

At a meeting of the FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES on October 5, 2021, the following tribute to the life and service of the late Dante Della Terza was spread upon the permanent records of the Faculty.

DANTE MICHELE DELLA TERZA

BORN: May 5, 1924

DIED: April 6, 2021

Dante Michele Della Terza, Irving Babbitt Professor of Comparative Literature, *Emeritus*, died in Cambridge one month shy of his ninety-seventh birthday. Literature was the passion of his life, and he generously shared it with generations of students, colleagues, and friends in Italy and the USA.

Dante grew up in the town of Sant'Angelo dei Lombardi, about sixty miles east of Naples. The son of an electrician and a homemaker, he won admission to the Scuola Normale Superiore of Pisa, the top university in Italy, where he pursued a degree in literary studies under the mentorship of the extraordinary literary critic and scholar Luigi Russo. He spent a year as a fellow at the *Romanisches Seminar* (University of Zurich) and then taught Italian in Paris, where he met Mollie McCush. The two soon married in Toulouse, where Dante taught at the university. In 1958 they moved to Bellingham, Washington, where Mollie's family lived, and had two children, Grazia and Giorgio.

Dante had an affable disposition and made a conscious effort to get along with everyone he met. His knowledge and natural talent for irony made it easy for him to befriend others. In Zurich, where his adviser was Theophil Spoerri, he socialized with Bertold Brecht and Lucien Goldmann, and in Paris Giuliano Procacci. When he studied English at the University of Washington, Seattle, he met and befriended the celebrated Romanist Leo Spitzer. In 1959, midway in the journey of our life, partly thanks to Spitzer's and Russo's enthusiastic letters, he landed his first job, an assistantship at UCLA.

From his early years, Dante developed extraordinary abilities to absorb, synthesize, and process abstract discourses and complex ideas and to articulate them eloquently in Italian, which he spoke and wrote in an unmistakable, musical Latinate style: ample, balanced, always perfectly rotund. He spoke all languages with a trace of Southern Italian accent, clearly enunciating every syllable and underlining every syntactical nuance. The stylistic device he loved most was the periphrasis, a perfect vehicle for irony. He described the most humble, awkward objects and events in a captivating, dignified, and even endearing manner. He was

an early and charming practitioner of political correctness, which he employed liberally in his speech with a smile and a glint in his eyes. He was, however, vastly more skillful verbally than ambulatorily. The story of his plunge into Venice's Canal Grande while attempting to board a *vaporetto* in pursuit of nimble Franco Fido is legendary.

In 1963 he edited the Italian translation of a volume of studies on Dante by Erich Auerbach, which changed the course of Dante studies in Italy and made Dante Della Terza a major player among Italianists. The same year, invited by Renato Poggioli, he moved to Harvard where he taught Italian literature for the following thirty years and from 1983 held the chair of Irving Babbitt Professor of Comparative Literature, formerly occupied by Harry Levin. He was a much-admired teacher and graduate advisor. In his classes, to avoid distracting students with his prodigious memory, he pretended to read Dante, Petrarch, Tasso, and Leopardi, which he knew by heart.

Dante rapidly became a much sought-after Italianist on both sides of the Atlantic, often receiving visiting appointments at American and Italian universities. In Cambridge, Massachusetts, he was the force behind the New England Italian Seminar, which regularly brought together local scholars and eminent visitors from Italy. He co-founded, with Antonio D'Andrea, and directed the *Yearbook of Italian Studies*, a journal dedicated to fostering a dialogue between Italian and American scholars (1971–1995). His natural ability to bring people together and promote intellectual exchange had a determining impact on the growth, cohesion, and visibility of Italian studies in North America.

After he retired from Harvard in 1994, he continued teaching at the University "Federico II" of Naples where he held the chair once occupied by his beloved fellow countryman Francesco De Sanctis. One of his major interests was the history of European intellectuals who, fleeing Fascism and Nazism, found a home in the U.S., a condition with which he closely identified, as witnessed by one of his most original volumes, *Da Vienna a Baltimora. La diaspora degli intellettuali europei negli Stati Uniti d'America* (1987). A keen interpreter of Italian culture in the U.S. and American culture in Italy, he always adapted with intelligence and grace to his intellectual environment. In his heart, however, he always remained the boy from Sant'Angelo dei Lombardi, and from that "loving legacy" he drew his strength and identity. His hometown was devastated by an earthquake in 1980, and though he visited it in later years, he never went back to live there.

Four of his major volumes of essays were *Forma e memoria* (1979), *Tradizione ed esegesi* (1987), *Letteratura e critica tra Otto e Novecento* (1989) and *Strutture poetiche, esperienze letterarie* (1995). With precision, he constructed coherent and sustained discourses about even the most heterogeneous sources and material. He wrote on the entire range of Italy's literary and cultural history. Following Spitzer rather than Auerbach, his approach was stylistic and synchronic rather than figural and diachronic.

During his last years, Dante spent more time at home in Arlington, Massachusetts, coming to campus several times a week. His bright eyes and cheerful greetings were a treat. He never appeared rushed and was always ready to engage in conversation. In his Widener office, he read articles for the new Italian journal he founded in 2004 (*Dante. Rivista internazionale di studi su Dante Alighieri*) or wrote on De Sanctis in his squared exercise books. Rumor has it that he never learned to type. We know that he never touched a computer or wrote an email. Neither did he ever learn to drive: his only attempt, in Paris, was a disaster. So, he wrote by hand and took buses. In his mid-nineties he lost some of his hearing, but he always retained his friendly, mischievous smile and the sparkle in his eyes.

Respectfully submitted,

Josiah Blackmore
Mary Gaylord
Gregory Nagy
Lino Pertile, Chair