

THE THINKER IN THE POET AND THE THIRD TESTAMENT

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"I didn't touch the text for the next 15 years," says Andreas Kablitz, remembering his first encounter with Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* and the deterrent effect it had on him. As a student, it would have been unthinkable for today's Kablitz – a Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Prize winner – that he, of all people, would one day give a lecture on this, one of the most important works of premodern Europe. Back when he was a student, the lecture intended to introduce him and his fellow students to Dante's poetry was a complete disappointment for Kablitz. "It conveyed nothing of the spirit of the text," he explains. Years later, a second encounter with Dante's *Divine Comedy* seemed unavoidable after all. "You cannot deny your students the preeminent work of Italian literature forever," the then professor of Italian Language and Literature at Ludwigs-Maximilians-Universität in Munich had to admit, "and I haven't managed to escape the *Commedia* since."

Anyone talking to Kablitz about Dante finds himself in a conversation about fundamental philosophical issues. The Professor of Romance Languages and Literature and Director of the Petrarca Insti-

tute in Cologne speaks with extreme precision when describing the project he has pursued since April in his role as External Senior Fellow at FRIAS. He wants to understand Dante the thinker, to separate him from his literary work and see what is underneath. "Both his own self-understanding and that of his contemporaries indicate that his great work, the *Divine Comedy*, can also be understood as that of a thinker, a philosopher, a theologian or a linguist, and it is this Dante that I want to reconstruct," explains Kablitz.

He has been studying Dante for several years, with his first piece of work on the Italian poet published in 1994. It is therefore only logical that now, during his FRIAS fellowship, he should venture to synthesise his many years of research. Only then, states Kablitz, will it be possible to see which aspects have not yet been tackled. His book, *Dante Alighieri*, will appear in the series entitled "Denker" published by Otfried Höffe at the C.H. Beck-Verlag.

In order to uncover the "Denker" [thinker] in Dante the poet, the academic will primarily focus his research on Dante's great work, the

Divine Comedy, while taking into account his entire collection of work. The poem, which dates from the beginning of the 14th century, describes a journey through the afterlife from the first-person perspective. In the story, the narrator travels from Hell, through Purgatory and eventually into Paradise where he finally meets God himself. It seems exciting to reveal Dante's closed system of thought and the various facets of his thinking in this work in particular – as it is primarily a poetic text and not a theoretical one. The *Divine Comedy* also demonstrates that which Kablitz believes makes Dante particularly stand out: the poet's claim to establish a radical concept of poetry as an insight into reality. "The *Divine Comedy* reveals the radicalism of the truth claim that Dante demands of poetic texts," explains Kablitz. "He thus tries to elevate poetic knowledge – regarded as the lowest form of knowledge in scholastic philosophy – to the level of the highest authority, namely the truth. Dante himself

understood his poem as an addition to the Book of Revelation, which for him fulfils the highest claim to truth. He wanted to create a text in which the Christian work of salvation could be recognized; one could even call it a Third Testament." At first, this sounds like a daring theory; however, Kablitz's argument offers an exciting glimpse into history and philosophy. The academic believes that Dante deliberately chose a narrative text as a medium for his cause. According to Kablitz, Dante knowingly opted to use the literary structure of the Bible, which also has a narrative text form. "Dante wanted to add to the Book of Revelation, even to outdo that text, as he was driven by the fear that knowledge of salvation was disappearing during his era. He sought to defend a *monarchia universalis* which he saw represented in the Roman Empire, since this Empire symbolised for him the system of order on earth made possible by Christ," states Kablitz.

In the *Divine Comedy*, Dante expertly shows how to express this theoretical interest through the medium of poetry, and Kablitz uses this as the basis of his search for the thinker. This search is also intended to reveal a substantial component of Dante's historical thinking. "I think that he was an early advocate of historical theology," Kablitz states.

The academic firmly believes that Dante was convinced he had actually experienced a real journey to the afterlife by way of a dream, a vision or in his imagination. Kablitz therefore sets himself apart from the section of research on Dante which understands the text as purely allegorical, with the journey into the afterlife

being merely symbolic. According to Kablitz, in Dante's self-understanding, a unique encounter with the existence of the afterlife had taken place. The academic now wants to reconstruct this self-understanding as a means of unveiling the thinker within.

A further avenue pursued by Kablitz also puts him at odds with a popular trend in research on Dante: he contests the "modernisation of Dante", questioning all theories that portray Dante as the 'forward thinker' and thereby insinuate that he was ahead of his time in terms of modern thought. Kablitz explains his view: "To my mind there is no direct link between Dante's thought and modern thought. He may have been revolutionary in his era and highly innovative, but this innovation does not reflect modern-day innovation." The literary scholar has prepared himself well for the pursuit of his research. The literary medium and poetic structure that Dante uses to communicate his philosophy via his works will show Kablitz the way to the thinker in the poem. The time has therefore come to uncover and decode this medium and this structure. Finally, Kablitz will attempt to create that which he felt was so lacking when he attended his first lecture on Dante as a student: a way for people to experience the spirit of the text. (ab)



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