Wk 3

four

Dante's Banquet of knowledge

Convivio

From internal evidence, we learn that Dante began to compose his *Convivio* or "banquet" of knowledge in the first years of his exile (c. 1303). This encyclopedic enterprise was intended to bolster his reputation by revealing the riches of medieval philosophy to a broad audience of men and women ignorant of Latin. The complete work was to have comprised some fifteen books (of which only four were written) and to offer extended commentaries to fourteen of Dante's own canzoni. The author's purpose was to provide those involved in practical affairs with the "scraps" of knowledge he had succeeded in collecting from "that table at which the bread of angels is eaten" (*Conv.* 1.1.7). Those scraps of wisdom and knowledge would be sufficient to satisfy the hunger of thousands (*Conv.* 1.12.12).

Two main obstacles prevent a large body of noble souls—"princes, barons, knights, and many other noble persons, not only men but women also"—from acquiring precious knowledge: their family and civic duties do not allow them "leisure for speculation," and/or they live far away from libraries and centers of learning (*Conv.* 1.1.4). By making essential knowledge accessible to such persons, Dante will allow them to overcome many handicaps and assist in ridding society of pernicious error and false judgments that create "the worst possible confusion in the world" (*Conv.* 4.1.7). In all this, we already hear the voice of the author of the *Comedy,* determined to set humanity on the right path in a world that has gone terribly astray.

Aristotle

"As the Philosopher says . . . all men naturally desire to know." This opening sentence reveals the driving force behind Dante's *Convivio* and places it firmly under the aegis of Aristotle, who is the Philosopher *par excellence,* "most worthy of faith and obedience" and "the master and guide of human reason" (*Conv.* 4.6.7–8). The modern reader is likely to take for granted the triumph of Aristotelian philosophy in medieval Western Europe and to discount such quotations and praise as mere lip service paid to "medieval orthodoxy." Nothing, in fact, could be further from the truth. Aristotle's writings had remained virtually unknown in the Latin West until the late twelfth century. Before this, whenever contacts were established with pagan philosophy, the mainstream of Christian thought had been influenced by Neoplatonism, which proved to be far more pliable to Christian attitudes and dogma. Aristotle's works were preserved by Arab and Jewish scholars, and eventually translated into Latin (from the Arabic or the original Greek, which had become incomprehensible to scholars in the West). These translations constituted the first rigorously scientific system to challenge the Christian view of the world; inevitably, they aroused both immense enthusiasm and great opposition. In 1210 and again in 1215, they were banned at the Sorbonne—the intellectual powerhouse of Latin Christendom—although they made their entry into its Faculty of Arts in 1255. The writings of Aristotle's Arabic commentators added further dangerous material and helped to provoke the bishop of Paris's condemnations proclaimed in 1270 and 1277. The struggle was eventually resolved by the Church's acceptance of Thomas Aquinas's heroic attempt to iron out the differences between "natural" Aristotelian philosophy and religious dogma. But the struggle was by no means over when Dante wrote his *Convivio.*

Another essential point is that Aristotle was not yet regarded as an authority of such prestige and scope that an appeal to his views on logic, metaphysics, natural sciences, politics, or poetics could be used to smother original thought, as was occasionally to happen in later centuries. For Dante, Aristotle had brought the essential science of ethics to perfection (*Conv.* 4.6.15). We must also remember that Dante's enthusiasm for the Greek philosopher was that of a largely self-taught man, someone who had just discovered the intense satisfaction and delights of intellectual speculation, in an age when such activity could strike an intelligent layman as an immensely exciting adventure. Above all, in order to try to understand Dante's intellectual position, we must realize that the Florentine poet and politician was no professional philosopher. His arguments and attitudes are those of a passionate amateur, who borrowed freely from a variety of sources.[1]

Philosophy

Similarly, the assertion that "all men naturally desire to know" was no cliché for Dante. All his later works were fired by this fundamental belief in the thirst for knowledge that is the distinguishing mark of human beings (cf. *Purg.* 21.1–3, *Mon.* 1.3–4). Dante therefore sets out to break down the elitist barrier of Scholastic philosophy, which was expounded in Latin as the only language fit for such study. Scorning professional scholars who study only for monetary gain, he invites all men and women of good will to share the meal he has prepared for his Banquet, in the conviction that "knowledge is the ultimate perfection of our soul, in which lies our ultimate happiness" (*Conv.* 1.1.1). This passionate belief also inspired the great doctrinal cantos of the *Comedy*. Here, it kindles the neophyte's ardor, urging him on in his self-appointed task. The author of *Convivio* was determined to break the monopoly of clerics and to open up the treasures of philosophy, in order to distribute its wealth for the good of society at large. But it was not his purpose to produce another *Tresor,* like that of his predecessor Brunetto Latini. This work, well known to Dante, was composed (just before the poet's birth) with encyclopedic intent and a desire to avoid all personal touches. Nothing could be further from Dante's own approach, which reflects every aspects of the writer: his experience of love, of politics, learning, art, and human nature. Everything he offers his readers in *Convivio* is rooted in his personal vision of society and the human condition.

Dante's passionate defense of Italian

After his exordium, Dante vindicates his purpose and authority in chapters 2–4, and then defends his choice of the vernacular language, Italian, in the last nine chapters of book 1. First, he apologizes for the autobiographical element (so much a feature of his vernacular trilogy: *Vita Nova, Convivio, Comedy*). The laws of rhetoric do not allow writers to speak about themselves, except for two compelling reasons. The first is the need to avoid great peril or infamy, which inspired Boethius (c. 470–c. 525) to defend his reputation in his *Consolation of Philosophy,* after he had been accused of treason and imprisoned by Theodoric, king of the Ostrogoths. The second justification occurs when others may derive great benefit from an account of one's own experiences (as with Augustine's celebrated *Confessions*). Dante is therefore inspired both by the desire to instruct others and by his need to rebut the accusation that he had "pursued so great a passion" (*Conv.* 1.2.16; cf. 3.1.11) as that described in the poems written for a Noble Lady *(donna gentile)*. He will now explain their true, allegorical

meaning, and show that they had been inspired not by passion but by virtue. Like Boethius, Dante struggled against the infamy of exile. On March 10, 1302, he had been condemned to death—supposedly for corruption while holding political office—by the government "of the most beautiful and most famous daughter of Rome," Florence, where "I desire with all my heart to rest my weary soul and end the time granted to me." Since then, Dante tells us, he has been forced to wander as "a pilgrim, almost a beggar, displaying fortune's wound against my will" (*Conv.* 1.3.4). Adrift like a ship without sail or rudder, blown hither and thither by the wind of poverty, Dante is only too conscious of the fact that his public image has been debased and his works devalued in the eyes of the multitude, who judge by appearances since they "live according to the senses and not according to reason" (*Conv.* 1.4.3). Thus traduced and humiliated by his unjust exile, Dante sets out to adorn his Banquet of Knowledge with a loftier, weightier style "so that it may acquire greater authority" (*Conv.* 1.4.13).

It is this experience of exile that underlies not only the ethical bent of the treatise but also the decision to write in Italian. In his wanderings in the Italian peninsula, Dante became aware of the immense potential of the Italian dialects, provided that they could be "regulated" by art and molded into a literary language, modeled in part on Latin. As we have seen in chapter 3, this conviction inspired the composition of his treatise *De vulgari eloquentia,* with its assertion of the vernacular's greater intrinsic nobility. It also led Dante to forge his own linguistic tools in *Convivio*. Having emulated the great Latin poets in his Italian poems, he now sets out to compete with the writers of Latin prose in their special preserve. The vernacular of *Vita Nova* is here made to embrace the whole range of intellectual and political interests occasioned by his study of philosophy and his exile. Dante has discovered the linguistic path that will eventually lead to the *Comedy*.

Defending his decision to write in Italian, Dante points out that a commentary is meant to serve the text. Because the text of his poems was in the vernacular, a commentary in Latin would not have been a servant but instead "sovereign, through nobility, efficacy and beauty" (*Conv.* 1.5.7). Latin is seen as a more efficient intellectual tool; it achieves greater beauty "because the vernacular follows usage, and Latin follows art" (*Conv.* 1.5.14). It is art that confers immunity from the changes that constantly plague vernacular languages. The great advantage enjoyed by Latin is its static form, governed and preserved by grammar, whereas "in the past fifty years many words have disappeared, have been born, and have changed" in the languages of Italy (*Conv.* 1.5.9). This painful awareness of linguistic change, expressed in both *De vulgari eloquentia* and *Convivio* is still present in the *Comedy*. It is also latent in Dante's use of the term "grammar" as a synonym for Latin in *Convivio,* for the vernacular "is fashioned

at will and changes," remaining at the mercy of unstable human nature (*Conv.* 1.5.8).

Among other arguments marshaled against the use of a Latin commentary, Dante points out that it would have gone over the heads of many otherwise able to appreciate the Italian poems—while, paradoxically, expounding the latter's true meaning to many "such as Germans and English and others" who would have understood the Latin commentary but would have been incapable of enjoying the "beauty" of the Italian poems (*Conv.* 1.7.13). Although in *Convivio* Dante is chiefly concerned with the message his poems was intended to convey, as an artist he can never forget their aesthetic qualities. In fact, to the discomfiture of generations of translators of his *Comedy,* Dante declares that to translate poetry is an impossible task, since it inevitably destroys "all its sweetness and harmony." This is why "the verses of the Psalms are without sweetness of music and harmony, because they were translated from Hebrew into Greek and from Greek into Latin, and in the first translation all their sweetness disappeared" (1.7.14–15).

As we have noted, Dante's audience is the multitude of men and women who, through their involvement in practical affairs, have "abandoned literature to those who have prostituted it"—namely, scholars who study merely for monetary gain and social advancement (*Conv.* 1.9.3–5).[2] Dante's democratic purpose must not be obscured by the list already quoted, which begins with "princes, barons, [and] knights." Surprisingly enough for a work devoted to philosophy, its intended audience includes not only men but also women ("of whom there are many"), noble souls handicapped by their ignorance of Latin. We should not, of course, expect to find, in Dante's age and situation, a democrat in the modern sense. It is nevertheless to his eternal credit that, as one of the first lay "intellectuals," he did so much to reject the closed shop of medieval learning and helped to initiate the process of civilizing European society at all levels.[3]

Dante's spirited message rises to heights of passionate eloquence in the greatest hymn of praise ever written in honor of the Italian language. Freed even from the trappings of poetry, its beauty and power shall shine forth in its ability to reveal the "most profound and most original concepts," virtually as effectively as Latin itself (*Conv.* 1.10.12). Dante goes on to denounce those evil Italians who praise the vernacular of other nations and despise their own. They are swayed by five "detestable causes" (*Conv.* 1.11.1): blindness of judgment; bad faith, which leads a bad workman to blame his tools; a desire to be admired for exotic tastes; envy; and pusillanimity, which makes people undervalue what belongs to them. Such are the wretches who have no care for "this precious language"—whose only blemish is that "it is found in the harlot mouths of

those adulterers" (*Conv.* 1.11.21). For his own part, Dante lists the many benefits Italian has given him: life itself, because of the bond it created between his parents; "moreover, this vernacular of mine led me to the world of knowledge, which is ultimate perfection" (*Conv.* 1.13.4–5). As we have seen, in *Convivio* 1.10, Dante claims that two of Latin's chief qualities, its beauty and efficacy, shall in fact distinguish the vernacular of Dante's present work. An element of stability, too, will be given to the vernacular. The writer's pride in his ability to wield and honor his native language is paramount.

The "bread" necessary for the Banquet has been purified. It is now time to begin serving it to the multitude. Like the Gospel's miraculous loaves, Dante's bread will satisfy the hunger of thousands. His Italian, the basis for a new culture, will be "a new light, a new sun, that shall rise when the old sun sets and shed its light on those who live in darkness and in the shadows" (*Conv.* 1.13.12). Deploying a prophetic tone and biblical language, Dante forecasts the eventual triumph of vernacular culture in the modern world. Centuries before Machiavelli and Galileo, Dante Alighieri must be accorded a place of honor among those who fought to break the stranglehold of Latin over Western European culture.

Book 2 (allegory and cosmology)

Allegory

After this long introduction, book 2 opens with a canzone probably written some ten years earlier: *Voi che 'ntendendo il terzo ciel movete.* The first lines of the commentary tell us that Dante's exposition will be both literal and allegorical, since "writings [the tantalizing term *le scritture*] can be understood and must therefore be expounded chiefly according to four senses" (*Conv.* 2.1.2). First, we have the literal meaning. Then comes the allegorical sense, which reveals "a truth hidden beneath a beautiful lie"—as when Ovid speaks of Orpheus taming the wild beasts and moving the trees and stones with his lyre, "which signifies that the wise man, with the instrument of his voice, can make cruel hearts tender and humble, and sway according to his will those whose lives are empty of knowledge and art: for those who are quite devoid of rational life are virtually like stones" (*Conv.* 2.1.3). We note in passing that the reason why this hidden, allegorical meaning was first used was to have been discussed in the fourteenth book of *Convivio*. Third is the moral or tropological sense, which may be found in the Gospels' accounts of the Transfiguration, when they tell us that Christ took with him only three of the twelve apostles: "from which the moral may be deduced that we should have few companions in whatever is

most secret" (*Conv.* 2.1.5)—an intriguing example of medieval allegorical exegesis! The fourth sense is the anagogical, which points to "heavenly things of eternal glory" (*Conv.* 2.1.6), as may be seen in Psalm 113 [114]. This psalm narrates the story of Exodus, a historical fact which also points to the sanctification and the liberation of the soul from sin (cf. *Purg.* 2.43–48 and *Ep.* 13.7.21–22). Dante insists on the need for a thorough understanding of the literal sense before the others can be approached. He will therefore explain the literal sense of his poems before going on to discuss their allegorical meaning, their "hidden truth" (*Conv.* 2.1.15), while touching upon other senses, should the need arise.

Many modern scholars claim that in *Convivio* Dante asserted a fundamental distinction between the two types of allegory familiar to medieval exegetes: the allegory of the theologians, as exemplified in Scripture, which was based on a literal sense regarded as historically true; and the "allegory of poets," whereby a truth was superimposed on a literal sense that was a beautiful fiction or lie.

If, however, we turn to what Dante in fact wrote, we find that at this point the text of *Convivio* is riddled with omissions and scribal errors. This means that in 2.1.3, editors have had to supply their own conjectural readings in order to fill the obvious gap between two phrases found in the manuscript tradition: "The one is called literal . . . and this is the one which is hidden beneath the cloak of these fables, and is a truth hidden beneath a beautiful lie." In the extant text, there is no referent specified for "these fables." Scholars suggest that the term "these fables" indicates that all poetry consists of mere lies (as Aquinas and others maintained). However, there is nothing in Dante's text, as we have it, that justifies this supposition. The example given (Orpheus) may well point to specific "fables," such as those contained in the most widely read of pagan texts, Ovid's *Metamorphoses.* On the other hand, the fable or myth of Orpheus's descent to the underworld was also capable of receiving a Christological interpretation, whereby his descent to the underworld was regarded as a prefiguration of Christ's harrowing of hell.[4] It is in fact after referring to Orpheus's powers and their allegorical meaning that Dante makes his controversial aside (*Conv.* 2.1.4): "Truly, the theologians understand this allegorical sense in a different way from the poets; but since it is my intention to follow the poets' way, I shall understand the allegorical sense in the way it is used by poets." The terms "understand" (literally, "take": *prendono*) and "used" *(usato)* also point to another essential difference: the theologians' task *uses* allegory in order to interpret a given text, Holy Scripture, whereas poets *structure* their texts allegorically.

Instead of assuming that, at the time of writing *Convivio,* Dante judged all poetry to be nothing but a "beautiful lie," we should in fact take into account the following points. *Convivio* was written partly in order to rescue his reputation from the "infamy" of having betrayed Beatrice's memory by loving another woman (*Conv.* 1.2.15–16). In other words, the author's intention is to play

down or devalue the literal sense of the love poems selected *(Voi che 'ntendendo* and *Amor che ne la mente mi ragiona),* in order to claim that when the text refers to love and feminine charms its true meaning lies elsewhere. We must also realize that Dante never in fact uses the term "allegory of the theologians": this phrase does not exist in his writings. Nor does he indicate in the slightest way that he is concerned with a literal sense as understood by the theologians. It must also be remembered that even the text of the Bible was not always taken to be historically or literally true: for example, the erotic Song of Songs must not be taken literally; instead, it was to be understood as "a truth hidden beneath a beautiful lie," signifying the human soul's longing for God. As so often in his *Convivio,* Dante is here displaying his erudition by pointing out that theologians always use the term "allegory" as referring to Christ and the Church. Augustine of Dacia put it in a nutshell: allegory teaches you what you must believe *(quid credas allegoria).* For the theologians, allegory was concerned with the Christian faith.

Any blanket devaluation of poetry as a mere lie is unthinkable for the author of the poems written in praise of Beatrice and then set in the elaborate framework of *Vita Nova.* What is more, even in *Convivio,* allegory is jettisoned in the poem chosen for the fourth book, *Le dolci rime,* whose subject—the true nature of nobility—was of such universal import that "it was not right to speak under any rhetorical figure . . . therefore, no allegory needs to be revealed, but only the literal meaning discussed" (*Conv.* 4.1.10–11). Clearly, the author of *Convivio* did not believe that the literal sense of the text of his canzone on nobility was a beautiful lie concealing a profound truth; it was instead judged capable of "bringing people back on to the right path regarding the proper understanding of true nobility" (*Conv.* 4.1.9). Even Ovid, the pagan mythographer, is quoted as a reliable historical witness, together with Lucan "and other poets," in this same work (*Conv.* 3.3.7–9), and Vergil's *Aeneid* is treated as a reliable historical source (*Conv.* 4.26.9). Where his first two poems were concerned, however, Dante was bent on minimizing their literal text/message in order to reveal their hidden, "true meaning . . . which no one can discover if I do not explain it" (*Conv.* 1.2.17; cf. 2.12.1 and 15.2).

All this in no way undermines the claims made by Dante in his *Comedy.* The vexed question of how much Dante expects of his readers in his epic has been examined, most recently and convincingly, by Hollander (2001, 94–104). *Convivio,* with its astonishing claim that secular writings may be structured and expounded according to the four senses traditionally—and exclusively (Aquinas, *Quodlibetales* 7.6.16)—reserved for the interpretation of the Bible, represents an intermediate stage between the rudimentary discussion of allegory and figures of speech in *Vita Nova* 25 and Dante's complex use of allegory in the *Comedy.* There, in a unique amalgam that combines fabulous mythological figures such

as the Minotaur and Pluto with the most sacred personages of Christian history, we find what may truly be called Dante's figural allegory, something he made utterly his own.

The literal sense of *Voi che 'ntendendo*

Chapters 2–11 are concerned with glossing the literal sense of *Voi che 'ntendendo.* We are told that the noble lady mentioned at the end of *Vita Nova* first appeared to Dante "accompanied by Love," when the planet Venus had accomplished two full revolutions after Beatrice's death in June 1290 (*Conv.* 2.2.1). According to Dante's astronomical lore, this brings us to a date near the end of August 1293—and to the first contradiction with the account given in *Vita Nova,* to which Dante himself refers us. In that earlier work (*VN* 35.1), we read that the Noble Lady *(donna gentile)* appeared to the grieving lover "some time after" the first anniversary of Beatrice's death (June 8, 1291). Even more disturbing is the fact that the account given in *Convivio* insists that a long struggle was waged in Dante's mind between the memory of Beatrice and his love for this Noble Lady, whereas *Vita Nova* speaks of the poet's sorrow and repentance after being tempted by the latter "*for some days* against the constancy of reason" (*VN* 39.2; emphasis mine). *Convivio* celebrates Dante's enduring love for the Noble Lady; *Vita Nova,* on the other hand (composed some ten years previously), had spoken of his definitive return to Beatrice. Nowhere in the later work does Dante attempt to iron out the discrepancies between the two accounts. This has led some scholars to suppose that there existed a first version of *Vita Nova* which agreed with what we read in *Convivio,* because it ended with the episode of the Noble Lady (chapters 35–38), and that the present ending, celebrating the triumph of his love for Beatrice, was added after Dante had abandoned his *Convivio* (c. 1308) in an attempt to prepare the way for Beatrice's victorious return in the *Comedy*.[5] There is, however, not a shred of hard evidence to support this idea. We are therefore left with the contradictions (but also with the possibility that Dante *might* have decided to remove the discrepancies by changing the account given in *Vita Nova,* if he had ever finished *Convivio*). On the other hand, Peter Dronke (1997a, 16) puts forward the fascinating suggestion that perhaps "for some brief time near their beginning, Dante's philosophical studies . . . were not purely disinterested—and that he then came to recognize that some element . . . had been leading him towards philosophically false positions." This would explain the apparent contradictions in Dante's writings concerning the *donna gentile.*

As things stand, however, we must also take into account the fact that, in *Vita Nova* 35.4, 37.5, 39.7, Dante insists that the meaning of the sonnets describing this interlude is plain enough and without need of further explanation.

If the object of Dante's attraction was indeed Lady Philosophy, as we are told in *Convivio* 2.12.9 and 2.15.12, the author-commentator of *Vita Nova* could only with a degree of subterfuge assure readers that his sonnets' true meaning was obvious from their texts. The identification of the Noble Lady with Lady Philosophy is even more difficult to square with the description of his thought of her, which was noble only "in so far as it spoke of a noble lady; for the rest, it was most base" (*VN* 38.4): surely the strangest and most illogical way of describing what was later purported to be desire for true knowledge and wisdom—a description which then culminates in the identification of this desire as the "adversary of reason" (39.1). As Dronke remarks (1997a, 20), Dante "expected much both of his immediate and his future readers . . . At least part of his artistic originality lay in his refusal to harmonize."

What little evidence we have points to late 1293 and 1294 as the period when both poems were written that were later glossed in *Convivio* as exalting Dante's love of philosophy. Both in fact presuppose the present ending of *Vita Nova* with its vision of Beatrice in glory and the sonnet *Oltre la spera* (*VN* 41.10–13). We recall that Beatrice's lover had already been charged with inconstancy by his beloved (*VN* 12.6). After her death, for the author of *Convivio* to have laid himself open to a similar accusation would have been utterly incompatible with the dignity and authority Dante sought to acquire, especially given his lowly state in exile. It would therefore seem likely that the episode of the Noble Lady as recounted in *Vita Nova* was inspired by Dante's infatuation with a real woman (cf. *Purg.* 31.49–60), whereas *Amor che ne la mente* and *Voi che 'ntendendo* (especially the latter's *envoi,* ll. 53–61) were written to celebrate his newfound love for philosophy.

Astronomy and angels

In the third chapter of book 2, Dante explains that the third "heaven" is that of Venus. This leads to a long astronomical digression. Aristotle had stated that the heavens were eight in number. The truth, discovered by Ptolemy, is that there are nine heavens, ascending from the earth in the following order (which was retained in Dante's *Paradiso*): Moon, Mercury, Venus, Sun, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, the Fixed Stars, and the Primum Mobile. The ninth, invisible heaven answered the need to explain motion in Aristotelian physics. According to the Greek philosopher, physical motion cannot be explained solely in terms of physical principles; it must depend on some immaterial cause, in order to break through the vicious circle of mover and object moved. This immaterial cause—the unmoved mover—is, in Christian terms, God, whose power of attraction over the Primum Mobile is so strong that the latter is propelled by the swiftest motion, since

motion, when not due to a physical cause, is the result of unsatisfied longing. The Primum Mobile is motivated by its intense desire to be united with God, while it transmits motion to the rest of the universe. Finally, outside both space and time is found the tenth heaven or Empyrean, "posited by Catholics" (*Conv.* 2.3.8), the abode of God and the blessed souls, "according to the teaching of Holy Church, which cannot lie; and Aristotle seems to indicate this to those who understand him correctly" (*Conv.* 2.3.10). Possessing all that can possibly be desired, the Empyrean is a place of perfect peace, hence motionless, situated in the very mind of God and encompassing the entire universe (*Conv.* 2.3.11).

The moving spheres are propelled by "substances separate from matter, namely Intelligences, commonly called Angels" (*Conv.* 2.4.2). Medieval angelology is hardly likely to make the modern reader's pulse beat faster. As we shall see, however, this apparently unrewarding subject holds an important clue for an understanding of Dante's philosophical (and idiosyncratic) outlook in *Convivio*. According to the Scholastic method, Dante first examines various contradictory opinions regarding these angelic propellers. Aristotle and others limited the number of angelic intelligences to the number of celestial movements; others, like Plato, extended their number to include all the different species of things. Plato called them Ideas, while the gentiles called them gods and goddesses, adored their images, and built temples in their honor (*Conv.* 2.4.6). Dante's syncretism is nowhere more in evidence than in this highly personal assimilation of the pagan deities of classical antiquity into Christian angelology (with lasting results, for no Olympian is found in *Inferno* and the same belief underpins Beatrice's discourse in *Par.* 4.58–63). Nevertheless, the pagans were defective in both their reasoning and knowledge (*Conv.* 2.4.8)—a significant statement, when we realize that this is the first reference to the limitations of human reason (an important theme that does to a certain extent temper the rational optimism so evident in this work).

Everyone—"philosopher, Gentile, Jew, and Christian"—agrees that angels enjoy a state of blessedness. Moreover, "since human nature here on earth has not just one beatitude, but two, the one belonging to the life of practical affairs, the other to the life of contemplation, it would be irrational (for we see that they [angels] possess the beatitude of the active life in guiding the world) if they did not also possess the beatitude of contemplation, which is more excellent and more divine" (*Conv.* 2.4.9–10). This flatly contradicts Dante's basic premise that, since their intellect "is one and perpetual," angels can enjoy only one or the other type of beatitude, so that there must be a majority of angels who engage only in contemplation (*Conv.* 2.4.11–12). Dante further muddies the waters by agreeing that the contemplative life is the only one fit for the angelic nature.

Nevertheless, in 2.4.13, he contradicts his basic principle by wanting some angels "to contemplate *and* to move; he has thus fallen into a remarkable confusion" (Bemrose 1983, 86).

All this is clear evidence of the unsatisfactory state of *Convivio* and its manuscript tradition as we have it (Ageno 1995). Here, however, rather than a scribal error, it would seem that the confusion is due to the probability that Dante never revised his text. Of even greater interest is the fact that, whereas the distinction between the active life and the life of contemplation may strike us as a medieval commonplace (ultimately derived from Aristotle's *Ethics* 10.7–8), its application to angelic activity is neither Aristotelian nor Scholastic but very much Dante's own. His argument, based on the fact that human nature *on earth* is capable of two types of happiness, is not merely a glaring case of anthropomorphism. It is in fact typical of Dante's approach in *Convivio,* which tends to divide human activities into separate compartments. Unlike St. Thomas (*Contra Gentiles* 3.80.11), who stated that the angelic movers belonged to the order of the Virtues, Dante claims that each heaven is moved by a different category of angels, from the Seraphim downward (*Conv.* 2.5.6–13; the concept remains in *Par.* 28.64–129, although the correspondences between angels and the heavens they move are modified). Here, the hierarchy of nine angelic orders is split from top to bottom between, on the one hand, those angels who enjoy pure contemplation, and, on the other, those angelic intelligences who move the various spheres of the universe *(Voi che 'ntendendo).* A similar dichotomy is noticeable in the fact that humanity's active life is considered solely with reference to the moral virtues; the intellectual virtues are the province of the contemplative life (*Conv.* 4.2.16–18). In this way, the theological virtues are ignored. This is surely a paradoxical situation for a Christian thinker—even for one concerned above all with ethics. The author of *Convivio* did not distinguish clearly between the Aristotelian conception of contemplation as an intellectual activity and the Christian emphasis on mystical contemplation and prayer. As a result, Dante reached what was virtually a theoretical impasse, which he circumvented by rehabilitating the life of action in this, a work written expressly for men and women wholly engaged in practical affairs.

In true Platonic vein, Dante ends his fourth chapter by stressing once more the limitations of the human intellect, since it is in part closed like the eyes of a bat "while the soul is bound and imprisoned by our body's organs" (*Conv.* 2.4.17; cf. 3.7.5)—a Neoplatonic view, contrary to Aquinas's conception of human beings as an essential amalgam of soul and body (*S. Th.* 1.76.4, 1.75.7.3). Limitations inherent in the human condition on earth are further emphasized in the next chapter, which speaks of the effects of Christ's revelation of things that would otherwise have remained hidden to humankind. We also learn that ap-

proximately one-tenth of the angels rebelled against God, thus creating a gap which humanity was destined to fill (*Conv.* 2.5.12).

Beatrice and the soul's immortality

Commenting on the struggle waged between his attraction to Lady Philosophy and the memory of Beatrice, Dante warns us that he will now mention Beatrice for the last time in this work. The thought of his beloved in heavenly glory sparks off a brief but important digression on the immortality of the human soul. It strikes the reader because of the deep emotional charge behind it and the dramatic implications it may well hold. Dante inveighs against the belief that there is no life after death: "the most foolish, the basest, and the most pernicious" of bestialities (*Conv.* 2.8.8). He insists that all writers agree that there is some immortal part in us: philosophers, pagan poets, the religions of the "Jews, Saracens, Tartars and whoever lives according to reason" (*Conv.* 2.8.9). If all were mistaken, including all those who have sacrificed this life for a better life to come, it would signify "that the most perfect animal, man, was the most imperfect—which is impossible—and that the part which is humanity's greatest perfection, reason, was the cause of this greatest flaw" (*Conv.* 2.8.11). Moreover, frequent proof of our immortality is to be found in "the divinations of our dreams," when the truth revealed must be derived from an immortal source and, consequently, transmitted to a similarly immortal element in our being (*Conv.* 2.8.13). It is interesting to note that Roger Bacon tells us that belief in the prophetic power of dreams was one of the "Aristotelian" errors condemned at the University of Paris in 1210. The idea seems to have been gradually discarded by professional philosophers, and it is not found among the ten syllogisms employed by Aquinas to prove the soul's immortality. Dante, however, accepted it through Cicero and Albert the Great from a long Neoplatonic tradition, but also from personal experience, which included Beatrice's appearance to him in dreams recorded in *Vita Nova* and alluded to in *Purgatorio* 30.133–35.

But it is not only the thought of Beatrice's fate that may have stirred Dante to make his impassioned declaration of faith: "and I thus believe, thus affirm and am thus certain of passing over to another, better life after this one, where that lady lives in glory of whom my soul was enamored" (*Conv.* 2.8.16). He was no doubt also moved by the memory of Guido Cavalcanti, his "first friend," who had died in August 1300. As his great canzone *Donna me prega* demonstrates, Guido subscribed to the Averroist belief that the intellect was granted to human beings only for their lifespan on earth and that after death the individual was destroyed. And it was with tragic compassion that the poet of the *Comedy* was to hint at his friend's possible damnation among "those who make the soul die

with the body" (*Inf.* 10.13–15, 52–72). *Vita Nova* and a number of his early lyrics show how profoundly Dante was influenced by Cavalcanti's poetry. Whether or not he was ever tempted to follow his friend in rejecting the doctrine of personal immortality, it was a subject that evidently touched him to the quick, involving as it did the eternal destiny of both Beatrice and Guido, the two leading actors in Dante's youthful drama. Guido and Dante had both exalted intellectual activity on earth, sharing the belief that man is only truly alive when he "uses his reason, which is the life specific to him and the activity of his noblest part" (*Conv.* 2.7.4). For the author of *Convivio,* to believe that this noblest part abandoned the individual at death was a terrible betrayal of humanity's highest destiny—a betrayal, moreover, capable of degrading otherwise noble beings to the level of the beasts through the worst "bestiality" of all (*Conv.* 2.8.8).

An aside in the tenth chapter shows us that the future poet of the *Comedy* is already conscious of the danger of social standing and historical importance in exemplars of vices and virtues (cf. *Par.* 17.136–42): "How much wisdom and virtue remain hidden, because they lack this light [of reason]! And how much folly and how many vices are revealed because of this light! It would be better for the wretched, crazy, foolish and vicious great ones of this world to be of lowly condition, for they would not be so infamous then either in this world or after their death" (*Conv.* 2.10.9–10). In the last part of his commentary on the literal meaning of *Voi che 'ntendendo,* Dante turns to his poem's *envoi* and glosses its last verse (l. 61: "Consider at least how beautiful I am!"), establishing a theoretical distinction between his poem's formal beauty and the excellence of its content: "for goodness lies in the message, and beauty is in the choice and arrangement of the words; both provide pleasure, although goodness is the more pleasurable" (*Conv.* 2.11.4).

The *Consolation of Philosophy*

The last four chapters of book 2 are concerned with expounding the "true," allegorical meaning of Dante's canzone. He returns to the watershed event—Beatrice's death—that had left him distraught. Soon, he had turned to the writings of others who had likewise sought comfort for great distress: he began to read Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* (surprisingly described in 2.12.2 as "not known to many"), as well as Cicero's treatise on friendship *(De amicitia).* At first, Dante found the meaning of these ancient texts difficult to grasp, but "at last, I did so, as much as my knowledge of Latin and a little of my intellect made possible"—his intellect, which had already made him dimly aware of certain philosophical truths "as if in a dream, as may be seen in *Vita Nova*" (2.12.4).

Seeking consolation, Beatrice's unhappy lover found even greater rewards, as a whole world of knowledge gradually disclosed its treasures. Dante began to imagine Philosophy in the form of a noble lady (as Boethius had done at the beginning of his *Consolation*)—an association of ideas facilitated by the feminine gender of the term in both Latin *(philosophia)* and Italian *(filosofia)*.

Dante began to seek out Philosophy where she was truly to be found, "in the schools of the religious and in the disputations of philosophers" (*Conv.* 2.12.7). Although there was as yet no university in Florence, the two great teaching orders were well represented in the city: the Franciscans at Santa Croce, the Dominicans at Santa Maria Novella. By the end of the thirteenth century, the new Aristotelianism had met with considerable opposition from Franciscan theologians, so that the emphasis at Santa Croce remained on biblical exegesis and a detailed study of the first of the great medieval *Summae,* Peter Lombard's *Sentences* (cf. *Par.* 10.106–8). The Dominicans, on the other hand, were totally committed to the teaching of Christian Aristotelianism. It is therefore likely that Dante (who may well have been introduced to Aristotle's *Ethics* by Brunetto Latini) became acquainted with Aquinas's commentary on this celebrated work through the teachings of the Dominican Remigio de' Girolami. Remigio may also have influenced Dante's interpretation of Roman history, while his fervent desire for civic peace and exaltation of the common good would seem to have left their mark on the author of the *Comedy* and *Monarchia*.[6] It is also likely that Dante attended lectures at Santa Maria Novella, where the lectors organized disputations once a week. The term "disputation" was a technical one in medieval schools. It implied a debate, carried out before an audience of scholars, between the *opponentes,* who opened with a series of objections to a given doctrine, and the *respondentes,* who replied to each objection in turn. The debate was brought to a close by the *magister,* who gave the definitive exposition, acting as a kind of intellectual referee.

After some thirty months of study, the love of philosophy so gripped Dante's mind that it began to banish all other interests. To celebrate this new love, he composed *Voi che 'ntendendo,* in which he chose to express his involvement with philosophy "under the figure of other things" (*Conv.* 2.12.8). Dante tells us that he chose this allegorical method for two reasons: vernacular poetry was deemed unworthy of dealing with such an exalted subject, and his audience would not have believed him if he had merely declared his passion for philosophy in a literal way. In *Vita Nova* 25.6, written perhaps only one year before *Voi che 'ntendendo,* Dante had claimed that poetry in the vernacular must deal exclusively with the subject of love. His Florentine audience was obviously conditioned by the same prejudice, and only too ready to think that Dante had fallen in love with another woman.

The universe of knowledge and the pre-eminence of ethics

Expounding the allegorical meaning hidden in the canzone, Dante tells us that the third "heaven" mentioned in the third line also signifies the third "science" (cf. Latin *scientia,* "knowledge"), for each branch of knowledge is compared to one of the ten heavens (including the Empyrean) in an analogy that would have struck many of his contemporaries as old-fashioned. Dante, however, bravely sets out his reasons. Grammar is associated with the moon, rhetoric with the third heaven, Venus, to whose angelic movers Dante addresses his poem. The most interesting parallels are the final ones, when Dante is left with four sciences but only three heavens. The traditional order of the seven liberal arts given in 2.3.8 had produced one or two surprising results (dialectic = Mercury, geometry = Jupiter), but it had naturally corresponded to the first seven heavens. Now, however, Dante had to decide where to place physics, ethics, metaphysics, and theology, while taking into account the fact that placing them implied a hierarchy or scale of nobility. The order of the heavens also indicated greater or lesser proximity to God; hence, it was immediately apparent that theology must be placed at the top, with metaphysics in second place. Theology is thus an open-and-shut case: it is automatically assigned to the highest heaven of all, the Empyrean (in itself a theological "discovery").

The shock comes when we find that Dante reverses the expected order by attributing ethics to the ninth heaven (Primum Mobile) and by placing metaphysics beside physics, equating them both with the firmament or eighth heaven of the Fixed Stars (*Conv.* 2.13.8). Dante sets out his reasons for this highly unusual arrangement. Like the Milky Way, a multitude of fixed stars that "produce that white mass we call the galaxy" but are so small that they cannot be perceived from the earth, so metaphysics is concerned with "primal substances" which we cannot see or understand except through their effects (*Conv.* 2.14.7–8). Ethics or moral philosophy, on the other hand, is as necessary to life on earth as is the movement engendered by the Primum Mobile: if the latter did not move, "the order of the whole universe would be destroyed, and the movement [of the other heavens] would be in vain. Likewise, if moral philosophy were to cease, the other sciences would be hidden for some time, and happiness would be neither created nor experienced . . ." (*Conv.* 2.14.17–18). As Étienne Gilson pointed out, "The thesis which Dante here maintains is quite extraordinary for the Middle Ages" (1948, 105).

Lastly, the Empyrean, outside of space and time, is likened to the science of theology, "which is full of perfect peace" (*Conv.* 2.14.19)—a truly astonishing observation for a medieval Christian so cognizant of theological controversy (cf. *Par.* 29.88–117). Moreover, in a highly personal interpretation of a passage from the Song of Songs (6.7–8), Dante equates theology *not* with one of the sixty

queens but with the perfect dove, thereby asserting its uniqueness but also effectively separating it from the other sciences, which were traditionally regarded as its handmaidens and thus subservient to theology.

By placing ethics above metaphysics, Dante parted company with both Aristotle and Aquinas. For his illustrious predecessors, metaphysics was the supreme science. For Dante, however, it had one great drawback: its tendency to isolate its practitioners from society and the needs of everyday life. Metaphysics was also concerned with a relatively small number of problems concerning God, the angelic intelligences, "prime" or formless matter (*Conv.* 3.8.15), all of which offered little scope for individual speculation. It could not be compared in utility to the discovery of a whole new social and intellectual perspective found principally in Aristotle's *Ethics,* a work that revolutionized the conception of society and political life in thirteenth-century Western Europe.[7] Nor must we forget that the author of *Convivio* was writing in exile, suffering from poverty and his exclusion from the political life of his beloved Florence. The *Epistle to Cangrande* places the *Comedy* under the aegis of ethics (*Ep.* 13.16.40): Dante's ordering of the sciences does the same for *Convivio.*

Homage is paid to theology, the highest and the purest of all sciences. Nevertheless, since its perfection depends on revelation and Christ's teachings, Dante will be content with the relative imperfection within his grasp. Whereas for Aquinas philosophy must remain subservient to the supreme science of divinity, for Dante its very existence "helps" the Christian faith (*Conv.* 3.7.16)—there is no hint of subordination or even of active collaboration between the two, such as we find in St. Thomas. Characteristically, the author of *Convivio* concentrates on the moral virtues, because they are subject to the human will and therefore the most human (*Conv.* 4.17.2). In general, Dante separates the human from the divine far more clearly than Aquinas; and in *Convivio* he pushes the distinction virtually as far as it will go within the bounds of Christian orthodoxy. In Dante's scheme of things, *relative* inferiority does not necessarily imply total subjection. We find this typically Dantean idea at the root of his analysis of the ideal relationship between the empire and the papacy (*Comedy,* the "two suns" of *Purg.* 16.107; *Mon.* 3), between philosophy and theology *(Convivio, Comedy, Monarchia),* and here—at the origin of such later developments—between ethics and theology.

The theme of the third book is announced in the last chapter. It will be the nobility of Lady Philosophy, full of sweetness, virtue, and knowledge. Her eyes are the philosophical proofs she offers, which confer blessedness on those who love her and "salvation from the death brought about by ignorance and vice" (*Conv.* 2.15.4). These extravagant claims are accompanied by the use of terms reminiscent of the mystics' passionate exaltation of the soul's longing for God, and they culminate in the assertion that philosophy is truly "the most beautiful

and most virtuous daughter of the emperor of the universe, to whom Pythagoras gave the name Philosophy," so that, in his exposition of *Voi che 'ntendendo*, the word "love . . . always signifies the study" of philosophy (*Conv.* 2.15.12 and 10).

Book 3: A hymn of love to philosophical wisdom

All the resources of Dante's love poetry—combined with his eloquent prose commentary (inspired by the Sapiential books of the Vulgate and the Song of Songs)—are exploited to the full in the task of celebrating Philosophy's beauty and perfection throughout book 3. In his extensive commentary to his canzone *Amor che ne la mente mi ragiona* (written expressly to rebut the charge of inconstancy in love: 3.1.11), we immediately sense how passionately Dante experienced the joys of intellectual activity and the thrill of discovering philosophical truths, a passion that made him pass many nights immersed in fervent study while others slept and which even damaged his eyesight (*Conv.* 3.1.3, 9.15). His enthusiasm was difficult to contain. It overstepped the bounds of orthodoxy, when it caused him to claim that philosophy is a miracle in some ways more effective than Christ's miracles or those of the saints—"which are the principal foundation of our faith"—for these may be doubted by skeptics, whereas philosophy "is a visibly miraculous thing that can be experienced daily by the eyes of men, and she makes other miracles credible: hence, it is obvious that this lady with her wonderful countenance helps our faith" (*Conv.* 3.7.16). Indeed, throughout this section of his *Convivio* or Banquet of Wisdom, Dante's philosophical ardor is such that it seems akin to the ecstasy of contemplation described by Richard of St. Victor in his *Benjamin Major* (1.4): "the free penetration into the manifestations of wisdom by a mind suspended in wonder." And as Dronke remarks (1997a, 34), Dante "now claims for the Donna Gentile precisely that status of incarnate divine miracle, blessed in her effects, which he had claimed for Beatrice in the *Vita Nova*." Indeed, philosophy even possesses a miraculous ability to destroy vices that are innate, since "her beauty has the power to renew nature in those who gaze on her; which is a miraculous thing" (*Conv.* 3.8.20).

Philosophers are lovers of wisdom (*Conv.* 3.11.5). No one can be called a true philosopher who loves wisdom and knowledge "for utilitarian reasons as do lawyers, doctors and almost all churchmen, who do not study in order to become wise but to acquire money and rank" (*Conv.* 3.11.10). Philosophy leads to the perfection of humanity's noblest part, the intellect, conferring a beatitude which, however, differs from that enjoyed in paradise in that the latter "is perpetual, which this one cannot be for anyone" (*Conv.* 3.8.5). Here is the crux of

the matter: despite later modifications, Dante sees the difference between earthly and heavenly beatitudes largely in terms of time and eternity, rather than in the interplay between nature and grace.[8] In fact, grace is virtually absent from *Convivio*'s depiction of life on earth.

On the other hand, Dante does make a clear-cut distinction between the human and the divine, although he regards the human being as a "divine animal" (*Conv.* 3.2.14) and he wholeheartedly accepts Aristotle's evaluation of philosophical speculation as a "divine" activity (*Ethics* 10.7). It is in the last chapter of book 3 that Dante most resolutely faces up to the problems posed by this optimistic view of the human condition. After reasserting his claim that in the possession of wisdom humanity sees all its desires fulfilled as human beings, he concedes that it may be difficult for some to accept this claim, since wisdom (now synonymous with philosophy) cannot "perfectly reveal certain things" to humankind *in via* (*Conv.* 3.15.7). Together with Christian doctrine, Augustine's celebrated statement at the very beginning of his *Confessions* (1.1) evidently reverberated throughout Dante's being: "You [God] made us for yourself and our heart is always restless until it finds peace in You" (cf. *Par.* 30.100–102). Dante now attempts to overcome this difficulty inherent in the human condition by stating that natural desire is always commensurate with a creature's capacity, "hence man's desire is limited in this life to the knowledge attainable here, and it does not go beyond this point except by error, which is outside nature's intention" (*Conv.* 3.15.9). Even angels cannot know everything. Hence, "since it is not given to our nature to know God and certain things in their essence, such knowledge is not naturally desired by us" (*Conv.* 3.15.10). It was only with great difficulty that a medieval Christian could make such a claim. Aquinas, for example, did not hesitate to affirm that the contemplation of things divine is "the activity most proper to man and the most delightful" (*S. Th.* 2.1.3.5). Aquinas denied that the desire for knowledge could be quenched in this life; and, momentarily casting Aristotle aside, he returned to the mainstream of Christian thought (e.g., *Contra Gentiles* 3.48) by refusing to accept the idea of a natural goal for humanity on earth that was not utterly subordinate to its supernatural destiny. However, no less an authority than Albert the Great, Aquinas's teacher, claimed that "although things divine are not perfectly conjoined to us in their own mode, they are nonetheless perfectly conjoined to us according to the measure of our disposition . . ." (Dronke 1997a, 45).

The influence of Albert the Great's writings on Dante's thought has been well illustrated by such scholars as Bruno Nardi, Maria Corti, and Cesare Vasoli. Not only does the Dominican theologian point the way for what we may term Dante's "philosophical optimism," but Albert (c. 1200–1280) also included a significant number of Neoplatonic elements in his fundamentally Aristotelian but eclectic teachings—elements that were clearly congenial to Dante's outlook.

Dante's Neoplatonism is evident in such passages as *Conv.* 3.6.4–6 and 3.7.2–7, which are based on a view of the created universe seen as multiplicity proceeding downward from the supreme unity existing in the First Mind of God and gradually becoming embroiled or imprisoned in matter and contingency—a vision that also inspired passages in the *Comedy* (e.g., *Par.* 13.52–78).

An even more significant aspect of Dante's philosophical eclecticism is the fusion of biblical Wisdom, together with the Bride of the Song of Songs, with the Platonic-Aristotelian figure of Lady Philosophy, so that she is now hailed as "bride of the Emperor of heaven . . . and not only bride, but sister and beloved daughter!" (*Conv.* 3.12.14). Philosophy is truly "a loving exercise of wisdom, which is found supremely in God . . . and is united to Him in perfect and true manner, as if by eternal marriage" (*Conv.* 3.12.12–13). Dante implies the consummation of this virtual marriage when, in 3.15.16, he glosses line 72 of the canzone—"She was the thought of Him who set the universe in motion"—by a direct quotation from Proverbs 8.27–30: "When God prepared the heavens I was present . . . when He laid the foundations of the earth, I too was with Him, setting everything in order and rejoicing every day." This heady intellectual eroticism prepares the way for the celebration of Beatrice's beauty in such passages as *Paradiso* 18.8–21, 27.104–5, and 30.19–33. Indeed, the transformation of the silent Beatrice of *Vita Nova* into the *Comedy*'s loquacious spokesperson for Divine Wisdom is anticipated by Dante's portrayal of Lady Philosophy in *Convivio* 3. As will be seen later, in spite of the Christian taboo which forbade women to act as teachers of theology (1 Cor. 14.34–36), in the *Comedy* Beatrice is made to act not only as Dante's teacher throughout his heavenly ascent, but she even corrects churchmen on points of theology (*Par.* 29.70–126)—a revolutionary overturning of the gender roles made possible not only by the poet's vision of Beatrice Portinari in glory but also by his exaltation of God's "most beautiful and most virtuous daughter" in *Convivio* 3.[9]

Dante's orthodoxy

Such passionate enthusiasm for philosophy has led a number of scholars to assert that *Convivio* represents a stage in Dante's career when he became so besotted with his philosophical studies that subsequently he felt it necessary to repent of such a passion in his sacred poem. This hypothesis is not based on any solid internal evidence. As far as the latter is concerned, we may focus on two essential passages, both taken from the third book (which marks the zenith of his love and praise of Lady Philosophy). The first is proof that—unlike his Ulysses (*Inf.* 26.85–142)—the author of *Convivio* did not go beyond the bounds set by God, since he took care to translate and cite Ecclesiasticus 3.22 as a warning against sinful curiosity: "You shall not ask for things too high for you, nor seek out things

too difficult for you; but consider those things that God has commanded you and do not be curious about His other works" (*Conv.* 3.8.2; see also St. Paul's exhortation cited in 4.13.9: "Do not strive to know more than is fitting . . ."). The second passage is the Platonic assertion of man's intellectual limitations in the last chapter of book 3, where Dante writes: "to a certain extent these things blind our intellect, in that they affirm that certain things exist which our intellect cannot gaze upon, namely, God, eternity and primal matter"—things whose existence we accept wholeheartedly as an act of faith (*Conv.* 3.15.6). Far from evoking an infatuation leading to a Ulyssean "mad flight" (*Inf.* 26.125), Dante tells us that his Lady's manner changed, so that her harsh disdain eventually caused him to moderate and even restrict his studies to a branch of ethics (*Conv.* 4.1.8–9). Deeply enamored of philosophy as he was, the man who asserted that the human soul "naturally desires and wants to be united with God in order to strengthen its own being" (*Conv.* 3.2.7) was no crypto-heretic or radical Aristotelian.[10]

The controversial problem that brought Dante to a metaphysical halt—"whether the prime matter of the elements was known by God" (*se la prima materia de li elementi era da Dio intesa:* 4.1.8)—was a Scholastic conundrum.[11] Various points must be borne in mind. First of all, the word *intesa* could mean either "understood" or "intended, created"—as is evident from *Paradiso* 27.114, where God alone is said to comprehend *(intende)* the Empyrean in a permanent act of creation. Second, in Aristotelian terms, prime matter is not "something": as sheer potentiality, it is always undetermined being, by definition unknowable. How, then, is it possible to square prime matter's incomprehensibility with God's omniscience? And if the idea of primal matter could not be in God's mind, how could he have created it? These philosophical problems proved too great for Dante; wisely, he turned away from them. There is no indication that his difficulties were heretical—as they would most definitely have been, if they had been concerned with the (Aristotelian) eternity of matter or its creation at any remove. Indeed, if Dante had wished to signify the temptation of heretical belief, the logic of his allegory would have obliged him to indicate a moment of succumbing to temptation; and not, as he depicted himself, temporarily *repulsed* by his Lady's harsh behavior. What the beginning of *Convivio* 4 does reflect is his state of mental confusion and his inability to find a way out of a philosophical impasse. Later, in *Monarchia* 1.3.8, Dante would resolve the issue by declaring that it is impossible to divorce the potentiality of matter from its realization, while in the *Comedy* he would convey both the distinction between matter and form *and* their simultaneous creation by the image of three arrows shot from a three-stringed bow with the speed of light (*Par.* 29.22–36). Many years before, however, the fledgling philosopher had been stymied by an apparently insuperable problem.

Since the issue is vital to a proper understanding of Dante's thought, we must now turn to the *Comedy,* to examine the possibility that its author went on to reject philosophy. There, we find that the poet—whose intellectual outlook was conditioned at an optimistic moment in the history of Christian philosophy, when revelation and rational enquiry were judged compatible by such Christian stalwarts as Albert and Aquinas—did not hesitate to place that radical Aristotelian and Aquinas's opponent, Siger of Brabant, among the blessed in heaven (*Par.* 10.133–38). Of even greater significance is Virgil's role in the poem: just as the emperor, aided by the teachings of philosophy, must guide humankind to the happiness signified by the Earthly Paradise (*Mon.* 3.16.7–10), so Virgil guides Dante to this very same goal. A key episode in this connection is the one set on the shores of Mount Purgatory (*Purg.* 2.112–23), in which Cato rebukes Dante, Virgil, and others for listening to the sweet tones of *Amor che ne la mente mi ragiona,* Dante's own canzone, intoned by Casella and which had been chosen for commentary in *Convivio* 3. For some scholars, Cato's rebuke (ll. 121–23) is aimed not at simple negligence but at the love of philosophy that had inspired the hymn of praise penned by Dante years before in *Convivio* 3.[12] To interpret the episode, we need to ask ourselves a simple question: Could Dante have expected contemporary readers of *Purgatorio* to know that *Amor che ne la mente* was really a love poem addressed to Lady Philosophy, rather than a straightforward love poem as its citation in *Purgatorio* 2 implies? The answer must be firmly in the negative, for the unfinished *Convivio* remained unread by and virtually unknown to Dante's contemporaries.[13] Thus, the opposition intended is between the pilgrims' negligence, brought about by the power of music and the appeal of what would have been for Casella and the disembodied souls a song about human love, on the one hand, and their urgent need to proceed on the path toward purification and God, on the other—as exemplified by the chanting of Psalm 113, which signifies the liberation of the soul from sin (*Conv.* 2.1.7).[14]

There is in fact not one piece of compelling evidence that Dante, both philosopher and poet (who described himself as philosophy's friend in *Epistole* 12.3.6 and who wrote *Monarchia* and the *Questio de aqua et terra,* as well as *Paradiso* in the last decade of his life), ever renounced philosophy as a means of arriving at the truth necessary to humanity on earth. Indeed, in the eighth heaven, Dante goes so far as to claim that his love of God had been inspired not only by revelation *but also by proofs provided by philosophy* (the *filosofici argomenti* of *Par.* 26.25; see also, 46–48). Instead of positing a rejection of philosophy in the *Comedy,* we ought rather to regard the universal hierarchy and the problem of causality sketched out in the third book of *Convivio* as the philosophical embryo that developed into an essential part of the *Comedy*'s intellectual infrastructure.[15] Our conclusions must also take into account the fact that, because of insur-

mountable difficulties posed by certain metaphysical questions, Dante turned his full attention to the study of an ethical problem highly relevant to contemporary society: the nature of true nobility. Philosophy thus remained for Dante "a loving use of wisdom, which exists above all in God" (*Conv.* 3.12.12), but also one that could—and did—provide humanity with eminently practical answers concerning essential problems posed by society on earth.

Book 4: Philosophy, society, and politics

The fourth book—whose ostensible subject is the definition of nobility—provides us *inter alia* with the matrix of Dante's political thought, the result of his discovery regarding Rome's imperial destiny. This section of *Convivio* (as long as the other three parts combined) was written about 1306 as a commentary to the canzone *Le dolci rime d'amor ch'i' solia* (LXXXII: 69). Presumably, it was completed just before Dante embarked on the *Comedy*. Dante tells us that his study of philosophy made him love those who seek the truth and hate the followers of error and falsehood. One error above all others was most pernicious not only to the individual but to society as a whole: the idea that nobility consists in "ancient wealth and fine behavior" (*Conv.* 4.3.6), a fallacy responsible for a state of dire confusion in the world. Since, however, he attributes this definition of nobility to Frederick II, Dante sets out to reassure his readers that the rebuttal of this philosophical error in no way impugns the emperor's authority in its proper sphere. The way he does this leads to a quite extraordinary digression, covering two whole chapters (*Conv.* 4.4–5). Dante, a citizen of Guelf Florence, for the first time clearly upholds the imperial thesis while further proclaiming his belief that God had populated pagan, republican Rome "with citizens not human but divine" (*Conv.* 4.5.12), granting them divine assistance at crucial moments in their history, in order that Rome might unite the world in the universal peace necessary for the coming of its Savior.

Rome and her universal empire

This political conversion is paralleled by the rediscovery of the true message of Vergil's *Aeneid*, with its paean to Rome and its imperial destiny. In *Inferno* 20.113–14, we are told that Dante was well acquainted with every line of Vergil's poem—an unusual feat in an age when the classics were chiefly known through quotations and extracts found in anthologies. The first evidence we have of a detailed and comprehensive knowledge of Vergil's great epic appears at *Convivio* 4.26.9, where Dante refers for the first time to the sixth book of the *Aeneid*, with its description of Aeneas's descent to the underworld and the

foretelling of Rome's mission to unite the world.[16] Vergil, now acclaimed as "our greatest poet" (*Conv.* 4.26.8), is quoted as God's mouthpiece in 4.4.11, when *Aeneid* 1.278–79 is translated as proof that Divine Providence had chosen the Roman people to rule the world without limit of place or time: "to them have I given empire without end." This—Vergil's authentic historical and political message—had been ignored for a thousand years or more; and this is surely at least one of the reasons why his shade first appears to Dante in the *Comedy* as "someone who seemed weak through long silence" (*Inf.* 1.63).

In *Convivio* 4.4.1, Dante declares that the empire is rooted in the needs of society, which is organized with one end in view, a life of happiness. Since, as Aristotle declared, "man is by nature a social animal," individuals are incapable of fulfilling this collective purpose without guidance from the emperor, who is at the apex of the civil hierarchy and thus immune from greed. From this summit, he administers justice and secures peace for states, families, and individuals.[17] The need for unity—that *reductio ad unum* so characteristic of medieval thought—is asserted (*Conv.* 4.4.5–6), although Dante quickly passes on to illustrate the legitimacy of the Roman claim to supreme temporal power. Opponents (such as the Guelf extremists, who could claim the support of no less an authority than St. Augustine) claimed that Roman power was based on force alone; but force was only the instrument, "hence, not force, but reason—and divine reason at that—was the first cause of the Roman Empire" (*Conv.* 4.4.12).

The fifth chapter sets out to document the teleological process whereby God willed and brought into being the empire of Rome. That empire was decreed by God as the means of establishing the unity and peaceful state of the world necessary at the time of Christ's Incarnation. Similarly, Dante manipulates traditional chronology in order to prove that the origins of this historical process (both secular and divine) were laid *simultaneously* by Divine Providence through the birth of David, Christ's ancestor, in Israel, on the one hand, and the "birth" of Rome, on the other, when Aeneas made his epic journey from Troy to Italy (*Conv.* 4.5.4–6). Rome is thus placed firmly at the center of universal history, with the Romans viewed as another chosen people. And it is important to notice that the whole of this fifth chapter is truly a hymn of praise to the Eternal City and its *pagan* past, a hymn hardly relevant to the digression concerning the emperor's authority. Dante's newfound belief in the need for a supreme universal authority in the secular sphere, complementary to the pope's spiritual authority, takes on a radically new dimension, thanks to his discovery of the essential role played by Rome in God's blueprint for the world. As we have just seen, this discovery was made through Vergil's *Aeneid,* in which the Guelf exile found an impassioned justification of Rome's imperial mission. Thus, beginning with a reaffirmation of Frederick II's imperial authority, Dante's justi-

fication of the empire turns into a glorification of Rome, the city's name repeated obsessively in the fifth chapter, which exalts the citizens of her pagan past as "divine, in whom not human but divine love inspired their love for her" (*Conv.* 4.5.12). All who refuse to accept this providential design are condemned for speaking "against our faith" in denying "what God has thus providentially ordained!" (*Conv.* 4.5.9). This divine inspiration motivated Fabricius, Curius, Mucius, Regulus, and—above all—Cato (cf. *Purg.* 1–2). God, we are told, acted through these agents in preparing the way for and then setting up the Roman Empire, while intervening at crucial moments in the history of pagan Rome to save her from the Albans, the Gauls, the Carthaginians, and lastly from her own son, Catiline—in a lengthy rhetorical sequence punctuated by the fourfold repetition of the question "And was not the hand of God present?" (*Conv.* 4.5.18–19).[18] The apotheosis of Rome ends with the statement that even the stones of the city's walls are "worthy of reverence" and the very soil on which Rome stands is more worthy than is commonly proclaimed or realized by men (*Conv.* 4.5.20).[19] By the time he came to write *Convivio* 4, the various pieces in Dante's jigsaw of universal history had fallen into place. Its grand design was to remain unaltered through the *Comedy* and *Monarchia,* to the poet's death in 1321.

The digression continues in the sixth chapter. After the supreme political authority, the supreme philosophical authority must be identified. Dante therefore sets out to prove that Aristotle is the philosopher "most worthy of trust and obedience" (*Conv.* 4.6.6). Once again, the unifying principle is invoked: all human activity on earth is directed toward a single end, namely the life for which human beings are ordained insofar as they are human. With this end constantly in view and with his quasi-divine intellect, Aristotle brought the science of morality to its final perfection (*Conv.* 4.6.16). Hence, as the "master and guide of human reason" (*Conv.* 4.6.8), he is the supreme authority in the sphere proper to philosophy. This division of humankind's natural or secular activities into two spheres under two mutually autonomous authorities is typical of Dante's method. The two are complementary: the emperor is to be guided in his task by philosophical truths, for government without the aid of philosophy "is dangerous" and philosophy deprived of the emperor's authority has no practical effect, whereas when the two are united, they are "most useful and most powerful" (*Conv.* 4.6.17). The perfection of this union is exalted in the Bible (Wisd. 6.23); its antithesis is now found in the rulers of Italy, apostrophized as "enemies of God" (*Conv.* 4.6.20). But the cause of Italy's woes is not merely the wicked incompetence of its rulers; it is to be found above all in the absence of an emperor who, endowed with the bridle of Roman law, must guide humanity on earth and restrain its will even as a good horseman controls his steed (*Conv.* 4.9.10).

The nature of nobility

Following the Scholastic method of philosophical analysis, Dante exposes contemporary fallacies about his stated theme, nobility. To be condemned above all is the foolish individual who claims that he is noble because his father or grandfather was truly worthy, "although he himself is worth nothing" (*Conv.* 4.7.2). In fact, he is even more to blame, for his life and actions ought to have followed the glorious example set by his predecessors. In order to drive his point home, Dante invents a parable of two people lost in the snow. The first finds the right way, without any help; the second loses his way and falls into thorn bushes and ruins. Which of the two is to be judged worthy? This is the first of a number of poetic images in book 4 that point the way to the *Comedy*'s superabundance of imagery (cf. 4.7.3, where error is pictured as an all-devouring weed in a field that must be cleared by the author, as well as the image cited above of the human will as a horse and the emperor as its rider, which will reappear in *Purg.* 6.88–93).

Dante not only rejected the feudal concept of nobility, he was also opposed to the world of nascent capitalism with its lust for wealth. He now devotes three chapters (*Conv.* 4.11–13) to proving that riches, far from being indispensable to nobility, are essentially base. There is no justice in the way they are distributed; their promise of contentment is utterly false; and their evil allurements have been denounced by David, Solomon, Cicero, Horace, Seneca, Juvenal, and "every other writer and poet" (*Conv.* 4.12.8). The desire for riches destroys not only individuals but also cities and whole regions. It leads men to commit every possible crime and even to desire the death of a father, so that both canon and civil law have as their chief aim the need to protect humanity from the effects of greed, which only increases with the possession of wealth (*Conv.* 4.12.9). Dante deals with the objection that knowledge, too, must be base, since like wealth it instills a desire that never ceases to expand and can never be wholly satisfied. He quickly goes on to proclaim the perfection of knowledge, although once more he has to wrestle with its relative imperfection on earth, owing to the limitations of human nature. In the acquisition of knowledge, an individual moves from one step to the next. In this progression, each step is mastered, thus achieving ever "greater perfection," whereas a desire for riches is based on a constant frustration devoid of all perfection (*Conv.* 4.13.2). Furthermore, it is wrong to claim that the natural desire for knowledge cannot ultimately be gratified, for it can in fact be wholly satisfied, provided it remains within its natural limits, as Averroës (1126–98) and Aristotle imply and St. Paul makes clear (Rom. 12.3). Indeed, the right measure of knowledge is analogous to the just use of wealth. In the fourteenth chapter Dante attacks the static nature of feudal society with its illusion that time can help to confer nobility through the possession of "an-

cient wealth" (*Conv.* 4.14.1). In the next chapter he adduces humanity's descent from Adam, to prove that individuals must be capable of becoming noble through personal worth, whether or not they belong to the nobility. In typical fashion, Dante goes out of his way to show that it is universally believed that humanity had a single ancestor—even by such disparate authorities as Aristotle, the Christian faith, "which cannot err," Plato, Ovid, and "the religion and ancient belief of the Gentiles" (*Conv.* 4.15.5).

Second part of book 4

With the second half of book 4, we arrive at the *pars construens* or positive part of Dante's exposition. First, he defines the term "nobility" as indicating in common usage the perfection of a thing's nature, as when people speak of a noble horse or a noble stone because they have realized their full potential as horses or stones (*Conv.* 4.16.4). In order to discover the hallmark of nobility in human beings, we must examine its effects, "which are the moral and intellectual virtues" (*Conv.* 4.16.10). The practical bent of Dante's interests in *Convivio* 4 leads him to put to one side the intellectual virtues in order to concentrate on the moral virtues. In fact, he asserts that the latter are the most truly human of all virtues, "because in all respects they lie within our power" (*Conv.* 4.17.2). The underlying distinction between the active life and the life of contemplation leads to the most stringent separation of these two spheres of human activity with their respective virtues. Dante is careful to remind his readers of the superior happiness afforded by contemplation (*Conv.* 4.17.9); and everything in his recent experience—his exile and his passionate involvement with philosophy—leads him to echo Aristotle's praise of this intellectual activity.

On the other hand, what Dante takes away from the active life by affirming its relative inferiority, he generally restores in practice. A fascinating example of this vindication of the active life is the liberty Dante takes with the traditional interpretation of Christ's words to Martha. In Luke 10.42, Christ tells Martha, as she busies herself "with many things," that her sister Mary has chosen "the best part of all" by neglecting practical cares and giving her undivided attention to the words of her Savior. This episode was commonly interpreted as signifying the relative merits of the lives of action and of contemplation. Dante, however, applies not to Mary but to Martha (the active life) Christ's words "However, one thing is necessary" *(Porro unum est necessarium),* and he proceeds to apply them to Martha's actions (*Conv.* 4.17.10). In the Gospel text, "one thing" is clearly opposed to the multitude of Martha's cares, whereas the shift in Dante's translation of the Vulgate's *porro* (however) to "*certainly,* one thing is necessary" transforms the radical opposition implied by Christ's words into an acknowledgment of the utility of the active life. This interpretation is very

much Dante's own: in harmony with *Convivio*'s revaluation of the active life, it flatly contradicts the pronouncements of such authorities as Augustine, Gregory the Great, Bede, and Anselm.

Nobility, however, is not merely a question of possessing moral and intellectual virtues; it is the overall perfection of human nature. Such perfection makes human beings hardly lower than the angels (Ps. 8.6–7). It is given not to families but to individuals, when God finds the soul "ready and disposed to receive this divine act" (*Conv.* 4.20.7). Dante sets out to demonstrate how this union is accomplished, first by rational inquiry and then by following the revealed truths of theology. As far as philosophy is concerned, the opinions of Plato, Pythagoras, and others are discarded in favor of Aristotle's judgment. Yet, even while offering a scientific description of human conception, Dante cannot refrain from expressing his wonder at the miraculous fusion of body and soul and at the mysteries of God's ways (*Conv.* 4.21.6). He returns to his task by explaining that the creation of the embryo is effected by the sperm (the female ovum was judged to be essentially passive). This active element varies in its elemental composition, its generative virtue, and it is subject to certain celestial influences at the moment of conception. Then, divine intervention adds the intellectual principle: the "rational" soul, whose purity depends on the greater or lesser perfection of the embryo.

This explanation is at variance with the teachings of both Averroës and Aquinas, but it follows the doctrine expounded by Albert the Great in his *On the Nature and Origin of the Soul*. As already stated (*Conv.* 3.2.11–14), the basis of all life is found in the vegetative soul; animals also possess a sensitive soul, while humans add a third essential element, the rational soul.[20] The problem for orthodox Christians lay in safeguarding the unity of the tripartite human soul against radical Aristotelians (who believed in the separateness of the rational soul from the vegetative-sensitive compound), and the obvious misconception that three separate souls exist in humans. Dante was to return to this problem in *Purgatorio* 25.37–75, one of the peaks of his philosophical poetry and a passage that completes the views set forth in *Convivio* 4.[21] Whereas the vegetative and sensitive souls are both produced by the formative power of the male seed—a process induced by the power of the heavens (thereby providing a scientific basis for a qualified belief in astrological influences)—the miraculous transformation of an animal embryo into a human being is an act performed directly by God and thus untouched by astral determinism. In both texts (*Conv.* 4.21.5 and *Purg.* 25.65) Dante refers to the infusion of the "possible intellect" by God. It was this cognitive faculty that made impossible any form of individual immortality, according to Averroës (*Inf.* 4.144), for the possible intellect was "loaned" to the individual and remained distinct, united with the human body only until death severed all links. For Dante, however, the possible intellect is totally united with

the individual through its absorption of the active elements present in the vegetative-sensitive compound, which transforms the whole into "one single soul" (*Purg.* 25.67–75).

Nobility is a divine gift made to the individual capable of receiving this "seed of happiness" (*Conv.* 4.21.8). So much seems clear to Dante from his study of natural science. As far as theology is concerned, Dante tells us that God similarly endows the soul with the gifts of the Holy Spirit in accordance with the individual's receptivity (*Conv.* 4.21.11). That he should have developed such an idiosyncratic theology, which omits all reference to the Christian sacrament of baptism, shows how deeply Dante was conditioned by his attempt to turn professional philosopher.

Differences between book 4 and books 1–3

We must now assess some fundamental differences between the fourth and the first three books of *Convivio*. The differences between the two sections (the first three books and book 4) are striking and indicative of a different approach that prepares the way for Dante's poetic masterpiece (Corti 1983, 123–45).[22] Symptomatic of this change of perspective is Dante's idiosyncratic interpretation of the visit by the three Marys to Christ's empty tomb in the twenty-second chapter of the fourth book. He tells us that the three women may be taken to represent the "three sects of the active life, namely Epicureans, Stoics, and Peripatetics, who go to the sepulcher, that is, this world, which is the home of corruptible things, and seek the Savior, that is happiness *(la beatitudine),* and do not find it there" (*Conv.* 4.22.15). The angel's words to the women tell us what our nobility in fact teaches us: that "whoever looks for happiness in the active life" will not find it there; instead, happiness will go before us "in Galilee, that is to say in speculation" (*Conv.* 4.22.16). Dante points out that the Bible says that Christ and beatitude will *precede* us, not that they will be with us, since "in our contemplation God always lies ahead of us, and here we can never reach Him, who is our supreme beatitude" (*Conv.* 4.22.17). This is quite different from the astounding claim made near the end of the third book, when Dante asserts that the *theological virtues* make it possible for men to "rise up to philosophize in that heavenly Athens, toward which the Stoics, the Peripatetics, and the Epicureans hasten together in common accord and by the light of eternal truth" (*Conv.* 3.14.14–15). The radical optimism of "a philosophical utopia—a heaven of reason, rather than of theology's saints and angels" (Dronke 1997a, 35), so characteristic of the third book, is now tempered by a vein of orthodox skepticism concerning the powers of human reason unaided by grace. This shift in outlook is reflected in the sources quoted by Dante. For the first time, in the fourth book religious sources are quoted more frequently than Aristotle (whereas in the

second book quotations from Aristotle were three times, and in the third book more than twice, as numerous as quotations from religious authorities).

Returning to the twenty-second chapter of the fourth book, we find further evidence of this important shift. Whereas in book 3, humanity's desire for knowledge was limited to the kind of knowledge attainable on earth and could therefore be wholly satisfied (*Conv.* 3.15.9), now in 4.22.13 the life of speculation cannot be practiced to perfection on earth, since it will be fully realized only in the vision of God, "the supreme object of our understanding." Aristotle's optimism is replaced by the Christian concept of the limitations of life on earth, expressed in terms Aquinas might have used. Similarly, in the third book, the active life is linked to the moral virtues and offers a secondary happiness, while the life of the intellect provides the greatest possible happiness through the perfection of human reason (*Conv.* 3.15.4). In book 4, however, Dante has added a verbal marker of prime importance—the little word *quasi*—so that we now read that human happiness can be found "virtually imperfect *(quasi imperfetta)* in the active life, in other words in the practice of the moral virtues, and then almost perfect *(perfetta quasi)* in the practice of the intellectual virtues." Both ways, however, are intended to lead to "supreme happiness, which cannot be had here on earth" (*Conv.* 4.22.18). Another important factor is the addition of the cardinal virtues as necessary for the proper ordering of the active life (*Conv.* 4.22.11). However, the greatest switch from Aristotelian to Christian ethics occurs in the surprising metamorphosis of magnanimity from the Aristotelian virtue connected with honor and fame (*Conv.* 4.17.5) to its Christianized form, whereby it becomes a synonym of the cardinal virtue of fortitude, which had led Aeneas to go down "into hell in search of the soul of his father Anchises and face up to so many dangers" (*Conv.* 4.26.7–9). Together, all these elements contribute to the process that transformed the optimistic Christian humanist of the third book of *Convivio* into the Christian world-judge of the *Comedy*.

The four ages of man

We must now return to the twenty-third chapter, where, in characteristic fashion, Dante follows up his theoretical exposition of the origins of nobility with an eminently practical application. For this, he divides human life into four ages: adolescence (which lasts until our twenty-fifth year); youth (twenty-five to forty-five); old age, from forty-five to seventy; and an occasional bonus of some ten or eleven years constituting extreme old age *(senio)*. Dante's love of symmetry is obvious in the way he divides up the biblical span of seventy years with twenty years spreading out in both directions from the midway point of thirty-

five, flanked by two periods of twenty-five years, in the sequence 25–35–45–70 (35 – 10 = 25; 35 + 10 = 45; 45 + 25 = 70). He also mentions that Plato lived to be eighty-one years old, on account of his natural perfection, adding that Christ would no doubt have lived to this age, if he had not been crucified—another homage paid to the number nine (of which eighty-one is the square), which had accompanied Beatrice throughout her life on earth (*VN* 29.2).

All this may seem rather quaint. More important is the fact that, for Dante, nobility expresses itself in different ways during the various phases of human life. We also find some significant changes to a number of basic Aristotelian concepts already introduced. For example, the list of the eleven moral virtues given in 4.17.4–6 is taken from Aristotle, because "where Aristotle's divine opinion has spoken, I feel that every other opinion should be discarded" (*Conv.* 4.17.3). However, when Dante comes to discuss these same moral virtues as the effects of nobility, he gives a different list, very much his own and which he elaborates through the rest of the fourth book. Aristotle's list presupposes a static view of the human personality in a fully developed, adult being. Instead, Dante's conception of nobility goes hand in hand with the biological development of human beings and traces an evolutionary progression toward the higher virtues.[23] Thus, adolescence is seen as the time when human beings concentrate on their physical development, so that its virtues include obedience and bodily grace (*Conv.* 4.24.11). In old age humans must cultivate the supreme virtues of prudence and justice, so that, if they reach their physical peak at the age of thirty-five, it is only in old age that human beings attain their moral peak.

Equally significant is the fact that Dante places his virtues in an active social context. The most striking example is that of justice, the most lovable and most "human" of all the virtues (*Conv.* 1.12.9), now defined in Aristotelian terms as the virtue that makes us "love and practice righteousness in all things" (*Conv.* 4.17.6). This blanket definition acquires its civic status in 4.27.10, when we are told that a man must be just in his old age "so that his judgments and his authority may be a light and a law to others."[24] Equally important is the fact that Aristotle had excluded prudence from his list of moral virtues, because he considered it to be an intellectual virtue. In signaling prudence as the prime virtue of old age, Dante restores the rational element to virtuous action. The cardinal virtue of prudence is in fact indispensable as a guide to action, since it gives true counsel and ensures success "in human affairs and activities" (*Conv.* 4.27.6); and it is the one thing Solomon asked for when God offered to give him anything requested (3 Kings 3.9–10; *Par.* 13.94–108).

We thus witness the gradual development of the human being's personality from the preoccupation with physical development in adolescence to altruism in old age, when the elderly "must open out like a rose which can no longer

stay closed but must cast its perfume abroad" (*Conv.* 4.27.4). The divorce brought about by the rigid separation of the active life and its moral virtues from the contemplative life with its intellectual virtues is now quietly annulled in Dante's evolutionary view of nobility, whose last stages are governed by the alliance of prudence with justice. The moral virtues have been intellectualized and the individual's role in society is brought to the fore.

Such harmony is of prime importance. Nevertheless, it leaves out a whole area of human experience that was to be of paramount importance to the author of the *Comedy:* the area concerned with religious belief and practices, which is only hinted at in Dante's description of extreme old age. No particular virtues are assigned to this exceptional stage, although we read that it befits the noble soul at this point "to return to God" and to "bless the voyage" accomplished during its sojourn on earth (*Conv.* 4.28.2). Death must be a "haven"; and, in preparing for it, the sails of earthly concerns and activities must be lowered in order that the haven may be reached in safety and peace. Here we find the first mention of the human being's relationship with God. Until now, life on earth has been viewed as an essentially autonomous process, with duties imposed by participation in a social community. Only now is the religious dimension of life addressed. This fact alone must make us realize how very different *Convivio*'s perspective is from the all-embracing view that inspired Dante's *Comedy*.

Equally startling is the way in which this new dimension is illustrated. The soul's return to God is exemplified by Lucan's account of a pagan marriage and divorce. Marcia's return as Hortensius's widow to Cato, her first husband, is interpreted allegorically as showing that "the noble soul at the beginning of extreme old age returns to God. And what earthly man was more worthy to signify God than Cato? None, surely" (*Conv.* 4.28.15). Cato reappears in the *Comedy* as the guardian of purgatory; and it is clear how profoundly Dante was impressed by the praise of Cato found in ancient writers. It is nevertheless wellnigh incomprehensible that a pagan suicide (who was also Caesar's implacable enemy) should be chosen to signify God at the end of *Convivio* 4. Possible reasons why Dante chose Cato as guardian of his purgatory are examined in chapter 9, especially the Christological accretions to his pagan life. For the time being, we may simply note that line 123 of *Le dolci rime* ("from the moment she weds with the body") implies that Marcia's marriage to Cato required Cato to represent *the human body* in this strangest of all allegories. Subsequently, full of admiration for the Stoic hero (cf. *Conv.* 4.5.16), Dante must have shifted his allegorical aim to focus on the soul's final return to God (*Le dolci rime,* l. 137). Hence, his attempt to justify this immense conceptual leap: "what earthly man was more worthy to signify God than Cato? None, surely." But nothing should dull our amazement at this particular *tour de force,* whereby we find the great-

est poet of the Christian faith illustrating humanity's relationship with its Creator through the example of a pagan divorce and remarriage!

After the shock of this allegorical interpretation and intrusion (in *Conv.* 4.1.10–11, Dante had declared that he rejected the use of allegory in *Le dolci rime* in order to make its message more effective as a necessary remedy for a social ill), the fourth book is brought to an end. *Convivio* is thus left interrupted, with less than one-third of the projected book written—and with a final reminder that individuals cannot be ennobled by their families. The essential link between nobility and philosophy is also proclaimed: "for they love each other so greatly that nobility always asks for her, and philosophy does not cast her sweetest gaze elsewhere" (*Conv.* 4.30.6).

Conclusion

The imposing fragment known as *Convivio* must be regarded as vital evidence of an important stage in Dante's development as both a writer and a thinker, in which we find a number of significant elements pointing in the direction of Dante's masterpiece. Four of its most striking features—boundless confidence in the Italian language (book 1); appropriation of biblical allegory for secular writings (book 2); faith in the ultimate compatibility of philosophical inquiry and revealed dogma (book 3); the belief that the Roman Empire had been chosen by God to unite the whole of humanity (book 4)—all bear witness to the work's importance in Dante's career as both writer and thinker. From a stylistic point of view, it would be difficult to imagine the *Comedy* without the experience of the earlier work (whose prose was a necessary stage in and testing ground for Dante's development as a writer).[25] It was during this "unpoetic" phase in Dante's development—the period from 1303 to 1308, which saw the production of both *De vulgari eloquentia* and *Convivio*—that the future poet of the *Comedy* mastered the art of expressing the most complex subtleties of human thought. What had hitherto appeared as the monopoly of an intellectual elite—especially ethics or "morality . . . the beauty of philosophy" (*Conv.* 3.15.11)—was for the first time effectively transmitted through the "natural" medium of the vernacular and thus made accessible to a new class of reader. The audience for which Dante was to write his *Comedy* had already appeared on the writer's horizon.

Similes (scarce in Dante's early writings) are more frequent in *Convivio*—a development that anticipates one of the glories of his poetic masterpiece. Especially noteworthy is the prevalence of similes and metaphors in the final chapters of the last book. We may take as our example:

> the noble soul in its last age . . . returns to God, as to *that port* from which it left when it first entered *the sea* of this life . . . *the path* . . . straight and true, untroubled by *violent storms* [cf. *Inf.* 26.136–42] . . . a natural death is for us like *reaching port after a long journey,* and coming to rest . . . like a *goodsailor* . . . so we must lower *the sails* of our earthly activities [cf. *Inf.* 27.79–81] . . . like a *mature apple* [cf. *Par.* 26.91–92] . . . And *like someone* arriving after a long journey, before entering *the gates of his native city,* is greeted by the citizens, so the noble soul is greeted . . . by *the citizens of eternal life* . . . and it feels that it has left behind *the inn* and returned *home* [cf. *Inf.* 15.54], that it has left behind *the journey* and returned to *its city* [cf. *Purg.* 16.96 and *Par.* 30.130], that it has *left the deep and returned to port.* (*Conv.* 4.28.1–7; my emphasis)

This dense cluster of images is followed by an address to the reader of a kind that will be such a striking feature of the *Comedy*'s prophetic voice: "O you wretched and base souls who rush to this port under full sail, and where you ought to find rest . . . you wreck yourselves at the very place to which you have been journeying for so long!" (*Conv.* 4.28.7; cf. 3.5.22; 3.15.17; 4.6.19–20; 4.27.13–14).

Another feature common to both works is their structural symmetry, based on the principle that "we say that something is beautiful, when all its parts are in due accord" (*Conv.* 1.5.13), as well as the importance of numerology in medieval art. Instead of the trinitarian number that is at the basis of the *Comedy,* the number 15 (3 × 5) is the architectural unit of books 2, 3, and 4 (Simonelli 1970, 2:193). In book 4, with its thirty chapters, the first fifteen refute common errors concerning nobility while the next fifteen expound the author's thesis. Dante's sense of balance and proportion—what he was to call the "bridle of art" in *Purgatorio* 33.141—is already in evidence, especially in the fourth book.

All this is but a signpost pointing in the direction of what we know was the inevitable outcome. In his *Comedy,* Dante would contradict a number of assertions made in *Convivio*. For example, Guido da Montefeltro and Bertran de Born are both damned (*Inf.* 27–28), instead of praised (Guido for his tardy conversion and Bertran for his liberality: *Conv.* 4.28.8 and 4.11.14). In *Paradiso* 2.61–148, Beatrice is made to refute the Averroistic hypothesis concerning the cause of the spots visible on the moon, replacing a physical explanation by a metaphysical one, indicating the degree of beatitude enjoyed by the angels who impart its motion to the moon. Another retraction is found in *Paradiso* 28.121–35 (cf. *Par.* 8.34–37), when the angelic hierarchy described in *Convivio* 2.5.6 (cf. Brunetto Latini, *Tresor* 1.12) is rearranged according to the sequence first found in a sixth-century text, *The Celestial Hierarchy,* attributed to Dionysius the Areopagite. As Hollander observes (2001, 90), "The later poem at times tackles

the task of clearing the record of errors in *Convivio*. And it is clear that some of these are not trivial."

It appears that until the very last moment Dante intended to finish his massive enterprise: as late as *Convivio* 4.26.8, he looks forward to book 7, while, in 4.27.11, justice is for the second time selected to be the theme of book 14. What caused him to break it off, in all likelihood we shall never know. The election of Henry of Luxembourg as emperor on November 27, 1308, soon brought a sense of new urgency to Dante's political message. For this message, the synchronization of pagan and religious history in the persons of Aeneas (ancestor of Rome) and David (ancestor of Christ) is of the utmost significance (*Conv.* 4.5.6), since—as we have seen—it shows that Dante felt he had traced the twin paths that led to the establishment of God's providential design, with its "two suns" established to guide humanity to happiness on earth and to beatitude in heaven (*Purg.* 16.106–8).

Two essential things were still lacking: a belief in the supremacy of poetry as vehicle for the communication of a universal message, as well as the religious dimension and vision that together were to fashion the *Comedy*'s universe. Poetry, with its "ornaments," is here seen as a distraction for the reader (*Conv.* 1.10.12). In his *Vita Nova,* Dante had already set his hand to writing a prose commentary to certain of his poems, but these remained the core element of that *libello.* Instead, in *Convivio*, the poems chosen are little more than a pretext for a dazzling display of erudition and dialectic. The moment of Dante's conversion to poetry as the supreme medium for the expression of the totality of human experience and knowledge remains hidden; but it is evident that in writing *Convivio* he had not yet found his vocation as *poeta-theologus.*[26] As far as that vocation is concerned, we have seen that the author of *Convivio* was convinced that philosophy helped the Christian faith (*Conv.* 3.7.16), that Holy Church could not utter falsehood (*Conv.* 2.3.10), and that its doctrines commanded supreme authority (*Conv.* 4.15.9). Nevertheless, these principles had to be fused by the white heat of its author's religious and poetic convictions in order to create the explosion that gave birth to Dante's sacred poem, his *Comedy*.

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