

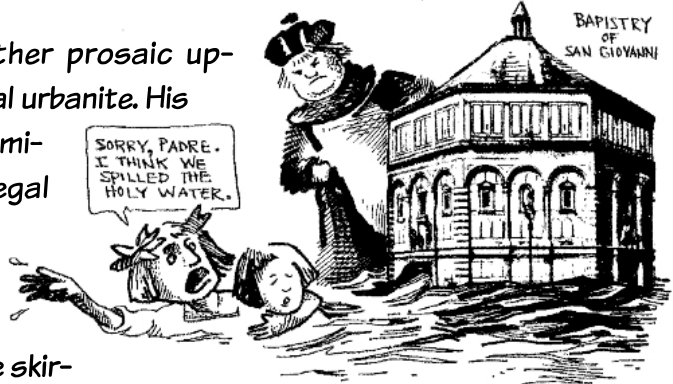


ON, or about, May 30, 1265 a son was born to Bella d'Alighieri and Alighiero di Bellincione d'Alighieri in Florence. They named him Dante and as his first biographer, Giovanni Boccaccio relates, his mother had a dream in which she delivered her son in a green meadow by the mouth of a crystal spring, directly beneath the branches of a laurel tree.

This tree of "poetry" dropped its berries between the lips of the gurgling infant and the most sublime lyrics issued forth. The boy, now a shepherd (things happen so quickly while visiting in the Realm of Morpheus), stretched to pluck the leaves for his crown, stumbled, and fell down. No broken bones, but he transformed into a peacock and flew off. Well, Dante's childhood wasn't exactly like that, but you can't fault a mother for dreaming.



Dante had the rather prosaic upbringing of any medieval urbanite. His father was a notary, a minor member of the legal profession entrusted with deeds, wills, contracts, and his fellow citizens' little skir-



mishes with the powers that be. Both his parents were kin to families with more prominent social positions. His mother's distant family, in fact, had been driven into exile after an ancestor's treacherous deed, but she wasn't that related, so Florence was still her mailing address. Pop's family boasted the Crusader, Cacciaguida degli Elisei, who didn't quite make it to Jerusalem with the Second Crusade (of course, the crusade didn't quite make it either).

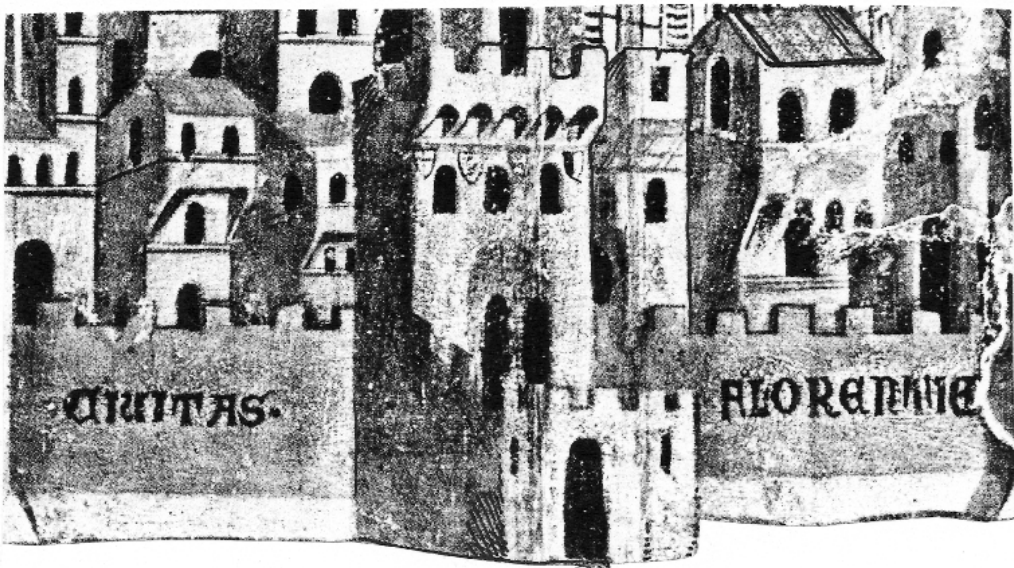
All in all, it was a pretty undistinguished childhood in his little house on the north side of the Torre di Badia. A little learning, a little adventure (he supposedly made like a boy scout and snatched another kid safe who was headed down for his third "full immersion" in one of the fonts at the Baptistery of San Giovanni), and a lot of play. In fact, it was while attending a neighbor's party that his life took a decidedly different track.



May Day, 1274, the Portinaris, a very well-to-do family, were throwing their annual bash. Alighiero d'Alighieri took his son's hand in his and led him around the block to pay their respects to the big man himself, Folco. It never hurts to bow and scrape to your betters. The fiesta was in full swing. Adults and kids in their velvety best were dancing around the maypole.

Flowers garlanded and bedecked the garden and all its denizens, but in that riot of bloom, Dante, like a bee to its nectar, had attention for only one: Beatrice, daughter of Folco, who was barely a year younger than Dante, born in April, 1266. So near, yet so far, Dante ached: "From that time onward, love was the lord of my soul." Wrapped in crimson, this pearl met him with an emerald gaze. No words were exchanged, but Dante had that gaze to recall for the next nine years, as he would be in the presence of this rare blossom again in 1285.

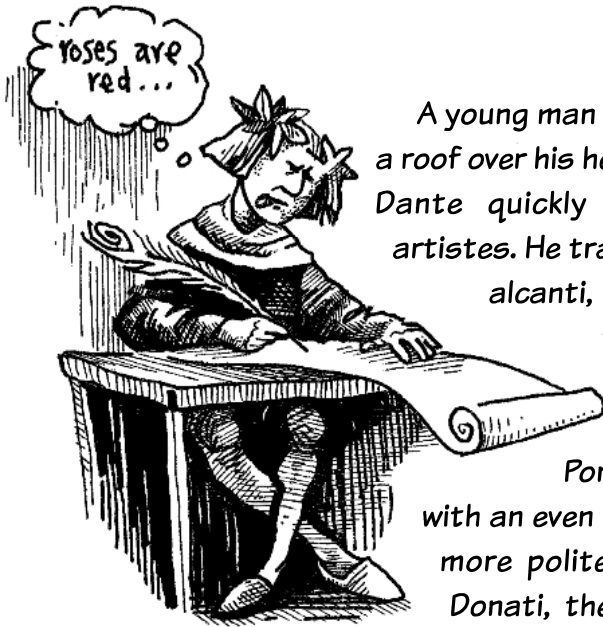




Dante went back to his side of the block and proceeded to be a kid, but a little more serious than before. He grew more serious yet when his mother died in 1277 and his father remarried in the next year or so. The senior Alighieri's new wife, Lapa di Chiarissimo Cialuffi, in quick order provided Dante some siblings, a lack he seemed not to have noticed before, and soon his seriousness was tinged with the certain displacement that the two new half sisters and brother brought as their birthright. It is likely that Dante did not have to suffer the pitter-patter of their little feet for long and instead was regaled with the clippity-clop of hooves on the road to Bologna, the capital of higher learning, the seat of acquired European knowledge, the University.

No one knows for sure, but it has been suspected that Dante continued his studies in this august burg around the year 1279. He would have plowed his way through the Trivium—grammar, rhetoric, and logic—planted his seed with the Quadrivium arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music—and after a short season in the sun, reaped the fruit of poetry. His cornucopia spilling, he returned to Florence, possibly upon the death of his father in 1282, to share his fruits.





A young man with a little money to burn, a roof over his head and a song in his heart, Dante quickly became the favorite of artists. He traded verse with Guido Cavalcanti, an arrogant young knight with a nose wedged firmly in the air and a pretension of learning; Manetto Portinari, a fine young fellow with an even finer young sister (Bice, or more politely, Beatrice); and Forese Donati, the sweet-tempered brother of Dante's future enemy, Corso, all the while sharpening his gifts under the tutelage of Brunetto Latini.

Brunetto was widely known as a Libertine, and even though Dante loved him and viewed him as the most civilized man in Florence, he would later see him in Hell for his practices. This was a giddy time for Dante only partially caused by the great amounts of time he spent carousing.

It is not unusual for the serious boy to come back from university the sodden youth. But once again, a fateful meeting took place.



It was 1283, and Dante was in a rush, stepping across a bridge spanning the Arno. Beatrice was crossing from the other shore with two companions. The companions were beautiful, but beautiful as the moon to the radiance of Beatrice's sun. Love for this woman, whom he had not seen in nine years, dawned anew. The day spoke through Beatrice with such graciousness that the poet reeled with a blessed intoxication, and Dante was serious again.





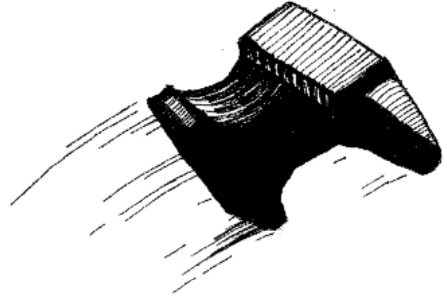
And he wrote, and wrote, and wrote. He wrote not of some idealized woman, some diaphanous metaphor for a grace and beauty unrealized. No, Beatrice was, not exactly with him *per se*, but she did appear with him in his dreams, one of which he later set down in his book, *La Vita Nuova*: a flame-colored mist permeated his room, and slowly a figure took solid form within the swirl, a figure of terrible beauty.

In his arms was curled a sleeping figure wrapped in a blood-colored cloth. Yes, it was she, Beatrice. Her bearer opened one hand to display a burning object and gravely intoned: "*Vide cor tuum*," or "behold thy heart."

Next, he roused the slumbering woman and with a gentle but unrelenting pressure, forced her to take the heart between her lips and eat. Such a meal gave her no sustenance, but much fear, and the angel, for it finally dawned on Dante that this was indeed the creature that bore his love, fell to grieving and leapt Heavenward.



Dante awakened with raw anguish holding him in its unspeakable grip. Anguish and the suffusing power of love kept Dante asway for many years. A brief meeting with Beatrice would be followed with a sweet and tender lyric, one that would become popular in the streets of Florence.



Boccaccio tells us that Dante was once traversing the work-a-day neighborhoods deep in thought when a voice broke through his mental occupation and stopped him in his tracks.

A blacksmith sang one of his most delicate poems, and not knowing all the words, he substituted some of his own. Dante sprang into the shop and furiously began tossing tools about, leaving destruction in his wake. "Madman, what are you doing?" the smith implored of this fury. Dante blankly replied, "That is my poem you have mangled. You destroy my work, I destroy yours."



Not all of Dante's encounters with the plebian classes were so high-pitched, nor were his encounters with Beatrice, as fleeting as they always were, as evocative of the most attainable reaches of love. To protect the privacy of his beloved, Dante often penned his missives to another woman. Beatrice was, needless to say, put out and was not shy to display her upset. Dante, of course, was quick to write another, less disguised work.

It was also about this time that both Dante and Beatrice were forced to pursue new careers: he as warrior and she as a wife. Beatrice was wed to a stolid young nobleman in the late 1280s, a match arranged by the parents since childhood.

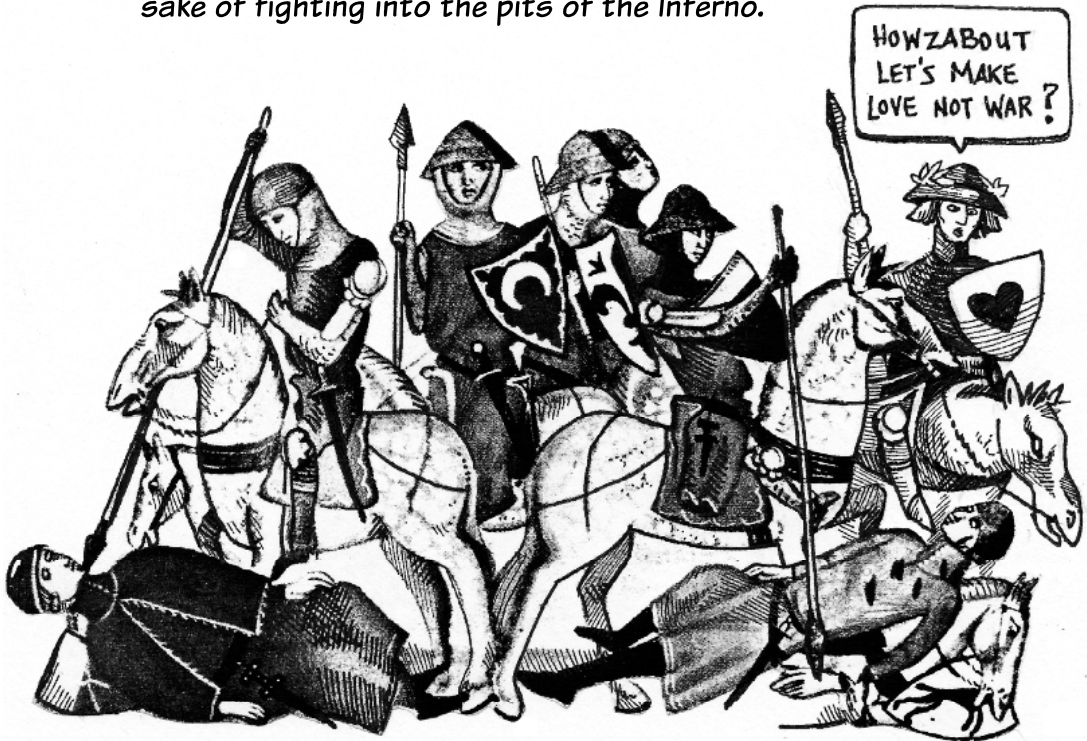
This would certainly not in any way affect Dante's affections (as, has been previously stated, love and marriage were unwedded notions at this time, and a contractual obligation to one person did not negate the possibility of bliss with yet another). What did force a separation was war with the city of Arezzo.

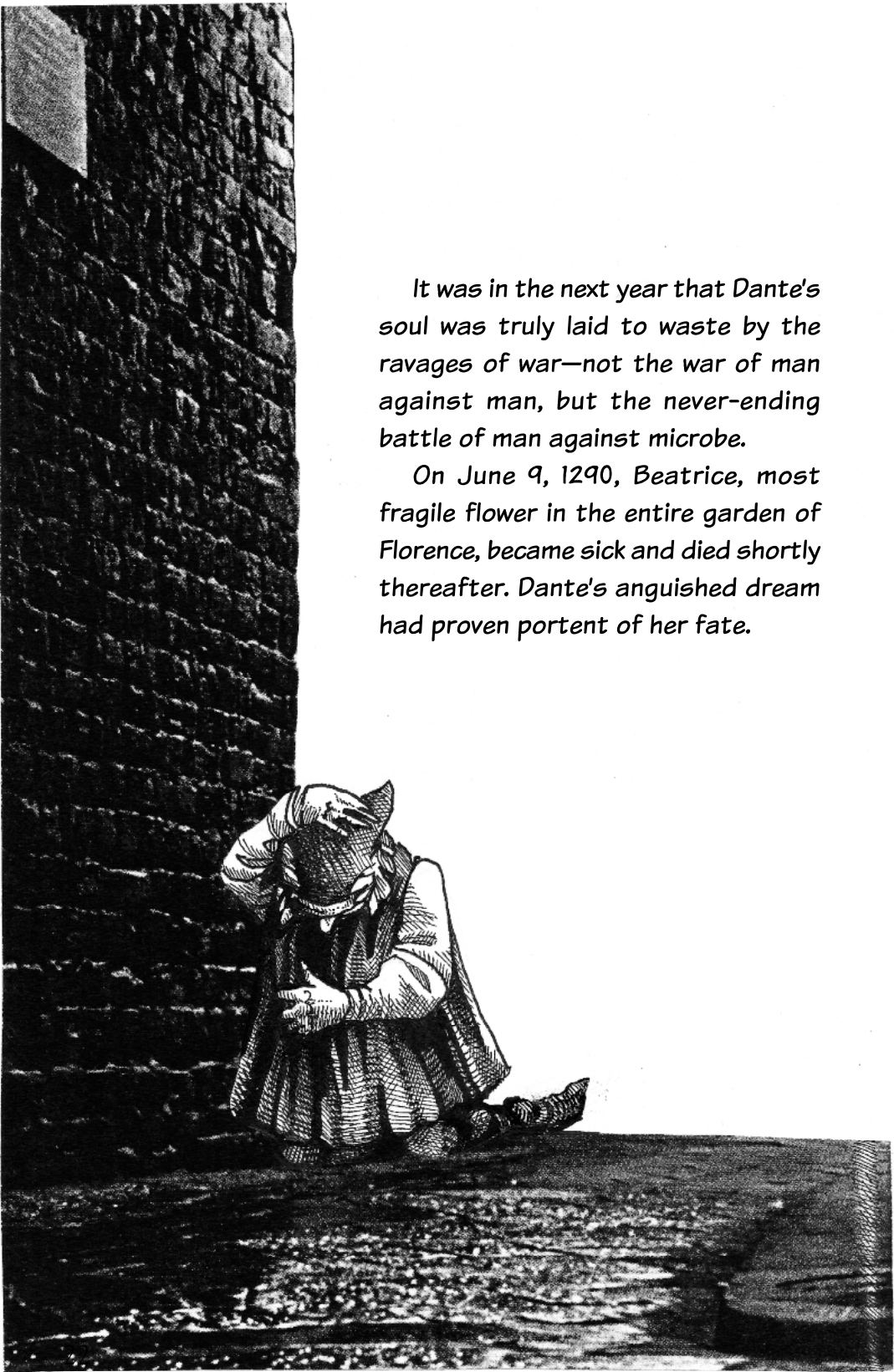


The Ghibellines still held out in a few places, and one was Arezzo. Seizing control of the local government, they promptly tossed out all of the Guelphs, who ran to Florence, where the trumpet's clarion called all good Florentines to arms. It was 1289, Dante was twenty-four and had yet to experience bloodshed organized on this level.

On June 11, Guelph and Ghibelline met at Campaldino. The Aretines charged under the command of their bishop. (Clergy were allowed to fight and kill. They were proscribed from drawing blood, however; and instead carried hammers and maces, not edged weapons.) It was a fearsome maneuver and pushed the Florentines back, but under the stern leadership of Corso Donati, they rallied and eventually took the day.

It was certainly not a day that Dante wished to relive. From somewhere in the ranks, he hacked and slashed with the best of them, but he would later plunge those who fought for the sake of fighting into the pits of the Inferno.





It was in the next year that Dante's soul was truly laid to waste by the ravages of war—not the war of man against man, but the never-ending battle of man against microbe.

On June 9, 1290, Beatrice, most fragile flower in the entire garden of Florence, became sick and died shortly thereafter. Dante's anguished dream had proven portent of her fate.

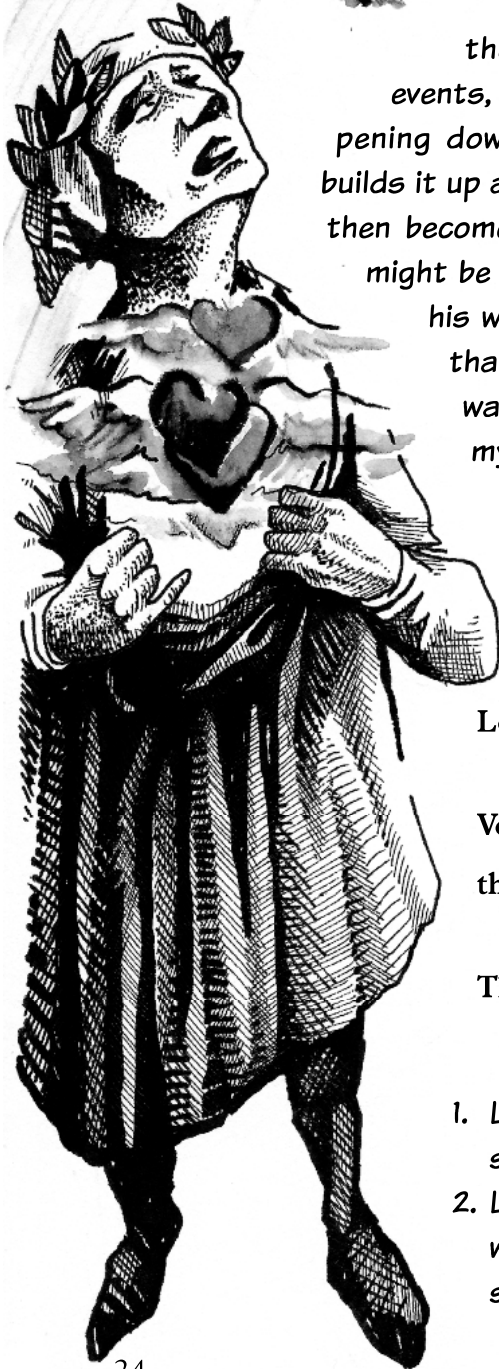


Depression seems too mild a descriptor for the careening descent of Dante's spirit, tears too small to describe the bathing torrents that rushed from his life. Blinded eyes, Dante grieved, and in his grief, he rediscovered the power of his art if not to heal, at the very least, to slow his fall and take account from where he had slipped and where he now stood.

This was *La Vita Nuova*, or *The New Life*, an autobiography. Dante took the sonnets and *canzones* he had written thus far and framed them with prose explanations of their origins.

It is from him we learn of his first meeting with Beatrice and their subsequent regard. It is from his specificity that we learn the corporeality of Beatrice is not to be questioned. She was decidedly not a poetic construct but a living, breathing woman. And most importantly we learn that love, by its very nature, leads directly to the Divinity.





In forty-three brief chapters, Dante sets forth his discovery, laying bare his artistic method in the process. First stirred by actual events, he distills the emotion of the happening down into one powerful idea. He then builds it up again into a lyric, but the poem itself then becomes as simple or as complex as one might be willing to enter. In fact, elsewhere in his writing, Dante is very careful to note that his work can be read in one of four ways: literally, allegorically, morally, or mystically.

One could take, for example, the lines from the second sonnet (in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's translation):

Love (never, certes, for my worthless
part, but of his own great heart),
Vouchsafed to me a life so calm and sweet
that oft I heard folk question as I went
what such great gladness meant: —
They spoke of it behind me in the street.

1. Love has made me so happy people stop and talk about it.
2. Love moves mysteriously through the world and even those deprived of it sense it in another.

3. Love brings joy undeserved but also its public burden.
4. Love, or rather, God's grace is impossible to comprehend but never goes unnoticed in the world.

Ultimately, *La Vita Nuova* is a chronicle of a man's love for a woman and the grief that comes with her loss, a grief that transcends and transforms:

Beyond the sphere which spreads to widest space
now soars the sigh that my heart sends above;
a new perception born of grieving love guideth
it upward the untrodden ways.

When it reached unto the end, and stays,
it sees a lady round whom splendours move
in homage; till, by the great light thereof,
abashed, the pilgrim spirit stands at gaze.

It sees her such, that when it tells me this
which it hath seen, I understand it not,
it hath a speech so subtle and so fine.
And yet I know its voice within my thought
often remembereth me of Beatrice;
so that I understand it, ladies mine.

(trans. Rossetti)

So goes the twenty-fifth and last sonnet
of Dante's little book, which he ends with a
prayer and a promise to continue the
tale of his love and where it takes
him at some future date. And
does he ever continue.

