

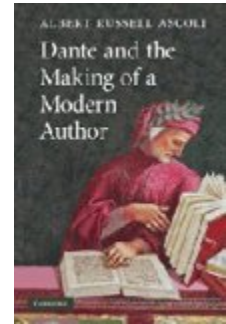


Albert Russell Ascoli. *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. xvii + 458 pp. \$99.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-88236-1.

Reviewed by Jan G. Soffner (Zentrum für Literatur- und Kulturforschung)

Published on H-Italy (December, 2009)

Commissioned by Monica Calabritto



By Which Authority Did Dante Write?

If one happens to talk by chance about Dante's fourteenth-century masterpiece *Divine Comedy*, one can observe a strange phenomenon. Non-academic readers often express an uneasy feeling about this text. This impression does not relate to the poetic structure, but to the author. Dante seems to misuse God for his political opinions, by letting the divine justice condemn his enemies, and for his personal pride or arrogance, by having all the best dead poets honor him (see, for instance, *Inferno* IV, 100-102). Moreover, isn't it already quite presumptuous to "know" the divine verdict about everybody who has ever died? All this seems to be even stranger, since this work is evidently a literary text, not an inspired prophecy like the Revelation. So how could Dante attribute this authority to himself? And did he attribute this authority to himself after all, or did he "just" write fiction?

Dante's fiction, indeed, seems to be different from, say, Stanley Kubrick's movie *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), which seems to have similarly overstressed claims about what forty years ago one considered to be the "truth" of humankind. While watching the movie, one knows that the point that the movie director is trying to make is about understanding his work as a possible model of the world. When reading the *Commedia*, though, one cannot but suspect that Dante is not just offering a possible model for explaining the world, but is deeply convinced that his model is very factual, although it is evidently also a poetic construction.

This suspicion arose as soon as the *poema sacro*—the

"holy poem," as Dante himself calls it (*Paradiso* XXV, 1)—was written. Nearly seven hundred years of "Dantology" (to use Robert Harrison's brilliantly provocative term)[1] have not convincingly resolved this doubt. Originally the skepticism about the nature of Dante's model was a bit different than nowadays. In the fourteenth century cosmological representations in the *Cosmographia* of Bernardus Silvestris (ca. 1084-1178), the *Anticlaudianus* of Alanus ab Insulis (1120-1202) and the *Tesoretto* of Brunetto Latini (ca. 1220-94) had traced allegorical journeys to the heart of Truth similar to that created by Dante. Nevertheless, Dante's use of allegory makes a big difference. Using historical human bodies instead of personifications or the spiritual substance of angels means to talk far more concretely about transcendental matters. It means to embody instead of personify. Furthermore, after St. Paul, nobody seems to have physically, that is, literally, traveled through the hereafter. Nobody at all had claimed that the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, which lay bare after the Fall of Man, returned to flourish, when he himself (not Christ!) passed it.

The answer that the first commentators on Dante gave was not very convincing, but it was nevertheless very influential. They read the text either as a spiritual revelation and a dream, despite its literary construction and despite the claim to report a physical journey, or they interpreted it in a "modern" way, that is, as a fictional construction, despite the explicit claims of the *Commedia* to be a revelatory work.

Apparently, the second interpretation seems to prevail nowadays, which has led to Charles S. Singleton's paradoxical assumption that "the fiction of the Divine Comedy is that it is not a fiction." [2] It is the path mostly followed. While Singleton implies an all too modern term of "fiction," Dante himself only uses the word with the meaning of "making" (pp. 117-118, n. 80). Even though Andreas Kablitz has convincingly shown its shortcomings, the question about Dante as an author remains one of the most mysterious ones for Dante's scholars. [3] Evidently, this is a question about authorship in the broadest sense of the word: it is about the assumption and the production of authority, and it is about the function of the author for a text.

It is Albert Russell Ascoli's great merit to give the most accurate and elaborate account of the notion of authorship that Dante modeled and produced for himself. Ascoli's book is the fruit of a long and laborious scrutiny—twenty years of work, Ascoli states—and it is outstandingly erudite. Ascoli also has an excellent knowledge not only of the works of modern theoretical thinkers such as Hannah Arendt, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and Mary Carruthers about literary authorship and authority, but also of the discursive figurations of *auctores* available at Dante's time. In the first section of his book he offers a neat and concise analysis of Dante's struggle to acquire *auctoritas* in his earlier works, and in the second section he investigates the innovative, proto-modern (as he calls it), and at the same time reactionary construction of authority and authorship in the *Monarchia* and the *Commedia*.

It is an easy prophecy that Dante scholars of the present and next generations will use this monograph as an important compendium when dealing with the issue of authorship. Already upon publication it appears to be a classic.

The main thesis of Ascoli's work consists in "the (re-)assertion of medieval *auctoritas*," which paradoxically "opens the way to the proto-modern notion of literary authorship, one which emerged gradually, inconsistently between the thirteenth and the eighteenth centuries" (p. 12).

At first glance, this proposal seems to be a bit counterintuitive. If the authorship Dante assumes for himself is a "modern" one, if his struggle for authority leads to the *Making of a Modern Author*, so why should we (moderns) spend so much time in understanding it? Why do we so easily (mis?) understand it as presumptuous and not just as something normal, just the way we might (mis?) un-

derstand Petrarch's authorship as something much more easy to access?

Ascoli starts with an extensive analysis of contemporary concepts of authorship, and of the manner in which Dante seems to be relating to them as a whole. Ascoli argues that the image of an author stemmed from the trustworthy *auctoritates* of the ancient and/or philosophical and theological tradition granting for an immanent truth to biblical scribes and the true author, who is God. These traditional concepts refer to *auctoritas* as both an individual and impersonal power and knowledge. The *auctor* thereby was not so much a creative agent, but rather a mediating power of knowledge. He was one worthy of faith and obedience (a "persona degna di fede e obediienza," *Convivio* 4.6).

Within these multiple concepts of authorship, accordingly, there is a tension between "the prestige of Latin and the novelty of the vernacular; the transcendence of an author and the immanence of a reader; a tradition of *auctoritas* and a new idea of authorship," and it is one of Ascoli's merits to discuss them extensively in his introduction (p. 56). He convincingly argues that while Dante followed a more traditional rather than a more pragmatic and creation-based concept of authorship of the "emerging, proto-modern usage of the word [*auctor*] to refer to 'any person who writes a book,'" he also dignified his own creative writing of books far more than the traditional account could conceive of in claiming *auctoritas* for himself (p. 6).

Historically speaking, this self-assumption of *auctoritas* seems to succeed. Ascoli argues that Dante soon becomes *auctor* like Virgil or Ovid. No other vernacular texts were treated like his texts, and this is certainly true especially when thinking about the *Commedia*. Ascoli accordingly assumes a *translatio auctoritatis*, which Dante conceives of and acts out, starting with God and going all the way down to the authors, from authoritative Latin all the way down to vernacular Italian. Hence Dante, modeled as an individual traveler in the *Divine Comedy*, "comes, paradoxically, to embody the canons of impersonal authority" (p. 20). On the one hand Dante is thereby traditionalist and conservative, on the other, he is also provided with the "transgressive desire to appropriate that attribute for himself, for the vernacular, and for 'modernity'" (p. 20f).

Dante himself used the term *auctor* for institutional authorities, canonical classical writers, poetic authorship, or "God as supreme Author and Authority, and, in subordinate relationship thereto, the authority of the

Bible and the Church Fathers” (p. 8). Only in two isolated cases he did use it for himself. So, despite the fact that he was accepted as an *auctor* immediately, he had problems in attributing the concept to himself, and Ascoli argues that this problem of attribution stems from the very high notion of traditional *auctoritas* and how Dante could claim it for himself.

The concept of the “proto-modern” author that Ascoli develops for Dante draws on the concept of individualization and willfulness (cf. p. 56) and as such it can relate to the concepts of impersonal authority only in a paradoxical way. The processual *translatio auctoritatis* thereby becomes the translation of this paradox in a practice of authorship.

Ascoli proposes this point very extensively and carefully. Without presuming a monolithic unity of Dante’s work as a whole, he argues that the *Commedia* “may be seen as a contingent outcome of the earlier works, but not as either their unique *telos* or as the fulcrum point of interpretation from which they are to be understood” (p. 52). Accordingly, in the first part of his book he focuses on Dante’s multiform conceptions of authorship in the *Vita Nova*, *De Vulgari Eloquentia* and the *Convivio*, and considers the Italian words related to authorship and notions of authority related to institutional authority—juridical, political, ecclesiastical—and textual authority—poetic, philosophical, and theological. In this section of the book, Ascoli can unfold his vast knowledge and scholarship by showing how Dante deals with, and assumes the role of, authoritative knowledge, paving the way for becoming himself an authoritative poet, philosopher, and theologian. In these chapters, Ascoli’s analysis matches the complexity of these works. His profound scholarship helps him to avoid simplistic answers concerning these complex phenomena.

Ascoli treats Dante’s gained authority in the second section of the book, which deals with *De Monarchia* and the *Commedia*. He focuses on how traditional notions of authority—textual and institutional, intellectual and concerned with the empire and the church—are individually instantiated in the person of Dante himself. This is evidently the central part of Ascoli’s study, and it sometimes goes right through to the heart of the bold question with which I have opened this review: By which authority can a work like the *Commedia* be written? How can a fictional work gain a revelatory truth? Ascoli shows convincingly how Dante assumes the traditional role of an authoritative author without thereby relating to the pre-existing models of knowledge implied by these kinds

of authorship. For Ascoli Dante not only claims authority for himself instead of only drawing on the authority of ancient authors, church fathers and the Bible. He distinguishes a horizontal axis of authority and authorship, represented by empire and papacy, from a vertical one, represented by the divine foundation and inspiration, which Dante unifies in his account on authorship and authority. By putting himself in the place of a *nuntius*, a messenger of God, by thereby claiming the role of a prophet, he claims the highest form of traditional authority for himself, and he does so as a “modern,” that is, a personal and autonomously acting author.

Despite the fact that research on authorship has been one of the most common playgrounds of literary scholarship within the last two decades, Ascoli himself being one of the protagonists in Italian studies, this notion gives the whole discussion a compelling twist. Ascoli proposes to read the *Commedia* as describing Dante’s acquisition of an extremely self-confident form of authorship. The fact that Dante is crowned by Virgil and then leaves behind this antique guide marks the assumption of a modern and yet traditional authorship, which, indeed, goes beyond both concepts. Thus, Ascoli argues persuasively that “Dante’s acquisition of authority is not only the condition for the writing of the poem; it is also integral to the subject matter of the poem” (p. 316), and that it goes as far as to Dante claiming to be God’s own “*portavoce*.” Since God is the only true author, Dante’s rejection of the term for himself refers to a perfect mirroring of the divine authorship. Ascoli concludes: “Dante can at once anticipate the modern ‘author-God-whose dual task is the novelistic representation of ‘the real’ and the lyric representation of his own inner world—and remain firmly, doctrinally, within a paradigm that subordinates earthly reality and psychic experience to an ineffable and transcendent Being. Thus it is that he can take the medieval concepts of *auctor* and *auctoritas* to their ideal extremes and at the same time put himself at the threshold of modern authorship” (p. 399)

This path of authority and authorship seems to be the best one to address the question about the strange and not at all proto-modern form of fiction implied by Dante, at least in the *Vita Nova* and the *Commedia*. Nevertheless, I still see two important questions that need to be answered. Is Dante’s poetics really only one of *representing* the world and himself as the image of God? Is Dante really so much concerned with the inner-outer distinction on which Ascoli’s approach to “modernity” seems to be based? In what follows, I wish to question Dante’s account of the body of an author and Ascoli’s concept of

“modernity.”

I begin with the body of the author. Of course, there is something like an *aesthetics* of *auctoritas*, just as there is also a specific rhetoric of it. However, by limiting considerations on the structures producing this very aesthetics, by focusing on the “I’s” of the author and their discursive production, it becomes difficult to establish a relation to what today would be called embodiment. In other words, talking about the constitution of authoritative “I’s” does not ask for the authority of the body.

This authority, though, seems to be essential for Dante. For Ascoli the question of how to address the issues of fiction and historicity is that of an authorization by divine inspiration, and their precarious status is the product of an autonomous human imagination. Both inspiration and imagination, though, are mental phenomena. But why then should Dante focus so much on his own corporeal presence in the hereafter? Why should he develop the most embodied psycho-physiology of the soul existing in his time (see *Purgatorio*, XXV)? Why does he so much focus on an environmentally embedded and embodied soul, which is formed enactively (to use Francisco Varela’s term),^[4] and emotionally in symbiosis with the body and in its emotional interaction with the world? ^[5] And why does it take this very shape as a sensing and emotionally feeling body to the hereafter? Why should Statius, whom Ascoli himself considers an important model for authorship in the *Commedia*, argue that even the rational soul gets embodied as much as it still lives on as a sensing, feeling, formable and trainable body, when it has died and hence left matter?

One can even go as far as to say that all sins and virtues in Dante seem to be emotional inclinations distorting or shaping the soul, which is part of the lesson to be learned from the character of Statius. The focus on author functions, inner-outer distinctions, and “I’s” emphasized by Ascoli cannot match this psycho-physiological point of the aesthetics of salvation. One can see how crucial this aesthetics of salvation is from the fact that Dante needs to encounter these body-souls in the hereafter, and not allegories like in the theological literature to which he referred. It is important that the meaning of the world is embodied in Dante. This fact seems to be essential for Dante’s *translatio auctoritatis*. As stated above, Dante in his *Commedia* focuses on the fact that he traveled not just spiritually, but also as a sensing and feeling material body. The same is true for his account in the *Vita Nova*.^[6] Dante does not get tired of pointing out that, like a martyr, he is a witness of God not just

by testimony but by embodied presence. His poetic authority, like that of a martyr, always seems to concern embodiment and emotionality, not just inspiration.

Emotional understanding in Dante seems to be the most relevant form of understanding. A single tear of penitence can save a soul and bring it to Purgatory (see *Purg.* V, 107). Hence, the knowledge of the authorities must also consider a knowledge as embodied, living people. And, accordingly Dante presents the knowledge of the authorities not as the knowledge of authoritative texts either: his poetics is about encountering the authorities as people.

Hence, the following question arises: In what way can the sensing and feeling body relate to literary *auctoritas* or even establish it? This question can best be answered by focusing on the first canto of the *Commedia*. When he encounters Virgil and calls him “il mio maestro e ‘l mio autore,” Dante has lost his path halfway down the course of life, or, to be more precise, on the course of *our* lives, since he places himself as an exemplary human in this very earthly pilgrimage of our embodied souls. As he is unable to find his way out of a wood, Dante tries to gain a view over the territory in order to find his way back, but three animals hinder this plan. These animals can be read allegorically as three of the deadly sins. But, again, allegories do not tell the whole story. “Reading” them as such does not seem to be the only point here: Dante does, indeed, understand very well the evilness of the first of these beasts, the “lonza.” He is able to “read” the appearance and thereby transform it into allegory. He knows that this animal symbolizes the perversion of love (see *Inferno* I, 29-30), and makes clear that he understood its allegorical meaning as soon as he encountered it. Yet, he still gets caught by its beauty.

The problem that reading knowledge is not enough and that loving attraction, even if the loving person knows better, is essential for authorship too. Love, indeed, is Dante’s all-embracing cosmic principle (see *Paradiso* XXXIII,145), and Ascoli persuasively links this principle to authorship by showing how the “‘Alfa e O’ of ‘quanta scrittura/ ... mi legge Amore’” (all the writing that Love reads to me) (*Par.* XXVI,17-18) are also the “Vowels of Authority” (p. 393). Accordingly, Ascoli convincingly argues that Love, the true author, the “‘verace autore’ ... who dictates within” is used to bridge the gap between the ancient *auctoritates* and the modern, vernacular poets (p. 312).

However, love does not only consider the beauty of the divine order of the cosmos. Dante first introduces

love as a lustful, and thus sinful, relation with beauty. Even though he had understood the danger coming from the “lonza,” he gains a misleading hope from perceiving its beauty. Hence, Love’s dictates are precarious ones, and, most of all, they are not just inner. They can also be embodied in the emotional relations with an environment—which is the very issue that Statius’s psychophysiology considers.

This problem about physical love and Love’s dictates is essential for Dante. He knows that sinful lust can arise by just seeing a beautiful body, even if we are told that this attraction is evil beforehand. And this means for Dante that love is already aesthetically and emotionally sinful *despite* the fact that it might be understood better mentally. The inherent sin of the world, hence, lies in the aesthetic relation with the environment. Reading and deciphering the animals does not help, and this is the problem with which the *poema sacro* starts: how can the authority of Love be such, if *this* can happen too?

The author Virgil saves Dante from this problem. Ascoli sees in him an authoritative exponent of classical reason and the empire “naturalizing these abstract categories” (p. 309). However, the words Dante pronounces about Virgil as his master and author in canto I of the *Inferno* are those of a fearful and lost man, desperately in need of a helping knowledge to get out of a sinfully induced situation. So how much can we trust this assertion? Moreover, the accumulated authoritative moral knowledge of antiquity is personified by the inhabitants in the Limbo, that is, in hell. Accordingly, the establishment of modern authorship also implies a critique of the authority of the pre-Christian authorities, who have to be read according to a hermeneutics of their “integumentum,” the “veil” of their writing, under which the true knowledge, inspired by God, is hidden. It is the knowledge they might have known as texts, but did not know as persons. So, how far can we trust Virgil’s reasoning? Is a pagan poet—as a person—really the right authority to find a way out of this problem?

Indeed, Virgil will lead Dante only through the problematic parts of the hereafter. While wandering through the Purgatory, his knowledge seems slowly to become less and less adequate. Finally he is substituted by the “Christian” Statius, who explains salvation based on emotionality, embodied souls, and compassionate *piety* instead of the stoic *pietas* Virgil had embodied in his *pius* Aeneas. Again, it is emotionality and embodiment that count for salvation. And moreover, an ethics of love and a stoic ethic even seem to contradict each other.

Statius himself has been moved to conversion by poetry. While reading Virgil’s fourth *Eclogue*, he was moved to understand what God had lain into Virgil’s text, without the antique author knowing. He had been moved by understanding that Virgil’s text had only been the *integumentum*, the beautiful cloth, of a hidden truth. And, at least according to Statius’s own theory, this truth cannot be but embodied as well. Seen from this angle, Dante’s authority still must stem from an embodied experience of the divine and cosmic order. Thus, the question of authorship does not only relate to Love dictating the *Commedia*. It is also about a body travelling through the paths of our lives—and a body travelling through the hereafter. Dante focuses on embodied authorship when he emphasizes the *physical* journey through the hereafter. It is a journey which does *not* arise from inspiration nor imagination but from embodied presence. If applied to these issues, Ascoli’s focus on Dante’s own theory of the author being somebody “worthy of faith and obedience”—and thereby of imitation—becomes rather a question about the body of the author than about his “I.”

It is also on the ground of embodiment that we encounter what Ascoli so convincingly observes, that is, Dante’s assumption of divine authority. Traditionally, the only body to imitate bodily is the body of Christ, the incarnated Word, whose passion marked the way by which the flesh could be redeemed. The authority of the martyrs and the flagellant ascetics stems from the idea of imitating the re-embodiment of Christ’s passion, as Niklaus Largier compellingly argues.[7]

By focusing on embodied and aesthetic authority Dante seems to take different step in the direction of grounding *auctoritas* not only on a relation of and with discursive knowledge, but also on aesthetic and emotional embodiment. Dante’s authorship transfers the embodiment of passion into an aesthetic experience. And, rather than a simple imitation of Christ, Dante’s *factio*, that is, his poetic production, develops what Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht has called “Production of Presence.”[8]

Perhaps this focus on embodiment as a source for authority and authorship makes an incredibly modern author out of Dante, one who might even inspire the most advanced theories of embodiment and phenomenology. This is a concept of modernity, though, which would be opposed to Ascoli’s concept of a modern author *representing* himself and reality.

The unease of us moderns when confronted with Dante cannot just be about the relation to an ineffable divine Being. Representationalist modern authors work

with a more or less Aristotelian concept of fiction, that is, with a concept of a poetic truth relying on modeling possibilities and an emotionality that can be addressed playfully and without consequences. However, Dante tells us a different story. The first prominent sinners he encounters in Hell are Paolo and Francesca, who were seduced by a fictitious story. Nevertheless, they become sexually aroused, which is their sin. They stop reading, get caught, and are killed before having a chance to repent. Addressing the emotions is the most consequential issue in Dante. The aesthetic, emotional fact holds the moral truth, and Paolo and Francesca do not know “as if” and aesthetic distance. The sexual arousal is real, even if the story is fictitious. It is factual, even if the story line only proposes possibilities.

The episodes of Paolo and Francesca and of Statius’s conversion are the most important models relating to the question of authorship in the *Commedia*: one episode presents the model of the courtly fictional author creating aesthetic effects which become emotionally much more powerful than any knowledge about their fictional status can prevent, and the other offers the model of the pagan author writing with divine grace that he himself does not and cannot know. Moreover, both episodes are narrated among sinners of love (*luxuria*), and both refer to a Thomistic all-embracing Love governing the universe which grounds true authorship in Dante. Both gain this reference emotionally and aesthetically induced by poetry, which in both cases seems to be the essential point. Paolo and Francesca know that adulterous love is a sin, but they are nevertheless seduced by poetry. Statius already knew Christianity and its theory, but only the powerful verses of Virgil make him emotionally, that is, really, understand.

Again, the point in both episodes is not about holding for historically true the story told. It is not about a fictional construction of realities referring to the world, but the immediate emotional effects poetic texts have upon the world. It is about bodies, the formation of bodies, not about the construction of authors as “I’s.”

The uneasiness modern readers feel with Dante, hence, might derive from the suspicion that Dante does not accept the contract about authors making possible worlds to tell us something *about* the actual world and to provide us with a non-consequential emotionality.

I believe that this critical reading is still somewhat congruent with Ascoli’s basic lines. The modern author’s authority, which relies on his or her autonomous imagination, has indeed been bought for a high price that Dante was not yet willing to pay, which is that *fictio*, that is, poetic making or *poiesis*, turned into fiction in a modern sense of the word. Ascoli is completely right about Dante taking important steps into this direction in attributing to himself the poetic power of construction, and he is also right about Dante trying to avoid the consequences. If Dante is thereby a precursor of modern authorship, a point with which I completely agree given Ascoli’s impressive work, his strength seems to consist in the fact that he did not go all the way, but that, half-way down the path of our lives, he rather undertook a pilgrimage to the heavens instead of walking down the way of really *becoming* a modern author.

Notes

[1]. Robert Harrison, *The Body of Beatrice* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), ix.

[2]. Charles S. Singleton, *Dante Studies I: Elements of Structure* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1954), 62.

[3]. Andreas Kablitz, “Poetik der Erlösung. Dantes *Commedia* als Verwandlung und Neubegründung mittelalterlicher Allegorese” in G. W. Most (Hg.), *Commentaries–Kommentare* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999), 353-379.

[4]. Francisco J. Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1991).

[5]. *Ibid.*

[6]. See Harrison, *The Body of Beatrice*.

[7]. See Niklaus Largier, “Die *magna spectacula* der Flagellanten,” in Sigrid Weigel, ed., *Märtyrer Portraits* (Munich: Fink, 2007), 81-83, and *In Praise of the Whip: A Cultural History of Arousal*, tr. Graham Harman (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007).

[8]. Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-italy>

Citation: Jan G. Soffner. Review of Ascoli, Albert Russell, *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author*. H-Italy, H-Net Reviews. December, 2009.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=25533>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.