

Foreword

Marcello Ciccuto

What made the reading of these essays so enjoyable was that I did not come across any of the usual, outworn readings to which the tradition of scholarly, academic and literary criticism has accustomed us. Nor did I find traces of the ethical, political and religious thought, or other—even more conventional—interpretative codes which have dominated readings of Dante for centuries. Instead of readings in this tired tradition, with its a priori judgements concerning Dante's poem, I was treated to, among other pleasures, the many unconventional reflections which emerged from the individual imaginations of the young student readers/interpreters who took the opportunity to offer some profound articulations of their own thoughts and their own "being in time" through their readings of Dante. It is clear that these individual appropriations of a classic, which is so distant from our own times, successfully project echoes of the *Divine Comedy* onto current human realities—and the specific realities of a country such as South Africa—which much like the *selva selvaggia e aspra e forte* [wilderness, savage, brute, harsh and wild] is characterised by impermanence, vulnerability, exile, and, in rising through purgatory, the redemptive power of suffering. These elements lend themselves (at times spontaneously), to a comparison with the deep memory of a nation. Their focus is the *tornar de la mente* [the coming once more to mind] that only the reliving of the evil and the vicissitudes of history can make interesting, both at an individual and collective level.

It seems that in these readings, even where the voices of specialists in the field make themselves heard, Dante has taken on the role of interlocutor in an intimate dialogue from which emanate different, perhaps better, reinterpretations.

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Sonia Fanucchi, Anita Virga (edited by), *A South African Convivio with Dante. Born Frees' Interpretations of the Commedia*, © 2021 Author(s), content CC BY 4.0 International, metadata CC0 1.0 Universal, published by Firenze University Press (www.fupress.com), ISSN 2704-5919 (online), ISBN 978-88-5518-458-8 (PDF), DOI 10.36253/978-88-5518-458-8

tions of the readers' own identities because, from their encounter with the world of Dante, possible alternatives to their present emerge. It is significant that the various themes brought forward by the student readers/interpreters in relating to Dante are in close dialogue with current events. This is the real *pan degli angeli* [bread of angels] that the student readers/interpreters are able to bring to the fore in the course of their own, unique *convivium*. From the intellectual nourishment of the Dantesque cosmos, combined with creative "talking back", come forth visions of Beatrice as female figure of *deviance and goodness* simultaneously and a symbol of the power of black women. Ulysses is seen as a model of a search for knowledge that cannot be separated from the exercise of virtue or from prideful self-sufficiency. Indeed, it can be said that this wonderful editorial initiative is inspired, to a certain degree, by this confrontation with the Homeric and Dantesque Ulysses: bearer of the idea of not going it alone, detached from the world, but rather setting one's course in line with a life lived through encounter with the Other, with other people and their stories.

This is because, after all, the student readers/interpreters, in their essays, have shown themselves to be acutely aware of that most admirable alloy forged of many stories within the journey of Dante; that marvellous ensemble of hundreds of figures, characters and situations in a single, fused past and present, which leads us to imagine, in our own present, the fundamental idea of living alongside the Other. We grasp this idea, a task our student/interpreters have accomplished well, when we comprehend the experiences of each of us and of all of us through the application of a model: the model Dante continues to provide us with his undying message of a civilization founded on our participation in and our sharing of an intellectual adventure.

Presidente della Società Dantesca Italiana

Foreword

Libby Meintjes

The publication of this book was not deliberately planned but evolved and grew with the enthusiasm of two young Dante scholars, Dr Anita Virga and Dr Sonia Fanucchi, who were intent on enriching their postgraduate students' experience of reading Dante. The response to their exhortation to the students to consider the relevance of Dante's work to their lives and experiences was as unexpected as it was inspirational. The project took on a life of its own.

I am thus delighted to have the opportunity to write the foreword to *A South African Convivio with Dante. Born Frees' Interpretations of the Commedia*. As a former head of the School of Literature, Language, and Media at the University of the Witwatersrand, from whence this book emanates, I am proud to be associated with a project which has proved to be an intense journey full of personal and theoretical insights for students and academics alike.

The project captures the spirit of experimentation in teaching and learning, and research, with which my colleagues at Wits University are responding to calls for the decolonisation of universities and the curriculum. The *#FeesMustFall* movement which began in 2015 was focused on free university education, but it had a far wider ideological imprint, locating itself within debates on the role of the university *for students and society* and calling for a radical re-imagination and transformation of the university. What the movement, together with its precursor, *#RhodesMustFall*, signalled was the need for a fundamentally different university, one with which students (but also academics and workers) could identify and in which they could recognise themselves—a university radically re-imagining its ideological identity post colonialism and post liberation. Rad-

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ical change can mean changing everything—total disruptive displacement—which is unlikely to occur without a full-scale revolution, or it can mean gradual but incremental transformative change through the integration of different approaches, as we see here.

This book signals to us that the postcolonial university is within our reach, that progress can be made in leaps and bounds. The book's publication shows that the adoption of decolonising practices in teaching and learning and research places us at the threshold of the decolonial. The ambition of “developing a South African narrative around Dante—of determining in what sense Dante ‘speaks’ to us as South African readers and whether we might build a community of scholars, students and writers with this shared vision” demonstrates how academics and students can rise to the challenge of changing the university.

The performance of writing back to Dante showcased here is an exciting combination of decolonising practice and of translation informed by the practice of reading through different epistemological paradigms. At the very heart of the *Convivio with Dante* lies a classic of mediaeval literature—in translation (and only tangentially in the original). Although the issue of translation as such never seems to have entered the picture (students were free to use any Dante edition in translation), the students nonetheless engaged in a process of translation and transformation—a form of rewriting and translanguaging producing, what I would like to call, *transwriting*.

The students take charge of the text, using their conversation with Dante to uncover their singular identities, whether through resistance to the text or through recognition of themselves in the text. Their writing takes hold of our imagination. Through their eyes we see a different *Purgatorio*, a different Dante, more akin to our times.

Dante seems to speak directly to their strengths as well as their anxieties, and to their social and political worlds. The reader is taken on an exhilarating, at times horrifying, journey with the students. Their moral philosophies spill over enthusiastically, carrying the reader with them on their Dantesque journeys – which are likely to be as revelatory and salutary for the reader as they were for the students and their academic guides.

The book is a wonderfully successful experiment in enhancing the value of a formidable literary work, often seen by many as irrelevant and as divorced from our immediate and current experiences. This book is proof that that is not the case.