

Reviews

Article

Published Version

(2001) Reviews. Reading Medieval Studies, XXVII. pp. 227-250. ISSN 0950-3129 Available at <https://reading-clone.eprints-hosting.org/84492/>

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work. See [Guidance on citing](#).

Publisher: University of Reading

All outputs in CentAUR are protected by Intellectual Property Rights law, including copyright law. Copyright and IPR is retained by the creators or other copyright holders. Terms and conditions for use of this material are defined in the [End User Agreement](#).

www.reading.ac.uk/centaur

CentAUR

Central Archive at the University of Reading

Reading's research outputs online

REVIEWS

Zygmunt G. Baranski, *Dante e i segni. Saggi per una storia intellettuale di Dante Alighieri*. Naples: Liguori, 2000. x + 231 pp. ISBN 88-207-3129-0. Lire 30,000.

The central concern of this volume is to explore Dante's relationship as an artist and as a thinker to medieval traditions regarding the interpretation of signs and the systemisation of human knowledge, and regarding the limits on such knowledge. Zygmunt Baranski provides a substantial re-examination of Dante's artistic and intellectual formation, and challenges modern interpretations of Dante as a primarily Aristotelian-Thomist thinker by a rigorous and convincing analysis of the evidence of his close relationship to symbolist and exegetical Neoplatonic traditions.

The volume's eight constituent essays take different angles of approach, furnishing a variety of evidence to help elucidate Dante's sympathies in contemporary epistemological debate. Some chapters take the classic form of *lecturae* of passages from the *Commedia*, others offer wide-ranging investigations of the relationship between Dante's writings and the interpretative practice of different medieval schools of thought, or of developments in Dante's ideas from one work to another. One of the pleasures of this volume is to find in accessible and unitary form a collection of studies which have all been previously published, but have appeared in different locations and in two languages. The coherence with which the topics and arguments are ordered in the book must of course be the product of intellectual and editorial care, but it also bears witness to the systematic and energetic commitment that Baranski has brought to his analysis of Dante's intellectual tendencies over more than a decade (the earliest of the original essays appeared in 1987). It is striking, for instance, that the book's central chapters (chapters 4 and 5) juxtapose the substance of both the earliest and the most recently-published of the original essays, yet fit naturally into the present sequence of arguments, demonstrating that a deep-laid programme of investigation has been followed throughout the different phases of research.

One of the book's major targets is the critical tendency wishfully to see Dante as a modern, rationalist thinker, abreast of the most avant-garde of Duecento and Trecento intellectual trends. Along the way,

Baranski surveys several important debates – twentieth-century and medieval – over interpretation, offering valuable summaries of the main critical positions, which are supplemented by ample footnotes with bibliographic references. The book's first three chapters offer a survey of general themes, in which lucid outlines of the relevant historical and intellectual backgrounds help contextualise the analysis of Dante's own practice in the *Commedia* and elsewhere. These chapters investigate Dante's literary and philosophical formation, his syntheses of Aristotelian elements into what Baranski sees as a more broadly Neoplatonist outlook, and his relationship to the medieval encyclopaedists. They outline three major compositional and conceptual phases in Dante's career, from the symbolist epistemology of the *Vita nuova* and the lyric corpus, through a more Aristotelian phase with the *Convivio*, to be finally resolved in the *Commedia* and in the late Latin works by a return towards his original Neoplatonism. The closing section of chapter three in particular offers a new account of the relationship between the *Convivio* and the *Commedia*, in which Dante's relationship to medieval encyclopaedism is shown to have as much a symbolist as a rationalist direction.

The following four essays focus on single passages from the *Commedia*, but also extend the scope of the broader arguments regarding Dante's practice as thinker and as writer. They offer ample illustration for Baranski's contention that to understand the poet's choices in the formal construction of his texts, we need also to take account of his contemporary ideological concerns, and their more mystical or more analytical tendencies. These essays offer detailed examination of semiotic questions (Baranski's *Premessa* acknowledges the deliberate anachronism of his critical terminology, necessary to avoid misappropriation of medieval technical lexis), showing how Dante presents his poem as a faithful imitation of the two sets of divine signs that humanity depends on for knowledge of the divine – the words of the Bible, and the works of nature. Baranski argues that the implications of this claim were almost wilfully ignored by contemporary readers, whose refusal to acknowledge the scope of the *Commedia*'s stylistic and conceptual innovations protected them from the scandal of according it over-exalted ontological status. The close focus on interpretative strategies produces wide-ranging discussion of questions about allegory and prophecy, genre and style, but also detailed analyses of specific Dantean terminology. The series of close readings of individual passages provides ample illumination of the

author's thesis regarding Dante's sympathy for the symbolist-exegetical tradition.

The volume's concluding chapter brings together many of the earlier arguments in a re-evaluation of a relatively neglected text, the *Questio de aqua et terra*, offering re-assessment of the importance of what is often regarded as an eccentric and minor Dantean product of the poet – its authenticity has indeed been disputed. The text occupies a crucial place in Baranski's arguments, because its late date means that it must fall within what he has designated as the final, symbolist phase of Dante's thought, yet its overtly scientific subject matter means that it has conventionally been classified as essentially Aristotelian. Instead, Baranski argues that the treatise launches a subtle and concise attack on those rationalist philosophers who refused to renounce attempts to penetrate the mysteries of certain phenomena within creation with the inadequate tools of the human intellect. This attack is mounted via the form of the treatise – based on the typical Scholastic *quaestio* – as well as via its content: Baranski affirms that by advancing arguments of a Neoplatonist, exegetical cast within the form preferred by Aristotelians, Dante's deconstruction of the insufficiencies of the rationalist system is substantially enhanced.

By concluding with a text that is often neglected by scholars whose primary interests lie with the *Commedia*, Baranski gives additional force to his consistent rebuttal of the critical tendency to cast Dante as a modern intellectual *avant la lettre*. The indisputably medieval flavour of the treatise, and its engagement with important contemporary epistemological debates, means that it can cast important light on the *forma mentis* of the author of the *poema sacro*. Dante's search to follow the meaning of the signs of God's words and his works is revealed just as fully by the *Questio* as by the *Commedia* – and the eight studies in this volume allow us intriguing insights into how that search may have been conducted.

Catherine Keen

University of Leeds

Zygmunt G. Baranski, 'Chiosar con altro testo'. Leggere Dante nel Trecento. Florence: Cadmo, 2001. I saggi di letteratura italiana antica, 2. 181 pp. ISBN 88-7923-233-9. Lire 35,000.

This latest collection of Professor Baranski's writings on Dante – following '*Luce nuova, sole nuovo*'. *Saggi sul rinnovamento culturale in Dante* (1996) and *Dante e i segni. Saggi per una storia intellettuale di Dante* (2000) – shows all of what are by now the familiar virtues of his work. Sharply focused, crisply argued, firmly grounded in enviably wide reading, on occasion (but always cordially) polemical, and, above all, consistently engaged with matters of genuine importance to the progressive extension of our knowledge and understanding of Dante, Baranski's articles always manage to pack into their relatively small compass enough conceptual originality, factual discoveries, and sparkling critical insight to keep the reader's mind busily whirring long after the actual experience of reading them is over. Perhaps more than any other scholar currently active in the notoriously feisty field of Dante studies, Baranski is able to tackle controversial questions in a way that succeeds in furthering debate rather than closing it down. At its best – as can often be seen in the volume under review – his work is distinguished not only by its erudition and its sheer usefulness, but by a truly collegial sense of the scholar's duty to contribute to a wider cultural discourse.

Baranski's subject on this occasion is, broadly speaking, the tradition of fourteenth-century commentaries on Dante's *Commedia*. Six articles are collected here, of which four have been previously published (but are now substantially rewritten), the other two being *inediti*. The first piece, 'L'esegesi medievale della *Commedia* e il problem delle fonti' (pp. 13-39), which is previously unpublished, stakes out the whole book's argumentative terrain with admirable clarity: the study of the Trecento commentaries is vitally important for the twenty-first-century interpreter of the *Commedia*, but, up to now, has too often been carried out on the basis of an inadequate understanding of their generic nature and procedures (and has therefore all too frequently led to critical misinterpretation both of their texts and of Dante's). If we want to be able to read the commentaries so as to make them genuinely helpful in our reading of the poem, we need to learn to do so in a way that respects their generic self-definition

and, above all, recognizes the many complex and limiting factors that affect any attempt to treat them as 'sources'.

The essays that follow illustrate these general points through a series of case studies. Chapter 2, '*Comedia*: Dante, l'Epistola a Cangrande e la commedia medievale' (pp. 41-76), the first version of which appeared as part of a resounding scholarly battle fought in the early 1990s across the pages of the now defunct (and much-missed) American journal *Lectura Dantis*, argues that a fuller and more accurate understanding of the medieval definition(s) of comedy will both improve our ability to read Dante's significantly-titled poem and, along the way, do the poet the 'modest service' of detaching his authorial imprimatur from the early fourteenth-century *Epistle to Cangrande*. Also connected with the generic definition of comedy is chapter 3, 'Benvenuto da Imola e la tradizione dantesca della *comedia*' (pp. 77-97), dating originally from 1991, which examines the late Trecento commentator Benvenuto's understanding of the term and its implications both for his own activity as commentator on Dante and for the history of commentary itself. Benvenuto also plays a leading role in the fourth essay, 'Boccaccio, Benvenuto e il sogno della madre di Dante incinta' (pp. 99-116; first version, 1993), which traces the intellectual relationship – one that comes interestingly close to 'anxiety of influence' in the Bloomian sense – between the two major commentators of the later fourteenth century.

Chapter 5, '“Li infrascripti libri”: Guglielmo Maramauro, l'*auctoritas* e la “lettura” di Dante nel Trecento' (pp. 117-49) is the volume's other *inedito*, and is, as they say, worth the price of admission in itself. A superbly concise but penetrating study of the recently (re-)discovered *Expositione* (1369-73) of the Neapolitan Maramauro, it deploys a mass of historical evidence and philological acumen in order to make a thoroughly convincing case for Maramauro's complete and utter commentatorial ineptitude. As Baranski rightly remarks, this is a fascinating case; and his captivating analysis of it throws light not only on Maramauro himself but on the whole context of intellectual activity in late fourteenth-century Naples. This piece will surely turn out to be a prime example of Baranski's capacity to inspire important work in others, for the facts brought to light and the questions raised by his examination of Maramauro should cause large-scale *ridimensionamento* of much of the received wisdom about the Trecento commentary tradition as a whole.

The final article, 'Le costrizioni della forma: verso una definizione provvisoria dei *Triumphs* di Petrarca' (pp. 153-73; first version, 1990), while no less learned or thought-provoking than the others, is the only one that strains somewhat to fit under the 'Dante-commentary' rubric, notwithstanding the obvious degree of intertextual connection between Dante's work and Petrarch's. Indeed, the relative scantiness of the article's references to Dante – it is much more a linguistic and generic analysis of the *Triumphs* themselves than a study of Petrarch's reading of Dante – does make one wonder whether it really belongs in this *galère*, however highly one may value it as a contribution to Petrarch scholarship.

More than once in the course of this collection, Professor Baranski remarks that the history of Trecento Dante commentary remains to be written. In the present state of our historical knowledge, not to mention the still more lamentable state of the majority of the editions in which the texts are available, that must inevitably be true; and perhaps the sheer magnitude of the challenge – cultural, interpretative, and philological – posed by these vast, multifarious and often rebarbative works will ensure that it continues to be so. But Baranski's own work gives us cause for greater optimism. Whoever does undertake, some – let us hope – not too distant day, to provide a comprehensive survey of 'reading Dante in the Trecento', will find these endlessly stimulating pages an indispensable starting-point.

Steven Botterill

University of California, Berkeley

Stephen Bemrose, *A New Life of Dante*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000. xxi + 249 pp. ISBN 0-85989-584-X (paperback), 0-85989-583-1 (hardback). £14.99 (paperback), £42.50 (hardback).

In his new biography of Dante, Bemrose aims to make the life and work of the poet accessible to university students and to 'any curious, intelligent, English-speaking (but non-specialist) reader' (p. xi). Bemrose is aware that his readers may have no knowledge of the socio-political or historical background to Dante and his time, and, bearing in mind this amateur audience, the author assumes 'no prior knowledge [...] of Graeco-Roman civilization, nor of Christian history or doctrine, nor indeed of medieval Europe' (p. xi).

Consequently, a useful amount of background information is provided on events and historical personages.

The book is divided into eleven broadly chronological chapters, each covering a particular period in Dante's life. The structure of the book, with many sub-headings within each chapter, allows the reader to move around the book and to locate areas of particular interest easily.

Bemrose begins by explaining the historical and political situation in Florence up to and including Dante's own time. The first five chapters chronicle Dante's political life and literary achievements up until the time of his exile. In these chapters, Bemrose provides the reader with the historical and political information necessary to locate Dante and his works in their historical setting. The *Detto d'Amore* and *Fiore* are included here with a brief history of the arguments for and against their attribution to Dante. However, the attention Bemrose pays to the early lyric poetry and – even more strikingly – to the *Vita nuova* is limited. In a biographical overview, it is understandable, and to be expected, that discussions of the poet's so-called 'minor' works will be necessarily succinct. However, the brief section concerning the *Vita nuova* does not do justice to the work's significance within the poet's *oeuvre*, nor to its importance for an understanding of the *Commedia*. This deficiency is all the more apparent when the relatively large sections devoted to the Latin works are taken into consideration.

Bemrose then moves on to consider the life and times of the post-exilic Dante, in two chapters which also consider the *De vulgari eloquentia* and the *Convivio*. The author provides useful summaries of both works, outlining both the structure and the main issues of the text in some detail. The outline of the *Convivio*, in particular, would be most useful and informative to newcomers to Dante, since it provides concise synopses of all four books.

Throughout the book, Bemrose locates his discussions of Dante's works in their historical and biographical context. He attempts at all times to present a chronological account, but acknowledges that due to the very limited amount of concrete information available on Dante's whereabouts at particular times, this chronological approach contains a considerable amount of conjecture both on his part and on the parts of the Dante scholars he draws upon.

Stepping slightly out of this chronological structure, however, Bemrose (rightly, in my opinion) deals with the *Commedia* in a

separate chapter, free from extraneous historical and political details. In this freestanding chapter, Bemrose provides his readers with a 'survey' of the *Commedia*. This is not a comprehensive overview of the *Commedia*; many encounters are omitted or mentioned very briefly. Bemrose's intention is to draw his reader's attention to 'episodes of particular historical, political and moral significance' (p. 114), his stated aim being not to overlap with other condensed versions of the *Commedia* available in English. However, it is doubtful whether Bemrose's intended reader would be familiar with such texts, and indeed, considering Bemrose's stated target audience, it would, perhaps, have been appropriate to include at this stage a scheme or a map – 'it is indeed possible, and useful, to draw maps of Dante's Hell' (p. 115) – of the three realms of the afterlife according to Dante's poem. The survey provides a useful introduction into the *Commedia*, briefly touching upon the main doctrinal, moral and political issues which the poem raises. The discussion of allegory – admittedly an enormous topic whose implications stretch beyond the reach of a biography – is less clear, however. Likewise his short explanation of the allegorical and symbolic nature of the souls Dante encounters and, indeed, of the nature of 'Dante' himself in the *Commedia* leaves many questions unanswered. For instance, the statement that, 'as every reader of the poem will know, there are enormous dramatic possibilities, vigorously exploited, in the contrasts between the protagonist and the poet writing in hindsight' (p. 116) would mean little to Bemrose's target readers. Bemrose uses the terms 'Dante' and 'Dante-character' interchangeably, and also refers to 'Dante the pilgrim' and 'Dante the poet'. This section of the book would have benefited enormously from a paragraph defining and distinguishing the different roles that Dante creates for himself, as distinct from the actual, historical Dante.

After his overview of the *Commedia*, Bemrose returns to his chronological scheme in 1308 and for the last three chapters of the book, discusses Dante's relations with Henry VII, the places and patrons with whom Dante stayed, and the later Latin works. Included in these chapters are discussions of both the *Monarchia* and the letter to Can Grande. Bemrose concisely explains the problematic questions of the dating of the *Monarchia* and the authorship of the letter, explaining not only his own viewpoint but the general nature of the debate, giving, in his notes, references to the main works of scholarship on both sides. Bemrose is careful to include all Dante's

works in his overview, including a surprisingly detailed synopsis of the *Eclogues*.

In addition to his biographical overview of Dante's life and work, Bemrose provides a guide to further reading in English aimed at his non-specialist reader. This guide is useful as a starting point, although the bibliography contains some surprising gaps. It is somewhat incongruous, for example, to recommend the *Cambridge Companion to Dante*'s introductions to *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* but to omit the introduction to *Inferno*.

Overall, Bemrose has succeeded in his stated aims for this book. He has produced a lively, accessible and readable (although his style is, at times, idiosyncratic) account of Dante's life and works, well suited to a non-specialist reader or a student just embarking on Dante Studies.

Theresa J. Oliver

University of Reading

Patrick Boyde, *Human Vices and Human Worth in Dante's 'Comedy'*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. x + 323 pp. ISBN 0-521-66067-X. £40.00.

This book is the third in Patrick Boyde's trilogy on Dante, but it could easily stand on its own. Like the other two books, it is concerned with setting out Dante's ideas in the context of the thinking of his own day and the sources of that thinking in the ancient world, and then looking at the way in which the ideas are turned into poetry. But whereas the first volume dealt with 'man in the cosmos' and the second with 'perception and passion', the third is about ethical issues, the 'human vices and worth' that Ulysses wanted to be expert in. It is a subject which many readers may find more accessible than that of the other two volumes.

The work is designed for the student and educated general reader rather than the specialist, but will interest any reader of Dante. It is above all a piece of lucid exposition. As Boyde remarks, Dante in the *Commedia* offers a much richer and more rigorous account of ethics than anything offered at the average school or university in the United Kingdom. While seeking to do justice to this, the author is at pains to avoid any anachronistic or universalizing reading of Dante. The moral thinking of Dante's time is seen as remote from that of today, so that

the use of analogy or metaphor serves as the best way of communicating it to us or making it accessible. And Boyde is a lover of metaphor, which he uses with inventive verve.

The task of reconstructing the ethical mentality of an age is no easy one, and Boyde does it with care and clarity, avoiding any facile assumptions. There is a review of the writers on ethics whom Dante knew, with an account of the more representative ones. A great deal of space is given to Aquinas, not so much because of any claim that his influence might be of greater importance than that of other writers, as because of the clarity with which he sets out issues, defines terms, and tackles problems to do with reconciling classical and Christian ethics. But as well as looking at the content of the various moral treatises and discussions, Boyde is interested in the form which ethical writing took: scholastic debate, classification, division and numeration. This indeed is the concern of the first section of the book, along with the topic of 'authority' and a review of Dante's 'authors', Greek, Latin, Biblical and patristic. This is followed by a section on 'competing values', Aristotelian, Christian, and courtly as seen 'through Dante's eyes'. After this comes a section on 'arch-vices' (covetousness and pride) and the 'supreme virtue' (justice). Finally a 'case-study' of the Ulysses canto allows us to see the moral ideas at work in the poetry, with all the tensions and conflicts that they entail.

Dante is not assumed to be morally consistent. He is seen as inheriting values from different sources and having mental habits of classification and numerical tidiness which do not always suit his material. In the canto of Ulysses, he inherits tensions and ambiguities which go back to classical times. The only possible synthesis of this diverse and complex material is, it seems, a literary one.

The subject is vast and raises issues which go beyond the boundaries of Dante studies. Is literature the only way in which our often apparently alien and contradictory moral heritage can be mediated to us? But to return to the account of medieval moral thinking, one quibble could be made about the chapter 'Christian Values Through Dante's Eyes'. Boyde gives a clear account of the 'literal sense' of certain relevant Gospel passages such as the Beatitudes, the story of the rich young man and the parable of the Good Samaritan, and an outline of basic Christian beliefs, including Dante's accounts in *Paradiso* of the Redemption and of charity. While this certainly does justice to Dante's feeling for the literal sense of the Bible and his own theological reflections, it perhaps fails to give enough weight to the

extremely widespread use of allegory in medieval Christianity. Allegorical readings of the Bible in commentaries or sermons could apply to its moral meanings of a kind that were not in themselves in the strictest sense Biblical, but rather part of a lengthy process, both patristic and medieval, of attempting to sift and synthesize various strands of moral thinking.

This qualification apart, the book is a very clear and satisfying exposition of the various ways of writing about moral concerns which influence Dante's poem. Moreover, the poem itself is never allowed to disappear behind the thought, but is allowed to speak for itself.

Jennifer Petrie

University College, Dublin

Dante Alighieri: *The Inferno*, translated by Robert and Jean Hollander, introduction and notes by Robert Hollander. New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Auckland: Doubleday, 2000. xxxiii + 634 pp. ISBN 0-385-49697-4. \$35.00.

Husband-and-wife team, Robert and Jean Hollander – a Dantist and a poet – could, with some justification, be considered a match made in Heaven for the undertaking of a new translation of Dante's *Inferno*. The Hollanders' deceptively modest aims – 'to offer a clear translation' and 'to be as compact as possible' (p. ix); 'to bring Dante into our English without being led into the temptation of making the translation sound better than the original allows' (p. vii) – belie the complexity and difficulty of the task which any translator of Dante assumes. To render Dante's poem in clear yet fluent English while conveying a sense of the power of the original; to make accessible to the non-specialist a world-view as far removed from that of the twenty-first century as Lucifer is from the Empyrean while not patronising the reader or resorting to over-simplification: these are no simple undertakings. This translation, however, succeeds on all these counts.

The translation itself provides the reader with parallel texts on facing pages, with the Italian text reproducing that of Petrocchi's *Commedia secondo l'antica vulgata*. The presence of Dante's original alongside the English translation will make this volume an invaluable resource for the many students of Dante in Britain and North America who come to the study of the poet with a limited previous knowledge

of Italian. The English version of the text has its origins in the 1939 prose translation of John Sinclair, although it has moved some way from its original aim of simply modernizing Sinclair's now rather stilted-sounding English. In particular, the transition from prose to verse, as well as rendering the translation – in the words of the translators themselves – more 'sayable' (p. vii), would seem to enhance the translation's ability to convey the mixture of allusiveness and directness which characterizes the original. The clarity which is the Hollanders' stated aim has undoubtedly been their guiding principle throughout, for their text is accurate and limpid, coherent and, above all, readable.

While it would be possible – and, indeed, enjoyable – to read the English translation purely as a narrative in its own right, without closer reference to Dante's original, the notes which follow each canto allow the translators to expand, where necessary, on the relationship between Dante's text and their own. The notes thus signal, for example, the occasional passages where the translators would have preferred a different reading of the Italian text from that of Petrocchi and are also used, on occasion, to justify their decision to adopt one reading of a particular passage rather than another and to compare the merits of different possible solutions to ambiguities in Dante's text.

As well as allowing for more in-depth discussion of the translation, the notes also provide an extremely full introduction to many different aspects of Dante's poem. Assuming little or no previous knowledge, the notes fulfil a basic explanatory function, rendering the text and its implications accessible to the first-time or amateur reader. Yet the notes also manage to be scholarly and do not attempt to evade difficult issues. A case in point is the treatment of the three beasts of *Inferno* I, of which it is commented that 'few passages in the poem have generated as much discussion and as little common understanding' (p. 16). In his discussion of this and other disputed passages (the note on the debate concerning homosexuality in *Inferno* XV and XVI is particularly useful), Hollander succinctly conveys the main schools of thought regarding the issue, while making clear where his own sympathies, and/or those of the majority of contemporary scholars, lie. This approach allows for further exploration of the subject by serious students, without losing the more casual reader in the apparent confusion of a myriad of possible interpretations.

In accordance with this wide-ranging approach, the notes also make extensive reference to critical literature on Dante, both in English and

in Italian (as well as limited mention of works in other languages). These works are listed in a bibliography at the end of the volume, which does not aim to be all-inclusive, but instead provides ample guidance on where to look – both in print and online – for those seeking further bibliographical material. The notes also refer frequently to the many earlier commentaries on the *Commedia*, most of which are available online in the ‘Dartmouth Dante Project’ database. As well as bearing witness to Professor Hollander’s own scholarship, therefore, the notes and bibliography are designed to facilitate further research. In addition to these resources, the book also contains useful indices of names and places referred to in Dante’s text and of subjects dealt with in the notes.

Hollander’s introduction to this work, like the bibliography, does not claim to be comprehensive. Rather, after a brief account of Dante’s life and the genesis of the *Commedia*, it focuses on three questions, which are both personal (they are identified by Hollander as, ‘what I myself missed when I started reading Dante’; p. xxii) and absolutely central to an understanding of the *Inferno*: the function of allegory in the poem, the role of Virgil as guide in the first realm of the afterlife, and the moral position of the reader (‘How am I supposed to react to the sinners of *Inferno* [...]?’; p. xxii). Selective though the choice of these particular issues necessarily is, one can question neither their importance to the reader of Dante, nor Hollander’s assertion that they represent issues which are frequently misunderstood by the poet’s readers.

The volume is not without its idiosyncrasies. There is a tendency for Italian and English forms to be intermingled. For example, on p. xvii there are references to ‘Florence’ and ‘Genoa’, but also to ‘Milano’; names having an accepted English equivalent are usually Anglicized, but on p. 55 there is a reference to ‘Petrarca’. The method of referring to the works cited in the bibliography by using just the first four letters of the author’s name also seems somewhat clumsy, particularly since it almost always requires the name to be repeated in full for the sake of clarity. And the map of Hell, while beautifully drawn, seems to give disproportionate space to the circles of Incontinence at the expense of the lower, central circles. These, however, are matters of negligible importance. Overall, this book offers a valuable resource for all those – whether students or casual readers – with an interest in Dante, and such readers can only await the

appearance of the Hollanders' translations of *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*, due to be published by Doubleday in 2002.

Claire E. Honess

University of Reading

The 'Fiore' and the 'Detto d'Amore': A Late Thirteenth-Century Italian Translation of the 'Roman de la Rose'. Attributable to Dante, translated by Christopher Kleinhenz and Santa Casciani. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000. The William and Katherine Devers Series in Dante Studies 4. 568 pp. ISBN 0-268-00893-0. \$45.00.

This edition and English translation of the *Fiore* and the *Detto d'Amore* will be a welcome contribution to the area of Dante Studies on the one hand, and to the study of Old French literature and its medieval reception on the other. In particular the English translation will be a great boon in making these two interesting poems available to specialists in Old French literature – and to all those with an interest in the *Roman de la Rose* – whose knowledge of Italian is not sufficient to permit easy reading and study of the texts. The existence of the *Fiore* is well known among Old French specialists working on the *Rose*, but the *Detto d'Amore* is far less widely known, and neither poem has had much impact on the study of the *Rose* and its medieval readership. One may hope that the translation published here will bring the two Italian poems to a wider audience than has hitherto been the case.

The authorship of the *Fiore* has been the subject of intensive debate for many years, and seems unlikely to be resolved definitively unless substantial new evidence should be discovered. The attribution to Dante rests on the designation of the narrator-protagonist as 'Durante' and on the analysis of language and versification, which shows that the text exhibits features compatible with such an attribution. There is no truly conclusive evidence either for or against the attribution. At the very least, however, both the *Fiore* and the *Detto d'Amore* are evidence for the reception of the *Rose* in late thirteenth-century Italy, and thus help to illuminate the context for Dante's writing and for his encounters with French literary texts and with the *Rose* in particular. These poems will thus always be of relevance for Dante Studies, whatever their attribution.

The *Roman de la Rose* as begun by Guillaume de Lorris and continued by Jean de Meun was one of the most widely read and most often imitated of all medieval vernacular texts. Its impact on late medieval French literature is all-pervading; and in addition to Italian, it was translated into Flemish, Dutch and English before the end of the fourteenth century. A highly complex and controversial poem, the *Rose* gave rise to divergent readings and adaptations virtually as soon as it was written and continues to be hotly debated by medievalists to this day. The two Italian poems presented here are fascinating evidence for the early reception of this important work, and deserve to be read not only by Italianists but also by Old French specialists interested in medieval readings of the *Rose*. The *Fiore* does adhere fairly closely to the narrative structure of the *Rose*, but the Italian poet freely abridged and adapted his material. The changes introduced in the *Fiore* are similar to those found in some of the early reworkings of the *Rose* itself (in particular the much altered and abridged *B* text) but do not strictly correspond to any known manuscript of the *Rose*. A comparative study of the *Fiore* and the *Rose* manuscript tradition indicates that Durante, whoever he may have been, must be credited with having effected his own recasting of the French poem. That his reading of the *Rose* should have so many features in common with that of early French poets and scribes is a point of considerable interest. The *Detto d'Amore* is even less to be seen as a translation of the *Rose*, but it does incorporate material that must derive ultimately from the *Rose* and/or from the *Fiore* itself.

The translation provided by Kleinhenz and Casciani is idiomatic and very readable, while nonetheless adhering closely to the lineation of the Italian text. It is thus completely accessible to those with no knowledge of Italian, while readers wishing to use the translation as an aid to reading the original text will have no trouble in doing so. In order to clarify the allegorical structure of the poem, Kleinhenz and Casciani have selected a single English equivalent for each allegorical personification or motif and used it consistently throughout, and they supply a table listing all such terms in both languages. Another useful feature is a list of all the rubrics of the *Fiore* which enables one to see at a glance how many sonnets have been devoted to each character and to each section of the narrative. Thorough indexing also makes it possible to track down every appearance of a given allegorical figure, literary or historical character, and place name within both poems presented here.

The Introduction provides background concerning the *Roman de la Rose*, its treatment of love, desire and procreation, and its relationship to Alain de Lille's *De Planctu Naturae*, as well as discussion of the modifications and omissions introduced by the author of the *Fiore*. This contextualisation and commentary will be especially welcome to students or other non-specialists in medieval French and Italian literature who may wish to read the poems presented here, but will also be of interest to more specialist readers. Kleinhenz and Casciani have produced an admirably concise, yet very informative, account of essential features of the *Rose* and the ways in which the *Fiore* imitates, omits or reworks this material. The Introduction together with their notes on the text will provide the uninitiated with a means of situating the poem and navigating its various twists and turns, while facilitating the work of the more experienced reader as well.

Sylvia Huot

Pembroke College, Cambridge

Guy P. Raffa. *Divine Dialectic: Dante's Incarnational Poetry*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000. xii + 254 pp. ISBN 0802048560. \$55.00/£35.00.

By Dante's time, the mystery of the Incarnation had been the object of penetrating philosophical-theological reflection, as well as of mystical contemplation, for more than a millennium. Guy Raffa is surely right to claim in this book that the Incarnation is at the heart of both Dante's understanding of reality and his poetics, 'the key to writing and reading the *Commedia*' (p. 4). To show that the Incarnation is the key to the *Comedy*, and how it is, would require engaging that millennial tradition of reflection analytically, to reveal how the non-dualistic metaphysical, spiritual, and epistemological implications of the Incarnation form the inexpressible nexus from which radiate the *Commedia*'s precise imagery and exact verbal expression. (A good analogue would be Bonaventure's *Collations in Hexaemeron*, whose premise is that the Incarnation mandates a *scientia*, and thus a narrative, beyond philosophy, beyond the binary categories of human reason.)

The aim of this book is more restricted: it uses the term *Incarnation* to mean a 'paradoxical "both-and" structure' (p. 6), the ability to 'have it both ways' (p. 7). The term thus becomes virtually

synonymous with 'dialectic' in the particular (and from a medieval point of view, slightly peculiar) sense of contradictory readings simultaneously maintained, 'embracing both contradiction and resolution at the same time' (p. 10). A medieval mind would sense a slippage here between what we might call nonduality ('what' the Incarnation reveals) and dialectic, which aims (as in Aquinas) to prepare the finite intelligence for the deeper, non-conceptual, inspired understanding that can receive that revelation, that can 'see' or experience how the One and the Many, the divine and the human, the self-subsistent and the contingent, are not two, though not the same. Neither the Incarnation nor dialectic rests in paradox; the paradox rises and falls with the illusion that the finite subject of experience is self-subsistent, other than or alienated from God. These, however, are not the concerns of this book, which speaks of many sorts of things as 'incarnational': a union between wills – as between the pilgrim and Virgil (e.g. pp. 45, 61) –, between action and contemplation (p. 182), between worldly and spiritual desire (p. 178), between Brunetto and Cacciaguیدا (p. 179), between martyrdom and mission (p. 148), between Adam and Eve (p. 134), between Francis and Dominic (p. 133), between the Spirit and the Letter (p. 123), between uniformity and variation in homonyms (p. 119), between language and the world (p. 114), as well as between humanity and the divine (p. 98); moreover implications (pp. 78, 94, 136, 179), dimensions (pp. 85, 136, 148), casts (p. 133), overtones (p. 80), hues (p. 80), charges (p. 79), paths (p. 149), finales (p. 144), splendour (p. 142), significance (p. 141), images (pp. 77, 131), contexts (p. 76), moments (p. 71), hermeneutics (p. 126), vision (pp. 125, 152), representations (pp. 77, 79), parody (p. 57), terms (p. 54), imagination (p. 79), itineraries (p. 125), dramas (p. 120), responses (p. 125), lessons (p. 32, 35), failures (p. 35), junctures (p. 107), acts (pp. 78, 114), purposes (p. 102), scenarios (p. 102), reciprocities (p. 103), events (pp. 69, 101), relationships (p. 98), progress (p. 89), circles (pp. 103, 125), rhetoric (p. 193), figurations of grammar (p. 104), conceptions of purgatory (p. 94), and of course dialectic and poetry, can all be 'incarnational'. Paolo and Francesca, as well as Ulysses and Diomedes, and Ugolino and Ruggieri, are 'incarnationally challenged couples' (p. 133); Lucifer has 'anti-incarnational status' (p. 67). The word is thus not a term of analysis, but a rubric under which to collect wide-ranging reflections on Dante's text.

The reflections are linked by the salutary reminder that in reading Dante, to reduce 'complex issues to simplistic "either/or" solutions' (p. 11) is to impoverish him. For example, the imperfect structural symmetries and ideological oscillations of the *Vita nuova* indicate 'an incarnational failure' (p. 32), a dichotomy between the human and the divine that is a failure to grasp Beatrice's Christological significance. It is unclear whether this 'failure' is engineered by the author ('strategic', p. 25; 'successful', p. 32), or imposed by his youthful shortcomings (pp. 27, 30, 35), but that may be the kind of dichotomy called into question. It is a useful insight, in the first chapter, to think of all the coupled and divided souls in Hell as a sustained parody or inversion of the Incarnation, though the author's analysis of these images cannot be more penetrating than his particular use of the term 'incarnational', and it is perhaps not entirely clear that, or how, the bond between Dante and Virgil is an 'incarnational union' that offsets that parody. It would also be useful to investigate the deep theological connection between pride, which the author appropriately identifies as the ruling principle connecting his examples, and the failure to recognize the Incarnation. The Griffin, emblematic of Incarnation, receives slightly short shrift, as does Beatrice's speech on the Incarnation in *Paradiso* VII, but the idea that the three heavenly spheres within the earth's shadow are themselves an image of the Incarnation, as an 'astronomical union of the human and divine realms', reflected in souls who both preserve and transcend their earthly limitations, is intriguing, and may provide some useful paths of interpretation. Justinian's conversion to orthodoxy on the question of the Incarnation is seen as the centre of these spheres associated with the language arts of the trivium: the theme is how the incarnate Word manifests itself in language. Also useful are the suggestion that the *Paradiso's* images of reflection and deflected rectilinear flight represent the relation between the human and the divine, and the discussion of homonyms and equivocal rhymes as linguistic evocations of the Incarnation.

It is clever to link Cacciaguida's encircled Cross to the squaring of the circle that closes the poem, and to the patterns of chiasmi and circles of *Paradiso* X-XII. The author is certainly right to stress the importance of the *Somnium Scipionis* for understanding Dante's self-fashioning in the Cacciaguida cantos, and he enriches the pilgrim's self-designation as a tetragon (*Paradiso* XVII, 24) by observing that Thierry of Chartres called Christ the 'first tetragon'. The book ends

with an example of 'incarnational hermeneutics': Boethius complements Cacciaguida in establishing contemplation as the equal of action, an ideal realized in Dante's 'incarnational poetry' (p. 180), and Cacciaguida is not only a corrective to Brunetto Latini as a paternal image, but his figural fulfilment. As in an 'incarnational dialectic', opposition or conversion does not eclipse continuity.

Christian Moevs

University of Notre Dame

David Robey, *Sound and Structure in the 'Divine Comedy'*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. x + 204 pp. ISBN 0-19-818498-0. £40.00.

This book aims to provide a systematic and analytical description of the sound features of the *Commedia* according to their overall distribution in the text. It does so by electronic means, using computer-generated numerical analyses to explore the phonological and metrical features of the poem. The analyses involve two main stages: a phonological transcription by electronic means without distinguishing between accented and unaccented syllables; and a transcription which involves manual (and interpretive) intervention and which does demarcate such syllables. The first stage provides the subject-matter for chapters 2 and 3 on the distribution of alliteration/assonance and of rhyme respectively. The second stage offers the material for chapters 4 and 5 which consider syllable divisions and accentual rhythm. An introductory chapter provides a clear and concise overview of the critical debate on sound in the *Commedia*, and it is this debate which forms the framework upon which the empirical chapters are articulated. Robey's theoretical allegiances for a structuralist approach to the analysis of texts are made explicit in the introduction and in the final chapter which examines the reception of structuralism in Italian criticism in order to provide a broader context for the theoretical and methodological aspects of his numerical analysis.

Amongst the more important features of the book are the discriminating approach it adopts to the text of the *Commedia* itself and the broad comparative context that it introduces through comparison with other sample texts, both poetic (Petrarch, Boccaccio, Pulci, Boiardo, Ariosto, and Tasso) and prose ones (the *Convivio*, *Il*

fu Mattia Pascal, La costituzione italiana). In a volume which has fifty-four tables, many of them of quite considerable intricacy, it would be easy for the reader to come away with the impression of at least *trompe-l'oeil* if not downright trickery. That this is not the case is testament to the clarity with which Robey explains his methods and procedures, and expounds upon the significance of the data. Equally admirable is the desire shown throughout not to force the data or to make unwarranted conclusions; instead the stress falls repeatedly on the importance of allowing comparability and of providing a context of reference against which future interpreters can approach the sound features of the poem.

As a whole, the cumulative weight of the findings presented by Robey offers very strong support to proponents of the view that the sound features of Dante's text are autonomous from context. His findings also effectively demolish some of the more absurd proposals of direct links between sounds and expressive intent, even though some support is found for limited elements of expressive effect through underscoring via certain patterns of alliteration. The range and exhaustiveness of the numerical data will, as Robey hopes, provide future critics with a valuable set of thresholds above which the unusual can be identified both with regard to the sound features of the *Commedia* itself and through comparison between Dante's practices and those of later poets. At times, the results reveal new features of one *cantica* in relation to the others, such as the slight increase in 'i's and 'u's in *Paradiso*, or they highlight changes in relation to narrative divisions such as the high density of 'o's in *Inferno* XXXI-XXXIV. In other instances, the computer, as guided by Robey, allows the counterintuitive to emerge such as the fascinating demonstration of the high level of alliteration in prose texts – a fact which prompts the author to proffer some highly judicious remarks on the nature of poetic effect as residing not in the quantity of sound features or isolated devices but in the overall complexity of interacting parts subsumed within a larger structure. On several occasions, Robey's data and his informed commentary upon it help to confirm the established perceptions of previous Dante scholars. Chapter 3, for example, demonstrates the exceptional variety of Dante's rhyming practice by providing numerical data on his highly expressive handling of the line-ends in relation to the more limited range found in the later Italian tradition. Robey concludes this chapter with the assertion that: 'Using a computer has not told us anything very new in this respect,

but it has enabled us to measure more precisely the difference between Dante and his successors'. It is this sense both of the limits and of the value of his own tools which is one of the strongest qualities of his approach. Chapter 4 provides much interesting quantitative data on the distribution of *dialefe* and *sinalefe*, showing that the latter is not more prevalent in the *Paradiso* and that the former does not occur as kind of break in language and thought as is often assumed (we have here yet more evidence of the autonomy of the signifier). In this chapter, the exhaustiveness and consistency of computer analysis also allow Robey to pinpoint several examples where Petrocchi's edition has missed diaereses. Chapter 5 is the most technical and interpretative of all, and it opts for an inclusive approach to metrical structure which also incorporates the practice of actual readers from recorded performances of the *Commedia*. The comparative context is again used to reveal and illustrate some of the significant variations in accent patterns between different parts of Dante's work and those found in other authors.

This fine volume might have been enhanced by the addition of a reiterative and summative conclusion, highlighting future issues of methodology and restating the significance of its principal findings. Rather than this kind of conclusion, the final chapter represents something of an appendix, albeit an elegant and interesting one, which gives account of the complex mediation of structuralism in Italy in relation to earlier traditions, and its impact on criticism of the *Commedia*. Although it is true that the computer analysis is underpinned by the theoretical matrix elucidated here, the 'lettore' may feel that he is left a little too much to his own 'banco' and might have wished for more and closer links with the many important findings and careful lessons in method detailed in the preceding chapters. Some of Robey's material may be redimensioned by later analyses either through more extensive use of a wider comparative context or by refinements with regard to the complex issues raised by accentual pattern. Further subdivisions of the Dantean text (such as isolating parallel cantos from each *cantica* or considering other possible narrative divisions) might also provide interesting material for future analysis. But given the care and measure with which Robey has conducted his analyses it seems unlikely that the major findings of the study will be radically displaced by later analysis.

John Took, *Dante's Phenomenology of Being*. Glasgow: University of Glasgow Press, 2000. xvii + 266 pp. ISBN 0-85261-4192. £25.00.

John Took's latest book is a challenging and controversial learning experience for the reader of Dante. As the title clearly suggests, this is a serious attempt to assess Dante's moral and ontological concerns in the light of contemporary existentialist theories. Husserl, Heidegger, and Gadamer are the spiritual and intellectual guides for this enterprise; Took embraces their fundamental ideas on the phenomenology of human being-as-existence and redirects – or deflects – their ontological questions onto Dante's work.

The scholar appears aware of the danger of his interpretative approach: to consider Dante a phenomenologist would be, after all, a facile anachronism (p. viii). Medieval ontology is a complex matter that cannot be understood, as Took himself warns, outside of the theological realm. However, accepting the term in a broader (or 'weaker') sense, the scholar believes that it is indeed possible to analyse Dante's exploration and dramatisation of the modalities of being, thinking and knowing. On these premises, the book sets out to analyse the patterns of self-relatedness, the structure and the moods of being in Dante's works. The relationship between language and being as well as the comparison between Thomist and Dantean transcendentals are also discussed in the additional essays with which the book closes. This wide range of issues is developed in complex, convoluted but rigorous arguments, in a dense and highly conceptual prose.

Despite this complexity, in an attempt to glimpse at once the 'matter and soul' of the book it is worthwhile to outline some of the topics touched upon by Took. In the first chapter, the scholar has investigated the nature of man's threefold self-having. According to existentialist philosophy, man is ahead of, away from and alongside himself; in other words, man is defined by continuously redrawing the boundaries of his self, both at the cognitive and at the affective level. Likewise, Took writes, for Dante and his contemporaries, man is constantly engaged in a sublime search for the truth ahead of himself. But his thirst for *world-transcendence* is always 'a matter of *self-transcendence*, of defining the shape and substance of historical selfhood [...] for it is by virtue of the call to transcendence that the individual knows himself in the kind of being he is' (p. 8). By way of

finding a theological answer to the existential question, the medieval (as well as the contemporary) subject is released from the anxiety of his own 'universally tragic destiny [...] under the conditions of time and space' (p. 25). In the third chapter, Took examines the moods of being following Heidegger's consideration that 'the mood [...] is far from nothing'. The phenomenologist's focus on psycho-ontological matters, Took observes, is deeply in tune with Medieval thought on mood and being. Fear, anger, restlessness, inertia, renunciation, dissipation, obsession and paranoia, as they appear in the writings of Dante as well as in those of St. Augustine, the Fathers, the Victorines and the Cistercians, are under scrutiny. Took considers these moods as ontological indicators, as 'the leading phenomena of specifically human being in its estrangement, in its standing over against the call to transcendence' (p. 132). Thus, to give just one example, the opening lines of the *Commedia* (*Inf.* I, 1-29, 49-54) can be read as a manifestation of fear 'as the primary phenomenon of being in its lostness' (p. 107). Not only that. According to Took, the pilgrim is caught here in his disorientation, self-forgetfulness and despair, in other words in his state of existential crisis caused by the 'prospect of his ceasing to be as a creature of responsible self-determination' (p. 105).

The book turns on such arguments, and I make no mystery of the fact that it is often difficult to follow Took in his 'existentialist' *tour de force*. The first impression is that the theoretical framework, and the interpretative question that brings it about, are the most important achievements of the book. Took's call is to bring Dante 'home to all those most urgently engaged, both in his and in every other generation, in the business of [...] "thinking being"' (p. xi). That is to say, he endeavours to establish the 'modernity' of the theological and ontological bearings of the *Commedia* (but also of the minor works). In the hands of John Took, the masterpiece of medieval literature becomes the timeless expression of the human need for the theological answer (or transcendence) to the universal anxiety of being-in-the world (p. 25). This comes as no surprise. Like any real classic, the *Commedia* proves its resistance to time and weathering, its ability to offer infinite readings, its openness and richness, as well as its possibility to give new answers to new questions.

Dante's Phenomenology of Being therefore, can be a useful tool for those Dante readers who are searching to question and discover the modernity of the moral/theological dimension of the poet's work. The

book is also of interest to readers of philosophy, since it offers an interpretation of medieval theological ontology in the light of the contemporary 'theories' of being. Last but not least, Took's work offers a wide collection of extremely interesting medieval sources on a variety of philosophical and ethical issues. In the chapter on the moods of being, for example, the scholar presents a rich documentation of the medieval debate on moods (or sins) such as fear, anger and restlessness. His sources range from the unavoidable Augustine to Richard of St Victor, from Thomas Aquinas to Bernard of Clairvaux, from Anselm to Gregory the Great, from Aelred of Rievaulx to Rabanus Maurus. This book, therefore, could be beneficial also for readers whose interests are more historical or philological.

To conclude, I would like to return to my *incipit*, that *Dante's Phenomenology of Being* can be a challenging experience, but the reader must be careful not to be defeated by it.

Paola Nasti

University of Manchester