

Dante's *Inferno*: Critical Reception and Influence

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Dante and the *Divine Comedy* have had a profound influence on the production of literature and the practice of literary criticism across the Western world since the moment the *Comedy* was first read. Although critics and commentators normally address the work as a whole, the first canticle, *Inferno*, is the part that has met with the most fervent critical response. The modern epoch has found in it both a mirror with which it might examine the many vices and perversions that define it and an obscure tapestry of almost fundamentalist punishments that are entirely alien to it. From Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and Osip Mandelstam in the early twentieth century to Seamus Heaney, W. S. Merwin, and Robert Pinsky at century's end, modern poets of every bent have been drawn to the *Inferno* and to the other two canticles of the *Comedy* as an example of poetry's world-creating power and of a single poet's transcendence of his own spiritual, existential, and political exile.¹ To them Dante was and is an example of how a poet can engage with the world and reform it, not just represent it, through the power of the poetic imagination. In order to understand how Dante and his poem have been received by critics and poets in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, we must glance—however cursorily—at the seven-hundred-year critical tradition that has formed the hallowed academic institution of Dante studies. In this way, we can come to see the networks of understanding that bind Dante criticism across its history.

The story of the critical response to Dante's poem begins with Dante himself (or with someone writing under Dante's name). Upon completing the last canticle of the *Comedy* he wrote a letter to his patron in Verona, Cangrande della Scala, in which he dedicated the *Paradiso* to him and then, as a reader of his own poem, explained its subject and meaning.² Although most of the epistle is dedicated to the interpreta-

tion of *Paradiso*, for our purposes he introduces several concepts important for the history of criticism of the poem as a whole and for literary criticism in general. The structure of the epistle is modeled on the schema that was used in Dante's time for writing prologues to classical texts (the *accessus ad auctores*), which suggests that his work, though in the vernacular, deserved and demanded the same kind of attention as if it had been written in Latin. Also, Dante importantly illustrates the meaning of the poem by applying the fourfold system of allegory normally reserved for interpretation of the Bible. According to this system texts may have several meanings (Dante uses the word "polysemous"): the literal or historical, the allegorical (regarding the life of Christ), the moral or tropological (regarding the actions of the individual soul in this life), and the anagogical (regarding the life of the soul to come). As an example of this interpretive method, Dante briefly analyzes the first two lines of Psalm 113, "When Israel went out of Egypt,"³ obliquely opening up the possibility of comparing his own poem and personal experience with these biblical verses and the narrative of transcendence through exile that they recount.

The interpretation of the poem's title and subject, however, is rather unimaginative and does not fully account for the poem's radical novelty. Dante explains that the poem is a comedy because "the subject matter, at the beginning it is horrible and foul, as being Hell; but at the close it is happy, desirable, and pleasing, as being Paradise" and because the "style is unstudied and lowly."⁴ The subject, he writes, is literally "the state of souls after death," but allegorically it is "man according as by his merits or demerits in the exercise of his free will he is deserving of reward or punishment by justice."⁵ The allegorical subject of the *Inferno*, then, would be those who deserve punishment by exercising poorly their free will. Furthermore, in the tradition of most medieval commentaries on Latin literature, Dante and those who follow him describe the work as belonging to the field of ethics, which gives even its most abstract moments a practical purpose. In sum, whether penned by Dante or not, this epistle establishes the *Comedy* as

a work of poetic theology whose truth as a fiction lies somewhere between the Bible and the *Aeneid*.

The first commentaries on the *Comedy* were written in the period immediately following Dante's death, beginning with his own sons, Jacopo and Pietro. These commentaries for the most part sought to redeem the work's unorthodoxy by explaining it allegorically. A generation after Dante, the contributions of Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-75) founded the cult of Dante and created the institution of Dante studies that spans the globe today. The famed author of the *Decameron* wrote the first biography of Dante (the *Trattatello in laude di Dante*, or "treatise in praise of Dante"; translated into English in 1898 as *Life of Dante*) and gave a series of public lectures (the *Esposizioni sopra la Commedia di Dante*, or "expositions on Dante's *Comedy*") meant to elucidate the literal and allegorical meanings of the poem.

Convinced that the poem could have a profound practical effect on the Florentine community, the *comune* of Florence paid Boccaccio to lecture on the poem in the church of Santo Stefano in Badia. The first official *lector Dantis*, Boccaccio was able to speak only about the first seventeen cantos of *Inferno* between October 1373 and January 1374 before falling ill.⁶ Boccaccio, like other medieval and Renaissance interpreters of the poem, considered Dante a *poeta theologus*, or poet theologian, whose art was able to probe major philosophical questions as well as treatises on theology or the interpretation of Scripture. Even more, he treated Dante as the heir both to the biblical poets David and Solomon—as a new *scriba Dei*, or "scribe of God"—and to the classical bards Homer and Vergil, creating for Dante a persona that is somewhere between prophet and poet. Whereas most of the early commentators were interested in the allegorical meanings alone, Boccaccio focused in his *Esposizioni* on the literal meaning of the text because he thought that the uneducated would be less likely to misunderstand its allegorical message if they understood it literally first. For Boccaccio, as for Dante before him, the fact that the poem was written in vernacular was key to its fulfilling a practical purpose. By the end of the fif-

teenth century, after numerous commentaries and lives of Dante had been written, the *Comedy*'s status as a "classic" had been secured, and Dante had become a key figure in the establishment of a Florentine identity.

In Renaissance Florence, Cristoforo Landino (1424-98), the chair of poetry and rhetoric at the University of Florence, wrote a commentary on the *Comedy* that was printed in the first Florentine edition of the poem in 1481, which included illustrations by Sandro Botticelli and a now famous discussion of the physical dimensions of Hell. Landino's commentary is important both for the political role it assigns to the poem and for the philosophical truths it finds therein. If medieval commentators had been interested in establishing the poem's authority, Renaissance critics had a freedom of interpretation that is recognizably modern. In fact, certain similarities might be drawn between Landino's Neoplatonic vision and that of Jungian psychology, both of which make the pilgrim's journey into a flight of the *psyche* toward unity and wholeness. For Landino the journey to Paradise is a metaphor for the return of the soul to its maker, and he casts it in terms of the contrast between movement and quietude, as in the initial note on *del cammin*, or "of the journey," in the first line of the *Inferno*, where he writes that human life is not situated in eternity, "where everything is stable and in eternal peace, but in time, which is nothing but continuous flux and movement."⁷ He goes on to interpret Dante's journey as the descent of the soul into the depths of corruption and sin (the "prison" of the earthly body), out of which it then rises toward the incorruptible, disembodied happiness of *Paradiso* after having purged the body of the weight of its vices in *Purgatorio*.

Although Landino's Neoplatonic interpretations were often questionable, he did pay careful attention to Dante's language, making Dante into the ideal heir to the classical epic poets and Florence into a center of culture to rival ancient Athens and Rome. For Landino and the centuries that followed, Dante and his poem were pillars of Florentine civic identity. The connection between language and politics was

key to the poetic receptions of the *Inferno* that would emerge in the sixteenth century. The language of Hell, which was criticized by those who wanted to purify the dialects of Italy and make a homogeneous literary language, became the model for satirical poets of the Italian courts. No longer interested in transcending human experience in their poetry, poets began to see the *Inferno* as the mirror of a flawed reality, both in its language and in its landscape. In principle, this is not dissimilar from Sadow Birk and Marcus Sanders's adaptation of the *Inferno* as a mirror for the city of Los Angeles at the end of the twentieth century.⁸

Only in the eighteenth century, with "The Discovery of the True Dante" by Giambattista Vico (1668-1744),⁹ did the *Comedy* become analyzed as a cultural product that was definitive of its age. For Vico, Dante was a new Homer for a barbarous age in which the poetic language of the Italians had been born. Through his "high fantasy," Dante was able to fuse the culture of his age rhetorically—from popular customs and language to theological concerns—into a poetic language that drew from all the major dialects of the peninsula. By the middle of the next century, however, Giuseppe Mazzini wrote that the critical tradition on the poem had become so overwhelming that the only valid approaches that remained were "the study of life and works of the poet and the correction of the text."¹⁰ Almost overcome by the weight of the authority that Dante's poem had accumulated over the years, critics of eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century Italy were left with the choice between biography and philology as approaches to the text.

In response to this weight, Italian romantic critic Francesco de Sanctis (1817-83) sought to renew the poem and to translate its beauty into terms that a "new generation" could appreciate. He was captivated by the poetry of the *Inferno*, where the soliloquies of the sinners and Dante's pathetic interaction with them spoke to his romantic sensibilities, and he wrote memorable essays on Francesca da Rimini (canto 5), Farinata degli Uberti (canto 10), and Count Ugolino (canto 33), in which he focused on the existential pathos that emerges from them.

These cantos are so moving, he thought, precisely because they had existed in history. For example, in his 1869 essay on canto 5, de Sanctis juxtaposes Francesca da Rimini with Beatrice, both of whom he understands as personifications of different kinds of love. Beatrice, he says, “is less than a woman . . . pure femininity, the genus or type and not the individual,” whereas Francesca is “not the divine, but the human and the earthly; she is a fragile, passionate creature, capable of sin, guilty of sin; her condition therefore is such that all her faculties are stirred to life, resulting in deep-rooted conflicts that stir irresistible emotions: and this is life!”¹¹ De Sanctis saw characters of the *Inferno* as representative of human imperfections and of the trials and tribulations of human experience. Like many romantics, he tried to engage directly with the poem, its author, and its characters and to leave behind the crippling weight of tradition.

This same process of renewal and translation is what first engaged the critical analysis and the poetic reception of Dante in the Anglo-American tradition. In the nineteenth century Dante and his poem become for the first time a true part of the Western critical canon outside of Italy. Although Dante’s poetry had been read and imitated in the English-speaking world since the generation after his death—for Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1343-1400) Dante was just as much a model as were Boccaccio and Petrarch—the revival of interest in the Middle Ages that came with romanticism made the *Comedy* the figurehead for a new kind of visionary poetry. For English romantic poets like Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834) and Henry Francis Cary (1772-1844) Dante’s poetry was an example of how Art could represent the totality of human experience, and it was their job to *English* that Art. For Cary this meant translating the poem into unrhymed paragraph verses in the style of Milton, and for Coleridge it meant popularizing Dante in his lectures and imitating that poet’s “gloomy imagination” in his own poetry. On the other side of the Atlantic, Dante’s poem was translated twice by Americans in the nineteenth century—by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow in 1865-67 and by his student Charles Eliot Norton in

1891-92—and the Dante Society of America was founded in 1881 in Longfellow’s Cambridge, Massachusetts, home, where American Dante studies as an academic discipline would come into its own in the twentieth century. The early efforts of translators and critics in the American context sought to relate Dante’s medievalism to their own rapidly expanding world.

The most significant of the Americans to engage with Dante in the early twentieth century, however, were two expatriates living in Europe, T. S. Eliot (1888-1965) and Ezra Pound (1885-1972), both of whom wrote about the *Comedy* as critics and engaged with it as poets. In his early essay on Dante in *The Spirit of Romance* (1910), Pound presents the *Comedy* according to the terms of the epistle to Cangrande, but then interprets the character of the pilgrim in typically modernist terms: the pilgrim is an “everyman” who strives to leave ignorance behind for the “clear light of philosophy.”¹² Pound writes that “Dante conceived the real Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise as states, and not places” and recommends that readers “regard Dante’s descriptions of the actions and conditions of the shades as descriptions of men’s mental states in life . . . that is to say, men’s inner selves stand visibly before the eyes of Dante’s intellect.”¹³ For Pound, then, the theology of the *Comedy* is of little importance; Dante’s poem is an example of how poetry can engage with the living world of history by turning the reader’s mind toward his or her own moral flaws. For Pound it is the poetic and moral measure of the modern world. In fact, Pound’s own long poem, the *Cantos*, engages precisely with the poetry of Hell and Purgatory. It begins with an image of a descent into the underworld patterned on the *Odyssey* but politicized and moralized much like the *Inferno*, and it concludes with the lament that he was never able to raise himself out of the mire of the *Inferno* and write a *Paradiso terrestre*, or earthly paradise, as Dante had.¹⁴

For T. S. Eliot, writing in 1929, Dante represented the most “universal” poet ever to have written. Dante not only dealt with “what is universally human,” as did Molière and Shakespeare, but he also did so in

a language and with a lucidity that was less localized in language and style. His vernacular poem comprehended all of European culture up until his time and bequeathed that culture universally to the Europeans who followed. When faced with interpreting the first canto of the *Inferno* Eliot took the novel approach of recommending that readers not worry “about the identity of the Leopard, the Lion, and the She-Wolf,” since “it is really better . . . not to know or to care what they do mean,” but to consider “that which led a man having an idea to express it in images.”¹⁵ The practice of allegorical poetry—Dante’s visual imagination—was seen as a predecessor of the modernist poetry that Eliot himself practiced. Eliot found Dante’s poem to be comprehensible on multiple levels even from the first reading, in which “we get a succession of phantasmagoric but clear images, of images which are coherent, in that each reinforces the last; of glimpses of individuals made memorable by a perfect phrase . . . and of particular longer episodes, which remain separately in the memory.”¹⁶ As examples of such memorable episodes, he cites Brunetto Latini in canto 15 and Ulysses in canto 26, among others. His interpretation of the Ulysses episode is particularly illustrative of his theory of Dante as an imagistic poet, whose poetry functions on multiple levels thanks to his use of allegory:

So Ulysses, unseen in the hornèd wave of flame . . . is a creature of pure poetic imagination, apprehensible apart from place and time and the scheme of the poem. The Ulysses episode may strike us first as a kind of excursion, an irrelevance, a self-indulgence on the part of Dante taking a holiday from his Christian scheme. But when we know the whole poem, we recognize how cunningly and convincingly Dante has made to fit in real men, his contemporaries, friends, and enemies, recent historical personages, legendary and Biblical figures, and figures of ancient fiction. He has been reproved or smiled at for satisfying personal grudges by putting in Hell men whom he knew and hated; but these, as well as Ulysses, are transformed in the whole; for the real and the unreal are all representative of types of sin, suffering, fault, and merit, and all become of the same reality and contemporary.¹⁷

Whether the image was historical or fictional, for Eliot meaning in Dante's poem consists in a narrative of experiences that grow richer the more one contextualizes them within the larger theological landscape of the poem.

If Eliot, the critic, saw in Dante's *Comedy* an example of universal poetry, as a poet Eliot found in Dante's poem the images with which he could represent the *Inferno* of his own times. His early poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1915) has as epigraph Guido da Montefeltro's words to the pilgrim (*Inf.* 27.61-66) and the more mature *The Waste Land* (1922) has references to the *Inferno* scattered across it.¹⁸ The overall impression that one gets from Eliot's poetic employment of Dante's verse is that Eliot was using Dante and specifically the *Inferno* to paint the modern world as a drab kind of Hell populated with antiheroes such as Prufrock. Eliot wrote in passing in his 1929 essay that "Dante and Shakespeare divide the modern world between them; there is no third,"¹⁹ but even more than the theater of Shakespeare, Dante's poetry was the compass according to which the direction of the modern world could be determined, both poetically and existentially. Eliot sought to be a Dante for the modern age, and Pound, for one, must have thought he had succeeded, since after Eliot's death he wrote of his fellow poet that "his was the true Dantescan voice."²⁰

Although poets continued to read Dante and be influenced by his poetry throughout the twentieth century, the heroic engagement of early modernism with the *Inferno* never returned. In the meantime, however, the American academic engagement with Dante's poem developed into an institution on par with Italian Dante studies, but with its own distinctive voice. Twentieth- and twenty-first-century Dante criticism has for the most part focused on the same problems that arise in the epistle to Cangrande and in the early commentaries and on the same concerns for adapting those problems to the modern age that have provoked poets since the nineteenth century. The history of Dante criticism, in fact, might be described as a variation on the themes of

history, poetry, and theology, and how to “Make it new!,” to use Ezra Pound’s modernist battle cry.

The question of poetry and theology took on a polemical tone in the criticism of Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce (1866-1952). In an effort to free the *Comedy* from the grips of overly zealous allegorizers and restore to it an artistic autonomy, Croce opposed all allegorical, and thus also theological, interpretation of the poem. He held that Dante’s poetry, his art, must be separated from the doctrine behind the poem: in the *Comedy* there are “poetry” and “non-poetry,” and only the former deserves the critic’s attention. In an indicative passage from his *La poesia di Dante* (1921; *The Poetry of Dante*, 1922), Croce contends that each of the individual episodes of the *Inferno* “stands by itself and is a lyric by itself” outside of any structural technique and outside of Christian doctrine.²¹ For Croce, the *Inferno* is the most artful of the three canticles, precisely because of the pathos of its many vignettes, which allows for an easier separation of the art from the theological superstructure of the poem itself.

The major critics both inside and outside Italy have spent the past century reestablishing these limits between poetry and theology in the *Comedy*. In the generation that followed Croce, Erich Auerbach (1892-1957) recuperated theology by making it into a rhetorical problem. Whereas Croce dismissed any universal meaning or consistent structure to the *Comedy*, in his 1938 essay “*Figura*” Auerbach argued that the *Comedy* is the ultimate fulfillment of the Christian “figural tradition,” which describes the texts that mimic the temporal connection between the Old Testament (as promise of things to come) and the New Testament (as the fulfillment of the promise), a connection known as typology.²² In the *sermo humilis*, or humble speech, of the Gospels and with a unique historical realism, the narrative of Dante’s poem fulfills the promises of past history and fixes its characters in an “immutable existence” in the afterlife. In one of his most well-known interpretations from the later study *Mimesis* (first published in German in 1946; English translation, 1953), which concerns a fifty-odd-line passage

from *Inferno* 10 (22-78), Auerbach presents the pilgrim's conversation with Farinata degli Uberti and Cavalcante de' Cavalcanti as an example of how Dante's poetry makes "man's Christian-figural being a reality," with the ultimate result that the "image of man eclipses the image of God" so that "even in Hell there are great souls."²³ Far from denying the theological strata of Dante's poem, however, in *Mimesis* Auerbach establishes Dante's poem as the apex of the Christian worldview and as the turning point in the history of literature from the ancient epic to the modern novel, from a literature with God at the center to one focused on humanity.

With Gianfranco Contini (1912-90) and his generation's cohort of Italian philologists, Italian criticism reacted to the problem of poetry and theology as it had been presented by Croce and gradually re-historicized the *Comedy*. Although he was a convinced formalist (that is, he believed in the unity of form and content), Contini produced a historical analysis of Dante's language and style that paved the way for a new Italian philology and for historically contextualized readings of Dante's poetry. Two of his most important contributions are the separation of the subject-character of Dante's poem, the pilgrim, from the poet of the *Comedy* ("Dante as character-poet of the *Comedy*," 1958), so that the *Inferno* (and *Purgatorio*) become the theater of the sins and temptations that the poet has already overcome; and the historical analysis of Dante's language in the context of the poetic vernaculars of medieval Italy and in the development of Dante's own poetic lexicon across his career, or an "intertextual" and "intratextual" philological analysis as the basis for interpretation of the poem's meaning ("An interpretation of Dante," 1965).²⁴ Contini's legacy, combined with that of many other Italian philologists, has been the continued refinement of knowledge of the historical, linguistic, and semiotic layers of Dante's poem.

Contini's contemporary in the United States, Charles S. Singleton (1909-85), responded to Croce's legacy in an entirely different way, focusing almost entirely on the theological underpinnings of the poem.

Singleton's major insight into reading the *Comedy* was that it needs to be read in the context of the theological tradition of the Middle Ages. As did T. S. Eliot before him, Singleton found Dante's poem to be universal precisely because of its multilayered poetic allegories. Singleton suspended "both belief and disbelief," as Eliot had recommended in his 1929 essay,²⁵ and founded a school of Dante criticism that "believed" in the historical reality of Dante's journey, insofar as "the fiction of the *Comedy* is that it is not fiction," as his famous adage goes.²⁶

In a famous reading of the first two lines of the *Inferno*, Singleton argued for an allegorical reading of the *persona* of the poem, a reading similar, though antecedent, to Contini's "Dante as character-poet."²⁷ Singleton believed that Dante intended his poem to be read as literally true, so that his individual experience ("I found myself") might become the "our life," the experience of any and every man. For Singleton, Dante's *modus operandi* in the poem was based on the Bible and on the long-standing tradition of interpreting the Bible alluded to in the epistle to Cangrande. In his two-volume *Dante Studies* Singleton expounds his allegorizing vision of Dante's poem, all but reducing it to a poetic rendition of the world according to the theology of Saint Thomas Aquinas.²⁸ For Singleton the *Comedy* is like a Gothic cathedral: each piece points beyond itself and is a part of a complex, hidden structure within the poem that imitates the majesty of God in the world.²⁹ Singleton's major insights do not lie in his opening up specific enigmas within the text of the poem but in his deriving a superstructure, both theological and artistic, according to which we can understand the poem.

Singleton's most faithful disciple, John Freccero, has responded to the monolithic readings of his teacher by pointing out that one of the major models beneath the narrative structure of the *Comedy* was Augustinian conversion. Thus, instead of reading the pilgrim's journey as a linear arc in which he becomes Dante the poet, Freccero reads the journey as a spiral that continually turns back in upon itself as it gradually moves forward. Defined as an example of "existential figuralism"

by his own student Giuseppe Mazzotta,³⁰ Freccero's approach assigns central importance to the will in Dante's poem and to the nature of the narrative movement that begins when the poet dramatizes the crisis of the pilgrim's will in the first canto. For Freccero, the *Comedy* is a "novel of the self," a Christian autobiography, a story of reeducation and of conversion of the old self into the new. He shows how Dante rewrote classical ideas of education (Plato's *paideia*) and corrected them with Christian ideas of humility and grace. Armed with such a powerful paradigm, Freccero has proposed ingenious readings of small passages and episodes of the *Comedy*, many so strong that they can be seen to function across the whole breadth of the poem. From his interpretation of the *piè fermo*, or "firm foot," as the wounded will in *Inferno* 1.30 and that of the pilgrim's encounter with the three beasts as a dramatization of the failure of the will in the soul's ascent toward truth to his understanding of terza rima as the formal poetic representation of the spiral movement of conversion and his readings of Ulysses (example of a pilgrim who could not convert) and of the Geryon ("a self-conscious emblem" of the dangers of poetry), Freccero presents Dante's poem and the pilgrim's journey as a continuous reflection on Christian education and existential redemption through conversion.³¹

Twenty years ago the story of Dante criticism in the United States seemed to have come to a turning point with Freccero's virtuoso criticism in the wake of Singleton and Auerbach, with a plethora of responses—ranging from the orthodox to the fringe—to Singleton's strong approach, and a few of his contemporaries whose methods never took Singleton openly into account.³² Today, however, new trends in Dante criticism have expanded on the legacy of Croce, Auerbach, Contini, Singleton, Freccero, and others to formulate new vistas on the artistic and philosophical landscape of the poem. Mazzotta has expanded and complicated Singleton's Thomistic and Freccero's Augustinian readings of Dante's theological underpinnings and, raising the question of the ambiguities of Dante's poetic language, has suggested that we read Dante's poem between exile and encyclopedia.

Only from the perspective of exile can the poet call into question the “falsifications and ambiguities that language harbors” and reformulate through the self-conscious language of poetry all fields of knowledge. To put it another way, Mazzotta understands the *Comedy* as a cry from exile that would encompass and reformulate all learning and all voices within it. For Mazzotta, the poetry and theology of Dante’s poem are inseparable, since poetry was the instrument through which Dante tried to configure the universal knowledge that belongs to theology.³³

Alternatively, but not entirely in contradiction with this reading, there is Teodolinda Barolini’s formalist approach, which takes as its point of departure not Dante’s theology but the formal demands—linguistic and stylistic—of the narrative of the *Comedy*, which the poet claims to be true. According to Barolini, only once the *Comedy* has been understood formally (not theologically) can its historical, cultural, and (therefore) theological contexts be reconstructed.³⁴ Other critics have sought to refine knowledge of Dante’s political intentions and aspirations (Ferrante; Honess); of his relationship with classical antecedents (Hollander; Jacoff and Schnapp); of the novelty of his plurilinguism (Barański); of his use of mystic theology (Moevs), of Islamic philosophy (Stone), and of the Bible (Hawkins); and of his quest for authority (Ascoli)—not to mention increased interest in Dante’s minor works (Ascoli; Barański; Harrison)—but this is not the place to review their approaches in detail.³⁵

In the history of Western literature there has hardly been any other work of poetry that has sustained the amount of critical attention that Dante’s *Comedy* has sustained over the years. It is a vast storehouse of poetic invention and knowledge that unveils as much as it conceals when probed. It is a profoundly generous poem in that it does not greedily withhold itself from the engaged attention of its readers. The more energy a reader puts into the *Comedy*, the more reward he or she reaps from it. Each time we return to the poem it renders new fruits, seemingly infinite. Not only critics have tried to come to terms with Dante and his poem, but poets also and especially have continually

found in it a model for the capacity of poetry to represent and reform the world. Every critic, expert or novice, who sits down to read Dante's *Comedy* brings to it a different approach, a different reading, a different slant, but each and every critic must face the same questions that have intrigued readers since the earliest commentators: What does it mean to have written a poem about oneself and to have claimed that God had a hand in writing it? What are the relationships among poetry, history, and theology? How can we make this poem our own and how is it already a part of us? If the poem's fortune over the past seven hundred years holds for the future, then it will continue to speak to students, scholars, and poets the world over for a long time to come.

Notes

1. Peter Hawkins and Rachel Jacoff, eds., *The Poets' Dante: Twentieth-Century Responses* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002).

2. Although there is still debate on whether or not Dante himself penned the letter, its importance as the founding document of Dante criticism goes unquestioned. For a brief outline of the history of the document and the debate on its authenticity, see Albert Ascoli, "Epistle to Cangrande," in *The Dante Encyclopedia*, ed. Richard Lansing (New York: Garland, 2000), 348-52. The interpretive sections of the letter are available in English translation with notes and an introduction in A. J. Minnis and A. B. Scott, *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism, c. 1100-c.1375: The Commentary Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).

3. Psalm 113 in the Latin Vulgate Bible, which Dante knew, is Psalm 114 in other versions of the Bible.

4. Minnis and Scott, *Medieval Literary Theory*, 461.

5. *Ibid.*

6. His lectures have recently been translated into English by Michael Papio as *Boccaccio's Expositions on Dante's "Comedy"* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009).

7. Cristoforo Landino, *Comento sopra la "Comedia,"* 4 vols., ed. Paolo Procaccioli (Rome: Salerno, 2001), 1:285-86. Translations, unless otherwise noted, are my own.

8. See *Dante's Inferno*, adapted by Sandow Birk and Marcus Sanders, illustrated by Sandow Birk (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2004).

9. Vico's "Discoverta del vero Dante, ovvero nuovi principi di critica dantesca" (1728-29) has been translated by Cristina Mazzoni in *Critical Essays on Dante*, ed. Giuseppe Mazzotta (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1991), 58-60.

10. Mazzini (signed “Un italiano”), preface to *La Commedia di Dante Alighieri*, 4 vols., ed. Ugo Foscolo (London: P. Rolandi, 1842-43), 1:xii.
11. Francesco de Sanctis, “Francesca da Rimini,” in *De Sanctis on Dante*, ed. and trans. Joseph Rossi and Alfred Galpin (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1957), 38-39.
12. Ezra Pound, *The Spirit of Romance* (New York: New Directions, 1953), 127.
13. *Ibid.*, 128.
14. See “Notes for Canto CXVII” in Ezra Pound, *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1996), 822.
15. T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), 242.
16. *Ibid.*, 246-47.
17. *Ibid.*, 247-48.
18. On the epigraph to “Prufrock,” see Robert Pogue Harrison, “Comedy and Modernity: Dante’s Hell,” *Modern Language Notes* 102, no. 5 (Dec. 1987): 1043-61.
19. Eliot, *Selected Essays*, 265.
20. E. P. [Ezra Pound], “For T. S. E.,” *Sewanee Review* 74, no. 1 (Winter 1966): 109.
21. Benedetto Croce, *The Poetry of Dante*, trans. Douglas Ainslie (New York: Henry Holt, 1922), 92.
22. Erich Auerbach, *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature: Six Essays*, trans. Ralph Manheim (1959; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 11-76.
23. Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. William R. Trask (1953; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 202.
24. These two essays were published in Italian as part of Contini’s collected works on Dante, *Un’idea di Dante* (Turin: Einaudi, 1976).
25. Eliot, *Selected Essays*, 243. Charles Singleton’s idea of Dante and his influences and heirs have become the subject of critical interest since his death in 1985. See, for example, Giuseppe Mazzotta, “The American Criticism of Charles Singleton,” *Dante Studies* 104 (1986): 27-44, in which Singleton is related to American Transcendentalism, especially to Ralph Waldo Emerson; and Zygmunt G. Barański, “Reflecting on Dante in America, 1949-1990,” *Annali d’Italianistica* 8 (1990): 58-87, where Singleton is related to the “St. Louis Hegelians,” especially George Santayana.
26. Charles S. Singleton, “The Irreducible Dove,” *Comparative Literature* 9 (1957): 129.
27. Singleton actually beat Contini to the idea of the separation of the pilgrim and the poet, but in regard to the *Vita Nuova*, in his *Essay on the “Vita Nuova”* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1949), 25.
28. See Singleton’s *Dante Studies 1: Commedia. Elements of Structure* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1954) and 2: *Journey to Beatrice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958).
29. For a famous example, see Singleton’s “The Poet’s Number at the Center,” *Modern Language Notes* 80, no. 1 [Italian issue] (Jan. 1965): 1-10.
30. Giuseppe Mazzotta, “Reflections on Dante Studies in America,” *Dante Studies* 118 (2000): 329.

31. I am referring to the subjects of the following essays, each available in the collected volume of Freccero's work, *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, ed. Rachel Jacoff (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988): "The Prologue Scene" (1-29), "The Firm Foot on a Journey Without a Guide" (29-54), "Pilgrim in a Gyre" (70-92), "Dante's Ulysses: From Epic to Novel" (136-51), and "The Significance of *Terza Rima*" (258-73).

32. See Dino S. Cervigni's introductory essay in the special issue of *Annali d'Italianistica* 8 (1990), "Dante and Modern American Criticism," the main aim of which is to find a new path for Dante criticism after Singleton. This is also the story that Rino Caputo tells in his *Per far segno: La critica dantesca americana da Singleton a oggi* (Rome: Il Calamo, 1993).

33. In addition to numerous essays, Mazzotta's two major contributions to Dante studies are *Dante, Poet of the Desert: History and Allegory in the "Divine Comedy"* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979) and *Dante's Vision and the Circle of Knowledge* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

34. Barolini's major essays on Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio have been collected in *Dante and the Origins of Italian Literary Culture* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), and Barolini has recently dedicated herself to the editing of Dante's early poetry, *Rime giovanili e della "Vita Nuova"* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2009). Her two major contributions to Dante studies are *Dante's Poets: Textuality and Truth in the "Comedy"* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984) and *The Undivine Comedy: Detheologizing Dante* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992). She explains her approach to Dante and medieval Italian literature in an interview with Simon Gilson, "Historicism, Philology, and the Text: An Interview with Teodolinda Barolini," *Italian Studies* 63, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 141-52.

35. I allude to the following studies: Albert Ascoli, *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Zygmunt G. Barański, *Dante e i segni: Saggi per una storia intellettuale di Dante Alighieri* (Naples: Liguori, 2000); Joan M. Ferrante, *The Political Vision of the "Divine Comedy"* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984); Robert Pogue Harrison, *The Body of Beatrice* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988); Peter Hawkins, *Dante's Testaments: Essays on Scriptural Imagination* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001); Robert Hollander, *Virgilio dantesco: Tragedia nella "Commedia"* (Florence: Olschki, 1983); Claire E. Honess, *From Florence to the Heavenly City: The Poetry of Citizenship in Dante* (London: Legenda, 2006); Rachel Jacoff and Jeffrey T. Schnapp, eds., *The Poetry of Allusion: Virgil and Ovid in Dante's "Commedia"* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991); Christian Moevs, *The Metaphysics of Dante's "Comedy"* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); and Gregory B. Stone, *Dante's Pluralism and the Islamic Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).