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*Dante and the Bowery*

IT is the conventional thing to praise Dante because he of set purpose “used the language of the market-place,” so as to be understood of the common people; but we do not in practice either admire or understand a man who writes in the language of our own market-place. It must be the Florentine market-place of the thirteenth century—not Fulton Market of to-day. What infinite use Dante would have made of the Bowery! Of course, he could have done it only because not merely he himself, the great poet, but his audience also, would have accepted it as natural. The nineteenth century was more apt than the thirteenth to boast of itself as being the greatest of the centuries; but, save as regards purely material objects, ranging from locomotives to bank buildings, it did not wholly believe in its boasting. A nineteenth-century poet, when trying to illustrate some point he was making, obviously felt uncomfortable in mentioning nineteenth-century heroes if he also referred to those of classic times, lest he should be suspected of instituting comparisons between them. A thirteenth-century poet was not in the least troubled by any such misgivings, and quite simply illustrated his point by allusions to any character in history or romance, ancient or contemporary, that happened to occur to him.

Of all the poets of the nineteenth century, Walt Whitman was the only one who dared use the Bowery—that is, use anything that was striking and vividly typical of the humanity around him—as Dante used the ordinary humanity of his day; and even Whitman was not quite natural in doing so, for he always felt that he was defying the conventions and prejudices of his neighbors, and his self-consciousness made him a little defiant. Dante was not defiant of conventions: the conventions of his day did not forbid him to use human nature just as he saw it, no less than human nature as he read about it. The Bowery is one of the great highways of humanity, a highway of seething life, of varied interest, of fun, of work, of sordid and terrible tragedy; and it is haunted by demons as evil as any that stalk through the pages of the “Inferno.” But no man of Dante’s art and with Dante’s soul would write of it nowadays; and he would hardly be understood if he did. Whitman wrote of homely things and every-day men, and of their greatness, but his art was not equal to his power and his purpose; and, even as it was, he, the poet, by set intention, of the democracy, is not known to the people as widely as he should be known; and it is only the few—the men like Edward FitzGerald, John Burroughs, and W. E. Henley—who prize him as he ought to be prized.

Nowadays, at the outset of the twentieth century, cultivated people would ridicule the poet who illustrated fundamental truths, as Dante did six hundred years ago, by examples drawn alike from human nature as he saw it around him and from human nature as he read of it. I suppose that this must be partly because we are so self-conscious as always to read a comparison into any illustration, forgetting the fact that no comparison is implied between two men, in the sense of estimating their relative greatness or importance, when the career of each of them is chosen merely to illustrate some given quality that both possess. It is also probably due to the

fact that an age in which the critical faculty is greatly developed often tends to develop a certain querulous inability to understand the fundamental truths which less critical ages accept as a matter of course. To such critics it seems improper, and indeed ludicrous, to illustrate human nature by examples chosen alike from the Brooklyn Navy Yard or Castle Garden and the Piræus, alike from Tammany and from the Roman mob organized by the foes or friends of Cæsar. To Dante such feeling itself would have been inexplicable.

Dante dealt with those tremendous qualities of the human soul which dwarf all differences in outward and visible form and station, and therefore he illustrated what he meant by any example that seemed to him apt. Only the great names of antiquity had been handed down, and so, when he spoke of pride or violence or flattery, and wished to illustrate his thesis by an appeal to the past, he could speak only of great and prominent characters; but in the present of his day most of the men he knew, or knew of, were naturally people of no permanent importance—just as is the case in the present of our own day. Yet the passions of these men were the same as those of the heroes of old, godlike or demoniac; and so he unhesitatingly used his contemporaries, or his immediate predecessors, to illustrate his points, without regard to their prominence or lack of prominence. He was not concerned with the differences in their fortunes and careers, with their heroic proportions or lack of such proportions; he was a mystic whose imagination soared so high and whose thoughts plumbed so deeply the far depths of our being that he was also quite simply a realist; for the eternal mysteries were ever before his mind, and, compared to them, the differences between the careers of the mighty masters of mankind and the careers of even very humble people seemed trivial. If we translate his comparisons into the terms of our day, we are apt to feel amused over this trait of his, until we go a little deeper and understand that we are ourselves to blame, because we have lost the faculty simply and naturally to recognize that the essential traits of humanity are shown alike by big men and by little men, in the lives that are now being lived and in those that are long ended.

Probably no two characters in Dante impress the ordinary reader more than Farinata and Capaneus: the man who raises himself waist-high from out his burning sepulchre, unshaken by torment, and the man who, with scornful disdain, refuses to brush from his body the falling flames; the great souls—magnanimous, Dante calls them—whom no torture, no disaster, no failure of the most absolute kind could force to yield or to bow before the dread powers that had mastered them. Dante has created these men, has made them permanent additions to the great figures of the world; they are imaginary only in the sense that Achilles and Ulysses are imaginary—that is, they are now as real as the figures of any men that ever lived. One of them was a mythical hero in a mythical feat, the other a second-rate faction leader in a faction-ridden Italian city of the thirteenth century, whose deeds have not the slightest importance aside from what Dante's mention gives. Yet the two men are mentioned as naturally as Alexander and Cæsar are mentioned. Evidently they are dwelt upon at length because Dante felt it his duty to express a peculiar horror for that fierce pride which could defy its overlord, while at the same time, and perhaps unwillingly, he could not conceal a certain shuddering admiration for the lofty courage on which this evil pride was based.

The point I wish to make is the simplicity with which Dante illustrated one of the principles on which he lays most stress, by the example of a man who was of consequence only in the history of the parochial politics of Florence. Farinata will now live forever as a symbol of the soul; yet as an historical figure he is dwarfed beside any one of hundreds of the leaders in our own Revolution and Civil War. Tom Benton, of Missouri, and Jefferson Davis, of Mississippi, were opposed to one another with a bitterness which surpassed that which rived asunder Guelph

from Ghibellin, or black Guelph from white Guelph. They played mighty parts in a tragedy more tremendous than any which any mediæval city ever witnessed or could have witnessed. Each possessed an iron will and undaunted courage, physical and moral; each led a life of varied interest and danger, and exercised a power not possible in the career of the Florentine. One, the champion of the Union, fought for his principles as unyieldingly as the other fought for what he deemed right in trying to break up the Union. Each was a colossal figure. Each, when the forces against which he fought overcame him—for in his latter years Benton saw the cause of disunion triumph in Missouri, just as Jefferson Davis lived to see the cause of union triumph in the Nation—fronted an adverse fate with the frowning defiance, the high heart, and the stubborn will which Dante has commemorated for all time in his hero who “held hell in great scorn.” Yet a modern poet who endeavored to illustrate such a point by reference to Benton and Davis would be uncomfortably conscious that his audience would laugh at him. He would feel ill at ease, and therefore would convey the impression of being ill at ease, exactly as he would feel that he was posing, was forced and unnatural, if he referred to the deeds of the evil heroes of the Paris Commune as he would without hesitation refer to the many similar but smaller leaders of riots in the Roman forum.

Dante speaks of a couple of French troubadours, or of a local Sicilian poet, just as he speaks of Euripides; and quite properly, for they illustrate as well what he has to teach; but we of to-day could not possibly speak of a couple of recent French poets or German novelists in the same connection without having an uncomfortable feeling that we ought to defend ourselves from possible misapprehension; and therefore we could not speak of them naturally. When Dante wishes to assail those guilty of crimes of violence, he in one stanza speaks of the torments inflicted by divine justice on Attila (coupling him with Pyrrhus and Sextus Pompey—a sufficiently odd conjunction in itself, by the way), and in the next stanza mentions the names of a couple of local highwaymen who had made travel unsafe in particular neighborhoods. The two highwaymen in question were by no means as important as Jesse James and Billy the Kid; doubtless they were far less formidable fighting men, and their adventures were less striking and varied. Yet think of the way we should feel if a great poet should now arise who would incidentally illustrate the ferocity of the human heart by allusions both to the terrible Hunnish “scourge of God” and to the outlaws who in our own times defied justice in Missouri and New Mexico!

When Dante wishes to illustrate the fierce passions of the human heart, he may speak of Lycurgus, or of Saul; or he may speak of two local contemporary captains, victor or vanquished in obscure struggles between Guelph and Ghibellin; men like Jacopo del Cassero or Buonconte, whom he mentions as naturally as he does Cyrus or Rehoboam. He is entirely right! What one among our own writers, however, would be able simply and naturally to mention Ulrich Dahlgren, or Custer, or Morgan, or Raphael Semmes, or Marion, or Sumter, as illustrating the qualities shown by Hannibal, or Rameses, or William the Conqueror, or by Moses or Hercules? Yet the Guelph and Ghibellin captains of whom Dante speaks were in no way as important as these American soldiers of the second or third rank. Dante saw nothing incongruous in treating at length of the qualities of all of them; he was not thinking of comparing the genius of the unimportant local leader with the genius of the great sovereign conquerors of the past—he was thinking only of the qualities of courage and daring and of the awful horror of death; and when we deal with what is elemental in the human soul it matters but little whose soul we take. In the same way he mentions a couple of spendthrifts of Padua and Siena, who come to violent ends, just as in the preceding canto he had dwelt upon the tortures undergone by Dionysius and Simon

de Montfort, guarded by Nessus and his fellow centaurs. For some reason he hated the spendthrifts in question as the Whigs of Revolutionary South Carolina and New York hated Tarleton, Kruger, Saint Leger, and De Lancey; and to him there was nothing incongruous in drawing a lesson from one couple of offenders more than from another. (It would, by the way, be outside my present purpose to speak of the rather puzzling manner in which Dante confounds his own hatreds with those of heaven, and, for instance, shows a vindictive enjoyment in putting his personal opponent Filippo Argenti in hell, for no clearly adequate reason.)

When he turns from those whom he is glad to see in hell toward those for whom he cares, he shows the same delightful power of penetrating through the externals into the essentials. Cato and Manfred illustrate his point no better than Belacqua, a contemporary Florentine maker of citherns. Alas! what poet to-day would dare to illustrate his argument by introducing Steinway in company with Cato and Manfred! Yet again, when examples of love are needed, he draws them from the wedding-feast at Cana, from the actions of Pylades and Orestes, and from the life of a kindly, honest comb-dealer of Siena who had just died. Could we now link together Peter Cooper and Pylades, without feeling a sense of incongruity? He couples Priscian with a politician of local note who had written an encyclopædia and a lawyer of distinction who had lectured at Bologna and Oxford; we could not now with such fine unconsciousness bring Evarts and one of the compilers of the Encyclopædia Britannica into a like comparison.

When Dante deals with the crimes which he most abhorred, simony and barratry, he flails offenders of his age who were of the same type as those who in our days flourish by political or commercial corruption; and he names his offenders, both those just dead and those still living, and puts them, popes and politicians alike, in hell. There have been trust magnates and politicians and editors and magazine-writers in our own country whose lives and deeds were no more edifying than those of the men who lie in the third and the fifth chasm of the eighth circle of the Inferno; yet for a poet to name those men would be condemned as an instance of shocking taste.

One age expresses itself naturally in a form that would be unnatural, and therefore undesirable, in another age. We do not express ourselves nowadays in epics at all; and we keep the emotions aroused in us by what is good or evil in the men of the present in a totally different compartment from that which holds our emotions concerning what was good or evil in the men of the past. An imitation of the letter of the times past, when the spirit has wholly altered, would be worse than useless; and the very qualities that help to make Dante's poem immortal would, if copied nowadays, make the copyist ridiculous. Nevertheless, it would be a good thing if we could, in some measure, achieve the mighty Florentine's high simplicity of soul, at least to the extent of recognizing in those around us the eternal qualities which we admire or condemn in the men who wrought good or evil at any stage in the world's previous history. Dante's masterpiece is one of the supreme works of art that the ages have witnessed; but he would have been the last to wish that it should be treated only as a work of art, or worshipped only for art's sake, without reference to the dread lessons it teaches mankind.