

THE INHABITANTS OF DANTE'S HELL

IT is said that Dante took his revenge upon his enemies by putting them in his *Inferno* and thus pilloried them for all time. According to Alphonse de Lamartine, for example, 'le poème exclusivement toscan du Dante était une espèce de satire vengeresse du poète et de l'homme d'Etat contre les hommes et le partis auxquels il avait voué sa haine.' Lamartine's shallow Voltairian view is still vaguely held, for a modern writer has recently referred to Dante's 'vindictiveness which mars and prevaricates the truth.' Carlyle, on the other hand, exclaimed, 'What a paltry notion is that of his *Divine Comedy's* being a poor, splenetic, impotent, terrestrial libel; putting those into hell whom he could not be avenged upon on earth!' But the general impression among casual readers of the *Commedia* is that this was what he actually did.

The purpose, therefore, of this article is to enquire whether there is any evidence of 'vindictiveness' in the *Inferno*.

Now, apart from the crowd of mythological and scriptural and ancient historical personages, there are about sixty-seven persons, mostly contemporaries, mentioned by name or whose identity is undisputed. The supposed 'vindictiveness,' of course, could only be shown towards some of these. There are notorious Florentines, like Ciaccio, the glutton, and Filippo Argenti, an arrogant and intolerant bully, of whom Boccaccio also tells us a characteristic *Decameron* story (ix, 8). There are common highway murderers like Rinier de Corneto and Rinier Pazzo. There are prodigals, like Lano of Siena, who in despair com-

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mitted suicide, and Jacomo da Sant' Andrea of Padua, who was executed for arson. There are the two infamous hypocrites from Bologna, Catalano and Loderingo, who, appointed magistrates of Florence, abused their trust and misappropriated public funds. There is that sacrilegious thief, Vanni Fucci, who in the year 1293 meanly robbed the sacristy of the Church of San Jacopo, in Florence, during Carnival. There are forgers and falsifiers like Capocchio, a friend of the poet, a famous imitator—a good ape of nature, he calls himself, *di natura buona scimia*—who was executed at Siena in the same year; and Gianni Schicchi, one of the Cavalcanti family, convicted at Florence of impersonation in a will case; and Adam of Brescia, put to death in 1281 for counterfeiting golden florins. These, and such as these, were evil characters and police-court criminals in their day, but they were not Dante's personal enemies. There is no 'vindictiveness' in his treatment of them.

There, too, in the hell of those who have caused schisms, is the notable shade of Geri del Bello, a kinsman of the poet, for creating family discord. 'His being placed here,' says H. F. Cary, 'may be considered as a proof that Dante was more impartial in the allotment of his punishments than has generally been supposed.' In the same circle is Mosca, who persuaded the Amidei to assassinate Buondelmonte, 'which was,' says Villani, 'the cause and beginning of the accursed Guelph and Ghibelline parties in Florence.' And there also is Mahomet, chief of schismatics, who bids Dante warn Fra Dolcino, the apostate 'reformer,' of his impending fate. In this class of instances Dante's mind seems to have been under the influence of the idea of 'retribution' which underlies Greek tragedy. 'Ultio non sinit eum vivere.'

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He appears, moreover, to be superior to mere party feeling. A Guelph and a Ghibelline are sometimes bracketed, as in the case of the above-mentioned Catalano and Loderingo. Among the tyrants are Ezzelino, chief of the Ghibellines in North Italy, and also Obizzo of Ferrara, a leader of the Guelphs; among the usurers is a member of the Ghibelline Ubriachi family, and also a member of the Guelph Gianfigliuzzi family; and among the heretics Farinata and Cavalcante. These are in hell not because of their politics, but because they are tyrants, or usurers, or heretics. Indeed, Dante admires Farinata because of his speech against the proposed destruction of Florence in 1260, after Montaperti, and yet, as one commentator puts it, 'non fa grazia al miscredente.' And if there are obnoxious sinners like Filippo, towards whom he felt as David felt towards Nabal the Churl, there are others like Pier delle Vigne, Frederick's great Chancellor, who awaken his sympathy.

There is a further proof that he wished to be considered impartial in the fact that he puts some of his friends there. Francesca da Rimini, for example, with her lover, Paolo. Dante was her father's friend, and must have known her in her childhood. Her tragic story still vibrates with passion and tears. And there is Cavalcante de Cavalcanti, the Epicurean, the father of Guido, Dante's dearest friend; and Guido de Montefeltro, Boniface's evil counsellor at Penestrino, for whom Dante had such great respect that he calls him elsewhere 'il nobilissimo nostro Latino'; and the sensualist, Brunetto Latini, whose 'cara e buona imagine paterna,' the poet tells him, is fixed for ever in his memory. 'Infinite pity,' said Carlyle, 'yet also infinite rigour of law : it is so nature is made; it is so Dante discerned that she was made.'

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Although Dante adheres to the Aristotelian ethical system in his *Inferno*, he follows his own line of ethical values. Traitors and tyrants are most severely punished, because he hated supremely treachery and tyranny. And his increasing austerity, whether it was a natural disposition or taught him by bitter repentances, made him severe towards sins of the flesh. Finally, as a faithful son of the Church he placed heretics—'con Epicuro tutti i suoi seguaci'—within the walls of Dis. But not one of the souls in hell is put there *because* he is the poet's personal enemy. We look in vain for signs of 'vindictiveness.' The weight of a higher judicial gloom overwhelms the seeker for them. We find everywhere only the impersonal and impartial rigour of moral and spiritual law. Of the men who are known to have been his enemies at the time of his fall, such as Cante de' Gabbrielli da Gubbio, the Podesta who passed savage sentences, one after the other, against him and his fellow-exiles, he is silent. Even of the judge who signed the decree that he should, if caught, be burned alive, he says not a word. Even Charles of Valois and Corso Donati, who were equally implicated with Boniface in the political movements that ruined him, are not found here. Truly, if Dante had desired to satisfy his 'vengeance,' he missed his opportunities.

We come now to the question of Boniface VIII. The scene where the shade of Pope Nicholas III mistakes Dante for Boniface—'sei tu già costl ritto, Bonifazio?'—is usually taken to describe the poet's device for overcoming the difficulty of dates, for, although the real date of the *Inferno* is about 1316, its ideal date is 1300, and Boniface died in 1303. It should, however, be carefully noted that, as a matter of fact, Dante did not see Boniface in hell, and that

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Boniface cannot strictly be called one of its inhabitants. And if the poet's animosity was so exceedingly bitter towards one whom he regarded as the source of the troubles in Florence and of his own misfortune, he might have managed the time-difficulty more effectually by treating Boniface as he treated Fra Alberigo and Branca d'Oria in Ptolomea. It may be remembered that the souls of these traitors had gone down to hell before their bodies died :

'Cotal vantagio ha questa Tolomea,
Che spesse volte l'anima ci cade
Innanzi ch'Atropòs mossa le dea.'

'How my body fares in the world above,' says the soul of Fra Alberigo, 'I know not.' And when he tells the poet that Branca d'Oria is with him in that place of torment, and Dante expresses surprise, because he knows for certain that Ser Branca d'Oria is still alive on the earth, Fra Alberigo explains that his soul departed from his body many years ago and left a devil in its place—'lasciò il diavolo in sua vece nel corpo suo.' Grim invention of the poet it was, as a time-device; and if his 'satire vengeresse' was so very hot against Boniface, it could have been as readily used in his case, for there is no reason given why the City of Dis should not share the 'vantaggio' of Ptolomea. But apparently it was not hot enough for that terrible expedient.

The problem is to discover what was Dante's personal feeling towards Boniface. And the fact that he did not actually put him in hell, although he had a method of doing so ready to his hand, suggests that his introduction of the well-known Anagni scene in *Purgatorio XX* was intended to indicate a tempering of whatever political feeling he had against a Pope who, after all, was not his personal enemy. The striking contrast between the Anagni tragedy and the

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scene in the City of Dis is not altogether satisfactorily accounted for by Dante's clear distinction between the Holy See and its unworthy occupants. However strong his opposition to the politics of Boniface in regard to Florence, it was impossible for him to forget that he had 'seen the fleur-de-lys enter Anagni and Christ made captive in His Vicar':

'Veggiolo un' altra volta esser deriso;
Veggio rinnovellar l'aceto e il fele,
E tra vivi ladroni esser anciso.'

The distinction (always hard to maintain, even in thought) here becomes almost imperceptible.

If, however, it was the poet's intention to place him in hell, it will be observed that this solitary mention of his name is among the 'miseri seguaci' of Simon Magus. Dante may have thought there was sufficient ground in common rumour for believing that Boniface was really guilty of simony, that is to say, of the ecclesiastical offence which was called 'barratry' in the state, *viz.* of making private gain out of a sacred, or of a public, trust. And barratry was the very crime with which Dante was falsely charged and the ostensible reason why he was exiled from Florence. There is a touch of grim humour in the idea that the Pope whose political action was believed to have ultimately led to the punishment of Dante for barratry was being punished in hell for simony.

In any case, the poet's feeling towards Boniface, as towards all the others mentioned in the *Inferno*, is not personally vindictive. Boniface was not his enemy. It is impossible to discover, even after careful examination, any trace of personal animosity. There are political opponents who may be personal friends; only, in Dante's case, political responsibilities acquired the weight and intensity of a sacred charge. And there is the further fact that the souls he meets

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in the *Inferno* are not so much individuals as types. This is specially true in regard to the Papacy. It looks as if in his condemnation of its abuses, a condemnation which reverberates through the whole of the *Commedia*, he had in his mind what is known as a 'composite photograph' of all the Popes who had a bad reputation, and that it was not so much to this or to that Pope that his most terrible words apply as to the general character of the Papacy as it neared the unhappy period of the Avignon 'captivity.'

But whatever view we who are Dante-lovers may take of his attitude towards Boniface, it will be well for us to bear in mind A. F. Ozanam's wise words: 'Jamais les catholiques ne furent tenus de croire à l'impeccabilité de leurs pasteurs. L'Eglise, couverte d'une inviolabilité plus sérieuse que celle dont on environne les rois, ne saurait être solidaire des iniquités de ses ministres. Sans doute il est plus pieux de détourner nos regards, et, comme les fils du patriarche, de jeter le manteau sur les turpitudes de ceux qui, dans la foi, sont nos pères. Mais, si Dante l'oublia, s'il répéta souvent les calomnies de la renommée, ce fut erreur et faute, et non pas hérésie.'

JOHN FOSTER MAKEPEACE.