



*Metamorphosing Dante: Appropriations, Manipulations, and Rewritings in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries*, ed. by Manuele Gragnolati, Fabio Camilletti, and Fabian Lampart, *Cultural Inquiry*, 2 (Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2011), pp. 9–18

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## Metamorphosing Dante

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**ABSTRACT:** After almost seven centuries, Dante endures and even seems to haunt the present. His works have been used, rewritten, and appropriated in diverse media and cultural productions; the image of Dante himself has provided many paradigms for performing the poet's role, from civic to love poet, from experimenter in language to engaged poet-philosopher, from bard of the 'sublime' Inferno to scribe of heavenly rarefaction. *Metamorphosing Dante: Appropriations, Manipulations, and Rewritings in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries* investigates what so many authors, artists, and thinkers from varied (artistic, political, geographical, and cultural) backgrounds have found in Dante in the twentieth century and in the first decade of the twenty-first. / Dante's work has actually provided many linguistic and narrative structures, characters, and stories, evoking and reactivating a wide range of possibilities. In constructing Dante as one of the pivotal authors of the canon, the nineteenth century worshipped him in manifold — sometimes enthusiastically exaggerated — ways. Following the establishment of the scholarly tradition of Dante studies in the twentieth century, which was deliberately constructed in opposition to the frequently uncritical manipulations of the previous era, the influence of Dante's oeuvre has become more oblique, challenging, and question-raising. Its impact has been fluid, sometimes subterranean, and always complex, each reappropriation also investigating its own Weltanschauung, [...]

# METAMORPHOSING DANTE

Fabio Camilletti, Manuele Gragnolati, Fabian Lampart

After almost seven centuries, Dante endures and even seems to haunt the present. His works have been used, rewritten, and appropriated in diverse media and cultural productions; the image of Dante himself has provided many paradigms for performing the poet's role, from civic to love poet, from experimenter in language to engaged poet-philosopher, from bard of the 'sublime' Inferno to scribe of heavenly rarefaction.<sup>1</sup> *Metamorphosing Dante: Appropriations, Manipulations, and Rewritings in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries* investigates what so many authors, artists, and thinkers from varied (artistic, political, geographical, and cultural) backgrounds have found in Dante in the twentieth century and in the first decade of the twenty-first.

Dante's work has actually provided many linguistic and narrative structures, characters, and stories, evoking and reactivating a wide range of possibilities. In constructing Dante as one of the pivotal authors of the canon, the nineteenth century worshipped him in manifold – sometimes enthusiastically exaggerated – ways.<sup>2</sup> Following the establishment of the scholarly tradition of Dante studies in the twentieth century, which was deliberately constructed in opposition to the frequently uncritical manipulations of the previous era, the influence of Dante's oeuvre has become more oblique, challenging, and question-raising. Its impact has been fluid, sometimes subterranean, and always complex, each reappropriation also investigating its own *Weltanschauung*, moving forward while gazing back on its past.

The hypothesis that this volume proposes is that the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have found in Dante a field of tension in which they can mirror, explore, and question the tensions within their own realities. *Metamorphosing Dante* is thus very much part of the project on 'Tension/Spannung' which the ICI Berlin Institute for Cultural Inquiry has been pursuing since autumn 2007. One of the project's guiding principles is that different fields, cultures, and disciplines can often be more productively brought into contact with one another by identifying and comparing their internal relations of tension than by

focusing on common substantive elements. This approach is directly developed in *Tension/Spannung*, the first publication in the series ‘Cultural Inquiry’,<sup>3</sup> but it has already informed two other projects closely related to *Metamorphosing Dante*. The first of these projects, which led to the volume *The Power of Disturbance: Elsa Morante’s ‘Araceli’*,<sup>4</sup> focused on the tensions introduced by Morante’s powerfully disturbing last novel in order to re-evaluate its aesthetic and theoretical complexity and explore its connection with contemporary philosophical discourses (from feminist/queer to political theory to psychoanalysis) and the works of authors such as Carlo Emilio Gadda, Pier Paolo Pasolini, and Pedro Almodóvar. This project also explored the connection of Morante’s novel with Dante, and the opening essay of the volume offers a joint investigation of the two authors focusing on the tension they stage between the concept of ‘mother language’ as affective and corporeal and that of ‘father language’ as rational and disciplinary.<sup>5</sup>

The second ICI project, to which *Metamorphosing Dante* is even more directly related, focused specifically on Dante, resulting in the volume *Dante’s Plurilingualism: Authority, Knowledge, Subjectivity*.<sup>6</sup> It brought together approaches ranging from literary studies to philosophy and history, from aesthetics to queer studies, and from psychoanalysis to linguistics, offering new critical insights on the shifts and tensions in Dante’s linguistic theory and practice. In particular, *Dante’s Plurilingualism* explored the rich and often paradoxical way in which Dante’s philosophical and poetic works structure and reflect an original configuration of the relationship between authority, knowledge, and identity, which is still fascinated by a ‘medieval’ ideal of unity but is also imbued with a strong element of subjectivity presaging the multiplicity of modernity.

Dante’s rich combination of a medieval paradigmatic frame with that proto-modern take on reality that several critics have highlighted – most powerfully Erich Auerbach – provides an initial clue for understanding Dante’s obsessive presence within modernity, which often seems paradoxical or even contradictory. For instance, one would expect the powerful sense of authorship in Dante’s oeuvre to be irretrievable after Roland Barthes’s famous claim of the ‘death of the Author’. In the same way, the paroxysmal aspiration for totality in Dante’s work, which is manifested in the *Commedia*’s crystalline architecture and its attempts at systematization, might appear outworn or even not fully comprehensible in the twentieth-century epoch of fragmentation.

Far from determining an irremediable fissure between Dante and modern sensibility, this apparent contradiction instead engenders a productive conflict. In the age of the reader and of the 'open work', Dante's oeuvre seduces precisely as the site of a construction of authorship, giving birth to the modern notion of the author by appropriating the authority of biblical and Classical texts and charging it with a strongly subjective dimension imbued with experience, memory, and desire. Itself situated at critical points of tension (*sermo humilis/sublimis*, Latin/vol-gare, lyric/epic, life/afterlife, human/divine, present/future ... ), Dante's strongly structured work represents a source of inspiration for the modern challenges of language and plurilingualism, realism and representation, the role of literature and, eventually, the practice of writing itself. It was not by chance that Barthes, inaugurating his 1978–79 seminar on *La préparation du roman*, made explicit reference to the *Commedia*'s opening line as an embodiment of the superimposition of subjective history onto the collective dimension in which every act of writing is grounded.<sup>7</sup> The question of the possibility of the modern novel was referred back to Dante as the foundation of a simultaneously individual and universal notion of writing. The *object* Dante, intended as a constellation in which the tensions of the medieval world are intricately and productively mirrored, can therefore be used – precisely because of its power – to reassess and rethink the manifold tensions of the present, its self-definition as well as its notions of subjectivity and multiplicity, of desire, politics, and society. Hence, *Metamorphosing Dante* is an attempt to show how the constant, if often unexpected, return to Dante in the twentieth century and in the first decade of the twenty-first can be interpreted as a sign of Dante's ability to help the contemporary world understand itself.

Such reflections have led us to focus on the notion of 'metamorphosis'. A group of interesting recent studies has explored Dante's presence in literature, arts, and culture, especially from the late eighteenth century onwards.<sup>8</sup> These studies often deal with the question of how Dante is read and interpreted by critics and philologists, or that of how the motifs, themes, and linguistic qualities of his texts are creatively reshaped by artists and writers. 'Reception' – and, specifically, 'productive reception' – represent important concepts for analysing this process.<sup>9</sup> Whereas 'reception' alone is conventionally used to describe the ways in which a text is understood from the side of the reader, 'produc-

tive reception' involves the idea of a new creative move and focuses on aspects of active production and transformation.

With the notion of 'metamorphosis', we take up and emphasize some of the implications of the concept of 'productive reception'. In highlighting the advantages and disadvantages of the term 'metamorphosis' for literary studies, Peter Kuon re-established its legitimacy and productivity, concluding that in spite of its partly metaphorical sense, it could be helpful in clarifying the limits of reception as a type of cultural relationship based on a genealogical-historical model.<sup>10</sup> Differing slightly from Kuon, we are not using the concept of 'metamorphosis' to propose an alternative critical category but rather to point both to the potential of variation that can be produced through a creative engagement with Dante and to those elements culturally interpreted as connected to Dante. The notion of metamorphosis might also help us take into account examples of the various modifications which texts can undergo in cultural memory. From this angle, this concept can be helpful in improving our understanding of a specific characteristic of modern reappropriations of Dante emphasized by recent studies: the heterogeneity of ways in which Dante has been used and reused, especially in the course of the twentieth century.<sup>11</sup> Speaking of 'metamorphosis' therefore allows us to go beyond the many cases of mere reception, underscoring the fact that creative encounters with Dante often reveal another dimension in which a philologically based understanding of the text is accompanied by more intuitive or even associative approaches.

Rewritings of Dante can become aesthetically productive by transforming aspects, themes, or motifs that have developed a certain semantic autonomy in the course of Dante's reception history. Still, alongside reactivations of textual loci that have become widely popularized, such as those connected with Paolo and Francesca, Ulysses, Ugolino, or Beatrice, Dante's oeuvre seems to represent a source of inspiration that somehow generates something different and very distant from the 'original' pre-text.<sup>12</sup> This 'somehow' – relying on what Harold Bloom defined as Dante's 'strangeness'<sup>13</sup> – can also be understood as a certain 'obliqueness' in later authors' reappropriations. From this angle, authors can either work on Dante or instead start *from* Dante in order to obtain something new: writing *like* Dante rather than *about* Dante, they thus accept the many challenges posed by his work in an indirect (but often more *faithful*) way. In this respect, Giorgio Pressburger's novel *Nel regno oscuro* (2008) – which was discussed in the epilogue to

*Dante's Plurilingualism* and is analysed in depth in this volume – can be considered a prime example of ‘metamorphosing Dante’ because, in a very Dantesque gesture, it draws upon its model and modifies it, transposing some of its tensions to the present and making them productive for its own concerns. Starting from these premises, *Metamorphosing Dante* therefore attempts to suggest a way to view the complexity and variability of Dante’s presence in twentieth- and twenty-first-century culture.

A deeply dynamic concept of metamorphosis informs the contributions to this volume. Without neglecting historical inquiry into the media through which Dante is conveyed to modernity, we decided not to draw a precise demarcation line between Dante as a (textual) *object* and the *manipulations* this object undergoes, but rather to reflect upon the reasons for these manipulations, the ways in which they are undertaken, and the kind of Dante that is thereby performed. Given the culturally constructed nature of every canon, the reactivation of Dante within modernity seems to derive from the peculiarly resilient and ductile nature of his oeuvre. Rather than considering Dante’s metamorphoses through the vertical and genealogical movement of cultural transmission, we have therefore chosen to analyse them through a horizontal and reciprocally illuminating paradigm, like the one recently proposed by Giorgio Agamben in the tradition of Aby Warburg’s *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*.<sup>14</sup> Warburg’s notion of *Pathosformel* eschews the distinction between original and manipulation; he presents *Pathosformeln* as ‘hybrids of archetype and phenomenon, first-timeness (*primavoltità*) and repetition’, so that every image is ‘the original’ and ‘constitutes the *archē* and is in this sense “archaic”’, blurring the distinction between diachrony and synchrony, unicity and multiplicity.<sup>15</sup> Thus, metamorphosis would not rely on the relationship between an original and its reappropriation (which would unavoidably be marked as a *distortion*), but would rather engender a circular movement through which both objects are reciprocally brought into productive contact. One could therefore say that the model of the ‘circle’, which structures Dante’s entire work – under the forms of wheel, rose, and sphere as geometric emblems of angelic ‘intelligence’ and divine love<sup>16</sup> – reverberates with the relationships engendered by Dante’s text and its metamorphoses, thus generating new perspectives of analysis.

The essays collected here examine several ways of metamorphosing Dante, giving a hint of the polymorphic and polyphonic presence of his

oeuvre in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The plural dimension of these metamorphoses is even reflected in the structure itself of the book, in which media, genres, and cultural domains are deliberately juxtaposed. The essays are grouped into four sections. The first, 'Canonizations', considers how a certain cultural tradition has discussed and appropriated Dante's works. The second, 'Eschatologies', focuses on the transformative ways in which twentieth-century authors have engaged in their works with Dante's concepts of hell, paradise and, to a lesser extent, purgatory. 'Subjectivities', the third section of the volume, explores how Dante's works have represented an opportunity to articulate identities, while the fourth, 'Trans-lations', takes its eponymous notion to an extreme and considers transpositions of Dante into other languages, medias, and semiotic codes.

Yet, there are many other intersections, as well as other possible orders in which the text can be read. For instance, there are explicit datings and reactivations of Dante. Florian Trabert examines the *Inferno* as a model for the representation of evil in twentieth-century German literature, while Angela Merte-Rankin shows how the very same *cantica* provides Walter Benjamin with the spatial model underlying his conceptualization of the modern city. In contrast, Rachel Jacoff argues that, unlike their predecessors T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, the American poets James Merrill and Charles Wright focus mainly on Dante's *Paradiso*, remodelling the dialogue with the dead and in particular with dead poets. Ronald de Rooy analyses a specific case of comic and parodic adaptation of the *Inferno*: a 2007 puppet movie with cardboard characters and settings, directed by Sean Meredith and based upon Sandow Birk and Marcus Sanders's cartoon adaptation of the entire *Commedia*. Erminia Ardissino examines the case of Giovanni Giudici's original and multilayered transcodification of Dante's *Paradiso* for the theatre, while Nick Havely analyses the presence of the *Inferno* in Harry Lachman's movie *Dante's Inferno* (1935), arguing that the critique of the ruthless pursuit of wealth is an important link between the *Inferno* and the anti-capitalistic tone of its American cinematographic version from the thirties. Piero Boitani retraces Dante's presence in Irish literature from W.B. Yeats to James Joyce and Samuel Beckett, showing Dante's dramatic insertion in the twentieth-century Irish canon, which complicates the relationships between language, literature, religion, and national identity.

The notion of ‘metamorphosis’ also allows for the detection of comparatively hidden resonances of Dante’s oeuvre. Fabio Camilletti reassesses the role of Dante in Jacques Lacan’s reflections on courtly love, showing how nineteenth-century manipulations of the *Vita Nova* reverberate in twentieth-century psychoanalytic theories of desire and loss, while Teresa Prudente traces the presence of Dante in Virginia Woolf’s meditations on language and, in particular, in her original figurations of the tension between the categories of personality/impersonality and materiality/immateriality in both perception and writing. Francesca Southerden investigates the way in which Vittorio Sereni and Andrea Zanzotto engage with the poetic language of *Paradiso*, the former turning its fullness into aphasia, the latter into logorrhoea. Tristan Kay shows how the structure of the *Commedia* appears as a hidden countermodel in Cesare Pavese’s *La luna e i falò*, which can be understood as an anti-*Commedia* in which the journey through purgatory does not arrive in heaven but falls back into hell.

In some cases, these metamorphoses are quite unexpected. Antonella Francini examines Robert Rauschenberg’s deep and very personal transformation of Dante, a transformation all the more striking for taking place in the environment of the American twentieth-century urban avant-garde, while Dennis Looney explores the African-American appropriation of Dante, focusing in particular on LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka’s *The System of Dante’s Hell* and engaging critically with Edward Said’s thesis that the *Commedia* is essentially an imperial text. Nicola Gardini shows that Dante provides an explicit paradigm of corporeality for American twentieth-century gay poetry, offering a more plastic and productive model for speaking of carnal love than the Petrarchist tradition.

Dante also seems to provide a structural framework for a lucid analysis of modernity. While Federica Pich reflects on Dante’s prominence in the Western canon and argues that the force of his text lies in its incessant negotiation between ethical and aesthetic concerns, Manuela Marchesini shows that Carlo Emilio Gadda’s *Pasticciaccio* functions as a ‘profanation’ of the *Commedia*, and Davide Luglio illustrates how Pier Paolo Pasolini’s *La Divina Mimesis* revisits Dante’s concept of allegory to address the problems caused by contemporary society’s loss of an authentic language. In other cases, Dante’s influence is more closely connected to the sphere of intra- and interpersonal issues. For instance, Manuele Gagnolati explores how in Giorgio Pressburger’s

*Nel regno oscuro* Dante's journey to hell metamorphoses into a phantasmagoric voyage into the subject's unconscious – which is also a journey through the tragic events of the twentieth century and the Shoah in particular. Rebecca West shows that Dante reemerges in Montale's poetry as a way to conceptualize 'hybrid' feminine figures that challenge the binary categories often used to read the texts of these two poets and the subjectivities that they stage, while James Miller analyses the political agenda of Derek Jarman's queer aesthetic appropriation of Dante's *Inferno* in the movie *Edward II*.

Our hope is that in its attempt to rechart some of the many ways in which Dante has been appropriated and metamorphosed in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, this volume may not only help us understand Dante's haunting presence in modern and contemporary culture, but also reveal new and original perspectives on the complexity of Dante's oeuvre itself.

The conference at which the papers contained in this volume were first presented took place on 24–26 September 2009 at the ICI Berlin Institute for Cultural Inquiry. We would like to thank the ICI, in particular its director, Christoph Holzhey, for all its support and generosity, and for sponsoring the publication of this volume. We are also very grateful to Catharine Diehl and B. Madison Mount for their precious help in the preparation of the manuscript. Finally we want to express our gratitude to Claudia Poppel for helping us with the images and to all those who – coming from many places and participating in many ways – took part in the conference and contributed to its success.

#### NOTES

- 1 For a recent overview of the ways in which Dante's model has been interpreted and appropriated in the twentieth century and today, see Alberto Casadei, 'Dante nel ventesimo secolo (e oggi)', *L'Alighieri*, 35 (2010), pp. 45–74. For the case of Italian culture, see also the overview provided by Zygmunt Barański, 'The Power of Influence: Aspects of Dante's Presence in Twentieth-Century Italian Culture', *Strumenti critici*, n.s., 1 (1983), pp. 343–76.
- 2 A clear example is provided by the *Vita Nova*, which witnessed a symptomatic upsurge in popularity after the 1840s, even supplanting the *Commedia* within the Symbolist environment: the nineteenth century bent Dante's *libello* to a multiplicity of meanings, constructing it as a veritable paragon-book through

- which it could reassesses its own challenges with respect to writing, memory, and desire. See Fabio Camilletti, *Dante's Book of Youth: The 'Vita Nova' and the Nineteenth Century, 1840–1907* (London: IGRS books, forthcoming 2011).
- 3 *Tension/Spannung*, ed. by Christoph F.E. Holzhey (Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2010).
  - 4 *The Power of Disturbance: Elsa Morante's 'Aracoeli'*, ed. by Manuele Gragnolati and Sara Fortuna (Oxford: Legenda, 2009).
  - 5 Sara Fortuna and Manuele Gragnolati, 'Between Affection and Discipline: Exploring Linguistic Tensions from Dante to *Aracoeli*', in *The Power of Disturbance*, pp. 8–19. See also, by the same authors, 'Attaccando al suo capezzolo le mie labbra ingorde: corpo, linguaggio e soggettività da Dante ad *Aracoeli* di Elsa Morante', *Nuova Corrente*, 55 (2008), pp. 85–123.
  - 6 *Dante's Plurilingualism: Authority, Knowledge, Subjectivity*, ed. by Sara Fortuna, Manuele Gragnolati, and Jürgen Trabant (Oxford: Legenda, 2010).
  - 7 Roland Barthes, *La Préparation du roman I et II: Cours et séminaires au Collège de France (1978–1979 et 1979–1980)*, ed. by Nathalie Léger (Paris: Seuil, 2003), p. 25.
  - 8 See, for instance, *Dante: The Critical Heritage, 1314(?)–1870*, ed. by Michael Caesar (London: Routledge, 1989); Peter Kuon, 'Lo mio maestro e 'l mio autore': Die produktive Rezeption der 'Divina Commedia' in der Erzäblliteratur der Moderne (Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann, 1993); *Dante's Modern Afterlife: Reception and Response from Blake to Heaney*, ed. by Nick Havely (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998); Eva Hölter, 'Der Dichter der Hölle und des Exils': Historische und systematische Profile der Dante-Rezeption (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2002); *Dante Metamorphoses: Episodes in a Literary Afterlife*, ed. by Eric G. Haywood (Dublin: Four Court Press, 2003); Antonella Braidà, *Dante and the Romantics* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2004); *Dialoghi con Dante: Riscritture e ricodificazioni della "Commedia"*, ed. by Erminia Ardisino and Sabrina Stroppa Tomasi (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2007); *Dante on View: The Reception of Dante in the Visual and Performing Arts*, ed. by Antonella Braidà and Luisa Calè (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007); *Rewriting Dante/Le riscritture di Dante: Russia, USA, Italia*, ed. by Maurizio Bossi, Antonella Francini, Francesco Stella and Lucia Tonini (special issue of *Semicerchio*, 36 (2007)).
  - 9 See Gunter E. Grimm, *Rezeptionsgeschichte: Grundlegung einer Theorie mit Analysen und Bibliographie* (Munich: Fink, 1977). The term 'productive reception' ('produktive Rezeption') was coined by Wilfried Barner; see Wilfried Barner, *Produktive Rezeption: Lessing und die Tragödien Senecas* (Munich: Beck, 1973). A broad definition can be found in Grimm, *Rezeptionsgeschichte*, pp. 147–53. The two concepts are discussed in relation to Dante in Kuon, *Lo mio maestro e 'l mio autore*, pp. 22–25.
  - 10 Peter Kuon, 'Metamorphose – ein literaturwissenschaftliches Konzept?', in *Metamorphosen/Metamorfosi: Akten der 6. Jahrestagung des Deutschen Italianistenverbandes DIV – Fachverband Italienisch in Wissenschaft und Unterricht. Dresden 8.–10. November 2001*, ed. by Peter Kuon and Barbara Marx (Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 2005), pp. 1–27, especially pp. 18–19.

- 11 Cf. Kuon, *Lo mio maestro è 'l mio autore*, p. 23; and Hölter, 'Der Dichter der Hölle und des Exils'.
- 12 For an attempt to explain this difference by applying the paradigm of 'performance', see Fabian Lampart, 'Dante's Reception in German Literature: A Question of Performance?', in *Aspects of the Performative in Medieval Culture*, ed. by Manuele Gragnolati and Almut Suerbaum (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010), pp. 277–98.
- 13 See Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994).
- 14 Giorgio Agamben, *The Signature of All Things: On Method*, trans. by Luca D'Isanto with Kevin Attell (New York: Zone Books, 2009), pp. 9–32, especially pp. 28–30.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 29.
- 16 On the circular model of Dante's works, see Corrado Bologna, *Il ritorno di Beatrice: Simmetrie dantesche fra 'Vita Nova', 'petrose' e 'Commedia'* (Rome: Salerno, 1998), pp. 12–23.

Fabio Camilletti, Manuele Gagnolati, and Fabian Lampart, 'Metamorphosing Dante', in *Metamorphosing Dante: Appropriations, Manipulations, and Rewritings in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries*, ed. by Manuele Gagnolati, Fabio Camilletti, and Fabian Lampart, *Cultural Inquiry*, 2 (Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2011), pp. 9–18 <[https://doi.org/10.25620/ci-02\\_01](https://doi.org/10.25620/ci-02_01)>

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