

Dante, Poet of the Intellect

by Kenelm Foster, O.P.

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The death of T. S. Eliot in the first month of the seventh centenary of Dante's birth could be an occasion for examining a particular poetic influence; or, more generally, for reflecting on Dante's contemporary 'image'. The subject, however, of the present note is an aspect of Dante's poetry in itself – though considered, as befits the occasion, with an eye to its general relevance to us today. That it has some such relevance is no doubt already implied in allowing this of Eliot's work – in particular of the *Four Quartets*; for no one, I suppose, would deny that these poems have a contemporary importance, and certainly they, like *Ash Wednesday* and *Animula* and even *The Waste Land*, are inconceivable without the influence and example of Dante. Yet one may doubt whether Eliot's own example has been much followed, in this respect, by more recent poets. Eliot did his best, certainly, and to re-read now the famous essay of 1927 is to be struck once more by its admirable concentration on Dante as artist and a master in his art. The essay was not addressed to scholars, nor even primarily, I think, to the common reader, but to the writer's fellow-poets. The emphasis was all on Dante 'the master', 'the greatest master of the simple style', from whom 'more can be learned about how to write poetry' than from any English poet. How many of our contemporaries, I wonder, look to Dante in this way? For the modern educated public the *Comedy* – that epitome of Western pre-Renaissance thought and feeling – remains an important historical document; it is hardly felt as a stimulus to fresh creative writing. Yet it seems a pity to abandon so great a poet to the scholars and philologists – people whose special training, as Gilson has remarked, tends if anything to numb the response to poetry ('il est très difficile de faire croire aux philologues que la poésie ne soit pas une oeuvre d'érudition, comme la leur'). On the other hand it would be absurd to preach a 'return to Dante' to contemporary writers: they must find their masters for themselves, as Dante himself found Virgil. And yet again, what is a centenary for it not to renew connections, pick up threads, discover or rediscover such relevance as one can? Otherwise why call up ghosts from the past?

There are ghosts and ghosts, of course. The 'familiar compound', one whom Eliot met in a London street at dawn, after an air-raid, is recognisably Dante's (blended perhaps with a poignantly topical suggestion of

Ezra Pound) and the meeting re-enacts the scene in *Inferno XV*¹. Both poets assume 'a double part' suggested by that haunting text: Eliot, catching 'the sudden look of some dead master', assumes what had been Dante's role, and the ghost what had been Brunetto Latini's. And no passage in Eliot's poetry is so convincing a testimony to the living presence of Dante to his mind; a presence we feel subtly communicated to the tone and rhythm of the lines; and which one can only call ghostly if one allows a good deal of reality to ghosts. A living cultural tradition would be peopled with such ghosts; but we must not suppose that only poets meet them. Anyone may. Anyone with a little Greek may meet Homer's ghost; with a little Italian, Dante's. The only question is, is it worth it? And why?

Our world is very different from Dante's, and it would be tedious to rehearse the more obvious dissimilarities. At the risk of triteness let me recall what we have basically in common with the Middle Ages – humanity. And humanity, we know, covers a multitude of things, of which the one most to my present purpose is the capacity to ask what Paul Tillich calls the question of being: What is reality? What, in this or that instance, is true or false? What am I, and whence, and where am I going? And then the associated capacity – upon which so much of Dante's own meditations turned – to put these questions in *words*. And since words were, *ex professo*, a chief concern of the Florentine, let us try to meet him by reflecting on this capacity – more precisely, on the point where experience turns into language, thought into speech. It is the point, incidentally, to which Eliot very soon found his attention directed by that ghost:

Since our concern was speech, and speech impelled us
To purify the dialect of the tribe
And urge the mind to aftersight and foresight . . .

What is implied, of course, is that speech and its purification and the urging of the mind to awareness of past and future are all one single concern. Speech is not refined and extended either simply to aid the mind to understand or simply in consequence of its understanding: the two processes inseparably interweave; the mind – both our poets knew and we know – only lives through verbal expression. But why does Eliot say 'purify' here? To me the word seems exquisitely apt to connote every educated man's task and responsibility, with regard to language, in every age; but in particular the task Dante set himself, in peculiar conditions, using a hitherto relatively untried language, and carried out to such prodigious effect. And the first point to stress about that achievement, in connection with verbal 'purification', is the *finesse* that it involved, the delicate precision in seizing differences and distinctions – a precision that was absolutely required from the moment that Dante decided to

¹See *Little Gidding*, Part II.

write a poem about the universe ('al quale ha posto mano e cielo e terra'²) without sacrificing concrete particularity. From this decision came that enormous *volte face* in literary history represented by his peopling his great morality play with living persons instead of allegorical abstractions. And that the persons in the poem were to be 'living' only after death made no difference, because the whole effort of the poet was to show the after-life as continuous with this life, as a point of arrival is continuous with the movement that precedes it and ends in it. Hence the changing realities of our earth were an essential part of this poem about eternity; no less essential, and no more, than those intimations of an eternal reality which, as he put it, glitter like stars in the mind as it glimpses an unchanging truth through and beyond the drift of sense-data ('e come stella in cielo il ver si vide'³). Thus Dante's potential subject was everything apprehended by the human mind and senses; and its elaboration, therefore, an ever fresh discovery of the incredible subtlety of the real thus apprehended – the subtlety, and so the difference, the uniqueness, of each item of the real considered in itself; the subtlety which is at once the stimulus and the despair of men so enchanted by the task and challenge of expression as he was. Implicitly perhaps such men crave for a language so developed that every word would have a single unique charge of meaning, absolutely precise, unconfused and, in this sense, 'pure' ('si che dal fatto il dir non sia diverso'⁴).

Dante's vast and delicate work of (in this sense) purifying language might be compared with the achievement of Aquinas a generation or two earlier. Each man's achievements might be called the discovery of a real order through verbal distinctions, through the closest attention to the possible meanings of words. But past admirers and present detractors of Dante, at any rate, have perhaps made too much of – to use Pascal's terms – his *esprit de géometrie* at the expense of his *esprit de finesse*. Since order (of a kind) can be imposed ready-made, an orderly work is not as such of great interest. Of course Dante's work does follow an order that was in a sense ready-made for him, the Catholic division of the after-life into Hell, Purgatory and Heaven. But if we are to arrive at any sense of his poetic greatness it is misleading, I think, to imagine this scheme as a *limiting* framework. We do better to think of it as a stimulus that set him seeking, in his own experience, for an idea of utter iniquity, for an idea of moral recovery, for an idea of spiritual bliss. For that surely is what dogma is for a poet *qua* poet: whether he sincerely believes or not will indeed make a difference to the end-result, if his subject be dogma; it will affect the tone of his work. But poetry itself is not an act of belief but an expression of human experience – that is, in the last resort, of ideas discovered through living. And dogma believed in prompts one to look

²*Paradiso* xxv, 2: 'to which heaven and earth have set their hand.'

³*Paradiso* xxviii, 87: 'and truth was seen like a star in heaven.'

⁴*Inferno* xxxii, 12: 'so that speech differ not from fact.'

for one's ideas in certain directions rather than others. This is perhaps all it does or can do for the poet as such (or novelist as such . . .).

It may be objected that I speak of ideas in this context. Ideas are of the intellect, and a whole aesthetic has been built on the postulate of the entire non-intellectuality of poetry. But this is to identify ideas with their explicit logical expression; and to discount their presence by implication. A poet may be a philosopher, as Dante at least claimed to be, and be interested in 'pure' ideas and in their explicit logical articulation. But that is not where his interest is focussed as he writes his poem; but rather on what is happening to himself and in himself, in the act of pursuing an idea or as a result of possessing one. In the former case the poetry tends to be more explicitly argumentative and didactic, as in a good deal of the *Paradiso*; but if a poet is really at work what is expressed is, to a greater or less degree, precisely what is happening, happening to and in his psyche as a whole, as he pursues. If Dante is an uncommonly intellectual poet (as in some sense he certainly is) this means in practice that he was more inclined than most poets have been to give expression to this pursuit of ideas, to show the love of truth in action. A text from his prose work the *Convivio* comes to mind here, of which I remember Edward Bullough remarking that it contained in germ the whole theory of philosophical poetry. The philosophic mind, says Dante there, not only contemplates truth but contemplates its own contemplation, turning round upon itself and delighting 'in the beauty of its own gazing'. But the beauty of this gazing, of this actual sight of a truth – which is a *conscious* sight causing joy, Augustine's *gaudium de veritate*, or, as Dante puts it: 'luce intellettuale piena d'amore / amor del vero ben pien di letizia' – this beauty can reflect back over the whole life of the psyche in the degree that this already has intimations of it as a joy to come (and this is when the mind is in pursuit, as it explicitly is so often in the *Paradiso*) or, once the joy has come and gone, in the degree that the psyche is as it were still vibrating to the touch of it –

. . . quasi tutta cessa
mia visione, ed ancor mi distilla
nel core il dolce che nacque da essa.⁵

An adequate study of Dante's intellectual poetry would, I think, have to give particular attention to this second aspect of 'reverberation', of the after-effects of vision or insight; for it is much the harder one to describe and analyse. To discern it accurately could be almost a lifetime's occupation; consisting essentially in eliciting the abstract thought implicit in, and inwardly directing and animating, Dante's concrete representations; and the thought itself constantly varies as the poet's mind turns now to one, now to another aspect of human life or the world of nature – it is in turn ethical, historical, scientific, aesthetic, metaphysical, theological.

⁵*Paradiso* xxxiii, 61–3: 'My vision almost wholly fades, yet still the sweetness of it drops in my heart'

There is always, in Dante's poetry, a latent idea shaping and directing the imagery, even when, as in the later cantos of the *Inferno*, these are most aswarm with concrete particularity. But this in itself is not extraordinary; what is so is the degree to which, in this poetry, thought and image, concept and emotion interpenetrate. One feels that the thought is both extraordinarily wide-ranging and extraordinarily precise; but what most impresses in the long run is the way the grasp of ideas gives a depth of meaning, a peculiar intellectual 'resonance', to sensory details, while at the same time allowing each of these its full proper sensory effect. The total impression is of a greatness that seems *sui generis*. Much of what Dante offers can be paralleled in the work of other poets: superb architectural structure, multiplicity of vivid detail, mastery of wide diversities in tone and feeling, great narrative skill. What the *Comedy* displays to a degree that is perhaps unparalleled in all imaginative literature, and is in any case very extraordinary, is quite simply the life of the human intellect as such – the range and scope of intelligence working in and through sensation: the mind in pursuit, and then in possession, and then again in pursuit, of truth; and both 'moments' represented in strictly psychophysical terms. This is not, of course, the only sort of 'greatness' one may look for in literature; I only say it is the sort that Dante offers. And it is arguable, despite appearances to the contrary, that an adequate response to it has become more, not less, possible with the passage of time since he wrote.

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