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## The Use of Dante as an Illustrator of Scripture.

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### II.

THIS article, like its predecessor (THE EXPOSITORY TIMES, p. 393 of this volume), will be confined to the *Purgatorio* of Dante. And its scope will be further limited to the descriptions of the seven *cornici*, or terraces, on the Mount of Purgatory itself (cantos ix.—xxvii.), thus excluding the details of the Ante-Purgatory (cantos ii.—viii.), which, though extremely interesting in themselves, do not seem to provide much material that can be used, simply and intelligibly, for the practical and homiletic purposes which these articles are primarily meant to serve.

Those seven terraces are occupied by the corrective punishment (for it must be remembered throughout that in Dante's view all the punishment in Purgatory is essentially corrective, and therefore it is that we can safely draw from it illustrations of earthly punishment) of seven separate sins—those which were catalogued in the mediæval Church as the Seven *Vitia Capitalia*, or Deadly Sins. It is a list which, with some slight variations, one of which will be noticed presently, has been used long and widely, and it may still be regarded as practically valuable as well as historically interesting. There is, indeed, but one serious fault that can be found with it from the point of view of modern ethics—and surely no less from the point of view of the proportion of scriptural teaching—namely, the omission of any mention of the class of sins which includes hypocrisy and insincerity and unverity. As Dr. W. Bright puts it, when preaching on 'Sincerity towards God,' from the text Ps 51<sup>6</sup>, and referring also to Ps 15<sup>2</sup> 52<sup>5(4)</sup> 55<sup>11</sup> 101<sup>7</sup>, Zec 8<sup>16</sup>, Eph 4<sup>15. 25</sup>, Rev 21<sup>8</sup>, etc.: 'Is it not strange and sad that, in the face of such passages as these, good men who were to wield vast ethical influence should have drawn up a list of seven mortal sins, and yet have

left out falsehood?' (*Morality in Doctrine*, p. 224). He adds in a note: 'Cardinal Newman, far otherwise, makes "unverity" one of the three "offences against the majesty of God"; the others being impurity and cruelty' (*Grammar of Assent*, p. 412). We are apt to think of the virtue of strict truthfulness as being more highly valued among northern and Teutonic, than among southern and Latin, peoples; but as to Dante himself, there is no reason to suppose that he personally, any more than Cardinal Newman, would have thought falsehood too slight a sin to be regarded as 'capital' or 'mortal.' More easily it might be argued on the other hand, by those who remember how he wrote in the *Inferno* about hypocrites (canto xxiii.), falsifiers (cantos xxix.—xxx.), and traitors (cantos xxxii.—xxxiv.), that he regarded it as too degrading and too deadly a sin to admit of purgatorial cleansing. But it is enough for us to say that he simply accepted on Church authority, and used as part of the framework for this part of his poem, the catalogue of sins which would be most familiar in catechisms and penitentials and sermons. Just so in our own country, later on in the same century, Chaucer adopted the same catalogue in the treatise on penitence known as 'The Person's Tale.'

Let us then look through the seven sins which form the items in that catalogue. It may be useful in each case, first, to collect a few of the most salient and instructive of the texts which are likely to suggest the subject of the particular sin to the preacher or teacher, and then to show how, in trying to enforce the need and the nature of due penitence for that sin in this life, he may be helped by illustrations drawn from Dante's projection of such penitence into another sphere.

## FIRST TERRACE: THE PROUD.

## CANTOS X. 27-XII.

Some texts in point, besides those mentioned immediately below, would be Pr 3<sup>24</sup>, quoted in Ja 4<sup>6</sup> and 1 P 5<sup>5</sup>, Dt 8<sup>2-16</sup>, Ps 131<sup>1</sup> 138<sup>6</sup>, Pr 11<sup>2</sup> 15<sup>33</sup> 16<sup>6-19</sup>.

1. Now, first, it should be observed how completely consistent with the whole Christian scheme of ethics, and especially with the sayings of our Lord Himself, is the fact that pride stands foremost in Dante's list of sins, and is punished on that terrace which is the lowest on the Mountain of Purgatory, and therefore the farthest from Paradise and from the Divine Presence. Of the seven deadly sins, typified in the poem by the seven P's (*i.e. peccata*) marked on Dante's forehead (*Purg.* ix. 112, etc.), this one must be washed away before the others can be dealt with. As, then, in Holy Scripture, the first beatitude is that pronounced upon 'the poor in spirit' (Mt 5<sup>3</sup>), as the humblest are 'the greatest' (Mt 18<sup>4</sup>, cf. 20<sup>27 f.</sup>), and therefore the proudest must be the least, in the kingdom of heaven, as the 'meek and lowly' heart is the very essence of the imitation of Christ (Mt 11<sup>29</sup>), so here Dante places the subjugation of pride first among the necessary processes of repentance and purgation. He follows in this case the usual classification and order of sins, although he does not seem to have felt towards pride the personal contempt and disgust with which he regarded the sins of avarice and gluttony, and although (or should we rather say because?) he looked upon it as his own besetting sin, as he indicates distinctly in *Purg.* xiii. 136 ff.

2. But there is something more to be observed. Though, as has been said, it was usual in Dante's time to count the deadly sins as seven, and to reckon pride as the first of them, this had not always been the case. Some earlier writers, beginning with Cassian, extended the list to eight, placing vainglory (*inanis gloria*), which of course is one specific form of pride, among the seven, but also placing pride itself (*superbia*) outside of that number, either before the commencement or after the conclusion of the list, as being a kind of summary of all its items, 'an inclusive vice,'<sup>1</sup> and,

<sup>1</sup> Moore's *Studies in Dante*, ii. 185, where the discussion of the 'Deadly Sins' is very full and complete. A short reference to the subject will be found in THE EXPOSITORY TIMES, vol. xv. p. 302.

as it called in agreement with Eccus. x. 15 (Vulgate), 'the beginning of all sin,' or, in Chaucer's language, 'the general rote of all harmes.' Now, it is remarkable that Dante, though not by the same means, accords to pride a quite exceptional position among sins, as being not merely *primum inter paria*, but as alienating men in a very special and fundamental manner from goodness and from God. For before he can enter Purgatory even as a spectator, he has to submit to a certain preliminary process of cleansing and enlightenment, which is thus described in the charge of Cato to Virgil, who is to be Dante's guide and guardian—

'Go, then, and see thou gird this man about  
With a smooth rush, and that thou wash his face,  
So that thou cleanse away all stain therefrom.'

*Purg.* i. 94-96.

And it is certain that in the allegorical interpretation which all such details were intended by Dante to bear, the reed with which he was to be girded represents *humility*. As Mr. Tozer well expresses it, in his *Commentary* on these lines, 'just as in Scripture "a bruised reed" is used to signify repentant humility (Is 42<sup>3</sup>), so here the rush, which bends before the beating of the waves [see lines 102-105], suitably represents the attitude of the soul entering Purgatory, where it submits itself to correction' (p. 196). The incident will thus be a particularly apt illustration of the scriptural counsel, 'all of you gird yourselves with humility' (1 P 5<sup>5</sup> R.V.), where the verb used (*ἐγκομβώσασθε*) in its literal meaning implies such a knotting as would have fastened Dante's pliant rush.

3. Returning to the description of the first terrace, a striking expression of Dante's may be quoted to show how utterly, in his view, pride spoils and renders worthless all actions that are prompted by it. In the course of a noble invective, he thus exclaims—

O ye proud Christians! wretched, weary ones!  
Who in the vision of the mind infirm [or, diseased]  
Confidence have in your backsliding steps.

*Purg.* xi. 121-123.

It is the expression 'backsliding,' or rather 'retrograding steps,' that is to be particularly noticed. It implies that Christians who are letting themselves be influenced by a thing so contrary to their profession as pride 'are so blinded to their condition, that they are confident of reaching their goal, and do not perceive that their steps are retrograding and leading them to perdition' (Scartazzini, in

Vernon's *Readings, in loc.*) With this thought we may compare the paraphrase of the Lord's Prayer in the next canto—

Give unto us this day our daily manna,  
Withouten which in this rough wilderness  
Backward goes he who toils most to advance.

*Purg.* xi. 13-15.

And again we may note the reference to that special form of pride which consists in the love of praise and reputation on earth—

O human creatures, born to soar aloft,  
Why fall ye thus before a little wind [*i.e.* the breath of fame].

*Purg.* xii. 95-96.

4. The fact that the very beautiful paraphrase of the Lord's Prayer, which has just been referred to (*Purg.* xi. 1-24), is placed in the mouth of the penitents for pride, is noticeable. It may suggest to us (1) that the most comprehensive of all prayers is needed against the most comprehensive of all sins, and (2) still more, that the proud above all others have need to 'become as little children,' and with them to use the simplest of all prayers.

5. The nature of the special penalty that must be borne by the proud has to be gathered from several passages (*Purg.* x. 115-120, 130-139, xi. 25-30, 52-55, 75), but it is clearly summed up, and its significance is well expressed by Mr. Vernon: 'The proud . . . have to carry upon their shoulders heavy stones, which bend them down to the earth, and oblige them to move slowly. By this is meant, that in his penitence the proud man must carry his head bent as low towards the earth as he aforesaid carried it high and arrogant' (*Readings, in loc.*). And thus, as Dean Plumptre says, 'the discipline is appropriate to the sin. Those who had lifted themselves up through pride are constrained to an enforced humility of attitude, and through that pass to lowliness of mind.' Now this enforcement of a humble attitude of body is represented as a very painful process. Its justice is admitted by those who have to submit to it, but still it is a penalty hard to bear—hard for all those upon whom in due degree it is laid—

They were more or less bent down  
According as they more or less were laden;  
And he who had most patience in his looks  
Weeping did seem to say, 'I can no more.'

*Purg.* x. 136-139.

We have there a striking allegory of the certain truth as to moral discipline on earth, that the

proud man has no light and easy task when he sets himself to mortify and kill in himself the vices of haughtiness and self-conceit, and to bring himself into a habitually humble attitude of soul. Resolutions and intentions to be humble are worth nothing, unless and until they are worked out in practice, and that practice involves such painful humiliations as apologies for past insolence, reparations of past neglects, condescensions to men of low estate who had before been scorned, admissions of failures and mistakes in the very matters in which most self-confidence had been shown, and in which the advice of others had been despised.

## SECOND TERRACE: THE ENVIOUS.

### CANTOS XIII.-XV. 81.

Some texts in point are 1 S 18<sup>9</sup>, Pr 14<sup>30</sup> 28<sup>22</sup>, Mt 20<sup>15</sup>, Mk 7<sup>22</sup>, Ac 7<sup>9</sup>, 1 Co 13<sup>4</sup>, besides the mention of envy among other vices in Ro 1<sup>29</sup> 13<sup>13</sup>, 2 Co 12<sup>20</sup>, Gal 5<sup>20</sup>, 1 P 2<sup>1</sup>, etc.

In dealing with this hateful sin of envy references of three kinds may be made to Dante's treatment of it in the *Purgatorio*.

1. In several of the texts above named, and also elsewhere in Scripture, envy is spoken of under the name of 'an evil eye,' a form of expression which is kept up in the Latin *invidia*, from which our own word 'envy' is derived. And in one of those texts (1 S 18<sup>9</sup>) the 'evil' nature of the look is implied without being expressed, it being simply said that 'Saul eyed (*ὄφθαλμος*, LXX *ὄφθαλμολόμος*) David.' We need not enter into the curious superstitions which have attached themselves, and in Italy and elsewhere still remain attached, to this notion of the evil eye; it is enough to notice the moral truth which lies at the root of the expression, namely, the danger of looking too intently at the successes and advantages of others (especially in contrast with failures and disadvantages of our own), because such intent looks are so very likely to degenerate into envious looks. Therefore the eyes must be directed elsewhere—directed upward, as religion tells us, to the Giver of all good things in acknowledgment of His wisdom and love, even when our own share of such things seems small, and on earth directed, as such moralists as Plutarch<sup>1</sup> counsel us,

<sup>1</sup> 'When you admire anyone who is carried by in his litter as a greater man than yourself, lower your eyes and look at those who are carrying the litter' (*De Tranq. Animi*).

towards the contemplation of those who are worse off, rather than of those who are better off, than ourselves. But to do this is no easy task; it needs sharp efforts of self-control; and therefore Dante represents the corrective punishment of the envious as consisting of the painful closure of the eyes which had been the means through which occasion for their sin had been given—

So to the shades, of whom just now I spake,  
Heaven's light will not be bounteous of itself;  
For all their lids [*i.e.* eyelids] an iron wire transpierces,  
And sews them up, as to a sparrowhawk wild  
Is done, because it will not quiet stay.

*Purg.* xiii. 68-72.

From which Buti, one of the old Italian commentators quoted by Vernon, draws the lesson that he who would cure himself of envy 'must have his eyes sewn with wire, that is, with strength of mind and resolution he must close his eyes against all that would lead him to envy.'

2. We are told by St. Paul (1 Co 13<sup>4</sup>) that envy is a frame and habit of mind which is directly contrary to the Christian spirit of love; for 'charity envieth not.' In several ways Dante emphasizes the truth that the growth of love is the 'expulsive power' which alone can clear the heart from envy. Thus (a) soon after entering the terrace he hears the loud proclamation of the Saviour's teaching which sets forth the highest, because the most difficult, aspect of love, 'Love those from whom ye have received evil' (*Purg.* xiii. 36). (b) And when the angel has dismissed Dante and Virgil at last from that terrace, they hear chanted behind them the two congratulatory sayings, 'Blessed are the merciful' (Mt 5<sup>7</sup>), and 'Rejoice thou that conquerest,' a conjunction of benedictions which surely implies that it is only when the conquest of envy is achieved that the Beatitude pronounced upon the merciful can be inherited. For, as Dante's favourite authority, St. Thomas Aquinas, had pointed out, envy is the very opposite to mercy, because 'the jealous man is made happy, while the pitiful man is saddened, by the misfortunes of his neighbour' (*Summ. P.* ii. 2, 36, 3, quoted by Plumptre). (c) And there is another incidental, but very beautiful and interesting, way in which Dante brings out this principle that the growth of love is the destruction of envy: he is describing the sufferings of the penitents for envy, as they sat beneath the bank of 'livid' stone,—the colour

Jeremy Taylor has made much use of this admirable treatise in his *Holy Living*, chap. ii. § 6, 'Of Contentedness.'

appropriate to their sin,—and is showing that for them, hardly less than for the proud, a sorely painful and humiliating purgation is needed—

I do not think there walketh still on earth  
A man so hard that he would not be pierced  
With pity at what afterward I saw:

Covered with sackcloth vile they seemed to me,  
And one sustained the other with his shoulder,  
And all of them were by the bank sustained.

*Purg.* xiii. 52-60.

The detail of special interest to us now is that 'one sustained the other with his shoulder.' So in their misery they are brought to 'bear one another's burdens' (Gal 6<sup>2</sup>), by giving that kindly help and support to one another, which envy might have kept them back from giving to others in their lifetime. Their suffering is their training in sympathy.

3. Dante further points out that effective help against envy may be found in the exercise not only of charity but of piety, *i.e.* in the fulfilment of the precept, 'Set your mind on the things that are above, not on things that are on the earth' (Col 3<sup>2</sup>). His argument, as given in *Purg.* xiv. 86 f. and much more fully in xv. 43 ff., is not easily represented in brief quotations, but the essence of it is that, since all earthly things are limited in quantity, it follows that if one man gains a larger share of them, it must leave a smaller amount of them for others to share in, and so there arise temptations to envy on the part of the less fortunate or less successful. Whereas in heavenly and spiritual things this is not so; one man's gain in them cannot be another's loss; nay, rather, the opposite is the case, for the greater the number of the blessed in heaven, the greater must be the joy and bliss which is the portion of each soul there, because (to use Plumptre's admirably clear exposition of the somewhat obscure passage with which Dante concludes), 'God as the Supreme Good, is light (1 Jn 1<sup>5</sup>), and every soul that is capable of receiving that light is as a mirror which does not absorb but reflects it; and so the greater the number of souls, the more is the light mirrored, and therefore multiplied, by and for each and all.'

### THIRD CORNICE: THE WRATHFUL.

CANTOS XV. 82-xvii. 69.

Pr 16<sup>32</sup> 19<sup>11</sup>, Ec 7<sup>9</sup>, Ro 12<sup>19</sup>, Ep 4<sup>26, 31</sup>, Jas 1<sup>19</sup> are a few of the many texts that might introduce the subject of anger.

1. St. John tells us that 'he that hateth his brother is in the darkness,' which 'darkness hath blinded his eyes' (1 Jn 2<sup>11</sup>). Now hatred is very generally the result of long indulged anger: thus Seneca writes of anger becoming incurable when it has hardened into hatred ('ex ira in odium obcaluit,' *De Ira*, iii. 41), and Cicero defines hatred as 'ira inveterata' (*Tusc. Disp.* iv. 9). Dante, therefore illustrates and enforces St. John's saying when he describes the appropriate penalty for anger as being darkness, which is caused by a thick smoke (*Purg.* xv. 142-145, xvi. 1-7). To quote again Mr. Tozer's *Commentary*, 'The symbolism seems to be that anger, which is "a brief madness," clouds the judgment and obscures the conscience in the same way as smoke takes away the power of sight. Smoke, moreover, like anger, is harsh and irritating.' And so the smoke of this terrace is described by two strong adjectives as being 'pungent and foul' (*amaro e sozzo*).

2. But in Dante's Purgatory every scene of suffering is also a scene of contrition and amendment. And so those wrathful spirits, while passing through that blinding smoke and darkness, 'go loosening the knot of anger' (*Purg.* xvi. 24) by means of prayer—the 'knot' evidently signifying the bondage of the sin of anger, which would tie them down so that they could not ascend heavenwards (cf. also the 'cords' of Pr 5<sup>22</sup>). Dante writes—

Voices I heard, and every one appeared  
To supplicate for peace and misericord  
The Lamb of God who takes away our sins.  
Still 'Agnus Dei' their exordium was;  
One word there was in all, and metre one,  
So that all harmony appeared among them.

*Purg.* xvi. 16-21.

Two instructive points may be noted here. (a) The word rendered 'harmony' is *concordia*, which may be taken to imply that the sense of a common need, and the sharing in a common worship, was

bringing about an agreement and sympathy in heart between those who in life had been drawn by anger into discords and collisions with their fellowmen; and here we may remember how a peaceful and forgiving temper is set before us by our Lord as the indispensable preliminary to acceptable worship (Mt 5<sup>22-24</sup>). (b) And there is surely a special fitness in the Saviour being here addressed as the 'Lamb of God' by the penitents for anger: that name recalls His submissive and unretaliating obedience when He was 'led as a lamb to the slaughter,' thus being for such penitents the Lamb of God not only as 'a sacrifice for sin,' but also as 'an ensample of godly life' under the oppositions and provocations and real or seeming humiliations which are the most frequent causes of human anger. (See 1 P. 2<sup>19-25</sup>.)

3. That mention of 'real or seeming humiliations' suggests a further remark. It was noticed, with reference to the first terrace, that the pre-eminence among sins which Dante (in accordance, as we then saw, with the teaching of the New Testament) ascribes to pride, is justified by the fact that it so often lies at the root of other sins. And it may here be added that this is especially the case with the class of sins which are dealt with on this third terrace. Moralists who have closely examined the causes and circumstances of anger, have often pointed out that it arises from wounded self-love or self-esteem or sense of dignity much more often than from anything else. 'Now when I contemplated,' says Plutarch, for instance, 'the origin (*γένεσιν*) of anger itself, I observed that different persons fell into it for different reasons, but in nearly all of them was present the idea (*δόξα*) of their being despised and neglected' (*De Cohibenda Ira*, xii.).

The four remaining terraces must be reserved for another paper.

## At the Literary Table.

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