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Prue Shaw, The poet as thinker

PATRICK BOYDE

Dante Philomythes and Philosopher: Man in the Cosmos

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T.S. Eliot once observed that Dante did no “real thinking”; but on another occasion he noted that the *Purgatorio* teaches us that a direct philosophical statement can be great poetry. How one can make a philosophical statement without really thinking remains something of a puzzle; but the seeming contradiction points to what has been a central problem of aesthetics at least since the time of the Romantics: the relationship between intellect and imagination, between rational thought and the creative impulse. When Coleridge wrote to Wordsworth in 1815, “In Lucretius everything which is poetry is not philosophical, everything which is philosophy is not poetry” he was formulating an extreme solution to the same problem. Dante and Lucretius, the two writers in whom we recognize both greatness as poets and professional competence as philosophers, are of course the test cases: in each of them the poetry is inconceivable *without* the philosophy, the philosophy is in some sense at least the *raison d’être* of the poetic masterpiece.

This ambitious study –two further volumes are promised – examines the relationship between Dante’s philosophy and his poetry in the *Comedy*. Patrick Boyde’s uncompromising thesis is that Dante is first and foremost a poet of the intellectual life, and that most of the distinguishing features of his mature poetry derive from his study of philosophy. As the title proclaims, Dante is both *philomythes* (lover of myth) and *philosopher* (lover of wisdom). There is no contradiction between the two terms: Aristotle tells us that *philomythes aliquantulum philosophus est* (the lover of myth is in some sense a lover of true knowledge). The *Comedy* is a poetic fiction which nonetheless embodies or expresses truths which its author believed to be, and wished his readers to accept as, literally the case. These ideas – philosophical in the broadest sense, encompassing both theology and science – constitute a view of the world and man’s place in it which, if he would but understand it and act on it, would ensure human happiness. Dante’s urgent concern is that men should “use their intellects, recognise the facts, and live their lives in conformity with the truth – the truth that the poem itself will lay bare.”

At the heart of this first volume is an exposition of Dante’s beliefs about the physical universe in which he lived: its nature (chemistry, geography, astronomy), its origin (creation and generation), and man’s unique role within it (biology and psychology). If Eliot meant only that Dante passively and uncritically accepted scholastic thought as represented by Aquinas, this book demonstrates for English readers what Italian scholars have been telling us for decades: that Dante followed no single authority, but was an exceptionally

independent and vigorous thinker. Dr Boyde moves with ease and authority among his classical and medieval authors and texts. He has a gift for lucid exposition, a genuine interest in the ideas he is expounding, and a profound conviction that we cannot understand Dante if we do not understand what he believed.

Alongside the exposition of the ideas is the demonstration of how they come into the *Comedy*. Many of the major doctrinal statements in the poem are translated, elucidated, and then subjected to perceptive, if sometimes rather perfunctory, literary analysis. The point repeatedly insisted on is that without sacrificing intellectual rigour or technical vocabulary Dante expounds complex concepts – for example, the process of conception and generation in human beings, to take a subject on which the author is particularly felicitous – in language which is poetically forceful and moving. The philosophy does not suffer from being put into verse form; the poetry is no less poetic because of the conceptual density and rigour.

This central nucleus – what Dante thought, and how he expressed it in the poem – is prefaced by a lengthy introduction and followed by an ample section of texts, references and notes. The introduction develops an extended comparison with Lucretius in order to illustrate the contention that Dante is essentially a poet of the intellectual life, whose study of philosophy was “decisive and beneficial” for his art. The account here given of Dante’s life, with its emphasis on the “conversion to philosophy” in his late twenties as the central formative experience, is persuasive; but the connection between biography and art is notoriously problematical. In what ways can the distinguishing features of Dante’s mature poetry be said to derive from his study of philosophy?

Several interesting points emerge in this connection. The Aristotelian principle of wonder or amazement as the source of and stimulus to knowledge is shown to lie behind Dante’s narrative in the *Antepurgatorio*; his use of similes based on the vivid rendering of concrete detail is related to the Aristotelian dictum that “nothing is in the intellect that was not in the senses beforehand.” Dr Boyde is nowhere more interesting than when he establishes a link with philosophy where we would least have expected it. A telling instance is the famous description in *Inferno* XIII of the green log, one end in the fire, while the other end oozes and hisses with sap and escaping air. Commentators invariably remark on Dante’s realism and close observation of the natural world; Boyde shows that this was a text-book example of the interaction of the elements, which Dante was at least as likely to have come across in Aristotle as in nature. Nor is the identification of a philosophical source pointless if, as is suggested, it helps us to understand the exact significance of the peculiarly inhuman punishment Dante has devised for suicides.

The case for the decisive influence of his philosophical studies on the poetry rests on an accumulation of such details. It is nowhere argued systematically; indeed, Boyde rather assumes that it is self-evident. But what is self-evident, surely, is the influence of the philosophy on the poem, rather than on the

poetry. At the risk of labouring the obvious, when we compare Dante with his sources, it is the abyss which separates them rather than the common conceptual core which is striking. Perhaps one baulks at Boyde's formulation only because of a certain intransigence or lack of qualification; in any case, his book's essentially pragmatic, down-to-earth temper can be gauged precisely by the fact that he clearly finds certain areas of speculation unprofitable.

The *Comedy* is the story of a journey of intellectual and spiritual discovery; at its centre is the experience of a protagonist who is eager to understand and who delights in finding out and possessing the truth. The poetry communicates that delight, and communicates it as prose could not; in this sense certainly Dante is a poet of the intellectual life. But – and this surely is the crux of the matter – the delight remains, and the poetry communicates it no less effectively, when the “true knowledge” is in fact false. Coleridge's “willing suspension of disbelief” still seems to meet the case. Any non-Christian reader will have to make some such accommodation when he reads the poem; all readers will have to do so when they read the scientific discourses. Dante's account of human conception and generation is, in the light of modern medical science, almost comical. Yet the lines which expound this doctrine are, to return to Eliot, great poetry; the greatness would seem to be independent of the truth or falsehood of the doctrine expounded. Boyde's choice of epigraph for his book – Auden's lines “it's as well at times/ To be reminded that nothing is lovely/ Not even in poetry, which is not the case” – is therefore decidedly odd. A great deal of what the *Comedy* asserts – its astronomy, its chemistry, its biology, its geography: almost everything, in fact, which Boyde so learnedly and lucidly expounds, with the possible exception of Dante's views about the weather – is not the case. That Dante passionately believed it to be the case can hardly be the point: nobody would postulate a direct connection between intensity of conviction and intensity of poetic effect.

Dr Boyde has performed a valuable service in taking the reader through a tangled forest of Christian Aristotelianism, showing exactly where Dante followed or diverged from his various authorities. He has helped us to understand with greater precision just what Dante thought and why. He has argued forcefully (but undogmatically) for the central importance in Dante's experience of his philosophical studies: if we must call Dante something other than poet, intellectual will certainly do better than mystic.

But to suppose that this exhausts the problem of the relationship between the philosophy and the poetry in the *Comedy* is surely wrong. In the words of the great nineteenth-century critic, Francesco De Sanctis, Boyde never leaves the “mondo intenzionale del poeta”, the world of the poet's own conscious intentions. For Dante the value of his masterpiece may have consisted in the fact that it expresses “true knowledge”; for us its value lies elsewhere. To ignore this paradox – that the poetry loses nothing of its poetic force when we do not believe (or believe in) what it is asserting – and with it two centuries of aesthetic debate, seems quixotic; casually to dismiss someone who spent a lifetime thinking about its implications is too easy. In recent years it has

become almost *de rigueur* for English-speaking scholars writing on Dante to open with a dismissive reference to Benedetto Croce. It is a pity that this otherwise welcome book should, and in its opening paragraph, propagate a misconception: Croce did not say (though he is often supposed to have said) that the ideological framework and content of the *Comedy* had proved an obstacle to the free expression of Dante's poetic genius. What he said was something close to Eliot: that when Dante was truly a poet he was not thinking— a debatable proposition, certainly, but very different from the simplistic notion that Dante would have been a better poet if he had not thought.