

Mary Alexandra Watt.

Dante's Golden Legend. Auto-hagiography in the Divine Comedy.

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The autobiographical nature of Dante's *oeuvre* is a subject of many debates, and this book tries to address it with a more extensive and well-structured examination, looking at the *Commedia* as a "continuous narrative intended to tell, among other things, the autobiographical story of Dante's life" [pp.2–3]. Watt argues that both the *Vita Nova* and the *Convivio* are fundamental pieces of Dante's autobiographical writing, a trial mode for his ability to insert himself under a different light in what becomes the auto-hagiographical chronicle of the *Commedia*.

The scholar is fully aware of the complexity of her argument and structures the book in a progressive order, which starts with a theoretical understanding of biography and autobiography in the Middle Ages. In the first chapter, "Life-Writing in the Middle Ages," Watt clarifies from the start certain ideas and concepts that will repeatedly return in the following passages of her argument. She starts with a needed explanation of the understanding of truth, a central concept in the theory of biography (and autobiography even more). There is an essential difference between what we consider truth nowadays — a documented reality —, and what was understood in medieval thought, an event imbued with meaning through God's revelation. Watt argues that the scholarship has discussed, at length, the literal sense of Dante's poetical writing in the continuous quest to understand what kind of allegory he uses in the *Comedy*. Not the same care has been fully given to address the width of his biographical reach. It is almost impossible to find proper biographies in the Middle Ages if one looks at the biographical genre with contemporary ideas. Using medieval biographies (or alleged ones), Watt shows how Abelard and Augustine, among others, were looking at the events of their lives both as a representation of God's presence and as a blueprint for the spiritual realization of the readers. The same can be said of hagiographies: the lives of the saints are not considered authentic because they happened the way we read them, but rather because these events manifest God's will and favor, and they trace a path for those who follow. Hagiographies teach, edify, and entertain, three characteristics that could be found, Watt implies, in the *Commedia*.

The second and third chapters advance the argument to the next step: the pre-*Comedy* Dantean experience of biography and writing of the self. The first challenge is, of course, to better determine what Dante does with the *Vita Nova* in the *Comedy*, and how he seems to have intervened later to emend or readdress his youthful work. Watt, however, argues that the movement from *Vita Nova* to *Convivio* to *Comedy* is not a limited palinodial approach, but rather a series of attempts at biographical writing, with Dante already aware of the importance of systematizing memories and giving meaning to events. This is a biographical approach that is not limited, however, to the description of events and characters of one's life: for Watt, the *Vita Nova* is not a love story, nor a spiritual narration, but rather a "literary manifesto" [p.78]. The complexity of the *Vita Nova* finds a perfect further step in the *Convivio* in constructing a myth, the *redeemer*, as Watt defines Dante in this new work. The poet forges a more complex and richer role for himself, one as the guide for his fellow citizens, a Christ-like mission of knowledge and salvation.

This position changes, almost paradoxically, in his masterpiece. In the following chapters, Watt discusses the core of the argument: the hagiographical lenses of Dante's writing of the *Comedy*. First, she underlines the shift from the solitary and exceptional man of the first two works to the *us* of the *Commedia*: the traveler's experience is the readers' experience; Dante now describes and pursues a larger universe. It is here that Watt's main point finds expression: Dante's biography, the exceptionality of a man, turns into hagiography, the transformation into a saint, a living *exemplum* to follow. Through punctual and numerous reminders of the *Vita Nova* and the *Convivio*, the scholar addresses the issues of biography, of the *donna gentile*, and the transformation of Dante and Beatrice's love story in these different iterations, bringing together the diverse stimuli of Dante's grand *opera*. The fundamental understanding of this argument, thus, seems to be the behavior of the poet, who styles himself as a model of endurance, resilience, and ideological (not physical) martyrdom. In other words, Dante transforms his experience into that of a saint who endured great sufferings, whose ideals of love turn into charity, from earthly passions to subtle and divine aspirations. The passage between *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*, thus, is one of extreme importance, because it shapes a new understanding not only of the relationship between Dante and Beatrice but, more importantly, of the entire experience of the *Commedia* and the new meaning of love as the fundamental truth of the Dantean travel — a new love, that sublimates the *Vita Nova* and the *Convivio's donna gentile*.

The same exemplarity of Dante's love shapes the approach to politics, as discussed in the fifth chapter. Here Watt considers Dante's rereading of his own political exile as a key to understanding politics in a broader sense, as another way to forge his unbendable resistance to the hits of fortune. Florence, his own city, finds ample space in Hell, and its many citizens seem remarkably at ease in its flames. Yet, the experience is not limited there; it does not consume itself in a rebuke of his political life: Dante's Florence returns strongly in Cacciaguida and his understanding of the city in *Paradiso*, and thus once again, Dante is the leading political example to follow.

Although the epilogue of *Dante's Golden Legend* might seem surprisingly anticlimactic, the conclusive arguments are no less interesting, especially the association of Dante with the DXV—something the author explores more in detail elsewhere. Yet, the book argues towards a broader interpretation of the *Commedia*, and the whole of Dante's *oeuvre*, as a successful attempt to write a biography—even an auto-hagiography—with more significant implications. The book works well in this sense, as it offers a thorough overview of the author's interpretation in a well-argued path that starts with the *Vita Nova* and culminates in *Paradiso*.

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