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Prue Shaw, Author as character

ANTHONY K. CASSELL

Dante's Fearful Art of Justice

186pp. University of Toronto Press.

£16.95.

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JOAN M. FERRANTE

The Political Vision of the Divine Comedy

392pp. Guildford: Princeton University Press.

£37.90.

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TEODOLINDA BAROLINI

Dante's Poets: Textuality and truth in the "Comedy"

312pp. Guildford: Princeton University Press.

£32.50.

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Any thoughtful reader of Dante's *Inferno* must confront a problem which has been a focus of critical debate on the *Comedy* for more than a century: what to make of the "great" figures of Hell, those sinners whose human stature seems to command sympathy, respect, even awe. The romantic response of admiration isolated these figures from their background, and saw their greatness thrown into relief by the squalor of their surroundings. It implied a divided Dante – in a celebrated formulation, Dante the poet admires these souls, Dante the theologian condemns them.

A more sophisticated version of this notion of a divided Dante characterizes the discordant elements in the author's psyche in a slightly different way, setting theological rigour not against simple humanity, but against the artist's true creative impulses, which have a force and logic of their own. On this view, Dante the poet has unwittingly created something which undermines the theoretical position of Dante the moralist: Francesca's sympathetic presence calls the poem's rigid moral order into question.

Modern criticism, unhappy with the notion of a Dante not fully in control of his material, circumvents the problem with recourse to yet another distinction, but a more fruitful one: that between pilgrim and poet. The pilgrim, Dante the character in the poem, may indeed respond with inappropriate sympathy to certain figures in Hell (and the reader may err with him), but such responses form part of the dynamics of the narrative which Dante the author has carefully structured to imply their erroneousness – the pilgrim starts in sin and error and only slowly learns true judgment. While unobtrusive application of the pilgrim/poet distinction can be as reductive and distorting in its effect as any nineteenth-century heroic reading, the distinction has taught us to read the poem with a heightened awareness of its intrinsic dramatic qualities and of the truly remarkable extent to which Dante leaves the reader to draw his own conclusions.

Anthony Cassell, whose sympathies are rigorously anti-romantic, takes as his theme in *Dante's Fearful Art of Justice* the principle of *contrapasso*, the *lex talionis* of the Old Testament. This law of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth governs the punishments in Hell and ensures that infernal torment is exactly matched to earthly sin. Dante's genius for devising artistically satisfying punishments has always delighted his readers: poetic justice and God's justice coincide in the afterlife. Heretics who denied the immortality of the soul and thought life ended in the grave are condemned to spend eternity in tombs; the souls of suicides are imprisoned in trees, on which their bodies will hang on the Day of Last Judgment, for those who wilfully sundered body and soul are denied the privilege of a human form and the hope of ever repossessing their earthly bodies.

Cassell investigates these and other examples, arguing in general for a figural reading of the punishments in Hell. Punishments involving immersion, for example, whether in ordure, slime, blood or fire, are all to be seen as images of a distorted baptism; episodes involving ingestion imply a perverted eucharist. More specifically, individual punishments carry a weight of verbal and iconographic associations, inescapable to any contemporary of the poet's, which create a context that goes beyond and reinforces the generic context of damnation and which precludes any possibility of sympathy for the sinner.

The figure of Farinata, proudly erect from the waist up in his tomb – to romantically inclined readers an image of dignity and heroic indifference to physical suffering – echoes and parodies the “Man of Sorrows” image of Christ in his tomb. The body of Pier which will one day hang from the thorn-tree in which his soul is imprisoned recalls the hanged body of Judas, but is also a visual pun: not the Man crowned with thorns, but a thorn-bush “crowned” with a human body. And so on. (A series of plates strikingly attests the exactness of the iconographic parallels, perhaps the most original element in this densely argued book.) If Farinata is an anti-Christ and Pier is both an anti-Christ and a Judas, then their words, no matter how seemingly noble and persuasive, must be treated with extreme wariness – eloquence from such a source is tainted. When Pier defends his honour with passionate conviction he is, quite simply, lying.

The very physical attitudes of the damned have figural implications, creating a web of associations within the totality which is Christian history; punishment itself, Cassell holds, is to be understood as a figural fulfilment of sin, a bodying forth of its true evil nature. This book, which proves yet again the enduring value of Auerbach's seminal essay on “Figura” as a point of departure for later Dante scholars, will surely become required reading for those interested in the complexities of Dante's art.

Joan Ferrante, too, is concerned to re-create a cultural context which Dante's contemporaries took for granted and which we have lost,

specifically its social and political dimension. Her emphasis falls on Dante's conception of sin as an offence against society, damaging to the social fabric. The introductory chapters of *The Political Vision of the Divine Comedy* thoroughly and usefully survey the background of political debate and theory in Dante's time and the range of contemporary opinion on the roles of city, empire, church and state, against which Dante's own political vision was formed. The extended central section of the book examines the way in which this vision is projected in the poem, with Hell seen as the corrupt society, Purgatory as a society in transition, and Paradise as a model of an ideal society. A final chapter argues, rather less convincingly, that language and money are for Dante parallel and indispensable tools of exchange in human society, and that Dante the character is to be seen as a merchant who travels and brings back treasures from distant lands. (In what sense can he be said to sell or trade or barter his goods?)

Rather too much of the book is paraphrase or summary of the poem, accompanied by a sometimes mechanical listing of the reactions of the early commentators (the Ottimo says... Jacopo notes ... Benvenuto comments ... Dino declares At times the scrupulous reporting of everybody's opinion seems to be almost an end in itself.) Such conclusions as are ventured are unexciting. The *Comedy* conveys its political message with such imaginative power and such verbal inventiveness, and so unambiguously in its general outlines, that to be told after 300 pages that "the basic message of the poem is the threat to all men from sin and corruption, particularly in high places, and the desperate need to find the proper guide to correct that" is inevitably something of an anti-climax.

Ferrante assumes an early date for the *Monarchia*, Dante's work of political theory, against the textual evidence, and without acknowledging that there is a problem. The argument about the dating of the treatise turns on an explicit cross-reference in the text to the *Paradiso*, which, if authentic, makes an early date impossible. On sheer grounds of probability, it is not unlikely that an author who early in his career makes just such an explicit cross-reference from one work to another ("Di questo si parlerà altrove più compiutamente in uno libello ch'io intendo di fare, Dio concedente, di Volgare Eloquenza") should do the same thing again later on, looking backwards now rather than forwards ("sicut in Paradiso Comedie iam dixi"). The burden of proof lies with those who claim this to be a unique instance of interpolation – though quite what the point or purpose of such an interpolation might be is hard to imagine. It is disconcerting to find that all three books reviewed here accept an early dating apparently without misgivings.

If self-reference is a habit in Dante, self-citation is its most explicit and uncompromising form. Teodolinda Barolini's absorbing study of *Dante's Poets* takes as its starting-point those three lines in the *Comedy* which are quotations from earlier poems of his own. These lines, rich in "archeological resonance", come from earlier texts in which Dante overtly

assesses his previous poetic performance. This same pattern of retrospective self-analysis and re-evaluation continues in the *Comedy*, which can be seen as a “unified and continuous autobiographical meditation” on his own evolution as a poet, now projected against the broader canvas of his vernacular predecessors and his more distant classical antecedents.

The narrative line of the poem, where Dante encounters vernacular poets and is accompanied by classical ones, enables some points to be made openly and polemically – notably the celebration of Guinizzelli and Daniel and the denigration of Guittone, on which Barolini writes with great acuteness, as she does on the “absent” figure of Cavalcanti. Others emerge obliquely and more problematically, forming a story which has been “encoded” and must be “deciphered”. Barolini teases out the implications of this “buried” narrative with skill, tenacity and a relentless logic. Not everybody will be persuaded that when Virgil chides Dante for taking too much interest in the vulgar brawl between Mastro Adamo and Sinon it is Virgil who is wrong, not Dante. The episode, we are told, signals Virgil’s limitations, not a regrettable lapse on the part of Dante the character, for Dante the character is himself a poet, the *personaggio-poeta* of another seminal essay – by Contini, whose influence is everywhere here apparent. It is precisely the character-poet’s openness to all experience and his willingness to include it in his poem which gives the measure of the distance by which he surpasses Virgil.

Barolini offers us a poem where the dynamics of the narrative involve not just a Dante-character who can err, but a Dante-character who can appear to err, be rebuked for erring, yet in fact be right, even though the narrative offers no hint of justification for his behaviour. A naïve reader may take the point at a simple moral level. A more alert and sophisticated reader will appreciate that Dante the poet is making statements about textuality and truth and the limitations of classical epic. This impressive book is full of thought-provoking ideas and incidental insights. With the other volumes here reviewed, it testifies to the continuing vitality of Dante studies in North America.