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DANTE

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In Canto XXII of *The Paradiso* Dante writes :

O reader, by my hopes of turning back to that
devout triumph, for the which I many a time
bewail my sins, and smite upon my breast,
Thou hadst not drawn back and plunged thy
finger in the flame in so short space as that
wherein I saw the sign that followeth the
Bull, and was within it.

O stars of glory, O light impregnated with
mighty power, from which I recognise all,
whatsoe'er it be, my genius ;

with you was rising, and hiding him with you,
he who is father of each mortal life, when
I first felt the air of Tuscany ; . . .

Temple Classics Edition (London : Dent, 1919), pp. 275-277.

From this Wicksteed, the translator and editor, concludes that Dante's birthday was somewhere between the 18th of May and the 17th of June (both inclusive), the time during which the sun was in Gemini. The United States Postal Department recognized the 700th birthday of Dante this year by issuing a commemorative stamp. First-day covers on these stamps were mailed on July 19th.

Whatever the actual calendar date, in the year A.D. 1265, Dante was born in the tumultuous, fabulous city of Florence. He grew up buffeted by the political strife of the Guelphs (supremacy of the church) and the Ghibellines (supremacy of the empire) which created an atmosphere reeking with all the sins that Dante so graphically dramatizes in *The Inferno*. In spite of all this wickedness, the sons of the city of Florence loved her and strove to make her queen of the world.

Dante's *Divine Comedy* is based on mature culture. There was a maturity in theology, revelation, mythology, and in the church with its many heresies; also maturity in civil life, philosophy, art, architecture, music, poetry, science (inductive and deductive) and language.

He wrote in the simple language of the country people and in this way influenced the modern Italian vernacular. He might be called the Chaucer of Italy. His aristocratic friends criticized him for using simple and often rough words to express his thoughts. He used them for their strength and so that ordinary people could read his poem. After he was accused of being a traitor, he fled to Montefegatese, a small ancient town in the Apennines Mountains. In this beautiful rural land of olive trees garlanded with grape vines he realized that he was a sinful man because he had been guided by love of self and the world instead of love to the Lord. It is interesting to note that he turned to the Greek Classics instead of the Catholic Church to try to save himself. His poetry shows that he also knew the Old and New Testaments. We can see his interest and love for the book of Revelation.

Dante's style is emotional, concise, proportioned and opalescent. Dante's journey in the *Divine Comedy* is a political story, a summary of all knowledge and man's spiritual journey. In the opening allegory of the *Divine Comedy*, Dante finds himself lost in darkness ready to begin this spiritual journey:

Midway in life's journey, I went astray
from the straight road and woke to find myself
alone in a dark wood. (Canto I, Ciardi translation)

Dante writes in depth; his thought is made complex by his spiritual thinking. The poem opens in the year 1300 and the exact time is dawn of Good Friday. The Easter season, the full moon, and the sun at the vernal equinox all symbolize rebirth. He knows that all things are at a regenerative peak when a man approaches regeneration by acknowledging his sins. He is then ready to face temptation with the help of the Lord and can gradually work toward his own rebirth.

Dante created this back-drop for his poem, knowing that man must go through the hell of temptation before he is ready for reformation and regeneration. Throughout the *Divine Comedy* the Spiritual Sun is the central theme. In the *Purgatorio* a soul

can climb upward only in the light of the Spiritual Sun. This represents an eternal truth: only in the light from the Lord can one resist temptation and move toward regeneration.

Dante's choice of words and symbols shows his greatness and is not matched by any other Christian writer. He tried to think from spiritual truth. When he started his mad rush for salvation he met the "She Wolf, who represents Incontinence, The Lion, the sins of Violence and Bestiality, and the Leopard represents Fraud. The beasts themselves were derived from Jeremiah; and the three categories of sin from Aristotle. Into these three categories fall all the sins of the world." (John Ciardi, *The Purgatorio*, p. 342.) They also foreshadow the three divisions of hell through which Dante must journey. When Dante can find no way around the beasts of worldliness, Virgil appears. Virgil combines in himself the classical heritage, genius, magic powers, and Dante's personal devotion. He represents true human wisdom; he also represents the knowledge of the true poet. He leads Dante through the painful descent into the recognition of sins (hell) to the difficult ascent to purgatory and the renunciation of sin. Only then can Dante begin the soaring flight into heaven and the presence of God. There is no short cut.

Virgil as human reason or wisdom is Dante's first guide to the knowledge of good. Virgil cannot guide him all the way because reason is finite and God infinite. Virgil guided Dante through hell to the top of purgatory because Beatrice (Divine wisdom) had sent Virgil (human wisdom) down to Dante in his darkest hour so that he could bring him through the labor of reformation. This labor is the basic plot. On one level Dante treats of hell as a literal place of sin and punishment. Man places himself in hell, and *The Inferno* is a treatise on self-destructive behavior. It expresses the physical reality of man's state of evil. Heaven is man's state of good when he turns to love and wisdom or charity and faith. Each environment as presented by Dante is an allegorical, moral and anagogical commentary on the essential nature of the spirits one finds in each. After death we cannot hide our true nature.

Dante not only draws a map of his universe, but also travels it from end to end. His map has physical geography and spiritual values. For Dante, everything is a projection of God's will, and moral and physical laws were derived from that will. There is no natural law.

Thomas Caldecot Chubb, writing in the *New York Times Book Review* for March 14, 1965, says :

Homer and Shakespeare, the two other great poets of the Western tradition, turned outward—Homer to write in *The Iliad* the most magnificent *chanson de geste* ever composed, and in *The Odyssey* the greatest seaman's yarn; Shakespeare to create and lovingly people a world of his own, a world that ranged from Egypt to Macbeth's Scotland and included both fairyland and Prospero's island, but which was still, in his own words, "a stage." Dante, instead, takes us inward, and we find ourselves. His world is not a stage but a pilgrimage in which we all are fellow pilgrims.

It is a religious pilgrimage, and that is fitting, too. For man, atheist and agnostic included, is a religious animal quite as much as a political animal. Even those, therefore, who cannot literally believe in the terms, can deeply and personally share Dante's progress from Hell through Purgatory to Heaven. They can share it because it is Everyman's—because it is their own.

Comments have been made that there is a revival of interest in Dante. Other recent comments, more intent, are that there has been continuous interest in the centuries since he wrote the *Commedia*, the festal song of the pilgrimage. From some recent writers there has been acknowledgment of the debt they owe to Dante. Mr. Chubb, in the above-mentioned article, discusses the recent book entitled *Dante* by Thomas G. Bergin. One of our leading poets, John Ciardi, has published new translations of *The Inferno* and *The Purgatorio*. Other studies and references and comments also refer to the fact that interest has been continuous, is now continuing, and will continue. A great poet, perhaps the great poet, has written a great poem. The poem is about the other world.

It may be said, "But the poem includes many heresies." This is true. It is also true that the poem includes many truths. Reading the *Divine Comedy* sends us frequently to the Writings for revealed truth. We then may return to the poem for further realization of the state of the declining Christian Church of that time, and also realize that it was a time when they had the Bible, knew about Eden and the fall of man, were reaching out for what the Rev. Frank Sewell recognized as the "unity of truth." They learned too from the classical writers who knew and upheld certain truths that have come down from the ancient churches. See AC 8944: "From this source both Greeks and Romans had knowledges about the Supreme Deity, and the immortality of the soul, of which their learned men wrote." A paper by Dean Eldric S. Klein lists and explains many such numbers. It is entitled "Determinism in Greek Tragedy."

The Crusades were over, chivalry was dominant in some—not all—European countries. The Renaissance would come soon and help to sustain what truths they had from the ancients and would teach them to look forward to new sciences and discoveries. They still considered the Ptolemaic theory of the universe logical, and believed the earth to be the center of the universe, with the sun and stars revolving around it. (Dante called both the natural and the Spiritual Sun planets.) The Last Judgment would come more than four hundred years later. The *Nunc Licet*, the great permission, would come after that, and the New Revelation and the New Church would come to save mankind.

Another characteristic of the time helps to explain both the heresies and the truths. The people from the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries were accustomed to mysticism and symbolism, but with deeper implications than most of the learned in the Christian world give these words at present. A few comparisons may help. The Greeks, for example, deferred to the muses when writing poetry. See the first words of the *Iliad*, "Sing, Oh Muse, of Peleus' son, Achilles"; and see Book XI of the *Odyssey* when Odysseus visits the World of Spirits. For some contrast see Virgil's *Aeneid* when Aeneas visits the "World of the Dead."

We may also compare modern writers, who usually do not want to be considered mystic or symbolic—except for a minority group called Symbolists, and certain individual writers who oppose realism and naturalism. Edgar Allan Poe is one of these. Of course any writer uses figurative language, which has a different connotation. There are several references in the Writings to the difference between figurative and correspondential writing. In the New Church we find light in studying significatives, representatives, and correspondences.

Dante, however, living in a time when people loved symbolism, could use symbolic terms and know that he would be understood. The Gothic architecture, which developed at the time, was based not only on newer architectural knowledge but also on Christian symbolism. This resulted in the famous Gothic cathedrals and was recognized in the building of the cathedral in Bryn Athyn, but with still deeper meaning in the symbolism. See a booklet entitled *The Cathedral-Church of Bryn Athyn*, Eighth Edition, page 10:

While the form of the building is, in general, traditional Gothic, the symbolism connected with it is not derived from that traditionally used in Christian Churches. Emblems arising out of dogmatic theology, legends of

saints, animal fables, and morality plays, together with the numerous conventional signs usually associated with ecclesiastical symbolism, find no place here. Gradually there is being evolved a new system of representation drawn entirely from the Sacred Scripture, and applied according to the science of correspondences to be found in the Writings of the New Church.

In his essay, "How to Read Dante," Ciardi says: "*The Divine Comedy* has often been compared to a cathedral, and, whether or not the comparison is finally apt, it is certainly true that Dante's details keep acquiring significance as one goes on and learns to look back at them from some corresponding point in the later structure. The structure, that is to say, produces a *back-illumination*."

A brief summary of *The Paradiso* contains a picture of Dante winding his way through the nine moving heavens and one motionless heaven. Virgil (human wisdom) has gone. Beatrice (Divine wisdom or revelation) leads him, growing more beautiful as they ascend.

The experts agree that Beatrice is an allegorical figure representing Divine science (Rossetti); Chubb uses the word Revelation, and others Divine wisdom. It is exciting that Dante should clothe a woman with this significance. Could she also represent the Woman encompassed with the sun and the moon under her feet? (Rev. XII:1) AR 533 says: "A woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, signifies the Lord's New Church in the heavens, which is the New Heaven, and the Lord's New Church which is about to be upon the earth, which is the New Jerusalem."

Dante describes how the world is ruled through the heavens—as hammers that stamp the Divine ideas upon material creation. In Canto XXXIII, Beatrice gazes at the sun of this world. Dante, looking, suddenly sees another sun. They ascend swifter than lightning. Beatrice explains the Lord's government of the universe and how he draws all things back to Himself over the great sea of being. *The Paradiso* is a song of regeneration.

The first heaven, the heaven of the moon, is the heaven of will power. They discuss the philosophy of the will, the will of God, love or celestial charity, and man's freedom of will.

The second heaven is the heaven of Mercury made up of those who have conquered selfish ambition; there is a discussion of redemption by the Lord and immortality. This is the heaven of redemption.

The heaven of providence is the third heaven, Venus, where they discuss the souls of purified lovers.

A discussion of doctrine, creation and the order of the universe takes place in the fourth heaven, the heaven of the Sun, where we find those who teach, who combat darkness, and the learned. This is the heaven of Doctrine.

The fifth heaven, the heaven of Mars, is the heaven of endurance. A great image of the cross is shown.

The sixth heaven is Jupiter, the heaven of government, the true love of dominion from love to the Lord. An angelic representation of an eagle teaches of the Divine will.

Next is Saturn, the heaven of the tranquil, the heaven of peace, where going up and down the ladder of contemplation teaches what meditation is. This is the seventh heaven.

The eighth heaven, the stellar heaven of Divine wisdom, is the heaven of the fixed stars. Four cardinal virtues are discussed, prudence, fortitude, justice and temperance, and the three theological virtues, faith, hope and charity.

At last Dante is in the ninth heaven, the heaven of the first motion, Divine love. Nature begins here, it is the heaven of good and truth and pure light. Dante is blind at first but after he drinks from the fountain of knowledge, Divine love and wisdom is explained and then Dante sees a brilliant point of light representing the unity of God, surrounded by nine angelic circles (the heavens of the human internals). In this heaven nature begins, and from it proceed motion and time. "The royal mantle of all the swathings of the universe which most doth burn and most is quickened in the breath and in the ways of God." (*Paradiso*, Canto XXIII, Wicksteed translation, p. 287.) This is Dante's way of telling us of this heaven.

The Empyrean, the tenth heaven, is a spaceless, motionless ocean of Divine love, a heaven of good and truth and perfect peace. Man's will is at rest in union with universal good and his intellect in possession of universal truth. A heaven of pure light, it is in the form of an immense white rose with a lake of light in the center. Dante is blinded again. He "drinks with his eyes" of Divine Grace and thus can see what angels see by perception. He sees the river as a circular light. "And then, confessing himself all impotent to tell, Dante yet tells as best he may of his consummated grace in the crowning Vision of God Triune, God Incarnate." Rossetti, *Shadow of Dante*, (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1904) p. 284.

This brief summary of some of the truths and falsities in *The Divine Festal Song* (the word "divine" was added generations later and "comedy" meant then a festal song) gives us only a simplified idea of an age quite different from ours; but by further comparison and contrasts we may add to our comprehension of our own age. Dante was not a prophet or revelator; he was a great poet who said, "This poem kept me lean these many years." "This poem" is *The Divine Comedy*, in which we can find a beautiful picture of regeneration, if we are willing to sort the dross from the gold!

Why are we thinking and writing about Dante's *Divine Comedy* so many centuries later? Is it because man is born to perceive truth and Dante was allowed to resolve, in his magnificent poem, the eternal truth that through regeneration man can come to see the Visible God?

EDITORIAL NOTES

Historians apparently have had difficulty in naming that period from roughly A.D. 600 to 1200. One period studied by historians is called Ancient History, and there is another period called Modern History. But the years referred to above have no name and can only be referred to in a pejorative manner, as for example, "Medieval." Some people call this the "Dark Ages." Thilly in his history of philosophy characterizes the Middle Ages by the terms "authority, obedience, and subordination." It is possible that the modern mind may associate these terms only with religion. And because religion has become an object of scorn with some scholars, so obedience, subordination and authority themselves, when related to a spiritual background, carry a pejorative meaning, even as does the term "Middle Ages." Incidentally I wonder what is the relation of these terms to the modern "state." I wonder if "state" has not become a super term that removes "my country" into the background.

Nevertheless, as the "Middle Ages" drew to a close there appeared a number of individuals whose contributions to mankind are acknowledged freely by moderns.

In this issue some space is dedicated to one of these. Dante Alighieri was born 700 years ago. It is hoped that NEW PHILOSOPHY readers will enjoy the effort in the lead article in this issue, to broaden our perspective with reference to the use of the