A NOTE ON UNIVERSALISM AND ITALIAN NATIONALISM IN DANTE

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The picture of Dante Alighieri as a theorist of the universal Holy Roman Empire has become familiar in the commentaries of the past century, and in particular in the recent work of Barbi, D’Entrèves, Lenkeith, and Renaudet – the crowning study of the past twenty years being the splendidly allusive performance by C. T. Davis in Dante and the Idea of Rome. If there is, at present, any criticism to be made of this main stream of political analysis it is perhaps that because of the inescapable "compartmentalization" of Dante studies too little attention has been paid by the exegetists of Dante's political thought to the parallel development of his philosophical thought. Dante's view of world history, his attitude towards the Roman emperors, his concept of the unique and sacred mission of Rome, his yearning for universal peace, and disgust with the turbulent and faction-ridden state of Italy, have all been displayed for us and have contributed towards our understanding of the almost apocalyptic expectation with which Dante greeted the descent into Italy of the young Emperor Henry VII in 1310. But there has been no major attempt to relate any of this material to the purely philosophical side of Dante's universalism. Dante's philosophy, in so far as it can be studied as a separate and coherent entity, has been treated with discernment by Etienne Gilson, and with great depth and literary bravura by Nard; but the philosophical universalism which pervades his radical and post-Thomistic Averroism, in the form of a fairly consistent working out of the Averroist doctrine of the "unity of the possible intellect", has hardly been adequately related to his concept of the universal Empire. The raw materials for such a study have existed since the publication in recent years of important Italian editions of the Convivio, the De Volgare Eloquenta, and the Monarchia, in which a continuous procession of notes and cross-references has drawn attention to the many instances of Dante's political use and adaptation of philosophical motifs drawn from the conceptual currency of the late thirteenth century; although it must be admitted that the materials exist in a rather uncompromising form. The Italian editors have confined themselves to "drawing attention to ..."; they have not attempted a synthesis, and after all this is not their function. The energy, however, which Busnelli and Marigo have devoted to explaining and cross-referencing even the more mundane passages in the Works is perhaps excessive; any one of the paralyzing footnotes to Marigo's edition of the De Volgare might well bring the most determined synthesist to a standstill. There are suggestions of the procedure by which Dante's philosophical universalism might be related to his political thought in Remucci's 1954 thesis Dante, disciple et juge du monde gréco-latin, but they remain, so far, suggestions.

Whatever the ingredients of Dante's universal-imperialism may have
been, they were bound to have been in at least a latent conflict with the elements of particularism and even nationalism in his political thought. To some extent Dante represents a new voice in political theory, the citizen of the developing commercial city-state whose local patriotism is to prove refractory to the concepts of Empire and centralised Papacy. In many hundreds of familiar lines from the Commedia we can trace Dante's ambivalent attitude towards his native city; while he laments from his exile the greed, brutality and fractionalism of his fellow Florentines, their moral and even racial degeneracy, he remains always, with pride, with solicitude and with a bitter nostalgia, a citizen of Florence. But whenever he turns to rail at the inhabitants of the other cities, Pisa, Milan, Lucca, Rimini, complaining that in their murderous feuds and factions they are no better than the Florentines themselves, it is possible to discern the outlines of something far bigger - a concept of Italy; a more formidable idea, and more seriously disruptive of his universal-imperialism. In the Inferno XXXIII, 79ff., occurs a remarkable passage in which Dante complains that when the citizens of Pisa became notorious for the monstrous cruelty with which they slaughtered the sons of the Pisan traitor Ugolino, the other cities ought to have united to punish such evil behaviour.

Vituperio delle genti
del bel paese là dove il sì suona,
poiche i vicini a te punir son lenti ...

Disgrace to the peoples of the fair land of the mellifluous language of "sì", because thy neighbours are slow to punish thee ...

The language of "sì" is of course Italian, by contrast with the language of "oc", Provençal, and that of "oil", French. There is a clear concept here of a union within the boundaries of a common volgare, a union whose members should share and enforce a common code of ethics, and an implicit concept of a standard of public life suitable for the "Latin folk sweet in the exercise of lordship, firm in its exercise". 10

This splendid race are habituated to law, he says, but cannot apply the laws that have been handed down to them because they lack the essential focal point of any Corpus juris, a just Prince. Dante speaks always in the Convivio and the De Volgare of the regnum of Italy as an established concept, inoperative in his lifetime through the vacancy of the Imperial throne which is also the throne of Italy. But if there is no Prince and no Imperial Court in Italy, there is the volgare which is, he says, in effect a curia, uniting the Italians as their Royal Court unites the Germans. If the Italians did have a Royal palace and a Court, he says, the Italian language would flourish, inspired by this centre of style and usage. As matters stand at the end of the thirteenth century, however, the inspiration must flow in the reverse direction, and the language...
itself must act as a curia.

"Et etiam merito curiale dicendum ..." 11

Just as a body of laws may be uniquely fitted to express the will of a people, by reason of its perfect concord with the national spirit, 12 so the Italian language is curial in this sense; it unifies the Italian nation:

Nam licet curia, secundum quod unita accipitur, ut curia regis Alamanie, in Italia non sit, membra tamen eius non desunt; et sicut membra illius uno Prinçipe unitur, sic membra minus gratioso lumine rationis urita sunt. 13 Quare falsum esset dicere curia careare Ytalos, quamquam Prinçipe careamus, quoniam curiam habemus, licet corporaliter sit dispersa. 14

The comparison with the German curia regis shows, perhaps, that in speaking of an Italian regnum he was not considering a revival of the Lombard-Carolingian kingdom of Italy; his new (if semi-mystical) kingdom is coextensive with the volgare, and with the Italians. If he will not have Florentine blood contaminated with Fiesolan (Inferno XV, 61-78), neither can Italian blood be mixed with German. To deal with the inconvenient nationality of the new Emperor he draws on the twelfth-century theory of the Trojan descent of the German Emperors, making them almost the kinsmen of Aeneas and hence of the Romans, and he is able to greet Henry of Luxembourg with the words:

"From the fair line of Troy a Caesar has sprung ..." 15

If the true Italian curia is linguistic, there is all the more reason to look back to the Sicilian court of Frederick II as the last true manifestation of the Holy Roman Empire, since poets and lovers of reason (the two terms are almost synonymous for Dante from the time of the stilnovisti until the Commedia) held the places of honour there. Frederick, who told the Italian barons that

"Italia hereditas mea est, et hoc notum est toto orbi ..." 17

and expressed (although for diverse reasons) a wish to govern Italy from a Roman curia regis, is established in Dante's mind as the last true Emperor, the last to enter the "garden of the Empire" as the "bridegroom of Italy"; when Henry of Luxembourg comes in 1310 Dante hails him in these terms. He is the mystical spouse of Rome, but also the bridegroom of Italy by virtue of being "divus et Augustus et Caesar". 18 Between Frederick II and Henry of Luxembourg there have been, he says, no real Emperors, in the
sense that not only have none of the intermediate German kings been

crowned at Rome, but none of them have had a sense of the primary

responsibility of the Holy Roman Emperor - to be an effective king of

Italy, to heal her dissensions and rectify her injustices. Had Dante

not called in vain on Albert of Austria?

Vien crudel, vieni, e vedi la preesura
de' tuoi gentili, e cura lor magagne .. 19

Writing before the German coronation of Henry of Luxembourg he had lamented

Frederick II as the last of the true Emperors:

"... ultimo imperatore de li Romani,
ultimo, dico per rispetto al tempo presente,
non ostante che Ridolfo e Andolfo e
Alberto poi eletti sieno appresso la sua
morte e de li suoi descendenti". 20

But whether Italy has a king or not, the Italians are at least
potentially united in their allegiance to a common language. This is
a poet's nationalism. As the major inheritor of the dolce stil nuovo
Dante in the first half of his adult life is deeply concerned with
preserving and developing the power and purity of the volgare. The
very accuracy and truthfulness of the dolce stil nuovo make it an
instrument for the moral regeneration of Italy for which he calls with
such eloquence; the language of "s1" is superior to all others, he says,
not only in its poetic richness but in its more correct and less
capricious syntax. 21

The Nationalism which precedes the achievement of political unity,
as in Italy in Dante's lifetime or in Germany at the beginning of the
nineteenth century, is very likely to be linguistic in its form; perhaps
the pride in possessing a common language is the strongest of the many forces
which make up a "national consciousness" - it can persist long after
political unity has been broken, a country partitioned, and its people
dispersed over several continents. In medieval Italy as in post-
Napoleonic Germany the poets are the most eloquent nationalists, and feel
themselves to be the trustees of a cultural treasure; in their eyes a
betrayal of the language is the ultimate treason, and unforgivable.
Dante speaks in the Convivio of those evil and unpatriotic Italians
who disdain their own language and prefer the literature of foreigners. 22

This could suggest a possible explanation of the appearance in Hell,
under the "rain of fire" (Inferno XV), of Dante's beloved precursor and master
Brunetto Latini. The rain of fire falls on those whom Renaudet calls the
"spiritual sodomites", 23 who have in some way turned their natural gifts
or their offices to a perverse end. Andrea de' Mozzi, a Christian prelate,
nobilized consistently in financial and political conflicts. The grammarian
Priscian deserted the Latin language to write in Greek and indulged
himself in a sycophantic Hellenism, rejecting all things Latin in favour of the cultural splendour of the Eastern Empire. And Brunetto Latini, the master of the Italian stilnovisti, abandoned Italian to write his masterwork, the _Trisor_, in French.

**Footnotes**

7. Bruno Nardi, *Dante e la cultura medievale*, Bari, 1941-49; especially the essay "L'Averroismo".
9. It is worth noting Dante's use of genti as a sort of double plural: _la gente_ is "the people", _le genti_ is "the peoples" collectively, a nation. Cf. the use by medieval Arab historians of the Arabic root equivalent to B-L-D; _balad_, "town"; _bilad_, "towns"; _buldân_, "group of towns, nation".
13. The slight but pervasive flavour of radical Averroism is perceptible in phrase.
18. Epistle V.
22. *Convivio* I, iii and xi.
23. Augustin Renaudet, *Humanisme et Renaissance*, Ch. III, "Dante sous la plus de feu". Published in *Travaux d'humanisme et renaissance*, XXX, Genèse;