Leading scholar Albert Russell Ascoli traces the metamorphosis of Dante Alighieri – minor Florentine aristocrat, political activist and exile, amateur philosopher and theologian, daring experimental poet – into Dante, author of the *Divine Comedy* and perhaps the most self-consciously “authoritative” cultural figure in the Western canon. This is the first comprehensive introduction to Dante’s evolving, transformative relationship to medieval ideas of authorship and authority from the early *Vita Nuova*, through the unfinished treatises, *The Banquet* and *On Vernacular Eloquence*, to the works of his maturity, *Monarchy* and the *Divine Comedy*. Ascoli reveals how Dante anticipates modern notions of personalized, creative authorship and the phenomenon of “Renaissance self-fashioning.” Unusually, the book examines Dante’s career as a whole, offering an important new point of access not only to the Dantean *oeuvre*, but also to the history and theory of authorship in the larger Italian and European traditions.

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For Barbara
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When describing a big book in a short title, it seems important, as Virgilio instructs his pupil after the brusque hail of Farinata degli Uberti, that “le parole tue fien conte” ([you] make your words count; Inf. 10. 39). For this reason, to adapt Mary McCarthy’s renowned mot, each constituent part of the phrase “Dante and the Making of a Modern Author” has plural meanings, including “and,” “the,” “of” and “a.” Let me begin with the least of these, the vowel-word, “a.” The besetting temptation of single author studies, and those of Dante above all, is to turn one’s object into the pivot around which history – literary, intellectual, and otherwise – turns. And while I would not wish to underestimate the transformative powers of the Dantean oeuvre, nonetheless I would also insist that, my occasional lapses into hyperbole notwithstanding, it represents neither the only way of construing modern authorship nor the only route for arriving at that complex cultural phenomenon. Rather, the ensemble of works known as “Dante” is a symptom, a case – a particular product of and participant in ongoing historical processes – neither an origin nor an end in itself.

Which brings me to the question of “modernity.” There is no doubt that I am interested here in highlighting the relation between Dante and established scholarly discourses which posit a break between pre-modern and modern, not to say post-modern, modes of authorship – and of discovering how Dante may be said to anticipate – to crystallize if not to invent – traits associated with authorial modernity in the Western tradition. At the same time, however, I am deeply suspicious of the reifications and periodizations of modernity. Rather, I tend to see the “modern” as paradoxically perennial, as a vacant placeholder through which the relation of present to past is continuously construed and lived. Modernus, after all, comes from classical Latin, and moderno turns up four times in the Commedia. Finally, I will argue, what should concern us most is Dante’s own sense of his modernity,
that is, his status as a living writer faced with an \textit{a priori} exclusion from the normative, authoritative categories of medieval \textit{auctor}-hood, notably from the ranks of the long-dead classical \textit{auctores} (Virgil, Aristotle, \textit{et al.}), and from the “closed book” of the Bible to whose canonized truths neither jot nor tittle may legitimately be added.

At the center of this study, as, more or less, of the title, is the word-concept “making.” The \textit{frase fatta} calqued here suggests the process by which Dante became a, if not \textit{the}, modern author: the use of the present participle emphasizing a mobility and a dynamism within that process. Already at this stage, however, there is an ambivalence: who, or what, made Dante into a modern “author”? His place within a complex social and discursive history? His own efforts and his consequent development over the course of a career of some thirty years of writing? Critical narratives which portray him as such, including my own? There is, however, a second sense at play in this word: that is, Dante’s continuous, if evolving, understanding of his authorship as an activity of “making,” at once the artisanal mastery of the \textit{techne} of poetry (and, more broadly, the disciplines of rhetoric, philosophy, and theology) and an \textit{imitatio} of the Divine Maker, the Author of all authors, the origin of every legitimate authority. In this sense my book strives to unpack Dante’s compact definition of a poem as “\textit{fictio rethorica musicaque poita}” (“a fictive invention [a made object] composed poetically with the aid of rhetoric and music”; \textit{DVE} 2.4.2), along with his etymological derivation of “\textit{autore}” [author] from \textit{avieo} to mean a “binder of words,” a maker of languages and of poems. I seek to understand him, then, as a \textit{fabricator of fictions}, though in a sense not opposed, but neutral to “truth.”

I will leave it to my gentle reader to perform an analogous operation on “the,” “and,” and “of,” whose specific polysemies, in any case, follow directly from those just presented. As for the Alpha and Omega of my title, “Dante” and “Author,” suffice it to say here that both have plural referents (the properness of the former name notwithstanding), and that the next seven chapters are aimed at proving just this point.

This is long book – no doubt about it – that took too long to write. Its genesis can be traced to my graduate years at Cornell in the late seventies and early eighties, although it first began to assume written form in a 1989 essay composed and published with the warm encouragement of Walter Stephens and Kevin Brownlee. In the interim, I have incurred any number of debts, direct and indirect, some of which, I fear, have been lost or deformed in the vagrant book of memory. Much of what this study
has become is owed to wonderfully lucky intersections between collegiality and friendship. I cannot, for example, begin to acknowledge or to calculate the effects produced by the mentorship of Leonard Barkan and Tilde Sankovitch during my years at Northwestern. Nor can I tell fully how much the overlapping interests and intersecting passions first of Tom Stillinger and then, and now, of Ron Martinez have contributed to shaping and reshaping the ideas, and to uncovering the “facts,” that drive this study. To these have been added, at crucial moments, the generosity and rigor of David Quint; the high scholarly standards and warm hospitality of Ted Cachey; the intellectual energy and collegiality of Zyg Bańkski; the formidable example and kind encouragements of Teo Barolini; the amicable, astute provocations of Robert Durling; the elegant, inimitable teachings of John Freccero. Among my Berkeley colleagues I owe special thanks to the intellectual comradeship of Louise George Clubb, David Hult, Timothy Hampton, Victoria Kahn, Ignacio Navarrete, Loren Partridge, Mary Ann Smart, and Randolph Starn.

If I now fall to list-making, it is not because those mentioned do not deserve to be singled out, each in her or his own way, but because, to specify the gifts received, the salutary challenges posed, the knowledge conferred (and, of course, the errors corrected and infelicities kindly overlooked) during twenty-some years would become a chapter itself. My thanks then go to Craig Berry, Howard Bloch, Lina Bolzoni, Steven Botterill, Terry Butler, James Carolan, Anthony Cassell, Gary Cestaro, Alison Cornish, Rita Copeland, Jonathan Culler, John Dagenais, Charles Till Davis, Frederick De Armas, Nancy Vine Durling, Carla Freccero, Lisa Freinkel, Disa Gambera, Susan Gaylord, Mary Gaylord, Paul Gehl, Simon Gilson, Stephen Greenblatt, Jody Greene, Steven Grossvogel, Ralph Hexter, Robert Hollander, Olivia Holmes, Amilcare Iannucci, Katherine Ibbett, Rachel Jacoff, Constance Jordan, Carol Kaske, Christopher Kleinhenz, Seth Lerer, Robert Lerner, Toby Levers, Otfrid Lieberknecht, Larry Lipking, Dennis Looney, Joe Lowenstein, Manuela Marchesini, Herbert Marks, John Marino, John Martin, Maria Luisa Meneghetti, Maria Rosa Menocal, Alastair Minnis, Mario Moroni, Gary Saul Morson, Martin Mueller, Ed Muir, John Najemy, Franca Nardelli, Annabel Patterson, Daria Perocco, Armando Petrucci, David Posner, Regina Psaki, Lisa Regan, Mary Beth Rose, Albert Rossi, Manuel Rota, Marco Ruffini, Myriam Swanen Ruthenberg, Natasha Sankovitch, Anne-Marie Sankovitch, Brenda Dean Schilddgen, Cesare Segre, Phyllis Silverstein, Tom Simpson, Janet Smarr, Barbara Spackman, Paul Stasi, Ruggiero Stefanini, Justin Steinberg,
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Preface

A substantial portion of Chapter 3 is revised from “‘Neminem ante nos’: Historicity and Authority in the *De vulgari eloquentia*,” originally published in *Annali d’Italianistica* 8 (1991) 186–231. Finally, Chapter 6 and a small portion of Chapter 7 revise “Palinode and History in the Oeuvre of Dante,” from Theodore Cachey (ed.), *Dante Now: Current Trends in Dante Studies*, South Bend IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995, pp. 155–86. I thank all of the original publishers for permission to reprint here.
Abbreviations of primary texts and translations

(These works are cited throughout from the following editions and with the abbreviations given in the left margin. My occasional emendations are indicated by brackets. Where no translation is indicated, translations are my own. Italics in translations, unless otherwise noted, reflect my emphasis.)

works of dante alighieri


Abbreviations of primary texts and translations


[N.B.: references to book, chapter and paragraph are to the Ricci edition, from which the Shaw translation departs at one point. Ricci’s chapter 10 of book 3 is divided by Shaw into two distinct chapters, with a break after Ricci’s paragraph 17. As a consequence her chapters 12–16 in book 3 correspond to Ricci’s chapters 11–15. Minor variations in chapter division appear in other editions as well.]


Primary Texts Cited

Abbreviations of primary texts and translations


DDP Dartmouth Dante Project (http://Dartmouth.Dante.edu). Director Robert Hollander.


Abbreviations of primary texts and translations


N.B., All other references in this text use the author-date system and refer to the bibliography to be found at the end of the volume. In general, series of three or fewer references without commentary are placed in parentheses within the body of the text. Longer series of references accompanied by discursive commentary are located in the footnotes.