

## 10. Proposal narrative.

**Proposal Title.** Active and Contemplative Life in Dante, from *Convivio* to *Commedia*.

**An explanation of the project. Previous work on this or closely related projects.**

I provide a full list of presentations and publications related to this project in point 9 of my grant application. In this proposal narrative I will explain more in detail the direct connection between my previous research and the one I will develop.

The project for which I am applying for a grant is a direct extension, a development of my doctoral dissertation. In my previous research I study the textual relationships between the three dreams Dante the pilgrim has in *Purgatory* (the dream of the Eagle in *Purg.* X, the dream of the Femmina Balba in *Purg.* XIX, and the dream of Leah and Rachel in *Purg.* XXVII) and three key poems of Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, 3M12, on Orpheus and Euridice, 4M3 on Ulysses and Circe, and 4M7 on Agamemnon, Ulysses and Hercules. Let me first illustrate the context of these poems in Boethius's text.

Together with the first poem of the *Consolation*, the three poems I mentioned above are the only ones, of the thirty-nine present in the text, where the subjects are mythological characters. These three poems are also the ones to which the commentary tradition has devoted significantly more attention than to the rest of the poems in the text of the *Consolation*. What makes them stand out, in addition to their poetic and metrical sophistication and their beauty, is that they articulate the ascent from active to contemplative life, a trajectory of great importance in Boethius's *Consolation*. The centrality of the passage from active to contemplative life is confirmed by the ladder embroidered on the gown of Lady Philosophy, a ladder connecting  $\pi$ , praxis, to  $\Theta$ , theoria. Through that representation the text promises, in a way, to bring the reader,

along with the protagonist, to a higher level of understanding of reality, to a higher dimension of understanding of what “reality” is in our everyday existence.

The mythological characters who are at the center of these poems exemplify different phases of the protagonist Boethius’s intellectual progress. They connect his initial desperation, his partial recovery of philosophical knowledge and his approaching the ultimate goal, theoretical philosophy, to different parts of the human soul, *voluptuosa*, *civilis*, *contemplativa*, as described by Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. Following the guidance of Lady Philosophy, the protagonist – a prisoner about to be executed -- will learn how to understand his own past according to the negative example of Orpheus, who lost his beloved Euridice for looking backward at her physical image; the positive examples of Ulysses, who with the exercise of his reason resisted Circe’s poisons; and Hercules, who, after a life of active deeds, was finally able to earn his immortality and to reach heaven.

From a retrospective point of view, it is not difficult to see to what extent this structure appealed to the author of the *Commedia*. To point out only the most striking similarities, both texts (one allegorically, one literally) narrate the progress of their protagonist from hell to heaven, they also share a relevant use of mythology, and, contrary to medieval practices, poetry is shown in both texts to be an apt vehicle for the expression of philosophical and religious truth. These are key elements that clearly mark possible ways in which Boethius’s *Consolation* provided an important model for the composition of the *Commedia*. Of course, given the magnitude of the issues at hand, the conclusions I draw in my research are provisional and not free of interpretive problems: my dissertation shows several textual connections between Dante’s dreams and these key episodes of Boethius’s text, as well as significant ways in which Dante’s text deviates from these subtexts. Boethius’s model seems to be one step removed from Dante’s

text, just as if its direct influence had been limited to an earlier version of the *Commedia*, and was now somehow “buried” in the new scheme of Dante’s poem.

### **Specific aims.**

After the completion of my dissertation, I had time to think about the outcome of my research, and became more and more convinced that in order to make sense of all my findings I needed to widen my perspective. While at the time of writing my dissertation, in order to bring the project to a close, I limited the focus of my research to the text of the *Commedia*, thinking and meditating about my results induced me to take into consideration more of Dante’s texts, and see whether this pattern occurs more than once. This process allowed me to confirm the validity of some of my dissertation’s conclusions.

In the present research, following an avenue of interpretation that I presented in a recent presentation, I will show that the first stage of the three-partite structure I identified in Dante’s *Purgatory* is already present in his unfinished philosophical treatise, the *Convivio*. In particular, I will illustrate how in this earlier text we can find suggestive antecedents of the three purgatorial dreams that are particularly interesting, as they reveal the direct influence of Boethius’s *Consolation*. The parallel starts with Dante’s use of the Orpheus myth (the same used by Boethius in the first poem) to illustrate the difference between pagan and Christian allegorical practices. The parallel continues with the poem that opens Dante’s fourth book of the *Convivio*. Both in its text and in the gloss Dante provides in the prose section, it shares many points in common with the dream of the *Femmina balba* of *Purgatory* XIX. The parallel concludes with the mention of the Martha and Mary, in *Convivio* IV, 17, 9-11. These two New Testament characters appear connected in Aquinas’s *Summa Theologica*, *quaestio* 179, to Rachel and Leah,

the characters Dante selects as different examples of the passage from active to contemplative life in the third dream of his *Purgatory*. In the passage of this structure from *Convivio* to *Commedia* the Italian poet was thus drawing from an established interpretive tradition of the Scriptures.

Given the nature of the project, this new phase of research will require a detailed knowledge of the texts that might have influenced Dante's understanding and representation of these two different spheres of human existence. My aim is to devote some time to the reading of the texts that possibly Dante himself (in the *Letter to Cangrande*, a text whose paternity is still debated) indicates as those that most clearly lend authority to his writing. That letter identifies Augustine, in *de quantitate animae*, Richard of St. Victor and Bernard of Clairvaux (the third of his guides in the *Commedia*) as the intellectuals who most directly inform his use of allegory. To date, Dante scholarship has been unable to see a common denominator among these texts that might justify Dante's mention of these authors in this group. Furthermore, there is evidence that Albertus Magnus, Aquinas and some Averroist commentaries on Aristotle had considerable influence on Dante's ideation of the transition from active to contemplative life. These are all areas of inquiries and texts that do not belong to the library of the average Italian scholar, but that are of central importance to the study of Dante as a practitioner of medieval philosophy.

### **Method.**

My method is based on traditional methods of close reading and intellectual history.

## Significance of the project

The significance of the project is far-reaching. In the Western tradition, only the Bible has received more commentary than Dante's *Commedia*, a text that has been glossed without interruption from the early fourteenth century to the present. Yet, Dante scholarship is still open to widely diverging interpretations regarding several issues that are of key importance to this project. To name just a few, the three purgatorial dreams have not yet received a satisfactory interpretation; the reason why Dante interrupted the *Convivio* at the end of the fourth of the planned fifteen books is still the object of speculation; and the debate about whether or not Dante is the author of the *Letter to Cangrande* is still flourishing among Dante scholars.

It would be naïve of me to claim that my research will provide a final solution to any one of these issues. Still, I know that the perspective of my study is one that Dante scholars have not considered so far, and for this reason I believe that this avenue of research has the potential to discover fertile ground for Dante scholarship. There is a long tradition of scholars who have studied various aspects of Boethius's influence on Dante. Around the middle of the past century these studies fell out of critical favor, and the topic of Dante's relation to Boethius's *Consolation* (a topic that Dante himself indicates as extremely central in more than one passages of his texts) was consequently tabled for several decades. My research indicates that Boethius's relevance for Dante is to be found less in any specific doctrinal aspect, and more in the literary model provided by his *Consolation*, a text that Dante indicates as important for his choice to write a first-person narrative. Boethius's *Consolation* is thus a key model for Dante, both in terms of its literary choices, and as a paradigmatic text that Dante uses to represent a variety of topics related to philosophical speculation. Thanks to this new perspective I believe my research can offer a valuable contribution to Dante studies.