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Nel mezzo: Roland Barthes's Mediated Dante and Dantean Figures of Mediation

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ABSTRACT

In this essay, I consider the reception of Dante by the twentieth-century French theorist and writer Roland Barthes. Barthes did not otherwise evince much interest in Italian literature, in poetry, nor indeed in the Middle Ages. Dante is therefore exceptional in Barthes's writings, and present particularly in the late Barthes and in texts written after the death of Barthes's mother. Most striking is Barthes's expressed intention around this time to write a novel that would bear the same title as Dante's youthful prosimetrum: *Vita Nova*. I reflect on why Barthes should have turned to Dante at this point, thinking especially about the mediators between the two, including critics (Jean-Michel Gardair) and translators (Alexandre Masseron, André Pézard). More generally, I also examine figures of mediation within Dante's own work, in particular the guide figure, the book-as-guide, and the screen lady, the first two of which were admired by Barthes.

KEYWORDS

Barthes; Dante; mediation; guide; *Vita Nova*; reception

This essay starts from the premise that one can never access Dante's work directly. Rather, it contends that any reading of Dante is mediated by a wide variety of factors including editions, introductions, commentaries, footnotes, and translations, not to mention the influence of home, school, or university education. This lack of direct access to Dante's oeuvre is partly true of all texts, which are always mediated – and remediated – by particular editions, formats, and paratexts (e.g., blurbs, prefaces, endorsements, notes).¹ Yet it is particularly true in the case of an author such as Dante whose texts have accrued centuries of analytical, interpretive, and pedagogical materials across countless editions and translations. To demonstrate this mediation, I take as my focus the twentieth-century French theorist Roland Barthes. Barthes may seem like an unexpected choice, since he is known neither for his readings of poetry nor for his interest in the Middle Ages, nor for his particular attentiveness to Italy and Italian culture.² Nonetheless, at the end of his life Barthes expressed the desire to write a novel called *Vita Nova*, and it is the evident Dantean inspiration of this project with which I have become concerned.³

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¹On the paratext, see Gérard Genette, *Seuils* (Paris: Seuil, 1987), in English as *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. by Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), as well as Kathryn Batchelor, *Translation and Paratexts* (London: Routledge, 2018).

²See, notwithstanding, *Roland Barthes and Poetry*, ed. by Callie Gardner (*Barthes Studies*, 2 (2016)), available online at <http://sites.cardiff.ac.uk/barthes/category/volume-2/>; Bruce Holsinger, *The Premodern Condition: Medievalism and the Making of Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), especially pp. 152–94; *Medieval Barthes*, ed. by Jennifer Rushworth and Francesca Southerden (*Exemplaria*, 33.3 (2021)); Guido Mattia Gallerani, 'Barthes et l'Italie: voyages, collaborations, traductions, réception, études', in *Barthes à l'étranger*, ed. by Claude Coste and Mathieu Messager (*Revue Roland Barthes*, 2 (October 2015)), available online at http://www.roland-barthes.org/article_gallerani.html.

³For other sources of inspiration, see Diana Knight, 'What Turns the Writer into a Great Writer?: The Conversion Narrative of Barthes's "Vita nova"', *L'Esprit créateur*, 55.4 (2015), 165–80; *La 'vita nova': la vie comme texte, l'écriture comme vie*, ed. by Marie Gil and Frédéric Worms (Paris: Hermann, 2016).

Fuller consideration of Barthes's reading of Dante would need to take into account earlier manifestations of this particular interest, from Barthes's early writings on the nineteenth-century historian Jules Michelet, where Dante's name first appears, to the 1965 Dante anniversary, marked by the literary journal *Tel Quel* with a special issue on Dante, and around which time Dante is a connecting thread between Barthes and one of the journal's founding editors, Philippe Sollers.⁴ It would also need to incorporate reflections on the potential influence on Barthes of the broader French reception of Dante, especially the medieval poet's nineteenth-century cult.⁵ Dante's *Vita nuova* itself has even inspired specific French imitations, including by Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve, Gérard de Nerval, and André Gide.⁶ However, as we will see, Barthes's *Vita Nova* is, despite its name, inspired much more by Dante's *Commedia* in substance and structure than by Dante's youthful prosimetrum.

The focus of this essay is on references to Dante in the late Barthes, considering, on the one hand, his notes and index cards devoted to the *Vita Nova* project and, on the other hand, relevant lectures from 1978 onwards.⁷ The latter includes, in particular, Barthes's lecture entitled "Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure" (borrowing the incipit of Marcel Proust's novel) from autumn 1978 as well as *La Préparation du roman* (*The Preparation of the Novel*), his final lecture series at the Collège de France.⁸ From this later period I do not take into account Barthes's 1977 text *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* (*A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*) since, although this work is an extended meditation on the language of love drawing on a range of literary and musical sources, it does not explicitly engage with Dante.⁹

⁴On the latter material see instead Jennifer Rushworth, 'Barthes as Reader of Dante: The Mediation of Sollers and the Role of Commentary', *Barthes Studies*, 4 (2018), 31–55, available online at <http://sites.cardiff.ac.uk/barthes/volumes/volume-articles/?q=volume-4>.

⁵See Michael Pitwood, *Dante and the French Romantics* (Geneva: Droz, 1985), as well as *Dante in the Nineteenth Century: Reception, Canonicity, Popularisation*, ed. by Nick Havely (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2011) and *Dante in the Long Nineteenth Century: Nationality, Identity, and Appropriation*, ed. by Aida Audeh and Nick Havely (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁶See Sainte-Beuve, *Vie, poésies et pensées de Joseph Delorme*, new edition (Paris: Michel Lévy frères, 1863 [first edition 1829]), available online at <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k57026879.r=sainte-beuve%20poesies?rk=257512;0>; Nerval, *Aurélia*, ed. by Michel Brix (Paris: Librairie générale française, 1999); Gide, *Les Cahiers et les Poésies d'André Walter* (Paris: Gallimard, 1952). Of these three, the closest to Barthes is certainly Gide, who also inspired Barthes's writings in other ways (including through his use of the diary form): see Sam Ferguson, 'Diary-Writing and the Return of Gide in Barthes's "Vita Nova"', in *Deliberations: The Journals of Roland Barthes*, ed. by Neil Badmington (*Textual Practice*, 30.2 (2016)), pp. 241–66.

⁷Barthes's notes for his *Vita Nova* project were first published in facsimile and with transcription in Barthes, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Éric Marty, 3 vols (Paris: Seuil, 1993–95), III, 1287–94, and reprinted in Barthes, *Œuvres complètes* (hereafter, = *OC*), ed. by Marty, new edn, 5 vols (Paris: Seuil, 2002), v, 994–1001 and 1007–18, as well as in larger, colour facsimile in Barthes, *Album: inédits, correspondances et varia*, ed. by Éric Marty (Paris: Seuil, 2015), pp. XXXIII–XL. I subsequently cite from the *Album*, which also includes a selection of previously unpublished index cards, pp. XLI–LXIV. An English translation of the *Album* has been published (see Barthes, *Album: Unpublished Correspondence and Texts*, trans. by Jody Gladding (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018)), but I refer to the French edition since the *Vita Nova* facsimiles are not reproduced in the latter. English translations of the newer set of *Vita Nova* notes are my own, while the original eight pages are cited in English from Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel: Lecture Courses and Seminars at the Collège de France (1978–1979 and 1979–1980)*, ed. by Nathalie Léger and trans. by Kate Briggs (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), pp. 389–406.

⁸Barthes, "Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure", *OC* v, 459–70; 'Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure', in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. by Richard Howard (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 227–90. Barthes's last lecture course exists in two different versions, firstly based on his written lectures notes (Barthes, *La Préparation du roman I et II: cours et séminaires au Collège de France (1978–1979 et 1979–1980)*, ed. by Nathalie Léger (Paris: Seuil/IMEC, 2003), the source for the English translation *The Preparation of the Novel*) and secondly as a transcription of the oral lectures (Barthes, *La Préparation du roman: cours au Collège de France 1978–1979 et 1979–1980*, ed. by Nathalie Léger and transcribed by Nathalie Lacroix (Paris: Seuil, 2015)). On the two different editions see Kate Briggs, 'Augmentation infinie de la mayonnaise: On the New Edition of Roland Barthes's *La Préparation du roman*', *Barthes Studies*, 7 (2021), 49–64, available online at <http://sites.cardiff.ac.uk/barthes/files/2021/11/BRIGGS-Augmentation-infinie.pdf>.

⁹See, nonetheless, Barthes, *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*, in *OC* v, 25–298; Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, trans. by Richard Howard (London: Penguin, 1990). Despite the omission of Dante, Barthes's references in his *Fragments* are very wide-ranging and international, from Sappho via Ronsard to Heine, Rilke, and others, with a particular focus on Goethe and Stendhal.

In considering Dante as mediated for Barthes, I am working with theoretical concepts of mediation derived from sociology, translation studies, and comparative literature.¹⁰ On the sociological side, there is the attention to socio-political networks and contexts of Bruno Latour and Pierre Bourdieu (the latter with his eye on French academia specifically in *Homo academicus*), and which Jacob Blakesley has pioneered within the study of poetry translation.¹¹ Within a literary sphere, meanwhile, Daniel-Henri Pageaux has argued for what he calls ‘une poétique de la médiation’ [a poetics of mediation], based upon an understanding of comparative literature as ‘non point comparaison, mais mise en rapport, relation’ [not comparison, but connection, relationship] and necessitating, as a consequence, greater attention to mediators or what Pageaux also calls ‘homme-ponts’ [human bridges].¹² Pageaux attributes the term ‘médiateur’ [mediator] in this sense to Yves Chevrel, for whom the translator and the critic are ‘Les deux figures d’intermédiaires les plus aisément identifiables’ [The two most easily identifiable intermediary figures].¹³ He also draws on Paul Van Tieghem’s earlier attention to intermediaries and in particular his concept of comparative literature as ‘mésologie’ [mesology], that is, the study of that which is in the middle (from the Greek *mesos*).¹⁴

Following these theorists, it is my contention that reception studies ought to acknowledge mediation more explicitly, thoroughly, and with greater appreciation, especially where such acknowledgement may shed light on otherwise often invisible intermediaries.¹⁵ Such a revalorisation of mediators, while drawing support from the aforementioned disciplines and theorists, also challenges one of the most memorable and polemical accounts of mediation in literary studies: René Girard’s reading of desire in literature as always mimetic or mediated, and therefore doomed to inauthenticity.¹⁶ For Girard, the ‘médiateur’ [mediator] who directs and inspires desire leads the lover astray and must be renounced. I turn to Girard in order to question this very negative characterisation of the role of mediators, finding instead that there is no way out of mediation and that mediation should be embraced for the creative connections it forges and enriches. In making this argument, I draw in due course on existing critiques of the Girardian model, particularly by Heather Webb and Manuele Gragmolati, bearing in mind that Girard wrote about mediation not only in novels but also with specific reference to Dante and to a passage upon which Barthes (like so many) likewise dwells: the famous love story of Paolo and Francesca as recounted in *Inferno* v.¹⁷

¹⁰For an excellent theoretical overview, see Mickaëlle Cedergren and Cecilia Schwartz, ‘From Comparative Literature to the Study of Mediators’, *Moderna språk*, 110 (2016), i–x.

¹¹Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo academicus* (Paris: Minuit, 1984), in English as *Homo academicus*, trans. by Peter Collier (Cambridge: Polity, 1988); Jacob Blakesley, *A Sociological Approach to Poetry Translation: Modern European Poet-Translators* (New York: Routledge, 2018) and *Sociologies of Poetry Translation: Emerging Perspectives*, ed. by Jacob Blakesley (London: Bloomsbury, 2018). For recent medievalist engagement with Latour, see *Category Crossings: Bruno Latour and Medieval Modes of Existence*, ed. by Marilyn Desmond and Noah D. Guynn (*Romanic Review*, 111.1 (2020)).

¹²Daniel-Henri Pageaux, *L’Œil en main: pour une poétique de la médiation* (Paris: Librairie d’Amérique et d’Orient, 2009), p. 31 for the definition of comparative literature and pp. 39–65 for the chapter on ‘hommes-ponts’. I take the English translation of ‘hommes-ponts’ from Cedergren and Schwartz, p. i.

¹³Yves Chevrel, *La Littérature comparée* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1989), with quotation from p. 30, also cited in Pageaux, p. 44.

¹⁴Paul Van Tieghem, *La Littérature comparée* (Paris: A. Colin, 1931), p. 152, cited in Pageaux, p. 39.

¹⁵With the question of invisibility, I am drawing on Lawrence Venuti’s classic critique *The Translator’s Invisibility: A History of Translation*, 2nd edition (London: Routledge, 2008), although those in the middle and potentially invisible are of course not only translators.

¹⁶See René Girard, *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1961); *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, trans. by Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1965).

¹⁷See René Girard, ‘The Mimetic Desire of Paolo and Francesca’, in *To Double Business Bound: Essays on Literature, Mimesis, and Anthropology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), pp. 1–8, as well as Heather Webb, ‘Deceit, Desire, and Conversion in Girard and Dante’, *Religion & Literature*, 43.3 (2011), 200–08, and Manuele Gragmolati and Heather Webb, ‘*Dubbiosi Disiri*: Mimetic Processes in Dante’s *Comedy*’, in *Mimesis, Desire, and the Novel: René Girard and Literary Criticism*, ed. by Pierpaolo Antonello and Heather Webb (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2015), pp. 113–32.

The first part of the essay introduces some of the evidence for Barthes's *Vita Nova*, its critical reception, and its Dantean inspiration. The second part considers three Dantean figures both in light of Barthes's notes and lectures and as a way of understanding the workings of mediation.

Barthes's *Vita Nova*

Vita Nova is the name Barthes gave to a future writing project that he desired for its divergence from his previous work. Barthes saw this *Vita Nova* as a break from stultifying academic habits and routine, and specified that it was, in contrast, a 'roman' [a novel], although with little apparent generic specificity. As Lucy O'Meara comments, in this case 'The novel is a convenient term for what might be any form at all'.¹⁸ Barthes's desire for a *Vita Nova* has usually been dated to after the death of his mother (25 October 1977), although Neil Badmington has usefully suggested not only the 'possibility [...] that there is more than one *vita n(u)ova* in the late Barthes' but also that Barthes's earliest expressions of a desire for a *Vita Nova* significantly predate his mother's death.¹⁹ Still, there is certainly a greater intensity to this quest for a *Vita Nova* in the last few years of Barthes's life, since it is from this moment on that we find not only metatextual expressions of a desire for 'une nouvelle pratique d'écriture' [a new practice of writing] (as delineated briefly in the "Longtemps" lecture of 1978 and elaborated upon in *The Preparation of the Novel*) but also dated notes and index cards devoted to further reflections on and experimentations with this 'new practice'.²⁰ These notes have been published posthumously and only sporadically: first, eight pages of drafts published at the end of Barthes's *Œuvres complètes* in 1995, republished in the five-volume edition of the *Œuvres complètes* from 2002, and available in English translation at the end of *The Preparation of the Novel*; subsequently, a selection of thirty-seven facsimile index cards included in the *Album* edited by Éric Marty.²¹

Critical responses have varied according to the release of these materials, ranging from an early sense of the project as barely begun and fundamentally impossible to Tiphaine Samoyault's tantalising discovery of more than one thousand index cards in the archive.²² Accordingly, the challenge of considering material that is only partially accessible and which may not be wholly representative should not be underestimated, and this challenge is exacerbated by the editor of Barthes's *Album*, Éric Marty, who admits that his selected additional index cards have been 'choisies un peu au hasard' [chosen rather at random].²³ In this essay, nonetheless, I embrace the serendipity of this material, finding ample evidence for the Dantean inspiration of Barthes's *Vita Nova* even amidst this incompleteness and provisionality.

My investigation begins with an index card included in the *Album* and dated 27 July 1979. This card demonstrates *in nuce* not only several ways in which Dante's work is a model for Barthes's own *Vita Nova* but also, from the outset, the mediated nature of this inspiration:

¹⁸Lucy O'Meara, *Roland Barthes at the Collège de France* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012), p. 171.

¹⁹Neil Badmington, *The Afterlives of Roland Barthes* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), p. 36 n. 50.

²⁰Barthes, "Longtemps", *OC* v, 467; 'Longtemps', p. 286.

²¹For full details of these primary materials, see n. 7 above. For discussion of this material, see Diana Knight, 'Idle Thoughts: Barthes's *Vita Nova*', *Nottingham French Studies*, 36 (1997), 88–98, and Maya Zorica, 'Vita Nova de Barthes', in *Le Moi et ses modèles: genèse et transtextualités*, ed. by Véronique Montémont and Catherine Viollet (Louvain-la-Neuve: Bruylant-Academia, 2009), pp. 127–40.

²²See Knight, 'Idle Thoughts', and Tiphaine Samoyault, *Roland Barthes: biographie* (Paris: Seuil, 2015), p. 650; *Roland Barthes: A Biography*, trans. by Andrew Brown (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016), p. 471. The most comprehensive account of this broader archival material is by Mathieu Messenger, 'Dans le fichier de Roland Barthes', paper presented at the Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, 5 May 2021, available online at <https://www.bnf.fr/fr/agenda/dans-le-fichier-de-roland-barthes>.

²³Barthes, *Album*, p. 372.

Choc créatif, hier *, en lisant le petit chapitre de Gardair s/ *La Divine Comédie*: je me dis: c'est la clef, le schema conducteur (secret) de l'Œuvre.

- Point fictif précis de la Vie de Dante: 1300 (1265–1321: il a 35 ans: c'est fictif) = Ma double année: deuil et Vita Nova
- Quelle lumière (quelle Beatrice ?) ? – Maman (la valeur civile, la *Délicatesse* se substituant à la *Pieta*)
- Bonne idée: un conducteur (Virgile) ou plusieurs →²⁴

[Creative shock, yesterday*, reading the short chapter by Gardair on *The Divine Comedy*: I say to myself: it is the key, the (secret) guiding scheme of the Work.

- Precise fictional point in the Life of Dante: 1300 (1265–1321: he is 35 years old: it is fictional) = My double year: mourning and Vita Nova
- What light (what Beatrice?)? – Maman (civil value, *Delicateness* taking the place of *Pieta*)
- Good idea: a guide (Virgil) or several →]

This note is dense and often elliptical, and to understand it fully would require further dialogue with Barthes's writings in the wake of the death of his mother and especially consideration of what characteristics such as 'Delicateness' and *Pietà* mean for Barthes.²⁵ Instead, I will focus on the note's Dantean resonances, in particular: the timing of 'new life'; the mediation of Gardair; the value of guides (*conducteurs*).

The comments in the middle of the note point to an identification that is more clearly fleshed out elsewhere, both in the "Longtemps" lecture and at the start of *The Preparation of the Novel*. This identification involves the insight that new life becomes necessary 'Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita', in the famous words of the incipit of the *Commedia*.²⁶ This middle is mathematical in Dante's case, since 35 years is half the ideal lifespan according to the Psalmist, although Barthes emphasises the fictionality of this account. Barthes is more interested in the "middle of life" as a 'semantic' point, understood as an encounter with the reality of death, in his case the death of his mother and in Dante's case the death of Beatrice.²⁷ In these comparisons we see that Barthes draws a direct line between Dante's *Vita nuova* and his *Commedia*, and from Beatrice's death to the 'selva oscura', erasing the deviant paths taken by Dante in between these two texts (including the 'donna gentile' and the writing of the *Convivio*).²⁸ It is, moreover, evident that Barthes's *Vita Nova* is, counter-intuitively, inspired more by the *Commedia* than by its Dantean namesake.

²⁴Barthes, *Album*, p. LII. The following index card also references *Purgatorio* xxiii and xv.

²⁵See Katja Hausteijn, "'J'ai mal à l'autre': Barthes on Pity", *L'Esprit créateur*, 55.4 (2015), 131–47.

²⁶These words are cited by Barthes in Italian: "Longtemps", *OC* v, 465; *La Préparation du roman* (2003), p. 25; *La Préparation du roman* (2015), p. 14. Subsequent quotations from Dante's works in the original are taken from the Princeton Dante Project: <https://dante.princeton.edu/pdp/>.

²⁷See Barthes, "Longtemps", *OC* v, 465–67; 'Longtemps', pp. 284–86, as well as *La Préparation du roman* (2003), pp. 25–28; *La Préparation du roman* (2015), pp. 15–18; *The Preparation of the Novel*, pp. 3–5.

²⁸Barthes does, nonetheless, reference the *Convivio* on the question of the relationship between Latin and the vernacular: see Barthes, *La Préparation du roman* (2003), p. 373; *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. 295. On Barthes's reading of the 'selva oscura', see Jennifer Rushworth, 'Roland Barthes's Mournful Dante', in *Dwelling on Grief: Narratives of Mourning Across Time and Forms*, ed. by Simona Corso, Florian Mussnug, and Jennifer Rushworth (Cambridge: Legenda, 2022), pp. 65–76.

Yet the start of this note also presents the ‘Choc créatif’ [Creative shock] that is one of the catalysts for Barthes’s own *Vita Nova* as having been inspired not by Dante’s works, whether the *Vita nuova* or the *Commedia*, but rather by the short chapter on Dante in Jean-Michel Gardair’s pedagogical book on Italian writers published by Larousse in 1978.²⁹ Gardair (1942–2013) had been a professor at the Sorbonne; he was the author of novels, editions, translations, and criticism; he was also a friend of Barthes. Gardair’s *Écrivains italiens* surveys Italian literature from its origins up to contemporary writers such as Pier Paolo Pasolini and Andrea Zanzotto. The chapter on Dante begins with a biographical section and then introduces Dante’s oeuvre, before focusing specifically on the *Commedia* and concluding with an overview of the structure of the three *cantiche*. Gardair assures his reader of ‘l’existence historique’ [the historical existence] of Beatrice, identified as married to Simone dei Bardi and née Portinari.³⁰ He also explains the political context in Florence at the time and the causes of Dante’s exile. For Gardair, Dante’s *Vita nuova* is ‘une véritable *autobiographie* amoureuse et poétique de l’adolescence de Dante’ [a veritable amorous and poetic *autobiography* of Dante’s adolescence].³¹ Finally, the *Commedia* is described as having been conceived as “‘le livre des livres’” [‘the book of books’] and as a *Summa*.³² Dante’s Virgil is introduced only very briefly as ‘le guide fictif de son voyage d’outre-tombe’ [the fictional guide of his voyage beyond the grave], although his replacement by Beatrice at the top of the mountain of Purgatory is later acknowledged.³³

It is difficult to guess what part of Gardair’s chapter so enthralled Barthes, although in *The Preparation of the Novel* Barthes does repeatedly reference p. 46 of Gardair’s study: that is, the explanation of the *Commedia* as a *Summa*.³⁴ Certainly, to *dantisti* the chapter is likely to feel solid and quite accurate, although inevitably limited in scope. What the index card suggests, nonetheless, is the power of mediation, in ways that can be difficult for us retrospectively to understand and reconstruct. Perhaps surprisingly, reading secondary criticism such as that of Gardair can apparently be as inspiring as reading the primary text.

What is certain is that while Barthes’s thoughts on Dante were clearly in some sense mediated by his reading of Gardair, Gardair is not the only conduit through which Barthes accessed Dante. Rather, considering the role of mediation points to a network of writers, colleagues, and friends involved in Barthes’s reading of Dante. These figures can be understood in different ways and through different metaphors, such as Pageaux’s ‘hommes-ponts’ [human bridges] cited above. I would like to propose some specifically Dantean terms: firstly, the guide-figure; secondly, the book-as-guide; and thirdly, the screen lady.

The Guide-Figure

One of the striking aspects of the note above is the recurrence of the word ‘conducteur’, on the one hand in recognition of the *Commedia* as ‘la clef, le schéma conducteur (secret)’ [the key, the (secret) guiding scheme] of Barthes’s own *Vita Nova*, and on the other hand as a structuring principle that might be borrowed from the *Commedia*: ‘Bonne idée: un conducteur (Virgile) ou plusieurs’ [Good idea: a guide (Virgil) or several]. Virgil is Dante’s guide through the Afterlife; Dante will be Barthes’s guide in the writing of his *Vita Nova*. Recognising the importance of Virgil, one of the phrases that Barthes repeatedly cites in the notes for his *Vita Nova* project is the phrase ‘Maestro et Autore’, sometimes also given by Barthes in the plural (‘Maestri e Autori’).³⁵ Barthes indicates in a note

²⁹Dante Alighieri’, in Jean-Michel Gardair, *Écrivains italiens* (Paris: Larousse, 1978), pp. 35–53.

³⁰Gardair, p. 35.

³¹Gardair, p. 41 (emphasis in the original).

³²Gardair, p. 46.

³³Gardair, pp. 47 and 52.

³⁴See Barthes, *La Préparation du roman* (2003), pp. 249 and 255; *La Préparation du roman* (2015), pp. 341 and 350; *The Preparation of the Novel*, pp. 185 and 189.

³⁵Barthes, *Album*, pp. XXXV (in the plural) and XXXVI (in the singular).

added in red pencil that this phrase is taken from *Inf.* II, 139–42, that is, Dante-pilgrim's commitment to follow Virgil, addressed there as “tu duca, tu signore e tu maestro” (*Inf.* II, 140).³⁶ In fact, however, the binomial pair more closely comes from Dante-pilgrim's initial recognition of Virgil as “lo mio maestro e l' mio autore” (*Inf.* I, 85).

In a note dated 23 August 1979, Barthes introduces the phrase “Maestro et Autore” with the precise term ‘Médiateurs’ [Mediators], and follows it with a list of figures:

- Le Gigolo
- Le Jeune homme inconnu
- L'Ami

- L'Écrivain → *Vita Nova*

- L'enfant (marocain): le Sans-Guide
l'Oisiveté

- [- The Gigolo
- The unknown Young Man
- The Friend

- The Writer → *Vita Nova*

- The (Moroccan) child: the Guide-less
Idleness³⁷

Barthes is tempted by the wordplay of ‘Gigolo’ and ‘Virgilio’, and also adds his own idiosyncratic guide of ‘the Moroccan child’.³⁸ Other guides in the list are, however, more obviously Dantean, especially that of ‘the Writer’. Here, it is notable that Barthes – himself the author of the famous essay on ‘La mort de l’auteur’ [The Death of the Author] – transforms the Dantean ‘autore’, with its associations of authority (*auctoritas*), into the less grandiose ‘Écrivain’.³⁹ Meanwhile, ‘the Friend’ instead recalls amicable encounters throughout *Purgatorio* in particular, even if these friends are not properly speaking guide-figures. This list is reiterated in other notes, at times with variations of order or omission. The most significant addition is to the note of 26 August 1979 where Barthes adds in black pencil at the bottom of the list: ‘Mam. reste le guide’ [*Mam. still the guide*].⁴⁰ This addition is a continuation of the identification of Maman with Beatrice noted above.

Rather than asking who Barthes's ‘Maestro’ in the singular might be, it is more fruitful to focus on the plurality of these figures, that is, in Barthes's amendment of the Dantean phrase, his “Maestri e Autori”. In the “Longtemps” lecture, for instance, Barthes describes Virgil as ‘un grand initiateur’ [a great initiator] whom Dante follows, and explains parenthetically that ‘pour moi, du moins le temps de cette conférence, l'initiateur, c'est Proust’ [for me, at least during this text, the initiator is Proust].⁴¹ As we have seen above, Dante's *Commedia* is also recognised as ‘le schema conducteur (secret)’ of Barthes's *Vita Nova*, while Barthes's Dante is, in turn, mediated by Gardair. To this eclectic trio of literary guides (Proust, Dante, Gardair), we can add further “Maestri e Autori”, in particular the two French translators of Dante referenced by Barthes in the notes to

³⁶Barthes, *Album*, p. XXXV.

³⁷Barthes, *Album*, p. XXXVI; *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. 402.

³⁸For the latter reference, see especially *Roland Barthes au Maroc*, ed. by Ridha Boulaâbi, Claude Coste, and Mohamed Lehdahda (Meknès: Publications de l'Université Moulay Ismail, 2013).

³⁹On the meaning of ‘autore’ for Dante, see Albert Russell Ascoli, *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), which engages with Barthes in the introductory chapter ‘The Author in History’, pp. 3–64.

⁴⁰Barthes, *Album*, p. XXXVII; *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. 403. For the further addition of ‘Le Musicien’ [the Musician], see Barthes, *Album*, p. LVI.

⁴¹Barthes, “Longtemps”, *OC* v, 466; ‘Longtemps’, p. 284. Of the very rich bibliography on Barthes and Proust see most recently Thomas Baldwin, *Roland Barthes: The Proust Variations* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019).

the *Vita Nova* and in *The Preparation of the Novel*: namely, Alexandre Masseron and André Pézard, whose translations of *Inferno* v in particular Barthes cites at length.⁴²

The Book-as-Guide

Beyond the meaning of the ‘mezzo [...] di nostra vita’ (*Inf.* 1, 1) and the question of guide-figures, Barthes’s references to Dante most frequently focus on two distinct aspects of *Inferno*: firstly, the story of Paolo and Francesca from *Inferno* v; secondly, the sin of *acedia*.⁴³ I focus here on the former as crucial to the question of mediation, although the latter is a sign of Barthes’s familiarity with less well-trodden parts of *Inferno*. The story of Paolo and Francesca is a further example of the mediating power of literature, in this case the Arthurian tale of Lancelot and Guinevere. Indeed, as anticipated earlier *Inferno* v has been read by Girard as an instance of ‘mimetic desire’ typical of later novels, although his reading of Dante has been developed and challenged by Webb and Gragnolati.⁴⁴ According to Girard’s reading, the error made by Paolo and Francesca is that common ‘romantic lie’ (to borrow another Girardian term) that sees desire as mediated by a third party, in this case a form of ‘external mediation’ through literature.⁴⁵ For Girard, this mediation means inauthenticity and a lack of directness, as well as, ultimately, an experience of desire as suffering, rivalry, and jealousy. Yet the example of Barthes’s mediated Dante suggests, in contrast, that mediation can be beneficial, exciting, and creative. As Gragnolati and Webb write:

In his discussion of the mimetic nature of desire, Girard has put almost exclusive emphasis on its conflictual and antagonistic aspects [...], leaving aside the positive and constructive ones (empathy, the pedagogical modeling of desire, reciprocal positive mirroring, nonconflictual love, and the emancipatory role of art).⁴⁶

In the lecture of 5 January 1980, Barthes sketches out what he calls ‘Une typologie du livre’ [A typology of the book], within which Dante’s *Commedia* appears under a number of different, overlapping categories: ‘L’Ur-livre: l’Arché-Livre, le Livre-Origine’ [*The Ur-Book: the Arché-Book, the Origin-Book*]; ‘le Livre-Clef’ [*The Book-as-Key*]; ‘Le Livre-Somme’ [*The Book-as-Summa*].⁴⁷ These categories recall Gardair’s introduction to Dante, and Gardair is, indeed, as noted above one of the explicit reference points for *The Preparation of the Novel*. Amongst these categories, that of ‘Le Livre-Guide: livre unique, secret ou non, qui guide la vie d’un sujet’ [*The Book-as-Guide: unique, possibly secret book that directs the life of a subject*] is also illustrated with a Dantean example, though not that of the *Commedia* as a whole but rather one specific, famous, infernal episode:

Dante: Paolo et Francesca découvrant qu’ils s’aiment et se désirent en lisant ensemble les amours de Guenièvre et Lancelot. *Enfer*, V, 115 sq. (second cercle: les luxurieux)

[Dante: Paolo and Francesca discovering their mutual love and desire for each other while reading the love-story of Guinevere and Lancelot. *Hell*, V, 115, sq. (second circle: lust)]⁴⁸

Barthes had referenced this same passage earlier in *The Preparation of the Novel* as an example of a ‘Moment de vérité’ [Moment of Truth] achieved through reading rather than writing.⁴⁹ It is a reference point that can be followed further back in Barthes’s œuvre, to works such as *S/Z*

⁴²Dante, *La Divine Comédie*, trans. by Alexandre Masseron (Paris: Albin Michel, 1950); Dante, *Œuvres complètes*, trans. by André Pézard (Paris: Gallimard, 1965). Whether Barthes used other translations as well, or also had recourse to a particular Italian edition of Dante’s works, is not clear from the material considered here.

⁴³On Barthes and *acedia*, see Jennifer Rushworth, *Discourses of Mourning in Dante, Petrarch, and Proust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 28–34.

⁴⁴Girard, ‘The Mimetic Desire of Paolo and Francesca’.

⁴⁵For the distinction between ‘external’ and ‘internal mediation’, see Girard, *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque*, pp. 22–23; *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, p. 9.

⁴⁶Gragnolati and Webb, p. 114.

⁴⁷Barthes, *La Préparation du roman* (2003), pp. 242–45 and 248; *La Préparation du roman* (2015), pp. 330–34 and 341; *The Preparation of the Novel*, pp. 180–81. Briggs translates ‘Somme’ as ‘sum-total’ (*The Preparation of the Novel*, p. 185), where I prefer the Latin *Summa*.

⁴⁸Barthes, *La Préparation du roman* (2003), p. 244; *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. 181.

⁴⁹Barthes, *La Préparation du roman* (2003), p. 156; *La Préparation du roman* (2015), p. 225; *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. 104.

(1970).⁵⁰ Yet, where Barthes can tend to summarise the story of Paolo and Francesca quite succinctly (as above, in the written lecture notes), in the oral version of the lectures we find Barthes instead citing at length from two different translations of *Inferno* v.

In the lecture of 10 March 1979, Barthes reads aloud *Inf.* v, 127–38 ‘dans la traduction célèbre d’André Pézard, qui est une traduction de la Pléiade, comme vous le savez, en vers simili anciens’ [in the famous translation by André Pézard, which is a Pléiade translation, as you know, in faux-ancient verse].⁵¹ Pézard’s translation had been produced to coincide with the 1965 Dante anniversary, and achieves the impressive feat of all of Dante’s works in one volume, translated by one single translator.⁵² In a later lecture from 5 January 1980, Barthes cites from *Inf.* v, 115 to the end of the canto in a different translation, introduced as ‘la traduction la plus simple, [...] plus littérale’ [the simplest, more literal translation] of Masseron.⁵³ Barthes may be citing (as he himself acknowledges in the latter lecture) from a ‘passage à la fois connu et beau’ [passage both known and beautiful], but he does know it intimately and, moreover, in two different versions. There are obvious differences between the two translations: verse versus prose; deliberately archaic versus more modern. In Pézard’s version, Francesca becomes Françoise (v. 117), part of his broader attempt to produce ‘an imaginary “old French” version of Dante’s poem and which leads to frequent archaisms.’⁵⁴ Paolo and Francesca were reading “par plaisance” (v. 127, the translation of “per diletto”); Lancelot is a “preux amant” (v. 134, the translation of “cotanto amante”); the Galeotto (here, Galehaut) becomes “le livre et son trouvère” (v. 137), pointing to the French origin of the Lancelot tale read by the two lovers.⁵⁵ Masseron’s translation, in contrast, is much more literal (translating the last example, for instance, as “Gallehaut fut le livre et qui l’a écrit”), but to the point of losing the intensity of the original, for instance rendering “solo un punto fu quel che ci vinse” as “seul un passage triompha de nous” (v. 132; my emphasis).⁵⁶ Finally, the translations also create a further level of mediation, by adding prefatory material, canto summaries, and notes. The influence of these notes is clear, for instance, in Barthes’s interpolation into his reading of the Masseron translation, glossing the ‘docteur’ of v. 123 as Virgil, an identification which we find in the notes of both Masseron and Pézard.⁵⁷

Jorge Luis Borges once wrote that ‘the *Odyssey*, thanks to my opportune ignorance of Greek, is an international bookstore of works in prose and verse’.⁵⁸ The same might be claimed, on a smaller scale, of Barthes’s Dante, in a way that encourages us to see translation as gain as well as loss. Similarly, I follow Gagnolati and Webb in seeing mediation, too, as gain, in a challenge to the Girardian model. While Gagnolati and Webb, like Girard, read Dante’s Francesca as mired in ‘mechanical repetition’, they argue for the benefits of imitation as a form of therapeutic change in

⁵⁰See the references in the third volume of the *Œuvres complètes*, which reiterate (without citation) that the ‘passion’ (Barthes’s term) of Paolo and Francesca is inspired by reading: OC III, 100, 180, and 584.

⁵¹Barthes, *La Préparation du roman* (2015), p. 225.

⁵²For discussion of criticism of Pézard’s archaising translation, see Viviana Agostini-Ouafi, ‘André Pézard traducteur de Dante ou le choix inactuel de l’archaïsme’, *Transalpina: études italiennes*, 18 (2015), 125–40, available online at <https://doi.org/10.4000/transalpina.1310>. Note that for the 2021 Dante anniversary (seven hundred years since his death), the Bibliothèque de la Pléiade series has published a further volume of Dante, this time the *Commedia* only, in a bilingual edition adopting the French translation of Jacqueline Risset: see Dante, *La Divine Comédie*, ed. by Carlo Ossola and trans. by Jacqueline Risset (Paris: Gallimard, 2021). See also Marc Lebiez, ‘Dante: pourquoi une deuxième Pléiade?’, *En attendant Nadeau: journal de la littérature, des idées et des arts*, 10 November 2021, available online at <https://www.en-attendant-nadeau.fr/2021/11/10/dante-deuxieme-pleiade/>.

⁵³Barthes, *La Préparation du roman* (2015), p. 333.

⁵⁴The linguistic characterisation here is that of Antoine Berman, who criticises Pézard’s translation in *The Age of Translation: A Commentary on Walter Benjamin’s ‘The Task of the Translator’*, trans. by Chantal Wright (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), p. 126.

⁵⁵Dante, *Œuvres complètes*, pp. 912–13. See, on the question of the Lancelot source text, ‘now accepted’ to be ‘a prose version of the story’, Elena Lombardi, *The Wings of the Doves: Love and Desire in Dante and Medieval Culture* (Montreal; Ithaca: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2012), p. 184.

⁵⁶Dante, *La Divine Comédie*, p. 92. On the significance of this ‘punto’, read alongside *Par.* xxx, 11, see Lombardi, pp. 189–92.

⁵⁷*La Préparation du roman* (2015), p. 333. See Dante, *La Divine Comédie*, p. 92, and Dante, *Œuvres complètes*, p. 912. On the debate over whether this ‘dottore’ is Virgil or Boethius, see Lombardi, pp. 177–80.

⁵⁸Jorge Luis Borges, ‘The Homeric Versions’, in *The Total Library: Non-Fiction 1922–1986*, ed. by Eliot Weinberger and trans. by Esther Allen, Suzanne Jill Levine, and Eliot Weinberger (London: Penguin, 2001), pp. 69–74 (p. 70).

Purgatorio and for ‘models of joyful, noncompetitive desire’ in *Paradiso*.⁵⁹ In the case of Barthes’s secular, affective reading of the *Commedia*, however, even Francesca – in her two different French versions – becomes an admirable example of the transformative power of literature, translation, and mediation.

The Screen Lady

As we have seen, Barthes’s *Vita Nova* is inspired by Dante’s *Commedia* more than by his *Vita nuova*. Barthes does, nonetheless, at different points comment on Dante’s *Vita nuova* as an example of experimental formal hybridity.⁶⁰ I introduce the device of the screen lady (‘*donna schermo de la veritade*’, *VN V. 3*) here as a final example of the workings of mediation, with a particular emphasis on the idea of what lies ‘*nel mezzo*’:

Uno giorno avvenne che questa gentilissima sedea in parte ove s’udiano parole de la regina de la gloria, ed io era in luogo dal quale veda la mia beatitudine; e nel mezzo di lei e di me per la retta linea sedea una gentile donna di molto piacevole aspetto, la quale mi mirava spesse volte, maravigliandosi del mio sguardare, che pareva che sopra lei terminasse. (*VN V. 1*)

The screen ladies are an invention – ‘an audacious operation’, even – of the *Vita nuova*, designed to allow Dante to include in his ‘libello’ poems which are not about Beatrice without therefore risking accusations of amorous infidelity.⁶¹ Yet the departure of the first screen lady also reveals a surprising emotional attachment on the part of Dante; as he admits, ‘*assai me ne disconfortai, più che io medesimo non avrei creduto dinanzi*’ (*VN VII. 1*).

Taking the introduction of the screen lady as a metaphor for literary mediation, what we find is that when we attempt to draw a straight line (‘*retta linea*’) between desiring subject (in our case, Barthes) and love object (Dante), we have to take into account the ‘screen ladies’ (of any gender) that are in the way. The straight line is – to borrow Donna Haraway’s theory of diffraction, adopted by Manuele Gagnolati as a mode of reading in his 2013 book *Amor che move* – diffracted, that is, bent and scattered, like a beam of light entering a prism.⁶² Haraway writes that ‘*Diffraction patterns record the history of interaction, interference, reinforcement, difference*’.⁶³ Focusing on mediation reveals a similar pattern and recognises that mediation produces differences, rather than ‘representing the Sacred Image of the Same’ (to continue the quotation from Haraway). Moreover, the case of the screen lady suggests a real affection for mediators independent of their role as screens for the beloved, just as we saw at the start of this essay with the example of the ‘*Choc créatif*’ [Creative shock] Barthes derived from reading Gardair on Dante rather than Dante directly.

In itself, Barthes’s mediated reading of Dante is a rich case study, as witnessed by the preceding, non-exhaustive analysis. Focus on this subject demonstrates, moreover, the productiveness of looking at a more modern, transnational commentary tradition on Dante than is typically taken into consideration.⁶⁴ Equally, Barthes’s fascination with different guides points to the presence of key figures of mediation within Dante’s own works, and which as we have seen also include the

⁵⁹Gagnolati and Webb, pp. 116 and 128.

⁶⁰For details, see Rushworth, ‘Barthes as Reader of Dante’, pp. 36 and 40–41.

⁶¹See Manuele Gagnolati, ‘Authorship and Performance in Dante’s *Vita nova*’, in *Aspects of the Performative in Medieval Culture*, ed. by Manuele Gagnolati and Almut Suerbaum (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010), pp. 125–41 (p. 135).

⁶²See Manuele Gagnolati, *Amor che move: linguaggio del corpo e forma del desiderio in Dante, Pasolini e Morante* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 2013), drawing on Donna Haraway, *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium.FemaleMan@_Meets_OncoMouse™: Feminism and Technoscience* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

⁶³Haraway, p. 272, cited in Gagnolati, *Amor che move*, pp. 11 and 163.

⁶⁴The most modern chapter in *Interpreting Dante: Essays on the Traditions of Dante Commentary*, ed. by Paola Nasti and Claudia Rossignoli (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013) is that of John Lindon, ‘Notes on Nineteenth-Century Dante Commentaries and Critical Editions’, pp. 434–49. More germane to my focus is *Metamorphosing Dante: Appropriations, Manipulations, and Rewritings in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries*, ed. by Manuele Gagnolati, Fabio Camilletti, and Fabian Lampart (Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2011). See also most recently *Dante Beyond Borders: Contexts and Reception*, ed. by Nick Havelly and Jonathan Katz with Richard Cooper (Cambridge: Legenda, 2021).

book-as-guide (*Inferno* v) and the screen lady (in Dante's *Vita nuova*). Literary mediation ought not to be understood as an inauthentic obstacle but rather as an inevitable and intriguing form of relationality. Ultimately, what I am arguing for is a revalorisation of middleness, with greater acknowledgement of the mediating figures who stand 'Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita', in the middle of the journey of our lives as readers of Dante.

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