

THE DANTE SEXCENTENARY

ON September the 14th, this year, the six hundredth anniversary of the death of Dante Alighieri, at Ravenna, will be celebrated. It is a significant fact that the revival of the study of the great Italian poet, and of mediæval Italian literature generally, in the nineteenth century was contemporaneous with the "Second Spring" of Catholic life in England. For while it is true that many non-Catholic scholars have contributed to our knowledge of his life and work, it is also true that no one who has not an inner knowledge of the Catholic Church can fully understand the *Commedia*. To such there must always be, inevitably, something in it that is alien to his mind. For Dante was, first and foremost, a Catholic and regarded everything from a Catholic standpoint.

The argument in his famous political treatise, *De Monarchia*, and the real purpose of the Guelph and Ghibelline wars in Italy, can be properly understood only from that point of view.

Those protracted wars ended at last, in 1266, after fifty years of swaying fortunes, in the victory of Charles of Anjou over King Manfred at Benevento, and the final supremacy of the Guelphs. Dante was one year old when that decisive battle was fought. The echoes of the long struggle are heard throughout all his writings, for his family were patriotic Guelphs. It must be remembered that the war was not, fundamentally, a strife for mastery between Popes and Emperors. To take that limited view of it is wholly to miss its meaning. It was the conflict of two opposed political ideals, in which the Hohenstaufen Emperors, on the one hand, asserted the theory of centralized government, and the Popes, on the other, defended the rights of the Italian republics to freedom and self-government. It is a conflict which recurs in every

The Dante Sexcentenary

age, the basic and irreconcilable difference between two principles of government, the never-ending clash of the advocates and the equally stern opponents of Imperialism, or world-domination—of which Napoleonism and Kaiserism are a recrudescence in later times. Rome was then, as it has always been, its most determined opponent, the strong and persistent defender of the rights of the people to self-development, of national independence, of the freedom of self-governing communities.

To a thoughtful mind nurtured in Catholic traditions and accustomed to Catholic teaching such a political principle is the only tenable one. And that this was Dante's deliberate political creed is clearly seen in his *De Monarchia*. That treatise was written about the year 1312, in the tenth year of his exile. Its object was to justify the existence of the Holy Roman Empire. The threefold division of its argument is well known. First, that the Temporal Monarchy is necessary, side by side with the Spiritual Supremacy of the Holy See, for the well-being of the world. Second, that the Roman people took to itself this dignity of Empire by right. Third, that the authority of the Roman Emperor is derived immediately from God. There are two essential points in the argument that should be carefully noted. In the first place, Dante is describing an ideal Emperor. He is one who cannot have any human weaknesses nor any earthly possessions. Selfishness cannot influence him, nor rival ambitions move him. The only force he can exercise is not military, but moral. He exists only for the protection of states and small nations, for their temporal and mutual welfare. In fact, he is the mouthpiece, in temporal affairs, of the Justice of God. Dante assumes throughout his treatise that the world is composed of free republics like Florence, of independent civil communities, and that the business of the "Emperor"

Blackfriars

is to prevent any infringement of their rights, and to maintain one supreme moral law that shall hold all national jealousies and encroachments in check. This—the defence of civil freedom—is the master-key of the treatise. “Haec libertas,” he says (i. 12), “sive principium hoc totius libertatis nostrae, est maximum donum humanae naturae a Deo collatum; quia per ipsum hic felicitamur ut homines, per ipsum alibi felicitamur ut Dii.”

In other words, Dante’s Emperor is the incarnation of International Law, a mediæval prototype of the “League of Nations.”

In the second place, it should be carefully noted that this ideal Emperor, or Temporal Head of the world, although his authority is directly derived from God, must render to the Pope, as its Spiritual Head, the reverent subjection which a son owes to his father. “Inasmuch as this mortal felicity is in a certain sense (quodammodo) ordained with a view to immortal felicity, let Cæsar observe that reverence towards Peter which a first-born son should observe towards a father, so that illuminated by the light of paternal grace he may with greater power irradiate the world.” (iii. 16).

In the *Commedia*, too, liberty is the keyword. The love of liberty dominates it like a recurring musical phrase. It is the only explanation of the unexpected appearance of Cato of Utica as privileged guardian of the shores of Purgatory instead of among the suicides, with Pietro della Vigna, in the Seventh Circle of Hell. The stern old Roman republican had killed himself after the battle of Thapsus and the triumph of Julius Cæsar, because he preferred liberty rather than life. Virgil accompanied by Dante, addresses Cato on behalf of Dante: “Now may it please thee to allow him to proceed. Seeking liberty he travels—liberty, which is so precious, as he well knows who for

The Dante Sexcentenary

her sake refused life. Thou knowest it, because for her sake death was not bitter to thee in Utica where thou didst leave the vestments which at the great day shall shine so brightly."

Dante's intense admiration of Cato on account of his supreme sacrifice for liberty's sake is repeated again and again in the *Convito*.

The same chord is struck, with deeper and richer harmonies, in Virgil's farewell to Dante at the end of the twenty-seventh canto of the *Purgatorio* :

Non aspettar mio dir più, nè mio cenno.
Liberò, dritto, e sano è tuo arbitrio,
E fallo fora non fare a suo senno ;
Perch' io te sopra te corono e mitrio.

The liberty which, he had told Cato, was the object of Dante's journey through the depths of Hell and up the steep of Purgatory, was now his, in the Earthly Paradise.

It is in the fifth canto of the *Paradiso*, in which Beatrice explains the Church's teaching on Vows, that Dante's high exaltation of the freedom of the human will occurs, since the value of a religious vow lies precisely in our sacrifice of it to God :

Lo maggior don che Dio per sua larghezza
Fesse creando, ed alla sua bontate
Più conformato, e quel ch' ei più apprezza,
Fu della volontà la libertate,
Di che le creature intelligenti,
E tutte e sole furo e son dotate. (Par. v. 19.)

In the year 1295 Dante first entered public life. Florence was divided into two camps by one of those bitter family feuds, or "vendettas," which cursed the Italian republics. Like the Montagues and Capulets of Verona, of whose quarrel Shakespeare makes use in *Romeo and Juliet*, the Donati and the Cerchi families—the "Neri" and the "Bianchi"—dragged the whole

Blackfriars

city into senseless and bloody strife. In 1300 Dante was elected one of the Priors of the city. He had enemies, and they made use of the wretched Neri-Bianchi squabbles to ruin him. Every public man has them, whether he be a Cabinet Minister or a Town Councillor. No one now seriously questions the integrity of his conduct during his short term of office. But he was not made for the party levels of public life. His enemies were more skilled than he in that kind of warfare, and so on January, 1302, he was formally sentenced to perpetual banishment from Florence and he never entered the city again.

It is difficult to realize that he lived an outcast, homeless life as an exile for nineteen years, and that most of his literary work, the *Convito*, the *De Monarchia* and the *Commedia*, besides letters and sonnets, was done during this period. It is a long time. We read those lines of dignified pathos spoken by his ancestor Cacciaguida in the Heaven of Warriors: "Thou shalt leave everything most dearly loved, and this is the shaft that the bow of exile first shoots at thee. Thou shalt discover how salt is another's bread, and how hard the ascent of a stranger's stairs." We catch fugitive glimpses of the wanderer here and there, at Siena, Verona, Padua, Bologna, perhaps also at Paris and Oxford, cherishing occasionally a vain hope of returning to Florence, or rejoicing in the advent of Henry of Luxemburg, or conversing, an unrecognized pilgrim in search of Peace, with Fra Hilario at the convent gate. We know for certain that he spent the last three or four years of his life at Ravenna under the protection of Count Guido Novello. His three children were with him and a few congenial friends, and he was able to complete his *Paradiso*. Returning from a fruitless embassy to Venice on behalf of his patron he was taken ill and died, in the fifty-seventh year of his age, on September 14th, 1321.

Youth and Age

He had failed in everything earthly, but he had finished his great poem "to which heaven and earth had put their hand," and which has lifted him for ever among the immortals.

J. F. MAKEPEACE.



YOUTH AND AGE

WHEN we are old, and these our blithesome days
Are like a dream to one from slumber torn,
Who in the austere twilight of the morn
Tries vainly to recall the sunlit ways
That but a moment since beguiled his gaze,—
Ah, let us, in the land of eld forlorn,
Where old griefs dwell and sorrows newly-born,
Deny no suppliant in youth's name who prays.

Let us look backward from Death's shadowing wings,
Nor scorn the dreamer's trancèd melody
Because we have forgot the tongue he sings ;
But rather deem that Youth may prove to be
The final goal of all Time's wanderings,
And Age a false and fleeting phantasy.

SISTER M. BENVENUTA, O.P.