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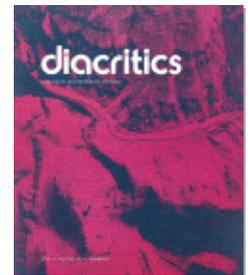
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## Professional Dantology and the Human Significance of Dante Studies

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# PROFESSIONAL DANTOLOGY AND THE HUMAN SIGNIFICANCE OF DANTE STUDIES

**A REVIEW OF WORKS BY JUSTIN STEINBERG**

*ACCOUNTING FOR DANTE:*

*URBAN READERS AND WRITERS IN LATE MEDIEVAL ITALY* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007)

*DANTE AND THE LIMITS OF THE LAW* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013)

WILLIAM FRANKE

In order to envision what humanities scholarship can be at its best, I propose to examine a very specific field of scholarship and to do so with reference to the particular case of a single scholar and his two books. Humanities studies are rich and multivalent in nature and purpose: their means and ends are not easy to define adequately. Such study can be brought into focus best by exemplification in works that typify its purport and methods. The ambiguities and paradoxes of such study in a real world of professional competition and social struggles for power and prestige are also a part of this story—and one that cannot be elided or simply ignored without truncating our understanding and skewing truth. What I wish to probe here, in particular, are questions of how to determine the proper scope and purpose of humanities scholarship as it emerges poised in the tension between the specific aims of advancing specialized disciplines and the potential for making a contribution of more general cultural significance with a broader remit. At bottom, I am asking: How can humanities scholarship, beyond serving career goals, attain to a more universal type of value or intrinsic worth? This goal is important if we are to avoid constructing artificial academic disciplines without relevance beyond an enclosed circle of insiders who mutually validate and authenticate one another's work and views in presumably authoritative terms, but without wider human interest and intellectual challenge.

Justin Steinberg's book *Dante and the Limits of the Law* is captivating from its introduction. It outlines a fascinating project of considerable amplitude, one that raises fundamental questions concerning positively legislated law versus the unwritten sensibility of a community in determining what is right and just. The further question of whether the free choice of individuals remains bound by reason and therewith also responsible to traditional authority beyond the individual's conscience (or perhaps just their passion and caprice) is also examined sensitively and profoundly by Steinberg in relation to Dante's work. Yet another analogous question concerning the authority of a sovereign political power to establish law—whether responsibly (to what or whom?) or just arbitrarily by its own absolute sovereignty—likewise receives acute attention, even if only indirectly and by means of examples. The book promises to address broad and deep philosophical problems in penetrating ways by the detailed, historically specific, and critically concrete analyses in which its pages abound.

Steinberg is effective, in the first place, in finding and defining medieval contexts that incisively bear upon and illuminate Dante's text. Many valuable elucidations of the nuances of Dante's text are gained by Steinberg's reading them in their historical and specifically *legal*-historical contexts. For example, the vocabulary of "discernment," "discretion," and "arbitrium" is much richer when its contemporary legal resonances are taken into account in ways that are made possible for the reader by Steinberg's researches. Dante's medieval understanding is informed by interpretive application of the traditions of civil or Roman law, as deposited eminently in the *Digest of Justinian* (*Digesta seu Pandectae*), and of the body of ecclesiastical or canon law archived in the *Medieval Canon Law* (*Corpus iuris canonici*). In applying such legal codes, discretionary judgment exercised at the limits of the law does not weaken or annul its force by

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undermining or subordinating its authority but rather demonstrates its adaptability, and this turns out to be vital to the law's claim to universality.<sup>1</sup> Thus discretion can actually serve the law and extend its range rather than simply trumping or subverting it.

However, at least at first, Steinberg's research, despite the provocative questions it raises, seems to serve strictly as background for a much more restricted purpose of explaining certain enigmatic, or at least curious, aspects of Dante's texts. The reader may feel a suspicion that the objectives actually operative in the work are exhausted with such explications. The opening pages signal, for instance, the importance of Giorgio Agamben to thinking the legal status of the exception, but this connection is not pursued further in the balance of the book. The allusive capaciousness of the introduction, encompassing political theology in Shakespeare together with legal rights theory ranging from medieval to contemporary periods, is very impressive. Yet the panorama sketched there seems not to be developed any further for its own intrinsic interest. The project seems rather to fold back into an exegetical exercise of illuminating Dante's text. The question that this raises for me is that of whether and to what extent scholarship of this caliber can benefit from opening into a more general and deliberate discourse addressing the overarching concerns of the humanities.

Steinberg shows compellingly how the law's capacity to regulate human society and ensure peace, and so to order society in accordance with a divine purpose, butts up against its limits in Dante's own historical experience—specifically, in his political debacle, his personal defaming and criminalization by his political enemies, the black Guelfs, who held power in Florence from 1301. This was the year in which Dante went into an exile that proved to be irreversible. The law is necessary to Dante's conception

of an ordered and viable society, yet in the hands of ambitious and unjust humans it can itself become a formidable instrument of oppression and tyranny. Hence its "limits." But can these very limits become the grounds for recreating "law" in a broad sense—law realized in an ideally regulated community and applied in well-governed, disciplined living, as well as in the reforming of society by the fire of prophetic zeal? This would entail appeal to a common humanity, in which one uncovers the submerged basis of the law, its underlying

principles or "spirit" (as in Montesquieu's "l'esprit des lois"). In fact, the law wields an incalculable and even a mystical authority that is made manifest perhaps only by virtue of its limits. Every positive formulation is inadequate to its sublime intent and purpose, and precisely these limits, by pointing to the inadequacy of all phenomenal manifestations, can exalt the law as such above the heavens into a metaphysical and theological instance bearing a purportedly transcendent value.

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Dante's works, in Steinberg's reading of them, effectuate a reexamination of the true sources of legal power and authority. They attempt to expose the myriad false pretenses to and abuses of such authority that were rife in Dante's world in the Italian city-states of the early fourteenth century. This entails a probing of the very metaphysical and epistemological bases of the law. On this score, Steinberg emphasizes Dante's attempt to rebuild objective judgment as a basis for public trust through developing the imaginative underpinnings and presuppositions of any possible collective knowledge or sensibility. The role of public infamy and presumptive guilt based on reputation and popular imagination is questioned by Dante's representations of its fallacies in cases like those of Brunetto Latini and Bertran de Born.

Although Dante as a character in his poem demonstrates the utmost reverence for his former master, "ser Brunetto," and reinforces Latini's reputation or *fama* as an outstanding humanist, the frame of the encounter in the circle of the sodomites ironically exposes how erroneous the best of reputations, even this one, can be. Dante offers this exposé from his position as poet and at the same time takes a critical stance vis-à-vis himself as character. As character, he is still in awe of Brunetto's immense prestige. But as poet, Dante "dramatizes his own misperceptions about Brunetto in order to illustrate how such fictions function more broadly across society—regardless of the 'facts' before one's eyes" (*DL*, 38–39). Or again, Bertran carrying his severed head dangling from the hair like a lantern suggests more specifically that the power of public authorities to bring down infamy upon the punished (*infamia ex genere poenae*) exceeds the measure of every sentence and even of every rational and discursive formulation. Bertran's plight graphically embodies a *contrapasso*—a punishment consisting of suffering that corresponds to and fits a harmful action—as defined by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and as elaborated by Thomas Aquinas in *Summa Theologiae* (IIa.IIae. 61.4 resp.) in his discussion of the Biblical *lex talionis*. Bertran's punishment takes on a valence as public spectacle that largely exceeds the requirements of retributive justice for the particular case at hand (*DL*, 46–49).<sup>2</sup>

Dante's literary medium can prove to be even more incisive and demonstrative than more direct, deliberate philosophical analysis could be. The subtleties of the questions often do not lend themselves so well to explicit statement as to partial truths, and such insight can be conveyed most effectively by a rhetorical approach availing itself of imaginative representation. There are no surefire means of knowing the singular truth of individuals as against and apart from their public images and reputations. Consequently, Dante, in effect, pleads for deployment of the full powers of imagining. This power deals effectively with both exemplary types and with specific facts concerning real individuals. Imagination is on both counts crucial for building communities. Like the law, imagination moves between the universal and the particular, the timeless and the immediate or urgent: it engages, moreover, the difficult but essential task of integrating the two. In a programmatic statement of the theme of his book, Steinberg writes,

Dante seeks in the *Commedia* to restore the common values, exemplary narratives, and disciplining practices that exist at the boundaries of the law. His poem is meant to occupy the interstices between law and life, to provide the moral and aesthetic preconditions necessary for the law to thrive. These “emergency poetics” form the cultural tissue beneath, beyond, above, and beside the law. (*DL*, 5)

Steinberg thereby corrects a common tendency in current criticism to see Dante as valorizing individual creativity over convention and dogma. Seeing Dante as a superior individual talent and artistic creator triumphing by his creative genius is anachronistic; it draws on very modern notions of artistic creation that were forged in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and achieved a kind of apotheosis in romanticism. This period and its *Zeitgeist* laid down new foundations for self and world in the autonomy of the individual. But Dante’s drift is rather to rehabilitate the intrinsic powers of the law. He does not place the individual in principle above or outside and beyond the law. He is not antinomian any more than he is invested in romantically exalting the artistic genius of the individual. He is seeking the means, on the law’s own terms and within the legal vocabulary and apparatus available to him in his day, to clear his own reputation, which has been compromised and, in fact, egregiously sullied by his exile. In order to do so, he must systematically reimagine the deeper meaning of the law and reconstruct legal logic for a secular world, one in which absolutes of theological revelation or unified, public, imperial authority can no longer be relied on in any straightforward way but must rather be imaginatively recreated and reanimated.

I wish to stress that this is not to surpass or discard theological revelation any more than it is to transcend legality, but rather to redefine its basis and status in a way that is true and applicable for the real and actual world, whether Dante’s or our own. This is in either case a world that has by and large lost its naive faith, not to mention its intellectual foundations, in the religious and social norms of the past. Nevertheless, it is a world projected into the future in infinite hope to establish a peaceful pact or *modus vivendi* among human agents meeting and acting together in the political arena. Still, the ideals of the past that remain alive or that can be resuscitated in the imagination must in any case serve as guiding lights for discerning transcendent ideals and collective standards. The crisis of theology and the law, and of every other form of idealization, is the occasion for deepening one’s understanding of them by rediscovering their embeddedness amid the complexities of real social and historical existence rather than apprehending them merely in the diaphanous ether of abstract norms and intellectual principles.

Indeed, Dante’s own personal and historical experience was one of being betrayed by the law. He was unjustly but legally adjudged a criminal by the reigning government of the city of Florence and was, accordingly, subjected to the punishments it imposed: exile, fines, and eventually a death sentence, should he ever be apprehended on the territory of the Florentine commune again. Dante’s whole oeuvre emerges in Steinberg’s reading as motivated by his rebellion against this injustice and by his Promethean attempt

to exonerate himself by use of the prodigious literary means of self-justification at his command. He had no other recourse except to try to influence the field of public imagination, endeavoring to substitute an alternative image of himself for the public infamy incurred through his sentence and punishment.

This urgent need and challenge, which was created by his personal drama and tragedy, involved Dante in a very wide-ranging rethinking of the legal system—of its bases, its limits, its vulnerabilities, and its capabilities—as well as in a far-reaching redeployment of the rhetorical models and infrastructures of this legal system. Steinberg examines from a specifically legal point of view the thoroughgoing social reconfiguration and self-reinvention that Dante undertakes, chiefly in his *Commedia* but also in his other works—the so-called “minor works” that serve as anticipations of, but also in part as foils for, the project of the *Comedy*.

Thus the larger context in which Steinberg places Dante’s oeuvre is that of a general crisis of the legal system and even of legality tout court in Dante’s day and age. At the same time, Steinberg insists on Dante’s *adherence* to this system and its available resources, even in all his attempts to get around its impasses so as to redeem his reputation and, at least ideally, save his whole cultural world from imminent collapse. This is already a crisis of incipient modernity, one in which transcendent foundations and collectively acknowledged bases for legal discernment and decision are undermined, or at least are no longer assured. In other words, Dante’s drama prefigures the modern crisis of subjectivity—the crisis of a modern subjectivity severed from its transcendental ground beyond itself and lacking in objectively validated standards to anchor it. The law already in Dante’s day had become a manipulative instrument at the disposal of scheming and unrighteous political rivals and opponents rather than a sacred norm commanding the respect and obedience of all and thus able to maintain peace among different individuals and distinct classes and factions of society.

The breakdown of the very cultural fabric on which the legal order relies, due to endless strife between church and empire, which is played out in the struggles of the Italian city-states among themselves, turned positive law into “just another legitimized form of violence” (*DL*, 4). Dante suffers the brunt of losing in the resulting contest of force. His white Guelph party is banished from Florence, and he is legally condemned. After futilely attempting reentry by diplomatic and military means, Dante finds that he can fight back only by means of literature. This is his only real recourse for attempting to redress the wrong against him: he can do so through influencing public conscience and by shaping the social imaginary. These resources underlie and would be necessary finally to underwrite the credibility of the explicit legal judgments promulgated against him by the public authorities reigning in Florence.

Steinberg convincingly portrays Dante as facing the newly emerging, unprecedented legal dilemmas and paradoxes of a new age in which commonly acknowledged, unshakably established legal bases are lacking. Confronted with disintegrating institutions at the close of the Middle Ages, and in the absence of effective social sanctions or legal means of enforcement, no longer able to defer to universally recognized standards and

rights, individuals must make pacts, even “naked pacts.” There is no encompassing legality with effective power of enforcement on which they can rely. However, this only renders more acute Dante’s sense of the law per se (regardless of whether it is taken to be natural or divine in origin) as transcending in essence or spirit the human institutions that endeavor to translate it into practically applicable precepts and prescriptions. A key indicator of this disparity between positive laws and their true basis and foundation is the indispensable role played by *exceptions* in the legal life of any regulated and just society of human beings.

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For Dante’s medieval mind and sensibility, exceptions and anomalies take on a revelatory role for establishing normativity beyond the capacity of what any fixed rules or system can possibly determine. The true norm is higher than any law that can be fixed and formulated.

system can possibly determine. The true norm is higher than any law that can be fixed and formulated. Consequently, only a dialectic between laws and their exceptions can reach beyond the reductiveness of positive systems and attain to something of their inspiring rationale or spirit.

Dante’s whole journey, after all, is an exception to the law of the afterlife, since by rights only the dead are admitted to this kingdom. The poem, furthermore, is built on a series of exceptions such as the emblematic cases of the saved pagans, Cato and Ripheus. Exceptions are necessary to confirm the higher sense

of the law that no finite rendering can adequately or exhaustively capture and display. The role of the exception as paradoxically preserving the law it violates is outlined by Steinberg as follows:

Even when imperial rescripts or papal dispensations were in violation of positive law (*contra ius*), they were expected to remain faithful to higher norms, namely the foundational, “constitutionalist” tenets of the *ius commune* and the dictates of natural law. These extraordinary yet regulated exceptions were in fact necessary to the juridical order, serving to ensure its universal reach and adaptability by balancing the demands of justice with the authority of law. From this perspective, the exception guaranteed the law’s continued applicability, saving it from becoming a dead letter when confronted with unforeseen cases. (*DL*, 2)

Steinberg lucidly argues that in the Middle Ages, “the exception expressed the continued relevance of the legal order;” whereas in our “post-Enlightenment conception,” “law” is synonymous with “legislation,” so that as a consequence any exception simply nullifies it (*DL*, 2–3). The law is now nothing more than a positive prescription. We have lost our understanding and the very conception of law as a transcendent principle that lives and is affirmed precisely in the exception that reveals a goodness in excess of any

formula, a rightness that no express precept can exhaust—nor any static law adequately render—in its full meaning and purport.

As a corollary to this, Steinberg emphasizes that the law that was still alive, or at least still imaginable, in the Middle Ages was not a flat and imperative prescription or proscription but rather required participation in order for its true content to be discerned. This active involvement, moreover, entailed inevitably a measure of individual and even inventive discretion. Dante invites readers to join him in judgment of the characters he represents. To this extent, his representations of the eternal destinies of humans are dialectical rather than definitive. The eternal truth about each individual cannot be represented except in part. And hence, notwithstanding all their gravity and pretended authority, Dante's representations elicit debate and have in fact incited critics ever since to disagreement in an endless multiplication of interpretations.

Surely Dante's central message can be usefully and innovatively seen in something like these legal terms, and Steinberg has qualified himself, by extensive training and research in medieval jurisprudence and related fields, to make us see it in such a perspective. Dante and the *limits* of the law is surely a happy choice of theme for Steinberg and for his bringing into focus something that is centrally at stake in Dante's poem, as well as in the very life project and personal destiny of the incomparable Alighieri.

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The limit of Steinberg's own project, which is also its strength and likely to be a key to its success, is that it is cast in terms very specific to the study of Dante by specialized, professional Dante scholarship. Although he writes in very accessible prose and works always with English-language readers in mind, ones who may not understand other languages (foreign language quotations, particularly from Italian and Latin, are kept marginal), nevertheless he does not attempt to turn the problems he discusses over to a wider audience. He evokes much wider contexts as relevant to interpreting Dante, but not vice versa. This lends his writing a concentrated force and limits the field of his discussions, so that the project can demonstrably accomplish what it expressly sets out to achieve. Such limitation, however, can also make the work appear to be something of an academic exercise rather than an unlimited intervention into open discussion of our most vital problems as human beings generally. The potential for this latter dimension is palpable: the text is pregnant with such possibilities, as are certain other magisterial treatments of Dante that distinguish this field of criticism today. I would compare this work, for example, with the similarly excellent and elegant work of Gary Cestaro for its being richly suggestive as a model of humanities studies. Cestaro's *Dante and the Grammar of the Nursing Body* (2003) effectively crosses medieval philology with the poststructuralist (Lacanian) psycholinguistics of Julia Kristeva. Yet it, too, is very much ensconced in professional Dante studies and, not surprisingly, appears in the same University of Notre Dame series (The William and Katherine Devers Series in Dante Studies) in which Steinberg published his first book.

By limiting his scope in the way he does, Steinberg does not exceed the parameters of the philological framework. This is, of course, what Dante scholarship likes best, since it enables such scholarship to feel at home and in command of a game that it can judge authoritatively by its own accepted canons and familiar standards.

By the way it is presented, Steinberg's work is addressed specifically to professional Dante scholars. The potential for becoming a broader discourse of wide-ranging relevance to the humanities remains somewhat concealed behind this professionally motivated focus. This limitation, too, is in keeping with the usual practices of Dante scholarship. And this is where I perceive the limits and the law of Steinberg's own

work—together with the issue that it raises for me concerning humanities scholarship and its professional nature and purposes. Even though he occasionally shows much broader knowledge and a versatile talent for highly interdisciplinary and multi-registered writing, Steinberg does not venture beyond the frame of specialized scholarship or propose to develop original thinking about universal issues in the humanities. By limiting his scope in the way he does, Steinberg does not exceed the parameters of the philological framework. This is, of course, what Dante scholarship likes best, since it enables such scholarship to feel at home and in command of a game that it can judge authori-

tatively by its own accepted canons and familiar standards. This gives it power—together with the inevitable ambiguities that go along with the artificial creation of the bases of power and authority by subtle, perhaps mostly subliminal forms of collusion and complicity. These are limits, then, but I mention them only because I feel the potential of a different and very important kind of challenge near to emerging in Justin Steinberg's work. Literary criticism can take on a speculative vocation, although the Dante profession tends to discourage and shun such attempts to exceed its own field of expertise. Steinberg's work, in this regard, has the merit at least of knowing its primary audience and of shrewdly assessing the requirements and expectations to which it is held directly accountable.

It would be presumptuous on my part to judge whether Steinberg's book *should* be addressed to a wider audience or be differently oriented in its approach. It is what it is, and I find that, as such, it is something marvelous. My purpose is simply to point to the issue raised by scholarship of this level of excellence. The same issue arises for me, to give another example, also in relation to Christian Moevs's *The Metaphysics of Dante's "Comedy."*<sup>3</sup> Does such scholarship have its full significance only within the circumscribed field of Dante studies, or is it rather a resource for culture and humanity more generally? Steinberg's book in some respects spans these two possibilities. The tension between them is perhaps necessary in order for the book to retain its integrity as a work of

specialized scholarship and yet, at the same time, make such investigation more broadly relevant in forming our minds and moral beings.

Beyond developing merely technical expertise and virtuosity in a hierarchically assessed and audited professional context, there is a question here of the vocation of literary criticism as a form of culture—of speculative philosophy, in Moevs’s case or my own, and of cultural critique or history of ideas in Steinberg’s case. The pressure exerted by the need for recognition from professional peers can effectively discipline scholarship and prevent it from indulging in excessive generalization. However, this specialized training needs to work in tandem with and not to suffocate the broader humanistic outlook that is developed for the sake of the cultivation of the human individual. This greater range and less delimited purpose are crucial for making humanities scholars successful teachers of undergraduate courses, as well as effective public lecturers and intellectual leaders. The two types of purpose, the specialized and the general, can often be at odds with each other. I find that this book, while acutely raising these issues for me, nevertheless succeeds in the end in becoming an example of a harmonious blending of such different, even divergent, objectives: it strikes a well-balanced stance. Even without any explicit effort to do so, it does speak potentially to many who are situated well outside the pale of the Dante profession. Its being published by an internationally recognized humanities press known for relevant discussion of great ideas (colloquially an “ideas press”) rather than appearing in a specialized series devoted to medieval studies also helps to profile *Dante and the Limits of the Law* for this wider scope and audience.

It may, after all, be precisely the disciplinary limits he sets himself that enable Steinberg to mount such a precise and exacting discourse, one that avoids the vagaries of unwarranted generalization and the vertigo of speculative discourses that have to pull themselves up by their bootstraps so as to project their own conditions of validation. And yet he is, after all, in the very substance of his work, exposing just this type of dilemma as a juridical predicament that demands precisely the kind of willful self-creation that Dante excels in and emblemizes. It is a predicament where law has lost its self-evident validity and must prove itself in a more general cultural context through dialectic with other discourses and even through strategic self-contradiction by its own exceptions. Steinberg, by contrast, is able to validate his own project in terms of a structure already in place: namely, the discourse of Dante studies in conjunction with the further academic fields and disciplines of jurisprudence and legal history. These discourses count as antecedently established, even though it is really only in every new deployment of their ideas that their establishment takes place ever anew. Nonetheless, there is a presumption of intelligibility that can be invoked and leaned on, for their terms are already part of an ongoing discussion and tradition. There is an enabling fiction furnished by the well-recognized academic field and its constitutive authorities that is operative here. I cannot help but recognize the fertility of such a dependence at the same time as I point to it as an artifice.

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One of the crucial insights that emerge from Steinberg's examination of Dante's ineluctable dealings with the law is that precisely its *limits* are what allow it to be authoritative and authentic. The limits to positive and explicit legality, the cases in which it proves necessary to go beyond the letter of the law in order to preserve its justice, are the exceptions in which the law's *vitality* becomes manifest. It needs to have a capacity to change and adapt in order to live. The life of the law is always much greater than any of its positive formulations. With respect to Dante's poem, this same logic means that the readers are judges with power and responsibility for interpreting the text and giving it a meaning that is never definitive in terms of its letter alone. They react to the scenes staged and framed by juridical motifs such as witness, testimony, and confession—discursive modes that are often associated with making oaths or pacts, or with sentencing to punishment, pleading one's cause or litigating, granting amnesty, pardon, immunity, extenuation, etc. The limits of the law call upon human beings with their creative powers of imagination and judgment to fill in and supplement what it explicitly says on the basis of the hints given in the text. Analogously, there are certain limits of the profession as an inevitably exclusionary system of judgment discriminating winners from losers, the selected from the rejected. For everyone's sake and the love of God, these limits need to be transcended into the more universally human embrace and affirmation of the infinite worth and value of all participants. But, of course, the all-too-human and often infernal phenomena that Dante so penetratingly inventories and represents on his epic stage are all too frequently mirrored in our professional transactions as well.

A professional guild like "Dante studies" is inevitably at risk of turning into a closed circle or coterie of insiders in which certain conventions enable mutual recognition and alliances among empowered members. Certain watchwords function as exclusionary

shibboleths, and just as any civil society is based on recognition of authority—traditionally on the collective recognition of kings and gods—so academic societies erect authorities that all must implicitly bow down to in order to gain credibility or be accorded a hearing. Orthodoxies crop up that secretly police and regulate what will be published with the official

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imprimatur or be endorsed to receive funding. Certain systematic biases then prevail unchallenged, and the profession is at risk of becoming prey to a politics of promotion by favoritism and by relations of patronage or by inauthentic toeing of party lines rather than true originality in free exchange by open communication and competition, through uncoerced persuasion in the public arena.<sup>4</sup>

Whereas I often find the most intellectually challenging work on Dante to be that bearing this more wide-ranging, interdisciplinary character, the work that most

readily meets with official approval tends to be the more circumscribed and strictly philological productions because in this domain there are supposedly clear-cut criteria for differentiating and for separating what is correct and valid from what is not. The field must be strictly delimited in order to enable presumably authoritative judgments. It is the craving for such authority that most often lies behind privileging the more limited approaches to Dante, those remaining closely bound to the exegetical task, approaches that thereby avoid opening the door to the bigger, wider questions that cannot be authoritatively adjudicated because the framework of inquiry itself is an integral part of what is called into question. It is easier to deal with work that can be graded according to already existing canons than with work that challenges and endeavors to reset the norms. Consequently, relative obscurity can often be the fate of some of the most challenging and innovative approaches to any author, but especially to as established and canonical an author as Dante.<sup>5</sup>

The ethos of critique, however, which is dear to the academy, builds in some countervailing checks and balances. Much to his credit, Steinberg does level some incisive critiques against certain of the reigning authorities of Dante studies, even after making all the acknowledgments and genuflections that professional tact requires. His positioning himself so carefully within Dante studies enables him to deliver these criticisms as a sort of immanent critique cast in the type of language and discourse used by those he critiques, and so all the more effectively. Particularly, he criticizes Albert Ascoli's depiction of Dante's role in the invention of a new kind of modern authorship as remaining beholden to a modern understanding of freedom as the individual's faculty of doing whatever he or she wants, whereas Dante conceives of freedom not in terms of such a liberal worldview but rather as circumscribed by legal systems and constraints (*DL*, 56–57). Such constraints, nevertheless, can and need to be creatively interpreted and reinvented by inspired individual poets and prophets and legislators and reformers. Freedom for Dante is not freedom *from* the law but rather is realized in terms of the law and its evolving life. Shared public responsibility and personal sacrifice, for example, through military service, rather than private profit and privilege, are crucial to Dante's values, including liberty, which is not primarily a matter of freedom for the individual but of commitment to collective goals and principles. This is at least an intellectually significant critique, although the critiqued might not agree that it applies in any degree to his work.

There are similar moments of taking distance from other widely recognized authorities among leading Dante scholars including Robert Hollander and Zygmunt Barański.<sup>6</sup> Even though Steinberg acknowledges and praises their contributions, he points to their weak points and analyzes the causes of such limits in order to more clearly set off his own vision of Dante and to underscore the aspects of Dante's heritage that his method recovers by removing blinders typical of our own age of culture in its perception of the late Middle Ages. We tend to focus on the individualistic and the subjective, on the extraordinary individual that Dante is for us, and on the unmatched aesthetic vision that he created, at the expense of the legal and social aspects of his activity in a civic and

political context within world history. Most often, the styles of criticism called into question here emphasize Dante's *distinctiveness* within this context, whereas his strength can also derive from his being typical of his time, or in any case from his reacting to his specific historical situation on its own terms.

Starting from his first book, *Accounting for Dante: Urban Readers and Writers in Late Medieval Italy*, Steinberg has pursued a program of reading Dante against the "social field" of Dante's own historically specific time and context. He opposes the dominant tendency of contemporary criticism, which he characterizes as taking Dante's own writings and their strong self-interpretation as the context for interpreting his manifold texts, so that criticism remains beholden especially to the literary history that Dante himself constructs. Steinberg is intent on surpassing such stylistic or psychological criticism and its "formalistic" terms and on "understanding Dante as a historically specific reader and author interacting with a historically specific community of readers and authors."<sup>7</sup>

This perhaps explains why Steinberg does not treat the universal questions raised by Dante's works in and for themselves. He does not deliberately or programmatically use Dante to cast light on issues far exceeding the specialized field of Dante studies because his criticism is historicist in approach. Accordingly, its conclusions and insights remain bound to Dante's particular medieval world. This differentiates him from critics like Robert Harrison, who takes Dante away from the specialists and their Dantology in order to entrust him to a wider historical destiny.<sup>8</sup> It also distances him from philosophical readers like myself, who are interested in what is exemplary in Dante and in what makes him *like* other poets of widely disparate times and places because he casts an exceptional light on common problems concerning the nature and purpose of poetry as such.<sup>9</sup> These are possibilities of Dante and of literary scholarship that Steinberg does not as such embrace. He avoids this kind of exceeding of historical frameworks, and in so doing he gives the profession the kind of criticism it understands and expects. This, I now realize, is the reason that I have not seriously examined his work previously. From the indirect indications and signals that I came across, the work seemed to be concerned only with ascertaining the specifics of Dante's ambience and not with the broader philosophical questions engaged by Dante's oeuvre.

Steinberg is not, like Dante, defying the very system in and with which he necessarily works, antagonizing the authorities (ecclesiastical, imperial, and municipal) to which he also appeals. Of course, Steinberg affirms, and rightly, that Dante is not asserting the modern rights of autonomous individuals to sovereignty over themselves. A fine reading of the investiture scene of *Purgatorio* 27 (lines 139–42), where Virgil "crowns and mitres Dante over himself" (*io te sovra te corono e mitrio*) underlines Dante's understanding of obedience to law as indispensable to genuine human freedom (*DL*, 54–59).<sup>10</sup> However, Dante's rebelliousness and transgressiveness are equally indispensable for making transcendent authority appear from behind the travesties that mask it everywhere on earth. Dante certainly does not want a world without authority, yet direct confrontation and denunciation and diatribe are necessary under almost any concrete circumstances in order to challenge the collusions and compromises that otherwise usurp the place of

justice. Dante sets an example of an ethics of not always being deferential and compliant vis-à-vis the pervasive manipulations of a system exploited to serve the interests of the least scrupulous at the expense of those most respectful of the common good. Dante's letter to the Florentines, Epistle 6, gives a most eloquent and inflamed exposé of this predicament, and of course the same dismal dynamic still thrives across the spectrum of human affairs, not least in our own professions.

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There is, nonetheless, a very coherent approach to Dante criticism and an extensive program of research that is effectively articulated between Steinberg's two very different but at the same time closely connected and, in key ways, continuous books. By turning, particularly in the first book, to materialities of manuscript culture and to historicized readings of Dante's text as a response to largely unexpressed contemporary contexts (such as the materialist and mercantilist poetry of Monte Andrea, or the public archives inscribed with literary marginalia of the *Memoriali bolognesi*, or again the municipal and mercantile poetry anthology known as Vaticano 3793), Steinberg is able, after all, to open his study of Dante toward horizons surpassing those of an enclosed academic circle of Dantologists and to engage with certain pressing intellectual issues of our own time.

The seed of an idea of potentially broad significance, one which will be given full scope in *Dante and the Limits of the Law*, is first articulated in *Accounting for Dante* as a concern on Dante's part with controlling the material production of his texts: "these references to the material status of texts are inextricably tied to the author's new role as exiled intellectual producer" (*AD*, 95–96). Dante is concerned to check and offset certain effects of the concrete material transmission of his texts. His Edenic poetics of the *canzone* project a sacred, supra-historical space immune to the contingency and corruption of the fallen linguistic world, the world of the Italian municipalities and their contrasting cultural politics, which Steinberg expounds as reflected especially in the dialogical poetic forms of the *contrasto* and the *tenzone fittizia*. These popular genres he holds to be typically inflected with insincerity, particularly in their representation or "feigning" of female voices. In this regard, Dante's famous manifesto poem for the *dolce stil novo* (sweet new style), his "Donne ch'avete intelletto d'amore" (Ladies who have intelligence of love) with its poetics of interiority and disinterested praise, contrasts with the seduction poetics of "Rosa fresca aulentissima" (Cielo d'Alcamo) or of "Una fermata scopai da Cascioli" (Canzone del Castra).<sup>11</sup> Dante is intent on "reframing contemporary cultural politics within a sacred and transhistorical narrative" (*AD*, 98). For this noble and sublime purpose, he aspires to discover or invent an illustrious vernacular (*vulgari illustre*) as the remedy to the ignoble municipal dialectical forms of the Italian language, which are eminently unsuitable to refined literary use, and yet his own work is in myriad ways itself contaminated by the forms he ostensibly spurns for their constitutive deceptiveness or feigning.

Thus Steinberg exposes how Dante's self-reflexive, self-authorizing *Divine Comedy* attempts to reflect itself out of historical contingency and contentious controversies over literary merit or legitimacy and canonicity (*AD*, 169). This endeavor, according to Steinberg, needs to be unmasked through a hermeneutics of suspicion. In the epilogue to *Accounting for Dante*, Steinberg emphasizes particularly how the authenticating moment of the inscription of Dante's own name into his text as pronounced by Beatrice in *Purgatorio* 30 brings the extratextual instance of the author as transcending and controlling his work into close contact with the inferior textual traditions of the *tenzone* and the *contrasto*. Both are dialogical in form, and especially the latter turns on mimetic simulation of the female voice.

Beatrice speaks in the realistic idioms characteristic of this vernacular literature, and she reproaches and humiliates Dante in a mordant and sarcastic style such as is often found in these supposedly degraded genres. After pronouncing his name "Dante" in verse 55, Beatrice proceeds with a scathing indictment and shaming of him for his unfaithfulness: "he took himself from me and gave himself to another" (*Purgatorio* 30.126; *questi si tolse a me, e diessi altrui*). She continues to accuse him in the next canto of having been seduced by "present things and their false pleasure" (31.34–35; *Le presenti cose / col falso lor piacer*). How, then, could he have dared to ascend the holy mountain into her presence (30.74; *Come degnasti*). She berates him with blunt, forceful, ordinary language spearheaded by the imperatives "Look at me!" (30.73; *Guardaci ben!*) and "Answer me" (31.11; *Rispondi a me*) and the demand: "What are you thinking?" (31.10; *Che pense?*). The simple directness of Beatrice's voice, which resembles the female voice of common life and low mimetic, municipal poetry, deflates the poet's exalted, epic rhetoric. Her "raise your beard" (31.68; *alza la barba*) has the same direct, command structure, but with a sardonic innuendo, as the text itself underscores when Dante remarks that he "knew well the poison of the discourse" (31.75; *ben conobbi il velen de l'argomento*). Referring to his face as "bearded" points to his being far too mature for the adolescent behavior for which he is here being upbraided. The frequent repetitions, too, are reflexive structures that can give this language a low and potentially even a comic aspect: "say, say" (31.5; *dì, dì*), "I am, I am Beatrice" (30.73; *Ben son, ben son Beatrice*), "don't cry, don't still cry" (30.56; *non pianger anco, non piangere ancora*).

This is a self-reflexive moment in which Dante asserts the truth of his text in relation to an exterior reality, specifically, the rough and morally corrupt world of contemporary politics, rather than only by resorting to the self-reflexive resources of his text and its poetic self-creation. He stakes his prophetic claim, Steinberg insists, with reference not (only) to transcendent myths of divine creation but also with at least indirect, subliminal reference to the low tradition of vernacular poetry and its debased genres fraught with artificiality and fraud, and thus in dialogue with the merchant class and urbanized readers of the Vatican anthology.

By such means, then, this authorial signature at the climax of the *Purgatorio* exposes its own inauthenticity. Self-reflexivity in this way simultaneously authenticates and delegitimizes itself. As Steinberg points out, "an important precedent for this game of

mirrors in which creator and created mutually authenticate or delegitimize each other is found in the love poetry of Guittone" (*AD*, 175), the poet whom Dante rejected and used as a foil for his *dolce stil novo*. In this manner, Dante would, perhaps inadvertently, deconstruct his own transcendent pretenses to theological inspiration and even to a socially superior or aesthetically refined elite class of poetry. His Beatrice is translated into the wholly different context of the feigning of the female voice in realistic municipal lyric. "Whether the ultimate target of her condemnation is a dalliance with the *donna gentile*, with Lady Philosophy, or with the *pargoletta*, Beatrice embodies the linguistic skepticism characteristic of writing in the female voice in her demystification of the courtly tradition" (*AD*, 175).

Nevertheless, this is to look at the transactions between the juxtaposed texts and traditions from one side only. Alongside this subtle self-deconstruction of the text, there is also a creative aesthetic achievement in the poetic alchemy of *Purgatorio* 30 that casts its spell and that can become a fertile revelation of meaning especially in philosophical and theological registers. This, too, can be effected by the resources of self-reflexivity that Dante exploits so astonishingly. His taking even lower genres up into his sublime synthesis is a way of extending the redemptive action of poetry beyond limits and without exclusions. So the dialectic can go either way: the low can abase the high, but it can also itself be raised up and assume a dignity previously unsuspected as being, after all, within its reach. Poetry, moreover, can be divinely revealing well beyond the intentions and self-interested aims of the poet. A hermeneutics of belief rather than of suspicion opens access to some of the most challenging insights that Dante can lead us to, insights that we are often sorely in need of today.

In his analysis of *Purgatorio* 30, the scene in which Dante is named by Beatrice, Steinberg is exposing the way that Dante uses a form of self-reflexivity, specifically the inscription of his own proper name into the poetic text, as a means of reflecting himself out of history and its contingencies. The autobiographical self-reference becomes for him a means of authenticating his fiction in relation to an outside historical reality, his own existence as an exiled Florentine, which, however, is itself sublated into the ahistorical world of textual fiction. Outside and inside, history and fiction—each transfigures the other reciprocally. Steinberg thus correctly exposes the power exerted by the mechanisms of self-reflexivity that are deployed in Dante's texts. Steinberg's spirit seems to be primarily aligned with the hermeneutics of suspicion, but we can also utilize the same analyses for a hermeneutics of faith, if we allow that the investment of faith or of existential commitment that Dante manifests can be productive of a world that becomes reality for those who believe in it, and that it can consequently become operative in transforming our world. Such belief has been necessary to many of the great movements of history, particularly those of the world religions—for better and for worse, since every worldly power seems eventually to encounter or to engender its own nemesis. The unifying and often civilizing power of the church in the Middle Ages became a power for persecuting heretics and, especially in the modern period, for colonizing non-Western peoples all across the globe.

The way in which extratextual reality invades and authenticates the representations of a text is again the issue in Steinberg's discussion of Dante's representations of Mohammed and of Manfred, which are discussed at the end of chapter 1 of *Dante and the Limits of the Law*. Dante uses the signs of wounds imagined in his text to undermine the historical judgments of the pope and a bishop against Manfred: these grisly marks become sacramental signs exposing the force of violence used against Manfred for what it is. Dante is exposing here the tragedy of the power of justice degenerating to a mere exercise of force at the beck and call of all-too-human passions and ambitions. Manfred's wounds as exposed in the afterlife are turned into signs that he is saved in spite of the ecclesiastical authorities' desecration of his body and their defaming of his name. The wounds thereby gloriously display God's correction of human (in)justice.

Mohammed, on the other hand, is condemned because, as a schismatic (and he was often seen as such by medieval Christendom), he threatened the integrity of the church. His wounds not only show upon his own head and body the *contrapasso* of the violence that he himself perpetrated: their stupefying excessiveness (as the character Dante's reaction attests) stands for the excessiveness of both the damage done by schism and of the punishments inflicted by public authorities in the emerging modern world, where the very frame of the law—beyond just the laws themselves—is broken. There is more meaning here than can be interpreted: there is an excess of meaning, and Dante is accordingly dumbfounded. Steinberg speaks of “how to do things with wounds” because there is here an exceeding of the economy of representation altogether. Dante's signs become efficacious in challenging history and a force of (counter) violence in their own right. The transparency of the punishments as signs, according to the principle of the *contrapasso*, is a legibility that destabilizes the very law of representation and spills into real action itself—precisely, “doing things with words” (echoing the title of J. L. Austin's groundbreaking work in speech-act philosophy).

To place Steinberg's work finally in perspective, it seems to me only accurate to identify its critical genealogy by pointing to its affinity with certain materialist and even Marxist critiques of literature. Steinberg is not ostensibly close to critics like Frederic Jameson and Terry Eagleton, but he does draw essential insight from Walter Benjamin. Although Benjamin is kept scrupulously to the margins (the most detailed reference is in a very long note at the end of chapter 4 of *Accounting for Dante*), Benjamin's texts are present and working more than perhaps appears. This particular provenance of Steinberg's critical vision and method is not so easily integrated with the ethos of Dante studies in the Anglo-American world. Nevertheless, it is crucial in order to historicize Steinberg's *own* work so as to define its place in the literary and social history of our time. After all, Steinberg's work insists on the necessity of historicizing Dante. He should not be allowed himself to assume an unqualified vantage point as simply an objective observer training an all-seeing scientific eye on Dante's text. This has sometimes been the implicit pretense of Dante studies as pursued by the experts on Dante. But Steinberg's texts have their own more or less declared polemics and submerged interests. They should not be more immune than Dante's are to exposure of their ideological agenda and historical

situatedness, for precisely these limits can serve, paradoxically, to outline and highlight the texts' more universal value.

Part of my purpose here has been to signal to a wider audience some critical literature in the field of Dante studies that has the potential for interesting many readers as general reading for cultural enrichment beyond functioning only as specialized professional scholarship. It is work of a quality that makes it exemplary for professional scholars in other fields. Steinberg's books illustrate, moreover, the way that historical research and archive work can be used to illuminate literature. They are revealing specifically of Dante and his world, but also more generally of the relation of literary texts to history. There is, finally, also a factor of individual talent that deserves recognition for its marvelous creations in the genre of literary and historical humanities scholarship. When writers of various types create works that are profound and true and humanly moving, they deserve, or are at least eligible, to receive the wondering reactions of their readers. Such reactions might in some ways be as valuable as the benefits of advancement in the profession, and they are in any case more sincere.

#### >> CODA AND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

As a final irony, I acknowledge that I first read Justin Steinberg's books in the context of a professional review for his promotion, so I owe my acquaintance with them to this very system that I have treated here in terms of its limits. With regard specifically to the topic at hand, only its limits are what make the law in all its ideality real and effective in our lives. This goes for the law in each of its numerous senses, including the law of the letter and the laws of the university (not to mention the laws of the universe) and the laws of human nature, with all their imaginable and unimaginable contradictions. For all my reservations about the untoward aspects of professional scholarship and of the Dante profession in particular, with its paradoxes and inevitable power struggles, I owe my own cultivation in the humanities, and every blessing that it brings, largely to the opportunities created in and around our institutions of higher learning and research.

# RESPONSE

## JUSTIN STEINBERG

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William Franke has written an elegant, intelligent, and laudatory review of my work. He is especially gracious if one takes into account our differing methodologies: his own approach is more explicitly philosophical while mine is primarily historicist. For that reason, I am grateful that he brings to the fore the theoretical underpinnings and philosophical implications of my books, and argues forcefully that they deserve to be discussed outside the restricted circle of Dante Studies. He goes so far as to describe my work as “profound and true and humanly moving.” In light of his praise, it would be petty of me to quibble about the few issues over which we disagree. I prefer to use my response to reflect upon the more general questions he raises about the current state of Dante Studies, which he characterizes as “Dantology.” We agree that the field is sick, but differ in what we envision as its cure.

Franke is absolutely right to refer to the field of Dante scholarship as a “game.” There are rules to follow and certain gestures to be made. If you fail to cite the proper authorities, divine justice will be swift. Moreover, since resources for the humanities are increasingly scarce, power has been collected in the hands of a few established scholars, with stultifying results for intellectual exchange and debate. The deleterious effects of this “guild,” as Franke accurately describes it, are especially evident in the soporific conferences many of us have been subjected to this year in honor of the 750th anniversary of Dante’s birth.

Franke blames the insular, over-professionalized nature of Dantology on a methodology he identifies alternatively as philological or exegetical. This text-based approach focuses on a limited range of well-worn topics that are easily identified by insiders and thus especially legible and quantifiable. In contrast, Franke makes the case for a more overtly philosophical reading of the poem, one tackling “great ideas” and “universal issues.” By putting Dante in conversation with philosophers and contemporary theorists, he argues, we can engage a broader public.

I must admit that I do not find the proposal that we move away from philological approaches a productive solution to the current stagnation of Dante Studies. For one,

criticizing overly narrow philological approaches is itself a “game,” as self-legitimizing and exclusionary as any other. Various academics have built quite successful careers capitalizing on their supposed outsider status vis-à-vis the philological establishment. At its most pernicious, the philosophical/philological divide has allowed American scholars to ignore European scholarship and vice versa. Fortunately, this Manichean worldview is beginning to fade. At least since the emergence of New Philology in the 1990s, some of the most adventurous and theoretically sophisticated young scholars have been trained in and engaged by the fundamentals of philology and primary research (for one recent example, see the special issue of *Postmedieval* [volume 5, no. 4, 2014] dedicated to “Philology and the Mirage of Time”; see also the work of the BABEL scholarly collective). Given these developments, Franke’s suggestion itself—that we need to move beyond sterile philological/exegetical approaches to write books about Dante and Lacan or Dante and Kristeva or Dante and Benjamin—seems outdated. Rather than reaching an increasingly global audience, it substitutes one academic bubble for another.

Franke suggests that Dante scholarship must transcend its particularism in order to truly engage with the “universal issues in the humanities.” Yet Dante himself did not share such an either/or perspective. Even at their most universalizing, his texts remain rooted in the particular, the contingent, and the local. He wrote his most influential work, the *Commedia*, not in Latin, the transhistorical and transregional language of European intellectuals, but in the Florentine vernacular. His subject matter may be universal justice, but he sees it animated through the lens of local politics and scandals. His poetry is a poetry of proper nouns—of real historical actors and locales. He remains in dialogue with his contemporary poetic rivals (Guittone, Guinizelli, Cavalcanti, etc.), even as he evangelically expands his intended audience. Finally, Dante’s own approach to texts can only be described as exegetical, as is most evident in *Monarchia*, in which he participates in a political-theological debate about the exact interpretations of contentious Biblical passages. God, for Dante, is in the details.

For Franke, the philological method is a limit from which we need to free ourselves. For me, when practiced by its most illustrious exemplars, it is a height toward which to strive. When it is practiced as an end in itself, to assert an authority or jump through an academic hoop, philological investigation is deadening, as Franke rightly points out. But when employed to awaken a new sensibility to works of literature, it can be innovative, radical, even destabilizing. By focusing on details that stand out or do not fit, this form of criticism can challenge received *doxa* immanently, shifting perceptions in ways that simply cannot be accomplished from the outside. For this reason, even after more than fifty years, the philologically based Dante scholarship of Erich Auerbach and Ernst Curtius is still in print, still eminently readable, still influential for scholars across the disciplines. How many academic books published in the humanities today can hope for such a shelf life? Indeed, the interpretive methods of Dante Studies and romance philology more generally have much to offer the humanities at large. Auerbach and Curtius remain relevant because they create pathways *through* texts, rather than brutally imposing their original theses (the real malady, to my mind, of the American academic marketplace).

They accompany us year after year as we read, discuss, and teach Dante—our collective secular liturgy.

Despite these different perspectives, I take Franke's basic point. In the last few decades, institutional Dante scholarship has not been receptive to the contributions of comparativists and non-specialists, to its detriment. In fact, one of my primary goals as the new editor of the journal *Dante Studies* is to provide a space once again for creative and theoretically informed scholarship. I hope that anyone who has ever felt excluded, for one reason or another, by the "Dantologists," will consider sending us their essays.

## WILLIAM FRANKE

Justin Steinberg's response is very interesting, generous (not to be churlish), and even at some points amusing—for example, in pointing out that critiquing the game-structure of professional scholarship is a well-established game in its own right, and a hackneyed one. Nevertheless, Steinberg shows himself to be very sensitive to the limits of the profession and perhaps even more critical than I would be. It is amusing, furthermore, that we seem bound (perhaps by our relative positioning in this game?) to misread each other in certain revealing ways. Of course, I am suggesting nothing like a Manichean opposition between philosophy and philology—and even less recommending a rejection of or emancipation from philology per se. On the contrary, I insist on how Steinberg's historicist philological rigor gives depth and integrity to his ideas. I love philology and even celebrate its speculative potential and suggestiveness, while also acknowledging the typical pitfalls of speculative thinking. My essay gives explicit credit to exegetical discipline for its role in limiting excessive generalization.

Although I may have filtered it through my own misprision, the main point that I take from Steinberg—because he has developed it with such convincing logic and detailed evidence, as well as with wit and brio—is that precisely the *limits* of the law make it come alive for Dante in his re-imagining of the entire cosmos. I then extend this insight in affirming that precisely the limits of our disciplines are what make them dynamic and productive. So my pointing out the limits of professional scholarship is not exactly meant to condemn nor even to diagnose it as sick or soporific. Instead, identifying the limits can make room for moving beyond them and invite into expanded conversation. I look forward to continuing this conversation with Justin Steinberg and with other *Dantisti*: I think that we are groping dialectically toward unlimited and ever more challenging discoveries by helping one another to sharpen our awareness of each one's own limits.

# Notes

- 1 Steinberg, *Dante and the Limits of the Law*, 61; subsequent references to this work will be noted parenthetically by page numbers (DL).
- 2 Walter Benjamin's analysis of the spectacle in modern, urban society, with its newly emerging cultural media industries, although not referenced here by Steinberg, seems to me to lurk behind and to exert influence on his formulations. Jaeho Kang's *Walter Benjamin and the Media: The Spectacle of Modernity* represents the state of the art on this topic.
- 3 I elaborate on this in "Equivocations of 'Metaphysics': A Debate with Christian Moevs's *The Metaphysics of Dante's 'Comedy'*."
- 4 Such a space of communicative openness is theorized systematically by Jürgen Habermas in *The Theory of Communicative Action*, particularly volume 1: *Reason and the Rationalization of Society*.
- 5 Even the Dante scholarship of celebrated authors such as Jorge Luis Borges and Osip Mandelstam, or of influential thinkers and theologians such as Hans Urs von Balthasar, or of non-specialist critics such as George Steiner, encounters difficulty in penetrating and becoming recognized by the Dante profession, since the parameters and approaches deployed so largely exceed the familiar contexts within which the hard-core professionals are accustomed to work and can do so authoritatively. Particularly suggestive and generally ignored are Borges's *Nueve ensayos dantescos*, Mandelstam's "Conversation about Dante," and Balthasar's *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 2.
- 6 The bibliographies for both of these deans of Dante studies are so extensive that their essential contribution cannot be identified with any given work. As is typical of scientific, technical fields and even, for example, of analytic philosophy, monographs are not the primary genre or metric of career accomplishment, as is typically the case in continental philosophy and in critical humanities disciplines. The fact that in

Steinberg's case we are discussing two monographs, each developed from beginning to end as a genuine book and not a collection of essays, already represents a significant indication of the difference of his work from the typical pattern of the masters of Dante philology. Hollander's influence is exerted most noticeably by his extensive commentaries on the *Divine Comedy* published in print by Doubleday/Anchor, 2000–2007 and available online at the Dartmouth Dante Project (<http://dante.dartmouth.edu>). Another crucial instrument is Hollander's Princeton Dante Project (<http://etcweb.princeton.edu/dante>). Barański writes essentially essays about Dante that may also be collected into books, notably "*Sole nuovo, luce nuova*": *Saggi sul rinnovamento culturale in Dante* and *Dante e i segni: Saggi per una storia intellettuale di Dante Alighieri*. "Saggi" in both subtitles says explicitly that these books are "Essays." The essays focus on specific problems of exegesis of Dante's texts. Its philological cast does not prevent Barański's work from being marvelously innovative in its genre, which claims such illustrious forebears as Gianfranco Contini.

7 Steinberg, *Accounting for Dante*, 3; subsequent references to this work will be noted parenthetically by page numbers (AD).

8 From his debut with *The Body of Beatrice* (1988) and its phenomenological, Heideggerian reading of the *Vita nuova*, Harrison has continued to bring Dante into his wide-ranging reflections on cultural history in *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* (1992), *The Dominion of the Dead* (2003), *Gardens: An Essay on the Human Condition* (2008), and *Juvenescence: A Cultural History of Our Age* (2014). The term "Dantology" is one that I remember reading in Harrison's *The Body of Beatrice*, and I have also found "Dantologia" used in Italian scholarship. The term conveys the idea that the literary-critical corpus that accretes around a universal author such as Dante can become a sort of independent discipline and practically a science in its own right, with its own technical vocabulary and peculiar cultural climate.

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- 9 Such is one overarching agenda of my *Dante's Interpretive Journey and Dante and the Sense of Transgression: "The Trespass of the Sign,"* as well as of the chapters on Dante in my 2015 books dealing with Dante's antecedents (*The Revelation of Imagination: From the Bible and Homer through Virgil and Augustine to Dante*) and successors (*Secular Scriptures: Modern Theological Poetics in the Wake of Dante*).
- 10 I quote and translate the *Divine Comedy* from *La Commedia secondo l'antica vulgata*.
- 11 These early Italian lyrics are usually categorized as *giullaresco* or jester-like and exemplify some of the more popular, low registers of lyric in the medieval world.
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