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## Introduction

Several good introductions, 'companions', and encyclopaedias on Dante have been published in English in recent years. The novelty of *The Cambridge Companion to Dante's 'Commedia'* is that, unlike *The Cambridge Companion to Dante* and the recent *Dante in Context*, also published by Cambridge University Press in 2015, its primary focus is Dante's masterpiece. This *Companion* aims to offer Dante's readers of today an accessible overview that gives a strong idea of the poem and its core features. We do this by exploring questions related to its structure, narrative and characterization, language and style, its handling of politics, the classics, vernacular writings, theology, philosophy and religious culture, and of various other major cultural issues, its relationship with Dante's other works, and its transmission and reception. As far as we are aware, no single study of this kind has ever appeared either in Italy or in the English-speaking world.

The book is divided into sixteen chapters that have been conceived in four broad blocks. The first four chapters study questions pertaining broadly to narrative, although the first chapter also offers a compelling overview of the *Commedia* as a whole. We were acutely aware that such 'narratological' features have been relatively understudied by Dantists, and that it has been especially difficult for readers confronting the poem to seek adequate orientation in this area. This group of chapters aims to address such omissions by offering new contributions on narrative structure, the relationship between poet and protagonist, characterization, and moral structure. The next three chapters are concerned with matters which can loosely be defined as literary, metaliterary, linguistic, and stylistic in character, from the poem's title and genre to Dante's choice of the vernacular, from the character of his Florentine to his syntactical and lexical choices, from the *Commedia's* use of dialogue, similes and invectives to its complex deployment of allegory. The following five chapters turn to consider Dante's treatment of various kinds of cultural 'content': Latin culture, the vernacular, religion, philosophy and theology, and politics. In each

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case, these chapters examine the relevant context, but the primary emphasis remains, as throughout, Dante's poem, with discussion focused upon the artistic questions and complex cultural operations involved. This section is then followed by a single chapter that concentrates on Dante's 'other works' (still often – and unhelpfully we believe – referred to as his 'minor works'), examining their interconnections with the poem, as well as considering the *Commedia's* genesis and processes of composition. The chapter is placed here rather than at the beginning of the volume out of a conscious concern to avoid it being read as having a programmatic status and as predetermining the treatment of the *Commedia*. The final three chapters address the poem's 'afterlife' and illustrate how richly and inextricably the *Commedia's* reception is interwoven with its interpretation, and how deeply implicated Dante's poem has been and continues to be in the cultural sphere. One chapter explores the poem's complex textual transmission (a topic seldom summarized in English), and a further two illustrate its extraordinarily varied and influential afterlife, in its many forms across well over seven centuries, from the exegetical work of his first glossators and commentators to the poem's reverberations in our contemporary multimedia culture. We have used Cristoforo Landino's celebrated print edition and commentary, published in Florence in 1481 and a major watershed in Dante's presentation, in order to divide the discussion of the reception into two.

The volume has been designed so as to allow both individual chapters and broader blocks of chapters to be read in sequence in ways that allow cross-cutting themes and issues to emerge. Several chapters can be read in especially close relationship with one another, such as the contributions by Cachey and Tavoni, Pertile and Corbett, and Gilson and Nasti. At the same time, however, a rich array of interconnections exists between all our chapters, although our readers will also note tensions and disagreements between chapters on important issues (for instance, the status of the Letter to Cangrande, Dante's attitude to his 'other works', etc.), as well as 'inconsistencies' regarding, say, the dates of certain works. Dante studies is a remarkably rich critical field characterized by competing interpretations, and we felt that it was only right that something of this energetically complex debate should seep into our volume. Furthermore, there is much that we do not know about Dante's life and career, hence, the discrepancies regarding the dating of his works. Indeed, alluring hypotheses are many about his time in Florence, his exile, his intellectual formation, and his emotional life, while hard facts are actually frustratingly few.

Our readers will also need and want to make use of the detailed name and subject index to explore topics of central interest, such as Rome, Virgil, and

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Beatrice, but also sin, plurilingualism, and the body. We have used J. D. Sinclair's translation as our base text when citing the *Commedia*, although we have regularly adapted this in order to make the sense explicit.

Our hope is that the volume will be useful not only to students of medieval Italian literature and of medieval Italy, but also to those interested in literary classics. The book is intended to complement *Dante in Context*, which offers an exhaustive account of the historical, cultural, and intellectual context in which Dante lived. The *Companion* digests and synthesizes aspects of such knowledge, as well as the current state of criticism about the poem. Our volume is, however, intended to do more than summarize the state of play; its individual chapters also aim to make their own contributions to Dante criticism, by raising problems and questions that call for renewed attention. In these ways, then, we hope that *The Companion to Dante's 'Commedia'* – with its unstinting focus on the poem and its attention to several topics that seldom, if ever, appear in critical assessments of the poem – will also be of value to academic Dantists and other medievalists.

*The Cambridge Companion to Dante's 'Commedia'*, unlike rather too many collaborative volumes, has been a relatively straightforward academic and editorial project. We are thus extremely grateful to Linda Bree, Anna Bond and Tim Mason at Cambridge University Press for their constant support, advice, and efficiency. Most of all we are thankful to our contributors for the timeliness with which they have sent us their chapters, and for the generous and understanding manner with which they have reacted to our editorial suggestions and interventions. Demetrio S. Yocum is an elegant and painstaking translator. The book has been enriched by his contribution. We are also very pleased to express our warmest gratitude to the Institute for Scholarship in the Liberal Arts at the University of Notre Dame for its generous financial support towards the costs of the translations. The Press's three anonymous readers gave us invaluable advice at a crucial moment of the book's development.

Working together has not simply been a source of intellectual satisfaction and enrichment. It has also been an act of friendship. As one of us is starting to bring to a close his career as a full-time scholar and teacher, collaborations such as this one stand out as among the most satisfying and happy experiences of his academic life. An opportunity, yes, to talk about Dante and medieval Italian culture, but perhaps more significantly, an opportunity to talk about much else, with our families always to the fore. It thus seems entirely appropriate to dedicate this book to our children, Anna and Ed, Lauren and Sofia.

## I

LINO PERTILE

## Narrative Structure

The *Commedia* is the story of a journey through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise, which Dante says he made during Easter week 1300, when he was thirty-five. The poet finds himself lost in a dark wood on the evening of Maundy Thursday; his journey begins at dusk on Good Friday and ends six days later in the Empyrean, where God resides with the angels and the blessed. The purpose of the journey is to rescue the poet-character and bring him to moral perfection; the poet will then recount his journey with the aim of transforming the lives of his readers and of the entire world.

**Dante: Character, Narrator, Author**

The hero and true engine of the *Commedia* is the poet-character, protagonist, narrator, and author of the story. This is one and the same person, the poet Dante – as he explicitly declares at *Purg.* XXX, 55–66 – simultaneously at two different stages of his life: the stage of actual experience (the present of the narrative); and the stage of re-living that experience through the retelling of it (the present of the narration). The former takes place in Easter week 1300; the latter in an imprecise time, but one that certainly lasts ‘many years’ (*molti anni*; *Par.* XXV, 3) beginning in 1306, though the possibility that the *Commedia* may have been conceived and begun in some form before Dante’s exile, as suggested by Boccaccio, cannot be categorically excluded.

One of the striking features of the *Commedia* is that, from its very beginning (*Inf.* I, 4), it not only tells a story, but it also makes the recounting of it part of the story itself. The narrator often comments on his present efforts to adjust his language to his experiences as poet-character, ‘so that the telling may not be diverse from the fact’ (*si che dal fatto il dir non sia diverso*; *Inf.* XXXII, 12). He also inserts warnings to the reader, observations on the story’s development, and comments on his own states of mind at the time of the narrative. Thus, in addition to being influenced by the reactions of Dante-character, the reader’s responses are shaped by Dante-narrator who

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interrupts the narration to address the reader. These interruptions are far from rare – about twenty can be counted, but there are many more if we adopt a broader definition of the phenomenon. They can be as short as one line (*Inf.* XXII, 118) and as long as twenty-four (*Par.* XIII, 1–24). They occur at critical points in the narrative, when the expressibility, credibility, or interpretation of an event, sight, or statement is at stake. The narrator intervenes, calling the reader's attention to what is about to happen or has just happened, and in so doing creates suspense (as is the case at *Inf.* VIII, 94–6) or heightens the significance of the action. This dialogue has a didactic role but its chief purpose is to involve the reader in the character's experiences. Thus the narrator becomes another character, who is and is not the same as the protagonist, whose story he authenticates while bringing it closer to the reader.

To these two Dantes, some scholars add a third – Dante the author and man – who is responsible for every word the other two say and every move they make. According to this further distinction, the author Dante Alighieri is the only real person involved in the operation, whereas Dante-traveller and Dante-narrator are both characters created by him. Most importantly, the standard narratological distinction that applies to all first-person narratives is made in the *Commedia* as well. In the narrated story, the character becomes the narrator only after completing his journey, whereas, from the perspective of the actual poem (the plot), character and narrator coexist, but the narrator knows everything about the journey from its very inception, while the character needs to progress through the journey to acquire the same understanding of himself and the world as the narrator. This is a valid structural distinction, but it cannot be forced systematically upon the story without falling into substantial contradictions. Character, narrator, and author are indeed intertwined and often overlapping in the *Commedia*, but we cannot always treat them as one; nor can we assume that they are perfectly discrete. It is a structural ambiguity which the poet fully exploits.

### Dante: Pilgrim and Exile

The poet-character performs another function in the *Commedia*, one that is intrinsic to the 'journey of life' metaphor. In Christian culture, life is understood, and experienced, as a journey back home, 'for here', Paul writes, 'we have no lasting city, but we seek the city which is to come' (Hebrews 13:14). Life is a state of exile in a land that was not meant for us. In this alien land we are pilgrims returning home, and our desire for fulfilment is the sign of a profound homesickness, the yearning for our lost paradise. The journey in the middle of which Dante suddenly finds

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himself lost at the beginning of *Inferno* is this universal journey from the human to the divine (*Par.* XXXI, 37–8); and it is because of this that Dante-character is referred to as ‘the pilgrim’. However, there is something unique about the themes of journey and exile in the *Commedia*. When he wrote the poem, Dante was in exile from Florence, and it is to this double exile, from Heaven and from Florence, that we owe the poem. Sadly, while Dante-pilgrim reaches his heavenly home and beholds God, as an exile in life, he never saw his beloved Florence again. Thus, the theme of his desire for God, essential in the narrative of *Paradiso*, often mirrors the poet’s longing for Florence.

## Virgil and Beatrice

At the outset, Dante introduces two other fundamental and in different ways astonishing characters, both historical and yet both devised to interact with Dante-character, conferring on him the emotional and intellectual depth that makes his adventure plausible and compelling. The first is Virgil and the second Beatrice. Virgil is clearly the poet of the *Aeneid* – not a philosopher, an angel, or saint, but the pagan poet of the Roman empire and medieval classicism, who will lead Dante to Eden and Beatrice. But the lady who descends from Heaven to Hell to deploy the most venerated poet of the Latin tradition, saying to him ‘I am Beatrice who bid you go’ (*I’ son Beatrice che ti faccio andare; Inf.* II, 70), who is she? There is something preposterous about this young, recently dead Florentine bidding Virgil to rescue her lover from the dark wood. The least that one can say is that, in imagining this story, Dante is immensely ambitious and self-confident. Only a reader of the *Vita nova* would know that the Beatrice of *Inferno* II is the same lady whose soul ascends to Heaven in the earlier work (*Vn* XXIII [14]). Such a reader would probably assume that the *Commedia* is Dante’s promised work in honour of Beatrice (*Vn* XLII, 2 [31, 3]). But could Dante count on anyone knowing the *Vita nova* in the first two decades of the fourteenth century? And if not, how could he promote Beatrice to the role of heavenly guide, a role higher even than Virgil’s?

## Structure and Poetry

The autobiographical basis of Dante’s multifaceted identity in the *Commedia* – character-poet, singer of Beatrice, exile longing for home and universal peace, pilgrim to the heavenly Jerusalem, intellectual in pursuit of truth, prophet of the regeneration of Italy and the empire – gives the poem’s structure its extraordinary intensity and coherence.

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There was a time when 'structure' was a rude word in Dante studies. Benedetto Croce, Italy's most influential philosopher, historian, and literary critic of the twentieth century, treated the structure of the *Commedia* as a necessary evil, 'the framework upon which the luxuriant vegetation of poetry is clambering, decorating it with pendulous boughs, festoons, and flowers'.<sup>1</sup> Dante's journey, with its physical and moral topography and its ethical-political-theological themes should be 'respected as practical necessity, while we go in search of poetry elsewhere' (p. 99). Croce was convinced that there is much poetry in the *Commedia*, but, as with all poetry, it is exclusively lyrical and is to be found in isolated characters, episodes, and passages that have little to do with the story of Dante's journey or its doctrinal content. For Croce, the poetry of the *Commedia* consists of 'the poetic representations in which the poet's multiform passion is condensed, purified and expressed' (p. 100).

While believing that a sharp distinction between structure and poetry is impossible, this chapter attempts to identify the 'structure' of Dante's great poem and show how essential it is in the generation of its 'poetry'.

## The Three Otherworldly Kingdoms

Hell and Paradise, and to some extent Purgatory, already existed in the medieval imagination. Building on that existence, Dante maps out the three realms as an explorer charts a new continent; he gives them physical contours, psychological identities, and names. The three realms have – and this is new – parallel structures but distinct characteristics. Hell is a huge conical cavity extending to the centre of the earth; it is divided into the Ante-Inferno and nine concentric circles, sloping down towards the bottom. The damned are punished according to the gravity of their sin from the top to the bottom – the closer to the bottom, the graver the sin. Purgatory, topographically Dante's original creation, is a tall conical mountain arising from the ocean; it comprises the shore and Ante-Purgatory plus seven terraces and the Earthly Paradise. The penitents wait on the shore and lower slopes for a prescribed time and then enter Purgatory proper, where they purge themselves of their sinful dispositions in order of gravity from the bottom of the mountain to the top – the closer to the top the lighter the fault. Paradise consists of nine concentric translucent spheres rotating about the earth, plus a tenth heaven, the Empyrean, the domain of absolute rest outside time and space, which contains everything and is contained by nothing. The blessed appear to Dante in the sphere that influenced them most in their lives, from the sphere of the Moon to that of Saturn according to the degree of their blessedness – the closer to God the more intense their bliss. Thus there are ten major

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partitions in every realm, a structural symmetry that is matched by the highly symmetrical organization of the poem. This symmetry is not presented as an arbitrary choice, but as an objective requirement of the subject matter itself, a mirror of the reality of the afterlife. The three kingdoms and the symmetrical ways in which they function are the product of a unified, harmonious plan, which is presented as the work of God, witnessed by the pilgrim and related by the narrator.

## The Poem: Form and Structure

Dante's claim is astonishing; however, the form in which he makes it renders it unique. The story is told in a 'comedy' (*comedia*, *Inf.* XVI, 128; XXI, 2; for a discussion of Dante's decision to term his poem a 'comedy', see chapter 5) or a 'sacred poem' (*Par.* XXIII, 62; XXV, 1), divided into three books called *cantiche* (canticles) – *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso* – which are in turn subdivided into *canti* (cantos). As there are thirty-four cantos in *Inferno* (the first serves as general prologue) and thirty-three each in *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*, their total is one hundred, a perfect number signifying the perfection of the universe and the poem. The cantos are made up on average of just under fifty interlocking units of three hendecasyllables each, called *terzine* or tercets. Each tercet consists of three lines of eleven syllables, for a total of thirty-three syllables per tercet. These numbers are not accidental. Three is the number of the Trinity, thirty-three the age of Christ, and the thirty-fourth of His life was the year when He died (*Conv.* IV, xxiii, 10).

This elaborate framework is highly self-conscious; once the poet has entered it, it cannot be modified in any major way; it can only be realized. In the poem, therefore, two interdependent movements or *journeys* co-exist: the journey of the poet-character from the dark wood to the Empyrean; and the journey of the poet-narrator from *Inferno* I to *Paradiso* XXXIII. The critical question is which came first: the idea of the journey; or the one hundred-canto structure? Most probably the great framework came into being gradually, as the vision of the journey gained clarity in the poet's mind. However, it is also reasonable to assume that it was only through the frame that that clarity was reached. It is no surprise then if, for Croce, the existence of the frame has 'a repressive effect on poetical inspiration' (p. 93). For us, however, it is the only form that an encyclopaedic, 'sacred poem to which both heaven and earth have set their hand' (*il poema sacro / al quale ha posto mano e cielo e terra*; *Par.* XXV, 1–2) could take, and in this form the frame or 'theological romance' (p. 65), as Croce calls it, is as inspired as the most passionate of its lyrical segments.



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### Textual and Narrative Units: The Canto

The canto – the word generally means ‘song’ – is the fundamental textual and metrical unit used to organize the story; and the way Dante employs it in relation to his subject matter is crucial to the narrative structure.

What strikes and intrigues the reader is the flexible length of the canto, from a minimum of 115 lines (*Inf.* VI and XI) to a maximum of 160 (*Purg.* XXXII). A difference of some forty lines can be extremely significant in narrative terms: it allows for ample creative freedom while the canto remains true to its form. Canto V of *Purgatorio* offers an interesting example of Dante’s compositional strategy. The canto tells of the pilgrim’s encounter with souls who died violently, repenting just before dying. After two public figures, Iacopo del Cassero and Buonconte da Montefeltro, have told the stories of their deaths (46–129), a third voice arises unannounced, the voice of a woman who condenses her life into six lines that are a masterpiece of suggestive restraint. The speaker is the mysterious La Pia, possibly Pia de’ Tolomei from Siena. This episode prompts two observations. First, since Buonconte ends his speech on line 129, there was no compelling reason for adding a third figure; second, having decided to add a third figure, the poet had available much more space than the little he actually employed for the portrait of Pia. He could have used eighteen lines as he did with Iacopo in the same canto, or twenty-four as he did with another Sienese woman, Sapia, in *Purgatorio* XIII, 106–29. Instead, Dante concentrated Pia’s biography into three lines, demonstrating that he uses the structure as it suits him and not vice versa.

This is even more apparent in *Purgatorio* XXXIII. Here Dante employs six precious lines (136–41) to inform us that, had he more space available, he would tell us more about the sweetness of the waters of Eünoè, but since all the sheets prepared for the second canticle are now full, ‘the bridle of art’ (lo fren de l’arte; 141) does not let him go farther. This is obviously a pretext. The poet could as easily have used those six lines to sing of the water; or, had he genuinely felt that six lines were not enough, he could have added six more, bringing the total for the canto to 151 lines, a reasonable length in the second canticle. In the event he did neither. Dante’s narrative choices are determined by his desire to achieve a specific poetic effect rather than by the canto’s length; his ‘art’ helps him attain his creative goal rather than constrain him.

There are many other ways in which the canto establishes continuities and contrasts between segments, characters, and episodes of the same or different canticles. A network of intratextual references, signalled by the repetition of the same word, image, rhyme, or structure enriches the *Commedia* with

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unsuspected and deeper meanings. Some episodes are illumined retrospectively by later passages. Thus only by completing the journey can the protagonist of the story – and the reader with him – gain the knowledge that the narrator has from the beginning; and only a second reading will begin to release the riches that otherwise remain buried under the surface of the text.

There is no space here to delve into the variety of effects achieved by this kind of intratextuality; one of the most prominent is the 'vertical' correspondence between the same cantos in different canticles to signal important topics or transitions in the journey. The three cantos VI concentrate on political issues in Florence, Italy, and the Empire; the three cantos IX signal a narrative and theological transition in all three realms and canticles; the cantos XIX of *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, and the XXVII of *Inferno* and *Paradiso* are largely about the Church and the popes, one of Dante's foremost concerns; the final cantos, and the last sections of the three realms, echo each other by analogy or contrast: Cocytus, Eden, the Empyrean; three-faced Satan and triune God; finally, the last line of each canticle ends with the word, 'stars' (stelle).

**Textual and Narrative Units: The Canticle**  
*Inferno*

At first sight the *Commedia* appears to be organized in a simple fashion, in which, textually and narratively, the canto works as the fundamental unit, and no action started in a canto remains unconcluded at the end of that canto. This is true of the first six cantos. The first two are introductory (one of Virgil, the other of Beatrice), the third tells of Ante-Inferno, and the last three are devoted, respectively, to the first three circles of Hell. Even canto VII, in which Dante describes the fourth and fifth circle, seems perfectly finished when we read its last, forward-looking line: 'we came at last to the foot of a tower' ('Venimmo al piè d'una torre al da sezzo'). Thus, if we had only the first seven cantos of *Inferno*, we might assume that Dante planned to organize the first canticle following the order of the seven capital vices, starting with lust and ending with pride. The canticle would have been less complicated and much shorter – ten cantos, perhaps twelve on the model of the *Aeneid*'s twelve books.

However, in the first eighty-one lines of canto VIII, Dante does something unexpected. He relates a series of thrilling events that happened just *before* he and Virgil reached the foot of the tower mentioned at the end of canto VII: namely, the arrival of the angry ferryman Phlegyas, their crossing the Styx on his boat, and their violent and morally problematic interaction with Filippo Argenti. This section of canto VIII is an amplification of the short segment