

# 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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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.