Chapter 1

Dante's Life and Works

Any study of Dante must begin with the man himself: there is no getting around him. Indeed, Dante has made it impossible for us *not* to look for him or read his work as autobiographical. In almost all of his writing, major and minor, there is the inescapable sense of a singular individual quite willing to self-dramatize. He talks about himself freely despite a professed hesitation about doing so (*Conv*. 1.2), or even about registering his own name (*Purg*. 30.62–3). Yet this demurral is pure smoke screen: no writer ever made such good use of the ''I'' as Dante. We have every right to hunt for hints of what he felt and thought, at least insofar as we can ever separate out the voices of poet and pilgrim from the ''real'' Dante Alighieri who crafted them both.

Domenico da Michelino understood this very well (see Figure 1). In 1465, the second centenary of Dante's birth, he was commissioned to produce a painting for the cathedral in Florence; it still hangs there, on the north wall of the Duomo's nave.[1] Michelino gives us the towering figure of the poet looking like a saint in a conventional religious painting. Instead of

holding an open Bible, however, he tenders the *Commedia*, its first page radiant with light. Both poet and text are turned to face his birthplace, which is crowded with the splendid monuments unknown in Dante's day but familiar to Michelino and his fellow-citizens two hundred years later. While the painter shows him looking leftward toward Florence, he points with his right hand to the open gates of Hell – a warning to those inside the city of the fate to befall any who ignore the ''scripture'' he holds out to them. This gigantic image of Dante is placed in a stylized wilderness that no doubt represents the exile to which Florence subjected him. In the rear of the painting we see the Mountain of Purgatory, and above it a suggestion of the heavenly spheres through which the pilgrim ascends in

Figure 1 Domenico da Michelino, ''Dante and his poem'' Alinari Archives, Florence

the *Paradiso*. There is no missing the fact, at least to the mind of one fifteenth-century artist, that the poet and his writing make a single picture.

The relevance of the man to the work is most obviously seen in the *Commedia*, in which Dante is both the narrator of the story (''the poet'') and the protagonist within the narrative (''the pilgrim''). This is also the case in his first book, the *Vita Nuova*, in which Dante-as-poet looks into his ''book of memory'' and, in both prose and poetry, meditates on the impact of a woman called Beatrice upon his youthful life. While the autobiographical thrust of Dante's other works is not so striking, it in fact characterizes *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, *Convivio*, and *Monarchia*, each of which will be touched on presently. His epistles, needless to say, are in some sense all about him. To different extents, then, everything Dante wrote presupposes the sheer drama of his life.

The Life Story

The poet's biography has been written many times over, starting a mere 20 years or so after his death. First there was the brief account by the great chronicler of Florence, Giovanni Villani (c.1348). Then, in about 1360, Giovanni Boccaccio circulated his treatise in praise of the poet, the *Trattatello in laude di Dante*.[2] To begin, Villani paints the portrait of a great citizen and polymath but also something of an antisocial snob: ''This Dante, because of his knowledge, was somewhat haughty and reserved and disdainful, and after the fashion of a philosopher, careless of graces and not easy in his converse with laymen'' (*DCH*, pp. 150–1). Boccaccio takes these unappealing attributes into account but accentuates the positive. He celebrates Dante the genius; he also gives us what becomes the received notion of what the poet looked like: ''His face was

long, his nose aquiline, and his eyes rather large than small; his jaws big, and the underlip protruding beyond the upper. His complexion was dark, his hair and beard thick, black, and curling, and his expression very melancholy and thoughtful'' (*DCH*, p. 163). This is the image, famously painted by Raphael, that remained fixed in people's minds until a painting thought to be by Giotto, presumably taken from life, was discovered in Florence in 1840 (see Figure 2). Suddenly, the brooding hook-nosed Dante, ''the mask of a corpse of 56,'' became a ''fine noble young man'' who might well have fought a battle on horseback or wooed a lady with sonnets (*DEL*, 2, p. 640).

Not much can be said securely about Dante's origins or early life. The Alighieri family was ''old,'' at least to the poet's mind. In *Paradiso* 15, Cacciaguida, his great-great-grandfather, traces the line back to the Roman Elisei clan, allegedly one of the founding families of Florence. Dante celebrates his

Figure 2 Detail of Dante Alighieri in *Paradiso*
Finsiel/Alinari Archives, Florence

ancestry throughout these cantos in the Heaven of Mars. Yet we also hear Cacciaguida noting that Dante's great-grandfather Alighiero *continues* to circle the Terrace of Pride centuries after his death (*Par.* 15.91–6) – a subtle indication that Dante came by his own enormous ego quite naturally. Nor are we allowed to miss Beatrice's indulgent smile at the pilgrim as he revels in his ''roots,'' or the voice of the poet, coming from off stage, remarking on how little ''nobility of blood'' turns out to matter (*Par.* 16.1–15). As usual, Dante has it both ways: he manages to be proud *and* humble at the same time.

About Alighiero Alighieri, Dante's father, the poet is completely silent. Neither the man nor his house seem to have been very important, though the properties he held both in the city and surrounding countryside were sufficient to underwrite Dante's Florentine life and creative work. In addition to being a notary, Alighiero seems to have functioned as a money-changer and lender, like Dante's uncle Brunetto and grandfather Bellicione. In a boom town like thirteenth-century Florence, steadily outgrowing its ancient walls and conducting trade with much of the known world, such a profession could be very lucrative. It was also vaguely shameful in an ostensibly Christian culture that professed to abhor usury.

The shadow of illicit paternal wealth would fall on Dante both before and after his exile. But it is also true that his father's massed resources enabled him after his 30th year to join a guild (physicians and apothecaries), to become active in the political life of the commune, and to devote his creative energies to poetry. There seems also to have been some military service in the 1289 Florentine campaign against the city of Arezzo, whose cavalry assault the poet recalls vividly in *Inferno* 22.4–9 (''I have seen / rangers and raiding parties galloping''), if in the hilarious context of mock epic.[3]

Of the poet's maternal lineage there is even less to say. Again according to Cacciaguida (*Par.* 15.136–8), the Alighieri

family name derived from Dante's mother's side. Bella died when her son was only six, and it's tempting to imagine the extraordinary warmth he accords to the mother–child relationship, especially in the latter part of the *Paradiso*, as compensation for this loss.

The other female important to Dante's early life was Gemma Donati, offspring of a far nobler family, to whom he was betrothed in 1277, when he was only 12. They were later married and together had four children, three boys (Giovanni, Pietro, and Jacopo) and a girl (Antonia, who assumed the name Beatrice when she became a nun). Boccaccio described the marriage as a disaster – a judgment that a fifteenth-century biographer, Leonardo Bruni, dismissed entirely. Who knows? In his writings Dante says nothing about either his wife or children. Adult sons were often forced to join their fathers in exile. Jacopo and Pietro, together with Antonia, seemed to have made that decision for themselves by going to Ravenna at what turned out to be the end of Dante's life. Gemma Donati, however, stayed in Florence. Two of the three sons went on to become interpreters of their father's writing: Jacopo wrote a commentary on the *Inferno* in Italian and Pietro a commentary in Latin on the entire *Commedia*. Pietro later moved to Verona, where his father had spent many years of his exile. He married, became a judge, and on at least one occasion performed a vernacular verse summary of the poem in what became the city's Piazza di Dante.

The Figure of Beatrice

Whatever Dante's marriage to Gemma Donati may have been, and whatever the strength of his ties to his children, the Florentine who made all the difference to his life was Beatrice. We have Boccaccio to thank for first identifying Beatrice as

Bice di Folco Portinari, a daughter of the Portinari and a Bardi by marriage, thus linking her to two prominent Florentine families. She died in 1290 at the age of 24. If Dante's beloved is indeed this same woman, then these bare facts are nearly all that can be reliably said about her. About the Beatrice Dante created, on the other hand, there is a good deal more to say, though infinitely less than one might like.

We have few clues about who she was apart from the lover who immortalized her. According to the *Vita Nuova*, an almost nine-year-old Dante first saw her on May Day 1274 when she was roughly the same age. Nine years later there was another meeting, and life changed irrevocably. Beatrice smiled and he was transfixed; she withheld her salutation, he fell into despair. Much of this is the overheated romanticism of ''courtly love,'' whereby a suitor bewails his inaccessible lady and talks a great deal about himself. When such narcissism is pointed out to the suffering Dante, he takes note and begins to write instead about his lady. He does so in ways that link her not merely to the angelic goddesses whom vernacular poets had hymned before, but, astoundingly, to Christ. This was either romantic hyperbole approaching irreverence or a new way of understanding what a beloved could be for a lover. As the *Vita Nuova* concludes, the young poet vows that someday he will write for Beatrice what no man had yet offered a woman in verse. Fifteen years later the *Commedia* made good on that promise.

The *Vita Nuova* was in circulation by 1295, when Dante turned 30. It consisted of many poems written earlier, independent of one another, but subsequently organized within an autobiographical prose narrative. In their compilation, they seemed freshly wrought to account for the miracle of Beatrice. In this somewhat odd collection of old and new, the author wears many hats: he is poet, memoirist, and literary critic of his own efforts. The intended audience seems to have been his peer group: young men fascinated by philosophy, physiology, and

the earlier vernacular poetry of Italy and Provence. First among them, and Dante's declared ''primo amico'' or best friend, was the poet Guido Cavalcanti: 10 years older, learned, sophisticated, well-born, and inclined to believe that Eros was more an affair of Mars than Venus – more likely to lead to madness and death than anything remotely like divine glory. Dante's *Vita Nuova*, which he refers to as his *libello* or little book, was ostensibly a gift to a mentor and the fruit of a powerful friendship. Yet it was as much written *against* Cavalcanti as for him.

The *Vita Nuova* established Dante – at least according to one of the poet's characters in the *Purgatorio* – as master of the ''dolce stil novo'' (*Purg*. 24.57), the sweet new style. What distinguished Dante from his literary circle was that he truly took note of what Love breathed within him and then wrote it down. His style might be his own, but (like the inspired authors of Scripture) his words ultimately came from beyond (*Purg*. 24.52–63).

What begins in the *Vita Nuova* as a claim for inspiration – Beatrice sends visions from Heaven that one day will be recorded in verse – then develops over the length of the *Commedia* into something infinitely more audacious. His recollections of the impact of Beatrice upon his youth goes on to become the *Commedia*'s journey to God. The lady not only leads him toward the beatific vision but commands him to write a work that will warn his readers of their headlong rush toward death: ''Take note; and even as I speak these words, / do you transmit them to those / who live the life that is a race toward death'' (*Purg*. 32.52–4). Dante is a prophet as well as a poet.

Political Life

The year 1295, when the *Vita Nuova* had its debut, also marks Dante's formal entrance into the civic and political world of

Florence. The commune had opened itself to men who were by no means from the elite.[4] Dante's family, like others neither aristocratic nor rich, allied themselves with the republican Guelph party (which looked to the papacy and the French for support of their interests) rather than the imperial Ghibellines (aligned with the Holy Roman Empire). By the time that Dante's membership in a guild gave him formal access to politics, Florence was entirely (and permanently) in the hands of the Guelphs. Yet this fact turned out to mean nothing for civic peace and stability.

In public records Dante appears as a member of various councils that played a part in governing the city. By 1300 – the designated year of the *Commedia*'s journey through the afterlife – he had sufficiently risen in the oligarchy of Florence to be elected to a two-month term as one of the six priors of the commune (one prior for each of the *sesti* or administrative jurisdictions of the city). During their time in office, the priors were sequestered in public quarters. This made sure they would be available for municipal business at all times; it also, no doubt, cut down on lobbying by their constituents. In one sense, this period marks a high point in Dante's life: no other Alighieri had risen to such an office or been given the public trust to this extent. In fact, however, his political success was the beginning of the end.

At this moment, the commune was about to be torn apart by conflict between the dominant Guelph party's two factions, the Bianchi or ''Whites'' and the Neri, or ''Blacks.'' Historians can find no clear cause for the split between the two in ideology, economic interest, or class (although the ''Blacks'' regarded themselves as more grand or better established than the allegedly upstart ''Whites''). Perhaps what pitted them against one another was what Dante decries throughout in the *Commedia* – a sheer bloody-mindedness, a resolute refusal of partnership no matter the consequences. Although local,

this Guelph civil war was connected to larger political strife involving the papacy of Boniface VIII, an increasingly powerful French nation state, and what was left of the Holy Roman Empire. To quell violence that threatened the city during their time in office, the Florentine priors agreed to banish the leaders of the contending factions for a cooling-off period. One of these, Corso Donati, was a relative of Dante's wife Gemma; another was his friend Guido Cavalcanti. This particular order, or at least the way it was carried out, was later said to unjustly favor one side (Cavalcanti's ''Whites'') over the other (Donati's ''Blacks''). Whether or not this perception was true, it had terrible consequences for the poet.

After his priorate, Dante continued to serve the commune in a number of ways. In April 1301 he was put in charge of a road-building project (for which he was later accused of graft); in June he debated against a proposal to assist Pope Boniface in his war against the Aldobrandeschi family. He was asked that September to participate in an embassy to the Vatican on behalf of the Florentine ''Whites.'' Nothing came of the mission. Boniface dismissed the rest of the company after a short time but kept Dante behind for months. As a result, he was powerless to participate in the November 1301 crisis within the commune. The ''Blacks'' were triumphant, property of the ''Whites'' was looted or burned, and a punishment was leveled against those who had served the commune in the past. Dante was among them.

By late January of 1302, he and three others were charged with barratry (trafficking in public offices), bribery, taking vengeance against the ''Blacks,'' and other unsubstantiated crimes. He was furthermore denounced for having militated against the papacy on account of its interference in Florentine life – an accusation that was incontrovertibly true! Because Dante did not reply to these charges in person, detained in Rome as he was by Boniface, his property was confiscated, he was exiled for

two years, and barred from ever again holding public office. Two months later, another decree condemned him and other former priors to be burned to death should they return to the commune. Others who shared his sentence eventually made their way back to Florence. They accepted the often humiliating terms extended to them and, as best they could, picked up the pieces of their lives. Such was also the case during an earlier period of turmoil for Dante's mentor Brunetto Latini, who went on to become an illustrious figure and office-holder within the city. But for complex reasons, no doubt a mixture of integrity and pride, Dante never went home.

The Work of Exile

Given the extraordinary mobility that characterizes our present-day global society, it may be hard to conceive what exile would have meant to a person as rooted as Dante.[5] Apart from the easily imagined trauma of being separated from family, possessions, and the taken-for-granted securities of daily life and routine, he was losing his identity too. Siena, where he took early refuge along with the many others banished by the new Black Guelph-dominated government, was notoriously an enemy of the Florentines: how could he take up residence *there*? More to the point, Dante did not come from that city or belong to its myth, any more than he did to the other places in north-central Italy he visited during an exile that lasted until his death in 1321 – almost 20 years in duration. In every case the local dialect was different, the food ''off,'' lodging temporary and belonging to someone else. Dante came to know only too well the words that Cacciaguida prophesizes:

> You shall leave everything that you love most dearly:
> this is the arrow that the bow of exile

shoots first. You are to know the bitter taste
of others' bread, how salt it is, and know
how hard a path it is for one who goes
descending and ascending others' stairs.
(*Par*. 17.55–60)

Cacciaguida goes on to say that among the many crosses to bear in exile, perhaps the heaviest is the company of those who suffered his fate but who had an entirely different heart. They wanted to destroy the city Dante had come to think of as an extension of his own self; they were a crowd that Cacciaguida dismisses as scheming and senseless, insane, completely ungrateful, and profane (*Par*. 17.61–9).

Throughout the *Commedia* the poet accuses Florence of being all these things (and more), so that it may appear that what distinguishes Dante from the ''senseless'' crowd is the unflappable conviction of his own righteousness. There is rage aplenty in the *Commedia*, but at the work's passionate core burns a frustrated love that refuses resignation and is incapable of the ''peace that passes understanding.'' Nor can we take comfort in Cacciaguida's final word: ''your honor will be best kept if your party is yourself'' (*Par*. 17.68–9). For a political animal like Dante, with his deeply held belief that to be truly human was to be a ''member incorporate'' of a community, the prospect of an existence alone – ''per te stesso,'' in Cacciaguida's words – was a kind of death sentence. Indeed, radical singularity is a state the poet will explore repeatedly throughout *Inferno*. It is Hell.

Dante's most radiant portrayal of civic life was his ancestor Cacciaguida's recollection of the commune in the good old days of the eleventh century: ''Florence within her ancient ring of walls . . . sober and chaste, lived in tranquility'' (*Par*. 15.97–9). Yet experience had taught him that the single city state, looking after its own self-interests and forever at odds

with its neighbors, was a recipe for ongoing disaster. The old dream of a Holy Roman Empire was rapidly fading; nonetheless, it held out hope for a political structure less selfish and disposed to violence, more directed to unity and common cause. Looking north, he found in Henry VII of Luxembourg someone to believe in and a cause to support, especially as his exile gave him little reason to expect from the city state anything other than cause for despair.[6]

Dante characterized his exile as the experience of being lost at sea. ''Truly,'' he wrote, roughly five years after leaving Florence, ''I have been a ship without a sail and without a rudder, cast about to different harbors and inlets and shores by the dry wind of wretched poverty'' (*Conv*. 1.3). He was a man without a country, as much beggar as pilgrim. Nautical images would later work their way into the *Commedia*, which begins in *Inferno* with the pilgrim likened to one escaped from a shipwreck at sea only to look back at the perilous waters he has somehow survived. In *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* Dante goes on to liken himself to a mariner (and his poem to a boat), who ultimately finds port in Heaven's harbor. The struggle of the exile, however, would be to transform the shipwrecked man into the triumphant navigator. He will be a new Jason (*Par*. 33.94–6) who not only sails over previously uncharted seas but manages against all odds to obtain the Golden Fleece – in this case, the *Commedia* itself.

Dante effected this transformation in stages, all the while tasting the saltiness of unfamiliar bread and climbing borrowed staircases in other peoples' houses. He discovered that writing was a way to compensate for his losses – and writing well the best revenge. He earned his living by making his verbal skills valuable to one noble host or another. But he could also capitalize on his uprooting from the hubbub of Florence to free himself from the demands of civic and family life. Tragedy had given him an opportunity to develop his thoughts into an impressive body of prose.

On Vernacular Eloquence and Philosophy for All

Perhaps as early as 1303, Dante took advantage of being ''one for whom the world is fatherland as the sea is for fish'' (*De vulgari* 1.6). In *De vulgari eloquentia*, he wrote a thesis on the current state of the vernacular and on the possibility of finding true eloquence not only in Latin, where everyone expected to find it, but in Provençal, French, and Italian. His advocacy of the mother tongue, commonly considered to be inherently inferior, was written in the superior language of Church, University, and Empire: he made his case for the vernacular in Latin. With a confidence that characterizes everything he writes, he surveys the existing dialects and finds each of them wanting. Along the way he issues gold stars and demerits to the poets of his day, and in the process creates a place for himself to shine and for his own version of the Florentine dialect to take center stage.

The *De vulgari* begins with a history of language from Eden to the present day; in its second book it discusses the legitimate subjects of serious literature (war, love, and righteousness). It also gives guidelines for style, and makes magisterial judgments about which words are to be considered inappropriate for worthy poets to use – a list of prescriptions Dante later feels quite free to violate in the *Commedia*. Whatever Dante imagined the treatise would be when completed, the *De vulgari* breaks off in mid-sentence in its second book. Either the project ran out of steam or he decided that the way to demonstrate the power of the vernacular was to write it very well.

Between 1304 and 1307, he turned to another project, the *Convivio* or ''Banquet.'' This work also stops before it is finished. Its introduction promises to make the High Table affair of philosophy accessible (this time in Italian) to the many vernacular ''illiterates'' who cannot read Latin. Fourteen

books were meant to follow, each one centered on a multi-stanza poem – a *canzone* – which would in turn provide a springboard for various kinds of analysis. As in the *Vita Nuova*, the author interprets his own poetry in prose commentary. He displays his vernacular eloquence in both linguistic modes, shining as lyric poet, philosopher, and literary critic.

But if the *Convivio* in its ''prosimetric'' joining of prose and poetry looks back to Dante's meditation on his experience of Beatrice, the new work also entails a sharp break with the past. In its first book, the anonymous ''gentle lady,'' who in the *Vita Nuova* offers the bereaved Dante consolation after the death of his beloved, is allegorized as Philosophy. In fact, as Dante says in an autobiographical aside, after the death of Beatrice he took up the study of philosophy (Boethius and Cicero) during a 30-month period of mourning. It was then that he frequented the monastic ''schools of the religious'' established in Florence by the Franciscans, Dominicans, and Augustinians.[7]

This study led him to a change of mind and heart: seasoned by grief, he would put away childish things and leave Beatrice for Lady Philosophy. The puerile romance of the *Vita Nuova* would become the serious business of what it means to *know*. Following the hard road of reason, it was possible to come to the philosopher's feast. Indeed, Dante would prepare a banquet open to ''princes, barons, knights, and many other noble folk'' along with clerics and scholars, and to ''women no less than men, a vast number of both sexes, whose language is not that acquired through education, but the vernacular [volgari, e non literati]'' (*Conv*. 1.9).[8] Philosophy was God's gift and by pursuing it a person could attain faith, hope, and charity – could reach a ''celestial Athens'' (*Conv*. 3.14).

One could also, as *Convivio* 4 demonstrates by repeated reference to Virgil's *Aeneid*, learn much about virtuous living by turning to the classics. In the first place, virtue should not be

thought of as having to do with ancestry or handed down from generation to generation like the family silver. Rather it is the achievement of the earnest individual – the most adept readers of the *Convivio*, say, or the noble but not nobly born Dante. Aristotle is invoked first of all, but so too are Cicero and Virgil, Solomon and Boethius. The same imperial Rome that Augustine (d. 430) campaigned against so ferociously in his *City of God Against the Pagans* also became an ideal *Romanitas* to emulate. The student of philosophy had much to learn from the empire of Augustus, which was the universal authority God chose to pacify the world in preparation for the Incarnation of Christ. Indeed, Rome is part of a providential plan, and the extraordinary deeds of her great citizens were ''not done without some light from the divine goodness over and above their natural goodness'' (*Conv*. 1.4).

Universal Empire

Dante continued thinking about Rome and the virtues of empire in a later work, *Monarchia*, written some time between 1309 and 1313. It was at time when he was also busy with the *Commedia*. Likening himself to Daniel in the lion's den or singly facing off against a pagan ruler, he confronts the papacy and those who supported its temporal claims. He argues for an imperial government that would restore peaceful order to an Italy torn apart by factionalism. The Emperor has a God-given role to play and the earthly city a ''beatitude'' of its own that could flourish if spared some sword-wielding pope who had abandoned his pastoral staff. Let the Church lead people to life hereafter and the emperor, duly instructed by the pope in things eternal, enable them to live at peace in the here and now. Dante had hoped that Henry VII of Luxembourg would be this figure, but Florentine resistance to imperial claims and

Henry's early death prevented the dream from coming true after 1313. Nonetheless, it remained a dream.

Not surprisingly, the *Monarchia*, written in Latin and therefore certain to come to the attention of the authorities, was publicly burned in 1329. It was put on the Counter-Reformation's Index of Prohibited Books and kept there until 1921, when Benedict XV declared that, on the contrary, it articulated the *proper* relationship between Church and state.[9] The Pontiff was perhaps reflecting the ''concordat'' that the Vatican would enter into with a Fascist government. Benito Mussolini, who was said to read a canto of the *Commedia* every night before sleep, also loved the proimperial *Monarchia*, with its mysterious call for a DVX (*Purg*. 33.43), a leader sent from God who would redeem an Italy otherwise hopelessly divided.

The Birth of the Commedia

During the first decade of his exile from Florence, Dante was extraordinarily productive as a poet, literary critic, philosopher, and political thinker. His two works dating from this period, however, remain incomplete. Was this because he lost heart in attempting to carry out these grand projects or because something else, some new endeavor, claimed his attention? It is impossible to answer this question definitively, but easy to see the *Commedia* as a reprise of his previous works, which are deployed and often quite dramatically reworked within its three canticles and one hundred cantos. The poem's encyclopedic scope embraces almost every topic of discourse that Dante had thus far engaged – poetry and prose, literary history and theory, philosophy and political science – and always relates such objective concerns to the subjective realities of his own life.

Yet far more impressive than the poem's continuity with the past is a sense of *novità*, of the new, that emerges in the *Commedia*. Instead of writing primarily in prose, with sonnets or canzoni worked into a narrative framework, Dante gives us a sustained narrative poem, in which the poet's singular voice constantly gives way to the speech of others. Although it makes brief forays into other languages (Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and Provençal), by the poet's death in 1321 its more than 14,000 lines constituted the most extended example of Italian poetry. The distinctive *terza rima* rhyme scheme (aba, bcb, cdc) that propels the narrative forward is Dante's invention. No verse form moves so wonderfully, says poet James Merrill: ''Each tercet's first and third line rhyme with the middle one of the preceding set and enclose the new rhyme-sound of the next, the way a scull outstrips the twin, already dissolving oar-strokes that propel it'' (*PD*, p. 229). Also innovative are the *Commedia*'s wide mixture of styles, plenitude of distinct voices, and omnivorous appetite for virtually the whole of human experience (both sacred and secular). Then there is the architectural design of the entire work, whether detected on the minute level of end rhymes or in the broader reach of recurring themes and motives. Despite deep connections to the past, the *Commedia* is truly something new under the sun.

Vision or Brainstorm?

It was some time after 1308 that Dante began work on what would be his taskmaster for the rest of his life. We can only guess the poem's genesis. Perhaps it represented the deliberate resolution of a life crisis, an allegorical account of his rediscovery of Beatrice, his new appreciation of the writing of Virgil, and his personal synthesis of everything he had read and

thought thus far. But surely its origins were more spectacular than any premeditated decision about ''what to write next.''

Did Dante have a brainstorm and ''see the light'' in a visionary explosion of imagination? Or was there some kind of rapture like the prophet Ezekiel's: ''And the likeness of a hand was put forth and took me by a lock of my head: and the spirit lifted me up between the earth and heaven, and brought me in the vision of God into Jerusalem'' (Ezek. 8:3)?[10] The author of the *Commedia* wanted his readers to believe something like this, to think that, like Ezekiel in the Old Testament or John the Divine in the New, he had been raised up by the hand of God, and received Heaven's commission to tell what he'd seen and heard. Even without giving credence to such rapture, one can see the poem as an extended prophetic ''call'' narrative in which the poet, like his scriptural predecessors in both testaments, is told to compose a divine message in his own words – in his case not in Hebrew, Greek, or Latin but in Italian.

Dante wrote when divine visions were by no means unusual. Indeed, a claim of spiritual illumination was often used by lay people to authorize their otherwise disregarded speech. No doubt some of Dante's contemporaries, like the credulous ladies of Verona mentioned by Boccaccio in his *Trattatello*, took the poet literally. Observing the somber Florentine making his way, they supposed that his grave mien and dark complexion were the result of time spent in ''the heat and smoke down there.'' ''Do you see the man who goes down to Hell, and comes again at his pleasure, and brings tidings of them that be below?'' (*DCH*, p. 163). Reputedly, they would cross to the other side of the street when the poet came along.

The earliest commentators, such as Dante's son Pietro, were at pains to maintain a skeptical distance from such literalism. According to them, the poet was speaking metaphorically, as poets do, and was therefore only feigning

the journey. When his father says that he descended into Hell, clarified Pietro, ''he means that he descended mentally in imagination and not physically'' (*DCH*, p. 136). Others finessed the issue and concentrated on the ultimate source of Dante's vision – God. According to Guido da Pisa, Dante was another prophet Isaiah, another Psalmist David: ''for he was indeed the pen of the Holy Spirit, with which the Holy Spirit wrote speedily for us both the penalties of the damned and the glory of the blessed'' (*DCH*, p. 127).

Textual Inspiration for the Poem

Perhaps fantasy can get us closer to the origins of the *Commedia* than anything else. Imagine it this way. Years into an exile that Dante has realized may never end, he paces the precincts of somebody else's garden. He is in a state of intense turmoil not only over his larger reversal of fortune but more specifically over his inability to bring to fruition the two works he had been laboring over. Suddenly – it is not clear whether the sound is in his own head or comes from the house next door – he hears a voice singing the same words over and over again: ''Take it and read, take it and read.'' Remembering Augustine's famous garden moment in Milan he decides that whatever these strange words may mean, they are meant for him: a command to be taken literally. Again like Augustine, he rushes to retrieve the book he had distractedly set aside some time earlier, thinking that it might lead him through his present impasse and on to the great work he's meant to do.

And what might that book have been? Given Virgil's prominence in the *Commedia*, both as a guide throughout two-thirds of the journey and as an unmistakable subtext for the whole work, many have assumed that the *Aeneid* (with its hero's

descent to the realm of the dead) is the ''missing link'' between *De vulgari* and *Convivio* and his poem. At least one scholar argued that Dante's impassioned reflection on the *Aeneid* in *Convivio* 4 primed him ''to go himself, as a poet, to Hell and Heaven.'' [11]

For those looking for a ''smoking gun,'' there are other possibilities. Might it be Augustine's *Confessions* that inspired Dante's imagination, with its exploration of an author's double identity – the past self and the present, who records a tale of transformation? A good case could be made as well for the poet's rediscovery of the *Vita Nuova* and therefore of Beatrice. Was it time to make good on the promise that ends his youthful *libello* ''to compose concerning her what has never been written in rhyme of any woman''? Nor should we pass over the many accounts of visions or voyages to the afterlife that date from the third century to the thirteenth. This popular genre – *St. Patrick's Purgatory*, for instance, or the Visions of Thurkill and of Tundale – was much out of fashion by the time Dante turned to the *Commedia*. He might have determined to revive it, however, grafting its low-brow medieval sensibility onto the epic high culture of the classical *Aeneid*. Then again, he may have found in the Latin translation of the Arabic *Book of the Ladder* an account of Muhammed's night journey to Heaven and Hell that he could in his turn use for his known purposes – an ''infidel'' text to work along with all the other sources that produced the *Commedia*.

Finally, there's a chance that Dante took up and read a book he had always known but never before experienced at such a depth – God's Book, the Bible. Not that there would necessarily have been a single passage to inspire his future course, as was the case with Augustine, when a verse from Paul's Epistle to the Romans changed his entire life. Instead, the *Commedia* takes shape around the entire biblical canon. Christ's descent into Hell and resurrection on the third day makes possible

Dante's own story of redemption. Israel's exodus out of Egypt transfigures the tragedy of his exile into deliverance. Paul's rapture to the ''third heaven'' (2 Cor. 12:2) provides a precedent for his own vision and ''apostolate.'' In this light, the poem may not only be his personal letter to the world – in which accounts would be settled, rough places made plain, the mighty brought low – but also, despite the wild audacity of the move, a third and newer Testament.

Once undertaken, the writing of the *Commedia* consumed the rest of Dante's life. Whatever he did in addition to this work, including *Monarchia* and a Latin lecture on geology (*Questio de aqua et terra*, 1320), did not interrupt the flow of cantos. We assume they came forth one after the other, in elaborate cross-referencing, and according to whatever master plan the poet *must* have had in mind from the beginning.

The Florentine chronicler Villani reports Dante to have been a scholar gypsy, first in the university ''at Bologna, and afterwards at Paris, and in many parts of the world'' (*DCH*, p. 149); there is also an English legend about an Oxford visit no doubt intended to counter the French connection. At Verona or Ravenna there would be letters (in Latin) to write for his host, personal favors to carry out, conversations to join, intellectual entertainment to provide.

There were also his own Latin epistles to compose – his dogged attempts, no matter how disenfranchised and beside the point he may have been, to sway the course of history. Thus he urges the Italian cardinals in Avignon's ''Babylonian Captivity'' to bring the seat of the Church back to Rome, and, in astonishingly biblical language, charges Henry VII of Luxembourg to fulfill his divine calling as Holy Roman Emperor by taking Florence by storm: ''Behold now is the accepted time.'' The originals of these letters were apparently beautiful to behold. Although there is no extant record of Dante's penmanship, Leonardo Bruni in the fifteenth century noted that

''his handwriting was perfect, and his letters were slender, long and very accurate.''[12] Toward the end of his life there was also a poetic exchange in Latin with an admiring but disgruntled Bolognese scholar, Giovanni del Virgilio, who took Dante severely to task for wasting his great talent on the paltry vernacular.

Given the monumental weightiness of the *Commedia* – its massive architecture, density of reference and allusion, and mind-boggling coherence – the actual process of writing the text seems no less mysterious than its origins. We know nothing of Dante's personal library or how he might have had access to the myriad works he cites.[13] No doubt his memory was prodigious, as well as his ability to compose in his head, without resort to the endless ''vision and revisions'' made possible for us by computers and cheap paper. Moving from place to place, beholden to the generosity and whims of other people, it is difficult to conceive how he managed to sustain so complex a project for almost two decades, a work that never relents and seldom slacks off, that only grows in power.

Early Circulation of the Poem

After Guttenberg's invention of moveable type, the *Commedia* first appeared in print (and from three different presses) in 1472. Dante himself, however, belonged to the earlier manuscript era of book production and therefore released his text in installments during his own lifetime.[14] In this way he was ''present'' in Florence despite his actual absence from the city. Yet it was Bologna, with its venerable university and population of learned men, that was the earliest center of Dante ''diffusion.''

Boccaccio says that the poet made his work available to copyists in fascicles or *quadernetti,* little unbound booklets of

between six to eight cantos. According to John Ahern, a scholar who has done much to help us understand the material production of the *Commedia*, Dante seems to have circulated installments of his work so as to achieve a rapid, economical reproduction:

> Although friends and family may have assisted him in producing such copies, given his relative poverty and isolation from major centers of book production, it is likely that he himself produced most of the copies that he sent out – on parchment (not paper) and in a double column format that would present, on two sides of a page, an entire canto.[15]

By late 1314, the whole of the *Inferno* was available; by autumn of 1315, the *Purgatorio*. The *Paradiso* was only just finished at the time of Dante's death in 1321, and most probably the first complete, bound edition of all hundred cantos was either the one made immediately by the poet's sons or the volume they sent to Dante's last patron, the lord of Ravenna, in 1322. Bound copies of the entire *Commedia* would have been very expensive and therefore quite rare. For this reason, the extraordinarily large number of early fourteenth-century book manuscripts that survive – 827, by one count – were most likely the work of enthusiastic readers who copied successive *quadernetti* for themselves.[16]

The *Commedia* was an immediate hit, and not only among the 7 percent of the total population who were the *literati*. These would have included judges, notaries, lawyers, civic administrators, doctors, and upper-level teachers; yet we also have indications that merchants (without much formal schooling) not only knew the poem but could quote from it.[17] So too the Italian Jewish community: from Emmanuel of Rome we have a sonnet on Dante's death and a Hebrew account, the *Mabberet ha-Tofet weha-Eden*, that tells of a journey

through Hell and Paradise revealing the strong influence of the *Commedia*.

It was to assist this diverse group of readers that the commentary tradition came into being, starting almost immediately after the poet's death with his sons, Jacopo and Pietro. More skillful interpreters were quick to join in on the task of explication, to shed light on the poem's amalgam of philosophical and religious tradition, politics and literature. They were also keen to defend Dante's decision to write a narrative poem aimed toward the widest possible audience. And popular it was. Interest in the *Commedia* transcended the boundaries separating Guelph and Ghibelline, laypeople and clergy, those with impressive education and those with little at all.

Not that everyone was pleased with Dante's appeal to what turned out to be a mass audience. Giovanni del Virgilio, his sometime correspondent, was particularly fierce in this regard. Why should Dante waste his talent on a lay (or popular) song – *carmine laico* – written in a vulgar language that had thousands of idioms but no standards? It certainly had no credibility among the learned (like del Virgilio) who believed that Latinists should be the *Commedia*'s intended audience because they alone were sufficiently erudite to meet its demands. In the opening volley of a poetic debate he carried on with Dante he implores, ''Cast not in prodigality thy pearls before the swine, or load the Muses with garb unworthy of them'' (*DCH*, p. 106).

Dante's response might well have been that he wanted a much larger audience than the *literati* could provide. He hoped his work would touch the blacksmiths and donkey-drivers, fishwives and merchants who might come to know the *Commedia* second-hand. It did not matter that they could not actually read the text; after all, poems were songs – cantos and *canzoni* – meant to be sung or performed in dramatic recitation. Such delivery is precisely what we see in *Purgatorio*

2, for instance, when Casella takes the stage. Singing a poem from *Convivio* 3, ''Amor che ne la mente mi ragiona'' (''Love that discourses to me in my mind''), he enchants the newly arrived penitents at the base of Mount Purgatory not only with Dante's words but no doubt with his own mesmerizing rendition.

By contrast, the poet Petrarch complained to Boccaccio about how the ''unskilled tongues of [Dante's] admirers defiled the poem'' when they sang or declaimed it. Observing how familiar the ignorant marketplace masses (*idiotae*) were with Dante, Petrarch proclaimed himself free of any personal envy at his distinguished predecessor's success with the crowd. He dismisses ''the applause and hoarse murmuring of dyers, drapers, shopkeepers, thugs, and their ilk'' (*DCH*, p. 156). Such disdain seems like high-brow contempt for the medieval equivalent of a best seller.

The public was of a different mind. In 1373, Florentines of all sorts and conditions asked for a public reading of the poem to be followed by detailed commentary. They obviously wanted to applaud it all the more and knew they needed help. The commune complied with their wishes and Boccaccio was the obvious choice for the task. Many of the stories in his renowned vernacular collection, the *Decameron*, owed their origins to characters and episodes that first appeared in the *Commedia*. Furthermore, he had written his biography of the poet and even put together an anthology of his poetry. By popular demand, therefore, Boccaccio began a cycle of performance and exegesis of the poem at the church of San Stefano di Badia. Although he covered only about half of the *Inferno*, his effort became an institution.

Thus began the *lectura Dantis* tradition that continues till this day, not only in Florence and other cities in Italy but indeed throughout the world. In New England, for instance, there are several long-standing groups, usually led by local academics, now working their way through *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*. Accord-

ing to the website of San Francisco's venerable Shrine Church of Saint Francis (http://www.shrinesf.org/lecturadantis.htm), ''The *Lectura Dantis* group meets Wednesday evenings at 7:30 PM in the basement of the church for informal discussion. There are no formal writing assignments or tests. Anyone is welcome.''

Not everyone acclaimed the poet as ''divine.'' Some clerics thundered from their pulpits against his flights of fancy. The Dominican Guido Vernani went so far as to condemn Dante as a ''vessel of the Devil'' and ''a man who wrote many fantastic things in poetry, a verbose solipsist [who] fraudulently seduces not only sickly minds but even zealous ones to the distraction of salutary truth'' (*DE*, p. 855). The *Commedia*'s vivid presentation of the life to come apparently threatened to supersede authorized versions of the same. Certainly few in ecclesiastical authority would take kindly to Dante's withering portrayal of the Church and its hierarchy.

It is significant nonetheless that the first public exposition of the *Commedia* took place in a church. In its day, the poem was the only vernacular work to be given the kind of commentary treatment otherwise reserved for the Bible and such ''canonical'' classical authors as Virgil. It was second only to the Bible in its fourteenth-century proliferation, as we can tell by the number of early extant manuscripts and the sheer volume of *Commedia* citations in other works. Many of these manuscripts, like the printed editions that soon followed them, are gorgeously illustrated and embellished; others, like the 1502 ''portable Dante,'' presented the printed text in a format similar to the compact, one-volume Bible produced in Paris in the early thirteenth century and used throughout Europe by students and preachers alike. By the mid-sixteenth century these associations with Holy Writ became official. In 1555, the one-word title that Dante gave to his poem, *Commedìa*, was emended with the adjective ''Divina.'' Ever since it has been

customary to refer to the poem as the *Divine Comedy*. No doubt the poet would be very pleased.

How did Dante persevere with a project that, by his own account, made him ''lean through these long years'' (*Par*. 25.3)? In addition to returning his readers to the true way, he would write a vernacular poem so astonishing that it leaves all others, even the *Aeneid*, in the dust. His ''song of myself'' would make the fame-bedazzled Ovid, another of his ancient models, seem a shrinking violet. He also wrote a poem that he believed had a divine mission to reform the world and transform the reader. It is not necessary to *believe* Dante's claims, of course, when reading his work. He can be enjoyed entirely as a word magician without being heeded as a prophet. Yet no one remains unchanged by an encounter with the *Commedia*. It gets under the skin, into the blood, like few other texts. There are consequences to picking it up. Let the reader beware.