

*Critical Essays on
World Literature*

*Robert Lecker, General Editor
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*Critical Essays on
Dante*

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ease, the poet establishes distinctions in the various episodes, adorns and illustrates his poem.

With such eloquence he does not describe the errors of Ulysses or the Trojan battles; the coming of Aeneas to Italy, the Roman Empire, the tears of Venus, the hatred of Juno, the wounds of Mars, which are the subject matter of Homer's and Vergil's labors. Rather (and what genius, immortal God, what depth of intellect) he embraces heaven, earth, and the Tartarus. . . .

And what theologians could express to us mortals with more order and more manifest demonstrations what the immortal spirits contemplate within the luminous core of nature. What physicist ever wrote with more pellucid reasons the movements in the natural world. What course of the stars, what conjunctions, what revolution of the heavens was left out by Dante? What transformation from one element to another, what alteration in the air—hail, rain, winds, thunderbolts? Which composition of mines below the ground have the physicists demonstrated and this poet failed to catch a glimpse of? With Dante we have true cognition of all. . . .

THE POET AND THE PHILOSOPHER

What shall we say of that philosophy which Socrates brought from heaven to earth, and with greatest utility he brought into the Republic, into the individual households, and, finally, into the human breast? In no philosopher, however, are more explicit or more manifest either the arguments that lead us to the highest good and to true happiness or the rules and precepts by which we share in the good life.

With how much passion and acrimony, however, does Dante condemn injustices, perfidy, incontinence, cruelty, pusillanimity, and all other vices? With how much praise and how many rewards does he invite us to virtue and persuade us to observe justice, use temperance, keep a free and constant heart, and never avoid any danger for one's own country, one's parents, and one's friends?

To have true worship of God, piety toward the elders, burning charity toward all: truly, Dante's poem reaches its conclusion on nothing else than the praise of virtue. What can be affirmed of Dante is what the Greeks affirm of Homer: that he is like the ocean: just as all rivers originate from the ocean and to the ocean return, so all the sciences are gleaned from him and in him.

Add to this his knowledge of history and his diligent investigation of antiquity, not just ours, but also the Greek and Hebrew antiquity. . . . We, therefore, by invoking divine assistance, will set sail on

such a wide sea, and, as far as we can, we will play the role of faithful interpreter. We shall open up not only the literal sense but the allegorical, tropological, and anagogic senses. These three senses we call allegorical. . . .

[From "On Canto I of *Paradise*"]

Benedetto Varchi*

PROEM

All of this globe and this great machine, embracing and containing in itself all things—both those that can be sensed and those that are intelligible—is sometimes called the world or ornament and sometimes called the universe. And, noble academicians and all other esteemed listeners, it was divided into two principal parts by both philosophers and astrologers: the celestial or divine and the terrestrial or worldly. The celestial and divine part, called by many the superior or, in fact, ethereal region, begins with the moon's sky as its lowest point and includes everything else above it, and this region is neither creatable nor corruptible. It is because of this that, according to the peripatetics, it always was and always will be. The earthly and terrestrial part, which many consider the inferior or elementary region, beginning with the first and primary element, i.e., fire, is that region immediately below the moon and includes everything below it, air, water, and earth. And this is creatable and corruptible, changing every day and degenerating, as everyone can clearly see. The species, as many as they are varied which are found in this conjunction of heaven and earth, even if they are not infinite (since nothing is infinite according to the philosophers) but neither can they all be accounted for. For no one could ever account for all the species of all animals, those that fly or those that walk on the earth or those that swim in the sea, the latter being thought to be ten times as numerous as all the others. And it is true but also marvelous that among so many different species there is none which is exactly like another and that all are either more noble or less perfect than others. And because of this the Philosopher said, in the eighth book of *Knowledge*, that the species are like numbers, that one cannot find two that are alike, two that contain exactly what the other contains: thus it is impossible to find two identical species, of the same perfection and being one as noble

* From Benedetto Varchi, *Lezioni sul Dante*, ed. Giuseppe Aiazzi and Lelio Arbib (Florence: Società Editrice del Varchi, 1841), 1:189–220. Translated for this volume by Maria Rosa Menocal.

as the other. And for this same reason the Philosopher also said, in the fifth book of the same book of *Knowledge* (in the 19th section) that the number six, for example, and likewise all other numbers, is only six times one, not two times three or three times two. And so that we may understand both these concepts better, we have to know that just as all numbers are indivisible and exist only as one, such that one can never find two numbers equally distant from the ultimate unity, source and beginning of all numbers, thus all species consist of only one point and are indivisible such that one can never find two species that are equally distant from the first and true unity, that is God, glorious and sublime source and beginning of all entities. And each species is more noble and more perfect the less remote from the closer it is to its noblest and most perfect type, as will be explained later in greater detail, but suffice it to say for the time being that in general in the universe those things that are noblest and most perfect are those that are least removed from the first and highest heaven, that which is the noblest and most perfect of all. Thus, the orbit of Saturn is more perfect than that of Jupiter, and Jupiter's nobler than Mars, and so forth; thus, fire is nobler and more perfect than air and air more so than water, such that earth, being the last among the elements and furthest from the heavens is the most ignoble and most imperfect of all. And thus, since the heavens, being invariable and immutable, are perfectly beautiful, all good, perfectly ordered and harmonized, but the earth being variable and with a thousand conflicting features is all foul, wicked, disorganized, and discordant. In the heavens there is always peace, always life, always sweetness and happiness, and finally, all goods without evil, while on earth there is always war, always bitterness and death, bitterness and sadness, in sum all evils without anything that could be called good. The life of those up above is always full of joy, laughter, pleasure, and ineffable contentment while ours here below is never free of unspeakable pain, cries, evils, and torments. They are rich, they are happy, they are blessed; we are poor, miserable, unhappy. They are completely just and wise and holy, while we are completely unjust, stupid, and (profane), to sum it up in a word, they are gods and we are men. But, not to delay any longer in this preface, which is perhaps unnecessary (although not without reason), I note that each of us, noble and ingenious listeners, may have already understood, because of what I have said above, how much, besides being great and high and magnificent that beginning is serious, wise, and marvelous. It is no less worthy of paradise than it is of the poet, and as of now, granting your generous and human indulgence, we will call it, with a happy augur, God, great and highest. But first it is only right that I turn humbly to Dante, my teacher and master, who, no doubt, from the highest heaven, forgotten or completely

absolved in love all old grievances, now looks down with happiness and piety, to this place where so many citizens who have studied him are gathered together to honor him. And it is appropriate to turn to him and ask his help and his blessing in such a great enterprise and say to him, with no less truth and affection in my position those same words he himself said to Virgil in his:

O de li altri poeti onore e lume,
Vagliami 'l lungo studio e 'l grande amore
Che m'ha fatto cercar lo tuo volume
(*Inf.* I, 82-84)

(O glory and light of other poets, may the long study and the great love that have made me search your volume avail me.)

Dear listeners, the subject of this canticle is so lofty and Dante's doctrine so profound that if, before coming to his text I had wanted to state all the things that would be necessary, or at least useful (for such a topic), many such lessons, let alone this one alone, would not suffice; and thus those who may think I have already said too much would realize how wrong they are. Thus, we will leave aside so many other things, including and especially how Dante reached the heavens in his fiction as well as how long it took him to climb those heavens and circle them one by one with Beatrice's guidance, all matters that are no less difficult than beautiful, no less useful than marvelous but on which Alessandro Vellutello has already spoken with considerable diligence and knowledge, and in any case we will discuss some of these particulars as is necessary. Instead, I will talk to you about what we have here that is theological and philosophical no less than it is poetry so that we may, briefly and with clarity, so that we may take profit and pleasure from the doctrines and eloquence of such a man or, rather, prodigy.

In any author one chooses to analyze, one may, in fact one should, consider two things principally: the things that are said and the words with which they are said. As far as the words themselves are concerned, even if they are by their very nature less worthy and of less value than the things themselves, nevertheless in orators and especially in poets they count for so much (they are so much) that they in fact matter more than the things said themselves. It is thus that Eloquence takes its name (and position), not from invention or rediscovery or from its disposition or order, but rather from the third division of rhetoric, i.e., from good and well-decorated speech, i.e., from what the Latins called elocution; and who isn't aware that the same things said with different words don't seem to be the same things at all? And those same words placed in one order have infinitely greater power and greater value than placed in a different order, so much so that he who carefully thinks about it realizes that the great

difference between good writers and those who are not good is in words, or more accurately, in the ordering and disposition of words, rather than in the things said. I would say then, in order to clarify how one is to consider words, that all things are made up of matter and form, as are all natural things, or of things that resemble and act like matter and form; and just so is speech structured, which the ancients called discourse (*parlatura*), having its matter and its form: the material is the words, and grammarians deal with them, dividing them into eight different kinds, each of which in turn has two modes: thus, specifically, each word is considered by whether it is declinable, what gender it is, what number, what case, what mood or verbal tense, and other such categorizations; and words are also considered in relation to each other and this is called syntax (*construzione*). And even if a grammarian considers the meaning of words, he does not do so in isolation but rather *per accidens*, that is, in order to place them in a real and more noble context, such as the philosophers'. The forms of speech and of those words are their meaning; and this meaning is what is considered by the logician, not, like the grammarian, whether they fit together well or not but rather whether they are true or false, i.e., whether they speak truth or falsehood. And these are two means, that of the logician and that of the grammarian, that consider speech *per se*. Then the rhetorician, whose object of study is also speech, does not consider it either as the grammarian or the logician but rather as an orator, i.e., from the point of view of whether it is ornate and beautiful. Finally, the poet adds to all of these things number and some ornaments and figures, i.e., poetic language, because the poet is more a friend of sweetness than is the orator and he wants not only to teach but also to move and delight, to induce marvel. Thus, in these four modes can one deal with words, and we will consider them in all four whenever it seems to us necessary or useful to do so.

As far as things are concerned, all things necessary fall under the auspices of Philosophy, as we saw in its primary divisions, where things must be either speculative or practical. If they fall into the category of the practical or manual then those are dealt with by specific practical artifices; if they are in the active category they are dealt with by the moral or political philosopher, and these include laws. If (on the other hand) the things are speculative, or if they are divine, then they are the provenance of the metaphysician or supernatural or divine philosopher; and these may be mathematical, and will be dealt with by mathematicians who may be, depending on the different matter involved, an arithmetician or a musicologist or a geometrician or an astrologer, and also in this category fall the cosmographers, and others like them; or they may be natural, and these belong to the physicist, also called the natural philosopher, and

medicine is a subcategory of this larger one. And thus we have seen how all things belong to one category or another of philosophy and what analyses must be applied: and to these things must be added Christian theology, which is absolutely necessary in order to be able to understand Christian authors, and most of all Dante, and supremely so this last canticle, where he is all theologian, although no less so philosopher if and when philosophy is in agreement with theology. And it is necessary to know all of these things, at least in part, if one wishes to understand Dante in the other two canticles and especially in this one; and even if this mode of interpretation was not used by the ancients, as far as I know, or by the moderns, I find it very useful. Wishing to be useful, I will make every effort to follow it rather than confiding in my own ingenuity or doctrine but relying instead on the help of He who is the first beginning and the last end of all things. And I will do so if for no other reason than to see if I can, with my hard work and efforts, awake someone else, who, with this same order (but with a different mode of expression and perception, aside from knowledge of the sciences) might shed some light on some of the passages of so many authors who for so many years have lain in the shadows, nearly completely buried.

This third and last canticle is divided up differently by different people, but as we approach the first canto, which is divided into three principal parts, we note that our intent will be to analyze each tercet individually, using that ordering we have set out. And in doing so we leave aside many general things that will be set out specifically at the appropriate moment. We are thus able to be briefer, not having to repeat the same things, and also clearer and easier, trying to avoid annoyance and confusion. And thus, once again invoking God's name and help, we begin.

La gloria di Colui, che tutto muove,
Per l'universo penetra, e risplende
In una parte più, e meno altrove.

(Par. I, 1-3)

(The Glory of the All-Mover penetrates through the universe and reglows in one part more, and in another less.)

In this tercet, which could never be praised sufficiently for either its words or for the magnificence of its concept, the poet means simply to say that the Motor, i.e., God, gives being and life to everything in the world, but this is not equal in all things but rather different in each thing, and thus the meaning is that every thing, whatever and wherever it may be, has its essence from God and depends on God both for being and for continued life; thus without Him, there would have been no life and, later, no ability to conserve life. It is, of course, true that some things are more noble in their

existence than others, and it is because of this that all species are different from one another and unequal, i.e., they are more or less perfect. As far as the words go, we will first deal with them as the Grammarians would: *La gloria*, that is, according to some, the work that is glorious and worthy of praise; *Di colui*: of him; *Che*: that; *Muove tutto*; moves all things, and thus this is God; *Penetra*: enters completely and thus penetrates; *e risplende*, and reglows, that is, manifestly appears; *per l'universo*, throughout the world; *piu in una parte*, as in the heavens; *e meno altrove*, that is in another part, as in the world, even though here one has to understand in all things, as we have said. *La gloria*, glory, is none other than the general expectation of common good, i.e., it is to be universally praised by all good men, and wherever there is glory there is fame, but not, however, for its opposite, but rather glory is always for things that are praiseworthy, whereas fame may be either good or bad (although the latter is better called infamy). Here we note form instead of substance; there is glory instead of glorious works, although I would like to analyze more: glory, that is goodness or power or love or Divine providence, or whatever word might be found more adequate than these. *Per l'universo* is a Tuscanism, and good Latin authors would never use it as a substantive, and it means the aggregate of the heavens and the earth together, in sum, all things. Petrarch used it in his *canzone* "Spirito gentil" (Noble spirit) (Song 53) when he says in the third stanza: "Se l'universo pria non si dissolve" (If the universe does not first dissolve).

As far as rhetoric is concerned, anyone who wants to understand the great artistry of Dante and the great difference that exists between philosophers and orators, on the one hand, and poets, on the other, need only look at the hundredth text of the first book of the *Heavens* of Aristotle, from which Dante undoubtedly dug out this concept. Because what is stated by Aristotle philosophically, in simple terms and without any adornment or affection ("The being and existence of all things depend on eternity, for some more clearly, for others darkly"), is said by Dante poetically, with as much adornment as someone not far from the Muses can know. He used great and magnificent words, both proper and metaphoric, such as *gloria*, *universo*, *penetra e risplende*; he uses an expression such as *colui che tutto muove* instead of simply saying God, thus naming him according to so worthy an operation as movement. He said *penetra* to indicate great power and virtue such as that which penetrates everywhere, even to the lowest place. He said *risplende* to show that not only does he penetrate within but also lights up from outside and is thus visible to all who wish to see. He said *e meno altrove*, where he might ordinarily have said "in another place," using the adverb instead of the noun, as is often done in order to vary words. And finally it

seems to be that in these three verses he expressed all that which Virgil, his master, so divinely expressed in the sixth book of the *Aeneid*: . . .

He makes his listeners attentive to the greatness of this beginning just as later he will make them docile and benevolent, which is, rightly speaking the purpose of a proem such as this; it is thus that the proposition serve poets and thus the invocation instead of the proem. And this will suffice as the explanation of Dante's words.

As far as the meaning is concerned, we must be aware that this proposition, that all things derive their being and their existence from God, although each one differently, is a part of natural philosophy. Thus, although theologians may adhere to the same principle, they are different in their manner since they concede creation, i.e., a generation, from absolute nothing, while this is denied by the Peripatetics. Thus Aristotle says that all philosophers agree in this basic proposition, that from nothing one creates nothing. Again, they are in disagreement because our theologians maintain, as our faith requires, that creation and thus things have a beginning, something again completely denied by the Peripatetics. Again, they are in disagreement because the theologians, in whom we Christians must believe, want that God should have created and maintained all things, and not so the philosophers. For them, all things from the moon down are generated and maintained directly by the heavens and by their own minds and intelligences, and mediated by God, that is, via the heavens, which is their instrument, and the movement and their worth are the instruments of the heavens. And thus this proposition, understood as we have stated it, is not theological but philosophical. And so that we may understand more clearly not only that all things have their being from God but also that they differ from each other, we must know that all things that exist are thus called entities or substances, and their order may be set out in a number of different ways. For the time being we will note that between these two extremes, i.e., between the first form which is God who is first above all things in existence, and the first substance, in which all things exist potentially and which is as imperfect and incomplete as God is perfect and noble, between these two extremes are contained all substances or entities in seven categories. The first and most noble, within which are found the Angels, is called Intelligence by the Philosophers. In the second are human beings because they have a rational soul. In the third are animals because they have sensitive souls. In the fourth are plants because they have a vegetable soul. In the fifth are inanimate but perfect minerals, such as metals and stones. In the sixth are imperfect *misti*, such as snow and sleet, arrows, the winds, and others like these. In the seventh and last are the four elements.