The Figure of Beatrice

A Study in Dante

Charles Williams

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by

CHARLES WILLIAMS

D. S. BREWER

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Riguarda qual son io
Paradiso xxiii, 46.

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I

INTRODUCTION

This study of Dante is intended to pay particular attention to the figure of Beatrice and to the relation which that figure bears to all the rest. That figure is presented at the beginning of Dante's first book, for Dante is one of those poets who begin their work with what is declared to be an intense personal experience. That experience is, as such, made part of the poetry; and it is not only so, with Dante, at the beginning, but also when, in his later and greater work, the experience is recalled and confirmed.

He defined the general kind of experience to which the figure of Beatrice belongs in one of his prose books, the *Convivio* (IV, xxv). He says there that the young are subject to a 'stupor' or astonishment of the mind which falls on them at the awareness of great and wonderful things. Such a stupor produces two results—a sense of reverence and a desire to know more. A noble awe and a noble curiosity come to life. This is what had happened to him at the sight of the Florentine girl, and all his work consists, one way or another, in the increase of that worship and that knowledge.

The image of Beatrice existed in his thought; it remained there and was deliberately renewed. The word image is convenient for two reasons. First, the subjective recollection within him was of something objectively outside him; it was an image of an exterior fact and not of an interior desire. It was sight and not invention. Dante's whole assertion was that he could not have invented Beatrice. Secondly, the outer exterior shape was understood to be an image of things beyond itself. Coleridge said that a symbol must have three characteristics (i) it must exist in itself, (ii) it must derive from something greater than itself, (iii) it must represent in itself that greatness from which it derives. I have preferred the word image to the word symbol, because it seems to me doubtful if the word symbol nowadays sufficiently expresses the vivid individual existence of the lesser thing. Beatrice was, in

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her degree, an image of nobility, of virtue, of the Redeemed Life, and in some sense of Almighty God himself. But she also remained Beatrice right to the end; her derivation was not to obscure her identity any more than her identity should hide her derivation. Just as there is no point in Dante's thought at which the image of Beatrice in his mind was supposed to exclude the actual objective Beatrice, so there is no point at which the objective Beatrice is to exclude the Power which is expressed through her. But as the mental knowledge or image of her is the only way by which she herself can be known, so she herself is (for Dante) the only way by which that other Power can be known—since, in fact, it was known so. The maxim of his study, as regards the final Power, was: 'This also is Thou, neither is this Thou.'

I say 'the only way', but only to modify it. There were, in his mind, many other shapes—of people and places, of philosophies and poems. All these had their own identities and were each autonomous. But in his poetry Dante determined to relate them all to the Beatrician figure, and he brought that figure as near as he could to the final image, so far as he could express it, of Almighty God. It is, we all agree, one of the marks of his poetic genius. But it is something else also. It is the greatest expression in European literature of the way of approach of the soul to its ordained end through the affirmation of the validity of all those images, beginning with the image of a girl.

It is this particular way of approach which these pages pretend to examine. It is an accepted fact that there have, on the whole, been two chief ways of approach to God defined in Christian thought. One, which is most familiar in the records of sanctity, has been known as the Way of Rejection. It consists, generally speaking, in the renunciation of all images except the final one of God himself, and even—sometimes but not always—of the exclusion of that only Image of all human sense. The great intellectual teacher of that Way was Dionysius the Areopagite; its conclusion was summed in a paragraph:

'Once more, ascending yet higher, we maintain that It is not soul, or mind, or endowed with the faculty of imagination, conjecture, reason, or understanding; nor is It any act of reason or understanding; nor can It be described by the reason or perceived by the understanding, since It is not number, or order, or great-

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ness, or littleness, or equality, or inequality, and since it is not immovable nor in motion, or at rest, and has no power, and is not power or light, and does not live, and is not life; nor is It personal essence, or eternity, or time; nor can It be grasped by the understanding, since It is not knowledge or truth; nor is It kingship or wisdom; nor is It one, nor is It unity, nor is It Godhead or Goodness; nor is It a Spirit, as we understand the term, since It is not Sonship or Fatherhood; nor is It any other thing such as we or any other being can have knowledge of; nor does It belong to the category of non-existence or to that of existence; nor do existent beings know It as it actually is, nor does It know them as they actually are; nor can the reason attain to It to name It or to know It; nor is It darkness, nor is It light, or error, or truth; nor can any affirmation or negation apply to It; for while applying affirmations or negations to those orders of being that come next to It, we apply not unto It either affirmation or negation, inasmuch as it transcends all affirmation by being the perfect and unique Cause of all things, and transcends all negation by the pre-eminence of Its simple and absolute nature—free from every limitation and beyond them all.'

The other Way is the Way of Affirmation, the approach to God through these images. The maxim of this Way is in the creed of St. Athanasius: 'Not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh, but by taking of the Manhood into God.' That clause was primarily a definition of the Incarnation, but, being that, it necessarily involved much beside. Other epigrams of the sort are, no doubt, scattered through the history of the Church. But for any full expression of it, the Church had to wait for Dante. It may be that that Way could not be too quickly shown to the world in which the young Church lived. It was necessary first to establish the awful difference between God and the world before we could be permitted to see the awful likeness. It is, and will always remain, necessary to remember the difference in the likeness. Neither of these two Ways indeed is, or can be, exclusive. The most vigorous ascetic, being forbidden formally to hasten his death, is bound to attend to the actualities of food, drink, and sleep which are also images, however brief his attention may be. The most indulgent of Christians is yet bound to hold his most cherished images—of food, drink, sleep, or anything else—

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negligible beside the final Image of God. And both are compelled to hold their particular Images of God negligible beside the universal Image of God which belongs to the Church, and even that less than the unimaged reality.

Our sacred Lord, in his earthly existence, deigned to use both methods. The miracle of Cana and all the miracles of healing are works of the affirmation of images; the counsel to pluck out the eye is a counsel of the rejection of images. It is said that he so rejected them for himself that he had nowhere to lay his head, and that he so affirmed them by his conduct that he was called a glutton and a wine-bibber. He commanded his disciples to abandon all images but himself and promised them, in terms of the same images, a hundred times what they had abandoned. The Crucifixion and the Death are rejection and affirmation at once, for they affirm death only to reject death; the intensity of that death is the opportunity of its own dissolution; and beyond that physical rejection of earth lies the re-affirmation of earth which is called the Resurrection.

As above, so below; as in him, so in us. The tangle of affirmation and rejection which is in each of us has to be drawn into some kind of pattern, and has so been drawn by all men who have ever lived. The records of Christian sanctity have on the whole stressed the rejection. This indeed can hardly be avoided in any religion—nor perhaps outside all religion; the mere necessities of human life—change, misadventure, folly, age, and death—everywhere involve it. But even more within religion the discipline of the soul, ordinary or extraordinary, enforces it. The general praise of ascetic life and even the formal preference of one good (such as virginity) to another good (such as marriage) have themselves imaged that enforcement. On the other hand such great doctrines as the Resurrection of the Body and the Life Everlasting have continually recalled the Affirmation; with every act of charity towards others, every courtesy towards others, and even permissibly towards ourselves. The very equalling of ourselves with others and of others with ourselves is a declaration of the republic of images. No doubt these doctrines, metaphysical or moral, are to be understood after a great manner and towards God. But no doubt also every way of understanding leaves them exact in themselves. After the affirmations we may have to

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Oh, joy to him who here hath sown, hath laid
Here, the foundation of his future years!
For all that friendship, all that love can do,
All that a darling countenance can look,
Or dear voice utter, to complete the man,
Perfect him, made imperfect in himself,
All shall be his; and he whose soul hath risen
Up to the height of feeling intellect
Shall want no humbler tenderness.

It has seemed worth while to quote at this length for two reasons: (i) because the whole passage is a description of the difficulty of the Way of the Images, (ii) because a number of the phrases are, as might have been expected, exactly applicable to that other Dantean Way. It is not to be rashly assumed that the Way of Affirmation is much easier than the Way of Rejection. To affirm the validity of an image one does not at the moment happen to like or want—such as that of one's next door neighbour—is as harsh as to reject an image—such as oneseif as successful—which one does happen to like and want. 'To fashion this ability' is a personal, secret, and arduous business. It is the Purgatory of the *Divine Comedy*; just as 'the dear voice' of Beatrice assists in the *New Life*, as in the *Paradise*, in the perfecting of Dante. That Wordsworth wrote like Wordsworth and not like Dante may be a criticism of his verse but does not alter the application of the maxims.

The great resemblance between Dante and Wordsworth rather than any other of the English poets is that the work of each of these pretends to start from a definite and passionate personal experience. In that sense their work has something in common which is not, for example, in either Shakespeare or Milton, the throb in their poetry of a personal discovery. The Shakespearian world becomes gradually full of human capacities; the Miltonic is ritually aware (in the *Ode on the Nativity*) of the moment following the victory of one capacity over the others. But Dante, even in the first—call it an anecdote, is aware of three kinds of capacity all overwhelmed by a power; and Wordsworth has a similar, though less analysed, sense. The next to nearest is Patmore, but the entry of Patmore on this Way is more graceful

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and delicate; he delays, as it were, poetically, before the revelation of an 'unknown mode of being'. This 'unknown mode' which in Wordsworth is 'Nature' is in Dante Romantic Love. I keep the word Romantic for three reasons. The first is that there is no other word so convenient for describing that particular kind of sexual love. The second is that it includes other loves besides the sexual. The third is that in following the Dantean record of his love it may be possible to understand something more of Romanticism itself, and of its true and false modes of being. The word should not be too narrowly confined to a literary manner. It defines an attitude, a manner of receiving experience. I do not see any grounds on which, if we are to call the young Wordsworth a Romantic, we can deny the term to the young Dante. That there is a false Romanticism I willingly concede; that Dante denounced it I hope to suggest. But the false does not abolish the true or the value of the true, any more than the cheap use of the word Romantic spoils the intellectual honour which properly accompanies it.

Romantic Love then was the personal experience with which Dante's poetry ostensibly began; that is, the love which has been described in so many exalted terms by so many poets. Since one of the purposes of this book is to examine its nature as Dante revealed it, there is no need to delay to do so outside Dante. A question debated is whether it is, in varying degrees, a normal human experience. Those who suppose it not to be will naturally deny that an examination of the pattern of the work dealing with that abnormal state can have any general value. Those who believe that it is may agree that such an examination of a normal state may perhaps have some such value. I am not suggesting that Dante confined his attention to Beatrice alone. Beatrice, as was said above, was met in Florence; and Florence was a city; and images of cities, human and indeed divine, are part of Dante's affirmation. That affirmation was made, by him, in prose and verse; and such prose and verse was the means of his poetic images, and formed in itself an actuality of his life; that is, literature was an image, of which the greatest expression in his own work was the shape of Virgil. It is because Dante knew that there was a great deal other than Beatrice to which he must attend that his attention to Beatrice is valuable. It is that in-

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clusion which prevents his Way of Affirmation being either a mere sentimentality or a disguised egotism. He was, it must be admitted, moral, for he perceived that images existed in their own right and not merely in his.

The image of the woman was not new in him, nor even the mode in which he treated it. What was new was the intensity of his treatment and the extreme to which he carried it. In his master's great poem—in Virgil's *Aeneid*—the image of the woman and the image of the city had both existed, but opposed. Dido had been the enemy of Rome, and morality had carried the hero away from Dido to Rome. But in Dante they are reconciled; the appearance of Virgil at the opening of the *Commedia* has about it this emphasis also. Virgil could not enter the paradise of that union, for his poem had refused it. But after Virgil the intellect had had visions which it communicated to the heart, if indeed they are so far separate. Since Dante the corrupt following of his way has spoiled the repute of the vision. But the vision has remained. People still fall in love, and fall in love as Dante did. It is not unusual to find them doing it.

There are two other matters which should be touched on in relation to this particular romantic vision and marriage. The first is the error that it is, or should be, the only basis for marriage. It would be as ridiculous to assert this as it is foolish to deny that it often forms such a basis. The 'falling in love' often happens, but it is not to be either demanded or denied. There are many modulations and combinations of vision, affection, and appetite, and none of these modulations is necessarily an improper beginning for that great experiment which we call marriage.

The second, and opposite, error is that it necessarily involves marriage; it may indeed exist—as it seems to have done in Dante's own case—where, for one reason or another, marriage is not only impossible but is never even contemplated. Adoration, and it is adoration of its own proper kind which is involved, may exist between all kinds of people; that kind of secondary worship permitted, under the name of *dulia*, to saints and angels and other express vehicles of the Glory. Where this romantic adoration exists, there this proper intellectual investigation of it ought to exist. The clearest possibility of this Way, and perhaps the most difficult, may be in marriage, but the suggestion of it is

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defined wherever the suggestion of adoration is present. 'Hero-worship', and even more sentimental states, are only vaguer and less convincing images of the quality which this love is. They are often foolish, but they are apt also to have that kind of sincerity which may, one way or another, become fidelity to the image or to the principle within and beyond the image. One way or another this state is normal; what is not yet normal is the development of that state to its proper end.

It may be thought that the death of Beatrice interferes with the proposition that the way of Dante's imagination can be an image of the normal way of romantic love, whether with marriage or without. There are two answers. The first is that the death of Beatrice corresponds to a not uncommon stage in the sensible development in the Way. Something will be said about that in the third chapter. The second is that the death of Beatrice, or (let us say) the disappearance of Beatrice, does not mean the abandonment of her image; and that the *Commedia*, by its maintenance of that image, exhibits the definitions of the Way in their general application.

We have then three themes with which this book is, one way or another, intended to deal: (i) the general Way of the Affirmation of Images as a method of process towards the inGodding of man, (ii) the way of romantic love as a particular mode of the same progress, (iii) the involution of this love with other images, particularly (*a*) that of the community—that is, of the city, a devotion to which is also a way of the soul, (*b*) that of poetry and human learning. The general maxim of the whole way in Dante is *attention*; 'look', 'look well'. At the beginning he is compelled to look by the shock of the vision; later his attention is enforced by command and he obeys by choice. At the beginning, two of the three images—poetry and the city—are habitual to him though still fresh and young; they do not astonish him. But Beatrice does. *Incipit Vita Nova*. It was, with Dante as with Wordsworth,

> the bodily eye . . .
> Which spake perpetual logic to my soul,
> And by the unrelenting agency
> Did bind my feelings even as in a chain.

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II

BEATRICE

The *Vita Nuova* is said to have been written when Dante was twenty-six, directly after the death of Beatrice. He is reported in maturer years to have been 'much ashamed of having made this little book'.[1] This is likely enough; Shakespeare at the time of *King Lear* probably had no great opinion of *Romeo and Juliet*. The greater the poet, the farther his later achievement from his earlier. Even in our degree, we can feel a little, from the midst of the *Paradiso*, how tender, how thrilling, but how young and small a thing it is. That does not prevent it from being much beyond our own capacities at twenty-six.

It is a conventional book; that is, it is written according to the literary habits of his time. Dante was acquainted with contemporary poets and writing more or less in their style. He himself tells us how he sent the first sonnet in it to various well-known poets, 'famosi trovati in quel tempo', and how some of them answered him, and how one answer was the beginning of a friendship between him and its writer, who became the chief of his friends. This too is natural enough; it has a kind of epistolary agreement with

> What things have we seen
> Done at the Mermaid!

or to Wordsworth reading the *Prelude* to Coleridge. But Wordsworth was then thirty-six; the *Prelude* was begun when he was thirty. The events of which he was writing had taken place some years before. It is of interest to observe that the great crisis in Wordsworth's early experience—the declaration of war by England against France; that is, against the Revolution—took place when he was twenty-three: the death of Beatrice is supposed to have taken place when Dante was twenty-four. This, at least, on the assumption that she was Beatrice Portinari. Whether she was or not, whether her actual name was Beatrice or not, is

[1] Boccaccio, *Life of Dante*.

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doubt the worse. The liver is the seat of organic life, and in considering the whole history it would be unwise to forget that Dante allowed fully the disturbance to this third seat of his consciousness. It is not, I think, too much to say that his sex, like his intellect, was awakened. That he had, there and perhaps thereafter, no direct desire of Beatrice sexually is likely enough; first love often happens so. But that the potentiality of it was there is also likely. When, later, he says that his 'natural' spirit was 'impeded in its operations', so that he became weak and frail, and his acquaintances grew curious and even spiteful, he must mean at least that this potentiality was present. Long afterwards he was to cry out: 'The embers burn, Virgil, the embers burn', and the fire was general through him.

So much only to prevent too great an 'elevation' of Dante's thought; we are not to suppose him a mere cerebralist. When, after the second critical meeting, he dreamed of Love, and saw in a cloud of the colour of flame the figure of a lord, 'of terrible aspect to whoever should look on him', who seemed 'of such joy as to himself that it was a marvellous thing' it is his first imaginative formation of this 'quality of love'. Love speaks aloud but Dante understands little of what he says, except the words: 'I am thy lord.' This great and terrible figure, fire-shrouded, is carrying Beatrice asleep in his arm, and lightly wrapped in some crimson cloth, and in his other hand something burning, of which he cries to Dante: 'See, your heart!' Then he wakes Beatrice and causes her 'by his art' to eat, though in fear, of the burning thing; and then presently Love begins to weep, and gathers her, and still weeping ascends towards heaven.

They were, said Wordsworth, of other huge and mighty forms, 'a trouble to my dreams.' The dream is generally referred to the death of Beatrice, and so perhaps properly. But this figure is what this accident of substance, this quality of being, this new relation, is. His spiritual emotions, his intellectual perceptions, his organic sensations, all coalesce in a recognition of it and of her by whom it comes. It is no wonder he quotes Homer: 'She did not seem the daughter of a mortal man, but of God.' A kind of dreadful perfection has appeared in the streets of Florence; something like the glory of God is walking down the street towards him. It appears that this is an experience which has

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occurred to a large number of young people besides Dante. Their elders do not encourage them to believe that the phenomenon is what it seems; the causes of their elders' hesitation are many, and some of them at any rate are exhibited in the ditches of the *Inferno* or (if they are fortunate) on the terraces of the *Purgatorio.*

This state of things is what Dante calls 'Love'. It must however be stressed that this image of Beatrice is 'of so noble a virtue' that it does not allow Love to triumph without Reason, in all things proper to Reason. This, at that moment, is not a very advanced business; indeed, an opponent might say that Reason is only there to show Dante how to carry himself towards the lady. It would be an unfair retort; at the moment certainly that is Reason's chief occupation because it is Dante's. But the part that Reason plays is the beginning of a much greater part; it is the first determination that this Love is precisely what Wordsworth said his was—

> kindred to our purer mind
> And intellectual life.

Beatrice is 'la gloriosa donna della mia mente'—the glorious lady of my mind. The development of that intellectual concern is to be shown long afterwards—in its rejection and in its affirmation. 'We are come', says Virgil to Dante at the opening of the *Inferno*, 'where I told you you should see that unhappy people who have lost the good of intellect'—'il ben dell' intelletto.' And at the close of the *Paradiso* Beatrice says to him: 'We are come to the heaven which is pure light—intellectual light full of love'—'luce intelletual piena d' amore.' In the *Vita* it is rather love (of its own proper kind) full of intellectual light. But the greatest Romantic poet, like every other true romantic, insists on the intellect at every step of the Way; of that threefold image—Beatrice, love, and intellect—no element was ever false to the others.

With the dedication of the *Vita* to Reason in mind, it is permissible to observe the kind of language that Dante uses concerning the Florentine girl. She has 'an ineffable courtesy'; she is 'la mia beatitudine'—my beatitude; she is 'the destroyer of all vices and the queen of virtue'; she is, in one remarkable poem, 'salute'—salvation. In 1576, when the *Vita* was first printed,

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the ecclesiastical authorities revised it for the press. They removed all these semi-theological words; they substituted 'felicità' for 'beatitudine' and 'dolcezza' for 'salute', and they made other alterations. The net result was to cut out as much theology as they could. They were (it seems probable) foolish; but they were not so foolish as those other commentators who, keeping Dante's language, have assumed either (*a*) that Dante did not mean it, or (*b*) that Dante's experience was abnormal and that his language is not applicable to any other love affair. What between clerical caution and lay obtuseness, the idea that Dante's state of being is that of many others, and that the doctrine is generally applicable, and was seriously meant, has been almost lost.

But in fact Dante did mean his language. The proof of it is in the famous passage in which he describes the significance of her 'salutation'. He wished to keep his feelings about Beatrice secret —it was a convention of 'courtly love', but it is also quite a frequent human tendency, especially if combined with a tendency to talk about the beloved on every possible occasion: literary conventions (in spite of some critics) are not necessarily 'psychologically' unsound. He therefore pretended to be 'attentive' to another young woman, and (after that one left Florence) to a third. Of this third lady and Dante there was a good deal of gossip; the worst of the talk came to Beatrice's ears. She cut Dante in the street. 'She refused me her most sweet greeting in which all my blessedness lay.'

He explains what he means by blessedness, and it seems that he meant blessedness. He writes: 'Dico—I tell you when she appeared from any direction, the hope of her admirable greeting abolished in me all enmity, and I was possessed by a flame of charity which compelled me to forgive anyone who had done me an offence; and if anyone had asked me a question about anything, I should have said only *Love!* with a countenance full of humility.' The sight of Beatrice (dico—I tell you) filled him with the fire of charity and clothed him with humility; he became—and for a moment he knew it—an entire goodwill. Neither of these great virtues is gained by considering oneself; and the apparition of this glory, living and moving in Florence, precisely frees him from the consideration of himself. Love is greater than he: his soul was right when it exclaimed: 'A stronger than I

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dominates me' and trembled, and his brain was right when it said: 'Behold your blessedness', and even his flesh when it said: 'O misery, how I shall be shaken', as in Malory 'the deadly flesh began to tremble right hard when it beheld spiritual things'. This love certainly does not exclude the physical reactions; his body, he says, was so oppressed by it, as by a surfeit of sweetness, that it felt heavy and lifeless; her greeting was too much for him; it 'passava e redundava la mia capacitade—overpassed and overflowed my capacity'. This too is not without significance when we consider the way in which, in the *Paradiso*, the body is spoken of, 'the glorious and holy flesh' (*Par.* XIV, 43); there the light, beauty, and love of the holy souls will grow greater through their bodies, and they will see more deeply into God. It is an image of this state which he already sees in Beatrice, as for a moment its actuality—humility and charity—is, so far as he can bear it, communicated to his soul.

On this particular occasion she passes and ignores him. That sudden snub, those cold averted eyes, must have struck similarly—for better or worse reasons—on numbers of young men. Dante was young; he was medieval and an Italian; he went away and cried. It did not occur to him to be ashamed of his emotions; he wept and slept—'come un pargoletto battuto lagrimando—like a beaten sobbing little child', and he had a dream of Love. The image of Love appeared to him in sleep on a number of occasions; or (perhaps more truly) he invented these dreams in order to declare something of the nature of this quality of Love. It is not possible to go over all, but this one is of importance. Love appears to him clothed in white and sitting deep in thought; presently he gazes at Dante and after a time says with a sigh: 'Son, it is time to put aside our pretences—*simulacra*', and he himself begins to weep. 'I said: "Lord of nobility, why do you weep?" He said: "Ego tamquam centrum circuli, cui simili modo se habent circumferentiae partes; tu autem non sic." Thinking over these words, it seemed to me he had spoken obscurely, and I forced myself to speak and say to him: "Lord, why do you speak to me so darkly?" And he answered me in the common tongue: "Do not ask more than is useful to you." ' After which they go on to the matter of the snub, and Love causes Dante to write a poem to put himself right with 'our Beatrice'.

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But while Love was talking the more ceremonial Latin, what did he mean? 'I am the centre of a circle to which all parts of the circumference are in a similar relation; but you are not so.' The whole crisis is about Dante's unhappiness at Beatrice's behaviour; this saying then has some bearing on it. Dante is not like Love; he is not central to all the circumference. The earlier similitudes are to be put away; they are to speak truth, and the truth is that Dante is not Love. He moves, presumably, on the circumference; he changes and is changed with it, but Love is not. Greeting or no greeting, Love is Love.

> Love is not love
> Which alters when it alteration finds
> Or bends with the remover to remove.[1]

But Dante, for all that momentary charity and humility, is not yet in a state to recognize so much.

There was written by St. Bonaventura, about the same time, a sentence which, with a like simile, had a further aim; it was the famous 'God is a circle whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference nowhere'. The two formulae together cover almost the whole of the Way of Images—and indeed of the Way of Rejection of Images also. Dante is not in the centre; he feels great emotions varyingly; only some parts of the circumference impose goodwill. But to Love in the centre all parts are equal; it does not matter whether the lover is successful or not, happy or not. To be so—'but you are not so'—one must will charity and humility; it is not enough that they shall be communicated by joy. Beyond this again lies that further state when Love is no longer in relation to something in the soul which is not Love; charity and humility do not exist there only in relation to some other particular image; they are at all times everywhere to everyone.

[1] The preceding line and a half of the sonnet—

> Let me not to the marriage of true minds
> Admit impediments—

are sometimes taken to refer to two lovers. But this makes nonsense of the next lines, for then one of the 'true minds' must 'alter', or the other could not find alteration. It is rather to the union of two minds with Love that the sonnet refers, which 'bears it out even to the edge of Doom', and the meaning is not unlike Dante's dream.

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much. It may also perhaps be generally admitted that Dante did not rationally and out of love suppose Beatrice to be so much of an exception and example to all the young women of Florence as, in love but not unrationally, he imaginatively asserted that she was. The quality of love (he maintained) exhibited in her a heavenly glory. Are we to say that this was so or that it was not so? If so, was it unique, or is it general to other young lovers and other states of adoration? And if general, are we to take the glory as seriously as Dante did? and if so, why? and if not, why not?

These are the questions which, always supposing we go on calling Dante a great poet, we shall have seriously to try and answer. The answers which the present pages support are that the exhibition of glory is actual; that it is also general; that we do well to take it seriously; and for reasons these pages attempt to sustain. The immediate suggestion, put forward elsewhere, which coincides with that canzone, is that what Dante sees is the glory of Beatrice as she is 'in heaven'—that is, as God chose her, unfallen, original; or (if better) redeemed; but at least, either way, celestial. What he sees is something real. It is not 'realer' than the actual Beatrice who, no doubt, had many serious faults, but it is as real. Both Beatrices are aspects of one Beatrice. The revealed virtues are real; so is the celestial beauty. The divinely intelligent angel is quite right; the place of this heavenly creature is heaven. God, not disapproving, says that Dante will call her 'the hope of the blessed'. Beatrice then, so the quality of Love reveals, is the hope of the blessed; that is, the high and glorious Beatricean quality of Beatrice is the hope of the blessed. The phrase itself is obscure. We might allow Dante a rash, even an over-rash, phrase in his youth, but the purgatorial ratification should cause it to be considered further. It may however be left for the moment, only so that it be taken as a serious statement with all that is to follow.

Indeed there had been at least one earlier definition of the same kind. In the earlier pages of the *Vita* is a sonnet on a young lady who died. Dante had once seen her in the company of Beatrice; and (he says) 'I said something of this in the last part of the words which I composed, as clearly appears to him who understands'. The last lines are: 'I will not disclose what lady this

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was except by her known quality. He who does not merit salvation must not hope to bear her company.'

Chi non merta salute
Non speri mai d' aver sua compagnia.

This, it seems, has been a difficulty to the commentators, yet, on Dante's showing, the thing is clear enough. The dead lady had been in the company of Beatrice; this, he says, is what he was alluding to. Anyone then who wished for her company must be worthy of the company of Beatrice. He who does not merit—Beatrice? say, 'salute', salvation—need not hope to find her. But this is to identify Beatrice with salvation? Yes, and this is the identity of the Image with that beyond the Image. Beatrice is the Image and the foretaste of salvation. This is not proper to say to any but those 'ch' avete intelletto d' amore.'

Of that canzone Dante wrote that he feared he had communicated its intention to too many and it would please him if any who did not understand it let it be. It seems, even in those days of love-doctrine, to have caused a certain sensation. One of his friends asked Dante to tell him then what Love was—this high accident of his substance which dared such similes and definitions, and Dante answered with the 'Love and the gentle heart are one same thing'; Love lies asleep in that heart till the beauty of a wise woman (saggia donna) causes it, by desire, to awaken, and so in a woman's heart does the worthiness of a man. But a greater sequence and one more worthy the preceding doctrine of the conclusion of the sonnet and of the whole of the canzone is in an episode that soon succeeds—the episode, as it were, of the Precedent Lady. On a particular day, Dante writes, 'I saw a gentle lady coming towards me who was well known for her beauty and was the dear lady of my chief friend. Her name was Giovanna (or Joan) but because of her beauty, as it was thought, she was often called Primavera (or Spring), and went by that name. And looking past her, I saw the admirable Beatrice coming. These ladies went by me, one after the other. Then it seemed as if Love spoke in my heart, and said: "The first is called Primavera only because of her coming to-day. For I caused the name to be given her—Primavera, or *prima verra*, 'she will come first', on the day when Beatrice shall be shown to the imagination of her

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liege. And if you consider her first name, it is as much as to say 'she will come first', for her name Giovanna (Joan) is from that Giovanni (John) who preceded the true light, saying: 'I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord.' " And I thought Love went on to say other words, namely: "He who should consider this matter subtly would call Beatrice Love, for the likeness she has to me." '

It is at this point that Dante breaks off in order to define Love as a quality and not a thing, an accident and not a substance. He did well; the intellect had to be justified with the greatness the vision demanded. But the defined limitation of the then relation —the substance, the image, and the quality of the substance towards the image—only confirms the permissible vision. If that vision had not developed in the *Paradiso,* we should have been less certain whether we could trust it here. The sight of Joan preceding Beatrice as John preceded Christ would have been nothing but an invention, and at that perhaps a profane invention. But we know—what the young and conventionally writing Dante could not then altogether know—how he was to justify the invention, both for himself and for all future lovers of his school. Beatrice is not indeed to be, in the divine sense, Love though there is a sense in which she is the Mother of Love, the God-bearer. That quality of love which is the beginning of the New Life is to become a quality of the final Consummation. The Way to this knowledge is in the practice of charity and humility and all virtues.

The lord of terrible aspect then has so far defined himself. He is the image of a quality by which the truth of another image is seen, and that other image is a girl in Florence, as it might be in London or San Francisco, in the thirteenth century or in the twentieth. Through her there springs in Dante this new quality. But Love also defines himself as that centre of a circle, and as in some sense one with Beatrice herself. This, to make a gloss on Dante, is the point of the beginning of Romantic Theology; that is, of theology as applied to romantic experiences—as Mystical Theology is applied to mystical experiences; and Dogmatic Theology to thought about dogmas. In this interpretation Beatrice is the Mother of Love in Dante; that love has authority; it communicates and demands charity and humility; it can

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endure without failing the application to it of such words as beatitude and salvation. In its light Beatrice is seen in something of her true celestial state; in which state she is declared by Christian doctrine to be precisely what Dante then sees her as being. She follows her precursor as the way of the Lord followed the preluding voice. The vehicle of Love moves in Florence as (after an incomparable and yet comparable manner) it moved in Nazareth. Her 'off-spring' is, beyond Dante's first meaning, indeed a lord of terrible aspect. But the first meaning is not to deny the second implication, any more than the implication of divinity is to negate the meaning of earth. 'Ego dominus tuus.'

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III

THE DEATH OF BEATRICE

I. THE DEATH OF BEATRICE

There is no reason to suppose that the death of Beatrice was, in Dante's own life, anything but the death of Beatrice. The *Vita* is a work of art, written afterwards, and therefore the account of her death in it is prepared for and arranged. Hints and dreams precede it; then it follows, one might say, as the second great negative crisis of the book, the first being the refusal of the salutation. The death of her companion, the death of her father, the dream of her own death, precede it, and the significance of hers follows as she herself followed Giovanna in the street of Florence.

It was just after that death of her father that Dante had his own dream. He had been ill and was still lying weak and in pain when he suddenly thought: 'Even Beatrice will certainly die.' It came like one of Wordsworth's 'strange fits of passion', and the fit Wordsworth remembered was similar:

> 'O mercy!' to myself I cried,
> 'If Lucy should be dead!'

He, like Dante in another poem, meant this confession for 'the Lover's ear alone'; there is a confraternity of passion, and both poets belonged to it, in which such things have a simple terror. As Dante lay there, he dreamed he saw faces of women with dishevelled hair floating before him and crying: 'You too will die', and then other more horrible faces which called to him: 'You are dead'—'tu se' morto.' And in the nightmare forms of women weeping and disarrayed followed; and darkness lay on the earth, in which the burning stars seemed to be weeping, like the lord of terrible aspect in the first dream, and there seemed to be earthquakes, in the midst of which a friend of his came up to him and said: 'What! don't you know? your wonderful lady has gone from this world.' He remained staring up to heaven, and all his images of her so combined that he saw a little cloud of great whiteness,

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though they would hardly, of themselves, prove it. Yet Milton talked of chastity; we are not therefore to suppose him lecherous. There is no rule; look and pass.

He wrote the first stanza, and then the news came. It was the evening of the eighth of June, 1290. A blank breaks the canzone, and then he turns again to the great Latin, to a sentence from Jeremiah: 'Quomodo sedet sola civitas . . .' 'How doth the city sit solitary, that was full of people! how is she become as a widow, that was great among the nations!' 'The Lord of Justice called this most gentle lady to be glorious under the ensign of that queen, the blessed (benedetta) Mary, whose name had the greatest reverence in the words of this blessed (beata) Beatrice.' It was more proper than perhaps she knew; not than he. At the end of the *Paradiso* the only eyes to which the eyes of Beatrice give place are the eyes of Mary. He was 'abbandonata dalla sua salute'—abandoned by her—whatever exact meaning we give to 'salute', for the light of her humility—'luce della sua umilitate'—had struck through the heavens (a new and substituted canzone sang) so strongly that the eternal Father himself had wondered and had called to himself so great a 'salute'—'tanto salute'. The word recurs as the word 'humility' recurs; it is another quality of Beatrice—salutation in courtesy, salvation in blessedness. It is no wonder the censors cut it out, thinking it too full of meaning; we, leaving it in, make it meaningless. Yet it is the crux of the whole matter.

It had been particularly her quality towards Dante, the quality of her image—la sua immagine—which his own quality of love had revealed to him. His love had somehow seen his most courteous salvation, make what we will of the words. It was gone now, with the actual death of an actual woman, the actual disappearance of an actual joy. The Lord of Justice had called its visibility to himself. Beatrice is dead. Let us forget for a moment that this is Dante and recapitulate as if it were any young man. He has met a young woman; he is attracted to her; his emotions are moved, his sensitiveness increased, his intellect excited, and that dim state of being which we call his soul purged and cleared. He is 'in love'. He is concerned (perhaps) to ask questions about this new quality of life. It seems to him to have a terrible power, grand but (in a sense) ominous, related to every recognizable

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element in him. The girl seems to him something like perfection —though, of course, he knows quite well that she is not, and may even (if he is on more intimate terms with her than ever Dante was with Beatrice) experience quite sharply that she is not. The vision of perfection does not at all exclude the sight of imperfection; the two can exist together; they can even, in a sense, co-inhere. To suppose anything else would be a false romanticism of the worst kind. Proper Romanticism neither denies nor conceals; neither fears nor flies. It desires only accuracy; 'look, look; attend.'

She dies. Innumerable young lovers have mourned such a death. Innumerably more have regretted the disappearance if not of Beatrice yet of that quality in Beatrice, the particular glorious Beatrician quality. Innumerably more again have not regretted it, have almost not noticed it, or have noticed it and easily reconciled themselves to it. It is from that too-easy reconciliation that all aged imbecilities arise, and even the not so aged. 'Young love', 'calf-love', 'it won't last', 'you mustn't expect', 'a quiet affection', and all the rest of the silly phrases—silly not in themselves but in their sound, borrowing silliness from the voices that sound them.

'It won't last.' Or, at least, it does not. An opaqueness, even if a beautiful and dear opaqueness, takes the place of that translucency. The sensitive awareness of perfection disappears, and the spring joy of Beatrice and Love arriving at once. Why then? There are, no doubt, many reasons. Time seems to change it, and custom—'heavy as frost and deep almost as life.' One grows (despite oneself) tired of beholding beauty; the mere monotony of the revelation wearies, and beauty ceases, in one's own sight, to be beauty, and the revelation to be revelation. It may be added, for fairness, that Beatrice—in a closer and more prolonged life than Dante was permitted—is not always celestial. Sin on both sides—original or actual—is a fact; we are too quickly 'disobedient to the heavenly vision'.

Wordsworth said the same thing, in the special terms of his own romantic exploration—

> There hath passed away a glory from the Earth . . .
> At length the Youth beholds it die away
> And fade into the light of common day.

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Say 'the woman' or 'the man' instead of 'the Earth' and the principle is still the same. What then? Nothing; a particular phenomenon has disappeared. It is for us to decide whether its disappearance makes nonsense of its first appearance. If we choose to think so, then for us, no doubt, it will be so. If we choose not to think so, then for us, no doubt, it will not be so. But in itself it is so or not, and whether it is in fact so or not does not at all depend upon our thinking. In this, as in so much, we have on inadequate evidence to make up our minds on the principles of things; it is the old gamble. 'Then the wise course is not to gamble.' 'Yes, but you must; you are not free to choose.' The agnostic, the anti-romantic, gambles as much as the believer and the romantic—nor is he any more certain of the great classic end. He is indeed less certain, for he has ceased to explore the distances; he has given up measuring the times; he has, that is to say, abandoned proportion. But on proportion the classic whole depends. That whole has a place for the romantic beginning; it puts the romantic into its place certainly, and firmly keeps it there. But the anti-classic has no place for any image at all—either of the beginning or of the end, only for a makeshift.

The Beatrician quality has disappeared. But the things that have been said and done in the light of that quality remain; vows, if they have been serious vows, remain. If under the influence of the centre where Love is, we have wished to be at the centre with Love, then we have to get to the centre. It was not by accident that Dante was so intensely aware of humility. Humility has to do with things as well as persons.

There may, in the light of that humility, be something else at work. The fault, wherever it is, if there is a fault, is indefectibly linked to purposes of redemption. The clouding of the translucency may be at the will of the translucency, and the withdrawal of the glory at the will of the glory. Here too, if we may continue the similitude of the young Beatrice with the True Light, it is perhaps the glory which says: 'If I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you, but if I depart, I will send him unto you.' Similitude? yet the image of the True Light comes in the *Vita* after Love has warned Dante that it is time to put away similitudes and speak plainly. The young lament the vision; the old warn the young—sometimes with tenderness, sometimes

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with abominable gusto—that the vision will go. Few remit to the vision itself the control of its own manifestation.

The purpose of the withdrawal, by whatever power, is evident. There was, in the early days, communicated not only a vision but a conversion. The quality of love which springs from Beatrice and beholds Beatrice seems to 'drive far off each thing of sin and guilt'. It communicates to the worshipper and lover either repentance or virtue or perhaps both. Dante himself, at the girl's greeting, becomes love. That moment may last for the flash of her smile or for an evening or for six months. But it desires more than such a miracle; it desires the total and voluntary conversion of the lover. Dante has to become the thing he has seen in Beatrice, and has, for that moment, been in himself. The maxim: 'This also is Thou, neither is this Thou' applies here. Love is at the centre of the circle, and Dante has to get there; this is the significance of the romantic distances. The sensitive knowledge is withdrawn. There is perhaps another contributory reason—the difficulty of co-ordinating the physical and mental satisfactions. Saint Thomas Aquinas long ago stated that physical intercourse caused a submergence of the rational faculty, which was an evil though no sin. The two climaxes of power seem to be a little opposed. The clear serenity of the intellectual adoration, which is an element in it however intense it may grow, is hidden and pent by the night of desire. The night of desire is thinned and (in a sense) impoverished by the intellectual lucidity. Our virtues are not at ease together. The habit—selfish or generous or both—of physical intercourse, once established, is apt permanently to cloud the intellectual and to make the memory of it weaker. I am far from saying that the eventual good it brings is not necessary and greater than that it seems temporarily to remove. If we take into account children and the co-inherence of married bodies (if fortunate), there is no doubt that it is necessary, and only perhaps in very few cases could the intellectual remain effective in its own scale without that friendship of the body. All that I say is that the lack of immediate co-ordination, natural to us now, is apparently part of the general clouding of the vision. The maintenance of a mutual memory of that intellectual glory might be one of the methods, in due time, of a re-quickening of the vision.

For there remains always the certain knowledge of what has

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been and there remains the free will. In one of the poems of the *Vita* Dante calls Beatrice 'nobile intelletto'. It may be seen presently how this aspect of their relation runs through all; it is sufficient here to feel that the quality of Beatrice is not only a sensitive but an intellectual thing. The recollection of her moves the rational part, even if she no more affects the sensitive, and this rational part can, to a certain extent, still loose her image on the sensitive. It is by that recollection that the lover is helped towards becoming 'a flame of charity', 'a vesture of humility'. He must, without a miracle, become the perfection he has seen.

This removal of the image does not set up a contradictory image; that comes later. The real and extreme contradiction of Beatrice in Dante's work does not lie in her death but in his later civic frustration and banishment from his city. To speak again in the terms of Romantic Theology, this disappearance of the Beatrician quality is not in correspondence with the death of our Lord, but rather with the beginning of his ministry. The wonders of the birth and the hiddenness of the childhood are done. Love must, in every sense, be about his Father's business. The real work of conversion is about to begin. It is one of the duties of marriage—one of those quiet and long duties which make marriage the great business it is—or of whatever state of vigilance corresponds to marriage. It might almost be said that the formal rite of marriage corresponds to the public baptism of our Lord.

> Public profession, vows, the ring, we twain
> A single household; so, he lives again
> His first presenting, and his Temple stay,
> The three years following his baptismal day.

The ceremony is not, in the strictest sense, necessary any more than that Baptism;[1] in both, Love submits to a Rite—'thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness.' It does; that is why it seems to withdraw; that is why its power remains.

[1] That is, 'the ministrants of the sacrament are the contracting parties themselves.' (*The Church and Marriage*, S.P.C.K., 1935, App. I. *Short Notes by a Roman Theologian.*) But the Roman Church decrees that the contract must be made before a priest 'under penalty of non-validity for lack of form'. I quote this that no-one may accuse me of wishing to make Dante an Anglican.

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Blacks. The Whites were driven out, and on 27 January 1302 sentence was passed against Dante. He was accused of corruption and fraud, of having disturbed the peace, and of other high misdemeanours. He was sentenced to a fine of five thousand florins, two years' exile, and perpetual exclusion from any office in Florence. On 10 March it was further decreed that he and fourteen others should be burned alive if they should at any time be captured by Florence. On 19 May 1315 the exiles, however, at another crisis, were offered a recall on payment of a small fine, a formal imprisonment, and a ceremony of submission; Dante refused the conditions. But the sentence seems to have been reduced to detention in an appointed place; for further contumacy however he was further condemned, with his two sons, to decapitation.

For nineteen years he lived in exile, passing from town to town for a longer or shorter time. In 1321, on the night of 13 September, he died at Ravenna. He was then fifty-six years old.

This is the history of Dante in relation to the men of the actual city. It is not very much, yet the other stories are mostly disputed and uncertain. Of his history in relation to the images of women in the city we know even less. Outside his own work we know only that he married Gemma di Manetto Donati. He is thought to have been betrothed to her as early as 1277 when he was twelve; the marriage itself was before 1297. During the exile she seems to have remained in Florence. They had three children—two sons, Jacopo and Pietro, who afterwards joined him at Ravenna, and a daughter, Antonia, who, it is thought, entered religion at Ravenna and took the name of Beatrice—'Suora Beatrice', a Dominican nun.

So much for the—it would unfortunately be rash to call them facts, but reports as near facts as can be managed. It is possible now to return to Dante's own work with the original question—What happened after the death of Beatrice? When that image was withdrawn, did others appear? and if so, how?

What then it seems happened was something like this. A little while after the death of Beatrice Dante saw at a window the face of a young woman who was looking at him with great pity and compassion. ('Pietade' is his word; that word which covers so much, due and not due, propriety and generosity.) He found

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himself, in his state of desolation, much moved by that silent gaze, and as he went on he said to himself: 'Surely most noble Love must dwell with so compassionate a Lady.' His thought thus directed to her, he observed, whenever he met her, that her pity seemed to grow. She was of a paleness which seemed 'color d' Amore', 'the colour of Love', and he remarked it the more because Beatrice had been of a like pallor. If 'a sorrow's crown of sorrow is remembering happier things', this visible recollection of Beatrice at once accentuated and eased the pain. It enabled and soothed his grief. Others besides Dante have discovered this, and the delicate self-deceit (could one say so!) which it holds. Dante himself, like those others, discovered that he was in fact finding not merely ease of grief but a good deal of delight in seeing the lady. This discovery of his dishonesty shocked and angered him; he turned against himself, 'Vanità', vanity! he wrote; but now that the delight was discovered, it still recurred, and he even thought that this was 'per voluntà d' Amore', 'by the will of Love', in order that his life might reach repose.

It is, in view of the *Convivio*, important to remark that he thus raised the reference of the Lady of the Window to Love. Love must (I suppose) at this point in the *Vita* be still that kind of quality which it has been defined as being. It is not for us to diminish the augustitude which the lord of terrible aspect has taken on. Dante's difficulty is that he suspects himself to be tempting himself with a kind of false pretence, an encouragement of a pseudo-identity of Love. This encouragement seemed to him for a little 'a gentle thought'; he composed a sonnet on it; 'it', he imagined himself saying to the Lady of the Window, 'speaks of you . . . it reasons so dulcetly of love that it causes the heart[1] to consent. . . .' Then the heart says to the reason: 'O pensive Reason, this is a new breathing of Love . . . his life and all his worth spring from the eyes of that compassionate one who was so disturbed at our torment.'

'A vile sonnet' he called it—*vilissimo*. It can only have been so vile because he was trying to persuade himself of the identity of a Love which was not in fact there; that love, that high vision, was still with Beatrice. 'Against this enemy of Reason'—the words are to be noted; it is intellect and knowledge which are

[1] Here, he says, 'heart' means appetite.

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offended—there came to him one morning about nine o'clock an intense visual recollection of his first meeting with Beatrice; from that he thought again of all the order of those times that were now over, and set his heart and mind again on her. The end of the *Vita* holds, not merely that resolution, but the result of that resolution. The last sonnet is very remarkable. It was written for two ladies who wished to have some verse of his; and his respect for them was such that he determined to write them a new poem. This was the poem:

'Beyond the farthest sphere, the Primum Mobile itself, the sigh passes which issues from my heart; it has a new intelligence which Love in tears has given it, and this draws it upward. When it has come where it desires to be, it sees a lady so honoured and so shining that this pilgrim spirit wonders at her splendour. It sees her such that, when it tells its knowledge again to me, I cannot understand it, so subtly does it speak to the sorrowing heart which causes it to speak. I know that it speaks of that noble lady for it often recalls Beatrice—so that then I understand well, dear ladies mine.' 'My thought', he added as a comment, 'rises to her quality in such degree that my intellect cannot comprehend it, for our intellect is to those blessed souls as our weak eyes are to the sun—and this Aristotle says in the second book of his Metaphysics.'

It was directly after this that there was given to him 'a very wonderful vision'—and he determined to write no more of her till he could write worthily, and then 'such things as have never yet been written of any woman'. The sonnet, with its Aristotelian reference, is hardly to be separated from the vision. He had, in some way poets may understand and the rest of us believe, gripped the principle of the *Commedia*; it was to be *this* and nothing else, dim as the method, uncertain as the details, might be. He had refused the false persuasion, the too-easy inclination, the pseudo-image; he was given the true result of the true image.

If everything had stopped there, it would have been much, but both he and we were given more. He finished the *Vita* on that high note. Years afterwards he sat down to the *Convivio* and there, serious and unashamed, told us the rest. This book was to be an arrangement, with long prose commentary, of fourteen canzoni; but only the introduction and the treatises, or chapters, on the first three poems were finished. It seems likely that Dante

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abandoned it in favour of the *Commedia*. Its date is supposed to be during the early years of the exile, though some of the poems were written earlier. 'It is', says Dr. Gardner, 'the first important work on philosophy written in Italian—an innovation which Dante thinks necessary to defend in the chapters of the introductory treatise, where he explains his reasons for commenting upon these canzoni in the vernacular instead of Latin, and incidentally utters an impassioned defence of his mother-tongue.' He says of it indeed, in a sentence which relates the image of speech to the image of Beatrice: 'This my native speech drew me into the path of knowledge which is our particular perfection, for by her aid I began Latin, and by her aid learned it—that Latin by which I was able to go farther, so that all can see, and I myself acknowledge, that she has been my benefactor in the greatest degree.'

It was, however high the phrases, the common thing from which Dante always started, as it was certainly the greatest and most common to which he came. His images were the natural inevitable images—a girl in the street, the people he knew, the language he learned as a child. In them the great diagrams are perceived; from them the great myths open; by them he understands the final end. The *Convivio* was meant to be for the common folk (not necessarily the poorest). Dante wrote of it that it should be the barley bread through which thousands should be filled, and baskets of it remain over for him. It should be 'a new light and a new sun, to shine when the old sun should set, and to give light to those who were in darkness because that old sun did not shine for them'. Italian instead of Latin? no doubt. Explication of the principles of existence? philosophy? no doubt. But perhaps also some intuition, some seizure by the Imagination, of the union of all those Images, without loss of any, in the in-Godding, and the relevance between them on the Way.

The new book was to deal with the same subject as the old—that is, love and virtue. The fourteen odes had been admired by many, but rather for their beauty than their goodness—say, their doctrine. Now their meaning is to be explained. 'And if in the present book the theme is treated more virilely than in the *Vita*, I do not intend that as any derogation from that earlier book, but rather that that should be helped by this.' It is reasonable that

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the *Vita* should be fervid and passionate, and that the *Convivio* should be temperate and masculine. Style of speech and action changes as one's age changes; 'in the former work I spoke when I was entering on my youth, now in the latter when it has gone by.' The canzoni, he adds, have a different intention from their apparent meaning; he will discuss both—the allegorical and the literal. He has been reproached for having yielded to such a passion as the canzoni suggest; he will show now that it was not passion but virtue which moved him—'la movente cagione.' The noun is worth remembering for the *Commedia*.

The *Vita* and the *Convivio* then are on the same subject; they treat 'di amore, come di virtù'. The *Vita* had been (say) feminine and passionate; the *Convivio* is to be masculine and intellectual. The poems (in both? certainly in both) have two meanings—literal and 'allegorical'; he will deal with both. It is perhaps worth while pointing out that when a poem is said to have two meanings, both are included in the poem; we have only one set of words. The meanings, that is, are united; and the poem is their union. The poem is an image with many relevancies, and not only so, but it is itself the expressions of the relevancy of its own images each to other. The poem, not the literal or allegorical meanings, is the existing thing, the image we have to deal with; the meanings assist and enrich the line; they do not replace it (which is the danger of all—even necessary, even Dante's—criticism and comment). One goes outside the poem, in following the meanings, but only to return; only to centre again what, for a good purpose, has been de-centred. Poetry also, as Virgil might have said, 'is at the centre of a circle to which all parts of the circumference are equal, but with criticism it is not so.'

This then is the kind of work the *Convivio* is to be; the definition is laid down and the introductory treatise ends. We come to the first canzone and the Second Treatise, and again to the Lady of the Window. She is introduced as ceremoniously and astronomically as Beatrice had been. 'The star of Venus had twice revolved . . . since the passing of that blessed Beatrice who lives in heaven with the angels and on earth with my soul, when that gentle Lady of whom I spoke at the end of the *Vita* first appeared to my eyes accompanied by Love, and took some place in my mind.' This means three years after the death of Beatrice—a

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ratification, by his style, of the validity of the vision. Where we ignorantly worship, there he defined. But, on that Christian showing to which he was committed, his style and those other lovers' insight are themselves only valid because that perfection is the arch-natural state of human beings as such, seen after that arch-natural manner. It is everyone's or it is no-one's; on that there can be no compromise.

But then why do we not see it always, everywhere, and in all? Because the Divine Mercy intervenes. Mercy? Mercy assuredly. 'We cannot', wrote Dante in the third Tractate of the *Convivio*, 'look fixedly upon her aspect because the soul is so intoxicated by it that after gazing it at once goes astray in all its operations.' The first manner in which it goes astray is in a tendency always to extort from the glory its own satisfaction with the glory. The alternative to being with Love at the centre of the circle is to disorder the circumference for our own purposes. This—the perversion of the image—is in fact the sole subject of the *Inferno*, although Beatrice herself is hardly mentioned there. If such a perversion follows so easily on a single seeing, would it be less likely to follow on a multitudinous? If the gazing fixedly on one divine aspect is apt to intoxicate the soul and send it reelingly astray, what chaos would follow if all men and women were so beheld, what sin, what despair! Dante himself had seen the danger in the *Vita*; the *Donne, ch' avete intelletto d' amore* is to go only to those who are courteous; to the rest it was not proper to speak. While we are what we are, the Divine Mercy clouds its creation. In the old myth, the Adam, once they had insisted on seeing good as evil, were mercifully ejected from Paradise; how could they have borne with sanity that place of restrained good, all of which could be known as unrestrained evil? So we, being also with the Adam in the Fall. In the *Commedia*, it is only at the end of the Way of Affirmation, and of its rejections, purgations, and indoctrinations, that the light of all the saints is seen united with that of Beatrice, and the humility and charity of all the City burns sensitively on human eyes.

This universalism, by the Mercy, does not endanger us; it is a truth clear to our intellects, obscure to our flesh. It serves however to direct attention to the problem, after the Beatrician revelation and the Beatrician withdrawal, after vows taken to Beatrice, of

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the appearance of the second image of the Beatrician kind. If, as has been suggested, this quality of love lies at the root of many marriages, then the problem is contemporary enough and urgent enough—and perhaps in other fidelities of the soul, but let us say marriage and mean (as far as may be) all. The Christian Church has insisted that certain conditions are necessary for the carrying out of that great experiment of marriage: free choice, intention of fidelity, physical capacity. The physical union which is permitted, encouraged, and indeed made part of the full 'salute' of that first experience is to be forbidden to any other. Why, if the vision is credible and identical? if (in terms of Dante) 'most noble Love' indeed abides with the Lady of the Window?

The aim of the Romantic Way is 'the two great ends of liberty and power'—'la podestate', 'la nobile virtù', 'lo libero arbitrio.' To be free one must have power to accept or reject. Having thriven in one manner, we are offered the opportunity of thriving in another; we are offered the opportunity of being free in the glory. The second image is not to be denied; we are not to pretend it is not there, or indeed to diminish its worth; we are only asked to free ourselves from concupiscence in regard to it.

> The rash oath of virginity
> Which is first love's first cry

must have a lofty education—more perhaps than it or we wished. That first oath had in it no Gnostic denial of earth, nor must its later ratification have; we are not, in the words of an ancient canon, 'blasphemously to inveigh against the creation.' The first image was towards physical union; the second towards its separation. It repeats the first, in an opposite direction. But both movements are alike intense towards most noble Love: that is, towards the work of the primal Love in the creation.

Natural jealousy and supernatural zeal—the zeal of the officers of the supernatural rather—have brought us to regard that great opportunity of the second image rather as a sin than as a goodness. Of the two jealousy is the more potent. It is a form of envy, and in the *Commedia* it is properly exhibited by the livid colour of the stone on that terrace in Purgatory where it is lived through, by the haircloth and the eyes sewn up with wire: 'luce del ciel di sè largir non vole' (*Purg*. XIII, 69), 'the light of heaven does not will

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to give largely of itself.' The doctrine of largesse is here objectively contradicted as it was subjectively in the sin; but a voice cries out: 'they have no wine', recalling the largesse of our courteous Lord. Jealousy is the old man on the new way, who does not know courtesy even there, the courtesy which Virgil shows and Beatrice and all the blessed. Not to be jealous, it is often supposed, condones the sin, if sin there be. That anyhow is false; to be jealous only increases the first sin of infidelity to the Image by developing elsewhere another, that of infidelity to most noble Love. But there need not be sin; to observe and adore the glory is not sin, nor to receive the humility and charity shed from the glory, of the second image, or indeed any number—say, up to that seventy times seven in a day which our Lord chose as the only limit of the exercise of love. It has often been the habit of lovers, in the first rush of love, to cry out that they will not be rancorous, even if their lovers find another image. That they are not usually able to manage it is no spoiling of that first goodwill; a later impulse does not destroy the validity of the original impulse. He who hates the manifestation of the kingdom hates the kingdom; he is an apostate to the kingdom.

Saint Augustine is reported to have said that he often could not make adulterers understand that they were doing wrong. There was perhaps more excuse for them than the great doctor altogether guessed, especially if among the cares of the Church (and there was every excuse for him) he had forgotten his African love, or had perhaps loved her without the quality of the new life. However much excuse, they were still wrong. But perhaps denunciation is not the best way of correcting the error; or perhaps the error cannot be properly corrected until jealousy is denounced as strongly as adultery (whether with or without divorce). An awful truth lurks behind the comic figure of the complacent husband or wife; they are indecent, but the true decency is on the farther side. If it were possible to create in marriage a mutual adoration towards the second image, whenever and however it came, and also a mutual limitation of the method of it, I do not know what new liberties and powers might not be achieved. Meanwhile, so limiting the method, we must wholly practise passion without concupiscence wherever the principle of all the images appears.

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Marriage is the great example, in this sense, of the Way of Affirmation. The intention of fidelity is the safeguard of romanticism; the turning of something like the vision of an eternal state into an experiment towards that state. Once that experiment has been formally begun, it cannot be safely abandoned, or so the Christian Church maintains. No other experiment of the same complete kind can be begun in the Omnipotence, once the Omnipotence has conjoined itself with the lovers' assent to the first.[1]

The appearance of a second image however is not in itself a beginning of a second experiment; it might be a desirable prolongation and enlargement of the first. The Way of Affirmation is, in this small detail, enlarged to include the Rejection; and how? by a preference of the principle of satisfaction to satisfaction itself. So to unite all, so to press towards what (in the doctrine) is the truth of the whole City, is to take a step towards unity. Fidelities are of many kinds; much more than marriage is sealed in them. Our functions are not in existence for the sake even of our immortal beings, but our immortal beings for the sake of our functions. To love is to love and serve the function for which the loved being was created, whatever that may mean or involve; this is the definition of the Way, the end of which is in that point from which heaven and all nature hangs: 'depende il cielo e tutta la natura.'

[1] It is true that the Church, in spite of the Montanists, has not disapproved of second marriages. But in those cases it is held that the first experiment has been concluded by death, which is the intervention of Almighty God, though by that outrage which he himself endured; and that the very conditions of the great experiment are therefore removed. Marriage is, partly at least, a recovery of matter; where there is no matter there is no marriage.

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IV

THE *CONVIVIO*

The Lady of the Window then has been accepted as a vehicle of most noble Love. That is simple and credible. What had burst on Dante with a profound shock in the person of Beatrice had in this other appearance been a matter of slow growth. His reluctance had taken three years to recognize the identity. It is perhaps a hint that, at certain times, we too may have to exercise patience and goodwill, and another hint that, given goodwill, the nature of Love is always discoverable. I should not find it impossible, though I concede that it is the opposite of Dante's problem, to draw a further lesson and apply it to Beatrice herself. When she is 'dead', when her quality has been withdrawn, then comes the time to assert that humility and charity. Charity, in this sense, begins at home. The second image, so, would be more like a second coming of Love, more like the Parousia itself. Even that perhaps is more at our disposal than we know, and may deign to depend, at least in part, on the liberty and power of the faithful. Where Love has once been, it does not—except in hell—refuse to return.

But other things had been happening during those three years. Dante, recording them, proceeded to involve generations of commentators in a difficulty. He says (II, xiii) that after the death of Beatrice he turned for consolation to various books; notably Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*. Boethius was a Roman who had written this book while in prison and under sentence of death; it was an effort, and a very noble effort, to actualize to himself the principles in which he had supposed he believed. The great attempt profoundly affected Dante also. Love-in-grief, as he had said in the *Vita*, gave him a new insight; his desolation opened out into comfort and more than comfort—power. 'I found', he says, 'the vocabulary of authors, of sciences, of books.' More than ever before, he discovered and understood words. 'Visionary power,' wrote Wordsworth,

> Attends the motions of the viewless winds,
> Embodied in the mystery of words:

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himself older and himself more philosophical. The difference that it makes is simply that in the one case he is attending only to Philosophy; in the second case, he was attending to a woman and to Philosophy at the same time. The difference is very small, and yet perhaps to us important. Dante imagining Philosophy as a woman is doing what great poets do, and conveying to us by a poetic image the sensibilities of his intellectual concern. Dante discovering a woman to be Philosophy is doing the same thing, no doubt, but he is also setting us an example, if we are of the kind that wishes for such an example. The one is a great invention; the other is a knot of union. Of the first we say: 'How beautiful!'; of the second: 'How true!' It is therefore this second possibility which carries the greater intensity. It is this also which fits better (before and after) with the image of Beatrice in the *Vita* and the image of Beatrice in the *Commedia*. Sooner or later, denying the actuality of the Lady of the Window, we are driven very near to denying also the actuality of Beatrice; for the *Convivio* is a discourse on that development of the soul into Perfection which it was Dante's task to describe (and to be), the plan of the way to the centre. As for reconciliation, it is not unlikely, even if we take that point of view, that Dante was annoyed with the interpretations put upon the canzoni. If you are seriously engaged on the attempt to analyse a real woman as philosophy and philosophy as a real woman—it is disconcerting to have it generally supposed that you are completely taken up by a carnal passion for her. The Lady of the Window—unknown even beyond Beatrice, young, compassionate, noble, and the subject of so high an experiment—gleams for a moment and disappears. Perhaps she too was disappointed; perhaps this intense intellectual passion was not at all that for which she had looked. Or perhaps she was not; perhaps it was more than all. There is an Ode, a canzone—the sixth of those which were to be commented on in the *Convivio*—in which Dante complains of her cruelty, and sighs for revenge. It does not read as if he were then brooding on the difficulties of study, on the remoteness of philosophy, or the unfriendliness of Saint Thomas Aquinas. On the other hand, in the fourteenth canzone of the same series, written for those who are 'enamoured', 'in love', he says that to men virtue was given, and to women beauty, and to Love power to make the two one. The

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Convivio may be read as an effort, at least intellectually, to express that union of the two. It was abandoned, perhaps because it was already failing, perhaps because the difficulties of explaining some poems were too great, perhaps because a greater method was taking its place. We do not know what happened to the Lady of the Window. She had had at that moment a great vocation; she was then at the beginning of a movement in the mind of man, of which we do not yet know the end; happy those who have a part in it. Wish her well, and pass.

Let us say then that this was the effort—the union of virtue and beauty. It is, I think, true that virtue eventually runs away with the book; in that sense Dante was quite right. Philosophy—lady or no lady—is the vaster subject matter. But his descriptions and explanations of philosophy are often put in terms applicable to the woman, and sometimes astonishingly so. The Lady—Beatrice or she of the Window; say, the woman—is defined, or her function (for which she was created, and not her function for her) is defined, and even more exactly than in the *Vita*. That was a vision; this is much more like a diagram. But it is a living diagram; it still eats and speaks and moves in Florence. Or so (for the purpose of this chapter) we have decided to believe.

At the beginning of the second treatise, just before he takes up the theme of the Lady of the Window, Dante explained the four senses in which books may be understood. They are the literal, the allegorical, the moral, and the anagogical. The first 'goes no farther than the letter as it stands'. The second is the literal sense translated into and applied to things of the intellectual and, as it were, abstract life; the third is the literal sense applied to moral life; the fourth, the literal sense applied to—what we may call the spiritual life. Dante gives an example of each of the last three, and unfortunately a different example; it would have been more convenient here if he had shown us the different meanings of the same phrase. He did it later, in the letter to Can Grande della Scala, which dedicated the *Paradiso* to him. There he takes the sentence: 'When Israel went out of Egypt, the house of Jacob from a strange people; Judah was his sanctuary, and Israel his dominion.' He says of this: 'If we consider the literal sense alone, the thing signified is the going out of the children of Israel from Egypt in the time of Moses; if the

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allegorical, our redemption through Christ; if the moral, the conversion of the soul from the grief and misery of sin to a state of grace; if the anagogical, the passage of the sanctified soul from the bondage of the corruption of this world to the liberty of everlasting glory.'

These four meanings—of which one only is literal, and all the others are in a sense 'allegorical'—rule the interpretation of the canzoni as of the *Commedia*. But we may go a little further. 'It is clear that the subject,' says Dante in the *Letter*, 'in relation to which these alternate meanings have their movement, must be double (*duplex*).' The feminine form about which the *Convivio* is discoursing must be duplex. The great difference between the two schools of thought on Dante may be summed up by asking: is the actual form of a woman in this sense duplex? or is it not?

The last sonnet of the *Vita* had spoken of a perception which had been led by Love-in-grief up to heaven and had there seen Beatrice in glory, with splendours about her. It had been overwhelmed by her light; afterwards in the *Commedia* Dante was to speak of the 'luce intellectual plena d' amore' which Beatrice shows him in heaven; it was at that moment that he at last, and for the first time, abandoned the effort even to hint at her face and her smile. The intellectual light full of love is also the love of the good full of ecstasy. In the sonnet all this is undefined; we are told only that when this perception, or thought, speaks of that feminine form, so seen, it speaks of things Dante cannot follow. As with the terrible figure of Love when it first appears in a dream, there is heard a throng of words of which only a few could be understood—the presaging '*Ego dominus tuus*', so in the sonnet all he can catch is the reverberation of the name of Beatrice it brings to mind. It is speaking of the secret of that high state, of Beatrice in heaven. The first canzone of the *Convivio* takes up the same theme. It is addressed to those Intelligences who move the third heaven, and it speaks of a thought which often took its way to God, where it saw 'mia Donna gloriar', and so speaks of her that Dante desires to be there. But now comes another spirit, who lords it over Dante so greatly that he trembles; and this spirit says: 'He who would see salvation (la salute), let him look on the eyes of this lady, if he is not afraid of agony of sighs'; and then the poem goes on to say how wise and

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courteous this lady is, and how, if Dante does not deceive himself, he shall see an adornment of high miracles, and say: 'Love, true lord, behold thy handmaid; do what thou wilt.' The saying is again a variation on the great phrase of 'her, the sister'd yet the sole'—'behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word.' We must suppose, as before, that Dante knew very well what he was doing when he used the phrase, and that he did it deliberately. But here it is he who is to say it; his own soul is to be the feminine, the God-bearer, the mother of Love. In this sense there is already proposed that mortal maternity of God which is fully exposed in the conclusion of the *Paradiso.*

This lady also then is to reveal to him an adornment of high miracles. The perception which Love-in-grief had launched, which sees Beatrice in glory, is counter-acted by this other spirit, who brings him to Philosophy, included in which is the philosophy of this matter also; and in speaking of this lady who is visible and yet philosophical he, and we, are to trace the path to thse miracles. The Intelligences of the third heaven have been invoked; 'ye who by thought move the third heaven'; it is they who have brought Dante into this experience. They are the angels proper to this heaven.

The third heaven has its own particular attributions. It is, to begin with, the heaven of Venus, and (as we find in the later *Commedia*) it is that heaven where the shadow of earth, reaching like a cone into the deep skies, finally ends. Earth itself is not, of course, done with there; but, in spatial terms only, it is left behind. The woman whom Dante is studying expresses this borderland between heaven and earth. But also there are the great sciences of learning which correspond, by their nature, to the opening intellectual powers, and in this hierarchy the third heaven corresponds to rhetoric, for Venus is 'more pleasant to behold than any other star' and Rhetoric is 'the most pleasant of all the Sciences, for its chief aim is to please'. And then, besides these meanings, is one in which the divine subjects of contemplation fit for this heaven are named; for of the nine heavens, the highest three contemplate the supreme power of the Father, and the second three the wisdom of the Son, and the third three 'la somma e ferventissima Carità dello Spirito Santo'—and these last three are nearest to us and give to us of what they receive. These

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last three contemplate the Spirit in three different modes—as he is in himself, and as he is in his union with and distinction from the Father, and as he is in his union with and distinction from the Son. But whether the third heaven contemplates the Spirit in himself or in his relation to the Father, I do not see that Dante makes clear.

These then are the four meanings—the lady herself, philosophy itself, rhetoric, the contemplation of the high fervent love of the Spirit, and all these are inter-related, but especially they are all contained in the literal; that is, both in the literal sense of the verse, which is what Dante says, and in the visible appearance of the lady, which he does not say, but it is, I think, an inevitable result of the affirmation of that physical image and of what he does say. He does continually refer to its greatness of communication; thus, when he speaks of courtesy, (and it is inevitable that we should remember 'la sua ineffabile cortesia' of the first greeting in the street between the two young creatures of eighteen), he says: 'There is nothing better in a woman than courtesy. And let not wretched ordinary folk deceive themselves with this word, and think that courtesy only means largesse, for largesse is one special kind of courtesy, and not courtesy in general. Courtesy and propriety (onestade, decency, honour, *pietas*)—it is all one; and since in courts of old virtue and fine customs were in use (as now the contrary), so this word was taken from courts, and was as much as to say courtesy, the use of courts. But if the word were taken from the courts of to-day, especially in Italy, it would mean nothing but shamefulness.' And he goes on, thinking thus both of courtesy in a woman and the most courteous doctrines of philosophy, to denounce those high-seated wretches who, 'mad, foolish, and vicious,' expose their evils by their temporal grandeur, quoting the bitter sentence of Ecclesiastes: 'There is a sore evil which I have seen beneath the sun, namely, riches kept for the owners therefore to their hurt.'

This courtesy is a kind of heavenly largesse of behaviour, not only the largesse of money. It was what Beatrice had when she greeted him, and the other lady when she showed her compassion, and (afterwards) Beatrice again when she moved so quickly to Virgil in the *Commedia*, and Virgil himself when he went to meet Dante. 'Love', wrote Tyndale, translating Saint Paul,

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The process of indoctrination with this largesse of spirit continues through the third and fourth treatises of the *Convivio.* The third, on the whole, continues to be an analysis of the duplex feminine image. The fourth is an analysis of virtue in man, which Dante here calls nobility. He had, in the *Vita,* in the sonnet 'Amore e cor gentil', *Love and the gentle heart,* spoken of the beauty of a 'wise woman, saggia donna', awakening love in a man, and so in a woman the worthiness of a man; and it would not be improper to see these treatises as separately continuing that idea. By so doing, they do another thing also, for they bring the reader near and nearer to that other image of the City which is the necessary complement and balance to the image of the woman, or (making such modifications as are proper) of the man.

The second canzone, and the third commentary, begin with this sense of the intellect labouring under something too great for it. It is perhaps almost the beginning of what Wordsworth called 'the feeling intellect'; there is a sensation of significance, and some, but not sufficient, understanding. After this Dante comes to a discussion of Love, which is here both a quality and an act conditioned by that quality: 'Love is nothing else than the spiritual union of the soul with the object loved.' 'And since the constitution of the divine nature is shown in the excellences of nature, therefore the human soul unites herself spiritually with them the quicker and the closer as they themselves appear more perfect' (III, ii). And 'this lady' exhibits the pattern of man's essence as it exists in the divine mind (III, vi). This is to repeat formally what has been asserted often enough in the *Vita* to be seen in Beatrice. She is the heavenly norm; she is what everyone ought to be; 'she is as completely perfect as the essence of man can possibly be.' There is nothing new or uncommon about this experience; it is in a great many novels and films and plays and songs; our modern songs hold it as much as the lyrics of the metaphysicals. All that is new is the seriousness with which Dante treats it and the style in which he expresses it. The lady creates in her lover the sensation of supreme content. It does not last. Why not? Dante, at least, had a perfectly definite answer (III, vi). Everything desires its own perfection: 'in this all desires are appeased and for the sake of this all is desired.' This desire causes every delight to lack something, 'for there is in this

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life no delight so great as to assuage our souls' thirst, so that this longing for our own perfection is not always in one thought.' Our desires are everlasting, and to see an image of perfection is not the same thing as to be perfect ourselves, which until we all are, possession, even the possession of Beatrice, must lack perfection. This is what all the talk of 'the ideal' comes to; the ideal can never satisfy us until we are ideal. He who pursues any hope of satisfaction without his own conditioning perfection is bound, sooner or later, straight for the *Inferno*.

Yet certainly this outer perfection (III, vii) calls us to that; 'her aspect aids our faith.' Philosophy does it by reason, and she does it through vision. She is, as it were, the substance of spirit and the visibility of spirit; in that respect she is an arch-natural thing. The divine light 'radiates into her—I mean, in her speech and in those acts which we call her bearing and her behaviour'. It has been held by some that something like light shines from the beloved, and that her physical vehicle is lucent with it. A thousand songs repeat it; it is taken as light talk, but it may be the lightness of grave truth. Her speech, 'per l' altezza e per la dolcezza sua,' 'by her loftiness and sweetness, nourishes a thought of love in the mind of the listener'; her acts, 'per la loro suavita a per la loro misura,' by their suavity—smoothness—and by their measure—propriety—waken love and bring it to awareness wherever in a good nature its possibility has been already sown. This appearance of a harmony of sensitive good arouses in us the faculty by which we escape from eternal death and reach eternal life—'per la quale campiamo da eternal morte e acquistiamo eternal vita.' Nothing less than this is the claim; it was made in the *Vita* and it is now repeated. A noble propriety of good becomes visible. Her modesty is made magnificent by God; her God-given magnificence becomes modesty in herself; the great laws of exchange begin. All this—to say it once more—may happen anywhere at any time between any persons. Romantic love between the sexes is but one kind of romantic love, which is but a particular habit of Romanticism as a whole, which is itself but a particular method of the Affirmation of Images. And—to say this also once more—all this involves no folly of denial of the girl's faults or sins. The vision of the perfection arises independently of the imperfection; it shines through her body whatever

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she makes of her body. Thus chastity is exhibited in the lecherous, and industry in the lazy, and humility in the proud, and truth in the false. Duplex in this also, the single image moves. The task of Beatrice or her of the Window was, in actual life, the same as the task of Dante. Her lover's testimony told her what, in fact, the image of her was; it was for her too to make haste to become it—perhaps when in some sullenness of his own, or because of some other function of his own, or through some rejection of hers, the testimonies had temporarily ceased.

The divine beauty of this most gracious being appeared in her speech and her acts. But also it appeared in the different members of her body. The body 'has organs for almost all the powers' of man; and these organs were, for Dante, of a nature as everlasting as his desire for God; they were indeed part of his desire for God: 'the organs of the body', says the *Paradiso*, 'shall be strong for all that means delight.' Dante himself did not go far in the analysis of the human body itself; much there remains to be done.

Wordsworth, in a profound phrase (*Prelude*, VIII, 279–81), said:

> The human form
> To me became an index of delight,
> Of grace and honour, power and worthiness.

The operative word is *index*; an index refers us to the text for full treatment of its items, but the names of the items, verbally treated in the text, are verbally repeated in the index. The subjects exist in the index in the manner that they do in the text—briefly, it is true, though a good index will generally indicate the development of the subjects on any particular page, and the good student will be always attentive to the index. It is very much in this sense that the human body contains and indicates the virtues. Dante confines himself to two of those entries in the index; they contain each a joy, which points to fuller joy; things appear there 'which reveal some of the joys of Paradise'. But we must go to the text of philosophy to understand the subjects actually present in the index of the body, the body in itself being part of the philosophical volume. His stress on the whole philosophical volume was very necessary. The great doctrine lies between the spiritualizers and the carnalizers—the idealists and the sensualists; it is explained away by both, yet for ever 'it

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trembles yet it does not pass away'. Nor, speaking generally, does it fare much better when it is called sacramental. Technically, the word might serve, but in popular use it dichotomizes too much; it divides, while professing to unite; and, in popular use, it throws over the light of the serious object a false light of semi-religious portentousness. It overwhelms the gay and lordly body with its own significance; no doubt, as Dante says, the everlasting contentment which that foreshadows cannot fall to anyone here, but we do less than proper honour to our present delight if we are everlastingly reminding ourselves of its limitation. We are bound to be—except in the laughter of the lady—self-conscious, but we should carry it as lightly as possible. To be mocked by her in love is a divine experience; perhaps that was why the deepening smile of Beatrice is one of the loveliest properties of heaven.

The two points to which Dante chooses to direct attention are the eyes and the mouth. These the soul mostly adorns; there she bestows most of her subtlety; there she shows herself 'as on a balcony'—'per bella similitudine', adds Dante rather pleasantly, 'to use a beautiful simile.' From the first balcony, that of the eyes, her passions show—goodwill, jealousy, compassion, envy, love, and shame. She can, it is true, keep them from showing, but only by the exertion of great power. We may conclude that some part of that becoming other which is a duty for Dante and for all is precisely the exercise of that power when it is desirable; and this adds another relevance to the sewing-up of the eyes of the envious spirits in the *Purgatorio*; until they can control the appearances in those balconies, the balconies themselves are not to be opened.

On the mouth Dante himself had better be quoted. 'The soul demonstrates herself in the mouth, as colour does under glass. And what is laughter but a coruscation of that delight of the soul, as a light appearing without according as it exists within? And therefore it is becoming to a man to let his soul show in a tempered joy, laughing in moderation, and with frank restraint, and only with slight movement of the face; so that the lady (the soul) who there shows herself should seem modest and not uncontrolled . . . O marvellous smile of my lady, of whom I speak, which is only communicated through the eyes!'[1] (III, viii).

[1] 'che mai non si sentia se non dell' occhio'—which means, I am told, 'is not felt itself if it were not through the eye.' This might mean

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This paragraph, short as it is, is one of those that knots all. Its four meanings are bound up with it here before they are carried on into the *Paradiso*. First, it is a description of the gay and glorious young creature laughing in Florence, the mirth of whose delight scintillated in her mouth and eyes; we may allow ourselves the belief that the young Beatrice smiles so much in heaven partly at least because she had smiled so much on earth. Into this single sweet and silent laughter the joyous happiness of all lovers seems to move, and all that has been said about it in high verse; so that the earth is full of it. Secondly, it is a description of that kind of joy which accompanies the intellectual formulation of philosophy: 'dimostrare'—almost 'demonstrates herself' in figures of geometry. This demonstration is the half-concealed smile of the divine science, theology, which like the empyrean holds all peace of knowledge, and only shows herself to us in such satisfying scintillations of mouth and eyes as gleam in the syllogisms of the great Scholastics, or what other method other philosophers use. Thirdly, there is the moral meaning, which is here that of a courtly reticence of largesse. Laugh with a charming dissemblance of laughter; give all, but give princelily; and let the great laws of control exhibit themselves immingled with what they control. Fourthly, it is the soul taking a joy in her being, and rendered in her own modesty into the magnificence of the Creator, scintillating courtesy back to our most courteous Lord, so that laughter is a proper off-springing from a largesse of spirit. These are the meanings, but they are all included in each, for there is only one paragraph, and in whichever direction that paragraph is turned the three other implications lie within it. This unity of (here) quadruplicity gives to the experience of the thought a particular quality; it arouses a sensation much like the sensation of some poetry, especially of Dante's poetry. For when we talk of Dante setting the experience of beatitude in intellectual knowledge, we have to remember that it was the intellect of poetry; that is, that it had a much greater emotional sensitiveness about it than thought for us usually has. In the fourth treatise Dante spoke of philosophy becoming 'enamoured of

the lady's eyes or the lover's eyes, and does probably mean both. It either way expresses the extreme joy which dances in eyes and mouth, too full and rich for sound.

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V

THE NOBLE LIFE

With the fourth treatise of the *Convivio* there enters into the work of Dante a new element—the element of the mass. This, as was said before, already exists in allusion—the other girls, the other poets, the gentlemen of standing, the philosophers, Beatrice's father, Dante's best friend, and other even more casual groups, pilgrims and rich men. They have been a background to the protagonists. There has been also a suggestion of the intellectual mass, the weight of past thought; indeed, one description of the *Vita* and the *Convivio* might be precisely the bringing into relation of the single girl and the communion of intelligences, pre-Christian and Christian, who formed for Dante an orthodoxy of the brain. She had been the occasion by which Dante had discovered this orthodoxy; the spirit who at the beginning of the *Vita* had cried out 'Now your beatitude has appeared!' meant it of his own intellectual concern as well as of Dante's whole being, of that part as of the whole. But this new mass is something different.

The appearance of this mass is in most of the great poets, though it is managed differently. In Shakespeare it is there from the beginning; it might indeed be argued that it is the only thing that is there from the beginning, and that the individuals are gradually evoked from it. In Wordsworth it is also there throughout—the mass of mankind against the mass of nature, and Wordsworth their junction. In Patmore it appears equally with the individual, lightly in the *Angel* and the *Victories*, weightily in the *Odes*. In Keats it is hardly there at all. In Virgil it is always already a city; the alteration from one form of it to another, from Troy to Rome, is his subject. Shakespeare and Wordsworth manage their synthesis of its existence by the introduction of a kind of natural *pietas*, against which Othello, Lear, and Macbeth rebel, and which the French Revolution attempts and fails to establish. In Dante the poetic effort is more philosophical, though both natural *pietas* and a revolution (at least, a desired revolu-

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tion) come in; he moves from the intellectual mass to the actual mass.

Wordsworth wrote

> My soul diffused herself in wide embrace
> Of institutions and the forms of things;

the second line is noble, but perhaps the word 'diffused' unduly weakens the first. Dante's method was the opposite of diffusion; he so concentrated the idea that he personified it, and that not only by an abstract name, however effective. The personification comes later, at the beginning of the *Commedia*; there, between the disappearance of Beatrice and the re-appearance of Beatrice, the City appears in the form of a man. It lives as a man; it lives as Virgil. Virgil, like all the rest, has at least four significances; he is Virgil, and poetry, and philosophy, and the Institution or the City. 'Tu se' lo mio maestro e il mio autore' (*Inf.* I, 85); this is true in all the meanings. An Institution is the nurse of souls. It would have been every way impossible for Virgil to enter the *Paradiso*; he and the other, the redeemed, City must have collided poetically.

We have heard a great deal of courtesy—'la sua ineffabile cortesia'—and are to hear more. At the beginning of the *Vita* it is this quality which Dante marks in Beatrice, and at the beginning of the *Commedia* it is the same quality which Beatrice is caused to remark in Virgil, at the moment when she herself is on a most courteous errand, the salvation of her lover. She salutes him with the same adjective, adding—perhaps by an undeliberate collocation—the name of a city: 'O anima cortese Mantovana' (*Inf.* II, 58), 'O courteous Mantuan soul.' The juxtaposition serves as a reminder that courtesy is one of the chief virtues of the City. Beatrice and the other Lady—but from now on we may say Beatrice alone, since Dante chose it so, and since it is a principle of the whole Way of Affirmation—are always full of courtesy, and it was once communicated to Dante by a miracle. Virgil is courteous, and so is our Lord. This doctrine of largesse ranges from the girl's body to the mystery of the Trinity. But how, having for a moment known it, ourselves to continue courteous? how to bring all men to courtesy? This is the problem of the making of the City.

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The third canzone opens with a new note. Something disdainful and fierce has appeared in the lady, and has put a stop, as such moments will, to his accustomed habit of speech. He must give up his 'dulcet rhymes of love' and 'lo mio suave stile', his persuasive style. Instead of this, he will use a different sound, harsh and subtle, 'aspra a sottile', to tell of the 'valore' by which men are truly 'gentle'. This will refute the false and vile judgement which supposes that 'gentilezza' is based on the principle of 'ricchezza', that high spirit depends on wealth—wealth meaning, no doubt, chiefly money, but having a side fling at every kind of false possession, even of mental qualities. He invokes that Lord who so dwells in the eyes of the lady that she is enamoured of herself—'s' innamora'.

This is all, no doubt, chiefly philosophical, but a good deal of Beatrice has got in. The undeserved snub, the remote gaze, even the inimical chatter at the party, still—we must not say rankled, but they still exhibited another aspect of Beatrice. She was more like Imogen than Ophelia; she was 'a fair warrior', and less submissive than Desdemona, whom Othello rather flattered by calling her so. The lady whom Dante admired was a lady worthy of Dante in her highness as well as her softness. When, in the second canzone, he had said that her beauty 'rained down little flames of fire', he was speaking of her character and behaviour as well as of her appearance. When she returns in the judgement of the *Purgatorio* she is not different; the young girl in Florence had not then caught the later grand style, but the *principium* had been there. Her silence, in that moment of the snub, said the same thing—'Yes, look: this is I; I am Beatrice.' It is a reminder of, and a summons to, an almost irrational fidelity, a fidelity only recorded in 'a loftier understanding', for they were bound by no vows and held by no institution. Yet her demand was to be justified—by the spectacle at the opening of the *Commedia* when, in the moment of his need, she immediately precipitated herself to his help. 'No-one', she says, 'for any gain or any escape ever moved so quickly' (*Inf.* II, 109–10) as she to be of use to 'l' amico mio', to my friend. It is this great fidelity of Beatrice, it is because even in universal heaven she can still say 'my friend', which justifies through the whole work her unstressed acceptance of the whole adoration. We need not think

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that she had no duty; Dante imagined that she kept and fulfilled her duty, and it is at her passionate summons that Virgil, that the poetry and prophecy of Virgil, deign to move and speak. Virgil brings Dante to her, but she has deliberately as well as undeliberately sent Virgil to Dante.

It is in answer to this disdain that Dante's masculinity is heightened; the thing that moves in his mind is 'valore'—worth, value, valour. Her beauty springs fierce before him and he answers by declaring the particular virtue of a man. In the allegorical sense, something similar happens. Philosophy is not expressing itself in such attractive and dulcet demonstrations, but is now, as it were, imperious and almost arrogant. His reason is committed to a state which is in truth 'onesto' (IV, ix)—say, noble, but it appears to him disdainful and fierce. There are indeed moments in studying, say, the *Summa* when, if we could attribute feminine characteristics to that admirable work (it is not our habit? no, but it was Dante's), we should certainly describe it as disdainful and fierce; it is very high-sprung and awful, and to get on with it we must summon up all our intellectual 'valore'. And so with the other allegorical meanings. It is in this moment of pause that we can recognize what 'valore' is; another word for it, and the one he now uses is *nobility*, and nobility is later defined as 'perfezione di propria natura in ciascuna cosa', 'the perfection in each thing of its proper nature' (IV, xvi). 'A man speaks of a noble stone, a noble plant, a noble horse, a noble falcon, whenever it appears perfect after its own nature.' This certainly is Philosophy loving herself, when her high threats produce a philosophical demonstration of the nobility of man's nature; it has sometimes been held that, in a different kind, the disdain of a woman is not always displeased to provoke a serious augustitude—the perfection of his nature—in her lover.

Before however he enters on that discussion, Dante is deflected by having made an allusion in the canzone to the Emperor Rudolph of Suabia. The Emperor, when asked to define nobility, had said that it lay in 'ancient wealth and gracious manners', and some of his courtiers had gone further by omitting the second clause. Dante is thus led into a discussion of the imperial authority, and so of authority as a whole. He defines it as 'that act to which

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between authorities of which he wished to be aware, but one authority ('to which trust and obedience are due') operating in different manners. Our habit is to think of 'authorities' and always regard them as potentially in conflict, but with Dante it was not so. The unity of a poem which directed itself into various meanings, the unity of the humility of Beatrice which had many courtesies, the unity of the doctrine of largesse which is in many operations, are all similar to the unity of authority.

It is not to the point to follow Dante through the long discussion by which he proves that neither riches nor high descent are the cause of true nobility; we must take it up again when he returns to his affirmations. In the 16th chapter of the treatise he says we must think of nobility as 'the perfection of man's nature', and defines this by its fruits. What then are those fruits? They are, according to Aristotle, eleven; they are:

(1) Courage—which controls rashness and timidity.
(2) Temperance—which controls indulgence and abstinence.
(3) Liberality—which controls giving and receiving.
(4) Magnificence—which incurs and limits great expense.
(5) Magnanimity—which moderates and acquires honour and reputation.
(6) Love of honour—which moderates and orders us as regards this world's honours.
(7) Mansuetude—which moderates our anger and our overmuch patience with external evils.
(8) Affability—which makes us 'con-vivial' or companionable with others.
(9) Truthfulness—which prevents us in our talk from pretending to be more or less than we are.
(10) Pleasantness (eutrapelia)—which sets us free to make a proper and easy use of amusement ('sollazia'—solace).
(11) Justice—which constrains us to love and practise directness in all things.

These are the eleven virtues of largesse; these are the powers which are provoked into action by the girl's challenge, because they are the 'valore' of a man. It is indeed these which Beatrice, consciously or unconsciously, encourages, and in which she takes delight. They have a particular beauty when considered precisely

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virtues, for it comprehends them all. He goes on: 'Certainly it is a heaven in which many different stars shine; in it shine the intellectual and moral virtues; in it shine all good dispositions instilled by nature—as piety and religion, and also those emotions mostly of praise—as shame and compassion and many others; in it shine the bodily excellencies—as beauty, strength, and (as far as may be) continuous health. The stars that are spread in this heaven are so many that it is no wonder if many different fruits thrive upon human nobility, so many are their natures and influences, gathered and unified in one simple substance.' These are the stars which shine afterwards in the *Commedia*—the hints and gleams of perfection, showing in separate virtue from the deep nobility of creation. But here on earth this nobility is not imparted to every man and woman, for some (by defects of nature or the time) are not so disposed that its light can shine in them directly, though it may do so indirectly and by reflection. So that, from all these considerations, we come to a second definition of Nobility (IV, xx), which is 'lo seme di felicità messo da Dio nell' anima ben posta', which is what the canzone had sung on which all this is a commentary—'the seed of felicity sent by God into a well-disposed soul.' This seed springs in the light of Beatrice and is nourished by philosophy; the imperial power protects its growth, and its final fruition is in God.

This nobility, this seed of blessedness, is communicated to a man or woman at the time of his generation. It is therefore in a particular sense related to Beatrice. She who had been the image of Love to Dante and the mother of Love in his soul is (do things so determine) to be the mother of children to whom, by her husband, the seed of felicity is communicated. This high occasion may be the opportunity for very much: 'there are some', says Dante, 'who think that if all the aforesaid powers (animal, intellectual and divine) should agree together to produce a soul when they were best fitted for the task, so much of the Deity would descend into the soul that it would almost be another God incarnate' (IV, xxi)—'un altro Iddio incarnato.' This sentence again is a union of the vision of Beatrice-in-perfection and of the knowledge of philosophy-in-perfection. The actual Incarnation itself shows for a moment, arch-natural and not alien from our commonalty, a thing (as it were) all but seen happening, a marvel

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the full time possible to his nature, he would at the same age have transmuted his mortal body to an eternal'. Not choosing to do this, he seems to have left us, as it were, ourselves to redeem Age and Decrepitude, in which the apocryphal stories suggest that his mother was the first worker.

There remains to pass under view the several virtues naturally predominant at the different stages of this noble life. In the first, which is Adolescence, there are obedience, suavity (or, let us say, a sweet courtesy), shamefastness, and 'adornezza corporale', physical beauty. This life, at its opening, must be obedient to its father and teachers; it must speak and act sweetly and courteously, 'dolce e cortesemente' (IV, xxv). This is the perfection of the small Beatrice, together with the kind of modesty proper to that age; that is, a capacity for admiration—'stupor'—before all great and wonderful things. This kind of awe, this proper romanticism, is a part of nature's contribution to a noble life; we ought then to be capable of practising wonder and reverence, and to push those virtues further—to desire to be wise in them; so that such stupor is the proper beginning of wisdom. I do not know that Wordsworth put it differently when he wrote:

> Fair seedtime had my soul, and I grew up
> Nurtured alike by beauty and by fear.

This particular shy adoration is accompanied by that other modesty which is 'a shrinking of the mind from foul things, and by that shame which arouses penitence for faults committed'. This excellency of spirit is accompanied by an excellency of body; the noble life is physical in its beauties—health, alertness, comeliness. This Aristotle declared and this Beatrice was; the 'stupor' she caused was the beginning of wisdom.

But neither the noble life nor romanticism can stop with adolescence. The Way of Affirmation, in all its opening aspects, possesses the qualities defined in that earliest stage. It has them even in its literary sense; it is obedient to all proper high tradition, but not to any false images of it—that is why it is so often in apparent revolt; it must have a 'stupor' before greatness and a repugnance to foulness—but it is a spiritual foulness which it mostly hates; it has all proper adornment and alertness of its vehicle. It is not always those who have trodden one Way of

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DANTE IS UNEQUALLED among poets for his extraordinary intensity of thought and experience, but this very power can make his work seem difficult to approach. Charles Williams's *The Figure of Beatrice* is outstanding in Dante scholarship and criticism for its sympathetic enthusiasm and clarity: without simplifying the achievement, Williams gives a highly personal yet approachable introduction to Dante's work.

The first part of the book traces the way in which the central image of Beatrice, representing transcendent beauty in feminine form, animates Dante's earlier works; the second part richly expounds *The Divine Comedy*, meditating on its significance in Dantesque terms. Williams foreshadows the valuable modern emphasis on Dante as philosopher-poet, and he touches on many later concerns in Dante criticism, including ambiguities of language, the inherent self-contradiction of all powerful discourse, problems of authority and necessity, and the place of the feminine. *The Figure of Beatrice* is also a moving and poetic work in its own right.

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