Error in Dante’s Convivio

Dante writes the Convivio to rectify an error of reading. He makes it clear in the first chapter where he points out that the canzoni have not been read properly. The reader too taken by their beauty has ignored their true moral worth, “a molti loro bellezza piú che loro bontade era in grado” (1.1.14). But the Convivio is not meant for everyone because not everyone can benefit from Dante’s commentary. Although by nature every man desires to know since man’s final happiness consists in the ultimate perfection of the soul, which is attained through knowledge, not everyone is capable of attaining it (1.1.1). Dante lists a series of impediments that prevent man from fulfilling this natural desire and that affect equally the body and the soul. They can be divided in two types: internal and external impediments. The body is internally handicapped when it is physically incapable of receiving knowledge as in the case of deaf-mutes and people with similar shortcomings (1.1.3). The soul is similarly incapacitated when it is crippled by malice, which deceives it by making everything appear cheap and worthless (1.1.3). Readers affected by these internal disorders of body and soul should not even bother to take a seat at the banquet. Their defects are such that no understanding is possible.

E però ad esso non s’assetti alcuno male de’ suoi organi disposto, però che né denti né lingua ha né palato; né alcuno assettatore di vizii, perché lo stomaco suo è pieno d’omori venenosi contrarii, si che mai vivanda non terrebbe. (1.1.12)

Dante invites to his banquet only those readers whose defects of body and soul are external. These are the cripples of necessity, “di necessitade,” who are too busy or too lazy to read or to seek the company of the learned.

Ma venga qua qualunque è [per cura] familiare o civile ne la umana fame rimaso, e ad una mensa con li altri simili impediti s’assetti; e a li loro piedi si pongano tutti quelli che per pigrizia si sono stati, che non sono degni di più alto sedere: e quelli e questi prendano la mia vivanda col pane, che la farà loro e gustare e patire. (1.1.13)
In other words, those affected by internal disorders, physical or spiritual, will not be able to benefit from Dante’s explanation of the *canzoni* whose aim is to point to man the way to true happiness. Only if the defects are not inherent in the reader, but external to him, can he hope to overcome them and benefit from being served a higher form of nourishment.

The *Convivio* is not written solely for the benefit of those readers who have misread Dante’s doctrinal poems. The work has implications for Dante’s literary production as well. The *Convivio* is meant to go beyond the thematics of Dante’s earlier work, the *Vita Nuova*, the *New Life*, that Dante now regards as a work of the past, reflecting the enthusiasm and passion of youth and no longer adequate. The *Convivio*, instead, is meant to be the statement of a more sober and mature meditation in keeping with Dante’s newly arrived at awareness.

E se ne la presente opera, la quale è Convivio nominata e vo che sia, più virilmente si trattasse che ne la Vita Nuova, non intendo però a quella in parte alcuna derogare, ma maggiormente giovare per questa quella; veggendo si come ragionevolmente quella fervida e passionata, questa temperata e virile esser conviene. Ché altro si conviene e dire e operare ad una etade che ad altra; perché certi costumi sono idonei e laudabili ad una etade che sono sconci e biasimevoli ad altra, sì come di sotto, nel quarto trattato di questo libro, sarà propria ragione mostrata. E io in quella dinanzi, a l’entrata de la mia gioventute parlai, e in questa dipoi, quella già trapassata. (1.1.16–7)

Yet no conflict is meant between these two works.¹ The *Vita Nuova* is to the *Convivio* as youth is to adulthood.² Between them there is the same continuity and difference that exists between two stages of a man’s life. In terms of literary representation, this difference is expressed in terms of the allegorical exposition that Dante means to give in the *Convivio*. The youthful stage of the *Vita Nuova* corresponds to a period of literalism when the passion and enthusiasm of youth places value solely on appearances. In the more moderate and manly stage of the *Convivio*, Dante has learned to go beyond the appearances of things to the allegorical truth behind. In other words, the *Convivio* is also the place where Dante’s own youthful impediments have been overcome in the reasoned affirmation of the new awareness. The distance taken from the *Vita Nuova* now marks a shift from the poet’s youthful love for Beatrice to his present ma-
ture love for wisdom, for Lady Philosophy (“filo-sofia”), and from a literal or symbolic mode to an allegorical one. The bread of commentary that Dante distributes to his readers consists of the same knowledge that he himself has acquired by overcoming his youthful errors. The allegorical exposition that Dante intends to give ought to likewise enable his readers to go beyond the limiting and misleading appearances of a first reading to the true knowledge that lies behind the canzoni. The love of knowledge necessary to overcome these impediments will lead to an understanding of the true nature of knowledge and of the nobility that it bestows on man.

When Dante alludes to his youthful error in the Convivio, it is to resolve the apparent discrepancy between the ballad “Voi che savete ragionar d’Amore” (Rime 80) and the canzone “Amor che ne la mente mi ragiona” (Rime 81) discussed in the third book of the Convivio. In the ballad, Dante had spoken ill of philosophy calling her “disdegnosa” and “fera.” However, in the canzone, he not only praises philosophy for her beauty and virtue, but calls her “divina.”

In lei discende la virtù divina
si come fece angelo che ‘l vede;
e qual donna gentil questo non crede
vada con lei e miri li atti suoi.

(Dante’s explanation of the discrepancy is lengthy and aims at demonstrating that objects very often are not what they appear to be at first sight and that truth is usually discordant with appearances, “alcuna volta, la veritate si discorda da l’apparenza, e, altra, per diverso rispetto si puote trattare” (3.9.5). He gives the parallel example of the sky that although clear most of the time is sometimes dark. “Dico: Tu sai che ’l ciel sempr’è lucente e chiaro, cioè sempr’è con chiaritade; ma per alcuna cagione alcuna volta è licto di dire quello essere tenebroso” (3.9.5). Dante goes on to distinguish two types of objects: those that can be properly understood and those that cannot. He dismisses those that present difficulties to the understanding, those that are neither visible nor tangible, and concentrates on those elements, like color and light, that can be easily apprehended by sight. “Ma lo colore e la luce sono propriamente; perché solo col viso comprendiamo ciò, e non con altro senso” (3.9.6). Dante is concerned only with this latter category of objects.)
In order to explain what could go wrong, Dante sums up briefly the process of apprehension and representation of objects. He explains this process as a movement of the object’s visible form toward the eye through the medium of air. The visible form becomes imprinted in the pupil’s humour and becomes visible. In this fashion the image becomes registered on the brain by the sensitive faculty and we see (3.9.7–9). The point of the explanation is to stress that in order to have true representation it is necessary that both the medium and the humour of the pupil be clear and transparent. Any interference with the medium of transmission or any defect in the eye will hinder the reception of the visible form and distort the image.

Per che, acciò che la visione sia verace, cioè cotale qual è la cosa visibile in sé, conviene che lo mezzo per lo quale a l’occhio viene la forma sia sanza ogni colore, a l’acqua de la pupilla similemente; altrimenti si macolerebbe la forma visibile del color del mezzo e di quello de la pupilla. (3.9.9)

The medium can be defective when, for instance, the presence of the sun makes it impossible to see the stars or when vapours rise from the earth (3.9.12). Or the defect can be in the eye that receives the form as when the eye is inflamed by illness or fatigue (3.9.13). In either case what is transmitted to the “visual spirit” is altered and the image is no longer concordant with the object. Dante makes this digression to justify the behaviour of the “young” ballad, ballatetta, which because of inexperience had mistaken philosophy for a proud and pitiless woman. Just as the stars sometimes appear different because of some infirmity of the eye or some alteration of the medium, so the young ballad because of an infirmity of the soul judged philosophy solely according to appearances.

Partendomi da questa disgressione che mestiere è stata a vedere la veridade, ritorno al proposito e dico che si come li nostri occhi ‘chiamano’, cioè giudicano, la stella talora altrimenti che sia la vera sua condizione, così quella ballatetta considerò questa donna secondo l’apparenza, discordanza dal vero per infertade de l’anima, che di troppo disio era passionata. (3.10.1)

Dante’s explanation is that the soul, as it moves closer to the object of its desire, becomes incapable of judging rationally and can only infer “sensually,” as an animal, according to appearances.

onde, quanto la cosa desiderata più appropinqua al desiderante, tanto lo
desiderio è maggiore, e l’anima, più passionata, più si unisce a la parte concupiscibile e più abbandona la ragione. Si che allora non giudica come uomo la persona, ma quasi come altro animale pur secondo l’apparenza, non discernendo la veritate. (3.10.2)

The ballatetta, which believed philosophy to be “disdainful” and “pitiless” judged like an animal according to the senses, “sensuale giudicio” (3.10.3); the canzone, instead, judged philosophy rationally according to the truth, “secondo la veritate.”

Dante’s explanation reproposes the initial dichotomy that characterizes the distance between the Vita Nuova and the Convivio. Error is the result of a too passionate soul unable to judge rationally according to the truth. This error, however, is overcome in the more mature and rational soul capable of going beyond appearances. The error of the young ballad is left behind and the truth of philosophy is celebrated by the canzone.

E con ciò sia cosa che la vera intenzione mia fosse altra che quella che di fuori mostrano le canzoni predette, per allegorica esposizione quelle intendo mostrare, appresso la litterale istoria ragionata; sì che l’una ragione e l’altra darà sapore a coloro che a questa cena sono convitati. (1.1.18; italics mine)

The Convivio is the place where error is not only denounced but corrected in the light of a more rational and mature awareness. At the cognitive level, the work is a shift toward philosophy and its virtues, whereas at the level of representation it is a shift away from the literal, or the symbolic, to the allegorical. Truth resides at this level of representation and Dante’s aim in the Convivio is to explicate this sense to its readers.

The fact that the Convivio was left unfinished is not the only indication that, notwithstanding Dante’s assurances to the contrary, the road that he has paved for man’s happiness is not entirely free of obstacles. Dante provides us with other reasons in chapter 10 of Book 3 where he alludes to his technique of blaming the young ballad as “dissimulazione.”

E questa cotale figura in rettorica è molto laudabile, e anco necessaria, cioè quando le parole sono a una persona e la ’ntenzione è a un’altra; però che l’ammonire è sempre laudabile e necessario e non sempre sta convenevolmente ne la bocca di ciascuno. . . . questa figura è bellissima e utilissima, e puotesi chiamare ‘dissimulazione’. (3.10.6–7; italics mine)
The figure of dissimulation shifts the blame from Dante to the ballatetta making it appear the young ballad’s fault rather than the poet’s. A very common poetic device. Even in common usage the work and the poet are often exchanged metonymically when we say “Dante” to mean his works. But the figure of dissimulatio is not a case of metonymy and, as it is used by Dante, it is not just a stylistic device but has moral implications. The figure is used in condemning a vice when it is not proper to name the offender directly either because it would bring him shame and dishonour, or because harm could come of it.

Onde, quando lo figlio è conoscente del vizio del padre, e quando lo suddito è conoscente del vizio del signore, e quando l’amico conosce che vergogna crescerrebbe al suo amico quello ammonendo o menomerebbe suo onore, o conosce l’amico suo non paziente ma iracundo a l’ammonizione. ... (3.10.7)

Which is Dante’s case? His dissimulation has obviously the aim of drawing the reader’s attention away from himself to hide the shame of having misjudged philosophy’s true nature. But is this all there is to it? Dante’s next example of dissimulation provides us with more helpful hints. It tells of a wise warrior who, in order to draw attention away from where the real battle is taking place, feigns an attack on another side.

Ed è simigliante a l’opera di quello savio guerriero che combatte lo castello da uno lato per levare la difesa da l’altro, che non vanno ad una parte la 'ntenzione de l’aiutorio e la battaglia. (3.10.8)

The dissimulation has the purpose of covering up something. It distracts the attention of the observer by making something else appear to be the case. In other words, what appears to the observer to be the case is, on analysis, only a dissimulation. How can this type of dissimulation be said to be applicable to Dante in the Convivio? In what way can it be said that Dante is acting like the wise warrior? To answer these questions we must go back to that section where the poet justifies the error of the ballatetta and his own. The passage, partly quoted earlier, is the following.

cosi quella ballatetta considerò questa donna secondo l’apparenza, discordante dal vero per infertade de l’anima, che di troppo disio era passionata. (3.10.1; italics mine)
In attributing the error to the young ballad, Dante is covering up the fact that the impediment in question is internal, the result of an infirmity of the soul, and not easily corrected as the analogy with the infirmity of the eye first led us to believe. As Dante had stated in the first chapter of the Convivio, defects that depend on internal causes, such as infirmities of the soul and of the body, cannot be corrected. Only those flaws that result from external causes are susceptible of correction. Dante’s dissimulation is to make an internal and impossible impediment appear external and amenable to solution. Furthermore, by shifting the blame to the young ballad the error is minimized as a youthful blunder belonging to a past which has been safely left behind.

The dissimulation is not limited to this one case but invests the entire project of the Convivio. Just as the ballad’s impediment is said to be amenable to correction so is the reader’s. The wise poet’s strategy is meant ultimately for the reader who is made to believe that through the canzoni and their commentary he can easily acquire wisdom and achieve the happiness he so much desires. Dante assures his readers that those who have not been fortunate enough to have this wisdom bestowed upon them at birth will be able to acquire it through learning.

E similemente puote essere, per molta correzione e cultura, che lì dove questo seme dal principio non cade, si puote inducere [n]el suo processo, si che perviene a questo frutto; ed è uno modo quasi d’insetare l’altrui natura sopra diversa radice. E però nullo è che possa essere scusato; ché se da sua naturale radice uomo non ha questa sementa, ben la puote avere per via d’insetazione. (4.22.12)

Here the soul of man handicapped by the sensual appetite no longer is a factor and an impediment to learning as it was in the first chapter of the Convivio. Now the flaw is said to be not in man but in his circumstances. If the seed of goodness has by chance gone astray depriving man of his natural and ultimate happiness, this temporary and unfortunate situation can be corrected through the grafting of knowledge. The flaw, in other words, is no longer inherent in man but external to him. As in the case of the ballatetta, an internal impediment is now said to be external and beyond man’s control and thus easily amendable. While in the first chapter, it was said, in no uncertain terms, that the soul can be handicapped by the sensual
appetites, in Book 4 Dante insists that the soul can only be rational.

E non dicesse alcuno che ogni appetito sia animo; che qui s'intende animo solamente quello che spetta a la parte razionale, cioè la volontade e lo intelletto. Si che se volesse chiamare animo l'appetito sensitivo, qui non ha luogo, né instanza puote avere; che nullo dubita che l'appetito razionale non sia più nobile che 'l sensuale, e però più amabile: e così è questo di che ora si parla. (4.22.10; italics mine)

Dante’s strategy of dissimulation is to provide a one-sided view of human nature and one in which human error is the result of causes independent of man’s will and, for this reason, open to correction. Either through the practice of a moral active life or through the more perfect contemplative life, man has at his disposal two ways to achieve happiness directly and without impediments.

E così appare che nostra beatitudine (questa felicitade di cui si parla) prima trovare potemo quasi imperfetta ne la vita attiva, cioè ne le operazioni de le morali virtudi, e poi perfetta quasi ne le operazioni de le intellettuali. Le quali due operazioni sono vie expedite e directissime a menare a la somma beatitudine, la quale qui non si puote avere, come appare pur per quello che detto è. (4.22.18; italics mine)

In either case and with the help of Dante’s exposition in the Convivio, the reader will be brought back on the right and quickest path to “supreme beatitude.” As the wise warrior, Dante distracts the reader’s attention away from the real issue. Instead of confronting them with their own flaws, which in some cases might entail a recognition of the impossibility of correction, Dante pretends that wisdom can be easily acquired and easily imparted. It is a way of tricking the reader into believing that he too can improve through the study of philosophy but, as the incomplete Convivio and Dante’s subsequent Commedia demonstrates, it is a dissimulation that cannot be sustained and which is bound to fail.

Dante’s strategy is not unrelated to the role that Virgil or the Aeneid play in the Convivio as the literary model for Dante’s enterprise. Ulrich Leo, in his seminal essay on the Convivio, argues that one of the reasons that led Dante to abandon the Convivio for the Commedia was a more profound knowledge of the classical authors and of Virgil’s Aeneid, in particular.

This reading of the Aeneid, particularly of book VI, may have given him the final impulse to put into action what, virtually, had already become
nearly inevitable: to discontinue the Convivio, an ethical treatise, and also the De Vulgari eloquentia, and to go himself, as a poet, to Hell and Heaven. There he might hope to see, with his eyes opened and strengthened by divine grace, those things which, during the time of the Convivio, he had only thought or believed. (60)

By analysing the quotation pattern from the classics and from the Aeneid, Ulrich Leo shows that Dante, by the time he was writing the fourth treatise, had acquired a direct knowledge of these works. He no longer quotes from them but gives plot summaries that only a close reading can provide. Useful as this observation may be to a better comprehension of Dante's sources as well as to an understanding of the Convivio, the conclusions that he draws from it are conditioned by the accepted belief of Virgil as Dante's "duce" and as the voice of natural reason (Leo 61). Although Virgil fulfills the role of the guide and does embody the attributes of reason, Dante's relation to Virgil and to his poem is not as accepting as we have so far been led to believe. Besides providing Dante with the idea of undertaking a similar journey in the afterlife, a closer reading of the Aeneid also proved to him that the commonplaces on Virgil that he had unquestioningly accepted from tradition and which he had used in his works, were not correct. A closer reading of the Aeneid, of which Dante will ironically boast to Virgil in the Commedia, as well as a reading of Juvenal's Satires especially where they relate to Virgil, revealed a different Virgil to him. As the poet of the Empire writing the history of its origins and of its foundation, Virgil had compromised his art by employing a double standard of justice to cover up the aberrations committed by the ancestors of the Romans for whom he was writing. It is more probable, therefore, that the opposite of what Ulrich Leo claims is the case. A closer reading of the Aeneid must have persuaded Dante that the work did not provide an ethical model to follow and, in particular, that Aeneas was not the symbol of everything that is noble in man. The ethical values on which the Commedia is founded entail a rejection of the compromised system of values of the Aeneid as well as of an Aeneas-like figure as the central character of the poem.7

Even more interesting, for our present purposes, are the similarities between Dante's strategy of dissimulation, to which we have alluded earlier, and Virgil's compromised ethics. Dante's misrepre-
sentation of the conditions that make it possible to acquire wisdom is not unlike Virgil’s cover up of the crimes committed by the ancestors of the Romans or by those protected by Roman Gods. In both cases, the distortion is in function of a public that the poet wants to ingratiate and cajole. As the dissimulation of the wise warrior aims at conquering the castle, the wise poet wants to win over his readers or, as in Virgil’s case, to keep his patron happy and satisfied. The differences are clear. The moment Dante knows the hopelessness of ever returning to Florence or becomes aware through Virgil of the bankruptcy of an ethical model based on dissimulation, that is the time he breaks off the Convivio to write a poem that will expose all deceits, including his own in this work.

Dante’s dissimulation at the thematic level has its necessary counterpart at the level of textual representation. Dante’s promise of a philosophy that redeems and ensures happiness depends on its teachability and on the reader’s ability to decipher its signs. This had been the problem with the ballatetta and with reading the canzoni. At the level of representation, Dante’s dissimulation takes the form of a claim that a commentary can explain the meaning (of the figure) of the canzoni as if this meaning were self-evident. In the Convivio, the account of the literal meaning of the canzoni is followed by an explanation of the latent allegorical sense as if it were its inevitable and natural analogue. The literal is said to accompany the allegorical as bread a meal.

Dante’s dissimulation takes the form of a theory of allegory which is equated to a mode of allegorical reading common to theologians. In the Second Book, before commenting on the first canzone, Dante tells the reader that he wants him to understand the poems allegorically in the same way that scriptures are read according to the four allegorical levels.

Dico che, si come nel primo capitolo è narrato, questa sposizione conviene essere litterale e allegorica. E a ciò dare a intendere, si vuol sapere che le scritture si possono intendere e deonsi esponere massimamente per quattro sensi. (2.1.2)

Dante enumerates the four meanings—literal, allegorical, moral and anagogic—but does not follow the practice himself. He adds that the poets read the allegory differently from the theologians and he intends to follow the way of the poets.
Veramente li teologi questo senso prendono altrimenti che li poeti; ma però che mia intenzione è qui lo modo de li poeti seguitare, prendo lo senso allegorico secondo che per li poeti è usato. (2.1.4; italics mine)

Dante’s intention is to explain the literal and the allegorical meanings and, from time to time, to touch also on the others, “e talvolta de li altri sensi toccherò incidentemente, come a luogo è a tempo si converrà” (2.1.15; italics mine). Indeed, these two other meanings are so “incidental” to the exposition that Dante very rarely uses them. When he does they are not readings of a canzone but of Scripture.

In the Fourth Book, the example of Martha and Mary as symbols of the active and contemplative life is a reading of the Gospel of Luke.

Che se moralemente ciò volemo esponere, volse lo nostro Segnore in ciò mostrare che la contemplativa vita fosse ottima, tutto che buona fosse l’attiva: ciò è manifesto a chi ben vuole porre mente e le evangeliche parole. (4.17.11; italics mine)

And when in the Fourth Book, Dante wants the benefit of his commentary to reach the reader immediately, he even does away with the pretense of the allegorical commentary.

e cominciati una canzone nel cui principio dissi: Le dolci rime d’amor ch’i’ solia. Ne la quale io intendo riducere la gente in diritta via sopra la propria conoscenza de la verace nobilitade: si come per la conoscenza del suo testo, a la esposizione del quale ora s’intende, vedere si potrà. E però che in questa canzone s’intese a rimedio così necessario, non era buono sotto alcuna figura parlare, ma convennessi per via tostana questa medicina, acciò che fosse tostana la sanitade, [dare]; la quale corrotta, a così laida morte si correa. Non sarà dunque mestiere ne la esposizione di costei alcuna allegoria aprire, ma solamente la sentenza secondo la lettera ragionare. (4.1.10–11; italics mine)

Dante’s pretext is dictated by a major concern. He wants to impress upon his readers that the canzoni have a definite moral content and not a passionate one, as some of his critics had insinuated.

Temo la infamia di tanta passione avere seguita, quanta concepe chi legge le sopra nominate canzoni in me avere segnoreggiata; la quale infamia si cessa, per lo presente di me parlare, interamente, lo quale mostra che non passione ma vertù sia stata la movente cagione. (1.2.16)

Encouraging his readers to read as theologians read Scripture confers upon the canzoni, and on Dante’s entire enterprise, the needed moral
authority that previously had been put in question.9

Dante’s strategy of dissimulation is to equate the allegory of poets, which is a mode of poetic representation, with the allegory of theologians, which is a mode of reading. By stating that the allegory of theologians can read the allegory of poets, Dante makes the reader believe that the poetic figure is readable. Errors of interpretation, as I have already said, being dependent on external factors that can be easily corrected by eliminating the interfering causes. Dante’s dissimulation conceals what elsewhere he has stated on account of the figure. In the chapter where he discusses the visible and the intelligible, Dante excludes the figure, amongst others, as that which is neither properly visible nor tangible.

Ben è altra cosa visibile, ma non propriamente, però che altro senso sente quello, si che non può dire che sia propriamente visibile, né propriamente tangibile; si come è la figura, la grandezza, lo numero, lo movimento e lo stare fermo, che sensibili [comuni] si chiamano: le quali cose con più sensi comprendiamo. (3.9.6; italics mine)

The figure is neither “propriamente visibile” nor “propriamente tangibile” because we comprehend it with more than one sense. Differently from color and light, which can be easily comprehended because they are apprehended by the sole sense of sight, the figure is difficult to comprehend. For example, in the sentence “Achilles is a lion” the connoted quality of courage is not readily available to understanding. It is not “propriamente” visible or tangible. Besides exercising the sense of sight we must also intuit what the figure “lion” stands for. This characteristic of the figure makes it very difficult to read and leads easily to error as when we read literally that Achilles is a lion or, in the young ballad’s case, that philosophy is “fera” and “disdegnosa.” But this error is not resolved by dismissing the figure just as human nature cannot be improved by taking into account only the rational side of the soul and by ignoring the sensitive appetites. This is Dante’s error.

In the Convivio Dante aims to show his readers the true road to happiness by dissimulating the difficulties inherent in such undertaking.10 The impediments, Dante argues, are external to man and can be easily overcome by an understanding that goes beyond the false appearances of things to the truth behind. Allegorical understanding, as the theologians practice it, enables the reader to benefit from the
moral teachings that the poet has represented in his canzoni. Dante's version of "come l'uom s'etterna" fails, however, because his desire to win over an audience leads him to falsify the true nature of the problem and its solutions. If the Convivio fails therefore, it is not because philosophy is incapable of bestowing true happiness on man nor is it because the allegory of the poets is deemed insufficient. It fails because it misrepresents, willingly, both man's ability to change and the true nature of poetic figuration. Just as no reader reading the canzoni could arrive at the allegorical explanation that Dante gives in the commentary, no reader reading Dante's Convivio could ever find true happiness.

Dante probably adopts this strategy because at the time he writes the Convivio he still hoped to return to Florence. By writing this work in volgare, he probably hopes to ingratiate himself with his fellow Florentines and prove to them that he was the wise man, the savio, who could show them the way to true happiness. Perhaps if he had returned to Florence and Henry of Luxembourg had lived to become the emperor of the Italian States, Dante would have continued the Convivio and stopped at the De Monarchia. But this was not to be. As an exile who knew he was never to return to his native city, the dissimulation that he had used to return to Florence was no longer necessary. In fact his attitude toward man's salvation changes drastically. In a new work, which adopts a genuine poetic allegory and where the commentary is left to the reader who learns as he goes, one is treated to a vision of Hell where all degrees of dissimulation are enumerated and punished before any hope of salvation can be entertained. As for Dante, his own dissimulation in the Convivio will be accounted for and denounced before a new banquet, the Commedia, can take place.

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NOTES

1 Dante explains the difference between the young ballad and the canzone as that of two sisters who, although different and in opposition, are related by a common parent. "Per similitude dico 'sorella' de l'opera che da uno medesimo operante è operata; ché la nostra operazione in alcuno modo è generazione"
(3.9.4). (“I use the word ‘sister’ metaphorically, for a work which is written by the same author, since our work is in some sense a begetting.”)

2 The terms that Dante uses in Book 4 (see especially chapter 24) are “Adolescenza” and “Gioventute.” In discussing the difference between the Vita Nuova and the Convivio, I have preferred to use the more modern terminology of Youth and Adulthood to characterize this difference. This I have thought necessary to do in order to avoid unnecessary confusion and, eventually, unnecessary explanation.

3 See 3.9.5–6 where Dante discusses the etymology of “filosofo” (philosopher) as “amatore di sapienza” and “Filosofia” as “amistanza a sapienza, o vero a sapere.”

4 Dante’s criticism of philosophy in the ballad and his rejection of the “donna gentile” in the Vita Nuova are explainable, allegorically, by Dante’s difficulties with the study of philosophy. See Convivio 3.15.19.

5 Dante here is writing from experience. Because of long hours of reading, his eyesight had weakened and stars appeared to him blurred: “per affaticare lo viso molto, a studio di leggere, in tanto debilitai li spiriti visivi le stelle mi pareano tutte d’alcuno albo ombrate” (3.9.15). The example is particularly poignant because the study Dante is referring to is the study of philosophy.

6 By ballatetta Dante wants to stress the inexperience and fervor typical of youth that led the ballad to its error. The more adequate English rendition of ballatetta is “young ballad.”

7 For these same reasons the De Monarchia cannot be thought a later work than the Convivio, as Ulrich Leo suggests basing it on Dante’s greater knowledge of the Aeneid (59 n. 42). It is inconceivable that Dante could still make references to Virgil that were not ironic after breaking off with the Convivio.

8 Dante makes frequent use of the figure of dissimulation in the Rime. I refer the reader to Patrick Boyde’s excellent study on Dante’s lyric poetry in which he stresses the importance of this figure for Dante, but a consideration of its broader implications for Dante’s work and for the Convivio lie outside the scope of his study.

9 A similar suggestion is made in the letter to Can Grande where again, in offering the cantica of Paradiso to the Lord of Verona and Vicenza, Dante wants to bestow upon this work the same moral authority that one gives the Bible. However, in my opinion, Dante’s gesture is rhetorical, aimed at stressing the high seriousness of his poem and not to be taken as an hermeneutical key to his poem.

10 The commentary in vernacular for instructional purposes is already a genre before the Convivio. Dante’s predecessors are Brunetto Latini and Ristoro d’Arezzo who writes a work on astronomy. Hugh of St. Victor’s Didascalicon is the most celebrated example of a work that teaches the reader how to read according to the four levels of scriptural allegory. For general background on the Convivio see the appropriate chapter in Anderson.

11 Versions of why Dante abandoned the writing of the Convivio abound. A
The general critical trend has been to situate the break with the Convivio and the writing of the Commedia in terms of an opposition between prose and poetry, philosophy and theology, pagan philosophy and Christian philosophy, allegory of poets and allegory of theologians. For a critique along philosophical lines, see Mazzeo, Gilson, Nardi and Mazzotta. For studies that place emphasis on the theological aspect, see d’Alverny, Foster, Freccerò and Singleton.

12 On this question, see Simonelli who argues that the Dante of the Convivio wants to be known and studied as an author but disagrees with the thesis that Dante went out of his way to please his readers to return to Florence.

WORKS CITED


