

The Use of Dante as an Illustrator of Scripture.

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FEW phenomena in literary history are more remarkable than the modern growth of interest in Dante, to which the large and still growing number of editions, translations, commentaries, studies, and essays bearing on his works, gives unimpeachable testimony. It is therefore always possible as to any of the more educated congregations in our churches, that it may contain a few real and painstaking students of the *Divina Commedia*; and it is fairly certain that such a congregation will contain more than a few persons who have some knowledge of parts of the poem, and who wish and intend to increase that knowledge. To both these classes allusions and references to Dante, as well as direct quotations from him, are always interesting; many preachers must have noticed how the very mention of his name has arrested and stimulated attention among their hearers.

It may therefore be practically useful to call attention to some of the ways in which, as it seems to the present writer, Dante may be used as a source for illustrations of those scriptural truths which form the basis and the main substance of our teaching. And the endeavour will be to select such illustrations as would be intelligible to a congregation generally, though they may have a special fulness of meaning for those who have some previous knowledge of Dante.

An article on 'Dante as an *Interpreter* of Scripture' would seem to accord better with the name and the scope of THE EXPOSITORY TIMES, and it would certainly be more interesting and attractive, from a literary point of view, than the treatment of him merely as an 'illustrator of Scripture.' But it would have far less of the practical usefulness which is here aimed at. For his exclusive employment of the text of the Vulgate, and his unquestioning acceptance of the strange processes of allegorical interpretation and application, which in his days were generally recognized as valid, render much of his exégesis unsuitable for modern needs. But as expressing in concrete and pictorial forms the moral and spiritual truths of Scripture, and thus as *illustrat-*

ing Scripture, his homiletical value will be always very great.

I.

It is to the *Purgatorio* that we must turn for the most numerous and the most helpful of such illustrations. And this for two reasons. First, because the references to the Bible are far more numerous here than in the *Inferno*, and somewhat more numerous than in the *Paradiso*; the numbers of such references being, according to Dr. Moore (*Studies in Dante*, i. 359 ff.), in the *Inferno* 63, in the *Purgatorio* 128, and in the *Paradiso* 111. And, secondly, because the *Paradiso*, though numerically, as we have just seen, not far behind the *Purgatorio* in its use of the Bible, has far less bearing on those needs and trials and temptations of daily life upon which we wish to bring the words of the Bible to bear. It is of the *Purgatorio* alone that it can be said, in the words of Dean Church, that it is 'a great parable of the *discipline on earth* of moral agents, of the variety of their failures and needs, of the variety of their remedies.'¹

That sentence admirably expresses two leading characteristics of the *Purgatorio*, which combine in fitting it for modern and practical use. (a) The sufferings which it portrays are throughout disciplinary and remedial; they are to last only so long as they are needed for the sufferer's good, and therefore they need bring into our minds no suggestion of that stern and terrible eschatology of the *Inferno* which is summed up in its best known line, 'All hope abandon ye who enter here,' and from the positiveness of which we all shrink now, whether we are among those who more firmly or more 'faintly trust the larger hope.' (b) Then, again, those disciplinary and remedial sufferings may be taken as forming, and, indeed, as being intended by Dante to form, 'a great parable of the discipline' on earth of moral agents.' For he represents his Purgatory as providing 'the opportunity that was missed' in life for cultivating and acquiring that holiness of

¹ Introduction to Vernon's *Readings on the Purgatorio*, p. xiii.

character without which no man can see God.¹ As to whether, and to what extent, and by what means, such opportunity will be granted to men beyond the grave, most of us will prefer to be silent in our teaching, even if we are unable to be simply negative; we shall be impressed by the complete reticence of Scripture (1 Co 3¹³⁻¹⁵ being certainly no exception) on the matter, and by the practical evils which followed upon the substitution for such reticence of 'the Romish doctrine concerning Purgatory [and] Pardons,' even if we cannot altogether repress our belief that there must be for many of the redeemed some kind of further training and purification. But be this as it may as to the future, be it allowable or not for us to anticipate for ourselves or for others the disciplinary and remedial influences of suffering beyond the grave, we know certainly that in this life pain and sorrow are constantly exercising such influences, and are thus affording opportunities for repentance and amendment; and in explaining and inculcating the use of such opportunities, so that they may not be 'missed in life,' we may be helped by the vivid and expressive imagery of Dante's *Purgatorio*.

(c) It may be further noted that this division of the *Divine Comedy* is specially adapted for supplying illustrations of this present life, because human nature is there represented to us as so very similar to what we see and feel that it is now. To quote Dean Church again: 'The poet finds companions who are neither below him, nor hopelessly estranged from him, as in the *Inferno*, nor far above him, as in the *Paradiso*; they are still almost creatures of flesh and blood, certainly human characters, capable of effort, pain, and self-command, going through their training as he is going through his, though on a higher level, having in view the aim and hopes that lead him on, praying the prayers which he prays, singing the Psalms which he sings' (*op. cit.* p. xvi).

Leaving for another paper all consideration of the special and appropriate sufferings which are reserved for separate sins on the seven distinct *cornici*, or terraces, it will be enough now to make as clear as possible two thoughts which dominate

¹ Moore's *Studies*, ii. 250. The primary reference there is to the provision of appropriate subjects for meditation on each terrace, but we shall see that the infliction of the various sufferings was also intended to have the like disciplinary and purifying influence on character.

the whole of Dante's conception of purgatory. And it may be worth while to remark, by the way, that his views on this subject show in several points a remarkable amount of originality and independence, in contradistinction from the closeness with which he usually follows previous mediæval writers, and especially Aquinas.

1. There is first, of course, the leading thought already referred to, that all suffering in this sphere is designed for the purification of the soul from evil, and so for its preparation for entrance into the Divine Presence.

Therefore, when the good effects of earthly suffering have been suggested by such passages as Ps 119⁶⁷⁻⁷¹, Jg 10⁹⁻¹⁶, Jer 2²⁷ 31^{18f.}, Hos 5¹⁵, and especially He 12⁵⁻¹³ (the verses quoted and enforced in the Anglican service for the visitation of the sick), then some of Dante's references to the refining and uplifting influences of suffering may be aptly quoted.²

(a) Thus he tells us, at the opening of this *Cantica*, his purpose in it—

Of that second kingdom will I sing,
Wherein the human spirit doth purge itself,
And to ascend to heaven becometh worthy.

Purg. i. 4-6.

(b) We hear Cato, the guardian of Purgatory, thus summoning those who loitered outside it—

'What is this, ye laggard spirits?
Run to the mountain to strip off the slough
That lets not God be manifest to you.'

Purg. ii. 120-122; so xiii. 106-108.

(c) Again, the poet represents himself as thus addressing Marco Lombardo, who on the third terrace is 'untying the knot of anger'—

'O creature that doth cleanse thyself
To return beautiful to Him that made thee.'

Purg. xvi. 31 f.

(d) Similarly, this is his address to Pope Adrian v., who is found weeping among the penitents for avarice—

'O spirit, in whom weeping ripens
That without which to God we cannot turn.'

Purg. xix. 911.

We may note how that saying is expressed as a general truth, the plural 'we' being used, so as to include the poet himself and other men. And

² Longfellow's well-known translation will generally be used in the quotations given here; for a metrical rendering, it is wonderfully close to the original.

though it is expressed negatively, it implies of course the corresponding positive truth that by the endurance of pain and sorrow in a truly penitential spirit men may and do turn to God.

(e) And thus Dante's *Purgatorio* is lightened throughout by the hope which is abandoned in his *Inferno*; there is in each stage of it the sure and certain hope of final deliverance when there shall have been accomplished that purification, the sense of which is blended in the sufferers with the sense of receiving 'the due reward of their deeds.'¹ Thus we have Virgil's address to the avaricious, when he and Dante first come upon them in their deep humiliation—

'O ye elect of God, whose sufferings
Justice and hope both render less severe.'

Purg. xix. 76 (contrast *Inf.* i. 114-120; iii. 1-9, 85).

(f) And once the poet himself turns preacher to us on this element of hope in purgatorial suffering. When he is about to describe the pains and penalties of the first terrace which he enters, he stops to forewarn his readers not to let what they are going to read discourage them from entering upon the task of repentance (and it must be remembered throughout that, in Dante's view, if repentance is to be carried on in purgatory, there must have been some commencement of it on earth, before power to sin and opportunities for sinning were overpast). This is his encouraging caution for us—

But still I wish not, Reader, thou should'st swerve
From thy good purposes, because thou hearest
How God ordaineth that the debt be paid;
Attend not to the fashion of the torment,
Think of what follows; think that at the worst

It cannot reach beyond the mighty sentence [*i.e.* the
Day of Judgment].

Purg. x. 106-111.

2. The other point to be noted depends upon the preceding one. So clearly, in Dante's *Purgatory*, is the remedial and therefore beneficial purpose of pains and humiliations recognized by all who suffer them, that it is not merely with resignation, but with willingness, and, as we shall see, with something more than willingness, that those sufferings are accepted and borne.

¹ Therefore it is, because of the mingling of these two elements, that we read of lamentation and praise being heard at once from the same souls (*Purg.* xxiii. 10, 64); and thus is explained the striking *oxymoron* in which Forese (*Purg.* xxiii. 86) speaks of drinking 'the sweet wormwood of these torments.'

Now there is an element in Christian and scriptural teaching as to repentance which may be illustrated from what Dante thus pictures for us. In the Bible we may trace something more than an acquiescence in chastisement; there are cases in which it is welcomed gratefully. (a) Perhaps we can hardly say that in any case it is actually asked for; for the prayer, 'O Lord correct me' (*Jer* 10²⁴), is so qualified by the following words that it may be taken as mainly a plea for a limitation of punishment. Still, there is no desire to escape punishment altogether. (b) The same remarks will apply to the prayer of Israel under Ammonite oppression, 'We have sinned: do thou unto us whatsoever seemeth good unto thee; only deliver us, we pray thee, this day' (*Jg* 10¹⁶). (c) But nothing less than a willing and thankful acceptance of any punishment that God may send seems to be involved in the beautiful words of *Lev* 26⁴¹, concerning the days when Israel should 'pine away in their iniquity,' and should thus be brought to confession of their sins: 'if, then, their uncircumcised heart be humbled, and they then accept of the punishment of their iniquity, then will I remember my covenant with Jacob,' etc. The passage is a difficult, as well as a beautiful one, but the leading sense of the verb *קָבַץ*, rendered 'accept of,' is given by the best lexical authorities as 'to be pleased with, accept favourably': and it may be added that in the Book of *Tobit* (13¹⁻¹⁴) there is a touching picture of such grateful, because hopeful, acceptance of the woes of captivity itself: 'Blessed,' exclaims *Tobit* (v. 14), 'are all they that have been sorrowful for all Thy scourges.' (d) The ready willingness to accept chastisement appears again in *Mic* 7⁹, 'I will bear the indignation of the Lord, because I have sinned against Him,' etc., on which words Pusey thus comments, after referring to 1 S 3¹⁸, and 2 S 16¹⁰ as parallels: 'The penitent owns the just sentence of God, and knowing that he deserves far more than God inflicts, is thankful to endure it until He removes it.' (e) And of course those who feel deeply their own special need of penitence and purification, will make such special application to themselves of St. Paul's great exhortation concerning Christian endurance generally, where he thus joins together hope and suffering: 'Let us rejoice in hope of the glory of God. And not only so, but let us also rejoice in our tribulations' (*Ro* 5^{2,3} R.V.; see also 2 Co 4¹⁷).

It may be interesting to notice, before turning to Dante, how some other thoughtful Christian writers have emphasized the thought which such passages as those suggest.

i. Erskine of Linlathen has done so very clearly: 'Faith in Jesus Christ,' he says, 'does not deliver us from the eternal law that "verily it shall be ill with the wicked," but teaches us to approve and love that law, even in its application to ourselves, and carries us safe through it, to the other side, where its fruits grow' (*Letters* ii. 17).

ii. Dr. Moberly, in the course of the chapter on 'Punishment,' in his *Atonement and Personality*, writes of punishment as being valuable 'in proportion as the man has begun to go over (as it were) from the side of his sin to the side of the condemnation of his sin' (p. 19). And afterwards more fully: 'If we believe that the value and glory of punishment is in proportion as it becomes self-chosen,—taken up into personal abhorrence of sin; it is possible that our own instinctive attitude may be modified towards all that familiar penal discomfort which we now have, or are likely to have, to bear. The leading instinct may by degrees be rather—not to shrink, to avoid, to beg off, to groan with self-pity, but rather to accept, to use, and to make the most of it, as indispensable—as invaluable—means of beauty and power. It is the punishment which the will wholly accepts, which is really, in quality, purifying' (p. 24).

iii. The same aspect of things is summed up in some well-known lines of Coventry Patmore's—

Hearts that verily repent
Are burdened with impunity
And comforted by chastisement.

iv. And we may remind ourselves also of Cardinal Newman's still better known lines in one of the poems on 'Affliction,' where, after a retrospect of past blessings, he adds—

Yet, Lord, in memory's fondest place
I shrine those seasons sad,
When, looking up, I saw Thy face
In kind austereness clad.
I would not miss one sigh or tear,
Heart-pang or throbbing brow;
Sweet was the chastisement severe,
And sweet its memory now.

Lyra Apostolica, xxiii.

But probably no writer has ever expressed this thought of the welcoming of chastisement so impressively and so vividly as Dante in his delineation of Purgatory.

(a) Thus, near the beginning of the *Divine Comedy*, where he is sketching in a few lines the purport of the three divisions of the poem, he thus distinguishes the second of them from the first, in which cries of despair would have been heard—

Then thou shalt see those who contented are
Within the fire, because they hope to come,
Whene'er it may be, to the blessed people.

Inf. i. 118-120.

(b) And in the *Purgatorio* itself, the sufferers pass far beyond mere contentment. So Forese, on the fourth terrace, thus corrects himself as he speaks (the word rendered pain being *pena*, which carries with it the thought of penalty)—

Our pain becomes refreshed,
I say our pain, and ought to say our solace.

Purg. xxiii. 70 f.

(c) It is to be observed, further, that there is never any wish to escape from the appointed penalties; the only desire of the sufferers is to accomplish their destined purgation through pain, not to evade or even to interrupt it. Thus the band of spirits, who are being hurried on unrestingly as the penance and the cure for slothfulness, excuse themselves for not lingering to talk to Dante—

So full of longing are we to move on
That stay we cannot: therefore pardon us
If thou for churlishness our justice take

(or, as Dean Plumptre more clearly renders the last line—

If this our duty rudeness should appear).

Purg. xviii. 115-117.

(d) Similarly, Pope Adrian v. breaks off abruptly his conversation with the poet—

Now go; no longer will I have thee linger,
Because thy stay doth incommode my weeping;
With which I ripen that which thou hast said,

Purg. xix. 139-141.

(i.e. the penitence which Dante had said, in the previous lines already quoted, to be 'that without which to God we cannot turn.')

(e) Most striking of all, as a sign of valuing, nay, of clinging to chastisement, is what is said of the spirits in the agonizing flames of the seventh cornice—

Then towards me, as far as they could come,
Came certain of them, always with regard
Not to step forth where they would not be burned.

Purg. xxvi. 13-15.