

PHILOSOPHY, MYSTICISM, AND THE POLITICAL: ESSAYS ON DANTE. By Massimo Cacciari. Edited and with an introduction by Alessandro Carrera. Translated by Giorgio Mobili. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2021. 185 pp.

Massimo Cacciari (born 1944) is one of the most popular Italian philosophers, politicians, and intellectuals of his generation. Much of his philosophical career has been centred on the concept of “negative thought”, inspired by philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, and Ludwig Wittgenstein, and is conveyed through a dialogue between philosophical and theological reflection. He has published numerous books on both “negative thought” and the relationship between philosophy and theology, including *Krisis, Saggio sulla crisi del pensiero negativo da Nietzsche a Wittgenstein* (1976), *Pensiero negativo e razionalizzazione* (1977), *L'angelo necessario* (1986), *Dell'inizio* (1990), and most recently *Il lavoro dello spirito* (2020).

*Philosophy, Mysticism, and the Political: Essays on Dante*, is a collection of all the essays that Cacciari has written on Dante Alighieri's writings and their reception. Structured in nine chapters, the book singles out three main topics that recur in Dante's works – philosophy, mysticism, and politics – the relationships among which Cacciari has explored extensively throughout his scholarly career.

Given the genesis of the book, each chapter stands alone and there is no sequence from one chapter to the next. They touch on disparate themes (e.g. Dante's and Giotto's interpretations of Saint Francis, Dante's view on Ulysses' journey, Dante's idea of divine perception, Dante's concept of the ineffable, Dante's interpretation of intellectual love, Dante's philosophy of language, Dante's political theology, and the reception of Dante's works in Germany), often broadly covered, and have dissimilar lengths. A further imbalance arises from the fact that the first five chapters and the seventh are focused on the *Divine Comedy* (*Divina Commedia*) and only the sixth deals primarily with *On the Eloquence in the Vernacular* (*De vulgari eloquentia*). Cacciari's erudition provides the reader with a glimpse into the multifaceted structure of Dante's thought. However, some of the topics treated herein are too vast and complex (such as Dante's philosophy of language, Dante's political theology, and the reception of Dante's output in Germany) to be addressed in a few pages. In these instances, the chapters are more discursive than analytical, and often the reader has to reach his or her own conclusions.

The first chapter (the book's longest), “Double Portrait: Saint Francis of Assisi in Dante and Giotto”, retraces the significance of Saint Francis for both Dante's and Giotto's works. In this chapter, Cacciari (p. 24) asks “Can the Francis of the double church of Assisi be understood in analogy with the Francis of Dante?” To answer this question, Cacciari compares and contrasts Dante's and Giotto's interpretations of the figure of Saint Francis, focusing on several themes, especially humility, history versus legend, and poverty.

According to Cacciari, the originality of the theology of the *Paradiso* revolves around the figure of Saint Francis and, more precisely, his humility. Dante regarded Saint Francis as a man of his century, making the figure of Francis historical. On the other hand, Giotto represented Saint Francis as a religious man who preaches to the birds. Consequently, in Giotto's frescoes Saint Francis is a legendary instead of an historical man. Thus, whereas for Giotto history and legend are intertwined, for Dante these two dimensions are distinct.

Another topic Cacciari (p. 47) addresses in this chapter is Francis' poverty: “Poverty constitutes the very character and destiny of Francis' legacy”. Giotto's Francis is an emblem of popular religion, miracles, and poverty. For this reason, Giotto exalted poverty in his frescoes. Similarly, in the *Comedy*, Dante endorsed Francis' idea of poverty. However, according to Cacciari, both Giotto and Dante did not fully understand Francis' poverty, that is, the joy of poverty. In fact, Francis' joy of poverty and suffering is absent both in Giotto's Assisi frescos and in Dante's *Comedy*.

In chapter two, titled “The ‘Sin’ of Ulysses”, Cacciari identifies Dante’s view on Ulysses’ character and expresses one himself. According to Dante, an issue with Ulysses’ personality – and the source of his sin – is the combination of inordinate love and immoderate intelligence, inasmuch as “the former leads the lovers to ruin” and the latter “brings ruin to the false brethren” (Cacciari, p. 62). This is why Dante places Ulysses in the *Inferno*, in the eighth Bolgia of the eighth Circle (where those who have given out fraudulent counsel reside), thereby condemning Ulysses as a dishonest adviser.

However, considering Ulysses’ temperament, Cacciari prefers to talk about error rather than sin. This is compelling because discussing the concept of error anchors the character of Ulysses in its original Greek context. However, the reader would have benefited more if it was justified by clearer and more well-founded statements. Cacciari (p. 66) writes:

In Greek parlance, we could say: Ulysses does not sin, he *misses the target*. His is not sin but Greek *hamartia* (“error”). He does not orient himself by the reason and purpose of knowledge; in fact, he misses knowledge’s goal by misconceiving its foundation. Even the meaning to be attributed to Ulysses’ unstoppable longing should be carefully understood. It is not a commandment enjoining moderation and temperance, but rather the necessity to keep the ship of inquiry (Dante’s is a ship, Ulysses’ only a *bark*) well oriented and well steered. Inevitably, then, the error of intellect produces a catastrophe on the plane of ethics and of religious conscience.

Ulysses’ “error” would consist in his lack of goal, in other words, according to Cacciari (p. 69), his journey has no real purpose:

He wishes to “gain experience of the world” (“divenir del mondo esperto”, *Inf.* XXVI, 98) without trying to determine from time to time what his end will be. He “touches” several places only to abandon them at once. He leaves behind what he encounters without really getting to know it.

Cacciari’s view is grounded on Dante’s idea that, in his journey, Ulysses does not gain any real experience. He just wants to experiment. In this respect, Ulysses’ journey is very different from Dante’s journey (Dante the character in the *Comedy*, not Dante the author), which, as Cacciari points out, instead resembles those of Saint Paul and Aeneas. The comparison between the journeys of Ulysses, Paul, Aeneas, and Dante is interesting and fruitful, but it is a pity that Cacciari did not have the space to further explore the subject; that exploration would have allowed the reader to better understand Dante’s points of reference on the theme of travel and the different ways of conceiving it.

In chapter three, titled “Dante’s Divine Perception (*Aesthesis Theia*)”, Cacciari investigates Dante’s concept of divine perception. On Dante’s account, light plays a special role in divine perception because it “reveals the perfect merging of divine and human in the figure of the Son, thereby turning into a perfectly deifying Light” (Cacciari, p. 86). Cacciari (p. 91) continues,

Platonically, Light is the first Energy, that which makes possible the connection between seer and seen, and in whose unveiling every intuition and every word take place. A light that is perfectly sensible, and at the same time transcending every limitation. The Taboric light is also perfectly sensible. And all our lights arrange themselves according to this one Light, lights from the Light (*lumina de Lumine*), they are coordinated with the Light, just like the Light is coordinated with the Father whom it reveals and whom, however, no one ever saw.

In this sense, Beatrice is an important symbol: “Her smile signals the very merriment (*hilaritas*) of the divine Light trinitarily conceived, that is, the Light of God-as-Relation (*Deus Relatio*), of God-as-Love (*Theos Agape*)” (Cacciari, p. 87). Therefore, Beatrice’s smile leads to the divine and, for this reason, she plays a crucial role in Dante’s journey.

In chapter four, titled “The Concrete Ineffable: The Last Cantos of the *Commedia*”, Cacciari’s aim is to analyse Dante’s ability to intertwine hearing, seeing, and speech in the *Paradiso* and to show how Dante represents the ineffable, that is, a vision that “surpasses any predicative-demon-

strative language” (Cacciari, p. 103). Though the concept of the ineffable is well explained in the chapter, Cacciari neglects to show how Dante intertwines hearing, seeing, and speech and how “the different ways in which each of these dimensions is articulated, and [...] the different forms in which these different ways interweave with each other” (Cacciari, p. 93). In this sense, this part lacks both clarity and a strong argument. Some longer excerpts than those provided by Cacciari from Dante’s *Paradiso*, accurately interpreted by the author, as well as a more solid theological contextualisation, would have helped the reader to follow the author’s reasoning.

Chapter five, “Dante’s *Intellectual Love*”, deals with Dante’s idea of love. As Cacciari (p. 107) indicates, “in the *Paradiso*, Love is declared to be the *substance* of God, and [...] for this reason its energy can achieve the *excessus* and win it all”. Therefore, love is the main theme of the *Paradiso*. Using Cacciari’s words, the *Paradiso* shows “how the mind surpasses itself (*si trasmodi*; see Par. XXX, 19) and how such supreme metamorphosis is conceivable only through the *violence* of love” (Cacciari, p. 107). In this sense, according to Dante, God represents “the highest Cause, loving Cause, both final and efficient, unconditional Love” (Cacciari, p. 108).

Chapter six, “Latin and Vernacular in the *De vulgari eloquentia*”, breaks the continuity of the analysis of the *Comedy* and investigates Dante’s philosophy of language in *On the Eloquence in the Vernacular*, where Dante examines the common speech. Dante expresses the necessity of establishing a distinguished vernacular to express ourselves clearly, with skilful eloquence and the utmost rigour, in every aspect of everyday life (e.g. in academia, the courts, the tribunals, politics, etc.).

In this chapter, Cacciari identifies the most innovative insights of Dante’s philosophy of language: (i) the idea of a “sign” that entwines the sensible with the rational; (ii) the notion that language originated in a “sign”; (iii) the notion of the “becoming” of languages and therefore that there is no “sacred” language; and (iv) the notion of the “form of language”, that is, the idea that there is an innate structure in the human brain that allows us to learn language from the “matrix” but that, as Cacciari (p. 115) affirms, “the multiplicity of idioms is a function of change (*vicissitudo*) and human will”. Cacciari concludes that Dante’s philosophy of language would be the “precursor” to Noam Chomsky’s theory of generative grammar.

Chapter seven, “On Dante’s Political Theology”, returns to the *Comedy* (and to a certain extent also deals with *On Monarchy (De Monarchia)*) and outlines Dante’s idea of political theology. According to Cacciari, the connection between politics and theology makes Dante *a seer* and his poem *sacred*. Dante defends the idea that salvation can come only if the religious and political authorities fulfil their roles perfectly in both dimensions. Therefore, Papacy and Empire should complement each other: “The City is both city of man (*civitas homini*) and city of God (*civitas Dei*) and contains in itself all the dynamics that issue from such duplicity” (Cacciari, p. 120). It follows that, as Cacciari’s main argument states, Dante’s political discourse can only be understood in relation to its theological foundation.

The last two chapters deal with Dante’s fortune in Germany. In chapter eight, titled “A Brief Note on the German Reception of Dante”, Cacciari broadly traces the reception of Dante’s works in German poetry and philosophy. The result of Cacciari’s research is that “in the German-speaking world, Dante emerges as the paragon of a grandiose *epic*, in opposition to both the Baroque and an Enlightenment perceived as too cold and intellectualistic, devoid of religious strength” (Cacciari, p. 133). Consequently, the fortune of Dante in Germany coincides with the era of Goethe, between Romanticism and Idealism. The last chapter, “Schelling’s Dante”, is more limited in scope, concentrating on the importance of Dante’s output in Schelling’s philosophy. According to Cacciari, the relationship between Schelling and Dante is critical to understanding Schelling’s philosophical system. However, this topic is addressed in a very general way, leaving out a sound explanation of Schelling’s indebtedness to Dante.

To conclude, Cacciari’s book offers original and thought-provoking perspectives from which to engage with the complex and crucial poet and thinker that Dante Alighieri was. Despite the weaknesses outlined above and the fact that Dante’s works have been studied for a long time by

numerous distinguished scholars and specialists, Cacciari succeeded in demonstrating novel ways to appreciate the richness, profundity, and originality of Dante's opus, as well as the importance of continuing to engage with his writings.

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TAGORE AND YEATS: A POSTCOLONIAL RE-ENVISIONING. By Amrita Ghosh and Elizabeth Brewer Redwine (Eds.). Leiden, Netherlands: BRILL, 2022. xvi, 220 pp.

Many readers consider Tagore and Yeats to be two beacons of anti-colonialism; cosmopolitan as well as champions of the causes they advocated. They look at their friendship in genteel terms, calling out the fallout rather unfortunate. This anthology aims to fill the lacuna left in studying the causal trajectory their symbiotic relationship took thereby becoming an *initium* for discussion, debate, criticism, and comparison albeit following a decentralized exegesis. The foreword to the anthology succinctly sums up the content – the essays use “theoretical, literary critical, biographical, historical, art historical, even sartorial” (Ramazani, ix) analysis for a relational understanding between the two poets and how their assimilation in curating an anti-colonial literature impacted each poet's profession.

Amrita Ghosh and Elizabeth Brewer Redwine gloss over the beneficial equation shared by the poets in the introduction and call the anthology a ‘postcolonial re-envisioning.’ They argue that the essays look at the two poets not by glorifying one's identity at the cost of the other, but by juxtaposing their paradoxical equation within a “collaborative artistry” (Ghosh and Redwine, 1).

Divided into three broad themes, the first section of the anthology is titled “Tagore, Yeats, Translation and Appropriation,” and contains two essays. The first essay, written by Amardeep Singh, ‘(Un)Translatable Authorship: Positioning Yeats' ‘Preface’ and the Poetry of Tagore,’ deals with the problematics of translation, especially the poetics of Tagore with poetry being rather untranslatable. It also highlights how the generous addition of Yeats' Preface to *Gitanjali* prefigured Tagore in the Western intellect but instead of uplifting Tagore, helped in elevating Yeats' career in Europe. Tagore, in the critic's opinion, was lost in translation; modelled for European consumption with Yeats' chaperone which has since been difficult to overcome and certainly raises doubts about his possible re-examination without Yeats' overshadowing influence.

Similarly, the second essay, ‘Translation at the Abbey Theatre in 1913: The World Premier of Rabindranath Tagore's the Post Office,’ by Barry Sheils takes a step further in discussing Tagore's rise as a translated Indian by taking recourse to the staging of his play *Daakghar* as ‘The Post Office’ at Dublin's Abbey Theatre on 17 May 1913 through the Borgesian paradox. This paper argues how literature which transcends nations are translated literature. Reclaiming space by the effaced translators and the local import of linguistic nuances are seen as prerequisites to the strategy of global exchange, which is not always easy, especially in case of self-translation.

The second set of essays, “Representation, Subalternity, and Transnational Collaboration” contain three essays, namely, ‘Hybrid Performances: Tagore, Yeats, Politics and the Practice of Cosmopolitanism’ by Louise Blakeney Williams, ‘Tagore's China, Yeats' Orient’ by Gregory B. Lee, and ‘Tagore, Yeats and the Poetics of Subalternity’ by Sirshendu Majumdar. Williams' essay expounds the cosmopolitanism of the two poets. Tagore's hybridity as a poet depends on his personality, carefully crafted to become cosmopolitan. Yeats shares Tagore's idealism and is helped by Tagore in achieving his own. While Tagore's cosmopolitanism rests on his appearance, Yeats' rests on his performance.