

Dante Humaniste

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In the vocabulary of the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance the term 'humanist' literature refers only to profane, as opposed to sacred, writings. However, the greatness of the ancient authors appeared such that a certain confusion was created between profane and classical writings. Thus the idea arose of what was much later called humanism, and the feeling of a mission 'to revive dead things' (in the words of Machiavelli) gained ground. Today we like to give a wider meaning to the word humanism: to be a 'humanist' is to have faith in Man, to believe in his eminent dignity and in the potentialities of his genius. Such humanism is of all times, but it seems (and this is no mere

chance) that its golden age coincides with that of the renaissance of antiquity and that it has remained inextricably linked with classical culture—culture understood here in the two-fold sense of 'knowledge' and 'cult' of Graeco-Roman antiquity. The reason for this correspondence between certain ideas on the potentialities of Man and admiration for the ancients is founded not only on the fact that these latter were admirable because of their wisdom, their virtues and their arts, but also, and primarily, because in the eyes of the Christians (who had good cause to believe themselves their equals), these ancients, whether Latin or Greek, not having received the help of Revelation

and Redemption, had to accept on their own account the authority of moral law and to procure for themselves all the benefits of a truth envisaged only imperfectly. How could such triumph of Man, incomplete though it might have been, be arrived at? This was a crucial question, ever since the first centuries of Christianity, a question to which the Fathers of the Church, particularly the Greek Fathers, had found various answers. Some of them denied that the pagans had any knowledge whatever of Truth, others admitted that whatever they had learned or divined of Truth could be due merely to chance Hebraic influence or to the grace of partial revelation.

Profoundly Christian and at the same time a passionate admirer of Roman classicism, Dante found himself face to face with a problem he could not evade. The solutions he found for it in *Il Convivio*, in the *Monarchia*, and above all in the *Divine Comedy* are presented in Augustin Renaudet's excellent book with all the authority we have the right to expect from one of the best historians of the Renaissance, who has undoubtedly been most painstaking in his definition of humanism.

How was it possible that Virgil was chosen as guide through the worlds of the damned and the penitent? How did it come about that Cato, 'who knew nothing of the Hebraic revelation and in his person represents the highest level of virtue arrived at by the mere force of reason' (p. 501), was not only absolved of his suicide, but, while he was awaiting his final salvation, is raised to the dignified office of Guardian of Purgatory?

How is it possible that the virtuous pagans banned from Paradise are, nevertheless, gathered together in a relatively happy place and rewarded for their deserving deeds as far as the law of Christ permits it? How does it happen that the giants who rebelled against Jupiter are punished for their crime and thrown into the same abyss as the wicked angels? Why are the Roman conquests defended and regarded as the necessary forerunners of redemption? These are some of the points—there are many others—cleared up by the reading of *Dante humaniste*.

They are explained but not always to the reader's full satisfaction. While enumerating in detail what Dante knew about antiquity and what he thought of the pagan world, Renaudet reveals the limits of a culture and of a horizon. Certainly Dante should not be reproached for the fact that his humanism was almost exclusively Latin, nor that he knew Greek literature, history and mythology only through the mediums of Horace, Virgil, Ovid and Statius, and Greek philosophy for the better part through his knowledge of Cicero; nor should he be blamed because he understood and kept company only with the Aristotle of the Arab scholars. Nevertheless it is difficult to reject the suspicion that he knew too little, denied too much, of the Platonism which had been the prop of the early Christian philosophic systems, and tended rather to cherish the doctrines in fashion since the thirteenth century. We see in fact that in the 'palace of wisdom' Socrates and Plato occupy a high position though they are over-shadowed by Aristotle.

Reviews

The total neglect of Lycurgus in the list of great law-givers, Dante's partiality towards Rome as against her enemies, against Greece, against Florence, the Ghibelline favouring of the Empire as opposed to the Capetian monarchy, and a host of other prejudices, joined at times to hate and nourished by bitterness—all these compensating faults of genuine passion and an authoritarian genius tend to diminish the universality which the very word, humanism, calls up and lets us anticipate.

But, after all, is it important that this or that classical source, this or that aspect of the legend be ignored or misunderstood? What do prejudices and partialities matter since Dante has arrived by divination at what he does not know, and has breathed renewed life into legends which have been recaptured with their eternal verities intact?

In several instances (particularly in the chapter entitled *Les Mythes Heroïques*) Renaudet notes how the greatness of a man is left untouched even when he is damned. He says (p. 542), 'Ulysses—as well as Jason or Achilles—is one of those ancient heroes who preserve the majesty of their character in Dante's *Inferno*'. Ulysses, Achilles, Jason and others . . .

Jason, whose example we remember, is one of the crowd of wrong-doers and seducers eternally hunted by demons and suffering the degrading punishment of whipping. And yet Virgil points him out to Dante with respect, noting that he shall forever remain the undaunted sailor, the head of the Argonauts, the possessor and conqueror of the Golden Fleece.

Look on that great one who
advances now
And seems in all his pain no
tear to shed,
How regal still is the aspect
of his brow.¹

'The head of the expedition to Colchis,' thus comments Renaudet, 'united in his person genius and courage. He sinned only because of human weakness and human love. This love and this weakness have led him to lie and to betray, which he expiates. . . . But Dante recognises in him the nobility of a human soul which, from the very beginning of the world's existence, in spite of its fall from grace, in spite of its imperfect cognisance of divine realities, its false beliefs and superstitions and illusions, in spite of temptation and sin, carries within it an element of majesty: *celsa creatura in capacitate majestatis*.'²

Referring to the same episode in the *Inferno*, Josef Baruzi has written in a book unfortunately not published: 'In Dante there is always something which recoils in horror before the terrors which he describes. He never spares himself as he imagines punishments. There is always a latent rejection and a need for compensation. Even in the darkest moments there trembles in the depths of his soul a glimpse of other worlds.'

Without softening in the slightest

¹ *Inferno*, XVIII, 83–85 (Translation by Lawrence Binyon).

² The final citation "sublime creature, bearing in power its majesty", is taken from Saint Bernard, *In canticum canticorum*, sermo 80. Renaudet, p. 371.

degree the chastisement of one who abandoned first Hypsipyle, then Medea, the poet has placed before us the great stature of the Argonaut chieftain. Thus one of the great myths of humanity is formulated by recalling that two-fold destiny of the adventurer and the seducer, 'the eternal prisoner of his ever-rambling strength and of his victory'.

Even more than by the fact that he raised to Purgatory, even to Heaven, a Cato, a Trajan; that he spared the pagans the sufferings of Hell, Dante's

humanism shows itself in his reflections on the classic myth, in his illumination of its human content. Above all it is exemplified by the presence in every one of Hell's circles of those men, no matter what their origin or their time, whose greatness has withstood the two-fold degradation of sin and of punishment and still withstands it. In the deepest profundities of the abyss their avenging faces emerge bearing witness to a majesty that nothing can destroy, that of the image of God.