

Dante: The Story of His Life

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SANTAGATA, Marco. **Dante: The Story of His Life**. Tradução de Richard Dixon. Cambridge: Belknap, 2016. 485 p.

Comprehending a work written seven centuries ago can be difficult for many reasons, even if we can read it through a good vernacular translation. One of the biggest difficulties, for example, is the cultural aspect that, beyond being from another country, belongs to another age. In case of Dante's work, the comprehension is even more difficult because he wrote for and about the Florentine citizens, as a "municipal man" as Santagata refers to: "Each of his works, in the first instance, defines a particular environment: in the *Vita Nova* it is that of his contemporaries in Florence who shared his way of life and his idea about literature; in the *Commedia* it is the families of his patrons and the political parties [...]" (p. 185).

The book in question "Dante: The Story of His Life" by Marco Santagata can lead beginners in Italian literature through Dante's life, as the title says, approaching cultural and political aspects of the medieval times, and moreover through his literary work. Also, for advanced researchers Santagata's work is paramount for consultation or reference. The text is detailed, the analyses are based on documents, registers of the epoch and circumstantial reconstruction.

Santagata portrays Dante's life from public to inner perspectives, as we can see in the following quotation where he assumes Dante's needs and feelings: "Having spent a couple of years fighting among the ranks of the exiles, he felt the need to give order to the new experiences gained over the period, to organize his feelings, the sensations, and the knowledge he had accumulated into a single conceptual framework." (p. 261).

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Dante Alighieri is a historical character, nevertheless the true history of his life is bound to fiction, as scholars have no proof of much information. That is probably why Santagata tells the story of Dante's life approaching either his psychological concerns.

As an imitation of the course of Dante's life, the book is divided into two parts: Part One under the title of "Florence" informs the reader about Dante's childhood, his life in Florence, when he first met Beatrice, his school life, friendship, family, condemnation, and so on. Part Two, called "Exile" tells the reader about how and where he lived during exile, poverty, courtier, success as poet, and death.

Each part is divided into sections. Part One is divided in "Childhood" (1265-1283), "A Strange Florentine" (1283-1295), "Municipal Man" (1295-1301), "Condemned to the Stake" (1301-1302). In "Childhood" (1265 – 1283) we learn that Dante was given the name Durante, was born in Florence (May 1265) and lived there until he was thirty-six. Santagata says that "Dante's Florence was a medieval city: a tangle of narrow streets, of buildings in stone and wood, one against the other, a jumble of houses, factories, workshops, and storehouses interspersed here and there with vegetable plots, vineyards, and gardens" (p. 9). Dante had a feeling of being different, predestined and had an exceptional nature. Giovanni Villani writes in his history of Florence (1321) that Dante's learning had made him "presumptuous, contemptuous, and disdainful". He was against modernity, i.e., economic progress and social mobility, probably because its effect on art, culture, politics and society.

Dante probably first attended a public school, at the age of five or six, as his family was not wealthy enough to afford a private teacher. First, he learned the vernacular and then some Latin. "In the *Convivio*, Dante explains that the vernacular tongue introduced him 'onto the path of knowledge' and thanks to this he 'entered Latin', a language that then opened the way 'to progress further'" (p. 26). The first cycle of school ended around the age of ten. The second cycle led the children or to the "algorism" schools, the frequently more exercised, or to the "liberal arts", which was a way to enter the university and was devoted almost entirely to Latin. It is not clear where Dante has attended the second cycle of studies, because there were no evidences of grammar schools in Florence, in the second half of the 1270s. Probably, Dante attended grammar school in monastic institutions and attained his linguistic and rhetorical skills with Brunetto Latini. Dante turned out to be an excellent Latin prose writer and a great epistolographer, useful abilities, as they will be necessary during his exile. He had a remunerated job of register or secretary for nearly two years.

The section "A Strange Florentine" (1283-1295) first talks about the difficult coexistence in the city after an upheaval against the Ghibellines in 1267. Many were interned,

exiled or persecuted. During the 1280s a new force, the trading middle class organized in guilds, diminish the bloody conflict in Florence. The guilds were concerned with domestic peace to ensure economic development. However, later, a class conflict started between the guilds and the magnates of the city due to limitations of power imposed by the guilds. The section portrays Dante as an unusual intellectual figure who could concentrate reading and be absorbed among a festival around him; showed complete disinterest in politics until the age of thirty; was unable to revenge a relative murder and was fond of painting and drawing. He is portrayed as unusual because for men at that time was extremely regular to revenge a relative's murder and to be involved with politics since the age of fifteen.

In a "Municipal Man" (1295 – 1301) Santagata says that Dante confessed in a letter, although this letter is not surely genuine, that he had chosen to write the *Commedia* in vernacular, not in Latin because the level of culture demanded it. The nobles were unpracticed in Latin. He wrote the *Commedia* almost certainly from 1306-1307 until just before his death. It is a poem written by a Florentine to his fellow citizens. The characters are almost entirely from Florence namely the ones in *Inferno*.

The section "Condemned to the Stake" (1301 – 1302) explains how and why Dante, involved in political conspirations, was condemned to exile. In med-August 1300 Dante was at the end of his term as prior and the Cerchi faction was firmly in power. The Cerchi confidence led them to commit a grave error: they persuaded the new priors to allow their political comrades back from internment at Sarzana, while leaving the representatives of the rival party at Castle della Pieva. This decision led to a new outbreak of violence. Guido Cavalcanti was one of those interned in Sarzana. Everyone knew that Guido and Dante were close friends and Dante was one behind the order. Later Dante was condemned to death along with Palmiero degli Altroviti and Guido Bruno di Forese Falconieri. On June 10, 1302, "Cante issued a sentence against fifteen defendants, including Dante. All of them had already been sentenced to fines and internment, but now they were to die at the stake, all because they hadn't turned up to prove their innocence." (p. 144).

Part Two, "Exile" is divided in "At War with Florence" (1302 – 1304); "Return to Study and Writing" (1304-1306); "The Penitent" (1306-1310); "An Emperor Arrives" (1310 – 1313); "The Prophet" (1314 – 1315); "Courtier" (1316 – 1321).

Dante left his wife and young children in Florence and went alone into exile with no financial resources or a patron to live with. He left the city before the judgments of January 18, 1302 and joined the others exiles in Arezzo. On June 9, 1302 a Commune official with the task of managing the assets of those convicted in barratry, or for political offences, and to

expel their children aged over fourteen and their wives. Meanwhile, Gemma, Dante's wife, was forced to leave Florence. Santagata says that was unlikely that she had joined Dante as he was, at that time moving between Arezzo, the Mugello, and the Casentino. "The Donati or Riccomanni family had probably found a place for her and the children outside Florence and had taken on the responsibility of their financial support" (p. 156).

"At War with Florence" (1302 – 1304) Dante had a feeling that his exile was an injustice, claiming that when those from Sarzana were called back he was out of the office of prior and must not be held responsible for it. Due to this feeling Dante acted with no sense of betrayal against his own city. He formed with Ghibelline exiles and rebel families from the Valdarno the Coalition of the Whites, occupying a governing role as member of the Council of Twelve.

"Return to Study and Writing" (1304 – 1306) While living exiled in Verona, Dante found one of the most extraordinary libraries existing at that time in Europe, the Biblioteca Capitolare. There he could access works dating back to the fifth and sixth centuries and works from Latin writers such as Livy, Pliny, Frontinus, and Orsius. Therefore, Dante could refine his intellectual and literary practice.

By the time he lived in Bologna, from 1304 forth, Dante gave private grammar lessons, what would have solved his financial problems for a moment. In Bologna, Dante could share an intellectual atmosphere, so he found the people with whom to discuss and develop his philosophical ideas. Nevertheless, he probably taught at the university of Bologna as a free lecturer, received his doctorate at the ends of 1317, and became a *magister* at many Italian universities (such as Siena, Perugia, Naples and perhaps Florence).

"The Penitent" (1306 – 1310) Dante began to nurture the idea of being granted a pardon, but he could not apply directly to the city governors. He needed to be supported by authority or prestigious people in Florence. "Dante's request for a pardon was only the beginning of a story that would continue for another two years" (p. 194).

"An Emperor Arrives" (1310 – 1313) The coronation of the emperor elected, Henry of Luxemburg, was in February 2, 1312. The arrival of the new emperor would change the political life in Italy for around four years, and those changes would affect positively Dante's life. Henry intended to establish imperial rights over northern and central regions of Italy. To achieve that he needed to restore peace between the cities, as Santagata points out: "Peace was the central word in Henry's message: he presented himself as the man whom God had destined to bring an end to disputes between cities and financial wars, to bring down the despots [...]" (p. 237).

“The Prophet” (1314 – 1315) The emperor Henry VII (of Luxemburg) died in August 24, 1313 in a military expedition, probably poisoned. With the emperor’s death all the political arrangements collapsed: the imperial army fell apart; the Ghibellines who had joined the emperor went back to their cities; and the exiles also left. For Dante, Henry’s death must have been a terrible blow as he expected to restore his civic life in Florence. In early September 1315 the priors of Florence established that the death sentences passed by Cante dei Gabrielli were to be commuted to internment. The convicted had appear and pay a surety to guarantee that they would respect the internment order. Dante was included in the list but did not appear. The place of compulsory residence was unknown, which might have been inappropriate for his studies and ambitions as a poet. For this failure, Dante and his son were sentenced to death by decapitation.

“Courtier” (1316 – 1321) Being sentenced to death by decapitation, Dante fled to Varona to live under the patronage of Cangrande della Scala, who played an important role in Dante’s poetical and intellectual life. Some suggest the *Paradiso* was dedicated to Cangrande.

Dante last refuge was Ravenna where he lived for several years, until his death, under the protection of the Polenta family, probably with his own family. In Ravenna he was more centered in cultural than in political issues. He was surrounded by an intellectual group with literary interests. In the region of Romagna and Casentino, the noble families were bound together by common interests than by political allegiances.

In August 1321 Dante traveled to Venice in order to avoid a war. During the trip he took ill perhaps with malaria in the marshy Po delta and died on September 13, 1321 after the sunset.

This breve summary is an invitation to read the complete work. A long but rewarding reading that conducts us to the harsh life of the middle ages fulfilled with conspirations, murders, exiles, destruction, betrayal in name of economic gain and power. We understand that Dante, although living in an insane world, was a different man due to his ability to observe circumstances from a different approach. He is qualified as an intellectual due to his endless reflection on what he is doing, both as author and as a man. “The main motivations for his writing come from what he himself has seen, experienced and said; and so he relies on the *hic et nunc*, on what is happening around him, on public and private accounts of events” (p. 162).

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