

Supreme Poet with Two Beatitudes

DANTE, THE PHILOSOPHER. By Etienne Gilson. Translated by David Moore. New York: Sheed & Ward. 338 pp. \$4.

By THOMAS CALDECOT CHUBB

NOT even excepting Shakespeare, there is no man who has used the word to write with who has had more words written about him than that lean, harassed-looking Florentine who was tormented by his memory of Beatrice and by the bitterness of political exile into composing the greatest single poem of Western Christendom—that “Divine Comedy,” which is either the last word of the Middle Ages or the first word of the Renaissance, according to your point of view.

This writing began when the great poet was scarcely dead. His son, Jacopo, was the first to say his word, and he was followed, among others, by Jacopo della Lana, Andrea Lancia, Dante's other son, Pietro, Guido da Pisa, Giovanni Boccaccio, and Benvenuto da Imola.

Thereafter, the spate of commentaries, expositions, exegeses, and explanations continued to flood and swell until the sum total of all the books, pamphlets, and articles written about Dante would, if assembled, of themselves fill a large library. Etienne Gilson, of the Collège de France, is, then, but the latest of a long and by no means unloquacious line, which has included a large portion of the most able scholars, thinkers, and crea-

tive writers who have lived in the intervening six centuries.

There is some advantage in this, but also certain disadvantages. The late-comer at least must have a justification. This is M. Gilson's: “The object of this book is to define Dante's attitude, or, if need be, his successive attitudes towards philosophy.” That has been done before—although it must be said that a new man writing about something old has to say something new.

But his real object is somewhat different. It is to attain truth by clearing away error. Certain Dante scholars, notably Father Mandonnet in his “Dante le Théologien,” have attempted to demonstrate that Beatrice was merely a symbol, that there was no Bice Portinari at all, that the lady whom Dante called Beatrice represented Beatitude or Theology, that his poem came not from his resolve to write about the beautiful young Florentine “that which was never said of any other woman” but from his repentance at having abandoned his clerical vocation.

A considerable part of M. Gilson's book is devoted to refuting these conclusions. Though conceding the part played by symbolism, the French scholar takes the more reasonable view that Boccaccio—who must have known many who knew Dante—knew what he was talking about, that there was a real Beatrice (whether or not he first saw her walking near the Ponte Santa Trinità), and that his repentance was not for failure to take

orders, but for the debauched living in which he indulged, according to the author of the “Decameron,” “not only in his youth, but even when he was mature.”

M. Gilson deals likewise with the contention that Dante was a pure Thomist. He was not, he concludes. Using the “De Monarchia” as a basis for his line of thought, he insists that Dante held the concept that there are two kinds of beatitude—temporal and spiritual—and two kinds of authority—the Emperor's and the Pope's. Each was derived from God, but each was independent of the other. This is not Thomism, M. Gilson says. St. Thomas believed in one beatitude—the spiritual—and one authority—that of the Supreme Pontifex, “to whom all kings of Christian peoples owe submission as to Our Lord Jesus Christ Himself.”

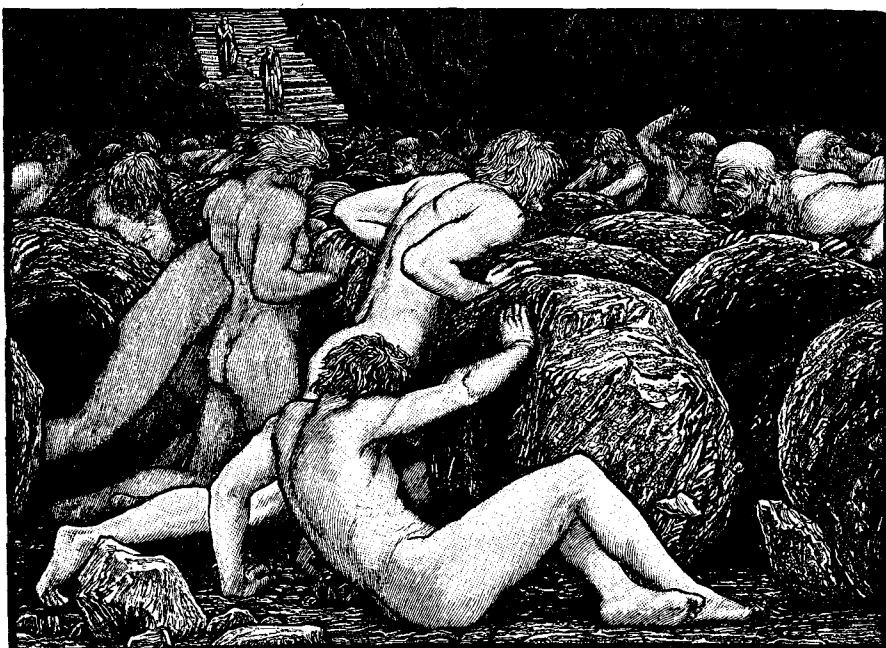
These are the principal matters in a volume which discusses also, as it must, the vexing unsolved problem of how Siger de Brabant, supposedly an Averroist and a heretic, is found in Paradise, and the identity of the *donna gentile* in the “Vita Nuova” and the “Convivio.” M. Gilson is, as I have said, a scholar; he writes as a scholar and much of this book will have no appeal for the non-technical mind. Yet it is not without its humor—“of the women who hear themselves called ‘angels,’ very few expect to be treated as ‘symbols’”; its common sense, its self-confidence, its urbanity, and that kind of dialectical skill that would have won many battles in the days when men, allegedly, debated as to how many angels could stand upon the point of a pin.

But, for all that, when I had finished reading it, an irreverent angle came into my mind. I saw it many years ago in an English book of drawings under two appropriate sketches of the poet.

I sometimes wonder whether Dante
Drank Benedictine or Chianti,
But I will have it as you say
for I can draw him either way.

Either way—or indeed every way—for in some respects Dante is universal. He is a theologian to theologian Mandonnet and a philosopher to philosopher Gilson. But most of all he is the supreme poet, something which the learned folk who write about him are so likely either to pass over lightly or to forget.

Thomas Caldecot Chubb, Italian Renaissance biographer, has written “The Life of Giovanni Boccaccio” and “Aretino: Scourge of Princes.” He has also published several volumes of verse, including “Ships and Lovers” and “A Time to Speak.”



—New York Public Library.

“The Avaricious and Prodigal,” by John D. Batten, for Dante's “Inferno.”

Fiction. Beginning with Sir Thomas More's "Utopia," fantasies of the future have fascinated the public, though few of them have had the enduring qualities of Hermann Hesse's "Magister Ludi," which recently appeared in translation. This work of a famous German-Swiss novelist and philosopher, winner of the Nobel Prize in 1947, is endowed with scholarship and mysticism and deserves to be rated with the best in this field. It is in sharp contrast to three other able novels reviewed this week. W. R. Burnett's "The Asphalt Jungle," the story of a vice-ridden city, is as powerful as his first novel, "Little Caesar," published twenty years ago. In "The Show Must Go On," Elmer Rice uses a playwright's knowledge of the theatre to describe the harrowing complications involved in acceptance, production, and run of a young writer's first play. A distinguished woman novelist uses the pseudonym of John Sedges for "The Long Love," a tale, unusual for these days, of a happy marriage.

A Cop and a Robber

THE ASPHALT JUNGLE. By W. R. Burnett. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 271 pp. \$2.75.

By VICTOR P. HASS

IT HAS been twenty years and fourteen novels since W. R. Burnett wrote "Little Caesar," that superb dissection of a mobster. Some of the novels (notably "High Sierra" and "Dark Hazard") were very good, some were so-so, some mere hack work. But not even the very good ones challenged the bitter power, the brutal impact of "Little Caesar."

Now, however, students of top-level crime stories will want to make room on their shelves for "The Asphalt Jungle." Here is Mr. Burnett so close to the top of his form that there undoubtedly will be some who will agree with the publisher's blurb writer that this is Mr. Burnett's best book. For myself, I should place it behind "Little Caesar" for sheer drive but ahead of it for its subtle probing of the criminal mind. However you rank

it, "The Asphalt Jungle" is a corking yarn.

The jungle of the story is a huge Midwest city. It is a city shot through with official corruption, a city whose police department has for years been under tremendous fire from the newspapers. Into this picture steps Theo Hardy as the new commissioner of police. Oddly, astonishingly, unbelievably (to citizenry, newspapers, cops, and thugs alike) Hardy turns out to be not only an honest man but a crusader as well. To cynical and amused newspaper reporters he reveals that he is going to enforce the law.

Now, unknown to Hardy, there appears in the jungle a short, fat, mild yet icy man named Erwin Riemenschneider, an international jewel thief just out of stir and eager to get back to work. With him Riemenschneider has detailed plans for robbing the city's oldest and richest jewelers of no less than a half million dollars in gems. He seeks two things: a crack crew to do the job and a

fence big enough to dispose of the loot once the job is done. He finds the first in Dix Handley, a "heavy" quick with fists and gun; Louis Bellini, a master cracksman, and hunchbacked Gus Minisi, a terror behind the wheel of an escape auto. He finds the second in Alonzo Emmerich, a big-time but off-color criminal lawyer.

So, still unknown to each other, Hardy and Riemenschneider marshal their resources, one to clean up crime and the other to pull off the biggest theft in the city's history.

As always, Mr. Burnett places great demands upon a reviewer. To reveal any part of the action from this point would do the author an injustice and the prospective reader a disservice. But it can be said that as each of these two forces moves into action, one working by one set of laws and the other working by the devious but no less rigid rules of the underworld, Mr. Burnett depends upon no shoddy tricks of the mystery hacks to push his story to its conclusion.

For this is no mystery story, but a slice of life and the story develops in these taut pages as it undoubtedly would have developed had it happened in New York or Chicago or Detroit or any other big city. Even knowing the outcome, and the intelligent reader will know it long before the book's end, in no way lessens the impact of that outcome.

This is why: under Mr. Burnett's skilful prodding the reader becomes a dual personality. He can sympathize with and encourage Hardy, hoping against hope when things go awry that he will bull his way through. At the same time he can identify himself so closely with Riemenschneider and his crew, admiring their genius at so dangerous a calling, that he finds himself rather hoping that they will pull it off. There must be some reward besides death or the clink for men so daring.

Such dillydallying on the part of the reader is, of course, ridiculous and the heedless Mr. Burnett, having tied that reader into knots, unravels him and slaps him good for sneaking around in the dark corners of the jungle and enjoying himself.

If your bent is for crime stories that have the juices of life in them and the tautness of a wildfowler's nerves with mallards swinging into his blind, by all means read "The Asphalt Jungle." It is possible that you may be able to put it down for another evening after you are midway but if you can, be sure to apply to Mr. Erwin Riemenschneider, c/o Postmaster, The Asphalt Jungle. He can use a cool operator like you in his work.

