

As this overview aims to show, *The Cambridge Companion to Dante's 'Commedia'* offers a vast array of perspectives on Dante's poem. The contributions collected in this volume are heterogenous: some advance new interpretations of the text, some skillfully recapitulate previous scholarship, and others present what perhaps we already knew but from fresh and original angles. All are valuable and of great interest.

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Stefano Carrai.

*Il primo libro di Dante. Un'idea della 'Vita nova'.*

Pisa: Edizioni della Normale, 2020. 141 pp. € 10

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A collection of brief essays on Dante's youthful *prosimetrum*, Stefano Carrai's *Il primo libro di Dante. Un'idea della Vita nova* addresses the broad issue of the relationship between *libello* and *Comedy* by way of a reexamination of some interpretive cruxes. Carrai's volume takes up where he left off in his previous *Dante elegiaco* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 2006 [repr. 2020]) and collects work conducted since then, but it is also in dialogue with both older and most recent contributions on Dante's 'first work'. Composed of distinct research projects carried out in the course of over a decade, the volume is heterogeneous, unified to some extent by the premise that *Vita nova* and *Comedy* constitute a "diptych" (16) – that they are to be read together as parts of a broader plan.

Following an introduction on the poetic path delineated in the *Vita nova*, the volume is divided in seven chapters, published earlier individually. The first chapter considers the question of the chronology of the *libello* against the backdrop of the astronomical knowledge Dante displays in his philosophical treatise. The starting point of every argument about the date of composition of the *Vita nova* should be Dante's own declaration in the *Convivio* that his infatuation with the *donna gentile* took place after two revolutions of the star of Venus from Beatrice's passing. Carrai rereads the poet's indication in light of his declared astronomical source – Alfraganus' *Liber de aggregationibus*. The author subscribes to the customary view of the *libello* as having been assembled between 1293 and 1296, but only after considering some alternative readings. He engages particularly with Alberto Casadei's proposal to follow Jacopo Alighieri's calculation of Venus' orbit, which anticipates by two years the *terminus post quem* of the *Vita nova*. Carrai persuasively observes that it is not logical that Dante, who derives from Alfraganus' text every other notion of astronomical geography, divert from it only with regard to Venus' revolution to follow the unspecified tradition Jacopo draws on.

The following chapter revisits the vexed question of the textual variants, dwelling especially on those arguably authorial variants that appear to suggest Dante's search for a greater effectiveness of the poetic diction, which Carrai terms "pentimenti d'autore." The chapter reexamines Domenico De Robertis' studies of

the *estravagante* tradition, that is, the circulation of the poems prior to their inclusion in the *prosimetrum*. Particular attention is devoted to the example of the sonnet *Era venuta ne la mente mia*, which explicitly displays its variants, being inserted in the *libello* with two openings.

The third chapter takes up the opacity of the urban background of Dante's work. Here Carrai takes into account Marco Santagata's studies on the topographical features that emerge from *Deh peregrini, che pensosi andate*. But, after recalling this and other scholarly attempts to identify the path taken by the *romei* who pass through the 'grieving' city, the author reaffirms Dante's intended reticence on that matter and poses the question of the reason for this lack of a recognizable topography. Carrai's contention is that the very nature of Dante's *prosimetrum* excludes a precise contextualization – that a “programmatic indeterminacy” (66) is essential to the story, aiming to reach a wider audience than that of fellow Florentines.

The subsequent chapter reads *Ballata, i' vo' che tu ritrovi Amore* – the only ballad included in the *Vita nova* – alongside *Novo cant'amoroso, nuovamente* by Lupo degli Uberti. The author observes concordances between the two ballads both as regards the metrical structure and with respect to wording and subject matter and argues for direct borrowings, although the direction of such borrowings (who borrowed from whom) cannot easily be established, as he recognizes.

Chapter five is devoted to the signs of Beatrice's death in the episode of Dante's sickness. Carrai's contribution is valuable in that it shows that the peculiarity of Dante's vision lies, not in the two portents of Scriptural origin, but in the other two and in that he proposes a new source for the third Dantean omen: Virgil's image of the birds unable to fly over the Aetna as recalled by Statius in his *Thebaid*, where they become falling birds, just as in Dante's premonition.

The sixth chapter reconsiders Dante's ambiguous claim, in the first canto of the *Comedy*, to have drawn from Virgil “the beautiful style that won him honor.” Not finding persuasive the widely accepted reading of the verses as referring to the moral canzoni, Carrai considers what we know of the wide circulation of Dante's youthful work – from internal evidence to Boccaccio's testimony to Luca Azzetta's studies on Dante's Bolognese readers – and argues that the “bello stilo” for which Dante has been honored is an allusion to the *Vita nova*. Yet the question remains – as Carrai admits – of what is Virgilian in Dante's *libello*, given that echoes of Virgil's works in the *prosimetrum* are rare. Carrai thus argues that, more than looking for Virgilian intertext, one should consider Virgil's broader influence on Dante's conception of poetry itself. In this regard, the author observes that Dante believed the most fruitful way to acquire stylistic mastery was to study the Latin poets and that, in the *De vulgari*, Virgil is the first of the four *regulati poetae* that Dante claims one should read to attain the highest level of construction.

Acknowledging that one of the explicit motives that trigger Dante's otherworldly journey is his desire to see again his lady's countenance, in the seventh chapter Carrai argues that the memory of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice lies behind the conception of Dante's voyage more than scholars have observed. Never explicitly referred to, the Orpheus myth is nevertheless ‘blended in’ throughout the poem. In this last chapter, Carrai builds upon his former studies of the elegiac components of Dante's *prosimetrum*. Restating his view of the *Vita nova* as the poem's essential starting point, he argues that, if Dante's earthly love for Beatrice and her

demise are the necessary background to the “celestial crowning” of that love, then the *libello* should be thought of as “the grievous, dismal premise to the ultimate apotheosis” (125-26). On this ground, Carrai reiterates the reading of the *Vita nova* advanced in his former monograph as elegiac text modeled after Boethius’ *Consolation of philosophy*, which in Dante’s time – Carrai maintains – was considered a chief example of elegy.

Given the wealth of allusions that each chapter brings in, a lengthier discussion would have been beneficial. For example, in his last contribution Carrai recalls a vast array of accounts of the Orpheus myth, from Fulgentius’ to Bernardus Silvestris’ to that of Boethius and his major commentators, Remigius of Auxerre and William of Conches. Carrai’s list is somewhat cursory, especially given the resonance of the allegorical reading of the myth advanced in the Remigian commentary, to which perhaps the author might have referred more extensively.

In its brevity, *Il primo libro di Dante* pays attention to specific exegetical questions in the history of the critical debate and will appeal to readers concerned with the interpretive details of Dante’s juvenile work whether or not they accept its fundamental continuity with the poem.

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Luca Carlo Rossi.

*L’uovo di Dante. Aneddoti per la costruzione di un mito.*

Rome: Carocci, 2021. 230 pp. €23.

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The 2021 Dante Centenary renewed the public’s attention for the troubled life of Dante Alighieri with a new wave of biographies published in that same year (and mostly reviewed in volume 4 of this journal). John Took’s grand *fresco* delineated the journey of the poet’s mind through the combined study of the socio-political context and the literary text. Alessandro Barbero’s international bestseller, *Dante*, offered a captivating, often adventurous portrait of the poet opening with the battleground of Campaldino. Both Paolo Pellegrini’s *Dante Alighieri. Una Vita* and Elisa Brilli and Giuliani Milani’s *Vita Nuove. Biografia e autobiografia di Dante* grounded their reconstruction onto re-discovery and re-reading of archival sources, literary and historical, to ‘merge historical analysis, philology, and critical interpretation’ (Vacalebre, 219).

Recently, this biographical frenzy has taken a transmedial turn with the release of Italian director Pupi Avati’s project twenty-year in the making: a novel titled *L’alta fantasia* (Solferino, 2021) and, most importantly, the feature-length film *Dante*. While Avati’s cinematic work claims to be staging ‘la vera vita, fatta di lotte, rinunce, innamoramenti, vittorie e perdite’, Luca Carlo Rossi’s *L’uovo di Dante. Aneddoti per la costruzione di un mito* is a scholarly investigation that problematizes the very notion of truth by reconstructing the mythopoetic process encompassing Dante’s life through the lenses of a largely untapped biographical source, the