

DOROTHY SAYERS ON DANTE

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IT is eight years since Miss Sayers brought out her 'Penguin' version of the *Inferno*, to the surprise of some readers of her other thrillers. Yet it need not have surprised anyone that she was interested in Dante and perfectly capable of writing competent footnotes to the *Comedy*. The long Introduction to her *Hell* was, however, a remarkable manifesto in praise of Dante and in justification of her own rendering of his verse—at once a declaration of love and a statement of method. But the most remarkable thing was the translation itself, a real *tour de force*—five thousand lines rhyming in an intricate pattern, the *terza rima*, which I should have thought an extraordinarily difficult one to handle in English, though Miss Sayers herself speaks of the task with noticeable *sans gêne*. It had been attempted before, notably by Binyon for the whole *Comedy* and by Professor Bickersteth for the *Paradiso*; both commendable efforts, especially the latter. Then came Miss Sayers's attempt; and then, a little later, the quiet voice of Mr Eliot was heard, off-stage, to observe that it would be better not to try to reproduce in English, with its less copious and 'in a way more emphatic' rhyming words, the 'light effect' of the more easily rhyming Italian. Mr Eliot did not refer, in the lecture from which I quote, to Miss Sayers; he was talking, with characteristic modesty, about his own Dantean *pastiche* in *Little Gidding*; but his judgment is relevant, of course, to any rhyming English version of Dante. Meanwhile Miss Sayers, undeterred and unwearied, forged ahead with hers. Her *Purgatory* appeared in 1955; and though for the moment, I believe, she has turned aside to deal with the trifling matter of the *Chanson de Roland*, no power on earth, we may be sure, will prevent her from crowning her labours, in due course, with a *Paradise*.

Even as it stands and regarded simply as a very skilful output of mental energy, and even if, as I think, it does not amount to a practical refutation of Mr Eliot, this translation of the *Comedy* is a great achievement. A very distinguished Italian scholar, Cesare Foligno, who knows English well, has praised it highly. But here my concern is rather with Miss Sayers as a Dante critic, and particularly with the second of her two volumes of 'Introductory Papers'¹ on the poet. Both of these books have high merits and equally real defects. Each consists of some pretty close study of Dante's thought and art mixed with much cheerful conversation about him, often shrewd, suggestive and even brilliant; but also sometimes intemperate and often tiresomely assertive. The

1 *Further Papers on Dante*. (Methuen; 25s.).

dashing pugnacious style, enjoyable in a lecture-room, is not so effective in cold print. Naturally one allows for this in books the greater part of which was at first delivered *viva voce*; and as one of her listeners on several occasions, I freely acknowledge Miss Sayers's power as a lecturer. But afterwards—well, one comes to see that many of the views expressed are her personal views or fancies (or Charles Williams's),² interesting enough but not especially authoritative; and so one begins to resent the peremptory tone. The self-confidence seems a trifle excessive.

Again, one suspects, from time to time, a tilting at windmills—I mean, the inventing or the exaggerating of some folly in order to knock it down; a controversialist's trick which however need not, of course, imply any conscious dishonesty. One may simply become the victim of one's style. For Miss Sayers this is always a danger; though, to be sure, her genuine regard for truth and her real, if limited, scholarship act as partial preservatives. There is less of that kind of thing in this second volume of 'Papers' than there was in the first. But it crops up here too; as when she returns to her customary attack on the 'reverential awe' which has lifted Dante to an 'exalted isolation' out of reach of criticism or comparison. The point may be partly admitted; but reflection also suggests that if Miss Sayers were more familiar with the great Italian critics from De Sanctis to Momigliano, she would have been more careful not to claim (by implication) so much for the freedom and originality of her own approach. Pretty well everything that can be said against Dante's art has been said in Italy, and with unequalled force and subtlety, during the past hundred years. With this in mind it is not so surprising, after all, to be told, a few pages on, that before the publication of Charles Williams's *Figure of Beatrice* in 1943 Miss Sayers had hardly ever even glanced at Dante. It was Williams's book that made her blow the dust off her grandmother's copy of the 'Temple Classics' *Divine Comedy*, and so fall under its spell, to her own advantage and ours. And yet in another way—and this time to her credit—that information is surprising. How much she has done in fourteen years!

This new collection of Papers, she tells us, is less theological than the other one, it pays more attention to the 'literary and poetic aspects of Dante's work'. A rather disarming statement, for if Miss Sayers is, inevitably, an amateur theologian, she is a highly professional writer, and may be supposed to be expert on 'literary aspects'. However that may be, we are here given four 'literary' papers: a quite searching and detailed comparison of Dante and Milton, a study of Dante's

² Miss Sayers has always emphasized her debt to Williams—the 'Dead Master of the Affirmations', as she called him in the dedication to her version of the *Inferno*.

Virgil, an excellent little paper on the Ulysses canto (*Inferno* XXVI) and another good one on Dante as a story-teller. Two papers—on Dante and St Thomas and on *Purgatorio* XVIII—keep closer to theological issues. Another, on the poet's *Cosmos*, opens boldly and merrily with a dialogue between Dante and Sir Arthur Eddington and goes on to give a most intelligent and, for its length, thorough account of the mental world of medieval man. This is perhaps the best essay in the book, and one of the best ever written by Miss Sayers. It contains its over-statements (e.g. that with the *Summa* of St Thomas 'peace was established between faith and reason for several centuries') but these are specks on a crystal. Finally we have an essay comparing Dante and Charles Williams as poets of 'the Image', of the 'Way of Affirmation'; but here, I confess, I began to skip. I cannot share Miss Sayers's enthusiasm for Williams; whenever she mentions him, which is often, my heart sinks with a sure anticipation of boredom. The fault, I admit, is partly my laziness; but partly it is Williams's style which I find sticky and turgid. But in fairness I should add that this essay is not the facile assimilation of Williams to Dante which I had feared. A useful distinction is drawn between Dante's pre-occupation with 'the *inherence* of the metaphysical in the physical' and Williams's concern with 'the *irruption* of the metaphysical into the physical' (both italics my own). This 'irruption' is that magical element with which Dante's mind was so singularly unconcerned; whereas 'all the Williams novels are concerned in one way or another with magic'. That is surely well observed and could start some interesting lines of thought.

Looking back now over the whole book, three doctrinal points seem to call for correction or clarification.

First, touching the analysis of voluntary human action in *Purgatorio* XVIII, 19-75, Miss Sayers seems to equate Dante's 'prima voglia' with instinct, thus including all the working of the rational will within the sphere of *free will*, i.e. of deliberate choice of this or that object in particular. I do not think Dante meant this; I think his 'prima voglia', though a necessary inclination and as such not morally imputable, is already strictly human and comes from the rational soul. Here Miss Sayers is too quick, perhaps, in seeing a correspondence between Dante's teaching and the Freudian unconscious. The comparison with Freud is interesting and should be explored; but without diminishing the range of the will, as Dante, with St Thomas, conceived this. For Dante's implicit allusion is to the will's spontaneous appetite for goodness unparticularized, for total happiness, and this appetite aims immediately at the ultimate end, *prior* to any choice of means. This transcendent (so to say) orientation of the will seems to have escaped Miss Sayers; to the detriment also of her understanding of

what Dante says or suggests about the radical freedom of the will in *Purgatorio* XVI, 79–81—admittedly a difficult passage.

The next point concerns Virgil. Why is he excluded from Paradise? Of course, the poem, as we have it, requires that he be excluded, but how does it justify the exclusion doctrinally? Obviously, by Virgil's lack of Christian faith. Explicit faith or implicit faith? Explicit, I say; for Dante nowhere, I think, allows implicit faith as sufficient for salvation. This is not to say that he ruled out baptism by desire; with Miss Sayers I agree that Dante's Trajan and Ripheus were both baptized 'by desire'; but neither without an explicit faith in the Redeemer, already come or still to come, miraculously revealed to them. So, to reward Ripheus's love of justice,

Dio li aperse

l'occhio a la nostra redenzion futura.³

And search Dante as you will, you will never see him step beyond this point. But Miss Sayers is not satisfied: her warm heart sets her wondering again about Virgil. *Why* is this lovable figure suspended in that melancholy Limbo? *Why*—of course!—because his whole work is itself pervaded by melancholy. . . . Virgil is banned from Paradise because he had not faith, and this means (as the *Aeneid* shows, in such contrast with the *Divine Comedy*) that Virgil could not *imagine bliss*. 'True, he did not know the Christian revelation. But faith is imagination actualized by the will. What was lacking in the heathen philosophies was . . . the imagination of bliss. They had not, so to speak, sufficient faith in the good intentions of the universe.' The explanation is charming, but it is not Dante's: implicit faith may be a valid notion for modern theology, but to make Dante's term 'fede' mean faith in the good intentions of the universe is to go beyond his text and out of his historical context. Moreover, it is not true that Dante's Virgil could not imagine bliss: he prophesied Christ, implicitly, in the fourth Eclogue, he dreamed, on Parnassus, of the Garden of Eden. That is how the medieval Christians saw him; nor did the Elysian Fields represent for them, as they do for Miss Sayers, 'the best of Virgil's imagination'. And yet, by the voice of Dante, they banned him from heaven, all his dreams and prophecies notwithstanding. No, it was not Virgil's melancholy that put him in Dante's Limbo; the reverse is the truth; the Virgil of the Comedy is melancholy *because* he is in Limbo.

Finally, I have an old difference with Miss Sayers on the *Paradiso* as a description—if the term may pass—of the vision of God. On this theme she has added little here, so that criticism may as well be deferred until we have, at last, her 'Penguin' translation of the third Cantica. Pending this, I only remark that where, near the end of

3 *Paradiso* xx, 122–3. 'God opened his eyes to our coming redemption.'

the book, Miss Sayers does touch on the paradisaical vision she still seems to miss Dante's intention, as I think she missed it in her other volume of 'Papers'. That intention was not, I think, to give a symbolic transcript of the spiritual life of ordinary Christians on earth, but to represent, symbolically of course, the extraordinary state known to mystical theology as *raptus*, of which the prototype was the experience described by St Paul in 2 Corinthians, 12—'whether in the body or out of the body, I know not, God knoweth . . .'. Preoccupied (as a disciple of Charles Williams) by the 'Way of Affirmations', Miss Sayers tends to underrate the 'naughting' of images in the *Paradiso*, the passing beyond all creatures to a reality and an experience which the poet, writing after the event, cannot distinctly recover, still less put into words. To say this is not of course to assert that Dante had such an experience, but only that it is this experience which he represents himself as having. The *Paradiso* describes a voyage into the heaven of heavens, not an ideal pattern of life on earth. Magnificently affirmative and image-laden as it is, it is ultimately a rejection of images. But to pursue this further now would take us too far.⁴

4 As a post-script, and with reference especially to Miss Sayers's excellent chapter on Dante's cosmos, I must heartily recommend the new edition of *Dante and the Early Astronomers* by M. A. Orr (Wingate, 30s.). This work, first published in 1913, is the best historical account in English of Dante's astronomy; and without some such account much of the meaning and beauty of the *Comedy* is missed or blurred. It has been carefully revised for the new edition by Dr B. Reynolds of the Italian Department at Cambridge.

A CASTING OUT OF BEAMS

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THE casting out of beams is inevitably a more ponderous process than the discerning of motes. It has about it the heavy-handed inelegance of fly-swatting, in contrast to the darting agile dancing of dragon-flies in the sunlight. God forbid that anyone should wantonly swat a dragon-fly, or that I should attempt to toss a caber at the dexterous mote-discernment of Fr McCabe.¹ I would, in any case, almost certainly miss. But dragon-fly antics, while they delight our gaze, are liable to leave us a trifle dizzy; and the virtuosity of Fr

1 'A Discernment of Motes' by Herbert McCabe, O.P., in *BLACKFRIARS*, July-August 1957.