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# READING DANTE WITH GEORGE ELIOT AND CO.

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**ABSTRACT**

This short article approaches intertextuality as a network, as a form of 'reading with' and in company which is inevitably complex, mediated and fragmentary. It takes as its primary example a chapter from George Eliot's last novel *Daniel Deronda* (1876) in which Dante is explicitly present: on the one hand, as the words for a song from Gioachino Rossini's opera *Otello* (1816); on the other, via a paraphrase by Alfred, Lord Tennyson placed as the chapter's epigraph. This example confirms Caroline Levine's argument about transnational 'networks allow[ing] us to reconceive what is proper to Victorian literature', so as to include Dante, for example (Levine, 'From Nation to Network', *Victorian Studies*, 55.4 (2013), 647–66 (p. 664)). Yet it also raises vital and even worrying questions about the canon as a network, about the presence and role of fragmentation and about an overreliance on authors and authorship.

*Keywords:* George Eliot; *Daniel Deronda*; Dante; network; fragmentation; Rossini; Tennyson; song; opera; intertextuality

I HAVE LONG BEEN INTERESTED IN THE DYNAMICS OF INTERTEXTUALITY; in vital and intriguing encounters between texts; in questions of how to unearth, understand and analyse one author's reading of another. This interest can be summarized – deceptively simply, of course – as a kind of 'reading with', borrowing this phrase from Neil Badmington, who considers Roland Barthes as 'first and foremost a reader', as someone who 'wrote reading' and who hears in Barthes's writings 'an invitation to read with him and to write in this wake'.[1] When we 'read with' another writer who is recognized to be, at heart, likewise a reader, we immediately enter a network of relations between authors and texts. Mapping such networks is surely a key task of comparative literary studies, especially in the case of the exploration of reception and translation, yet such studies have too often taken a much narrower approach, one that ignores the network in favour of apparently more direct or selective pairings.

I take the case of George Eliot here because she, like Barthes, 'wrote reading' and her writings offer a very clear and striking example of reading not only as mediated, but also as interestingly intermedial.[2] Eliot's interest in Dante is well-established and her manifold engagement with him in her own writings has been explored

comprehensively by Andrew Thompson in particular.[3] In this short intervention, I wish to highlight the indirect, multi-layered ways through which Eliot receives Dante, focusing on an explicitly Dantean web in one particular chapter of Eliot's last novel, *Daniel Deronda* (1876). Using this specific example, I reflect more generally on the benefits and challenges of a network-based approach to comparative literary studies, especially where such studies are focused on questions of readers, reading and reception.

## *Network*

Though the idea of the network is most closely associated with the work of Bruno Latour and actor-network theory, my reference points here are primarily the adoption of the same term by Martin Eisner and Caroline Levine respectively.[4] On the one hand, Eisner has argued with reference to Dante's *Vita nova* [*New Life*] – though the same might be said of the *Commedia* [*Comedy*], or indeed other texts with rich afterlives by other authors – that the work 'exist[s] in all of its copies, adaptations, and translations' and that 'the "whole book" refers not just to the single material object but also to the network of multiple objects that contributes to the work's survival through time'.[5] Eliot's reading of Dante both draws on and adds a new manifestation to this 'network of multiple objects' which are, as Eisner propounds, an essential and constitutive part of the work's development over time and place. As Felski similarly highlights in her explanation of actor-network theory, 'mediation does not subtract from the object but adds to the object [...]. Art's power and presence are not attenuated by its relations, but made possible by its relations, which help bring it into view'.[6]

On the other hand, Levine uses the idea of the network to call for a transnational approach to Victorian literature, one which recognizes the nation itself as just one possible network among others. She writes:

> If far-reaching forms of interconnection brought foreign texts, bodies, and ideas into everyday literary life in Britain; and if British-born writers, readers, and texts themselves moved across borders and returned, sometimes transformed, then an attention to networks allows us to reconceive what is proper to Victorian literature: Tolstoy and Whitman, *The Arabian Nights* and Euripides, Fénelon and *Gilgamesh*, *The Adventures of Peregrine Pickle* and the *Bhagavad Gita*, Homer and Dante, Dickens and Barrett Browning.[7]

For Levine, Victorian literature is defined neither by nation, nationality, language nor time period, but rather by overlapping, cross-temporal, plurilinguistic networks. From this perspective, Dante emerges as 'proper to Victorian literature' thanks to his importance for authors including Eliot.[8]

## *Dante in 'Daniel Deronda'*

The passage in question is the rescue scene of Mirah Lapidoth from the River Thames by the eponymous protagonist. What brings Mirah and Deronda together is a shared Dantean song:[9]

He was all the while unconsciously continuing the low-toned chant which had haunted his throat all the way up the river — the gondolier's song in the 'Otello,' where Rossini has worthily set to music the immortal words of Dante —

> 'Nessun maggior dolore
> Che ricordarsi del tempo felice
> Nella miseria:'

and, as he rested on his oar, the pianissimo fall of the melodic wail 'nella miseria' was distinctly audible on the brink of the water.[10]

The unconscious and probably fashionable song of a gentleman (though at this stage in the novel of unknown origins) out rowing near Kew is answered by a desperate and mysterious woman with a beautiful singing voice for whom the words have deep personal significance. Dante's 'immortal words' set to music by Rossini are felt by Mirah to be 'alive' – vibrant and even, for her, life-giving.[11] Ironically, the tragic story of Paolo and Francesca (*Inferno*, v) becomes, in Eliot's novel, the 'galeotto' [Galehault] or intermediary which will lead Deronda and Mirah to a happy ending.[12]

Eliot's engagement with Dante here is explicit, giving the text in the original language, while clarifying that the source is not Dante directly but rather Rossini's musical setting of Dante's words. Even more attention is drawn to this quotation from Dante, since the author herself appends to it the following note: 'Dante's words are best rendered by our own poet in the lines at the head of the chapter'. A glance back to the start of the chapter reveals the following epigraph:[13]

> 'this is the truth the poet sings,
> That a sorrow's crown of sorrow is remembering happier things.'
> — TENNYSON: *Locksley Hall*

By turning to Tennyson, Eliot places her own engagement with Dante within a broader context of nineteenth-century British obsession with the Italian poet, especially *Inferno*, v and the story of Francesca. Indeed, as Edward Jacobson has highlighted, this same tercet, cited in Italian, also forms the epigraph to the opening canto of Lord Byron's *The Corsair* (1814), a poem admired alike by Rossini's librettist Francesco Maria Berio di Salsa and by Tennyson.[14] Who, then, is the author of these lines: Dante (via the character of Francesca), Shakespeare as adapted by Berio and Rossini, Byron and/or Tennyson?[15] Is Dante lost in this labyrinth of references, or – to recall David Damrosch's definition of world literature as '*writing that gains in translation*' – are his words all the more 'alive' (Mirah's term, again) thanks to their incessant quotation and reappropriation?[16]

The example of Eliot is unusual in its explicitness; she includes direct quotations and gives her sources, including in her use of paratexts.[17] In these respects, she makes key parts of the network easy for us to see. Yet this example is challenging in other ways, prompting questions which are of broader import. In particular, I would like to present three talking points for further consideration: the canon as a network;

the presence and role of fragmentation; and the return of the author, including as a reader.[18]

*The canon*

The aims and benefits of the study of literary networks surely include a desire to expand and complicate the canon. Yet the example of Eliot suggests instead the circulation of Dante within a very recognizable musico-literary canon, from Rossini's opera with Shakespearean resonances to the citation of Dante by Byron and Tennyson. In short, the company Eliot keeps is strikingly selective and venerable. This is not to say that less canonical parts of this network are not waiting to be discovered, though the archival and historical challenges attendant on such discoveries are well-known, and an uncanonical network would be a very disorientating and difficult thing to read as well as to reconstruct. Rather, the point is that Eliot's network is not only irredeemably canonical (at least in the case of the examples considered here) but deliberately and self-reflexively so.

Eliot deliberately places herself within this canonical Dantean network as a gesture of self-legitimation and self-authorization. Such, indeed, is one of the key functions of epigraphs, as outlined by Gérard Genette:

> L'épigraphe est à elle seule un signal (qui se veut indice) de culture, un mot de passe d'intellectualité. En attendant d'hypothétiques comptes rendus dans les gazettes, prix littéraires et autres consécrations officielles, elle est un peu, déjà, le sacre de l'écrivain, qui par elle choisit ses pairs, et donc sa place au Panthéon.[19]
>
> [The epigraph in itself is a signal (intended as a *sign*) of culture, a password of intellectuality. While the author awaits hypothetical newspaper reviews, literary prizes, and other official recognitions, the epigraph is already, a bit, [their] consecration. With it, [the author] chooses [their] peers and thus [their] place in the pantheon.][20]

Such a perspective calls attention to what is at stake in Eliot's overt citation of Dante, Tennyson and others. Creating a space for oneself in the literary pantheon is achieved by dialogue with the canon, by establishing links with recognizably canonical authors and by claiming parity or fellowship with one's illustrious forebears. In other words, it requires active participation in a particular kind of transtemporal, multilingual network.

This does not mean that a network-based approach does not have a part to play in deconstructing the canon, but rather that the choice of primary examples here reveals that the mediators (most explicitly, Rossini and Tennyson) are as canonical as the endpoints (Eliot and Dante). The canon functions, then, not only as a pantheon (Genette's term) but – in Terence Cave's words, and more positively – as 'a large and resonant echo-chamber'.[21] He continues: 'one might indeed claim that a canon is precisely what affords the possibility of cognitively rich echoes: an echo-chamber is constructed over many generations by the collective work of writers and readers'.[22] Through her literary references, allusions and quotations, Eliot perpetuates and places herself within the canon as pantheon and echo-chamber, images which suggest, on the one hand, the status and richness of the canon as network

and, on the other, its problematic limitations, repetitions and potential exclusivity. Though very much part of this 'collective work' (Cave's phrase), Eliot's contribution remains idiosyncratic in its blend of poetry and music, the medieval and the modern, and, most of all, in its imagining of a happy ending for her amorous pair, quite unlike her infernal model. Within her carefully constructed echo-chamber, Eliot's own voice sounds with even more richness and individuality; the canonical and the personal are not incompatible.

*Fragmentation*

Zygmunt Barański has described reading in the Middle Ages as 'a mediated, haphazard, and often fragmentary activity', and much the same might be claimed of networks of reading in later centuries, including our own.[23] The citation from Dante's *Inferno*, V is in itself highly fragmentary, circulating as a kind of proverb detached from its original context.[24] As such, it is ripe for uptake as an epigraph (which Eliot herself called a 'motto') or, more generally, as a 'commonplace' (Jacobson's explanation for the appearance of these lines from Dante in Rossini's *Otello*).[25] Though enticing and memorable, there is a risk that these fragments may come to take the place of an inevitably more complex whole – not for Eliot, whose reading of Dante was much wider and more varied, but perhaps for other less assiduous readers.

On a larger scale, networks may seem to bind fragments into meaningful, interconnected wholes, yet they too remain vulnerable to partiality in its twin senses of bias and incompletion. As Levine writes, 'We cannot ever apprehend the totality of the networks that organize us'; 'This is a formal fact of networks'.[26] As critics, how are we to work with what is not only 'mediated', but also 'haphazard, and often fragmentary'? How is our desire for thoroughness and completion frustrated by such encounters? And how can networks make space for and respect the haphazard and the fragmentary, faced as they are with the risk of overdetermination?

Eliot directly grapples with such questions in *Middlemarch* more than in *Daniel Deronda*, via reflections on the idea of the web.[27] The image appears when Eliot reflects (in an explicit contrast with the digressive art of Henry Fielding) on the difficulty of creating a clear, focused and legible narrative out of the intersecting life stories of a set of characters:

> I at least have so much to do in unraveling certain human lots, and seeing how they were woven and interwoven, that all the light I can command must be concentrated on this particular web, and not dispersed over that tempting range of relevancies called the universe.[28]

Questions of relevance, temptation and the 'unraveling' of what is 'interwoven' beset not only the novelist (or 'historian', as Eliot presents herself here), but also the literary critic, especially one who sets out to map a series of proliferating networks or webs. For either party, it is difficult to resist the temptation of dispersal and difficult, too, to ensure that the solution of concentration and particularity affords a fair and representative account. As Eliot herself comments in the 'Finale' to *Middlemarch*, where

she returns to this image, 'Every limit is a beginning as well as an ending. [...] For the fragment of a life, however typical, is not the sample of an even web'.[29]

### *The return of the author*

The particular Dantean network I have explored is reliant on explicit authorial evidence, in this case paratexts, although further support and contextualization might (in a longer format) be drawn from Eliot's letters, diaries and notebooks. The nodes of this network are also author-centric, or at least creator-centric: Rossini, Tennyson, Byron and others. In relying on such materials and in constructing our network around named, canonical intermediaries, are we at risk of overemphasizing the author? How can texts – and other objects – themselves be considered as 'actants'?[30] How does a focus on networks and on communities of readers participate in a broader (and doubtless welcome) return of the author, while also continuing to navigate enduring and appropriate circumspection about overreliance on the (auto) biographical?

Barthes famously and elliptically proclaimed that 'la naissance du lecteur doit se payer de la mort de l'Auteur' [the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author].[31] A focus on 'reading with' sees the rebirth of the author as reader and reveals that, far from being antithetical, the two categories are inseparable. Yet if we really want to take full advantage of what the network offers (including in the sense outlined by Eisner of the work as a 'network of multiple objects that contributes to [its] survival through time'),[32] we need to be more accommodating and attentive to the non-canonical, the haphazard, the fragmentary and the nonhuman. At the same time, we also need to be more self-aware as researchers of our own place and role within the networks that we do not only observe, describe or catalogue, but which we also create and inhabit.[33]

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## NOTES

[1] Neil Badmington, *The Afterlives of Roland Barthes* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), p. 110.

[2] For discussion of mediation, see the special issue edited by David Bowe and Federica Coluzzi on 'Mediating Dante', *Italian Studies*, 77.2 (2022). As Rita Felski notes, 'actor-network theory is sometimes described as a sociology of mediation'; Felski, 'Latour and Literary Studies', *PMLA*, 130.3 (2015), 737–42 (p. 738). For definitions of intermediality, see Gabriele Rippl, 'Introduction', in *Handbook of Intermediality: Literature – Image – Sound – Music*, ed. by Gabriele Rippl (Berlin: de Gruyter Brill, 2015), pp. 1–31.

[3] For a thorough examination of Eliot's extensive engagement with Dante, see Andrew Thompson, 'George Eliot's Borrowings from Dante: A List of Sources', *George Eliot–George Henry Lewes Studies*, 44–45 (2003), 26–74, and Thompson, *George Eliot and Italy: Literary, Cultural and Political Influences from Dante to the 'Risorgimento'* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998).

[4] The classic text is Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). On the use of Latour within literary studies and the potential for an 'alliance' (Felski's term) between the two, see Felski, 'Latour and Literary Studies'.

[5] Martin Eisner, *Dante's New Life of the Book: A Philology of World Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), p. 6. See also Jennifer Rushworth, 'The Networks of Dante's *Divine Comedy*', in *The Oxford Handbook of Italian Literature*, ed. by Stefano Jossa (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming); published online, 19 September 2024, <https://academic.oup.com/edited-volume/58209> [accessed 26 May 2025].

[6] Rita Felski, 'Comparison and Translation: A Perspective from Actor-Network Theory', *Comparative Literature Studies*, 53.4 (2016), 747–65 (p. 750).

[7] Caroline Levine, 'From Nation to Network', *Victorian Studies*, 55.4 (2013), 647–66 (p. 664).

[8] The study of Dante in the nineteenth century is extensive; see the following for a start: Alison Milbank, *Dante and the Victorians* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988); Ralph Pite, *The Circle of Our Vision: Dante's Presence in English Romantic Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); *Dante in the Nineteenth Century: Reception, Canonicity, Popularization*, ed. by Nick Havely (Bern: Peter Lang, 2011); Julia Straub, *A Victorian Muse: The Afterlife of Dante's Beatrice in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012); Federica Coluzzi, *Dante Beyond Influence: Rethinking Reception in Victorian Literary Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021).

[9] Commentators on this passage have more often highlighted the importance of song rather than the presence of Dante: see, for example, Lawrence Kramer, 'Afterword: The Song Pact – How the Novel Sings', in *Song in the Novel*, ed. by Jennifer Rushworth, Hannah Scott and Barry Ife (Oxford: Published for the British Academy by Oxford University Press, 2024), pp. 208–19 (pp. 209, 211–12), as well as Delia da Sousa Correa, *George Eliot, Music, and Victorian Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

[10] George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, ed. by Graham Handley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 156.

[11] Ibid., p. 161.

[12] On Galehault and the 'galeotto' (explicitly named in *Inferno*, v. 137), see Elena Lombardi, *The Wings of the Doves: Love and Desire in Dante and Medieval Culture* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2011), pp. 185–89.

[13] Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p. 154.

[14] See Edward Jacobson, 'Of Shreds and Patches: Operatic Commonplaces in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain', in *Opera Outside the Box: Notions of Opera in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, ed. by Roberta Montemorra Marvin (London: Routledge, 2023), pp. 9–29 (p. 19), and *The Poems of Tennyson*, ed. by Christopher Ricks (London: Longmans, Green, 1969), p. 693.

[15] Not to mention the identity of the 'dottore' [teacher] to whom this maxim is attributed in *Inferno*, v. 123, and whom commentators have tended to identify as either Boethius or Virgil. On this question see Lombardi, *The Wings of the Doves*, pp. 177–80. On the only in fact indirect relationship between Shakespeare and Rossini's *Otello*, see Roberta Montemorra Marvin, 'Shakespeare and *Primo Ottocento* Italian Opera: The Case of Rossini's *Otello*', in *The Opera and Shakespeare*, ed. by Holger Klein and Christopher Smith (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1994), pp. 71–97; and Danielle Thien, 'Operatic Forays into Translation Studies: Translation, Adaptation and Rossini's *Otello*', *TRANS – Revue de littérature générale et comparée*, 26 (2021), 1–17.

[16] David Damrosch, *What is World Literature?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 281 (emphasis in the original). On the idea of Dante as alive through his reception, see also *Dante Alive: Essays on a Cultural Icon*, ed. by Francesco Ciabattoni and Simone Marchesi (Oxford: Routledge, 2023).

[17] On George Eliot's extensive and distinctive use of epigraphs, many of which are self-authored, see: David Leon Higdon, 'George Eliot and the Art of the Epigraph', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 25.2 (September 1970), 127–51; Eike Kronshage, 'The Function of Poetic Epigraphs in George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*', *Connotations*, 23.2 (2013/14), 230–60; and Eirian Yem, '"An inordinate number of words": Epigraphs in *Daniel Deronda*', *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 29 (2020), 1–20.

[18] I borrow the phrase 'the return of the author' from Séan Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida*, 3rd edn (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008).

[19] Gérard Genette, *Seuils* (Paris: Seuil, 1987), p. 163.

[20] Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. by Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 160.

[21] Terence Cave, *Live Artefacts: Literature in a Cognitive Environment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), p. 123.

[22] Ibid., p. 123.

[23] Zygmunt G. Barański, 'The Classics', in *The Oxford Handbook of Dante*, edited by Manuele Gragnolati, Elena Lombardi and Francesca Southerden (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), pp. 111–26 (p. 111).

[24] For this kind of use of Dante as still in some respects a living practice, see *Citar Dante: espressioni dantesche per l'italiano di oggi*, ed. by Irene Chirico, Paolo Dainotti and Marco Galdi (Athens: ETPbooks, 2021).

[25] See Jacobson, 'Of Shreds and Patches'. Commonplacing was a popular nineteenth-century form of engagement with Dante, including as practised by Eliot, as Coluzzi discusses in *Dante Beyond Influence*, pp. 22–27.

[26] Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), p. 129.

[27] Though see, for instance, the mention of 'ideal webs / Of innovation' in the epigraph of Chapter 22: Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p. 198.

[28] Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ed. by David Carroll (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 132.

[29] Ibid., p. 779.

[30] Bearing in mind that, as Jane Bennett summarizes with reference to Bruno Latour, 'an actant is a source of action that can be either human or nonhuman': see Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), p. viii. I thank Francesca Southerden for this reference, as indeed for many conversations about Eliot and Dante.

[31] 'La Mort de l'auteur', in Barthes, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Éric Marty, new edn, 5 vols (Paris: Seuil, 2002), III, 40–45 (p. 45); Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), pp. 142–48 (p. 148). Nonetheless, for important contextualization of this statement within this essay and within Barthes's œuvre more generally (where the author makes a return), see Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author*, pp. 19–59.

[32] Eisner, *Dante's New Life of the Book*, p. 6.

[33] See again Felski, 'Comparison and Translation', p. 746, on the need to include the researcher as actor in the network.



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Talking Points