



Review

Epilepsy in Dante's poetry

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ABSTRACT

Dante Alighieri is the greatest Italian poet and one of the most important writers in Western literature. He is best known for the epic poem "Commedia", later named "La Divina Commedia" that has profoundly influenced not only poetic imagination but also all subsequent allegorical creations of imaginary worlds in literature. This paper examines the poetic description of some episodes of loss of consciousness in Dante's poetry discussing how and why typical elements of epileptic seizures have been used. On the 750th anniversary of Dante's birth, his poetry still remains to be an inspiring source of debate and reflection.

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1. Introduction: Dante "the supreme poet" and the historical context

Dante Alighieri (1265–1321) is the greatest Italian poet and one of the most important writers in Western literature. He is best known for the epic poem "Commedia" (c.1310–14), later named "La Divina Commedia". It has profoundly influenced not only poetic imagination but all subsequent allegorical creations of imaginary worlds in literature. However, Dante produced other wonderful works such as "Convivio" (The Banquet), a collection of his longest poems with an (unfinished) allegorical commentary, and "Monarchia", a summary treatise of political philosophy in Latin which was condemned and burned after Dante's death by the Papal Legate Bertrando del Poggetto.

Dante was born to a Florentine family of noble ancestry. Originally, he was called Durante by his mother's father, the name was subsequently shortened into Dante. His great-great-grandfather Cacciaguیدا had participated in the Second Crusade, and before dying in a battle, he was knighted by the Holy Roman Emperor Conrad III. Maybe also for this reason, Dante's family had loyalties to the Guelphs, a political alliance that supported the Papacy and was involved in a complex opposition to the Ghibellines, who were backed by the Holy Roman Emperor [1].

After defeating the Ghibellines, the Guelphs was divided into two factions: the White Guelphs (Guelfi Bianchi) — Dante's party, led by

Vieri dei Cerchi — and the Black Guelphs (Guelfi Neri) — led by Corso Donati. Although the split was along family lines at first, ideological differences arose based on opposing views of the papal role in Florentine affairs, with the Blacks supporting the Pope and the Whites wanting more freedom from Rome. The Whites took power first and expelled the Blacks. In response, Pope Boniface VIII planned a military occupation of Florence with the help of Charles of Valois, brother of King Philip IV of France; he was expected to visit Florence as the Pope had appointed him peacemaker for Tuscany. On November 1, 1301, Charles of Valois entered Florence with the Black Guelphs, who in the next six days destroyed much of the city and killed many of their enemies. A new Black Guelph government was installed, and Dante was condemned to perpetual exile [1]. Considering the complexity of the political situation of Florence of that time, it is understandable why several political topics are discussed in Dante's work. This is particularly evident not only in political writings such as "Monarchia" but also in the Divine Comedy. However, the main poetic topic during that time was love, which has indeed represented the main core of Dante's poetry. This paper examines the poetic description of episodes of loss of consciousness in Dante's poetry discussing how and why elements typical of epileptic seizures have been used.

2. The epilepsy metaphor in Dante's poetry

Fainting episodes, blank spells, sleep attacks, or dreaming states are frequently described in Dante's poetry. They are usually associated with intense emotions such as the epiphany of the beloved, namely, Beatrice Portinari, who also served as the ultimate symbol of salvation in the Comedy (Fig. 1). The story of his love for Beatrice is described in

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Fig. 1. Dante meets Beatrice at Ponte Santa Trinità, by Henry Holiday.

La Vita Nova (The New Life), a poetic composition which exploits a combination of prose (prosa) and verse (metrum), with the prose creating the illusion of a narrative continuity between the poems. Although The New Life has a deep autobiographical perspective, it is important to emphasize that this is far from the modern impulse of Romantic autobiographical works. In fact, Dante and his audience were interested in the emotions of courtly love and how they develop, how they could be expressed in verse, how they reveal the permanent intellectual truths of the divinely created world, and how love could confer blessing on the soul and bring it closer to God. Therefore, all descriptions of sufferings, swoons, fainting and loss of consciousness described in Dante's poetry need to be considered in such a perspective. In this respect, it is interesting that "Love" is described by Dante as a force that drives human beings, and as such, it is able to take possession of the most important faculty of humans, namely, consciousness. For this reason, episodes of suffering described in the context of an amorous state are represented as episodes of loss of consciousness [2].

*That which opposeth in my mind doth die
Whene'er I come to see you, beauteous Joy!
And I hear Love sat, when to you I'm nigh,
"Begone, if death be unto thee annoy"
My face the color of my heart displays,
Which, fainting, any chance support doth seek;
And as I tremble in my drunken daze,
Die! Die! The very stones appear to shriek.
He who may then behold me doeth ill
If my affrighted soul he doth not aid,
Showing at least that me he pitieth
For that distress the which your scorn doth kill,
And which is in the lifeless look displayed
Of eyes which have a longing for their death.*

*[Spesse fiate vègnonmi a la mente
le oscure qualità ch'Amor mi dona,
e vènnemi pietà, sì che sovente
io dico: «Lasso! avvien elli a persona?»;
ch'Amor m'assale subitanamente,
sì che la vita quasi m'abbandona:
càmpami uno spirto vivo solamente,
e que' riman, perché di voi ragiona.
Poscia mi sforzo, ché mi voglio atare;
e così smorto, d'onne valor vòto,
vegno a vedervi, credendo guarire:
e se io levo li occhi per guardare,
nel cor mi si comincia uno tremoto,*

che fa de' polsi l'anima partire.]

After what I have said, this sonnet roused in me a wish to say also some words in which I would tell four things further in regard to my state which it seemed to me had not yet been made manifest by me. The first of which truly is, that oftentimes I grieved when my memory excited my fancy to imagine what Love made me; the second is, that oftentimes Love assailed me with such force that naught remained alive in me save be thought which spake of my lady; the third is, that, when this onset of Love thus attacked me, I went almost altogether pale to look on this lady, believing that the sight of her would be my defence from this attack, forgetting that which befell me in approaching gentleness so great; the fourth is, how this sight not only defended me not, but finally discomfited my little remaining life.

[The New Life XV–XVI translation by Charles Eliot Norton]

*All I encounter in my mind dies,
when I come to gaze on you, sweet joy:
and when I am near you, I feel Love
who says: 'Run, if you care about dying'.
The face shows the colour of the heart,
that, fainting, leans for support:
and in the vast intoxicating tremor
the stones beneath me cry: Death, death.
They commit a sin who see me then,
if they do not comfort my bewildered soul,
if only by showing that they care for me,
through pity, which your mocking killed,
that is described in the dying vision
of eyes that have wished for death.*

[The New Life XV–XVI translated by A. S. Kline]

The metaphor of Love taking possession of humans seems to change over time in Dante's poetry, going from episodes of febrile delirium or syncope to episodes of loss of consciousness with the typical stigmata of epileptic seizures and the equivalence Love equals Death. This is particularly evident in "Le Rime" (The Rhymes). It is a collection of Dante's writings throughout his life and based on the poet's varied existential and stylistic experiences. It was not originally designed as a collection by Dante himself, but it was created by modern critics who collected and ordered his poems.

In "E m'incresce di me si malamente", "And I'm sorry for me badly", Dante writes: "lo spirito maggior tremò sì forte che parve ben che morte per lui in questo mondo giunta fosse", "the soul shocked so intensely that he looked like the death for him was arrived" [3].

*Lo giorno che costei nel mondo venne,
Secondo che si trova
Nel libro della mente, che vien meno;
La mia persona parvola sostenne
Una passion nova
Tal, ch'io rimasi di paura pieno;
Ch'a tutte mie virtù fu posto un freno
Subitamente sì, ch'io caddi in terra
Per una voce, che nel cor percosse;
E (se'l libro non erra)
Lo spirito maggior tremò sì forte,
Che parve ben, che morte
Per lui in questo mondo giunta fosse:
Ora ne incresce a quei, che questo mosse:*

[From: E' m'incresce di me si malamente, Libro III Canzone IV]

*The day that she was born,
According to what is
In the book of the mind, that fails;
My little person claimed
A new passion*

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