



The National Idea in Italian Literature (Manchester University Lectures) (Volume 22)

Edmund G. Gardner

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An excerpt from the beginning...

There is a noble poem by Carducci, *Per il monumento di Dante a Trento* (written in 1896), in which the soul of the Divine Poet soars up after death to the gate of Purgatory, impelled by conscience to seek the expiation of his pride before passing into the bliss of Paradise. A voice from on high tells him that the spiritual world of his vision has passed away, but God has consigned Italy to his charge; he is to watch over her destiny as a guardian spirit through the centuries, until the fullness of the times shall come:—

"Ed or s'è fermo, e par ch'aspetti, a Trento."

The national idea came to Dante as part of that essential continuity between ancient Rome and modern Italy which is the key to Italian civilization. Virgil himself had defined the national aspirations of Italians throughout the centuries, when he placed upon the lips of Aeneas the pregnant words: *Italiam quaero patriam*. There was never a time, from the day on which a barbarian conqueror dethroned the last of the old Roman emperors in the west to that on which Victor Emanuel assumed the crown of the united modern kingdom, when Italy — in the notorious phrase of Metternich — was "a mere geographical expression." From the writers of ancient Rome the Italians of the early Middle Ages had inherited the conception of the Italy of classical literature, whose glories and beauties, whose ancient gods and heroes, had been sung by Virgil and Horace — the Italy which, through the Roman Empire, had given the Latin civilization to the nations whom she united in the Roman Peace. The continuity of the Latin tradition in Italy, kept alive by the grammarians and rhetoricians, by the study of the classics and of Roman law, preserved this conception of an ideal Italian unity after the political unity had been torn to pieces as the result of the Langobard conquest.

We find Italia in this sense in the letters of Gregory the Great at the very beginning of the Middle Ages, when the political dissolution of the peninsula had but just begun. An anonymous writer of Ravenna, at the end of the seventh century, speaks of that patria *nobilissima quae dicitur Italia*. There was a notably strong sense of Latin continuity in the eleventh and twelfth centuries; the new, vigorous, many-sided life and activity of the communes was, in part, a conscious renovation in the Italian cities of the spirit of ancient Rome. Thus, the anonymous poet, who celebrates the victory of the Pisans over the Saracens on the African coast in 1088, begins by uniting this new glory of Pisa with the deeds of the Romans of old:—

"Inclitorum Pisanorum scripturus historiam,
antiquorum Romanorum renovo memoriam;
nam extendit modo Pisa laudem admirabilem,
quam olim recepit Roma vincendo Carthaginem."

And he calls upon not only Pisa, but all Italy, to weep for the fallen hero, Ugo Visconti.

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