

Human Vices and  
Human Worth in Dante's  
*Comedy*

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## Dante's authors

### *'Viaggio, cammino, volo'*

The *Comedy* is the first-person narrative of a divinely willed journey through Hell, Purgatory and Heaven, a journey from which the author returns to write his poem 'for the good of the world that lives so ill' ('in pro del mondo che mal vive'). Canto xxvi of *Inferno* contains a first-person narrative put into the mouth of Ulysses in which he relates the ill-fated voyage from which he never returned. Both travellers undertook their journeys to gain understanding of 'human vices and human worth' (the phrase is used by Ulysses); and the realistically detailed stories they tell are of course fictional representations of a purely metaphorical journey towards the 'knowledge of good and evil', which occupied Dante the author for much of his adult life.<sup>1</sup>

During that quest he undoubtedly learnt much from introspection and from close observation of the people he met. His poem is packed with references to himself and to characters and events of his own time. But unlike Ulysses, he did not limit himself to gathering information at first hand. His 'expertise' did not derive simply from the 'experience of our senses'. A very large part of his 'voyage of discovery' was made in his mind and imagination as he read the works of other men. And the purpose of this chapter is to give some account of the earlier 'explorers' who had acted as his 'guides' and of the extraordinarily detailed and accurate 'maps' of the moral universe they had drawn.<sup>2</sup>

The libraries available to Dante were very much smaller than those to which we have access today. But the relative paucity of books meant there was time to read them and to remember their contents (Dante's personal library in the years of his exile must have existed largely on the shelves of his memory). There existed numerous works in the field of ethics which are still regarded as fundamental, and which are astonishingly varied in their provenance and the values they uphold. When

Dante looked at the moral world, his vision was not myopic, monochrome or blinkered.

The same point might be made with an analogy from the law-court. Dante took it upon himself to sit in judgement on human affairs, but he delivered his verdicts only after he had sifted the contradictory evidence of countless witnesses, after he had listened to the eloquent but opposing pleas of many advocates, and after he had studied the conflicting judgements of his predecessors on the judicial bench.

Chief among these predecessors were the great teachers in the 'schools' of the University of Paris between about 1250 and 1280. Like them, and like the whole intellectual culture we call 'scholasticism', Dante's ambitions may be described as both syncretist and systematic. 'Syncretist' means attempting 'to unite or reconcile diverse or opposite tenets or practices, especially in philosophy or religion'; while 'systematic' characterises a body of thought that aims to be comprehensive, rigorous and methodical. Both tendencies may be viewed as a response to the challenge posed by the diversity and wealth of a much-revered inheritance. And the following survey of Dante's 'authors' – who were also his 'authorities' – is intended above all to convey some idea of this wealth and diversity.<sup>3</sup>

*The proud Greeks: (a) the soaring eagle*

Dante knew no Greek, but he knew that the Romans had recognised the pre-eminence of the Greeks in philosophy and literature, and he was anxious to pay his tribute to the civilisation which had produced the greatest philosopher and the greatest poet of all time.

The poet was Homer, and Dante honours him as the 'lord' who with his 'lofty song' 'soared like an eagle' above all his rivals in antiquity. Homer was the ultimate source of information about the heroes and gods who were involved in the War of Troy and who have marched and counter-marched through the European imagination ever since, providing paradigms of so many human types and so many insights into human behaviour. He had been held up for admiration by Macrobius as a philosopher-poet who had revealed 'the truth of all divine inventions under a veil of poetic fiction'. So it is fitting that Homer should prove to be Dante's authority for two of the most important propositions in his political and ethical thought. It was Homer who anticipated the argument of the *Monarchia* in his assertion that there should be one supreme ruler; and it was he who said

that the noblest human being is like the child of a god rather than of a man.<sup>4</sup>

*The proud Greeks: (b) the three sects*

In the thirteenth century, all the other philosophers of ancient Greece were completely overshadowed by Aristotle (384–322 BC), whose main ideas on ethics will be presented in Chapter 4 below. But a rapid glance at Dante's scattered remarks about four other thinkers will serve to indicate his attitude to the relationship between philosophical thought and day-to-day life, as well as documenting his familiarity with a range of ideas he rejected, and showing the respect in which he held all those who had made an effort to reach the truth.

Plato (427–347 BC), 'uomo eccellentissimo', was Aristotle's teacher. He had explored topics of the greatest interest to Dante, such as the influence of the planets and stars on human behaviour. Aristotle revered him, but dissented from many of his ideas, refusing to allow love for his master to overcome his greater love for the truth. Dante tried to live up to this model.<sup>5</sup>

Like Plato, Democritus (c. 460–c. 370 BC) was admired by Dante because his evident contempt for worldly values proved that he rejected superficial concepts of happiness. For Dante, 'morality is the beauty of philosophy', by which he meant, among other things, that it is right to judge the quality of a man's beliefs from the quality of his life. Personal virtue, however, is not the same as true understanding; and in Dante's view Democritus was wrong in his belief that matter is composed of atoms or that the universe is the product of their chance collisions.<sup>6</sup>

It had been a commonplace since antiquity to compare and contrast the ethical teachings of Epicurus (341–270 BC) and Zeno of Citium (335–264 BC). Epicurus asserted that the human soul dies with the body, and that the highest good is pleasure (understood as 'the absence of pain'): Dante repudiated both views with some vehemence. He was more sympathetic to the ideas of Zeno, the founder of Stoicism, who taught that the highest good lies in the exercise of the cardinal virtues, whether or not this leads to worldly approval or happiness. Dante admired the austerity and integrity of a Stoic like Cato of Utica, and tried to live up to Cato's example in the long years of his exile. But he clearly rejected the Stoic view that moral virtue demands the suppression or eradication of the passions.<sup>7</sup>

Aristotle's followers, the Peripatetics, are also said to have missed the mark by attempting to locate human fulfilment in the 'active life'. Even Aristotle himself, who held that the supreme happiness lies in contemplation, will be consigned to Limbo together with all these thinkers. And yet Dante recognised that all these erring 'sects' had been animated by a common love for truth and goodness, and that they had been striving towards the same goal. Philosophy (he argued in the *Convivio*) prepares our minds to accept the Christian faith; this is the basis of our hope; this in turn is the cause of Christian charity; and 'through these three virtues one ascends to philosophise in that celestial Athens where the Stoics and Peripatetics and Epicureans, by the light of the eternal truth, run shoulder to shoulder in concord and one will'. There are few more eloquent testimonies to the spirit of medieval syncretism:<sup>8</sup>

Per le quali tre virtudi si sale a filosofare a quelle Atene celestiali, dove li Stoici e Peripatetici e Epicurii, per la luce de la veritate etterna, in uno volere concordevolmente concorrono. (*Con.* III, xiv, 15)

*'The noble seed of the Romans': Dante's first masters in philosophy*

Dante came to believe that the Romans had been destined by God to rule over the whole of mankind. The 'populus romanus', whom he celebrates in the second book of his *Monarchia*, had fulfilled the prophecy made by Virgil's Anchises in the *Aeneid*. They had excelled, not, as the Greeks had, in sculpture, oratory or astronomy, but in the 'arts required to govern the peoples and to impose the pattern of peace'. They had exercised those 'arts' for many centuries before Augustus established the Empire; and they continued to do so in the West for another five hundred years until the time when Italy was invaded by the Goths and Lombards at the end of the fifth century AD. As thinkers, they themselves were the first to admit that they were not as subtle or profound as the Greeks, but their practical experience of government and their sense of an imperial destiny gave their ethical, political and legal thought a new dimension; and they bequeathed a rich legacy of works which Dante could and did read in the original Latin, and which deepened and refined his understanding of human vices and worth.<sup>9</sup>

Among the moral philosophers, the two most significant for Dante were Cicero, who flourished just before the establishment of the Empire, and Boethius, who lived just after its collapse in the West. They were of unique importance in his intellectual development,



because, as he himself tells us, it was in their writings that he first discovered philosophy, when he was seeking consolation for his grief at the death of Beatrice.<sup>10</sup>

Dante must have recognised a good deal of himself in Marcus Tullius Cicero (106–43 BC), whom he calls Tully ('Tullio'). Cicero had been a man of humble origin who took an active part in the political life of the Republic, rising to hold high office at a time when he had to 'defend Roman liberty' against the conspiracy of Catiline. Ousted from power and influence, he dedicated his enforced leisure to spreading knowledge of Greek philosophy in his native tongue, casting his work in the accessible form of the dialogue. From his dialogues Dante quotes with approval a condemnation of riches, arrogance and decadence, stirring examples of valour and magnanimity drawn from Roman history, a definitive defence of old age, and an affirmation of belief in personal immortality – all these ideas being expressed in a fluent and elegant prose which gave Dante a model to emulate when he set himself a similar task in similar personal and cultural circumstances in the *Convivio*.

Dante refers to five of Cicero's works in all, but the one that left the deepest impression on him was the one he read first, the dialogue *De amicitia*. There he found a celebration of disinterested friendship as a supreme value together with a cluster of related ideas that would permeate the prose of his *Vita nuova*. There also he found a model that would help to shape the *Comedy*, inasmuch as the ideas and ideals are not expressed analytically and in the abstract, but form part of a moving, personal account by an historical individual, Laelius, who speaks of his friendship for Scipio Africanus, the greatest Roman of the previous century.<sup>11</sup>

Boethius (480–524 AD) was born in Rome but ended his days as a consul under Theodoric, the Ostrogothic king whose capital was at Ravenna. Dante was to place him not in Limbo (like Aristotle and Cicero), but as a Christian martyr in the Heaven of the Sun. The title of his most influential work – *Consolatio Philosophiae* – delimits its scope very precisely. It does not draw on the revealed truths of the Christian religion; and it has the practical aim of giving comfort to anyone in distress. Boethius tells of his imprisonment on a trumped-up charge (for which he was subsequently executed) and how he learnt to rise above his misfortunes. His book would 'console' Dante not only for the death of Beatrice but also for his sufferings and deprivations in exile (significantly, Dante invokes the example of Boethius in the *Convivio*

to defend himself for speaking in the first person in order to clear his name).<sup>12</sup>

In the long run the spirit and shape of the *Consolatio* were perhaps more important for Dante than its content, because its strictly ethical ideas are derived from Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics. But Boethius' narrative of a spiritual journey towards happiness (achieved through successive acts of understanding about the nature of goodness and the nature of love) was to influence Dante over a thirty-year span from the *Vita nuova* to the *Comedy*. So too was Boethius' vision of mankind as part of a universe created and governed by a supreme being, who is identified with the Supreme Good that all existing things are striving to attain in whatever way is appropriate to their nature.<sup>13</sup>

### *Roman Law*

Shortly after the death of Boethius, the Eastern Emperor Justinian (who ruled from 527 to 565 AD) set out to consolidate his military reconquests by means of a radical overhaul of the law. Sixteen experts were given the task of sifting through the accumulation of statutes, edicts, decrees and rescripts from the past, together with the all-important interpretations that had been given by the great jurists in the period from 100 to 250 AD. By the end of the year 533 they had stripped out repetitions, contradictions and obsolete material – 'il troppo e'l vano', in Dante's famous phrase – and arranged the surviving material by subject matter into fifty books to create the *Digest* (a work about half as long again as the Bible). The *Digest* was complemented by the *Institutes*, an introductory textbook for students, and by two further collections of earlier and new laws to form the 'Body of Civil Law'. In the opinion of many scholars the *Corpus juris civilis* was the single most important bequest to the Middle Ages from the classical past, and the most distinctively Roman.<sup>14</sup>

By the beginning of the twelfth century it had become an object of renewed study in Bologna and other universities, and by the year of Dante's birth the long task of interpretation and recovery was complete. His lifetime coincided with the work of the Commentators who sought to apply the 'grammar and terminology' of Roman private law to the vastly different context of their own day. For the university student of law in Dante's time, the *Digest* had the same status as the Bible had for the student of theology; and the educated laymen who administered the communes of Northern Italy (including a number of

Dante's fellow poets, and a good many members of his first audience) were trained lawyers who were steeped in its concepts, axioms, terms and procedures. They were confident that the Roman jurists had been able to deduce universal categories and principles from the bewildering complexity of daily life, and that it was possible to apply these categories and principles in such a way that all men could live in peace and harmony under just laws, justly interpreted and justly enforced.

Dante himself did not study make a formal study of the law (or if he began the course, he did not complete it), and there are several passages in his works where he speaks of jurists with hostility or contempt as people who sell their knowledge for a stipend or a fee. But he too could venerate the law as 'Reason written down'. His ideal vision of a universal Empire under a divinely constituted 'sole ruler' (*monarcha*), who is the supreme *legis lator* and *legis executor* for all mankind, owes a substantial debt to the Prologue to the *Digest*. As one reads the *Inferno* – above all the eleventh canto which explains the principles underlying the classification of sins in Hell – one becomes aware that the spirit and some of the details of his analysis are derived not so much from the 'divine law' enshrined in the Bible as from the 'human law' embodied in the *Corpus juris civilis*. Canto xi might even be described as Dante's *Institutes*, his highly personal 'digest of the *Digest*'.<sup>15</sup>

*'La bella scola': Horace, Ovid and Lucan*

Dante's greatest debt to classical Rome, however, was to the poets who flourished in the hundred years on either side of what he took to be the turning point in world history, that is, between c. 40 BC and c. 60 AD. Four of them are quoted with reverence in the *Vita nuova* and the same four – Horace, Ovid, Lucan and Virgil – will be 'set apart and honoured' in Limbo as members of Homer's 'bella scola'.

Horace is recalled for his *Satires* and verse *Epistles*, which depict some of the follies and vices of late Republican Rome (in *Inferno* iv he is described as 'Orazio satiro').<sup>16</sup>

In the *Vita nuova* Ovid is cited for his *Remedium amoris*, the 'antidote' to the better-known *Ars amatoria*, which had provided the Middle Ages with a uniquely witty and sophisticated account of sexual love. In Dante's other works, however, he figures above all as the author of the fifteen books of the *Metamorphoses* – the supreme virtuoso in the description of how human beings were changed into non-human forms. Most of Dante's references to pagan myths can be traced to the

*Metamorphoses*; and he was inclined to treat such myths as deliberate allegories or as veiled perceptions of the truth about human nature.<sup>17</sup>

Lucan is coupled with Ovid in *Inferno* xxv because of his description of some particularly repellent metamorphoses, but the ten books of his unfinished *De bello civili* describe a totally different world (the poet was compelled to commit suicide under the Emperor Nero in AD 65 at the age of twenty-six). Dante drew extensively on Lucan's epic as a source of historical information about the struggle for power between Pompey and the victorious Julius Caesar, a struggle which, in Dante's view, had paved the way for the Empire, the coming of universal peace, and the birth of the Saviour. The politics of this decisive civil war are treated without any idealisation and the battle-scenes are horrific. Only one man emerges with dignity and honour – Cato of Utica; and it was from Lucan that Dante derived his hero-worship for this statesman turned soldier. Cato is presented in the epic as the embodiment of Stoic virtue. He asserts that there is but one God. He believes he was born not just for himself or for his native land, but for the good of the whole world. He loves true freedom so much that he prefers death by his own hand to life under a tyrant. One can no more speak adequately of him than one can of St Paul, says Dante; and no man was ever 'more worthy to signify God'.<sup>18</sup>

### *Statius and Virgil*

Two other Roman poets from the first century AD were important in helping Dante to understand the interests and values of pagan, imperial Rome in the period when St Peter and St Paul came to the capital and were martyred there. They were Juvenal (born c. 60 AD), who is still recognised as the most important successor to Horace as a satirist, and Statius (born c. 45 AD), who was the author of two epics dealing with themes from the remote mythological past. (His unfinished *Achilleis* deals with events at Troy, and his *Thebaid* with the misfortunes of Oedipus and Jocasta and the wars between the twin sons of their incestuous union.)<sup>19</sup>

In the fiction of the *Comedy* Dante chose to represent Statius as a 'secret' and 'tepid' convert to Christianity; and the fictional Statius remains on stage for twelve cantos after his appearance in *Purgatorio* XXI. He has a complex role to play, but the most important of his various functions is to pay homage to Virgil. Virgil, we are told, gave Statius 'the strength to sing of men and gods', and the *Aeneid* had been his

'mother and nurse in writing poetry'. A striking phrase in that epic led to a change in his moral life, by showing him that prodigality is a vice no less than avarice. The opening of Virgil's Fourth Eclogue had sown the seeds of his Christian faith by prophesying the descent of a 'new progeny from heaven' at the birth of a Son who would usher in an age of justice and primal innocence. The intensely moving encounter between Virgil and Statius – the former exiled for ever in Limbo, the latter finally on his way to Heaven – is a celebration of the power that Dante himself still exerts over *his* readers, the power of a long-dead poet from an alien culture to 'instruct, please and move' his readers and to bring about a change in their lives.<sup>20</sup>

The historical Virgil was indeed Dante's 'maestro' and 'autore' in writing the *Comedy*; and it is probable that he drew on the *Aeneid* more often than all the other works considered so far. He found in Virgil two overarching visions: the first, of an individual human life portrayed as a hazardous journey to a promised land; the second, of an entire nation playing its role in a divine plan involving all mankind from the beginning to the end of time. (Aeneas undertook his journey from Troy to Italy in order 'to found the Roman race', and the *populus romanus* was to play a part in world history second in importance only to that of the Jews.)<sup>21</sup>

The *Aeneid* also offered Dante a diversified cast-list of exemplary characters among whom there are no outright villains (except perhaps the treacherous Sinon) and where even the hero has many moments of human weakness and uncertainty in the course of his long quest. Several of Virgil's characters reappear under their own names in the *Comedy*, while some of Dante's most memorable creations are based on his prototypes. There are of course profound differences between the two poets in the representation of human vices and worth. But these are all compatible with the fact that Dante sat down to write a counterpart to Virgil's 'Tragedy' (as he called it) – a 'Comedy', which was to be just as much the expression of his own Christian culture as Virgil's had been of that of pagan Rome.<sup>22</sup>

### *The 'Writings' and the 'Book'*

The next group of Dante's authors could hardly be more different from the poets and philosophers of ancient Greece and Rome. They include a charismatic leader, two kings, several 'outsiders', a farmer, some fishermen, a doctor and an intellectual. They wrote from within a pastoral

or rural society over a very long period, in very different forms: historical narrative, invective and exhortation, prose-poems, aphorisms, parables, sermons and open letters. In a shortlist given by Dante himself, they are named as Moses, David, Job, Matthew and Paul, and to these we might add Solomon, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Peter and Luke. For Dante and his culture their words were 'Writings' with a capital letter (in Latin, *Scripturae*). Their collected works formed the Bible, the 'Book' par excellence ('Bible' comes from *Biblia*, which is simply a transliteration of the Greek word for 'books'). They enjoyed this special status because the voice that speaks through all of them was believed to be that of the Holy Spirit. In Dante's own metaphor, the authors were no more than 'scribes' who wrote at God's 'dictation': 'unicus dictator est Deus'. The Bible was read aloud in Latin and expounded in the vernaculars from the lecterns and pulpits of every church in Europe, because it was universally regarded as the Word of God.<sup>23</sup>

Among the messages recorded by these 'scribes' are clear instructions on how to lead a good life. Many of these are similar to the precepts offered by the Greek and Roman philosophers; but others can be understood only within the kind of framework to be sketched out in Chapter 5 below, where we shall examine the distinctive values enshrined in 'the life of Christ, including both his words and his actions' – 'vita Christi, tam in dictis quam in factis comprehensa'. For the moment, therefore, it must be enough to make two very simple points about the ways in which biblical teaching differs from that of the pagans.<sup>24</sup>

First, the precepts given are not simply counsels but commands or commandments. Taken together they constitute a 'law', which has unique authority because it comes from on high. Human beings are required to obey the divine law or suffer the inevitable consequences, because God is not simply the Lawgiver, but the all-seeing Judge and the all-powerful Executive. Second, the *lex divina* differs completely from its human counterpart, as codified by Justinian, in that it always embodies the perspective of eternity. God is 'from everlasting to everlasting'; and human beings do not cease to exist when they die. Our conduct in *this* life (and the addition of the simple demonstrative 'this' diminishes the value of all 'earthly' goals and rewards) becomes a matter of supreme importance, since it will determine the quality of the *other* life, an eternal 'after-life'. We shall be judged once and for all on what we did or left undone in the brief span of threescore years and ten. Paradoxically, the achievement of success or happiness as measured by

the standards of this world may lead to eternal misery in the next; whereas earthly suffering may be rewarded by heavenly bliss.

Even in this highly compressed account, it would be wrong to leave the impression that Dante took from the Bible no more than a perfect *exemplar*, a set of values, and a code of conduct. The historical books of the Old Testament provided a gallery of complex moral portraits and striking instances of behaviour that was either pleasing or displeasing to God; and these were no less important to him than their counterparts in the classical epics. More significantly, the characterisation of Dante as protagonist of the *Comedy* is influenced by the three main 'actors' in the New Testament – St Peter, St Paul, and Jesus himself. The impetuosity that leads him into error, and the transparent goodness of intention that soon earns him forgiveness, are both modelled on the 'festina et impremeditata praesumptio' and the 'fidei sinceritas' of St Peter, as he is presented by Dante in a remarkable piece of practical criticism in the *Monarchia*. Dante's ascent into heaven echoes that of St Paul (just as his descent into the Underworld is based on that of Aeneas). And his journey to Hell (which he enters on the evening of Good Friday and leaves on the morning of Easter Sunday) is in its way an 'Imitation of Christ'.<sup>25</sup>

### *Two 'giants' and a 'Colossus'*

This rapid survey of Dante's 'guides' through the territory of moral philosophy is now almost complete. He did acknowledge generic debts to later writers, including some from his own thirteenth century. Vernacular poets such as Guido Guinizzelli (whom Dante once cited as 'il saggio') had celebrated the ennobling power of a certain kind of sexual love. St Francis and St Dominic founded two orders of mendicant friars who were to carry the Christian good tidings with renewed fervour into the booming cities of Western Europe. Great teachers – such as St Albert, St Thomas Aquinas and St Bonaventure – had been active in the University of Paris. But they were not Dante's 'authors' in the full sense: they were not 'authorities'.<sup>26</sup>

Dante would accuse the poets of courtly love of muddying the waters they brought to the well (Guinizzelli and Arnaut Daniel will be encountered among the lecherous in Purgatory). St Francis was simply obeying to the letter the commands that Christ had given to his first disciples; while the Parisian theologians and philosophers were engaged in the task of interpreting, reconciling and putting into order

the truths they had inherited from the past (as we shall see in the next two chapters). To borrow a famous phrase from Bernard of Chartres, writing in the twelfth century, they were ‘dwarfs’ perched on the ‘shoulders of giants’. They could admittedly see further than their masters, but they did not enjoy the same status.<sup>27</sup>

Before recalling the names and major works of Dante’s remaining authorities, however, we must pause to reflect on the vast and ultimately irreconcilable differences between the works that have been presented so far. The heroic world of the Homeric poems was not that of Plato’s Athens, and its values were not the same. Similarly, the late Roman Republic produced works very different in ethical content from those of the Empire in the first century AD. The three philosophical sects of the active life were not really ‘running towards the same Athens in the sky’. It was anything but self-evident to a majority of the Jews that Jesus was indeed the ‘Messiah’, the ‘Anointed One’ (the ‘Christ’), whose coming had been foretold by their prophets, or that their Law had been ‘fulfilled’ in his life and teaching.

In the early centuries of our era, moreover, there had been an apparently unbridgeable gulf between the monotheism of the Jews and Christians and the polytheism of the rest of the Roman Empire. It did not matter to Jews or Christians whether the local gods of the Gentiles were rainmakers, Olympians, natural forces, abstractions, dead emperors who had been raised to the skies, or the new astrological deities from Babylon: they were all ‘false and lying’. By contrast, the educated members of the Roman ruling class who continued to worship the ancestral gods in those early centuries were repelled by many aspects of Christianity – its subversive values, its concept of history, its philosophical naïvety, and the stylistic barbarity of its sacred texts.<sup>28</sup>

Until the beginning of the fourth century AD (down to the year 313), Christians were intermittently persecuted and often executed for refusing to worship the pagan gods (a ‘martyr’ was a ‘witness’ to the faith). By the end of that century, however, under Theodosius I (379–95), the situation had been reversed and Christianity became the official religion of the Roman state. And the years between toleration and recognition saw the birth of three men who have been revered ever since as the Doctors (that is, ‘Teachers’) of the Catholic Church. They were Jerome (c. 340–420), Ambrose (340–87) and Augustine (354–430).<sup>29</sup> These men were still ‘giants’, and it was they who played the definitive role in the long task of assimilating Christianity to classical culture, which had been begun by St Paul.



Of course, much had already been achieved before their time. It is now thought that the canonical scriptures had been defined, and arranged in the two Testaments, during the second half of the third century AD. The Council of Nicaea in 325 agreed on a single Creed which summarised the essence of orthodox Christian belief. But even in this favourable new climate, there was still much to be done in order to fill out the implications of the words and deeds of Christ, and to make Christian ideas accessible and acceptable to those who had been educated in the classical schools, as the three Doctors had been.

Jerome mastered Hebrew as well as Greek and produced the definitive translation of the Bible for the Latin-speaking Western Empire.<sup>30</sup> Ambrose is now remembered chiefly for his hymns (such as the *Te lucis ante terminum* sung by the souls in Dante's Antepurgatory), which proved to be an effective way of spreading sound doctrine. But he was probably most important historically for his role in establishing the allegorical interpretation of Scripture, which was still the norm in Dante's lifetime (a good many of Dante's references to the Bible are not so much to the literal meaning as to one of the commonly accepted 'sovrasensi').<sup>31</sup> The greatest and most influential of the three was undoubtedly Augustine, a Colossus, of whom one might remark, as Jerome said of Paul and Dante said of Cato, that 'it would be better to keep silent than say too little'.<sup>32</sup>

Dante, it must be said, refers to the works of Augustine very seldom and his quotations are almost certainly at second hand. But with his usual unerring instinct he singles out the three most influential texts. The first of these was *De doctrina christiana*, which set out a programme of Christian education, indicating exactly what was to be preserved from the classical curriculum. It is to this work more than to any other that we owe the survival of the Seven Liberal Arts and, in consequence, the copying and re-copying of the pagan works necessary to teach them. The second was the vast and sprawling *De civitate Dei*, which begins with an exposé of the absurdity of polytheism and the inadequacies of pagan philosophy, and goes on to adumbrate the definitive Christian view of world history, starting with the Fall and looking forward to the Second Coming of Christ on the Day of Judgement. The third book cited by Dante is the *Confessiones*. This begins with Augustine's account of his own childhood as the son of a Christian mother in North Africa, his schooling and career as a teacher of rhetoric and his passionate love for his mistress. It goes on to recount his long quest for a meaning in life, which started (as Dante's did) with the

reading of a dialogue by Cicero, passed through a prolonged adherence to the dualist teachings of Manes, led him on to the Greek philosophers and brought him, at long last, to a re-discovery of the Christian faith of his childhood (this Father and Doctor of the church was baptised at the age of thirty-three!).<sup>33</sup>

There is no clear evidence that Dante read the *Confessiones* closely. But he was certainly familiar with its contents and with its character as a work of personal 'confession'. He referred to it explicitly in an early chapter in the *Convivio* where he defended his decision to speak directly about himself in order to clear his good name. And so it is probably to Augustine (rather than to Boethius, who is mentioned in the same context) that we owe Dante's crucial decision to set down his conclusions about 'human vices and human worth' by representing his own experiences, errors and faults, and by tracing the slow development of a purer love for the good, which came as the result of a progressive understanding of its true nature. That was Dante's method in the autobiographical *Vita nuova*; and – making due allowances for the fictional form – this would be his method in the *Comedy*.<sup>34</sup>

## Putting authors to the question

### *New uses for old monuments*

Having seen that Dante was typical of his age in his reverence for the wisdom of the past, and even in his choice of authorities, we must now investigate his *use* of those authorities and ask in what ways this use was typical and distinctive of his time. Many later centuries have drawn on the reservoir of classical and biblical culture, but they have channelled the waters to run in very different courses.

The punning title of this chapter suggests that the very notion of asking a ‘question’ lies at the heart of scholastic methodology. ‘Putting authors to the question’ could mean (to take examples of Middle English usage from the *OED*), subjecting them to a judicial examination, torturing them as part of that interrogation, or re-phrasing their words to focus on a difficulty or doubt, thus making them the basis of a problem to be debated and decided within the fixed form of a disputation. All these meanings are relevant in some way (even putting to the torture!), and all were present in the Latin word *quaestio* (from *quaerere/quaestum*, ‘to seek, to inquire’). This is why the central part of the chapter will be devoted to the reading of a representative scholastic *quaestio*, and why it will end with Dante’s metaphorical celebration of a ‘quest’ for knowledge carried forward by the posing of one question after another.

Some sort of introduction is necessary, however, to provide a context for the example of a scholastic thinker in action, and, given the limitations of space, this can be provided only by resort to circumscription and simile. We shall focus on three distinct ways in which the ancient heritage was re-employed in scholastic culture; and these will be linked and illuminated through an analogy deriving from the architectural monuments of the past.

There are some obvious parallels between the works of Dante’s authors and the surviving buildings of classical Rome; and there are

parallels, too, between the ways in which these two kinds of ‘monument’ were pressed into service in the late Middle Ages, which can help us to understand how thirteenth-century scholasticism created something quite new while always deferring to the past. Some of the ancient Roman buildings had been preserved in their entirety, but were assigned a new function (the Pantheon became a Christian church, S. Maria Rotonda, and Hadrian’s mausoleum became a fortress, later known as the Castel Sant’Angelo). Others had become ruinous and were treated like quarries from which the individual stones, or even whole columns, could be removed and reassembled in structures of a totally different kind. Finally, a good deal of the marble from the remains was burnt in limekilns to make the cement which would bind these building blocks together.

The *written* ‘monuments’ were put to similar uses. Some were studied as complete entities, but with little regard to their original context. The majority were treated as a storehouse of weighty paragraphs, which were incorporated and given pride of place in new works. And these ‘reclaimed materials’ were held in position thanks to a powerful ‘mortar’ of procedures derived from the logical works of Aristotle and from Roman law.

The three-part analogy is no more than an analogy and is not to be pressed too hard. One of its chief shortcomings is that the real architectural monuments that come most readily to mind are in the city of Rome, whereas the ‘recycling’ of materials from ancient texts took place mostly in Bologna, Oxford and Paris. These were the locations of the most important universities of thirteenth-century Europe – complex institutions without precedent in the ancient world, which were the heirs to the cathedral schools of the late eleventh and twelfth centuries.

It was of course these ‘schools’ – in the widest sense – that give us the adjective ‘scholastic’, which remains the best single word to characterise the kind of intellectual culture that forms the context of Dante’s thought. It reminds us, among other things, that the most important thinking was done by professional teachers, organised in a corporation, who sold instruction in a classroom to young men who had, as it were, apprenticed themselves in order to obtain a marketable skill.

This is not the moment to attempt even the briefest summary of the long evolution of the *scholae* over a period of at least 200 years; and all the generalisations that follow cry out for qualification. Clearly, there were huge variations in place and time and a great diversity in the practice of

any two contemporary masters in the same faculty, or even in different works by the same man. But the ensuing paragraphs will have served their purpose if they help to make sense of a single lesson given by a great teacher in the University of Paris, who was active during Dante's lifetime. This will typify scholasticism in action – a re-investment of the capital of the past to make possible the production of something entirely new.

*The 'consecrated temples'*

Very few words can be spared here for those classical works which were studied in their entirety, but it must be borne in mind that in many cases a master's course would consist of nothing other than readings (*lectiones*, whence our word 'lectures') in which he would guide the student through every page of some complete text. Proficiency in a subject might be virtually equivalent to the detailed knowledge of a limited number of books from the past.

This is not to say that the master contributed nothing of his own. Admittedly, his divisions and paraphrases, or the information he supplied about topics or proper names, did not allow much room for manoeuvre. Sometimes, though, his lectures might be tantamount to a commentary to the text. He might contribute a prologue and introduce substantial digressions, which would give him the chance to make connections with other authors or develop his independent thought. In the later period, he would concentrate on controversial passages, in which his interpretation differed from those of his predecessors. If the work under study was a poem or a book of the Bible, a large part of his energy would be dedicated to the exposition of the presumed allegorical meanings. In all these ways, his exegesis might be very different from that which would win approval from modern scholars; and a medieval *commentum* could and often did become a work in its own right. This was the book the student had to know in order to pass his examination.

It should also be said that dramatic advances could and did come about simply through the adoption of hitherto unstudied texts, either by the same author, or by a new author, no less venerable. This is what happened during the first half of the thirteenth century when the whole corpus of Aristotle's writings became available in translation for the first time. The university authorities might proscribe the teaching of these works in the Faculty of Arts (as they did periodically from 1215 onwards), but there was no stemming the tide. By the 1260s a student

of philosophy in Paris had to acquire an extensive knowledge of the man who became known antonomastically as ‘the Philosopher’. A change in the set texts meant that the subject was no longer the same. It was as though a whole group of classical temples had been excavated, restored, and ‘consecrated for contemporary worship’.

### *Reclamation and sorting of materials*

The disciplines that most narrowly concern us in this book are philosophy and theology, as these were practised in Paris in the third quarter of the thirteenth century. But there are certain features of the works produced in this period which cannot be understood without glancing back to the twelfth century and taking note of developments in the study of civil and canon law.

As we saw in Chapter 1, the committee of jurists employed by Justinian in the early sixth century had produced an introduction to the *jus civile* (the *Institutes*), which explained the main concepts, principles and guidelines with exemplary clarity. But this remained the only school-book one might recognise as such. The fifty books of the *Digest* were no more than a selection of statutes, edicts, decrees and rescripts from the past, organised by topic, and accompanied by the interpretations given by earlier great jurists. To open the work at any page is to be thrust *in medias res* – straight into the practice of the law; and this is an area where there must of necessity be a constant interaction between abstract reasoning and deference to precedent, and a constant struggle to apply both of these to contentious situations in unique circumstances. In essence, the lawyer or student of law was always faced with a particular case in which two parties had come before an arbiter or judge to settle a dispute, precisely because the correct answer was not obvious. In the real world, the task of the judge was to identify the issue, to look for guidance in the decisions of his revered predecessors, to apply the general principles of natural justice in the light of a ‘long and deep practical experience of the law’ (which is a rather long-winded translation of the root-meaning of ‘jurisprudence’), and, finally, to deliver his verdict (*sententia*). In the classroom, the master was required to do something very similar. He too had to identify the point of law, pick his way through the authorities who had spoken *pro et contra*, and propose soundly argued solutions to hypothetical cases – with the result that his lesson might be rather like a mock trial.

The main centre for the study of Roman civil law was the University of Bologna, which, in the early twelfth century, also became the centre for the institutionalised study of the law of the church. The first major task in this cognate field had been to produce a work similar in kind to the *Digest*, that is, a vast collection of papal decrees and decisions, grouped by subject, and encouraging the same kind of exposition as in civil law. This work was known as the *Decretale*, and the man who played the decisive role in its compilation was Gratian (who died c. 1150).

Now, although it is extremely difficult to establish relative dates (and therefore the relative direction of influences), the biggest single development in the study of theology in the middle of the twelfth century came when the Bible and the many writings of the Fathers and Doctors of the Church were subjected to a similar process of ‘harvesting’ and ‘threshing’. In other words, pronouncements of a doctrinal kind were isolated and gathered into compilations resembling the *Corpus juris civilis* and the *Decretale*.

The first of these compilations announced by its very title that the adversarial mode natural to the law (the appearance before a judge of a plaintiff and a defendant) was to be applied to the teaching of theology as well. This was the notorious *Sic et non* (‘Yes and no’) by Peter Abelard, who died in 1143. It presented excerpts from the Fathers of the Church in such a way as to call attention to real or apparent conflicts of opinion between the authorities. Twenty years later Peter Lombard (who died in 1160 or 1164) produced a similar if less controversial compilation, the *Sententiae*, which became the standard textbook for students of theology in the thirteenth century. A hundred years later, every great master in Paris had to produce his own commentary to the *Sententiae*. And with his habitual insight, Dante would honour Justinian, Gratian and Peter Lombard in his *Paradiso* for the role they had played in producing textbooks made up of authoritative excerpts, arranged by topic, which focussed attention on contentious issues, and encouraged teaching in the form of a disputation leading to a solution.

### *The ‘mortar’ and the ‘medium’*

In terms of our governing analogy, the ‘monuments’ left by the authors revered in the faculties of law and theology had been broken up into manageable building blocks, sorted, and made available for modern

use. To understand how these blocks were bound together in new 'structures', we must consider the contribution made by logic.

The study of logic was also inherited from the ancient world (where it was associated with the names of Aristotle and Boethius) and it not only provided the 'mortar' to hold the fragments of the past in place but also became the 'medium' of all independent discourse. Everyone who went on to study philosophy or theology had received a rigorous training in its use. Together with grammar and rhetoric, logic was the 'core subject' of the 'foundation years'; and it was so fundamental to all advanced study that nothing can be described as typically scholastic if it does not conform to its rules.

Logic has long been banished from the school curriculum, and it can be so dry and technical that it is difficult to empathise with Dr Faustus when he exclaims 'Sweet Analytics, 'tis thou hast ravished me.' But in that line Christopher Marlowe succeeded in capturing the enthusiasm that inspired generation after generation of medieval students, including Dante; and we must therefore make some effort to understand attitudes and assumptions that have long since been discredited.<sup>1</sup>

There are perhaps three linked postulates concerning language and truth which underlie the medieval teaching of logic. (a) There is such a thing as a true proposition, understood as one in which there is a 'proper match between reality and the words' (*adaequatio rei et verbi*). (b) A proposition known to be true commands our assent simply because we are rational, truth-seeking animals. (c) It is possible to discover a truth that is not self-evident by due process of reasoning, that is, by drawing valid inferences from what is already known.

These three assumptions have to be spelled out because so many statements which claim to be true turn out to be false (or true only under certain conditions), and because the cause of the error lies not in the ignorance or malice of the speaker, but in the numerous shortcomings of all natural languages. Words are often vague or ambiguous, signifying different things to different hearers or in different contexts. A statement may be correct grammatically, but conceptually defective; or more often, it may be placed after another statement, but does not necessarily 'follow' from it: it is a logical *non sequitur*.

The student of logic had to be made aware of these defects and taught how to overcome them. He had to learn how to define his terms with precision and how to make those terms follow each other coherently, which, in the Middle Ages, meant to express them in one of the valid forms of the syllogism (although this was not the only form of logically