

AN AMERICAN VIEW OF DANTE<sup>1</sup>

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**D**URING the past fifteen years a fair amount of work on Dante has been published in England and America; but the American contribution has been larger and on the whole more interesting than the British. Over here we are well served now with books for beginners in Dante; the old 'Temple Classics' edition of the *Commedia*, representing the highwater mark of late Victorian Dante scholarship, is still in some ways very recommendable, and there are the annotated translations of those two gifted enthusiasts, J. D. Sinclair and Dorothy Sayers. But the American work—including that done by Continental scholars resident in the U.S.A. or Canada and writing in English—has in general more weight and originality. It has too a wider range—from the writings of scholars like C. S. Singleton, C. T. Davis, Ulrich Leo and J. A. Mazzeo, which every 'Dantist' feels obliged to read, to more literary studies addressed to a wider public. Of the latter class the most distinguished recent example from America is perhaps Mr Francis Fergusson's book on the *Purgatorio*, *Dante's Drama of the Mind* (1953). Mr Stambler's work, though it makes more display of learning than Mr Fergusson's, falls within the same class. It is typically American, in both its merits and its faults: in a certain speculative vigour, more common across the Atlantic than here, in its racy but prolix style, in certain crudities of thought and expression side by side with acute intelligence, and an oscillating between over-confidence and uncertainty. It is a book similar to Mr Fergusson's in that it approaches Dante through the *Purgatorio* (which may well be the best approach for most modern readers), and that it treats the *Commedia* as a modern poem, in the sense of a work of art with a serious living interest for the twentieth-century reader. If I have not enjoyed reading Mr Stambler, as I remember enjoying Mr Ferguson, this is chiefly because much of Mr Stambler's thought seems to me obscure and, so to say, undigested; a state of things reflected in the style. If Mr Stambler had known better what he wanted to say, he would have said it, I feel, more concisely, he would have written perhaps forty pages less. And where the thought is clear, it is sometimes brilliant, but occasionally absurd and often liable to mislead. I would not recommend it to beginners in Dante. Yet it contains some very good things—so good that one feels bound *malgré tout* to rate it, as criticism, fairly high.

<sup>1</sup> *Dante's Other World. The Purgatorio as Guide to the Divine Comedy.* By Bernard Stambler. (New York University Press; \$ 6.50.)

Mr Stambler is at his worst on the parts of the *Purgatorio* that are most doctrinal: the central cantos, XVI to XVIII. He misunderstands Marco Lombardo on free will and the first lines of Virgil's great speech on love. He can be amazingly insensitive to the doctrine contained or implied in Dante's imagery, as when, *à propos* of XV, 67-72, a poetically glorious and theologically faultless passage, he comments, 'it has . . . theological as well as optical infelicities and sounds unpleasantly like the economic theory that money attracts money'. This last phrase I call downright vulgar, but what seems still more extraordinary is the author's assumption—for he offers no proof at all—that he is a better *theologian* than Dante. And there are similar lapses elsewhere, e.g. on VIII, 112-4. Nor does Dante suggest that 'without the Fall man would have remained at the level of the Earthly Paradise, not to rise above it'; he suggests precisely the opposite—see XXVIII, 93. Mr Stambler does not appreciate the thoroughness of Dante's theological training. That is not perhaps surprising; what is surprising in so acute (in some respects) a critic is the bad taste and cocksureness of some of his comments.

And yet—to repeat—there are extremely good things here; and especially with regard to two general topics: the poet's *method* all through the *Purgatorio*, I mean the way he develops what Mr Stambler calls the 'dramatic process' of it; and secondly, the personal relationships displayed in the action of the poem, particularly between Dante and Virgil and Dante and Matelda. As to the first topic, Mr Stambler corrects and completes Professor Singleton's views on allegory in a strikingly simple and, to me, convincing way. And he is admirably attentive to the way certain recurrent images have a *history* within the poem: 'that is, the second or the eighth time an image is used it means something increasingly more than it meant the first time . . .' Such images are those of light, of bow-and-arrow, of thirst, of boat, of net. And again Mr Stambler is most interesting, if not so convincing, on the development of the Dante-Virgil relationship, and in general on the idea of 'guidance' in the poem. On this idea he lays great stress; so great that his speculations on it have a way of slipping towards obscurity or of raising more questions than they answer. But at least they do raise questions—and pretty deep ones—sincerely and seriously. For Mr Stambler is a serious critic; and to be taken seriously.