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The Divine Comedy as Philosophy of Revelation

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I. Why Schelling to understand Dante?

If it is true that Schelling (1775-1854) is the first modern philosopher who considered Dante with a philosophical interest¹, it is necessary to wait for his lessons about *Philosophie of Revelation* (1841-1842, published by his son in 1861) to have a complete idea of what he called “Revelation” in his mature philosophy and in what way it concerns Dante. Our intention today is to shed light on the relationships of Dante’s thinking not only with a Christian, but first with a philosophical idea of Revelation². Therefore, we have to explain what is “revelation” as a philosophical object and why it is so important to ask to German Idealism a renewed approach of this conceptual history. We can then defend the idea that Schelling, at the end of Western metaphysics, *repeat*, with the highest degree of consciousness, the crisis on which is based Dante’s ontology³.

The Schelling’s inaugural item in 1804 appears first as a manifest about the importance of Mythology in Dante following these theses of “The oldest program of German idealism”. For the young romantic philosopher, Christian world has lost its mythological traditions. Once these roots are lost, it is very difficult to provide a real esthetic and political project for the modern world. The future of philosophy is to create a new mythology, even a Mythology of Reason. Dante appears as the first realization of this absolute emergency, that is why we still look forward him to understand the future of poetry and civilization.

If it is true that Dante has lost a real link with antique Poetic Principles, but he had, for Schelling, the personal ability to produce a new creation, founded on his own individuality, able to provide a mythological power:

To present the ideas of Philosophy and Theology in symbols was impossible because there was no symbolic mythology in existence. No more could he make his poem completely allegorical, because it would then no longer be historical. Therefore it had to be a completely unique mixture of the allegorical and the historical. In the exemplary poetry of the Ancients

¹ F. W. J. Schelling, “Ueber Dante in philosophischer Beziehung”, in *Kritisches Journal der Philosophie*, 1804.

² Schelling emphasizes the difference between a Christian Philosophy, which begins with Faith and Church tradition, and a Revelation Philosophy which studies Revelation as a fact of consciousness and a philosophical problem. It is neither a Religious Philosophy, because all Philosophy is religious in its meaning; cf. F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophie der Offenbarung*, in *Sämmtliche Werke*, Stuttgart und Augsburg, 1858 (SW) XII, Leçon VII, p. 133- 134, trad. fr., p. 158-159.

³ I have exposed first this hypothesis in my edition of Dante’s *Convivio* for the *Opere complete di Dante*, Classiques Garnier, Paris, 2023, p. 17-20. I try to give some new developments.

no alternative of this kind was possible. Only the individual was able to seize it, only free invention pure and simple could pursue it⁴.

But this personal power in Dante is also, for Schelling, an effective mean to give a poetic foundation of our world, which is similar in some respects with Vico's design in his *Science nuova*. Both philosophers discuss with Homer and Dante.

Fourty years after, when he is professor in Berlin after Hegel's death, the perspective changes. Determined to surpass the achievement of the Rational Philosophy closed in mind (for this reason, it is called a "Negative" philosophy), the lessons gave between 1841-1842, are all about a new idea of Philosophy opened on Being beyond any form of idealization: the Positive philosophy. This new "empirical" philosophy, grounded on the transcendence of Being, is divided between a Philosophy of Mythology and a Philosophy of Revelation.

Schelling looks for an alternative to the great Hegelian *Offenbarung Philosophie*. Hegel thinks that the content of philosophy is exactly the same as religion content. There is the same logic inside the revelation of salvation and the philosophy as a dialectic process and it is possible to show it across a systematic exposition of this absolute logic, considered as the "god's thinking before the creation". Of course, in this unified process between Hellenistic and Judeo-Christian Spirit, there are the grounds of the critical approach of religions we find again in the young Hegelians and Marx's early manuscripts till the *German Ideology*.

Aware of these consequences, Schelling tries to construct an alternative concept of the Revelation, which it would be impossible to reduce to an immanent content. That was one of the goals of his Philosophy of Revelation in the last figure of German idealism. Although Schelling doesn't expressly refer to Dante in these ultimate writings, our attempt at explaining Schelling's concept of revelation can lead us to understand one of the most difficult problems in Dante's interpretation: the transition from the *Convivio* to the *Commedia*.

II. Revelation and Freedom

We know that one of the original aspects of the *Convivio* is the continuous crossing from *possible* to *real*: from the first paragraph: "La ragione di che puote essere ed è [...]"⁵, to: "tutti questi amori puote avere e tutti li ha"⁶; "per lei <philosophy> si crede ogni miracolo in più alto intelletto poter avere ragione, e per conseguente poter essere"⁷. So we pass from the possible to the real.

⁴ F. W. J. Schelling, "On Dante in Relation to Philosophy", translated by Elizabeth Rubenstein, in *German aesthetic and literary criticism* (Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Schopenhauer, Hegel), edited by David Simpson, Cambridge University Press, 1984.

⁵ *Conv.* I, I, 1.

⁶ *Conv.* III, III, 5.

⁷ *Conv.* III, XIX, 14.

But after the *Convivio*, the situation changes and begins a new relationship between possible and real, which includes *willing*. In *Inferno*, Virgil defends Dante against Minos in this way:

Non impedir lo suo fatale andare:
vuolsi così colà dove si puote
ciò che si vuole [...] ⁸.

There are two ontologies. These technical affirmations often appear as automatic scholastic formulations. Actually, we are in the heart of a dialectic opposition between *ontology of reason* and *ontology of freedom*. This difference is the scope of Schelling's Philosophy of Revelation.

For Schelling, philosophy after Kant is closed inside possibility and necessity. This rational system (grounded on synthetic judgment) cannot know another kind of reality, first a reality considered as a result a *free design*. To experiment this free design, the philosophy has to totally transform his laws. This transformation is philosophy of Revelation, a history of the free choice of God for the world when he is not yet considered as necessity, but as a willing and a decision. To think Dante *with* Schelling is to show that there is a moment for the possible in Dante — and a moment for revelation. It is the key to understand the real extend of Dante's ontology:

The real aim of a philosophy of Revelation is to overcome general considerations until the moment which is beyond all necessary knowledge; this is exactly when we can speak of Revelation. [...] Not every philosophy is not made to conceive a Revelation⁹.

To get a living Revelation, we have to put the *fact* before the *possible*, that is to say to respect the secrets of God which cannot be exposed following the synthetic laws of human reason. That is why we can formulate in this matter a radical principle: the more there is a posteriori revelation, the less there is an a priori reason.

It is true that Hegel has conceived his Philosophy of Revelation as a Revelation of Reason¹⁰. But Schelling is not an irrational philosopher, he wants a rationality which releases a place to the fact of Revelation, with its secret story and its links with the old story of paganism:

The concept of Revelation, or of a being revealing itself, is based on an original darkness. It may reveal what was first hidden. The true God, God in his supernatural face can then reveal itself only if he appears through this darkness, or this dissimulation into which he is installed by consciousness¹¹.

⁸ *Inf.* V, 22-34.

⁹ SW XIV, p. 27, trad. fr. (PR), Leçon XXIV, vol. III, p. 48. It is the distinction between *Ideal* and *Real*. Real, at its turn, is so divided : "Real (real) is a general expression which includes : a) a natural relationship = mythology, b) a personal relationship = revelation. » (SW, XII, p.191, PR, Leçon IX, trad. fr., vol. II, p. 37). I always translate myself.

¹⁰ G.W.F. Hegel, *Encyclopédie des Sciences philosophiques*, Addition au § 36, trad. fr. Bernard Bourgeois, Paris, Vrin, 1970, p. 491.

¹¹ SW, XIII, p.187-188 ; PR, Leçon IX, vol. II, p. 33-34.

The god who reveals itself is always *an esoteric God*. Schelling refuses a philosophy of Revelation which transforms Supernatural Willing in necessary bonds. It is impossible in this way to reach the fact of the story and the god's actuality:

The divine will as effective is in the most eminent sense what we absolutely cannot know without Revelation, this will is the mystery *kat' exochèn*, and Revelation in his supreme meaning, this only one about we speak, is the Revelation of this will and Revelation in the supreme sense, the only one we are talking about, is Revelation of this will. [...] The supreme Revelation therefore consists precisely in the *execution* of this divine decision, of this divine will that was conceived at the same time as man's catastrophe¹².

We discover the meaning of Revelation only after the events. There is place only for a *a posteriori* interpretation. It will be an interpretation through human story of the Fault and the Redemption.

III. How Beatrice is a fact of revelation and his love a mystery

How is it possible to use these models to understand better Dante? Massimo Cacciari has written an important essay about this question and has shown how Schelling has the intuition that Dante is the absolute modern poem and the first figuration of a new kind of mythology which proceeds from Nature to Spirit, that is to say from Inferno to Paradiso, to give to human beings the joy to participate to the All¹³. But I can add something to this powerful thesis to enter into the sharp transition between the *Convivio* and the *Comedy*.

For Cacciari, there is an evident continuity between the two works, also if the first is not over, and the second is achieved:

Everything, science, philosophy and art, *Regine* (Queens), let us say with the *Convivio* since they are all scholars and images of the universal *Poiesis*, of Nature as Acting, Creating eternally at the beginning¹⁴.

But this coherence doesn't exist and Dante has suffered in his mature life a terrible discontinuity between the possible ontology in *Convivio* and the empirical experience of free revelation in *Commedia*. I think that Schelling has repeated this breaking and has built his philosophy, both negative and positive, on this intimate crisis¹⁵.

Following this hypothesis, we can tell Dante's story in three main moments: first, the Beatrice apparition in *Vita nuova*: "a li miei occhi apparve prima la gloriosa donna della mia mente."¹⁶ Second her disappearance and the arrival of the queen of reason, "Donna gentile",

¹²SW, XIV, p. 10 (for this volume, in *Schellings Werke*, ed. Manfred Schröter, München, 1927, VI); PR, Leçon XXIV, vol. III, p. 30.

¹³ Cf. Massimo Cacciari, "Schelling's Dante", in *Rivista di estetica*, 74/2020. Cacciari perfectly summarizes the relationships between Dante, Fichte, Schelling and Hegel, but he emphasizes in this process a critical discussion about Spinoza rather than the ontological interrogation about a "philosophy" of Revelation.

¹⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 14.

¹⁵ As a critical lecture of Schelling, Jean-Luc Marion wants the *gift of the being* in God free from the doctrine of the Powers. This phenomenology of Revelation remains outside the *Convivio*'s problem, because it breaks all respects of this "gift" to the genesis of the divine in Nature; cf. *D'ailleurs la Révélation*, contribution à une histoire critique et à un concept phénoménal de révélation, Paris, 2020, p. 462-463.

¹⁶ *Vita Nuova*, II, 1.

in the *Convivio*, third her return on the Purgatorio's mount. The first moment is a rather individual fact which happens suddenly, in an excessive way, beyond any merit; the second is an objective possibility which is in search of its universal necessity; the third a philosophy of Revelation after exploring "human catastrophe" (*Inferno*):

This appearance of the first possibility of a being different of himself places him for the first time in a free relation towards the necessity of his unforethinkable being, which he did not give to himself and in which he is therefore not freely or voluntary¹⁷.

In this apparition, the free being begins to liberate itself from the ground of the universe. Following this process of liberation, Dante's poetry crosses Mythology to Revelation: discovering Beatrice, he is in front of the first apparition, far from the pagan Anagkè. After this first moment, in the *Convivio* he transforms this initial contingency in rational necessity (with the "Donna Gentile"), keeping Beatrice as a secret. In *Commedia*, he discovers the path, through the Fault, to freedom: "libertà va cercando"¹⁸.

When he comments a verse of the first canzone in *Convivio*, Dante recalls the figure of a "Beatrice rivelante": "Io era certo, e sono, per sua graziosa rivelazione, che elle era in cielo"¹⁹. Beatrice herself is a power of Revelation (by dreams, or by words heard), but she is spiritual power, or to speak as Schelling, she is a will which passes from necessity to freedom, and from absolute being to the story of salvation.

By her power of sudden appearance, Beatrice may be considered as a shadow of the Jesus Christ. That is why *Commedia* as a Philosophy of Revelation could concern all the humanity. She is the Revelation of a messianic will where *si puote quello che si vuole*. Beyond any declared heresy, we find obviously in Dante's poetry, as well as in Schelling's speculations, tendency towards the St John Church and its apocalyptic predictions. It reveals a common belief into Joachimist tradition. Beatrice arrives in our world after the Church of sacraments, as a promise of a spiritual age:

Sed quare vel a Domino dicitur "evangelium regni" vel a Iohanne "evangelium eternum", nisi quia illud, quod mandatum est nobis a Christo vel apostolis secundum fidem sacramentorum, quantum ad ipsa sacramenta transitorium est et temporale, quod autem per ea significatur, "eternum"²⁰?

In *Divina Commedia*, as in Philosophy of Revelation, Beatrice is double. As a pagan goddess, she is the expression of the obscurity from which she emerges, as a moment of Revelation, she is an expression of the cosmical drama of Willing grounded on Creation and Salvation:

¹⁷ SW, XIII, p. 268; PR, Leçon XIII, vol. II, p. 117.

¹⁸ *Purg.* I, 71, éd. Enrico Malato, Salerno editrice, I Diamanti, Roma, 2018.

¹⁹ *Conv.* II, VII, 6.

²⁰ Joachim Abbas Florensis, *Tractatus super quatuor evangelia*, éd. Francesco Santi, Roma, 2002, p. 99, extract quoted by the Anagni Protocol to accuse Joachim of heresy.

The scope of a Philosophy of Revelation cannot explain *a priori* the foundation of the god's *decision*, which is the proper object and the original causality of the Revelation, but after it has really succeeded, it is possible to produce it as thinkable in general, and in its proceedings²¹.

It is true that in the *Convivio*, Dante returned to the allegorical conventions of the *Fin' Amor*, and that he has forgotten the real experience of Love: he has imagined a felicity far from God, only a *possible* one. It is the moment of opposition between God and Humanity. It was not without success, because he can develop by this mean the rational late of philosophy, both theoretical and practical, through language, science, felicity, nobility²². After the interruption of *Convivio* possible world, Beatrice returns, also if dead, as a real being, not being in general, but as such a singular and concrete person that she cancels a *universal* felicity for the enjoyment of an *individual* heart²³.

It was the time then for Dante to write the poem of a "superior Story":

Revelation content is a superior Story, which comes from the beginning of the things and extends itself to their end. Philosophy of Revelation does not have any other scope than to explain this superior story, to conduct it to its well-know principles and known by other ways²⁴.

These lines could be the better Schelling's comment about the *Commedia* as a poem of Revelation. It shows that revelation is a singular event, never closed in mind by ideas, but a fact we have to interpret, philosophically and poetically. Thus Beatrice is both mythological and "rivelante". She emerges from the immemorial, but she does not have a daughter as Demeter²⁵. That is why she is together Nausicaa and a pure soul which lives in a celestial rose. She comes and she changes the world, from fatality to freedom.

After so many crisis, treason and return, Dante has understood that she cannot be known *a priori*. For him now, she is as a Christmas day. All Dante's work is the story of that stupor. This story begins in front of the door of the Hell which conducts, on the other face of the earth, to the original stupor of the first apparition:

E lo spirito mio, che già cotanto
tempo era stato ch'alla sua presenza

²¹ SW, XIV, p. 27 ; PR, Leçon XXIV, vol. III, p. 48.

²² Schelling proposes descriptions of this very impressive moment: "as soon as the first philosophy has made the principle possible or generated it, it has reached its end; it must before be called *negative* philosophy, in so far as, in spite of its importance, or even its indispensability, it *knows* nothing in relation to what is alone worthy of being known [...] ; for it has the principle indeed as the only effective, but only as a concept, as a simple *Idea*". With the proposition: "Apparuit iam beatitudo vestra (*Vita Nuova* II, 5), Beatrice appears as a fact after the "destruction of *Idea*" to make place for *what is better than Idea*, a Will: "A *will*, this is where the expulsion of A⁰ <the free principle> out of reason must come from, this ultimate crisis of *rational philosophy*"; cf. *Einleitung in die Philosophie der Mythologie*, Leçon XXIV, trad. fr. p. 517, 520; SW, XI, 562, 566. Schelling insists on the fact that in the rational process there is no place for felicity, "except the felicity which saves.", p. 521. It is a good evaluation of the *possible* felicity given by the Gentle Dame: here the Ego "have only a *ideal* respect to the god, it is impossible for it to have another.", p. 514.

²³ Cf. *op. cit.*, p. 523.

²⁴ SW, XIV, p. 30 ; PR, Leçon XXV, vol. III, p. 51.

²⁵ About these mysteries, Schelling writes in his *Philosophy of Revelation*: "What was captive in Demeter by an exclusive god <Dionysos>, goes out from herself as *Persephone*, by a kind of birth." SW, XIII, p. 413-414; PR, Leçon XIX, vol. II, p. 271. This process doesn't happen to Beatrice, but to Virgin Mary.

non era di stupor, tremando, affranto,
 sanza de li occhi aver più conoscenza,
per occulta virtù che da lei mosse,
d'antico amor sentì la gran potenza²⁶.

To conclude, it is true that Dante prefers vision rather than revelation. We have an illustration with these two parallel formulations in *Comedy*: in *Paradiso* (about the resurrection of the flesh), we find: “questa revelazion ci manifesta²⁷”; but also “tutta tua vision fa manifesta²⁸”. Dante is first a poet of vision. But it is useful to return to the romantic Philosophy of Revelation to show that there is not one philosophy in Dante, but two, a philosophy of perfection and a philosophy of freedom. This division breaks in two part his creation, exactly as its works in the story of the world. That is why Dante is so complete, together so human and so divine. I have only wanted to cancel the spirit of confusion which comes from a much too easy unity between these two primordial aspects. By this retrospection, Dante is closer to us and our interrogations.

²⁶ *Purg.* XXX, 34-39.

²⁷ *Par.* XXV, 96

²⁸ *Par.* XVII, 128.

