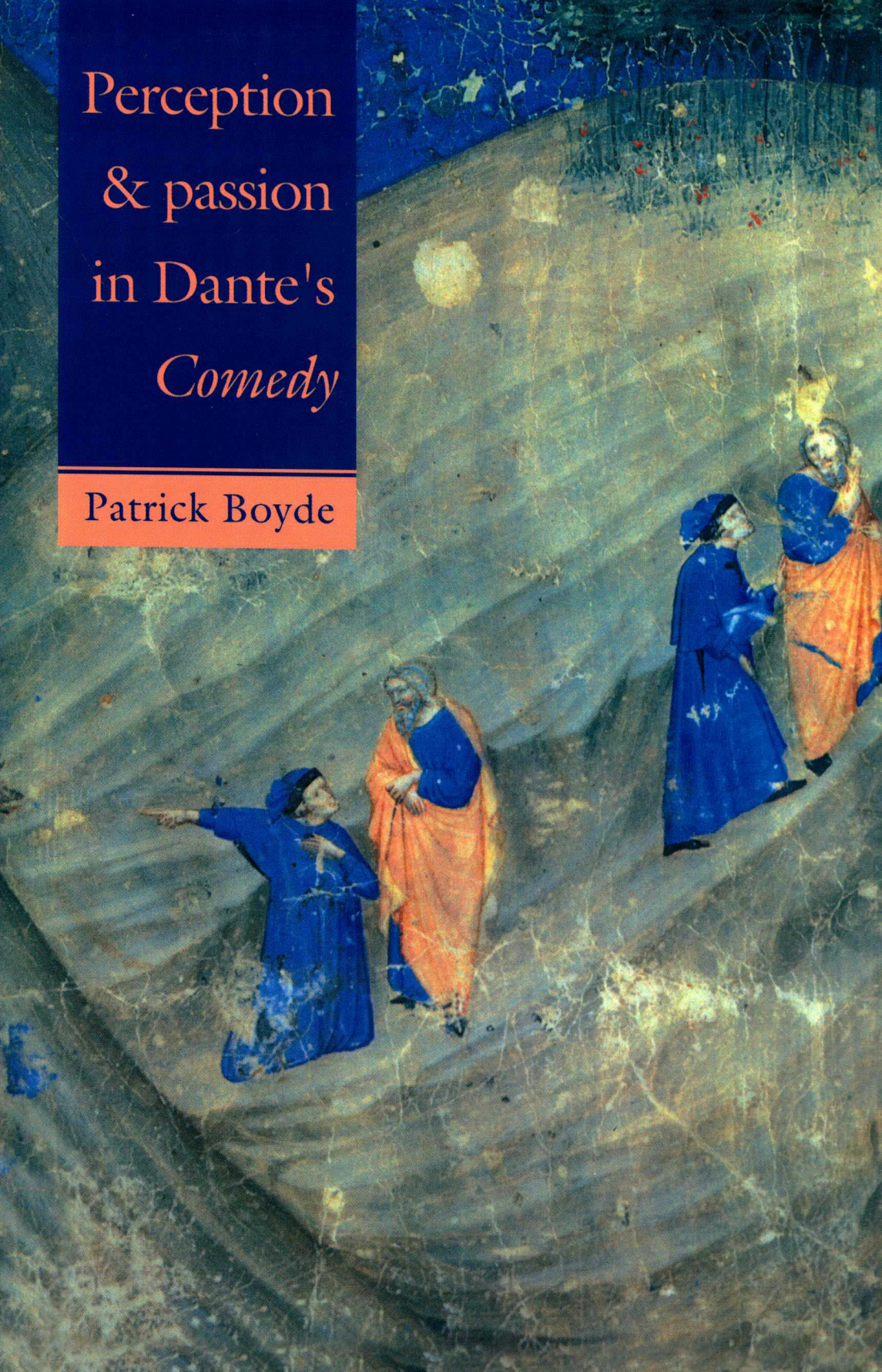


Perception  
& passion  
in Dante's  
*Comedy*

Patrick Boyde



# Perception and passion in Dante's *Comedy*

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E se la stella si cambiò e rise,  
qual mi fec' io che pur da mia natura  
trasmutabile son per tutte guise!

Dante, *Paradiso* v, 99–101

The passions are feelings associated with pain or pleasure which so change a man as to affect his judgements. Aristotle, *Rhetoric* II, i, 8, 1378a

The Philosophers, as well natural as moral, the one for Speculation, the other for Practice, wade most profoundly in the matter of our Passions.

The natural Philosopher contemplating the natures of men and beasts' sensitive souls (for Passions are common to both) consequently enters into discourse about the actions and operations thereof; for, without the knowledge of them, it were impossible to attain unto the perfect understanding of either of them.

The moral Philosopher, describing manners, inviting to virtue, dissuading from vice, sheweth how our inordinate appetites must be bridled with fortitude and temperance. He declareth their natures, their craft and deceit, in what sort of persons they are most vehement, and in whom more moderate; and to be brief, he spendeth well nigh in this disputation all his moral Philosophy in teaching how they may be used or abused.

Thomas Wright, *The Passions of the Mind in General* (1604), I, 1

And here again I find strange (...) that Aristotle should have written divers volumes of Ethics and never handled the affections, which is the principal subject thereof. (...) Better travails, I suppose, had the Stoics taken in this argument. (...) But yet it is like it was after their manner, rather in subtilty of definitions (...) than in active and ample descriptions and observations.

But the poets and writers of histories are the best doctors of this knowledge; where we may find painted forth with great life, how affections are kindled and incited; and how pacified and refrained; (...) how they disclose themselves; how they work; how they vary; how they gather and fortify; how they are enwrapped one within another; and how they do fight and encounter one with another; and other the like particularities.

Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning* (1605), II, xxii, 6

'I think I'll go and meet her,' said Alice, for, though the flowers were very interesting, she felt that it would be far grander to have a talk with a real Queen.

'You can't possibly do that,' said the Rose: 'I should advise you to walk the other way.'

This sounded nonsense to Alice so she said nothing, but set off at once towards the Red Queen. To her surprise, she lost sight of her in a moment, and found herself walking in at the front door again.

A little provoked, she drew back and, after looking everywhere for the Queen (whom she spied out at last, a long way off), she thought she would try the plan, this time of walking in the opposite direction.

It succeeded beautifully.

Lewis Carroll, *Alice through the Looking-Glass*, chapter 2

# Preface

For a number of years I have been teaching early Italian literature in a Faculty of Modern Languages, working with students who have a relatively limited knowledge either of the language or of medieval culture, and giving regular public lectures for people who are not studying Italian at all but who want to know more about Dante. In this time I have become ever more conscious of the exceptionally close link between Dante's fiction and his ideas, and have increasingly felt the need to read the *Comedy* in the light of the poet's own beliefs about the nature of language, art, morality, history and God. For better or worse, this work has grown out of my teaching and the consequences will be obvious at every turn.

If the book has a motto over and above its five epigraphs, it is the much-quoted injunction of E. M. Forster: 'Only connect'. It presents many individual philosophical concepts which become clearer as they are reintegrated into their system. The exposition of Dante's ideas is always related to a reading of one or more episodes in the *Comedy*. Each episode is interpreted in the light of its place in the whole poem which is itself set in the context of Dante's other works. And all the time I am trying to make connections between an early fourteenth-century poem and a reader in the late twentieth century.

There are, of course, other important relationships of a different kind between the book as a whole and its predecessors – the giants of Dantean and medieval scholarship, for example, or an earlier work of my own written in the same spirit. These relationships too deserve to be spelt out, but they will be of interest only to a minority, and at this stage there are just two things that need to be made clear. First,



the book's main claim to originality lies precisely in the connections that it seeks to re-establish between a medieval poem and medieval ideas. Second, the only close link with my earlier study of Dante's thought and poetry is that I occasionally use the adjective 'philomythical', as a correlative to 'philosophical', in order to signify the kind of creative writing that is open to and nourished by philosophy. Anyone who is curious to know how I conceive the relationship between *mythos* and *sophia* in Dante, or who would like to read my own sketch of his development and his other works, is referred to the first forty pages of *Dante Philomythes and Philosopher; Man in the Cosmos*. But this book stands entirely on its own feet.

The editions of Dante's works and the abbreviations used are given on p. 302 below at the beginning of the notes section. All unattributed translations and all italicisations for emphasis are mine.

My thanks are due to many people. First and foremost, to the friends who read and commented on drafts of one or more chapters, particularly Peter Brand, Fergus Campbell, Robbie Carroll, Ruth Daniel, Robert Gordon, Michael Horton, Martin Kemp, Robin Kirkpatrick, Laura Lepschy, Alison Morgan, Roger Morgan, Elizabeth Mozzillo, Christopher Ryan, Malcolm Schofield and Chris Stevens. They helped to make the 'crooked straight and the rough places plain' as well as pointing out a good many slips and inconsistencies. (It should go without saying that all the remaining anfractuosities and errors are my own responsibility.) And this is the place to record my debt to the staff of the Cambridge University Press for their patience and their admirably professional service, particularly to the editor, Kevin Taylor, and to the copy-editor, Rachel Neaman, who went through the final draft with something more than the proverbial toothcomb and made suggestions for scores of vital improvements.

During the long years of gestation, however, there have been other less tangible kinds of support which it is a pleasure as well as a duty to acknowledge. My thanks go therefore to the Fellows of St John's College for their intellectual stimulation, good humour and affection. It is a unique privilege to spend one's working life in the middle of such a community. At another level I must express my gratitude to the general audiences in England, Germany and North America whose warm responses have encouraged me to persevere in the

## PREFACE

attempt to present Dante, even to non-specialists, in his own language and as a medieval intellectual. I am still more deeply indebted to our Cambridge students whose moments of bewilderment or boredom have done as much to improve the book as their questions in tutorials or seminars. Last, but not least, I must thank all my immediate colleagues in the Department of Italian at Cambridge for their advice, friendship and cheerful support throughout the making of this book. It is perhaps invidious to single out one name, but I want to end by expressing special gratitude to my fellow Dantist and keenest interlocutor, Robin Kirkpatrick, whose generous offer to shoulder the ever-more intrusive duties of Head of Department in 1990 had the effect of liberating and focusing my energies and thus bringing the work to its conclusion.



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PART ONE

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# Coming to terms with Aristotle



## The prestige and unity of the Aristotelian corpus

### *'The Master of those who know'*

The first line of the *Comedy* tells us that the events to be narrated took place when the narrator was 'in the middle of the journey of our life'. The words are usually interpreted (with a certain amount of circularity in the reasoning) to yield the very precise sense that it was 1300, when Dante was in his thirty-fifth year. But it is equally possible, and highly desirable, to understand the phrase less narrowly as meaning 'in our middle age', that is, in the second of the three ages of man, which, in Dante's view, extends from the twenty-fifth to the forty-fifth year of a normal human life span.<sup>1</sup>

There are several linked advantages in this more flexible formulation. It helps us to see that the protagonist is portrayed with critical detachment by the author of the poem, who writes from the superior vantage point of full maturity gained in the *third* age. It prepares us to recognise that Dante-the-author depicts his earlier, wayward self as a typical representative of that time of life, as someone who manifests both the weaknesses and the 'signs' of innate goodness which theory would lead one to expect in a well-endowed man during his middle years. Taken together, these considerations remind us that Dante-the-pilgrim is a character in a work of fiction: he is partly drawn from life, partly a free creation and partly modelled on a type.

If we want to discover what the *historical* Dante was really like in the crucial years of his second age, at a time when his work gives clear indications that he was approaching some kind of crisis, we must turn to the *Convivio*, and especially to the fourth and last book,

probably written in 1307 or 1308, when Dante was not much over forty.

Few sections of that book could be more revealing than chapters xi–xiii, which develop and amplify an argument which he had formulated in just five lines of verse in the poem to which the book is a commentary. The central chapter (xii) is very well known, because it is there for the first time that Dante explicitly uses the image of the ‘journey’ of human life. And it will be instructive to quote the opening of his extended simile, since it can reasonably be interpreted as evidence of the creative or ‘philomythical’ Dante growing impatient with his self-imposed role as commentator and teacher:

Imagine a traveller who is taking a road along which he has never been before. Every time he sees a house in the distance, he believes it to be the inn; and each time he finds he was wrong, he extends the same belief to the next house. And so he goes on from house to house until he does come to the inn. The soul is like this traveller. It has never been on the strange journey of this life before [*‘nel nuovo e mai non fatto cammino di questa vita’*]. As soon as it sets out, it turns its eyes towards the supreme good, which constitutes its goal; and every time it sees something that seems to embody some good, it believes it has found that goal.

At first, its judgement is defective because it lacks experience and instruction. So it believes that small objects of little value are large and valuable, and it begins by desiring them. This is why we see small boys long for an apple above all things, and then, when they are a little more advanced, set their hearts on a pet bird. From this they go on to desire a fine suit of clothes, then a horse, then a woman. Next they aspire to a modest fortune, then to a larger one, then to a still bigger one. And this happens because the soul never finds what it is looking for in any of these objects, but believes that it will find its heart’s desire further on.

(*Con.* IV, xii, 15–16)

The chief interest of these three chapters, however, with their sustained attack on the pursuit of riches, and their celebration of the quest for knowledge, lies in what they reveal about Dante the thinker and philosopher in his second age. And we could sum this up by saying that he is still under the spell of Aristotle.

Aristotle was the inventor of the syllogism, which is used in the strictly logical passages. Aristotle figures prominently among the authorities (indeed, if we include the previous chapter in our count, he is quoted more frequently than any other source in this section, since there are six references to his works, as against five to the Bible

and five to Boethius). Lastly, it was from Aristotle that Dante derived his most important new argument, namely, that human beings *can* achieve a perfect human happiness in *this* life, because the 'natural' desire for certain knowledge (in which this happiness consists) *can* be satisfied, notwithstanding the limitations of our intellect. Nor is this composite debt in any way surprising, since Aristotle had been described in the first eight chapters of the same fourth book of the *Convivio* as 'the master of human reason', the 'guide of human life' and the 'master of the philosophers'. In fact, Dante is nowhere more representative of his time than in the reverence he felt for the man whom everyone called '*the* Philosopher'.

### *The rediscovery of Aristotle*

Aristotle's reputation had not always stood so high. Before the middle of the twelfth century his fame in the Latin West rested on two short introductions to the science of logic (although it has to be said that these had been of crucial importance for the new breed of dialecticians who laid the foundations of the scholastic method in the monastic and then in the cathedral 'schools' of northern France). But in the hundred or so years between the death of Peter Lombard in the early 1160s and the death of Aquinas in 1274 – the years in which the University of Paris became the most important intellectual centre in Western Europe – he had climbed slowly but inexorably to a position of absolute supremacy. By the latter year, virtually all his works had been translated and re-translated, 'commentated' and 're-commentated', attacked and defended, re-attacked and re-defended. A Parisian Master of Arts in the 1280s or 1290s was in a position to know what Aristotle had actually said and what he really meant in some of his more cryptic utterances. He could hold an informed opinion (although not an uncontroversial one) concerning the truth of certain propositions which seemed to run counter to Christian belief. And he could and did deploy Aristotelian concepts, terminology and methods in his own questions and disputations. Back in the 1150s his course would have been limited to works relevant to the seven Liberal Arts; in the 1250s the curriculum of the Arts Faculty in Paris is known to have consisted almost exclusively of 'bookes (...) of Aristotle and his philosophie'.<sup>2</sup>

Obviously, one cannot do justice to a hundred years of complex

development in a single paragraph, nor condense that paragraph into a single phrase. There is, nevertheless, more than a grain of truth in the textbook cliché that forms the title of part one. The history of philosophy and theology in the first part of the thirteenth century had been one of 'coming to terms with Aristotle' in the most pregnant sense of that expression. And this is why any serious reader of Dante must sooner or later 'come to terms' with Aristotle in the more limited sense of acquiring at least a nodding acquaintance with the essential concepts and terminology of his philosophy.

*Aristotelian moral science: one among three, or three in one?*

The known writings of Aristotle may be divided into three main groups: (a) an inquiry into the meaning of knowledge itself, that is, 'true' or 'demonstrable' knowledge (*scientia*); (b) knowledge about the universe (*scientia naturalis*); (c) knowledge about man considered as a being distinguished from the rest of the universe by his capacity for knowledge and by his capacity to initiate or control action in accordance with his knowledge (*scientia moralis*). At the risk of oversimplification, one might say that his writings were devoted to truth, nature and human nature. And Dante clearly had these distinct groups in mind when he described Aristotle, in different places and contexts, as (a) 'the master of those who *know*', (b) 'the glorious philosopher to whom *Nature* had revealed her secrets more than to any other man', and (c) 'the master of our life', who 'showed the purpose and goal of *human* living'.<sup>3</sup>

My last book drew extensively on the texts dealing with the science of nature. The present volume, by contrast, is affected more strongly by the gravitational pull of works in the third group, especially by the *Nicomachean Ethics* (hereinafter known simply as the *Ethics*).

Now, it is important to acknowledge that the *Ethics* may be studied without constant reference to Aristotle's other writings. It is not a difficult or pronouncedly theoretical work. The approach is for the most part commonsensical and down to earth, and there are many real life examples to illustrate the general points. Aristotle addresses himself to mature men who are assumed to have wide experience of the world and 'sound judgement'; and he often concludes that the adages and rules of thumb enshrining the practical wisdom of this



class of reader are at least tolerably well founded from the point of view of the professional philosopher. He is generally cautious and undogmatic; and he does not lose sight of the principle, enunciated near the beginning of the work, that one cannot demand the same degree of exactitude in the study of human affairs that one may reasonably expect from the theorems of geometry. Many of the issues he defined are still at the centre of ethical debate, even though the terminology has changed; and however much individual members of the legal profession or members of the general public might disagree in theory about the definition of such matters as 'personal responsibility', the 'age of consent' or the 'admissibility of circumstantial evidence', it is clear from the decisions reached in the law courts of the free world that, in practice, judges and jurors find themselves very much in agreement with the content and spirit of Aristotle's work.<sup>4</sup>

It is also arguable that the Aristotle whom we feel we get to know in the *Ethics* is a less forbidding, less monolithic figure than the author of the *Metaphysics* or *Concerning the Heavens*. Reading the work, one comes to understand why some twentieth-century scholars have been at pains to bring out the inquisitive character of his mind, why they are inclined to view internal inconsistencies between one work and another as signs of a desirable evolution in his thought, and why they admire him as the man who kept asking questions and checking his hypotheses against the evidence, rather than as the oracle who delivered all the answers.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, the reader of Dante must always bear in mind that the 'false' image of Aristotle, which modern scholarship has consigned to the lumber room, was precisely that of 'the Philosopher' with a capital P – the image which had been so lovingly pieced together and set on a pedestal in the course of the thirteenth century. Like so many of his near contemporaries, Dante was strongly attracted to Aristotle, not simply because he had investigated every branch of knowledge in turn, but because he seemed to offer a *unitary* vision of knowledge, nature and man.

The three groups of works were expressions of a single endeavour and formed a unified system of thought. It was not possible, so it then seemed, to acquire knowledge about 'nature' without knowing what 'knowledge' was, or without mastering the linguistic tools and the 'primary' concepts provided in the writings on logic and in what Aristotle himself called 'First Philosophy' (only later were these

books so seductively named *Metaphysics*). Similarly, one could not understand 'human nature' unless one understood the structures, properties, powers and functions of *animal* existence, because man was seen to be – to paraphrase Dante – 'up to his neck' in the natural order.<sup>6</sup>

Again, one could not grasp what was distinctive about the power that differentiates man from all other existing species unless one knew enough about animals to be able to perceive how human 'reason' differs from the 'cunning' of a fox, the 'docility' of a horse or the 'imitative' ability of a monkey or parrot (in Aristotle's model of rational knowledge, concepts like these are reached and successively refined by a process of comparison and contrast). The more one studied what was distinctively human, and what was therefore good for man considered as a human being, the more inescapable seemed the conclusion that the purpose of our life, and the nature of our happiness, lay in the 'actualisation of a potential for knowing' (this is a paraphrase of a definition accepted by Dante).<sup>7</sup> And so the path of investigation seemed to lead full circle through 'natural science' and 'human science' back to the original question: 'What is knowledge'?

### *Aristotle's commentators and disciples*

The medieval commentators – from Averroes (d. 1198) in Moorish Spain to Aquinas (d. 1274) in Paris – excelled above all in interpreting Aristotle '*with Aristotle*'. They would use their understanding of the whole body of his thought to justify one translation of a difficult phrase against another, or to reject an apocryphal work as being un-Aristotelian. They filled out the lacunae in Aristotle's frequently elliptical utterances and reconstructed the 'missing stages' in what they took to be a syllogistical train of thought. Hence, when a student of Dante's generation read the *Ethics*, he found the text embedded in an extensive commentary which presented the 'moral science' in the framework of 'science' and 'natural science'.

As often as not, Dante would have encountered Aristotle's ethical thought at second hand in the lapidary fragments that were quoted by his teachers or contemporaries in the course of their own independent enquiries (typically, the quotations were used as points of departure or as proofs of an intermediate stage in the argument). As a result, Aristotle came to seem more authoritarian and technical