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Prue Shaw, The devil is in the details

MARCO SANTAGATA

Dante: The Story of his Life

Translated by Richard Dixon

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Marco Santagata is a distinguished literary scholar at the Scuola Normale in Pisa and a prize-winning creative writer. The original Italian subtitle of his new biography of Dante – *Il romanzo della sua vita* (The novel of his life) – suggests that in writing it he might be drawing on his creative talents as well as his academic expertise. Dante is a writer about whom documentary evidence is notoriously scant; his works, though deeply-rooted in his lived experience, for the most part resist analysis in narrowly biographical terms. About the key episode in his life, his banishment from Florence and the death sentence that went with it, the only document which survives is the death sentence itself, preserved in the Florentine state archive. Dante never wrote about it or the events which led up to it, though his masterpiece, the *Commedia*, is inconceivable without it. It is the traumatic event on which his whole life turns, and around which his poem is structured, and yet we know almost nothing about it.

T. S. Eliot famously made a distinction between ‘the man who suffers and the mind which creates’. Benedetto Croce elevated a similar distinction to an aesthetic principle when he insisted that a writer’s *personalità pratica* and his *personalità poetica* (the flesh-and-blood human being who lived the life and the artist whose intellectual and emotional experiences and energies fashioned the work) are two very different things. To reconstruct the life from the work will always be a delicate operation, and never more so than with a writer where we can demonstrate (as Santagata ably does) that the ordering and shaping imperative often trumped a historian’s concern with factual truth. Undeterred by any such theoretical misgivings – indeed (one suspects)

relishing the challenges that his subject presents, and never fudging the difficulties and complexities of the relationship between life and art – Santagata has written a book which any reader interested in Dante will find absorbing, richly informative, and very thought-provoking.

The book, like the life, falls naturally into two not-quite-equal halves, pre-exile and post-exile. A bulky section of immensely detailed endnotes follows the main narrative: testimony to Santagata's command both of the documentary evidence and the long tradition of scholarly engagement with it, though some lengthy notes running to several pages have been shoe-horned in where they have no obvious connection at all with the narrative. The decision to corral the notes at the end of the book was a wise one. Reading them in tandem with the main text (as a reviewer must) impedes the narrative flow, losing the impetus of the author's notably lively, informal and engaging style. In the main text, Santagata's narrative and organisational skills guarantee that complex historical information is introduced seamlessly into the story and brought vividly to life.

The first section ('Florence') traces Dante's family circumstances, his emergence as an accomplished writer of love poems, and his involvement in the turbulent world of communal politics in the city from the mid 1290s on. Especially interesting is the picture which emerges of his straitened economic circumstances. The dry documents of the *Codice diplomatico dantesco*, which record details of loans made to Dante and his half-brother Francesco, or indeed made by Francesco to Dante just weeks before he took on the role of prior, at the apex of his political career, take on new life as Santagata ponders the circumstances and implications of these transactions. The families of both Dante's wife Gemma Donati and his beloved Beatrice Portinari and her husband were vastly superior in social status to his own. A bride's dowry was determined by the groom's economic status, not her family's: Gemma's modest 12 gold florins stand in telling contrast to Dante's sister Tana's 366 gold florins. (Both were prestigious marriages for the Alighieri family.)

Concrete details of this kind anchor this part of the story in documented facts. Dante's lifelong obsession with the subject of true nobility and how it is to be understood is plausibly linked to his insecure social and economic status. So too is his sense of his own exceptionalism, the single characteristic Santagata picks out as defining his personality from the very beginning.

When the source for reconstructing the life is not a document but a literary text the situation becomes problematic. In the *Vita nova* Dante describes his hyper-sensitive psychophysical reaction to certain events. Santagata is inclined to believe that he was epileptic, a view advanced in the late nineteenth century by Cesare Lombroso, who linked the condition with the pathology of genius (a view from which Santagata carefully distances himself). In general Santagata proceeds with due caution. A typical short paragraph includes the phrases: 'It would seem..., It is reasonable to suppose..., It is possible..., It would have been difficult...'. So scrupulous is he in distinguishing between conjecture and certainty that the reader is pulled up short by the occasional slippage from cautious rumination to bald assertion of unsubstantiated fact, as when we are told that Dante must have followed the imperial court to Pisa in early March 1312, and that in Pisa he devoted himself to writing his political treatise, *Monarchia*. But we simply do not know these things to be true. (We need to consult the notes to find that opinion is divided on the matter: 'Dating Dante's works can be a hopeless task, and *Monarchia* is no exception.' – a good example of the sometimes uneasy relationship between narrative and notes.)

The second half of the book ('Exile') gives an illuminating account of the social and political realities of those regions of Italy Dante visited during his years of exile, with emphasis on the importance for his evolving political thinking of the Casentino and the Lunigiana, and the great feudal dynasties of the Guidi and the Malaspina (for whom no fewer than eight family trees are helpfully provided). It is in this second half of the book that the problem of

the relationship between life and art becomes critical, since we know so little (in effect, nothing at all) about the composition of the *Commedia*.

On three separate occasions Santagata describes the *Commedia* as an 'instant book' – a curious phrase for a work written over a period of fifteen years (or longer, if we accept his own view that the nucleus of the poem predated the exile). The paradoxical phrase underscores his approach: the poem is mined to throw light on the changing political realities with which Dante was dealing in the years of his exile, and the complexity of his shifting political allegiances. Conversely, the historical realities, to the extent that they can be reconstructed, give clues to the chronology of the writing (or re-writing, or re-framing) of different parts of the poem.

This approach gives a strong sense of Dante as an intellectual and political animal, but little sense of the creative writer and poet. The poetry is seen simply as an instrument for furthering his practical political aims, for negotiating the difficulties of his immediate real-life circumstances. Even the treatment of episodes in the poem which are directly political (Farinata, Brunetto) seems perfunctory: the complexities and nuances of a literary and poetic text are unacknowledged. Of Dante's astonishing linguistic skills, of the expressive power and fierce originality and poetic force of the language of the *Commedia*, we hear nothing at all. Perhaps Santagata counts on his Italian audience taking this for granted (in Italy the book has its own Fan Page on Facebook). English readers must take the imaginative power and linguistic brilliance of the *Commedia* on trust; but with their well-known fondness for literary biography, they will surely be grateful for this bold, vigorous and invigorating account of Dante's life and times.

