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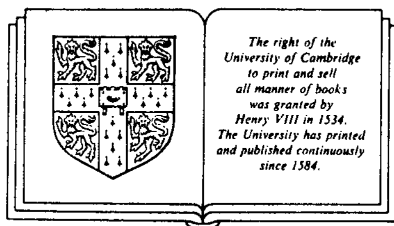

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Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore,
São Paulo, Delhi, Dubai, Tokyo

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521379601

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First published 1986
Reprinted 1987
First paperback edition 1988
Re-issued in this digitally printed version 2009

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Dronke, Peter.
Dante and medieval Latin traditions.
Bibliography: p.
Includes index.
1. Dante Alighieri, 1265–1321 – Knowledge – Literature.
2. Dante Alighieri, 1265–1321 – Sources. 3. Latin
literature, Medieval and modern – History and criticism.
I. Title.
PQ4394.D76 1985 851′.1 85–19464

ISBN 978-0-521-32152-5 Hardback
ISBN 978-0-521-37960-1 Paperback

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More information

Contents

Preface *page* vii

1 The *Commedia* and Medieval Modes of Reading 1
(i) Allegory and Vision 1
(ii) Alan of Lille: Poetry and Creativity 8
(iii) Image and Metaphor 14
(iv) Symbol and Myth 24

2 The Giants in Hell 32
(i) *Umbriferi prefazii* 32
(ii) Illusions 34
(iii) Demythologisation 37
(iv) Nimrod 43
(v) Invented Languages 46
(vi) The Parity of Biblical and Classical Giants 50

3 The Phantasmagoria in the Earthly Paradise 55
(i) Hidden Comparisons 55
(ii) Dante's Tree 59
(iii) Eagle and Chariot 65
(iv) Dragon, Giant, and Prostitute 69
(v) *Modicum, et vos videbitis me* 73

4 The First Circle in the Solar Heaven 82
(i) Knowledge and Love 82
(ii) *Quelli ardenti soli* 90
(iii) Boethius and Siger 96

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978-0-521-37960-1 - Dante and Medieval Latin Traditions
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Frontmatter
More information

Excursus
(i) The *Epistle* to Cangrande and Latin prose rhythm 103
(ii) Nimrod: his character, ambitions, and thoughts about God. The evidence of the *Liber Nemroth* 112

Notes 125
Bibliographical Note 148
Index 149

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Frontmatter
More information

Preface

My purpose in this study is to sketch and illustrate a range of ways in which medieval Latin traditions can help us to comprehend Dante's *Commedia*. The focus is on a number of poetic techniques, ideas, symbols and myths which Dante came to know through the Latin Middle Ages, but which become alive in new ways in his poem. I have chosen to concentrate on a few problems only, and to link these throughout with attempts at detailed interpretation. But the selection has been planned, it is hoped, along lines that will lead towards fuller understanding of many of Dante's principal strategies, and towards meeting the challenges – even obstacles – that he deliberately sets.

There is a pervasive belief, supported by a consensus that begins with the earliest commentators and still flourishes today, that the most fitting approach to the *Commedia* lies in attempting a predominantly allegorical reading. Many elements of allegorical explanation have become so firmly, almost unanimously, established that it may seem foolhardy even to question them. At all events, to question them on poetic grounds, by suggesting that the conventional allegories proposed do not do justice to the stature of Dante's imagination, will always sound too impressionistic, too subjective, to carry conviction. We may feel that Dante has an 'esemplastic power' – unifying meanings and making language dense with meaning through awareness of an associative kind – that transcends the schemes of allegory; yet it remains difficult, historically, to set the hallowed approach aside in favour of a more unfettered criticism.

The best hope in this dilemma, it seems to me, is to try to show from a group of texts that subtler, more imaginative approaches to poetic meaning were possible in and before Dante's time. Here and there in the Latin Middle Ages I believe we can find certain insights into poetry that would still strike us today as worthy of great poetry. The allegorising methods, such as were used by bib-

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lical – and at times classical – commentators, were neither the only nor the most outstanding instruments of interpretation available.

I am also encouraged to question afresh even some of the most deeply rooted assumptions of the commentators because in our century two of the scholars whose work on Dante means most to me have distanced themselves from that exegetic tradition in notable ways – ones, moreover, that they could substantiate on historical grounds. I refer to the writings of Erich Auerbach and Bruno Nardi. By examining the medieval notions of *figura* as something distinct from allegory, Auerbach was able to arrive at a well-founded premise that was adequate to some fundamental aspects of Dante's imaginative richness. It was no longer necessary to follow Guido of Pisa, Jacopo della Lana, or Dante's sons, Jacopo and Pietro, in explaining Vergil and Beatrice as allegories – of Reason and Theology, or similar concepts – or to fear that it would be 'unmedieval' to reject such crude conceptual equations. For, alongside allegory, the equally well-attested medieval concept of *figura* allowed for the simultaneous presentation of vividly individual creations and hidden meanings – meanings that do not conflict with the perception of individuality but are consubstantial with it.

So, too, Nardi was able to argue, on the basis of his incomparable detailed knowledge of medieval thought, that the notion of sustained allegorical, moral and mystical reading of the *Commedia* was *historically* inappropriate, that 'any attempt to extract from Dante's poem the hidden senses which Jewish and Christian theologians were wont to extract from the Bible is simply an attempt at cabbalistics'.[1] And yet – so the objection runs – was it not precisely this kind of reading that Dante himself had espoused, in the letter in which he dedicates the *Paradiso* to his patron Cangrande? Where in 1944 Nardi spoke of a 'grave and justifiable doubt'[2] about whether Dante wrote that exposition, in his later work on the question he concluded, with a wealth of observations, many of which have been neither countered nor superseded, that the expository text which follows the dedication – the seeming foundation-stone for the systematic allegorising of the *Commedia* – could not be attributed to Dante himself.

The present study takes some of Nardi's and of Auerbach's insights as points of departure. It is clear – and both scholars were fully prepared to admit – that moments of allegory do occur in the *Commedia*, that Dante worked with fixed meanings at times, as

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well as with open ones. In identifying the moments of true allegory and delimiting their scope, many questions still seem to me debatable, and in some, on which I touch in the course of the book, I follow neither of the two great pioneers. Nor would I quite follow Nardi to the extent of staking so much on the inauthenticity of the explanation for Cangrande. I have many reasons – including some unsuspected till now – for thinking Dante did not write this explanation; these emerge both during the first chapter and in a separate Excursus. Nonetheless I still think it just conceivable that on this one occasion Dante should have resolved to bring to his own otherworld journey an explanatory method similar to that which Bernard Silvestris and others had thought appropriate to the otherworld journey of Aeneas, or which the Fathers had imposed on many parts of the Bible. It was a method that may well have been so deeply assimilated by most commentators of the time that, inasmuch as they perceived the *Commedia* as a text with striking analogies to the *Aeneid* and the Bible, they automatically began to organise the new text in the anciently familiar pattern. At least it can be seen that the author of the Cangrande exposition, though tempted in this direction, did not persist with it: after a general statement, and an example drawn from the Bible, he did not go on to apply the method even to the handful of lines from *Paradiso* that he chose to elucidate. Still more important is for us to recognise how far the allegorising method differs, first, from the other Latin discussions of poetic meaning that Dante could have known (and that, even if he did not need them for instruction or inspiration, offer at least some appropriate co-ordinates for his poetic craft); second, from the brilliant perceptions of the nature of meaning that can be found at certain moments in the *Commedia* itself. Some of these, too, are discussed in Chapter 1.

The chapters that follow are in a sense only fragments of what would be, ideally, a more extended inquiry. I have selected three principal moments – those of the giants in *Inferno*, of the apocalyptic showings in *Purgatorio*, and of the first circle in the solar heaven in *Paradiso* – to examine in detail some of the ways in which these moments rely upon medieval Latin traditions, and in which Dante's medieval Latin inheritance helps to illuminate his poetic practice. Many cross-references are made, naturally, to other parts of the *Commedia* and to Dante's other writings; but I decided to focus on these parts, rather than others, because taken

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together they involve us in a substantial group of complementary problems, and hence can in some measure be regarded as exemplary. Considered in conjunction, these parts can be seen to unite a large range of Dante's modes of generating poetic meaning; they reflect many of the kinds of creativeness that can be encountered in the *Commedia* as a whole; they illustrate many aspects of the medieval Latin imaginative world upon which Dante relied, and can help show how he both used that world and went beyond it.

What kind of imaginative reality do the beings that appear in the *Commedia* have? To perceive and define this, for a range of apparitions as diverse as the giants in hell, the phantasmagoria in the earthly paradise, and the philosophers and theologians in the sphere of the sun, certain Latin evidence is crucial. Thus, for instance, Dante's treatment of the mythological giants and the historical Nimrod would not have been possible without the kinds of euhemerism that the medieval Latin world had developed. Yet no one before Dante had used those euhemeristic techniques so many-sidedly, to achieve such complex effects. It was possible for the Church Fathers to reduce the gods and demigods of the pagans to human, or demonic, status: if Christ is the 'true Apollo', the pagan Apollo can only have been a human king, or else – if he still exists – an evil spirit. Dante's course, however, is not that of opposition but of integration: for him, the fabled giants Ephialtes and Antaeus are real in the same way as the biblical giant Nimrod – they share a human brutishness and wretchedness. But by his language Dante's integration extends far beyond this – into the realms of the comic, the scary, the colloquial. No one had brought such things into the domain of biblical–classical confrontation before. Dante inherits certain conceptions of the literal and the mythical, as well as notions of imaginary languages and of the nature of illusions. What he brings to all these is his own: he makes them serve the purpose of distancing the giants, in the dramatic sense, and demythologising them, in the philosophical, while at the same time through his resources of language he allows the encounters with the giants to become fearsomely real.

The phantasmagoria that are shown to Dante in the earthly paradise exemplify an even wider spectrum of imaginative realities, that extends from emblematic constructs to visions of obsessive vehemence. Controlling all these is the double standpoint which some medieval thinkers – including ones that Dante celebrates later, in his solar heaven – had perceived in the prophetic

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books of the Bible, seeing the content of the prophets' visions simultaneously as inner events within a human being and outer ones that the seer projects upon the world. Yet there was also a corresponding double standpoint known to the finest authors of medieval poetics: the poet in the act of making 'hidden comparisons (*collationes occultae*)' could, like the prophet, realise something that was 'both within and without'. Dante's achievement in the last cantos of *Purgatorio* cannot be accounted for in terms of either the poet's or the prophet's mode alone; he avails himself of both, sure that, because his thought is integrated, the two will coalesce.

This approach necessarily calls in question a number of received allegorical interpretations of images in these enigmatic cantos, such as those commonly advanced for the tree, the eagle, or the dragon. With these and the others, my method is to begin from Dante himself, trying to ascertain what imagery he might, historically, have known, and how he has transformed it; I leave aside the method that begins from the assumptions of Jacopo della Lana and the other early commentators. It is still, of course, open to scholars to claim that these commentators fathomed Dante's intentions correctly. But I hope to have shown at least that this is not self-evident: it is a case that would have to be argued anew, on its own merits.

In the fourth chapter, my principal endeavour is to look at a group of medieval Latin texts and authors with Dante's eyes, to see what he might have seen in them. Here I begin with the hypothesis – which, strangely, seems not to have been entertained before – that the twelve sages in the first circle of the solar heaven were chosen because Dante was familiar with the work of each one of them, and had seen in each something that illuminated his central poetic concerns in the group of cantos (*Paradiso* X–XIV) that describe this sphere. Testing this hypothesis revealed a far deeper coherence in Dante's design than anyone who had not followed Dante into the thought of these figures could have surmised. Thus, from attention both to the authors Dante knew and the poetic context in which he sets them, it becomes possible to understand more precisely just what each of these thinkers meant to him.

The book concludes with two Excursus, which give detailed documentation for some controversial points that arise in the course of discussion in Chapters 1 and 2. In the first Excursus, I aim to set out in a more rigorous form than hitherto the technical

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difficulties involved in the claim that Dante is the author of the expository part of the *Epistle* to Cangrande. These difficulties concern the patterns of Latin prose rhythm. Since Tore Janson's remarkable study of this topic (1975),[3] the medieval Latin rhythmic cadences have been precisely quantifiable, and intended cadences have become effectively distinguishable from fortuitous ones – a fact that requires the revision of a number of earlier assessments and opinions.

In the second Excursus, my object is to distinguish for the first time, among the medieval Latin texts relating to Nimrod, the details of the legend of Nimrod the astronomer, adducing substantial extracts from the still unpublished early medieval 'Book of Nimrod (*Liber Nemroth*)'. This allows one to differentiate clearly between the Nimrod of the *Liber*, who is a lofty and noble sage, and the debased giant Nimrod – a figure Dante will have known especially through the tradition preserved by 'Pietro Mangiadore', one of the theologians whom he names in the sphere of the sun (*Par.* XII 134).

While so much of the book sets medieval Latin traditions in relation to Dante, I should like to stress here, once and for all, how little, in the last resort, Dante's intellectual and imaginative processes can be accounted for in terms of his learned sources. He leaves nothing in his sources as he finds it. The materials of the world of learning – the medieval Latin world – set him a constant challenge, conscious and unconscious. He was never going to copy simply: all understanding for Dante implied transformation. Almost nothing can be 'traced back' in an uncomplicated fashion. In the study of Dante, *Quellenforschung* must inevitably retain something elusive: his was a mind for which every assimilation was already instinctively the beginning of an alchemy. There is a rare and obstinate independence – which is close to the heart of his creativeness. Thus the traditions here evoked reveal no more than possibilities that lay open to Dante; they take us only to the threshold of the mystery of how he came to surpass what he knew.

This book is addressed in the first place to medievalists and Dante scholars; but I hope it may also be a fresh invitation to non-specialists to the reading, or revisiting, of Dante's *Commedia*. That is why, in the chapters, citations from Italian and Latin are translated throughout. Those from the *Commedia* are rendered line by line: not because I make any claim for the English versions as poetry – they are no more than aids to understanding – but in

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order to try to convey, at least by approximations, something of the movement as well as of the content of Dante's thoughts.

My debts of thanks must begin with an affectionate remembrance of Bruno Nardi, from whom, at the start of my postgraduate work, I was privileged to learn much about Dante and about medieval philosophy. His intellectual penetration and his generosity are unforgettable. Since 1969 I have been delighted by the warm welcome of the Cambridge Italian Department, who, first under Uberto Limentani and more recently under Patrick Boyde, have invited me regularly to contribute to their series of public lectures, the 'Lectura Dantis Cantabrigiensis'. Preparation for these has helped me incalculably in crystallising the ideas expressed in this book; many of them, indeed, were first risked in the context of a *lectura*. A large part of Chapter 1 was offered as a talk, '¿Interpretación medieval o moderna? El caso de Dante', in a symposium 'Literatura medieval y literatura contemporánea', at the Universidad Internacional Menéndez Pelayo, at the invitation of Francisco Rico; Chapter 2 was given its final shape while preparing an address, 'Die Riesen in der Göttlichen Komödie', for the annual meeting of the Deutsche Dante-Gesellschaft.

I am grateful to Sebastian Brock and Charles Burnett for their advice on diverse aspects of the *Liber Nemroth*, and to Theresia Payr, editor of *Mittellateinisches Wörterbuch*, for expert information on the meaning of certain expressions in medieval Latin. Patrick Boyde, Ursula Dronke, and Jill Mann have most kindly read the complete typescript; I have been helped and heartened by their observations.

Palm Sunday, 1985 P.D.

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