

Human and Beyond:

Dante's Transhumanization and the Scope of Liberal Education

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As Dante the pilgrim prepares to ascend into the highest heavens, he undergoes an inexplicable transformation. Blinded by celestial light, he averts his gaze into the eyes of Beatrice and abruptly *transhumanizes* into a higher being. Words powerless to capture the experience, the poet can only gesture toward the metamorphosis of Glaucus in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as an *exemplum*. In his all-too-human struggle to adequately articulate the incident, Dante strikes at the heart of liberal education—he touches upon both its magnificent power and its limitations. That is, the poet's dependence upon the classical literary tradition facilitates comprehension of his mysterious metamorphosis, while it simultaneously demarcates the limit of liberal education, insofar as it cannot necessarily produce in the reader—but only stimulate thirst for—actual personal self-transcendence.

Multifaceted though the concept of “liberal education” may be, its intrinsic relationship to a tradition of great literature cannot be denied. Traditionally understood to serve not a utilitarian end but to cultivate the highest faculties of man, a liberal education liberates students to reason and learn independently of a teacher. Most fundamentally, this liberation is wrought by teaching students to read. As succinctly articulated by Eva Brann, “to have an

education is *to know how to read*" (16). According to Brann, the sphere of knowledge, or "*orbis intellectualis*," enframes and reflects upon the cosmos both as exposed to human beings in nature and as produced by human beings in art. Furthermore, this reflective sphere subsists most especially in books, the medium through which all readers at all times may participate in the conversation of great minds throughout the ages. A complete liberal education, then, demands exposure to the great literary tradition.

Dante's *Divine Comedy* is a constituent member of the Western literary tradition *par excellence* as it strives to delineate a universal cosmology and deliberately takes up the discourse among great minds of the past: who, after all, guides Dante on his journey but the great Latin poet Virgil? While the work is rife with literary allusions to sundry sources, the case of Dante's transhumanization in the first canto of the *Paradiso* represents a pivotal instance of intertextuality in the *Commedia*, for Dante must depend upon the Ovidian myth of Glaucus to convey his abrupt transformation into something greater than human. The poet explains:

Within me I was changed
 as Glaucus changed, tasting the herb that made
 him a companion of the other sea gods.
 Passing beyond the human cannot be
 worded; let Glaucus serve as simile—
 until grace grant you the experience. (*Paradiso* 1.67-73)

The corresponding episode of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* describes the fisherman Glaucus' sudden transformation into a sea god upon consumption of a strange herb:

I plucked some [grass], chewed it,

swallowed its strange juices, and instantly felt my heart
 quaking within me. I knew that I'd undergone some basic
 and fundamental change.

.....

I watched my feet as they walked down to the water
 and entered the beckoning sea, for which my entire being
 suddenly yearned.

.....

The sea gods welcomed me grandly,

.....

My body changed but also my mind. (13.935-956)

Dante presumes a liberally-educated audience and general familiarity with Ovid's work, which permits him to rely on Glaucus' metamorphosis as a "simile" for his own: where words fall short, *mythos* suffices.

Indeed, this unique Ovidian tale provides a wonderful framework within which to comprehend Dante's experience. Glaucus transforms from a human into a superior creature, describing himself as "a god of the sea, the equal of Proteus, Triton, Palaemon, / or any of those of whom you have heard, and with powers as great" (Ovid 13.915-916). Interestingly, the vast majority of Ovidian myths entail transformations of humans into inferior beings, such as rocks, trees, or irrational animals. The fact that Glaucus transmutes into a prestigious sea god, then, refines the Dantesque concept of metamorphosis by underscoring Dante the pilgrim's elevation into a superior, blessed creature. In the same way that Glaucus yearns to enter the "beckoning

sea,” the transformed Dante yearns to penetrate the heavens, explaining, “The newness of the sound and the great light / incited me to learn their cause—I was / more keen than I ever had been before” (*Paradiso* 1.82-84). Furthermore, Glaucus’ tale stands out among Ovidian myths by virtue of its uncanny Christological symbolism. Critics suggest that the strange “grass” corresponds to the Eucharist; Robert Hollander moreover notes that just as Glaucus’ fish come to life upon eating the strange grass, the purpose of Dante’s pilgrimage is to see Christ, “the ‘fish’ Who came back to life” (219). Hollander proceeds to explain, “The change in Glaucus’ nature is a prefiguration of the change in human nature wrought by Jesus” (219). The pre-Christian Roman myth, therefore, prefigures and illuminates Dante’s own spiritual odyssey, revealing a rich continuity between classical and Christian literary traditions. Hence, intertextuality in the *Divine Comedy* substantiates the idea that by beautifully enframing and immortalizing a long tradition of human thought and experience, liberal education permits better understanding and articulation of one’s own present experiences.

Continuity within the literary tradition does not preclude critical points of divergence, however, for significant contrasts do exist between Ovid and Dante; moreover, comprehending such disagreements also helps make intelligible the pilgrim’s experience, particularly with respect to love and its relationship to metamorphosis. That is, both Dante and Ovid perceive a close rapport between love and metamorphosis, but they disagree over its meaning and its role. In the *Metamorphoses*, Glaucus tells his tale only in order to entreat the beautiful maiden Scylla: he spied the girl swimming unclothed and “was smitten at once with a passionate yearning. / He called to her, said whatever a man can say to a maiden” (Ovid 13.903-904). Scholar Brooks Otis comments that the concept of love in the sense of lustful attraction, or

“amatory *pathos*,” is Ovid’s “preferred theme” throughout his work, and furthermore, “The passion depicted in the major episodes is...degrading or catastrophic: metamorphosis comes to it as sheer release from the pain of human existence” (166). Interestingly, the Glaucus myth involves an inversion of this generalization, while maintaining its negative character: Otis suggests that humans transmute to escape passion, but Scylla escapes the passion of Glaucus because she fears his transmuted being. Nevertheless, Ovid perversely weaves the phenomena of metamorphosis and love. Dante, however, purifies the relationship by presenting pure, Christ-centered love as the very impetus causing metamorphosis. Love catalyzes his personal metamorphosis through the medium of the beautiful lady Beatrice; he explains, “I turned aside; I set my eyes on her. / In watching her, within me *I was changed*” (3.1.66-67, emphasis mine). Physical attraction to Beatrice herself does not cause the change, but rather the grace of God and the love of Christ as mirrored in her eyes: “Just like the sun within a mirror, so / the double-natured creature gleamed within, / now showing one, and now the other guise” (2.31.121-123). The “double-natured creature” signifies the griffin, which embodies the natures of both lion and eagle; insofar as it unifies two separate natures, the griffin symbolizes Christ, both man and God. In the words of literary critic Guy Raffa, “Beatrice’s eyes were the mirrors reflecting the mystery of Christ, who was figured symbolically as the sun and more concretely—that is, incarnationally—by the complete natures of the hybrid creature alternately reflected in Beatrice’s ‘smeraldi’” (96). Hence, by means of contextualization and contrast, a liberally-educated audience can appreciate Dante’s considerable alteration of the Ovidian concept of metamorphosis as perversely bound to impure love, for the Christian poet clearly develops a metamorphosis driven by pure Christian love. As such, both the parallels and the discrepancies

magnified through literary allusions aid Dante's transmission of and the reader's comprehension of the inexpressible experience of transhumanization.

Liberal education, then, wields great power in permitting students to enter the conversation of great minds and better articulate concepts by means of comparison and contrast. However, in the great *Commedia*, Dante the poet also acknowledges the limit of liberal education insofar as Glaucus may serve only as a "simile— / until grace grant [each reader] the experience" (*Paradiso* 1.71-72). According to critic Daniel Murtaugh, the literary *exemplum* "is a provisional structure, a vantage point from which we can judge the great distance that separates our poet and us from the pilgrim in Paradise" (278). Similarly, liberal education provides a "vantage point" and intellectual framework that prepares students for lived human experience but cannot replace it. After all, Dante's rendering of the cosmos limits the glory of the great philosopher St. Thomas Aquinas to that of the fourth heavenly sphere, and the poet laments: "O senseless cares of mortals, how deceiving / are syllogistic reasonings that bring / your wings to flight so low, to earthly things!" (*Paradiso* 11.1-3). Beautiful and liberating though an education may be, sometimes the trappings of knowledge and intellectual cultivation can ensnare men and cause them to forget to live.

Ultimately, Dante's allusion to Glaucus ought also to stimulate in the reader a thirst for the very same transformation that the pilgrim experiences, for the apex of human life could be said to consist of transhumanization—this radical love-driven self-transcendence and re-centering of one's self in the prime Source of all existence. Thus argues philosopher W. Norris Clarke in *Person and Being*, a contemporary work that purports to graft modern phenomenology onto the Thomistic metaphysical tradition. Clarke explains that because

humans possess a spiritual intellect and will, they naturally seek the fullness of being and infinite goodness: “Only by reaching beyond the human can we succeed in becoming fully human...To be a human person fully means to self-transcend toward the Infinite” (108). Furthermore, “Since the self-diffusiveness of the Good in a supremely personal being like God is nothing else than love, then God is Love, the infinite Lover, and we too, as his images must be lovers” (97). Hence, Clarke and Dante convey the same concepts by different means; namely, God is love and the fullness of human existence is to be achieved in transcending the self like Dante and in becoming incarnations of God’s love like Beatrice. Therefore, while knowledge of Glaucus does make Dante’s experience intelligible, it is no substitute for the truly supernatural process of transhumanization that brings personhood to completion.

In sum, Dante’s reliance upon Ovidian myth in the *Divine Comedy* conveys the beauty of liberal education insofar as it facilitates articulation and comprehension of human experience, but even more importantly, it ultimately strives to incite in every reader a desire for actual personal self-transcendence. Dante the poet describes the “Infinite Goodness” and “Eternal Light” of the Trinity by means of a strikingly illuminating metaphor: “In its profundity I saw—
ingathered / and bound by love into one single volume— / what, in the universe, seems
separate, scattered” (*Paradiso* 33.85-87). To Dante, the whole universe is a book “bound by love.” Consequently, if liberal education is truly at its heart a conversation among great books, then the greatest book to be read is the cosmos itself—and this supreme book cannot be read by means of human faculties alone, but only with the aid of that divine grace that draws men out of themselves. The liberally-educated, then, ought to take heed: for it is incumbent upon those equipped with knowledge of the literary tradition to live out the “divine comedy” for

themselves, in earnest pursuit of and receptivity to the “Love that moves the sun and the other stars” (*Paradiso* 33.145).

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