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DANTE.

ONE who would write in Dante's honour will scarce avoid the commonplace, that nothing now remains to be written. Six hundred years, no great tale of centuries when compared with the longer reputations of Homer and Virgil, have sufficed to produce a vast mass of commentary, and to exhaust, one might suppose, every topic discoverable by learned curiosity in the cantos of the *Divina Commedia*. The winding history and strange vicissitudes of Dante criticism are themselves one of the curiosities of history, only less remarkable than the record of Virgil in the Middle Ages, unfolded for us some years ago in Comparetti's fascinating book. And now, on the very stroke of the sexcentenary, when the scholars of all nations are gathered in solemn assembly before the tomb at Ravenna, Signor Croce has flung out his challenge, requiring one and all to exhibit their cards of invitation before they presume to lay a wreath on the shrine. There is nothing new, perhaps, in *La Poesia di Dante*; nothing, at least, that we should not have expected from its author, no fundamental question of principle that he has not raised before. Yet the name and authority of Croce are a fair excuse for reconsidering, with special reference to the character of this JOURNAL, the simple and innocent proposition that Dante's business was poetry, not dogmatic theology, nor historical innuendo, nor even the general edification of mankind. The proposition is true enough, and has often been forgotten. It is not the less true because Dante himself was a man of notable erudition, or because he dreamed of a single, united Italy, and then implored a German to come and unite it. The partisan, the patriot, the imperialist, the scholar,

the critic of poetry, the interpreter of Aquinas—all these characters might have been blended in one human being, yet out of the rich complexity not one line of genuine poetry might have flowed. Even so, perhaps, the commentators would have been hardly less busy. They could still have perplexed themselves and others as they wandered to and fro within the mazes of Dante's mind, and still would have found in the *Divina Commedia* an unrivalled document and revelation of the Middle Ages. Nor does Croce himself protest against the existence of *interpretazione alloτρια*, as he calls it, so long as it is not confused with that other interpretation, at once historical and aesthetic, which alone can reveal the poet as he is.

But does the Italian philosopher, author of the one and only aesthetic, get quite to the root of the matter? Were it only to warn us against superfluous erudition and solemn futility that his book had been composed, we might cheerfully have accepted the admonition, and have learned to look more critically on our expositions of Dante. But is not Croce himself in some danger of inventing a new scholasticism for the better confounding of the old? Pedantry creeps as easily into the rebuking of pedants as snobbery into the denunciation of snobs. As Croce will have none of the traditional distinctions, no various *kinds* of poetry, such as the epic and the dramatic, but finds the essence of all alike in the personal expression of the poet; so is the *Divina Commedia* to him neither tragedy, nor comedy, nor *sacro poema* to which both heaven and earth have lent a hand, but just a lyric, a great craftsman's realization of himself in his chosen material of verse. Vain, then, is the *siati raccomandato il mio Tesoro* of the laborious student, vain all this prying into chronicle and folio, this translation of narrative into allegory and transformation of signs into things. All is vanity but to drink of the fountain, caring nothing that the Naiad might 'spout oceans if she could'. Now all this is very fine and sweeping; as a remedy for cobwebs it has at least the merits of a broom. But when we would get beyond the truth, or truism, that the authentic poet sets down only what he feels, and in whatever style he feels it, in what direction are we to advance? Croce knows well enough, and freely admits, that to dabble in the *-Divina Commedia* without due preparation is barely to find a means of whiling away an

idle hour. What he does not tell us, nor even begin to consider, is where precisely the line is to be drawn. How much is it well to know, or how little? Upon this point there is, we believe, something more to be said than will be found in *La Poesia di Dante*.

To the lover of Dante the reason for steeping himself in the atmosphere of the Middle Ages is not appetite for superfluous learning, nor belief that a poet is best honoured by conversion of him into a theologian or a moralist; it is that, without considerable knowledge of many matters, some of them rather abstruse for modern readers, the *beauty* of the *Divina Commedia* can never be fully revealed. One who refuses to undergo the preliminary labour will never catch the shifting hues and shadows that flit over the varied landscape. All the rare and subtle flavours will escape his palate; deaf to the inner harmonies, the deep *bordone alle sue rime*, he will gape like a rustic at the noise of a symphony, and grin when he hears a pretty tune. There is much in the *Divina Commedia* to repel the casual reader; there is also (let it be freely admitted) not a little that, even to the best trained ear, will always lack the true ring of poetry. The *materia sorda* has been sometimes too obstinate, or has dulled, perhaps, the artist's perception of form. Yet no one who declines to study the material, and gauge its possibilities, will ever know where the poet has succeeded, and where in some measure he has failed. The erudition, the pedantry, the allegorizing, of Dante will never assume their just proportions except for those to whom they are obstacles no longer but familiar commonplaces of a vanished age. Talking once, some years ago, to Francis Paget about Milan Cathedral, I made a disparaging comment on the painted interior roof, with its fretted and fretful parody of marble. In reply the bishop quoted with approval a remark once made to him in the cathedral itself: 'Yes, it's a vile imitation, *but how much worse it would have been had it been genuine.*' What stone or marble can do for the artist, what any material can express without damage to its genius, must be deeply considered by the critic before his judgement on vault or effigy can be sure. So it must be with the criticism of Dante. Whether in this or that canto he achieves poetry, or sinks into rhyming prose, is not to be determined by dilettanti in velveteen jackets,

who stroll through the majestic galleries and find them a trifle cold.

Moreover, it is not only, or chiefly, for the more difficult passages, the learned interludes and recondite discourses, that the instruments of knowledge are required. Rather is it the simple lines, the common phrases and images, that decline to yield the secret of their beauty to those who will not dip below the surface. Open the *Divina Commedia* at random, and on any page you will find examples such as,

e la sua volontate è nostra pace,

or

nè creator, nè creatura mai,  
cominciò ei, figliuol, fu senza amore  
o natural, o d'animo; e tu il sai,

or

l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle;

still and pleasant waters for every holiday excursionist, who yet knows not how deep they run. Nor is it necessary to lay particular emphasis on the background of philosophical thought in Dante. Where does *interpretazione allotria* begin and end in relation to his conception of history or his poetical inheritance? How thin and poor must the *Inferno* be to one who has never visited antiquity, to whom Virgil himself is but a name, and the *quattro grand' ombre* no more than shadows indeed. The wealth of literary allusion in the *Divina Commedia*, and the delicate art of transformation through which the author proclaims his own originality, are not the least among the treasures to be discovered by the judicious eye.

Come d'autunno si levan le foglie,  
l'una appresso dell'altra, infin che 'il ramo  
vede alla terra tutte le sue spoglie.

Beautiful lines, no doubt, to the least equipped of Dante's readers; but how much more beautiful to those who are also readers of Virgil. Or again, without some sense of history, of mythology, of legend, there are hundreds of lines that a man may read and find little more in them but a sonorous jingle of names.

Galeotto fu il libro e chi lo scrisse

would be no bad description of the *Divina Commedia* and its

author for one to whom Galeotto signified nothing whatever. Even when we cast aside theology, philosophy, history, ancient literature, and a dozen other branches of learning, there remains the language itself. Without some considerable scholarship, Italians themselves, to say nothing of foreigners, will find in the reading of Dante an exercise in unprepared translation rather than the enjoyment of poetry. In the last resort, we might be driven by Croce's argument to maintain that poetry need have no meaning at all, that it is superfluous to learn Italian for the appreciation of Dante, since the rhythm and the delightful sounds will always be there. Now Croce, it need scarcely be said, is not really advocating this extravagant indifference to all that smacks of erudition. He does, however, appear to forget sometimes the extent of his own knowledge and the degree to which his own appreciation of Dante depends upon it. Not how much we swallow, but how much we can digest, is the cardinal question. Much learning, like much riches, may be fatal to the possessor; but the cure is not ignorance or neglect of the necessary knowledge. It will be unfortunate, therefore, if Croce, by the weight of his name, should seem to encourage the indolent, and to persuade lackadaisical triflers that, without *lungo studio* and *grand' amore*, they can pick up their Dante and walk straight into the innermost sanctuary of that ardent and passionate soul.

All poetry records, after its own manner, some kind of experience. Without some taste of the same experience, or without, at least, the higher gift of imaginative sympathy which, in some measure, can take the place of experience, no one can hope to accompany one of the greater poets very far on his flight. To declare that all poetry is lyrical, merely because it is all an expression of the poet, is surely to make the mistake of supposing the resemblances between things to be as important as their differences. Horace wrote odes, and so did Keats. It would be a sorry criticism, no doubt, that would therefore attach the same label to both and dismiss them to a common pigeon-hole. But is it not a sorrier still that forbids us to find a significance in the various modes of expression discovered and chosen by the genius of different poets? That one writes an epic, another a play, a third a sonnet, a fourth a 'dramatic lyric'; that

one who tries many forms fails in most of them, but succeeds, perhaps, to admiration in one; or again, that in one age the *Agamemnon*, in another the Book of Job, in another the polished jewellery of Pope, was best suited to the taste of the few or the many; these, after all, are the various revelations of the human spirit which it is the business and the privilege of criticism to disclose. 'With this same key Shakespeare unlocked his heart?' Yes, but the man who unlocks his heart in *Lear* or *Macbeth*, in the *Aeneid* or the *Divina Commedia*, is far enough removed in kind from a Horace, a Leopardi, a Blake, or a Tennyson, to make it worth while to meditate a little on the causes and nature of the difference. The mental and spiritual experience which Dante translated into poetry has no parallel in the lives, the traditions, the education of any other poet among those very few who can take their places *tra cotanto senno*. In the *Vita Nuova*—all the more interesting for its obvious points of contact with the prevalent artificiality in the treatment of love—we cannot fail to discern that rare and hazardous quality of passion known to Plato, to Michael Angelo, perhaps (like all things) to Shakespeare, but to how few others who have left their stamp on the history of poetry and the arts. Many poets, again, have been learned, but there is nothing to set side by side with Dante's meditation on the bards and sages of antiquity, or on the great systems of his own age, in which was mirrored the history of a thousand years and more. On this food he nourished his creative energy; with these old colours, recom-pounded and glorified, he filled his stupendous canvas, betraying his supreme individuality in the fresh handling of elements grimed over with dust and ignorance.

Beyond all else this 'lyric' of the Middle Ages depends upon acquaintance with the deep waters of the spirit, upon profound immersion in that greatest of all tragedies and triumphs which Croce describes, a little airily, as the 'theological romance'. The women who pointed at Dante (so the old story goes) as the man whose visage was dark and sombre because he had gone down into hell, were far better critics of poetry than the young exquisites, innocent of good and evil alike, who lounge about repeating the chatter of studios and muttering vaguely the names of French authors, whose works, it is more than likely,

they have omitted to read. Without descending into the *selva oscura*, without tasting the salt of penitence, without ecstasy and vision, Dante could no more have written the *Divina Commedia* than Mr Hardy could have created his Dorsetshire peasants by sitting in Bloomsbury and staring at ordnance maps of Wessex. A man can express no more than he feels, can describe only that which he has seen. The inferior artist exposes his own emptiness just because he would fain escape from this law. The more he learns the tricks of the craft, the vocabulary, the phrases, the devices, the more damaging and complete is the exposure. Wise, indeed, is he who, like Browning's Andrea del Sarto, can at least discover and confess the truth—

But all the play, the insight and the stretch,  
Out of me, out of me!

The gift of the poet or the painter, it is true, is not granted to a tithe of those who would gladly ease the burdens of their griefs and passions in the imperishable placidity of the highest art. Let us beware, however, of confounding this truth with the trivial fiction that the 'objectivity' of the artist keeps him for ever outside the storms of experience—

Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,  
Though winning near the goal—yet, do not grieve;  
She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,  
For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!

There, in the perfect lines of a perfect poet, we have the enduring monument of art, but not, as Keats knew very well, the history of the artist. And so, when we come to study and commemorate a greater than Keats, if we brush aside the 'theological romance', not only do we reject the poet's own testimony, but we hide from ourselves not the least among the secrets of his craft.

No one desires now to judge Dante as a theologian. No one reports him to the Inquisition; no one cares much if he fixed a few Popes upside down in hell and tickled with flames the soles of their writhing feet. No great pains need be spent in vindicating his orthodoxy, nor yet in searching for originality in his religious teaching. This, indeed, is a kind of *interpretazione allotria* which need not detain us very long. Why it is worth

while to spend some time and trouble in studying Dante's handling of theology is because we find here a clue to his whole vision of human history, and at the same time one of the finest examples of his art. What a dull work the *Inferno* might have been! How frigid, how lifeless and didactic the utterances of Virgil! What converts a possible sermon into an actual masterpiece of poetry is Dante's great and triumphant attempt to see the spiritual world as Virgil might have seen it, not wholly indeed

al tempo degli Dei falsi e bugiardi,

yet with the eyes of those who, by no fault of their own,

non adorar debitamente Dio,

but who now, long before Dante's fateful journey *dentro alle segrete cose*, have learned, as it were from beyond the border, the tale of the wondrous mystery, and have witnessed the coming of

un possente

con segno di vittoria incoronato,

Whose Name they may not mention, Whose Triumph they cannot share. To Dante all this was clear and vivid; first, because he had long walked with Virgil through that other *Inferno* of *Aeneid* VI; and secondly, because he devoutly believed his own feet to be already on the stairway,

u' senza risalir nessun discende.

Love and compassion, knowledge and deep consciousness of ignorance, combined to make it possible for him to rescue the great Roman poet, not indeed from his eternal exile, but from the slough of despond in which illiterate superstition had long plunged him, almost as deep as Filippo Argenti in the *sucide onde* of the marsh. Among the many devices employed by Dante to impart reality to the figure of Virgil none is of greater magnitude, and none more successful, than the virtual exclusion of all Christian theology from the *Inferno*. The Christianity of hell, as Dante paints it, is wellnigh confined to the fact of its existence. On the gateway is written the audacious legend,

fecemi la divina potestate,

la somma Sapienza e il primo Amore.

Virgil himself and the companions of his greatness, the heroes

and poets of antiquity, bear witness to the incomprehensible, inexorable law of redemption, which bars the way to heaven against all whose lot it was to be born too soon. We might think, therefore, that only in Limbo would the ancient poet have been perfectly at home. But this is not Dante's policy. By a bolder stroke, impossible, perhaps, had he been less versed in the tradition of Christian thought represented so conspicuously by Aquinas, he moulds all the circles of hell (with one doubtful exception) in accordance with the morality of the ancients, the *lex naturalis*, imprinted, as was believed within the Church, upon the heart of every rational being, but not specially revealed like the *lex nova* of the Gospel. Now Virgil, as Dante conceived and pictured him, was, above all men in the ancient world (not even excluding Aristotle), qualified to expound the nature of this moral law, and to approve the penalties of transgressing it. As he says to Dante,

ben so il cammino, però ti fa sicuro.

He knew the road because it was the sinister road that he and all righteous Pagans had avoided. To follow it was, for Christians, to put themselves beyond the reach of grace and to seek a common level with the heathen. Thus to Virgil Limbo is a mystery, but Hell is not. By another ingenious stroke Dante elicits from him the fact that once already,

congiurato da quella Eriton cruda,

he had descended to the lowest circle, and thus is added another touch of verisimilitude to Virgil's knowledge of the way; but even without that cunning device Dante succeeds in creating the atmosphere of artistic probability as a background to the figure of his guide, and succeeds just precisely because he at least understood how solid erudition can be converted to the uses of art.

Dante's architectural treatment of theology by no means ends with the *Inferno*; architectural we may call it without confusion of poetry with another art, because the framework or substructure of the entire *Commedia* had to be theological, and the skill of the architect had therefore to be exercised in avoiding monotonous repetition and, at the same time, in preserving the unity of the whole. To distinguish the general style and ornament of the

*Paradiso* from the other storeys of the edifice was, perhaps, not difficult; but much careful design was required to prevent the *Purgatorio* from merely duplicating the *Inferno*, with no change but the substitution of sunshine for darkness. From this difficulty Dante was again relieved, in the first place, by his knowledge. By his evident familiarity with the theoretical aspect of sin, he knew that it was unnecessary and even wrong to make the terraces of the purgatorial mount a mere reproduction of the circles of hell. He knew also that it was easy enough, according to the prevalent philosophy of the schools, to give three or four versions of the same moral doctrine without altering its substance. Above all he remembered that the beloved Virgil was still to serve as his guide until the proper moment for the appearance of Beatrice. The result is that one may assert of the *Purgatorio*, only less confidently than of the *Inferno*, that it is free from the technicalities of Christian theology, at least until the entrance to the Earthly Paradise, where Virgil, by his own admission, reaches the limits of his knowledge, and where he bids Dante

non aspettar mio dir più, nè mio cenno.  
 Libero, dritto e sano è tuo arbitrio,  
 e fallo fora non fare a suo senno;  
 perch'io te sopra te corono e mitrio.

At the same time Dante again betrays his skill in avoiding repetition by the subtle difference in Virgil's position in the *secondo regno*, as compared with the more definitely Pagan region of hell. The inhabitants of Purgatory, or rather, the travellers who must pass through it on their way to eternal joy, are essentially Christians. Yet Cato is allowed, by singular privilege, to hold office and authority at the foot of the mountain, and Virgil's recognition of him eases his entrance to the region of the spirit where, alas! he is not at home. By a still bolder device Dante even allows Virgil to display a certain strangeness of feeling, a minute lack of moral perception in the new atmosphere, so that twice he is corrected or reproved by Cato:—

O dignitosa coscienza e netta,  
 come t'è picciol fallo amaro morso!

Any careful reader will observe, too, that, after the episode of

Cato, Virgil enters into familiar conversation with only two of all the spirits encountered in the journey through purgatory. The first of these is Sordello, who is linked to Virgil by his Mantuan origin and by their common services to poetry. Dante allows himself here to forget that Sordello had committed the crime (so strongly denounced in the *Convivio*) of writing verses not in his mother tongue. To permit him to address Virgil in the words,

O gloria de' Latin' (disse), per cui  
mostrò ciò che potea la lingua nostra,

is a concession to artistic necessity which may almost provoke a smile; unless indeed, in a moment of broader charity, Dante is remembering that the *lingua di sì* is not the sole representative of *la lingua nostra*. After Sordello comes Statius, not only a poet, but an ancient poet, the story of whose salvation (if we are not misinformed on the point) Dante invents to suit the occasion. Were anything found to justify the invention, we could find it in that glorious *ἀναγνώρισις*, surpassed, surely, by no Greek tragedian,

già si chinava ad abbracciar li piedi  
al mio Dottor; ma egli disse: 'Frate,  
non far, chè tu se' ombra, ed ombra vedi.'

This is followed by the not less wonderful tribute of Statius to Virgil,

facesti come quei che va di notte,  
che porta il lume retro, e sè non giova,  
ma dopo sè fa le persone dotte,

where Dante uses the famous legend of Virgil's prophetic Eclogue, yet uses it with an artistic detachment, a freedom from superstition, which none can fully appreciate but those who know to what depths the caricaturing of Virgil had sunk in the preceding centuries. Statius, whose time of purgation is but now completed, accompanies the two poets on their way, and here again Dante skilfully avails himself of this new means of gradually suspending Virgil from his office, so that the final termination may not seem too abrupt. Even in the Earthly Paradise, which Virgil is allowed to enter, though he speaks no more, an allusion to Parnassus and the Golden Age is contrived to suit the understanding of the two ancient poets, and at the

last moment before the entry of Beatrice, when Virgil has silently vanished, Dante pays his final and most audacious tribute to his master in the two lines,

*manibus o date lilia plenis,*

and

conosco i segni dell'antica fiamma.

Thus does Dante, from first to last, lavish all his skill and knowledge in fashioning a Virgil who (if we may venture on the alteration) shall be *non ombra ma uomo certo*. He effects his purpose by nothing so much as by his learned suppression of Christian knowledge. Only by a good deal of what, perhaps, Croce would condemn as *interpretazione allotria* can these facts be recognized, and without recognition of them, though one may read the *Divina Commedia*, he is in some danger of reading it, as Stevenson would say, 'with the eyes of a fish and the heart of a sheep'.

The *Paradiso* is the severest of all tests to the reader of Dante. It has often been said, somewhat arrogantly, that only those who rank it above the other parts of the poem are fully qualified to praise the *Divina Commedia*. In such a view of the matter there is, undoubtedly, some risk of the substitution of a false for a true criterion. The sense of intellectual mastery may be mistaken for appreciation of poetry, and the student may slip inadvertently into the character of those rather tiresome travellers who will hear nothing in praise of Rome, or Venice, or any of the more famous cities, but assure you that the one priceless gem is some little town which they alone have visited. The *Paradiso* is by no means a little town, but it is a stronghold more difficult of access, perhaps, than any other in literature:—

vassi in Sanleo, e discendesi in Noli:  
montasi su Bismantova in cacume  
con esso i piè; ma qui convien ch' uom voli.

The flight was hazardous for Dante himself, if only because here for the first time he had to sever himself almost completely from poetical tradition. Hell was already ancient in literature, and Purgatory was not new, save in the clearer definition of an idea long familiar to poetry and to human experience. But for depicting in thirty-three cantos the state of final, immutable bliss

in a diaphanous world of light, with no shadow and little colour to variegate the landscape, and no pain or passion to temper the uniformity of spiritual existence, there was no real precedent in Virgil or in any other master; nor, indeed, has there been any successor to Dante in so great a venture. For Milton does not seriously attempt it, and a Miltonic paradise, even with a matchless style to adorn it, would be a little ponderous when set over against the *eterna margarita* of Dante's moon, or any of his more dazzling heavens. Should one turn aside from poetry and seek a parallel in the other arts, there is little to help, unless it be the music of Palestrina or that strange, ethereal whiteness that Fra Angelico sometimes achieves in his frescoes. With these slender, perhaps fanciful, aids to comprehension we have to follow Dante into the world where, at last, he is driven to use openly the materials of Christian theology:—

l'acqua ch'io prendo giammai non si corse:  
Minerva spira, e conducemì Apollo.

But the breath of Minerva cannot waft him far, and the lyre of Apollo will soon fall silent in this new world:—

lì si cantò non Bacco, non Peana,  
ma tre Persone in divina natura,  
ed in una persona essa e l'umana.

On these topics gods and poets of antiquity alike are dumb. What helped Dante and saved him from even greater perplexities was the cunning reticence of the *Inferno* and the *Purgatorio* upon the greater part of Christian doctrine. At least he had not to repeat himself; Beatrice, if one may so express it, had a fresh pulpit, from which the memory of Virgil's eloquence had not to be effaced. Whether she does not occupy it over long at times, or even get near to thumping it, opinions will always differ. But here, more than anywhere else, it is only some measure of learning, some real familiarity with the material, that can enable one to form a judgement upon the poetical worth of the product. Dante is still full of devices, and of that dramatic instinct which covers so much more than the composition of plays. The various speakers preserve their character, as Dante knew it from legend or from study of their writings. Dominic and Francis and, most

conspicuously perhaps, Aquinas are clothed in their proper vestments and cast for their proper parts. In a cantolike *Paradiso XIII* much that might otherwise seem intolerable, even lines like

non per saper lo numero in che enno  
li motor di quassù, o se *necesse*  
con contingente mai *necesse* fenno ;  
non *si est dare primum motum esse*,  
o se del mezzo cerchio far si puote  
triangol sì ch'un retto non avesse,

become appropriate, and almost amusing, when we reflect that they are spoken by *la gloriosa vita di Tommaso*. The whole discourse on the wisdom of Solomon is an affectionate reminiscence of the *Summa*, not very far removed from the tone of a parody. Whether Dante does sometimes smile at his own ingenuity is a not uninteresting question. Beatrice condescends at times to be amused, so does Virgil, and why not Dante? In Oxford, at least, we must permit ourselves to laugh a little when Dante sits down before his three examiners and prepares for his 'viva voce'—

sì come il baccellier s'arma, e non parla  
fin che il maestro la question propone ;

and when we rejoice that he not only passes but receives the congratulations of the examiners, we shall do well to remember that, had he not qualified himself by long and arduous study, he never could have bequeathed to us the 'lyric' that happens also to be the *Divina Commedia*. It is not the orthodoxy of the theologian, but the triumph of the artist that we celebrate; the skill, the power, the imagination, that could take these vast and rough materials and shape them into a palace so marvellous and unique. We celebrate also, with thanks to Croce for the phrase, the romance of theology. For Dante has vindicated for ever the poetry of what some mistake for prose. Let theology, then, with many other sciences, take heart of grace, and boldly advance to lay her wreath on the immortal poet's somewhat ignoble tomb.

W. H. V. READE.