

Dante's Letter to Cangrande (1320)—An Extract

Epistola XIII a Cangrande della Scala è un'epistola in lingua latina, ultima delle tredici Epistole di Dante Alighieri.

[...]

6. Those who wish to give some kind of introduction to a part of any kind of work ought to offer some information about the whole of which it is a part. Whence also I, wishing to offer something concerning the above named part of the whole Comedy by way of introduction, thought that I ought to first set down something about the whole work, that it might be a easier and better entry to the part. [...].

7. For me be able to present what I am going to say, you must know that the sense of this work is not simple, rather it may be called polysemantic, that is, of many senses; the first sense is that which comes from the letter, the second is that of that which is signified by the letter. And the first is called the literal, the second allegorical or moral or anagogical. Which method of treatment, that it may be clearer, can be considered through these words: 'When Israel went out of Egypt, the house of Jacob from a barbarous people, Judea was made his sanctuary, Israel his dominion' (Ps. 113.1-2). If we look at it from the letter alone it means to us the exit of the Children of Israel from Egypt at the time of Moses; if from allegory, it means for us our redemption done by Christ; if from the moral sense, it means to us the conversion of the soul from the struggle and misery of sin to the status of grace; if from the anagogical, it means the leave taking of the blessed soul from the slavery of this corruption to the freedom of eternal glory. And though these mystical senses are called by various names, in general all can be called allegorical, because they are different from the literal or the historical. Now, allegory comes from Greek *alleon*, which is Latin means 'other' or 'different'.

8. Now that we have seen this, it is obvious that the subject around which the two senses turn must be twofold. And therefore it is to be determined about the subject of this work when it is taken literally, then about the subject when it is understood allegorically. The subject of the whole work, taken only from a literal standpoint, is simply the status of the soul after death, taken simply. The movement of the whole work turns from it and around it. If the work is taken allegorically, however, the subject is man, either gaining or losing merit through his freedom of will, subject to the justice of being rewarded or punished.

9. Its form is twofold, the form of the treatise and the form of the treatment. The form of the treatise is three-fold, according to the three-fold division. The first division is that by which the entire work is divided into three canticles. The second that by which each canticle is divided into cantos. The third that by which each canto is divided into rhyming units. The form or the mode of treatment is poetic, fictive, descriptive, digressive, transumptive; and along with this definitive, divisive, probative, improbative, and setting examples.

10. The title of the book is: 'Begins the Comedy of Dante Alighieri, Florentine in birth, not in custom.' In order to understand you need to know that *comedy* comes from *komos* 'village' and *oda*, which means 'song', whence *comedy* sort of means 'country song'. And comedy is sort of a kind of poetic narration, different from all others. It differs, therefore, from the tragedy, in matter by the fact that tragedy in the beginning is admirable and quiet, in the end or final exit it is smelly and horrible; and it gets its name because of this from *tragos*, which means 'goat', and *oda*, sort of like 'goat-song', that is, smelly like a goat, as can be seen in Seneca's tragedies. But comedy begins with harshness in some thing, whereas its matter ends in a good way, as can be seen by Terence in his comedies. And thus letter writers are accustomed to say in their salutations in the place of an address 'a tragic beginning, a comical end'. They differ also in the way of speaking: the tragedy is elevated and sublime, the comedy loose and humble, as Horace tells us in his *Poetria*, where he permits now and again comic writers to speak like tragedists and also vice versa.

At times, however, even comedy exalts her voice, and an angry Chremes rants and raves; often, too, in a tragedy Telephus or Peleus utters his sorrow in the language of prose ...

And from this it is obvious that the present work is called comedy. And if we look at the matter, in the beginning it is horrible and smelly, because *Inferno*; in the end it is good, desirable and graceful, for it is *Paradiso*; as to the manner of speaking, it is easy and humble, because it is in the vulgar tongue, in which also women communicate. And thus it is obvious why it is called Comedy. There are also other genres of poetic narration, such as bucolic song, elegy, satire and the votive sentence, as also may be seen through Horace in his *Poetria*, but at present there is nothing to be said about these. [...]