

MEDIÆVAL DANTE AS A GREAT MODERN FORCE

Italy's Celebration of the Six Hundredth Anniversary of His Death Renews Interest in His Brilliant, Varied Career

Richard Le Gallienne, English poet and critical writer, who has long been domiciled in New York city, where the bulk of his mature writing has been accomplished.

Poet of To-day Pays Tribute in Unmeasured Terms to Genius Whose Works and Deeds Survive the Ages

By RICHARD LE GALLIENNE.

JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL in his fine essay on Dante—none finer has been written—recalling the many other great figures which have made Florence illustrious, says: "To an American there is something supremely impressive in this cumulative influence of a past full of inspiration and rebuke, something saddening in this repeated proof that moral supremacy is the only one that leaves monuments and not ruins behind it." It is this "moral supremacy," his moral and spiritual greatness, that has made Dante a unique figure among the poets of the world. When Italy celebrates, on September 14, the six hundredth anniversary of Dante's death, it will not be merely the memory of the poet of "The Divine Comedy" she will be celebrating, but the memory of her first great patriot, the patriot at the white fire of whose lonely spirit the undying flame of Italian freedom has ever since renewed itself.

Florence Craves the Poet Dead; Ravenna Holds His Ashes

Some other great poets may be held representative of their country, Homer of Greece, Shakespeare of England, Burns of Scotland, but none of these has been part and parcel of the national life in the same way as Dante. He might almost yet be regarded as a political issue; and one wonders if the demand so often through those six centuries made in vain by Florence of Ravenna for the return of his sacred ashes will be made once more this coming September. In this respect his fate, indeed, is curiously parallel to the legendary story of Homer, embodied in the old rhyme:

Seven Grecian cities strove for Homer dead
Through which the living Homer begged his bread.

For the man in the street he is, doubtless, first of all, as in his later years of exile he was to the citizens of Verona, "the man who has been in hell." So the women of Verona pointed him out to their children as he passed ansterly by: the author of the "Inferno," the terrific describer of hell. The melodramatic genius of Doré has helped to fix that stamp upon him. The "Purgatorio" and "Paradiso" are comparatively little read, and the Dante who, out of his suffering, finally wrought that peace with God, in which was revealed to him the mystic harmony of the universe, is largely forgotten in the tragic, unbreakable exile.

But now was turning my desire and will,
Even as a wheel that equally is moved,
The Love that moves the sun and other stars.

But there are, of course, three Dantes: Dante the great lover, Dante the great patriot, Dante the great poet. The man who had been to hell, he who loved Florence so well as to be called, beyond all others, "The Florentine," was also the lover of Beatrice, he who from his ninth year to his last breath, kept before the eyes of his soul the face of one beloved girl, Dante and Beatrice! We say the names together as we say "Romeo and Juliet." To be so great a lover, so great a patriot, so great a poet—has been given to none but Dante. So is he unique among the historic figures of the world. The facts of Dante's life have been so often told that it may hardly seem necessary to tell them again. But a general familiarity with the lives of great men is somewhat of a polite assumption, and even for those who know, or once have known, it is well that such memorial occasions as this of Dante's death six hundred years ago should be used not merely for refreshing our memories, but for refreshing our spirits by the recital and contemplation of the great story of a great man.

Born 600 Years Ago,

Dante Is Still an Issue

Dante (Durante, by contraction Dante) degli Alighieri, was born at Florence in May, 1265. The exact day is not known, but it was probably "about the middle music of the May." He came of an ancient family that for some generations had belonged to the burgher class. His father was a lawyer of some account. The family name of his mother, the second wife of his father, is not recorded. She is known simply as Donna Bella, and bore her husband one son, Dante, and a daughter. The family was in a respectable position, and Dante received an excellent education, embracing all the learning of his time, under the tutelage of the famous scholar Brunetto Latini, to whom he refers with great affection, and particularly as one who had "taught him how man eternalizes himself." In addition to his academic studies he is supposed to have had a knowledge of drawing—Giotto was a friend of his youth—and Browning in his famous poem "One Word More" has retold how, on the anniversary of the death of Beatrice, he "prepared to paint an angel."

Dante's own account in "The New Life" ("Vita Nuova") runs thus: "On that day which fulfilled the year since my lady had been made of the citizens of eternal life, remembering me of her as I sat alone, I took myself to draw the resemblance of an angel upon certain tablets. And while I did thus, chancing to turn my head, I perceived that some were standing beside me to whom I should have given courteous welcome, and that they were observing what I did; also I learned afterwards that they had been there a while before I perceived

them. Perceiving whom, I arose from salutation, and said: "Another was with me." His friendship with the musician Casella, "met in the milder shades of purgatory" suggests a knowledge of music also. The poets, Guido Cavalcanti, and Cino di Pistoria, were his intimate friends, and, generally, his youth was lived amid the cultivated, aristocratic society characteristic of Florence. His family was a part of the social life of the noble and wealthy of the city, and it was when, a little boy of nine, his father had taken him to a May feast given in the year 1274 by one of the principal citizens, Folco Portinari, that his eyes first fell on Beatrice, the daughter of his host, she being also at the beginning of her ninth year, as he at the end of his—a fact in which Dante finds deep mystic significance. The story of that first meeting, and of the whole springtide of Dante's passion is told in the "Vita Nuova," a book filled, as none other in literature, with the awe and wonder and holiness of first love. This brief, familiar quotation from Rossetti's exquisite translation, is all I may allow myself here:

"Her dress, on that day, was of a most noble color, a subdued and goodly crimson, gridded and adorned in such sort as best suited with her very tender age. At that moment, I say most truly that the spirit of life, which hath its dwelling in the secret chamber of the heart, began to tremble so violently that the least pulses of my body shook therewith; and in trembling it said these words: 'Ecce deus fortior me, qui veniens dominabitur mihi'—Here is a deity stronger than I; who, coming, shall rule over me."

A Love Story the World Has Preserved for Centuries

There is no evidence that Dante's love was returned, rather the contrary—for, on the occasion of a marriage feast, years after, when both had grown to young manhood and womanhood, Dante's confusion at the sight of her was, he records, a matter of mirth for her and her friends. Otherwise, she seems to have been unconscious or unregarding of his love. Their meetings seem to have been few and casual, passing glimpses of her in the street, or in church, or at a feast. And then she married, to die soon after. Of such slight material was this great love story made, the creation of a great poet's dreaming and adoring heart, for whom, as the years went by, Beatrice was more and more to grow the hallowed symbol of the mystic, immortal beauty in the universe.

Dante was himself soon to marry. But two years after Beatrice was "desired in the high heaven" (1322) he married Gemma, daughter of Manetto Donati, a relative of Corso Donati, afterward one of Dante's bitterest enemies. There is no reason for thinking the marriage otherwise than happy, and there came of it two sons and two daughters—one of whom was named Beatrice. It would seem—as, at all events, it is romantic to imagine—that this daughter Beatrice was his companion at the last, when he died in exile at Ravenna; for it is on record that, after his death, she took the veil, and died, a nun, in that city. It was to this daughter, thirty years after her father's death, that the Republic of Florence, or one of its guilds, offered the first sign of its repentance by sending, through the hands of his biographer, Boccaccio, a gift of ten golden florins. And now let us briefly outline the series of events which made Dante an exile from Florence—"exul immeritus" as he was fond of prefacing his letters—that Florence of which he scornfully describes himself in the original title of his "Divine Comedy" as "a Florentine by birth, but not in morals." (It is scarcely necessary to say that Dante was a good later.)

Complicated as our American politics may seem they are simplicity itself compared with the politics of Italy in Dante's time and, for that matter, ever since. This passage from Lowell, however, gives a clear general outline for our guidance. Long before Dante's birth, "the rival German families of Welfs and Weibolgens had given their names, softened into Guelph and Ghibellini to two parties in northern Italy, representing respectively the adherents of the Pope and of the Emperor, but serving very well as rallying points in all manner of intermediary and subsidiary quarrels. The nobles, especially the greater ones—perhaps from instinct, perhaps in part from hereditary tradition, as being more or less Teutonic by descent—were commonly Ghibellines or Imperialists; the bourgeoisie were very commonly Guelphs or supporters of the Pope, partly from natural antipathy to the nobles and partly perhaps because they believed themselves to be espousing the more purely Italian side. Sometimes, however, the party relation of nobles and burghers to each other were reversed, but the names of Guelph and Ghibelline always substantially represented the same things."

For sixty years before Dante's birth a private feud such as that of Montague and Capulet in "Romeo and Juliet" had involved Florence in the larger struggle of Guelph and Ghibelline, with much bloody fighting and many changes of government. At length, in 1282, the Guelphs had temporarily gained the upper hand, and a form of republic was organized, the officers of which were chosen from the various guilds and were called "priors." Of these there were six, holding office for two months. One of these guilds of "the greater arts" was termed "speziall"—being composed of "druggists and dealers in all manner of Oriental goods, and in books." Of this guild Dante became a member, and by vir-



due of this membership he held from June 15 to August 15 the office of "prior," though for several years previous his voice had been masterfully heard in the councils of the city. He had also fought in the famous battle of Campaldino (1289), in which the Ghibellines were utterly routed; but civic warfare was soon to break out again under other names. The quarrel of the Bianchi and Neri (the Whites and the Blacks), two noble families of Pistoia, spread to Florence, where already the Cerchi and Donati were biting their thumbs at each other. The Donati took the side of the Blacks, the Cerchi of the Whites. Pope Boniface in vain attempted mediation, but Dante and his fellow "priors" banished the heads of the two parties in different directions from Florence. The Blacks then appealed to Charles of Valois, who with the consent of the Pope, took possession of the city, with the result that 600 Whites were condemned to exile. Dante, with four other Whites, was summoned before the podesta on a trumped up charge of peculation in his office, condemned to a large fine and two years' exile. Dante at the time (January 27, 1302) was at Rome on an embassy, on setting out upon which, tradition says, he had laughingly remarked: "If I go, who remains? and if I stay, who goes?" He ignored his sentence, and on the 10th of March following he and fourteen others were condemned to be burned alive should they venture within the boundaries of the wrathful republic. Dante never saw his beloved city again. Then began his wanderings, and thus, as he says in the opening lines of the "Inferno," at the age of 37.

In the midway of this our mortal life,
I found me in a gloomy wood astray.

Poet Always Yearned For Beloved Natal City

But as Beatrice though dead still lived on in the inner shrine of his spirit, so he carried Florence in his heart every step of his pilgrimage, keenly watchful of her turbulent fortunes from afar, and enlarging his dream of her into a dream of a united northern Italy which was not to be fulfilled for another five hundred years. In pursuit of this he joined himself with the Ghibelline party, not from any motives of revenge, but because its character had changed. It was no longer a danger to the republican cities of northern Italy. They had now nothing to fear from the nobles, but most to fear from their own rivalries, and it seemed to Dante that their only hope of unity lay with the Ghibellines, led by some strong prince, who, "united in spiritual harmony with the Vicar of Christ, should show for the first time to the world an example of a government where the strongest force and the highest wisdom were interpenetrated by all that God had given to the world of piety and justice." "In this sense, and in no other," adds one of Dante's finest commentators, A. J. Butler, "was Dante a Ghibelline." This prince he thought he described in Henry of Luxembourg, who in 1308 was elected Holy Roman Emperor, and to whom he appealed in a noble letter still extant, urging him, like a prophet of old, "to hew the rebellious Florentines like Agag in pieces before the Lord." This dream, held over several years, at last finally faded with Henry's death; though it flickered again with the martial successes of his friend and patron Uguccione, who won a signal victory over the Guelphs at the battle of Monte Catini (August, 1315)—a victory which was the occasion of the Florentines once more renewing their promise to burn alive his immortal adviser.

With Uguccione's defeat, however, in the

following year, Florence had a sudden change of heart, and offered forgiveness to Dante and other exiles if they would acknowledge their offences and do penance, walking in sackcloth and ashes to the Church of St. John. To this offer Dante returned his famous answer of lofty scorn. "Is this then," he said, "the glorious return of Dante Alighieri to his country after nearly three lustres of suffering and exile? Did an innocence, patent to all, merit this—this, the perpetual sweat and toll of study! . . . This is not the way of returning to my country; but if another can be found that shall not derogate from the fame and honor of Dante, that I will enter on with no lagging steps. For if by none such Florence may be entered, by me then never!" And mark the beautiful proud close: "Can I not everywhere behold the mirrors of the sun and stars, speculate on sweetest truths under any sky without first giving myself up inglorious—may, ignominious—to the populace and city of Florence? Nor shall I want for bread."

Dante, indeed, was too illustrious an exile to want for bread. In the castles and at the courts of many an Italian prince he found himself an honored guest, and Rossetti has drawn a remarkable picture in his poem of "Dante at Verona," of his sojourn at the court of young Can Grande, Prince of that city. Yet it was a gay court, and when Dante in his "Paradiso" complains,

Yea, thou shalt learn how salt his food
Who fares
Upon another's bread—how steep his path
Who treadeth up and down another's stairs,

we may reflect that he must have seemed a grim and lonely figure amid all the lutes and the lovenaking, and no very comfortable guest.

Arriving only to depart,
From court to court, from land to land,
Like flame within the naked hand
His body bore his burning heart
That still on Florence strove to bring
God's fire for a burnt offering.

Honors Bestowed on Poet in His Lifetime

The universities of Bologna and Padua welcomed him, and it seems certain that he visited Paris, studying at the university and lodging in the Rue du Foin, thence journeying into the Low Countries; but that he visited Oxford is, it is to be feared, but a romantic fable. It is known for certain, however, that the last three years of his life were spent under the protection of Guido da Polenta, Lord of Ravenna. Having undertaken an embassy to Venice in the service of that Prince, he caught a fever, returning through the unhealthy lagoons, and died in Ravenna on September 14, 1321. He was buried there under a monument built by his friend Guido Novello, having dictated his own epitaph in Latin, of which Lowell gives this translation:

The rights of Monarchy, the Heavens, the Stream of Fire, the Pill,
In vision seen, I sang as far as to the Fates seemed fit:
But since my soul, an alien here, hath flown to nobler wars,
And happier now, hath gone to seek its Maker 'mid the stars,
Here am I Dante shut, exiled from the ancestral shore,
Whom Florence, the of all least-loving mother bore.

As Lowell well says, "Scarcely was Dante at rest in his grave when Italy felt instinctively that this was her great man." In vain did Cardinal Poggetto in 1329 cause

Dante's treatise "De Monarchia" to be publicly burned at Bologna, and propose to have his bones dug up and similarly burned. The sentiment of Italy was against him, and Florence, that had been so eager to burn him alive, was almost ready to make war against Ravenna to enshrine his sacred ashes within her gates. As we have seen, in 1350 she had sent that present of golden florins to his daughter Beatrice, and in 1373 she instituted in her university a chair for the study of the "Divina Commedia," of which Boccaccio was the first professor. Other cities soon followed suit and in Bologna, Pisa, Venice, Piacenza and Milan, before the century closed, there were chairs from which distinguished professors expounded his great poem. Manuscript copies of it were multiplied as fast as monkish scribes could engross them, for it must be remembered that Caxton and his printing press were yet a hundred years or more in the future.

Dante's Fame Belongs To No One City or Nation

In 1366 Florence built him a monument and begged Ravenna again for his ashes, and again in 1429. In 1519 Michelangelo offered to build a monument for them, but Ravenna still refused to surrender them, and in Ravenna they remain till this day. True lovers of Dante will hope that there they may ever rest in peace. The city that was not worthy of him in his lifetime has no rights in his ashes, and though the refusal of Ravenna to give them up be now only an ironic symbol it is one of that symbolic import which Dante himself, who was so great a symbolist in his work, would surely approve. The love of Florence came too late and was from the first suspect, merely following on the posthumous fame of that strong soul whom in life it had only helped to strengthen by the bitterness of its hate. Long before his death, despite his love for Florence, which, as he said, he could like other exiles only "revisit in dreams," Dante had ceased to be merely a Florentine, ceased to be either Guelph or Ghibelline, withdrawn from all political parties, become, as strong men always must do in the end, his own party of one.

So 'twill be well for thee
A party to have made thee by thyself.
He belonged to no one Italian city, but to Italy, whose final unity owes more to his strong dreaming than to all its soldier revolutionists, great as they have been. "Is it possible to say," asks Butler, "that the dream did not work its own realization, or to deny that the high ideal of the poet, after inspiring a few minds as lofty as his own, has become embodied in the constitution of a state which acknowledges no stronger bond of union than a common worship of the exile's indignant and impassioned verse?"

As Lowell has said, "We comprehend the 'Commedia' better when we know that Dante could be an active, clear headed politician and a mystic at the same time."

Greater in His Life Than in Poetry Is His Influence

It is not necessary here to discuss Dante as "literature." He is one of the very few great writers who transcend what they have written and whose final significance is in having been supremely themselves. With Dante it is the man behind the book with whom we are chiefly concerned. Carlyle was right when he wrote of him as "the poet as hero"—the man who, being first of all great as a man, makes use of poetry as one of the means by which he awakens his fellow human beings to a sense of the divine significance of being men and women, and to their responsibility as such. His "solemn song" had first and last this purpose. To this end Beatrice and Florence alike were symbols, and his own life also as he wandered to and fro, with the "Divine Comedy" shaping itself, throughout all his vicissitudes for nineteen years, in his heart and brain. Mr. John Cowper Powys has expressed this significance of Dante in these masterly words:

"In one respect Dante is, beyond doubt, the greatest poet of the world. I mean in his power of heightening the glory and the terror of the human race. Across the threefold kingdom of his 'Terza Rima' passes in tragic array the whole procession of human history—and each figure there, each solitary person, whether of the blessed or the purged or the condemned, wears like a garment of fire the dreadful dignity of having been a man! The moving sword point that flashes, first upon one and then upon another, amid our dim transactions, is nothing but the angry arm of human imagination, moulding life to grander issues: creating, if not discovering, sublime laws. In conveying that thrilling sense of the momentousness of human destiny which beyond anything else certain historic names evoke, none can surpass him."

One Is Poorer in Spirit Not to Have Read the Poem

This, of course, is far from saying, as some shallow "modernist" critics would have it, that Dante's "Divine Comedy" is fading and negligible in literature. In one sense, indeed, there is no need to read it—though, of course, not to have read it is to have missed one of the most exalting experiences provided by books, and to be by so much the poorer. Its greatest importance is that it was the means to an end—the presentation of a great spiritual, prophetic human being, who was also a great patriot. The most personal of books, it might be said to us Dante himself and his inspiring story. Yet, of course, it goes without saying that

the study of the book itself is a great spiritual education. But it is a very difficult book, hard of mind, and at first bitter to the taste. While its harsh strength can on occasion blossom into blinding beauty, like some apparition of almond blossom out of the rock—"out of the strong came forth sweetness"—its appeal is not primarily "poetical" in the usual sense. Its style is stark and unadorned.

"His verse," said his famous French commentator Rivarol, quoted by Lowell, "holds itself erect by the mere force of the substantive and verb, without the help of a single epithet," and Dante himself is reported to have said that "never a rhyme had led him to say 'other than he would'—two characteristics which should recommend him to the latest school of poets."

In addition to this austerity of style, his subject matter is superficially archaic. Dante's physical science is hopelessly "antiquated." In his day the world was still Ptolemaic and the earth was still regarded as the centre of the universe. Moreover, Dante not only literally believed in hell and all the scriptural revelation, but believed, too, that hell was actually "situated in the interior of the earth, being in shape a sort of funnel, with the point downward, and reaching to the centre of the earth, which is also the centre of the universe. Purgatory rises in the form of a truncated cone, on the surface of the southern hemisphere, being in solid form the same shape as the hollow funnel of hell." Heaven is "composed of nine spheres enclosed by the empyrean, which itself is boundless, and is the seat of the Godhead, surrounded by the celestial hierarchy of seraphim, cherubim, thrones, dominions, virtues, powers, principalities, archangels and angels. The Blessed are likewise here, seated on thrones, which are arranged in the form of a rose, surrounding a lake of liquid light, in which they, gazing, see all the fullness of the glory of God."

To shallow readers it might seem that a man who believes in so "childish" a cosmogony can have nothing to say to a world that has discovered wireless, and Milton is in the same case, for there are no automobiles or airships in "Paradise Lost." Yet, who knows but that the "certitudes" of our modern sciences and philosophies may some day seem scarcely less childish to our descendants? After all, nothing changes so rapidly as science from one era to another, and all man's theories of the universe are but so many "changes of the garments" of his mysterious soul.

His Life and Pilgrimage Is the Pilgrimage of Man's Soul

Men and women and their lives were no less real when the medieval Duns Scotus pondered on how many angels could dance on the point of a needle than now, and no little of our boasted intellectual advance amounts to little more than a change in terminology. We give different names to the same things, and while Dante believed in a literal physical hell, he realized hell too as a condition of the soul. As Lowell says, "Its mouth yawns not only under Florence but before the feet of every man everywhere who goeth about to do evil." His pilgrimage, literal and local as were its terms, was still the pilgrimage of man's soul in all times and under all conditions, and his account of it, properly understood, thus remains eternally "modern." In one sense, indeed, Dante's "Divine Comedy" is most "up to date." With all its rugged masculinity it is the most "feminist" of poems, for it is, as Lowell says, "in a very intimate sense, an apotheosis of woman." Beatrice is at once its inspiration and its all prevailing spiritual essence. It is the love of her that through all the turmoil of Dante's mortal experience dwells in his heart—as a purifying flame and as a guiding light till at last on the slopes of Paradise she stands awaiting him to lead him up into the very presence of God.

"As soon as on my vision smote the power
Sublime, that had already pierced me
Through
Ere from my boyhood I had yet come
forth,
To the left hand I turned with that reliance
Which the little child runs to his
mother
When he has fear, or when he is afflic-
ted."

So, in those last exiled years at Ravenna, was fulfilled that dream which Dante had so touchingly shadowed forth at the end of his "Vita Nuova."

"After writing this sonnet," he says, "it was given unto me to behold a very wonderful vision; wherein I saw things which determined me that I would say nothing further of this most blessed one until such time as I could discourse more worthily concerning her. And to this end I labor all I can; as she well knoweth. Wherefore if it be His pleasure through whom is the life of all things, that my life continue with me a few years, it is my hope that I shall yet write concerning her what hath not before been written of any woman. After the which may it seem good unto Him who is the Master of Grace that my spirit should go hence to behold the glory of His lady; to wit, of that blessed Beatrice who now gazeth continually on His countenance *qui est per omnia secula benedictus* (who is blessed through all ages), *Lux Dei*."

Never was a love story so complete as this of Dante's, and those to whom Dante of the "Inferno," Dante the fierce patriot and prophet is too grim a companion will find the loveliest of all the love books of the world in that youthful testament of the "Vita Nuova."

the song
Which first of all he made when young.