Wit and Humour in Dante

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WIT AND HUMOUR IN DANTE.

PROFESSOR SANNIA'S work on the humorous element in the *Divine Comedy*¹ marks in some respects an epoch in the study of Dante. Its title may seem audacious, to the verge of irreverence; but if this is so, the fault lies partly in an age-long neglect of one aspect of the great poet's nature, partly in a difficulty (common to both the Italian language and our own) confronting the critic who would define in appropriate language that subtle element—now gently playful, now fiercely ironical—which redeems Dante's work as a whole from dulness, and makes the *Divine Comedy* in particular one of the most human books ever written.

Whether or not Professor Sannia has fallen deep into the pit that ensnares most critics who have a hobby and a mission, his pioneer movement is certainly far from futile. We believe that he has largely proved his point, and given us, in consequence, a living Dante in place of the traditional wooden effigy. At any rate his work will have justified itself if it turns the attention of all-too-serious Dante students to a new field, and emphasizes those qualities in the Divine Poet which the sheer sublimity of his work has hitherto tended to obscure.

In the following study we shall not confine ourselves to the limits of the *Divina Commedia*, but gather all we can in so short a space from his other works, and especially from the *Convivio* and the *De Vulgari Eloquentia*.

As a preliminary we shall do well to bestow a glance at least upon Dante's environment from this particular point of view—the temper of the generation in which he lived, and that of his immediate circle, not neglecting such inferences as may be suggested by the tradition of his physiognomy and the evidence of his earliest biographers. For a provisional definition of the subject we may turn to 'The Philosopher' from whom Dante and his contemporaries drew directly and indirectly. 'Melancholy men of all others are most witty.' So said the 'Maestro

¹ *Il comico, l'umorismo e la satira nella Divina Commedia*. Da Enrico Sannia. 2 vols. Milan, 1909.

di color che sanno,' according to the author of the *Anatomy of Melancholy*; and Boccaccio¹, describing the habitual expression of Dante's face, says it was 'always melancholy and thoughtful.'

Before we draw the enticing inference that Dante was a paragon of wit, we shall, however, do well to verify our quotation from Aristotle, and to bear in mind the fact that the words 'wit' and 'witty,' like their companions 'humour,' 'humorous,' have changed their meaning since the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. By 'Wit and Humour,' as applied to Dante, we mean something vague and general, yet sufficiently definite to make our quest practicable. The phrase is intended to cover the playful and fanciful use of the intellect upon literary material, in the broadest sense: from the simplest and most elementary puns and word-plays to the subtlest and most surprising analogies; from the most discursive description of a laughably incongruous situation, to the swift agility of brilliant paradox; from the quiet, genial sally of the man who laughs *with* you while he laughs *at* you, to the biting sarcasm of the satirist, whose keen and often envenomed darts are winged with wrath and indignation. It is this last phase that we shall naturally expect to find most prominent in Dante.

In so far as it is to be expressed by a single Aristotelian word, our subject corresponds most nearly in connotation to the Greek *εὐτραπεία*, that intellectual elasticity and adroitness which seizes instinctively upon the right subjects on which to vent its fun, and handles them with a sure, artistic touch. It stands midway between the vulgarity of the buffoon (*βωμολόχος*) and the insensibility to humour of the downright boor (*ἄγροικος*). Indeed in one place (*Mag. Mor.* i, 31, 1193) this quality of *εὐτραπεία* is described by the Philosopher in terms which practically identify it with our own useful phrase 'A sense of humour.' 'The vulgar buffoon,' he says, 'deems everybody and everything a legitimate mark for a jest, while the boor has no will to jest himself, and to be jested upon makes him angry. The witty man'—the true humorist, as we might say—'avoids both extremes. He selects his subjects—and is not a boor. On the one hand he has the capacity of jesting with decency and decorum'—his jokes do not jar on our good taste—'and on the other, he can bear good humouredly jests of which he is himself the butt.'

¹ *Vita*, § 8.

² *Mag. Mor.* i, 31, 1193. *εὐτραπεία δ' ἐστὶ μεσότης βωμολοχίας καὶ ἀγροικίας. ὁ τε γὰρ βωμολόχος ἐστὶν ὁ πάντα καὶ πᾶν οἰόμενος δεῖν σκώπτειν, ὁ τε ἀγροικὸς ὁ μὴτε σκώπτειν βουλόμενος, μὴτε σκωφθῆναι, ἀλλ' ὀργιζόμενος. ὁ δ' εὐτράπελος ἀνὰ μέσον τούτων, ὁ μὴτε πάντας καὶ παντὶ σκώπτων, μὴτ' αὐτὸς ἀγροικὸς ὢν. ἔσται δ' ὁ εὐτράπελος διττῶς πῶς λεγόμενος. καὶ γὰρ ὁ δυνάμενος σκῶψαι ἐμμελῶς, καὶ δεῖν ὑπομείνῃ σκωπτόμενος.*

How far Dante would satisfy the second part of this canon, may perhaps be open to discussion. But this is to anticipate. For the moment it behoves us to observe that a somewhat tedious search in the Berlin Index volume for the passage cited in the *Anatomy of Melancholy* reveals the fact that Burton's 'witty man' is not *εὐτράπελος* but *εὐστοχος*¹. In other words, what Aristotle attributes to the melancholy temperament is inductive acumen, the qualification of the scientific discoverer, rather than a sense of humour. The two qualities have, however, something in common: the gift of seeing and grasping analogies not obvious to the plain man in his plain moments². So this crumb of comfort may hearten us in our quest, although the path be at first sight as unpromising as were certain stages of the Poet's mystical journey.

If then we elect to follow Aristotle, as Dante followed Virgil (and I feel sure the Divine Poet would approve our choice of guide), we may draw one more drop of comfort from a passage in the *Eudemian Ethics*³, in which the Philosopher, discoursing of friendship, notes how unlike characters often pair off together, 'as austere people with witty ones (*εὐτράπελοι*).'⁴ May we look for this friendly union of playfulness and austerity within a single personality—in the redoubtable person of Dante Alighieri?

Is it not almost as incongruous, it may be asked, to look for humour in the *Divina Commedia* as it would be to search for jokes in the Bible? We are prepared to maintain that even the intense seriousness of Dante—that sublime and solemn earnestness which can only be compared to the temper of Holy Writ, is not merely compatible with a playful use of the intellect, artistically restrained, but is rendered more complete and effective thereby. And what about Holy Scripture itself? I speak with all reverence.

Hebraists assure us that puns and plays on words are far from rare in the Old Testament; and there are, in the Psalms and the Book of Isaiah⁴, and elsewhere, passages of which the irony, at once keen and sublime, cannot fail to strike the English reader. Would it not be possible also to quote even from the New Testament—from the

¹ *De divinatione per somnum* II (464^a 33) οἱ δὲ μελαγχολικοὶ διὰ τὸ σφύδρα, ὥσπερ βάλλοντες πόρρωθεν, εὐστοχοὶ εἰσὶν. Cf. *Eth. Nic.* VI, 10 (1142^b 2), where *εὐστοχία* is distinguished from *βούλευσις* as 'swift and wordless': ἀνευ τε γὰρ λόγου καὶ ταχύ τι ἢ εὐστοχία. And a little further on it is said that ἀγχνούα—'ready wit,' 'shrewdness,' is a kind of *εὐστοχία*.

² *Rhet.* III, 11, 1412^a. *εὐστοχία* sees analogies, like Archytas who says 'a *διατητής* is like an altar'—for to both the injured flee!

³ *Eth. Eud.* VII, 5, 1240^a 2.

⁴ Cf. *Ps.* cxv, 4—8. Esp. *Isaiah* xlv and xlvii.

Gospels—phrases and metaphors in which the deepest and most solemn truths are cast into a form which, for want of a better word, must be described as playful or witty? The picture of the children in the market place discontented with their games; the ironical description of the ‘blind guides of the blind’; and of the pedants who ‘strain at a gnat and swallow a camel,’ the still more terrible irony of the ‘whited sepulchres’—instances like these show that Truth and Wisdom incarnate did not disdain to use the whip wherewith the old Hebrew Prophets had scourged the idolatrous follies of their contemporaries.

In the light of what has just been said, we may perhaps be justified in doubting whether the most perfect presentation of ideas—or at any rate the most surely effective—does not involve of necessity the use of those faculties with which we are at present concerned. ‘Without a sense of humour,’ it is often said, ‘no man can be a perfect Saint.’ Surely it is equally true to say that the same quality is essential for a really great man of letters, be he Essayist, Historian or Poet.

One more question before we come to Dante himself. What about the age and place in which the Poet lived? Were the Italians of Dante’s time devoid of the spirit of mirth and of the power to express it? Boccaccio and Sacchetti, the *Novellino*, nay, even the Franciscan Legend with its *Joculatores Domini*, and not least the charming *Fioretti*, cry out with one voice against the unjust imputation. But one single name would be enough to vindicate for the Italy of Dante’s elder contemporaries, and for the men who figure largely in Dante’s writings, the possession of the sense of humour and the gift of wit: Fra Salimbene of Parma, the immortal gossip, who so dearly loves a joke, and is so ready to pardon other failings in the man who has ‘a pretty wit.’ He peoples the world into which Dante Alighieri was born with folk whose joy in laughter and rollicking sense of fun match in their intensity the sternness, cruelty, savagery of those strange days. And to Florence he accords the palm for wit and humour¹, though not in the strict Aristotelian sense; for Salimbene’s Florentines are far from being always seemly and decorous in their jests.

The mirthful spirit that pervades the pages of Salimbene recalls indeed most forcibly a passage of Aristotle to which we have not yet referred, and a definition of *urbanitas* (εὐτραπεία), which, if slightly mysterious, is the most epigrammatic and the most suggestive of all his utterances on the subject.

‘The young,’ he says in the second book of the *Rhetoric*, ‘are

¹ See esp. *op. cit.* pp. 77 sqq. ‘Florentini...trufatores maximi sunt.’

laughter-loving, and therefore witty, for wittiness is *πεπαιδευμένη ὕβρις*...¹ How shall we render it? 'A disciplined "cheek",' an 'educated insolence'! The riotous, effervescent self-assertion of the Middle Ages, outcome of abundant vitality, offered splendid raw material for the manufacture of *urbanitas*. The uncontrollable vivacity which vented itself in the field of life sometimes in horseplay or in huge practical jokes; too often in fighting and bloodshed; which vented itself in the field of Art in the fantastically contorted and quaintly humorous subjects of the illuminations with which even sacred MSS. were adorned, and in the carving of grotesque figures in wood or stone:

Come, per sostentar solaio o tetto
Per mensola talvolta una figura
Si vede giunger le ginocchia al petto²;

and in the field of literature ranged from sheer profanity and lewdness to the edifying if amusing hagiological tales which meet us everywhere in the pages of Tammassia's work upon St Francis³.

That Dante's own literary circle was not innocent of this *πεπαιδευμένη ὕβρις*—*ὕβρις*, that is, more or less *πεπαιδευμένη*—a glance at the dainty little collection in Rossetti's volume will show at once⁴. Not to speak of the famous *Tenzone* or 'literary wrangle' between Dante and Forese Donati, of which the Poet, it would seem, was afterwards ashamed⁵; a group which included the extravagantly humorous Cecco Angiolieri cannot be described as wanting in the 'playful use of the intellect.'

'Del resto,' says Professor Sannia, 'Dante era un toscano, uno fiorentino; che è tutto dire...nella facoltà comica e satirica ei fu degno rappresentante della sua stirpe, il più degno e il più alto: il genio comico e satirico fu in lui impronta, eredità etnica⁶.'

And though he fails to cross-examine the Friar of Parma—perhaps the most telling of all witnesses on this point—he has much to adduce to the same effect. Most pertinent is his quotation of D'Ancona's remark that the gay songs with which the streets of old Florence rang were not all love-ditties. Popular poetry was one of the forces which ruled the city, 'Firenze fu un Comune nel quale la poesia era uno dei

¹ *Rhet.* II, 1389^b 10. οἱ νέοι...φιλογέλωτες, διὸ καὶ εὐτράπελοι· ἡ γὰρ εὐτραπεία πεπαιδευμένη ὕβρις ἐστίν.

² *Purg.* x, 130—3.

³ Nino Tammassia, *S. Francesco d' Assisi e la sua Leggenda*, Padova, Drucker, 1906. [Eng. Tr. Fisher Unwin, 1910.]

⁴ D. G. Rossetti, *The Early Italian Poets*, etc.

⁵ *Purg.* xxiii, 115 sqq.

⁶ *Op. cit.* pp. 55—6.

pubblici poteri.' It cannot fail to be significant that Dante spent the most impressionable years of his life in a society where the *poesia popolare*, by the inspiration of its eulogy and the stimulus of its satire, took the place of our modern newspapers in the formation, guidance and control of effective public opinion. And if the lessons of Florence were not fully learned at the time—if the *Vita Nuova* may be said by the unsympathetic to reveal something of the prig—the rough and tumble of an exiled life in fourteenth century Italy had no mean share of teaching to offer.

We have thus narrowed the field of observation to Dante himself, and are justified in claiming to have established at the outset at least so much as this: that if Dante was humourless, it was not for want of inspiration in his environment, or of material in the human—the *very* human—spirits among whom he moved.

It is not unnatural to ask first of all, whether Dante's physiognomy has anything to tell us on the subject. Two features act emphatically as index of the movements of the unseen spirit—as the Author himself points out in the *Convivio*¹—the eyes and the mouth, those 'Balconi della donna che nello edificio del corpo abita.' And though the spirit of pleasantry and humour is apt to reveal itself through these windows chiefly in momentary flashes, the genial temper will usually leave some prominent tokens of its influence more especially about the corners of the mouth. As regards the eye, that most expressive of all our features, no fourteenth century portraiture, however faithful, could hope to reproduce its living flash. Moreover the most authentic portrait of Dante is blind, alas, or rather worse than blind: fitted with an execrable false eye by the much-abused Marini. The pose of Dante's mouth might teach us something, if only we could be sure of it. Mr Holbrook in his recent monograph² has confirmed our suspicions about the famous 'Death Mask,' which at best would naturally have furnished nothing more significant than the smile of peace which so often graces our poor clay, a parting gift from the spirit as it leaves.

The magnificent Naples Bust is seemingly, like the so-called 'Death Mask' itself, the creation of some abnormally gifted artist, who derived his inspiration, perhaps indirectly, through the Palatine Miniature (No. 320)³, from the Bargello portrait to which we have already referred. In vain, therefore, does its splendid physiognomy, completely

¹ *Conv.* III, viii, 70.

² *Portraits of Dante from Giotto to Raffael.* A critical study, with a concise iconography, by Richard Thayer Holbrook. London, Philip Lee Warner, 1911.

³ Holbrook, *l.c.* pp. 68—72.

human, give such promise of a sense of humour as a face in repose can be expected to give. Nor does it matter for our purpose that the 'Ritratto brutto' (as the Riccardian picture—attached to MS. 1040—is justly styled by some distinguished Florentines) would suggest the bare possibility rather than the probability of a sense of humour; for that work of Art (if it may be so called), is probably derived, like the famous Torrigiani Mask, from the Naples Bust.

The one probably genuine contemporary portrait, the Bargello Fresco, which a merciful criticism still allows us to attribute to Giotto, is only preserved in the drawings of Kirkup and Faltoni. In these, one window of the soul, the eye, is wanting, and there is considerable difference between the two reproductions of that other essential feature, the mouth; where Kirkup has much more of the conventional 'Cupid's Bow'.¹ The most that can be said here is what we said of the Naples Bust, that it certainly leaves room for a play of humour, restrained and dignified.

When we pass from portraiture to written record, we have but little material that is really *à propos* in the early biographers of Dante. Boccaccio, after portraying his character and features, says 'his expression was ever melancholy and thoughtful'—'nella faccia sempre malinconico e pensoso' (*Vita*, § 8), but goes on to describe him as 'smiling a little'—'sorridente alquanto' (*ib.*), when he overheard the gossips of Verona commenting on the crisped hair and darkened complexion of the man who 'goes down to Hell and returns at will to bring back word of those below.' Later on in his biography he draws out with evident relish the power of the poet's sarcastic satire: 'with a fine resourcefulness of invention,' says Boccaccio (§ 17), 'he fixes his fangs on the vices of many yet alive and lashes the vices of many that have passed away'—'con invenzione acerbissima morde le colpe di molti viventi e quelle de' preteriti castiga.' And speaking, in an earlier passage, of his courtesy in intercourse with others²—'più che alcun altro cortese e civile'—he takes something of the edge off Giovanni Villani's description of a man 'somewhat haughty, reserved and disdainful, and after the fashion of a philosopher, careless of graces and not easy in his intercourse with laymen'.³ Yet we feel all the time that Villani's description is, speaking broadly, the more convincing; and are relieved

¹ Holbrook, *op. cit.* p. 102 and illustration opposite p. 98.

² *Vita*, § 8. 'Ne' costumi domestici e pubblici mirabilmente fu ordinato e composto, e in tutti più che un altro cortese e civile.'

³ *Hist.* ix, 136. 'Per lo suo sapere fu alquanto presuntuoso e schifo e isdegnoso, e quasi a guisa di filosofo mal grazioso. Non bene sapea conversare co' laici.'

when we realise that it is the outwardly and obviously genial temperament rather than the saving sense of humour that the Florentine historian would deny to his great contemporary.

Next, before we turn to the testimony of Dante's own works, we may refer briefly to the stories told of him; for if none of these be incontrovertibly authentic, and not a few of them be comparatively late in origin, their cumulative evidence should be of some value, at any rate in suggesting what his own countrymen of succeeding generations regarded as compatible with the Poet's temperament¹.

We may dismiss, if we will, as apocryphal, the tale of Dante's conversation with the fish at the Venetian Doge's banquet, and of the smearing of his court dress at King Robert's feast; we may reject, perhaps, with more hesitation and regret, Sacchetti's stories of the harmonious but offending blacksmith and the donkey-driver who farced Dante's songs with an interpolated *Arrhi!* We may relinquish the pun on Can Grande's name, while retaining Petrarca's story (of which Michele Savonarola's is possibly a 'doublet') wherein Dante administers a deserved rebuke to Can Grande and his court for their preference of a buffoon to a poet. But even the rejected legends add their quota of testimony to the general and traditional belief that the Divino Poeta could unbend, and was capable of making a joke.

And there is a certain residuum—some would say larger, some smaller—of anecdotes that may be believed to contain a nucleus of truth.

There is to me a convincing ring about the comment of the *Anonimo Fiorentino* on *Purg.* iv, 106. When Belacqua makes excuses for his laziness on the ground of the Aristotelian dictum that 'by repose and quiet the mind attains to wisdom,' Dante retorts: 'Certainly, if repose will make a man wise, you ought to be the wisest man on earth!'

A like readiness of wit, in a moment where all depended on readiness, is evinced in the story of his reply to the Florentine envoy who was sent to Porciano to demand his extradition. 'Is Dante Alighieri still at Porciano?' asked the messenger who met the forewarned exile on the road, in the act of escaping. 'When I was there, he was there,' was the non-self-committing response:—'quand io era, v' era'².

¹ Cf. Toynbee, *Dante Alighieri*, Methuen, 3rd ed., 1904, p. 176 sqq.

² This is quoted from C. Bruni's excellent *Guida al Casentino*, p. 167. B. does not specify his authorities, but says in a footnote: 'Questo aneddoto è così riferito da varii scrittori danteschi.'

The stories told of Dante, if they do not suggest a genial and convivial temperament, do suggest a ready and caustic wit. But it is time to turn to Dante's own works, and taste for ourselves.

The *Divina Commedia* is the criterion by which most would judge him, and on this we shall spend the bulk of the space at our disposal; but no discussion of this or any other aspect of Dante's literary genius can afford to neglect the field of his minor works, which are, in this particular case, of not a little importance. The *Convivio* (if we may anticipate) supplies us, among other things, with Dante's own idea of what laughter should be; and the *De Vulgari Eloquentia* furnishes a practical illustration of his treatment of a subject like *patois* which lends itself to humorous handling even in a serious treatise.

These three works not only cover a large proportion of Dante's total literary remains, but they are also representative of his three chief styles of writing: Poetry, Italian Prose, and Latin Prose.

In opening the *Divina Commedia* one would venture to issue a further warning on the mistake of limiting the field of observation to the *Inferno*, or of allowing its temper and atmosphere too great a place in our estimate of the characteristics of Dante. Whatever he was to the women of Verona, Alighieri is to us much more than 'the man who goes down to Hell and comes up again at will.' Yet now and then even educated Italians, if you mention Dante's name, are apt to make it clear that they know him mainly as the creator of two episodes—*Paolo and Francesca* and *Conte Ugolino*; and there is a real danger among Englishmen—amply illustrated in Dr Paget Toynbee's *Dante in English Literature*—of laying too much stress on the *Inferno*, even if they do not confine themselves to it.

The humour of the *Inferno* is, of necessity, prevailingly grim; sometimes almost coarsely grotesque. Here we may see the hand of the subtle artist, and detect a deliberate purpose on Dante's part to pour (as I have said elsewhere) 'a disdainful and indignant ridicule upon the futile, monstrous, hideousness of sin.' 'His fine scorn of sin tempts him to heap upon it all the...burden of loathsome grotesqueness that the resources of his imagination can furnish¹.'

Typical of this method is the fierce sport of the scene described in *Inf.* xxii—xxiii, which culminates in the 'nuovo ludo²' (puzzlingly compared by Dante to the apocryphal Aesopian Fable of the 'Frog

¹ *Dante and His Italy*, pp. 141, 2.

² *Inf.* xxii, 118.

and the Mouse¹) in which Ciampolo outwits the Demons and brings them to confusion². We are in mid-Hell, in the fifth *Bolgia* of the eighth circle, *Malebolge*, the place of the *Barattieri*, of those, that is, who have made traffic of justice or of public interests. Dante, who had been falsely accused of this crime, expends all the resources at his command to express his detestation of it, and holds it up at once to ridicule and loathing.

In Purgatory, on the terrace where pride is purged, he seems to acknowledge his appropriate place; but far different is his attitude towards the spot in Hell where his political enemies would fain have placed him.

The whole of these two Cantos and a half is pervaded by an unholy reek of boiling pitch; the appropriate similes are those of frogs immersed to the muzzle in stagnant ditch water³; of clawings, flayings, proddings of raw flesh⁴. Here, if anywhere, Dante verges on the vulgar. The names of the Demons are fantastically ridiculous and unpleasantly suggestive; their actions and their gestures, their badinage and their horseplay, all remind one that the stately pageant of the Middle Ages had its unspeakable and unrepresentable side. The Cantos are only redeemed from unreadableness by the fine similes, the lofty poetical touches which Dante, because he was Dante, could not but introduce here and there.

The graphic picture of the Venetian arsenal in full activity⁵, the swiftly drawn but masterly sketches of the wild duck's dive to escape the swooping falcon⁶, of the mother's rescue of her child by night from a flaming house⁷; the vivid reminiscences of Dante's own campaigning days, at Caprona and before Arezzo: these play, like sunlit iridescence on the surface of a noisome pool, where foul creatures sport and gambol in a nightmare fashion.

We must note, however, one point: that Dante never represents himself here as moved to mirth by the fiendish antics he so conscientiously describes. Rather he is pictured as consistently consumed by fear and loathing⁸.

More reprehensible from the point of view of good taste is the Poet's eager attention attracted to the vulgar harlequinade between

¹ *Inf.* xxiii, 4 sqq.

² Sannia not inappropriately describes this passage as 'il comico popolare della D.C.' (p. 193). He should perhaps have excepted *Inf.* xxx, 103.

³ *Inf.* xxii, 25.

⁴ *Inf.* xxii, 41, 57, 60, 72, cf. xxi, 55 sqq.

⁵ *Inf.* xxi, 7—15.

⁶ *Inf.* xxii, 130.

⁷ *Inf.* xxiii, 37.

⁸ *Inf.* xxi, 31, 88 sqq., 127 sqq.; xxii, 31.

Master Adam the false-coiner and the Greek Sinon, where the latter strikes the former on his 'inflated paunch' till it resounds

Come fosse un tamburo¹.

But Dante is careful to put things right in the sequel, and makes his own blush of shame respond at once to Virgil's chiding:

...Or pur mira,
Che per poco è che teco non mi risso²!

Less broad in its grim playfulness is the taunt which the spendthrift Jacomo da Sant' Andrea, hunted and breathless, gasps out at his fellow-sufferer: 'Lano, at Toppo's jousts thy legs were not so nimble'—

Lano, sì non furo accorte
Le gambe tue alle giostre del Toppo³!

Exquisite in the irony of its situation is *Inf.* XIX, in which Dante, in order to find a place for solemn invective against Boniface VIII⁴, and to assign him, while still alive, his place in Hell, makes Nicholas III mistake the Poet's voice for that of the Pontiff, and exclaim

Sei tu già così ritto,
Sei tu già così ritto, Bonifazio⁵?

Whereat Dante represents himself as quite puzzled, and unable to grasp the speaker's meaning!

Nor is the scene itself without a picturesque absurdity that evinces a subtle sense of humour, especially when we remember the overweening pretensions of Boniface to unearthly dignity. The flaming legs of Simonists kicking to and fro above the surface of the ground wherein the rest of them is buried headforemost; and the neat epigram in which Pope Nicholas describes his plight:

su l' avere, e qui me misi in borsa—

'I pursed wealth above, and here—myself⁶.'

Bearing in mind the Poet's solemn and deliberate purpose, as we conceive it, to pour scathing ridicule upon that which qualifies man for a place in Hell, we may fairly aver that even in the most critical scenes and episodes he does not transgress the canons of the Master whom he revered. If there is *βαμολοχία*—unseemly and unrestrained jesting—in his *Inferno*, it is not Dante's but the Demons'. Dante, as we have seen, deliberately dissociates himself from it; and the absence of all such extravagance from his description of Paradise and even of Purgatory

¹ *Inf.* xxx, 103.

² *Inf.* xxx, 131, 2.

³ *Inf.* xiii, 120 sqq.

⁴ *Inf.* xix, 52 sqq. Cf. Boccaccio, *Vita*, § 17.

⁵ *Inf.* xix, 52 sq.

⁶ *Inf.* xix, 72.

confirms our inference that the humorous element, even at its grimmest and coarsest, is carefully proportioned to the environment with which he is dealing.

The *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* are marked (like the scene with Nicholas III) by occasional outbursts of political or quasi-political invective, seasoned with stinging satire. In these tirades against Florence or the Papacy Dante is sometimes his own spokesman; sometimes they are put into another mouth.

The concluding verses of *Purg.* VI will at once come to mind: the famous invective in which he ironically congratulates his native city on her 'feverish' energy¹, shown in the disinterested eagerness of her citizens to take up the lucrative burdens of public office, and in the amazing agility of her legislative activity, beside which the democratic traditions of Ancient Athens

Fecer al viver ben un picciol cenno²—

the laws passed in October being superseded by the middle of November—

...Che fai tanto sottili
Provvedimenti, che a mezzo Novembre
Non giunge quel che tu d' Ottobre fili.

Then there is the scarcely less famous passage in *Par.* XXI³, where St Peter Damian, inveighing against the Roman Curia, describes the fat Cardinals as supported on every side as they go—held up to right and left, and pushed and pulled along—

Or voglion quinci e quindi chi rincalzi
Li moderni pastori, e chi gli meni
Tanto son gravi, e chi dretro gli alzi.

And when they ride, covering their palfreys with their ample robes, 'so that two beasts are moving 'neath one hide'—

Sì che due bestie van sott' una pelle⁴.

Or again, there is Beatrice's tirade in *Par.* XXIX⁵ against the farce of unauthorised indulgences, and against the fashions of the contemporary pulpit: the fashion of neglecting the Gospel, and straining after originality, as though Christ's mandate had been: 'Go ye into all the world, and preach—frivolities!'

Andate e predicate al mondo ciance⁶.

¹ *Purg.* vi, 149.

³ *Par.* xxi, 130 sqq.

⁵ *Par.* xxix, 34 sqq.

² *Purg.* vi, 141.

⁴ *Par.* xxi, 134.

⁶ *Par.* xxix, 110.

The modern preacher's 'head is swelled' (if we may so translate 'Gonfia il cappuccio'), and he is perfectly content if by his jests and gibes he can raise a laugh, while the fiend sits unseen in the corner of his hood.

This passage is as perennially applicable as any in Dante, and combines the satire of Alexander Pope with the stern earnestness of the author of the *Task*, so aptly compared to it by W. W. Vernon.

Dante no doubt felt a certain appropriateness which justified him in putting these invectives into the mouths of his august *dramatis personae*: but we are apt to hear the ring of *his* voice in each of them. There are however other passages in the *Purgatorio* and the *Paradiso* of which the playfulness belongs to the characters themselves.

In *Purg.* xx we have two instances given to show that the risible faculties are not extinguished by the pains of purification.

Greedy Midas' dismal surprise when, in answer to his ill-advised prayer, his very food turned to gold and became uneatable, is a legitimate and unfailing cause of laughter—

Per la qual sempre convien che si rida¹—

to those who lie fettered face downwards² in the terrace of the avaricious. And it is with evident relish that the same souls repeat their last lesson: 'Tell us, Crassus, for thou knowest, what is the flavour of gold?'

Crasso,
Dicci, chè il sai, di che sapore è l' oro³?

In the next Cantos, XXI and XXII, the Poet delights us with scenes of a graceful and most appropriate playfulness. First there is the charming episode, *Purg.* XXI, 100 sqq., where Statius addressing Virgil, whom he does not recognise, says: 'What would I have given to have been on earth when the author of the *Aeneid* was alive!' and Dante, in spite of Virgil's unspoken but unmistakable 'Taci!' betrays the situation by an uncontrollable smile. Then in the next Canto (XXII) when the puzzled Virgil mistakes the guilt for which Statius is suffering for *avarice*, it is Statius' turn to laugh. The gentle, mirthful grace of the whole scene is enhanced by the pathetic sequel, when Statius explains that it was Virgil who converted him, by his famous fourth Eclogue, to Christianity, like one who, walking himself in darkness, carries a lantern behind his back to illumine the path of those who follow—

Facesti come quei che va di notte,
Che porta il lume retro, e sè non giova
Ma dopo sè fa le persone dotte⁴.

¹ *Purg.* xx, 108.

³ *Purg.* xx, 116—17.

² *Purg.* xix, 72, 124.

⁴ *Purg.* xxii, 67—9.

Charming too is the playful irony of the scene in the Earthly Paradise where Matelda gravely discourses to Dante, in presence of Virgil and Statius, about the poets who in days of yore sang of the Golden Age—

Quelli che anticamente poetaro
L' età dell' oro e suo stato felice¹—

and Dante looks round on them and sees them smiling.

Io mi volsi dietro allora tutto
A' miei poeti, e vidi che con riso
Udito avevan l' ultimo costrutto².

The smiles which wreath the lips of the denizens of the Heavenly Paradise, like that which gleams in Beatrice's eyes³, are something ineffably solemn and sublime: like the *Gloria* chanted in the Starry Heaven, of which the Poet exclaims:

...mi sembrava un riso
Dell' universo⁴.

But there is a touch of the more distinctively human in the suggestion thrown out in the following Canto that St Gregory woke up in heaven to the true facts about the Angelic Hierarchy, and 'smiled at his own mistake' in departing from the Dionysian scheme.

Onde, sì tosto come l' occhio aperse
In questo ciel, di sè medesmo rise⁵.

The passages we have touched upon in the *Divina Commedia* are those most obviously to the point. Professor Sannia's Italian mind can discern subtleties of humour in places where the foreigner cannot always hope to follow. But there is one point on which he lays much stress, namely the importance, for our purpose, of observing Dante's attitude towards himself throughout the mystical journey, and especially as he passes through the dismal regions of the First Kingdom. The Dante so graphically depicted to us in the Divine Comedy is altogether different from the cold, abstract Dante of tradition. He is an impatiently curious child, in whom the passion of curiosity even conquers fear. And while the pilgrim is depicted to us in very human guise, and his motions and his attitudes described in terms which presuppose not only a remarkable degree of self-knowledge, and a striking power of psychological analysis, but also a very real sense of humour; the poet, who sings of the pilgrim, reveals to us by the way a whole group of characteristics which claim the humorous gift as their inevitable

¹ *Purg.* xxviii, 139.

⁴ *Par.* xxvii, 4.

² *Purg.* xxviii, 145.

⁵ *Par.* xxviii, 134, 5.

³ *Par.* xxiii, 22.

associate. Such are his broad humanity, his sympathy, his reverence even for the noble damned, his very modern type of tenderness shown by interest in the ways of children, animals, birds, insects, from whose life he loves to draw his similes.

Popular tradition has imaged him as a heartless, unfeeling judge, without that indulgence towards human frailty which the gift of humour presupposes: but the entire *Purgatorio* belies this calumny, and not a few episodes in the *Inferno* itself.

To pass from the *Divina Commedia* to the *Convivio* is in any case a drop down. If it is but one step from the sublime to the ridiculous, the sublimity of the *Divina Commedia* should bring us very close to the regions where laughter is generated. The *Convivio*, with all its manifold interest, is obviously far below the level on which thought and feeling habitually move in the Divine Comedy. Has it therefore less promise in the matter of our quest?

I venture to think that there is a strain of playfulness underlying a good deal of the argument of this work: and that, even if we can bring ourselves to believe Dante's own solemnly elaborate interpretation of his love-songs to be quite serious in the main.

And apart from this, if we take the *Convivio* with the utmost seriousness, we may remember for our comfort that *πορίζεσθαι τὰ γέλοια*¹ is one of the qualifications of Aristotle's *εὐτράπελος* and the willingness to be laughed at another; and see in Dante (with all reverence) an example of those who, more or less unconsciously, provide matter for amusement to posterity. Nay, we may treat him as he treats St Gregory, and look upon him as laughing now at his own certitude about the ten heavens and the angelic hierarchy, from his place in the mystic rose—or are we to say on the terrace of Pride?

But to return to the *Convivio*. It is here, as we have already suggested, that Dante gives us his description of the ideal nature of Laughter. 'Ridere,' he says, 'è una corruscazione della dilettazone dell' anima².' On the Aristotelian principle of the Mean (though his actual reference is not to Aristotle, but to Pseudo-Seneca 'On the Four Cardinal Virtues'), he urges that laughter should be moderate and modest, with no violent movement (such as convulses the pages, e.g., of Franco Sacchetti) and no 'cackling' noise. Laughter is, in fact—like little children—'best seen and not heard.'

¹ *Eth. Eud.* III, 1234^a 17.

² *Conv. III*, VIII, 95 sqq.

From each of the four extant treatises, quotations may be adduced which at any rate show the writer's sympathy with that view of life which fastens on the incongruous and sees in it matter for genial irony or for bitter sarcasm, according to the moral context.

Tratt. I. Chapter XI opens with a delicious satire on the 'sheep-like opinion' of the multitude, which I have elsewhere compared to the charmingly nonsensical scene—'Less Bread, More Taxes!'—with which Lewis Carroll inaugurates his *Sylvie and Bruno*. The 'man in the street,' says Dante, is ready to follow any cry that is raised. Thus the populace will be found exclaiming 'Viva la lor morte! Muoia la lor vita!—purchè alcuno cominci.' They are for all the world like sheep who follow their leader blindly over a high precipice or down a well. He goes on to rail at 'a bad workman who blames his tools,' the many who 'sempre danno colpa alla materia dell' arte apparecchiata, ovvero allo stromento; siccome il fabro biasima il ferro appresentato a lui.'

Nor can we fail to find in the next chapter (I, XII) a touch of the drily humorous spirit; in the passage which Dr Toynbee in his *Anthology*¹ entitles *Of Silly Questions*.

'If flames were plainly to be seen issuing from the windows of a house, and a bystander were to enquire whether that house were on fire, and another man to reply that it was, I should find it difficult to decide which of the two was the more ridiculous.'

What are we to say of the *Trattato II*? Here, if anywhere, Dante poses as the unconscious humorist; here, if anywhere, in his elaborately solemn disquisition upon the arrangement of the heavens and their analogues in the *trivium* and *quadrivium*, he is qualifying himself to play the rôle of St Gregory in the other world! But even here he finds leisure to cast occasionally a satirist's eye on the contemporary world,

l' aiuolo che ci fa tanto feroci;

and the naïveté of his references to it is delightful. They sometimes come in incidentally in the form of similes. In Chapter VII, for instance, is an allusion to the perennial banishments and sieges with which the factions of Guelf and Ghibelline, Black and White, harassed the cities of the peninsula: 'When we speak of "the city",' he says, 'we are wont to mean those who are in possession of it, not those who are attacking it, albeit the one and the other be citizens.' Or again, in Chapter XI², a reference to the decline of good taste and culture is

¹ *In the Footprints of Dante* (Methuen, 1907), p. 303.

² *II*, xi, 60 sqq.

ingeniously worked into a question of etymology. 'Cortesia' is equivalent to 'onestade,' and 'because in courts of old time virtuous and fair manners were in use (as now the contrary), this word was derived from courts, and "courtesy" was as much as to say "after the usage of courts." If the word had been derived in modern days from the same origin, it could have signified nothing else than *turpezza*.'

In *Tratt. III*, as elsewhere, the playfulness is for the most part so spread out that it is difficult to quote. There is, however, a touch of real satire in such passages as that in which Dante twits the lawyers, physicians, and members of religious orders with their disqualification for the reputation of a true philosopher (XI, 100 sqq.).

'We are not to call him a real philosopher who is a friend of wisdom for profit[s sake], as are lawyers, physicians, and almost all the members of the religious orders, who do not study in order to know, but in order to get money or office; and if any one would give them that which it is their purpose to acquire, they would linger over their study no longer.'

Trattato IV is more obviously fruitful. Here again he girds at the lawyers and doctors, suggesting that they might at least give unprofessional advice gratis, and, in another place, ventures timidly to assert that it may be possible 'to be religious though married¹.' Again, in Ch. XVI, if *nobile* simply meant *nōtus*, then the Obelisk of St Peter would be the noblest stone on earth, and Asdente the cobbler (of whom Salimbene gives us so lively a sketch) would be noblest among the citizens of Parma².

Some arguments are so senseless, he says a little earlier, that they deserve to be answered not with a word, but with a knife. 'Risponder si vorrebbe non colle parole ma col cottello a tanta bestialità³.'

Lastly, he has in this treatise the audacity to depict to us the sublimest sage, 'il maestro di color che sanno,' as indulging in a burst of hypothetical laughter at the idea of a double origin of the human race. 'Senza dubbio, forte riderebbe Aristotile'; and, he adds, 'those who would divide mankind into two separate species like horses and asses are (with apologies to Aristotle) themselves the asses.'

In the *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, as we have already hinted, the 'idioma incompertum et ineptum' of various localities, alike on the right and on the left of the Apennines, gives play for pleasantry of which Dante does not fail to take advantage. It is with evident relish that he puts on record typical uncouth phrases of each dialect:—the Roman

¹ *IV*, xxviii, 70 sqq.

² *IV*, xvi, 69. Salimbene (ed. cit.), pp. 457, 512, 530 sqq.

³ *IV*, xiv, 105.

‘Me sure, quinte dici¹,’ the ‘Chignamente sciate siate’ of the Marches of Ancona², the Milanese ‘Mes d’ ochiover³,’ the ‘Çes fastù’ which men of Aquileja and Istria ‘crudeliter accentuando, eructant⁴.’ The feminine softness of the Romagna, and especially of Forlì, with its ‘corada mea⁵’; the more than masculine roughness of the men of Verona, Vicenza, Brescia—all those who say ‘Magara⁶’; the ‘nof’ and ‘vif’ of Treviso⁷.

In Chapter XI he has his knife into mediaeval Rome, the proud and corrupt. ‘Sicut ergo Romani se cunctis praeponendos existimant, in hac eradicatione sive discriptione non immerito eos aliis praeponamus, protestantes eosdem in nulla vulgaris eloquentiae ratione fore tangendos.’ The primacy which the Romans claim in all things may certainly be theirs in this. In our eliminating process they shall be first to be rejected from the candidature to furnish a classical vernacular for all Italy.

Their dialect (he goes on), like their morals, is the most degraded in the whole peninsula, and has spread its corrupting influence into neighbouring districts⁸. It is indeed not worthy to be called a ‘vulgare’ (vernacular), but rather a depraved misuse of speech (*tristiloquium*), and is ‘italorum vulgarium omnium...turpissimum.’

At the end of Chapter XIII he tilts at the Genoese *Z*—an ugly sound in itself, but one which, if lost or mislaid by defect of memory, would leave the poor people of Genoa without a means of transmitting their thoughts! The loss of this one letter would leave them dumb, or impose on them the necessity of inventing an entirely new mode of speech. ‘Si per oblivionem Ianuenses ammitterent *z* litteram, vel mutire totaliter eos vel novam reperire oporteret loquelam: est enim *z* maxima pars eorum locutionis: quae quidem littera non sine multa rigiditate profertur⁹.’

On a different plane is Dante’s lamentation in Ch. XII over the decay of literary culture in Sicily since the glorious days of Frederic and Manfred, which gave the title ‘Sicilianum’ to the work of Dante’s predecessors in the vernacular: a passage (to me at least) somewhat obscure, in which Frederic II of Sicily, Charles II of Naples, Azzo Marquis of Este, and John Marquis of Montferrat are accused of blood-thirstiness, treachery and avarice: ‘Venite carnifices; venite atriplices; venite avaritiae sectatores...¹⁰.’

¹ *I*, x, 17.

² *I*, x, 19.

³ *I*, x, 35.

⁴ *I*, x, 36–7.

⁵ *I*, xiv, 7–17.

⁶ *I*, xiv, 20–26.

⁷ *I*, xiv, 30 sqq.

⁸ *V.E.* I, xii.

⁹ *V.E.* I, xiii, *fin.*

¹⁰ ‘Quid nunc personat tuba novissimi Frederici? quid tintinnabulum secundi Caroli? quid cornua Iohannis et Azzonis marchionum potentum? quid aliorum magnatum tibiae? nisi *Venite carnifices, etc.*’

Turning to Bk II we find the same Azzo ironically praised in Chapter VI, in a 'copy-book phrase' of which the incidental introduction gives point to the satire: 'Laudabilis discretio marchionis Estensis et sua magnificentia praeeparata cunctis illum facit esse dilectum¹.'

More delightful still is a sentence which closely follows, quoted solemnly like the former merely as an example of good phraseology appropriate to a lofty subject, in which Charles of Valois plays the rôle of a 'second Totila,' and his calamitous dealings with Florence (including, presumably, Dante's own banishment) are adduced as a fitting prelude to his futile descent upon Sicily. 'Ejecta maxima parte florum de sinu tuo, Florentia, nequicquam Trinacriam Totila serus adivit².'

Earlier in the book there is another humorous touch with which we may conclude our list, at the risk, perchance, of an anti-climax. A passage near the end of Chapter I recalls, in a curious way, a line from the *Epistles* of Horace.

Dante, having premised that every one should adorn (*exornare*) his verses as far as possible, goes on to point out that there are limits beyond which adornment becomes incongruous and absurd. 'We do not speak of an ox caparisoned like a horse or a belted pig as *ornatus*; we laugh at them, and would rather apply the word *deturpatus*.' This *bos ephippiatus* most aptly typifies incongruity of adornment. In Horace's well-known line

Optat ephippia bos piger, optat arare caballus³,

the point of the satire is different. It is the Roman poet's favourite theme of universal discontent—each envying another's lot.

In Dante's phrase we may perhaps detect an unconscious or semi-conscious adoption or adaptation of a classical image: parallel, in a humble way, with those splendid thefts from Virgil and Ovid with which he has enriched the *Divina Commedia*: conceptions too unquestionably original in their new form to be classed as mere plagiarisms.

'Cicero hath observed,' says the *Spectator* of Nov. 5, 1714⁴, 'that a jest is never uttered with a better grace than when it is accompanied with a serious countenance.'

If this be true, our quest may perhaps modestly congratulate itself on the avoidance of undue levity. Nor need we take it seriously to

¹ *V.E.* II, vi, 42—4.

³ *Hor. Ep.* I, xiv, 43.

² II. vi, 46.

⁴ No. 616.

heart if we have failed to vindicate for Dante the character of a humorist in the modern sense, and of the American type. The most that our investigation can be said to have proved is that Dante, embittered as he was by his exile, and emaciated by long and serious study, was not devoid of that sense of humour whereby man is able to wring matter for cheerfulness and mirth out of the most unlikely material, and, going through this vale of misery—‘questo aspro diserto’—to ‘use it for a well.’ But neither is he the cold abstraction, both less and more than human, which tradition, of a sort, has handed down to us. His works display, for those who care to look for them, a breadth of sympathy, a capacity for observation and discernment, a keenness of interest, an eye for the incongruous, a richness and sureness of self-expression that are guarantees of the possession of the sense of humour. The manifold play of the forces of one of the most picturesque ages of human history found a sympathetic response in Dante’s genius, though the sublimity and the restraint of his work has obscured this. This side of his genius is well summed up by Sannia.

‘La coscienza lucidissima di sè stesso, l’attitudine all’analisi psicologica, la febbrile curiosità del mondo esterno, naturale ed umano, lo spirito d’osservazione, il senso più squisito dell’arte, la divina serenità, la multiforme impressionabilità dell’artista, il senso del tenero, la pietà umana, il pessimismo furono note spiccatissime, eminenti del suo genio.’

LONSDALE RAGG.

GREEN’S NORTON,
TOWCESTER.