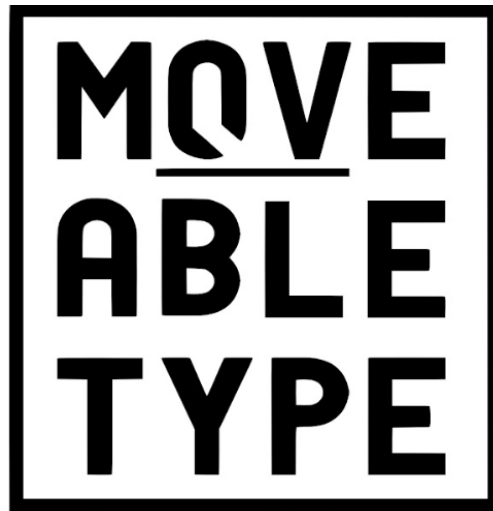




Book Review: Winthrop Wetherbee's *The Ancient Flame: Exemplarity, Intertextuality, and Illumination in Dante's Revision of the Past*

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Winthrop Wetherbee's *The Ancient Flame: Exemplarity, Intertextuality, and Illumination in Dante's Re-Vision of the Past*

The Ancient Flame: Dante and the Poets. By Winthrop Wetherbee. 2008. 304p. £36.
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*"Elli givan dinanzi, e io soletto
di retro, e ascoltava i lor sermoni
ch'a poetar mi davano intelletto."
(Purgatorio, 22.127–29)*

*[They were going on in front, and I solitary
behind, and I was listening to their speech,
which gave me understanding in poetry.]¹*

Dante Alighieri, the principal figure of the 'tre corone' of Italian literature and, according to T. S. Eliot, the most 'universal of poets in the modern languages' along with Shakespeare, has constituted an exciting, boundless field of study.² In recent decades, much critical energy has been devoted to Dante's dexterous handling of the textual representation of his own authorial agency and status. One of the most elusive, yet infallibly fascinating, points of critical intrigue regarding the *Commedia* (c.1308–21) is the matter of authorial self-representation and literary self-reflexivity—that is to say, Dante's difficult and complex negotiation of his own poetical voice and literary aims, his numerous autocitations and assertion of his own authority vis-à-vis his intertextual objectives, and the promissory obligations to his forebears that he may exalt, renegotiate, or repudiate entirely.³ As such, not only the discussion of his status as an author, but also the origin and development of his creative agency and poetic virtuosity are frequent areas of exciting critical inquiry. Similarly, as Dante's readers have long signalled, his poem's pointed yet varied treatment of a wide range of classical forefathers provides another riveting point of critical concern. Wetherbee's critical exploration of these tensions explicates Dante's debts and obligations to his forebears, whilst clearly articulating his own voice.⁴ Complicating a dichotomy of influence, this critic insists that Dante's self-promise is imbricated in his careful positioning as heir to past greatness, guardian, yet re-creator, of the poetic flame, and living progressive conduit for future poetics.

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the conflicted relationship between classical and medieval exempla, or *translatio*, *imitatio*, and *aemulatio*, and their related Renaissance counterparts are precepts that assist understandings of Dante's medieval yet remarkably modern poem. These principles similarly foster recognition of the complex relationship between Dante, his classical models, and the wide range of epic and lyric poets that constitute his referential

¹ Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: Purgatorio*, translated with a commentary by C. Singleton (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), pp. 242–43.

² T. S. Eliot, 'Dante', in *Selected Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1950), pp. 199–237 (p. 11).

³ On self-referentiality and autocitation in particular, see Teodolinda Barolini, "Autocitation and Autobiography," in *Dante's Poets: Textuality and Truth in the Comedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984) pp.3–84.

⁴ Winthrop Wetherbee, *The Ancient Flame: Dante and the Poets* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008). Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in-text.

ambit.⁵ In his evident desire to revere and yet surpass, to acknowledge literary debts while also proclaiming independence, Dante's negotiation of his intertextual genealogy thus often seems to result in a rather 'anxious' interaction, to use a Bloomian vocabulary, with his poetic past.⁶

While numerous critics have sought to delve into the heart of Dante's intercalated relationships with other authors and authorial moments—from the series of catalysing actantial oaths that open the *Commedia* introducing to readers a Beatrice famously 'moved' by love, a Virgil then spurred to succour Dante due to the pledge to assist he has made to Beatrice, and Virgil's own words that coax Dante to follow him since they 'promise' the pilgrim 'such good' ("‘*Imio parlar tanto ben ti promette*’" (*Inf.* 2.126])—aiming for a definitive solution to what seems to be the epistemological key of the *Commedia*, few have succeeded.^{7,8} One such success, however, is Winthrop Wetherbee. And yet, Wetherbee's monograph, *The Ancient Flame: Dante and the Poets* (2008), which was hailed shortly after its publication as being an 'important and beautiful book', and a 'masterful study', an 'endlessly fascinating book' that 'opened a great number of possibilities for scholars of Dante, who will benefit greatly from Wetherbee's masterful work of drawing connections between Dante's world and the worlds of the ancient epic', merits renewed critical attention.⁹ This distinguished scholar of the humanities scrupulously enters into a sustained dialogue not only with Dante's poem, but also with a selection of seminal critical works, all of which address similar questions of authorial agency, intertextual grounding, and the commitment to and (re)evocation of various authors and voices of the past.

Looking simultaneously to the past and to the future, just as the *Commedia* does itself, *The Ancient Flame* draws most heavily on the ground-breaking works of Barolini, Auerbach, Hollander, Mazzotta, Picone, and Moevs, while proposing new modes of reading.¹⁰ Yet, what

⁵ (Wetherbee 10-11; Barolini, *Dante's Poets* and *Dante and the Origins*, Baránski, *Dante e i segni*) By no means an exhaustive list, see, in particular, Teodolinda Barolini's aforementioned *Dante's Poets* and her *Dante and the Origins of Italian Literary Culture* (Fordham: Fordham University Press, 2006); Zygmunt Baránski, *Dante e i segni. Saggi per una storia intellettuale di Dante Alighieri* (Naples: Liguori, 2000); Massimo Verdicchio, *Reading Dante Reading* (Edmonton: University of Alberta, 2002); Peter Dronke, *Dante and Medieval Latin Traditions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Filippo Gianferri, *Dante's Education: Latin Schoolbooks and Vernacular Poetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024); and Natalino Sapegno, *Commento alla Divina Commedia*, 3 vol., (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1955-57). See also Albert Ascoli, *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), who examines the various levels of signification of 'author' and 'authority', and helpfully distinguishes between 'medieval *auctoritas*' and 'modern *authority*' (5).

⁶ Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

⁷ Dante Alighieri, "Inferno," in *Commedia*, 3 vols., ed. by Giorgio Petrocchi (Milan: Mondadori, 1966-67).

⁸ Notable exceptions, including recent works, are: Barolini, *Dante's Poets*; Simone Marchesi, *Dante and Augustine: Linguistics, Poetics, Hermeneutics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018); Christopher Kleinhenz, 'Virgil, Statius, and Dante: An Unusual Trinity', in *Lectura Dantis Newberryana*, ed. by P. Cherchi and A. C. Mastrobuono (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), pp. 37-55; and Ascoli.

⁹ Piero Boitani, "The Ancient Flame: Dante and the Poets by Winthrop Wetherbee," *Speculum* 85:4 (2010):1038-40. Mark David Rasmussen, "The Ancient Flame: Dante and the Poets by Winthrop Wetherbee," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 41:4 (2010): 1279-81. Heather Webb, "The Ancient Flame: Dante and the Poets by Winthrop Wetherbee," *Renaissance Quarterly* 63:3 (2009): 868-69.

¹⁰ Wetherbee acknowledges his huge debts to various texts by Teodolinda Barolini, in whose 'footsteps' he follows, and cites in particular her *Dante's Poets*, referenced above, and her *The Undivine Comedy: Detheologizing Dante* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); Erich Auerbach, *Dante, Poet of the Secular World*, trans. by R. Mannheim (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961); Robert Hollander, especially his work on Virgilian resonances in the *Commedia* and his *Allegory in Dante's 'Commedia'* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969); Giuseppe Mazzotta, *Dante, Poet of the Desert* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), and *Dante's Vision and the Circle of Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); and Michelangelo Picone's and Ronald Martinez's work on Dante's renegotiation of Ovidian myths and use of Statius, in 'Dante argonauta; La ricezione dei miti ovidiani nella *Commedia*', in *Ovidius redivivus: Von Ovid zu Dante*, ed. by M. Picone and B.

distinguishes Wetherbee's convictions from his own populous 'bella scola' of critics is the detailed and measured way in which he manages his exploration of the filial yet conflicted relationship between Dante and exemplary classical *auctores* without privileging one to the detriment of the other. In fact, as a distinguished scholar of Old French, Classical and Medieval Latin, and Middle English literature, Wetherbee's formation and long-standing interests, including poetry, chivalric romance, history, allegory, cosmology, Platonism, and philosophy, inherently allow him to parse Dante's intertextual borrowings in a vigorously original and broadly comparative manner throughout *The Ancient Flame*.

While Wetherbee does indeed hold Dante's rapport with Virgil, Ovid, Lucan and Statius as a primary line of inquiry, not once does he circumscribe the presence of the Latin poets with a myopic, uneven focus. Instead, he remains faithful to the specific textual clues presented by Dante regarding his feelings towards his predecessors, and his frequently reiterated promises to remember or recall their lives and their works. In so doing, he is able effectively to divorce himself from a facile straightforward acceptance of other critics' voices. Highlighting the vital space that separates Dante from the 'Poeti' who preceded him, Wetherbee comments in his introduction that, '[f]or many critics of the *Commedia*, Dante's undeniable distancing of himself from the Poeti has seemed to constitute an assertion of superiority. But this is a claim I do not believe Dante himself would have made. He would have been in full sympathy with Eliot's rejoinder in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' to the charge that we 'know so much more' than the classical authors did' (11).¹¹ Adroitly suturing together different temporalities in his own version of Dantean style, Wetherbee reveals to his readers the spiralling path of examination that his analysis will take. Indeed, the critical space in which he manoeuvres, much like the material of his argument, obeys no explicit temporal boundaries.

That is, in a similar fashion to Derrida's insistence upon the convergence of temporalities and the residue or 'traces' that unremittingly inform and comprise the present; Wetherbee insists that Dante draws from earlier literary and philosophical traditions while challenging and recodifying them, offering readers a polyhedral assessment of the remnants of classical tradition that shape and 'remain[n] significantly present' throughout the *Commedia* (227)¹². All the same, although it is difficult to perceive the singularity of a voice that both emerges from and is constituted by past echoes, the consideration Wetherbee gives to Dante's actual 'voice' is a clear testament not only to his sensitivity as a reader of the *trecento* author, but also to the attention he grants to precision of detail and interpretive coherence on a much larger scale.

From his introduction onwards, Wetherbee refuses a definitive diagnosis of Dante's use of the Poeti, precisely because of what he views as the pagan poets' widely different and constantly metamorphosing role in Dante's poetical, political, and spiritual imaginary. As he demonstrates most explicitly in the beginning of his second chapter, 'Virgil in the *Inferno*', and in the subsequent 'Virgil and Lucan: Judgment and Poetic Authority in Dis', he does not merely examine the religious or allegorical pertinence of the presence of the Poeti, as has commonly

Zimmermann (Stuttgart: M & P Verlag für Wissenschaft und Forschung, 1994), pp. 173-202; 'Dante e i miti', in *Dante: Mito e Poesia. Atti del secondo Seminario dantesco internazionale*, Monte Verità: Ascona, 1997 (Firenze: Cesati, 1999), pp. 21-32; and 'Dante and the Two Canons: Statius in Virgil's Footsteps', *Comparative Literature Studies* 32 (1995): 151-75, respectively.

¹¹ In full, the Eliotian moment from which Wetherbee is drawing is: "Some one said: 'The dead writers are remote from us because we *know* so much more than they did.' Precisely, and they are that which we know," from "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in *The Sacred Wood. Essays on Poetry and Criticism*, (London, Methuen, 1920), pp.42-53, at 46.

¹² Consider, for example, Derrida's comments on phenomenology and the temporal convergences that constitute the 'now' and its wake in Jacques Derrida, *La voix et le phénomène* (Paris: Quadrige / Presses Universitaires de France, 1993), pp. 76, 95-96.

been done previously, nor does he privilege this over the historical, identity, and literary roles that these figures play. His analysis therefore depends on a consistent valorisation of the instances of concrete intertextuality that reveal Dante's own reading, understanding, and reaction to his Latin models.

In his noteworthy fourth chapter, 'Cato's Grotto', Wetherbee studies the curious presence of Cato in *Purgatorio*. He evinces how, in Dante's paradoxical representation of an exemplary Cato, the poet is borrowing an 'essentially "infernal" poetics' from Lucan's *Pharsalia* while furthering Lucan's 'deeply ambivalent portrayal of Cato' (97-103). As Cato is just one of two pagans in Purgatory, and a figure whose suicide would have normally prevented his ability to ascend to the mountain—let alone be its saved warden—Dante's framing of Cato points towards salvation yet reveals the infernal residue that remains present throughout the canticle. In turn, this leaves readers to question the hazy notion of virtue that remains unresolved until *Paradiso*. In Chapter Five, 'Ovid and Virgil in Purgatory', Wetherbee astutely analyses the 'problematic relation of the poem to epic tradition' (166) and examines Dante's fragmentary use of the Poet's texts in 'Statius' (Chapter Six). Wetherbee's elucidation of the crucial beginnings and eventual transference of poetic power from the Poet to Dante *qua* poet, as he first joins their ranks and then moves 'beyond', most firmly takes root in these chapters. He reaches the apogee of this extension past his intertextual and citational models in 'Lust, Poetry, and the Earthly Paradise', which discusses paternity and dependency, and marries the disappearance of Virgil from Dante's text to a brilliant yet brief exploration of moments of grief in the *Aeneid*.

Wetherbee's final chapter, '*Paradiso*', details Dante's interaction with a variety of classical models once again, and provides a particularly useful recapitulation of Dante's use of important personal and literary past events—from his exile to Cadmus' travels and Aeneas' vision, from the Donation of Constantine to the founding of Thebes—as crucial interpretive keys for what the future holds, as well as for the lengthy trajectory that his poetry and 'historical vision' have taken. As Wetherbee's own language is stylistically formal and tends towards enargia and dramaticism, he is able to vividly accentuate the epic quality of Dante's voyage as a pilgrim, as well as the subtler, yet similarly heroic feat of Dante's writing process and rhetorical trajectory.

The work is not without its points of contention. Greater attention to the physicality and spatial descriptions with which the relationship between Dante and Virgil is depicted would have bolstered the arguments put forth in 'Virgil in the *Inferno*' and 'Ovid and Virgil in *Purgatory*'. These chapters examine fundamental moments of the *Commedia* that not only rely heavily on Virgil's presence and specifically accentuate the physicality of the relationship between Dante and his exemplary 'maestro' and 'autore', but also serve to proleptically announce Dante's insertion of himself into the pagan poets' ranks. Occasionally, while Webb rightly offers a Dantean justification for the open-endedness of some of Wetherbee's claims, *The Ancient Flame* often seems to hint at phantasms of arguments that never really come to fruition.¹³ For example, Wetherbee's frequent repetition of the terms 'alien' and 'alienation' in the first part of the book portends a possible line of argument that he does not fully take up in the latter part, even despite the relevance of historical and thematic examples of exile to many of the figures he studies. His preoccupation with valuing Dante's use of the classical poets as 'ideal', 'necessary', or 'effective foils'—which he stresses numerous times across the course of the book (14, 16, 17, in the first chapter alone)—and his reflexive association of anything sooty, foggy, murky or obscure with the 'smoky darkness of fallen Troy' are memorable, but slightly distracting quirks given the copious amount of repetition. Finally, although his conclusion does put 'poetry in perspective', as

¹³ "[T]o quote Dante's Peter, [...] it is better to 'err in opening than in keeping closed,'" Webb, "*The Ancient Flame*" (Review), 869.

he has proposed to do, it is hurried to the extent of seeming elliptical, which is very much in discord with the steadier pace and hermeneutical robustness of his seven previous chapters (145-268).

Although his analysis remains perspicacious throughout, Wetherbee's vaguer treatment of *Paradiso* and his rather laconic conclusion subscribe to its popular characterisation as the least accessible canticle.¹⁴ Yet the ineffability of Dante's metaphysical transhumanation and spiritual development are part and parcel not only of his sublunary experience but of his entire charted trajectory beginning from his infernal descent, and there is much for invested readers to appreciate in any of the canticles. Wetherbee's use of increasingly slippery terms—for example, his mention of 'a great deal of mythic history'—a heightened level of abstraction, and a certain rushed fullness in the second half of his last chapter, are slightly unsatisfactory given the analytical style of the rest of his text, redeemed somewhat by the pithiness of his final paragraph (276).

Nonetheless, *The Ancient Flame* provides an engaging and sparkingly original contribution to criticism of Dante and his sustained engagement with the thought and works of Virgil, Lucan, Ovid and Statius. Like Dante himself, Wetherbee offers readers a methodology built around resurrection and reverence. He disabuses what has typically been a more reductive management of the Poeti, and emphasises the intimacy of Dante's engagement with each of them. Wetherbee's own intimate approach to Dante's literary debts and the 'uniquely intimate relation' of Dante's poetry to that of his classical predecessors is invaluable. Not only does *The Ancient Flame* fulfil the promise of its title to shed new light on many of the long-standing traditional conceptions and popular assumptions regarding Dante's use of classical texts, it also illustrates how the sparks of these interactions illuminate the fertile intertextual topography of the entire *Commedia*.

* * * *

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¹⁴ Anthony Esolen calls *Paradiso* the 'least accessible' of Dante's canticles, while Robert Hollander writes in his and Jean Hollander's translation of the *Commedia* that '[o]ne finds few who will claim (or admit) that [*Paradiso*] is their favourite cantica'. *Paradise*, trans. by Esolen (New York: Modern Library, 2007), p. xii; *Paradiso*, trans. by Robert Hollander (New York: Doubleday, 2007), p. 2.