



# “Sinners and Saints in Dante’s *Commedia*”

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Week One

26 July 2022

# Commentary

The monthly magazine

MARCH 1975 POLITICS & IDEAS

## On Teaching Politics Today

My relatives and other worthy people who still maintain a certain awe, tempered with skepticism, about higher education, are given...

by Werner J. Dannhauser

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In a 1975 article published in *Commentary Magazine*, political scientist Werner Dannhauser argued that a liberal education “ought to be concerned with the architecture of a student’s soul.” In doing so, he continued, such an education “should provide students not with the right answers but with the right questions, and those questions concern three matters basically: God, love, and death.”

## The ultimate aim of the *Comedy*: Death, Love, and God

“But in the condition of nature of the whole universe the first heaven contains all; thus it is related to all as the formative to the formable, which means to be related by way of cause. And since all causative power is a kind of ray flowing from the first cause [...] all things flow from the ultimate cause. [Paradise, the “empyreum”, is the highest heaven], containing all bodies, and contained by none [...] Since [God] has been found, there is nothing more to be sought. This treatise is ended with God himself, who is blessed throughout the ages.”

(Dante [?], *Letter to Cangrande della Scala*)



## Liberal Italy and Dante

Statue of Dante Alighieri in  
Piazza Dante (Naples), erected in  
1871

Dante: from *arma* of Italian unification in express opposition to the Church, to “Catholic” poet fully embraced by the Church

- Pope Francis (2021, *Candor lucis aeternae*, on the VII centenary of Dante’s death)
- Pope Francis (2020, address to kick off celebration of Dante 2021)
- Pope Francis (2015, on the 750th anniversary of Dante’s birth)
- Pope Francis (first encyclical, *Lumen Fidei*, 2013)
- Saint John Paul II (1985, speech for the inauguration of the exhibit *Dante in Vaticano*)
- Pope Paul VI (1965, Address of the Sacred College and to the Roma Prelature, December 23, 1965, *motu proprio* on the VI centenary of Dante’s birth)
- Pope Benedict XV (1921, encyclical on the VI centenary of Dante’s death)



Allegorical print: Italy personified; Enrico Cialdini (general with saber); Napoleone III transformed into a tree; and all of Modern Italy's enemies: *brigands*, *Bourbon nobles*, *the clergy and Pope Pius IX*. In the background, Giuseppe Garibaldi as a modern-day Cincinnatus.

*In praeclara summorum. On Dante* (encyclical of Pope Benedict XV, 1921)

1. Among the many celebrated geniuses of whom *the Catholic faith* can boast who have left undying fruits in literature and art especially, besides other fields of learning, and to whom civilization and religion are ever in debt, *highest stands the name of Dante Alighieri*, the sixth centenary of whose death will soon be recorded. Never perhaps has his supreme position been recognized as it is today. *Not only Italy, justly proud of having given him birth*, but all the civil nations are preparing with special committees of learned men to celebrate his memory that the whole world may pay honour to that noble figure, pride and glory of humanity.
2. And surely we cannot be absent from this universal consensus of good men; rather should We take the lead in it as the Church has special right to call Alighieri hers.

## *In praeclara summorum. On Dante* (encyclical of Pope Benedict XV, 1921)

4. And first of all, inasmuch as the divine poet throughout his whole life professed in exemplary manner the Catholic religion, he would surely desire that this solemn commemoration should take place, as indeed will be the case, under the auspices of religion, and if it is carried out in San Francesco in Ravenna it should begin in San Giovanni in Florence to which his thoughts turned during the last years of his life with the desire of being crowned poet at the very font where he had received Baptism. Dante lived in an age which inherited the most glorious fruits of philosophical and theological teaching and thought, and handed them on to the succeeding ages with the imprint of the strict scholastic method. Amid the various currents of thought diffused then too among learned men Dante ranged himself as disciple of that Prince of the school so distinguished for angelic temper of intellect, Saint Thomas Aquinas. From him he gained nearly all his philosophical and theological knowledge, and while he did not neglect any branch of human learning, at the same time he drank deeply at the fountains of Sacred Scripture and the Fathers. Thus he learned almost all that could be known in his time, and nourished specially by Christian knowledge, it was on that field of religion he drew when he set himself to treat in verse of things so vast and deep. So that while we admire the greatness and keenness of his genius, we have to recognize, too, the measure in which he drew inspiration from the Divine Faith by means of which he could beautify his immortal poems with all the lights of revealed truths as well as with the splendours of art. Indeed, his *Commedia*, which deservedly earned the title of *Divina*, while it uses various symbolic images and records the lives of mortals on earth, has for its true aim the glorification of the justice and providence of God who rules the world through time and all eternity and punishes and rewards the actions of individuals and human society.

It is thus that, according to the Divine Revelation, in this poem shines out the majesty of God One and Three, the Redemption of the human race operated by the Word of God made Man, the supreme loving-kindness and charity of Mary, Virgin and Mother, Queen of Heaven, and lastly the glory on high of Angels, Saints and men; then the terrible contrast to this, the pains of the impious in Hell; then the middle world, so to speak, between Heaven and Hell, Purgatory, the Ladder of souls destined after expiation to supreme beatitude. It is indeed marvellous how he was able to weave into all three poems these three dogmas with truly wrought design. If the progress of science showed later that that conception of the world rested on no sure foundation, that the spheres imagined by our ancestors did not exist, that nature, the number and course of the planets and stars, are not indeed as they were then thought to be, still the fundamental principle remained that the universe, whatever be the order that sustains it in its parts, is the work of the creating and preserving sign of Omnipotent God, who moves and governs all, and whose glory risplende in una parte piu e meno altrove; and though this earth on which we live may not be the centre of the universe as at one time was thought, it was the scene of the original happiness of our first ancestors, witness of their unhappy fall, as too of the Redemption of mankind through the Passion and Death of Jesus Christ. Therefore the divine poet depicted the triple life of souls as he imagined it in a such way as to illuminate with the light of the true doctrine of the faith the condemnation of the impious, the purgation of the good spirits and the eternal happiness of the blessed before the final judgment.

## *In praeclara summorum. On Dante* (encyclical of Pope Benedict XV, 1921)

6. No need to recall Alighieri's great reverence for the authority of the Catholic Church, the account in which he holds the power of the Roman Pontiff as the base of every law and institution of that Church. Hence the outspoken warning to Christians: You have the Old and the New Testament: the Pastor of the Church as Guide; Let that suffice for your salvation. He felt the troubles of the Church as his own, and while he deplored and condemned all rebellion against its Supreme Head he wrote as follows to the Italian Cardinals during the stay at Avignon: "To us who confess the same Father and Son, the same God and Man, the same Mother and Virgin; to us for whom and for whose salvation the message was given, after the triple Lovest thou Me? Feed My sacred sheepfold; to us, driven to mourn with Jeremias-but not over things to come but over things that are-for Rome-that Rome on which Christ, after all the old pomp and triumph, confirmed by word and work the empire of the world, and which Peter, too, and Paul the Apostle of the Nations consecrated with their very blood as Apostolic See-now widowed and desolate; to us it is as terrible grief to see this as to see the tragedy of heresy" (Epist. VIII). For him the Roman Church is The Most Holy Mother, Bride of Him Crucified and to Peter, infallible judge of revealed truths, is owing perfect submission in matters of faith and morals. Hence, however much he may hold that the dignity of the Emperor is derived immediately from God, still he asserts that this truth "must not be understood so strictly as to mean that the Roman Prince is not subject to the Roman Pontiff in anything, because this mortal happiness is subjected in certain measure to immortal happiness" (Mon. III, 16).

Excellent and wise principle indeed which, if it were observed today as it ought to be, would bring to States abundant fruits of civil prosperity. But, it will be said, he inveighs with terrible bitterness against the Supreme Pontiffs of his times. True; but it was against those who differed from him in politics and he thought were on the side of those who had driven him from his country. One can feel for a man so beaten down by fortune, if with lacerated mind he breaks out sometimes into words of excessive blame, the more so that, to increase his feeling, false statements were being made by his political enemies ready, as always happens, to give an evil interpretation to everything. And indeed, since, through mortal infirmity, “by worldly dust even religious hearts must needs be soiled” (St. Leo M. S. IV de Quadrag), it cannot be denied that at that time there were matters on which the clergy might be reproved, and a mind as devoted to the Church as was that of Dante could not but feel disgust while we know, too, that reproof came also from men of conspicuous holiness. But, however he might inveigh, rightly or wrongly, against ecclesiastical personages, never did he fail in respect due to the Church and reverence for the “Supreme Keys”; and on the political side he laid down as rule for his views “the reverence which a good son should show towards his father, a dutiful son to his mother, to Christ, to the Church, to the Supreme Pastor, to all who profess the Christian religion, for the safeguarding of truth” (Mon. III, 3).

*Altissimi Cantus (motu proprio of Pope Paul VI, 1965)*

4. Nor do we regret the fact that the voice of Dante lashed out severely against more than one Roman Pontiff, and had harsh reproofs for ecclesiastical institutions and for persons who were representatives and ministers of the Church. We do not hide this moment of his spirit and this aspect of his work, knowing well what caused this bitterness of soul, even his own beloved city of Florence and Italy itself, were not spared such harsh reprimands; one can concede indulgence in regard to his art and political passion, that the office of judge and corrector was taken over by him, especially before pitiable circumstances, and yet, such fiery attitudes never weakened his firm Catholic faith and his filial affection for Holy Church.

**Dante is Ours,** We can well repeat; and, that we affirm this not to gain any ambitious trophy of egotistic glory, but rather, in order to remind ourselves of the duty we have to acknowledge it as such, and to explore in his work the inestimable treasures of Christian thought and sentiment. We are convinced that only if one penetrates into the religious soul of this sovereign Poet can one find in depth the understanding and taste of its wonderful spiritual richness.

We too, wish to pay tribute and homage to the Poet. However, not only to give him glory at this moment, but, in his honor to do something which would inscribe itself and attribute over time a constant reminder of him, even more than a mute or cold monument of stone or bronze. By raising to a higher level an uninterrupted flow of knowledge of Dante, for the spiritual benefit of young people, who, as students of so great a Master, may in turn also give him praise, becoming capable of pointing to his memory and work. In this way, Dante's ever fertile poetry, will enjoy a continuous springtime in the field of literary discipline, and his human and Christian wisdom strengthen the cultural tradition of Italy, which meritoriously acknowledges in Dante the father of its living language.

3. To this end, We have established in accordance with the competent academic authorities, a Chair of Dante Studies, in the heart of that residence of Our venerable Predecessor Pius XI, and following him the successive Roman Pontiffs, until Us, who always, and especially during the period of Our Ministry to the City of Milan, have held it in great honor and affection. We refer to the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart of Milan. Therefore, We establish on our initiative (Motu Proprio), that it have its own Dante Chair!

[...] Perhaps some would want to ask why the Catholic Church wishes, by its visible Head, to take to heart cultivating the memory and celebrating the glory of the Florentine Poet. Our response is easy: by direct claim -- *Dante is Ours! Ours, by which we mean to say, of the Catholic Faith; Ours, because breathing the love of Christ he very much loved the Church and sang Her glories; and Ours, because he acknowledged and venerated in the Roman Pontiff the Vicar of Christ on earth.*

22. Theology and philosophy also have a consistent relation with beauty: because beauty lends its garment and ornamentation to their doctrines; with sweetness of song and the visibility of the figurative and plastic arts, beauty opens the way, so that its precious teachings may be communicated to many. At times, high dissertation and subtle reasoning are inaccessible to the untrained and to the many who hunger for the bread of truth; they are otherwise informed through sensing and appreciating beauty's influence, it is more easily through this vehicle that the truth shines and nourishes them. This understood, justifies Dante as the "lord of sublime song", for whom beauty became the servant of goodness and truth, and goodness the subject of beauty.

## The Popes and *Inferno* XIX

- we are in the the third *bolgia*, where Dante encounters the simoniacs, those who sold ecclesiastical offices for money or personal gain
- O Simon Magus! O wretches of his band,  
greedy for gold and silver,  
who prostitute the things of God  
that should be brides of goodness!  
Now must the trumpet sound for you,  
because your place is there in that third ditch.  
(*Inferno* 19.1-6)
- From the mouth of each stuck out  
a sinner's feet and legs up to the thighs  
while all the rest stayed in the hole.  
They all had both their soles on fire.  
It made their knee-joints writhe so hard  
they would have severed twisted vines or ropes.  
(*Inferno* XIX.22-27)
- ‘Whatever you are, with your upper parts below,  
planted like a post, you wretched soul,’  
said I, ‘come out with something, if you can.’  
I stood there like a friar who confesses  
a treacherous assassin. Once fixed in place,  
he calls the friar back to stay his death.  
And he cried out: ‘Is that you already,  
are you here already, Boniface?’  
By several years the writing lied to me.’  
(*Inferno* 19.47-54)



Then Virgil said: "Tell him right away,  
"I'm not the one, I'm not the one you think."  
I gave the answer I was told to give.  
At that the spirit's feet began to writhe.  
Then, sighing, with a plaintive voice, he said:  
'What is it then you want from me?  
'If you are so keen to learn my name  
that you descended from the bank for it,  
know that I was cloaked in the great mantle.  
'But in truth I was a son of the she-bear  
and so avid was I to advance my cubs  
I filled my purse as now I fill this hole.  
'Beneath my head are crushed the others  
who practiced simony before me,  
now flattened into fissures in the rock.  
(*Inferno* XIV.61-74)

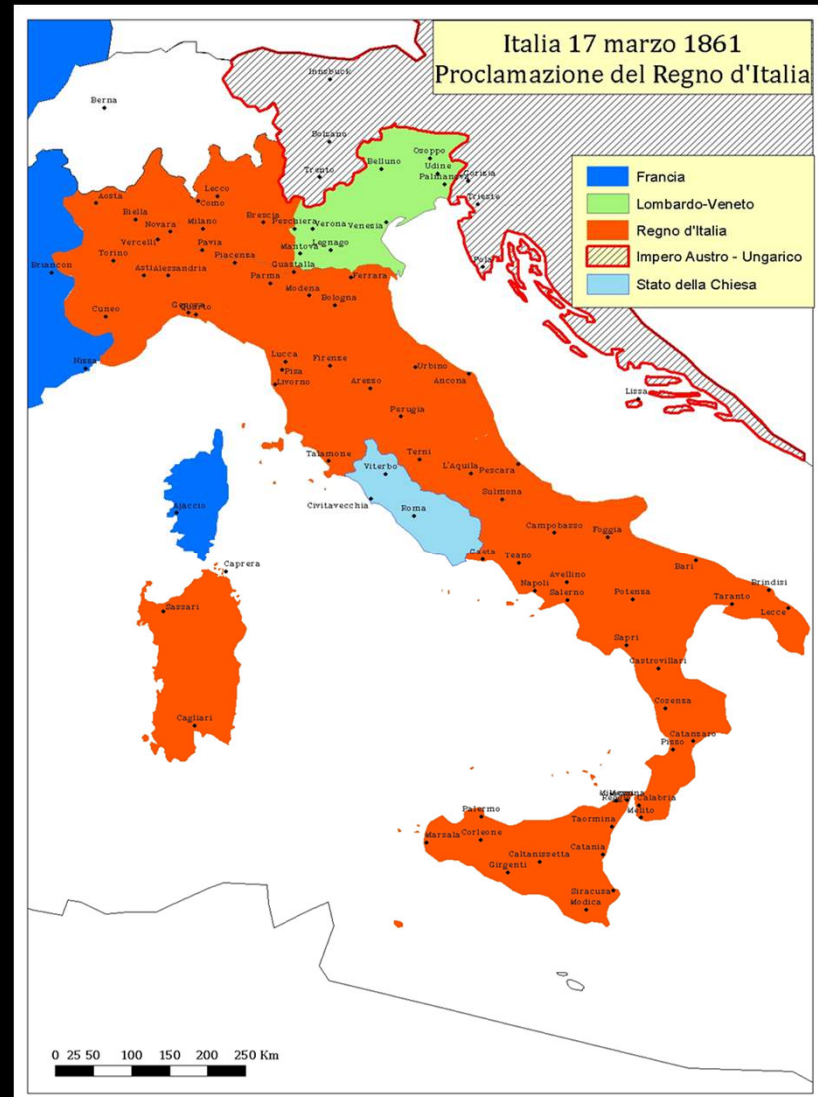
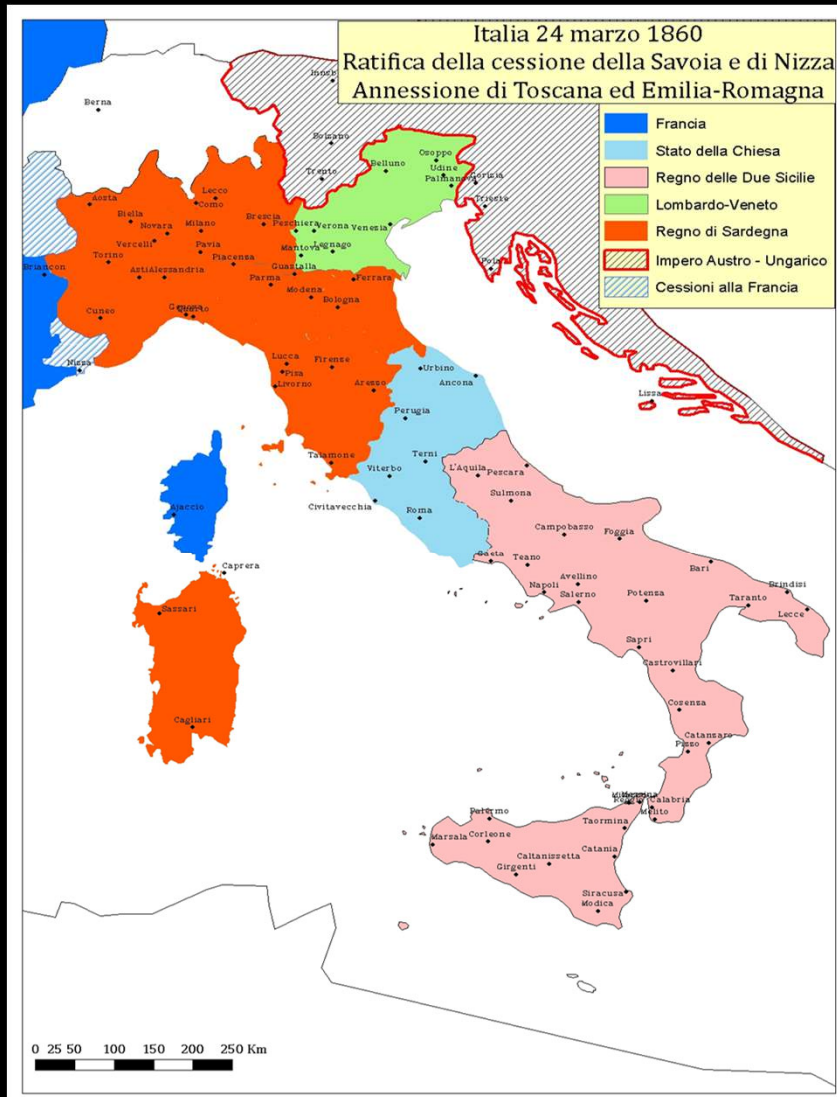
## *Paradise 27: St. Peter castigates Boniface VIII*

Quelli ch'usurpa in terra il luogo mio,  
il luogo mio, il luogo mio, che vaca  
ne la presenza del Figliuol di Dio,  
fatt'ha del cimitero mio cloaca  
del sangue e de la puzza; onde 'l perverso  
che cadde di qua sù, là giù si placa.

He who on earth usurps my place, my place,  
my place that in the sight of God's own Son  
is vacant now, has made my burial ground  
a sewer of blood, a sewer of stench, so that  
the perverse one who fell from Heaven, here  
above, can find contentment there below.

*(Par. 27.22-27)*







# Italy's Literary Unification

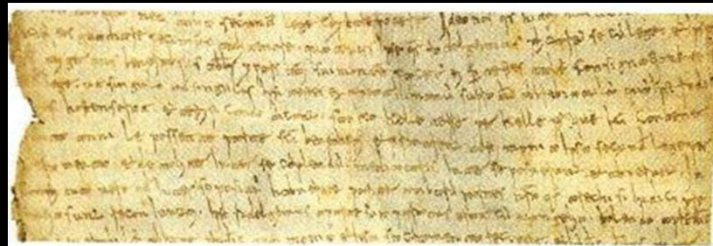
## **Works that discuss and/or are intertwined with Italy's unification:**

- *Le ultime lettere di Jacopo Ortis* (*The Last Letters of Jacopo Ortis*, Ugo Foscolo, 1802)
- *Confessioni di un italiano* (Ippolito Nievo, 1867 - posthumously)
- *Piccolo mondo antico* (*Old-Fashioned World*, Antonio Fogazzaro, 1895)
- *Il gattopardo* (*The Leopard*, Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, 1958)
- Opera (especially Verdi)

## **Works used—by their author or later readers—to unite Italy culturally and linguistically:**

- *Commedia* (*The Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri, 1307-1321)
- *I promessi sposi* (*The Betrothed* by Alessandro Manzoni, 1827/1842)
- *Pinocchio* (Carlo Collodi, 1884)
- *Cuore* (*Heart* by Edmondo De Amicis, 1886)
- Opera (especially Verdi)

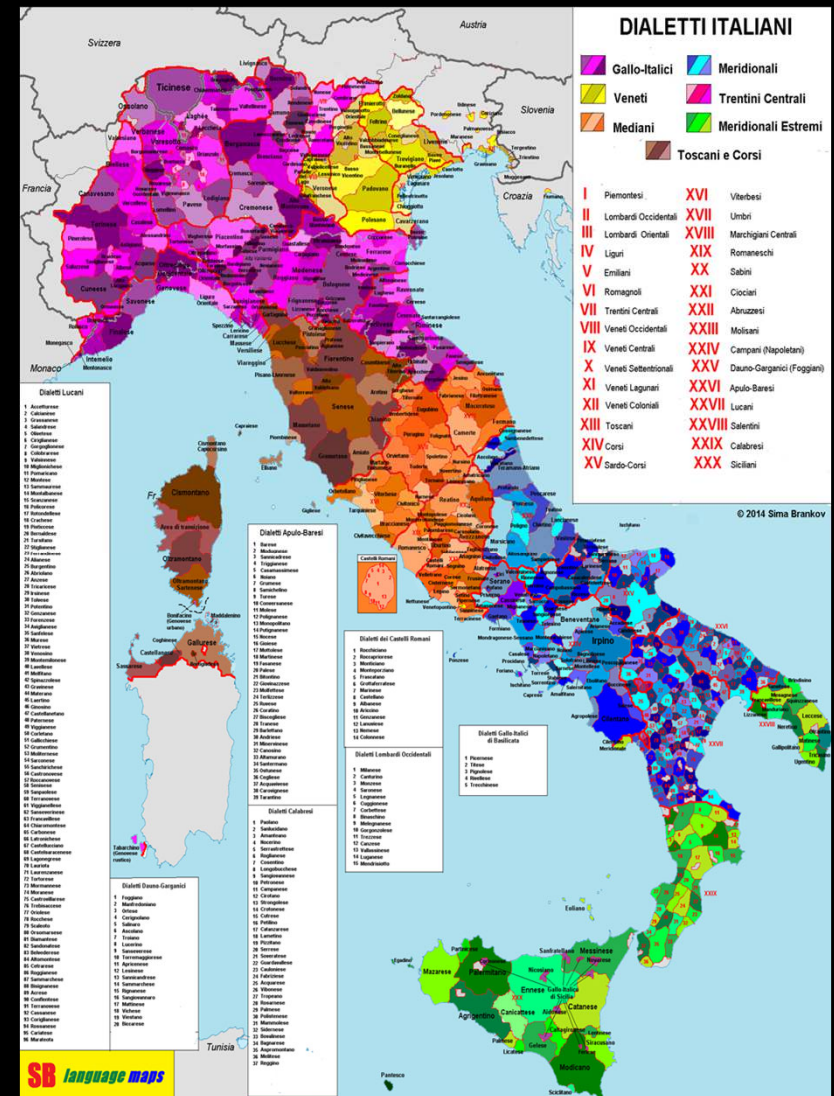
- founded only in 1861 as the Kingdom of Italy (1870)
- Italian is the principal language. First evidence of (written) Italian is from *c.* 960 AD:



Sao ko kelle terre, per kelle fini que ki contene, trenta anni le possette parte sancti Benedicti. (Capua, marzo 960) Foto della pergamena custodita nel monastero di Montecassino con il primo scritto ufficiale in un linguaggio neolatino della Campania

- At the time of unification, only 1.8%-3% of Italians spoke Italian
- Still today there exist hundreds, if not thousands, of dialects
- *Surnames:*
  - Italy (approximately 60 million people):
    - 330,000 surnames (**1 surname for every 181 people**)
  - China (approximately 1.4 billion):
    - 700 surnames (**1 surname for every 2 million people**)

“So we see that Italy alone presents a range of at least fourteen different vernaculars. All these vernaculars also vary internally, so that the Tuscan of Siena is distinguished from that of Arezzo, or the Lombard of Ferrara from that of Piacenza; moreover, we can detect some variation even within a single city, as was suggested above, in the preceding chapter. For this reason, if we wished to calculate the number of primary, and secondary, and still further subordinate varieties of the Italian vernacular, we would find that, even in this tiny corner of the world, the count would take us not only to a thousand different types of speech, but well beyond that figure.” (Dante, *De vulgari eloquentia*, I, x, 9)



[N]ow at last is Italy's ever receding shore (*Italia fugiente*) within  
our grasp; thus far only may Troy's fortune have followed us!  
(*Aeneid*, Book Six)

"Mantüa ...", e l'ombra, tutta in sé romita,  
surse ver' lui del loco ove pria stava,  
dicendo: "O Mantoano, io son Sordello  
de la tua terra!"; e l'un l'altro abbracciava.  
Ahi serva Italia, di dolore ostello,  
nave senza nocchiere in gran tempesta,  
non donna di provincie, ma bordello!  
(Dante, *Commedia, Purgatorio VI*, vv. 72-  
78)

[A]nd the shade, who had seemed so withdrawn,  
leaped toward him from his place, saying:  
'O Mantuan, I am Sordello of your city.'  
And the two of them embraced.  
Ah, Italy enslaved, abode of misery,  
pilotless ship in a fierce tempest tossed,  
no mistress over provinces but a harlot!  
(Dante, *Commedia, Purgatorio VI*, vv. 72-78)

Italia mia, benché'l parlar sia indarno  
a le piaghe mortali  
che nel' bel corpo tuo sì spesse veggio,  
piacem' almen che e' mia sospiri sian quali  
sper' il Tever e l'Arno  
e 'l Po, dove doglioso et grave hor' seggio.  
Rector' del cielo, io cheggio  
che la pietà che Ti conduss' in terra  
Ti volga al tuo diletto almo paese:  
Vedi, Signor' cortese  
Di che levi cagion, che crudel guerra  
I cori, che indur' et serra  
Marte superb' et fero  
apri Tu, Padre, e intenerisci et snoda  
ivi fa che el tuo vero  
qual io mi sia per la mia lingua s'oda.  
(Petrarca, *Italia mia*, vv. 1-16)

My Italy, although to speak is vain  
[to heal] the mortal wounds  
that upon your beautiful body I so often see,  
I am content at least that my sighs may be such  
hope to the Tiber and the Arno  
and the Po, where sorrowfully and gravely now I sit.  
Ruler of heaven, I beg  
that the pity that brought You to earth  
may return You to your beloved, noble country.  
See, gracious Lord,  
of what slight cause this cruel war;  
and the hearts, which are hardened and closed  
by Mars, proud and fierce,  
open [them], You, Father, and soften and unknot [them].  
Therein, let it be that Your truth,  
whatever I may be, through my speech be heard.

*[C]osì al presente, volendo conoscere la virtù di uno spirito Italiano, era necessario che l'Italia si conducesse ne' termini presenti, e che la fusse più schiava che gli Ebrei, più serva che i Persi, più dispersa che gli Ateniesi, senza capo, senz'ordine, battuta, spogliata, lacera, corsa, ed avesse sopportato di ogni sorta rovine.*

(Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, cap. XXVI)

Then at the present time, in order to discover the virtue of an Italian spirit, it was necessary that Italy should be reduced to the extremity that she is now in, that she should be more enslaved than the Hebrews, more oppressed than the Persians, more scattered than the Athenians; without head, without order, beaten, despoiled, torn, overrun; and to have endured every kind of desolation.

*The word 'Italy' is a geographical expression, a description which is useful shorthand, but has none of the political significance the efforts of the revolutionary ideologues try to put on it, and which is full of dangers for the very existence of the states which make up the peninsula.*

(Prince Metternich, letter to Austrian ambassador to France, April 1847)

*L'Italia è fatta; ora bisogna fare gli italiani.* (Massimo d'Azeglio)

“Italy has been made; now we have to make Italians.”

*Tutt'altra Italia io sognavo nella mia vita, non questa, miserabile all'interno e umiliata all'estero, ed in preda alla parte peggiore della nazione.*

(Giuseppe Garibaldi)

For all my life I had always dreamed of another Italy, not this one, wretched at home and embarrassed abroad, in the clutches of the worst part of the nation.

*Libera Chiesa in libero Stato.* (Camillo Cavour, Primo ministro)

A free Church in a free State.

*Bisogna che tutto cambi, perché nulla cambi. (Giuseppe Lampedusa, *Il gattopardo*)*

If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change.

# The Themes of Italian Unification

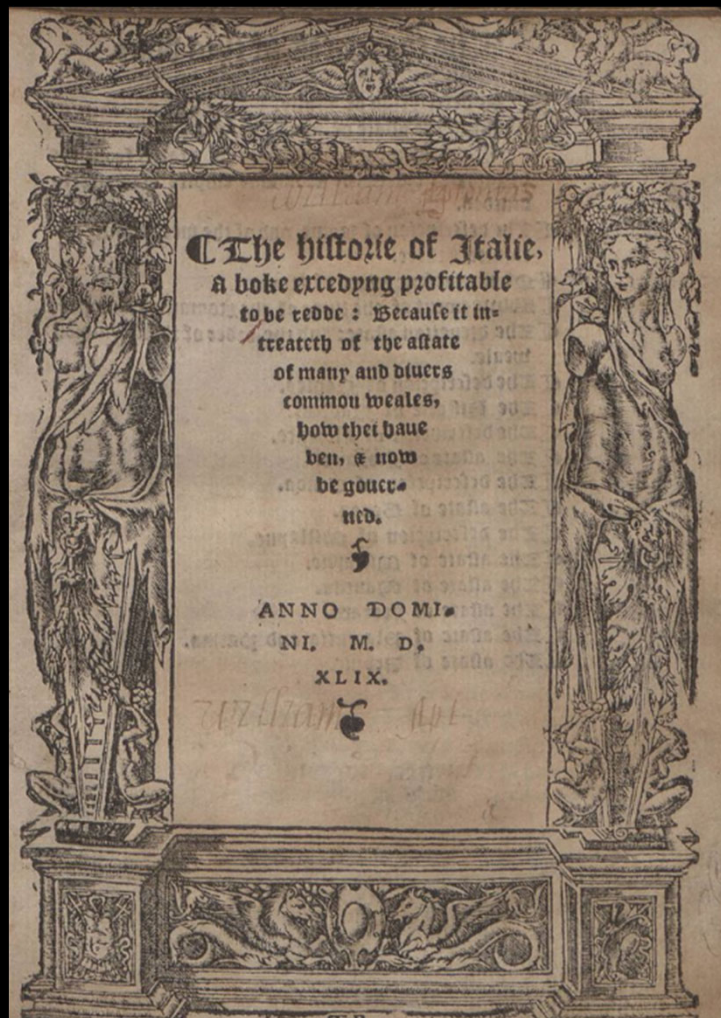
- Paradox n. 1: dynamic stasis (or, if you prefer, static dynamism)
- “Fleeing” or “fleeting” Italy
- the Church
- North v. South
- the question of language
- Paradox n. 2: international nationalism

Throughout its history, ‘Italy’ has been an idea that takes shape most forcefully among those who leave it. (Brunetto Latini, Dante, Petrarch, Mazzini, et al)

# The First History of “Italy” in English

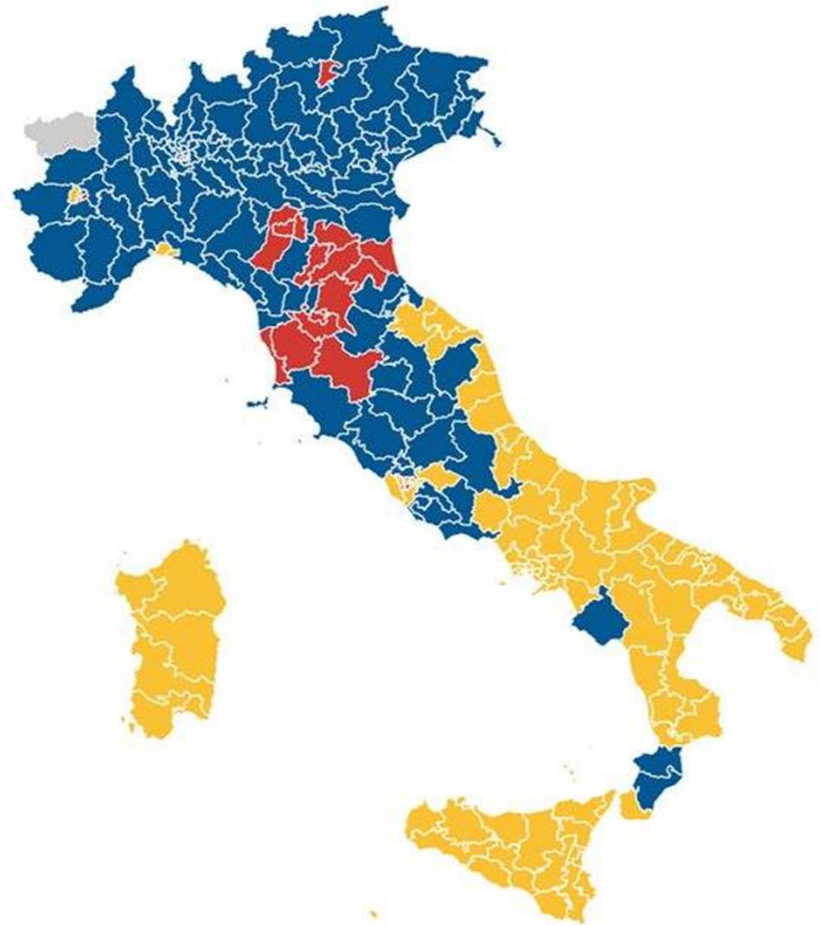
William Thomas, *The Historie of Italie*  
(1549)

Subtitled: “A Book Exceedingly  
Profitable to be Read Because it  
Entreateth of the State of *Many and  
Divers Commonwealths How they Have  
Been and Now Be Governed*”





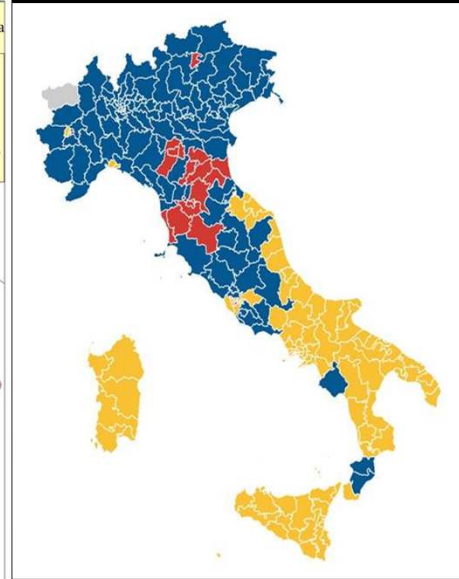
1490



2018



1490



2018

Sicily [in *The Leopard*] is Sicily—1860, earlier, forever.”  
(Giuseppe Lampedusa to Baron Enrico Merlo, 30 May 1957)



Among democratic nations new families are constantly springing up, others are constantly falling away, and all that remain change their condition; [...] Aristocracy had made a chain of all the members of the community, from the peasant to the king; democracy breaks that chain and severs every link of it.” (*Democracy in America*, volume 2, Chapter 2).

- Dante's Italy is "enslaved" (*Purgatorio* VI) just as modern Italy is "enslaved"
- Dante (generally) decries the interference of the Church in temporal affairs, preferring the two "suns" (*De monarchia*) - the Emperor and the Pope - be exclusive
- the overarching character of the *Risorgimento* is anti-clerical
- Dante does not *invent* Italian; he is merely the most successful at writing in Italian, thereby conferring glory on the *italico nome*

*Altissimi Cantus* (motu proprio of Pope Paul VI, 1965)

**From the lowest realms to the vision of the Most Holy Trinity. The Saints, and the Queen of Saints**

9. From the abyss of crimes punished, through the serene realms where human spirits purify themselves, toward the arduous summits of perfection, to which a multiplicity of ways lead to holiness and splendor, there are those who model the many different forms that holiness takes -- panegyrics woven for St. Francis, St. Dominic, St. Peter Damian, St. Benedict of Norcia, St. Romuald, St. Bernard -- all rising toward a summit. One hundred cantos, for whoever would understand their salutary meaning, one hundred rungs of a ladder, as that seen in the dream of Jacob, which, from abysmal darkness rises to the light of the Trinity. But before the last and highest step is taken, invoked by Bernard to be the gracious advocate on behalf of the new and inexperienced pilgrim, in order that his ultimate desire might be fulfilled, is the Virgin Mother Mary.

# Dante: from *arma* of unification in express opposition to the Church, to “Catholic” poet fully embraced by the Church

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