

MISCELLANEOUS

DANTE AND AQUINAS

ONE of the recurrent problems in the *Divina Commedia* has been the system that underlies Dante's treatment of sins and sinners in the *Purgatorio*, and especially in the *Inferno*. Dante himself, to be sure, explained very clearly that love is the foundation principle of his whole poem. But in the punishment of the various sins which transgress or destroy this principle many difficulties of interpretation arise. The arrangement of Purgatory offers little trouble by itself, for it is based on the seven deadly sins or capital vices dealt with in various ways by the fathers of the church from Cassian down. But the arrangement of the *Inferno* is not so easy to understand. Some similarities between it and the *Purgatorio*, such as that each is conical in shape with the sinners grouped on ledges or cornices, have led commentators to expect that the same sins would be punished in each region. Four of the seven sins for which penance is done in Purgatory were indeed easily discovered in Hell, but pride, envy, and sloth appeared to have no place in Dante's scheme of the *Inferno*. As the commentators held that Dante was not only a poet but a philosopher, they felt obliged to rescue him from his seeming inconsistency.

Accordingly, numerous solutions have been offered, especially in the last fifty years. The most obvious method was to place the three missing vices somewhere in Hell. Pride was located in the seventh circle with Capaneus, envy in the fifth circle with Filippo Argenti, and sloth beneath the marsh which the poets crossed in approaching the city of Dis. When it was observed that the treacherous evil in the lower circles of Hell simply could not be forced into Purgatory, some Germans explained that the seven deadly sins were the mothers of all sorts of vices, and that pride and envy were particularly prolific. The last four circles of the *Inferno* were immediately taken to correspond to these two vices in the *Purgatorio*.

All such makeshifts Witte rejected *in toto*, declaring that Purgatory and Hell were constructed on different principles, and that any correspondences were fortuitous. For sins to be punished in Hell they must issue in acts. Minos took account not of inward purpose but of overt deeds, just like the judge of a police court. If, however, the culprit repented before death, he would make atonement, not for the overt deed but for the inward purpose. If envy led a man to commit murder, Minos would condemn him to the seventh circle. But if the envious murderer repented, he would make atonement, not for murder, but for the capital vice of envy, in the second circle of Purgatory. The explanation was so simple and brilliant that it dazzled the majority of Italian commentators and English students into acceptance, the references to it sometimes implying that only those guilty of the densest ignorance could take any other view of the matter.

But now Mr. Reade, an English student of the middle ages, refuses to be dazzled. He contends not only that Witte's theory is utterly inadmissible but that it absolutely ignores the whole doctrine of capital vices as Dante would have learned it. He maintains this contention thru some four hundred and fifty crown-octavo pages of closely reasoned argument.¹ He examines the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas with the greatest fairness, cites passages from the schoolman in support of his statements, and shows that according to medieval doctrine guilt resides solely in the interior purpose, and that absence of an overt act never prevents a sinner from being cast into Hell.

The method of attack illustrates the method of explaining Dante. Mr. Reade does not forget that Dante read many books besides St. Thomas, but he maintains that in philosophical matters "St. Thomas is the best criterion of what Dante is likely to have taught in the *Inferno*." So far as Aristotle is concerned he is right. Contrary to the usual assumption, Aristotle was a relatively new authority in the thirteenth century. St. Thomas's master, Albertus Magnus, had thru his Latin paraphrase virtually established the medieval conception of the Greek thinker, and St. Thomas himself contributed no little to advance the Stagirite's reputation. It is

¹ *The Moral System of Dante's Inferno*, by W. H. V. Reade. Oxford, at the Clarendon Press, 1909.

therefore quite natural that the twentieth century interpretation of Aristotle differs in several particulars from that familiar to Dante. But Mr. Reade's assumption results in underestimating, sometimes in entirely neglecting, other sources of Dante's thought. That is, Dante was more of an eclectic than he is in this book given credit for being. There are traces of influence from Averroës and currents of mysticism altogether left out of account in this treatment of his moral system. But to re-create the intellectual atmosphere in which Dante lived would at this date be impossible, and in the task which Mr. Reade has set himself—that of expounding Aquinas so far as he may have influenced the great poet of the middle ages—the success is noteworthy.

The chief result of this exposition is to establish a difference between the seven deadly sins as a class and the sins of malice or *malitia*. The capital vices are all produced by passion; they emanate from no habitual bent or disease of the will; in technical language, they are committed *ex infirmitate*. The sins of malice, on the contrary, are produced by a desire to harm others; they emanate from a will vitiated by habit so as to delight in committing injustice; in technical language, they are *injuriae*, sins against justice. These conclusions are imbedded in a mass of minute and at times scholastic discussion of the bases for classifying sins, of the sources in Aristotle, of the relations with the theological virtues; and the whole argument is supported by such abundant quotation in the original Latin that the distinction itself is established beyond cavil. This fact is important, for on this distinction rests Mr. Reade's explanation of Dante.

The explanation itself requires little over fifty thousand words, about half the space devoted to the exposition of St. Thomas. The theory in brief is this: Dante based the *Purgatorio* on the doctrine of the seven capital vices as treated in Aquinas, with variation to suit his particular purpose; but the *Inferno* he based on Aristotle, so that the capital vices have nothing to do with the scheme of Hell. The reason four of the vices happen to appear is that they appear in Aristotle and in other systems as well. There are consequently two classes of sins in Hell—sins of incontinence and sins of malice. The sins of incontinence are punished in the upper circles. The

sins of malice are punished in the three lowest circles only. The fact that the latter sins consist in violations of justice proceeding from a vitiated will explains their non-appearance in Purgatory. So long as the condition of the heart known as *malitia* persists, the soul is doomed to eternal punishment in Hell. It may gain admission to Purgatory thru repentance, but the penance and purification which it must then undergo are not in expiation of malice, which no longer exists, but in expiation of those sins which led to malice. Thus the medieval doctrine of sin as found in St. Thomas underlies the treatment of moral problems in both the *Inferno* and the *Purgatorio*.

The superiority of Mr. Reade's theory to Witte's is that it is based on medieval and ancient philosophy, not as it is expounded today, but as it was understood by Dante. What is perhaps more important, the theory fits in perfectly with the principle of love which rules the poem and from which derives to so large an extent its loftiness and perennial significance. Yet to students of Dante objections will at once occur. They will say that according to the poet's own explanation of his system in the seventeenth canto of the *Purgatorio* the sins there result from the very love of evil to one's neighbor which, according to Mr. Reade, shuts out a soul from Purgatory forever. The objection proves to be ill-founded, since a comparison with the language of Aquinas makes it certain that Dante was not there using technical phraseology and consequently was not confusing the seven capital vices with sins of malice. It is nevertheless a little damaging to the contention that Dante was following St. Thomas in detail to find in the poet's own explanation language that at first seems to contradict St. Thomas's doctrine. Objectors will find another difficulty in the scheme of the *Inferno*, which many commentators have supposed to be based on Cicero rather than on Aristotle. As a matter of fact, however, Dante appears to have read his Latin translation of Aristotle more carefully than his commentators have. He was not departing from "the master of them that know" when in the seventh circle of Hell he treated sins of violence or brutishness under the general head of malice, for in the version which the poet used Aristotle was made to speak of sins of bestial malice. Cicero

may have afforded a suggestion for the scheme, but recourse to Cicero is not necessary to explain the peculiarities of the plan.

The main contention of Mr. Reade is therefore well founded. The doctrine of *malitia* appears to be so obvious and fundamental in the philosophy of Aquinas that it is highly improbable that Dante would have overlooked or disregarded it. But the author of this new theory, in applying it to the various minor problems of the *Inferno*, makes the mistake of assuming that Dante was a thorough schoolman who would feel constrained to carry out or elaborate in detail a metaphysical system. Consequently few will agree with everything in these sections, as when Dante is called dishonest for not explaining the seventh circle in accordance with Aquinas and Cicero. Such defects are perhaps the inevitable result of the author's exceptional qualifications for his self-imposed task. He has so saturated himself with St. Thomas that he has adopted something of the scholastic attitude. He has set forth, with clearer comprehension than any previous investigator has displayed, the medieval philosophy of sin which after all was the major influence in the formation of Dante's moral system. For this reason it seems fairly certain that Dante students will adopt the broad general features of his exposition.

DUDLEY HOWE MILES.

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY.

AN ITALIAN COMPLAINT FOR THE DEATH OF PIERRE DE LUSIGNAN

THE death of Pierre I^{er} de Lusignan, King of Cyprus and Jerusalem, on the 16th of January, 1369, aroused the fear and horror of Christendom as few assassinations have done. The poem of Nicolò di Scacchi which is here printed, I believe for the first time, is one of several efforts to portray in literature the genuine consternation roused not only in Italy, but in France and England as well, by the loss to the Christian powers of so staunch a defender of the faith. Froissart indignantly tells us:¹

Ce fut bien ennemie chose et mauvais sang de occire et murdrir
si vaillant homme comme le bon roy Piettre de Chyppe, qui ne

¹ *Œuvres, Chroniques*, 1870, tome XI, p. 231.