JÁNOS KELEMEN

Dante and the tradition of the written word

1. Dante and the Reader

In this essay, I am returning to a theme that I had already discussed in my book entitled "The Philosopher Dante". My purpose, however, is not to rehash my previous arguments but to offer some new observations about the history of the written word and of reading, and to add to the debate about how the written and spoken word are related. This debate—started by Eric Havelock (see Havelock, E. A. 1963.)—explores how the dominant communication techniques of an era determine its thinking, and the given culture's content elements.

(Before I continue, allow me to make a parenthetical remark about an interesting coincidence. József Balogh conducted the first round of research on the history of reading. This same Balogh also prepared the first modern German translation of *De Vulgari Eloquentia* with Franz Dornseif. Until most recently, this was the standard translation for German readers of Dante [see Dante 1925.]. Balogh was also an excellent Hungarian translator of Saint Augustine's work. And it was an Augustinian passage that prompted his research on how people were reading in other eras.)

I will not take sides in this debate. My aim is simply to display some empirical facts in the light of which one can judge what kind of role the written word was playing in a concrete historical moment. I draw my data from Dante's text. I summon the poet as the witness of a culture that was—in my opinion and contrary to common belief—permeated by the written word. With writing becoming widespread, this effective communication technique undoubtedly affected the

mentality of Dante's society. What is more, writing became one of the factors that made possible his poetry and extraordinary intellectual achievement. And Dante was fully aware of this.

At the outset, I would like to note that it is of course independently difficult to establish what data should be regarded as relevant to the relationship between the written and spoken word. A further source of difficulty derives from the complexity involved in accessing such data.[1] And it is not just thematic aspects of literary texts that could prove to be interesting. Ernst Robert Curtius gave inimitable examples of making use of characteristic topoi and metaphors found in old texts. (Curtius 1969. See the chapter entitled "Das Buch als Symbol", 306-384.)

Turning our attention to Dante: it could not have been an accident that on the gate of hell there was already an *inscription* and not some sort of picture, icon or visual symbol. Dante employs a careful, calculated method to make this entirely clear to the reader. After the three verses that introduce the third Canto of *Inferno*, ("Through me is the way into the woeful city"), we read this:

> These words of obscure color I saw
> written at the top of the gate;
> (*Inferno*, III. 10-11.)

> In dunkler Farbe sah ich diese Zeilen
> Als einer Pforte Inschrift.

---

[1] Today, however, parties in this debate can draw on extensive research on the history of writing and reading. For an excellent overview on the history of reading from the beginning to the present, see Cavallo – Chartier 1997.

Consider this: in the image of writing—whose subject is first person singular— the gate of hell is speaking to us. This simultaneously means that the gate speaks to us as *something written.* The "I" of the text, that is, the gate, is at the same time *a piece of writing*, which says this, among other things:

> Before me were no things created, save eternal,
> and I eternal last.
>
> (*Inferno,* III. 7-8.)

> Vor mir entsdand nichts, als was ewig wäret
> Und ew'ge Dauer ward auch mir beschieden

Could this be interpreted as anything other than an expression of the written word's permanence and eternal nature: of the written word which condenses the connotation of sacredness even in Dante's work?[2]

Let us take stock of the major types of textual locations relevant for our purposes:

– In some places, the figure of Dante appears as that of a reader, who is simultaneously a reader of the auctor's work and of his own text (let us include here cases in which he himself appears as an *auctor*, commenting on his own text, and also cases in which he depicts himself during the actual physical act of writing).

– Likewise important are numerous places (the "apostrophes"), where Dante addresses his reader explicitly ("lettore!"), and places where he characterizes the expected

[2] This remark is enhanced, not weakened by the fact that it was probably a tradition familiar to Dante from which he drew the idea of placing an inscription on the gate of hell. According to a general medieval custom, alongside coats of arms and other emblems, inscriptions were placed on houses, especially sacral buildings.

audience of his works. These passages make it clear that he intended his works expressly for reading. The kind of reception he had in mind was none other than the very study of written texts.

– No less important are the narrative episodes a valid reading of which involves themes about the relationship between contemporary literature and its audience (recall the story of Francesca da Rimini in Inferno, Canto V).

– Finally, it is striking to see how often Dante employs the metaphor of reading and writing, as well the book-symbolism. According to Curtius, Dante's poetry summarizes, from the first paragraph of the *Vita Nuova* all the way until the last Canto of the *Divina commedia,* the entire medieval institution of the book-metaphor, and lifts it to a higher plane. (Curtius 1969. 329.)

Let us now consider Dante as a reader himself. As we examine how this figure appears in the *Divina Commedia* and in other texts, we are not merely asking a kind of philological question: *what* had Dante read, what influenced him, what constituted the basis of his erudition? Instead, cultural-historical questions are asked: what was his attitude like as a reader, what kind of role did he attribute to the act of reading in the context of gaining knowledge?

A passage in *Convivio* provides a suggestive image of Dante as reader. From this we learn that after Beatrice's death, the poet first turned to Boethius' and Cicero's books for consolation, then he discovered that while reading, he found not only a remedy for his tears but he also learned facts about authors, disciples and books (see *Convivio* II. Xii. 5.). Subsequently, his eyes—which were searching after the truth—were set firmly on philosophy, whose sweetness he discovered on a short time, perhaps some thirty months. It also makes for an important biographical note that for Dante, this was a period of intensive, fanatical reading that even endangered his eyesight: he must indeed have had a voracious

appetite for books if we grant that this was the time when he laid the foundations for his erudition.

Dante is also his own reader. In other words, there is another side to the fact that he did not intend his works for oral presentation or to be spread by word of mouth: he developed an interesting and historically innovative relationship with his own work as written work; he was, after all, constantly commenting on it. (recall the prose accompanying the *Vita nuova*; the tractates of the *Convivio*; letter XIII, written to Can Grande della Scala; numerous self-referential passages of the *Commedia*). He transforms himself into an *auctor* by appearing as *commentator* of his own work—a move that was unheard of in his time.

2. The Ideal Reader, the "Apostrophe" and the *Lectura*

Dante was also among the first to include in his text the figure of the "ideal reader", and he emphatically formulated the problematic nature of his relationship to his audience. This is no doubt connected with his continual effort to make the author's figure visible by commenting on himself. By reviving the classical rhetorical form of "apostrophe", he often turns directly to the addressee, in most cases expressly using the designation *reader*: "Think, Reader" ("Denkst, Leser, du" – *Paradiso,* V. 109.), "Here, reader, sharpen well thine eyes to the truth" ("Nun suche, Leser, scharfen Blicks die Wahrheit", – *Purgatorio*, VIII. 19-21.).

Several functions are associated with the addressing of the reader. Noteworthy among them is the metalinguistic function in which—as we saw in the previous example—the addressing calls attention to certain parts of the text that are particularly crucial to interpreting it. In other words, Dante provides guidance for the *way to read* him. For example, he does this by determining his work's function and type, recommending it to

us as a lesson or textbook, meant expressly for careful study, thorough reading: "Reader, gather fruit from thy reading" ("O Leser, willst du, dass aus deinem Lesen dir Segen Gott gewähre, so bedenke [...]". *Inferno*, XX. 20.).

The designation "lettore" (*lector*) is thus a new kind of semantic trace, referring to the unique form or genre that reading represents. This is the *lectura*. It looks as though the expression *lectura,* in contrast with the words *lectio* and *legere,* familiar from classical language, is a specifically medieval creation, conceived in the era of universities. It clearly became common because the need arose for conveying a new kind of meaning within the circle of ideas concerning reading.

The meaning of "lettore" within the *Commedia* is mostly related to this sense of *lectura.* The *author* who addresses and designates the readers, is asking them to read the poem as one would read a set of lecture notes, an annotated text accompanied by comments. This "teaching" or "lesson" sense is sometimes explicit.[3]

The following is the most significant place within the *Divina Commedia* where the reader is addressed:

O ye who in a little bark, desirous to listen,
have followed behind my craft
which singing passes on,
turn to see again your shores
[…]

[3] "Perché tu veggi pura / la verità che là giú si confonde, / equivocando in sí fatta lettura" ("I will speak further, in order that thou mayest see the simple truth, which there below is confused, by the equivocation in such like teaching"; "So will ich weiter reden, dass du rein / die Wahrheit siehst, die man durch Missverständnis / dort unter arg verwirrt in dieser Lehre" – *Paradiso,* XXIX. 73-75..)

Ye other few, who have lifted up your necks betimes
for the bread of the Angels, on which one here subsists,
but never becomes sated of it,
ye may well put forth your vessel over the deep brine…
(*Paradiso*. II. 1-13.)

Die hörbegierig ihr in kleinem Nachen
bis hieher nachgefolgt seid meinem Schiffe,
das mit Gesange seine Bahn durchmisst,
kehrt nunzurück zu eurem Heimstrane
[…]
Ihr wenigen jedoch, die ihr beizeiten
den Hals gestreckt nach jenem Engelsbrote,
das Nahrung hier, als Sättigung gewährt,
wohl dürft eu'r Schifflein in die hohe Meerflut
ihr kenken…

Through the use of another important metaphor-type—the ship-metaphor—the author is warning us that unlike the previous two parts, *Paradiso* makes for a particularly difficult read. It is intended for just a few, and only those should be encouraged to continue who are hungry for the "bread of the Angels", that is, who are familiar with the abstract teachings of philosophy and theology. This is already a question about the audience in a sociological sense as well. The apostrophes of the *Commedia* demonstrate that on the one hand, Dante was counting on the existence of a certain kind of readership, and on the other hand, he strove to create his own reader, to create a readership. The same two points are reflected in the *Convivio* as well.

It is no wonder then that Dante was trying to delineate not just his own reader but the figure of a reader in a general sense. For the first time in world literature, he turned the act of reading into a dramatic theme. It is time for us to recognize the *reader* in Francesca da Rimini and Paolo Malatesta, two romantic figures of forbidden love. Their stories are introduced thus: "We were reading one day, for delight [...]" ("Wir lasen eines Tages zum Vergnügen" – *Inferno*, V. 127.). Dante is expressly emphasizing that his characters are reading "for delight" (zum Vergnügen): "Noi leggiavamo un giorno per diletto". This is one of the first literary descriptions of the function of reading.

It is noteworthy that this episode also features the expression *lectura* ("lettura")–"quella lettura, e scolocci il viso", rendered as "reading" in the English translation:

> Many times that reading urged our eyes,
> and took the color from our faces…
> (*Inferno*, V. 130-131.).[4]

> Oft hiess des Buches Inhalt uns einander
> Scheu ansehn und verfärbte unsre Wagen

The expression *lectura* is originally expressly technical. Here it is clearly about the layperson's use of books. This is an interesting sign of a widening in the technical meaning of the word traditionally used at universities. This, in turn demonstrates that the practice of *lectura*-style reading, which requires attention and in-depth perusal, had extended beyond clerical circles, to non-professional albeit educated strata of society.

---

[4] "Per piú fiate li occhi ci sospinse / quella lettura, e scolorocci il viso".

Based on the foregoing, we can uncover interesting information about the sociology of reading from the Francesca-scene, which has been admired, studied and overstudied for centuries. Dante offers us a glimpse into reading habits at the turn of the XIII. and XIV. centuries: who the readers were and what their motives were. At the same time, the adage—"[…] Gallehaut was the book, and he who wrote it"—depicts the impact books made (Dante had in mind fashionable court literature, of course). (According to the poet's account, this impact is no less disastrous than the effect of television according to contemporary cultural critics and psychologists.) Needless to say: the very fact that Gallehaut could have been the book and the one "who wrote it" ("Galeotto fu 'l libro e chi lo scrisse"; "zum Kuppler ward das Buch und der's geschrieben" – *Inferno,* V. 137.) is yet another illustration of the written word's central role within culture.

3. Book Metaphor, Writing Metaphor

The various examples mentioned so far were all "thematic", that is, they demonstrated that the intellectual and sometimes downright physical act of reading and of writing often appears in the text as the independent object of poetic description. But the mentality shaping the text leaves other significant marks. The plethora of images, metaphors, similes about the circle of ideas concerning reading and writing provide a faithful picture of just how much the author of the *Divina Commedia* was occupied with issues we would include under the heading "written word".

One example is the "book metaphor", also studied by Curtius. In the first sentence of *Vita nuova* we encounter the "book of memory": according to the poet's fiction, this work from his youth copies words ("è mio intendimento d'assemplare") from the chapter entitled *Incipit vita nuova* of the Book of Memory.[5] In *Poems (Rime)*, we find the phrase "written in the book of the mind that is passing away".[6] In the *Commedia*, memory is the book which records the past:

> […] I heard this invitation,
> worthy of such gratitude that it is never
> to be effaced from the book which records the past.
> (*Paradiso*, XXIII. 52-55.)

> so war mir, als ich dies Erbieten hörte,
> das solches Dankes wert war, wie er nimmer
> im Buch verlischt, das das Gescheine aufnimmt.

Elsewhere we read that memory is writing, or more precisely, to remember is to record and preserve. "That which you tell of my course I write, and reserve it with other text", says Dante to Brunetto Latini ("scrivo, e serbolo a chiosar"; "Was Ihr von meines Lebens Fortgang sagtet, - bewahr ich, dass es mir mit andrem Texte / ein hohes Weib glossiert" – *Inferno*, XV. 88-89.).

---

[5] *Vita nuova,* I. 9. (Dante 1993. 668.)
[6] "[...] nel libro della mente / che vien meno". *E' m'incresce, Rime* XX. (Dante 1993. 728.)

We could quote many of Dante's extensive and elaborate similes which revolve around writing and the tools of writing (see the passages starting at *Inferno*, XXIV. 4.; and at *Inferno*, XXV. 64.). But by way of a conclusion, let us content ourselves with recalling the image confronting us in the sky of Jupiter: souls flying in packs that assume the shapes of letters ("and in their figures made of themselves now D, now I, now L."; "hin und wieder fliegend / ein D erst bildend, dann ein I und L" – *Paradiso,* XVIII. 78.), becoming "parts [...] as if spoken to me" (*ibid*. 90.), and tracing the inscription *DILIGITE JUSTITIAM QUI JUDICATIS TERRAM*. As we saw with the inscription on the gate of hell, here, too, writing becomes an outright cosmic phenomenon.

***

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Cavallo, Guglielmo – Chartier, Roger 1997, *Histoire de la lecture dans le monde occidental.* Paris, Editions de Seuil.

Curtius, Ernst Robert 1969 (1948), *Europäsche Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter.* Bern – München, Francke Verlag.

Dante, Alighieri 1925, *Über das Dichten in der Muttersprache - De vulgari eloquentia* (aus dem Lateinischen übersetzt und erläutert von Franz Dornseiff und Joseph Balogh). Damrmstadt, Otto Reichl Verlag

Dante, Alighieri 1945, *Göttliche Komödie* (aus dem Italienischen übertragen von Karl Witte). Leipzig, Philipp Reclam Jun.

Dante, Alighieri 1984, *Divine Commedy* (translated by Charles E. Norton). Chicago, Encyclopædia Britannica.

Dante, Alighieri 1985, *La Divina Commedia* (a cura di Tommaso di Salvo). Bologna, Zanichelli.

Dante, Alighieri 1993, *Tutte le opere* (a cura di Italo Borzi). Roma, Newton.

Dante, Alighieri, *Vita nuova.* In Dante 1993, 667-880.

Dante, Alighieri, *Rime.* In Dante 1993,716-765.

Dante, Alighieri, *Convivio.* In Dante 1993, 880-1017.

Dante, Alighieri, *De vulgari eloquentia.* In Dante 1993, 1017-1071.
Havelock, E. A. 1963. *Preface to Plato.* Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press.

Kelemen, János 2002. *A filozófus Dante* (Dante philosopher). Budapest, Atlantisz.