

PAOLO PELLEGRINI, *DANTE ALIGHIERI: UNA VITA*, GIULIO EINAUDI, TORINO 2021 (PICCOLA BIBLIOTECA EINAUDI, NUOVA SERIE, 747: SAGGISTICA LETTERARIA E LINGUISTICA), XXII + 252 PP., ISBN 9788806247218.

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Dante's was a life of two halves, if unequal ones. From his birth in May or June 1265 until March 1302 he lived, wrote and was politically active as a resident of his native Florence, but from 10 March 1302, when he was sentenced to death as an enemy of a new regime, until his actual decease in September 1321, he secured his comparative safety by remaining outside the jurisdiction of the Florentine state. Although the first 'half' occupied nearly two-thirds of the poet's lifespan, in any biography it is likely to occupy fewer pages than the second – in this case 3–71.¹ Not surprisingly, little is new in these pages: the documentary record is exiguous, especially before the poet's entry into politics in 1295; the only other contemporary evidence lies in the creative writings of Dante and his associates; to these may be added the testimony of early biographers, all of whom wrote after their subject's death; and essentially all avenues were thoroughly explored long ago. The scene has been slightly reset by the appearance, in 2016, of a new *Codice diplomatico dantesco* (superseding an earlier one published in 1940 and subsequently augmented), that is, an edition, with commentary, of all known documents relating to Dante and his family.²

The present biography's first section opens with a fluent and largely up-to-date account of Florence's socio-political evolution, which is followed by passages on Dante's family, education, military activity, early writings and participation in

¹ The other biographies referred or alluded to in this review are: GIORGIO PETROCCHI, « Vita di Dante », in *Enciclopedia dantesca*, 6 vol., Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana, Rome 1970–78, vol. VI, p. 3–53, revised as *Vita di Dante*, Laterza, Rome–Bari 1983 (Collezione Storica); ENRICO MALATO, *Dante*, Salerno Editrice, Rome 1999, 4th edition, revised 2017 (Sestante 1); GUGLIELMO GORNI, *Dante: storia di un visionario*, Laterza, Rome–Bari 2008 (Storia e Società); MARCO SANTAGATA, *Dante: il romanzo della sua vita*, Mondadori, Milan 2012 (Le Scie); GIORGIO INGLESE, *Vita di Dante: una biografia possibile*, Carocci, Rome 2015 (Saggi); ALESSANDRO BARBERO, *Dante*, Laterza, Bari–Rome 2020 (i Robinson/Lecture); ELISA BRILLI, GIULIANO MILANI, *Vite nuove: biografia e autobiografia di Dante*, Carocci, Rome 2021 (Saggi).

² TERESA DE ROBERTIS, GIULIANO MILANI, LAURA REGNICOLI, STEFANO ZAMPONI (eds.), *Codice diplomatico dantesco*, Salerno Editrice, Rome 2016 (Nuova Edizione Commentata delle Opere di Dante, 7/3).

politics between 1295 and 1302. There are occasional slips, as when the poet's grandfather is named Alighiero rather than Bellincione (p. 21), or where Geri del Bello is said not to be named in *Inferno* XXIX (p. 29), or the age of legal majority is given as fifteen instead of fourteen (p. 34 and 125), or where it is implied that Pietro di Giovanni Olivi, who taught at Santa Croce in 1287–89, was there in 1293–96 (p. 52–53). Other inaccuracies appear to derive from a hasty consultation of the documents (not all of which are identified): Dante's father could not inherit Geri del Bello's house (p. 19) as he predeceased him; Cione del Bello should be read as his sons (p. 28); Vinciguerra was not Corso Donati's grandfather (p. 34) but his great-grandfather; a family property was called not Le Radere (p. 35) but Le Radole. It is inaccurate that Bello's branch of the family clave to the magnate class (p. 63) or that Dante belonged to the *popolo grasso* (p. 64). A bizarre passage on page 32 seems to imply that one of Dante's uncles was his own son. But these are details, and in the main these chapters, illuminated by a ground plan of the Alighieri neighbourhood, offer an uncontroversial account of information and hypotheses accepted as standard today.

Where controversy becomes more of an issue is in relation to the later part of the poet's life. Here again the documentary record is minimal, and one of the fundamental questions is that of where Dante spent his exile and wrote most of his works. There are a few sightings: at San Godenzo (north-east Tuscany) on 8 June 1302, at Castelnuovo (north-west Tuscany) on 6 October 1306, in the Casentino on 31 March and 17 April 1311, at Poppi castle on 18 May 1311. To these Dante's writings add clues of debatable dependability, which at least make it clear he was at the Della Scala court in Verona during the campaign of the exiles' army to retake Florence, and again for a period that seems to have lasted at least from 1316 to 1318; and with varying results scholars have sought further hints in the poet's own words. Early biographers provided more information which may or may not be reliable, notably that he spent the closing months of his life at the court of Guido Novello da Polenta in Ravenna. The rest is open to speculation, some of the more persuasive of which has placed Dante at various times in Arezzo, Forlì, Treviso, Bologna, Lucca, Pisa and Paris.

In his introduction Pellegrini helpfully lists the book's « novelties ». One of these is that Dante was « very probably » in Forlì in the summer of 1310 and may there have written a letter to Cangrande Della Scala in Verona (p. 132 and 142–43). But none of this is new, not even to biographical monographs (Santagata has it on p. 232); its best sources are unacknowledged articles published by other scholars in 2005 and 2015. What gives Pellegrini a firmer belief than Santagata in Dante's authorship of the lost letter is his declared policy (p. xix) of rehabilitating the testimony of the fifteenth-century historians Leonardo Bruni and the Forlivese Biondo Flavio – a policy to which, however, he adheres only selectively, as derogations of it are encountered on pages 48–49, 76–77 and 154.

If that lost letter points towards Verona, all four of the other « novelties » concern Verona directly. One of them focuses on the early visit there to which the poet refers in *Paradiso*, XVII. 70–75. There has been much debate in recent years about the timing, purpose and duration of that visit. To me Pellegrini's reconstruction seems as plausible as any, though its originality is limited to the fine tuning. It is assumed that Dante was in Verona to represent the exiles, seeking military aid for their Mugello campaign from the *signore*, Bartolomeo Della Scala; whether or not he returned to the exiles's base – the theory continues – he abandoned them and the commitment to warfare in February or early March 1303 and spent the next year or so as Bartolomeo's guest in Verona, to rejoin his former comrades only when the prospect of a peaceful solution presented itself in 1304.

Two of the novelties belong together. Pellegrini wishes his reader to believe that when Dante left his fellow exiles for the second time (perhaps in July 1304) he returned to Verona, stayed there until the summer of 1306, and there wrote the first three books of his *Convivio*, followed by *De Vulgari Eloquentia*. In recent years the main rival candidates for the poet's whereabouts in this period have been Bologna and Treviso. The lord of Verona was now the late Bartolomeo's brother Alboino, and one of the standard objections to the Verona theory is that Dante, whose works include expressions of appreciation for several of his patrons, has only words of vitriol for Alboino, whom he accuses of ignobility (*Convivio*, IV. 16. 6). Pellegrini's preference for Verona notwithstanding the objection is based on the testimony of Bruni and Biondo (p. 105–107), whose reliability is at this point assumed because they evidently had access to letters written by Dante but now long lost. Bologna has the better claim from the point of view of library access and intellectual stimulation, and was not – despite what Pellegrini appears to say (p. 99) – politically off limits for Dante. The biographer counters this with a somewhat feeble case for Verona as another lively scholarly milieu around the famous Chapter Library, and with a striking detail. In *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, II. 6. 7 Dante lists four Latin prose writers who – as appears to have been suggested to him by a friend – could be beneficial as models to vernacular poets: Livy, Pliny (presumably the Younger), Frontinus and Orosius. The first three of these were rare at the time, but, as pointed out in Tavoni's 2011 edition, all three were represented in the Chapter Library; to which Pellegrini adds that he knows of no other library where Dante could have found all three, while the present tense « *invitat* » appears to point to the time of writing.

The one novelty that seems to be based on Pellegrini's own research is the idea that Dante's last period in Verona, commonly seen as lasting from about 1316 to 1318 or 1319, actually began as early as 1312, while Henry VII was still alive. In two articles published in 2018 the author argued that a Latin letter sent by Cangrande Della Scala to the newly crowned Emperor probably in August 1312, now lost as an original but copied into a surviving contemporary collection of specimen letters,

shows signs of having been composed by Dante, who must therefore have been in Verona at the time.³ Given the formulaic and derivative nature of all such *dictamina*, those signs are not necessarily as compelling as Pellegrini believes; certainly Alberto Casadei has responded with some « preliminary doubts ».⁴ For now at least, this should be considered an open question, especially if it is to be used as the single exhibit in a case for four extra years in Verona (though on page 176 Pellegrini does concede that we have no idea where Dante was in 1313–14, contenting himself with the observation that he had no reason to leave Verona). For the open question to be steered towards closure a critical edition of Cangrande's letter is needed, together with a fuller analysis of its prose, including its use of the *cursus*. Pellegrini has promised these things, though they have yet to appear. One would also value the view of a specialist in the *ars dictaminis* as practised by Dante and his contemporaries, such as Benoît Grévin.⁵ Meanwhile the rival claim of western Tuscany as a plausible base for Dante between 1312 and 1316 should not be dismissed so lightly as it is here.

Between the novelties Pellegrini makes a good job of covering the essentials, from Dante's activism firstly in the White Guelf and later in the Ghibelline cause, through the composition of his later literary works, including the here authentic Epistle XIII and *Questio de Aqua et Terra*, to the poet's closing years in Ravenna. Scholars such as Carpi and Santagata, however, who see the various parts of the *Commedia* as differently coloured by the author's political persuasion at the time of writing,⁶ are given short shrift, their view of the poem being characterized as that of a sort of « instant book » (p. xv and elsewhere), a term which, in its normal sense of a book produced and published very quickly to meet market demand, belittles the scholars concerned. As in the earlier parts of the biography there are occasional lapses. Dante's first biographer was not Boccaccio (p. 161) but Giovanni Villani. The so-called Battle of La Lastra was not a surprise attack organized by Cardinal Niccolò da Prato (p. 84). According to the only source (Filippo Villani's *De Origine Civitatis*) Dante did not contract his fatal illness during the return journey to Ravenna (p. 209) but was already suffering from it in Venice. To say that when Henry VII died in August 1313 Italian Ghibellines looked to Cangrande as their

³ PAOLO PELLEGRINI, «La quattordicesima epistola di Dante Alighieri: primi appunti per una attribuzione», *Studi di erudizione e di filologia italiana*, 7 (2018), p. 5–20; ID., «Lo stilista nascosto di Cangrande Della Scala», *Il Manifesto/Alias Domenica*, 16 September 2018.

⁴ ALBERTO CASADEI, «Una nuova epistola di Dante? Alcuni dubbi preliminari», in his *Dante: altri accertamenti e punti critici*, FrancoAngeli, Milan 2019 (Letteratura Italiana: Saggi e Strumenti), p. 278–86.

⁵ See, for example, BENOÎT GRÉVIN, *Al di là delle fonti "classiche": le Epistole dantesche e la prassi duecentesca dell'"ars dictaminis"*, Ca' Foscari Digital Publishing, Venice 2020 (Filologie Medievali e Moderne, 22; serie occidentale, 18).

⁶ UMBERTO CARPI, *La nobiltà di Dante*, 2 vol., Edizioni Polistampa, Florence 2004 (Studi su Dante a cura della Società Dantesca Italiana, 1); MARCO SANTAGATA, *Dante*, cit.

guiding star (p. 160) is to exaggerate, while the statement that Santagata sidesteps a difficulty by assuming the *Questio* was not written by Dante (p. 186n) is a trivialization of Santagata's view. Confusion is displayed over the chronology of Guido Novello's departure from Ravenna (p. 209 and 211) and over the dates of Boccaccio's visit to that city (p. 206 and 209); and was Ravenna's cultural environment really « vivace » (p. 210)? But such infelicities are not numerous.

What is of perhaps greater concern, in the book as a whole, is a lack of etiquette in the acknowledgement of debts to previous scholarship. A preference is expressed (p. xvii) for certain « great masters of the past », the paladins of the *nuova filologia*, which in the biographical arena means down to and including Giorgio Petrocchi (1978 and 1983). Subsequent work is characterized as derivative, superficial and therefore largely to be ignored. This, however, is a travesty of reality: during the past two decades a huge amount of valuable original work has been done in this area by scholars such as Mirko Tavoni, Giuseppe Indizio and Paolo Pontari. Pellegrini in fact makes good use of Tavoni and Pontari (who are afforded space in the bibliography), though without ever mentioning them in the text or including them in the index. Most strikingly, Indizio, who in recent years has done more than anyone to bring Dante's life into focus and whose work is frequently perceptible here, occasionally verbatim, is mentioned once, in a footnote (p. 79), in connection with a marginal issue, and appears in the bibliography as the author of only one study, whereas the parallel bibliographies of Brilli-Milani and Barbero credit him, respectively, with nine contributions and with seventeen.

Of course, the focus into which Dante's life can be brought remains glaringly imperfect, and consists mainly of intelligent hypotheses; Giorgio Inglese had the candour to subtitle his offering « a possible biography », while Santagata went so far as to subtitle his *Dante* « il romanzo della sua vita », even though it is anything but a novel or a romance. Pellegrini is at pains to smother competing hypotheses with his own. In his introduction (p. xix-xx) he expresses the wish to reach and presumably influence a wide and impressionable readership; but if I were asked to recommend a biography of Dante to novices or lay persons, this – for all its cherished and undeniable readability – is not the one I should select, because of its Verona-centric tendentiousness. Other accounts, most recently those by Barbero and Brilli-Milani, are far more open-minded about Dante's whereabouts during his exile.