The eighteenth century holds a unique place in the history of Dante studies, especially with regard to the critical evaluation of the Divine Comedy. After the sensitive exegesis undertaken in the fourteenth century and on the strength of the humanist evaluation of Dante as poet and philosopher in the fifteenth century, the Cinquecento focused attention on the linguistic and grammatical aspects of the Comedy. Many critics condemned the work because it did not conform to their interpretation of Aristotelian poetics. Moreover, Dante was again accused of heresy and his poetic style was branded as representative of Italy’s Dark Ages. Ostracism of the poet continued in the seventeenth century, although Dante’s work inspired a number of imitators, not to mention the enterprising activities of the Accademia degli Apatisti in Florence, which continued to foster interest in the poet in various quarters. The negative judgement expressed by the more vociferous seventeenth century critics was related to Dante’s ‘indecorous’ use of language, as compared to the civility and elegance of Baroque poetic accomplishments. Opposition to the poet was also stirred by the publication of the Crusca dictionary in 1612, which openly asserted the superiority of Tuscan. In countering this view, some critics launched a personal attack against Dante, even going so far as to cast aspersions on his moral integrity.

The Settecento’s preoccupation with the formal aspects of Dante’s work was carried on into the eighteenth century, when the demands of good taste and decorum were frequently emphasized. However, the diversity of response to the dictates of Arcadia reflected the shifting attitudes of the age of Enlightenment. In the early part of the century, opposition to Dante was very much in evidence, especially because the Settecento poets were considered to be technically superior to their predecessors. Gradually, new attitudes took shape and the critical perspective of writers was extended to considerations of the moral, philological, historical and even biographical elements in Dante’s work. The burgeoning of critical awareness was accompanied by new endeavours in serious textual criticism, as well as by the preparation of annotated editions and the reappraisal of the poet’s minor works.

The second half of the century was also characterized by polemics, notably the publication of Bettinelli’s Lettere virgiliane, which in turn prompted Gozzi’s memorable defence. Although Bettinelli’s Lettere were viewed as a fierce attack on Dante’s Comedy, a closer look reveals that his motives were not entirely those of condemning or dismissing Dante’s work. Bettinelli’s scorn was primarily levelled at Dante’s emulators, the upholders of tradition who, by their continued acritical veneration of the poetic idols of the Trecento, were impeding the development of a modern literary style. Bettinelli believed that the Arcadian heirs needed to follow a different approach; one which was in tune with the needs of their rapidly-changing, cosmopolitan society. Pedantry and erudition in poetry were part of a bygone era and Bettinelli’s refractory stance was a deliberate attempt to liberate Italian writers from the shackles of the past and so foil the guardians of traditional authority. Encouraged by the polemical spirit of the French writers, Bettinelli took issue with a number of the problems current in that time of change. However, in his attempt to stamp out obsequious Dante imitators, he openly derided the Florentine poet and so invoked the wrath of Dante supporters of the calibre of Gasparo Gozzi, Giuseppe Baretti, and, to a lesser extent, Francesco Algarotti. Indeed, the volatile Bettinelli was angered by Algarotti’s lack of support for his planned demolition of the paragons of Italy’s literary hierarchy. Whilst other critics spoke out against Bettinelli’s work, Algarotti demonstrated a somewhat ambivalent attitude towards the shifting critical alliances that surrounded him. Unlike Gozzi, he operated within the safeguards of
non-committal critical exposition and this was interpreted by Bettinelli as an affirmation of Algarotti’s fear of radical change. Although Bettinelli dismissed any suggestion that Algarotti recognized the importance of Dante’s contribution, the Venetian critic could not ignore the impact of Dante’s poetry. No matter how reconducible in meaning and composition, the Comedy remained the inimitable “primogenito” of Italian poetic development and, as such, its author warranted the respect and loyalty of Italian men of letters. At the same time, other less flattering comments by Algarotti suggest that the solicitous designations of “padre” and “re” were platitudes to offset public interest in his real views.

Algarotti’s shortcomings in the critical arena were due to his inability (or perhaps unwillingness) to provide conclusive assurances of his literary and artistic credence. For example, in the Saggio sopra l’Architettura (Bologna, 1756) and the Saggio sopra la Pittura (Bologna, 1762), he downgraded the efforts of artists from the “tempi ancor gotici”, yet he lauded Dante’s incisive poetic voice: “Dante non prese già egli a imitare le particolari espressioni di Virgilio, ma il suo modo risoluto e franco di poetare”.3 Bettinelli’s interpretation of the rules governing good taste demanded that the old be sacrificed for the greater glory of the new. Algarotti’s “accommodating” stance constituted a transgression of these laws and prompted Bettinelli’s unflattering portrayal of him in Lettere inglesi, VII (1766). According to Bettinelli, Algarotti lacked the conviction to express his true beliefs for fear of sparking public controversy:

Ma basta avere quel che in inglese voi dite si hanne self-consciousness, che si dirrebbe coscienza del vero oppure senso intimo del vero, e ognun vede la verità. E chi è quell’uomo ragionevole che non senta e non vegga l’asprezza dello stile di Dante, la mostruosità dei suoi quadri, la lunghezza inoffribile delle sue visioni, la stravaganza delle sue immagini ed invenzioni, l’oscurità delle sue allusioni, l’orrore delle sue rime e l’irregolarità del suo poema? I ciechi e zelanti adoratori di Dante niente veggono di questo, e voglion sol che i vegghino maravigliose bellezze. Mi sembra ciascun di loro un don Chisciotte che assalta i viandanti.

Algarotti’s essays reveal that his appreciation of
Dante was not based on unqualified zeal. He worked from the assumption that Dante’s linguistic craftsmanship (“padre della nostra poesia e formatore della lingua”) was an integral factor in the development of Italian literature. The Comedy represented an important break from the Latin tradition and in his Saggio sopra la necessità di scrivere nella propria lingua, Algarotti commended Dante’s use of the vernacular:

Né già lo stile di Dante sarebbe così vivo, che si trasforma nelle cose medesime s’egli avesse disteso il suo poema in latino.

He also credited Dante with having attained "(le) altezze più sublimi dell’arte". The accolade continued in the Saggio sopra la lingua francese: "meritamente di nostra lingua [Dante] è chiamato padre e re". Yet such endorsements were not unconditional. Algarotti placed Dante within an historical context and the poet’s liberties with language were only admissible in view of the evolving state of the Italian vernacular. He did not believe that similar licence should be granted to modern-day writers:

Noi avremmo il gran torto a volerlo imitare, non essendo altrimenti permesso a’ giorni nostri di far quello che concedere potevansi per avventura al padre, al re, al creatore della nostra lingua.

In effect, Algarotti was not entirely convinced by Dante’s linguistic devices and found occasion to admonish the poet’s unconventional semantic "tailoring":

spesse volte facea i vocaboli dire nelle sue rime altro che quello ch’erano appo gli altri dicitori usati di primere: cosa troppo strana e difficile.

Nevertheless, he could not ignore the poet’s trenchant, energetic style, which was a measure of his honesty as a poet-craftsman. In a letter to the marchese P. Manara, Algarotti compared styles of painting to styles of versifying; for example, he equated Virgil with Tintoretto and Homer with Leonardo. Applying the principle ut pictura poesis, he concluded that Dante’s poetic style in the Comedy was comparable to Virgil’s in its ability to create an immediate visual impact: “in quattro pennellate ti forma una figura”. From this it is evident that Algarotti recognized the intensity of Dante’s characterizations. He admired the "spirito fiero e bizzarro" of the Florentine poet, but felt that his major work was clouded by the presence of "sottigliezze teologiche" which minimized the overall effect. Furthermore, he considered Dante’s inclusion of scientific learning as burdensome for his readers:

le droghie ch’egli avea alle mani nà così odorose sono nè così saporite come erano quelle di Virgilio.

Clearly, Algarotti experienced difficulties with Dante’s epic work, but refrained from participating in the quarrels which arose. Although Bettinelli was disappointed in Algarotti’s lack of support, other writers, for example Baretto, continued to view him as an advocate of Bettinelli. Certainly Algarotti admired aspects of Dante’s poetry, but he did little to defend the poet when the denigrators spoke out. In fact, it was his own good name that he was most eager to defend. Conversely, Savero Bettinelli was credited with the Settecento’s most spurious display of anti-Dantesque sentiment. His lively outburst in the Lettere virgiliane promoted widespread discussion of the major Italian poets and Dante’s work became the subject of much critical conjecture. However, Bettinelli’s hastily composed Lettere were not intended as an unqualified assault on Dante himself. Written at the request of the Venetian nobleman Andrea Cornaro (who required a preface to the Versi scolti), the concept of the Lettere virgiliane arose from Bettinelli’s desire to stir the self-complacent attitude of members of certain literary coteries. His target was slavish imitation, “il vezzo gruschevole delle frasi e delle forme rare e antiquate”, which threatened the development of new literary modes. Whilst Bettinelli recognized the "anima
grande" behind a number of episodes in the Comedy, he deplored the imposition of the entire text upon scholars and writers, believing that the mores of a bygone era should not dictate the activities and taste of present-day study. In the guise of "Nestore della letteratura del suo secolo", Bettinelli outlined his premise in the "Codice nuovo di leggi del Parnaso italiano". The first rule stipulated: "Non si mettano giovani allo studio di poesia come le gregge". Furthermore, he derided the adherents of Arcadia and the Accademia della Crusca, calling for the abandonment of their membership as a necessary prerequisite for the revival of a new Italian poetic tradition:

L’Arcadia stia chiusa ad ognuno per cinquant’anni, e non mandi colonie o diplomi per altri cinquanta. Collegisi intanto colla Crusca in un riposo ad ambedue necessario per ripigliar fama e vigore. Potranno chiudersi per altri cinquant’anni dopo i primi, secondo il bisogno.

Academicism and the vacuous emulation of the great works of the past would render Italy’s writers obsolete; Bettinelli was eager that his country participate in the literary movements taking shape in other parts of Europe, particularly France. Sadly, the iconoclastic abbe offered no concrete proposals or solutions in lieu of the activities of the "danteggianti" and their cohorts. His spirited censure was not an in-depth critical exposé. Bettinelli set out to be provocative and in this respect his "pamphlet" succeeded because its frank, cajoling manner made it a catalyst for public debate and the airing of personal views. Not surprisingly, in the wake of the furore over the Lettere virgiliane, Bettinelli’s promotion of modern-day verse writers in Versi sciolti was obscured.

Bettinelli’s diverse interests in Italian culture (via teaching, literary criticism, poetry and theatre), attested to his sincere desire to enhance Italy’s reputation on the European scene, but his outspoken comments earned him the title of acid-tongued critic. His interest in Dante (an interest which spanned at least fifty years of literary activity), was not merely the whim of a tempestuous denigrator. In some instances, his assessment of Dante offered new vistas; evidence that he had given considerable thought to the Trecento poet and his work. Already in an earlier work, Le raccolte, a poem written in 1750 on the occasion of Andrea Cornaro’s marriage, Bettinelli had raised the question of Dante’s relevance to the Settecento. He deplored the "rancidum" present in the Comedy, but also praised Dante, "ch’ogni verso ha d’oro fino":

Il cantor immortale d’Ugolino
E cigno in Elicon, chi no ‘l riespe?
Ma Dante, ch’ogni verso ha d’oro fino,
Dante, che tutto disse, e tutto seppe,
Che cantò in senso altissimo divino
Pape satan, pape satan aleppe,
Dante dottor, teologo, e profeta
Fa ognor più d’un ridicolo poeta.
Senzà natura il seguon mille stolti,
Ch’han repleta di bolge ogni canzone,
E fuor che introque, e lo mia duca, e i coltì
Del bel paese là dove il si suona.
E le berze, ed il seno, e peggior molti
Tai rancidumi, non han cosa buona:
Ma perché al peggio s’appigliar di Dante,
Credono aver di lui ambio e portante.

In his notes, Bettinelli tells us that his quarrel was with "coloro, che abusav dell’autorità...di Dante per riputarsi buoni poeti", that is, poets who misused their talents by duplicating the style of the "divino Poeta". The crude transfer of phrases and terminology from another era was damaging to the poetic development of the writers of the day, especially since the language employed by Dante was still evolving. Always one to prompt replies, Bettinelli’s views received an answer in Parere, o sia lettera da un’amico del Friuli, ad un’amico di Venezia sopra il poemetto intitolato Le Raccolte, con la risposta dell’amico di Venezia all’amico del Friuli. The reply from the members of the Accademia dei Granelleschi ("amici del Friuli")
attempted to justify Dante's linguistic licence on the basis of the exigencies of his time and the state of the Italian vernacular:

Le voci antiche di Bolge, introque, Duca, berze, e simili di Dante non lo chiamerei il peggio di Dante. Che forse in Dante questo non è neppur male. Erano allora voci dell'uso, o non tanto disusate, quanto ora sono; che delitto era adoperarle? o come esser può che fossero male, perché ora buone non sono dell'uso?24

The Accademia dei Granelleschi, whose members included Baretto, Gasparo Gozzi and his brother Carlo Gozzi, aimed to "tener fermo lo studio in su gli antichi maestri".25 The conservative attitude of the Accademia members was at odds with Bettinelli's deflation of traditionalist ideals. They believed his methods in encouraging young writers were unrealistic and misguided: "Le Raccolte son mala cosa...perché mettono in corpo il bacco di poetare a ogni saputello".26 Likewise, Bettinelli viewed their approach as confining because it perpetuated outmoded forms. If Bettinelli's comments in the Raccolte foreshadowed his growing dissatisfaction with certain elements in the Italian literary scene, then the Lettere virgiliane were an emotionally charged synthesis of that discontent.27 The action of the Lettere virgiliane takes place in Elysium, where the souls of the Greek and Latin poets of classical antiquity decide to investigate the work of the "dio de' poeti", Dante Alighieri. Having secured a copy of the Divina commedia, Virgil begins to read Inferno, but is soon overcome by boredom.28 His companions are in agreement, and Ovid concludes that the cantica rivals his description of Chaos at the beginning of Metamorphoses. However, the episodes concerning Francesca da Rimini and Count Ugolino are isolated from the rest and praised for their beauty and expressiveness. Various attempts are made to translate the Ugolino episode into Greek or Latin, but the poets relinquish the task declaring that the power of Dante's language in this episode defies translation:

For the remainder of the poem, the verdict is decidedly negative and Virgil, only too painfully aware of his guiding presence in the poem, is particularly vocal in his criticism of the troublesome Pilgrim:

Ognun confessò che uno squarcio si originale e si poetico, per colorito insieme e per passione, non cedeva ad alcuno d'alcuna altra lingua, e che l'italiana mostrava in esso una tal robustezza e geneva in un tuono così pletosò che potrebbe in un caso vincere ogni altra.29

Bettinelli's response to poetry is dictated by his impressions concerning style which, in his view, is the major consideration for every poet: "lo stile è quel, poi, finalmente, che fa un poeta".30 A poet's style is emblematic of his true ability and, according to Bettinelli, each work should be a paragon of harmony and elegance, where visual images are stimulating and the choice of rhyme, metre and semantic construction renders the work pleasing to the ear. Perfect symmetry ensures that as the poem moves towards its conclusion, it continues to reach greater heights of beauty.31 These were the criteria which Bettinelli used when examining Dante's work, and in all of the above-mentioned categories, the Trecento poet's contribution was deemed unsatisfactory. Marred by "incoltezza deforme", Dante's epic structure was considered too far removed from the Settecento's refined tastes. According to Bettinelli, Dante's readers were not only faced with an array of fragmented encounters, but the poem was
absurdly long into the bargain:

E questo è un poema, un esemplare, un'opera divina? Poema tessuto di prediche, di dialoghi, di questioni, poema senza azioni o con azioni soltanto di cadute, di passaggi, di salite, di andate e di ritorni, e tanto peggio quanto più avanti ne gite? Quattordici mille versi di tali sermoni, chi può leggerli senza svenir d'affanno o di sonno? 33

For Bettinelli, doctrine and pedagogy had no place in a time of progressive re-evaluation and, consequently, he allocated the Comedy a place among the "libri d'erudizione". Only a small portion of the text was spared: "cinque canti incirca di pezzi insieme raccolti". 34

Given the atmosphere of turbulent change and Bettinelli’s serious commitment to literary endeavor, his outburst was no merely capricious exercise. 35 He attempted to give some direction to his fellow writers - points of reference from which they could establish a modern repertoire and dispel those habits which turned the Arcadian disciples into "tante anime copiatrici e servili". 36 In meeting the needs of the new century, Bettinelli attempted to formulate a workable basis for literary development and consequently doctrinal works such as the Comedy were excluded. In carrying out his remedial task, he did not dismiss Dante himself as being unworthy of esteem and respect. On the contrary, he was full of praise for the Florentine:

Io per me non so abbastanza stimare quest'uomo raro, che il primo ha osato pensare a un poema e dipignere arditamente tutti gli oggetti della poesia in mezzo a tanta ignoranza e barbarie onde il mondo traeva il capo... Dante è stato grand'uomo a dispetto della rozzezza de' suoi tempi e della sua lingua. 37

In Bettinelli’s estimation, the Comedy bore witness to an age lacking in refinement. Although he credited Dante with extraordinary verve and imaginative power, he believed that the Comedy offered limited scope for the modern age:

A Dante null’altro mancò che buon gusto, e discernimento nell’arte. Ma grande ebbe l’anima, e l’ebbe sublime, l’ingegno acuto e fecondo, la fantasia vivace e pittoresca, onde gli cadono dalla penna de’ versi e de’ tratti mirabili. Anzi giudico che da questi venuto sia l’abuso d’imitazione tra gli italiani. La sua Commedia, mostruosa per altro, presenta qua e là certe immagini così forti e terribili, de’ terzetti si bene organizzati, che t’incantano in guisa da non sentir l’asprezza d’altri dodici o venti che vengon dopo. 38

The sepulchral preoccupations of the pre-Romantics and the infernal bolge of Dante’s imagination were not considered advantageous to Italy’s emergence as an influential literary force in the modern world. Grisly tales from a mythical primeval world could offer little to a society enjoying the fruits of man’s intellectual advancement and scientific discovery. Italy’s scholars needed to explore themes reflecting the progressive mood of the times. This was particularly crucial as far as language was concerned, and Bettinelli was adamant that every effort be made to broaden the possibilities for individual achievement and original contribution — qualities which he admired in Dante, even when deploiring what he considered as the poet's use of rancidumi. In the Lettere inglesi, Bettinelli made reference to "le parole di Dante, che paiono a noi rancide, oscure, antiquate". 39 The argument appeared in later works, and in the Discorso sopra la poesia italiana of 1781 he questioned the severity of Dante’s treatment:

Lo strumento primario dovette esser la lingua, che infatti cominciò con qualche durezza ed asperita de’ costumi a formarsi in man di Dante, quasi temendo che, se tutto ad un tratto divenisse gentile, non potesse ottenere l’intento. 40
In Il Risorgimento d’Italia dopo il Mille of 1773, Bettinelli generously praised Dante’s poetic ability, but hastened to remind readers that elements of his poetic language were incongruous in the Settecento. The Comedy was incomparable in its day (“la più armonica ed elegante [poesia] che allor fosse nota”), but by modern standards the text was unduly obscure because the language contained many Latinisms, “che a noi la deformano”. By contrast, Petrarch, “il primo vate”, was considered the supreme model of elegant poetic style. To make matters worse, Dante’s subject-matter was ‘encyclopaedic’, which invalidated his poetic achievement from the outset. In 1800 Bettinelli returned to Dante in the Dissertazione accademica sopra Dante. The scathing wit of the Lettere virgiliane was absent, but the critic did not relinquish his view regarding the study of the works of the past, nor did he admit Dante to the ranks of the “bello ideale”. Bettinelli was convinced that the “dureze” and “stravaganze” of Dante’s poem made his text inaccessible to modern readers.

A contemporary of Bettinelli, Giovanni Francesco Galeani Napione supported this view. He, too, was sceptical of the adaptability of a “Gotico Poema” from the “secolo semibarbaro”, and in a letter to Bettinelli he addressed the question of Dante’s erudition:

Il saper suo è un sapere tenebroso, ed astruso, onde, nella parte scientifica, è il Poeta de’ Matematici, e de’ Metafisici soltanto. L’Astrologia, la Logica, la Metafisica Aristotelica, la Teologia, segnatamente come studiavasi, a’ tempi suoi, son lo scoglio della sua Musa.

Galeani Napione disapproved of the influence of Gothic and Medieval lore in the Settecento, and he criticized pre-Romantic writers like James Macpherson, author of Fingal. In his Vita dell’abate S. Bettinelli, Galeani Napione spoke of "l’antica ferocia Ghibellina di Dante" and he supported Bettinelli’s attempts to disseminate good taste. He believed that man’s cultural activities should attest to the pursuit of the "bello ideale", and that this was not possible in literature as long as writers looked to material inspired by the "tempi dei canti ferali dei Bardi".

Bettinelli’s openness was a clear sign of the Settecento’s ebullient challenging spirit. Although his attempts to encourage the use of free verse were overshadowed by the belligerent remarks in the Lettere virgiliane, the controversy had important repercussions for other writers who came to Dante’s defence. The two parties unwittingly caught up in the dispute, Algarotti and Frugoni, did not lend their support to Bettinelli and were keen to deflect responsibility for the unfavourable comments on the poet. They did not engage in open debate with Bettinelli, and, although Frugoni maintained a traditionalist outlook, his contribution to Dante studies was minimal. Walter Binni speaks of “la generica e vaga ammirazione degli accademici tradizionalisti” and admittedly, few Settecento scholars possessed the acumen of Vico. Nevertheless, admiration for Dante went beyond token civility and praise and Bettinelli’s views were not shared by all. For one writer in particular, the abbé’s outburst provided the fuel for one of the century’s most coherent defences of the “divino Poeta”.

In 1758 Gasparo Gozzi, a prominent member of the Accademia dei Ganelleschi, published his Giudizio degli antichi poeti sopra la moderna censura di Dante, attribuita ingiustamente a Virgilio (otherwise known as the Difesa di Dante), in answer to Bettinelli’s Lettere virgiliane. However, the Bettinelli-Gozzi exchange was more than a question of honour or an exercise in verbal thrust and parry. In synthesizing his ideas on the poet and his works, Gozzi succeeded in focusing serious critical attention on the issue of Dante’s validity in the Settecento. He also defended the traditions established by the Ganelleschi members and his correlation of observations far exceeded the modest offering of the Accademia (the Parere o sia lettera scritta da un amico dei Friuli). Gozzi’s "dramatis personae" in the Difesa include the sixteenth century Italian writer Anton Francesco Doni, Virgil, Juvenal, Aristophanes, Trifone Gabriello, author of the Annotazioni sul Dante (c.1540), and other “shades” in Elysium. In a letter to the Venetian editor Antonio Zatta, Doni explains that
the arrival of the Veronese scholar Filippo Rosa Morando in Elysium augurs ill for Dante because the young man's shade brings news of Virgil's supposed censure of the poet in the Lettere virgiliane. Doni decides to investigate and, after careful reading of the text, is full of praise for the "vivacità" and "leggiedria" of the Versi scolti, but reacts violently to the suggestion that Virgil is the author of the defamatory letters. A series of dialogues ensues in which the shades of other poets express their views on the matter.

In his prefatory remarks, Gozzi addressed a number of issues, and demonstrated remarkable perception in his outline of how the study of Dante should be approached and carried out; for example, he encouraged the parallel study of the poet and his time, believing that Bettinelli's negative adjudication of the Comedy was the result of a cursory reading of the poem. Again and again, the critic stressed the need to read the entire text, for instance, "Come mai può dare giudizio del filo e della regola d'un poema chi l'ha letto a lanci e a salti?" and "se il Censore l'avesse letto tutto, avrebbe pensato come noi; perciocché non si può così da un poco squarcio conoscere la bellezza e bontà del tutto".

Gozzi maintained that by familiarizing oneself with all the elements in the Comedy, Dante's ordered structure and his syncretizing principles would become apparent. He saw a relationship between the setting and the action, "oltre all'unità dell'azione forma anche unità di loco", and felt that the entire Comedy took its inspiration from the unifying presence of Beatrice. Woven into the Pilgrim's itinerary was a vast store of sights, sounds and colours which demonstrated the poet's versatility, and only a close study of all three cantiche would awaken the reader's response to Dante's subtle artistic skill:

Ma che vi dirò io della varietà usata da lui?
Io non vi posso ogni cosa ridire, se voi non leggete e rileggete l'opera stessa.

In Gozzi’s view, the Comedy was not the only testimony to Dante’s creativity. The poet’s minor works, the Vita nuova and the Convivio, were also fundamental to an understanding of Dante’s poetic doctrine. Through them the poet expressed dimensions of his civic and literary persona, and therefore any critical undertaking needed to demonstrate an awareness of Dante’s public and personal concerns, as well as the customs, political questions and literary preoccupations of the day. Although Gozzi himself admitted to being guided by a "lume naturale" (his Difesa was by no means an incontrovertible critical exposition), he offered sound advice and incentives for further study of the poet’s work and his era:

Oh quante facilissime verità n’uscrirebbero,
chi avesse cominciato dall’esaminare gli anni
in cui finse Dante il principio del suo}
viaggio, il Giubbileó di quell’anno, che fu
nel 1300; il suo desiderio di fare vita attiva
nella repubblica, le cagioni della sua uscita
di Firenze; e sopra tutto chi avesse bene
studiatò la sua Vita nuova, il Convito, e le
altre opere di lui, nelle quali l’animo suo si
vede, ad ogni passo, al vivo dipinto, e come
pensava, e qual cuore fosse il suo, e in qual
guisa intorno ad ogni scienza riflessesse. Ma
noi abbiamo gli orecchi dilicati oggidì: e quel
poco di ruidedezza antica, che a’ tempi
suoi ruvidezza non era, ci fa fuggire gli
alti suoi libri, e per poche parole, che ci
offendono, non ci degniamo di vedere mille
buone e belle cose, e dette ancora così
nobilmente, che in qual si voglia secolo non
poteammo essere espresse con eloquenza più
grande.

When Dante’s text was examined in accordance with the state of the vernacular in the Trecento, his controversial deployment of language was vindicated. In Gozzi’s estimation, the imposition of eighteenth century norms upon a fourteenth century text was a futile exercise. Not only was Dante fully justified in his original use of material, but his achievement outstripped the efforts of the majority of his fellow
poets. Gozzi saw the realization of the three-part epic as a challenge to the poet's linguistic skills. When the poet's "fantasia" called for the harnessing of a rhetorical structure, Dante had the necessary skills to implement his design:

Quasi che la rima sforzasse Dante a stroppiare la geografia, e non si vegga sempre ch'egli obbligò la rima ad assecondare in ogni cosa il suo intelletto.

Such intellectual handiwork did not deserve the condemnation which Bettinelli unleashed, and Gozzi's protest was particularly creditable when we consider that his convictions did not simply echo those of his peers among the Granelleschi members, but rather, were based on his personal study of the poet.

Gozzi believed that the Commedia deserved the epithets of "divino" and "sublime", both for its original conceit, "andò così alto e così fuori d'ogni umano pensiero", and because of Dante's well-regulated presentation:

ha saputo con un capacissimo ingegno, dopo tanti, stati prima di lui, un'invenzione ritrovare originale, grandissima, darle regola d'arte.

In answer to Bettinelli's accusation of an "eterna vacuità", the Difesa argued that Dante's poetic invention was in evidence at every turn:"ha sempre il cuore del poeta in ogni espressione". Gozzi also paralleled the tenacity of Dante's artistic endeavour to the tenure of a staunch moral disposition: "quel grande, insuperabile affetto alla virtù". In effect, Gozzi felt that Dante's creative spirit was shaped by the circumstances of his poetic genius and by his moral virtue. Observations like this gave the Difesa a fresh quality and, often, the untempered sincerity of Gozzi's responses transcended the mechanism of a point by point rejoinder to Bettinelli's criticisms. For example, in "L'Orfeo, favola d'Aristofane intorno al buongusto di Dante", Gozzi attributed the Trecento poet with "buongusto universale". Elsewhere he alluded to "nobiltà" and the close rapport between "animo" and "ingegno". Dante was viewed as both a poet and a highly-motivated individual. One of Gozzi's enduring features was his ability to step outside the prejudices and conventions of his time and let the poetry speak for itself:

Dico dunque, o nobilissime ombre, che anima e sangue, per così dire, di Dante, finch'egli visse, fu un grande amore di se medesimo, il quale cotanto lo empié per tutto il corso della sua vita, che altro non volle, né poté udire, né vedere volentieri giuammi, se non quello che potea farlo risplendere come unico a' tempi suoi nel cospetto di tutte le genti. La quale abitudine d'animo se ad un mal verso è inclinata, spesso di gravissimi danni è cagione; ma all' incontro, indirizzata colà dove la bellissima faccia della gloria risplende, fa gli uomini atti alle grandissime imprese, et in ogni generazione di cose più altamente di tutti gli altri pensare.

The publication of the Difesa di Dante caused a stir among various literary coteries and proved an immediate success for Gozzi. During his career as a journalist, he had occasion to return to Dante, and his thoughts on the poet appeared in various issues of the Osservatore Veneto. On April 22 1761, for example, Gozzi spoke of the visual impact of Inferno and Purgatorio, "quelle turbolenze delle anime... quella nobile malinconia". On August 26 of the same year, he published a dialogue between Charon and Mercury which discussed the ineffectualness of present-day poets. A dialogue between Aristophanes and Mantegna appeared the following year (10 April) and a few days later, readers were treated to a discussion between Aristophanes and Petrarch (14 April). In this final dialogue, Dante was credited with the ability to forge striking poetic images, "li suoi colpi fieri e arditi", and although Petrarch was lauded for his "delineatizza", the author of the Canzoniere admitted that his poetic style could not
evoke the scenarios of Dante’s fertile imagination: “Pensa che il mio stile non avrebbe però potuto mai dipingere l’Inferno”.

Gozzi’s sensitive analysis offered new vistas for Dante enthusiasts, as well as providing a serious countermove to Bettinelli’s attack. In their own way, both critics helped usher in the new critical attitudes of the nineteenth century; Bettinelli by drawing attention to the inadequacies of his contemporaries and Gozzi by stimulating interest in the philological study of Dante’s major and minor works. All three critics, Algarotti, Bettinelli and Gozzi, shared the underlying belief that Dante’s text was inimitable. In Bettinelli’s acrimony lay a desire to improve Italy’s credibility on the European literary scene. In Gozzi’s critical approach lay the means for bringing that desire to fruition.

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NOTES

1. Giovanni Francesco Galeani Napione reviewing the confrontation in his Vita dell’abate S. Bettinelli (Venice, Zerletti, 1810), pp. 29-30, made the following observation: “Ma non fu solo il Gozzi a scandolezzarsi, ed a mostrarsi offeso, che si fossero trovate cose degne di biasimo in Dante. Un’Apologia di Dante in versi sciolti detto il Paradisi contro le lettere Virgiliane, coonestandosi col Bettinelli in un’annotazione, in cui suppone, che quasi totalmente da scherzo avesse Egli parlato”. The reference was to Agostino Paradisi’s “Epistola al canonico Gioseffo Ritorni sul poema dantesco”, in Memorie per servire all’Istoria Letteraria (1758), XII, pp. 473-78 (also published in Bologna, 1762, as Al sig. Can-Ritorni sopra

Dante. Versi scolti del Paradisi). Disapproval of Bettinelli’s criticism is shown by Johann Jakob Bodmer in Uber das dreyzache Gedicht des Dante (1763), for which see B. Croce, “Una difesa di Dante del 1763”, La Critica, 18 (1920), 306-II.


5. Venezia, Modesto Fenzo, 1758 (actually 1757), and Milano, Marelli, 1758.

6. His protest is recorded in a letter to Madame de Boccage (28th December 1758) printed in Volume I of Algarotti’s Opere (Palese edition, 1791).


11. Ibid.


14. Ibid.

15. "Al marchese Manara a Parma", in Lettere filologiche (Venezia, Alvisopoli, 1826), p.149. The letter is first published in Nuove memorie per servire alla istoria letteraria (1760), Vol. II and is included in Opere del C. Algarotti (Palese, 1791-94), Vol. X.

16. Lettere filologiche, p.154.

17. Whilst addressing himself to Voltaire, Baretto made the following remarks about Algarotti: "Il méprisait Dante, qu’il n’entendait guère plus que vous entendez Confucius...Mais à propos de ce Dante, que l’ignorant Algarotti méprisait si fort, vous nous assurez que les italiens ne le lisent plus. Savez-vous que cela est dit avec un petit peu plus d’impudence que de vérité?" Discours sur Shakespeare et sur monsieur de Voltaire" (1777), in Baretto, Prefazioni e polemiche, a cura di Luigi Piccioni (Bari, Laterza, 1933), pp.273-74.

18. Aronne Torre, "Le 'Lettere virgiliane' e la 'Difesa di Dante'", Giornale dantesco, 4 (1896), 146.


20. Ibid., p.682. See also Carlo Calcaterra’s spirited description of "padre Totila" in Il Barocco in Arcadia, pp.132-41, which incorporates two letters to Bettinelli from Alfonso Varano.


22. Ibid., n.8, p.74.

23. Published in Venice 1758 and included in the Tommasini-Mattiucci edition of Le Raccolte.


26. Parere, o sia lettera sopra il poematto intitolato 'Le Raccolte' scritta da un'amico del Friuli a un'amico di Venezia, Tommasini-Mattiucci edition, p.120.

27. "Con le Virgiliane la polemica alquanto svagata delle Raccolte trovava obbiettivi ben precisi"; Ettore Bonora, "L'abate Bettinelli", in La cultura illuministica, p.90.


29. Ibid., p.639.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid., p.640.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid.
34. Lettera IX, ibid., p.675.
35. In a letter to Fr. Benaglio (Paris, 4 September 1758), Bettinelli declared: "Le Lettere di Virgilio sono un capriccio, una pazzia, uno scherzo fatto per impegno, e abbandonato intieramente alle critiche ed ai furori dei cacoetici scrittori in sull'uscire d'Italia. Ciò dico a voi, che ad alcuno per verità noi direi, e mi tengo celato, come sono pentito dell'indulgenza soverchia. Mi fido del vostro discreto animo ed amico. Potrei aver dei fastidi". See Angelo Marchesan, Vita e prose di Fr. Benaglio (Treviso, 1894), pp.182-83.
37. Lettera II, ibid., p.641.
38. Lettera III, ibid., p.643.
40. Ibid., p.1069.
41. Il Risorgimento d'Italia negli studi, nelle arti e ne' costumi dopo il Mille (1773), op. cit., p.950.
42. Delle lodi del Petrarcha, 1786.
43. Dialoghi d'amore, 1796.
46. Frugoni was also mindful of the position held by Bettinelli in the Jesuit "Collegio dei Nobili". For a detailed discussion of their correspondence see Calcaterra, "La questione storica delle lettere virgiliane", pp.110-19.
47. Preromantismo italiano (Napoli, Edizioni scientifiche italiane, 1959), p.76.
50. Ibid., p.275.
51. Ibid., p.268.
52. Ibid., p.273.
53. Ibid., pp.274-75.
54. Ibid., p.239.
55. Gozzi's words to this effect can be found in the preface to the Difesa di Dante: "que' vocaboli, i quali sono da' suoi censori stimati forse i più rugginosi e i più rozzi, leggansi quasi tutti essere stati in uso fra gli scrittori de' tempi di Dante". See Scritti scelti di G.G., p.218. Gozzi also commented on the allegorical nature of the poem: "Le traduzioni e spiegazioni non sono necessarie al poema, ma a chi non ha conoscenza d'un linguaggio che s'usava ora fa trecent'anni, e della storia di que' tempi. E le interpretazioni delle allegorie abbisognano, perché il poema è allegorico, avendo sempre Dante fatto professione e detto egli medesimo d'aver scritto allegoricamente", ibid., p.247.
56. Ibid., p.241.
57. Ibid., p.255.
58. Ibid., p.214.
59. Ibid., p.217.
60. Ibid., p.214.
61. Ibid., p.288.
62. Ibid., p.260.
63. Published from 4 February 1761 to 18 August 1762.
64. Scritti scelti di G.C., p.454.
65. Ibid., p.590. Dante was briefly mentioned in an issue published on 2 June 1762, pp.591-95.

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