

A TENTATIVE ESSAY ON DANTE AND PROUST

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THERE ARE, it is true, two or three references to Dante in the full length and breadth of Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*. But there exists, apparently, not a shred of evidence to show that Proust had more of a predilection or inclination for Dante's writings than he had for any of the other chosen books in his library. Well known, on the other hand, is the especial delight he took in reading and translating Ruskin. To compare Dante's *Divine Comedy* with *Remembrance of Things Past* may seem, then, arbitrary and far-fetched, like the application of a yardstick first to St. Peter's in Rome and then to Sta. Sofia's in Istanbul. If so, it is true only at first glance, perhaps. The perception of analogy between these two great literary works insinuates itself gradually and persistently in the mind. It is not surprising to learn, indeed, that the fraternity between them has already been noted by some scholars. What impresses the reader in a perusal of Proust's sevenfold, fifteen-volume novel and Dante's threefold, hundred-canto poem, is that the evolution of the works represents a dedicated, life-long pilgrimage each writer undertook to explore the world of hidden significance undergirding human feelings and human destiny. Beyond a certain point, in the notation of parallels between the masterpieces, lies the temptation to press the comparison too far for validity. If the danger has been skirted in some details of comparison, the fact may serve to delimit the broader, more compelling sympathies. The most and best to be done, perhaps, is to measure Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* from some common remove, much as a landscape painter might, with his thumb and forefinger at arm's length, square off a distant composition.

First, let us revive our recollections of Dante. He was, of course, a transcendent figure of the Italian Middle Ages (Florence, 1265-Ravenna, 1321). As a rhetorician he wrote *De vulgari eloquentia*,

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which recommended the use in literature of the Italian vulgar tongue. As a theologian and philosopher he wrote the *Convivio*. As a poet-seer he wrote the *Vita nuova* and the *Commedia* (dubbed in the sixteenth century the *Divina commedia*, the title it has usually born since). In our discussion we shall refer principally to the latter two works.

Vita nuova means *new life, rebirth*. An early work of Dante's composed part in prose and part in verse, it contains the early history of Dante's love for Beatrice. It describes the first encounter with her in his ninth year and Dante tells us that in true courtly fashion he painfully concealed his feeling for her. In due course of time, the poet sees in a vision the death of Beatrice, which soon afterwards really occurs. Dante gradually masters his grief and, some while later, nearly yields to love for another young woman. Beatrice, however, appears to him in a touching vision from beyond the grave, and reclaims his heart. Shortly thereafter, such sights are revealed to him concerning the spiritual worlds that the poet decides to postpone further description of them until he shall have acquired powers of understanding and poetic technique adequate to the task and befitting the glory of Beatrice. The promised sequel to the *Vita nuova* is, to be sure, the *Commedia*.

In the opening lines of the *Commedia* Dante hesitates at the entrance to a dark forest, mid-way along his life path. He would proceed, but three beasts bar the way: the Wolf of passion, the Lion of pride and the Leopard of envy. At this juncture, the shade of Virgil approaches and offers to serve as his guide, for Beatrice, fearing for Dante's safety, has requested Virgil to come to his aid. Together, then, the poets set out on that wonderful journey through the regions of the departed souls. Virgil warns Dante, however, that he may accompany him only through Hell and Purgatory, but that Beatrice shall lead him in Paradise, whose entrance no pagan may pass. In Limbo Dante meets the heroes of the Elysian Fields, where Aeneas, Virgil's own epic hero, had sojourned with the shade of his father Anchises, by virtue of the Golden Bough which the Sibyl commanded him to carry for a token of admission. Thence, Dante and Virgil wind downward to deeper subterranean circles of retributive punishment. The suicides, for example, are bleeding trees which beasts periodically approach and gnaw. There is also the stirring moment of encounter with the

swirling Paolo and Francesca, those murdered lovers commemorated by Tschaikowsky in music and by Lifar in ballet. From Hell the poets ascend to Purgatory, a solitary mountain rising from the sea on the opposite side of the earth. In Purgatory there are still scenes of pain and suffering to be seen, but the punishments are temporary, purifying. Dante hesitates when he arrives at a path obstructed by a sheet of flame, but Virgil explains to him that it is all that severs him from Beatrice. Dante bids reluctant farewell to Virgil, plunges through the flames, and beholds Beatrice in a scene of surpassing beauty. Here, as the poet says, he moves faster than tongue or pen can tell, into the realm of Paradise, beginning with the Sphere of the Moon and proceeding heavenward through the Spheres of Mercury, Venus, the Sun, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn. In the Eighth Sphere Dante looks back upon the earth and smiles with pity on its abject form. But Beatrice calls his attention to a more splendid view than all the rest: the glorious company surrounding the triumphant Redeemer. His eyes cannot brook the brilliance of it, and St. Bernard offers a prayer for the further strengthening of Dante's spiritual vision. Now loom before him the souls of the blessed ranged in a vast amphitheater widening into a magnificent Rose. Beatrice has taken her place on a throne of light beside Rachel (the contemplative life), and smiles upon Dante. Then she turns to contemplate the Ineffable, that Love which moves the world and all the universe.

Marcel Proust is frequently named, along with James Joyce, as the greatest novelist of our twentieth century. He is known primarily for his lengthy novel *A la recherche du temps perdu* (*Remembrance of Things Past*), which he composed intermittently from the turn of the century up to his death in 1922. Its seven Parts, comprising fifteen volumes, were published between 1913 and 1927. The First Part—*Swann's Way*—contained an introduction entitled *Combray*, a psychological study of Proust's childhood. *Swann's Way* appeared in 1913, but received very little critical notice. It was not until Part Two—*Within A Budding Grove*—was published in 1918, that Proust found acclaim and received the Prix Goncourt. By 1922 had appeared *The Guermantes Way* and *The Cities of the Plain*. Issued posthumously were *The Captive* (1924), *The Sweet Cheat Gone* (1926), and *The Past Recaptured* (1927).

Unlike the *Divine Comedy*, Proust's novel *Remembrance of Things Past* does not lend itself to graphic, narrative summary. The fifteen volumes present an autobiography conceived in the form of an artistic whole, a work of art. The novel is a recast of the author's own life, reconstructed to reveal, in a unified way, its most intimate meaning. The recollections are also a survey of upper French society. The characters develop, as it were, through a kind of discontinuous sculpture, into statues seen in the full round. In retrospect, also, phases of life take shape in huge, processional tableaux, and the light suffusing them seems to shine through stained glass.

Certain crises of psychological insight in Proust's life quicken his sense of recall in remembering the past. In *Combray* we learn that his boyish mind ranges back and forth confusedly between past and present during the interval betwixt sleep and awakening. Over the years, Proust's mind passes through three distinct phases of maturity which the author pointedly calls to our attention. The first developmental phase is marked by his famous experience with the so-called *madeleine* cake, the kind his Aunt Léonie used to give him in childhood. The experience indicates his mind's capacity for swift flight into the full-tapestried past, by means of a clue to it in the present. The second phase is conveyed by Marcel's visit to Venice, where he assumes an unusual stance in front of the Baptistry of St. Mark's Cathedral. The third and last phase is conveyed by an avoided accident in the Guermantes courtyard, where he leaps backward to safety from the path of a speeding vehicle. Each of these symbolic, critical events is accompanied by a more profound insight, a new subliminal remembrance of things past.

We have observed that Dante and Proust each wrote one truly great and sustained masterpiece. In the matter of sheer bulk, a thousand pages of Dantean poetry stand over against the four thousand pages of Proustian prose. Both authors postponed the composition of their works while acquiring further mastery over themselves and their craft: Dante did so for definite spiritual reasons; Proust did so for definite psychological reasons and technical difficulties he met in the composition of an immense inter-linear and extended supplement which increased his work to two and one half times its first draft. In this connection, Dante's be-

wilderment in the opening of the *Divine Comedy* corresponds to Marcel's distracted inertia with respect to writing his book.

Both Dante and Proust experienced stages of emergent psychic evolution: Dante in a prescribed Christian initiation familiar to the Roman Catholic Church of his day; Proust in a tentative and intermittent quest of self-revelation through self-inspection. Dante focused his inner vision on the astral world; Proust focused his intuition on the diorama of his own past.

Each of the writers was guided by love remembered, Dante by his beloved Beatrice and Proust by his Albertine. Each one of the writers also announced the theme of loving memory as his guiding principle. Dante, at the conclusion of the *Vita nuova*, had written: "I had an admirable vision in which I saw things that persuaded me to say nothing more of this blessed person (Beatrice) until I could speak more worthily of her. To attain to this, I study as much as possible, a fact which she well knows, so that if He, through Whom all things have their being, allows me to live some years still, I intend to say about her what has never been said about any other." Proust, in Volume II of *Within A Budding Grove*, quite simply stated: "I decided to make Albertine my novel." In recording corresponding events, we should note that Dante meets Beatrice in her ninth year, and Proust meets Albertine in early adolescence. Both girls are accompanied, Beatrice by another maiden, Albertine by companions. The glance, the exchange of glances, is the poignant essence of the greeting in both encounters. Both writers conceal their love, Dante as a courtly and mystic lover, Proust to bind Albertine the more closely to him. Hereafter, the maidens become the obsessions of their lovers who, through their devotion, attain to a knowledge and understanding of themselves and of their lives. Dante is never to know Beatrice carnally, but Proust is to cohabit with Albertine. Dante's love for Beatrice increases and develops into a spiritual apotheosis. Proust's love for Albertine increases to a climax; then it leads him through experiences of jealousy, bitter separation and death, to a tragic realization and a serene understanding of the world that he had known.

Turning now to the structure of the works, we might set up a rough equation as follows: the *Vita nuova* of Dante is to the *Divine Comedy* as *Swann's Way* is to the *Remembrance of Things Past*. The *Vita nuova*, that is, represents the brief, initial form of his

treatment of the Beatrice theme. And *Swann's Way*, first conceived as a unit in itself, is the initial form of his treatment of the Albertine theme. Trinary and septenary structural divisions are common to the *Divine Comedy* and *Remembrance of Things Past*. The former comprises Inferno, Purgatory and Paradise; the latter, as originally conceived in the intermediate version of 1913, comprised *Swann's Way*, *The Guermantes Way*, and *Time Recaptured* (only *Swann's Way* was published at the time). Dante's Paradise contains the Seven Spheres and Three Realms above; the *Remembrance of Things Past* contains Seven Parts, the outgrowth of the 1913 trilogy on which they depend. Be it the result of chance, choice, or tradition, the two masterpieces evince a structure based on threefold reality manifest in sevenfold form.

From the standpoint of literary genres, the *Divine Comedy* and *Remembrance of Things Past* are both *commedias* in the sense which dictated Dante's use of the term for his poem: a literary piece which may begin in the midst of distressing events but which resolves them in a fortunate outcome. Proust's novel oscillates between fortune and misfortune until a final gracious turn of event and circumstance occurs in *Time Recaptured*.

To Dante's vision of the death of Beatrice in the *Vita nuova* may be likened Proust's vision of Agostinelli crucified. Agostinelli was Proust's chauffeur who provided many traits of the personality of Albertine. One day, as Proust was being driven in his town car along Parisian streets, he observed his chauffeur from the rear seat and was forcibly impressed by a vision of him in crucifixion: Agostinelli died some while afterwards in a plane crash. In one of the letters of his literary correspondence Proust explains that when he learned of Agostinelli's death, he was reminded of his vision as if it had been a prophecy.

The Dantean circles of condemned souls put us in mind of the strata of upper French society with its hierarchy of mutually exclusive social salons to which only the privileged few, like St. Loup and Marcel, can gain free entry, somewhat as Dante and Virgil acquire access to the forbidden circles of the dead. The gradual descent into Hell brings to mind the degeneration of the character of St. Loup from his nobility to his subsequent exposure as a lover in unregenerate search of a *délicieux bourreau*.

Indeed, one of the prime features of the characters in *Remem-*

brance of Things Past is that they are subject to drastic change. Odette as mistress is, in some respects, hardly recognizable as the later Mme. Swann. Swann himself assumes his aura of personality color by color. Cottard suffers a sort of glacial change between *Swann's Way* and *The Guermantes Way*. The later Elstir is much altered from that exciting artist Marcel used to meet at Mme. Verdurin's. This emergent evolution (fundamental in Proust's treatment of human character) reminds us of those extraordinary metamorphoses of condition we observe in some of the unexpected destinies meted out to many of the persons whom Dante recognizes in the Hereafter (Brunetti Latini, for example, Dante's teacher; certain popes; Orestes).

The spirits whom Dante meets, call out to him from afar, much as Proust says in *Combray*, that our own memories, incarcerated like tree spirits or enchanted monads, call out to us for liberation. Some of the monumental metaphors which Proust weaves into his descriptions of social panoramas, remind us of the phantasmagorical backgrounds in Dante's Purgatory. Both Dante and Proust combine the elements of ritual, allegory, and metaphor all together, to produce equally magnificent effects: Dante in a striking succinctness of poetry, Proust in an incisive exposition of psycho-analytical prose.

Brusk as the comparison may seem, Virgil and St. Loup play analogous roles. For St. Loup, as Marcel's friend and companion, attends him quite as Virgil attends Dante. St. Loup, that is, by his social position and attachment to Marcel, facilitates for him *entrée* into several salons of the *haut monde*, out of which Marcel selects his gallery of characters for his novel. Virgil withdraws from Dante's path at the verge of Paradise; St. Loup disappears from Marcel's life through death in World War I.

Now, Dante tells us in his *Convivio* that his writings are to be interpreted on four levels: literal, allegorical, ethical and anagogic (mystical). For our own interpretive purpose, let us take the concept of Easter, the season in which all Three Parts of the *Divine Comedy* originate. Easter is, literally, a date significant meteorologically. It is also, allegorically, the season of Christ's death and resurrection. Further, it is, ethically, related to the release of the souls from purgatory. Finally, it is, anagogically speaking, the salvation of man through the beatitude of eternal life.

Could we not similarly interpret the characters of Beatrice and Albertine? Beatrice is, literally, a young girl, probably named Portinari; Albertine is a young woman, probably modelled after Proust's chauffeur Agostinelli. Beatrice configures, allegorically, love of woman; Albertine configures physical desire. Beatrice's death is, ethically speaking, the means to the rehabilitation of Dante's soul; Albertine's disappearance and later death awaken Proust to the awareness that the human love-union is insufficient. Lastly, Beatrice signifies, anagogically, spiritual meditation; Albertine signifies the affective memory of intuitive wisdom.

It is common practice for Proust to present his material on multiple levels of interpretation. It is as if the four stages of his own psychic development from *Combray* to the period of *Time Recaptured* had retouched his entire novel for a four-dimensional effect. One becomes especially aware of the effect in a grand event like that of Marcel's attendance at a performance of Rachel in Racine's *Phèdre*. A simpler example of it, for the purpose of reference, is found in Marcel's visit to the atelier of the painter Elstir, during which the young man has a chance to view one of the artist's oil paintings: a kind of land and sea-scape. In the course of Proust's elaborate analysis of the scene depicted in the painting, we soon realize that we are in the presence of a pictorial allegory. Briefly speaking, the land and sea-scape is not only a painting, but an allegory of the interplay of two forces or elements of the mind: conscious and subconscious thought, objective and subjective perception. The composition of the painting implies the value of the proper juxtaposition and interplay of these two forces. Lastly, the just combination of the allegorical elements of land and sea, is a technical means for the creation of true art. It becomes evident in the exposé that literature and artistic creation in general, are implied likewise.

Proust makes a peculiarly personal use of the fourfold connotation. At the crisis in Marcel's life described in *Time Recaptured*, the young man is desperately discouraged for not yet having set about writing his novel. Some time later, he has the strange psychic experience in reaction to the near-accident with the passing carriage at the Guermantes courtyard. This event is a turning point in the *Remembrance of Things Past*. Now, into this crisis Proust introduces, as harmonics, four autobiographical moments of his own

life. Proust had begun to write around the year 1900, whereas Marcel's psychic experience which inspires him to begin writing his novel, occurs after World War I. A similarly crucial psychic experience in Proust's own life is attributed by March (in his book *The Two Worlds of Marcel Proust*) to the year 1909, an event which greatly accelerated the conclusion of the first draft of the trilogy of 1913. Further, the period of deepest depression in Proust's life occurred after World War I, a point of identity with Marcel's life. Finally, Marcel's decision to begin to write coincides with Proust's first wide recognition as a writer (1918), with the publication of *Within A Budding Grove*, which, as we have seen, was awarded the Prix Goncourt for the year. Thus, the beginning of Marcel's book corresponds to the first public acclaim of the *Remembrance of Things Past*. Have we not, in the four biographical repercussions of Marcel's crisis, a remodelling of real events in an artistic form to assert an essential truth? When a person sits down to commit his first words to paper, that is, are there not implicit in the first pen stroke a sequel and development whose turns are unpredictable? A manuscript can be said scarcely to exist until the writing of it is finished. A book does not, in a sense, exist until it reaches the reader toward whom it is directed. This is why Marcel starts to write in 1918 the novel Proust actually began twenty years before.

Now, it is on his return to Paris that Marcel ultimately discovers the strait and unobscured way back into his meaningful past. Since his book was to be an autobiography, it is not surprising that at the moment of despair for his life, he should be in despair for his writing. He had reached a standstill in the face of a new world order after the War. He himself had been away: the past was over; the future seemed void. Life and his artistic record of it seemed about to collapse together. In reality, the time had come for creative writing to moult the world of personal experience. Art had necessarily been life till now; now life had to become art.

Vinteuil is the musician in Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*. He has been identified with one or two contemporary French composers. Certainly Proust was unusually fond of the music of Wagner and Fauré. In any case, Vinteuil's most mature work, his Septet, relates to the memory of his daughter as Dante's poem and Proust's novel relate to Beatrice and to Albertine. As Vinteuil was—however subconsciously—indebted to the affective memory of

his daughter for the more sublime parts of his artistic creation in music, so Proust was indebted to Albertine for her role in conducting him to a comprehension of his past. Love's tragedy is the key to the artistic universe. Vinteuil's Sonata and Septet are, so to speak, the art-songs of life.

Music looms large in both the *Divine Comedy* and *Remembrance of Things Past*. Dante finds that he is enticed with difficulty away from the music of the great musician Casella, a friend whom he meets in the Hereafter. Each Sphere of Paradise has its own characteristic music as the blessed intone some celebrated latin hymn. *Swann's Way* is dominated, as it were, by the overtones of a motive from Vinteuil's Sonata. Later parts refer rather to the Septet, a work of strong psychic influence on Marcel. So much for music and literature. What about the larger question of the ratio between literature and truth?

Dante's contemporary Thomas Aquinas defined theology, in his Aristotelean *Summa theologica*, as the poetry of God. The idea, susceptible of both strict and loose interpretation, derives from an ancient conception that religion, art, and science form a triplicity, a threefold manifestation of the nature of reality. If, in a strict interpretation, theology is God's own effort at poetry, then—like an inverted reflection from on high—poetry is surely Dante's theology in the *Divine Comedy*. Whatever there be of ultimate truth and reality that arrests us readers today in Dante's writings, lives and breathes in the poetry as a murmur of eternal prayer. As similar expressions, we might mention Christ's parabolic message and the Psalms. Something of this sacramental quality of poetry was voiced in Renaissance France by the Pléiade poets, and again in the nineteenth century by Victor Hugo: the poet was a high priest of daemonic wisdom. Proust, in the twentieth century, believed he was called to show that the profound wisdom of one's own life could be expressed in the prose art of an autobiographical masterpiece.