

Dante Society Newsletter

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A Letter from the President

Dear Friends and Colleagues,

I begin this annual letter with an uncharacteristic supplication: *Please read what follows.* Our Society has reached a turning point, and we need an engaged membership. Your elected Council members (Albert Ascoli, Peter Hawkins, Vicky Kirkham, Joe Luzzi, Ron Martinez, and Vittorio Montemaggi) have joined me, as well as *Dante Studies* Editor Richard Lansing, in rethinking and reorganizing how the Society does its work. In this, we have importantly been informed by your response to our 2011 survey. The “problem,” as we see it, has been on the table for at least a decade (see the Spring 2003 *Newsletter* on the DSA Website). It is an effect of changes in “volunteer culture” broadly speaking; in how the academy does its work in an age of radical technological change; and, indeed, in how our Society imagines itself going forward.

We believe we must finally come to terms with the unintended consequences of our long trajectory away from being a local organization toward becoming a national (and increasingly international) one. Granted, an expansionist agenda was already envisioned in the nineteenth-century shift from a “club” to a “society.” But, in the late twentieth century, our move away from Cambridge (or Boston)-based leadership was ultimately also a move away from office space (and even secretaries) loaned for our use by the nation’s wealthiest academic institution. We have, of course, benefited greatly from the generous collaboration of the Longfellow House-Washington’s Headquarters National Historic Site for the use of meeting rooms. But the site has no vacant offices and cannot be the long-term solution to our administrative challenges. In time, the DSA’s clerical needs (rendered more complex by our exile from a local habitation) have devolved onto single-actor, colleague volunteers storing boxes of back issues and files in their basements or in the trunks of their cars. We remain ever grateful for the appreciable sacrifice of time and energy these colleagues have made to keep us operational.

That said, the Council is now addressing the fact that this form of administrative organization is impractical for the present and unsustainable for the future. Though things may well have appeared effortless on the surface (a tribute to the professionalism and hard work of our volunteers), the burden of such service clearly took a toll. Former Secretary-Treasurer Vincent Pollina was eloquent in describing our impasse, as were both Todd Boli and Richard Lansing before him. Initially, we all imagined the solution to be the hiring of a half-time administrative assistant and the establishment of a small office. Your Council researched this possibility and concluded it to be well beyond our means. It would require some \$500,000 of endowment dedicated to this purpose alone; our entire endowment (albeit doubled by our Campaign!) is about \$160,000 dollars. In addition, research into our fundraising capacity argues that we cannot achieve such numbers in the foreseeable future, despite being very successful at raising money for an organization of our size and nature.

The Council is therefore in the process of redefining the division of our volunteer labor, a project that also likely necessitates the revision of our half-century old By-Laws. This task, by itself, is very labor intensive. Therefore the Council asked me, a retiree, to function both as President and as Acting Secretary-Treasurer during a limited transitional period. This approach has the advantages of (1) disburdening an otherwise fully-employed colleague while still keeping the DSA going, and (2) giving me a hands-on sense of the tasks to be done and, thus, the ability to lead the Council in imagining how we might do those tasks differently. Your enclosed 2012 ballot reflects this temporary arrangement.

We are now making progress both in rewriting the By-Laws and in exploring what a redesigned website could do for us. These initiatives are prerequisites to reorganization, to the reallocation of work—formerly all done by one volunteer—to the Web and/or to several volunteers. Those tasks accomplished, the Council and the Nominating Committee will be in a position to recruit new officers. Expressions of interest and nominations are welcome by mail or

email (see the address box below). We hope to be redistributing labor by this time next year.

A few words should be said about the aforementioned “prerequisites.” First, the By-Laws, as they stand, describe a mission and principles of governance that we all hold dear. The core of the document will clearly remain the same. We do, however, hope to follow the responses to our survey in extending our geographic reach beyond the boundaries of Massachusetts for many of our events as well as for recruiting our officers. Such constraints were—but no longer are—prescribed by Massachusetts law. We also hope to make the structure of our governance more transparent and to eliminate some anachronisms (such as meeting notices being hand delivered!). We will continue working on draft revisions at our upcoming meetings, circulate text to the membership for comment and discussion, rework, and then submit our proposed revision to a vote, as specified in the current By-Laws.

And second, Albert Ascoli is ably chairing a committee to look into the redesign of our website such that it would: (1) serve as an updated public face of the Society; (2) meet the varied needs of our members (scholarly, pedagogical, intellectual, professional, etc.); and (3) function as our administrative hub. We hope ultimately to eliminate most of our current clerical tasks (soliciting and processing dues; updating contact information; balloting; disseminating information) by making effective use of current technologies. We recognize that some of you will be unprepared for such change, and we propose to continue mailing to you as we now do. Still others eagerly await the transformation. If we could simply move the majority of our members online for DSA “housekeeping,” we would dramatically reduce the administrative burden.

As DSA members, you are well served by a hardworking Council that effectively balances seasoned and fresh voices. We collectively ask for your engagement in—and for your patience with—this process as it unfolds. We will periodically be in touch with you, and we welcome your comments at any time.

Sincerely,
Nancy Vickers

The Annual Meeting

The Annual Meeting of the Society will take place on Saturday, May 19 in the Carriage House of the Longfellow House-Washington's Headquarters National Historic Site (105 Brattle Street, Cambridge, MA 02138), only a short walk from Harvard Square. Parking at the site is extremely limited, but garages are available in and around the Square.

The event will begin with a business meeting at 11 a.m., followed by a talk by Professor Emerita Rachel Jacoff (Wellesley College) on "Dante and Rome." Refreshments in the garden (weather permitting) will follow.

A possible afternoon field trip to the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum is being considered. Dr. Anne-Marie Eze, DSA member and Andrew W. Mellon Postdoctoral Curatorial Fellow, would discuss Gardner's membership in the Society and show a selection of the collector's Dante-related rare books and Society paraphernalia. Very limited space would be allocated on a first-come-first-serve basis, so please express interest now (see address box below). We will then follow up in the coming weeks with potential attendees.

Student Essay Prizes

Members of the Society are urged to encourage promising *dantisti* to compete for the Dante Prize (for undergraduates) and for the Grandgent Award (for graduate students). Submissions must be sent by June 30 as email attachments to dsa@dantesociety.org. For complete guidelines, see "Prizes" on the Website.

Survey Summary

A summary of your responses to the 2011 DSA "Survey of the Membership," as completed both online and by hand, is now available on the DSA Website under "Membership." It is also available, upon request, in hard copy.

Audit Committee

At its October 2011 meeting, the Council voted to restructure the Audit Committee in order to bring it into alignment with the structures of other DSA committees. It is now to be composed of three members serving staggered three-year terms. Subsequently, the President, in consultation with the Council, appointed three colleagues to this year's committee and assigned terms so as to set the desired rotation in motion. They are:

Richard Lansing, Chair (expires 2012);
Albert Ascoli (expires 2013); and
Christopher Kleinhenz (expires 2014).

Spring Election

Enclosed you will find a ballot of candidates prepared by the Nominating Committee. Please mark your ballot and seal it in the provided "Ballot Envelope." Also enclosed is a proxy for the Annual Meeting. Please return it, together with the ballot envelope, so that it arrives no later than Monday, May 14 to The Dante Society of America, P.O. Box 1558, Arlington, MA 02474-0023.

The Nominating Committee (Peter Hawkins, Chair; Rachel Jacoff; and Dana Stewart) has nominated Nancy Vickers to serve for one year as Acting Secretary-Treasurer (see the "Letter from the President") and the following colleagues for membership on the Council.

Albert Russell Ascoli is Terrill Distinguished Professor of Italian Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. He is the author of *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author* (Cambridge UP 2008) and of numerous articles on Dante including "Access to Authority: Dante in the *Epistle to Cangrande*." He has also written frequently about Dante's *fortuna* in the works of Boccaccio, Petrarch, Ariosto, Machiavelli, Tasso and others. He is now completing a three-year term on the Dante Society Council, the last year as Vice-President. He previously served from 1994-1997. He organized the recent survey of the membership and is currently chairing a committee to restructure the Society's website. Other significant publications include *Ariosto's Bitter Harmony* (Princeton UP 1987) and *A Local Habitation and a Name: Imagining Histories in the Italian Renaissance* (Fordham UP, 2011).

Arielle Saiber is Associate Professor of Italian, Bowdoin College. She has published articles on medieval and early modern Italian literature; early modern mathematics, print history, and advice manuals; "literature & science" studies; genre theory and experimental electronic music; and Italian science fiction. Her book *Giordano Bruno and the Geometry of Language* came out in 2005, and her co-edited anthology *Images of Quattrocento Florence: Writings on Literature, History and Art* in 2000. She has also co-edited special issues of *Configurations* ("Mathematics and the Imagination," 2009) and *Dante Studies* ("Dante and Longfellow," 2010). She is

currently completing a book entitled "Well-Versed Mathematics in Early Modern Italy," for which she received an NEH Fellowship. She has been a fellow at the Istituto Italiano per gli Studi Filosofici, the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, and Villa I Tatti. Saiber previously served on the Council from 2006 to 2009. Inspired by her students, she built the web-based archive, *Dante Today: Sightings and Citings of Dante's Work in Contemporary Culture*.

Brenda Deen Schildgen, Professor of Comparative Literature, UC Davis and 2008 recipient of the UC Davis Prize for Undergraduate Teaching and Scholarly Achievement, writes on the Bible, Dante, Chaucer, Christian/Islamic cultural relations in the Middle Ages, and iconoclasm of Art and Architecture. She is the recipient of NEH, PEW, and National Center for the Humanities fellowships. Besides several essays on Dante and Islam and India and on the legacy of Augustine, among her books are *Divine Providence, A History: Bible, Virgil, Orosius, Augustine, and Dante* (2012); *Heritage or Heresy: Destruction and Preservation of Art and Architecture in Europe* (2008); *Dante and the Orient* (2002); *Power and Prejudice: The Reception of the Gospel of Mark* (1999). She teaches Reception of Major Authors, Dante, Chaucer, the Bible, and European Middle Ages.

Francesca Southerden (Ph.D., University of Oxford) is Assistant Professor of Italian Studies at Wellesley College, where she also teaches courses in the Medieval-Renaissance Program. She has published several articles on Dante, Petrarch, and twentieth-century Italian poetry, with a focus on the changing constellation of desire, language, and subjectivity from the Middle Ages to the present. She is the author of *Landscapes of Desire in the Poetry of Vittorio Sereni* (Oxford UP, 2012), and is co-editor with Manuele Gragnolati, Tristan Kay, and Elena Lombardi, of *Desire in Dante and the Middle Ages* (Legenda, 2012). She is currently working on a book-length project on Dante and Petrarch and their different conceptualizations of desire and loss.

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