

Memory and Appropriation: Remembering Dante in Germany During the Sexcentenary of 1921

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INTRODUCTION: REMEMBERING ABANDONED ART

The 1921 German sexcentenary commemoration of Dante's death saw rival centres of collective memory competing for cultural possession of Dante's literary and philosophical oeuvre. Among the several cultural groups competing for the memory of Dante was the Catholic Church in Germany, which confronted a literary and cultural establishment that claimed Dante for a Germany associated to one degree or another, confessionally or culturally, with Protestantism. At stake was the charge of wholesale appropriation of another's spiritual patrimony; each group

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celebrated the memory of Dante while charging the other with appropriating the monumental poet without warrant, without justification, and without authenticity to the harm of the oeuvre and the community that legitimately deserved to be its steward. Underlying this contest of memory and possession is each community's claim for cultural, moral, spiritual, and political leadership in the reconstitution of Germany during the aftermath of World War I.¹

The rivalry, however, was not between two equal contenders. Catholics were claiming Dante as part of a program of self-assertion following first a period of suppression during the *Kulturkampf*, and then the period of proven German loyalty in World War I, which ultimately resulted in increased political power after the war. Nevertheless, the Catholic claim on Dante accompanying a rise of political and cultural confidence was an innovation that followed centuries of hostility. The Catholic claim on Dante in 1921 may be understood under the category of what the philosopher James O. Young, in his legal study of the appropriation of artworks, identifies as "abandoned art": a work of art abandoned by a community as either without value or even inimical to the community, which the community later claims as its own because it belatedly recognises its worth, while in the meantime the work has by then been adopted by another community, which is now accused of appropriating it. Young points to the Parthenon marbles taken to England by Lord Elgin as perhaps the best known example.²

The Church dissociated itself from Dante from at least the time it placed his *De monarchia* on the Index of Prohibited Books in 1554. It

¹I use terms like "collective memory," "remembering," "memorial," "memorialisation," and "commemoration" in the sense defined by Jan Assmann as a socially institutionalised rehearsing of the past to maintain group identity as determined by present needs, or as he calls it, a "contemporized past." See Jan Assmann, "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity," trans. John Czaplicka, *New German Critique* 65 (Spring-Summer, 1995): 125–33. For the notion of rival memory performed by competing groups, I rely on the seminal work of James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 72–73, especially his discussion of the multiple uses of Nathan Rapoport's Warsaw Monument Memorial (155–85). See also Young on the German Holocaust memorialist Horst Hoheisel. James E. Young, "The Countermonument: Memory against Itself in Germany Today," *Critical Inquiry* 18 (Winter 1992): 267–96. Reprinted by *The Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies* (February 6, 2014), <http://chgs.umn.edu/museum/memorials/hoheisel/>.

²James O. Young, *Cultural Appropriation and the Arts* (Chichester UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 72–73.

was removed from the Index by Leo XIII only in 1881. Only in 1921 did Dante fully enter the fold of the Church when Benedict XV, reinterpreting Dante's treatment of the papacy in *De monarchia* and forgiving Dante his treatment of popes in the *Inferno*, issued an encyclical, *In praeclara summorum*, calling for a worldwide commemoration of Dante's death, fully ending centuries of hostility. Benedict now proclaimed that the Church has a "special right to call Alighieri hers" (para. 2), and called upon Catholic intellectuals "to show even more clearly than before the intimate union of Dante with this Chair of Peter" (para. 3).³ In the centuries of Dante's exile from the Catholic Church, a tradition had arisen in Germany according to which Dante anticipated Luther and other German Protestant thinkers. This was the Dante German Protestants "remembered" in the sexcentenary, a proto-Protestant in the German tradition. At the same time, the sexcentenary was the occasion for Catholics to counter by "remembering" Dante within Catholic tradition. The task was undertaken by German Catholic scholars, often members of the German Catholic Centre Party or German Catholic cultural organisations, which responded to Benedict's call. It may seem obvious to us now that Dante is generally regarded as the preeminent Catholic poet, but it was during the 1921 Dante sexcentenary that German Catholics had to make the case against German Protestants and other Germans that Dante was indeed truly Catholic.

The competing claims to "remember" Dante in the commemorative year in commemorative essays were driven by a struggle for his contemporary significance. The debate was carried on with a distinct sense of difference from, and even condescension toward, academic historical scholarship. Appropriately, the struggle over Dante's contribution to the current post-war crisis took place in the popular press, literary magazines, and periodicals associated with religious organisations rather than in the academic journals of the philologists; it took place among writers, intellectuals, politicians, publicists, or at times among academics without

³Benedict XV, *In praeclara summorum*, www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xv/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xv_enc_30041921_in-praeclara-summorum_en.html. An English translation also appeared in *The Catholic World* 113.678 (September 1921), 867–72. A German version of the encyclical was disseminated as *Rundschreiben Unseres Heiligsten Vaters Benedikt XV, durch göttliche Vorsehung Papst, zum 600. Todestag von Dante Alighieri* (April 30, 1921: "In praeclara summorum copia") (Herder: Freiburg im Breisgau, 1921).

university affiliations to Romance Philology departments where Dante was studied professionally by historically minded *Wissenschaftlern*. When the memorial struggle for Dante did take the form of a debate about his historical origins, it was almost always for the purpose of asserting his present-day importance, an approach we would now call presentist.

How this conflict over Dante memory played out can be seen in contrasting, representative commemorative articles about Dante by two outspoken writers of the time, now lost to the polemics of the day, Hans Benzmann and Martin Fassbender. Benzmann was a nationalistic poet and Reichstag secretary; Fassbender was a Catholic Centre Party member and a professor of public health. Both could not be further removed from the world of professional *Dantisti*, but they clearly illustrate the range and motives of those “remembering” Dante in 1921, especially those with public interests.

HANS BENZMANN

Although he disclaimed any connection to organised religion, Hans Benzmann (1869–1926) came from a pious, bible-reading Protestant household and his personal spirituality resembles the *Kulturprotestantismus*, or liberal Protestantism, of Adolf von Harnack (1851–1930).⁴ He was primarily known as a nationalist poet with a strong local Pomeranian allegiance who sought a larger European and even global perspective rooted in the German *Volksseele* and *Heimat*, in German nation and region. He held a doctorate with a dissertation on the “social ballad” in Germany, but had no university affiliation.⁵ He wrote prolifically mostly on German national poetry, compiling many anthologies on the theme, though he much less frequently approached contemporary trends as well. Like many who wrote about Dante in this period, Benzmann held a minor political office, in his case as Reichstag

⁴For an overview of Benzmann’s religious views, see Ernst Lemke, *Hans Benzmann: eine Einführung in sein Leben und sein Werk* (Stettin: Fscher & Schmidt, 1919), 18–20.

⁵The closest he came to a university affiliation was a memorial by the Akademisch-Literarisches Bund of Greifswald University, where he had received his degree. See Karl Stork, ed., *Hans Benzmann, zum seinem Gedächtnis* (Greifswald: Akademisch-Literarischer Bund, 1928).

secretary and in the National Assembly; he also served in the army during the war.⁶ Of the more than 400 works on Benzmann's bibliography, only three essays are about Dante. All were written in 1921 for the Dante commemoration.⁷ All were published in daily and weekly newspapers. All address the issue of Dante's relation to Germany and Europe with reference, explicitly or implicitly, to Dante's Catholicism and to contemporary German Catholic writers about Dante. The articles reveal an ambivalent combination of respect, condescension, and ultimately dismissal of the revival of Dante among Catholic writers and intellectuals.

Benzmann appears to have been drawn to Dante because of his own attachment to religion in culture and poetry. His most ambitious work, *Eine Evangelienharmonie*, is a poetic cycle based on the gospel narrative.⁸ As Benzmann himself explains, he synthesises a number of dialectical relationships, the region-nation-universal, the general-specific, and the timeless-time bound. Jesus is the world-historical prototypical pinnacle of humanity whose ideal nature is repeatedly experienced in individuals through his rebirth in the faithful. This dialectic of the typical and individual is also a temporal dialectic in which the salvific personality of Jesus affects us anachronically across centuries (Benzmann 1909, 238–40; see Lemke 20),⁹ an idea that makes poetry itself a “contemporized past.” Benzmann's pre-war poetic was ideally suited to commemorate Dante by addressing the ongoing significance of a thirteenth-century poet in post-war Germany.

Both the temporal dialectic of past-present and the logical dialectic of general-particular played out for Benzmann in the German national context. Benzmann explains that he has deliberately portrayed Jesus

⁶Details about Benzmann's life can be found in Lemke, *Benzmann*, 9–11.

⁷See Walter Betke, “Hans Benzmanns Nachlass,” in *Benzmann*, ed. Stork, 13–17. Betke lists only two articles; he misses “Dante in Deutschland,” perhaps mistaking two articles with similar titles.

⁸Hans Benzmann, *Eine Evangelienharmonie, mit Holzschnitten von Dürer, Lucas Cranach d. ä., Altdorfer und Burkmair* (Leipzig: Fritz Eckardt, 1909). For an overview of the personal dimension of Benzmann's work, see Gustav Christmann, “Hans Benzmanns Werke als Ausdruck seines Lebensgestzes,” in *Benzmann*, ed. Stork, 5–10.

⁹Benzmann, *Evangelienharmonie*, 238–40; see Lemke, *Benzmann*, 20. I have borrowed the term “anachronic” from Christopher S. Wood and Alexander Nagel, *Anachronic Renaissance* (New York: Zone, 2010).

sometimes in, and sometimes removed from, his historical time frame and homeland, sometimes as if he were a German in a present-day setting. In this, he tells us, he has followed the iconic German woodcuts by Dürer, Cranach, Altdorfer, and Burkmaier he has included in the volume. The woodcuts present images of Jesus in late medieval and early modern German dress and setting that stand anachronically for both the original historical gospel setting and the contemporary German setting.¹⁰ They are both historical and timeless, prototypal and particular, universal and individual. “[T]he needs and capabilities of the soul are independent of any age” and “what is conceivable today and tomorrow is also conceivable yesterday and from the very beginning.”¹¹ The starting point of widening significance into the universal is the German *Volksseele*—in the seminal fifteenth- and sixteenth-century figures of German artistic production; three of the four artists are associated with Lutheran spirituality, while one (Burkmaier) with Maximilian I, German emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. Benzmann’s treatment of these woodcuts anticipates the issue he will address in Dante: how can the values of Dante’s poetry be ours?

Ultimately, however, it is Ploetz who reads back into the *Evangelienharmonie* the post-war perspective of cultural crisis that connects Benzmann to Dante. “Today” the *Volksseele* at the heart of Benzmann’s poetic “is no longer unified. The lyric poet of today cannot therefore build on a coherent world representation like the poet of ancient times.” Instead, the poet today is an “individualist” and he addresses an audience of “individualists.” As a result, “he must always ground anew his position to religion, nature, science, and art, and seek to convey it through the magic of his words to the world around him,” which naturally resists him. Dante would indeed be attractive to a poet who seeks to offer a vision of universal unity based in a now fragmented *Deutschtum* to an atomised audience of individualists whose antipathy he must overpower.¹²

¹⁰Benzmann, *Evangelienharmonie*, 239–40.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Hermann Ploetz, “Vorwort,” in *Hans Benzmann, Ausgewählte Gedichte* (Stettin: Fischer & Schmidt, 1919), 7.

“DANTE IN DEUTSCHLAND”

The first of Benzmann’s articles, “Dante in Deutschland,” came out in the *Berliner Börsen-Zeitung*,¹³ a “bürgerlich, right-conservative [news-paper] without direct connection to any party.”¹⁴ Benzmann here finds in Dante the qualities he tried to project in his own poetry—the combination of religious fervour and purely human idealism, the intersection of the imminent and the timeless, the combined representation of pure spirit and the absorption of real appearances. These qualities form the source of the projection of Dante’s poetic power into the present, but they also create a fundamental tension with which Benzmann wrestles. The *Divine Comedy* “must from timely and eternal grounds remain unique,” but the “radiance” of Dante’s genius, its effect on individuals, including the German poetry of the last century up to today, is immeasurable. The tension is never fully resolved.

The article is devoted to Benzmann’s attempt to mediate Dante’s uniqueness and his impact on German readers and poets by “remembering” Dante with an oft repeated ritual enumeration, as it were, of the connections between Germans and Dante over the centuries. Benzmann’s procedure in the article is to draw on two admired, but very different German sources, Richard Zoosman, a Catholic translator known for his four-volume *Werke Dantes*, and an essay by Paul Alfred Merbach,¹⁵ a theatre critic and Wagner devotee who elsewhere indicated his view of Dante as an anti-Catholic proto-Protestant monarchist in an article for the right-wing *Deutsche Zeitung*¹⁶ (Merbach 1921, n.p.). Benzmann repeats a standard Protestant-German account. He emphasises the early link between Dante and Germany through the poet’s connection with German princes. Johannes von Neumarkt, the fourteenth-century Bishop of Olmütz, closely connected to the emperor Karl IV, owned a manuscript of the *Divine Comedy*, since lost, and the principal manuscript of the *De monarchia*, now in the Vatican, was held in the

¹³Hans Benzmann, “Dante in Deutschland,” *Berliner Börsen-Zeitung*. Kunst und Wissenschaft (28 Aug 1921): n.p.

¹⁴Karsten Schilling, *Das zerstörte Erbe: Berliner Zeitungen der Weimarer Republik im Portrait* (Norderstedt: Books on Demand, 2011), 159.

¹⁵Paul Alfred Merbach, “Dante in Deutschland,” *Dante-Jahrbuch* 5 (1920): 140–65.

¹⁶Paul Alfred Merbach, “Dante,” *Deutsche Zeitung* 411, Unterhaltung Beilage (14 Sept 1921): n.p.

castle library of Heidelberg in 1500. The *De monarchia* was historically a source used to support German princes against popes, and which thus tied Dante to Germany in opposition to the Catholic Church. (He does not mention it, but the *De monarchia* was put on the Index in the sixteenth century).

Benzmann draws on the Catholic Zoozmann for examples that highlight the importance of Protestant Nuremberg for the dissemination of Dante in the sixteenth century, with special emphasis on the role of two Germans: the humanist Willibald Pirckheimer, who also owned a copy of the *Divine Comedy*, and through whom Dürer may have become familiar with Dante; and Hans Sachs, who included anecdotes about Dante in his *Historia*. From then on, Benzmann avers, passages from the *Divine Comedy* and the *De monarchia* became the common property of German Protestants as they were most often invoked by Lutherans. He further traces Dante's influence in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries through the printing of the *De monarchia* in Basel, and the reception of Dante by Jakob Boehme, Martin Opitz, Andreas Gryphius, Herder, and others. Dante, finally, became firmly rooted in Germany through the Romantics, while a German readership was established through translations by Schlegel (1795), Kannegiesser (1809), Streckfuss (1824), and the Saxon king who went by the name of Philalethes. Dante scholar Karl Witte, as well as early twentieth-century *Nachdichtungen* (poetic adaptations) by Paul Pochhammer and Josef Kohler, exerted enormous influence. Benzmann considers translations and *Nachdichtungen* as the real measure of the successful contemporisation of Dante in Germany, even to his own day, as exhibited in German adaptations of the *terzine*, of grandly conceived allegories, and the stately style of "world view epics," and especially the "creative imitation," or *Nachschöpfung*, of Stefan George's translations. Translation is here considered a positive activity that affirms German stewardship of Dante by preserving his work and catalysing its enduring creative energy in German poetry.

Benzmann's seamless narrative of Dante's incorporation into German literature and culture through imperial politics, Protestantism, and Romanticism, however, is disrupted by the implications of Dante's Catholicism, an institution that itself claims universality but that does not easily fit into the Benzmann's German sense of national identity. Benzmann confronts and puzzles his way through this unsettling break in the German paradigm. He acknowledges and pays tribute, for example, to Catholic scholars, with whose work he is clearly familiar. He gives highest

praise to the “holy zeal” that inspired Zoozmann to produce a translation that is so faithful to the original and so sensitive to Dante’s formal beauty, yet so readable and accessible that it is widely used in (i.e., Protestant) German schools and homes. He extends similar accolades to Constantin Sauter for his translation of the *De monarchia* and the *Convivio*, and to Karl Jakubczyk for his up-to-date scholarship in his introduction to the life and work of Dante. These were in fact all figures who were making a case for a Catholic reading of Dante and indeed celebrating the Catholic memory of Dante. It is not surprising, therefore, that there is a hint of discomfort with the dissonance between Benzmann’s litany of connections between the real (non-Catholic) Germany and his praise for writers seeking to provide an alternative Catholic connection between Dante and Germany. There is a note of condescension in his description of Sauter as a “commendable” (*verdienstvoll*) scholar (the German word has the connotation of “deserving”), and in his characterisation of these scholars as “unbiased” (*unbefangen*), literally “uncaptured,” a word commonly used to clear a writer of the expected Catholic scholarly prejudice, parochialism, and self-interest.¹⁷

The dissonance in Benzmann’s account of Dante’s natural place in Germany deepens when he concedes that *unbefangen* Catholic writers can perhaps most “directly and correctly” evaluate and translate his work because Dante clearly “stands *only* on the ground of the *Catholic* world view” (emphasis in the original) whose concern for purification and transfiguration found in Church doctrine lies at the heart of Dante’s work. Only from this Catholic point of view, he continues, is one able to enter deeply into Dante’s world, in which the dogmas and teachings of the great Scholastics resound and in which the human condition is experienced as a deeply spiritual vision of the primordial desire for purification and redemption, for release from sin and for sanctification. Benzmann appears to condone the transmission of this Catholic spiritual vision into German schools and homes through Zoozmann’s translation.

However, Benzmann contends that Dante’s admittedly historical rootedness in the Catholic Middle Ages kept him, as Benzmann now seems to reverse himself, from having a direct impact on German poets.

¹⁷The word carries echoes of the accusation in the pre-war controversy over whether Catholic scholars were capable of *voraussetzungslos*, or impartial, scholarship, a controversy still very much alive in 1921. See Willy Hellpach, “Die katholische Kulturoffensive und der politische Katholizismus,” *Die neue Merkur* 1 (1924–1925): 363–74.

The world of the Catholic Middle Ages was shaped by a grand European synthesis in which Germany itself did not share. The *Divine Comedy* was “the highest poetic revelation of the Gothic, romantic-Germanic spirit,” the amalgam that defined Dante’s medieval world. Its poetry represents a marriage of the classical spirit with southern European culture, a union of Latinity (*Lateinertum*) with the Christian Gothic perception of the world. (Italy itself plays no role in Benzmann’s account.) Neither Dante’s poetry nor his values could have been created in Germany at that time; Germany was too limited by its Gothic sensibility, and, he implies, too isolated from the rest of Europe, particularly from the Mediterranean. Benzmann, however, resolves the contradiction between Dante’s impact on Germany and its poets, on the one hand, and its isolation from Germany, on the other, by insisting on Dante’s German blood. Dante, he almost offhandedly assumes, was *German*; he was a “*Genius*” whose ancestors were “Germanic,” a claim made by many another German nationalist. His deep-seated inherited German sensibility was made fertile (*befruchtet*) by the fullness of southern, Mediterranean romance culture (*südländische romanische Kultur*). This union of Dante’s “exceptionally gifted” personal and German “*Genius*” (he could have just as easily used the word *Volksseele*) with the conditions of Mediterranean culture was responsible for the enormous world-historical synthesis in his great poem. This is the closest Benzmann comes to resolving the contradiction of a Dante who was both German and Catholic, a combination with which Benzmann seems uneasy, and for which there is no easy unpacking.

“DANTE UND DEUTSCHLAND”

Benzmann undertakes a very different approach to Dante in a brief article with a similar title, “Dante und Deutschland,” which came out only a few weeks after “Dante in Deutschland” in another conservative outlet, the *Rheinisch-Westfälische Zeitung*,¹⁸ a nationalistic paper published in industrial Essen, and controlled by heavy industry, and with strong ties to the ultra-nationalist anti-Semitic Pan-German League.¹⁹ Benzmann uses the brief space allotted to him to emphasise a direct connection

¹⁸Hans Benzmann, “Dante und Deutschland,” *Rheinisch-Westfälische Zeitung* (13 Sept 1921), n.p.

¹⁹See Jeffrey Verhey, *The Spirit of 1914: Militarism, Myth, and Mobilization in Germany* (New York: Cambridge, 2000), 19.

between Dante and Germany. He begins with the assertive claim that Dante was in fact German. Dante's name and background, for example, betray his German origins. Alighieri emanates from the German name Aldiger, a name which represents Dante's fundamental kin relationship with Germany. It is not accidental that his ancestor Cacciaguido was a follower of the Hohenstaufen Kaiser Konrad III. A family, or blood tie, to Germany again suggests that Benzmann thinks of Dante as having a German *Volksseele*.

Indeed, Dante's German origins are consistent, in Benzmann's gross distortion of Dante's biography, with his lifelong sympathy with the Ghibellines (not historically accurate), for which he was expelled from Florence (not historically accurate). However much we might now think of Guelf and Ghibelline as Italian parties, Dante was a Ghibelline, Benzmann points out, in the original German sense: for legal constitutional reasons (*staatsrechtliche Gründen*) he advocated world monarchy under the German Kaiser in the *De monarchia*, that is, against papal claims. He continually hoped that the German Kaiser would be able to pacify and unify his country torn by internecine war. This view was based not just on political reasoning, but stemmed from a deep feeling (*Empfinden*) of a (i.e., *völkisch*) affinity for Germany consistent with the idea of a *Volksseele*. "A strain of elemental unconscious kinsman-like sympathy [*verwandtschaftliche Sympathie*] for Germany runs through Dante's entire life, works, and creativity," he asserts.

There are no ambiguities or dissonances here between Dante's Germanness and his surroundings. Benzmann repeats much of the same material from his earlier article as he traces the line of interest and influence of Dante in Germany through his political thought in the *De monarchia* and through the poetry of the *Divine Comedy*. Dante's German influence, in Benzmann's account, has come not only through German humanism and romanticism, but also through Protestantism, a reference to the widespread claim in Germany that Dante anticipated Protestantism. Through these routes, Benzmann concludes, Dante's strong artistic, psychological, and spiritual influence both directly and indirectly influenced the poetic form and world view of German poets. To commemorate Dante is to claim his art as the common property of German poetry, once again, the true measure of his influence. Catholic dogma, the Catholic Middle Ages, the Catholic world view, contemporary Catholic Dante exegetes have all disappeared in this article which "remembers" Dante's unimpeded and unambiguous influence in Germany and on German poets.

“WAS BEDEUTET DANTE FÜR UNS?”

Benzmann's third essay for the Dante commemoration, “Was bedeutet Dante für uns?” (What Does Dante Mean for Us?), came out the same September in the liberal Berlin paper *Die Gegenwart* (The Present), subtitled *Wochenschrift für Literatur, Kunst und öffentliches Leben* (A Weekly for Literature, Art and Public Life),²⁰ (Benzmann 1921b, 274–276) and which addressed a cultured, *bürgerlich-demokratisch* readership that opposed fascism and National Socialism.²¹ Here, even in this liberal paper, Benzmann takes the next step to explicitly dissociate Dante from Catholicism, implicitly discrediting the Catholic reading of Dante, and in effect rejecting the claims of the rival Catholic commemoration of Dante, as if repudiating the Catholic context he uncomfortably tried to incorporate in his first article.

Benzmann begins with a common trope of the sexcentenary, namely that Dante's poetry provides an effective antidote to the post-war malaise by raising religious consciousness. While religion has receded to the private realm and interest has been directed mostly to practical and material matters of “politics, food shortages, and inflation” in “this catastrophic time” (*die einheilvolle Zeit*), the growing enthusiasm for Dante on this anniversary of his death has stimulated a completely unpredictable moral and religious “upsurge” (*Erhebung*).²² The reason for this spiritual stirring, he proposes, is that Dante fills a void, an absence of an ideal, and a consequent “desire of European humanity” for “a unified positive world view,” expressed in feelings of “religious exaltation” (*religiöse Erhebung*),²³ echoing Ploetz's view of Benzmann's own *Evangelienharmonie*. Benzmann repeats his view of Dante's embodiment of European geographic and mental synthesis and universalism in the *Divine Comedy*, even praising Latinity over Germanness for its freer individual life of the soul.²⁴

²⁰Hans Benzmann, “Was bedeutet Dante für uns?” *Die Gegenwart* 50 (September 1921), 274–76.

²¹See the Harald Fischer Verlag web page on digitalised manuscripts at: www.haraldfischer-verlag.de/hfv/KLP/gegenwart.php.

²²Benzmann, “Was bedeutet Dante für uns?,” 274.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Ibid.

Benzmann here too considers the European synthesis of the *Divine Comedy*, “the universal hymn of the triumphant Catholic Church,” to be the product of the Catholic Middle Ages.²⁵ He refers to the Catholic position that Dante’s power stems from bestowing poetic form on “the inherited treasure of [Catholic] belief,” which it shapes into a “powerful unity and coherence of spiritual consciousness.” This consciousness is objectified in the “monumentality and discipline of artistic form” derived from Catholic faith, which enabled Dante to frame the world view of the Church at the very moment of the waning of the Middle Ages. Benzmann applies the same intersection of the historical and the timeless on the model of the woodcuts that illustrate the *Evangelienharmonie*, except that here the historical context is Catholic. The Catholic Middle Ages are the starting point for understanding the *Divine Comedy* in its own time as “a representation of its age and its people, its struggles, its sins and exaltations,”²⁶ but at the same time, the historical moment in which the poem is rooted also submerges (*taucht*) it in the “timeless depth of everything human,”²⁷ and thus provides the source of all spiritual values. Its powerful desire for redemption and transcendence, its human triumph and greatness, are kept alive by allowing it to “flow as an immeasurable, mystic, aesthetic stream into modern poetry” and into the present.²⁸

How Dante’s influence is transmitted from the Catholic Middle Ages to the German modern is the underlying problem of the article that will require Benzmann to seriously qualify the significance of Dante’s Catholicism. In one of his typical reversals, Benzmann ultimately sees Dante’s Catholicism as an obstacle to this flow into the present. The sole emphasis of Catholic scholars on the *Divine Comedy* as a major summing up of the religious, intellectual, and cultural forces of the closing Catholic Middle Ages, he charges, may have made Dante a living poet for believing Catholics, but only through a narrow understanding of Dante that excessively and parochially focuses on the Scholastic philosophy of his time.²⁹ While he expresses respect for Catholic Dante interpreters and translators

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Ibid., 276.

²⁹Ibid., 275. Benzmann here refers to articles by Ludwig Gorm and Max Fischer which appeared in the prestigious *Das literarische Echo* (1 September 1921). Both Gorm and Fischer were Jews who converted to Catholicism.

like Zoozmann, Sauter, Jakubczyk, Karl Federn, and Engelbert Krebs, he disparages the notion that the *Divine Comedy* must be regarded as a compendium of its Catholic medieval culture because it cannot explain how the historical can be transcended and how the time-bound can become timeless to reach the present day. Catholic readers and expositors cannot see “*was für uns Dante bedeutet*” (what Dante means for us) because there is one essential dimension of Dante’s poetry they do not recognise—that it breaks with the Middle Ages and heralds modernity.

Benzmann appeals to a common view that, just as Dante absorbed the entire culture of the Middle Ages, so too he was responsible for the birth of modernity. Dante’s enormous poetic energies lie at the fault line of two eras, a passing older period, the Middle Ages, and a dawning new modern era. The religious, moral, artistic, and purely human energies of his personality derive from these overlapping eras, according to Benzmann. Most important, Dante’s modernity lies in his unprecedented portrayal of the emergence of the individual human being (*Einzel mensch*). Benzmann memorialises Dante as the modern poet who, above all, represents the emotions and spiritual passions of the self-contained individual, with all his experiences, inner conflicts, and exaltations, like the Jesus of his *Evangelienharmonie*. A personal human life appears here for the first time in an individual form in an “eternally modern style.”³⁰ The recognition of the living individual in modern form is the necessary condition of Dante’s impact in the present. Moreover, if the Latin European tradition of Dante’s time surpassed the *Germanentum* of the time as an influence in Dante’s poetry, Benzmann implies that the modernity into which Dante emerged was a German modernity.

Catholic readers fail to notice this entire modern dimension in Dante in part because of their strict allegorical interpretation. Catholic interpreters insist, for example, that Beatrice is a purely spiritual representation rather than an actual individual who once had an earthly manifestation in order to preserve her for Catholics of all time as a saintly figure. Such a view, however, prevents Catholics from seeing Dante’s formal achievement of combining lived experience with a guiding idea, an achievement, Hugo Daffner claimed, Dante shared with Goethe³¹; the

³⁰ Benzmann, “Was bedeutet Dante für uns?,” 275.

³¹ The reference is to Hugo Daffner, “Goethe und Dante,” *Dante-Jahrbuch* 5 (1920): 166–72.

Catholic view of Beatrice eternally objectifies her and precludes a subjective identification with her as an individual such as Benzmann the poet experienced for himself and communicated to his readers in his own *modernist* portrait of Jesus in the *Evangelienharmonie* as an eternal prototype with whom he could connect as an individual. In effect, Benzmann concludes that because of doctrinal habits and parochial needs, the Church prevents Catholics from the readerly negotiations necessary to make Dante a living figure. Catholics cannot, in the terms we have been using, “remember” Dante. In this manner, Benzmann’s commemoration of Dante performs a very typical marginalisation of the Catholic dimension in his work.

MARTIN FASSBENDER

Martin Fassbender (1856–1935) was Benzmann’s Catholic counterpart. His one article written for the Dante commemoration asks, in a familiar title that echoes Benzmann’s, “Was soll uns Heutigen Dante sein?” (What Should Dante Be for Us Today?). The article came out a month before Benzmann’s “Was bedeutet Dante für uns?” and the similarity of title and content raises the tempting possibility that Benzmann was writing in response to Fassbender. Whether or not this was so, both their views were common at the time; Benzmann represents a frequently stated fortress of opinion that Catholic writers tried to breach following Benedict’s call for a Dante celebration. Fassbender’s article appeared in the *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*³²; he signed his byline “Geh.[eimrat] Regierungsheimrat Prof. Dr. Martin Fassbender,” referring to his position in the Catholic Centre Party, and as professor at the Landwirtschaftliche Hochschule (Agricultural College) of the Friedrich Wilhelm University in Berlin. His work evinces no interest in literary culture; his interest in Dante has more to do with Catholic polemics. His contribution to the sixcentenary is deeply rooted in his work as an important and well-known Catholic publicist recognized for combating anti-Catholic prejudice and credited for his role in persuading that the

³²Martin Fassbender, “Was soll uns Heutigen Dante sein?,” *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* 321(12 July 1921): n.p.

Catholic world view, once considered obsolete, be taken seriously³³ (See Preuss). He played a leading role in Catholic life in Berlin.³⁴ He argued for the rights of Jesuits against their exclusion in newly unified Germany; he denied that the Jesuit order was founded to root out Protestants, and defended Jesuits against charges of intolerance.³⁵ His professional interests focused on such matters as financial and social economics,³⁶ the rural cooperative movement,³⁷ and population policy and public health.³⁸ He established a chair of homeopathy at Berlin's Friedrich Wilhelm University, and he embraced a state-run eugenics program, together with a leading Jesuit, Hermann Muckermann, whose brother, Friedrich Muckermann, also coincidentally spoke out during the sixcentenary for Dante as a Catholic world-view poet. Unlike Benzmann, Fassbender did not come to the Dante commemoration with a literary background, but as a Catholic apologist responding to Benedict's encyclical.

"WAS SOLL UNS HEUTIGEN DANTE SEIN?"

Fassbender supplies the answer to the question posed by the title of his article only in its very last lines: Dante provides an antidote to the materialism "in which the humanity of the present day is sunk," a view shared by members of all religions who participated in the sixcentenary commemoration. But to reach that simple conclusion, he divides German writing about Dante according to confession. As Benzmann begins with

³³See Arthur Preuss, "F.W. Foerster and his Attitude toward the Catholic Church," *Fortnightly Review* 29, no. 15 (1922): 283.

³⁴Bettina Blessing, *Pathways of Homoeopathic Medicine: Complex Homoeopathy in its Relationship to Homoeopathy, Naturopathy and Conventional Medicine* (Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer Verlag, 2011), 75n663.

³⁵Róisín Healy, "Religion and Civil Society: Catholics, Jesuits, and Protestants in Imperial Germany," *Paradoxes of Civil Society: New Perspectives on Modern German and British History*, ed. Frank Trentmann (New York: Berghahn Books, 2000), 255.

³⁶Blessing, *Pathways of Homoeopathic Medicine*, 75, 75n663.

³⁷See David Peal, "Anti-Semitism by Other Means? The Rural Cooperative Movement in Late 19th Century Germany," in *Hostages of Modernization: Studies on Modern Antisemitism, 1870–1933/39*, ed. Herbert A. Strauss, vol. 1 (New York: W. de Gruyter, 1993), 144n46. See also Martin Fassbender, *F.W. Raiffeisen in seinem Leben, Denken und Wirken: im Zusammenhange mit der Gesamtentwicklung des neuzeitlichen Genossenschaftswesens in Deutschland* (Berlin: P. Parey, 1902).

³⁸Blessing, *Pathways of Homoeopathic Medicine*, 75n663.

Catholic Dante commentators, Fassbender begins, using similar respectful gestures, with remarks about four Protestant commentators, two contemporaries, the leading academic liberal Protestant thinkers, Adolf von Harnack and Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923), and two earlier figures, Karl Hilty (1833–1909) and Paul Pochhammer (1841–1916). He reports admiringly on the sexcentenary memorial addresses of Harnack and Troeltsch, two harsh critics of Catholicism, who present Dante as a model for the moral and spiritual reconstruction of Germany in its distress after the war. He quotes Harnack’s injunction not to despise the Catholic Middle Ages, but to be grateful for its establishment of European ideals, cultivation, education, and culture. In Fassbender’s account, Harnack appeals to the unifying force of the Middle Ages (he does not mention the Catholic Church) embodied in the unified form of Dante’s great poem. “It is becoming increasingly clear, particularly in the present time of our distress [*Not*]” as Fassbender summarises Harnack, that we must rebuild, with “new means,” a “social container filled with appealing contents” (*soziales Gefäß mit köstlichen Inhalt*) as strong as that of the Middle Ages “so that our people [*Volk*] can achieve form, unity, and power.” The “new means,” which Fassbender does not explain, is presumably Harnack’s own *Kulturprotestantismus*. Fassbender further reports that Troeltsch proposed that the meaning of the *Divine Comedy* lies in the theme that all of life is a purification (*Läuterung*, the word commonly used to translate *Purgatorio*). Purification from worldly pride is the ethical demand of our temporal existence on the way to inwardness and to overcoming worldliness with Christian mysticism and love. Such purification is achieved through the connection of ancient tradition with the deepest reverence for history. Fassbender appears here to register Troeltsch’s reverence for the medieval Catholic tradition from which Dante arose. Troeltsch himself distinguished the ancient tradition of (pre-Reformation) Catholicism as a source of European unity with what he considered a less than admirable modern Catholicism.³⁹ His own recommendation for contemporary European unity—the League of Nations—could not be further removed from the Catholic Church.

³⁹See Ernst Troeltsch, “Der Berg der Läuterung: Rede zur Erinnerung an den 600jährigen Todestag Dantes gehalten im Auftrage des Ausschusses für eine deutsche Dantefeier am 3. Juli 1921 in der Staatsoper in Berlin” (Berlin: E.S. Mittler & Sohn, 1921).

Fassbender does not explicitly acknowledge the low opinion held by both Harnack and Troeltsch of contemporary Catholicism.

Similarly, the claim that Dante's poetry had meaning for all Germans, even into the present, Fassbender recognises, was made by both Hilty and Pochhammer. The latter's pre-war translation, a product of his rejection of the prejudice that Dante is accessible only to the learned, had recently appeared in a new posthumous edition in honour of the six-centenary. Hilty, a Swiss German Protestant philosopher, claimed that contemporary readers of Dante's poetry would find that it strengthened the ethical power (*sittliche Kraft*) that could act as a guide (*Führerin*) to a noble life, and that it could even be a guidepost (*Wegweiser*) to Christianity for non-Christian idealists. Pochhammer too treated the *Divine Comedy* as a poetic solution to present-day life problems. Pochhammer's view of Dante cut across all confessions. According to such views, divorced from Dante's specifically Catholic background, Fassbender skeptically remarks, understanding the *Divine Comedy* requires only an open mind for the true, the good, and the beautiful. It requires only an openness to the poem's teaching that true happiness on earth can only be found in the harmonious cooperation of the two souls that abide in every human breast and are symbolically represented by Dante's Virgil as human knowledge and Beatrice as heavenly longing.

Fassbender grants that such views are valid as a basis for Dante commemoration for non-Catholic circles looking for contemporary significance in Dante. As Benzmann criticises the Catholic reading of Dante as too parochial, Fassbender considers this ethical reading of Dante, whether Protestant or non-denominational, as a diluted rendering divorced from Dante's most authentic meaning. He reminds the reader of the foremost role the Catholic Church has played, longer and more fervently than Protestant expositors, in proclaiming Dante's greatness for all peoples in all times, especially since the time of the last three popes: Leo XIII (served from 1878–1903), Pius X (1903–1914), and Benedict XV (1914–1922). He calls particular attention to Benedict's encyclical declaring Dante a prophet for all time, even for us today, and praises him for calling for a Dante commemoration, which has been answered the world over, implicitly giving him credit for the larger six-centenary celebration. This universal appeal of Dante, that is, must be understood within the Catholic Church, the genuine institution of universalism. The Church, he claims, through the Dante Committee of the Görresgesellschaft, the German Catholic cultural society, was the first to

see the importance of Dante beyond confessional partisanship; Dante's unifying vision is the Catholic vision, not the liberal Protestant vision implied, for example, by Harnack's "new means." How far Dante memory extends into the past is part of the Dante memory rivalry. Fassbender must in fact get around the reality that the Church's claim on Dante is recent and that the assertion that it long championed the poet is not accurate. Fassbender can only trace a restored relationship to the late nineteenth century, to the time of Leo XIII when Dante was taken off the Index. He cannot trace the relationship back, as Benzmann does, to any tradition between the fourteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Fassbender's case for Dante's Catholicity rests on the German Catholic theologian and apologist Franz Hettinger, a domestic prelate in the household of Leo XIII whose work on Dante and the *Divine Comedy* spanned from 1876 to 1888. Hettinger, according to Fassbender, convincingly demonstrated that Dante is "the first born poet of the Church [who] most inwardly adhered to the great Scholastic masters." Fassbender does not address the causes of the Church's hostility to Dante over the centuries—his anti-papal attitude in the *De monarchia* and the *Divine Comedy*. He relies instead on Hettinger's retroactive connection between Dante and the Catholic Scholastic philosophers to argue that Dante was doctrinally orthodox all along. For Fassbender, Hettinger represents strong German support for a Dante entirely explicable through the theologians of the Catholic Middle Ages, a position asserted in Benedict's encyclical, which proclaimed the essential connection between Dante and Church doctrine. The notion, widely discussed, perhaps most famously by T.S. Eliot, that one had to understand and even share Dante's belief to fully appreciate his poetry was predicated on the view that Dante was theologically orthodox,⁴⁰ an assumption that was not always accepted in Dante's own day. Dante was denounced as a heretic even shortly after his death. Accordingly, Fassbender, professor of public health, cannot not go far beyond an apologetic reading of Dante's poetry as Catholic dogma in poetic form; Fassbender reads Dante institutionally, as it were, through the connection made by the papacy to medieval theology. He characteristically states the Catholic case by affirming, first, Dante's orthodoxy, and then the timeless—not the historical—significance of Scholastic philosophy for Dante; hence the

⁴⁰T.S. Eliot, *Dante* (London: Faber & Faber, 1929), 57–60.

supreme contemporary significance of Dante the Catholic poet-thinker in a spiritually ailing Germany. As Fassbender understands it, Hettinger made Dante's reliance on Scholastic philosophy a core issue in determining how to read Dante.

With the combined reconsideration of Dante's orthodoxy by Benedict and the proof of that claim by Hettinger, a German historian close to the pope, Fassbender links Dante remembrance to Germany's post-war reconstruction. "In the difficult times in which we are living" (*schwere Zeitläuften, die wir durchleben*), an institutional, doctrinal reading of Dante's poetry must result in a spiritual experience and a great (personal) event (*geistiges Erlebnis grosses Ereignis*) in which Dante becomes a teacher of the Christian life. (One thinks of Max Fischer's conversion).⁴¹ Fassbender warns against the merely aesthetic enjoyment of magnificent poetry because he wants to undercut not only the secular academic study of Dante, but also to assert the quintessentially Catholic source of Dante's Christian teachings, the great Scholastic masters, who, far from being an obstacle, are the very vehicle of his impact on post-war Germany.⁴² Fassbender attributes powers to Dante's poeticised Catholic doctrine that rival the claims made by Benzmann, Harnack, and Troeltsch. Dante affects us in the present through the power of the Church's teachings. To remember Dante is to remember he is Catholic, and to remember he is Catholic is to be spiritually nourished by the Church in these "difficult times."

Moreover, Fassbender understands the "inner renewal" inspired by Dante's Catholic vision of life (*Lebensanschauung*) in a political sense. Inner renewal is connected to both a national and international dimension. Here he moves into Benzmann's discursive world of *Heimat*. Inner renewal in the individual establishes the correct bond between genuine love of *Heimat* and true humanity (*Menschtum*), a word often used

⁴¹Fischer refers to his conversion from Judaism to Catholicism in terms similar to those used here by Fassbender. Max Fischer, "Bekenntnis zu Dante," *Das Literarische Echo* 23 (1921): 1413–14. See Gershom Scholem, *From Berlin to Jerusalem: Memories of My Youth*, trans. Harry Zohn (1980; repr. Phila: Paul Dry Books, 2012), 75, for his reaction to Fischer's conversion. See above for Benzmann's use of Fischer as a negative example of how to understand Dante.

⁴²The only professional academic Dante scholar Fassbender mentions is Karl Vossler, a Protestant not particularly confessionally oriented in his writing, but who stressed the medieval context of Dante's work.

in Catholic apologetics to signify the universal rather than the national commitment of the Church, which just as often brought suspicion of lack of commitment to the primacy of Germanness. National *Heimat* within the universal Church is the correct institutional arrangement for rebuilding the spiritual and moral world of our own people (*Volk*) while connecting peoples (*Völker*) to each other in the spirit of Christian love. Dante thus serves as a guide (*Führer*) for the salvation of the individual soul at the same time as a guide out of the “labyrinth of the European collapse.” Preempting Benzmann’s dialectic stemming from the German *Volksseele* and implicitly dismissing Troeltsch and Harnack’s post-Reformation surrogates for a universalism lost to the Church, Fassbender, the Centre Party member, sees the Catholic Church as the proper model for the connection between Germany and Europe, turning anti-Catholic suspicions of internationalism on their head. This political arrangement between individual, nation, and Europe is the meaning of the sixcentenary commemoration: it can be accomplished through “a worthy celebration of the memory [*Erinnerung*] of the 600 year anniversary of Dante’s death”; Dante must be remembered through immersion in the (i.e., Catholic) idea-world (*Ideenwelt*) of the gigantic Dantesque fantasy of his poetic portraits, not through aesthetic, artistic enjoyment of an admittedly glorious creation of one of the greatest poets of humanity. Fassbender in effect warns that if Dante is taken away from the Catholic ideas and theology underpinning those portraits, and if those ideas and theology do not become the centre of the German reader’s attention, the appreciation of Dante will be trivial and Dante’s uplifting impact on the defeated nation will be negligible. The Dante memory celebration is the occasion for Fassbender, a representative of the Catholic Centre Party, to claim a Catholic role in the political dimension of the spiritual inner reconstruction of Germany, and, beyond that, its relationship with other nations.

As for Benzmann, so too for Fassbender, the mark of Dante’s importance for us today should be felt in his anachronic contemporarisation through *Nachdichtung*. Fassbender expresses particular glee at the appearance, in celebration of the German Dante *Gedächtnistag* (memorial day), of the poetic adaptation of Siegfried von der Trenck (1882–1951), *Das Ewige Lied. Dantes Divina Commedia, durch Versenkung und Eingebung wiedergeboren* (The Eternal Song: Dante’s Divine Comedy, Reborn through Immersion and Inspiration) (1921). Enthusiastically referring to von der Trenck’s (unelaborated) comments

on Dante's contemporary significance delivered in a lecture in Berlin,⁴³ Fassbender pointedly admires his ability to make a deep experience of Dante's poetry accessible, not just to the learned, but to all "without the time-consuming study of learned annotations (*Anmerkungen*), which are not to everyone's taste." Most important, von der Trenck's adaptation is effective because he has "the wonderful ability to empathise [*Einfühlungsvermögen*] as a Protestant with the Catholic psyche of the Middle Ages." He quotes a passage from von der Trenck's *Paradiso* to illustrate the point. Fassbender in effect makes the argument that other Catholic writers would make: to fully understand and be affected by Dante's poetry during this *Gedächtnistag*, one must "remember," or contemporise, Dante by adopting the Catholic viewpoint.

Benzmann and Fassbender are but two examples of the rivalry for the *Errinerung* of a contemporised past in the *Gedächtnisfeier* on the anniversary of Dante's death carried on in commemorative articles for the occasion. The two writers represent two competing communities constructing conflicting memories of the same historical figure in order for each writer to claim his community's greater significance in the present state of German affairs. Each claims to possess the true memory of Dante in order to be the true agent of spiritual and moral reconstruction after the war. Benzmann does not represent a particular organised community; he speaks for a general German tradition that almost takes for granted that Dante belongs to Germany and Protestantism. Fassbender, on the other hand, does represent a newly organised German Catholic cultural community that is using the *Gedächtnisfeier* to remember Dante in several senses. This community is "remembering" a Dante from whom its institution, the Church, had long been separated: Dante was a figure whom it had long neglected or ignored. In a sense, it was reclaiming through commemorative celebration a Dante it had never really laid claim to; the Church more accurately "re-membered" than "remembered" Dante. Accordingly, Benzmann and Fassbender present contending memorial histories of the German connection to Dante, but each must find a way to "remember" the Catholic history of Dante, a

⁴³Von der Trenck gave a similar lecture in Weimar: "Vortrag: Dante Alighieri, Dr. Siegfried von der Trenck (Berlin), a. G.," in the *Morgenfeier Dante Alighieri*, Weimar, Deutsches Nationaltheater (Sunday, 16 October 1921) and contributed an article on Dante, "Genie und Heiligkeit: zum Verständnis der 'Divina Commedia'," in *Weimarer Blätter* 3, no. 9 (1921): n.p.

history problematic for each writer in different ways. Benzmann, taking on a view common with those for whom Germany is inherently tied to Protestantism, keeps Dante in the German fold by “remembering” Dante’s Catholicism out of significance when he claims that Dante himself left his Catholicism behind in his role as midwife to modernity. Fassbender, a Catholic engaged in the project of returning Dante back to the Catholic fold away from the tradition represented by Benzmann, must “remember” Dante’s Catholicism through a nineteenth-century scholar who, because the Church in fact rejected, or abandoned, Dante for centuries, retrospectively connected Dante’s theology centuries back.

How this extra-academic memory rivalry made its way into the academic discourse of Romance philology remains to be explored. The connection between Dante’s poetry and his theology in fact became one of the foremost issues of academic debate. Perhaps most notably, Erich Auerbach, who also began writing about Dante in 1921 (1005–1006), successfully established the widely accepted scholarly position that Dante’s theology is an essential part of his poetry⁴⁴; he argued this position against his friend Benedetto Croce and against his University of Berlin antagonist Eduard Wechsler. The issue continued to be a matter of contention well into the late twentieth century and beyond.⁴⁵ Not well known, however, is that Auerbach’s philological position comes out of the rival sexcentenary memory discourse, a synthesis of the Catholic apologetic stance and the views of his mentor, Troeltsch.

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⁴⁴See Teodolinda Barolini, *The Undivine Comedy: Detheologizing Dante* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

⁴⁵Erich Auerbach, “Zur Dantefeier,” *Neue Rundschau* 32 (1921), 1005–6.

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Traumatic Memory and the Ethical, Political and
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