

DANTE AND AQUINAS

August 23, 2006
Fitzgerald Hall of Engineering 356

LECTURE 1: OVERTURE

Over the next few weeks we are going to wallow in the works of two authors who by common consent would make it into anyone's list of 100 Greatest, if not into the Top Ten. Indeed, for many, Dante is quite simply the poet of our culture. He can get endorsements from T.S. Eliot, Harold Bloom, Jacques Maritain and Patrick Gardner. As for Thomas, well, I am not alone in regarding him as Numero Uno in philosophy and theology.

Leo XIII, in his *Aeterni Patris* of 1879 (the year the Main Building burned down) commends Thomas because he was a veritable Summa of all that had gone before. In a similar way, Dante gathers into his outlook the vast tradition that had preceded him. "Tradition and the Individual Talent."

TWO MEDIEVAL ITALIANS

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), Dante Alighieri (1265-1321).

- *accessibility: language, temporal remoteness
- *the enormous mountain of scholarship

ANALOGY WITH SCRIPTURE

Dante would welcome this. . . the Bible has come down to us over the centuries, shepherded by those for whom it is the word of God

- *private interpretation. . . but even Jimmy Swaggert offers an expositor's Bible, with explanations larded among the sacred verses. . . Bible Study
- *scriptural interpretation
- *Thomas as commentator on Scripture
- *The two paths of theological training: Sentences, Sacred Scripture
- *Dante, as we will see, applied to the Comedy the techniques developed to divine the sense of Scripture. . . apart from the literal meaning, there are allegorical meanings (moral, anagogical. . .)

At the end of *La Vita Nuova*, Dante tells his reader that he will devote himself to study in order to write of Beatrice as no woman has ever been written of before. The first fruit of that study was a work called *Il Convivio* and in it Beatrice seems to have been replaced by Dame Philosophy. . . the work is unfinished. He turns to the Comedy and Beatrice is back.

A FANCIFUL CONJECTURE

The shock of graduate studies. You have responded to the great writings in your field, say that you like millions of others have been overwhelmed by reading Plato...you decide to continue your studies...suddenly the expansive domain

that attracted you is reduced to countless special problems, each of them requiring reading lots of earnest scholarship, and scholars have a way of disagreeing with one another...so you are pulled into this vortex...you may never emerge. Few would say—I will not say No one—that the point of such an author as Plato is to provide employment for Platonic scholars. But the vertigo the beginning graduate student feels arises from the practical suggestion that this is the case. You first read Plato in translation; now you must read him in Greek. There are seductive avenues already opening here, philology, the transmission of texts, variant readings. . . . Let us say that you succumb and your life is spent in the controversy over the chronology of the Dialogues. A century ago, it was de rigeur in Aristotelian studies to worry about the evolution of the Aristotelian corpus, and there were as many theories as there were theorists until ultimately a man named Zurcher claimed that Aristotle had actually been written by Theophrastus. You do not have to be Nietzsche to be amused by this.

*The case of Barker and the Politics.

*D.J. Allen and Marjorie Green.

Here is my conjecture. *Il Convivio* represents a time when Dante was in the grips of scholarship. True, he embarked on a work meant to make what he had learned accessible to those for whom Italian was their mother tongue, not the Latin of the scholar. No one would call *Il Convivio* a popular work, however... So I imagine Dante, deep in his effort, suddenly caught up short. Suddenly he becomes aware of the vast frieze of erudition that has intruded itself between him and his original intent. Think of him as a graduate student beset by melancholy as he imagines the decades ahead when he must maneuver through oceans of secondary literature in order to—in order to read the text. Perhaps in the privacy of his carrel he takes out a well-thumbed book. It has a plain brown paper dust jacket. He looks over his shoulder, he blots out the window in his door and then, almost furtively, begins to read—Plato. Not Platonic scholarship, but Plato. Imagine Dante tiring of his effort in *Il Convivio* to subject odes of his own to a scholarly interpretation. Like Melville embarking on his last novel *Billy Budd*, he recalls the dreams of his youth. He remembers what the point of all this was, at the end of *Vita Nuova*. He sets aside *Il Convivio*, never to return to it. Instead, he begins the *Comedy*.

END AND MEANS

Of course this is fanciful. Scholarship is meant to be at the service of the text. But it so easily becomes an end in itself. Criticism. Chesterton on Dickens. The arc that begins with a presumed love of Dickens, passes through reflections addressed to devotees of Dickens, and then returns them to the text, all this mean to enhance their appreciation of what they already love. There are of course annotated editions of Dickens, of Milton, of just about every author. Some authors do their own annotating, either in notes, e.g. *The Wasteland*, or internally, e.g. *Ulysses*, *Finnegans Wake*. Almost every edition of Dante comes accompanied by notes, maps, illustrations. . . this is certainly true of the

text we will be using. The advice to just read the poem through to attain a primary response is difficult to follow. One learns to be grateful for those notes. In translations they are pretty obviously aimed at making the text accessible. Dante scholarship is more problematically related to simple reading.

This not a plea for obscurantism. Only a reminder of what is the end and what are the means. Thomas Aquinas prayed the psalms every day of his life. He also wrote an (unfinished) commentary on them. Augustine, ditto. Those commentaries are like Chesterton's appreciative criticism of Dickens.

*Lectio divina and scholarship.

ENDS AND ENDS

Scholarship is a means aimed at enhancing our reading of the text. What is the aim of reading Thomas and Dante?

"Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita"...our life...Dante at midlife (35, but he never saw 70) is lost, in bad moral shape, and thanks to the invocation of Beatrice he is about to undertake a long journey the term of which is his salvation. And he conveys it to us as meaningful to us. It is meant to change our lives as well. When Thomas begins the Summa theologiae, laying out sacra doctrina, the plan of salvation, he is a believer addressing himself to believers. Not everyone who reads these two shares their presupposition, which is the presupposition of their works. Is such a reading possible?

The parallel of Parmenides. The poem of Parmenides purports to be the account of a revelation; he has been snatched up into the heavens where he learns the way it really is; that is the prologue. The poem is in two parts, the Way of Truth, the Way of Seeming. You may be reminded of the Didache, that early catechetical work. No one reads Parmenides as if what he claims is literally true. And yet the interpretations of Parmenides continue. Often, his arguments are considered independently of the mythical claim: both Plato and Aristotle do this.

Many read Dante and Aquinas as they read Parmenides. Of course, this is not an indictable offense. But there is another way.

Professional philosophers, most of them, hold themselves to knowledge of a large number of their predecessors. It would be gauche not to know Descartes, Leibnitz, Hume, Kant, Hegel... the list goes on. Usually, one settles on one of these. Let us say, Kant. One becomes a Kant scholar. He adds to the already vast fund of secondary works on Kant. He is widely recognized as an expert on Kant. His status does not depend on his agreeing with Kant. But if there are Kant scholars, there are also Kantians. Even Neo-Kantians. So too there are Thomistic scholars, and there are Thomists. Perhaps we will have to include Dante among them.

*accuracy in understanding what the text means

*judging that what the text says is true or false

So too, I suppose, there are Dantisti, scholars, who dazzle us with their erudition, but that erudition in no way commits them to the world view of the poet. And then there is us, you and I, who respond differently to that opening

verse: it is our life that is going to be examined. We share with Dante a belief in the stakes of life, salvation or damnation. The drama of our days consists in where our deeds are taking us. An empathetic reading, to call it that, is the only one Dante wanted. He is out to help us save our souls.

The believer is the addressee both of the Comedy and of the Summa.

THE AESTHETIC

For all that, our appreciation of the poem is inevitably aesthetic; however one with Dante we might be in our beliefs, the drama he puts before us makes spectators out of us. We do not get existential credit for our aesthetic response. In watching a play or movie, I follow the action, I am engaged, the tension mounts, ultimately there is a resolution. We emerge from the theater suffused with—with what? An appreciation of courage, new insight into perfidy. Think of *A Man for All Seasons*, by Robert Bolt. We're better for having seen it. A believer should get a deeper lesson from it than the unbeliever. But one does not become a martyr by appreciating martyrdom.

Its all a remove from what Kierkegaard would call the existential. The appreciation is what he would call aesthetic. The moral? The believer may be the intended reader, but his reading, however profound, is not the ultimate aim. The ultimate aim can only be achieved in our lives.