

THE INTEREST IN DANTE SHOWN BY  
NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN MEN  
OF LETTERS

O Time! whose verdicts mock our own,  
The only righteous judge art thou;  
That poor old exile, sad and lone,  
Is Latium's other Virgil now:  
Before his name the nations bow;  
His words are parcel of mankind,  
Deep in whose hearts, as on his brow,  
The marks have sunk of Dante's mind.

THOMAS W. PARSONS

In 1965 we have been paying special honor to one of the world's greatest poets. If such a poet might himself choose the way in which he is to be honored by living men, what way would he choose? Would he not prefer above all else, that men should « search his volume » — read, study, understand, love, and find inspiration, in what he wrote? — and not on one day only, but always? Therefore, the fact that Americans for a long time (approximately 150 years) have shown as much interest as they have in this poet of another land already constitutes, it seems to me, the highest and noblest kind of tribute. And assuming this thought to be true, I feel that it would be appropriate on this occasion to review the beginning of the interest in Dante's writings shown by people in the United States, particularly by the major men of letters, and to trace the growth of this interest through approximately three-fourths of the 19th century, to a time when a Dante tradition had become firmly established here.

The awakening in the United States of interest in Dante followed close upon a revival of interest in Dante in Europe. During the 17th century, when our country was being coloniz-

ed, Dante's fame in Europe seems to have been at its lowest point. It was in the latter part of the 18th century that his reputation began to rise again — in Italy, France, Germany, and England; and in the 19th century, in all of these countries, the interest in Dante grew rapidly and greatly. Considering these facts, we should not expect any attention to be paid to Dante in the United States before the end of the 18th century. And the fact is that it *was* very late in the 18th century that the United States began to discover Dante.

One indication of the awakening of American interest in Dante was the acquisition of printed copies of some of his works. So far I have located only three items in the United States before 1800: the Library Company of Philadelphia had Henry Boyd's translation of the *Inferno* in 1789 and a copy of the *Divina Commedia* in Italian in 1795, and Governor Edward Rutledge of South Carolina had a set of Dante's *Opere*. After 1800, we in America acquired more and more Dante books; — and to see how our interest in Dante grew, one needs only to look at the catalogues of the Harvard Dante Collection and the Fiske Collection at Cornell, not to mention the collections in other universities throughout the nation, in the Library of Congress, and in certain public libraries, for instance, the one in Boston.

Another indication of the beginning and growth of American interest in Dante was the publication of magazine articles about him, quotations and bits of translation from him, original verse inspired by him, and so forth. Only two items concerning him are known to have been published in the United States before the 19th century, and a third item was unpublished. (These have been pointed out by Professor Joseph G. Fucilla of Northwestern University). One of these items appeared near the end of the 17th century: just a verse and a half from the *Paradiso* was quoted (in Italian and English) in the *Almanack for 1697* (New York) by John Clapp. Two of the items date from near the end of the 18th century: in 1791 William Dunlap published, in *The New-York Magazine*, a verse translation of 34 lines (a portion of the Ugolino story), and

at least as early as 1797, Richard Alsop translated the Ugolino story into literal prose, though he never published it.

In the first decade of the 19th century, according to Theodore W. Koch's bibliography, 2 items were published. In the second decade, 3 items; in the third, 7 items; in the fourth, 14; and in the fifth, 27. We observe that there was an increase — approximately a doubling — of interest every decade during the first half of the century, if one may judge by the numbers of items published.

A few of the items were simply reprints of European works; a few more were works done in America but by Europeans; a few more were translations of Europeans works. There were four reviews of Henry F. Cary's translation; four essays or long articles on Dante; nine original poems about Dante; and six significant works of translation.

In the second half of the century the rate of publication continued to grow. In the sixth decade, there were 32 items; in the seventh, 54; in the eighth, 54; in the ninth, 135; and in the first half of the tenth, 108.

It is of interest also to observe who were the early readers, students, and teachers of Dante in the United States. We do not know whether John Clapp and William Dunlap read more of Dante than the single passages they published in 1697 and 1791, but Alsop presumably read more than the Ugolino passage which he translated, for he translated other Italian works. As early as 1807 Benjamin Welles of Boston seems to have read Boyd's translation of the *Inferno* — possibly of the whole *Commedia* — and had read at least some of the *Inferno* in Italian. And Thomas Jefferson is said to have admired the *Divina Commedia* and read at least parts of it at some time before 1815.

The first person who is known to have taught Dante in our country was Lorenzo Da Ponte. During his approximately 25 years of teaching, beginning in 1807, he sought to inspire his pupils with enthusiasm for the *Divina Commedia* especially, and according to his testimony, they loved, admired, and studied it more than any other work of Italian literature.

George Ticknor was the second person who is believed to have taught Dante here and was our first Dante scholar. He had tried in vain to get help in reading that poet's work before he left Boston in 1815, but after reaching Europe, he studied Italian and Dante. Entering upon his duties as professor of modern languages at Harvard, he is said to have « first introduced Dante to his students in 1819 in a general course on the great European poets », and at least as early as the autumn term of 1831, to have delivered a whole course of lectures on the Italian master for a college class, and to have continued the course during his three remaining years there. He remained an eager student of Dante for the rest of his life — for example, with a knowledge of all the principal commentaries on Dante, he prepared notes for the *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, and he read Prince John of Saxony's translation of and notes on the *Commedia*. But when he resigned his professorship, he put a limit to his influence as a teacher, and he never published any results of his Dante studies.

After he left Harvard, the course in Dante was carried on by Longfellow, beginning in 1838. Meanwhile, Pietro Bachi, instructor under Ticknor and Longfellow from 1826 to 1846, was having the students in his course in Italian read the *Inferno*.

Another early student of Dante was William H. Prescott, the historian, who read the *Divina Commedia* during the winter of 1823-24. The impression the poem made upon him at that time was never lost, according to George Ticknor, who wrote: « He never ceased to talk of Dante in the same tone of admiration in which he . . . broke forth on the first study of him ». Then a few months later he regularly attended the readings of Italian poetry which were held three or four times a week in Ticknor's home, and at which large portions of the *Divina Commedia* were gone over. He was greatly impressed by the simple style of the poem, the beauty of its « unrivalled similes », and its allusions to familiar objects; and he perceived that « to have read the *Inferno* is not to have read Dante »; that while the *Inferno* is more entertaining and superior to

the other two parts in narrative and action, the *Purgatorio* excels in giving « delicious descriptions of natural scenery » and « sober meditation », and the *Paradiso* in doing the impossible — picturing « purely intellectual delight ». He also made some use of his knowledge of the *Commedia* in his writings, principally in his articles « Italian Narrative Poetry » and « Poetry and Romance of the Italians ». In the latter article, moreover, he once referred to the *Convito*, giving page references for a particular edition, and once to the *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, thus suggesting that he might have read those works, and he spoke of the *Divine Comedy* as « so popular a work ».

Margaret Fuller was both a student and teacher of Dante. She first read the *Divina Commedia* probably in 1825 or soon afterward, and in 1836 she was, according to Emerson, « a dear student of Dante ». One winter, while employed in Mr. Alcott's school in Boston, she formed a class in Italian, with which she read among other things « the whole hundred cantos » of the *Commedia*; and in her famous « conversations » held in Boston, she gave some attention to Dante. She also read the *Vita Nuova*, at least as early as 1842, and later wrote that it had been « one of the most cherished companions of [her] life ». In 1845, moreover, she got copies of Cary's translation of the *Commedia* and Charles Lyell's translation of Dante's *Lyrical Poems*, and wrote a short review of them entitled « Italy. — Cary's Dante, *Lyrical Poems of Dante* ».

Richard Henry Wilde, too, of Georgia, deserves to be remembered as a student of Dante and also as a minor poet whose work shows a little Dantean influence. He seems to have read at least some of the *Divina Commedia* before 1835, for the first stanza of his « Lines for the Music of Weber's Last Waltz » was modeled, he wrote, on the passage in canto VIII of the *Purgatorio* « commencing 'Era già l'ora' ». About the beginning of 1836 he began a 5-year residence in Italy, and after spending some time upon a study of Tasso, he began « translating specimens of the Italian lyric poets, and composing short biographical notices of each author; and being much

puzzled with the obscurities and contradictions abounding in the ordinary lives of Dante, it occurred to [him] to seek in the archives . . . whatever explanations they might afford ». In carrying out this purpose, he came to desire to write a life of Dante and then decided to include in the work a history of Dante's times.

The biographical sketch which he originally set out to write for the *Italian Lyric Poets* was never done — or else has been lost; but he did translate for the anthology two little poems by Dante and a third poem then thought to be Dante's. *The Life and Times of Dante* was never finished either but only about half done — unless the manuscript of some of it has been lost. But if Wilde never realized his ambition to complete and publish this work, just laboring at the task led him to read Dante's writings and many things written about them, their author, and his age. Wilde's studies also led him to make an unexpected contribution of another kind. Through his reading he learned of the former existence of a portrait of Dante in the Bargello, and so he was led to initiate the undertaking which culminated in the discovery of the portrait by Giotto.

One should notice, moreover, that in Wilde's long original poem *Hesperia* there are five passages which contain echoes from the *Purgatory* and the *Inferno*, and two other Dante references; that two quotations, from the *Purgatory* and the *Paradise*, are quoted in his book on Tasso; that there are several references to or quotations from the *Divine Comedy*, *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, and the *Convivio* in his biographical sketches in the *Italian Lyric Poets*; and that in his manuscript of *The Life and Times of Dante* there are nearly 100 references to or quotations from 6 of Dante's works.

Still another important student of Dante was Thomas W. Parsons of Boston, who was also a minor poet whose poems were considerably influenced by Dante. At the age of 17 he went with his father on a year's visit to Europe and spent the early months of 1837 in Italy. While there he became devoted to Dante and started to memorize the *Commedia* and to

translate it into English; and he continued to work at the translation after returning home. In 1843 he brought out *The First Ten Cantos of the Inferno of Dante Alighieri*, which was the earliest published American translation of any considerable portion of Dante. Later he finished the first canticle, did nearly all of the *Purgatorio* and a little of the *Paradiso*. He also turned into English verse at least two short passages from the *Vita Nuova*. And 41 of his original poems show Dantean influence. One of them, « On a Bust of Dante », is well known.

Let us now consider our major authors of the period. James Fenimore Cooper was the only one who did not show an interest in the Italian poet.

#### IRVING

Washington Irving read « part of Dante » in Italian in May 1823, while in Dresden, and finished the *Inferno* in December 1825, while in Bordeaux. And at some time he acquired a copy of the *Divina Commedia*. The first influence of his reading of Dante on his own writing appeared in a passage in « The Story of the Young Robber », in which he referred to the « horrible verity . . . of some of the tragic fictions of Dante ».

Then, in a letter, he referred to the « feeling of severe grandeur which [he had] experienced in reading the pages of Dante », and the fact that in Dante's poem « this austere majesty is at times relieved by touching and unexpected beauties ». In a magazine article on Wilde's researches in Italy, he mentioned Dante's name a few times and the titles *Divina Commedia* and *Vita Nuova*. And finally, in *Oliver Goldsmith*, besides mentioning in the body of the book the story of Ugolino, he wrote in the preface —

to [Goldsmith] ... I may address the beautiful  
apostrophe of Dante to Virgil:

Tu se' lo mio maestro, e 'l mio autore:  
tu se' solo colui, da cu' io tolsi  
lo bello stile, che m'ha fatto onore.

## BRYANT

William Cullen Bryant began studying Italian in 1825 and in the same year mentioned Dante's name three times (in a lecture and in an article). By 1826 he had read at least part of the *Divina Commedia* in Italian, for he published in that year a verse translation of six lines of *Purgatorio* VIII. In 1831 he read Edmund Griffin's lecture on Dante, which includes 75 lines from the Ugolino story, in translation, and a few other short quotations. Years later, while in Naples for 4 months, he read (as appears by his diary) « the greater part of Dante » (that is, presumably, the *Commedia*). In 1865, in an address, he spoke of « Ugolino, whose story is so pathetically told by Dante », and in a letter thanking Mrs. Parsons for sending him a copy of her husband's translation of *Seventeen Cantos of the Inferno of Dante Alighieri*, he revealed that he had at least looked into Parsons' book. In the same year, the 600th anniversary of Dante's birth, Bryant wrote a little 20-line poem entitled « Dante », in which he praised the Italian poet as an apostle of liberty. In a letter to James T. Fields he spoke of admiring Mr. Longfellow's translation of the *Commedia* and implied that he had read at least parts of it. In 1875 he was able, according to the testimony of a friend, to recite in Italian a long passage from Dante with power and enthusiasm. In his anthology *The Family Library of Poetry and Song* he included two little quotations from *Inferno* III and V in Cary's translation.

## EMERSON

Ralph Waldo Emerson read bits of the *Divina Commedia* as early as 1818 in an *Edinburgh Review* article containing 18 quotations from the poem, all in Cary's translation and 7 of them in Italian also. He was so much impressed by the 44-line passage from the Ugolino story that he transcribed it. In 1825 he said that he had Dante, by which he meant, presumably, the *Commedia* — though whether in Italian or English is not known. However, by 1834 he seems to have



had both Cary's translation and an Italian text of the poem, for in that year he quoted from the *Paradiso* twice in Italian and once in Cary's English. Meanwhile, by 1833, if not earlier, he had learned to read Italian moderately well. And in 1839 he began to read the *Vita Nuova*.

He acquired a Lombardi edition of the *Commedia*, Cary's translation, an Italian edition of the *Vita Nuova*, a copy of the *Commedia* with Cristoforo Landino's commentary, John A. Carlyle's translation of the *Inferno*, four volumes of translation by Parsons, and Charles Norton's two little books of *The New Life*.

We have already observed that in 1834 he quoted from the *Paradise* three times. At least six other times between then and 1867 he quoted from the *Paradise* or the *Inferno*, and a number of times he referred to specific passages or characters. Indeed, there are in his various published writings, between 1818 and 1872, about 175 references to Dante. Although some of these references are only general or vague, even they help to indicate Emerson's interest in the Italian poet, and the specific references help to indicate the extent of his reading and his reactions to it. In 1849 he read Carlyle's translation of the *Inferno* « with wonder and joy at all his parts », and he also arranged for the publication of this book in the United States in the same year. In 1867 he finished reading Parsons' translation of the *Inferno* with the original text at his elbow, sometimes comparing the translation with the Italian, and he admired the excellence of Parsons' work.

Emerson especially admired Dante's courage and force, his powerful genius », his « robustness » and « energy », the « symmetry » and architectural quality of his work, his vivid perception, his recognition of the symbolic character of things, his power of graphic description, and his universality. For example, he wrote in his poem « The Solution »:

And Dante searched the triple spheres,  
Moulding Nature at his will,  
So shaped, so colored, swift or still,

And, sculptor-like, his large design  
Etched on Alp and Apennine.

And in his *Journal*, in 1851, he listed as one of the events of culture in the 19th century « the new importance of the genius of Dante ... to Americans ».

There are also in Emerson's writings a few passages which seem to echo specific lines of Dante. For example, in the poem « St. Augustine », the lines:

An exile's bread is salt, his heart is sad,—  
Happy, he saith, the eye that never saw  
The smoke ascending from a stranger's fire!

were almost surely inspired by Dante's tercet:

tu proverai sì come sa di sale  
lo pane altrui, [ecc.]

And in a letter, the statement:

The secret of virtue is to know that the richer another is, the richer am I,

is probably an echo of Dante's observation that:

the more there are who say 'ours,'  
the more of good does each possess,  
and the more charity there is.

The most surprising and exciting fact to notice here is that in 1843 Emerson translated the *Vita Nuova*, before any complete translation of the work into English had been published either in America or in Europe. His abiding awareness and appreciation of this work of Dante are shown by references in his journals and letters ranging over a period of nearly 30 years. And at a time when very few Americans were even slightly acquainted with it, Emerson read it with considerable understanding, perceiving its inner aspects, its symbolism, and its revelation of Dante as a man full of humanity, who wrote from his heart, from firsthand experience, out of genuine inspiration,

this « Bible of Love ». It is noteworthy, too, that Emerson aimed at an exact, literal translation into prose.

#### HAWTHORNE

Nathaniel Hawthorne first referred to Dante in a story published in 1835; in 1837, according to Elizabeth Peabody, he was perfectly at home talking about Dante.

Altogether, he referred to Dante about a dozen times. His first four references show that he had a general conception of the *Inferno*, an appreciation of the ironic appropriateness of the punishments, and an acquaintance with the forest of suicides and the usurers in the circle of burning sand. A passage in *The Scarlet Letter*:

Doomed... therefore, as Mr. Dimmesdale... was, to eat his unsavory morsel always at another's board, and endure the life-long chill which must be his lot who seeks to warm himself only at another's fireside,

sounds like an echo of *Paradiso* XVII, 58-60:

You shall prove how salty tastes another's bread, and how hard it is to descend and climb another's stairs.

In his *Italian Note-Books* he spoke of seeing the Dante monument in Santa Croce, the fresco portrait in the Bargello, and two 14th-century manuscript « copies of Dante », a plaster cast of Dante's face, and a tracing of the Giotto portrait at Mr. Kirkup's in Florence. He said that one of the copies of Dante which Mr. Kirkup showed him « was written by a Florentine gentleman ..., one of whose ancestors the poet had met and talked with in Paradise »; and he spoke of having for dinner one day some fish from Lake Bolsena:

Not, I am sorry to say, the famous stewed eels which, Dante says, killed Pope Martin.

The references to the monument, portrait, and manuscripts suggest at least a general interest in Dante. The reference to the character whom Dante had met may suggest that Haw-

thorne had read the *Paradiso*. The reference to Pope Martin and the eels of Bolsena, in spite of the errors, suggest that Hawthorne had read *Purgatorio* XXIV.

In *The Marble Faun* there is a reference to « an antique edition of Dante », and a reference to the spiritual experience of a sinful soul struggling upward through dark prison cells into the pure air and light of Heaven — which sounds like an echo of Dante's journey through the dark, blind prison of Hell and up from the bottom of Hell to the shore of Purgatory, or up the Mountain of Purgatory, and suggests that Hawthorne had an understanding of the allegorical meaning of Dante's poem. A third passage:

And now the broad valley twinkled with lights, that glimmered through its duskiness, like the fire-flies in the garden of a Florentine palace,

may be a reminiscence of Dante's pretty simile in *Inferno* XXVI.

A fourth passage — in which sunlight and color are associated with the glories of the celestial world and absence of light with the horrible lot of unpardoned souls, and in which there is the idea of two sinners — suggests that Hawthorne was acquainted with the symbolism of the *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*, and with the story of Paolo and Francesca. (One remembers that the situation in *The Marble Faun* involves two lovers, sharers in a crime, suffering because of their guilt and also because each knows of the other's suffering).

The evidence, then, shows that Hawthorne read the *Inferno*, presumably all of it, probably by 1835 or earlier, and strongly suggests that he read the *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* too. Whether he read in Italian or English does not appear, although he was able to read Italian at least in the latter part of his life. Also, one may assume that with his own great interest in symbolism and in the soul of man, he found much in the *Divine Comedy* which was congenial to him.

## WHITTIER

John Greenleaf Whittier probably read by 1840 the five selections from the *Purgatory* included in Longfellow's *Voices of the Night*, and certainly read Parsons' translation of *The First Ten Cantos of the Inferno of Dante Alighieri* soon after July 1843. He mentioned Dante twice in the following fall, again in the next year, and in 1845 he quoted two lines from Parsons' translation of Canto VI. He spoke of « the terrible ... forest which Dante traversed on his way to the world of pain »; of « Dante's terrible imagery » and « the colossal and massive horror of the *Inferno* »; and of the « heavy, cursed, and relentless » rain, putrid land, and « rayless atmosphere of Dante's Third Circle ». However, the very first time he mentioned Dante, Whittier was writing of the Devil (Satan), and one would judge from what he said that Whittier had read canto XXXIV of the *Inferno*, in which Satan is described; but if he had, he obviously at that date must have read it in some other translation — probably Cary's.

In 1850 he mentioned the *Inferno* and Dante's « grand and awful fancies »; and in three poems he spoke of « The mournful Tuscan's haunted rhyme », « glooms of Dante fringed with lurid fire », and:

... a load of death  
Loathsome as that the Tuscan's victim bore  
When keen with life to a dead horror bound.

In another poem occurs a phrase « the lords of song », which sounds like an echo of « quel signor de l'altissimo canto », from *Inferno* IV; and in yet another poem there are four lines which refer to the inscription Dante read over the gate of Hell.

A passage in a letter seems to indicate that he had read the *Paradiso*, although not very sympathetically.

Whittier's interest seems to have included also the *Vita Nuova*, for in the preface to *Child Life in Prose* he referred to it, quoted a phrase from section II of it (apparently in Charles Eliot Norton's translation), and quoted, somewhat freely, about

three lines from a passage of Boccaccio's *Life of Dante* (which is given by Norton). Whittier wrote:

How we turn from the light dames and faithless cavaliers of Boccaccio to contemplate his exquisite picture of the little Florentine, Beatrice, that fair girl of eight summers, so « pretty in her childish ways, so ladylike and pleasing, with her delicate features and fair proportions, of such dignity and charm of manner as to be looked upon as a little angel! » And of all the creations of her illustrious lover's genius, whether in the world of mortals or in the uninviting splendors of his Paradise, what is there so beautiful as the glimpse we have of him in his *Vita Nuova*, a boy of nine years, amidst the bloom and greenness of the Spring Festival of Florence, checking his noisy merry-making in rapt admiration of the little Beatrice, who seemed to him « not the daughter of mortal man, but of God »?

If Whittier was quoting from Norton's volume, as seems likely, he probably had read all of *The New Life*; but one cannot be sure. It is clear, however, that he was strongly impressed by the beauty and charm of at least section II of it.

#### POE

Although Edgar Allan Poe was a member of a class in Italian for one year at the University of Virginia, there is no record of his having read any work of Dante's at that time. But a person who knew him in 1843 testified that he used to quote passages from Dante. And in a work of Poe's dated 1844 there is a suggestion that he at some previous time had bought a copy of the *Inferno* in translation.

In Poe's writings between 1835 and 1850 there are 16 Dante references and 3 quotations from Dante. Eight of the references are quite insignificant, however; and four others give rather negative impressions.

With three of the remaining four references there are also quotations: one from the *Inferno*, in Italian; one from the *Purgatory* in Cary's translation; and one line from a sonnet of the *Vita Nuova* in Italian. It is so likely, however, that all three

quotations and the details included in these references were derived from secondary sources, that they cannot be taken as showing much about Poe's reading of Dante's works. The 16th reference seems clearly to indicate that Poe knew the story of Ugolino, though one cannot tell whether he learned it directly from reading the *Inferno* or from some secondary source.

There are five instances of resemblance between passages in Poe's writings and passages in Dante's. In « The City in the Sea » there are several elements of description that resemble elements in Dante's description of the city of Dis. An expression in « Berenice », « The memory of past bliss is the anguish of today », sounds like an echo of the « Nessun maggior dolore » passage in *Inferno* V. A clause in Poe's review of *Philothea* resembles somewhat *Inferno* I, 22-24. In the *Narrative of A. Gordon Pym* there are several details in Pym's dreams (the serpents, deserts, Pym's being embraced by serpents, naked souls on burning sand, and the trees with human vitality) which resemble elements in the *Inferno*, cantos XXV, XIV, and XIII. A passage in « Eleonora » contains four phrases that remind one of phrases in *Inferno* V.

The evidence, then, of Poe's knowledge of Dante is slight and inconclusive. But it seems reasonably certain that Poe read — probably in translation, mostly — at least parts of the *Inferno* — such parts as the Ugolino story and the Francesca episode. Of course he might have read all of the *Inferno*, but almost surely he read nothing else of Dante's, except perhaps a few quoted passages found in secondary sources. And his interest in Dante seems to have been shallow; he certainly showed no depth of feeling for Dante and was not profoundly moved by him.

#### HOLMES

Oliver Wendell Holmes studied Italian at Harvard College for three terms in 1827 and 1828, read the *Inferno* in his college course, and almost certainly acquired a copy of the *Divina Commedia* at that time. Later he acquired the translation of

the *Commedia* by Cary, Parsons, Longfellow, and Norton, and a Fraticelli edition of the *Commedia*. Also, he attended at least two meetings of the Dante Club at Longfellow's house.

In his published writings Holmes first mentioned Dante in *The Autocrat of the Breakfast Table*, and there revealed a knowledge of the *Inferno* as a place having circles and having the worst circles at the bottom. A little later he referred to Dante's keeping close to Virgil while journeying through Hell; and he spoke of the place of neutrals « in the antechamber » of Hell, and quoted six lines from *Inferno* III in Cary's translation.

Next he referred to Dante as « the wan-checked Florentine »; then he quoted the words « lasciate ogni speranza », alluded to Paolo and Francesca's abruptly stopping their reading of Lancelot, and referred to the awe-inspiring inscription in the Tuscan's poem.

Also, in 1867, he mentioned Dante or the *Divine Comedy* in three letters. In one he wrote that as long as genius and scholarship are honored, the English-speaking world will thank Longfellow for his noble translation. In the second, he said that he had read part of Parsons' *Inferno* and praised it as a noble addition to our literature. In the third, he revealed that he had been sufficiently interested in the *Divine Comedy* to talk often with James Russell Lowell about it and to attend some of the Dante Club meetings at Longfellow's. Also, he showed, as he did again a year later in an essay, that he was strongly impressed by what he called the savage, nightmare quality of the work.

In 1876 he read Lowell's essay on Dante — with admiration, and a sigh of regret that he himself was not a better Dante scholar. Then, in an essay of his own, he mentioned Dante five times. For example, he said, referring to Jonathan Edwards' conception of Hell, that « We can endure much in the medieval verse of Dante which we cannot listen to in the comparatively raw and recent prose of Edwards »; he mentioned that « The archbishop did not poison Ugolino and his boys, — he only withheld food from them »; and he referred to a state-



ment which he correctly said was to be found at the beginning of the fourth canto of Dante's *Paradiso*, and then quoted the passage (three lines) in Mr. Longfellow's translation. So he had read at least some of the *Paradiso*, too, in translation.

Near the beginning of 1881, Holmes « Sent to 'The Philological Circle' of Florence, for its meeting in commemoration of Dante », a sonnet entitled « Boston to Florence ». In it he spoke of the true homage Americans were paying Dante and of the fact that America's poets were making Dante ours, and he closed with these words to Dante:

Now to all lands thy deep-toned voice is dear,  
And every language knows the Song Divine!

Also in the 1880's he quoted a few phrases from the first canto of the *Inferno* and parodied Cary's line « All hope abandon, ye who enter here ». In *Over the Teacups*, he again showed definite knowledge of *Inferno V* by echoing the « Nessun maggior dolore » passage, quoting the phrase « tutto tremante », and alluding to Paolo and Francesca's reading together. Then, in a letter to Norton, he spoke of « Dante in the presence of Beatrice » showing « in his features the delight with which he looked at her and listened to her ». This remark suggests that Holmes was familiar with the *Paradiso*. And in three other letters, he mentioned Parsons' translation.

It seems, then, that Holmes read all of the *Inferno* in Italian as early as 1828, and probably all of the *Divine Comedy* in translation, if not so early as 1828, then in later years. And during the last 37 years of his life he showed, by quotations and translations done by his friends, not only a moderate familiarity with Dante's major poem but also considerable interest in it.

#### THOREAU

Henry David Thoreau acquired a good reading knowledge of Italian while in college (1833-37), and in that same time almost certainly got the edition of the *Divina Commedia* which

he owned in 1840 and read at least all of the *Inferno*. Later, probably in 1849, he got a copy of Carlyle's translation of the *Inferno*.

In Thoreau's writings one finds 16 references to Dante, the earliest dating in 1841. Most of these are rather general, but a few are specific. In *A week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* he referred to Dante and Virgil's crossing the Acheron; later he twice alluded to the trees of Dante's forest of suicides; and in the essay « Walking », he spoke of « the words which Dante read over the entrance to the infernal regions, 'Leave all hope, ye that enter,' — that is, of ever getting out again ». In Thoreau's writings one finds only one reference which suggests that he read more of Dante than the *Inferno*: he wrote, « We may any day take a walk as strange as Dante's imaginary one to l.'Inferno or Paradiso ».

#### MELVILLE

Herman Melville bought a copy of « Cary's Dante » in 1848, and seems to have read the *Inferno* by the next year, for in a journal, in *Redburn*, and in *Mardi* (all three dating 1849) there are Dante references: a reference to the city of Dis, an echo of the « Nessun maggior dolore » passage, and two general references to Dante and the *Inferno* — and one of these references to Dante in « Hawthorne and His Mosses » and *White Jacket*, and two more in *Moby Dick*.

In *Pierre* there is a detailed, extended reference to the story of Francesca; a reference to the story of Agnello and a two-line quotation from *Inferno* XXV in Cary's version; a statement that the character Pierre loved Dante; a quotation of four lines from *Inferno* III in Cary's version; a remark about the severe treatment Dante received in life and his cursing the world by means of his *Inferno*; a statement about the influence of Dante upon Pierre and Pierre's seeing « allegorical meanings » beneath the surface of Dante's poem; an echo of the phrase « All hope abandon »; and another echo of the « Nessun maggior dolore » passage.

In *Israel Potter* there is a reference to the city of Dis, the Phlegethon, and the centaurs; and in « The Tartarus of Maids » there is a reference to a Dantean gateway. Finally, in *Clarel* there is a reference to the city of Dis, the Gorgon, and the Furies, and another to Dante and Virgil and a difficult climb up an ascending path.

One finds no clear evidence that Melville ever read the *Purgatory* or *Paradise*, and his appreciation even of the *Inferno* was somewhat limited; he was, for example, too much inclined to see in the *Inferno* the spirit of pessimism and revenge. But he was strongly impressed also by some other qualities of the *Inferno* (for instance, its truth to human experience, its vividness, and its power), and he was at least somewhat impressed by some of its allegory, by Dante's spirit of aspiration, and by Dante's tenderness. And his interest in Dante was great enough for him to reflect it in ten of his works.

#### WHITMAN

Walt Whitman, who did not read Italian, read Dante's *Inferno* in John Carlyle's translation in the spring of 1859, and he wrote about a page and a half of notes about this reading. He was especially impressed by the work's intense brevity, great vigor, lean, muscular ruggedness, simple, convincing realism, and fascination as a well-told tragedy. He frankly said that he had not read the *Paradiso* and seemed, by his statement, to be completely unaware of the *Purgatory*.

Since it was his rule to « make no quotations and no references to any other writers », one should not expect to find in his writings much evidence of his knowledge of or interest in Dante. In three poems and in his prose he made more than a dozen rather insignificant references to Dante, to the *Inferno*, or to « Dante's utterance ». A few times he wrote something more significant. In 1862 he filled a page of a notebook with bits of information about Dante and the *Divine Comedy* which he got mostly from Carlyle's preface; so apparently he was reading Carlyle's volume again. He also mention-

ed looking over Gustave Doré's illustrations of Dante, and thought them « very fine — yet some of them too melodramatic ».

To give an impression of what he saw of the Civil War, he referred to Virgil's « showing Dante on and on among the agonized and damned » and to « Dante's pictured hell and all its woes, ... degradations, filthy torments ». Again he spoke of Virgil's guiding Dante, and mentioned Dante as one of the great literary geniuses. Another time he spoke of lights and flames seen along a river as « Dante-Inferno gleams ». And still another time, he sought to give an impression of the beauty, terror, and power emanated by some of our western mountains by means of a comparison with Dante.

Although Whitman did not like in Dante what he took to be vengeance and melancholy, he did like Dante's simplicity, economy of words, knifelike sharpness and power, and « impression of *bonafide* in all that he says ».

Whitman owned for a while a portrait of Dante given to him by John A. Symonds (the lithograph published by the Arundel Society and based upon the fresco portrait by Giotto), and his comments upon this picture show that he thought of Dante as « unquestionably one of the first-class men », a man who stood for « the supreme ideals ».

In 1883 Dr. Richard M. Bucke recorded that Whitman thought much of Carlyle's translation of the *Inferno*, had had the volume by him for many years, read in it often, and felt that he had learned much from it, especially in conciseness. And in one of the last pieces Whitman wrote, he mentioned that he still had the volume in his room.

#### LONGFELLOW

Henry W. Longfellow's interest in and knowledge of Dante began at least as early as the summer of 1828, at which time he was reading the *Inferno* in Italian; and his letters and journals show that he continued to read Dante's works, and most of all the *Divina Commedia*, for the rest of his life, a period of over 50 years.

He must have begun to become intimately acquainted with practically all of Dante's works at least as early as 1838, when he first gave his Dante course at Harvard and wrote an essay on Dante — and possibly a few years earlier, while he was teaching at Bowdoin College. For example, quotations in his *North American Review* article on the Italian language and dialects seem to indicate that he knew the *De Vulgari Eloquentia* as well as the *Commedia* as early as 1832. But in the essay of 1838 he spoke of and quoted from, not only the *Commedia* and *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, but also the *Vita Nuova*, *Canzoniere*, *Convivio*, *De Monarchia*, and *Epistolae*. Then in his anthology of *The Poets and Poetry of Europe* (1845) he included selections from the *Vita Nuova*, the *Canzoniere*, the *Convivio*, and the *Divina Commedia*.

He continued to teach his Dante course at Harvard from 1838 until 1854 — over a period of 16 years. This teaching stimulated him to read much, and repeatedly, in Dante's works themselves and also everything available that had been written about them. The teaching stimulated him also to begin translating the *Commedia*. As early as 1839 he published five passages from the *Purgatorio*, and nearly 30 years later, he published his complete translation of the *Commedia*. The first volume, *Inferno*, was finished in time to be sent to Italy in 1865 for the celebration of the sixth centenary of Dante's birth.

Other indications of the breadth and depth of his study of Dante are to be found in the great number of times he quoted from or referred to the works of Dante in his own published writings and in the extensive notes which he prepared for publication with his translation of the *Divine Comedy*. He clearly was well acquainted with many books dealing with Dante's life, works, and times. For example, in his writings published over a period of about 50 years, he quoted from the *Divine Comedy* at least 70 times (sometimes in English, sometimes in Italian), not counting numerous references to specific passages; and in his notes to the *Divine Comedy* he quoted from the *Convivio* 65 times.

Another matter of great importance is the influence Longfellow's teaching of Dante for 16 years must have had on many students, although this is a thing impossible to measure. Charles Eliot Norton, for example, wrote: « You ... first taught me to love Dante »; and Norton became one of the great Dante teachers at Harvard and one of the great translators both of the *Vita Nuova* and the *Commedia*.

Finally, one must notice the influence upon Longfellow's own writings of his almost lifelong devotion to Dante. In his two prose works *Hyperion* and *Kavanagh* there are at least six passages which were influenced by parts of the *Commedia*. Among his poems, one finds 20 that show influence from Dante.

The outstanding examples, of course, of Dantean influence on his poems are to be seen in his sonnet « Dante », published in 1845, and his six « Divina Commedia » sonnets, written in the 1860's. These not only are among the best of Longfellow's poems but also are among the finest literary tributes which America at any time has paid to the Italian poet.

May we read just one of these, which is addressed directly to Dante?

O star of morning and of liberty!  
 O bringer of the light, whose splendor shines  
 Above the darkness of the Apennines,  
 Forerunner of the way that is to be!  
 The voices of the city and the sea,  
 The voices of the mountains and the pines,  
 Repeat thy song, till the familiar lines  
 Are footpaths for the thought of Italy!  
 Thy flame is blown abroad from all the heights,  
 Through all the nations, and a sound is heard  
 As of a mighty wind, and men devout,  
 Strangers of Rome, and the new proselytes,  
 In their own language hear thy wondrous word,  
 And many are amazed and many doubt.

## LOWELL

James Russell Lowell read the *Inferno* in 1836 or 1837, while he was a student at Harvard; and during his last 2 college years he wrote in some letters four Dante references: to a volume of Dante, to Dante's early love for Beatrice, to the circle of Ugolino in Hell, and to the opening line of the *Inferno*.

During the 17 years between his graduation and his appointment as professor at Harvard, in his writings he mentioned Dante's name or the *Divine Comedy* 11 times, once spoke of Dante's bare and perfect style, and 15 times quoted from or referred to 11 different cantos of the *Inferno*. Moreover, in his review of Parsons' *The First Ten Cantos of the Inferno of Dante Alighieri*, he revealed, not only that he had read Parsons' work critically and carefully, but also that he was familiar with the translations of Ichabod C. Wright and of Cary.

He visited in Italy for a year in 1851-52, and it was apparently about this time, or just after his appointment to the professorship, that his most serious study of Dante began.

He chose to give a course in Dante in his first year of teaching, 1856-57, and continued to give this course every year for 20 years. Naturally his duties led him to continue to study the works of Dante. Each year he read with his class through the *Divina Commedia* and the *Vita Nuova* and dipped into the *Convivio* and the lesser writings. Outside of class he read all, or almost all, of the remaining portions of Dante's writings, and many works written about them.

Lowell's study of Dante was further stimulated during approximately the first 10 years that he was teaching by the translating being done by his friends Charles Norton and Henry W. Longfellow — and most especially was he involved in his friends' work during a period of about 2 years, when the three of them met regularly to go over Longfellow's translation of the *Commedia* and then Norton's translation of the *Vita Nuova*. Moreover, during the last 9 years of his life he was president of the Dante Society; and near the end of his life he looked over the first part of Norton's translation of the *Commedia*.

How extensive his reading of Dante's works was after he began teaching is shown first by his article on Dante written for Appleton's *The New American Cyclopaedia* (1859), in which he briefly discussed and revealed an acquaintance with Dante's seven main works and also with Dante's biographers, commentators, and translators; second, by his review (1872) of Maria Rossetti's *A Shadow of Dante*; third, by his famous essay « Dante » (1876) which is a combination of the review and the cyclopaedia article; and fourth, by the great number of quotations from Dante's works which appear in Lowell's writings. For example, one counts 138 quotations — about half in Italian and half in English — from 60 cantos of the *Commedia*. At every turn he was reminded of something in that great poem or found some occasion for quoting from it. It would seem that during the last 25 or 30 years of his life he knew this poem almost by heart; and he wrote once, about 1868 (?): « I suppose I must have read [it] at least thirty times with minute attention ». He also quoted 121 times from 5 other works by Dante.

Not only did Lowell quote; he also often spoke of or made some comment about Dante or Dante's writings. In Lowell's prose writings other than the 3 Dante articles, he mentioned Dante in an important connection about 20 times. And then the famous essay « Dante », which fills 147 pages in the standard edition of Lowell's works, is made up largely of comment upon Dante's works and shows that Lowell's knowledge and appreciation of them was deep and rich as well as extensive.

One thing more to be noticed is the Dantean influence upon Lowell's poems, but it is not as extensive as one might expect. Quotations, or echoes from, or references to Dante occur in 10 poems, most notably in « On a Portrait of Dante by Giotto » and in « Paolo and Francesca ». But his really great literary contribution to the Dante tradition in the United States was his prose essay.

This brings us to a convenient stopping place. Lowell died in 1891, approximately a century after the birth of America's interest in Dante.



We have seen from the survey which we have made that Dante was almost entirely unknown in America until the end of the eighteenth century, and that during the first two decades of the nineteenth century there was only a little interest in him, and only a small number of persons who were acquainted with any of his writings. But certain influences began to make themselves felt. Besides a general awakening of literary and cultural consciousness, there was the influence from Italy exerted through the teaching of men like Da Ponte and Bachi; influence from England through such works as Hunt's *Story of Rimini*, Byron's *Prophecy of Dante*, and Boyd's and Cary's translations; and the influence of the native sons Ticknor and Longfellow, who studied in Europe and returned home full of Dante and began to teach others. The two strongest influences, almost certainly, were the publication of Cary's translation in 1822 and the teaching of Dante at Harvard, which began about the same time. After a few years the results of all these forces began to appear. A good many persons, especially in the neighborhood of Boston, began to read Dante; a good number of items relating to Dante began to appear in periodicals or books; and nearly all of the leading men of letters, and not a few of the minor figures too, began to pay some attention to Dante in their writings.

Of the twelve major writers we have noticed, one began to read Dante before 1820; four began to read him in the 1820's; three in the 1830's. Eight of the twelve were able to read Dante in Italian, although not equally well. Whittier, Melville, and Whitman did their reading entirely in translation, and Poe probably relied mostly on translations. The two best students of Dante, by far, were Longfellow and Lowell, and they were the only men of the twelve to read all, or nearly all, of Dante's works and to have anything like a complete understanding of them. (The next best Dante students of the time — Ticknor, Wilde and Parsons — were not major men of letters). Of the twelve major writers, the next most widely read in Dante's works was Emerson, who read the *Divina Commedia* and the *Vita Nuova*. Bryant, Hawthorne, and Holmes seem to have

read all of the *Commedia*, showed a considerable interest in it, and seem to have had a relatively fair understanding of it. Irving, Thoreau, Melville, and Whitman, so far as we know, read only the *Inferno*.

It is interesting to observe that the men who knew most about Dante had the experience of studying in Europe. Another interesting fact is that the *Inferno* was more generally known and more influential than the other two parts of the *Commedia* (this seems to have been true in England, too); of the twelve men, five seem to have read no more than the first cantica. Furthermore, the conception of Dante which was commonly held was based largely upon the *Inferno*. And it was the *Inferno* that was most often spoken of and quoted from. Nearly all of the references to, and borrowings of various sorts from, Dante in the writings of eight of the twelve authors are to or from the *Inferno*.

As regards the degree to which the men we have studied showed in their writings influence from Dante, we observe that it parallels fairly closely the extent and thoroughness of their knowledge of him. Longfellow and Lowell, who knew most, showed the largest amount of influence; after Longfellow and Lowell rank Emerson, Hawthorne, Holmes, Melville, and then the other six: Bryant, Irving, Thoreau, Whitman, Whittier and Poe.

During the first three-quarters of the nineteenth century, then, every major American man of letters except Fenimore Cooper showed an interest in Dante — in most instances a surprisingly large amount of interest, considering the date. And since by about 1875 a Dante tradition had been firmly established and was flourishing in the United States, we may expect most of our leading men of letters from that time forward to be acquainted with Dante's works and to pay some attention to them in their own writings.

J. CHESLEY MATHEWS

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