DANTE
and the
BLESSED VIRGIN

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One of the marvels of art is that our appreciation of it does not require that we share the outlook of the artist. There must, of course, be sympathy, and more than sympathy, with the protagonist and with his manner of viewing his plight. A reader in the third millennium can be drawn into a Greek tragedy and experience the anguish of a character whose culture is utterly alien to his own. Explanations of this have been advanced. It requires a willing suspension of disbelief, a dismissal of the differences, and then immersion in a plot involving decisions almost wholly foreign in their weight and gravitas to those that engage the latter-day reader. Almost wholly foreign. What counterpart in our times could there be, pace Freud, to the dilemma of Oedipus? Nonetheless, it may well be said that beneath the undeniable strangeness is the note of familiarity, a familiarity due to our common humanity. The great imaginative works bring about in us a sense of affinity with agents living in cultural circumstances long since gone.

But we need not appeal only to the chronologically distant. When we read Conrad’s Heart of Darkness, the mesmerizing voice of the narrator establishes a rapport with such a one as Kurtz, a Kurtz who, alive or dead, we could never be. Moreover, we grasp the contrast between a Europe that no longer exists and a colonial Africa that is no more. It seems not to matter at all that those referents no longer exist.
Call our empathy aesthetic, in the best sense of the term. For the duration of the story, we sense and feel that the protagonist is ourselves and we are him. We reach across the differences and in some way we are one with Kurtz, *notre semblable, notre frère*.

I think, too, of Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach.” One who does not share the poet’s interpretation of the way in which Christianity is the putative casualty of nineteenth-century philology and science can nonetheless occupy the outlook of the poem and be stirred.

The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth’s shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.

One can argue with Arnold’s prose work on these matters, but the argument of the poem requires only our responding to the feelings that would accompany holding Arnold’s melancholy views, and we experience a similar *frisson*.

Great imaginative works enable us to sense a common humanity with those with whom we have almost nothing else in common. But it would not do to suggest that there is just some residue of common nature that remains when all the differences have been thought away. Appreciation of the story requires that, for a time, we take on an outlook and occupy circumstances that have little to do with our own lives.

All this is fanfare for the way we read Dante. I have sometimes been struck, at meetings of medievalists, by the way in which the beliefs of those long ago days are discussed with perceptiveness and intelligence, but also with the unstated sense that we are dealing with matters no longer believed, indeed, incredible. Aesthetically, from the vantage point of the scholar, surpassed attitudes can be reoccupied and things said of pith and moment. Once, however, I listened to a somewhat facetious talk having to do with medieval Eucharistic
treatises, and it occurred to me to remark that there were those of us in the audience who shared the beliefs of the authors of those treatises. This was not criticism, nor was it an irrelevant remark. I have come to think that there can be an advantage—it is a possibility only, nothing inevitable—in sharing the deepest beliefs of an author whose assumptions must otherwise be taken on only in an aesthetic and scholarly way.

Dantisti, as a group, seem to me to be a very special breed of scholar. Those whom I have come most to admire, whatever their personal attitude toward the Catholic faith that animates all the work of the great Florentine, seem to possess an uncanny ability to enter into Dante’s world in a way that strains against a merely aesthetic identification. Chaucer makes fewer demands in this regard, I think, and of course Shakespeare is notoriously ambiguous as to his own beliefs. But there is no such doubt possible in the case of Dante. He is inescapably and thoroughly Catholic. A Catholic who reads him, one who shares the same faith, can be in a privileged position.

It would be absurd, of course, to suggest that believing as Dante does enables one, just for that reason, to better appreciate him. It would be absurd to suggest that all the Dantisti who do not share the great Florentine’s faith are thereby consigned to some outer darkness. And some scholars, such as Etienne Gilson and Ernest Fortin, have argued from a Catholic perspective for the heterodoxy of Dante’s Catholicism. For all that, the theme of this little book, Dante and the Blessed Virgin, provides a Catholic reader with a unique opportunity to respond to this central element of the great poet’s work in a way that goes far beyond scholarly or aesthetic appreciation. It is somewhat like the different ways in which a believing or nonbelieving reader responds to Gerard Manley Hopkins’s poem “The Blessed Virgin Compared to the Air We Breathe,” which ends:

Be thou then, O thou dear
Mother, my atmosphere;

...........................

World-mothering air, air wild,
Wound with thee, in thee isled,
Fold home, fast fold thy child.
I have found a few works devoted explicitly to the role of the Blessed Virgin in Dante, not all of them by Catholics. There is a little book of Hellmut Schnackenburg, a marvelous study by Jaroslav Pelikan, and moving little books by Domenico Bassi and Renato Nicodemo. They are, in their different ways, edifying. That is what Dante aimed at explicitly in the *Divine Comedy*: to move us from the misery of sin to the happiness of salvation. And he emphasized the essential providential role of Mary in helping us to make that transition.

The Catholic can see Dante’s devotion to the Blessed Virgin in warm continuity with his or her own beliefs and practices. Central as Mary is to the *Divine Comedy*, she has become even more central in Catholic belief in the centuries since it was written. In the seventeenth century, St. Louis-Marie Grignion de Montfort wrote that the role of Mary in the life of the Church would become ever more pronounced in what he called “these last days.” And Father Frederick Faber ended his preface to the English translation of de Montfort’s work with a prayer for the “speedy coming of that great age of the Church which is to be the Age of Mary!” The prophesy has been fulfilled and the prayer answered. Pope John Paul II’s personal motto—“Totus tuus sum Maria” (Mary, I am all yours)—had a Montfortian ring to it.

The nineteenth century saw the Catholic definition of Mary’s Immaculate Conception and the twentieth century the definition of the Assumption of Mary, body and soul, into heaven. We might link the first with Mary’s appearance to Bernadette at Lourdes in the mid-nineteenth century, where she identified herself as “I am the Immaculate Conception.” There is less of a link between the dogma of the Assumption and the visions of Mary by three shepherd children at Fatima, Portugal, in the early twentieth, but the official Church sanction of those apparitions is eloquent of Mary’s unique role in our salvation. Perhaps the present century will see the definition of Mary as Mediatrix of all Graces. Such definitions are a corroboration of the faith of the Church. Dante and millions of others believed these truths about Mary without any official definition of them.

Some have responded to these definitions as if they were novelties introduced into Christian faith, but they are not. Ours is an
apostolic faith, and our beliefs accordingly must be in warm and essential continuation with the deposit of faith entrusted to the Apostles. Any conception of the development of doctrine that ignored this connection would be wrong. One of the saddest things in human history has been the divisions among those who are Christians. No one, I think, addressed the misgivings of non-Catholics to the development of Marian doctrine more effectively than Charles De Koninck.\(^3\)

As a very young man, he wrote a little book addressing the way in which certain scriptural passages from the Canticle of Canticles and from the Wisdom books are applied to the Blessed Virgin Mary in the liturgy.\(^4\) One could make a small florilegium of those attributions from the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin. And of course, there is the Litany of the Blessed Virgin. To find such devotion to Mary, such insistence on her unique role, excessive is to fail to see the nature of the history of salvation.

~ I would have been less than frank if I had not begun with these few animadversions, which explain, if they do not justify, why such an amateur as myself would dare to produce yet another book on Dante. Jorge Luis Borges, a lapsed Catholic but perhaps at the end reconciled, like Dante’s figure of Buonconte in the *Purgatorio*, said this with reference to the essay “Introduction à un poème sur Dante” by Paul Claudel: “Claudel has written—in a page unworthy of Paul Claudel—that the spectacles awaiting us after death will no doubt little resemble those that Dante showed us in the *Inferno*, the *Purgatorio*, and the *Paradiso*.”\(^5\) That is a large subject, and there is much with which one might quibble in this essay by that greatest of modern Catholic poets,\(^6\) but there is also much in it to ponder and to praise, not least Claudel’s comparison of a *philosophia perennis* and a *poesis perennis*, the latter exemplified by Dante and the *Comedy*. Few things could be more profitable than comparing Santayana’s *Three Philosophical Poets* and this essay of Paul Claudel. Poets like Claudel are in the direct line from Dante Alighieri.

Like his great predecessor, John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI has taken to ending his encyclicals with an explicit reference to the Blessed Virgin. The final paragraph of *Spe Salvi (Saved in Hope)* is
entitled “Mary, Star of Hope.” Benedict begins with a discussion of the *Ave maris stella* and links Mary’s role to the stars by which sailors would navigate the sea. Life is a journey, and “Who more than Mary could be a star of hope for us? With her ‘yes’ she opened the door of our world to God himself; she became the living Ark of the Covenant, in whom God took flesh, became one of us, and pitched his tent among us (cf. John 1:14).”
Prosaic language easily gives way to translation, to a restatement in equally impersonal words. Euclid alone may have looked on beauty bare, as Edna St. Vincent Millay said, but who has not learned his Euclid in translation? Logicians speak disdainfully of natural languages, supposedly ripe with ambiguity, and urge upon us the merits of their austere p’s and q’s. But there are uses of language which resist being turned into another form, let alone another language. Preeminent among them is poetry. Whenever language is something other than a pure medium, what is being said becomes inseparable from the how.

For many years I taught a course called “Dante and Aquinas.” St. Thomas attracts translators in the dozens; it is difficult to resist the temptation to carry over into English that limpid prose. Having succumbed to it myself, I have learned how difficult a task translation can be. It can be done, more or less well or badly, but the conviction grows on the reader of the Divine Comedy that, while this work may be disguised in other languages, it resists the effort. Nevertheless, translations of Dante multiply, although every translator seems somewhat sheepish about what he or she has done. The suggestion is that while the reader may make do with Dante in English, or French, or German, finally, Dante can speak to us only in the original.
In the course I mentioned I was always concerned that the students had before them the originals, Thomas in Latin and Dante in Italian. This was not meant to turn them into pedants but rather to provide the occasion for hearing the original voices of our two authors. In recent years, Patrick Gardner served as my course assistant and generously offered to give quick crash courses in Latin and Italian—in the evenings, with attendance quite voluntary. All but one or two students availed themselves of that opportunity. It takes a long time before one can easily read the Comedy in the original, much less all the explanatory notes. But one can, like T. S. Eliot, begin reading Dante even before knowing any Italian, enjoying its music before grasping its meaning.

In what follows, I almost always provide the original Italian of Dante before an English version of it. Unless otherwise noted, these English translations are my own. The originals on which I rely are


English translations of St. Thomas Aquinas and other Latin and Italian sources are also my own. Biblical quotations generally follow *The Holy Bible,* New American Catholic Edition (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1952). In referring to Psalms I provide the Vulgate number and the alternate numbering of the Hebrew text.
Abbreviations in the chapters include:

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