

*La materia e la forma della 'Divina Commedia': I mondi oltraterreni nelle letterature classiche e nelle medievali.* By PIO RAJNA. Ed. by CLAUDIA DI FONZO. Preface by FRANCESCO MAZZONI. Florence: Le Lettere. 1998. 381 pp. 60,000 lire.

The name of Pio Rajna (1847–1930) is familiar to all those acquainted with the world of Italian literary criticism. Pupil of Alessandro D'Ancona, member of the so-called *scuola storica* which prevailed in Italy in the years surrounding the turn of the century, and popularly known by his own description of himself as an *indagatore d'origini* for his work on Dante, Ariosto and others, Rajna's contribution to the study of the great works of Italian literature cannot be underestimated. This posthumous publication of his first lecture course, given in Milan in the years 1873–1874, is therefore of particular interest.

There has always been a certain amount of mystery surrounding Rajna's early work on Dante. The correspondence between himself and D'Ancona, some of which is published for the first time in the present volume, shows that he intended to write these lectures up in the form of a book. That never happened, although he did publish a rather dense lecture on the subject given at a conference in Florence in 1891, and the reason would seem to be the publication in 1874 of D'Ancona's own *I precursori di Dante*, also following a conference paper. D'Ancona breaks the news of his intentions rather apologetically in another letter included here. Yet in this volume we have a series of eighteen lectures that tackle the subject of the narrative background to Dante's representation of the other world at a level of detail which has been equalled since only by August Ruegg's two-volume study *Die Jenseitsvorstellungen vor Dante und die ubringen literarischen Voraussetzungen der 'Divina Commedia'* (Einsiedeln-Cologne: Benziger, 1945), and which remains of considerable value today. Obviously Rajna lacked access to the modern editions of many of the texts which have appeared since, and the evident to and fro of books between himself in Milan and D'Ancona in Pisa makes one appreciate the relative bibliographical luxury in which we live now. Criticism of the relation between the *Comedy* and earlier medieval representations of the other world has moved on, and Di Fonzo includes a helpful bibliographical update to take account of this, but apart from the historical interest of the present publication, which is considerable both for those who take an interest in the work and development of a great literary critic and for those who follow the fortunes of schools of criticism as they wax and wane, the lectures in themselves still offer a useful overview of the otherworld tradition before Dante. Written for oral delivery, they are shorn of much of the rhetorical elegance of the published writing of the time, and are clear and accessible to the modern reader. Perhaps the most useful part of the work is that devoted to the Classics. Before accepting the post in Milan Rajna was teaching Classics, and his treatment of the classical texts shows a depth of critical appreciation not commonly found amongst scholars of vernacular literature.

Rajna's lecture course has been preserved amongst the papers which he left at his death to the Biblioteca Marucelliana in Florence. Attention was drawn to its existence by Francesco Mazzoni at a conference on Pio Rajna held in Sondrio, the city of his birth, in 1983, and it is here edited by Claudia Di Fonzo, pupil of Mazzoni as Rajna was of D'Ancona. Mazzoni's preface, which outlines the history of the course and the original reasons for its non-publication, is itself dedicated to his mother Giuseppina Mazzoni Rajna, last of the direct descendants of Rajna; so the book has a pleasing family tone to it, a tone I, who also studied briefly under Mazzoni in Florence, am happy to perpetuate here. Claudia Di Fonzo precedes the text with a discussion of Rajna's work in the context of the criticism of the preceding years, of the biographical events surrounding it, of Rajna's own motivation for

writing, and with an appendix containing examples of the correspondence between Rajna and D'Ancona.

The lectures themselves survive in a flow of continuous prose, with marginal annotations and many corrections and abbreviations which make them difficult to read at times. From this material Di Fonzo has produced a clear and readable text supplemented by footnotes giving additional references and bibliographical information. As published here it is divided into sections, not according to Rajna's rather arbitrary lecture divisions, but according to the subject matter. This also makes it much more accessible.

The course begins with a discussion of Dante's knowledge of other languages and literatures, from which it moves on to a general exploration of the kind of relationship it is appropriate to postulate between the *Comedy*, compared by Rajna to a great river, and any of the many tributaries which have flowed into it and whose waters now form it. The bulk of the course is taken up with a chronological exploration of the other world in classical, Judaeo-Christian and later medieval literature, beginning with Homer and ending with the *Vision of Tundale*, and dotted throughout with comments highlighting similarities with and differences from the *Comedy*. In contrast to many of his immediate predecessors, for whose over-enthusiastic claims to have found specific source texts, for the *Inferno* in particular, he shows scant respect, Rajna is both thorough and balanced in his study of the previous representations of the other world, concluding that 'la *Divina Commedia* e i suoi materiali mi paiono aver presso a poco i rapporti del corpo umano e del cibo: il corpo è tutto costituito di sostanze venute dal di fuori; ma quelle sostanze si sono scomposte e ricomposte nel suo interno, e non sarà davvero merito loro, bensì dell'intima forza vitale, se sono andate a costituire un'armonia di membra e di forme, che fa meravigliare il riguardante' (p. 293). This is the position adopted by those critics who have taken up the subject of the relation between the *Comedy* and previous representations of the other world in recent times, and which is due in large measure to the robust common sense first brought by Rajna to this subject a century and a quarter ago.

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