



The Structure of Dante's Hell.

Acts	The Acts of the Apostles
<i>Aen.</i>	Vergil, <i>Aeneid</i>
Apoc.	The Apocalypse of Saint John
<i>Commentarii</i>	Macrobius, <i>Commentarii in Somnium Scipionis</i>
<i>Consolation</i>	Boethius, <i>Philosophiae Consolatio</i>
Cor.	Saint Paul's Epistles to the Corinthians
Dan.	Daniel
Deut.	Deuteronomy
Eccles.	Ecclesiastes
Eccclus.	Ecclesiasticus
<i>E. D.</i>	<i>Enciclopedia dantesca</i>
Eph.	Saint Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians
Ex.	Exodus
Ezek.	Ezekiel
Gal.	Saint Paul's Epistle to the Galatians
Gen.	Genesis
<i>Inf.</i>	<i>Inferno</i>
Is.	Isaiah
Jer.	Jeremiah
John	The Gospel According to Saint John
Luke	The Gospel According to Saint Luke
Mark	The Gospel According to Saint Mark
Matt.	The Gospel According to Saint Matthew
<i>Met.</i>	Ovid, <i>Metamorphoses</i>
<i>Par.</i>	<i>Paradiso</i>
Peter	Saint Peter's Epistles
P. L.	<i>Patrologia Latina</i>
Prov.	The Book of Proverbs
<i>Purg.</i>	<i>Purgatorio</i>
Romans	Saint Paul's Epistle to the Romans
Servius	<i>Servii grammatici qui feruntur in Vergilii carmina commentarii</i>
<i>Summa theol.</i>	Thomas Aquinas, <i>Summa theologiae</i>

Theb. Statius, *Thebaid*
Thess. Saint Paul's Epistle to the Thessalonians
Wisdom The Wisdom of Solomon

Authors' names not followed by dates (e.g., Singleton) refer to commentaries that are listed in the Bibliography under "Commentaries on the *Divine Comedy*"; authors' names followed by dates (e.g., Singleton 1966) refer to items listed in the Bibliography under "Modern Works." Primary sources are for the most part cited by author and abbreviated title; references are to editions listed under "Works by Dante" and "Primary Texts."

THE DIVINE COMEDY
OF DANTE ALIGHIERI

INTRODUCTION

The seventh centennial of Dante's death will take place in September 2021, at this writing little more than a quarter century in the future. After seven centuries his masterpiece, the *Divine Comedy*, continues to engage and fascinate readers all over the world, both those approaching it for the first time and those who know it intimately, from students and amateurs to professional scholars, in spite of the fact that the culture from which it springs is so distant and so different from our own. As even those who have not read the poem know, it recounts the journey of its protagonist (the poet himself) through the three realms of the medieval Catholic Otherworld: Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise. On this basic narrative thread of a complete tour of the cosmos and the moral universe that it embodies, with its great central theme of the education of the protagonist, is strung a series of remarkably vivid encounters with the inhabitants of the three realms. Under the guidance first of the soul of the poet Vergil,* then of his beloved Beatrice, who, he tells us in the *Vita nuova*, had died at the age of twenty-four, the protagonist meets the souls of those who have determined the nature of European history.

Dante's ultimate subject might be described as the ways the great cosmic and historical drama of God's creation of the world, man's fall, and humanity's redemption from sin is visible in history and in his own personal experience; his experience is always conceived as firmly located in place (Florence and the Italy of his day) and time (the late thirteenth century). For Dante, as for most medieval thinkers, the fate of the individual is inextricably bound up with that of society as a whole, but the great principles are always seen in terms of the actions and words of concretely represented individuals, as often as not contemporaries of the poet, usually those prominent in political life. More than any other major European poem, the *Comedy* is a detailed commentary on the political, economic, and social developments of its author's times.

Many of the historical events and individuals so important in Dante's experience are all but forgotten today, except among medieval historians (and, of course, students of the *Comedy*). But Dante's age was in fact a major turning point in European history, fraught with developments and problems whose results are still with us today, albeit in very different

*Modern scholarship has established that *Vergilius* is the correct spelling of Vergil's name; Dante follows the traditional medieval spelling in writing *Virgilio*. We shall maintain the distinction, using *Vergil* to refer to the historical Vergil, and *Virgil* to refer to the character in Dante's poem.

form: they include early capitalism, already revealing its tendency to engulf cities and local interests in the network of an international economy, closely associated with the development of international finance, in which Dante's city, Florence, was the acknowledged leader; the menacing rise of the nation-state, still in the form of feudal monarchy but increasingly centralized, ruthless, and violent, with the accompanying collapse of medieval internationalism; and the increasing involvement of the Christian Church in the economic and political struggles of the day, with the resultant corruption and compromise of its spiritual mission.

One of the reasons for the *Comedy's* enduring vitality is that Dante saw so deeply into the nature of these problems. He also acknowledged very clearly that it was increasingly difficult to discern a providential plan, though he continued to believe there must be one. The terms of his analysis and of his imagined remedies are medieval, of course, which means theological, moralistic, and metaphysical, as opposed to structural, economic, or sociological in any modern sense. His grasp of the historic urgency of contemporary events, however, has largely been vindicated, and we can still learn from his powerful analysis—structural and sociological in its own way—of the nature of greed-motivated fraud, which Dante identified as a major social problem. And, like the question of the direction history is taking, the great moral and spiritual issues remain, though few today would wish to inhabit the cosmos Dante supposed was the theater of human action or the society he wished to see established.

We devote the bulk of this introduction to providing, in condensed and abbreviated form, some of the historical and biographical background essential to understanding the poem; much of this material is also discussed in the notes to the individual cantos. A brief concluding section discusses the form of the *Comedy*.

Dante's Times, Life, and Works

Dante Alighieri was born in Florence in 1265, probably in late May, to Bella and Alighiero degli Alighieri. His mother, perhaps of the prominent Abati family, died while Dante was still a boy. His father was a modest moneylender and speculator in land, descended from an old but much declined noble family; he died when Dante was about eighteen. At the time of Dante's birth, Florence, though already an important center of trade and banking, was scarcely more than a town of about 45,000, of whom only several thousand—males who were over thirty, owned property, and were related to powerful families—were eligible to vote and hold public office. By 1301, the date of the great disaster of Dante's life, his going into exile, Florence was one of the largest and most important

cities in Europe, equal in size and importance to Paris, with a population of over 100,000 and financial and commercial interests that extended as far as England and Constantinople and even beyond. Like other independent city-states, Florence had always been deeply implicated in Italian and European politics, especially the great struggle between the emperors and the popes, and its phenomenal expansion during Dante's lifetime made its involvement ever deeper. The increasing commercialization of Florentine life and the corruption of the papacy seemed to Dante the two principal causes both of his own misfortunes and of the troubling developments he saw throughout Europe.

Dante followed Florentine tradition in dating the expansion of the city from the beginning of the twelfth century—thus during the lifetime of his ancestor Cacciaguida degli Elisei, who appears in the poem in *Paradiso* 15-18—an era the poet idealized as one of peace, simplicity, and civic virtue. Favorably located on the trade routes between the Mediterranean basin and northern Europe, Florence developed important wool-finishing and silk industries early and began to assert its power in the surrounding countryside and against the smaller towns of central Tuscany: Fiesole, a chief rival, was conquered and destroyed in 1125. The population of Florence expanded steadily; the city walls Cacciaguida had known, built around 1072, were replaced after 1172 with a new circle of walls, enclosing three times the earlier area. During Dante's youth the expansion became even more rapid: in 1284 new walls were begun, designed to enclose eight times the area of 1172 (they were not finished until 1333). Ambitious projects for churches, bridges, and public buildings were undertaken: Santa Maria Novella, the Dominican church, was begun in 1279; Santa Croce, the Franciscan church, was expanded in 1295; Santa Maria del Fiore, the new cathedral, or Duomo, was begun in 1294; the Baptistery of San Giovanni was entirely renovated in the 1290s, with resplendent internal mosaics that may or may not have been finished when Dante went into exile. Two hundred years of exploding wealth, population, and civil strife help explain Dante's condemnation of acquisitiveness and political factionalism as well as his changing views on republican versus imperial forms of government.

For several centuries the jockeying for commercial and dynastic advantage among Europe's growing national powers had been overshadowed by the bitter struggle for hegemony between the increasingly ambitious popes and the Holy Roman Emperors. The emperors were the feudal heads of an "empire" more legal and traditional than real, embracing much of central western Europe, including Italy; it was often claimed to be continuous with the Roman empire founded by Augustus, by virtue of its supposed restoration when the pope crowned Charlemagne

emperor in the year 800. The long rivalry had reached a decisive stage during the two decades preceding Dante's birth, when Frederick II of Hohenstaufen, grandson of the great emperor Frederick Barbarossa and heir through his mother to the Norman kingdoms of Naples and Sicily, was made emperor (1212). Among Frederick's holdings were feudal dependencies in northern Italy, including a number of prosperous cities, as well as in southern Italy and Sicily; his lands thus completely encircled the traditional possessions of the popes, the so-called patrimony of Saint Peter, comprising parts of modern Latium, Umbria, Romagna, and the Marches (see the maps on pages xiii-xvi). Frederick II was known as *Stupor mundi* [Wonder of the World] because of his formidable abilities and the brilliance of his court, which welcomed Moslem as well as Christian scientists and artists and first developed courtly poetry in Italian (including the sonnet). He was in many respects an enlightened ruler, but throughout his reign he was forced to struggle against his papal antagonists, Gregory IX, Innocent IV, and Clement IV, who considered his power and influence a danger to the Church. Excommunicated and declared deposed by the council of bishops held at Lyons in 1245, beleaguered but still in power, Frederick died suddenly in 1250. This was an opportunity Clement IV could not ignore; he promised Charles of Anjou, the brother of Louis IX of France, all of southern Italy and Sicily as a papal fief if he could conquer it.

All over Europe the conflict between the popes and the emperors had split local communities: supporters of the popes were known as Guefts (after the powerful Welf family, dukes of Bavaria—the *w* → *gw* shift is common in the Romance languages), and those of the emperors were known as Ghibellines (after the castle of Waibling, traditionally owned by the emperors). Florence was no exception, and historians have shown that its division into Gueft and Ghibelline parties was the expression of long-standing rivalries between clans of similar economic and social profiles rather than the reflection of differences of class or ideology, though these soon emerged. Originally rural landowners, the clans took up residence in the city as its importance increased, building fortress-like palaces equipped with high towers—useful for both defense and reconnaissance—from which they continued their vendettas. The city's tradition of representative government grew out of the necessity of controlling the clans' rivalries and inclinations toward private war. Some clans adhered to the traditional loyalty to the empire, of which Tuscany was still a fief, while others saw an opportunity to expand their own interests in alliance with the popes.

According to the Florentine chroniclers, Guefts and Ghibellines coexisted peacefully in the city until Buondelmonte de' Buondelmonti, a prominent Gueft, broke his engagement to a daughter of the Ghibelline

Donati family and married another; to avenge this slight the Donati and their relatives the Lambertini murdered Buondelmonte on Easter, 1215, near the Ponte Vecchio. Thenceforth violence became increasingly prevalent. While this single event scarcely explains the social tensions within the city, it does suggest how networks of rival clans could polarize it. Over time these networks became ever more entangled, so that by Dante's day, when the Guefts themselves split into "White" and "Black" factions, it is almost impossible to say why one family saw its interests lying more with one side than with another. By then, however, new lines of antagonism had emerged, pitting the members of the trade guilds against the more powerful families, the "Magnates."

One of Frederick II's last maneuvers had been to furnish a troop of cavalry that helped the Florentine Ghibellines drive out the Guefts in February 1248. The Guefts returned victorious in January 1250, after Frederick's death, driving the Ghibellines out in their turn. Gueft domination coincided with a major change in the constitution of the city, known as the *Primo popolo* [literally, first (government of the) people], reflecting a new assertiveness in the increasingly powerful trade guilds. The new government prohibited private towers higher than 150 feet (all exceeding that height were ordered reduced) and established a new official, the *Capitano del popolo* [captain of the people], charged with maintaining the peace, alongside the traditional *podestà* [mayor]. Meanwhile, with the help of Frederick II's natural son Manfred, king of Naples and Sicily, the Ghibellines all over Italy were mobilizing against Charles of Anjou. The Tuscan (especially Florentine and Siense) Ghibellines, along with German troops furnished by King Manfred, massacred the Florentine Guefts at Montaperti, near Siena, in 1260, a battle still remembered with great bitterness forty years later, according to Dante (see *Inferno* 10, with notes). Ghibelline rule was short-lived, however, for in 1266, Charles of Anjou and his largely French army defeated and killed Manfred at Benevento (see map), and in 1268, in a battle at Tagliacozzo (see map), captured Frederick's eighteen-year-old grandson Conradino, later beheaded in Naples. Charles was thus established as the ruler of Sicily and southern Italy, under the overlordship of the pope, and his hegemony extended much further; he was made *podestà* of Florence, where he ruled through *vicari* [vicars]. The Angevin "protectorate" thus replaced Hohenstaufen "tyranny," until the death of Charles of Anjou in 1285 and especially the election of Pope Boniface VIII in 1294; once again the balance of power had shifted.

Many Italian cities remained Ghibelline after Charles's victory; some of the more prominent were Verona, Siena, and Pisa. Gueft Florence was continually at war with its Tuscan Ghibelline rivals. According to a

letter written by Dante (now lost), Dante was in the first line of cavalry at the battle of Campaldino in June 1289, when the Guelphs defeated the Ghibellines of Arezzo; in *Inferno* 22 he tells us that he saw the surrender of Caprona, a Pisan stronghold, which took place later in the same year. Periods of uneasy peace alternated with armed conflict; Florence was to achieve definite victory over its hated rival Pisa only in the sixteenth century.

There were efforts to reconcile Ghibellines and Guelphs within Florence, the most important of which took place in 1280; after its failure, the city embarked on a new process of democratizing its constitution (the *Secondo popolo*), which shifted all power of choosing city officials to the trade guilds, while eventually expanding the number of enfranchised guilds from seven to twenty-one. A decade after the creation in 1282 of a board of six *Priors* [priors] as the executive branch of the government, the process of democratization came to a head with the promulgation of the *Ordinamenti di giustizia* [Ordinances of Justice] in 1293, whose main provision was to exclude from public offices all members of noble families sufficiently powerful to be classed as Magnates; soon thereafter, however, several of the more rigid restrictions were relaxed (1295), and it became possible for nobles who were guild members to hold public office. This made it possible for Dante to enter politics, and he became eligible to do so by joining the guild (*Arte*) of doctors and apothecaries.

The election of Benedetto Caetani, member of a powerful Roman clan, to the papacy as Boniface VIII brought to the throne of Saint Peter a particularly able, ambitious, and ruthless man, eager to consolidate and extend the power of the Church everywhere in Europe. He claimed that with the imperial throne vacant, jurisdiction over Tuscany reverted to the papacy, and he was determined to break the Florentine habit of independence. Dante advanced through a series of minor offices and at last, in 1300, was elected to serve a (normal) two-month term as one of the six priors (June 15–August 15), but his rise to political influence took place in circumstances that were increasingly dangerous, particularly since the antagonism between the White Guelphs (Dante's party) and the Black Guelphs became increasingly hostile, culminating in bloody riots on May 1 and June 23 (perhaps intentionally fostered by the pope). The six priors, Dante among them, exiled the leaders of the two factions, including the turbulent Guido Cavalcanti, Dante's friend (see the notes to Canto 10); the Blacks, however, refused to abide by the sentence, and the next group of priors recalled the Whites as well.

These troubles were the subject of many anxious public meetings, at which it seems clear that Dante took a leading role. Those who, like Dante, were desirous of moderation and reconciliation decided to appeal

to the pope to mediate between the two parties, unaware that he secretly favored the Blacks, and to this end the city sent two embassies to Rome, one in November 1300 and one in October 1301. Dante was a member of at least one of these delegations, though it is not entirely certain which one; according to early biographers, he was in Siena, on his way home from the second of them in November 1301, when he learned of the events that would mean he would never again see his beloved native city.

For Boniface had secretly connived both with the Blacks and with a young brother of Philip IV (the Fair) of France, the adventurer Charles of Valois (Lackland), who was leading an army south to attempt the reconquest of Sicily, which had rebelled against the Angevins in 1282. On November 1, 1301, as the official peacemaker appointed by the pope, Charles gained entry to Florence with his army. Once inside, according to his agreement with the pope (documentation of which still exists), he cooperated with the Blacks in their violent coup d'état, during which the leading White Guelphs were killed or driven from the city and had their property confiscated or destroyed.

Dante was accused and tried in absentia (January 1302) on trumped-up charges of forgery, embezzlement, and opposition to the pope; when he did not respond he was, in subsequent proclamations, stripped of his property and condemned, if captured, to be burnt at the stake. Confiscation of property, exile, and loss of citizenship were even more severe to a Tuscan of 1300 than the equivalent would be today; there was no provision for "naturalization" into some other community; also, as Dante complained, the unthinking supposed that official condemnation must be justified.

By the time of his exile Dante was known as a poet and intellectual of some distinction. Precisely where he began the education that ultimately made him one of the best-informed individuals of his age is not fully known. He probably had private tutoring as a boy, which taught him the rudiments of Latin and a few of the elementary Latin classics, like Phaedrus's *Fables* and the *Distichs* of Caro. He may have attended the cathedral school, and there is a strong possibility that he was able to attend lectures accessible to laymen at the *studia* of Santa Maria Novella and Santa Croce, where he might have heard teachers like the Dominican Remigio de' Girolami, who had strong views on the importance of civic institutions, and Peter John Olivi, a radical Franciscan critic of ecclesiastical wealth. It is virtually certain that Dante went to Bologna in the late 1280s (one of his poems was copied there in 1287); there he would have come into contact with the dominant intellectual trend of Aristotelian natural science, though in what capacity we do not know. That he had any direct schooling from Brunetto Latini, the prehumanist described by the chroni-

cler Villani as the “refiner of the Florentines,” is uncertain, but Brunetto—a man of letters, the political theorist of the *Secondo popolo*, and a trusted political counselor to the Florentine commune from 1266 until his death in 1293—provided him with an important early example of civic engagement inspired by classical models.

The high culture of the Middle Ages had always been dominated by Latin, the language of the Bible, of the Church, of government, diplomacy, theology, philosophy, science. Only recently, first in Provence with the upsurge, beginning in the early twelfth century, of a brilliant courtly civilization whose most characteristic product was the poetry of the troubadors, had poetry and prose in a European vernacular begun to attract international notice. The movement caught on at the French-speaking court of the Angevin kings of England and in northern France, especially in the aristocratic circles of prosperous cities, often the courts of minor rulers. Concomitantly with the development of the Gothic cathedrals came the spread of courtly romance, including Arthurian romance, courtly love poetry, and courtly ideals of behavior and style, especially through the influence of the poet Chrétien de Troyes (active in Champagne ca. 1170–1180). With the rise of the universities, poetry in the vernacular became increasingly learned. Paris became an important literary as well as intellectual center, and philosophical poetry in the vernacular was born with the continuation and completion (ca. 1274) of the *Romance of the Rose* by the bourgeois intellectual Jean de Meun. Literary prose came into existence in French as vast cycles of Arthurian romance were compiled in the early thirteenth century: the so-called Vulgate Cycle, centering on Lancelot and Guinevere, and the Tristan Cycle. The fashions spread to Austria, Spain, England, Italy, and elsewhere.

In Italy the themes and forms of troubador verse were introduced, as we have mentioned, at the court of Frederick II, which traveled both in the north and in the south and kept in contact with new trends everywhere. Frederick’s courtiers and officials adapted the Provençal *canzo* to create the Italian *canzone*, and they invented the sonnet. Soon after midcentury the movement was spreading to Tuscany, with the satirical, moralizing canzoni of Guitone d’Arezzo, and to the Italian university cities, especially Bologna, where Guido Guinizelli, probably a prominent judge, created a new suavity and philosophical intensity in love poetry; Dante was to call Guinizelli “the father of me and of all my betters who ever used sweet, graceful rhymes of love” (*Prig.* 26.97–99). Legal circles in Bologna took keen interest in the new poetry, and the fashion arose of filling out the spaces at the bottom of parchment legal documents (as an attestation of the integrity of the pages) with quotations from

it, a fashion that enables us to document the early circulation of Dante’s lyrics and of the *Inferno*.

In Florence, in ferment with its new expansion and prosperity, the fashion caught on with characteristic elegance and intensity. When Dante was in his teens there were a score of accomplished writers of sonnets and canzoni: lawyers, physicians, and aristocrats. Dante began writing poetry—mainly sonnets and canzoni—under the influence especially of Guinizelli, from whom he adopted the theme of the so-called *domina angelicata*, the lady so pure and beautiful as to seem an angel, named Beatrice [she who makes blessed] in Dante’s poems. His entrance on the Florentine literary scene was characteristically self-conscious, if it followed a typical mode of the day. He sent a sonnet (later made the first poem in the *Vita nuova*) to “many of those who were famous poets in those days,” as he says in the *Vita nuova*, including the most elegant and gifted of them, Guido Cavalcanti, whom we have already met as a turbulent Guelph. The sonnet asked for interpretation of a portentous love-dream; three replies survive, including one from Cavalcanti, which Dante says was “quasi lo principio de l’amistà tra lui e me” [almost the beginning of the friendship between him and me]. In retrospect Dante’s entrance on the literary scene can seem portentous. His works, and those of his followers Petrarch and Boccaccio, established the Tuscan vernacular as a literary medium worthy of comparison with Latin and Greek. This prestige in turn led to the great revolution of literary style of the Renaissance as Italian influence spread throughout Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

The *Vita nuova*, Dante’s first important work, completed by 1295, is a selection among his early poems about Beatrice, accompanied by a prose narrative that explains the occasion of each, arranged so that they form an idealized account of how Beatrice’s miraculous influence shaped his life, both as lover and as poet. At the center of the book is her death, recorded as occurring on June 8, 1290; the second half relates a period of grief and disorientation until a vision of her in Heaven calls the writer’s devotion back to her memory. The elaborate dating of her death suggests that Beatrice was a historical figure, but although she has been plausibly identified with Beatrice Portinari, daughter of Folco Portinari and wife to Simone de’ Bardi, a wealthy banker (to whom she bore several children), the book bears no trace of these domestic circumstances; there is likewise no trace of the fact that Dante himself had been married in the mid-1280s to Gemma Donati, to whom he had been betrothed in 1277 while still an adolescent.

Though in some respects appreciably juvenile, the *Vita nuova* already demonstrates Dante’s genius for arranging complex, cumulative verbal structures; it reflects deep, if not wide, reading, especially of Boethius’s

Consolatio Philosophiae [Consolation of Philosophy] and of several of Cicero's dialogues, as well as of Provençal, French, and Italian poetry. It also introduces Dante's complex, in many ways mysterious relationship with his friend and poetic rival Guido Cavalcanti, whose sympathy with heretical philosophical doctrines—such as the mortality of the individual human soul—Dante deplored.

Dante continued to write poems, and not long after completing the *Vita nuova*, probably in 1296, he wrote a group of four canzoni, usually called the *nine petrose* [stony rhymes], poems of challenging power and formal difficulty addressed to a lady called "stone" (*petra*), in which the poet's frustrated sexuality and feelings of violent resentment toward the conventional "lady" of amatory verse are given scope to a degree unusual for the Middle Ages. Trends incipient in the *Vita nuova*—representation of the poet as a microcosm, the idea of the human being as the horizon of the material and spiritual (a Platonic problematic considered an existential predicament until the mid-seventeenth century), the function of poetry as the salve or sublimation of the poet's failures, whether erotic or political—are brought to a remarkable focus in the *petrose* and serve, we have argued, as a principal proving ground for the work that still lay in the future.

In the years following his exile, Dante's movements are difficult to trace exactly: he lingered in Tuscany and participated, along with other exiled Whites, in abortive attempts to reenter the city (1302–1303). He received hospitality from Bartolommeo della Scala, lord of Verona, in 1303 and 1304 (he would later dedicate the *Paradiso* to Bartolommeo's son Can Grande). Early in 1304 Dante broke decisively with the Whites, and, astonishingly for the times, dissociated himself from all political parties and became "a party by [himself]," as he has his ancestor Cacciaguinda say in *Par.* 17.69. The years 1305 to 1307 saw Dante in northeastern Italy, in the region then known as the March of Treviso; he was in Padova in 1306, where he may have met Giotto at work on the Scrovegni chapel, and in Lunigiana in 1307 on an errand for the Malaspina family; in 1308 he seems to have been in Forlì and may have stopped in Lucca. Boccaccio and the chronicler Villani claim he journeyed to Paris in 1308 to 1309 but offer no corroborating evidence. Around 1310 to 1311, Dante is in the Casentino, near the headwaters of the Arno, probably at the castle of Poppi (see map) with Guido da Bartifolle; in 1312, he may have met the emperor Henry VII in his camp near Pisa.

During the years 1310 to 1313, Dante followed closely the efforts of Henry VII of Luxembourg, the Holy Roman Emperor (elected 1308), to reimpose imperial authority in northern and central Italy, a campaign

upon which Dante based great hopes for the reform of Italian and European political life. In 1313, after the failure of the long-awaited (and too-long-delayed) siege of Florence, a center of resistance to him, Henry fell sick and died. By then Dante had written several impassioned letters hailing him as the appointed savior of Italy and had also written to the Florentines condemning in the harshest terms their resistance to Henry's claims. After the collapse of imperial hopes, Dante's later years were spent as the guest of Can Grande della Scala at Verona (perhaps 1314–1316) and then, from perhaps about 1317, of Guido minore da Polenta (the nephew of Francesca da Rimini) in Ravenna, then a peaceful and palpably archaic city, dotted with ancient Christian temples decorated with shimmering mosaics. In Ravenna Dante enjoyed considerable status, gathering around him a coterie of disciples (though he did no formal teaching); he was joined there by his sons Jacopo and Pietro, who had fallen under a reiteration of their father's condemnation (1315) upon reaching majority; his daughter Antonia was a nun there, with the name Beatrice. Of Dante's wife, Gemma, there is no word. In 1321, after fulfilling a diplomatic mission in defense of his hosts before the Venetian council of state, Dante caught a fever (probably malaria) while traversing the swampy Comacchio region of the Po estuary; he died in Ravenna on September 13 or 14 of the same year.

Thus most of Dante's works, including the *Comedy*, were written in exile, a fact to which most of them allude. Probably the most important work, next to the *Comedy*, is the *Convivio* [Banquet], planned as a feast of wisdom offered to its readers, written in Italian because its intended audience was those who followed the active life with no leisure for study and who thus knew no Latin. It is a prose commentary, deploying a formidable mixture of Aristotelian and Neoplatonic lore for the explanation of three previously composed canzoni. Although the commentary is coordinated with the poems, Dante finds room to hold forth on the relation of the vernacular and Latin, on the hierarchy of the liberal arts in relation to theology and the structure of the cosmos, and on the correlation of the Aristotelian virtues to the ages of man. In its present form—only four of fifteen projected books (on fourteen canzoni) were completed—the work is organized around the writer's devotion to the personified lady Philosophy, a form of the biblical *Sapientia* [Wisdom], who is presented as the successor to Beatrice.

Probably between the composition of the third and fourth books of the *Convivio*, Dante began a Latin treatise, *De vulgari eloquentia* [On eloquence in the vernacular], also left unfinished. After a preamble on the necessity of language itself, a critique of the various dialects in use in

Italy in the thirteenth century leads to the suggestion that the proper language of vernacular poetry—referred to as the “illustrious vernacular”—exists in no single court of Italy (for Italy lacks a unifying court), but rather virtually, in the use of all who write well. The illustrious vernacular once established, Dante uses examples culled from Provençal, French, Sicilian, and north-central Italian poets to derive the preferred forms and diction of the canzone.

Certainly after 1309, very possibly as late as 1317, Dante wrote a treatise on world government, the *Monarchia*, which argues for the necessity of a single all-powerful emperor as ruler of the world on a priori, historical-theological, and polemical grounds: a single emperor is necessary because the single human race, with the single goal of full actualization of its intellectual powers, requires peace, which only a single emperor can guarantee; the present emperor is the successor of Caesar and of Augustus, under whose authority Christ chose to be born, thus Rome’s power was providentially established by God; the papal arguments denying the equal competences, in their separate spheres, of pope and emperor are therefore demonstrably false.

Dante wrote other, less important works during his exile: several more canzoni and short poems; a number of letters, some of them with important political content; one letter, of debated attribution, expounding the prologue (really the first eighteen lines) of the *Paradiso* for Can Grande della Scala of Verona; a scholastic disputation on the distribution of earth and water on the surface of the earth; and two Latin eclogues in response to poems by Giovanni del Virgilio, an early Bolognese humanist, encouraging Dante to write in Latin and to accept being crowned in Bologna with the laurel.

Not the least of the consequences of Dante’s exile is that his work was done in the unpropitious circumstances of a wandering existence, with no fixed residence or library, no real status except that conferred on him ad hoc by his various hosts. Dante’s memory, like that of Aquinas, must have been prodigious, allowing him to quote scores of texts known by heart. Among other effects of his exile were his sense, often attested in the poem, of the diverse linguistic traditions and dialects of Italy, and his resulting awareness of the need for a common literary language and a universal monarchical government that might stem the factionalism of the Italian cities.

The most important labor of Dante’s exile was, of course, the vast *Comedy*—not vast in length (it is 14,233 lines long), but in scope and power. Current thinking suggests that the *Inferno* was published around 1314 (including revisions; a first version was probably ready by 1310) with the *Purgatorio* following shortly thereafter, and that the *Paradiso* was

brought to completion by 1320 in Ravenna. Dante’s poem could have taken the form that it did, and acquired the finish that it possesses, at few other moments in history: that is, at any time other than just before the breaking up of the attempt, begun by scholastics like Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas, to harmonize the philosophy of Aristotle with the teaching of the Catholic Church.

For Dante came to maturity when the most sweeping and exciting intellectual revolution of the Middle Ages had just crested. The years 1190 to 1250 had witnessed the introduction of the majority of the corpus of Aristotle’s writings, including works on physics, biology, ethics, psychology (in the older sense, the study of the embodied rational soul), politics, and metaphysics. These far surpassed in scope and power anything else available and made possible much broader and more intelligent and sympathetic observation of natural phenomena and human institutions. The renewed natural and human sciences were proposed, moreover, through Aristotle’s own methods of inquiry and argument (logic, dialectic, and rhetoric), of great power and persuasiveness; little wonder that scholars of the day seem to have felt they might come to know virtually everything. This movement was inextricably bound up with the rise of the cities and their new universities, and roughly contemporaneous with the rise of literature in the vernaculars.

Although the first Latin versions of Aristotle (from translators in Toledo, Spain, and in southern Italy) began to circulate toward the end of the twelfth century, it was not until 1255 that Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* was actually a required text at the University of Paris, the center of the Aristotelian revival. From the very beginning, however, there had been reaction from traditional theological circles, who saw in the works of Aristotle (and in their dissemination, especially by masters from the Dominican order) both a challenge to their domination over the diffusion of knowledge—not to mention the control of university chairs—and, as the best young minds began to subject questions of faith to the razors of dialectic, a dangerous invasion of the sanctum of Christian truth by rationalistic ideas and styles of thought. A number of episcopal injunctions early in the century culminated in 1277 with the condemnation by Etienne Tempier, bishop of Paris, of over two hundred propositions: even a number of positions taught by Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) were declared erroneous. Such discouragement did not, however, much diminish the spread of Aristotle’s influence, and many of his views and methods became part of the common heritage of learned inquiry. Dante was the heir and product of this intellectual ferment, and the unique combination of conceptual clarity and vivid, realistic presentation of the natural and human world we see in the *Comedy* is one expression of a

thirteenth-century worldview shaped by the scholastic interpretation of Aristotle and the shift of interest to natural phenomena that accompanied it.

The *Comedy* was also deeply shaped by another influence, that of the Franciscan movement, history's most revolutionary protest against the wealth of the Church. Saint Francis of Assisi (1181?–1226, canonized 1228) was the son of a rich merchant; he publicly renounced his patrimony before the bishop in order to espouse a life of utter poverty and severely ascetic penitence, all in a spirit of spontaneous joyfulness and loving identification with the suffering Christ. Disciples flocked to the *povertello di Dio* [God's poor little one] as he became known; in a few years the Order of Lesser Brothers (*Ordo fratrum minorum*), verbally authorized by the pope in 1210, later confirmed with a charter, grew into one of the largest and most powerful organizations in Europe. In spite of Francis's efforts to maintain the purity of his original conception, the order became immensely rich (and inevitably corrupt) and was split by bitter disputes on the issue of property (the saint's will prohibiting the owning of property by the order or its members was declared invalid by the pope in 1230). A large group within the order, however, did continue the polemic in favor of apostolic poverty.

Saint Francis himself had written the first great Italian lyric, the "Cantico di frate Sole" [Canticle of Brother Sun], in rapturous praise of the beauty of creation, and the Franciscan movement, with its essentially democratizing impulse, gave powerful impetus to Italian as a medium of devotional poetry. Along with their rivals the Dominicans, the Franciscan masters dominated instruction in theology at the universities; they were leaders in forming the new scientific orientations of the fourteenth century, and by the time of Dante's death the principles on which Albertus and Aquinas had built their remarkable syntheses were under withering attack from a new generation of nominalist scholastics, chief among them the Franciscans Duns Scotus (1265?–1308) and William of Occam (d. 1350): like the first general of the Franciscan order, Saint Bonaventura (1221–1274), they remained faithful to an Augustinianism that emphasized God's omnipotent will rather than rational continuities. The influence of the Franciscan movement and its characteristic sensibility is visible everywhere in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century art (Giotto is the leading example), architecture, and literature.

As C. H. Grandgent observed long ago, a number of medieval literary genres are digested and combined in Dante's poem: the dream-vision (exemplified by the Old French *Romanse of the Rose*), which included first-person narration and a global perspective achieved in a dream; accounts of journeys to the Otherworld (such as the *Visio Pauli*, Saint Patrick's

Purgatory, the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani*), which contributed the ideas of distinct areas of punishment and of bringing news of punishment to spark repentance; philosophical allegory, sometimes of the *prosimetrum* (mixed verse and prose) variety, such as Boethius's *Consolatio Philosophiae* (the *Vita nuova* and, in a sense, the *Convivio* are *prosimetra*); the medieval encyclopedia (e.g., Isidore, Brunetto Latini, Vincent of Beauvais, Bartholomew of England), which brings together information on all subjects; and finally, the supreme work of the medieval theologian, the comprehensive presentation of theological knowledge in a *summa*.

Dante frames a number of problems in the poem as scholastic *quaestiones*; but the parallel with scholastic method goes deeper. We might here recall Erwin Panofsky's thesis that the same principles governed the scholastic *summae* and the great Gothic cathedrals: the cathedrals, like the highly rationalized sequence of topics of a *summa*, exhibit clarity for clarity's sake, manifesting the exhaustive articulation of their parts; but, like the balancing of authorities and reason in the scholastic response to a question, they also embody a principle of concord, or reconciliation of contradictory views, in that the history of solutions to specific problems (like the insertion of a rose window into a markedly vertical facade) begins by sharpening and concludes by reconciling opposing tendencies. Both clarity of articulation and concord can be found at work in the *Comedy*, for example in Virgil's account of love in *Purgatorio* 17–18, or in *Paradiso* 4, where Dante reconciles Platonic and Christian views on the influence of the planets. And an even more fundamental parallel links the form of the *Summae* of Alexander of Hales and Aquinas, and no doubt others, and of the *Comedy*: the order of subjects discussed in these *Summae* is explicitly conceived as a procession from God, through the creatures and man, then back to God via the mediation of human will and the Incarnation. A similar procession and return is discernible in Dante's poem, which begins with the descent of Beatrice to help Dante, lost in the wood of error, and then returns through Hell, Purgatory, and the heavenly bodies to the universal source in God.

Dante's most important literary models, however, were Vergil's epic poem, the *Aeneid*, and the Vulgate, or Latin Bible. The *Aeneid* is the epic of Rome, the city that would one day be the seat of the papacy and the source of the imperial authority to which Dante looked for the restoration of justice in the world; its author is imagined to be Dante's guide through the first two parts of the poem, which is partly to say that Dante's account of Hell and Purgatory is ruled to a considerable extent by precedents in the *Aeneid*. In the tradition of its late antique commentators, Dante viewed Vergil's poem as a work that embraced the whole cosmos and all of history; but the *Comedy* exceeds even that measure, for it depicts

this life and the next; it traverses Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven. As Auerbach showed, it exhibits all levels of style and draws from all genres, a diversity of register impossible for classical epic.

Such breadth and variety can be matched within a single book only by the Bible, which is itself a miscellaneous compilation of verse and prose, myth, chronicle, prophecy, allegory, and sententious wisdom, high style and low (although always sublime in some sense, being the transcription of God's word). Medieval study of the Bible also affects how we interpret Dante's poem, for Dante's views of the multiple meanings possible for a text derive directly from techniques of biblical interpretation typical of his age (although by Dante's day even works written by pagans—Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, for example—were interpreted in a similar way). Although the manner and extent of Dante's application of such schemes to his own poem is hotly disputed, that the richness of the poem's meaning is in some sense analogous to that of the Bible (as then interpreted) has been an influential view among modern students of the poem.

The *Comedy* is much too complex a poem for us to attempt to give a full account of it in this brief introduction. Instead, we conclude this section with discussion of one important image that can stand, metaphorically, for the whole *Comedy*: the "ladder of creation," sometimes called the "great chain of being" or "Homer's golden chain." Dante's poem is the fullest representation ever made of this ancient concept, so influential in Western thought. Its most significant implication is that the hierarchy of logical classes (species and genera) coincides with the hierarchy of being and value; thus every created thing has a unique and inevitable place in the order of the cosmos.

That the various, hierarchically arranged levels of creation are viewed as a "ladder" or (preferably) "stairway" becomes explicit in the *Paradiso*, with Jacob's ladder—Dante specifies that it is "golden"—which reaches from the sphere of Saturn to the Empyrean, beyond space and time, in Cantos 21–22. Thus all creation descends from God stepwise in a "great chain of being," described by the Neoplatonist Macrobius as "an uninterrupted connection of interlocking links from the supreme deity as far as the last dregs of things"; Macrobius identifies this chain with the "golden chain of Homer" (actually, a rope) mentioned in the *Iliad*. Although thus explicit only in *Paradiso* (why this is so we will see in a moment), the image of the pilgrim's journey as proceeding gradually along a stairway recurs throughout the poem: frequently in the *Purgatorio* to describe the penitential climb through the seven realms of purgation (3.50–56; 11.40–44; 17.60–62; 27.122–24) and sparingly in *Inferno*, notably in the description of both Geryon and Lucifer as "ladders" necessary to the traversing of Hell (17.82–86; 34.82–86; note the same line numbers) and

in Virgil's description of Hell in Canto 11 (cf. "descending step by step," lines 17–18). Repeatedly Dante rhymes words for stairway or ladder (*scala*, *scale*) with the words for wings (*ale*, *ali*) and for climbing (*sale*, *salire*) or descending (*cala*, *calare*). These recurring rhymes correlate, and reiterate, the essential aspects of the pilgrim's journey as first a descent, then an ascent along the stairway of being; they are links in the chain and correlate the narrative of the poem with the concatenation of its rhymes.

For Dante, the image of the great chain of being had been filtered through late antique Neoplatonism; in addition to Macrobius, the idea is important to Augustine, Boethius, and especially Dionysius the Areopagite, the extraordinarily influential sixth-century writer who successfully imposed on the whole Middle Ages his claim to be the Dionysius converted by Saint Paul in Acts 17 (Saint Denis, the patron saint of France). In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the image reappears among the Platonic writers associated with the school of Chartres, while monastic writers pair it with the biblical image of Jacob's ladder (Gen. 28.12). Contemporary with Dante, Jacob's ladder as the "ladder of being" is readily found in the widely read *Journey of the Mind to God* by the Franciscan Saint Bonaventura, where the visible creation is treated as a ladder to be ascended through contemplation to the vision of God:

Since, then, we must mount Jacob's ladder before descending it, let us place the first rung of the ascension in the depths, putting the whole sensible world before us as a mirror, by which ladder we shall cross over to God, the Supreme Creator, that we may be true Hebrews crossing from Egypt to the land promised to our fathers; let us also be Christians crossing with Christ from this world over to the Father. (John 13.1)

The parallel Bonaventura draws here between the Exodus from Egypt and the Atonement is fundamental to the *Comedy*, as the epistle to Can Grande says. Bonaventura fuses it with the idea of the ladder, and this fusion is also part of Dante's conception. When the pilgrim, in the heaven of Mars, is told by his ancestor Cacciaguida that during his approaching exile he will experience "what a hard path it is to descend and mount by another's stairs" (*Par.* 17.58–60), his basic images for the poet's journey to God—the way or road, and the stairway—are fused in the description of the pain of exile. (In portions of the passage we do not quote, the images of arrow and bread gain similar double meanings; see the notes to *Paradiso* 17.) Such a nexus of words, images, and rhymes is another link in the chain. In this profoundly Boethian passage, misfortune is recast as blessing, and one of Dante's most heartfelt insights into how his life and his poem have become unified crystallizes around the figure of the stairway of being.

A number of other important dimensions of the poem are linked to the idea of the great chain: the poem's numerological form, by which it may be said to be "bound" by number (cf. Wisdom 11.21, and see "A Note on the Form of the Poem"); the oft-remarked scheme of parallel cantos (by which the popes in *Inferno* 19 are answered by one in *Purgatorio* 19); even the many references, pointed out by Curtius, to the "image of the book," may suggest the ancient notion, well known in the Middle Ages, of a book as a "chain," or *catena* of passages designed for memorization.

All of these aspects of the poem articulate or imply a catenary structure. Since the golden chain depends from God, this scheme also implies, consistent with Dante's intellectual formation, that the *Paradiso*, though reached last in the narrative (and the last of the three *cantiche* to be composed), is the origin and cause of the whole poem. The poem ends where it logically, causally, began, in its final/first cause: the blessedness that is humanity's destiny and the reason for its having been created. This "return to origins" is evident everywhere in the *Paradiso*: the pilgrim meets his remote physical origins (first his ancestor Cacciaguada, then the "first father," Adam) and is told why he should write down his vision, so that we witness the logical genesis of the poem. These moments of origin are the narrative and autobiographical equivalents of cosmic structure, which provides that the heavenly spheres (and the angelic intelligences that drive them) are the cooperating agents (secondary causes) in bringing about what happens on earth, far below. The inescapable corollary is that if we wish to fully understand Dante's poem on its own terms, we must follow it through to its end, which is its real beginning: everything both derives from it and hangs from it.

A Note on the Form of the Poem

The *Inferno*, like the rest of the *Divine Comedy*, is written in the normal eleven-syllable line of Italian poetry. The prestige of this line was established by the poets of the Sicilian school (mid-thirteenth century), who invented the sonnet and introduced the high courtly lyric into Italy, and by those of the so-called *dolce stil novo*. Bolognese and Tuscan poets of the generation before Dante's and later. Dante's own treatise on poetry in the vernacular, the *De vulgari eloquentia* (unfinished, ca. 1306), set forth theoretical grounds for the superiority of the hendecasyllable to other line lengths, but it was the *Divine Comedy* itself that definitively established the preeminence of the hendecasyllable and, to some extent, that of its formal rhyme pattern, terza rima, for narrative poetry.

The hendecasyllable corresponds to the normal ten-syllable verse of English poetry as practiced by Chaucer and Milton. This was not a met-

rical scheme in the sense of requiring a fixed pattern of metrical feet, as it became in the nineteenth century. Rather the nature of the line was determined by the number of syllables (normally ten in English but eleven in Italian, since most Italian words are accented on the next-to-last syllable, the penult), with certain syllables, which might be called the anchors of the line, being accented. In both English and Italian the tenth syllable must be accented as well as either the fourth or the sixth. There must be a caesura, or break in the line, normally near its middle. Beyond this, there is a virtually unlimited flexibility: any number of syllables in any additional positions may be accented. Two famous lines of Milton's illustrate the principle (accented syllables are underlined; the caesura is marked with ()):

Of Man's First Disobedience, | and the Fruit . . .

Note that the fourth and eighth syllables are not accented, but the second, third, sixth, and tenth are; this is not iambic pentameter. In

Hurl'd headlong flaming | from th' Ethereal Sky . . .

the first, second, fourth, eighth, and tenth syllables are accented, but not the sixth.

Compare Dante's verse (5. 142)

E cad-di, | co-me cor-po mor-to ca-de.

One additional principle needs to be added to complete the picture: ordinarily, contiguous vowels are elided. Thus (in line 2 of the *Inferno*) "u-na sel-va os-cu-ra" counts as six syllables, not seven, because the *a* ending *selva* is combined in pronunciation with the *o* beginning *oscura*. (For the rules of Italian pronunciation, the reader should consult an elementary grammar text.) Here are the opening four lines:

Nel mez-zo del cam-min | di nos-tra vi-ta,
mi ri-tro-vai | per u-na sel-va os-cu-ra,
ché la di-rit-ta via | e-ra smar-ri-ta.
Ahi quant-o a dir qual er- | a è co-sa du-ra . . .

In line 4, there are three contiguous vowel pairs that must be elided: *ahi*, *o a è*. The frequency of them in this and the following line is unusual and contributes strongly to the breathless, anxious effect they create (as does, of course, the highly unusual position of the caesura in both). Of course it often happens that two contiguous vowels both have to be pronounced. This can be seen, in fact, in the third line of the poem. The strong caesura after *via* requires the two vowels of that word to be elided. As one can readily see, the repertoire of expressive possibilities in Italian

verse is very great indeed, and although there were fine poets before him, Dante was the first poet to explore them with anything like thoroughness.

One last item of terminology. An Italian hendecasyllable normally has a full eleven syllables, having one unaccented syllable after the accented tenth one. This type of line and line-ending is called *piano* [smooth]. But, like an English line, though more rarely, it can end after the tenth syllable, as in 4.60:

e con Ra-che-le, per cui tan-to fè,

in which case it is called *tronco* [truncated], or it can have two unaccented syllables after the tenth, as in 24.66:

a pa-ro-le for-mar dis-con-ve-ne-vo-le,

in which case it is called *sdrucciolo* [sliding]. The *verso piano* is by far the most numerous of the three types.

The rhyme scheme of the *Comedy*, invented by Dante, is called *terza rima* (literally, third [i.e., triple] rhyme). Here is the opening of the poem:

Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita	A (-ita)
mi ritrovai per una selva oscura,	B (-ura)
ché la dritta via era smarrita.	A (-ita)
Ahi, quanto a dir qual era è cosa dura,	B (-ura)
esta selva selvaggia e aspra e forte	C (-orte)
che nel pensier rinova la paura!	B (-ura)
Tant'è amara che poco è più morte;	C (-orte)
ma per trattar del ben ch'ì vi trovai,	D (-ai)
diò de l'altre cose ch'ì v'ho scorte.	C (orte)
Io non so ben ridir com'ì v'intraí,	D (-ai)
tant'era pien di sonno a quel punto	E (-unto)
che la verace via abbandonai.	D (-ai)

After the first group of three lines (called a *terzina*), each *terzina* begins and ends with the middle rhyme of the previous one, introducing a new one into its own second position. It is easy to see from the punctuation that the syntactic units generally follow the division into *terzinas*. At the same time, the rhyme scheme forms a kind of interlocking chain that links each *terzina* with the previous and subsequent ones. Each rhyme appears three times, except for the ones that open and close cantos, which appear only twice. Here is the end of the first canto:

E io a lui: "Poeta, io ti richeggio	X (-eggio)
per quello Dio che tu non conoscesti,	Y (-esti)
acciò ch'io fugga questo male e peggio,	X (-eggio)

che tu mi meni là dov' or dicesti,	Y (-esti)
sì ch'io veggia la porta di san Pietro	Z (-etro)
e color cui tu fai cotanto mesti."	Y (-esti)
Allor si mosse, e io li tenni dietro.	Z (-etro)

Thus the end of a canto is a kind of mirror image of its beginning.

Terza rima is an extremely supple and flexible medium. In the *Divine Comedy* there is no set number of lines in a canto; the cantos range in length from 115 to 160 lines. It is clear that Dante associated the triplicities of the form (groups of three lines, interlocking chains of three rhymes) with the idea of the Creator as triune and with the idea of the chain of being. In the wake of Saint Augustine's *De trinitate*, he saw the marks of the Creator's triple unity everywhere in creation—in the structure of time (past, present, and future), in the triple structure of man's nature (rational, appetitive, and vegetative), and in the three "first things" (form and matter, separate and conjoined)—and he regarded his verse medium, terza rima, as one of the ways his creation of the poem imitated God's creation of the universe: others are, of course, that the poem has three parts and that it consists of a "perfect" number of cantos, 100—or, after the prologue of the first canto, three parts of thirty-three cantos each. (John Freccero's 1983 essay "The Significance of *Terza Rima*" discusses further implications of the form; see the Bibliography.)

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