

by Kenelm Foster, O.P.

The legend of Dante's 'Thomism' arose from the fact that a main component of his culture is obviously 'scholastic', and that until not so very long ago the authentic thought of St Thomas had not been clearly differentiated from its general scholastic background. A poet writing within a few decades of St Thomas's death, and showing a great respect for him, and delighting to reason, even in verse, about form and matter, act and potency and so on, seemed plainly a 'Thomist'; and when this designation began to be questioned there were not wanting those who went on insisting on it for the greater glory of the Dominican Order or of Catholic culture,¹ which was thought to have reached its apex in the work of Aquinas. But now all that has changed. Since the pioneering labours of Bruno Nardi² and Gilson's brilliant book³ it has become increasingly evident that Dante cannot be called a Thomist in any strict sense of the term as denoting a body of doctrine characteristic of St Thomas.

However there is, I think, a qualified sense in which one may speak of the poet's Thomism, and which it is one purpose of these notes to indicate. But first a little more should be said about the question in general; and here I may be allowed to bring myself briefly into the picture. When, some years ago, I undertook to write the article 'Tommaso d'Aquino' for the *Enciclopedia Dantesca*,⁴ I naturally set about reading or re-reading all the relevant texts, beginning with Dante. My task, as I saw it, was twofold. First, on the abstract doctrinal plane—comparing ideas with ideas—I had to try to decide how far Bruno Nardi had been right in his lifelong effort to detach Dante from Aquinas by expounding the poet's philosophy as a variant on the Neoplatonist tradition, with traces (especially in the *Monarchia*) of Averroism. Nardi was a very great scholar, but I had learned long ago to keep a wary eye on his polemical temper; he was too irascible a man to be always a fair debater; especially when his opponent happened to be a priest. However, the result of my resumed researches was to confirm, for me, Nardi's general negative contention—that

¹I have in mind particularly the work of two Dominicans and one Jesuit: M. Cordovani, O.P., in *Xenia Thomistica*, III, Rome, 1925, pp. 309-26; P. Mandonnet, O.P., *Dante le théologien*, Paris, 1935; and G. Busnelli, S.J.'s learned but very tendentious commentary on the *Convivio* in the 'Edizione Nazionale' of D's works, Florence, 1934-37.

²For a full bibliography of Nardi's writings down to 1954 see *Medioevo e Rinascimento: Studi in onore di B.Nardi*, 2 vols., Florence, 1954, pp. 907-27. Nardi's chief studies in this field since 1955 are collected in *Dal 'Convivio' alla 'Commedia'*, Rome, 1960, and *Saggi e note di critica dantesca*, Milan-Naples, 1966.

³*Dante et la philosophie*, Paris, 1939 (Eng. tr. *Dante the Philosopher*, London, 1948).

⁴Published at Rome by the 'Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana'. It will consist of five volumes, three of which had appeared by the end of 1973.

Dante's universe was not the Thomist one. The differences were too distinct and deep to allow any other conclusion: differences in cosmogony—regarding, especially, the creation of matter, and the role of the angels in the formation of the sublunary world and their relation to the heavenly bodies;⁵ and differences in anthropology touching the soul-body relationship, and the process of human generation, and the 'end' of human life considered as mortal and terrestrial.⁶ Moreover it became clearer to me than ever before (though I would like to be clearer still on this) that the *unity* of this Dantean world is poetic rather than philosophical. Analysed philosophically it turns out, I think, to be a rather uneasy synthesis of Neoplatonist and Aristotelian elements. But as the 'matter', precisely, of poetry it is unified by a double 'drive' of tremendous power, expressing two aspects of one extraordinary human soul: an intellectual drive towards understanding that culminates in the *Paradiso*; a moral-political drive towards the establishment of justice on earth, predominant in the *Inferno* and the *Purgatorio*.

The other part of my task was, of course, to relate Dante to Aquinas in and through the historical context of the poet's life from 1265 to 1321. His philosophical education began, he tells us, not long after the death of Beatrice in 1290, when he began to frequent 'le scuole de li religiosi' in Florence;⁷ by which he presumably means that he attended courses given by the Dominicans at S. Maria Novella and doubtless also by the Franciscans at Santa Croce on the other side of the city. This relatively late start in philosophy (he was over twenty-five and married)⁸ had an immediate effect on his lyric poetry but its chief fruits were the great works written after his exile from Florence (1302), the *Convivio* in Italian prose, the *Monarchia* in Latin, and of course the *Divine Comedy*. As for theology proper, the first evidence of Dante's giving it really serious attention is Books II-III of the *Monarchia*, which can hardly have been composed before 1310. Dante knew the Vulgate Bible extremely well but, this apart, I would say that the firmest elements in his mature culture were literary and philosophico-scientific, not theological. It may even be misleading to speak of the *Comedy* as a theological poem, though of

⁵*Par.* XXIX, 22-4, 34-6. On angelic influences on the sublunary world see (to begin with) *Par.* II, 112-38, VII, 121-41: on angels and the heavenly bodies. *Par.* XXIX, 37-45.

⁶On this crucial matter see E. Gilson, *Dante et la philosophie*, op. cit., pp. 100-199, and my own essay 'Religion and Philosophy in D.' in *The Mind of Dante*, ed. U. Limentani, Cambridge, 1965, pp. 47-78.

⁷*Conv.* II, xii, 7. On Italian Thomism in Dante's time the best general study is still perhaps M. Grabmann's *Mittelalterliches Geistesleben*, I, Munich, 1926, pp. 332-391. See also P. O. Kristeller, *Le thomisme et la pensée italienne de la Renaissance* ('Conférence Albert-le-Grand' 1965), Montréal-Paris, 1967, pp. 41-125; and with particular reference to Dante, C. T. Davis, 'Education in Dante's Florence', *Speculum*, 40 (1965), pp. 415-435.

⁸Dante's statement in *Conv.* II, xii, 7 can however be taken with a pinch of salt; he shows signs of having some philosophical culture in poems written before 1290.

course it contains much theology and certainly reflects in various ways the influence of St Thomas. But this influence does not seem to me primarily *doctrinal*. I would prefer to describe it as primarily a 'cultural' and moral influence—giving each of these terms a sense to be defined presently.

Guelf Florence in the 1290s was a thriving commercial centre and closely linked politically with France and the papacy; but it had no university and the echoes that reached it of contemporary philosophical and theological debate at Paris and Oxford must have come largely through the two great international Orders of the Friars; and their interest in that debate had by now become, to a marked degree, a matter of *esprit de corps*. For a major controversial issue was the teaching of the Dominican master who had died in March 1274. The half-century, covering most of Dante's life, between that date and the canonisation of Thomas in July 1323, was perhaps the most troubled period in the history of Thomism; and from the early 1280s the Franciscans were increasingly identified, as a body and even officially, with the anti-Thomist cause. And as action leads to reaction, and the ideas of a genius may quickly become a party-line, so by the turn of the century the doctrine of brother Thomas (still of course uncanonised) was being imposed by authority on all Dominican teachers and students.⁹ What Dante thought, or later came to think, of this deplorable rivalry between the two Orders appears obliquely but magnificently in *Paradiso* X-XII, in the lovely dance of the Sages in the Solar Heaven, where Thomas sings in praise of St Francis and Bonaventure of St Dominic;¹⁰ but neither here nor elsewhere does Dante express any judgement on Thomism as such. And by this I mean that he never either (1) says that he is for or against Thomism in general, or (2) identifies any particular philosophical or theological position as 'Thomist' and then states his opinion of it. This is to say that Dante took no part in the current debates about Thomism as a system. He always used his sources freely, selecting what suited his immediate purpose, as a tool to help him clarify his own very personal vision of life. The only master he persistently tries to have on his side is Aristotle.

I grant that on some fundamental matters Dante speaks *prima facie* like a Thomist: angels, for him, are wholly non-material;¹¹ man has only one substantial form, the rational soul;¹² intellect is pre-eminent

⁹I refer to legislation of the General Chapters of the Order in 1278, 1279, 1286 and 1313; see *Monumenta Ord. Fr. Praed.*, ed. Reichert, I, pp. 199, 204, 235; II, p. 64. A brief but well-documented account of the late 13th century controversies over Thomism is in F. J. Roensch, *Early Thomistic School*, Dubuque, Iowa, 1964, espec. pp. 1-27, 170-199. See also the excellent survey by C. Fabro in *Enciclopedia Cattolica*, XII (1954), col. 281-285.

¹⁰I may refer to my own study, 'The Celebration of Order: *Paradiso* X', in *Dante Studies* (Cambridge, Mass.) XC, 1972, pp. 109-124.

¹¹*Parad.* XXIX, 21-36; *Conv.* III, vii, 5.

¹²*Conv.* III, iii, 5; *Purg.* IV, 1-12; *XXV*, 61-75.

over the will.¹³ As to these points (and others might be adduced) Dante probably was influenced, directly or indirectly, by St Thomas; but from the way he enunciates them it is impossible to be sure (at least as regards the first two) that he did not think he was also following, say, St Albert the Great—some of whose writings he knew very well, as Nardi pointed out long ago.¹⁴ In any case it is hardly likely that Dante distinguished between Albertinism and Thomism with the subtlety of a modern medievalist; as Gilson says, 'suivre Albert le Grand sur un point n'était sans doute pas pour lui se séparer de saint Thomas'.¹⁵ Dante venerated both men and when he meets them in paradise he is at pains to emphasise their closeness one to the other; he has Thomas introduce Albert as 'my brother and my master'; and he has Albert, Thomas and Siger of Brabant standing side by side as (so at least it seems to me) the three greatest Aristotelians of their century.¹⁶ But we need not see in this an expression of Thomism in a precise sense of this term. Far more probably it expresses Dante's sense of the debt that Christian thought in general owed to Aristotle. If he had to leave the Philosopher down in Limbo—for reasons, by the way, not exclusively theological—he could beatify his influence; he could show sheer rationality enjoying glory. Hence he has Thomas compliment Siger on his expertise with the syllogism,¹⁷ and Thomas himself gives a little lecture on the value of distinctions.¹⁸ There was an extremely tough vein of rationalism in Dante and this gave him a special sympathy with the Christian Aristotelianism of Albert and Thomas.

But the rare reader who comes to Dante with 'ears accustomed to Thomist language', as Gilson puts it, will meet with surprises; with a *materia prima* apparently created in the beginning devoid of form;¹⁹ with angels far more involved than those in the Thomist system with the heavenly bodies;²⁰ what is more important, with that drastic division of human life under 'two final ends' (*duo ultima*), corresponding respectively to man's nature as mortal and as immortal, which is set out at the end of the *Monarchia*²¹ and reappears implicitly, I would say, in those Noble Pagans in the poet's Limbo whom St

¹³*Mon.* I, v, 4; *Par.* XXVIII, 106-111.

¹⁴*Saggi di filosofia dantesca*, Città di Castello, 1930, pp. 67-78.

¹⁵*Dante et la philosophie*, op. cit., p. 158, n. 1.

¹⁶Cf. E. Gilson, op. cit., p. 263.

¹⁷*Par.* X, 136-138.

¹⁸*Par.* XIII, 109-142.

¹⁹*Par.* XXIX, 22-24.

²⁰*Par.* XXIX, 37-45—where Dante seems to say that *all* the angelic Orders are *essentially* movers of this or that heavenly 'sphere'. This goes far beyond St Thomas's position in *Contra Gentiles* II, 92. It is interesting to note that the Dominican Robert Kilwardby, St Thomas's contemporary and critic, was still further from Dante on this point; he saw no reason to think that any of the angels were star-movers; see M. D. Chenu in *Mélanges Mandonnet*, 'Bibliothèque Thomiste XIII, Paris, 1930, I, pp. 191-222.

²¹*Mon.* III, xv, 5-6.

Antoninus, O.P., was later to find so unacceptable.²² And then there is the negative aspect of the question. What is precisely most distinctive and original in Thomist metaphysics and anthropology seems to me but faintly, if at all, reflected in Dante's system: the distinction between essence and existence in creatures and their identity in God; the notion of *intellectus agens* as the distinctive function of human intelligence. Dante never so much as mentions the agent intellect and though he uses, once, the distinction between *esse* and *essentia*, this use is quite marginal and incidental.²³

Doctrinally then there is not much to be said for calling Dante a Thomist. Nevertheless Gilson was plainly right to say that Dante '[a] profondément admiré et aimé saint Thomas'.²⁴ So the question is, how we should define, and explain, that admiration and love. After all, Dante also admired and loved Aristotle, Virgil, Boethius, Cicero, St Bernard: what distinguishes the motive and manner of his regard for St Thomas? A fine subject for a book which no one has written! But if I were to try to write it I would begin by distinguishing, in the poet's devotion (the expression is not too strong) to 'il buono frate Tommaso',²⁵ two basic motives: (a) gratitude to the Aristotelian scholar, the author of the commentaries, and (b) esteem for the thinker as a model of intellectual probity and finesse. And I would show that the former attitude appears chiefly in the *Convivio* and the latter above all in cantos X-XIII of the *Paradiso*. Let me briefly illustrate what I mean.

(a) For a layman and a non-academic Dante had a very extensive knowledge of Aristotle's writings (the *Poetics* being a notable exception). The *Convivio* alone contains some 80 references to Aristotle, nearly all of them naming some particular work.²⁶ Now an examination of these references gives solid grounds for holding that Dante frequently studied Aristotle with and through the commentaries—or, better, 'expositions'—of Aquinas. True, there are, in the *Convivio*, only two explicit mentions of St Thomas in this connexion, at II, xiv, 14 and IV, viii, 1; but in a good many other cases an implicit recourse to the Thomist 'exposition' is, I think, more or less clearly discernible; and in six cases which I have examined²⁷ a careful comparison of the *loci* in Aristotle to which Dante seems to refer (in a Latin version of course) with the corresponding 'exposition' of Thomas (or in one case, at IV, xiii, 8, with *Contra Gentiles* I, 5) show that the poet's quotation or paraphrase is much closer to the latter than to the

²²See A. Renaudet, *Dante humaniste*, Paris, 1952, p. 124.

²³*Epist.* XIII, 53-61.

²⁴*Dante et la philosophie*, op. cit., p. 118.

²⁵*Conv.* IV, xxx, 3.

²⁶Among these references are 34 to the *Nicomachean Ethics*, 10 to the *De Anima*, 8 to the *Metaphysics*, 7 to the *Physics*, 6 to the *De Coelo et Mundo*, 2 to the *Politics*.

²⁷II, iii, 2; xiii, 6; xiii, 18; IV, viii, 6; xi, 9; xiii, 8. There is a similar case in *Quaestio de aqua et terra*, 77.

former. The commentary he made most use of—and it is the only one he explicitly cites—was that on the *Nicomachean Ethics*; but he certainly also knew those on the *Physics* and *De coelo et mundo*, and probably those on the *Metaphysics* and *De anima*.²⁸ Dante's literary culture depended, of course, on other sources, and there were aspects of his scientific, philosophical and even theological culture that owed as much or more to other masters.²⁹ But his formation as an Aristotelian came principally through St Thomas—with Averroes perhaps a good second (see *Conv.* IV, xiii, 8; *Monarchia* I, iii, 9; *Quaestio de aqua et terra*, 12).³⁰

(b) What is particularly interesting, however, about Dante's admiration for St Thomas is that it goes to the *moral* component in the saint's thinking; it carries the strong suggestion that this man's extraordinary intelligence was only the other side of extraordinary goodness. The term Dante picks on to denote this double quality is 'discrezione'; which in the immediate context, at *Convivio* IV, viii, 1, means the rational power of seeing the relations between things, and so of discriminating and drawing distinctions,³¹ but in its wider context in the book this passage connects with a number of others which all turn on a contrast, both intellectual and moral, between 'discretion' and its consequence 'reverence' on the one hand, and 'presumption' with its consequences 'irreverence' and 'insolence' (*tracotanza*) on the other.³² And both the denunciations and the recommendations are supported by appeals, explicit or implicit, to St Thomas. And this repeated recourse to Thomas in connexion with the same general theme is the more impressive in that elsewhere in the *Convivio* he is only mentioned twice³³ (though again, in one of these cases,³⁴ as pronouncing on the *moral* aspect of the intellectual life). It seems clear then that in Dante's mind, as he wrote the *Convivio*, the figure of St Thomas was associated in a special way with *discrimination*, conceived as a quality both intellectual and moral though rooted specifically in the human reason whose task it is to 'discern the relations between things'.³⁵ For Dante Aquinas both represents and justifies the properly *human* use of in-

²⁸See note 26 above.

²⁹To St Albert, Avicenna, Alfraganus, Ptolemy, for example, for natural science; to the *Liber de Causis* (the Thomist commentary on which Dante shows no sign of having read) for neoplatonist tendencies; to the Pseudo-Denys and Bonaventure for aspects of angelology and trinitarian theology.

³⁰Dante had a great respect for Averroes (cf. *Inf.* IV, 144) but rejected his monopsychism, *Purg.* XXV, 61-66.

³¹Dante has raised the question whether, in refuting the Emperor Frederick II's opinion on 'nobility', he had been guilty of 'irreverence'. So he defines 'reverence'. It is a 'fruit' of 'discrezione', which in turn is identified with the kind of knowing that St Thomas had called 'proper to the reason', i.e. 'ordinem . . . unius rei ad aliam cognoscere', *In X libros Ethicorum Expositio*, I, lect. 1 1. This is the passage referred to in *Conv.* IV, viii, 1.

³²Compare *Conv.* IV, v, 9; viii, 1-5; xiii, 8; xv, 12-13.

³³II, xiv, 14; IV, xxx, 3.

³⁴II, xiv, 14.

³⁵See note 31 above.

telligence which is 'intelligere componendo et dividendo . . . quod est ratiocinari' (*Summa theol.* 1a, 85, 5).

The same twofold theme reappears, subtly and splendidly developed in *Paradiso* X-XIII. Indirectly these cantos sum up all that Dante personally owed to Aquinas; directly they present him as the image and synthesis of a special kind of saintly intelligence—the saintliness of the good friar in the Dominican way of being a friar—

Io fui de li agni de la santa greggia
che Domenico mena per cammino
u' ben s'impingua se non si vaneggia (X, 94-6)³⁶—

and the intelligence of the good theologian according to the way of doing theology that gives full place and honour to reason. The motif of sanctity appears especially in Thomas's tribute to St Francis (reciprocated in Bonaventure's to St Dominic in canto XII) and in his critique of unworthy Dominicans, in XI, 40-139; while the motif of intelligence appears in Thomas's being the spokesman of the first circle of Christian scholars and sages (X, 91-138), but more particularly in the recurrent stress—evidently intended as characteristic—in his three discourses³⁷ on the need for and the beauty of rational discrimination, measure and sobriety of judgement, the stress which reaches its climax in the last words Thomas speaks in the *Commedia*, the great closing passage of canto XIII. Thomas speaks all through as 'a logician and a great clerk',³⁸ because that is how Dante saw him and saw the value of his example. Hence the admonition that opens the second discourse: 'e qui è uopo che ben si distingua' (XI, 27).³⁹ Hence the praise of Siger of Brabant (X, 133-8), for whatever else Dante may have intended in making Aquinas honour his former adversary, he certainly meant to show theology giving due honour to philosophy and particularly to the properly human activity of logical reasoning ('sillogizzò invidiosi veri', X, 138;⁴⁰ cf. *Summa theol.* 1a, 58, 3). Hence the significant word 'discreto' in Bonaventure's concluding compliment to Thomas: '. . . l'infiammata cortesia/di fra Tommaso e 'l discreto latino' (XII, 143-4).⁴¹ Hence above all the three great distinctions which guide and govern the discourses in cantos X and XIII: that of orders and functions in the Church and in the *studium* (X, 94-138; XI, 28-42); that of the creative Word and secondary causes (XIII, 52-78); that of the two orders of intellectual excellence, the speculative and the practical, the latter being repre-

³⁶'I was a lamb of the holy flock that Dominic leads along a path where you fatten well if you don't waste time'.

³⁷In *Paradiso*, X, XI, XIII.

³⁸*Conv.* IV, x, 3. In their context the words refer, a bit ironically, to the Emperor Frederick II.

³⁹'and here we must carefully distinguish'

⁴⁰'he reasoned out truths that brought him ill favour'

⁴¹'the flaming courtesy of brother Thomas and his well considered speech'

sented supremely by Solomon who has practical knowledge of the highest kind, the wisdom of the good ruler, 'regal prudenza' (XIII, 91-108). Hence, in conclusion, the vehement recommendation already noted of 'distinguishing'—of the need to be grounded in the 'art' of thought and the weighing of evidence before one can safely pronounce on deep matters (XIII, 109-42). Incidentally, it is by no means unlikely that, in making his Thomas exalt his Solomon in the way he does, Dante is reading a lesson in political science to the theologians of his time—is cunningly using the theologian he most admired to uphold his *own* rather extreme view of the independence of the civil power with respect to the ecclesiastical; the view which led the *Monarchia* to be condemned by the Church in 1329,⁴² eight years after Dante's death, and placed on the Index in 1554, where it remained until 1881.

It is worth remembering that Dante wrote the *Paradiso* before the canonisation of St Thomas which took place, of course, in July 1323, nearly two years after the great poet's death. It is also worth noting that within fifteen years of Dante's death his love for Aquinas, and all his published praise of him, did not save him from bitter Dominican hostility. Between 1327 and 1334 Guido Vernani, O.P., of Rimini wrote his violent attack on the *Monarchia*;⁴³ and in 1335 the Provincial Chapter of the Roman Province, meeting at Florence (of all places) strictly forbade all the brethren, young or old, to study the *Commedia*.⁴⁴

⁴²This is well attested. Boccaccio adds, and we have no reason to disbelieve him, that the *Monarchia* was publicly burned at Bologna by order of the Cardinal Legate (*Trattatello in laude di Dante*, c. 24). See *D.A., Monarchia*, 'Edizione Nazionale', ed. P. G. Ricci, Milan, 1965, pp. 3-4.

⁴³*De reprobatione Monarchiae*, ed. N. Matteini, Padua, 1958. On Guido Vernani see also T. Kaeppli, O.P., in *Quellen und Forschungen aus italienischen Archiven und Bibliotheken*, XXVIII. 1937-38, pp. 107-146.

⁴⁴*Monumenta Ord. Fr. Praed. Hist.*, XX. *Acta Cap. Prov. Provinciae Romanae* (1243-1344), ed. T. Kaeppli and A. Dondaine, 1941, p. 286.