

The Smiling Walls. *Dante e le arti figurative / Dante and the Visual Arts.*

A cura di Rossend Arqués, Silvia Maddalo e Laura Pasquini.

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The work leading to the crowning achievement of this massive volume began a long time ago, and several academics worldwide have been lucky to count themselves among the witnesses of its creation. Its three editors have been working for a very long time in funded research projects concentrating on several aspects of it on both sides of the Atlantic, and contributing to the extensive bibliography on its subject for many years now. Rossend Arqués, Silvia Maddalo and Laura Pasquini are three major scholars who have long interrogated themselves, richly and productively, on the relationship of the Dantean imagination and the visual arts both before and after the creation of the *Commedia*, considering Dante as a creator/agent and receiver/subject within the complex cultural systems of the Trecento. Dante must thus be seen as a cultural facilitator and synthesizer, as well as a poetic and imaginative master: according to the editors, no major creation, not even the *Commedia*, could ever take place in a vacuum. This amazing volume stands now as a vibrant end eloquent testimony to that fact.

Let us briefly (though not exhaustively) consider the very diverse nature of its contributions, which come in the form of thematic chapters, profusely and lavishly illustrated as befits the usual quality of the publisher (Brepols). As the editors open the volume, they remind us of the fact that Dante should most adequately be understood as “a powerful cultural collector of everything that art, history and society had produced before his poetic and existential experience”, and that his work, therefore, must always be seen in a vital dialogue with the immediate atmosphere that produced it. The relation between Dante’s work as poet (whether in the *Commedia*, in the *Vita Nuova* or in the *Rime Petrose*) and the “new sculpture” to which Clario di Fabio dedicates one lucid chapter here is only one of the multiple existing possibilities that become available to the renewed gaze of specialists. The Scrovegni chapel can thus be revised by Marcelo Cicutto not only as an object or a place, but as a living and enriching crossroads of cultures, dynamic and responsive to its environment, signifying a change of cultural “episteme” within which the *Commedia* becomes possible as a new way

of making the visual and the verbal coincide. The relationship between Giotto and Dante is re-examined as well in an illuminating essay by Alessandro Tomei, which makes a painstaking revision of the links between image and text: both poet and painter appear here in their roles as cultural facilitators. The cultural past may thus be thought of as illuminating in its own way the origins of the visual world of the *Commedia*: the Baptistery of San Giovanni may easily have been among the origins of this new imaginative language, as a chapter by Sonia Chiodo shows. Conversely, the Dantean differentiation of infernal and purgatorial cycles seems to find later echoes in the Pisan frescoes by Buffalmacco, which show how his visions of the afterlife respond to a shared culture within which the *Commedia* had already become a powerful force in the fourteenth century.

The *Inferno* painted by Nardo di Cione is discussed in illuminating detail by Silvia Maddalo, who sees it as a sermon in images, concentrating on its effacements and omissions (the elusive role of usury seems especially significant here), as well as on the emphases and the coincidences between it and the *Commedia*. Fabio Masacesi explores the role of the Dantean imagination in a widely different context, that of the Great Schism and the eschatological crisis generated by it in Bologna, with the Bolognini chapel of San Petronio at the centre. Even in spaces where this influx would seem less immediately obvious, such as the frescoes of Tadeo di Bartolo at the beginning of the fifteenth century, the role of Dante can be still traced, as Salvatore Sansone indicates. A learned chapter by Gerardo de Simone takes us through the universal judgements painted by the Beato Angelico, showing the evolution of this theme through its different levels and formulations in the fifteenth century, with various levels of integration of the Dantean inheritance. A brief intervention by Alessandro Tomei suggests a possible visit of Dante to Torcello and its boiling tar pits, while Laura Pasquini examines the various functions that the city of Ravenna may have played for Dante not only as the last refuge of his exile, but as a cultural landscape through the whole process of composition of the *Commedia*.

Among the most spectacular examples of the *Giudicio Universale* sub-genre stand the frescoes of San Giorgio in Campochiesa (discussed by Gianluca Ameri), which, by the way, offer one of the most astonishing examples of Dante's direct influence, with the specific presence of count Ugolino and Archbishop Ruggiero in a distinct position among the damned, very close to the viewer. Also in Liguria, the Bisacci Brothers signed a cycle of two frescoes in the fourteenth century (discussed by Fulvio Cervini) which shows an impressive use of a visual memory which clearly goes beyond the role of influence or learned transmission, in order to reach towards the realm of cultural memory. Similar cases of cultural, not necessarily verbal, transmission are studied in the sanctuary of Santa Maria

in Pereto (by Rosanna Torlontano) and in several frescoes in the Piedmont (by Giovanna Saroni), as well as the much more explored and well-known work by Luca Signorelli in the Capella Nova in Orvieto, concentrating here on the monochromes of its roundels (discussed by Claudia Cieri Vita).

It falls to one of the editors of this major volume, the erudite Rossend Arqués, to approach one of the most iconic paintings representing Dante and the world of the *Commedia*, Domenico di Michelino's own *Dante* (1465), taking into account, among many other factors, the new role that the poet had acquired, since his death, before the authorities of the city. It is left to Enrico Fenzi to examine one of the details that stand out most significantly in Michaelangelo's own rendition of the comedy, a very local detail, but one that is pregnant with meaning. Beyond the spiritual affinities between Dante and Michelangelo, Fenzi focuses on the detail of the human skin that St Bartholomew holds in his representation in the Sistine chapel and extracts all kinds of conclusions (theological and ethical) of this theme, relating it to the Dantean concept of metamorphosis, of fundamental change from one form of life to another. Even constructions as well known as the Florentine Santa Maria Maggiore can be excellent reminders of the need to revise and reread spaces we all thought we knew: the critical perspective of Liana De Girolami Cheney examines, among other things, the effects created by the physical descent of light into the cupola, which lends it its peculiar role as a very Dantean "eye of God" in such a context. The book closes with a clever examination, authored by Marco Tanzi, of the Dantean iconography present in San Pietro al Po, in Cremona.

This volume is completed with a splendid and very legible bibliography compiled by Elisa Orsi, along with several useful indexes of places and names. Special mention must be made of the almost titanic work of Nicola di Nino, who has undertaken the task of translating every one of these varied essays, all of them extremely diverse in their theoretical perspectives and technical vocabulary. This major publication deserves a place of honour among the latest achievements of Dantean studies: no respectable library on Dante or on his cultural traditions will be able to do for long without having this resource in its shelves. May the walls so vividly painted by his imaginative fire continue to smile on us all for long.

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