

Ideas

VOL. 9 • NUMBER 1 • 2002

FROM THE NATIONAL HUMANITIES CENTER

**Gleanings: Excerpts from
the Writings of Fellows**

Gleanings

Excerpts from the writings of Fellows
of the National Humanities Center



Dante

R. W. B. Lewis

As you walk across the Ponte Vecchio in Florence today, you come upon a plaque bearing a passage from Dante's *Divine Comedy*. The lines are spoken by Dante's ancestor Cacciaguida, whom the poet encounters in one of the higher spheres of heaven, among the warrior saints. They reflect grimly on an event that took place on that very spot in 1216, almost fifty years before Dante's birth, and plunged the city into decades of turmoil. The event was the murder of Buondelmonte dei Buondelmonti, a feckless nobleman who had abruptly abandoned his betrothed, a maiden of the Amidei clan, for the richer and more beautiful daughter of the clever Madonna Donati. The Amidei

were joined in vengeful outrage by their Uberti relatives; a group of them lay in wait for Buondelmonte on Easter morning, when he rode across the bridge on his white palfrey, himself suitably clad in gleaming white, and cut him to pieces.

This, Cacciaguida says, was the city's last day of peace, and he thought it fitting that the assassination should be carried out near an ancient statue thought to be of Mars, the god of war. For civil warfare immediately ensued, in a ferocious battle for power between competing groups of Florentine families.

Dante was the supreme poet-historian of Florence, its most passionate observer, its most bitter and frustrated product. Scattered around the contemporary city are thirty other plaques with passages from the *Comedy*, evoking a range of places Dante had known and moments and

In its description as a notable book of nonfiction for 2001, the *New York Times* called R. W. B. Lewis's *Dante* "a brief, loving, and learned biography of the great poet who made himself his own protagonist in the *Commedia* as well as other writings; accordingly, Lewis artfully interweaves the life and works." Professor Emeritus in American Studies at Yale, R. W. B. Lewis was a Fellow at the National Humanities Center in 1989–90 and again in 1998–99. *Dante* was published by Lipper/Viking.

persons he had known or heard about in his thirty-five years of Florentine life: the Arno and Ponte Vecchio; the venerable Baptistery (mio bel San Giovanni, Dante called it); Via del Corso, a main thoroughfare in Dante's neighborhood, with its cluster of rich and potent families; the church of San Miniato, perched high above the river on its south side; Brunetto Latini, the great humanist and Dante's tutor in classical literature; Farinata, the most valiant among the Florentine Ghibellines; and, of course, Dante's mythically beloved Beatrice. She is captured verbally in a passage near the end of *Purgatorio* a visionary presence who will escort Dante through the Christian heavens, here garbed in a green mantle that seems to glow like a living flame, wearing a snow-white veil crowned with olive. The plaque offering this image is attached to No. 4 Via del Corso, on the palazzo that once belonged to Beatrice's father, Folco Portinari.

Dante associated himself with his native city to a degree almost incomprehensible in modern times. Florence was not merely his birthplace; it was the very

context of his being. He was Dante Alighieri, a distinct individual with a classic profile and a sometimes tempestuous disposition. He had intimate friends, like his sportive neighbor Forese Donati; literary colleagues, like the older poet Guido Cavalcanti; and deadly enemies, like Forese's brother Corso. He was the dedicated lover, from a distance, of Beatrice Portinari, until her death at an early age in 1290, and a few years later he composed in her memory his first major work, the *Vita Nuova*, the story in prose and poetry of his devotion to her from the age of nine. In the course of time, Dante became a married man (his wife was another

and more sedate member of the Donati clan), with three children. But he was an ardent personality, and more than once, in pursuit of other Florentine maidens, he lost the straight way, to borrow a phrase at the opening of the *Inferno*. Even in his lifetime, as the first two canticles of the *Divine Comedy* began to circulate (around 1315), he was recognized as the greatest Italian poet, the *sommo poeta*, of his age. But he was first and last a Florentine, and indeed, on one level, his masterpiece, the *Comedy*, is an expression of his passionate feelings about Florence, his rage against the conspirators who had driven him out, his longing to return.

Two photos that appeared in David Finn's "Photographing Great Sculpture," in volume 8, number 1 of *Ideas*, were positioned improperly. They are reproduced correctly here. We regret the error.



The name of John McGreevy, one of the contributors to "Why Is Religion Important," which appeared in volume 7, number 2, of *Ideas*, was misspelled. We apologize for the error.