

A critical approach to Dante's "cantica"

Review of: Zygmunt G. Barański, *Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio. Literature, Doctrine, Reality*. Cambridge (UK): Legenda, an imprint of Modern Humanities Research Association, 2020, 658 p., ISBN: 9781781888797, € 85.

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This book collects nineteen articles written and published from 1991 to 2017, preceded by an 'Introduction. "A Contrariness in It": Seven "Fragmented" Reflections', where the author lays out the book's rationale. He additionally evokes his family's role in the development of an early interest in the *Comedy*, retraces the most relevant steps of his academic career, and concludes with an in-depth discussion of his own critical approach, consisting of a 'close consideration of context – whether literary, linguistic, historical, cultural or intellectual' (p. 1). Presenting himself overall 'as a Dantist' (p. 2), most of the collected essays deal in fact with Dante (twelve), four examining Petrarch, two Boccaccio, and one Cavalcanti. Since his early work, Barański strived to question the poet's "'solitary" genius, the creator of works without precedent' (p. 12) in an epoch that, implicitly, was deemed as intellectually poor (p. 9). Instead, the author has since then focused on 'Dante's relationship to medieval literary theory and criticism and his highly original reworkings of both traditions' (p. 9), delving into 'Dante's intellectual formation' (p. 10) and the problem of educational training in the Middle-Ages (pp. 10-11). Barański has therefore been able to ascertain the influence on the poet of 'scripturally inflected symbolic and exegetical currents' (p. 11) at odds with the Aristotelian and rationalist traditions usually pointed out as Dante's main intellectual references.

Because of the book density and length, I have opted for an in-depth presentation of three essays, most representative of Barański's scholarly achievements and innovations he has brought in the field of Dante's study: '(Un)orthodox Dante', 'The Poetics of Metre: *Terza rima*, "canto", "canzon", "cantica"', '*Purgatorio* XXV: Creating Poetic Bodies'. In the first, the author analyzes the passage in *Purgatorio* XXXIII, in the earthly Paradise, where Beatrice rebukes Dante's accomplishment on the ground that he has followed the wrong 'scuola' (p. 85). Barański thrives to identify such 'scuola' by analyzing some early commentators and the theological debates on the nature of the poet's faith raised by the *Comedy*. One of them is connected to *Inferno* XIII, 103-05, a 'disconcerting admission that runs counter to the key doctrine of the resurrection of the flesh' (p. 91); the other to *Inferno* XXXIII, and the 'inhabitants of Tolomea' (p. 98). Both are resolved on the ground of a 'careful amalgam of well-established Scriptural, theological, exemplary, and popular traditions [...], a textbook example of his syncretism' (p. 101). Another example discussed is the

nature of heresy in *Inferno* IX-XI, provoked by the problematic inclusion of Epicurus and his followers, which responded in fact to a conception of heresy on both theological and intellectual ground (p. 113).

The question of Dante's unorthodoxy comes therefore to rest within the context of late-medieval intellectual environment, 'where differing and competing ideas, not infrequently of questionable conformity, vied for attention and legitimacy' (p. 115). The issue of the presence of heterodox ideas and thinkers in the *Comedy* is again brilliantly resolved following the same method of thorough reconstruction of the historical and theological context. For instance, the creation and nature of angels in *Paradiso* XXIX, 22-36, and Siger of Brabant appearing in *Paradiso* X, 133-38, have raised the issue of the Averroist influence on the poet. On the contrary, each of these examples shows instead Dante's remarkable 'synthesizing eclecticism' (p. 132), which needs invariably to be understood 'in terms of faith' (p. 132). In the second, the author grapples with the controversial *terzina* of *Inferno* XX, 1-3, questioning the widespread assumption about the unproblematic nature of the use of the technical terms of *canzon* and *canto* appearing here. For instance, when focusing on *canzon*, he alludes to the conflict with both the term *cantica* employed in *Purgatorio* (XXXIII 140) and the lyric genre of the same name. Retracing its discussion in *De Vulgari Eloquentia* (II, 8 and 9), Barański finds a contrastive connection between the comic *canzon* and 'its tragic counterpart [...] Virgil's *Aeneid* [...] [and] [...] the traditional "high" canzone' (p. 303). But, he also opposes the 'formally balanced and restricted treatment of a narrow subject-matter' (p. 306) championed in the treatise, to the 'formal and ideological polyvalence of the cantos' (p. 306), which are at the core of Dante's innovation. He in fact needed a structural unit as flexible as the *canto* to incorporate in his poem an extremely heterogeneous matter, reflection of the variety of God's creation (p. 307). Furthermore, *canto* and *canzone* were traditionally linked to 'poetry or poetic composition in general' (309). On a structural level, *canto* innovates over both classic epic poetry and the *chanson de geste*. '[C]umberson, and narratively amorphous' (p. 311) the former, centered on the rigid *laisse* the latter, the *Comedy* shows instead a 'highly nuanced yet totalizing sense of structure' (p. 313). Lastly, *canzone* is linked to the poet's lyric experience as forerunner of the *Commedia*, although connecting this genre to the comic style tells us about Dante's 'rejection of the oppressive precepts of the *genera dicendi*' (315). Following Lino Pertile's findings, Barański concludes by illustrating the hermeneutic function the use of the word *cantica* in *Purgatorio* fulfils.

With respect to the third essay, the twenty-fifth *canto* of *Purgatorio* has been mainly glossed as a proof of Dante's familiarity with the Aristotelian tradition about the rational soul's creation. However, the various readings have generally failed to acknowledge the reason why the poet includes a *canto* assessing the relation between poetry and doctrine in his analysis of literature carried out in cantos XXI-XXVI, and having their peak at *Purgatorio* XXIV, 52-62, where the poet asserts the '*Commedia*'s divine inspired character' (p. 331). Logically, the following *canto* 'offers concrete clarification [...] of the collaboration between "cielo e terra"' (p. 331) on both the life's creation and the process of literary inspiration. A double parallel is therefore set between how God instills life into the human rational soul and inspires Dante to author a poem as '*Vestigium Dei*' (p. 333), and about the survival of the soul and body in the afterlife. However, as for Virgil's *Aeneid* sixth book, the Aristotelian tradition fails to solve this problem, because of 'their overreliance on logical structures' (p. 338), and the lack of Christian inspiration, as the poet shows in lines 67-75, using Scriptural sources. The issue of creation of aerial body (as in lines 79-102), which mirrors the creation of the human being (lines 37-75), is also based on sacred literature on similar themes, such as texts by Bernard de Clairvaux and St Augustine. *Canto* XXV's strategic

role in validating Dante's accomplishment resides ultimately on his ability to answer a question 'hitherto remained shrouded in mystery' (p. 345). By my brief discussion of three essays, I do not aspire to exhaust all motives developed by Barański in his outstanding essays. However, because of his innovative and rigorous critical approach, this book represents an essential instrument available to anyone interested in improving his/her knowledge of the 'divine' poet.

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