In his *Life of Dante*, which in its first version runs to some 30,000 words, Giovanni Boccaccio, writing in Italian, tells of the poet’s ancestors, birth, early studies, love for Beatrice, marriage, political career, exile, death, burial, appearance, and character. After a long digression on the nature of poetry, he considers each of Dante’s works. Here, for the first time in European literature, is a full-length biographical presentation of a culture-hero, one who, struggling through all difficulties, attains artistic triumph:

Neither amorous desires, nor tears of grief, nor household cares, not the tempting glory of public office, nor miserable exile, nor insufferable poverty, could ever by their power divert our Dante from his main intent, that of his sacred study. For as will be seen later when separate mention is made of his works, in the midst of whatever was most cruel of the aforementioned troubles, he will be found to have employed himself in composition.2

For Boccaccio this was clearly a work of major importance; between 1351–52 and 1370 he produced no less than three versions of it.3 Yet though modern scholars have considered many aspects of his study – the motives for its composition, its value as a guide to key changes in interests and sensibility between the generations of the two men, and its

* I must acknowledge the encouragement given to me by Kenneth Hyde who, with characteristic generosity, read and commented on a larger study of which this material formed a part.


2 Trattatello, 457 [T], expanded in B and A (509–10).

reliability as a record of Dante’s life\textsuperscript{4} – they have by and large neglected the role it has played in the history of biography and, more particularly, literary biography. Accordingly, in an attempt to consider some part of that subject, this essay seeks to set the \textit{Life of Dante} within such traditions of biographical writing as already existed at the time Boccaccio composed it.

One starts with the recognition that before Boccaccio, excepting only the field of hagiography, in which one Italian had already achieved a decisive influence,\textsuperscript{5} Italians had hardly contributed anything to the genre. One finds works, like Galvano Fiamma's \textit{Opusculum de rebus gestis ab Azone, Luchino et Iohanne Vicecomitibus} or Gerardo da Maurisio's \textit{Cronica Dominorum Eccelini et Alberici fratrum de Romano}, whose titles might seem to promise biographies. But on examination any biographical impulse behind them, any interest in character, proves so weak that they can only be considered as traditional chronicles structured around the individual names. So too such collections of lives of popes or of archbishops of Milan and Ravenna as had occasionally appeared resolved themselves into mere histories of the papacy or the respective sees. Twelve or thirteen years before Boccaccio finished his first version of the life of Dante, Petrarch had begun writing a work which he called \textit{De viris illustribus}. This was designed to present the lives of twenty-one Roman and some other non-Roman heroes, and among the sources drawn upon was indeed the Roman biographer, Suetonius. However, on completion, this emerged not at all as a series of biographies but as what Petrarch himself later and correctly characterized as a \textit{liber historiarum}. Petrarch's principal source was Livy and under Livy's influence the book became a simple sequence of historical narratives.\textsuperscript{6} Accordingly, Boccaccio stood alone in Italy in having produced a biography of a layman. More remarkably, in widening attention to medieval Europe as a whole, it can be seen that all biographies of laymen which had been written took as their exclusive subjects kings, princes, or great political figures. Here is the first extended biography of a poet.

From a modern vantage point, at first sight, this originality requires no explanation. The emergence of the first pre-eminently great Italian poet, it might be thought, ensured, as it were spontaneously,


that he should be celebrated in this way. This answer is unsatisfactory.
Chaucer died in 1400: the first brief memorials of his life were produced
by the antiquary John Leland in the first half of the sixteenth century in
pages which were not published until the eighteenth. The first life of
Shakespeare was written by Thomas Fuller in his *Worthies of England*,
published in 1662. I call it a ‘life’. In fact it consists of 300 words in
which we are told three things: first that Shakespeare was born at
Stratford-on-Avon; second that he lacked learning; and third that he
died in sixteen-something-or-other – the date is left blank on the page.
In Europe as a whole, that is to say, for a long time, the need for any full
lives of writers was by no means felt. The very existence of the life of an
author presents, after all, a problem, namely: why should it ever be
written? One can see the need for a life of a king or a political figure;
without it memory of his deeds will perish. One needs the life of a saint
in order to learn of his miracles and be inspired by stories of his
asceticism. In the same way, too, one could justify that ancient genre,
the lives of the philosophers, in that, rightly or wrongly, we tend to feel
that a man’s views are validated or invalidated by the quality of his life.
When, from the biographical elements in the *Phaedo*, we learn of the
last days of Socrates, we turn with a livelier respect to consider his
teachings on immortality. If, on the other hand, we give more credence
to the account offered by Aristoxenus of Tarentum – a work which
portrays him as a perverse lecher, ill-tempered, avaricious, and a
bigamist to boot – we may think it better to stay with that Stoicism
which Aristoxenus himself recommends. Other classical genres present
more difficult problems. Why should anyone want to read the lives of
the grammarians and rhetoricians, or, still more boring, the lives of the
historians? Perhaps because here we are being offered exemplars of
heroic dedication to learning?

When we come to lives of poets the problem becomes more acute,
for there is a real sense in which any biographical discussion distances
us at once from all that is important about them: not what they did but
what they wrote. ‘Biographies of writers are always superfluous and
usually in bad taste’ (W. H. Auden). Poets themselves have continually
reworked the topos that it is their own works which are their memorial:

```plaintext
Dear sone of memory, great heir of Fame
What need'st thou such weak witness of thy name?
Thou in our wonder and astonishment
Hast built thyself a live-long Monument.
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Since the eighteenth century, of course, the question has found an
answer, at least among some people. What is sought from the life of a

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Shakespeare: ‘Thou art a monument without a tomb.’
poet is the source of his creativity, the link between the individual and what he actually wrote. Yet this is something of which the Middle Ages knew nothing. In the quotation in my first paragraph it can be seen how Boccaccio wrote of Dante's civic patriotism, his political and social commitments, his suffering as an exile. All these are considered, essentially, as obstacles to the completion of his work. Obstacles which, such was his innate greatness, he was able to overcome. There is nothing here of our contemporary belief that it was precisely these things which were indispensable elements in the making of the Commedia.

Those things, in fact, which induced Boccaccio to embark upon the composition of so original a theme – his need for a defence of poetry, his wish to justify the previous generation with its different interests and sensibilities to his own generation – have been discussed in recent years by many scholars and can be passed over here. I shall consider instead simply the biographical traditions upon which Boccaccio could draw. In all I would distinguish four among them. First and most important was that of classical literary biography which, born in fifth-century Greece, had then been absorbed by Rome. Giuseppe Billanovich has already considered this influence upon Boccaccio and I have very little to add to his account. None the less, for the sake of completeness, I summarize his findings. The greater part of classical biographical material had perished with the end of the ancient world. Other parts of it were to be recovered only after Boccaccio's death. Still, Boccaccio knew something of this material. Around 1360 he transcribed the life of Terence, ascribed to Suetonius or Valerius Probus. On other occasions he copied Suetonius' life of Valerius Flaccus, and the so-called Berne life – in fact it consists of only some 150 words – of Virgil. He certainly knew two other brief lives of Virgil, one generally ascribed to Suetonius and the other largely though not wholly derived from Donatus. The tradition which Boccaccio met here was, to our eyes, strange. Professor Lefkowitz, in her recent study of the biographies of the Greek poets, has convincingly argued that 'virtually all the


material of the lives is fiction'. They are largely based upon very strained interpretations of their author's works. They include those stock narrative or anecdotal features and conventional characterizations typical of many genres of classical biography. Some of these, such as portraits of future greatness or prodigious displays of intelligence, seem designed to portray their subject in an heroic light; others, showing domestic folly or professional mishap, perhaps seek to reassure the reader that their subject is human.

Many of these elements are to be found in the ancient lives of Virgil. One has to think of Boccaccio reading these as one who is seeking from the ancients, source of all literary skill, knowledge of how to write a biography. These customary classical themes would have to be introduced in order to give an air of continuity with the classical world, to show Dante as the reborn Virgil of the modern world. Accordingly, Suetonius has Virgil's mother dream, in pregnancy, of a laurel bough; so too does Dante's mother in Boccaccio's Life. The lives of Virgil described how his works had been dedicated to three men: the *Bucolics* to Asinus Pollio; the *Georgics* to Maecenas; the *Aeneid* to Augustus. It followed that the three parts of the *Commedia* had to be dedicated to three men. Since Boccaccio assumed (in fact, mistakenly) that Dante was a Ghibelline, it seemed appropriate to claim that the three parts of the *Commedia* had been dedicated to the three great Ghibelline leaders of his own lifetime: the *Inferno* to Ugguccione della Faggiuola, Lord of Pisa; the *Purgatorio* to the Marquess Moruello Malaspina; the *Paradiso* to Frederick III, King of Sicily. Again, Boccaccio's chronology for the writing of the *Commedia* - begun in 1300, completed in 1321 - may be, as Billanovich has suggested, influenced by the Donatus Life of Virgil. Here we are told that the *Eclogues* were written in three years, the *Georgics* in seven, and the *Aeneid* in eleven. Three plus seven plus eleven equals twenty-one, and it could be that it is for this reason that Boccaccio ascribes twenty-one years to the writing of the *Commedia*. In a similar way Servius' *Life of Virgil* shows the poet as having studied at various Italian centres - at Cremona, Milan and Naples - before going abroad to sit at the feet of teachers in Athens. Boccaccio, not to be outdone, has Dante study in the university of Bologna - which might just be possible - and then at Paris, which seems improbable.

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16 P. Herde, *Dante als florentiner Politiker* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1976), particularly 43–53.

17 Billanovich, 'La leggenda dantesca', passim.

18 Ibid., 109, n.1.


Boccaccio here revives then the tradition of classical literary biography which had died out with the fall of the Empire. There were other more recent models too. These were the *vidas* or biographical notices, and *razos* or commentaries on poems which were sometimes attached to manuscripts of the troubadour poets writing in Provençal. There survive today some 225 of these *vidas* and *razos*, dealing in all with 107 poets. Normally they are extremely brief: ‘Marquess Alberto was of the family of the Marquesses of Malaspina. He was a valiant man, generous, courteous, and instructed. He well knew how to make couplets and *sirventes* and songs’. Taking that example, one wonders whether one can discern here the origin of the whole tradition of literary biography, whether in Greece itself or in medieval Europe. Normally the classical lives are said to derive from funeral orations. It might equally be possible that they originate in sentences like these whose function is that of an introductory cough, an overture which quietens the audience down in preparation for the minstrel’s performance. At the same time they offer an explanation, before recital of a poem, of who the author was and, sometimes, in what circumstances he wrote it. It is a tradition still found on BBC Radio 3 where the announcer does not simply say that we are now to hear Mozart’s Symphony K425 but has to add that it was composed while Mozart and Constanze were enjoying the hospitality of the Counts of Thun, that it was first performed on 7 November 1784 in the Concert Hall of Linz, and so on. Introductions of this type tend quite frequently to incorporate mythic elements inserted to arouse interest, and designed, above all, to persuade the audience not to leave. So it was with the Provençal *vidas*. In the life of Sordello of Mantua, for instance, we learn how the troubadour was commissioned by Ezzelino da Romano and his brother to steal their sister away from her husband, the Count of San Bonifaccio. Or, again, in the life of Guilhem de Cabestanh of Roussillon, which extends to about 2,500 words, we learn how the minstrel had seduced the wife of his lord and how the lord, in revenge, had killed him and had his heart served up as a meal to his guilty lady. Any expansion of the basic introductory cough, as I think of it, generally leads to a brief historical romance constructed from the poet’s verse. This Provençal tradition was still strong in Italy during Boccaccio’s youth and Boccaccio certainly knew of the *vidas*, for he took over the tale of Guilhem de Cabestanh and retold it as the ninth

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22 Boutière and Schulz, *Biographies*, 559.
23 ibid., 562–5.
24 ibid., 530–55.
25 So, for instance, the *vida* of Bertran de Born (ibid., 65–139) was incorporated in the Italian thirteenth-century *Novellino*, ed. L. di Francia (Turin: Unione tipografico-editrice torinese, 1930), 38–42 (nos. xix and xx).
story of the fourth day in the Decameron. It is unlikely, however, that they had much influence upon him as a biographer, except, perhaps, in suggesting to him, once again, that truth was not the primary purpose of a literary biography.

He would reach a similar conclusion from another and much more popular genre of the middle ages, that of lives of the saints. Boccaccio is rarely thought of as an exponent of hagiography but it was something with which he was familiar and to which, indeed, he turned his hand. In the autumn of 1361, Petrarch, then working on his De vita solitaria, wrote to Boccaccio, asking for information on Saint Peter Damiani. And at this Boccaccio exhumed a life of the saint written by Giovanni da Lodi, freely rewrote it with the aid of other information, and sent it off to his friend. From the lives of saints one learnt the importance of miracles as registering divine approval. And so two miracles are placed in the Life of Dante. Both harmonized very well with a classical literary motif in which a work of genius, threatened with destruction, is saved for posterity by a fortunate last-minute intervention. So, for instance, in the Donatus life, Virgil is said to have asked on his deathbed that the Aeneid should be burnt. The work, however, is preserved from the flames at the command of the Emperor Augustus. The first miracle which Boccaccio associates with the Commedia occurs with Dante's exile from Florence in 1302. At that time, according to Boccaccio, Dante had written the first seven cantos of the Inferno. He was forced to leave them behind in his precipitate flight, and so, for many years, abandoned his poem. 'But even as we certainly must believe that Fortune can work nothing contrary to what God ordains . . . so it happened that some one . . . found the seven cantos that Dante had composed.' There follows a mass of circumstantial detail: the work is finally identified as being, probably, by Dante, and is sent off to him. Dante, seeing it, remarks that he had abandoned the project, 'but since Fortune has unexpectedly restored the work to me . . . I will try to recall the original idea, and proceed accordingly as grace shall be given me."

This extraordinary story – particularly striking is the thought of Dante groping to remember the original idea of the Commedia – was perhaps invented by someone other than Boccaccio. If so, he fell upon it eagerly. It was useful to him, not only in showing how, against fortune, the Divine Will had come to the aid of the poet, but also in explaining that long twenty-one year gap he had postulated between the beginning and end of the poem. That within those lost, and then

27 Vitae Vergilianae, 9.
28 Trattatello, 482–4 [T], 525–7 [A and B].
29 It seems to originate from the temporal retrogression, unique in the Commedia, between the end of canto vii and the beginning of canto viii, allied (as Boccaccio stresses at this point) to the word 'seguendo' in Inferno, viii, 1.
refound, seven cantos, supposed to have been written before the exile in 1302, there appeared matter referring to events after that date, he, for the moment, ignored. When, towards the end of his life he delivered his commentary on canto VII of the Inferno, he discusses the problem but simply shrugs it off as insoluble. The second, and still more spectacular, miracle occurs posthumously. Dante dies in 1321 with the last thirteen cantos of the Paradiso unpublished. His children and disciples search feverishly for them but in vain. In despair his sons decide to finish the work themselves. Eight months after the poet's death, however, Dante's son, Jacopo, near the hour of dawn, announces to one Pier Giardino, whom Boccaccio names as his source, that in sleep his father has appeared to him, 'clad in the whitest raiment and with his face shining in an unwonted light' and has led him to the spot where the missing cantos are hidden. Thereupon Jacopo and Pier Giardino set off for the place indicated by the dream, and, sure enough, find what they have for so long been seeking.

Hagiography, too, then, plays its part in the making of the Life of Dante. There was, again, another biographical or pseudo-biographical tradition in the middle ages. This had its origins in the classical world and is indeed generally subsumed under classical literary-biography proper. However, although there are overlaps between the two genres, it seems helpful to distinguish this by the term 'biobibliography'. This had its origins in the Alexandrian Library of the third century BC. Its purpose was to provide a bibliographical guide and catalogue of those writings known to be in existence. Callimachus of Cyrene, for example, who died around 235 BC and who may have been head of the library, drew up lists of literary celebrities and their works, with, wherever possible, brief lives of the authors, in, it is said, 120 volumes. Apart, it seems, from their primary bibliographical purpose, these works provided a chronological framework of literary history through which the librarian could guide the scholar. Thanks to St Jerome, who in 392 AD produced 135 lives of distinguished ecclesiastical writers, this genre – unlike that of the classical literary biography proper – had survived the fall of the ancient world.

St Jerome's book was immensely popular in the Middle Ages, found in over 150 manuscripts. It was continued by Torquatus Gennadius at the end of the fifth century (about 100 manuscripts extant), by Isidore of Seville in early seventh-century Spain (37 manuscripts), and by Sigebert of Gemblou, Honorius of Autun, the Anonymous of Melk, and Henry of Brussels in...
the eleventh and twelfth centuries. It was carried on by Petrarch's friend, the Veronese judge, Guglielmo da Pastrengo, in the fourteenth century, and by the Abbot Trithemius of Sugenheim at the end of the fifteenth century in Germany. The lives one is offered are often inaccurate and always terse. I cite one of St Jerome's:

Trypho, pupil of Origen, to whom some of his extant letters are addressed, was very learned in the Scriptures and this many of his works show here and there, but especially the book which he composed *On the real Heifer* in Deuteronomy, and *On the Calves*, which with the pigeon and the turtle-doves. were offered by Abraham as recorded in Genesis.

End of Life of Trypho. It seems little enough to us, yet clearly it meant a lot to monastic culture. What we have here is a brief bibliographical reference set in time together with an indication of the author's orthodoxy ('pupil of Origen' yet 'very learned in the scriptures').

Before the thirteenth century no writer lacking in immediate Christian relevance appeared in their pages. Their overwhelming interest was Christian learning, theology, and philosophy. From their concern with these subjects, indeed, was to come about the occasional reappearance in the later middle ages of two separate biobibliographical genres cultivated among the Greeks, namely the lives of the philosophers and the lives of learned men. In itself, then, this genre had no direct influence on Boccaccio's *Life*. On the other hand, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries one can see two offshoots and developments of this tradition which reveal something of a new interest in literature as such and serve as a background to the *Life of Dante*. The first is found in the work of the Italian Dominican, Giovanni Colonna, who died in 1343, the friend who accompanied Petrarch in his intense, nostalgic walks through the ruins of Rome. In his *Concerning Illustrious Men* there appear - sometimes with citations from their works - articles on some 350 Latin and Greek authors, men like Cicero and Caesar, Terence, Pliny, and Quintillian, of whom ninety per cent lived before 600 AD and of whom nearly a half were pagans. The origins of this

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36 Boccaccio had read, in these genres, the *Compendioquum de vita et dictis illustrium philosophorum* of Johannes Gallicus: G. Auzzas, 'I codici autobiografici: elenco e bibliografia'. *Studi sul Boccaccio*, vii (1973), 15.

work, it is clear, are to be found in Vincent de Beauvais’ *Speculum Historiale*, presented by the author to King Louis IX of France in 1244.\(^{38}\) Here material from the biobibliographical genre is taken over, expanded, and incorporated within a universal history. The work was specifically structured as a chronologically ordered collection of *flores* (excerpts from authors’ works) ‘chosen from nearly all those whom I have been able to read whether from our own Catholic or from gentile philosophers, poets, and historians’.\(^{39}\) So, for example, Book VII, which treats of the era of Caesar and Augustus, contains within its 129 chapters, among many other matters such as the birth of the Virgin and the Incarnation of Christ, quite long discussions of Cicero, Valerius Maximus, Marcus Varro, ‘his books and sentences’, together with the poets, Horace and Ovid. This is very remarkable; for the first time, here is an account of the past which gives an important weight not simply to political and religious events but also to literature.

These works provided some sort of precedent for Boccaccio’s biography of Dante. Yet they are very different. What we have here are not so much lives as lists of works fleshed out with quotations and occasional biographical details. They are not designed as formal works of biography and they treat of authors who wrote not in the vernacular but in the learned tongues. There was only one man who had preceded Boccaccio in writing the life of a poet in Italian. This was Giovanni Villani, in the chronicle of Florence which he put together in the 1330s and 1340s. Here – perhaps influenced by Vincent de Beauvais? – Villani included under the year 1321, the year of Dante’s death, a chapter of some 500 words on the poet himself. He explains why he does this:

> This Dante, because of his knowledge, was somewhat haughty and contemptuous and disdainful and, almost in the manner of an ungracious philosopher, he could not easily speak with laymen. But for his other virtues and the knowledge and worth of so great a citizen it seems suitable to give him perpetual memory in this our chronicle, although his noble works left to us in his writings give true testimony of him and honourable fame to our city.\(^{40}\)

With these almost apologetic phrases – curiously combined with the notion that he is giving Dante ‘perpetual memory’ – Villani is inaugurating a new tradition. It was one which was to be fully put into

\(^{39}\) For Colonna’s debt to Vincent, G.M. Gianola, ‘La raccolta di biografie come problema storiografico nel *De viris* di Giovanni Colonna’, *Bullettino dell’Istituto Storico Italiano per il Medio Evo*, lxxxix (1980-81), 510, 526, 536-7.
effect, after Boccaccio’s death, by Giovanni Villani’s nephew, Filippo. Between 1381 and 1382, Filippo Villani wrote his Concerning the Origin of the City of Florence and its Famous Citizens, in which the lives of some forty Florentines, the overwhelming majority of them writers – Dante, of course, and Boccaccio himself appear among them – are presented as a testimony to the greatness of the city. It was the starting-point for all those many later similar collections of authors’ lives in which the criterion of selection was to be birth in a certain city or state, with the implication that their writings reflected immense credit upon that state.

Yet from this tradition, too, Boccaccio’s life stands apart. This is not simply because a main burden of his work – particularly in its first version – is to show how the life of Dante throws not fame but infamy upon Florence. It is much more because, though taking hints from the biobibliographical, troubadour, hagiographical, and, above all, classical traditions, Boccaccio has created something entirely new: he is writing the life of a poet at a length never before attempted and he is writing it as a most skilfully formed work of art. As such his is a key work in the development of humanist civilization. The life of a poet can be all too easily dismissed – and by poets themselves – as a futile enterprise. The historian, again, may be tempted to think that a work so remote from the virtues of positivist history can have nothing to offer. Yet in erecting this monument to a poet, Boccaccio was asserting, not indeed for the first time, but more emphatically than had ever been done before, that the culture-hero was superior to the political hero. It is the note which sounds in one of his invectives against the Florentines; the heroes of high wealth, blood, and station here yield to ‘your most precious citizen, your chief benefactor, your supreme poet’. What Boccaccio was saying here became a leading motif in Italian humanist thought. ‘The three crowns of Florence’ were not to be three saints or politicians but Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio himself. It was never a unanimous verdict. To seek fame with the pen rather than in the field of action was, after all, in many ways an un-Roman aspiration. But it was a strong tradition, and from Boccaccio’s expression of it the whole genre of Renaissance literary biography was to derive.


42 Trattatello, 460–2 [T]; omitted in A and B.