

THE FRIENDSHIP OF VERGIL AND DANTE

Whoever is reading the *Divina Commedia* may find himself to experience the sensations of a man admiring a great skilfully wrought of superior workmanship. His eye suddenly fastens on a single thread or a single ornament following its meandering lines finally to conceive it as an independent thing separated from the whole fabric.

Thus, the names Dante gives to his guide Vergil appeal to our spiritual eye. We have but to arrange them systematically to observe a gradual increase of intensity and a meaningful coherence. Finally, they conserve an image of pure human comradeship encompassing the width and breadth of mortal emotion to build up an element important in its simplicity. I'll strive to retrace this picture so as to make it clearly visible to be enjoyed as a timeless monument and a permanent example.

Yet there seems to be some obvious objections to such an undertaking. That relation between Dante and Vergil is it not beyond human experience, can it be judged by ordinary human standards? Can it bear comparison to things mortal? Vergil and Dante are they not governed by other laws, are the sources of their strength comparable to ours?

While the heroes of Homer live through the same range of human passions and experiences as we — Dante and Vergil bear the halo of the supernatural. Here it is not common existence but only a common road that counts.

They are not mere comrades of work or even of war, they are fellow travellers on a road that encompasses the whole length of human existence, a road around which heavenly forces play their part and which leads them to the heights and farthest regions of transcendental thought. Does it not lead then — again that question arises — beyond the range of human existence?

«Che la diritta via era smarrita» («where the right road was wholly lost and gone»). We encounter Dante himself in the dark place around which all have stayed once who claim to have been human, he has lost

His own doubts and fears present at once an almost insurmountable obstacle

«Poeta che mi guidi,
Guarda la mia virtù s'ell'è possente,
Prima ch'all'alto passo tu mi fidi»

(*Inf.*, II, 10 ss.).

Now Vergil discloses the conditions of his own mission, tells him that sublime love has decided upon his salvation. Thus he overcomes the fears and doubts that assail the wretched man and he succeeds to restore his thoughts to a state of clarity and selfreliance :

«Dunque che è? perchè, perchè ristai?
Perchè ardire et franchezza non hai? ...»

(*Inf.*, II, 121 s.).

What ails thee then? Why, why this dull delay? Why bring so white a liver to the deed? Why canst thou find no manhood to display? To quote one of Dante's most famous similes those words raised his spirits as the sun rises the flowers bent down by nocturnal frost. Now he has regained his inner freedom, he can now observe his found guide and companion without tremor. Admiringly he comments on Vergil's calm obedience to the divine voices

«E tu cortese ch'ubbidisti tosto»

(*Inf.*, II, 134).

Only now free from the blind panic of his first call for help gratefully respectful to his guide and companion informed of the eternal plan, will he be able to pronounce those words which are to constitute his union with Vergil the finest and simplest words ever spoken to consecrate the beginning of a human relation :

«Or va, chè un sol volere è d'ambedue:
Tu duca, tu signore e tu maestro»

(*Inf.*, II, 139. s.).

The manifold experiences and hazards of their common journey can only deepen their mutual relation. To describe it the poet needs neither pathos nor rethorical phrases, for both partners enter upon their new relation in the spirit of willing obedience and modesty.

Since rhetoric is to be dispensed with, Dante must use the subtler means of his art to describe the thoughts and feelings of his heroes. Almost every stage of their friendship is either introduced or close by one of his

beautiful similes which lend a soft brilliance to his style. The peculiar situation makes of Vergil the dominant figure. He becomes at once leader and speaker.

To lead Dante is now Vergil's main task. He makes no direct claim to leadership but being more experienced and mature he assumes the part quite naturally. He does not enforce obedience. But Dante is obedient of his own accord with a willing heart («buon ardire») as soon as he realizes Vergil's *fortezza* («ei primo io secundo» (*Inf.*, XXXIV, 136) ... «retro ai piedi di sì fatta guida, di mondo in mondo» (*Purg.*, V, 62 s.).

Thus Dante marches on (dietro alle care piante) as he once phrases it in grateful recognition of his friend's superior leadership. Though: «libertà va cercando ch'è sì cara» (*Purg.*, I, 71), he is at first entirely dependent upon the poet much as a child on his mother or a boy on his teacher (to quote with Dante's words). And exactly as a mother or a teacher would do, he is leading him on his path constantly protecting or warning him or calling his attention to possible dangers. But often the warning does not suffice to protect Dante from danger to lead him across all obstacles. The most potent adversaries, the gatekeepers of each separate hell such as Caron, Minos, Cerberus, the furies and demons — Vergil knows them all. Deeply conscious of the necessity and importance of his missions he finds strength and power to exercise them all

«chè 'l nostro passo
Non ci può tôrre alcun, da tal n'è dato»
(*Inf.*, VIII, 104 s.),

or speaking to Charon of Dante :

«Necessità l'induce e non diletto»
(*Inf.*, XII, 87),

or he mentions

«voler divino e fato destro»
(*Inf.*, XXI, 82).

as protecting their pilgrimage. Yet he cannot remove the obstacles on their path : precipices, swamps, darkness and fiery flames which alternately threaten their progress. His guiding and helping hand must give Dante the necessary protection. Thus he walks on the outward rim of the brid-lepath lest Dante should fall and come to harm

«Vergilio mi venia da quella banda
Della cornice onde cader non si puote,
Perchè da nulla sponda s'inghirlanda»
(*Purg.*, XIII, 79 ss.),

safely he guides him through the impenetrable darkness drawing him close to himself. Strongly, yet tenderly he carries him across yawning precipices and chasms

«Però con ambo le braccia mi prese»
(*Inf.*, XIX, 124),

he protects him from the petrifying gaze of the Gorgo

«Volgiti indietro, e tien lo viso chiuso :
Che se il Gorgon se mostra e tu li vedessi
Nulla sarebbe del tornar mai suso»
(*Inf.*, IX, 55 ss.).

Dante himself points out that those lines contain an allegory. We would give the following interpretation : it is man's duty to protect a friend to hide from him those dreadful sights he would be too weak to bear and to support and sustain him in the face of overwhelming danger. Vergil's loving care and true friendship are brilliantly described by the beautiful simile of *Inferno* XXIII. Here he protects him against the wicked assaults of demons and devils

«Lo duca mio di subito mi prese,
Come la madre ch' al romore è desta»
(*Inf.*, XXIII, 37 s.).

Those lines reveal the fact that Dante and Vergil have reached a deeper understanding as could be explained by their mutual position of appointed guide and wanderer. Eros has taken hold of the leader and the rescue of the friend out of mortal danger is his first and finest manifestation «lo tempo è ormai» to lead his friend safely, is not Vergil's only duty. Within two days he must go with him through hell and purgatory, but «la via è lunga e il cammino è malvaggio» (*Inf.*, XXXIV, 95). Therefore, he is compelled to admonish Dante continually to hasten onwards. For Dante is apt to look with awe and wonder up to the marvels of the road, to stop when moved by pity or to tarry to speak with comrades of bygone days. Thus when entering the world of damned «Andiam che la via lunga ne sospigne» (*Inf.*, IV, 22) or «non ragionam di lor, ma guarda e passa» (*Inf.*, III, 51).

He addresses him sweetly as if to awaken a dreamer :

«Mentre che gli occhi per la fronde verde
Ficcava io così, come far suole
Chi retro agli uccelin sua vita perde,
Lo più che padre mi dicea «Figliuole»
Vienne oramai, chè il tempo che n'è imposto
Più utilmente compartir si vuole».
(*Purg.*, XXIII, 1 ss.).

Often Dante spellbound by the phenomena around the road, does not pay attention. But Vergil's patience is inexhaustible

«è il buon Vergilio»
(*Purg.*, XIX, 12).

But if he has heard the call he follows his leader without delay, and ever more willingly ... as proved by those lines

«su mi levai»

and later on

«quale il falcon che»

and later still

«Io m'era mosso ...»

The simple call, the mild admonition don't prove sufficient when Dante is actually exhausted, when his strength leaves him and he allows himself to fall to the ground. But even then Vergil knows how to spur on the proud mind

«Ormai convien che tu così ti spoltre»
(*Inf.*, XXIV, 46).

The allusion to fame, the appeal to the spirit which wins every battle were not lost upon Dante :

«Levami allor mostrandomi fornito
Meglio di lena ch' io non mi sentia ;
E dissi, "va ch' io son forte e ardito"».
(*Inf.*, XXIV, 58 ss.).

Once, and only once, when Cassella sings

«Amor che nella mente mi ragiona»
(*Purg.*, II, 112),

Vergil himself forgets to march on as he usually does. Yet how deeply does he feel the shame of this momentary weakness. Dante comments on the incident :

«Ei mi pareva da sè stesso rimorso :
O dignitosa coscienza e netta,
Come t'è picciol fallo amaro morso!»
(*Purg.*, III, 7 ss.).

This is one of the very few charactersketches of Vergil to be found in the *Commedia*. But intentionally he does not grant himself or Dante a moments rest «senza cura d'aver alcun riposo» they try strive to leave hell behind and «da riveder le stelle».

«Reverenti mi fe' le gambe e 'l ciglio»
(*Purg.*, I, 51).

In the realm of purgatory Vergil, not content to protect, to admonish to hasten his pupil, assumes the task of introducing Dante to the high and exalted personages of this world. When Cato makes his appearance :

«Lo duca mio allor mi diè di piglio,
E con parole e con mani e con cenni,
Reverenti mi fe' le gambe e 'l ciglio»
(*Purg.*, I, 49 ss.).

Before the angels arrive, he advises him thus :

«Fa, fa che le ginocchia cali ;
Ecco l'angel di Dio ; piega le mani :
Omai vedrai di sì fatti officiali»
(*Purg.*, II, 28 ss.),

or upon another occasion :

«Vedi colà un angel ...»

Finally they arrive on the top of the mountain of purgatory. Surrounded by the radiance of eternal secrets even Vergil becomes silent. Dante, awakening from rapt admiration, observes him «con vista carica di stupor non meno».

ENCOURAGEMENT

«In di m'han tratto su li suoi conforti»
(*Purg.*, XXIII, 124).

All his words of advice, all his acts of protection are surpassed by his attitude in those moments of crisis when Dante has lost courage and is near despair. Unfailing intuition lets him find the right word and the right gesture needed to help his friend.

When introducing him to the horrors of hell a smile and a ever so slight pressure of his hand are all the need to comfort the friend

«E poi che la sua mano alla mia pose
Con lieto volto, ond'io mi confortai,
Mi mise dentro alle segrete cose»
(*Inf.*, III, 19 ss.).

That smile makes so deep an impression on Dante's mind that he remembers it on a later occasion. For Vergil is to use once more that magic trick of his when all of a sudden they seem to have lost their way.

«Chè, come noi venimmo al guasto ponte,
Lo duca a me si volse con quel piglio
Dolce ch'io vidi in prima a piè del monte»
(*Inf.*, XXIV, 19 ss.).

And again that smile proves a helpful anodine

«E così tosto al mal giunse l'empiaistro»
(*Inf.*, XXIV, 18).

But Vergil does not always need a gesture to steady Dante's faltering heart in the face of overwhelming danger.

He comforts him with these simple words

«Ben so lo cammin, però ti fa sicuro»
(*Inf.*, IX, 30).

These are the very words we all most love to hear from a guide. When ascending to purgatory it suffices to say

«E tu ferma la speme, dolce figlio»
(*Purg.*, III, 66).

Vergil knows that a small word may give great comfort and he speaks openly about it.

«Non domandai : "Che hai?" per quel che face
Chi guarda pur con l'occhio che non vede,
Quando disanimato il corpo giace»
(*Purg.*, XV, 133 ss.).

He strives continually to ease the strain on Dante's mind. When compelled to fight the devils himself he at once bids Dante to have no fear:

«E per nulla offension ch'a me sia fatta
Non temer tu, ch'io ho le cose conte,
Perchè altra volta fui a tal baratta»
(*Inf.*, XXI, 61 ss.).

If compelled to show him some new awesome apparition he does so with quiet words a gentle gesture.

«Poi caramente mi prese per mano
E disse "pria noi siam più avanti"..."»
(*Inf.*, XXXI, 28 s.).

Vergil's serenity stays undisturbed even in the midst of strange events and dire perils; his words and gestures always retain their forceful simplicity.

When the universe seems shaken by the release of Statius he comforts Dante with these words:

«Non dubbiar mentre'io ti guido»
(*Purg.*, XX, 135).

These words «non dubbiar» which irradiate so much strength and confidence will be found with slight alterations in other parts of the poem.

When Dante awakens on the mountain of Purgatory where he has been carried in his sleep, when terror almost freezes the blood in his veins, he finds Vergil «sub conforto» at his side and listens:

«“Non aver tema”, disse il mio signore:
“Fatti sicur, chè noi siamo a buon punto;
Non stringer, ma rallarga ogni vigore”»
(*Purg.*, IX, 46 ss.).

Vergil again lends him strength of mind so that he may walk on without heeding the whispering, the abuse, the supplications of the damned and of the shadows around the road.

Vergil addresses Dante in *Inferno* with short, almost commanding words:

«Qui vive la pietà quand'è ben morta»
(*Inf.*, XX, 28).

In Purgatory Dante stops when spoken to by one of the shadows. Again Vergil admonishes him:

«Perchè l'animo tuo tanto s'impiglia»
(*Purg.*, V, 10).

He speaks to Dante much as a loving mother would comfort a child:

«O caro duca mio, che più di sette
Volte m'hai sicurtà renduta, e tratto
D'alto periglio che incontra mi stette»
(*Inf.*, VIII, 97 ss.).

Such consolation will be repeated at a later stage, for Vergil knows how much comfort Dante may draw from knowing his friend near him.

«E far ragion ch'i' ti sia sempre allato»
(*Inf.*, XXX, 145).

In the course of their pilgrimage Vergil's helpful counsel unfailing guidance and protection have filled Dante with unlimited confidence. In moments of great stress Vergil may draw upon that confidence as upon a hoarded treasure. When Dante recoils before the flames through which he is to go so as to be cleansed from sensual lust he addresses him thus:

«figliuol mio ...»
(*Purg.*, XXVII, 20).

Yet that reminder, that call remain without effect.

Here the sage observer of human nature uses a still stronger appeal than the one to courage, he appeals to Dante's love for Beatrice.

«Or vedi, figlio
Fra Beatrice e te è questo muro»
(*Purg.*, XXVII, 35 s.).

He just smiles when he sees his ruse succeed.

Beatrice's name has acted upon Dante with the power of magic. During their ascent through the sea of flames Vergil never allows that power to weaken.

«Lo dolce padre mio ...»
(*Purg.*, IV, 44).

Thus Vergil succeeds to guide Dante through a thousand dangers to inspire him when his courage fails and to appeal ever and again to the hard core of his character. To attain this he uses only simple yet forceful language which reveals the greatness of an imperturbable spirit — only a few gentle gestures underline his words irradiating the power of his mind.

SECURITY

Again and again Vergil bestows on Dante a feeling of safety in the midst of danger — thus his confidence increases, a feeling of security mingled with gratitude takes hold of him, panic has left him, he no longer feels to be abandoned and deserted. In the first stages of their pilgrimage Dante seeks the help of Vergil almost instinctively. So inspiring are the sight and the cries of the furies

«Ch'io mi strinsi al poeta per sospetto»
(*Inf.*, IX, 51).

When out of the grave an unexpected sound makes him tremble

«Però m'accostai, temendo, un poco più
Al duca mio»

(*Inf.*, X, 29 s.).

When surrounded by the shrieking devils :

«Io m'accostai con tutta la persona lungo
Il mio duca»

(*Inf.*, XXI, 97 s.).

Finally, in Guidecca, the innermost centre of Hell :

«Per lo vento mi ristrinsi retro
Al duca mio ; chè non v'era altra grotta»

(*Inf.*, XXXIV, 8 s.).

When Dante has emerged out of the more imminent and immediately threatening dangers, he seeks the support of his friend more calmly and deliberately.

Thus when meeting Cato at the beginning of the pilgrimage through Purgatory :

«Ed io su mi levai senza parlare,
E tutto mi ritrassi al duca mio,
E gli occhi a lui drizzai»

(*Purg.*, I, 109 ss.).

Frightened by Cato's abuse of the laggards among the souls

«Io mi ristrinsi alla fida compagna :
E come sare' io senza lui corso ?
Chi m'avria tratto su per la montagna ?»

(*Purg.*, III, 4 ss.).

The pilgrimage and his faithful guide have become inseparable in Dante's mind. Thus he says with words which recall the «care piante»

«Mi volsi intorno, e stretto m'accostai
Tutto gelato alle fidate spalle»

(*Purg.*, VIII, 41 s.).

In the last stage of their pilgrimage through Purgatory Dante gives his expression to his feelings of security by a beautiful simile

«E quale il mandrian che fuori alberga,
Lungo il peculio suo queto pernotta,
Guardando perchè fiera non lo sperga;
Tali eravamo tutt'e tre allotta,
Io come capra, ed ei come pastori,
Faciati quinci e quindi dalla grotta»
(*Purg.*, XXVIII, 82 ss.).

Reflected as in a mirror

«Così mi fece sbigottir lo maestro,
Quand' io li vidi sì turbar la fronte»
(*Inf.*, XXIV, 16 s.).

Besides the more important events and meetings we learn by many details how the personalities of the two wanderers are merging into each other so as to reflect each other as in a mirror.

Dante is deeply ashamed whenever Vergil's feels compelled to admonish him more severely

«Ma vergogna mi fe' le sue minacce,
Che dinanzi a buon signor fa servo forte»
(*Inf.*, XVII, 89).

That state of mind is expressed in a longer simile written in the style called *dolce stil nuovo*:

«Quand'io il senti' a me parlar con ira»
(*Inf.*, XXX, 133),

and similarly in *Purg.* V, 19 ss.:

«Che potea io ridir? se non: "Io vegno";
Dissilo, alquanto del color consperso
Che fa l'uom di perdon talvolta degno».

Dante extremely sensible to the slightest reprimand or admonition from Vergil always reacts instantly and exactly as desired. He responds to the smallest almost invisible hints and to every change in his leaders attitude. If Vergil tarries only for a moment, if his face pales, Dante is instantly worried. When descending for the first time to the regions of hell he observes Vergil to be «tutto smorzo»

«Ed io che del color mi fui accorto,
Dissi: "Come verrò se tu paventi,
Che suoli al mio dubbiare esser conforto?"»
(*Inf.*, IV, 16 ss.).

But Vergil can easily reassure him : it was not fear which made him grow pale

« ... L'angoscia delle genti
Che son quaggiù, nel viso mi dipigne
Quella pietà che tu per tema senti»

(*Inf.*, IV, 19 ss.).

Remembering that incident Vergil avoids later to give visible expression to his fears and doubts.

«Quel color che viltà di fuor mi pinse
Veggendo 'l duca mio tornare in volta
Più tosto dentro il suo nuovo ristrinse»

(*Inf.*, IX, 1 ss.).

Conscious to be turned to one another they choose their words with care and observe their effect

«Posto avea fine al suo ragionamento
L'alto dottor, ed attento guardava
Nella mia vista s'io pareo contento»

(*Purg.*, XVIII, 1 ss.).

Dante on his part is satisfied, that his harsh and condemning words against the «Constantinian donation» meet with Vergil's approval.

«Io credo ben ch'al mio duca piacesse,
Con sì contenta labbia sempre attese
Lo suon delle parole vere espresse»

(*Inf.*, XIX, 121 ss.).

Once and only once we see Vergil act impulsively against Dante when crossing the Styx Dante pushed back one of the damned

«Lo collo poi con le braccia m'avvinse ;
Baciommi 'l volto, e disse : "Alma sdegnosa,
Benedetta colei che in te s'incinse"»

(*Inf.*, VIII, 43 ss.).

INSTRUCTION

«Il dolce pedagogo»

It is Vergil's task to advise Dante about Hell and Purgatory and Vergil acquits himself gracefully and tactfully. Dante's longing for knowledge knows no bounds — «dimmi maestro mio, dimmi signore» — he all but im-

plores his teacher in the craving for further information. But sometimes he checks his curiosity afraid to tax too severely the patience of his guide and master.

«Allor con gli occhi vergognosi e bassi,
Temendo no'l mio dir gli fosse grave,
Infino al fiume di parlar mi trassi»
(*Inf.*, III, 79 ss.).

Vergil proves a skilful teacher keenly sensitive to the wishes of his pupil. He encourages Dante's inquisitiveness and allows him to speak without hindrance.

«Ed io cui nuova sete ancor frugava, ...»
(*Purg.*, XVIII, 4),

he even praises him for his questioning :

«La tua preghiera è degna...
Di molta lode»
(*Inf.*, XXVI, 70),

or

«allora rispose...».

Once more a beautiful simile elucidates that part of their relation :

«E quale il cicognin!...»
(*Purg.*, XXV, 10).

Often Vergil responds to unspoken questions

«Io già pensando e quei disse»
(*Inf.*, XII, 31).

Sometimes a mere look suffices for an answer

«E volsi gli occhi allora al signor mio ;
Ond'egli m'assenti con lieto cenno
Ciò che chiedea la vista del disio»
(*Purg.*, XIX, 85 ss.).

On many occasions Vergil seems to read Dante's mind as in an open book when addressing him thus :

« ... soddisfatto sarai tosto,
Ed al disio ancor che tu mi taci»
(*Inf.*, X, 17 s.),

or :

«Lascia parlare a me, ch'io ho concetto
Ciò che tu vuoi ; ch'ei sarebbero schivi»
(*Inf.*, XXVI, 73 s.),

therefore Dante praises him

«Che intese 'l mio parlar coverto»
(*Inf.*, IV, 51).

Vergil's skilful instruction, unfailing patience and constant devotion are rightly rewarded by those fine words Dante finds to thank him :

«Maestro, i tuoi ragionamenti
Mi son sì certi, e prendon sì mia fede,
Che gli altri mi sarian carboni spenti».
(*Inf.*, XX, 100 ss.).

No teacher can hope to receive higher praise.

CONFIDENCE

«Non tegno nascosto a te mio cor»

These words reveal great, even unlimited confidence but even when we take them literally we have to consider the shyness and restraint of both wanderers which have become apparent on so many occasions — must we not doubt whether perfect frankness may ever be achieved? Dante himself feels that his attitude is open to such an interpretation. When their pilgrimage through Hell has scarcely begun he thus addresses his friend :

«Buon duca, non tegno nascosto
A te mio cor, se non per dicer poco.»
(*Inf.*, X 19 s.),

or

«Tanto m'è bel quanto a te piace :
Tu se' signore, e sai ch'io non mi parto
Dal tuo volere, e sai quel che si tace.»
(*Inf.*, XIX, 37 ss.).

That *terzina* reminds us of those lines where Vergil speaks of Dante as of a well beloved son where he likens him to a child or looks upon

him, smiling as one would look upon a child. Dante's words are they not those of a child ready to open his heart to his father unrestrainingly? How often Vergil has been spoken to us «dolce padre, dolce padre caro, dolcissimo padre». Yet these words have a deeper meaning than the words of a child. Thus speaks a young lover desirous to give his soul away so that it may grow and be reborn in the partner. Hence Vergil is addressed finally not as «padre» but as «più che padre» (*Purg.*, XXIII, 3).

Vergil's and Dante's attitude are entirely correlated. No words are needed where a loving soul seeks his image, where overflowing emotions emanate from one soul to be conceived by the other as always Vergil's is the part of the leader who has to understand and arrange. But while in the course of their pilgrimage he has shown unresting activity, leading, protecting, instructing here he remains quiet and demure, unwilling to lay bare his soul he retains the superior aloofness of the observer, the firmness which may steady and support the loving mind.

He knows and understands.

«Se tu avessi cento larve
Sopra la faccia, non mi sarien chiuse
Le tue cogitazion quantunque parve»
(*Purg.*, XV, 127 ss.).

To be thus understood means comfort and happiness for Dante, gratefully he says:

«Se savio, e intendi me' ch'io non ragiono»
(*Inf.*, II, 36),

or:

«O sol che sani ogni vista turbata»
(*Inf.*, XI, 91),

again their spiritual union is given a wonderful expression in the following simile:

«S'io fossi di piombato vetro,
L'immagine di fuor tua non trarrei
Più tosto a me che quella d'entro impetro.
Pur mo' veniano i tuoi pensier tra' miei,
Con simile atto e con simile faccia,
Sì che d'entrambi un sol consiglio fei»
(*Inf.*, XXIII, 25 ss.).

Vergil's great heart and Dante's trust in his leader become strikingly manifest when Beatrice makes her appearance

«Tosto che nella vista mi percosse
 L'alta virtù che già m'avea trafitto
 Prima ch'io fuor di puerizia fosse,
 Volsimi alla sinistra col rispetto
 Col quale il fantolin corre alla mamma
 Quando ha paura, o quando egli è afflitto»
 (*Purg.*, XXX, 40 ss.).

In the whole realm of poetry it will be hard to find a passage wherein the three main springs of human emotions and the tensions produced by their clash are condensed in so few lines. Can we find a stronger picture of love's restless power, that power which seems to grant but one means of escape, namely to retreat in order to seek a refuge. But there is none, and to believe such a refuge possible would only mean deceit and confusion.

None of the other obligations can hold their own beside thus one and Vergil knows it only too well. And out of that knowledge he performs the supreme act of friendship and of renunciation. Unselfishly and as demurely modest as ever he glides back into darkness without leavetaking, without provoking the pangs of separation, without asking for a word of thanks or appreciation.

So shaken is Dante's mind by Vergil's sudden departure that neither the sight of paradise nor Beatrice's presence can console him. So the perfect union of their thoughts, their profound mutual devotion, the harmony of their spirits seem to lack fulfilment.

Yet that moment of sudden separation is susceptible of a deeper interpretation.

Their friendship is not an end in itself. As Dante's pilgrimage is not a journey without a goal sufficient in itself once that goal is reached thus their friendship does not only adorn and accompany their journey but it has been created to complete it. One can not be imagined without the other. The journey is full of danger but the goal is high, thus they develop their relation to the high level of true and noble friendship we have come to admire.

With these words of Dante interpreting Vergil's character :

«Questi che guida in alto gli occhi miei»
 (*Purg.*, XXI, 124) ;
 «Costui per la profonda
 Notte menato m'ha de' veri morti»
 (*Purg.*, XXIII, 121 s.),

and after Vergil's departure :

«Ma Vergilio n'avea lasciati scemi
 Di sè. Vergilio dolcissimo padre»
 (*Purg.*, XXX, 49, s.) ;

«Vergilio a cui per mia salute dièmi.»
 (*Purg.*, XXX, 51).

The last words addressed by Vergil to Dante epitomize with perfect clarity the meaning and the purpose of their friendship interpreting it spiritually. Therefore they are not concerned with the emotional side of their relation, rather they seem to convey a hint of didactic instruction.

«Il temporal fuoco e l'eterno
 Veduto hai figlio...»
 (*Purg.*, XXVII, 127 s.).

We are easily tempted to draw from those words some obvious conclusions that Dante believed the purpose of every human relation to be the development of personality so as to give it full enjoyment of every possibility. But in reality the development of personality is only a step towards finding and grasping the eternal prizes to make oneself ready to receive the divine grace. Therefore friendship does not mean (at least not for the leader) to take, to give, to enjoy, but it constitutes a sacred obligation which calls for character and the will to renunciation. The friend may use all his love, all the power of his personality, all his wisdom, but they must remain subservient to eternal love.

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