

## DANTE ALIGHIERI—THE TUSCAN DREAMER

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The figure of Dante Alighieri stands at the close of the mediæval period of history as the crystallization of all that is noble and beautiful in that period. By his genius in creating to a great extent the modern Italian language, however, he breaks with the centuries behind him and appears as the forerunner of the development of modern literature. While the world of mediæval knowledge is his inspiration, yet by his spiritual insight, dramatic interest, sureness of touch, and terseness of expression, he emerges from the morbid realism of the mediæval world and looms as like the herald of the "New Learning."

There are probably few competent judges who would hesitate to give Dante a place of honor with Homer and Shakespeare in the triad of the world's greatest poets. Homer and Shakespeare reflect the ages in which they lived in all their fullness and variety of life, largely sinking their own individuality in the intensity and breadth of their sympathies. They are great teachers, no doubt, and fail not to lash what they regard as the growing vices or follies of the day, and to impress upon their readers the solemn lessons of those inevitable facts of life which they epitomize and verify. But their teaching is chiefly incidental or indirect, and is often almost as difficult to unravel from their works as it is from the life and nature which they so faithfully reflect.

With Dante it is far otherwise. Aglow with a prophet's passionate conviction, and an apostle's undying zeal, he is guided by a philosopher's breadth and clearness of principle, a poet's undying sense of beauty and command of emotions, too, a reformer's practical aims, and a mystic's prayerful peace. And though he limns his works with dramatic touches of startling power and variety, yet with all the depth and scope of his sympathies, he never for a moment loses himself or forgets his purpose, which is to lead men to God.

As a philosopher and statesman, he had analyzed with keen precision the social institutions and political forces by which he found his time and country dominated: as a moralist and a theologian, he had grasped with a firmness that nothing could relax the essential conditions of human blessedness here and hereafter;

with an intense fixity of purpose almost without a parallel, he threw the passionate energy of his nature into the task of preaching the eternal truth to his countrymen, and through them to the world. Hence, the crushing blows dealt to the powers and institutions which he regarded as hostile to the well-being of mankind. He strove to teach his brothers that their true bliss lay in the exercise of virtue here, and the blessed vision of God hereafter. And as a step towards this he strove to make Italy one in heart and tongue, to raise her out of the sea of petty jealousies and intrigues into which she had been plunged; in a word, to make of her a free, united country, with a language all her own. These two purposes, supported by a never-dying zeal for truth and a never failing sense of duty, inspired the life and works of Dante Alighieri.

It is often held that a strong and definite didactic purpose must inevitably be fatal to the highest forms of art. Had Dante never lived, it would be hard to find a refutation of this thought; but in him it is the very combination said to be impossible that inspires and enthralls us. He was a perfect artist, guided in the exercise of his art by an unflagging intensity of moral purpose; a prophet, submitting his inspirations to the keenest philosophical analysis; a moralist and a philosopher, whose thoughts were fed by a prophet's clearness of vision and a poet's subtle and imaginative might. He was a philosopher, a prophet, a poet, supreme as each, and unique as a combination of them all.

We may note also that the poet was a contemporary of the best representatives of medieval philosophy, theology and chivalry. St. Thomas Aquinas, Roger Bacon, Blessed Albert the Great, and St. Louis, were still alive when Dante was born. Giotto was his companion and friend. Petrarch and Boccaccio were already living when he died. These facts indicate more clearly than could be done by a more elaborate statement the position he occupies at the very turning point of the Middle Ages, when the forces of modern life had just begun to rise. Accordingly Dante, in whom the truest spirit of the age is, as it were, "made of flesh," may be regarded as the great morning star of modern freedom and culture, or as the very type of medieval discipline, faith, and chivalry.

The future is always contained in the present, and it was just because Dante was the perfect representative of his own age that he became the herald and the prophet of the ages to

come, not, as one often imagines them, rebelling against and escaping from the overshadowing solemnity of the ages past, but growing out of them as their natural and necessary result.

In the year 1265 Dante was born in Florence, then one of the most beautiful and flourishing, but also one of the most factious and turbulent, of the cities of Europe. When he was scarcely nine years old an event occurred which furnishes us with the key to his whole life, and especially to his greatest work, "*The Divine Comedy*." This was his meeting with his Beatrice. In the full beauty of Italian springtime, May, 1274, Dante was taken to a garden party at the house of Falco Portinari. There he met, with other children of his own age, a girl named Beatrice, who became the loadstar of his life.

As to this lady, suffice it to say that she was a beautiful, sweet and virtuous girl; and that in her Dante found a solace midst the sorrows which harassed his days, a comfort, and a hope which formed the bond of unity in so many and so diverse thoughts and events of his life, from youth to old age. And all this in spite of the fact that Beatrice died while still young, and the wife of another man. Dante, however, was conscious that no evil propensity ever defiled his first sighs of love, and that there was no blemish in the demeanor of his beloved. From this first meeting, Beatrice was all in all to Dante, and like the lover that he was, he sought every opportunity of seeing the object of his affections. His love of her purified his heart. It impelled him to love his fellow playmates, and to forgive those who offended him. Beatrice became the symbol of all that was good on earth, and lifted his soul to the love of the highest good, which is God.

Of Dante's early education very little is known. At the age of eighteen he mastered the art of writing poetry. Nine years had passed since his first meeting with Beatrice. They knew each other only by sight, as neighbors, or as fellow citizens, but had never so much as spoken to each other. Yet she was the center of all his thoughts. He regarded her as the perfect ideal of growing womanhood, the flower of womanly courtesy, grace and virtue. When Beatrice was seventeen years old, while walking one day with two companions in a public place she met Dante and gracefully saluted him. It was the first time she had ever greeted him, and Dante's soul was stirred to its very depths. Not many

hours afterwards, the poet began the first of his sonnets which have come down to us, and perhaps the first he ever wrote.

By the time he had reached his twenty-sixth year he had gained quite a reputation as a poet, and the foremost men of Italy—artists, poets, scholars, and statesmen—sought his friendship. He was now a man, of keen intellect and extreme sensitiveness of feeling, loving equally to bury himself in mysticism and to struggle with the intricate problems of scholastic philosophy. He had a haughty contempt for all that degrades man, and gave up his dearest hopes rather than humble himself before injustice, but through all his fierce hatred of his enemies we can catch glimpses of a heart as tender and as easily touched as is the heart of a father. He was heedless of hot or cold weather, of food or sleep, or any bodily discomfort. A strange seriousness characterized him from boyhood to old age. In his bearing towards others he was somewhat hard of access and reserved, but to those who succeeded in gaining his affections he proved to be an exceedingly fascinating companion and the most faithful of friends.

Beatrice died in the year 1290. Dante, in his first passion of grief for her death, was profoundly touched by the pity of a gentle-eyed damsel whom many critics identify with Gemma Donati, the lady whom he married not long afterwards. This marriage was the result of the counsel of anxious friends who feared that the poet's health was being undermined by his intense grief. They hoped that domestic peace might console him for his irreparable loss. But in this they were mistaken, for though we have no reason to assume that his domestic life was unhappy, he found his sole consolation in the study of philosophy and theology.

About this time Dante began to take an active part in the politics of his city, and hence we see new powers and interests rising in his life which for a time disturbed its unity and purpose. While Beatrice lived, Dante's whole life was centered in her; she was the visible token of God's presence on earth, born to fill the world with faith and gentleness. But when she was gone other passions and pursuits disputed with her memory the first place in his heart. For a time he seemed, in losing sight of his loadstar, to lose the secret of the meaning of life, and to find himself suddenly floundering helplessly in the vortex of the moral, social and political disorder which swept over his country.



For Italy was then politically and socially divided, subdivided and floating in a sea of contradictions.

Yet Dante's soul was far too strong to be permanently overwhelmed. He had pierced down to the fundamental conditions of political and social welfare and found what was wanting in his own life and in that of his country. These conditions once ascertained, by means of a synthetic study he gradually arose from the whirlpool of disorder into which he had drifted. And when human philosophy had thus restored unity and concentration to his powers, then the image of the pure maiden who first awakened the powers of his soul, returned, glorified and transfigured, to guide him to the very pinnacle of undying fame. With his life thus strengthened and enriched, with a firm heart and a steady purpose Dante stood in the year 1300 at the helm of the state of Florence.

At this time two great political factions were disturbing the peace of Italy. Without going into detail, it will suffice merely to mention the central ideas of each party. The Ghibellines represented an aristocratic principle of government bordering on oppression, while the Guelfs represented a democratic principle verging upon chaotic and unbridled license. The Ghibellines longed for a national unity; the Guelfs aimed at local independence which tended to national disintegration. In the difficulties between the Popes and the German Emperors the Ghibellines sided with the Empero, the Guelfs with the Pope. Dante was by family tradition a Guelf, and Florence was the headquarters of Guelfism. The political complexion of the various cities of Italy changed with the varying success of these two parties. At times the Guelfs held the upper hand and drove out the Ghibellines; then the roles were changed and the Guelfs were exiled in their turn.

At the close of the thirteenth century the government of Florence was in the hands of the Guelfs. In 1300 Dante was elected one of the six priors, a body of men known as the "Seignori." These six priors divided the year into six equal periods, and each in his turn was supreme ruler of Florence for two months. Not long after Dante's election a new strife arose between the two political factions which led to his downfall. He was absent from Florence on an embassy to the Pope, in the interests of his party, when the Ghibellines seized the reins of government and exiled the six Guelf priors. Dante, being of

their number, was one of the first victims of this revolution. In January, 1302, he was condemned to pay a heavy fine and declared ineligible for office. Having refused to pay the fine, he was exiled from the city under pain of being burned alive if he should ever again enter its precincts.

This exile was a severe blow to Dante. He was still young, eager for honor and fame, and loved his native city with passionate devotion. And now, at one fell stroke, he was cut off from home and family, his property confiscated and he himself driven into ignominious banishment.

The supreme desire of his life for three years was to return to the city where his family and friends were. He wrote a letter to his fellow-citizens, full of pathetic pleadings, beginning with the words: "*O populi me quid feci tibi.*" But neither tears nor entreaties, threats nor open warfare, could unlock the gates of the city to him who was destined to be the glory not only of Florence but of all Italy. He finally accepted his exile as inevitable and adapted himself to his new conditions.

At the time of Dante's banishment in 1302 Gemma, his wife, on account of the tender age of her four children, could not follow her husband into exile. She remained in Florence with them and through the influence of her family managed to save some of their property. Dante never saw her again. His two sons and one of his daughters, Beatrice, joined him later in his exile. Meanwhile, he was left alone and became a homeless, almost destitute, wanderer.

The whole period of his exile is so obscured by conflicting traditions that it is difficult to separate the true from the fictitious. We are told that he visited nearly all the cities of Italy. France, Belgium, and England claim the honor of a visit from him. The poet's journeys during this period are shrouded in obscurity; yet from time to time the mists roll away and we catch a glimpse of the wanderer climbing some mountain pass, wending his way through plain and valley, or, like a lost soul from the spirit world, treading the crowded streets of some great city. In 1304 we find him in Bologna, where he remained for two years and whence he was again banished by a decree exiling all Florentines. Tradition tells us that he then visited Padua, studied at the University of Paris, crossed to England and studied at the University of Oxford. In 1311 he appears to have been at Milan, and the following year in Pisa, then in Umbria,

and again in Luca. In 1316 he turned up at Verona, and it is in this city, in the palace of Can Grande, that Dante found his first real refuge. It was in Verona that the story of Romeo and Juliet is said to have occurred in the year 1302, just fourteen years before Dante's arrival, and it is most probable that the poet who has immortalized the touching story of Francesca de Rimini and Paulus, knew also the story which forms the subject of Shakespeare's tragedy.

In the year 1316 Florence announced that all exiles would be allowed to return, but on humiliating conditions. These conditions were, first, that they should pay a large sum of money; secondly, that, wearing paper mitres on their heads as a sign of infamy, they should march to the Church of St. John and there make an offering for their crimes. Many yielded, and friends implored Dante to yield likewise. But the poet, preferring exile to self-abasement, even with return to Florence, wrote a noble and dignified letter refusing to accept such terms. "This is not the way to return to my country, oh my father. If another shall be found by you or by others which does not derogate from the fame or honor of Dante, that I will take with no lagging steps. But if Florence is entered by no other road, then never will I enter Florence."

It was in the city of Ravenna that Dante found his last refuge and final resting-place. Here in the palace of Guido Navello da Polenta, the ruins of which can still be seen, he secured a permanent home. From time to time he made journeys and visits to neighboring towns and villages. But his principal occupation was to spend whole days in the vast forest of pines, brooding over Florence and her civil wars, and composing cantos for his poem.

In the year 1321 the republic of Venice was at war with the lord of Polenta, and Dante was sent thither to sue for peace. While in Venice he was stricken with a malignant fever and, having refused to return to Ravenna by sea, was obliged to travel through low marshy lands whose infected atmosphere aggravated his illness. He died shortly after his arrival at Ravenna.

Dante's life is best portrayed in the trilogy composed of the "Vita Nuova," the "Convito" and the "Divina Commedia." In studying these works one can trace three distinct phases in the development of the character and genius of their author. In the "Vita Nuova" can be seen a young man full of enthusiastic devo-

tion to study and poetry, filled with a pure idealized love for a noble woman, and led by this love to a confiding faith in God, and to a love and charity for all the world.

In the "Convito" we see Dante full of passionate love for science, struggling with doubts, and relying on human reason as the sole means of obtaining happiness. This work is a scientific disquisition on the philosophy and science of the times, and in it we no longer find the simple faith and peace of the earlier days, but struggles and conflicts with temptation and grief.

The third and last part is shown in the "Divina Commedia." Here we find the poet crushed by sorrow and chastened by suffering, turning to God for peace and comfort, and having reached a haven of peace and quiet himself, sending out a warning cry to all men to save themselves from the consequences of sin and folly.

Nineteen years elapsed between Dante's exile and his death. They were years of varied hope, aspiration and endeavor, but, as they advanced, the main strength of the poet's life was concentrated more and more upon the idea already conceived in the years of mourning for Beatrice. "Forging on the anvil of incessant toil" the several parts of his great work, and "welding them into imperishable symmetry," the might of his intellect and the passion of his heart grappled during these nineteen years with the task of giving utterance to his vast idea. And line by line, canto by canto, the victory was won. He called this, his last and greatest way, "The Comedy." The world has pronounced it Divine, hence, the name "The Divine Comedy."

Dante has shown that his mother tongue could rise to loftier themes than Greek or Roman had ever touched, and had wrought out the fitting garb of a poem that stands alone in the literature of the world, for the scope and sublimity of its conception.

—Bro. Andrew Pope, O. P.