

# **“Not made to live like a brute”: Remembering Dante Alighieri**



***Dante Alighieri’s significance stems from his work and extends beyond it. He is the quintessential European figure, epitomising the different strands which make Europe a culturally rich and distinct continent***

By André P. DeBattista *The European Conservative* 31 December 2021

‘Few people can claim to succinctly sum up their epoch and their civilisation. Durante di Alighiero degli Alighieri—better known as Dante Alighieri—is one such man. For this alone, this year, on the 700th anniversary of his death, his personality and vast opus deserve to be celebrated—but also for much more

During his lifetime, his politics were divisive. Florence, the city he loved and wrote about sent him into exile. It was in exile that he wrote his best and most well-known works. He died away from his homeland (“*parvi Florentia mater amoris*” was famously inscribed on his tombstone in Ravenna). Attempts to try Dante for heresy in the years following his death failed.

As the significance of his work became more apparent, he became a more unifying figure. Florence, the city which once exiled him, lodged a request for his remains to be repatriated and reinterred in an ornate tomb built for the purpose. This request was rejected. Indeed, his bones had to be concealed for fear that they might be taken by stealth.

Dante was born in 1265. Some of the details of his early life remain shrouded in mystery. In his late teenage years, he began to associate with other poets of the *Dolce Stil Novo*. He married Gemma Donati in circa 1285. His foray into politics began in 1295 when he joined the Guild of Physicians and Apothecaries. This was a necessary step for him to occupy public office.

The city-states in the central and northern parts of the Italian peninsula were divided mainly into two factions; the Guelphs were supporting the Pope, and the Ghibellines supporting the Holy Roman Emperor. In Florence, the Guelphs had successfully defeated and expelled the Ghibellines. Nonetheless, the Guelphs themselves were divided into a further two groups: the White Guelphs, which were opposed to the influence of Pope Boniface VIII, and the Black Guelphs, who remained loyal to the papacy. Dante belonged to the White Guelphs. Initially, the White Guelphs had considerable power in Florence. Between June and August 1300, Dante was elected to the post of *Priore*. Each of the six *Priori* formed part of the executive body of the city.

Pope Boniface VIII's appeal to Charles de Valois to rid Florence of the White Guelphs led to a takeover by the Black Guelph faction in November 1301. Dante escaped unscathed because he was on a diplomatic mission to the Pope in Rome. The city of Florence formally exiled him, and in 1302 confiscated his property. In addition, the city handed down an automatic death sentence should he ever return to Florence.

In his work, Dante never explains when he went into exile and the specific circumstances which led to it, but he does protest his innocence and expresses the hope of one day returning to his native city. This was, sadly, not to be.

### ***La Vita Nova and Convivio***

The *Divine Comedy* remains a fixed star in the firmament of the Western canon. Nonetheless, had Dante written only his earlier works, such as *La Vita Nova*, *Convivio*, and *De vulgari eloquentia*, he would still be regarded as one of the greats of his generation. His influence on other great authors such as Chaucer, Milton, and T.S. Eliot adds to the significance of this man and his work.

In addition to being a central literary figure, Dante is also one of the great characters of literature since he himself is the main character of all of his significant works. In *La Vita Nova*, he espouses the virtues and beauty of his courtly love for Beatrice (“she who confers blessings”) from the time when he first laid eyes on her until her death. His love for Beatrice still permeates *Convivio*, but he ventures further to explore his respect for the vernacular and his passion for learning. Beatrice is to some degree replaced by the “*donna gentile*”—Lady Philosophy—who he describes as the beautiful and most honest daughter of the emperor of the universe (“*la bellissima e onestissima figlia de lo imperadore de lo universo*”). Influenced by Scholastic

thinking, he underpins his work in the knowledge of two great sets of truth: those espoused by science and philosophy and the truths of Faith.

These two books are incredibly different yet intimately related. The reader gets a privileged glimpse into Dante's personal growth as a man of letters, a poet, and a lover. With perhaps the sole exception of Augustine of Hippo, he writes with a degree of self-awareness that unseen in literature until that point.

### **The *Divine Comedy***

The *Comedy* was nicknamed "Divine" by Giovanni Boccaccio, whose role in shaping our understanding of Dante remains invaluable. In addition to writing a sympathetic biography of the man, Boccaccio was the first to give a *Lectura Dantis*, which involves the declamation of various *Canti* before an audience.

In the *Divine Comedy*, the reader once again experiences the many different facets of Dante: the poet, politician and philosopher, and literary character who embarks on a journey that enables him to rise above the moral turpitude of his age and come face to face with truth, beauty, and goodness.



A painted miniature of Dante and Virgil speaking to Statius in Canto XXI. Image taken from f. 100v of the *Divina Commedia*.

PHOTO: BRITISH LIBRARY VIA PICRYL.

Despite these noble aims, Dante does not present himself as a hero; indeed, there is an element of vulnerability. He is 35 years old, halfway through his life and feeling somewhat lost (“*Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita mi ritrovai per una selva oscura ché la diritta*

*via era smarrita*”). The year is 1300—a Jubilee year where pilgrims travelling to Rome can gain indulgences. Dante’s journey itself is one of purgation and conversion; some parallels may be drawn with St Augustine’s journey in the *Confessions*. Both start their journey as sinners; both undergo an experience of conversion; and both are led by different companions along their journey (though, in Dante’s case, these companions are allegorical).

Dante chooses Virgil as his companion through Hell and Purgatory. The Roman poet proves to be a good travel companion: a man of letters, a lover of reason, and an inspiring quasi-paternal figure. Virgil, however, is a pagan philosopher, and he must leave Dante at the gates of Paradise. There, Dante has Beatrice as guide to the summit of paradise: the Beatific Vision. Throughout his journey, Dante meets various persons. Some, such as Antaeus and Ulysses, are fictional characters from antiquity. They are joined by other real personages from classical times (such as Brutus and Cleopatra) and biblical figures (including Caiphas and Judas Iscariot). Dante juxtaposes these historical and mythical characters with his contemporaries, including Pope Celestine V, Pope Boniface VIII, Count Ugolino, and Brunetto Latini.

His work gives a glimpse into the holistic and rich worldview of the period, one which was underpinned by metaphysical and theological assumptions. It singlehandedly dispels the myth that this period was some kind of “dark age.” On the contrary, the late medieval period—and the earlier medieval periods it was built on—embodies a deep and complex understanding of natural law and the natural order. God is the lynchpin upon which everything hangs. Every created being is a thought in the divine mind. Man is created in the image and likeness of God and, thus, is at the centre of the universe. Nonetheless, this gives him an obligation to rule and govern according to God’s design and through the order that God himself ordained. Sin is understood as

being the offence that goes against God and nature; Hell is the consequence of disrupting that Divine Order.



Detail of a medieval miniature taken from Dante's *Inferno*. In the image, Dante is attacked by three beasts: a leopard (who represents lust), a lion (who represents pride), and a she-wolf (representing greed).

PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE BRITISH LIBRARY VIA PICRYL.

Dante's work also shows a nuanced understanding of grace and redemption. Repentance is what distinguishes those who, through Purgatory, can hope to see the beatific vision from those who languish forever in the horrors of hell.

## **The contemporary significance of Dante**

The *Divine Comedy*'s emphasis on Purgatory is interesting in that it reflects one of the primary theological debates of the period. Though prayers for the dead were always an integral part of the life of the

Church (in Augustine's *Confessions*, for example, the dying Monica urges her son "remember me at the altar of the Lord wherever you may be"), it was only at the Second Council of Lyon in 1274 that Purgatory was defined as a place for grace to purify souls after death. Lyon emphasised the utility of prayers and sacrifice by the living for the dead; however, details were scant.

The lack of detail does not deter Dante; he embraces the Church's teachings and takes copious creative licence in depicting Purgatory for his readers. He uses the allegory of a place with seven terraces, each corresponds to a particular vice, and each evil is punishable by an equivalent punishment linked to that specific sin. However, the suffering in Purgatory has a salvific function; the souls in Purgatory know that their grief will lead them to Heaven. It is, therefore, a place where one changes and grows morally and spiritually. This, in itself, was different from how some of his contemporaries imagined Purgatory. Significantly, Dante places angels rather than demons in Purgatory, thus contradicting the widespread view that it was a "temporary hell." Instead, his work reimagines Purgatory as the sure way to the beatific vision.

Dante's work also addresses the great political question of the period: the relationship between the temporal and the spiritual. Roger Scruton succinctly summed up Dante's dilemma: "Dante argues that both institutions—empire and papacy—are sanctioned by divine ordinance, and both are necessary, the one holding all legitimate temporal power, and the other all legitimate spiritual power. The papacy cannot wield temporal power without also losing spiritual authority, in particular, its authority to adjudicate disputes by referring them to the law of God. Its attempt to transform itself into a principdom was, therefore, a lapse from its divine mission and apostolic constitution." In this sense, Dante recognised the tensions that remain with us today and tackled these questions of allegiance.

## **Why Dante remains relevant**

Dante's decision to write in the Tuscan vernacular was groundbreaking. He explores the use of the vernacular in various works and at some length in his unfinished book *De vulgari eloquentia*. This choice to write in his native tongue was challenging. Latin was the learned language of the day, and it was easier to write in this language than in the vernacular. Dante's choice inspired future writers and scholars, not least Cardinal (and Knight of Malta) Pietro Bembo, who wrote his *Prose della volgar lingua* (1525) based on the works of Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio. He may, thus, be considered one of the fathers of the Italian language.



Close-up of the center panel in a fresco by Luca Signorelli (1450-1523) in the Capella di San Brizio in Orvieto.

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Dante Alighieri's significance stems from his work and extends beyond it. He is the quintessential European figure, epitomising the different strands which make Europe a culturally rich and distinct continent (though many now deny this heritage). He baptizes the epic poem with Christian themes; unites the characters and language of the two lodestars of the classical world—ancient Rome and Greece—with biblical and Christian arguments. The themes of journey and exile and light and darkness transcend time and space. This makes Dante more relevant than ever.

Dante engages with the quintessential question on the meaning of life and what the 'good life' constitutes. In Canto 26, we read: "Consider ye the seed from which ye sprang; Ye were not made to live like unto brutes, But for pursuit of virtue and of knowledge" ("*Considerate la vostra semenza: fatti non foste a viver come bruti, ma per seguir virtute e canoscenza*"). This passage epitomises the poem's devotion to the idea of order as mandated by God and as visible in nature. Human nature offers humanity the opportunity to transcend animal instinct, go beyond personal satisfaction, and seek virtue, knowledge, and beauty.

Dante does not hold back from drawing conclusions from classical philosophy. However, Dante embraces a *saeculum* shaped and oriented towards God. Hell is a state of being without the presence of God. Dante's *Inferno* is also a profound commentary on the socio-political situation of the time. Personal sins and foibles always have a broader impact; indeed, social ills often result from individual shortcomings. On the other hand, Heaven is the vision of a mystery that human reason cannot grasp but is, nonetheless, called to behold: the Beatific Vision, the beholding of God in Whom all order is beauty and beauty is perfectly ordered In our own grievously disordered

world, these lessons remain relevant seven hundred years after Dante embarked on his own final journey.

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