

ON THE DIVINE COMEDY¹

M. MASSERON finds a very effective way of concluding his book on Dante by recalling the centenary celebrations that took place at Ravenna in 1921. It was only in the course of the preceding century that the body of the poet had been recovered from an ignominious hiding-place and restored to its rightful tomb. The homage which he now received was like the setting of a seal on his fame and status, like the raising of a definitive monument. Or it was like an act of canonisation, performed in the name of the whole civilised community of Europe. The 'Empire' and the Church acted for the occasion in such perfect harmony as to make a sort of pageant representing what had been the highest earthly vision of the poet. Not that he could be deceived by any pageant. It was accordingly left to the Church to preside and to pronounce the solemn benediction. Pope Benedict XV despatched a cardinal legate and composed an Encyclical Letter. And M. Masseron is surely right in suggesting that this document deserves to be treated as still important: deserves at least to be read. Papal Encyclicals are not lightly composed, for the momentary purpose of mere long-distance speech making. To return on the metaphor used above, one may say that the 'In Praeclara Summorum' has something of the character of a brief of canonisation. (Among the papal documents for that year it is to be found placed precisely between two other Encyclicals composed in honour of St. Francis and St. Dominic.)

¹ *Pour Comprendre La Divine Comédie*. Alexandre Masseron. (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer; 32 fr.; Edition de Luxe, 55 fr.)

The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri. With translation and comment by John D. Sinclair. Two volumes: I, Inferno; II, Purgatorio. (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head; 10s. 6d. each.)

The Pope addresses himself to 'his dear children, to those within the Catholic world who are experts or students in Literature or the other fine arts.' All due honour is paid to Dante's artistic genius, but it is with Dante as a Catholic poet—or rather as *the* Catholic poet—that the Pope is naturally chiefly concerned. 'One can admire the incredible grandeur and power of his genius, but at the same time it is obvious what a source of strength he found in the inspiration of his divine faith, so that in his greatest work (in the so properly termed *Divine Comedy*) all the splendour that belongs to art is as though further charged with the radiance of divinely revealed truth.' The Comedy is represented as a sort of Summa of Catholic doctrine or as containing the essence of Catholic theology, philosophy and politics. But in particular the Encyclical fixes on two articles in Dante's teaching which it considers to have special importance for us to-day. The first is comprised in his attitude to the Scriptures and to Tradition. To consider here only what may be intended by Dante's attitude to the Scriptures:—A text is cited from the *De Monarchia*, as follows: 'Whereas many writers have been engaged in transcribing the Word of God, there has been only one authority throughout, namely God himself, who in expounding His gracious purpose has made use of a number of scribes.' This statement may seem derogatory to the sacred writers, in reducing their rôle to that of mere secretaries. But in a total view of the work of the Scriptures it is a fact that their rôle *is* reduced to such a humble level. They are no longer co-authors with God, but tools of which He makes use in order to produce the material necessary for His total artistic achievement. Indeed, not to see that the Scriptures form a single, organic work of divine art is to lack a Catholic sense of their value and their meaning. Dante possessed this sense in its perfection; and it would appear that this is precisely what the Encyclical has in mind.

It belongs to this right apprehension of the Scriptures

to find in them a certain absolute, self-contained meaning, as one does in any genuine work of art. For God has composed them as an organic unity—they are not a library of independent works. And He has composed them most freely, creatively. He does not here play the part of a commentator, the Scriptures do not enable us to find a revelational significance in the history they tell about, putting us on the track of Revelation, so to speak. They *are* Revelational. The sacred and significant history is the history they present to us, and as they present it. Accordingly it is not the proper, the adequate use of the Scriptures to treat them as providing historical indications that need to be followed up, completed, gone behind; but to take them as they are. The Scriptures are to be contemplated—to be ‘enjoyed.’ It is here that we have been led astray through our addiction to the practice of historical criticism. We set out to discover by comparative historical means the full truth concerning, let us say, the figure of Abraham; as though the Scriptures as such could be supplemented, reconstructed. We do not commit the solecism of re-writing Shakespeare by means of Holinshed. Ultimately of course the absolute quality of the work of the Scriptures infinitely transcends that which belongs to any work of art as such. The creativeness of Shakespeare in writing his plays is only a pale reflection of the creativeness with which the Holy Spirit has written the Scriptures: for this corresponds to, is the counterpart of the strict physical creativeness of God, whereby all events as well as all substance are of His making. What He expresses in the Scriptures—the history of the preparation for and the coming of Christ—He has also made. The two parallel activities of the Word of God.

Dante’s appreciation of this self-contained, absolute value and meaning of the Scriptures is apparent in his whole manner of handling and applying them. It provides the true understanding of what would otherwise appear as an obsolete allegoric method of interpretation. A good

instance of his art is to be found in that sequence of cantos in the *Purgatorio* which describe the Earthly Paradise and the Pageant of Revelation. Here if anywhere his imagery might seem like a jungle of allegorism; but in fact it is a superb piece of realistic biblical exegesis that he has contrived: he has succeeded in focussing a host of scriptural lights, in bringing together the first chapters of Genesis and the last chapters of the Apocalypse with the help of the prophets and the sapiential writers. The method is not one of allegorism, but of an appreciation of the internal, organic structure of the Bible, of the meaning (the quasi-symbolic meaning) which the parts acquire in relation to the whole, over and above their local isolated meaning. One does not read the Porter's scene or the Witches' scene in *Macbeth* without reference to the theme and climax of the whole play. So with the Scriptures, understanding that they are written throughout by the Holy Spirit, it becomes inevitable to see all that there precedes the coming of Christ as being in some way—whether ironically, pathetically, hopefully, or what—pre-figurative of Him; and all that follows Him, as being post-figurative. It was in this way that the inspired writers of the New Testament interpreted the Old. It will not do to dismiss them as victims of some far-fetched method of rabbinic allegorism. Until we come to appreciate this sense of the Scriptures, they will remain for us something of a pedantic, moralistic burden; moreover, we shall lack one of the essential keys for understanding the Liturgy of the Church; we shall be like barbarians ignorant of the most sacred and intimate language in use in the City of God.

The other point which the Encyclical underlines is Dante's attitude to the authority of the Church and his conception of the relationship of Church to State. His rough handling of certain former pontiffs is frankly and charmingly dealt with. And yet he inveighed against certain popes of his time with the utmost bitterness and contempt. . . . But one must remember the cruel misfortunes he

suffered and be ready to forgive him if in the bitterness of his soul he somewhat lost his sense of proportion. For one thing, too, we can be sure that there was no lack of false and malicious rumour and misrepresentation to help inflame his anger. Moreover, it has to be admitted that at that time many unworthy things were to be met with among ecclesiastics which could only cause anguish and disgust in one so completely devoted to the Church as Dante. . . . However he may have attacked the hierarchy of the Church—and this whether justly or unjustly—certainly it was never in his mind to take away from the honour due to the Church as such or from the supreme authority belonging to the Holy See.'

But to turn to the more complex issue, to Dante's conception of the nature of the relationship between Church and State. The Encyclical summarizes its approval as follows: 'Accordingly, although he held that the authority of the Emperor derived immediately from God, yet he also held that this truth "must not be interpreted in such a downright or literalist way as to exclude the further truth that the Roman Prince is nevertheless in his complete capacity subordinate to the Roman Pontiff (Inasmuch as the earthly happiness he stands for is subsidiary to eternal happiness.)" An excellent argument, full of wisdom'—comments the Encyclical—'which if only it were now acted upon, in a proper religious spirit, would entail the happiest consequences for the well-being of society.'

This statement of the relationship between Church and State rests on a profound conception of the intrinsic natures of the two societies. The form which Dante assigned to the State, that of a universal Roman Empire welding the nations into a close organic unity comparable to that of the Church, is not of fundamental interest here. It is true that for all its political impracticability it embodies ideals of grand significance, is full of a symbolic truth that is enduringly valid. But what supremely matters is Dante's conception of the nature of the State as such. The theory

he offers is not in itself original; the originality comes from the vision and the inspiration of the poet. Dwelling on the fact of the divine institution of the State, and of its integration into the supernatural order, Dante sees the State as operating from within the realm of grace *upon* the world of nature. Whereas it is more commonly imagined as working from below, from outside of that realm; as though it came to meet the movement of grace, working up stream. He sees it, then, as working in line with the Church. For him the Emperor is a Messianic figure, a Saviour of his people, and the society he rules is thereby in process of coming down from heaven. The collaboration of Church and State is not simply parallel but interactive, organically united and marvellously complex. The State is at the same time subordinate to the Church and independent of her. For the Church being the specific instrument and channel of grace, the State as working in the cause of grace—as a secular instrument of grace—is dependent on the higher co-operation of the Church at every point of its activity, throughout the whole course of its proper task of fitting men for the life of earthly citizenship. It is therefore in the condition of being immediately, continuously, operatively, or technically subordinate to the Church. And yet it is not formally an instrument of the Church, by no means a department of the Church. Rather both Church and State are together instruments of the Kingdom of God, forces together active within the total organism of the Mystical Body of Christ—since it is the Church in her institutional, official, 'administrative' character that is alone envisaged here. The two societies co-operate as being united together in this total life of grace; but it definitely is co-operation and not identity of action. Their functions are different in kind, the one being specifically, immediately supernatural, the other secular; and they are different in their scope, for whereas the Church immediately co-operates in the whole activity of the State, the reverse is of course not true. In its own

immediate sphere of activity the State is dependent on the Church in the operative sense above indicated, but it does not come under her direct authority. There is nothing of Ultramontanism in Dante's position. In fact he was a fierce opponent of the Ultramontanism of his day. He considered that the chief cause of the degenerate condition of Christendom as he knew it was the failure of the Church and the State to work together in loyal partnership, but it was the totalitarian tendency of the Church rather than of the State that he regarded as the major peril. He saw it as making for a sort of Christian nihilism. His own position is perfectly poised between the extremes of Ultramontanist priestcraft and Pelagian statecraft. This just balance is by no means easily attained, even in thought, in imaginative realisation. Dante here can be our master; with an Encyclical authorising him in that capacity.

It is perhaps in the sequence of cantos in the *Purgatorio* that has been mentioned above that his mind on this subject is most splendidly represented: in the vision that describes the harnessing of the chariot of the Church to the Tree of Paradise; which tells of the return of the sacred history upon itself, the undoing of original sin, the fulfilling of the promise of the first chapters of Genesis according to the triumphant terms of the last chapters of the Apocalypse.

Fortunately, it is unnecessary at this hour to defend Pope Benedict against the charge of philistinism for having recommended Dante as a master of theology. It is now again generally perceived that a poet may have doctrine to teach, provided it forms a living part of his poetry. It would be barbarous and futile to look for the authentic theology of Dante otherwise than by entering into his poetry; just as it has been maintained above that it is barbarous and futile to seek the authentic meaning of the Scriptures otherwise than by concentrating on their artistic sense. 'Do you, then, my dear children,' the Pope concludes, 'continue to prize and to love this Poet, who sets forth Christian Wis-

dom and sings her praises with a beauty that is unrivalled. To love him is to have your minds kept open to the light of truth, confirmed in their loyal and ardent attachment to our holy Faith.'

Yet, although the Encyclical benignly assumes that between us and Dante, '*Eadem omnino spirat in Aligherio atque in nobis pietas, eosdem habet sensus religio, iisdem tanquam velaminibus utitur,*' and judges that despite the length of time that separates him from us, nevertheless, '*hujus paene aetatis dixeris esse, certe longe recentiore quam quemquam ex his, qui nunc sunt cantoribus vetustatis ejus quam Christus e cruce victor de medio pepulit*'—it is probably the fact that most of us find ourselves to be out of touch with the aristocratic quality of his Catholicism, and obstructed in our reading of him by ignorance of his intellectual, cultural background. We therefore need the help of commentators. But again it is baffling to find such a multitude of commentators presenting such a conflicting variety of views. It is precisely the practical intention of the present article to recommend the two works above noted as providing a solution of this difficulty. Between them they make up a first-rate course of introduction to the Divine Comedy—which still remains to be completed, however, by the appearance of the third volume of Mr. Sinclair's work.

M. Masseron has produced a very comprehensive work of exposition, but it is ordered with such skill and insight that it rises above the category of the mere text-book. The first section is a guide to the physical features of the poem: it describes the course of the journey, the chronological, geographical, astronomical details, etc. Some very practical plans are supplied in an appendix tabulating the more schematic portion of this information—all of which is undoubtedly essential for a proper understanding of the action and of its symbolic meaning. The author then sets out again in pursuit of what Dante calls the 'allegoric' or 'mystical' sense of the poem, or what we should simply

call its symbolic meaning—for in the special sense that 'allegory' now has for us the Divine Comedy is not characteristically an allegoric poem. It is not such, for example, in the sense in which *Pilgrim's Progress* is allegoric, where the outward meaning has no real significance except as symbol. Accordingly M. Masseron investigates some of the important clues to the figurative sense which in Dante is woven into the literal sense. And he inspires complete confidence in his handling of those famous questions, such as the meaning and the implications of the figure of Beatrice, the symbolism of Vergil, of St. Lucy, of the three beasts, and so on. Moving among a welter of theories he maintains a clear equable judgment that savours all the time of Catholic centrality. In another section he describes the contemporary background of Dante's life and thought. No poem could be more fully concerned with contemporary social facts than the Divine Comedy; and no poet more vitally experienced and versed in their meaning than was Dante. M. Masseron renders a most valuable service by working up the relevant data into a coherent historical picture. To pick up such information piecemeal, as one does in the ordinary commentary, does not help towards a proper understanding of Dante's mind and intention. It is here made quite clear how organic was Dante's destructive criticism, how completely removed from the petty, the spiteful, or the merely anecdotal. Florence was a veritable microcosm of the general disorder of Christian society of that age, and there Dante was thoroughly immersed in a flood of social evils, of cupidity, injustice, usury, factional hatred, ruthless ambition which, moreover, provide a sufficiently faithful representation of the disordered Europe known to us at present. Next, since this poem is a Confession as well as a social diatribe, the data concerning Dante's personal life are gathered together. And finally, in what is perhaps the least successful part of the book, a general appraisal is attempted of Dante's characteristics as a poet and as a theologian. The

only important omission suggesting itself is that no account is given of literary influences, not a word about Provence.

Mr. Sinclair deals only with the *Inferno* and the *Purgatorio*, but presumably a third volume on the *Paradiso* will appear in due course. This work provides the Italian text of the poem, with a parallel prose translation. Each *Canto* is followed by brief annotations explaining isolated points of verbal meanings, historical allusions, etc., and then by some two or three pages of constructive commentary. The translation plays for safety, and is successful. At the very least it can probably be said to be the most useful translation now available, for the purpose of any one wishing chiefly to be helped to read the original. The Italian text is that of the *Società Dantesca Italiana*. The printing is excellent; the form and binding attractive and appropriate.

The commentary is a work of very high quality, and probably the only thing of its kind existing in English. What it provides is genuine literary criticism; it attempts to gather light from and throw it back upon the poem as it is in itself. Although from another point of view the statement can be reversed, it can be said that Mr. Sinclair's appreciation of the Catholic meaning of the poem is a fundamental factor of his successful critical achievement. It has helped to save him from the common enough practice of dwelling on a distinction between the poetic qualities of the work and what are regarded as its mediaeval, dogmatic irrelevancies, and thus being distracted from realising the complete artistic integrity of Dante's achievement. Thus he is able to write in his preface: 'In the comments on the cantos I have gone on the view, confirmed all through with closer knowledge of the poem, that Dante is constantly and closely concerned with the moral and spiritual system and consistency of the whole, his imagination working habitually *within* that system; that one of his most distinguishing qualities—in his imagery, his epithets, his choice of *dramatis personae*, his mythological and his

torical illustrations, his astronomical way of telling the time of day or night, his frequent harping on words, phrases and ideas, his curious verbal devices, his varying moods as a pilgrim—is the quality of *relevancy*, relevancy, that is, to the moral and spiritual matter in hand, and that these features as they come are not merely decorative, they are integral and are to be so interpreted. Their meaning *is* their relevancy.' Incidentally one may remark that if this pronouncement be transferred and applied to the Scriptures instead of to Dante it is a fine statement of the point of view which was described above as being the only appropriate, fully Catholic biblical approach. The Scriptures also must be envisaged as a self-contained artistic whole. And their relevance, too, *is* their meaning. Mr. Sinclair continues further on with a quotation from M. Barbi: "'But Dante is not the man to accept submissively the thoughts and convictions of other men . . . Everything may help to an understanding of his writings, but the key of real comprehension is to be sought, not so much in St. Augustine or the Abbot Joachim or Saint Thomas . . . as in the inner life and the work of the poet himself.'" In some passages any interpretation is fairly open to debate, but it is by that standard of relevancy that it must be judged, and a poet is to be known from within or not at all.' The simplest and truest way of praising Mr. Sinclair's work is to say that it fulfils the promise contained in this splendid manifesto.

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