

Marx Hardy Machiavelli Joyce Austen
Defoe Abbot Melville Montaigne Cooper Emerson Hugo
Stoker Wilde Christie Maupassant Haggard Chesterton Molière Eliot Grimm
Garnett Engels Schiller Byron Molière
Goethe Hawthorne Smith Kafka
Cotton Dostoyevsky Kipling Doyle
Baum Leslie Henry Flaubert Nietzsche Willis
Dumas Stockton Vatsyayana Crane
Burroughs Verne
Curtis Tocqueville Gogol Busch
Homer Tolstoy Whitman Twain
Darwin Zola Lawrence Dickens Plato
Potter Freud Jowett Stevenson Andersen Burton Harte
Kant London Descartes Cervantes Voltaire Cooke
Poe Aristotle Wells Bunner Shakespeare Chambers Irving
Hale James Hastings Richter Chekhov da Shaw Wodehouse
Doré Dante Pushkin Alcott
Swift



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**Dante: "The Central Man of All
the World" A Course of Lectures
Delivered Before the Student
Body of the New York State
College for Teachers, Albany,
1919, 1920**

John T. (John Theodore) Slattery

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DEDICATION

THIS MODEST WORK OWES ITS
PUBLICATION TO THE ENCOURAGEMENT OF
PRESIDENT ABRAM R. BRUBACHER

AND

DEAN HARLAN H. HORNER
OF THE STATE COLLEGE FOR TEACHERS, ALBANY, N.Y.

WHERE MANY PLEASANT HOURS WERE PASSED IN
DELIVERING THESE LECTURES. TO THESE FRIENDS
AND TO THE STUDENT-BODY OF THE COLLEGE THE
AUTHOR HAS THE HONOR OF DEDICATING THIS BOOK

PREFACE

I stand as does the reader at the entrance to this book which I have not as yet entered myself. I have before me the journey through the Inferno and Purgatorio, into Paradise, with a new companion. I have made the journey before many times with others, or with Dante and Virgil alone, but I know that I shall enjoy especially the companionship and comment of one with whom I have had such satisfaction of comradeship in our journey as neighbors for a little way across this earth. I invite others, and I hope they may be many, to make this brief journey with us, not because I know specifically what Dr. Slattery will say along the way, but because whatever he says out of his deep and reverent acquaintance with the Divine Comedy will help us all who follow him, whether we are of his particular faith or not, to an appreciation of the meaning of this immortal poem, and make us desire to go again and again in our reading through these spaces of the struggles of human souls.

A world-literary-movement will commemorate in 1921 the six hundredth anniversary of the death of the immortal Dante. That a medievalist should call forth the homage of the twentieth century to the extent of being honored in all civilized lands and by cultured peoples who, for the most part, do not know the language spoken by him, or who do not profess the religion of him who wrote the most religious book of Christianity, is a marvel explainable by the fact that the Divine Comedy is a drama of the soul,—the story of a struggle which every man must make to possess his own spirit against forces that would enslave it. The central interest of the poem is in the individual who may be you or I instead of Dante the subject of the work, and that fact exalts the personal element and gives the spiritual value which we of modern times appreciate as well as did the thirteenth century.

The Divine Comedy is attractive for other reasons. It may appeal to us as it did to Tennyson, because of "its divine intensity," or it may affect us as it did Charles Eliot Norton by "its powerful exposition of moral penalties and rewards," showing that righteousness is inexorable; or it may interest us because of its solid realism, its pure strength of conception, its surpassing beauty, its vivid imaginative

power, its perfection of diction "without superfluousness, without defect." Whatever be the reason of our interest in Dante, the study of his Divine Comedy will ever be both a discipline "not so much to elevate our thoughts," says Coleridge, "as to send them down deeper," and a delight calling forth the deepest emotions of our being.

JOHN H. FINLEY.

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DANTE AND HIS TIME

To know Dante we must know the age which produced Christianity's greatest poet, he whom Ruskin calls "the central man of all the world, as representing in perfect balance the imaginative, moral and intellectual faculties, all at their highest." Other writers are not so dependent upon their times for our clear understanding of their books. Dante to be intelligible to the modern mind, cannot be taken out of the thirteenth century. "Its contemporary history and its contemporary spirit" says Brother Azarias in his *Phases of Thought and Criticism*, "constitute his clearest and best commentary." Only in the light of this commentary can we hope to know his message and realize its supremacy. And that it is worth while to make the study there can be no doubt upon the part of any seeker of truth and admirer of beauty.

Emerson said: "I think if I were a professor of rhetoric I should use Dante for my text-book. Dante is the rhetorician. He is all wings, pure imagination and he writes like Euclid." James Russell Lowell told his students in answer to the question as to the best course of reading to be followed:⁴ "If I may be allowed a personal illustration, it was my own profound admiration for the *Divina Commedia* of Dante that lured me into what little learning I possess." Gladstone declared: "In the school of Dante I learned a great part of that mental provision ... which has served me to make the journey of human life." It surely must be of inestimable advantage to sit under the instruction of one of the race's master teachers who stimulates one to lofty thinking and deep feeling, leads one into realms of wider knowledge and helps one to know his own age by revealing a mighty past.

To see that mighty past, to live again with Dante in the thirteenth century is possible only after we have cleared the way with which ignorance and misrepresentation have encumbered the approach. Here, perhaps, more than in any other period of civilization is the dictum true that history is often a conspiracy against the truth. We moderns who are not only obsessed with the theory of evolution, but are dominated by the idea that nothing of permanent value can come from medievalism, arrogantly proclaim that ours is the great-

est of centuries because we have not only what all other centuries had, but something else distinctively our own—a vast contribution to the world's progress. This self-complacency makes us forget that whatever truth there may be in the5 great theory of evolution, certainly the validity of the theory is not confirmed by the intellectual history of the human race. As was said of the Patriarchal Age so we may say of Dante's times "there were giants in those days" which we presume to ignore. Homer, Shakespeare, Dante, indeed stand forth in irrefutable protest against the questionable assertion of evolution that the present is intellectually superior to the past.

The evolutionary theory prejudices our age against acknowledging the high accomplishments of the past. So to know the truth we must overcome the conspiracy with which so-called history has enveloped the past, especially those generations immediately prior to Dante's. How that ignorance of the history and spirit of that period can blind even a great writer to the wonderful feats inherited from the centuries immediately preceding the thirteenth, is revealed by the assertion of Carlyle that "in Dante ten *silent* centuries found a voice." To state what history now regards as fact, it must be said that while Dante by his giant personality and sublime poetic genius could alone ennoble any epoch he was not "a solitary phenomenon of his time but a worthy culmination of the literary movement which, beginning shortly before 1200, produced down to 1300 such a mass of undying literature" that subsequent generations have found in it their model and inspiration 6 and have never quite equalled its originality and worth.

In verification of this statement I have only to mention to you the names of the Cid of Spain, the Arthurian Legends of England, the Nibelungen Lied of Germany and the poems of the Meistersingers, the Trouveres and the Troubadours. The authors of these works had been taught to make themselves eternal as Dante says Brunetto Latini taught him. They are proof against the alleged dumbness of the ages just preceding Dante's. Of those times speaks Dr. Ralph Adams Cram, renowned equally for historical study and for architectural ability: "The twelfth was the century of magnificent endeavors and all that was great in its successor is here in embryo not only in art but in philosophy, religion and the conduct of life. The eleventh century is a time of aspiration and vision, of the enuncia-

tion of new principles and of the first shock of the contest between the old that was doomed and the new that was destined to unprecedented victories." (*The Substance of Gothic*, p. 69.)

Let us now make a general survey of Dante's century and then consider the more particular events and circumstances of his environment.

It may be a surprise to you to know that there is a book entitled *The Thirteenth, the Greatest of Centuries* by Dr. James J. Walsh, in its fifth⁷ edition with a sale of 70,000 copies. He indeed is not the only man of letters who signalizes that century for its greatness. To confine the quotations to two writers well known in our day, I find that Fiske in his *Beginnings of New England* says of the thirteenth century: "It was a wonderful time but after all less memorable as the culmination of medieval empire and medieval church than as the dawning of the new era in which we live today." Frederic Harrison, in his *Survey of the Thirteenth Century* says, "Of all the epochs of effort after a new life that ... is the most spiritual, the most really constructive and indeed the most truly philosophic. It had great thinkers, great rulers, great teachers, great poets, great artists, great moralists, and great workmen. It could not be called the material age, the devotional age, the political age or the poetic age in any special degree. It was equally poetic, political, industrial, artistic, practical, intellectual and devotional. And these qualities acted on a uniform conception of life with a real symmetry of purpose."

Ours is an age of thought but of thought finding concrete expression in practical invention and especially in activities in the line of manufacture and commerce. Posterity will probably characterize our age as the Industrial Age, a phrase that will signalize our period both for the development⁸ of industries not thought possible a century ago and for the evolution of the industrial worker to a position of striking importance and power. For the first time in the history of humanity the workman's status is the subject of international agreement. The League of Nations promises to treat Labor from a humanitarian point of view and so to place it on the broad, firm pathway leading to industrial peace and economical solidarity for the common good. That would seem a necessity in view of the strides of progress in other directions.

Now wireless telegraphy crosses oceans and unites continents. The wireless telephone between ships and shore is in operation. It has been found practicable to transport by submarine a cargo from Bremen to Baltimore. In aircraft the development has been just as wonderful. Less than ten years ago the world's record for long flight by aeroplane was made, with no regard for time, with two stops between Albany and New York. In July, 1919, an aeroplane making no stop covered the distance between New York and Chicago in some six hours. Furthermore an American seaplane, in three stages made the trip from New York to England and then a British Dirigible without making a stop came from England to Long Island in ninety-six hours. "This is the end and the beginning of an age" says the author of *Mr. Britling Sees It Through*. "This is something far greater than the French Revolution or the Reformation and we live in it."

We indeed consider it the age of "big things." Dynasties fall and republics spring up. When war breaks out it is a World War involving twenty-four nations and causing 7,781,806 deaths (Nelson's Encyclopedia, V. iv, p. 519) and costing \$200,000,000,000. In the first year in which we were at war, our country spent more than had been the cost of conducting the government for 124 years, including the expenses of the Civil and the Spanish-American Wars. Yes, it is an age of things." The Allies in the Champagne offensive of September, 1915, threw 50,000,000 shells into the German lines in three days. Was it one out of sympathy with "big things," one intent on the quiet of the higher life as contrasted with the din of the day, who said that "modern civilization is noise and the more civilization progresses, the greater will be the noise?" In any event the muses who inspired Dante, are almost dumb. Now the captains of industry are the commanding figures of the day and the student, the poet, the philosopher, the statesman have gone into innocuous desuetude. Amy Lowell is preferred to Longfellow: Charlie Chaplin draws bigger crowds than Shakespeare¹⁰ can interest. Trainmen get wages higher than are the salaries of some of our governors. Unskilled labor is paid more than the teachers of our youth receive. The cost of living was never higher in the history of mankind.

How illuminating to turn from this picture to that of Dante's age. Then in Florence, a bushel of wheat cost about fifteen cents, a car-

penter could buy a broad ax for five cents, a saw for three cents, a plane for four cents, a chisel for one cent. The average daily wage of a woolworker was about thirty-six cents. In view of the high purchasing power of money in Dante's age, the fact that he borrowed at least seven hundred and fifty seven and a half golden florins, a debt that was not paid until after his death, leads one to think that he must have been regarded by his contemporaries as prodigal in the use of money. His financial difficulties must have given him an uneasy conscience for he insists repeatedly on the wickedness of prodigality. In fact he makes the abuse of money on the part either of a miser or of a spendthrift a sin against the social order punishable according to the gravity of the offence in Hell or Purgatory.

To return to the matter of prices in Dante's day. In England a goose could be bought for two and a half pence. A stall-fed ox commanded twenty-four shillings while his fellow brought up¹¹ on grass was sold for sixteen shillings. A fat hog, two years old,—and this is interesting to us who pay seventy-five cents a pound for bacon—a fat hog two years old cost only three shillings four pence and a fat sheep shorn, one shilling and two pence. A gallon of oysters was purchasable for two pence, a dozen of the best soles for three pence. A yard of broadcloth cost only one shilling one pence, a pair of shoes four pence. These figures of English money are taken from an act of Edward III of England who was born seven years after Dante's death. Parliamentary enactment under the same king fixed a table of wages.

For a day's work at haymaking or weeding of corn, for instance, a woman got one penny. For mowing an acre of grass or threshing a quarter of wheat a man was paid four pence. The reaper received also four pence for his day's labor. Eight hours constituted a working day. The people of the Middle Ages not only had the Saturday half-holiday but they enjoyed release from work on nearly forty vigils of feast days during the year. That they were as well off, e.g. as the unskilled laborer of our day, who demands from four to eight dollars a day as a wage, is evident from the fact that while he has to pay forty cents a pound for mutton, the workman of Edward the Third's day earned enough in four days to buy a whole sheep and a gallon of ale. So plentiful was meat¹² in England that it was the ordinary diet of the poor. A preamble of an act of Parliament of the

fourteenth century in specifying beef, pork, mutton and veal declares that these are "the food of the poorer sort." (The Thirteenth, the Greatest of Centuries, p. 479.)

Speaking of live-stock leads to the observation that the people of Dante's time for the most part lived in the country. Cities had not yet become magnets. London is supposed to have had a population of twenty-five thousand, York ten thousand four hundred, Canterbury, four thousand seven hundred, Florence, in the year 1300, according to Villani, a contemporary of Dante, had "ninety thousand enjoying the rights of citizenship. Of rich Grandi, there were fifteen hundred. Strangers passing through the city numbered about two thousand. In the elementary schools were eight thousand to ten thousand children." (Staley's Guilds of Florence, p. 555.)

The means of travel and communication, of course, were few and difficult. The roads were bad and dangerous. In France, Germany and Italy there were so many forms of government, dukedoms, baronies, marquisates, signories, city republics, each with its own custom regulations, not to speak of each having its own coinage and language, that travelers encountered obstacles almost at every step. For the most part, journeys¹³ had to be made afoot and a degree of safety was attained only if the traveler joined a large trade caravan, a pilgrimage or a governmental expedition. Night often found the party far from a hospice or inn and so they were obliged for shelter to camp on the highway or in the fields. Necessarily the traveler was subjected to innumerable privations and sufferings.

I have not been able to get accurate information as to the exact length of time required to make a trip, say from London to Paris—a distance covered the other day by an aeroplane in eighty minutes. But, the "Consuetudines" of the Hereford Cathedral, England, afford us some data upon which to base the conclusion that six weeks were necessary for such a trip, allowing another week for religious purposes. The "Consuetudines" after specifying that no canon of the cathedral was to make more than one pilgrimage beyond the seas in his lifetime, allows the clergyman seven weeks' absence to go abroad to the tomb of St. Denis in the suburbs of Paris, sixteen weeks to Rome and a year to Jerusalem.

A table of time limits between Florence and the principal cities of Europe and the East made by the Florentine Banking houses in Dante's day, showed the number of days required for consignments of specie and goods to reach their destination. Rome was reached in fifteen days, Venice¹⁴ and Naples in twenty days, Flanders in seventy days, England and Constantinople in seventy-five days, Cyprus in ninety days. How long it took Dante to make the trip from Florence to Rome, we do not know but history tells us that he went to the Eternal City in the year 1300. He was indeed a great traveler. During his twenty years' exile, we know that our poet's itinerary led him among other places to Padua, Venice, Ravenna, Paris and there is good reason to believe, as Gladstone contends, that he went for study to Oxford. The regret is permissible that he did not leave us an account of his journeyings. "Had he given us pictures—as he alone could have painted them—of scenes by the wayside and of the courts of which he was an honored guest," says Dr. J.A. Zahm in his *Great Inspirers*, "we should have had the most interesting and the most instructive travel book ever written."

We cannot but notice one great effect brought about by traveling in those days, especially by pilgrimages and by the Crusades formed in defence of pilgrimages to the Holy Land and that is, that there arose on all sides a desire for liberty and the growth of a spirit of nationality that worked to the destruction of absolute government. The power of the common people began to assert itself. In 1215, England forced from John Lackland the Magna Charta, the foundation¹⁵ of all the liberty of English speaking people even in modern times. The very year in which Dante was born, representatives of the townspeople were admitted as members of the English Parliament. In France, during the thirteenth century, the centralization of power in the hands of the kings went forward with the gradual diminution of the influence of the nobility—a fact operating to the people's advantage.

In 1222 the nobles forced Andrew II of Hungary to issue the Golden Bull, the instrument which Blackstone later declared turned "anarchy into law." In Germany and Sicily Frederick II published laws giving a larger measure of popular freedom. In Italy, the existence of the city republics—especially those of Florence, Sienna, Pi-

sa — showed how successfully the ferment of liberty had penetrated the mass of the body-politic.

Coming now to regard the characteristics of Dante's age we must say that the first big thing that looms in sight is the fact that this was the golden age of Christian faith. Everywhere the Cross, the symbol of salvation, met the eye. It was the age when men lived in one faith, used one ritual, professed one creed, accepted a common doctrine and moral standard and breathed a common religious atmosphere. Heresy was not wholly absent but it was the exception. Religion regarded then not as an accident or an incident¹⁶ of life but as a benign influence permeating the whole social fabric, not only cared for the widow and orphan and provided for the poor, but it shaped men's thoughts, quickened their sentiments, inspired their work and directed their wills. These men believed in a world beyond the grave as an ever present reality. Hell, Purgatory, Heaven were so near to them that they, so to speak, could touch the invisible world with their hands. To them, as to Dante, "this life was but a shadowy appearance through which the eternal realities of another world were constantly betraying themselves." Of the intensity and universality of faith in that life beyond death, Dante is not the exception but the embodiment. His poem has no such false note of scepticism as we detect in Tennyson's *In Memoriam*. Note the words of the modern poet:

"I falter where I firmly trod
And falling with my weight of cares
Upon the great world's altar stairs
That slope through darkness up to God,
I stretch lame hands of faith and grope
And gather dust and chaff and call
To what I feel is Lord of all
And faintly trust the larger hope."

Not thus does Dante speak. As the voice of his age he begins with faith, continues with faith¹⁷ and leads us to the unveiled vision of God. He both shows us his unwavering adherence to Christian doctrine in that scene in *Paradiso* where he is examined as to his faith by St. Peter and he teaches us that the seen is only a stepping stone into the unseen. It has been said of him in reference to his

Divina Commedia, "The light of faith guides the poet's steps through the hopeless chambers of Hell with a firmness of conviction that knows no wavering. It bears him through the sufferings of Purgatory, believing strongly fits reality: it raises him on the wings of love and contemplation into Heaven's Empyrean, where he really hopes to enjoy bliss far beyond that whereof he says." (Brother Azarias.)

Leading the religious awakening of the thirteenth century and making possible Dante's work at the end of the century were two of the world's greatest exponents of the spiritual life, both signalized in the Paradiso. St. Dominic characterized by Dante (Par. XII, 56) as "a jealous lover of the Christian faith with mildness toward his disciples but formidable to his foes," founded an order to be "the champions of Faith and the true lights of the world." Even in its early days it gave to the world eminent scholars such as Albertus Magnus and St. Thomas Aquinas, and it has never ceased to number among its members great thinkers, ardent apostles, stern ascetics and profound mystics. In Dante's time it was the only order specially charged with the office of preaching and from its founder's time down to the present day the one who acts as the Pope's Theologian has been taken from the ranks of this order. Besides preaching to all classes of Christian society and evangelizing the heathen, the Dominicans in Dante's day fought against heresy and schism, lectured in the universities, toiled among the poor, activities in which the order is still engaged.

But perhaps the man whose spiritual influence was greatest in medievalism, if not in all the history of Christianity, was Francis of Assisi, who "all seraphical in order rose a sun upon the world." (Par. XI, 37.) Born at Assisi in Umbria in 1182, the son of a wealthy cloth merchant and of Pica, a member of a noble family of Provence, Francis grew up a handsome, gay and gallant youth "the prime favorite among the young nobles of the town, the foremost in every feat of arms, the leader of civil revels, the very king of frolic." A low fever contracted when with his fellow citizens he fought against the Perugians turned his thoughts to the things of eternity. Upon his recovery he determined to devote himself to the service of his fellow man for the honor of God.

His renunciation of the things of this life¹⁹ was dramatic. To swerve him from the new life his father had cited him to appear before the Bishop. Francis, unmoved by the appeal of his father persisted in his resolution. Stripping himself of the clothes he wore, the Bishop covering his nakedness, Francis gave his clothes to his father saying, "Hitherto I have called you Father, henceforth I desire to say only Our Father who art in heaven." Then and there as Dante sings, were solemnized Francis' nuptials with his beloved Spouse, the Lady Poverty, under which name, in the mystical language afterwards so familiar to Francis, "he comprehended the total surrender of all wordly goods, honors and privileges." He went forth and attracted disciples. With these partaking of his zeal and animated by his charity, he labored to make his generation turn from the sordid to the spiritual, diffusing over all the people a tender love of nature and God.

Among his disciples—great minds of the time—were Thomas of Celano, one of the literary geniuses of the day, the author of the sublime *Dies Irae*—a religious poem chanted to this day at every funeral high mass in the Catholic Church, and frequently sung or played in great opera houses,—Bonaventure, professor of philosophy and theology at the university of Paris, Roger Bacon, the friar, the renowned teacher at Paris²⁰ and Oxford, Duns Scotus, the subtle doctor. In the Third Order established for those not following the monastic life the membership, in the course of time, embraced among others St. Louis, King of France, St. Elizabeth of Hungary, and Dante.

He, towards the end of his exile, footsore, weary and discouraged, buffeted by the adverse winds of fortune knocked, a stranger, at the gates of the Franciscan monastery at Lunigiana. "As neither I nor any of the brothers recognized him," writes Brother Hilary, the Prior, "I asked him what he wished. He made no answer but gazed silently upon the columns and galleries of the cloister. Again I asked him what he wished and whom he sought and slowly turning his head and looking around upon the brothers and me, he answered 'Peace.'"

The monks spoke gently to him, ministered with kindly and delicate sympathy to his bodily and spiritual needs. His reticence left