

The Renaissance was the work of individuals, and in a sense it was about individualism. And the first and greatest of those individuals was Dante Alighieri (1265-1321). Dante was a Florentine, appropriately because Florence played a more important role in the Renaissance than any other city. He also embodies the central paradox of the Renaissance: while it was about the recovery and understanding of ancient Greek and Latin texts and the writing of elegant Latin, it was also about the maturing, ordering and use of vernacular languages, especially Italian. We know little about Dante's early life, except that his parents died before he was eighteen. He was betrothed at twelve and married in 1293, when he was twenty-eight. In typical Italian fashion, this was a family matter of little emotional significance. His emotional life began in 1274, aged nine, it is believed, when he first glimpsed his Beatrice (Bice Portinari, the daughter of a respectable Florentine citizen). His poetical life was devoted to her presence and after 1290, when she died, to her memory; in a sense, his entire life and work were dedicated to her.

There were three key elements in Dante's education. One was the Florentine Dominicans, with whom he studied in the 1290s. By then the great Dominican teacher and writer St. Thomas Aquinas was dead, his work complete, so Dante was able to absorb the whole Aristotelian philosophy, as conceived and Christianized by Aquinas. Thomist Aristotelian

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gives a structure to his oeuvre, bringing to it internal consistency and intellectual rigor. Second, Dante had as mentor the classical scholar Brunetto Latini. He too was an Aristotelian, and the first part of Book Two of his main work, *Li Livres dou trésor*, written in French because Italian was not yet regarded as a suitable tongue for a serious work, contains a translation of Aristotle's *Ethics*, one of the first in a European vernacular. It was thanks to Brunetto Latini that Dante was able to understand the importance of rhetoric, that is, the ability to present a case and to use Latin—or any other language—with force and elegance. Through Latini, too, Dante got to know at least part of the works of Cicero and Seneca. Virgil, and especially his *Aeneid*, the epic successor to Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, had never gone out of use even in the more harassed period of the Dark Ages, and had always found Christian defenders. But other Christians, including some of the weightiest, like St. Jerome and St. Augustine, had condemned him as a pagan archetype. Latini, however, taught Dante that Virgil was to be used as well as enjoyed, and in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, which can be seen as a Christian successor to the *Aeneid*, Virgil appears as his guide through Hell and Purgatory, though Dante is sufficiently orthodox a Christian to exclude him from Paradise, allowing the Latin poet to sink into Limbo instead.

The third element in Dante's education was the influence and encouragement of his friend and near contemporary Guido Cavalcanti, another classical scholar but a man whose passion was the promotion of Italian. It was he who persuaded Dante to write in the Tuscan or Florentine version of the Italian tongue. In due course, Dante provided in his *Convivio*, written in Italian, and in his *De vulgari eloquentia*, written in Latin, the first great Renaissance defense of the vernacular as a suitable language for works of beauty and weight. The *De vulgari* contains a sentence that prophesies of Italian: "This

shall be the new light, the new sun, which rises when the worn-out one shall set, and shall give light to them who are in shadow and darkness because of the old sun, which did not enlighten them"—a shrewd recognition, on his part, that the masses would never acquire a significant grasp of Latin but could be taught to read their own spoken tongue. More important than his arguments, however, was the example he provided in *The Divine Comedy*, written throughout in Italian, that the common Tuscan tongue could be used to write the most exquisite poetry and to deal with matter of the highest significance. Before Dante, Tuscan was one of many Italian dialects and there was no Italianate written language that was accepted throughout the peninsula. After Dante, however, written Italian (in the Tuscan mode) was a fact. Indeed, Italians of the twenty-first century, and foreigners who have some grasp of Italian, can read most of *The Divine Comedy* without difficulty. No other writer has ever had such a decisive impact on a modern language.

Dante's *Divine Comedy*, describing his journey through Hell, Purgatory and Heaven and what he saw therein, is a Christian epic about vice and virtue, rewards and punishments. It has an enormous cast of characters, many of them Dante's contemporaries. In 1294 he became involved in politics in Florence, a city that was itself highly political, deeply committed to the Guef or papal cause. Florence was split into two parties, as were most Italian cities, and the party to which Dante belonged, having opposed the ultratriumphalist Pope Boniface VIII, lost the game, and he was exiled in 1302, a sentence renewed in 1315. These Italian city faction fights were vicious and deadly. Dante's property was confiscated, and he was condemned to be burned at the stake if he returned to the city. He spent much of his life, therefore, in exile, chiefly in Ravenna, where he died, and he laments in pitiful verse the

Dante legitimizes Italian language

pain of "eating another man's bread and using another man's stair to go to bed."

Yet there is little bitterness in his great *Commedia*. Dante was a man of exceptional magnanimity, of all-encompassing love for mankind as well as individuals, and he understood, too, the nature of divine love, which suffuses the universe and gives it meaning. His poem is moralistic and didactic, as plainly so in many ways as a great altarpiece in a medieval cathedral. He takes the Christian faith with awesome seriousness and does not seek to discount the miseries of the damned or the pains of Purgatory. In this sense he was a medieval man, built to be sure on a gigantic scale, but untouched by doubt about the mechanics of the universe as described by the church. But he was also a storyteller of immense resources and a poet of genius. The narrative moves forward at a great pace and is full of delightful, striking and terrifying incidents, lit by flashes of vivid verbal color and what can only be called inspiration.

Moreover, Dante was not just a medieval man; he was a Renaissance man too. He was highly critical of the church, like so many scholars who followed him. Although a Gueif, he was impressed by the German emperor Henry VII, who came to Italy in 1310 and converted Dante to the idea of a universal monarchy, expressed in a Latin treatise, *De monarchia*, condemned as heretical after the poet's death. Dante had great faith. He grasped the point of medieval Christendom, that the only way to personal peace was submission to the divine will, however hard it was at times to bear. But he had the critical spirit of the new times that were coming. He saw into the heart of things with a piercing gaze. All men (and women), rich and poor, well or badly educated, could find something in him, and read or listened to his verse with wonder. His fame came soon after his death, and continued to grow steadily.

Soon, Florence, which had expelled him, was fighting with Ravenna for custody of his honorable, and now highly valuable, bones. Dante not only launched the Italian language as a vehicle for high art; in a sense he launched the Renaissance itself, as a new era of creative endeavor by individuals of unprecedented gifts. He became a model, a beacon, a mentor, as Virgil was to him, an energizing, vivifying source for talents of a lesser order and a towering giant against whom the most ambitious could measure themselves. After Dante, nothing seemed beyond human reach.

That was the view of another Tuscan, Giovanni Boccaccio, born in 1313, when Dante still had some time to live, and destined by his merchant father for a life of business. For this purpose he was sent to Naples, but there he found, like Dante, his lifelong love, Fiammetta, who emerges in all his work, like a palimpsest. He was Dante's heir, in his ability to handle the newly mature language and in his surpassing ability to tell a tale. His mother was French, and he subsumed in his work the legacy of the French medieval romances. He took the *ottava rima* of the minstrels and gave it literary status, made it indeed the most dynamic verse form in Italian literature. His *Decameron*, second only to *The Divine Comedy* as a source of delight for Renaissance Europe, is a product of the Black Death of 1348. The author has seven young women and three young men flee from Florence to escape infection. They remain in the countryside a fortnight, ten days of which are spent storytelling, making one hundred tales in all. Each story ends with a *canzone*, or song. It is thus a compendium of stories and verse, which less inventive spirits would ransack for inspiration over the next two centuries. The church and the stiffer element of society did not like it, for it represents the more liberal approach to lifestyles and opinion of the younger generation, contrasted to the formalities and stuffiness of the