Emotional Minds and Bodies in the Suicide Narratives of Dante's *Inferno*

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Abstract: Suicide plays a dynamic role in both the narrative and structure of Dante's Inferno, and yet, in accordance with there being no term for the act in European languages until the 1600s, the poet mentions it only euphemistically: Dido 'slew herself for love' (Inf. *5.61), Pier della Vigna describes suicide as a process in which 'the ferocious soul deserts the body / after it has wrenched up its own roots'* (Inf. *13.94–95), and the anonymous Florentine suicide simply 'made [his] house into [his] gallows'* (Inf. *13.151). It is thus unsurprising that the notion of mental health in connection with suicide is equally absent in explicit terms. Reading between the lines of Dante's poetry, however, it becomes clear that the emotive language and embodied hybridity associated with the suicides within Dante's* oltremondo, *and of Dante the pilgrim as he responds to their narratives, highlights a heterogeneous yet shared experience of loss and despair, mirroring contemporary understandings of mental health issues. Through an analysis of the emotive language associated with the narratives of a number of Dante's suicides, and the hybrid embodiment of numerous suicides inscribed in Dante's text, this paper hopes to explore the ways in which, even inadvertently, Dante reflects on the distancing of the suicides from the civic bodies of their communities, from their own physical bodies, and from the vital rationality of their human minds, and thus to investigate the ways in which the lack of emotional wellbeing experienced by the suicides forces them to the edges of society's, and their own, consciousness.*

INTRODUCTION: EMOTIONS AND THE LIMINAL

Suicide is often considered a particularly taboo subject within many Western cultures.[1] This taboo stems from the fact that any discussion of the act of suicide must contend

[1] All quotes from Dante's *Inferno* are from the following editions: Dante Alighieri, *La Commedia secondo l'antica vulgata*, ed. by Giorgio Petrocchi (Milan: Mondadori, 1966–67); Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, trans.

with the question that has been asked by so many philosophers, writers, and poets throughout the ages, yet is still so daunting to many: that is, is life worth living? This question is one that medieval Italian poet Dante Alighieri troubled himself with at length in his tripartite narrative poem known as the *Commedia*. The subject of suicide plays a dynamic role in both the narrative and the structure of this great poem, yet elements of the traditional taboo still remain. The suicides form a subset of the second ring of the Seventh Circle of Hell, home to the Violent. Virgil sets out the three categories of violence in *Inferno* 11.28–51: the first ring houses the Violent against their neighbours (murderers, tyrants, pillagers); the second ring houses the Violent against themselves, divided into suicides and squanderers – 'A man may lay injurious hands upon himself | or on his goods, and for that reason | in the second ring must he repent in vain | 'who robs himself of the world above | or gambles away and wastes his substance' (*Inf*. 11.40–44)[2] – and the third ring houses the Violent against God (blasphemers and sodomites). The poet, while including twenty suicides in the poem and explicitly discussing the deaths of a number of them, alludes to suicide only euphemistically throughout the work.[3] In turn, none of the twenty figures are permitted by Dante the poet to name themselves, making them the only full category of sinners to be denied that right. It is thus unsurprising that the notion of mental health in connection with suicide is equally absent in explicit terms, but appears instead through veiled references, evidenced most conspicuously in Pier della Vigna's description of his general state of anxiety prior to his suicide: '[…] first I lost my sleep and then my life' (*Inf*. 13.63).[4] This paper will thus explore how Dante addresses both the philosophical concept of suicide and the lived experience of the suicides he meets

by Robert Hollander and Jean Hollander (New York: Doubleday, 2000). These editions are available online through the Princeton Dante Project: http://etcweb.princeton.edu/dante/pdp/.

[2] 'Puote omo avere in sé man vïolenta | e ne' suoi beni: e però nel secondo | giron convien che sanza pro si penta | qualunque priva sé del vostro mondo, | biscazza e fonde la sua facultade'.

[3] Lucan (*Inf*. 4.83–90), Lucretia (*Inf*. 4.127–128), Socrates (*Inf*. 4.130–135), Diogenes the Cynic (*Inf*. 4.136–138), Empedocles (*Inf*. 4.136–138), Seneca (*Inf*. 4.141), Dido (*Inf*. 5.61–63, 82–87), Cleopatra (*Inf*. 5.63), Deianeira (*Inf*. 12.67–69), Pier della Vigna (*Inf*. 13.31–108), Lano da Siena (*Inf*. 13.115–121), Jacopo da Sant'Andrea (*Inf*. 13.119–135), the anonymous Florentine (*Inf*. 13.131–151), Myrrha (*Inf*. 30.34–41), Judas (*Inf*. 34.55–63), Brutus (*Inf*. 34.64–67), Cassius (*Inf*. 34.64–67), Cato (*Purg*. 1.31–109), Saul (*Purg*. 12.40–42), Amata (*Purg*. 17.34–39).

[4] '[…] i' ne perde' li sonni e ' polsi'.

as protagonist of his poem, using the tools available to him in his medieval context. I will argue that the emotional journeys of the suicides within Dante's otherworld, and of Dante the pilgrim as he responds to their narratives, highlight a heterogeneous yet shared experience of loss and despair, mirroring contemporary understandings of mental health issues. Through an analysis of the emotive language associated with the narratives of Dante's suicides, and the hybrid embodiment of the suicides inscribed in Dante's text, this paper hopes to explore the ways in which, even inadvertently, Dante reflects on the distancing of the suicides from the civic bodies of their communities, from their own physical bodies, and from the vital rationality of their human minds.

This study will adopt a history of emotions framework as a means of accessing the interiority of the figures depicted in Dante's work, including Dante the pilgrim, as protagonist of the poem.[5] By bringing the emotional experiences of medieval society into the light, we can first note the great nuances that existed in the ways that emotions were expressed and experienced, and second, begin to better understand our own social and cultural practices. In the first section, I will follow in the footsteps of the school of thought fostered at the ARC Centre of Excellence for the History of Emotions (University of Melbourne), which treats literary texts as a potent means of giving form to feelings and emotions and finding alternate modes of delving into affective states.[6] The Centre and its scholars recognise that rather than naming such states, literature uses the language of allegories, metaphors, metonymy, and symbols: language that is indirect, experimental, and liminal to explore emotions, making it a fertile ground for the analysis of feelings and emotions in a given time period. In the second section, I will draw on Jan Plamper's dissection of universalism, which sees the diversity and complexity of human emotion as highly visible in facial and bodily expression, in my analysis of the hybrid 'embodiment' of many of the suicides scattered across the

[5] It is important to note here the distinction between Dante the pilgrim, protagonist of the *Commedia*, and Dante the poet, author of the *Commedia*. While an attempt to uncover the interiority of the poet would be both fruitless and anachronistic, the interiority of the pilgrim can indubitably be approached through a close reading of the text.
[6] Stephanie Downes and Stephanie Trigg, 'Facing Up to the History of Emotions', *postmedieval*, 8.1 (2017), 3–11 (p. 8).

geographies of *Inferno*.[7] Throughout this study I will use close textual analysis to determine precisely how emotions emerge in the depictions of suicide by the poet, and what this can tell us about the ways in which suicide was understood and mediated in Dante's medieval context.

This paper will also explore notions of liminality and hybridity in the context of the emotional experiences of Dante's suicides and of Dante the pilgrim in his interactions with them. Elaine Treharne has recently explored such notions in her work on what it meant to live in and on the edges of medieval textual cultures.[8] Treharne discusses the historical privileging of certain texts, time periods, and languages to the exclusion of others; living on the edge, in spaces that are rife with danger and notions of unbelonging, but also filled with possibilities for transformation and capacities for change; cliffs, shores, and margins; and liminal, littoral, and limological discourses. In light of this research that explores the medieval period itself as a marginal space, it is easy to see the appeal of analysing marginal experiences within the literature of such a period. Related to this idea of the peripheral Middle Ages are medieval conceptions of hybridity and monstrosity, wherein figures that did not conform to norms of human appearance or behaviour were viewed as untrustworthy and dangerous. In his discussion of the medieval and Renaissance folk culture of the comic in the work of Rabelais, Bakhtin describes the aesthetic concept of grotesque realism as a concept revolving around the positive degradation of the world to a bodily, earthly, material level with a focus on digestion and defecation, death and decay, copulation and reproduction.[9] When the grotesque appears in

[7] Jan Plamper, *The History of Emotions: An Introduction*, trans. by K. Tribe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). I use the term 'embodiment' as a matter of convenience, acknowledging that the shades of Dante's afterlife have been separated from their carnal forms and, as a result, from bodily expression as such. The shades' 'embodiment' thus refers simply to their visible presentation in the eyes of Dante the pilgrim.

[8] Through a comparison of manuscript production in early Britain and China, Treharne analyses what it meant and means to live on the periphery, in terms of both community and geography, seeking to discover whether common characteristics of marginality might be determined within spatial, temporal, cultural, and intellectual frameworks. Elaine Treharne, 'Living on the Edge in Medieval Studies', keynote presented at ANZAMEMS 2019 conference, University of Sydney, Australia, 7 February 2019.

[9] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. by Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), pp. 18–21; Alexander Lee, *The Ugly Renaissance* (London: Hutchinson, 2013), p. 5.

medieval and Renaissance depictions, however, the images become 'ugly, monstrous, hideous'; the body exceeds categories of meaning, and transgresses the boundaries of the human form, and as such becomes undesirably grotesque in its hybridity.[10] The works of Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, Sarah Alison Miller, and Barbara Spackman on aspects of hybridity and its relation to identity in the medieval and early modern period have proved invaluable in the shaping of this study's discussions of the emotional weight of hybrid embodiments in Dante's suicide narratives.[11]

Before analysing these narratives, it is also imperative that we begin with an understanding of the philosophical context in which Dante's depictions of suicide proliferated. It is generally agreed that Dante wrote the *Commedia* over a period of approximately fourteen years (1307–1320).[12] At that time, one name trumped all others in the quest for an understanding of the immorality of suicide. Towards the end of the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) addressed the subject of suicide in his *Summa theologiae*. In this work, Aquinas presents violence as a more serious sin in its openness than that of secretive fraud. This framework was opposed by Dante, who, in agreement with Cicero, paints fraud as the most serious category of sin.[13] In line with this more severe judgment of violence, Aquinas explicitly defends the prohibition of suicide, decreeing the act to be a sin that, amongst other things, wrongs not only the individual but the society, too, injuring and depriving the community of

[10] Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, pp. 25–26. See also Sarah Alison Miller, *Medieval Monstrosity and the Female Body* (New York: Routledge, 2010), pp. 2, 7.
[11] Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Hybridity, Identity, and Monstrosity in Medieval Britain: On Difficult Middles* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Miller, *Medieval Monstrosity*, pp. 1–7; Barbara Spackman, *Decadent Genealogies: The Rhetoric of Sickness from Baudelaire to D'Annunzio* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989); Barbara Spackman, '*Inter musam et ursam moritur*: Folengo and the Gaping "Other" Mouth', in *Refiguring Women: Perspectives on Gender and the Italian Renaissance*, ed. by Marilyn Migiel and Juliana Schiesari (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 19–34; Barbara Spackman, 'Monstrous Knowledge', in *Monsters in the Italian Literary Imagination*, ed. by Keala Jane Jewell (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001), pp. 297–310.
[12] Lino Pertile, 'Introduction to *Inferno*', in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, ed. by Rachel Jacoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 39–69 (p. 67).
[13] See two studies by John A. Scott: 'Treachery in Dante', in *Studies in the Italian Renaissance: Essays in Memory of Arnolfo B. Ferruolo*, ed. by Gian Paolo Biasin, Albert N. Mancini and Nicolas J. Perella (Naples: Società Editrice Napoletana, 1985), pp. 27–42; 'Dante's Other World: Moral Order', in *Understanding Dante* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), pp. 191–212 (pp. 191–94).

one whose responsibilities will no longer be carried out.[14] The emphasis placed on notions of belonging to and participating in one's community as reasons that should deter one from committing suicide are not original to Aquinas, but stem from fourth-century BCE philosopher Aristotle's approach in his *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Eudemian Ethics*, in which he concludes that while suicide is not an act that results in the unjust treatment of oneself, it is an injustice committed against one's community or state (the *polis*).[15] As noted by scholars of the medieval and the contemporary period alike, the social isolation experienced by those facing mental health issues often denies them the ability to engage with the notion of social wellbeing, and, having been forced to exist for some time at the peripheries of their communities and themselves, they are sometimes pushed beyond their ability to cope.[16] Thus, in every sense, suicide makes of its perpetrators outsiders and outcasts. The very liminality of the suicide narrative in society, in which the topic of suicide teeters at the edge of people's consciousness, and is often swept under the rug, hushed, or wilfully ignored, becomes instead the lived experience of the suicidal person: they exist in that same liminal space. Aristotle and Aquinas judge those who commit suicide for the wrong they do to society by denying their fellow citizens the work and profits that would have come from their continued existence; however, those people were already exiles in those communities.

[14] Thomas Aquinas, *The 'Summa Theologica' of St Thomas Aquinas*, ed. by Vincent McNabb, Ælred Whitacre and Bede Jarrett, 17 vols (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1929), X, pp. 203–06. See also Alfred Alvarez, *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971), p. 130; Marzio Barbagli, *Farewell to the World: A History of Suicide*, trans. by Lucinda Byatt (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015), pp. 46–48; Simon Critchley, *Notes on Suicide* (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2015), pp. 20–21.

[15] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. and trans. by Roger Crisp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 98–99 (5.11.1138a5–14); Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*, ed. and trans. by Brad Inwood and Raphael Woolf (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 79 (4.11.1–3). See also Michael Cholbi, 'Suicide', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Edward N. Zalta (2017) <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/suicide/> [accessed 20 September 2020]; Yolande Grisé, *Le suicide dans la Rome antique* (Montreal: Bellarmin, 1982), pp. 172–73; Georges Minois, *History of Suicide: Voluntary Death in Western Culture*, trans. by Lydia G. Cochrane (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), p. 46; John D. Papadimitriou et. al., 'Euthanasia and Suicide in Antiquity: Viewpoint of the Dramatists and Philosophers', *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 100 (2007), 25–28 (p. 27).

[16] Riikka Miettinen, *Suicide, Law, and Community in Early Modern Sweden* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), p. 270.

The consequences of not feeling that sense of belonging or worth within one's community lie at the heart of Dante's depiction of suicide in the underworld.[17]

EMOTIONS AND MENTAL HEALTH: *INFERNO* 13

The emotional language present in Dante's encounter with Pier della Vigna, punished for his suicide in the wood of the suicides in *Inferno* 13, is particularly evocative of discussions centring on mental health. Pier della Vigna, a chancellor in the court of Emperor Frederick II who was imprisoned for supposedly plotting against the Emperor and who then reportedly dashed his head open on the walls of his prison cell, is undoubtedly the most famous suicide of Dante's work. He and the other suicides in the wood actually make up the wood itself; their punishment, as Dante the pilgrim inadvertently discovers when he breaks off a branch from one of the plants, is to be turned into thorny sterile trees for eternity:

> Then I stretched out my hand
> and plucked a twig from a tall thorn-bush,
> and its stem cried out: 'Why do you break me?'
> When it ran dark with blood
> it cried again: 'Why do you tear me?
> Have you no pity in you?
> 'We once were men and now are turned to thorns'.
> (*Inf.* 13.31–37)[18]

[17] This section would be incomplete without reference to Cato of Utica, the pagan orator and exalted war hero who committed suicide in order to escape Caesar's rule, and who appears in Dante's *Commedia* on the shores of Mount Purgatory, serving as custodian of the souls who come ashore there (*Purg.* 1–2). While Cato does not appear in *Inferno* and therefore is not included in the parameters of this study, it is worth noting the great divide between the Thomist understanding of suicide outlined above, with which Dante undoubtedly engages, and Dante's treatment of Cato both in *Purgatorio* and in the *Convivio* (4.5.10–20, 4.27–28), where he presented as being worthy of standing in for God, and in the *Monarchia* (2.5.15–16), where his suicide is praised as an 'inenarrabile sacrifitium' (inexpressible sacrifice) for the common good, in line with a Christological understanding of his death. Again, it is not within the scope of this paper to explore Dante's Cato herein, but it behooves the reader to understand that while this paper presents Dante's conception of suicide as highly nuanced, its nuances are in fact beyond the abilities of this paper to contain.

[18] 'Allor porsi la mano un poco avante | e colsi un ramicel da un gran pruno; | e 'l tronco suo gridò: "Perché mi schiante?" | Da che fatto fu poi di sangue bruno, | ricominciò a dir: "Perché mi scerpi? | non hai tu spirto di pietade alcuno? | Uomini fummo, e or siam fatti sterpi:'.

Piero himself speaks of the way in which, obsessed with his loyalty for the Emperor, 'first [he] lost [his] sleep and then [his] life' (*Inf.* 13.63).[19] He describes a situation in which his tireless work for the Emperor became the central focus of his life, and indeed took over the life he had outside of that work, before eventually depriving him of life altogether. Piero speaks of the way in which the envy of his fellow courtiers led to him falling out of favour:

> 'The slut who never took her whoring eyes
> from Caesar's household, the common bane
> and special vice of courts,
> 'inflamed all minds against me.
> And they, inflamed, did so inflame Augustus
> that welcome honors turned to dismal woe.
> (*Inf.* 13.64–69)[20]

As the apparent victim of envy, the 'common bane' ('morte comune') of courtly life, Piero paints himself as being unable to enjoy the praises of the Emperor, dwelling instead in a state of daily misery, until the Emperor, too, turns against him and he finds himself in prison. Here, hoping by dying to escape the injustices perpetrated against him, he kills himself:

> 'My mind, in scornful temper,
> hoping by dying to escape from scorn,
> made me, though just, against myself unjust.
> (*Inf.* 13.70–72)[21]

[19] 'tanto ch'i' ne perde' li sonni e ' polsi'.
[20] 'La meretrice che mai da l'ospizio | di Cesare non torse li occhi putti, | morte comune e de le corti vizio, | infiammò contra me li animi tutti; | e li 'nfiammati infiammar sì Augusto, | che ' lieti onor tornaro in tristi lutti'.
[21] 'L'animo mio, per disdegnoso gusto, | credendo col morir fuggir disdegno, | ingiusto fece me contra me giusto'.

Whether Piero's ornate orations of victimhood and vilification are to be believed or not, there is no doubt that his experiences of helplessness and despair in the face of this perceived prejudice are palpable, and made all the more poignant through the phrase 'me […] against myself' ('me contra me'). This phrase epitomises suicide, an act in which a part of the self opposes the rest, and in which the will defeats the self. Furthermore, the gerund 'hoping' ('credendo') reveals the tragic illusion of the gesture: in the verse, Piero performs the physically impossible by grammatically splitting himself into a Piero who is guilty of killing and a Piero who is the blameless victim of a deadly attack.[22]

Piero's pre-suicide narrative is one that expresses a loss of identity, social stigma and isolation, discrimination, and pain, and the very words of the suicide trees expose the fact that their suicides have led to the continuation of the aforementioned emotional toll in Hell: their speech takes the form of lamentations ('guai', l. 22) and cries ('gridò', l. 33), only able to be produced when another being (a Harpy nesting in the trees or a spendthrift running by them) causes them pain by breaking off one of their branches, allowing sound and blood to arduously and painfully pour out as one:

> As from a green log, burning at one end,
> that blisters and hisses at the other
> with the rush of sap and air,
> so from the broken splinter oozed
> blood and words together, […]
> (*Inf.* 13.40–44)[23]

> Then the tree forced out harsh breath, and soon
> that wind was turned into a voice:

[22] John C. Barnes, '*Inferno* XIII', in *Dante Soundings: Eight Literary and Historical Essays*, ed. by David Nolan (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1981), pp. 28–58 (p. 44); Alison Cornish, 'Sound Matters. 3. Words and Blood: Suicide and the Sound of the Soul in *Inferno* 13', *Speculum*, 91.4 (2016), 1015–26 (p. 1022); Eszter Draskóczy, 'Strutture antitetiche e metamorfosi nel canto XIII dell'*Inferno*', *Dante Füzetek / Quaderni Danteschi*, 7 (2012), 55–76 (pp. 62–63).

[23] 'Come d'un stizzo verde ch'arso sia | da l'un de' capi, che da l'altro geme | e cigola per vento che va via, | sì de la scheggia rotta usciva insieme | parole e sangue; […]'.

(*Inf*. 13.91–92)[24]

The Harpies, feeding on its leaves,
give pain and to that pain a mouth.
(*Inf*. 13.101–102)[25]

And then my leader took me by the hand.
He led me to the bush,
which wept in vain lament from bleeding wounds.
'O Jacopo da Sant' Andrea,' it said,
'what use was it to make a screen of me?
Why must I suffer for your guilty life?'
When the master stopped beside it, he said:
'Who were you, that through so many wounds
pour out with blood your doleful words?'
(*Inf*. 13.130–138)[26]

The Harpies, hybrid creatures (half-woman, half-bird), nest in the suicide trees, with the purpose of feasting on the leaves of the trees. By breaking off the leaves, the Harpies increase the pain experienced by the suicide trees, but in so doing they also create a means by which the trees can voice their suffering, both the physical (caused by the Harpies) and the emotional (caused by their very presence in the wood). The mingled words and blood emitted by the suicide trees rush out like steam escaping from a burning log, suggesting that it has been both trapped and yearning to escape, in much the same way as many suicidal individuals initially feel that their soul is imprisoned within their body and must break free from its confines (only, in Dante's universe, for the suicide to find themselves trapped in another and far inferior plant-

[24] 'Allor soffiò il tronco forte, e poi | si convertì quel vento in cotal voce:'.
[25] 'l'Arpie, pascendo poi de le sue foglie, | fanno dolore, e al dolor fenestra'.
[26] 'Presemi allor la mia scorta per mano, | e menommi al cespuglio che piangea | per le rotture sanguinenti in vano. | "O Iacopo," dicea, "da Santo Andrea, | che t'è giovato di me fare schermo? | che colpa ho io de la tua vita rea?" | Quando 'l maestro fu sovr' esso fermo, | disse: "Chi fosti, che per tante punte | soffi con sangue doloroso sermo?"'.

body and forever denied a reunion with their earthly corporeal form).[27] This same emotional language of social malaise and isolation, of pain, and of imprisonment is at the forefront of contemporary discussion about and understandings of mental health, as detailed in Marsh and White's study of the liminal in youth suicide prevention practice through analysis of language use.[28] The desperate and painful speech of the infernal suicides of *Inferno* 13 also recalls a similar discourse extant in Australian suicide prevention organisations such as R U OK? and the broader social media campaign #YouCanTalk, which encourage those suffering from mental health issues and the people around them to engage in a conversation on the subject, in order to begin the process of managing the issues. Dante the poet's depiction of both a desire and an inability to effectively communicate on the part of the suicides strikes at the heart of the issue: without communication, belonging is impossible, and marginalisation inevitable.

Dante the pilgrim's encounter with the suicides of *Inferno* 13 is likewise steeped in emotional responses to their plight. Upon entering the wood of the suicides, Dante describes himself as completely confused due to his inability to identify the origin of the voices and cries he hears:

> Lamentations I heard on every side
> but I saw no one who might be crying out
> so that, confused, I stopped.
> I think he thought that I thought
> all these voices in among the branches
> came from people hiding there.
> (*Inf.* 13.22–27)[29]

[27] Cornish, 'Words and Blood', pp. 1017–21.
[28] Ian Marsh and Jennifer White, 'Boundaries, Thresholds, and the Liminal in Youth Suicide Prevention Practice', in *Youth Work, Early Education, and Psychology: Liminal Encounters*, ed. by Hans Skott-Myhre, Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw and Kathleen Skott-Myrhe (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 69–89.
[29] 'Io sentia d'ogne parte trarre guai | e non vedea persona che 'l facesse; | per ch'io tutto smarrito m'arrestai. | Cred' ïo ch'ei credette ch'io credesse | che tante voci uscisser, tra quei bronchi, | da gente che per noi si nascondesse'.

The pilgrim's confusion is poetically reinforced in the polyptotonic line 25, 'I think he thought that I thought' ('Cred' ïo ch'ei credette ch'io credesse'). The root verb of this polyptoton, 'to think' (*credere*), is the same discussed above ('credendo col morir fuggir disdegno', *Inf*. 13.71), used by Piero to evoke the impossibility of his belief that he could escape injustice through an unjust act committed against himself. We may read this as a pre-emptive comment on the part of Dante the pilgrim to suggest that he, too, could as easily have found himself in Piero's shoes had his path not been interrupted by the welcome aid of Virgil. The word 'confused' ('smarrito') was used by the pilgrim in line 3 of *Inferno* 1 ('mi ritrovai per una selva oscura, | ché la diritta via era smarrita', l. 2–3),[30] when he found himself physically and spiritually 'lost' in the dark wood. This verbiage at once recalls the *selva oscura* in which Dante first became lost, and simultaneously sets it apart from the 'mesta / selva' ('dismal / wood', *Inf*. 13.106–107) of the suicides. While in the dark forest Dante has simply lost the 'straight way' ('diritta via', *Inf*. 1.3), the wood of the suicides is instead described as 'not marked by any path' ('da neun sentiero era segnato', *Inf*. 13.3). This wood is a space with no visible way out; it is a space of obstacles and confusion, both physical and metaphysical (the wood is pathless, but it is Dante's own discombobulation at the apparent lack of spirits in the wood that paralyses him). The pathless wood of the suicides is furthermore surrounded on all sides by uninhabitable habitats, forged from the extremes of heat to create a treacherous waterway of boiling blood (*Inferno* 12) and an arid, burning, sandy wasteland (*Inferno* 14–15). As noted by Pegoretti, the very term 'foresta' derives from the Latin term *foris* meaning 'outside', thus indicating that even in name the forest is a place of the unknown, of everything that exists outside of the ordinary and the familiar;[31] the wood of the suicides in particular, then, is an expression of true exile, from which there is no salvation, no possibility of return.

Having broken a branch from Piero's tree, and faced with an anguished voice emanating from the bleeding stump, Dante the pilgrim is naturally 'afraid':

[30] 'I came to myself in a dark wood, | for the straight way was lost'.

> so from the broken splinter oozed
> blood and words together, and I let drop
> that twig and stood like one afraid.
> (*Inf*. 13.43–45)[31]

Once he has overcome this initial fear, however, the emotion that overwhelms Dante following his first encounter with the bleeding tree is that of compassion:

> The poet waited, then he said to me:
> 'Since he is silent now do not waste time
> but speak if you would ask him more.'
> And I replied: 'Please question him
> about the things you think I need to know.
> For I cannot, such pity fills my heart.'
> (*Inf*. 13.79–84)[32]

Dante feels such extreme pity for Pier della Vigna because he understands his suffering in a very personal way, due to his previous experience of finding himself spiritually lost in the 'dark wood' ('selva oscura', *Inf*. 1.2), an experience which can in turn be read as an allegorical depiction of the real-life exile of Dante from the city of Florence.[33] Here, passing through the wood of the suicides, Dante experiences confusion, fear, and overwhelming sympathy for Piero's plight, so overwhelming in fact that it causes him to lose his ability to communicate with Piero; the pilgrim may be on the outside looking in on the suicides' fate, but his emotional narrative mirrors theirs in myriad ways. The emotional language of the suicides and the pilgrim in

[31] 'sì de la scheggia rotta usciva insieme | parole e sangue; ond' io lasciai la cima | cadere, e stetti come l'uom che teme'.
[32] 'Un poco attese, e poi "Da ch'el si tace," | disse 'l poeta a me, "non perder l'ora; | ma parla, e chiedi a lui, se più ti piace." | Ond' ïo a lui: "Domandal tu ancora | di quel che credi ch'a me satisfaccia; | ch'i' non potrei, tanta pietà m'accora"'.
[33] Marilyn B. Skinner, 'The Last Encounter of Dido and Aeneas: *Aen*. 6.450–476', *Vergilius (1959–)*, 29 (1983), 12–18 (pp. 12–13).

Inferno 13 demonstrate clearly that the threshold between medieval and contemporary conceptions of mental health is indistinct (if not imagined), and that the marginalisation of suicide and suicides is by no means a modern scourge.

EMOTION 'EMBODIED': BODILY FEELING IN HELL'S SUICIDES

The emotional mental health narratives referred to above also seep into the ways in which the suicides are 'embodied' within the geographies of Hell, and these embodiments will be the focus of the analyses in this section. Dante's infernal suicides are depicted in hybrid ways, revealed through the similes and rhetoric used to describe their bestial qualities (both physical and metaphysical), and this hybridity is encoded with the physical and mental pain experienced by the suicides, and reflects the suicides' loss of selfhood within the context of the medieval social and cultural understanding of suicide as an act that marginalised and separated people from the community and from God.

We return again to the wood of the suicides of *Inferno* 13. The suicides are incarcerated within plant bodies to become *uomini-pianta*, hybrid plant-figures, trees whose bleeding stumps and voices expose the monstrous nature of their transformation, and whose punishment is both the eternal denial of their earthly human bodies and the inability to use their faculty of reason (refuted in the very act of suicide) to carry out characteristically human activities such as walking and talking. The distancing of the suicides from all things human and rational culminates in Piero telling Dante that the spirits of the wood of the suicides will remain separated from their earthly bodies even at Judgment Day, the only group of sinners in Dante's Hell to be dealt this heretical blow, instead having to hang their earthly forms on the branches of the thorn-bush that each suicide has become. Having thrown away their lives and limbs (*Inf*. 13.94–95, 103, 105), the suicides are doubly and eternally separated from their corporeal forms; this is their *contrapasso*.[34] As discussed above, the *uomini-*

[34] In Dante's *Commedia*, the *contrapasso* refers to the unique relationship between earthly sins and the often perversely fitting way in which they are punished in Dante's Hell. The term is taken from the

pianta must suffer the pain of their branches being broken in order to speak. These breakages most often occur at the talons and beaks of the Harpies, whose hybrid woman-bird forms are tasked with nesting in the trees and feeding on their leaves so that they bleed at the point of separation (*Inf.* 13.7–12, 101–102). The effort of speaking in turn causes the suicide trees further suffering ('Then the tree forced out harsh breath, and soon | that wind was turned into a voice', *Inf.* 13.91–92).[35] The result of this manner of speaking is the emergence of the suicides' performative role as the inherently 'painful shade' ('ombra […] molesta', *Inf.* 13.108) within the scheme of Hell, embodying in their infernal forms the emotional division and pain of the suicide journey.

Turning to the other infernal suicides, we see that many of them are also described using the tropes of the *disumano*.[36] Famous suicides Dido and Cleopatra are found in the circle of the Lustful ('Here is she who broke faith with the ashes | of Sichaeus and slew herself for love. | The next is wanton Cleopatra', *Inf.* 5.61–63),[37] where they are eternally buffeted by a ceaseless storm:

words of Bertran de Born, who explains in *Inferno* 28 that the severing of his head, as a punishment for his sin of sowing discord, is just retribution: 'Perch' io parti' così giunte persone, | partito porto il mio cerebro, lasso!, | dal suo principio ch'è in questo troncone. | Così s'osserva in me lo contrapasso."' ('Because I severed persons thus conjoined, | severed, alas, I carry my own brain | from its starting-point here in my body. | In me you may observe fit punishment.') See Victoria Kirkham, '*Contrapasso*: The Long Wait to *Inferno* 28,' *MLN*, 127 (2012), S1–S12.

[35] 'Allor soffiò il tronco forte, e poi | si convertì quel vento in cotal voce:'.

[36] Lucretia, whose rape at the hands of Tarquinius Superbus and consequent suicide inspired in the Roman people the revolutionary spirit necessary for the overthrowing of the monarchy and the founding of the Roman Republic, and whose tragic death has been of much interest within the Western historical and literary tradition, does appear in the *Commedia* as one of the virtuous pagans of Limbo: 'Vidi quel Bruto che cacciò Tarquino, | Lucrezia, Iulia, Marzïa e Corniglia' (I saw that Brutus who drove out Tarquinius, | Lucretia, Julia, Marcia, and Cornelia, *Inf.* 4.127–128). While Lucretia is not treated in terms of the trope of the *disumano*, it is worth considering Dante's refusal to place Lucretia in the suicide wood as a refusal in turn to violate her physical body, already violated in life, by transforming her into a 'donna-pianta'. Lucretia is therefore saved from the fate of Pier della Vigna because of the redeeming qualities of her chastity and bravery, and perhaps for another reason. It is important to note that Dante owes a significant debt to the suicide of Lucretia; without so monumental an event, the founding of the Roman Republic may never have taken place, and Dante's own vision for a united nation would never have come to be. See Joseph E. Gillet, 'Lucretia, Necia', *Hispanic Review*, 15.1 (1947), 120–36 (p. 125); Diana C. Glenn, 'Women in Limbo: Arbitrary Listings or Textual Referents? Mapping the Connections in *Inferno* 4 and *Purgatorio* 22', *Dante Studies*, 117 (1999), 85–115 (p. 94); Victoria Kirkham, 'A Canon of Women in Dante's *Commedia*', *Annali d'italianistica*, 7 (1989), 16–41 (p. 21); Winthrop Wetherbee, *The Ancient Flame: Dante and the Poets* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), p. 244.

[37] 'L'altra è colei che s'ancise amorosa, | e ruppe fede al cener di Sicheo; | poi è Cleopatràs lussurïosa'.

I reached a place mute of all light,
which bellows as the sea in tempest
tossed by conflicting winds.
The hellish squall, which never rests,
sweeps spirits in its headlong rush,
tormenting, whirls and strikes them.
Caught in that path of violence,
they shriek, weep, and lament.
Then how they curse the power of God!
I understood that to such torment
the carnal sinners are condemned,
they who make reason subject to desire.
(*Inf*. 5.28–39)[38]

The description of the Lustful as those who 'make reason subject to desire' indubitably prefigures Piero's description of his suicide as an act that pitted 'me contra me': in Dante's poem, both lust and violence against oneself are sins in which a part of the self opposes and defeats the rest. Kirkham notes that this canto acts as a denunciation of the animalistic appetite for corporeal delights over human reason and that in fact women, and thus the women of this canto, 'flawed creature(s) of the flesh', were viewed during the medieval period as figural representations of the human body.[39] What they are directly compared to by Dante, however, is birds: the poet metaphorises them first as starlings ('li stornei', *Inf*. 5.40–43), then as cranes ('i gru', *Inf*. 5.46–49), and finally as doves ('colombe', *Inf*. 5.82–87) (though this image refers specifically to the souls of Paolo and Francesca, rather than the entire flock of souls). These metaphors, intended, we may assume, to recall the animalistic lack of self-control and irrational desires of the Lustful, also lead us once more to the notion of a deep effect on the

[38] 'Io venni in loco d'ogne luce muto, | che mugghia come fa mar per tempesta, | se da contrari venti è combattuto. | La bufera infernal, che mai non resta, | mena li spirti con la sua rapina; | voltando e percotendo li molesta. | Quando giungon davanti a la ruina, | quivi le strida, il compianto, il lamento; | bestemmian quivi la virtù divina. | Intesi ch'a così fatto tormento | enno dannati i peccator carnali, | che la ragion sommettono al talento'.
[39] Kirkham, 'A Canon of Women in Dante's *Commedia*', p. 25.

selfhood of the suicides within Dante's work. The weightless shades of Dido and Cleopatra tossed in the storm become birds lifted on the winds, no longer grounded on their two feet but rather governed entirely by their desires – that is, their deepest and most primal bestial instincts – drifting with abandon according to the will of Hell and of interlopers such as Dante.[40] The strength of their emotions in life led them to commit the most extreme violence against themselves, and here in Hell that emotion continues to haunt them, subjecting them to the effects of the *contrapasso* (tossed like lost birds in an eternal storm that mirrors the wayward force of their passions) until they become simply two amongst an endless flock.

The theme of embodied emotion continues in *Inferno* 30, where Dante the pilgrim encounters Myrrha, one of the Impersonators. Myrrha is depicted as rushing around in a frenzy, snapping her jaws, utterly mad. Madness denotes a lack of reason, the very characteristic that distinguishes humankind from beast, and thus the impersonators of *Inferno* 30 take on animalistic traits, in the manner of a woman driven mad by grief who begins to bark like a dog ('latrò sì come un cane', l. 20), or swine who have been freed from their pigsty to run naked and pale through the world ('ombre smorte e nude, | che mordendo correvan di quel modo | che 'l porco quando del porcil si schiude', l. 25–27). Here in Hell, Myrrha is robbed of her human reason and is transformed into a ferocious and savage beast in human form, recklessly pursuing her primal instincts, as she did to a lesser extent in life. It should be remembered here that Dante also uses Myrrha in *Epistle* VII.23–24 (1311) as a term of comparison for the city of Florence, in tandem with numerous pestilential beasts including a stinking vixen, a viper, and a sickly sheep. The animalistic hybridity that Dante associates with this figure may stem from Myrrha's original plea to the gods in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* that she be turned into a tree: 'but lest, surviving, I offend the living, and, dying, I offend the dead, drive me from both realms; change me and refuse

[40] Giuseppe Ledda, 'I baci delle colombe e il bestiario d'amore', in *Il bestiario dell'aldilà. Gli animali nella* Commedia *di Dante* (Ravenna: Longo, 2019), pp. 91–102.

me both life and death!' (*Met*. 10.485–487).[41] It is interesting, however, that Dante chooses not to engage with the plant-based punishment that is already part of Myrrha's historical suicide narrative, instead mobilising Myrrha's sentence to one in which her conflicted emotions result in a mental madness that is physically encoded, causing her to act based on pure animal instinct, rather than human reason, which is now lost to her.

Inferno 34 offers a final group of infernal suicides, in the form of Judas, Brutus, and Cassius, the 'three greatest traitors of human history'.[42] In this canto, Judas, the suicide *par excellence* in the Western tradition, finds himself placed head-first into Lucifer's middle mouth, quite literally losing his mind as part of his punishment in Hell. Without a head to contain his mind, Judas' essential selfhood is lost. Humankind is likewise distinguishable by its distinct talent for producing articulate words through voice, another trait that Judas forgoes in his headlong fall into the jaws of sin. In Dante's depiction, Judas loses vital aspects of that which made him human in life, and as the worst sinner of all, he is not even afforded an animal or plant-based alternative; he simply becomes a mindless form, the food of the devil himself. Dante creates for Judas a symbol of cannibalistic punishment that is the antithesis of the heavenly Eucharistic banquet in which humankind consumes Christ's body to engage with his selfless self-sacrifice for all humankind.[43] Dante also does the same for Brutus and Cassius: in Lucifer's chewing of their legs rather than their heads, he perhaps depicts a symbolic negation of the pair's flight following their assassination of Caesar, as well as a metaphorical negation of their escape into death by their own hands. Furthermore, just as Lucifer's hybrid angelic-animalistic form has three differently-coloured heads, in a parodic depiction of the Holy Trinity, the sins of treachery against

[41] 'sed ne violem vivosque superstes | mortuaque exstinctos, ambobus pellite regnis | mutataeque mihi vitamque necemque negate!' Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, vol. 2, trans. by Frank Justus Miller (London: William Heinemann, 1922), pp. 98–99.
[42] Teodolinda Barolini, '*Inferno* 34: Satanic Physics and the Point of Transition', *Commento Baroliniano*, Digital Dante (New York: Columbia University Libraries, 2018), <https://digitaldante.columbia.edu/dante/divine-comedy/inferno/inferno-34/>.
[43] Sheila J. Nayar, 'Flesh Corruptible: Dante's *Inferno*', in *Dante's Sacred Poem: Flesh and the Centrality of the Eucharist to the Divine Comedy* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. 47–94 (pp. 86–88).

a political leader (Brutus and Cassius) and a religious leader (Judas) and the suicides of all three mean that Lucifer is viewed as 'tormenting three at once' ('tre ne facea così dolente', l. 57), with the sinners becoming a new and antithetical three-in-one. This constitutes an erasure of the sinners' individual identities in favour of a mutual and interminable shared experience of pain. Thinking back to this paper's introductory statement regarding the suicides being denied the ability to name themselves, it becomes clear that this is not only an example of taboo: it is a clear statement about their loss of selfhood through the irrational act of suicide.

THE SELF-DESTRUCTIVE CITY: BODY AND MIND COMBINED

Returning once more to the wood of the suicides of *Inferno* 13, the loss of selfhood inherent to the experience of suicide is perhaps most visible in the following narrative. Dante's wood of the suicides is home to the anonymous Florentine suicide, a tragic unnamed figure who describes his sad end thus: 'I made my house into my gallows' ('Io fei gibetto a me de le mie case', *Inf.* 13.151). The anonymity of this figure allows Dante to make of him a representative for all the citizens of Florence, and so in Dante's description of his sad demise there exists a broader commentary on the self-destructive nature of the city of Florence as a whole. In fact, Dante's entire poem is filled with harsh invectives against his home city, the city that exiled him and did not welcome him back during his lifetime. In *Inferno* 15, for example, Dante, through the words of Brunetto Latini, describes the city of Florence as 'il nido di malizia tanta' ('the home of so much malice', *Inf.* 15.78). In *Purgatorio* 14.29–66, this time with the voice of Guido del Duca, Dante metaphorises the city of Florence as a barren wood that will not recover from the destruction wrought upon it for centuries to come:

> 'Covered in blood, he leaves that wretched wood
> in such a state that not one thousand years
> will make the trees grow green as once they were.'

(*Purg*. 14.64–66)[44]

Florence reappears in arboreal form in *Paradiso* 9, wherein Folco of Marseilles describes Florence as a city that sprang from a seed planted by Satan and that continues to spread disharmony like an accursed flower (otherwise known as the Florin, spreading greed throughout the world and making a wolf of the church, a reference to the avaricious she-wolf of *Inferno* 1):[45]

> 'Your city, which was planted by him,
> the first to turn his back upon his Maker
> and from whose envy comes such great distress,
> 'puts forth and spreads the accursèd flower
> that has led astray both sheep and lambs,
> for it has made a wolf out of its shepherd.
> (*Par*. 9.127–132)[46]

The commentary on Florence in *Inferno* 13, then, can be read as a specific criticism of the sin and corruption that have ruined the once-just city and turned it into a den of debauchery and crime, utilising the anonymous Florentine suicide to represent the more extensive issue of the deep factional divisions within the body politic of Florence. This image of division prevails across the narrative within *Inferno* 13 and into the following canto, wherein his branches and leaves are scattered by the action of the spendthrifts, who tear through the wood as they are pursued by black dogs who attempt to use the suicide's tree form as refuge:

> And he to us: 'O souls who have arrived
> to see the shameless carnage

[44] 'Sanguinoso esce de la trista selva; | lasciala tal, che di qui a mille anni | ne lo stato primaio non si rinselva"'.
[45] Massimo Verdicchio, *The Poetics of Dante's* Paradiso (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), p. 57.
[46] 'La tua città, che di colui è pianta | che pria volse le spalle al suo fattore | e di cui è la 'nvidia tanto pianta, | produce e spande il maladetto fiore | c'ha disvïate le pecore e li agni, | però che fatto ha lupo del pastore'.

that has torn from me my leaves.
'gather them here at the foot of this wretched bush.
(*Inf.* 13.139–142)[47]

Urged by the love I bore my place of birth,
I gathered up the scattered leaves and gave them back
to him, who had by this time spent his breath.
(*Inf.* 14.1–3)[48]

The anonymous Florentine's gallows looms at the very end of canto 13 as a reminder of the finality of suicide, and of the suicide's self-damnation, both on earth and in Hell, to the borderland of the wood of the suicides, barren and lifeless from its very birth. While Dante's gathering of the anonymous Florentine suicide's scattered limbs and leaves at the beginning of *Inferno* 14 is a sign of his sorrow at the sad state of his city's moral demise, they cannot be reattached, and so he remains divided, bleeding from his wounds. Dante's gathering of the leaves may appear to bring the suicide's tale into another narrative space and thus away from the outskirts; but as the reader discovers, his breath is already spent ('era già fioco', *Inf.* 14.3), and thus his hybrid communication is silenced. Here it is again appropriate to recall Dante's later metaphorisation of the body politic of Florence in *Epistle* VII.23–24 as a series of beasts and suicides in turn, indicative of Dante's own feelings of division from his city, and his sentiments towards the divided *corpus methaforicum civitatis* itself.[49] It would appear, then, that Dante uses the anonymous Florentine suicide to paint an image of the *civitas* as a divided body, and thus places the blame for self-destruction, both individual and collective, on the Florentines themselves. This narrative, however, indubitably highlights Dante's own emotional suffering as a result of his political exile from his city: contemplating the strange new boundaries of his world outside of

[47] 'Ed elli a noi: "O anime che giunte | siete a veder lo strazio disonesto | c'ha le mie fronde sì da me disgiunte, | raccoglietele al piè del tristo cesto'.
[48] 'Poi che la carità del natio loco | mi strinse, raunai le fronde sparte | e rende'le a colui, ch'era già fioco'.
[49] Elisa Brilli, *Firenze e il profeta. Dante fra teologia e politica* (Rome: Carocci, 2012), pp. 215–23.

Florence, the thresholds from which he is now barred, the reality of a life to be lived on the fringes, at the periphery of a society in which he used to play a central role. Dante's depictions of the suicides examined in this study as hybrid figures, caught in-between the human and the non-human, pushed to the peripheries, is directly linked to an understanding of, or at least a familiarity with, the emotional experiences of these souls in life; and the fact that it is so nuanced a depiction may lie in the fact that Dante himself had experienced a physical exile comparable to the emotional exile they felt. Through its depictions of mental reflection and corporeal presentation, Dante's poetry allows the emotional narratives of the suicides to emerge, highlighting one way in which mental health narratives can be traced through literature.

CONCLUSION

The very nature of suicide, as an act that in contemplation and in execution isolates and separates a person from their community, pushing them to the limits of human experience and indeed human anguish, is itself reflected in Dante's emotional and embodied depictions of the suicide souls scattered throughout the *Commedia*, and it seems that Dante is able to access to a certain extent the emotional trauma experienced by suicides through reflection on his experience of exile. The emotional discourses and discourses of hybridity contained within Dante's depictions of the suicides mirror the ways in which the act of suicide distances the suicide from their rational mind, from their physical body, and from the civic body of their community; and so this study has brought the discussion of mental health contained within Dante's poem from a marginal to a focal position.

We have seen that suicide does indeed play a dynamic role in both the narrative and structure of Dante's *Commedia*; yet it is still the case that the poet does not in fact mention the term 'suicide' anywhere in the work. We could perhaps easily attribute this to the simple linguistic fact that the substantive for the act or perpetrator of suicide did not exist in most European languages until the sixteenth century, undoubtedly as

at least a partial result of the taboo surrounding the subject in the Western European tradition.[50] This would then suggest in turn that Dante was simply forced to conform to this taboo, out of linguistic necessity. The taboo re-emerges, however, in another distinct way in Dante's text: none of the twenty figures whom I have identified as suicides in Dante's *Commedia* are permitted by Dante to name themselves, and they are the only full category of sinners to be denied that right. Thus, while Dante's work contains unusually nuanced and visible portrayals of suicide considering his medieval context, it is evident that the taboo surrounding suicide still remained strong in many ways, even for a poet who set out to explore the subject explicitly in his poetry. Further research in this area will promote sustained conversation regarding the marginalisation of mental health narratives, thus ensuring that such narratives continue to be foregrounded.

[50] Andreas Bähr, 'Between "Self-Murder" and "Suicide": The Modern Etymology of Self-Killing', *Journal of Social History*, 46.3 (2013), 620–32 (p. 623); Minois, *History of Suicide*, pp. 3, 182.

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