

Looking back with Auerbach: A Convivial Celebration of Dante's 750<sup>th</sup> Birthday  
5<sup>th</sup> June 2015, St John's College Oxford

This conference was conceived as part of wider international celebrations in honour of Dante's 750<sup>th</sup> birthday, with the particular aim of bringing together Dante scholars from within the UK to share ideas and current work. The focus of the event was the important literary critic Erich Auerbach; all participants were asked to read and think about three specific essays by this critic, which formed an ideal base for wider discussions.

The organisers were David Bowe (University of Oxford), Manuele Gragnolati (Somerville College, Oxford), Elena Lombardi (Balliol College, Oxford), Martin McLaughlin (Magdalen College, Oxford), and Jennifer Rushworth (St John's College, Oxford). The day was divided into three sessions, with two speakers per hour. All speakers were invited especially as representatives of the state of Dante studies in the UK at present. There were ten speakers in total, in order of appearance: Tristan Kay (Bristol University), Francesca Southerden (Wellesley College, formerly of Oxford University), Paola Nasti (University of Reading), Heather Webb (Selwyn College, Cambridge), Simon Gilson (University of Warwick), George Corbett (Trinity College, Cambridge), Robin Kirkpatrick (Robinson College, Cambridge), Claire Honess (University of Leeds), Catherine Keen (University College London), and Paolo de Ventura (University of Birmingham).

A traditional conference format was eschewed in favour of a structure that would prioritise discussion over performance. Thus the speakers were asked to limit themselves to ten minutes, even though there were no formal chairs. This structure worked well and allowed for interesting conversations to arise. The room layout also supported interactions, since we used Garden Quad Reception Room laid out with tables forming a large square. In addition to the ten speakers and five organisers, there were thirty-three additional registrants who were key participants in the discussions. These participants ranged from postgraduate students (both from within Oxford and as far afield as New York University) to retired professors. The day ended with a dinner in St Giles House, to which speakers, organisers, and some graduate students were invited. Funding was provided by St John's College, Oxford, the ICI Berlin Institute for Cultural Inquiry, the Society for the Study of Medieval Languages and Literature, and Oxford Medieval Studies (via TORCH). We are grateful to all our sponsors who made this day possible.

Here are some of the comments made by speakers after the day and which testify to the success of the format and environment:

- 'It was a real celebration, which is not easy to achieve with an academic conference, and the free-flowing discussion which you succeeded in generating (no mean feat) was brilliant, and really thought-provoking.'
- 'It was great to see so many of the UK medieval Italian community gathered together, and to talk with such animation and enjoyment about the ways that the return to Auerbach's essays could help us all to pick up new threads and look in different directions within our collective engagement with Dante.'
- 'Thank you for everything you did (in biscuitry as well as intellectual bollition) to make the event so delightful. Like the best of all things, the best on this occasion was that it opened up a future.'