

vitality? It is a narrative poem whose greatest strength lies in the fact that it does not so much narrate as dramatize its episodes. Dante had doubtless learned from experience how soporific a long narrative could be. He also firmly believed that the senses were the avenues to the mind and that sight was the most powerful ("noblest," he would have said) of these. Hence his art is predominantly visual. He believed also that the mind must be moved in order to grasp what the senses present to it; therefore he combines sight, sound, hearing, smell and touch with fear, pity, anger, horror and other appropriate emotions to involve his reader to the point of seeming actually to experience his situations and not merely to read about them. It is really a three-dimensional art.

The *Divine Comedy* is also an allegory. But it is fortunately that special type of allegory wherein every element must first correspond to a literal reality, every episode must exist coherently in itself. Allegoric interpretation does not detract from the story as told but is rather an added significance which one may take or leave. Many readers, indeed, have been thrilled by the *Inferno's* power with hardly an awareness of further meanings. Dante represents mankind, he represents the "Noble Soul," but first and always he is Dante Alighieri, born in thirteenth-century Florence; Virgil represents human reason, but only after he has been accepted as the poet of ancient Rome. The whole poem purports to be a vision of the three realms of the Catholic otherworld, Hell, Purgatory and Paradise, and a description of "the state of the soul after death"; yet it is peopled with Dante's contemporaries and, particularly in the materialistic realism of the *Inferno*, it is torn by issues and feuds of the day, political, religious and personal. It treats of the most universal values—good and evil, man's responsibility, free will and predestination; yet it is intensely personal and political, for it was written out of the anguish of a man who saw his life blighted by the injustice and corruption of his times.

The *Divine Comedy* is classically referred to as the

xiv

epitome, the supreme expression of the Middle Ages. If by this is meant that many typically medieval attitudes are to be found in it, it is true: the reasoning is scholastic, the learning, the mysticism are those of the author's time. But if from such a statement one is to infer (as is frequently done) that the poem is a hymn to its times, a celebration and glorification of them, as Virgil's *Aeneid* was of Rome, then nothing could be more misleading. The *Comedy* is a glorification of the ways of God, but it is also a sharp and great-minded protest at the ways in which men have thwarted the divine plan. This plan, as Dante conceived it, was very different from the typically medieval view, which saw the earthly life as a "vale of tears," a period of trial and suffering, an unpleasant but necessary preparation for the after-life where alone man could expect to enjoy happiness. To Dante such an idea was totally repugnant. He gloried in his God-given talent, his well disciplined faculties, and it seemed inconceivable to him that he and mankind in general should not have been intended to develop to the fullest their specifically human potential. The whole *Comedy* is pervaded by his conviction that man should seek earthly immortality by his worthy actions here, as well as prepare to merit the life everlasting. His theory is stated explicitly in his Latin treatise, *De Monarchia*:

"Ineffable Providence has thus designed two ends to be contemplated of man: first, the happiness of this life, which consists in the activity of his natural powers, and is prefigured by the Earthly Paradise; and then the blessedness of life everlasting . . . which may be symbolized by the Celestial Paradise."

To us, reading his masterpiece at the comfortable distance of six hundred years, it may well seem that few men have better realized their potential than Dante; to him, a penniless exile convicted of a felony, separated under pain of death from home, family and friends, his life seemed to have been cut off in the middle.

It was Dante's pride—and the root of his misfortune—

xv

to have been born in the free commune of Florence, located near the center of the Italian peninsula, during the turbulent thirteenth century. It is important that we remember to think of it, not as an Italian city, but as a sovereign country, a power in the peninsula and of growing importance internationally. It had its own army, its flag, its ambassadors, its foreign trade, its own coinage; the florin, in fact, was on its way to becoming the standard of international exchange, the pound sterling or dollar of its day. Its control was a prize worth fighting for, and the Florentines were nothing loth to fight, especially among themselves. Internal strife had begun long before, as the weakening of the Empire had left its robber-baron representatives increasingly vulnerable to attack and eventual subjection by the townsfolk. They had become unruly citizens at best in their fortress-like houses, and constituted a higher nobility whose arrogance stirred the resentment of the lesser nobility, the merchants and artisans. The history of the republic for many years is the story of the bloody struggle among these groups, with the gradual triumph of the lower classes as flourishing trade brought them unheard-of prosperity. Early in Dante's century the struggle acquired color and new ferocity. In 1215 the jilting of an Amidei girl was avenged by the murder of the offending member of the Buondelmonti family, which, according to the chronicler Villani, originated the infamous Gueff-Ghibelline factions. But the lines had already long been drawn on the deeper issues, with the Ghibellines representing the old Imperial aristocracy and the Gueffs the burghers, who, in international politics, favored the Pope. In 1248, with the aid of Frederick II, the Ghibellines expelled the Gueffs; in 1251 the latter returned and drove out the Ghibellines, who were again defeated in 1258. In 1260 the Ghibellines amassed a formidable army under the leadership of Farinata degli Uberti and overwhelmed the Gueffs at Montaperti, where the Arbia ran red with the blood of the six thousand slain, and sixteen thousand were taken prisoner. The very existence of Florence hung momentarily in the balance as the triumphant Ghibel-

lines listened to the urgings of their allies from neighboring Siena that they wipe out the city; only Farinata's resolute opposition saved it. Gradually the Gueffs recovered, and in 1266 they completely and finally crushed their enemies at Benevento. Thus ended the worst of this partisan strife from which, as Machiavelli was to write, "there resulted more murders, banishments and destruction of families than ever in any city known to history."

Dante Alighieri had been born the preceding year, 1265, toward the end of May; he was a year old when his family (a typically Gueff mixture of lesser nobility and burgher) must have joined in the celebration of their party's victory. His whole impressionable childhood was undoubtedly filled with stories of the struggle so recently ended. The fascination it had for him is evident in the *Comedy*, where it is an important factor in the *Inferno* and the lower, "material" portion of *Purgatory*.

Our actual knowledge of Dante's life is disappointingly small, limited to a few documents of record. The biographies, beginning with Boccaccio's about fifty years after his death, are largely hearsay, legend and deductions based on his works and the meager references scattered through them. We know that his mother died when he was very young, that his father remarried, and that Dante was completely orphaned in adolescence. This is thought to account for a certain hunger for parental affection which can be noted in the *Comedy*. He doubtless received the normal education of the day for his class, and perhaps more, for his bent must have been clearly intellectual and literary. That he took an early interest in the vernacular lyric only recently borrowed from the Provençal is demonstrated by poems dating from his middle or late 'teens. It was through this activity that he made his closest friendship, that with Guido Cavalcanti, who was a gifted poet some years Dante's senior.

Most of our impressions about his youth are gleaned from his first work, in the planning of which Cavalcanti had a part. Called *La Vita Nuova* ("The New Life"), it was deliberately written in the vernacular in 1292 to celebrate the most important influence in Dante's life,

his love for Beatrice Portinari. It is made up of sonnets and longer lyrics interspersed with prose passages which explain and narrate the circumstances under which the poems had been composed years earlier. An astonishing feature of the book is the careful symmetry of its arrangement where the balance of three, nine and ten foregrounds the elaborate design which will be worked out in the *Comedy*. Very briefly, it is the story of a boy of nine suddenly awaking to love at the sight of a girl of almost the same age; of a second encounter at the age of 18 when a greeting is exchanged; of tribulations and misunderstandings leading to her disapproval; of her sudden death when the poet was 25, his grief and attempted consolation by another girl; finally of a "marvelous vision" of his Beatrice when he was 27, thus completing the trinity of "nines" and determining him to write no more of her until he could do so worthily. Although it is autobiographical, the *Vita Nuova* is not an autobiography; it is a delicate and sensitive analysis of emotions. Such facts as enter into it assume an air of strange unreality.

From our small array of factual data we learn that Dante's life in this period included other things than tremulous sighs and visions. In 1289 he took part in the battle of Campaldino and the capture of Caprona. In 1295 appears the first record of his political activity. In the same year he made himself eligible for public office by enrolling in a guild, the Apothecaries', where the books of that day were sold. In the following year it is recorded that he spoke in the "Council of the Hundred." By 1299 he had advanced to fill a minor ambassadorship. In the meantime he married Gemma, sister of his friend Forese Donati and of the hot-tempered Corso. As the mature but still youthful Alighieri was playing an ever more prominent role in politics, familiar tensions were once again building up within the republic. Thirty years without a serious threat from their common enemy put too great a strain on Guelph unity; and again it was a murder, though in nearby Pistoia, which precipitated open conflict. The Florentines took sides and in the late

spring of 1300 the two parties, called "Blacks" and "Whites," fought in the streets. It was at this particular moment that Dante's political career was crowned with the highest success and he was elected one of the six supreme magistrates, called priors. Himself a moderate White, he found it necessary during the two-month term to join in banishing his brother-in-law, Corso Donati, and his "first friend," Guido Cavalcanti, as ringleaders respectively of the Blacks and Whites. (Cavalcanti died very soon of an illness contracted during his banishment.) As friction continued, the Blacks conspired for the intervention of the Pope, Boniface VIII, who was delighted with the chance to strengthen the Papacy's claim on Tuscany. In spite of frantic White opposition he sent Charles of Valois ostensibly as impartial arbitrator and peacemaker. What the Pope's secret orders were became instantly apparent when Charles was admitted in November 1301, for he set upon the Whites, admitted the banished Blacks and stood by as they gave themselves over to murder and pillage. The matter was then legitimized by a series of "purge trials" of the sort only too familiar to us. Among those accused, and of course convicted, of graft and corruption in office was Dante Alighieri. Fortunately he had been absent and had stayed away; but from early in 1302 his voluntary absence became exile under penalty of being burned alive.

We know even less of the remaining 19 years except that they were spent largely with a series of patrons in various courts of Italy. The exile had no funds, no reputation as yet, no powerful friends. He stayed at various times with the Scala family, then with the Malaspinas; tradition has it that he studied at Paris, and even at Oxford. As time passed and his reputation grew, his way became easier and his last years were spent in relative comfort at Ravenna as the honored guest of Guido Novello da Polenta, nephew of Francesca da Rimini. On the way back from a diplomatic mission to Venice he fell ill and died soon after his return. In *Paradise XVII* he left one of the most poignant descriptions of life in exile ever

written: "Thou shalt prove how salty tastes another's bread, and how hard a path it is to go up and down another's stairs."

That Dante had ample reason to feel that the political chaos of his day was a prime menace to man's pursuit of happiness should be quite apparent. It should also be understandable that he used the *Comedy* to protest this evil and to suggest a remedy. His analysis and conclusions took years of reading and meditation, during which he denounced all existing parties, Whites, Blacks, Guefts, and Chibellines, in order to "make a party by himself." As his compatriot Machiavelli was to do two hundred years later and from very similar motives, he sought his material in the literature of Ancient Rome, with the difference that the later scholar had the advantage of the humanistic revival and the free inquiry of the Renaissance, whereas Dante was a pioneer circumscribed by scholasticism. He had already begun his study of ancient philosophy a few years after the *Vita Nuova* and before his political disaster. In his next work, the *Convivio* or *Banquet*, he tells how difficult he had found it: the Latin he had learned proved quite different from that of Boethius' *Consolations of Philosophy*. Cicero's urbane and complex style was much harder and, more confusing still, his whole mode of thought, his concepts, viewpoints, allusions were as if from a different world. The young explorer from medieval Christendom went doggedly on from one work to another which he had seen mentioned, without adequate teachers, courses, reference works, or indeed, the works themselves, except as he could beg or borrow the manuscripts. Eventually he mastered and assimilated all the learning available in Latin or Latin translations, from the *Timæus* of Plato, Cicero, Virgil, Horace, Ovid, Statius and Lucan through St. Augustine and other Fathers of the Church, to Averroës, St. Thomas and the great mystics. But the wastefulness, the needless difficulties, the groping aroused his indignation, as injustice always did. He had been "educated" but how much had it helped him in the pursuit of real learning? He knew that there were others, too, who longed for such

knowledge but lacked his extraordinary mental equipment (he allowed himself no false modesty) and thus failed to win through. What was lacking were real schools with competent teachers and high standards, available to all who had the talent and the desire to learn. But what agency would set them up and maintain them? Not the Church; for, though it was no longer ignorant of philosophy, the Church was suspicious of it and not inclined to grant it that primacy in the conduct of human affairs which Dante assigned to it. This was another problem, to be studied along with that of political instability and strife. In the meantime he, Dante Alighieri, could contribute the fruits of his own efforts in the form of an encyclopaedia or compendium of knowledge which would at the same time earn for him badly needed prestige. Not only would it gather together the knowledge which he had found scattered piecemeal in many works and in different forms, it would make that knowledge accessible by use of the vernacular instead of Latin. Such a thing was revolutionary in the first decade of the fourteenth century and called for an explanation which Dante gave in the form of an impassioned defense of what we call Italian. He concluded with the following prophetic words, referring to the new language as

" . . . a new light, a new sun, which shall rise where-as the accustomed one (Latin) shall set, and which shall give light to those who are in darkness because the accustomed sun does not give them light."

The *Banquet* was to consist of fifteen sections: an introduction and fourteen of Dante's longer philosophical lyrics, each followed by an expository prose passage. Only four sections were completed. Among the possible reasons for its abandonment, two in particular seem valid. First, the work is a failure in organization and style, typically medieval in its discursive rambling. Second, it was written to exalt philosophy, "most noble daughter of the Emperor of the Universe," and thus constituted a perilous deviation for a medieval Christian. It is at least possible that this frame of mind was included in the "Dark