

REVIEWS

Elisa Brillì and Giuliano Milani.

Vite nuove. Biografia e autobiografia di Dante.

Rome: Carocci, 2021. 400 pp. €29.

The literary tradition dedicated to reconstructing Dante's life was initiated by Giovanni Boccaccio in the decades after the poet's death. Following Boccaccio's *Trattatello in laude di Dante* numerous scholars—from the humanist period to the present day—have attempted to reconstruct and interpret events in the divine poet's life. The seventh centenary of Dante's death provided a unique opportunity to further explore biographical obscurities, and many specialists have offered new interpretations of the celebrated poet's life.

Among the many Dante biographies published in Italy, in 2021, the most intriguing and innovative is certainly that of Elisa Brillì and Giuliano Milani. *Vite nuove. Biografia e autobiografia di Dante* (published in France, earlier in the year, under the title *Dante. Des vies nouvelles*). The book, which takes an analytical approach, overturns the classical structures of Dante's biography. By combining their strengths and specialized skills, the authors have created a work that merges historical analysis, philology, and critical interpretation. The collaborative writing and dual analytical perspective allow the biographers to explore the poet's life through an interdisciplinary lens. This collaboration and interdisciplinarity led Brillì and Milani to distinguish documentary evidence from literary sources and thus read them on two parallel levels. Consequently, the biography presents chapters based almost exclusively on documentary sources (introduced by the title *La storia*) whereas others (*Il racconto*) analyze the different narratives of self ("racconti di sé"), elaborated by Dante in his works. This bipartite analysis results in a comparative work in which the perspectives of the two authors offer harmonious interpretative counterpoints.

The book is organized according to the stages of human life, as established in the fourth treatise of the *Convivio* (adolescence, youth, and old age). The biographical section is preceded by a *Prologo* on the origins of Dante's family and concludes with an interpretative *Epilogo*. The book's sophisticated composition, combined with the broad chronological structure, allows the reader to fully understand the value of a biography or, rather, a multifaceted life like Dante's. At an historical level, Milani's analysis of the documentary sources shows Dante in an entirely new light as compared to traditional historiography. Milani presents the poet as a "pure" intellectual who is distinguished from other *literati* of his time because of his nuanced view of the intellectual's social role. Unlike other medieval Tuscan poets, Dante did not have a stable profession: he was not a banker like Dino Frescobaldi, a jurist like Cino da Pistoia, nor a notary like Brunetto Latini. From

the time of his youth, Dante transformed the practice of writing poetry from an ancillary activity into a proper occupation; thus, he became a sort of predecessor to Petrarch and his idea of the “professional scholar.” Despite the lack of a well-defined social status, this new view of intellectual life, Milani tells us, allowed Dante to stand out in the political arena of his time, both in Florence and in the intricate geopolitical map of the early fourteenth-century Italian peninsula. When compared with the rigid ideological figure of a partisan man—fashioned by traditional historiography—Milani’s biographical profile presents a Dante who approaches the civic and political dimension as an intellectual who adapts himself to the fluid political landscape of medieval Italy.

Elisa Brilli’s investigation complements this excellent historical analysis by focusing on the relationship between Dante’s intellectual path and his works. The result of this study is an artistic biography that sheds new light on several aspects of the narrative and promotional strategies deployed by the poet in his works. Specifically, Brilli points out that in the *Vita nova* Dante sketches a self-portrait, as a poet and public figure, by virtue of which he aimed to enter the political and social scene of his city—a sort of “business card” of the nearly thirty-year-old Dante seeking social affirmation in the sophisticated late thirteenth-century Florentine context. It is precisely with the *Vita nova* that Dante introduces the poetics of the “narrative of self,” which is both a pioneering narrative device and a publicity strategy to build a new readership and reach wide-ranging intellectual prestige. In Brilli’s analysis, this new strategy reaches its peak in the *Commedia*. According to the scholar, the “sacred poem” is Dante’s true testament, the text through which the poet wished to convey the meaning of his life and that of human history. Like any medieval Italian who dictates his last will and testament to a notary, Dante employs the *Commedia*—and the perspective of the afterlife—to address his successors and influence his present condition. And, as in the case of any legal will, the poet occasionally changes his mind and redirects his intentions according to the circumstances. The result is a treasure trove of phrases, ideas, values, judgments, images, and knowledge that Dante dispenses to an audience that, for him, represents all of humanity. The writing of his poetic *testamentum* reflects and maximizes the powerful strategy of self-validation developed by the poet through the narrative of self. Indeed, in the poem, Dante presents himself as a character-narrator through narrative shifts inspired by literary models including Boethius, Augustine, and the Bible. Through these multiple interpretative lenses, Dante recounts his afterlife journey using his own biography as a narrative tool. He recounts his story as a converted sinner (Augustine) and unjustly persecuted person (Boethius), who is transformed into an apostle and prophet when, in *Paradiso*, he receives the investiture of “scribe of God.” These different portraits conveyed by the poet in the *Commedia*, Brilli suggests, constitute the literary mark of an extraordinary human and intellectual experience. Dante wisely makes this the central point of his narrative and thus delivers to posterity a unique precedent in Western literary history.

In conclusion, *Vite nuove* is a groundbreaking biography of Dante that differs from those that precede it in method, objectives, and structure. As the authors themselves emphasize, it does not claim to be a definitive biography of the poet. Rather, this excellent work seeks to be the first chapter of a historiographical “restoration” that considers the historical context of Dante’s life and the poet’s

multifaceted human and intellectual journey. A journey in which data and chronological and documentary gaps can be equally valuable clues to fully understand the poet's biographical narrative. For all these reasons, Brill and Milani's book should certainly be considered the major biographical study on Dante of the last few decades, and one of the fundamental points of reference for future works on this endlessly fascinating subject.

Natale Vacalebri, *University of Pennsylvania*

John Took.

Dante.

Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020. 582 pp. \$35

Dante by John Took contributes a thorough biography that both centers Dante's works and the historical context they are embedded in. Took begins his text by reflecting on T.S. Eliot's reading of Dante and the limits and possibilities of interpreting his biography and writing. Took agrees with Eliot and notes that reading Dante's contemporaries' after reading his own work is next reasonable step in interpreting a figure as monumental as Dante but expands Eliot's view by noting that something *must* be said or interpreted, because Dante himself invites the *lettore* to speak on his or her own account (XXI).

The book first delves into the historical context, the political background and struggle between Florentine power blocs, partisanship and alignment, and civic disorder. "Historical Considerations", which covers the periods of 1251-1313, is dedicated to outlining this historical backdrop before explicitly inserting Dante to the events. Took outlines Florentine power struggles through distinctive phases. He begins with Buondelmonte to characterize Florence's political past then details the struggle for power between the Guelphs and Ghibellines, describing the period as one of genuine political creativity. This then leads to his discussion of the subsequent early years of the fourteenth century and the inner struggle among Black and White Guelphs. After the first chapter, Took situates Dante within this larger conflict between factions. Chapter 2, "Biographical Considerations", begins with a biographical constellation of Dante's lineage, starting from Cacciaguida and his mention in *Paradiso*, to Dante's birth in 1265. Along with drawing out Dante's later relationship with Guido Cavalcanti and Brunetto Latini, Took underlines how Dante's turn to philosophy and the philosophical schools in Florence was set in motion by the death of Beatrice in 1290. The "Biographical Considerations" chapter is divided into three phases, "Susceptibility and the Significant Encounter (1265-1293)"; "Care, Conflict and Catastrophe (1293-1302)"; and lastly "Far-Wandering and the Agony of Exile (1302-1321)."

After these introductory chapters, Took analyses Dante's biography through a chronological examination of his literary works and letters. Although each section is ordered in a chronological manner, Took references post-exile works to analyze