

3. THE FUNDAMENTAL STAGES OF DANTE'S LIFE

To approach Dante's message it is necessary to recall briefly the fundamental stages of his life and the precise historical period in which his work appeared. What was Europe like in the years that marked the turn from the thirteenth to the fourteenth century? While man had been completely concerned with the transcendent for many centuries, this period saw the discovery of the world and human values. There was a gradual shift from extreme introversion (contemplation) to maximum extroversion (action). The ideal figure was no longer the hermit, totally absorbed in inner experience, but the knight, who attempted to endow his actions with ideal significance.

At a political and social level, the people were no longer a completely amorphous and undifferentiated mass, subjected to the twin powers of Empire and the Church. With the break-up of the Empire, which had maintained unity, the first states emerged and with them began the process of differentiation between the European peoples. In Italy this process led to various forms of government (communes, republics, principalities, seigniories) all of which maintained diverse relations with the realms and empires beyond the Alps. The principles of the classical epoch – from those of ancient Greece and Rome through to the Christian era – were still firmly established, but the ancient invaders of the Roman Empire, by that time converted and integrated, were also exerting a strong influence.

However, this tendency towards emancipation also involved a rush for domination in which primitive forces were unleashed to secure the supremacy of one idea, or one power, over another. The period was marked by all the confusion typical of ages of transition, in which the different powers in a complex society battle for supremacy in defence of their own interests and for personal gain.

The communes joined together in opposing leagues, allied from time to time with either the Emperor (Ghibellines) or the Pope

(Guelfs). The ensuing battles and wars were, however, accompanied by expanding trade between cities and among princes and feudal lords. Civic life was marked by a revival. Laymen – and not just clerics – sought to educate themselves and so become the masters of their own destinies by cultivating personal qualities. This process, already present in embryonic form in the late Middle Ages, reached its fullest expression with Humanism and the Renaissance.

Differences in religious thought also began to emerge, giving rise to various forms of heresy, as well as the first attempts to achieve harmony between reason and faith (with Saint Bonaventure, St. Dominic, and St. Thomas Aquinas).

The more politically powerful the Church became, the less effectively it fulfilled its role as spiritual guide. In contrast, there emerged a widespread need for a return to evangelical values, accompanied by the appearance of some important religious thinkers and guiding spirits (Joachim of Flora, Francis of Assisi).

Sources for a life of Dante

It is not easy to unearth sufficient information to describe the life of a man like Dante. Many dates and references are to be found in the chronicles of the period (those of Giovanni Villani and Dino Compagni)¹ and in the work of some of Dante's contemporaries, though not all these sources are equally reliable. The information left by Boccaccio, for example leads to some uncertainty, because of his well-known love for Dante and his wish to protect the poet and his work from the charge of heresy.

Boccaccio, together with Piero di Dante, was the first to attribute a physical identity to the figure of Beatrice. He described her as a Portinari married to Simone dei Bardi. But in a series of sonnets, he himself instills some doubt concerning the authenticity of the information he provides. It is difficult to understand if this is due to a sense of guilt over betraying Dante's secret, or regret for having invented an historical identity for Beatrice.²

If the chronicles of historical events allow us to follow the external form of Dante's life, it is only through his works that we can understand his development as a man: this will be the line of approach

taken here.

In the *Epistles* and in some passages of the *Convivio* (the Banquet), but above all in the lines of the *Vita Nuova*, the inner, social and exterior life of the poet from infancy on are all to be found.

3.1 *The Family*

Dante was born in the second half of May, 1265, under the sign of Gemini. At that time Florence was governed by the Guelfs, allies of the Pope, who had only recently driven out the Ghibellines.

Dante's mother, Donna Bella degli Abati, died when he was very young, and he was raised by his father, Alighiero, and his step – mother, Monna Lapa, who gave him two step – siblings, Francesco and Gaetana (Tana).

Very little is known about his infancy, but what scant information there is hints at the joys, suffering, and conflicts of his early years. Here and there Dante's work betrays a deep affection for the idealised mother he prematurely lost. This loss would lead to the development of an intensely feminine inner dimension, in marked contrast with his tough exterior and passionately virile nature.

In accordance with his family's wishes, as was the custom of the day, he married Gemma dei Donati, a cousin to the terrible Corso Donati. Very little is known about her, as is generally the case with the wives of "great men", who accompany and foster the growth of "genius" while they themselves remain silent and shadowy figures. Gemma bore Dante three sons – Pietro, Giacomo, and Giovanni – and one daughter, Antonia, who would devotedly attend her father as he lay dying in Ravenna, struck down by malarial fever on his return from a diplomatic mission to Venice. Afterwards, Antonia entered a convent, taking the name of Sister Beatrice, while her brothers, Pietro and Giacomo dedicated themselves to spreading their father's work and became the first commentators of the *Commedia*.

The *Vita Nuova* suggests that Dante led a solitary youth. Intensely introverted, he was prone to ecstatic visions from boyhood on. He studied grammar and latin at a very early age, and continued his studies in Santa Croce with the Franciscan order and in Santa Maria Novella under the Dominicans. He practised the arts of drawing and music and was a friend of the lutist Belacqua and of Casella (both

mentioned in the *Purgatorio*), who set his *Rhymes* to music .

He next dedicated himself to science and philosophy (“the kind lady”), precociously learning the art of “saying words in rhyme” (*Vita Nuova*, III). The *Vita Nuova* indicates that Dante’s cultural growth was centred on acquiring knowledge rather than on the mastery of technical skills.

3.2 *Beatrice Appears*

The *Vita Nuova* has always been regarded as a record of Dante’s youthful loves, but in reality it is a highly perplexing confession of something the poet had intuited and experienced since infancy.³

In my book of memory, in the early part where there is little to be read, there comes a chapter with the rubric: *incipit vita nova*. [I] (The new life begins).

This early experience was beyond the power of language to describe because it was still confused. Nine years later it emerged with greater insistence following the “apparition” of a maid exactly nine months his junior, who was dressed in crimson, the colour of youthful ardour. There is a clear allusion to the fact that the female aspect is conceived, and therefore potential, at the birth of every man. The “glorious lady of my mind”, as the poet calls her (II), reappeared after a further symbolic period of nine years, this time dressed in “purest white” (III). This is Beatrice as she is known to “many... who have no idea of the reality they are applying that name to”. (II)

It is opportune to clear the field immediately of all conjecture and theories concerning the identity of this “glorious lady”, the cause of such great physical, psychological and spiritual upheaval in the poet’s life.

As demonstrated by Jung, the feminine essence present in each man (the Anima), can be “roused” and developed only after encountering a real woman. The first “bearer” of the image of the Anima is the mother, then the sister, and then an external woman. Jung stresses the term “bearer” because this archetype of the feminine principle (the Anima) is inborn in man and continues to “sleep” until activated

from outside: as long as it remains unconscious, the Anima will be projected.⁴

Dante seems to allude to this very experience of the Anima in the sonnet composed for chapter XX of the *Vita Nuova*.

Love and the Gracious heart are a single thing,
as Guinzelli tells us in his poem:
one can no more be without the other
than can the reasoning mind without its reason.
Nature, when in a loving mood, creates them:
Love to be king, the heart to be his home,
a place for love to rest while he is *sleeping*,
perhaps for just a while, or for much longer.
And then the *beauty* of a virtuous lady
appears, to please the eyes, and in the heart
desire for the pleasing thing is born;
and this desire may linger in the heart
until *Love's spirit is aroused* from sleep.
A man of worth has the same effect on ladies.

In the last line Dante hints at the reciprocal nature of this phenomenon, as if he wished to allude to the presence of a masculine quality awakened in the woman by the encounter with a “man of worth”, the very instance defined by Jung as the Animus.⁵

In the next section Dante explains how he intends to show:

how, through her, this Love is awakened, and how she not only awakens him where he *sleeps* but also, how she, miraculously working, brings him into existence there where he does not potentially exist.

During youth it is generally necessary to forego – to “repress” in psychological terms – this experience of the innate feminine essence. This is necessary in order to avoid falling into a state of arrested development.⁶ In the second half of life, it is rediscovered in the form of the inner woman, the *Soror mistica* of the alchemists; prior to this it is generally projected onto a real woman.⁷

It is possible that the unspecified initial experience which is the starting-point of the *Vita Nuova* was later reinforced by the encounter with a real girl, a meeting so significant as to activate the image of the poet's inner Anima. The life of an individual may be marked forever

by such experiences; generally, though, they are kept secret, or confessed only to those capable of understanding them.

This was the case with Dante, who joined the *Fedeli d'Amore* group, all jointly engaged in an initiatory process, communicating their inner experiences through poetry (*Il Dolce Stil Nuovo*). The language they used was new for that period.⁸ Their poetry is woven from experiences and messages about inner events, expressed in a secret initiatory language centring on love and the figure of the lady. This style was dictated by their constant fear of falling foul of “the lady of stone”, the Church, which, far from encouraging, was deeply opposed to the nurture of the Anima from fear of heresy.⁹ The repeated allusions to the number nine, a symbol with multiple meanings, is another interesting aspect of the *Vita Nuova*.¹⁰

When Beatrice reappears to Dante in chapter III of the *Vita Nuova*, her movements seem to have a ritual quality: she walks between “two ladies of noble bearing ... older than she” and greets him “so miraculously, that I seemed at that moment to behold the entire range of possible bliss”. This is followed by the dream which reveals the poet’s destiny:

Thinking of her, I fell into a sweet sleep, and a marvelous vision appeared to me. I seemed to see a cloud the color of fire and, in that cloud, a lordly man, frightening to behold, yet he seemed also to be wondrously filled with joy. He spoke and said many things...one was *Ego dominus tuus* (I am your Lord). I seemed to see in his arms a sleeping figure...I recognized the lady of the greeting, the lady who earlier in the day had deigned to greet me. In one hand he seemed to be holding something that was all in flames, and it seemed to me that he said these words: *Vide cor tuum* (behold your heart). And after some time had passed, he seemed to awaken the one who slept, and he forced her cunningly to eat some of that burning object in his hand; she ate of it timidly.* A short time after this, his happiness gave forth to bitterest weeping, and weeping he folded his arms around this lady, and together they seemed to ascend toward the heavens. At that point my drowsy sleep could not bear the anguish that I felt; it was broken and I awoke.

The primal force of the vision is stronger than human passion.

* Literally, “doubtfully”.

Dante's fate seems sealed, his life no longer his own. He is now Genius mastered by Love, by which he is assigned a precise task: to awaken the sleeping woman (both in himself and in the world). As she is naked, he must clothe and fashion an identity for her, then nourish her with the fire of his impassioned heart. It is an intensely vivid image, but encountering doubts and resistance ("she ate of it timidly"), the figure of Love breaks into tears and gathering her up returns to Heaven.

Revived by his meeting with a real maiden, the "glorious woman" of Dante's "mind" now assumes her own life. Jung tells us that the unconscious and the image of the Anima tend to personify themselves,¹¹ and throughout the *Vita Nuova* we may listen to the inner conversation between Dante, his group of companions, his "lady" and Love.

By means of these dialogues, Dante tries to reach a clear understanding of the task before him: whether to give himself over to pure contemplation and attain a state of blessedness by evoking the vision of this "lady" or, as Love had commanded, throw himself into life, trying to instill her values into society.

In doing so, he runs the risk of falling prey to the "kind lady", namely, the philosophic mind. This provides a means of putting the primal experience into words, but it also involves the risk of excessive rationality.¹² He devotes himself to poetic expression, but the great personal fame this brings also entails the risk of mere aestheticism. In either case, Beatrice becomes more remote, even to the extent of withholding her greeting (XII), thus refusing to appear in his visions and dreams. Despair, doubt, and reflection are the result and the ensuing struggle with himself is bitterly painful.

The poet has a further dream (XII): Love appears before him in the guise of a white-robed youth, exhorting the poet to abandon pretence (to stop, that is, dissembling love for the "screen ladies"). The young man then bursts into tears and the poet asks him:

"Lord of all virtues, why do you weep?" And he said these words to me: "*Ego tanquam centrum circuli, cui simili modo se habent circumferentiae partes; tu autem non sic.* ["I am like the centre of a circle, equidistant from all the points on the circumference; you, however, are not".]

The tears shed by Love may express distress at the separation and division which afflict man when he forgets the starting-point of his quest. When they are separated from the totality of man, specialisations like philosophy, music, rhetoric, politics, and power, – the various “screen ladies” – increase the risk of one-sidedness, trapping man in confusion and drawing him further away from wholeness.¹³ As he continues his quest within the *Fedeli d'Amore* group, the poet seems to become aware that he himself must shoulder the responsibility for leading the way. In chapter XXI, he calls on his companions to help him in this task: “Help me to honor her, most gracious ladies”.

3.3 *The Death of Beatrice*

Eventually we come to the death of Beatrice (XXVIII). It is the most difficult part to understand because Dante devotes so few words to it:

it is not my intention to do so [say something of her] here...it would not be proper for me to treat the theme since this would entail *praising myself* – which is the most reprehensible thing one can do. Therefore, I leave this subject to some other commentator.

The poet does not wish to speak of Beatrice's death, because he does not want to sing his own praise; her death does honour to him and brings with it a beneficial effect. From this it can be intuited that the poet has attained a state of beatification through the contemplation of Beatrice, who has ascended to celestial peace and beatitude, an extremely elevated inner state, where man exists beyond the flux of the contingent.

This, in initiatory terms, is illumination – the appearance of the eternal feminine figure of Sophia, personified by Beatrice – leading her follower to theophany, the apparition of the divine within himself. Once this state of peace and beatitude has been reached – though it may always be rediscovered – Dante the man may return to practical life aided by reason (the Virgil of the *Commedia*) so as to understand the world in the light of this illuminating experience. As he proceeds, his task becomes all the more clear. The doctrinal *Rhymes* may have been composed in this very period, in particular the song:

Talking of love and failing to agree
 Two women scale the summit of my mind:
 With one come *Worth* and *Courtesy* behind,
Prudence, *Uprightness* too, in company;
 The other brings *Good Looks* and *Gaiety*,
 And for her maid-of-honour, *Noble Kind-*
 While I (thanks to my Lord, who's author) find
 I'm at the feet of their authority.
Beauty and *Virtue* call my intellect
 To settle how a heart can stand between
 Two ladies and still love without defect:
 The spring of noble speaking told each queen
 That virtue earns our love by its effect
 And beauty by delight when it is seen.
 [LXXXVI]

The meaning is quite clear. Two aspects of Eros (in other words, of the Anima) meet at the summit of the mind to hold an argument on love. One – Eros involved in action – possess the attributes of the terrestrial (cardinal) virtues, the other – Eros involved in contemplation – is endowed with the qualities of the celestial (theological) virtues. The man lies devotedly at their feet while the two women set out the terms of the problem: how can a heart combine perfect love for both women, for both beauty and virtue? Love, the fount of gentle speech, answers that beauty may be loved for delight and virtue prized for the demands of life. It is necessary, then, to achieve an inner balance between action and contemplation. Both women are equally marvelous when taken together, but if they become ends in themselves they constitute a danger, with one leading to frenetic activity, the other to total alienation from the world.

The choice facing Dante becomes increasingly clear: it is not through political action or philosophical reasoning, but with poetry that he must tell the “people of the future” of his vision of the correct balance between action and contemplation, a balance leading to the desired relation between the Ego and the Self. But in his desire to celebrate Beatrice, he falls prey once more to the dangers of the “gentle Lady”. In an attempt to bring Beatrice back to life in a world bereft of her presence, he writes his last impassioned letters to princes, cardinals, and fellow Florentines; but the more he writes and the greater

his activity, the more he is ignored.

Towards the end of the *Vita Nuova* (XL), Dante witnesses the arrival of pilgrims seeking to follow in the path of Christ. They are lost in the suffering city (both Florence and the world in general). He calls out to them, “don’t you realise that Beatrice is dead, and that now there is no love or justice, only pain in this widowed city?”

It is at this point that Dante intuitively feels he must help those who are engaged on a quest. He is overcome with distress at the loss of human values, but he is equally filled with a desire to revive them and make them a presence in the world. Now, however, he will no longer turn to the great earthly powers of princes, emperors, and popes; rather than hurling out denunciations, he will speak humbly to the pilgrims. He inclines compassionately towards the simple folk who are earnestly groping after something they cannot fully grasp. He asks them questions to help them begin this quest.¹⁴

Ah, pilgrims, moving pensively along,
thinking, perhaps, of things at home you miss,
could the land you come from be so far away
(as anyone might guess from your appearance)
that you show no signs of grief as you pass through
the middle of the *desolated city*,
like people who seem not to understand
the grievous weight of woe it has to bear?
If you would stop to listen to me speak,
I know, from what my sighing heart tells me,
you would be weeping when you leave this place:
lost is the city’s source of blessedness,*
and I know words that could be said of her
with power to humble any man to tears.

At the close of the *Vita Nuova* (XLII), Dante has a “wonderful vision”

in which I saw things that made me resolve to say no more about this
blessed one until I would be capable of writing about her in a nobler way.
To achieve this I am striving as hard as I can...Accordingly, if it be the plea-

* Reynold’s and Musa’s translations are less specific than the original which actually names Beatrice.

sure of Him through whom all things live that my life continue for a few more years, I hope to write of her that which has never been written of any other woman.

The poet has been given a glance of the divine. But to speak of Beatrice, his “loving and sweet guide”, who has led him to the threshold of the Divine Mystery, he must go more deeply into his studies and extend his search even further. The final vision of the *Vita Nuova* is prophetic: no sooner had he finished writing the *Paradiso*, than he died, in the city of Ravenna, aged only fifty-six.

3.4 Political experiences

After his formative experience with the Stil Novisti, Dante devoted himself to studying the classics and the mystics (Plato, Aristotle, Hermes Trismegistos, the gnostics, Cicero, Virgil, Saint Augustine, Boethius, Albertus Magnus, Saint Thomas, Saint Paul, Saint John, Saint Francis, Saint John, Bonaventure da Bagnoreggio, Gioacchino da Fiore). He felt that in order to revive the new principle of justice that urgently weighed upon him, it was necessary to re-assimilate the entire tradition of the ancients and recover the primary values of Christianity that had become distorted and corrupted in his day. Even though he interpreted Scripture and dogma in an esoteric, symbolic and anagogic sense, in accordance with his own deepest feelings, he was, nonetheless a convinced Christian.

Dante believed that the message of Christ opened a way forward that would overturn established ways of feeling, because it recognised that man is ultimately responsible for sustaining the contradictory nature of life (the Cross). The emphasis is placed on the central value of the individual, who must seek out his human task by looking deeply within him or herself, listening to the inner voice. This meant that the individual had “to die” – *ad imitatio Christi* – to the selfish claims of the Ego, to then “rise again” fully conscious of being an integral part of the cosmos.

Dante went on to become one of the most learned scholars of his age. His range was vast, and he could discourse clearly and in great depth on subjects as varied as theology, philosophy, history, mytholo-

gy, astrology, jurisprudence, and mathematics, not to mention rhetoric, poetics, music, and drawing. The doctrinal, allegorical and scientific poems collected in his *Rhymes* paint another picture of Dante as a gentleman and courtier.

In an attempt to give concrete form to his new-found sense of right, he threw himself energetically into politics. The Chronicle of Dino Compagni¹⁵ mentions Dante as one "of the few honest citizens" to put the welfare of the city before the interests of the party.

In 1289 he fought against the Ghibellines of Arezzo at the battle of Campaldino, and shortly after he took part in a successful assault on the Pisan castle at Caprona. He was one of the Council of a Hundred and ambassador to various cities, where he sought to protect the freedom of the communes against the "great tyrant" (the corrupt Church). In the summer of 1300 he was made a prior of Florence. But he also made a considerable number of enemies when he was forced to expel some of the local hot-heads (including personal friends like Cavalcanti).

In October 1301, the commune sent Dante, along with two other ambassadors, on an embassy to Pope Boniface VIII to plead the cause of Florentine liberty. The Pope dismissed the other two envoys, but detained Dante, whom he may have regarded as too dangerous to allow to return. With the pretence of bringing peace to Florence, he despatched Charles of Valois, who entered the city with the help of the Blacks. In the ensuing repression of the ousted Whites, the home of Dante was among the first to be pillaged and destroyed.

3.5 Exile

Dante could no longer return to Florence. He was aged thirty-six and would never see his homeland again. On January 1302 charged with fraud, extortion, and conspiracy against the Pope and Charles of Valois, he was deprived of public office *in perpetuo*. Invited to clear himself of these charges, he refused to appear before the court, and on March 10, 1302, he was condemned to burn at the stake, while all his property was seized. From that moment on, he lived in exile.

Weighing up Dante's political career, it can hardly be called a success. But careful consideration of the interior growth and maturation

involved in his life as a politician reveals how each stage was in keeping with his innermost feelings. Not once did the poet break faith with the principle of harmonious justice so sorely needed in those troubled times. Nor did he ever act in his own interests. Had he payed the fine and regained admittance to Florence by publicly asking pardon for crimes he had not committed, he would have fallen into a shameful compromise based on lies. Instead he chose exile and held true to his deepest feelings. He endured his banishment with great difficulty, but remained unbowed “like a solid tower whose brave height/ remains unmoved by all the winds that blow” (Pur. V, 14-15)

The sudden poverty that exile brought...without weapons or a mount, it has driven me into its dark prison, and no matter how hard I try to raise myself, pitiless poverty contrives to hold me down. [*Epistle to the Conti di Romena*, II, 3]

Defenceless and with no means of sustenance, always on foot, he roamed the plains and mountains between one city and another. His choice was made:

You shall be forced to leave behind those things
You love most dearly, and this is the first
arrow the bow of your exile will shoot.
[Par. XVII, 55-57]

The *Convivio* expresses all the pain and distress of a man torn from his family's affections:

Truly I have been a vessel without sail and without rudder, borne to divers ports and shores and havens by the dry wind that blows from dolorous poverty... through almost every part where her language* is spoken I have wandered, a pilgrim, almost a beggar, displaying against my will the wounds of Fortune [*Convivio* I, 3].

The Poet's inner state can be intimated in the poem “Three women round my heart have gathered”:

And I, who hear in their angelic speech

* Literally, the Italian language.

Wanderers from such a height
Find joy and pain in sight,
The exile I must bear, honor I call:
For though *God's will or vicar Fortune* teach
Earth's valley how to blight
White blooms to black as night,
It is still best to join the good, and fall.

[Rhymes, CIV]

Faced with a conflict of duties – the will of God expressed in terms of destiny and his own personal ethic – Dante chose what he saw as representing good, disposed to accept his own personal defeat if it prevented him from compromising his inner liberty.¹⁶

Nevertheless, if he wanted to help anyone else, then he would have to give expression to these thoughts. To this end and in order to be more easily understood he decided to break the vows of silence taken when he joined the *Fedeli d'Amore*:

But that my words may better serve your case,
I'll try another key
And speak less generally
In terms at grasping which no woman quails.*
For rarely under veils
Will darkling verses lead the mind to light,
So I'll speak plainly to your sisterhood.
[Rhymes, CVI]

To do this a language more readily comprehensible to the men of this time was required: the vulgate tongue.

Because it is the language of my parents...And this my language introduced me to the path of knowledge (which is our final perfection). [Convivio I, XIII]

...Latin would have benefited but few, but the vulgar tongue will certainly be of service to many. [Convivio I, 9]

This (the vulgar tongue) shall be the new light, the new sun, which shall rise

when the worn-out one shall set. [Convivio I, XIII]

* Dante's original is not so disparaging of women; he makes no specific of women. It simply stresses that the meaning should be clear and not veiled.

Through suffering and overcoming repeated conflicts and humiliations, Dante subjects himself to a profound journey of self-knowledge, in the course of which he paves the way to “individuation” for all. He obeys the will of “the Lord who dictates within” and shapes a new, readily comprehensible language. Now a pilgrim himself, he will bear witness to humanity and not appoint himself its judge.

If we reflect carefully, we will discover that the *Vita Nuova* already contains all the forms of transition the reader of the *Commedia* will undergo: the wood, the distress, the fear of being lost, the “looking up”, until a “new intelligence” emerges from one’s inner depths (XLII and sonnet XXV). Virgil, at the behest of Beatrice, will rescue the pilgrim who has gone astray and lead him upwards to where he may contemplate the Divine Light (the theophany of Love’s Faithful). This ecstatic experience, so subtle as to be beyond the range of the rational mind, may only be perceived deep within ourselves. But, as Dante states in the final canto of the *Commedia*, the heart which has felt and been touched by such an experience will have to search for a means of expression that lies beyond the limits of mortal concepts:

O Light Supreme, so far beyond the reach
of mortal understanding, to my mind
relend now some small part of Your Own Self*
And give my tongue eloquence enough
to capture just one spark of all Your glory
that I may leave for future generations.
[Par. XXXIII, 67-72]

* Literally, “some small part of how you appeared to me”.