

DANTE AS ARTIST.¹

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YOU will recall the famous passage in the *Vita Nuova* where Dante, sitting alone on the first anniversary of Beatrice's death, describes how he was drawing the picture of an angel. He turned his head, being conscious that bystanders were watching him. They were people of importance to whom a courteous greeting was suitable, and it appears they had been there some time before Dante realised their presence. He rose, and said simply "Someone else was with me—hence my meditation." And when they were gone Dante set himself again to his work "cioè del disegnare figure d'angeli." Let me quote Dante's own words :—

"In quel giorno, nel quale si compiva l'anno, che questa donna era fatta de' cittadini di vita eterna, io mi sedea in parte, nella quale ricordandomi di lei, disegnava un angelo sopra certe tavolette: e mentre io 'l disegnava, volsi gli occhi, e vidi lungo me uomini a' quali si convenia di fare onore. E' riguardavano quello ch'io facea; e secondo che mi fu detto poi, egli erano stati già alquanto anzi che io me n'accorgessi. Quando li vidi, mi levai, e salutando loro dissi; altri era testè meco, e perciò pensava. Onde partiti costoro, ritornai alla mia opera, cioè del disegnare figure d'angeli. . . ."

We think of Dante as poet, theologian, astronomer—as historian and satirist, as mystic or statesman, but this faint indication of Dante as artist is seldom noted, for it suggests few of those dilemmas or controversies so pleasing to the commentator. How Dante drew angels on his tablets—how Beatrice must have been the model. . . . "Questa non è femina, anzi è uno de' bellissimi angeli del cielo . . ." these elusive references in the autopsychology of the *Vita Nuova*

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have made small appeal to students; and yet something can be learned from considering the *Divina Commedia* in the light of contemporary art and in a lesser degree as to Dante's own influence on the artists of his day. In any case certain passages in his writings, few in number but significant in analysis, fully justify the claim that Dante must rank as the earliest historian of Italian Art. His observation was certainly acute, and in his terse descriptions of nature one can almost detect the pleasure of definition: but he paints rivers, birds, rocks, mountains and towns, as illustrations to his arguments rather than for their own sakes. To us landscape has become an integral and individual aspect of art, almost independent of other externals. Though Dante's study of flora and fauna was intimate, and almost microscopic, he hesitated before nature as a unit. In this he did not differ from his contemporaries unless it were that he saw more than they: but in 1300 the intellectual impact of nature was light. There was little to correspond with the prevailing curiosity, one might almost say the inquisitiveness about geography—the feeling that there existed unknown but discoverable lands—what Dante called the unpeopled world beyond the sun (*Inf.* 26, 117). The immediate point, however, is to note that Dante's eyesight was cultivated and his visual memory exact. He was equipped to watch the movements of his day.

And what was the position in 1300? How many and how recurrent are the golden ages of Italian literature and art! In that year of Jubilee Villani visited Rome, impressed by its history as recorded in Vergil, Sallust and Lucan. He reached the conclusion that Rome was a declining city, that Florence was rising in fame, and he therefore decided to write the history of the latter. Little of Florence, as Dante knew it, survives to-day. Its palaces had not emerged except as a Bargello or a Palazzo Pubblico then just begun. Its streets were sequences of fortified towers. The little town of Lucca had 300 of them. Santa Croce and the Cathedral were in process of erection, while the great Bell-tower, the "notabile campanile e di gran costo" was not built. Though the city walls had just been extended, Florence was still small and overcrowded, but the expansion of her architectural dignity was rapid, and was accompanied by a great intellectual revival. One must acknowledge that Dante's censorious verdict does not conform to what we assume Florence to

have been. To us the fresh and brilliant renaissance which marked the age of Giotto, Dante and Niccolò Pisano, of Can Grande, Marco Polo and Boniface VIII., is not only picturesque but inspiring. Dante judged with greater severity. To him the outstanding features of Florence were its feuds and fanaticisms. The largest single incident in the *Divine Comedy* is where Cacciaguida, Dante's great-great-grandfather praises his own generation at the expense of Dante's. It is a passage of sustained eloquence and fire. Cacciaguida recounts the simplicity of life, the modesty of dress, the unity of purpose—in short the peace and tranquillity of his time. What is in form the portrait of family life in 1150, is in substance Dante's harsh assault upon his native city in later times—a veritable tirade which concludes with Cacciaguida's prediction of Dante's exile, and the pressing injunction that he should write the Vision.

It is not only in these three Cantos of the *Paradiso* that Dante the innovator shows deep and passionate respect for the past. He looked on Italy as descendant in race and successor in title of the Roman Empire. The earlier Popes had already reaffirmed the continuity of Roman Laws, the employment of the Latin tongue, their right to crown and invest the Emperor. Dante in his treatise *De Monarchia* traced the Imperial power to its Roman progenitor, but argued that the ultimate sanction rested with the Deity rather than with His vicar on earth. Dante's devotion to Vergil is a tribute to the classical times of Rome as well as to the fame of the poet; and Dante is somewhat sparing in references to famous writers of the old world. He knew no Greek—so Marsilio Ficino tells us (in the Proemio to the *De Monarchia*), and Grecian lore and history supply many names but curiously few characters in the *Divine Comedy*. Vergil on the other hand was the object of intense hero worship, he was in fact assimilated into Italian theology—almost Christianised, and if Raphael does not place him with Dante in the *Disputa del Sacramento*, Vergil has at least a place of honour in the Vatican Parnassus. It was to the study of Vergil that Dante ascribed his own distinction in poetry :—

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

—(*Inf.* I., 85.)

Profound as was Dante's respect for the past, he was sensitive to every phase of contemporary life. If the *Inferno* contains what we may call the politics of the *Commedia*, the *Paradiso* embraces its theology, and the *Purgatorio* the most valued reflections on literature and art. Here we find the chief references to painting, sculpture, music and illuminations ; and of those the best-known passage is where Cimabue and Giotto are contrasted. The older painter had thought himself supreme, but his pupil won pre-eminence, thus casting his master into obscurity :—

“Credette Cimabue nella pittura
Tener lo campo : ed ora ha Giotto il grido,
Sì che la fama di colui oscura. . . .”

—(*Purg.* XI., 94.)

Modern research tends to dethrone Cimabue, even to the extent of disproving the charming story of the triumphal procession which accompanied the Rucellai Altarpiece to its home in Santa Maria Novella. Painting and story alike are now transferred to the credit of Siena. Moreover, it is shown that no authenticated work by Cimabue has survived, though half a dozen signed panels by Margaritone d'Arezzo, gaunt and uncouth affairs, give a clear impression of the earlier master. Florence in fact at that period had not secured precedence in pictorial art : it was in Rome and Siena that the most vital schools flourished. But if Cimabue be surrounded by a network of ill-founded tradition, none the less Dante's statement in the *Purgatorio* is explicit. It was written within a short time of Cimabue's death and cannot be dismissed offhand. Nor is there evidence that Dante shared Vasari's weakness for undue praise of Florentine artists, and it is possible that later exaggerations may have their source in Dante. It is said that Cimabue (“di bellissima presenza,” as Ghiberti described him) had actually taught drawing to the poet. What would Dante have learned ? Cimabue himself was engaged for important commissions at Pisa and Assisi, and if we treat him as type of the period, we can safely say that he made substantial progress. He would be among the first to make an effort to shake off the mannerisms of the debased School of Byzantium, “quella goffa maniera greca” as Vasari justly termed it—in other words a conventionalised treatment of accepted themes, even of individual figures, which had been standardised into unchanging

formulæ. The Canon of Art had become a tyranny. Invention was so much discouraged that the painter was little more than a copyist, and as time went on the original model, being more and more defaced sank into increasing decay. The moribund symbolism of Byzantium was a source of degeneracy—what a contrast with Dante's which was vivifying ; and we may credit Cimabue and his contemporaries with the earliest effective struggle for freedom in painting. But emancipation required long effort, and we must not underrate Cimabue because success was slow. Even the genius of Giotto left painting in a situation relatively lower than the poetry of the *Commedia*. What for instance will be found in Giotto's angels to compare with the tenderness of Dante's ? In Cimabue they are stiffer than his human figures—one might almost style them liveried retainers : in Giotto they are sometimes so emphatic as to be distractions. Dante anticipates the cherub of the Umbrian Renaissance—he longed to see “ questa angiola giovanissima,” and instead of visualising Death as the grim and often repellent figure of the Trecento, he summons him gently to his side, and exhorts Death to be kindly, considering that he had so lately visited Beatrice : “ Dolcissima morte vieni a me, e non m'esser villana, perocchè tu dèi esser gentile, in tal parte se' stata.” The Angel of Death is almost identified with the Angel of Life.

But Giotto's position is incontestable among the founders of Italian painting, as was freely recognised by those who immediately followed Dante. Boccaccio for instance, a sincere admirer of them both, and a shrewd observer of the arts, says that Giotto redirected art towards light. Ghiberti also recognised his abandonment of the Greek or Byzantine tradition, and his revival of learning lost for many centuries. “ Arrecò l'arte nuova, lasciò la rozzezza dei Greci . . . fu inventore e trovatore di tanta dottrina, la quale era stata sepolta circa d'anni 600.” Cennini generalised the same opinion, “. . . Giotto rimuto l'arte del dipingere di Greco in Latino, e ridusse al moderno”—a more perspicacious compliment than Villani's, that Giotto was greater than any of the painters of antiquity. Giotto nationalised Italian painting.

Of technical influences upon Giotto, that of Pietro Cavallini was doubtless the most insistent : but one is also inclined to trace that of Dante in the psychology of some of the principal paintings. Giotto's *Inferno* is closely allied to the conception of Dante, who is credited

with having secured for his friend the invitation to work at Ravenna : and there seems no reason to doubt the statement of Benvenuto da Imola, the earliest of the professional commentators of the *Divine Comedy*, that Giotto and Dante were on intimate terms during the decoration of the Arena Chapel at Padua. This great scheme was executed for Enrico Scrovegno, son of Rainaldo whom Dante placed among the usurers in *Inferno* XVII. It has both been alleged and contested that Dante during this visit to Padua inspired Giotto with a taste for allegory, and that the virtues and vices of the chapel were the firstfruits of their intercourse (Lord Lindsay, II., 27).

What were the relations, or perhaps one should say the analogies between the art of Giotto and that of Dante, between the pictorial and poetic inspirations ? The disparity of the two arts is not such as to preclude comparison, though one must remember that whereas the text of the *Divine Comedy* is authentic, the frescoes have been restored and in some cases sophisticated beyond recognition. But Giotto asserts himself in spite of the cloud of restoration which so often obscures our view. His simplicity or rather his simplification arrests attention. His composition is succinct. The episode is handled in a straightforward manner and one is never at a loss to read his whole story at a glance. Giotto's angels all weep or smile in unison, and his company is surprised or grieved or rejoicing all at once, being infected by the same emotion. Dante, too, gives the impression of clear-cut emphasis, but the more one examines the passage the more subtle it becomes and the more recondite are its implications. Dante was the real observer of nature, not Giotto, who, indeed, could only see trees or rocks in a dry and summary fashion without Dante's love of landscape as such. Nor is it possible to claim for Giotto, still less for the work of his pupils, which is frequently ascribed to the master himself, that certainty and confidence of handling which is so typical in the *Comedia*. There is nothing experimental in Dante's presentment. Benvenuto da Imola says that Dante supplied Giotto with the scheme for the Apocalypse at Naples. One must now allot the majority of these Giottesque frescoes to imitators and assistants, but in any case they seem to lack the decision and exactitude of the poet. The Last Judgment is often a jumble, a mere crowd where the number of figures is multiplied as far as space permits, in order to expand the scale of the miracle. Fra Angelico paints his saints in battalions. In

pictures of the *Inferno* painters were probably more influenced by the Dantesque model. The scenes of torture, pestilence, fire and sword, the fiendish and grotesque cannibalism, the studied vindictiveness of the whole conception, are frankly revolting in pictorial art : but at least the ferocity is anonymous and was justifiable as a public warning, which displayed the varied types of malefactors and punishment. The *Inferno* however names the victim, often enough accentuates his crime, and thrusts the delinquent into damnation without right of appeal. The *Comedia* of course was a book, a manuscript, and might be looked upon as a private and personal expression of opinion until John Neumeister of Foligno issued the *Editio Princeps* to the world in 1472. But Dante's pen gives a more acute sense of horror than the brush of the most truculent painter. Dante's angels provide a happy foil to the callousness alleged against the *Inferno*, for they breathe a sense of reality more vital than in Giotto or Niccolò Pisano, whatever be their angelic rank or function—sometimes grouped in orders or spheres, as guardians, messengers, mediators, sometimes marshalled and organised, sometimes active or symbolic. The angel which Dante drew sopra certe tavolette was a living presentment, but at the same time angelic. And in this connection we may note that only one Christian woman is placed in the *Inferno*, Francesca da Rimini, whose tragedy so deeply afflicted the poet, that as one spirit told him its story while the other wailed with grief, Dante was overcome with emotion, and fell fainting to the ground like a corpse :—

“E caddi, come corpo morto cade.”

—(*Inf.* V., 142.)

Dante lived in a transitional period and helped to make it transitional. He witnessed far-reaching developments in the State and University, and in the Church as the result of the Œcumenical Councils, and of the stabilisation of the Franciscan and Dominican orders. Moreover he assisted in the final emancipation of sculpture and painting. By 1300 artists had popularised sentiment in religious painting. They could no longer tolerate the high-bred aloofness and the staid gestures of the earlier style,—that immobility of countenance and hieratic stiffness which not only precluded vivacity of treatment, but were incompatible with the homely and domestic scenes which in a Franciscan sequence portrayed the life-mission of the Saint. Drama

was demanded. Its lesson had to be direct and readily understood, while here and there a lighter touch was not held amiss. Giotto's canzone on the Franciscan doctrine of poverty is full of humour, and by no means lacking a spice of agreeable malice. Notwithstanding tradition I sometimes fancy that Dante himself was not wholly sympathetic towards the Franciscans : at any rate St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Bernard and St. Benedict, take precedence of St. Francis throughout the *Paradiso* ; in fact St. Francis only figures in a subordinate rank, and it is Bonaventura who directly represents the Greyfriars. Dante was immersed in high politics, which led to his disconsolate wanderings over Italy—"exsul immeritus" as he signs one of his letters—and he seems to have been more impressed by the imposing statesmen of theology than by the humbler, but none the less effective exponent of Christian virtues. And while for many years Dante gazed back at Florence, frowning at times and censorious, but never quite concealing the tenderness of affection for his native city, he composed the *Comedia* in a spirit of uncompromising severity—does he not smile but once throughout its long course ? Yet it is relieved by lyric passages of supreme quality. It is here that the poet far excels the painters of his day. The *Dolce stil nuovo* of the poet, bursting forth as love inspires, had not approached maturity in the painters. Buonaggiunta of Lucca abruptly asks if he is looking upon the man who composed the sonnet beginning "Ladies that have intelligence of Love" :—

"Ma di' s'io veggio qui colui che fuore
Trasse le nuove rime, cominciando
Donne, ch'avete intelletto d'Amore?"

—(*Purg.* XXIV., 49.)

"Yes," says Dante, "I am indeed one of those who take note *quando amore spira*." "Such," replies Buonaggiunta, "such is the *Dolce stil nuovo*" which had eluded him and his contemporaries—and having said this he relapsed into silence as though contented. . . .

"E quasi contentato si tacette."

—(*Ibid.*, 63.)

Giotto and Duccio lag far behind the standard of Dante's sweet new style. The only Italian of the period one can compare with Dante on terms of equality is Niccolò Pisano the sculptor : but before turning to

the art by which Dante was perhaps most attracted, let me refer to the Poet's portrait in the Bargello at Florence, ascribed from time immemorial to Giotto, but now (in strict accord with precedent) given to some dull person in his entourage.

The Peace of 1301 which was forced on Florence by Boniface VIII. with Charles of Anjou as intermediary, is the subject of large scale frescoes in the Capella del Podestà in the Bargello. It is a combination of religious and secular episodes. Dante, Corso Donati, Brunetto Latini and an unidentified figure—all of them life-sized—form a group of onlookers. The painting is in very bad order, for the building has twice been on fire; it was subsequently remodelled, then suffered from two or three centuries of neglect, and the fresco was finally smothered with a coat of plaster. In 1840 permission was obtained to uncover the painting. Aubrey Bezzi and Seymour Kirkup disclosed the portrait on 21 July; but Marini the painter who was helping to remove the plaster, had driven a nail into the wall to secure some scaffolding, and it was ultimately found that the nail had pierced Dante's left eye and the upper part of his cheek. With some difficulty Mr. Kirkup contrived to visit the Chapel by himself, and he made a careful tracing of the Dante as well as a coloured drawing. This very fine version of a historic portrait which has now been practically destroyed, has fortunately been reproduced by the Arundel Society. Dante was dressed in green, red, and white, the mystic combination in which Beatrice first appeared in the *Purgatorio*. . . .

“Sovra candido vel cinta d'oliva
Donna m'apparve, sotto verde manto
Vestita di color di fiamma viva.”

—(*Purg.* XXX., 31.)

The colouring of Dante's clothes was doubtless what the poet had chosen more than five centuries before. “I suoi vestimenti sempre onestissimi furono,” says Boccaccio; but alas! in the forties these innocent hues had acquired a political complexion. They had in fact become revolutionary. The picture was hurriedly repainted, and as we see it to-day, quite apart from the colouring, is a poor travesty of the noble lines preserved in the Kirkup drawing. As to the portraiture, we may be confident that it is accurate, for it conforms closely with the authentic death-mask. When painted, Dante would

have been some five and thirty years old ; but Dante always leaves the impression of being older than his actual years : for instance the text of *Inferno* V. does not convey that Dante was younger than Paolo Matalista or Francesca da Rimini. There he stands in Kirkup's tracing, in some ways very true to Villani's description—"this Dante was a little haughty and shy and disdainful"; and if in this strong face one sees the faculty of keen analysis, perhaps of cold and cutting reprisal, there is a calm outlook and perhaps also a strain of melancholy, as memories crossed his mind of Beatrice, who lived in heaven with the angels and on earth with Dante's soul.

When this great portrait was again seen by the warm-hearted public of Florence, the cry went up "l'Abbiamo, il nostro poeta !" There was a feeling that at last something of the very man had been recovered, for little remained to Florence except his tiny birthplace—"in questa casa . . . nacque il divino poeta." Dante had been proscribed, persecuted, exiled, condemned to death ; had perished in a distant city ; and the remorse of Florence not then shewn for the first time, was enhanced by the fact that other portraits of the poet had been allowed to perish. Lorenzo Monaco is said to have painted one in Sta. Trinità. There may have been two in Santa Croce, perhaps one by Taddeo Gaddi ; and unquestionably another by Giotto, so well known according to Vasari that when Michael Angelo's funeral service was held in San Lorenzo, among the cartoons illustrating Florentine art was a canvas shewing Giotto carrying a portrait of Dante after this original. Michael Angelo was a good deal influenced by Dante. He was credited with the bas-relief of Ugolino now in Florence, and likewise with a long series of marginal illustrations in a printed *Commedia* of 1481. Condivi states explicitly that the Leah and Rachel of the *Purgatorio* inspired the figures of Active and Contemplative Life on the Tomb of Pope Julius. The Sistine Chapel has many analogies with the grim side of the *Commedia*—neither poet nor painter was much addicted to smiling—and Michael Angelo (who had himself smarted beneath the harshness of Florentine rule) offered to design a monument for Dante's grave. Pietro Lorenzetti at Pisa, Orcagna and Michellino at Florence, Signorelli at Orvieto, Raphael in the Vatican, are among those who sought themes from Dantesque inspiration. It is not my purpose to trace these analogies through later art, and one must be careful not to over-rate

in any degree Dante's influence upon his contemporaries in painting. The *Commedia* can only have been known to a fraction of his countrymen. But it may be remarked that with the death of Giotto the standard of progress in Italian painting was checked. There was no technical decline ; on the contrary proficiency steadily grew, but it was not accompanied by the refinement and spiritual expansion which should have sprung from the massive combination of Dante and Giotto. In Orcagna, for instance, drama is over-strained. The delicacy of the *Vita Nuovo* and the Arena Chapel is absent—witness his angels who are so much obsessed with their tragic duties as to lapse into sheer grimace. In fact a century and a half elapsed before the *Dolce stil nuovo* so well established in the *Commedia* found its full counterpart in Filippino Lippi and Botticelli. The latter made a long series of Dante illustrations,—the *Inferno* overcharged and tiresome, the *Purgatorio* simplified and tolerable, the *Paradiso* concentrated unified and superb. He got very close to the spirit of the *Vita Nuova*, and with the influence of Savonarola making its impact upon all Florence, Botticelli is perhaps the artist most capable of treating such a theme. Though lacking the robust and bellicose temperament of the *Inferno*, nobody could better encompass the mournful occasion of Beatrice's death, when the sun was overclouded and the stars shewed themselves of such a colour as to make Dante think they cried out in sorrow “. . . le stelle si mostravano d'un colore che mi faceva giudicare che piangessero.” Birds fell dead in their flight—“gli ucelli volando cadessero morti,” and there were earthquakes. Botticelli, too, brought the angels of heaven into the daily life of the people, yet preserving all the reticence of the *Vita Nuova*. Like Dante he must often have returned after interruption to his work, “. . . opera cioè del disegnare figure d'angeli,”—and he has left us the wistful faces, but withal the intense aspiration and the ardent quietism of what Dante would have called *la gloriosa donna della mia mente*. With Perugino and his school the angel grew younger ; with Cimabue they were so elderly. The Umbrians drew their angels walking across the heavens or moving with the very semblance of the act of flight, poised floating or suspended in their native element, and always adorned with the mild and unquestioning serenity of youth. And if we skip a century or two the angel again changes aspect, youthful still, but a *putto*, an *amorino*, a cupid or some mischievous yet lovable little

fairly ; and one could well applaud Metastasio or Goldoni if once in a way they had been taken by surprise when drawing the picture of one of these very modern latter-day angels.

One reason why Dante's appeal is so widespread and far flung lies in the fact that he was both modernist and reactionary, looking forward and backward too, living alike in the present and the past. One sees this in his deep reverence for Vergil and other classical writers, though passionately devoted to the *lingua volgare* of his time. He admired the great days of the Roman Empire, the imaginary golden age. . . .

"Lo secol primo quant'oro fu bello!"

—(*Purg.* XXII., 148.)

While the *Paradiso* begins with the magnificent prayer to Apollo, yet so sensitive were Dante's scruples that never once does he rhyme the name of Cristo with anything less sacred than the name of Cristo Himself. There are curious passages in the *Commedia* which illustrate the essential patriotism of his outlook and his attachment to every link which united Imperial Rome with the Florence of 1300 : these references to the statue of Mars are worth noting in connection with a study of Dante as artist. In *Inferno*, XIII., the nameless suicide who hanged himself in his own house indicates Florence as the city which exchanged its patron Saint, replacing Mars by St. John the Baptist : and he repeats the ancient legend that Florence could never have recovered from the devastations of Attila had not a fragment or glimpse of the old statue of Mars, been visible by the Bridge. . . .

"E se non fosse che'n sul passo d'Arno
Rimane ancor di lui alcuna vista."

—(*Inf.* XIII., 146.)

Cacciaguida, too, makes it clear that tradition associated the statue with the prosperity of Florence : Buondelmonti had been murdered in its neighbourhood :—

"Conveniasi a quella pietra scema
Che guarda il ponte, che Fiorenza fesse
Vittima nella sua pace postrema."

—(*Parad.* XVI., 145.)

Pietra scema means a reduced or mutilated stone, perhaps the worn fragment of the original, or else the base of the statue which protected (or as I prefer to read the word, which faced) the bridge ; and

Florence in effect offered a sacrifice during the last interval of peace she had enjoyed so long ago. In another passage Cacciaguida when describing Florence as he knew it, mentions the statue as a geographical point of measurement : he says that in his day the number of men who could carry arms was but a fifth of the number in Dante's time. Florence extended "tra Marte e'l Battista"—from the Arno Bridge to the Baptistery of St. John, say a diameter of 600 yards. A fanciful explanation is that the phrase is chronological, and measures the period between paganism and Christianity, though why either St. John or Mars should be taken to begin one epoch or to end another is very obscure. The simple reading is the best, and is fortified by the mingled fear and affection aroused by this relic. What can have been the nature of this ancient Deity which played so strong a part in the sentiment of Florence? Villani and Boccaccio suggest without any serious authority that the figure was equestrian. Neither of them ever saw it, nor indeed is there evidence that in Dante's time it was more than a fragment : he even makes Cacciaguida who lived a century and a half before, refer to it as a *pietra scema*, probably the stone base which may have maintained its identity by some inscription. The original figure would presumably have been marble or bronze. As to its later history, Villani and the Anonimo commentator concur in saying that the flood of 1333 swept it away, and a later hand adds to the text of the Anonimo that it fell into the Arno and remained there many years. Let us infer from this last sentence that the *pietra scema* was ultimately dredged up from the stream, and perhaps even to-day though unrecognised and neglected amidst the sylvan divinities of the Boboli Gardens, is none the less restored to Florence, still looks towards the River Arno, and exercises a beneficent sway in the cause of prosperity and peace.

I refer to this legendary sculpture to show how Dante's mind was attuned to the Antique. The only sculptor mentioned in the *Commedia*, which abounds in allusions to painters, architects, illuminators and musicians, is Policreto, as Polucleitos was called in Tuscan idiom. Dante's knowledge of this great but almost archaic genius, was of course derived from Cicero, Pliny, Quintilian and many other writers, who had recorded his fame. His reputation was traditional, or one should say conventional, just as Apelles and Pheidias represent painting and sculpture in Andrea Pisano's reliefs on the Campanile at

Florence. Dante had no direct or personal knowledge of Greek Art, and Italy possessed few object lessons, for classical sculpture even including its Roman developments was practically non-existent in his day. It is truly astonishing how high a percentage of the statuary, say in the Vatican or the Baths of Diocletian has been excavated since Dante's lifetime. This is abundantly proved in the current literature and correspondence on such subjects. Brunellescho was told by Donatello about some classical urn at Cortona and was greatly pleased with it, but Vasari suggests that its interest lay in its rarity alone, such things being scarce before the digging mania set in, ". . . cosa allora rara, non essendosi dissotterata quella abbondanza che si è fatta ne' tempi nostri." Sabba del Castiglione was an amateur of antiques, and complained that owing to their scarcity he was compelled to buy a work by Donatello! Dante's knowledge was drawn from history and his appreciation was founded on sentiment. The ruined temples of Imperial Rome had been converted into quarries or Christian churches: the amphitheatres and baths had become the glorious homes of inglorious squatters, yet their massive lines strove to resist assault, reflecting the grandeur of the Empire, and stimulating Dante's innate nationalism. I think, moreover, that Dante was particularly susceptible to plastic aspects of interpretation. He saw forms in their plastic sense, and conceived them as though he had visualised their structure and dimensional values. The episodes of Francesca da Rimini, of Count Ugolino, and perhaps most of all the conversation with Pia de' Tolomei. . . .

"Ricorditi di me, che son la Pia :

Siena mi fe, disfecemi Maremma," . . .

—(*Purg.* V., 133.)

All these and others which could be quoted seem almost to indicate that their sculptural outlines were embodied before his very eyes. His rugged and abrupt phraseology suggests a scene hewn out of marble and casting deep shadows, rather than the soft modelling and colour gradations of a painted canvas.

Apart from Dante's reminiscences of the old statue of Mars, there are only four effective references to sculpture in the *Divine Comedy*, and of these the passage about the fabulous statue at Crete is purely symbolical—a colossus made of gold, silver, brass, steel and clay, based of course upon the image described by the Prophet

Daniel (*Inferno*, XIV., 103). Again the huge bronze pinecone now in the Vatican Court, is only mentioned as analogous in size to the face of the giants who surrounded the Ninth Circle. . . .

“La faccia sua mi pareva lunga e grossa,
Come la pina di San Pietro a Roma.”

—(*Inf.* XXXI., 58.)

It is a magnificent and indeed a most interesting antique, of which the legendary vicissitudes would form an instructive study. Much more important are two lengthy descriptions in *Purgatorio*, X. and XII., of bas-relief and figured pavement illustrating Humility and Pride. The scenes of humility are upright reliefs—*exallabitur*: those of pride are abased on the ground—*humiliabitur*. In these cantos Dante exposes his entire theory of plastic art.

There were two phases of sculpture in Dante's time: one the slow-going traditional style, rather gaunt and unprogressive—this was the prevailing type; on the other hand the brilliant and surprising work of Niccolò Pisano, one of the great emanations of Italian æsthetics, and the only artist of the thirteenth century who can be justly compared with Dante. The ordinary sculpture with which Dante was familiar resembled contemporary painting in many ways. One aspect, associated with the family of Cosmati, was the employment of mosaic as a governing motive, and though much Cosmatesque work was purely pictorial, a great deal was plastic. The Cosmati seem to have established a prosperous family concern, aided of course by a well-organised *bottega*, and from the year 1200 or earlier, until the end of the century, they and their imitators produced masses of decorative work: some of it graphic, much of it devoted to the ambone, altar, pulpit, Pascal candlestick, and so forth, while later on they developed into sculptors on a large scale. The tombs of Stefaneschi, Durandus, Aquasparta and Gonsalvo are all really important monuments, conceived on big lines, but in every case decorated with shining mosaics. Nothing could be more efficient than their craftsmanship, but there was always the danger that the plastic art would be submerged in the decoration, and that the architectural elements of a tomb, and actually the planes of a sculptured figure, would be compromised by the desire to secure good surfaces for the incrustation of coloured cubes. The Cosmati who were most active in Rome exercised an indirect

influence on the sculptors of Tuscany, and throughout the thirteenth century there was a decided taste for mosaic embellishments on the bas-relief : at this stage the free-standing statue had scarcely emerged. The normal sculpture familiar to Dante was the slowly-evolved advance from Gruamons, Deodatus, Bonamicus, and Benedetto Antelami, who was the leading Italian sculptor of the twelfth century. It cannot be said that general progress was as rapid in sculpture as in painting, and even about the year 1300 dull and uninspired carving still passed muster for plastic art. But synchronous with this archaic and almost degenerate output, Niccolò Pisano was producing work of such superlative merit as to revolutionise Italian sculpture. Suddenly in 1260 the great pulpit at Pisa was unveiled ; in 1265, the year of Dante's birth, the contract for the equally famous pulpit at Siena was signed, and it was finished when Dante was three years old. One is almost inclined to look upon Niccolò Pisano as a prodigy, a giant like Dante who unexpectedly produces a finished and authoritative achievement, towering above his contemporaries and laying down examples from which succeeding generations will be wholly powerless to depart. We know little of Niccolò. Little if anything of the output of his first fifty years can be identified, and Tuscany became aware without warning of a genius at once spontaneous and mature. He was probably Apulian by birth and it is quite possible that his early training took place at the Court of Frederick the Second, who tried to revive Imperial splendour in his castle at Capua. Niccolò had certain affinities with classical art, and one can trace adaptations from old models so exact as to verge on copies. Moreover he was susceptible to Gothic influences of the North—Wessex and France at that time being in advance of Tuscany in scale sentiment and technical efficiency of the sculptured art. Not only did Niccolò Pisano progress far beyond the halting efforts of his contemporaries in painting, while the old schools of sculpture still continued unabashed and confident, but he made a contribution from which each art has profited ever since—namely, the fixation of biblical type and episode. Up till 1250 there were few accepted renderings of accepted beliefs, and it was fitting that divergence and contradictions should be checked in art as in theology. Yet although Niccolò Pisano laid down no hieratic canon, for he was no partisan, his crystallisations met with ready and almost universal acceptance. But one must not assume

that his influence was immediate. His works in the first place were uncommon. Communications were bad, travellers few, reproductions at that date were scarce, and there was always a certain reluctance for one town to learn lessons from a neighbour with which as often as not it was at war. Dante at any rate when anxious to interpret a dream, could circulate his poem to well-known poets of his day, *famosi trovatori*, and having saluted all those faithful to the Dominion of Love, "Io salutassi tutti i fedeli d'amore . . .," he could ask for explanations and in return he received many and diverse replies. With the sculptor the process of enlightenment was slower and more laborious: and it was not until Giovanni Pisano had amplified his father's teaching, assimilating northern ideas while retaining a certain hold on classical tradition, that the full measure of Niccolò Pisano's power was manifest. Meanwhile the migration of the Papal Court to Avignon broke the continuity of the Roman school of art, which had maintained a varying but unbroken existence throughout the Christian era. Siena and Florence then took the lead, Venice, Bologna, Milan, Perugia, Naples, each in their turn claiming precedence, and never again did Rome, though hospitable to every phase of art, possess any school of her own.

In the lowest circle of the *Purgatory* the sin of pride is chastised and the virtue of humility exalted. Dante introduces very few actual examples from his own time and relies chiefly on ocular demonstration by means of three bas-reliefs: the Annunciation, David dancing before the Ark, and the incident of Trajan and the Widow. Let me describe these fine paraphrases. In the first place they are made of marble, *marmo candido* (X., 31), and he mentions a figure of gleaming whiteness, *biancheggiava* (72). We may therefore conclude that the sculpture was not Cosmatesque, and certainly not polychromatic: in itself a mark of Dante's fine æsthetic reluctance to combine two arts to the detriment of each. The scenes are direct presentments of the episode, for he uses the word *storia* and *storiata* three times (52, 71, 73) and the narratives were legible in their plastic as well as their symbolic connotation, the term *immagine* being used four times in various forms (39, 41, 62, 98). And we must presume them to have been in bas-relief from their position on the steep containing-wall or *cornice* which bounded the narrow path along which Vergil and Dante walked. Michal, the sister of Saul, is *effigiata* at the palace window

(67). A difficult problem arises from the word *intagliato* which is used three times (32, 38, 55), in fact it is the only word describing the technical process of the sculptor. The *intaglio* is of course incised, a delicate art usually associated with gems or precious stones, and indeed Dante compares the relief of the Annunciation with the impression of a seal upon wax, so faithfully were the words "Ecce Ancilla Domini" conveyed by gesture and pose. We must, however, remember that appellations of artists were very vague at this period, and as late as 1423, in the Orvieto contract, Donatello is styled *intagliator figurarum*: moreover the line "un'altra storia nella roccia imposta" (52) should remove all doubt as to the sculpture being low relief.

In each of these plastic scenes, Dante insists upon their verisimilitude to life: so true were they that not only Polycleitos but Nature herself would have been put to shame—

". . . non pur Policreto
Ma la natura li avrebbe scorno."

—(*Purg.* X., 32.)

The Angel of the Annunciation does not look like a speechless statue, but seems to formulate his message: one could swear that he said *Ave*:—

". . . non sembiava immagine che tace.
Giurato si saria ch'ei dicesse, Ave."

—(*Purg.* X., 39.)

The relief of David is rather more complex, as the composition embraces two scenes and a cross motive. The cart bearing the ark is drawn by oxen and surrounded by choirs, and leading the procession was David the humble psalmist, girded with a linen ephod, "Trescando alzato, l'umile Salmista" (X., 65), both less and more than kingly in his action. In the background the Princess Michal "comè donna dispettosa e trista" (69), watched David dancing and despised him in her proud heart. Dante is bewildered as he gazes on the relief. Are they singing or are they not? His eyes say that incense is burning, his nose denies it: so vivid so convincing are the impressions, that three of his senses, sight, hearing and smell, are contradicting one another. Finally we see Trajan with horsemen around him, and the poor widow by his bridle imploring vengeance for her dead son. She seems to speak, the Emperor seems to answer; the whole dialogue is

indicated by the eloquent nature of the carving. "Await my return," says Trajan.—"But if you do not come back?"—"Then someone will act in my place."—"And how will that satisfy your conscience," she asks—"Content yourself," replies the Emperor, "my duty shall be done before I resume my journey."

"Ond'elli: Or ti conforta; che conviene
Ch'io solva il mio dovere, anzi ch'io muova."

—(*Purg.* X., 91.)

Dante has been in a trance, spellbound: twice he is urged forward by Vergil, so absorbing were these "immagini di tante umiltadi." (X., 98).

The tenth circle of the *Purgatorio* describes the bas-reliefs of humility. The eleventh, beginning with the grand paraphrase of the Lord's prayer, is notable for the famous passages about Oderisi the miniaturist, Cimabue and Giotto, and Guido Cavalcanti. The twelfth canto illustrates historic examples of pride and its punishment engraved on the pavement. Vergil tells Dante to gaze upon the ground "per tranquillar la via" (14). Then follows a passage of which the construction is far from easy, nine lines which compare the pictures on the pavement with memorials placed on graves. Attempts have been made as is frequently the case with similar obscurities, to extract some theological meaning in order to explain phrases which are abstruse or apparently unrelated to the context. There may of course be corruptions in the text, though in this case there are few recorded emendations. These lines begin with a simile covering six lines about graves, governed by the word "COME," then follow three lines governed by the word "SÌ" which refer to the pictures underfoot:—

"COME, perchè di lor memoria sia,
Sovr'a' sepolti, le tombe terragne
Portan segnato quel ch'elli era pria:
Onde li molte volte se ne piagne,
Per la puntura della rimembranza,
Che solo a' più dà delle calcagne;
Sì vid'io li, ma di miglior sembianza,
Secondo l'artificio, figurato
Quanto per via di fuor dal monte avanza."

—(*Purg.* XII., 16.)

As grave mounds (*tombe terragne*) above those who are buried (*sepolti*) bear records (*portan segnato*) for memory's sake of those

who once lived, causing many tears through the sting of remembrance (*puntura della rimembranza*) which only spurs the pious heart, so saw I there figured (*figurato*), so much of the roadway as the projection of the mountain permits, but of better likeness or appearance (*miglior sembianza*), according to the craft or craftsmanship (*secondo l'artificio*). The passage presents several intricacies. The reference to the tombs bearing records or cyphers (*portan segnato*) is taken by Lombardi to mean sculptured effigies—"scolpito nella soprapposte lapidi." But can *segnato* really mean as much? Philologically it would be more truly read as marked or certified, and flat earth-tombs seldom shewed anything but inscriptions or portraits of the deceased. On the other hand the word is used three times in this canto (38, 47, 63) in a purely pictorial sense, which seems to justify Lombardi: The *segno* of Rehoboam no longer threatens,—Dante sees Niobe "*segnata* in su la strada," and the *segno* of Ilion portrays a sorry spectacle. Then we reach two crucial phrases—"miglior sembianza," and "secondo l'artificio,"—better likeness or appearance, but better than what,—better than nature, better than the bas-reliefs, or the *tombe terragne*, or as Bagioni suggests, of divine origin? As to the words "secondo l'artificio," Venturi suggests: "in accordance with the correct rules of sculpture," which is unsatisfying, as nothing of the sort existed at Dante's date. All the last three lines beginning "So saw I there figured on the road" must refer back to the earlier paragraphs, in contrast of grave-mounds with their effigies. The comparison therefore is between the craftsmanship of the records on the pavement with that of the records on the tomb slabs. If this be correct, Dante is indicating that the lineal pictures were more vivacious (*di miglior sembianza*) than what was usual on grave-stones. His description of the bas-reliefs, undoubtedly suggests a standard of art far in advance of the normal sculpture of his day, and though he does not praise the pavement scenes with the lavish enthusiasm bestowed on the marble reliefs, he means us to understand that the workmanship of the former was exceptional. What he saw in *Purgatorio* excelled anything on earth.

Later on Siena Cathedral became the home of a vast series of similar representations, and one cannot doubt that from 1370 onwards, when the enterprise began, artists must have studied this canto. It is difficult to draw analogies between the two. Dante's "duro pavimento"

(XII., 49) was clearly marble or stone. The Siena cartoons are rendered in several methods, of which the earliest was the incision of outlines which being stopped with some dark and durable material would give the impression of a drawing. Dante does not hint that the cartoons were coloured, whereas the fifteenth century work at Siena is a skilful intarsia of variegated marbles, and has almost the richness of a painting. But Dante was familiar with large scale mosaics and also with coloured pavements. Some few pavements dating back to the Empire may have survived, and in the twelfth century Southern Italy shewed a strong preference for decorated floors, and the practise spread rapidly in the peninsula. As a rule they were purely geometrical in pattern with only an exceptional figure, for instance where the Signs of the Zodiac were displayed. *Opus Romanum*, mosaic in its most extended order, and marbles inlaid into patterns were the normal fashion, and nothing existed at that date to correspond with the ambitious scale of Dante's graphic scenes. He permits himself a concluding word of praise. Was there ever such a master, he exclaims, who could thus portray the shadows and features. . . .

“Qual di pannel fu maestro e di stile,
Che ritraesse l'ombre e i tratti . . .”

—(*Purg.* XII., 64.)

Cary translates *pannel* as pencil. Oderisi of Agubbio the illuminator, says that the sheets or *carte* of Franco Bolognese smile more brightly than his own—

“ . . . più ridon le carte
Che pannelleggia Franco Bolognese.”

—(*Purg.* XI., 82.)

This seems to suggest colour, or at any rate brushwork, and Dante draws attention to the shadows indicated on the pavement. *Stile* is rendered Stylus by Cary, the pointed implement for engraving or incision. Lombardi and Balducci for reasons which are not apparent, but which must have been cogent, suggest the mediæval *stilus*—“una verghetta sottile,” a thin rod, two-thirds lead and one-third tin, used for the first sketch by those who wish to draw with a pen (*penna*). Perhaps we need not enquire too closely into the technical processes of the pavement, contenting ourselves with the fact that Dante's conception was great, and that he anticipated an art which for two centuries conferred distinction on successive craftsmen of Siena.

Dante devoted special care to the poetic construction of these descriptions of the pavement. The passage in fact is unique in that it is built upon precise and rather singular principles. I wish we had his own analysis like those of the *Canzoni* in the *Vita Nuova*. Twelve histories of pride are described, beginning with Satan and proceeding alternately with examples from Classical history and the Old Testament. Each episode occupies three lines: they fall into three divisions of four episodes apiece. The episodes of the first group invariably begin with the word VEDEA, of the second group with the exclamation O, and in the third group with MOSTRAVA. Finally the humiliation of Troy is added in three lines, which resume the previous initial words:—

“VEDEVA Troia in cenere e in caverne
O llion, come te basso e vile
MOSTRAVA il segno che li si discerne.”

—(*Purg.* XII., 61.)

There is something solemn in the gloom of this sustained counterpoint: it conveys the very atmosphere of depression, the triple schedule of tragedy, each heralded by the muffled note of its own passing bell:—Satan, Briareus, Timbræus, Nimrod—Niobe, Saul, Arachne, Rehoboam—Alcmæon, Sennacherib, Thomyris, Holofernes.

Neither here nor in the bas-reliefs does Dante draw any illustration from contemporary life—nothing in fact after the Birth of Christ. Here they are types or examples, elsewhere some of the personages reappear as individuals. But we may ask how Dante made his choice, for some of the illustrations seem inappropriate. Niobe and Arachne appeal to us as objects of commiseration. When sorely wounded by the arrows of the Philistines, Saul committed suicide in Gilboa, and would be more suitably placed in *Inferno*, XIII. Alcmæon was a demented matricide. Sennacherib was quietly worshipping in the Temple when smitten by his two sons: Holofernes was tricked, drugged, and slaughtered by Judith. But Dante's selections are often odd and sometimes quite arbitrary, and he certainly did not embark upon the *Commedia* with a classified and ready-made list of names allocated to each of the three Canticles. Hence many contradictions and not a few paradoxes. In this case Dante happens to have been much more concerned with the poetic form than with the personnel: and in this canto taken in conjunction with the tenth, Dante sets himself to lay down his theory of æsthetics. Dante's supreme test is

truth : truth in likeness, in gesture, in action. Around him he saw sculpture and painting in which the actors explain their meaning by scrolls or inscriptions. Dante did not visualise parables demanding such elucidations. He saw the likeness as what we now call the speaking likeness, as visible speech which was almost miraculous to his eyes . . .

“ *Produsse esto visibile parlare,
Novello a noi, perchè qui non si truova.* ”

—(*Purg.* X., 95.)

Nature herself was challenged by the bas-reliefs. The angel was so true as to seem endowed with speech—“ *non sembiava immagine che tace* ” (39). The dead were dead, the living seemed alive—“ *morti li morti, e i vivi parean vivi* ” (XII., 67). Stress is throughout laid on this same degree of excellence. The Roman standards flutter in the sky, the incense and the singing, the movement portraiture and characterisation, all are drawn or modelled with intent to truth. Dante was himself something of an artist, who knew the obstacles as well as the happiness of striving after an ideal.

Having compared Dantesque standards with those of Giotto, it may be well to refer to Italian sculpture—not indeed of 1300, but of thirty or forty years earlier when Niccolò Pisano exposed his masterpiece at Siena. Niccolò relied mainly on reliefs. If anything they are somewhat congested, there being a tendency to multiply accessories, and from time to time to trust to embellishments. It is true there were few signs of the laborious construction found in Dante's own contemporaries among painters and sculptors alike : nor did Niccolò Pisano have to enlarge his figures to convey a sense of majesty. Dante's descriptions mark an advance on Niccolò's practise. He is more reserved, less pictorial, and shews greater concentration and emphasis. The fact that Niccolò Pisano was so much older than Dante adds greatly to his supreme position. And it was long before the unflinching survey and outstretched mind of Dante found its full counterpart in the sculptor who was always undismayed, and whose powers of execution never hesitated in embodying his ideals. Vergil urged Dante onwards when he lingered in admiration of the bas-relief shewing Trajan and the Widow—for the sculptured images of such humility were pleasing in themselves and also for their craftsman's share.

“ *E per lo fabbro loro a veder care :* ”

—(*Purg.* X., 99.)

Dante did not take the workmanship for granted—his synthetic intuitions led him to understand the difficulties, for was he not *fabbro* himself? “Io mi sedea in parte . . . disegnava un angelo sopra certe tavolette.” He was working on panels or tablets, perhaps what would correspond with the painter’s block. He was so deeply absorbed in his work that people came into the room unnoticed, and stood watching him for some time, so they also must have been impressed. Nor was it a mere sketch in a note-book, for several of the visitors were able to overlook his shoulder; and then after their departure he returned to his work—“cioè del disegnare figure d’angeli”—*figure* meaning the figures and not only faces of angels. We derive the impression from the whole passage that he was in the habit of drawing, and he refers almost casually to what passed in order to explain the sonnet suggested to his mind by the incident. But this chance allusion to the actual painting does not indicate that he thought lightly of his art. This is belied by the whole *Commedia*, still more by the treatise *Del volgare eloquio*, in which his reforming zeal, fired by his intense nationalism, shows his passionate aspiration towards the fine art of language. He seems to have been the protagonist in this field of reform. Moreover his desire for progress and his appreciation of it, is clear in every description of a work of art. To Dante and his contemporaries resemblance was progress. In his time, notwithstanding the Bargello portraits resemblance was seldom attained—resemblance that is to say where analysis and characterisation are the partners of modelling or draftsmanship—witness the portraits of Boniface VIII. (of whom there were more portraits than of any man of the year 1300)—often quite lifeless and inept such as Bonanno’s archaistic bronze at Bologna. Villani praised Giotto as the artist who “trasse ogni figura e atti al naturale.” Perhaps nowadays Truth in art is somewhat unfashionable: from time to time she is wont to retire to the hidden depths of the well; and for the moment she may be disdained as being photographic, as mere prettiness or as academic anæmia. But I observe that all that is most aggressive in the drama of our day claims justification as realism, actuality, life. But at least truth, and every effort towards its attainment, has the merit of training the eye, or guiding the chisel or the brush. Those who attacked the Pre-Raphaelites were wrong, in that, while criticising effects as was legitimate enough, they failed to notice the profound

grasp of truth ; and once the fundamental truth is at the artist's command, vagaries or experiment cannot wholly lack merit. Dante's desire for truth was deep-seated, but for novelty of interpretation as well, for progress with the help of originality. One detects this in his argument and sympathies, even in his application of the word *nuovo* to all that pleased him most. Buonaggiunta asks him if he is the man who "trasse le *nuove* rime" (*Purg.* XXIV., 50). Dante's eyes were intent "per veder *novitade*" of the bas-reliefs. The "visibile parlare" was *novello* a noi. Above all the Dolce stil *nuovo* was the new spirit of poetry which he explains with tragic intensity in the book he called the *Vita Nuova*.

Tradition says that Cimabue was Dante's teacher. Antonio Pucci says the poet was "esercitato nel disegno fino della sua gioventù." Leonardo Aretino says : "E di sua mano egregiamente disegnava. . . . Dante wrote a finished hand making thin long perfectly formed letters as I have seen in some of his correspondence." And this is all we know—tradition, the statement in the autobiography, one cartoon of an angel, and that lost ! But the harmonies remain intact and intangible—poetry, philosophy, religion, with art and music added, all fused by his genius : and so his influence lives on. Have we not had three hundred translations and derivatives in our own language from Chaucer and Milton to Browning and Swinburne, and down to others still happily with us—and yet I wish one single drawing had survived, perhaps a self-portrait, perhaps (who knows) the very angel he drew on that anniversary, the angel upon whom people gazed awestruck as Beatrice passed along : "Questa è una maraviglia : che benedetto sia lo signore che si mirabilmente sà operare !"