
III. The Genius Shapes History

Dante Alighieri and the New Paradigm for Human Culture

by Robert Ingraham

If you can't speak of the future of mankind, you ain't serious—you're just babbling.

—Lyndon LaRouche, April 12, 2017

Preface

June 26—The human species is blessed with a universal identity, a universal species-nature. For more than sixty years, Lyndon LaRouche has defended that unique universality of the human identity against all challengers: the singular *agapic* creative nature of the human mind which is universal for every member of the human race, that quality of profound love and profound creativity which defines mankind's mission in the universe.

On May 14-15, 2017 more than one hundred nations took part in the One Belt One Road Forum in Beijing, China. Among the participants were twenty-eight heads of state, including those of China, Russia, Indonesia, Turkey, Greece, and the Philippines. A close examination of those who participated in Beijing and those now engaged in this noble effort to eliminate the dying vestiges of imperial rule, reveals that among the new allies there exists a kaleidoscope of cultures, histories, religions, and races. Every shade and hue of the human race was represented in Beijing. Language groups representing widely divergent ways of articulating human expression were in dialogue. Many of the nations involved have a long history of past rivalries, jealousies, and hostilities, which for some are not merely memories, but exist as areas of mistrust and conflict down to the present day.

The challenge—in the post-imperial

era—is to redefine the relations among nations, cultures, and peoples throughout the world. Helga Zepp-LaRouche, the chairwoman of the Schiller Institute, has stated the urgent need for a Dialogue of Civilizations. She has already initiated this effort, stressing the beneficial results which might result from an examination of what has been, historically, the best in these cultures, the high points, the renaissances. It is hoped that from such an effort will flow a deeper appreciation of those principles and those beliefs which are common to all, those universal principles which have advanced human civilization in many different parts of the world over millennia.

It is precisely that desire which motivates this current work on Dante Alighieri. There are those—particularly among the Anglo-American elite—who would shatter and fragment the human identity. Under the



Helga Zepp-LaRouche participated in the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation.

Schiller Institute

guise of modern-day existentialist “cultural relativism,” they proclaim that mankind is eternally divided by widely divergent cultures, with different religions, philosophies, and values. In their view, perhaps a syncretism of ethically acceptable “shared values” might allow different nations to “co-exist,” but always within a geometry of divided, competing interests. They propose a perpetual Tower of Babel, in which people and nations become pawns to be profiled and manipulated.

We aim for something far better: a world in which the true nature of our species may flourish and the principle of the human identity, as understood by Dante, shall become the guiding light for future generations.

Introduction

Today, and throughout the 20th Century, everything that Dante Alighieri stood for has been under assault. The academic journals are filled with articles dissecting almost every aspect of his life, his beliefs, and his literary work, but the real Dante will not be found there. A moral indifference permeates these writings, and Jonathan Swift’s Laputans show more sense than some of these characters. The worst aspect to so-called “Dante Studies” is reflected in the deference given to the likes of Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, and other 20th Century existentialists and fascists as to their “authority” on the subject of Dante’s poetic method. It is as if Lucifer were appointed to stand judge over the Divine.

The issue at hand is to grasp the reality of the upward, self-directed evolution of humanity, and to ask the question, “How has this been possible?” This is the relevant subject matter in considering Dante. This gets to the heart of Dante’s examination of the Human Mind. It is not enough to simply stand in awe of his poetic skills. A courageous approach to Dante, of this type, promises great benefits to the work before us today.

For those who have never investigated the writings of Dante, I implore you to take the plunge. Dive into the deep end. From his poetry and his writings on language and the vernacular in *La Vita Nuova* (The New Life) and *De Vulgari Eloquentia* (On Eloquence in the Vernacular), to his poetic and philosophical *Convivio* (The Banquet), to his masterpiece on government and society, *De Monarchia* (On Monarchy), and, ultimately, to his “divine” *Commedia*, Dante made possible everything great that subsequently arose in 15th Century Florence, and it is the monumental repercussions of those breakthroughs in human culture which persist down to the present day.

I will not recommend any specific translation. Dante himself warned, “Nothing that is harmonized by the laws of poetry can be changed from its own language to another without destroying all its sweetness and harmony.” I have studied numerous translations of Dante into English, from the 19th Century efforts of Cayley, Cary, and Longfellow to the spate of more recent translations (Binyon, Sayer, Ciardi, Mandelbaum, the Hollanders, and others). Some have great strengths; all of them have weaknesses. In truth, translating Dante’s Italian poetry and the idea-content of his mind into modern-day English is an impossible task, and the vocation of the translator is most unenviable. Just find one you like and start reading!

One word of warning: Only those who share Dante’s life mission to change the conditions of the world, and to create revolutionary, new potentials within human society for future generations, will understand what he writes. Those who sit on the sidelines, watching passively the decay of the society around them, will understand nothing. Such individuals are only fit to be judged by Dante and put in the appropriate circle of the *Inferno*.

I. Historical Specificity

An egregious flaw in much of modern historiography is to take people and events out of their own time. Although Dante’s is an immortal mind with a universal message, it is impossible to consider what he did and what he wrote, without understanding the era and the realities with which he was confronted.

Dante lived from 1265 to 1321. Although many think this pre-Renaissance period was one of “medieval” ignorance and backwardness, in truth, great progress had been made in the human condition during the 12th and early 13th centuries. The population of Europe rose from 58 million in 1100 to 79 million in 1250—an increase of 36 percent—with a concurrent, rapid increase in urbanization and the emergence of many new towns and cities. A great deal of new technology was brought on line, including the spread of power generation technologies, primarily waterwheels and windmills, and improvements in mining, agriculture, and shipbuilding. A significant factor in these advances was the importation of new inventions and techniques from China, as well as from the Arab world. It was precisely this progress in the human condition, this increased mastery over nature, which made the emergence of



Statue of Dante at Naples.

Dante, Giotto, and others possible.

Nevertheless, Europe was still a fragmented, intensely oligarchical society, and by the middle of the 13th Century, the upward curve of progress had been destroyed. In several of his writings, including the *Commedia*, Dante ties the worsening crisis in Italy to the emergence of a usurious money economy. Dante's particular emphasis was on the introduction of the gold Florin in 1252. It was the Florin that became the accounting currency for the private banking houses of Bardi, Peruzzi, Frescobaldi, and others, who proceeded to loot, bankrupt, and destroy the peoples of Europe in the late 13th and 14th centuries.

Venice, which had emerged as the *primus inter pares* among the Italian city-states following its conquest of Constantinople in 1204, led the way in this orgy of oligarchical looting, and the key destructive dynamic of this period was centered in the alliance of Venice, the Church, and the Norman (*Angevin*) monarchy of England, which ruled half of France. Dante reserves particular vitriol for the involvement of the

Papacy and the Church hierarchy in the degeneracy, destruction, and financial looting he witnessed during his lifetime.

By the time that Dante was first elected to public office in 1295, Italy and most of Europe had become a speculators' paradise, dominated by Venice, the Lombard bankers, and a corrupt and venal Papacy. By 1290 the European population had begun to decline. Agricultural and wool production collapsed, food disappeared in many areas, and many smaller and medium-sized towns were abandoned. It was within this downward spiral that Dante waged his war. The economy and the society of Europe all came crashing down in the horrors of the 14th Century. But then, in the midst of unspeakable human suffering, at what seemed the nadir of human existence, the mind of Dante would resurface, and it would "light the path" for a way forward into a better future.

A Brief Initial Biography

Dante Alighieri came from a family of minor aristocracy. He grew up in the San Piero district of Florence. His mother died when he was ten; when his father died six years later, he came under the guardianship of Brunetto Latini, a Florentine aristocrat, a student of Cicero, and a leader of Florence after he became one of the six ruling Priors of Florence in 1287.

At that time, almost every city in northern Italy was gripped by ongoing warfare between the Guelph and Ghibelline parties. Generally, the Ghibellines were loyal to the Holy Roman Emperor, whose power lay primarily in Germany, and the Guelphs were partisans of the Pope, although in reality, it was the usury-centered Vatican-Venetian-Angevin alliance which defined the Guelph party. In practice, many of these political lines shifted over time and, in some cases, the party names came to have directly opposite meanings.

Warfare between the parties was bloody and went on for decades. In Florence, the Ghibellines were overthrown by the Guelphs in 1267,¹ and this was followed by the final military defeat of the Ghibellines in 1289,² after which the triumphant Guelph Party split into two mutually hostile factions, the [*Bianchi* (Whites) and the *Neri* (Blacks), the latter being the extreme, pro-Papal

1. Following Charles of Anjou's defeat of Manfred, the son of Frederick II Hohenstaufen, in 1266.

2. At the Battle of Campaldino, in which Dante participated as a cavalrman.

party. Dante, whose family was historically associated with the Guelph Party, joined the Whites in his adulthood.

In 1295, the conflict between the White and Black factions worsened, erupting in bloodshed. On November 1, 1301, a foreign army, backed by Pope Boniface and led by Charles of Valois, the son of the French king, occupied Florence. Under Charles' protection, the Blacks seized control of the government and carried out indiscriminate massacres of the Whites for seven days.

By this time Dante was the premier leader of the White Party in Florence and a dominant force in the Florentine government. He had been elected to the ruling Council of One Hundred early in 1295, and then to the more powerful Council of Thirty-Six later that same year. On June 15, 1300, Dante became one of the six ruling Priors. By 1301, he was the most important political leader. Boccaccio says that, by 1301, "nothing was done in Florence without Dante being consulted."

In the fall of 1301, Dante led a diplomatic mission to Rome to meet the Pope. It was a time of great crisis, and Dante knew he was needed in both Florence and Rome. Boccaccio reports him as saying, "If I go, who stays? If I stay, who goes?" When Charles's army occupied Florence and the massacres began, the Pope allowed all of the other members of the delegation to return home, but he ordered Dante alone to remain in Rome. In January 1302, *in absentia*, Dante was officially charged with bribery, trafficking in offices, and other crimes by the Black Guelph authorities. He was fined, banished for two years, and permanently excluded from office. Two months later, the Florentine government condemned Dante to be burnt to death if he re-entered the city or fell into the hands of Florentine authorities.³ Dante never returned to Florence.

II. Shaping Poetic Creativity

In 1283, at the age of seventeen, Dante wrote the poem *A ciascun'alma presa*. It was a modest sonnet, but it brought him to the attention of Guido Cavalcanti, leader of the *dolce stil nuovo* (sweet new style)⁴ poetry movement, a group of *fedeli d'amour* (faithful followers of love). This group of mostly upper-class young

3. The death sentence against Dante was finally rescinded by the Florentine government in 2008.

4. It was Dante, himself, who gave this name to the Florentine group.

men were heavily influenced by the earlier (roughly 1150-1225) efforts of the troubadour movement, a network of poets centered in the *langue d'oc* region of southern France and northern Spain. The troubadours, whose work was dominated by themes of chivalrous love, are noteworthy both for the lyric quality of their poetry (actually songs) and for the fact that almost all of their works were composed in the *Occitan* vernacular of the region.

The second great influence on the Florentine poets was the Sicilian School, which flourished in the mid-13th Century under the sponsorship of Frederick II Hohenstaufen. Frederick's life was a grand effort to dismantle the feudal system of social organization inherited from the Normans, and as he eradicated fiefdoms throughout his realm, his poets developed a new poetic language based on a mixture of local vernaculars with a richness of vocabulary—what is known as a *koiné* language. It was in Sicily that the modern sonnet form was invented and where the *canzone* was developed. The other striking feature of Sicilian poetry is the introduction of a kinder, gentler type of woman than that found in the French model. Dante was greatly influenced by the Sicilian School, and he quotes widely from it in his studies, especially in *De Vulgari Eloquentia*.

For roughly a decade, from 1283 to 1293, Dante honed his poetic skills. He composed many sonnets, a number of which were later incorporated into *La Vita Nuova*. It was also during this time that, according to Boccaccio, Dante engaged in an intensive study of both Boethius and Cicero.

Dante's "mentor" during this period was Guido Cavalcanti, who would later become a prominent leader of the White Guelphs. Dante also singles out both Bonagiunta Orbicciani and Guido Guinizzelli as primary influences on his poetic development. In Canto XXVI of "Purgatorio," in the *Commedia*, Dante describes himself as a disciple of Guinizzelli.⁵

All of this work culminated in the publication in 1293 or 1294 of *La Vita Nuova*.

La Vita Nuova

Although still far removed from the transcendent glory of the *Commedia*, *La Vita Nuova* already pro-

5. Despite Dante's respect for, and acknowledged debt to many of his colleagues of the *Dolce Stil Nuovo*, in his *Commedia* he does not place any of them in the *Paradiso*, although Bonagiunta Orbicciani does manage to make it into the sixth terrace (Gluttony) of the *Purgatorio*.

claimed the opening salvo of a new culture for human society. Dante's subject is Beatrice, with whom he "fell in love" at the age of nine, and the book's underlying story extends over sixteen years until Beatrice's death in 1290. But *La Vita Nuova* is not a tragic romance.⁶ Already, Dante has made a sharp break with the love poetry of the French model. In Dante, love is based on reason, not appetites. Derived from Dante's self-identified "book of memory," *La Vita Nuova* chronicles Dante's struggle for intellectual and moral growth, and this struggle is not merely personal and existential—and certainly not sensual—but rises to higher insights into the culture and human condition of Florence.

What most shocked his contemporaries was that the entire work is composed in the Florentine vernacular. *La Vita Nuova* is a sequence of sonnets interspersed with

6. The reputation of *La Vita Nuova* as a "romantic" work is largely due to the influence of the 19th Century proto-fascist Dante Gabriel Rossetti.

prose.⁷ The lyrics of the troubadours and the works of the Sicilian School all represented what one might call court poetry, written for a very limited, elite audience, but Dante's purpose was not to titillate or amuse an aristocratic class. At that time it was unheard of that a serious author would compose *prose* in the vernacular. In essence, in *La Vita Nuova*, Dante has already announced his intention, not simply to write beautiful poems, but to develop a new language for the advancement of human culture, for the unleashing of hitherto dormant cognitive and creative potential. His work was intended for everyone.

III. The Vernacular

Dante authored two works that explicitly, and in depth, take up the issue of the vernacular, *De Vulgari Eloquentia* and *Convivio*. Boccaccio dates the writing of *De Vulgari Eloquentia* to 1318, but there is compel-

7. *La Vita Nuova* is the only work by Dante in which most of the poetry is in sonnet form and written in iambic pentameter.

Ripples through Time

The power of the human soul reaches out over centuries. In the case of Alessandro Manzoni and his masterpiece *I Promessi Sposi* (The Betrothed), that striving for human salvation burst forth once again. Considered the greatest novel in the Italian language, *I Promessi Sposi* was first published in 1827. But Manzoni was not happy with the final outcome, and he rewrote it in the Florentine dialect of Dante, publishing a new version in 1842 to universal acclaim. As Manzoni said in one of his final letters, his novel did not reach its full potential until it had undergone a "rinsing in the Arno."

The protagonists of the story are the betrothed couple Lucia and Renzo, and it is set in and around Milan at the time of the great plague of 1630, when Italy was being ravaged by foreign troops and famine. Manzoni, himself, lived at a time of great crisis, of the *Risorgimento* and the struggle of Italy to free itself from foreign oppression. Manzoni's story of the two lovers is really the story of Italy, and his

theme of *agapic* redemption reverberated throughout the nation.

Giuseppe Verdi stood in awe of Manzoni. In 1867, he wrote that *I Promessi Sposi* was "one of the greatest [books] to emerge from the human mind" and "not only a book, but a consolation for humanity." After his first meeting with Manzoni, Verdi wrote to a friend, "I would have gone down on my knees before him if we were allowed to worship men. They say it is wrong to do so, and it may be, although we raise up on altars many that have neither the talent nor the virtue of Manzoni and indeed are perfect scoundrels." On the first anniversary of Manzoni's death Verdi premiered his *Requiem*, a work which became known at that time as "Manzoni's Requiem."

Manzoni championed the Florentine vernacular throughout his lifetime, leading an eventually successful fight for the adoption of Dante's vernacular as the national language of the unified Italian nation. He stated that Dante was striving "to create a form worthy of representing the national idea," and in 1868 he published a famous letter on the subject of *De Vulgari Eloquentia*.

ling historical evidence to show that at least the first of that work's two books was written earlier, 1303-1304, while Dante was in Verona. The *Convivio* was probably written between 1305 and 1307.

De Vulgari Eloquentia is diabolical. It is the only one of his major works that he wrote in Latin; yet the entire argument of the work is to prove not only the worth but the superiority of the vernacular over Latin as a means of poetic, scientific, and philosophical expression. Dante insisted on the necessity to invent, and expand the power of, a new language. He fiercely defended this idea throughout his life.

For example, between 1319 and 1321, toward the end of Dante's life, there was a concerted effort by Giovanni del Virgilio—an associate of the prominent Paduan scholar and champion of classical Latin, Albertino Mussato—to induce Dante to abandon the vernacular as “unworthy” of his literary talents. Del Virgilio offered Dante the prospect of being named the poet laureate of Bologna if he would rewrite *Inferno* from the “lowly” vernacular into Latin, saying, “recast the great poem in Latin and the laurel may be yours.” In response, Dante sent him ten cantos of the “Paradiso” in Italian, upon which he was then working, stating that with the completion of the “Paradiso,” he hoped instead to receive the laureate crown in Florence.

Dante was under constant, almost universal, attack for his use of the vernacular, but he never wavered. He returned to the subject again and again: Major sections of the *Vita Nuova*, the *Convivio*, the *Commedia* are given over to this purpose, not to mention the entirety of *De Vulgari Eloquentia*. In the *Commedia*, where Dante has Virgil recite a poem in Latin, Dante responds in Italian, and the disappearance of Virgil prior to the entrance into Paradise—where only the vernacular is uttered—drives the point home.

In exploring and expanding the many potentials of the vernacular, particularly in the *Convivio*, Dante uses this discussion of language to examine his own creative process. He transforms the vernacular into a vehicle for intellectual thought—science and poetry. In so doing, he creates the modern Italian language, and he improves, expands, and tests the limits of that language. He offers an invitation and a means whereby every Italian might be uplifted and have access to the higher, more subtle powers of mind.

De Vulgari Eloquentia is a rigorous, and vigorous, defense of the vernacular and is, essentially, a system-



“Paradiso,” Canto XXXI. Illustration from the series by Gustave Doré.

atic argument for what the basis for that language must be. He examines the three regional dialects of *oc* (southern France, Catalonia), *oïl* (northern France) and *si* (Italy); then he turns to the specifics of fourteen different Italian dialects. He argues for a single *volgare* which should include all the best features of each dialect, but he settles on the Florentine version of Tuscan as the basis from which the national language must develop. This is precisely what happened in the years following Dante's death, as the *Commedia* became the basis for a new Italian language culture.

In declaring his faith and his love for the vernacular in the *Convivio*, Dante writes:

“This shall be the new light, the new Sun, which shall rise when the worn-out one shall set, and shall give light to them who are in shadow and in darkness because of the old Sun, which does not enlighten them.”

The *Convivio*

The *Convivio* is divided into four books, the first of which is given over to an advanced argument in favor of the vernacular. Each of the remaining books is introduced by a long beautiful *canzone*. Book Two begins with the *canzone*, “*Voi che intendendo il terzo ciel movete*” (You who move the third heaven with an act of

the intellect) and Book Three begins with, “*Amor che ne la mente mi ragiona*” (Love, who speaks to me within my mind). It must be remembered that *canzoni* are songs, and the original *canzoni* of the troubadours and trouvères were sung.

In speaking of the vernacular in Book One, Dante says,

Now perfect generosity may be noted in three characteristics of the vernacular which would not have been consequential in the use of Latin. The first is that of giving to many people; the second is that of giving things of use; the third is that of giving without being asked.

To give to and assist one person is good, but perfect goodness is to give to and assist many in that this resembles the beneficence of God, who is the universal benefactor.

Latin would have failed to meet all of the three conditions mentioned above, all of which must be met for a gift to display complete generosity . . .

and,

I say that innate love moves the lover to do three things above all: firstly to enhance the beloved object; secondly to be solicitous on its behalf; and thirdly to defend it, which happens continually as anyone can observe. These three motives made me adopt the vernacular, which I love and have loved both innately and contingently.

and,

All these groups taken together [i.e., those who oppose the vernacular] comprise the vile Italian wretches who despise this rich vernacular, which, if it is base in any way, is base only insofar as it issues from the meretricious lips of these adulterers, by whom the blind are led.

Books Two and Three both begin with long poems (songs) which are addressed to *Lady Philosophy*, and these poems are both followed by lengthy prose sections, wherein Dante examines the workings of his own mind, his own sense of identity, the nature of the universe—and throughout all of it, he is testing the limits of, expanding the subtleties of, and developing the power of his new language. His discussion of the language and lyrics within each of the *canzoni* is crucial to this.

To grasp a sense of this, consider the following excerpt from Chapter 15 of Book Two:

From the analogies discussed above, it is obvious who those movers are whom I address: They are the movers of that heaven, such as Boethius and Cicero, who guided me by the sweetness of their discourse along the path of love, that is in pursuit of the most gentle lady Philosophy, with the rays of their star, that is their writings of her; because the written word is in every science a star filled with light that reveals that science. Understanding this, we can then perceive the true meaning of the first stanza of the *canzone* before us, by way of the literal meaning. By means of that exposition, the second stanza may also be adequately addressed, as far as: One that makes me look upon a lady.

Let us observe here that this lady is Philosophy, truly a lady full of sweetness, adorned with honor, marvelous in wisdom, glorious in freedom, as will be shown in the third book, which will treat of her nobility. And when I say: Who wishes to see bliss, let his eyes on this lady gaze, then this lady’s eyes are her proofs by reason, which directed into the eyes of the intellect, enamour the soul freed from confusion. Oh sweet and ineffable look, captivating the human mind, that appears in the eyes of Philosophy when she speaks with her lovers! Truly salvation lies in you, so that he who gazes on you is blessed and saved from the deathliness of vice and ignorance.

and, from Chapter 3, Book Three:

Then, since this highest nature is called mind, as explained above, I say in the *canzone* that: “Love speaks within my mind,” to make it clear that it is the love that springs from the noblest nature of truth and virtue, and to counter any false opinion regarding myself that my love was aimed at sensual delight . . .

Such is the first ineffable aspect of what I take for them in the *canzone*; and then I speak of the other when I say: “Love’s speech.” I say that my thought, that is Love’s word, sounds in me so sweetly that my soul, that is my affection, is on fire to speak it with my tongue; and because I cannot, I write that the soul therefore laments,

saying: “Alas, that I lack power.” This is the second ineffable aspect of my theme: that is, that the tongue cannot reproduce completely what the intellect perceives. And I also say: “My soul which feels and hears him”; that is hears the words, and feels the sweetness of the sound.

Book Four of the *Convivio*⁸ is given over to a discussion of true human nobility—as opposed to the “nobility” of the hereditary oligarchical aristocracy. Dante attacks the question of what defines a truly noble character; he defines that nobility as a process of increasing perfection within the human individual. Again, the book is introduced by a beautiful *canzone*: “*Le dolci rime d’amor*” (Those sweet poems of love).

The *Convivio* is a prodigious, challenging work. I could say much more, but will leave it to the initiative of the reader to pursue its wonders further. In the *Convivio*, Dante is teaching people how to read; he is teaching people how to think; he is teaching a new language; and he is creating a new audience for a new civilization. He is inviting *you* to the *Banquet*, and it is your decision whether to participate or not.

IV. War with the Oligarchy

After his banishment from Florence, Dante devoted himself for the next three years, from 1301 to 1304, to creating and then leading a new alliance between the White Guelphs and the Ghibellines. He traveled from city to city, with no permanent residence, except for an extended stay in Verona. He recruited, he advised, and he organized. This initiative came to a conclusion on July 19, 1304, when a Ghibelline-White military force, intent on recapturing Florence, suffered a disastrous defeat at La Lastra, outside the city walls of Florence.

Following this, Dante met with leaders of the Whites, on July 30 in Arezzo, advised them on a future course of action, and then left. He spent the next year traveling alone. He had become “a party unto [him] self.”

He traveled to Bologna, then to Treviso, and finally to Padua, where he remained for some time, meeting

8. Dante intended a work of fifteen books, with fourteen *canzone*, but the *Convivio* was incomplete at the time of his death.

Giotto, conversing with him for several months, and studying his frescos at the Scrovegni Chapel.

During this time, a new Pope was elected, Clement V. Clement would prove a far deadlier opponent than Boniface, and it was Clement, in alliance with the French King Philip IV, who moved the Papacy to Avignon in 1305, where it remained for seventy-three years.⁹

Between 1306 and 1309 Dante was in Lucca, Lunigiana, Casentino, and then back in Lucca. It was during this time that he wrote the *Convivio* and possibly began work on the “Inferno.”¹⁰ In the *Convivio* Dante describes the circumstances of his life at that time, “I have gone about as a beggar, showing against my will the wound of fortune. . . . Verily I have been a ship without sails and without rudder, driven to various harbors and shores by the parching wind which blows from pinching poverty.”

Henry VII

On January 6, 1309, Henry of Luxembourg is crowned as Holy Roman Emperor at Aachen. He immediately announces his intention to reassert traditional and legal authority over the cities of northern Italy. In November 1310, Henry’s army enters Turin.

Dante rushes to his side and travels with the army from Turin to Asti, and then to Vercelli and Milan. He begins writing a series of open letters (*Epistole*) rallying support for Henry’s cause. The first of these, directed to the leaders of Florence, “*Ecce nune tempus acceptabile*,” declares the moral responsibility of Florence to submit to the Emperor. When Florence refuses, Dante writes a second *Epistola* denouncing them.

On January 6, 1311, Henry enters Milan, where he is crowned King of Italy. Dante attends the coronation and meets Henry. For the next two years, Henry’s cause becomes Dante’s cause. In March and April, he

9. Dante places all of these—Boniface, Clement, and Philip—in the *Inferno*, and the very last words which Dante has Beatrice speak in the “Paradiso” are a fierce denunciation of Clement. Avignon, in southern France, was within the hereditary realm of the House of Anjou, and Clement, who was not Italian, was born and raised in Aquitaine.

10. The dating of the *Commedia* is a matter of controversy. Some claim that Dante began writing the “Inferno” as early as 1304. Others strongly disagree. What is known with certainty is that copies of both the “Inferno” and the “Purgatorio” were circulating by 1314-1315. It is also established that Dante had begun writing the “Paradiso” by 1316, and that it was completed in late 1320 or early 1321.

writes two *Epistole* urging Henry to take Florence by force and to seize “the most wicked Florentines within.” He also condemns Clement V for both simony and political treachery. In December, Henry issues a proclamation placing Florence under the ban of the Holy Roman Empire, and declaring the Florentine exiles—including Dante—under his special protection.

Henry’s army proceeds to Brescia, Genoa, and Vicenza. By April of 1312, Henry is at Pisa, with Dante by his side. Henry then directs his army toward Rome. After fierce fighting, his army enters the City on May 7, 1312. At this point, King Robert of Naples, the brother of Charles of Anjou, enters the war against the Emperor. For his service to the Papal cause, Robert would later be named a Senator of Rome, and Vicar General of all Italy, and it was Robert’s army which fought Henry’s forces throughout 1312 and 1313.¹¹

In September of 1312, Henry’s army attacks Florence and quickly defeats the defending army, forcing it back within the walls of the city. After a six week siege and a series of attacks on the defenses, Henry recognizes that he does not have a sufficient force to take the city by force, and withdraws. He subdues the rest of Tuscany and occupies Lucca. At this point, he prepares for a full assault on Naples. He begins building a fleet for a naval attack, and his army moves south. His first target is Siena, to which he lays siege. But it is here, in the midst of the siege, that Henry dies, of malaria, on August 24, 1313.¹²

11. In addition to ruling the Kingdom of Naples, the Angevin Robert was also the Sovereign of the so-called Kingdom of Arles, within which Avignon—and the residence of Pope Clement—was located.

12. Dante places Henry in the “Paradiso” (Canto XXX). Since the *Commedia* is set in the year 1300, when Henry was still alive, Dante creates an *alto Arrigo* to hold the place of honor for Henry, of whom Dante says, “He who came to reform Italy before she was ready for it.”

A Beacon that Refuses to be Extinguished

With the sudden death of Henry, the imperial cause disintegrated in Italy, and Henry’s armies disbanded or returned to northern Europe. Of Dante’s fate, little is known for the next two years. As one biographer states, during this time, “his steps are lost in darkness.” All hope of his returning to Florence had vanished. It is known that he lived, briefly, in Lucca, under the protection of the Ghibelline leader Ugucione della Faggiuola. There are also indications that he was working on the “Purgatorio” during this time.

By this time Dante was seen—by both enemies and friends—as the beacon of resistance against the Angevin monstrosity. The mere mention of his name evoked terror and self-befoulment among the oligarchical elite. In November of 1315, the Angevin vicar in Tuscany, Baldo d’Aguglione, condemned Dante and his sons to death by beheading, and when a sweeping general amnesty was declared in Florence, in 1316, for all of the White Guelph and Ghibelline opponents of the Angevin regime, Dante, alone, was excluded.

Among his friends and allies, Dante was viewed as the spokesman for *all* of Italy. Many had supported the campaigns of Emperor Henry, but it was Dante who was their voice. And it was not a pragmatic voice, but one imbued

with the vision of *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, the *Convivio*, his *Epistole*, and the opening cantos of his *Commedia*, which were by then beginning to circulate. Dante was defining a higher-ordered future for all of Italy, nay, for all of humanity. And this was recognized by many.

In 1315 Dante was invited to Verona by the great Ghibelline leader, Cangrande della Scala. He would reside there for three years. It was during his time in Verona that Dante wrote *De Monarchia* and began work on the “Paradiso.”

Cangrande was a great and remarkable individual, named by Henry VII as “Vicar to the Emperor.” As a



Dante Alighieri, in fresco by Andrea del Castagno, kept in the Uffizi in Florence.

general, he led his troops into battle numerous times for more than thirty years. He was, as well, a fervent sponsor of the arts and learning.¹³ The years 1315-1318 witnessed numerous military victories of the Ghibelline leaders Cangrande and Ugucione della Faggiuola against the forces of Robert of Anjou, and while they had no hope of overthrowing the Angevin power, they nevertheless succeeded in maintaining and expanding the Ghibelline strongholds.



Cangrande della Scala

Statue of Cangrande in Verona.



Dante's attitude toward Cangrande was explicit. Not only does he say of him in the "Paradiso," "even his enemies would be unable to keep silent about him," but in 1316 he issued his *Epistola* No. 13, dedicating the entire "Paradiso" to Cangrande.

By September 1316, all hope for a reform and purification of the Church were dashed with the election of a new Pope, John XXII. A Frenchman from Cahors, John would keep the Papal See at Avignon, and it was during his lengthy reign that the Papacy became massively involved in the financial and economic looting of Europe and the city of Avignon became a center of trans-Alpine banking. In "Inferno" Canto XI, Dante places John XXII's own home city of Cahors alongside Sodom and declares them synonymous with sin.

De Monarchia

Ignorant commentators often define *De Monarchia* as a simple defense of imperial rule over the cities and provinces of Italy, or even as a paean to the glorious heritage of the Roman Empire. It is far, far more than that. Dante defines his purpose very clearly in his introduction:

All men on whom the Higher Nature has stamped the love of truth should especially concern themselves in laboring for posterity, in order that

13. It was also during his time in Verona that Dante renewed his acquaintance with Giotto, who was brought to the city by Cangrande to create a series of frescos.

future generations may be enriched by their efforts, as they themselves were made rich by the efforts of generations past. For that man who is imbued with public teachings, but cares not to contribute something to the public good, is far in arrears of his duty, let him be assured; he is, indeed, not "a tree planted by the rivers of water that bringeth forth his fruit in his season," but rather a destructive whirlpool, always engulfing, and never giving back what it has devoured. Often meditating with myself upon these things, lest I should some day be found guilty of the charge of the buried talent, I desire for the public weal, not only to burgeon, but to bear fruit, and to establish truths unattempted by others.

He drives the point home with the title of Chapter II: "To What End Does Government Exist Among All Men?"

It is impossible here to explore in depth the full richness of *Monarchia*, and once again the only course of action available to the reader is to plunge into it for one's self. There is no substitute for reading this work in its entirety. Cliff's Notes will not do.

Much is made by dilettantes of Dante's adherence to the imperial cause against the alleged—but actually non-existent—"republican" nature of the Italian city-states, as well as to Dante's lengthy and positive discussion of the character of imperial Rome, but the deeper issues raised by Dante are often missed. What he is

posing is the question of universal principles which must govern the functioning of human society and become the basis for the individual human identity.

In Chapter II, he states:

As every truth which is not a first principle is manifested by the truth of some first principle, it is necessary in every investigation to know the first principle to which we may return, in analysis, for the proof of all propositions which are subsequently assumed. And as the present treatise is an investigation, we must before all else search out a basic principle, on the validity of which will depend whatever follows.

Since the matter under consideration is governmental, nay, is the very source and first principle of right governments, and since everything governmental is subject to our control, it is clear that our present theme is primarily adapted for action rather than for speculation.

So if there exists an end for universal government among men, that end will be the basic principle through which all things to be proved hereafter may be demonstrated satisfactorily. But to believe that there is an end for this government and for that government, and that there is no single end common to all, would indeed be irrational.

And he says in Chapter IV:

It has thus been sufficiently set forth that the proper work of the human race, taken as a whole, is to set in action the whole capacity of that understanding which is capable of development: first in the way of speculation, and then, by its extension, in the way of action.

Throughout the entirety of the work there are repeated references to the Roman Republic and to the “sacred example” of Cincinnatus,¹⁴ and it becomes very clear that Dante’s true subject is the moral basis for a citizenry, not the specific form of government. There is

14. The example of Cincinnatus is featured again, two centuries later, in Machiavelli’s *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livius*. Machiavelli was an avid student of Dante, and borrowings from the *Commedia* are found in his letters and a number of his works. The influence of Dante’s lyrics is also very apparent in Machiavelli’s neglected but beautiful poetry.

an extensive investigation into the subject of Free Will, wherein Dante states that animals do not possess free will because they are governed by appetites, but man is free to develop his goodness, his intellectual powers, and the society within which he lives—that, in this manner alone, is man truly free. In Chapter XII, he says:

It is therefore again manifest that this liberty, or this principle of all our liberty, is the greatest gift bestowed by God on mankind: by it alone we gain happiness as men: by it alone we gain happiness elsewhere as gods. But if this is so, who will say that humankind is not in its best state, when it can most use this principle?

Thus Dante is posing not merely the *form* of society or the mechanics of government, but the question of the *nature* of human identity required for the advancement of the human species.

This question of the universal divine nature of the human identity, which permeates both the *minimum* of the human individual and the *maximum* of society as a whole, is raised explicitly in Book Three of the *Monarchia*, “Whether the Authority of the Roman Monarch Derives from God Immediately or From Some Vicar of God.” On the surface, the subject is the centuries old conflict between the Pope and the Emperor and the assertion by the Guelph Party that the Emperor is subservient to the Pope. Dante, obviously, opposes that claim, but he takes his argument to a far more profound level.

Under the existing order of things in Dante’s time, kings, princes, lords, and doges were able to impose whatever arbitrary authority they chose, and their whims were *de facto* law, so long as the Pope did not intervene. Dante argues that all civilian authority must flow from a natural, inherent relationship with Divine Law, one to be found in the imperishable nature of the human soul. Rulers were not bound or controlled by the dictates of Popes; neither were they free to do as they chose. Only a government which is faithful to a true mission for the development of the citizenry is legitimate.

De Monarchia was a declaration of war—a flanking attack on the highest epistemological level—against the Angevin-Papal-Usury power, and Dante’s enemies reacted accordingly with denunciations and threats. It was written in 1317 or 1318, at the same time that Dante had begun work on the “Paradiso.” That reality alone suffices to demolish all notions that, after the death of Henry VII, Dante “abandoned” politics and turned

more fully to theological pursuits. Shortly after Dante's death, a Dominican monk from Rimini, Fra Guido Vernani, published *De Reprobatione Monarchie Composita a Dante*, declaring Dante's works as a danger to the Faith and denouncing *De Monarchia* as a book of cruel and pestilent poison. In 1329 the Guelph leaders of Bologna publicly burned all of the copies of *De Monarchia* that they were able to locate and seize.

Final Journey

In late 1317, Dante left Verona and once again became a "man without a city," traveling in the Romagna. As Boccaccio puts it, Dante "departed to Romagna, where his last day, that was to put an end to all his toils, awaited him." Most of the region's cities were Black Guelph strongholds. Bologna was fiercely loyal to Robert of Anjou, as were Forli, Rimini, Fano, and Cesena. Ferrara, which had been occupied by French troops, was liberated by the Marquis d'Este in 1317, amidst horrendous bloodshed, and the cities of Faenza and Imola were the scenes of ongoing warfare and widespread death as the Papal and Imperial parties struggled for supremacy.

Nothing is known of Dante's movements in those months as he traversed the treacherous landscape, but he was finally rescued from this danger in January 1318, when he received an invitation from the ruler of Ravenna, Guido Novello da Polenta, to take refuge in his city. He was joined there by three of his children. As Boccaccio reports:

When it came to his [de Polenta's] ears, that Dante, beyond all expectation, was now in Romagna and in such desperate plight, he, who had long time before known his worth by fame, resolved to receive him and do him honor. Nor did he wait to be requested by him to do this, but considering with how great shame men of worth request such favors, with liberal mind and with free proffers, he approached him, requesting from Dante of special grace that which he knew Dante must needs have begged of him, to wit, that it might please him to abide with him.

From Ravenna issued forth the glory of the "Paradiso." As he completed individual cantos, Dante sent



At the court of Guido Novello.

them to Cangrande della Scala at Verona, perhaps the most precious gifts in all of human history that one friend has sent to another. Boccaccio writes that Dante held della Scala "in reverence above all other men," and that della Scala, "when he had seen them, he copied them for whoso desired them." Thus, do the names Guido Novello da Polenta and Cangrande della Scala shine forth, to this day, as beacons of what earthly leaders can aspire to be, in making the realization of the "Paradiso" possible.

In the summer of 1321 the Venetian Empire prepared a war of annihilation against Ravenna, with the intention of exterminating the family of Guido Novello and annexing Ravenna to Venetian territory. The Doge of Venice, Giovanni Soranzo, entered into an alliance with Forli, and preparations were made for a military offensive. At the request of Guido Novello da Polenta, Dante accepted a mission to lead a delegation to Venice for the purpose of negotiating a peace agreement. The Venetian authorities refused to meet with Dante, despite repeated attempts. During his stay in Venice, Dante became seriously ill, and when he requested sea passage back to Ravenna, he was refused. Together with his party, the feverish Dante was forced to return to Ravenna via an arduous land route. He arrived in Ravenna on September 12, 1321, and after two days of worsening sickness, he died. He was buried, in Ravenna, at the church of San Pier Maggiore, where he remains, rightly, to this day.

Over the centuries, the rulers of Florence have made repeated attempts to “take back” the one they had once persecuted and rejected. In 1519 the Medici Pope Leo X ordered that Dante’s bones be transferred from Ravenna to Florence, but the papal order was refused. Instead, an empty coffin was sent back, and the Franciscan monks who had charge of Dante’s remains removed them from the tomb, and buried them secretly in the Franciscan monastery in Siena. In 1810, the same order of monks moved the bones once again to hide the remains of Dante from the armed forces of Napoleon Bonaparte. Finally, in 1865 Dante’s remains were returned to San Pier Maggiore (now the Basilica of Saint Francis) and a small tomb was built to hold them.

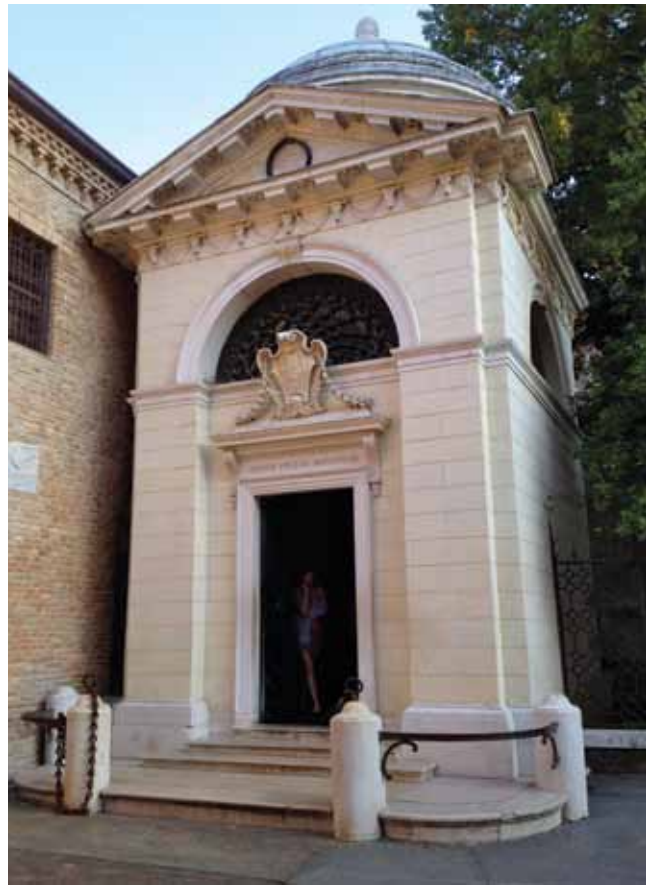
In 1829 the city of Florence erected an ornate tomb for Dante in the Basilica of Santa Croce. The inscription on the tomb reads, “Honor the most exalted poet,” but unfortunately for Florence, the tomb stands empty to this day. Dante is not there. The judgement on Florence is best given by Boccaccio:

In place of reward, he suffered an unjust and hasty sentence, perpetual banishment, the alienation of his family estate, and, if that could have been accomplished, the staining of his glorious fame by false accusations. To this the fresh traces of his flight, his bones buried in another country, his children scattered in others’ houses, still in part bear witness. If all the other iniquities of Florence could be concealed from the all-seeing eyes of God, would not this alone suffice to draw down upon her His wrath? Yea, verily.

V. Victory

References to Dante, quotations from Dante, and the soul of Dante all flow through the works of Giovanni Boccaccio, as the singular idea is inseparable from the whole. His earliest letters reveal the influence of Dante, and his first major work written at the age of twenty-three, *Filocolo*, shows the influence of the *Vita Nuova*. In *Amorosa Visione* he calls Dante the “lord of all knowledge,”¹⁵ and his musical *ballate* in the *Decam-*

15. The poem *Amorosa Visione*, directly modeled on the *Commedia*, contains 50 Cantos in *terza rima*. In the poem, both Dante and Giotto are celebrated, by name, as standing above all other artists, ancient or modern.



Tomb of Dante Alighieri in Ravenna.

eron are modeled on the lyrics of Dante.

Boccaccio knew intimately Dante’s nephew Andrea Poggi, and it was from him that Boccaccio received much information about Dante. He knew, as well, Dino Perini, a close friend of Dante, and during his two visits to Ravenna, in 1346 and 1353, he met and conversed both with Dante’s daughter, Antonia (who later became a nun, taking the name Sister Beatrice), and Piero Giardino, one of Dante’s most devoted friends. It was from these sources, as well as others, that Boccaccio would publish, in 1357, his *Vita di Dante* (Life of Dante), also known as *Trattatello in Laude di Dante* (Little Tractate in Praise of Dante).¹⁶

In August 1373, Boccaccio received a commission from the Priors of the Guilds and the Standard-Bearer of Justice to give a year of public lectures on Dante’s *Commedia*. The lectures began on Sunday, October 23, in the church of Santo Stefano in Badia, Florence. These were *daily* lectures, totaling about one hundred

16. Available [here](#).

and lasting for almost four months, until Boccaccio was forced to withdraw due to illness. In attendance were many who were then working on the construction of the Duomo, so as work proceeded on the Cathedral, the mind of Dante was there to guide them.

With Boccaccio, Dante's lifelong mission on behalf of the *illustrious vernacular* triumphed. It is true that in 15th Century Italy, many "Renaissance scholars" attempted to force a return to classical Latin as the only "accepted" medium for transmitting philosophical and literary ideas, but a product of human creativity, once recognized and socialized, can never be eradicated. This is the true secret of the relationship between Boccaccio and Petrarch. Often, the elder Petrarch is described as the polished mentor to the younger, less erudite Boccaccio, but in reality, the relationship was vice versa. It was Boccaccio, who for decades, battled unyieldingly with the classical Latinist Petrarch on the subject of the vernacular, and there are many letters still extant to attest to this. It was Boccaccio who represented the future.

Geoffrey Chaucer made several visits to Italy, including one in 1372, one year prior to Boccaccio's lectures at Santo Stefano. Chaucer called Dante "the grete poete of Itaille." He expressed great admiration for the *Commedia* to friends, and he attempted to use Dante's rhyming verse stanza form, the *terza rima*, in a number of locations. But it was to Boccaccio that Chaucer owed the greatest debt. "The Knight's Tale" from the *Canterbury Tales* is derived directly from Boccaccio's epic poem *Teseide*, and Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato* is the source for Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, as is Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*. Many other works by Chaucer show the influence of the *Decameron*.

After Chaucer returned from his first Italian trip, there was a great change in his writing: a new boldness and richness—an expansion of the vocabulary, the invention of new words, and a stretching of the potential



Giovanni Boccaccio

of the language. He also began to experiment more with meter, rhyme, and the poetic structure.¹⁷ There is a new confidence. This is all seen in *The Canterbury Tales*. A modern language is being created. From Chaucer, the ultimate development of the poetic beauty and power of the English language would then only await the arrival of William Shakespeare.

The Renaissance Begins

Following Dante's death in 1321, at a time when the death penalty was still in effect against him in Florence, and following the publication of the *Commedia*, where many Popes, Black Guelphs, usurers, and Angevin leaders were condemned by name to the torments of the *Inferno*, it was not Boccaccio who first rose in Florence to proclaim Dante's greatness. That honor belongs to Giotto di Bondone. In

1337, during the last year of life, Giotto painted his final work, a fresco of Biblical scenes. It is located in the Podestà Chapel of the Palazzo del Bargello, Florence, and in it, Giotto depicts Dante, dressed in red, very prominently among those in Paradise. Giotto thereby conferred a kind of informal sainthood on Dante, less than 20 years after his death.

Giotto and Dante had conversed and worked together in Padua in 1305 and later renewed their acquaintance in Verona. Dante acknowledged the greatness of his living contemporary in "Purgatorio," Canto XI, when he has one of the characters say, "Cimabue believed that he held the field / In painting, and now Giotto has the cry, / So the fame of the former is obscure."

Anyone who has grappled with Dante, and who at the same time has studied the paintings of Giotto, is struck—as if by a thunderbolt—with the singularity of vision with which both men are imbued. Even the artistic illiterate, upon first viewing a Giotto fresco and com-

17. For example, his Rhyme Royal, a seven-line poetic structure in iambic pentameter.



A detail of Giotto's Bargello fresco. Dante is in the center in red cape.

Giotto di Bondone

paring it with the earlier Byzantine ikons, is often heard to say, "the people are so much more lifelike in Giotto." Yes, they are lifelike, and yes there is the use of perspective, but there is also an introspection, a deepness of character, a cognitive "soul" within the depicted individual that jumps out at the viewer. Giotto was saying something about the human identity, the human condition, and his efforts are coherent with Dante's fight for the vernacular, and with what Dante discloses in the *Commedia*.

In the final years of his life, Giotto became very close to the young Boccaccio.

Il Duomo

Il Duomo di Firenze—the Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore, in Florence—was begun in 1296. Originally intended to be built in the Gothic style, work on the Cathedral proceeded slowly, in fits and starts, for more than thirty years. Then, in 1331, the *Arte della Lana*, the guild of wool merchants, took over patronage of the cathedral construction. In 1334 they appointed Giotto to oversee the work. Giotto was to die in 1337, and during those three years, his major accomplishment was the building of the *campanile* (bell tower), which was com-

pleted after his death with a few significant changes in his design. His associate, Andrea Pisano, continued the work, but then all construction was halted due to the Black Death in 1348.

In 1348, between 75,000 and 100,000 residents of Florence died, perhaps as much as three-quarters of the city's population. No modern audience can even begin to appreciate the horror, fear, and mass psychosis of such a social breakdown. Alessandro Manzoni's rendering of the 1630 plague in Milan is terrifying, yet the 17th Century plague was limited in its effect when compared with the events of Boccaccio's time. Mass graves, thousands of unburied bodies, the disintegration of families, the surrender to hysteria—all of this became reality.

I cannot provide here an in-depth account of the economic policies of the 14th Century, but it must be stated, that the onset of the plague that swept Europe came at the end-point of a century of economic looting, largely carried out by the military, financial, and church forces to be found among Dante's enemies. The generally ignored, paramount role of Venice, the policies of the Black Guelph banking houses of Florence and the Lombard cities, the avarice of the Avignon papacy, and



Basilica di Santa Maria del Fiore in Florence.

the lust for hereditary power on the part of the extended Angevin and Norman ruling families—all of these had combined to loot Europe and impoverish the populations in the decades leading up to 1348.

Many are familiar with the banking crash of 1345 that wiped out the Bardi, Peruzzi, and other banking houses. But that bursting of the *Trecento* financial bubble was itself the end-product of years of vicious economic thievery. For decades, caught in a web of usury and debt collection, Europe had been stripped of its agriculture and industry. The population was declining as early as the 1290s, food disappeared, famine and starvation spread throughout the continent, and whole cities and towns were depopulated: All of this prior to the arrival of the plague. By 1349 the devastation was complete.

One of the very first acts taken by the government of Florence, in 1351, as the population began to fight its way

back from the horror of the plague, was to restart construction on the Cathedral. Work resumed under the direction of Francesco Talenti, who enlarged its structure by redesigning the apses and prolonging the nave, making the church the largest ever built in Europe. Completion of Giotto's bell tower was put under the direction of Neri di Fioravanti and Taddeo Gaddi, and it was finished in eight years. Gaddi was Giotto's godson and, according to Giorgio Vasari, he was considered Giotto's most talented pupil.

During these years, it was Boccaccio who held aloft the guidon of Dante as the salvation for Florence. The *Decameron* was completed in 1353, a

work wherein Boccaccio, in his own way, held the noses of Florentines to the odors of their deadly follies. In 1357 his *Life of Dante* was published. In 1359 he began an extended

fight with the unresponsive Petrarch on the subject of the *Commedia*, a work that Petrarch disparaged. The year 1373 witnessed his daily lectures on the *Commedia*, and in that same year the government of Florence established a Chair for the promotion of the study of Dante at the University of Florence. Boccaccio was named its first occupant.

In 1367 occurred "one of the first events of the Italian Renaissance," as some have described it. A competition was held for architectural designs to move forward with the construction of the Florence Cathedral. The design that was accepted, a model by Neri di Fioravanti, was shocking and revolutionary. It abolished the original Gothic design of the Cathedral and eliminated all of the flying buttresses. Neri's model depicted a massive inner



creative commons/Thermos

Giotto's bell tower at the Basilica di Santa Maria del Fiore in Florence.



Fresco by Domenico di Michelino in the Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore, showing Dante illuminating Florence with his *Commedia*.

dome, enclosed in a thinner outer shell, partly supported by the inner dome. Much as Dante had relegated Latin to the dead past, so Neri, in abandoning the Gothic style, announced the birth of a new era.

Neri's dome was to stand on an unbuttressed octagonal drum, and it would be the highest in the world. Neri's model was one of sweeping magnificence and beauty, but the most stunning aspect to it was that there was no known way to construct the dome he proposed. It simply could not be done; existing knowledge would not suffice. This was the great challenge, the Great Project, which was presented to the people of Florence, and it would take a *willful* breakthrough to a higher and more perfect understanding of the universe to overcome it. Thus the courage and the genius of Filippo Brunelleschi.¹⁸

18. Brunelleschi began work on the dome in 1420. He did not read

In 1456, twenty years after the completion of Brunelleschi's dome, the workers of Santa Maria del Fiore—those who had built the dome—demanded that the finished Cathedral include the presence of Dante. Domenico di Michelino was commissioned for the work, and his fresco, *La Commedia Illumina Firenze* (The *Commedia* Illuminates Florence), is on the west wall of the Cathedral. The image of Dante towers over the scene, but in the background are Brunelleschi's dome, Giotto's *campanile*, the baptistery (where Dante was baptized), and the Bargello, the location of Giotto's 1337 fresco of Dante in Paradise.

Anyone who studies Michelino's fresco closely will see immediately that this is not an image of Florence "honoring" Dante. Rather, we see Dante, facing Flor-

Latin; all of the designs and instructions for work on the dome were written in Dante's illustrious vernacular.

ence, displaying his *Commedia* and directing the attention of the City, through the motion of his right hand, to the display of Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise. It is not subtle. The *Commedia* is the pathway to Florence's salvation.

Out of the Blue

It is of course true that no creative personality stands alone. Shakespeare would not have been possible without Chaucer, nor Kepler without Cusa, nor Beethoven without Bach. Yet, true creativity is always something new, something which no one has ever conceived of or imagined before—new insights into the nature of the universe and mankind's role in that universe. In that regard, an idea intervenes that it would be a lawful action to abolish, once and for all, the use of the term "Renaissance." A literal English translation of the French word *renaissance* is "re-birth" or "revival," and the common understanding of the events of the 14th and 15th centuries is that European society was reborn through a rediscovery of the great literature and philosophy of the ancient Greek and Roman world.

The appellation "Renaissance" was first used by Jules Michelet in his 1856 *History of France*, and then became widely accepted after the publication of Jacob Burckhardt's *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, in 1860.

But look at the *Commedia*, look at Dante's *invention* of the Italian language "for the greater good." Nothing like this had existed before. No work in the ancient world, not even Homer's epics, compares with Dante's miracle of the *Commedia*. Look at Brunelleschi's dome, a work of true, creative science: Nothing like it exists amidst the marvels of ancient Greece, and Rome's Pantheon is crude and barbaric when compared to its magnificence. Brunelleschi and Dante unlocked previously hidden secrets and unleashed powers within the human species that were utterly new and revolutionary.

Dante insisted that Latin, the language of the educated class, and the language in which Augustine, Aquinas, and Cicero wrote, must be superseded by a language with greater power and potential. I believe it is no accident that in the *Commedia*, Virgil—at the apex of Latin literature—is not allowed to enter *Paradiso*, for Dante is posing an entirely new future to his audience.

I do not propose here a new substitute for the word "Renaissance," but it is clear that the acceptance of that term, and all of its implied meanings, obfuscates, perhaps deliberately, the nature of the new revolutionary discoveries which were accomplished during that era—

creative interventions that made possible new potentials for an increase in the productivity of the human species, an increase in man's realization of his true nature and his relation with the cosmos—potentials that had no prior existence.

It was not the "revival" of "ancient learning" which spurred the achievements of Dante, Giotto, and those who followed them; it was the urgent necessity to "create something new" if European society and culture were to survive the crisis of their time and to "break through" to a higher level of civilization. One might say that this creative power arises "out of thin air." Better to say that it dwells, usually dormant, within the recesses of each individual human soul.

None of this is said to denigrate what followed in the 15th Century, but not all of what followed was good. Many individuals, including Salutati, Nelli, Bracciolini, Bruni, and Chrysoloras were critical in the rediscovery and propagation of the works of Plato. Yet, the pernicious influence of classical Latin as the accepted medium for the elite remained, and the resurgence of oligarchical influence resulted in the follies of Ficino and particularly Pico della Mirandola. By the time of Nicholas of Cusa's great intervention and his own discoveries in science, the torchlight of Dante, Boccaccio, and Brunelleschi was already beginning to dim, so it would be left to Cusa to create anew, yet unknown breakthroughs for humanity.

It was the *Commedia* which created the means whereby Florence arose from the ashes. To read it today, even in a paltry English translation and out of time from its original intended audience, is still an experience of profound moral introspection and one of almost unbearable intellectual confrontation.

VI. The *Commedia*

To approach writing about Dante's *Commedia* fills this writer with dreadful trepidation. Obviously, a didactic approach will not do. It is also impossible to "answer all of the questions" or provide a definitive analysis. The best that may be done is to emulate Dante, and as he attempted to *approach* perfection in *Paradiso*, so we shall attempt to approach Dante here.

To aid in this effort, we shall employ a "ringer" and bring in the help of a friendly voice. In 1984 Lyndon LaRouche wrote "The Science of the Human Mind," within which there is a subsection, "Dante's



Dante addressing Pope Nicholas III in Malebolge, the eighth circle of Hell.

Commedia.”¹⁹ We quote here excerpts from what LaRouche wrote:

It is well-established, that the levels of development possible for the human individual fall among three general categories, as those three categories are described by the three successive canticles of Dante Alighieri’s *Commedia*: “Inferno,” “Purgatory,” and “Paradise.” The first is infantile man, the irrationalistic hedonist, whose philosophical world outlook is that of David Hume, Adam Smith, Jeremy Bentham, and John Stuart Mill, among others. The second is of the philosophical world outlook best typified by Immanuel Kant, the Kant of his *Critique of Practical Reason*. To identify the third, preliminary discussion is required.

The fact of our individual mortality ought

19. ‘Dante’s Commedia,’ in “The Science of the Human Mind,” by Lyndon LaRouche, *The Campaigner*, Special Supplement, February 1984.

to impress each of us, at some point in our pre-adolescent or adolescent development, that those hedonistic pleasures whose memory exists chiefly in the experience of our own flesh, die in our grave with us. To live a life serving the pursuit of such individual pleasure is to die as a beast dies, leaving nothing after us better in principle than what is bequeathed to us by the beast who died yesterday in the slaughter-house. The survivors consume the remains, and after that, there is nothing of importance in the matter of society. The beginning of wisdom is to reflect upon this lesson, that we not waste our brief lives living and dying like mere beasts.

To accomplish this, we must find a means to make our having once lived of durable advantage to both our contemporaries and our society’s posterity in general. We must make some contribution to the advancement of the human condition. We must develop our potentialities accordingly. This broad, preliminary answer poses a second question, a deeper question: How can we have foreknowledge of what will be of such advantage to mankind? . . .

The case of the individual in “Purgatory” helps to instruct us, that to realize the higher self-interest in the Good, it is not sufficient to be able to recognize the Good descriptively, or even to be inspired by the desire to achieve what he describes as Good. We must become Good; we must be governed in impulses respecting our immediately personal self-interest by that Good. That Good must become our immediate self-interest, our immediate motivation in every aspect of personal life.

To achieve that congruence of personal, self-interested impulses and service of the Good, is the condition of “Paradise.” . . .

Reason itself cannot define sanity. Without the motive to submit one’s will to Reason, the individual’s will will be submitted more or less fully to the bestial ordering of impulses of wretches of the “Inferno”—or, perhaps, of “Purgatory.” Without a love for Reason more powerful than the infantile hedonism to which one is born, Reason will not be attained.

In that sense, Reason and the love of Reason, and corresponding hostility toward existentialist irrationalism, are the essential characteristics of

the sane adult mind. Any deviation from that standard, that “norm” if one insists, is psychopathology. The science of the human mind is a study of the methods by which that indicated psycho-pathology is overcome. . . .

This ennobled state of the majority of citizens is characterized, relative to “Purgatory,” by a shift of the sense of personal identity, and personal self-interest within society; to the individual’s true self-interest as a world-historical personality, a personality whose immediate motive of self-interest is the development and exercise of the powers to contribute a durable Good to his or her society over succeeding generations to come. It is that shift of the cathexis of sense of personal identity and self-interest within the personality, which defines “Paradise.”

The Light of Reason

With those words by LaRouche to guide us—but before we turn to the heart of the matter—a few things

should be said about the language and imagery of the *Commedia*.

The language of the *Commedia* is extraordinary. Dante abandons completely his earlier use of the sonnet form as well as that of the beautiful *canzoni* of the *Convivio*. He is not writing lyric poetry here. For the *Commedia*, Dante invents “out of the blue” an entire, new poetic language. He creates the *terza rima* rhyme scheme of aba-bcb-cdc . . . , thus the last word of the second line within each tercet becomes the basis for rhyming the first and third lines of the next tercet. Each line has eleven syllables (thus it is called hendecasyllabic), but there is no set meter (such as iambic pentameter). The rhythm, the inner dynamic, and the force of Dante’s language in the *Commedia* is strikingly different from his earlier poetry.

Throughout the one hundred cantos, the *terza rima* propels the reader forward. It is relentless. The absence of meter allows a freedom in expression, as action or contemplation is slowed or speeded up, or the mood is shifted—but never allowed to rest. One might say that

Shelley on Dante

Dante understood the secret things of love even more than Petrarch. His *Vita Nuova* is an inexhaustible fountain of purity of sentiment and language: it is the idealized history of that period, and those intervals of his life which were dedicated to love. His apotheosis of Beatrice in Paradise, and the gradations of his own love and her loveliness—by which as by steps he feigns himself to have ascended to the throne of the Supreme Cause—is the most glorious imagination of modern poetry. The acutest critics have justly reversed the judgement of the vulgar, and the order of the great acts of the ‘Divine Drama,’ in the measure of the admiration which they accord to Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise. The latter is a perpetual hymn of everlasting love. Love, which found a worthy poet in Plato alone of all the ancients, has been celebrated by a chorus of the greatest writers of the renovated world; and the music has penetrated the caverns of society, and its echoes still drown the dissonance of arms and superstition.

Dante was the first awakener of entranced Europe; he created a language, in itself music and persuasion, out of a chaos of inharmonious barbarisms. He was the congregator of those great spirits who presided over the resurrection of learning; the Lucifer of that starry flock which in the Thirteenth Century shone forth from republican Italy, as from a heaven, into the darkness of the benighted world. His very words are instinct with spirit; each is as a spark, a burning atom of inextinguishable thought; and many yet lie covered in the ashes of their birth, and pregnant with a lightning which has yet found no conductor. All high poetry is infinite; it is as the first acorn, which contained all oaks potentially. Veil after veil may be undrawn, and the inmost naked beauty of the meaning never exposed. A great poem is a fountain for ever overflowing with the waters of wisdom and delight; and after one person and one age has exhausted all its divine effluence which their peculiar relations enable them to share, another and yet another succeeds, and new relations are ever developed, the source of an unforeseen and an unconceived delight.

A Defence of Poetry
—Percy Bysshe Shelley, 1821

Dante uses all of the vocal registers, low to high, and all of the moods, from the ridiculous to the sublime. At times the language is almost violent, at other times it is excruciatingly tragic, or contemplative, and as Dante begins to ascend through the increasingly brilliant vision of Paradise, his language takes on a beauty that is unequaled.

Light is one of Dante's paramount metaphors in the *Commedia*: *luce* (light), *raggio* (radiance), *splendore* (splendor). Hell is governed by darkness, which deepens as Dante descends. It is dismal, barren, hideous. This is not the "fiery pit" of legend; Lucifer's lair is black, icy, evil. In Purgatory the darkness begins to lift as Dante moves through shadows. As he ascends the mountain, the shadows clear in the light of the Sun. Gradually, the domination of the senses which characterized Hell—where Dante weeps, faints, and must be steadied by Virgil—fades away. He is freeing his will from bestial senses, which culminates in the clarity of the earthly paradise.

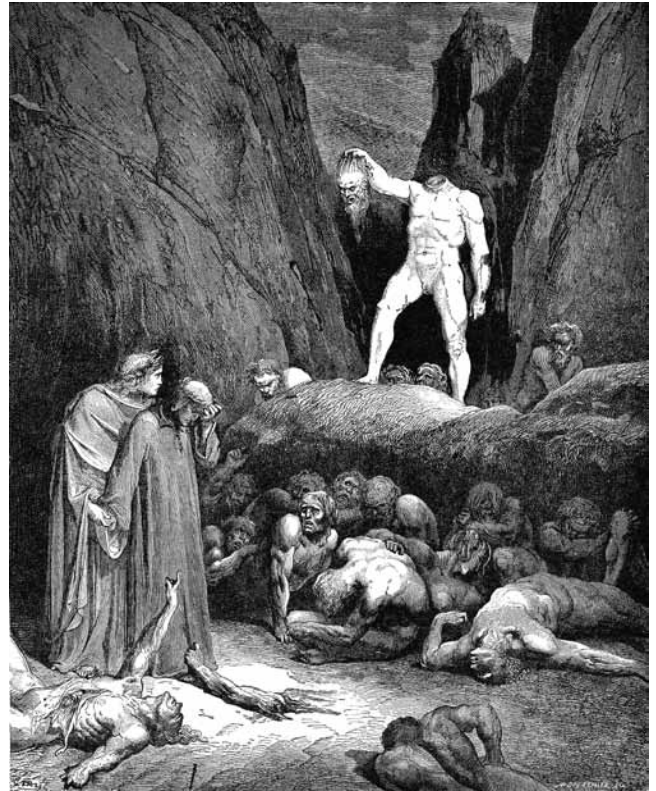
This is not simply sunlight. It is not sensual, visual light. It is heavenly light, the *prime mover*, which is propelling him upward.

The realms of light begin to change as Dante moves upward through Paradise, and with each change, his inner and outer vision, his intellect, his power of reason, grow, as he absorbs the true nature of the universe. He travels to a state "beyond metaphor, but one to which all metaphor aspires." In the *Paradiso*, Dante's mind is fully purified and enlarged to conceive of the inner truth of creation—"moving from one mind to a 'higher' mind." His will, once feeble at the beginning of his journey, is now in unity with his intellect, and both are enveloped within an all-encompassing love. Our ability to create depends on our willingness (our *will*, driven by love) to enter the Kingdom of Heaven: the separation of the will from the senses and the joining of the will to the divine creative process.

Dante's Journey

The *Commedia* is set in the year 1300, when Dante was 34 years old. As anyone with even scant knowledge of the *Commedia* knows, it begins with Dante at a moment of great crisis, a moment—as Dante says—when "the straight way was lost." He knows not how he got there: He is confused and distressed, and his heart is "pierced with fear."

It is at this moment that Virgil arrives, sent by Beatrice, to lead him on a journey. It begins with the entry into Hell—*Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'intrate* ("Abandon all hope, ye who enter here"), and Dante's senses are immediately assaulted by anguished screams.



Dante and Virgil see Bertran de Born, holding his severed head, in Malebolge.

This first arena is the place for the Uncommitted, those who, in life, took no sides.²⁰

From there, Dante and Virgil descend through the nine circles of Hell. Suffice it to say that this is the realm of bestial sense-perception—of the senses. It is the fitting home—as LaRouche emphasizes—of Adam Smith, whose theory of economics, now hegemonic in the trans-Atlantic world—is based on the animalistic "pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain." It is the home for all those who have closed themselves off from their *agapic* inner potential.

For the entirety of his sojourn through Hell, Dante himself is frequently overcome—anguished. He is profoundly affected by what he sees and experiences. This is not compassion; it is a product of the anchor of sense-

20. Franklin Roosevelt referenced this punishment in his speech to the 1936 Democratic Convention, when he said, "Governments can err, presidents do make mistakes, but the immortal Dante tells us that Divine justice weighs the sins of the cold-blooded and the sins of the warm-hearted on different scales. Better the occasional faults of a government that lives in a spirit of charity than the consistent omissions of a government frozen in the ice of its own indifference." Both Robert and John Kennedy also frequently cited this lesson on moral indifference, and Martin Luther King featured it in his 1967 sermon at the Ebenezer Baptist Church, "Why I Am Opposed to the War in Vietnam."

perception which still occupies Dante's soul.

As they descend, Dante and Virgil pass through the circles of Lust, Gluttony, Greed, and Wrath, all in Upper Hell. In Canto IX they enter the *City of Dis* which contains Lower Hell, inhabited by the Heretics and the Violent. As they descend, the punishments become worse, because the inhabitants are further and further away from God. In Canto XVIII they enter *Malebolge*, the Eighth Circle, given over to those guilty of Fraud. This circle is subdivided into ten rings (*Bolgia*), and here the punishments inflicted are terrifying.²¹

Corrupt politicians are immersed in a lake of boiling pitch, guarded by demons called the Malebranche who tear them to pieces with their claws if they catch them above the surface of the pitch. The Falsifiers are afflicted with horrible diseases and lie screaming in stench, thirst, filth, and darkness. Some lie prostrate while others run through the pit, tearing others to pieces. The Sowers of Discord are hacked and mutilated for all eternity by a large demon wielding a bloody sword.

The final descent is to the Ninth Circle, the icy lake of *Cocytus*, where the Treacherous are punished. In the very center of Hell, condemned for committing the ultimate sin—personal treachery against God—is Lucifer. Lucifer is not the “ruler” of Hell; he is a giant, terrifying beast trapped waist-deep in the ice, fixed and suffering. His punishment is most extreme because he is the worst sinner.

Redemption

*Now I shall sing the second kingdom,
there where the soul of man is cleansed,
made worthy to ascend to Heaven.*

At about 6:00 p.m. on Saturday evening, Virgil and Dante make their escape from Hell, passing through the center of the universe and of gravity, and emerging into the Southern Hemisphere at dawn of Easter Sunday. They are now at Mount Purgatory.

In *Purgatorio* Dante begins a process of ascending from the corporeal to the spiritual. This is not a discussion of an “afterlife”; it is one of atonement, moving from a state of misery to bliss. One of the characteristics of this new dimension is Dante's frequent discussion of astronomy, the visible stars, and the position of the Sun.²²

21. Dante places three Popes in Malebolge, and five Popes in all are in the *Inferno*, together with many of Dante's enemies, all of whom are representative of the evil oligarchical paradigm that Dante battled.

22. There are many references and discussions in the *Commedia* on astronomy, optics, language, geography, and other aspects of science. In



Dante and Beatrice (left), in “Paradiso,” Canto III.

Dante's eyes are being drawn upward.²³

This is the arena of atonement, purification, redemption, but one where the self is still being drawn in two directions, and where the union of the will with the Good is imperfect.

As Lyndon LaRouche stated in the work cited above, “The case of the individual in ‘Purgatory,’ helps to instruct us, that to realize the higher self-interest in the Good, it is not sufficient to be able to recognize the Good descriptively, or even to be inspired by the desire to achieve what he describes as Good. We must become Good.”

In Purgatory Dante hears the canzone, *Amor che ne la mente mi ragiona*, as well as the hymns *Salve Regina*

his in-depth description of Italian geography, as well as in his depiction of characters from every region—having them speak in their own dialects—he is, in fact, “creating” Italy. Dante also gives the circumference of the Earth as 20,400 miles (the actual circumference is 24,901 miles), which has led some scholars to posit that this was based on his study of the works of Ahmad ibn Muhammad ibn Kathir al-Farghani, the Arab astronomer of the Ninth Century.

23. The ability of Dante's message to survive in even the unlikely of places is remarkable. It is almost unknown today that the first European feature-length film ever produced, and the first international film “blockbuster,” was a silent adaptation of Dante's *Inferno*. Titled *L'Inferno*, it was released in 1911, four years prior to D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*. All of the intertitles used in the film are verbatim selections of cantos from Dante's *Inferno* in the original Florentine vernacular (in the United States, the intertitles were from the Cary translation). The sets and scenery were created using the illustrations of Gustave Doré. The film grossed more than \$2 million in the United States alone.

and *Te Lucis ante Terminum*, and there is much of beauty in the surroundings. Nevertheless, Purgatory is a place of struggle: The angel who stands guard at Peter's Gate uses two keys, silver (remorse) and gold (reconciliation), to open the gate, and both are necessary for redemption.

In Purgatory are to be found those guilty of Late-Repentance, Pride, Envy, Wrath, Sloth, Avarice, Gluttony, and Lust. Many of these are transgressions which are also condemned in Hell, but the difference here is one of intention. Those in Purgatory committed their sins through differing aspects of perverted, imperfect love. The punishments of Purgatory—though not of the nature of the Inferno—are severe: the Envious wear penitential grey cloaks, and their eyes are sewn shut with iron wire; the Wrathful walk in acrid smoke; the Gluttonous are starved in the presence of trees whose fruit is forever out of reach.

All of those in Purgatory may leave voluntarily—willfully—but only when they have corrected the flaw within themselves, when they have moved beyond the lure and trap of sense perception. Thus, the process of self-perfection is willful.

Traveling through Purgatory, Dante and Virgil are constantly moving upward, and with that ascent, the air clears, the light is brighter, and Dante's intellect is less clouded. Shortly before sunset, they reach the final terrace, just below the Earthly Paradise. As the Sun sets, they lie down to sleep.

In the Earthly Paradise, in a very dramatic scene, Dante is reunited with Beatrice, and then he is drawn through two rivers—the River Lethe, which erases the memory of past sin, and the River Eunoë, from which he drinks, restoring his memories of goodness and preparing him for the ascent to Heaven. This is no longer the Beatrice of the *Vita Nuova*. Neither the romantic nor sensual love of Dante's adolescence is present. Neither is this the abstract Lady Philosophy of the *Convivio*. In one sense, we might say that Beatrice has been redeemed, and her person has risen to a state of Divine Goodness.

Paradise²⁴

*The glory of Him who moves all things
pervades the universe and shines*

24. All quotations from the *Paradiso* are taken from the English translation done by Robert and Jean Hollander, and are freely available on the website of the [Princeton Dante Project](http://www.princeton.edu/~princdante/). Dante's original Italian is also available on the Princeton site.

in one part more and in another less.

*I was in that heaven which receives
more of His light. He who comes down from there
can neither know nor tell what he has seen,*

*for, drawing near to its desire,
so deeply is our intellect immersed
that memory cannot follow after it.*

*Nevertheless, as much of the holy kingdom
as I could store as treasure in my mind
shall now become the subject of my song.*

Beatrice leads Dante through the Ring of Fire, which separates Purgatory from Paradise. Paradise is depicted as a series of concentric spheres surrounding the Earth, defined by the Moon, Mercury, Venus, the Sun, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, the Fixed Stars, the *Primum Mobile*, and finally, the *Empyrean*.

Dante's intention, his language and imagery throughout *Paradiso*, is so magnificent and so dense, that, at this point, I find it impossible to convey, in prose, Dante's idea. At the risk of "ruining the ending" for those who have not yet read the *Commedia*, the remainder of this section will consist largely of Dante's own words, or rather, an English translation of them.

Note that in the very first sphere, the author Dante devotes one and one-half cantos to a dialogue between himself and Beatrice on the subject of the Freedom of the Will. This is an extensive discussion, and Dante takes a series of words, including *volontà*, *voglia*, *voler*, *invoglia*, and *volontade*, and examines their shades of meaning. The subject is the will's direction of human love to divine ends, and that this is the natural condition of Paradise. Dante says:

*"The greatest gift that God in His largesse
gave to creation, the most attuned
to His goodness and that He accounts most dear,*

*"was the freedom of the will:
all creatures possessed of intellect,
all of them and they alone, were and are so endowed."*

The entirety of *Paradiso* is an examination of self-perfection. Ever-ascending, ever-rising, being drawn closer and closer to the Prime Mover of all things universal. Dante and Beatrice move through the circles of the Wise, the Warriors of the Faith, and the Just Rulers. Although Dante does not state this explicitly, it is very clear that almost all of the individuals they encounter

had, themselves, to pass through Purgatory and willfully embrace a process of self-perfection, and Dante presents this as a challenge to the reader. In Canto X he says:

*Stay on your bench now, reader,
thinking of the joy you have but tasted,
if, well before you tire, you would be happy.*

*I have set your table. From here on feed yourself,
for my attention now resides
in that matter of which I have become the scribe.*

*It is Beatrice who leads from good
to better so suddenly that her action
has no measurement in time.*

*Whatever I saw within the sun, how shining
it must have been, for, when I entered,
it revealed itself, not by color, but by light.*

*Were I to call on genius, skill, and practice,
I could not ever tell how this might be imagined.
Enough if one believes and longs to see it.*

*And if the powers of our imagination
are too earthbound for such height, it is no wonder,
for eye has never seen light brighter than the sun.*

And in Canto XIV, Dante makes it very clear whence the motive for such willful improvement derives:

*“Just as long as the festival of Paradise
shall last, that is how long our love
shall dress us in this radiance.*

*“Its brightness answers to our ardor,
the ardor to our vision, and that is given
in greater measure of grace than we deserve.*

*“so that the light, granted to us freely
by the Highest Good, shall increase,
the light that makes us fit to see Him.*

*“From that light, vision must increase,
and love increase what vision kindles,
and radiance increase, which comes from love.”*

In Canto XXII they enter the Fixed Stars, where Dante is tested on Faith, Hope, and Love by Saints Peter, James, and John, and through the mouth of Peter, Dante delivers his most withering attack on the corruption, simony, and bribery rampant within the upper echelons of the Church.

From the Fixed Stars, Beatrice and Dante next enter the *Primum Mobile* (the “first moved”). As they enter, Beatrice says:



Dante and Beatrice in the Primum Mobile.

*“The nature of the universe, which holds
the center still and moves all else around it,
starts here as from its boundary line.*

*“This heaven has no other where
but in the mind of God, in which is kindled
the love that turns it and the power it pours down.*

*“Light and love enclose it in a circle,
as it contains the others. Of that girding
He that girds it is the sole Intelligence.*

*“Its motion is not measured by another’s,
but from it all the rest receive their measures,
even as does ten from its half and from its fifth.*

*“How time should have its roots in a single flower pot
and its foliage in all the others
may now become quite clear to you.”*

And then, as they are departing from the *Primum Mobile*, Beatrice says,

*With the voice and bearing of a guide
who has discharged his duty, she began: “We have
issued
from the largest body to the Heaven of pure light,*

*“light intellectual, full of love,
love of true good, full of joy,
joy that surpasses every sweetness.*

*“Here you shall see both soldieries of Paradise,
one of them in just such form
as you shall see it at the final judgment.”*

*Like sudden lightning that confounds
the faculty of sight, depriving eyes
of taking in the clearest objects,*

*thus did a living light shine all around me,
leaving me so swathed in the veil of its effulgence
that I saw nothing else.*

Finally, in the *Empyrean*, Dante is able to gaze directly upon God. Dante’s writing, and his description of what he sees, is so overwhelming and so beautiful that I must restrain an almost overpowering desire to print it here, but that would be unforgivable. Every human being must read this for himself or herself. Every person must be given the opportunity to traverse the path that Dante walked, and each individual must make his or her own way to the *Empyrean*.

VII. The Dawn of an Era

We live today in a trans-Atlantic culture that is filled with rage. The problem we face is not simply one of hedonism or pessimistic existentialism. Among the women, the men, and individuals of every generation there is deep rage at what has been denied them, what has been lost, the humanity which has been erased. People everywhere are yearning for something better. This is why the lesson of Dante is so critical—to give back to people the hope they have lost, the sense of what it means to be truly human.

We are at the cusp of two divergent paths. One direction leads to a future of war, chaos, and economic collapse. The second is best exemplified by the brilliant initiatives emanating from the Belt and Road idea. The partnership that is developing among a growing number of nations for economic development—and for a New Paradigm—is now the hope for all humanity. Within this framework, as stated at the beginning of this article, many have encouraged a “dialogue of civilizations” to further the process of worldwide peace and economic development. This is where the writings and the mind of Dante are so indispensable.

There are two aspects to this. The first is that a dialogue of civilizations must be based on what is best in those civilizations. This, in turn, requires that people in Asia, Africa, and elsewhere—as well as within the trans-Atlantic community itself—must learn what the true Western Culture is. It is not what most people think. They have been lied to! It has been hidden from them.

In 1763 the British Empire emerged as the dominant force on this planet, and it has ruled the world ever since, joined after 1945 by its now-corrupted American partners. As the saying goes, “It is the victors who write the history books,” and over the last two and a half centuries it has been the representatives of that empire who have not only written the political histories, but who have imposed the values, culture, and so-called science of their own imperial worldview.

Adam Smith, David Hume, Jeremy Bentham, and John Stuart Mill all express that degenerate worldview, and all will eternally inhabit Dante’s *Inferno*. The same is true for Bertrand Russell, John Dewey, John Von Neumann, and filth such as Nietzsche and Richard Wagner. These have nothing to do with Western Culture, except as an oozing, puss-encrusted corrupt disease upon it. They are representatives of the anti-human world outlook of Empire. They are enemies of the upward progress of humanity.

The wonders that flowed from Florence, the creation of the American Republic, and the creativity of Beethoven all flow from the view of the nature of man as recognized by Dante. Cusa, Kepler, Leibniz, Einstein, Hamilton, Lincoln, Schiller, Shakespeare, Mozart, Schubert, and Shelley—these and others exist in what Lyndon LaRouche has called the *Simultaneity of Eternity*. The sanctity of man’s identity and the willful upward perfectability of mankind’s role in the universe: This is the true Western cultural tradition, and no one should ever be allowed to misrepresent or hijack it.

In one very specific sense, at the highest level, there are no distinct, “separate” civilizations, and this is where Dante enters in again. What Dante puts forth, in the *Commedia*, is the universal nature of every human being ever born, anywhere in the world. No truly great civilization has ever arisen, no profound culture has ever been promulgated, which did not have, at its heart, the view of humanity and human potential expressed by Dante. Ultimately, we are not so different after all.

Dante fought for human redemption. He saw the “light behind the light.” So should we all.