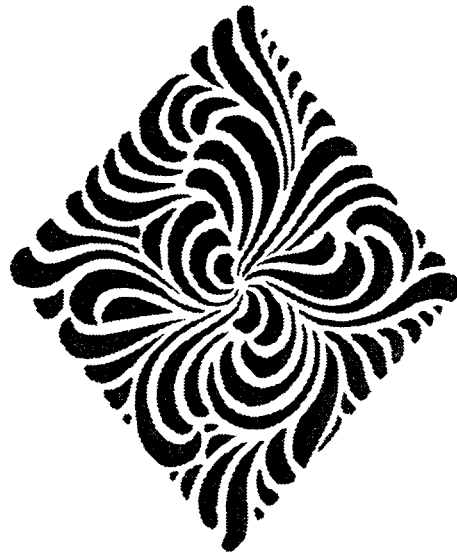


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SELECTED NON-FICTIONS

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Dostoevsky's novel has in some way been Raskolnikov and knows that his "crime" is not free because an inevitable network of circumstances predetermined and dictated it. The man who killed is not a murderer, the man who lied is not an impostor; and this is known (or, rather, felt) by the damned; there is, consequently, no punishment without injustice. The judicial fiction of "the murderer" may well deserve the death penalty, but not the luckless wretch who killed, driven by his own prior history and perhaps—oh Marquis de Laplace!—by the history of the universe. Madame de Staël has compressed these ratiocinations into a famous sentence: "*Tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner*" [To understand all is to forgive all].

Dante tells the story of Francesca's sin with such delicate compassion that all of us feel its inevitability. That is how the poet must have felt it, in defiance of the theologian who argued in the *Purgatorio* (XVI, 70) that if actions depended on the influences of the stars, our free will would be annulled, and to reward good while punishing evil would be an injustice.³

Dante understands and does not forgive; this is the insoluble paradox. For my part, I take it that he found a solution beyond logic. He felt (but did not understand) that the acts of men are necessary and that an eternity of heavenly bliss or hellish perdition incurred by those acts is similarly necessary. The Spinozists and the Stoics also promulgated moral laws. Here there is no need to bring up Calvin, whose *decretum Dei absolutum* predestines some for hell and others for heaven. I read in the introductory pages of Sale's *Koran* that one of the Islamic sects also upholds this view.

The fourth conjecture, as is evident, does not disentangle the problem but simply raises it in a vigorous manner. The other conjectures were logical; this last one, which is not, seems to me to be true.

[1948]

[EA]

³Cf. *De monarchia* I, 14; *Purgatorio* XVIII, 73; *Paradiso* V, 19. More eloquent still are the great words of Canto XXXI: "*Tu m'hai di servo tratto a libertate*" [It is you who have drawn me from bondage into liberty] (*Paradiso*, 85).

Dante and the Anglo-Saxon Visionaries

In Canto X of the *Paradiso*, Dante recounts that he ascended to the sphere of the sun and saw around that planet—in the Dantesque economy the sun is a planet—a flaming crown of twelve spirits, even more luminous than the light against which they stood out. The first of them, Thomas Aquinas, announces the names of the others: the seventh is *Beda*, or Bede. Dante's commentators explain that this is the Venerable Bede, deacon of the monastery of Jarrow and author of the *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*.

Despite the adjective, this, the first history of England, composed in the eighth century, transcends the strictly ecclesiastical. It is the touching, personal work of a man of letters and a scrupulous researcher. Bede had mastered Latin and knew Greek; a line from Virgil could spring spontaneously from his pen. Everything interested him: universal history, the exegesis of Holy Scripture, music, rhetorical figures,¹ spelling, numerical systems, the natural sciences, theology, Latin poetry, and poetry in the vernacular. There is one point, however, on which he deliberately remains silent. In his chronicle of the tenacious missions that finally succeeded in imposing the faith of Jesus on the Germanic kingdoms of England, Bede could have done for Saxon paganism what Snorri Sturluson, five hundred years or so later, would do for Scandinavian paganism. Without betraying his work's pious intent, he could have elucidated or sketched out the mythology of his elders. Predictably, he did not. The reason is obvious: the religion, or mythology, of the Germans was still very near. Bede wanted to forget it; he wanted his England to forget it. We will never know if a twilight awaits the gods

¹Bede sought the examples he gives of rhetorical figures in the Scriptures. Thus, for synecdoche, where the part stands for the whole, he cited verse 14 of the first chapter of the Gospel According to John, "And the Word was made flesh. . . ." Strictly speaking, the Word was made not only flesh, but also bone, cartilage, water, and blood.

who were adored by Hengist, or if, on that tremendous day when the sun and the moon are devoured by wolves, a ship made of the fingernails of the dead will depart from the realms of ice. We will never know if these lost divinities formed a pantheon, or if they were, as Gibbon suspected, the vague superstitions of barbarians. Except for the ritual phrase "*cujus pater Voden*" which figures in all his genealogies of royal lineages—and the case of the cautious king who had one altar for Jesus and another, smaller one for the demons—Bede did little to satisfy the future curiosity of Germanists. He did, however, stray far enough from the straight and narrow path of chronology to record certain otherworldly visions that prefigure the work of Dante.

Let us recall one of them. Fursa, Bede tells us, was an Irish ascetic who had converted many Saxons. In the course of an illness, he was carried off in spirit by angels and rose up to heaven. During his ascension, he saw four fires, not far distant from each other, reddening the black air. The angels explained that these fires would consume the world and that their names were Falsehood, Covetousness, Discord, and Iniquity. The fires extended until they met one another and drew near him; Fursa was afraid, but the angels told him: "The fire which you did not kindle shall not burn you." Indeed, the angels parted the flames and Fursa reached Paradise, where he saw many admirable things. On his way back to earth, he was threatened a second time by a fire, out of which a demon hurled the incandescent soul of a sinner, which burned his right shoulder and chin. An angel told him: "Now the fire you kindled burns you. For as you accepted the garment of him who was a sinner, so you must partake of his punishment." Fursa bore the stigma of this vision to the day of his death.

Another of these visions is that of a man of Northumbria named Drythelm. After an illness that lasted for several days, he died at nightfall, and suddenly came back to life at the break of dawn. His wife was keeping vigil for him; Drythelm told her he had indeed been reborn from among the dead and that he now intended to live in a very different way. After praying, he divided his estate into three parts, and gave the first to his wife, the second to his sons, and the third to the poor. He bade them all farewell and retired to a monastery, where his rigorous life was testimony to the many dreadful and desirable things that were revealed to him during the night he was dead, which he spoke of thus:

He that led me had a shining countenance and a bright garment, and we went on silently, as I thought, towards the north-east. We came to a

vale of great breadth and depth, but of infinite length; on the left it appeared full of dreadful flames, the other side was no less horrid for violent hail and cold snow flying in all directions; both places were full of men's souls, which seemed by turns to be tossed from one side to the other, as it were by a violent storm; for when the wretches could no longer endure the excess of heat, they leaped into the cutting cold, and so on infinitely. I began to think that this region of intolerable torments perhaps might be hell. But my guide who went before me answered my thoughts: "You are not yet in Hell."

When he had led me further on, the darkness grew so thick that I could see nothing else but the garment of him that led me. Innumerable globes of black flames rose out of a great pit and fell back again into the same. My leader suddenly vanished and left me alone in the midst of the globes of fire that were full of human souls. An insufferable stench came forth from the pit.

When I had stood there in much dread for a time that seemed endless, I heard a most hideous and wretched lamentation, and at the same time a loud laughing, as of a rude multitude insulting captured enemies. A gang of evil spirits was dragging five howling and lamenting souls of men into the darkness, whilst they themselves laughed and rejoiced. One of these men was shorn like a clergyman; another was a woman. As they went down into the burning pit, I could no longer distinguish between the lamentation of the men and the laughing of the devils, yet I still had a confused sound in my ears. Dark spirits ascended from that flaming abyss beset me on all sides and tormented me with the noisome flame that issued from their mouths and nostrils, yet they durst not touch me. Being thus on all sides enclosed with enemies and darkness, I could not seem to defend myself. Then there appeared behind me, on the way that I came, the brightness of a star shining amidst the darkness; which increased by degrees and came rapidly toward me. All those evil spirits dispersed and fled and I saw that the star was he who had led me before; he turned towards the right and began to lead me towards the south-east, and having soon brought me out of the darkness, conducted me into an atmosphere of clear light. I saw a vast wall before us, the length and height of which, in every direction seemed to be altogether boundless. I began to wonder why we went up to the wall, seeing no door, window, or path through it. Presently, I know not by what means, we were on the top of it, and within it was a vast and delightful field, so full of fragrant flowers that the odor of its delightful sweetness immediately dispelled the stink of the dark

furnace. In this field were innumerable assemblies of men in white. As my guide led me through these happy inhabitants, I began to think that this might be the kingdom of heaven, of which I had heard so much, but he answered to my thought, saying "You are not yet in heaven."

Further on I discovered before me a much more beautiful light and therein heard sweet voices of persons singing, and so wonderful a fragrant proceeded from the place that the other which I had before thought most delicious then seemed to me but very indifferent. When I began to hope we should enter that delightful place, my guide on a sudden stood still; and then turning back, led me back by the way we came.

He then told me that that vale I saw so dreadful for consuming flames and cutting cold is purgatory; the fiery noisome pit is the very mouth of hell; this flowery place is where the souls are received of the just who await the Last Judgment, and the place where I heard the sound of sweet singing, with the fragrant odor and bright light is the kingdom of heaven. "As for you" he added, "who are now to return to your body and live among men again, if you will endeavor to direct your behavior in righteousness, you shall, after death, have a place or residence among these joyful troops of blessed souls; for when I left you for a while, it was to know what your future would be." I much abhorred returning to my body, however I durst not say a word and, on a sudden, I found myself alive among men.

In the story I have just transcribed, my readers will have noted passages that recall—or prefigure—passages in Dante's work. The monk is not burned by the fire he did not light; Beatrice, similarly, is invulnerable to the flames of the Inferno: "*nè fiamma d'esto 'ncendio non m'assale*" [and no flame of this burning assails me].

To the right of the valley that seems without end, torrents of sleet and ice punish the damned; the Epicureans of the third circle endure the same affliction. The man of Northumbria is plunged into despair by the angel's momentary abandonment, as Dante is by Virgil's: "*Virgilio a cui per mia salute die'mi*" [Virgil, to whom I gave myself for my salvation]. Drythelm does not know how he was able to rise to the top of the wall; Dante, how he was able to cross the sad Acheron.

Of greater interest than these correspondences, of which there are undoubtedly many more than I have mentioned, are the circumstantial details that Bede weaves into his narrative and that lend a singular verisimilitude to

the otherworldly visions. I need only recall the permanence of the burns, the fact that the angel reads the man's silent thought, the fusion of moaning and laughter, the visionary's perplexity before the high wall. It may be that an oral tradition carried these details to the historian's pen; certainly they already contain the union of the personal and the marvelous that is typical of Dante, and that has nothing to do with the customs of allegorical literature.

Did Dante ever read the *Historia Ecclesiastica*? It is highly probable that he did not. In strict logic, the inclusion of the name *Beda* (conveniently disyllabic for the line) in an inventory of theologians proves little. In the Middle Ages, people trusted other people; it was not compulsory to have read the learned Anglo-Saxon's volumes in order to acknowledge his authority, as it was not compulsory to have read the Homeric poems, closed off in an almost secret language, to know that Homer ("Mira colui con quella spada in mano" [Note him there with sword in hand]) could well be chief among Ovid, Lucan, and Horace. Another observation may be made, as well. For us, Bede is a historian of England; to his medieval readers he was a commentator on Scripture, a rhetorician, and a chronologist. There was no reason for a history of the then rather vague entity called England to have had any particular attraction for Dante.

Whether or not Dante knew of the visions recorded by Bede is less important than the fact that Bede considered them worthy of remembrance and included them in his book. A great book like the *Divina commedia* is not the isolated or random caprice of an individual; many men and many generations built toward it. To investigate its precursors is not to subject oneself to a miserable drudgery of legal or detective work; it is to examine the movements, probings, adventures, glimmers, and premonitions of the human spirit.

[1945-51/1957]

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