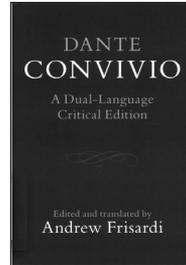


Dante: Convivio: A Dual-Language Critical Edition

Edited and Translated by Andrew Frisardi

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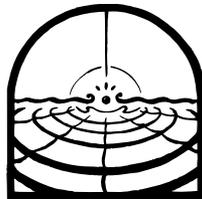


In considering the intellectual life of Dante Alighieri (c.1265-1321), it is generally acknowledged that two significant events of his life shaped his individual spiritual development. The first was his encounter with a Florentine maiden, Beatrice Portinari, who was to become his muse and, in various guises, his guide to the celestial abode. The second was his banishment from Florence due to political intrigues, which imprinted in him a profound sense of exile and an accompanying desire for spiritual reunion. Both these influences spurred in him a quest which is celebrated in his best-known work, the *Divine Comedy*, a polysemous description of the poet's journey from the psychological wilderness of Hell, through the ethical reformation of Purgatory — guided in this journey principally by the ancient poet, Virgil, and thence by the muse, Beatrice — to make the ascent through the concentric heavens of Paradise (laid out according to the Neoplatonic and Ptolemaic description of the *Convivio*). In the course of this journey, Dante outlines the stages and paths of spiritual regeneration of the soul through love, of love as a means of realizing the self in the divine. In so doing, he combines both strands of his spiritual quest — for Beatrice, the Beloved, and for the lost Paradise of the exile, and equally for Love and Wisdom — which converge in the “*ascensus mentis*” to the peak of Love and its Beatific Vision.

In his famous study on Dante titled *The Figure of Beatrice* (Faber, 1943), the Inkleing theologian, Charles Williams, comments on the significance of Beatrice in Dante's life. He observes that in the *Convivio* (IV, xxv. 5), Dante describes an experience, which is natural in the young, a feeling of awe at the awareness of (in Frisardi's translation) "great and marvelous things", which arouses reverence in pure natures. This is precisely what awakened in him when he caught sight of Beatrice Portinari during a May Day party when both were around nine years old. Her beauty evoked in him a sense of "reverence . . . and a longing to know more". Williams comments, "all his work consists, one way or another, in the increase of that worship and that knowledge". Referring to another physical encounter with Beatrice, alleged to have occurred nine years later (she died in 1290 at the tender age of 25), Dante later recalled its impact on him. Writing of it in *Vita Nova* he describes love's advent in these words (ii. 4): "Ecce Deus fortior me, qui veniens dominabitur mihi" ("Here is a god stronger than I, who comes to rule me," in Frisardi's *Vita Nova* edition), and he remarks on its significance (ii. 7), "From then on, I swear that Love dominated my soul." *Vita Nova*, compiled some two years after Beatrice's death, is an anthology of his verse produced according to the conventions of courtly love with which Dante and his friend and fellow Florentine, Guido Cavalcanti, were associated. Written innovatively and prosimetrically in the Tuscan vernacular in a combination of verse and prose, it describes a series of movements towards love to which Dante is spurred by, in part, an allegorical vision of an angelic Beatrice in the arms of the Lord, who proclaims his identity with the words "Ego Dominus Tuus". In the vision, the Lord clutches Dante's flaming heart in his hand - the heart which Beatrice's love then consumes. Beatrice is depicted here as celestial, a saint in death, and as the Beloved, the personification of Love herself. She, who is the apotheosis of humanity's potential for devotion — Dante suggests, through numerical and other symbolisms, that she is related to the Holy Trinity — is associated with the beginning of his 'new life' (indicated in the book's title).

During the decade or so following his writing of *Vita Nova*, Dante underwent a period of turmoil in his life, leading to his exile, during which he immersed himself in the study of philosophy. In 1295, during the papal reign of the new Pope, Boniface VIII, the ruling Guelphs in Florence split

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