

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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