

The Convivio, Book 1

Book One

Chapter 1

[1] As the Philosopher says at the beginning of the *First Philosophy*, all men by nature desire to know.¹ The reason for this can be and is that each thing, impelled by a force provided by its own nature, inclines towards its own perfection. Since knowledge is the ultimate perfection of our soul, in which resides our ultimate happiness, we are all therefore by nature subject to a desire for it. [2] Many are, however, deprived of this most noble perfection by various causes within and outside of man which remove him from the habit of knowledge. [3] Within man there exist two kinds of defects which impede him, one pertaining to the body, the other to the soul. That pertaining to the body occurs when its parts are not properly disposed, so that it can receive nothing, as is the case with the deaf, the dumb, and the like. That pertaining to the soul occurs when vice overcomes it, so that it becomes the follower of vicious pleasures, by which it is so deceived that because of them it degrades the worth of all things. [4] Likewise outside of man two causes may be discerned, one of which subjects him to necessity, the other to indolence. The first consists of domestic and civic responsibilities, which properly engage the greater number of men, so that they are permitted no time for

contemplation. The other is the handicap that derives from the place where a person is born and bred, which at times will not only lack a university but be far removed from the company of educated people.

[5] Two of these causes, namely the first from within and the first from outside, are not to be blamed but excused and are deserving of pardon; the other two, although one more than the other, deserve our censure and scorn. [6] Anyone therefore can plainly see upon careful reflection that there remain few who are capable of achieving the habit of knowledge desired by all, and that the handicapped who live forever starved of this food are almost too numerous to count. [7] Blessed are the few who sit at the table where the bread of the angels is eaten, and most unfortunate those who share the food of sheep!²

[8] But since man is by nature a friend of all men, and every friend is grieved by defects found in the one he loves, they who are fed at so lofty a table are not without compassion toward those whom they see grazing about on grass and acorns in animal pastures. [9] And since compassion is the mother of generosity, they who possess knowledge always give liberally of their great riches to the truly poor and are like a living fountain by whose waters the natural thirst referred to above is quenched.³ [10] Therefore I (who do not sit at the blessed table, but, having fled the pasture of the common herd, gather up a part of what falls to the feet of those who do sit there, and who know the unfortunate life of those I have left behind, for the sweetness that I taste in what I gather up piece by piece, and moved by compassion, though not forgetting myself) have set aside for those who are unfortunate something that I placed before their eyes some time ago, by which I have increased their desire.⁴

[11] Wishing now to set their table, I intend to present to all men a banquet of what I have shown them and of the bread which must necessarily accompany such food, without which it could not be consumed by them. [12] This banquet, being worthy of such bread, offers food which I intend should not be served in vain. Therefore I would not have anyone be seated there whose organs are ill-disposed because he lacks teeth, tongue, or palate, nor anyone addicted to vice, for his stomach is so full of poisonous

and contrary humors that it would not be able to retain my food. [13] But let come here all those whose human hunger derives from family or civic responsibilities, and let them sit at the same table with others likewise handicapped; and at their feet let all those place themselves who do not merit a higher seat because of their indolence; and let each group partake of my food with bread, for I will have them both taste of it and digest it. [14] The food of this banquet will be prepared in fourteen ways: that is, in fourteen canzoni, whose subject is both love as well as virtue. By lacking the present bread they possessed some degree of obscurity, so that to many their beauty was more pleasing than their goodness. [15] But this bread (that is, the present explanation) will be the light that renders visible every shade of their meaning.

[16] If in the present work, which is called *The Banquet* since this is what I want it to comprise, the subject is treated more maturely than in the *Vita Nuova*, I do not intend by this in any way to disparage that book but rather more greatly to support it with this one, seeing that it understandably suits that one to be fervid and passionate, and this one tempered and mature.⁵ [17] For it is proper to speak and act differently at different ages, because certain manners are fitting and praiseworthy at one age which at another are unbecoming and blameworthy, as will be shown below with appropriate reasoning in the fourth book. I wrote the former work at the threshold of my youth, and this one after I had already passed through it. [18] Since my true meaning was other than what the previously mentioned canzoni outwardly reveal, I intend to explain these canzoni by means of an allegorical exposition, after having discussed the literal account, so that both arguments will be savored by those who have been invited to this supper. [19] And if the banquet does not fulfill their expectations, I ask them to attribute every shortcoming not to my will but to my capability; for here it is my desire to be a disciple of complete and loving generosity.

Chapter 2

[1] At the beginning of every well-ordered banquet the servants customarily take the bread placed on the table and cleanse it of any impurity. So I, who stand in their place in the present work, intend first of all to cleanse two impurities from this exposition, which

passes for bread in my provision. [2] The first is that for someone to speak of himself seems impermissible; the other is that to speak of matters by going into them too deeply seems unreasonable; and in this way the knife of my judgment will strip away the impermissible and the unreasonable. [3] The rhetoricians grant no one the right to speak of himself, except in the case of necessity, and one is restricted from doing this because in speaking about someone the speaker cannot avoid praising or blaming the person about whom he speaks, and these two kinds of speech are crude since they come from one's own lips.

[4] To dispel a doubt that may arise here, I say that it is worse to blame than to praise, although one should refrain from doing either. The reason is that anything that is blameworthy in itself is more repugnant than something only incidentally blameworthy. [5] To disparage oneself is in itself blameworthy, because a person should tell a friend of his faults in private. No one is a better friend than one is to himself; therefore it is in the chamber of one's thoughts that a person must reprimand himself and bemoan his faults, and not openly. [6] Moreover, a person is usually not blamed for not being able or not knowing how to conduct himself properly, but always for not being willing to, because good and evil are determined by what we will or fail to will; therefore he who blames himself shows that he accepts his faults, accepts that he is not good; thus speaking of oneself with blame is in itself to be rejected. [7] Self-praise is to be avoided as an incidental evil, since one cannot give praise without its being mostly blame.⁶ It may be praise on the surface of the words, but it is blame to him who seeks out their substance; for words are made to reveal what is not known; hence one who praises himself reveals that he does not believe himself to be esteemed, which is something that does not happen unless he has a bad conscience, which he discloses by praising himself; and by disclosing it, he blames himself.

[8] Moreover, self-praise and self-blame must be avoided for the same reason, just like bearing false witness; for there is no one who can take measure of himself in a manner that is true and just, so much are we deceived by our self-love. [9] It happens that in judging the self everyone uses the measures of a dishonest merchant who buys using one measure and sells using another; for everyone measures his bad deeds with a long

measure and his good deeds with a short one so that the number, size, and weight of the good deeds appear to him greater than if he had assessed them with a true measure, and less in the case of the bad deeds. [10] Thus in speaking of himself with praise or its contrary, he either speaks falsely with respect to the circumstance he is talking about, or he speaks falsely with respect to its importance, which comprises both falsehoods. [11] Moreover, since remaining silent is a sign of agreement, he who praises or blames someone to his face acts discourteously, since the person so judged can neither agree nor disagree without falling into the error of praising or blaming himself—except in those instances in which correction is deserved, which cannot be accomplished without reproving the error meant to be corrected, and in those instances in which honor and praise are deserved, which cannot be accomplished without some mention of virtuous deeds and honors virtuously acquired.

[12] To return to the main topic, however, I say that (as touched on above) speaking about oneself is allowed in cases of necessity, and among the several cases of necessity two are very evident. [13] One is when great infamy or danger cannot be avoided except by talking about oneself; then it is permissible, for the reason that to take the less evil of two paths is almost the same as taking a good one. This necessity moved Boethius to speak of himself, so that under the pretext of consolation he might defend himself against the perpetual infamy of his exile, by showing it to be unjust, since no other apologist came forward.⁷ [14] The other arises when by speaking of oneself very great benefit comes to another by way of instruction; and this reason moved Augustine to speak of himself in his *Confessions*, because by the progress of his life, which proceeded from bad to good, good to better, and better to best, he gave us an example and instruction which could not be provided by any other testimony so true as this.⁸

[15] Consequently, if each of these reasons may serve as my excuse, the bread made from my wheat is sufficiently cleansed of its first impurity. A fear of infamy moves me, and a desire to give instruction moves me, which in truth others are unable to give. [16] I fear the infamy of having yielded myself to the great passion that anyone who reads the canzoni mentioned above must realize once ruled me. This infamy will altogether cease as I speak now about myself and show that my motivation was not passion but virtue.

[17] I intend also to show the true meaning of the canzoni, which no one can perceive unless I reveal it, because it is hidden beneath the figure of allegory. This will not only bring true delight to the ear but as well useful instruction concerning both this mode of speaking and this mode of understanding the writings of others.

Chapter 3

[1] Deserving of severe censure is that action which, while intended to remove some defect, itself introduces it, like the man who was sent to break up a quarrel, and before breaking it up began another. [2] Now that my bread has been cleansed on the one side, it is necessary for me to cleanse it on the other to escape a censure of this kind, for my writing, which can almost be called a commentary, is intended to remove the defect of the canzoni mentioned above, and this may itself prove to be perhaps a little difficult in part. This difficulty is deliberate here so as to escape a greater defect, and is not due to a lack of knowledge. [3] Ah, if only it had pleased the Maker of the Universe that the cause of my apology had never existed, for then neither would others have sinned against me, nor would I have suffered punishment unjustly—the punishment, I mean, of exile and poverty.

[4] Since it was the pleasure of the citizens of the most beautiful and famous daughter of Rome, Florence, to cast me out of her sweet bosom—where I was born and bred up to the pinnacle of my life, and where, with her good will, I desire with all my heart to rest my weary mind and to complete the span of time that is given to me—I have traveled as a stranger through virtually all the regions to which this tongue of ours extends, more or less begging, displaying against my will the wound of fortune for which the wounded one is often unjustly accustomed to be held accountable.⁹ [5] Truly I have been a ship without sail or rudder, brought to different ports, inlets, and shores by the dry wind that painful poverty blows. And I have appeared before the eyes of many who perhaps because of some report had imagined me in another form. In their sight not only was my person held cheap, but each of my works was less valued, those already completed as much as those yet to come. [6] The reason why this happens, not only to me but to everyone, I briefly wish to touch on here: first, because esteem inflates things with

respect to the truth, and secondly, because presence diminishes things with respect to the truth.

[7] A good reputation is principally engendered by good thoughts in the mind of a friend, and this is how it is first brought to birth; for the mind of an enemy, even though it receives the seed, does not conceive. [8] That mind which first gives birth to it, both to make its gift more fair and for the love of the friend who receives it, does not confine itself within the limits of the truth, but oversteps them. When the mind oversteps them in order to embellish what it affirms, it speaks against conscience; when an error arising from love makes it overstep them, it does not speak against it. [9] The second mind which receives what is said is content not only with the amplification supplied by the first but seeks to embellish it by transmitting it further, as if it were of his own making—and so much so that through this act and through the error caused by the love generated in it, it increases a reputation beyond what it originally was, whether, like the first mind, in accord or in discord with conscience. The third mind that receives it does the same, and the fourth, and hence it is inflated infinitely. [10] And so, by reversing the above-mentioned motives to the contrary, one can perceive the reason for infamy, which increases in the same manner. Thus Vergil says in the fourth book of the *Aeneid* that “Fame thrives on movement and acquires greatness by going about.”¹⁰ [11] Anyone who wishes, then, can clearly see that the image generated by fame alone is always greater, no matter what kind it is, than the thing imagined is in its true state.

Chapter 4

[1] Having presented just now the reason why fame inflates good and evil beyond their true dimension, it remains in this chapter to present those reasons which reveal why presence on the contrary diminishes them; and after presenting them, we will quickly come to the main topic, that is, the excuse mentioned above.

[2] I say then that there are three reasons why a man’s presence makes him less worthy than he really is. The first of these is immaturity, and I do not mean of age but of mind;

the second is envy—and these two reside in the one who judges; the third is human imperfection—and this resides in the person judged.

[3] The first can be briefly discussed as follows. The majority of men live according to the senses and not according to reason, like children; as such they do not understand things except simply by their exterior, and they do not perceive the goodness of things, which is ordained to a proper end, because they keep shut the eyes of reason which penetrate to a vision of it. Therefore they quickly see all that they are able to, and judge according to their sight. [4] And since they form some opinion regarding another man's fame by hearsay, with which, in the person's presence, their imperfect judgment clashes, which judges not by reason but only by the senses, they regard as a lie what they have previously heard and disparage the person they have previously esteemed. [5] Hence with these, who comprise, alas, almost all of humanity, a man's presence diminishes the one and the other quality. Such people as these are soon charmed and soon sated, are often glad and often sad with brief delights and sorrows, soon become friends and soon enemies; they do everything like children, without the use of reason.

[6] The second is seen by these reasons: that in vicious people equality causes envy, and envy causes bad judgment, because it does not allow the reason to argue on behalf of whatever is envied, and the faculty of judgment is then like a judge that hears only one side. [7] Hence when people such as these see a famous person, they become immediately envious, because they see limbs and powers very much like their own, and they fear, because of the excellence of that person, that they will be less esteemed. [8] These people who are moved by passion not only judge wrongly, but by defaming cause others to judge wrongly too; consequently with them presence diminishes the good and evil in each person presented to them; and I say "evil" because many, taking delight in evil deeds, are envious of evil-doers.

[9] The third reason is human imperfection, which attaches to him who is judged and does not obtain without some familiarity and intimacy with him. To make this clear, we must observe that man is blemished in many ways, for as Augustine says, "no one is without blemish." [10] Sometimes a person is blemished by a passion which occasionally

he cannot resist; sometimes he is blemished by some physical deformity; sometimes he is blemished by some stroke of misfortune; and sometimes he is blemished by the infamy of his parents or someone close to him. Fame does not bear these things with itself, whereas presence does, revealing them through intimacy. [11] These blemishes cast a shadow on the brightness of his goodness, so that they make it seem less bright and less worthy. This is the reason why every prophet is less honored in his own country; this is the reason why a good man should vouchsafe his presence to few and his intimacy to still fewer, so that his name may be known, but not disparaged. [12] This third cause may obtain for evil as well as for good, if each term in the argument is turned to its opposite. Thus it is clearly seen that because of imperfection, from which no man is free, presence diminishes the good and the evil in everyone more than truth warrants.

[13] Therefore since, as has been said above, I have presented myself to virtually everyone in Italy, by which I have perhaps made myself more base than truth warrants, not only to those to whom my fame had already spread but also to others, whereby my works as well as my person are without doubt made light of, it is fitting that I should add, with a loftier style, a little weight to the present work, so that it may seem to take on an air of greater authority. This should suffice to excuse the difficulty of my commentary.

Chapter 5

[1] Now that this bread is cleansed of its accidental impurities, it remains to apologize for one pertaining to substance, that is, for its being in the vernacular and not in Latin; which is to say, by way of metaphor, for its being made of oats and not of wheat.¹¹ [2] This impurity is excused in few words for three reasons which have moved me to choose this language rather than the other: the first arises from precaution against creating an inappropriate relationship; the next from zealous generosity; the third from natural love of one's native tongue. [3] And to counter an objection that might be made for the above-mentioned reason, I intend to discuss these points on their own basis in the following order.

[4] What most adorns and commends human actions and what most directly leads them to a good end is the habit of those dispositions which are directed to an intended end, as, for example, boldness of mind and strength of body are directed to the end of chivalry.

[5] So anyone who is placed into the service of another must have those dispositions which are directed to that end, such as submission, understanding, and obedience, without which a man is not equipped to serve well. For if he is not submissive in all of his functions, he will always perform his service with effort and strain and will rarely continue in it; and if he is not understanding of the needs of his master and is not obedient to him, he will never serve except according to his own judgment and his own will, which is more the service of a friend than that of a servant. [6] Hence, to avoid this inappropriate relationship, it is fitting that this commentary, which is made to play the part of a servant to the canzoni placed below, be subject to them in all of its functions and be understanding of the needs of its master and obedient to him.

[7] All of these dispositions would be lacking if it had been in Latin and not in the vernacular, since the canzoni are in the vernacular. For in the first place it would not have been subject but sovereign, because of its nobility, its virtue, and its beauty. Because of its nobility, for Latin is eternal and incorruptible, while the vernacular is unstable and corruptible. [8] Thus in the ancient Latin comedies and tragedies, which cannot undergo change, we find the same Latin as we have today; this is not the case with the vernacular, which, being fashioned according to one's own preference, undergoes change. [9] Thus in the cities of Italy, if we care to take a close look, we find that within the last fifty years many words have become obsolete, been born, and been altered; if a short period of time changes language, much more does a greater period change it. Thus I say that if those who departed this life a thousand years ago were to return to their cities, they would believe that they were occupied by foreigners, because the language would be at variance with their own. [10] This will be more fully discussed elsewhere in a book I intend to write, God willing, on *Eloquence in the Vernacular*.¹²

[11] Moreover, Latin would not have been subject but sovereign because of its virtue. Everything is virtuous in its nature which fulfills the purpose toward which it is directed; and the better it does this, the more virtuous it is. Therefore we call a man virtuous who

lives a contemplative or an active life, which he is by nature constituted to do; we call a horse virtuous which runs fast and far, which it is constituted to do; we call a sword virtuous which cuts through hard objects easily, which it is constituted to do. [12] Thus language, which is constituted to express human thought, is virtuous when it does this, and the more completely it does this, the more virtuous it is; therefore, since Latin expresses many things conceived in the mind which the vernacular cannot, as those who speak both languages know, its virtue is greater than that of the vernacular.

[13] Furthermore, Latin would not have been the subject but the sovereign because of its beauty. One calls a thing beautiful when its parts correspond properly, because pleasure results from their harmony. Thus a man appears beautiful when his limbs correspond properly; and we call a song beautiful when its voices are harmonized according to the rules of the art. [14] Therefore that language is the most beautiful in which the words correspond most properly; and they correspond more properly in Latin than in the vernacular, because the vernacular follows custom, while Latin follows art; consequently it is granted that Latin is the more beautiful, the more virtuous, and the more noble.¹³

[15] And this concludes my main point: that is, that Latin would not have been the subject of the canzoni but their sovereign.

Chapter 6

[1] Having shown how the present commentary would not have been subject to the vernacular canzoni if it had been in Latin, it remains to show how it would not have understood them nor have been obedient to them; and then we will reach the conclusion that to avoid creating an inappropriate relationship it was necessary to speak in the vernacular. [2] I say that Latin would not have been an understanding servant to its vernacular master for the following reason. The servant's understanding requires, above all, his understanding two things perfectly. [3] One is the nature of his master. Now there are masters of so asinine a nature that they order the opposite of what they desire, and others who without uttering a word expect to be understood, and others who do not want a servant to set about doing what is necessary unless they order it. [4] Why there are these differences in men I do not intend to explain at present (for this would make

the digression much too long), except insofar as to say that in general such men whom reason so little benefits are all but animals. Therefore if the servant does not understand his master's nature, it is evident that he cannot serve him perfectly. [5] The other point is that the servant must understand the friends of his master, for otherwise he could not honor or serve them, and consequently he would not serve his master perfectly; for friends are like the parts of a whole, since their whole consists of unity in willing and in not willing.

[6] Neither would the Latin commentary have understood these things, which the vernacular itself does. That Latin does not understand the vernacular and its friends is proved as follows. He who knows a thing in general does not know it perfectly, just as anyone who recognizes an animal from a distance does not recognize it perfectly because he does not know whether it is a dog, a wolf, or a goat. [7] Latin understands the vernacular in general, but not in particular, for if it understood it in particular it would understand all the vernaculars, because there is no reason why it should understand one better than another. So any man having perfect knowledge of Latin would have the habit of understanding the vernacular in particular. [8] But this is not the case, for a person having perfect knowledge of Latin does not distinguish, if he is from Italy, the English vernacular from the German; nor if a German, the Italian vernacular from the Provençal. Thus it is evident that Latin does not understand the vernacular.

[9] Moreover, it does not understand its friends, since it is impossible to know a person's friends without first knowing the person; therefore if Latin does not know the vernacular, as proved above, it is impossible for it to know its friends. [10] Moreover, without intimacy and familiarity it is impossible to know people, and Latin does not have an affiliation with as many people in any language as does the vernacular of that language, to which all are friends; consequently it cannot know the friends of the vernacular. [11] It is not a contradiction to say, as one might, that Latin all the same does have an association with certain friends of the vernacular; for, it is not therefore familiar with all of them, and so does not understand its friends perfectly, since perfect and not defective knowledge is required.

Chapter 7

[1] Having proved that a Latin commentary would not have been an understanding servant, I will tell why it would not have been obedient. [2] He is obedient who has that good disposition which is called obedience. True obedience should have three things, without which it cannot exist: it should be sweet and not bitter, entirely under command and not self-willed, and within measure and not beyond measure. [3] These three things a Latin commentary could not possibly have possessed, and therefore it would have been impossible for it to be obedient. That this would have been impossible for Latin, as has been said, is made clear by the following reasoning: everything that proceeds by inverse order is disagreeable, and consequently is bitter and not sweet, as, for example, sleeping during the day and lying awake at night, or going backwards and not forwards. [4] For the subject to command the sovereign is to proceed by inverse order (for the right order is for the sovereign to command the servant); so it is bitter and not sweet. And since it is impossible to obey a bitter command with sweetness, it is impossible for the sovereign's obedience to be sweet when a subject commands. [5] Therefore, if Latin is the sovereign of the vernacular, as has been shown above by many reasons, and the canzoni which play the role of commander are in the vernacular, it is impossible for its obedience to be sweet.

[6] Moreover, obedience is entirely under command and in no way self-willed when the person who obeys would not have acted on his own initiative without a command, either entirely or in part. [7] Therefore if I were commanded to wear two robes, and without being commanded should put on but one, I would say that my obedience is not entirely the result of a command but in part self-willed. Such would have been the obedience of the Latin commentary, and consequently it would not have been entirely the result of a command. [8] That such would have been the case is clear from this: that without having been commanded by this master, Latin would have explained many aspects of his meaning—and it does explain them, as he who carefully examines writings written in Latin knows—which the vernacular in no way does.

[9] Moreover, obedience is within measure and not beyond measure when it goes to the limit of the command, and not beyond it, just as individual nature is obedient to universal nature when it gives a man thirty-two teeth, neither more nor less, and when it gives the hand five fingers, neither more nor less; and man is obedient to justice when he makes a sinner pay his debt to society, neither more nor less than justice demands. [10] Now Latin would not have done this, but would have sinned not only through deficiency, and not only through excess, but through both; and so its obedience would not have been within measure, but beyond measure, and consequently it would not have been obedient. [11] That Latin would not have fulfilled the command of its master and that it would have exceeded it can easily be shown. This master, that is, these canzoni to which this commentary is constituted as servant, command and desire that their meaning be explained to all who can comprehend it, so that when their words are heard they will be understood. And no one doubts, were they to make their command heard, that this would be their command. [12] Latin would not have explained them except to the learned, for no one else would have understood it. Therefore, since among those who desire to understand them the unlearned are far more numerous than the learned, it follows that Latin would not have fulfilled their command as well as the vernacular, which is understood by the learned and the unlearned alike.

[13] Moreover, Latin would have explained them to people of other languages, such as the Germans and the English and others, and here it would have exceeded their command; for it would have been against their will (broadly speaking, I say) for their meaning to have been explained where they could not convey it together with their beauty. [14] Therefore everyone should know that nothing harmonized according to the rules of poetry can be translated from its native tongue into another without destroying all its sweetness and harmony. [15] This is the reason why Homer has not been translated from Greek into Latin as have been other writings we have of theirs. And this is the reason why the verses of the Psalter lack the sweetness of music and harmony; for they were translated from Hebrew into Greek and from Greek into Latin, and in the first translation all their sweetness was lost. [16] Thus I have fully dealt with what was promised at the beginning of the chapter immediately preceding this one.

Chapter 8

[1] Now that it has been shown by sufficient reasons that to avoid an inappropriate relationship a commentary in the vernacular and not in Latin would be necessary for unfolding and explaining the canzoni mentioned above, I intend also to show how complete generosity made me choose the former and forgo the latter. [2] Now complete generosity may be observed in three things which are a consequence of using the vernacular and which would not have been a consequence of using Latin. The first is giving to many; the second is giving useful things; the third is giving a gift without its being asked.

[3] It is good to give to and to help one, but it is complete goodness to give to and to help many in that it resembles the beneficence of God, who is the most universal benefactor.

[4] Moreover, to give to many without giving to one is impossible, since the one is included in the many; however, it is quite possible to give to one without giving to many. Therefore he who helps many does the one good and the other as well; he who helps one does only the one good; and hence we see that lawmakers keep their eyes fixed chiefly on the common good when making laws. [5] Moreover, to give things that are not useful to the recipient is also good, in that he who gives knows at least that he is a friend; but it is not perfectly good, and so it is not complete, as, for example, if a knight were to give a shield to a doctor, or a doctor were to give a knight a copy of Hippocrates' *Aphorisms* or Galen's *Art*. Therefore the wise say that the face of a gift must resemble that of the recipient, that is to say, it should be appropriate and useful to him; and in this the generosity of him who is discerning in his gifts is called complete.¹⁴ [6] But since a discussion of ethics usually engenders a desire to ascertain their origin, I intend in this chapter briefly to point out four reasons why a gift, in order for it to manifest complete generosity, should be useful to the person who receives it.

[7] First, because virtue must be cheerful, and not sad in any of its acts; therefore, if the gift is not cheerful in the giving and in the receiving, there is in it neither perfect nor complete virtue. This cheerfulness can be vouchsafed by nothing but usefulness which abides in the giver through giving and which comes to the recipient through receiving.

[8] The giver, therefore, must have the foresight to act so that on his side there remains the usefulness of integrity which surpasses every usefulness, and so that the usefulness of using the thing given passes to the recipient; in this way both will be cheerful, and consequently generosity will be the more complete.

[9] Second, because virtue must always move things toward the better; for, as it would be a blameworthy act to turn a fine sword into a spade or a beautiful lute into a beautiful goblet, so it is blameworthy to move a thing from a place where it is useful and convey it to a place where it will be less useful. [10] And since it is blameworthy to work in vain, it is blameworthy not only to put a thing in a place where it is less useful but even in a place where it is equally useful. [11] Therefore, for a change in things to be praiseworthy, it must always be for the better, because it should be praiseworthy in the highest degree, and it cannot do this in a gift unless the gift becomes more precious through its transfer; and it cannot become more precious unless it is more useful to the recipient than to the giver. From this we may conclude that the gift, if it is to manifest complete generosity, must be useful to the person who receives it.

[12] Third, because the exercise of virtue in itself should be to acquire friends, since our life has such a need, and the end of virtue is to make ourselves content. Therefore, for a gift to make a friend of the recipient, it must be useful to him, because usefulness stamps the image of the gift in his memory—which is the nourishment of friendship—and much more strongly the greater it is. [13] Thus Martin is used to saying, “The gift that John gave me will never fade from my mind.”¹⁵ So that, for the gift to have its virtue, which is generosity, and for it to be complete, it must be useful to the person receiving it.

[14] Finally, virtue must be free in its action and not compelled. Action is free when a person goes willingly in some direction, as is evident from his keeping his face turned in that direction; action is compelled when a man acts against his will, as is shown by his not looking in the direction in which he is going. [15] Now a gift looks in such a direction when it is directed to the needs of the recipient. Since it cannot be so directed if it is not useful, it is necessary that virtue, in order for it to move with free action, accompany the

gift in the direction in which it goes, which is to the recipient; consequently the gift must be useful to the recipient in order for there to be complete generosity in it.

[16] The third trait in which complete generosity can be observed is giving without being asked, because a thing asked for is on one side a matter of commerce, not virtue, since the recipient buys even though the giver does not sell. This is why Seneca says that “nothing is so dearly bought as that which is paid for with prayers.”¹⁶ [17] In order therefore that there may be complete generosity in the gift and that it be manifest in it, it must be free from every act of commerce: the gift must be unasked. [18] Why what is prayed for costs so much I do not intend to discuss here, because it will be discussed sufficiently in the last book of this work.

Chapter 9

[1] From all three of the above-mentioned conditions, all of which must be met in order for complete generosity to be found in a benefit, the Latin commentary was remote, whereas the vernacular is close to them, which can be plainly demonstrated as follows.

[2] Latin would not have served many, for, if we call to mind what was said above, the learned to whom the Italian language is foreign could not have availed themselves of this service; and regarding those who are native to this language, if we wish to consider who they are, we shall find that out of a thousand not one would have been served in a reasonable manner, because they would not have received it, so prone are they to avarice that it deprives them of all nobility of mind, a virtue that desires this food above all. [3] To their shame I say that they should not be called learned, because they do not acquire learning for its own use but only insofar as through it they may gain money or honor; just as we should not call a lute-player someone who keeps a lute in his house for the purpose of renting it out, as opposed to playing on it.

[4] Returning to the main proposition, I say that it may clearly be seen that Latin would have conferred its benefits on few while the vernacular will be of service to many. [5] For goodness of mind, which this service attends to, is found in those who because of the world’s perverse neglect of good have left literature to those who have changed it from a

lady into a whore; and these noble persons comprise princes, barons, knights, and many other noble people, not only men but women, of which there are many in this language who know only the vernacular and are not learned.

[6] Moreover, Latin would not have been the giver of a useful gift as will the vernacular, because nothing is useful except insofar as it is used. Nor does its goodness reside in potentiality, which is not a perfect state of being, just as in the case of gold, pearls, and other treasures that lie buried, and I speak only of what is buried, because what is in the hands of the miser lies in a place lower than the ground in which treasure is hidden. [7] The true gift of this commentary lies in the meaning of the canzoni for which it is made, meaning which is intended above all to lead men to knowledge and virtue, as will be seen in the full course of their treatment. [8] This meaning can be of use only to those in whom true nobility is sown, in the manner that will be described below in the fourth book; and almost all of these persons know only the vernacular, like the noble men and women referred to earlier in this chapter. [9] No contradiction arises even if there are some learned persons to be found among them; for, as my master Aristotle says in the first book of the *Ethics*, “one swallow does not make spring.” It is therefore evident that the vernacular will provide something useful and that Latin would not have provided it.

[10] Moreover, the vernacular will give a gift unasked, which Latin would not have done, because it will give itself as a commentary, something that no one has ever asked for; and this cannot be said of Latin, which has already been asked for as a commentary and a gloss on many writings, as may readily be seen at the beginning of many of them. [11] And so it is evident that complete generosity moved me to employ the vernacular rather than Latin.

Chapter 10

[1] A full apology should be made for serving oaten and not wheaten bread at a banquet so noble in its food and so distinguished in its guests, and the reason why a man departs from what has long been the practice of others, namely, the use of Latin in commentaries, should be evident. [2] Therefore the reason needs to be made clear, for

the end of new things is not certain, since that experience has not yet been had by means of which things long observed and long in use are measured both as to their progress and as to their end. [3] This is why the Law was moved to command that a man should take great care in entering on a new path, saying that “in establishing new things, the reason that makes us depart from what has long been in use must be evident.”¹⁷

[4] No one should be surprised, then, if the digression that I make in stating my apology proves lengthy, but since it is necessary let him bear its length patiently. [5] In pursuing this further (since it has been shown how I was moved to employ the vernacular commentary and forsake Latin in order to avoid an inappropriate relationship and by reason of complete generosity), I say that the nature of my full apology requires me to show how I was moved to this act through natural love of my native tongue, which is the third and final reason that moved me to it. [6] I say that natural love above all moves the lover to do three things: first, to magnify the loved object; second, to be jealous for it; next, to defend it, as everyone can observe happens continually. These three things made me adopt it, that is, our vernacular, which naturally and accidentally I love and have loved. [7] I was moved in the first place to magnify it, and in what way I magnify it may be seen by the following argument. Now things can be magnified, that is, made great, by many conditions of greatness, and nothing makes them so great as the greatness of their own goodness, which is the mother and preserver of all other kinds of greatness. [8] For man can have no greatness greater than that of virtuous action, which is his own proper excellence, by which the greatness of true dignity, true honor, true power, true riches, true friends, and true and glorious fame are both acquired and preserved. [9] And this greatness I give to this friend, since what it possesses of potential and latent goodness I make it express actively and openly through its own proper activity, which is to make manifest the meaning conceived.

[10] I was moved in the second place by jealousy for it. Jealousy for a friend makes a man solicitous to provide for the distant future. Thinking, therefore, that the desire to understand these canzoni would have induced some unlearned person to have the Latin commentary translated into the vernacular, and fearing that the vernacular might have been set down by someone who would have made it seem offensive, as did the one who

translated the *Ethics* from Latin—and that was Thaddeus the Hippocratist—I arranged to set it down, trusting in myself more than in another.¹⁸ [11] I was moved to defend it from its numerous accusers who disparage it and commend the other vernaculars, especially the language of *oc*, calling that one more beautiful and better than this one, thereby departing from the truth.¹⁹ [12] For by means of this commentary the great goodness of the vernacular of *sì* will be seen, because its virtue will be made evident, namely how it expresses the loftiest and the most unusual conceptions almost as aptly, fully, and gracefully as Latin, something that could not be expressed perfectly in verse, because of the accidental adornments that are tied to it, that is, rhyme and meter, just as the beauty of a woman cannot be perfectly expressed when the adornment of her preparation and apparel do more to make her admired than she does herself. [13] Therefore, if anyone wishes to judge a woman justly, let him look at her when her natural beauty alone attends her, unaccompanied by any accidental adornment; so it will be with this commentary, in which the smoothness of the flow of its syllables, the appropriateness of its constructions, and the sweet discourses that it makes will be seen, which anyone upon careful consideration will find full of the sweetest and most exquisite beauty. [14] But since the most effective way of revealing the defects and the malice of an accuser is to examine his intentions, I will tell, in order to confound those who attack the Italian language, why they are moved to do this, and I will now write a special chapter on this subject so that their infamy may be rendered even more conspicuous.

Chapter 11

[1] To the perpetual disgrace and humiliation of those contemptible men of Italy who praise the vernacular of others and disparage their own, I say that their impulse arises from five detestable causes. [2] The first is blindness in discernment; the second, disingenuous excusing; the third, desire for glory; the fourth, reasoning prompted by envy; the fifth and last, baseness of mind, that is, pusillanimity. Each of these faults has so great a following that few are those who are free from them.

[3] Of the first we may reason as follows. Just as the sensitive part of the soul has eyes by which it apprehends the difference in things with respect to their external coloring, so the rational part has its own eye by which it apprehends the difference in things with respect to how they are directed to some end: and this is discernment. [4] Also, just as he who is blind in the eyes of sense always follows others in judging what is good and what is evil, so he who is blind to the light of discernment always follows the popular cry in his judgment, whether true or false. And so whenever the one who cries is blind, he and the other who leans upon him, being likewise blind, must come to a bad end. For this reason it is written that “if the blind lead the blind, so shall they both fall into the ditch.”²⁰

[5] This popular cry has long been turned against our vernacular, for reasons which will be discussed below after the present one. And the blind mentioned above, who are almost infinite in number, with their hands placed on the shoulders of these liars, have fallen into the ditch of false opinion from which they do not know how to escape. [6] The common people especially are bereft of the habit of this discerning light because, being occupied from the beginning of their lives with some kind of trade, they direct their minds to it by force of necessity, so that they are mindful of nothing else. [7] Since the habit of virtue, whether moral or intellectual, cannot be had of a sudden, but must be acquired through practice, and since they devote their practice to some craft and do not trouble themselves with perceiving other things, it is impossible for them to have discernment. [8] As a result it often happens that they cry “long live their death” and “death to their life,” if someone but raises the cry. This is the most dangerous defect of their blindness. Hence Boethius deems popular glory to be vain because he sees that it lacks discernment.²¹ [9] These people should be called sheep, not men, for if a sheep were to cast itself over a cliff a thousand feet high, all the others would follow after it; and if while crossing the road a sheep for any reason leaps, all the others leap, even though they see nothing to leap over. [10] I have seen many jump into a well after one that jumped in, perhaps believing that they were jumping over a wall, even though the shepherd, weeping and shouting, tried to check them with his arms and body.

[11] The second group against our vernacular arises out of disingenuous excusing. There are many who love to be considered masters rather than to be such, and to avoid the opposite, that is, not being so considered, they always lay the blame on the material furnished for their craft, or on their tools. For example, a bad smith blames the iron supplied to him, and the bad lute player blames the lute, thinking to throw the fault of the bad knife or the bad music on the iron or the lute, and to remove it from himself.

[12] In the same way there are some, and not a few, who wish to be considered writers; and to excuse themselves from not writing or from writing badly, they accuse and blame their material, that is, their own vernacular, and praise another which they have not been required to work with. [13] Whoever wishes to see in what way this iron is deserving of blame should look at the works which good craftsmen make with it and he will recognize the disingenuousness of those who think to excuse themselves by blaming it. [14] Against men of this sort Tully cries out at the beginning of one of his books called *The Book on the End of Good*, because in his time they found fault with Roman Latin and praised the Greek language for reasons similar to those for which these men judge the Italian language vile and Provençal precious.²²

[15] The third group against our vernacular arises out of empty desire for glory. There are many who think that they will be more admired by depicting things in some other language, and by praising it, than by depicting things in their own. Unquestionably the talent of learning a foreign language well is not undeserving of praise; but it is blameworthy to praise it beyond the truth in order to boast of such an acquisition.

[16] The fourth group arises out of reasoning prompted by envy. As was said above, envy always exists where there is some kind of common ground. Among men sharing the same language there is the common ground of the vernacular; and because one cannot use it as another person does, envy springs up. [17] The envious man then argues, not by blaming him who writes for not knowing how to write, but by blaming that which constitutes the material of his work, so that by disparaging the work on that account he may deprive the poet of honor and fame—just like someone who would blame the iron of the sword in order to find fault not with the iron but with the whole work of the craftsman.

[18] The fifth and last group is moved by baseness of mind. The pretentious man always magnifies himself in his heart, and likewise the pusillanimous, conversely, always holds himself for less than he is. [19] Because magnifying and minimizing are always relative to something by comparison with which the pretentious man deems himself great and the pusillanimous himself small, it happens that the pretentious man always deems others to be less than they are, and the pusillanimous always greater. [20] And since man measures himself in the same way he measures his belongings, which are almost a part of himself, it happens that the pretentious man's belongings always seem to him better than they are and those of others worse; the pusillanimous always believes that his belongings are worth little and those of others worth much. [21] Therefore many by means of such abasement disparage their own vernacular and praise that of others.

All of these together make up the detestable wretches of Italy who despise this precious vernacular, which, if it is base in anything, is base only insofar as it issues from the meretricious lips of these adulterers under whose guidance go the blind of whom I made mention in treating the first cause.

Chapter 12

[1] If flames of fire were seen issuing from the windows of a house, and someone asked if there were a fire within, and another answered in the affirmative, I would not be able to judge easily which of the two was more deserving of ridicule. No different would be the question and answer if someone asked me whether love for my native tongue resides in me and I replied in the affirmative, for the reasons set forth above. [2] But nevertheless both to demonstrate that not simply love but the most perfect love for it resides in me, and to discredit further its adversaries by demonstrating this to anyone who will rightly understand it, I will tell how I became its friend and then how this friendship was strengthened. [3] I say then, as Tully may be seen to write in *Friendship*, without disagreeing with the opinion of the Philosopher expressed in the eighth and ninth books of the *Ethics*, that nearness and goodness are by nature the causes that engender love; benefit, purpose, and familiarity are the causes that increase love.²³ All these causes are

present to engender and sustain the love that I bear for my vernacular, as I will briefly show.

[4] A thing is nearest to the extent that of all things of its kind it is most closely related to another thing; thus of all men the son is nearest to the father; of all the arts medicine is nearest to the doctor, and music to musician, because they are more closely related to them than are other arts; of all countries the nearest is the one in which one lives, because it is most closely related to him. [5] And so a man's vernacular is nearest to the extent that it is most closely related to him, for it is in his mind first and alone before any other; and not only is it related to him intrinsically but accidentally, since it is connected to those persons who are nearest to him, that is, his kin, his fellow citizens, and his own people. [6] Such is one's own vernacular, which is not simply near but supremely near to everyone. Therefore, if nearness is the seed of friendship, as has been said above, it is clear that it has been among the causes of love that I bear for my language, which is nearer to me than the others. [7] The cause mentioned above, namely that that is more closely related which first exists alone in all the mind, induced people to adopt the custom of making the firstborn sole heirs, since they are the closest, and, because the closest, the most loved.

[8] Moreover, its goodness makes me its friend. Here it should be observed that every goodness proper to a thing is deserving of love in that thing, as in masculinity to have a full beard and in femininity to have the entire face free of hair, just as in the foxhound to have a keen scent, and in the greyhound to have great speed. [9] The more it is proper to it, the more it is deserving of love; thus, although every virtue in man is deserving of love, that is most deserving of love in him which is most human, and that is justice, which resides in the rational or intellectual part, that is, in the will. [10] This is so deserving of love that, as the Philosopher says in the fifth book of the *Ethics*, they who are its enemies, such as thieves and robbers, love it; and therefore we see that its opposite, namely injustice, is hated most of all, as, for example, treachery, ingratitude, falsehood, theft, robbery, deceit, and the like.²⁴ [11] All of these are such inhuman sins that to exonerate himself from being disgraced by them it is granted through long custom that a person may speak of himself, as has been said above, and may declare

himself faithful and loyal. [12] Of this virtue I will speak more fully in the fourteenth book; and leaving it aside for now, I return to my topic.

It is therefore proved that there is a goodness which is most proper to a thing; it must now be perceived what is most loved and praised in it, and that will be this goodness.

[13] Now we see that in all things relating to speech the apt expression of thought is most loved and praised: therefore this is its prime goodness. Since this is found in our vernacular, as has been clearly shown above in another chapter, it is clear that this is among the causes of love which I bear for it, since goodness, as has been said, is the cause that engenders love.

Chapter 13

[1] Having said how there exist in my native tongue these two characteristics which have made me its friend—that is, nearness to myself and goodness proper to it—I will tell how friendship, through benefits and harmony of purpose, and through a sense of benevolence born of long familiarity, is strengthened and increased. [2] I say first that for myself I have received from it the gift of very great benefits. For we know that among all benefits the greatest is the one that is most precious to him who receives it; and nothing is so precious as the thing for the sake of which all other things are desired; and all other things are desired for the perfection of him who desires them. [3] Therefore, since man has two perfections, one primary and one secondary (the first causes him to exist, the second causes him to be good), I have received, if my native tongue has been the cause of both the one and the other, very great benefit from it. And that it has been the cause of my being, and moreover of my being good—unless I should fall through fault of my own—may briefly be shown.

[4] It is not impossible, according to the philosopher, as he says in the second book of the *Physics*, for a thing to have several efficient causes, although among them one is principal; thus the fire and the hammer are the efficient causes of the knife, although the smith is the principal one.²⁵ This vernacular of mine was what brought my parents together, for they conversed in it, just as it is the fire that prepares the iron for the smith

who makes the knife; and so it is evident that it has contributed to my generation, and so was one cause of my being. [5] Moreover, this vernacular of mine was what led me into the path of knowledge which is our ultimate perfection, since through it I entered upon Latin and through its agency Latin was taught to me, which then became my path to further progress. So it is evident that it has been a very great benefactor to me, and this I acknowledge.

[6] Furthermore, it has had the same purpose as I myself, and this I can show as follows. Everything by nature pursues its own preservation; thus if the vernacular could by itself pursue anything, it would pursue that; and that would be to secure itself greater stability, and greater stability it could gain only by binding itself with meter and with rhyme. [7] This has been precisely my purpose, as is so evident that it requires no proof. Consequently, its purpose and mine have been one and the same, so that through this harmony our friendship has been strengthened and increased. [8] There has also been a sense of benevolence born of familiarity; for from the beginning of my life I have looked on it with benevolence and been intimate with it, and have used it in deliberating, explaining, and questioning. [9] Consequently, if friendship increases through familiarity, as seems plain to the senses, it is evident that it has been greatly increased in me, since I have used it all my life. [10] And so we see that all the causes that engender and increase friendship have joined together in this friendship, from which we must conclude that not simply love but most perfect love is what I ought to have, and do have, for it.

[11] So turning our gaze backwards and gathering together the reasons already noted, we can see that this bread, with which the canzoni placed below must be eaten, is sufficiently cleansed of its impurities and of being oaten. Therefore it is time to think of serving the food. [12] This commentary will be that bread made with barley by which thousands will be satiated, and my baskets will be full to overflowing with it.²⁶ This will be a new light, a new sun that will rise where the old sun will set and that will give light to those who lie in shadows and in darkness because the old sun no longer sheds its light upon them.²⁷

¹ *The Philosopher* Aristotle, whom Dante characteristically refers to by antonomasia, following the traditional practice of his age. The First Philosophy is his Metaphysics, and the citation is to the opening line of Book I, Ch. 1.

² *the bread of the angels* A metaphor signifying wisdom.

³ *the natural thirst* The thirst for knowledge of truth. The same metaphor reappears in *Purg.* XXI, 1 (“La sete natural”).

⁴ *the natural thirst* The thirst for knowledge of truth. The same metaphor reappears in *Purg.* XXI, 1 (“La sete natural”).

⁵ *the Vita Nuova* Dante’s first literary work (c. 1295), which celebrates his youthful and passionate love for Beatrice. Like the *Convivio*, it collects a number of poems written at an earlier time and supplies a commentary on their meaning.

⁶ *Self-praise is to be avoided* See the *Vita Nuova*, Ch. XXVIII, for a similar example of this literary topos.

⁷ *Boethius* The author (d. 524) of the *De consolatione philosophiae* (*Consolation of Philosophy*), one of the literary models for the *Convivio*. Dante locates him among the saved in the Sphere of the Sun, *Par.* X, 124-129.

⁸ *Augustine* The reference is to St. Augustine's *Confessions*, Book XIII. He is also one of the saved in the Sphere of the Sun; see *Par.* XII, 130.

⁹ *cast me out of her sweet bosom* Dante was exiled from Florence on 27 January 1302 and condemned to death on 19 March 1302. He was in Rome at the time of his exile, and he never returned to his native Florence.

¹⁰ "*Fame thrives on movement . . .*" *Aeneid* IV, 175.

¹¹ *accidental impurities* "Accident" and "substance" are formal terms of Scholastic philosophy, applied to the ruling metaphor of the bread (commentary). Substance is the thing itself, accident a condition in a substance. The "accidental" impurities are not inherent in the essence of the bread itself. The choice of Italian as opposed to Latin as the language of the commentaries is, however, a matter of substance and not of accident. The distinction between "oats" and "wheat" expresses the qualities of the Italian and Latin languages. "Oats" refers to all cereals except "wheat."

¹² *Eloquence in the Vernacular* Since Dante was at work on the *De vulgari eloquentia* in February of 1305, it is virtually certain that the *Convivio* was begun in the year 1304.

¹³ *while Latin follows art* Latin follows, that is, the rules of grammar and rhetoric.

¹⁴ *the wise say* See, for example, Seneca, *De beneficiis* II, 1; II, 17; IV, 9.

¹⁵ *Thus Martin is used to saying* Martin and John are conventional names, typical of the Scholastic practice (compare Thomas Aquinas, *S.T.* I, 119, 1r.).

¹⁶ *This is why Seneca says* *De beneficiis* II, 1.

¹⁷ *the Law* The *Corpus iuris*, or Roman Law. The citation is from the *Digest* I, 4, 2.

¹⁸ *Thaddeus the Hippocratist* A Florentine physician and author (1235-1295), known for his commentary to Hippocrates in addition to a translation of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*.

¹⁹ *language of oc* The words *oc* and *sì* signify "yes" in the Provençal and Italian vernacular languages, respectively.

²⁰ "*if the blind lead the blind . . .*" Matthew 15:14.

²¹ *Boethius deems popular glory to be vain* *De consolatione philosophiae* III, 6, 5.

²² *Tully* The traditional name for Marcus Tullius Cicero. The reference is to *De finibus* I, 1.

²³ *Tully* Cicero, *De amicitia* V ff.

²⁴ *in the fifth book of the Ethics* Dante misquotes the source for this passage, which is from Cicero, *De officiis* II, 2.

²⁵ *second book of the Physics* See St. Thomas' *Commentary* to the second book of the *Physics*, lect. 5.

²⁶ *by which thousands will be satiated* These lines echo John 6:5-13.

²⁷ *the new light* The metaphor refers not to the vernacular as opposed to Latin, but to the commentary in the vernacular as opposed to other works by other authors in the vernacular (Chiappelli).