By the same author

★

THE MIND OF THE MAKER

CREED OR CHAOS?

THE LOST TOOLS OF LEARNING

DOROTHY L. SAYERS

Introductory Papers on DANTE

with a preface by

BARBARA REYNOLDS

Lecturer in Italian in the University of Cambridge

Poiche di riguardar pasciuto fui,
tutto m'offersi pronto al suo servigio,
con l'affermar che fa credere altrui.
Purg. xxvi. 103–105.

Wipf & Stock
PUBLISHERS
Eugene, Oregon

Wipf and Stock Publishers
199 W 8th Ave, Suite 3
Eugene, OR 97401

Introductory Papers on Dante
By Sayers, Dorothy L.
Copyright©1954 The Estate of Anthony Fleming
c/o Watkins Loomis Agency acting in association with
David Higham Associates
ISBN: 1-59752-491-3
Publication date 1/1/2006
Previously published by Methuen & Co., 1954

Reprinted by permission of the Estate of Dorothy L. Sayers
and the Watkins/Loomis Agency.

Errata

Dorothy L. Sayers, *Introductory Papers on Dante*

p. 1, para 2, last words, lines 5 and 6: "so" and "of" should be transposed
p. 6, footnote, line 1: "on" should read "in"
p. 16, lines 1, 5: "Diomede" should read "Diomed"
p. 17, line 10 from end: "COGNOSCER" should read "CONOSCER"
p.34, lines 12-13 from end: "*gaietta pella*" should read "*gaetta pelle*"
p.37, Italian quotation: "*perpetualemente*" should read "*perpetuamente*"
p.40, 10 lines from end: transpose "mother" and "father"
p.53, footnote: insert superscript "1"
p. 54, line 7: "*Seraphin*" should read "*Serafin*"
p. 56, footnote: insert superscript "4"
p. 77, footnote: "*for*" should read "*from*"
p. 82, first Italian quotation: "*si*" should read "*sì*"
p. 89, line 4: "*voluntà*" should read "*volontà*"
p. 91, Italian quotation, line 5: "*moi*" should read "*noi*"
p. 94, line 9: "bird's" should read "birds'"
p.105, 3 lines from end: "quattrocento" should read "trecento"
p.114, 9 lines from end: "redintegration" should read "reintegration"
p. 157, lines 5 – 6: "*si*" should read "*sì*"; "*fiòco*" should read "*fioco*"
p. 163, Italian quotation, line 1: "*guarder*" should read "*gaurder*"
p. 164, line 15: omit comma after "*se*"
p. 168, line 9: "*basso voglio*" should read "*bassa voglia*"
p. 169, Italian quotation, line 3: "*ti*" should read "*tu*"
p. 171, Italian quotation, line 4: "*si*" should read "*sì*"
p. 172, Latin quotation, first word: "*ecee*" should read "*ecce*"
p. 186, 3 lines from end: "*piu*" should read "più"
p.200, line 14: "Vedeva" should read "Vede"
p. 201, line 3: "*finefur*" should read "*fine fuor*"
p. 201, 2 lines from end: "*silogizzò*" should read "*sillogizzò*"
p. 202, 7 lines from end, Italian quotation: should read "*che 'l gran comento feo*"
p. 202, footnote: note "44" should read "144"

THE MEANING OF HEAVEN AND HELL

IF the reader will take his Bible, either in the Latin Vulgate which Dante knew, or in the English Authorised Version, and turn to the ninth chapter of St. Mark, the 43rd and following verses, he will find this passage:

> Jesus said: If thy hand offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than having two hands to go into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched;
>
> Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched.
>
> And if thy foot offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter halt into life, than having two feet to be cast into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched;
>
> Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched.
>
> And if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out; it is better for thee to enter into the kingdom of God with one eye, than having two eyes to be cast into hell fire;
>
> Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched.

In some Greek codices and in the English Revised Version, the passage is shortened by the omission of some of the solemn repetitions, but without alteration of the significance.

I have begun with this quotation because there seems to be a kind of conspiracy, especially among middle-aged writers of vaguely liberal tendency, to forget, or to conceal, where the doctrine of Hell comes from. One finds frequent references to "the cruel and abominable *mediaeval* doctrine of hell", or "the childish and grotesque *mediaeval* imagery of physical fire and worms". People who write about Dante are often concerned to sneer at him, or alternatively to pity him, for being compelled by "the crude superstition of his age" to believe in these things under menace of excommunication and torture: or else they eagerly assure us that he was too clever really to have believed in them, and was actually a Gnostic heretic or a nineteenth-century liberal, engaged in debunking the Roman Catholic Church in an elaborate satirical cryptogram.

But the case is quite otherwise; let us face the facts. The doctrine of Hell is not "mediaeval": it is Christ's. It is not a device of "mediaeval priestcraft" for frightening people into giving money to the Church:

it is Christ's deliberate judgment on sin. The imagery of the undying worm and the unquenchable fire derives, not from "mediaeval superstition", but originally from the Prophet Isaiah, and it was Christ who emphatically used it. If we are Christians, very well; we dare not *not* take the doctrine of Hell seriously, for we have it from Him whom we acknowledge as God and Truth incarnate. If we say that Christ was a great and good man, and that, ignoring His divine claims, we should yet stick to His teaching—very well; *that* is what Christ taught. It confronts us in the oldest and least "edited" of the Gospels: it is explicit in many of the most familiar parables and implicit in many more: it bulks far larger in the teaching than one realises, until one reads the Evangelists through instead of merely picking out the most comfortable texts: one cannot get rid of it without tearing the New Testament to tatters. We cannot repudiate Hell without altogether repudiating Christ.

And, that being so, it is evident that we cannot reasonably blame Dante, or the Church in his age, or any Christian in any age, for believing with desperate seriousness what Christ so unequivocally said. It is quite fatal to come to the study of the *Divine Comedy* with our minds irrevocably set in a frivolous, or superior, or righteously indignant attitude to the very idea of hell; it will throw all our critical judgment out of focus. If we are ever to make head or tail of the greatest of Christian poems, we must at least be ready to understand what is meant by damnation, and why every believing Christian recognises it as a terrible possibility for and within himself, and why it matters to our comprehension of God and Heaven and Man.

From one point of view it is unfortunate that the *Inferno* is the first of the three books of the *Comedy*. It is right for the story, and it is artistically right; the passage from the Dark Wood of Sin in which we are so catastrophically caught must lead through the knowledge of Hell before it can emerge to ascend the Mount of Purgatory to the knowledge of Beatitude: and to descend from the ecstasy of the *Paradiso* to the squalors of the *Inferno* would be, from an artistic point of view, intolerable. But the order of the books means that the reader—especially the modern reader, with his often very inadequate theology and his inherited tradition of vague and kindly humanism—encounters on the very threshold of his enterprise, this huge block of what, to him, is obsolete, repulsive, irreconcilable with the religion of love, and meaningless. He is therefore apt, in self-defence, to dismiss the whole thing from his serious consideration, and either fall back on

5

enjoying "the poetry" without bothering about the meaning: or, which is far worse, write Dante down as a spiteful politician or a vindictive sadist, and pass on to something else—not, as a rule, to the *Purgatory* and *Paradise*. And that is a pity; because although, experientially, the order Hell, Purgatory, Paradise is correct, yet, intellectually, the understanding of Heaven is the key to the understanding of Hell. As a matter of fact, in Dante's own case, Heaven preceded Hell in his experience also. The *Vita Nuova* is the approach and ante-chamber to the *Divine Comedy*. As a child, and as a young man in love, he had glimpsed the vision of eternity: he had "looked upon the hope of the blessed". Later, he fell away and stumbled into the Dark Wood; the *Comedy* is the story of his return home, and the final vision is infinitely greater than that early, half-comprehended glimpse. But experience differs with different people and different generations. It may even be that for some of the younger people in the Europe of to-day, the theology of Hell will seem more acceptable than the theology of Heaven. We have seen in our time the abyss of wickedness yawn open at our feet: school-children have witnessed things which to our Victorian forbears would have seemed quite unthinkable, though they would scarcely have surprised Dante. However that may be, the *intellectual* understanding of the Three Kingdoms must begin with Heaven: and if I have preluded this paper with a brief consideration of Hell, it is only by way of a promise, or a warning, that I intend to take the question of damnation quite seriously, as Dante takes it and as all Christians must if they take Christ seriously.

What I shall try to set down here, as simply and briefly as may be, is the meaning of Heaven and Hell as Catholic Christians understand it, and I shall try to show how that meaning is displayed in Dante's imagery. The great danger always is that, unless we know the doctrine, we may mistake the imagery for the thing imaged. And here again we shall be greatly hampered if we imagine that educated people in the Middle Ages were childish and credulous. It was an age in which a great many people were illiterate, and when nobody knew as much as the twentieth-century person about the physical sciences. But the culture of a fourteenth-century city like Florence was extremely high, and the things that educated people did know, they knew very well indeed, and theology was one of those things. I have before now tried to explain Dante's conception of Heaven and Hell in simple terms to the kind of modern person who is brought up on smatterings of knowledge in popular digests, and have been told that "my ideas were very

sophisticated". The fourteenth century *does* seem sophisticated to the twentieth when it is talking on its own subject. We have forgotten so much of our theology since Dante's time.

Our explanation must begin with Heaven, because Heaven—or rather God in Heaven—is the only unconditioned reality. All other reality is derived from God, being either immediately created by Him, or engendered or evolved or manufactured by the mediation of His creatures, interacting among themselves. If we ask *why* God created a universe of beings, we have to acknowledge that

> *sì nasconde*
> *lo suo primo perchè, che non gli è guado.*[1]

Nevertheless, knowing by revelation that God is all-goodness and all-love, the Christian may meditate upon the matter: and the best conclusions of Catholic thought have never been more nobly summed up than in the passage in the 29th canto of the *Paradiso*:

> *Non per aver a sè di bene acquisto,*
> *ch' esser non può, ma perchè suo splendore*
> *potesse, risplendendo, dir:* Subsisto,
> *In sua eternità di tempo fuore,*
> *fuor d'ogni altro comprender, come i piacque,*
> *s'aperse in nuovi amor l'eterno amore.*[2]

The reason, Dante says, was *generosity*. God—as Plato had written in the *Timaeus*, which Dante had read—is not jealous; He wanted, and wants, to share His reality. He did not want to gain anything for Himself: that is impossible; for all things come from Him, and He could no more *add* anything to Himself by making a universe than a poet can add anything to *him*self by writing a poem. But He desired that there should be others, derived from Himself but distinguishable from Him, and with a dependent but genuine reality of their own, having each a true selfhood, which should reflect back to Him the joy and beauty and goodness that they received from Him. The image

[1] [His] primal *Why*
Lies so deep hid, no wit can wade so far.
Purg. viii. 69.

[2] Not that He might acquire any gain for Himself, for that cannot be; but in order that His splendour [i.e. the reflection of His glory from His creation] might, shining back to Him, declare "*I am*", therefore in His eternity, beyond all time, beyond all limitation, according to His good pleasure, the Eternal Love unfolded Himself into new loves.
Para. xxix. 13–18.

here, as throughout the *Paradiso*, is the familiar one of light; God is the light: the derived radiance of the creature is the *splendore*, the splendour. The right end of every creature is to shine back to God with that splendour, and to be able to say, thus shining (*risplendendo*); "*I am—subsisto*".

That is a key-passage to Dante's thought, and, indeed, to Catholic thought. Notice how entirely different it is from the Gnostic and Neo-Platonic thought which characterises the great Oriental religions and so often tries to infiltrate into Christianity. For the Gnostic, creation is evil, and the outflowing of the One into the Many is a disaster: the true end of the Many is to lose the derived self and be reabsorbed into the One. But for the Christian, it is not so. The derived self is the glory of the creature and the multiplicity and otherness of the universe is its joy. The true end of the creature is that it should reflect, each in its own way and to its capacity great or small, some tiny facet of the infinite variety comprised within the unity of the One. The Christian Heaven is a populous place. "Behold," says Beatrice.

mira
quanto è il convento delle bianche stole!
Vedi nostra città, quanto ella gira! [1]

The higher the created being is, and the nearer to God, the more utterly it is itself and the more it differs from its fellow-creatures. The lowest and least of created things—the prime matter—is formless and homogeneous: and inorganic matter has very little individuality. Plants have much more; animals are real individuals; and a human being is more than that: he is a person. When we come to the angels, or "intelligences" in Dante's phrase, they are thought of as possessing such super-personalities that the Schoolmen refused to think of them as being merely so many members of a species; they said that every angel was a separate species all to himself. This may seem to us rather a quaint if not absurd way of putting it: but the intention is clear; an angel is so triumphantly and perfectly himself that one of these blessed beings differs from another not as one man from another but as one *class* of terrestrial beings from another. Remembering the four beasts of the Apocalypse, we may even say that they differ as a man from an

[1] admire
How great the company of the robes of white,
Behold our city, how wide it spreads its gyres.
Para. xxx. 128–130.

ox, or an eagle from a lion. However curious this scholastic language may appear, we may at any rate find it a useful corrective to the impression we are apt to carry away from the pictures of many mediaeval and modern artists, which show row upon row of angels, all with the same wings feather for feather, the same white nightgown, the same hair-do, and the same expressionless face. All images are inadequate: but we may use one image to correct the other. An imagery of sameness may properly represent the unity in bliss; another kind of image may as properly present the inexhaustible variety of super-human personality and differentiated power.

With the ultimate destiny of the sub-rational creation, Western thought in the Middle Ages did not much concern itself, neither need we. Dante is clear, however, that the *splendore* shines back from every part of creation, though not equally from all:

La gloria di colui che tutto muove
per l'universo penetra, e risplende
in una parte più, e meno altrove.[1]

The splendour is in some parts less—partly because the "form" stamped on the "matter" is sometimes imperfect, owing to the limitations which attend all finite and created being; partly—and this is the great principle of hierarchy which runs all through mediaeval thought—because, even where all things are made perfect according to their capacity, their capacities differ. This is the conclusion to which Beatrice is leading up through the celebrated passage in *Paradiso* ii about the dark patches in the Moon:

Virtù diversa fa diversa lega
col prezioso corpo ch'ell'avviva—[2]

"diverse power makes diverse alloy with the precious body which it quickens". The *splendore* of, let us say, a beetle is less than that of an angel, even though beetle and angel may each be perfect after its own nature: it is their natures that differ. With this general conclusion we may readily agree; though we may rebel at some of its further consequences. We must bear it in mind, because it is important.

Leaving the lower creation, we come to the destiny of rational beings

[1] The glory of Him that moves all things soe'er
Impenetrates the universe, and bright
The splendour burns, more here and lesser there.
Para. i. 1–3.

[2] *Para.* ii. 139–140.

—that is, of men and angels. The angels are pure intelligences, and Heaven is their native abode. Men are beings of mixed nature, compounded of matter and spirit: Heaven is the abode in which they, too, but at the end of a shorter or longer time-process, will find the home prepared for them, and then at last their true selfhood will be fully realised.

What, then, is "Heaven"? Here, for the moment, let us resolutely dismiss all imagery—even Dante's images of light and music and ecstatic dance: even the rainbow and the wheels and the fire of Ezekiel and the Apocalypse: still more the Rubens-like Miltonic picture of angelic armies and celestial banquets: and most decidedly of all any caricature that may linger in our minds of "sitting on a damp cloud with a halo and harp". Let us dismiss all the geocentric mechanism of revolving spheres and distinct physical heavens—Dante himself will have none of them except by way of analogy. There is, he says emphatically by the mouth of Beatrice, only one true Heaven, and that is the Empyrean:

Ivi è perfetta, matura ed intera
ciascuna disianza; in quella sola
è ogni parte là dove sempr'era,
perchè non è in loco e non s'impola—[1]

"there every desire is perfect, ripe and whole: in that alone is every part there where it always was; for it is not in space and has no poles". It is not limited by time or space, or conditioned by motion or direction (*non s'impola*); in that eternal whole, all parts are present together (notice that multiplicity is again affirmed) and in that eternal instant all times are present together (*è . . . là dove sempr'era*). It is, in the words of Boethius, "the perfect and simultaneous possession of everlasting life". In what, then, does it consist, the everlasting life to possess which is Heaven? In the definition of the Schoolmen: "Heaven is the seeing of God in His essence." That is the Beatific Vision, the true goal of every desire: that is the realisation in which the true self of all spiritual beings is made real: behind all the tumultuous images of poet and musician and painter there lies that little, dry, abstract phrase. The images exist only to bring the significance of that phrase home to us.

I must now try to explain very shortly what the Schoolmen meant by this important phrase, and I will begin by borrowing a definition from P. H. Wicksteed's *From Vita Nuova to Paradiso*[2]—an admirable

[1] *Para.* xxii. 64–67.

[2] Manchester University Press, 1922.

little book, of the greatest possible assistance towards getting an intellectual grasp of the *Commedia*. "To know a thing in its essence meant so to understand its inmost being as to see how all its manifestations and effects necessarily flow from it because they are involved in it." Dante elsewhere explains that this is the way in which we understand a logical process, as for example, a series of geometrical propositions, all necessarily flowing out of, because virtually contained in, the fundamental axioms.

Now it is evident that very few things are known to us in this way. Apart from abstractions of the kind just mentioned, most things—the Aristotelians would have said all things—are known to us, not in their essence, but by their effects. Exterior objects make an impression upon our senses, and we deduce knowledge about their properties and behaviour. The minds of other people are made known to us by the actions we see and the words we hear, which we interpret largely by analogy with our own mental processes. There is, of course, the phenomenon called "mind-reading", but it is rare and partial. Of our own minds we have, indeed, direct and intuitive consciousness "from the inside": though even here I think we should have to admit that we do not even know them and their workings as intimately as perhaps we once supposed we did—the psychologists have given us glimpses of unplumbed abysses within ourselves, and we find it hard to tell where our thoughts and emotions come from, or how they interact one with another. When it comes to the mind of some alien species—even of our favourite cat or dog, we have to admit ourselves baffled. We try to interpret their behaviour: we argue about whether they can distinguish colours, and how far they are capable of reasoning: and we very often transfer to them the kind of feelings we have ourselves. But what it really feels like to be a cat: how the world really looks to a dog: and above all, what the values of the animal creation are; these are enigmas, and the more earnestly we gaze into those strange furry faces—so familiar, so uninhibited and open, and yet so curiously secretive, the more we are aware of their remoteness and otherness. Only God, who made all things, knows them and us and all His myriad creatures from the inside—knows them *in their essence* and as they are, and knows how their effects develop out of their essence, with the same intimacy and certainty with which we follow an abstract logical process.

We have imagined trying to enter into the consciousness of a creature more limited than ourselves; let us now imagine it the other way. Let us imagine ourselves able to read the mind of someone much

greater than we are—let us say of Dante himself. Instead of wrestling with the text of his poem and trying to work out what it meant, through a mist of our own preconceptions, prejudices, ignorances, and the inevitable misunderstandings which result when two minds of very different temper and capacity are trying to communicate by means of signs and words, we should watch the making of poetry from within, and have immediate insight into the mind itself. We should see the images pouring in through all the gates of sense and memory, linking and weaving and setting to partners in the intricate associative dance and streaming out again, transformed, into the great poetic images: we should know the *Commedia*, that is, in its essence and not merely by its effects. That would not, of course, make us as great as Dante; his would still be the originating mind, and our wonder and admiration could only deepen by seeing it at work. Neither should we be able to understand any more of its working than our own minds were capable of receiving; but what we did understand, we should know directly and intuitively instead of by the indirect process of reasoning upon the data presented to us by the senses. To take a very simple and inadequate analogy. As things are, we stand outside another mind like children looking at the dial of a clock; we see the hands move round and we can tell the time by their movement: but the mechanism is concealed and we can only guess at what makes them move. In the other case, it is as though we saw the clock from within, and directly watched the motion of the pendulum and weights and wheels; but how much we understood of their action would depend on whether we were mechanically-minded children or not.

In Heaven, we see that the knowledge which the blessed souls have of one another is of this intimate, intuitive and essential kind. That is why Dante never needs to formulate a question, for Beatrice and the souls whom he meets in the various spheres enter into his mind and read the question there. Sometimes they wait for him to ask—not because they need to, but for the sheer pleasure of hearing him speak (rather as, in the case I supposed, we should enjoy watching Dante actually make his poem and put it into words). Thus Cacciaguida, filled with delight at seeing the inheritor of his blood, says to Dante;

Tu credi che a me tuo pensier mei
da quel ch'è primo, così come raia
dall' un, se si conosce, il cinque e il sei—[1]

[1] *Para.* xv. 55–57.

"Thou thinkest that thy thought makes its way to me from the primal Thought itself, just as, when rightly known, the pentad and hexad are seen to ray forth from the monad" (i.e. as we said before, with the inevitability of a logical geometrical process): "*tu credi il vero*". Nevertheless, he goes on, in order that the sacred love which fills him with longing may be the better fulfilled,

la voce tua sicura, balda e lieta
suoni la volontà, suoni il disio,
a che la mia risposta è già decreta.[1]

The blessed creatures know one another and delight in one another, as they know and delight in Dante and all things:—

As in a fish-pool, still and clear, the fishes draw towards anything that is dropped in from without and seems as though it might be food, so I saw thousand and more splendours draw towards us, and from each was heard: "Lo, one who shall increase our loves—*Ecco chi crescerà li nostri amori*[2]"

All that is within their capacity they know and love perfectly: all that is beyond and above their capacity they know and love to the fulness of their capacity. In his joy at beholding Dante, the splendour that is Folco of Marseilles blazes out "like a fine ruby smitten by the sun"; for light up there is what a smile is here:

per letiziar lassù folgor s'acquista,
sì come riso qui—[3]

and Dante, entering into the spirit of the place, says to him with a mock-reproach that is almost playful:

"*Dio vede tutto, e tuo veder s'inluia—*"[4]

Why then does thy voice not satisfy my longing? I should not have waited for thee to ask

"*s'io m' intuassi, come tu t'immii.*"[5]

In all these exchanges, the manner in which the spirits see and know is not left doubtful. Their minds behold all things mirrored in the primal Thought: they read by the light which rays out for ever from the

[1] "let thy voice, assured and confident and glad, speak forth thy will, speak forth thy desire, to which my answer is decreed already". *Para.* xv. 67–69.

[2] *Para.* v. 100–106.
[3] *Para.* ix. 70–71.
[4] *Para.* ix. 73.
[5] *Para.* ix. 81.

eterna fonte, the eternal fountain of light to which, in our last glimpse of Beatrice, we see her turn her adoring eyes. "If I could in-thee myself as thou dost in-me thyself," says Dante, courageously coining new words for the unknown: but he begins by saying: "God sees all things, and thy sight *in-Hims itself—s'inluia*"—thy seeing sinks into God—it is "ingodded"; Beatrice uses that very word of the Seraphim who circle closest to God and know and love Him best: "*dei Seraphin colui che più* s'india".[1] Is it then possible for the knowledge of a creature to span the measureless distance between the made and the Maker, between the finite and the Infinite? Yes—for otherwise that desire and love for the highest possible good which (as Dante tells us over and over again) is the main-spring of all human and angelic action, would remain without fulfilment, and Heaven would not be perfect. How can this be? I will quote Wicksteed again, because he explains it so well:

> To human or angelic nature it is, in itself, impossible to be or to become deiform ["ingodded", in Dante's phrase], but to God all things are possible; and by impressing His very self, essentially, upon the created spirit He can so transfuse it with the "light of glory" (*lumen gloriae*) that "in that light it can see the light". For when assimilated to the essential being of God it can, up to the measure of the initial capacity divinely bestowed, see God as He sees Himself.[2]

That, we may remember, is what St. Paul says: "Then shall I know, even as I am known."

Wicksteed adds a reminder:

> "Up to its measure"—For the infinite must remain in infinite excess of the finite. But the assimilation within that measure may be perfect and may constitute, to that spirit, the absolute fulfilment of its longing for perfect vision and for perfect blessedness. . . . [It will be] the direct vision of perfect power, wisdom, love; of perfect goodness, truth, beauty; not as abstractions or ideals of our minds, but as the very Being of God, who is Being's self.[3]

In other words, what the blissful know is Reality, the ultimate reality of every good thing that they have imagined, filling them through and through with itself—and inexhaustible. I suppose that everybody as a child (as well as some adult people who ought to have put away childish things) has wondered what one would find to do in an eternity of bliss. Dante—and it is perhaps his greatest achievement—is able to

[1] that one of the Seraphim who is the most in-godded.
Para. iv. 28.

[2] *Op. cit.*, p. 27.

[3] *Ibid.*

convince us that this kind of thinking makes no sense. Eternity is not an unmeaning stretch of endless time: it is all times and all places known perfectly in one deathless and ecstatic present

> *O abbondante grazia, ond' io presunsi*
> *ficcar lo viso per la luce eterna*
> *tanto che la veduta vi consunsi!*
>
> *Nel suo profondo vidi che s'interna,*
> *legato con amore in un volume,*
> *ciò che per l'universo si squaderna;*
>
> *sustanzia ed accidenti, e lor costume,*
> *quasi conflati insieme per tal modo*
> *che ciò ch'io dico è un semplice lume.*[1]

"I think I saw it," he says, "the universal form of this complex, because, more largely, even as I say this, I feel that I rejoice."[2] That which for a blinding moment he knew in its essence, he now knows, human-fashion, only in its effects. But he did see that.

From that gaze upon the universe he passes to the Vision of God Himself. This he cannot even attempt to describe, except in that image of the three consubstantial circles or spheres, the rainbow and the fire, and the in-manning of God beheld there as the pledge and means of the ingodding of man. It is the same vision that Ezekiel had, prophetically looking upon Christ before ever Christ was incarnate, seeing the Son of Man exalted between the cherubims:

> Upon the likeness of the throne was the likeness of the appearance of a man . . . and I saw as the colour of amber, as the appearance of fire round about within it . . . and it had brightness round about. As the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud in the day of rain, so was the appearance of the

[1] O grace abounding, whereby I presumed
So deep the eternal light to search and sound
That my whole vision was therein consumed!

In that abyss I saw how love held bound
Into one volume all the leaves whose flight
Is scattered through the universe around;

How substance, accident, and mode unite,
Fused so to speak together, in such wise
That this I tell of is one simple light.
Para. xxxiii. 82–90.

[2] *Para.* xxxiii. 91–93.

brightness round about. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord.[1]

But Dante is not yet in Heaven. The power passes. Yet he has looked upon the reality of God, and already, as a wheel is moved equally about its centre, "desire and will are wheeled by love": the love in whose power the Intelligences "by understanding" move the spheres of Heaven, enters into him and makes Him its own. Long ago, in a dream, Love—the Lord of terrible aspect whom he had first encountered in the God-bearing image of Beatrice—had said to him "I am the centre of the circle, to whom all parts of the circle are similarly related: but with thee it is not so." [2] Dante had not then understood this; now he does. Now all parts of his circumference move equally about that central Love of which his first love was the image and the promise. The first love is not denied by the last love; all forms are taken up and integrated into that. So, in the early vision and in the final vision, the image of the circling wheel recurs.

This, then, is Heaven

Luce intellettual piena d'amore,
amor di vero ben pien di letizia,
letizia che trascende ogni dolzore.[3]

The soul, knowing God as He is, knows itself in God as God knows it and as it really is. It knows at last what it was made for, and plunges rapturously into the infinite understanding and love and joy in which every partial end that it had fumblingly proposed to itself—every "loose end", as one might say, of its being—is knit up into the *forma universal di questo nodo.*[4] It was made for this: to mirror the splendour and, shining back, to declare *I am*. Nor, however deeply it in-Gods itself, can it ever come to the end of the knowledge and the love and the joy, for God is infinite and new every day, and His riches unsearchable, and though every created thing brims over with its joy, He still has more.

It is not necessary to go into the details of Dante's Ten Heavens. The important thing is to grasp the central idea of what is *meant* by

[1] *Ezek.* i. 26–28.
[2] *Vita Nuova*, xii.
[3] Pure intellectual light filled full with love,
Love of the true good filled with all delight,
Transcending-sweet delight, all sweets above.
Para. xxx. 40–42.
[4] *Para.* xxxiii. 91.

the concept of Heaven itself, understood absolutely. There are perhaps two or three points about this concept that we need to emphasise, because they conflict so sharply with our contemporary ideas about what is good and desirable.

First of all, we cannot but be sharply struck by the fact that two of our favourite catch-words have absolutely no meaning in Heaven: there is no *equality* and there is no *progress*. Perhaps I should modify that a little: there is equality in the sense that all the souls alike are as full of bliss as they are capable of being: but between soul and soul there is no formal equality at all. The pint-pot and the quart-pot are *equally full*: but there is no pretence that a pint and a quart are the same thing; neither does the pint-pot ever dream of saying to the quart-pot, "I'm as good as you are"—still less of saying "It isn't fair that you should hold more than I." The old sin of Envy, which unleashed the She-Wolf of Avarice from Hell, is utterly extinguished in Heaven. And there is no progress at all in the sense of "bettering one's self" or "getting even with other people". Dante, in the lowest Heaven, the Heaven of the Moon, specially asks Piccarda about this:

Ma dimmi; voi che siete qui felici,
desiderate voi più alto loco,
per più vedere, o per più farvi amici?[1]

"Do you long to go higher, to gain more knowledge or win for yourselves more love?" She laughs, and all the blessed laugh with her. And she replies in the famous lines:

Frate, la nostra volontà quieta
virtu di carità, che far volerne
sol quel ch'avemo, e d'altro non ci asseta.[2]

"Brother, our desires are stilled by love. We want only what we have. To want more would be discordant with the will of Him who disposes us here, and in these circles there is no room for that, for here our being is in charity and cannot be otherwise (*è necesse*). So that our being thus, from threshold unto threshold, is a joy to all the realm as to the

[1] "But tell me, you who here have your happiness, do you desire a higher place, to see more or to win more love?"
Para. iii. 64–66.

[2] "Brother, our will is stilled by the power of charity, which makes us wish only for that we have, nor do we thirst for anything beyond."
Para. iii. 70–72.

king, who draws our wills to what He wills; *e la sua voluntade è nostra pace*—and His will is our peace."

When he says that, Dante means what he says. Envy and ambition (under the names of equality and progress) are so native to us to-day, that we find this rather difficult to accept. George Santayana, for example, has been betrayed at this point into a most lamentable piece of dishonest criticism. He says:

> For Piccarda to say that she accepts the will of God means not that she shares it, but that she submits to it. She would fain go higher, for her moral nature demands it, as Dante—incorrigible Platonist—perfectly perceived; but she dare not mention it, for she knows that God, whose thoughts are not her thoughts, has forbidden it. The inconstant sphere of the moon does not afford her a perfect happiness; but, chastened as she is, she says it brings her happiness enough; all that a broken and a contrite heart has the courage to hope for.[1]

There can seldom have been a more flagrant instance of reading into a poet's lines something that the critic would have said in his place and cannot forgive him for not saying. "Our being thus is a joy to the whole realm—*a tutto il regno piace*". "We love, for love is the necessity of our being."

At this point there is an interesting difference between Dante's conception and that of the Moslem writer Ibn Arabi. It has been argued that Dante's Three Kingdoms owe a good deal of their imagery to Moslem writings about the after-life, which may have reached him either directly, or through the work of the Averroïsts. Ibn Arabi says of Heaven:

> Each knows his allotted grade and seeks it as a child seeks its mother's breast, and iron, the lodestone. To occupy or even aspire to a higher grade is impossible. In the grade in which he is placed each sees the realisation of his highest hopes. He loves his own grade passionately and *cannot conceive that a higher could exist. If it were not so, heaven would not be heaven but a mansion of grief and bitter disillusion.* Nevertheless, those in the superior participate in the enjoyment of the lower grades.[2]

In Ibn Arabi's Heaven, envy is excluded, apparently, only by ignorance and lack of imagination. But in Dante's Christian Heaven, it is excluded by love. The lower know that the higher exist, and "it is a joy to the

[1] *Three Philosophic Poets.* (Harvard University, 1910), p. 127.

[2] Miguel Asin: *Islam and the Divine Comedy* (John Murray, 1926), p. 159. (Italics mine.)

whole realm": they look up the ranks of the great ones soaring above them, and are filled with rapture and love. They envy them no more than you or I envy Dante or Shakespeare for being great and glorious. Why should they envy, or why should we? We are thrilled with delight to know that beings so noble can exist. One might even say that a principle of equality works here: that the lowest ranks have a special bliss of their own in having so many—so extra many—splendours and joys to look up to.

We may find this very difficult of acceptance: nevertheless we must take it seriously, and bear in mind that for Dante and his contemporaries, this heavenly pattern is also the ideal pattern of earthly order. Nothing in it condones injustice; but justice is not having as much as the next man but having what one deserves. Felicity likewise is not abundance of possessions but perfect congruity with one's function; and that is why Dante is severe upon those who "thrust into the convent him that is born to wear the sword, and make a king of him that should be a councillor"[1]. Had Satan not introduced disorder into the universe, all creation would follow the pattern of the angelic orders, who are "wheeled by love" about that point "on which Heaven and all Nature hangs".

> *Cosi veloci seguono i suoi vimi,*
> *per simigliarsi al punto quanto ponno,*
> *e posson quanto a veder son sublimi . . .*
>
> *e del vedere è misura mercede*
> *che grazia partorisce e buona voglia,*
> *cosi di grado in grado si procede. . . .*
>
> *Questi ordini di su tutti rimirano,*
> *e di giù vincon sì che verso Dio*
> *tutti tirati sono e tutti tirano.*[2]

All look upon God in the measure of the knowledge and love which they have by the grace given to them and their own good will; all are

[1] *Para.* viii. 145.

[2] Thus swiftly do their withies [i.e. their circling bands] follow one another, that they may assimilate themselves to the point as closely as they can, and they *can* in measure as they are exalted to perceive. . . . And the measure of their perceiving is the merit begotten of grace and good-will, and so from rank to rank it goes proceeding. . . . These orders all direct their gaze upward, and below exert their winning power, in such fashion that all are drawn and all draw up to God.

Para. xxviii. 100–103, 112–114, 127–129.

drawn up with the cords of love by those above them, and themselves draw those below them. The Heavens draw Man; and Man was made "lord of creation" that he might draw up the whole material creation. What Man in his fallen nature cannot do of himself, Christ does in man, until the resurrection of the "holy and glorious flesh" and the "reconciliation of all things" to God in Christ, in a new Heaven and a new earth.

A second point that many people find difficult about Dante's Heaven is that although the blessed remain very closely and intimately concerned with the affairs of earth, and are indeed continually denouncing the sins of mankind, they remain untroubled in their ecstasy. Some critics are disconcerted by this intrusion of earthly matters into the courts of Heaven—Miss Rebecca West complains that the blessed seem to be "worried" all the time by these things; but "worried" is exactly what they are not, and to other critics this in itself is an offence. All Heaven blushes for the sins of him who sits in Peter's seat: yet immediately after, the aether is adorned with the triumph of the ascending flames; upon the great denunciations pronounced in Heaven after Heaven, the song and dance follow swiftly. Not even the knowledge that Hell co-exists with Heaven can make the least wound in the eternal joy of the saints: Beatrice leaves Dante with the prophecy that the divine vengeance will overtake Pope Clement "and thrust him of Alagna down lower", and returns unmoved to her seat amid the petals of the mystic Rose; and we are reminded of that earlier word that she had said to Virgil: "My nature by God's grace is made such that your calamities cannot touch me nor the fire of this burning assail me." [1]

What are we to make of this contradiction, in appearance so harsh, between the anger and the joy, the deep concern and the imperturbable indifference? We must first of all remember the action of the two streams of Lethe and Eunoë, of which all souls drink in the Earthly Paradise on their way to Heaven. Lethe destroys all memory of guilt and shame and sin: Eunoë restores the memory of the sin as a historical *fact*, but the accompanying unhappiness remains forgotten—the sin is remembered only as the glad occasion of God's gracious mercy and forgiveness. As Cunizza explains to Dante, "*lietamente a me medesma indulgo la cagion di mia sorte*" [2]—the blessed "joyously forgive themselves"—a thing, as we all know, extremely difficult in this life, because

[1] *Inf.* ii. 91–93.
[2] "joyously I forgive myself the occasion of my lot". *Para.* ix. 34–35.

pride gets in the way. For instance—that dreadfully silly and unkind thing you said to poor Miss Smith when you were quite a child. Even after all these years, it makes you turn hot and writhe on your pillow if you remember it suddenly in the middle of the night; and the fact that Miss Smith was so decent about it makes you feel all the worse. But in Heaven, when you have purged off the sin, you will remember the wretched little episode only as a *fact*: you will be free for ever from the ugly shame that is the protest of your pride against being humiliated in your own eyes; and seeing Miss Smith as God sees her, you will rejoice in her beautiful charity as though it had been something else, and not your unthinking cruelty, that called it forth.

In somewhat the same way, although the unity of Christ's mystical body is such that the blessed dead are deeply concerned with the living, whether to help, pity, pray for them, or to feel indignation at their sins, yet in Heaven the powers of anger and pity are experienced *pure*, and not bound up with a whole complex of confused personal feelings. When God and His Saints are angry, anger does not tear them to pieces, distort their judgment and poison their lives: they pity, but pity does not ravage them with helpless torments and put them at the mercy of the blackmailing egotism which thrives by exploiting and playing upon the feelings of the tender-hearted; in C. S. Lewis's admirable phrase: "The action of pity will live for ever, but the passion of pity will not." [1]

We cannot deal with this subject without touching upon that question of Free-will, which bulks so large in all Dante's thought, as in all discussions upon theology and ethics. Lest we should "find no end, in wandering mazes lost", I propose to skip all the standard arguments about the two freedoms and the validity of choice, and attack the problem from a slightly different angle.

Let us remind ourselves of the lines already quoted about the creation: that God created so that His splendour might, shining back to Him, declare: *I am*. Now, in one sense, all creatures can do this merely by existing: one day telleth another and one night certifieth another. But God has called into existence not only nights and days, and stones and oceans, but also plants and animals, which appear not only to exist but consciously to enjoy existing; and not only these, but

[1] C. S. Lewis: *The Great Divorce* (Geoffrey Bles, 1945), p. 111. (Cf. also *Purg.* xx. 94–96—*la vendetta che, nascosa, fa dolce l'ira tua nel tuo segreto*—
". . . the vengeance which makes sweet
Thy wrath, within the secret of Thy will".)

rational beings—men as we know, angels as we believe—who not only consciously enjoy existing but self-consciously know that they exist and enjoy. Their knowledge and their delight are enriched by their own free assent; they say "I am", and with the whole power of their selves they eagerly mean what they say.

Now the point is this: that this free assent of the creature must be his assent *to reality*. The facts of the situation are that he is a created being; that the end of his existence is to mirror God's glory to the utmost of his capacity; and that he can only enjoy or attain his true selfhood by letting his "desire and will" be wheeled about that centre of reality from which "Heaven and all nature hang". The fall of angels and men is, looked at from one point of view, a refusal of assent to this reality: or what the scientist would call "a lack of humility in the face of the facts". However this may be supposed to have come about, it is fairly obvious that if you make a creature capable of freely assenting, there is always a risk, so to call it—or at any rate a theoretical possibility—that he may refuse to assent, or assent with a bad grace. Assent cannot be forced and free at the same time: it is beyond the power even of omnipotence to produce two incompatible results at once—"the contradiction", as the logical demon very properly said to Guido da Montefeltro, "does not allow it". If we ask why God should have willed to make a free creature, we can only guess that the stature of such a creature is of such nobility, and its ecstatic love and obedience a thing so essentially glorious and so delightful to itself and to its Maker, that God thought it worth the risk to Himself and to the rest of creation. This is to speak in human terms; and we do not, of course, know: though in the Beatific Vision we shall know so far as we are capable of knowing.

But, taking the situation as the theology of creation gives it to us, we see that the mere existence of a "self" that can in a real sense know itself as "other than" God, offers the possibility for the self to imagine itself independent of God, and instead of wheeling its will and desire about Him, to try and find its true end in itself and to revolve about that. This is the fall into illusion, which is Hell. The creature denies, or rebels against, its creaturely status, and at once plunges itself into a situation which is bound to be full of frustration and misery, because it is at variance with the facts.

Scripture does not tell us very much about the fall of Satan and his angels, but the Church has always held that it was due to pride. The good angels, as Dante explains, "were modest to acknowledge them-

selves derived from that same Goodness which made them swift to so great understanding: wherefore their vision was exalted with grace illuminating and with their merit, so that they have their will full and established".[1] No more than any other creature can an angel be "in-godded" except by an act of divine grace; their "merit" is "to receive the grace by laying the affections open to it". This the rebellious angels would not do: they rejected their derivation, and so fell in the very act of being called into being—"before one could count twenty" as Dante picturesquely puts it.[2] They fell, that is, immediately and for ever; for angels, being pure intelligences and made in the mode of instantaneousness, do not change or develop or progress: they are what they are wholly and immutably, and move, as it were, all of a piece. All that was required of them was to receive their beatitude lovingly, willingly, and realistically, as a free gift of God: but they wanted to be "as God", and so they fell.

The fall of Man, we know a little more about from Scripture. It happens rather differently, because man is not a pure intelligence, but partly material, and it is his nature to develop in time and space and grow gradually into the life of Heaven. Therefore his knowledge cannot be purely intellectual, but has to be gained by experience. He is created good, in a good world; but Satan suggests to him that there is a different way of knowing reality—it can be known not only as good, but also as evil. God, says Satan, knows it both ways; if Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit, they also will know like God. Satan, however, carefully omits to point out that God can "know" evil purely as an intellectual possibility, without experiencing it or calling it into existence; but that Man, if he is to know it at all, must know it, as he knows everything else, by experience. Adam and Eve, intoxicated by the idea of being "as gods", disregard all warnings and eat; they have their desire, and know evil.

We need not now examine the Adam-and-Eve myth with the intention of arguing about how far it is pure parable and how far it may represent something that historically happened when a fully self-conscious self first made its appearance on the scene of creation. We may in passing note three things: first, that the fashionable habit of calling the prohibition of the Fruit of Knowledge an "arbitrary taboo" is a quite unjustifiable travesty of the Bible story. There, God is represented as saying to Adam and Eve: "Do not eat: if you do, it will kill you"—and I do not know what else one could reasonably say

[1] *Para.* xxix. 58–63. [2] *Para.* xxix. 49.

to anybody when begging him to refrain from taking strychnine or prussic acid. The second thing is a consideration that naturally would not occur to Dante, with his limited knowledge of the cosmos, but is bound to occur to us; namely, that if there are, in the universe, other rational material beings besides Man, there is no need to suppose that they have fallen into the same error. Thirdly: since Man is, of his nature, a being susceptible of development, it is possible in his case for God (with man's own assent and cooperation) to undo the consequences of the Fall—or rather, not to undo, but to redeem them. This, however, belongs to Atonement Theology, and is not part of our present subject.

What we have now to consider is this: What is the meaning of this illusion of Hell? this knowing of good as evil? It may sound paradoxical; but it is actually something very familiar to us.

If we refuse assent to reality: if we rebel against the nature of things and choose to think that what we at the moment want is the centre of the universe to which everything else ought to accommodate itself, the first effect on us will be that the whole universe will seem to be filled with an implacable and inexplicable hostility. We shall begin to feel that everything has a down on us, and that, being so badly treated, we have a just grievance against things in general. That is the knowledge of good as evil and the fall into illusion. If we cherish and fondle that grievance, and would rather wallow in it and vent our irritation in spite and malice than humbly admit we are in the wrong and try to amend our behaviour so as to get back to reality, that is, while it lasts, the deliberate choice, and a foretaste of the experience, of Hell.

Let us take one or two very simple instances:

When a child falls over a chair, its instant reaction will very likely be to say, "Naughty chair", and belabour it soundly with whatever first comes to hand. That is apt to strike the grown-up Adam, who knows more than the child about the nature of inanimate matter, as funny: but if Adam is sensible he will take the stick away and not encourage the child to expect the material universe to accommodate itself to his wishes.

The grown-up Adam, having laughed at the child, may then go to Piccadilly Tube Station with the intention of taking a train to Stanmore. With his mind fixed on the Test Match or the sins of the Government, he may neglect to consult the indicator which is saying plainly that the train now at the platform is going to Watford, and when, having passed Baker Street in a fond illusion, he looks up at the next station and finds that it is not St. John's Wood, but Marylebone, he will mutter savagely that he has got into "the wrong train". Neither will it for a moment occur to him that what he is saying is as absurd as what the child said. But what is wrong with the train? In the eyes of God and London Passenger Transport, it is a perfectly good train, proceeding on its lawful occasions to the destination appointed for it by a superior power. To be sure, it has got a wrong passenger, who has nobody to blame but himself. But the determination to see the good as evil and the right train as a wrong 'un has entrenched itself in the very core of Adam's language: and it is well for his soul if he confines himself to that merely conventional method of transferring his own errors to the universe, and does not angrily add that "all these damned trains seem to go to Watford".

Let us now take something that cuts deeper. We may perhaps have the misfortune to know a person who is unreasonably jealous. He exacts of his wife, his friends, his animals, an exclusive devotion to himself which only God would be justified in demanding—and indeed his demanding is part of his illusion that he is "as God". As a matter of fact, God is by far the less exacting of the two. God demands of us an entire devotion, but He permits—indeed, He desires—that that devotion should overflow in love upon all our fellow-creatures—*tutti tirati sono, e tutti tirano*.[1] But this is what the jealous man will not have. No expressions of affection can content him, no sacrifice will satisfy him: he wants to possess the object of his jealousy body and soul; and even if he did he would not be content. For he misinterprets everything and is determined to do so, and so sees all good as evil. If his wife likes having other friends and interests, he accuses her of being unfaithful and not finding him enough to satisfy her; if she shuts herself up and waits on him hand and foot, he complains that she is ostentatively making a martyr of herself for the express purpose of putting him in the wrong, and he darkly suspects that she is wishing him dead, so that she can have a good time. If she is cheerful in company, he asks why she keeps all her gaiety for other people; if she is silent, then she is only trying to win sympathy for being so badly treated at home. I need not go on—whether it is husband or wife, parent, or friend, the jealous person makes his own and other people's lives a misery. He will, of course, have moments of remorse, when he says that he is a miserable and accursed wretch and not fit to live, and so forth; but that he is made that way and cannot help it. And it is very usual for

[1] *Para.* xxviii. 129.

people to agree that in fact he *cannot* help it, and that his unfortunate behaviour is due to his having contracted an inferiority complex in childhood, through being an only child, or a younger child, or what not. Very often there is truth in the explanation. But only too often there is apparent in his very remorse a gloomy self-satisfaction. He is proud of his unfortunate disposition, which, he feels, confers on him a kind of distinction. He really thinks that this savage passion of his is a superior brand of love, which shows him to be much more highly-strung and sensitive than other people. He is not genuinely sorry; he only enjoys making a scene. If his remorse were a real conviction of sin he would go to a psychiatrist—or fall on his knees, which is cheaper and, as some of us think, more effective—and get himself put back into touch with reality.

Now, the tendency to this kind of illusion—to the knowing of good as evil—is what is known as Original Sin: and it is plain enough that we are in fact all born with it, however we come to be so. (This, by the way, is what the Church means by being "born in sin"—it does *not* mean that sex is sinful or that there is anything wrong in itself about being born into a material world.) The harbouring of evil passions and the doing of evil acts as a result of surrendering to this illusion is Actual Sin: and the effects of sin are very real evils, which proliferate in a world where all men are sinners and all the victims of their own and each other's sins. God's way of dealing with sin will be considered in our paper on the meaning of Purgatory. For the moment we must confine our attention to Hell.

It is the deliberate choosing to remain in illusion and to see God and the universe as hostile to one's ego that is of the very essence of Hell. The dreadful moods when we hug our hatred and misery and are too proud to let them go are foretastes in time of what Hell eternally is. So long as we are in time and space, we can still, by God's grace and our own wills assenting, repent of Hell and come out of it. But if we carry that determination and that choice through the gates of death into the state in which there is, literally, no time, what then? Death, which was the bitter penalty attached to man's knowledge of evil, is also man's privilege and opportunity. He is not allowed just to slip away easily, body and soul, into eternity, as the early Fathers imagined he might have done if he had never lost his innocence. In knowing evil, Man had to know death as a crisis—the sharp sundering of mortal and immortal—and in that crisis he sees his choice between reality and illusion. As it passes out of the flesh the soul sees God and sees its own

sin. This crisis and confrontation are technically known as the Particular Judgment. If, in the very moment of that crisis, the true self is still alive, however feebly: if, deep down beneath all perversities of self-will, the absolute will is still set towards God's reality, and the soul can find it in itself, even at that last moment, to accept judgment—to fling away the whole miserable illusion and throw itself upon truth, then it is safe.[1] It will have to do in Purgatory, with incredible toil and without the assistance of the body, the training which it should have done on earth: but in the end it will get to where it truly wants to be. There is no power in this world or the next that can keep a soul from God if God is what it really desires.

But if, seeing God, the soul rejects Him in hatred and horror, then there is nothing more that God can do for it. God, who has toiled to win it for Himself, and borne for its sake to know death, and suffer the shame of sin, and set His feet in Hell, will nevertheless, if it insists, give it what it desires. The people who think that if God were truly nice and kind He would let us have everything we fancy, are really demanding that He should give us freehold of Hell. And if that is our deliberate and final choice, if with our whole selves we are determined to have nothing but self, He will, in the end, say, "Take it." He cannot, against our own will, force us into Heaven, in the spirit of "I've brought you out to enjoy yourself and you gotter enjoy yourself". Heaven would then be a greater agony than Hell—or rather, Hell *is* Heaven as seen by those who reject it: just as the agonies of the jealous *are* love, seen through the distorting illusion. We might adapt the definition of Boethius and say: "Hell is the perfect and simultaneous possession of one's own will for ever."

"Justice moved my high Creator: Divine Power, Supreme Wisdom, Primal Love made me." That is the inscription over Hell-Gate. Power, Wisdom and Love make Hell by merely existing. The self-centred soul, seeing the eternal Reality, sees it as cruel, meaningless and hateful, because it wills to see it so. We need not really be surprised at this: we are only too well accustomed to these distorted views. When we demand justice, it is always justice on our behalf against other people. Nobody, I imagine, would ever ask for justice to be done *upon* him for every thing he ever did wrong. We do not want justice—we want revenge: and that is why, when justice is done upon us, we cry out that God is vindictive. Neither is it very certain that we

[1] *Cf.* in the *Purgatorio* the stories of Manfred (iii. 118–135) and Buonconte (v. 94–108).

shall welcome mercy or charity. La Rochefoucault, in a bitter and memorable maxim, pointed out how hard it is to forgive those whom we have injured. We avoid them, because the very sight of them is an offence to our vanity: and often, the meeker they are, the more savage we feel. The damned cannot bear to stand in the light of God's innocence and "look upon Him whom they pierced". What they want is the old familiar sin. They are like confirmed drunkards; their sin makes them miserable, but they cannot live without it. They press to pass the river,

chè la divina giustizia li sprona
sì che la tema si volge in disio—[1]

"Divine justice so goads them that their fear is changed into desire". God puts nobody in Hell: the damned may wail and weep and curse their parents and the day they were born, blaming everything and everybody but themselves: nevertheless they go, like Judas, "to their own place", because it is the only place where they can bear to be.

Hell, in a manner, is Heaven in reverse; it is Reality seen as evil and seen so far more perfectly than it can ever be in this world. At the bottom of Hell is the Miserific Vision, as the Beatific Vision is at the height of Heaven: and as the Beatific Vision is the knowing of God in His Essence, so Hell is the knowing of Sin in its essence. Dante speaks indifferently of the torments, the pains, the penalties, or the punishments of Hell; and this language often prompts people to suppose that the torments are punishments arbitrarily inflicted, as a man might beat a boy for stealing sweets. But the intimate analogy between the sin and the penalty shows that the suffering of Hell is punishment only in the sense that a stomach-ache, and not a beating, is "punishment" for greed. What has gone is the glamour; gluttony loses its accompaniments of the bright lights and holiday atmosphere, and is known *in its essence* as a cold wallowing in dirt, a helpless prey to ravenous appetites. Covetousness and squandering are no longer dignified by names like "the economy of thrift and the economy of conspicuous waste"—they are known as a meaningless squabble about a huge weight of nonsense; usury and sodomy—however we may like in this world to segregate them in the very different spheres of high finance and high aesthetics—are lumped together on the same scorched earth—sterility left to

[1] *Inf.* iii. 125–126.

scratch in its own dust-bowl. The platform rhetoric, the propaganda, the sloppy romanticism, the endless stream of words, words, words dishonestly used to debase language and extinguish right judgment—it all pours down to the ditch of the Second Bolgia where the flatterers wallow in their own excreted filth. The schism that divides the Body of Christ, the sedition that splits the State, the malice that breaks up homes for the pleasure of making mischief, are experienced in the self: "See how Mahomet is mangled!" The hidden graft which rots community life beneath the surface, only from time to time throwing up a black and oily bubble to burst in a public scandal, still works like a diabolic leaven beneath the "wondrous dark" crust of the boiling pitch; and as the devils thrust the barrator down with their prongs, they cry to him:

"Coperto convien che qui balli,
sì che, se puoi, nascosamente accaffi!" [1]

"Behold our City!" says Beatrice, "how wide it spreads its gyres! How great the company of the white robes!" The Città Dolente, too, is a populous place, "co' gravi cittadin, col grande stuolo",[2] but its gyres narrow as they go deeper. Nor, in that great city, is there any citizenship. "We are all citizens of one true city," says Sapìa to Dante on the road up Purgatory:[3] and in Heaven, the blessed, though they may appear to Dante in separate spheres, all have the same home in the Empyrean, where the angels flit between their ranks like bees visiting a bed of flowers. But in Hell, it is each for himself: there is no communication between one circle and another: even the demons are so bound that they may not pass their appointed limits.[4] No soul helps another, or pities another. Occasionally, when sin has been shared, as with the Lustful, or the Avaricious, or (more horribly) with Ugolino and Ruggieri, there is a kind of common grievance against fate. More often, especially in the deeps of Nether Hell, there is only an eagerness to accuse, a snarling vindictiveness of spite. "My beast of a wife is the cause of my torment"; "I wait till Carlin come to make

[1] "Go cut thy capers, try down there to do
Subsurface deals and secret money-grabbing!"
Inf. xxi. 53–54.

[2] With its sad citizens, its great company
Inf. viii. 69.

[3] *Purg.* xiii. 94–95.

[4] *Inf.* xxiii. 55–57.

excuse for me"; "Could I but see Guido or Alexander here, I would not miss that sight for all the waters of Branda"; and the spite is extended to Dante too: "That you of all people should see me here!" cries Vanni Fucci, and goes on: "So that you may not enjoy the thought of it I'll tell you something you won't like, and I hope it breaks your heart." [1] Even at his tenderest, Dante deals ruthlessly with this egotism; listen to Francesca: "If the King of the Universe were our friend"—one begins to think it is all God's fault; "Love took hold of us"—well, Love (as Dante had once said) is an abstraction, an accident in a substance; are we to put the blame on an abstraction? "My beautiful body was torn from me, I had no time to repent——" and then, like the lash of a whip, the sudden savage snarl: "Cain's place awaits our murderer!" The soft voice resumes: "You are so kind—I will tell you how it was; we were reading that lovely story —we thought no harm—something came over Paolo and he kissed me—the book was a pander and he that wrote it!" [2] God, Love, Gianciotto, the novelist, were to blame, not we; we were the helpless prey of our own and other people's passions, and now we drift on the black wind.

So piteous are the accents here, and so moving the sheer poetry that it might deceive the very elect. Many, indeed, have been deceived into swallowing Francesca's version of things, hook, line and sinker, and transferring to Dante the resentment they feel on her behalf against God, love, vindictive husbands, "suggestive" literature and all the rest of it. But, as in the case of Piccarda, we must believe that Dante means what he says, when he goes out of his way to write that meaning plain in the very structure of his verse. It is true that he does not comment: he merely shows. But he seldom makes a damned soul sympathetic without slipping in something which would show us—if we were not carried away by our admiration for picturesque sinners—just what it is we are admiring. Jason[3]—"is he not still right royal to behold?" Does he not scorn the whips? A magnificent Byronic figure. Quite so. He is the man who seduced a girl and left her "with child and abandoned". Farinata,[4] holding all hell in contempt—is he not splendid in his dark, unbending pride? There he stands, while old Cavalcanti lifts his head out of the burning tomb to put his pitiful question to Dante and then, thinking his son dead, sinks back into despair added to despair.

[1] *Inf.* xvi. 44–45; xxxii. 68–69; xxiv. 133, 148–151.
[2] *Inf.* v. 91 *sqq.*
[3] *Inf.* xviii. 83 *sqq.*
[4] *Inf.* x. 34 *sqq.*

Ma quell' altro magnanimo . . .
. . . non mutò aspetto,
nè mosse collo, nè piegò sua costa.[1]

That is the "magnanimity" of Hell—to remain totally unmoved by other people's misfortunes. There is no "action of pity" here—only a rigid seclusion in self. . . . What could be more touching than the tale of Pier delle Vigne? [2] Suspected by the Emperor he had served, traduced by evil tongues, he takes his own life. How can God condemn to Hell this poor man distracted by grief? But he himself proclaims that grief had nothing to do with it: it was hurt pride, *disdegnoso gusto*: he would rather be dead than humiliated, and for all eternity he has what he wills. At every turn we find the sinner still hugging the beloved sin and often expatiating upon his punishment with a gloomy relish which is only a continued expression of his egotism. Ciampolo [3] with his trickery and his delighted appreciation of other people's villainy—"Fra Gomita? a sink of corruption!—*barattier fu non picciol ma soprano*"; [4] Master Adam of Brescia and Sinon of Troy taunting each other with their crimes and comparing their diseases like a couple of drunks sneering at each other for not being able to carry their drink: [5] Bertrand de Born crying in what sounds like a blasphemous parody: "See if there be any horror like to mine!" [6]—a last hideous twist given to the ambition to be "as God".

It must be remembered about any poet who writes of Satan and Hell that he has a double task to perform: he must show sin as attractive and yet as damned. If sin were not attractive nobody would fall into it; and because pride is its very root, it will always present itself as an act of noble rebellion. It is only too easy, especially in an age when order and hierarchy are perverted or discredited, to persuade one's self that rebellion, *as such*, is magnanimous, that *all* control is tyranny, that the under-dog is in the right *because* he is vanquished, and that evil is to

[1] But that great-hearted (*magnanimo*) spirit . . .
. . . his countenance did not move,
Nor bent his neck, nor stirred his side at all.
Inf. x. 73–75.

[2] *Inf.* xiii. 58 *sqq.*

[3] *Inf.* xxii. 44 *sqq.*

[4] no pretty jobbery
for him—he was a sovereign barrator.
Inf. xxii. 86–87.

[5] *Inf.* xxx. 91 *sqq.*

[6] *Inf.* xxviii. 132.

be pitied the moment it ceases to be successful. But it is not true; "*qui vive la pietà quando è ben morta*".[1] The poet's business is to show both the brilliant façade of sin and the squalor hidden beneath it; his task is to persuade us to accept judgment. Purgation is what happens to the soul which, accepting judgment, moves out of illusion into reality, and this is the subject of the *Purgatorio*.

[1] Here pity, or here piety, must die
If the other lives:
Inf. xx. 28–29.

(1948)

THE MEANING OF PURGATORY

WE considered Heaven and Hell together because, although they are more totally opposed to one another than yes and no or black and white, yet they have certain aspects in common, as direct opposites always must have. Both are eternal states—"absolutely elsewhere" as regards our familiar time-space continuum. Both have that finality and absoluteness which our "climate of opinion" finds so uncongenial. Both can be experienced in this life, if at all, only in moods and moments which, while giving as it were a foretaste of the *quality* of beatitude or damnation, are other than, and discontinuous with, the pattern of daily life. Mystics intensely, and many other people less intensely, know these moments of vision which open a window upon a different mode of existence. There are the moments of the going out of the self —such, for instance, as St. Augustine and his mother experienced one evening shortly before her death. They had been talking of the sweetness of eternal life and how it must surpass all other sweetness, and they considered the marvel of God's works, "mounting step by step the ladder of the material order", until they

came to their own minds and passed beyond them into the region of unfailing plenty, where the life itself never comes to be, but is, as it was and shall be evermore, because in it is neither past nor future but present only, for it is eternal, for past and future are not eternal. And as we talked and yearned after it, we touched it for an instant with the whole force of our hearts. And we sighed, and left there impawned the first fruits of the spirit, and heard again the babble of our own tongues, wherein each word has a beginning and an ending.[1]

And there are the moments of the descent into the abyss of the self, such as Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote of in those sonnets which terribly explore the depths:

> O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall
> Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed. Hold them cheap
> May who ne'er hung there.[2]

[1] St. Augustine of Hippo: *Confessions*, Bk. ix (Bigg's translation).
[2] Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins (O.U.P., 2nd ed., 1935), p. 62.