

The inscription of the infernal gate and the function of its reading

1. *Reading the inscription of the infernal gate*

What could say a man who meets an old friend who gives an account to him on his new job? „What about your new job?” – asks the man. The answer of his friend is: „imagine that I was appointed to be a gate-guard in Hell.” „So”, replies the man, „am I now in Hell as well?”. We can see that the contrast which unfolds is *ontological* (who is in Hell, cannot speak to somebody who is not there), but the actors are put in the same level of reality concerning the truth of their assertion: the consequence of this is the apparent absurdity of the dialog. It's the same case when somebody is reading the infernal inscription: there is also an apparent ontological absurdity, ie. does the reader make himself a part of Hell or he doesn't? If the answer would be positive, in which sense has that to be understood? In other words: in this case who is the reader and what does it mean to *read* that inscription?

In the realm of the sacred and religious world there are many days of celebration, moments of devotion, when the crowd of believers is hearing the lectures of the sacred texts. The reader is a believer, or a priest. The essence of celebration is the same: reading a sacred text and hearing out the actual message of it. Usually, when Dante addresses a reader, he calls up him for an intensive attention, that is coming from the apprehensible actuality of the text (for example, in *Inf.* XXV. 46-48 or *Purg.* IX. 70-72). The sacred books need a different type of reading. The sacred text may be actual in every time and in every place – his content is acquirable everywhere and every time, but it needs a carefully lecture.

For example, in our Catholic liturgy believers come to hear the lecture of Biblical texts, chosen by a cleric. This text will represent

the message of sacrality. But we know as well, what relevance has the reading of the *Qur'an* in Islam, or of other sacred books in further religions. We certainly know the Tibetan funeral book, in which the reading itself is a religious act, facilitating the separation of soul from the body. The function is helping, guiding, illuminating and protecting. The book contains many technics to guide the soul from the body to its eternal house. In the *Book of Revelation* we can read on the above mentioned *Book of Life*, in which all (good) events in personal history are recorded, and that will be opened at the end of this world.

Reading is a kind of meeting with the hidden sense of a text or a sense corporated in a text. The semantic sign, through listening, opens a way of self-transformation for a „higher“ world (a higher understanding of one's partial rule). Hearing a pray is itself a praying of the hearer. The ontological differences by this act are gone: I hear and I realize in the same moment what I've heard, i.e. deeds and emotions; the first step is to understand the text, the second is to remember or to recite the previously heard, emblematic stories, and the third is to transform these into actions. These steps would be similar to those of contrition, as recorded in *Purgatory* (IX. 94-102) by Dante. This is why are important repetitions in religious acts: these are like a kind of body of spiritual cleaning and penance.

Consequences are clear; in religion reading is made by deeds: good deeds mean to understand the text, bad deeds mean words finding deaf ears (crime or indifference). But deeds have to function as a guide, because these are resolutions of the human will. Now we can read adequately the *Book of Books* (as any other sacred book, which has some religious relevance) with the will of deeds themselves. Dante says that his intention is to manage our deeds for good (see: *Epistle to Can Grande XIII*, 39 „...removere viventes in hac vita de statu miserie et perducere ad statum felicitatis“). But this managing has a double character, as follows from the word „perducere“. Faith is the strongest element to arrange our actions for

good (that actually doesn't exist: Dante repeats the dogmatic answer in the XXIVth canto of Paradise: faith is an „argument for what can not be seen“ XXIV. 65), but there is an other seduction (*per-ducere*) for our senses by beauty, by poetry. This lure is very important and comes to light by reading with esthetical enjoyment the text. Good, as the end of deeds (viewed from the teleological aspect) can work by guiding. The reading of sacred texts leads or perhaps makes possible to us to know the roots of any possible good deed. To read, as Paolo and Francesca did, certainly doesn't direct us to this roots.

Reading the inscription of the infernal gate is the same experience as to read the sacred texts conversely. If the initial dialogue is seen as real, whose truth belongs to this reality? No one's or both's. It's the same problem when somebody is telling lies to everybody, except to himself. Where is the foundation of the truth of his sentence, if all the utterances of him are lies? The ongoing question refers to the problem of connection between semantic reality and perceived reality. This is an old problem in theory of language (the problem of *doxa*): Dante knew the Augustinian-Neoplatonist distinction of „sapientia“ and „scientia“. Thus „whatever we do in the use of temporal things under the guidance of reason, we do it with our gaze fixed on the eternal things which we are to obtain, passing quickly by the former, but clinging to the latter“. ¹ Does any form of reading offer us this love?

Let's see the language of the lost people in *Vestibulum*: their speech has deformities (*Inf.* III. 25), mixed with anger and pain. What is absolutely missing, it is the intellect and the good of the intellect, that is God itself, because we know that the first spelled word by Adam is „God“ (*De Vulgari Eloquentia*, IV. 3). The first speech arranged by God defines all reality. In God we read reality itself. But what is reality at all? Pareyson says: it's interpretation. And the interpretation is not a reading, a variant of all possible combinations?

1 Augustine, *On the Trinity*, XIII, 21. in: *Augustine, On the Trinity*, edited by Gareth B. Matthews, Cambridge, 2002.

Maybe it is. But we chose between the different readings and this is our responsibility. The sacred text nevertheless gives us a connecting road to the whole reality and our responsibility is to choose in that, however it is beautiful.

On the question of reading singer Péter Müller says : „Reading means that you enter in the community of a genius. (...) thereby you live Their world and create for yourself a home in it. Since you read it, you are becoming Them, and while the book, the music sheet is before you, the music sounds in your mind.”² The reading of a sacred text makes you enter in the community of the world-creating genius, which is God. With this, his sound rings in you.

The inscription text of the Hellish gate is the subversion of the above mentioned community. Reading (on the gate) shows us that damnation is real. The gate constitutes the border of reality (it's not a real, physical border!) of bad deeds in the form of reading. The characters of this inscription – we can say – are made of our deeds. In this sense the infernal gate and the deeds noted in the *Book of Life and of Revelation* create a common lecture: Hell is nothing else than the *Book of Death*, wrote by bad deeds.³

2. *Reading and its functions*

In the history of ideas there are many meanings of reading. For example, memory is a spiritual reading of learned things. In Plato, memory is remembrance of the world of ideas, thus is a kind of reading.⁴ Science is the reading of the logical structure (the ideal) of the world. Mathematics reads the quantitative relations of the

2 Müller Péter, *Secret teachings (Titkos tanítások)*, Alexandra, 2003, p.38. (Hungarian edition).

3 The question is rightful what does it mean for Dante the „bad deeds”. For it I refer to the book of Joan Ferrante, *The Political Vision of Dante's Divine Comedy*, where this theme is expanded largely. Summarizing we can say, that the morality for Dante bases on the reference of a single to the whole human community.

4 Plato, *Menon*, 81c-d.

elements in the universe. Every knowledge substantially has something related to reading.

There is a very suggestive part in Dante's *Comedy* on what means reading for our spiritual (not physical!) life. Reading, Francesca tells to the wayfarer, have played a very important rule in the damnation of her and of Paolo. „*One day, when we were reading, /for distraction, how Lancelot was overcome by love – /we were alone, without any suspicion; /several times, what we were reading forced /our eyes to meet, and then we changed colour: /but one page only was more than we could bear. /When we read how that smile, so much desired, /was kissed by such a lover, in the book, /he, who will never be divided from me, /kissed my mouth, he was trembling as he did so; /the book, the writer played the part of Galahalt: /that day we got no further with our reading*” (Inf. V. 127-139. translated by H.C. Sisson).

Reading in this story is presented as an inverse reading of the sacred text and the underlined references are showing the main elements of the profane reading: „for distraction” means that reading has no other goal than spending time: this is the negation of hearing a sacred text. The next stage is that the reading discovers a desire concealed in them, but this desire leads not to the Infinite, but the finite. Ultimately there happens the transformation of body as the final stage of reading. However in this case the transformation has changed completely: reading falls into flogging of sensuality and not of reason. Reading is a kind of medium that carries the spirit in a different state, but it's not just the same in what is the content of reading, but combination of intention and content. Because reading unveils as guiding: we see that Virgil reads well the text of the gate and understands it appropriately (like a „persona accorta” Inf. III. 10). Now I refer to the quoted text of Augustine: this reading of the damned souls leads us to an erroneous love of material things and not to eternity.

3. *The essence of reading*

How is the process of reading? What is his way out? By reading and understanding a text we unfold an interpretation of reality in our mind. This unfolding can be called – as Singleton has paraphrased it – a fictionalized (subjectivized) reality that absorbs and transforms the reader who meets it. We introduce the interpretation of reality into our own consciousness *quasi* by reading. Dante's continuously addresses the reader: „you, listen! Here is the place that you must grasp well“. This implies us to take in our mind the right interpretation of the text, and that the forthcoming text is very important to apprehend the work at all. These are little moral blows for the reader to follow the guide to the right path. And it can rightly be said that this addressings have moral implications, namely Dante's commitment for helping the reader in this process of understanding allegorically the text, in this finding the way which leads out of the *selva oscura* (dark forest), veiled by your everyday life.

This helping-function is very important through the entire reading of the *Comedy*. John Freccero, who analyzes in details the Augustinian confession and the reading of this confession by Dante, emphasizes the necessity to identify personal experience with redemptive process. So the individual should become a sign for all who are seeking for their *beatitudo*. Now, what does make reading? It will connect the subjective element to the universal one, it will convert the natural throw to intellectual aspiration, that the biblical readings provide us the connection to God's eternal life through the intellectual understanding of the read text. The other function of reading is to get us into the right path and try to keep us between the borders of cornice of life.

The function of reading is putting us on the road of transformation. Of this transformation we can see the reverse in *Inferno* XXV, where the transformation is chaotic and directs not for good but to the harm of the transformed. Then again the final part of

the transformation is presented in canto X of *Purgatory*, where Dante says: „Do you not perceive that we are grubs, /born to turn into the angelic butterfly /which flies towards justice without defence?“ (*Purg.* X. 124-126). The „angelic butterfly“ or the infernal fusion of different and hatred-elements make the terrain of this decision.

Now, to read is a kind of conversion. To make poetry is a kind of religious mediation between Earth and Heaven. Dante's intention is to make the language as a mean for grasping the dynamic relation between reality and human spirituality. This dynamics is built into the text, as the reader is forced to understand the deeper sense-layer of the message.

„Sicut dicit Philosophus in secundo Metaphysicorum: «Sicut res se habet ad esse, sic se habet ad veritatem»; cuius ratio est, quia veritas de re, quae in veritate consistit tanquam in subiecto, est *similitudo perfecta rei sicut est*“. This is what Dante writes in his above quoted letter (*Epistola a Cangrande*, XIII, 14: „As the philosopher says in the second book of Metaphysics: «in the world each thing is in respect of the being, so is in respect of the truth», which means that the truth of a thing, that is the truth in the subject, is in perfect similarity with thing in that it is“). The truth is then the liaison to the Being, and this relationship brings forth reality. Verity is not identity, but unity of content and place, in which there is no any kind of oneness, but *similitudo perfecta rei*, namely the perfect resemblance of a thing to it's proper being. The reading is setting forth this resemblance (as the representation of a thing through arts) and merging in it even for the final transfiguration of the subjective relationship to an objective adaptation of known, reassumed ideas.

The *Divine Comedy* is a text where the language became poetry and a mean, an instrument of the most higher art. In fine arts colours play the role of letters and words in texts. What is colour in fine art, that's text for poetry. The similarity is self-evident. Let's read Dostoyevsky's account on the *effect* of an artwork (which is very difficult to measure): „For example, somebody in those adolescent

times – in those days when «the impressions reached the mind are news» and freshes – once has looked at the Apollon of Belvedere, the sublime and immensely nice features of God were craved in his soul indelible”.⁵ Poetry too is a charm of invitation for this seeing. Our deeds create a kind of reading of reality, and because every deed presupposes a final one, we cannot glance aside to our Galahalt, our “bawd”. The reading as the journey for Dante is a kind of Galahalt to gain an other life. In Purgatory we can read as well on the essence of this Comedy for the traveller: „...by my journey, I gain another life” (Purg. VIII. 60).

4. *The Infernal Gate and the inscription*

At first let's us quote the original inscription: „Per **me** si va nella città dolente, /Per **me** si va nell'eterno dolore, /Per **me** si va tra la perduta gente. /Giustizia mosse il **mio** alto Fattore: /Ece**mi** la divina Potestate, /La somma Sapienza e il primo Amore. /Dinanzi a **me** non fur cose create, /Se non etterne, ed **io** eterno duro: /Lasciate ogni speranza, **voi** che entrate”(Inf. III. 1-9).

There is debate over the inscription of the gate whether it's made of uppercase or lowercase. In the first case the inscription made by capital letter signs a typical city-gate shape (with congratulatory or religious intent), used often in that age. Nevertheless we think that this debate is marginal for the real significance of the gate.

This object is first of all a warning, but as an appeal it appears too late for the sinners, namely for those who are necessarily overpassing it. But it's not so for the reader who meets this necessity: he reads the inscription as an advance of the closed time of the sinners, for there is no possibility of changing their life, i.e. of „improving” their personality (there is no hope). Meanwhile by this advanced time we will be called, by reading, to our „open” time, to

5 F. Dostoevsky, *On Art (A művészetről)*, Kriterion, Bukarest, 1980, p. 57 (Hungarian edition).

wit opened yet for a good as spiritual gate for the land of Canaan. The gate as a textual object is a sign for the outset of a new time, which for sinners is „closed“, and for readers is „opened“, or we can say that this new time is opening actually to the Glory. This „opening“ is reading, a kind of purging process, referring to the whole intellectual intention of the *Comedy*.

The personification is a very important element of the gate as Mark Musa appeals to it. We can see „the abundance of personal pronouns and possessive adjectives in the inscription (seven in the nine verses), powerfully animates it, making the gate itself seem to come alive and speak with its own commanding voice“.⁶ Frongia said in his study on the inscription that the gate and the text create each other, which is independent from the shape. Words create reality as the divine *verbum* creates the world itself. The gate seems to live and seems to talk to us, because the gate has the power, what by Frongia has been called to be the result of a „semantic implication of the word“.⁷ What does it mean this „implication“? This is „a poignant warning to the damned and to the travellers alike, and an eloquent reminder of the *essence of Hell*“.⁸ So the „implication“ is determining a thing not explicitly stated, not explicitly defined, only implicitly suggested. The implication put the actual existence in the form of a final date of creative processing (Whitehead) and every attributes will be cut, closed into the stone. The gate now represents the sin, it became final in his sensibility (there is no sight without seeing), as the significance (soul) and the sign (body) are dissolved in the moment of death, and the soul itself becomes body (sign and significance together).

The gate is a fiction, and as a fiction denies reality, but as a textual-physical work (by God's justice) denies the „fiction's implicit

6 Mark Musa, *Dante Alighieri's Divine Comedy: Inferno. Italian text and verse translation*, Indiana UP, 2004, p.33.

7 Eugenio N. Frongia, Canto III: The Gate of Hell, in: A.Mandelbaum, A.Oldcorn, C. és C.S. Ross, *Lectura Dantis: Inferno*, University of California Press, 1998, p.36.

8 Ibid. p.37.

negation of the real".⁹ „Man only through signs is able to know the deeper truth, moreover does not know to express everything – for example the mystical experiences – with them”.¹⁰ Signs veil reality, but deny also the unknownableness of truth. This double negation forces the reader to apprehend the deeper significance of the lyrics and through the realization to get up to the stage of ineffability (as the essence of Dante’s representation is underlined by Kelemen as well), the ineffable reality of life as a personal, as an understanding part of the whole universe. This is a sensation that is implicit in sight and this is better for make it fit to the intellect.¹¹ The gate has such a leading role for the reader (effect-cause) and a damnation role for the sinner (final-cause). The obscure stone of the gate makes sensible the barrier of Hell to the sinner, but for the reader is just a barrier that moves itself together with him in his earthly travelling time making it an outstanding ethical implication.

9 J. Freccero, *Poetics of conversion*, Harvard University, 1986, p.101.

10 J. Kelemen, *A filozófus Dante*, Atlantisz, 2002, p.104.

11 „There must be such language for your mind /because it learns only from what is sensible /matter wich, afterwards, it makes fit for the intellect” (*Paradiso*, IV. 40-42). See: Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, IV. 1.1.