



WE ARE ALL GERMAN ROMANTICS*

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Starting from the middle

Dante's work has never had so many visitors. In France, the last years of the century have seen the undertaking of no fewer than four different translations. Jacqueline Risset, Jean-Charles Vegliante, Christian Bec and Alexandre Masseron have each brought their stone to consolidate André Pézard's haughty and dangerously mannerist tower. There has been no lack of exegeses and commentaries either, among which this recent dialogue led by Benoît Chantre with Philippe Sollers, all just as playful as their model. On the other side of the Channel, where Dante has been an active power ever since William Blake and his engraved plates of the *Divine Comedy*, the aptly-named Dante Gabriel Rossetti and his edition of the poem, its translations by Laurence Binyon and above all the marvellous work of investigation led by "detective" Dorothy Sayers have made the Florentine poet's work accessible several times. What can account for this renewed fascination at the end of a century entirely consecrated to modernism? Obvious answers may suffice. The *Divine Comedy* tells a story of spiritual ascent with so much knowledge and such an upward momentum that it has acquired the stature of a mountain. Dante is the Alps, scintillating with their snowy summits. A light both cold and hot at the same time, like snow. One stoops, and takes a handful with one's eye or hand on the versified hillside where one is standing. The force of the snow whips up the blood, swells the heart. T.S. Eliot, American poet and naturalised Englishman, expresses it better in fewer words: for him Dante "makes the spiritual visible."

For Ossip Mandelstam who, like his model, must have felt the coldness of exile, he is first and foremost a versifier of "stride associated to breath and pregnant with thought." But what a breath, what a thought, so daring in his marring Aquinas' theology of creation with Saint Bernard's theology of mystical love so as to make Saint Augustine's City of God practicable! A summit, the image is self-evident. But poets should not be read from too respectful a distance. Dante requires to be taken possession of, to be in dialogue with his reader. That is why Mandelstam reproaches the

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“French romantics, unfortunate *incroyables* in red waistcoats” with having distorted Dante. “How could he have any imagination? He writes under dictation, he is a copyist, doubled up in the position of the scribe.” Strange to see Hugo and Gautier taken as target by the Russian poet whereas it is the German romantics that should be blamed. But blamed for what? For raising Dante and Shakespeare to a summit far above European writers and to have made them the standards of tradition? True, it has been the vain ambition of summit-levelling modernity to repudiate this tradition. Dante’s return with us, our return to Dante brings us back to more positive notions of poetry and thought. It is a crucial point too often neglected that he was the first poet to present himself as such to his reader. With him, the poet defines his role bravely and lucidly. Far from bringing him down, personal ordeals seem rather to have given him the strength to analyse the powers-that-be.

The *Divine Comedy* is not only the story of a redemption, it is also a treatise of poetics in action that tells the poet where he should stand in the separation of powers. Who will have noted that? Certainly not the theoreticians of democracy, nor the poets themselves. Nobody seems to have better assessed the precariousness of this position, defined, at the peril of his life, by the Christian citizen of Florence. Dante, however, shows that poetry can only occur and live in a permanent tension between the political and the religious. The slightest leaning towards one or the other of these poles endangers the “democratic” function of the poet. But on the other hand, if he forgets one or the other of these poles, his poetry will be weaker. The lesson is clear and simple. Except that the political and religious contentions that shook Europe in the following centuries would blur the vision of poets and launch them in dubious directions. But now that the quakings of the European earth that we tread seem—for how long?—to have subsided, the thread must be picked up, more than ever, and the immense dark forest where we have wandered must be crossed with a “stride associated to breath and pregnant with thought.” Beginning over again with Europe and European tradition means, according to the programme inscribed in Dante’s own poem, starting from the middle. We will never be able to do anything else than begin again from the middle, such is the humility that we have to show after so many of our crimes. And so, we shall choose to begin on the European path over again from German romanticism on, although it meant to be a new philosophy of the origin, which became the cause of a series of ever more radical radicalisms. For every origin is indeed a middle masquerading as a founding moment. That he should have begun his poem by stating this truth is one of the clearer signs of intelligence ever shown by Dante.

Recovering a taste for mountaineering

The European is the heir to a History whose more and more violent spasms have gradually made him lose his sense of the meaning of life, which had always been grounded on the Christian message. This loss of meaning came to reach such depths of amnesia that it soon verged on its radical opposite, nonsense and absurdity. Contradicted from the inside, the beautiful stability, that the Christian order had maintained more or less firmly for several centuries by an accepted distribution of earthly and heavenly

realities, collapsed. The break occurred in this period that historians have since named Renaissance or Reformation. Besides splitting Europe into two camps, Protestants and Catholics, consequently bringing war into religion as a permanent conflict, the rupture fostered the emergence and the consolidation of national political subjects. And far from stopping at national borders this movement towards the greater autonomy of subjects aimed at the liberation of the subjects themselves and of their rights. Hence an evident contradiction, since individual autonomy necessarily came to be at variance with the autonomy of nations, to the defence of which it was supposed to contribute.

From that moment on, the history of Europe and of its civil wars became the absurd narrative of millions of individuals sacrificed and slaughtered in the name of individual nations. That was nonsense. The fundamental Christian principle of incarnation, which thinkers and poets had for ages been—so to speak—secularising, met its negation, its most violent denial. It must calmly be recognised that the history of Europe came to an end with this monstrous failure. Meanwhile, the balance between the political and the religious had gone to another continent. A new Christian empire had been built in America under the guidance of a comparatively tolerant Protestantism. By the time the prophecies of this slightly crude republican Virgil, Walt Whitman, rose above the roofs of Manhattan, soaring like a wild apostolic eagle, America could still appear as a possible Paradise on Earth. Today, we are becoming disillusioned. Not only has the spirit of equality between peoples and races appeared nowhere reinforced there, but the slightest effort of advancement towards some spiritual wisdom has been stifled by the most vulgar materialism ever known on earth. The equilibrium that Dante was striving to reach in Florence—the New York of his time—by keeping up the tension between love and the acquisition of knowledge has, in fact, not found any modern equivalent. That is why, being violently critical of this surrogate American Europe, poets like Eliot and Pound chose to return to Europe at the beginning of the century.

Their movement was still ambiguous however, since they made their optimistic pioneering impetus serve a spirit of restoration. They came back, like the Magi in Eliot's poem, to witness the emptiness of the cradle. This should have been undertaken instead through a criticism of European history argued and elaborated from Europe itself, in the dynamism of unaccomplished movements that it has born. For there is a European poetic subject, and it is the great contribution of German Romantics to have proved this once and for all. Contrarily to their desires, though, the time has come to put an end to the ambitions which they endowed this subject with concerning the absolute. Carried away by their movement for a radicalisation of the Reformation, these young men in a hurry wanted to make the spirit of freedom brought about by the French revolution coincide with the religious feeling of the infinite that Protestantism had set free.

Their project took on a convulsive form, made of rapid expression combined with acute vision—belatedly imitated by the French surrealists. As these poets were also in competition with their philosopher friends who were busy elaborating great new "Churches," great rational sums

supporting the absoluteness of the divine Subject, they chose by contrast the culture of the fragment and the paradox. By a sheer stroke of *witz* that brought together the two infinities of the night and the light, they were able to short-circuit any laborious ascension of the *Divine Comedy* type, to rise directly up to Heaven by means of the lightning of images. But, because of its failure to tackle evil, we have stopped believing in the poetic vehicle leading to absolute Science, Poetry. We no longer belong to this civilisation of contraries that falls so easily into aestheticism, and therefore superfluity. Neither will we lyrically complain about our decline, being too afraid that future centuries might perceive it as some laziness of our curiosity. Therefore we shall start again at the origin, that is to say in the middle of the way where Dante has set us to work. In other words, in the middle of science, of techniques, of philosophy and of theology. The mist has been dissipated, the clearing of Europe appears. We recover a taste for prolonged mountaineering since the ancient Florentine guide was waiting for us. Yet we first had to get to him, crossing the whole length of the German Protestant face, instead of diving straight for Rome, following the never-ending, murderous French short-cut.