

DANTE ALIGHIERI

The Banquet (1304-1308)

Here, Dante borrows Aquinas's interpretive categories in order to argue that "writings can be understood and ought to be expounded chiefly in four senses" (120) or levels of meaning:

- the literal meaning is "that sense which does not go beyond the strict limits of the letter" (120);
- the allegorical meaning is the "truth hidden under a beautiful fiction" (120) (e.g. when Ovid writes of Orpheus who used his lyre to tame wild beasts, the allegorical meaning of this is that wise man "by the instrument of his voice makes cruel hearts grow mild and humble" [120]);
- the moral meaning is "that for which teachers ought as they go through writings intently to watch for their own profit and that of their hearers" (121);
- the anagogic or symbolic meaning is "above the senses" (121) and "occurs when a writing is spiritually expounded" (121) and "gives intimation of higher matters belonging to the eternal glory" (121). To illustrate the last level of meaning, Dante refers to the Biblical story "when the people of Israel went up out of Egypt, Judea was made holy and free" (121). The symbolic meaning of this concerns "when the soul issues forth from sin she is made holy and free" (121).

"Letter to Can Grande Della Scala" (1318)

Here, Dante illustrates the schema outlined above with reference to a section of his own celebrated masterpiece, the Inferno. He argues that it is a "polysemous" (121), i.e. it consists "of more senses than one" (121), for "it is one sense which we get through the letter, and another which we get through the thing that the letter signifies" (121). The first level of signification he accordingly terms the literal, the second "allegorical or mystic" (121). He then proceeds to subdivide the allegorical or the mystic into several "denominations" (i.e. the moral and anagogic levels of meaning) but these may all be broadly termed allegorical, he argues, "since they differ from the literal and historical" (121) meanings of the text. Hence, the following altered schema of meanings:

- literal;
- allegorical:
 - moral;
 - anagogic.