

THE HUMANISM OF BOCCACCIO

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IN the two distinct periods that combined to give definition to Boccaccio's life, we find that each served to give expression, and to reveal, the sublimity and depth, not only of his genius, but of the quality which has earned him immortality—his humanism. Without the profound mysticism of Dante, or the extraordinary sweetness and perfection of Petrarch, he was more complete than either of them; in his passion, his love, his suffering which defines the first period of his life, he is full of laughter and humility and love,—that humanism which in him alone was really a part of his life; and which later, under profound grief and melancholy, developed into that noble friendship with Petrarch,—a friendship which has become one of the most beautiful things in literature, and in which Boccaccio saw the beauty and glory of an idealism that later became associated with Erasmus.

A poet by nature, sensitive to the influence of love, his passion for the unfaithful Fiammetta controlled his entire life. She had awakened in him the slumbering spark of genius; and years later her memory still continued to be his inspiration. Under the influence of his love for her, he gave expression to his happiness by the development of his creative genius. He wrote for her, first to please her, and then to regain her. Even when she betrayed and deserted him—even though his love affair was at an end, never to be renewed—his love for her gave him hope and inspiration, and found such beautiful expression in the work he wrote for her. Extraordinarily personal, his state of mind is visible in them. One simple thought seems to dominate his mind; he had loved a princess and had been loved in return; and though he had been forsaken by her she remained, in spite of all, the guiding star of his life. To

regain her love, he enchants her with stories, he glorifies her, constantly telling her his own story; but what hopeless means to win back the love of a woman; what folly to suppose she will read his thousands of lines!

"You are gone suddenly to Sammium," he writes to her in the dedication to Filostrato, "and . . . I have sought in the old histories what personage I might choose as messenger of my secret and unhappy love, and I have found Troilus, son of Priam, who loved Criseyde. His miseries are my history. I have sung them in light rhymes and in my own Tuscan, and so when you read the lamentations of Troilus and his sorrow at the departure of his love, you shall know my tears, my sighs, my agonies, and if I vaunt the beauties and the charms of Criseyde you will know that I dream of you."

It is an expression of his love. He wants her to know what he suffers, to tell her of his experiences, his pains, his joys. And though the story serves as a means of self-expression, it is, in its exquisite beauty of sentiment and verse, one of the loveliest of his works.

But his sufferings, his journeyings, were but the progress of preparation for the work which was to give perpetuity to his name. In his travels, he became familiar with the people of his country, their joys, their sorrows, their pleasures, their hardships; and in his own sufferings, he learned life, learned to recognize and appreciate its beauties, its crudities. And then suddenly all the bright world about Florence, among the woods of Vincigliata under Fiesole and the olive gardens and podere of Corbignano, on the banks of Affrico and Mensola so full of voices for Boccaccio, was silenced. The end of the world had come, some said. In a sense it was true. For the Plague was the end of the Middle Age. And at Florence, the vengeance of God, or an outraged nature, had deprived Boccaccio of all those for whom he had cared, or had lived, and now alone, he retired from the world to devote himself to the task of giving to posterity his great immortal work, which some have called the Human Comedy.

It is rather strange that the work which best represents his genius, his humour and his wide tolerance and love of mankind, should be so different to his other works which are so involved with

his own affairs. It can probably be best explained by the transition and change that had taken place in his soul, and which was to serve as an indication to that later period when a nobler and graver bearing gave definition to his friendship for Petrarch, and his interest and zeal in reviving the learning of the ancients.

Even his style had undergone a strange change, a style which, for its beauty and simplicity of expression, was in a certain sense to mark the rise of Italian prose. It is true that Dante's *Vita Nuova* was written before, but its involved sentences, founded essentially on Latin construction, cannot be compared with the infinite suppleness and precision of Boccaccio's prose. For the first time, Boccaccio presents a new idiom, which, like the character of the nation, is flexible and tender, and capable of rendering all the shades of feeling, from the coarse laugh of cynicism to the sigh of hopeless love. Like most progressive movements in art and literature, his remodeling of Italian prose may be described as a "return to nature." Indeed, it is the nature of the Italian people itself which he has made articulate in the *Decameron*; we find southern grace and elegance, blending with the unveiled naivete of impulse which is such a striking and admirable quality of the Italian character. And though the descriptions of low life, with its coarseness and indecency, might seem incomprehensible to the northern mind because of the freedom with which the life of the Italian finds expression, they are so admirable, and the character of the popular parlance rendered with such humour, that one cannot help but feel he is one of them, even though their immorality might seem disgusting.

The *Decameron* is a world in itself, and the effect upon the reader is the effect of life itself, which includes for its own good, things moral and immoral. It is Italy in the fourteenth century, and though with all its looseness, it is a philosophy of the world, with its variety, and infinity of people, dealing with man as life does, never taking him very seriously, or without a certain indifference, a certain irony and laughter. Yet it is full, too, of a love of country, of luck, of all kinds of adventures, gallant and sad; a true and realistic mirror of life in all its forms, among all classes, filled with observations of those customs and types that made up the life of the time. Dramatic, comic, tragic, ironic, philosophic and ever lyrical; indulgent of human error, it is a human book, per-

fect in construction and in freedom, full of people, of living people—that is the secret of its immortality. They live forever. And yet it seems to lack a certain idealism—a certain moral sense—an idealism which would have given it balance, a sense of proportion.

It was inevitable that a style so concise and yet so pliable, so typical and yet so individual, as that of Boccaccio should exert an enormous influence upon the progress of the prose created by it. This influence has persisted down even to the present day, to an extent beneficial upon the whole 'although frequently fatal to individual writers. But it is rather by its humanism that it has earned its place in literature. Even Chaucer, who turned freely to it, is not so complete in his humanism, his love of all sorts and conditions of men; Goethe, Shakespeare, Tennyson and many others looked to it for inspiration but in the literature of the world it stands, for its humanism, alone. Even the Divine Comedy cannot rock it from its pedestal.

In this immortal work is revealed, without the slightest constraint, the width and depth of his humanism, that admirable quality, the richness and beauty of which testifies to the sublimity of his inspiration. For with its completion, Boccaccio is no longer the same man, human, loving and tranquil, but rather sad, melancholy and somewhat cynical, a cynicism that found such terrible expression in that savage and mysterious satire, *Il Corbaccio*. Fiammetta was dead; and with the realization of that stern fact, the passion that had given him inspiration and expression to his creative genius, expired. He had written for her alone; now that she was dead he was sad, and his grief, on which he brooded, served to offer room for imaginative fancies. He had been injured and treated shamefully, woman was an evil creature, a tool of the arch enemy, to torment and destroy mortal man; and he found an outlet for his emotions in that wild invective against Woman, laughable in its wildness and unmeasured malice. But it was merely the reflection of the change that was taking place in his soul; the change that marks the transition from his youth to his maturity; from the freedom and exuberance of the boy to the grave and dignified bearing of the man. And when the storm had subsided and he found comfort in Petrarch, he still continued to cherish her fond memory, for that vain shadow always haunted him, the emptiness in his heart never left him.

In Boccaccio's deep and intimate friendship for the great humanist, it was inevitable that he should become interested in the cause for which his friend was laboring. Partly to forget his grief, and partly to be able to follow in the footsteps of the man whom he so greatly admired, he plunged with energy and enthusiasm into the work of reviving the learning of the ancient masters. Boccaccio was no scholar who saw in the literature of antiquity wisdom and thought, which Petrarch sought to make more profound, but rather, as a humanist, something living and splendid. He was no longer able to create living men and women; but he could find in the vast literature of the past a wealth of material which by industry and spade-work could be restored and given to the world. His devotion to this task, and his success, can be measured by the indebtedness of posterity to the classics of antiquity.

By his industry and interest in reviving the learning of the past, as well as the influence of the austere Petrarch, Boccaccio's humanism gradually grew from the simple love of human nature to adopt a higher and an intellectual significance. Having been far from virtuous, he gradually recognized the need of spiritual enlightenment and comfort, and the preparation for a future life. His conversion was precipitated, or rather hastened by that strange incident of the Carthusian monk which produced such a deep reaction on his impressionable nature. Having often attacked the institutions and servants of the holy mother church, and terrified by the approach of immediate death, he resolved to abandon literature and devote the remainder of his life to penance and religious exercise. Writing to Petrarch to this effect, he is cautioned in words of tenderest friendship not to lose hold of himself.

"No monk is required to tell thee," Petrarch writes in part, "of the shortness and precariousness of human life. Of the advice received accept what is good; abandon worldly cares, conquer thy passions, and reform thy soul and life of degraded habits. But do not give up the studies which are the true food of a healthy mind."

This advice and wisdom Boccaccio heeded; and learned more than ever to look to his friend for guidance and comfort. Their ties of friendship were strengthened; and Boccaccio, already ill and weighed by the grief which he could never throw off, felt

strangely drawn to the great scholar. He survived his friend but a short time.

In summary, we can do no better in fitting tribute to Boccaccio's sublime humanism, than to quote the few lines engraved on his tombstone, an epitaph composed by himself shortly before his death. Calm and dignified, it is indeed worthy of a great life with a great purpose.

*"Hac sub mole jacent cineres ac ossa Joannis;
Mens sedet ante Deum, meritis ornata laborum
Mortalis vitae; Genitor Baccaccius illi;
Patria Certaldum; studium fuit alma poesis."*