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Literary Influences on Dante's Use of Fear in the *Commedia*

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One does not have to read very far into the *Divine Comedy* before encountering the notion of fear. At the start of his journey, Dante attempts to ascend a mountain where he in turn confronts a leopard, then a lion, and finally a she-wolf. Together, they generate so much fear that he and his hopes are driven back to the “dark wood” where his journey began. The poet experiences a visceral reaction to the grisly environment of the *Inferno* and his perception of the terrible consequences of sin.

Fear is usually understood as an emotion that surfaces in the face of an approaching danger or threat. And fear is indeed that. Dante, however, goes much further to develop the concept of fear throughout the poem. He extends the meaning of fear from a situational response to a useful tool for measuring one’s spiritual state and one’s progress toward perfection.

I.

There are, I believe, some significant influences that helped to shape Dante’s use of fear, and I shall come to them in a moment. But first, I would like to say a little about the word “fear” itself as it appears in the *Divine Comedy* and its development.

Dante’s control over his poetry is legendary, from his careful crafting of *terza rima* to the ingenious incorporation of numerological elements that invite deciphering. Dante’s use of fear falls within this kind of control. He draws from a treasure chest of twenty different words for fear and still more Italian expressions. Dante uses the word *paura* eighteen times in the *Inferno*,

nine times in the *Purgatorio*, and three times in the *Paradiso*. 3, 9, 18. The frequency of use and its numerology indicate that Dante is intentional in his choice of fear (*paura*) throughout the poem.

Let me mention three notable occurrences of his use of *paura* that illuminate the operation and progression of fear in the *Commedia*.

(1) First, and perhaps the most important insightful occurrence, is in Canto II of the *Inferno*. Here, Beatrice responds to a question from Virgil on why she does not shrink from the horror of her surroundings in the *Inferno*. She answers, “Only those things should be feared that have power to do us ill, nothing else, for nothing else is fearful, and I am made such by God of His grace that your misery does not touch me nor a flame of the fires here assail me.”ⁱ

This instance of Beatrice’s response that defines fear and sets her apart from its reach is less about answering Virgil and more about preparing readers for Dante. On its own, fear is an unusual topic between these two speakers in the context of the *Inferno*. It seems misplaced for Virgil, who is stationed in the outer region of the *Inferno* and Beatrice, from the heavenly realms. This becomes more puzzling if one wonders why these two in their eternality, the eternal present, would talk about a subject that is more temporal in nature since neither are in a position to be the receiver from some “power to do us ill.” This instance of Beatrice’s response is not so much about answering Virgil’s question, as I’ve mentioned, but about Dante. The poet provides a set of subtle instructions preparing the reader for the contrast between Beatrice’s state without defect and Dante’s temporal state with defect. This tells the reader what to expect with Dante’s imperfection and his ensuing journey. The reader will soon observe the contrast between Dante pilgrim and Beatrice. Unlike Beatrice, he shows pity towards some of the punished shades in the *Inferno* and in some ways, he is even personally afflicted with their punishment, as shown by his

deep anguish at times.

(2) The second occurrence I would like to highlight is in the *Purgatorio*, Canto XXII, line 90.ⁱⁱ In this Canto, we meet Statius. We learn from Statius of his fear that suppressed his desire to become a Christian. "...[B]ut, for fear, I was a hidden Christian long making show of paganism, and this lukewarmness made me circle the fourth circle for more than four centuries." Statius' fear provides contrast to Dante pilgrim's own experience in the beginning of the *Inferno*. For both, fear appears in the beginning as the stronger element, forcing one to abandon or leave behind one's desire. Statius' fear did not turn him away in the same way as Dante's fear did at the beginning. Here the tone of fear has also changed, lacking the harshness of the fear of punishment mentioned by Beatrice in the *Inferno*.

(3) The third and final occurrence of the word *paura* comes in Canto 26 of the *Paradiso* where St. John questions Dante pilgrim on the subject of love. The context for this passage relates to St. John's own writing in 1 John 4:18: "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and he who fears is not perfected in love."ⁱⁱⁱ

St. John asks Dante "...tell what goal your soul has set." (lines 7-8) Dante answers (In line 16-18), "The good that satisfies this court Is alpha and omega of whatever scripture | Love teaches me in loud or gentle tones." Then Dante writes (in line 19), "The same voice that had delivered me from my fear at the sudden dazzling made me eager to speak again..."^{iv} *Paura* is no more. His deliverance from fear is complete. As we reach this point in Dante's journey, we learn that as love must be rightly ordered to come to perfect love, so must fear be rightly ordered as one comes to perfection in the heavenly realm.

In summary, fear begins as a fear of overpowering danger and drives Dante back to the "dark wood." In the course of the journey, fear is rightly ordered from fear of "powers to do us

ill” to the emulation of the perfect, unassailable state that is in Beatrice.

II.

When we now try to identify some of the sources that might have helped to shape Dante’s use of fear, the first place to look is in the work of that master cataloger of intellect of Dante’s time, St. Thomas Aquinas.

(1) Aquinas devotes several questions to fear in his *Summa*, e.g., fear as a gift, fear as a vice, etc., drawing on Aristotle, Cicero, and St. Augustine. These sources would have been available also for Dante. For example, Aquinas often cites Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*. In Book ii.5, Aristotle sets forth a lengthy text on the nature of fear. From Richard McKeon’s translation, he defines fear as “... a pain or disturbance due to a mental picture of some destructive or painful evil in the future.”^v Its cause is “...by whatever we feel has great power of destroying us...”(5.28-30) Aristotle offers as an example “injustice in possession of power; for it is the unjust man’s will to do evil that makes him unjust.”(p.1389, 5.34-35) “...If we have done anything horrible, those in the secret terrify us with the thought that they may betray or desert us. And those who can do us wrong are terrible to us when we are liable to be wronged...”(p.1390, 5.6-9) Does this use of fear resonate with Dante’s past political treacheries and part of the allusions in the dark wood of Canto I. Is Dante communicating to the reader more about himself a veiled confession in this use of fear with Aristotle’s context as a backdrop?

Cicero’s *Tusculan Disputations* is another source from antiquity that Aquinas cites and is also familiar to Dante. In the *Tusculan Disputations*, Cicero deliberates on the topics of death, pain, accidents of life, passions, and the importance of virtue to make a happy life. We learn from Cicero that fear is not only in the dread of a future danger, but is an underlying element in sloth, shame, terror, cowardice, fainting, confusion, and astonishment. All of these qualities are

recognizable qualities to those interned in the *Inferno* as well as for Dante our pilgrim traveling on his journey. He explains that fear is in sloth as the dread of some ensuing labor. Unfortunately, he does not go on further to illustrate how fear operates in the others, but he does draw the conclusion that each of these affect the body adversely and places it in a servile state. Cicero also notes that a quiet and tranquil mind comes from having no fear of death. In Cicero, fear has only a negating role. Fear is clearly not a helper. Its absence provides for a quiet and tranquil mind, but it does not serve to aid one to attain that state.

Another favorite of St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Augustine, often comments on fear in the context of managing other topics. In contrast to Cicero, St. Augustine redeems the role of fear. His writings place fear either in a helpful role or in its relationship in regard to love. In *De spiritu et littera*, *On the Spirit and the Letter*, we learn that fear can operate as a deterrent to sinful behavior. Fear can keep one from concupiscence and lust. Fear of pain as an emotion is unique in that it can bring irrational emotions under the control of reason.

In his *De doctrina Christiana*, *Teaching Christianity*, we learn that fear has a helpful role in the path toward wisdom. He describes fear as a first step in a journey toward wisdom by working against one's pride. "Fear nails our flesh and fixes all the stirrings of pride to the wood of the cross,"(p.132) he writes. He qualifies fear here to be the kind of fear that is of one's mortality, one's death. Fear acts as a catalyst to converting our will to wishing to know God's will. As an aside, following the first step of fear, the next steps are piety, knowledge, resolution, counsel, purification of heart, and then finally arrival at wisdom. These are also recognizable as steps on the path that Dante pilgrim walks through on his way to perfection.

In still other writings, St. Augustine contrasts the fear in the Old Testament with love in the New Testament. In *De sancta virginitate*, *On Holy Virginit*y, he views fear as a part of the

spirit of slavery that properly resides in the Old Testament. He derives this understanding from his understanding of Romans 8:15 where St. Paul writes “We have not received again the spirit of slavery and fear; but we have received the spirit of adoption as children...” This also includes “... the fear of losing the material benefits that God promised to those who ... were still slaves subject to the law.” St. Augustine's perspective of fear in relation to the Old Testament offers a loose parallel to Dante pilgrim's bondage of fear during the *Inferno* stage of his journey.

St. Augustine contrasts the servitude of the Old Testament with the dominance of the spirit of freedom and instruction by love in the New Testament, perhaps offering a loose parallel with the *Purgatorio* and the *Paradiso*. In *De fide et operibus, Faith and Works*, p.254, he writes, "The kingdom of heaven is within you" (Lk. 17:21). ...Then, with love poured into our hearts (Rom 5:5) through that Holy Spirit, the law is accomplished not through fear of punishment but through love of what is right.

These themes also appear together in *De sancta virginitate* with his discussion on 1 Jn 4:18, the reference in Dante's *Paradiso* at the time of his deliverance from fear. Here, St. Augustine describes three kinds of fear. First, the fear that perfect love drives out is “fear of human beings and fear of material evils.” He then distinguishes this from a second kind of fear, “the fear of God's last judgment or eternal fire.” This kind of fear he qualifies as “not yet the way of perfect love.” A third kind of fear is further highlighted, the fear of giving serious offense to the one you love. This kind of fear in love that he terms as “chaste fear” is “never absent.” Each step of fear, relates to each major stage of Dante pilgrim, that is, the *Inferno*, the *Purgatorio*, and the *Paradiso*.

As fear is the first step on the road to wisdom for St. Augustine, for St. Benedict, another favored author to Dante, fear is the first degree of humility. In St. Benedict's *Rule for*

Monasteries, chapter 7, he writes that a monk is “to keep the fear of God before his eyes and beware of ever forgetting it. Upon completing the 12 degrees of humility, we again come upon the transition of fear stemming from 1 Jn: 4:18. “[T]he monk will presently come to that perfect love of God which casts out fear. And all those precepts which formerly he had not observed without fear, he will now begin to keep by reason of that love, without any effort, as though naturally and by habit. No longer will his motive be the fear of hell, but rather the love of Christ, good habit, and delight in the virtues which the Lord will deign to show forth by the Holy Spirit in His servant now cleansed from vice and sin. St. Benedict's perspective summarizes Dante's design for the transition of fear at that point of his journey in the *Paradiso* where he is delivered from fear.

(2) With this review of Aristotle, Cicero, St. Augustine, and St. Benedict, we now ask the question “What did St. Thomas write about fear?” Or, we might well ask, “What did he *not* write about fear?” He represents, perhaps, the most prolific writer on fear as it relates to theology and philosophy.

Aquinas seems to explore every dimension of fear. He addresses the cause of fear, the kinds of fear, whether fear is the result of a defect, what are its objects and its effect, whether it is good, whether it is the beginning of wisdom, whether it is a gift of the Holy Spirit, whether it remains after life, in Heaven, for the lost, whether fear excuses sin, how fear is related to the virtues of temperance and hope, how fear is related to despair, whether fear as a vice is contrary to the virtue of fortitude, whether fear hinders actions, whether fear makes one suitable for counsel, whether fear causes trembling, and even whether fear itself should be feared (p.769).

For Aquinas, all fear shares a common origin with love. Love causes fear: since it is through loving a certain good, that whatever deprives a man of that good is an evil to him, and

that consequently he fears it as an evil. (p.771) As inordinate love is included in every sin, inordinate fear is included in every sin. (p.1721).

The cause of fear, he writes, is the result of some defect (p.772) "...for it is owing to some lack of power that one is unable easily to repulse a threatening evil. Fear makes one ready to receive counsel (p.774) 'since it is in matters of difficulty, especially when we distrust ourselves that we take counsel...'”^{vi}

Aquinas divides fear into two kinds of fear, servile fear and filial or chaste fear. Servile fear, Aquinas subdivides into a worldly fear that regards punishment that turns someone away from God and another servile fear that regards God's punishment and turns one toward God. Servile fear, whether worldly fear or fear of God's punishment, proceeds from self-love. Filial or chaste fear proceeds from love of God.

Servile fear is entirely cast out when charity comes, "charity being the love of God." ^{vii} As charity increases, fear decreases chiefly as regards its act, since the more a man loves God, the less he fears punishment; first because he thinks less of his own good, to which punishment is opposed; secondly, because the faster he clings, the more confident he is of the reward, and, consequently, the less fearful of punishment." ^{viii} Aquinas concludes that "servile fear, or fear of punishment, will by no means be in Heaven, since such a fear is excluded by the security which is essential to everlasting happiness..." ^{ix}

Conversely, fear of punishment for the lost will also exist in a general way. (p.875) [Yet being Aquinas, he also points out that since fear regards the future and there is no past or future in heaven or for the lost, there is no fear in either place.]

Aquinas' description of fear closely matches the fear in the *Commedia*, in its regard to its servility, the distinction between worldly fear, fear of punishment, and chaste fear, and its

progression or maturation through charity. From the worldly fear that chased Dante pilgrim into the dark wood, to his receptivity of Virgil's counsel to begin a journey, together with the contrast of Beatrice's chaste fear from heaven, Dante puts the scholastic theology of fear into poetry.

In addition to all the dimensions that Aquinas writes about fear and the resonances we can observe in Dante's poem, his writings also suggest a larger role for fear. In the theology of St. Thomas Aquinas, servile fear and filial fear play key roles in the beginning movement to turn toward God in the sacrament of penance. Aquinas writes that "...[T]he act of penitence comes from servile fear ... the initiating affective response pointing one to repentance..."^x and from filial fear whereby a man, of his own accord, offers to make amends to God through fear of Him. (p.2543)

In a broader way, Aquinas' influence may be seen in Dante framing fear, at a verbal level, to signal the reader for the larger operation of illustrating poetically the sacrament of penance. Worldly fear arises first, driving Dante away from God. Then, servile fear arises from grace that leads the transformation of Dante pilgrim from imperfect love to the perfect love exemplified in Beatrice who is without fear. Fear is necessary for the pilgrim to gain the straightway. But like Virgil, fear is not able to complete the journey, and must necessarily be turned back when the pilgrim is perfected in love and the sacrament of penance is complete.

Dante's use of fear finds a distant echo towards the end of John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (300-307). As the angel Michael carries out the sentence upon Adam and Eve, in the midst of his dialogue with Adam, offering hope, Michael says:

So Law appears imperfect, | and but giv'n With purpose to resign them in full time Up to a
better Cov'nant, | disciplin'd From shadowy Types of Truth, | from Flesh to Spirit, | From
imposition of strict Laws to free Acceptance of large Grace, | from servile fear To filial, |

works of Law to works of faith.

These, then, are some of the literary influences that have served to guide Dante in his development of the notion of fear. As I continue to search for others, I hope this will provide an additional dimension to your appreciation of Dante's art the next time you delve into the *Divine Comedy*.

[NOTE: Add to bookend the transition: Paradiso, XXXI, 85-87: 'It is you, on no matter what the path, have drawn me forth from servitude to freedom by every means that you had in your power...']

ⁱIbid., Inf., II, 88-93.

ⁱⁱHere, Statius is giving an account of his life.

ⁱⁱⁱ"St. John's examination of Dante on love." Dante, Canto XXVI.

^{iv}"Quella medesima voce che paura tolta m'avea del subito abbarbaglio, di ragionare ancor mi mise in cura..." Ibid., Par., XXVI, 19-21.

^vMcKeon, Richard. Rhetoric. 5.21, p. 1389. Basic Works of Aristotle. New York: Random House, 1941.

^{vi}(Pt I-II, Q.44, Art 2 Reply Obj. 3)

^{vii}Ibid., 2a-2ae, XIX, A. 9, Rep. 3.

^{viii}Ibid., 2a-2ae, XIX, A.10, Ans.

^{ix}Ibid., 2a-2ae, XIX, A.11, Ans.

^x"...but from filial fear as from an immediate and proper principle." The note given on these lines reads, "In Ia2æ, 112, 2 ad I & 2 the text makes it clear that this process of conversion may be understood either as a series of progressing dispositions, or as elements in the complex act of complete conversion. The 'act of repentance' here, then may be understood in either sense. It is the response as it springs from charity and from filial fear that is complete repentance. A person may approach the sacrament of Penance with only imperfect dispositions, but when the sacrament is received effectively, with the bestowal of grace, the act of repentance is completed." St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiæ*, trans. Blackfriars (New York: McGraw Hill Book Co., 1964) 3a.85,5, v. 60, p.65.