"TRASUMANAR": REWRITING FRANCESCA AND COMMUNAL APPROACHES TO READING IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN DANTE SOCIETY

SONIA FANUCCHI, University of Witwatersrand

The purpose of this paper is to introduce and explain the unusual reading practices of Dantessa, the South African Dante society, by examining the implications of one of the young members' African praise poem to Francesca. By drawing parallels between Dante's versatile presentation of Francesca as reader and the hybrid reading of the figure in which we engaged in the society, I attempt to unveil the performative and conversational dimensions of the South African reading experience and to explore their potential connections to Dantesque and Medieval notions of reading. I argue that Dantessa created a particular kind of community of readers which can be defined in terms of Dante's invitation to 'trasumanar', a reaching out beyond the limits of selfhood that resonates in significant ways with the African philosophy of Ubuntu.

Keywords: Reading Dante, Dante's afterlife, Dante in contemporary culture, postcolonial Dante, Praise poetry, Ubuntu

In 2021, Kylin Lotter, a postgraduate student at Wits University, Johannesburg, and a member of Dantessa, the South African society of Dante, argued in her course research paper that Dante's allegory could be interpreted from the perspective of the South African philosophy of Ubuntu, the belief that "a person is a person through other persons."[1] Drawing on Baggini's suggestion that "Ubuntu implies movement and action,"[2] Kylin argued that Dante's "metaphysical landscape" invites the reader to enter the text dynamically and personally, collapsing the boundaries between themselves and the poem and engaging in a vivid, communal

[1] Erasmus D. Prinsloo, "Ubuntu Culture and Participatory Management," in *The African Philosophy Reader*, eds. H. Coetzee and A. P. J Roux, (London: Routledge, 1998), 43.

[2] Julian Baggini, *How the World Thinks: A Global History of Philosophy* (London: Granta, 2018), 20.

experience.[3] Kylin's view of the text emerged as a result of the reading practices that we developed in Dantessa, a society that I founded along with my colleague, Anita Virga, in 2018.

I am a lecturer in the English Department at Wits University and have taught the *Commedia* in translation to English Second Years for over ten years. During my experience of teaching the poem I was struck by the unique manner in which it affected my students, who expressed an extraordinary passion for this poet, despite his cultural and temporal distance from them. For the most part my students had scant knowledge of Italian and were largely unfamiliar with the towering school of Dante criticism in which the *Commedia* has become immersed; yet this did not in any way hinder their responses, which were fervent, raw and personal. I soon discovered that my colleague in the Wits Italian department, Anita Virga, had noticed a similar response among her students. We were therefore inspired to create what started out as a reading group, with the specific intention of developing a South African reading of the text. We named our society Dantessa, the acronym for the Dante society in South Africa, and a name that also suggests the feminine quality of our community which, like Dante's "donne che avete intelleto d'amore" (*VN* 19), stood outside of traditional critical structures and yet was empowered precisely by this status as outsiders to expand and remake the text as part of our diverse communities.

The society comprises a group of about fifteen students and young scholars who first join us in their second year of study. Many of our members have since branched out into various disciplines, in which they are currently reading for their Masters' and Doctoral dissertations. Rather than following the traditional structures of the seminar environment, our monthly meetings are organized spontaneously, often at the behest of one of our members, and involve a passionate and personal encounter with the poet, drawing on and foregrounding our own South African preoccupations. Our meetings emphasize the distinctiveness of the South African experience of Dante. Although the *Commedia* is not taught at school and Dante is not a well-known figure to most ordinary South Africans, those who do encounter him respond in a unique and lively fashion: this was evident as far back as 2005 when Patrick Cullinan and Stephen Watson were inspired to put together a book

[3] Kylin Lotter, "An Exploration of Dante's Allegorical Conception of Nature: The Forests of Inferno and Gardens of Purgatorio," unpublished Honors Research Essay, Wits University, 2021: 1–59, 19.

of Dantean essays, art and poetry, capturing their surprise that Dante "fascinates a meaningful number of [South African artists and writers], even though most of them do not easily speak or read Italian."[4] It is significant that the editors felt that their collection needed to form part of a book that was as "lively and well-made as its contents."[5] When we founded our society in 2018, we shared the 2005 editors' sense that "any book" or, indeed, any conventional group of readers would not do justice to the South African Dante. We wanted to address the question of what precisely about Dante appealed to our youth and the related question of how we might then approach the text. What evolved from this was a unique way of reading Dante that, while distinctively South African in character, in important ways echoed and responded to Dante's own approach. The purpose of this article is to draw these connections in an attempt to explain the nature of the reading space that we have created in Dantessa.

It began with a conversation. Unusually, it was a conversation that developed outside of the confines of the classroom in an informal context. This was an important element of our engagement with Dante, which above all retains a spontaneous character, an immediacy that separates it from discussions in a formal setting. It is routine in seminar situations to ask students their impressions of a text as a prelude to a more

[4] Patrick Cullinan and Stephen Watson, *Dante in South Africa* (Cape Town: Centre of Creative Writing, University of Cape Town, 2005), 14. Cullinan and Watson's book includes samples from a wide selection of relatively contemporary South African writers, for whom Dante was a significant influence: among these are Patrick Cullinan, Dan Wylie, Donn Meclennan, and Chris Mann. It is evident that Dante has enjoyed a small presence in elite South African literary circles in the last few decades: other examples of South African writers for whom Dante served as a muse are JM Coetzee who modelled his *Age of Iron* on the *Commedia* (see for example Sheila Roberts, "The Appropriation of Dante's Inferno in JM Coetzee's Age of Iron," *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa*, 8.1 (1996): 33–44). Dante has particularly appealed to the Afrikaans community and influenced the work of N. P. van Wyk Louw, T.T. Cloete and Andre P. Brink (See Raniero Speelman, "Dante in Afrikaans: the Magnus Labor of Delamaine Du Toit, 1921-2016," *Italian Studies in Southern Africa*, 30.1 (2017): 1–19, 7). Moreover, all three canticles were translated into Afrikaans by by Delamaine A.H. du Toit, in the period between 1990 and 2002 (See Speelman, "Dante in Afrikaans," 1). Despite the fact that Dante is not taught in the official school curriculum and the limited exposure of most ordinary South Africans to his work, the Cape Town editors were the first to recognise the unique nature of the response to Dante in South Africa. We attempted to capture this energy, which, we discovered, goes beyond a few elite writers and is present among our youth, encompassing South Africans in various walks of life.

[5] *Ibid.*, 13.

complex engagement, but this seldom goes beyond a few somewhat trite observations. The character of the discussion that we developed around Dante was very different in that we engaged with and 'spoke to' the poet, employing the communal principals of Ubuntu and blending these with Dante's own outlook.

Dante describes his entrance into the Paradisal community as a "trasumanar" (Paradiso 1.70). The term should not be understood as surpassing the human but rather as the individual surpassing her own narrow understanding of her humanity, or, as Heather Webb puts it, "achieving a transmortal community in which the plenitude of each individual's person is realized in and through recognition of the personhood of other individuals who constitute that community."[6] From *Purgatorio* onwards an individual's personality expands to encompass not only her memory of herself but also her "ongoing" relationship with the "dead and the living."[7] The way in which Dante constantly reaches out beyond the limits of selfhood while reinventing the individual in the process, extends to include his relationship with his readership as well. From the moment in the *Vita Nuova* when he demands an active engagement from his readers, challenging them to surpass the mistaken interpretations of those who first heard about his dream,[8] Dante engages in a dynamic expansion and reinvention of his readerly community and his own place in relation to them. A striking example of this can be found in his approach in the *Convivio*, where he increases his readership from the traditional Latinate men to women who read in the vernacular, creating a community of "donne che avete intelletto d'amore," and according to them the power not only to read but to engage philosophically and intellectually with the poet.[9]

Dante's concept of *trasumanar* and its implications for a constantly evolving and expanding community of readers is particularly apt to our situation. The concept of an expanded individual, a reader who reaches out beyond himself to absorb and dynamically engage with a text, bears some affinity with the African philosophy of Ubuntu that we adopted in our group. At its most

[6] Heather Webb, *Dante's Persons: An Ethics of the Transhuman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 26.

[7] *Ibid.*, 25.

[8] "Lo verace giudicio del detto sogno non fu veduto allora per alcuno, ma ora è manifestissimo alli più semplice" (*VN* 3. 3–15).

[9] Alyssa M. Granacki, "*Molti* e *Molte*: Women Readers and Lady Philosophy in Dante's *Convivio*," *Bibliotheca Dantesca: Journal of Dante Studies*, 4.3 (2021): 50–66.

basic, Ubuntu implies a "family atmosphere," a "philosophical affinity and kinship among and between the indigenous people of Africa."[10] This suggests a way of being that is communally oriented. In this context the concept of individual identity is transformed in that individuals are perceived as forming part of a "greater wholeness" that spans across space and time.[11] This sense of an overarching being is not static, for the word ubuntu is gerundive in most languages, suggesting a continual process of being and becoming,[12] a process that embraces those who are dead and those who are yet to be born. This means that the dead are perceived as the 'living dead', defined by their continued existence in a world unknown to those living.[13] In this way the "forces of life" are exchanged "among and between human beings" and are not seen as belonging to any one individual.[14]

Ubuntu is a flexible term, its meaning constantly magnifying and transforming as the South African community changes. While traditionally the popular notion of "becoming a person through other persons" involved certain limitations, a prescribed set of rituals that an individual would need to pass through in order to be deemed worthy of the label of "person,"[15] the concept has since broadened with modernization and the increased contact between different groups of people. Change is therefore a fundamental dimension of Ubuntu so that, as Cornell puts it, "uBuntu is inseparable from a relationship between human beings, yet it is also connected to how we are always changing in those relations and our need of changing with them."[16] Different communities are in this way empowered to interpret the term differently so that it may come to include them as well: this was the case for the black feminist Ellen Kuzwayo, for example, who was able to invoke Ubuntu in her reformulation of the concept of mother.[17]

Ubuntu became a key term in the transition from Apartheid to a democratic future precisely because of its flexibility, the fact

[10] Mogobe B. Ramose, *African Philosophy through Ubuntu* (1999, 2002; rpt. Harare: Mond Books, 2005), 35.
[11] *Ibid.*, 56.
[12] *Ibid.*, 146-47.
[13] *Ibid.*, 45.
[14] *Ibid.*, 147.
[15] Hanneke Stuit, *Ubuntu Strategies: Constructing Spaces of Belonging in Contemporary South Africa* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 11.
[16] Cornell, Drucilla, *Law and Revolution in South Africa: uBuntu, Dignity and the Struggle for Constitutional Transformation* (New York: Fordham, 2014), 136.
[17] Stuit, *Ubuntu Strategies*, 15-16.

that it could embrace multiple pasts and futures while creating a common memory of a paradisal time before the evils of the oppressive regime and a common sense of purpose.[18] Our approach to Dante in Dantessa included the flexibility and unifying quality of the Ubuntu philosophy: Dante made us into a community of readers, forging strong connections between us.

We read the text together, orally, creating an atmosphere that was powerfully spiritual in the sense that we felt ourselves entering together into the words uttered and experiencing them intimately and personally. This approach broke down the boundaries between us as individual members of Dantessa, and between us and Dante's voice, which, freed from the stultifying confines of the seminar room and the expectations attached to textual analysis, began to speak in immediate and unexpected ways. We felt ourselves existing on a continuum with the poet, who, like the African 'living dead' was not dead at all but spoke directly to us, not as words on a page to be analyzed but as words spoken in real time to be engaged with, responded to. Reading Dante therefore became tantamount to engaging in a process of becoming, a continual process of making and remaking ourselves alongside the poet, who, in being brought so close to us, was not a static figure, but himself malleable, open to continual correction and reinvention.

Our engagement with the text was prayer-like, partly influenced by the South African praise poetry genre, which comprises songs to the living and the dead that are traditionally oral and ritual in character.[19] Such songs are social and religious, repositories of collective memory. They are often aimed at preserving the memory of the ancestors, so that living people are simultaneously honored and brought into communion with the past, which is made present through ritual invocation.[20] Our experience of reading Dante was similar to these ritual expressions in that there was a sense in which the text had brought us together, inexplicably, outside of traditional structures, a feeling that there was something mysteriously compelling about it, something that spoke directly to us.

The magic power of a book was not a new idea to Dante and his Medieval contemporaries. The book was a powerful symbol

[18] *Ibid.*, 97.

[19] Elias Kifon Bongmba, ed., *The Wiley-Blackwell companion to African religions* (New Jersey, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2021), 105.

[20] *Ibid.*, 110.

in the high Middle Ages, connected to the sacramental significance of the Logos, and in the fourteenth century this imagery became more complex, including not just the book, but its readers as well.[21] The practice of reading was therefore felt to be a complicated one, involving two 'presences': the author, who projects himself into his text, and the reader who is in turn 'completed' by the words on the page.[22] In this way books were not viewed as objects containing text but rather as voices that possessed supernatural power and authority and that spoke to and entered into the minds of readers.

Rather than revolving around a series of questions and answers, the conversation in our meetings developed naturally, with students spontaneously sharing their passion for a poet to whom they responded forcefully and personally, as if he were present in the room. Like Dante and his Medieval readers, we approached the reading experience as embodied and mystical, in the sense that it involved closely engaging with a 'present' poet in a setting that was magically set apart from ordinary university operations. Moreover, it was clear that Dante had brought us together and that we shared a respect and admiration for him, placing him in a similar category to the revered Medieval *auctor*, who was seen as coming alive through his readers and admitting them into a community of esteemed individuals, so that they were able to transcend time and space, and unite with "an entire tradition of history and legend."[23] But Dante carved out a unique place for himself between the depersonalized, inspired Medieval *auctor* and the creative voice of the individual, human author, [24] an identity that was reflected in our response to him: Dante was simultaneously esteemed and challenged by our student readers, who, always conscious of his power over them, also responded to him on an individual level as someone personally familiar, an intimate companion.[25]

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[21] Laurel Amtower, *Engaging Words*: *The Culture of Reading in the Later Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave, 2000), 5.

[22] *Ibid.*, 9.

[23] *Ibid.*, 39. Albert Ascoli, *Dante and the Making of the Modern Author* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 5, notes that the *auctor* was felt to have access to "transpersonal and transhistorical truth" and his words were therefore "worthy of *faith*."

[24] Ascoli, *Dante and the Making of the Modern Author*, 405.

[25] This echoed the Medieval approach to authors as dynamic presences that can be resurrected by the reader: Richard De Bury expressed a common sentiment of the time when he wrote that "In books I find the dead as if they were alive" (Quoted in Amtower, *Engaging words*, 38-39).

The connections between reading aloud and prayer were made in the Medieval practice of *Lectio Divina*, according to which words sounded aloud, "a voce magna or clare legend," engage the sense of hearing and its associated affective power. By listening to the emotional modulations of the words, readers were able to project themselves empathically into the role of the protagonist.[26] It was only once they have inhabited a text, memorizing it from within, that readers of the *Lectio Divina* could come to own the text "as a performer, as a (re)creator, and ultimately as an author in [their] own right": in this way the reader attained spiritual autonomy and was opened up to the ethical implications of the material.[27] In the *Commedia* Dante presents prayer as a powerful question, a conversation between man and God capable of "creat[ing] reality"[28] through incantatory language that is simultaneously personal and divine.[29]

When the missionaries brought the Bible to the South African religious group called the Nazarites, a member of the congregation described it as "songs" that "mean something" and "talk, you see."[30] Indeed, the perception of the Bible as a voice inhabiting a space between the "purely oral and emphatically literate,"[31] defined this group's approach to reading. This had implications for the way in which the written text of the Bible was absorbed and appropriated in the sacred Nazarite literature in the sense that the Nazarite hymnal and Zulu Bible were not deemed an end in themselves but acted as a prompt to be completed through ritual practices and the personal experience of miracles.[32] This style of reading moreover allowed greater freedom to individuals to rewrite the original text by imagining its members as

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[26] Sabrina Corbellini, "Introduction," in *Cultures of Religious Reading in the Late Middle Ages: Instructing the Soul, Feeding the Spirit and Awakening the Passion,* ed. Sabrina Corbellini (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), 2, notes that the meditative internalisation of a text in the *Lectio Divina* involved the almost physical union between reader and book as parts of the material were stored in the 'book of the heart', drawing the reader into a sacred conversation.

[27] Duncan Robertson*, Lectio Divina*: *The Medieval Experience of Reading* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2011), 203.

[28] Giuseppe Mazzotta, "The Book of Questions: Prayer and Poetry," *Dante Studies* 129 (2011): 25–46, 31.

[29] *Ibid.*

[30] Carol Muller, "Making the Book, Performing the Words of Izihlabelelo zamaNazaretha," in *Orality, Literacy and Colonialism in Southern Africa*, ed. Jonathan A. Draper (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 92.

[31] *Ibid.*, 93.

[32] *Ibid.*

'writers' actively engaged in the process of interpreting and contributing to their collective history.[33]

I suggest some parallels between the Nazarite example of a reading community and the approach that we developed in Dantessa. Of course, much has changed in modern South Africa since the preliterate world of the early Nazarites who encountered the written word for the first time, and our particular context in a world class University is very different from these historical examples. In their families and communities, it is nevertheless true that many young South Africans still inhabit a dynamic oral world, which is most clearly manifest in their churches, a central element of their cultural lives; and it is certainly true that reading Dante became akin to a religious experience for many of our students, even those who came from atheist backgrounds without the strong religious dimensions hinted at here. One reason for this could be that students encountered the text outside of the curriculum and outside of the classroom with its unspoken rigid rules of engagement. In the context of Dantessa, affective reactions were welcomed and encouraged and were moreover not isolated to individuals, instead becoming 'communal' events, chorus-like, in the sense that the poet's voice was read aloud and echoed in the many responses that his words inspired. Thus, Dante's voice was not experienced as a separate entity contained within the pages of a book, but reverberated in and through our group, dynamically involving us in a process of active, creative reading, re-reading and re-imagining.

The close-knit sense of community that our reading created and the nature of our shared, oral response can be better understood when turning to Augustine's *Confessions:* here, Augustine weaves the process of reading into his conversion narrative, making it central to his mental ascent. While the conversion through reading involves a turning inwards, it also entails triumphing over the isolation of the individual, for written words constitute a "community of ideas" that live in his mind as if they were separate beings.[34] In this sense the focus is shifted away from the original texts and towards the conversations in which they participate, so that the books invoked in Augustine's progress towards conversion function symbolically as part of the progressive correction of

[33] *Ibid.*, 99.

[34]Brian Stock, *Augustine The Reader: Meditation Self-Knowledge and the Ethics of Interpretation* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 28.

Augustine and Alypius who, in discussing the texts, are made more aware of their own errors of interpretation.[35] The Augustinian idea of a community of readers and writers that is constantly renewable and renewed was commonplace for Dante and his Medieval contemporaries and was an important element of the *Lectio Divina*, according to which reading, like prayer, is performed in the present tense, for the scriptural text is thought to contain inexhaustible possibilities.[36] Dante imbibes his authors in a similar manner to Augustine, allowing them to inhabit his texts as part of a dynamic, shifting community of thoughts and ideals. It seemed natural to us in Dantessa to continue this process, not merely in the theoretical acknowledgement of Dante's sense of community with his authors and readers, but in the conscious enactment of this community, through a talking-back, a direct transformation of ourselves in response to Dante and his *auctores*, as if they were embodied 'voices'.

Most readers in university literature courses typically engage in extensive or comprehensive reading practices, reading horizontally from start to finish.[37] This idea was foreign to Dante and his contemporaries who sought depth of reading rather than breadth and who therefore emphasized the importance of reading short sections intensively, attempting to internalize their significance.[38] But the manner in which texts were internalized and analyzed differed from what we would ordinarily understand by this process: instead of the quiet parsing of verse undertaken by a solitary individual, words were sounded out in company for it was believed that pronunciation was seminal to the interpretation process as texts could be deciphered and committed to memory in this manner.[39] The reading experiments that emerged from our initial conversations proceeded in a similarly non-linear fashion and encouraged students to absorb Dante into their own personal spaces as young South Africans and to respond to him as a speaking voice, unmoored from his context and yet communicating directly with them.

We began the process with the reading scene in *Inferno* V. No context was provided, and no prior preparation was done. The

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[35] *Ibid.*, 80-81.

[36] Robertson, *Lectio Divina*, 20.

[37] Sven Birkerts, *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age* (New York: Faber&Faber, 2006), 144.

[38] Robertson, *Lectio Divina*, 202.

[39] *Ibid.*

following words in translation were read aloud and members were asked to listen carefully and to focus on whatever image came into their minds as this was happening, even if the image did not appear to have an immediate connection to the words:

> One day, to pass the time in pleasure,
> we read of Lancelot, how love enthralled him.
> We were alone, without the least misgiving.
>
> More than once that reading made our eyes meet
> and drained the color from our faces.
> Still, it was a single instant overcame us:
>
> When we read how the longed-for smile
> was kissed by so renowned a lover, this man,
> who never shall be parted from me,
>
> all trembling, kissed me on my mouth.
> A Galeotto was the book and he that wrote it.
> That day we read in it no further. (*Inf* 5. 127–38).[40]

The reading gave rise to an intense discussion, built from a strong emotional response. Readers were struck firstly by the power of the language, by its salacious and seductive qualities and by the strongly moral way in which the scene developed. They found the depiction familiar, and the speaker arresting, leading them to question in what manner they recognized her: were these the artificial words of Hollywood romance or was there something closer to home about them? If they were spoken to a South African audience by a South African woman, how would their emphasis change? Some were suspicious of the speaker, but some were impressed: in a country where oppression and misogyny are a sad reality for most women,[41] the speaker sounded brave and defiant, a voice of passion who cannot be silenced and continues to tell her tale, even in hell, in words so authoritative that they are capable of overpowering the pilgrim. The context of Dante's poem eventually became apparent but not before the words were woven into very different, personal narratives. We approached the text loosely as words that take shape in an oral space and are therefore elastic, expanding to encompass the experiences of those who utter and

[40] *Inferno*. Translated by Robert and Jean Hollander (New York: Anchor, 2000, rpt. 2002).

[41] For more information about the oppressed status of women in South Africa over the years, see Shaina Hutson, "Gender oppression and Discrimination in South Africa," *ESSAI* 5.26 (2007).

respond to them. What emerged was a personal interaction with Dante who, we imagined, was speaking directly to us, and calling on us to respond, not as his own readers might have done, but from our context as South Africans. We engaged in 'talking back' to the poet – recognizing ourselves in his words and drawing him into a conversation with our own preoccupations and concerns.

The instructions in preambles to Medieval prayer books imagine the reader as a complex personage capable of being transformed or 'completed' by a particular text.[42] Following the example of Francesca, whose reading of the *Lancelot* could be called "unreliable" in the sense that she reshapes and transforms the author's words to suit her narrative,[43] our responses were not restricted to commentary in any recognizable form but involved responding spontaneously to the text and rewriting it to fit varying interpretations. This brought us closer to the role of reader as Dante might have understood it, to the practices of the Medieval scholastics, who would revise their commentary on the texts of the *auctores* according to the demands of each successive generation.[44]

The interplay between the context of the modern South African reader and Medieval Florentine author, and the oral, spoken, and creative manner in which our reading of Dante evolved, is best captured in the praise poem to Francesca written by one of our young members, Luyanda Kaitoo:[45] Luyanda is a young black woman who grew up in Swaziland, where she first

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[42] Amtower, *Engaging Words*, 6

[43] Susan Noakes, *Timely Reading: Between Exegesis and Interpretation* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1988), 48.

[44] Amtower, *Engaging words*, 88. Robertson, *Lectio Divina*, 218, reinforces this point, noting that the habit of quoting from one's sources was far less carefully defined than in modernity and the boundary between commentary and quoted text far more fluid as a consequence, so that texts are constantly recontextualised according to current needs; Amtower, *Engaging words*, 97-98, further comments that the *Vita Nuova* is an obscure text in the sense that it invites the reader to participate in the making of meaning, converting him or her through the dynamic reinvention of the reader-author relationship. The process is not dissimilar to the way in which we approached Dante: many of our members were compelled to rewrite the *Commedia,* attempting to modernise Dante and in the process feeling as if their experience with the poet inexplicably transformed them as well.

[45] It is interesting that Luyanda felt that Dante resonates with the African praise poem genre, considering the fact that the genre of *laudatio* was more familiar to Dante and his contemporaries than it is to a modern, Western readership, for example: in the *Vita Nuova* Dante resolves to write future works in praise of Beatrice, an intention that is fulfilled in the *Commedia* which can be read as a praise poem to Beatrice. See J. A. Burrow, *The Poetry of Praise* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univerity Press, 2008), 25.

heard praise poetry performed while a child at school. She since came to Wits University to read for a law degree, and it was here, in my English seminar, where she encountered Dante in translation.[46] She was immediately drawn to the poem and was inspired to join Dantessa, where she became especially captivated by the apparent beauty and bravery of the figure of Francesca. Her poem, shared below, celebrates Francesca, who, through the language of praise, is remade as an independent and powerful African woman:

> Her is she and she is her
> The holy grail of life
> Literally!
> See how beautifully molded she was by our creator
> Miraculous!
>
> Fissure upon curve—bend upon crevice, pulchritude adorning the finest details
> of her every flaw
> Imperfect is her form, yet she wears it with such pride (astounding is it not?)
> Hers is a beauty misunderstood by man
> One in defiance of morality and all seedlings of virtue
> An allure that defies the trivial standards of splendor and brings epiphanies to
> the eyes of the pious
>
> Self-assured and head held to the clouds, she reigns in a world of moralistic lechers
> Yet owns her sexuality
> For she is woman
> Still untamed, yet paradoxically a creature of grace
> She is hedonistic at heart (as foretold by her dreams) reckless in spirit and a
> slave to felicity -
> You know, the kind tainted by substantial pleasures, fear and emancipation.
> OH, being of majesty!
> Ignorant (by choice)
> She hears not the judgements and hatred hurled at her by the beautiful hypocrites
> of our Earthly realm
> Or rather, she refuses to yield her power –
> By lending an ear to their slanderous hymns
> Either way her selfhood is unbroken

[46] Luyanda Kaitoo (Wits University student and member of Dantessa), in discussion with the author, Microsoft Teams, August 2, 2022.

> Her wisdom still but an innate mystery
> And her confidence simply enviable
> Forever battling the voices that try to oppress her
> Telling her to "cover up! "Sit properly" and "act decent""
> She always chooses to expose the cacophonic brush strokes, that make her the
> masterpiece she is
> The very loathed stripes and burn marks that adorn her every atom
> Making her art in its most pristine form.
>
> Kumkanikazi.[47]
> Contoured by enigma in every fold of her ebony canvas
> She is the embodiment of divinity
> The epitome of tacit sex appeal
> And the universe
> A goddess of existential inferno
> And proud cherub of hell
> She is my soul
> And I will fear her no more
> For hers is the abstract life force
> Transcribed in my genes and sourced from her radiant chalice
>
> My ancestral empress
> She is a ruler of the nebulous night sky and
> Queen of the shadows
> The one who dons the crown reaching for the heavens, even in the abyss.[48]

The genre of the poem is particularly significant. Praise poems are considered a way of life for the African people:[49] although the official praise poet's role is to chronicle the "deeds and qualities of his chief" or political leaders and to "inspire . . . his audience to loyalty,"[50] praise poetry is also absorbed into people's everyday lives. In the isiXhosa culture for example it is common for a man to formulate 'boasts' about himself, phrases that capture his pride in his achievements or the opinions of others about him and that are arranged in a kind of biography that others can recite at ceremonial events to honor or encourage him.[51] Praise poetry is therefore

[47] "Queen" in isiXhosa.

[48] Luyanda Kaitoo, "Her Anatomy: A Praise Poem Inspired by Francesca da Rimini," in *A South African Convivio with Dante*, eds. Sonia Fanucchi and Anita Virga (Florence: Firenze University Press, 2021), 69–71.

[49] Norma Masuku, "The Depiction of Mkabayi: A review of her praise poem," *The South African Journal of African Languages* 2 (2009): 121–30, 121.

[50] Jeff Opland, *Xhosa Oral Poetry: Aspects of a Black South African Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 67.

[51] *Ibid.*, 38, 40.

intimately personal, to the point that when Nguni society was oral it constituted the memory of a person, the aspects of him that would be remembered after his death.[52] But it is also intensely social in character: by identifying a striking characteristic of a person the poems provide him with a "social identity."[53]

Luyanda's choice to render Francesca in this manner is revealing about the ways in which Dante resonates with the South African experience and about the particular style of reading that we adopted. When asked about her choice of Francesca as the subject of her praise poem Luyanda commented that "Francesca is me," [54] words that are very telling about the powerful way in which Dante reaches young South African women, who are accustomed to an oppressively patriarchal context: Luyanda was impressed by the fact that Francesca continues to tell her story while disregarding the dramatic reaction of the pilgrim and Paolo's continued weeping, and was therefore inspired to use the "stencil" of Dante's figure,[55] in order to create a mirror of herself, a new, empowered young African woman, who is unashamedly beautiful and sensual despite the disapproving narratives of the men around her.

By entering the space of the praise poem, Dante's Francesca was transformed. Luyanda explained that some of the words from her poem had been jotted down at various moments in her life before she encountered Dante: the creating of the poem therefore involved a dynamic yoking of her own personal praises to those directed more specifically at Dante's figure, resulting in a new 'hybrid' Francesca who was deeply personal to the young poet – "she is my soul." Freed by the praise poem genre from the moral constraints of Dante's hell, Francesca becomes the creator of her own destiny, as the play on pronouns in the first sentence of the poem, "she is her, and her is she," reveals. The praises for Francesca pile up throughout the poem as the sentences grow longer and longer. She emerges as a heroic figure who rises above traditional piety, and, whereas Dante's figure seemed ignorant of the choices that she made to lead to her sin, Luyanda's character is "ignorant (by choice)," consciously refusing to "yield her power" by "lending an ear to their slanderous hymns."

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[52] Richard Whitaker, "History, Myth and Social Function in Southern African Nguni Praise Poetry," *in Epic and History*, eds. D. Konstan and K. Raaflaub (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010): 381-91, 382.

[53] *Ibid.*, 381.

[54] Luyanda Kaitoo, in discussion with the author, August 2, 2022.

[55] Luyanda Kaitoo, "Her Anatomy: A Praise Poem Inspired by Francesca da Rimini," in *A South African Convivio with Dante*, 69.

But Luyanda's Francesca also reshapes the traditional African praise poem. Although Norma Masuku has commented that praise poems are occasionally written for "women, young boys, children dancers, and even animals,"[56] men remain the main focus of these poems,[57] and this was certainly Luyanda's experience when she commented that praise poets shy away from women and sexuality.[58] Francesca is therefore a disruptive presence: the process of rewriting her also transforms the African space into which she enters, forcing acknowledgement of the powerful, sensual female presence, as Francesca becomes a "Queen of the shadows," simultaneously elevated by her race and her femininity.

Luyanda's response reveals important dimensions about how our reading practices evolved. Praise poetry is notable for its oral style, the fact that it is a performance which encompasses the "totality" of the performer, the audience and the particular circumstance in which the performance occurs.[59] Audiences are not passive recipients of poems but are inspired to respond vocally so that the poem becomes a communal, social event.[60] Moreover, given their oral character, praise poems require a certain amount of flexibility and creativity from performers and audience alike: they represent a "dynamic, reciprocal relationship with the community,"[61] and stock phrases are reinvented and reshuffled "on the spot,"[62] with small additions and adaptations being made according to the demands of the performance.[63] When writing her poem Luyanda sounded each word aloud before setting it down, so that the poem emerged as an oral event or performance, as evident in asides like, "astounding, is it not?" which include the audience in the experience of creating and admiring Francesca, or emphatic chorus-like adjectives such as "Miraculous." The way that Luyanda translated Francesca mirrored the way that she read Dante's figure and the reading practices of our group – she

[56] Masuku, "The Depiction of Mkabayi," 121.

[57] See Opland, *Xhosa Oral Poetry*, for more information on the male-centred isiXhosa tradition of praise poetry.

[58] Kaitoo, in discussion with the author, Microsoft Teams, August 2, 2022.

[59] Whitaker, "History, Myth and Social Function in Southern African Nguni Praise Poetry," *in Epic and History*, 386.

[60] *Ibid.*

[61] Fritz H. Pointer, *African Oral Epic Poetry: Praising the Deeds of a Mythic Hero* (Lewiston, Queenston, Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2013), 38.

[62] Landeg White, "Power and the Praise Poem," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 9.1 (1982): 8–32, 10.

[63] H.C. Groneweld, "I Control the Idioms: Creativity in Ndebele Praise Poetry," *Oral Tradition* 16.1 (2001): 29–57, 50.

explained to me that when she saw Dante's words on the page, she was unable to make sense of them, but they came alive for her when they were read out aloud, in our group and alone in private.[64]

Luyanda's poem is testimony to the oral dimension of our reading practice, the fact that we engaged in a conversation with Dante that was spontaneous and verbal: the process was dynamic rather than static in the sense that Dante was transformed by the South African context while simultaneously reshaping our perception of ourselves. In reconfiguring Dante, we recovered some aspects of narrating in oral tradition, where it was common practice for narrators to introduce new elements into old myths, in response to the unique interaction with a particular audience.[65] The effect of our reading experience was unifying in the sense that it emphasized Dante's words as utterance rather than as text, for, as Walter Ong so eloquently puts it, "Sight isolates, sound incorporates. Whereas sight situates the observer outside what he views, at a distance, sound pours into the hearer."[66] Ong argues that, unlike sight, sound is immersive and communal in character, bringing people together and externalizing emotions rather than throwing the psyche back on itself. [67]

Luyanda's praise poem furthermore points to an important aspect of our oral engagement with Dante: the poem is immersed in religious terminology, as Francesca, the "cherub of hell" is described as deaf to the "slanderous hymns" of others. She is the young poet's "soul" and is constantly "reaching for the heavens, even in the abyss." These are not incidental allusions but are interwoven with the form and purpose of the writing and the style of our reading practice. As I have already noted, praise poems, which are composed both for the living and the living dead, are closely allied with traditional African religious practices, and were taken up early on in the Southern African Christian oral tradition in the form of hymns and songs.[68] The practice was common among significant religious figures such as Isiah Shembe, who invoked praise poetry creatively, in order to "re-oralize . . .the

[64] Kaitoo, in discussion with the author, Microsoft Teams, August 2, 2022.

[65]Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy*: *the Technologizing of the World*, 30th Anniversary Edition with additional chapters by John Hartley (1982; rpt. London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 41-42.

[66] *Ibid.*, 69

[67] *Ibid.*, 68

[68] Jonathan A. Draper and Kenneth Mtata, "Orality, Literature and African Religions," in *The Wiley-Blackwell companion to African Religions*, 106-107.

gospel tradition in a new and liberating way."[69] The spiritual impulse to memorialize, to honor the living by connecting them with former generations and to invoke the dead,[70] informed our reading, in the sense that we projected ourselves into Dante's words: students commented on the fact that they felt profoundly moved by the words that they heard and were therefore inspired to take creative ownership of these words, weaving them into their own life experience and thoughts. In this way personal experiences and literature became inextricable, just as they were for Bernard of Clairvaux*:*

> I have ascended to the highest in me, and look! the Word is towering above that. In my curiosity I have descended to explore my lowest depths, yet I found him even deeper. If I looked outside myself, I saw him stretching beyond the furthest I could see; and if I looked within, he was yet further within… . It was not by any movement of his that I recognized his coming; it was not by any of my senses that I perceived he had penetrated the depths of my being. Only by the movement of my heart, as I have told you, did I perceive his presence.[71]

We therefore recovered some aspects of the context in which Dante first conceived of Francesca in *Inferno* V, the challenge with which he presents readers of the original Francesca: should she be treated as a disembodied text, an intellectual puzzle to be solved in the tradition of scholars attempting to explain her damnation, or does she demand to be read in a different kind of way, as an embodied and protean figure, who reaches out directly to her readership, demanding to be reinvented in our own image?

Readers of *Inferno V* have increasingly focused on Francesca's flaws as a reader,[72] as well as her moral shortcomings: as

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[69] *Ibid.*, 107-8.

[70] *Ibid.*, 110.

[71] Ascendi etiam superius meum, et ecce supra hoc Verbum emi-nens. Ad inferius quoque meum curiosus explorator descendi, et nihlominus infra inventum est. Si foras aspexi, extra omne exterius meum comperi illud esse; si intus, et ipsum interius erat…. Nullis denique suis motibus compertum est mihi, nullis meis sensibus illapsum penetralibus meis: tantum ex motu cordis, sicut praefatus sum, intellexi presentiam eius. (SC 74.5–6; SBOp 2:243). Quoted in Robertston, *Lectio Divina*, 379.

[72] When discussing Francesca's reading practices in this episode, Stephen Popolizio, "Literary Reminiscences and the Act of Reading in Inferno V," *Dante Studies* 98 (1980): 19–33, 27, argues that in "effect, Dante equates faulty reading with a potential state of sin." The sentiment is a common one in the scholarship of the last century and was expressed by Renato Poggioli in his seminal essay of 1957, "Tragedy or Romance: a reading of the Paolo and Francesca episode in Dante's Inferno," *PMLA* 72.3 (Jun. 1957): 313–58: 358: "This moral is very simple, and could be summed up

Peter Levine very strongly put it, "Dante resolutely damned Francesca and justified her punishment, using her as a chief example of lust. He was willing to apply demanding moral principles, even though everyday sympathy might have tempted him to make exceptions."[73] According to this reading, Francesca is not only morally deviant but also sins against poetry, since she appears to misinterpret or misapply what she has read.[74] The notion that the key to Francesca's damnation is present in her words and reading practices has become so entrenched that it is difficult to accept the fact that for the Romantics, for example, she was viewed as a "heroine" who evoked "pity, sympathy and, indeed, admiration."[75] It has been argued that this response to Francesca amounted to a political misappropriation of Dante's figure, whose moral oversights were disregarded in order to make her into a symbol of cultural oppression;[76] but this would be to ignore the inherent flexibility of Dante's portrayal and the fact that ever since Boccaccio's famous embellishment of her tale, she has lent herself to various interpretations and reinventions.[77] The outline that Dante provides of Francesca seems to demand the active participation of readers, encouraging them to step outside of the text and ask, along with Boccaccio, "who she was and by what means she died."[78] This is

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in the statement that writing and reading romantic fiction is almost as bad as yielding to romantic love." For further examples see John Freccero, *In Dante's Wake*: *Reading from Medieval to Modern in the Augustinian Tradition*, eds. Danielle Callegari and Melissa Swain (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), René Girard, *To Double Business Bound: Essays on Literature, Mimesis, and Anthropology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978) and Peter Levine, "Why Dante damned Francesca Da Rimini," *Philosophy and Literature* 23 (1999): 334–50.

[73] Peter Levine, *Reforming the Humanities: Literature and Ethics from Dante through Modern Times* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 19.

[74] *Ibid.*, 7.

[75] Francesca Bugliani Knox, "Galeotto fu il libro e chi lo scrisse: nineteenth century translations, interpretations and Reworkings of Dante's Paolo and Francesca," *Dante Studies with the Annual Report of the Dante Society* 115 (1997): 221–50, 223. For a fuller understanding of the Romantic appreciation of Dante, see Antonella Braida, *Dante and the Romantics* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

[76] See Diego Saglia, "Translation and Cultural Appropriation: Dante, Paolo and Francesca in British Romanticism," *Quaderns. Revista de traducció* 7 (2002): 95–119.

[77] Teodolinda Barolini, "Dante and Francesca da Rimini: Realpolitik, Romance, Gender," *Speculum* 75.1 (Jan. 2000): 1–28, 2, notes that apart from Dante's account, there are no historical sources for the original Francesca, and Dante's own account tells us precious little, leaving the story open to embellishment.

[78] Giovanni Boccaccio, *Esposizioni sopra la Commedia di Dante*, ed. Giorgio Padoan, in Vittore Branca, ed. *Tutte le Opere di Giovanni Boccaccio* (Verona: Arnoldo

the impetus behind Teodolinda Barolini's attempt to fill the "information vacuum" left by Dante, in order to determine "the historical importance of Dante's intervention."[79] Despite the burden that scholars since Boccaccio have placed on Francesca's context as a key to unlocking the puzzle of her damnation, she remains mercurial and partial, her identity mirroring that of her readers and bound up with the poet's own, as Ugo Foscolo seemed to recognise when he merged her tale with the poet's own destiny:

> ...Francesca was the daughter of *Guido da Polenta*, master of Ravenna, Dante's protector and most faithful friend. The poet had probably known her when a girl, blooming in innocence and beauty under the paternal roof. He must, at least, have often heard the father mention his ill-fated child. He must therefore have recollected her early happiness, when he beheld the spectacle of her eternal torment; and this, we think, is the true account of the overwhelming sympathy with which her form overpowers him. The episode, too, was written by him in the very house in which she was born, and in which he had himself, during the last ten years of his exile, found a constant asylum.[80]

The reading space in *Inferno V* is therefore active and imaginative, a "playground" for specialised and lay readers through whom Francesca transcends her historical persona, multiplying into many versions of herself.[81] This is an important aspect of Dante's attitude to reading and of Francesca's approach in the text, as Mary Carruthers pointed out when she suggests that far from being a poor reader Francesca and Paolo read "properly," following Hugh of St Victor's advice to recreate "the exemplary scene, rewriting it in their own memories."[82] According to Dante's description, a text is not complete without a reader's active participation, a process that involves the employment of the imagination and all of the senses.[83] I have tried to show that we approached the reading of the *Commedia* in a similar manner: in responding to the poem's encouragement to *trasumanar*, to Dante's invitation to his readers

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Mondadori, 1965), vol. vi, gloss on *Inf.* 5.97–99. Quoted in Peter Levine, *Reforming the Humanities,* 13.

[79] Barolini, "Dante and Francesca da Rimini," 6.

[80] Ugo Foscolo, "Dante," *Edinburgh Review* 30 (1818): 317-51, 342.

[81] Sun Hee Kim Gertz, "The Readerly Imagination: Boccaccio's commentary on Dante's Inferno V," *Romanische Forschungen* 105.1–2: 1–29, 24.

[82] Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory* (1990; rpt. Cambridge, 2008), 231.

[83] Elena Lombardi, The *Wings of Doves: Love and Desire in Medieval Culture* (Montreal&Kingston, London, Ithaca: Mcgill-Queens University Press, 2012), 133, makes this point when she notes that, through Francesca, Dante invites "his readers to try at first hand the pleasures and troubles of interpretation."

to reinvent themselves and engage with him from new perspectives as he embraces a wider and wider vision, we were able to create a new Dantean identity for ourselves that acknowledged and embraced the poet on his terms while simultaneously encompassing our particular position in space and time as South Africans, many still very young, still grappling with the ghost of Apartheid and facing an uncertain future.

The dynamic and creative remaking and reliving of our personal and historical identity through the reading of Dante, is evident in the work of another young member of our society, Helena Van Urk. As a young woman from an Afrikaans background, Helena's cultural and social context is very different from Luyanda's. Yet her poem, *The Storm*, in many ways resonates with Luyanda's approach. Horrified by the injustices of South Africa's past, Helena invented an "anti-colonial" voyage of her own. The voyage is undertaken by Dante Alberti, a modification of Dante's name to reflect Helena's own Dutch heritage. Helena's Dante is a remote traveler from Medieval Florence and yet also an intellectual and lover of books, like Helena herself. His journey to Africa and subsequent shipwreck is a moral journey of the soul, that is extremely personal in that it answers Helena's own agonized questions about South Africa's history and future:

> Like Solomon I pled to be given
> Wisdom, of mankind's fall and great sorrow,
> if beauty still dwelt in this blighted Eden.[84]

Helena's's character encounters an 'Africa' and particularly a South Africa that is unbound by time and that encompasses greedy villains drawn from our present, our recent past and our distant colonial heritage, all grouped together and led by the shameless Cecil John Rhodes (a figure that has been villainized in South African rhetoric and has become a symbol of colonial plunder):[85]

> There was a world-renown zoologist
> named François the Rapist, a lusty

[84] Helena Van Urk, "The Storm," in *A South African Convivio with Dante*, 53.

[85] Rhodes became the symbol of colonial oppression during the student riots of 2015: members of the RhodesMustFall movement took exception to the presence of the statue on the campus of the University of Cape Town, which was interpreted as a form of violence against black history. This sparked countrywide riots on university campuses (for more information about the student protests and the symbolic role of Rhodes see Joleyn Steyne Kotze, "On Decolonization and Revolution: A Kristevan reading on the Student Movements and *Fallism*," *Politikon* 45.1 (2018): 112–27.)

voyeur, to envelop his perverse gist,

some farmers, "Trekboers" from further South,
having fled here from warrants of arrest
for brutal mass murders, by word of mouth,

a gentleman who was in a late life
called Man of God, but sold his office out
in service of Apartheid's racial strife,

wizarding doctors, with no power ordained
and no love for men, only with greed rife,
countless men of force and might, having served

God's children only to betray their oaths
at the altar of something bigger, looked
inwards with riches their only goals,

a statesman so famed for hypocrisy
during his reign over a land so loath
his Janus face was baked into pastry,

from across the seas had come two posh,
prestigious men of England's fine gentry,
Roberts and Kitchener or some such tosh,

brilliant tacticians and counsellors two,
but minds and tongues in devilry awash.
Another gentleman was with them, who

spoke of how he and Bell Pottinger
shared ears of kings and presidents through
secret missions to stoke discord, anger,

a man named Retief, full of suspicions,
who cheated a warlord, full of rancour,
out of jewellery under false provisions,

a Prince, Dingane, of his birth the victim,
had committed the worst, most heinous sins
in slaying his brother for a kingdom,

for traitors of nations, shameful heads hang
across the continent: there were plentisome
here from all countries, creeds and colourings
. . .
They were loyal, to death, to their master
who was only ever named as "Cecil";

their words raw sewage on a silver platter.[86]

Like Luyanda's praise poem, Helena's poem is deeply personal, a moral rewriting of her colonial inheritance. The shipwreck is rendered dramatically in Dantean language that echoes the imagery of greed in *Inferno VI,* the corpses of the infernal crew described in a manner that recalls Dante's damned, the "l'ombre che adona/la greve pioggia" (Inferno 6. 34-5):

and it moved me to bitter tears as I
fell to my knees in impassioned weeping.
All across this wretched strand lay strewn my

companions, my fellow men face down,
prone upon the earth, forever pinned by
God's Justice; in water and muck to drown.

Their bloated corpses resembled Hogs at
the trough, the same gluttony was now sown
and reaped, and had to them all death begat.[87]

The description is striking for its personal, oral quality, the fact that the destruction of the infernal crew is not narrated objectively but experienced subjectively and directly by the speaker, who, watching their demise, is moved to passionate and "bitter tears." By involving herself so closely in her historical reinvention of South Africa, Helena renders it a living experience, akin to Dante's own journey.

Dante is present, not only in the hybrid narrator of *The Storm,* but symbolically in the language, which is dynamic and flexible in that it is able to transform Dante's concern with political greed in Florence into a quintessentially South African phenomenon. It is moreover evident that this poetic reworking is not simply an intellectual and creative exercise: it involves a spiritual catharsis for Helena, evident in the powerful moral, Dantean language that she employs, the emphasis on the sinfulness of the crew who are forced to face God's justice. The motif is further reinforced by the closing prayer to endeavor to "keep faith in eternal Hope and Good" as the "Storm breaks, herald[ing] a new morning."[88]

[86] *Ibid.*, 53–54.
[87] *Ibid.*, 59–60.
[88] *Ibid.*, 61.

In a 1995 essay Giuseppe Mazzotta brought the role of the reader of Dante to the fore: readers should not, he admonishes, make the mistake of imposing "our own meaning onto" the text, without listening to its "alien voices" or "the resonant signs it ceaselessly emits."[89] To read Dante holistically he suggests that readers would need to do more than see the text as a mirror of themselves; but it would also not do turn to the poem's context as if it "can be clearly "defined and circumscribed" and in this way "shed light on the obscurities of the poem."[90] Instead he argues that readers should enter into the poem's "archaeology," acknowledging the multifarious discourses that the text generates in spite of its author and finding meaning in the "ruptures, gaps, and transformations in the field of knowledge."[91] Like Mazzotta, our group realized the importance of breaking down the artificial divisions between reader and author, and engaging interactively with the poem in a manner that privileges neither. But whereas Mazzotta's approach could run the risk of submerging the voice of Dante in his text, we instead developed a simpler and more direct engagement with the poet in the sense that we experienced him in an oral space as a voice that can be engaged, mirrored, and responded to as part of the dynamics of conversation. The essence of our approach is captured in the first few words of the *Commedia* when Dante the pilgrim first encounters the shade of his poetic master, and reacts with powerful emotion:

> Or se' tu quel Virgilio e quella fonte
> che spandi di parlar sì largo fiume?"
> rispuos' io lui con vergognosa fronte.
>
> "O de li altri poeti onore e lume,
> vagliami 'l lungo studio e 'l grande amore
> che m'ha fatto cercar lo tuo volume.
>
> Tu se' lo mio maestro e 'l mio autore,
> tu se' solo colui da cu' io tolsi
> lo bello stilo che m'ha fatto onore (*Inf.* 1. 79–87).

It is notable that the stream of speech from Virgil's fountainhead is not experienced as impersonal words on a page but

[89] Giuseppe Mazzotta, "Why did Dante write the Comedy? Why and how do we read it?" in *Dante Now: Current Trends in Dante Studies*, Theodore J. Cachey, ed., (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 66.
[90] *Ibid.*, 70.
[91] *Ibid.*

embodied in an individual with whom Dante assumes a direct and personal relationship, so that he can call him, in awed tones, the "de li altri poeti onore e lume" and his "lo mio maestro e 'l mio autore." Moreover, Virgil is not a memory confined to the past but a voice of the present with immediate personal relevance, and urgently needed to save Dante from the threat of the She-Wolf. In a world where Barthes's assumption that literature is "the trap where all identity is lost, beginning with the very identity of the body that writes,"[92] has become a commonplace of the reading experience, it seems naïve to read in the way that Dante does here, to insist on a text's identity as a person, an embodied personality who can act on a reader just as much as a reader can act upon him. Yet reading for Dante cannot be divorced from conversing, and conversing depends on the interactive presence and responsibility of both author and reader. In Dantessa we experienced Dante in just this way, as fully present and embodied in his words. I have shown that this was an empowering experience for our students and that reading developed along dynamic lines, engaging them in a process of recreation, so that another of our young members, Chariklia Martalas, could write directly to the poet, "Dante . . . can I lead you?"[93]

[92] Roland Barthes, "Death of the Author," in *Image, Music, Text* (London: Fontana Press, 1993), 2.

[93] Chariklia Martalas, "A Mad Flight into *Inferno* Once Again. Canto XIII Now Smells Like Roses," in *A South African Convivio with Dante*, 37.