

## DANTE AND HIS TIME<sup>1</sup>

Suppose, for the sake of easy memory, that the Middle Ages begin in A.D. 313, finish in 1313. The first date is marked by Constantine's Edict of Milan, virtually establishing Christianity as the religion of the Roman world empire. The second date emphasises the sudden death of Emperor Henry VII at Buonconvento in Tuscany during his Italian campaign, as the irreparable failure of the last attempt that could be undertaken, with a reasonable chance of success, to enact the plan of Roman-Christian unity under whose spell the Latin West and the Germanic North had dreamed and laboured all through those thousand years. Of this phase of history Dante is the witness and an actor, a victim and the judge as well.

The places themselves of his birth and death become more meaningful in this frame. Florence, where he was born in 1265 and lived until 1301, was the prime builder of modern man, with his civilisation of productive

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<sup>1</sup> These pages are excerpted from a larger and more comprehensive essay on Dante and on the reading of the *Divine Comedy*. The essay in its entirety will be published, in the original English version, by Henry Regnery, as Introduction to a new edition of the *Divine Comedy*. In Italian translation the essay will be included in a forthcoming volume of essays by Borgese, to be published by Mondadori next spring.

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energy and revolutionary progress, capitalism and individualism, separate sovereignties and secularised arts. Ravenna, where he died an exile in 1321, preserved in the incidental surrounding of a local principality the monument of architectures and mosaics which Latins, Goths, and Hellenes had raised concordantly eight and nine centuries earlier to the sacramental hope of a society enfolding West and East, Rome and Byzantium, and the converted barbarians with them.

The particular events in Dante's political career, as motivated by the fight of factions in his native city and by the relations of that city with Papacy and Empire, are less explanatory of his defeat than is the general temper of his mind. An objector to whatever he deemed an error, he rejected impartially all the errors of his age. They banded together to reject him. His success in statesmanship—a two month office, shared with five equals, in the chief magistracy of the city, and occasional missions as ambassador at large—had been brief and brittle. On his way back from Rome where he, one of three such ambassadors, had upheld the independence of Florence against the imperialism of Pope Boniface, he was served banishment, soon afterward death sentence, by the extreme Guelph left, the satellite popists, who had seized meanwhile the city. In the following decade he sought a place for himself in the opposite extreme—the imperial Ghibelline party; seldom if ever wholeheartedly until the arrival of Emperor Henry with the promise of a forcible return into 'the fair sheepfold where he slept a lamb'. Unwilling to sink, one should say with a cheaper idiom, he tried to swim; hitting, at the collapse of his emperor, on shallow waters. From that moment on he, the born exile, is a displaced person; with no home on earth except guest rooms at princelings' courts where he makes 'proof how the bread of others savours of salt, and how hard a path is the descending and the mounting of another's stairs'.

Within the economic determinism we have learned from Marxism and sub-Marxism, Dante's solitariness, his being at the wind-up of his career 'a party by himself', appears to be determined by his marginal, or even disconnected, location in the social order; an outcast because an outcaste. He neither belonged in the solid pyramid of feudal hierarchy nor in the rising tides of bourgeois fortunes. True, he claimed noble descent, even a crusader among his forebears; but the pedigree was recent and the estate gone. Poverty had stalked him long before his wanderings, in an insecure youth, when he was hard put to keep up with such Joneses as a Cavalcanti or Donati among his comrades in poetry and horsemanship; for his enlistment in the guild of physicians and pharmacists was but nominal, a

routine device for the readmission of the dispossessed nobility to public life, and he had no profession except that of a scholar, with no professorship, and of a writer whose *carmina non dant panem*, poems are no bread earners. These meagre conditions were crudely exposed in a deplorable battle of sonnets between him and his estranged friend, Forese. They must have been widely known if the masters of the city, when ostracising and defaming the dissenter, stressed, more than political conspiracy, fraud and 'embezzlement', a libel which they hardly would have hoped to make credible if levelled at a prosperous landed proprietor or banker.

Our other usual analysis, the Freudian, singling the individual Eros from the socio-economic continuum, shows obviously in Dante's early and not so early seasons a strong, however strongly repressed libido, as reported also with naive complacency by his first biographer, Boccaccio. His wife plays no role in his work—neither do his children, though they played some in his life when near to its end—an absence due probably, more than to disaffection, to the pattern of chivalric poetry which segregated the reality of the family from the world of imagination and ecstasy. The ladies of unsteady though not quite vagabond loves, sirens often half feminine half allegorical, shed elusive gleams on years of temptation and groping. A little Florentine society girl, generally identified with a Beatrice or Bice Portinari, married later to one Simone de'Bardi, dead when not yet twenty-five, struck with adoring wonder his precocious adolescence, reigned as long as she lived—from a halo of already celestial untouchability—on his eyes and heart; dead, after his and her eclipse in his years of temptations and groping, came to his rescue, silenced all sirens, established herself as the protagonist of his life and work, transfigured now by eternity into a sublimating Beatrix, Beatifyer, whose inner name, transparent through esoteric incarnations, is Hagia Sophia, Holy Sapience.

No one in his age was a more integrated and comprehensive scholar than he. His scholarship, however, except in one field, is of the epitomising not of the trail-blazing sort.

The epitome is exemplary, a testament—the testament—of the Middle Ages, those thousand years of culture in a thousand pages. In our very day when Herbert Butterfield (*The Origins of Modern Science*, 1950, pp. 15 *et seq.*) wants to design the cosmology and geography of the pre-Copernican and pre-Columbian epoch, his text is Dante; when Cortiss Lamont (*The Illusion of Immortality*, 2nd ed., 1950, pp. 251 *et seq.*) undertakes to outline the

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Christian representations of life everlasting with its damnations and salvations, his document is the Divine Comedy.

As conservative as his cosmology—the Platonic Aristotelian—Ptolemaic pocket-size universe, geocentric, custom-made *ad usum delphini*, for the use of man, rotating its numbered and concentric heavens around his unbudging home—is his ancestral geography—the earth admittedly a globe, but inhabited on our hemisphere only, with no denizens at the antipodes except for a South Sea island, his own visionary discovery, where the disembodied souls of pardonable sinners climb for years or centuries of torments through the terraces of Purgatory to the plateau which had been Adam's paradise, thence to soar to God's; as inherited as his penal code, spelled out in retaliatory retributions, are his ethics and economics, his chronology and history, all, root and branch, his systematic philosophy. Vices and virtues are tabulated in a symmetry combining Aristotle and Aquinas, classicism and catechism. Pride (which we call primacy), envy (which we call competition), avarice (which we call the profit motive) are the three spark-plugs of hell fire. Production is for use, not gain; cursed is the florin (which we call dollar); acquisitiveness is subversiveness. Truly, the career of man began with the subversion of Adam; this occurred, truly, not quite sixty-five centuries before the poet's birth, only yesterday. Roman history, from cover to cover, is as literally truthful as the Bible. Livy 'does not err,' *non erra*.

This fundamentalist monument is capped, it should go without saying, by strict confessional conformism. His piercing eagerness for precision and descriptive detail helps him to know things which the dogmatic church knows not so firmly: e.g., that the revolt of the angels was simultaneous with the creation of the world, and the riot and rout lasted altogether not quite twenty seconds; that Adam and Eve occupied the garden of Eden '*l'espace d'un matin*,' exactly seven hours, from 6 a.m. to 1 p.m. of one single day; or that the name of God in the language of Eden was I (pronounce Ee). But he knows and approves nothing that the Church disapproves. His domineering voice, his ruthless indictments of papal economics and politics, more than anything else, his final siding with the Ghibelline party, often penalised by zealot Guelphs as fellow travellers, at least, of heresy, made him eligible for Catholic suspicion and Protestant applause—to the point that the VELTRO of his prologue to *Inferno*, the symbolic hound who will free the earth from the she-wolf of avarice, could be read by zealot punsters as an anagram of LUTERO. The applause from more sensible grounds, has persisted; the suspicion has faded; a

growing Christian consensus lifting Dante's religion to near-Erasmian plentitudes. Infiltrations from the ever-menacing undercurrents of schism are noticeable here and there in his works; more pressingly perhaps in those deviationist years 'midway upon the journey of his life' when he found himself in the 'dark wood, where the right way was lost.' Of some of them he seems to have been repentantly aware; all of them anyway—as their parallel infiltrations were to be with Erasmus—were impeccably drained. The impeccability was recognised by the Church, hesitantly at first, then more and more warmly. She did not crown him as a doctor *angelicus* or *marianus*; nor has she sanctified the fugitive whom his community marked for burning as she did Joan of Arc, the burned witch; more and more proudly, nevertheless, she has laurelled him as her foremost *doctor poeticus*: an assignment whose sealing credential is the message of Benedict XV to the celebration of the sixth centennial of Dante's death, Ravenna, 1921.

Halfway between conservatism and innovation are Dante's linguistics and æsthetics. For his direct experience is the usual one, restricted to Latin and its derivatives in Italy and France, in all other regards his acceptance of uncritical lore, culminating in the Tower of Babel, being unqualified. But his guesses about the relations between classical Latin and the Romance vernaculars, his speculations on the literary languages as products of intellectual and consciously controlled synthesis rather than spontaneous emergences of one single dialect, his unprecedented analyses of metrics and meanings in the just-deceased Provençal poetry and in the just-aborning Italian, provided exciting starting points for the philologies to come. Even more relevantly, his captainship in the new school of *dolce stil nuovo*, the sweet new style, opposing the form of enthusiasm kindled by godly love to the crystallised formalities of post-Provençal poetry in Sicily and early Tuscany, has the modern ring which has become familiar to us in the insurrection and manifestoes, wave after wave, of the Romantic age from the Sturm and Drang to this day.

Politics, however, is the one field where tradition crops definitely in revolution. The foundations on which Dante lays his political science are unscientific and textual to the medieval heart's desire. Roman biblical history, whether myths or facts, are equally holy. The formal logic of scholasticism, whose perfection is stainless once its undemonstrable premises are taken for granted, is stretched to ultimate performances such as the assumption that the military fortune of Rome—which had left Augustine wondering—was clearly an ordeal by battle assigning victory

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to whom God had chosen (whence in generations yet unborn the identification of the rational with the real, of right with might) or the hair-raising theorem that the crucifixion of Christ would have lacked universal validity if Christ had not been born under the first Roman emperor and executed under the second, in the inaugural time of the *pax romana*, thereby enabled through his legal status in the world state to extend the gift of his atonement for the original sin of Adam to the universality of all the children of Adam. So fanatic a Romanism in Dante's brand of Christianity implied, and brought forth explicitly, a view of the civil power, embodied (he trusted) in the Holy Roman Empire and of the ecclesiastical, seated in the Holy Roman Church, as parallels, operating in the same direction yet mutually independent, both begotten externally, with no vicarious mediation, from the fatherhood of God, one specialising in earthly happiness, the other in celestial bliss, and happiness and bliss being sacrosanct alike. The parallelism was bound to result, had resulted already, in conflict and clash.

More dramatically than at the death of Emperor Henry, the death knell of an epoch had been sounded at Anagni, 1303, where henchmen of the King of France—prototype of the separatist national sovereignty, refusing recognition of any supranational authority, *nullam superiorem auctoritatem recognoscens*, as a jurist of later years was to describe it—violated the papal residence, seized the pope—Boniface, that of *Unam Sanctam*, the manifesto of total authority claiming with a logic more tenable than Dante's that eternal bliss is paramount, whence the subordination of all kings and cities to the vicar of Christ—and sent him to a prison out of which he was to step only to die of broken might and a broken heart.

Dante's reaction to that scene, a twofold emotion, might be condensed in the Latin saying *male captus, bene retentus*. The chief emphasis he no doubt would have laid on the first half of the phrase. Honestly, the capture of a pope, no matter which, the violence inflicted on the Church, was to him—a devout son of the Church and, to boot, an irreconcilable foe of the nation states whose disruptive impetus was spear-headed by France—an intolerable outrage. That, however, he would have been unable to endorse fully the second half, stating with the leer of *bene retentus* that the infamous procedure, infamy notwithstanding, served well the more infamous culprit, was because he could not possibly believe that so trifling a punishment as a brief incarceration and quick temporal death served well enough the malefactor, misnomered Benefacius, whom his unquenchable hatred was to single out as the most damned of all damned

through a wish-fulfilling vision from Hell to Heaven, where the expectation of the papal torments soon to begin, never to end, whets the saints already with a choicest taste of that inconsummable appetiser, the sight of Hell, which Aquinas himself, intolerably for us, promises to the everlasting enjoyment of celestial bliss.

Positions, theoretical and emotional, of this kind are sagging fences. It becomes hard to believe in the infallibility of the Church if its enthroned rulers are evildoers—as too many of them, not Boniface alone, are for Dante—unless one runs for harbour in the impish apologetics of the short story in the *Decameron* where the very perversity of the Roman Curia attests the Christian faith which not even the Pope could afford to wreck.

All subtlety and scholastic dialectics notwithstanding, the political science of Dante—a grave departure from the Thomist philosophy of which he otherwise was a disciple—while meant for the holy ecumenic emperor, could not but play into the hands of such French lawyers, before and after the ‘outrage of Anagni,’ before and during the ‘Babylonian captivity’ of the Church in Avignon, as wrapped in philosophic rationale the claim to unlimited power of their king. From the neo-Ghibelline’s dualism twinning equally state and church, eagle and cross, a neo-monism was bound to hatch, subjugating the Church, with no weapons or wealth of its own, to the iron-and-gold-clad absoluteness of the State.

Dante had been buried but three years when Marsilio da Padova’s *Defensor Pacis* came out, 1324. There the secular corollary, embodying itself already in our nationalist Leviathan of many heads—an inevitable development of the *bestia duo capita habens*, the two-headed beast, in which Boniface had visualised the dualist Ghibelline world—was impenitently confessed. The precursive revolutionary fire which Dante had tossed into the legacy of tradition could not be overlooked, nor condoned by the custodians of the unitary order. If not the Church from its throne, one of its princes, Cardinal Del Pogetto, had in retaliation Dante’s politico-theological treatise, *de Monarchia*, publicly burned, even though the smoke of that specific pyre, and the inclusion of that single work in the Index of Prohibited Books, did not durably obfuscate the general clarity of Dante’s soul in Christian-Catholic light.

Ethically, Dante’s acceptance of the Christian norm based on humility and renouncement is seemingly unreserved; but beneath it, alongside it, rumbles a new current of desire, with things rich and strange, and perilous

too. This is the neo-pagan, super-human but not supernatural ethos of pride, not humility, energy, not prayer, pugnacity, not surrender, glory, nor salvation. This is exile, made by Dante into an institution, the self-assertion of the modern rebel, a law unto himself, against the institutions of his community, and State. True, St. Francis (Par. XI) is drawn up 'to the reward which he had gained in making himself lowly' (*pusillo*), but hardly less exalted, on a contrasting standard of merits, had been Farinata (Inf. X), the unbending fighter and chieftain whom his visitor in Hell designated as '*quell'altro magnanimo*', that magnanimous one. At many crossroads in Inferno God's justice and Dante's part. True, Brunetto Latini had sinned in unnatural Eros, hence his assignment to Hell; but he had been the professor of Dante, his teacher of 'how man makes himself eternal' (in fame, not heaven); hence his glorification in poetry. Ulysses was an evil counsellor, the inventor of the Trojan horse; unextinguishable fire therefore, one should think, serves him well; but what counts for the poet is the unexplored water whereon in the Dante-made myth he sailed westward, an old man already, to his crowning feat and triumphal death, a violator of the pillars of Hercules, an intoxicating prophecy of Columbus.

Time and again the visitor looks like a connoisseur and genius interviewing ward after ward the inmates of a penitentiary where heroes and geniuses—we might say a Columbus or Bonaparte, an Oscar Wilde or Verlaine—are locked together with ordinary criminals. That visitor, Dante, has nothing to say against the validity of the charges on account of which they were locked there; God's justice he takes for granted; in those charges, however, he happens to be but mildly interested, content occasionally with the general indication of the type of guilt as engraved, so to speak, at the entrance of each ward; what he is avidly after is the opportunity for sublime conversation with the grandees of whom he hopes to be the peer. Genius after all is grace, of sorts; fame—for which, however lurid, even vilest culprits are pining in his Inferno as a token survival among the living—is a substitute, of sorts, for God's adoption; the underground of perdition is also a Hall of Fame. It is not without Dantean influence that the witticism, of remoter origins, on the advantages of Hell, was ascribed to Machiavelli nearing death, lastly to be perfected in the dictum of Barbey d'Aurevilly that Paradise is preferable for the climate, Hell for the company.

To himself, Dante, of course, predicted a place not in the pit of damnation but in the mountain of purgatory, anticipating rather proudly a protracted



sojourn in the circle where the sin of pride is purged. His kinship, nevertheless, with that parade of insurgents, progeny of ancient titans, ancestry of modern man, is unmistakably apparent. His oaths of allegiance to the collective authorities of Empire and Church are genuine; his rugged individualism nevertheless irrepressibly overtowers both; and there is no great work of art in any age—let alone the anonymous cathedrals, paintings, epics of the Middle Ages—half as full as the Comedy with the tumescent ego of its author. The reader cannot refrain from a smile as the author presents dutiful excuses for his writing down once, once only, Purg. XXX, that proper noun, Dante, ‘which of necessity is registered here’—irresistibly enthralling when issued from the lips, however scolding, of Beatrice—for the reader knows that each and all pages before and after are under the skyscraping sign of its pronoun *io*, I. The ritual and processional in the earthly Paradise, on the summit of Purgatory, are, whether their composer-conductor realises it or not, in competition with the liturgy of the Church. The arrival thereafter of so important a visitor in heaven makes quite a day for the saints, all of them glowingly busy in playing hosts to that unique guest; he is the hub of earth and firmament; and a no less sacramental meaning had hovered in a previous hour on the sacramental edict of Virgil, Purg. XXVII, when Dante, having scaled the whole mountain and purged vicariously all his sins, stands on the sill of the plateau prefiguring the Christian liberty from sin and error: ‘wherefore’, Virgil proclaims, ‘thee over thyself I crown and mitre’. For, no matter what Dante has said or is going to say about good and bad emperors—Barbarossa among the good, atop all his Henry, for whom a throne is ready in the empyrean though not in Florence—and about good, if any, and evil popes, there he is, higher than both, the crowned emperor and mitred pope of himself, the self-determining personality not altogether unrecognisable in the extremist upheavals of a Stirner or Nietzsche.

Likewise, though, true, no heresy infects his faith, no indictment could be sustained against his loyalty, yet that security, by no means a passive quiet, was not attained without much inner wrestling, much watchfulness on the rims of abysses. From dizziness on two such rims, most slippery, single- or absent-mindedness shielded him. One is Beatrice’s Holy Sapience’s lecture (*‘Cosi parlar conviensi’*, Par. IV) on how to read the Scripture. ‘It is needful to speak thus to your wit, since only through objects of sense does it apprehend that which it afterward makes worthy of the intellect. For this the Scripture condescends to your capacity, and

attributes feet and hands to God, and means otherwise; and Holy Church represents to you Gabriel and Michael with human aspect, and the other who made Tobias whole again.' This indeed is a big gift, green light, authorising the unorthodox and the unbaptised reader to feel at home in the whole poem by intending the Catholic dogma and the Christian story which are basic to it as a semantic myth that condescended to the capacity of a certain society or age and 'means' universally and agelessly 'otherwise'. But what if an orthodox reader, or the aroused anxiety of the writer himself, had asked the writer to explain why the allegorical interpretation, which he and the culture of his age applied so systematically to B. C. legends and pagan myths—meaning 'otherwise', justifiable therefore, since they were so beautiful, as veils of arduous things still unrevealed—should be forbidden for the Catholic creed? What, in other terms, if the orthodox reader had asked how could, in the wake of Beatrice's tenet, the Christian dogma be held to its literal ground, prevented from expanding and vaporising in a colossal metaphor? Dizziness would have ensued.

Another edge of vacillation, had the pilgrim glanced downward, is where (Par. XXIV) in his examination on the subject of faith by no lesser an examiner than St. Peter in person he argues that, even if the authority of the scripture were questionable, even if the miracles were untrue, the truth of the Christian faith would be proved by this greatest of all miracles: the spread, with no help of miracles, of the Christian faith all over the world. The argument may have sounded more plausible in Augustine, from whom Dante learned it, when even less than at Dante's time was known of worlds beyond the Roman world, Marco Polo had not travelled to China, Mahomet had not been born. What if a listener at Dante's time had asked him to validate the same argument for the no less amazing spread all over their worlds, miracles or no miracles, of Buddhism or Islam?

Dante's God has no feet or hands. His final vision of deity and Trinity (Par. XXXIII) is one metaphysical and metamathematical point of light, within whose spaceless depth is 'enclosed, bound up with love in one volume, that which is dispersed in leaves through the universe': a view incomparably more advanced and acceptable than Milton's God, a lord of hosts (not without heavenly infantry in 'cubic phalanx' and cannon of 'ten thousand thunders'), and a chairman of angels, not without articulate deliberations between eternal unbegotten Father and new-born eternal Son. Yet here too the straightness of Dante's view is under the

strain of contrasts. For his God, while not anthropomorphic, is anthropopathic; He, that metamathematical point of light, shares many a dense passion of man, most passionately anger, most definitely the political and personal anger of that man, Dante. The reek from Hell reaches, shall we say His nostrils? no less pleasingly than the fragrance from the prayers of the saints. He, It, that point of light, goes even so far as secretly to rejoice in the unfailing certitude of the vengeance to come—‘the vengeance which, hidden in thy secret, makes thine anger sweet’, Purg. XX—the sweeter the longer delayed it is, if, as humans know, vengeance is a dish which is best served cold.

And yet, again, there are instances when, if he were God, Dante would like to be a kinder God. One is the lot reserved to the unbaptised. No doubt, *ex ecclesia nulla salus*; there is no entrance to Purgatory and Paradise except for Christians (together with the precursors from the Old Testament whom Christ personally rescued in the interval between crucifixion and resurrection); and the justice of God is taken for granted; for ‘who is more criminal than he who brings passion to the Divine Judgment?’ (Inf. XX). Yet the mind and heart of Dante can find no repose except in stressing how inscrutable are the ways of God; for otherwise his heart aches at the thought and sight of the sages and poets of his adored Antiquity, including that sweet prince of them all, his Virgil, confined to their however, so to speak, air-conditioned Inferno, that Limbo castle of noble souls; his mind wonders at the justice which segregates from the community of God those whom no guilt but immaturity of times or inaccessible lands bereaved of the true voice of God; unless, he may venture no less humbly than boldly (Par. XXIX), the almighty mercy of the Almighty, which is no less inscrutable than his justice, keeps in store, more secret than those vengeance, an amendment to the law He had issued eternal, an auroral pardon when the last trumpet calls.

A like suspense may arrest the pilgrim when meditating on untimely deaths which may entail eternal doom for such as might have earned a better fate. Brunetto Latini, the beloved teacher of literature and glory, is down there, as a transgressor against natural love, scorched by hell fire to his imperishable skin’s discontent. Perhaps he would not be there if a longer life had left an ampler chance for reform and penitence, even though not more of it than the ‘one, little tear’, which snatched Buonconte (Purg. V) from the claws of the devil. Thus sounds to us an overtone from the exordium, so gentle, of Dante’s speech to that ‘dear, good, paternal’ soul: ‘If my entreaty were all fulfilled, you would not yet be placed in

banishment from human nature'; you would still be living. 'If my entreaty were all fulfilled'. 'If the King of the universe were a friend', on a kindred tune Francesca had sung (Inf. V). Not all prayers are granted. Her, that most benign and gracious of lost souls, most forgivable and faithful of adulteresses, we remember ever; never, though, so poignantly perhaps as when we meet in paradisial light (Par. IX) Cunizza, an incomparably more abundant sinner, yet irreversibly above the infernal hurricane gripping the other in its cruel whirl, whatever balm may breathe in it from the indissoluble company of the one she loved, sole partner of ended pleasure and endless pain. She too, Francesca, might, why not, be with Cunizza in that third heaven, of the loving spirits, named for its planet, Venus: if the King of the universe had been a friend, if, God-inspired somehow, the raging husband, the quick-as-lightning executioner, had been instead, say, as considerate as Othello: 'Have you pray'd to-night, Desdemon?' 'il modo', says Francesca, '*ancor m'offende*'; 'the mode', death undelayed, barred to repentance, 'still' and forever 'hurts me'. Thus an accident at death, the split, uncontrollable instant, may control the eternity of a soul: a justice inscrutable indeed, to which Dante bows, yet murmurs complaint (unheeding of the impending warning (Inf. XX) 'here pity lives when it is quite dead') in the passage that was called the canto of pity.

A miracle, if a miracle is a thing that happened but once, is the vigour, unequalled before and after, with which that one hand mastered all contrasts, yoked all dualisms, composed finally all urges in the harmony of one form, in the moral law of one world, in the intelligible order of one cosmos.

Opposite to the error which views the unity of the Comedy as the expression of a monolithic state of mind unshakably received by a premise, not a result, a bequest, not a conquest, is another superstition. This idolum, as Bacon would have called it, is a divisive one. It denies, aesthetically speaking, the unity of the Comedy; it holds the poem to be a combine of 'poetry and non-poetry', a double sequence of passages: theologico-political, where poetry sinks, and dramatico-lyrical, where poetry wings.

This view was introduced rather early in the eighteenth century by none lesser than Vico, whose pre-Romantic—and fully Romantic—tenet was that where reason is at its strongest, imagination is at its weakest, in

other terms, that poetic creativeness and intellectual maturity are mutually exclusive. The discrimination could not but be endorsed, in the nineteenth century, by the greatest of all literary interpreters, De Sanctis, whose emotions, however, were prevalently dramatic and whose mind, besides, thoroughly protestant and liberal, was uncompromisingly alien to any medievalism and scholastics: hence the grandeur, emulating Dante's, of his pages on the dramatic heroes and heroines of the Comedy, along with his unregretful distance from the cohesive build-up of the poem. In the footsteps of those two great, Vico and De Sanctis, walked later in the nineteenth century and during ours, in Italy and abroad, a number of comparatively minor ones.

One of the latter likened the poetry of the Comedy to the luxuriance of the live ivy growing on the 'dead' matter—the doctrinal non-poetry—of a brick wall: a self defeating simile, as that wall is obviously a decisive factor for the shape and strength of that growth. In permissible competition with the imagery of that critic, one might remember instead the unfeasible surgery proposed to Shylock, supposedly carving with no bloodshed one chunk of flesh from the one-blooded body; or, in another repertoire of familiar figures, the impossible severances of fuel from fire.

There are slow inflammables in the Comedy, heavier lumber than our present taste would choose to grapple with (look, however, at Ibsen; look at the edifications in Dostoevsky, at the disputations in Shaw). But they are inflammable. Sooner or later the flame catches up with them. Unfiguratively speaking, an accurate, unevasive reading will show that none of the great tragic encounters in Dante, or of the great lyrical acmes, is fully intelligible out of reference to the context of the three canticles in their hundred cantos. By the same token, seldom if ever do we come across another piece of indoctrination or rhymed information, such as the topography of Hell in *Inf. XI*, unstirred by the process which lifts what is theoretical and expositive in the poem as a treatise to the momentum of drama and song. This process, a crescendo either marked by dissonances which avow the effort, or limpidly ascending, I tried to describe elsewhere,<sup>1</sup> dwelling particularly on the supreme but not unique example of the tercets in *Purg. XVIII*, Virgil's lecture on love and free will, beginning from the conceptual ground of 'Direct toward me the keen eyes of

<sup>1</sup>'On Dante Criticism', in *Report of the Dante Society*, Cambridge, Mass., 1936. Another essay by the same writer, 'The Wrath of Dante', in *Speculum*, April 1938, deals with the interrelations between Dante's mind and heart, particularly in regard to the emergence of his passions and to the effects, in poetic creation and style, of the 'release of anger' when his destiny as a fugitive was sealed.

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the understanding', then rising from echelon to echelon to the final exultation of 'until the thing beloved makes it rejoice'.

Poetry, it was said, is a dream dreamed in the presence of reason. But reason has its say to say, not a passive spectator, in its presence at that dream. Logos is the Platonic term for reason; mythos for the poet's dream. They are inextricably, genetically, commingled in the human speech, which is all through a syntax of symbols; they join ultimately in poetry at its highest, where, as in the opening verses of the Fourth Gospel, logos and mythos are one, the Word made into words. Beauty is not the unalloyed emotional perfection—conceded to some briefest poem or other, denied to vaster structures—as yearned for by a Romantic trend whose most wilful exponent was Poe. Beauty is the ratio between the power of the form and the resistance of the subject matter. The resistance of the matter in Dante is as challenging as his power is conquering. The attempt at sundering in the Comedy poetry from 'non-poetry' has been a representative exertion in the late-Romantic chase after the blue birdie of 'pure poetry', more elusive than the wild goose of popular renown.

Whatever the impact of the titanic statuary in *Inferno*, the elegiac fascination of the shades of Purgatory, the radiance from the lives of saints in Paradise, they are episodes. The unifying cast is of three personages: Dante, Beatrice, Virgil. The unitary plot is the pilgrim's progress, first hand in hand with Virgil, then wing in wing with Beatrice, from a cosmic portal to a cosmic altar.

In turn the oneness of the structure is compensated by the pluralist inventiveness of the episodes, like niches, paintings, stained glasses, whose themes are not imperatively dictated by the all-encompassing intent and shape of the cathedral. No intellectual or academic planning explains their successions; which arise, as a rule without rules, from the free flow of imaginative associations. Similar is the balance between imitation and originality. Dante is—and proud to be, no shifty debtor like the modern 'self-made' writer—an apprentice and pupil; Virgil is his model; the *Aeneid* is the main source for the descent and ascents of his pilgrimage. That source, however, one twelfth of Virgil's tale, he expanded into the totality of his poetic space, moulding from that thin, visionary air a pattern whose novelty was not foreseeable in any antecedent worth mentioning nor could it be duplicated by any imitative industry without a tinge of involuntary parody.

Bound to the realistic and tangible (and to the spirit of rebellion, too) the Romantic and post-Romantic reader favoured the *Inferno* above the

other canticles. The neo-Thomist neo-Catholic finds, must find, that the Paradiso is better not only for the climate but also for the company. Sitting between the two slants a mediator might recommend the middle canticle: the purging soul's climb from the starlit shore of that 'Erewhon'<sup>2</sup> South Sea island, upward, upward to that *plein-air* Elysium of artists and lovers, still higher to the mystic wedding and the solar liturgy at the rivers of Eden.

He, none too resolute umpire, while not forgetting what confers pre-eminence on the Inferno, what on the Paradiso, would stress the more continuous accord in the Purgatorio between discourse and song, the mellowed, less exacting tension of contrasting drives, that blend of temperate exhilaration and tender melancholy, free already of terror, not strung as yet to ineffable ecstasies.

He might even suggest that may be there is no such a place as Hell or Heaven anywhere, but certainly there is, actually, a Purgatory, on all islands and lands of this earth of ours. For everybody's life (Hofmannsthal called him Jedermann) is, or ought to be, a stair from fate and guilt, through grief and hope, to liberty, immortal or mortal, at a high plateau of peace.

So plain an allegorical transvaluation is valid, needless to say, for everything in the Comedy. Unobstructed by the time-conditioned symbols of his society and culture, the dream of Dante speaks to every needed human awakening.

He remained for no less than four centuries Italian, with fragmentary appearances of his fame abroad. World citizenship Dante won in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: a universality now too firmly established for a few scattered, even whimsical, dissents to be of any import.

There are two manners of poetry. One is an uplifted report of human happenings, our evolution in mind and history mirrored in myths. This, from Homer down to our great novels and dramas of individual or collective life, no matter whether couched externally in prose, is the poetry we may call Homeric. The other, rising from struggle and desire, is, more than a proposal, a call to evolution and history for new beginnings; a faith that moves, or tries to move, the mountains; the 'violence' (Matt. II and Par. XX) that takes the kingdom of heaven by force. This is the poetry we might call prophetic, or Orphic.

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<sup>2</sup> *Erewhon*: title of Butler's novel, anagram of 'nowhere'.

### *Dante and his Time*

Dante is of the latter. This is why he chose as his guide not a philosopher, an Aristotle or Aquinas, as classical or Christian reason would have suggested, but the sovereign poet, Virgil, to whose primacy in art, uncontested at that time, and perfection in wisdom medieval folklore had added the power of a miracle-maker. For a miracle-maker the poet is, or ought to be, in Dante's view; and the equal of Caesar ('*o Cesare o poeta*', Par.I); Caesar being the active leader of men, the poet being the spiritual maker or remaker of men.

A classical image, known to Dante, gave to Parnassus, the mountain of the arts, two summits, one of which he assigned (Par. I) to the Muses of human poetry, the other to the divine afflatus of his theologised Apollo. Varying slightly the allegory, one might say that one summit stands for the narrative or Homeric, the other for the prophetic or Orphic.

Nothing has risen so far to the full greatness of the first-born among the great narrations, the Iliad. From a certain point of view these two, the Iliad and the Comedy, appear as the two fullest accomplishments of man's genius in words.

It may be mere chance that the same passion—anger, destructive in Achilles under the compassion of Homer, demiurgic in Dante under what he felt to be the will of God—is the pulse of both books.