

AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN THE DIVINA COMMEDIA.¹

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IN the *Convivio*, Dante discusses one aspect of what we should now call the personal element in literature : whether an author should speak of himself in his book. It is, he says, unlawful for a man to do so without a necessary reason. For a man cannot speak of any one without either praising him or blaming him ; both which kinds of discourse are in bad taste, *rusticamente stanno*, in the mouth of a man himself ; and, further, there is no man who is a true and just measurer of himself, so does our self love deceive us. Nevertheless, there are times and occasions when it is not only legitimate but necessary, for his own sake or for the sake of others, that a man should speak of himself :—

“ Verily I say that, for necessary reasons, to speak of oneself is permitted. And among the other necessary reasons two are most manifest. The one is when, without discoursing of oneself, great infamy and peril cannot be made to cease ; and then it is permitted on the ground that, to take the less evil of two paths, is as it were to take a good one. And this necessity moved Boëthius to speak of himself, in order that, under cover of consolation, he might defend himself from the perpetual infamy of his exile, by showing it to be unjust—since no other defender arose. The other is when, by discoursing of oneself, very great utility follows therefrom to others by way of instruction ; and this reason moved Augustine in his *Confessions* to speak of himself ; for by the process of his life, which was from evil to good, and

¹ The substance of a lecture delivered in the John Rylands Library 12 October, 1921.

from good to better, and from better to best, he gave example and instruction, which could not else be received on so true a testimony.”¹

This passage indicates the two main elements in the autobiography of the *Divina Commedia*. Like Boëthius, Dante would defend himself “from the perpetual infamy of his exile, by showing it to be unjust”; like Augustine, by the process of his life, he would give “example and instruction, which could not else be received on so true a testimony”. In the story of his outer life, the sacred poem is an apologia; in the story of his inner life, it is a confession of spiritual experience.

It is curious to notice how, now and again in the poem, Dante, as it were, tries to reconcile the theory of its being illegitimate for a man to speak of himself with the fact that the very nature of his theme is compelling him to do so throughout. When Farinata degli Uberti questions him about his family, the poet says: “I, who was desirous to obey, concealed it not, but opened the whole to him”;² but he never gives his own name to any soul, nor in any other case reveals his identity to anyone who does not already know him. He is content, as a rule, simply to let them understand that he is a living man;³ and, when they recognise from his speech that he is a Tuscan, to say that he comes from the banks of the Arno, or, at the most, from Florence. Thus, he answers the Frati Godenti: “I was born and grew up on the fair river of Arno at the great city, and I am with the body that I have always had”.⁴ To Guido del Duca he adds an excuse for his reticence: “Through the midst of Tuscany there spreads a stream which rises in Falterona, and a hundred miles of course does not content it. From its banks I bring this body; to tell you who I am would be to speak in vain, because my name as yet has slight renown.”⁵ To Bonagiunta’s question, whether he sees before him the author of the canzone, *Donne ch’aveve intelletto d’amore*, he merely replies with a definition of poetical inspiration: “I am one who, when love inspires me, take note, and, in that fashion which he dictates within, do I give utterance”.⁶ When at last his

¹ *Convivio*, i. 2.

² *Inferno*, x. 43-44.

³ Cf. *Purgatorio*, xi. 55: “Cotesti che ancor vive e non si noma”.

⁴ *Inf.*, xxiii. 94-96.

⁵ *Purg.*, xiv. 16-21.

⁶ *Ibid.*, xxiv. 52-54.

name is uttered, on the lips of Beatrice in the Earthly Paradise, it is introduced as it were apologetically : " When I turned at the sound of mine own name, that of necessity is here set down ".¹

Incidentally, Dante tells us in the *Inferno* the year of his birth, and in the *Paradiso* the season. He is " nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita," that is, in his thirty-fifth year, and it is now " mille dugento con sessanta sei anni " since the first Good Friday.² That is, it is now 1300, and Dante was therefore born in 1265. In the Stellar Heaven, he invokes his natal stars, the constellation of the Twins : " O glorious stars, O light fulfilled with great virtue, from which I acknowledge all my genius, whate'er it be, with you was rising and with you was setting he who is father of every mortal life, when I first felt the Tuscan air ".³ That is, he was born when the Sun was in the sign of Gemini, which would be between the middle of May and the middle of June ; and we know more precisely from Boccaccio that the poet's birthday was in May. According to Dante's theory of the correspondence of the angelic orders with the heavens, and the communication of their power to the spheres, the specific virtue of these stars—as part of the Stellar Heaven is that of the Cherubim, whose name is interpreted *plenitudo scientiæ*, the order of angels that sees most into the hidden things of God and whose function it is to spread the knowlege of Him upon all beneath them.

The scene with Beatrice in the Earthly Paradise tells again, in the light of fuller experience, the spiritual story of the *Vita Nuova*, the love that was the motive power of the poet's early days, when the revelation of earthly beauty in his lady became the guiding star to lead his soul to the quest of the divine beauty ; her " ascent from flesh to spirit," and Dante's changed life in the years that followed her death, when " he turned his steps along a way not true ".⁴ His first literary triumph—the composition of the canzone, *Donne ch'avete intelletto d'amore*, which revealed the new poet to his contemporaries—is recorded in the scene with Bonagiunta.⁵ His services in the army of the Commune have left their trace in more than one passage ;⁶ his

¹ *Purg.*, xxx. 62-63.

² Cf. *Inf.*, i, 1 ; *Conv.*, iv. 23 ; *Inf.*, xxi. 113.

³ *Par.*, xxii. 112-117.

⁵ *Ibid.*, xxiv. 49-51.

⁶ *Inf.*, xxi. 94-96, xxii. 1-9 ; *Purg.*, v. 91-123.

⁴ *Purg.*, xxx. and xxxi.

friendships with Carlo Martello and Casella (both of whom he associates with his later canzoni), his more intimate connection with Forese Donati and with Guido Cavalcanti, the one the companion of less worthy episodes, the other, whom he had once been proud to call the first of his friends, now unable to accompany him in his spiritual journey through the other world, inspire lines too familiar to need quotation.

The autobiography of Dante centres in the story of his exile, and for this the scene with Brunetto Latini is the preparation: that heart-rending scene of mutual recognition: "Siete voi qui, ser Brunetto?" Brunetto Latini is, to some extent, a companion picture to Farinata degli Uberti. Farinata represented the chivalry and turbid patriotism of the Ghibelline nobles of Florence, Brunetto the highest type of the Guelf burghers who had overthrown them. Michele Scherillo has aptly defined him as "a modest Cicero of Guelf Florence". The period in which Dante came under Brunetto's influence was that of the latter's old age and greatest political activity; the decade from 1282 to 1292, which in Florentine history ran from the institution of the priors as the chief magistrates of the Republic to the final triumph of the *secondo popolo* with the Ordinances of Justice. It is during those years, in the documents published by Del Lungo, that we find Brunetto taking part in the various councils of the State, giving his opinion, which is usually accepted and acted upon by the government. The phrase, *placuit quasi omnibus secundum dictum dicti ser Brunetti* ("almost all voted according to the speech of the said Ser Brunetto"), is several times repeated in these records, as the normal result when Brunetto had spoken. Following Scherillo's suggestion, we can surmise the relations between Brunetto and Dante. As the poet grew up, he found the older man, not only a light of the philosophical learning set forth in his *Trésor*, but a type of the highest patriotism that the faction-tossed Florentine commune could produce; while Brunetto saw in the youth, who no doubt became in some sort his disciple, one in whom his ideal of a citizen might be fulfilled, one prepared to bring the highest culture of his age and the dream of the glories of ancient Rome to the service of the new Italian State. "If thou follow thy star, thou canst not miss the glorious harbour, if I discerned well in the beauteous life; and, if I had so died too soon, seeing heaven so gracious to thee, I would have urged thee on to the

work"¹ Brunetto here refers primarily to Dante's political work for Florence. "E s'io non fossi si per tempo morto." In this line, as occasionally elsewhere in the poem, *per tempo* has the sense of "too soon".² It was just too soon for him to assist the poet in his political career, for Brunetto died in 1294, over eighty years old, the year before Dante entered political life as a member of the special council of the Captain in November, 1295. The eighteen lines that follow contain Dante's own political apologia, which he is to hear repeated on the lips of Cacciaguida. The ungrateful Florentine people "will become, for thy good deeds, thy foe". "Thy fortune has this much honour in store for thee, that the one party and the other shall hunger for thee; but far from the goat shall be the herbage." The earlier commentators understand "hunger for thee" in a good sense, "desire to make thee one of themselves"; the moderns, for the most part, in a sinister fashion, "desire to devour thee". In either case, we have Dante's testimony to the influence of Brunetto on his own life:—

"If my prayer were wholly fulfilled,' I answered him, 'you would not yet be placed in banishment from human nature; for in my mind is fixed, and now pierces my heart, the dear and kind paternal image of you, when in the world, from time to time, you taught me how man makes himself eternal; and how much I cherish it, while I live, must needs be shown forth in my tongue'".³

The vague prophecies of exile, which Dante hears at intervals throughout the poem, become explicit in the *Paradiso*, where the apologia placed on the lips of Brunetto receives a fuller commentary from Cacciaguida:—

"As Hippolytus departed from Athens, by reason of his pitiless and treacherous stepmother, so from Florence needs must thou depart. This is willed, this is already being sought, and soon will it be done for him who thinks it, there where Christ is put to sale each day. The blame will follow the offended party in report, as it is wont; but the vengeance shall be witness to the truth that deals it."⁴

Cacciaguida is speaking from the standpoint of April, 1300. It is difficult to imagine that, at that precise moment, Dante was marked out for special destruction at Rome. The reference is probably to

¹ *Inf.*, xv. 55-60.

² Cf. *Inf.*, xxvi. 10: "E se già fosse, non saria per tempo".

³ *Inf.*, xv. 61-87.

⁴ *Par.*, xvii. 46-54.

the plot against the liberties of the Republic, concocted at the papal court by three Florentines in the service of the Pope, which was discovered in that month of April, and may be regarded as the first step in the papal policy that led to Dante's exile.

As we know, Dante was a member of the Signoria from 15 June to 14 August, 1300. He entered upon office when the rival factions of the Bianchi and Neri had already "come to blood," and about the same time as a papal legate, Cardinal Matteo d'Acquasparta, arrived in Florence in the name of Pope Boniface—the pontiff who, a month previously, had demanded from Albert of Hapsburg the absolute renunciation to the Holy See of all rights claimed by the Emperor in Tuscany. On the first day of Dante's office, the sentence passed in the previous April against the three Florentine papal conspirators was formally consigned to him and his colleagues, and, in some sort, ratified by them. Nevertheless, the poet and his fellow priors—while putting the aristocratic leaders of both factions under bounds outside the territory of the Republic—avoided a direct rupture with the papal legate. It was the succeeding Signoria, after Dante had left office, which not only recalled the exiled Bianchi (on the plea of the illness of Guido Cavalcanti), but brought on a crisis with the Cardinal—who, in September, broke off negotiations and left the city. But in the following year, 1301, we find Dante evidently heading a kind of antipapal opposition, particularly in the famous meetings—famous because the only case in which his actual words have been preserved—of 19 June. The Pope, by letter from Cardinal Matteo d'Acquasparta, had demanded from the Republic the continuance of the service of a hundred horsemen. In a united meeting of the Councils of the Hundred, of the Captain, and of the Capitadini (the heads of the Greater Guilds), and again in the Council of the Hundred apart, Dante spoke twice against compliance, urging "quod de servitio faciendo domino Papae nihil fiat".¹ It would also seem that the poet was endeavouring to unite the rich burghers with the people for the defence of the Republic. Among the various occasions on which he is recorded to have spoken in September is one on the 13th of that month, when, in the united Councils, he pleaded for the preserva-

¹ Upon all this subject, see B. Barbadoro, *La condanna di Dante*, in Barbi's *Studi danteschi*, vol. ii. (Florence, 1920).

tion of the Ordinances of Justice. This was the usual course when the State was in danger, but an unusual feature in this meeting was that not only the Greater Guilds (those mainly engaged in wholesale commerce, exportation and importation, and the mercantile relations of Florence with foreign countries), but also the Minor Guilds (which carried on the retail traffic and internal trade of the city) were represented. A passage in Leonardo Bruni's *Life of Dante* seems to imply that this innovation was brought about by the poet's advice.

There can now be little doubt that the once disputed account of Dante's embassy to the Pope, related in detail by Dino Compagni, is substantially historical.¹ At the beginning of October, the Florentine government—then entirely of the Bianchi—induced the allied commune of Bologna to send an embassy to the Pope, and associated with it three ambassadors of their own: Maso Minerbetti, Corazza da Signa, and Dante Alighieri. The three Florentines were to make terms with Boniface so as to avert the coming of Charles of Valois. The Pope received the ambassadors, probably not at Rome, but at Anagni; sent two, Maso Minerbetti and Corazza da Signa, back to Florence to demand submission to his will, but detained Dante. Thus the poet was absent on that fateful All Saints Day, 1301, when Charles of Valois, as papal peacemaker, entered Florence "to joust with the lance of Judas"; but, notwithstanding Leonardo Bruni's statement that he had reached Siena on his way back when he heard of his ruin, it is more probable that he had returned, but fled from Florence after the summons to appear before the new Podestà that preceded the first sentence. This, as we know, is dated 27 January, 1302. With four others, Dante is accused of barratry in the priorate or after leaving that office, and of corruptly and fraudulently employing the money and resources of the Commune against the Sovereign Pontiff and Charles to resist his coming, or against the pacific state of the City of Florence and the Guelf Party, and by similar means causing the expulsion of the Neri from Pistoia and severing that city from Florence and the Church. He is condemned to fine, to two years' exile, and perpetual exclusion from office. A second sentence (10 March) dooms him, with his four companions and ten others, as

¹ Cf. Del Lungo's notes to *La Cronica di Dino Compagni* in the new Muratori (tom. ix., pt. ii).

contumacious, to perpetual exile or death by burning if he falls into the power of the Commune. The correct reading of the charge in the first sentence makes it exclusively one of corrupt practices though with a political purpose.¹ Dante's own words protest his absolute innocence, and imply that his real offence was his opposition to the attempts of the Neri to subject Florence to the domination of the Pope.

"Thou shalt leave everything beloved most tenderly ; and this is that arrow which the bow of exile first shoots forth. Thou shalt experience how the bread of others savours of salt, and how hard a path the descending and the mounting by another's stairs."²

Del Lungo has said that, with these lines, "Dante has made his sufferings immortal in the heart of humanity". The precise meaning of what follows is disputed :—

"And that which most will weigh upon thy shoulders will be the evil and senseless company with which thou shalt fall into this valley, which all ungrateful, all mad and impious, will become against thee ; but short while after it, not thou, shall have the brow stained red therefrom. Of its brutishness its proceedings will supply the proof, so that it will be well for thee to have made thee a party for thyself."³

The question at issue is the length of time covered by these lines describing the poet's relations and rupture with his fellow exiles. After the two sentences passed against him at the beginning of 1302, the only documentary evidence of his association with them is of 8 June of that year, when, at San Godenzo, Dante with eight others represents his party in making the alliance with the Ubaldini to wage war upon Florence. In a similar document of 18 June, 1303, his name no longer appears in the long list of those who, under the leadership of Scarpetta degli Ordelaiffi, signed an agreement with their allies in Bologna. It is therefore a plausible hypothesis that the rupture—which, according to two early commentators, was caused by an accusation of treachery brought against Dante in consequence of the failure of an enterprise of which he had counselled the postponement—and the forming of a party for himself took place between these two dates. The disaster, to which Cacciaguida refers, may be taken as the unsuccessful attempt to enter Florence from La Lastra in the summer of 1304. We have no documentary evidence of Dante's movements be-

¹ See Barbadoro, *op. cit.*

² *Par.*, xvii. 55-60.

³ *Ibid.*, 61-69.

tween June, 1302, and October, 1306,¹ when he appears as guest and ambassador of the Malaspina in Lunigiana (the supposed document attesting his presence at Padua in the latter year probably refers to another person). And after 1306 we know no more with certainty, until he pays his homage to the Emperor elect, Henry of Luxemburg, early in 1311. The usual interpretation, then, takes these lines as covering only the first few months of his exile. Del Lungo, on the other hand, holds that Dante, after withdrawing from participation in the active measures of the Bianchi, remained in Tuscany or near at hand, waiting. Although he had "fatta parte per se stesso," they were still the party whose victory would mean his return to Florence. According to this view, these lines cover some six years thus passed (1302-1307), until, in the latter year, the exiles assembled for the last time at Arezzo, and then, in the words of Dino Compagni, "departed all forlorn, and never assembled again".

The answer to the question depends in part upon how we understand the lines that follow :—

"Thy first refuge, thy first hostelry, will be the courtesy of the great Lombard, who bears the holy bird upon the ladder, who towards thee shall have so kindly a regard that, of performing and of asking, between him and thee, that will be first which among others is the slower. With him shalt thou see the one who at his birth was so impressed by this mighty star that notable shall be his deeds."

And Cacciaguida continues with the splendid panegyric of Can Grande, a boy of nine years old at the assumed date of the vision—the panegyric, so closely corresponding with the dedicatory letter of the *Paradiso*, and culminating in the mysterious prophecy of his future achievements, which seem to suggest those of the *Veltro*, the coming deliverer of Italy and the political saviour of mediæval society.²

The majority of commentators understand by *il gran lombardo* Bartolommeo della Scala, who held the lordship of Verona from 1301 until his death in March, 1304. On this assumption, Dante would have taken refuge in Verona immediately after his rupture with his fellow-exiles, and would have had no concern, even indirectly, with their later vicissitudes. Del Lungo and Torraca hold that the person indicated is Bartolommeo's brother and successor, Albuino

¹ Cf. *Purg.*, viii. 133-139.

² *Ibid.*, 70-93.

della Scala, who ruled in Verona until October, 1311, and almost from the beginning associated his younger brother Can Grande, a mere youth, with him as the commander of his troops. This would agree with the view that the previous lines cover the whole period of the struggle of the Bianchi to return to Florence, Dante perhaps finding his first refuge at Verona after the final dissolution of the party in 1307. The question is too complicated a one to discuss here, and the evidence hardly permits of a definite decision between the two theories.¹

We may find, I think, unconscious autobiography on Dante's part in the portrait of Romeo of Villanova, the righteous statesman of Provence, unjustly called to give an account of his stewardship, and thereafter wandering in self-chosen exile and poverty; Romeo, whom the poet has placed by the side of Justinian in the sphere of Mercury, among "the good spirits who have been active in order that honour and fame may follow them":—

"Within the present pearl shines the light of Romeo, whose great and goodly work was ill-requited. But the Provençals, who wrought against him, have prospered not, and therefore he treadeth ill who turns another's good deeds to his own loss. Four daughters, and each a queen, had Raymond Berengar, and this for him did Romeo, a lowly man and pilgrim. And then malignant words moved him to demand a reckoning from this just man, who had rendered him seven and five for ten. Thereupon he departed, poor and aged; and, if the world could know the heart he had, as he begged his life morsel by morsel, though much it praise him, it would praise him more."²

"The heart he had," *il cor ch'elli ebbe*: not of course his sorrow, but his unshaken magnanimity of spirit in adversity, saying like the English poet: "I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul". The analogy is striking between the mysterious pilgrim who came to Count Raymond's court and the greater pilgrim who has canonised him in the *Divina Commedia*. In the Romeo of the legend, passing away with his mule and staff and scrip as mysteriously

¹ It involves among other things the precise bearing of an apparently uncomplimentary reference to Albuino in the *Convivio* and the problem of the authenticity of the Letter to Cardinal Niccolò da Prato attributed to Dante.

² *Par.*, vi. 127-142.

as he came, there was seemingly no trace of vain glory or shadow of ambition to cause him to win a lower grade in Paradise. But to Dante, that zealous searcher into the secret things of the human spirit, this righteous indignation at being called to render an account may have seemed an excessive sensitiveness for the man's own reputation, a sudden revelation of the earthly strain in the character.¹ Dante admits in himself the failing that was that of the spirits in this sphere, at the beginning of the *Monarchia*, where he purposes to extract from its recesses the knowledge of temporal monarchy, not only that he "may keep vigil for the good of the world," but also that he "may be the first to win for his own glory the palm of so great a prize".² And it is clear that he creates the figure of Romeo and interprets his life in the light of his own experience. The same unjust charges of malversation in office were made against himself. The *mendicando sua vita a frusto a frusto*, which seems to be the poet's own addition to the legend of Romeo's passing into obscurity, corresponds only too well with the *peregrino quasi mendicando* with which he describes his own wanderings.³ We may pursue the analogy further, and find the corresponding expression of *il cor ch'elli ebbe*, the heart that Dante had, in the famous letter to the Florentine friend, refusing to return to Florence under humiliating conditions, and speculate whether even that noble utterance, reviewed by the poet from his celestial watch-tower of contemplation, might not have revealed to him something of the same spirit as appeared in Romeo's magnanimous shaking the dust of Provence from off his feet.

It is profoundly impressive to observe the contrast in tone in the *Divina Commedia*, when, instead of apologia, it becomes confession. The proud sense of political righteousness yields throughout to an intense spiritual humility. We have only to compare the lines spoken by Cacciaguida or Brunetto Latini with those uttered by Beatrice in the Earthly Paradise, where Dante for shame cannot meet her eyes.⁴ The famous passage in the Letter to Can Grande—defending the power of the human intellect to be so exalted in this life as to transcend the measure of humanity, and rebuking (by the example of

¹ I owe this suggestion to Dr. Wicksteed's note in the Temple Classics *Paraliso*.

² *Mon.*, i. 1.

³ *Conv.*, i. 3.

⁴ *Purg.*, xxx. 103-145, xxxi. 1-69.

Nabuchodonosor) the carpers who "cry out against the assignment of so great an exaltation because of the sin of the speaker"—justifies us, if the internal evidence of the poem itself be thought insufficient or inconclusive, in taking the *Divina Commedia* as the record of Dante's own spiritual experience. We are surely, then, to regard the *selva oscura* of the opening canto as the symbol of the poet's own moral state, when "so low he fell, that all means for his salvation were already scant, save showing him the folk in Hell".¹ We are to hold that the conversion, through Grace sent by Mercy, of which love was the inspiration and human philosophy the first means, was what he deemed to have been his; that he is the man whose soul, hardly touched by envy, was yet weighed down with the fear of the torment of the proud;² whose eyes were apt to be blinded by wrath, but who yet could be led through that "bitter and foul air" by the voice of reason.³ Though borne up "even to the sphere of fire" by the eagle of the spirit, he yet is tempted to listen for a while to the song of the siren of the flesh.⁴ The immeasurable burning, that purifies the sensual, must be endured by his soul before he can attain the peace of a good conscience in the Earthly Paradise.⁵ Love, the love that a woman had taught him on earth, becomes at last the guide through successive stages of illumination to the divine union; for he, too, even in life, had experienced that "moment of understanding," of which St. Augustine and St. Monica spoke together, here and now, which is the anticipation of the eternal life of the hereafter.

¹ *Purg.*, xxx. 136-138.

² *Ibid.*, xiii. 133-138.

³ *Ibid.*, xvi. 1-15.

⁴ *Ibid.*, ix. 30; xix. 10-24

⁵ *Ibid.*, xxvii. 10-51.