

Dante, Aquinas, and the Roots of the Modern Aesthetization of Reality

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When a philosopher with the stature of Nietzsche can seriously ask: “Why couldn’t the world *that concerns us*—be a fiction?”¹ we are dealing with what one might call the “aesthetization of reality.” Whereas before the ancient philosophers were concerned with reality as a world of nature, a world that brought itself into existence and could be known through the highest human endeavor of a receptive *theoria*, the modern “aesthetization” of reality knows only what it has itself made, and the aesthetic contemplation of reality is more akin to a painter contemplating his painting than an astronomer contemplating the stars. Whereas in the ancients the relation to reality was that of the knower and the known, in the moderns it is the relation of the poet or audience to a poem. If we recall what was already in Plato’s own day the “ancient quarrel between the poets and the philosophers,” we might say that the poets have now won that quarrel; and that what goes along with that victory is the ascendancy of fiction over reality, lying over truth, and making over knowing. How was that quarrel decided? How did the poets, who since Plato’s day seemed roundly defeated, finally end up victorious? Did they win all at once, with a sudden reversal? Or was this more a gradual affair where the battle was perhaps subtly lost early on, with victory becoming manifest only later as small losses accumulated into a final and wholesale rout? The latter, I believe, may well be what happened. Possibly, right after the highest flowering of philosophy in the Middle Ages, a poet came along who planted the seeds of its eventual defeat, seeds that would manifest their fruit only centuries later. The poet I am speaking of is Dante, and the philosopher he may

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Helen Zimmern, ed. Walter Kaufmann (Mineola, New York: Dover, 1997), #34, p. 26.

well have used as his Trojan Horse to bring down philosophical ascendancy was Thomas Aquinas. Nevertheless, what may well have made this defeat possible was that Aquinas was also a believer, a Christian believer, who believed that the one Poet and creator of everything that was, is, and will be, also became a man and dwelled among us. Perhaps ultimately the quarrel had been decided long before, and Dante merely pushed it along towards its conclusion and fundamental quarrel—who will be poet here, us or God?

But let us back up a bit. To begin this investigation we must remember what Aquinas claimed regarding Holy Scripture. In the last article of the first question in his *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas takes up directly the distinctive nature of Holy Scripture. The heart of what he says is found in the following quotation from St. Gregory:

St. Gregory declares that *Holy Scripture transcends all other sciences by its very style of expression, in that one and the same discourse, while narrating an event, transmits a mystery as well.*²

Unique among all ways of knowing, in Holy Scripture we find that “one and the same” discourse, by narrating an “event,” opens us up to the possibility that it may also be transmitting a mystery. In other words, there is something about the very nature of biblical discourse that allows it to transcend all other sciences, both practical and theoretical, if and only if, God is its author. The “style” opens up this possibility; but as we shall see, it is not the style but rather its “Stylist” that moves it from being a possibility to an actuality that transcends all other sciences.

Aquinas bases this entire article on the belief in God as the author of Holy Scripture, and the effect that belief has on interpreting its meaning. As he puts it in his reply: “That God is the author of Holy Scripture should be acknowledged”; or again later: “Now because the literal sense is that which the author intends, and the author of Holy Scripture is God who comprehends everything all at once in his understanding, it comes not amiss, as St. Augustine observes, if many meanings are present even in the literal sense of one passage of Scripture.”³ In other words, the problem of interpreting the meaning of Scripture is a problem that can only be solved by attending to the role of its author; and yet this attention to its author, or poet, is nothing less than the attention to the poet required in all comedies.⁴ The inter-

² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, ed. Thomas Gilby, O.P. (Garden City, New York: Image Books, 1969), I, q.1, a. 10.

³ *Summa Theologiae* I, a. 10, ad 1.

⁴ The pre-eminent role of the “poet” in his reflexive relation to the audience is developed in my unpublished dissertation “Comedy and Tragedy and their Central Importance to Philosophy and Theology,” Boston College, 1994.

pretative move to a transcendent author, then, does not overthrow or subvert the literal sense but is rather based upon and arises out of it. Scripture requires of any reader first and foremost a good reading; and it is that reading of its literal and comic sense that demands of us readers that we answer the question as to who its real poet is. For it is only in answering this question, even if we answer that it could not be God, that we can gain full access to its meaning. In typical comic reciprocity, the question as to the poet is equally a question as to the audience. It is only in this full circuit, then, this self-conscious-because-comic-circuit, that the full sense of a comic discourse's meaning can be found.

Yet, because of the historiographical intent of the Scriptures, the comic, literal sense must also be connected with what Aquinas calls the "historical" sense of Scripture. The way Aquinas explains the meaning of these juxtaposed terms is to set them off from what he calls the "spiritual senses" of Scripture. The literal and historical sense, he says, is the power of adapting words to convey meanings, a power that is no more nor less than the power of all human written and spoken discourse. Yet in addition to this power, there is the power of adapting "things themselves" to convey meanings, a power that is reserved to God alone. In speaking of Scripture, therefore, Aquinas says:

In every branch of knowledge words have meaning, but what is *special* here is that the things meant by the words also themselves mean something. The first meaning whereby the words signify things belongs to the sense first-mentioned, namely the historical or literal. The meaning, however, whereby the things signified by the words in their turn also signify other things is called the spiritual sense; it is based on and presupposes the literal sense.⁵

The "specialness" of Scripture is thus the specific qualities of its poet, and those qualities are the unique qualities of the poetic maker of the world who alone can fit things-to-things together in the world to make meaning; just as any human poet can put words-to-things (and presumably words-to-words) together to make meaning in his own verbal world. The fact that Scripture has both a literal and spiritual sense is thus a result of the nature of its poet, and not a quality of the poem itself.

But what of the poem itself? Is Aquinas here espousing a crude sort of literalism, with a one-to-one correspondence between words and things, thereby making God the only poet who has written anything interesting or worth reading? Not at all, for if we turn to his reply to an objection on the

⁵ *Summa Theologiae* I, a. 10, resp. (italics added).

parabolic sense, we will have a clear view of all that he includes under the literal sense. "The parabolic sense is contained in the literal sense, for words can signify something properly and something figuratively; in the last case the literal sense is not the figure of speech itself, but the object it figures."⁶ Aquinas goes on to give an example of what he means by this in the following: "When Scripture speaks of the arm of God, the literal sense is not that he has a physical limb, but that he has what it signifies, namely the power of doing and making."⁷ Now we have a better idea of what Aquinas could mean by the literal sense. For what this literal sense must include is the entire range of figurative meanings of the text (which would seem to include both the living and dead metaphors of language). This implies that the parabolic sense of Scripture is the norm rather than the exception, and that the literal sense includes the entire gamut of good readings with all their comic possibilities. On the other hand, it is only the spiritual sense that can include the actuality of meaning found in Aquinas's "Sacred Doctrine" and "articles of faith"; for this meaning can only flow from the reader's assent to the literal claim that God, rather than any man or men, is in fact the comic poet behind this comic narrative.

The equation between the historical and literal sense in Scripture is therefore what opens up the believing reader to the vertical dimension of Auerbach's "figural interpretation,"⁸ for the trans-historical connection between "things and things" is at best only a literary conceit apart from faith. If that faith is presupposed, as it is in Aquinas's account of theology, then the grounding of Scripture in its initial historical and literal sense also allows for the three spiritual senses described in the following:

Now this spiritual sense is divided into three. For, as St. Paul says, *The Old Law is the figure of the New*, and the New Law itself, as Dionysius says, *is the figure of the glory to come*. Then again, under the New Law the deeds wrought by our Head are signs also of what we ourselves ought to do.

Well then, the allegorical sense is brought into play when the things

⁶ *Summa Theologiae* I. q. 1, a. 10, ad 3.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ "Figural interpretation . . . establishes a connection between two events or persons in such a way that the first signifies not only itself but also the second, while the second involves or fulfills the first. The two poles of a figure are separated in time, but both, being real events or persons, are within temporality. They are both contained in the flowing stream which is historical life, and only the comprehension, the *intellectus spiritualis*, of their interdependence is a spiritual act" (Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis. The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask [Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1953], p. 73).

of the Old Law signify the things of the New Law; the moral sense when the things done in Christ and in those who prefigured him are signs of what we should carry out; and the anagogical sense when the things that lie ahead in eternal glory are signified.⁹

What all three of these spiritual senses have in common is the presupposition of an historical continuity between the concrete situation of the believing reader (belief is what makes them "spiritual," for faith is a spiritual rather than natural possibility) and the historical world enunciated in Scripture. Another way of putting this would be to say that if the reader believes his own concretely historical world to be part of the comic world described as beginning with the creation *ex nihilo* in Genesis and ending in the future with the new creation seen in the vision of Revelation, then the spiritual senses are no more than what flows from assenting to the historical and literal sense of Scripture as true. Nothing is added to what is already potentially there, other than the transformation of the reader himself to an already existing, yet for the reader, an altogether "new" reality. The "newness" of the New Law in the allegorical sense is thus part and parcel of the morally new covenant brought about by Christ and the anagogical new creation that will bring this story to full closure. The centerpiece to this entire circuit, however, is the historical life, rather than a mere narrative of the "head," Jesus Christ of Nazareth, who in his unique historical particularity ties in the narrative of the Old Testament with both the literal and concretely historical position of any given reader.

Consider this in the light of Umberto Eco's own account of why the literal and historical are combined in Aquinas.

But why should it be that the spiritual senses found in [S]cripture are not equally literal? The answer is that the biblical authors were not aware that their historical accounts possessed the senses in question. Scripture had these senses in the mind of God, and would have them later for those readers who sought in the Old Testament for a prefiguring of the New. But the authors themselves wrote under divine inspiration; they did not know what they were really saying. Poets, by contrast, know what they want to say and what they are saying. Poets therefore speak literally, even when they use rhetorical figures.¹⁰

Apart from the too historicized account of the historical meaning of Scripture, what Eco brings out well here is that the literal meaning of all other poetry besides the Bible, comic or tragic, is entirely literal even at the

⁹ *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 1, a. 10, resp.

¹⁰ Umberto Eco, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Hugh Bredin (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 154.

heights of its rhetorical and poetic force. Poets *as* poets do not, and cannot, write historically, and it is the Bible alone that makes the unique claim to be historical even while remaining poetic. Such a claim, of course, remains merely a "literal" claim, however unique or odd, if God is not in fact its poet and Jesus is not the Word of God that mediated all of creation.

There are thus two demands that must be distinguished in reading the Bible. The first is the demand to read it well and to discover the uniqueness of its comic narrative structure and the uniqueness of its literal claims to be also historical—a demand upon any reader, whatever his or her beliefs are. The second demand, dependent upon the first, is that the reader decide whether or not this poem's claim to be authored by God Himself is true; for it is only in the yes or no of that decision that the full circuit of meaning of this text can reach fruition, a fruition that fulfills the "historical" sense, so to speak, along with the spiritual sense.

If we turn to Dante at this point, what we find is a suspicious obscuring of these two distinctive demands. Initially, Dante lays out for us what he calls the "allegory of the poets" in contrast to what Aquinas has just described, which Dante calls the "allegory of the theologians." Not surprisingly, this description fits quite nicely into the way Aquinas describes the "parabolic sense":

[O]ne should know that writing can be understood and must be explained mainly in four senses. One is called the literal [and this is the sense that does not go beyond the letter of the fictive words, as are the fables of the poets. The other is called allegorical] and this is the sense that is hidden under the cloak of these fables, and it is a truth hidden under the beautiful lie, as when Ovid says that Orpheus tamed the wild beasts with his zither and caused the trees and stones to come to him; which signifies that the wise man with the instrument of his voice would make cruel hearts gentle and humble, and would make those who do not live in science and art do his will; and those who have no kind of life of reason in them are as stones. And the reason why this concealment was devised by wise men will be shown in the next to the last treatise. It is true that theologians understand this sense otherwise than do the poets; but since it is my intention here to follow after the manner of the poets, I take the allegorical sense as the poets are wont to take it.¹¹

This quotation is from Dante's *Convivio*, written well before his *Commedia*. In it we can see that his description of the allegory of the poets fits in

¹¹ Dante Alighieri, *Convivio*, quoted in Charles Singleton, *Dante's Commedia: Elements of Structure* (Baltimore, Maryland: The John Hopkins University Press, 1954), p. 85.

well with the immanent possibilities of human authorship, insofar as the words of the poets that refer to the events of their fables can also refer not to other things, but to the other meanings or "truths" hidden under the beautiful lie of the poets. At this point, then, there is no problem. The "beautiful lie" of the poets is subordinated to the knowledge of the wise man, and the example Dante gives of poetry in Ovid is very little different from how one might read the poetry of Plato's dialogues in relation to the philosophical truth that is esoterically conveyed through them. If we turn to another argument of Dante we can see how the problem arises.

This writing is the "Letter to Can Grande," composed while Dante was in the midst of writing his *Commedia*, and seemingly an account of how to read his new poem. Many have accounted this writing spurious, most convincingly for the problem we will see it presents, but there is now a greater consensus as to its genuineness. To see the problem, as you read, ask yourself whether he is here describing what he has earlier called the "allegory of the poets" or "the allegory of the theologians."

To elucidate, then, what we have to say, be it known that the sense of this work is not simple, but on the contrary it may be called polysemous, that is to say, "of more senses than one"; for it is one sense that we get through the letter, and another which we get through the thing the letter signifies; and the first is called literal, but the second allegorical or mystic. And this mode of treatment, for its better manifestation, may be considered in this verse: "When Israel came out of Egypt, and the house of Jacob from a people of strange speech, Judea became his sanctification, Israel his power." For if we inspect the letter alone, the departure of the children of Israel from Egypt in the time of Moses is presented to us; if the allegory, our redemption wrought by Christ; if the moral sense, the conversion of the soul from grief . . . if the anagogical, the departure of the holy soul from the slavery of corruption. . . . And although these mystic senses have each their special denominations, they may all in general be called allegorical, since they differ from the literal and historical. . . . [W]e must therefore consider the subject of this work [his *Commedia*] as literally understood, and then its subject as allegorically intended.¹²

What should leap out immediately from this account is its close modeling after the similar four senses of Scripture we have just seen in Aquinas. What should next be noted is the startling divergence from it. For in Dante's account we find no mention of what is all important in Aquinas—the complete dependence of the three spiritual senses upon the authorship of God. In Aquinas it is God alone who can connect "things to things" and

¹² Ibid., p. 87.

so make the allegorical, moral, and anagogical senses genuinely distinct from all the various figural meanings that could be included in the literal sense. Here, however, these spiritual senses are termed "mystic" or "allegorical" and then applied to the allegory intended in Dante's new poem. Is this, then, the old "allegory of the poets" of the *Convivio*, and not the "allegory of the theologians" found in Aquinas? If so, why would the example Dante uses to illustrate the various allegorical senses all be drawn from Scripture? His very choice of examples, drawing as they do from the possibility of connecting events to events, such as the departure of Israel from Egypt to the soul's redemption in Christ, would seem to apply to that possibility alone of connecting things disconnected in time and space that we find in an ever-present and omnipotent God of creation. Dante, you would think, should know better. What is he up to?

My contention is that Dante has, self-consciously or not, assimilated to himself the world-making powers of the Christian God. What we see here is Dante's radically new approach to poetry that gives to the poet divine powers unheard of in the pagan world. By taking up the prerogatives of Scripture, the poet assimilates himself to the world-making powers of the Christian God through a sleight of hand that simultaneously elevates the poet's creativity even while undermining the uniqueness of God's. Such a move is not at all surprising in light of the similar move made by the later Romantics, and the connection that Nietzsche draws between the murder of God and the transformation of reality into fiction would here find its primordial origin. But this sort of move is quite surprising in Dante, at the high-water mark of medieval piety and, seemingly, the poetic embodiment of Thomistic philosophy.

Nevertheless, something odd did seem to happen at this point. Erich Auerbach, in commenting on this and the following period, notes a significant transformation that he is nevertheless loath to blame on Dante. For even though "Dante's work remained almost without influence on the history of European thought; immediately after his death, and even during his lifetime, the structure of literary, cultured society underwent a complete change in which he had no part, the change from Scholastic to Humanistic thinking."¹³ Drawing upon the example of Petrarch, Auerbach points out how even though a mere forty years younger than him,

[H]e is distinguished from Dante above all by his new attitude toward his own person; it was no longer in looking upward . . . that Petrarch

¹³ Erich Auerbach, "The Survival and Transformation of Dante's Vision of Reality," in *Dante: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. John Freccero (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1954), p. 10.

expected to find self-fulfillment, but in the conscious cultivation of his own nature. Although far inferior to Dante in personality and natural endowment, he was unwilling to acknowledge any superior order or authority. . . . The autonomous personality, of which Petrarch was to be the first fully typical modern European embodiment, has lived in a thousand forms and varieties; the conception takes in all the tendencies of the modern age, the business spirit, the religious subjectivism, the humanism, and the striving for physical and technological domination of the world. . . . From Christianity, whence it rose and which it ultimately defeated, this conception inherited unrest and immoderation. These qualities led it to discard the structure and limits of Dante's world, to which, however, it owed the power of its actuality.¹⁴

What Auerbach points out here is the uniquely Christian, and yet anti-Christian, inheritance following on closely after Dante. "Secularized Christianity," the deliberate transformation and defanging of Christian doctrines into an immanent historical process, begun by Rousseau and attaining its high-water mark in Hegel, would thus seem no more than the full working out of a possibility built into the first Christian poetic epic and its author's account of what he is doing.

For what we have neglected until now is that Dante, the poet, is facing off not exactly with a philosopher, *à la* Plato, but with a theologian. And the reason Aquinas is finally a theologian rather than a philosopher is that he believes in a poetizing, which is to say creating, God who has created what was once termed "nature" (that which was earlier conceived as bringing itself into being), and who has also appeared in this, His own poem, and made manifest its central plot. Aquinas, in other words, has reconciled in his own mind the quarrel between the poets and the philosophers, but this reconciliation is only possible if God is the sole poet of both the natural things of nature and the human things of history and politics. To quarrel with the theologian rather than the philosopher, can now only take the shape of quarreling for philosophy against poetry and theology, or of quarreling for one poet against another, which is to say, of quarreling for human poetry in general against the one Poet of nature and Scripture. When Dante therefore takes on the prerogatives of the author of Scripture in his own authorship, and when Dante is the central character in his own poem who along with Virgil, Statius, and the eternal maker of the gates of hell, raises the question of poetic making with all its rivalry and educational ascendancy, we cannot help but ask the question of whether or not Dante has himself opened up the gates to a serious poetic rivalry with God.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

At this point, however, you may have grown impatient with my argument, and responded with what is essentially the argument of both Charles Singleton and Erich Auerbach. For their response is embodied in the words with which Singleton ends his famous essay on Dante, "The Two Kinds of Allegory." "And if you say: 'I do not believe that Dante ever went to the other world,' then I say that with those who deny what a poem asks to be granted, there is no further disputing."¹⁵ A poem, in other words, is meant to be "realistic," and so if it uses the realism of the Bible to graft on its own story, is not that itself a tribute to and continuation of the historical reality begun in the Biblical narrative? This, however, is exactly the problem. "Realism" is not reality. "Realism" and the "realistic" is something contrived to look like reality, but the contriver or poet is precisely he who stands between us and true reality. If the "as-if" quality of poetry is used to teach and illustrate historical reality, then history and reality will inevitably become no more than a species of human making wherein "realistic" will become the closest approximation to and finally one and the same with the real. Reality and history will become in their totality a fiction, and yet since there is no longer one poet responsible, this will be a fiction that, Nietzsche quite rightly proclaimed, has no author. But the reason this fiction we call "reality" has no author, the reason we now share in this common "aesthetization of reality," is that we no longer make the distinction between what a poet does when he makes a world, and the world that no one could make because it is made by the maker of creation and Scripture. Once we forget that making is not knowing, that we live in a world wherein all human making is a lie except God's own making in Scripture, then we have ourselves killed the God of Creation and Scripture through a violent act of usurpation. As Nietzsche says, "Lightning and thunder require time; the light of the stars requires time, deeds though done, still require time to be seen and heard."¹⁶ We have killed God long ago, but only now are beginning to see its full effects through our glorification of human creativity that follows apace with our denigration and hostility to the creator of Scripture.

It is no surprise, then, that any well-educated student today, particularly a graduate of a Catholic liberal arts college, is more likely to know something about Dante and the poetic world of his making, than the biblical world found in the Bible. This is not to say such a student has not studied the Bible. On the contrary, he or she has probably taken a required course

¹⁵ Singleton, *Dante's Commedia: Elements of Structure*, p. 94.

¹⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), #125, p. 181.

to both the Old and New Testaments. Yet what have they learned in those courses? The God who is their author? Or the "human, all too human" authors who poetically expressed their religious experience through their beautiful, but—admit it—not nearly as beautiful, poetry as Dante's. God is now, in fact, no longer the author of Scripture, and the graffiti of higher criticism that covers over his words are no less opaque than the blood that covers our own hands for the murder of that poet of all poets, the divine Logos through whom everything was made that has been made.