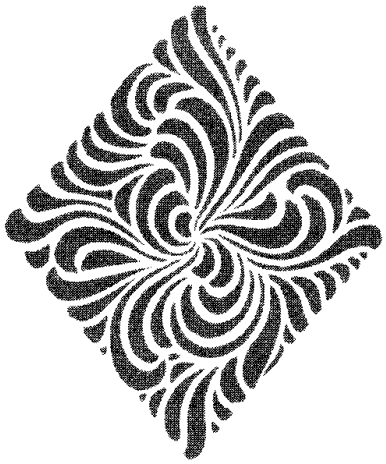
SELECTED NON-FICTIONS

Jorge Luis Borges



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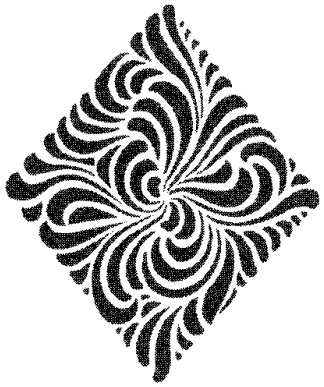
VIKING

V

Nine Dantesque Essays
1945-1951



Prologue

Imagine, in an Oriental library, a panel painted many centuries ago. It may be Arabic, and we are told that all the legends of *The Thousand and One Nights* are represented on its surface; it may be Chinese, and we learn that it illustrates a novel that has hundreds or thousands of characters. In the tumult of its forms, one shape—a tree like an inverted cone; a group of mosques, vermilion in color, against an iron wall—catches our attention, and from there we move on to others. The day declines, the light is wearing thin, and as we go deeper into the carved surface we understand that there is nothing on earth that is not there. What was, is, and shall be, the history of past and future, the things I have had and those I will have, all of it awaits us somewhere in this serene labyrinth. . . . I have fantasized a magical work, a panel that is also a microcosm: Dante's poem is that panel whose edges enclose the universe. Yet I believe that if we were able to read it in innocence (but that happiness is barred to us), its universality would not be the first thing we would notice, and still less its grandiose sublimity. We would, I believe, notice other, less overwhelming and far more delightful characteristics much sooner, perhaps first of all the one singled out by the British Danteans: the varied and felicitous invention of precise traits. In describing a man intertwined with a serpent, it is not enough for Dante to say that the man is being transformed into a serpent and the serpent into a man; he compares this mutual metamorphosis to a flame devouring a page, preceded by a reddish strip where whiteness dies but that is not yet black (*Inferno* XXV, 64). It is not enough for him to say that in the darkness of the seventh circle the damned must squint to see him; he compares them to men gazing at each other beneath a dim moon or to an old tailor threading a needle (*Inferno* XV, 19). It is not enough for him to say that the water in the depths of the universe has frozen; he adds that it looks like glass, not water (*Inferno* XXXII, 24). . . . Such comparisons were in Macaulay's mind

when he declared, in opposition to Cary, that Milton's "vague sublimity" and "magnificent generalities" moved him less than Dante's specifics. Later, Ruskin (*Modern Painters* IV, XIV) also condemned Milton's fog and uncertainty and approved of the strictly accurate topography by which Dante engineered his infernal plane. It is common knowledge that poets proceed by hyperbole: for Petrarch or for Góngora, every woman's hair is gold and all water is crystal. This crude, mechanical alphabet of symbols corrupts the rigor of words and appears to arise from the indifference of an imperfect observation. Dante forbids himself this error; not one word in his book is unjustified.

The precision I have just noted is not a rhetorical artifice but an affirmation of the integrity, the plenitude, with which each incident of the poem has been imagined. The same may be said of the psychological traits which are at once so admirable and so modest. The poem is interwoven with such traits, of which I will cite a few. The souls destined for hell weep and blaspheme against God; then, when they step onto Charon's bark, their fear changes to desire and an intolerable eagerness (*Inferno* III, 124). Dante hears from Virgil's own lips that Virgil will never enter heaven; immediately he calls him "master" and "sir," perhaps to show that this confession does not lessen his affection, perhaps because, knowing Virgil to be lost, he loves him all the more (*Inferno* IV, 39). In the black hurricane of the second circle, Dante wishes to learn the root of Paolo and Francesca's love; Francesca tells him that the two loved each other without knowing it, *"soli eravamo e sanza alcun sospetto"* [we were alone, suspecting nothing], and that their love was revealed to them by a casual reading. Virgil rails against proud spirits who aspire to encompass infinite divinity with mere reason; suddenly he bows his head and is silent, because one of those unfortunates is he (*Purgatorio* III, 34). On the rugged slope of Purgatory, the shade of Sordello the Mantuan inquires of Virgil's shade as to its homeland; Virgil says Mantua; Sordello interrupts and embraces him (*Purgatorio* VI, 58). The novels of our own day follow mental processes with extravagant verbosity; Dante allows them to glimmer in an intention or a gesture.

Paul Claudel has observed that the sights that await us after dying will not, in all likelihood, include the nine circles of Hell, the terraces of Purgatory, or the concentric heavens. Dante would undoubtedly have agreed; he devised his topography of death as an artifice demanded by Scholasticism and by the form of his poem.

Dante's universe is described by Ptolemaic astronomy and Christian theology. Earth is a motionless sphere; in the center of the Boreal hemi-

sphere—the one permitted to mankind—is the Mount of Zion; ninety degrees to the east of that mountain, a river, the Ganges, dies; ninety degrees to the west, a river, the Ebro, is born. The Austral hemisphere consists of water, not land, and is barred to mankind; in the center is a mountain that is the antipode of Zion, the Mount of Purgatory. The two rivers and the two mountains, all equidistant, inscribe a cross on the terrestrial orb. Beneath the Mount of Zion, but considerably wider, an inverted cone—Hell—tapers toward the center of the earth, divided into diminishing circles like the rows of an amphitheater. The circles are nine in number, and their topography is appalling and ruinous; the first five form the Upper Inferno, the last four, the Lower Inferno, a city with red mosques surrounded by walls of iron. Within it are crypts, pits, precipices, swamps, and dunes; at the cone's apex is Lucifer, "the worm that gnaws the world." A crack opened in the rock by the waters of Lethe connects Hell's lowest depths to the base of the Mount of Purgatory, which is an island and has a door. Its slopes are stepped with terraces that signify the mortal sins; at its peak, the Garden of Eden blossoms. Nine concentric spheres spin around the earth; the first seven are the planetary heavens (those of the Moon, Mercury, Venus, the Sun, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn); the eighth is the Heaven of the Fixed Stars; the ninth, the Crystalline Heaven, also called the Primum Mobile. This is surrounded by the empyrean, where the Rose of the Just opens, immeasurable, around a point, which is God. Predictably, the choirs that make up the Rose are nine in number. . . . Such are the broad outlines of the general configuration of Dante's world, which is subordinate, as the reader will have observed, to the preeminence of the numbers 1 and 3 and of the circle. The Demiurge or Craftsman of the *Timaeus,* a book mentioned by Dante (*Convivio* III, 5; *Paradiso* IV, 49) considered rotation the most perfect form of movement, and the sphere the most perfect body; this dogma, which Plato's Demiurge shared with Xenophanes and Parmenides, governs the geography of the three worlds traversed by Dante.

The nine revolving circles and the southern hemisphere made of water with a mountain at its center plainly correspond to an antiquated cosmology; there are those who feel that the same adjective is applicable to the supernatural economy of the poem. The nine circles of Hell (they argue) are no less outdated and indefensible than the nine heavens of Ptolemy, and Purgatory is as unreal as the mountain where Dante places it. A variety of considerations can serve to counter this objection: first, that Dante did not propose to establish the true or realistic topography of the other world. He stated this himself: in his famous epistle to Can Grande, written in Latin, he

wrote that the subject of his *Commedia* is, literally, the state of souls after death and, allegorically, man, whose merits and faults make him deserving of divine punishment or reward. Iacopo di Dante, the poet's son, developed this idea further. In the prologue to his commentary, we read that the *Commedia* seeks to paint humanity's three modes of being in allegorical colors, so that in the first part the author considers vice, calling it Hell; in the second, the passage from vice to virtue, calling it Purgatory; in the third, the condition of perfect men, calling it Paradise, "to demonstrate the loftiness of their virtues and their happiness, both of which are necessary to man in order for him to discern the highest good." Other time-honored commentators understood it in the same way; Iacopo della Lana, for example, explains that "the poet, considering human life to be of three conditions, which are the life of the sinful, the life of the penitent and the life of the good, divided his book into three parts, which are Hell, Purgatory and Paradise."

Another trustworthy testimony is that of Francesco da Buti, who annotated the *Commedia* toward the end of the fourteenth century. He makes the words of Dante's letter his own: "The subject of this poem is, literally, the state of souls once separated from their bodies and, morally, the rewards or pains that man attains by the exercise of his free will."

In *Ce que dit la bouche d'ombre*, Hugo writes that in Hell, the shade that appears to Cain in the form of Abel is the same shade Nero recognizes as Agrippina.

Much more serious than the accusation of obsolescence is that of cruelty. Nietzsche, in the *Twilight of the Idols* (1888), gave currency to this notion in the befuddled epigram that defines Dante as "the hyena that *poetizes* on graves"—a definition that is clearly more emphatic than ingenious. It owes its fame, its excessive fame, to the fact that it formulates, with thoughtless violence, a commonplace opinion. The best way to refute that opinion is to investigate the reason for it.

There is a technical explanation for the hardheartedness and cruelty of which Dante has been accused. The pantheistic idea of a God who is also the universe, a god who is every one of his creatures and the destiny of those creatures, may be a heresy and an error if we apply it to reality, but it is indisputable when applied to the poet and his work. The poet is each one of the men in his fictive world, he is every breath and every detail. One of his tasks, and not the easiest of them, is to hide or disguise this omnipresence. The problem was particularly burdensome in Dante's case, for he was forced by the nature of his poem to mete out glory or damnation, but in such a way as to keep his readers from noticing that the Justice handing

down these sentences was, in the final analysis, he himself. To achieve this, he included himself as a character in the *Commedia*, and made his own reactions contrast or only rarely coincide—in the case of Filippo Argenti, or in that of Judas—with the divine decisions.

[1945–51/1982] *[EA]*

The Noble Castle of the Fourth Canto

Toward the beginning of the nineteenth century, or the end of the eighteenth, certain adjectives of Saxon or Scottish origin *(eerie, uncanny, weird)* came into circulation in the English language, serving to define those places or things that vaguely inspire horror. Such adjectives correspond to a romantic concept of landscape. In German, they are perfectly translated by the word *unheimlich;* in Spanish, the best word may be *siniestro.* With this peculiar quality of *uncanniness* in mind, I once wrote, "The Palace of Subterranean Fire that we find in the final pages of William Beckford's *Vathek* (1782) is the first truly atrocious hell in literature. The most famous literary Avernus, the *dolente regno* of the *Commedia,* is not an atrocious place; it is a place where atrocious things happen. The distinction is valid."

Stevenson ("A Chapter on Dreams") relates that in the dreams of his childhood he was pursued by an abominable hue of brown; Chesterton (*The Man Who Was Thursday*) imagines that at the western limits of the world there exists, perhaps, a tree that is more and less than a tree, and at the eastern limits, something else, perhaps a tower, whose very shape is wicked. Poe, in the "MS Found in a Bottle," speaks of a southern sea where the ship itself will grow in bulk like the living body of the seaman; Melville spends many pages of *Moby-Dick* dilucidating the horror of the whale's unendurable whiteness. . . . I have been lavish with examples; perhaps it would have sufficed to observe that Dante's hell magnifies the idea of a jail;[1] Beckford's, the tunnels of a nightmare.

Several nights ago, on a platform at the Constitución railway station, I suddenly recalled a perfect case of *uncanniness,* of calm, silent horror, at the very entrance to the *Commedia.* An examination of the text confirmed the

[1] "*Carcere cieco,*" blind prison, says Virgil of Hell (*Purgatorio* XXII, 103; *Inferno* X, 58–59).

correctness of this delayed recollection. I am speaking of Canto IV of the *Inferno,* one of the most celebrated.

To one who has reached the final pages of the *Paradiso,* the *Commedia* can be many things, perhaps all things; at the beginning, it is obviously a dream dreamt by Dante, who for his part is no more than the subject of the dream. He tells us he does not know how he found himself in the dark wood, "*tant' era pien di sonno a quel punto*" [I was so full of sleep at the moment]; the *sonno* is a metaphor for the bewilderment of the sinning soul, but it suggests the indefinite onset of the act of dreaming. He then writes that the she-wolf who blocks his path has caused many to live in sorrow; Guido Vitali observes that this information could not have emanated from the mere sight of the beast; Dante knows it as we know things in dreams. A stranger appears in the wood; Dante has only just seen him, but knows that he has long been silent—another bit of oneiric knowledge, justified, Momigliano notes, for poetic, not logical reasons. They embark on their fantastic journey. Entering the first circle of the abyss, Virgil pales; Dante attributes his pallor to fear. Virgil avers that it is pity which moves him, and that he is one of the damned: "*e di questi cotai son io medesmo*" [and I myself am one of these]. To disguise the horror of this affirmation or to express his pity, Dante lavishes him with reverential titles: "*Dimmi, maestro mio, dimmi segnore*" [Tell me, master, tell me, sir]. Sighs, sighs of sadness without torment, make the air shudder; Virgil explains that they are in the hell of those who died before the Faith was established. Four looming shades greet him, neither sorrow nor joy in their faces; they are Homer, Horace, Ovid, and Lucan; in Homer's right hand is a sword, symbol of his sovereignty in the epic. These illustrious phantoms honor Dante as their equal and lead him to their eternal dwelling place, which is a castle encircled seven times by lofty walls (the seven liberal arts or the three intellectual and four moral virtues), and by a stream (earthly goods or eloquence) which they pass over as if it were solid ground. The residents of the castle are persons of great authority; they speak seldom and with gentle voices; their gaze is slow and grave. Within the castle's courtyard is a meadow, mysteriously green; Dante, from on high, sees classical and biblical figures and the occasional Muslim: "*Averois, che'l gran comento feo*" [Averroës, who made the great commentary]. At times, one of them is marked by a trait that makes him memorable—"*Cesare armato, con gli occhi grifagni*" [armed Caesar, with falcon eyes]—or by a solitude that enlarges him: "*e solo, in parte, vidi'l Saladino*" [and by himself apart I saw Saladin]. An arid catalogue of proper names, less stimulating than informative, brings the canto to a close.

A Limbo of the Fathers, also called the Bosom of Abraham (Luke 16: 22), and a Limbo for the souls of infants who die without baptism are theological commonplaces; the idea of housing virtuous pagans in this place or places was, according to Francesco Torraca, Dante's own invention. To allay the horror of an adverse era, the poet sought refuge in the great memory of Rome. He wished to honor it in his book, but could not help understanding—the observation is Guido Vitali's—that too great an insistence on the classical world did not accord well with his doctrinal aims. Dante, who could not go against the Faith to save his heroes, envisioned them in a negative Hell, denied the sight and possession of God in heaven, and took pity on their mysterious fate. Years later, imagining the Heaven of Jupiter, he would return to the same problem. Boccaccio says that a long interruption, caused by exile, came between the writing of Canto VII and Canto VIII of the *Inferno*; that fact—suggested or corroborated by the verse "*Io dico, seguitando ch'assai prima*" [I say, continuing, that long before]—may be true, but far more profound is the difference between the canto of the castle and those that follow. In Canto V, Dante made Francesca da Rimini speak immortal words; in the preceding canto, what words might he have given to Aristotle, Heraclitus, or Orpheus if the artifice had occurred to him then? Deliberate or not, his silence deepens the horror and is appropriate to the setting. Benedetto Croce notes: "In the noble castle, among the great and the wise, dry information usurps the place of measured poetry. Feelings of admiration, reverence, and melancholy are stated, not represented" (*La poesia di Dante,* 1920). Commentators have deplored the contrast between the medieval construction of the castle and its classical guests; this fusion or confusion is characteristic of the painting of that era and undoubtedly heightens the oneiric tone of the scene.

In the invention and execution of Canto IV, Dante plotted out a series of circumstances, some of them theological in nature. A devout reader of the *Aeneid,* he imagined the dead in the Elyseum or in a medieval variant of those glad fields; the line "*in loco aperto, luinoso e alto*" [an open place that was luminous and high] recalls the burial mound from which Aeneas saw his Romans, and of the "*largior hic campos aether.*" For pressing reasons of dogma, Dante had to situate his noble castle in Hell. Mario Rossi discovers in this conflict between formal and poetic concerns, between heavenly intuition and frightful damnation, the canto's innermost discord and the root of certain contradictions. In one place it is said that the eternal air shudders with sighs; in another, that there is neither sorrow nor joy in the faces. The

poet's visionary faculty had not yet reached its plenitude. To this relative clumsiness we owe the rigidity that gives rise to the singular horror of the castle and its inhabitants, or prisoners. There is something of the oppressive wax museum about this still enclosure: Caesar, armed and idle; Lavinia, eternally seated next to her father. The certainty that tomorrow will be like today, which was like yesterday, which was like every day. A much later passage of the *Purgatorio* adds that the shades of the poets, who are barred from writing, since they are in the *Inferno,* seek to distract their eternity with literary discussions.[2]

The technical reasons—that is, the reasons of a verbal order that make the castle fearsome—can thus be established; but the intimate reasons remain to be determined. A theologian of God would say that the absence of God is sufficient to make the castle terrible. Such a theologian might acknowledge an affinity with the tercet that proclaims the vanity of earthly glories:

> *Non è il mondan romore altro ch'un fiato*
> *di vento, ch'or vien quinci e or vien quindi,*
> *e muta nome perché muta lato.*
>
> [Earthly fame is naught but a breath/of wind which now comes hence and now comes thence,/changing its name because it changes quarter.]

I would propose another reason, one of a personal nature. At this point in the *Commedia,* Homer, Horace, Ovid, and Lucan are projections or figurations of Dante, who knew he was not inferior to these great ones, in deed or potential. They are examples of the type that Dante already was for himself and would foreseeably be for others: the famous poet. They are great, venerated shades who receive Dante into their conclave:

> *ch'e si mi fecer della loro schiera*
> *si ch'io fui sesto tra cotanto senno.*
>
> [for they made me one of their company/so that I was sixth amid so much wisdom.]

[2]In the early cantos of the *Commedia,* Dante was what Gioberti considered him to be throughout the poem, "a little more than a mere witness to the plot he himself invented" (*Primato morale e civile degli italiani,* 1840).

They are forms of Dante's incipient dream, barely detached from the dreamer. They speak interminably about literary matters (what else can they do?). They have read the *Iliad* or the *Pharsalia* or they are writing the *Commedia*; they are magisterial in the exercise of their art, yet they are in Hell because Beatrice forgets them.

[1951] *[EA]*

The False Problem of Ugolino

I have not read all the commentaries on Dante (no one has), but I suspect that in the case of the famous seventy-fifth line of the *Inferno*'s penultimate canto they have created a problem that arises from a confusion of art with reality. In that line, Ugolino of Pisa, after recounting the death of his children in the Gaol of Hunger, says that fasting did more than grief had done (*"Poscia, piú che'l dolor, potè il digiuno"*). I must exempt the earliest commentators—for whom the verse is not problematic—from my reproach; they all take the line to mean that grief could not kill Ugolino, but fasting did. This is also how Geoffrey Chaucer understands it, in the rough outline of the episode he inserted into the Canterbury cycle.

Let us reconsider the scene. At the glacial nadir of the ninth circle, Ugolino infinitely gnaws the nape of Ruggieri degli Ubaldini's neck and wipes his bloodthirsty mouth on that same sinner's hair. He raises his mouth, not his face, from the ferocious repast, and tells how Ruggieri betrayed him and imprisoned him with his children. He saw many moons wax and wane through the cell's narrow window, until he dreamed that Ruggieri, with slavering mastiffs, was hunting a wolf and its cubs on a mountainside. At dawn he heard the pounding of the hammer that was sealing up the entrance to the tower. A day and a night went by, in silence. Ugolino, in his sorrow, bites his hands; his children think he does so out of hunger and offer him their flesh, the flesh he engendered. Between the fifth and sixth day he sees them die, one by one. He loses his sight, and speaks to his dead, and weeps, and gropes for them in the darkness; then fasting did more than grief.

I have said what meaning the first commentators attributed to this final event. Thus, in the fourteenth century, Rimbaldi de Imola: "It amounts to saying that hunger overcame one whom great sorrow could not vanquish and kill." Among the moderns, Francesco Torraca, Guido Vitali, and Tommaso Casini profess the same opinion. Torraca sees stupor and remorse in Ugolino's

words; Casini adds, "Modern interpreters have fantasized that Ugolino ended by feeding on the flesh of his children, a conjecture that goes against nature and history," and considers the controversy futile. Benedetto Croce is of the same view, and maintains that of the two interpretations, the most plausible and congruent is the traditional one. Bianchi very reasonably glosses: "Others understand Ugolino to have eaten the flesh of his children, an improbable interpretation, but one that cannot legitimately be discarded." Luigi Pietrobono (to whose point of view I will return) says the verse is deliberately mysterious.

Before taking my own turn in the *inutile controversia,* I wish to dwell for a moment on the children's unanimous offer. They beg their father to take back the flesh he engendered:

> *. . . tu ne vestisti*
> *queste misere carni, e tu le spoglia.*
> [. . . you did clothe us/with this wretched flesh, and do you strip us of it.]

I suspect that this utterance must cause a growing discomfort in its admirers. De Sanctis (*Storia della letteratura italiana* IX) ponders the unexpected conjunction of heterogenous images; D'Ovidio concedes that "this gallant and epigrammatic expression of a filial impulse is almost beyond criticism." For my part, I take this to be one of the very few false notes in the *Commedia.* I consider it less worthy of Dante than of Malvezzi's pen or Gracián's veneration. Dante, I tell myself, could not have helped but feel its falseness, which is certainly aggravated by the almost choral way in which all four children simultaneously tender the famished feast. Someone might suggest that what we are faced with here is a lie, made up after the fact by Ugolino to justify (or insinuate) his crime.

The historical question of whether Ugolino della Gherardesca engaged in cannibalism in the early days of February in the year 1289 is obviously insoluble. The aesthetic or literary problem is of a very different order. It may be stated thus: Did Dante want us to believe that Ugolino (the Ugolino of his *Inferno,* not history's Ugolino) ate his children's flesh? I would hazard this response: Dante did not want us to believe it, but he wanted us to suspect it.[1] Uncertainty is part of his design. Ugolino gnaws the base of the

[1]Luigi Pietrobono observes "that the *digiuno* does not affirm Ugolino's guilt, but allows it to be inferred, without damage to art or to historical rigor. It is enough that we judge it *possible*" (*Inferno,* 47).

archbishop's skull; Ugolino dreams of sharp-fanged dogs ripping the wolves' flanks (*"e con l'agute scane/mi parea lor veder fender li fianchi"*). Driven by grief, Ugolino bites his hands; Ugolino hears his children implausibly offering him their flesh; Ugolino, having delivered the ambiguous line, turns back to gnaw the archbishop's skull. Such acts suggest or symbolize the ghastly deed. They play a dual role: we believe them to be part of the tale, and they are prophecies.

Robert Louis Stevenson ("Some Gentlemen in Fiction") observes that a book's characters are only strings of words; blasphemous as this may sound to us, Achilles and Peer Gynt, Robinson Crusoe and Don Quixote, may be reduced to it. The powerful men who ruled the earth, as well: Alexander is one string of words, Attila another. We should say of Ugolino that he is a verbal texture consisting of about thirty tercets. Should we include the idea of cannibalism in this texture? I repeat that we should suspect it, with uncertainty and dread. To affirm or deny Ugolino's monstrous crime is less tremendous than to have some glimpse of it.

The pronouncement "A book is the words that comprise it" risks seeming an insipid axiom. Nevertheless, we are all inclined to believe that there is a form separable from the content and that ten minutes of conversation with Henry James would reveal to us the "true" plot of *The Turn of the Screw.* I think that the truth is not like that; I think that Dante did not know any more about Ugolino than his tercets relate. Schopenhauer declared that the first volume of his major work consists of a single thought, and that he could find no more concise way of conveying it. Dante, on the contrary, would say that whatever he imagined about Ugolino is present in the debated tercets.

In real time, in history, whenever a man is confronted with several alternatives, he chooses one and eliminates and loses the others. Such is not the case in the ambiguous time of art, which is similar to that of hope and oblivion. In that time, Hamlet is sane and is mad.[2] In the darkness of his Tower of Hunger, Ugolino devours and does not devour the beloved corpses, and this undulating imprecision, this uncertainty, is the strange matter of which he is made. Thus, with two possible deaths, did Dante dream him, and thus will the generations dream him.

[1948] *[EA]*

[2]Two famous ambiguities may aptly be recalled here, as curiosities. The first, Quevedo's *"sangrienta luna,"* the bloody moon that is at once the moon over the battlefields and the moon of the Ottoman flag; the other, the "mortal moon" of Shakespeare's Sonnet 107, which is the moon in the heavens and the Virgin Queen.

The Last Voyage of Ulysses

My aim is to reconsider, in the light of other passages of the *Commedia,* the enigmatic tale that Dante places in the mouth of Ulysses (*Inferno* XXVI, 90–142). In the calamitous depths of the circle where deceivers are punished, Ulysses and Diomedes endlessly burn in a single two-pronged flame. Pressed by Virgil to describe how he met his death, Ulysses relates that after having left Circe, who kept him in Gaeta for more than a year, neither the sweetness of his son, nor the reverence Laertes inspired in him, nor the love of Penelope could conquer the ardor in his breast to know the world and the defects and virtues of men. With his last ship and the few loyal men left to him, he ventured upon the open seas; they arrived, old men by then, at the narrows where Hercules set his columns. At that outer limit marked by a god to ambition or audacity, he urged his comrades on, to see, since so little life was left to them, the unpeopled world, the untraveled seas of the antipodes. He reminded them of their origin, he reminded them that they were not born to live like brutes, but to seek virtue and knowledge. They sailed toward the sunset, and then to the south, and saw all the stars that the southern hemisphere alone encompasses. For five months their prow cleaved the ocean, and one day they caught sight of a dark mountain on the horizon. It seemed to them higher than any other, and their souls rejoiced. This joy soon turned to grief, for a tempest arose that spun the ship around three times and sank it on the fourth, as pleased Another, and the sea closed over them.

Such is Ulysses' tale. Many commentators, from the anonymous Florentine to Raffaele Andreoli, consider it a digression on the author's part. In their estimation, Ulysses and Diomedes, deceivers, suffer in the pit of the deceivers—"*e dentro dalla lor fiamma si geme/l'agguato del caval*" [and in their flame they groan for the ambush of the horse]—and the journey is no more than an incidental embellishment. Tommaseo, however, cites a pas-

sage of the *Civitas Dei*, and could have cited another from Clement of Alexandria, denying that men can reach the lower part of the earth; later, Casini and Pietrobono object to the journey as a sacrilege. Indeed, the mountain glimpsed by the Greek before the abyss entombs him is the holy mountain of Purgatory, forbidden to mortals (*Purgatorio* I, 130–32). Hugo Friedrich acutely observes: "The journey ends in a catastrophe which is not mere human destiny but the word of God" (*Odysseus in der Hölle*, Berlin, 1942).

As he recounts his exploit, Ulysses characterizes it as senseless ("*folle*"); Canto XXVII of the *Paradiso* refers to the "*varco folle d'Ulisse*," to Ulysses' rash or senseless route. The same adjective is applied by Dante in the dark wood to Virgil's tremendous invitation ("*temo che la venuta non sia folle*" [I fear that the coming may be folly]); the repetition is deliberate. When Dante sets foot on the beach Ulysses glimpsed before dying, he says that no one has navigated those waters and been able to return; then he says that Virgil girded him with a bulrush, "*com' Altrui piacque*" [as pleased Another]—the same words spoken by Ulysses as he declared his tragic end. Carlo Steiner writes: "Was Dante thinking of Ulysses, shipwrecked within sight of this beach? Of course. But Ulysses wished to reach it by relying on his own strength and defying the decreed limits of what mankind can do. Dante, a new Ulysses, will set foot there as a victor, girded with humility and guided not by pride but by reason, illuminated by grace." August Rüegg restates this opinion (*Jenseitsvorstellungen vor Dante* II, 114): "Dante is an adventurer who, like Ulysses, walks along virgin paths, travels across worlds no man has ever glimpsed and aspires to the most difficult and remote goals. But the comparison ends there. Ulysses sets forth on his own account and risks forbidden adventures; Dante allows himself to be guided by higher powers."

Two famous passages justify this distinction. One is where Dante deems himself unworthy to visit the three otherworlds—"*Io non Enëa, io non Paulo sono*" [I am not Aeneas, I am not Paul]—and Virgil announces the mission Beatrice has entrusted to him; the other, where Cacciaguida recommends that the poem be published (*Paradiso* XVII, 100–142). Given this testimony, it would be preposterous to place Dante's peregrination, which leads to the beatific vision and the best book mankind has ever written, on the same level as Ulysses' sacrilegious adventure, which culminates in Hell. The former action seems the reverse of the latter.

This argument, however, contains an error. Ulysses' act is undoubtedly Ulysses' journey, because Ulysses is nothing other than the subject to whom that act is attributed; Dante's act or undertaking is not Dante's journey, but

the composition of his book. The fact is obvious, but tends to be forgotten because the *Commedia* is written in the first person, and the man who died has been overshadowed by the immortal protagonist. Dante was a theologian; the writing of the *Commedia* must often have seemed no less laborious and perhaps no less audacious and fatal than the final voyage of Ulysses. He had dared to conjure up arcana that the pen of the Holy Spirit barely indicates; the intention may well have entailed a sin. He had dared to place Beatrice Portinari on the same level as the Virgin and Jesus.[1] He had dared to anticipate the pronouncements of the inscrutable Last Judgment that the blessed do not know; he had judged and condemned the souls of simoniac Popes and had saved that of the Averroëist Siger, who lectured on circular time.[2] So much laborious effort for glory, which is an ephemeral thing!

> *Non è il mondan romore altro ch'un fiato*
> *di vento, ch'or vien quinci e or vien quindi,*
> *e muta nome perchè muta lato.*
>
> [Earthly fame is naught but a breath/of wind which now comes hence and now comes thence,/changing its name because it changes quarter.]

Plausible traces of this discord survive in the text. Carlo Steiner recognized one in the dialogue in which Virgil overcomes Dante's fears and persuades him to undertake his unprecedented journey. Steiner writes, "The debate which by a fiction occurs with Virgil, in reality occurred in Dante's mind, when he had not yet decided on the composition of the poem. It corresponds to the other debate in Canto XVII of the *Paradiso*, which envisages the poem's publication. Having written the work, can he publish it and defy the wrath of his enemies? In both cases, the consciousness of its worth and the high end he had set for himself won out" (*Commedia*, 15). In such passages, then, Dante would have symbolized a mental conflict. I suggest that he also symbolized it, perhaps without wanting to or suspecting he had done so, in the tragic legend of Ulysses, and that its tremendous power is due to that emotional charge. Dante was Ulysses, and in some way he could fear Ulysses' punishment.

A final observation. Devoted to the sea and to Dante, the two literatures written in English have felt the influence of the Dantesque Ulysses. Eliot

[1] Cf. Giovanni Papini, *Dante vivo* III, 34.
[2] Cf. Maurice de Wulf, *Histoire de la philosophie médiévale.*

(and before him Andrew Lang and before him Longfellow) has implied that Tennyson's admirable *Ulysses* proceeds from this glorious archetype. As far as I know, a deeper affinity has not previously been noted: that of the infernal Ulysses with another unfortunate captain: Ahab of *Moby-Dick*. Like his predecessor, he accomplishes his own perdition by means of vigilance and courage; the general story is the same, the grand finale is identical, the last words almost repeat each other. Schopenhauer has written that nothing in our lives is involuntary; both fictions, in the light of this prodigious maxim, describe the process of a secret and intricate suicide.

[1948] *[EA]*

Postscript, 1981: It has been said that Dante's Ulysses prefigures the famous explorers who, centuries later, arrived on the coasts of America and India. Centuries before the *Commedia* was written, that human type had already come into being. Erik the Red discovered Greenland around the year 985; his son Leif disembarked in Canada at the beginning of the eleventh century. Dante could not have known this. The things of Scandinavia tend to be secret, as if they were a dream.

The Pitying Torturer

Dante (as everyone knows) consigns Francesca to the Inferno, and listens with infinite compassion to the tale of her sin. How can this contradiction be lessened, how can it be justified? I see four possible conjectures.

The first is technical. Dante, having determined the general shape of his book, feared that unless it were enlivened by the confessions of lost souls it could degenerate into a worthless catalog of proper names or topographical descriptions. The thought made him place an interesting and not too alien sinner in each of the circles of his Hell. (Lamartine, worn out by these guests, said the *Commedia* was a "*gazette florentine.*") Naturally it was preferable that the confessions be poignant, and they could be poignant without risk, for the author, having imprisoned the narrators in Hell, was safely beyond any suspicion of complicity. This conjecture is perhaps the most plausible (its notion of a poetical orb imposed on an arid theological novel was argued by Croce), but it has a nasty pettiness about it that does not seem to harmonize with our concept of Dante. Moreover, interpretations of a book as infinite as the *Commedia* cannot be so simple.

The second conjecture, following the doctrine of Jung,[1] equates literary and oneiric inventions. Dante, who has become our dream, dreamed Francesca's pain and dreamed his own compassion. Schopenhauer observes

[1]Jung's doctrine is somehow prefigured by the classic metaphor of the dream as a theatrical event. Thus Góngora, in the sonnet "*Varia imaginación*" ("*El sueno, autor de representaciones./En su teatro sobre el viento armado/sombras suele vestir de bulto bello*" [Sleep, author of representations./Within its theater mounted on the wind/bedecks shadows in lovely forms]); thus Quevedo, in the "*Sueño de la muerte*" ("Once unburdened, the soul became idle, without the labor of the external senses, and in this way the following comedy struck me; and my powers recited it in darkness, with myself as the audience and theater of my fantasies"); thus Joseph Addison, in number 487 of the *Spectator* ("She [the dreaming soul] is herself the theater, the actors, and the

that what we see and hear in dreams can astonish us, though ultimately it has its roots in us; Dante, likewise, could feel pity for things he himself dreamed or invented. It could also be said that Francesca is a mere projection of the poet, as, for that matter, is Dante himself, in his role as a traveller through Hell. I suspect, however, that this conjecture is fallacious, for it is one thing to attribute a common origin to books and dreams, and another to tolerate, in books, the disjunction and irresponsibility of dreams.

The third, like the first, is of a technical nature. Over the course of the *Commedia*, Dante had to anticipate the inscrutable decisions of God. By no other light than that of his fallible mind, he attempted to predict certain pronouncements of the Last Judgment. He damned—even if only as a literary fiction—Celestin V and saved Siger de Brabant, who defended the astrological hypothesis of the Eternal Return.

To conceal this operation, he made justice the defining characteristic of God in Hell—"*Giustizia mosse il mio alto fattore*" [Justice moved my high maker]—and reserved the attributes of understanding and pity for himself. He placed Francesca among the lost souls, and he felt sorry for Francesca. Benedetto Croce declares, "Dante, as a theologian, as a believer, as an ethical man, condemns sinners; but in sentiment he neither condemns nor absolves" (*La poesia di Dante*, 78).[2]

The fourth conjecture is less precise. A prefatory discussion is required to make it intelligible. Consider these two propositions. One: murderers deserve the death penalty; the other: Rodion Raskolnikov deserves the death penalty. The fact that the propositions are not synonymous is inarguable. Paradoxically, this is not because murderers are concrete and Raskolnikov is abstract or illusory. On the contrary, the concept of murderers betokens a mere generalization; Raskolnikov, for anyone who has read his story, is a real being. In reality there are, strictly speaking, no murderers; there are individuals whom the torpor of our languages includes in that indeterminate ensemble. (Such, in the final analysis, is the nominalist hypothesis of Roscelin and William of Occam.) In other words, anyone who has read

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beholder"). Centuries before, the pantheist Omar Khayyam composed a strophe translated as follows in McCarthy's literal version: "Now Thou art hidden from all things, now Thou art displayed in all things. It is for Thy own delight that Thou workest these wonders, being at once the sport and the spectator."

[2]Andrew Lang writes that Dumas wept when he killed off Porthos. Likewise, we feel Cervantes' emotion at the death of Alonso Quijano, "who, amidst the tears and lamentations of all present, gave up the ghost, or in other words, departed this life."

Dostoevsky's novel has in some way been Raskolnikov and knows that his "crime" is not free because an inevitable network of circumstances predetermined and dictated it. The man who killed is not a murderer, the man who lied is not an impostor; and this is known (or, rather, felt) by the damned; there is, consequently, no punishment without injustice. The judicial fiction of "the murderer" may well deserve the death penalty, but not the luckless wretch who killed, driven by his own prior history and perhaps—oh Marquis de Laplace!—by the history of the universe. Madame de Staël has compressed these ratiocinations into a famous sentence: "*Tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner*" [To understand all is to forgive all].

Dante tells the story of Francesca's sin with such delicate compassion that all of us feel its inevitability. That is how the poet must have felt it, in defiance of the theologian who argued in the *Purgatorio* (XVI, 70) that if actions depended on the influences of the stars, our free will would be annulled, and to reward good while punishing evil would be an injustice.[3]

Dante understands and does not forgive; this is the insoluble paradox. For my part, I take it that he found a solution beyond logic. He felt (but did not understand) that the acts of men are necessary and that an eternity of heavenly bliss or hellish perdition incurred by those acts is similarly necessary. The Spinozists and the Stoics also promulgated moral laws. Here there is no need to bring up Calvin, whose *decretum Dei absolutum* predestines some for hell and others for heaven. I read in the introductory pages of Sale's *Koran* that one of the Islamic sects also upholds this view.

The fourth conjecture, as is evident, does not disentangle the problem but simply raises it in a vigorous manner. The other conjectures were logical; this last one, which is not, seems to me to be true.

[1948] *[EA]*

[3]Cf. *De monarchia* I, 14; *Purgatorio* XVIII, 73; *Paradiso* V, 19. More eloquent still are the great words of Canto XXXI: "*Tu m'hai di servo tratto a libertate*" [It is you who have drawn me from bondage into liberty] (*Paradiso*, 85).

Dante and the Anglo-Saxon Visionaries

In Canto X of the *Paradiso*, Dante recounts that he ascended to the sphere of the sun and saw around that planet—in the Dantesque economy the sun is a planet—a flaming crown of twelve spirits, even more luminous than the light against which they stood out. The first of them, Thomas Aquinas, announces the names of the others: the seventh is *Beda*, or Bede. Dante's commentators explain that this is the Venerable Bede, deacon of the monastery of Jarrow and author of the *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*.

Despite the adjective, this, the first history of England, composed in the eighth century, transcends the strictly ecclesiastical. It is the touching, personal work of a man of letters and a scrupulous researcher. Bede had mastered Latin and knew Greek; a line from Virgil could spring spontaneously from his pen. Everything interested him: universal history, the exegesis of Holy Scripture, music, rhetorical figures,[1] spelling, numerical systems, the natural sciences, theology, Latin poetry, and poetry in the vernacular. There is one point, however, on which he deliberately remains silent. In his chronicle of the tenacious missions that finally succeeded in imposing the faith of Jesus on the Germanic kingdoms of England, Bede could have done for Saxon paganism what Snorri Sturluson, five hundred years or so later, would do for Scandinavian paganism. Without betraying his work's pious intent, he could have elucidated or sketched out the mythology of his elders. Predictably, he did not. The reason is obvious: the religion, or mythology, of the Germans was still very near. Bede wanted to forget it; he wanted his England to forget it. We will never know if a twilight awaits the gods

[1]Bede sought the examples he gives of rhetorical figures in the Scriptures. Thus, for synecdoche, where the part stands for the whole, he cited verse 14 of the first chapter of the Gospel According to John, "And the Word was made flesh. . . ." Strictly speaking, the Word was made not only flesh, but also bone, cartilage, water, and blood.

who were adored by Hengist, or if, on that tremendous day when the sun and the moon are devoured by wolves, a ship made of the fingernails of the dead will depart from the realms of ice. We will never know if these lost divinities formed a pantheon, or if they were, as Gibbon suspected, the vague superstitions of barbarians. Except for the ritual phrase "*cujus pater Voden*" which figures in all his genealogies of royal lineages—and the case of the cautious king who had one altar for Jesus and another, smaller one for the demons—Bede did little to satisfy the future curiosity of Germanists. He did, however, stray far enough from the straight and narrow path of chronology to record certain otherworldly visions that prefigure the work of Dante.

Let us recall one of them. Fursa, Bede tells us, was an Irish ascetic who had converted many Saxons. In the course of an illness, he was carried off in spirit by angels and rose up to heaven. During his ascension, he saw four fires, not far distant from each other, reddening the black air. The angels explained that these fires would consume the world and that their names were Falsehood, Covetousness, Discord, and Iniquity. The fires extended until they met one another and drew near him; Fursa was afraid, but the angels told him: "The fire which you did not kindle shall not burn you." Indeed, the angels parted the flames and Fursa reached Paradise, where he saw many admirable things. On his way back to earth, he was threatened a second time by a fire, out of which a demon hurled the incandescent soul of a sinner, which burned his right shoulder and chin. An angel told him: "Now the fire you kindled burns you. For as you accepted the garment of him who was a sinner, so you must partake of his punishment." Fursa bore the stigma of this vision to the day of his death.

Another of these visions is that of a man of Northumbria named Dryhthelm. After an illness that lasted for several days, he died at nightfall, and suddenly came back to life at the break of dawn. His wife was keeping vigil for him; Dryhthelm told her he had indeed been reborn from among the dead and that he now intended to live in a very different way. After praying, he divided his estate into three parts, and gave the first to his wife, the second to his sons, and the third to the poor. He bade them all farewell and retired to a monastery, where his rigorous life was testimony to the many dreadful and desirable things that were revealed to him during the night he was dead, which he spoke of thus:

> He that led me had a shining countenance and a bright garment, and we went on silently, as I thought, towards the north-east. We came to a

vale of great breadth and depth, but of infinite length; on the left it appeared full of dreadful flames, the other side was no less horrid for violent hail and cold snow flying in all directions; both places were full of men's souls, which seemed by turns to be tossed from one side to the other, as it were by a violent storm; for when the wretches could no longer endure the excess of heat, they leaped into the cutting cold, and so on infinitely. I began to think that this region of intolerable torments perhaps might be hell. But my guide who went before me answered my thoughts: "You are not yet in Hell."

When he had led me further on, the darkness grew so thick that I could see nothing else but the garment of him that led me. Innumerable globes of black flames rose out of a great pit and fell back again into the same. My leader suddenly vanished and left me alone in the midst of the globes of fire that were full of human souls. An insufferable stench came forth from the pit.

When I had stood there in much dread for a time that seemed endless, I heard a most hideous and wretched lamentation, and at the same time a loud laughing, as of a rude multitude insulting captured enemies. A gang of evil spirits was dragging five howling and lamenting souls of men into the darkness, whilst they themselves laughed and rejoiced. One of these men was shorn like a clergyman; another was a woman. As they went down into the burning pit, I could no longer distinguish between the lamentation of the men and the laughing of the devils, yet I still had a confused sound in my ears. Dark spirits ascended from that flaming abyss beset me on all sides and tormented me with the noisome flame that issued from their mouths and nostrils, yet they durst not touch me. Being thus on all sides enclosed with enemies and darkness, I could not seem to defend myself. Then there appeared behind me, on the way that I came, the brightness of a star shining amidst the darkness; which increased by degrees and came rapidly toward me. All those evil spirits dispersed and fled and I saw that the star was he who had led me before; he turned towards the right and began to lead me towards the south-east, and having soon brought me out of the darkness, conducted me into an atmosphere of clear light. I saw a vast wall before us, the length and height of which, in every direction seemed to be altogether boundless. I began to wonder why we went up to the wall, seeing no door, window, or path through it. Presently, I know not by what means, we were on the top of it, and within it was a vast and delightful field, so full of fragrant flowers that the odor of its delightful sweetness immediately dispelled the stink of the dark

furnace. In this field were innumerable assemblies of men in white. As my guide led me through these happy inhabitants, I began to think that this might be the kingdom of heaven, of which I had heard so much, but he answered to my thought, saying "You are not yet in heaven."

Further on I discovered before me a much more beautiful light and therein heard sweet voices of persons singing, and so wonderful a fragrancy proceeded from the place that the other which I had before thought most delicious then seemed to me but very indifferent. When I began to hope we should enter that delightful place, my guide on a sudden stood still; and then turning back, led me back by the way we came.

He then told me that that vale I saw so dreadful for consuming flames and cutting cold is purgatory; the fiery noisome pit is the very mouth of hell; this flowery place is where the souls are received of the just who await the Last Judgment, and the place where I heard the sound of sweet singing, with the fragrant odor and bright light is the kingdom of heaven. "As for you" he added, "who are now to return to your body and live among men again, if you will endeavor to direct your behavior in righteousness, you shall, after death, have a place or residence among these joyful troops of blessed souls; for when I left you for a while, it was to know what your future would be." I much abhorred returning to my body, however I durst not say a word and, on a sudden, I found myself alive among men.

In the story I have just transcribed, my readers will have noted passages that recall—or prefigure—passages in Dante's work. The monk is not burned by the fire he did not light; Beatrice, similarly, is invulnerable to the flames of the Inferno: "*nè fiamma d'esto 'ncendio non m'assale*" [and no flame of this burning assails me].

To the right of the valley that seems without end, torrents of sleet and ice punish the damned; the Epicureans of the third circle endure the same affliction. The man of Northumbria is plunged into despair by the angel's momentary abandonment, as Dante is by Virgil's: "*Virgilio a cui per mia salute die'mi*" [Virgil, to whom I gave myself for my salvation]. Dryhthelm does not know how he was able to rise to the top of the wall; Dante, how he was able to cross the sad Acheron.

Of greater interest than these correspondences, of which there are undoubtedly many more than I have mentioned, are the circumstantial details that Bede weaves into his narrative and that lend a singular verisimilitude to

the otherworldly visions. I need only recall the permanence of the burns, the fact that the angel reads the man's silent thought, the fusion of moaning and laughter, the visionary's perplexity before the high wall. It may be that an oral tradition carried these details to the historian's pen; certainly they already contain the union of the personal and the marvelous that is typical of Dante, and that has nothing to do with the customs of allegorical literature.

Did Dante ever read the *Historia Ecclesiastica*? It is highly probable that he did not. In strict logic, the inclusion of the name *Beda* (conveniently disyllabic for the line) in an inventory of theologians proves little. In the Middle Ages, people trusted other people; it was not compulsory to have read the learned Anglo-Saxon's volumes in order to acknowledge his authority, as it was not compulsory to have read the Homeric poems, closed off in an almost secret language, to know that Homer ("*Mira colui con quella spada in mano*" [Note him there with sword in hand]) could well be chief among Ovid, Lucan, and Horace. Another observation may be made, as well. For us, Bede is a historian of England; to his medieval readers he was a commentator on Scripture, a rhetorician, and a chronologist. There was no reason for a history of the then rather vague entity called England to have had any particular attraction for Dante.

Whether or not Dante knew of the visions recorded by Bede is less important than the fact that Bede considered them worthy of remembrance and included them in his book. A great book like the *Divina commedia* is not the isolated or random caprice of an individual; many men and many generations built toward it. To investigate its precursors is not to subject oneself to a miserable drudgery of legal or detective work; it is to examine the movements, probings, adventures, glimmers, and premonitions of the human spirit.

[1945–51/1957] *[EA]*

Purgatorio I, 13

Like all abstract words, the word *metaphor* is a metaphor; in Greek it means "transfer." Metaphors generally consist of two terms, one of which is briefly transformed into the other. Thus, the Saxons called the sea the "whale's path" or the "swan's path." In the first example, the whale's hugeness corresponds to the hugeness of the sea; in the second, the swan's smallness contrasts with the vastness of the sea. We will never know if the inventors of these metaphors were aware of these connotations. Line 60 of Canto I of the *Inferno* reads: "*mi ripigneva là dove'l sol tace*" [she pushed me back to where the sun is silent].

"Where the sun is silent": the auditory verb expresses a visual image, as in the famous hexameter of the *Aeneid:* "*a Tenedo, tacitae per amica silentia lunae*" [from Tenedos, silently in the quiet friendship of the moon].

Beyond discussing the fusion of two terms, my present purpose is to examine three curious lines.

The first is line 13 of Canto I of the *Purgatorio:* "*Dolce color d'oriental zaffiro*" [Sweet hue of oriental sapphire].

Buti explains that the sapphire is a precious stone, of a color between sky blue and azure, most delightful to the eyes, and that the oriental sapphire is a variety found in Media.

In the aforementioned line, Dante suggests the color of the East, the Orient, by a sapphire that includes the Orient in its name. He thus implies a reciprocal play that may well be infinite.[1]

[1]We read in the initial strophe of Góngora's *Soledades*:

Era del año la estación florida
en que el mantido robador de Europa,
media luna las armas de su frente
y el Sol todos los rayos de su pelo

In Byron's *Hebrew Melodies* (1815), I have discovered a similar artifice: "She walks in beauty, like the night."

To accept this line, the reader must imagine a tall, dark woman who walks like the Night, which, in turn, is a tall, dark woman, and so on to infinity. [2]

The third example is from Robert Browning. He includes it in the dedication to his vast dramatic poem, *The Ring and the Book* (1868): "O lyric Love, half angel and half bird . . ."

The poet says that Elizabeth Barrett, who has died, is half angel and half bird, but an angel is already half bird, and thus a subdivision is proposed that may be interminable.

I do not know whether to include in this casual anthology Milton's controversial line (*Paradise Lost* IV, 323): "the fairest of her daughters, Eve."

To the intellect, the line is absurd, but not, perhaps, to the imagination.

[1945–51/1982] *[EA]*

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luciente honor del cielo,
en campos de zafiros pasce estrellas.

[It was in the year's flowery season/that Europa's cloaked abductor/his arms a half-moon on his brow/and all the rays of his hair the Sun/glittering honor of the sky/ in fields of sapphires grazes on stars.]

The line from the *Purgatorio* is delicate; that of the *Soledades*, deliberately clamorous.

[2]Baudelaire writes, in *"Recueillement"*: *"Entends, ma chère, entends, la douce Nuit qui marche"* [Hear, my darling, hear, the sweet Night who walks]. The silent walking of the night should not be heard.

The Simurgh and the Eagle

Literarily speaking, what might be derived from the notion of a being composed of other beings, a bird, say, made up of birds?[1] Thus formulated, the problem appears to allow for merely trivial, if not actively unpleasant, solutions. One might suppose its possibilities to have been exhausted by the multiply feathered, eyed, tongued, and eared "*monstrum horrendum ingens*" [vast, horrible monster] that personifies Fame (or Scandal or Rumor) in Book IV of the *Aeneid*, or that strange king made of men who occupies the frontispiece of the *Leviathan*, armed with sword and staff. Francis Bacon (*Essays*, 1625) praised the first of these images; Chaucer and Shakespeare imitated it; no one, today, considers it any better than the "beast Acheron" who, according to the fifty-odd manuscripts of the *Visio Tundali*, stores sinners in the roundness of its belly, where they are tormented by dogs, bears, lions, wolves, and vipers.

In the abstract, the concept of a being composed of other beings does not appear promising: yet, in incredible fashion, one of the most memorable figures of Western literature, and another of Eastern literature, correspond to it. The purpose of this brief note is to describe these marvelous fictions, one conceived in Italy, the other in Nishapur.

The first is in Canto XVIII of the *Paradiso*. In his journey through the concentric heavens, Dante observes a greater happiness in Beatrice's eyes and greater power in her beauty, and realizes that they have ascended from the ruddy heaven of Mars to the heaven of Jupiter. In the broader arc of this sphere, where the light is white, celestial creatures sing and fly, successively forming the letters of the phrase DILIGITE IUSTITIAM and the shape of an eagle's head, not copied from earthly eagles, of course, but directly manu-

[1] Similarly, in Leibniz' *Monadology* (1714), we read that the universe consists of inferior universes, which in turn contain the universe, and so on *ad infinitum*.

factured by the Spirit. Then the whole of the eagle shines forth: it is composed of thousands of just kings. An unmistakable symbol of Empire, it speaks with a single voice, and says "I" rather than "we" (*Paradiso* XIX, 11). An ancient problem vexed Dante's conscience: Is it not unjust of God to damn, for lack of faith, a man of exemplary life who was born on the bank of the Indus and could know nothing of Jesus? The Eagle answers with the obscurity appropriate to a divine revelation: it censures such foolhardy questioning, repeats that faith in the Redeemer is indispensable, and suggests that God may have instilled this faith in certain virtuous pagans. It avers that among the blessed are the Emperor Trajan and Ripheus the Trojan, the former having lived just after and the latter before the Cross.[2] (Though resplendent in the fourteenth century, the Eagle's appearance is less effective in the twentieth, which generally reserves glowing eagles and tall, fiery letters for commercial propaganda. Cf. Chesterton, *What I Saw in America*, 1922.)

That anyone has ever been able to surpass one of the great figures of the *Commedia* seems incredible, and rightly so: nevertheless, the feat has occurred. A century after Dante imagined the emblem of the Eagle, Farid al-Din Attar, a Persian of the Sufi sect, conceived of the strange Simurgh (Thirty Birds), which implicitly encompasses and improves upon it. Farid al-Din Attar was born in Nishapur,[3] land of turquoises and swords. In Persian, Attar means "he who traffics in drugs." In the *Lives of the Poets*, we read that such indeed was his trade. One afternoon, a dervish entered the apothecary's shop, looked over its many jars and pillboxes, and began to weep. Attar, astonished and disturbed, begged him to leave. The dervish answered: "It costs me nothing to go, since I carry nothing with me. As for you, it will cost you greatly to say good-bye to the treasures I see here." Attar's heart went as cold as camphor. The dervish left, but the next morning, Attar abandoned his shop and the labors of this world.

A pilgrim to Mecca, he crossed Egypt, Syria, Turkestan, and the north of India; on his return, he gave himself over to literary composition and the fervent contemplation of God. It is a fact of some renown that he left

[2]Pompeo Venturi disapproves of the election of Ripheus, a personage who until this apotheosis had existed only in a few lines of the *Aeneid* (II, 339, 426). Virgil declares him the most just of the Trojans and adds to the report of his end the resigned ellipsis: "*Dies aliter visum*" [The gods ruled otherwise]. There is not another trace of him in all of literature. Perhaps Dante chose him as a symbol by virtue of his vagueness. Cf. the commentaries of Casini (1921) and Guido Vitali (1943).

[3]Katibi, author of the *Confluence of the Two Seas*, declared: "I am of the garden of Nishapur, like Attar, but I am the thorn of Nishapur and he was the rose."

behind twenty thousand distichs: his works are entitled *The Book of the Nightingale, The Book of Adversity, The Book of Instruction, The Book of Mysteries, The Book of Divine Knowledge, The Lives of the Saints, The King and the Rose, A Declaration of Wonders,* and the extraordinary *Conference of the Birds (Mantiq al-Tayr).* In the last years of his life, which is said to have reached a span of one hundred and ten years, he renounced all worldly pleasures, including those of versification. He was put to death by the soldiers of Tule, son of Genghis Khan. The vast image I have alluded to is the basis of the *Mantiq al-Tayr,* the plot of which is as follows:

The faraway king of all the birds, the Simurgh, lets fall a magnificent feather in the center of China: tired of their age-old anarchy, the birds resolve to go in search of him. They know that their king's name means thirty birds; they know his palace is located on the Kaf, the circular mountain that surrounds the earth.

They embark upon the nearly infinite adventure. They pass through seven valleys or seas; the name of the penultimate is Vertigo; the last, Annihilation. Many pilgrims give up; others perish. Thirty, purified by their efforts, set foot on the mountain of the Simurgh. At last they gaze upon it: they perceive that they are the Simurgh and that the Simurgh is each one of them and all of them. In the Simurgh are the thirty birds and in each bird is the Simurgh.[4] (Plotinus, too—*The Enneads* V, 8.4—asserts a paradisiacal extension of the principle of identity: "Everywhere in the intelligible heaven is all, and all is all and each all. The sun, there, is all the stars; and every star, again, is all the stars and sun.")

The disparity between the Eagle and the Simurgh is no less obvious than their resemblance. The Eagle is merely implausible; the Simurgh, impossible. The individuals who make up the Eagle are not lost in it (David serves as the pupil of one eye; Trajan, Ezekiel, and Constantine as brows); the birds that gaze upon the Simurgh are at the same time the Simurgh. The Eagle is a transitory symbol, as were the letters before it; those who form its shape with their bodies do not cease to be who they are: the ubiquitous

[4]Silvina Ocampo (*Espacios métricos,* 12) has put this episode into verse:

Era Dios ese pájaro como un enorme espejo:
los contenía a todos; no era un mero reflejo.
En sus plumas hallaron cada uno sus plumas
en los ojos, los ojos con memorias de plumas.

[Like an enormous mirror this bird was God:/containing them all, and not a mere reflection./In his feathers each one found his own feathers/in his eyes, their eyes with memories of feathers.]

Simurgh is inextricable. Behind the Eagle is the personal God of Israel and Rome; behind the magical Simurgh is pantheism.

A final observation. The imaginative power of the legend of the Simurgh is apparent to all; less pronounced, but no less real, is its rigor and economy. The pilgrims go forth in search of an unknown goal; this goal, which will be revealed only at the end, must arouse wonder and not be or appear to be merely added on. The author finds his way out of this difficulty with classical elegance; adroitly, the searchers are what they seek. In identical fashion, David is the secret protagonist of the story told him by Nathan (II Samuel 12); in identical fashion, De Quincey has proposed that the individual man Oedipus, and not man in general, is the profound solution to the riddle of the Theban Sphinx.

[1948] *[EA]*

The Meeting in a Dream

Having traversed the circles of Hell and the arduous terraces of Purgatory, Dante, now in the earthly Paradise, sees Beatrice at last. Ozanam speculates that this scene (certainly one of the most astonishing that literature has achieved) is the primal nucleus of the *Commedia.* My purpose here is to narrate the scene, summarize the comments of the scholiasts, and make an observation—perhaps a new one—of a psychological nature.

On the morning of the thirteenth day of April of the year 1300, the penultimate day of his journey, Dante, his labors complete, enters the earthly Paradise that crowns the summit of Purgatory. He has seen the temporal fire and the eternal, he has crossed through a wall of flame, his will is free and upright. Virgil has crowned and mitred him over himself (*"per ch'io te sovra te corono e mitrio"*). Along the paths of the ancient garden he reaches a river purer than any other, though the trees allow neither sun nor moon to shine on it. A melody runs through the air, and on the other bank a mysterious procession advances. Twenty-four elders, dressed in white garments, and four animals, each plumed with six wings that are studded with open eyes, go before a triumphal chariot drawn by a griffin; on the right are three women, dancing, one of them so red that in a fire she would barely be visible to us; to the left are four more women, dressed in purple, one of them with three eyes. The coach stops, and a veiled woman appears; her dress is the color of living flame. Not by sight, but by the bewilderment of his spirit and the fear in his blood, Dante understands that she is Beatrice. On the threshold of Glory, he feels the love that so often had pierced him in Florence. Like an abashed child, he seeks Virgil's protection, but Virgil is no longer next to him.

Ma Virgilia n'avea lasciati scemi
di sè, Virgilio dolcissimo patre,

Virgilio a cui per mia salute die'mi.
[But Virgil had left us bereft/of himself, Virgil sweetest father,/Virgil to whom I gave myself for my salvation.]

Beatrice calls out his name imperiously. She tells him he should not be weeping for Virgil's disappearance but for his own sins. She asks him ironically how he has condescended to set foot in a place where man is happy. The air has become populated with angels; Beatrice, implacable, enumerates the errors of Dante's ways to them. She says she searched for him in dreams, but in vain, for he had fallen so low that there was no other means for his salvation except to show him the eternally damned. Dante lowers his eyes, mortified; he stammers and weeps. As the fabulous beings listen, Beatrice forces him to make a public confession. . . . Such, in my bad prose, is the aching scene of the first meeting with Beatrice in Paradise. It is curious, as Theophil Spoerri observes (*Einführung in die Göttliche Komödie,* Zurich, 1946): "Undoubtedly Dante himself had envisioned this meeting differently. Nothing in the preceding pages indicates that the greatest humiliation of his life awaits him there."

The commentators decipher the scene figure by figure. The four and twenty preliminary elders of Revelations 4:4 are the twenty-four books of the Old Testament, according to St. Jerome's *Prologus Galeatus.* The animals with six wings are the apostles (Tommaseo) or the Gospels (Lombardi). The six wings are the six laws (Pietro di Dante) or the dispersion of holy doctrine in the six directions of space (Francesco da Buti). The chariot is the universal Church; its two wheels are the two Testaments (Buti) or the active and the contemplative life (Benvenuto da Imola) or St. Dominic and St. Francis (*Paradiso* XII, 106–11) or Justice and Pity (Luigi Pietrobono). The griffin—lion and eagle—is Christ, because of the hypostatic union of the Word with human nature; Didron maintains that it is the Pope "who as pontiff or eagle rises to the throne of God to receive his orders and like a lion or king walks the earth with strength and vigor." The women who dance on the right are the theological virtues; those who dance on the left are the cardinal virtues. The woman with three eyes is Prudence, who sees past, present, and future. Beatrice emerges and Virgil disappears because Virgil is reason and Beatrice faith. Also, according to Vitali, because classical culture was replaced by Christian culture.

The interpretations I have mentioned are undoubtedly worthy of consideration. In logical (not poetic) terms they provide an amply rigorous justification of the text's ambiguous features. Carlo Steiner, after supporting

certain of them, writes: "A woman with three eyes is a monster, but the Poet does not submit here to the restraints of art, because it matters much more to him to express the moralities he holds dear. Unmistakable proof that in the soul of this greatest of artists, it was not art that occupied the first place, but love of the Good." Less effusively, Vitali corroborates this view: "His zeal for allegorizing drives Dante to inventions of dubious beauty."

Two facts seem to me to be indisputable. Dante wanted the procession to be beautiful (*"Non che Roma di carro così bello, rallegrasse Affricano"* [Not only did Rome with a chariot so splendid never gladden an Africanus]) and the procession is of a convoluted ugliness. A griffin tied to a chariot, animals with wings that are spotted with open eyes, a green woman, another who is crimson, another with three eyes, a man walking in his sleep: such things seem better suited to the circles of the Inferno than to the realms of Glory. Their horror is undiminished even by the fact that some of these figures proceed from the books of the prophets (*"ma leggi Ezechiel che li dipigne"* [but read Ezekiel who depicts them]) and others from the Revelation of St. John. My reproach is not an anachronism; the other paradisiacal scenes exclude any element of the monstrous.[1]

All the commentators have emphasized Beatrice's severity; some, the ugliness of certain emblems. For me, both anomalies derive from a common origin. This is obviously no more than a conjecture, which I will sketch out in a few words.

To fall in love is to create a religion with a fallible god. That Dante professed an idolatrous adoration for Beatrice is a truth that cannot be contradicted; that she once mocked and on another occasion snubbed him are facts registered in the *Vita nuova.* Some would maintain that these facts are the images of others; if so, this would further reinforce our certainty of an unhappy and superstitious love. With Beatrice dead, Beatrice lost forever, Dante, to assuage his sorrow, played with the fiction of meeting her again. It is my belief that he constructed the triple architecture of his poem in order to insert this encounter into it. What then happened is what often happens in dreams: they are stained by sad obstructions. Such was Dante's case. Forever denied Beatrice, he dreamed of Beatrice, but dreamed her as terribly severe, dreamed her as inaccessible, dreamed her in a chariot pulled by a

[1]Having written this, I read in the glosses of Francesco Torraca that in a certain Italian bestiary the griffin is a symbol of the devil *("Per lo Grifone intendo lo nemico").* I don't know if it is permissible to add that in the Exeter Codex, the panther, a beast with a melodious voice and delicate breath, is a symbol of the Redeemer.

lion that was a bird and that was all bird or all lion while Beatrice's eyes were awaiting him (*Purgatorio* XXXI, 121). Such images can prefigure a nightmare; and it is a nightmare that begins here and will expand in the next canto. Beatrice disappears; an eagle, a she-fox, and a dragon attack the chariot, and its wheels and body grow feathers: the chariot then sprouts seven heads ("*Trasformato così 'l dificio santo/mise fuor teste*" [Thus transformed, the holy structure put forth heads upon its parts]); a giant and a harlot usurp Beatrice's place.[2]

Beatrice existed infinitely for Dante. Dante very little, perhaps not at all, for Beatrice. All of us tend to forget, out of pity, out of veneration, this grievous discord which for Dante was unforgettable. Reading and rereading the vicissitudes of his illusory meeting, I think of the two lovers that Alighieri dreamed in the hurricane of the second circle and who, whether or not he understood or wanted them to be, were obscure emblems of the joy he did not attain. I think of Paolo and Francesca, forever united in their Inferno: "*questi, che mai da me non fia diviso*" [this one, who never shall be parted from me]. With appalling love, with anxiety, with admiration, with envy.

[1948] *[EA]*

[2]It could be objected that such ugliness is the reverse of a preceding "Beauty." Of course, but it is significant. . . . Allegorically, the eagle's aggression represents the first persecutions; the she-fox, heresy; the dragon, Satan or Mohammed or the Antichrist; the heads, the deadly sins (Benvenuto da Imola) or the sacraments (Buti); the giant, Philippe IV, known as Philippe le Beau, king of France.

Beatrice's Last Smile

My intention is to comment on the most moving lines literature has achieved. They form part of Canto XXXI of the *Paradiso*, and although they are well known, no one seems to have discerned the weight of sorrow that is in them; no one has fully heard them. True, the tragic substance they contain belongs less to the work than to the author of the work, less to Dante the protagonist than to Dante the author or inventor.

Here is the situation. On the summit of the mountain of Purgatory, Dante loses Virgil. Guided by Beatrice, whose beauty increases with each new circle they reach, he journeys from sphere to concentric sphere until he emerges into the one that encircles all the others, the Primum Mobile. At his feet are the fixed stars; beyond them is the empyrean, no longer the corporeal heaven, but now the eternal heaven, made only of light. They ascend to the empyrean; in this infinite region (as on the canvases of the pre-Raphaelites) distant forms are as sharply distinct as those close by. Dante sees a high river of light, sees bands of angels, sees the manifold rose of paradise formed by the souls of the just, arranged in the shape of an amphitheater. He is suddenly aware that Beatrice has left him. He sees her on high, in one of the circles of the Rose. Like a man who raises his eyes to the thundering heavens from the depths of the sea, he worships and implores her. He gives thanks to her for her beneficent pity and commends his soul to her. The text then says:

> *Così orai; e quella, sì lontana*
> *come parea, sorrise e riguardommi;*
> *poi si tornò all'etterna fontana.*
>
> [So did I pray; and she, so distant/as she seemed, smiled and looked on me, / then turned again to the eternal fountain.]

How to interpret this? The allegorists tell us: reason (Virgil) is an instrument for attaining faith; faith (Beatrice), an instrument for attaining divinity; both are lost once their end is achieved. This explanation, as the reader will have observed, is as irreproachable as it is frigid; never could these lines have emerged from so paltry a schema.

The commentaries I have examined see in Beatrice's smile no more than a symbol of acquiescence. "Final gaze, final smile, but certain promise," Francesco Torraca notes. "She smiles to tell Dante his prayer has been granted; she looks at him to bear witness to him once again of the love she has for him," Luigi Pietrobono confirms. This assertion (shared by Casini) strikes me as apt, but obviously it only grazes the surface of the scene.

Ozanam (*Dante et la philosophie catholique,* 1895) believes that Beatrice's apotheosis was the primal subject of the *Commedia;* Guido Vitali wonders if Dante, in creating his Paradise, was moved, above all, by the prospect of founding a kingdom for his lady. A famous passage of the *Vita nuova* ("I hope to say of her what has never been said of any woman") justifies or allows for this conjecture. I would go further. I suspect that Dante constructed the best book literature has achieved in order to interpolate into it a few encounters with the irrecuperable Beatrice. More exactly, the circles of damnation and the austral Purgatory and the nine concentric circles and the siren and the griffin and Bertrand de Born are the interpolations; a smile and a voice—that he knows to be lost—are what is fundamental. At the beginning of the *Vita nuova* we read that once, in a letter, he listed sixty women's names in order to slip in among them, in secret, the name of Beatrice. I think he repeats this melancholy game in the *Commedia.*

There is nothing unusual about a wretch who imagines joy; all of us, every day, do the same. Dante does as we do, but something always allows us to catch sight of the horror concealed by these glad fictions. A poem by Chesterton speaks of "nightmares of delight"; this oxymoron more or less defines the tercet of the *Paradiso* I have cited. But in Chesterton's phrase the emphasis is on the word *delight;* in the tercet, on *nightmare.*

Let us reconsider the scene. Dante, with Beatrice at his side, is in the empyrean. Above them, immeasurable, arches the Rose of the just. The Rose is distant, but the forms that people it are sharply defined. This contradiction, though justified by the poet (*Paradiso* XXX, 118), is perhaps the first indication of an inner discord. All at once Beatrice is no longer beside him. An elder has taken her place: *"credea ver Beatrice, e vidi un sene"* [I thought to see Beatrice, and I saw an elder]. Dante is barely able to ask

where Beatrice is: *"Ov'è ella?"* he cries. The old man shows him one of the circles of the lofty Rose. There, in an aureole of reflected glory, is Beatrice; Beatrice, whose gaze used to suffuse him with intolerable beatitude; Beatrice, who used to dress in red; Beatrice, whom he thought of so constantly that he was astonished by the idea that some pilgrims he saw one morning in Florence had never heard speak of her; Beatrice, who once refused to greet him; Beatrice, who died at the age of twenty-four; Beatrice de Folco Portinari, who married Bardi. Dante gazes at her on high; the azure firmament is no farther from the lowest depths of the sea than she is from him. Dante prays, as if to God, but also as if to a longed-for woman:

> *O donna in cui la mia speranza vige,*
> *e che soffristi per la mia salute*
> *in inferno lasciar le tue vestige*
>
> [O lady, in whom my hope is strong,/and who for my salvation did endure/to leave in Hell your footprints]

Beatrice looks at him a moment and smiles, then turns away toward the eternal fountain of light.

Francesco De Sanctis (*Storia della letteratura italiana* VII) understands the passage thus: "When Beatrice withdraws, Dante does not utter a single lament: all earthly residue in him has been consumed and destroyed." This is true if we think of the poet's intention; erroneous, if we think of his emotion.

We must keep one incontrovertible fact in mind, a single, humble fact: the scene was *imagined* by Dante. For us, it is very real; for him, it was less so. (The reality, for him, was that first life and then death had taken Beatrice from him.) Forever absent from Beatrice, alone and perhaps humiliated, he imagined the scene in order to imagine he was with her. Unhappily for him, happily for the centuries that would read him, his consciousness that the meeting was imaginary distorted the vision. Hence the appalling circumstances, all the more infernal for taking place in the empyrean: the disappearance of Beatrice, the elder who replaces her, her abrupt elevation to the Rose, the fleetingness of her glance and smile, the eternal turning away of the face.[1] The horror shows through in the words: *come parea* refers to *lontana* but contaminates *sorrise,* and therefore Longfellow could translate, in his 1867 version:

[1]The Blessed Damozel painted by Rossetti, who had translated the *Vita nuova,* is also unhappy in paradise.

Thus I implored; and she, so far away,
Smiled as it seemed, and looked once more at me . . .

And *eterna* seems to contaminate *si tornò.*

[1945–51/1982] *[EA]*