THE ANGELS OF DANTE

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To trace the angelology of Dante back to all its sources would be an exacting task for a scholar. His mind was like a crystal; strong, and exquisitely polished, and reflecting light from many facets. From two books, however, much of this light came, and from their gift he found the luminous material with which he clothed his angels. These books are the Bible, and the works of the supposed Dionysius the Areopagite. The Bible is, of course, the supreme authority for any conception of the angelic nature—the 'Master-Light of all our seeing', the Force that moulds even when most unrecognized, and Dante's imagination no doubt found its prime source of inspiration there. The first thing we learn, however, is that angels are never *described* in the Old Testament. But Dante describes his angels minutely. They are all beauty, and Kerr Bain's comment on some of Bunyan's Shining Ones applies equally here: 'Everything demands that these visitants should come into view in something of a human aspect.'

Dante's angels 'do God's commandments'—they 'hearken unto the voice of his word'. (And with Dionysius, as in the Old Testament, angelic individuality is entirely subservient to the Divine.) They are equally intent on their ever-present home in the Empyrean, and on carrying out the decrees of God. This quality appears in its less amiable form in the one Messenger of God in the Inferno, whom Mrs Jameson (*Sacred and Legendary Art*) describes as 'quite unmindful of his worshipper, as one occupied by higher matters', and whom she classifies as an angel of a specially severe type, following the tradition of the Greek and Italian mosaics—whereas Dante's other angels rather form than follow a tradition. This angel is the one who comes to open the city of Dis (*Inf.* IX—73, 103). He comes, disdaining to make use of his wings, dispersing the gross air with a gesture of infinite disgust and weariness—without pity, without even interest—entirely a foreigner to sin. Thus Dante depicts the attitude of a pure being who is neither human nor divine, when brought in

contact with the mystery of evil, as though to show us that if we make our bed in Hell God can meet us there, but angels cannot.

But in the later books of the *Commedia* the Angels are in their true element. Their holiness there is full of sympathy, free from scorn, and each one is delicately delineated and dipped in the colours of the daybreak. First singly, and then in dazzling groups, they assist at the development of a human soul.

It was on the anniversary of the death of Beatrice that Dante drew his angel on a tablet ('Dante once prepared to paint an angel') and this suggests that the Angel-Pilot was possibly in his mind at the time—'Israel de Egypto' being, Dean Plumtre tells us, one of the psalms used in the burial of the dead.

(*Purg.* II—13, 51). The Angel approaches gradually, yet very swiftly, as though impelled by a great purpose. The whole passage is full of movement, swiftness, lightness, whiteness—this Angel giving very specially the impression of being ever at rest in the Empyrean while he fulfils his task. His speed in returning, after the spirits are disembarked, is a measured speed, corresponding to that with which he came, and does not show haste, but rather the reposeful motion of the Eternal Circles. His brow is pure as that of his charges will be when their purification is accomplished, and when the Beatitudes have become their own. His garments and wings are white beyond any earthly comparison. His wings, unlike those of the Messenger in the Inferno, are very prominent, and carry the whole boat onward. Virgil tells Dante to kneel and fold his hands, as though to confess himself an unwinged creature.

'The lightness of the wings', says Dionysius, denotes their being in no respect earthly, but undefiledly and lightly raised to the sublime.' The boat is as light as the Angel. The precious freight of souls is so light as to be without value, without even existence, to the materialist. The Angel, whose coming had been likened to the dawning of Mars, signs them with the Cross, and leaves them to their Battle.

(*Purg.* VIII—22, 94, 108, 142). In the two Angels who guard the Valley of the Kings, there is impetuous yet measured movement, like that of soldiers under some invisible discipline. The whole conception of the scene is military. The mere fact that the angels are two in number makes it possible to call up some faint shadowy

image of rank and file. They are called 'Heavenly Falcons'—the Bird-Similitude being, in this case, less dependent on wings, and more on trained vigilance. Each is armed with a flaming sword, unlike the Cherub at the entrance of Eden, who appears to wield one tremendous weapon of flame. But the two swords of Dante's militant angels are sufficiently awe-inspiring, and that their points are blunted makes little difference to the impressiveness of the spectacle. The Angels themselves have the quality of fire, which, according to Dionysius, 'manifests itself suddenly... as it were by a sort of seeking, and again flying away impalpably, undiminished in all the joyful distributions of itself'. But, though soldierly in action, they are almost childlike in aspect, as, with bright hair, and garments green as the earliest leaves, they come from Mary's bosom. 'Green', says Dionysius, (though here in reference to precious stones) 'denotes the youthful and the full-grown'—and these angels attain this double symmetry, poised in perfect youth, yet mature to do the Will of God.

(*Purg.* IX—78, 145). In contrast with these, and with the Angel-Pilot, the Angel of Penance, seated in absolute repose on the threshold of diamond, seems to partake of its stability.

Dante tells us that his imagery is about to become more complex—so here we have the only Angel who is also a symbol. He typifies the Priesthood, and is majestic as an angel, majestic as a priest. His garments are the colour of dust and ashes, showing his complete sympathy with 'the frailty of our frame'. Where others relieve, his duty is to inflict—and so he is armed with a naked sword, portentous as that of the Rebuking Angels in the Bible and of which Dante cannot bear the dazzling brightness, compared, as in the case of no other angelic implement, with the unbearable splendour of the face. He is the only angel who asks a string of questions. His manner is curt, authoritative, remote. But he is placable and wise, in receiving, as in dealing with penitents. A word of explanation is enough, and when he learns why the usual Angel-Escort has been replaced by Virgil, he welcomes the travellers with liberality, and accords to Dante the gift for which he is responsible—a fulfilled penitence, and an abundant entrance on the way of purification. We see Dante at his feet—thus fulfilling St Peter's requirement—beating his breast, begging for mercy—and it is only then that the Sword of

the Angel makes the Seven Wounds on his forehead, and that the golden and silver keys unlock the door which, in rolling back, mingles its resonance with the music of the *Te Deum*, heard from within.

(*Purg.* XII—76, 99). The Angel who erases the Wound of Pride is, of all, the most human, the most lovable. He recalls the sweetness of Piccarda, and the ineffable simplicity of the Souls in the Moon who though, like her, triumphantly enjoying their crowns in Heaven, are still touched with the very human shadow of the Earth. 'Angels have wisdom in proportion as they have innocence', says Swedenborg, and his gesture as he opens both arms and wings—the arms for help, the wings for healing—is strangely innocent, and full of impulsive, almost maternal, tenderness—with even perhaps a hint of the Divine pity. 'Open thine arms and take me in', says Charles Wesley—and the attitude is utterly evangelical. This wealth of welcome corresponds to the occasion, which is a special one, as we learn from the effect on Dante's general powers which results from the removal of the Root-Sin.

That the giving way of Pride, or Self, inaugurates a new stage in the Soul's history is an ethical conception, which is thus expressed by von Hügel—'As in all deep religion there is here an heroic *willing* at work to effect a genuine displacement of the centre-object of interest: the system from being instinctively man-centred, becomes a freely-willed God-centredness'. And the Angel who stands Sponsor for the Soul as it enters on these wider regions is gifted with the concern of Motherhood without its suffering. In his face—unlike the dazzling glory of all the others—the Morning-Star

> The firstborn of the Day,
> The first shy Child of Dawn,

quivers tremulously, and his voice is haunted with regret that so few come to him to be served and cherished.

A dream of Humility could hardly be more fittingly embodied, and is well followed by the First Beatitude enshrined in music beyond the power of speech to describe.

(*Purg.* XV—10, 39). The next Angel is very slightly described. His wings, with their healing touch, are not mentioned. The only point given emphasis to is the blazing splendour of his light, of

which Dante finds the mere reflection from the ground almost unbearable. The connection may be with the blindness which is part of the punishment of the Envious, and with the long pre-occupation of their eyes, when in full operation, with the things that love the dark. In addition to the Second Beatitude, the Voices sing 'Rejoice, thou Conqueror', as though to assign to the victory over Envy a special reward, of which fulness of light is a worthy emblem.

(*Purg*. XVII—40, 69). Curiously elusive, the very light that veils him striking as through sleep—the movement of the wing almost the ghost of a movement—the 'Angel of Peace' baffles Dante's passionate desire to see him face to face, as though to add the last fine finish to the lesson of self-restraint. This becomes the more noticeable when contrasted with the unsolicited and providential gift of upward direction with which, while himself hidden, he actually meets the longing of the Poet.

Line 58 ('He acts for us as a man acts for himself') reminds us that Guardian Angels were believed to have the power of assuming the form of their charge ('It is his angel', Acts xii—15)—an interesting variation from the power of sinking the personality in God which has been already noticed. And it reminds us also of (*Carmina Gadelica*) 'The shepherding kind of the fold of the Saints', of the Guardian Angel invoked by Celtic Catholics—

'Be thou a bright flame before me—
Be thou a guiding star above me—
Be thou a smooth path below me—
And be a kindly shepherd behind me
Today, tonight, and for ever.'

Virgil even calls him a 'Divine Spirit', and this may contain some allusion to the comfort and care of God who supplies our need before we pray. It appears in this case, for the first time, to be the Angel himself who utters the Beatitude—thus gathering up in himself, and magnifying, the authority of the Unseen World.

'The Angel of Peace who went with me, who showed me everything that is hidden', says the Book of Enoch, and by this Angel though himself hidden, the Hidden Things are not kept secret but revealed.

'The Spirit of the hoar-frost is his own angel'—and that the

Angel of Canto XIX is likened to a Swan (*Purg.* XIX—42, 52) tempts to a comparison with Mallarmé's strange sonnet, alluring and mysterious, where the Spirit of the Ideal in the form of a great white Swan might be named the 'Angel of Frost'—so pure, yet so dreary and hopeless. Though far from any medieval intention, there attach themselves to this modern conception of Frustration many of the characteristics of Accidie, the Sin of the Devout. The Swan, formed for grace and energy, is set in ice, the wings frozen, impotent of movement, in an atmosphere heavy with disillusionment, struggle, disdain—fixed in the '*weariness*' and '*sterility*' of Winter.

Dante's Angel, who heals the sin, is far removed from struggle—framed in granite, he gleams upon the poets, peculiarly clear and distinct and calm in contrast with its tormented gloom. His whole bearing is superbly free from Sloth. His wings are at liberty. They part the air with celestial graciousness as they do their beautiful work. Every movement is instinct with freedom, strength, 'Divine contentment', and his voice, the index in a special manner of the sin which it is his mission to erase, is 'soft and sweet, as we never hear it in this mortal region'. The note of Mastery is again in his rendering of the Beatitude which might be interpreted—'Blessed are they that mourn—for their soul shall *tread down* comfort'.

(*Purg.* XXXII). With a certain disdain, which recalls Virgil's allusion to the Neutrals ('Do not speak of them, but look and pass on'), Dante does not mention the name of the sin cleansed in the Fifth Circle. Even the Angel is only a recollection, and is not described. That the love of money hardly occurred to him as a temptation can be easily believed. The Fourth Beatitude is divided between this Circle and the next—the portion for money lovers, 'Blessed are the thirsty', recalling one of the reputed sayings of our Lord—'I found all men drunken, and none found I athirst among them.' Book of Enoch: 'And in that place I saw a fountain of righteousness which was inexhaustible: around it were many fountains of wisdom, and all the thirsty drank of them and were filled with wisdom, and had their dwellings with the righteous and holy and elect.'

'Blessed are those who hunger *with balance*—who are so illuminated by Grace that the sense of Taste does not unduly

predominate.' (*Purg*. XXIV—133, 154). So runs the Beatitude for the conquerors of the sin of Gluttony. The other senses are made delicately prominent in the description of the scene—especially those of smelling and hearing—as when the Angel, rose-red as glass or metal in a furnace, shines with so lucent a radiance as to destroy Dante's power of sight so that he must follow by sound—and as when the Angel's wing, symbol of a healing sensitive touch on the soul, Herald of the Dawn, all perfume and fragrance, fittingly erases the trace of this most despicable of sins. The Angel sheds abroad ambrosia and a tender touch, hinting that the Soul, once purified, is given to eat of the Hidden Manna, without fear of intemperance or satiety. And the appearance of the Angel gives a touch of austerity to his sweetness which, in the cure of this sin, might naturally be looked for. His colour—unique among the angels—transports our thoughts straightway to the red splendour of Mars—unique among the planets (*Par*. XIV—86, 108) —and to the vision of the Cross in Paradise, to which Dante responded by a holocaust, a sacrifice, of praise. And thus the Angel who caresses the sin into oblivion with the rapture-laden breezes of the Rose of Sharon embodies also the Fight—the Furnace—by which bodily passions are subdued.

(*Purg*. XXVII—6, 15-55, 63). But the accepted purgatorial emblem is reserved for the final Circle—where the emancipation gained by Dante in passing through the flames recalls in a very definite manner the last scene of the *Pilgrim's Progress* when Christian and Hopeful pass through the River. Two angels guard the flames on the hither side and beyond, and—in warning as well as welcoming—remind us that Bunyan also introduced an Angel of Discipline far on in his Pilgrimage—after the Delectable Mountains, and near the Land of Beulah. These two angels are very slightly described. The first is visible—the second is all light and sound. Both, like the rose-red Angel, have a delicately austere quality—the first in singing 'Blessed are the pure in heart', indicating clearly that such heart-purity can only be attained by enduring the Fire: the second, while summing up all blessedness in the 'Come, ye blessed of my Father', still says '*Hasten*'—showing that the mere purging away of Evil is only a beginning —that with the inheriting of the Kingdom effort and assimilation are necessary—that goodness, to have free play, must be absorbed

and become native. It is left uncertain which Angel erases the final 'P' from Dante's brow, or whether this is done by the Fire itself.

In this whole beautiful passage the position of Virgil is both touching and tragic—whether we liken him to Hopeful (though without hope for himself) 'keeping his brother's head above water', and encouraging him by describing what he sees on the other side—or whether we compare him with the two Shining Men who accompany the pilgrims to the margin. Like them he is a *man*, not an angel. Like them (though for dramatic purposes he seems to go through the Fire), he urges others to cross while himself debarred from the passionate plunge—but not like them through immunity from sin but because of a sin-shadowed destiny—Angelic in his 'recognition of the Light-Gift', yet himself uncomforted by it (*Purg*. XXII—61, 73), he carries always his torch behind him, shedding radiance on the path of others—while himself walking in the dark.

It is an interesting coincidence that as in the Bible the Angel Hosts become common only in the later books, so they make their first appearance far on in the *Commedia*.

(*Purg*. XXX—13, 33, 82, 99-101, 145). The first group, and the only one in the *Purgatory*, consisting of one hundred Ministers and Messengers of Life Eternal responds—joyfully as a host of Resurrection Souls, to the voice of the author of the Song of Songs, invoking Wisdom—and assists at the culmination of Dante's destiny—the recognition of Beatrice and the disappearance of Virgil. 'Scatter lilies with full hands', they sing. Their flowers make a veil, like a wreath of mist, between Dante and Beatrice, as though to accentuate, though only in forms of beauty, the fact that he is not yet worthy of full vision—and perhaps, from the use of the word '*aspersione*' (*Purg*. XXXI—78-98) with some reference to the '*asperges me*' which follows—as if the scent of the flowers suggested the pungency of hyssop, and their whiteness the passionate purity of snow.

'Stern lessons', it is said, 'befall the strong.' 'Prune thou thy words, thy thoughts control', is the advice of an experienced religious teacher. Perhaps in the fact that just at this point Virgil disappears; that for the first time Dante finds his confident appeal, as to a mother, checked; that even in his great loss

he is denied sympathy; it is shown that a more condensed stage of aspiration has been reached and that he is no longer a child in purpose. It is Beatrice alone, however, who administers the rebuke. These angels are no longer ministering to man. They are now at their own work of praise and festival, and, having no responsibility, do not share Beatrice's duty of reproof, but may let their compassion have free play. They have a certain remoteness, but it produces tenderness, as sometimes in the case of age. They point the poet to God, even in his humiliation, and their considerateness in chanting only the hopeful verses of the psalm of appeal, and the harmony of their music with the eternal spheres, which, far from adding a formidable element, is like a sacrament of pity—melt the ice round his heart.

The leading characteristic of the group is an entire absence of self-assertion. Though desiring to shield Dante, they lend themselves as a medium for Beatrice's rebuke, of which a great part is addressed to them. At the fitting moment they leave off the scattering of their flowers to let her be seen. All the action reveals order, willingness to be subservient, and unfretted content.

The groups of angels are continued in the *Paradise*, but usually under symbolical forms.

(*Par.* XXVIII—22, 39-94, 132). In Canto XXVIII, God—a Point of Burning Light—is the Centre of nine Circles which represent the nine Orders of Angels. These Circles are not described as *coloured*, but it is interesting to remember in this connection the three Theological Virtues who, after Dante's immersion in Lethe, presented him before the eyes of Beatrice (*Purg.* XXXI—130, 138). They are said to represent the First Hierarchy (line 130), which, consisting of three Orders, is all vision, and thirst for vision—and they correspond with it in that their prayer for Dante is *Vision*. 'Unveil thyself . . . Turn thine eyes upon him', is the burden of their rhythmic and angelic song. And thus Vision, which Dante, following St Thomas Aquinas, makes the essence of Beatitude (*Par.* XXVIII—110, 115), embraces within itself Love, so red as to be indistinguishable from flame—Hope, green as emerald, recalling the Rainbow round about the Throne, and Faith, white as newly-fallen snow (*Purg.* XXIX—121, 129).

The second Hierarchy sings a perpetual Spring-Song. The word employed for 'singing' ('*Svernare*') is used for the song of a bird

at the end of Winter—and the line might be translated 'They sing a perpetual Hosannah of the Spring'—'this threefold melody sounding in the three ranks of joy which form their threefold character'.

The Third Hierarchy is not so definitely described. But all, from the Seraphim swift in motion, and near God as the halo is near the moon, down to the angels who minister to man, all are bound in the closest bonds, drawn continually upwards, and continually drawing others after them.

In the two following groups the Angels make of communion with the Glorified Saints a part of their adoration (*Par.* xxx—61, 69). From a River of golden light they fly like sparks continually, to be set like rubies in the golden flowers which represent the Saints—till again they seek the River of Grace.

(*Par.* xxxi—1, 30). Like a cloud of Bees they rest on the snow-white Rose which typifies the Church Triumphant, the Bride of Christ—and then return to God—the Hive *where their work forms itself into sweetness*. Though likened to Bees, these angels are accurately described. Their faces are of living flame, their wings of gold, their garments whiter than any snow. Still ministering, they share with the Saints the Peace and Passion which they have gained in flying towards God. But they do not interpose between the Saints and the Beatific Vision. Unlike the flowers, scattered by angelic hands in the Earthly Paradise, their presence makes no impediment to the passage of the light. They form no veil between God and the Blessed, for nothing but unworthiness can be the real obstacle in these regions, and they see him face to face.

In the last group we have the true angelic form again, untouched by symbolism.

(*Par.* xxxi—118, 135). Round Mary, *the Oriflamme of Peace*, the Banner exalted for victory not by one, but by many angels, an innumerable company makes festival—each one distinct in splendour, in movement, and in gesture. They all reflect the beauty of Mary, but each has his own separate beauty—and it was, perhaps, from this vision of myriad individuality that Dante drew some of the individual angels of the Purgatory.

(*Par.* xxxii—85, 114). One form, detached from the soaring choir of exaltation, completes the number of the Angels of Dante. Not in flight, like those others who, as they fly between

God and the Blessed, rain upon Mary the fulness of heavenly joy, but with wings outspread, rapt and motionless in wonder and homage, the Angel of the Annunciation, leading the celestial song, makes a centre and focus for the multitude of the heavenly host. Gazing into the eyes of Mary, love has transformed him into flame. The act for which he was found worthy on earth has become an eternal act. The palm he carried to Mary is his palm almost as much as it is hers.

The two qualities named as his by St Bernard, and which he possesses above all angels, are ideal human qualities not often displayed together—glad confidence or fearlessness, mingled with harmonious grace. These are ungrudgingly attributed to him by angels and saints alike—'We wish that he should have them', says St Bernard with great simplicity.

And so, by the crowning Mystery of the Incarnation, Earth, no longer as a shadow, lies athwart the very heart of Heaven.

'Meliked no other Heaven,' says Julian of Norwich, speaking for all Christians—'for I would liever have been in that pain till Doomsday than to come to Heaven otherwise than by Him.' (*Revelations of Divine Love*).

ANGELS IN SCRIPTURE

ROSEMARY HEDDON

'I AM Raphael, one of the seven angels, who present the prayers of the Saints before the throne and who go in and out of the courts of Heaven. . . . I cannot eat and drink and walk the earth with you; I am less than a breath. Now therefore, give God thanks; for I go unto Him that sent me.' This quotation, taken from the play *Tobias and the Angel*, by James Bridie, and itself a paraphrase of the scriptural account of Raphael's farewell to Tobias and his son, sums up the varying angelic activities which are described in the Old and New Testaments. They are shown to us in the courts of heaven, and for this we must depend on the attempted descriptions of visions, descriptions necessarily