

Author: John Took. Princeton University Press 2020, 616 pp.

The book begins with a chapter of "historical considerations", which plunges us immediately into blood and passion, a story of murder both nothing and everything to do with Dante, 50 years before his birth. Then comes a chapter of "biographical considerations", which offers a sketch of Dante's life, although not in any conventional mould: it would take some work to pick out from Dante the details in my first paragraph and line them up in neat chronological order. Here we already glimpse Took's ambition to unpack the making not of Dante's life but of his inner self. Then follow 10 substantial chapters in three parts, from the early years leading to the writing of Dante's first great work, the *Vita nova*, to the middle years of the famed *Convivio* and then to the final years of the *Divina Commedia*, a journey in Dante's "commitment to the being and becoming of the anxious subject": that is, of understanding what it means to be truly human. (F: R. Moss, THE 12.03.20)

Asked why he has largely devoted his life to a single literary giant, Took responds: "T. S. Eliot used to say that when it comes to writing about great as distinct from lesser men, there is always a chance of finding something useful to say about them, for here especially there is ample room for manoeuvre." Dante's *Divine Comedy*, he goes on, works as "an essay in fundamental thoughtfulness". Although it apparently offers an account of a journey through the three realms of the afterlife (hell, purgatory, paradise), it "is at a deeper level concerned with the structures of human consciousness", and thus forms "an existential analytic preliminary" to engaging with whatever serious challenges we face on the plane of ethics and politics. (F: M. Reisz, THE 12.03.20)