

Dante and the Aesthetes

Towards an existential interpretation of the Divine Comedy

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The *Commedia* is not just an aesthetic, but an existential, work. As such, it demands an interpretation which relates it not merely to art and art-history but to our own human concerns, to our situation and existence in life, to life and life-history. That is the note which I wish to strike in this essay, and with this emphasis: the *Comedy demands* such interpretations; its demand is an integral part of its art.

Of course, though the point is often ignored or forgotten, it is not strictly an original one. Already in the *Letter to Can Grande* the note is struck, either by Dante or on his behalf, when, having affirmed that the poem has to do with ethics, the *Letter* goes on to say that its aim is not merely instruction but inculcation. In the previous paragraph it is struck more forcibly still: the work is intended to be nothing less than a means of grace, to produce nothing less than 'conversion': 'Finis totius et partis est removeere viventes in hac vita de statu miserie et perducere ad statum felicitatis' (§ 15)¹. The words are ambitious indeed, and it is hard, at first, to take them more seriously than we are generally wont to take the high-minded professions of moral purpose which conventionally preface a great part of the Renaissance's literary output. But we should, I think, make the attempt, and test them, to see if, at least in a part—since the whole cannot be studied in an article—the *Comedy* will substantiate them. We shall try to see how, in spite of the fact that its narrative is compounded of events and phenomena which are miraculous, or fantastic, the *Commedia* is a communication paradoxically spoken from and to 'existence' much as we know it, by an art which, at times, comes close to defining itself as something perhaps quite unique: the art of converting *through* art, 'de statu miserie . . . ad statum felicitatis.'

The episode which we shall deal with—the encounter, in *Inferno V*, with Francesca—is, morally at least, at first sight unpromising. So it would seem, at any rate, if we look to the critics whom I have labelled,

¹'The aim of the whole work and each part of it is to guide those who are actually alive away from misery and towards happiness'.

blanketwise, imprecisely, 'aesthetic'—for here or hereabouts, several of the word's normally divergent meanings seem to gather and come in touch with our subject. Francesca is described by Foscolo in these terms:

'Her fault is purified by the ardour of her passion, and truthfulness beautifies her confession of desire.'²

and by De Sanctis in these:

'She keeps her soul immaculate; she preserves that indefinable softness, purity, delicacy, which constitute the truly feminine.'³

In such criticisms as these, surely, Croce's view is already prefigured. It remained for him only to make the ethical problem explicit. Rightly seeing that within this drama Dante's feelings are not unmixed, that he both pities and condemns, Croce concludes that this is one of the moments in the *Commedia* when the 'mistero della giustizia divina' contradicts the 'sentimento etico umano', and he praises Dante for sometimes making us aware of it—Dante *then* is a poet—and blames him when sometimes he doesn't—and *then*, 'ripiglia il moralista . . . , e anzi il teologo', while, we infer, the poet stands in abeyance.⁴

These citations serve to represent the idea of the 'aesthetic critic' as we shall use the concept in this essay. And they do, as I say, together, make the episode seem an unpromising one—if not from the sentimental viewpoint, at least from the ethical—and none more so. But neither is there an episode, as we shall see, more apt to judge its own critics. For it contains, in itself, a criticism of views close to their own. By that standard of criticism which the scene with Francesca advances, these views are wrong, and wrong here precisely, in their view of Francesca. Looked at with a steadier gaze, she is plausible rather than admirable; she demonstrably subjugates reason to appetite and passion (*Inf.* V. 39); it is her own incomprehension that makes her fate seem so perverse (v. 93); and it is surely because of, not in spite of, this passion, this incomprehension, and especially this plausibility, that her bid for pity is so strong. Much of our pity for her—and we shall return to this later—is the echo of her pity for herself. This is so with Foscolo, De Sanctis, and Croce; it is a characteristic attitude of the 'aesthetic critic'.

Yet discussion of the 'aesthete' as critic uncovers only a part of the present relevance of the 'aesthetic': a consideration of Canto V in the light of these criticisms can hardly fail to suggest that Dante himself is

²U. Foscolo, *Discorso sul testo della Commedia di Dante*, Genoa 1930, p. 101.

³F. De Sanctis, *Lezioni e Saggi su Dante*, Turin 1955, p. 640.

⁴B. Croce, *La Poesia di Dante*, 2nd ed., Bari, 1921, p. 76.

the 'aesthete', the archetype of these critics. I refer to the 'Dante-personaggio'; not the poet of the *Commedia*, but the traveller as we find him in this canto.

'Poscia ch' io ebbe il mio dottore udito
 nomar le donne antiche e i cavalieri,
 pietà mi giunse, e fui quasi smarrito' (*Inf.* v. 70ff.)⁵

We note first how 'literary' is the quality of the romanticism to which Dante here responds. The lines quoted witness the strength of this response, and considering that what he has had from Virgil is little more than a catalogue of names it is strong indeed. And it seems to me that no other hypothesis so well explains its strength, and fits the facts recorded as this: the very names, Semiramis, Dido, Cleopatra, Helen, Achilles, Paris, Tristan, evoke for Dante a whole world of romantic literature, and definitely literature. The quoted lines themselves drive home the point in the phrase 'le donne antiche e i cavalieri', with its peculiar redolence of the chivalrous romance accentuating again the 'literary' element in these people's appeal. The nearest equivalent for us is Shakespeare's

When in the chronicle of wasted time
 I see descriptions of the fairest wights,
 And beauty making beautiful old rhyme
 In praise of ladies dead and lovely knights.

For here explicitly, as in Dante implicitly, the romance exists on a 'literary' level; there is no immediacy, only distancing, for the 'ladies' are 'dead', just as Dante's 'donne' are 'antiche'; in properly human terms the poet has no connection with them. And Dante's 'pietà' is conditioned by that distancing; the literature has so filled his head with romantic notions that he is 'quasi smarrito', 'lost', as at the first (*Inf.* I, 3).

Nor is that all. We are now faced with a passage of the literature which produces these apparent symptoms of Romanticism. As literature it is excellent: Dante at least attributes to his earlier self good taste. But by the end of Francesca's recitation he is not merely 'quasi smarrito', but absolutely so:

'di pietade
 io venni men così com'io morisse,
 e caddi come corpo morto cade'. (*V.* 140ff.)⁶

⁵'When I heard my Master name the knights and ladies of old times, pity seized me, I was as one lost and bewildered'.

⁶'For pity I swooned as if dying, and fell as a dead body falls'.

We can see the stages. Already his call to the lovers is 'affettuoso', tender; and Francesca, when she comes in response to his cry, couches her exordium in a vein of gracious courtly compliment. There are dissident factors—'l'aere perso', and 'mal perverso' (vv. 89 and 93)—and of these Francesca's words take cognizance, treating the facts of her situation, however, as if they essentially did not belong to her, as if she were out of place here. Instead, the manner, the style, of her speech invites us to see the situation as extrinsic to those who are in it, to see them as not of its essence:

'O animal grazioso e benigno,
che visitando vai per l'aere perso
noi che tignemmo il mondo di sanguigno,
se fosse amico il re dell'universo
noi pregheremmo lui della tua pace
poi c'hai pietà del nostro mal perverso'. (V. 88-93)⁷

The proper setting for this gracious period is the court, or perhaps the walled garden, where the interests of the 'gentle' heart may be pursued at leisure; and the illusory atmosphere of such a context is intensified as Francesca continues in the accent of Guinizelli and of Dante himself, the love poet of the *dolce stil nuovo*:

'Amor, ch' al cor gentil ratto s'apprende . . .'. (V. 100)⁸

With the threefold iteration of 'amor' at the beginning of consecutive *terzine* the lulling and soothing process is continued and intensified again. Not surprisingly, Dante, whose part in the changed situation which her words conjure is, as it were, already written for him (cf. vv. 89f., 93), responds in the way required of him. 'China' il viso' (v. 110):

'O lasso,
quanti dolci pensier, quanto disio
menò costoro al doloroso passo!' (vv. 112 ff.)⁹

And his pitying response is all the more apt, dramatically, because he is responding to ideals that were at any rate closely related to, or were actually, or (at the fictitious time of the journey) are, his own: the

⁷'O Living creature gracious and kindly, who came through the dark air to visit us who stained the world with blood, if the King of the universe were our friend we would pray him to grant you peace; since you feel distress at our dreadful plight.'

⁸'Love that swiftly seizes on noble hearts'. The line is obviously intended to recall Guinizelli's poem *Al cor gentil ripara sempre amore*, and Dante's own sonnet *Amore e il cor gentil sono una cosa*.

⁹'Alas, how many sweet thoughts, how much desire brought them to the woeful pass'.

whole scene, as Nardi has said, is 'un episodio stilnovista'.¹⁰ And with Dante respond Croce, De Sanctis and Foscolo, though with less reason. But the fact remains, nonetheless, that it is fundamentally a purely 'literary', 'poetic', 'aesthetic', ideal, for Dante as much as for them. It is literary, it is of the realm of fancy, but they think it true. And above all, at least for the moment, Dante the traveller thinks it true. Amor is irresistible when it comes to the gentle heart: 'Amor . . . a nullo amato amar perdona' (v. 103).¹¹

But there is a change now. The position has been that Francesca acts as literature upon Dante, and makes of him, like herself, an 'aesthete'. But in her next speech (vv. 121-38) she takes over his present part, or rather, since it is a recollection and in the past tense, she tells how she and Paolo came to this 'doloroso passo' precisely by the means which now lead Dante to the point of tears. 'Noi leggiavamo'—it was literature—'di Lancialotto come amor lo strinse'—and romantic literature at that. But they took it for life. They translated it, or tried to translate it, into the sphere of existence. And they found that the amorality of the love in the book became immorality in existence. The reason why it is so is not stated. All that Francesca does state is that the book and its author was 'Galeotto', a pandar, a go-between.

But therefore, on the strength of her own 'literary' pathos, so has Francesca been a Galeotto to our traveller, our archetypal aesthete. Or at least so she has been if he will not see the parallel between her reaction to Lancelot and his reaction to her. And would not the logic of the situation lead us on, to say further of Croce, De Sanctis and Foscolo, that if they do not see this parallel they make not of her alone but of Dante the poet a Galeotto, a pandar?

From this point the concept of the 'aesthetic' seems to deepen and blend with the 'aesthetic category' of Kierkegaard.¹² This category, or (to use Kierkegaard's word) *stadium*, denotes a rootless, uncommitted existence, without fundamental seriousness. 'Rootless', because it does not relate itself in any vital way to its environment, to life as it is, to 'existence' conceived as, in Heidegger's terms, *In-der-Welt-sein* or

¹⁰B. Nardi, *Dante e la cultura medievale*, Bari 1942, p. 82.

¹¹'Love . . . spares no one who is loved from loving'.

¹²The reader of BLACKFRIARS will recognize my debt to R. Poole and his article, 'Dante's Indirection' (April, 1963, No. 514, pp. 164-171). Though I am independent of his arguments and differ in my conclusions, I must acknowledge, with gratitude, the stimulus which Mr Poole has given to my thought in this essay by his original suggestion of the relation between Dante and the categories of Kierkegaard.

Da-sein, human 'being in the world', 'being *there*.' This we see in the case of Francesca, and in the traveller's case it is a real danger. And 'uncommitted', because it does not have an end, a purpose, or at least it acknowledges none, except the illusory one of attaining to a sublime but fancied freedom from ethic or duty, seizing instead only upon the elusive pleasure of the moment. This is seen, in Francesca's case, in the delusive amorality of her 'literary' world.

For the kind of sublimity which Francesca possesses consists precisely in her rejection of the ethical, in her refusal of responsibility in the world. That is what she has done on earth, and she does the same even now, in Hell, speaking in a way which disguises her culpability from her hearers too. For 'she tells the story of her vicissitudes', in her first speech especially, 'in the most general terms', wording it in the fixed and consecrated formulae of courtly love and 'tending to relate her experience to a generic and impersonal situation' which 'transfers the cause of her first impulse to sin away from the specific responsibility of the individual towards a plane where a transcendent and irresistible force is responsible: Love.'¹³ 'Hence', Sapegno continues, 'the elaborate structure of her discourse, both from the formal point of view—with its studied internal correspondences and the repeated use, at three points, of a single grammatical subject which does not coincide with the real subject of the actions expressed . . .—and also on the conceptual level, on which, by the referring of each act of the drama to a declared or assumed doctrinal norm, her discourse is transformed into a kind of urgent syllogism, which, from determined logical premises, leads as if by necessity to a foreseeable conclusion, independently of the wills of the particular agents.'¹⁴

Here then, in the evasion of responsibility and in the substitution of 'literary' for real values, is what today we should call an existential category, applying quite well to Francesca and no doubt to others of the inhabitants of Dante's *Inferno*. But the mere presence of existential categories in the poem was, of course, never in doubt; for the divisions between the three spheres of the after-life, as well as the divisions within them, evidently themselves represent such categories of existence. Neither that nor the presence of people in the *Commedia* who fit accidentally into categories created by 'existentialist' thinkers would by itself show the poem to be, in the other sense of the word, 'existential'

¹³N. Sapegno, comment to *Inferno* V. 100 in his one volume edition of the *Divina Commedia*, Milan 1957, p. 64.

¹⁴*loc cit.*

(i.e. *esistenza* as distinct from *esistenzial*).¹⁵ And it follows, too, that an interpretation of the poem is not to be called existential in the sense which our title suggests merely on account of its using or demonstrating the presence of such categories.

But the *Comedy* does, I believe, demand such interpretation, and our preliminary discussion of 'aestheticism', in terms of both critics and categories, may help to make plain that demand.

It is clear, first, that although we may speak of the subjectiveness of the aesthetic interpretations of Francesca it would be misleading to locate the fault strictly there. It is not subjectivity itself so much as its direction that is wrong. It has fastened on the wrong object, has failed to take account of the episode's own *self*-criticism. The interpretation corresponds, plainly, to something real in the *Dante-personaggio's* attitude, and it corresponds, too, to Francesca's understanding of herself. But it is not, as it pretends, an interpretation of the scene as a whole; rather, it turns its back on the scene as a whole, refuses complete involvement in the scene—and in that whole context alone are the actors themselves properly understood. Fundamentally the fault here is not subjectivity; it is rather a lack of 'seriousness': the attention of the reader is 'aesthetic' rather than 'human'. And to this fault ostensibly objective criticism can equally lead.

Here a passage from J. H. Whitfield can be our example. He remarks that all those human passions which one critic (Montano) had indignantly repudiated as gross inventions of De Sanctis are allowed (by the same critic) to return surreptitiously ('but also maybe triumphantly') 'as the possessions of Dante-character and Dante-peccatore'. It is hard to see why this should be a criticism of Montano, but at all events Professor Whitfield continues by saying, 'we may be, even if mistakenly, more interested in the peccant Dante than in the end-result'.¹⁶

Now what Whitfield *says* here is right. One could even go further. We may be more interested, and are even (since how many of us do not recognize a part of ourselves in these 'aesthetes'?) likely, at first sight, thus to be 'more interested', because more involved. And we may be forgiven for this—I believe, indeed, Dante intends it. We may be forgiven *if* we repent, if, that is to say, our involvement is only 'at first sight', as with the *Dante-personaggio* it is.

¹⁵The distinction is expressed by saying that the structure, the analysis, or the characterizing of human existence is '*esistenzial*' while '*esistenza*' is a speaking and listening in terms of one's own concrete concerns' (G. Bornkamm in *Kerygma and History* ed. by C. E. Braaten and R. A. Harrisville, p. 174n.).

¹⁶*Barlow Lectures on Dante* (1959), Supplement to *Italian Studies*, p. 14.

But the *tone* of Whitfield's remark is not so easy to agree with. The phrase 'even if mistakenly' suggests that the interest he posits here is not an involvement; or rather, that one may persist in one's preference for the peccant Dante without Whitfield's considering it a serious enough 'mistake' as to need rectifying. Either, therefore, it is not really so wrong because these 'human passions' are not really so evil as Dante (or Montano) would have us believe; or it is not so wrong because—quite apart from the question whether they are evil or not—Dante does not present, or at any rate he does not attract us to, a viable alternative. In the first case, the criticism of Dante is (theoretically) ethical; in the second (theoretically) literary. In practice, however, Whitfield does not very clearly distinguish them. He contents himself with the mixture, the issue is clouded, and it is suggested that the human passions of Dante have returned triumphantly indeed. At the end of his lecture Whitfield is able to refer back to near the beginning: 'Did we not see, in starting, that Dante's humility is in *Inferno* I, and is suspect, while his pride is shown in *Paradiso*, and is genuine? There is an opposite paradigm to Montano's'.¹⁷

Now this is, on the face of it, objective criticism. It is objective, at all events, if one leaves out of consideration the moral element in it—as we shall, for, after all, Whitfield does not commit himself to it. And as such we may deal with this at the same time as we deal with another (again, on the face of it) objective criticism, that of G. Trombadori, a criticism that is (more than Montano's) 'an opposite paradigm' to Whitfield's. Trombadori was not involved with Francesca even at first sight. He saw her evidently at once as 'the demoniac woman who employs her fair person, her sensual charms, to bemuse the virtue of the gentle heart and lead it to perdition'.¹⁸

But this is not what Kierkegaard would call 'inwardness'. It is not even sensitive. It misses the whole point of the episode, and, in a sense, of the *Comedy*, which is, by self-knowledge to see and reject the 'aesthetic' life of Francesca. This deserves stressing: by *self*-knowledge, not merely by knowing the fault of Francesca. Our subjectivity must be involved, and involved by both pity and fear. For we see ourselves in Francesca, as Dante saw himself, and must therefore pity her. And we should also see through ourselves, as we look at her, to what will be our end, if our self-identification with her persists, and are therefore invited to fear. But Trombadori does not pity, and it seems as if

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 15.

¹⁸Quoted by I. Brandeis, *The Ladder of Vision*, London, 1960, p. 23.

Whitfield does not fear. And neither of them so much as seems to realize that it is the *Comedy's* intention that they should, that the reading that the *Comedy* requires is an active and dramatic one, that the reader is supposed to be changed.¹⁹

I repeat: it is the *Comedy*, and not my doctrine or my doctrinaire-ness, that demands this subjectivity, this 'inwardness', and change. Its own 'aesthetic' in the philosophical sense, its own 'poetic', is an existential one. We can see this in action in this same canto, where, in rejecting Francesca, Dante plainly rejects too the philosophical aesthetic of the courtly love convention and its poetry, and rejects it as 'aesthetic' in Kierkegaard's sense, because it claims for its élite a freedom from the moral law which governs those outside. And in place of this Dante evolves, and practises, an existential poetic whose aim is to bring the reader to the point of change, of repentance, the point at which he may (if he will) commit himself to a real ethico-religious Christian existence in the context of a history that has been transformed by grace.

An analogue for this poetic, as it exists in the Francesca episode, can be found in a wholly different kind of work, Thomas Mann's short novel, *Death in Venice*.

Again—to note the more obvious parallels first—it is concerned with a death upon the shores of the Adriatic, and again it is a kind of damnation. Moreover, it is a damnation which is closely bound up with an aesthetic in the strict philosophical sense, and with the deceptive danger of an aesthetic which turns its back upon knowledge—in Francesca's case, the knowledge of good and evil, of individual responsibility, and, in the case of the writer Gustav von Aschenbach, knowledge of the immoral and daemonic tendency of the creative principle. Aschenbach's art is Apollonian, it is all discipline, willed control, ordered and composed, and it celebrates a humanistic moral triumph over the Dionysian abyss: 'explicitly (Aschenbach) renounces sympathy with the abyss, explicitly he refutes the flabby humanitarianism of the phrase: "tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner".'

And Thomas Mann's own involvement in this is real. As in the *Comedy*, there is an 'appropinquation' of the protagonist (and I mean here Francesca) and the author. Francesca speaks like one of Dante's own poems; Dante, as it were, breathes something of himself into her. And Aschenbach's literary output has a palpable relation to Mann's,

¹⁹See *Par.* xvii. 124-32, which shows that Dante consciously intends to alter his reader through the poem, to offend in order to edify.

and his 'aesthetic' is at least one element in Mann's, a possible development of Mann's, as Francesca's is an element and a possible development of Dante's.

Death in Venice is, on one level, the work of that 'possible' Thomas Mann. Its style, like Aschenbach's, is classical, imperturbable, Apollonian, existing in an ordered, if simplified, moral ethos which has no truck with the abyss.

But the story told in the style, the story of Aschenbach, conflicts with the style and with Aschenbach's classical temper, telling of the fever-ridden, hectic dream-world, world and/or dream, which Aschenbach enters as he comes to Venice. And this hectic element, the plague—it is Asiatic cholera, a secret hidden behind the ornate surface of the city—and the moral disorder, the moral and physical decomposition hidden behind the composed classical style of the esteemed protagonist, these together are the abyss, the swampy jungle of his fitful day-nightmare, and he cannot cope with them, they are outside his scope. But they now fascinate him, aesthetically, and he succumbs to their fascination, hiding from himself the common and clichéd quality of this lure and its fatal 'end', disguising it in the unreal, mythological style of his thought—as Thomas Mann does by the style of the prose.

But there is a difference, despite the 'appropinquation' which signals involvement. Thomas Mann, unlike Aschenbach, is conscious of the 'desperate' direction, the '*telos*' of the style. By objectifying the danger he is able to elude it. In the realm of Dante-poetics we must reckon with the possibility of similar behaviour: as here, when, in Francesca's first speech, Dante identifies her style with his own '*dolce stil nuovo*', and *Dante-personaggio* is so involved that he swoons, '*di pietade*'. It is a deceptive and dangerous style, and Francesca and the traveller are deceived by it. But the poet, like Thomas Mann, rejects it. It has been dramatically re-assumed, but the poet has now passed beyond it and sees through it to its end, in despair, in damnation.

It is time to draw threads together and reach a conclusion. The critique of aestheticism is, I believe, for Dante, a means to an end. Here perhaps is the first and fundamental point of comparison between Kierkegaard and Dante. The aim in each case is that of 'becoming a Christian' when all men think themselves Christians, of 'becoming a Christian . . . when one is a Christian of a sort'. Speaking of the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* Kierkegaard says, 'this work concerns itself with and sets "the Problem", which is the problem of the whole

authorship; how to become a Christian'.²⁰ And he elaborates this:

'Having appropriated the whole pseudonymous, aesthetic work as the description of *one* way a person may take to become a Christian (*viz. away* from the aesthetical in order to become a Christian), it undertakes to describe the other way (*viz. away* from the System, from speculation, etc.,²¹ in order to become a Christian)'.²²

And Dante asks, 'how may I become a Christian?', and asks his readers to ask it. For this reason Dante the poet deliberately engages us, with his traveller, in the 'human passions' of the *Inferno*, to the end that he may 'find us where we are' and not only find, but show us where we are, to show us with complete moral seriousness what he claims is the teleology of the existence in which we are. 'In quo medio doctrinat nos moraliter in persona sui,' as Dante's son Pietro says in connection with another part of the *Inferno*, 'debere aperire oculos mentis ad videndum ubi sumus, an in recta via ad patriam, aut non'.²³ Dante presents to our judgments this *telos*, this or that circle, this or that soul, for us to recognize and assent to as *our telos*, and so bring us to a state of self-knowledge, of knowledge of ourselves as committed in this way or that to a sinful existence, which is one pre-condition of repentance.

Away, then, from aesthetics by showing the end of aesthetics, which, Dante and Kierkegaard agree, is despair: 'Lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch'entrate.' And if the truly desperate are often, like Francesca, quite unconscious of a despair with which they are now unendingly at one, the despair to which Dante introduces us and which he induces in us is one which, on the contrary, does know and admit its own existence, and from which, therefore, we may be delivered. Away from aesthetics, through despair, to life as a Christian. Then, after the victory, despair only remains as something abolished, like the memory of sin after passing through Eunoë.

But if despair is the negative side of the *Comedy's* existential intention, it needs still a positive side to be presented and shown (as I said somewhat earlier) to be viable, a viable alternative. Despair may be the pre-condition of repentance but it does not itself effect repentance. Repen-

²⁰*The Point of View for my Work as an Author*, p. 13.

²¹i.e. from foolish objectivity, cf. again the *Letter to Can Grande*, §16.

²²*Ibid.*, pp. 41-2

²³*Petri Allegherii Commentarium* (Florence 1845), p. 25. 'By this means he gives us, in his own person, moral instruction, showing how we ought to open the eyes of our mind to see where we are, whether we are on the right road . . . or not'.

tance is made possible only by the sight of something better, of a better way and one within our reach.

For the penitent's self-knowledge is not only what we know when we experience our death and judgment, as it were conditionally, in (for example) Francesca's death and judgment: the knowledge of ourselves as doomed by sin.²⁴ It must include also the knowledge of a future possibility, one which attracts us more strongly than sin. And if we take the *Letter to Can Grande* at its word when it says that the aim of the work is to remove the living from misery to happiness, to effect therefore the change of existence which takes place in conversion, it must also be a part of the poem's existential aim to give the reader knowledge of that future possibility, to attract him and direct him towards 'blessing'.

And how can Dante show us this possible new self, except by showing us Christ? And how can he show that God's act in Christ makes Christ's way really viable for us? He cannot, of course, prove it. It is useless to ask of him (as Whitfield would like) whether he returned from his journey a better man. But he can claim it, and the poem presents his claim to our judgment. It asks the question, sets the 'problem': how to become a Christian. And it answers it, indirectly, by pointing us to Christ. I died, says Dante, with Him on Good Friday, and descended into Hell, and I rose with Him on Easter Day, and ascended into Heaven. And if this is a metaphor it is one which by now we know how to interpret in terms of self-knowledge and repentance and conversion. The truth of Christ, says Dante, has become my truth, and in some such way as this I believe that my truth points to Christ. Will you not accept this truth as *your* truth, and 'repent'? This, surely, is the heart of the *Comedy's* existential message.

²⁴Cf. Benvenuto da Imola, *Comentum*, Florence 1887, I, p. 16: 'Quaedam enim anima est posita in peccatis, et ista dum vivit cum corpore, est mortua moraliter, et sic est in Inferno morali'. It is in the context of this theology, surely, that the *Comedy* should be seen: here its critical task of evoking repentance is urgent indeed, and the centrality of its aim to teach us, as Pietro (quoted above) says, 'aperire oculos mentis ad videndum ubi sumus' in this light becomes clear.