The Dante Centenary and the Centenary’s Dante

Only a tradition traced back to its national origins, and grounded on the historical, realistic, polemical, and prophetic structure of Dante’s poem, could still serve as a spur for the revival of that humbled, uncultivated province of Europe that Italy had become.1

If they meant to celebrate Dante as the pinnacle of Italian poetry, they indeed chose a very bad time to do so, in this period of prose and of thieves.2

Ironically, the 1865 Centenary in honor of Italy’s greatest poet must be understood within the context of a period that Victor Emmanuel called an “age of prose”:3 an epoch in which the poetic heroism of the Risorgimento gave way to the realpolitik of the postunification decades.4

The 1861 unification of Italy as an extension of the Piedmontese monarchy was the culmination of a long period of strife among different Italian nationalist factions. From the 1830s until unification, Italian nationalists struggled over not only whether, but how, unification would take place. Should the unified country take on a Republican form of government (as Giuseppe Mazzini and his associations of “Young Italy” promulgated)? Was the pope the best leader to unify the peninsula (as the neo-Guelph Vincenzo Gioberti suggested)? Or should Italy become a monarchy under the Piedmontese king (the position of the northern and central Liberal elite)?
For a brief moment during the wave of 1848 uprisings, Mazzini’s revolutionary program for a Republican Italy found ascendancy. While Mazzini and Manin instituted republics in Rome and Venice, respectively, democratic upheaval ousted ancien régime rulers across the Italian peninsula. However, within a few months—unable to create a united front against the encroaching Austrian army—the republics, and along with them, the Republican model for Italian unification, failed.5

With the fall of 1848–1849 republics, not only the Mazzinian but also Gioberti’s alternative for Italian unification, which advocated a federation of states presided over by the pope, lost momentum. In April 1848, the once-reformist Pius IX rejected Gioberti’s neo-Guelph program. The revolutionary events of 1848 had convinced Pius IX that constitutionalism and governance by the church were essentially incompatible. Gioberti himself would soon abandon federalism in favor of a unitary program.6

The proceedings of 1848, in fact, emerged as a justification for a monarchic model of unity, a point made clear by Count Emilio Cavour, the prime minister of Piedmont, who pursued a diplomatic rather than a revolutionary path in his effort to unify Italy. He argued (mostly to the conservatives) that the only way to avoid the “revolutionary excesses” of 1848 was to unite Italy under the House of Savoy, the dynasty of Piedmont-Sardinia. The 1859 wars of independence, during which Tuscany and Lombardy ousted the Austrian regimes, set the stage for unification, as these regions held plebiscites in order to annex themselves to Piedmont. By 1861, through the military expeditions of Garibaldi and his volunteers in the south, most of the Italian peninsula—with the exception of Rome and Venice—was unified under the Piedmontese monarchy.7

The multifaceted problems facing the partially unified Italian nation-state have been amply studied.8 Cavour’s death in 1861 left his heirs with two interrelated tasks: the territorial completion of unification and the consolidation of rule. The new state faced numerous obstacles. In addition to the difficulty of fulfilling its pledge to liberate Venice from Austrians and Rome from papal jurisdiction, it confronted widespread brigandage in the South. By 1864, the government had deployed 100,000 troops there in order to fight a guerrilla-type war.9 On the political front, the regime led