



Claude Lefort, *Dante's Modernity: An Introduction to the 'Monarchia'*. With an Essay by Judith Revel, ed. by Christiane Frey, Manuele Gagnolati, Christoph F. E. Holzhey, and Arnd Wedemeyer, trans. by Jennifer Rushworth, Cultural Inquiry, 16 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2020), pp. xv–xviii

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Translator's Note
Translating Lefort on Dante

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Translator's Note

Claude Lefort's essay on Dante's *Monarchia* divides quite neatly into two halves. The first half provides us with an analysis of Dante's text, and comprises an introduction, followed by sections on 'The Human Race', 'Rome and the History of Humanity', and 'The Two Sovereignities'. The second half, more surprisingly, offers an idiosyncratic reception history of the *Monarchia* and its theories, beginning with the fourteenth century ('Dante and Civic Humanism') and moving irregularly through to the nineteenth century, although not entirely in chronological order, since it is back with the sixteenth century that Lefort's essay ends. At a certain point in his essay, Lefort describes the various actors in this process of transmission as 'relays' (*relais*).¹ Extending this image, the whole of Lefort's essay can be said to mobilize two different sets of relays. Firstly, there are the classic works of criticism on the *Monarchia*, with which Lefort is explicitly in dialogue: Étienne Gilson and Ernst Kantorowicz in the first half; Frances Yates in the second. Secondly, there are the political thinkers with whom Lefort engages, some only briefly (Niccolò Machiavelli, Coluccio Salutati, Leonardo Bruni), others more extensively — with the final two sections of his essay devoted, respectively, to Jules Michelet and Étienne de La Boétie.

In a metatextual twist, however, a third set of relays comes to join this already eclectic team. On the one

1 Claude Lefort, 'Dante's Modernity', in this volume, pp. 1–85 (pp. 49 and 63). All subsequent page references refer to this translation.

hand, Lefort himself relays Dante's *Monarchia* to a modern French audience through his introduction to a French translation of Dante's text (published in 1993 and 2010). On the other hand, all those involved in the present reworking of Lefort's essay for an anglophone readership must also be credited as additional relays, consolidating Lefort's special place in the reception history of this particular Dantean text. As the translator of Lefort's essay, I would like to record here my debt of thanks to all those who generously contributed to this translation project, both at the conference at the ICI Berlin devoted to Lefort's reading of Dante and in subsequent conversations.² In particular, my translation is infinitely better thanks to the painstaking care and patience shown towards it by the four editors, Christiane Frey, Manuele Gagnolati, Christoph Holzhey, and Arnd Wedemeyer. To Lele I also owe special thanks, amongst many reasons for inviting me to collaborate on this project. Last but not least, I am forever grateful to my writing companions Matthew Salisbury and Francesca Southerden.

As someone with a long-standing interest in translation, French theory, and the French reception of medieval Italian authors, it has been a pleasure to spend time with Lefort. Of course, the pleasure has not been without what we might call, borrowing a phrase from Lefort, '*de singulières difficultés*' (a phrase over which we deliberated at surprising length, mostly because of the polysemy of the premodifying adjective: 'singular' in what sense? Merely 'notable' or something closer to 'strange' or 'peculiar'?). Some of these difficulties related to Lefort's prose style.

2 'Dante's Political Modernites: Claude Lefort Reads the *Monarchia*', symposium held at the ICI Berlin on 6 July 2019 <<https://doi.org/10.25620/e190706>>.

In this regard, I have taken the decision to break up certain sentences into smaller units, and most of all to add paragraph breaks where feasible to aid the reader in navigating especially long passages. Other difficulties concerned vocabulary, whether that of Dante's *Monarchia* or Lefort's analysis. In confronting the former, Prue Shaw's English translation of the *Monarchia* was an indispensable resource, and it is from that translation that passages from Dante's text quoted by Lefort are also taken.³ In terms of Lefort's own vocabulary, I relied upon the advice of the editors, although it is worth noting here that some Lefortian phrases remained stubbornly resistant to translation. One such phrase was the heading 'Le travail de l'œuvre', where we eventually opted for 'The Work of the Oeuvre', avoiding the trap of apparent tautology ('The Work of the Work') and taking advantage of the fact that 'oeuvre' in English can also refer to an individual work even if it usually evokes an author's body of works. Finally, I decided to aim to make my translation as gender neutral as possible, and therefore avoided rendering 'homme' as 'man' and 'hommes' as 'men' (save in cases, of course, where the specific gender was intended as such).

When translating Lefort into English, I was struck by the many English and anglophone references in his essay. For example, Lefort devotes a strikingly long section of his essay to the example of Elizabeth I. His reading of Elizabeth I is, moreover, explicitly mediated by the work of Yates,

3 Dante Alighieri, *Monarchy*, ed. and trans. by Prue Shaw (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). Shaw is also the editor of the critical edition: Dante Alighieri, *Monarchia*, ed. by Prue Shaw, Edizione Nazionale delle opere di Dante Alighieri a cura della Società Dantesca Italiana, v (Florence: Le Lettere, 2009). Both the Latin text of the Edizione Nazionale and Shaw's translation are available online at <<https://www.danteonline.it/monarchia>> [accessed 5 December 2019].

just as his earlier discussion of Dante's *Monarchia* had been frequently in dialogue with Kantorowicz writing in English (to return to the first of the sets of relays that I mentioned earlier). From this perspective, translating Lefort into English pleasingly means returning some of his references to their original state.

Reading Lefort's essay, I was also struck, as I have already suggested, by the equal weight granted to textual analysis, on the one hand, and the text's reception, on the other. For Lefort, quite simply, 'the oeuvre continues to reveal itself through the work of time' (p. 47). Within this revelatory process, Lefort persuasively makes the bold claim that repudiation is as much a part of reception as adulation, hence the importance of Michelet and La Boétie as prime interlocutors in his narrative. In Lefort's emboldening words (and my translation), 'Whether he inspired praise or refutation, Dante was never forgotten' (p. 43). At the very end of his essay, Lefort tells us that 'in order to examine [Dante's] work', we need to know 'how to use time' (p. 85). Part of this injunction — which ultimately stems from a passage in *Convivio* IV, ii, 10 — is an invitation to consider time as a crucial factor in forming texts. More personally, however, translation has been for me a matter of knowing how to use time, so that new readers may come to enjoy spending time with Lefort, or more precisely with Lefort and Dante together.

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