

# DANTE

By SISTER MAURA

**T**HOUGH Dante lived six hundred years ago, he is still, in the true sense of the word a best seller. In 1944, a handsome edition of *The Divine Comedy* was published, translated by Melville Anderson and illustrated by Blake's ethereal drawings. Laurence Binyon's notable translation in terza rima—an English poem in its own right—is included in *The Portable Dante*, 1947. The next year a sumptuous *Dante* appeared, translated in blank verse by Laurence White and illustrated by Gustave Doré's sombre scenes. At present Dorothy Sayers, who excels as a writer of both sacred drama and detective fiction, is giving the public still another translation in the form of a Penguin Book Classic. She writes a limber triple rhyme in language racy enough to bring Dante within reach of the man in the street and the woman in the kitchen.

It may seem unaccountable that the lofty poet, Durante Aligheri, should be known to everyone by a nickname—Dante, short for Durante. This is as though we called Shakespeare just Will. The use of such a nickname implies a familiar, even an affectionate, regard. Why Dante? Perhaps because like Hamlet, the most sympathetic character in English literature, Dante 'unpacks his heart with words;' he takes the world in his confidence and tells, very eloquently, his ardent loves and his vehement hates. Shakespeare stands aloof as one who says, "Who shall pluck the heart out of my mystery." And who can? Is 'Mr. W. H., the onlie begetter of the sonnets,' Southampton or Pembroke? Is the dark lady really dark? Who knows?

The only authentic likeness of Dante is the beautiful portrait by his friend Giotto, which was painted on the wall of the chapel in the palace of the Podestà in Florence. It is the young Dante, the Dante of *La Vita Nuova*, with his fine, almost delicate, profile, clear color, blue eyes, and happy mouth. This painting has a strange history. After a lapse of years, the palace of the Podestà fell into the hands of those who knew not Dante, nor Giotto. It became a jail, and the chapel a storeroom with

whitewashed walls. Generations passed; finally, in 1840, the priceless picture was uncovered, and the resolute action of an English artist, Mr. Seymour Kirkup, preserved a copy exactly as Giotto painted it.

The Ravenna death mask is probably authentic. The face is older, stronger, sterner than the other—worn by the battle of life. It is the Dante of *The Divine Comedy*. This mask does not characterize the living Dante; it is the face of a man who died from a severe attack of malaria, and his expression is, naturally, far from cheerful.

Dante was fortunate in the time and the place of his birth. Florence was already a proud and beautiful city on the banks of the Arno, embellished by masterpieces of art and architecture. Swift and stimulating currents of thought circulated among its citizens; the sister arts of music, painting, and poetry raised their charming heads. Dante's best friend was the gifted poet, Guido Cavalcanti, who wrote his lyrics in the vernacular *dolce stil nuovo*. Another friend was the great Giotto whose pictorial life of Christ is said to be the noblest ever painted. Less known to fame is Casella, the musician who set Dante's canzoni to music and sang them so enchantingly that the very souls in purgatory lingered to listen. Another friend was the nimble-witted Belacqua, who would not take the trouble to lift his eyelids unless it were necessary.

Above all, there was Beatrice. Dante tells the shining story of his love in *La Vita Nuova*, tells of his meeting as a boy of ten with a little girl slightly younger, who was wearing a dress of "modest and becoming crimson." She seemed to him the "youngest of the angels" and he loved her from that moment. This book, a prose narrative interspersed with lyric poems, tells the story of their golden youth until the death of Beatrice when she was only twenty-five. These are living pages. Beatrice, Dante, and life in Florence emerge as they existed in those distant days when "she went along crowned and clothed with humility, showing no whit of pride in all that she heard and saw; and when she had gone by, it was said of many, 'This is not a woman, but one of the most beautiful angels of Heaven.'"

Dante closes *La Vita Nuova* with the express desire of giving Beatrice still greater honor. "If," he writes, "it be His pleasure through whom is the life of all things, that my life continue with me for a few years, it is my hope that I shall yet write concerning her what hath not before been written of any woman." He redeemed this promise gloriously in *The Divina Comedy*.

The year after Beatrice's death, Dante married Gemma Donati to whom his father had betrothed him in childhood. Her family was influential, and later, when he was driven into exile, she seems to have done her best to safeguard his interests in Florence. For several years Dante took an honorable part in public affairs, and in 1301 he went to Rome as a Florentine envoy. Here, he learned much about the Holy Year of 1300 that he afterwards embodied in the *Commedia*. One item has a present day interest. During that year of pilgrimage, traffic on the bridge of Sant Angelo became so crowded that it was controlled by a "Keep to the right" rule. The first of traffic regulations, no doubt.

In those days, political feeling ran shockingly high. Dante's opponents, having seized office in his absence, passed a sentence of banishment against him in June, 1302. He could say no good-bye to his dear ones; he never saw his home or visited his beloved city again. For years he lived as a homeless wanderer, dependent on the generosity of others. The *Paradiso* (XVII. 55-60) forecasts his experience in these words: "Thou shalt abandon everything loved most dearly, this is the arrow which the bow of exile first shoots. Thou shalt know how salt is the taste of another's bread, and how hard the path to descend and mount by another's stair."

A story that Longfellow has put in a sonnet, may well be true. One evening at sunset, a tragic-faced stranger knocked at the gate of a Franciscan monastery. When Fra Hilario the porter asked him what he sought, Dante, for it was he, answered, "Peace!"

All the blows of fortune could not quell that dauntless spirit. In his harsh exile, Dante maintained his literary interests and continued his study of the vernacular. About 1306, he embodied his findings in a Latin work, *De Vulguri Eloquentia*, since for him Latin was the language of learning, Italian of literature. This one sentence gives the gist of his matter: "Having therefore found what we were searching for, we declare that the illustrious, cardinal, courtly, and curial vernacular language in Italy to be that which belongs to all the towns in Italy but does not appear to belong to any one of them, and by which all the municipal dialects of the Italian are measured, weighed, and compared."

The vernacular is "illustrious" because of the shining quality it has in the work of the gifted writers like Cino of Pistoja. It is "cardinal" because it is the hinge on which all dialects

turn. It is "courtly" (or would be) with the culture of a royal court, and "curial" with the accuracy of the courts of law. This speech is without localisms. It is the standard by which others "are measured, weighed, and compared." All this applies to any language. It is true of the English vernacular girdling the globe.

In the first book of the unfinished *Convivio* which interprets three moral canzoni, Dante tells of seven years of exile. "After it was the pleasure," he writes, "of that fairest and most famous daughter of Rome, Florence, to cast me out. . . I have wandered through every region to which this tongue of ours extends, a stranger, almost a beggar, exposing to view against my will the stroke of fortune which is often unjustly charged to the account of the stricken. Truly I have been a ship without sail and without rudder, wafted to divers havens and inlets and shores by the parching wind of woeful poverty."

In that troubled time when city warred on city and streets ran red with blood in civic strife, Dante's hopes were fixed on a strong central government, such as Constantine gave in the palmy days of old. His confidence increased when Emperor Henry VII led his troops into Italy in 1310, and he set forth his ideas on government in *De Monarchia*. A strong central government gives peace, he held, and "in the quiet or tranquillity of peace the human race is most favorably disposed towards the work proper to it (which is almost divine, even as it is said 'Thou hast made him a little lower than the angels'). Whence it is manifest that universal peace is the best of all those things which are ordained for our blessedness. And that is why there rang out to the shepherds from on high, not riches, not pleasures, not honors, not length of life, not health, not strength, not beauty, but peace. For the celestial soldiery proclaimed, 'Glory to God on high, and on earth peace to men of good will.' Hence, also, 'Peace be with you' was the salutation of Him who was the salvation of man."

When Henry died suddenly at Siena in 1313, Dante's patriotic hopes crashed to earth. Then, apparently, he gave himself up to the completion of his great masterpiece. His good friend and generous patron, Can Grande della Scala, lord of Verona, offered him hospitality from 1315 until 1318. The last years of his stormy life passed serenely at the court of Guido Novello of Ravenna. Here, his sons Piero and Jacopo were with him and his daughter Beatrice was a Sister in the Convent of the Olives. Here, he brought to a triumphant close

in 1321 the magnificent work which had probably been begun in Florence. He named it simply *The Comedy*, because it had a happy ending, but his admirers have called it *Divine*.

*The Divine Comedy* is, perhaps, the loftiest peak in world literature. It is epic in its tremendous theme, its heroic quality, and its amazing sweep of circumstance. It is lyric in the winged terza rima that Dante invented; his verses sing themselves. Besides, time and again, the poetry becomes dramatic in quick dialogue, swift action, and vivid setting. Dante's men and women and angels live; he can characterize them in a word or phrase, such as "Caesar of the falcon glance," "broad-browed Plato," "the Master of those who know" (Aristotle), "Beatrice, true praise of God," "His face was such as seems the tremulous morning star" (Angel of Humility).

Being merely a creative genius, and not the Creator, Dante cannot make anything out of nothing. He must have material, which he draws from Christian teaching, from the classics, from the troubadours, and from the early Italian lyricists. But none of these sources suggests the character of *The Divine Comedy*. It is not a semi-historical narrative of heroic proportions like the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid*; rather it is a tremendous spiritual adventure, a voyage through eternity, a vision of the ineffable. Commentators offer nothing on sources which would explain this character; yet they might.

When the Gaels were the teachers of Europe, from the seventh to the tenth century, they developed among other literary forms the *fis* and the *immram*, the vision and the voyage. Most famous of the latter was the *Peregrination Sancti Brandani* which circulated through Europe in a ninth-century Latin version. This was accepted as history. When Columbus set sail westward, Ferdinand and Isabella laid claim to Saint Brendan's Island. Another well known was *The Voyage of Maelduin's Curagh*, a theme which Tennyson treats. The *immram* was probably inspired by the voyage of some Gaelic mariner to land across the western ocean: in process of time, fact and fancy became closely interwoven. On one island, for instance, Maelduin sees a huge demon miller who grinds in his ugly mill all things that have been begrudged on earth. At the Island of the Races, both horses and jockeys change into devils.

The vision, as might be expected, is closer to *The Divine Comedy* in general plan and in details than the voyage. *The Vision of Tundale*, written by a Gaelic monk of Regensburg,

is dated 1149. The year of Dante's vision is given as 1300. Tundale is a careless knight whom his guardian angel takes on a saving voyage through hell and heaven. Translated from Latin to the various vernaculars, this *fis* circulated widely through Europe.

The *Fis Adamnain* or *Vision of Little Adam*, dating back to the eighth century, tells of Little Adam's journey across the bourne of the undiscovered country. Adam was an abbot of the seventh century, regarded by his contemporaries as "the high scholar of the western world." Either Dante borrows much from this *fis* or his masterpiece is studded with coincidences. His borrowings are, of course, creative; he makes his own what he takes. It is supremely to the great artist's credit that he could gather into the melodious current of his verse all that the age he lived in had to give: the living light of Holy Scripture, the goodness of the saints, the wisdom of the philosophers, the romance and grace of the troubadours, the literary art and epic quality of Vergil, the visions and voyages of the Gaels, as well as the multiform human activity of his day—all assimilated and transmuted and glorified by his creative genius.

More than most writers, Dante expresses his life in his works. Had he never loved and hated and fought a tireless battle against fate, the world would have missed its perfect epic, the symmetrical, sustained, varied, and beautiful *Divine Comedy*. As Longfellow says in his illumined sonnet sequence:

"Ah! from what agonies of heart and brain,  
 What exultations trampling on despair,  
 What tenderness, what tears, what hate of wrong,  
 What passionate outcry of a soul in pain,  
 Uprose this poem of the earth and air,  
 This medieval miracle of song!"

Through the centuries, Dante has had a distinct, though slim, influence on English literature. He inspired, in whole or in part, Chaucer's *House of Fame*, Hunt's *Story of Rimini*, Browning's *Sordello*, Tennyson's *Ulysses*, and so on. These writers were the literati. To the rank and file of people, he remained only a name until Cary's standard blank verse translation in England and Charles Eliot Norton's smooth prose version in New England, brought him within reach of the average citizen. In the present century, good translations are multiplying apace. Never before has there been so widespread an interest in Dante as now.