
This collection, the acts of conferences held at Notre Dame during the 1993-1994 academic year, includes an introduction by the editor followed by ten essays on Dante which are divided into three parts: “Poetics,” “Minor Works,” and “Reception.” The authors of “Poetics” are Professors Barański, Kleinhenz, and Mazzotta; of “Minor Works”: Cervigni/Vasta, Martinez, and Ascoli; of “Receptions”: Shoaf, Brownlee, Richardson and Vickers. The collection earns its subtitle, Current Trends in Dante Studies, largely on account of the new ways it presents of reconciling the claims of sensitivity and erudition. These readings are uniformly erudite (proof: one essay twenty-one pages long contains a further eighteen pages of footnotes), richly complex, and committed to the notion that extrapoetic texts can illuminate the meanings of the poem without despoiling it of its semantic richness; that is, they involve themselves in a dialectical play between formalism and historicism. The only overtly theoretical essay is that of Giuseppe Mazzotta. Although proponents of other recent trends might find these too mild and apolitical, one suspects that in thirty years this excellent collection will still be found cogent and illuminating. Editor Cachey has done his work well: this volume could serve as an example of what collections of acts should contain and the way they should be organized and presented.

In “The Poetics of Meter: Terza rima, Canto, Canzon, Cantica,” Zygmunt G. Barański studies Dante’s thematic use of the term canto “to draw attention to his use of the word” (4), deconstructing “its aura of self-sufficiency” (9). The “formal and ideological polyvalence of the canti is what distinguishes the ‘commedia’ from all other human books” (11). Barański proceeds to compare the structure of the poem with biblical structures. Christopher Kleinhenz claims, in “Dante and the Art of Citation,” that Dante’s text “contains the message that derives its moral and spiritual force precisely because it is rooted in and appeals to the authority of Holy Scripture, such that the Comedy itself becomes a sort of ‘new scripture’” (49). He goes on to provide some novel close readings of biblical allusions, foremost among them his reading of the visibile parlare of Paradiso 18. Dino Cervigni and Edward Vasta’s study, “From Manuscript to Print: The Case of Dante’s Vita nuova” reveals how profoundly Michele Barbi’s editorial interventions have influenced the hermeneutical and ideological issues in the work. “‘Nasce il Nilo’: Justice, Wisdom and Dante’s Canzone ‘Tre donne intorno al cor mi son venute’” by Ronald L. Martinez makes the points that Dante’s lady Drittura, which represents Dante’s situation, is strongly influenced by Boethius’s Lady Philosophy, and Drittura’s excursus on the Nile, in its manifold meanings, “unifies the formal values of the poem with the virtue that it celebrates, showing how the ‘architectonic’ virtues of justice and wisdom are ordered in harmony with the final telos of cosmic justice” (132). In “Palinode and History in the Oeuvre of Dante,” Albert Russell Ascoli supports his claim that Dante’s palinodes “are rhetorical-conceptual devices for containing and dominating the unruly differences of the self and of history” (159) by comparing the De monarchia with Purgatorio 16 to 27.
R. A. Shoaf in “‘Noon English Digne’: Dante in Late Medieval England” makes the Gawain poet a shrewd and sensitive reader of Dante the theologian. Thus Pearl becomes “Purgatorio” without the subsequent advent – the stream uncrossed – to Paradise” (197). Shoaf also offers a fascinating interpretation of Inferno 33, the Pilgrim’s apparent betrayal of the traitor Alberigo: “Here, in short, Dante insists that there is no a priori, immutable property of words: their property is a fiction agreed to [...] by the community, and it is the poet who on extraordinary occasion, must disturb the fiction, break the convention (contract), in order to establish anew what is proper to the word” (199). Danistas who have been influenced by Robert Hollander’s notion of “verbal figuralism” and the essays of Giuseppe Mazzotta will find this Hermogenic position a challenging one, if only because so many of Dante’s names – in particular those of Ciacco, Farinata and Pier della Vigna – seem to cry out “nomina sunt consequentia rerum.” Kevin Brownlee examines “Literary Genealogy and the Problem of the Father: Christine de Pizan and Dante” from a feminist perspective, arguing that “Christine’s representation of Dante as a prestigious literary father is linked to her deeply ambivalent representation of her own father in specifically Dantean terms” (206). He concludes: “The authorial persona which emerges from this autobiographical narrative is thus authorized in a variety of ways which simultaneously valorize her historically specific, gendered identity” (207). Brian Richardson’s article “Editing Dante’s Commedia, 1472-1629” reveals the economic and social factors influencing the choice of texts and the production of commentary on the poem. He is particularly useful writing on the effect of the Council of Trent on the poem’s history of publication. Nancy J. Vickers studies Peter Greenaway and Tom Phillips’ A TV Dante in “Dante in the Video Decade,” showing both the influence and the play of the photographic work of Edweard Muybridge in their work. Vickers performs something of a tour de force by locating a figural dimension even in such novel multimedia: the artists’ looping the repeated figures of Muybridge “assumes two thematically driven and radically distinct modes: the first enacts a diabolical repetitiveness of sin; and the second, a redemptive repetitiveness of divine intervention” (271).

Giuseppe Mazzotta’s study “Why Did Dante Write the Comedy? Why and How Do We Read It? The Poet and the Critics” encapsulates and makes explicit the major concern of the volume, poetic ontology: the relation between poetic and extrapoetic meaning, closed and open form, concerns I myself addressed some years ago in my book Shadowy Prefaces. Poetic ontology asks whether a quotation retains its original, extrapoetic meaning when it enters the Commedia; it asks where the locus of poetic value lies. By making the Commedia the arena for this struggle, Mazzotta sets himself in a tradition that includes Benedetto Croce and such American contextualists as John Crowe Ransom and Allen Tate. Mazzotta takes to task historicism’s manifold desire to reduce the poem to transparency – be it the transparency of the source, the idea, or that of Foucauldian historical discourse – in the name of a “philology of the imagination” (69). He then opposes “Dante’s sense of poetry as the infinitely open language of ambiguities and of the endless imaginative quest of infinity” to “critics’ and scholars’ search for definable quantities, precise categories, transparent referentialities” (76). Although these essays were read some years ago, I believe that the syncretistic – and finally Romantic – ambitions of Mazzotta’s novel essay underlie a powerful argument for the return – a very welcome return – to Dante studies of what has been unfairly dismissed as “esthetic criticism.” One reservation I have, however, which I am sure Mazzotta recognizes and will address in his future work, concerns the status of the
Paradiso. The Paradiso, to some degree, embodies the critical concerns he gives voice to, for it represents a critical act within the poem itself, standing to the Inferno as criticism to poetry. It is, after all, with its reductive clarity – and transparency – the realm of transcendent peace, absolute certitude, perfect love and moral severity, this latter as exemplified in the behavior of Beatrice toward Virgil (Inf. 2, 91-93). Call it the anti-existential. How then can one reconcile the language of the Paradiso with an “infinitely open language of ambiguities”? I look forward to the reading of the Paradiso that will provide his response. On the evidence of this and the other writings of these admirable young dantisii, I would conclude that Dante studies is an exciting, diverse and thriving place to be.

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As indicated by the title, this study intends to trace the development of the dialogue, provocatively referred to as “codice onnivoro e sfuggente” (8), through the intellectually and politically turbulent Italian Sixteenth Century. The dialogue is held up as a mirror to the society which defined and cultivated it as a literary genre. Its evolution from the Quattrocento Humanists’ occasionally servile attitude towards classical auctores, to one of experimentation in the ensuing era, leads the author to investigate the dominant historical moments and cultural currents of the period.

His attempt at revealing the cultural importance of the dialogue is done through an analysis of fundamental issues which impacted greatly on Italian Renaissance culture. These are the ideological and physical importance of Rome in relation to the conception of the role of letters, as well as choice of locus by the authors studied (Pietro Bembo, Baldassare Castiglione, Piero Valeriano, Sperone Speroni); the questione della lingua; and the evolution of print culture for a transforming society of readers.

After a brief “Introduzione” (7-8), Vianello’s study opens with an examination of the art of the dialogue entitled “Il racconto di parole: l’arte cinquecentesca del dialogo” (9-23). The philosophical and socio-political issues at the basis of the transition between the early and late Renaissance is clearly and convincingly related by the author who proceeds from the various manifestations of the hegemonic grip on the dialogue by Ciceronian models, to the rise of genre theory in light of the translation of Aristotle’s Poetics. In relation to this last development, Vianello identifies three cornerstones of contemporary genre theory whose goal it was to lend artistic integrity to a popular, polymorphic genre which seemed to defy categorization: Carlo Sigonio’s De dialogo liber (1562), Sperone Speroni’s Apologia dei dialoghi (1575), and Torquato Tasso’s Discorso dell’arte del dialogo (1585).

After distinguishing the three categories of dialogue which surface in the contemporary theoretical literature as mimetic, diegetic and mixed, Vianello proceeds to provide examples of each (primarily from the repertoire of the aforementioned authors) and shows how, over the course of the Cinquecento, each had particular appeal to a cultured reading public that shifted from the court to the academy.