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978-0-521-37009-7 - Perception and Passion in Dante's Comedy

Patrick Boyde

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The *Comedy* tells the story of Dante's experiences, feelings and thoughts as he journeys through the three realms of the afterlife. In the core of this book, Patrick Boyde argues that the way in which Dante represents what he (or his fictional self) saw and felt was profoundly influenced by the thirteenth-century science of psychology. The author offers a clear and authoritative account of the way in which vision and the emotions were understood in Dante's lifetime and he re-reads many of the most dramatic and moving episodes in the poem, throwing fresh light on Dante's narrative technique.

Seeing and feeling were known to be inextricably bound up with thinking and voluntary action, and they were treated as special cases of motion and motive force. Professor Boyde therefore sets Dante's treatment of perception and passion in its intellectual context by presenting some of the leading ideas in Aristotelian epistemology, ethics and physics. Here too it is shown that a knowledge of Dante's philosophical ideas can help us to understand his poetic representation of mental processes and value judgements, and even the meaning of his journey towards the source of goodness and truth.

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and Fellow of St John's College*



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E se la stella si cambiò e rise,
 qual mi fec' io che pur da mia natura
 trasmutabile son per tutte guise!

Dante, *Paradiso* v, 99–101

The passions are feelings associated with pain or pleasure which so change a man as to affect his judgements. Aristotle, *Rhetoric* II, i, 8, 1378a

The Philosophers, as well natural as moral, the one for Speculation, the other for Practice, wade most profoundly in the matter of our Passions.

The natural Philosopher contemplating the natures of men and beasts' sensitive souls (for Passions are common to both) consequently enters into discourse about the actions and operations thereof; for, without the knowledge of them, it were impossible to attain unto the perfect understanding of either of them.

The moral Philosopher, describing manners, inviting to virtue, dissuading from vice, showeth how our inordinate appetites must be bridled with fortitude and temperance. He declareth their natures, their craft and deceit, in what sort of persons they are most vehement, and in whom more moderate; and to be brief, he spendeth well nigh in this disputation all his moral Philosophy in teaching how they may be used or abused.

Thomas Wright, *The Passions of the Mind in General* (1604), I, 1

And here again I find strange (...) that Aristotle should have written divers volumes of Ethics and never handled the affections, which is the principal subject thereof. (...) Better travails, I suppose, had the Stoics taken in this argument. (...) But yet it is like it was after their manner, rather in subtilty of definitions (...) than in active and ample descriptions and observations.

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But the poets and writers of histories are the best doctors of this knowledge; where we may find painted forth with great life, how affections are kindled and incited; and how pacified and refrained; (...) how they disclose themselves; how they work; how they vary; how they gather and fortify; how they are enwrapped one within another; and how they do fight and encounter one with another; and other the like particularities.

Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning* (1605), II, xxii, 6

'I think I'll go and meet her,' said Alice, for, though the flowers were very interesting, she felt that it would be far grander to have a talk with a real Queen.

'You can't possibly do that,' said the Rose: 'I should advise you to walk the other way.'

This sounded nonsense to Alice so she said nothing, but set off at once towards the Red Queen. To her surprise, she lost sight of her in a moment, and found herself walking in at the front door again.

A little provoked, she drew back and, after looking everywhere for the Queen (whom she spied out at last, a long way off), she thought she would try the plan, this time of walking in the opposite direction.

It succeeded beautifully.

Lewis Carroll, *Alice through the Looking-Glass*, chapter 2

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Preface

For a number of years I have been teaching early Italian literature in a Faculty of Modern Languages, working with students who have a relatively limited knowledge either of the language or of medieval culture, and giving regular public lectures for people who are not studying Italian at all but who want to know more about Dante. In this time I have become ever more conscious of the exceptionally close link between Dante's fiction and his ideas, and have increasingly felt the need to read the *Comedy* in the light of the poet's own beliefs about the nature of language, art, morality, history and God. For better or worse, this work has grown out of my teaching and the consequences will be obvious at every turn.

If the book has a motto over and above its five epigraphs, it is the much-quoted injunction of E. M. Forster: 'Only connect'. It presents many individual philosophical concepts which become clearer as they are reintegrated into their system. The exposition of Dante's ideas is always related to a reading of one or more episodes in the *Comedy*. Each episode is interpreted in the light of its place in the whole poem which is itself set in the context of Dante's other works. And all the time I am trying to make connections between an early fourteenth-century poem and a reader in the late twentieth century.

There are, of course, other important relationships of a different kind between the book as a whole and its predecessors – the giants of Dantean and medieval scholarship, for example, or an earlier work of my own written in the same spirit. These relationships too deserve to be spelt out, but they will be of interest only to a minority, and at this stage there are just two things that need to be made clear. First,

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the book's main claim to originality lies precisely in the connections that it seeks to re-establish between a medieval poem and medieval ideas. Second, the only close link with my earlier study of Dante's thought and poetry is that I occasionally use the adjective 'philomythical', as a correlative to 'philosophical', in order to signify the kind of creative writing that is open to and nourished by philosophy. Anyone who is curious to know how I conceive the relationship between *mythos* and *sophia* in Dante, or who would like to read my own sketch of his development and his other works, is referred to the first forty pages of *Dante Philomythes and Philosopher; Man in the Cosmos*. But this book stands entirely on its own feet.

The editions of Dante's works and the abbreviations used are given on p. 302 below at the beginning of the notes section. All unattributed translations and all italicisations for emphasis are mine.

My thanks are due to many people. First and foremost, to the friends who read and commented on drafts of one or more chapters, particularly Peter Brand, Fergus Campbell, Robbie Carroll, Ruth Daniel, Robert Gordon, Michael Horton, Martin Kemp, Robin Kirkpatrick, Laura Lepschy, Alison Morgan, Roger Morgan, Elizabeth Mozzillo, Christopher Ryan, Malcolm Schofield and Chris Stevens. They helped to make the 'crooked straight and the rough places plain' as well as pointing out a good many slips and inconsistencies. (It should go without saying that all the remaining anfractuosities and errors are my own responsibility.) And this is the place to record my debt to the staff of the Cambridge University Press for their patience and their admirably professional service, particularly to the editor, Kevin Taylor, and to the copy-editor, Rachel Neaman, who went through the final draft with something more than the proverbial toothcomb and made suggestions for scores of vital improvements.

During the long years of gestation, however, there have been other less tangible kinds of support which it is a pleasure as well as a duty to acknowledge. My thanks go therefore to the Fellows of St John's College for their intellectual stimulation, good humour and affection. It is a unique privilege to spend one's working life in the middle of such a community. At another level I must express my gratitude to the general audiences in England, Germany and North America whose warm responses have encouraged me to persevere in the

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attempt to present Dante, even to non-specialists, in his own language and as a medieval intellectual. I am still more deeply indebted to our Cambridge students whose moments of bewilderment or boredom have done as much to improve the book as their questions in tutorials or seminars. Last, but not least, I must thank all my immediate colleagues in the Department of Italian at Cambridge for their advice, friendship and cheerful support throughout the making of this book. It is perhaps invidious to single out one name, but I want to end by expressing special gratitude to my fellow Dantist and keenest interlocutor, Robin Kirkpatrick, whose generous offer to shoulder the ever-more intrusive duties of Head of Department in 1990 had the effect of liberating and focusing my energies and thus bringing the work to its conclusion.