

DANTE AND THE
MYSTICAL TRADITION
BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX
IN THE *COMMEDIA*

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CHAPTER I

(Re-)reading Dante: an unscientific preface

Reflect a little, if you will, on exactly what it is that you are doing at this moment. I have, of course, no way of knowing who you are, or where you are, or when this moment is – whether a day, a month, a year, or (I flatter myself) a century after these words first see the light of print – but I can still affirm, with absolute certainty, what activity you are currently engaged in. You are reading; your eye is scanning a page on which are printed certain symbols whose arrangement forms patterns to which you are able to assign meaning on the basis of your acquaintance with the semiotic system we call the English language. In so doing, you are participating in a remarkably complex and demanding enterprise whose nature is still by no means fully understood. This book begins from the recognition that what is involved in reading requires very careful consideration indeed from those of us who claim to do it well enough to wish to share the results of our reading with others.

The actions and processes that constitute the enterprise of reading, which the vast majority of people (at least in the Western world) are happily able to take for granted and, I suspect, rarely if ever pause to consider, have provoked a good deal of interest in various branches of the academic community in recent decades. Much of this has been directed towards the production of studies whose strictly scientific basis and assumptions carry them far beyond the scope of this book's preoccupations (or its author's competence). But, even within the comparatively circumscribed arena of the scholarly criticism of literature, extensive attention has been paid, especially in the last thirty years or so, to the ways in which the reader of a text may become actively involved in the production or delineation of that text's meaning. The schools of criticism and theory that have developed around the several approaches to the phenomenon of the reader and readerly activity are numerous, prolific, and more than

occasionally combative; and it is no part of my present undertaking to assess the extent or value of their contributions to critical debate.¹ It is, none the less, in the broad realm of a criticism informed by an interest in the role of the reader and the process of reading that this study aspires to find its place – a place whose marginal location will perhaps be guaranteed as much by the tentativeness of my conclusions as by the specificity of my project.

The subject of this book is a brief episode that occurs very near the end of Dante's *Commedia*: the intervention in the narrative of St Bernard of Clairvaux, and his subsequent exchanges with, and actions on behalf of, the character Dante. It may be seen primarily as a close reading of that episode, which aims both to analyse this part of *Paradiso* more thoroughly than has been attempted before, and to identify some of the thematic principles that appear to underlie the episode and to condition the details of its textual fabric. But this double approach – exposition of the text and definition of the concepts presumed to have affected its formulation – is further modified by a broader set of ideas about the act of reading itself. These ideas seem to me to bear with particular force on the reading of the *Commedia* (as a poetic narrative, but also as a landmark in intellectual history), and could thus, perhaps, usefully be brought into play during the study of any part or parts of the poem – or, best yet, when studying the whole vast verbal edifice as a single unit.

Briefly, my argument is that the *Commedia* is a Heraclitean river, into which no reader can ever step twice and find it unaltered. Less poetically, I would contend that there is a crucial difference between a *first* reading of the poem and any or all subsequent reading(s); and, equally, that no matter how many times a reader opens a copy of *Inferno* at those mysteriously thrilling words 'Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita / mi ritrovai in una selva oscura / ché la diritta via era smarrita' (*Inf.*, I. 1–3), he or she is never setting out again on the same

¹ The work of the major figures in what is now a crowded field – Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish, Hans-Robert Jauss – is voluminous and familiar enough to have inspired not only a large number of epigones but also a good deal of metacritical writing about theories of readers and reading. Useful introductions, from a variety of perspectives, include Robert C. Holub, *Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction* (London and New York, 1984); Ian Maclean, 'Reading and Interpretation', in *Modern Literary Theory: A Comparative Introduction*, edited by Ann Jefferson and David Robey, 2nd edition (London, 1986), pp. 122–44; and Elizabeth Freund, *The Return of the Reader: Reader-Response Criticism* (London and New York, 1987). All these include detailed guides to further reading. In connection with this chapter's interest in re-reading, see François Roustang, 'On Reading Again', in *The Limits of Theory*, edited by Thomas M. Kavanagh (Stanford, 1989), pp. 121–38; Matei Calinescu, *Rereading* (New Haven and London, 1993).

journey, never beginning to read again the same poem. Reading and re-reading the *Commedia* are very different propositions; and it is a serious flaw in modern Dante criticism that this fact has been so inadequately recognized.

The reason for this is intimately connected with the status and activities of the poem's readers. Any reader of any text, I would argue, enters into what is essentially an eternal triangle (no less titillating, at least intellectually, than its better-known, more carnal counterpart). This triangle's three corners are the text, its author, and its reader; and the subtle interplay among these three (which often becomes a more or less well-concealed struggle to establish authority) is the process we call the production of meaning.

Sometimes, of course, the triangle turns out to be defective, or the conditions for its successful accomplishment seem to be absent; texts can be corrupt, authors unknown, readers ill-equipped. In such cases, the triangle's failure to operate effectively has to be admitted, and the critic must be content with what fragments of meaning can be salvaged from the wreckage. Where text or author or reader cannot be clearly defined as an element in the interpretative situation, the finally provisional nature of all critical judgements is brought home to criticism's practitioners with unaccustomed bluntness. But the *Commedia* is not such a case. It exists in a reliable and formally complete textual version (the small number of cruces and variants that remain unresolved after Giorgio Petrocchi's monumental labours, though naturally important in their specific contexts, do not substantially affect the coherence of the poem as a whole);² its author is all too well known, and his authorial presence all too blatant; and its readers, provided that they have a reasonable grasp of medieval Italian (without which they cannot become readers in the first place), should find no invincible obstacles to a productive engagement with it. Dante's 'poema sacro' thus offers a more than suitable testing-ground for theories of reading and, by extension, of re-reading.

When speaking of the eternal triangle created in reading a text, I mean to stress the active involvement of all three participants (another point of contact, no doubt, with alternative versions of the metaphor). The author is responsible for the text's formulation,

² *La 'Commedia' secondo l'antica vulgata*, edited by Giorgio Petrocchi, 4 vols. (Milan, 1966-7). Petrocchi's edition, which seems to come as close to perfection as is imaginable in this world, has been used for all quotations from the *Commedia* in this book.

according to designs which it *may*, up to a point, be possible for readers to recover and assess (though the use they then make of their conclusions remains variable and, indeed, controversial). The text, meanwhile, exists as a combination of words on a page that offers both material for interpretation and (implicit or explicit) guidance for that interpretation; and the reader brings to the relationship his or her individual personality, linguistic expertise, cultural formation, aesthetic sensibility, and investigative enthusiasm (or lack of same). All three elements co-exist and co-operate in a tremulous balance, constantly subject to oscillation as a consequence of alterations in one or other of the triangle's corners (new facts about the author, new emendations of the text, new experiences for the reader) – a balance that issues in the generation of meaning(s) and the establishment of (an) interpretation. However, because at least one of the corners is, in theory, terrifyingly unstable – there is a theoretically infinite number of potential readers of any given text – there can, in the end, be no unitary, definitive meaning, at which all readers will arrive and which then excludes all possibility of dissent or the formulation of alternatives. You have as much right to your interpretation of the *Commedia* as I do to mine; and, if we try to convince each other that our reading is more accurate, more plausible, or more satisfactory than any other, we are perhaps doing our duty as critics, but we are exceeding our mandate as readers. Diversity in interpretation is an inescapable consequence of the nature of reading itself.

But the diversity among readers as individuals is more readily comprehended, perhaps, than the equally significant diversity among an individual reader's separate readings. This is the issue with which this book attempts to deal. I would argue, returning to my particular concern with the *Commedia*, that reading and re-reading the poem need to be distinguished, in theory if not always in practice, if we are to achieve anything even remotely resembling an understanding of how the *Commedia* 'works', of how its narrative, language, thematics, and symbolism combine and interact to form a meaningful textual artefact. For any 'meaning' the *Commedia* may be said to possess, whether in the tenacious conviction of an individual reader or the blander consensus of a community of scholars, will vary in startlingly significant ways according, quite simply, to whether or not the reader involved has read the poem before.

Readers come to a first reading of the *Commedia* equipped with some degree of linguistic capability and some kind of intellectual

prehistory, but no concrete knowledge of precisely what textual experiences the poem has in store for them. (They may, of course, know something *about* the poem, and thus have a rough idea of what to expect – but between rough idea and direct acquaintance there is a great gulf fixed.) Such readers are thus guided in their reading – wherever they start and wherever they stop – by signals, structures, and strategies built into the text itself; and their derivation of meaning from the words they identify and interpret will also be affected by such information and preconceptions (whether about the poem itself or matters arising from it) as they may have managed to acquire, from immersion in or study of the cultural setting to which the *Commedia* can be seen to belong. ‘Immersion’, of course, was only possible for Dante’s immediate contemporaries; it is replaced by ‘study’, in the sense of recuperation of a culture that has substantially or totally ceased to exist, very early in the poem’s critical history – arguably as early as Boccaccio’s commentary (1373–4) and certainly by the time of Landino’s (1481).³

First-time readers, then, advancing more or less timidly in their notably demanding exegetical adventure, are able to produce for themselves a cumulative interpretation of what they read, which is continually subject to revision in the light of their expanding experience of the poem. Not until the last word of *Paradiso* xxxiii has faded into the vacuum that replaces every text when the reading of it comes to an end can the first-time reader’s interpretation be said to be complete; and, by then, every line that precedes *Paradiso*, xxxiii. 142 will, to a greater or lesser degree, look different from the way it did when it was first deciphered.

But the adventure does not end there, at least for those who, sooner or later, find themselves impelled to begin all over again in the ‘selva oscura’ – or, indeed, anywhere else in the Dantean afterlife. When they do so, they undertake a *re-reading*, and find themselves, therefore, on radically altered terms with the *Commedia*, both conceptually and hermeneutically. The prior knowledge of the text gained from a first reading now itself becomes one (and by no means the least important) of the exegetical instruments that re-readers are able to employ; and it helps them, among other things, to devise a static and internally consistent account of the poem’s meaning, as a substitute for the dynamic and sometimes inevitably contradictory

³ On this, see my article on the Trecento commentaries in the forthcoming second volume of *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, edited by A. J. Minnis.

version generated during, and constantly modified by, the initial reading. Now they know how the story is going to end, so to speak, they can never again look at either that story or its characters as they did in the days of their interpretative innocence, when everything still remained to be discovered. So readers familiar with the text almost invariably begin to read prospectively as well as retrospectively, interpreting this or that feature of the poem not only in the light of what has preceded it in the linear unfolding of the *Commedia's* narrative, but also in that of what they already know is going to happen further along.

And so it continues: each successive re-reading alters – let us hope, deepens – the reader's understanding of the poem as an entity, by modifying his or her interpretation of its (verbal, thematic, narrative) details. The poem comes, then, to exist not just in the temporal present of a particular occasion of reading, but also in the cumulative past created on earlier occasions; its very narrative comes to seem proleptic of itself, apparently announcing in advance what is, in fact, being supplied by the experienced reader's memory. Nor is it just the re-reading of the *Commedia* itself that contributes to this development: in between re-readings, readers are constantly changing, acquiring new experiences, encountering other texts, coining fresh ideas – and they then come back to the *Commedia* with eyes that make of it each time a subtly but unmistakably different text. This is why I spoke of the poem as a Heraclitean river: though it may seem to be always and reassuringly the same, as it sits snug on the shelf in its trinity of leather-bound or paperback volumes, this seeming constancy of the *Commedia's* textual nature (and thus of its meaning) is exposed as an illusion as soon as one of those volumes is opened and a reader begins to read. The poem is actually, while being read, in a state of motion as rapid and unstoppable as the flow of water downhill to the sea.

In this book, therefore, I posit a crucial (and sadly neglected) distinction between a first reading of the *Commedia* (which I call 'reading'), and any or all later approaches by the 'same' reader ('re-reading'). Ancillary to this basic dichotomy is the potentially endless subdivision of re-readings according to their number, frequency, and so on; but that way lies, if not madness, at least an unnecessarily severe methodological headache. For the purpose of the present study I shall restrict myself to basing my argument on the fundamental difference between first and later readings.

My argument, then, is that 'reading' and 're-reading' are different

exercises, capable of producing – indeed, destined to produce – different kinds of interpretation; and moreover that, while both have much to tell us about Dante’s *Commedia*, the former – which I take to be an indispensable preliminary to any serious consideration of the poem – has all too often been disdained, omitted, or misperformed by modern Dante scholars. Our century knows too much about the *Commedia* for its own good: many of those who write about the poem in the 1990s begin with acts of ‘re-reading’, taking mere ‘reading’ for granted (as though it were easy!), and thereby, in effect, asking their audience to join them in the literally preposterous exercise of trying to run before they have learned to walk.

There are, incidentally, a number of more elaborate exegetical schemes that might – with due and heartfelt protestations of modesty – be assimilated to the distinction between ‘reading’ and ‘re-reading’. One is the separation, characteristic of late medieval traditions of textual commentary, between the literal and allegorical levels of a text. This is observed, to varying degrees, by almost all the fourteenth-century commentators on the *Commedia*, and is given its most memorable form in the *Esposizioni* of Giovanni Boccaccio, where each canto examined is read first literally and then allegorically, the results of each reading being presented even as formally distinct (there are two separate chapters of analysis of each canto, except those – *Inferno* x and xi – that Boccaccio deems to have no allegorical significance).⁴ In this context, ‘reading’ could be seen as related, conceptually if not historically, to the Trecento notion of literal analysis, being centred on the decoding of the letter of the text; while ‘re-reading’, which takes that letter as its point of departure and then permits the free play of allegorical speculation, would belong to the general sphere of analysis of the letter’s symbolic connotations.

At the other end of the historical spectrum, there is also the (distant) possibility of a correlation between the ‘reading’/‘re-reading’ distinction and E. D. Hirsch’s account of the difference between ‘meaning’ and ‘significance’ (though I am less anxious to restore the prestige of authorial intention, as a validating principle, than is the Hirsch of *Validity in Interpretation*).⁵ Here too occurs the idea of the text as possessing – in some (disputable) sense – a (literal) ‘meaning’ on which all reasonable readers can agree, as well as an

⁴ Giovanni Boccaccio, *Esposizioni sopra la ‘Comedia’ di Dante*, edited by Giorgio Padoan (Verona, 1965).

⁵ E. D. Hirsch, Jr, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven and London, 1967).

(allegorical) ‘significance’, in which individual emphases and interpretations can be given freer rein, so as to be judged by different standards of evidence and validation. *Si parva licet componere magnis*, I would tentatively propose that the former is akin to what is involved in my notion of ‘reading’, the latter to what emerges from ‘re-reading’.

Mention of two approaches as historically far apart as those of the Trecento commentators and E. D. Hirsch raises another issue that should not be overlooked when it comes to thinking about how we read the *Commedia*: the danger of anachronism. It is sometimes claimed, in fact, that a fundamental and insoluble incompatibility afflicts any approach to a fourteenth-century text in the twentieth century: that the attempt to re-create Dante’s own cultural horizon as a way of furthering our understanding of the poem, or to propound any particular response to it as being in tune with the presumed or documented response of its contemporaries, can no longer be reconciled with the awareness that we ourselves are inescapably conditioned by our own historical situation. On this view, it is impossible to see the *Commedia* – or any cultural phenomenon of the more than recent past, from the *Epic of Gilgamesh* to *The Waste Land* – with eyes other than those of the late twentieth century. Alterity, in a word, is assumed to preclude identification.

As the use of the ‘horizon’ metaphor in the previous paragraph implies, the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer is obviously indispensable to any effort to comprehend and overcome – or at least learn to live with – this problem.⁶ But, again without wishing to make inflated claims for my own work, I would suggest that the distinction between ‘reading’ and ‘re-reading’ can also be helpful and relevant in this case. ‘Reading’ offers an opportunity to come as close as is conceivably possible to an engagement with the poem on its own, medieval, terms (since it is based on the one thing we do have in common with the *Commedia*’s first readers, the letter of its text, and is guided by the indications supplied by that text itself); while ‘re-reading’ not only makes possible the historical consideration of medieval reactions to the poem, and of the nature of the cultural

⁶ Gadamer’s extraordinary *magnum opus*, *Wahrheit und Methode* (Tübingen, 1960; 2nd edition, 1965), remains a necessary, if daunting, point of departure; an English translation, *Truth and Method* (London, 1975; revised edition, New York, 1989) is available. Several of the articles by Gadamer collected in *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, edited by Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge, 1986) also illuminate the possibilities for applying Gadamer’s thinking to literary-critical and aesthetic questions.

matrix in which it is embedded, but also encourages fresh acts of interpretation, inspired by intellectual and critical developments that have taken place since the early fourteenth century. In short, while I am aware that there is no such person as the wholly innocent reader, who can occupy an Archimedean point outside history and come to the *Commedia* as a *tabula rasa* on which the poem can inscribe its meaning for itself – thus making our modern interpretations somehow ‘authentic’ – I suggest that ‘reading’ offers us the (potentially fruitful) chance to act as if there were. ‘Re-reading’, meanwhile, is free to stimulate the proliferation of interpretative hypotheses to an extent limited only by our (supposedly) healthy distrust of the arbitrary and the absurd.

What this book proposes, then, is both a ‘reading’ and a ‘re-reading’ of the episode involving Bernard of Clairvaux in the closing cantos of *Paradiso*. My aim is to demonstrate that reading the letter of Dante’s text – expounding its literal meaning and analyzing the narrative and formal structures and patterns that direct, from within the text itself, the production and definition of that meaning – prepares the way for the fullest possible appreciation of the episode’s symbolic connotations, cultural background, and exegetical difficulties, all of which are also involved in the establishment of meaning and the activity of interpretation. I do not claim, on the other hand, to have escaped any of the obvious traps of subjectivity or historicity built into the situation I have been describing; the essential instability of the eternal hermeneutic triangle eliminates any such possibility. I do think it feasible, however, at least where the literal level of the *Commedia*’s text is concerned, to arrive at a measure of agreement among readers that may serve as a shared basis for more individually characterized essays in interpretation; and it is as a contribution to the development of such a consensus that this book is chiefly intended.

You, as both Dante’s and – I trust – my reader, have, of course, the right and the power to silence my argument at any moment, by closing this book and replacing it wherever seems most appropriate at the time. However, I hope that, even if you do choose such a course, you will not give up the effort to make your own contribution to the reading – and re-reading – of this endlessly absorbing, endlessly frustrating, yet endlessly rewarding text that is Dante’s *Commedia*.