
In this volume, the second in the “Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature,” Trambling distinguishes himself from those critics who search for unity and univocity within the text; he seeks instead to demonstrate its polysemy: just as the past is constantly being rewritten, so “does the *Commedia* re-write itself as it goes on, and so does Dante’s whole life, as expressed in art, become re-written time and again” (6). Part one demonstrates, while dealing with Dante’s rewriting of other texts, that the *Commedia* both “declares its own refusal of closure” and draws attention to itself as a fictualization, as a system of writing. Part two proposes (in Derridian terminology) that each *cantica* rewrites the one before it. The *Purgatorio* becomes a critical rewriting and rethinking of the *Inferno*, whose theme is the reduction of signification and whose end is silence. In the *Purgatorio* “poetic desire takes the form of looking for significance, rather than overt meaning, and thus opens up the text as a space for new and surprising insights” (96). This leads to “the world that bursts with meaning” described in *Paradiso* 26.16–18 (78).

In part three the author argues “that the *Commedia* is not offering itself as a single, separate, autonomous work,” but rather that it is “an episode in a book” (129); that Dante’s texts work against one another, conveying a sense “that the whole life is a book to be rewritten” (132). By refusing to identify with the past, the *Commedia* makes the past subserve not only the present but also the future.

Endnotes. Select bibliography. Index to Dante’s works. Index of names.