



FAKULTA
HUMANITNÍCH STUDIÍ
Univerzita Karlova

Vzorové zadání přijímací zkoušky – zadaný cizojazyčný text

Dante's Greeks

GLENN W. MOST

I begin with a small question about a short text of Dante's, which will open out onto larger questions that will traverse all of the poet's works and in the end will reach down to the deepest level of his self-understanding that we can hope to approach. One of Dante's sonnets goes as follows:

Un dì si venne a me Malinconia
e disse: «lo voglio un poco stare teco»;
e parve a me ch'ella menasse seco
Dolore e Ira per sua compagnia.
E io le dissi: «Partid, va' via»;
ed ella mi rispose come un greco:
e ragionando a grande agio meco,
guardai e vidi Amore, che venia
vestito di novo d'un drappo nero,
e nel suo capo portava un cappello;
e certo lacrimava pur di vero.
Ed eo li dissi: «Che hai, cattivello?»
Ed el rispose: «Eo ho guai e pensiero,
che nostra donna mor, dolce fratello».

One day Melancholy came to me and said:
"I want to stay with you awhile";
and it seemed to me she brought
Sorrow and Wrath with her as companions.
And I said "Be off! Away with you!"
But she answered like a Greek; and while
she continued speaking with me, perfectly at her
ease, I looked and saw Love drawing near,
dressed in a new black cloak,
with a hat on his head, and weeping
real tears. And I said to him:
"What's the matter, poor fellow?"
And he replied: "I'm troubled and sad,
for our lady is dying, dear brother."
(K. Foster and P. Boy de, trans.)

It is not difficult for us to understand in very general terms what is happening in the situation imagined by this poem. If we were to explain it in the language familiar to us, we would say that one day Dante, without knowing precisely why, started to feel depressed. His inexplicable depression continued and he started to feel the first vague beginnings of something like grief and anger. Who amongst us has not experienced such days on occasion? But then Dante's account takes a surprising turn: suddenly he recalled his love for Beatrice, and on that basis he recognized within himself a deep anxiety that she might be dying – so, we might conclude, after all it was this that was the reason for his strange mood.

Dante, of course, uses a very different language from ours: he says not that he began to feel melancholy and continued to do so, but instead that the very person of Melancholy herself came up to him unannounced and proclaimed to him that she had decided to spend some time with him; he goes on to say that she remained despite his protestations, that he seemed to see Grief and Anger as her retinue, and so forth. Are these two modes of expression, Dante's and ours, simply two alternative ways to describe the very same state of affairs? Certainly not. We think in terms of a single human subject who goes through certain vicissitudes; Dante sees an inter-subjective drama in which he is only one speaking character among other, non-human ones. We might at first think it was simply a question of two different but closely corresponding languages, ours and his, which might well use different terms but would use them to refer to exactly the same situation and which could be translated back and forth without loss or serious distortion; but of course that is not at all the case. Dante's language is separated from ours not only by time and place but above all by enormous differences in key conceptions like those of the self, subjectivity, freedom, responsibility, and emotion (though they are perhaps not quite so enormous as to make it entirely impossible for us to understand and be moved by his poem).

There would be much to say about these differences; but instead, I would like to pose what seems a much smaller question: why does Dante say that Melancholy answers the speaker "come un greco"? Our first impulse might be to think that she speaks to him in the Greek language – is this not after all how Greeks talk? But this is obviously not right. Melancholy's name, to be sure, is Greek, and as such it stands out starkly against the Latinate Italian context of the rest of the poem. Yet Melancholy had spoken her first words to the poet in Italian ("lo voglio un poco stare teco"), and no reason is given, nor can one be supplied, for why she might have chosen to switch languages – nor, for that matter, is there any indication that, if she had suddenly started speaking in Greek, the poet would have been able to understand anything she said to him.

So although "Greek" is the name of a people and of their language, and although Dante applies it to a verbal action on the part of Melancholy ("ella mi rispose"), we must presumably take the term to refer not to the particular natural language in which that action was performed, but rather to some other quality of that verbal action which may be thought to be characteristic of that people. Which quality? Most commentaries on this poem explain that what Dante means is that the Greeks are typically haughty and arrogant, so that Melancholy in answering him "like a Greek" would be answering disdainfully. Now this may well be true about the Greeks, or about the Greeks as Dante and his readers saw them, but it must be acknowledged that nothing whatsoever in the poem itself authorizes us to think here of Melancholy as being particularly proud. To be sure, she continues speaking even though Dante tells her to leave; but we can imagine many reasons she might choose to do this other than arrogance (for example cruelty, or stubbornness, or laziness, or deafness), and it is not clear, at least not from this poem, in what sense her manner of responding might itself meaningfully be described as being arrogant.

So this line raises a question for us: what does Dante mean when he says that Melancholy answered "like a Greek"? But the immediate context, the poem in which it is found, does not seem to provide us sufficient information for answering it. We must cast our hermeneutic net more widely, and must ask, in order to find out how Dante can think that Melancholy answered like a Greek, a more general question: who are the Greeks for Dante?

Odpovězte česky (nebo slovensky) na otázky:

1. Čím se podle textu liší Dantův jazyk od našeho jazyka?

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2. Dantův sonet říká, že melancholie „odpověděla jako Řek“. Proč zde podle autora nejde ani o řecký jazyk, ani o řeckou povahu?

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3. S jakými podobnými a souvisejícími myšlenkami jste se již někdy setkali?

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