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06. Dante Alighieri

(1265 – 1321)

Life:

- ◆ Dante was born in Florence in 1265.
- ◆ He was an **Italian poet**, writer and philosopher.
- ◆ He influenced English writers such as Geoffrey Chaucer, John Milton and Alfred Tennyson, among many others.
- ◆ **Terza rima** (interlocking three-line rhyme scheme) was first used by Dante for the Divine Commedia.
- ◆ He is described as **the "father" of the Italian language**.
- ◆ In Italy he is often referred to as *il Sommo Poeta* ("the Supreme Poet").
- ◆ Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio are also called the *tre corone* ("three crowns") of Italian literature.
- ◆ He fell in love with the girl whom he celebrates under the name of Beatrice in the **Vita Nuova (1294) and the Divina Commedia. (1308-1321)**
- ◆ His *Divine Comedy*, originally called Comedia (modern Italian: Commedia) and later christened Divina by Giovanni Boccaccio.
- ◆ It is widely considered one of the most important poems of the Middle Ages and the greatest literary work in the Italian language.
- ◆ *The Divine Comedy* describes Dante's journey through **Hell (Inferno), Purgatory (Purgatorio), and Paradise (Paradiso)**, in three parts he is first guided by the Roman poet Virgil and then by Beatrice.
- ◆ Dante died in Ravenna on 14 September 1321.

Major Works:

- ◆ *Vita Nuova (1294), 31 poems*
- ◆ *De Vulgari Eloquentia ("On the Eloquence in the Vernacular", 1304–5)*
- ◆ *Convivio ("The Banquet", 1307) an unfinished philosophical work*
- ◆ *Monarchia ("Monarchy", 1313)*
- ◆ *Divina Commedia ("Divine Comedy", 1320)*
- ◆ *Eclogues (1320)*

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De Vulgari Eloquentia:

(Circa. 1304–1305)

Title:

It is known by three titles: *De Eloquentia Vulgari*, *De Vulgari Eloquentia* and *De Vulgari Eloquio*.

Structure:

- * De Vulgari Eloquentia is an unfinished project.
- * It was written in **Circa. 1304–1305, Latin to Italian, in Venice 1529 by Giangiorgio Trissino. Published in Latin in 1577.**
- * It is written in **Latin.**
- * He meant to write four books, but abruptly terminated in the middle of the second book.
- * This work is known for establishing the use of the *vernacular* in literature at a time when most poetry was written in Latin, which was accessible only to educated readers.
- * Dante's De Vulgari Eloquentia (*On Eloquence in the Vernacular*) argues that the vernacular is an appropriate medium for great poetry.
- * There are **nineteen-chapter divisions to part one.**
- * There are **fourteen-chapter divisions to part two.**
- * Dante's chief concern in 'De Vulgari Eloquentia' is **the language of poetry.**
- * In the first book, Dante discusses the relationship between Latin and the vernacular languages, and the search for an "illustrious" vernacular in the Italian area.
- * The second book is an analysis of the structure of the canto or song.
- * In the second book he declares that the illustrious vernacular may be used for prose or poetry.
- * But he starts discussing poetry because verse is superior and serves as a model for prose.

The Requirements of An Illustrious Vernacular:

1. *Vocabulary or Choice of words*
2. *Sentence Structure*
3. *Subjects*

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1. Vocabulary:

- * He classifies into **rustic and urban**.
- * The rustic are **ignoble** and therefore unfit for inclusion in the Illustrious Vernacular.
- * The urban are **of three kinds**:
 - 1) **The childish,**
 - 2) **The feminine and,**
 - 3) **The masculine or manly.**
- * Examples of childish words are *mamma and babbo*.
- * Feminine words are *dolciada and placevole*, which are too soft.
- * The first two, the childish and the feminine again are **ignoble**.
- * Only the last –the masculine are left for consideration.
- * The masculine consists of two sets of words:
 - 1) **the shaggy and rumped**
 - 2) **the combed and the glossy.**
- * Again, the shaggy and rumped are both **ignoble**.
- * The **combed and the glossy are the finest of all** and they only remain ultimately for use in poetry.
- * The combed are words like *amore, donna, and salute*, ‘*which leave the speaker’s lips, as it were, with a certain sweetness,*’ and the glossy those that are ornamental, which ‘*when mixed with combed words make a beautifully harmonious conjunction*’.

2. Sentence structure:

- * Dante next considers the arrangement of words.
- * It has not only to be grammatically correct but also ‘the most urbane’ in keeping with
- * its urbane vocabulary.
- * There is uncouth that is used by those without learning.
- * Then there is the purely learned that is employed by strict scholars and schoolmasters.

3. Subjects:

- * He asserts that only the most talented and learned poets should use the illustrious
- * vernacular and then only for appropriate subjects.
- * He considers the three-part structure of the human soul:

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- 1) *the vegetable soul, which seeks what is useful;*
- 2) *the animal soul, which seeks what is pleasurable; and*
- 3) *the rational soul, which seeks what is good.*

* The highest goals of these three souls, he says, are:

- i) **salus (security or safety),**
- ii) **venus (love), and**
- iii) **virtus (excellence).**

* In other words, ‘love of country, love of woman, and love of God’

The highest subjects for poetry, he says, are:

- i) **martial valor,**
- ii) **love, and**
- iii) **righteousness.**

Dante celebrates three writers for their achievements in these themes:

- 1) **Bertran de Born on war ,**
- 2) **Arnaut Daniel on love, and**
- 3) **Giraut de Bornelh on virtue.**

* He similarly praises Cino da Pistoia as a love poet in the Italian vernacular and Cino’s friend (i.e. Dante) as an Italian poet of righteousness.

Canzone:

- * According to Dante, the noblest poetic form is the *Canzone* which is **an Italian and Provençal form of lyric.**
- * The Canzone is traditionally used in three ways: **tragic, comic, and elegiac.**
- * The Canzone, he says, should be used for the highest poetic style, which is **tragic.**
- * Comic poetry should use the middle or low style.
- * He dismisses *the Ballata* as an incomplete art form. It is an Italian poetic and musical form.
- * He defines poetry as a composition which involves rhetoric and music.
- * In the beginning of the book, Dante tackles the historical evolution of language.
- * Dante sees man as distinguished from animals by his faculties of speech and reason.

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- * According to Dante, the linguistic sign conveys thoughts from one person's reason to another's reason, using the medium of sense.
- * The sign must have two components: **sound**, which is sensible, and **meaning**, which appeals to reason.

Vernacular and Grammar:

- * De Vulgari Eloquentia impinges interestingly on the connection of literature and grammar.
- * Dante defines the vernacular as *"natural" speech*, acquired when we are children through the practice of imitation without following any rules.
- * He defines **grammar** as a *"secondary speech,"* which arises from the first.
- * Unlike the first, natural, speech, grammar is acquired only by a few persons through assiduous study and much expenditure of time.
- * Vernacular language *'is that which we learn without any formal instruction, by imitating our nurses.'*
- * Grammar was invented as a kind of ideal stabilization of speech, as *"a kind of unchangeable identity of speech in different times and places."*

Purpose behind the creation of grammar:

- * The main purposes behind the creation of grammar, says Dante, were twofold:
 - i) The first was this requirement of stabilization, so that speech might not fluctuate at the mercy of individuals;
 - ii) The second, integrally related, motive was that we might *"at least attain but a partial knowledge of the opinions and exploits of the ancients, or of those whom difference of place causes to differ from us."*
- * Hence, the idea of positing through grammar a "correct" and stable language is implicitly connected with a literary heritage which embodies, exemplifies, and indeed defines that grammar.
- * Dante makes this connection explicit when he suggests that our practice should be modelled on imitation of the classics: *"the more closely we copy the great poets, the more correct is the poetry we write . . . it behoves us . . . to emulate their poetic teaching"*

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- * Hence, not only does grammar embody the ideals of unity, order, and permanence, as well as being emblematic of civilization itself, but also the poetic tradition is what lays the foundations of grammar.
- * Dante seeks a vernacular language that will be valid and suitable for all of Italy.

Definition of Illustrious Vernacular:

- * He defines the general vernacular as an **illustrious, cardinal, and courtly language**.
- * He defines this illustrious vernacular language as **“that which belongs to all the towns in Italy but does not appear to belong to any one of them.”**
- * Dante suggests that the illustrious language has been “chosen out” from the various dialects by the illustrious poets, including himself, who amalgamated these into a generally usable language.

Four features of any mode of expression:

- * For Dante there are **four main features** of any mode of expression appropriate for these tasks.
- * Dante identifies these four features as:
 - i) *A vernacular's illustriousness,*
 - ii) *Cardinality (cardinalis),*
 - iii) *Courtliness (aulicus), and*
 - iv) *Curiality (curialis).*
- * Dante used the term "illustrious" because the vernacular language can be illuminating; it helps us to literally see views and perspectives.
- * He explains that such a language is “cardinal,” or “pivotal,” (cardinalis) because it “plants” (plantat) what is best and peculiar to specific local vernaculars and “removes” (exstirpat) what is disreputable.
- * It is “courtly” or “aulic” (aulicus) because “it is common to all and the property of none”.
- * And it is “curial” (curialis) because it has been weighed by the scales of justice in a court unified.
- * This language is “cardinal” inasmuch as all the other dialects hinge upon it, and fluctuate in accordance with it.

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- * He pointedly notes, the illustrious vernacular is united only by the practice of the illustrious writers scattered through Italy, who are themselves “united by the gracious light of Reason.
- * He insists that the vernacular should only be used by men of genius and knowledge, and should be restricted to only the worthiest subjects such as war, love, and virtue, and should be expressed in the form of the canzone.

Six components of vernacular discourse:

- * Dante's six components, or canons, of vernacular discourse:

- 1) *"Worthy to use it" – who is able and deserving to use the vernacular*
- 2) *"Content" – the substance of the vernacular discourse*
- 3) *"In what fashion" – the style of the vernacular discourse*
- 4) *"Where" – the location for using vernacular discourse*
- 5) *"When" – the temporal considerations for using vernacular discourse*
- 6) *"To whom it is addressed" – audience considerations*

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