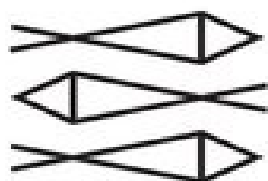


DANTE IN LOVE

A. N. WILSON



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IN LOVE



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I

WHY THIS BOOK HAS BEEN WRITTEN

DANTE IS THE GREATEST POET OF THE MIDDLE AGES. IT COULD BE argued that he was the greatest of all European poets, of any time or place. Yet, for many, perhaps nearly all (non-Italian) readers, he also remains unread. Most literate people are aware of only a few facts about him and nearly all of these are wrong, such as that he was romantically involved with a girl called Beatrice. Dante, a married man with children, did have love affairs, some of them messy, and about some of them, he wrote. Beatrice was not in this sense one of the women in his life. She was something different.

There are other readers who have begun to read Dante's book the *Vita Nuova* under the impression that it would have been all about Beatrice, and then they have given up because it was about something else – Dante himself, chiefly. Sometimes they have tried to read his *Comedy*, which was named by Boccaccio (1313 – 75) the 'divine' *Comedy*, and they have abandoned the attempt. The intelligent general reader of the twenty-first century – that is to say, you – might or might not have knowledge of classical mythology and Roman history. Dante expects you to remember who Briareus was, and who Cato, and how Arachne was transformed into a spider, and what was the fate of the Sabine women. On top of this, he expects you to share his knowledge of, and obsession with, contemporary Italian history and politics. Some translations and modern editions of his poem endeavour to 'help' you here by elaborate explanations of the Guelfs and the Ghibellines, which soon have your head spinning. And on top of all that, there is the whole confusing business of medieval philosophy and theology – what Thomas Aquinas owed to Averroes, or the significance of St Bernard of Clairvaux.

No wonder that so many readers abandon their reading of Dante's three-part *Comedy* (*Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*) long before they get to Purgatory. No wonder that so many who manage to read as far as the *Purgatorio* find that very little of it has remained in their heads. Such readers are prepared to take on trust that Dante is a great poet, but they leave him as one of the great unread. And in so doing, they leave unsavoured one of the supreme aesthetic, imaginative, emotional and intellectual experiences on offer. They are like people who have never attended a performance of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, or of *King Lear*, never heard a Beethoven symphony, never visited Paris. Quite definitely, they are missing out.

If you belong to this category of Dante-reader, or non-reader, then this book is specifically designed for you. And before we go any further, it had better be admitted that, as your travel guide in unfamiliar terrain, I know that my work will be difficult. The greatest of all European poems cannot be understood unless you familiarize yourself with the Europe out of which it came. So we must set out on a journey together to the Middle Ages, which were a strange land.

Dante was the most observant, and articulate, of writers. He was profoundly absorbed in himself, but he was also involved with the central political and social issues of his time. Indeed, it was his involvement with politics which led to his being expelled from his native city, Florence, and spending the last two decades of his life in bitter exile. If he had been a successful Florentine politician, he would never have written the *Comedy*. He would be remembered as a poet – no doubt about that. He

Canzoni and Ballate and Sonnets would ensure that his name had lasted. But his true greatness was sum up in one narrative poem, not only his own autobiography, but the lives of his contemporaries and the tremendous change which had taken place in Europe in his lifetime.

Dante lived from 1265 to 1321. Nation states, and independent city states, were emerging. Hindsight sees that. At the time, the institutions of papal monarchy versus the Holy Roman Emperor fought out their dinosaur battles, thinking to use the smaller units of nation state or city state. History would make nation states stronger than either the Holy Roman Empire or the papal monarchy. (The Papacy as a religious institution, which was all that Dante wanted it to be, clearly survives to this day but with no obvious hope of universal jurisdiction over all Christendom, let alone over all humankind.)

Dante's age was a time of great economic change, above all to the money supply of Europe, with Florence, the fountain of florins, being a supremely important place, as were the other Italian towns which pioneered that medieval invention, the Bank. Symptomatic of the era of change during which Dante lived was the rate of technological advance of the thirteenth to fourteenth centuries. Technological advance always brings with it great social and intellectual change. And if Dante did not live through anything so momentous as the Industrial Revolution, he nonetheless saw a Europe which would have been unimaginable to his great-grandparents, a Europe in which Arabic learning and Greek philosophy were available to Latin-speaking intellectuals for the first time for hundreds of years.

But before we begin the story, you might like to ask what my qualifications are for telling it? Allow me to admit at once that I am no Dante scholar. To be a Dante scholar is a full-time, lifelong occupation. Such rare beings need to possess a knowledge of medieval theology, astronomy, linguistics, poetics, mathematics and history of which I possess only an amateur's smattering. I first began to read Dante when I made a teenage visit to Florence. I became hooked on the *Inferno*, but it was some years before I went beyond it and read the rest of the *Comedy*. I think there was a simple reason for this. I did not realize how comparatively easy it is to master the historical and biographical background to the poem. I did not realize that Dante was an impoverished aristocrat living in a burgeoning city republic; the more you know about medieval Florence, of course, the better equipped you will be when you open the *Comedy*. But, to start with, all you really need to know is that this young man – his family identity pretty shadowy if not actually disguised in the early books of the *Comedy* – has two ambitions. One is to be a great poet, and in this ambition he has been encouraged by two people – Brunetto Latini (c.1220 – 94), the most famous Florentine intellectual of the generation before Dante's own, a (probably) homosexual older friend who was in some senses Dante's teacher, and the better-born, better-placed, brilliantly innovative older poet Guido Cavalcanti (c.1250/55 – 1300).

The only other thing which you need to master before you begin is that Dante had political ambitions. He had been married by arrangement, as was the custom of those days, into one of the grandest families of Florence, the Donati. He writes not one word about his wife, Gemma, though it is possible that, as I have come to suspect, he uses her as an unnamed figure in his allegories. Her cousins were his boyhood friends. One, Forese Donati, was a good friend of Dante's and exchanged ribald sexy jokes with him during their teens and early manhood. The other, Corso Donati, one of the most brutal of the big Florentine magnates, was, together with the Pope at the time, Boniface VIII, responsible for Dante's fall from political grace and his exile from Florence, a catastrophe which ruined him financially and broke his heart.

At first I read Dante only in English, then in the little blue Temple Classics editions which had the Italian on one side of the page with English on the other. Still a very good way to read him, in my opinion. Dante's Italian, clear, concise and sharp, is comparatively easy to master. But in this book

have decided to quote him in translation, using a variety of the excellent modern English translations available. After school, I went to the British Institute in Florence where Luisa Rappaccini's live language classes gave me a basic grounding in Italian, and Ian Greenlees's lectures began to open my eyes to the extraordinary story of Italian medieval literature and culture.

Yet, as a young man, I still thought that the historical and biographical background of the poem was too complicated to be mastered before I read the *Comedy*. Therefore, when any contemporary references occurred in the *Comedy*, I did not exactly 'skip' but I did not bother to see what was happening. I was racing on to the 'famous' scenes – such as the everlasting sorrow of the doomed adulterers, Paolo and Francesca, or the everlasting intellectual curiosity of Ulysses. Those who read the *Comedy* in this way definitely derive *something* from the experience – it would seem as if there were many Victorians who enjoyed such an approach. But the book remains for such a reader a set of 'lovely' scenes interrupted by passages which are only semi-comprehensible.

What I needed as a young man when I first read the *Comedy* was a book which did not take for granted any knowledge of Dante's background. I needed a guide to thirteenth-century Florence. I needed someone who had read the principal Latin texts in Dante's own library – Virgil, of course, Lucan, Boethius. I needed someone who had at least a basic grasp of medieval philosophy, and who was prepared to tell me who was Pope, who was King of France, and, when there were battles and political quarrels, what the fuss was about. And then again, I wanted this author to tell me how Dante's life and work did, and did not, relate to his contemporaries. He lived in a period which loosely contained the early Franciscans, St Thomas Aquinas, King Philip IV (the Fair) of France, Pope Boniface VIII. The Sicilian Vespers happened during his manhood – I needed to be reminded what they were. And then I needed to be told something of his poet-contemporaries in Italy. And of course, yes, I should like some help with Courtly Love, and Love theory in general.

Over the years, I became an amateur Dantean. Trawling second-hand bookshops, I would look in the Italian and medieval sections first, and add to a collection which ranged from exceptional generalist essays, such as the superb short book by R. W. Church, friend of Gladstone and Newman, and Dean of St Paul's, to Bruno Nardi's groundbreaking and sometimes bewildering *Dante e la cultura medievale*. In my early twenties I discovered a remarkable book, *The Figure of Beatrice in Dante* by Charles Williams. I read it all the time throughout 1973 and 1974, over and over again, and the child that was born to us in March 1974 was inevitably christened Beatrice.

Tall of figure, cocknified of speech, Charles Williams (1886 – 1945) is a cult author among a small number of people at present alive; it is a number which includes the Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams (no relation). Charles Williams worked all his adult life as a publisher for the Oxford University Press (OUP), he was fascinated by magic, and his series of supernatural thrillers (*Shadow of Ecstasy*, *All Hallows' Eve*, etc.) are unlike anything else either in the genre of spiritual writing or in crime adventures. He was also a poet, believing himself to have been heavily influenced by Dante – 'Beatrician experience' in 1910 convinced him that romantic love was a path to God,¹ a belief which caused his long-suffering wife, Michal, some anguish as he moved from one passionate, though apparently platonic, obsession to the next. The poet W. H. Auden met him when OUP commissioned the poet to edit *The Oxford Book of Light Verse*. Auden only spent a few moments in Williams's company, but he felt himself in the presence of sanctity, of palpable goodness. T. S. Eliot, who published Williams's books, said something similar.²

My feelings about Williams, and his book, changed a good deal over the years. At one time, I tried to escape the all-pervading influence he seemed to be having, not just over my attitude to Dante, but over my life, I lampooned him in a series of novels.³ When this did not seem enough, I abandoned the Christianity which was at the core of his life-view. When, years later, I came back to the Church,

found I was worshipping at Williams's regular place of worship, St Silas the Martyr, Kentish Town though I had no idea of this when I started going there, nor when a third child had been christened there. To Williams, with his fascination for the occult and the bizarre, perhaps nothing was accidental. Nor, too, was anything accidental for Dante, who would have found nothing odd in Williams's preoccupations with magic and astrology, nor his capacity to mix them up with both sexual fantasy and Christian piety of an arcane and ritualistic flavour.

Even when I had set Williams on one side – and for eighteen years I did not read a word he wrote – I continued to read Dante. His Sherlock Holmes – like profile haunted me. That angular, angry face living 700 years ago, was as unforgettable as his poem. The more often I read the *Comedy* the more it seemed a work which wanted to be read again. For seven years of my adult life I taught, in a very junior capacity, at two colleges in the University of Oxford. My brief was to help the young people master the rudiments of medieval English – the Old English of *Beowulf*, the Middle English of Chaucer. In Chaucer I found a man steeped in Dante. If Charles Williams was – is – the Crazy Guy among Danteans (and quite a crazy company some of us are), Chaucer was the voice of sanity. He had absorbed Dante, seen his stupendous, gigantic significance in the history of Europe, and at the same time domesticated him.

For these medieval poets, the central concerns of life were obsessions with sex in general, girls in particular; ditto with God. Another preoccupation was the political one, wondering whether anyone would ever devise a decent method of organizing human society. In politics, Dante's questions were sane – but his answers, particularly in the open letters he wrote to the Emperor Henry VII and to the cardinals of Italy – were deranged with violent hatred. The force of Dante's hatreds was undiminished even when he was supposedly describing the condition of the blessed in Paradise. You can see why Dante was not widely read for centuries, and why the Enlightenment, in particular, found him unsympathetic. The aesthete and wit Horace Walpole (1717 – 97; son of Sir Robert) dipped into Dante and found him 'extravagant, absurd, disgusting, in short a Methodist parson in Bedlam'.⁴ Any account of Dante which does not capture some of these qualities, of the Methodist parson in Bedlam, misses some of his flavour. That is what is so good about Charles Williams's book, though Williams lacks Dante's wrath and is closer at heart to his weird quasi-sexual women-mysticism.

A contemporary political figure in England in my lifetime who did possess some of Dante's rage and quirkiness – his memory already fading fast – was Enoch Powell. Elias Canetti, exiled in England because of Hitler, met Powell at a London party.

'He straightaway broached Nietzsche and Dante with me. Dante he quoted in Italian, and to considerable length. The thing that attracted him about Dante was the explicitly partisan nature of the civil war in the population still meant something, it hadn't degenerated into civilities. The civilized tone that prevailed in the House of Commons he [i.e. Powell] disliked. In Dante's day people were burned at the stake. When the other side came to power, you had to leave the city, and not come back as long as you lived. Hatred of the enemy *burned*. Dante's *Commedia* was full of this. He was a man who neither forgot, nor forgave.'⁵ Canetti almost seems here to equate Dante with the eccentric and marginal figure of Powell. But the ultra-Conservative, intellectual English politician had found something in Dante which was there, as had, in the eighteenth century, the languid wit who saw the Methodist parson in Bedlam.

But, while these snapshots of Dante explain some of his power, and flavour, they are distortions. Central to the abiding Dantean fascination is the question of Love – how we understand it, what the very word *means*. We live in a culture whose popular songs, music, films and soap operas are obsessed by Love, but whose articulate thinkers shy away from exploring it. This is very unlike the Middle Ages. We leave it to pop singers to tell us what Love is, whereas the Middle Ages brought forward the weighty intellect of Thomas Aquinas.

I remember one evening over thirty years ago at New College, Oxford, when sitting next to A. J. Ayer at dinner. I was the most junior of college lecturers, he was the Wykeham Professor of Logic and a famous philosopher. He told me that no medieval philosopher was worth reading, and he was proud to be able to say he had not read one word of Thomas Aquinas. Ayer was a genial man, but his breathtaking arrogance meant that, unless you were skilled in the tricks of analytical philosophy, it was difficult to keep up with him. I remember feebly asking him if he would think it permissible for the English tutor at the college not to have read any medieval literature – Chaucer, let us say – and he kindly conceded that it would not. But there was a difference. Chaucer's poetry was still worth reading. Ayer and the analytical philosophers had, in his opinion, solved the basic problems which confronted philosophy. There were a whole lot of questions which it was not the business of philosophy to answer and which were quite simply meaningless.

As the evening wore on, wine flowed and it would not be possible to outline his argument (if it existed) in any detail. But I do remember what he said at the end of the dinner: 'Even Logical Positivists think Love is important!'

He had no doubt trotted out, in the previous hour, a recitation of his non-creed – namely, that most aesthetic, moral and spiritual judgements were 'meaningless'. Logical Positivism is itself a vanished philosophical concept, based upon a strange notion devised in Vienna nearly a century ago – namely the 'Verification principle': a proposition could not be said to have meaning unless it could be verified either by sense-perceptions or *a priori*. That '*a priori*' begged so many questions that even the champions of the notion, such as the young Ayer, came to abandon it. I asked myself – if even Logical Positivists thought Love was important, was it not strange that they had not set their nimble minds to saying why they thought it was important, and what they thought it was? Cycling home under the starry sky of an Oxford night, I felt, yet again, that there were more interesting philosophical questions, and answers, in Dante's *Comedy* than in A. J. Ayer's once-famous book, *Language, Truth and Logic*. Love dominates our lives. Its rampages dislocate the heart. Sometimes it seems linked to sexual desire, sometimes it seems different. Religion, especially the Christian religion, uses the word to describe the life and activity of God. But when we are kept awake by thinking of the beautiful face of the girl we currently adore, is this 'love' at war with the Love of God or is it, as Charles Williams and Dante apparently thought, somehow or other connected? What use was a philosophy which refused to ask such questions, let alone provide an answer?

I left Oxford, and teaching and medieval literature, behind me, and for twenty years became a jobbing man of letters in London, writing novels, working as a journalist on various papers, and still from time to time, adding to my Dante library when browsing in a second-hand bookshop. The bibliography in the back of this volume is a list of the books which I have consulted over the years. Particular mention deserves to be made of W. W. Vernon's readings of the *Comedy*, which I found in a Norwich bookshop when rummaging about in Tombland with my brother Stephen. Vernon was a Victorian aristocrat who based his readings on one of the medieval commentaries on Dante – that of Benvenuto da Imola. If that makes his book sound alarming or high-falutin, it shouldn't. The several volumes of Vernon are wonderfully approachable books, and they elucidate line after line of the poem. So too did a book by a brilliant amateur Dantean called M. A. Orr – *Dante and the Early Astronomers* – to which I was introduced by Barbara Reynolds, herself the translator, with Dorothy L. Sayers, of the *Paradiso*, and author of a fine book on Dante. Among the French Danteans, I learnt much from Etienne Gilson, and among the Americans, Richard Pogue Harrison of Stanford University reawakened in me the sense of Dante's perennial and ever-repeated modernity.

Yet although I continued to read, decade by decade, in the field of Dantean studies, and although every few years, I reread the *Comedy*, 'my book' – the book I wish I had read before I started – has still eluded my grasp. W. B. Yeats would probably have been able to write such a book. I see the

outline of it glimmering in his magnificent poem – one of the best things ever written about (among other things) Dante – ‘Ego Dominus Tuus’, which are the words spoken to Dante by Love in a dream in the *Vita Nuova*:

Hic:

And yet

The chief imagination of Christendom,
Dante Alighieri, so utterly found himself
That he has made that hollow face of his
More plain to the mind’s eye than any face
But that of Christ.

Ille:

And did he find himself

Or was the hunger that had made it hollow
A hunger for the apple on the bough
Most out of reach? and is that spectral image
The man that Lapo and that Guido knew?
I think he fashioned from his opposite
An image that might have been a stony face
Staring upon a Bedouin’s horse-hair roof
From doored and windowed cliff, or half upturned
Among the coarse grass and the camel-dung.
He set his chisel to the hardest stone.
Being mocked by Guido for his lecherous life,
Derided and deriding, driven out
To climb that stair and eat that bitter bread,
He found the unpersuadable justice, he found
The most exalted lady loved by a man.⁶

Yeats saw that Dante was the first modernist, the first modern man. The puzzle of existence either resolves itself into the materialist notion that this overcrowded planet is crawling with lumps of surplus meat, calling themselves human, but eating and making war to such a destructive extent that the only sane approach to life would be that adopted by Stalin or Hitler, to cull and remove the surplus. Or – or! – it is worth investigating the sense possessed by most, if not all, of these individuals on the planet that love is the most important thing in their life, that love is what defines them, that ‘even Logical Positivists think Love is important’. The general can therefore only be understood in terms of the particular, the experience of one man seen as an allegory of all men. Yet solipsism and egotism which excludes consciousness of the Other – both as beloved human love-object, and as society of which we are all part – is not merely a moral, but an intellectual mistake. Into this picture God fits somewhere. Thomas Aquinas has interesting things to say about this, some of which any modern philosopher could read with profit. Dante had set some of these thoughts to poetry which continues to haunt the intellects, as well as the imaginations, of his readers.

I am still looking for a book which is a life of Dante set against the background of his times, which is also an introduction to the *Comedy*, and which gives the necessary historical and cultural background. At the same time, I want a book which will retain the excitement which Charles Williams continues to inspire in me, the sense that there is a connection between fancying women, wanting to understand poetry, and answering the deepest questions about life and the deepest needs of the human heart. Hence my title – *Dante in Love*. Dante believed that Love encompassed all things, that it was the force which moved the sun and other stars, so my title must be allowed to cover a wide range. At the outset, I should like to repeat that I am in no sense a Dantean scholar or expert. This book would be so much better if such a scholar had written it, but only provided that he or she had kept in mind the enthusiastic intelligent audience whom I know to be out there – persuadable, if not easily – to do the difficult but infinitely rewarding thing, beginning to read Dante. In the absence of such a book, I have done my best.

Let's start in the middle. Dante did. He set his *Comedy* in the year 1300. By then he was the most celebrated poet in Italy. He was also a diplomat and politician, who, during this year, occupied one of the most important offices of state in the biggest city republic in Italy – Florence. He was in middle age, but also 'in the middle' not of 'my life', but of 'our life' [*Inferno* I.1]. It is, in a sense, to be a poem for everybody and about everybody. But it was focused upon the experience of one remarkable man; focused during one particular three-day period – 7-10 April 1300; and the mighty clash of personalities between the greatest poet of the age and the most autocratic of Popes – between Dante Alighieri and Pope Boniface VIII.

II

ROME

THERE ARE SOME DATES IN HISTORY IN WHICH THE INDIVIDUAL destinies of men and women come together with public events, and the date itself achieves almost mythic status. One contemporary American has written, 'I imagine that most of us can cite a particular historical event – Pearl Harbor, D-Day, the assassination of John F. Kennedy, 9/11 – that we look on as a defining moment, the specific encounter of self and world that became the cradle of our historic consciousness.'¹ Easter 1300 (7 – 10 April) is such a date for Dante Alighieri. This Easter was also of immense significance for many Europeans. And it was during the period of Easter that year that Dante underwent his imaginative journey through Hell, Purgatory and Paradise. The *Comedy* is very specifically dated to those three days. When he wrote the poem, he tells us that he was journeying, in the company of the ancient Roman poet Virgil, through the three regions of the afterlife. He actually spent those days, with tens of thousands of others, on pilgrimage in Rome.

As the thirteenth century drew to a close, many looked to the year 1300 as one of special omen. Europe had passed through prodigious changes in the previous century. Those historians who now look in the previous hundred years for the Birth of the Modern would read it as a century in which the human race began a surge of technological competence. It suddenly discovered buttons for clothing (pioneered in Germany during the 1230s), spectacles (Italy, 1285), spinning wheels (France, 1268) and windmills (England, 1185). The first mechanical clock was made in England in 1283.² It was also the era when Europe ceased to be an economy where kings controlled the supply of money, and became an economy where banks, Italian banks, were the source of money. But it was also an age of marvels and miracles, an era of tremendous religious revival. It was the century in which God had touched the body of St Francis of Assisi (1181/2 – 1226) and marked him with the wounds of Christ. It was the century in which the Church had fought for its very life against heresy, which it had persecuted ruthlessly, against schism – the Eastern Churches made final their severance from the West – and against Islam, an ever-present threat. Though much of Spain had been won back from the Muslims, Grenada still remained in their hands, and, intellectually speaking, the Islamic philosopher Averroes (1126 – 98) remained arguably the most influential thinker in Europe. In the Middle East, the occupation by Muslims of the Christian Holy Places remained a perpetual threat in the eyes of many Europeans; and for many — Dante among them — this remained the ultimate scandal of Christendom. The last Christian stronghold in the Middle East had fallen to the Muslims only nine years before 1300. As reconquest of the Holy City of Jerusalem looked ever less feasible, Western Christians naturally looked towards Rome as a suitably sacred alternative for their pilgrimages.

So, 1300 was, for many, a date which would witness 'the specific encounter of self and world'. Attentive to the current mood, the Pope had instituted 1300 as a Holy Year. And clearly, the Easter pilgrimage for that year would be of particular importance, with Easter, the Feast of Christ's Rising from the Dead, being a high point of the Christian calendar. It was the first Holy Year (sometimes called Jubilee³) in the Roman Catholic Church's history. For some time before the close of the century, there had been murmurs that any who visited the Holy City of Rome during the year which brought the turbulent thirteenth century to an end would receive a plenary indulgence — that is,

completely clean slate, forgiveness of all their sins. At Christmas 1299, there were more pilgrims than usual in the city, urged on by these Vatican rumour-mongers. The Pope himself, though not an especially religious man, was beset by the medieval obsession with numbers – endeavouring to persuade himself, by juggling the figures, that he was the two-hundredth Pope, and that this ‘fact’ somehow added mystic significance to the coming of the new century.⁴

By February, the Pope had decided that he could exploit the groundswell of public support for the idea of a grand pilgrimage. On 22 February, the Feast of St Peter’s Chair, Pope Boniface VIII issued a bull – *Antiquorum habet fida relatio*. In it, he stated that any who visited the ‘venerable Basilica of the Prince of the Apostles’ during this Holy Year would receive ‘great remissions and indulgences for their sins’.

For the next two months, snow fell almost without cessation, making the Apennines all but impassable. The Emilian plain had turned into a blinding desert of trackless white. Nevertheless, Europeans turned out in their tens of thousands to make the pilgrimage. They came from all over Italy, from Sicily, Sardinia and Corsica. They came from Eastern Europe, from Hungary and from further East. They came from the North, from Germany and from England. Sons, in imitation of Aeneas, carried aged parents on their shoulders.

Children came, old women, families. A great number walked the entire journey, though the better off rode. By the time they reached the city, the swarm of poor beggars was immense, huddled around the gates of Rome, calling out for alms, for food, for shelter. One witness estimated that 30,000 pilgrims entered Rome each day. Another believed that there were over 200,000 extra inhabitants in the streets. By no means all of them were beggars. ‘A vast army was seen to pass daily in and out by the Claudian Way; barons and ladies from France and other distant lands rode in, attended sometimes by a cavalcade of more than forty or fifty followers. And nearly all the houses along the same Claudian Way both within and without the city were turned into inns, and sold food and drink to the foreigners; and every day they were thronged with people, and there was a very good supply of food.’ The prices were inflated, particularly of much-sought-for lodgings, and the Jubilee was big business for the Romans.

The numbers, and the wealth, of the pilgrims made the Jubilee Year a great financial boom for the Papacy itself. The Pope was literally raking in the money. One chronicler observed that ‘Day and night two clerics stood at the altar of St Paul with rakes in their hands, raking in the *pecuniam infinitam*’. Even princes came to obtain the expiation of their misdeeds, visiting the two shrines of St Peter and St Paul fifteen times on fifteen different days, as the Pope had decreed.

So great were the crowds that it became necessary to operate a one-way system for pedestrians, rather as happens on the pavements of busy streets in the modern West during hectic periods of Christmas shopping. Pilgrims swarming towards St Peter’s were forced to trudge on one side of the road as they crossed the bridge at Castel Sant’Angelo, and back on the other side. One pilgrim who observed them, when he came to write his *Comedy*, likened the shuffling crowds in the moat-like prison of the hellish city of Dis to the pilgrims in Rome on this occasion. This particular pilgrim was Dante Alighieri, who had reached the mid-point of his life. That is to say, if you take the scriptural three-score years and ten as the norm, he was thirty-five years old. If we had seen him in the crowd, would we have noted, as the poet Yeats was to observe seven centuries later, that his long face, his aquiline nose and jutting jaw were to become ‘more plain to the mind’s eye than any face/But that of Christ’?

It was the face of Christ Himself which many had come to see. As well as the tombs of the Apostles, Rome also contained that most holy relic the ‘Veronica’. The legend is that, while Christ was sweating and in pain, carried his Cross to Calvary, a young woman stepped out of the crowds and

bathed his face with a cloth. She discovered, when he had passed on to his Crucifixion, that he had left an image of his face on the cloth or Sudarium. The legend developed that the woman brought the sacred imprint to Rome. Various stories existed of authentic pictures of Christ. At Rome, to emphasize the point that the relic venerated by the Easter crowds was indeed the True Image, it was called the Vera Icon. Various writers speak of the image of the Saviour which is called the True one as ‘effigies Dominici vultus quae Veronica nuncupatur’, says Matthew of Westminster.⁷ Thus, the woman who brought the cloth in the legend acquired the name Veronica. Legend embellished the story further. She was the haemorrhoider, the woman with an issue of blood, who was cured by Jesus in the Gospels; she married the penitent, Zacchaeus. She went to the Bordeaux region to which she brought relics of the Virgin Mary, and was buried at Soulac (or, in another story, in the Church of St Seurin at Bordeaux).⁸

The cult of the Veronica became entwined with that of the Holy Year. Every Friday, and on all Solemn Feasts throughout the year, the ‘Veronica, the true image of Christ’ was displayed in St Peter’s Basilica.⁹

It is typical of Dante that, rather than just describing the swarms of people in Rome at this time, he should take a snapshot of just one. That Easter, his mind took just such a photograph – of a pilgrim from Croatia revering the sacred Veronica, and as he did so, thinking to himself, ‘O Jesus Christ, my Lord, the One true God, is this what your face truly looked like then?’ [*Paradiso* XXXI. 107 – 8, Musa’s translation].

The *Comedy* is the story of one man’s inner journey, against the turbulent backdrop of his times. It is also the story of Everyman. And this duality is something which religious ceremonial was also able to supply. When Dante wandered about Rome, and saw the pilgrims worshipping relics, or saw the priests raking money off the altars, we might be expecting this angry, independent-minded figure to turn into a Luther who rose up and denounced the whole bag of tricks. Dante is a much more paradoxical figure than that. He transformed the Catholic faith in which he believed. As we shall see later in this book, he was for many years regarded as a heretic, and at least one of his books was on the Index of books forbidden for Catholics to read. But Dante the pilgrim in Rome in 1300 was a devoted pilgrim. At the beginning of the section in his *Comedy* when he comes to the bottom of Mount Purgatory, he meets a musical friend, Casella, who tells him that for three months (i.e. since the start of the Holy Year) anyone could escape Hell who wished to do so [*Purgatorio* II.98]. Dante thereby endorses the Holy Year. Making the pilgrimage works. Whatever else the *Comedy* will undermine and it is a subversive work – it does not question (though it sometimes comes close to doing so) the truth of the Roman Catholic religion itself. Indeed, Casella tells Dante in Purgatory that the recording angel who ferries the souls to this stage of their redemption collects them all from the mouth of the Tiber.

To that place, where the Tiber turns to salt,
He’s turned his wings: for that is where, for ever, gather all
Who do not sink to Acheron ... [i.e. Hell]

[*Purg.* II.103 – 5, author’s translation]

In other words, Dante accepted that Rome, its Church, was the means of grace and the hope of glory.

Dante, in common with the other visitors to Rome in 1300, would have walked about in the ruins

the Forum. More deeply, perhaps, than some of the pilgrims, he would have meditated upon the astonishing intricacy of Divine Providence, which had woven the story of the Roman Empire into the story of Salvation. Mankind had sinned and must suffer. Only the innocent and incarnate Word, Jesus, had been good enough to pay the price of sin, but it had to be paid in a court which had universal recognition, a Roman court. Otherwise it could not have been a justice which was universal and recognized. (Medieval man believed that the Mediterranean was the centre of the world. Beyond the Pillars of Hercules you were quite likely to drop off the edge of the world. The Southern Hemisphere was uninhabited, and probably covered with water, though a few writers had pondered on the possibility of a land mass 'down under' – a *Terra australis incognita*.¹⁰) Hence the vital importance for Christians of including in their creed the phrase that He 'suffered under Pontius Pilate'. But the blasphemy, this deicide, this mocking, scourging, killing of the Incarnate God could not itself go unpunished, as visitors to Rome were reminded, in the middle of the Forum, by the Arch of Titus which showed the Roman troops entering Jerusalem in AD 70 and razing the Jewish capital to the ground. The massacre of the Jewish people, the uprooting of their Temple, the establishment of the Catholic Church in its stead, all these were ingrained features of the medieval Western European view of Rome, and its place in the scheme of things. The modern visitor, looking at the Arch of Titus and its bas-reliefs of Roman troops carrying off the Menorah and the sacred vessels of the Temple, perhaps chillingly reminded of the massacre of six million Jews in the twentieth century. In Heaven, however, when Dante visited it in his earthly body, he was told not to be sentimental. 'Just vengeance taken was afterwards avenged by just decree' [*Paradiso*, VII.50 – 51, Ciardi]. We know that Dante was impressed by Roman bas-reliefs. In Purgatory he reaches a terrace where just such bas-reliefs are carved in marble, displaying examples of humility. The bas-reliefs, made of 'pure white marble; on its flawless face/were carvings that would surely put to shame/not only Polyclète but Nature too' [*Purgatorio*, X.32 – 3, Musa], were suggested by the visually stunning – if to us morally chilling – reliefs in the Forum.

And Dante accepted too the newly formulated doctrine of Purgatory. Purgatory was one of the innovations of that orderly thirteenth century, like time being measured by the mechanical clock. Though the human race, ever since it heard of Heaven and Hell, must have considered that an intermediate sort of place would suit most of us better; and though prayers for the dead had been part of the Church's practice for centuries, it was only in that century of codification and canon law that the Western Church – at the second Council of Lyons in 1274 – had actually defined Purgatory as the place of purification through which souls pass on their way to Paradise. A French historian has elegantly stated, 'A little more than a hundred years after its inception, Purgatory benefited from an extraordinary stroke of luck: the poetic genius of Dante Alighieri ... carved out for it an enduring place in human memory.'¹¹

Dante was destined, almost literally, to put Purgatory on the map. In his lifetime, many intellectuals in the Church, especially in the University of Paris, had questioned the doctrine,¹² but in the thirteenth century – when so many states, cities and academic communities drew up self-defining constitutions – it made sense to organize the afterlife as well. Many human beings who were not deemed good enough for Heaven were hopeful that they might not be quite bad enough to merit instant damnation in Hell. What was more natural than to hope that, after death, there would be the chance to purge away our sins and make ourselves ready for Paradise? The generalized hope of earlier ages became a specific plan. Now they had mechanical clocks on earth, their time in Purgatory could be measured; and, by undergoing the appropriate rituals, they could actually reduce their purgatorial sentence in advance.

This was one of the points of pilgrimages, and indeed of crusades. The idea of making a journey to a holy place for the good of your soul was inextricably linked with the developing ideas of Purgatory.

The earthly journey, undertaken with great discomfort and, in the case of crusades, considerable danger, shortened your purgatorial journey after death.

Given the prevalence of human sin, the more pilgrimage sites the better. Not only did pilgrims dream of making the ultimate *haj* to the Holy Sepulchre of Christ in Jerusalem, but they also could visit the shrines of European saints. In 1220, for example, when the relics of St Thomas Becket were placed in the newly built shrine in Canterbury Cathedral, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Stephen Langton, got a special ‘Jubilee remission of sins’ declared by Pope Honorius III. Visit the shrine and you will get remission of your sins. (Opinions seem to differ about whether this shrine gave you a completely clean slate or whether it merely reduced your time in Purgatory.¹³)

In the everlasting struggle between Church and State, between Bishops and Kings, Popes and Emperors, Becket, murdered in his own cathedral in 1170, had been the ultimate example of a martyr who backed the Church; and his example was all the more striking because King Henry II, who had him murdered, had been his close friend. Henry had appointed Becket as Archbishop hoping to have a stooge in place who would subject the Church to secular control. Becket was transformed by his office. When asked to choose between the authority of the crown and that of the Pope in ecclesiastical affairs, Archbishop Becket had been in no doubt – ‘Still who can doubt that the Church of Rome is the head of all the churches, the source of all Catholic teaching?’ he had asked in one of his letters. ‘Who does not know that the keys of the Kingdom were given to Peter? Is not the whole structure of the Church built up on Peter’s faith and teaching, so to grow until we all meet Christ as one perfect man united in faith and in our recognition of him as Son of God?’¹⁴

If you believed this, and if you believed in the power of pilgrimage to reduce your time in Purgatory, then to visit the tombs of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul in Rome would be of potential immense value. And this value was not lost on the wise old head of Pope Boniface VIII.

Does this mean that the Pope who summoned the faithful for that Holy Year was Dante’s hero? It does not. Of all the sinners singled out for Dante’s vituperation and scorn in the *Comedy*, Pope Boniface VIII stands out, if not as the wickedest, then certainly the most hated. These two men, one in 1300 now seem to us destined to collide, though with hindsight it might be difficult to know which was the *Titanic* and which the iceberg. Pope Boniface was one of the last great medieval defenders of the papal monarchy. He ultimately failed. Dante, having been a supporter of the Popes in their struggle for power against the Emperors, turned from this position into one of virulent hatred of all modern Popes, and of Boniface in particular. Boniface was responsible for Dante’s political downfall. Dante was responsible for Boniface’s immortality as one of the great villains of literature.

One of Dante’s more fair-minded Victorian biographers felt the need to speak in the Pope’s defence. Dante had lived centuries before the era of the Borgia Popes and the excesses of the Renaissance. ‘When one reads these [Dantean] denunciations of a man who at any rate had much nobility in his character, and with all his greed of power, and of money as a source of power, is not accused of wanton brutality or of licentiousness, one is tempted to wonder what place the poet would have found in his *Inferno* for the typical Popes of the Renaissance! ... Boniface was at least a gentleman in many senses of the word.’¹⁵ He was a gentleman who was almost certainly responsible for the murder of his saintly predecessor.¹⁶ Certainly, he did not scruple, as the Holy Year came to an end, to double-cross Dante in a piece of astounding political skulduggery. Yet a gentleman he undoubtedly was.

Let us join Dante and other pilgrims in Rome, then, and see the tall elegant old Pope on the newly constructed balcony at the Church of St John Lateran. Giotto di Bondone, the greatest painter of the age, painted a fresco of the scene. A tiny fragment of it survives in the Vatican, and an early seventeenth-century watercolour, which copied the fresco-cycle before it was destroyed, survives

the Ambrosian library of Milan, and shows Boniface promulgating what came to be known as Jubilee Year, and the crowds of pilgrims at his feet coming to Rome to receive plenary indulgences at his hands.

Who was he? Why did he promulgate a Holy Year? What was going on?

Boniface VIII – Benedetto Caetani – was born around 1235 into the minor nobility at Anagni, the hill town near Rome which produced so many Pontiffs.¹⁷ He read law at the University of Bologna and by the time Dante was being born in Florence, this distinguished-looking man had entered the diplomatic service, eventually becoming a papal notary. He was regarded by learned contemporaries as the greatest of canon lawyers. He was an embodiment of civilization, European civilization, a person of great taste and cultivation. Much of the money raised by Boniface was for the beautification of the decayed old city. He contributed to the adornment of the first Gothic church in Rome, Santa Maria sopra Minerva,¹⁸ building a spindly baldacchino of exquisite delicacy over the high altar. The Mass vestments which he commissioned, and which survive in the museum at Anagni, betoken a aesthete. He commissioned Giotto to paint a triptych of the enthroned Redeemer.¹⁹ But the splendor of the ceremonial with which he surrounded himself, and the wonderful vestments and architecture together with the great Jubilee itself, all had one aim: the strengthening of the Papacy as a political force.

By then, Caetani had made diplomatic visits to Portugal, France and England. He was a tough negotiator. Ptolemy of Lucca calls him ‘fastuosus et arrogans ac omnium contemptivus’ (‘full of pride and arrogant and contemptuous of everyone’). ‘He guided the church,’ says Dino Compagni, contemporary Florentine chronicler, ‘after his own way, and abased whoso thought not with him.’ But he did so with intellectual rigour and with a very clear agenda, namely the protection of Church interests versus secular domination. His negotiations with Aragon in 1291 prevented a war breaking out between Aragon and England.²¹ In Paris he asserted the rights of the mendicant orders against the secularized faculties of the university and against royal interference. In England he did all he could to limit the power of the Plantagenets, championing the Scots against English conquest, for example. He was a man of immense energy, as his prodigiously copious correspondence testifies. One of his first letters, of great length, when he became Pontiff, was addressed to Edward I, King of England – son of ‘the simple-living Henry’, as Dante called him [*Purg.* VII.132]. This, and comparable letters to other European sovereigns, and the eight papal bulls of his comparatively short reign, all testify to the same purpose, the strengthening and enforcement of the papal monarchy. When, during the Jubilee Year, the German envoys came to Rome to ask Boniface to confirm the title of Albert of Austria as Holy Roman Emperor with a crown on his head and a sword in his hand, the Supreme Pontiff did not mince his words. ‘It is I, who am Emperor!’ he replied.²² He would change his mind about this too late when finding himself the victim of pressure from the King of France, he would come to feel that support from the Germans would not have come amiss.

During this Pope’s lifetime the Church had faced a whole series of body-blows, any one of which could have been fatal to its survival. For a start, Christendom had lost any hope of healing the fateful division between Eastern- and Western-rite Christian Churches. Despite the best efforts of the Pope’s predecessor in 1274 to patch up differences with Constantinople, the two mainstream Christian Churches – the Roman Catholic and the Orthodox as we should now term them – were irreconcilably split. Christians would never again speak with one voice, and the Christians of the East would never accept the papal monarchy, which for thirteenth-century Western Christians seemed the likeliest bulwark against the other threats to the faith which were so vigorously at work. There was the threat of Islam. Though most of Spain had been won back from the Muslims by James the Conqueror by the mid-thirteenth century, Islam remained a potent military threat to the Holy Places in the East. And the

intellectual renaissance of the previous century – the rediscovery of Aristotle, the birth of modern mathematics and physics and medicine – had come about largely as a result of Islamic scholars. The influence, especially in the University of Paris, was deeply feared by orthodox Catholics. At the same time, the civilization of Provence had been wiped out in a destructive internecine war, the so-called Albigensian Crusade. This wholesale massacre of heretics had technically been concluded by the Treaty of Paris in 1229, but the heresy itself was widespread, not only throughout France but in Italy, especially in Florence. The new philosophy in universities was teaching clever young Catholics that the soul was not immortal. The Albigensian or Cathar heresy was teaching men and women of all levels of intelligence that God did not make the world, that matter was sinful, that the Eucharist was not necessary for salvation ... The triumph of either school of thought would have meant the end of Catholicism.

After Boniface died, the King of France, who had precipitated his death (as we shall see in Chapter XII), tried to justify himself by conducting a posthumous trial of the Pope in 1310 – 11, accusing him of all manner of sins and heresies. It was said at this ‘trial’ that Boniface had disputed the divinity of Christ. Even those cardinals who defended the Pope of this charge conceded that he spoke ‘jestingly’ of religion when at table, and that if he had made such a remark it was not to be taken seriously. Another witness quoted him as saying that ‘to lie with women or boys is no more sin than to rub one’s hand against another’.²³ Although many of the charges against the dead Boniface were trumped up, a strong consensus about his character emerges. He was a cynic, with the studied frivolity today found in a certain type of academic, or senior lawyer. But he had given his life to the strengthening of the Roman Church and to the extension of the papal monarchy, and in that he would not weaken. As a cardinal, Benedetto Caetani had seen the Church fatally weakened in many aspects, and he was determined to leave the Church and the Papacy stronger, not weaker.

When Pope Nicholas IV had died in April 1292, eight years before, the College of Cardinals had been locked in a seemingly unbreakable feud. Half the college supported the Roman family of the Colonna, and the other, another great Roman dynasty, the Orsini (to whom Caetano was related). For over two years they were unable to reach agreement. At one point, when the anti-Colonna faction had left Rome, the Colonnas appeared to be on the verge of making their own election without the other. By the summer of 1294, Rome was drifting into anarchy; there was fighting in the district of Orvieto. Major questions, such as the future of the kingship of Sicily, could not be settled without a Pope, and Charles II, King of Naples, tried to remind the cardinals in their assembly at Perugia. He tried to make them choose from a list of four names, but this only produced deadlock.

Then had come what appeared to be an inspiration. Rather than electing one of their own kind, a canon lawyer, an administrator, an intriguer, a partisan for one or another of the great Roman families, or for the King of France versus the German Emperor, they would call upon the Holy Spirit to revivify the Church in a quite new way. Cardinal Latino Malabranca revealed to the others that there existed a devout hermit, one Pietro del Morrone, who had prophesied that if they left the Church for much longer without a leader, divine retribution would follow.

They hurriedly went in search of this octogenarian bumpkin, in his mountain retreat above Sulmona in the Abruzzi. There he had founded a monastery of great austerity, and lived so purely in the world of the miraculous and the spiritual that he had been able to hang his cowl upon a sunbeam.²⁴

Charles II himself and his son Charles Martel clambered up to Pietro’s rocky hermitage of Sant’Onofrio with a donkey, placed the saint²⁵ astride this animal, and took him to L’Aquila, where, safe from the in-fighting of Roman factions, he could safely be made Pope Celestine V.

It was not to be a long pontificate. Ensclosed in the royal palace in Naples, the old man was soon begging to have a cell constructed which would remind him of his mountain hermitage. He appeared

to have only the haziest knowledge of Latin, but in his plebeian Italian he implored them to let him abdicate. Dante, who attributed, in his *Comedy*, many or most of the ills of the contemporary Church to Benedetto Caetani, believed that it was he who, for reasons of personal ambition, forced the saintly Pope Celestine V to resign. It was even said that Caetani hid in the old man's room and addressed him in 'supernatural' tones, through a speaking tube, a *tromba*, telling him to go. This story was first told in a Florentine chronicle of 1303, and achieved wide circulation. It was used as evidence in Boniface's posthumous 'trial' and it is mentioned in an Icelandic saga of the fifteenth century.²⁶ In the autumn of 1294 the hermit-Pope suggested handing over the administration of the Church to three cardinals, while he devoted himself to prayer and fasting, but this suggestion was hotly refused. When the Pope asked for his advice, Cardinal Caetani stated what he must have known to be a falsehood: namely, that there were historical precedents for papal abdication. Celestine V abdicated on 13 December 1294, was stripped of his papal insignia and renamed simply Brother Pietro. He pleaded to be allowed to return to Monte Morrone, but Caetani, who had now emerged as the most powerful figure among the twelve cardinals in the College of Cardinals, forbade this.

After the fiasco of Celestine's Papacy, and the divisive Papacies which went before it, Caetani was determined not to allow another period in which the Holy See was empty, or worse, in which its rightful occupant was disputed. No more long interregna would be permitted. The cardinals were assembled at the royal court in Naples and on Christmas Eve elected Caetani as Boniface VIII. Was there significance in the name? St Boniface in the ninth century had converted the Germans to Christianity. Boniface was to spend his pontificate playing off the German claimants to the Imperial throne against the French. The monk-hermit was locked up in a tower at Castello di Fumone, lest the factions hostile to the new Pope should use the old one for their own purposes. Indifferent to the possibility, and yet determined to evade the nightmare in which he had been trapped, the spirited old man escaped; but he was recaptured and he eventually died in prison on 19 May 1296.²⁷ Though Dante places him on the borders of Hell, ditheringly anonymous, among the angels who had not even been able to decide to support God or Satan during the War in Heaven, the Catholic Church decided to canonize Celestine – in 1313, he became one of the many people known as St Peter. In 1988, an X-ray was conducted on the skull of Pope Celestine V. Signore de Matteis and Father Quirino Salomone of the Celestine Study Centre at L'Aquila, where he was buried, said that a five-centimetre hole was found in the Pope's cranium. 'We think the hole was made by a nail driven through the Pope's head by an unknown assassin,' Father Salomone said.²⁸

After this episode, it was hardly surprising that Pope Boniface VIII should have regarded it as imperative to strengthen the position of the Roman Pontiff. There was no need for this august, suave lawyer to emphasize the difference between himself and his flea-ridden holy predecessor. Nevertheless, he emphasized his sovereign status by riding to his coronation on a white charger gorgeously accoutred, the King of Naples holding the bridle on one side and the King of Hungary on the other.²⁹ 'Vulpes intravit, tanquam leo pontificavit, exit ut canis – He came in like a fox, he played the pontiff like a lion, and he went out like a dog.'³⁰ In Rome itself, he set out to banish the Colonna family from their Mafia-like grip on the Curia. In Italy, he wished to ally himself to Charles II of Naples in order to build up a power-base against what was plainly the greatest political threat to the independence of the Papacy at this time – not the German Emperor, but the French King, Philip the Fair. Against what was said by all this Pope's enemies, most eloquent of whom was to become Dante, it must be stated that within two years of Boniface's death, the Papacy itself would become a French dependency, the Popes would begin their 'Babylonian captivity' (a phrase coined by Petrarch), the seventy years during which they resided not in Rome but in Avignon. For Dante, Rome was so much more than a symbol. It was the very centre of that historical narrative in which the human race found

its redemption. For Dante, the Babylonian exile was even worse than the corruption of the Pontifex when in Rome. But against Boniface he could never be forgiving, since it was precisely in the Pope's political calculations, his struggles against the King of France, that Dante's life was to be tragically caught up and, as he would have seen it, ruined.

If Dante came as a pilgrim to look up at the Pope on the balcony at Easter 1300, his encounters with Boniface later in the year were of a purely political complexion.

Boniface spent very little of 1300 in Rome. For most of the year, he was in his birthplace, Anagnini, the magnificent fortified hill town, cool above the broad valley of the Sacco. Beyond stretches the green plain at the end of which ascend the seven hills of Rome itself. Here indeed it feels as if one surveys the kingdoms of the world and the glory thereof, Satan's last and greatest temptation to Christ as he was taken to a high mountain in the Judean wilderness, and offered political power by the Devil.

It was to the papal palace in Anagnini in September 1300 that there arrived the noisy and ostentatious entourage of Charles, Count of Valois, and brother of the French King, Philip the Fair. The Pope needed this man. There was hope that he might become a pro-papal Holy Roman Emperor. Meanwhile, the Pope hoped that he would be able to regain the throne of Sicily for the French. The French presence on Italian soil was deeply hated by most Italians, nowhere more than in Sicily. In 1282, the Sicilians had risen up and massacred the French in Palermo (the incident known as the Sicilian Vespers) and got rid of the French King. Since then, the King of Aragon, not an ally of the Pope's, had occupied the Sicilian throne. All the Papacy's expansionist dreams, including control or if not actual conquest of, the Eastern Empire and Constantinople, depended upon their control of Sicily – or so they supposed. So, the Pope backed Charles of Valois (1270 – 1325) as his man in Italy – his man to conquer Sicily, and where necessary to subdue the anti-papal or Ghibelline city states. By 1302, Charles had earned the nickname Lack-land ('Carlo Senzaterra'), so unsuccessful were his campaigns. The Pope had quarrelled so badly with Charles's brother that his own health and political strength were destroyed. And the party in Florence which had opposed the ambitions of Charles of Valois had also been vanquished. Almost everyone, in fact, in this particular power struggle, turned out to be a loser.

But it was worth one last throw of the dice for the Pope. And this was where Dante's destiny came to be entwined with that of Boniface. Dante, as well as being the most famous young poet in Italy, had entered politics, and during 1300, as luck would have it, he was rising in power in his city. In May, the Priors of Florence (the leaders of the city who served a two-month period in office) entrusted Dante with a diplomatic role. He was to go to San Gimignano to conduct negotiations with other like-minded factions in Tuscany. Florence was of vital importance to the Pope, to Charles of Valois, and indeed to anyone who wanted control of Italy. Not only was it, as we shall see in the next chapter, more or less the biggest city in Italy. It was also the source of currency. Its great asset, apart from a huge manufacturing and mercantile base, was the production of florins – the city gave its name to the coin which was fast becoming the chief currency of Europe.

The Pope, whose idea of celebrating Easter in Holy Year was to station priests beside the altar of St Paul to rake cash into their bins, was not slow to recognize the importance of cash-rich Florence in the scheme of things. But as well as being the richest city in Italy, it was also the most faction-ridden, the most sectarian, the most dangerously at war with itself and with its neighbours. For decades there had been rivalry between those families and factions which supported the interests of the German Emperors in Italy – these were called Ghibellines – and those which, broadly speaking, supported the Popes. These were called Guelfs. Dante's family were Guelfs, and he had married into one of the biggest Guelf family dynasties – the Donati.

Now in the last couple of years before the Holy Year a deadly feud had broken out among the Guelfs of Florence. Leader of one side in the feud was Corso Donati, known as the Big Baron. The

faction was known as the Blacks. Leader of the other side in the feud was a very rich banker, Vieri de' Cerchi. The Cerchi side in the feud was known as the Whites. Although (or perhaps because?) he was married into the Donati clan, Dante found himself lining up with the Whites. While Dante was at San Gimignano that year, the Pope, without the knowledge of Dante and his friends, was in secret negotiation with Corso Donati and the Florentine Blacks. Corso was at this time banished from Florence for a financial scandal, and the Pope was further exasperated by the fact that the Whites in charge of Florentine affairs had fined three Florentine businessmen, and members of Boniface's papal court, for conspiring against their city. They were sentenced, in their absence, to having their tongues cut out.

In May, Boniface sent Cardinal Matthew of Acquasparta to Florence, ostensibly to quieten down the feud between Blacks and Whites, but actually to promote Black interests. He wanted Corso's banishment revoked. Corso had secretly promised to let Charles of Valois into Florence and to hand over the city to French control.

On 13 June, new Priors were elected and this time Dante became one of the rulers of Florence. Almost at once they had a crisis on their hands. On the Eve of St John the Baptist (patron of the Florentines), the annual celebrations were disrupted by a riot. The *grandi*, or aristocrats, jeered at the merchants in the procession, asking who had been responsible for winning the great military victory some years before against Arezzo. The riot, as so often, got out of hand. The Priors decided that the only fair solution was to exile seven White *grandi* and eight Blacks. One of the Whites exiled was Dante's former best friend and poetic mentor Guido Cavalcanti.

So Dante's time as Prior was shot through with personal tragedy. Whatever his feelings about Guido by this time, the man had been his best friend and he could scarcely have wanted to send him – which he in effect did – to his death. (Guido died of malaria contracted among the swamps of Sarzana.)

Dante had made two speeches in the parliament of Florence, the Consiglio delle Capitadini. In the first – during a debate about how the Priors should be elected – he had supported a more democratic method of election. In the second speech, he was fatefully to mark himself down as a man whom Pope Boniface would have been glad to do without.

The Pope had asked the Florentines for military assistance in a small campaign he was conducting in the Maremma district, a campaign against the formidable Margherita Aldobrandeschi ('The Red Countess'). He already had one hundred Florentine knights in his army and he had asked for a renewal of the favour. Four opinions were expressed in the debate. Two were in favour of letting the Pope have his knights. One was in favour of delay. But the fourth speaker was in favour of refusing the Pope. 'Dante Alaghieri consulit quod de servitio faciendo d[omino] pape nichil fiat' — 'Dante Alighieri advised that, as to assisting the Pope, nothing should be done.'³¹

When it came to a vote, the Pope got his cavalry by forty-nine votes to thirty-two, but it is inconceivable that he did not hear of Dante's vote in the debate; from now onwards, the famous poet and anti-papal troublemaker was a marked man. What he had seen during Easter in the Holy City had plainly not impressed him favourably. Though the piety of the faithful had touched his heart, he had been nauseated by the displays of clerical avarice. Those priests raking the money off the altars are an unforgettable image in the chronicle. And Dante's *Comedy* inveighs over and over again against Popes, bishops, abbots and other clerics who use the Church as a way of making money.

By the time Charles of Valois was visiting the Pope at Anagni in September 1300, the Pope and the Florentine Blacks had already formed their alliance. Charles collected 200,000 florins from Boniface on his visit to Anagni. He had already been given 70,000 florins by Corso Donati, the Big Baron, who was still in exile.

At the end of September, the Florentine Whites sent a small delegation to the Pope to prevent their interests being completely overridden by the Franco-Donati alliance. Two of the three ambassadors

were men of whom history has little to say, while one was known as the greatest poet of the Middle Ages. But his poem would never have been written if he had not made this diplomatic mission and thus fallen foul of the Pope.

Given the way that Corso Donati and Pope Boniface VIII liked to operate, it would seem almost certain that Dante's fate was sealed even before he reached the papal palace. (Whether he was visiting Boniface in Rome or Anagni is not clear.)

'Why are you so stubborn?' asked Boniface of the three ambassadors. 'Humble yourselves before me; and I tell you in truth that my only intention is for your city to be at peace. Two of you will go back to Florence; and may they have my blessing if they ensure that my will is obeyed.'³²

Dante was in effect left a hostage with the Pope. The two inordinately proud, strong characters he confronted one another – allegories, almost, of the visions of life and of history which they represented. Boniface was tall, silky, disdainful, with an oval face and a severe expression. He had a massive jaw and very good teeth – only two of them were rotten when they opened his tomb in 1604. He was probably gay. (There were complaints at his posthumous 'trial' of large numbers of male concubines.³³)

Dante was a much shorter man – no more than five feet five inches (between 1.64 and 1.65 metres) tall, it was estimated when his body was exhumed.³⁴ We all know his face – the long shape, the aquiline nose, the large eyes. His jaw was very pronounced, and the lower lip jutted beyond the upper. His complexion was very dark and his beard was thick and curling. But the hair colour, surprisingly for so swarthy a man, was fair.³⁵ While Boniface was all smoothness and diplomacy, Dante was passion and rage. Both accepted the Roman Church as the means of salvation. But whereas for Boniface, the brilliant canon lawyer, it was the institution of the Church which was self-justifying, for Dante it was the Church as a vehicle for leading the inner life which gave it its credentials. The newly formulated doctrine of Purgatory had given Boniface the chance to make some much-needed cash. It had begun to shape Dante Alighieri's brain a sequence of inspirations which would create a literary masterpiece, the beginnings of modern literature with human singularity and self-consciousness at the centre of it.

Over the comparatively minor question of which unscrupulous gang enjoyed the patronage of Pope or French prince, these two polar opposites were to fall out. The Pope kept Dante as his 'guest'. But now it would seem that the Florentine delegation and the Pope himself had moved down the hills and valleys and back to the city of Rome itself.

As he left Rome, Dante heard the news which would change his life, and alter the fate of European literature. The Pope had stitched him up. During his absence from Florence, there had been a coup. It was orchestrated by that ruthless man, Corso Donati. He was back from exile, and he was determined to give his enemies, the Whites, a taste of their own medicine. But he was to pay them back more ruthlessly than they had paid him. Cante de' Gabrielli, one of Dante's enemies, also came back from exile and was made the civil chief of the city, the *podestà*. A trumped-up charge was levelled against Dante and his political allies that they had been guilty of barratry – the sale of political office. They were also condemned for having exiled the Blacks, who were described as 'loyal devotees of the Holy Roman Church' – which in a way they were.

For five consecutive days in Florence, White Guelf properties, including Dante's house, were pillaged and burned. Charles of Valois, the Peacemaker, looked calmly on and lifted not a finger to prevent the murder and arson which continued for a month. When enough of his enemies had been ruined or killed, the Pope once more sent Cardinal Matthew Acquasparta on a 'peacemaking' mission. This did nothing to stop the reciprocal killings on both sides, and nor did it help Dante.

In the cold of the Tuscan winter, with no money and nowhere to live, Dante was banished from Florence. He was sentenced to a fine of 5,000 florins. His property was to be destroyed, and if he

returned within five years he was to be killed. Later, in the summer of 1301, the Blacks added to the misery by decreeing that the wives and children over the age of fourteen of the exiled Whites should also be expelled from the city. Altogether 600 White Guelfs were exiled, wandering through Tuscan like beggars. It was this abominable cruelty which was to be the making of Dante's poetic life. It is his early life in Florence that we shall now return.

III

DANTE'S FLORENCE 1260–74

FLORENCE IS ONE OF THE MOST BEAUTIFUL CITIES IN THE WORLD, and it is difficult to imagine any visitor who does not remember their first sight of it. Its most conspicuous feature for the visitor is perhaps the dome of Brunelleschi, built in 1462 after the architect's death. Next, the eye catches the bell-tower of the cathedral, the campanile, designed by Dante's friend Giotto, but not built in Dante's lifetime. In fact, the visitor who wishes to see the Florence of Dante's boyhood must imaginatively eliminate nearly all the glorious Renaissance city of Florence which we see today: all the austere splendours of the Medici, the Strozzi and the Pitti palaces, and the Laurentian Library and the tomb of Masaccio in the Carmine, and the cells of San Marco decorated by Fra Angelico, and the giant statue of Michelangelo's *David* in the Bargello.

If you, as a modern visitor, approached the Florence in which Dante was born, some time in May or June of 1265, you might, if you did so at dawn or twilight, imagine that you were coming into a modern city with a high-rise skyline. In his *Comedy*, Dante makes the same mistake in reverse, when he and Virgil approach the central pit of Hell. Seeing the giants looming up from the ninth circle of the *Inferno*, Dante thinks he is entering a contemporary Italian city:

Thitherward, not long
My head was raised, when many a lofty tower
Methought I spied. 'Master,' said I, 'what land
Is this?'

[*Inf.* XXXI.14, 18—21, Henry Francis Cary's translation]

The inhabitants of medieval Italian cities lived in a state of such enmity with one another that it was necessary for them to live huddled in fortified towers. Not only were their cities surrounded by thick turreted walls to keep at bay their enemies from other cities. Their internal city architecture also took for granted the fact that, at any moment, your fellow-citizens would wish to knife, rob or pillage you and your family.

Rome at this period was infested with towers built by rival gangs. In spite of drastic measures which the city authorities and the Popes tried to take against them, such magnates as the Orsini and the Colonna built tower-fortresses all over the ancient monuments and even on the Capitol.¹ It was the same in Florence. In 1200, there were 150 towers. The modern tourist in Tuscany can see something of the same effect when visiting the small hill town of San Gimignano, where some of the extraordinary structures survive. The effect, when approached in mist, or evening light, is not unlike a sort of medieval Manhattan.

To be born in medieval Florence was to be born with a ready-made set of enemies. Dante, as a member of a Guelf family, was born the enemy of their rivals the Ghibellines. And within the tight

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