

Helga Finter

**Love for Letters or Reading as Performance:  
Carmelo Bene's *Lectura Dantis***

Lecture for the faculty of Arts and Literature at the University of Notre Dame Ind., April 12<sup>th</sup>,  
2006

Very pleased to present to the Faculty of Arts and Literature a research topic, I want to speak about an issue which may concern both – literary studies and theatre studies. I shall discuss a type of performance which in recent years has become more and more popular and is now an integral part of many theater programs in Europe: the reading of great texts of national literatures by professional readers, actors or theatre directors.

To focus on only the German context, a certain evolution of this type of performance can be diagnosed: reading in public was, in the fifties and sixties of the last century, still a virtuoso form of declamation, - some of us may remember the numinous sound of voices like that of Klaus Kinski, whispering François Villon or that of Oskar Werner, reciting the “Earl-King”: as source of the word, their candle-lit illuminated mouth raised present of what they were speaking of. But this ‘mise en scène’ of the spoken word was taken over at the end of the seventies by a modified form of recitation which did not primarily stress the virtuoso’s voice, but foregrounded the text and its semiotic potentials, as for instance did the reserved *Hölderlinlektüren* by Bruno Ganz. During the following decade, writers and poets themselves, like Ernst Jandl or Heiner Müller, arrived on the scene. Today this genre is also performed by directors, for instance, may I quote here the *Faust Reading* marathon, Peter Stein did last year in sold-out theatres and which is promised to get a continuation this season with Schiller’s *Wallenstein*.

This phenomenon is not a regional curiosity of the German language area, but quite European. I would like to quote here the reading part of Giorgio Strehler’s *Progetto Faust*, 1990-92, at Milan’s Piccolo Teatro, or also Jean Marie Villégier’s reading of the first version of Flaubert’s *Tentation de Saint Antoine* or the presentation of a text montage from Madame de Lafayette’s *Princesse de Clèves*, which the actor and current director of the Comédie Française, Marcel Bozonnet, has been proposing for 10 years again and again in a costume of that time, sustained by a subtle light design. Also writers and poets notorious for the difficulty of their texts, like Philippe Sollers with *Paradis* or Pierre Guyotat are practicing the reading

performance themselves or pass it over to chosen actors, like Valère Novarina with his *Discours aux animaux*, read by André Marcon for instance.

The actual public success of this genre, expanded by the sale of analogue and digital derivatives, seems to me valid to be questioned. Its impact exceeds in fact the evidence of star cult and spectacular curiosity. With these public readings or recitations, there emerges indeed the symptom of a crisis, for the rest also conjured by politicians: the crisis of reading. Its center nucleus is the relationship a singular human subject may have to the letter, to the written word. The chosen point of departure of my investigation will be the multiple relationship to a text which is paradigmatic for the question of reading: Dantes *Divina Commedia/ Divine Comedy* of 1301 to 1320. With this text I want to discuss some aspects of the relationship between human subjects and texts, first in regard to Jean Luc Godard's last movie *Notre musique* and then, after a theoretical excursion featuring the premises of reading practice, I want to submit this issue to a public *Lectura Dantis* by Carmelo Bene.

### *1. Love and Hate for Letters*

"I treat the relationship between text and image", says Jean Luc Godard at the beginning of his last film, *Notre musique*, appearing there as a filmmaker who presents his work to students in the French Institute of the destroyed city of Sarajevo. The relationship of text and image is also the topic of this film, the three parts of which are entitled with the names of the three *canticae* of Dante's comedy: *Inferno, Purgatorio, Paradiso*: Mute sequences of images taken from documentaries and fiction movies, underlayed by a Sibelius music and rhythmically assembled by black cuts, show the contemporary hell as an image arsenal of war violence and atrocity of the last centuries. The purgatory, in Dante the space of purification and penance, is here a place for reading: in the charcoaled ruins of the destroyed library of Sarajevo a lot of texts are read silently, murmured or spoken out loudly by their authors or fortuitous library visitors. On the contrary of Dante's mountain of penance, where a series of possible relations to the image and to scenic representation are experimented, Godard's purgatory displays different modalities of a subjective relationship to *écriture*: Each reader's expectation of paradise depends here on his singular desire, on this Janus-headed *movens* which just characterized in Dante the first two spaces of the other world: on the one hand, the *love* for the letter, for the word, on the other its *hate*. When love for the written word is lacking, when there is no transfer of desire onto the letter, then the voice, which could give them body with its breath and so *incarnate* them, is lacking also. Without love, lacking love, the relation to the

letter gives way to the Real in a Lacanian sense.<sup>1</sup> But also too much love implying an imaginary fusion with the body of the text, and proceeding so to *incorporate* the letter, becomes problematic. In Godard's movie, Olga, a passionate reader of Dostojevskij, is the witness of such an excess: loving the book to exceed in realizing herself the destiny of its heroes, at the same time, she hates the letters because of their incapacity to cope with the Real. Reading books with a love for letters so excessively that it turns to hate, becomes a source of violence: on the one hand love is a pretext here for an *acting out*, in which the reader fuses imaginarily with the letter, but on the other hand reading it can also become a pretext for a *passage à l'acte/ a turn into act*<sup>2</sup> which is a murderous rejection of the Symbolic, in Lacanian terms the 'foreclosure'/*forclusion* of the symbolic Law: this happens when Olga substitutes the symbolic by an *act*, that, we learn, employed a book as an envelope for the dynamite of her suicide bombing.

What causes this love to letters which awakens the voice of a text to life, which *incarnates* it? And what determines that hate-love which *incorporates* the voice of the Other, what determines the hate which forecloses this Other? What relationship creates this voice with the image?

Dante's *Divine Comedy* to which Godard refers with the tripartite structure of his movie, is indeed the key work of occidental literature permitting to answer such questions:

As Paul Claudel argued just in 1921 in his famous "Introduction à Dante", for that the reader of the *Divine Comedy* does not get lost in the forest of significations, he has to be patiently steered by the narrator in the right direction.<sup>3</sup> This guiding operates not only on the spiritual level of the reading process, but already on the *literal* level: A specific poetic structure contributes to guide the reader; it gives a symbolic frame to his desire, to the love or hate generated by the letter. This frame emphasizes the visionary word of the other world vision as a poetic voice supposed to be the dictated emanation of the divine *artifex*, creator and artist, which is god. The poetic structure is thus conceived as a *transcendental voice*. Its form obeys a Christian number symbolism: the *commedia*-verse is the *terza rima*, consisting of 33 syllables divided in three hendecasyllables - each line has 11 syllables - rhyming continually

---

<sup>1</sup> For Lacan, the Real, result of the double articulation of the Symbolic and the Imaginary, is the instance of the Impossible which lacks representation and is what the intervention of the Symbolic expulses from reality.

<sup>2</sup> Lacan distinguishes the *acting out* from the *passage à l'acte/ passage to the act*: acting out denies the symbolic still in midst a symbolic frame, it is a projection of the imaginary into the symbolic; the passage to the act is on the contrary a violent foreclosing of the symbolic and the affirmation of the real of dead: Cf. Jacques Lacan, *L'angoisse, Séminaire Livre X*, Paris 2004, 318sq.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Claudel, *Oeuvres en prose*, collection de la Pléiade, Paris 1965

according to the pattern aba, bcb, cdc etc. Each of the three *canticae* consisting of 33 *canti*, the poem forms with the initial *proemio* 100 *canti*, the number 100 corresponding to a perfect number. Referring through the symbolism of its ternary structure to the trinity and the age of Christ at his death, the space beyond is projected as emanation of that Other's breath, which is supposed to be the cause and reason of one's love for the letter and the word in Christian context. Love and desire caused by the letter, have to be guaranteed by the divine first love - *primo amore* -, origin of the creating Word: Getting the form of a ternary verse, poetic voice becomes a *transcendental* voice and poetic form *transfigures* so the great Other of the text.

This symbolic vocal framing of the three Other world places works as a poetic transcendental voice conditioning inner audio-visual representation: on the one hand, the verse permits to the reader to recreate with his inner ear the numerous polylogue, polyphone and polylinguistic voice images of the shade and beatified figures, whom Dante meets in these three dominions; on the other hand, departing from the vocal recreation of the voices through verse, the reader can now represent for his inner eye the shades of the damned and the penitents as well as the light figures of the beatified. The voice frame of the *terza rima* not only generates representation, it also works as a sort of protecting shield against the danger of narcissistic identification, in reminding of the *Otherness* of a transcendental voice. So the symbolic vocal verse instance has the further function of limiting the imaginary risk of seducing or terrifying body visions insofar as, in the quality of a transcendental verse, it is supposed to muffle considerably the spec(tac)ulary fascination.

Explicitly addressed to a lonely reader sitting mute on his bench,<sup>4</sup> Dante's *Divina Commedia* develops, due to its poetic structure, a theory of reading, which puts the relationship between letter and representation, text and image into the center. But this reading process is not considered as a merely mental one, because – directed by the framing symbolic voice – one has in the same time also to sub-vocalize with one's bodily inner ear the different singular voices of the other world habitants as voice images to make their body images appear in front of one's inner eye. The text's Other, here transfigured by the poem's verse as its voice, needs the reader's breath to be heard by him.

---

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Leo Spitzer, "The Addresses to the Reader in the *Commedia*", in: *Romanische Literaturstudien 1936-1956*, Tübingen: Francke, 1959; Erich Auerbach, *Literatursprache und Publikum in der lateinischen Spätantike und im Mittelalter*, Bern 1958

Dante's poem demands therefore a tri-fold animation of its dead letters, a tri-fold breath to come to live. It implies

- An actualization of the symbolic *transfiguration* of the Other, due to the *terza rima*
- An imaginary *incorporation* of the single figures' discourses, which puts forward the reader's desire
- A real *incarnation* of the body quality of those voice/s by breath.

Thus the single reader's relationship to language is demanded as relation to the instances which constitutes him as subject: the Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real, which knot the trifold Lacanian subject. Only an incarnation of the material vocality which is actualization of the text's literal level permits the projection of a mental representation, featuring the specific structures of the world beyond: there, not only each sinner and penitent shade or each beatified light figure is visibly signed in its *habitus* by the effect of its relationship to the original Word, but also the relationship to the original Word is impressed on the whole Other World's tripartition.

Concerning today's generally agnostic readers, the question is now put on, what may happen to reading, when Dante's Other, source of love for the letter, vanishes in the only now probable, universal horizon line of love for language.

## 2. Scenes of Reading

The question of voice and its relations to the letter is the center of the relationship between text and reader. What voice is the issue? Voice of the text or voice of the writer and reader? Or both or their in-between? A relation of representation, incorporation or an ego game? The relationship to the text's Other is knotted by voices the text proposes, the reader hears or thinks to understand and that he articulates loudly or with his inner voice. Mute and loud reading are contrary, because loud voice excludes all the possible other voices in becoming a loud one.

Several hypothesis have been proposed concerning the exchange between written letters and inner ear: Besides the famous scholastic short circuit between letter and *mens*, mentioned already by Augustinus in his *Confessions* and whose effects are still visible in today's theories

of reading in the cyber era<sup>5</sup>, poetic conceptions of text voice are current which suppose for instance an immediate exchange between body and body, between throat and throat: *vox gutturis*.<sup>6</sup> Loud reading on the contrary seems much more difficult to define: How to articulate a poem's utopian voice which aims to contain the whole language and which - in becoming the voice of the text - pretends to be both the mysterious voice dictating it?<sup>7</sup>

In a little text with the title "Une représentation de *Phèdre*/A representation of *Phèdre*"<sup>8</sup>, the French poet Yves Bonnefoy proposes a theatrical primal scene as a foundation of each performance of poetry. Its trigger is an excessive long pause between the two parts of an alexandrine, question is the first alexandrine in the third scene of the first act of Racine's *Phèdre*: The actress's long sustained breath after the first six syllables – "N'allons pas plus avant...."<sup>9</sup> – , interrupts the verse flow and lets the reader's attention glide from the voice to the actress's figure on stage.<sup>10</sup> The anxiety caused by the silence provokes the desire to see. Usually a voice heard in theatre remotes the conscience of the otherness of the word and gives to the spectator the rocking utopian scene feeling of an originally unity of body and text. But here the interruption of the vocal flow – one may think here of Klaus Michael Grueber's theatre directing –, the suspense of the pause, the silence, deny the memory of an anterior private mute reading of these verses and the manifest presence of the actress' body renders obvious the difference with the own body.

An anterior mute reading had formed with the projection of its inner glance a different representation, another relationship between body and voice. The actress's pause, the long hold up of the verse's flow transform a verse caesura, in Racine's text marked by a sole dot, which indicates a simple taking of breath, into a series of multiple interruption dots.

For Yves Bonnefoy this scene becomes an allegory of writing, experienced as waiting for the word of the Other, as waiting for the voice of the poem. But this scene refers too to the singularity of each reading act and with this to the incongruence of several readings of the same text. Contrasting the memory of a mute reading with its performance on stage, puts on

---

<sup>5</sup> Christian Vandendorde, *Du papyrus à l'hypertexte, Essai sur les mutations du texte et de la lecture*, Paris : La découverte 1999

<sup>6</sup> Pascal Quignard, *Les Paradisiaques. Dernier royaume IV*, Paris : Grasset, 2005, 106-109

<sup>7</sup> Jean Christophe Bailly, « Un chant est-il encore possible ? », in : *L'animal. Littératures, Arts&Philosophies*, N°17, Automne 2004, 126-137

<sup>8</sup> Yves Bonnefoy, „Une représentation de *Phèdre* » in : *Rue traversière et autres récits en rêves*, Paris 1992, 131-132

<sup>9</sup> The second part: „Demeurons, chère Oenone“

<sup>10</sup> She is for the poet deceiving.

trial by concrete bodies and voices the spectator's imaginary representations of a prior reading.

This collision of mute private and loud public reading underlines the *theatrical* character of each reading: reading brings the symbolic up with the reader's imaginary desire and the real of his body, appealing imaginary images and voice bodies with his inner voice. The act of reading is a performance producing representations for an other scene/ *ein anderer Schauplatz* (Freud). The general structure of such a reading scene should be discussed, before featuring - with Carmelo Bene's *Lectura Dantis* from the 31 July 1981 – a public reading proposing with this performance implicitly a theory of this poem's reading devices.

### 3. *Scaena/cena*

The act of reading is far from being mere deciphering or decoding of letters. The reader's relationship to *écriture* puts on the contrary a multiple relation to language on.<sup>11</sup> Aphasia research first and today research on reading problems, as for instance dyslexia, underlined this phenomenon.<sup>12</sup> Already Sigmund Freud in his "critical study" from 1891 "On Aphasia" has approached these linguistic troubles under the aspect of the relationship to spoken and written language.<sup>13</sup> Contrary to the purely physiological researches of his time, Freud distinguished different types of aphasia by their relationship to language. Based on the word unity,<sup>14</sup> he sketched for this purpose a theory of language acquisition regarding both the writing and the reading phenomenon: Freud differentiates there between 'word representation/image' (*Wortvorstellung*) and 'object representation/image' (*Sachvorstellung*) he also referred to 'object associations' (*Object-Assoziation*). Concerning the representation/image of a word, four aspects have furthermore to be considered: the 'representation of writing/writing image' (*Schriftvorstellung*), the 'sound representation/image', (*Klangvorstellung*), the 'reading representation', (*Lesevorstellung*) and finally the bodily 'kinaesthetic image', (*Bewegungsbild*) of writing, reading and articulating. In this context, Freud understands the mechanism of reading as result of a double relation: on the one hand reading is due to a

---

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Michel Picard, *La lecture comme jeu*, Paris : Minuit, 1989; Gérard Pommier, *Naissance et renaissance de l'écriture*, Paris:PUF, 1993 ; Murielle Gagnebin, *Pour une esthétique psychanalytique. L'artiste, stratège de l'Inconscient*, Paris 1994, 9-32

<sup>12</sup> Concerning dyslexia cf. the definitions and developments of Gérard Pommier, op.cit.:335-362; for an polemic approach of illetresm cf. Guy Debord, *Commentaires sur la Société du Spectacle*, Paris 1988

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Sigmund Freud, *Zur Auffassung der Aphasien. Eine kritische Studie.* [Leipzig/ Wien 1891], edited by Paul Vogel, in collaboration with Ingeborg Meyer-Palmedo, Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 1992

<sup>14</sup> We know today, that global intonation lines preside the acquisition of grammar and syntax – cf. David Crystal, *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*, Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press 1987, § 40 -; we know too, that the global word guide writing and reading cf. Pommier op.cit..

relation to language, recognized as the symbolic law of the Other and therefore heard as a voice, generating visual and acoustic writing, reading and sound representations. On the other hand, this reading is a result of the relation to the imaginary and the real of a body via kinesthetic images. Sound representations as well as kinesthetic images produce object representations appealing to all five senses.

Therefore in reading, loudly articulated or mute sub-articulated words can actualize an acoustic, visual or kinesthetic memory. Those affective energies which have been fixed to them in their first context can be reactivated in the meantime. These subsisting rests are solely aural, mnemonic rests of heard words, because for Freud, letter representation is secondary whereas the kinesthetic image has solely a maintaining function. These affective mnemonic rests fixed to the sound image of a word can later be activated by sound to favor the return of the repressed in form of affect energies.

For each human subject the relationship to the letter is thus mediated by representations and images on several levels: representations of the written, of the read and heard word and kinesthetic image of the spoken and written word. The relationship to language implies therefore an affective, motor and imaginary memory. Each reading, each listening spins it in a new way determined by singular desire and transfer.

Proceeding from Freud, let us now consider the poetic text. Over-determined by the sound material of its verse, by rhythm and image, it is a vocal text. Though different from the modulated sound of concrete voices, the voice of the text has to be articulated. To be heard by the reader, the Other of the text claims to be incarnated by a breath.<sup>15</sup> Even when mute, there is thus no immediate exchange between bodies; an inner or exterior voice has to articulate the text voice so that an image, a representation emerges in front of the inner eye of the reader. Theatricality of texts is thus linked to their poetic voice. Its sound potential attracts / draws the reading subject outside, produces the fusion of substances, Roland Barthes evoked as feature<sup>3</sup> of theatricality.<sup>16</sup> Desire as *movens* of reading is anchored here.<sup>17</sup>

Reading resembles to the double perception of a theater spectator, but differs in the same time from it: in theatre the spectator's audio-vision has to link what he hears and sees on stage to

---

<sup>15</sup> Jacques Lacan, *L'angoisse, Séminaire Livre X*, Paris 2004, 318sq

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Roland Barthes, « Le théâtre de Baudelaire » [1954], in : *Oeuvres complètes*, tome I, op.cit.1194-1195

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Roland Barthes, « Sur la lecture » [1975], *Oeuvres complètes*, tome III, 377-384



his own imaginary scene that is opened by the audiovisual appeal to fix his scopical and invocant drive /*pulsion invocante*. In the reading process, the reader has on the contrary first to establish a relationship to an Other which theatre just gives him with the stage. Fixing the invocation drive/*pulsion invocante* to the text, means transferring affect to the letter and transforming it into sound. Reading presupposes transfer in Freudian terms, it means here love for a letter to be heard as vocal sound. To do so, the reader has to hear the text with the breath of his/her own body for opening the other scene, *der andere Schauplatz*, of his memory and imaginary. The reading process works with the reader's subtle listening which generates his/her inner glance; to create, actualize representations, the reader has such to proceed from voices which his own body incarnated.

Such an idea of reading conceives its process as a sort of Eucharistic experience which transubstantiates the body of the letter. This real presence of the reading performance is a challenge to all specular or spectacular incorporation becoming suddenly in front of it an hysterical symptom. For a long time, that hysteria over-determined text performances on stage. Today's post-dramatic theatre opposes multiple bodies deconstructing the relationship between the real of a body and the imaginary and symbolic of texts. Treating very often texts as foreign bodies/*Fremdkörper*, post-dramatic theatre emphasizes the prelinguistic or specular aspect of subjectivity, the utopian lust of fusion, but also the terror of dismemberment. With Carmelo Bene, however, I want to present a performance which displays explicitly the relationship to the symbolic as that to an Other in throwing a light on the sacred aspect of public reading.

#### 4. Carmelo Bene and the Theatre of Poetry

For the first anniversary of the carnage created by a fascist bomb which on July 31 in 1980 assassinated hundreds of citizens in the central station of Bologna, the communist mayor instructed Carmelo Bene to give a *Lectura Dantis*. Broad opposition of both left- and right-wing members of the city council vehemently argued against such an "actor's commemoration /*commemorazione d'attore*", particularly as the actor, director and film-maker Carmelo Bene had been preceded by the scandalous fame of a narcissistic avant-garde ego-impersonator. In fact at that time the critical dimension of Bene's baroque deconstructions of histrionic stage acting was even in Italy far from being wholly appreciated.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Carmelo Bene, *La voce di Narciso*. A cura di Sergio Colombo, Mailand: Il Saggiatore, 1982

The choice of reading Dante for the commemoration of an assassination may astonish at first glance. Whereas for the communist mayor, the reasons may have been the choice of a classic text which for Italians had and has a quasi sacred nation and Italian language-founding value, for the national values contesting artist Bene, accepting the reading of such a classical text, must have had profounder and more complex reasons. In fact, Bene's contribution today is also remarkable for a range of reasons: For the first time Bene could present here the installation of an "invisible theatre" which he will develop in the coming years.<sup>19</sup> Here, he refined his esthetics of a theatre of poetry and reading the implications of which became obvious in this Bolognese performance. And finally the political and ethical impact of his theater concept is revealed here: With Dante, Bene opposes the love for the letter to terrorist hate. He is thus touching one of the tender points in a society of spectacle referring to the relationship to texts: question is thus the relation between text and voice, voice and image implying the necessary recognition of the Other, of Otherness and respect for others. In opposing the reading of several cantos of Dante's Divine Comedy to terrorist violence, Bene accepted further the challenge to render audible what in the letter itself knots love and hate.

Carmelo Bene performed this memorial reading on the evening of July 31 in 1981 from the top of one of the two high medieval towers in the center of Bologna. This *Torre degli Asinelli* is situated near the Basilica San Petronio, where a Quattrocento fresco by Giovanni da Modena shows a Last Judgment with Dante's hell.<sup>20</sup> Bene's reading was transmitted live by loudspeakers to the surrounding historic city center for a public of several thousands of people.<sup>21</sup> This *acousmatic* performance – the reader was not visible for the public, the voice source was hidden and came from above – certainly bore traces of that sacred which is linked to the traditional genre of a *lectura Dantis*. But Bene turned the recitation to profit which displayed the deconstruction of a relationship to the text.

The technical installation Bene used for the first time to that extent, **gained a symbolic value here:** in amplifying the voice of an invisible reader by microphones and loudspeakers,

<sup>19</sup> CF. Carmelo Bene, *Il teatro invisibile*, Biennale 1986

<sup>20</sup> Threatened by moslem fundamentalists in 2002, this fresco is also problem for traditional moslem communities in Italy, who claimed repeatedly to remove it because it represents Mohamed and his son in law Ali in the circle of the discord sowers. (La Repubblica, August 20, 2002, I" I cinque fermati a San Petronio").

<sup>21</sup> Carmelo Bene, „Sono apparso alla Madonna .Dante a Bologna 31-7-81”, in: *Opere*, Milan 1995 , 1120-1131; a recording permits to listen to this reading: cf. Carmelo Bene, *Lectura Dantis*, original music composed by Salvatore Sciarrino, recorded on July 31, 1981, CGD 20 283, Messaggeri musicali; Carmelo Bene reads there the following extracts of the *Divina Commedia: Inferno*, Canto V, Canto XXVI, Canto XXXIII, *Purgatorio*, Canto VIII, *Paradiso*, Canto XXIII, Canto XXXVII, Canto VII

Carmelo Bene modulated the presence of this voice as near and in the same time as far away. An echo, produced by the recording technique's sound reverberation gave his voice a sound halo which distorted it in an unrealistic and transhuman manner and localized it in an immense space. On the other hand, this sound amplification created at the same time a sort of vocal close up: it brought physically close with breath, timber and vocal noises those figures that Bene's voice evoked with vocal body images. The acoustic amplification created thus a vocal *aura*: In approaching the far away voice of the reader by technical means, techniques made him at the same time an 'apparition of distance'.<sup>22</sup>

This technical amplification contributed to render evident the double voice structure of Dante's poem: By the acoustic aura of the reverberation halo, the structure of the verse is displayed as transcendental poetic voice transfigured as the voice of the Other. On the other hand, the singular voices of the figures, represented as drive-determined vocal images, gain by this technique a density of corporality and sensuality.

Different types of singular voices, framed by the transcendental voice of the *Terza Rima*, determined together a polyphony space: Bene's voice delivers for Hell concrete drive-determined voices, for Purgatory between drive and love struggling voices and renders the contrast to those in Paradise which are transfigured by love: variations of intonation, modulations of vowels and timbers which color signifier potentials are suggested in displaying the proposals of the text. Changing the pitch level, the tempo and the loudness, Bene gives a phrasing to the texts which gives an experience of loud reading as producing mental representations and imaginations which is a result from the vocal sound performance. The presence of a voice by personal timber and melos is overlapped by voice representations in form of prosodic masks.

With Bene's voice the enunciated subject becomes present: Figures like Paolo Malatesta and Francesca da Rimini, like Dante, Vergile, Ulisse or Ugolino, Beatrice or Saint Peter find their adequate voice and sound representation. Voice pitch, timber sweetness or hardness are varying the sound image of a male or female voice. Even body movements are figured by voice sound when for instance the evacuation of Dante's faint at the end of Francesca *récit* is doubled by an explosion sound which overlays with the sound image of a falling waterdrop

---

<sup>22</sup> For this definition of „aura“ cf. Walter Benjamin, « Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit », : “Man könnte sie definieren als einzige Erscheinung einer Ferne so nahe sie auch sein mag.”

the object association of a fainting body: - „E caddi come corpo morte caddi“ / “And fell, even as a dead body falls”(Canto V, 142). Pre-coded in the text by the four-fold recurrence of the phoneme /k/, this sound-image is rendered as vocal gesture which produces a visual mental image to the auditor.

Finally, voice can also be a vector of heterogenous lust inscribed in the words of a figure: We had the vocal gestures of Paolo and Francesca which Bene gave with the sweet sensual voices of two lovers who describe their passion in the vocabulary and metaphors of knight tales and *dolce stil nuovo* poems. But we also have violent lust precoded by verse: I want to quote here the example of the beginning of Inferno Canto 33 which Bene reads: It shows in the ninth hell circle in the second zone of the Antenora the second meeting of Dante with the count Ugolino and his murderer, the archbishop Ruggieri. Dante had met them first at the end of the preceding canto (v.124-139):

When I beheld two frozen in one hole,  
So that one head a hood/hat was to the other;

And even as bread through hunger is devoured,  
The uppermost on the other set his teeth,  
There where the brains to the nape united.<sup>23</sup>

ch'io vidi due ghiacciati in una buca  
si che l'un capo a l'altro era cappello

e come 'l pan per fame si manduca,  
così 'l sovrano li denti a l'altro pose  
là 've 'l cervel s'aggiungne con la nuca

Already here the text is over-determined by a frequency of certain consonants: bilabial occlusive /b/ and /p/, bilabial fricative /f/ and /v/ and dorsovelar occlusive /t/. Following Ivan Fonagy<sup>24</sup>, these phonemes indicate the inscription of oral aggressive drive representation. In his loud reading of the beginning of Canto 33, Bene exhibits this sound frequency as bodily lust when he stretches the bilabial and dorsovelar occlusive and fricative consonants, sustained by microphone amplifying, to body noises. Their friction is rendered manifest as noisy body resistance and breath, as lust of a mouth which smacks its lips and expresses loudly:

---

<sup>23</sup> Verse 125-129, translation H.W.Longfellow: Already we had gone away from him,/When I beheld two frozen in one hole/ So that one head a hood [hat]was to the other;/And even as bread through hunger is devoured,/The uppermost on the other set his teeth,/ there where the brain is to the nape united.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Ivan Fonagy, “Les bases pulsionnelles de la phonation”

La bocca sollevò dal fiero pasto  
quel peccator, forbendola ai cappelli  
del capo ch'elli aveva di retro guasto<sup>25</sup>

His mouth uplifted from his grim repast,  
that sinner, wiping up the hair  
Of the same head that he behind had wasted

The coloring of the vowels emphasizes and enforces furthermore the impression of a cannibalistic lust: it charges the reader's voice with body presence indicated by his timbre. Contra-pointing the transcendental voice of the verse, Bene is erotizing the lust of terror. Murderous violence, punished as an act of cannibalization, shows murder caused by hate as the contrary of reading, originated in love: the reading mouth is an instrument of sublimed lust, the contrary of the murderous cannibals.

Reading loud actualizes a breath union with the text voice, the reader's voice becomes this voice when he invests lust in its drive indicating signifiers. Doing this the reader's voice usurps the poetic voice of the text which is now originated in the multiple body of an actor: the reader's voice is his own present voice and simultaneously the represented voice of the figures which hide behind the mask of lust. With Bene's performance this fiction of vocal origin is deconstructed: the sound echo of reverberation has here the function to irrealize this origin: Bene's voice is simultaneously extremely near and extremely far away in a space which is designated by this technical procedure as contradiction and heterotopia.<sup>26</sup>

The technical sound amplifier takes here the transcendental function of the *terza rima* over and bans the danger that the sonorous close up would petrify the auditor in perverse aural lust. This instance of the Other has to render impossible the mixture of erotic fascination of terror and of to a symbolic law addicted love for justice. A technically created aura indicates simultaneously the transcendental voice of the poem giving so barriers to the histrionism of recitation.

This, for his *Lectura Dantis* developed sound amplifying installation will from now on be part of Bene's so-called "reading concerts." It will however hardly reach the esthetic force which issues of the structural specificity of Dante's polyphonic text. With its voice amplifier setting Bene performs a relationship to the text, he displays as Other, and invests at the same

---

<sup>25</sup> Inf. XXXIII, 1-3: „His mouth uplifted from his grim repast,/ that sinner, wiping up the hair/ Of the same head that he behind had wasted.”

<sup>26</sup> Cf. for heterotopia as utopian space projected in a real space cf. Michel Foucault, „Other Places“

time with affect, when he appropriates as his own the lust that Dante prefigured in his text. His *incarnation* of an invisible theatre lets us hear the tension between verse rhythm and phrase intonation as a relationship to the text which emerges as a submission to the text in his vocal treatment of drive representing consonants as body noise and as timbre-colored vowels. Here, the *écriture* is doubled by a sound text, consisting of traces of represented lust and of the present lust of the vocal act. A such opened sound space displays an imaginary space where a vocal body image is represented by sound images and kinesthetic word images.

Vocal reading, recitation or declamation gives not only a situative framing to the text, it also projects a multiple imaginary body in actualizing the poetic and narrative voices of the text. In such a performance, the difference between the performer and the text voice can be negated, denied, foreclosed or emphatically exhibited as Carmelo Bene did.

### 5. Orality/Vocality

Bene's voice treatment of the text bears witness of a love for the letter resulting from a transfer that the verse induced. The title of Carmelo Bene's reflections on his Bolognese Dante – Performance: "Sono apparso alla Madonna/ I appeared to the Madonna" also refers to this : He gives there account of a "voice appearing/apparir della voce" by "saying/enunciating the listening/ dire l'ascolto": Only speaking, which is at the same time listening to the Other, may produce that vision for the mass who applauds the actor: question is of the Madonna's apparition due to the invisible theatre of an actor, because it is a theatre of reading which accomplishes this miracle in making the actor disappear by his way of enunciating. But nevertheless this miracle doesn't impeach the destiny of all spectacle: to be applauded. This applause is intended for that whom the mass suppose to be the origin of saying and who suffers its prostitution.

This apparition *sub specie spectacoli* will be the future utopian model for Bene's theatre. It obeys an ethic determining of the relationship to text: The reader/ reciter brings to apparition that which he isn't and in this act he constitutes himself however at the same time as the subject.

In this context, Bene's choice of Inferno cantos for the commemoration is extremely significant because the three cantos he will read will enable three types of relationship to the

letter to be heard, implying three types of relationship to the Other, three types of love or hate of the word.

With Paolo Malatesta and Francesca da Rimini in the fifth hell circle we see a mirror relation in which dominates the *incorporation* of the letter. Whipped by the *bufera*, the hurricane of carnal desire, the lovers tell in a moment of dead calm with the precious words of medieval knights' novels and with poetic metaphors recalling the *dolce stil nuovo* their destiny which is a result of false reading: their Bovaryism *avant la lettre* induced them to imaginarily incorporate the letter in becoming the adulterous figures of the novel read in common.

Physical love substitutes here the love for the original Verb, vocality becomes here narcissistic orality.

Ulisse on the contrary, who burns in canto XXVI, verse 112-120, in a double-tongued flame in the 8th circle in the 8<sup>th</sup> 'bolge', is punished for his double-tongued speech witnessing a perverse relationship to language: love for the letter, for the Verb gives way here to love for *ingegno*, for intelligence and power of invention, which transforms him into a traitor of the letter and at the same time a rival of God.<sup>27</sup>

Too cunning perverted a love for intelligence leads him to deny divine commandments pretending to challenge human limits and thus to an alternative law giving authority. His gesture is that of seeking to incorporate with his word a new symbolic law.

Ugolino finally – chained to his rival in a anthropophagic gesture – articulates obviously with his accents and his *habitus* the hate for the letter in substituting the sound of the words by the oral aggressiveness of the Real. Carmelo Bene made us hear this orality inscribed in the text by foregrounding in the first verses of Ugolino's monologue the overlaying of speech by oral lust, in giving him a pressed uttering which insists on the fricative and occlusive consonants.

The degree of symbolic, imaginary and real letter lust, the incapacity to transpose or sublime desire determine the destiny of these three figures. Evoked by the voice of the poem, they propose three forms of oral lust: devouring, cunning falsifying and aggressive lust are in the same time three modalities of relationship to the letters' vocality : the gestures of negation, denegation and foreclosure of the Symbolic display three forms of relationship to language and thus to the foundation of a human subject as a speaking subject: Paolo's and Francesca's

---

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Jurij Lotman, *Testo e contesto. Semiotica dell'arte e della cultura*, Bari 1980; Maria Corti, *Dante a una nuova crocevia*, Florence, 1982

hysteria, Ulisse's perversion and the psychotic hatred of Ugolino's acting out exhibit sorts of avoidance of the Symbolic and thus of the other which contemporary theatre describes today in mute and aphasic actions as symptom of our epoch.

Dante was still able to give a voice to such forms of avoidance of the Other: the symbolic transcendental voice of the *terza rima*, which in fact transfers a ternary signification to the poetic voice. With his reading as a performance, Carmelo Bene made not only the theatrical quality of Dantes text obvious, but also the theatrical potential of poetry in general which makes an aural and visual image emerge of that which overcomes each of the dimensions knotting the human subject as a de-centered one. Dante will try to seize this with the image of the unheard-of *riso dell'universo* which fills the paradise's space. Bene evokes this unheard-of paradise with his reading of the canto 27, but he ends his *lectura* with the evocation of Beatrice in canto 7 and in a poem from his *Vita Nuova*. So Bene finally stops with the evocation of that image which occidental iconographic tradition developed as sublime form of heterogeneous, of impossible.

It is reserved to the reader to make that image of the Impossible and Unrepresentable, which until now no iconography was able to fix, appear in front of his inner eye, thanks to the poem's voice: question is the vision closing Dante's travel beyond.: that is the both abstract and concrete, imaginary, symbolic and real figure of a trinity, source and metaphor of desire and love for the letter, vanishing point of the heavenly amphitheatre of the *candida rosa* which appears through the sound of the words. This figure defies human glance and may only be evoked as invisible, in all bunches absent Mallarmé's flower: For this the voice, lent to the letter has to *incarnate* the poetic voice of the text simultaneously as its own and in the same time as that of an Other. Such a reading is *ver-rückt*, dis-placed and lunatic, but it joins a contemporary comprehension of poetry which stands out by its proper way to hear and to use the words.<sup>28</sup> Its reading aims to "love as pre-knowledge of the invisible". It rescues from the world's silence, it delivers - in the word's of Yves Bonnefoy - the invisible as "cipher of a unity each form carries in itself."

The challenge of reading on stage means to exhibit a relationship to the text and to display in an audible way his voice variations. Since Dante, the public reader's task may hardly have been changed: hearing through the voice delivery the voice of that Other who enounces poetry

---

<sup>28</sup> Yves Bonnefoy, « La poésie française et le principe d'identité » in : *L'improbable et autres essais*, Paris 1980/1998, 245-273



linguistic apparatus of subjectivity with its relation to the imaginary of a body rhetoric and and simultaneously make this listening heard. Thus a reading performance exhibits the makes the singular quality of a uttering voice with its music of desire, simultaneously heard through sound and timbre-modulating: reading a text in that way means reading a text of the Other, of others and delivering the text of one's relationship to them.

In his Encyclical Letter *In Praeclara Summorum*, issued April 30 1921 to commemorate Dante's 600th obituary year, Pope Benedict XV celebrates Dante as pure glory of humanity, but also, in spite of his famous critics and partialities, as a profoundly catholic poet who demands a reader delivered of all prejudices. For Pope Benedict XV, the transfer, that a reading of the Divine Comedy could achieve, may even lead to conversion to catholicism. This papal optimism could find a surprising supporter in Alfred Jarry's Père Ubu, Father Ubu, ancient King of a nowhere and everywhere Poland, who claimed not only to sign as S.J., as member of the Jesus Society but also declared to be catholic: universal, ubiquitous – „ubique“.. Jarry too was concerned with the question of evil, of the heterogeneous. For him also, the recognition of an Other, love or hate of his law, was fundamental. The last Encyclica of the following Benedict, Pope Benedict XVI, seems thus to me to be standing in a line of thinking tradition that Dante represents with his *Comedia*, but that certain literature and poetry implicitly affirm via their relationship to the letter: love is the universal arm and measure to challenge and defeat all terrorism which is not only hate but substitution of the Word , of the Symbolic Law by death.