

1290 - LA VITA NUOVO - "the New Life" - in "the sweet new style" (dolce stil nuovo) - influenced by Sordello (1200-1270), Guido Cavalcanti (1258-1300) - Sordello wrote in Provençal, troubadour poems of platonic ethereal love, women seen as embodiment of essences & divine ideas.

DIVINE COMEDY (COMMEDIA) - called "comedy" because it goes from misery to happiness - also because it is written in vernacular, Italian rather than in tragic Latin: "it is written in a careless and humble style, in the vulgar tongue, which even housewives speak."

The philosophy/theology of COMMEDIA is from SUMMA THEOLOGICA of THOMAS AQUINAS (1225-1274), "Thomism" or "Scholasticism" set God at center of Universe, proved His existence through 5 arguments: first cause; necessity; design; first mover; gradation. Sun is the fixed symbol for God as divine light.

Poem is written in terza rima, which Dante invented. COMMEDIA is in triads throughout, to reflect the Trinity. 3 separate books of 33 cantos each (to reflect 33 years of Christ's life), with extra canto in INFERNO to make perfect sum of 100. Rhymes used 3 times each.

At outset of poem, Dante's way is blocked by 3 beasts: SHE-WOLF (incontinence), LION (violence & ambition), and LEOPARD (fraud). Dante claims his own chief sin is ACEDIA or sloth, knowing the good but not doing anything about it.

Punishments in INFERNO are all compensatory - as a soul has sinned, so is it punished, and the imagery reflects the sin itself.

Jacob Burckhardt: *(In Florence about the year 1300) There was then, we are told, nobody in Florence who could not read; even the donkey-men sang the verses of Dante; the best Italian manuscripts which we possess belonged originally to Florentine artisans...*

T. S. Eliot: *It is visual in the sense that he lived in an age in which men still saw visions.*

Ezra Pound: *It is therefore expedient in reading the COMMEDIA to regard Dante's descriptions of the actions and conditions of the shades as descriptions of men's mental states in life, in which they are, after death, compelled to continue: that is to say, men's inner selves stand visible before the eyes of Dante's intellect, which is guided by a personification of classic learning, mystic theology, and the beneficent powers ...*

John Ciardi: *Hell is not where the damned are; it is what they are. ... it is basic Catholic doctrine (the doctrine of Ever Sufficient Grace) that God welcomes all who ask for Him.*

