

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

Dante's development as political thinker, poet, and philosopher. Through the reading of *Vita Nova*, Dante's notion of love as a principle of disposition, as opposed to acquisition, surfaces within Took's inquiry as he also notes how *Vita Nova* functions as a preliminary essay in the dialectic of hell, purgatory, and paradise "as a matter of self-confrontation, self-reconfiguration and self-transcendence" (77). In a continuation of his detailed exploration of *Vita Nova*, Took divides his third chapter, "Literary Apprenticeship and a Coming of Age" into "Dante Guittoniano" and "Dante Cavalcantiano." He elaborates on Dante's Guittonian phase, which was marked by a heightened sense of moral and salvific substance of love in both his *Rime* and *Vita Nova*. In his "Dante Cavalcantiano" section, Took describes this phase in Dante's biography as a lyric poet as one characterized by "restiveness" in his development of "love-understanding" and "love-expression" while also putting into question Dante's Cavalcantianism, noting that his is "just a pale reflection of the real thing, a living out of the Cavalcantian drama under the aspect less of its substance than of its symptomology" (133). In other words, Took notes that within Dante's Cavalcantian phase, love is never "in and for itself as a principle of undoing on the plane of properly human being—of confusion, consternation and near-impossibility, to be sure, but never, in and for itself and properly understood, of anything other than new life" (133). In the following sections, Took continues to touch on Dante's different influences during his development as a lyric poet in both his subsections "Dante and the *Rose*" and "Dante Guinizzelliano" and concludes with summarizing the affective-philosophical aspect of the *Vita Nova* as well as the principle of "properly human being and becoming", meaning, the finality of one's human presence. Took notes in the final section of Part II that Dante's activity as a lyric poet and as a philosopher of love is expressed through the literary-aesthetic facet of *Vita Nova* which had the same underpinnings as Dante's later *Convivio* and *Divine Comedy*.

Part II of Took's book explores the *Rime*, the *Convivio*, the *De vulgari eloquentia* and the Post-Exilic *Rime*. It is noted that in most of the works detailed in this biography that the discussion of the principle of "being and becoming" is an undercurrent in Dante's writing. One of the most striking moments it is investigated in is within Dante's treatise on language and rhetoric and the "becoming" of the *vulgare illustre* which aligns itself with the concept of self-affirmation and recognition. It is made clear that the *vulgare illustre* is a matter of rejoicing but also a diasporic force which Took characterizes as forlorn even while superimposing the matter of being and becoming on the theme of language. Took notes that Dante's three *canzoni* written early in his exile echo his meditations on exile and grief in the *Divine Comedy*.

In the final section of his book, delineating the *Commedia*, *De Monarchia*, the *Eclogues*, and the *Quaestio de aqua et terra*, Took expands on the theme of the self as meditated on by Dante and the world surrounding the self. In one of his final sections titled "The Dialectics of Being: A Difficult Dimensionality" Took analyzes Dante's sense of temporality in relation to both *Paradiso* and the *Convivio*. He writes that for Dante, time is conceptualized as a before and after especially in the reconstruction of the self, "the intentional reconstruction both of self and of the world beyond self, is always temporally conditioned. It is always a matter of its

successive moments” (389). Time is thus described as a means of self-perspectivization but also as an entity that speaks in the imperative for Dante.

Took’s chapters are brimming with both contextual information and analysis of Dante’s biography and life works; the book provides a full view into the background in which Dante is writing while bringing to light themes of existence, exile, language, temporality, and love through its meticulous selection of sources. It becomes clear through every chapter and analysis that the *lettore* mentioned in the preface, is necessarily part of this biography.

Lourdes Contreras, *University of Pennsylvania*

Paolo Pellegrini.

*Dante Alighieri. Una vita.*

Turin: Einaudi, 2021. XX + 259 pp. €22.

---

Among the new generation of Dante biographies, inaugurated by Marco Santagata’s work *Dante. Il romanzo della sua vita* (2012), Paolo Pellegrini’s *Dante Alighieri. Una vita* is undoubtedly one of the most cogent and fascinating. This brand-new study begins with the assumption that Dante’s works, and particularly the *Commedia*, are not “instant books” of the poet’s life. In the last few decades, there has been a tendency among Dante biographers to use verses of the sacred poem to glean information about the author’s life. Pellegrini, referring to the interpretative discretion of Italian scholars of the first half of the twentieth century—and especially Michele Barbi—chose instead to find a balance between documentary analysis and literary interpretation in constructing his biographical profile of the poet.

The book is based on an accurate analysis of the archival documents related to Dante and his historical context (specifically the excellent collection of the new *Codice Diplomatico Dantesco* published by Salerno Editrice), as well as literary sources that Pellegrini considers reliable and worthy of consideration. Specifically, the author considers texts of the exegetical tradition of the *Commedia* (e.g., Jacopo and Pietro Alighieri, Andrea Lancia, the *Ottimo commento*, Boccaccio, Filippo Villani) as well as Boccaccio’s *Trattatello*, Leonardo Bruni’s *Vita di Dante*, and Biondo Flavio’s *Historiarum decades*. The author has analyzed the testimonies collected with a highly philological approach, delivering to both specialist readers and the broader public a balanced and innovative profile of Dante. From a strictly narrative point of view, the biographical portrait Pellegrini provides is a “traditional” account that develops chronologically through a geographic-poetic distribution of the chapters.

The book opens with a short introductory chapter on the historical context of Florence between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries; this is very helpful for understanding the governmental structure of the Tuscan city and the social and political upheavals prior to the poet’s birth. This chapter is followed by one dedicated to the Florentine period of Dante’s life (1265-1302) and a third on the poet’s