

# DANTE ALIGHIERI



## 1265–1321

Dante Alighieri (dān' tā al eg yēr' ē), whose visions of Hell have haunted centuries of people since the Middle Ages, was born in Florence, Italy, in May of 1265. Dante's Florence was a place of political turbulence, divided between two rival political factions, the Guelphs and the Ghibellines. The Ghibellines favored the primacy of the Holy Roman emperor in Italian politics, while the Guelphs supported the Roman pontiff. Even after the Ghibellines were expelled from Florence, the Guelphs could not unify the city-state and were themselves divided into two parties, the White (supporting the empire) and the Black (supporting the papacy).

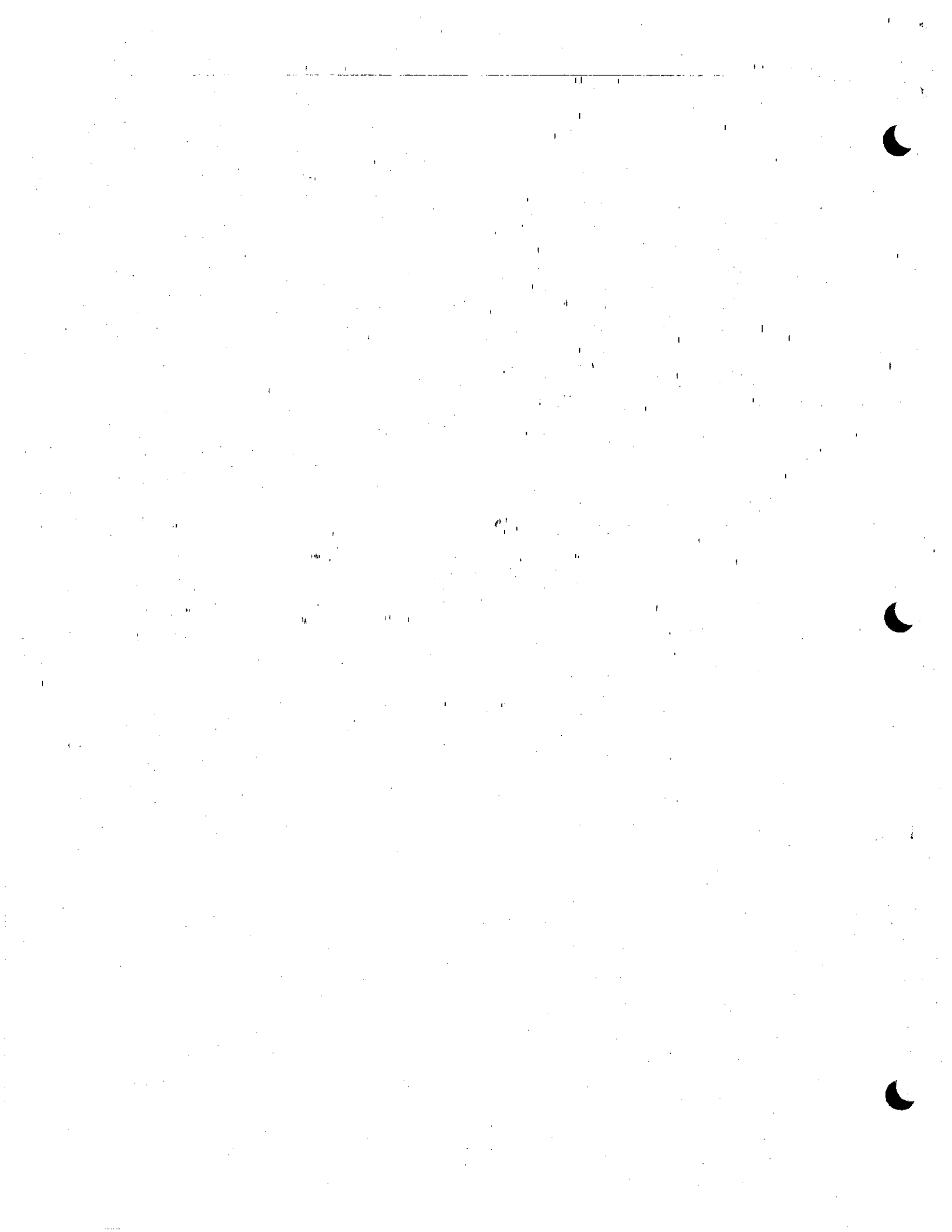
Dante was born into a well-to-do merchant family. Although his father, Alighiero di Bellincione (al eg yēr' ō dē bel lēn cō' nē), was only moderately involved in Florentine politics and remained relatively unscathed by the political troubles, the same cannot be said of Dante.

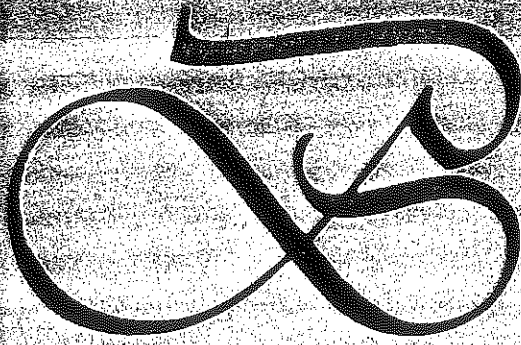
Dante was probably educated at the University of Bologna, where he studied law and rhetoric. Not only was Bologna Europe's most presti-

gious center of legal and rhetorical training, but it was also a city with a great poetical tradition. It was here that Dante came in contact with a new school of poets who sought to free poetry from its old confines of church and court. As a result, he produced a great number of lyric poems and formulated a poetic language that would culminate in the *Divine Comedy*.

Soon, however, Dante became embroiled in the political controversies of his time. He fought against the Ghibellines from Arezzo in the Battle of Campaldino in 1289. In 1295 he became an official in the Florentine commune. Dante belonged to the White faction of the Guelphs at a time when the pope, Boniface VIII, had decided to support the Blacks. The Black Guelphs, aided by the pope and the French, came to power in Florence and in 1302 Dante found himself exiled from his beloved home, never to return. Although he attempted through letters and treatises to regain some influence on papal and Italian politics, these were to no avail. Dante died in Ravenna in northern Italy in 1321.

Finished only shortly before his death, the *Divine Comedy* was the poetic journey of a man struggling to reconcile himself to a bitter political exile through the triumph of love. Guiding him on his pilgrimage for temporal and spiritual salvation was his beloved Beatrice. Dante may have seen the model for his ideal guide, Beatrice Portinari, only twice in his life, when he was nine years old and then again nine years later. Nonetheless, Beatrice, whose name means "she who blesses," became for Dante the force that led him out of his despair and into spiritual renewal. She was first the subject of most of his love poetry, but his quest for happiness in this secular role did not suffice. She became the object of his religious quest and the symbol of spiritual purity that he met at the top of the mountain of Purgatory. Such idealization of Beatrice linked her to the Virgin Mary, herself the object of cultlike adoration in the Middle Ages.





# BACKGROUND

## THE DIVINE COMEDY

The *Inferno* is the first of three parts of the *Divine Comedy*. Dante's journey begins on Good Friday, the commemoration of Christ's Crucifixion, and ends on the vigil of Easter Sunday, the celebration of Christ's Resurrection. The *Divine Comedy* thus takes the reader on a journey that symbolically begins in a despairing world not yet redeemed by Christ's Crucifixion and ends with the poet's return as a man, renewed in hope, having beheld the beatific vision of divine grace.

Central to Dante's conception and execution of all his work is his preoccupation with the number three, inspired by the Christian concept of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost united in one trinity. Not only is the *Divine Comedy* the last in a poetic trilogy but it is itself composed of three parts. Each part is composed of thirty-three cantos if we exclude the first canto of the *Inferno*, which is the only canto that takes place on Earth. Within each canto, the verse form the poet uses is called *terza rima*, which is composed of three lines. Thus from one of the smallest poetical units, the verse, to the larger project of the *Divine Comedy* and its ultimate place in the Dantean corpus, the number three is crucial.

In fact, the spiritual quest of the *Divine Comedy* takes place over the space of three days. On Good Friday, Dante finds himself lost and directionless in a dark forest. Abandoned by hope and in despair, he undertakes his quest for belonging and ultimate salvation. He is led through Hell by Virgil, who is sent down by Beatrice to guide her admirer through his spiritual journey. Virgil, perhaps the Latin poet most widely read in the Middle Ages, has special significance as a pre-Christian prophet

because of his fourth Eclogue, in which he discusses the birth of a potential savior of the Roman people. Medieval people, obsessed with relating the pagan past to the present Christian experience, were constantly justifying reading ancient literature by means of such interpretations.

The various sinners with whom Dante meets and the punishments they suffer serve as warnings to him to change his life for the better. The images and events depicted in the *Purgatorio* and the *Paradiso*, the last two sections of the *Comedy*, reinforce the lessons of the *Inferno*.

### The Circles of Hell

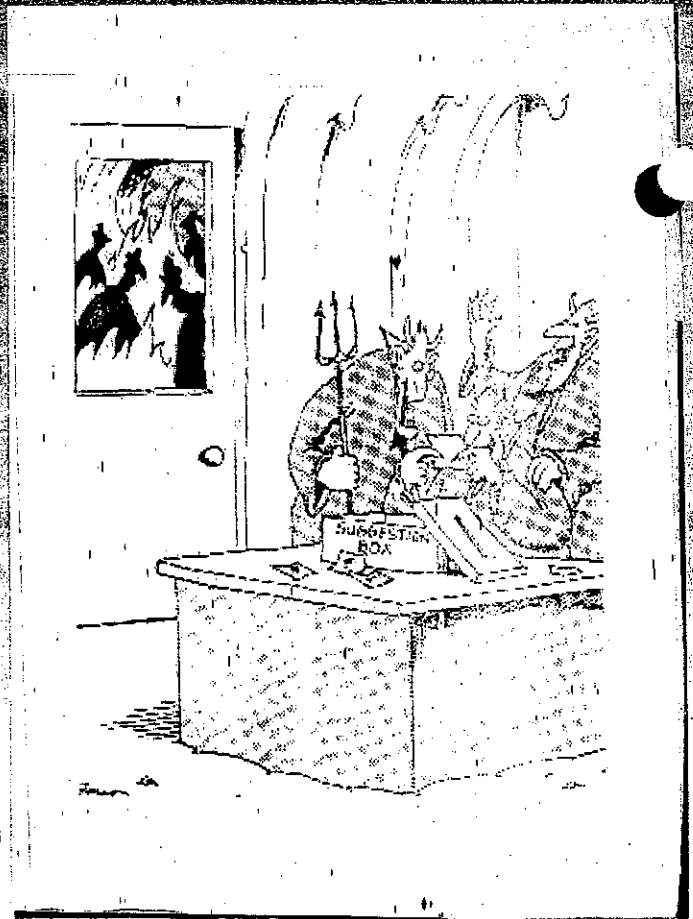
Hell is organized according to the gravity of the sin involved. In this work, however, there is a tension between the theological classification of sin and Dante's personal agenda. The farther Dante descends into the pit, the more serious the crimes committed by the people who surround him. Sometimes these crimes have been committed against God, the Church, and other people; but each of Dante's enemies finds his or her own special place in Hell. In this way Dante avenges himself on those responsible for his exile. It is ultimately his pen that condemns them to their eternal literary damnation.

The virtuous pagans, whom Dante admires but who do not know about Christ, rest peacefully in Limbo, a place without pain or hope where medieval thinking places the souls of unbaptized children and righteous people who lived before Christ's birth. They are closely followed by the lustful, the gluttonous, the avaricious, the prodigal, and the

wrathful. These relatively harmless sinners are separated from the heretics by the forbidding Wall of Dis. Even further isolated by the bloody river of Phlegethon are the violent, murderers, suicides, and blasphemers. Dante and Virgil must be carried down a steep precipice by the monster Geryon to the Malebolge, the realm of the fraudulent. Here the most hated of Dante's enemies, such as Boniface VIII, are tormented. But the lowest circle of Hell is reserved for traitors. For Dante, Lucifer, frozen into the lowest depths, is the ultimate traitor. It is easy to see why Dante finds in the demon's mouth Brutus and Cassius, who betrayed Caesar, and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Jesus Christ.

## Purgatory

Virgil carries Dante down through the bottom of Hell and then up toward the mountain of *Purgatorio*. The organization of Purgatory, with its movement toward redemption, is the mirror image of Hell. Not surprisingly, none of Dante's enemies are to be found in this realm of hope. Traitors thus begin their long climb toward Paradise at the bottom of the mountain. They are preceded by the envious, the wrathful, and the other lesser sinners. At the top of the mountain, and at the verge of salvation, Dante finds the lustful, confused by their pursuit of physical rather than spiritual love. His contemplation of love preambles his encounter with Beatrice, the personification of perfect love. At this point, Virgil can go no farther and Beatrice must become Dante's guide.



## Paradise

As Dante has confronted the wages of sin in the *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, so he contemplates the rewards of love in the *Paradiso*. It is love that ultimately saves humankind and enables Dante to gaze upon the mystical rose. Saints, angels, the Virgin Mary, and God all reside in that vision. Having seen all that without being able to describe its inexpressible beauty, Dante returns to his earthly life, renewed in his quest for ultimate redemption.

## The Vernacular

Dante broke with tradition by writing in the Italian vernacular. By not writing his masterpiece in Latin, he made it available not only to the learned but to anyone who read Italian.