had first met Cary in the seaside town of Littlehampton. Coleridge was rusticated in an attempt to manage his opium addiction; Cary was walking the beach teaching his son ancient Greek by reading Homer aloud as they went. It was the perfect Coleridge-trap: the poet watched on with interest over several days before his curiosity got the

best of him, striding over to announce "Sir, yours is a face I should know: I am Samuel Taylor Coleridge." The same day, he accepted a set of the Dante and, by the next, was back on the beach having memorized long passages in admiration.

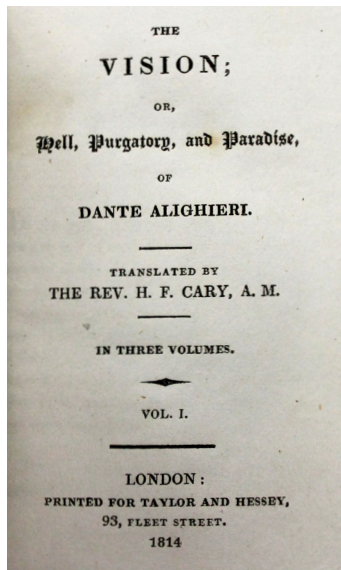
The timing was perfect for Coleridge, who was planning a series of public lectures on literature, including one on Dante, Milton and Donne which he ultimately gave in London on the evening of 27 February 1818. It was Coleridge, as pushy and enthusiastic as ever, who encouraged Cary to hand over the huge quantities of remaindered copies of the book to the publishers Taylor & Hessey, who took the simple expedient of issuing new title-pages and advertising it in their trade lists.

Coleridge's fizzing enthusiasm for the book is quite clear in a series of letters he sent to Cary in the rush to get ready. In January he assured his friend that the house would take on whatever number of copies Cary still had, confidently asserting that "many or few, this will make no difference with Taylor & Hessey as to their consenting to be the publishers, but it might be a question, how soon an arrangement might be made with you, so as to sacrifice a small number in order to bring out the work in a form more worthy of its character, and more saleable" (Coleridge to Cary, 30 January 1818). The letter concludes with Coleridge hustling Cary to reply by return of post and to make every effort to remember where copies of the book might be located.

Coleridge wrote again days later to confirm that Taylor & Hussey were in a wild rush to get their hands on the remainders (Coleridge to Cary, 2 February 1818) and then again to say that they have already printed the prospectus for the lectures (Coleridge to Cary, 6 February 1818). In this last, Coleridge provides a critical gloss on the project when he firmly states that "a new Title-page must be printed – and such outside improvements made as the copies may admit of – and then Taylor & Hessey say, that by their connection they do not doubt of disposing of the greater part of the remaining impression immediately among the Trade."

That is, while the earliest Taylor & Hessey advertisement I have discovered for their reissue of the three "pocket volumes" is from May 1818 – it is listed just under Keats's *Endymion* – the deal had been struck much earlier, in time for the collaboration with Coleridge's lecture series. The letters from Coleridge not only prove that he was advertising Cary's work at Taylor & Hessey's as early as February but explicitly state that new title-pages would have to be made – and paid for – as is "the custom of the trade" (Morgan Library, MA 1851.7).

This letter is also one of the only times in which concrete numbers are mentioned, however obliquely, because it is clear that Cary had suggested only sending some of his remaindered stock. At least, this would seem to be the implication of Coleridge’s comment that the expense of printing 650 title-pages or 300 is about the same. The most likely interpretation is that Cary knew that he had some 650 copies readily to hand and Coleridge thought it best to send the lot. Even if that figure is broadly accurate, it is also clear that more were scattered around various booksellers throughout the country, as Cary was still calling these in months later from as far afield as Birmingham and Lichfield (Cary, *Memoir*, vol. II, pp. 32–33). Indeed it may be that a sum of £109 Cary was paid by Taylor & Hessey in May relates to this last cache.



Although Rogers had been working on his review by mid-1817 at the latest (and must therefore have been using the original 1814 edition), the publication of his review in February 1818 meant that it appeared at the precise moment that the second issue of the work was being prepared. That this was mere chance is proven by a curious little bibliographical point. For unknown reasons Taylor & Hessey printed the date on their reissue as 1814: as Roscoe, the first bibliographer to discuss the work in any detail in an important note published in *The Book Collector* (1953), has commented (with commendable restraint!), this has been “slightly misleading to bibliographers of a later age.” It certainly caught out the *Edinburgh Review*, because Roger’s review lists the publishing details as “London, 1818” (perfectly accurate, but suggesting that he had not actually seen the cancel title-page).

Taylor & Hessey’s imprint not only burnished the work’s Romantic credentials (as the publisher of Keats, De Quincey and soon enough Coleridge as well), but became a surprise bestseller, the standard edition in English for more than a century. It was the Romantics who first took it to heart, from Keats (who read his copy of the Taylor and Hessey issue on his tour of the Lake District in 1818 and later gave it to Fanny Brawne), to Blake (as he worked on his unfinished illustrations to Dante, as Crabb Robinson recalled, the second edition of “Cary’s Dante was before him”) and even Herman Melville (who took his 1840s reprint with him to the South Pacific). Lamb, Hazlitt, Southey, Moore and Landor all admired it, while Shelley is on record as having sought out a copy in late 1817 (in the same letter

revealing himself as having already read Cary’s *Inferno*). Even Wordsworth thought it “a great national work.” 1000 copies were reputedly sold in three months and Taylor & Hessey had their second larger-format edition in print by 1819. Cary’s reputation was such that to friends such as Moore he was known as “Dante Cary” and in later life Rogers was able to secure him a valuable pension from Lord Melbourne. He was buried in Westminster Abbey.

November 2023

References: Beatty, ‘A Century of Cary’s Dante’ (1914); Braida, *Dante and the Romantics* (2004); Cary, *Memoir of the Rev. Francis Henry Cary* (1847); Clayden, *Rogers and his Contemporaries* (1889); Corrigan, ‘Foscolo’s articles on Dante in the *Edinburgh Review*’ (1971); Hale, “Samuel Rogers the Perfectionist”, *Huntington Library Quarterly* (November 1961); Hill (ed.), *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth* (1982); Jones (ed.), *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (1964), I, pp. 585–586; Gilchrist, *Life of William Blake* (1863); Gittings, *The Mask of Keats* (1956); King, *Parson Primrose* (1925); Maltby, *Recollections of the Table-Talk of Samuel Rogers* (1866); Marlow, ‘Query,’ *The Book Collector* (1953/1), p. 54; Moore, *Memoirs, Journal and Correspondence* (1856); ODNB; Roscoe, ‘Query,’ *The Book Collector* (1953/2), pp. 127–128; Saly, ‘Keats’ Answer to Dante’ (1965); Toynbee, *Dante in English Literature from Chaucer to Cary* (1909); Worldcat.

The convoluted publishing history and the book’s tiny format has combined to make even Taylor & Hessey’s second-issue quite uncommon, but the genuine first issue, privately printed for the author, is almost never seen on the market. Although I have made no real attempt at a census, it is worth noting that OCLC locates copies at the BL (they have Coleridge’s copy) and UCL, and in North America Cornell, Maryland, Ohio Northern University Law, Penn State and San Antonio. Another is definitely noted at Harvard.

Fig. 1. The title-page of the Taylor & Hessey issue with the “1814” imprint.



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