Theology and Poetry

Dante, Theologian by Way of Poetry

Bluntly, I say that Dante’s *Comedy* is a work of theology. It is many other things besides – political, ethical, psychological – and it is a personal story of conversion, an apology for a life. In genre, of course it is a poet’s work, an apology for poetry, and, putting both together, it is a poet’s *apologia pro vita sua*. But it is a theologian’s work too, and not just in content. Indeed, it would be unhelpful from the outset to suppose that Dante the poet and Dante the theologian are properly distinguished as between a poetic vehicle and a theological passenger incidentally taking a ride on it, just as it would be a mistake, indeed the same mistake, to think of it as a theological work that is incidentally written in vernacular verse. For the poet and the theologian are one undivided Dante, and, whether it is theology as poetry or poetry as theology, Dante wrote the *Comedy* out of the one compulsion, that is, simply for truth’s sake – for truth’s sake you write theology because there is something that needs saying that calls for it, and you write poetry because that is the only way truthfully to say it.¹ Therein is in Dante a general guide to all good theological practice, one that is

¹ See Vittorio Montemaggi and Matthew Treherne, eds., *Dante’s Commedia: Theology As Poetry*, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010, for wide-ranging discussions of issues of Dante, the theologian and poet.
relevant to this day: Do only such theology as you have discovered out of intellectual need you have to do, there being a lot more theology done than anyone needs doing. And when you do what is needed theologically, in no time at all it turns out that poetry is the one thing necessary to saying it and at that same time the only thing sufficient to the task.

Out of the conviction that theologians need Dante for reasons that Dante-poet understands and has shown, I have called this little book *Dante the Theologian*. It is an attempt to explain why theologians should allow Dante into their conversation as a compelling voice, and why their failure to do so has left them bereft, whether as historians of fourteenth-century Christian theology or as theologians addressing agendas of our own times.

You might of course deny both propositions – some do – and say that in the end there is no specifically theological agenda that needs Dante and then deny that he has any compelling poetic need to do theology, and that, questions of belief or disbelief suspended, you might as well just stick to the poetry and be done with it. For, like music, dance, and having a pint with your friends, poetry is its own justification and need not be done for some further purpose. But if, short of a rather gaunt skepticism of this kind, you do anything at all for an end, then an intellectual obligation to do some theology imposes itself. For, though in a life there is a multiplicity of penultimate ends the study of which is the business of other disciplines, one end leading to another and subordinate to it, still, if there is to be any conclusive obituary, a judgment on a life taken as a whole – and you might say that there isn’t one, and that all life is simply left hanging unjudged unless, if noticed at all, by the local newspaper’s obituary columns – then
there are only two possible verdicts that are truly final and survive when death has done for everything else, and they are, as Dante describes them, Hell and Heaven. And let us note here for the first time but not for the last that Dante’s Purgatory is not a condition undecided between Hell and Heaven, for Purgatory waits attendance only at Heaven’s gates for those whose death has left requirements of the ars moriendi unmet. That is not to underrate Purgatory. Far from it: for Purgatory is where Dante-writer and we his readers ourselves really are, learning how to die well. It is our common moral mise-en-scène, and purgatory is its practice. It is from there that reader and writer have come when they meet in the Comedy. Purgatory is more than a place in the Comedy’s scheme: In so many ways, the purgatorial is the Comedy’s scheme.

We should start, though, with Dante’s being a theologian, for of this even the professional theologians are in need of some persuasion. There is nothing outlandish in proposing Dante’s theological standing, neither is anything implied exclusive of other ways of reading the Comedy. The notion that the theological is exclusive of something else, indeed of anything else, is a deep error caused by the intellectual divisions of labor that dominate today’s academic practices. It is a mistake that some theologians themselves seem all too ready to make as they yearn for a private space cut out for themselves alone – whether within the academic curriculum or within the wider culture – where they can play to their own rules without interference from others. Dante himself was not so narrow. You do theology when not doing it amounts to an evasion of core, common, intellectual responsibilities, and we read Dante amiss if as readers we neglect his sense of
what those responsibilities are. We should admit Dante to the theological schools for reasons analogous to those that in recent decades caused some of us to recognize the case for the theological credentials of the fourteenth-century English writer Julian of Norwich, who, like Dante, was not taken seriously by academic theologians because, like Dante when writing the *Comedy*, she didn’t write academically as the schoolmen of her times customarily did.

As recently as forty years ago it was still unusual to think of Julian as a theologian with as good a claim to that title in the Middle Ages as have either the university men – a Thomas Aquinas, a Duns Scotus – or the monk theologians – a Gregory the Great or a Bernard of Clairvaux – for in those days other softer and weaker taxonomical terms were reserved for women writers – “spiritual” or “mystical” came to mind, those weasel words that have commonly been thought more accurately to describe Julian’s style so as to entail, without too openly saying it, that her work did not pass muster as theological.² Thereby in one stroke the notions of the theological, of the mystical, and of women as writers were misconstrued. As to Julian, in more recent decades it has come to seem right to resist those descriptions of her writing as typically misrepresenting the hard theological core of her thought, implicitly taking for granted misleading caricatures both of the

kind of writing that a medieval woman might be expected to be good at and of a corresponding antitype of what the men were good at, the men typically doing something that the women typically didn’t do because, not being university trained, the women were at best amateurish theologically and not up to doing the real thing.¹

This mentality produced a caricature of Julian’s work. She was challenged by a tough theological call, being given sixteen “showings” and only very general indications as to how she was supposed to understand them – no more than that in some way they were all given to her by love and for love’s sake. Start there, she was told; after that it was left for her to work it out for herself, which meant that she would have to find some way of squaring the revelations of love with her primary experience of evil, and, more precisely, of sin, as a constant which she was not prepared to leave to the theologians to explain away, as if you could solve the problem simply by showing that there is a formal consistency between God’s omnipotent goodness and the world’s evil. She allows that, at the very least, you can demonstrate rational grounds, if not for full consistency, at least for resisting claims to their formal inconsistency. But even consistency doesn’t explain why God would do it all that way in the first place, since she sees that God could have created a world of rational free human agents who never consented to sin. So why did God not do so?

She wants to know what the story is that makes some sort of sense of God’s having allowed the quantity and viciousness of sin that all can observe in our world. In that way, Julian’s worry about sin seems to ring truer to our sense of its predicament today than does, for example, that of Thomas Aquinas; and, for sure, she seemed to have little time for Augustine’s take on the matter.

If, granted that much, you tried to identify aspects of her *Revelation of Love* in virtue of which Julian would stand out as male or female, then you might guess from some relatively incidental features of the *Revelation*’s style, imagery, and vocabulary that a woman wrote it. It also seemed that nothing much of the work’s substantive theological importance could be put down exclusively to her gender, but, if so, even less could be put down to her generally falling in with the men’s way of doing it. If there was a typically women’s way of writing theologically in fourteenth-century England, then we are stuck with Julian as the one and only exemplar of it, for in that century she is the first and only woman known to be writing about anything at all in the English vernacular. Let us therefore just say that she was in practice a writer who seemed to do what she wanted as and when she pleased and not fall in with any exclusive stereotype; and then you can say that it is precisely the freedom from stereotype that, in the fourteenth century, is womanly about her style; for it is the men who create the stereotypes and seem compelled to stick with them. Other than that, it becomes a sort of useful tautology: We know that she writes as a woman does in fourteenth-century England because she is the only woman writing in English that we know of in that century.
Whatever the general explanations, the fact is very obvious in her case: When she wanted she wrote in a dialectical style as skillfully as any man of her time – she wrote of “substance” and “sensuality” as technical terms of theology, with a mastery of how to distinguish them, of which the apostle Paul, or Thomas Aquinas, would have fully approved. They, especially St. Paul, might even have been quite surprised by her account of the complexity and nuance of it all. But on other occasions, when other styles served to get across something else, she wrote quite differently – as when she told of her own prayer-life in ways autobiographical that have no place within the dialectical styles of the fourteenth-century university man in the conduct of a disputed question. She shows herself to be in control not only of either style at will but also of both ways at once, as when she speaks of her “holy mother, Jesus,” as “he” who saves us, getting across a sense of how both gender ascriptions succeed and fail together. Thus she was able to say in a terse oxymoronic phrase what other theologians could sometimes explain about theological language and gender only at tediously


5 Romans 8:5–9.

6 Thomas Aquinas, Commentary on Romans, chapter 8, lecture 1, 596–599, where he reads St. Paul’s distinction between sarx and pneuma not as that between body and soul, but as between a person spiritually dead and a person spiritually alive. See Saint Thomas Aquinas, Commentary on St Paul to the Romans, trans. F. R. Larcher OP, eds. J. Mortensen and E. Alarcón, Lander: Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Scripture, 2012.

7 Julian of Norwich, A Revelation of Love [Long Text], chapters 40–42.
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pedantic length.⁸ In all this, there seemed to be reason to write of her just as a theologian, so that by getting the word “theology” to embrace Julian’s writing you bring good news to theologians generally, Aquinas and Scotus included.⁹ By such means you would situate the university men and their like where they are best understood, not as defining the field of theology as such with the hard stuff of dialectics to the exclusion of the merely pious but as offering but one theological subclass, the academic, within the much expanded range of theological possibilities that Julian’s work in its own way represented. For all that she is neither professor nor abbot, she may not be cast out of the circles of the theologians into the outer darkness where women are best staying at home in theological frustration, there to weep and gnash the teeth of mere pious devotion.

It seemed best, then, to allay scrupulous taxonomical anxieties in respect of medieval theological writing and say in a more informal spirit that Bernard of Clairvaux is a “monastic theologian” simply because he was a monk and wrote like one meditatively or, as an abbot, instructively to fellow monks; then Thomas Aquinas falls into place as a “school theologian” simply

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⁸ Ibid., chapter 59, where she says, “And Jesus is our true mother by nature, at our first creation, and he is our true mother in grace.”

⁹ Nor is there any need unsubtly to stereotype the “academic” style with a view to devising a cheap term of contrast. The medieval university did not “academicize” the theological otherwise than to make of it the foundation of a taught training course for the acquisition of preaching and pastoral skills in the Church. There are no full-time tenured university academic theologians in the Middle Ages. A full-time tenured and purely academic profession of theology is an invention of modernity.
because he was a university master and taught with problem-based theological agendas in mind appropriate for the training of urban preachers. That done, you can place Julian in a room of her own as an “anchoritic theologian,” meaning in general that she wrote theologically in ways that exhibited the concerns of a woman theologian who was an anchoress, *ana ebora*, without *any* restricted community, whether of learning or of piety, whether monastic or academic, working out her relationship with the wider worlds of theological reflection on her own terms and in her own way as an independent thinker, and that it was her addressing this open, unspecified life-world of what she called her “even Christens” that accounted for the distinctively exploratory character of her thought. After all, you do have to think differently about theology when, unlike Thomas Aquinas and the schoolmen, you are writing for anyone at all who might be persuaded to take an interest. But in all events, it seemed as if we have only to loosen the grip of the monks and of the university men on the title and we could be happy to call Julian a theologian and otherwise stop fussing about exclusive methodological dogmas.

In a parallel case, there is the question whether there is a sense, and if so what, in which Dante may be regarded as a theologian doing a theologian’s day job – as distinct, that is, from his espousing incidentally some theological opinions while pursuing other principal purposes, above all those of the poets. There is of course a subfield of Dantean scholarship devoted to finding traces in his thought of Aquinas’s influence or of Bonaventure’s, and it is often illuminating, as is Griffin Oleynick’s essay on
Bonaventure and the influence of the Spiritual Franciscans on Dante’s theology;\textsuperscript{10} but it is far from being the case that it is on the strength of such source criticism alone that there is justification for granting Dante the standing of a proper theologian. Were the question of Dante’s credentials as theologian answerable only by reference to such sources of influence upon him as Aquinas or Bonaventure, then one would have to conclude that Dante is only incidentally a theological writer at best, and not in any way essentially so. It is perhaps because some Dante scholars have regarded the question of Dante’s theological credentials to be well posed in those terms that there are critical literatures today which seem able blithely to ignore his own theological standing as incidental, in that way being very easily reassured when confining themselves to literary considerations of allegory only.

Therefore, as it was with Julian, so it is with Dante, and it seems better to begin without prejudging the theological character of the \textit{Comedy} on any terms other than those discernible as operating immanently within his own work and then allow Dante the poet-theologian to set out on his own terms what counts for theology and what doesn’t. Even then, though, one is easily misled by the criteria of theological standing that Dante himself seems to have had in mind when in cantos 10–14 of \textit{Paradiso} he assembled a representative cohort of theologians on terms that, wherever he, the poet, would have