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Edited by Rachel Jacoff

Excerpt

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I

GIUSEPPE MAZZOTTA

Life of Dante

The life of Dante is such a tangle of public and private passions and ordeals experienced over the fifty-six years he lived that it has always been a source of inexhaustible fascination. It is as if everything about his life – its innumerable defeats and its occasional and yet enduring triumphs – belongs to the romantic and alluring realm of legend: a love at first sight that was to last his whole life and inspire lofty poetry; the long, cruel exile from his native Florence because of the civil war ravaging the city; the poem he wrote, the *Divina Commedia*, made of his public and private memories; the turning of himself into an archetypal literary character, such as Ulysses, Faust, or any of those medieval knights errant, journeying over the tortuous paths of a spiritual quest, wrestling with dark powers, and, finally, seeing God face to face.

Many are the reasons why generations of readers have found the story of Dante's life compelling. His relentless self-invention as an unbending prophet of justice and a mythical quester for the divine is certainly one important reason. The fact that in his graphic figurations of the beyond (rare glimpses of which were available in only a few other legendary mythmakers – Homer, Plato, and Virgil) he was an unparalleled poet also greatly heightens our interest in him. Yet none of these reasons truly accounts for what must be called – given the extraordinary number of biographies Dante has elicited over the centuries – the literary phenomenon of “The Life of Dante.”

Stories of mythical heroes of literature deeply absorb us either because these heroes are rarely, if ever, wholly human (Gilgamesh, Achilles, Aeneas), or because they display noble, exceptional gifts (Beowulf, Roland, El Cid) that transcend the practice and measure of ordinary life. By the same token, truly great poets have so quickly entered the domain of myth that they leave readers doubtful about the very reality of their existence; did Moses or Homer really exist or are they imaginary authors of actually anonymous texts? In the case of Shakespeare, arguments still rage as to whether or not he truly was who we may like to think he was.

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But no such skepticism is warranted for the reality or legal identity of Dante's existence. One suspects that it is exactly this unquestioned reality, the knowledge that he was part of our history and was so much like us, that he was so thoroughly human while at the same time so thoroughly extraordinary as only fictional characters are, that accounts for the persistent fascination he exerts on us. The disparity between, on the one hand, his ordinariness (he was married, had children, was notoriously litigious, unable at times to pay his rent or find credit, craved recognition), and, on the other hand, his larger-than-life visionary powers (his unrelenting sense of justice, his unique ability to stretch the boundaries of the imagination, and the conviction, at once humble and proud, of a prophetic mission) repeatedly triggers the questioning and the desire to know what he was really like.

Accordingly, biographers have tried to define Dante's involvement with the Florentine intellectuals and poets of his time, as well as his role in local politics, which unavoidably reflected and shared in the larger struggles between pope and emperor. They have also tried to assess how real were the shifts in his philosophical and theological allegiances (whether or not he was ever an "Averroist" and what were the limits of his Thomism). And they have not neglected to unearth numberless details about his family circumstances in the effort to grasp the elusive essence of his life.

There is not yet, however, a full-fledged literary biography of Dante that evokes simultaneously the poetic, intellectual, and social topography of both Florence *and* the larger cultural world conjured up in his works. Existing biographies, in effect, beg the question. Is there really a correspondence between life and work? Can we take obscure details Dante writes about himself as clues to his life? And even if we could, what was Dante's relation to his friends, to his wife, to his children, and, perhaps more importantly, to himself? Where did he learn all he knew? When did he discover his poetic vocation? What did "to be a poet" mean to him and to those around him?

These questions have not been altogether ignored by biographers, but, right from the early biographies of Dante to those written in the last few years, they have drawn forth a predictable variety of answers. The answers, no doubt, are chiefly determined by the rhetorical assumptions shaping the biographical genre in itself. One such assumption is that the biographer has grasped the inner, authentic sense of the life to be told and will, thus, make it the principle of the narrative trajectory. Another assumption is that the history of a great poet coincides with the history of his own times; Dante, for instance, to adapt a statement by T. S. Eliot, is part of the consciousness of his age which, in turn, cannot be understood without him. A third assumption is the illusory belief, shared by almost all Dante biographers, that there is a solid, ascertainable correspondence between the facts of the poet's life and

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his art. From this standpoint the role of the biographer consists in sifting the documentary evidence and removing all obscurities and ambiguities from the record – did Dante really go to Paris during the years of his exile? Was Brunetto Latini an actual teacher of Dante? Was Dante ever a Franciscan novice? Did he attend both the theological schools of Santa Croce and Santa Maria Novella in Florence? And who was the “montanina” for whom Dante, late in his life, wrote exquisite poems?

The only remarkable exception to this pattern of the biographical genre is Giovanni Boccaccio’s *Vita di Dante*, a self-conscious fictional work akin to Dante’s own *Vita nuova* which responds imaginatively to Dante’s steady self-dramatization in his works. Modern biographers of Dante, on the other hand (notably Michele Barbi and Giorgio Petrocchi), have given brilliant and dependable accounts of Dante’s life and works, but these accounts are limited, paradoxically, in the measure in which, first, they are not speculative or imaginative enough, and, second, they refrain from giving what can only be, as Boccaccio lucidly grasps, the novelistic sense of Dante’s life. It does not come as a surprise to discover, then, that these modern biographical reconstructions deliberately follow in the mold of the highly influential biography of Dante written by the Florentine historian Leonardo Bruni (1369–1444). Bruni’s own version of the *Vita di Dante* was written specifically to correct and root in the reality of history the legend concocted by Boccaccio.

Boccaccio’s *Vita di Dante*, which was written roughly around 1348 and is, thus, the earliest available biography of Dante, follows an altogether different path. His text has the structural complexity of both a personal poetics and of a romance telling the marvelous birth of the poet (accompanied, as happens in hagiographies, by an omen, such as the mother’s prophetic dream). The two rhetorical strands converge in the central, exalted, narrative of the poet’s fated growth and of the splendor of his imagination in the face of the severe encroachments of daily cares on the exercise of his craft. Because Boccaccio so often strays and digresses from the presentation of his material to relate his ideas about the sublime nature and essence of poetry, and because he chooses fiction as the dominant mode of his narrative, its literal trustworthiness has been much doubted or maligned since Bruni’s stringencies. Nonetheless, in spite of some overt incongruities in Boccaccio’s account, the legend he constructs fixes steadily on his central perception of Dante’s life as pulled in antithetical directions.

One of these pulls was Dante’s insight into the implacable demands of poetry as a total, all-encompassing activity which could provide the metaphysical foundation of the world. The other pull was Dante’s experience of the burdens of the daily realities of family, of financial difficulties, of a marriage that, in point of fact, was far less unhappy than Boccaccio himself

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thought, and his naive decision to yield to the siren call of involvement in the shadowy, violent perimeter of city politics. The power games of politics, so Boccaccio infers, were Dante's deluded, even if provisional, choice and inexorably brought about his exile. Yet, this tragic mistake notwithstanding, Dante still clung to his faith in his own comprehensive visionary powers to recall the muses from their banishment.

To a civic humanist such as Leonardo Bruni, Boccaccio's celebration of Dante's heroic poetic temper seemed too partial an invention (much like, Bruni says wryly, the *Filocolo* or the *Filostrato* or even the *Fiammetta*). Bruni found Boccaccio's intimation of the poet's necessary disengagement from the responsibilities of the history of Florence an unacceptable way of bypassing the vital, empirical force of poetry, and of confining it to the realm of abstract metaphysical generalizations. Thus, in reaction to Boccaccio, Bruni's *Vita di Dante* presents Dante in the context of the particularities of Florentine intellectual and political life. It is possible that a transaction between Boccaccio's and Bruni's respective narrative techniques and understanding of the poet would convey a sharper view of Dante's life. Yet it must be acknowledged that the biographical paradigm inaugurated by Bruni and deployed by the historical scholarship of a Barbi or a Petrocchi has made a considerable contribution to the preliminary establishment of the facts of Dante's life.

The facts we know for certain are relatively few, but they are firmly established. Dante Alighieri was born in Florence in 1265 (between May 14 and June 13). Of his childhood, spent in Florence, most people recall only what he himself records in his *Vita nuova*, that when he was nine years old he met Beatrice, then eight years old, who died in 1290 (on either June 8 or 19), but whose memory never faded from the poet's mind and who was destined to play a providential role in his poetic vision. But many other things happened to and around Dante during his early years which were bound to affect a precocious and sensitive young man, as he no doubt was, to judge by the intensity of his response to Beatrice.

One can only speculate, for instance, what impression the meeting that took place in Florence in June 1273 between Pope Gregory IX and Charles of Anjou to establish peace between the city's warring factions of Guelfs and Ghibellines made on Dante. One can easily imagine the city's mood on those early summer days (which coincided with the feast of Florence's patron saint, St. John the Baptist), celebrating the dramatic event and calling for a general reconciliation. Everywhere, and for everybody, in Florence it was a feast marked by processions, songs, dances, laughter, jousts, tumblers, clowns, colorful young women and young men, as the poets' recitations of their verses mixed with the clamor of street vendors. Dante himself never refers to this extraordinary public episode which turned out to be nothing

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more than a brief interlude in Florence's endless bloody civil wars. But who can say the extent to which, if at all, this spectacular experience of the ritual of peace shaped his imagination of the pageantry at the top of *Purgatorio* or of *Paradiso* as the vision of peace and play? Who can say whether or not it was in the middle of that feast that he discovered his vocation to be a poet?

One would expect this sort of question to be asked by a biographer in the mold of, say, Boccaccio. A sober-minded biographical narrative of the life of Dante, however, would be expected to focus on ascertained, objective events of his early life. Some of these events, like the schooling he received, were fairly ordinary. He went to a grammar school where he was trained in classical Latin and medieval Latin texts, but because at this time his family was of moderate means, he had access both to the poetry and literature that came from Provence and France, and to the medieval vulgarizations of classical material. There were other events in his childhood, however, that could in no way be called ordinary. He lost his mother, Bella, between 1270 and 1273; his father remarried soon after and had three other children who remained close (especially Francesco) to Dante throughout his life. In 1283 Dante's father died, and his death forced Dante to take legal charge of the family. This circumstance, in turn, meant that he could not but become involved in the tense and even exciting realities of Florentine public life.

The Florentine meeting of 1273 between the pope and the emperor, arranged to mark the reconciliation of the popular factions, had no noticeable practical effects on the mood of the city, nor did it manage to efface the tragic memories of the defeat of Montaperti (1260), recalled in *Inferno* 10. Montaperti meant the defeat of the Guelfs, and also that Dante, a Guelf, came to life in a Ghibelline city. In terms of Florence's public mood, moreover, the defeat simply crushed the spirit of the city and marked Florence's loss of its hegemony over its neighboring cities. Public life was a persistent danger zone punctuated by the almost daily battles between the Guelfs and the Ghibellines. At the same time, the implacable, bitter resentments of the popular social classes against the entrenched interests of the magnates added a new and generalized turbulence, beyond the rivalries and feuds of the nobility (the Donati versus the Cerchi), to the city's political tensions. Dante, who had entered by necessity this political arena with its intractable problems, was soon to stumble against a host of unpredictable snares.

There is no doubt that Dante at first responded with enthusiasm and genuine excitement to the lure and prestige of public life. Public life was characterized in the Florence of the 1280s by the mingling of aristocrats, office-holders of the commune, men of letters and educators, poets and rich merchants. In concrete terms, it meant, for Dante, friendship with the prominent, cosmopolitan intellectual Brunetto Latini, the highly valued intimacy

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with the poet and aristocrat Guido Cavalcanti, and with Cino da Pistoia, and admission to the exclusive social circles of Nino Visconti and Guido da Polenta. It also meant recognition among the bourgeois and academic coteries of Bologna, where Dante journeyed and lived for several months (and where he possibly met the physician Taddeo Alderotti). At any rate, from Bologna he brought back to Florence the poetry of Guido Guinizelli, a master whom he was to hail later as the founder of the “sweet new style.”

The decade from 1280 to 1290, the year of Beatrice’s death, was immensely rich in Dante’s life. In 1285 he married Gemma Donati with whom he had four children: three boys (Giovanni, Pietro, and Jacopo – named after the apostles who witnessed Jesus’ transfiguration) and a girl (Antonia), who reappeared late in the poet’s life in Ravenna where she was a nun who had taken the name of Sister Beatrice. Family life had its public counterpoint in what later came to figure as a central experience: the military campaign of Campaldino (June 1289) against the Aretines. Florence’s victory reversed the mood as well as the internal balance of power that had been determined by the defeat of Montaperti. The Ghibellines were now defeated, and the popular classes strengthened their power; yet the victory gave rise to new social tensions between the popular government and the magnates. Kept out of the government of the city until they agreed to enroll in the various guilds, the magnates felt entitled to seek more political influence because of their decisive role in the city’s military victory over Arezzo.

It is extraordinary how, even in the midst of so many demands made on him by family and civic responsibilities, Dante did not abandon the world of poetry. On the contrary, during this period he composed *Il Fiore*, a series of sonnets adapted from the *Roman de la Rose*. He also wrote *Il Detto*, only lately, and correctly, attributed to Dante. This work can be defined as a general synopsis, as it were, of the conventions of courtly love, but it also shows deep traces of the influence disparate literary traditions had on him: the *Roman de la Rose*, Provençal poetry, the Sicilian School, Guittone, and Brunetto Latini.

These early literary experiments can objectively be viewed as phases in Dante’s technical-poetic apprenticeship, but the story of the apprenticeship itself, of the discovery and the necessity to be a poet, is told in the *Vita nuova*. As Dante’s love story for Beatrice, which the text primarily purports to be, it relates few sensuous, empirical signs of her presence – the elegance (a bit showy but never tawdry) of her clothes; her stride; her eyes; her silence; her smile; her aura; her (violent) gestures of disdain. But it is certain that Beatrice’s enigmatic presence, a sort of dematerialized body which casts her as an extraordinary, unique apparition, sets the lover on the path of self-discovery.

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There must be, Dante soon finds out, a more profound means of exploring the sense of Beatrice's meaning in his life than those provided by the traditional, formulaic, Provençal poetic conventions. If Beatrice is a unique figure of love, it must follow that the poetry that celebrates her cannot but be a unique form of poetry. This poetic quest for a *new style*, which takes place in the shadow of Cavalcanti's literary-philosophical concerns, turns into the central theme of the narrative. Oriented at first to the past and to the unveiling of the secrets of memory, the *Vita nuova* quickly confronts memory's limits, seeks to transcend those limits, and strains for a mode of vision no longer that of mere reminiscences of the past. Dante must move, as the last chapters of the *Vita nuova* tell us, beyond the contingent revelations of objective, empirical knowledge to a realm of imagination and vision.

But Dante was not to keep immediately to this plan. While writing the *Vita nuova* he began reading the works of Boethius and Cicero, and attended the theological and philosophical schools (*Convivio* II, xii, 1–7) where he became familiar with radical Franciscan and Thomistic speculation, with apocalyptic literature (tied to the names of Ubertino da Casale and Giovanni Olivi), and political theology (Remigio dei Girolami). This deepening of the intellectual horizon of his youth meant that the idea of poetry embodied in the *Vita nuova* appeared now as a coiled cipher, as a severely limited experience because it was predicated on the exclusion of other worlds from the realm of the personal. A new idea of poetry, one which would neither forfeit public realities nor transfigure those realities into a private phantasmagoria, now emerged. The reasons for this poetic shift, discernible in the writing of the allegorical-philosophical *Rime*, are several. But the primary reasons are both Dante's awareness of the city's political-moral climate in the 1290s, and the consciousness of his new responsibilities as a family man and a member of a middling social class.

The decade was marked by a number of contradictory signs for the future of Florence. In the aftermath of the battle of Campaldino there were many hopeful, scandalously utopian attempts to establish a bipartisan government, such as an alliance of Guelfs and Ghibellines to secure peaceful conditions in the city. This bold, provocative scheme never had a chance to become reality. Yet the passage of Charles Martel through Florence (1294) kept awake in Dante the dream that his own voice and ideas of how to bring order to the city could one day be heard by the emperor. There were, however, other events which signalled ominous and disastrous consequences. Chief among them was the inauguration of Boniface VIII's theocratic papacy (1294) in the aftermath of the collapse of Celestine V's ideals of evangelical pauperism. The new papal policy presaged difficult times for Florence's hegemonic claims, since the theocratic scheme entailed nothing less than the submission of the

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whole of Tuscany to papal control. This factor alone possibly constitutes the background against which Dante's further political involvement is to be seen. In this same year (1295) he enrolled in a guild, and on several occasions opposed Boniface's exactions on Florence.

Dante's political career reached its acme in 1300 (June 15–August 15) when he was one of the city's six priors. Leonardo Bruni's biography records a lost epistle of Dante in which the by-now exiled poet, taking stock of his life's disappointments, sees the cause of all his misfortunes in the decisions taken while he was a prior. In his *Cronica* (I, xxi) Dino Compagni, himself both a witness and protagonist of the times, registers the crisis that crippled the city's political life during these months: the violent clashes between the magnates and the representatives of the popular government. As a punitive measure for the violence, the priors agreed to send the leaders of the warring factions (Black and White Guelfs) into exile. Among the exiles was Dante's own friend, Guido Cavalcanti, who died late in August of that year.

The events that followed the priors' momentous decision are so muddled and complex that a simplification is necessary. As soon as Dante's tenure expired, his successors recalled the Whites from their exile. Pope Boniface VIII, angered by the decision which he saw as favoring his enemies, solicited Charles of Valois, the brother of Philip, then king of France, to intervene militarily in Italy. When Charles was in Italy, the Florentines dispatched three emissaries to the papal court in Rome to persuade the pope to keep the French king from entering Tuscany. One of the ambassadors was Dante who, perhaps while in Rome, was sentenced to death on March 10, 1302. Dante went into exile, which was to last until his death in 1321.

The remaining nineteen years of his life were the most painful for the poet. So dark were they, that the romantic image of the fugitive poet, roaming around like a "rudderless ship" and a "beggar" (*Convivio* I, iii, 4–5), captures the fact that we cannot even trace with any great precision his constantly shifting, precarious whereabouts. We know that at first he variously plotted and conspired a military seizure of Florence; and that he went from one city to another: Forlì in 1302; Verona in 1303; Arezzo, where, according to Petrarch, he met his exiled father, Ser Petracco; Treviso; Padua, where in 1305 he met Giotto at work in the Scrovegni Chapel – and one is left to imagine the exchanges between them; Venice; Lunigiana, where he worked for a time for the Malaspinas; Lucca in 1307–09; and many other places – only some of which are real – until he settled once again in Verona in 1312, and from Verona moved in 1319 to his last refuge in Ravenna.

But for all its harshness, exile turned out to be for Dante a blessing in disguise, nothing less than the central, decisive experience of his life. His texts always speak of his exile as a darkening time and as a ravage of the

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spirit. But from 1302 to 1321, from the year of his exile to the year of his death, Dante's history is essentially the history of his works, and they cannot be understood without understanding the bleak clarity exile brought to his vision. He knew despair and almost certainly he contemplated suicide. But because everything was now lost, nothing was lost. He abandoned the shallow illusion of a return to Florence by military action, and retreated from the grim, squalid quarters where other Florentine expatriates spun endless, wicked conspiracies of revenge.

Dante soon discovered, or simply accepted, that the exile they all bewailed as a tragic fatality need not be construed as a hopeless, unalterable condition. In the depths of his despair he saw the futility and falseness of despair. For his friend Guido Cavalcanti, the exile to Sarzana that Dante himself had a few years earlier decreed was the irremediable experience of no return, tantamount to the premonition of an imminent death. Guido's great exilic poem, "Perch'i' no spero di tornar giammai, ballatetta, in Toscana," is the tragic figuration of a mind yielding to despair's grip and ultimate unreality. For Dante, on the contrary, as his own exilic song, "Tre donne," exemplifies, hopelessness is illusory because it denies the reality and the possibilities of the future, and exile becomes the providential condition wherein he recognizes the necessity to transcend the particularisms of local history. The way out of the darkness of partial and relative viewpoints, as he was ceaselessly to argue in the two major works he started but never finished in the early stages of his nomadic existence, the *De vulgari eloquentia* and the *Convivio*, is a universal standpoint.

He must have longed during this time for an impossible restoration of his honor and his property, for the irrevocably lost security of a family life, for the conversations with his sweet friends along the banks of the river at the hour of dusk, and for a world of ordinary concerns. But he never let nostalgia stand in the way of his obstinate and absolute moral convictions. He continued to weave his voice into the web of intellectual-practical discourses, and undertook to write the *De vulgari eloquentia* and the *Convivio*. In the *Convivio*, the lyrical fluidity and cadences of the *Vita nuova* are now bracketed as the provisional, radiant compulsion of a solitary mind. He never rejects his past, but now strives for a new discipline of thought and for the rational bounds of a universalizing philosophical-theological discourse. The *De vulgari eloquentia* envisions the vitality of the vernacular as the root and bark of the politics, law, poetry, and theology of the whole of Italy. The *Convivio*, on the other hand, presents itself as an ethics and, as such, recalls both the teachings Dante received from Brunetto Latini and the commentary of St. Thomas Aquinas on Aristotle's *Ethics*. From the viewpoint of Dante's own existential concerns, the *Convivio* addresses the issue of the relationship

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between philosophy and political power (the intellectual and the emperor), and focuses on the range of moral values that shape the fabric of our life.

From 1308 to 1313, a historical enterprise dominated the stages of international politics and was at the center of Dante's own political passions and dreams. He seems to have all along understood the necessity of the empire as the sole reasonable warranty against the sinister spirals of violence splintering all cities. He sensed in the event at hand a real possibility for his abstract design. In November of 1308, the electors of Germany agreed to have Henry VII of Luxemburg crowned as emperor. Henry, who was on his way to Rome where in 1312 he would be crowned by the pope, was expected to redress the political imbroglios in the various Italian cities of the north and of Tuscany. Dante himself hailed his arrival as a new messianic advent. He met the emperor, and this meeting renewed and nourished, at least for a while, as one can infer from his political *Epistolae*, Dante's moral vision of the necessity of empire that comes to maturation in the political tract, *Monarchia*, perhaps written around 1316.

By the time of Henry's descent to Italy, Dante had finished writing both *Inferno* and most of *Purgatorio*. Around June of 1312 he moved back to the court of Cangrande in Verona, drawn to it, no doubt, by the legendary hospitality of the prince and by his devotion to the Ghibelline cause whose legitimacy Dante endorsed. During his stay in Verona, a city of great culture that celebrated, for instance, the arrival of a manuscript of the Veronese Catullus' *Carmina*, he started (in 1315) *Paradiso*, and when he was halfway through (*Paradiso* 17 is a glittering celebration of Cangrande's generosity and, retrospectively, a farewell to him) he took his leave. In 1319 Guido Novello of Polenta invited him to move to Ravenna, and Dante accepted.

Why did he leave Verona and go to Ravenna? We do not really know. In a famous letter to Boccaccio, Petrarch sharply suggests that it had become intolerable to Dante to be confused with the Veronese court's actors, buffoons, and parasites. Their bibulousness and hoaxes were as far a cry from his childhood memories of Florence's spontaneous feasts as they were from his understanding of *theologia ludens*, the insight into the deeply "comic" essence of God's creation and grace, which the whole of the *Divina Commedia* unveils and represents over and against the vast pageant of horrors it foregrounds. Nonetheless, the break with Cangrande was not definitive. It was to Cangrande that Dante addressed the letter (the attribution of which, by what must be termed academics' recurrent suspicions, has again been contested) that masterfully explicates the complex principles of composition of *Paradiso* and, implicitly, of the whole poem. And he was also to return to Verona to read on January 20, 1320, a Sunday, his *Quaestio de aqua et terra*.