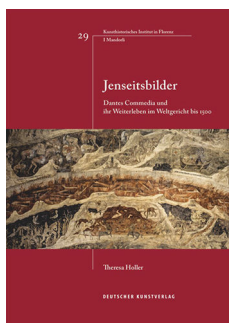


THERESA HOLLER, *JENSEITSBILDER. DANTES COMMEDIA UND IHR WEITERLEBEN IM WELTGERICHT BIS 1500*

Italienische Forschungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz, I Mandorli 29, Berlin: Deutscher Kunstverlag 2020, 378 pages with 30 color and 119 b/w ill., ISBN 978-3-4229-8131-7 (Paperback).



Reviewed by
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The title of Theresa Holler's book, *Jenseitsbilder*, engages the reader in a comparable dynamic as *l'au-delà* in the title of Jérôme Baschet's fundamental work on the subject, *Les justices de l'au-delà. Les représentations de l'enfer en France et en Italie (XII–XV siècle)*, first published in 1993. Michael Camille, in his review of the latter, highlighted the insufficiency of the term “beyond” to grasp the polyvalence of the word, since it equally references spatial and temporal aspects. Similarly, *Jenseits* can simultaneously stand for “afterlife” and “otherworld”, linking it to a new space and a new time in Christian imaginary. The comparison with Baschet is instructive also for the scope of the project. The French scholar attempted a comprehensive study of the representations of hell in the context of the *Last Judgment* in France and Italy. Dante's *Divine Comedy* was a relative latecomer to this stage whose significance, albeit recognized, nevertheless faded in the light of the previous textual and visual contributions to the subject. It was a hell among many other infernos. Holler's focus on the *Divine Comedy* provides an alternative entry to

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this tradition that attempts to capture Dante's formative intervention to the imagery on its own right.

Furthermore, emphasis on the Florentine poet allows framing the project in terms of reception studies, which means the widening of the investigation to visual and cultural parallels beyond the confines of the iconography of hell. The book addresses these phenomena in four chapters, each constructed around a key case study that exemplifies typical attitudes: Giotto di Bondone's work in the Arena Chapel (Padua, 1303–1305) stands for fictionality, Buonamico Buffalmacco's work in the Camposanto (Pisa, ca. 1333–1336) for paradoxicality, Nardo di Cione's work in Santa Maria Novella (Florence, ca. 1350–1357) for poetics, and Bartolomeo di Tommaso's work in San Francesco (Terni, ca. 1448) together with Luca Signorelli's in the Cathedral of Orvieto (1499–1504) for liminality. A common thread in all these chapters is the creative dialogue between literature and mural painting. Holler makes a compelling argument for the ways the spatiality of Dante's vision was a catalyst for the subsequent visual reception of his work since the literary setting of the otherworld required a meticulous rendering of pictorial space.

Chapter 1 revolves around the relationship between Giotto's *Last Judgment* fresco in the Arena Chapel and the *Divine Comedy*. The author, rightly, steers away from the question of direct influence in both directions without fully excluding its possibility. Instead, she interrogates the underlying metatextual and metapictorial matrices that made these works possible. Giotto in the Arena Chapel (and possibly already in Assisi) engaged with the constructed nature of representation and demonstrated the wide range of visual possibilities inherent to naturalism. The depiction of the doors of Heaven behind the blue sky, which is rolled up, is a telling example. Holler convincingly argues that Giotto's metapainting finds its cultural parallel in Dante's metapoetry, evident in the virtuous handling of diction but also in the different reality levels assigned to hell, purgatory, and paradise. Although this convergence cannot single-handedly explain their subsequent success, it supports the hypothesis that in their seminal roles for painting and literature, self-awareness and self-referentiality played an important part, besides the obvious appeal of naturalism.

The analysis of Buonamico Buffalmacco's frescoes in the Camposanto provides a comprehensive overview of the entire program in Chapter 2. Instead of trying to disguise the contradictions of the cycle, the author emphasizes the paradoxical duplications of hell (Lucifer's realm, and the mouth of the Leviathan), judgment (Christ and Mary's realm, and the particular judgment), and paradise (Christ and Mary's realm, and the Thebaid). The suggestion that the contrast between the temporal earthly existence of the particular judgment and the Thebaid located at the sides, and the universality of the Last Judgment in the center reflects period debates around *visio beatifica* is a plausible one. Although it is clear that the *Divine Comedy* cannot account for all these aspects of the iconography, it undeniably contributed to the representation of hell. Holler's

careful reading catalogues the access to Dante's text in Pisa and the presence of Muhamad together with some heretics (probably antipope Nicholas V and Ludwig of Bavaria) in the imagery. She notes the established links to the papal context of the late 1320s and early 1330s. Perhaps the strongest section of the chapter is the discussion of the mage-necromancer Erichtho and the decapitated heretical poet (Arius/Bertran de Born). The author shows the topicality of these figures in the *Divine Comedy* and in clerical circles in Pisa, and she also makes a strong case for the overlap between the perception of magic and poetry in the epoch. Although the negative views on poetry questions the reliance on Dante for some elements of the program, they may actually explain the limited integration of his text into the iconography. In any case, the promotion of *visio beatifica*, the defamation of Nicholas V, and the condemnation of sorcery were all in line with Pope John XXII's policies, and the author proposes that these relevant themes provide some overall coherence to the program.

Chapter 3 on Nardo di Cione and the Santa Maria Novella Dominican monastery in Florence accounts for almost half of the entire book, and even if it contains remarkable material at times, better structuring could have improved its coherence during the editing process. The importance of the cycle in the Strozzi Chapel as a close illustration of hell from the *Divine Comedy* has always been clear. In the reconstruction of the commission, the author examines the complex context of the chapel: it was dedicated to Saint Thomas Aquinas, decorated with an extensive *Last Judgment* cycle, and financed by the Strozzi family, probably by Tommaso. Several members of the family were friars, therefore the divide between the monastic community and the commissioner is not clearcut. It is likely that the strong cult of Saint Thomas Aquinas and Dominican interest in Dante's text, presumably because of its utility for preaching and inquisition, led to the combination of the titular saint and the iconography. Holler points out the link between the positioning of the saint and the depiction of the heretics, which may indicate an attempt to bring together the diverse agendas. The close reading of the fresco cycle itself is insightful, supported by detailed photographs and a diagram. Given the poor preservation of the murals, they are an essential addition to the understanding of the chapel. Particularly relevant interpretations include the figures of Minos, Sisyphus, the suicides, and the eighth circle.

Besides the synthesis of the iconography, the author engages with a natural-scientific history of hell ranging from the materiality of the ground to hydrography. This section provides the broader context of Dante's text and to some extent of the imagery, especially the intriguing parallel between a vista of a quarry in Carrara and Nardo's hellscape. The analysis of paradise emphasizes the centrality of order, harmony, and music; and this part sits outside the parameters of the *Divine Comedy*, even if the significance of music for the Dominican order is amply demonstrated. The chapter concludes with an excursus on the poet-theologian in the writings

of Giovanni Boccaccio and the Dominican friar Jacopo Passavanti from Santa Maria Novella. Holler's intention is to capture the shift from the condemnation of poetry in Pisa to its more inclusive handling in Florence. Although the comparison is perceptive, since Boccaccio persuasively vindicates the recognition of poetry as a source of divine truth, Passavanti rejects this position; and in the end, this may suggest that Dante's text was appreciated because of its rich topography of sins, instead of being a poetic form of revelation.

Chapter 4 is a comparative study of the cycles by Bartolomeo di Tommaso in Terni and Luca Signorelli in Orvieto. The common thread of the chapter is the liminality of time and space after death, an in-between that is linked to the iconography of the purgatory. Bartolomeo di Tommaso's frescoes have been little studied, and the author presents an extensive analysis of the chapel. This attention is justified in the sense that the position of the viewer is fully integrated into the imagery, which results in a dynamic topography of purgatory, hell, and paradise. However, as Holler notes, Dante's influence on the decoration remains generic at best, and it is addressed in the context of the patchy research history of the site. This part concludes with the reception of the *Divine Comedy* within the Franciscan order, a useful contrast to the earlier Dominican engagement with the text. Luca Signorelli's frescoes, on the other hand, betray the direct influence of Dante. The main question of the Cappella Nuova is the compartmentalization of this influence in the lower section of the chapel in fictive monochrome niello reliefs and its very limited bearing on the overall iconography of the polychrome *Last Judgment*. These marginal details include pioneering compositions, like the depiction of shadows in the otherworld or the fictive marble reliefs of humility, which can equally be taken as an example of *paragone* (the competition between painting and sculpture) and *parergon* (the creative liminal space of the by-work). Together with the author portraits of this zone (the only identifiably one is that of Dante's) they constitute a self-aware reflection on the status and skill of the painter, possibly Luca Signorelli's attempt to a metapictorial credo.

The volume is generously illustrated with appropriate halftones throughout and a set of color plates at the end, which support the close visual reading of the works. All in all, it offers a multifaceted discussion of Dante's *Divine Comedy* in mural painting in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italy. The reconstruction of the role of the Dominican order in the reception of his work and the connections between pictorial and poetic creativity are relevant contributions to the complex history of the *Last Judgment*. However, at times the links to Dante appear rather loose and this affects the overall coherence of the book. Not necessarily for being irrelevant, but one wonders whether, with a more condensed presentation of the sites and the contexts, the author might have had the opportunity to also address the anthropological dimensions of the works. Is there a way to detect Dante's influence on a more humanistic approach towards

sin and punishment in late medieval and early Renaissance Italian imagery? Similarly, is there a shift in the perception of gender, or does the inherent misogyny of ecclesiastical ideology remain dominant? The empathy towards the sinner is usually hailed as the principal characteristic of the *Divine Comedy* and its transformative potential can extend beyond the iconography or the topography of the frescoes. In any case, Theresa Holler's erudite study will certainly figure in the forefront of these discussions.