Concerning a Paradox in the "Divine Comedy"

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ONE of the contradictions, real or apparent, to be found in the Divine Comedy is the fact that Dante places in hell a saint, namely Pope Celestine V, whom the poet reproaches for having abdicated and for having thus betrayed his charge. Here is the story, one that is well known but inevitably lost sight of by many people: the holy see having remained vacant for more than two years—following the death of Nicholas IV towards the end of the 13th century—the cardinals elected the hermit Pier Angelerio from Murrhone in the Abruzzi, an aged holy man who had founded the Celestine order[1]; the reason for this unexpected election was that the hermit had threatened them with hellfire if they delayed any longer in electing a pope. From the moment of his election, the holy man—who took the name of Celestine V—was held more or less prisoner in Naples by King Charles II and the Colonna clan, protagonists of the moral and political reform of Christianity. The new pope soon proceeded to nominate some cardinals of the same tendency, which was the only thing to do, but which aroused lively protests from the opposing "worldly" party, represented especially by the Caetani clan; and it was a cardinal of this family who entreated the pope to abdicate in his favor, and who, having become pope in his turn—under the name of Boniface VIII—held his predecessor prisoner in Rome; it was there that Celestine died after two years of captivity.

In the first passage of the *Inferno* that refers to Celestine V, Dante "sees and recognizes" in the first circle of hell, reserved for the sins of omission, "the shadow of him who from cowardice (*per vista*) made the great refusal" (III, 58-60); in a second passage, Boniface VIII speaks of the "two keys that my predecessor held not dear" (XXVII, 103-105); while in a third passage, it is Boniface himself who is reproached for "having taken the Beautiful Lady (the Church) by fraud (from Celestine), and thereafter having abused her" (XIX, 55-57). Dante's attitude towards Celestine V may appear exaggerated, but one must take into account the following factors: firstly, the canonization of the hermit-pope, which was promulgated in the pontificate of Clement V, took place, as far as one can tell, after the completion of the *Inferno;* secondly, Dante avoids mentioning Celestine V by name, and some have even supposed that in the first passage quoted Dante is speaking, not of this pope, but of Esau or Diocletian, both of them more or less traitors to their charge[2]; finally, only this first passage places the pope in hell—granting that in fact it is the pope who is referred to—while the other two passages place Boniface VIII in hell, and the allusions to Celestine V—incontestable in these instances —do not imply that he too is damned.

Be that as it may, if Dante did not hesitate to make the insinuations just mentioned, this can be explained by considerations of both a spiritual and political nature which were to the discredit of Boniface VIII, and also, from another point of view, by the haughty and combative nature of the poet[3]; the election of Boniface was made possible only by Celestine's abdication, an unprecedented act in the history of the papacy. The hermit-pope has been reproached for having fallen, without resistance, under the influence of the Colonnasa reproach which is in no wise

conclusive, for the Colonnas were on the side of the *spirituali* and, like the pope, hated the ambitions and insatiable worldliness of the clergy; Celestine V had no motive, to say the least, for opposing just tendencies that were in conformity with his own sentiments, merely because his quasi jailers also subscribed to them.

Celestine V could in principle have achieved these plans for the renewal of the Church, but he quickly came up against unexpected difficulties of a kind largely unimaginable for a man of his sort; it was for having missed this opportunity, and for having missed it in favor of one of the chief representatives of the worldly tendency, that Dante could not forgive him.[4]

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It remains to be explained why Celestine V, a virtuous man if there ever was one, shrank from what Dante considered to be an imperative duty; the reasons for his doing so had no interest for the eagle of Florence, or at least they escaped him at the moment of writing the *Inferno,* but they do explain and excuse the attitude of the holy pontiff, who *a priori* was hardly a man of this low world. By this we mean that he was a born contemplative, that is to say a contemplative not by conversion, but by nature.

In the language of gnosis, he was what is called a "pneumatic", namely a being who is attracted by Heaven in a "supernaturally natural" manner; the name of *Coelestinus,* chosen by the new pope and given to the monastic order which he founded, is also an indication of this. The "pneumatic" lives on the memory of a lost paradise: he seeks only one thing, a return to his origin, and having himself a quasi-angelic nature, he is to a large extent unaware of the average nature of men. Incapable of knowing in advance that the general run of men are wild beasts, Celestine V, with a holy naivety, believed them to be similar to—or even better than—himself; he was unaware to what extent passions, ambitions and other illusions dominate intelligences and wills, and to what extent men are capable of pretence—which incidentally proves their culpability. He had to become pope to find this out.

A companion of the young St. Thomas Aquinas told him, in the presence of other young monks, to look out of the window to see a flying ox; this the saint did, without of course seeing anything. Everyone began to laugh, but St. Thomas, imperturbable, made this remark "A flying ox is less astonishing than a lying monk". There is no occasion to reproach pure souls for having a certain credulity which, in fact, is to their credit, in that their humility inclines them to overestimate others, provided that evidence to the contrary is not immediately present.

Pier Angelerio accepted the tiara because he believed that this was the will of God; but what Providence wanted for him was a spiritual experience and not the pontificate; an experience which at the same time was an instruction for others in incorruptibility, and not an example of weakness, still less of cowardice. God also wished to show that there are vocations that are mutually exclusive—in the absence of very rare gifts, to be found above all in Prophets—and that no vocation is more pleasing to him than that of contemplation, which includes all others in a potential manner. Moreover, Celestine V would have been an ideal pope in the normal ambiance that Dante wished for, that is to say, under the protection of a powerful emperor fully conscious of his charge, and consequently freed from the political interferences with which the Roman pontiffs had to contend; it was undoubtedly from the normal point of view that the hermit of the Abruzzi accepted the tiara and it was because of the same point of view that the Florentine poet did not forgive him for having renounced it. The whole problem here lies in the definition of "duty": the imprescriptible vocation of the contemplative—of the "pneumatic" whose spiritual

ascent results from his very substance and not from a choice or a conversion as in the case of the "psychic"[5]—may possibly be reconcilable with activity in the world, but there are cases—and this is more probable—where it is not so. At all events, it is through the duties that are properly his that the contemplative fully satisfies the love of God, and thereby the love of men, the latter being contained in the former.[6]

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Dante's intention was to replace the illegitimate worldliness of the popes with the legitimate lay status of the emperors, this lay status being entirely relative and in a certain manner a priesthood in its turn. Celestine was the very type of a spiritual pope; it is certainly not a pontiff of his sort who would have favored the worldly and humanist revolution of the Renaissance, and thus inaugurated the self-destruction of Christianity. Naturally Dante could not foresee the nature of the cultural revolution of the Medicis and the Borgias, but he discerned its principle; he could see far-off consequences in nearby causes. The state of urgency, he thought, did not permit considerations of personal vocation, even in the case of a saint like Celestine V.

What Dante foresaw, his contemporaries did not know or did not want to know: the incorrigible brawlers of the Middle Ages imagined that they could kill and plunder each other indefinitely in the name of God and the angels and the saints; they lacked the presentiment that this very contradiction, if it went beyond certain limits, would culminate in the destruction of their supremacy and their form of government, and at the same time of Western Christendom. Dante has been called a "dreamer" because his plan for the empire was never realized; if this were justified, every man who counsels wisdom and prudence is retrospectively a dreamer if he is not obeyed; and as no sage is ever obeyed fully, every sage would be a dreamer. If the norm is a dream, it is certainly no dishonor to dream.

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[1] A branch of the Benedictines, which spread widely in the 14th century. It still has monasteries in Italy to this day.

[2] An obvious reproach in the case of the brother of Jacob, but not in the case of the Roman emperor.

[3] One may well feel astonished that Dante had no compunction in placing in hell contemporaries or great men from the past, and in describing the pains of hell in a singularly detailed fashion; and that in so doing he did not shrink from assuming responsibility for imaginative coagulations that were necessarily both conjectural and rash. In this there may doubtless be seen a mark of the European spirit, which is very inventive but not very sensitive to the subtle hazards of the magic of words and images; but one may also suppose that Dante felt himself at greater liberty to imagine a hell that was too concrete and sentences that were too peremptory, in that his intention was to compensate the darkness of the *Inferno* by the liberating light of the *Paradiso;* this moreover seems to be suggested by the crossing of the river Lethe towards the end of the *Purgatorio,* the quintessential meaning of this

symbolism being the re-absorption of accidentalities in pure Substance.

[4] Another holy pope whom we surprisingly meet in the *Inferno* (*XI,* 6-10) *is* Anastasius II, accused of having fallen into heresy under the influence of Photinus, vicar apostolic in Thessalonika; in reality, this pope—keen to come to an understanding with Constantinople—had done no more than receive Photinus with kindness; but this incident contributed to a subsequent confusion between Anastasius II and the emperor Anastasius who was a partisan of the monophysite heresy. Given this misunderstanding, the case of the fifth century pope does not pose the same problem as that of the hermit-pope who was Dante's contemporary.

[5] The "pneumatic" may incarnate either an attitude of knowledge or of love, although the former manifests more directly his essential nature; he is not necessarily a great sage, but he is necessarily a pure and quasi-angelic man. Be that as it may, these gnostic terms are susceptible of different nuances, independently of the speculations of Valentinus.

[6] If Christ took care to add the second commandment to the first, it is because love of God is not possible without leaving egoism behind; this means at the same time that we should be aware of the divine kernel in man, and even in every creature, the mark of this kernel being precisely subjectivity.