

Critical Theory Since Plato, ed.

Dante Alighieri

Hazareel Adams
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1265-1321

Dante's invocation of the fourfold scheme of interpretation in *The Banquet* and in the letter to Can Grande follows that of Aquinas and his early Christian predecessors. These statements have been of particular interest to students of *The Divine Comedy*. It is possible, however, that Dante has led his readers somewhat astray, for it is difficult to discover all the levels of meaning working in quite so explicit a way as his remarks suggest. (As Helmut Hatzfeld has suggested, it is also possible that Dante is not the author of the letter.) In any case we see in the letter Aquinas' principles applied to secular writing. For Dante and others the allegorical mode was not merely a matter of artistic cleverness; it was part and parcel of their way of thinking about the world, which was itself considered full of symbolic meaning—like a work of art, we might say today. Then the simile would have been reversed: the work of art is symbolic, like the world.

Dante's definition of his great work as a "comedy" seems to reflect a rather simplified approach to genres in light of Aristotle's detailed definition of tragedy, but it does serve to broaden the scope of the term and free it from narrow association with the amusing or farcical.

A good translation of *The Banquet* is that by W. W. Jackson, *Dante's Convivio* (1909). A translation of the letter to Can Grande appears in C. S. Latham, *A Translation of Dante's Eleven Letters* (1891). Important critical works include H. F. Dunbar, *Symbolism in Medieval Thought* (1929); C. S. Singleton, *Dante Studies I, Commedia, Elements of Structure* (1954); P. J. Toynbee, *Dante Alighieri, His Life and Works* (1965); and three studies by Erich Auerbach, "Typological Symbolism in Medieval Literature," *Yale French Studies*, IX (1952), *Mimesis* (1953), *Dante, Poet of the Secular World* (1961); Robert Hollander, *Allegory in Dante's Commedia* (1969); Guiseppe Mazzotta, *Dante, Poet of the Desert: History and Allegory in the Divine Comedy* (1979).

From

The Banquet

I say that, as is affirmed in the first chapter, it is meet for this exposition to be both literal and allegorical.¹ And to make

THE BANQUET. *Il Convivio* was written sometime between 1304 and 1308. The text is from W. W. Jackson, tr., *Dante's Convivio* (Oxford, Eng.: Clarendon Press, 1909).

¹Compare Aquinas, *The Nature and Domain of Sacred Doctrine*, pp. 117-19.

this intelligible, it should be known that writings can be understood and ought to be expounded chiefly in four senses. The first is called literal, and this is that sense which does not go beyond the strict limits of the letter; the second is called allegorical, and this is disguised under the cloak of such stories, and is a truth hidden under a beautiful fiction. Thus Ovid says that Orpheus with his lyre made beasts tame, and trees and stones move towards himself; that is to say that the wise man by the instrument of his voice makes cruel hearts grow mild and humble, and those who have not the life of science and of art move to his will, while they who have no rational life are as it were like stones. And wherefore

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this disguise was invented by the wise will be shown in the last tractate but one. Theologians indeed do not apprehend this sense in the same fashion as poets; but, inasmuch as my intention is to follow here the custom of poets, I will take the allegorical sense after the manner which poets use.

The third sense is called moral; and this sense is that for which teachers ought as they go through writings intently to watch for their own profit and that of their hearers; as in the Gospel when Christ ascended the Mount to be transfigured, we may be watchful of his taking with himself the three Apostles out of the twelve; whereby morally it may be understood that for the most secret affairs we ought to have few companions.

The fourth sense is called anagogic, that is, above the senses; and this occurs when a writing is spiritually expounded which even in the literal sense by the things signified likewise gives intimation of higher matters belonging to the eternal glory; as can be seen in that song of the prophet which says that, when the people of Israel went up out of Egypt, Judea was made holy and free. And although it be plain that this is true according to the letter, that which is spiritually understood is not less true, namely, that when the soul issues forth from sin she is made holy and free as mistress of herself.

From

Letter to Can Grande Della Scala

6. Therefore if we desire to furnish some introduction to a part of any work, it behooves us to furnish some knowledge of the whole of which it is a part. Wherefore I too, desiring to furnish something by way of introduction to the above-named portion of the *Comedy*,¹ have thought that something concerning the whole work should be premised, that the approach to the part should be the easier and more complete. There are six things then which must be inquired into at the beginning of any work of instruction; to wit, the subject, agent, form, and end, the title of the work, and the branch of philosophy it concerns. And there are three of these wherein this part which I purposed to design for you

¹LETTER TO CAN GRANDE DELLA SCALA. This letter to a friend and patron of Dante's who lived in Verona was written about 1318. Some doubt has been cast on Dante's authorship (see Helmut Hatzfeld; "Modern Literary Scholarship as Reflected in Dante Criticism," *Comparative Literature*, III [1951], 296), but it is still popularly attributed to him. The text is from P. H. Wicksteed, tr., *Translations of the Later Works of Dante* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1904) Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

²Dante is referring to Part III of *The Divine Comedy*, "Paradise," which he dedicated to Can Grande.

differs from the whole; to wit, subject, form, and title; whereas in the others it differs not, as is plain on inspection. And so, an inquiry concerning these three must be instituted specially with reference to the work as a whole; and when this has been done the way will be sufficiently clear to the introduction of the part. After that we shall examine the other three, not only with reference to the whole but also with reference to that special part which I am offering to you.

7. 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 which 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."² 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 the grief and misery of sin to the state of grace is presented to us; if the anagogical, the departure of the holy soul from the slavery of this corruption to the liberty of eternal glory is presented to us. 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; for *allegory* is derived from *alleon*, in Greek, which means the same as the Latin *alienum* or *diversum*.

8. When we understand this we see clearly that the subject round which the alternative senses play must be twofold. And we must therefore consider the subject of this work as literally understood, and then its subject as allegorically intended. The subject of the whole work, then, taken in the literal sense only, is "the state of souls after death," without qualification, for the whole progress of the work hinges on it and about it. Whereas if the work be taken allegorically the subject is "man, as by good or ill deserts, in the exercise of the freedom of his choice, he becomes liable to rewarding or punishing justice."

9. Now the form is twofold, the form of the treatise and the form of the treatment. The form of the treatise is threefold, according to its threefold division. The first division is that by which the whole work is divided into three cantiche; the second that whereby each cantica is divided into cantos; the third, that whereby each canto is divided into lines. The form or method of treatment is poetic, fictive, descriptive, digressive, transumptive; and likewise proceeding by defi-

²Psalms 114:1-2.

nition, division, proof, refutation, and setting forth of examples.

10. The title of the work is, "Here beginneth the *Comedy* of Dante Alighieri, a Florentine by birth, not by character." To understand which, be it known that *comedy* is derived from *comus*, "a village," and *oda*, which is, "song"; whence comedy is, as it were, "rustic song." So comedy is a certain kind of poetic narration differing from all others. It differs, then, from tragedy in its content, in that tragedy begins admirably and tranquilly, whereas its end or exit is foul and terrible; and it derives its name from *tragus*, which is a "goat" and *oda*, as though to say "goat-song," that is fetid like a goat, as appears from Seneca in his tragedies; whereas comedy introduces some harsh complication, but brings its matter to a prosperous end, as appears from Terence, in his comedies. And hence certain writers, on introducing themselves, have made it their practice to give the salutation: "I wish you a tragic beginning and a comic end." They likewise differ in their mode of speech, tragedy being exalted and sublime, comedy lax and humble, as Horace has it in his *Poetica*, where he gives comedians leave sometimes to speak like tragedians and conversely:

*Interdum tamen et vocem comaedia tollit,
Iratuque Chremes tumido delitigat ore;
Et tragicus plerumque dolet sermone pedestri.*³

And hence it is evident that the title of the present work is "the *Comedy*." For if we have respect to its content, at the beginning it is horrible and fetid, for it is hell; and in the end it is prosperous, desirable, and gracious, for it is paradise. If we have respect to the method of speech the method is lax

³"But yet sometimes comedy raises its tone and a Chremes in his wrath declaims his wrongs in mouthing phrase; and in the same way Telephus and Peleus, so tragical generally, in their pain take to the language of prose." *Art of Poetry*, p. 69.

and humble, for it is the vernacular speech in which very women communicate. There are also other kinds of poetic narration, as the bucolic song, elegy, satire, and the utterance of prayer, as may also be seen from Horace in his *Poetica*. But concerning them naught need at present be said.

11. There can be no difficulty in assigning the subject of the part I am offering you; for if the subject of the whole, taken literally, is "the state of souls after death," not limited but taken without qualification, it is clear that in this part that same state is the subject, but with a limitation, to wit, "the state of blessed souls after death"; and if the subject of the whole work taken allegorically is "man as by good or ill deserts, in the exercise of the freedom of his choice, he becomes liable to rewarding or punishing justice," it is manifest that the subject in this part is contracted to "man as by good deserts, he becomes liable to rewarding justice."

12. And in like manner the form of the part is clear from the form assigned to the whole; for if the form of the treatise as a whole is threefold, in this part it is twofold only, namely, division of the cantiche and of the cantos. The first division cannot be a part of its special form, since it is itself a part under that first division.

13. The title of the work is also clear, for if the title of the whole work is "Here beginneth the *Comedy*," and so forth as set out above, the title of this part will be "Here beginneth the third cantica of Dante's *Comedy*, which is entitled *Paradise*."

14. Having investigated the three things in which the part differs from the whole, we must examine the other three, in which there is no variation from the whole. The agent, then, of the whole and of the part is the man already named, who is seen throughout to be such.

15. The end of the whole and of the part may be manifold, to wit, the proximate and the ultimate, but dropping all subtle investigation, we may say briefly that the end of the whole and of the part is to remove those living in this life from the state of misery and lead them to the state of felicity.

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