

mate, indeed, was he with the works of St. Thomas that he looked upon him as a companion and well-known friend, and styles him as would a Brother of St. Dominic's community—"Il buon fra Tomaso"—Good Brother Thomas.

Dante and the Bible

He would seem to have memorised the Sacred Scriptures, both Old and New, in the Latin, as appears from the numerous texts he quotes and from the Scripture material he handles and weaves into verse. He goes much further than this—this child of the ignorant and obscure ages—he solemnly recommends the reading of the Bible to his contemporaries and places it in juxtaposition with the teaching of the Church through her chief pastor, the Sovereign Pontiff of Rome:

*Avete il vecchio e il Nuovo Testamento
E il pastor della Chiesa che vi guida
Questo vi basti a vostro salvamento.*

You have the Old and the New Testament,
The Shepherd of the Church, too, for your guide.
These to preserve you ample means present.

And yet, ladies and gentlemen, we are told in all seriousness that the Bible was a banned and unknown book till it was fortuitously discovered by an apostate monk in the 16th century hidden away in a German library. But while Dante imbibed the inspiration of his poems in no small part from Christianity, from the teaching of the Church, the Fathers and Sacred Scripture, he did not overlook or neglect the lessons taught by the best minds of pagan Greece and Rome. He is steeped in Aristotle, whom he calls the Doctor of Reason—"The Master of those who know," "*Il maestro di color che sanno*." Plato, too, and his opinions were known to him, but as Ozanam says, "while accepting a large number of Platonic dogmas regarding God, nature, and humanity, he never dreamed of betraying the faith due to his first master, Aristotle." He was a proficient scholar of Roman classics and wrote works in the Latin language—*De Monarchia*, *De Vulgari Eloquentia*. Horace, Ovid, Virgil, and Lucretius were his favorite authors, who, along with Homer in the IV. Canto of the *Inferno*, form the "*bella scuola*" with whom Dante made the sixth. To explain this passage I must remark that our poet was fully conscious of his own talents, which he knew would not fail him. He trusted in his own powers rather than in another's.

Fidandomi di me piu che di un altro—

and does not hesitate to place himself on an equal with Homer, Horace, Virgil, and the others just mentioned. Virgil, who had left his realm of Limbo, which is the antechamber of Hell, had gone in search of Dante lost in the darkness of the Forest. He returns with Dante to Limbo, where dwell the other poets mentioned, when at the sight of Virgil returned, a voice cries out: "*Onorate l'altissimo poeta*"—Do honor to the all high poet, words now inscribed on Dante's own monument.

Assembled thus the goodly school I saw
Of him, the master of the most high song,
Who o'er the others like an eagle flies. [This is Homer]

When somewhat they together had discoursed
They turned to me with gesture of salute:
My master also smiling at the same.
And more they did me honor yet by much
For so they made me of their company
That I became, 'mid so much mind, the sixth.

*Così vidi adunar la bella scuola
Di quei signor dell' altissimo canto
Che sovra gli altri come aquila vola.
E in d'onore ancora assai mi fenna
Che essi mi facevan della loro chiera
Sì ch'io fui sesto tra cotanto senno.*

Dante's Art

The polished art of Dante is seen in the manner he employs sacred and profane history, blending them together

so that while leaving them distinct he moulds them into one harmonious whole. The heroes of antiquity he mixes up with the champions of the Christian faith. Charon is the boatman in Hell, Cato in Purgatory. Mythology is blended with the lives of the saints, and out of a medley of diverse material—philosophy, theology, natural science, nature study, legends of paganism, history sacred and profane—he succeeds in weaving a poem in his *Divina Commedia* which for refinement subtlety, beauty of language, loftiness of purpose, dignity of style, grandeur of thought, and height and wealth of imagination stands unsurpassed in poetic literature. In his own words:

Sovra gli altri come aquila vola—
"Above all others he soars—an eagle."

This much has been said by way of giving a general idea of the high standing place Alighieri occupies in the world of letters. It is now time to speak of his life in more detail and to refer to certain passages of his works which must interest a Catholic in a special way.

Florence

Unlike other great men, he alone is claimed by Florence as her son—"Florence the flower of all cities and the city of all flowers." Here he was born on the banks of the Arno in 1265, a few years before the Florentines began to build their magnificent Cathedral—the Church of Santa Croce—the mausoleum of their famous dead, and just before Giotto raised aloft that masterpiece of graceful architecture, his marble Campanile. No doubt he was baptised in what was then the cathedral church, for which he always entertained a tender affection, and which he calls "His beautiful St. John's"—*Il mio bel San Giovanni*. The name Dante was a fortunate one; for it is an abbreviation of Durante, which means the "enduring one." The struggle between the Guelphs and the Ghibellines is so intimately connected with our poet's age and life and works as to require a word of explanation before we proceed further. Originally the Guelphs represented the adherents of the Popes, who strenuously resisted the might and tyranny of the German Emperors, whose followers were the Ghibellines. But the spiritual conflict between the Pope and Emperor was over for the Pope had won, and now with the lapse of time the Guelphs were formed of those who fought for the liberties of the people—for communal franchise—in a word, for the rights of Democracy, whereas the Ghibellines favored the feudal privileges of the barons and the nobility, and were supported by the Emperor's power. The struggle between these two parties was one between aristocracy, *overbearing* and *relentless*, and democracy, and then as now the Pope sympathised with the weak, sided with the people striving for their liberty, and favored the democratic Guelphs. The Ghibelline was *worldly, without religion, insolent, and selfish*: he had what we would call the manners of Potsdam. He was a man of the court whose *will* was law, with whom *right* was *might*. The Guelph belonged to the middle classes: he was the well-to-do tradesman (the *popolano*) who had risen from the low rungs of the ladder of life. He was strong because of his command of money, was attached to his religion and to his Church. Now these two parties incessantly fought, and each had its victories and its defeats, and though the Popes did their best to reconcile them they were unsuccessful. The great battle of Campaldino was fought with Dante on the battlefield on the Guelph side, and was a victory for the people—for democracy: in a word, for the Guelphs. But before long a family feud arose between the *Donati* and the *Cerchi*, and the Guelphs themselves were split into two factions called respectively the Whites and Blacks—*Bianchi e Neri*. A French prince went to Florence to make peace. The leaders of the Whites were condemned and banished, and with them some who had endeavored to hold the balance of power between the two parties, and among these was Dante. Thus the great Florentine poet was thrust forth from his native city to wander an exile eating the bread of strangers and climbing another's staircase till at length after nineteen years he died at Ravenna on the Adriatic coast, where his body was buried in the Church of his own loved St. Francis of Assisi. "Ungrateful Florence," sings Byron, "Dante sleeps afar."