

Dante and Lady Philosophy

By Andrew Frisardi

Early in the *Convivio*, Dante seems eager to distance himself from his youthful writings in the *Vita Nova*. A decade or so of intensely active life has passed since Dante's composition of his first book. He is now middle-aged and famous both as a lyric poet and as a leading politician of his city, Florence, from which he was exiled a couple of years before he started composing the *Convivio*. Since writing the *Vita Nova*, in which he was a poet of love, he has become, as he says of himself in another work written near the time of the *Convivio*, a poet of ethical and social vision. As Dante puts it early on in the *Convivio*, while the *Vita Nova* was 'fervid and passionate' the present work is 'temperate and virile'.¹

At the same time, close connections between the two works are clear as well. Near the start of the *Convivio*, the final episodes of the *Vita Nova* are given as background material. Like the *Vita Nova*, the *Convivio* is a combination of prose and poetry. In fact, although the *Convivio* is not a narrative with a beginning, middle, and end, but a multifaceted series of essays, it is in many ways a sequel to the drama of the *Vita Nova*. A crucial episode in the *Vita Nova* is the death of Beatrice. Dante's shock of recognition of what her impending death means occurs at exactly the centre of the middle poem of that book—like a hinge between life before Beatrice's death and life after her death. Dante refers to Beatrice's death also in the *Convivio*, where he says it is the crisis in his life that led him to the study of philosophy, which

Note: This essay was previously published as part of Temenos Academy Paper No. 38, *The Quest for Knowledge* in Dante's "*Convivio*" (2015), with funding from the Golgonooza Foundation. The author wishes to express his thanks to the Academy for permission to reprint.

¹ *Convivio* I.i.16. All translations are mine, unless otherwise stated.

he personifies as a woman he fell in love with. His love of her is his consolation for the loss of Beatrice. When Beatrice died, he writes, 'I was pierced by such profound suffering that nothing could comfort me. However, after some time had passed, my mind, which was attempting to heal, turned, since neither my own nor others' consolation had made any difference, to the means that a certain disconsolate person had adopted for consoling himself.'²

The disconsolate person here is Boethius, whose *Consolation of Philosophy* tells us about Boethius's rising above the most adverse circumstances through philosophical contemplation, personified as Lady Philosophy. Dante tells us that at this time he also read Cicero's book *On Friendship*, in which a man named Laelius, whose friend Scipio has died, claims that the soul does not perish at death. Rather, following the great philosophers and oracles of antiquity, he thinks that our soul has a divine origin and destination, and that after death the soul returns to heaven. So, he says, death did not actually destroy his bond of affection with his friend. Dante writes in the *Convivio* that these works of Boethius and Cicero not only comforted him in his grief, but they led him to a newfound passion for philosophy:

And as it can happen sometimes that a man goes in search of silver and serendipitously finds gold, which a hidden cause presents, I, perhaps not without divine authority, in trying to console myself, found not only the remedy for my tears but words of authors, fields of knowledge, and books. Considering these, I determined then and there that philosophy . . . was a supreme thing. And I imagined her as a gracious lady, and I could not imagine her in any comportment that was not merciful; so that my truth-sense gazed on her so willingly that I could barely turn it away from her.³

The merciful quality that Dante says was intrinsic to philosophy, personified as a woman, is characteristic also of a beautiful woman who appears near the end of the *Vita Nova*, after Beatrice's death: the so-called Donna Gentile, or gracious or noble lady, whose compassionate expression comforts Dante. Here is the scene in the *Vita Nova*. The phrase 'some time later' at the beginning of the passage means that this episode takes place a little after the one-year anniversary of Beatrice's death:

² *Convivio* II.xii.1-2.

³ *Convivio* II.xii.5-6.

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