A Propos of a new book on Dante

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A drawing of Dante on the dust-cover of this new study[1] of the *Divine Comedy* gives the poet a slightly Oriental look—and is that a helmet he is wearing? The suggestion, anyhow, of the Mongolian and the martial, whether intended or not, may perhaps be linked with the fact that the author is a young North Korean who served with distinction in the Korean army against the Communists before going to America to study philosophy at Yale. Mr Swing is a convert to the Catholic faith and, to judge from this book, his Dante studies have a good deal to do with his religion. He has fed his mind on the strong Christian meat of the *Comedy*: it has formed in fact his introduction to theology, and he now repays the debt with a theological introduction to it. And because his mind is exceptionally vigorous and original, and because he is very well acquainted with Dante's poem (though not, I think, with its literary and historical background) he has given us an extremely interesting and even valuable book. So much had better be said at once, and emphatically, because it would be only too easy to multiply objections in detail to Swing's work, while missing or only half-appreciating its merits as a whole. It is likely to irritate scholars—that irritable race—and on the other hand it takes its subject too seriously to prove easy reading for people who do not already know the *Divine Comedy* fairly well. Thus it may in effect fall between two stools, leaving the scholars full of their 'ifs' and 'buts', and the others somewhat bewildered. And that, I am sure, would be a pity; but before I go on to say why, it may be of interest to glance round the field which our young Korean critic has entered as a newcomer.

Dante studies are very much alive at present, though the average educated Englishman is hardly aware of this; but then the best new and original work on the poet—if we except Mr Colin Hardie's audacious probings—is being done abroad: in America, for example, by C. S.

[1] *The Fragile Leaves of the Sibyl. Dante's Master Plan.* By T. K. Swing. The Newman Press, Westminster, Maryland; $5.75.

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Singleton, in France by André Pézard, and in Italy by a brilliant group of post-war scholars whose chief point of convergence is, appropriately, Florence, where the venerable *Studi danteschi* has awakened to new life in the hands of its present editor Gianfranco Contini. I should mention too the rather isolated—and aggressive—figure of Rocco Montano, if only because this critic's persistent and courageous polemic[2] in favour of an integrally Christian interpretation of the *Comedy* gives his work a certain affinity with that of Swing. And behind these younger men stands the veteran Bruno Nardi; and further back the massive historical and textual work of Michele Barbi and his collaborators who gave us the critical edition of Dante's works published in 1921. That was the sixth centenary of the poet's death, and we are now approaching the seventh of his birth, 1965; a fact which no doubt is helping to stimulate the present intense activity of re-appraisal and reassessment. This activity, however, is proceeding on different lines, from different starting points and in a rather different spirit from that which bore its fruits thirty or forty years ago. The general progress of medieval studies has considerably altered the way we view Dante and his work; we know more about the medieval world and ways of thinking than our grandfathers did and this increase of knowledge has brought certain factors into prominence which were less important for them, while on the other hand we are inclined to find some of their emphases excessive and naive. Thus it is now impossible to relate Dante so closely to Thomism as it used to be before the complexity of thirteenth and early fourteenth century scholasticism was properly appreciated. We now know that Thomism was only one of a number of currents of thought at that time, and that in any case Dante's own philosophy, though owing much to St Thomas (but still more perhaps to St Albert), was highly eclectic and personal. On the other hand the medieval Latin literary—as distinct from philosophical—background is being given an importance which it did not have before, not only of course in relation to Dante but to the rise of the Romance literatures generally—enough to refer to the influential work of E. R. Curtius.[3] Again, the study of these Romance literatures—French, Provençal and early Italian—in relation to Dante has been taken a good deal further, especially with regard to his achievements as

[2]I say courageous because when Montano began writing, twenty years ago, the hand of Croce still lay heavy on Italian culture, even where Dante was concerned; and Montano was the first critic to attack the old dictator all along the line, and with a ferocity which has done him no good in academic circles.
[3]*European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (translated from the German) 1953.

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a lyric poet before he came to write the *Comedy*. A notable feature of modern Dante study is a stress on his *Rime*; and this has to some extent modified the old emphasis on his political interests. These in a sense cannot be overstressed, but we are less inclined now than our fathers were, and far less than the nineteenth century was, to place the whole of Dante's work, the *Comedy* included, under the sign of Imperialism or Ghibellinism. And this change, along with others, has helped to rid us of the tiresome, if understandable, rhetoric and emotional uplift that used to accompany so much writing on Dante, especially in Italy. A cooler tone prevails today. We admire Dante no less than our elders did, but we have taken his measure more accurately (or think we have) and we burn less incense.

Such shifts in perspective and changes of tone and emphasis are not, of course, only a result of increased knowledge; they reflect the wider change of sensibility which has followed the decline of Romanticism. 'Romantic Dante's dead and gone', to adapt Yeats's line—and yet, the traditional exaltation of Dante as one of the supreme poets of mankind is a product, largely, of the Romantic movement. Between about 1500 and 1800 he hardly counted in the European mind. His great cult began with the nineteenth century; and one might, then, expect it to be ending now in the post-Romantic world. But this is certainly not the case, except so far as 'cult' might suggest certain emotional attitudes. Interest in Dante, wherever it can be expected, is as keen as ever; and it is worth asking why. Briefly, there are three reasons, of unequal importance, for his enduring fascination: first, his prodigious mastery of the poet's craft; then, the extraordinary historical interest of the *Comedy*; and thirdly—Dante's deepest, and also most mysterious, claim on our attention—something his great poem seems to say about the very springs of human life and its ultimate significance, the message or meaning that the *Comedy* conveys.

Of these three aspects of Dante, I am concerned here only with the last, since it is on this that Mr Swing, whose book has occasioned these remarks, has something interesting and new to say. He has nothing to say about Dante's art as such, and hardly anything on the second of the aspects I have distinguished, the one that counts most for historians, the extraordinarily revealing and representative character of the *Comedy* as a document of Western pre-Renaissance life and thought. I have noted in passing that Swing is weak on the literary and historical background. He gives the impression of knowing little in detail about the Middle Ages; of jumping straight from the twentieth century into the *Comedy*,

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and then striking out into relatively unknown country—though he knows some Greek philosophy—but in one direction only, that which led him to St Thomas (whom he does not greatly respect) and one or two other theologians. As he disarmingly tells us, his book was already begun before he awoke to the importance, for Dante, of St Bernard—in whose works he then found, however, the 'chief model' for the 'architectonic construction' of the *Comedy*. Whether St Bernard's works were as important as all that for Dante is at least an open question, but they were a godsend for Mr Swing. And I do not mean this ironically. I am more than half convinced that this young Oriental has seen more deeply and clearly into the structural theological pattern of the *Comedy* than any other author known to me—more so than Nardi or Gilson or Singleton, with all their learning. Swing is not particularly learned, but he shows something like intuitive genius in penetrating the *Comedy* as a theological structure—and I must emphasize 'theological', for that is exclusively the aspect that he is concerned with. But it is the most important aspect by far; not because of any abstract dignity of theology as such, but simply because the *Comedy* in essence is all about mankind's relations with God. This theme takes the form of a story of one man's journey to God, a story which, as it unfolds, reveals ever more of the nature of the two main protagonists, the human and the divine: but of the divine one chiefly, of course, in the last third of the poem, the *Paradiso*. Here the divine background moves up into view, the concealed springs of the whole action become visible. In other words, an inward underlying order becomes increasingly clear, through the surface pattern of incident and symbol, as we approach the poem's ending; such at least must have been Dante's intention if he conceived his poem from the first as a unity, with his mind on the unifying principle of the Christian universe (which the *Comedy* is certainly intended to represent), namely the divine nature as Christianity sees it: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. If Dante's poem is about God and man, we should expect it to present the divine nature as the dominant ordering principle of the whole. And so in fact it does; and in this sense Mr Swing is perfectly right to say that the Trinity is 'the main theme of Dante's epic'. Few critics, however, have ever said this of the *Comedy*; and none that I know, apart from Swing, has made anything like a convincing effort to show that it is true.

And of course the truth of Swing's statement is not in the least obvious. It requires a considerable intellectual effort, and one of a special kind, to grasp the inward theological form or pattern running

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through the *Comedy*; a pattern composed of Catholic doctrine and certainly intended as Catholic, and so far as traditional and 'public', yet woven by an intensely original mind and one moreover that turned everything it touched into poetry, that is into symbols of what it loved or what it loathed. Now this personal poetic element is as Christian and, since it involved the working of a powerful intellect, as 'theological' as the traditional materials it worked with. No serious critic today would revive Croce's flimsy distinction between the poetry and the 'structure' of the *Comedy*. But the personal element involves so much that is not explicitly theological, so much incidental detail, so much passion and so much imagery, that it is no wonder the average reader can hardly see the wood for the trees. The trees are so fascinating. Nor, as I have said, are most of the critics, even the best of them, of much help with regard to what I have called the inward order of the *Comedy*. One can hardly blame them, indeed. One cannot expect theology from literary critics and historians; for whom in any case the poem holds a literary and historical interest that seems literally inexhaustible. Most of them have been more concerned with, or at least more illuminating on, the parts than the whole; working inwards from the periphery towards a centre which they only confusedly glimpsed, if at all. And those who have tried hardest to see the poem as a whole have tended, in recent years, to concentrate precisely on that part of the *Comedy* where the personal and public elements of Dante's vision, the subjective and the objective, the poetic and the theological are most tightly and puzzlingly interwoven; I mean *Purgatorio* 30-33, the encounter with Beatrice. Now there is a great deal to be said for focussing on this famous episode —'the very heart of the *Comedy*', 'the pattern at the centre', as Mr Hardie and Professor Singleton respectively call it. Indeed there is everything to be said for this procedure if one is considering the *Comedy* as autobiography. And certainly the *Comedy* is intensely autobiographical; and these four cantos are the place where this essential feature is most fully revealed: for here the poet, who had all but worshipped Beatrice in the *Vita Nuova* and then renounced her in the *Convivio*, now meets her again coming in triumph to recall and judge the whole course of his life hitherto. It is the climax of the *Comedy* as a self criticism. It is also clearly presented as expressing a turning point in Dante's life on which the entire possibility of his having the vision which the *Comedy* embodies depended. It states, in fact, the genesis of the poem—though with what tantalising if splendid obscurity! For though this scene shows clearly enough that the *Comedy* was

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written because of some 'return to Beatrice', it remains by no means clear what precisely Dante was returning *from*—what sins or errors or both he was renouncing—nor precisely what he was now turning *to*. That the scene represents in some way a conversion to God is, of course, clear. But what is Beatrice doing in the action? What does she represent? Opinions vary from, say, Mr Hardie's view of the scene as a very private affair between Dante and his lady, with the latter recalling him only indirectly to God but directly to his vocation as a poet, and Singleton's downright religious interpretation of Beatrice as a 'likeness' of Christ.

I mention these views here to mark a difference between Mr Swing's approach and that of a good deal of the best modern Dante criticism. Very roughly, one might say that whereas the latter tends to focus on *Purgatorio* 30-33, Swing starts with the *Paradiso* and measures the rest in relation to it. His method, he says, is 'to mount the ten rungs of the ladder of joy simultaneously viewing in parallel contrast the corresponding rungs of the ladder of humility (the *Purgatorio*) and the ladder of pride (the *Inferno*)'. And this, he claims, is the best method because 'the Paradiso is the ladder of absolute truth and . . . truth is the measure of itself and its contraries'. And certainly Swing is right if what one is concerned to discover is the inward *theological* order of the *Comedy*, stripped as far as possible of the autobiographical element. Moreover, I think that this method was the only one open to Swing, for the simple reason that any other would have required a kind of scholarly preparation such as he does not appear to have had. I do not say this in disparagement; I consider his book, on the whole, magnificent. The sometimes excessive ingenuity, occasional factual errors, dogmatism, inflated tone and style—these things are doubtless largely the faults of youth. But in any case it is fairly clear that Swing is not deeply versed in contemporary Dante criticism—nor, I think, in Dante's minor works—but also that this ignorance may well be a *felix culpa*, since without it he might not have leaped so readily to the task he *was* fitted to perform. Had he known more of the background to the *Comedy*, and particularly of that nearer background formed by the poet's other and earlier works —*Vita Nuova*, *Rime*, *Convivio*, *Monarchia*—he might have got entangled in the problems of a Hardie or a Contini and so been swept into the whirlpool of *Purgatorio* 30-33. As it is he was free to leap straight to the 'ladder of love'.

I should need far more space than remains to me to examine Swing's system in any detail; here I can only indicate its outline and one or two

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points that leave me uncertain and unconvinced. His stress on the Trinity as 'the main theme' of the *Comedy* has been noted, and I am sure that in some sense it is profoundly just; yet he would, I suppose, admit that through most of the narrative the idea of the Trinity is only implicit—that before *Paradiso* 10 it emerges clearly only twice, in the inscription over Hell-gate (*Inf.* 3, 5-6) and in the symbolically three-headed figure of Satan (*Inf.* 34), which Swing rightly calls an inverted image of the Trinity and on which his comments, however audacious, are at least exceedingly interesting. But this is only a particular application of his general theory, which itself includes two main principles: (*a*) that the *Comedy* represents the perversion, in Hell, and the restoration, in Purgatory and Paradise, of an image of the Trinity in human nature; and (*b*) that Dante, consistently and all through the poem, works out this two-way moral movement in terms of the loss or recovery of exactly the same set of virtues—those contrary to the seven vices that are purged away on the seven terraces of Purgatory, plus the three theological virtues, faith, hope and charity. Now every reader of Dante knows that those seven vices are purged away on the Mountain in an order that runs from pride up to lust. But it is not obvious that this order both reproduces, inversely, a pattern of perversion going down the circles of Hell, from Francesca (lust) to Satan (pride), and anticipates a triumph of the seven contrary virtues in Paradise, in a pattern that runs up the seven planets, from the Moon (humility) to Saturn (spiritualized love); nor is it obvious that faith, hope and charity are particularly connected negatively, with *Inferno* 1-4, and positively with *Purgatorio* 30-33 and with the three topmost heavens, the Fixed Stars, the Primum Mobile, the Empyrean. The symmetry of this system is exciting and *prima facie* plausible; it makes a grand design. But is it Dante's? To make us accept it as Dante's Swing first constructs a three-fold image of the psyche divided into the concupiscible, irascible and intellectual powers—a pattern never explicitly referred to in the *Comedy*; he then elucidates the obscurer moral orders of *Inferno* and *Paradiso* in terms of the more evident order of *Purgatorio*; and finally he fits in the theological virtues in the manner indicated. This triple task of explanation and correlation Swing performs with astonishing ingenuity and often too, with superb intuitive insight. And if at the end I am still excited and attracted rather than convinced, it is perhaps after all, not Swing's fault but the poet's. There are obscurities in the *Comedy* which resist—I would rather not say contradict—the critic's system. But the effort to justify this was immensely worth while.

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