PENGUIN CLASSICS

DANTE

The Divine Comedy

Volume 1: Inferno

Translated by MARK MUSA

PENGUIN CLASSICS

THE DIVINE COMEDY
VOL. I: INFERNO

DANTE ALIGHIERI was born in Florence in 1265 and belonged to a noble but impoverished family. He followed a normal course of studies, possibly attending university in Bologna, and when he was about twenty, he married Gemma Donati, by whom he had several children. He had first met Bice Portinari, whom he called Beatrice, in 1274, and when she died in 1290, he sought distraction by studying philosophy and theology and writing *La Vita Nuova*. During this time he became involved in the strife between the Guelfs and the Ghibellines; he became a prominent White Guelf, and when the Black Guelfs came to power in 1302, Dante, during an absence from Florence, was condemned to exile. He took refuge first in Verona, and after wandering from place to place—as far as Paris and even, some have said, to Oxford—he settled in Ravenna. While there he completed *The Divine Comedy*, which he began in about 1308. Dante died in Ravenna in 1321.

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DANTE
ALIGHIERI

The Divine Comedy
Volume I: Inferno

Translated with an Introduction,
Notes, and Commentary by
MARK MUSA

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FOR

ISABELLA

Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita

The subject of this work must first be considered according to the letter, then be considered allegorically. The subject of the whole work, then, taken in the literal sense alone, is simply "The state of souls after death," for the movement of the whole work hinges on this. If the work be taken allegorically, the subject is "Man—as, according to his merits or demerits in the exercise of his free will, he is subject to reward or punishment by Justice. . . ."

The title of the work is "Here begins the Comedy of Dante Alighieri, Florentine by birth, not by character."

DANTE'S *Letter to Can Grande*

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AN INTRODUCTION TO DANTE AND HIS WORKS

NOT MUCH is known about Dante Alighieri. We know he was born in Florence sometime in late May or early June (he was a Gemini) of the year 1265 in the district of San Martino, the son of Alighiero di Bellincione d'Alighiero. His mother, Donna Bella, died when he was very young; his father, whom he seems to avoid mentioning as much as possible, remarried, and died while Dante was in his late teens. The Alighieri family may be considered noble by reason of the titles and dignities bestowed upon its members, although by the time Dante arrived on the scene the family seems to have been reduced to modest economic and social circumstances. According to Dante himself in *Inferno* XV, the family descended from the noble seed of the Roman founders of the city. This claim, however, remains largely unsubstantiated, as nothing is known of Dante's ancestors before his great-great-grandfather Cacciaguida, who was knighted by Emperor Conrad III. In the company of Cacciaguida Dante spends several emotional cantos in the final part of the great poem: they are cantos that occupy the central portion of the *Paradise*, in which important questions are answered, tragic events are revealed, and major themes running through the entire *Divine Comedy* are resolved. Cacciaguida died, or so Dante tells us in *Paradise* XV (139–48), during the Second Crusade, about 1147.

Like most of the city's lesser nobility and artisans, Dante's family was affiliated with the Guelf party, as opposed to the Ghibellines, whose adherents tended to belong to the feudal aristocracy. These two parties came into Italy from Germany, and their names represent Italianized forms of the names attached to the two rival German clans of Welf and Waibling. In Italy, the parties were at first identified with broad alle-

giances: to papal authority for the Guelfs, and to imperial authority in the case of the Ghibellines. Eventually, however this distinction between Church and Empire disappeared, and the two parties became less clearly defined in outlook and purpose. Local connotations became much more important, as party issues and activities were tied to neighborhood rivalries, family feuds, and private interests. Thus, the Guelfs and Ghibellines of Florence were in a sense factions peculiar to that region alone.

One year after Dante's birth the Guelfs gained control in Florence: 1266 marks the beginning of nearly thirty years of relative peace and prosperity in the city. Florence was flourishing at this time, artistically, intellectually, and commercially; according to a contemporary chronicler, Dino Compagni, Florence could even boast of a tourist trade. The city, composed of old and respectable, wealthy families as well as the nouveau riche, was certainly one of the wealthiest of its day. Founded on banking and the gold florin, it thrived on the manufacturing of silk, fur, leather, and especially wool. Another chronicler, Giovanni Villani, reports that there were as many as two hundred shops, or *botteghe*, belonging to the wool guild (which employed thirty thousand people) and as many as eighty banks in town. By this time the Florentine banking families, most prominent of whom were the Bardi and the Peruzzi, had become international leaders in the field of banking.

Like every good male citizen of Florence, Dante did his military service. In 1289 he joined the cavalry, the aristocratic branch of the armed forces, and in the summer of that year, when Florence and its Guelf allies were at war with the neighboring town of Arezzo, Dante took part in the battle of Campaldino, which ended in a decisive victory for Florence. Later on, in August, he was at the siege of the Pisan fortress of Caprona. He records both experiences in *The Divine Comedy*: Campaldino in *Purgatory* V, through the eyes of the courageous Buonconte da Montefeltro, who dies in that battle; and the surrender of Caprona's fortress in *Inferno* XXI.

If I were asked to quote a passage that best describes Dante's

feelings about war in general, I might turn to the opening lines of *Inferno* XXII for their color and force and pageantry, but my final choice would be to quote the closing lines of Canto XXI, for the first five tercets of the next canto are simply a gloss on them. Malacoda, the devil-captain in charge of affairs in the Fifth *Bolgia*, which houses the corrupt souls of the Grafters, who misused public office, orders ten of his best devils to accompany the Pilgrim and his guide, Virgil, to the archway crossing the Sixth *Bolgia*. There is no archway, but only the captain and his men know that, and they are about to take advantage of the fact by having a little fun with their innocent wards; the canto ends with the black squadron of ten saluting their honorable captain just as they are about to take off:

> Before they turned left-face along the bank
> each one gave their good captain a salute
> with farting tongue pressed tightly to his teeth,
>
> and he blew back with his bugle of an ass-hole.

So much for war!

As far as one can tell from his writings, Dante's recollections of family life were pleasant ones. It is fairly certain that he received a careful education, although little of its content is precisely known. He may have attended the Franciscan lower schools, and later the order's schools of philosophy. The family's modest social standing did not prevent him from pursuing his studies, nor was he hindered in his effort to lead the life of a gentleman. His writings indicate that he was familiar with the ways of the country as well as with city life. He probably studied for a time under the direction of the distinguished teacher, scholar, and statesman Brunetto Latini (c. 1220–94), who was the author of an encyclopedia in French, the *Trésor*, a work well known all over Europe. At this time Dante was driven by a desire to master the techniques of style. It seems that Brunetto encouraged his keenness for study and learning, and this may account for a trip, around 1287, to Bologna, where Dante decided to pursue his study of rhetoric in the highly renowned university.

We learn from the *Vita nuova* (Chapter III) that as a young man Dante taught himself the art of writing verse. In time, he became acquainted with the best-known poets of Florence, corresponding with them and circulating his own love lyrics. For the youthful Dante, writing poetry gradually became an important occupation, nourished by his love for art and learning and his interest in the nature of genuine love courtship. Equally significant at this time was his friendship with the wealthy, aristocratic poet Guido Cavalcanti (c. 1240–1300), who exerted a strong influence on Dante's early poetic endeavors. This period was also marked by the death of his father (c. 1283), and by his marriage to Gemma, a gentlewoman of the Donati family. (The marriage had been arranged by Dante's father in 1277, well before his death.) Gemma gave Dante two sons, Pietro and Jacopo, and at least one daughter (there exist the names of two daughters, Antonia and Beatrice, but they could refer to the same person, Beatrice being a monastic name). Dante's marriage and family seem to have had little influence on him as a poet; some critics believe that during his last years of life in exile, Gemma joined him in Ravenna and was a comfort to him, but nowhere in his works does Dante make reference to his wife.

Besides his associations with Guido Cavalcanti and Brunetto Latini, Dante knew well the notary Lapo Gianni (c. 1270–1332) and became acquainted later on with the youthful Cino da Pistoia (c. 1270–c. 1336). Both of these men were poets, and Cino, like Dante, was a highly productive one. Dante was also on friendly terms with the musician Casella, who appears in *Purgatory* II (76–114), and about whom there exists little information. We are not certain, but the artists Oderisi da Gubbio (c. 1240–c. 1299) and Giotto (c. 1267–1337) may also have been among Dante's acquaintances. A comrade chosen with far less discrimination, perhaps, was Forese Donati (d. 1296), a kinsman of Dante's wife's and a regular rogue, with whom Dante exchanged at one time a series of reproaches and coarse insults in sonnet form. Dante the Pilgrim's meeting with his bon vivant friend Forese in the *Purgatory* (Canto XXIII) precedes a number of conversations in Cantos XXIV–XXVI

with the great poets Guido Guinizelli (c. 1230–75) and Arnaut Daniel (c. 1150–?). And it is here, immediately following his talk with Forese, that Dante the Pilgrim discusses poetry with a not-too-distinguished poet from Lucca, Bonagiunta (c. 1220–c. 1275), and in so doing gives a definition of the so-called school of the *dolce stil nuovo*.

Along with his good friend Guido Cavalcanti, Dante refined and developed his poetic skill and began to distinguish himself from the other writers of the time. In their poetry, Dante and Guido presented their ideas on the nature of love and its ability to contribute to the inner perfection of man. Guido, however, was more interested in natural philosophy and the psychology of love than Dante, who favored the study of theology and Latin poetic models. He particularly admired Virgil, from whom he learned much about matters of style as well as content. Though Dante was deeply influenced in his writing by the example of his friend Guido, he eventually responded to his own artistic temperament, to his study of Virgil, and to the example provided by a great poetic master, Guido Guinizelli, who died when Dante was just a child.

Dante's life and writings were also influenced by his acquaintance with a noble Florentine woman of outstanding grace and beauty. He casually mentions her name among the names of sixty of the most beautiful women of Florence in one of his early poems, but it was not until later that the poet truly "discovered" her. This revelation proved to be an extremely powerful force in his artistic development. According to the testimony of Boccaccio and others, the woman was called Bice, and was the daughter of Folco Portinari of Florence. She later became the wife of the banker Simone dei Bardi. Dante called her Beatrice, "the bringer of blessings," the one who brought bliss to all who looked upon her.

Dante tells us that he met Beatrice for the first time when he was nine. Some time later they met again, and if we are to take the literal level of what our poet tells us in his *Vita nuova* as true (and I see no reason not to), theirs was not an easy relationship, for Beatrice was offended by the attention Dante paid other women. The resulting rebuff caused Dante great

sorrow. His emotional attachment to Beatrice brought him to idealize her more and more as the guide of his thoughts and feelings, as the one who would lead him toward the inner perfection that is the ideal of every noble mind. In his poems, Dante praised his lady as a model of virtue and courtesy, a miraculous gift given to earth by God to ennoble and enrich all those who were able to appreciate her superior qualities. Such an exalted view of this woman was bound to carry with it the fear that she would not remain long in this life, and, in fact, she died at a rather early age in 1290. Dante was overcome with grief at his loss, and there followed a period of contemplating Beatrice in the full glory of Heaven. After the first anniversary of Beatrice's death, another woman (unnamed) succeeded in winning Dante's affection for a brief time. However, Beatrice soon came vividly to mind again, and, feeling guilt and remorse for having neglected her memory, Dante reaffirmed his fidelity to her. This experience prompted him to gather together all the poems he had written in her honor, in an attempt to celebrate her virtue. To this selective collection of poems (Dante chose to include thirty-one) he added a commentary on the meaning and occasion of each, and he called the little book *Vita nuova*, or the *New Life*.

This, the most elegant and mysterious of Dante's earliest works, is a masterpiece in its own right. Had Dante never written *The Divine Comedy*, he would undoubtedly still be remembered today for the *Vita nuova*. In addition to the poems, it includes one of the first important examples of Italian literary prose, which serves the purpose not only of offering a continuous narrative but also of explaining the occasion for the composition of each of the poems. The originality of the *Vita nuova* lies in the functional relationship between the poetry and the prose. The *Vita nuova* is, I believe, the best introduction to *The Divine Comedy*. From this little book the great poem is born, and in it we find Dante's early use of such techniques as allegory, dream, and symbolism.

In recent years the critics of *The Divine Comedy* have come to see more clearly the necessity of distinguishing between Dante the Poet—the historical figure, who wrote the poem in

his own voice—and Dante the Pilgrim, the poet's creation, who moves in a world of the poet's invention. In the case of the *Vita nuova* it is more difficult to distinguish between Dante the Poet and Dante the Lover, because in this book the Lover, the protagonist, is himself a poet. More important, however, is the fact that the events of the *Vita nuova*, unlike those of *The Divine Comedy*, are surely not to be taken as pure fiction, and the protagonist himself is no fictional character: he is the historical character Dante at an earlier age. But we must attempt, just as we must do in the case of any first-person novel, to distinguish between the point of view of the one who has already lived through the experiences recorded and has had time to reflect upon them, and the point of view of the one undergoing the experiences at the time. What we have in the *Vita nuova* is a mature Dante, who is evoking his youthful experiences in a way to point up the folly of his youth.

Also significant is the chronological relationship between the composition of the poems and that of the prose narrative, which reflects the way in which the author adapted some of his earlier writings to a new purpose. In general, scholars will agree that sometime between 1292 (that is, two years after the death of Beatrice) and 1300, when Dante composed the *Vita nuova*, most—if not all—of the poems that were to appear in the text had already been written. The architecture of the work, it might be said, consists of selected poems arranged in a certain order, with bridges of prose that primarily serve a narrative function: to describe the events in the life of the protagonist that supposedly inspired the poems included in the text.

By giving the poems a narrative background, the author was able to clarify their meaning. For example, though its beauty is independent of its position in the work, the first *canzone* in the book, "Donne ch'avete intelletto d'amore" ("Ladies who have intelligence of love"), owes entirely to the preceding narrative its dramatic significance as the proclamation of a totally new attitude adopted by the young poet-lover at this time in the story. This is also true, though from a different point of view, of the most famous poem in the *Vita*

nuova (and probably one of the most exquisite sonnets in all of world literature):

Tanto gentile e tanto onesta pare
la donna mia quand'ella altrui saluta,
ch'ogne lingua deven tremando muta
e li occhi no l'ardiscon di guardare.
Ella si va, sentendosi laudare,
benignamente d'umiltà vestuta,
e par che sia una cosa venuta
da cielo in terra a miracol mostrare.
Mostrarsi sì piacente a chi la mira,
che dà per li occhi una dolcezza al core,
che 'ntender no la può chi no la prova·
e par che de la sua labbia si mova
un spirito suove, pien d'amore,
Che va dicendo a l'anima: "Sospira!"

Such sweet decorum and such gentle grace
attend my lady's greeting as she moves
that lips can only tremble into silence,
and eyes dare not attempt to gaze at her.
Moving benignly, clothed in humility,
untouched by all the praise along her way,
she seems to be a creature come from Heaven
to earth, to manifest a miracle.
Miraculously gracious to behold,
her sweetness reaches, through the eyes, the heart
(who has not felt this cannot understand),
and from her lips it seems there moves a gracious
spirit, so deeply loving that it glides
into the souls of men, whispering: "Sigh!"

Just how much of the narrative prose is fiction we shall never know. We can never be sure that a poem actually arose from the circumstances outlined in the preceding prose. A few critics believe that all of the events of the narrative reflect biographical truth; most, fortunately, are more skeptical. But it goes without saying that in reading the *Vita nuova* we must suspend our skepticism and accept as "true" the events of the narrative (as we must when we read *The Divine*

Comedy), for only by doing so can we perceive the significance that the author attributed to his poems as he placed them where he did.

In the opening chapter, or preface, of his little book, the author states that his purpose is to copy from his "book of memory" only those past experiences that belong to the period beginning his "new life"—a life made new by the poet's first meeting with Beatrice and the God of Love, who, together with the poet-protagonist, are the main characters in the story. And by the end of Chapter II of the *Vita nuova*, all the motifs that are important for the story that is about to unfold have been introduced. The first word of the opening sentence is "Nine": "Nine times already since my birth the heaven of light had circled back to almost the same point, when there appeared before my eyes the now glorious lady of my mind, who was called Beatrice even by those who did not know what her name was." The number nine will be repeated twice more in the next sentence (and it will appear another twenty times before the book comes to an end). In this opening sentence the reader finds not only a reference to the number nine of symbolic significance but also an emphasis on mathematical precision, which will appear at frequent intervals throughout the *Vita nuova*, and will become important to the poetic structure of *The Divine Comedy*. In the same opening sentence the child Beatrice is presented as already enjoying the veneration of the people of her city, including strangers, who did not know her name, and with the words "the now glorious lady of my mind" (the first of two time shifts in which the figure of the living Beatrice is described in such a way as to remind us of Beatrice dead), the theme of death is delicately foreshadowed at the beginning of the story. The figure of Beatrice, when she is seen for the first time in this chapter, appears in a garment of blood-red—the same color as her "shroud" will be in the next chapter. In the next three sentences the three main *spiriti* are introduced: the "vital" (in the heart), the "natural" (in the liver), and the "animal" (in the brain). They rule the body of the nine-year-old protagonist, and they speak in Latin, as will the God of Love in the chapter that follows (and

again later on). The words of the first spirit describing Beatrice anticipate the first coming of Love in the next chapter and suggest something of the same mood of terror. The words of the second spirit suggest rapturous bliss to come (that bliss rhapsodically described in Chapter XI), and in the words of the third spirit, the spirit of the liver, there is the first of the many references to tears in the *Vita nuova*. It is only after this reference to the organ of digestion that Love is mentioned. He is mentioned first of all as a ruler, but we learn immediately that much of his power is derived from the protagonist's imagination—a faculty of which there will be many reminders in the form of visions throughout the book. We are also told that Love's power is restricted by reason, and later in the book the relation between Love and reason becomes an important problem. Two more themes are posited in this chapter, and will be woven into the narrative of the rest of the book: the godlike nature of Beatrice, and the strong "praise of the lady" motif, which sounds throughout the chapter, as the protagonist's admiration for Beatrice keeps growing during the nine years after her first appearance.

Thus, the opening chapter of the *Vita nuova* prepares for the rest of the book not only by presenting a background situation, an established continuity out of which single events will emerge, but also by setting in motion certain forces that will propel the *Vita nuova* forward—forces with which Dante's reader will gradually become more and more familiar. Dante presents in the first chapter of this book the major themes to be developed in the following chapters, as he will do again in Canto I of his *Divine Comedy*, which is not really the first canto of the *Inferno*, but rather the opening, introductory canto to the entire *Divine Comedy*. And we see here, as we will in the later work, the poet's medieval love for numbers and symmetry.

In Chapter XLII, the final chapter of the *Vita nuova*, the poet expresses his dissatisfaction with his work: "After this sonnet there appeared to me a miraculous vision in which I saw things that made me resolve to say no more about this blessed one until I should be capable of writing about her in a more worthy fashion." The earlier vision made him decide

to keep on writing; this one, which is not revealed to the reader, makes him decide to stop. If the main action of the book is to be seen, as some critics believe, in the development of Dante's love from preoccupation with his own feelings to enjoyment of Beatrice's excellence and, finally, to an exclusive concern with her heavenly attributes and with heavenly matters, then the *Vita nuova* ends, in an important sense, in failure.

To understand the message of the book, to understand how the book succeeds through failure, we must go back in time and imagine the poet Dante, somewhere between the ages of twenty-seven and thirty-five, having already glimpsed the possibility of what was to be his terrible and grandiose masterpiece, *The Divine Comedy*—we must imagine him rereading the love poems of his earlier years, and reading a number of them with shame. He would have come to see Beatrice, too, as she was destined to appear in *The Divine Comedy*, and indeed, as she does appear briefly in the *Vita nuova*, specifically in that essay (Chapter XXIX) on the miraculous quality of the figure nine, which is the square of the number three, that is, of the Blessed Trinity, and which is Beatrice herself.

Having arrived at this point, he would choose from among his earlier love poems many that exhibit his younger self at its worst, in order to offer a warning example to other young lovers and, especially, to other love poets. This, of course, would imply on Dante's part, as he is approaching "il mezzo del cammin di nostra vita" ("midway along the journey of our life"), a criticism of most of the Italian love poetry for which his century was famous, and also of the Provençal tradition of the preceding century, which gave birth to the Italian love lyric.

One might even say that the *Vita nuova* is a cruel book—cruel, that is, in the treatment of the human type represented by the protagonist. In the picture of the lover there is offered a condemnation of the vice of emotional self-indulgence and an exposure of its destructive effects on a man's integrity. The "tender feelings" that move the lover to hope or despair, to rejoice or to grieve (and perhaps even to enjoy his grief), spring from his vulnerability and instability and self-love. However

idealistically inspired, these feelings cannot, except spasmodically, lead him ahead and above; as long as he continues to be at their mercy, he must always fall back into the helplessness of his self-centeredness. The man who would realize his poetic destiny must ruthlessly cut out of his heart the canker at its center, the canker that the heart instinctively tends to cultivate. This is, I am convinced, the main message of the *Vita nuova*. And the consistent, uncompromising indictment it levels has no parallel in the literature of Dante's time. But, of course, the *Vita nuova* offers more than a picture of the misguided lover: there is also the glory of Beatrice, and the slowly increasing ability of the lover to understand it, although he must nevertheless confess, at the end, that he has not truly understood it.

In the treatment of both the lover and Beatrice, Dante went far beyond what he found at hand in the love poetry of the troubadours and of their followers. He took up two of their preoccupations (one might almost say obsessions) and developed each in a most original way: the lover's glorification of his own feelings, and his glorification of the beloved. Of the first he made a caricature. Unlike his friend Guido Cavalcanti, who was also highly critical of the havoc wrought by the emotions within a man's soul and who made the distraught lover a macabre portrait of doom, Dante presented his protagonist mainly as an object of derision.

As to the glorification of the lady, all critics of the *Vita nuova* will admit that Dante carried this idealization to a point never reached before by any poet, a degree of idealization that no poet after him would ever quite reach. However blurred may be the lover's vision of the gracious, pure, feminine Beatrice, Dante the Poet, in Chapter XXIX, probes to the essence of her being and presents the coldness of her sublimity, reflected by the coldness and the sublimity of the square of the number three. Thus, the tender foolishness of the lover is intensified by contrast with the icy perfection of the beloved. The nature of Beatrice is destined to inspire not tender sentiments, and certainly not weak tears, but only the stern resolution to strive for spiritual growth. Tears the divine Beatrice could approve,

but these should be tears of deep contrition—as she herself will tell the Pilgrim in *The Divine Comedy*, when she first addresses him at the summit of the Mountain of Purgatory.

With a few exceptions, Dante's lyric poems (and not only those contained in the *Vita nuova*) are inferior as works of art to those of Cavalcanti and Guinizelli or, for that matter, to those of Bernart de Ventadorn and Arnaut Daniel. The greatness of the *Vita nuova* lies not in the poems but rather in the purpose that Dante forced them to serve. Certainly his recantation is the most original in medieval literature—a recantation that takes the form of a re-enactment, seen from a new perspective, of the sin recanted.

We will get a glimpse of the poet-lover protagonist of the *Vita nuova* once again in a similar tearful mood in *The Divine Comedy*, this time in the role of the fragile and inexperienced Pilgrim. In Canto V of the *Inferno* we find him in tears yet another time, after listening to the words of the most eloquent and charming of all the sinners he will encounter in Hell. She is the enchanting lady Francesca, who, with her lovely words, melts the Pilgrim's heart. At first glance, the Pilgrim's deep compassion for her seems easily understandable. The story of Francesca da Rimini and her lover, Paolo Malatesta, even reduced to its sober, factual details, is made to order for inspiring sympathy, and Dante the Poet allows Francesca to present herself, on the surface at least, as one of the most charming creatures in world literature. So the Pilgrim is seduced by the gracious, aristocratic, tenderly eloquent, and all-too-feminine Francesca—and this seduction has also infected most critics and readers of *The Divine Comedy*. How this all takes place I have tried to explain in the notes to my translation. Let me add, however, that the reader will do well to be on guard while reading the *Inferno*, for while Francesca is the only woman in the *Inferno* who talks to the Pilgrim, she is by no means the only sinner there who tries to sweet-talk the naïve traveler. We must keep in mind the words of Minòs, the grotesque and snarling figure who judges all sinners at the entrance to Hell proper, when he warns the Pilgrim: "Be careful how you enter and whom you trust" (*Inferno* V, 19).

But for the moment, let us return to Dante the man and citizen of Florence. During the time he was composing the *Vita nuova* in at least a first draft—that is, sometime between 1290 and 1300—Dante's passion for study continued unabated. His vision was broadened by the reading of Boethius and Cicero. The dissemination of the scientific and philosophical works of Aristotle was bringing recognition of the need to harmonize the ideas of the great guide of human reason with the truths and teachings of the Faith. Dante, by now a grown man, was attracted to many of the new schools and universities that were operating under the tutelage of the new religious orders. Among the Franciscans, Dominicans, and Augustinians were many eminent teachers and scholars. In this brisk intellectual environment of the 1290s, Dante applied his energies to philosophy with such fervor that "in a short time, perhaps thirty months," he began "to be so keenly aware of her sweetness that the love of her drove away and destroyed every other thought," as he tells us in his *Convivio* (II, xii, 7). Among Christian scholars and theologians, he certainly read Saint Thomas, Albertus Magnus, and Saint Augustine, Hugh and Richard of Saint Victor, Saint Bonaventure, Saint Bernard, and Peter Lombard. In the area of history, he took up Livy and Paulus Orosius, among others. Evidence of this extensive course of study found its way into his poetry, as he became interested in the glorification of philosophy as mistress of the mind. Dante also treated questions of moral philosophy, such as nobility and courtship, in a number of beautifully composed *canzoni*. Nevertheless, in spite of his ardent pursuit of philosophical matter, he retained his view of love as the most important force behind noble actions and lofty endeavors. To his appreciation of the Latin poets he added his admiration for the Provençal troubadours, and this encouraged him to attempt new poetic techniques, which would serve him well in his later writings.

In Canto IV of the *Inferno* the Pilgrim and his guide, Virgil, who are now in Limbo, see a hemisphere of light glowing in the distance, and as they move toward it they are met by four great pagan poets. Virgil explains to his ward:

"Observe the one who comes with sword in hand,
leading the three as if he were their master.

It is the shade of Homer, sovereign poet,
and coming second, Horace, the satirist;
Ovid is the third, and last comes Lucan."

(86–90)

Together with Virgil these four non-Christians are the classical poets whom Dante most admired and from whom he drew much of the material for his poem. It must be said, however, that while Homer was known in the Middle Ages as the first of the great epic poets, the author of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, few people, including Dante, could read Greek; thus, Homer's great epics were known almost entirely secondhand, through the "revised" versions of Dares and Dictys, who told the tales of the Trojan War in a way that exalted the Trojans and often disparaged the Greeks, or through Virgil's use of Homeric material in the *Aeneid*. Dante, then, admired Homer more for his reputation than through any intimate knowledge of the Greek's works. The second of the four is Horace, whom Dante calls the "satirist" but whom he must have thought of mainly as a "moralist," since Dante was familiar only with the *Ars Poetica*. Ovid, who comes next, was the most widely read Roman poet in the Middle Ages, and he was Dante's main source for the mythology in *The Divine Comedy*. Dante, however, seems to have been acquainted with only the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid. Coming last is Lucan, author of the *Pharsalia*, which deals with the Roman civil war between the legions of Pompey and those of Caesar. The book was one of Dante's important historical sources. But among all the poets of antiquity it was Virgil who had the greatest influence on Dante. Virgil mentions, in Canto XX of the *Inferno*, that his ward knows all of his *Aeneid*, every word of it. Not only did Dante consider the great Roman poet a master of classical verse, but he also identified him with the legend of Rome itself. The Augustan Age, the time of Virgil, represented for Dante the high point of civilization: it was the time of the Coming of

Christ, the Christian savior. Dante also found Virgil attractive because of a particular passage in his *Fourth Eclogue* that was interpreted generally in Dante's time as a prophecy of the birth of Christ. Virgil, then, would serve Dante well as the guide for man on his own before the First Advent, before the coming of grace; he would stand for the highest achievement of human reason unenlightened by the word of God, the Pilgrim's guide to divine revelation.

Along with his spiritual and intellectual activities, Dante began an active public life. There is evidence that he served as a member of the People's Council of the Commune of Florence (1295), on the council for election of the priors of the city (1295), and on the Council of the Hundred (1296), a body that dealt with finance and other important civic matters.

This was a time of political ferment and instability. Between 1215 and 1278, the Guelfs and Ghibellines of Florence had engaged in a bitter struggle for power, with numerous reversals of fortune on both sides, countless plots and conspiracies, and frequent expulsion orders issued against whoever was on the losing side. The Guelfs finally prevailed. Around 1300, however, the Guelf party split into two hostile factions: the Blacks and the Whites. The Blacks, who were staunch Guelfs, led by the Donati, a family of old wealth with banking interests all over Europe and very concerned with Florentine imperialism, remained in control of the commune. The Whites, led by the rich and powerful family of the Cerchi, were prosperous merchants, who wanted peace with their neighbors so that trade could flourish. The party eventually became associated with the Ghibellines. Dante, meanwhile, was fighting to preserve the independence of Florence, and repeatedly opposed the schemes of Pope Boniface VIII, who sided with the Blacks, since he depended on the Florentine bankers of that party for most of his financial support, and who wanted to place Florence and all of Tuscany under the control of the Church. Boniface attempted to take advantage of the unrest in the city and to undermine his opponents by promising protection to those who displayed sympathy with his cause. He met with firm opposition from the six priors, or magis-

trates, of Florence, of whom Dante was one in the summer of 1300. To show his displeasure, Boniface moved to excommunicate the members of the priorate. Dante was spared this fate only because his term as a prior was soon due to expire (he served for the two months from June 13 to August 15). Obviously, none of this improved Dante's opinion of the pontiff. He made no secret of his opposition to the pope's ambitious policy; he regarded Boniface as an enemy of peace and later would reserve a place for him among the damned of *Inferno* XIX.

In 1301, Boniface summoned Charles of Valois and his army to Italy to help in the reconquest of Sicily. But the pope also had other plans for Charles: he hoped to use him to neutralize antipapal forces in Florence. It was at this time, as Charles approached the city, that Dante was sent, as one of three envoys of the commune, to the pope at Anagni, to request a change in papal policy toward the city and to protest the intrigues of the Blacks. After the initial talks, the other envoys were dismissed, but Dante was detained. During his absence from Florence, Charles of Valois entered the city, and the Blacks staged a revolution and gained complete control of the commune. Dante found himself sentenced to two years of exile and permanent exclusion from public office on trumped-up charges of graft, embezzlement, opposition to the pope and his forces, disturbance of the peace of Florence, and a number of other transgressions. Dante always felt that his difficulties had been brought on by the trickery of Boniface, and this aggravated his already pronounced hatred for the pontiff and his methods. When Dante failed to appear to answer the charges against him, and when, on March 10, 1302, he did not pay the fine levied against him for his "crimes," a second sentence was imposed upon him: should he ever return to the commune, he would be seized and burned alive. There is no evidence that Dante ever saw his beloved Florence again.

Shortly after his banishment, Dante conspired with his fellow exiles, most of them Whites, to regain admission to Florence. However, disapproving of their machinations and possibly in danger of his life because of their violence, he abandoned

them and set off on his own to lead the life of an exiled courtier. It appears that he first took refuge with the Scala family at Verona. He is also believed to have visited the university at Bologna, where he had been known since 1287. This visit probably occurred after the death in 1304 of his generous patron, Bartolommeo della Scala. It is generally thought that Dante traveled extensively in Italy, particularly in the north. He may have been in Padua in 1306. During that same year he appeared in Lunigiana with the Malaspina family, and it was probably then that he went to the mountains of Casentino, on the upper Arno. It has also been suggested that he may have visited Paris sometime between 1307 and 1309.

In 1310, Henry VII of Luxembourg, emperor from 1308 to 1313, descended into Italy in an effort to reunite Church and State, restore order, and force various rebellious cities to submit to his authority. His coming caused a great deal of excitement and conflict. Florence generally opposed him, but Dante, who attributed the woes of Florence and all of Italy to the absence of imperial guidance, welcomed Henry as a savior. (His state of great exaltation is documented in three letters that he wrote in 1310 and 1311.) However, Henry's invasion proved fruitless; he met opposition from all sides, including the very pope, Clement V, who had sent for him in the first place. Just as the situation for Henry and his supporters began to improve, the emperor died, near Siena in 1313. With him went Dante's best hope of restoring himself to an honorable position in his city. Thus, in 1314 he took shelter with Can Grande della Scala in Verona.

Dante did not totally abandon his quest to return to his native city of Florence. He wrote letters to individual members of the government, attempting to appease those who ruled, and even sent a *canzone* to the city of Florence, praising her love for justice and asking that she work with her citizens on his behalf. Dante strove to be politically acceptable to the Florentines, but the public associated him with the Ghibellines, and no matter how he tried to free himself of suspicion, he did not succeed. He also tried to appeal to them on the grounds of his poetic ability, and sought to show that if he had culti-

vated poetry in the vernacular, it was not for lack of skill or study in Latin. Feeling compelled to display his love for learning and his great respect for philosophy and matters having to do with civic education, he composed two treatises (both left incomplete), the *De vulgari eloquentia* and the *Convivio*; in them one senses his longing to reestablish himself in the good graces of his city, and to find consolation for his wretchedness in the study of matters useful to man's well-being and to his art.

Thus, in the years between the *Vita nuova* and *The Divine Comedy*, Dante's studies were essentially of a philosophical and artistic nature. The *Convivio* is often acknowledged as the key to his philosophical researches, while the *De vulgari eloquentia* is viewed as the key to his artistic inquiries.

Though he desperately hoped to restore his reputation as a Florentine and resume his life in the city that had turned against him, Dante refused to compromise his principles and turned down more than one opportunity to return to Florence because returning would have involved answering the false charges made against him. Such unwillingness to dishonor himself earned him yet another sentence of death, this one extending to his sons as well. The last years of the poet's life were spent at Ravenna, where he was offered asylum by Guido Novella da Polenta, a nephew of the famous Francesca da Rimini. These years seem to have been serene ones. In Ravenna he was greatly esteemed, and he enjoyed a very pleasant social life and an eager following of pupils, for he was already well known for his lyrics, and especially for the *Convivio*, the *Inferno*, and the *Purgatory*. Shortly before his death, he was sent by Guido on a mission to Venice. Although Florence still rejected him, Bologna very much valued his presence, and his friendship with the Ghibelline captain Can Grande della Scala in Verona remained intact—it is to him that he dedicated the *Paradise*. Ravenna remained Dante's home until his death, on September 13 or 14, 1321.

Sometime between 1304 and 1308 Dante began the *Convivio*. It is an unfinished piece of work. His purpose in writing it is explained in the opening sentence, which is a quotation from

Aristotle's *Metaphysics*: "All men by nature desire to know." The reader is invited to a "Banquet" consisting of fourteen courses (only three were completed); the "meat" of each course is a *canzone* concerning love and virtue, while the "bread" is the exposition of the ode. To his banquet Dante invites all those worthy people who, because of public duties, family responsibilities, and the like, have not been introduced to the science of philosophy, for it is through philosophy, he believes, that men may attain the temporal goal of happiness. The poems—apparently mere love poems, written to a beautiful woman of flesh and blood, and motivated by the poet's sensual passion—are essentially meant for the "mistress of his mind," Philosophy, and are motivated by virtue.

The *Vita nuova* is Dante's monument to his first love, the lady Beatrice; the *Convivio* is a monument to his "second love," Lady Philosophy. That this Lady Philosophy is the same as the lady who offers to console Dante a year after the death of Beatrice in the *Vita nuova* we learn in Chapter 2, Book II, of the *Convivio*:

> To begin with, then, let me say that the star of Venus had already revolved twice in that circle of hers which makes her appear at evening or in the morning, according to the two different periods, since the passing away of that blessed Beatrice who dwells in Heaven with the angels and on earth with my soul, when that gentle lady of whom I made mention at the end of the *Vita nuova* first appeared to my eyes, accompanied by love, and occupied a place in my mind.

What attracted the poet-protagonist to this lady in the *Vita nuova* was her offer of consolation, but his love for the lady at the window lasts only a short time, and he refers to it as "the adversary of reason" and "most base." It should be remembered, however, that it is not the *donna gentile* who is "the adversary of reason," but rather the love for this lady; for Philosophy in the *Vita nuova* tries to make the young protagonist forget the fact that he has lost Beatrice—and something of this earth (such as philosophy) cannot replace the love

of Beatrice. After the vision in Chapter XXXIX of the *Vita nuova*, after grasping the true significance of his lady, he returns to Beatrice, and never again will he stray. In doing this, he is not to be thought of as rejecting philosophy but rather as rejecting the ideal of replacing Beatrice with philosophy. Never in the *Convivio* does he consider such a possibility, although he calls his love for the Lady Philosophy "most noble."

The *Convivio* exalts learning and the use of reason, for only through knowledge can man hope to attain virtue and God. The *Convivio* can be seen as a connecting link between the *Vita nuova* and *The Divine Comedy*, in that love at first seems to have earthly associations but then acquires religious significance. Furthermore, Dante's praise of reason in this work is developed in *The Divine Comedy*, where reason in the pursuit of knowledge and wisdom is man's sole guide on earth, apart from the intervention of Divine Grace.

In Book I of his *Convivio* Dante suggests the revolutionary idea that the vernacular might be suitable for ethical subjects as well as amorous ones. He was a leader in considering the vernacular a potential medium for all forms of expression, and his impassioned defense and praise of Italian manifests his awareness of its value in scientific studies as well as in poetry. Book II sets forth his view that writings should be expounded in four senses: the literal, the allegorical, the moral, and the anagogical. The literal level of a story or poem need not be true. For example, when Ovid tells his reader that Orpheus moved both animals and stones with his music, what he is signifying is the power of eloquence over what is not rational. If the story is not true on the literal level, it is expounded on the second level as an allegory of poets; if the literal level is taken to be the truth, the story is understood as an allegory of theologians (so called because the literal level of the scriptures was considered to be true). The third level, the moral, has a didactic purpose; for example, the fact that Christ took only three of his disciples with him on the occasion of the Transfiguration is a way of saying that "for those things which are most secret we should have little company." The fourth sense is the anagogical, by which scripture signifies eternal

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