

played a very active—even militant—role in the political life of Florence. In June 1300, after a bloody riot fomented by the rival factions of the Whites and the Blacks, he was banished with other leaders by order of the city's board of governors, among whom was Dante himself. Cavalcanti's exile lasted only a few weeks, however. Having contracted malaria, he was allowed to return to Florence, where he died in August of the same year.

In a small grove I met a little shepherdess



*In a small grove I met a little shepherdess  
More beautiful than the stars — she seemed to me.*

*She had light-blond, curly hair  
And eyes full of love, rosy complexion;  
With her little staff she tended lambs,  
And, barefoot, she was wet with dew;  
She was singing as though in love;  
And she was adorned — with every delight.*

*I greeted her at once with love  
And asked if she had any companions,  
And she answered me sweetly  
That she was going through the wood quite alone,  
And said: "You know, when a bird calls,  
Then my heart — yearns to have a lover."*

*After she had told me of her state,  
And I had heard birds singing in the wood,  
I said to myself: "Now is the time  
To take pleasure in this little shepherdess."  
I asked of her only permission to kiss  
And to embrace — should she so wish.*

*She took me by the hand, with amorous desire,  
And said she had given me her heart:  
She led me beneath branches of cool leaves  
Where I saw flowers of every color,  
And there I felt such joy and sweetness  
That the god of love — I seemed to see.*

DANTE ALIGHIERI

2

“So gentle and so virtuous she appears”

*So gentle and so virtuous she appears,  
My lady, when greeting other people  
That every tongue tremblingly grows silent,  
And eyes do not dare gaze upon her.  
She passes by, hearing herself praised,  
Graciously clothed with humility,  
And she appears to be a creature who has come  
From heaven to earth to show forth a miracle.*

*She shows herself so pleasing to her beholders,  
That she gives through the eyes a sweetness to the heart,  
Which no one can understand who does not feel it;  
And it appears that from her lip moves  
A tender spirit full of love,  
Which says again and again to the soul: “Sigh.”*

Francesca da Rimini (*Inferno*, from Canto V)

*I began: “O poet,<sup>1</sup> willingly  
Would I speak to those two who go as one,  
And seem to be so light in the wind.”  
And he to me: “You shall see when they are  
Closer to us; and then address them  
In the name of that love which drives them, and they will  
come.”  
As soon as the wind bent them towards us,*

“Now that the sky and earth and wind are still”

3

*Now that the sky and earth and wind are still,  
And beasts and birds are stayed by sleep,  
Night leads her starry chariot on its round,  
And without waves the sea lies in its bed;  
I am awake, I think, I burn, I weep; and she who is my  
undoing*

*Is ever before me to my sweet pain:  
War is my state, full of wrath and grief;  
And only in thinking of her do I have some peace.*

*Thus from the same clear living spring  
Flow the sweet and the bitter on which I feed;  
One hand alone heals me and stabs me.  
And so that my martyrdom may not reach the shore,  
A thousand times a day I die and a thousand I am born;  
So far away am I from my salvation.*

"I am a young maiden, and I willingly"

4

*I am a young maiden, and I willingly  
Rejoice and sing in the new season,  
Thanks to love and to my sweet thoughts.*

*I wander through green meadows gazing  
At the white and yellow and vermilion flowers,  
At the roses above their thorns and the white lilies,  
And all of them I liken  
To the face of him who, loving me,  
Took me and forever will keep me as the one  
Who desires nothing but his pleasures.*

*Among these when I find one which is,  
In my view, very much like him,  
I pluck it and kiss it and talk with it,  
And as best I can, thus my soul  
I open entirely to it, and [also] my heart's desires:  
Then I place it in a garland with others  
Tied with my light, blond hair.*

*And that pleasure which nature's flower  
Offers the eyes—a similar one it gives me  
As though I were seeing the very person  
Who has inflamed me with his sweet love;  
What else its odor does to me  
I could not express in words,  
But my sighs bear true witness thereof.*

*They never rise out of my breast,  
As out of other women's, harsh or heavy,  
But come forth warm and smooth,  
And go to my lover's presence;  
And he, feeling them, stirs to give me delight  
of himself, and comes at that moment  
When I am about to say: "Come, ah! come, lest I despair."*

Triumph of Bacchus and Ariadne

5

*How beautiful youth is  
Though ever fleeing!  
Let him be happy who wants to be:  
There's no certainty of tomorrow.*

*Here are Bacchus and Ariadne,  
Handsome, and burning for each other:  
Because time flies and beguiles,  
They remain ever happy together.  
These nymphs and these others  
Are always merry.  
Let him be happy who wants to be:  
There's no certainty of tomorrow.*

*These happy little satyrs  
Enamored of the nymphs  
In caves and groves  
Have set a hundred traps for them:  
Now warmed by Bacchus,  
They're always dancing and leaping.  
Let him be happy who wants to be:  
There's no certainty of tomorrow.*

*These nymphs in turn are glad  
To be beguiled by them;  
No one can shield himself from Love  
Except crude and ungrateful people:  
Now mingling together  
They play instruments and sing always.  
Let him be happy who wants to be:  
There's no certainty of tomorrow.*

*This load coming behind  
Upon the ass, is Silenus:  
Old as he is, he's drunk and happy,  
Already full of flesh and years;  
If he can't hold himself straight, at least  
He laughs and revels always.  
Let him be happy who wants to be:  
There's no certainty of tomorrow.*

*Midas comes after these:  
Whatever he touches turns to gold.  
And what's the good of having treasure,  
If one then is not satisfied?  
What sweet pleasure do you think he feels—  
One who is always thirsty?  
Let him be happy who wants to be:  
There's no certainty of tomorrow.*

*Let every one open his ears well:  
Let no one feed on tomorrow;  
Today, young and old, let's be  
Happy, everybody, women and men:  
May every sad thought fall away;  
Let's be celebrating always.  
Let him be happy who wants to be:  
There's no certainty of tomorrow.*

*Ladies and young men in love,  
Long live Bacchus and long live Love!  
Let every one make music, dance, and sing!  
Let hearts be fired with sweetness!  
No straining, no grieving!  
Whatever has to be, must be.  
Let him be happy who wants to be:  
There's no certainty of tomorrow.*

*How beautiful youth is  
Though ever fleeing!*

and beauty while youth lasts—follows Horace's *carpe diem* motif, which also prompted Lorenzo de Medici's "Triumph of Bacchus and Ariadne." But Poliziano displays a lightness of touch, an elegance of rhythm, a subtlety and a restraint which neither Lorenzo nor any other Italian poet of this period was ever quite able to achieve. With François Villon, Poliziano ranks as one of the two greatest European lyric poets of the fifteenth century.

"Welcome to May"

6

*Welcome to May  
And its wild banner:<sup>1</sup>*

*Welcome to spring  
Which wants one to fall in love.  
And you, young girls, in a group  
With your sweethearts,  
You who with roses and flowers  
Make yourselves pretty in May,*

*Come to the cool shade  
Of the green young trees.  
Every pretty maiden is safe  
Among so many youths;  
For beasts and birds  
Burn with love in May.*

*She who is young and beautiful,  
Pray that she not be bitter,  
For it does not renew itself,  
Age—as does the grass:  
Let no one remain proud  
With her sweetheart in May.*

<sup>1</sup> The "wild banner" was a branch which a young man would cut from a tree in the woods to attach to the door of his sweetheart's home on May Day.

*Let each girl dance and sing  
In this group of ours.  
Behold your sweet lovers  
Going, my pretty ones, to joust for you :  
She who shows herself harsh to them  
Will cause the withering of May.*

*To capture the young girls  
Their lovers have armed themselves.  
Surrender, my pretty ones,  
To those in love with you ;  
Give back the hearts you have thieved,  
Do not wage war in May.*

*Let her who has stolen someone's heart  
Give her own heart in return.  
But who is that one flying?  
It's the young angel of Love,  
Who is coming to do honor  
With you, young girls, to May.*

*Love comes forth laughing  
With roses and lilies on his head,  
And he comes looking for you.  
Greet him with joy, my pretty ones.  
Which of you will be the first  
To give him the flower of May?*

*Welcome to the pilgrim.  
Love, what is your command?  
That for her lover's hair  
Each pretty one weave a garland ;  
For young girls and grown women  
Fall in love in May.*

apparently by either Cardinal Ippolito de' Medici or Duke Alessandro, both of whom had tried in vain to enlist the poet's support in their bitter struggle for power in Florence.

"Hair of fine silver, shaggy and twisted"



*Hair of fine silver, shaggy and twisted  
Tastelessly around a beautiful face of gold:  
Wrinkled brow, gazing at which I pale,  
Whereon Love and Death break their arrow points.  
Shimmering eyes of pearl, beams turned away  
By every object unequal to them;  
Eyebrows of snow, and you, which move my heart,  
Fingers and hands, delightfully thick and short.*

*Lips of milk, large azure mouth,  
Teeth of ebony, rare and wandering,  
Unheard of, ineffable harmony;  
Manners haughty and ponderous; to you, divine  
Servants of Love, I now make plain that such  
Are the charms of my lady.*

lived at the court of the Queen, Maria de' Medici, and to her, in 1623, he dedicated his poem *Adone*, which was acclaimed as an unsurpassable masterpiece. Soon afterward Marino returned to Italy, greeted with triumphant receptions in every city he visited. Covered with glory, he spent the remaining two years of his life in Naples. The impact of his influence can be detected not only in the works of several minor Italian writers, but also in the writings of poets such as Crashaw in Great Britain and Góngora in Spain.

Beautiful Slave



*Black—yes, but you are beautiful, O Nature's  
Graceful exhibit among Love's beauties.  
Dawn is gloomy alongside you; defeated and darkened  
Are ivory and crimson by your ebony.  
When or where did the ancient world, or ours,  
Ever see such lively, ever feel such pure  
Light coming out of dark ink,  
Or such ardor issuing from spent coal?*

*Servant of her who is my servant, here I am  
bearing my heart caught in a brown noose  
Which can never be untied by a pure-white hand.  
There where you burn the most, O Sun, for your shame alone  
A sun has been born; a Sun who in her beautiful face  
Bears the night, and in her eyes has day.*

only in death can man find lasting happiness. But although statements in this vein appear frequently in the *Canti*, they are balanced by many others—such as the wonderful last line of “L’infinito” (The Infinite): “E il naufragar m’è dolce in questo mare” (And to shipwreck is sweet for me in this sea)—that uncover a completely different aspect of Leopardi: not the optimist, to be sure, but the enraptured admirer of nature’s beauty, and the believer in the power of the imagination.

“L’infinito,” our first selection, represents one of the summits not only of Leopardi’s poetry but of all poetry. Rarely has a poet been able to compress within one hundred words such depth of meaning with such simplicity of language and harmony of sounds. Leopardi called “L’infinito” an “idyll,” a definition that perfectly fits the charm and suggestive power of this superb poem, which, to quote Renato Poggioli, “makes familiar and almost dear to the heart of man the alien metaphysical vision of a universe ruled by laws other than those of life and death.”

### The Infinite



*Always dear to me was this lonely hill,  
And this hedge, which from so great a part  
Of the farthest horizon excludes the gaze.  
But as I sit and watch, I invent in my mind  
endless spaces beyond, and superhuman  
silences, and profoundest quiet;  
wherefore my heart  
almost loses itself in fear. And as I hear the wind  
rustle through these plants, I compare  
that infinite silence to this voice:  
and I recall to mind eternity,  
And the dead seasons, and the one present  
And alive, and the sound of it. So in this  
Immensity my thinking drowns:  
And to shipwreck is sweet for me in this sea.*

JO

### Assuntina

In a long-ago time and place  
I swiftly fell in love with a beautiful blond young woman  
Whose name was Assuntina.

Without ever uttering a word  
I could communicate my love with just a glance.  
I furtively followed her to school.

Whatever the season or weather,  
I took a walk every evening In the Via Riccio  
with the intent of seeing her beautiful blond head.

The day came when she was a beautiful young woman,  
resplendant as a ray of sunshine.  
I thought: If only dear Assuntina could be mine.  
God Willing.

One day I left for far flung shores  
with the hope she would wait for me,  
But destiny intervened, and I never returned.

Some things have faded with time  
as memories wax and wane.  
But in my mind she remains as beautiful as she was  
in that time so long ago.

**Folklore**

Myrtle flower:

When I was twelve I fell in love with a beautiful, gracious, and lovely young girl.

Verbena flower:

If a day passed that I did not see her, my heart had neither peace nor will.

Withered flower:

Secretly I followed her everywhere.  
I followed her as the thread follows the needle.

Mimosa flower:

For six long years I spent the summer and winter season near her home

Lost flower:

Poorly advised, I left my homeland, never writing to her a line or a greeting.

Sloping flower:

It wasn't meant to be. I am at peace, knowing that she is a happy bride with children.

Clover leaf:

Even though my first love changed her mind, I will always wish her well.

Evergreen:

Your Cupid changed the direction of his bow and arrow  
Yet, the first love never leaves your heart.

12

Alda Merini

I tenderly loved some very sweet lovers  
without them ever knowing anything.  
And over them I weaved spiders' webs  
and I was prey of my own material.  
In me there was the soul of the prostitute  
of the saint of the bloodthirsty and of the hypocrite.  
Many gave a name to my way of living  
and I was simply a hysterical person.