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## Lives of Dante: Why Now?

DAVID WALLACE

On reading Elisa Brilli's *Ouverture* on biography, as an English-based comparatist, and on pondering the recent proliferation of Dantean lives I consulted the catalogue of my London workplace: the Warburg Institute (<https://warburg.sas.ac.uk/>). This magnificent library has always especially favored work in Italian Studies; its founder, Aby Warburg, was a personal friend of Robert Davidsohn, the great historian of Florence who died in Dante's city in 1937. Davidsohn's works are found in abundance on the shelves of the Warburg, as are the scholarly and editorial works of Giorgio Inglese and Marco Santagata. But curiously, neither of their recent Dante lives are to be found; the most recent catalogue entry under *Vita di Dante* is the work of Giorgio Petrocchi from 1986.

If one exits the Warburg Institute and walks a few hundred meters to the Waterstones on Gower Street, the largest bookshop in London, one will find Marco Santagata's *Dante. The Story of His Life*, as translated by Richard Dixon and published by the Belknap Press of Harvard University Press in 2016. Belknap is the extra-prestigious imprint of an illustrious university press—and yet this is not a book that Warburg finds it necessary to stock on its shelves, in either English or Italian. How can that be?

Santagata's *Dante* is to be found in the Biography section of the bookstore, which is huge. It keeps company with a number of Dante lives, such as A.N. Wilson's *Dante in Love* from 2011, a book crushingly reviewed in the *Guardian* by Peter Conrad as "less a book about Dante in love than an excuse for A.N. Wilson to vent his own ideological hatreds." But life, or Biography, sells, whereas literary criticism is approaching extinction as a bookstore genre. Seasoned Dantisti will know that it is very difficult to convince a university press to publish a book on Dante, unless it be a Handbook, a Guide, or (best of all) a Life. And so there arises the temptation to write a book on Dante that might in essence be literary criticism, but must outwardly appear to be life-like. Dante as a multifarious, foreign textual corpus intimidates, but

Dante as a *life* becomes manageable, containable, one more celebrity to be collected at high speed.

George Monbiot (2018), in a recent article entitled “Our cult of personality is now leaving real life in the shade,” asks who, what class of persons, might we suppose that newspapers now interview most? The answer is not politicians or scientists or business managers, but actors; and increasingly, all those in public life aspire to the condition and skill sets of actors (or TV personalities). Might we then expect to see Dante represented not as author or *personaggio*, but rather as actor-celebrity? The moment has in fact already come, with the recent publication of yet another Dante life-text, Ian Thomson’s *Dante’s Divine Comedy: A Journey Without End* (2018). This book I found half a mile south of the Warburg Institute, prominently displayed in the London Review Bookshop, a venue opened in 2003 in association with England’s toniest literary newspaper, *The London Review of Books* (“located in the heart of Bloomsbury, just a Rosetta Stone’s throw from the British Museum”, as its website states). This book, selling at £18.99, is gorgeously produced, with sewn spine, a Tom Philips lithograph on its cover (“Dante in his Study”), arresting graphic design, and a plethora of illustrations, mostly in color, beginning with Domenico di Michelino’s *La Commedia illuminata Firenze* (1465, Duomo, Florence) and Don Draper on a Hawaiian beach reading John Ciardi’s 1954 *Inferno* translation (from *Mad Men*, sixth season). This wild mixing of medieval and contemporary forms the Leitmotif of the extended Introduction (Thomson 2018: 13–41), bombarding the reader with a dizzying and disorientating array of images and factoids. There is no dialectic here between the patient scholar seeking to comprehend Trecento life and poetics from the inside, as it were, and the energetic appropriations of modern art: Thomson himself wants to *be* one of these contemporaries, to share their excitement, to make stuff up. His “Introduction” is full of blunt axioms: “*The Divine Comedy*,” he says, “belongs to a pre-Reformation world where any pity shown to the damned was seen as an offence against divine justice” (Thomson 2018: 16). Somehow he must have missed reading *Inferno* V, one thinks, and *Inferno* XV must also have escaped him: “*The Divine Comedy* accounts homosexuality an offence,” he says, “almost too grievous to be atoned for” (Thomson 2018: 35). Thomson is similarly forthright in stating why Dante might speak to “us” today, why “we” might read him: “Dante speaks to us today not because we fear damnation or

are moved by the beauty of Christian revelation, but because he wrote the story of an ordinary man—an Everyman—who sets out hopefully in this life in search of renewal” (Thomson 2018: 26). Here one meets a motif, or ploy, common to much Dante life writing, and certainly shared by Santagata’s *Dante*: reducing Dante to ordinariness. This is here accompanied (easier to do in English) by reducing Dante from *poeta* to storyteller, a sort of Trecento John Bunyan (who is actually referenced in the next paragraph). But perhaps the most terrifying thing about Dante, for those who persist with his Italian, is the not-ordinariness expressed through his sublime abilities as a poet. In this sense, the best and truest *life* of Dante in English yet written is Albert Russell Ascoli, *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author* (2008). Thomson’s image-addled book, by contrast, follows the logic of a selfie-stick culture: a celebrity may seem intimidating, in his or her remoteness, but may be domesticated through capture in a single image (Dante and me). Buy this one book, this *life*, and you can be done with Dante for good.

Fear of actually *reading* Dante is quite often expressed on the covers of Dantean lives; purchase of this volume, the implicit logic runs, will save you the trouble, as the life explains (contains, domesticates) the poetry. Charles Bernstein, a brilliant American poet, often hears the complaint that contemporary poetry is difficult; his *Attack of the Difficult Poems* (Bernstein 2011) sets out, comico-seriously, to alleviate such fears. Its lead off chapter, first published in *Harper’s* in June 2003, includes a “handy checklist” for a reader who is, or thinks they might be, reading “a difficult poem”; feeling stupid and finding imagination being affected by the poem are sure-fire symptoms. The preferring of *life* or *image* over poetry in the case of Dante might similarly symptomatize anxieties so expertly anatomized by Bernstein.

Once Thomson has set off the shock and awe fireworks, verbal and visual, of his extended “Introduction” he actually settles down into fairly conventional biographical writing, starting with “Guelfs v Ghibellines.” Santagata, having spoken of Dante as “such an egocentric man, so sure of his exceptional nature” (Santagata 2016: 4), similarly settles to the task of what might be termed mundanization or, less charitably, banalization. The text of Dante, it is said, suggests social pretensions that the life of Dante cannot sustain. Thus in the *Vita Nova*, “Dante refers several times to a ‘room’ of his own where he could go alone to think, to weep, and also to sleep” (Santagata 2016: 8). But the “small Alighieri house,” “east

of what is now Via dei Calzaiuoli” (Santagata 2016: 7), contained too many people and too few rooms. It is hard to believe, therefore, that young Dante “had a room of his own”; pretending that he did “would be one of the many signs of distinction by which he was seeking to hide his lowly origins and give himself a higher social rank” (Santagata 2016: 8). In pursuing literalism here, Santagata severs the text of Dante from metaphorical sense and literary tradition. Dante, on finding that “la mia beatitudine mi fue negata” in *Vita Nova* XII, goes “in solinga parte” to bathe the earth with most bitter tears. The “beatitudine” denied here is the greeting of she who blesses, Beatrice; the place sought by Dante, sketchily suggested, lies somewhere between specific locale and inner state of feeling. Dante then puts himself into “la mia camera, là ov’io potea lamentarmi senza essere udito” (XII, 2), a more secure and controlled space (with De Robertis [1980] glossing “misimi” as *mi misi; entrai; mi chiusi*). The last of these glosses suggests a likely Biblical intertext in Matthew 6.6, where Christ is directing his followers how to pray. Here’s the Vulgate: “tu autem cum orabis intra in cubiculum tuum et cluso ostio tuo ora Patrem tuum in abscondito et Pater tuus qui videt in abscondito reddet tibi.” Matthew 6.6 is straightforwardly rendered by the New International Version of the Bible as follows: “But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.” The King James version, however, renders *cubiculum* not as a full-size room, but rather as a small part of one: “But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.”

It is unlikely that Christ in Matthew 6.6, preaching al fresco on the side of a mountain, is addressing only those affluent enough to possess a room of one’s own: primary distinction here is made between the public display of elocutionary acts and their private unfolding. Dante, similarly, distinguishes between exchange of language and greeting in the public domain (so suddenly denied him) and private thoughts and dreams. *Camera* thus primarily suggests a reserved space of the mind, to be associated secondarily with elements of physical building, certainly, but also with the mental materials from which poetry, and its component *stanze*, are furnished. Its appearances in *Vita Nova* are unreliable guides to the state of real estate in the *sestiere* of San Piero Maggiore in late Duecento Florence.

But perhaps it is time to ask what drives this thrust to *mundanization* in Santagata, as in so much Dante life writing? Perhaps Santagata has already provided us with a clue in speaking of Dante's egocentrism, his self-convinced exceptionalism ("so sure of his exceptional nature," 4). There is no doubting that Dante thought himself, and his poem, and his historical mission, exceptional, and that this has provoked both resentment and competition (overwhelmingly from men). Many translators envision their work as a prolonged *agon* with Dante, one that (if so conceived) they are doomed to lose. Amiri Baraka, in *The System of Dante's Hell* (1966), suggests that Dante cannot know, as an African-American knows, *what hell is*. He has a point. Mostly, however, it is apparently the universalism of Dante's claims that, experienced as claustrophobia, inspires the wish to puncture airholes in the seamless *terzine*, and to bring him down; grounding Dante through mundane detailing of historical life traces is one such strategy. If it seems off balance, trying too hard, perhaps that suggests the strain of *contrapasso*, working to render mundane that which critical tradition has decreed sublime. In Auerbach's *Mimesis*, for example, the sublimity of Dante's exchanges with Farinata and Cavalcante is rendered the more exceptional by contrast with Boccaccio's *Decameron* IV.2, Frate Alberto's *folle volo* as the archangel Gabriel into a Venetian canal. Had Auerbach chosen not *Decameron* IV.2 but IV.1, featuring the sublime Ghismonda, the contrast would seem less extreme (Auerbach 1953, chapters 8 and 9).

More broadly, criticism of the *Commedia* has been wrong-footed from the start, in that Dante himself (or a genius of Dantesque stature) laid down a template, in the *Epistle to Cangrande*, for how the poem might properly be interpreted. The *Epistle's* suggestion that techniques of exegesis traditionally applied to Scripture might usefully transfer to the analysis of the *sacro poema* quickly spawned a tradition of Dante commentary that would proliferate for centuries (Minnis-Scott 1988). And while more recent Dante criticism would not see itself as continuing this tradition in any straightforward way, it largely remains intradiegetic, operating with and within critical terms that Dante (seen as a text) itself supplies. Such a *modus agendi* might be characterized as *untheoretical*, if we adopt Paul Strohm's proposal "that *theory is any standpoint from which we might challenge a text's self-understanding*" (Strohm 2000: xiv, Strohm's italics). Finding themselves trapped within the universalism and formal perfection of the *Commedia*, denied any such standpoint, critics attempt

to bust out, to find points of leverage outside the text; mundanizing life writing is one such unhappy strategy.

These recent attempts to mundanize Dante through heavily-historicizing life writing prompt memory of a critical phenomenon from thirty years ago, namely the absencing of Dante Studies from New Historicism. As an outsider (but generously-welcomed occasional visitor) to Italian Studies, I have long pondered this mystery. Dante's pre-programming of his own critical reception, as said, forms part of the answer. But it must also have to do with the special status of Dante as member of the *tre corone*, the configuration established by the Venetian Pietro Bembo in association with Aldo Manuzio and his local printing industry (Dionisotti 1966). In 1501 a series of pocket-sized texts were produced—Vergil, Horace, and Petrarch—and then the following year, among a series of Latin and Greek texts, the *Commedia* of Dante. Such a project promised profit for a Venetian printer, since a standardized vernacular, albeit based on Tuscan, could extend the appeal of his wares, transcending local or regional differences. And the appearance of Dante and Petrarch among Greek and Latin texts gave material form to Bembo's suggestion that they were classics among classics. They were not, however, to be seen as modern texts in competition with, or alternative to, ancient avatars. Latin and Italian were seen to work in parallel, each offering models for imitation. And since Trecento Tuscan was the chosen model, imitation of it suggested continuity with the past rather than, as with other European vernaculars, rupture.

Faith that the spirit of ancient Italy was preserved and carried forward by its *tre corone* proved especially crucial during centuries of foreign occupation, when Italian crowns were worn by foreign heads. If Italy could not be located territorially before 1860, it might at least be found, proleptically, in the soul of its great writers: “l'Italia prima dell'Italia,” as Luzzato and Pedullà have it (Luzzatto and Pedullà 2010: xvii). Petrarch, too, has typically been treated as a writer whose sensibility spans centuries, transcends time. He might alternatively or supplementarily be investigated as a writer whose inner turmoil expresses need for strong external direction—as provided by the strong men or tyrants of northern Italy, most notably the Visconti. His classicizing, and his racist view of slaves, might be connected with the slaving conducted in his lifetime by the Venetians and Genoese, from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean. Boccaccio is best appreciated not as an Italian, but as a writer caught

between the distinctive polities of Florence and Naples—as evidenced by the *contrapposto* of the *Filostrato* and the *Fiammetta*, by the rotating monarchy of the *Decameron*, and by a lifetime caught, aspirationally, between two cities. Historicist writing has much to offer here if freed from the *a priori* baggage of what Dante, and his peers, must mean, and will come to mean, in Italian contexts. A liberating start was made by Justin Steinberg's *Accounting for Dante* (Steinberg 2007), in effect offering an alternative to the reception history pre-programmed by the *Epistle to Cangrande*, finding an alternative ground zero (among merchant texts).

Such historicizing work, however, is a hard sell; the most palatable form of it comes attached to a biography, a single life. Stephen Greenblatt, the most influential New Historicist of the 1980s, intuits this in his *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare*. For his earlier work (Greenblatt 1980), written for the academy, Greenblatt had deployed techniques of thick description, as developed by anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz, to facilitate quick and suggestive movement between textual and historical moments. *Will in the World* (Greenblatt 2004) develops a more relaxed (but equally writerly) technique that sashays gently between moments in plays and meetings in the world, arguing that what matters is “not the degree of evidence but rather the imaginative life that the incident has” (Taylor 2004). For this work, Gary Taylor reports, Greenblatt received a million dollar advance from his publisher, reverential reviewing from *The New Yorker*, generous excerpting in *The New York Times Magazine*, plus extravagant praise from “critics, poets, actors.” Many academics, however, were discomfited by Greenblatt's laying aside, as they saw it, of the theoretical sophistication of his earlier work. They were further alarmed by the appearance, and egregious success, of Greenblatt's 2011 book *The Swerve. How the World Became Modern*, put out, like *Will in the World*, by the American publishing behemoth W.W. Norton. *The Swerve* won the National Book Award for nonfiction, a Pulitzer Prize, and much else besides, but in the opinion of Jim Hinch (Hinch 2012) “did not deserve the awards it received because it is filled with factual inaccuracies and founded upon a view of history not shared by serious scholars of the periods Greenblatt studies.” For Colin Burrow (Burrow 2011), the book is “a dazzling retelling of the old humanist myth of the heroic liberation of classical learning from centuries of monastic darkness.” One might add that the book revives a central trope of Burckhardtian individualism: for

at a Church Council convened to heal the Papal Schism of the west, in 1414 (Wallace 2016: II, 655–682), and among hundreds of gifted literary men, just *one* man (Poggio Bracciolini) has the wit and vision to open the way to the Renaissance, to modernity, and to us.

Interestingly, *The Swerve* is to be found both at Waterstones and the Warburg Institute; Stephen Greenblatt did spend time early on in his career writing at Warburg (where, like most of us American visitors, he was politely ignored). It would be foolish to suggest that Greenblatt is growing less sophisticated with age; his writing hardly suggests that. But he has become more interested, it seems, in *what appeals* (to a larger, extra-academic public); discerning this, of course, is but one further test of writerly ability. What appeals to Anglo-American readers of *Will in the World* and *The Swerve, inter alia*, are stirring tales of against-all-odds individualism: “the bits of Shakespeare’s imagination that can’t be made uplifting,” says Taylor (2004), “get short shrift.” But if Greenblatt’s Will Shakespeare and Poggio Bracciolini are realized with pep and verve, why does Santagata’s *Dante: The Story of His Life* seem, by comparison, so downbeat? Perhaps this, too, speaks to a national mood: the compulsive need, in this current Italian case, to doubt all that has long seemed constitutive, through transcendent claims, of national fabric.

To seek out medievalist narratives that truly appealed, and still appeal, to a wide English public we must turn back fifty to eighty years, to C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien. The critical works of C.S. Lewis are prominently displayed, in their Canto Classics edition, in the Cambridge University Press bookshop by the market square, Cambridge, and Tolkien has just enjoyed an exhibition at the Bodleian Library, Oxford (<https://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/whatson/whats-on/upcoming-events/2018/june/tolkien>). Both writers strongly champion Germanic filiations in English writing, an emphasis always particularly accentuated at Oxford that carries directly into the current blockbuster exhibition at the British Library, *Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms: Art, Word, War* (<https://www.bl.uk/events/anglo-saxon-kingdoms>). The signage that ushers visitors into this exhibition, reproduced in the leaflet that comes with the timed ticket, concludes thus:

The kingdom of England which emerged in the 10<sup>th</sup> century was conquered by Cnut of Denmark in 1016 and by William of Normandy in 1066. And yet it survived, along with the English language brought by the early Anglo-Saxon migrants.

And so whatever influence varieties of French might have exerted in England after 1066, to say nothing of Latin, Welsh, Cornish, Norse, and other languages, the singular triumph of “English” was always already complete, as “brought” by Anglo-Saxons. Chaucer’s intensive study of Dante, of Boccaccio, and of Italian poetics, is thus mere rearrangement of cherries atop a Germanic cake, already baked. Such is certainly the view of C.S. Lewis in an influential essay of 1932 on “What Chaucer really did to *Il Filostrato*,” in which the English poet’s supposed repugnance at the “strutting Latinisms” of his Italian source is at once sexual, social, and racial; the essay ends by citing lines of *Beowulf*, true touchstone of Englishness against all foreign threats. First written for the English Association, this essay (amazingly) still features as the lead off critical work in the latest (2006) Norton edition of *Troilus and Criseyde*. This, in the estimation of America’s most powerful publishing company, is what an English language public still wishes to find as critical gateway to its greatest long poem.

In the nineteenth century, the kind of affectionate high regard accorded to Tolkien and Lewis was enjoyed by historians, many of them medievalists: figures such as Cesare Balbo (1789–1853), Alexandre Hercolano (1810–77), François Guizot (1787–1874), Jules Michelet (1798–1874), and Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800–59). Once again, life writing forms a key element of success: for such writers, some of them novelists, narrated the nation as if it were the life of a singular person, a biography, a *Bildungsroman* (Geary 2017: 74). Such writing remained hugely popular until challenged by the scientifically-disciplined, seminar- and research-based styles of history associated with Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886). Legal, constitutional, and economic strains of history proved less appealing to wide publics, although Henri Pirenne did in effect invent a national history, in seven volumes between 1900 and 1932, with his *Histoire de Belgique*. But as Patrick Geary observes, the unwillingness of professional historians to frame or believe in national histories has left a vacuum for eager reading publics; journalists, amateurs, and politicians look back to the methods of nineteenth-century historians to compose works that historians *de nos jours* are unwilling to supply (Geary 2017: 85). A return trip to Waterstones confirms that this triumph of History is now complete: Biography may thrive in the basement, but History, divided chiefly by nation, now dominates the (English) ground floor, the view from the

street. Literature in all forms, classic and contemporary, poetry and prose, has retreated up the stairs.

This proliferation of life writing, then, this preferring the life of Dante to the poetry itself, symptomatizes several ills that are best met with the medieval exegetical formula, well known to Dante, *quod agas, moralia*: what to do? What might effect a return to the poem? English Departments in the United States, having seen enrollments drop precipitously over the last five years, and having also seen literary criticism expire as a bookshop genre, have been saved by the emergence of Creative Writing: fully one third of all majors, where I teach, are now CW concentrators. Perhaps Dante Studies, too, needs to embrace creative outlets that retain umbilical connection with hard-won, philologically-based scholarship. Or rather, to reconnect with them, since *lecturae Dantis* have been an available part of the repertoire ever since Boccaccio stepped to the pulpit, or podium, at Santo Stefano di Badia, Florence, in 1373 (the year of Chaucer's visit). Dante readings are held at the Warburg, certainly, but it is the format followed at Cambridge in the late 1970s that I recall as the more compelling model. For forty minutes or so, a Dantista or para-Dantista such as Pat Boyde or Kenelm Foster, Robin Kirkpatrick or Peter Dronke, would map the terrain of a canto; they would then walk through it by reading aloud, in Italian. This is an exhilarating and unnerving form, in that you reap in the reading what you sow in critical preparation. Hundreds came weekly to these very live events: townspeople and foreigners; academics and amateurs; unemployed persons and (I recall) a mental health nurse. The poetry of Dante thus drew together, made visible, the life of city. Similar things have been essayed, of course, in Italy, on a grander scale: one thinks of Roberto Benigni's *Tutto Dante* (Benigni 2008), in Florence. Such events affirm that the work of *mundanization* offered by Santagata, or the effortless sensationalism of Thomson, may not be the last word. Let the last word here not be that the poetry is greater than the life, but that the poetry *is* the life in the ways that matter most.