

SECTION 2  
BOOK REVIEWS



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Abbiati, Roberto, and Simone Marchesi, *A proposito di Dante. Cento passi nella Commedia*. Rovereto, Keller editore, 2020. Pp. 252.

In their collaborative book, Simone Marchesi and Roberto Abbiati suggest a synecdochic approach to the *Comedy*, inviting their readers to view the poem with fresh eyes.

*A proposito di Dante* is the beginning of a conversation, one that is relaxed and friendly, as well as profound and full of unexpected detours. The *cento passi* are a selection of one hundred tercets from the *Comedy* accompanied by one hundred drawings, presented as windows into the whole poem. They are also one hundred steps, a stroll, a peripatetic exchange on topics such as life and afterlife in the Middle Ages, as well as timeless questions and reflections on the meanings of existence for men and women throughout the centuries. From the very beginning, the authors invite the readers to join the conversation: Simone Marchesi addresses them directly using the second person, and Roberto Abbiati shows Dante as a strikingly real figure, who gazes, gestures, and walks toward them from the front cover, asking them to read just a few of his verses.

Marchesi selected one tercet per canto, a challenge that allowed him to approach the even most suspicious and difficult reader with a Japandi-style layout: a minimalist, almost entirely white-page, on which the words sit comfortably on large, clean margins. Abbiati completed each tercet with a drawing, a sort of Instagram post reacting to a tweet. The commentary plays then its part: measured and self-contained, it dives deeply into centuries of annotations, *lecturae*, and scholarship, and surfaces again, condensed, concise, provocative. Bearing just one (key) title, one tercet, one image, and the textual comment, every double page takes the form of a modern emblem for the non-initiated reader. Visual and verbal elements complete each other and are accessible to those curious enough to take a look, progressing in linear fashion from cover to cover, jumping around, or resting on selected passages.

The authors succeeded in keeping the conversation light yet profound, and vivid throughout all the three realms. The black-and-white contrasts that characterize Hell soften gradually, and lighter shades make space for music at the beginning of *Purgatory*. Highlighting the novel geography of this third place in between Hell and Paradise, the authors transport us to other liminal places of our own time. While in the first canticle they invite the reader to

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undertake the journey, in *Purgatory* those of us who have accepted the invitation are traveling together. Later, in Heaven, Dante gradually disappears from the illustrated pages as he walks with us to the first spheres, and his absence from the illustrations establishes a more explicit contemporary engagement with the text.

Abbiati's drawing of Dante feels like a statue and a cartoon at the same time. He leans towards the first page from the right margin, for literally "the straight way is lost": his dramatic profile and tense hands show the readers his struggle upon finding oneself in a savage, dense, and harsh wood. Far away from the hieratic profiles we have learned to associate with the great poet, Dante's head and hands dominate the first images, and recur throughout the entire book, more often than any other image. If the readers think they have grasped Abbiati's version of the poet from the cover and the first illustration, they would be surprised, as Dante's hands and head metamorphose in the second, third, and fourth cantos, filling the gap between Dante and antiquity, and the divide between Dante's time and ours. While Virgil puts his hand on Dante's own, we enter the third canto and "the city of woe". Dante's readers will certainly remember the sign on the gate: "Justice moved my maker on high. / Divine power made me, / wisdom supreme, and primal love" (Hollander translation). Those who are unfamiliar with Dante's verses will be reassured that no prerequisites are necessary. Marchesi and Abbiati, with their two-word title and close-up of black and white hands grasping one another, lead us to focus on what Justice means to us as readers from the twenty-first century. Then, in the fourth canto, it is now Dante's head that transforms, creating an ambiguous image that combines opposites, dark and light, past and present.

The visual tradition of Dante's *Comedy* is almost as long as its textual one. The earliest illustrations appeared just a few decades after the poet's death, and all the manuscripts show a strong focus on one aspect that must have produced a considerable effect on the first readers: Dante the poet becomes Dante the character, and the readers are invited to follow him on the journey to the afterlife, and to visualize Dante's own vision. What did it mean, for a fourteenth-century reader, to follow this incredibly audacious katabasis: not that of Ulysses or Aeneas, but that of a contemporary individual? Not a predestined hero, but a Guelf who fought in battle; a Prior of the Florentine Republic sentenced to a life in exile and treated as a dangerous enemy to his homeland; a poet writing in the vernacular, whose growing fame had not yet crystallized his role as the father of

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the new Italian literary language. The first illustrations needed to insist, incessantly, almost obsessively, on this exceptional aspect, emphasizing the presence of Dante and Virgil as protagonists and eyewitnesses of this unprecedented journey. Printed woodcuts over the centuries, along with twenty-first-century illustrations, would often share this same focus. Abbiati, instead, seems to concentrate on Dante the poet, rather than Dante the character.

Abbiati's Dante is a canonized poet, wearing the laurel crown which he received only after his death, when he was called "supreme" and "divine". Nevertheless, his metonymical hands and his dramatic expressions are powerfully human. At times his body seems to be carved in a monolith, other times it looks like a two-dimensional puppet made of different pieces of fabric; and yet he walks the pages with pensive strides and sudden jerks and twitches, emphasized by foreshortened perspectives and unexpected angles.

Struggle, tension, rage, and darkness seem to prevail, as they should, in Hell. But in the eleventh canto, gazing at the starry sky reflected in the sketch of a human eye, the reader catches a glimpse of the luminous end that awaits. All the vulnerability of human nature and the inherent power of *sentire* and *intellegere* coexist in a small image, a synthesis of microcosm and macrocosm that anticipates the very essence of the journey as well as the last word of each canticle: "stars."

Marchesi's Dante is a poet we are invited to meet, forgetting for a moment his venerable grandiosity and the seven centuries that separate us, in order to get acquainted or re-acquainted with the *Comedy*. On the 700th anniversary of Dante's immortality, Simone Marchesi and Roberto Abbiati invite any and all readers to read and to imagine.

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Bregni, Simone. *Locus Amoenus. Nuovi strumenti di analisi della Commedia*. Ravenna: Longo, 2020. Pp. 248.

Il libro risponde criticamente a un saggio del 2004 (“Against Intertextuality,” *Philosophy and Literature*, 28), nel quale William Irwin invitava, in una forte reazione all’approccio critico fondato da Julia Kristeva e Roland Barthes, ad abbandonare l’intertestualità come metodo di indagine critica. Irwin, Bregni nota, scriveva da studioso di filosofia, con una prospettiva, quindi, diversa da chi si occupa di critica letteraria. Simone Bregni argomenta, al contrario, e da quest’ultima specola critica, che l’intertestualità è tuttora un approccio vivo e proficuo, offrendo una lettura del poema dantesco fondata proprio sulle dinamiche di allusione, citazione e imitazione che la *Commedia* dantesca intrattiene nei confronti della letteratura classica e biblica.

Dopo una breve introduzione ricapitolativa, che prende le mosse appunto dal saggio di Irwin, il primo capitolo (“Intertestualità, interdiscorsività e letteratura medievale”) getta le basi metodologiche per la trattazione della tesi dell’autore, fondata sulle importanti ricerche nel campo dell’intertestualità a partire da Julia Kristeva, Roland Barthes, Michail Bachtin, e per quanto riguarda più specificamente la letteratura italiana, Cesare Segre, Maria Corti, Stanley Benfell e Christopher Kleinhenz. Con queste autrici e autori, Bregni stabilisce un dialogo critico puntuale e complesso, avvalendosi—opportunamente—anche della critica americana.

Il secondo capitolo, “Paradisus terrestris – Loci amoeni imperfetti, *Inferno* IV e *Purgatorio* VII,” si addentra nel testo dantesco presentando la selva oscura come luogo letterario e simbolico opposto al giardino delle delizie. Di quest’ultimo esistono però varie versioni, nella tradizione letteraria e anche specificamente nella *Commedia*, a partire dal palazzo dei pagani virtuosi nel Limbo di *Inferno* IV e dalla valletta dei principi di *Purgatorio* VII. Bregni mostra in modo dettagliato e convincente come gli elementi costitutivi di questi luoghi letterari provengano a Dante tanto dalla traduzione bucolica greco-latina quanto da quella biblica, specialmente Genesi e Apocalisse. Si deve dissentire dall’affermazione che “[a]ll’interno del limbo il poeta ha posto un’oasi di quiete e serenità per le anime nobili dell’era pagana” (50), perché il testo di *Inferno* IV 26-28 dice chiaramente che se nel limbo i dannati non piangono, essi però sospirano fino a far tremare l’aria

per un dolore tutto interiore e psicologico (“non avea pianto mai che di sospiri / che l’aura eterna facevan tremare; / ciò avvenia di duol senza martiri”). Ma a parte questo, il capitolo argomenta con efficacia che l’intertestualità classica è volta a ritrarre un locus amoenus di una certa piacevolezza ma escatologicamente imperfetto, i cui limiti sono invece messi in evidenza dell’intertestualità biblica (58).

Il terzo capitolo, intitolato “Paradisus terrestris – Il paradiso terrestre (*Purgatorio* XXII-XXIII; XXVIII-XXXIII)” prende in analisi le sezioni della seconda cantica—compresi canti dei golosi—che presentano il mito classico dell’Età dell’Oro come dilatazione del significato allegorico del testo per mettere in evidenza, in contrasto, la verità rivelata dalle scritture sacre, sempre attraverso un sottile intreccio allusivo. Qui, Bregni estende le sue considerazioni alle relazioni intertestuali e interdiscorsive che la *Commedia* intratterrebbe (il condizionale è dettato dal dibattito aperto sulla questione, giustamente riconosciuto da Bregni) con il *Liber Scalae Machometi*, e a quelle, più solidamente accertate, con la tradizione romanza (la pastourelle cavalcantiana in *Purg.* XXVIII).

Un caso più specifico rappresenta la trattazione della processione nell’Eden, oggetto del quarto capitolo (“Paradisus terrestris - *Purgatorio* XXIX”), in cui l’autore si muove a partire dallo studio di Lino Pertile *La puttana e il gigante*, per distanziarsene progressivamente e considerare la processione—che Bregni definisce “sacra rappresentazione”—il compendio del cammino salvifico del pellegrino (120). L’autore rileva l’unicità e la singolare assenza di precedenti letterari per la “sacra rappresentazione” di *Purg.* XXIX, rintracciandone però alcuni elementi nel Testamento di Abramo, testo pseudoepigrafico del I-II secolo (123), e in un mosaico nella chiesa romana di Santa Prassede (129, nota 47), che costituirebbero quindi possibili intertestualità e addirittura intermedialità. Data l’insistenza dell’autore sulle espressioni “sacra rappresentazione” e “dramma sacro” (120-124), la trattazione di Bregni avrebbe forse potuto esplicitare ciò che comunque qui si intuisce fra le righe, e cioè che le fonti dell’ispirazione dantesca vanno oltre la sfera strettamente scrittoria, estendendosi alle arti figurative e alle esperienze teatrali e performative accessibili a Dante nei luoghi e tempi della sua vita. Ma d’altronde il fulcro del ragionamento di Locus amoenus rimane strettamente letterario, basato sulla relazione dialogica fra testi scritti, che diviene strumento ermeneutico e addirittura salvifico se “[l]’intertestualità, da parte dello scrittore, è strumento allegorico-drammatico; ma dalla parte del lettore si profila come strumento

ermeneutico, in quanto illumina e permette di chiarire il senso allegorico generale non solo di uno specifico passo, ma, in ultima analisi, del poema intero” (124).

Si prosegue con “Paradisus terrestris – *Purgatorio* XXX-XXXIII,” che sviluppa ulteriormente la tesi che l’intertestualità biblica, progressivamente superando per densità e per oscurità di significato, l’intertestualità classica, prepara la via al paradisus coelestis. Particolarmente suggestiva è la riflessione sulla drammatizzazione del battesimo nel Lete, che è, sì, un chiaro topos classico, ma in questo caso cristianizzato in funzione salvifica: non la vita va dimenticata nelle acque del fiume edenico, ma la “negatività della vita,” il che salvaguarda quindi la positività della vita terrena, preservata dall’immersione nell’Eunoè. L’effetto straniante del gioco intertestuale, e la necessità per il lettore di interpretare sulla base dei riferimenti intertestuali, conclude Bregni, avvicinano la narrazione dantesca alla letteratura profetico-sibillina.

Il sesto e ultimo capitolo “Paradisus coelestis. Il paradiso celeste e la beatitudine spirituale” ribadisce ed espande le conclusioni che l’intertestualità funge da strumento poetico, allegorico ed ermeneutico per orientare il lettore al senso ultimo della scrittura e della lettura: codificare e far recepire il messaggio di Salvezza del cristianesimo. Le ultime pagine di questo avvincente saggio argomentano dunque che per il topos del locus amoenus, Dante si avvale sia di fonti classiche e pagane sia di fonti cristiane (liturgiche, teologiche, e bibliche) e che queste due tradizioni sono impiegate con uno scopo ed un effetto precisi nell’economia testuale della *Commedia*. L’intertestualità con la letteratura pagana, sostiene Bregni, prevale nelle sezioni che evocano il paradiso terrestre, presentato come perduto e limitato, colmo di una piacevolezza ingannevole, di contro a quello celeste, vero traguardo escatologico dell’umanità (83). Diversi punti del poema richiamano il mito classico dell’hortus deliciarum, spiega l’autore, attraverso riferimenti intertestuali e interdiscorsivi: il limbo, la valletta dei principi e la cornice purgatoriale dei golosi, dove la presenza dell’albero rimanda al topos del giardino delle delizie. Al contrario, i rimandi alla letteratura cristiana mostrano invece come “attraverso un’intertestualità di tipo biblico, Dante stia additando al credente l’intera Rivelazione, il cammino di Salvezza” (112).

Le osservazioni dell’autore mostrano una certa finezza interpretativa e vanno anche oltre l’approccio strettamente intertestuale, proponendo analisi linguistiche e grammaticali volte a



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sottolineare, ad esempio, la strategia con cui il poeta invita l'immedesimazione del lettore nel pellegrino Dante/Everyman (109), o questioni filosofico-teologiche poste nei termini della scolastica medievale come quella del libero arbitrio (147-149). Solidi sono anche gli elementi di coerenza interna dell'argomentazione, basati sulla tradizione critica degli studi intertestuali sia teorici sia direttamente collegati al testo dantesco. Se qualche piccolo refuso rischia di confondere il lettore non specialista (zeia mania a p. 162, anziché theia mania come invece appare correttamente scritto a pp. 119, 183 e 217 nota 24), il saggio rimane uno strumento critico utile che rilancia convincentemente l'opportunità e l'utilità dell'approccio intertestuale nella letteratura medievale e in particolare negli studi danteschi.

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Pellegrini, Paolo. *Dante Alighieri. Una vita*. Turin: Piccola Biblioteca Einaudi, 2021. Pp. 246.

The past decade has seen a number of new biographies dedicated to Dante, especially more recently in the lead-up to the 700th anniversary of the poet's death. This tendency to biographize is particularly understandable in the case of a poet whose main works are all written through the lens of the first person and who repeatedly attempts to write and re-write his own poetic and individual history. The incidence of autobiographical material throughout Dante's production (and especially in his vernacular works) poses a problem for the modern biographer: to what extent is the poet himself to be believed? Is the material of autobiography transferable to biography, and indeed can a literary work be read as a source for biographical material? The major contributions to the genre, such as Marco Santagata's *Dante. Il romanzo della sua vita* (2012), Giorgio Inglese's *Vita di Dante. Una biografia possibile* (2015), and now most recently Paolo Pellegrini's *Dante Alighieri. Una vita* (2021), and Elisa Brilli and Giuliano Milani's *Vite nuove. Biografia e autobiografia di Dante* (2021) are in great part defined by their respective authors' willingness to take the author at his word (or lack thereof). This same issue has also recently been the subject of debate among scholars in the 2018 volume of *Dante Studies*. The scarcity of reliable sources related to Dante's life further compounds the problem, often leaving biographers with no choice but to make hypothetical inferences from the poet's own writings. In the introduction to his work, Pellegrini explicitly situates his biography with respect to those that have preceded it: having delineated the advantages and disadvantages of the more novelistic approach adopted by Santagata (and before him, Umberto Carpi, in *La nobiltà di Dante*) and the more philologically-oriented method adopted by Inglese, Pellegrini ends up siding largely with the latter. He explains that the attempt to see the *Comedy* as a direct reflection of historical and biographical realities constitutes a risky enterprise for the historian, given the oftentimes fragile link between the two. Consequently, Pellegrini stresses the need for external sources to confirm or confute hypotheses based on Dante's own literary production, and the result is a highly rigorous historical approach that, perhaps more than any other Dantean biography before it, aims to

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foreground both the sources that it employs and the work of the historian in piecing them together.

Pellegrini's book begins with a chapter on Florence in the 12th and 13th centuries, which aims to describe the fundamental political, social and cultural context that conditioned Dante's life and serves as a highly useful historical introduction for those less familiar with the period. The biography proper therefore starts with the second chapter, which describes Dante's Florentine period between 1265, the year of his birth, and his exile in 1302. Here, Pellegrini manages to intertwine personal and literary history, giving not only an account of Dante's youth but also of his literary production, most notably the *Vita nuova* and the poet's other *rime*. The largely literary focus of the second chapter yields to a more political one in the third, which traces the poet's involvement in Florentine politics and the events that eventually precipitated his exile. The first period of the poet's banishment along with the composition of the treatise *De vulgari eloquentia* and the *Convivio* are described in the fourth chapter, with Pellegrini arguing that Dante may have spent much of this time in Verona, where the first three books of the *prosimetrum* are likely to have been written. Dante's return to Tuscany and the beginning of the *Comedy* are treated in the fifth chapter, where the author deals with the legend surrounding the first seven *canti* of the poem (which, according to Boccaccio, were written in Florence) as well as the question of Dante's travels to Paris (considered unlikely by Pellegrini). Remaining true to the historical rigor that he displays throughout the volume, the author adopts a conservative approach to the poem's dating, limiting himself to establishing the *termini post quem* of individual *canti*, based on the historical events they refer to. Central to Dante's political views and activities is Henry VII's descent into Italy to be crowned Holy Roman Emperor, which occupies the entirety of Chapter Six. Pellegrini agrees with Petrocchi that Dante returned to Verona sometime around 1312, where under the patronage of Cangrande della Scala he would go on to write the *Purgatorio*, as well as part of the *Paradiso*. According to the biography, the composition of the *Quaestio de aqua et terra* and the *Monarchia* coincides with the end of Dante's sojourn in that city around 1320, before the poet moved to Ravenna. The final chapter is then dedicated in part to Dante's epistolary exchanges with Giovanni del Virgilio as well as to the poem's earliest dissemination by the poet's sons, Pietro and Iacopo.

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The portrait that Pellegrini paints is that of a particularly Veronese Dante, especially during the early period of the latter's exile. The biography also gives him the opportunity to weigh in on several key issues of authorship. Thus, following the opinion of Gianfranco Contini, the author argues for the attribution to Dante of the *Fiore*, and the same goes for the Epistle to Cangrande. As far as sources are concerned, it is of notable interest that throughout the biography Pellegrini lends particular credence to the testimony of Leonardo Bruni and Biondo Flavio (as Inglese does as well), though their temporal remove from Dante and the philological standards of the time may make them less trustworthy sources than the author assumes. But what is perhaps even more valuable than Pellegrini's *prises de position* is the transparency of his argumentation and his foregrounding of the sources he uses. One may agree or disagree with the conclusions he reaches, but his rigorous historical approach will no doubt be of great use to future scholars of Dante. The perhaps inevitable side-effect of this more philological method is that Pellegrini's biography lacks the novel-like fluency and readability of Santagata's. The work does not try to in any way psychologize Dante or paint a broader picture of him as a character, preferring instead to stick to whatever facts can be known or deduced from the material available. What Pellegrini clearly does do is attempt to strike a balance between reaching a scholarly audience and a broader one which may lack the former's expertise. In part, this work of mediation is accomplished via chapter sub-sections on broader topics such as the *stil novo* or Dante's minor works; while someone familiar with the subject can skip over them, they may prove beneficial to others encountering the poet's work for the first time. The biography's readability, even in its drier, more technical moments, is also undeniably an advantage in reaching a more diverse reading public. University students working on Dante will find Pellegrini's biography particularly useful, not only for the wealth of information it offers but also for its transparent historical methodology. For the general reader, it serves as an excellent counterpoint to Santagata's work, and will in all likelihood be preferred by those who favor a more philologically-oriented approach to Dante's life and works.

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