RECENSIONI

Hollander, Robert. *Dante. A Life in Works*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2001. Pp. 222

In the introduction to his latest work on Dante, Robert Hollander observes quite rightly that Dante is, for most readers a "one-book author." Indeed one need only consider the amount of commentary and criticism directed at the *Commedia*, especially in comparison with the marked paucity of study dedicated to Dante's "minor" works, to confirm the accuracy of Hollander's observation. This neglect of Dante's other works, however, suggests Hollander, loses sight of one of the most significant characteristics of Dante's writing —its autobiographical aspect— and results in a reading of the *Commedia* that falls short of what its author intended. As Hollander points out, Dante by no means considered these other works to be minor. Rather, he says, each of them is marked by considerable excitement and begins with an "unblushing announcement of its importance." Starting then from the assumption that Dante set, if not equal, then at least, great store in all of his works, Hollander approaches each of them as Dante himself might have intended, as evidence and products of a continuing evolution in his political philosophy and his development as a writer. *Dante. A Life in Works*, therefore, constitutes Hollander's "attempt to delineate the intellectual biography of the greatest narrative poet of the modern era." His attempt has succeeded.

One suspects that *A Life in Works* will quickly become required reading for any meaningful study of Dante. In terms of its efficacy as a reference tool, the work could not be better organized. Hollander has set out his commentary on each of Dante's writings in accordance with the order in which Dante wrote them. The commentary on the *Commedia* has been further subdivided thematically. Following the preface there is a reasonably detailed chronology of Dante's life upon which Hollander expands in his text. In the pages that follow, he systematically completes the task he sets for himself; examining Dante's development from work to work while also considering each project on its own terms. He commences with a consideration of Dante's first lyrics and progresses through to Dante's poetic exchanges with Giovanni del Virgilio in the last years of Dante's life. As such the reader is provided with a new insight into many of Dante's "lesser writings" as well as a comprehensive overview of all of Dante's literary efforts, their contents, their context and their reception.

Perhaps more importantly, however, is Hollander's successful attempt to determine how and to what extent each is a reflection of Dante's own personal evolution. Focussing more on the subjective nature of Dante's writing and less on what he refers to as the "objectivity in Dante's gaze," Hollander proposes that much of Dante's writing comprises an obsessive telling and retelling of his own narrative. Hollander's compelling and, in most cases convincing arguments pre-

sent an image of Dante that finds its most explicit expression in Dante's fervent and mortal desire to be recognized not so much as a saint but as "poeta." The significance of Hollander's holistic approach is that it provides a new paradigm within which Dante scholars might tackle some of the more troublesome points in Dante's corpus of work.

The issue of Dante's selection of St. Bernard of Clairvaux as his third guide in the *Commedia*, for example, becomes less problematic when one considers the *Paradiso* as yet another step in Dante's progress as a writer. As Hollander points out, "there has traditionally been a certain puzzlement over why Dante should have turned to [St. Bernard] as his guide in the concluding portion of the poem." Generally, critics point to Bernard's status as the leading figure in mystical theology or Bernard's devotion to the Virgin to explain Dante's choice. However, if one considers that the protagonist's spiritual growth might also correspond with Dante's growth as a writer, then the issue of Dante's knowledge of Bernard's writing, suggests Hollander, merits a closer and more extensive study.

Similarly, Hollander's approach provides a decisive response to the issue of the *Commedia*'s "correction" of the errors of the *Convivio*. If each work can be considered as yet another stage in Dante's intellectual evolution, then, argues Hollander, it is simply not convincing to say that "we are not licensed to consider the text of the *Convivio* as relevant" to the meaning of the *Commedia*.

In the same vein, Hollander encourages the reader to consider Dante's political letters in relation to some of Dante's more overt political writings. He suggests, for example, that Dante's epistle addressed to the Italian cardinals attending the conclave at Carpentras, might provide a helpful introduction to the *Monarchia*, given that both works deal with many of the same issues and draw on many of the same sources for their imagery.

Using the letter to contextualize the *Monarchia* within Dante's own political circumstances and evolving philosophy not only enhances the reader's appreciation of the potential impact of the work but also provides a certain insight into its personal significance for its author. Which is precisely Hollander's point. Dante, he suggests, could not help but personalize his work — every letter, every eclogue contains his signature.

Whether he veils it in a bucolic pseudonym or shouts it from the top of Mount Purgatory — Dante wants us to remember his name and remember his voice.

What Hollander has presented is an interpretive approach and exegetical paradigm through which we, as readers, can distinguish that voice and follow Dante's journey not only through the other world but also here in this world. In his attempt to find and follow the thread that is Dante's life, Robert Hollander has finally touched that part of Dante that most astonished the other shades — and eluded so many critics — his existence as a mortal of flesh and blood.

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