

Dante's 700th Anniversary . . . Serge L. Hughes

In the introduction to his Founder's Day address, Professor Hughes comments that he would like to allude to some reasons why readers of the most diverse temperaments and convictions continue to read Dante.

We do so in spite of the warnings of many sensitive contemporaries, anxious to protect us from the dangers of nostalgia and learned poetry. We do so even though the custodians of our contemporary tastes are right in pointing out what Dante lacks, what we will never find in his poetry: Dante, in fact, is *not* awed by the problem of communication. He does not really believe that poetry is sensitive solitude. He has no inkling of the poetical possibilities of boredom. Anger and wrathful indignation are inseparable from his poetry, but his poetry is something more. Sex does interest him but sex is just one of his many interests. He seems to be rather cavalier, moreover, towards another of our recurrent worries, the problem of alienation; and he is far more interested in what goes on in the conscious than in the unconscious.

The warnings of many contemporaries, then, appear to be justified, and we who persist in reading Dante should acknowledge as much. We should have the courage or the impudence to go one step further. We should make a clean breast of it and admit that we turn to Dante because he is so uncontemporary. In times in which the expression "normal and healthy" cannot be pronounced without ironical or sarcastic overtones, there is something almost tantalizingly forbidden in Dante's world: he is so completely, exuberantly, irrepressibly "healthy." For the incorrigible who do not wait for calendar commemorations to turn to Dante, the *Divine Comedy* is a gift, a sign that at least in poetry a robust, complicated "healthiness" is not one whit less fascinating than the most meticulous perusal of all that is askew and awry in man.

I do not mean to imply that Dante is always playing wild exultant bagpipes. In life as well as in poetry, Dante experienced such loss and pain as I hope few contemporaries will ever experience. He may not have been an existentialist, but he knew something about loss and contradiction, the tragic dimension. He knew that life was not always rousing, that great poetry is often the poetry of pain and stillness. Yet though conscious that "words strain, crack and sometimes break under the burden," Dante drove words to their very limits, to that point where meaning and rhythm become vertiginously balanced and the only sound we hear is that of wings rushing towards a throne.

But Dante's poetry, we ought to admit, since our sen-

sitive custodians of contemporary tastes are right in their warning, is not "pure" poetry. Dante's poetry is not a pure potency on which our sensibilities can impose a limitless number of forms. He does not transform poetry into an essence of essences. He is fantastically anthropomorphic, and his curiosity knows no bounds. And, if our concerned contemporaries need further evidence, there is no doubt that Dante does not consider prose prosaic; indeed he does not see much difference between poetry and prose. Dante has the habit (friend as well as foe might as well admit it) of bringing together pell mell *and* in orderly fashion all our motley coherent experiences—in philosophy, art, politics, religion, natural science, rhetoric, history—fusing them, and rolling them all into one enormously complicated, overwhelming poetry. Not content to see his universe in a grain of sand, he magnifies that grain of sand into a cosmos, in which meanings leap out, criss-cross, intersect each other, dance before us and swirl away.

We should admit that this kind of procedure does not comply with the canons of "pure" poetry; and since we are making this additional concession, we ought to make yet another. We ought to admit, whether or not we are inclined to agree with Dante's basic conclusions or assumptions, that we turn to him precisely because we are nostalgic and because we find his learned poetry so limitlessly enjoyable.

It is good to read a poet who does not hide in the light of thought, but dances and grows and finds his own true dimensions in that multi-faceted light. Accustomed to an intense, narrow, clinical light, to the phosphorescent glow of fragments, pathology and the unconscious, the poetry of Dante makes us rub our eyes. We had forgotten we could do so much, we had lost a sense of scale. We had forgotten with what vehemence and with what sublime irony man can be considered the measure of all things.

For those of us who brave the dangers of nostalgia, the poetry of Dante is a necessity. The *Divine Comedy* has enduring meaning, enduring value: in it Dante explains us to ourselves. The custodians of contemporary tastes and the "pure" poet can also, of course, tell us something about ourselves, and they are, without doubt, well-meaning and solicitous in their warnings. But the readers of Dante of all ages, of all convictions, will pay little heed. For in Dante the dimensions of man have a power that does not fade. Today, as in the many yesterdays and tomorrows, we need to contemplate those dimensions.