Barthes as Reader of Dante: The Mediation of Sollers and the Role of Commentary[1]

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Looking back, 2015 was an important year for Barthes and Dante. It marked for both writers a significant birthday: Barthes's centenary and Dante's seven hundred and fiftieth. This convergence was, of course, no more than coincidental, and indeed at the time went unremarked. Yet potential connections between the two deserve further consideration. The subject of Barthes as reader of Dante may appear unusual, since Barthes has not typically been associated with the Middle Ages, nor with poetry, nor indeed with Italian literature.[2] From this perspective, Dante is uniquely privileged within Barthes's work and provides a further, though unusual example in support of an understanding of Barthes as 'first and foremost a *reader*'.[3] In this essay I explore how and why Barthes turns to Dante at two distinct moments in his career: the mid-1960s and the late 1970s. This investigation is part of a wider project which seeks to assess Barthes's debts to – but also divergences from – the wider tradition of modern French Dantophilia. That project necessarily takes into account different forms of mediation which shaped Barthes's reading of Dante, including the writings of Jules Michelet as well as different translations (often with copious notes) of Dante into French, upon which Barthes relied.[4] While I refer to one important nineteenth-century translator – Étienne-Jean Delécluze – below, this essay, in contrast, begins to approach such a task by tracing some landmarks in Barthes's reading of Dante, focusing primarily on the Sollersian inspiration of Barthes's Dante.

My analysis begins at the end of Barthes's life, since this period is the one in which the Dantean connection is most explicit, present from the very title of Barthes's last, unfinished literary project, *Vita Nova* (*New Life*).[5] Around this time the importance of Dante is overtly signalled in a lecture given by Barthes in autumn 1978, the Dantean aspects of which are largely reprised at the start of Barthes's final lecture course at the Collège de France, on *La Préparation du roman* (*The Preparation of the Novel*).[6] The original lecture, entitled in Proustian fashion '"Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure"' and first published in 1982, is the

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initial focus of my analysis.[7] I begin by considering what is distinctive about Barthes's reading of Dante in this lecture, in particular the interpretation of Dante's *Commedia* (*Comedy*) as beginning under the sign of mourning.

Against this late interest in Dante, the central section of this article traces the presence of Dante earlier in Barthes's *œuvre*. Through this return I show that Barthes's reading of Dante significantly predates his *Vita Nova* project. Of particular importance in this Dantean web is another anniversary, seven hundred years since Dante's birth, celebrated in 1965. Around this anniversary, Philippe Sollers and the experimental literary journal *Tel Quel* emerge as important mediators for Barthes's reading of Dante. It is in an essay on Sollers's *Drame* (likewise from 1965; translated into English as *Event*) that Barthes himself first engages in a sustained and creative manner with Dante's work.[8] Barthes's essay points to his astute reading of Dante's *Vita nuova*, with particular attention to matters of form mediated not only by Sollers but also by the first French translator of the *Vita nuova*, Delécluze.[9]As I show in the final section of my essay, Barthes's reading of the *Vita nuova*, via Sollers's *Drame*, has important implications for the potential form of his own eventual *Vita Nova*. I also suggest that the discussions of Dante around 1965, as evidenced in Barthes's essay on Sollers, played a guiding role in Barthes's reflections on the role of commentary in *Critique et vérité* (1966; *Criticism and Truth*).[10]

Dante and the Late Barthes

Barthes's lecture from 19 October 1978, '"Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure"', is overtly Proustian in inspiration. Indeed, its later American title was even more direct: 'Proust et moi' ('Proust and myself').[11] Yet, as Diana Knight has pointed out, the revised title 'might well have been "Proust, Dante, and Myself"'.[12] In Barthes's perhaps surprising comparative reading, Dante rubs shoulders with Proust, and the grounds for this comparison are mournful.[13] For Barthes, Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*) and Dante's *Commedia* are comparable in that both start from an experience of bereavement. In each case, grief is a catalyst for writing. In this respect, Dante and Proust are also sources of inspiration for Barthes himself. This lecture postdates the death of Barthes's mother (25 October 1977) and is explicitly concerned with the desire for a 'new life' of writing in the wake of this loss.

Halfway through this lecture, after a Proustian start, Barthes turns to focus on one extremely short but nonetheless pivotal aspect of Dante's work, the famous opening line of the *Commedia*: 'Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita' ('In the middle of the journey of our life').[14] It is at this moment that Dante-pilgrim finds himself lost in a dark wood, whence he is rescued by the poet Virgil, Dante's guide through Hell and Purgatory.

> Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita
> mi ritrovai per una selva oscura,
> ché la diritta via era smarrita.
>
> (Midway in the journey of our life
> I came to myself in a dark wood,
> for the straight way was lost.)
>
> *Inferno*, I. 1-3

Traditionally, as Barthes recognises, the opening line of the *Commedia* situates Dante's journey as having taken place in 1300, when Dante was thirty-five years old and halfway through his own life, based on the Biblical assumption of an ideal lifespan of seventy years. More open to debate (to which Barthes does not allude) is the meaning of the 'dark wood', which has provoked competing allegorical interpretations over the centuries, with the most common suggestions revolving around ideas of sin, exile, and a possible repudiation of aspects of Dante's earlier writing.

Refreshingly, Barthes embarks on a new reading of these lines, unfettered by the mass of exegesis that has accumulated around them. Barthes discards the numerological approach, offering a new interpretation of the 'middle' that goes beyond mathematical calculations:

> le 'milieu de notre vie' n'est évidemment pas un point arithmétique : comment, au moment où je parle, connaîtrais-je la durée totale de mon existence, au point de pouvoir la diviser en deux parties égales ? C'est un point sémantique, l'instant, peut-être tardif, où survient dans ma vie l'appel d'un nouveau sens, le désir d'une mutation : changer la vie, rompre et inaugurer, me soumettre à une initiation, tel Dante s'enfonçant dans la *selva oscura*, sous la conduite d'un grand initiateur, Virgile (et pour moi, du moins le temps de cette conférence, l'initiateur, c'est Proust).

> (the 'middle of our life' is obviously not an arithmetical point: how, at the moment of writing, could I know my life's total duration so precisely that I could divide it into two equal parts? It is a semantic point, the perhaps belated moment when there occurs in my life the summons of a new meaning, the desire for a mutation: to change lives, to break off and to begin, to submit myself to an initiation, as Dante made his way into the *selva oscura*, led by the great initiator, Virgil (and for me, at least during this text, the initiator is Proust).)[15]

For Proust, Dante, and himself, Barthes identifies the 'middle of life' as a moment of mourning: Proust and himself after the death of their mothers; Dante after the death of Beatrice.

> Pour Proust, le 'chemin de la vie' fut certainement la mort de sa mère (1905), même si la mutation d'existence, l'inauguration de l'œuvre nouvelle n'eut lieu que quelques années plus tard. Un deuil cruel, un deuil unique et comme irréductible, peut constituer pour moi cette 'cime du particulier', dont parlait Proust ; quoique tardif, ce deuil sera pour moi le milieu de ma vie ; car le 'milieu de la vie' n'est peut-être jamais rien d'autre que ce moment où l'on découvre que la mort est réelle, et non plus seulement redoutable.
>
> (For Proust, the 'middle of life's journey' was certainly his mother's death (1905), even if the mutation of existence, the inauguration of the new work, occurred only a few years later. A cruel bereavement, a unique and somehow irreducible bereavement can constitute for me that 'pinnacle of the particular' Proust spoke of: though belated, this bereavement will be for me the middle of my life; for the 'middle of life' is perhaps never anything but the moment when you discover that death is real, and no longer merely dreadful.)[16]

Having established that the 'middle of life' cannot be calculated mathematically, Barthes casts further doubt on the nature of this experience by applying to it, in his case, an unexpected future tense: 'ce deuil sera pour moi' ('this bereavement will be for me'). This choice of tense extends both the experience of bereavement and, therefore, the experience of middleness indefinitely, and even potentially endlessly. In

this passage we also witness an interplay between the specific and the general, with the examples of Proust and Barthes himself – couched in highly Dantean language – ceding to a conclusion that is claimed to be more universally valid (with the impersonal 'on découvre', translated here as 'you discover'). This mid-life crisis, provoked by bereavement and mediated by the examples of both Dante and Proust, is a turning point with conversionary overtones, encapsulated in the desire expressed towards the end of this lecture for a *Vita Nova* (*New Life*).[17] Barthes attributes this phrase to the nineteenth-century historian Jules Michelet,[18] but its more explicit intertext is Dante's own youthful work, the *Vita nuova* (or *nova*).[19] This work narrates the life and death of Dante's beloved Beatrice, in a series of poems embedded in an overarching prose narrative. In short, Dante's *Vita nuova* is a prosimetrum that has been compared to models such as Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* or troubadour *vidas* and *razos*, but which has also been declared to be ultimately unprecedented in form and scope.[20] That Barthes has in mind Dante's *Vita nuova* is clear not only from the Dantean framework of the exposition, but also from Barthes's gloss on the concept of new life, which – in its emphasis on literary style – is highly appropriate to Dante's text. Barthes declares:

> Or, pour celui qui écrit, qui a choisi d'écrire, il ne peut y avoir de 'vie nouvelle', me semble-t-il, que la découverte d'une nouvelle pratique d'écriture […] la recherche, la découverte, la pratique d'une forme nouvelle.
>
> (Now, for the subject who writes, who has chosen to write, there can be no 'new life', it seems to me, except in the discovery of a new practice of writing […] the search, the discovery, the practice of a new form.)[21]

These lines begin boldly and decisively with the conjunctive 'Or' ('Now'), but soon start to meander syntactically with a sequence of subordinate clauses. Inverting the logical progression of the previous example, Barthes initially adopts a more objective stance by speaking in general terms of 'celui qui écrit' ('the subject who writes'), with the first-person pronoun only emerging in the subsequent interjection 'me semble-t-il' ('it seems to me'). The passage culminates in a tripartite asyndetic list which narrates rapidly and in a nutshell a successful story from 'recherche' ('search') to 'découverte' ('discovery') and, finally, 'pratique' ('practice'). The language of discovery returns, recalling the earlier discovery of the reality of death, but in a more upbeat key.

In the '"Longtemps"' lecture Dante offers to Barthes a model of middleness, bereavement, and literary conversion. In some respects, this reading of Dante is idiosyncratic, in particular in its inverting of the order of texts and events. Most prominently, Barthes situates Dante's 'new life' at the very start of the *Commedia*, thereby connecting the *Vita nuova* to the later text, and in so doing skipping over Dante's intervening works (in particular, the *Convivio*). Yet some of the idiosyncracies of Barthes's reading are productive not only for Barthes in his quest for 'new life' but also for other readers of Dante. By interpreting being lost in the dark wood as an experience of loss, Barthes offers a new way of reading the *Commedia* that brings to the fore the text's affective charge, privileging emotion and human, interpersonal relationships. Barthes radically re-opens the question of the place from which the *Commedia* starts, replacing moral and political contexts with a more psychological perspective.

Moreover, Barthes proves himself to be a perceptive reader of Dante's *Vita nuova* through this focus on the need for 'a new practice of writing'. Dante's *Vita nuova* narrates a literary apprenticeship that is all about finding an appropriate way to write about love and about Beatrice. As Barthes points out in *La Préparation du roman*, it is an example of 'L'œuvre-maquette' ('The work-as-maquette') which 'se présente comme sa propre expérimentation' ('presents itself as its own experimentation').[22] In the *Vita nuova* the desire for newness is evidently thematized from the work's title onwards. The need for a 'new practice of writing' also punctuates the text at intervals, for instance the declaration that 'a me convenne ripigliare matera nuova e più nobile che la passata' ('I felt forced to find a new theme, one nobler than the last').[23]

At the end of the text this desire for novelty in writing has still not been satisfied. The *Vita nuova* ends with an *impasse*, a promise of future writing that is suspended and uncertain in its outcome:

> Appresso questo sonetto apparve a me una mirabile visione, ne la quale io vidi cose che mi fecero proporre di non dire più di questa benedetta infino a tanto che io potesse più degnamente trattare di lei. E di venire a ciò io studio quanto posso, sì com'ella sae veracemente. Sì che, se piacere sarà di colui a cui tutte le cose vivono, che la mia vita duri per alquanti anni, io spero di dicer di lei quello che mai non fue detto d'alcuna.
>
> (After I wrote this sonnet there came to me a miraculous vision in which I saw things that made me resolve to say no

> more about this blessèd one until I would be capable of writing about her in a nobler way. To achieve this I am striving as hard as I can, and this she truly knows. Accordingly, if it be the pleasure of Him through whom all things live that my life continue for a few more years, I hope to write of her that which has never been written of any other woman.)[24]

This passage begs the question: when does 'new life' start in Dante? The text of the *Vita nuova* ends with a deferral of newness and with a hope that the poet's life will last long enough for the desired literary conversion to take place. Barthes's reading of Dante's *Vita nuova* contributes to debates concerning when the 'new life' starts, by suggesting that 'new life' and the 'middle of life' converge, under the sign of mourning. From the perspective of recent Dante criticism, which tends to stress that the end of the *Vita nuova* is not a prophecy or announcement of the *Commedia*, this reading is controversial but tempting.[25]

Barthes's own *Vita Nova* shares the desire, expressed at the end of Dante's *Vita nuova*, to write something new ('that which has never been written'). In the case of Dante, this desire for newness is deliberately left unanswered in the text as a sort of cliffhanger; in the case of Barthes, his sudden death cut short any serious or sustained attempt to fulfil this desire. Barthes's *Vita Nova* was heralded in various texts, including the '"Longtemps"' lecture, but also *La Préparation du roman* and the *Journal de deuil* (*Mourning Diary*).[26] Barthes's death curtailed the project in its infancy, with eight pages of plans published posthumously in 1995 suggesting that his *Vita Nova* was a 'utopian' work, barely begun, and indeed 'not intended to be written'.[27] More recent evidence, coinciding with the anniversary year in 2015, has reopened the question of the *Vita Nova*, demonstrating the existence of a much wider set of fragments devoted to the project.[28] Since the full extent and implications of these discoveries have yet to be realised, an assessment of the importance of Dante in Barthes's *Vita Nova* remains at present both desirable and difficult.

One aspect of Dante's work consistently admired by Barthes is the use of guide–figures, in the case of the *Commedia* a trio of guides organised sequentially: Virgil through *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, Beatrice through *Paradiso*, and St Bernard at the very end of the poem. Already in the first set of drafts published, Barthes notes the potential fruitfulness of 'Maestri e Autori', a phrase adapted from Dante's acclamation of Virgil as his guide, authority, and teacher.[29] This interest in the figure of Virgil is reaffirmed

in the additional material published in the 2015 *Album* devoted to Barthes. There, Barthes writes very explicitly: 'Bonne idée : un conducteur (Virgile) ou plusieurs' ('Good idea: a guide (Virgil) or several').[30]

The new material in the *Album* also offers the following superb example of Barthes's explicit debt to Dante, from an index card dated 27 July 1979:

> Choc créatif, hier, en lisant le petit chapitre de Gardair s/[sur] *La Divine Comédie* : je me dis : c'est la clef, le schéma conducteur (secret) de l'Œuvre.
>
> (Creative shock, yesterday, whilst reading Gardair's short chapter on the *Divine Comedy*: I said to myself: it is the key, the (secret) guiding scheme of the Work.)[31]

Part of what is striking in this quotation is the mediated nature of Barthes's engagement with Dante. Here, Barthes is reading not Dante but rather an introductory chapter on Dante's life and works by the critic and translator Jean-Michel Gardair, published only the year previously in 1978.[32] Barthes's path to Dante is, in this case, indirect and explicitly reliant on criticism, although it is difficult to see what it was that Barthes found especially compelling in Gardair's account.

In any case, Gardair is neither the first nor the most significant indirect path to Dante taken by Barthes. Such an accolade belongs, instead, to Sollers. Looking backwards in time in search of earlier manifestations of Barthes's interest in Dante, Sollers emerges as a vital point of dialogue and mediation. This retrospective glance affords valuable context and precedents for the Dantism of the late Barthes, in terms of both Barthes's earlier writings and a wider French Dantophilic readership, within which I consider Sollers to be exceptional. It will also allow us to return to the late Barthes with a better understanding of what attracted Barthes to Dante's *Vita nuova*.

The Mediation of Sollers

Sollers's lifelong engagement with Dante requires fuller consideration elsewhere, although three striking and varied examples are as follows: *Paradis*, an experimental text, infamously free from punctuation, and published serially in *Tel Quel* from 1974 onwards; the novel *Un Cœur absolu*, whose protagonist wants to make a TV adaptation of the *Commedia*; an extended dialogue with Benoît Chantre published boldly as *La Divine Comédie*.[33] This list is far from exhaustive, especially given Sollers's own assessment of his debt to Dante: 'tous mes livres sont consacrés plus ou moins, par différents angles convergents, à Dante – vous y trouvez toujours sa trace profonde' ('all my books are devoted more or less, from different convergent perspectives, to Dante – you will always find in them his deep mark').[34]

One of the first to recognise the importance of Dante for Sollers was none other than Barthes. The fertile moment of confluence for the three authors was 1965, Dante's seven-hundredth birthday. In this anniversary year the experimental journal *Tel Quel*, founded by Sollers at the start of the decade, devoted a special issue to Dante.[35] The volume's epigraph cited, in the original Italian, a line from the end of Dante's *Paradiso* in which its own name could already be heard: 'Ma io era | già per me stesso *tal qual* ei volea'.[36] Contributions to the volume included an original essay by Sollers on 'Dante et la traversée de l'écriture' ('Dante and the Traversal of Writing'),[37] translated essays by contemporary *dantisti* Bernard Stambler and Edoardo Sanguineti, and two seminal texts (again in French translation) by F. W. J. von Schelling and Giambattista Vico.

We know that Barthes read this special issue quite carefully. Already in a postcard to Sollers dated from Urt in late August 1965, just prior to the publication of the special issue, there is evidence of an ongoing conversation between the two about 'Vico et des différents *Nova*' ('Vico and the different *Nova*'), a conversation which surely includes Dante.[38] Following the publication of the special issue, precise textual allusions can also be traced in published material by Barthes. Sollers's essay is referenced by name in *Critique et vérité* (first published in *Tel Quel*'s series in 1966), suggesting a Dantean backdrop to Barthes's defence of new forms of critical writing.[39] (I will return to the Dantean context of *Critique et vérité* in due course.) The same essay is also mentioned by Barthes in an interview with Jean Thibaudeau published in *Tel Quel* in autumn 1971.[40] Finally, a

remark from Edoardo Sanguineti's reading of *Inferno* VIII included in the same issue is repeated by Barthes in his entry on Sanguineti from May 1967 for the *Catalogue Feltrinelli*.[41]

A further pair of texts published in 1965 underscore this shared Dantean moment: Sollers's *Drame* and Barthes's essay on *Drame*, entitled 'Drame, poème, roman' ('Drama, Poem, Novel'). As Sollers himself recalls, referring to this essay, 'Dante est là, dès le début, dans le texte qu'il me consacre' ('Dante is there, right from the start, in the text he writes about me').[42] Sollers's *Drame* is a short but strange and often oneiric text. Structurally, it alternates between passages in the third person and passages in quotation marks in the first person, the latter consistently introduced by the phrase 'Il écrit' ('He writes'). Writing is the foremost theme and driving force of *Drame*. The protagonist is defined by his desire to write and indeed the setting emerges as that most literary of spaces, a library. The protagonist's writing consistently addresses a desired second person, 'tu' ('you'), but the identity of this figure is unclear and unstable: a Beatrice-like beloved lady who is the addressee and therefore also a figure for the reader.

Barthes's essay on *Drame* was first published in *Critique* (1965), then republished in a slightly extended form in *Théorie d'ensemble* (1968), and eventually taken up in *Sollers écrivain* (1979; *Sollers Writer*). In it, Barthes suggests the productiveness of reading *Drame* in the light of Dante's *Vita nuova*. To begin, Barthes proposes that we might fruitfully read *Drame* as a poem, in which the lady and poetry tend to merge:

> Il est effectivement possible de lire *Drame* comme un très beau poème, la célébration indistincte du langage et de la femme aimée, de leur chemin l'un vers l'autre, comme fut, en son temps, la *Vita Nova* de Dante.
>
> (It is in fact possible to read *Drame* as a very beautiful poem, the celebration at one and the same time of language and of the beloved, of this path towards each other, as, in its time, was Dante's *Vita Nuova*.)[43]

Continuing his interrogation of the form of *Drame*, Barthes emphasizes that it is both poem and novel, and therefore again comparable to Dante's *Vita nuova*:

> Cette substance [*Drame*] est nommée par son auteur [Sollers] : *roman*. S'il paraît encore aujourd'hui provocant d'appeler *roman* un livre sans anecdote (visible) et sans personnages (prénommés), c'est que nous sommes encore dans l'étonnement condescendant d'un traducteur de Dante, Delécluze (1841), qui voyait dans la *Vie nouvelle 'un ouvrage curieux parce qu'il est écrit sous trois formes (mémoires, roman, poème) développées simultanément'*, et qui s'estimait devoir *'prévenir le lecteur de cette singularité…pour lui épargner la peine de débrouiller l'espèce de confusion d'images et d'idées que ce système de narration fait naître à une première lecture'*, après quoi ledit Delécluze passe à ce qui l'intéresse beaucoup plus, la 'personne' de Béatrice.
>
> (The author [Sollers] calls this substance [*Drame*] a *novel*. If it still seems provocative nowadays to use the term *novel* to describe a book which has no (visible) anecdote, and no (named) characters, this is because we are still suffering from the same condescending surprise of one of Dante's translators, Delécluze (1841), who saw the *Vita Nuova* as '*a curious work, since it is written under three forms (as memoirs, as a novel, as a poem) which are developed simultaneously'*, and who thought it his duty to '*warn the reader of this peculiarity…in order to spare him the trouble of unravelling the kind of confusion of images and ideas which this way of telling the story gives birth to on first reading*' – after which the said Delécluze moves on to what he finds much more interesting, the 'person' of Beatrice.)[44]

Barthes compares Sollers and Dante as formally innovative and therefore potentially disorientating writers. More precisely, Barthes borrows from Delécluze the idea of a work in 'three forms'. This idea unites Delécluze's reading of Dante's *Vita nuova*, Barthes's reading of Sollers's *Drame*, and ultimately, as we will see, Barthes's presentation of his own *Vita Nova* project.[45] It is also present in Sollers's essay on Dante, where Dante's *Vita nuova* is described as engaging 'trois niveaux d'énonciation' ('three levels of enunciation'), narrative, poems, and commentary, which eventually merge in the *Commedia*.[46]

There are two further references to Dante in Barthes's essay on Sollers. The first uses lines from *Inferno* to illustrate, in a footnote, a comment about 'un ancien mythe : celui du monde comme Livre, de l'écriture tracée à même la terre' ('an ancient myth: that of the world as Book, of words inscribed in the earth itself').[47] The second points to a

further important point of intersection between Sollers, Dante, and Barthes: a self-reflexive use of language, often manifested as a penchant for self-commentary. Barthes observes that with *Drame* Sollers has broken a taboo in seeking to 'faire du langage un *sujet*, et cela à travers le langage même' ('making language into a *subject*, and doing so through language itself').[48] A footnote (from the original version of the essay) adds that:

> C'est ce tabou que Dante – entre autres – a secoué, lorsqu'il a fait de ses poèmes et de leur commentaire technique une seule œuvre (*La Vita Nova*), et plus précisément encore lorsque, dans ce livre, s'adressant à sa ballade (*Ballade, va trouver Amour…*), il repousse l'objection selon laquelle on ne saurait à qui il parle sous prétexte que 'la ballade n'est rien d'autre que ce que j'en dis'.
>
> (It is this taboo which Dante – among others – threw off when he made his poems and the technical commentary on them into one and the same work (the *Vita Nuova*), and even more precisely when, in this book, addressing his ballad ('Ballad, go off and discover love') he rejects the objection that nobody will know who he is talking to with the argument that 'the ballad is nothing but what I say of it'.)[49]

This point is particularly interesting, since in republishing this essay in 1968 Barthes adds some notes (in italics) that he also explicitly presents as a form of self-commentary. In an introductory paragraph to the second published version of the essay, Barthes writes:

> *Le texte que voici a été publié dans* Critique*, en* 1965*, quand a paru* Drame*, de Philippe Sollers (aux éditions du Seuil). Si l'auteur y ajoute aujourd'hui un commentaire, c'est d'abord pour participer à l'élaboration continue d'une définition de l'écriture, qu'il est nécessaire de corriger en rapport et en complicité avec ce qui s'écrit autour de lui ; c'est aussi pour représenter le droit de l'écrivain à dialoguer avec ses propres textes ; la glose est certes une forme timide de dialogue (puisqu'elle respecte la partition de deux auteurs, au lieu de mêler vraiment leurs écritures) ; menée par soi-même sur son propre texte, elle peut néanmoins accréditer l'idée qu'un texte est à la fois définitif (on ne saurait l'améliorer, profiter de l'histoire qui passe pour le rendre rétroactivement vrai) et infiniment ouvert (il ne s'ouvre pas sous l'effet d'une correction, d'une censure, mais sous l'action, sous le supplément d'autres écritures,*

> *qui l'entraînent dans l'espace général du texte multiple) ; à ce compte, l'écrivain doit tenir ses anciens textes pour des textes autres, qu'il reprend, cite ou déforme, comme il ferait d'une multitude d'autres signes.*
>
> (*The text which follows appeared in* Critique*, in 1965, after the publication of Philippe Sollers's* Drame *(Editions du Seuil). My first reason for adding a commentary of my own is to take part in the continuing attempt to define what is meant by 'writing' ('*écriture*'), a definition which must be continually adjusted in relation to what is being written today and in complicity with it. I also wanted to demonstrate the right of the author to take part in a dialogue with his own texts. Commentary is undoubtedly a timid form of dialogue since it allows two authors to perform different parts, instead of mingling their texts genuinely together. When applied by the author himself to his own text, it can nevertheless give some standing to the idea that a text is at one and the same time definitive (the author cannot improve it, taking advantage of what is happening here and now in order to give it a retrospective truth) and infinitely open (the text cannot be opened out by being corrected or censored, but only under the action, under the addition of the other writings, which draw it into the general space of the multiple text). In this respect, the writer should look upon his earlier texts as something entirely different, something which he can take up again, which he can quote or distort as he would do with a multitude of other signs.*)[50]

Barthes is writing about *Drame* as a new *Vita nuova*, in an essay which (in the revised version of 1968) borrows techniques from both, in particular as concerns the art of self-commentary.

This supplementary introductory paragraph to the essay 'Drame, poème, roman' grasps something quite fundamental about Dante's *Vita nuova*; that is, the freedom of writers to return to and distort their own earlier texts, in a mode which (in relation to Dante's *libello*) Manuele Gragnolati has rightly characterised as performative.[51] Indeed, the *Vita nuova* demonstrates precisely the possibility of bestowing '*retrospective truth*' on earlier texts through distortion and rewriting.[52] Barthes's added opening also brings to the fore questions about the value of commentary, which suggest the Dantean inspiration of *Critique et vérité*, published the year following the 1965 Dante anniversary. From this perspective, this text

represents not only a defensive response to Raymond Picard (the essay's explicit catalyst) but also a continuation of a Dantean meditation on the permeability of the roles of author and critic (or *commentator*).

The Role of Commentary

The perspective of Dante's *Vita nuova*, in particular drawing on Barthes's earlier analysis from his essay on *Drame*, allows us to reconsider the proposed form of Barthes's *Vita Nova* as it emerges in the '"Longtemps"' lecture and in *La Préparation du roman*. Two aspects in particular are fundamental: on the one hand, the idea of Dante's *Vita nuova* as a generically hybrid, mixed text comprising 'three forms' (a term borrowed from Delécluze); on the other hand (and connected to this hybridity), the incorporation of self-commentary into the text. As Barthes highlights, a key innovation of Dante's *Vita nuova* was that the author 'made his poems and the technical commentary on them into one and the same work'.[53]

The idea of a work in 'three forms' resonates with the question of a 'third form' that Barthes elaborates in the '"Longtemps"' lecture in relation to Proust. Proust offers to Barthes the example of a writer who hesitated and vacillated, but who was ultimately successful in producing a *magnum opus*. Barthes connects this vacillation to the period after the death of Proust's mother and to Proust's uncertainty as to how to choose between 'le côté de l'Essai (de la Critique) et le côté du Roman' ('the way of the Essay (of Criticism) and the way of the Novel').[54] The solution was to evade this binary and establish a '*tierce forme*' ('*third form*') or 'troisième genre' ('third genre'): 'roman ? essai ? Aucun des deux ou les deux à la fois' ('novel? essay? Neither one, or both at once').[55] Inspired by the example of Proust, Barthes declared that his *Vita Nova* ought similarly to constitute a 'new practice of writing' involving 'the search, the discovery, the practice of a new form'.[56] What is evident after the detour via Barthes's essay on *Drame* is that this 'new form' is indebted not only to Proust but also to Dante, and in particular to the peculiar 'three forms' (memoirs, novel, poem) of the *Vita nuova* observed by the text's first French translator, Delécluze.

It is in relation to this Dantean mixing of forms that it is useful to turn to Barthes's final lecture course, *La Préparation du roman*. This course relates Barthes's desire to write a novel, taking as his inspiration two polar

models: the haiku and Proust. Barthes is keenly aware of the seemingly insurmountable challenges posed by this bipolarity:

> Mon problème : passer de la Notation (du Présent) au Roman, d'une forme brève, fragmentée (les "notes") à une forme longue, continue.
>
> (My problem: how to pass from the Notation (of the Present) to the Novel, from a short, fragmented form ('notes') to a long, continuous form.)[57]

The 'three forms' of Dante's *Vita nuova* offer a solution to this 'problem', through a work that successfully juxtaposes poetry and narrative. Consequently, the choice of the Dantean title *Vita Nova* suggests not merely a thematic but also a formal debt to Dante. While it cannot reasonably be claimed that Barthes's *Vita Nova* would have taken the precise form of a prosimetrum,[58] it is nonetheless striking that Dante's *Vita nuova* offers a very promising example of formal invention that is able to overcome the dichotomy between long and short forms delineated above. Barthes's establishment of a formal dichotomy proves unstable and even untenable; his 'problem' is challenging but far from insurmountable.

As well as the productiveness of Dante's *Vita nuova* as a formal hybrid, this work is also attractive to Barthes for its integration of commentary into a narrative space.[59] From this perspective, Dante's *Vita nuova* approaches even more closely the 'third form' of Proust's novel as read by Barthes, since it integrates novelistic and essayistic strands. What Barthes and Dante share above all is this penchant for commentary and self-commentary, bolstered by the recognition of the artistic, literary merits of such endeavours. Famously, the Dante of the *Vita nuova* assumes a number of previously disparate roles: *auctor* (author), *scriptor* (scribe), *compilator* (compiler), and *commentator* (commentator).[60] The narrator is presented from the outset as the author of poems preserved in his 'Book of Memory', which it is his task to copy out, order, and expound:

> In quella parte del libro de la mia memoria dinanzi a la quale poco si potrebbe leggere, si trova una rubrica la quale dice: *Incipit vita nova*. Sotto la quale rubrica io trovo scritte le parole le quali è mio intendimento d'assemplare in questo libello; e se non tutte, almeno la loro sentenzia.

> (In my Book of Memory, in the early part where there is little to be read, there comes a chapter with the rubric: Incipit vita nova. It is my intention to copy into this little book the words I find written under that heading – if not all of them, at least the essence of their meaning.)[61]

Dante's assumption of the role of *commentator* in his *Vita nuova* is unusual, since it entails self-commentary.[62] By juxtaposing narrative and commentary alongside poetry and and poetic analysis, Dante creates a unique form that integrates commentary into this idiosyncratic literary space. In this respect Dante's *Vita nuova* is more radical than his *Convivio*, which instead – though also a form of self-commentary – emphasizes a more traditional hierarchy between prose commentary and poetry, the former being 'servo' ('servant'), 'subietto' ('subject'), and 'obediente' ('obedient') to the latter, its 'signore' ('master').[63]

The four medieval terms describing the different forms of authorship are familiar to Barthes. They are cited and glossed, for instance, at the end of *Critique et vérité*.[64] Indeed, it is in this same text that we find a continuation of the discussion of Dante by Barthes and Sollers from the previous year. For a start, Barthes echoes his description of Dante as having disobeyed the 'taboo' of 'making language into a *subject*, and doing so through language itself'.[65] As Barthes comments, this time of the accusations levelled by Picard and others against 'la nouvelle critique' ('new criticism'), 'ce qui n'est pas toléré, c'est que le langage puisse parler du langage' ('what is not tolerated is that language should talk about language').[66] In Barthes's conception, the task of the critic – precisely, to 'talk about language' – is thus aligned with Dante's project in the *Vita nuova*.

Barthes clarifies towards the end of the essay that he considers the roles of critic and commentator to coincide: 'Le critique n'est rien d'autre qu'un *commentator*, mais il l'est pleinement' ('The critic is nothing other than a *commentator*, but he is fully that').[67] More radically, Barthes also seeks to break down boundaries between criticism and literature, validating the work of commentary as a literary undertaking. Thus the critic is not only a *commentator* but also an *auctor*; 'le critique devient à son tour écrivain' ('the critic […] becomes a writer in his turn'), since 'l'acte critique' ('the act of criticism') is to be recognised as 'un acte de pleine écriture' ('a complete act of writing').[68] Here, as in Dante's *Vita nuova*, we witness the privileging of critical commentary and the merging of traditionally separate roles within one single writer.

Appropriately, it is at this juncture that Barthes refers to Sollers's essay on Dante, in particular its titular phrase 'la traversée de l'écriture' (here translated as 'this "journey across writing"').[69] For Sollers this phrase 'implique à la fois une lecture et une écriture' ('implies at once a reading and a writing') in the context of his wider investigation of Dante's relationship to language.[70] Barthes also identifies the present '*crise générale du Commentaire*' ('*general crisis of commentary*') as harking back to a similar crisis witnessed in the shift from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, that is, in the time of Dante.[71] Further, in his defence of language as symbolic, plural, and open to interpretation, Barthes cites as a key historical example the four medieval levels of Scriptural exegesis (literal, allegorical, moral, anagogical) that underpin Dante's *Commedia*.[72] In an interview from March 1970, Barthes predicts a time when 'la distinction entre l'œuvre littéraire et le commentaire critique disparaîtra peut-être. Voilà du moins ce que je souhaite' ('the distinction between literary work and critical commentary will perhaps disappear. This at least is my wish').[73] Yet as Barthes had observed earlier in his essay on *Drame*, this distinction is no longer tenable already by the time of Dante's *Vita nuova*, where the author 'made his poems and the technical commentary on them into one and the same work'.[74]

The same notion of combining creative and critical activities is a key part of what Barthes's *Vita Nova* owes to its Dantean namesake, especially as incarnated in Barthes's final lecture course devoted to *La Préparation du roman*. This lecture course has been considered as a sort of 'mode d'emploi', 'compagnon de route', and 'laboratoire' ('manual', 'travelling companion', and 'laboratory') for the *Vita Nova*, and therefore as subservient to the envisaged literary project.[75] Yet in the Dantean light of the present investigation the likelihood emerges that Barthes's *Vita Nova* would, following Dante, have been a mixture of forms including self-commentary.[76] In this manner, the '"Longtemps"' lecture, *La Préparation du roman*, and the surviving plans all become central to and even part of the *Vita Nova* project, rather than merely preliminary products destined to be superseded. Indeed, commentary comes to occupy entirely the place of the absent, desired, anticipated literary work.

To conclude, bringing together texts from the mid-1960s and late 1970s demonstrates that Barthes is a passionate, idiosyncratic reader but also a critic and *commentator* of Dante. For Barthes, reading Dante leads to a desire to compare Dante to other writers, such as Sollers and Proust. Reading Dante also unleashes Barthes's own identification with Dante in terms of mourning and a desire to write. Ultimately, Barthes's reading of

Dante is manifested in both commentary and writing, and indeed in the claim – inspired by Dante – for commentary as writing. In his own way, Barthes joins forces with innumerable other readers, critics, and translators who have fallen under the spell of Dante and sought to respond creatively to his works.

Notes

[1] I thank all readers of earlier versions of this essay, especially the usual suspects David Bowe, Simon Park, Matthew Salisbury, and Francesca Southerden. I am also grateful to the organisers of the following conferences, where aspects of this work were first aired: '"Dante Now": Trends in Dante Studies 2016', *International Medieval Congress*, University of Leeds (5 July 2016); *'L'ombra sua torna': Dante, the twentieth century and beyond*, University of Leeds (24 March 2017); *The Shape of Return: Progress, Process, and Repetition in Medieval Culture*, Institute for Cultural Inquiry, Berlin (30 September 2017).

[2] Important exceptions to this observation include a chapter on Barthes's *S/Z*: 'The Four Senses of Roland Barthes', in Bruce Holsinger, *The Premodern Condition: Medievalism and the Making of Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), pp. 152-94. On Barthes and poetry, see *Barthes Studies*, 2 (2016), available online at http://sites.cardiff.ac.uk/barthes/volumes/volume-articles/?q=volume-2. The relationship between Barthes and Italy has been most comprehensively studied by 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.

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

[4] Barthes refers in his writings to several different translations of Dante, with his preferred translations being Dante, *La Divine Comédie*, trans. by Alexandre Masseron (Paris: Albin Michel, 1950) and Dante, *Œuvres complètes*, trans. by André Pézard (Paris: Gallimard, 1965).

[5] Evidence for this *Vita Nova* (discussed below) was first published in Roland Barthes, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Éric Marty, 3 vols (Paris: Seuil, 1993-95), vol. III, pp. 1287-94, and subsequently reprinted in Barthes, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Marty, new edn, 5 vols (Paris: Seuil, 2002), vol. V, pp. 994-1001 with transcription pp. 1007-18. Hereafter I refer to this second expanded edition by the abbreviation *OC* followed by the volume number. For an English translation of these drafts see Roland Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel: Lecture Courses and Seminars at the Collège de France (1978-1979 and 1979-1980)*, ed. by Nathalie Léger, trans. by Kate Briggs (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), pp. 389-406. Most recently, additional facsimiles of selected index cards from the archive have been published in Roland Barthes, *Album: inédits, correspondances et varia*, ed. by Éric Marty (Paris: Seuil, 2015), pp. XLI-LXIV.

[6] 'Séance du 2 décembre 1978', in Roland 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), pp. 25-34; 'Session of December 2, 1978', in *The Preparation of the Novel*, pp. 3-9. As Nathalie Léger already highlights in her preface to this text, '*La Préparation du roman* est engagé sous la conduite de Dante' ('*The Preparation of the Novel* was undertaken with Dante as

a guide'). See Léger, 'Préface', in *La Préparation du roman*, p. 20; Léger, 'Editor's Preface', in *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. xxi.

[7] Roland Barthes, '"Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure"', in *OC* V, pp. 459-70; '*Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure*', in Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, trans. by Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 277-90. I refer to the English translation subsequently as '*Longtemps*' alone.

[8] Philippe Sollers, *Drame* (Paris: Seuil, 1965); *Event*, trans. by Bruce Benderson and Ursule Molinaro (New York: Red Dust, 1986). Barthes's essay, 'Drame, poème, roman', first appeared in *Critique*, 218 (July 1965), 591-603, then in *Théorie d'ensemble* (Paris: Seuil, 1968), pp. 25-40, and later in Roland Barthes, *Sollers écrivain* (Paris: Seuil, 1979), pp. 11-45, although I cite the essay as it appears in *OC* V, pp. 583-600, with English translation as 'Drama, Poem, Novel' from Roland Barthes, *Sollers Writer*, trans. by Philip Thody (London: Athlone Press, 1987), pp. 39-67.

[9] On this first French translation, see Cristina Trinchero, 'La prima traduzione francese della "Vita Nuova" nell'opera dell'italianista Étienne-Jean Delécluze', *Studi francesi*, 176 (2015), 302-18.

[10] Barthes, *Critique et vérité* (Paris: Seuil, 1966), hereafter cited from Barthes, *OC* II, pp. 757-801; *Criticism and Truth*, trans. by Katrine Pilcher Keuneman (London: Continuum, 2007). The explicit catalyst for this text is Raymond Picard's attack on Barthes in *Nouvelle Critique ou nouvelle imposture?* (Paris: Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1965). On this polemical context see Colin Davis, *After Poststructuralism: Reading, Stories and Theory* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 9-33.

[11] Of the many significant essays on Barthes and Proust I will signal here only Antoine Compagnon, 'Proust et moi', in *Autobiography, Historiography, Rhetoric: A Festschrift in Honor of Frank Paul Bowman*, ed. by Mary Donaldson-Evans, Lucienne Frappier-Mazur, and Gerald Prince (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994), pp. 59-73.

[12] Diana Knight, *Barthes and Utopia: Space, Travel, Writing* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 252.

[13] For further comparative consideration of Dante and Proust, in part inspired by Barthes, see Jennifer Rushworth, *Discourses of Mourning in Dante, Petrarch, and Proust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[14] Throughout I cite Dante's works from the online Princeton Dante Project: http://etcweb.princeton.edu/dante/pdp/. The Italian edition of the *Commedia* is by Giorgio Petrocchi, with English translation by Robert Hollander and Jean Hollander; Dante's *Convivio* is translated by Richard H. Lansing; Dante's *Vita nuova* by Mark Musa.

[15] Barthes, *OC* V, p. 465; '*Longtemps*', p. 284.

[16] Barthes, *OC* V, p. 467; '*Longtemps*', p. 286.

[17] On earlier uses of this phrase by Barthes, without an association with mourning, see Badmington, *The Afterlives of Roland Barthes*, pp. 35-36 n. 50. On

the conversionary aspects, 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.

[18] Barthes, *OC* V, p. 467; '*Longtemps*', p. 286.

[19] Especially since Dante, *Vita nova*, ed. by Guglielmo Gorni (Turin: Einaudi, 1996), *dantisti* have had a choice between the title in Latin (*Vita nova*) or Italian (*Vita nuova*), the former strongly argued by Gorni. Barthes himself is inconsistent as regards Dante's text, but I refer to it as *Vita nuova* in order to differentiate it from Barthes's own *Vita Nova*.

[20] For a list of possible models, see Albert Russell Ascoli, *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 181-85, although Zygmunt G. Barański has instead stressed that the *Vita nuova* 'constitutes a new literary genre': see his '"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. by Maggie Kilgour and Elena Lombardi (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), p. 23.

[21] Barthes, *OC* V, p. 467; '*Longtemps*', p. 286.

[22] *La Préparation du roman*, p. 232; *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. 170.

[23] *Vita nuova*, XVII, 1.

[24] *Vita nuova*, XLII, 1-2.

[25] See, for instance, Robert Pogue Harrison, *The Body of Beatrice* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), pp. 144-57.

[26] For 'intertextual twinklings' between Barthes's *Mourning Diary* and *Vita Nova*, see Badmington, *The Afterlives of Roland Barthes*, pp. 23-27.

[27] On the utopian Barthes, see Diana Knight, *Barthes and Utopia*, as well as – focussed on the plans published in 1995 – Knight, 'Idle Thoughts: Barthes's *Vita Nova*', *Nottingham French Studies*, 36.1 (1997), 88-98. In the '"Longtemps"' lecture Barthes himself refers to his *Vita Nova* as 'Ce roman utopique' ('this utopian novel'): *OC* V, p. 470; '*Longtemps*', p. 289. Knight's initial assessment of the *Vita Nova* is developed by Lucy O'Meara in *Roland Barthes at the Collège de France* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012), pp. 163-99 (I take the phrase 'not intended to be written' from O'Meara, p. 164). The plans are also usefully evaluated in Maja 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.

[28] See Tiphaine Samoyault, *Roland Barthes* (Paris: Seuil, 2015), pp. 649-85, and Barthes, *Album*, pp. XLI-LXIV.

[29] Barthes, *OC* V, pp. 1011-12. In the following note the phrase also appears in the singular (*OC* V, p. 1013); both times it is left untranslated by Kate Briggs. Barthes himself cites as his reference *Inferno*, II. 139-42, where Dante-pilgrim heralds Virgil as '"tu duca, tu segnore e tu maestro"' ('"You are my leader, you my lord and master"', v. 140), although the phrase recalls more precisely the earlier homage: '"Tu se' lo mio maestro e 'l mio autore"' ('"You are my teacher and my author"', *Inferno*, I. 85).

[30] Barthes, *Album*, p. LII (English translation my own).
[31] Barthes, *Album*, p. LII (again, English translation my own).
[32] See 'Dante Alighieri', in Jean-Michel Gardair, *Écrivains italiens* (Paris: Larousse, 1978), pp. 35-53. The chapter includes information about Dante's life and works, and an overview of the structure of the *Commedia*. In his weekly column in *Le Nouvel Observateur* (18 December 1978–26 March 1979), Barthes also refers to Gardair's chapters on Giordano Bruno and Pietro Aretino (see *OC* V, pp. 639-40).
[33] See Philippe Sollers, *Paradis* (Paris: Seuil, 1981), not to mention *Paradis II* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986); *Le Cœur absolu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987); *La Divine Comédie: Entretiens avec Benoît Chantre* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2000).
[34] Philippe Sollers, *Vers le Paradis: Dante au Collège des Bernardins* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2010), p. 27. The text of the book is based on a lecture given by Sollers on 1 July 2009; translation my own.
[35] *Tel Quel*, 23 (1965). On the history of the journal more generally, see Patrick Ffrench, *The Time of Theory: A History of 'Tel Quel' (1960-1983)* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995) and Philippe Forest, *Histoire de 'Tel Quel': 1960-1982* (Paris: Seuil, 1995).
[36] The emphases are as cited in the special issue of *Tel Quel*. An English translation (which of course loses the play on *Tel Quel* / 'tal qual') is as follows: 'but of my own accord | I was already doing what he wished' (*Paradiso*, XXXIII. 50-51). The passage refers to the final guide of the *Commedia*, St Bernard, who is instructing Dante-pilgrim – needlessly, it turns out – to direct his gaze upwards.
[37] *Tel Quel*, 23 (1965), 12-33, subsequently reprinted in Sollers, *L'Écriture et l'expérience des limites* (Paris: Seuil, 1968), pp. 14-47, although I cite throughout from the essay's first appearance in *Tel Quel*. In English see 'Dante and the Traversal of Writing', in Philippe Sollers, *Writing and the Experience of Limits*, ed. by David Hayman, trans. by Philip Barnard with David Hayman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), pp. 11-43.
[38] Sollers, *L'Amitié de Roland Barthes* (Paris: Seuil, 2015), p. 65; *The Friendship of Roland Barthes*, trans. by Andrew Brown (Cambridge: Polity, 2017), p. 59. The postcard is dated simply 24 August, with an editorial footnote ascribing 1965 as the year.
[39] Barthes, *OC* II, p. 782; *Criticism and Truth*, p. 24.
[40] Barthes, *OC* III, pp. 1037-38.
[41] See Edoardo Sanguineti, 'Dante, *Inf.* VIII', trans. by Jean Thibaudeau, *Tel Quel*, 23 (1965), p. 35 and Barthes, 'Edoardo Sanguineti', in *OC* II, pp. 1241-42.
[42] Sollers, *L'Amitié de Roland Barthes*, p. 18; *The Friendship of Roland Barthes*, p. 12.
[43] Barthes, *OC* V, p. 584 n. 1; Barthes, *Sollers Writer*, p. 40 n. 1.
[44] Barthes, *OC* V, p. 584; *Sollers Writer*, p. 41. For the quotation from Delécluze, see the translator's preface in Dante Alighieri, *La Divine Comédie: traduction nouvelle par A. Brizeux; La Vie nouvelle, traduite par M. E.-J. Delécluze* (Paris:

Charpentier, 1841), p. iii. I thank Riccardo Raimondo for assistance in consulting this text. Barthes somewhat condenses Delécluze's observations, which first identify the *Vita nuova* as both memoir and novel, and then explain the 'trois formes' ('three forms') as prose narrative, poetry, and commentary.

[45] Andy Stafford also notes in passing that in quoting this phrase from Delécluze Barthes is 'prefiguring his own *vita nova*': Stafford, *Roland Barthes, Phenomenon and Myth: An Intellectual Biography* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), p. 132.

[46] Sollers, 'Dante et la traversée de l'écriture', pp. 20, 23; 'Dante and the Traversal of Writing', pp. 22, 27.

[47] Barthes, *OC* V, p. 595; *Sollers Writer*, p. 59. The lines cited are from *Inferno*, XXIV. 4-6.

[48] Barthes, *OC* V, p. 599; *Sollers Writer*, p. 66.

[49] Barthes, *OC* V, p. 599 n. 3; *Sollers Writer*, p. 66 n. 22.

[50] Barthes, *OC* V, p. 583; *Sollers Writer*, p. 39.

[51] See Manuele Gragnolati, 'Authorship and Performance in Dante's *Vita nova*', in *Aspects of the Performative in Medieval Culture*, ed. by Manuele Gragnolati and Almut Suerbaum (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010), pp. 125-41.

[52] See Manuele Gragnolati, 'Without Hierarchy: Diffraction, Performance, and Re-writing as *Kippbild* in Dante's *Vita nova*', in *Renaissance Rewritings*, ed. by Helmut Pfeiffer, Irene Fantappiè, and Tobias Roth (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2017), pp. 9-24.

[53] Barthes, *Sollers Writer*, p. 66 n. 22.

[54] Barthes, *OC* V, p. 460; '*Longtemps*', p. 278.

[55] Barthes, *OC* V, p. 461; '*Longtemps*', p. 280.

[56] Barthes, '*Longtemps*', p. 286.

[57] Barthes, *La Préparation du roman*, p. 53; *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. 23. On the role of fragmentation and the influence instead of German Romanticism in *La Préparation*, see O'Meara, *Roland Barthes at the Collège de France*, pp. 175-82.

[58] See, however, for a reading that highlights the importance of poetry in *La Préparation*, 'Roland Barthes en saint Polycarpe', in Antoine Compagnon, *Les Antimodernes: de Joseph de Maistre à Roland Barthes* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), pp. 404-40.

[59] See also Zygmunt G. Barański, 'The Roots of Dante's Plurilingualism: "Hybridity" and Language in the *Vita nova*', in *Dante's Plurilingualism: Authority, Knowledge, Subjectivity*, ed. by Sara Fortuna, Manuele Gragnolati, and Jürgen Trabant (Oxford: Legenda, 2010), pp. 98-121.

[60] These four Latin terms are used, for instance, by St Bonaventure in his commentary on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard, as cited in A. J. Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages*, 2nd edn (Aldershot: Wildwood House, 1988), p. 94. On Dante's *Vita nuova* as uniting all four forms of authorship, see Michelangelo Picone, 'Leggere la *Commedia* di Dante', in *Lectura Dantis Turicensis*, ed. by Georges Güntert and

Michelangelo Picone, 3 vols (Florence: Casati, 2000-02), vol. I: *Inferno*, pp. 13-25 (especially pp. 15-16).

[61] Dante, *Vita nuova*, I, 1. For discussion of this book imagery see Charles S. Singleton, *An Essay on the 'Vita nuova'* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1949).

[62] On this aspect see, for instance, Claudette Perrus, 'Dante critique de Dante', in *Les Commentaires et la naissance de la critique littéraire: France/Italie (XIVe-XVIe siècles)*, ed. by Gisèle Mathieu-Castellani and Michel Plaisance (Paris: Aux Amateurs de Livres, 1990), pp. 83-89.

[63] See Dante, *Convivio*, I, v, 6.

[64] Barthes, *OC* II, p. 800. Barthes also references the four forms in 'L'ancienne rhétorique', *Communications*, 16 (1970), 184-85.

[65] Barthes, *Sollers Writer*, p. 66.

[66] Barthes, *OC* II, p. 761; *Criticism and Truth*, p. 2.

[67] Barthes, *OC* II, p. 800; *Criticism and Truth*, p. 39.

[68] Barthes, *OC* II, pp. 781, 782; *Criticism and Truth*, pp. 23, 24.

[69] Barthes, *OC* II, p. 782; *Criticism and Truth*, p. 24.

[70] Sollers, 'Dante et la traversée de l'écriture', p. 32; 'Dante and the Traversal of Writing', p. 40.

[71] Barthes, *OC* II, p. 783; *Criticism and Truth*, p. 24.

[72] Barthes, *OC* II, p. 784; *Criticism and Truth*, p. 26. These four levels are discussed by Dante in *Convivio*, II, i, 2-7. As Holsinger has shown, Barthes also engages with these four levels explicitly in his writing on Ignatius Loyola and implicitly in *S/Z*, and is likely influenced by Henri de Lubac's work on medieval Biblical exegesis: see Holsinger, 'The Four Senses of Roland Barthes'.

[73] Roland Barthes, 'Critique et autocritique', interview with André Bourin for *Les Nouvelles littéraires* (5 March 1970), reprinted in *OC* III, p. 648; English translation my own.

[74] Barthes, *Sollers Writer*, p. 66 n. 22.

[75] These three terms are taken from Claude Coste, '*Vita Nova*: notes pour un roman de Roland Barthes', *op. cit.: revue de littératures française et comparée*, 12 (Spring 1999), 114, part of a special issue on *L'Œuvre inachevée: actes du colloque de l'Université de Pau 13-14-15 novembre 1998*, ed. by Christine Andreucci, Jean-Yves Pouilloux, and Régis Salado. Coste reads the *Vita Nova* project both in a Proustian light and as already partially fulfilled in Barthes's *La Chambre claire* (*Camera Lucida*).

[76] In this sense, the *Vita Nova* fails to embrace the 'simplicity' of refusing a meta-literary path, presented as desirable in *La Préparation du roman*, pp. 378-80 (*The Preparation of the Novel*, pp. 299-301).

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