

EPILEPSY IN DANTE'S POETRY**^{1,2}Marco Mula MD PhD****¹Epilepsy Group, Atkinson Morley Regional Neuroscience Centre, St George's university Hospital, London, United Kingdom****²Institute of Medical and Biomedical Sciences, St George's University of London, United Kingdom****Corresponding author:**

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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 creation 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. In the 750th anniversary of Dante’s birth, his poetry still remains inspiring source of debate and reflection.

Key words: epilepsy, Dante, creativity, art

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 creation of imaginary worlds in literature. However, Dante produced other wonderful works such as, for example, “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 into a Florentine family of noble ancestry. Originally called Durante, as his mother's father, but 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 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 of 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.

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 *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 emphasise 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 vègnomi 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 guerire:
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 ofttimes I grieved when my memory excited my fancy to imagine what Love made me; the second is, that ofttimes 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
 So that I was full of fear;
 That all my virtues were curbed
 Suddenly yes, I fell to the ground*

*For a voice, that in my heart beating;
And (if 'the book is not wrong)
The soul most trembled so violently,
That seemed well, that death
For him in this world came to be:
Now it irks those, that this moved:*

(From: And I'm sorry for me badly, Book III Song IV)

Still, in "Amor, da che convien" "Love, from which it behooves" love is described as a thunder that struck him on the floor almost dead, followed by something similar to a post-ictal confusional state [3].

*Qual io divenga si feruto, Amore,
Sail contra tu, non io,
Che rimani a veder me senza vita: E
se l'anima torna poscia al core,
Ignoranza ed oblio
Stato e' con lei, mentre ch'ella e' partita.
Quando risorgo, e miro la ferita,
Che mi disfece, quando io fui percosso,
Confortar non mi posso,
Sicch'io non tremi tutto di paura:
E mostra poi la faccia scolorita
Qual fu quell tuono, che mi giunse addosso;
Che se con dolce riso e' stato mosso,
Lunga fiata poi rimane oscura;
Perche' lo spirto non si rassicura.*

(From: Amor, da che convien Stanza 4, Linee 46-60)

*What I become when so stricken, you know, Love,
not I you who stay to see me lifeless. And though in
time the soul returns to my heart, nescience and
oblivion were with it all the time it was away. When I get
to my feet and gaze at the wound that destroyed me when
I received the blow, I cannot so take heart as not to
tremble all over with fear. And then my face, drained of
its colour, shows what that lightning was which struck
me; for though the lightning flashed from a lovely smile,
my face remains darkened for a long while after, because
my spirit does not regain courage.*

(From: Amor, by which it behooves Stanza 4, Lines 46-60 [4])

When Dante wrote this song he was about forty years old and had behind him not only The New Life with its story of an entirely sublimated "heavenly" love, but also the series of canzoni that more or less celebrated a love that had its seat in the mind. Now, in his poetry, the feeling of love becomes an ineluctable force against which neither reason nor virtue can prevail. In this context, it is tempting to speculate that he decided to use the description of epileptic phenomena as "the sacred disease" represented the most ineluctable power of nature on human's intellect.

Was Dante aware of epilepsy?

That Dante was aware of epilepsy is clearly evident from the episode of Vanni Fucci described in the Canto XXIV of the Hell. Vanni Fucci was a thief who lived in Pistoia, and, in the Divine Comedy, he is in the eighth “*bolgia*” (circle) of Hell, where thieves are punished. In that round, the punishment was to be stung by a serpent, reduced to ashes, and then restored to former human shape for more torturing. Dante and Virgil meet him and ask him why he is there (**Fig. 2**). He replied that he stole a treasure from the Church of St. James in his hometown; he had accused an innocent man, Vanni Della Nona, with the crime, for which Della Nona was executed. Fucci says he was not caught but he still went to Hell. He then predicts the overthrow of the Florentine Whites to spite Dante and he is finally attacked by numerous nearby serpents and by the monster Cacus, who was put in that round for stealing Hercules' cattle [5].

*And as he is who falls, and knows not how,
By force of demons who to earth down drag him,
Or other oppilation that binds man,
when he arises and around him looks,
Wholly bewildered by the mighty anguish
(Hell Canto XXIV 112-118)*

*E qual è quel che cade, e non sa como,
per forza di demon ch'a terra il tira,
o d'altra oppilazion che lega l'omo,
quando si leva, che 'ntorno si mira
tutto smarrito de la grande angoscia
(Inferno Canto XXIV 112-118)*

In this episode, there is not only a nice description of an epileptic seizure but the reference to epilepsy is quite clear by the use of the word “*oppilation*”. This word, from the latin “*opillatio*”, was used mainly in the medical context with the meaning of obstruction (caused by phlegma) of the pneuma, representing, since the era of the Hippocratic Corpus, the main cause for epileptic seizures. That Dante might have seen or have been in contact with people with epilepsy is more than certain. At that time, considering the high prevalence of infections and the high risk of traumatic brain injury due to continuous wars, there might have been an incidence of epilepsy similar to those of current developing countries or even higher, namely 68.7 per 100,000 per year [6]. Considering that Florence had 100.000 inhabitants during Dante's period, it is possible to estimate that there were at least 69 new cases of epilepsy every year and, at that time, there were no major hospitals or institutions looking after people with epilepsy. In fact, the first hospital for paupers and disabled was founded in Florence by Bonifacio Lupi, after Dante's death, in 1380, and for this reason named “*Ospedale Bonifazio*” [7]. However, it started accommodating “*lunatics*” and “*epileptics*” only in 1780. Shortly after, in 1840, the first established chair for nervous diseases was established under Vincenzo Chiarugi [8]. In this regard, it is also important to acknowledge that, during Dante's time, patients with epilepsy were still highly stigmatized due to the influence of Christianity which linked epilepsy to demonic possession. It is, thus, possible that, for such a reason, Dante never explicitly mentioned the “*falling sickness*” in his poems or never wanted to explicitly describe such a phenomenon but it is possible that he was impressed and fascinated by this “*divine*” power that he alluded to it in several occasions such as those described in this paper.

The phenomenology of the episodes of loss of consciousness in Dante's poetry has been matter of debate for a long time. According to Cesare Lombroso, the phenomenology of the episodes in the Divine Comedy was organised in three levels: the Hell was characterised mainly by “*falls typical of epileptics*”, the Purgatory by “*visions typical of somnambulists*” and the Heaven by “*ecstatic visions typical of madness*” [9]. Such a hierarchic organisation mirrored perfectly the relationship between the atavistic man and the genius theorised by Lombroso [10]. Other authors speculated that Dante himself had epilepsy [11] while others discussed the narcoleptic features of his descriptions [12].

*And all the while one spirit uttered this,
The other one did weep so, that, for pity,
I swooned away as if I had been dying,
And fell, even as a dead body falls.
(Hell Canto V 139-142)*

*Mentre che l'uno spirto questo disse,
l'altro piangea; sì che di pietade
io venni men così com' io morisse.
E caddi come corpo morto cade.
(Inferno Canto V 139-142)*

In this regard, the famous quotation from the Hell Canto V -142 “and I fell, even as a dead body falls” has been interpreted as an episode of muscle weakness triggered by an intense emotion typical of narcolepsy. Whether Dante was aware of narcolepsy is difficult to say, epilepsy was definitely better known. The only possible explanation would be that Dante actually had narcolepsy but this is unlikely considering biographical information. In any case, it is important to note that Dante’s knowledge of medical and natural sciences was quite accurate as demonstrated by the fact that he joined the Guild of Physicians and Pharmacists (*Ars Medicorum et Apothecariorum*) of Florence [13]. It is quite striking that there are no clear seizure pointers in the Purgatory or the Heaven and in these two sections of the Divine Comedy fainting episodes are really narcoleptic-like, leading the reader into a clear oneiric dimension that parallels a sort of mystic climax. In this regard, the original observation of Lombroso seems to be quite right.

Dante’s poetry is still today quite contemporary and, at the same time, epilepsy represented and still represents a fascinating condition. Dante’s poetry has inspired centuries of western poetry and has attracted the interest of philosophers and scientists. In the 750th anniversary of his birth, Dante still remains one of the most eminent poets of Western culture.

Acknowledgments and disclosure

The author thankfully acknowledges Prof Barolina (Columbia University) for providing some of the translations.

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Figure legend.

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

Figure 2. The in the eighth “bolgia” of the Hell and Vanni Fucci by Gustave Dore.

Figure

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