

7. Dante and Italian Philosophy

I am really only an amateur reader of Dante; and, like so many others before me, I read him for many years simply for the poetry, and for his immediate human significance. But I have long been interested in Italian philosophy, and have gradually come to have a knowledge — very erratic and uneven certainly, but enough to make me want to know more — of several interrelated strands in it. My interest, and much of my knowledge, grew out of a professional concern with, and long study of, the philosophy of Giovanni Gentile, whose many historical essays when they are systematically arranged can be seen to constitute a remarkably well integrated history of Italian philosophy from the twelfth century to the end of the nineteenth, in some twenty-five volumes.¹ There is scarcely any figure or any aspect of the subject — except perhaps the important Italian contribution to the philosophical foundations of mathematics — that he did not deal with at length. One might complain perhaps that some parts are out of proportion to others; but criticisms of this sort would almost inevitably be made about any work on this scale even if it were deliberately planned by a committee of scholars. To find such a measure of organic unity and proportion in the piecemeal productions of a single man over a period of more than thirty years is little short of miraculous.

¹ *Opere Complete* (Florence, Sasoni), Volumes XI to XXXV. Of his historical works only the posthumously published manuscript on Greek Philosophy (Volume X), and the early essays on Roman Stoicism, are really extraneous to his concern with the Italian tradition. His early essays on Marx (Volume XXVIII) are relevant to it because although not strictly part of *his* history of Italian philosophy they illustrate perfectly the impact of Marxism in the history of Italian philosophy. They are an *example* of the influence of Labriola which serves in place of the reflective judgment upon Labriola's work that must be supplied in a proper history.

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The miracle here is not really fortuitous. It is possible to regard almost all of Gentile's historical essays as if they were part of a single organic whole, because they are all guided and controlled by a fairly simple and quite definite conception of what Italian philosophy is about and what makes it distinctively Italian. Gentile inherited this conception from Spaventa through the teacher of his undergraduate days at Pisa, Donato Jaja; and although he continued to develop and refine it as his own system took form in his mind, he never radically transformed or changed it. Indeed his own theory of the spirit as "pure act" was formulated as the one and only logically consistent solution to the specific problem of Italian philosophy as he saw it from the beginning of his career; and because of this, his *tesi di laurea* of 1897 fits, not perhaps perfectly, but still quite neatly into its niche beside other works composed many years later when he was an acknowledged *maestro* with a philosophical system of his own.

The great central problem of Italian philosophy according to Gentile, is the conflict between a theology of immanence and a theology of transcendence; and the proper or ideal solution of the problem is only to be found in a clear and adequate theoretical statement of the theology of immanence.² Thus the *history* of Italian philosophy should be studied as exhibiting the gradual emergence of the theology of immanence (a theology in which the world, and especially the thought and work of man, is viewed as the only true and necessary expression or revelation of God's nature, and as constituting His very being) out of the traditional theology of transcendence (the orthodox Christian theology in which God is regarded as having a quite independent being and as revealing Himself only very partially, and then mainly by an act of grace, to the world that He has created and which absolutely depends on Him).

This then was the conception of Italian philosophy which my studies of Gentile had given me. But not long after Gentile died, a very different and quite explicitly anti-theological interpretation of the history of Italian philosophy was put forward by Eugenio Garin in his two-volume history of Italian philosophy; and this work, like most of his earlier books, has been

² Gentile speaks typically of the "*philosophy* of immanence" and the "*philosophy* of transcendence." In summarizing Gentile's view, Garin substitutes "religion" for "philosophy" (*La filosofia* I, p. 15). But it seems to me that the word "theology" expresses in a more neutral way what both of them mean, because it links the aims of Aristotle and Hegel to those of Bonaventura and Ficino.

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widely, if not indeed universally, acclaimed as a model of historical objectivity, monumental erudition and minutely accurate scholarship.

Garin's general characterization of Italian philosophy is as follows:

almost always a science of man and of his activities, a mundane, this-worldly philosophy, which leaves to religion the task of solving the supreme problems, is preferred to great systematic constructions. The riches of art and literature on the one side, and on the other the living problems arising from the presence of the Church, and from the crises of political life, have constituted the two fundamental types of experience about which philosophical reflection in Italy has been continually engaged: it has been philology in Vico's sense, as the science of human communication; or politics and ethics, through the pressure of the problem of the state, and of the relation between Church and State. And hence it has been religious, but particularly as the need to clarify the function of the Church upon earth. The great problems of metaphysics, the problem of the relation between God and the world, are not so much resolved as lived through at the limits of an experience in which God is accepted on the plane of religion itself and made the pivot on which rests the *regnum hominis* and on whom man relies for his own lordship over nature. A typical example is Galileo, whose vision of the world rests entirely on the validity of his faith in the God who created the world *numero pondere et mensure*.³

When I agreed recently to write a general survey article on Italian philosophy for an encyclopedia,⁴ I was therefore faced with the problem of which of these two conceptions was more nearly

³ *La filosofia*, Milan, Vallardi, 1948, I, 23.

⁴ See "Italian Philosophy" in P. Edwards (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ===

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correct. I eventually concluded, as students in this sort of dilemma so often do, that both sides were right, but also that both of them are wrong in a fundamental respect; and the memory of Dante was one of the most crucial factors in my arrival at this conclusion. To anticipate briefly, I think that Gentile and Garin have each pointed to and emphasized an aspect of the truth that is hidden and underplayed, but certainly not denied by the other; and the main disagreement between them is terminological. Garin is convinced that the stating of the problem of Italian philosophy in terms derived from German philosophy after Kant deforms and denatures it; and there is a quite obvious sense in which he is right. Italian philosophers often would not recognize themselves in Gentile's historical works. But then, on the other hand, I think many of them would not accept Garin's separation of the philosophical from the religious. It seems reasonable to suppose that most of them would find Garin easier to grasp, but that they would nonetheless disagree with his way of drawing boundary lines; while that same majority would agree with Gentile's refusal to set boundaries (once they understood him), however much they might disagree with his conclusions. Much more important than the disagreement over language and concepts between Garin and Gentile is their agreement upon the fact that there is a dominant motive in the Italian tradition. I think myself that this tenet, however it is formulated, is an error, or at best an extremely debatable proposition. Italian philosophy presents us with an unresolved tension between this world and the other world (or between "immanence" and "transcendence") which goes back at least to Dante. I believe that it was through Dante that this tension first became explicit in Italian philosophy, though the problem itself is older, being first found, in the specifically Christian form that it assumed for Dante, in the work of St. Augustine.

In order to show that this thesis, or any other general thesis, about the character of Italian philosophy, is true, without being guilty of arguing in a circle, one must be able to draw the boundary lines of the category "Italian philosophy" without reference to this thesis. Just what should be included under "Italian philosophy" and in particular where does (or should) the history of *Italian* philosophy begin? We may take it (I hope) that the term in its ordinary use is meant to include all literature of a philosophical type that was written by Italians, and is quite widely read by Italians. But if works were intended by their authors to be read by anyone and everyone, and if they are in fact quite widely read by non-Italians, their being counted as works of *Italian* philosophy becomes rather a trivial matter. No one would bother to write a

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history of *Italian* philosophy in that case, just as no one (until very recently) has written a history of the philosophical reflections of women as distinct from men. This reflection leads us to a much stricter definition of Italian philosophy as such: we might say that philosophy is “Italian” in the strict sense if it is deliberately produced by Italians for an audience of Italians because the author believes that the problems he is dealing with are of special or peculiar relevance and interest to Italians.

But now we have a definition that is too narrow, just as previously we had one that was too broad. Very little philosophy is national in this sense. In particular we should note that the vernacular works of Dante (including the *Commedia*) do not fall into the category of Italian philosophy as thus strictly defined. Distinctively philosophical problems are almost always regarded by those who cultivate them as being of interest and relevance to all of us; and when Dante chose to write about Christian philosophy in vernacular prose (the *Convivio*) and poetry (the *Commedia*) he did so because he took this universality of relevance *more* seriously and *more* literally than the official professors did. He held that some philosophical doctrines were *so* relevant to the lives of all men, that discussions about them should be addressed to all men (even those who were not very highly educated) and that this should be made clear by using the language of ordinary educated men. He did not write for his Italian audience as Italians, but simply as people who did not know, or were not fluent in, Latin. The same motive had operated in the mind of St. Francis earlier, and was to operate in the mind of Luther later.

Nevertheless, in abandoning Latin for the vernacular, Dante was condemning himself, willy-nilly, to write primarily for ordinary Italians (just as Luther wrote primarily for ordinary Germans) and not for ordinary men as such or universally; and when he found his vocation in the writing of a great religious-philosophical poem in Italian he was of necessity obliged to address himself to those who could read Italian. Both the *Convivio* and the *Commedia* have been translated (the latter certainly many times and into many different tongues); but whereas a translation of the former can convey Dante’s philosophical argument fairly adequately, a translation of the latter must (if I am not mistaken) lose much even of Dante’s philosophical doctrine and purpose, because that doctrine and purpose is conveyed indirectly by poetic means for which no commentary on a translated text, however elaborate, will ever be an adequate substitute.

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It is mainly in this *involuntary* way that separate philosophical traditions have come into being; and it is through the use of the vernacular tongue that at least some of the separated traditions have assumed a *national* character. Every philosopher, no matter how convinced he may be of the universal import of his problem and its solution, is restricted in his outlook by his membership in some finite community of fellow workers, consisting mainly of the living men with whom he can talk freely, and the dead or distant ones whose written work is readily available to him. Equally he must address the results of his reflections to some finite community of fellow students present and distant, living and yet unborn. From these universal human limitations the growth of distinct traditions follows naturally. An important thinker will be one who either founds or seriously modifies a tradition by giving a distinctive turn to speculation in his community as above defined. Even in medieval philosophy distinct traditions are easy to identify, because the relative slowness of communication between cultural centers allowed different problems, and/or ways of looking at problems, to become stabilized and accepted as basic, in different centers. But nationality had little to do with this separation of the medieval traditions because the accepted language of philosophy was international, and most philosophers were clergy who both were, and felt themselves to be, members of a universal church, or of some order within it, rather than of any more strictly *localized* community.

The use of a local vernacular changed this situation dramatically, by localizing the audience, and making communication between centers of different nationality and language slower and more difficult. Inevitably, too, it changed the fund of problems to be studied. Practical and secular problems that were of continuing local concern, would force themselves on the attention of philosophers; and even contributions to problems of general interest, would be restricted in their influence by the language they were written in. Thus, although a national tradition in philosophy can by no means be defined simply in terms of work written in the national language, my own conclusion is that the first important work written in the national tongue is the only reliable starting point for the study of a national tradition. I think that for Italy the *Commedia* is that starting point, and in the light of the previous discussion I propose as a working definition of Italian philosophy the following formula: Italian philosophy consists of those philosophical works which Italians read more than other people do, and the important works in Italian philosophy are those

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which Italians generally read more attentively than they read the important works of non-Italian philosophy.⁵

What then is the relation of Dante to the Italian philosophy that came after him? He is by my definition the beginning of the Italian tradition; but is he the beginning only in the sense of being a catalytic agent of change, or can he be regarded as in any way the architect or founder of it? This question is not often even asked, because the attention of philosophical students of Dante is usually focused on the problem of his relation to the philosophical tradition *before* his own time; and when my question *is* raised, attentive and unprejudiced students of Dante from that other point of view would all be inclined (I think) to opt for the catalytic view of Dante, if they agreed with my contention that his work is the true beginning of Italian philosophy at all. It will come as something of a shock therefore, when I say that I think Dante really can be regarded as the true founder or “father” of Italian philosophy. Lest this claim should seem too hyperbolic to merit further attention, let me qualify it at once by saying that probably Luther and the Council of Trent had as much to do with his achieving this status as his own poetic and moral genius did. But still I do think that he showed genius as a moral philosopher, and not only as a poet; and I think the whole nature of his philosophical achievement has been generally misconstrued and under-estimated, because of an undue concentration on the sources of his ideas, and especially upon the positions that he took in various technical disputes in medieval philosophy.

In the history of the philosophy of his own time, as the term is normally understood and as he would have understood it himself, Dante played only a minor role. He was never more, as far as I can tell, than an enthusiastic amateur of the philosophy of the Schools. But he had always a deep-seated and very distinctive concern about the right ordering of practical life; and if we stand off from his work enough to see the pattern of it as a whole, even the fragmentary *Convivio* reveals a very original conception of the

⁵ If anyone wishes to raise the point, the major works of non-Italian philosophy can be defined in terms of the consensus of all Western students, Italian and non-Italian alike. But if this consensus is as clear and definite as I believe it to be, I would hope that no one will be in any doubt of what is meant.

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character, limits, and ultimate purpose of human cognition.⁶ This pattern and the guiding doctrine behind it are expressed only in allegorical forms, of which Dante was a natural master; the detailed arguments are mostly derivative, and Dante is quite humble about his own role as purveyor of the wisdom of the doctors of the Church to the busy multitude. But we may notice that something like a belief in poetry as a form of philosophical revelation is already implicit in his undertaking to write such a lengthy philosophical commentary on his own poems. (He gave it up, I think, precisely when he decided that poetry, being “revealed,” was a *higher* mode of communication than philosophy (or “reason”). This made him a *philosopher* (of language) in a very *original* sense.)

The disquisitions upon detailed points of moral philosophy and theology in the *Commedia* are of the same type, and on the same level as those of the *Convivio*. There is all too often a note of unction more appropriate to the pulpit than to the professor’s lectern, and the logical coherence of the arguments with one another is often very imperfect. The arguments themselves are restatements, by an intelligent and enthusiastic, but not an outstandingly brilliant student, of what he found in his books. Nevertheless the philosophical significance of the *Commedia* as a whole is enormous. The whole character of the scholastic philosophy is changed, when Dante uses it as the framework for his great poem, because the angle of vision is radically different, and philosophy itself is endowed with a new purpose. In Dante’s vision philosophy becomes, almost for the first time, an instrument of universal salvation. It is not just the salvation of the few intellectuals that is attempted by Dante; it is the salvation of all men. Plato’s lifelong concern with politics and education rested on something of the same faith; and from Plato Augustine inherited it. These two (as far as I know) were Dante’s only predecessors. But the range over which Dante extended and applied the conception far exceeded anything in the work of either of them. One can find the first examples of philosophy conceived as it is conceived in the *Commedia* in some of Plato’s myths — especially in the myth of Er at the end of the *Republic*, and in other myths about the life of the soul in the other world. Augustine’s *City of God* comes even closer to Dante’s vision in some respects, because he is a Christian

⁶ This has been well brought out in E. Gilson’s book *Dante and Philosophy* (New York, Harper Torchbook).

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Platonist for whom the actual events of history have assumed an eternal exemplary significance like that of the events related in Plato's myths. But it is only in Dante's poem that we find the eternal significance of *every* aspect of human life and human nature systematically organized and confidently displayed. Even those who cannot read, even the youngest children, can receive his message and grasp its relevance to their own lives. The magnitude of the task is so vast, the execution of it so sure, and the success so complete, that it ought not to surprise anyone that it was only achieved by taking over a theoretical system in which all the main currents of Greco-Christian speculation have been conciliated and systematized. The enterprise of the *Commedia* would have been inconceivable without the prior achievement of the *Summa Theologica*, even if Dante had been a philosopher by profession who had spent half a lifetime in the Schools.

In fact, if Dante *had* been a philosopher of the Schools it is hard to believe that he could have produced the philosophical revolution that he did produce, with or without the *Summa* behind him. Only a philosopher who was already, like Plato, a frustrated statesman would be likely to have the experience, the insight, and the burning urge, needed to complete the *Inferno* and the *Purgatorio*, regarded simply as documents of applied philosophy. Any Augustinian monk might have written a philosophical analogue of the *Paradiso* — think of Bonaventura's *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum* to mention only the most obvious example — but for a philosophical treatise in the accepted sense, which is comparable to the *Inferno* in its living force and psychological authority, as well as in the subject matter, we must wait for Machiavelli.

It is in the conception of the *Inferno* and the *Purgatorio* that Dante's revolutionary power is to be found. For in these two parts the philosophical or eternal meaning of all the non-philosophical, non-contemplative aspects of human life is exemplified. In the *Inferno* we recognize all too often and all too painfully the moral chaos of our political, social, and personal life as it actually is; and in the *Purgatorio* we recognize it again on its better side, as an organized social fellowship in which we aid one another wherever we can, in the spirit of the second commandment. The *Paradiso* completes the picture by showing us life as it is (or rather as it would be) when every other consideration is taken up into, and absorbed in, the first commandment. This is a life we can achieve in our present existence, only fitfully and imperfectly; but it is this life upon

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which all of medieval philosophy is focused, and it is only Dante's conviction that as a divinely inspired poet he has a privileged access to it, equal to that of a contemplative saint, that makes the *Commedia* a possible enterprise for him at all. If he did not claim, quite literally and seriously, to be "seeing all things in God," his account of Hell and Purgatory would be a shameless blasphemy involving the usurpation of God's prerogative at the Last Judgment. But, of course, a contemplative saint would not be concerned with Hell and Purgatory in the way that Dante was; and even if he were, he would certainly never have perceived them so clearly or in such fine detail.

It is because of this that although he was essentially a medieval Christian philosopher, whose standpoint was that of the contemplative life, Dante restored to Italian philosophy the clear awareness of an option which Christian philosophers had almost completely lost sight of since the time when Augustine had first clearly formulated it, and made the choice for them. This was the choice between the earthly and the heavenly city, exemplified for Augustine in the supposedly historical figures of Cain and Abel. "It is recorded of Cain," he says, "that he builded a city. But Abel, being a sojourner built none. For the city of the saints is above, though it have citizens here upon earth, wherein it lives as a pilgrim until the time of the kingdom come" (*De Civitate Dei*, XV, 1). The destiny of the two brothers was, of course, in Augustine's eyes, providentially appointed and hence eternally significant. Cain, the first murderer, prefigured Romulus, that other murderer who likewise slew his brother for jeering at his seeming folly in laying out the confines of the nascent city of Rome (cf. XV, 5); and Abel, the first victim, was the first of many prefigurations of Jesus himself who was unjustly condemned and murdered by an authority deriving ultimately from the Senate and people of Rome. Rome, the earthly city, was for Augustine only an enemy or a snare, which might inveigle the Christian pilgrim to abandon his journey to life in the other world. At most and at best, the earthly city should be to the Christian like an inn, and its peace and good order are of some interest to him, though not of vital import, just as efficient service is of value to a traveler staying at a hotel for a day or two. He will appreciate good service and certainly he will do all he can to facilitate it both for himself and others; but if the service fails he can bear it patiently because his stay is so short.

Dante's view is very different; it is so different that, although he accepts and indeed makes himself the symbol of the orthodox Christian role of the pilgrim, the option between the city

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builder and the sojourner becomes a real choice in his work, and one that is by no means easy to make. Dante's Rome is a Christian city, which means that some Christian must serve as the innkeeper, and not all Christians can adopt the attitude of guests passing through. Of course many city builders are still to be found among the damned. Notably, any Pope who hankers after temporal power must inevitably find himself there, since he is the divinely appointed leader of the Christian pilgrimage. But the earthly city, of which Rome is for Dante, as for Augustine, both the eternal symbol and the actual historical center, is something that *must* be properly united, organized and governed if this world is ever to become what it ought to be, the foothills of the mount of Purgatory, rather than what it now is, the dark forest at the mouth of Hell. Purgatory itself, with its successive levels of communal charitable endeavor, exactly prefigures what Dante's Universal Rome would be like if we realized it. In the *Commedia* he definitely chooses the role of the pilgrim, alone save for a single guide and intellectual mentor. But the *De Monarchia*, which is by far his most important and original contribution to philosophy in the ordinary sense, is the result of a very different commitment in his own active life; it provides the documentary proof of how hard the choice was for him, and how real a tension there was in him between the poetic spectator of all time and all existence, and the frustrated philosopher king.

Even in the *Commedia* Dante's view that human reason is properly designed and intended for the solution of practical problems, and the organization of practical life, is clearly symbolized by the way that Virgil gives place to Beatrice in the Earthly Paradise. The proper object of natural reason, as Aristotle taught, is the order of physical nature; this is shown by our dependence on elements derived from sense experience in all of our cognitive activity. But just because we know, by faith, that there is a higher order of things in which we have a crucial part to play, and because, through God's grace, this order has been revealed to us for contemplation even in this life, our concern with the things of this world must be primarily a practical, not a contemplative one. The contemplative life is higher certainly; but it is founded on revelation, not on the natural exercise of reason. Beatrice is herself a rational guide, but her reason is one that comes to us by grace, and when we have that grace we see why the proper use of our natural reason is *not* the use made of it by Aristotle, although he was the "master of them that know" because he first understood the nature and limitations of human knowing. Instead, human reason should be used as Virgil, the poet of the Empire, used it. When we understand this, we can appreciate the

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tremendous significance of the throne reserved in Paradise for the Emperor Henry himself. Aristotle understood what human reason *is*; but it was Plato who first understood what it is *for*, and realized that the independently contemplative use of reason belongs to another world than this.

The choice between a social concern with human salvation which culminates in the Earthly Paradise (or at least in a city at the foot of the mount of Purgatory), and a solitary intellectual pursuit of personal salvation which culminates in the beatific vision of Paradise itself, is the problem that Dante bequeathed to Italian philosophy, and it has been the central issue in the Italian tradition ever since. Gentile's theoretical formulation of the issue in Hegelian metaphysical terms involves a serious understatement of the *practical* ethico-political character of Italian philosophy (though in his own philosophy precisely these concerns are central, which is proof enough that he did not mean to undervalue them); while Garin's practical formulation of the issue in terms of the social problems of human existence involves an equally serious understatement of the theoretical or contemplative aspect of the Italian tradition (though the way in which every chapter in his history tends to focus on "the great problems of metaphysics" or "the problem of the relation between God and the world" proves that he did not mean to underestimate them either).

To prove this thesis adequately, a fairly large book would be required, which I am certainly not competent to write. The most that I can do here is to illustrate it by citing a few examples, at least some of which will, I hope, be familiar enough for the point to be grasped without lengthy explanations. The case of Machiavelli as a philosopher of the *Inferno* has already been mentioned, and I trust that the parallel is obvious enough. Not everyone, perhaps, realizes that Machiavelli thinks that political life can and ought to be more like Purgatory than like Hell; but this is easily shown by a key quotation from that classically infernal document *Il Principe*. In chapter XVIII, "Concerning the way in which princes should keep faith," the very chapter which more than any other made him infamous, Macchiavelli says: "You must know that there are two methods of fighting, the one by law, the other by force; the first method is proper to men, the second to beasts." He goes on to argue, of course, that a prince must know how to use both because all men are half bestial; but if we remember that he has said that there *is* a non-bestial mode of political life that is proper to men, it becomes much easier to see how the moral idealism, and quite Dantesque fervor of his

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concluding appeal for the liberation of Italy from the barbarians, can coexist in his mind with the strict moral neutrality of his political analysis throughout the book. It would be too much to say that he wishes, or believes it possible, to reach the Earthly Paradise. He does not aspire to leave the surface of Dante's globe at all, but he does want to move from the dark forest on this side to the foot of the mount of Purgatory on the other side.

Machiavelli is an extreme case, of course, in that (according to the terms of Dante's option) he does not hedge or compromise at all; he chooses firmly for the active social life, and dismisses the contemplative life altogether (except for its use as a tool of statesmanship). Most other Italian thinkers saw the choice and faced it, but also tried afterwards to compromise or produce some kind of a synthesis. Dante's own solution would seem to be a valid and accurate enough representation of the attitude of many early humanists, for example Colluccio Salutati who made explicit use of the symbolic figures of Martha and Mary, Leah and Rachel, to represent the two attitudes of reason, and the necessary order of the two stages of rational life, in the *Paradiso*. "In this life Leah precedes Rachel," as Salutati wrote; and hence the dominant emphasis even in the pious writers of the period often fell upon the problems of law and literature, the *Studia humanitatis*, rather than upon theoretical philosophy and theology. On the other hand, even someone who, like Lorenzo Valla, accepted the Epicurean doctrine of pleasure as the highest good, was at the same time filled with the theologian's sense of divine providence at work in the natural order of things.

Seen in the perspective of the *Divina Commedia* the two great Platonic systematizers, Ficino and Pico, offer an interesting contrast. For, unlike the earlier humanists, Ficino places the main emphasis on the contemplative life; while Pico is a philosopher in the spirit of Dante himself, convinced certainly of the superiority of pure contemplation, but at the same time almost obsessed with the practical power of reason to reconcile all conflicts and solve all problems. For both of them the life of this world is directly continuous with that of the other, so that there is no necessary break between the two functions of reason, no clear division between the realms of reason and revelation. In the mind of man all threads are gathered, here the key to every mystery can be found. But for Ficino the universality of human nature is theoretical, and so, to take a crucial example, astrology is a possible science, since the reduction of man's body to the status of a cog in a cosmic machine would not affect his place in the eternal

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spiritual order. Whereas, for Pico, the foundation of human dignity lies in man's freedom, his ability not merely to know everything and see everything, but to *be* everything and experience everything, and hence the possibility of astrology cannot be admitted for a moment. Man *is* a microcosm, he has the capacity of life at every level; and the fulfilment of his true rational nature requires that he should employ his reason to establish in himself a perfect harmony of all the lower levels of living activity. (For Dante, as we know, the "science" of astrology was an agonizing problem; he had to find a workable compromise, between these two positions.)

The history of the Aristotelian School at Padua shows how, when the master of them that know is fully accepted as such, Dante's whole philosophical edifice must fall. Padua was, of course, the great medieval school. A whole line of humanist thinkers, from the time of Salutati onwards, had debated the question of whether law or medicine was the higher study. Once this question was taken as settled on behalf of medicine, a critical attack upon the conception of the immortal soul, like that mounted by Pomponazzi, was bound to come. When it did come two lines of philosophical development were possible. One could extrapolate from the practical aims of medicine, and regard philosophy and law as the sciences of political health and stability as Machiavelli did; or one could extrapolate from the scientific character of medicine, and regard philosophy as queen of the sciences in the manner of Aristotle. This was what the Padua School did. But in so doing they broke away from the tradition that Dante founded altogether. The ethics of self-realization that Pomponazzi taught, was not very different from that of many devotees of the *Studia humanitatis*; but the crucial point was that the problem of man's destiny, whether in this life or another, had no longer the central importance that Dante gave it. Man as the rational animal must properly be concerned with the eternal order of nature, not with the changes and chances of mortal life. Telesio, though he rejected scornfully so much of what he learned at Padua, drew the right conclusion from the education he received there, when he set out to write *De rerum natura iuxta propria principia*.

In Bruno and Campanella, the tradition of Dante reasserts itself and absorbs the new science. For Bruno the new physics, and the Copernican cosmology became the material for a new *Theologia Platonica*. In him again we see the figure of the lonely pilgrim seeking union with his God, a contemplative, for all his furious educational activity and his many journeys; and a mystic

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for all his faith in the art of memory, and in the gospel of the new scientific cosmology. Bruno was quite properly feared by the Church as a potential heresiarch. In the life and work of Campanella on the other hand, the central organizing conception and the guiding light is, as everyone recognizes, the City of the Sun; and this is quite transparently Dante's ideal of Rome all over again, supported now by the scientific philosophy of Telesio, and by a general faith in scientific cooperation and division of labor that reminds one of his near contemporary Francis Bacon. Campanella recalls Pico, as Bruno does Ficino. But now it is not simply a case of closing the gap that exists in Dante between reason and revelation, but of regarding our sense experience in this world itself as revelation, so that the natural use of reason itself becomes the source of religion. Campanella thought and wrote like a prophet and a poet about his "solar revolution"; but he was quite indifferent about whether it was inaugurated in Rome by the Pope, or elsewhere by a temporal monarchy like that of Spain. Similarly, to Bruno's God all places are alike; He is not easier to find in Rome than in Geneva.

In my view, Galileo's place in the development of Italian philosophy is more problematical than his place in the history of European philosophy as a whole. By training and avocation he was not so much a philosopher as a mathematician. But he was also a sincere Catholic, convinced that the mathematical investigation of nature was the way to see God's Creation through His own eyes, and hence that the new science was indeed a revelation. Since he also admitted the divine inspiration, and the superior value and importance, of the moral revelation contained in Scripture, we could argue that his *Letter to the Grandduchess Christina* is a new version of Dante's synthesis, revised to fit the mathematical conception of reason. The trouble with this claim, is that mathematical reasoning is impersonal and neutral; it is only accidentally concerned with human nature and human problems as distinct from the rest of nature. Thus, in Galileo, the situations of Leah and Rachel are reversed. Rachel can contemplate God with the aid of Archimedes; but Leah's problems need the higher guidance of Holy Writ. It was only through force of circumstances, and the accidents of his own psychology, that Galileo came to fit the typical pattern of the Italian tradition. His essential achievement was in the realm of scientific method. Through the distinction between "primary" and "secondary" qualities he became the architect of the "bifurcation of nature," and the complete dehumanization of scientific knowledge, against which the scientific humanist Whitehead protested three centuries

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later, on behalf of an integral naturalism conceived in the spirit of Bruno and Campanella. For Galileo, even more than for Telesio, we can truthfully claim what Spaventa tried to claim for Bruno and Campanella: that his true heirs were the philosophers of the rest of Europe in the next two centuries.

If Galileo were, as Garin claims he is, typical of Italian philosophy, my thesis would be false. But I think that it is Garin who is mistaken, and the historic fate of Galileo indicates why Italian philosophy did not take the path that he opened. He was a major influence in the history of *European* philosophy (and hence *a fortiori* a major Italian philosopher). Indeed he was great enough to turn speculation into the new channels; but he was not a major influence in the history of *Italian* philosophy, because the presence of the Church forced Italian philosophers to concern themselves with Dante's problem, while the fact of the Counter-Reformation prevented or at least seriously impeded the absorption of Italian intellectual life into the wider world north of the Alps where Galileo's ideas worked out their destiny.

With the martyrdom of Bruno, the imprisonment and torture of Campanella and the trial of Galileo, the shadows close over independent speculation of any real note in Italy until Vico's inaugural lectures some seventy years later. If my thesis is right it is Vico who is the typical Italian philosopher, indeed almost the archetypal Italian philosopher, the Italian philosopher *par excellence*. For in Vico's work the problem of reconciling the contemplative with the active life is faced and resolved in a synthesis in which neither can be said to have a clear priority or superiority. His *Scienza Nuova* is thus the philosophical counterpart or answer to the *Divina Commedia*. All of human life and history is seen once more *sub specie aeternitatis*, and its eternal significance is assessed with authority, even if (as in the case of Dante) the accuracy sometimes leaves much to be desired, because of deficiencies in the historical record available to him. All of the currents of Italian speculation before Vico's time meet in this veritable new *Summa* of Italian philosophy; and for almost all subsequent Italian philosophers he is a continuing source of inspiration and of problems. I hesitate to utter more than a few generalities about the character of his system, because every subsequent school has its own Vico. Cuoco, Romagnosi, Gioberti, the Positivists, the Marxists, Croce and Gentile, and now the contemporary Christian spiritualists and the existentialists, have offered us a steady succession of new interpretations and new portraits. One can generally recognize the original in each portrait

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separately, but if one takes two of the portraits and compares them with one another it is often hard to see that they are taken from the same original. It is necessary to remark on this because if I offer any interpretation at all, no matter how brief and general, it must be remembered that I am only adding another portrait to the list (or rather an extremely spontaneous sketch); and one may reasonably wonder why it should be taken to have more authority than the others. The one reason for supposing that it *may* be nearer the truth than they are, is that it takes some account of their existence; and indeed it is meant precisely to explain why such a multiplicity of interpretations was natural if not quite inevitable.

Vico's *New Science* I take to be the fulfilment at one and the same time of two programs that were originally quite distinct from one another. He offers us a "Platonic theology" more adequate than Ficino's, in combination with a science of society more adequate than Machiavelli's. He seeks to discover the pattern of the "eternal history" of the nations, the essential pattern of history itself, and the reason why we can never hope to achieve Plato's *Republic* (or, in the terms of our present discussion, Dante's Rome) and so finally come to rest at the gates of Paradise (or at least of Purgatory). In discovering the pattern of this "eternal history," he believes he is laying open to view the very plan of God Himself (or, as he prefers to say, the plan of "Providence") in the establishment of the Earthly City. Among others he assigns Dante himself to his proper place in the scheme of things, as the Homer of the renewed barbarism of Medieval Europe. This is certainly an example of what Vico himself calls "poetic logic," but the implicit conception of the relation between poetry and philosophy must be more or less right if the main thesis of this present essay is at all justified.

The crux of Vico interpretation lies in the conception of Providence. If we take him at his word, there can be no question that "Providence" is to be interpreted in a fairly orthodox Christian-Platonic sense. In that case there can be no doubt of the existence of Dante's other world, and of the superiority of the contemplative life at least in the other world. But we have to remember that Vico makes a separation between the realms of nature and of grace as strict as that of any Padua Aristotelian, and he quite clearly assigns Divine Providence to the natural realm, and distinguishes it sharply from Divine Grace.⁷ This distinction

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Scienza nuova seconda, 136.

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becomes the basis of his distinction between sacred history (controlled by divine grace) and gentile history (controlled by divine providence). And thus, although the record of sacred history is very useful to him in proving or illustrating some parts of his theory, because he can put special trust in it, his philosophy as such is actually complete and self-sufficient without any necessary references to the Christian doctrine of grace at all.

If we choose to set supernatural revelation aside, the life of contemplation and the life of action become mutually complementary, and (if we mean by "life" a human or self-conscious existence) logically dependent upon each other. There is a prior, independent level of practical existence before man is roused to self-consciousness by the fear of God's thunder, but this is not a properly human level of life at all. Contemplation and action are logically interdependent because of Vico's fundamental thesis that we can only know what we have done or made. His theory does, of course, oblige us to believe in a God who knows the order of nature that He has made, and whose mind is a realm of Platonic order of which one part is the "Providence" concerned with what we as part of His creation have done and can do. This part of His mind we can ourselves come to understand, and it is the purpose of the *Scienza Nuova* to help us to understand it. In mathematical reasoning also, we directly share in God's creative activity and hence in His contemplative knowledge; but we can never understand the rest of creation as God does, and certainly there is *no* channel of natural reason by which we could ever come to have a direct vision of the whole of it as Dante did in Paradise.

But in actual fact, Vico does seem to hold the orthodox view that grace comes only to perfect nature. That is why he is able to use sacred history with such absolute security in proving his thesis about divine providence at the *natural* level. So the only fair conclusion is that his basic concept of Providence is ambiguous. I am myself inclined to the belief that it was deliberately and designedly so. Vico's concept of "Providence" is consistent with belief in the possibility of a perfected beatific vision in another life, but it does not in any way require it. This ambiguity is what makes Vico so plastic, and so patient of many interpretations, so readily available to all philosophers for whom Dante's problem of human destiny is the central one. But the ambiguity does not affect his achievement as a philosopher. He showed, in any case, that at the human level, the choice that St. Augustine and Dante placed before men is a false one. We must be innkeepers in order to be pilgrims, and vice versa; and it is not

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true that the one function is in any way higher than the other, because one cannot be either one of them, one cannot in fact be a man at all, without being both.

For nearly a hundred years after Vico's death in 1744 Italy produced very little original speculation, and that little was of questionable value. The existence of a virtual vacuum before and after Vico, was the basis for Spaventa's doctrine of the "circulation of Italian philosophy" according to which the main tradition of Italian speculation was driven into exile by the Counter-Reformation, and only returned home again in the Risorgimento period. The greatest difficulty in this view is the existence in such remarkable isolation of Vico himself. He certainly carries on all the main traditions of Italian speculation, but there is nothing in the rest of European philosophy that can plausibly be said to resemble his work until we come to Herder. The fact is that the Counter-Reformation did have a very repressive effect on creative originality and individual spontaneity in most parts of the Italian cultural spectrum, excepting only historical studies; and this does partially account for the isolated character of Vico's achievement. But the only tradition that was really carried abroad was that of Galileo. The others were carried on in a somewhat stunted fashion, heavily dependent on blood transfusions from abroad.

The mechanistic tradition of Telesio was maintained for a time by those who imported the ideas of Gassendi and Descartes; after that it seems to have perished, unless it is permissible to find an echo of it in some of the followers of Condillac. But the main lines of speculation that survived after Vico were the two that we found united in his work, the traditions of Platonic theology, and mundane social science. The social scientists, Genovesi, Galiani, Filangieri, Beccaria, Romagnosi, have a more prominent place in the history book. They did not produce any original philosophy of note, being mainly dependent on Locke and the *philosophes* for their theoretical foundations; most of them were not even interested in theoretical speculation, but only in applying their borrowed ideas to concrete social problems. In this they resembled the earlier humanists, and the element of continuity here is one of the things that make Garin's characterization of the Italian tradition so persuasive. But just as the practical philosophizing of the humanists gave place to the speculative theology of Ficino and Pico, so these secular philosophers give place in their turn to the two great ecclesiastics of the Risorgimento, Rosmini and Gioberti; and Rosmini managed to establish the continuity of the "genuine" Italian tradition (i.e. the tradition of Renaissance Platonism) from

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Vico to himself through Padre Giovenale (1635-1713) and Cardinal Gerbil (1718-1802). This tradition was not really much more native or original than that of the secular philosophers, since it leaned quite heavily upon Malebranche. But it does go back to Vico, who seems to have been the first Italian thinker to recognize the Platonic-Augustinian basis of the Cartesian philosophy; and it was a conscious continuation of the tradition of Renaissance Platonism.⁸

Rosmini and Gioberti are essentially contemplative philosophers who tried to integrate the active life of man into their vision. But Gioberti went much further in this direction than Rosmini. Thus we find again a contrast like that between Ficino and Pico, though Rosmini was less of a quietist than Ficino in practice, and Gioberti was much more of a chauvinist than Pico. The universal Empire of Rome in Dante, and the Solar Revolution in Campanella, now appear as the "primacy of Italy." Gioberti is in some respects closer to Dante than Campanella was, because his philosophy is essentially a philosophy of history, and in general because of the necessary role that supernatural revelation plays in his theory of knowledge. Thus for him, as for Dante, Rome has a divinely appointed mission. But the dream of a *universal* empire of reason is more nearly matched by Mazzini's vision of "Young Italy" as part of "Young Europe." In Mazzini, however, action is more important than contemplation; so much so, that it is doubtful whether he should be regarded as a philosopher at all.

To these champions of the theology of transcendence, there succeeded in the Hegelian Spaventa, and the positivist Ardigò, two champions of the theology of immanence. All of the important philosophers of nineteenth-century Italy, except Cattaneo, seem to be united in conceiving philosophy as a journey of the mind to God (or, in the case of Ardigò, a journey towards the perfected science that will finally eliminate God). Thus the nineteenth century speaks for Gentile's interpretation as the eighteenth did for Garin's. But there is a practical, political concern behind the

⁸ There were of course quite a number of thinkers who continued the tradition of Platonic-Augustinian theology. One of the first of the Italian students of Descartes to return to it was Vico's friend P.M. Doria. For Vico's influence on Doria see his remarks about their early conversations in *The Autobiography of G.B. Vico* (trans. Fisch and Bergin), Ithaca, 1944, p. 138.

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philosophizing of these two renegade priests. The Italian followers of Comte, of whom Ardigò was the most important, inherited and continued the mundane philosophy of Beccaria and Romagnosi; and in giving a strictly immanent interpretation of Hegel — that is, one in which the Absolute or God is strictly identified with the actual process of human development in history — Spaventa was reviving the memory of Vico's *New Science*, and laying the foundation for the triumph of historicism in the next generation.

In Croce and Gentile we have the counterparts of Rosmini and Gioberti: that is to say, two philosophical systems in which the opposed aspects of the *Divine Comedy* are again united in a synthesis, but where the practical social activities of man are regarded as ultimately more important. Croce has more of the intellectualism of Rosmini and Gentile more of the voluntarism of Gioberti; but on the other hand Croce has a closer affinity with the mundane tradition, and Gentile is more in sympathy with the speculative theologians. Thus Croce lays great stress on the distinction between theory and practice, while Gentile strove always to show that it was an illusion. But it would not be right to say that Croce's *theoretical* philosophy is a type of contemplative knowledge; it is the methodology of an activity, the activity of writing "ethico-political" history through which men achieve the most adequate consciousness that they can of their own social achievements and endeavors. The activist political emphasis of Gentile's philosophy is evident enough, even without considering his political career. But Croce stigmatized Gentile's theory as "theologizing philosophy" none the less, because of his heritage from Spaventa and Gioberti. Even during his lifetime Gentile's followers began to split into two groups, the "Right" who eventually rejoined the tradition of Platonic theology, and the "Left" who are now helping to maintain the mundane tradition. The proof that for Gentile himself Leah is ultimately more important than Rachel is not to be found in the facts of his career but in the gradual evolution of his most fundamental philosophical concept, the "pure act." In the end he regarded the Act of Thought as an essentially political activity, a "transcendental society." But the existence of the two wings among his followers shows once more that the fundamental tension that I have found in the history of Italian philosophy since Dante, is still far from resolved. I suspect it will be with us as long as there are two Romes.

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