

# DANTE'S SELF-COMMENTARY AND THE CALL FOR INTERPRETATION

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## A POETIC LICENSE

The first poet to begin writing in the vernacular was moved to do so by a desire to make his words understandable to ladies who found Latin verses difficult to comprehend. And this is an argument against those who compose in the vernacular on a subject other than love, since composition in the vernacular was from the beginning intended for treating of love. Since, in Latin, greater license is accorded to the poet than to the prose writer, and since these Italian writers are simply poets writing in the vernacular, we can conclude that it is fitting and reasonable that greater license be granted them than to other writers in the vernacular; therefore, if any image or coloring of words is conceded to the Latin poet, it should also be conceded to the Italian poet. So, if we find that the Latin poets addressed inanimate objects in their writings, as if these objects had sense and reason, or made them address each other, and they did this not only with real things but also with unreal things (that is: they have said, concerning things that do not exist, as if they speak, and they have said that many an accident in substance speaks as if it were a substance and human), then it is fitting that the vernacular poet do the same – not, of course, without some reason, but with a motive that later can be explained in prose. (...) So that some ungifted person may not be encouraged by my words and go too far, let me add that just as the Latin poets did not write in the way they did without a reason, so vernacular poets should not write in the same way without having some reason for writing as they do. For, if any one should dress

his poem in images and rhetorical coloring and then, being asked to strip his poem of such dress in order to reveal its true meaning, would not be able to do so – this would be a veritable cause for shame. And my best friend and I are well acquainted with some who compose so clumsily. (*Vita Nova* XXV, 6–8 and 10)<sup>1</sup>

A well-known chapter of the *Vita nova* discusses the origins, main features, and legitimacy of lyric poetry in the vernacular. In his 30s, with a little more than a decade of experience as a “dicitore per rima”<sup>2</sup> under his belt, Dante (1265-1321) explains what this art is and, even more importantly, what it should be. First of all, vernacular poetry should not deal but with love. In his opinion (which we know to be historically unfounded), this form of textual composition was first defined to reach a practical goal: seducing women who did not understand Latin. Second, despite its different linguistic, metrical, and formal features, such a production does not intrinsically differ from Latin poetry. Thus, vernacular poets rank a step above vernacular prose writers, and they must benefit from the same poetic license as Latin poets. Third, not all vernacular poets are of the same caliber. A profound divide subsists between those who make superficial use of rhetorical tropes, and those who accurately employ them and are able to provide a philosophical justification for their poetic choices and creations.

These statements constitute one of Dante’s first attempts to confirm himself as a “poet” but also, and more broadly, to establish a relatively new field of aesthetic and linguistic production as worthy of socio-cultural recognition.<sup>3</sup> Obviously, this attempt is nourished

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<sup>1</sup> Dante Alighieri and Mark Musa, *Dante’s Vita Nuova. New Edition: A Translation and an Essay* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973), 54–56.

<sup>2</sup> Alighieri and Musa, *Dante’s Vita Nuova*, 54. Literally: “who says verses in rhyme,” a vernacular poet, the rhymes being the distinctive feature of poetry in Romance languages.

<sup>3</sup> As Dante notes in the same chapter (par. 4), “It is only recently that the first poets appeared who wrote in the vernacular (...). And proof that it is but a short time since these poets first appeared is the fact that if we look into the Provençal and the Italian literatures, we shall not find any poems written more than a hundred and fifty years ago.” Alighieri and Musa, 54. Here and *passim* I shall talk of “literary

by his own poetic experience. The claim about the thematic focus on love offers an *a posteriori* justification for his production in the 1280s–1290s. Breaking from previous generations active in Tuscany – such as Guittone d’Arezzo (around 1235-1294), Chiaro Davanzanti (died around 1303) and others –, the young Dante and his closest friends, among whom was Guido Cavalcanti (1258-1300), despised writing rhymes on politics, religion, and any topic other than love. This observation also suggests, though indirectly, the moral and artistic superiority of a form of love poetry conceived as a disinterested act of praise – such as the poetry that Dante proposed some chapters earlier (*Vita nova*, XVIII–XIX) via the manifesto of *Donne ch’avete intelletto d’amore* – over those intended only to obtain a lady’s consideration.<sup>4</sup> The analogy drawn between ancient and modern poets addresses another specific aim, namely defending the personification of Love against those who might argue that a feeling, insofar as it is an “accident in a substance,” should not be represented as a “bodily substance.”<sup>5</sup> While not unfamiliar to other poets from the same context, the personification of Love constitutes a distinctive feature of Dante’s juvenile poetry. Its presence, as well as that of other prosopopoeia, in his first poems is so massive that it can be compared only to productions belonging to the didactic-allegorical tradition.<sup>6</sup> Finally, the point made about being able to explain oneself manifests not only Dante’s allegiance to the lofty

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field” in the meaning proposed by Pierre Bourdieu, *Les règles de l’art: Genèse et structure du champ littéraire* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1992), that is a “field” of human cultural activity socially acknowledged as different and autonomous from others as well as regulated by distinctive practices and institutions.

<sup>4</sup> See Alighieri and Musa, *Dante’s Vita Nuova*, 30–37.

<sup>5</sup> See Alighieri and Musa, *Dante’s Vita Nuova*, 54.

<sup>6</sup> On this characteristic of Dante’s juvenile poetry and his debt towards the tradition of allegorical poems, see Charles S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love. A Study in Medieval Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936), 47–48; Jean Pépin, *Dante et la tradition de l’allégorie* (Montréal and Paris: Université de Montréal, Institut d’études médiévales and Vrin, 1970), 22–23; and Marco Grimaldi, *Allegoria in versi. Un’idea della poesia dei trovatori* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2012). On the connection between allegory and personification, see Walter S. Melion and Bart Ramakers, *Personification. Embodying Meaning and Emotion* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 1–40.

intellectual stance of Cavalcanti, as openly declared here, but also to the philosophical training in which Dante was engaged during these years, as he will reveal later on.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, it provides an indirect validation of the *Vita nova* which consists of a self-commented collection of a selected number of Dante's previous poems. Such an implication is even more crucial given that Dante nowhere explains this astonishing feature of his first "libello." In the introductory chapter he presented it as a "copy" from the "book of *his* memory," without even mentioning its self-commentarial dimension.<sup>8</sup>

Chapter 25 of the *Vita nova* might inspire various other remarks. For instance, one could note that the so-called *intentio*

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<sup>7</sup> In *Convivio* II, XII Dante will date his philosophical studies to around 1293-1296 (for the interpretation of this passage, see Giorgio Inglese, *Vita di Dante. Una biografia possibile* [Rome: Carocci, 2015], 52-58), which roughly corresponds to the same years when he conceived and wrote the *Vita nova* (see Stefano Carrai, "Puntualizzazioni sulla datazione della *Vita nova*," *Rassegna dantesca*, 52 [2018]: 109-115). The impact of these more engaging readings on the "libello" is also highlighted in this subsequent work (par. 4): "Although it was difficult for me at first to penetrate their meaning, I finally penetrated it as deeply as my command of Latin and the small measure of my intellect enabled me to do, by which intellect I had perceived many things before, as in a dream, as may be seen in the *New Life*" (Dante Alighieri and Richard Lansing, *Dante's Il Convivio* [New York: Garland, 1990], 67).

<sup>8</sup> See Alighieri and Musa, *Dante's Vita Nuova*, 3. Self-commentary is commonly acknowledged as one of the most innovative features of the *Vita nova* (see for instance Albert Russell Ascoli, *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008], 185 and Zygmunt G. Barański, "«Lascio cotale trattato ad altro chiosatore»: Form, Literature, and Exegesis in Dante's *Vita nova*," in *Dantean dialogues: Engaging with the Legacy of Amilcare Iannucci* ed. Maggie Kilgour and Elena Lombardi [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013], 1-40). Corrado Calenda, "Reticenza e allusione: strategie comunicative dell'autore e attese del lettore sulla soglia della *Vita nuova*," in *Per beneficio e concordia di studio. Studi danteschi offerti a Enrico Malato per i suoi ottant'anni*, ed. Andrea Mazzaucchi, 247-54 (Cittadella [PD]: Bertoccello Artigrafiche, 2015), 249-53, highlights the evasiveness of Dante's first chapter on this key aspect of his invention.

*auctoris* stays, somehow, out of the picture. Different from Dante’s later works and subsequent generations of Italian self-commentators for whom self-exegesis is above all else a tool to convey poetry’s “real” meaning,<sup>9</sup> such an aim seems secondary here. Explaining one’s poetic creation is less a way to secure the text from potential misreading than a way to affirm oneself as a poet. In this respect, for the young Dante, self-exegesis is less an apologetic gesture than a performative one, its goal is not so much to defend the truth of his poetry but to confirm himself as a true poet.<sup>10</sup> I shall return to this point below.

For the moment, however, it shall suffice to recall two textual pieces of evidence, and to formulate a couple of questions. In his subsequent production, Dante will detach himself from an exclusive focus on love. In his unfinished treatise on vernacular poetry and language, Dante proposes a more articulated thematic classification, in which the topic of love occupies the intermediate degree between “arms” and “virtue” (*De vulgari eloquentia* II, ii). A similar vision inspired the *Convivio* and, down the road, the *Commedia* which can only be regarded as a poem on love in the broadest sense of the term. Dante will equally complicate his claim about the analogy between contemporary and ancient poets up to the point of suggesting, in his major poem, that ancient poetry, represented by Virgil, Dante the Pilgrim’s guide, and the “bella scola” of classical authors in Limbo (*Inferno* IV), has been overcome by Dante’s

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<sup>9</sup> On subsequent generations of Italian self-commenting poets, see Francesco Venturi, *Self-Commentary in Early Modern European Literature, 1400–1700* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), and, in this same issue of *Glossator*, the essay by Christine Ott and Philip Stockbrugger on Girolamo Benivieni.

<sup>10</sup> By this, I am pushing the analyses that highlight the apologetic and, in this sense, subsidiary function of the prose sections of the *Vita nova* a step further. At the same time, I do not intend to suggest that such a function is not also present, as it is evident from my previous remarks. Among the studies focusing on different facets of this dimension, see John Sturrock, *The Language of Autobiography: Studies in the First Person Singular* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 56–60; Justin Steinberg, *Accounting for Dante: Urban Readers and Writers in Late Medieval Italy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 61–94; Ascoli, *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author*, 178–201.

Christian poetry. So, does Dante stay loyal *at least* to the principle that a true poet should be able to explain his creations? In other words, what is the connection between poetry and self-commentary as argued in the *Vita nova*, and does it survive Dante's later ways of defining his poetry? These questions guide this inquiry, together with a peripheral though crucial one: how does Dante's rather exceptional case contribute to a more general reflection on literary self-commentary?

#### AN "IDIOSYNCRATIC EVOLUTION"

To begin with, Dante's literary works present so many and such unprecedented utterances of self-exegesis that this problem cannot be ignored. Here, however, some self-glosses might help to better posit it. By "utterances of self-exegesis," I refer to an articulated linguistic act explaining the meaning of another linguistic act by the same author. This definition rules out, for instance, cases of auto-citations which are numerous in Dante's writings, as well as in some of his predecessors', but whose exegetical function stays implicit and therefore subject to discussion.<sup>11</sup> Even more delicate is the definition of "literary work": which textual productions belong to the "literary field" between the thirteenth and the fourteenth century in an Italian commune like Florence?<sup>12</sup> I employ "literary" here in the broad sense of "non-pragmatic," that is, as a textual composition not intended to reach an extra-textual aim. At the same time, "work" is here used in the strong sense of *oeuvre*, an organic textual project that, no matter if achieved or not, responds to an articulated plan in the author's mind. Such limitations rule out various writings by Dante: the *Monarchia*, a treatise of political theology intended to defend the necessity of the Universal Empire and its autonomy from the Church in the sphere of secular politics; his letters, which constitute a composite corpus that includes semi-private texts such

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<sup>11</sup> This second typology is listed by Giunta, *Codici: Saggio sulla poesia del Medioevo* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2005), 317–41. On the importance of self-quotation in Dante, see Teodolinda Barolini, *Dante's Poets* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 3–84.

<sup>12</sup> For a reflection on the shifting boundaries of "literature" in this context and its effects on authorship, see William Robins, "The Case of the Court Entertainer: Popular Culture, Intertextual Dialogue, and the Early Circulation of Boccaccio's *Decameron*," *Speculum* 92 (2017): 1–35.

as the condolences on the death of one of his protectors (*Epist.* II), as well as public texts such as the three letters-manifesto supporting Henri VII’s expedition to Italy (*Epistles* V-VII); the so-called *rime*, which is the title given by modern editors to the totality of Dante’s poems in vernacular that he never collected as such; two Latin *Egloge* that Dante composed in 1320-1321 in response to Giovanni del Virgilio’s suggestion to visit him in Bologna and start composing epic poetry in Latin; finally, if authentic, the *Questio de aqua et terra*, a *quaestio disputata* on cosmological problems, which Dante would have transcribed in written form after an oral delivery in Verona in 1320.<sup>13</sup>

Drawing such distinctions is essential in order to be reminded of the impressive variety of Dante’s writing skills and practices. Furthermore, it is crucial insofar as such “utterances of self-exegesis” pervasively characterize these “literary works,” while they are almost completely absent from Dante’s other writings.<sup>14</sup> This fact

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<sup>13</sup> This list does not include the so-called “libro delle canzoni” (the “book of the *canzoni*”), which some scholars suggest Dante might have put together while working at the project of the *Convivio*, on purpose. Even though seductive, this hypothesis remains a conjecture. See Natascia Tonelli, “Rileggendo le *Rime* di Dante secondo l’edizione e il commento di Domenico De Robertis: il libro delle canzoni,” *Studi e problemi di critica testuale* 63, no. 2 (2006): 9–59; and Giuliano Tanturli, “Come si forma il libro delle canzoni?” in *Le rime di Dante*, ed. Claudia Berra and Paolo Borsa (Milan: Cisalpino, 2010), 117–34. For the recent discussion of the authenticity of the *Questio*, see Gianfranco Fioravanti, “Simplicio: chi era costui?,” *Studi danteschi* 74 (2019): 189–96.

<sup>14</sup> One marginal exception is the relationship between the letter IV and the *canzone*, known as “montanina,” which the letter accompanies and for which the letter provides some contextual information, even though not a true self-commentary and indeed the interpretation of this poem, whether literal or allegorical, is still subject to debate; see Claudia Villa, “Tempi dell’epistolario dantesco l’epistola al Malaspina,” in *Le lettere di Dante. Ambienti culturali, contesti storici e circolazione dei saperi*, ed. Giuliano Milan and Antonio Montefusco (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020): 233–41 for a recent synthesis of this question. I shall not discuss here the letter XIII to Cangrande as the philological evidence is insufficient to demonstrate the authenticity of the second, exegetical, part of it; see

already suggests that, in Dante's mind and experience, self-commentary is linked not only to poetry but also, and more specifically, to the effort of elaborating stand-alone, consistent textual wholes. In those – namely the *Vita Nova*, the *De vulgari eloquentia*, the *Convivio* – self-commentary is so present that Albert Russel Ascoli identifies it as an “idiosyncratic evolution of Scholastic *divisio*” and observes that “the most spectacular version of this phenomenon (...) is Dante's adaptation of the widespread medieval practice of academic glossing into distinctive, and virtually unprecedented, forms of auto-exegetical self-commentary, incorporated into hybrid texts combining poetry with prose.”<sup>15</sup>

Let us take a closer look at the *Vita nova*. The “libello” selects and collects a series of 31 poems relevant to Dante's love for Beatrice and his training as a poet of love, and accompanies them with a double register of self-comments in prose. Before each poem, the “ragioni” (from the Provençal *razos*, the bio-bibliographical introductions to troubadours' poems in the collections that a medieval reader like Dante knew) provide the biographical context for its composition. After each poem, the “divisioni” (from the so-called *divisio textus*, which is the operation preliminary to every other in medieval exegesis) illustrate its main rhetorical features. One might observe then that these two forms of self-commentary consider the same poems from two different and yet complementary angles. The “ragioni” envision them as historical facts, linguistic events promoted by other events, whereas the “divisioni” consider them as textual artifacts, series of signs and spaces which deserve to be unpacked and explained. The result is an eccentric and yet extremely consistent work, formally belonging to the tradition of the *prosimetrum* but for which no convincing antecedent has been – and likely cannot be – identified.<sup>16</sup>

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Giorgio Inglese, “Epistola a Cangrande: questione aperta,” *Critica del testo* 2, no. 3 (1999): 951–74 and Giorgio Inglese, “Dante (?) a Cangrande Postille,” *Giornale storico della Letteratura italiana* 131 (2014): 121–3. On this intricate question, the most recent contributions are to be found in Alberto Casadei, *Nuove inchieste sull' “Epistola a Cangrande”*. *Atti della giornata di studi, Pisa 18 dicembre 2019* (Pisa: Pisa University Press, 2020).

<sup>15</sup> Ascoli, *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author*, 176.

<sup>16</sup> The only point on which contemporary scholarship seems to agree is the impossibility to explain the *Vita nova* within the

However, at the philological level, it is well-established that only a part of Dante’s poetry was in circulation before the *Vita nova*; this fact suggests that other poems were expressly composed for this work. At the hermeneutical level, scholars nowadays highlight the multiple ways in which Dante’s prose (even when commenting on poems that pre-date it) always manipulates his poetry and, in this sense, creates new meanings.<sup>17</sup> Thus, the relationship between text and self-commentary is not unidirectional but bidirectional in that the self-exegetical impetus produces, either literally or hermeneutically, the texts commented. Either way, what we observed about the performative more than the apologetic function of the self-commentary in chapter 25 is confirmed. If the *Vita nova* presents itself as a copy made after Dante’s “book of memory,” the cohesion of such a book depends on this self-commentary; the poems alone being nothing but scattered and potentially meaningless leaves of just such a manuscript. In other words, what institutes the “libello” is the self-commentary and, given that one of the main aims of the “libello” is to affirm Dante as a poet, one can safely conclude that Dante the self-commentator creates Dante the poet.

The consideration of the *De vulgari eloquentia* and the *Convivio* inspires similar remarks. While the *De vulgari* is not a “prosimetrum” strictly speaking, Dante assumes other vernacular poets’ literary outputs and his own as exemplifying the elaboration of a new “illustrious vernacular” in Italian; a project rich in cultural, political and literary implications. This project was never accomplished but the existing books are more than sufficient to appreciate Dante’s

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boundaries of any medieval literary genre. For a discussion of this problem, see Elisa Brilli and Giuliano Milani, *Dante: Les vie nouvelles* (Paris: Fayard, 2021), 127–32.

<sup>17</sup> For this aspect see Michelangelo Picone, *Le rime di Dante*, mon. issue of *Lecture classensi* 24 (1995): 174; Sherry Roush, *Hermes’ Lyre: Italian Poetic Self-Commentary from Dante to Tommaso Campanella* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 25–51; Teodolinda Barolini, *Dante and the Origins of Italian Literary Culture* (New York, Fordham University Press, 2006), 245–78; Ascoli, *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author*, 178–201; Manuele Gagnolati, “Authorship and Performance in Dante’s *Vita nova*,” in *Aspects of the Performative in Medieval Culture*, ed. Manuele Gagnolati and Almut Suerbaum (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 2010), 125–41.

plan. The *De vulgari* promotes a teleological vision of the history of vernacular literature of which Dante's poetry constitutes the highest achievement in all respects from the linguistic, to the stylistic, and thematic and therefore moral. Yet, while attributing such a critical position to Dante's previous production, this work of his years in exile also rereads Dante's previous poetry in a conceptual horizon which likely did not originally belong to it. Dante, the most excellent among vernacular poets is, again, the product of Dante the self-commentator.

The *Convivio* presents an even more sophisticated nexus and interaction between poems and self-commentary. Dante plans to write an encyclopedia of moral philosophy in the vernacular for laypeople who do not have access to Latin equivalents, and the readers will immediately recognize in this argument an updated extension of Dante's juvenile ideas about the origins of love poetry. However, the *Convivio* is nothing but a self-commentary on Dante's moral *canzoni*. To complicate the matter, not all of these *canzoni* are openly doctrinal, for many of them "look like" love poetry, and certainly were taken as such by readers. We know this for a fact thanks to subsequent readers who, since they ignore the *Convivio*, go on reading these *canzoni* as love songs,<sup>18</sup> but also thanks to Dante. He is so aware of the eccentricity of his plan that he feels the need to justify it. In one of the introductory chapters, he "purges" – that is his metaphor – his work from two "stains" for which it can be reproached: "the first is that for someone to speak of himself seems impermissible" (*Convivio* I, ii, 2).<sup>19</sup> To get around this rhetorical veto, Dante appeals to a double exception, namely when this is necessary to defend oneself from an unfair accusation – as Boethius did, says Dante, in his *Consolatio* – and when this is helpful as an example to others – as Augustine did in his *Confessions*. It is no surprise that both these conditions apply to his case. He needs to protect himself from the accusation of being a man of unreasonable passion because of his previous love poetry, and he intends to benefit the readers by illuminating the true meaning of his poems. Coming to the second stain, namely that "to speak of matters by going into them too deeply

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<sup>18</sup> See Beatrice Arduini, "Il desiderio naturale della conoscenza: *Le dolci rime d'amor ch'io solea*," in *Le rime di Dante*, ed. Claudia Berra and Paolo Borsa, 235–49 (Milan: Cisalpino, 2010), 235–38.

<sup>19</sup> Dante Alighieri and Richard H. Lansing, *Dante's Il Convivio* (New York: Garland, 1990), 6.

seems unreasonable” (ibid.), Dante again recalls his biographical situation as an exile: his banishment affected his public fame so deeply that, as a consequence, he would go on to “add some weight” to his previous production in order to rehabilitate himself.<sup>20</sup> As announced, the apologetic scope of self-commentary becomes apparent here. At the same time, this objective should not obscure the other, performative one. The *Convivio* “extracts” from Dante’s love songs meanings that, likely, were not originally part of the creative process which brought these *canzoni* to light in the first place. Furthermore, as is well-known, the new self-commentary also manipulates the narrative previously told by the self-commentator of the *Vita nova* to make it better match the new profile of poet and moral philosopher that Dante is sketching for himself in this new work. The self-commentator re-creates the poet.

#### SELF-COMMENTARY AND TIME

We can draw some provisional conclusions. To underline the authoritative function of self-exegesis would be superfluous given its evidence and the important studies already devoted to this topic and referenced above. I would also avoid dwelling on the question of the exegetical modes that Dante masters and applies, from the historical and literal method of analysis proposed in the *Vita nova* to the stylistic and rhetorical reading of the *De vulgari* and the allegorical mode practiced in the *Convivio*, and their various sources. This inquiry is undoubtedly a key to better appreciate his intellectual formation and the stimuli that enliven it beyond the omnicomprehensive but too general category of medieval or “Scholastic” exegesis.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Among the best comments on this puzzling passage, see Marziano Guglielminetti, *Memoria e scrittura. L'autobiografia da Dante a Cellini* (Turin: Einaudi, 1977), 73–100; Peter Hainsworth, “Rhetorics of Autobiography in Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio,” *Journal of the Institute of Romance Studies* 3 (1995): 53–63 (58–60), and Ascoli, *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author*, 67–75, 85–97, 130–36.

<sup>21</sup> See the reflection of Enrico Fenzi, “L’esperienza di sé come esperienza dell’allegoria: a proposito di Dante, *Convivio* II i 2,” *Studi Danteschi* 67 (2002): 161–200; or, in a different perspective, the analysis by Rosier-Catach of Dante’s lexicon in comparison to Scholastic practices (in Dante Alighieri and Irène Rosier-Catach, *De l'éloquence en vulgaire* [Paris: Fayard, 2011], 15–20).

Beyond these items, however, we can develop another observation. In all these works, self-commentary is always linked to life-writing and, potentially, to history-writing as it is the case of chapter 25 of the *Vita nova* and the *De vulgari eloquentia*, even though here limited to the history of vernacular poetry. This aspect is so dear to Dante that to justify his approach, he refers to foundational works of medieval Christian culture such as Augustine's *Confessions* and Boethius' *Consolatio Philosophiae* instead of appealing to the tradition of commentary. In Dante's practice, such a principle translates into the rewriting of previous texts, and even previous self-commentaries, to make them better fit the current work and its different expectations. This fact is a crucial one. While it confirms the overarching and performative function of self-commentary, it also invites us to think of it more broadly as a temporal device whose primary aim is to create a continuity between past and present and to ensure the constant topicality of a text. At the same time, via his self-commentarial endeavours, Dante systematically subtracts his texts from the *hic et nunc*, as well as from the orality and the dialogism which was still the dominant mode of vernacular poetry in Dante's cultural context.<sup>22</sup> Thanks to the self-commentary, pieces of poetry said here and now by someone to someone and which will eventually be transcribed but more often lost, become self-standing wholes; that is, book-like works which echo known patterns of textual culture. Thus, they can be said to enter a new and nobler "régime de historicité."<sup>23</sup> In this sense, Dante's self-commentary not only creates the true poet, but also aims to create a new field of vernacular poetry by referring to other already established fields of knowledge (classical literature, philosophy, etc.).

#### BEYOND SELF-COMMENTARY?

The *Commedia*, Dante's major poem, seems to break with what we have observed so far. Differently from previous works, no section of the *Commedia* is written in prose, which is the space traditionally charged with auto-exegesis. For this reason, scholars interested in Dante's self-exegetical effort almost never discuss his major poem. Ascoli, one of the few who offers a comprehensive

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<sup>22</sup> See Claudio Giunta, *Versi a un destinatario: Saggio sulla poesia italiana del Medioevo* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2002).

<sup>23</sup> See François Hartog, *Régimes d'historicité. Présentisme et expériences du temps* (Paris: Seuil, 2003).

analysis of Dante’s quest for authorship, also underscores this gap but fruitfully envisions the poem as the place where Dante manages to overcome previous tensions and recompose his previously divided self. To quote him: “the *Commedia* begins where the others end as far as the project of authorial self-representation: with an integrated *poeta-personaggio* who remains undivided grammatically, conceptually, and formally. My claim is that this feature of the *sacratio poema* is made possible, though not fatally determined, by the earlier works, even as it represents itself as effecting their supersession.”<sup>24</sup> Does this move correspond to the actual exhaustion and disappearance of the self-commentarial mode from Dante’s mature horizon? Some recent notes by Luca Fiorentini suggest that what happens in the poem is something extremely subtle:

What is most relevant, though, is that, due to their being completely performed within the poetic text itself, the modes of representation adopted in Dante’s *magnum opus* tend to resolve directly the three factors which justified the recourse to self-commentary in Dante’s preceding works: the construction of a narrative revealing the true sense (*Vita nova*), the revelation of meanings communicated in allegorical form, and the discussion of doctrinal questions in greater depth. (*Convivio*)<sup>25</sup>

In other words, the function or better the functions that, in earlier works, were carried out thanks to different textual voices and the dynamic between poetry and self-commentary are now reabsorbed and embedded within the same textual universe.

Dante obtains such an outcome thanks to the activation of various devices that, not by chance, are all dialogic in appearance since they involve the participation of different characters of this textual universe. The first and most evident one engages Dante the Pilgrim and his guides, Vergil and Beatrice. These characters regularly provide explanations as to the functioning of the otherworld, the allegories presented in the text, and so forth, which

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<sup>24</sup> Ascoli, *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author*, 225.

<sup>25</sup> Luca Fiorentini, “Commentary (both by Dante and on Dante),” in *The Oxford Handbook of Dante*, ed. Manuele Gagnolati, Elena Lombardi, and Francesca Southerden, 79–95 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 86.

are openly addressed to their pupil under the form of teachings beneficial to his self-development. However, from a narratological standpoint, as the design of this “otherworld” is nothing other than Dante’s creation, these remarks are equivalent to meta-textual additions or self-commentaries. At times, this function is attributed to different characters dwelling in the afterlife. For instance, Farinata degli Uberti, chief of the Florentine Ghibelline faction of the mid thirteenth-century (and damned as heretic in Dante’s version of hell), all of a sudden explains the so-called doctrine “dell’antivedere” (foresight): that is the principle which controls the capacity that damned souls have to foresee and therefore predict the future (*Inferno* X, 100–108). Needless to say, this is a crucial resource of the *Commedia*, in which prophecy – both regarding the life of Dante the Pilgrim as well as the destiny of humankind – occupies a major role. Moreover, when in the *Paradiso* Dante’s great-grandfather, Cacciaguida, gives him the mission to write the poem, he also explains that all the journey up to this moment has been planned by divine providence with the sole aim of facilitating Dante’s future testimony, namely by promoting his encounters with souls that, being exemplary, will be more memorable for future readers, us (*Paradiso* XVII, 136–142). In stating this, Cacciaguida provides a full justification not only for the journey/account of it as a whole, but also for specific choices of composition, here the criterion of exemplarity ruling the selection of historical material included in the poem. With Farinata and Cacciaguida, as many have noted, we touch the very heart of Dante’s strategy of self-validation and self-legitimation, and – this is my argument – these goals are once more attained through self-commentary. Such strategy dissimulates itself by appealing to spokespeople different from the self-commentator and attributing the ratio behind the scenes to divine providence. If the first aim of self-commentary, since the *Vita nova*, was less to prove the author’s intention than to demonstrate the poetry to be meaningful and therefore the poet to be a true poet, Dante stays profoundly loyal to himself.

We also noted that self-commentary in earlier works performs a more clearly apologetic purpose and offers a way to reconnect previous works to Dante’s current endeavors. As clearly suggested by Ascoli, the double-faced entity known as Dante *personaggio-poeta*, protagonist and narrator of his journey, performs this function. There is a temporal and moral gap between these two characters, as normal in an account *ex post* of something which has already

happened, and as it was the case in all Dante’s previous works. Thanks to this gap, the author inserts meta-textual remarks supplementing the narration, underlining specific turning points, which again can be envisioned as forms of dissimulated self-commentary. Furthermore, this double character is constantly presented within the text as the same man who authored Dante’s previous poetry, by even referencing it by its title.<sup>26</sup> Thus, the operation of rewriting and readaptation once obtained through the self-commentary becomes now the direct object of the narrative. Given that this dimension is the best studied, there is no need to provide more specific examples.

#### SELF-COMMENTARY AND READERSHIP

However, we noted that in earlier works self-commentary possesses also a third crucial function. It ensures not only vernacular poetry’s (and poet’s) meaningfulness and continuity through time but also its future or, better, its continuous present, which is its unique “régime d’historicité,” and therefore its new place within the sphere of cultural productions. Does Dante accomplish something similar in the *Commedia*?

I believe he does and much more effectively than before. The third dialogic device distinctive of the *Commedia* relays the voice of Dante the Author to his readers. I am referring to the well-known “addresses to the reader,” namely passages in which the Author suspends his narration to talk to his audience. Such meta-textual interventions satisfy various aims. Their vast majority amplifies the description by prompting readers’ emotional response and adhesion to the marvellous events of the otherworld.<sup>27</sup> Others, however, invite the reader to pay attention to specific elements of the poem which, as the Author emphasizes, possess deeper meanings – such as the sudden appearance of a “messo dal ciel” in *Inferno* IX (61–63), the dream of the “femmina balba” in *Purgatorio* VIII (19–21), the stylistic change in the subsequent canto (*Purgatorio* IX, 70–72), the logic of contrapasso in purgatory (X, 106–11), and the denser conceptual

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<sup>26</sup> Exemplary is the case of the *Vita nova* quoted by its title in *Purgatorio* XXX, 115.

<sup>27</sup> See for instance *Inferno* VIII, 94–96; XVI, 127–30; XX, 19–24; XXII, 118; XXV, 46–48; XXXIV, 22–24; *Purgatorio* XVII, 1–9; XXXI 124–26; *Paradiso* V, 109–14; X, 7–12; XIII, 1–21; XXII, 106–11.

enterprise of the *Paradiso* (II, 1–6). These instances even invite us to refer to the Bible in identifying specific allusions to specific books of it in order to supplement the information left out by Dante’s own descriptions. For example, Dante’s description of his encounter with the tetramorph matches closely Ezekiel – he underlines – except for one detail taken from the Book of Revelation (*Purgatorio* XXIX, 97–105). Furthermore, in such an ongoing dialogue with his readers, the author establishes the title of the work even by swearing on the poem’s future reception (*Inferno* XVI, 128), and even bestows the definition of “cantica” unto its three main parts (*Purgatorio* XXXIII, 136–41).

These innovative features of Dante’s major poem were at the center of an interesting debate between Erich Auerbach and Leo Spitzer. The two illustrious contenders disagreed about how to interpret Dante’s stance towards his readership; whether he addresses his audience as a *magister* (Auerbach) or as a Christian fellow speaking to his peers (Spitzer). Neither of them, however, even by underlining the novelty of this trope, questioned Dante’s idea to address his readers and the factual existence of such readership.<sup>28</sup> More broadly, modern scholarship usually reacts by following Dante’s lead and therefore discussing the best interpretation for the passages he points out. However, if we reconsider these addresses from the perspective of Dante’s long-standing practice of self-commentary, more than what they tell the readers about the text, or what they reveal about the author’s attitude towards the readers, it is interesting to consider what these inserts do to both the text and its readers. Their message is always the same and the simplest one; the *Commedia* is a sophisticated work which demands us to study it, to reference other works (starting from the most authoritative thereof), and to comment upon it. Exactly like Dante’s earlier self-commentaries, these inserts create the status of this textual production as a valuable work. However, differently

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<sup>28</sup> Erich Auerbach, “Dante’s addresses to the Reader,” *Romance Philology* 7 (1953): 268–78; and Leo Spitzer, “The Addresses to the Reader in the *Commedia*,” *Italica* 32 (1955): 143–65. For a comprehensive bibliography about the legacy of this dispute, see Eva Plesnik, “ISCAD Annotated Bibliography: Readership, Reading and Readers,” International Seminar on Critical Approaches to Dante (Website), May 2019, <https://dante.medieval.utoronto.ca/readership/>

from earlier attempts, they obtain this effect by launching a message whose semantic content is nothing but a *manicula*, a visual sign pointing to the necessity of going beyond the surface-level interpretation, but without explicitly directing the reader how to do so.

This is what, in the title of this contribution, I define as a “call for interpretation” and this is what Dante affirms in one of these passages (*Paradiso* X, 22–27):

Or ti riman, lettor, sovra ‘l tuo banco,  
dietro pensando a ciò che si preliba,  
s’esser vuoi lieto assai prima che stanco.  
Messo t’ho innanzi: omai per te ti ciba;  
ché a sé torce tutta la mia cura  
quella materia ond’io son fatto scriba.<sup>29</sup>

Now stay there, reader, on your bench, thinking back on your foretaste here, if you wish to rejoice long before you tire; I have set before you: now feed yourself, for all my care is claimed by that matter of which I have become the scribe.

The self-commentator intentionally takes a step back, while the author endorses the role of the scribe. The permanence of the metaphor of the “banquet,” the fundamental one of the *Convivio* underscores Dante’s radical change of posture from the servant feeding his readers to the master setting the table and inviting others to come and enjoy. However, what Dante’s claim about the opportunity/necessity for his work to be commented stays identical, only now delegated to his readership.

I believe that it is also thanks to this new discursive strategy if the historical reception of the *Commedia* presents features that have no term of comparison in all medieval tradition, whether Latin or vernacular. Between the “publication” of the poem around 1322 and the end of this same century, fifteen different exegetical enterprises were launched, and this without considering the various versions existing of the same commentaries, such as per the so-called *Ottimo commento* and the commentary delivered by the son of Dante, Pietro

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<sup>29</sup> Dante Alighieri, Robert M. Durling, and Ronald L. Martinez, *Paradiso* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 207.

Alighieri. Needless to say, ancient commentators are often in disagreement about the status of the *Commedia*, whether the poem is a fictional work vehiculating doctrinal knowledge or an inspired work, similar to the Bible and prophetic writings. They equally fought about which hermeneutical tools forged by medieval exegetical traditions were the most appropriate to read it.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, they all agreed on a common ground, which is still ours: that the *Commedia* is a literary work of value, and they proved it to be so by commenting on it – a point which is far from evident for any vernacular writings before Dante.

Shall we conclude by stating that Dante's idiosyncratic self-commentary answers the need not only to build himself up but also to establish and empower the new field of vernacular poetry, and that he succeeds in this endeavor by forging a new interpretative and textual community within and by his works? I will leave it to the readers, and only invite caution when granting poetic license, especially when it involves personifications. Such personifications might happen to be us.

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<sup>30</sup> For an overview, see Alastair J. Minnis, Alexander Brian Scott, and David Wallace, *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism c.1100–c.1375. The Commentary Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), 439–519; Saverio Bellomo, *Dizionario dei commentatori danteschi. L'esegesi della Commedia da Iacopo Alighieri a Nidobeato* (Florence: Olschki, 2004); Fiorentini, “Commentary (both by Dante and on Dante),” 88–95.