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# Introduction: the role of context

## *The joint squareness of malt*

Anyone who has tried to explain a joke to a foreigner, or a family saying to an outsider, will know that it is next to impossible. This truism was brought home to me with particular force by the sentence 'Malt is both square.' Set down on the page like that, the four monosyllables seem both ungrammatical and nonsensical, and it would take about four *hundred* words to show why they were meaningful, good English, and funny, when they were first pronounced. One would have to supply so many facts about the age of the speaker, his relationship to his interlocutor, and the question to which the four words were a spontaneous answer; and one would have to explain so much about the eating habits and material culture of the English middle classes in the 1960s. And yet that terse reply convinced me once and for all that it is impossible to understand any piece of 'real language' without some familiarity with its context.[1]

What is true of a single phrase is true *mutatis mutandis* of a paragraph, a chapter, a book, even a whole œuvre. The context varies in kind and scale. Sometimes (and to avoid confusion, we may confine ourselves to a work of fiction such as the *Comedy*) it is enough to register the words immediately preceding and following the passage to be interpreted. Sometimes we need to grasp the situation, the character of the speaker, and the nature of his intentions (otherwise we should never understand irony). At other times we might misunderstand the meaning or implication if we did not remember the plot of the book, or recognise the genre to which it belonged. At the highest level of all, we need to be broadly familiar with the culture to which the author belonged, by which he was formed, and for which he wrote. This is as true of Dante as of any lesser author. Although it is a matter of definition that a writer who has achieved the status of a classic has in some



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sense risen above the limits of his time, we shall fail to understand him, or misrepresent the nature of his greatness, if we cannot distinguish what is individual and original in his work from what is typical of the species and genus to which it belongs.

## *'The past is a foreign country'*

In reading contemporary fiction in our native language, we hardly ever pause to think of the ways in which our interpretation is being controlled by our familiarity with this hierarchy of contexts. Perhaps it is only when we *re*-read a novel or play from an *earlier* period that we discover how much we had failed to understand on the first reading because of our lack of such familiarity. The beginning of wisdom in this regard is the recognition that 'the past is a foreign country: they do things differently there'.

L. P. Hartley's much-quoted dictum has a particular relevance for English-speaking readers of Dante. The poem we are trying to understand is twice removed from us – first by the barrier of a language we have learnt late and imperfectly, and secondly by a distance of six hundred years. Nevertheless, Dante himself offers rational grounds for hope that it is possible to become sufficiently familiar with the necessary contexts to come close to his meaning or meanings. He was acutely aware that linguistic and cultural differences in time and place are essentially of the same kind. Everything human, including our language, is subject to constant change because 'man is a highly unstable and variable animal' ('instabilissimum atque variabilissimum animal'). This, he knew, was why there were 'more than a thousand sub-species' of the spoken language in the different regions of Italy he had visited; and this was why a citizen of Pavia would not be able to understand his fellow countrymen if he were to return to his native city after an interval of five hundred years. On the other hand, Dante accepted that human infants can acquire any spoken language whatsoever, mastering both the sounds and the meaning of the sounds they hear simply by listening, imitating, and observing the reactions of their minders. He had learnt Latin at school and knew it was possible to translate from the *grammatica* into the *vulgare* (as he called the artificial and natural languages respectively), or from Greek and Hebrew into Latin. And while he was aware that correspondences are rarely exact, he was sufficiently confident in the possibility of translation for him to compare different versions of the



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same text and to judge them better or worse, more or less faithful to the original.[2]

The child's innate ability to learn any language by natural means, and the more limited ability of some adolescents and adults to become proficient in a foreign language through conscious study, are both closely related to our capacity to feel our way into the customs, beliefs and rituals of other human societies which are different in place or time. Just as we can learn to understand the words and syntax of Dante's Italian, so we can learn to understand the most important aspects of his culture. Whether the obstacles are linguistic or cultural, all we have to do (to paraphrase Terence) is to be human and refuse to accept that anything human can be alien to us: 'homines simus, et humani nil a nobis alienum putemus'.[3]

## *'They do things differently there'*

For reasons I have explained more fully elsewhere, one of the most important contexts for the better understanding of the *Comedy* is that of medieval philosophy and theology. For many years of his life (in round figures, from the age of twenty-eight to the age of forty-three) Dante regarded himself primarily as a 'Lover of Wisdom', knowing that this was the meaning of the two roots of the word 'Philosopher' (*philos* + *sophia*). During this time he composed verse and prose in the service of the 'Noble Lady' who had come to replace Beatrice as the inspiration and subject of his writing. The greatest differences between the poetry of his youth (much of which is contained in the *Vita nuova*, which was probably completed in about 1293) and that of his full maturity (the *Comedy*, most of which was written after 1308) are to be attributed to the enrichment and redirection of his imagination, which he owed to his passionate study of the highly sophisticated and comprehensive system of thought that has come to be known as scholasticism, and, in particular, to his study of scholastic ethics.[4]

Scholastic moral philosophy is radically unfamiliar to most readers today. Ethics in our time tends to be pluralistic, relativist, tolerant, and anxious to free itself from the preconceptions of the past. Late medieval thought was utterly different. It looked to the past for authority; it believed in objective truth and was correspondingly rigorous in its methodology. It was confident it could distinguish a true good from an apparent one. Setting out from the premiss that goods are different in kind and unequal in value, it attempted to combine all true concepts



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into a single hierarchical system. They did things differently then. Some introduction is therefore required. And, in essence, this is what the present volume sets out to provide. The *Comedy* will be studied as a poem – as a product of Dante's imagination and literary craft – but the poetry will be set within the context of his own specific pronouncements concerning the nature of right and wrong, and these in turn will be located within the larger context of thirteenth-century thought.[5]

## *Proportional comparison*

Many first-time readers of Dante feel that he speaks to them directly across the centuries, giving a true portrait of the positive and negative sides of human nature, redefining the goals of human life, offering insights that can influence the choices they make in the real world of every day. This book is written in the conviction that Dante can become more of a living force in our time if we restore him to his own, and if we do not search his work for universal truths, but look instead for similarities between him and us, for likenesses between his situation and ours.

It is helpful to think about these likenesses in the way that Aristotle analysed metaphor and simile, that is, by looking for proportional relationships, rather than precise correspondences – for ratios of the kind that a geometrician would express as $A:B = C:D$. To see what this implies, we may look at a famous metaphor in the *Comedy* which links the words 'wings' and 'oars'. It is used by Dante's Ulysses (in the famous episode which forms the subject of Chapter 10 below) at a point in his narrative when he has persuaded his ageing crew to join him on a final voyage of discovery 'to a world without people behind the sun'.

Commentators on Canto XXVI of the *Inferno* have noted that the image is a revitalisation of its ancient sources, because classical poets had used 'oars' to refer to the action of 'wings', whereas Ulysses turns things round by saying 'we made wings of our oars for the mad flight', 'de' *remi* facemmo *ali* al folle volo'. But the Aristotelian analysis is valid in either direction. It rests on two assumptions about the nature of metaphor. The first is that a metaphor is nothing other than a compressed comparison. The second is that the similarities between the two terms of the comparison may be multiple but far from complete. (In our example, an oar is not made of feathers; wings beat up and down, whereas oars pull fore and aft.) The comparison rests on a series of analogies. Wings are to oars as flying is to rowing, as the bird is to the



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boat, and as air is to water. The metaphor does not assert a straightforward resemblance between object A and object C. It suggests that the relationship between A and its context B (where A stands for the wing, and B for the bird, for flying, and for the air) is similar to the relationship between C and its context D (where C stands for the oar, and D for the vessel, rowing, and water). That is why the likeness implied or asserted by the metaphor should be expressed in the form: as A is to B, so C is to D (or, more economically, A:B = C:D).[6]

There is infinitely more that might be said about the concept of metaphor. But even this very simple example can serve as a model to suggest how we might transfer the insights gained from our reading of Dante to the lives we lead in the twenty-first century, by restoring him to his own context in the fourteenth. Dante will be more, not less, 'of our time' if we consciously reflect – to take a few examples only apparently at random – that the personal computer, popular television series, democracies of a hundred million people, or an international organisation like the United Nations have no counterparts in Dante's culture, but nevertheless present distant analogies, respectively, with the quill pen, courtly romances, the Florentine republic of 80,000 inhabitants, and the Holy Roman Empire.

The scholastic synthesis of all certain knowledge (*scientia*) – incorporating both what God has revealed and what men have discovered for themselves – is very different indeed from the astonishing range and diversity of sciences studied and pursued in any modern university. But there is an analogy between what *scientia* meant to Dante and what 'science' means today. The thirst for knowledge remains just as much a distinguishing feature of human nature as it was when Aristotle laid it down in the first sentence of his *Metaphysics* that 'all men by nature desire to understand', or when Dante translated that sentence in the opening words of his *Convivio*: 'Tutti li uomini naturalmente desiderano di sapere.'

What Dante might teach us – to take some examples from my earlier studies of the relationship between Dante's thought and his poetry – is not that there are only four elements, or that the earth is at the centre of a steady-state universe which came into existence in 5198 BC. We are not to follow him in believing that procreation is due initially to the activity of the father's seed operating on the mother's passive menstrual blood, while the specifically human faculties are breathed into the embryo by God at about the twenty-eighth week. Again, we are not to accept that individual character is largely determined by influences



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rayed down from the stars; or that the brain transmits messages to the limbs through gaseous spirits moving along the hollow nerves and the veins and arteries. Those 'facts' are plainly not true.[7]

If, however, we apply the proportional model (A:B = C:D), we shall recognise that Dante took all those 'facts' on trust from the best-qualified experts in exactly the same way as we accept that the universe is still expanding, that the earth is a planet orbiting the sun, that there has been life on the planet for at least five million years, that individual character is greatly influenced by the genes, and that a mother contributes half the genes to the embryo in her womb. We shall see that the essence of the comparison lies in the presumed relationship between natural science and ethics. Dante believed that it is impossible to understand human nature (and impossible therefore to understand what we ought to do in order to live well and to achieve happiness), unless we understand something of the nature of the universe and the matter of which it is composed, the processes of procreation, the formation of character, and how it comes about that human beings can all learn a *vulgare* and a *grammatica* while no other animal can. If we really want to understand 'human vices and human worth' in the way he did, we must think 'proportionally'. That means we must not look for answers in fundamentalist religion, or in simple common sense, but seek to discover what happens at conception, how the human brain differs from those of other animals, why Darwin gave a more scientifically credible account of the origins of man than the author of Genesis, why the structure of DNA gives a better explanation of personality-types than astrology does, and just how thoughts and feelings are really translated into bodily movements.

## '*Sustanze, accidenti e lor costume*'

The context to be discussed in the present book is formed not by the metaphysical, cosmological and physiological ideas that underpin Dante's ethics, but by his moral philosophy considered as a highly structured system which incorporates and gives meaning to each of the distinct concepts of which it is composed. We shall have to grasp the interconnections between the parts and the whole, the whole and the parts. But it is relatively easy to break into this 'hermeneutic circle', because ethics has changed a great deal less than the natural sciences over the past six centuries. As a result, the interlocking concepts of scholastic moral philosophy are more familiar than those in the field of medieval



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physics or psychology. And it will be possible to round off this introduction with a few words of caution and encouragement concerning the application of Dante's insights to the modern world.

Time and again it will be found that there are 'false friends' among the terms used by Dante. His words survive, but they have acquired different meanings or connotations. Hence it may prove less easy to distinguish between his *justitia* and our 'justice' than between his four *elementa* and the ninety-two 'elements' in the periodic table.

While we have to accept that Dante believed he was dealing in facts, we do not have to commit ourselves to their literal truth. For example, it is not necessary to affirm that there is any such place or state of eternal punishment as Hell before one can learn something from Dante's *Inferno* about the nature of evil, the relative gravity of different crimes, or our apparently infinite capacity to make ourselves and others miserable in the pursuit of happiness. But it is dangerous to pick and choose. To paraphrase John Donne, 'no concept is an island'. And it is unsatisfactory to endorse Dante's representation of the folly of greed while ignoring his treatment of suicide, homosexuality or forgery.

Dante and his culture have no need of an apologist. His treatment of ethics is rich, rigorous and nuanced – far more so than anything taught in the schools or universities of the United Kingdom at the present time. We should study his ethical system sympathetically, seeing it as an astonishing attempt to encompass all the contradictory data of human existence. And we might ask ourselves whether this system does not accommodate the potentially conflicting demands of our complex nature – work, leisure, study, friendship, love, the rearing of a family, political obligations – at least as well as any of its modern rivals or counterparts.

The *Comedy* also challenges us to entertain the notion that there is some absolute criterion by which all values and actions may be judged. It asks us to empathise with Dante's belief in a Last Judgement when we shall be called to account for our actions on earth, and either rewarded or punished eternally. It invites us to share imaginatively in his confidence that we all have a 'concreated thirst' for God. There is no need to subscribe to Dante's convictions as articles of faith before we enter into the world of his imagination. But if we do suspend our disbelief, and exercise the special human gift of empathy, then we shall find ourselves occupying a strange and wonderful viewing-point, particularly if we follow Dante the protagonist through the last stages of his journey in



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the *Paradiso*. The globe 'that makes us so ferocious' will seem no more than a patch of dry earth. The 'order which all things have among themselves' will appear in the perspective of eternity. We shall see 'all independently existing beings, their attributes, and their relationships' ('sustanze, accidenti e lor costume') 'conflated in a simple light', because we shall have glimpsed the 'universal form of their knot'.[8]



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PART ONE

# Authority, reason and order

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CHAPTER ONE

# Dante's authors

## *'Viaggio, cammino, volo'*

The *Comedy* is the first-person narrative of a divinely willed journey through Hell, Purgatory and Heaven, a journey from which the author returns to write his poem 'for the good of the world that lives so ill' ('in pro del mondo che mal vive'). Canto XXVI of *Inferno* contains a first-person narrative put into the mouth of Ulysses in which he relates the ill-fated voyage from which he never returned. Both travellers undertook their journeys to gain understanding of 'human vices and human worth' (the phrase is used by Ulysses); and the realistically detailed stories they tell are of course fictional representations of a purely metaphorical journey towards the 'knowledge of good and evil', which occupied Dante the author for much of his adult life.[1]

During that quest he undoubtedly learnt much from introspection and from close observation of the people he met. His poem is packed with references to himself and to characters and events of his own time. But unlike Ulysses, he did not limit himself to gathering information at first hand. His 'expertise' did not derive simply from the 'experience of our senses'. A very large part of his 'voyage of discovery' was made in his mind and imagination as he read the works of other men. And the purpose of this chapter is to give some account of the earlier 'explorers' who had acted as his 'guides' and of the extraordinarily detailed and accurate 'maps' of the moral universe they had drawn.[2]

The libraries available to Dante were very much smaller than those to which we have access today. But the relative paucity of books meant there was time to read them and to remember their contents (Dante's personal library in the years of his exile must have existed largely on the shelves of his memory). There existed numerous works in the field of ethics which are still regarded as fundamental, and which are astonishingly varied in their provenance and the values they uphold. When



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