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Exploring Dante, Robert C. Evans . . . . . xv

*This opening essay offers a comprehensive overview of everything else included in the present volume, such as the volume’s introductory essay, its brief biography of Dante, its four critical contexts essays, its ten critical readings, and its closing resources section. Evans summarizes the contents of all these various parts of Critical Insights: Dante Alighieri.*

Amplifications of Antiquity in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, Edwin Wong . . . xxvii

*Edwin Wong’s introductory essay explores a major issue relevant to any reading of the *Divine Comedy*: how does Dante present himself in relation to the great classical poets who preceded him—poets he deeply admired but poets with whom he was also deliberately and obviously competing? According to Wong, “Instead of engaging in self-praise, Dante adopts the narrative strategy of amplifying and overcoming antiquity: if others invoke the Muses so many times, he will invoke more Muses more often. If others sight landfall, he makes landfall.” He thus seeks both to honor and surpass the writers he most valued.*

A Biography of Dante Alighieri, Robert C. Evans . . . . . li

*This deliberately brief biography sketches the main events of Dante’s life, including his childhood, his early encounter with “Beatrice,” his short military career, his involvement in the politics of Florence, his eventual exile from that city, his later wanderings throughout Italy, and the composition of his various works, including the *Commedia*, later known as the *Divine Comedy*.*

## Critical Contexts

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The Life of Dante and the *Commedia*, Brandon Schneeberger . . . . . 3

*Employing a historical approach, Brandon Schneeberger provides a reading of Marco Santagata's Dante: The Story of His Life, translated into English by Richard Dixon (2016). Schneeberger focuses on the ways Santagata describes the events in Dante's life that helped to shape some of his lesser-known writings as well as his greatest literary work, the Commedia. He reports that "Santagata presents a very detailed account of the specific educational, historical, political, geographical, and relational factors that influenced Dante the person and the writer."*

Recent Literary Criticism of Dante's *Commedia*, Melissa Anderson . . . . 19

*Exploring an important gathering of recent critical commentary, Melissa Anderson examines The Cambridge Companion to Dante's 'Commedia,' which she calls "an invaluable collection of highly researched and lucidly explained essays exploring literary, historical, and cultural aspects of the poem." She reports that this collection deals with various significant issues, such as the poem's "transmission history and early reception or religious culture and doctrine" as well as "themes of intertextuality, metaliterary elements, and literary innovation."*

Why Did Dante Call the *Divine Comedy* a Comedy? or, How to Do Things with Genres, Edwin Wong . . . . . 41

*In this critical lens essay, Edwin Wong suggests that "Dante appears to differentiate comedy and tragedy in terms of speech genres," with tragedies addressed to "the educated elite and comedies addressed to the masses." Wong argues that Dante "thinks of literary genres not as containers for different types of plots (as we do), but rather as different registers of speaking." According to Wong, Dante defines "tragedy as a high art for the literati and glitterati, and comedy as pop art for the illiterate." He thus wrote his *Commedia* to achieve the broadest possible audience.*

"Listen, Pal, There Was a Man Named Dante": Refractions of *The Divine Comedy* in Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*, Steven D. Ealy . . . . . 64

*Steven D. Ealy, comparing and contrasting Dante's fourteenth-century poem with Warren's twentieth-century novel,*

*examines how (and how often) Warren alluded to Dante, how frequently and thoughtfully he read Dante, and how he used references to (and ideas from) Dante in his greatest work of fiction. Both Dante and Warren, according to Ealy, were keenly interested in some of the same issues, especially issues of political behavior and personal morality.*

## **Critical Readings**

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- Dante’s *Vita Nuova*: A Survey of Recent Introductions and Afterwords,  
Matthew M. Thiele . . . . . 85

*Aside from the Divine Comedy, La Vita Nuova, Dante’s collection of lyric poems with prose explications, has long been his second-most-admired and widely influential work. In this essay, Matthew Thiele surveys what editors of various translations of this work have had to say about its importance. He notes that critics “have been interested in La Vita Nuova for such reasons as its unusual, hybrid form, its development of ideas about courtly love, its place in the tradition of Italian vernacular poetry, and its employment and interrogation of specific elements of Christian theology.”*

- “By the testimony of reason and authority”: Reason, Rhetoric, and Literature in Dante’s *Monarchia*, Matthew M. Thiele . . . . . 99

*Examining another major work by Dante—his political treatise De Monarchia [On Monarchy]—Matthew Thiele explains that this work was “aimed at a specific audience at a particular moment in time. Its stated purpose is to justify the authority of the Holy Roman Emperor and limit the governing authority of the pope. “This,” Thiele notes, “was primarily a religious dispute, and Dante relies heavily on his understanding of theology, scripture, and the doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church to support his argument.” Thiele cautions, however, that this text by Dante exemplifies “the complicity of the learned in legitimizing and reifying dominant power structures. It begs us to be suspicious of those who would deploy art and philosophy in partisan politics.”*

- Which Translation of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* Is the “Best”?,  
Robert C. Evans . . . . . 112

*Addressing a question asked by nearly every non-Italian person planning to read the Divine Comedy, Robert Evans, in this essay, examines the opinions of a variety of highly qualified academic*

experts who have assessed various English translations of Dante's masterwork. He shows that even these persons, however, take often strongly conflicting positions: "Those interested in fairly literal translations tended to favor the versions by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, John D. Sinclair, Charles S. Singleton, Robert Durling, and, to some extent, Mark Musa." However, "those willing to accept less literal translations tended to admire the efforts by Musa, John Ciardi, and Robert Pinsky. The translation by Robert and Jean Hollander," according to Evans, "seems to appeal to people in both camps while also satisfying people interested in detailed commentary."

Dante's Art and Ideas: Opinions of Important Translators and Editors,  
 Robert C. Evans . . . . . 137

*In the present essay, Robert Evans suggests that "anyone relatively new to the Divine Comedy who wants to learn just why it is considered a 'classic' can learn a lot by reading introductions to the newest editions. These introductions," Evans notes, "are often 'up-to-date' about critical issues and controversies in the field, and each new introduction ideally also brings something new to the table." Examining a number of such introductions, Evans focuses "on what various translators, editors, or translator/editors have had to say about Dante's key ideas as well as about the true artistry and literary meaning of the work—how well the work is written, how carefully it is structured, what some of its symbolism implies, and, in short, what makes it worth reading as a poem rather than simply as a piece of Florentine or medieval history."*

Rare Illustrated Editions of Dante's *Divine Comedy* (With Some  
 Thoughts on Using Illustrations to Read and Teach Dante),  
 Robert C. Evans . . . . . 155

*In the present essay, Robert Evans suggests that "anyone wanting to learn more about the actual poetic methods of the Divine Comedy—or anyone wanting to teach those methods to students—can benefit from reading the poem side-by-side with as many different illustrations as possible. On the one hand," Evans argues, "illustrations can help us notice details in Dante's narrative that we may miss through our own mere reading, because artists are often trained to notice visual clues and details that many of us may overlook. On the other hand," he continues, "illustrations can also help us notice how Dante's poetry sometimes radically differs from the artistry employed by the poem's illustrators."*

*Evans's essay looks at a number of illustrations of Dante's poem, including some from rare and little-known editions from the nineteenth century.*

The Dante Paintings of Joseph Anton Koch, Robert C. Evans . . . . . 174

*In this essay, Robert Evans examines the stunning but little-known frescoes created by the equally little-known nineteenth-century Austrian painter Joseph Anton Koch. Koch was commissioned to create his frescoes for Casino Massimo, an Italian mansion in Rome. Evans contends that "Koch's depictions of scenes from the Divine Comedy are among the most vivid and haunting ever created. Once seen, they stick in the mind." He notes that "unfortunately, however, relatively few people have ever had a chance to see them—until now," in reproductions revealing that "Koch's genius as an artist working with Dante's words is now visible for all to view, appreciate, and never forget."*

Unfamiliar Illustrations of the First Canto of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Rhianna Ragan . . . . . 192

*In another essay of little-known illustrations for Dante's masterpiece, Rhianna Ragan explains that "Gustave Doré's illustrations of Dante's Divine Comedy have always been the most popular drawings associated with the poem and are likely to remain popular for centuries to come (and rightly so). But drawings by other artists," she asserts, "are definitely worth exploring," especially drawings by a nineteenth-century French artist named Yan' Dargent as well as a later anonymous but presumably Greek imitator, "both of whom seem influenced by Doré but both of whom obviously possessed definite talents of their own." Also examining works by John Flaxman, Bartolomeo Pinelli, and Walter Crane, Ragan concludes that "Dante's poem has inspired not only a rich tradition of critical commentary but also an equally rich tradition of responses by talented visual artists."*

Depictions of Cerberus, the Three-Headed Dog, by Various Illustrators of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Kelsie Kato . . . . . 209

*In the last of this volume's series of essays devoted to discussions of illustrations of the Divine Comedy, Kelsie Kato explores various little-known depictions of Cerberus, one of the most memorable monsters the poem describes. She observes that a survey of illustrations of the sort she provides "almost inevitably amounts to a survey of different periods of Western art, from the Middle*

*Ages to the Renaissance to the Enlightenment to Romanticism and beyond. By creating such a vivid and memorable poem,” Kato argues, “Dante also created a rich source of material for painters, engravers, and drawers in pen and ink, just as he has more recently helped feed the imagination of modern and postmodern artists.” She thinks it is safe to say that “for as long as visual art continues to exist, its practitioners will draw on Dante for themes, characters, settings, and, in the case of Cerberus, strange beasts.”*

“It was enough to make you dream for nights”: Dante’s *Inferno* on the Screen: Milano Films’ *L’Inferno*, Christopher Baker . . . . . 228

*In the present essay, Christopher Baker reports that a silent film—L’Inferno—released in 1911 “has some of the features one might find in a modern blockbuster.” He notes that “never-before-seen special effects set the film apart from its predecessors and bring the text of the poem to life in fresh and inventive ways. It is probably,” Baker suggests, “the very first ‘buddy movie’ as its two travelers—Virgil, experienced and fearless, and Dante, timid yet fascinated—embark on a suspenseful journey through a strange and forbidding realm. Moreover,” Baker continues, “it features a mesmerizing panorama of human depravities, inhuman creatures, and (literally) hellish punishments from which we cannot look away.”*

Norman Bel Geddes’s Stage Designs for Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, Robert C. Evans . . . . . 246

*In the final critical readings essay, Robert Evans notes that the famous American designer Norman Bel Geddes “seems to have been one of the few artists who have tried to bring Dante’s work to three-dimensional life on a gigantic planned public stage. It would,” Evans thinks, “have been fascinating to see Bel Geddes’s plans fully realized,” but although those plans were quite elaborate and aroused real enthusiasm in the early 1920s, sufficient funds to implement them were never raised. Nevertheless, they survive in a series of drawings, written scenarios, stage designs, and, recently, computer-generated recreations, as well as in many assessments by Bel Geddes’s contemporaries.*

## **Resources**

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