



October 28, 1976

## GRADUATE THEOLOGICAL UNION

2465 Le Conte Avenue, Berkeley, California 94709 Tel. (415) 841-9811

For Immediate Release:

The Reverend Massey H. Shepherd, Jr., Hodges Professor of Liturgics at the Church Divinity School of the Pacific, will give the first annual Graduate Theological Union Lecture on November 17, 1976.

The title of the lecture by Dr. Shepherd, who serves concurrently as Professor at Berkeley's Graduate Theological Union, is "Dante's Comedy: A Vision of 'What Is and Was and Is to Come.'"

The GTU Lecture has been established to honor distinguished scholars on the faculty, and to allow the community an opportunity to hear the results of their scholarship.

Dr. Shepherd, who graduated magna cum laude from the University of South Carolina, received the degree of Doctor of Philosophy from the University of Chicago.

He has received honorary degrees from the Berkeley Divinity School in Connecticut, the Anglican Theological College of British Columbia, and the University of the South in Tennessee.

An ordained priest of the Anglican Church, Dr. Shepherd is Chairman of the Diocese of California's Commission on Church Building, Art, and Architecture. He also serves on the Roman Catholic Diocese of Oakland's Theological Commission.

Dr. Shepherd is the author of eleven books, the two most recent being A Liturgical Psalter for the Christian Year and The Psalms in Christian Worship, both published this year.

The GTU Lecture will be given at the University Christian Church, 2401 LeConte Avenue, Berkeley, at 8:00 P.M.

- end -

### PARTICIPATING SCHOOLS

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RECEIVED AUG 23 1976

The Church Divinity School of the Pacific

2451 Ridge Road, Berkeley, California 94709

(415) 848-3282

MASSEY H. SHEPHERD JR.  
PROFESSOR OF LITURGICS

August 23, 1976

President Claude Welch, Ph.D., D.D.  
Graduate Theological Union  
Berkeley, California 94709

Dear Claude:

The subject of my GTU lecture which we arranged for Wednesday, November 17th, in the evening will be:

DANTE'S COMEDY: A VISION OF 'WHAT IS AND WAS  
AND IS TO COME'

I plan to treat the subject under four main headings: 1) Spiritual Autobiography; 2) Love Poem; 3) Theodicy; and 4) Prophecy. The paper will be documented in the hope that I may be able to publish it.

<sup>of</sup> I trust this subject is satisfactory and will be of interest not only to the GTU community but also to the public outside. Although the paper is scholarly, I have tried to write it so that the non-expert will not have difficulty following it. I have completed a little more than half of it, and sketched the rest. I hope to have it completed before I leave for our General Convention in Minneapolis early next month.

Again, my appreciation for your gracious invitation, and with all best wishes,

Sincerely,

*Massey*

Massey H. Shepherd, Jr.

RECEIVED OCT 22 1976

The Church Divinity School of the Pacific

2451 Ridge Road, Berkeley, California 94709

(415) 848-3282

FREDERICK H. BORSCH  
DEAN

*E.N. -  
Please call Fred.  
Announce with the  
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October 21, 1976

Dean Claude Welch  
GTU

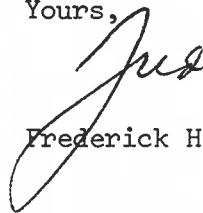
Dear Claude:

I had a chance to talk with Shep today about his forthcoming GTU lecture, and I gathered that he thought that the lecture was going to be at 8 p.m. on Wednesday, November 17. Somewhere I have picked up the idea that it was going to be at 3:30 in the afternoon. Obviously, one of us needs to be straightened out.

I feel too that it would be helpful for him if there could be some advance publicity on the lecture to the GTU community now so that they can reserve the date and later to the public, since I understand this is to be a public GTU lecture. Shep is working incredibly hard preparing and we, of course, feel very honored that he has been selected.

We will be happy on our part to do anything in terms of publicity that you think would be helpful. Oh, also we need to know where the lecture will take place.

Yours,



Frederick H. Borsch

FHB/j

DANTE'S COMEDY: A VISION  
OF 'WHAT IS AND WAS AND IS TO COME'

By Massey H. Shepherd, Jr.

Faculty Lecture  
Graduate Theological Union



Berkeley, California

November 17, 1976

## Preface

Mr. President, colleagues of the faculty, fellow students and friends of the Graduate Theological Union:

I am deeply sensitive to the honor given me to inaugurate this series of public lectures by members of the faculties of the Graduate Theological Union. The reason for my selection I do not, and may never, know; but in gratitude I accepted the invitation in order to share with you a subject which has been, throughout the forty years of my teaching in theological schools, a sustenance to my faith and Christian devotion.

DANTE'S COMEDY: A VISION  
OF 'WHAT IS AND WAS AND IS TO COME'

Any consideration of Dante's Comedy must begin and often return to the poet's own statement of his subject and purpose. In his letter dedicating the Paradiso to a friend and patron of his exile, Can Grande della Scala, the lord of Verona, Dante made his aim explicit and gave the following clues to the interpretation of his poem:

The subject of the whole work, taken in the literal sense only, is considered simply as the state of souls after death; for from this and around this the course of the whole work turns. If, however, the work is taken in the allegorical sense, the subject is man as he is liable to the reward or punishment of justice according to whether he is deserving or undeserving through the freedom of the will. ...

It can be said briefly that the aim of both the whole and the part is to remove those who are living in this life from a state of misery and to lead them to a state of happiness.

The kind of philosophy under which we proceed in whole and in part is moral philosophy or ethics, because the whole was devised not for speculation but for practice.<sup>1</sup>

Immediately prior to these statements, Dante made a more daring claim. The Comedy was to be interpreted according to the accepted fourfold meaning of Scripture in his time. In addition to the literal meaning, "the state of souls after death," he divided the allegorical meaning into three categories: 1) the allegorical proper, i.e., the symbolic, or what Dante called the "mystical"; 2) the moral meaning; and

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<sup>1</sup>Epistulae x. 8, 15-16, ed. Paget Toynbee (Oxford, 1920), pp. 174, 178. The authenticity of the letter continues to be questioned; but the majority of Dante scholars today accept its genuineness. For literature, see Robert Hollander, Allegory in Dante's "Commedia" (Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 40-41.

3) the anagogical meaning, which Dante called "spiritual," but which is better understood as eschatological.<sup>2</sup> These fourfold meanings are interwoven throughout the Comedy; but, in fact, they can frequently be reduced to two. The literal meaning, "the state of souls after death," is also anagogical; and the allegorical meaning is often identical with the moral.

That Dante dared to place his masterpiece on a level with the theological interpretation of Scripture was novel indeed and distinguished it from the customary "allegory of poets."<sup>3</sup> Twice in the Paradiso he called the Comedy a "sacred poem."<sup>4</sup> In one case he expressed his hope (albeit unfulfilled) that in reward for his work he would return to Florence and receive the poet's crown of laurel in the baptistery of San Giovanni where he had entered into the faith. For the rightness of his faith he had just been examined and not found wanting by no less a person than St. Peter, as a prelude to his entrance into the higher mysteries of Heaven:

So, when I was silent, the apostolic light  
sang benedictions on me, and circled me  
three times for what I said at his command;  
I so pleased him with my words.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Epistulae x. 7, ed. Toynbee, pp. 173-174. Dante probably derived the fourfold exegesis from Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica I, i, 10. The roots of it go back to the threefold exegesis of Origen, De Principiis iv. 2, 4. See the work of Henri de Lubac, S.J., Exégèse médiévale, les quatre sens de l'Écriture, 4 vols. (Paris: Aubier, 1959-1964).

<sup>3</sup>Cf. Convivio ii. 1. The distinction of the allegory of the theologians and the allegory of poets has been brought to the fore by Charles S. Singleton, Dante Studies 1: Commedia, Elements of Structure (Harvard University Press, 1954), pp. 84-98; see also Hollander, op. cit., passim.

<sup>4</sup>Par. xxiii. 62; xxv. 1.

<sup>5</sup>Par. xxiv. 151-154.

It is impossible to categorize the Comedy by any single definition. In this lecture I shall maintain that it is a spiritual autobiography, a love poem, a theodicy, and a prophecy, all in one. These fourfold categories of mine are not intended to fit neatly into Dante's own fourfold interpretation of his poem. But my exposition, hopefully, will not do violence to his intention.

As a spiritual autobiography the Comedy is the story of a conversion,<sup>6</sup> depicted as a visual journey through Hell, Purgatory and Heaven. This is its literal meaning. This is how Dante himself tells us of his own experience of "the state of souls after death."

The allegory basically revolves about his two chief guides through the journey and what they teach him: namely, Vergil and Beatrice, neither of them at the time of writing creatures of flesh and blood. They are symbols of the reason and grace that enabled his conversion. The Comedy is a love poem for both of them.

The moral meaning is inherent in the theodicy of the poem: the vindication of divine justice in the face of evil. This is worked out in terms of both fallen man and sinful society, beginning with Dante himself as "Everyman," and extending to his city and country, the Empire and the Church, all of them typical of every individual and commonwealth.

Lastly, the anagogical interpretation points to the consummation of the age, for which Dante drew his imagery from prophecy and apocalyptic, whether of Vergil or of Scripture. The Comedy thus completes a full circle--from the vision of souls after death now to the end time of final judgment. Purgatory is only an intermediate state now. Hell and Heaven are final and eternal states of existence.

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<sup>6</sup>Cf. A. C. Charity, Events and Their Afterlife, The Dialectics of Christian Typology in the Bible and Dante (Cambridge University Press, 1966), p. 167.



In taking this approach to the Comedy I am aware that it goes against the grain of a purely literary appreciation of the poem. Modern criticism stresses the importance, and rightly so, of reading the Comedy first and foremost as poetry: not only the sounds and images, the varied similes, and the sustained lyricism, but also the extraordinary interlocking structural patterns. It is affirmed that the modern reader should discount as outmoded the substantive content of its theology, philosophy, science, and history. It is the poetic genius of Dante that is perduring, not the teaching that he sought to convey. Learned disputations and commentaries about the Comedy's sources, allusions, and symbolism are of value only as they illuminate one's understanding of the poem in the light of the age in which it was written.

Such an aesthetic approach had a powerful advocate in Benedetto Croce (1866-1952), the eminent philosopher and elder statesman of Italy in recent years.<sup>7</sup> It is echoed today by Professor Theodore Roszak in what he calls "the myth of the objective consciousness," when he says,

I, who do not share any of Tolstoy's religion or that of the prophets of Israel, and who do not believe that a single jot or tittle of Dante's or Blake's world view is "true" in any scientific sense, nevertheless realize that any carping I might do about the correctness of their convictions would be preposterously petty. Their words are the conduit of a power that one longs to share. One reads their words only with humility and remorse for having lived on a lesser scale than they, for having at any point foregone the opportunity to achieve the dimensions of their vision.

When a man has seen and has spoken as such men did, the criticisms of the objective consciousness fade into insignificance. What men of this kind invite us to do is to grow as great with experience as they have, and in so doing to find the nobility they have known.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> La Poesia di Dante (7th rev, ed.; Bari: Gius. Laterza e Figli, 1920).

<sup>8</sup> The Making of a Counter Culture (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1969), p. 237.

The difficulty with this view is its half-truth. It divorces the medium from the message. As a poet, Dante had to communicate his message through the medium he knew best and of which he was a master. If we take his words seriously, his intent was not merely one of aesthetic enjoyment nor of appreciation of his genius, of which he was fully aware.<sup>9</sup> His purpose was emphatically ethical and didactic and therefore theological. Umberto Cosmo rightly said:

The Comedy is not, as Croce would have it, simply "a series of lyrics of varying tone" within the framework of a theological romance. It is a vast, compact poetic organism, which in concrete form gives shape to the solution that an exalted religious system, in accord with the aspirations of millions and millions of people, has given from century after century to the problem of human destiny.<sup>10</sup>

The visual and pictorial character of Dante's poem is like the creation story in Genesis or the vision of the eschaton in the Book of Revelation. It is not a documentary film. Only a fundamentalist would take it so. The Comedy is full of symbol and myth, presented as a way of knowing, a way of grasping the realities behind and above our ordinary world of sense and change, whatever the advances of our philosophical and scientific apprehension. It is Dante's way of guiding us to Him "in whose will is our peace."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>For Dante's own estimate of himself, see Inf. 1. 86-87, and Par. xxii. 112-114; xxv. 1-2; and the tributes in the poem from Brunetto Latini, Inf. xv. 55-57; Casella, Purg. ii. 112-114; Bonaguinta of Lucca, Purg. xxiv. 49-60; Guido Guinizelli, Purg. xxvi. 106-108. See also the perceptive comments of Dorothy L. Sayers, Introductory Papers on Dante (London: Methuen, 1954), pp. 184 ff.

<sup>10</sup>Guida a Dante (Torino: Francesco de Silva, 1947), p. 141. An English translation by David Moore is published by Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1950.

<sup>11</sup>Par. iii. 85, quoting Ephesians 2:14. The comparison to Genesis I owe to Singleton, op. cit., p. 79.

I

Spiritual Autobiography

As the story of a conversion, it is inevitable to compare the Comedy with the similar pilgrimage of Saint Augustine. Both Dante and Saint Augustine tower as 'twin peaks' in the history of Christian spirituality. Their temperaments were similar; both shared an intensely sensual and intellectual passion. Their narratives, each in its own way, evoke in us strong and disturbing emotions of identification with them in their struggle to overcome sin and find peace with God. The secret of their power to move us is their acknowledgment that only the free gift of grace can remove from us, as with them, every trace of self-pity and self-justification.

By way of contrast one may consider another famous example of the genre of 'confessions': Peter Abailard's History of His Misfortunes.<sup>12</sup> Like Abailard, Dante had himself gone through a stage of self-justification in his unfinished work, the Convivio ("The Banquet"). Written about 1304-1307,<sup>13</sup> this treatise was an attempt, as unconvincing to Dante as it has been to later readers, to expound his earlier love poetry by way of the "allegory of poets" with the help of philosophy. Dante knew very well what he was doing in this sophisticated 'cover-up' about himself, in seeking to justify his self-blame and self-praise at this "banquet" by reference to Boethius and Saint Augustine.<sup>14</sup>

The citation of the latter, at least, did not fit; and it would not fit until resolved in the Comedy. One's published confessions, if they are to be credible and instructive, must

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<sup>12</sup>Cf. Mary M. McLaughlin, "Abelard as Autobiographer: The Motives and Meaning of his 'Story of Calamities,'" Speculum XLII (1967), 463-488.

<sup>13</sup>The date is that of Michele Barbi, Life of Dante, translated and edited by Paul G. Ruggiers (University of California Press, 1954), p. 20.

<sup>14</sup>Convivio 1. 2.

be honest before God and with oneself, as Saint Augustine noted:

The confessions of my past sins, which you [i.e., God] have forgiven and covered over, when they are read and heard, awaken the heart, lest it sleep in despair and say, "I cannot" rather than wake up in the love of your mercy and the sweetness of your grace, through which whoever is weak is strong and by which he becomes conscious of his own infirmity. ...

Let a brotherly mind love in me what you teach must be loved and lament in me what you teach must be lamented. ... Let that brotherly one rejoice over me when he approves me, and sorrow over me when he disapproves me; so that whether he approves or disapproves me, he loves me. To such I shall disclose myself. ...

Such is the profit of my confessions, not such as I have been but such as I am, that I may confess this not only before you in secret exultation with trembling and in secret sorrow with hope, but also in the ears of the believing sons of men, companions of my joy and sharers of my mortality, my fellow citizens and pilgrims, those who go before and those who follow and are the comrades of my life.<sup>15</sup>

Saint Augustine's Confessions, as we see from this quotation, were in the form of a prayer that included selected narratives of his life, interspersed with theological, ethical, and devotional reflections. Dante's story, in the form of a poem, was a vision of a mind that encompassed the entire cosmos, with flashbacks and projections from his life and his observations and conversations. His joys and sorrows, his loves and hates, his intellectual and artistic curiosity, his political ideals, his Catholic faith, his concern for his world, are all there. It is a panorama unprecedented and unsurpassed in literature. Yet, like Saint Augustine's Confessions, it is all interiorized and made part and parcel of himself until he finally realized the wholeness of his person.

Dante's vision was rooted in his Catholic belief that the three realms of the afterlife--Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven--

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<sup>15</sup>Confessions x. 3-4.



really existed; and this was tested by his own existential experience of them in his own life. Professor Singleton put the matter aptly: "This is a vision, not of things as we should wish them to be, but of things as they are."<sup>16</sup> The visionary journey was set, for symbolic and dramatic reasons, at Easter in 1300-- the year of the first Jubilee proclaimed by the Pope, and the year when Dante achieved the highest political office of a citizen of Florence, his election as one of the six priors of the city for the customary two-month term. The date may have some basis in fact; but his full conversion took many years, at least a span of twenty-five years.

It began with the death of Beatrice in 1290 and the agonizing readjustment of his romantic values, which he recorded in his first book, the Vita Nuova ("The New Life"), his first attempt at a spiritual autobiography. In 1302 came his loss of Florence in the sentence of exile by his political enemies, to be followed shortly by his disgust with his own partisans, so that he resolved "to make a party for himself."<sup>17</sup> Within the next decade he would witness the humiliation of the Papacy by France (1303) and the failure of the Empire to regain its hold of Italy, in the futile expedition of Henry VII (1311-1313) in which Dante had placed so much hope. Lastly, his rejection of an amnesty from Florence in 1315, on humiliating terms, brought to an end all his ambition for the recognition he so longed to possess.<sup>18</sup>

As we follow Dante in his odyssey and share his reactions and emotions, we soon become aware of the sins that beset him, the sins from which he stood aloof, and the sins that provoked in him a righteous indignation and contempt. In the last category

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<sup>16</sup>Op. cit., p. 81. With all respect, I find it difficult to accept his statement that Dante nowhere presents his work as a vision (pp. 62, 82, n. 2), since he recognizes the term in Par. xiv. 49; xvii. 128; and xxxiii. 62.

<sup>17</sup>Par. xvii. 67-69.

<sup>18</sup>See Par. xxv. 1-9.

were the fraudulent and treacherous, all who were destructive of both personal and social relationships. These sinners range from Pope Boniface VIII for his avarice, hypocrisy, and presumption of inordinate claims, to the despicable Master Adam, a counterfeiter of the gold florin of Florence, the medium of commerce and exchange throughout Europe. Of all these falsifiers, Miss Dorothy Sayers remarked:

... they falsify their persons, they falsify speech, they coin false money. ... everything is bought and sold--sex and religion and government, and art and speech and intellect and power: ... the very coin for which they were sold is itself corrupted.<sup>19</sup>

In the infernal pit where demons with their forks tormented the barrators who were stuck in boiling pitch, Dante experienced personal terror; and from it he barely escaped with his life.<sup>20</sup> The scene is a farcical burlesque similar to interludes of hellish portrayals in medieval miracle plays. It was not comic for Dante, but all too real. The charge of barratry (*i.e.*, corruption in office) was the basis of his condemnation by his enemies in 1302. From all that we know about his public career in Florence, Dante's service to his city was marked by honesty, courage, impartiality, and sincere patriotism. Yet the temptation of corruption must have brushed him closely, with a remembrance that haunted him for years.

Of the traditional seven deadly sins, for which those in Purgatory did penance, four of them did not affect Dante personally: envy, sloth, avarice, and gluttony. For the other three he was forced to join in the punishments of his fellow sinners: for pride, wrath and lust. These sins have echoes in Dante's emotions in the Inferno; and there are indications of them in the Paradiso.

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<sup>19</sup>Op. cit., pp. 146-147.

<sup>20</sup>Inf. xxi-xxii. That Dante devoted two cantos to this pit shows how deeply the sin affected him. See the note of John D. Sinclair, The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri, I: Inferno (New York: Oxford University Press, Galaxy Book, 1961), pp. 278-279.

Dante's pride was noted by his contemporaries. The chronicler Villani wrote: "This Dante, because of his learning, was somewhat haughty and reserved and disdainful, after the manner of an ungracious philosopher, not knowing how to converse easily with the unlearned."<sup>21</sup> An example occurs early in the poem in Limbo, the first circle of Hell, when Vergil introduced him to Homer, Horace, Ovid, and Lucan. After these poets had conversed a bit with Vergil, Dante remarked that the group honored him by inclusion in their company: "And so I was sixth among such sages."<sup>22</sup> On the terrace of the proud in Purgatory, Dante was forced to share with these sinners their bent position with face to the ground. From his acquaintance Oderisi, a miniature-painter from Gubbio, he learned how "renown is as the hue of grass that comes and goes," especially among artists and poets. Dante thanked him "for the true speech that fills my heart with good humility."<sup>23</sup>

The wrath of Dante is writ large throughout the Comedy.<sup>24</sup> Once Dante lost all control of it. In the bottom pit of Hell, where the treacherous, encased in ice, are for ever back-biting and gnawing one another in their fury, Dante kicked and tore the hair of one and broke his promise to another. His failure was justified, if at all, because the Guelfs and Ghibellines he met there had, as Professor Sinclair remarks, poisoned the public life of Italy.<sup>25</sup> On the terrace of the wrathful in Purgatory, Dante had to do his penance with the others by walking through the blinding, foul smoke. His fierce denunciations continued

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<sup>21</sup>Giovanni Villani, Chronica ix. 136; cf. Boccaccio, Vita di Dante 12. See also above, notes 5 and 9.

<sup>22</sup>Inf. iv. 102.

<sup>23</sup>Purg. xi. 73-121; cf. xii. 1-6.

<sup>24</sup>Cf. G. A. Borgese, "The Wrath of Dante," Speculum XIII (1938), 183-193; reprinted in Essays on Dante, edited by Mark Musa (Indiana University Press, 1964), pp. 94-109.

<sup>25</sup>Inf. xxxii. 78, 97-105; xxxiii. 149-150; Sinclair, op. cit., I, 417.

to reverberate throughout the Paradiso, though Dante was discreet enough to place them in the mouths of the saints. Popes and higher clergy, preachers and teachers, monks and friars, rulers and kings, the Church, the State, and the city of Florence--none escaped the wrathful condemnation of heavenly voices.

"The last wound to be healed" in Purgatory was lust.<sup>26</sup> It was a long journey from Dante's swoon of pity in the second circle of the Inferno, after he heard Francesca's self-justifying story of her adultery;<sup>27</sup> to that last terrace of Purgatory where the lustful had to pass through a wall of fire in order to regain the earthly Paradise of Eden and man's lost innocence. When Dante balked at these flames, Vergil's last resort of reason to get Dante through them was the reminder:

Look now, my son,  
between Beatrice and you is this wall.<sup>28</sup>

What Dante first saw on the other side of the fiery wall was not Beatrice but a fair lady who was singing and culling flowers on the opposite shore of a sparkling stream. Immediately captivated by her, he composed on the spot a pastorella in the best style of his early poetry: Deh, bella donna, che a'raggi d'amore:

Pray, fair lady, who warm yourself  
at love's beams.<sup>29</sup>

When Beatrice did appear, Dante turned and said to Vergil:

Not a drop of blood  
is left in me that does not tremble;  
I know the signs of the ancient flame.<sup>30</sup>

But Vergil had departed, with but a glimpse of Eden; and Dante was left alone with his beloved face to face. She was not amused. Addressing him by name (Dante's only signature in his poem), she exacted from him an agonizing confession for his unfaithfulness

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<sup>26</sup>Purg. xxv. 139.

<sup>27</sup>Inf. v. 140-142.

<sup>28</sup>Purg. xxvii. 35-36.

<sup>29</sup>Purg. xxviii. 43-44.

<sup>30</sup>Purg. xxx. 46-48.



before she absolved him and directed the fair lady to lead him through the stream of Lethe in a final baptism of forgetfulness of his sin. So Paradise was regained.<sup>31</sup>

## II

### Love Poem

Dante's early lyric poetry--the sonnets, odes, and ballads, addressed cryptically to Beatrice or other "gentle ladies"--stood within the tradition of the troubadours as transmitted through their Sicilian and Italian imitators. Guido Guinizelli (d. 1296) and his disciples, of whom Dante was one, developed a "sweet new style" (dolce stil nuovo) in which sincerity of feeling replaced artificiality, and romantic love was spiritualized so that the beautiful, noble ladies, who were the object of passion, were treated as a grace from heaven.<sup>32</sup> For example, in the canzone of five sonnets--Donne ch'avete intelletto d'amore ("Ladies who have understanding of love")--which Dante wrote for Beatrice and which brought him his first fame as a poet, he said of her:

God meant her as a new creation.

She is nature's summit of goodness  
And beauty is judged by her perfection.<sup>33</sup>

In this canzone the ground was laid for Dante's promise at the end of his Vita Nuova, written a few years after Beatrice's death:

... a marvelous vision appeared to me, in which I saw things that made me resolve to speak no more of that blessed lady until I could write of her more worthily.

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 55-145; xxxi. 1-105.

<sup>32</sup>See C. H. Grandgent, Dante (New York: Duffield and Co., 1916), pp. 90-137; Karl Vossler, Mediaeval Culture, An Introduction to Dante and His Times (New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1929), II, 30-96; Domenico Vittorini, The Age of Dante (New York: The Citadel Press, 1964), pp. 47-84; Thomas G. Bergin, "Dante's Provençal Gallery," Speculum XL (1965), 15-30.

<sup>33</sup>Vita Nuova xix. [Translation by William Anderson, Dante, The New Life (Penguin Books, 1964), pp. 65-66.]

To attain this end, I study as much as I can, as she knows truly. Hence, if it pleases Him by whom all things live, that my life last for a few years, I hope to say of her what has never been said of any woman.

And then may it please Him who is the Lord of grace that my soul may go to see the glory of its lady, of that blessed Beatrice who in glory beholds the face of Him who is blessed throughout all ages.<sup>34</sup>

Thus began the arduous study that made Dante the greatest polymath of his generation and the Comedy "a synthesis of medieval learning"<sup>35</sup>--all offered in homage to Beatrice, whose very name means "blessed one," and who for Dante was the mediator of that enabling grace that brought him salvation and peace with God.

As a lay theologian of no mean ability, Dante knew that all grace, operating and cooperating, comes from God; and for every Christian it begins by baptism into Christ.<sup>36</sup> His doctrine of the person and work of Christ was thoroughly orthodox by any Catholic standard, as the instruction of Beatrice on the Incarnation and Atonement in the seventh canto of the Paradiso makes clear. From a devotional standpoint, however, Christ was remote to him, without intimate and personal relationship. Only twice in the Comedy did he record a direct gift of grace from Christ to his saints: the one to Saint Francis in the seal of the stigmata, the other to Saint Dominic in the gift of his call and first counsel of poverty.<sup>37</sup>

In Dante's own visions Christ is always veiled in symbolic forms: the mythical two-natured griffon, half-eagle and half-lion; a flashing cross that gathers the lights of the crusading warriors of the Church; a dazzling light that his eyes cannot

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid., xliii.

<sup>35</sup>Thomas G. Bergin, Dante (New York: The Orion Press, 1965), p. 45.

<sup>36</sup>Par. xxxii. 82-84 ; cf. xx. 118-123, and Singleton's note in his commentary on the Paradiso (Princeton University Press, 1975), pp. 342-343.

<sup>37</sup>Par. xi. 106-108; xii. 70-75.

endure; and in the final vision, one of three circles of one dimension that bears the color of humanity.<sup>38</sup> Regarding the dazzling light Beatrice explained:

That which overcomes you  
is power, against which nothing has defense.  
Therein are the wisdom and the might  
that open'd path 'twixt heaven and earth,  
for which of old had been such long desire.<sup>39</sup>

There is therefore no "Jesus piety" in Dante, such as became common in the later Middle Ages--one of its earliest expressions perhaps in the "Rosy Sequence," the hymn Dulcis Jesu memoria:

Jesu!--the very thought is sweet!  
In that dear Name all heart-joys meet;  
But sweeter than the honey far  
The glimpses of his Presence are.<sup>40</sup>

The late Father Joseph Jungmann has shown that the awesomeness of Christ to medieval man reflected the Church's struggle to overcome the Arianism of the Germanic peoples after their conversion to Catholicism. Without denying his humanity, his divinity was exalted; and his role of final Judge depicted on the chancel arch of so many parish churches was a bit terrifying--hence the need of more accessible mediators of his grace, above all the Blessed Virgin Mary and from and through her the other saints.<sup>41</sup>

There is a certain truth in this. We all know Christ from the apostolic witness of the Gospels and its transmission in the Church's preaching and sacraments. For most of us it is mediated also through personal relationship with parent, teacher, priest, or friend, or even from our capture by the love of Christ in the life of a saint.

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<sup>38</sup>Purg. xxix. 106-114; Par. xiv. 103-126; xxiii. 28-33; xxxiii. 115-120, 127-132.

<sup>39</sup>Par. xxiii. 35-39.

<sup>40</sup>Stephen Gaselee, The Oxford Book of Medieval Latin Verse (Oxford, 1937), pp. 111 ff. for the Latin text; the translation is that of John Mason Neale. The traditional attribution to Saint Bernard is by no means certain.

<sup>41</sup>J. A. Jungmann, S.J., Pastoral Liturgy (New York: Herder and herder, 1962), Part I, especially pp. 38-48.

So it was with Dante. The grace for his journey was initiated by Saint Mary, and from her through Saint Lucy (probably Dante's patron saint) to Beatrice. Yet Beatrice did not come to him directly, but sought out another mediator, namely Vergil. For she knew that if he was to turn from where he was into the right path he had to be brought to it first of all by the exercise of his reason and his art. Again at the end of the journey, when Beatrice has brought him to see her glory with all the saints in the Mystic Rose of Heaven, she gave him over to Saint Bernard to pray to the Blessed Virgin for the final grace: the vision of the Holy Trinity. It was Saint Bernard, the Virgin's most ardent lover, who had said: "It has been given to Mary that through her you should receive whatever you would have. ... God wills us to have nothing that does not pass through the hands of Mary."<sup>42</sup> So Saint Bernard prayed to her for Dante in the final canto:

Thou, Lady, art so great and so availing,  
that whoso would have grace and not turn to thee,  
his desire would seek to fly without wings.<sup>43</sup>

Yet, for all that, Beatrice was for Dante the icon, the image of Christ, no less than that creature of flesh and blood, the girl of Florence, daughter of Folco Portinari and wife of the banker Simone de' Barbi, the one Dante loved from his first sight of her when he was nine years old. After the long years of struggle and repentance, of worldly fame and bitter exile, Dante beheld her coming, her advent,<sup>44</sup> in the gorgeous pageant of the Church Militant in the Garden of Eden at the top of Purgatory's mountain. She came in judgment and in grace. Standing on the chariot of the Church, drawn by the griffon of two natures, and hailed with shouts of Benedictus qui venis by the blessed troop about the

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<sup>42</sup>Sermo de Vigilia Nativitatis Domini iii. 10. I owe this reference to Edward Moore, Studies in Dante, Second Series (Oxford, 1899), p. 62, n. 1.

<sup>43</sup>Par. xxxiii. 13-15.

<sup>44</sup>For Beatrice as "an Advent," see Charles S. Singleton, Dante Studies 2: Journey to Beatrice (Harvard University Press, 1958), pp. 72-85.

chariot, she reflected in her emerald eyes the two natures, "now with the one, now with the other," of the griffon whose mythical form represented Christ. Dante's immediate reaction was:

... Full of wonder and gladness,  
my soul tasted of that food which satisfies  
of itself, and gives thirst for itself.<sup>45</sup>

Certainly we have here imagery drawn from the festal procession of Corpus Christi. Beatrice is a living monstrance who enshrines in the mirror of her eyes the Christ of the Eucharistic Host.<sup>46</sup>

The last love song to Beatrice occurred after she left Dante in charge of Saint Bernard, when he saw her at the right hand of Rachel in the third tier of the Mystic Rose beneath Saint Mary. The promise was fulfilled "to say of her what has never been said of any woman":

O lady, in whom my hope has strength,  
who did endure for my salvation  
to leave in Hell your footprints,

Of all the things that I have seen,  
I acknowledge the grace and virtue  
to be of your power and your goodness.

You have drawn me from bondage to liberty,  
through all those paths and means  
by which you had the power to do so.

Preserve me in your bounteousness,  
so that my soul, which you made whole,<sup>47</sup>  
may please you when it quits the body.

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<sup>45</sup>Purg. xxxi. 127-129; cf. for the whole scene cantos xxix-xxxi.

<sup>46</sup>For the reference to Corpus Christi, I am indebted to Sinclair, op. cit., II, pp. 415-416. I do not agree with him that Beatrice is herself the Host. She is but the mirror in which the Host is contained, for it is in her eyes that she mirrors the two natures of Christ. Hence my judgment is that Beatrice is only the icon of Christ, not Christ himself. The chariot of the Church in which she stands is drawn from many images. Dante himself likens it to imagery from Ezekiel and Revelation, and to the ancient Roman triumphal processions, such as those of Scipio Africanus and Augustus (Purg. xxix. 100-105, 115-116), of which he had seen a representation on the Arch of Titus in the Roman Forum. Another image may have been the war-chariot (caroccio) with its flag of the medieval communes in Italy.

<sup>47</sup>Par. xxxi. 79-90.

The Comedy is also a love poem for Vergil. Beatrice "left her footprints in Hell" to ask his aid as Dante's guide through the terrors of Hell and the pains of Purgatory, in order to bring Dante back to herself. It is not strange that she should have sought him from among all the righteous souls in Limbo and not, for example, Aristotle whom Dante called "the master of those who know."<sup>48</sup> Vergil was to Dante, as he has been for many others, the poet's poet. So he acknowledged Vergil when they met in that first canto of the poem:

O glory and light of other poets,  
may the long study and great love  
that made me search your volume

Avail me. You are my master and my author;  
you alone are he from whom I took  
the beauteous style that brought me honor.<sup>49</sup>

The meaning of Vergil for Dante was more varied and complex than that of Beatrice. Though now but a shade (ombra), whose voice was "weak from long silence,"<sup>50</sup> Vergil had been, like Beatrice, a real historical person and no mere allegorical symbol. Dante understood him as few have done; for as Professor Hollander has said, Dante read Vergil as Vergil "'read' himself."<sup>52</sup> From Vergil he learned how to sing the beauties of Italy and not only the beauties of "gentle ladies." From Vergil he gained his political ideal of a universal Empire (albeit Roman) as guarantor of peace and justice,<sup>53</sup> ordained by God for this purpose before the Incarnation, and there-

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<sup>48</sup>Inf. iv. 131.

<sup>49</sup>Inf. i. 82-87.

<sup>50</sup>Inf. i. 63; cf. ii. 44.

<sup>51</sup>See Étienne Gilson, Dante et la philosophie (Études de philosophie médiévale, XXVIII; Paris: J. Vrin, 1939), pp. 294-295.

<sup>52</sup>Op. cit., p. 103.

<sup>53</sup>Charles Till Davis, Dante and the Idea of Rome (Oxford, 1957), pp. 123 ff.; J. H. Whitfield, Dante and Virgil (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1949), pp. 31-32; Hollander, op. cit., pp. 75-103.

fore possessing an authority independent of ecclesiastical usurpation.<sup>54</sup> Dante knew the Aeneid by heart<sup>55</sup> and took it seriously, as Saint Augustine had done, to be the history of the founding of this Empire and its destined purpose "to spare the conquered and beat down the proud."<sup>56</sup>

Medieval tradition had made Vergil both a magician and a seer. Dante stoutly rejected the former and affirmed the latter. In the infernal pit where diviners, soothsayers, astrologers, and magicians are punished, Dante cleared Vergil's reputation as a diviner and placed on his lips a scathing judgment against all tricksters. For they defied both God's sovereign will and man's free will.<sup>57</sup> Interestingly, these magicians are placed in a pit just beyond that of the simoniacs, named for the arch-trickster of them all, Simon Magus, since these sinners sought to obtain spiritual authority for money and thus "prostituted with gold and silver the things of God."<sup>58</sup>

On the other hand, with his contemporaries, Dante accepted the interpretation of early Latin Fathers that Vergil's fourth Eclogue contained, unknown to Vergil himself, a prophecy of the coming of

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<sup>54</sup>This is the argument of Dante's De Monarchia, especially Book iii. It explains the outbursts in the Comedy against Constantine's "Donation" (Inf. xix. 115-117) and Boniface VIII's claims to join "the sword to the crook" (Purg. xix. 97-112).

<sup>55</sup>So Vergil says to him in Inf. xx. 113-114.

<sup>56</sup>Vergil, Aeneid vi. 853, quoted in De Monarchia ii. 6. Cf. Augustine, De Civitate Dei i. pref. and 6; in xviii. 1521, he uses the Aeneid for the history of Rome, sometimes discriminating between what he considers to be history and what to be "poetic fictions."

<sup>57</sup>Inf. xx. 28-30, 97-99; cf. Vergil, Aeneid x. 198-200. See the fine note on this canto by Sinclair, *op. cit.*, I, 256-259.

<sup>58</sup>Inf. xix. 1-4; cf. Acts 8:18-23.

Christ.<sup>59</sup> Both the Eclogue and the Aeneid were for Dante a true praeparatio evangelica. Professor Hollander is right in remarking that Vergil's Aeneid "becomes, in Dante's poem, ... the pagan counterpart to the Old Testament, the authoritative history of Troy on its way to becoming Christian, as the Old Testament is the history of the Hebrews on a parallel path."<sup>60</sup> In one place in the De Monarchia Dante called Vergil "our divine poet."<sup>61</sup> When the two of them were leaving the terrace of the avaricious in Purgatory, they met the poet Statius (d. A.D. 96), now freed from 1,200 years of penance. Statius was a poet whom Dante admired; and his secret conversion to Christianity was invented by Dante to suit his own dramatic purpose. In recounting his story, Statius quoted three lines from Vergil's fourth Eclogue, and then said to Vergil: "Through you I was a poet, through you a Christian."<sup>62</sup>

Why Dante did not give Vergil, as he did for Statius and certain other righteous pagans, a destiny among the redeemed--though Vergil was a prophet of Christ--is a question that has troubled many interpreters; for he loved Vergil above all other guides on the way to Beatrice--for those humane qualities of firmness and tenderness, patience and reasonableness, and for a faithful and humble devotion to duty. The reason lies in the theodicy of the Comedy, to which we now turn.

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<sup>59</sup> Purg. xxii. 70-72; De Monarchia i. 11, ii. 6; Epistulae vii. 1 (to Henry VII), ed. Toynbee, pp. 89-90. The earliest allusion in the Fathers is in Lactantius, Divinae Institutiones v. 5, vii. 24. It is expressly quoted as a prophecy of Christ in Constantine's Oration to the Assembly of the Saints 19-20, a Greek translation of a lost Latin original, which some critics attribute to the hand of Lactantius. See also Augustine, De Civitate Dei x. 27. Jerome, however, considered the interpretation to be absurd: Epistulae liii. 7; cf. xxii. 29.

<sup>60</sup> Op. cit., p. 79.

<sup>61</sup> ii. 3; in Inf. iv. 80 he is called "l'altissimo poeta."

<sup>62</sup> Purg. xxii. 70-73. Dante's invention is generally thought to be based on Statius' Thebaid xii. 481 ff., concerning the altar of mercy at Athens; cf. Acts 17:23.



### III Theodicy

In his journey through the heavenly circle of Mars, Dante met his great-great-grandfather, Cacciaguida (c. 1091-1147), who had fought and died in the Second Crusade under the Emperor Conrad III. His ancestor said to him:

... A conscience dark  
with its own or another's shame  
will feel your words to be harsh.  
Nonetheless, all falsehood put aside,  
make manifest all your vision  
and let them scratch where the itch is.<sup>63</sup>

Many readers of Dante have had this itch. They protest his harsh judgments of eternal torments or purgatorial pains which he awarded to friends and foes alike.

Some of his judgments had a factual basis; others were no doubt the result of unreliable information. They were colored, as are all human judgments, by his own moral and ideological values. We should not fault him, by our modern standards, for the uncritical historical methods of his age. No historical writing, however, can ever be so objective as to be definitive; it is always subject to correction and revision. Myths and legends make history no less than verified facts, whether of persons or of events. A case in point was Dante's belief, along with others of his time, in the historicity of the fictitious "Donation" to the Pope of temporal rule in Italy by the Emperor Constantine. Though Dante absolved Constantine for his "good intention" and placed him among the just rulers in Heaven, he no less excoriated the gift as contrary to divine law and hence a major cause of the evil--indeed, as he called it, the "ruin"--of his own times, especially in the corruption of the Church.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup>Par. xvii. 124-129.

<sup>64</sup>Par. xx. 55-60; cf. Inf. xix. 115-117; Purg. xxxii. 124-129; De Monarchia iii. 10. The proof by Lorenzo Valla in 1440 that the "Donation" was a forgery did not materially alter papal claims until recent times.

The theodicy of the Comedy is, of course, a Christian one. Its picturesque narrative, so full of symbolism, is rooted in the Scriptural "myths" of the Creation and Fall of man and his redemption and recreation through the Incarnation and Atonement of Christ. Its ethic has a base in the classical philosophy of antiquity, especially that of Aristotle; but the theological super-structure is indebted chiefly to the scholastic summae of his time, particularly that of Saint Thomas Aquinas. His own spirituality, however, owed much to the exegesis of the Spiritual Franciscans, as we shall see in his prophetic application. Dante did not argue his faith. He expounded it.<sup>65</sup> As we have already noted, his theodicy represented reality as it is and not what one might wish it otherwise to be. Its verification was his own experience of sin and grace in his own spiritual pilgrimage.<sup>66</sup>

Unlike Milton, Dante was not concerned to "justify the ways of God to man," but to illustrate the divine justice. By selecting a single vice or virtue, as the case might be, he sought to show their eternal consequences, so that others like himself "who are living in this life may be removed from a state of misery and led to a state of happiness."<sup>67</sup> Two principles underlie his theodicy. One is the sovereignty of divine justice, in which God's power, wisdom, and love are One.<sup>68</sup> The other is man's free will, as it is informed by his reason, for which he is accountable. Dante was fully aware of the unfathomable mystery of this justice to the mind of mortals, and he had his own problem with it (as we shall see).

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<sup>65</sup>Notably in Purg. xvi. 65-93, xviii. 1-75; Par. vii. I am much indebted to the exposition and documentation of Singleton, Journey to Beatrice.

<sup>66</sup>See above, note 16.

<sup>67</sup>See above, note 1.

<sup>68</sup>Cf. Inf. iii. 4-6, the inscription over Hell.

Beatrice instructed him that the vision of his mind was "too scant a vessel for that Good which has no limit":

Therefore within the eternal justice  
the vision that your world receives  
penetrates as the eye into the sea.

For though it sees the bottom from the shore,  
in the open sea it does not, although  
it is there; but the depth conceals it.<sup>69</sup>

In his creation man was given a perfect nature that was ordered by God for the attainment of eternal happiness. To achieve this end, God provided, in addition, gifts of grace beyond man's natural powers to sustain him in free communion with, and vision of God, so that his reason might control his appetites and his body thereby remain incorruptible. Man thus had integrity--or what Dante, quoting the liturgy, called "dignity"<sup>70</sup>--whereby he was able to commit himself entirely and without difficulty or pain to what is good. By specious reasoning and abuse of free will, in his eagerness to know evil as well as good as though he would be like God, man lost his original righteousness and impaired his nature. He thereby forfeited the happiness of Eden, his earthly paradise, and alienated himself from that free and unimpeded communion with his Maker which he enjoyed there, with the result that he could no longer control his passions; and his body became subject to death.

Only a new and more marvellous grace could save him; and God gave him this promise of redemption even as he was expelled from Eden.<sup>71</sup> The Fall is therefore the condition and the predicament of natural man as he knows himself. Reason and free will remain. By their proper exercise man can acquire a certain virtue and peace; but he can never regain Eden, much less the supernal happiness and light of Heaven without the grace of redemption. That grace begins

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<sup>69</sup>Par. xix. 50-51, 58-63.

<sup>70</sup>Par. vii. 82, 86; cf. the ancient Collect: Deus, qui humanae substantiae dignitatem mirabiliter condidisti, etc.

<sup>71</sup>Genesis 3:15.

with our baptism into Christ, a baptism of repentance and faith, which is the earnest of salvation.

That is why Dante set the time of his journey at Easter, the normative time of baptism at the Paschal mysteries,<sup>72</sup> and more particularly in the year of Jubilee, 1300, when the Pope gave a special plenary indulgence of the Church for pilgrims to Rome.<sup>73</sup> Dante may well have had in this case a reminiscence of a stage in his conversion, as one of these pilgrims, when he was midway in the course of his life and at the height of his public career.<sup>74</sup>

That is why Vergil, who lacked this baptism and faith--having lived as he said "in the time of the false and lying gods"<sup>75</sup>--could not be saved. Nor could he initiate his role as guide without the intervention from Heaven of the three ladies who had pity for Dante's plight, themselves a paradigm of the Holy Trinity professed in baptism.<sup>76</sup> Even in the Inferno, whose terrain Vergil knew well,<sup>77</sup> he was unable by reason or art to storm the citadel of the Lower Hell, so as to lead Dante into it, without the aid of an angel "sent from heaven."<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>72</sup>Cf. Charles S. Singleton, "'In Exitu Israel de Aegypto,'" 78th Annual Report of the Dante Society of America (1960), reprinted in John Freccero, ed., Dante, A Collection of Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1965), pp. 102-121.

<sup>73</sup>The Bull of Pope Boniface VIII, Antiquorum habet fide, dated Feb. 23, 1300, but retroactive to the previous Christmas, was the first time of those Jubilee years which have continued to the present. Dante's friend Casella apparently received the indulgence after his death; cf. Purg. ii. 98-106.

<sup>74</sup>See above, pp. 8 and 15; cf. Inf. i. 1; Convivio iv. 23-25. For Dante's pilgrimage to Rome, cf. Inf. xviii. 28-33.

<sup>75</sup>Inf. i. 72.

<sup>76</sup>Inf. ii. 94-114; Par. xxxiii. 16-18; see above, p. 15.

<sup>77</sup>Inf. ix. 25-29.

<sup>78</sup>Inf. ix. 85.

On the Mount of Purgatory, where he had no experience, Vergil was dependent for direction upon the courteous help of the penitents and subsidiary guides such as Sordello and Statius.<sup>79</sup> When at last he brought Dante, now "free, upright, and whole" in his will,<sup>80</sup> to the shore opposite Eden, Vergil could go no further. Though he had acquired the intellectual and moral virtues that other righteous pagans had, he had, like them, not received the sanctifying grace of those who believe in Christ.<sup>81</sup> Hence he had to return to his eternal home in Limbo, the first circle of Hell. Yet Dante gave (perhaps for Vergil's sake) a new conception of Limbo. It was not merely a shadowy realm for infants and others who were unbaptized. It was a place of light and peace, without torment though without hope of greater glory.<sup>82</sup> Vergil's departure is the most poignant moment in the Comedy; and Dante felt it deeply. He cried out for Vergil even as Beatrice his beloved appeared:

... Vergil, sweetest father,  
Vergil to whom I gave myself for my salvation,  
Nor did all our ancient mother lost  
avail to keep my dew-washed cheeks  
from turning dark again with tears.<sup>83</sup>

Dante, too, despite his restored will by Vergil's guidance, could not cross the stream into Eden to possess the fair lady who was singing and culling flowers--herself the very symbol of man's primal innocence.<sup>84</sup> No one can live again in Eden. It is no place

<sup>79</sup>Purg. vii. 41 ff., xxii. 124-126.

<sup>80</sup>Purg. xxvii. 140.

<sup>81</sup>Purg. vii. 28-36. Vergil was conscious only of defects, not of sins. Miss Dorothy Sayers calls him "Natural Man in his perfection"; Further Papers on Dante (New York: Harpers, 1957), p. 56.

<sup>82</sup>Inf. iv. 33-42.

<sup>83</sup>Purg. xxx. 50-54; cf. i.121-129.

<sup>84</sup>See Singleton's chapter "Matelda," in Journey to Beatrice, pp. 204-221. Though a handmaid of Beatrice, any historical identification of this fair lady remains problematical.

for anyone who has a memory of having sinned, though the sin be absolved and have no longer any power. That state belongs to Heaven alone by reason of the redemption brought and wrought in Christ. So Beatrice, the instrument of Christ's grace to Dante, had him washed in the two streams that flowed from the one fountain in Eden: first Lethe, for the forgetfulness of sin, and then Eunoë, for the remembrance of good.<sup>85</sup> So also in Dante's vision, that baptism of death unto sin and of raising to newness of life,<sup>86</sup> which he had received mystically and sacramentally in San Giovanni's font in Florence, was now finally sealed for an everlasting joy in the vision of God with all the saints. As Eden was a transitory place for those who fell from grace, so now it is only a transitory place for those who are redeemed by grace.

The Purgatorio is the key to the theodicy of the Comedy. It is one of Dante's most original conceptions. Unlike Hell and Heaven, which are ultimate states of life, Purgatory existed in the created order of time and would ultimately pass away. Medieval tradition, however, had no certain notion of its place. Some put it in the underworld near Hell; others in some remote, unknown vale or mountain on earth.<sup>87</sup> Dante sought a clearer definition. He imagined it to be a mountain rising from the seas of the southern hemisphere directly opposite Jerusalem, pushed up by Satan's fall into the center of the earth. It was bathed by the light of the sun and moon and stars and so experienced the alternation of day and night. Vergil and Dante took three days and nights to climb it. As a fiction of Dante's imaginative symbolism, no one, of course, had ever seen it.<sup>88</sup> Yet Dante invested it with a realism by careful calcu-

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<sup>85</sup>Genesis 2:10 refers to four streams from the river of Eden, whereas Dante has only two: Lethe, drawn from classical mythology, and Eunoë, from his own invention--an example of his free adaptations.

<sup>86</sup>Cf. Romans 6:3-11.

<sup>87</sup>Thomas G. Bergin, Perspectives on the Divine Comedy (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967), pp. 10 ff.

<sup>88</sup>Cf. Purg. i. 23-24, concerning the four stars; see M. A. Orr, Dante and the Early Astronomers, New and revised edition (London: Allan Wingate, 1956), pp. 190-192.

lations of the position of the constellations at the time of the spring equinox; and since in the southern hemisphere the sun is seen from the north, Vergil and Dante always ascended the mountain by steps on its northern slope, never on its sunless, southern side.

Considered allegorically, Purgatory is in truth our own life in time and space, the way of pilgrimage for all redeemed in Christ. It begins on Easter morn with our baptism.<sup>89</sup> For many it took a long time to start the climb--thus the Ante-Purgatory was given nine of the thirty-three cantos, almost a fourth of the canticle. But Purgatory belongs to all who by repentance and faith have hope. Unlike the inhabitants of Hell, the penitents do not blame others, much less God, for their fate; nor do they resent the place where they find themselves. They are not shut up in self-containment, in the illusory goods which Hell's citizens have chosen, with no relation to others near them except in frustration or hostility. Though the sufferings in Purgatory are grievous, they are accepted gladly because they are remedial and not merely punitive. The penitents support one another and pray for one another and seek the prayers of others still in this life. They do not complain; and they rejoice when one of them is released. Surrounding them, too, are the praises and prayers of the liturgy and artistic representations of virtues in the lives of the saints.

The closed system of this Christian theodicy, however, left Dante uneasy, and with a problem never convincingly answered for him: namely, why those who had never heard of Christ should have no hope of redemption in Heaven.<sup>90</sup> He tried to intimate his problem in several ways. If he could not save Vergil, he invented the secret conversion of the pagan poet Statius, as we have seen, because of Vergil.<sup>91</sup> He also placed the pagan Emperor Trajan among the just rulers in the Paradiso because of a pious legend about his salvation wrought by the intercession of Pope Gregory the Great--a legend also accepted,

<sup>89</sup> See above, note 72, for the symbolism of Purg. i.

<sup>90</sup> The question is raised in Par. xix., and Beatrice tries to answer it in verses 70-90; cf. above, note 69.

<sup>91</sup> See above, note 62.

though with caution, by Saint Thomas Aquinas.<sup>92</sup>

More astounding than these, who by invention or legend were in some way made Christian, Dante saved two pagans, one of them Roman, the other Trojan, to show his belief (also supported by Saint Thomas, no less than by Beatrice's instruction about the unfathomable mystery of divine justice). The former was Cato, who committed suicide rather than submit to the tyranny of Caesar, and whom Dante made the guardian of the Mount of Purgatory and presumably the last who would find salvation among the penitents. Normally one would expect him, if mentioned, among the suicides in Hell. But Dante used him allegorically as a champion of free will deciding for liberty rather than submitting to despair.<sup>93</sup> The latter was a more surprising choice: a name taken from Vergil's Aeneid, the Trojan hero Ripheus, whom Vergil described as "the one most just among the Trojans and most careful of the right, though the gods thought otherwise."<sup>94</sup>

Thus Dante, the lay theologian, with a layman's intrinsic sense of what was just and right, left a way open for later ages to consider with their theologians about the exclusive claims of Christianity, for all its doctrine of a Limbo for righteous pagans, and find a way for a more universal salvation. Perhaps--and this is only a conjecture--Dante had in mind the teaching of St. Paul about the "glory and honor and peace for every one who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. For God shows no partiality."<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>92</sup>Par. xx. 43-48; cf. Purg. x. 73-93; Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica III, Suppl. q. 71, sec. 5. The legend first appeared in the anonymous Vita of the Pope by a monk of Whitby, ch. xxix [see Charles W. Jones, Saints' Lives and Chronicles in Early England (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1947), pp. 56, 116-117.]

<sup>93</sup>Purg. i. 31 ff.; cf. De Monarchia ii. 5 (quoting Cicero De Officiis 1. 112); Vergil, Aeneid viii. 667-670; Lucan, Pharsalia ii; for a different view, see Augustine, De Civitate Dei i. 23-24. In addition to Singleton's note on Purg. i. 31 (pp. 10-12, see C. H. Grandgent, "Cato and Elijah: A Study in Dante," Publications of the Modern Language Association of America XVII (N.S. X; 1902), 71-89.

<sup>94</sup>Aeneid ii. 426-428; cf. Par. xx. 67-69, and Singleton's note, pp. 336-338, with reference to Saint Thomas Aquinas.

<sup>95</sup>Romans 2:10-11, with its preceding argument.



#### IV Prophecy

The Comedy is not only a theodicy; it is a prophecy. Like Biblical prophecy it is both immediate and particular in application and universal in scope. A particular prophecy, as a prediction, may not have been fulfilled; but as a universal judgment it contains many facets of meaning--historical, moral, and eschatological. Prophecy arises out of despair or hope or both together. Dante's prophecy was no exception. His insights into his own times searched out the ultimate issues of the strifes of individuals and parties, the conflicts of Florence and other cities of Italy, the collapse of the Empire, and the corruption of the Church.

In his own life and person he had experienced all these sorrows. What was left to him was a strong faith in God's intervention to bring again unity and peace. The Comedy has at times the urgency of apocalyptic prophecy: the time of repentance and endurance is at hand for the Kingdom of God draws near. In line with patristic and medieval exegesis of the Book of Revelation, Dante believed that the first stages of this end were at hand in the overthrow of the Anti-Christ and the establishment on earth of the millennial reign of Christ.<sup>96</sup> In this hope he was encouraged and comforted by the hopes and ideals of the Spiritual Franciscans, whose works he knew and whose principle of apostolic poverty in the Church, both of property and of temporal power, he fully shared.<sup>97</sup>

That this end was near is indicated by Dante's vision of the Mystic Rose of Heaven, where is gathered together in its varied petals all the saints who for ever contemplate God's glory. Half of the petals are complete: namely, the saints of the Old Testament who believed by faith and hope in Christ's coming. The other half

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<sup>96</sup> See Robert E. Lerner, "Refreshment of the Saints: The Time after Antichrist as a Station for Earthly Progress in Medieval Thought," Traditio XXXII (1976), especially pp. 124-136.

<sup>97</sup> Davis, op. cit., pp. 195-235, 239-243, and the same author's article, "Education in Dante's Florence," Speculum XL (1965), pp. 425-426.

are the saints of the New Covenant, led by the Blessed Virgin.<sup>98</sup> Only a few petals are missing--seats in this rosy amphitheatre yet to be filled. One of them is reserved for the Emperor Henry VII, a last tribute of Dante to his erstwhile hero.<sup>99</sup> And as Beatrice shows him this, she utters her last words to him in a judgment upon the greed of the papacy, and especially Pope Clement V, who had first supported then betrayed Henry and so was doomed to Hell to push Pope Boniface VIII deeper into the pit reserved for simoniac pontiffs.<sup>100</sup> It is the final moral judgment of prophecy, whether for eternal bliss or eternal judgment that has reverberated through the Paradiso.<sup>101</sup>

There are two apocalyptic passages in the Comedy that must be mentioned. The interpretation of them is still in question, except for the fact that portends an imminent denouement and revelation of divine justice. One appears in the very first canto, and is appropriately given to Vergil when he comes to rescue Dante, helpless before the rapacious she-wolf, the lupa, symbol of Rome, who prevented his climb up the sun-bathed mountain when he had just emerged from the dark wood. The prophecy of Vergil is this:

Many are the beasts with whom she mates  
and there will be more, until the Hound  
shall come to deal her doleful death.

He shall not feed on earth and pelf,  
but on wisdom, love, and virtue,  
and his nation will be 'tween felt and felt.

He shall be salvation to low-lying Italy  
for which died the virgin Camilla,  
and Euryalus, Turnus, and Nisus of their wounds.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>98</sup>There are two descriptions of the Rose, one by Beatrice in Par. xxx, and one by Saint Bernard in Par. xxxii.

<sup>99</sup>Par. xxx. 130-138; see above, p. 8.

<sup>100</sup>Ibid., 139-148; cf. Inf. xix.

<sup>101</sup>See above, pp. 10-11.

<sup>102</sup>Inf. i. 100-108; cf. De Monarchia i. 13. The names are from the Aeneid--two who fought with Aeneas, and two against him--ix. 176-449, xi. 759-831, xii. 887-952.

We shall not pause to survey the many theories that have sought to identify the "hound" (Veltro) and his place of origin. Since it is Vergil's prophecy, he is probably an Augustan, imperial person, but one who represents the one, true God "of wisdom, love, and virtue."<sup>103</sup> In any case, the "hound," who is more than a match for the she-wolf, is a messianic figure.<sup>104</sup>

The other passage is a full apocalypse of Biblical dimensions, imparted to Dante by Beatrice at the end of the Purgatorio. It follows after the gorgeous pageant of the triumph of the Church Militant, in which Beatrice finally appears as a "monstrance" on the chariot of the Church, drawn by the two-natured griffon, and surrounded by the Biblical saints and the nymphs of the four cardinal and the three theological virtues. Suddenly the procession wheels about and returns into the wood. Dante falls asleep and when he wakes, he finds nothing left but an empty chariot tied to the tree by which Adam fell, and Beatrice seated on the ground as guardian of the chariot. The whole history of the Church to Dante's time is now revealed in the fate of the chariot.

First, the chariot is buffeted by persecution, then laden with the ill plumage of the Roman eagle, representing Constantine. Next it is rent and part of its bottom taken away by the heresies and schisms. What is left is again burdened with the plumage of the Holy Roman Empire founded by Charlemagne. Lastly, the chariot is transformed into the image of a beast with the seven heads and ten horns of Revelation 13:1, and upon the beast a harlot. Such has the Church and Papacy become under Boniface VIII. But there is more. A giant appears to woo and then beat the harlot, and carry her off in the chariot-monster. The meaning is clear. France has usurped the Empire, wooed and then humiliated the Papacy and finally carried both Church and Pope to Avignon.<sup>105</sup>

<sup>103</sup>Cf. Inf. iii. 5-6, and above, n. 68, where "power" replaces "virtue."

<sup>104</sup>For a suggestive summary of the theories, see Leonardo Olschki, The Myth of Felt (University of California Press, 1949).

<sup>105</sup>This is the apocalypse of Purg. xxxii. The interpretation of Revelation is that of the Spiritual Franciscans. See above, n. 97.

The prophecy of the near future was then given to Dante by Beatrice:

Not for all time shall be without heir  
the eagle that left its plumage in the car,  
whereby it became a monster, then a prey.  
For I see surely, and therefore tell of it,  
stars already near to give the time,  
secure from all check and hindrance,  
In which a five hundred ten and five,  
sent by God, shall slay the thievish woman  
with that giant who now sins with her.<sup>106</sup>

The clue again escapes us. We are only told with certainty that deliverance is near. The mysterious 515 recalls the 666 of Revelation 13:18, the number of the beast, commonly referred to the Roman Emperor Nero. But some Western texts transcribed the number as 616--a more likely counterpart to Dante's 515. Did Dante know this textual variant, and so make the deliverer a number comparable to that of the first persecutor of the Church? In this case, the 515 would be an earthly, imperial figure such as Henry VII.<sup>107</sup>

For myself, I am more impressed by Professor Kaske's interpretation based upon the Latin numerals for 515, namely DXV. He sees it as a monogram for God (Dio) and man (Vomo) united in the X which is the symbol of Christ.<sup>108</sup> We cannot be certain in these matters. The resolution of apocalyptic prophecy always remains open to ever new applications to history and its eschatological ending. Perhaps Dante knew this as well as we do today. Since his Comedy was intended to be understood as Scripture, he may still be prophetic.

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<sup>106</sup> Purg. xxxiii. 37-45.

<sup>107</sup> This is the view of Edward Moore, Studies in Dante, Third Series, Miscellaneous Essays (Oxford, 1903), pp. 253-283; and it seems to be favored by Singleton in his commentary on the Purgatorio, pp. 813-815.

<sup>108</sup> R. E. Kaske, "Dante's 'DXV' and 'Veltro,'" Traditio XVII (1961), 185-254; an abridged reprint in Dante, A Collection of Critical Essays, edited by John Freccero (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1965), pp. 122-140. Cf. Hollander, op. cit., pp. 184-190.

None of us can escape, at least none of us who are heirs of Western civilization, much less of Christendom, the passion and the power of Dante's vision. It is true, his world and his scientific knowledge of it was much more limited in scope than is ours. But I doubt if it was less complex, if one considers his primary concern with man's personal and social predicaments and alienations. These problems are still with us--man's free will, uninformed by reason, and self-sufficiency in his pride and greed that threaten to destroy him, his society, and even the good earth given to him to cultivate rather than to ravish.

A basic myth of the Comedy is the ideal of Roma aeterna as the center of world government and a single faith, ruled by a righteous Emperor and a pastoral Pope, doing their divinely appointed tasks in harmony and cooperation. We may dismiss the myth as unrealistic and romantic. But in doing so we may lose the substance of truth that the myth seeks to convey. For fallen man is not so far gone that he has lost a memory and a hope of the unity and peace and concord of that "city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God."<sup>109</sup> It is contained in a statement made to Dante by the first and lowliest saint he met in Heaven, Piccarda Donati, the sister of that Corso who was the cause of his exile, when she said:

Nay, it is the essence of this blessed state  
to keep ourselves within the divine will,  
whereby our wills themselves are made one.

Hence our being ranked from height to height  
throughout this realm is a joy to the whole,  
as to the King who draws our wills to his.

"And in his will is our peace";  
it is the sea to which all things move,  
both what it creates and what nature makes.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Hebrews 11:10.

<sup>110</sup> Par. iii. 79-86; see above, note 11.

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The Reverend Massey H. Shepherd, Jr., is the Hodges Professor of Liturgics at the Church Divinity School of the Pacific and serves concurrently as Professor at the Graduate Theological Union

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