

PREFACE

Misguided though he was by the pre-humanist stirrings that circulated in the scholarly milieu of his day, Giovanni del Virgilio is responsible for two eminently accurate observations regarding his illustrious correspondent: in the verse epistle that initiates their correspondence he calls Dante a "most free judge of poets," and in his responsive eclogue he hails him the next Vergil, or indeed Vergil reborn (*Egloge* I, 19; III, 33-34). If the first of these labels, Dante *ensor liberrime vatum*, provides the starting point for this study, the second illuminates its goal, which is to trace, by deriving the implications of this censorship, the itinerary Dante designs for himself, the self-definitions that take him from being the *primo amico* of Guido Cavalcanti to being Giovanni's *Alter . . . aut idem*—the new Vergil.

The self-reading that this study aims to delineate is built upon Dante's reading of others: the poets of the *Comedy*. These poets, sign-makers, are themselves transformed into signs in the crucible of Dante's text; like the souls in the heaven of Jupiter, who obligingly form a sentence of thirty-five letters for the pilgrim to read (thus confirming the identity of souls and signs), the poets of the *Comedy* constitute a carefully fashioned narrative that may be deciphered and read. We begin with the observation that they are differentiated by Dante according to genre. The epic poets, Vergil and Statius, move in geographic and discursive space, i.e. physically and in their discourses, which cover a broad range of topics from the nature of free will to the generation of the human soul. Lyric poets, on the other hand, are restricted in both these spheres, more confined than their brethren in their movements and in their speech, since

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their discourses generally reflect their primary poetic concerns on earth.

An attempt to draw significance from Dante's treatment of the poets in his poem necessarily begins by investigating his most overt treatment of himself as poet, in the *Comedy's* three autocitations. Thus, Chapter I deals with Dante's retrospective appraisal of earlier poetic selves; Chapter II charts the intricate maze of his relations with vernacular precursors, while Chapter III traces his handling of classical antecedents, especially Vergil. Since the focus of this study is dictated by Dante's placement and treatment of the poets within his text, it does not seek to be a comprehensive catalogue of the *Comedy's* sources; the intertextual currents of the *Comedy* are explored in detail, but always with the goal of illuminating less Dante's poets than Dante himself, the only poet present from the poem's beginning to its end, its textual alpha and omega. In short, this is an inquiry into Dante's beliefs on textuality: its limits, purposes, and—most crucially—its relation to truth.

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DANTE'S POETS
TEXTUALITY AND TRUTH IN THE *COMEDY*