

# “Noi leggiavamo un giorno per diletto”: Reading Dante in South Africa

Sonia Fanucchi, Anita Virga

## The Origin

The seed for this book was planted the first time that we met over a coffee. It was a summer's day in 2018 when we met under the blue skies of the Highveld at the coffee shop of the Origins Centre Museum at our university, the University of the Witwatersrand, in Johannesburg, South Africa. We chose to meet there for its convenient distance from our departments; but it is a highly symbolic place, and, though we did not realise it at the time, was to take on special significance for us. The Origins Centre is a museum with a particularly South African flavour, dedicated to the origins of humankind. For us it also came to represent the origins of a new intellectual and personal journey that would culminate in the founding of our society, Dantessa. There was another layer of significance connected with the Origins Centre, for it was our common Italian origin that first drew us together, despite the fact that our backgrounds were very different. During the course of this meeting, we found that we had something more in common than that: a special place for Dante in our teaching. We both teach Dante in our courses, although Sonia teaches it in translation in the English Department and Anita in the original version in the Italian Department. While talking about our teaching experiences, we discovered that in both of our courses, our students invariably showed a great interest in Dante, irrespective of their race, religions, home languages, and chosen majors.

Sonia Fanucchi, University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa, [sonia.fanucchi@wits.ac.za](mailto:sonia.fanucchi@wits.ac.za), 0000-0001-7653-2650

Anita Virga, University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa, [anita.virga@wits.ac.za](mailto:anita.virga@wits.ac.za), 0000-0002-7600-4919  
FUP Best Practice in Scholarly Publishing (DOI 10.36253/fup\_best\_practice)

Sonia Fanucchi, Anita Virga, “Noi leggiavamo un giorno per diletto”: *Reading Dante in South Africa*, pp. 13-24, © 2021 Author(s), CC BY 4.0 International, DOI 10.36253/978-88-5518-458-8.03, in 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](http://www.fupress.com)), ISSN 2704-5919 (online), ISBN 978-88-5518-458-8 (PDF), DOI 10.36253/978-88-5518-458-8

We noticed that the *Commedia* affected South African students in a very personal and meaningful way and that our students responded to it passionately. They tended to see themselves reflected in Dante's epic journey through the after-world, and found themselves grappling with the challenges that the text poses to their political and ethical beliefs. It became very clear that Dante struck a note among our students, despite his text's cultural, temporal and linguistic distance from them. Many of them found themselves conversing with the text in the sense that they transposed its language and imagery into the realm of their own experience, a process that involved both resisting and accepting Dante's vision. This, in turn, compelled them to return repeatedly to the difficult questions that the text raises. These reactions were especially interesting given that our students are so different from their American or European peers in terms of their cultural, moral, political, and ethical outlooks, all of which have been shaped by the trauma of an unequal past and the continuing challenges of an unequal present. Our students are moreover different from those in other postcolonial societies, since it was only in South Africa where colonialism was followed by half a century of racial segregation under an oppressive regime. For this reason, our students related to the *Commedia* in a unique way, as will become evident in this book.

That day at the coffee shop we were compelled to act on our realisation that Dante has such a powerful effect on our students. We decided to start a reading group on Dante, which we called Dantessa (Dante Studies in South Africa). Our choice of name with its feminine connotations, echoing our own response as young female scholars engaging with Dante, was already suggestive of the way in which our society would evolve. We started as an informal group, asking our students to join us in reading and commenting on Dante's *Commedia*, but soon defined our purpose of developing a South African narrative around Dante. The goal of the society is to determine how and why Dante 'speaks' to us as South African readers and whether we might build a community of scholars, students and writers with a shared vision. Our first step was tentative: it is generally accepted that Shakespeare has a far more sustained presence in South Africa—indeed, as Chris Thurman notes in his chapter, "*Dante can I lead you?*" *South African Students write back (across seven centuries and a hemisphere)*, Shakespeare is an integral part of South Africa's political voice and struggle to transcend its colonial history, in a way that Dante has not been.

This notwithstanding, our initial discussions revealed some illuminating things about our students' experience of the *Commedia*. In our very first meeting we asked students simply to talk about their individual experiences: what drew them to Dante and what made them wish to be part of the society, despite the fact that our reading group would not count officially toward the completion of their degrees.

Significantly, a picture began to emerge of the role that Dante played in these students' lives and intellectual development: some had encountered the *Commedia* before university, in early childhood, or through its popular culture manifestations (in the computer game *Dante's Inferno* for example, or the movie *Seven*). There were some who had encountered the text for the first time during the courses taught by the two of us at university and were intrigued to know

more. Several of the students who had some previous experience of the *Commedia* told us that they had come across it by chance, and associated it primarily with the enjoyment of private reading. Almost all of them had read translations rather than the original Italian.

We encouraged them to write their personal reactions to Dante and the *Commedia*, and, when we started reading their pieces, we realised that this exercise ought not to be an end in itself: in their work we saw something of great value, which spoke to us as individuals even before it spoke to us as scholars. At that point it became evident to us that our personal stories also affected the way in which we read the texts of our students and, through them, of Dante. For example, the conflict between the desire to belong and the feeling of exile—the Dantesque theme that so affected our students—was not only theirs, but also ours.

### Anita

In the moment in which I am writing, I consider myself to be in exile. It is indeed two years that, for personal reasons, I have not been able to go back to Italy, my home country, where I was born, grew up and lived until I was twenty-five. One day, around fifteen years ago, I left Italy to pursue my studies in the USA. At that time, I did not know that my home would progressively become more and more distant. I left with the idea that I could always go back. In the USA, while studying for my Ph.D., I encountered Dante. I had already studied the *Commedia* in High School in Italy, but back then I did not appreciate it. In the USA, I discovered the power of the text, which was taught to me by prof. Franco Masciandaro, who appears in this book, not only because of his expertise, but also because of his impact on me regarding Dante. It was when I moved to the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg in 2013 and started teaching the *Commedia* that I realised that I was using the same images and the same words that I had learnt from my professor a few years before. Through teaching, I came to appreciate Dante's text even more, for my engagement with my students led me to find greater meaning in the *Commedia*. Then I met Sonia, and together we started our Dantesca journey, in which Dante continues to speak to us, both directly and through the voices of our students.

### Sonia

“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”  
(*Inf.* 1.82–5).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> “O glory and light of all other poets, / let my long study and great love avail / that made me delve so deep into your volume. / ‘You are my teacher and my author.”

These are the words with which the pilgrim first addresses his guide and muse, Virgil, and these words also capture my relationship with Dante. When first I discovered the *Commedia*, in the last year of my undergraduate degree, I was struck by Dante's familiarity, the ways in which his voice seemed to call to me from my own childhood in an immigrant family, echoing my Nonno's larger-than-life, deeply emotional personality. But mine was also an intellectual attachment, as Dante surprised and challenged me, driving me back to Aquinas, Augustine, the Neoplatonists, Virgil, and demanding that I engage interactively with the philosophies of the past, present, future. With Dante I undertook a Ulysses-like flight of the mind, and strove always to reach beyond the boundaries of thought, joining the poet in his *legno che cantando varca* (*Par.* 2.3).<sup>2</sup>

Dante, too, was the answer to my acute spiritual crisis. Raised Catholic, I had since been educated in a progressive school of thought and had come to view anything I deemed conservative with suspicion. Yet Dante's was a living faith, a faith seeking understanding rather than proof. Rather than stultifying and restrictive, his faith was deeply and challengingly moral, undermining my assumptions and encompassing every aspect of love and desire, all of those *segni de l'antica fiamma* (*Pur.* 30.48),<sup>3</sup> that was first sparked by his love for Beatrice. Mentor, poet and guide, Dante led me to the seminar series that I would be asked to create, a course on the poem in translation which would open the way for my meeting with Anita, and for the birth of Dantessa. Just as the pilgrim looked to his guides to pave the way, so have I, Anita and our students continued to look to Dante, who in turn commands, *Leva dunque, lettore... la vista* (*Par.* 10.7–8).<sup>4</sup>

#### Our students' reading of the *Commedia*

It is true that Dante is known on the wider African continent and in elite literary circles in South Africa, and that the *Commedia* was part of the very exclusive literary formation and training of professional South African authors such as J.M. Coetzee, Chris Mann and Guy Butler. But this is not a reality for most young readers encountering the text. It is important to note that the text does not appear anywhere in the South African school curriculum and that it is not included in any official literary narrative, either traditional or postcolonial, with which South African students are familiar.

The effect of this is twofold: on the one hand students' first experience with the *Commedia* is quite personal and their individual reactions, consequently, are not impacted by any prior assumptions. Reactions are often strongly emotional, and feelings run the gamut from shock and resistance to recognition and excitement. These responses are similar in that they react forcefully to Dante's invitation to converse and engage with the text and the challenges that it poses.

<sup>2</sup> "Ship, that singing makes its way."

<sup>3</sup> "Signs of the ancient flame."

<sup>4</sup> "With me, then reader, raise your eyes."

But the students in our Dantessa society, all of whom belong to the 'born free' generation—the generation born after the fall of Apartheid in the early 1990s—were also inspired to take their relationship with the text beyond these initial impressions. Indeed, they were inspired to build their personal encounters with the text into a broader narrative, both personal and, in important ways, moral and political.

Over the course of our next few meetings, it became clear that there were significant points of connection between the text and the mentality of our South African youth. For example, students immediately picked up on and identified with the poem's various iterations of the question of exile. In South Africa the feeling of exile is, on one level, political, in that it is connected with an Apartheid past where political rebellion led to the banishment of many writers and activists. But young people in contemporary South Africa also experience the feeling of exile as personal: the sense of responsibility to their country and a desire to be part of building a new, more inclusive nation was counterbalanced by feelings of dislocation and profound uncertainty about whether they have a legitimate place in the society that we are creating. In our discussions, we noticed that this sense of displacement was experienced by students across the racial divide: all felt conflicted about the social roles they were required to play as black or white individuals. Moreover, the feeling of disconnectedness was augmented by the substantial differences between private and familial lives, since our students' heterogeneous cultures and languages differ substantially between themselves.

The Prologue's extremely powerful image of the *selva oscura* evoked exile and, therefore, resonated with students' sense of social alienation, and with white students' additional burden of inherited guilt. For Dante the image of the *selva* is rich in its associations of loneliness and vulnerability and is notable for its obscure quality, conveying powerfully the emotional turmoil of being spiritually and politically displaced, as the expressive opening lines of the poem reveal:

Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita  
mi ritrovai per una selva oscura,  
ché la diritta via era smarrita.

Ahi quanto a dir qual era è cosa dura  
esta selva selvaggia e aspra e forte  
che nel pensier rinova la paura! (*Inf.* 1.1–6).<sup>5</sup>

The image of the *selva* is soon replaced by the more overtly aggressive Leopard, Lion and She-wolf, as the pilgrim's crisis deepens. The pilgrim's encounter with the beasts, which grow increasingly more intimidating, resonated with students' sense of progressive estrangement and with their fear of the falsely seductive allure of easy solutions: they could once again read the emotional signif-

<sup>5</sup> "Midway in the journey of our life / I came to myself in a dark wood, / for the straight way was lost. / Ah, how hard it is to tell / the nature of that wood, savage, dense and harsh—/ the very thought of it renews my fear!"

icance of these images into our own political landscape which had so recently succumbed to destructive populism during the Jacob Zuma years (2009–2018).

Traditional allegorical interpretations of the three beasts—as biblical figures or moral signs, mapping out the various stages of Dante’s infernal journey—were not as appealing to our students. They were instead attracted to the elasticity of Dante’s allegory in the Prologue, the ways in which it reaches out to include the reader in the process of meaning making, and indeed writes itself into their lives while simultaneously drawing attention to Dante’s specific spiritual journey, and the points at which this intersects with and deviates from their own.

As they continued to explore the implications of Dante’s language of exile throughout the *Commedia*, it gradually became clear that *Purgatorio* spoke most meaningfully to the young South African’s vulnerable condition, as the pieces included in this book testify. Students spoke of the ‘liminal’ character of *Purgatorio*, a canticle based on a narrative of reconciliation and nevertheless characterised by nostalgic longing for a past now beyond the poet’s reach. This is the tone of Dante’s meeting with his old friend Casella for example, who sings for the company on the shores of Purgatory, conjuring the sweet memory of Dante’s earlier poetry and almost distracting the souls from the far more important climb up the mountain:

E io: “Se nuova legge non ti toglie  
memoria o uso a l’amoroso canto  
che mi solea quetar tutte mie doglie,

di ciò ti piaccia consolare alquanto  
l’anima mia, che, con la sua persona  
venendo qui, è affannata tanto!”

“Amor che ne la mente mi ragiona”  
cominciò elli allor sì dolcemente,  
che la dolcezza ancor dentro mi suona.

Lo mio maestro e io e quella gente  
ch’eran con lui parevan sì contenti,  
come a nessun toccasse altro la mente.

Noi eravam tutti fissi e attenti  
a le sue note; ed ecco il veglio onesto  
gridando: “Che è ciò, spiriti lenti?

qual negligenza, quale stare è questo?  
Correte al monte a spogliarvi lo scoglio  
ch’esser non lascia a voi Dio manifesto” (*Purg.* 2.106–24).<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> “And I: ‘If a new law does not take from you / memory or practice of the songs of love / that used to soothe my every sorrow / please let me hear one now to ease my soul, / for it is out of breath and spent, / joined to my body coming here.’ / ‘Love that converses with me in my

For students of Dantessa, this in-between space, rich in future possibility and yet still encumbered by the burden of memory, is a familiar one, both politically and personally. Yet they are also conscious of *Purgatorio's* difference, the fact that it offers a surprising and satisfying answer to the habitual presentations of the liminal as a place of discomfort and estrangement.

#### How the book is organized

In the first part of this book, we collected some of our students' written responses to the *Commedia*. In most of these responses, it is evident that *Purgatorio* plays a major role. The collection includes writings of all genres and subjects: prose, poetry, personal reflection, dialogue, non-fiction. Some are more autobiographical, and others are fictional stories, but they all have in common a very personal (and South African) approach to Dante's text.

*Purgatorio* was the inspiration for Casey Fern's essay, *La divina foresta: Earthly Paradise and Liminal Thresholds in Dante's Purgatorio*, which describes Dante's *Purgatorio* as a liminal homecoming, a ritual return to the comforting and the concrete. Dante's narrative is therefore experienced as broadly congruent with the emotional condition of many young South Africans but also as actively transformative and transforming, creating new ways of relating to familiar feelings and experiences.

Purgatorial imagery, with its emphasis on the redemptive power of suffering, also underlies the short vignettes of Thalén Rogers, *The Lodestone*, which confronts the inherited guilt of Apartheid's legacy captured in personal narratives and encounters that occur during an aeroplane flight, drawing on Dante's ascent up Mount Purgatory. Painful narratives of suffering and inequality, so familiar in a South African context which is still beset by the inequalities entrenched in its past, are here mystically transformed into a narrative of redemption that nevertheless does not eschew or deny pain. Rogers makes use of *Purgatorio's* narrative of intermittent dreams, where the crimes of the white man, for whose greed thousands of innocent black people were killed, are revisited in the powerful dream vision of the old man who is pictured holding his beating heart and attempting to reinsert it as he confesses to terrible crimes of murder, torture and racism.

In South Africa these wounds are particularly fresh, and it is not seldom that a story of racial hatred will appear in the news, bringing back all the old horrors, divisions, and insecurities of Apartheid's crimes. These stories always rehash the same old dichotomies, so that many South Africans have become numb and even indifferent to their implications. But in a *Purgatorial* context, freed by Dante's mystical combination of pain and redemption, Rogers is able to ask the

mind,' / he then began, so sweetly / that the sweetness sounds within me still. / My master and / I and all those standing / near Casella seemed untroubled, / as if we had no other care. / We were spellbound, listening to his notes, / when that venerable old man appeared and cried: / 'What is this, laggard spirits? / What carelessness, what delay is this? / Hurry to the mountain and there shed the slough / that lets not God be known to you.'

difficult questions: “When will my country heal? When will the corruption and suspicion, badly healed wounds and inequality be purged from the land? How will the scar of sin be smoothed from the face of the country? Do we have to suffer so much for redemption?” He shares with his readers a hearteningly positive reply, a sun that envelopes passengers in the “warmth of grace.”

The role of Dante as mediated through translations, and mediator between his classical inheritance, his own context and the context of his readers, became a central dimension of our group’s engagement with the poet. Students were acutely aware that reading in translation required constant (re)interpretations. They were quick to realise that the original text itself is engaged in this process and that it constantly ‘reads’ its readers, demanding their direct response and moral involvement in its conundrums. Reading in translation necessitated a complex and often painful wrangling with Dante’s voice, which catalyzed students’ attempts to use the text to justify and discover their own identities. Dante appeared variously as a mirror and as a remote and, at times, severe, judgmental presence against which to measure themselves. This process is powerfully evident in the creative pieces of three young writers, all of which respond to and re-write Dantesque episodes: Kai Lötter’s *A Tree in Hell*, Chariklia Martalas’s four pieces of *A Mad Flight into Inferno once again* and Helena Van Urk’s *The Storm*.

Chariklia Martalas, in her creative reworking of Dante’s Ulysses motif, casts Dante the poet in an ostensibly authoritative role as her therapist. This impression is soon undermined, as Dante, well-meaning but misled, imagines that her dream equates her with the Ulysses of the *Commedia*, when really it reveals her distance, as a sincere writer, from his glory-seeking speech (indeed, it is hinted in the comical opening scene that Dante may be more seduced by the allure of celebrity than she is). Dante is further caricatured in her reinvention of Canto 5, where, in an infernal party hosted by Francesca, he is gently mocked for his supposed prudish horror of unbridled desire. These Dantes are at once echoes of the original poet and inventions of the student-writer, who seeks to assert her own authority, in a repeat of the Dante-Virgil dynamic. And yet, Dante remains an indispensable component of Martalas’s reinvention of *Inferno*: even as she rewrites and at times corrects, so to speak, the scenes of damnation she evokes, they all remain deeply enmeshed in Dante’s original allegory. To explain further: in her creative reworking of Canto 13, the symbol of the suicidal trees and Harpies are powerfully present yet re-imagined as part of a rose garden without the infernal associations of pain and punishment. Thus, Dante’s allegory of betrayal in *Inferno* 33 is transformed into a narrative of a nation betrayed, as Hendrick Verwoerd, infamous in South Africa as Apartheid’s architect, feasts on the head of John Vorster, Prime Minister in 1966 and in many ways Verwoerd’s accomplice in the crime of Apartheid.

A similar process is evident in Kai Lötter’s, *A Tree in Hell*, where the protagonist initially resists Dante for his depiction of the suicides in hell and finally comes to embrace him as indispensable to her salvation. Lötter casts herself in the role of the pilgrim Dante, depicting her encounter with the horrors of the mental facility as congruent with his frightening journey through Hell,

by drawing on the powerful imagery of the forest, guardians of the circle and guide. Lötter's narrative of mental dissolution and redemption is powerfully conveyed through the Dantesque imagery of the forest, which is mapped onto the landscape of Johannesburg, now transformed into an allegorical reflection of the state of the protagonist's soul. In Helena Van Urk's, *The Storm*, the voice of Dante is again invoked, this time as that of a voyager involved in a shipwreck, thus echoing the fate of Dante's great explorer, Ulysses. Van Urk's Dante is a remote figure, a somewhat naïve 'outsider' and exile, who, searching for a place to belong and an answer to a moral crisis, finds himself instead in the hellscape of early colonial South Africa, where he becomes the horrified observer of scenes of greed that evoke the images of *Inferno* 6. Unlike the original poet, this Dante exists at one remove from the world that he encounters, and his foreign character renders him something of an idiosyncratic anomaly. Yet he simultaneously evokes and embodies the original pilgrim's moral journey and indeed the poet's moral role, as these distasteful scenes are mediated through his eyes and judged from his perspective.

Increasingly in our discussions it became evident that student responses to the poet's voice were not straightforward, visceral. Rather, they were complex, filtered through deep memory, and at times rebellious in tone, as their creative work bears out. Their work is inspired by the need to rewrite Dante, to tone down his moralism, rendering it more palatable to South African youth. At the same time, in contradiction it might seem with themselves, their stories are drawn to the poem's powerful moral and intellectual narratives, and to the rich implications of Dante's allegory as it inscribes itself into students' personal and political landscapes and offers an alternative narrative—a new language—in which to frame the young South African's experience.

During the pandemic, our society evolved beyond its original reading group structure, broadening our personal, South African perspective by bringing this into conversation with the perspectives of various experts and critical schools across the world. True to the diverse character of our society, we invited a variety of scholars from our institution as well as from abroad to enter into a dialogue with us. These scholars belonged to many different disciplines and offered a wide range of perspectives against which to measure ourselves. Thus, the scope of our conversations expanded to include Frank Ambrosio's philosophical meditation on the nature of freedom in the *Commedia*, Albert Ascoli's meditation on Dante's reinvention of the concept of *auctoritas*, Pietro Del Corno's discussion of Dante's afterlives in 15<sup>th</sup> century sermons and beyond, and David Bove's searching exploration of the text's female voices as mediators that rewrite and shape the male perspective of the poet. The variety of perspectives offered in these exchanges intersected in useful ways with our society's developing conversation on how we might revisit or rewrite Dante in our own context, and in what sense we should interpret his voice. One of the most salient questions raised in these conversations had to do with the role of the feminine voice as mediator in the text: does this intersect with our own understanding of the complicated female figure in South Africa? This question resonated most powerfully with Lesego Maponyane who, in

her paper *Beatrice*, reads Dante's beloved as an "ambivalent" figure who embodies both "deviance and godliness." The depiction of Beatrice therefore resonates in important ways with the common characterisation of South African women who she describes as occupying "a distressingly ambivalent space—in which they are hailed as harbingers of a liberty they cannot possess, are emblematic of fortitude, yet subject to oppressive vulnerability." Similarly, Luyanda Kaitoo approaches Dante's text by rewriting Canto 5 of hell from the perspective of a black South African woman. This time, the figure of Francesca is transformed and adapted to the South African context, becoming the emblem of the strength of the black woman.

Erin Jacobs (*Yet, I Had not Discovered You*) and Ross Smith (*My Discovery of Dante and the Apocalyptic Crisis: My Dantesque Ulysean Return to the Commedia*) describe their almost fatal attraction to Dante. It is significant that both of them write about their encounters with Dante as a 'discovery'. In their texts—the first written in lyrical prose and the second in an autobiographical style—we are given a glimpse into Dante's powerful effect on the inner creative and intellectual lives of the young writers. Both describe a passionate love for Dante's text, which they experience as completely life-altering.

After collecting the contributions from our students that are included in this volume, we were inspired to develop the conversation that had begun orally in our Dantesse group by analysing and drawing out the implications of the written compositions, from a scholarly perspective. Our main focus was the image of South Africa that emerges from these pieces and the different ways that Dante has contributed to this. The scholarly conversation was deepened when we broadened it to include other colleagues, external to our group. We purposely chose a wide variety of colleagues, some from South Africa, some not currently in South Africa but with a strong connection to it, some with a distant connection, and some with no connection at all. We invited them to comment on our students' pieces, but were careful not to give them any specific guidance on how to approach the compositions. Instead, we allowed our fellow scholars to approach the material in the same manner as we encouraged our students to read Dante: without any prior assumptions or expectations.

As the essays from our colleagues arrived, we were intrigued to see how our Dantesque *convivio* had expanded. Not only had our students entered into dialogue with Dante, but now so had our colleagues, conversing with the students and with each other, and presenting arguments that in some cases crossed continents and generations. It was notable that colleagues at a distance from our group nevertheless reacted in a similar manner to those who are closer to the project: they too were struck by how easily Dantesque imagery lends itself to the experiences of South African youth. The second part of the book, which collects all these essays, is therefore also experimental and speculative in character, seeking to establish an identity for Dante studies in South Africa and to create an approach to the poet that is uniquely our own. Each essay is notable for its personal touches, as the writers engage closely with the students' vision, which they bring into relationship with their own backgrounds and experiences. Despite their differences, the essays collected here are all concerned with the

unusual way in which Dante is appreciated by our youth: not as a remote figure only encountered in the hallways of the literature department, but as an intimate presence, a guide, a friend whose language is familiar and invites a response.

This personal element defines the first chapter in the scholars' section—Franco Masciandaro's *Notes on the writings of the University of the Witwatersrand students of Dante*. Masciandaro imagines himself in "dialogue with the young authors of this project, thus transcending the physical distance that separates us, in the spirit of a newly discovered friendship." His essay helps initiate the conversation by providing a complete overview of all the students' pieces.

Chris Thurman, "*Dante, Can I Lead You?*" *South African students write back (across seven centuries and a hemisphere)*, and Martina Di Florio, *Dimitri Tsafendas Meets Dante, Friend and Witness of Our Time*, are struck by the intimacy established between the students and Dante. Thurman, after a comparison between the reception of Dante and Shakespeare in South Africa, notes in his conclusion how each of the students "in way or another, cherishes Dante as companion or conversation partner or correspondent: sometimes close by, sometimes from afar." Di Florio, who focuses on the writings of Chariklia Martalas, also talks about the friendship established between our young South African writer and Dante. On the contrary, in his essay, Marco Medugno is less directly concerned with the personal connection between the young writers and Dante the poet, but instead with their more intellectual sense of the Comedy and its "generative power."

It was surprising to see how the various responses talk to and complement each other, at times reinforcing each other's visions and at others exploring the same point from divergent perspectives. Both Victor Houliston (*Releasing the Prisoners of Hope: Dante's Purgatorio breaks the Chains of the Born Frees*) and Anita Virga (*The Unattainable South African Paradise*), for example, explore how students see Dante's *Purgatorio* reflected in the current South African situation; Houliston, however, sees a "thread of subdued optimism" in these students' writing and the possibility of overcoming purgatory to reach the final vision, whereas Virga puts more emphasis on their fear of the lack of paradise and consequent condemnation to an eternal purgatory.

Giovanna Trento, in *Dante's Journey Through Our Lives: Reading La Commedia in Post-Apartheid South Africa*, provides a sweeping exploration of the students' writings, touching on Dantesque themes as they appear, and drawing out their potential for a South African narrative: journey, exile, trauma, injustice, autobiography, suicide, language, identity, and Apartheid. Sonia Fanucchi (*The South African folle volo: Ulysses Reinvented*), on the other hand, decides to explore a specific theme, ostensibly more Dantesque than South African, which runs through many of the students' responses. Fanucchi analyses how the classic Ulyssian myth, in the form in which it has been reworked by Dante, is appropriated and again transformed by the students, revealing surprising connections with the South African experience.

This year our students indicated that it was during our reading group meetings, reading a Canto together and talking freely about their impressions of the text, where they were first able to discover their distinctive voices and approaches to the

poet, unencumbered by the need to belong to a specific critical school of thought. It must be noted here that many of our students first came to us from English Literature, having studied Dante in translation, and that they have since branched out into diverse fields—Philosophy, History, Psychology, Sociology. The strength of their voices therefore cannot be found in a studied, specialised approach, but in a sustained, passionate, and creative engagement with a poet who continues to resonate with them, across disciplines, speaking directly to their sense of identity both as individuals and more particularly as young South Africans.

The eminent South African poet and critic, Stephen Watson (2010, 119), wrote compellingly of his experience of Dante:

[...] above all this poet exists for me because his *Divine Comedy* gives us what still seems to me the most complete—which is to say, not only comprehensive but comprehending—panorama of human existence available to us in literature. I know of no other instance in which our condition [...] has been so lucidly arrayed, so *placed*, that this condition, so far from being seen through a glass darkly, is actually comprehended, even as it is lived and suffered.

The idea of a poet with whom one can live and intimately understand ‘the human condition’, takes on a special poignancy when applied to the precarious state of our South African youth: we hope that these essays reveal the closeness that our young people feel to Dante, turning to him as a guide with whom to navigate the turbulent waters of post-Apartheid South Africa. This book is a reflection of our philosophy as a group, our sense that Dante inspires personal and scholarly reflections on our political vision and ethical convictions as a society and as individuals. The essays and compositions collected here chart out an African vision, which is driven by a more direct and personal conversation with the poet. In the *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, Dante famously extols the virtues of the *volgare* in which he ultimately wrote the *Commedia*—the popular language that was accessible not only to the men of his time but to the less educated women and children as well. It is in this spirit that we have read the *Commedia*, as a language of the people, that reaches us across time and continents. The text itself remains unexpectedly accessible to our readers, despite their lack of specialist knowledge, and it is this conversation, a fresh engagement with a text that too often becomes lost beneath hundreds of years of critical engagement, that we are attempting to draw out and refine. From the essays included in this collection it is evident that it is possible to ‘write’ Dante into our own African social fabric, to ‘borrow’ his symbolism in a creative talking back, a process of rewriting that becomes simultaneously a process of interpretation, as the poem itself reaches out to embrace its afterlives.

## References

Watson, Stephen. 2010. *The Music on the Ice: On Writers, Writings and other things*. Cape Town: Penguin Books.