

DANTE & AQUINAS

Week Four: Before the Comedy

Let us take a glance at writings other than the Comedy, particularly those that antedate it and, seemingly, prepare for it. But first of all, a letter written presumably after Dante had completed his great poem.

1. Letter 13 to Can Grande Della Scala

There is a letter of Dante, the 13th, addressed to one of his patrons, Can Grande della Scala, in which he dedicates the third part or cantica of the Comedy, the Paradiso, to Can Grande. The whole of the Comedy was written after Dante was exiled from his native city as a result of political machinations that left him embittered. I will leave it to experts to sort out the meaning of the opposition between Guelphs and Ghibellines, or their Florentine version of Blacks and Whites. The division had to do with whether one felt more loyalty to the emperor than to the pope, but that translated itself into a maze of local variations. It is generally held that Dante was part of a Florentine delegation to the pope and that during his absence he was condemned to death and exiled from his native city. *Fiorentinus natione, non moribus*, he would describe himself bitterly: a Florentine by nation but not by behavior. He became a wanderer, a pilgrim, an exile, forced to climb the stairs of others' homes and eat their bread.

Are we surprised to find that Dante was hip-deep in local politics and in the wider struggle between emperor and pope? One of his works is called *De monarchia*, a treatise in what we would call political philosophy. Throughout the Comedy, not least in the Paradiso, we come upon extended ruminations on his native city and its politics. For a long time, Dante seemed to dream that a strengthening of the emperor, a more equitable balance between the two great forces of the day. But with age, not untypically, he lost faith in political solutions. We have here no lasting city. Indeed.

All the more poignant, then, Dante's explanation of first the literal and then the allegorical meaning of the Comedy. Its literal meaning is the state of souls after death. The allegorical meaning is what animates the long journey and the various figures we meet in Hell, in Purgatory, in Heaven.

Si vero accipiatur opus allegorice, subiectum est homo prout
merendo et demerendo per arbitrii libertatem iustitie premiandi
et puniendi obnoxius est (n. 6)

But if we consider the work allegorically, its subject is man insofar as by merit or demerit he justly earns reward and punishment.

Dorothy Sayers rightly sees this assumption as the biggest hurdle modern readers have to clear in order to understand the great poem. One still hears the silly claim that Dante put his enemies in hell, as if poetry were the best revenge. Neither God nor Dante puts souls in hell—or in purgatory or heaven—they put themselves where they are by the lives they have lived on earth. By the free actions they perform, the deeds they do, the character they form. The great mystery of human freedom is that it can be used to thwart its very purpose. There is no trace of the later Calvinist interpretation of predestination here. It is an abomination to say that God creates some souls for hell and others for heaven and that nothing we can do can alter that prenatal determinism. God wills all men to be saved; all men have been created to enjoy eternal bliss in heaven. But God can no more just place a person in heaven than He can place him in hell. Heaven is our destination, but the only way we can get there is by a correct use of freedom, aided by supernatural grace. Our eternal destiny hangs by the fragile thread of our freedom. The grace to use it well is always available, but it must be freely accepted. Nor should we seek here the lonely and autonomous individual, isolated, related to God alone, working out in the smithy of his lonely soul the choices that will define him eternally. Dante is Aristotelian in his conviction that all men are political, social animals. We were not just created, but procreated: we have parents, a family, connections to the place where we were born. That is what we are, not isolated individuals. We arrive as infants, that is, non-speakers, and we learn our mother tongue as we are nourished and burped and bathed and changed and slowly and gradually learn our place in family and nation. If that is what we are, our good will be inevitably linked to the common good.

I have put this in a way meant to differentiate it from latter day exercises of the imagination, such as the contract theory according to which autonomous and isolated individuals shuffle toward Philadelphia to enter into social and political relations to one another, trading off some private advantages to insure others. All one need ask is where these individuals came from to see what is missing. Mom and Dad. Grandparents, Siblings. Aunts and uncles. A whole network that enters into our identity. Hence the anguish and tragedy when that social and political context go awry. Hence Dante's long hope that peace and order can be restored and justice be done.

A few more remarks on this dedicatory letter to Can Grande della Scala. The application of the distinction between a literal and allegorical meaning

of the Comedy invokes the meanings of Sacred Scripture (which then, admittedly, were applied to secular writings as well). Take this as a sign of the enormous seriousness with which Dante wrote the Comedy. In a way analogous to Scripture, his poem conveys beyond its surface meaning another meaning of more importance.

And there is more. Dante goes on to indicate the points he must make if he is to present the work properly. Medieval education, as we shall be seeing, had as one of its major components the explication of authoritative texts, commentaries on them, a painstaking effort to assimilate the wisdom locked up in what we would call the classics, even the Great Books. The commentary tradition goes back to the tailend of Greek philosophy, when the writings of Plato and Aristotle were pored over and commented on. There grew up the convention of the proemium or preface to such commentaries. We find this in Boethius and we find it in the Greek commentators such as Ammonius associated with Alexandria, the city to which the school of Athens had moved and where, perhaps, Boethius studied. In paragraph 6 of the letter to Can Grande, Dante reminds his reader of the six points to be made in a proemium or preface: the subject of the work, its author, its form, its end, its title, and finally the part of philosophy to which it belongs. Since he is introducing the Paradiso, the first three of these can be taken to establish its difference from both the Purgatorio and Inferno. The last three apply to the Comedy as a whole.

It is at this point that, although he has already invoked the various senses of the work, that Dante alludes to the polysemous, multi-meaning character of his work. The primary sense of a text is its literal meaning; other meanings ride piggy-back on the literal, and they are three: allegorical, moral and anagogical. (We will be returning to this in Thomas Aquinas). Not insignificantly, Dante illustrates what he means with a Scriptural verse (a favorite of his, by the way, as we encounter it several times in his writings):

In exitu Israel de Aegypto, domus Iacob de populo barbaro, facta
est Iudea sanctificatio eius, Israel potestas eius.

In the exodus of Israel from Egypt, the house of Jacob from a
barbarous people. Judea was made its sanctuary and Israel its
dominion.

What are the various of meanings? Literally, it states the exodus of Israel from Egypt under Moses. Its allegorical meaning is our redemption by Christ. Its moral meaning is our conversion from the misery of sin to the state of grace. Its anagogical meaning is the blessed soul's exit from the

state of slavish corruption to the freedom of eternal glory. Why did Dante contrast only the literal and allegorical meanings earlier. The three non-literal meanings can be called, as a group, the allegorical.

You will find a discussion of the senses of Scripture in the *Summa theologiae*, Ia, q. 1, a. 10. Here Thomas makes clear that God, the author of Scripture, not only can use words to signify things other than what they literally mean, but can make things stand for other things. He takes this to be a peculiarity of Scripture. As is his wont, Thomas then reconciles the different accounts of the various meanings that have come down to him.

[This is a topic to which we will be returning. What Dante says here in the letter to Can Grande is at odds with what he says elsewhere and the difference is important for understanding the role of allegory in the *Comedy*.]

The passage I called attention to earlier, the literal and allegorical senses of the *Comedy*, follows on these precisions when he takes up the first proemial or prefatory point, the subject of the work.

In discussing the form of the *Comedy*, Dante distinguishes between the form or the poem and the form of treatment. The DC's form is threefold, the three *cantiche*, each *cantica* is divided into *cantos*, and each *canto* into lines or verses. The form of treatment is "poeticus, fictivus, descriptivus, digressivus, transumptivus, et cum hoc diffinitivus, divisivus, probativus, improbativus et eemplorum positivus: poetic, fictive, descriptive, digressive, transumptive and also definitive, declarative, probative and improbative, and provides examples."

One could look closer at each or these, and each and the whole thus become more striking. One illustration, the triplet, *definitive, divisivus, probativus* refers to the threefold division of logic based on Aristotle's *Categories*, *On Interpretation* and works on argument, beginning to the *Posterior Analytics*.

A further surprise is to be found in paragraph 16 where Dante asks which part of philosophy his poem belongs to! His answer: *it is morale negotium, sive ethica*: its concern is moral or ethical. He adds that while in parts the poem seems speculative, this is at the service of the practical.

We can perhaps imagine a modern poet speaking of the philosophy of his poem, but would any poet characterize his work as philosophy? Clearly this is not some thoughtless lapse on Dante's part. It represents yet another major fact we must come to terms with if we are fully to appreciate Dante. Thematically, we will take up the matter in the second half of our meetings. How do philosophy and poetry relate to one another, first, for Dante, and then, so to say, as such?

2. *La vita nuova*

One of the great eventual influences on Dante was Boethius (480-524) whom we have already met as a translator of Aristotle into Latin. Important as these translations and his commentaries on them are, in the Middle Ages Boethius was known primarily for his *Consolation of Philosophy*. This is an instance of prison literature, since Boethius wrote it while awaiting execution in his cell in Pavia near Milan. He had been accused by Theodoric, the Ostrogoth (and Arian) emperor who resided at Ravenna, of conspiring with the emperor in Constantinople. Boethius assures us he is innocent of the charge, and this fact provides the theme of the *Consolation*. Why do the innocent suffer? Why do the ways of the wicked prosper.

Now Boethius was a Christian, and thus might be expected to have recourse to the innocent victim par excellence, Jesus Christ. But, as the title suggests, he will confine his search for consolation to philosophical arguments. Boswell tells us that Dr. Johnson remarked, dropping into Latin, that is wondrous that in such a predicament Boethius showed himself to be *magis philosophus quam Christianus*: a philosopher rather than a Christian. It is wondrous. It is also a fact.

It would be tempting to expatiate on the *Consolation*, but we will resist. I will confine myself to the following remarks. The *Consolation* is divided into five books and in each of them a poem alternates with a prose section which comments on the poem. At the outset, when Dame Philosophy appears in Boethius's cell, she chides him for dropping into poetry, and effectively whining, when he has the resources of philosophy at his disposal. A powerful passage which however does not prevent Boethius from structuring the work in the way just mentioned, poetry and prose.

And so we turn to Dante's earliest work, *La vita nuova*, which is similarly structured although at the time he wrote it Dante seems not to have known Boethius. Whether or not the poems were written specifically for this purpose of the book, which is unlikely, or were poems already written, they function in *La vita nuova* as texts to be explicated in prose. But what is the story?

In that part of his memory before which little can be recalled there is a rubric which reads: "Incipit vita nova: Here begins a new life." The book before us will explain the meaning of the phrase.

The turning point of Dante's life was meeting Beatrice, "la gloriosa donna de la mia mente."

There are 31 poems gathered here, most of them sonnets, but three of them canzoni or odes. The division of the work into chapters is due to a

later editor (Barbi), not Dante, which is unfortunate. I shall employ Barbi's chapter division. (Dante, *Tutte le opere*; such scholars as Hollander make use of it.)

We might divide the book into three parts:

I-XVII – love of Beatrice and accompanying unhappiness

XVIII-XXVIII – praise of Beatrice

XXVIII-XLII – death of Beatrice, another love, vision of Beatrice in heaven.

First are the poems (and commentaries) that tell of meeting Beatrice, falling in love, wishing to conceal his love lest her honor be affected, pretending to love another... These poems are in the tradition of courtly love. The commentaries on them are in effect *divisiones textus*, analyses of the steps of the poem. Dante thus comes before us both as a poet and his own commentator. This might be taken as his bid for recognition among the poets of his city and region. But Dante's self-estimate is never a reflection of what others say of him. He is thoroughly convinced of his own poetic vocation and excellence.

Since the poems gathered here already existed and were known, at least by some, and since it is difficult to find in them the connected significance given them by the prose commentaries, attention must be paid to what Dante is up to here. Even if his interpretations of his poems are later reflections, he is out to convince us that they hang together and mean what he says they mean.

No reader will overlook the numerical insistence in speaking of Beatrice in terms of the number 9. Nine is the square root of three, three is the number of persons in the Blessed Trinity. Dante is 9 when he first sees her and she is coming on to 9; nine years later, he sees her again and is noticed. When he dreams of her it will be at the beginning of the ninth hour of the night (10 pm). It seems inescapable that Dante is providing us with a deep theological significance in his love for this young girl.

Courtly love was never aimed at possession of the beloved; it is, however existentially engaging, even if a bit of a spectator sport; the poet seeks to honor his beloved. This convention suggests the elevating nature of love, the way in which the beloved lifts the lover above the merely sensual, to something noble. All this is remarkably heightened in *La vita nuova*. Beatrice represents Dante's path to salvation. That is the message of the commentary, but again it is often difficult to see that the poems themselves convey this thought.

The arrangement of the poems is intricate. Mark Musa in his translation of the work (Indiana U Press, 1962) indicates how each part of the work contains one longer poem, ballata or ode, that is surrounded by sonnets,

and that the arrangement exhibits a remarkable balance.

The first two divisions are set off from the third by the death of Beatrice, something that occurs off-stage. Dante first dreams that she will die, and then refers to the death as having occurred. He does not trust himself to write directly of it. The third section tells of Dante's falling in love again, with *la donna gentile* whom he sees in her window, his overcoming of this love and final vision of Beatrice in heaven. This *donna gentile* will figure in a surprising form in Dante's next work.

Here his new love fills Dante with misgivings and a fierce battle between his head and heart takes place. The *donna gentile* is a temptation away from that for which Beatrice stands. And what is that? Dante's struggle is solved when one day, at the 9th hour, he has a vision of Beatrice in glory, in heaven. He then comes upon a group of pilgrims on their way to Rome to see the imprint of Jesus's face on the veil of Veronica. It occurs to him that they are from a distant place and will not have known of Beatrice for whom the city grieves. He then clarifies the term "pilgrim." Strictly speaking, it means those on the way to the speculcher of St James the apostle in Compostella; pilgrims who go to the Holy Land are called *palmisti* since they bring back fronds, and those who go to Rome are called *romeos*. In the penultimate chapter Dante gives a poem he wrote to two ladies in which he mentions Beatrice by name.

The book ends with an account of a final vision which convinced him that he must not write anything more of Beatrice until he could treat her more worthily. He must first devote himself to study in order that he might write of her as no other woman has ever been written on.

Dante then devoted himself for thirty months to the study of philosophy and theolong with the Dominicans and Franciscans in Floreence. It is tempting to see this as undertaken in order to write the *Divine Comedy*. What Dante learned is surely put to use in that great poem, but that does not seem to be the point of the final chapter of the *Vita nuova*.

3. Il Convivio

Some ten years after *La vita nuova*—now in exile—Dante began a great and unfinished work which he called the *Banquet*. It is divided into tractates or treatises and after the initial one, each treatise was to follow one of his odes with a length commentary, one that goes far beyond the modest scope of the commentaries in the earlier book. The work also compares itself to the *Vita nuova*.

And if in the present work, which is called *The Banquet*, just as

I wish it to be, deals with its subject more maturely (virilmente) than did *The New Life*, it is nonetheless not my intention to contravene the latter in any respect, but to support it in major ways with this one, since where that work was understandably ardent and impassioned, it is fitting that this one be restrained and mature. (I, 1)

The proposed work would have contained 15 tractates, of which we have four. What are we to make of it.

However speculative the influence of Boethius on the *Vita Nuova*, the Roman author figures prominently here. Lady Philosophy came to Boethius in his cell and indicated where his consolation in his tragic plight was to be found. In philosophy. There is a remarkable transformation of the *donna gentile* of the third part of the previous work. There she was a beautiful lady who tempted Dante away from his love for Beatrice, a temptation that was successfully overcome. Now we are told that that woman is none other than Lady Philosophy. And she is Dante's new love.

What he proposes to do, employing the same strategy of the earlier work, is to interpret long poems of his own, doubtless already in existence, in such a way that the riches of philosophy will for the first time be set forth in the vernacular so that all may profit from them—men, and even boys and women to the degree they are capable.

In subsequent discussions we will be drawing on the content and many asides of these commentaries. If it is a stretch to see it as shoring up *La vita nuova*, it also presents difficulties from the point of view of the *Comedy*. An early theme has to do precisely with the use of the vernacular, and the emphasis is on its prose employment. (Another unfinished work dating from roughly the same period, the early 1300s, *De vulgari eloquentia*, is a Latin defense of the use of the vernacular in poetry.) But the discussion that will bring us back to this work is that of allegory and the comparison of the allegory of the poets and the allegory of the theologians.

Was the abandonment of *Il Convivio* an abandonment of philosophy? Was philosophy too, as represented by the *donna gentile*, a temptation Dante had to conquer? The role of Aristotle is clear from the beginning: the work begins with the opening line of the *Metaphysics*: All men by nature desire to know. In the *Comedy* we will meet Aristotle in Limbo and he will be described as the master of those who know. The assimilation of Aristotle in the 13th century, and later, was complicated by the fact that the translations of Aristotle were accompanied by the commentaries of Averroes and Avicenna and the great decision bore on how they Arabic commentators

understood the text. Were they to be accorded the authority of Aristotle himself? Some, like Etienne Gilson, detect a good deal of Averroism in Dante and use this as a basis for questioning his dependence on Thomas Aquinas.

Was philosophy a temptation? In *Fides et Ratio*, John Paul II contrasts Christian philosophy with a “separated” philosophy. The range of reason can never be sufficient for the believer; beyond what we can know lies truths which have been vouchsafed to us by Revelation. For a believer to engage in philosophy as if it were all in all, as if his faith plays no role in his intellectual activity, would be a grave error. Thus it is that many secular philosophers have concluded that the believer cannot be a genuine philosopher, since he is influenced by his faith. Real philosophy, the suggestion is, is agnostic or skeptical with respect to religion. This is a vast subject, to which we will be returning when we discuss the distinction between philosophical and theological discourse.

Thomas Aquinas, whose metier was theology, commented on a dozen Aristotelian treatises, and Dante refers to them in *Il Convivio*. This puts him in good company, although Thomas had come under fire for his deference to Aristotle. In 1277, three years after Thomas’s death, 219 propositions were condemned by the bishop of Paris and among them we find Thomistic tenets.

We cannot know why Dante abandoned the project of *Il Convivio*. It does not seem to be the work envisaged at the end of *Vita Nuova* in which we would write of Beatrice as no woman has ever been written of. It is the fruit of Thomas’s intensive study but we can speculate what, remembering his earlier intention, he hit upon another and more appropriate way to praise Beatrice, the *Comedy*.