

DANTE'S STYLE IN HIS LYRIC POETRY, by Patrick Boyde. *Cambridge University Press*, ix + 359 pp. £6.

If Dante had died at forty the *Divine Comedy* would not exist, but as things are it is natural to regard his earlier verse and prose as mere prolegomena to the masterpiece. That is not however the point of view adopted by Dr Boyde in this brilliant study of Dante's pre-*Comedy* poetry; at least not explicitly. His aim is to define what is distinctive and personal in the style of this part of Dante's work, against the background of the Romance lyric generally and the thirteenth-century Italian lyric in particular. Hence of course his method is comparative. But the force and value and originality of this book lie in the thorough stylistic analysis of Dante's poems themselves. It is not often that one sees learning of a very special kind being applied to literature with such rigour—and, I would add, such success. The special learning applied here is Boyde's mastery of classical and medieval rhetoric; that formal school-rhetoric which so persistently and decisively influenced literary composition in Western Europe from classical times down through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance to the rise of Romanticism.

But what, it may be asked, has text-book rhetoric to do with poetry, or even with style, as these terms are understood (if that is the word) today? In his ample Introduction—which I confess I found hard going here and there, and not everywhere perspicuous—Dr Boyde makes a very good case for his thorough-going use of traditional rhetoric for an analysis which is evidently put forward as not only *historically* illuminating but also, and indeed chiefly, as a discovery of qualities in Dante's lyrics which are as actual now as they have ever been, simply because these lyrics are works of art (see Keats on the Grecian Urn). It is true that post-Romantic speculation about poetry is usually more interesting than anything Dante said on the subject: and that modern definitions of literary style—such as Riffaterre's, which Dr Boyde on the whole favours—are far more interesting than any you may find in the old books on rhetoric. This does not alter the fact that if what we want is not so much a theory of the essence of poetry or style as an objective analysis of literary discourse into its verbal and clausal constituents, then it is still to the old grammar and rhetoric that we must

turn; for in this respect they have never been supplanted. In saying this I am going beyond what Boyde actually says; though not, I suspect, beyond what he might wish to say. In any case, for his purpose of combining 'a study of Dante's rhetoric with a study of his personal style', it was enough to assure himself 'that *within its own limits* the original analysis of the constituents of literary or oratorical style was remarkably sensitive, coherent, logical and complete. The Greek grammarians and rhetoricians invented such names as trope, metaphor, synecdoche . . . apostrophe and prosopoeia; but they did not invent the linguistic or stylistic features that these designate. They found these features in existing texts of a literary character . . . even in popular speech. And their terminology was originally purely descriptive.'

Having inspected his tools, he gets down to work in the eight following chapters; which are a thorough combing and re-combing of Dante's eighty-nine lyrics (a misleading term but hardly avoidable) to bring to light and classify every significant example of the uses to which Dante put the linguistic and rhetorical 'variables' at his disposal: vocabulary and sentence structure; the tropes, especially metaphor; metre and rhythm; simile and *descriptio*; repetition and antithesis, etc., etc. The examination is meticulous, the scholarship impeccable, the exposition beautifully 'dry'. But of course all this is only preparatory to the exercise of critical judgment; to the comparing of pairs or groups of poems—of Dante's with those of his predecessors or contemporaries, Guinizelli, Guittone, Guido Cavalcanti; and within Dante's work, of the earlier *Vita Nuova* lyrics with the great ethical canzoni of 1304-5 and with the extraordinary sonnets for Cino da Pistoia. And about this, the crowning part of the book, I will only say that in my view its aim is certainly achieved; we really are shown what is individual and distinctive in Dante's lyric poetry; and also, very clearly, the phases of its development. Under our eyes the outline emerges, gradually but distinctly, of the Middle Ages' most original artist in the vernacular. This is a very good book and it will have, I think, deep and lasting effects; and not only in the field of Dante studies.

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