

## ONE DOES NOT DALLY WITH DANTE...

No, one absolutely should not! Such I discovered some 30 years ago during a mid-life “crisis” of my own, when I undertook translating Dante Alighieri’s “Divine Comedy” from the original Italian into English. A great number of translated renditions exist of the work; certainly it wasn’t my intent to try to better them. I began simply for mental occupation, to supplant mind’s futilely repeating worries. The exercise was to try to tell the story, in English, strictly in the *terza rima* form of the original, which is composed in tercets of 11-13 syllables of which the last words or syllables of first and third lines rhyme.<sup>1</sup>

The lovely cadence of the original is a direct result of Italian’s many-syllabled words, so naturally the exercise meant using English words of longer syllables; and quite admittedly I acknowledge it involved a reach open to authoritative criticism. I recall how at the outset *hubris* whispered a notion I might translate the entire work. By the end of three years, with psyche then on track with new life circumstances, merely two “cantos” (below) had been completed. There being 98 more to go of the epic 14,233 lines, clearly I would need for that fantasy another full lifetime devoted exclusively to it!

My literary-minded father was destined to be an uncomplaining laborer supporting a large family. Had Fate deemed otherwise he himself may have been a poet. He kept his copy of *La Divina Commedia* in a drawer bedside and read from it almost nightly. That book, 5 x 3 x 1-3/4 inches, along with a small bronze bust of Alighieri, was my legacy. The thick little book sits here now beside my laptop, fine-sheaved pages that include the Gustav Dore illustrations. Its burgundy embossed leather cover is frayed and clear tape supports the spine.

Alighieri originally named his work only “Comedy,” the word “Divine” bestowed by Giovanni Boccaccio, another Italian author and poet. It is a first-person tale of a man’s journey through the three post-death realms advanced by Christian theology, told in three primary parts (*cantiche*)-- *Inferno* (“Hell”), *Purgatorio* (“Purgatory”), and *Paradiso* (“Paradise”)—in which the protagonist is led through Hell and Purgatory by Roman poet Virgil, and through Paradise by “Beatrice”—the name of a Florentine woman with whom Alighieri was enamored from boyhood. Each main part or *cantica* has 33 *cantos* (‘chapters’), a total of 99 excluding an introductory passage. Because the exact year of Alighieri’s birth isn’t known, the prevalence of the number three in his work cannot be attributed definitively to his age when the work began; but 33 does correlate with the protagonist’s assertion of being at a mid-point of life.

*The Divine Comedy* is held as one of the greatest works of world literature. For Italy it was the spring of an eventual national language. In the 14<sup>th</sup> century c.e. medieval Italy was a mélange of dialects, over which the Tuscan became predominate. *La Commedia* was written in the Tuscan vernacular, the forbearer of standardized Italian. Italian, a direct offshoot of the Latin of Rome and conveyed to peoples it dominated, is closest to Latin of all Romance languages. In the work’s birth of new literary formation separate from the reigning Latin of the clergy and sophisticatedly educated, one encounters some words the *definition* of which better is obtained not from an Italian dictionary, from their form in Latin. The Divine Comedy was proof of Alighieri’s premise, advanced also in two unfinished treatises, that eloquence in the vernacular could match that of Latin.

---

<sup>1</sup> One finds the form referred to as *hendecasyllabic*, meaning 11 syllables, despite frequently employing one or two more in a line.

The year of Alighieri's birth in Florence, Italy has been estimated *circa* 1265 c.e. and the writing of his epic poem between 1308 and his death in 1321. Very early in my exercise it was apparent how much one needed to know of the history and politics of the then "western" world, and of Italy especially, to appreciate references to persons and events. I wanted to know what Father found so humorous of the apparently fitting sufferings in Purgatory and Hell that Alighieri chose for certain real-life politicians, ecclesiastics, and aristocrats.

I needed, it seemed, to study the history of Rome and Italy. Well (I do allow!), all one needs do to ascertain the enormity of *that* undertaking is to peruse the three volumes of Gibbons. Overwhelmed by the minutiae and quantity of its detail, I turned to other books which seemed conveniently synthesized. Even there, however, one loses track in the progressions of Rome-- from a Republic to Empire; succeeding Caesars and Emperors (often dictated by far-flung legions supporting different vying generals); the split of the Empire into Western *Roman* Empire and Eastern *Roman* Empire that divided medieval Christianity into two Latin branches, with West and East emperors and "patriarchs;" ensuing ecclesiastical disputes among the Church's jurisdictional patriarchates of Alexandria, Antioch, Rome, and Constantinople—all of that *before* the entity that became known as the *Holy* Roman Empire (and to say nothing of monarchical competitions in Italy itself and Saxon, Goth, and Germanic involvements that ultimately would lead to formations of Britain, France, and Germany!).

In a few words, Alighieri's Italy in the later middle Ages was a broil of ethnic, tribal, royal, and individual politics that had been brewing for centuries. To have a bit of an idea of the history leading up to, and of the era in which he lived, the following are random highlights only:<sup>2</sup>

#### c.e. Year

445 Leo I, West Patriarch (the term "Pope" not yet employed), obtained from West Roman Emperor Valentinian III a decree recognizing prelate primacy of the Bishop of Rome, whose rulings were to have the force of ecclesiastical law. Any opposition to his rulings or summons would be considered treasonous, with appropriate sentences. Leo I enforced the stance that the seat of the "Catholic" ((Greek for "Universal") Church was to be "Peter's," *i.e.* Rome.

451, Bishops at a Council of Chalcedon claimed St. Peter spoke through Leo I, recognized him as leader of the Church body, and adopted a "Chalcedonian Creed" that specified Jesus as fully the second person of the "Holy Trinity."

453, Patriarch Leo I (considered by some as founder of the Papacy) confirmed 27 of 28 canons governing church administration; but he did not confirm the 28<sup>th</sup>, by which council bishops sought to make the stature of the Constantinople Bishopric (or *See*) equal to Rome's.

457, Leo I "the Thracian" (different Leo) became East Roman Emperor. Once confirmed by the Roman Senate, this Leo was crowned as the East emperor by the Patriarch of Constantinople, the first time of the practice of an emperor being crowned "with the purple" by a head of the Church.

[We skip here, among many things, the rise of and wars with and of Visigoths and Ostrogoths; Persia's rise, its conquest of Constantinople and annexation of Asia Minor and Egypt; rise of Muhammad, his mastering Arabia and subsequently Byzantine Egypt; Attila the Hun's ascent and descent; civil wars in Britain, Burgundy, and elsewhere; all the interconnected monarchical and territorial rivalries; Moorish Islamic conquests in Iberia (later, Spain); and ecumenical councils seeding separation of Church east and west.]

---

<sup>2</sup> Taken from a lengthier chronology, *History of the Daughters*, linkable at this domain.

768ff., Charles the Great/*Charlemagne* became King of the Franks (numbered Charles I in German and France regnal lists). He would proceed to expand the “Frankish” kingdom into an enlarged “Carolingian Empire” that would incorporate much of western and central Europe (eventually to include most of “France,” “Germany,” and Northern Italy).

812, the East (now called “Byzantine”) Empire recognized Charlemagne as “Emperor of the Romans.”

962, Saxon Otto I (former King of Germany) was crowned Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire; he deposed then Pope John XII.

1054, Roman legates denied east Michael I the title of Ecumenical Patriarch, insisting he recognize Church of Rome as head and other of the churches. Michael I refused; final rupture of medieval Christianity into Eastern (Greek) and Western (Latin) branches, respectively later known as Roman Catholic Church and Eastern Orthodox Church (the “East-West/Great Schism”--papal claim to universal jurisdiction; conflict was heightened by west Pope Leo IX and east Patriarch Michael I respectively suppressing Greek and Latin in their domains).

Byzantine Empire commenced a decline.

1071, Seljuk Turks defeated Byzantine army, leading to Byzantine loss of all of Asia Minor (modern Turkey) save coastlands. (Turks later conquered Jerusalem.)

1073, Pope Gregory VII imposed celibacy upon all priests.

1080, Pope Gregory levied a second excommunication against Henry IV of Germany. Henry invaded Rome, forced Gregory’s retreat, and named Clement III Pope. The rooting of a Roman empire then was permanently damaged, as the Church became an independent player in a political system not subject to imperial authority. (Byzantine Empire’s decline was temporarily halted by east Emperor Alexius I, “Komnenian Restoration.”)

[The Papacy for a period was beset by opposing claimants for the papal throne (“anti-popes”)-- details omitted in this and above timeframe.]

1084, Henry IV of Germany was crowned west Emperor. Henry VI was Pope of Roman Catholic Church. Emperor Henry IV’s tenure would coincide with final phase of popes pitted against emperors and kings (“great Investiture Controversy”).

1095, First Crusade called by Pope Urban II; advent of Orders of Knights Templar and Knights Hospitaller.

1122, European sovereigns’ attempts to autonomously control their respective domains led to the “Concordat of Worms” between Pope Callistus II and west Emperor Henry V, concluding the Investiture Controversy. Henry V yielded to reforms, ending the first phase of power struggles between Papacy and Emperors (which carried the germ of nation-based sovereignty later to be confirmed in the 1648 Peace of Westphalia). By the Concordat a king had the right to invest bishops with secular authority in his own territory (“by the lance”), but not with sacred authority (“by ring and staff”); bishops owed allegiance to both king and pope while popes, above and out of direct control of the Emperor, ended the concept of divine right of kings.

1155, German King Frederick I *Barbarossa* became Holy Roman Emperor and restored order.

1169, Kurdish adventurer Saladin seized power in Egypt and reunited it with Baghdad.

1187, Saladin captured Jerusalem, leading to Third Crusade.

1210, Birth of Roger Bacon (“*A crowd is not company, and faces are but a gallery of pictures, and talk but a tinkling cymbal, where there is no love*”).

1230, an alliance under Castile King Ferdinand III won territory from Islamists, their power in Spain near end.

1244, Egypt Sultan’s occupation of Jerusalem caused Seventh Crusade.

1257, German selection of a new king resulted in a “double election,” two kings over the realm, reflecting political split between “Guelf” and “Ghibelline” persuasions. The former chose

Richard of Cornwall and the latter, Alfonso X of Castile. The Guelf faction supported the Papacy and Holy Roman Emperor in central and northern Italy; the Ghibellines, largely Italian aristocrats, supported German emperors.

1258, Treaty of Paris confirmed surrender of former English possessions in France.

1261, Greek dynasty recaptured Constantinople from Latin emperors in east; papal influence in the East ended

1265, estimated year of birth of Dante Alighieri

1271, Marco Polo began his travels.

1273, Germanic House of Habsburg became ruling dynasty of Holy Roman Empire.

1280, Kublai Khan founded Yuan Dynasty in China.

1294, Boniface VIII was Pope. (1294, Marco Polo returned to Venice.)

1296, France took England's possessions in Frank territory.

1298, Genoese and Venetians naval battle. (Marco Polo, taken prisoner, would write his "Travels" while in captivity.)

1302, *Unum sanctum*, papal "Bull" issued by Pope Boniface VIII, claimed papal supremacy over every human being.

....[I]n the implacable discord of the two factions, the Ghibelins [*sic*] were attached to the emperor while the Guelfs displayed the banner of liberty and the church." Gibbons, page 1712.

"Boniface used the authority which he claimed as pope to establish a temporal dominion in central Italy. The treatment of his political opponents as sinners goes far to explain the bitterness aroused in the minds of his enemies. Italian opposition to Bonifacace emanated from four principal quarters. Nearest home were the members of the great Ghibelline house of Colonna who, like their rivals the Orsini [Ursini], held estates and fortresses...and competed for control of the city of Rome and of the College of Cardinals. Boniface...set himself to destroy the power of Colonna, and to enrich his own relatives at the Orsinis' expense." When Sicilians rebelled, rendering ineffective a treaty of territorial exchanges made by Boniface with Sicily's prior ruler (James of Aragon), Sicily's subjects were added to the list of Boniface enemies. Third was the split of the Guelfs of Florence into the "Whites" and the "Blacks"--Ghibellines having been expelled [and] Boniface allying himself with the Blacks." Header and Waley, pages 53ff.

Alighieri was among members of the Whites exiled from Florence in 1302.

"The Ursini...from Spoleto...soon distinguished by [their bravery and strong towers], and elevation of two popes, Celestin III and Nicholas III...were alienated...by the liberal Celestin; and Nicholas was ambitious...to solicit the alliance of monarchs; to found new kingdoms in Lombardy and Tuscany; and to invest them with the perpetual office of senators of Rome." Gibbons, page 2391.

Dante's "bitter hatred shown in the *Commedia* for Boniface VIII is due in part to Boniface's personal responsibility for Dante's exile. A deeper cause [was] Dante's veneration for the Papacy as the supreme spiritual power, and his conviction that it was degraded and turned from its true purpose by its assumption of temporal prerogatives. The Papacy under Boniface had usurped the function of the empire. 'Rome...used to have two suns, which lighted the roads of the world and of God. Now one has extinguished the other, the sword is joined with the pastoral staff, and the two together must perforce go ill.' (*Purg.* XVI, 106-111)." Header & Waley, pages 55-56.

Here, then, is the result of my 'brief' exercise:

*From "INFERNO" of LA DIVINA COMMEDIA of DANTE ALIGIERI*

Canto I

*Halfway along this journey of our existence, I found myself in a forest of such darkness that the proper direction could not be distinguished.*

*Oh to say all that it was is a difficult thing--that savage forest so dense and overpowering that my fear is renewed in the remembering.*

*Much of it is bitter; death itself, little more; but in order that I may deal with the good I encountered I shall speak of other things there that I saw.*

*I can't recall well how I came upon that entry, so filled with sleepiness was I at that moment when from the true way I was cut off completely.*

*But then I was at the foot of an adjoining hill, where there came an end finally to that valley that struck such fear in my heart I can feel it still.*

*I looked up and beheld that the rays of the sun already were clothing the shoulders of the hill with more light than on any path is led anyone.*

*There departed from me then a little of that fright which, unremittingly filling the lake of my heart, had caused me to pass such a pitiful night.*

*And, in the way that one exhausted and gasping for air, delivered out of danger to the ocean's shore, turns 'round to the perilous waters to stare,*

*Thus my soul also even as it was fleeing did turn and take a last backward look at that pass which never before had let go a living being.*

*Once my tired body had rested temporarily, I again set out upon the forsaken landscape which beneath each footstep now ascended steadily.*

*And lo there came toward me from near the top of the slope a lynx, lithely graceful and exceedingly swift, all covered by a sleek multi-colored coat.*

*And it persisted in circling in front of me then, and impeded me greatly indeed along my way, to which it kept me from returning time and again.*

*It was then the beginning hour of morning time, and the sun was climbing with the very same stars that were joined with it when Creation's love divine*

*first placed into motion all beauties that abide; so I had cause to feel hopeful again by reason of that animal's colorfully spotted hide,*

*the hour of the day, and sweet season of the year-- but not so that I wasn't given to know fear at the sight of a lion that was next to appear.*

*Now this apparition approaching me opposite, carrying its head high and ravenous with hunger, was such the very air seemed to stand still in awe of it.*

*With him, a she-wolf that was hungering so badly in all of her skinniness she seemed but a carcass, already having ended many lives miserably.*

*This one brought the gravest weight to descend on me by virtue of the fear provoked by the looks of her, and I lost the high hope that I had felt previously.*

*Like those who without effort acquire everything but their time having run out are forced to lose it, so all of their thinking is plaintive and sorrowing,*

*So was I made to feel by that relentless beast, which continuing toward me little by little was forcing my retreat to where the sun reached least.*

*As I stumbled to lower ground, losing my balance, before my eyes there manifested a presence that seemed to be weakened from a long time of silence.*

*Upon seeing that presence, from out the desolate misery inside me I was forced to cry out, "Which is it you are? Spectre, or man incarnate?"*

*He replied, "Not man; man I already have been. My mother and father both were Lombardian, and Mantua was the native land of each of them.*

*"Born under Julius, though he was born before I was, I was observer at Rome under good Augustus during the period of false gods and liars.*

*"I was a poet and I sang of the righteous young son of Anchise as he returned from Troy, after haughty Ilium was reduced to ashes."<sup>3</sup>*

*"But you--why are you returning to all that madness..... Why not climb instead that blissfully sweet mountain that is origin and cause of every gladness."*

*"Are you now not that Virgil? The very fountainhead?-- of speech which overflowing becomes a wide river?" I exclaimed somewhat imprudently but with bowed head.*

*"Oh, of other poets of honorable mention, they were worthy of long study and my great love, that was the cause for my seeking your dimension.*

---

<sup>3</sup> Legendarily, Anchise was a prince of Dardania neighboring ancient Troy. Publius Vergilius Maro *Virgil* (70 – 19 b.c.e.). in his classic epic poem, the *Aeneid*, tells the story of how Anchise's son, Aeneas, (said to have been born of the Goddess Aphrodite), carried his father from the burning sack of Troy; how they sailed with survivors of Troy to the west coast of Italy in search of a new homeland; and how Aeneas did battle to found a city that would become Rome.

*"You are my teacher and mentor, the author for me. You are one and one, only---he who gave unto me that beautiful style I respect so deeply.*

*"See that wild beast from which I have turned to flee? Assist me to escape from her, oh famous sage, for she makes me quake in every vein and artery!"*

*"It would be better for you to take another path," he responded, "because I see weeping ahead if you insist on staying in this place of wrath.*

*"For that beast, the reason behind all of your cries, does not permit any person to get beyond her; indeed, impedes them so much as to cause their demise.*

*"And her nature is so evil and bent upon gore that the greed of her appetite never is sated, and after each meal she is hungrier than before.*

*"Many are the animals to which she plights her troth and more yet will there be until the hound finally comes and causes her to die in the pangs of bringing forth."<sup>4</sup>*

*"Those born thereby will feed not on land or precious ores, but shall be nourished by knowledge, love, and virtue; and their nation, from the hills to where Mount Feltro soars,*

*"of that humble Italy that shall be whole once more, for which died the maid Camilla and Enrialo, and Turno and Niso, from the woundings of war."<sup>5</sup>*

*"These newborn shall hunt for her from villa to villa until they have forced her to return into Hell—there, from whence envy originally unleashed her.*

*"Wherefor, for you I think-- and it is my opinion-- you should follow me and with myself as your guide withdraw from here for the eternal region,*

*"wherein you will hear the shriekings of desperation, and you will see the spirits of the ancients mourning all lamentations of Death's second visitation.*

*"And there also you will see those content to endure because from the fire they know, with time, to ascend and be joined together with those blessed and pure.*

*"From that point should you wish to ascend further, there shall be a soul that is more worthy than mine, and to whom at our parting I shall give you over,*

---

<sup>4</sup> Per Ciardi, *hound* "[a]lmost certainly refers to Can Grande della Scala (1290-1329), great Italian leader born in Verona, which lies between the towns of Feltre and Montelfeltro." Page 33.

<sup>5</sup> In Italy, Aeneas successfully territorially battled one Turnus/*Torno*, King of the Rutulians, also winning thereby the hand of Lavinia (daughter of King Latinus), who previously had been promised to Turnus. Niso/*Nisus* and Enrialo/*Euryaluso* "were Trojan comrades-in-arms who died together fighting Rutulians. Camilla was the daughter of the Latian king and [a Volscian] warrior woman; she was killed in a horse charge against the Trojans.... Turnus was killed by Aeneas in a duel." Ciardi, page 32.

*“as the Emperor who reigns over that dominion, for the reason that I rebelled against his laws, does not want to have sight of me in his kingdom.*

*“Of all parts of the empire He rules in all respects, that is His own City and high seat of authority. Oh happy is the one who thereto He elects!”*

*And I, to him, “Poet, once again I do implore, by that God whom you once did not deign to recognize-- in order I may escape present evil and more--*

*“that you lead me to the place of which you were speaking so that I, yes, will see the gate of Saint Peter, and all that you have made to sound so intriguing.”*

*At that he moved off, and I followed my leader....*

## Canto II

*The day was ending in the dusk of the setting sun. All of the souls upon the earth were being released from their toils except for me, alone, one,*

*being held in preparation to sustain the war--yes, of the journey and yes, the expiation—from which thought wished to retreat but could not ignore.*

*Oh Muse, oh higher intellect, now do assist me! Oh Mind that will write to Memory all that I see-- here we shall learn what is your true nobility.*

*I commenced: “Poet, you who are to be my guide, examine my virtue if it be strong enough, before entrusting to me that high divide.*

*“You told about how the parent of Silvius<sup>6</sup> entered into the age of immortality while still incarnate and retaining full consciousness.*

*“But that Foe of all evils was not to him abrupt. Considering the high good Aeneas rendered wherever he was, and upon whom and upon what,*

*“ does not seem unmerited to a man of reason, for he was of the soul of Rome and, of her Empire, father-elect by the celestial empyrean.*

*“The one and the other, the Empire and Rome, in truth were established in the same holy place of each successor to the great Peter’s throne.*

*“For that traversing, to which your verses give vaunt, was to serve the purposes that were occasioned by Rome’s victorious achievements and Papal wont.*

---

<sup>6</sup> Silvius/Sylvius was son of Aeneas. In Book 6 of the *Aeneid*, Aeneas is led by a ‘Sibyl’ to Hades, where he saw Anchise, his dead father, who told him of Rome’s future

*“Then after went the Vessel<sup>7</sup>, of his own volition, to bring back the gift of consolation to that Faith which is the starting point of the way to salvation.*

*“But why has it come to me? Or, who grants me leave? I am not Aeneas; I am not Apostle Paul. I merit not that or other honor, I believe.*

*“However, should I give over to this exercise, I am anxious that what should come may be folly. Being wise, you comprehend what I cannot rationalize.”*

*And like those who lose want for that which they had wished, and the prospects change with every new passing thought, so that before beginning anything they desist--*

*such happened to me on that hill in shadowy dark. Thought ate away at the enterprise it initially had been so immediately ready, to start.*

*“If I understand well what you mean, it is this”-- that ghostly presence replied magnanimously-- “your soul has suffered an attack of cowardice—*

*“that which causes man’s breathing to be fast and shallow, making him to turn away from an honorable deed like a blinded animal bolts from a shadow.*

*“In order that I may make you free of this fright I will tell you why I came and that which was purposed, from my very first feeling of pity for your plight.*

*“I was among those who are in suspended state and a woman called to me, blessed and so lovely that in asking her command I could not hesitate.*

*“Eyes brighter than the star by which the shepherds were led, she began to speak to me sweetly and softly with the sound of an angel in her voice, as she said,*

*“Oh gentle and courteous Mantuan spirit, of whom fame and renown continue still in the world and shall endure for as far as motion takes it,*

*“A friend of mine not highly favored in fortune’s sight is impeded greatly on the deserted slope—yes, where on the pathway he has turned back out of fright.*

*“He already has lost his way I am afraid, and I, too late to be able to raise him, to the plan in Heaven I there heard for him made.*

*“Now, will you go and by the richness that your words hold, and with that expertise of which you are master, assist him so that I thereby shall be consoled...”*

\* \* \*

[Perhaps?—who knows?—life may allow me time for continuing the ‘exercise.’ However, I have lots of material about Dante’s life and era, which if time does allow I wish to add to this....]

---

<sup>7</sup> Saint Paul.

### References

Bury, J. B., Ed., *Edward Gibbon, The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Volume III, New York, NY: The Heritage Press, 1948.

Ciardi, John, *The Inferno*, New York, NY: New American Library of World Literature, Inc./Mentor Books, 1954.

Header, H., Waley, D. P., Editors, *A Short History of Italy*, New York, NY and Melbourne, Australia: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

Lenci, Tosca, *History of the Daughters*, Sonoma, CA: L P Publications, Third Edition 2008, [www.historyofthedaughters.com](http://www.historyofthedaughters.com).

Wells, H. G., *Outline of History*, Vol. II, Medieval History, New York, NY: Triangle Books, 1940-1941 Edition.

[www.wikipedia.org/Aeneas](http://www.wikipedia.org/Aeneas).

[www.wikipedia.org/Dante\\_Inferno](http://www.wikipedia.org/Dante_Inferno).

[www.wikipedia.org/Dante\\_Life of](http://www.wikipedia.org/Dante_Life_of).