

CULTURAL TRADITIONS IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

BY HARDIN T. MCCLELLAND

IT WAS after his exile from Florence and sometime between 1304 and 1306 that Dante composed his *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, a highly polished dissertation nominally dealing with the effective eloquence of the Italian vernacular language, but actually and very effectually recommending to his limited circle of capable readers the classical prodigality of twelfth and thirteenth century Italian literature. Within its pages he developed his theory of poetic art as aiming to fulfill three main expressive purposes: comic, tragic, and lyric; it was to exemplify the first of these in his great trilogy, the *Commedia*, according to De Sanctis, but I don't know but what we might not find argument to say that the *Purgatorio*, *Inferno*, and *Paradiso*, respectively exemplified to a certain degree each of these three poetic categories.

However, this may be, the "Eloquent Vernacular" was a work striking as powerfully the attitudes of the learned humanists of that day as did those famous efforts of Aeschylus, St. Jerome, or King James and Shakespeare in their respective days. To be sure of his ground on the side of traditional support, Dante applied to literary art, both as it was represented in classical records and as it was expressed in effective speech, the very scheme pursued by the other pioneers of humanism who had sifted not only Greek philosophy, but throughout all the Roman and Patristic literatures, to find a new eloquence and a more fundamental psychology on which to base their structure of public culture and liberal education. In Dante's express purpose the ultimate aim of the pristine humanism, whether in religion and philosophy themselves or in the spicy variations of their documentary elaborations, was to find as many undogmatic truths and inviolable springs of human character as could possibly be dis-

covered in a state of freedom from all heretic hazards and ignorant imprecision. And if this could only be expressed in common utterance it would go far toward constituting a new eloquence of artistic vernacular which might in time serve to replace the culture under a Greek-and-Latin minority with a more democratic culture under a homogeneously sympathetic and educated majority.

There is just one attitude which I think is pivotal to the whole cultural process whether publicly or privately sought after, and which I do not think Dante sufficiently emphasized. Ever since the *Apologetica* of Tertullian and Justin Martyr swept over the world of classical scholarship the actual character which has been most emphasized in Morality and Art (although variously debated in certain philosophical schools and religious sects) is that of Aspiration. The most common question of responsible thinkers has been to ask what could be done toward the redemption of man, and accordingly the resultant literature sought to answer this question in terms of popular education, social uplift, moral enlightenment and spiritual rehabilitation. Meliorism was the general atmosphere and outlook under which all the sober social workers strove to make the world better and more beautiful. In art especially the critique of a certain work could expect but little attention if it presumed to estimate any proper value, either cultural or ornamental, without the indispensable aid and counsel of an aspiring appreciation and its faithful coefficient, the melioristic criterion. No one could support his claim to critical capacity who had not already shown himself able to strike immediate aperçus of the cultural achievements of others. Even today the associate rule of constructive or creative requirement is one of our foremost criteria in the domain of religion, philosophy, ethics, sociology, and the moralism of art. It is the spontaneous insight and the intuitive appreciation of truth, goodness and spiritual reality which are the primary credentials of all genuine creative power, no matter what sphere the genius seeks to operate in. We may be "spoilt by too much culture," as Schiller and Nordau have warned us to guard against, but not unless we let our civilization become ill-balanced and incorrigible in some certain forward tendency. But our dreams of yesterday are among the most necessary desiderata of today. We just simply *must* have originality, upreach, genuineness of heroism, discovery, invention and spiritual largesse. We *demand* that our dream-makers of today shall give us a better world, a more beautiful environment where life will have a more refined relish and humanity can find distinct delight in nobler

living. Thanks to the everlasting urgency of a periodically renaissance humanism, we have gradually become publicly aspirant as well as privately devout, and I see no reason why we should not go on until we reach the aesthetic morality of the millenium.

But we, I hope, will not rest content with the bare revivalism which seemed to be the chief aim of the Renaissance. At that time culture was sought after more as a patronizing respect than as a participating eagerness and collaboration. The laborious and really commendable research into the sources of classical religion, philosophy and art was quite possibly the vital interest which animated and controlled the lives of both the authors and the patrons of this great epochal activity, but it was not an interest in these subjects for their own sake. It was an effort consecrated to *the finding of precedents* which would sanction and support the establishment of human reason rather than faithful theological dependence; it was a movement which found its political flower in the memorable services of Erastians and the leaders of the Reformation. Scholars of that time were concerned only to know the extent of the classical support afforded to this establishment by the treasures of a rediscovered culture of former days. The intention of the majority of the writers and readers of the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries was not near so much to preserve even the high religious and philosophical ideals of the past as it was to rationalize these into items of argument supporting their propagation of the new ego-humanism. The art of the period too can hardly be said to have had any very different retrospect or aim.

Long anticipating some of the main sophisms of Fichte and Max Stirner in that rare day of insecure religious belief and shrewd intellectual resort, Petrarch and Dante were not valued nearly so highly and hardly as popularly as were Averrhoes and Ficino, Aretino and Medici. For these latter belonged to a stylist school which wrote more according to what was of current interest than to what was the full truth of a richly ornamented literary past. This is perhaps why their commentaries on art were so devout with affirmations of its sensory superficialities and hedonistic utility-values. Indifference to any serious faith and honest piety was the general public character of the age and their attitude toward morality and art could not help sharing the same inhospitable feeling. But the bright illumination of Petrarch's and Dante's (not to mention Campanella's or Bruno's) religious and philosophical patronage could not be veiled for long, even behind the subtle screen of Boccaccio's

licentious but popular humor. For every good the world has ever known has always had its claims brutally and implacably contested, has always had to struggle, fight, starve and make heroic sacrifices, only to win out at last in the happy hearts and minds of a courageous and unconquerable minority. Against the onslaughts of a vandal world they appear to be a hopeless minority, but not to those of similar soul who sooner or later learn to love them and try to emulate them. With some such exemplary feeling let us look down the pathway of the centuries and see how nobly heroic such champions of man's transfiguration as Politian, Vico, Campanella, Bruno and Copernicus have tried to redeem the apparently ruthless delinquency of time and the thwartancy of an all-too-human inertia or impotence which often nullifies whatever natural affection we have for beauty, truth and justice.

Many of their watchwords survive to this day in the culture of modern Italian literature and art which is such a strange polyglot of futurism, post-modernism and romantic rationales of human experience; such a veritable pot-pouri of various vegetables, meats, cereals and garlic all more or less proportioned in edible relish according to the delectable recipes of Petrarch, Dante, Boccaccio and Pomponazzi. There is indeed a large measure of froth and inanity about the modern dietetics of Italy, regardless of the reverberating clamor over "energy-values in philosophy, religion and art" or over those all-too-desultory "ideals that will someday arrive." But the character which seems to survive in major significance is that triple mirror of Italian virtue: concrete sincerity, critical research, and devotional affection to all that is beautiful, wise and good. Especially in their religious poetry, as well as in the literature of their politico-moral and economico-philosophical life, do we find this to be a dominant trinity of their unique character as a people of exceptional creative power and delicate moral discrimination. As I have often remarked, it is of more than passing notice to observe that so very many of modern Italy's critical works have "nuovi" as the first word in their titles. New discriminations, new decisions, original viewpoints and radical departures from the mechanical footsteps of the past are to be observed on every side: it is the invariable intention, if not the actual accomplishment, of all who announce themselves to be "new specimens" of Italian genius. And it is not seldom that they succeed in giving us an altogether new or a significantly rearranged list of the elements which are necessarily required in the makeup of every masterpiece in scholarship, religion or art.

Even in the last quarter of the nineteenth century when their notion of literature as one of the fine arts was first beginning to develop into a confirmed and irrepressible movement, we could have seen Carducci, Zanella and D'Annunzio designing the superb fabric of modern Italy's lyric poetry. And although drier intellects might look upon their efforts as little more than so many "serious trifles," as was the modest title of one of Carducci's most charming volumes, yet all the wide and permanent popularity which they have enjoyed has always been due if not overdue to those very precocious efforts. In another court of activity we might have observed Manniani, Mazzini, Mazzoni, Lombroso and Della Seta patiently analyzing and resynthesizing the relations of art and religion and philosophy to the economic and political affairs of modern society. How may we so interpret the instruction of our cultural traditions to the present age that some sort of reliable prophecy and anticipant preparation may be made to forestall the evil tendencies of modern life from becoming realized in the future conflict of economic and aesthetic, mechanical industrialism and "pure" art—the arena being no more shared by science and religion, but by the creative genius and moral conscience of man. This was the general problem on which their combined attention was centered, and it has been passed on to us as one of the most vital questions confronting modern civilization today.

Contemporary with these moral pioneers we could have just as readily observed Cantoni, Vecchio and Varisco laboriously investigating the philosophical grounds of education, affective heredity, political economy and industrial law. It was truly a unique inquiry, even though the varied interests and arguments were loosely thrown together like Chinese money on a string, and the influence of Kant and Hegel in Italy have for long been on a popular wane, being hardly yet resuscitated by Gentile and Croce. But for the pure inquiry into the moralism of art, a more philosophical interpretation of its literature and educational value than any which Cantoni had attempted, the foremost thinkers of the end of last century were De Sanctis, Villari, Nencioni, Lombardi and the early part of Croce's career. Here was a rare group indeed; two critical essayists of the first water who gave us "nuovi saggi" of critical procedure in the historical interpretation of literature as it related to morality and art; one a member of Carducci's famous band of "Amici Pedanti" who in his *Studi di Letteratura Straniere* and in various of his articles in the Italian *Nuova*, charmingly translated and criticized

French and English poetry; the fourth a Spencerian disciple who sought to analyze the evolutionary process of literary and aesthetic development, thence trying to show that it is variable in structure but constant in its progressive cultural function. And Benedetto Croce we know is one of the leaders of Hegel's philosophy as it is interpreted in Italy as well as being also the champion of the *estetica nuova* that is being centered on the linguistic of language as a powerful adjunct to man's other means of art-expression. As editor of *La Critica* in Naples, he is also still doing admirable work in the neo-critical philosophy as it is applied to both pure philosophy and general aesthetic practice.

Accordingly then, we must not prejudice our opinion of New Italy as the mother soil of rampant futurism or iconoclastic neo-romanticism in aesthetic theory and practice, without first looking up the foundations of this ultramodern interpretation, both in what it consists and in what it overlooks. Her leading poets, artists, critics and philosophers of art are not so hide-bound as to rest satisfied with the old monotonous rhetoric and immoral elegance of the bourgeois schools, nor even with the occasional spice of imported listings of foreign art, culture or experimental ethics. They have their own Muse to attend, and taking her into their confidence they were and are still able to create new rhythms, new symbols, nobler cultural values, and broader foundations of art-criticism with which to amplify and exalt their moral wizardry. Thus in the work of Ardengo Soffici the chromatic idyllist, of Giovanni Papini the philosopher of iconoclastic art whose fame now rests secure on his *Life of Christ*, of Guido Gozzano the sad soul of beautiful simplicity, and of Vincenzo Cardarelli the arbiter of classical prose and art-criticism, we find worthy exemplars of what may prove to be the moral aesthetic of the future. They are even today engraving tablets of literary bronze that shall commemorate all that is worthy, all that has been validly discovered and heroically advocated by Italian genius throughout its slow evolution up from medieval humanism into the creative culture and magic art of its spontaneous modern expressionism.

It was at first meant that these items should be severally embraced in an ornamental interpretation of aesthetic vision and creative function, and yet they have turned out to be members, not merely of a privative inclusiveness, but of a cosmopolitan application and significance as well. For there is associated with this ornamental phase of the subject a secondary interpretation of the moral-

istic validation, sometimes called the adjudicating function of aesthetic criticism, which is always accessory to a normal love of beauty and devotion to Truth; namely, that it exercises a decisively cultural effect upon all other departments of humanity's civilizing process, the activities which are commonly grouped under the general heads of education, religion, art, science, history, philosophy. Thus, then, with this latter accessory both the instructionist and ornamentalist theories of art are rendered more complete, more philosophical, more in keeping with the immediate aesthetic causes of intelligent human life; for, with the events even of the other less specific cultural pursuits, the adjudicating function of this moralistic validation shares a common field of purpose and idealism.

The primary characteristic of all good Art is that it is spiritually aspirant and not a mere sensory supplication or mimetic symbol. It has the further characteristics of being co-eventual with the general progressive stream of human life, methectic with the cultural Ethos that has gradually been evolved out of the barbaric past. It is an objectified ideal which expresses all our inner aspirational requisites, affective desiderata and ecabatic obligations to society; all three of these expressions being found more or less dominant and continuous down through the history of all our aesthetic loves and ambitions. Taken all together these characteristics and expressions bind our various interpretative measures up into a general philosophical theory of the joint mechanism whose cultural practice is divided into morality and art, but when used in the field of education they are not so divided because the aim of the cultural process is to render us aspirant toward both Virtue and Beauty, both Wisdom and Nobility. Of course, they may, in a merely discursive analysis of aesthetic morality, be considered either separately or in supplementary series for purposes of constitutive interpretation; but in a more practical and condensed conception we would have to show their selective character, we would have to show that they were choice morsels on the table of our intellectual contents and spiritual goods.

But we do not always run true to the historical perspective of our cultural traditions. Even at present, in this most glorious of all civilized centuries, our cultural faculty is often the most dormant if not sometimes practically a latent power altogether unmoved to any effectual expression or genuine appreciation. The only distinctively human significance that can be attached to the major part of our modern effort is not its aspirational culture-search but its worldliness and success-ambition, not its spiritual affection but its

hedonism and superficial vendible value as a public pastime or commercial utility. And with this limitation of value it is only a cripple's step to the opportunism, the artificial poseury, the material fallacy in fact, which seem to threaten soon to become the mancilla blossoms of modern Art. Although beautifully colored, symmetrically formed and glistening with the morning dew, they are treacherous treasures, poisonous to touch or taste.

Albeit such, there is yet a redemptive element of rich spontaneous grace, harmony of line and color, nobility of symbol and adequate expression of concerted motive-contrivance, which saves us from too readily falling into a hopeless mood of moral or aesthetic pejorism. We are passing through an age of transition and both our morality and our art are being subjected to a rigorous test; if genuine they will be able to withstand the crushing weight of vandal power and will gradually metamorphose with the rest of humanity's gradual transfiguration. But I think the larger part of this climacteric change will apply to the structure rather than the function of culture, art or ethics. I cannot see that the proper function of these great fields of human progress can be very materially altered or improved, although there is much room for renovation and reconstruction in the forms and uses to which they are sometimes put. The apparent ill-health, ennui and decadence of our modern arts and moral sense are merely symptoms of this metamorphic travail; they are not diseases themselves but only the passing symptoms which indicate a more or less persistent disturbance of our spiritual health. Still this travail should always be anticipable because the periodical rebirth of morality and art is really an arc in the evolutionary orbit of the soul, and should not be harassed by any momentary disaffection nor by any eristic process of external exploit or superficial relish.

Ever since 1742 when the first part of Hume's *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary* appeared, dealing with the rise and progress of the arts and sciences, literary and aesthetic criticism has been steadily catharized and purged of its sensual appeal, its tradesman tactics; and wherever it is not so purged today it is no longer a real critical procedure but a more or less subtly camouflaged commercialism. In Hume's day Holland was the great flourishing nation of art, science and philosophy, as well as of an omniverous commercialism, and on page 125 of the work mentioned he takes that country as illustrating the critical difficulties which arise over the existence of the wide difference between leadership in commercial

facility and excellence in scientific or aesthetic pursuits. He shows us that the service of such a contrast of interests cannot but be one of ambiguity, in that either side will read its own favor into the argument; whence it cannot help but prove negative if not actually obstructive to the ideal purpose and destiny of any nation's art and social science.

However, we may realize that Hume was a better philosopher than literary critic, a distinction which he perhaps shared with Doctor Johnson, Voltaire and Goethe whose specialism in certain phases of aesthetic moralism show them as being quite as radical and reactionary to the traditional judgments in philosophic thought as Hume. In a less definite manner of anticipation they were the original trail-blazers with the closer and purer philosophical analyses of Kant and Hegel and Mamiani they were the direct predecessors of Schiller, Winckelmann, Sibbern, Coleridge, Lowell, Sainte Beuve, Grillparzer and De Sanctis; for in their various ways they were devoutly determined to break and dissipate the stagnant dogmas of eighteenth century rationalism, replacing them with the sparkling romance of a new aesthetic genius, both scholarly and original. It was the secret burden of Pater's polished gospel of beauty and culture, Matthew Arnold's "sweetness and light," and made lasting provender for Lowell's great digestive power to cope with the subtle relish of critical values. Thus with the delightful sense of "joyous influence" which Pater tried to read out of all art and culture, the proper cultivation and exercise of the mind will give any intelligent man an artistic and scholarly outlook on life, he will become in short a twin brother to "Marius the Epicurean." So, too, with Lowell the aesthetic morality is necessary to both public duty and private virtue; even in his most critical moods he could not wholly restrain this viewpoint from coming to the surface now and then. It gives both color and charm to one of his Atlantic essays where particular effort is made to analyze the three natural periods of poetic construction, showing them to be the progressive measures of the imaginative, the thoughtful-artistic, and the sentimental. Among the Greeks these measures were respectively represented by the works of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides; with the Romans by Horace, Lucretius and Plautus; with the Elizabethans by Milton, Shakespeare and the Beaumont-Fletcher combination; while among the moderns we might favor Shelley, Wordsworth and Swinburne or perhaps D'Annunzio, Maeterlinck and Rabindranath Tagore.

In any case, we know that an aspiring mind always has power to influence for good all with which it comes in contact, for it is eager for better things, for nobler conceptions and expressions, and makes of them its constant atmosphere of honest inquiry and constructive argument. Thus we may honestly believe that such a mood supplied the true motive behind Southey's "reasons for anonymity" in *The Doctor*, for his was an age when the prejudicial controversies between science and faith, honesty and quackery, wise strenuousness and lazy folly, made it dangerous to subscribe one's name to either side of the conflict, and doubly hazardous to attempt an impartial estimate of the invective situation. And yet, going back to the ancients, we should have no doubts at all that some such a notion governed the lives of the majority, but not any of the great martyrs, not any of the immortal geniuses who lived for truth's sake and not their own. St. Jerome gives us an intimate picture of the actual situation when he remarks that the culture, art, philosophy and political achievements of man are vain and futile if he has no love or deep respect for the sacredness of antiquity. His immediate predecessors shared this conviction too, for even allowing excuses for the half-pagan Christianity of the early Fathers, this endeavor to be of cultural service both to contemporaries and to successors alike, was best represented by Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Origen, Eusebius, Basil, Clement, Iraeneus and Heliodorus. Their cumulative influence upon the succeeding ages was made in keeping with these so-called Aristotelian Rules, the unities of time, place and action, and in the monastic patronage of a thousand years were held supreme and worthy of man's perennial following.

After this great thousand years, as Doctor Cram would say, came the Renaissance and the period of the Enlightenment which, especially in England, had made somewhat of a departure, so that Southey's neighbors in immortality, Spencer and Shakespeare, gave shelter to a literary zeitgeist which had come to be in radical attendance upon liberty, romance, and variety; while Ben Jonson and Milton in the next and third generations following favored a return to the ancient rules which had been so classically and patristically established as to seem indispensable, if not the inexorable units for all aesthetic measurement and construction. Thus with a common terminology for both morality and art we have since found that the Elizabethan rules of liberty, romance, and variety might well apply to the ornament of aesthetic structure, while the classical rules of restraint, conceptual order and uniformity are seen to be more in

sympathy with the validation of aesthetic function. The real issue is that of creative establishment for man's delight and cultural destiny, not the ephemeral exploit of cheap or tawdry ornamental structure. And right today, is there not a growing bulk of evidence that we are slipping away from the classical requirements and taking precarious refuge in informal originality, romantic spice, and free variations of style, content and utility? Some of the modern high-speed aestheticians would even go so far as to sanction this departure from that supreme triad of criteria in aesthetic morality, holding sophist commercial argument sufficiently valid to dispense with honesty of empirical source or intuitive inspiration, the intelligibility of conveyance or expression, and the ethical influence of the cultural values which all works of art are supposed to exercise. There is only one way about it all: no one can dispense with true spiritual inspiration, intelligibility and ethical validity without renouncing the whole cultural process, and this is too great a sacrifice to make for the putrid sake of commercial ingenuity and exploit.

Instead of so brusky following this vulgarian dispensation, I think the modern culture-seekers would do far better, nobler and more exemplary work if they turned their attention to the true conations of genuine aesthetic faculty; to St. Jerome's *scintilla conscientiae*, the spark which fires man's conscience, to the synderesis which St. Thomas Aquinas considered the innate moral sense of every one but fools and scoundrels, to Kant's primary root of the practical reason which makes us recognize the laws of God and man in their proper justicial relations. At least they would make no mistake in appreciating just what the close self-examination and spiritual aspiration recorded in Petrarch's *Secret* between himself and St. Augustine really meant as a moral corollary to his revival of Greek studies in art, religion and philosophy. This meaning is given its semi-ascetic significance in the treatise, *On the Solitary Life*, written a few years later, in which he gives his program of soul-culture and religious duty planned after the fashion of the famous ascetic esthetes whose illuminated manuscripts vouch for their loyal industry and generous spiritual consecration. I believe that the original charter of Italian Humanism was just this mediaeval freedom from worldly passions and vulgarian anxieties, this monastic freedom of the spiritual life away from all material wants and woes, this freedom of philosophic inquiry, cultural thought and moral conduct which Petrarch claimed was the only royal road to wisdom and happiness.

Dante had approached something like this attitude in his quasi-individualism from Aristotle's pandectic example, but Petrarch considered Plato the wiser philosopher in both moralism and aesthetic theory, and his choice gave similar tendency to the whole Renaissance movement away from the scholastic interpretation of Aristotelian doctrines and more in sympathy with the ideal metaphysics of Platonism. With almost Pythagorean versatility the love of nature, music and painting inspired most of his poetry, and yet it was well balanced by a compensating love for travel, history and ethnology. Even with all the versatile talent and intellectual power of the quattrocento Florentines interpreting the beauty of Nature and the dignity of man's soul from the viewpoint of religious anagoge, Petrarch can hardly be said to have had a worthy successor until the age of art had been well established by the genius of Da Vinci and Michael Angelo.

The whole period of Italian art from the thirteenth to the seventeenth century may be said to have been the aesthetic conflict of Christian versus pagan ideas, and the representative artists as a whole repudiated the merely sensuous and replaced it with the works of a nobler dignity and genius, works of moral inspiration, intellectual beauty, spiritual power. The ancient legends of mythology were sought out and translated in factual realities of art expression, their esoteric symbols were given a tangible and lasting public interpretation on frieze, ceiling, wall, canvas or pedestal, no more to be the private shuttle of priests and pedants. It was this generous gift of mental emancipation and spiritual ennoblement to all who wished to share them, which now shows the Italians to have been possessors of enviable credentials in aesthetic honesty, moral discernment and creative power. It is one of the outstanding reasons why I cannot wholly concur with Symonds' claim that all figurative art eventually paganizes its authors and creators as well as its patrons and devotees. To picture the pagan prescriptions as they were is one thing, while to translate them out of their pagan symbolism into some grander cultural conception of our own is quite another. A return to antiquity for material to work with does not oblige us to partake also of their crude idolatry and sensual impressionism; we have a morality and art-theory of our own to follow which is melioristic, not atavistic. It does not need to dispense with any of the ordinary *human* symbols in order to keep itself pure, but it does most emphatically need to cast out all the treacherous tastes(?) which smack of the vulgarian foist, all the wordly, sensuous, degenerate attach-

ments which are really foreign, parasitic elements thriving at the expense of the valid human symbols. Some of us may be betrayed by the false freedom of paganism and sensuous aesthetic pursuits, but this does not necessarily require that *all* of us should be no longer left free to pursue the Earth-veil or the Mountain Glory according to whatever light and inspiration we can derive from our private character and taste.