

DANTE

# The Divine Comedy

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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.

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

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

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,

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



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

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 wrongdoing 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?

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*

*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).

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

he will suffer in exile; the poet must remain a bold 'friend of truth' (118) and speak out clearly about all he has seen on his journey (127–9). And it is fitting that in this manifesto of poetic purpose, Dante should model the entire encounter between himself and his ancestor on the meeting between Aeneas and Anchises in Book VI of the *Aeneid*, casting himself as Aeneas to Cacciaguida's Anchises: where Aeneas laboured to repair the disaster of Troy, so Dante will work, by thought and word, in the world that has caused his exile to reveal the principles of universal order.

We began by considering how Dante left incomplete the philosophical project of the *Convivio*. It may now be apparent that he has not so much abandoned philosophy itself as found a new way in which to do it. In the *Comedy* philosophy is distinctly seen as something we *do*, not simply think about. (There is evidence in the *Paradiso* at XI 1–9 and XIV 97–102 that Dante held speculative thought in some disdain.) Philosophy is in two senses a practical activity, first because the philosopher must benefit and serve his fellows, and secondly because philosophy involves a disciplined and right-minded application of everything in the intellectual sphere, down to the words we use and the plans we conceive for the story of our lives. Language for Dante is a field of moral engagement, and storytelling a test of moral perspective. It is not, therefore, surprising that the first emotion expressed in the *Inferno* is the emotion not of Dante the protagonist but of Dante the poet, as he envisages the difficulty of the task he has undertaken: to remember Hell – as Dante must for the purposes of his story – is 'so bitter that death is hardly more so' (*Inf.* I 4–7). From the first, Dante conceives the writing of the *Comedy* as a challenge to his own strength of mind.

But how far does this take us from 'fiction'? And what are the implications of Dante's position for a reading of the *Comedy*?

On the first question, Dante himself allows us an exact view in probably the most famous episode of his poem, the meeting with Francesca in *Inferno* V. As a literary creation, Francesca has been compared sometimes with Shakespeare's Juliet, sometimes with Flaubert's Madame Bovary. *Inferno* V is undoubtedly the product of an imagination which could have spent itself in works of fiction. (This is scarcely anachronistic when one thinks of Chaucer's

Criseyde or Boccaccio's Fiammetta.) Dante here displays the utmost skill in evoking a tone of voice, both sophisticated and passionate (*Inf.* V 100–7), and in creating, for Francesca's account of her death (121–38), the highest degree of tension and pathos. The episode is also a study in psychology, representing particularly the action of literary convention upon a receptive and uncritical mind. The mentality of Francesca is dominated by a concern for literary language and courtly fiction. Her first speech dextrously employs codes of language which Dante had helped to institute in his early love poetry; and the kiss which seals Francesca's passion for Paolo and equally her fate is brought about, not by naive appetite, but by an over-sympathetic reading of a kiss described in a French romance (136).

Yet none of this, in itself, accounts for the uniquely Dantean character of the canto. To see this we must admit that Francesca is, in a real sense, a fact and not a fiction. Dante has here set himself to deal with a near-contemporary whose story – in outline at least – is historically attested; and this will reveal that the purpose of the canto is to raise the essential moral question of how we should deal with beings other than ourselves. That general question encompasses the more particular consideration of love and lust which the canto provides – for clearly it is emotion and sexual feeling which most often leads us into relationship with others. It also includes a preliminary analysis of the central issue in the *Comedy*: the relation between God, as the *other* being who created us, and the human will; Francesca's behaviour has distanced her from the love of God (91–3), and that distance vitiates her relationship with both Paolo and Dante. But *Inferno* V is designed rather to enact than to solve this question. Words, along with the imaginings and definitions they produce, are seen to be the fallible instruments we employ in our encounter with others: in Francesca's speech, one recognises the pressure of emotion and the emotional claims that words may exert upon others; in Dante's text we see that acts of judgement, too, are a necessary part of our approach to those around us.

The historicity of Francesca is emphasised by the manner in which Dante introduces her into his narrative. Hitherto, the poet has drawn his characters (almost) exclusively from the pages of classical literature; the first half of *Inferno* V itself begins with a

portrayal of Virgil's Minos, and proceeds to enumerate the lustful who include Helen, Dido and Cleopatra. As soon, however, as the protagonist utters Francesca's name (116), the text moves towards a more 'modern' or immediate sphere. Yet classical antiquity is not left wholly behind. It is this world (among several other sources) which provides the criteria by which Dante judges Francesca. All the figures in the first half of the canto have in some way disregarded or damaged the laws on which the well-being of communities depends (55–60). Lust, here, is no private matter but a failing which (like all other sins in Dante's scheme) has repercussions throughout the public world. So, not only do Francesca's words and feelings eliminate from the scene her lover Paolo – who remains an unnamed and feebly weeping presence throughout the episode – but also they have a similar effect upon the sympathetic protagonist, who at the end of her story falls in a faint as if he were a dead body. Francesca, like Dido, distracts those around her, rather than promoting their progress and purposeful advance. Ironically, the most 'historical' figure Dante has yet conceived corrodes the principles on which historical communities depend.

In this respect Francesca stands in deliberate contrast to the other major figure whom Dante has so far created, Virgil. One notes how her sentimental repetition of the word *pietà* or its cognates (93 and 117; 140) recalls – in a context where Dido is prominent – the *pietas* of Aeneas, but weakens the word (which, for Virgil, is the key to practical care and concern), so that it becomes a merely affective indulgence. It is, however, primarily against Virgil as presented in *Inferno* I that Francesca is seen to fail. Her words have nothing of that stability and concern for truth which Virgil displayed in declaring: 'Non omo, omo già fui.' Nor is her story any sort of epic: so far from offering the protagonist a plan, her words lead him to renewed oblivion. Thus, her first speech is dominated by repetitions and rhythmic patterns which, initially, relegate the overwhelming fact of God's displeasure to a subordinate clause (91), and splinter (107) into an expression of hatred not love. Likewise, the story of her love and death is told to the rhythm of an erotic pulse which finally disintegrates into three staccato lines of conclusion dominated by expressions of hatred and incomprehension (136–8).



In his judgement of Francesca, the poet is not concerned simply with the condemnation of lust. (Lust itself is entirely redeemable, as shown by *Purg.* XXVI and *Par.* IX.) Dante, of course, does condemn lust – with a subtle orthodoxy that is only progressively revealed – as an abdication of moral freedom. Hence Francesca's covert but repeated admission that she was 'taken' by love at lines 101, 104 and 106. But his underlying theme remains the way in which we approach the fact of another existence. To judge represents one such approach, since to judge is to admit, for good or ill, the moral independence of the other; we only judge individuals who have been free to choose. But judgement is always complicated by the subtleties of imagination, emotional sympathy and verbal nuance. And the purpose of the canto, seen as part of Dante's own story, is to take account of these factors: Dante here challenges himself to treat as moral and historical facts the same details which, in Francesca's mouth, emerge as glamorous and seductive fictions. The canto is thus a critique of Dante's own imaginative and linguistic powers; for at the moment of realising – as never before in his career – that he had the imaginative power to give body and voice to his literary creations, Dante also realises that any such imaginings must also submit to the disciplined assessment of fact which moral and intellectual attention alone can provide.

Where Francesca's story obliterates both Paolo and the protagonist, Dante attempts to place his own imaginings or fictions in the overall scheme of reality as he knew it, and to ensure that crucial words like *amore* do not 'slip, slide, perish' or decay with imprecision, but remain available for use in a line such as that which concludes the *Comedy*: 'l'amor che move 'l sole e l'altre stelle' (the love which moves the sun and the other stars).

This is in part an indication of how the reader must proceed throughout the *Comedy*. No reader of Dante's poem can risk becoming a Francesca by allowing free rein to an emotionally indulgent reading. Certainly, the story which Dante is telling will call into play an extremely wide range of emotions and an even wider range of imaginings. And all of these will have their value; but only if guided by intelligent discrimination and an eye for the analysis of fact.

In this sense, to read the *Comedy* is to act. We have seen that Dante conceived the writing of the work as a practical activity, analagous

to the journey of Aeneas. Likewise, the reader, possessed of the same faculties as Dante and focusing his mind on the page which Dante himself first approved, should expect to engage in a comparable advance. This is not to say that one need agree with Dante's beliefs or ideological conclusions; indeed, too rapid an assent to the content of Dante's poem may stultify the action which it essentially requires. The reader must be prepared rather to tolerate the moral questions which the poem proposes so precisely: we may not accept the answers that Dante offers, for instance, on matters of sexual mores, suicide, the value of poverty or the justice of God; but as rational beings, we are called upon to plan and express in words an answer as comprehensive as Dante's own. As pure fiction, the *Comedy* will satisfy any appetite for spectacle and passion. But its unique characteristic is to locate the workings of imagination and emotion in the sphere of intellectual questioning and analysis. Anyone who thinks or writes at all understands what it means to conceive an intellectual purpose, to desire to finish one's work, to investigate the means of doing so, to know the satisfactions and dissatisfactions of a phrase. Such experiences as these – quite apart from any specifically Christian definition – are the experiences that Dante requires us to draw upon in the 'act' of reading his work.

### III

Over the last sixty years, students of the *Comedy* have sought to demonstrate that no opposition exists between the philosophical and poetic aspects of Dante's work. The terms of this debate were established by Benedetto Croce in his *La Poesia di Dante* (1921), where he maintains that one will do justice to Dante's imaginative achievement only by allowing that his doctrinal and allegorical constructions form merely a frame to moments of truly poetic intensity. This is now regarded as far too restrictive a view, too narrow in its understanding of what excites the imagination and too reluctant to learn from Dante's own theoretical writings what he intended his poetry to be and do.

The present study is broadly in agreement with these objections. As has been suggested, it is impossible to sustain a distinction between the practical and 'poetic' phases of Dante's activity. Support

for this view can be found in *De Vulgari Eloquentia*; and there, too, it will be seen that there is no warrant, in dealing with Dante, for that unconcern over technicalities of linguistic and metric form which Croce's idealism led him to display.

None the less, Dante criticism may now have returned to a point where it needs to recover the urgency of Croce's interest in the specifically poetic act. Our view of poetry has moved on since Croce; but Dante studies have not benefited greatly from this advance, nor has modern critical theory sufficiently taken the *Comedy* into account.

An issue of particular importance in this regard is the question of Dante's allegory. Ever since Croce looked askance at allegory, a great deal of work has gone into the analysis of Dante's allegorical procedures. On the authority especially of Dante's much-debated Epistle to Can Grande, modern critics have recognised a distinction between the three levels of meaning (as well as the literal) which a text like the *Comedy* may be expected to yield. So – taking an example analysed in the Epistle – the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt may be interpreted in four ways: literally, this event *did* occur; but, allegorically, the event refers to the Redemption of Mankind from sin through grace; morally, the same event refers to the life of the individual whose soul will be freed from bondage by Christ; and, finally, in the 'anagogical' sense, the Exodus offers an insight into the 'last things' – death and judgement, Heaven and Hell – showing how, for instance, death will free us for eternal life.

That Dante's earliest readers did look for such meanings in his work is beyond question; and even a study – like the present one – which views allegorical interpretation with some suspicion will nevertheless make tacit use of its findings. Yet there are difficulties about applying the method to the *Comedy* at large. Some of these are scholarly, concerning, for instance, the extent to which the Epistle is an authentic work of Dante's. But the modern reader will want to know how the theory can illuminate the *Comedy* itself; and the problems here are threefold.

In the first place, when Dante offered his own 'allegorical' reading of his poems in the *Convivio* he placed quite exceptional emphasis upon the value of the *literal* level of meaning; so far from seeking hidden meanings, Dante's reading is largely a scientific discourse upon the literal or actual features of the world – the stars, the course

of the sun, the behaviour of light – to which he refers in constructing the narrative scenery of his poems. Secondly, it is quite impossible to argue that the *Comedy*, even if it is ‘allegorical’, is so in any uniform way: at times Dante deliberately alerts his reader to an allegorical meaning (see *Inf.* IX and *Purg.* VIII); but these occasions serve to emphasise how often he does not give any such indication. Thirdly – as modern critics – we may complain that any attempt to endow the details of Dante’s text with a precise conceptual meaning will in fact rob these details of their richer imaginative resonance. Most readers will at some point take comfort from a clear-cut interpretation. (And in *Vita nuova* XXV Dante himself expresses contempt for any poet who cannot explain his own meaning.) Yet the images of the work retain a vitality of their own, and cannot be confined in meaning to pre-established categories of thought.

The best students of Dante’s allegory have all come to terms with these problems. Erich Auerbach, for example, in his ‘Figura’ (1959, pp. 174–221), allows the highest prestige to the literal level: any event or figure in this life is seen both as itself and as a prefiguration of some future state in history or eternity; temporal reality is, so to speak, the ink in which God spells out his meaning. So, too, Peter Armour emphasises in a valuable study of *Purgatorio* I and II that no allegorical account can ignore the rich ‘polysemy’ of the *Comedy* (1981, pp. 74–5).

However, one has only to consider the ‘meaning’ of two of the most important figures in the *Comedy* to see what damage the method might do in unskilled hands.

To the exegete who first said that Virgil is Reason (it was not Dante), all subsequent readers must be grateful. But no one can suppose that Virgil is only that. From what we have seen, it is plain that in *Inferno* I the importance of Virgil to the protagonist – reflecting his importance to the poet – is that he actually *is* a presence, to whom an appeal can be made and from whom definite and practical answers can be expected. In *Inferno* I, these answers involve a renewed attention to history itself; indeed it could be said that the entry of Virgil marks the moment at which Dante abandons rather than begins his allegory. For while the wood, hill and beasts of the opening lines undoubtedly do possess an allegorical dimension, Virgil insists that Dante should consider his position in a literal

sense, and dramatises, by his own words, that concern with 'what is the case' in moral and physical fact which is also expressed in the Francesca episode.

It is one thing to know what Reason – or any other concept – is generally supposed to mean, quite another to realise how it is embodied in persons and particular acts. Indeed, one might say that to know what is *literally* true is the more difficult task – especially if this knowledge involves, as it does in the *Comedy*, a knowledge of the facts of human need, suffering, criminality and frustrated purpose. And much of the characteristic energy of Dante's thought derives from his determination to 'convert' his understanding from the plane of generalities to the plane of actual and particular instances. As to Virgil, his importance for the poet is that he provides an historical example of how a poet may assert the actual principles of community and order. Dante's treatment of Virgil as a character in the *Comedy* is entirely consistent with this. In portraying Virgil Dante offers no fixed view of rationality but a developing critique of all the ways in which a human being can be reasonable. Discursive argument is one such way; but acts of friendship, concern or duty (in sum, of *pietas*), and even the physical support which Virgil so frequently offers to the protagonist, may themselves be no less 'reasonable' in the contribution they make to Dante's advance.

But what of Beatrice? Here Dante certainly appears to encourage an allegorical interpretation. The cantos of the *Purgatorio* which depict her approach to Dante in the Earthly Paradise contain the most explicitly allegorical sequences in the *Comedy*: Beatrice is preceded by a long procession in which the history of Divine Revelation is expounded in poetic and liturgical symbols; and subsequently the protagonist witnesses a Masque portraying the present-day corruption of the Church. In this context we cannot fail to agree with the precisely formulated interpretations of, say, C. S. Singleton (1958), in which Beatrice is seen as a prefiguration not only of the True Church but of Christ in Judgement. It would also be wrong to deny that the 'high dreams' (T. S. Eliot 1929, p. 15) of vision and ceremonial rite can have a powerful appeal for the imagination. Yet to rest content with that is to ignore another kind of drama. For Beatrice no less than Virgil is the focus of an intellectual action; and here, in describing Beatrice's first words to the protagonist, as also in *Inferno* I, Dante portrays a most vigorous encounter with fact.

So far from remaining an inert or bluestockinged concept, Beatrice is shown to demand with the utmost urgency that Dante should confront the facts of his own sinfulness and of his early deviation from the example of perfect living which she had provided. In short, the dynamics of this meeting – breaking so unexpectedly into the solemn procession – mirror the painful collision against the particular demands of moral action which the mind is tempted constantly to soften: spectacle can flatter or comfort the onlooker; interpretation can divert or distance the impact of a truth. But, as Dante is shortly to say, ‘deeds must be the interpreters of hard enigma’ (*Purg.* XXXIII 49–50).

The encounter with Beatrice is also, however, a release, allowing the protagonist to move from the realities of his sins to the reality – fulfilled in Paradise – of his own virtues and potentialities. And, in conceiving that change, the notion of allegory is a relevant one. For Beatrice has displayed not only a present truth but also the possibility of conversion to the ‘other’, divine, order of understanding; in her Dante sees how the objects that God has created can, and should, bear a meaning beyond themselves, so that even the features of Beatrice’s physical form are for Dante irradiated with ulterior significance. But the response to that image is itself an act; in cultivating allegory, Dante is interested not merely in conclusions but in the power of the mind, morally and intellectually, to convert itself and the objects on which it is trained to another plane.

As we shall see, the theme of conversion begins as early as the *Vita nuova* and is especially relevant in discussing the *Purgatorio*, where Dante not only investigates the psychology of the changing mind, but also develops a range of unique poetic devices to reflect and enact that theme. Here, one need only stress that the great allegories which conclude the *Purgatorio* must be understood as actions: the mind is impelled towards the scene by the promise of precise meaning – and it will not be disappointed. But the shifts of the mind, as it investigates that scene, are themselves no less significant; our essential capacities (on Dante’s view) for rigorous thought and imaginative freedom will both be realised in the inquiry.

It will at times appear that the purpose of this study is to press for a ‘creative misreading’ of the *Comedy*. In part it is. After all, there are few better examples of such misreading than Dante’s own treatment

of Virgil; and it should already be apparent that the *Comedy* is pre-eminently a 'writerly' work. We are required to engage directly with the actions of the text – as if reader were as responsible as author for establishing its meanings. And this activity will be dulled if one assumes too readily that the fruit of reading must be an accurate understanding of Dante's conceptual scheme.

On the other hand, Dante does have a Hell prepared for those who disregard the truth. And – to repeat – whether or not one is convinced by Dante's scheme, a reading of the *Comedy* will have to admit the force of the questions the poem raises. Right and wrong, truth and falsehood are constantly at issue. We need to ask – as most readers do – whether it is right for Francesca to be damned.

On turning to the *Comedy* itself, it will be seen how far Dante's words and narrative forms are intended not only to produce conclusions but also to sharpen such questions as these. But before that we must consider in some detail the works which precede the *Comedy*: there is, first, the *Vita nuova*, which is an anthology of Dante's early poetry connected by a prose narrative and commentary; then the *Convivio*, in which Dante presents a philosophical commentary on three of his own lyric *canzoni*; and, finally, *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, where, writing in Latin, Dante offers a wide-ranging discussion of linguistic and poetic questions relating to his own practices as a poet. Together these works cover the most essential aspects of Dante's thinking, making it, largely, unnecessary to refer outside Dante's own writing for an understanding of his thought in the *Comedy*. At the same time, these works – especially the *Vita nuova* – show how Dante prepared himself as a poet for the *Comedy*: and while Dante's own advance towards the *Comedy* is not in any sense obvious or direct, this indirection is itself important: Dante is from the first an experimentalist, requiring in his minor works, as he will in the *Comedy*, an audience attuned to and able to appreciate the value of artistic or intellectual experiment.