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Chapter 1

Approaches to *The Divine Comedy*

The series to which this volume belongs is dominated by the names of narrative writers. Dante is a narrative poet; and few readers of *The Divine Comedy* will doubt that the poem stands comparison – for its portrayal of event and character – with the greatest epics of antiquity and the greatest novels of the modern tradition. Representing himself as protagonist in the story he has to tell, Dante writes of a journey which is simultaneously inward and outward: inwardly, he sets himself to explore both the worst and best of which human beings are capable; outwardly, he aims to investigate nothing less than the whole of the physical and spiritual universe. At every stage, the storyteller dramatises the shock or pleasure of discovery; at every stage, the poet produces words and images appropriate to each new development in experience.

To cite two of the most important modern Dante critics, Erich Auerbach can draw parallels between the *Inferno* IX and Book XIII of Homer's *Iliad*, while Gianfranco Contini speaks of resemblances between Dante's work and Proust's. It is nonetheless unusual for an introductory study of the *Comedy* to concentrate, as the present study will, upon the characteristics of its poetic and narrative form. And there are grounds to suspect that any approach confining itself to these lines could misrepresent or diminish Dante's achievement.

I

To see why these suspicions arise, consider how difficult it is to describe the *Comedy* as a fiction.

Plainly Dante himself was concerned in his poem with what he thought was true. Any fiction may claim a certain imaginative authenticity – but the *Comedy* is devoted to truth in the strongest sense.

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On Dante's account, his visionary journey is a privilege granted by a God who desires the human creature to know and understand the universe in which He has located it. The project rests upon a mystic confidence that God will finally allow the human being to 'fix the gaze upon the eternal light' of truth (*Par.* XXXIII 83). At the same time, the language in which Dante communicates that truth is – to an extent unexampled in subsequent literature – the language of exact science and logical demonstration. With the most advanced thinkers of Medieval Scholasticism, Dante shared a new-found faith in the power of human reason; facing St Peter (*Par.* XXIV 77), Dante, as protagonist, spells out his beliefs in 'syllogistic form'; and Dante as poet is always prepared to do the same throughout the *Comedy*.

It is equally evident that the *Comedy* addresses itself directly to the historical actualities of the period in which it was written. Nor is this to say that Dante merely mirrors his own age; rather, he intends his poem to change it. Dante is not only a philosopher but also a controversialist and moral teacher; he is a mystic – capable of detachment from the world – but also an exile, defending as well as he can in the words of a poem the rights and prestige that his native city has denied him (*Par.* XXV 1–9). One cannot ignore history in reading the *Comedy* (or speak easily of its 'implied author'); it lies in the nature of Dante's poetry to demand attention to the barest facts of its author's own life story, to his political persuasions, and to his socio-economic circumstances.

Born in May 1265 (*Par.* XXII 112–20), Dante lived his early life at a time of change and of great economic and cultural expansion in Florence. The poet was critically aware of developments in Florentine poetry and painting (*Purg.* XI 94–9). He also participated actively in the diplomatic and political life of the city; in 1300 – which is the ideal date for Dante's vision – the poet served as one of the six priors elected (for two months at a time) to govern the republic. Even at this period, however, Dante must have been aware of the political tensions – both internal and external – which, later, the *Comedy* consistently reflects. Economic success could be interpreted as greed or moral decadence (*Par.* XV–XVI); and feuding interests threatened to divide the city into 'envious' fragments (*Inf.* XV 61–9; *Par.* VI 100–5). Internationally, too, the old order was changing. The Holy Roman Empire was losing any power it had to extend a *pax romana* over the

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Italian peninsula (*Purg.* VI 76–135), while the Church – expanding to fill the vacuum left by the Empire – displayed an increasing concern with temporal and not spiritual advancement (*Inf.* XIX 90–117). In Florence such international dissension was reflected in the long-standing conflict between the Ghibellines, who represented the Imperial party, and the Guelphs, who (while subsequently dividing into Black Guelphs and White Guelphs) broadly allied themselves with the Papal cause and sought to further the local interests of the city-state.

All these pressures were unleashed against Dante on 1 November 1301. While the poet was absent from the city on an embassy, a *coup d'état* took place, organised by Corso Donati – a Black Guelph opposed to Dante's White Party (*Purg.* XXIII 82–8) – involving the connivance of Pope Boniface VIII and the armed assistance of invading French troops. Dante never returned to the city. Sentenced to exile and death on charges of corruption (*Inf.* XXI–XXII), he spent the remaining twenty years of his life dependent on patrons (*Par.* XVII 55–92), turning – with increasingly forlorn hopes – to the Empire for justice, and (from around 1307) writing the *Comedy*, as if that itself could be a remedy.

The *Comedy*, then, is not, in any simple sense, a fictional work. And, consequently, the modern reader is bound to benefit from the many commentaries which already offer historical, cultural and philosophical information of a kind which, hereafter, the present introduction will rarely repeat (see Holmes 1980, Quinones 1979). Historical scholarship sharpens our sense of the problems that Dante faced, and reveals the subtlety of the answers that he developed for himself in his poem; to read the *Comedy* in the light of such scholarship is to know 'what the universal vision might be like, and what we should feel if we possessed unshakeable principles that could lead all mankind to live in peace, fulfilment and purposeful activity' (Boyde 1981, p. 19).

Yet the *Comedy* is not a philosophical treatise, let alone a political pamphlet or Florentine chronicle. Nor can we read the poem as if it were. Mistrusting the accuracy of Dante's science and philosophy, a modern reader will often speak with Samuel Beckett of the 'misinformed poet', or even – considering Dante's treatment of his fellows in the *Inferno* – agree with I. A. Richards that the Christian

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theology of judgement on which the poem is built is among the most 'pernicious' in the annals of Western culture. Yet neither Beckett nor Richards would recommend us *not* to read the Comedy.

As for Dante himself, if he had wished, he clearly could have defended himself and propounded his universal vision in terms of pure philosophy. Before writing the *Comedy* he had begun the *Convivio*, a prose work of popular science and philosophical exposition; and his sense of his own professional competence as a philosopher must have increased rather than diminished as his career went on. While still engaged on the *Comedy*, Dante also wrote *De Monarchia*. I shall not discuss this work in any detail; but it must be emphasised that *De Monarchia* represents Dante's most original contribution to Medieval philosophy (see Gilson 1948). Here, arguing from first principles, Dante is at pains to show that peace and order are possible on Earth through the restoration of a Universal Empire. God providentially ordained the Roman Empire and its descendants to establish a realm of Justice and to banish all greed – therefore dissension – from the world. The Church also has a providential role (obscured by its temporal aspirations), which is to lead human beings to eternal happiness. But God intends humanity to enjoy happiness in this life, too; and it is the function of the Just Emperor alone to secure that temporal beatitude.

Dante proposes this case in terms so purely philosophical as to exclude all reference to the injustice he himself had suffered as an exile. Yet, shifting away from the civic politics of his early years, he does formulate here a practical solution to his own problems.

Why, then, instead of devoting himself to this clear philosophical and political cause, does Dante, within ten years of his exile, embark upon a work in which, as we shall see, he himself is constantly aware of a tension between fact and fiction, truth and misapprehension? In the *Comedy* Dante risked writing a story of adventure, portraying the life of intellect and spirit in terms of continual crisis, quest and discovery. That, no doubt, is why we read him. But why did he write it?

II

Few things are more important in understanding Dante's approach to the *Comedy* than his attitude towards the epic poet Virgil,

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author of the *Aeneid*. It is Virgil who leads the Dante character from Hell to the summit of Purgatory. It is Virgil who at *Inferno* I 85–7 is acknowledged as the master of the poet's own style. Moreover, Aeneas – Virgil's hero – is at several important points proposed as a model of conduct both for the protagonist and the poet himself (notably in *Paradiso* XV, to which I shall return).

Many of the reasons for Dante's interest in Virgil are illustrated in *Inferno* I, when Virgil first appears to the Dante-character lost in the Dark Wood. In context, it comes as a surprise that Dante's first steps to salvation and Christian truth should be guided by a poet, and a pagan poet at that. But, to gauge the extent of that surprise, we may delay its impact a little and consider four other figures, all of whom Dante revered and might far more obviously have chosen as authorities or leaders on his intellectual journey.

For instance, St Thomas Aquinas. Dante may not have been as slavish a follower of Aquinas as once was supposed; it is nonetheless Aquinas in *Paradiso* XIII who enunciates the overriding theme of the *Comedy*: the relation between God, as Creator of the Universe, and his human creature. The Aquinas of *Paradiso* XIII displays many of the characteristics that must have recommended his historical work to Dante, displaying above all a sense that the Universe itself is a 'book' (*Par.* XXXIII 86) and that the relationship between God and humanity can be founded upon a rationally disciplined 'reading' of the created universe. (As Kenelm Foster writes, a basic motive in the poet's devotion to Aquinas was 'esteem for the thinker as a model of intellectual probity and finesse' (1977, p. 61).) Aquinas reconciled Christian belief with rational inquiry; and Dante, locating Aquinas in the Heaven of Christian philosophy, allows him neither more nor less influence than that.

What, then, of St Francis (whom Aquinas praises in *Paradiso* XI)? The *Comedy* is devoted as much to spiritual reform as to intellectual speculation; and in the century preceding Dante's work there had been strong pressures on the margins of the Church for a return to the essential values of apostolic Christianity. This movement (largely initiated by Joachim of Flora who appears in *Paradiso* XII 140) culminated in the life and teachings of St Francis; and in St Francis Dante would have found both a critic of social decadence and a model of life as a journey to God. Above all, he would have seen exemplified the virtue of poverty. In *Paradiso* XI St Francis is

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shown to have been reconciled to the example of Christ by giving himself – against all worldly reason – to a positive love of poverty. For Dante, too, avarice or acquisitiveness is the vice that corrodes both State and Church; it is the She-Wolf who in *Inferno* I presents an almost insuperable obstacle to the advance of the protagonist. The cultivation of Franciscan asceticism might easily have formed a part of the answer that Dante sought.

Now it may be said that Dante had no need of the Franciscan ideal, since the function of the Emperor (in *De Monarchia*) is to overcome human cupidity; it may also be said that the 'otherworldliness' of Franciscan asceticism would have been at odds with Dante's sense of the value of *this* world. There is no incompatibility (either in Dante or in Franciscanism) between the pursuit of justice and the pursuit of poverty. Still Dante, 'poet of the secular world', did need to assert the value of Justice and Reason, independent of any strictly religious application; that indeed is one of Virgil's functions in the *Comedy*. But in the years preceding the *Comedy*, Dante had interested himself in two thinkers, either of whom could have provided a more exact model of intellectual conduct and ethical aim than the poet Virgil.

The first was Boethius, a fifth-century Roman but also a Christian. Boethius appears (from the *Vita nuova* and the *Convivio*) to have been the first philosopher that Dante read. But the lesson of Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* – written in response to political disgrace and imprisonment – would have had especial significance for the exiled Dante. The *Consolation* teaches that, in spite of all the weaknesses and sufferings of human nature, the mind is free to pursue the truth; and the opening cantos of Dante's own 'prison poem', the *Inferno*, contain many verbal reminiscences of the *Consolation* (especially VI and VII). But when Boethius himself appears (*Par.* X 124–6), he is described as one who made plain the 'falsity' of the world: and Dante would never be satisfied to regard the world simply as a realm of illusion.

Then, and most convincingly, there is Aristotle. The impact that the Greek philosopher had upon Dante's conception of science, ethics and politics is first registered in the *Convivio*, and maintained until *Paradiso* XXX where – in the *Primum Mobile* – Dante arrives at the limit of the universe which Aristotle had projected in his scientific and logical speculations. For Dante (as for Aquinas) it was

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Aristotle who demonstrated the methods of rational investigation and argument by which reliable knowledge is achieved – analysing a phenomenon down to 'its primary causes and first principles right back to its elements' (Boyde 1981, p. 57). Likewise in the sphere of ethics, it was Aristotle – as *De Monarchia* shows – who taught Dante the meaning of justice, revealing that moral virtue in the individual was inextricably linked with the well-being of communities. Appropriately, Dante describes Aristotle as the 'master of those who know' (*Inf.* IV 131). But these words imply a limitation: 'to know' may not be enough; and while Aristotle and Virgil are both, in Dante's scheme, inhabitants of Limbo, Aristotle never stirs from that circle whereas Virgil is qualified to lead the protagonist far beyond it.

In the course of the *Comedy*, Virgil acquires many of the attributes which characterise these four great authorities: with Aquinas he becomes a working example of intellectual discipline (cf. *Purg.* III 37 and *Par.* XIII 112–42); it is he, not St Francis, who defends Dante from the Wolf of Avarice (*Inf.* I 88), and he, in *Inferno* VII, who expounds the Boethian doctrine of mutability. With Aristotle, Virgil shares a capacity for scientific argument (*Inf.* XI and *Purg*. XVII), while in ethical terms, his task is to instil in the protagonist a sense of moral purpose (*Inf.* XXIV 52–7) and an awareness of how wrong-doing injures community and social order (*Inf.* XI 22–3 and *Purg.* XVII 113).

But Virgil is a poet. It is this that distinguishes him from every other candidate so far mentioned. And to withhold this conclusion so long is to suggest how startling it was for Dante himself to arrive at it. At a point immediately before he began the *Inferno*, Dante (as Ulrich Leo has shown) must have read or reread the *Aeneid*; for in *Convivio* IV – while still engaged upon his first philosophical enterprise and still pursuing themes dictated by Boethius and Aristotle – Dante makes repeated reference, increasing in warmth, to Virgil and Aeneas, until finally he abandons the entire project with ten books of its plan uncompleted. Henceforth he will devote his energies almost exclusively to the *Comedy*.

It is as if, through reading the *Aeneid*, Dante the neophyte philosopher had rediscovered himself as Dante the poet. But what was it that he saw in Virgil's work?

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In a word, he had seen that poetry – in particular epic poetry – could fulfil a moral and philosophical purpose. Virgil, to be sure, is no philosopher – he is not, for instance, Lucretius. Yet the *Aeneid* is an account of philosophy in practice: as a refugee from fallen Troy, Aeneas has to plan a course for the new 'Troy' – Rome – and must keep to that course for the sake of his companions with as much strength of purpose and clarity of mind as he can muster. Philosophy here means knowing what is right and finding a way to translate that knowledge into action.

Even in *De Monarchia*, verses from the *Aeneid* are interwoven with Aristotelian argument, to express the promise of an Age of Peace, Order and Justice (*Mon.* I 11), and to show what virtues would be needed to found and sustain a perfect Empire (*Mon.* II 3). Similar allusions are found in *Convivio* IV, as Dante develops the outline of his later Imperial politics. But the *Convivio* is a much more personal work than *De Monarchia*; and in two particular respects Dante here begins to elaborate, by reference to the *Aeneid*, a practical philosophy which is directly applicable to his own talents and circumstances.

First, Dante understands the epic voyage of Aeneas as an emblem for human life. Already in the *Vita nuova* he had seen the pursuit of truth as a pilgrimage. But the epic image defines this notion more precisely. To travel like Aeneas is to exercise skill in the negotiation of hazards and the plotting of directions until we arrive at 'the port and city' we were meant to reach (*CNV* IV xxvii). The idea of pilgrimage emphasises our ability to conceive an ultimate goal; that of the sea journey emphasises the care and the techniques we employ in arriving at such a goal. For Dante the pursuit of truth can never be a 'mad flight' (*Inf.* XXVI 125); action must always be deliberate and graded. In this light, each stage of the journey of life has its specific responsibilities and virtues. And here the example of Aeneas bears directly upon Dante. For the Aeneas of *Convivio* IV is a man of middle age who shows by example that one's particular responsibility at this stage in life is to be useful to others. But Dante, too, at the time of the *Convivio* is of that same age; and by writing the *Convivio* – a compendium of philosophic learning for his fellow citizens – he is already trying to be 'useful'.

Long as the leap may seem from heroic mariner to philosophical poet, it is a leap which Dante is always ready to make; in the *De*

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Vulgari Eloquentia (II iv) he compares the technical labours of the poet with the trials of Aeneas, and never ceases to represent his own poetic activity as a craft upon the ocean (*Purg.* I 1–3; *Par.* II 4). But on technical matters it is naturally to Virgil himself, not Aeneas, that Dante would have looked; and in abandoning the *Convivio*, Dante not only abandons formal philosophy (at least in the vernacular), he also changes, in a moment of literary conversion, the whole character of his own poetry. Until this point, he had written no narrative verse; in common with all early Italian poetry, his work had been essentially lyrical in nature, containing little to justify the claim that Virgil had taught him his fine 'style'. Yet the early cantos of the *Inferno* not only draw heavily for their personnel upon *Aeneid* VI but also include some of Dante's most direct imitations of Virgilian diction (as in the similes of II 127–9 and III 112–14).

It is important to stress that Dante is never content merely to imitate Virgil. Nor does he ever completely desert the lyric mode of his earlier poetry. (In the next chapter we shall see something of the interaction in Dante's text between Virgilian and (broadly) lyric features.) But Dante's indebtedness – both poetically and morally – to Virgil's example is never in doubt; and *Inferno* I is a dramatisation of what that example meant to him.

When Dante begins the *Inferno* 'halfway along the road that we in life are bound upon', he vividly depicts a moment of spiritual re-awakening. But until Virgil appears at line 63 it is also a moment of vertiginous confusion. Dante has awoken to the knowledge of his own involvement in sin: the exiled Dante may have known that the world was unjust; but the poet chooses to depict himself in the first lines of his poem as one who, in his own weakness, yields to disorder. Striving to advance towards salvation, the protagonist ends in panic-stricken retreat, close to a point of renewed oblivion where the 'sun is silent' (60) and all hope, guidance and light extinguished.

Virgil now enters; and the effect of his intervention is primarily to insist that the protagonist re-engage in a steady and disciplined way with the world beyond his own anxieties. So Virgil delivers a miniature epic in which – while saying nothing of God directly – he pictures Rome as a vessel of divine purpose, from its origins in the ruins of Troy, through its early sufferings and triumphs, to a conclusion (as yet unrealised) in a realm of perfect Justice (67–111).

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Only by placing himself within this scheme of history can the protagonist begin to make progress. But the poet, too, in writing this speech for Virgil makes a comparable move. He has rediscovered Aeneas's example; he has already begun to be 'useful' in re-asserting the value of classical civilisation and in prophesying a providential deliverance from present disorder; simultaneously he has begun that slow reconciliation with truth which will lead through a detailed inspection of the facts of human sinfulness – his own and that of others – to the fact, ultimately, of God's existence.

By the end of *Inferno* I Virgil has set the protagonist on his way; it is not a spectacular advance – 'and so he moved forward and I followed after' (136); and since the lesson Virgil teaches is one of intellectual care it would be wrong if it were spectacular. But moving painfully into the dark of Hell, Virgil has already shown how literally painstaking the pursuit of truth must be. At the height of Dante's panic, Virgil declared: I am not a man: I once was a man – 'Non omo, omo già fui' (67). There are no five words more important than these in the *Comedy*. Elegant as they are (in their balanced, chiasmic form), they also insist, tragically, upon a truth: for Virgil to admit that he is 'not a man' is to admit the loss of the only dignity that a pagan could fully enjoy. The admission, however, is necessary in the interest both of truth and of the protagonist: in his panic, the protagonist may care little whether Virgil is 'man or shade' (66); but that is a mark of his confusion, and his intellectual salvation must begin with attention to the most minute nuances of reality.

In *Inferno* I Dante establishes standards of intellectual and linguistic clarity to which he will refer throughout the *Comedy*. And Virgil is always the exemplar of such virtues. One may ask whether the historical author of the *Aeneid* is accurately reflected in Dante's reading of him. But by placing Virgil in his poem Dante has performed an act of literary interpretation. This will allow him as the *Comedy* goes on to develop a progressive examination of the kinds of language and narration he associates with Virgil; and Virgil is not always right. Yet whatever differences emerge between, as it were, the Virgilian voice and the Dantean voice, the poet is still prepared in *Paradiso* XVII to reaffirm the values of *Inferno* I. Cacciaguida (speaking, initially, in Latin phrases which draw upon the *Aeneid* Book VI as well as the epistles of St Paul) tells Dante of the miseries

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