HISTORY

JANUARY, 1922

DANTE'S CONCEPTION OF HISTORY.

Of the great poets of the world Dante is far the most interested in the actual historical past of mankind. The very conception of history is unknown to Homer: the past is hidden apparently from his eye and certainly from ours by the golden mists of his imagination. Is there in either of the Homeric poems one single mention of or allusion to a certainly historic fact or person? Certainly I can mention none. This is, of course, no hostile criticism of the sovereign poet, as Dante calls Homer: his limitations belong to his age and his glory suffers no diminution.

Virgil is deeply penetrated by a sense of history. Rome—her past, her greatness and her future—is the real subject of his poem. The historical judgments in the vision in the sixth book are full of interest: the siege in the second book has an actuality which is entirely absent from Homer's battles: the topography of the later books is of real historical value. But even in Virgil history is usually presented in symbol. The poet seems almost to fear that his poetry would evaporate if confronted with concrete facts. The Punic Wars are implicit in the story of Dido and Æneas, but we get no hint of Cannæ or Trasimene.

In English we have Shakespeare's historical plays, whose great merits it is not necessary here to analyse; but I will venture to say that their value is not primarily historical. In saying so I do not allude to the mistakes of fact or omissions of important points in the Roman or the English plays. It is more important that the spirit of the past is not seized. The men of Rome and of mediæval England are Elizabethan Englishmen. Nor does Shakespeare show any feeling for the relation between the present and the past which is the most important part of the historic sense. We know that Milton had thought much on history: there are fine historic touches especially in the *Paradise Regained*;

and we cannot be wrong in seeing in *Samson* an allegory of the fate of Puritanism. But in the *Paradise Lost* he is too much occupied with overwhelming theological conceptions to spare room or thought for the life and fate of historic man.

The Middle Ages are sometimes said (but I think wrongly) to have had no interest in history. Yet Dante at the beginning of the fourteenth century gives us a poem which treats of man's fall with epic completeness, which embraces cosmogony and astronomy, ethics and theology; but the actual record of man, as Dante knew it, is the groundwork of all his poems. He gives us not merely a picture of the world of his own day; but a vision of history which is interesting as exhibiting the conceptions of the fourteenth century, and is also the most complete, the noblest and I think the truest vision of history that the world has yet had in verse or prose. I wish in this paper to point out some of the characteristic features of that vision.

On the history of his own time he is in one way disappointing. That he loved Florence and Italy with a passionate love is indeed plain. The violence of his abuse only springs from the disappointment of one whose lofty ideals would hardly allow him to be contented with anything in the actual world. Yet we could wish that he had allowed us to find in his poem some reflection of the greatness of an age that is really the heroic age of Italy. He sees that heroic age a century and a half behind him and puts in the mouth of his ancestor, the crusader Cacciaguida, a denunciation of the dress of Florentine women and the morals of the Florentine community of the fourteenth century, which was perhaps true, but was certainly not the whole truth. The government of Florence, he tells us, is changeful, turbulent, corrupt: he gives us no hint of its actual working, though it is well known that he was at one time connected with the executive government and a member of the guild of Apothecaries. If his exile from Florence accounts for the bitterness with which he speaks of its people and its rulers, there is no personal explanation of the exclusively hostile tone with which he handles the general condition of Italy. Confusion and civil war; the triumph of brute force; the repudiation of justice; moral and political chaos to which the Popes contribute their evil quota—this is the sum of what meets his eyes. It seemed to him, he has told us in the *De Monarchia*, a condition in which the human spirit could do nothing great. Yet it produced the *Divina Commedia*—than which there is nothing greater in the history of thought or art.

But we are chiefly concerned with Dante's view not of the present but of the past. The circumstances of Dante's life and time saved him from one danger which has vitiated some surveys of history by poets, philosophers, and even by historians. A Florentine and an Italian of the fourteenth century could hardly interpret all history as exhibiting nothing but the greatness and the glory of his own country and race. Dante, as we have seen, probably took too gloomy a view of both Florence and Italy. He was at any rate saved from national egotism, and within the limits of the knowledge possible to the year 1300 he saw history steadily and saw it whole. He has been acclaimed as the prophet of the Rinascimento, and the devotion of modern Italy to him knows no bounds. But he has no antipathy to Germans (it is true that he talks of the clumsy Germans—*i Tedeschi lurchi*): his abuse of the French house of Capet derives from Philip IV's attack on the Papacy and has nothing in it of nationalism. His special love for Italy (I believe it is no paradox to say it) is only shown by the special violence of his abuse.

Dante saw in the past mainly three forces: the science of Greece; the law of Rome; and the Catholic Church, in its intention greatest of all, as in its corruption worst.

What Dante thinks and says of Greece is of the greatest historical importance. Clearly he knew no Greek: if he thought that the word "*entomata*" was Greek, that in itself proves his ignorance. He had read no Greek poetry, not even in translation. Homer and the great tragedians, Pindar and Plato are only names to him. Yet though the Revival of Classical Learning would throw floods of new light on the nature of the greatness of Greece, its enthusiasm would not go beyond Dante's own conception. In the *Purgatory* there is a wonderful phrase concerning Athens, and it is declared to be the place from which all science (*scienza*) streams. Homer is for Dante (though some commentators try to make a different application of the famous words) the master of the lofty song that floats like an eagle over all the others. But for Dante Greece was summed up in Aristotle. He is "the master of those who know" in the *Inferno*. Beatrice refers Dante to his authority ("Your master," she calls him) when they are making their way through the heavens of Paradise towards the Beatific Vision. Directly and indirectly Aristotle is everywhere in the *Comedy*.

It is important to dwell on this, for there are books much read and admired which still represent the mediæval world as wholly ignorant of the importance and almost of the existence

of Greek civilisation, until in the last years of the fourteenth century Chrysoloras began to teach Greek in Florence. Such views invert the order of events. The revival of Greek learning came because Italy was already so much interested in Greek and so assured that there was in Greek literature much that was of vital importance for her own life. The revival of learning was thus not the cause but the result of the Renaissance, and in the Renaissance Dante is really the greatest figure.

Dante was hampered in his appreciation of Greece by his scanty knowledge of Greek literature. Of Rome he could speak and think with a freedom born of much fuller acquaintance. The sources of his information were few and unsatisfactory. The name of Tacitus was of course unknown. He knew little of Livy: if he had known more could he have called him "infallible" (*che non erra?*). The name of Sallust appears, but there is no sign of anything but the name. His knowledge of Roman history is drawn for the most part from mediæval compilations. This makes the rightness and penetration of his judgment the more remarkable.

While Greece means for Dante primarily science (which includes philosophy), Rome meant poetry, law, and empire.

In the fourth canto of the *Inferno* he gives us a list of the great pagans whom he met in the not altogether unpleasant borders of hell. The list has been closely scrutinised to discover the extent of Dante's knowledge, and certainly of many whom his travellers meet there he knows no more than the names. The five great Latin poets are for him Horace, Ovid, Lucan, Statius, and Virgil. Dr. Wicksteed's essay, in the commemorative volume published by the Dante sexcentenary committee, deals in a most interesting way with the use made by Dante of the minor poets of this group; and to that valuable essay I may refer my readers. His relation to Virgil is one of the most beautiful and touching things in literature. There is a note of personal affection in nearly everything that he says of Virgil, and all springs from his long study and intimate knowledge of the *Æneid*. When the poetic merits of Virgil are depreciated (though that rarely happens now) it is well to remember the passionate enthusiasm of one who was a greater poet even than Virgil. But in what Dante writes of Virgil there is more than the love of one great poet for another. It is usually admitted that there is in one place at least of the *Inferno* some trace of Virgil the Magician, of whom mediæval legends tell so many strange stories. It is strange, too, to find that Virgil no less than Aristotle is appealed

to as an authority on religious matters that might seem to be beyond his province. There is no stranger passage in the *Divine Comedy* than the account which Statius gives of his conversion to Christianity through reading Virgil. He was saved from the pains of Hell by reading the lines of Virgil, which he translates (I give Dr. Wicksteed's version), "Wherefore dost thou not regulate the lust of mortals, O hallowed hunger of Gold?" Can Dante really have thought that this was the meaning of Virgil's lines, "Quid non mortalia pectora cogis Auri sacra fames?" Even if he so translated them, how can he have attributed to them this miraculous effect? Clearly he treats Virgil as a sacred text which has meanings beyond those which lie on the surface. The same impression is left by another passage where in a discussion on prayer Virgil's line, which bids the hearer "not to expect to alter the fate of the Gods by prayer," has to be met and answered before the efficacy of prayer can be accepted.

More even than poetry Rome meant for Dante law. His admiration and gratitude for Roman law knows no limits. It is in his political treatise *De Monarchia* that this is most definitely set out, but it is implied in many places in the poem. The praise of Rome in the sixth canto of the *Paradiso* is not put into the mouth of any warlike emperor, but comes from Justinian, because to Justinian belonged the "lofty task" of setting in order the laws of Rome and taking from them "the superfluous and the vain." And this work Dante emphatically says was done "by the will of the primal love." Dante believes in the Empire, to which we shall come in a moment, because it is the divinely appointed institution for administering Roman law. It is in a tone of real anguish that he calls upon the weak emperors of the day to mount the saddle once more and draw tight the bridle.

Dante's feeling for Roman law is a fact that deserves thought. There have been books lately written full of admiration for the Middle Ages (I am thinking especially but not solely of Mr. Penty's *Guildsman's Interpretation of History*) which tell us that all was well with the Middle Ages—Church and feudalism, economic and social organisation, knights and guilds and priests: all was well except Roman law. This was the canker in the flower that turned all sweet to bitterness and took us from the beauty and humanity of the Middle Ages to the cruelty and ugliness of the modern world. Popular judgments on history are such important things that I am anxious to see this view refuted, as it quite

easily can be. It is surely significant that Dante, living at the moment when the culture of the Middle Ages culminated, not living apart from the life of his time as some poets have done, but sensitive to every phase of it, sees in the enforcement of Roman law the only road to social and political salvation. Municipal independence, the organisation of industry through guilds, the influence and the coercive force of the Church—all these were before his eyes, and some of them at their best. In his opinion they had made of Italy “a servile state, a hostelry of woe, a vessel without helmsman in the stress of the storm, mistress no longer of provinces, but a house of impurity.” And the remedy was that the successors of the Cæsars should mount the saddle again and draw tight the bridle that Justinian had constructed. Of all mediæval guildsmen Dante is easily the greatest, and it is interesting to contrast this judgment with that of the guildsman of the nineteenth century.

The praise of Roman law anticipates Dante’s view of the Roman Empire. It is set out at length in the *De Monarchia*, a book in which the highest political wisdom is for many concealed under an envelope that seems strange and irrational. The same view of the Empire is contained in the poem. The Empire was divinely ordained: Rome and her Empire “were established by Æneas as the agent of the empyreal heaven to be the holy place where the successor of Peter should sit.” He does not question the historical reality of Æneas, and his pilgrimage to Rome is as holy as any incident in the history of the Jews. Julius Cæsar was for Dante the actual founder of the Roman Empire, but he does not choose him for idealisation or eulogy. Among the voices that he hears in the fourth circle of Purgatory, reciting incidents which reprove by examples of energy the sluggish souls that are there undergoing purgation, is one which declares, “Cæsar in order to conquer Iberda, struck Marseilles and then dashed on to Spain.” And in the Limbo of the *Inferno* he sees among the great pagans “Cæsar with his hawk’s eyes.” But Dante knew too little of Cæsar to appreciate his greatness, and besides was almost controlled in his judgment of the Civil War by the poem of Lucan, where Cato and Pompey are the heroes and Cæsar the villain. It is therefore remarkable that Dante is not more severe in his judgment on Cæsar. But if he has little admiration for Cæsar the man, his indirect eulogy of Julius Cæsar the founder of the Empire can hardly be surpassed. When he reaches the very centre of Hell he finds Lucifer grinding in his triple jaws three representative sinners. They are drawn from the class of those who had

been treacherous to their benefactors; but they are chosen also with reference to the two great essential institutions of the world. The head of Judas Iscariot is not seen; his torment is shown by the movement of his legs. But from one of the other mouths hangs Brutus, who writhes, but says no word; and from the third hangs Cassius. This, by implication, almost surpasses the eulogy of Mommsen and anticipates that of Froude.

The Roman Empire enforcing Roman law was for Dante an essential feature of the European order. The woes of the world are in his judgment due to the weakness of the Empire. He calls down the vengeance of Heaven upon "German Albert" for abandoning Italy. The strongest expression of this feeling is probably to be found in the twenty-seventh canto of the *Paradiso*, where Saint Peter tells Dante that there is no governor left on earth, "and therefore the human family has gone astray" (*onde si svia l'umana famiglia*). He darkly prophesies the swift coming of the governor that he desires.

Dante's love and regret for the Empire go far beyond the actual institution of the Cæsars, of Charlemagne, and of Otto. If it were merely praise of the Holy Roman Empire and hope for its return we could only smile sadly at another instance of the illusions of genius. But Dante's politics seem to me to be full of valuable suggestion, and in their essence true. His praise of the Empire is, if we pierce to the reality beneath the symbol, mainly two things. First it is a demand for a world order, resting on laws that are sensible and generally known, and which control the lives of states as well as of individuals. It is little exaggeration to say that it is a plea for a League of Nations; and the *De Monarchia* is not a bad handbook for those who are called upon to speak for the League. It is next a declaration that the civil and temporal power has a sphere of its own in which it is supreme, and in which it should not be interfered with by the spiritual power. But of this we may speak again when we have examined Dante's attitude to Church history.

The dispute as to Dante's loyalty to the Catholic Church is, it seems, at an end. Yet some have in the past held that the object of his poem was to assault Catholicism, and have found in him a forerunner of the Protestant Reformation. A knowledge of the poem can hardly leave any doubt on the reader's mind that Dante was perfectly loyal to the Church and to its Roman head; that he accepted the Catholic doctrine without hesitation and found in it a framework within which all human knowledge could be arranged without difficulty. It is plain at the same time

that he found in the actual life of the Church, from the Pope to the parish priests, the gravest corruptions, and that these seemed to him the chief cause of the evils that oppressed the world. Here, as in the case of his attacks on Florence and on Italy, the violence of his attack is the measure of his devotion. It is the thought of what the Church ought to be and could be that makes him so unmeasured in his assault on its actual condition. Nor was he in any doubt as to the cause of the corruption in the Church : it was due, he believed, to the possession and the love of power and of wealth. We will briefly illustrate these three points.

As to Dante's orthodoxy, it is enough to say that Catholic criticism has found nothing to object to in his statement of doctrine. Visitors to the interesting Dante exhibition recently held at University College will not forget how considerable passages of a most beautiful manuscript had been blocked out by a religious censor. But the passage objected to was an attack on the character of the Pope, not on Catholic doctrine. Then there is the terrible twenty-eighth canto of the *Inferno*, where Dante sees the punishment of those who have sown discord and produced schism. The mere heretics are punished in a higher circle of Hell. In the twenty-fourth canto of the *Paradiso* Dante is examined by Saint Peter himself. With what exultation does he recite the articles of the Christian faith ; how boldly he takes his stand on the "evangelical doctrine" ; with what characteristic pride he tells us that Saint Peter thrice embraced him when he had finished, "as a master embraces a servant who tells him what he rejoices to hear : so much had what I said pleased him."

The thoroughness of Dante's orthodoxy only makes the violence of his attack on Popes and clergy the more remarkable. Pope Anastasius is placed among the heretics : that the view is founded on a historical mistake does not detract from the significance of the incident. In the nineteenth canto Dante finds one Pope, Nicholas III, among those punished for simony, and by a literary artifice of great skill tells us that the reigning Pope Boniface VIII is doomed to descend for the same crime to the same punishment. He mixes with his noble eulogy of Saint Dominic and Saint Francis the bitterest criticism of the degenerate lives of contemporary members of their orders. But the highest point in his denunciation is reached in the *Paradiso* (canto 27), where Saint Peter himself speaks of the condition to which his See has been reduced by his successors. The light that conceals the spirit of Saint Peter grows red in sign of his indignation. The whole heaven glows like a sunset in token of its shame and anger.

Beatrice herself changes her appearance, and Dante likens the change to the eclipse which occurred at the time of the crucifixion. And it is to such an auditory that Saint Peter pronounces the words that fall with terrible and triple emphasis: "He who usurps on earth my place, my place, my place which in the presence of the Son of God is vacant, has made of the place where I was buried a sewer of blood and filth whereby he who fell from heaven (Satan) is well content." He goes on to say that the root of the offence is that the Pope, Boniface VIII, has used his position for vile traffic and money-making. We need not follow this further. Note, however, that it is not only the Pope who is at fault, though Dante pursued the memory of Boniface VIII with a sort of vendetta. The clergy as a whole are declared to be the part of the world's population that has most turned aside from the right path.

Further, in Dante's eyes the offence of the Papacy was that it had interfered with the independence of the secular powers represented in the Empire. Comte held that for the order of the Western world there was necessary both a temporal authority and a spiritual; that each should be independent of the other; and that the spiritual authority should confine itself in its relation with the temporal power to advice and persuasion. Dante's conception of the relation between Church and Empire is not very different. The sixteenth canto of the *Purgatory* gives the clearest utterance to this doctrine. "Rome that made the good world was wont to have two suns, which made plain to sight the one road and the other: that of the world and that of God. Now one has quenched the other and the sword is joined to the crosier; and when the one is joined with the other they must perforce go ill: because, being joined, one feareth not the other. If thou believest me not, look well at the ear, for every herb is known by the seed. . . . Say henceforth that the Church of Rome, by confounding two powers in herself, falls into the mire and fouls herself and her burden."

Has any one come nearer than Dante to understanding the Middle Ages, their strength and their weakness? Is there any better explanation than Dante's of the failure of the mediæval Church to give to the world the unity to which it had contributed so much?

In conclusion it may be noted that Dante is not troubled—as so many modern commentators on history have been troubled—by the idea of progress. The conception was of course not born and would not be born for more than five centuries after his

death. He has not, therefore, to bring his conceptions of the past into harmony with a supposed inevitable and constant tendency of human life to advance towards every sort of excellence—the idea that has so completely crumbled away at the touch of Professor Bury and Dean Inge. Dante's theory would rather be the contrary. Man had lived in the Earthly Paradise, though only for a moment, and then through sin had been driven out. Dante knows other instances, in life and art, of great promise or achievement being overwhelmed by failure or barbarism. And yet he holds no theory of decadence either. The possibility of progress is implied in his whole theory, though he does not formulate the idea. Doubtless for him the world of history as much as the world of nature was governed by "the love that moves the sun and all the stars—in whose will is our peace." The Catholic doctrine might have made it difficult for him to recognise excellence in the pagan world: if it had done so the poem would have lost half its beauty and could not have given us that wide and almost universal view of life which makes it unique among the poems of the world. It is infinitely touching to see how Dante is pained by the impossibility of introducing the great pagans into Paradise. He places, as we have seen, a great group of them in the calm atmosphere of the Limbo of Hell. A mediæval story allowed him to put the Emperor Trajan in Heaven: with splendid daring and apparently merely on the strength of a line in Virgil (*justissimus unus, qui fuit in Teucris et servantissimus aequi*) he places Rhipeus the Trojan there too. His conception too of Rome and Greece, as preparing the way for Christianity, allowed him to treat the pre-Christian poets not merely without hostility but with sympathy and admiration.

Knowing nothing then of the idea of progress, he has no difficulty whatever in drawing his examples of excellence from all periods. Ancient and modern have hardly any meaning for him. His two chief guides are Virgil the Roman and Beatrice Portinari, his contemporary at Florence: the two chief intellectual influences on his thought are Aristotle of the fourth century B.C. and St. Thomas Aquinas of the thirteenth A.D. The foot of the mountain of Purgatory is guarded by Cato—Lucan's Cato rather than history's—the great antagonist of Julius Cæsar; and I trust that Dr. Wicksteed and the other commentators are right in thinking that Matilda, the gracious custodian of the Earthly Paradise, is none other than Matilda of Tuscany, the ally of Pope Gregory VII and the enemy of the Emperor Henry IV. She had died in 1115, just a hundred and fifty years before

Dante was born. How impossible it would have been for Milton to have placed an English woman of Henry VIII's reign among the Saints of Heaven; how difficult for a modern poet to exalt to any such position a contemporary of George III. It seems to me a specially notable quality in Dante, that while he appreciates all the greatness and glory of the remote past, there is nothing for him common or unclean in later times or in his own age. Nor are Dante's examples taken exclusively from the ranks of those high in place or office. His pride, if nothing else, would have saved him from this. I am grateful to him for his mention of the humble Piero Pettinagno in Purgatory XIII, and to the commentators for telling us that Piero sold combs on the bridge at Pisa, and that if he found that any of his combs was cracked or defective, he refused to sell it and cast it into the Arno.

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