

JOYCE AND THE TRECENTO

'Surely, he thought, I have as much right to use the word as ever Dante had.' (SH158).

In *Stephen Hero*, the protagonist visits Marsh's 'a few times in the week to read old Italian books of the Trecento', which reminds us that Joyce had studied Italian for four years at Belvedere College, and elected to pursue the subject at University College Dublin. The Bachelor of Arts curriculum placed a strong emphasis on the *Tre Corone* or 'three crowns' of fourteenth-century Italian vernacular literature: Dante Alighieri, Francesco Petrarco, and Giovanni Boccaccio. Of the three, Joyce has little later engagement with Petrarch's work, though he alludes to his crowning as poet laureate on 8 April 1341 in *Finnegans Wake*, where the 'laurels' are also suggestive of his innamorata, Laura, 'teaseong petrock' (FW203.30-1). Boccaccio's *Decameron* is first mentioned in *Stephen Hero*, where Moynihan, one of Stephen's duller, yet more successful, university acquaintances, assures him it is 'ten times as bad in the Original' (SH150). In the Trieste notebook of 1907-09, Joyce recalls Boccaccio's comments regarding Dante's great friend, Guido Cavalcanti, 'Si diceva tralla gente volgare che queste sue speculazioni erano solo in cercare se trovar si potesse che Iddio non fosse' ('It was said among the common people that these philosophical enquiries of his were but attempts to discover if it were possible that God might not exist') (*Decameron*, vi.9.9). As he 'walked along the North Strand Road' on his way to university, Stephen 'would recall the dark humour of Guido Cavalcanti and smile' (P176), particularly the incident recorded by Boccaccio where Guido likens the bullish dullards of a dining club to the dead under their tombstones in the old cemetery formerly located beside the Baptistery in Florence. Stephen returns to this passage in the 'Proteus' episode of *Ulysses*, misremembering the location in an internal monologue as he walks down Sandymount Strand, 'But the courtiers who mocked Guido in Or san Michele were in their own house. House of ... We don't want any of your medieval abstrusiosities' (U3.318-20). In the 'Scylla and Charybdis' episode, Joyce also mentions 'Boccaccio's Calandrino' (*Decameron*, ix.3), who 'was the first and last man who felt himself with child' (U9.836-7) in a cautionary tale which became an emblem of folly during the Renaissance. In *Finnegans Wake*, there is a fleeting reference to Issy, daughter of Chapelizod, as 'A more intriguing bambolina could one not colour up out of Boccuccia's Enameron' (FW561.23-4). Here, her description

as a baby doll, mouthing her enamourment, recalls the erotic aspects of the *Decameron*, which ‘took the biscuit for “smut” in Moynihan’s considered opinion’ (*SH*150). According to Arthur Power, Joyce believed ‘one of the most interesting things about present-day thought’ was its ‘return to medievalism’, because ‘it was the medieval and the medievalists which attracted him most’. Indeed, Joyce stated ‘if I had lived in the fourteenth or fifteenth century I should have been much more appreciated. Men realized then that evil was a necessary complement to our lives and had its own spiritual value’. This was especially true in the case of Dante, who remained for Joyce, as Aristotle remained for Dante, the ‘*maestro di color che sanno*’ (*U*3.6–7): the master of those who know in *Inferno* 4.131. On 11 June 1922, Padraic Colum reminded the readers of the *New York Times* that the young Joyce regarded the *Divine Comedy* as ‘Europe’s epic’, while Stanislaus Joyce averred that his brother, like T.S. Eliot, ‘placed Dante even above Shakespeare, another heresy’. The influence of Dante permeates every aspect of Joyce’s work, from Stephen’s ‘scattered love-verses’, inspired by the vision of Beatrice in the ‘Vita Nuova’ (*SH*174), to his adoption of Dante’s ‘spiritual-heroic refrigerating apparatus’ (*p* 252) at the close of *Portrait*, to the fourfold interpretation of scripture, first transposed into the secular sphere in Dante’s letter to Can Grande, parodied throughout *Finnegans Wake*. Moreover, it would appear that Dante’s allegorical pilgrimage is itself the subject of parody as early as *Dubliners*. Commenting on the short story, ‘Grace’, Stanislaus Joyce suggests that ‘Mr Kernan’s fall down the steps of the lavatory is his descent into hell, the sickroom is purgatory, and the Church in which he and his friends listen to the sermon is paradise at last.’ Even Joyce’s goliardic inversion of the clerical task in ‘The Holy Office’ is a characteristically cock-eyed, and literally cack-handed, evocation of Dante’s gyrotory licence in the *Divina Commedia*:

Wherefore receive now from my lip Peripatetic scholarship.

To enter heaven, travel hell,

Be piteous or terrible. (CW150)

Certainly, Dante’s *spiritus intellectualis* hovers over all that Joyce writes, guiding his belief that ‘if you are sufficiently national, you will be international’. Dante’s example bulwarks Joyce’s belief that as ‘an Irishman’ he must ‘write in an Irish tradition’: at a tangent, but informed by traditions ultimately sourced in the circle of cultural *romanitas*, which also inform the theologico-political vision of Dante. Indeed, Joyce’s work became increasingly concerned with the union of opposites which not only defines the medieval period in his view, but also what it is to be Irish:

One of the most interesting things about Ireland is that we are still fundamentally a medieval people, and that Dublin is still a medieval city. I know that when I used to frequent the pubs around Christ Church, I was always reminded of those medieval taverns in which the sacred and the obscene jostle shoulders.

In true medieval style, Joyce consciously fashions himself as a peripatetic scholar, who not only identifies with such Irish forerunners as the early medieval *peregrini*, Colum Cille and Columbanus, and their seventeenth-century Franciscan hagiographers, but also with Dante, perpetually exiled from Florence in 1302. In the 'Telemachus' episode of *Ulysses*, Stephen once again invokes Dante, as he does at the close of *Portrait*, but this time he reflects on the bitter savour of patronage and exile. Through the prophetic words of *Paradiso* xvii.55-60, delivered by his great-great-grandfather, Cacciaguida, the 'old cruxader' (*FW*464.13-4), Dante reminds us he will learn as an exile how salty another man's bread tastes, because he will be forced to earn it, like Adam, by the sweat of his brow in dispossession. However, Joyce's acute sense of his position as 'a dispossessed' (*U*3.84-5) precipitates his self-imposed exile, rather than stemming from it. He finds it hard to swallow the prospect of eating 'salt bread' (*U*1.631) on another man's stairs, in the oppressive surroundings of a Martello tower, and he returns to Cacciaguida's prophecy in *Finnegans Wake*, 'saviour so the salt and good wee braod' (*FW*483.23). Moreover, in the 'Wandering Rocks' episode, we may note the seemingly incidental vignette of Joyce's Dantean alter ego, 'a pedestrian in a brown macintosh eating dry bread' (*U*10.1271) on Lower Mount Street. However, this not only indicates the inherent captivity of the poverty already caused by dispossession, which grinds exceedingly small, but also presages the transient, fugitive life to come. Although Joyce's exile, like that of Columbanus or Petrarch, was of his own making, throughout his years on the Continent he continued to identify with the political consequences of Dante's exile, which formally stripped him of citizenship, rendering him an alien from the soil of his native city: 'his groundould diablen' (*FW* 72.34). However, as his fellow Irishman, Arthur Power, concluded, 'Dublin was to Joyce what Florence was to Dante, the city of his soul.'

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