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Prue Shaw, Spiralling to significance

JOHN FRECCERO

Dante: The poetics of conversion

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John Freccero's essays on the *Divine Comedy*, produced over a twenty-five year span and hitherto available only to scholars in more or less obscure learned publications, are here assembled in a volume whose arrival must rank as one of the major events of Dante scholarship in recent decades. The essays range in scope from the elucidation of the significance of a single line or even phrase to the analysis of structural principles which underlie and shape the whole work. Thus assembled, they prove to have an extraordinary coherence and unity, which derive in large part from the author's conviction that Augustinian and Neoplatonic modes of thought and imagery have a determining role in the conception and shaping of Dante's masterpiece.

Critics have sometimes regretted that Augustine does not have a larger role to play in the *Comedy*: he has a seat in Paradise, but there is no episode devoted to him, suggesting perhaps that he was not a figure who particularly stirred Dante's imagination. Equally, it has been a matter of scholarly debate whether Dante even had a direct knowledge of the *Timaeus*, the key Platonic text which, with the commentary on it by Chalcidius, became the principal vehicle for the transmission of Neoplatonic ideas in the Middle Ages. If Freccero is right, the *Confessions* and the *Timaeus* are texts as decisive for their influence on the shaping and structuring of Dante's imagined world and the poem which projects it as any text of Aristotle or Aquinas for his intellectual formation. The twin interlocking themes which emerge in essay after essay of this remarkable book are Dante's indebtedness on the one hand to the Augustinian model of conversion narrative as exemplified in the *Confessions*, and on the other to Neoplatonic conceptions of the movement of the individual soul in relation to the cosmic order – an indebtedness to be located less in the theological and conceptual content of the poem than in patterns of narrative organization.

The *Comedy*, Freccero argues, like the *Confessions*, is structured according to what he terms "the poetics of conversion", whose narrative logic is that of retrospective illumination: events become meaningful only in the light of the ending of the story. The experience of conversion offers a unique vantage-point from which a previous history becomes significant – unique because it corresponds in the life of the individual to the "Christ-event" in universal history, the point in time which links time to eternity and gives events in this world their ultimate significance. So the "poetics of conversion" is the counterpart in Christian autobiography

of figuralism in biblical narrative: a structural principle which becomes an exegetical tool, a key to significance which an episodic or fragmentary reading of the text will fail to elicit.

The story of the *Comedy* is the story of a conversion, or series of conversions, by which the sinner is saved and (inseparable from this first process and indeed for Freccero indistinguishable from it) the pilgrim becomes the poet. More exactly, the minor poet who was the pilgrim becomes the major poet who will bear witness to the events he has experienced by writing his masterpiece, for Freccero, along with a number of recent critics, sees confrontation with his own poetic past as one of the most insistently recurring themes of the *Comedy*, and asks us to see it surfacing at points in the narrative where it has not hitherto been suspected – in the encounter with Medusa at the gates to Lower Hell, for example. The double focus which holds in balance the “then” of experience and the “now” of witness – the perspective of the pilgrim and the perspective of the poet – creates a space for irony and it is the “ironic mode of representation” which accounts for the inherently dramatic (and inherently unresolvable) ambiguity in the presentation of certain figures in the *Inferno*.

To read the *Comedy* in the light of the Augustinian model and with sensitivity to the Neoplatonic connotations of certain images and expressions enables us, in the first instance, to get our bearings in the “Prologue” scene (*Inferno* I and II), whose strangeness and shifting imagery have often been found disconcerting. (Dante’s progress is impeded by a wolf which, mysteriously, seen in another perspective, has become a river, the *fiumana* of *Inf.* II 108; and so on.) Some of the basic organizing metaphors of the poem – flight, voyage, shipwreck – are enriched by an awareness of their Neoplatonic resonance: Freccero’s elucidation of Ulysses’ words “dei remi facemmo ali al folle volo” is a brilliant example of his ability to use a phrase to unlock the significance of an episode which is shown to call into question epic and Platonic notions of cyclical time by setting against them the Christian sense of human history (whether of the race or of the individual) as linear, as progress towards a point in time which connects time with eternity.

Patterns of physical movement in the poem become more meaningful in the light of Neoplatonic analogues. In one of the most dazzling essays in the book, “Pilgrim in a Gyre”, Freccero considers the path traced by Dante as he first descends into the cavity of Hell, circling to the left (anticlockwise), and then ascends the mountain of Purgatory, circling to the right (clockwise). The conventional gloss on the pilgrim’s itinerary associates left (etymologically sinister) with evil, right with good, and leaves the matter there. But the apparent discontinuity proves on examination to be a continuity: taking into account the fact that Dante turns upside down on Lucifer’s flanks in order to leave Hell and emerge into Purgatory (one of the key “conversions” in the narrative), his path is in fact a continuous spiral movement through the world of matter, dizzying in its cosmic perspective and philosophical implications, which

carries him towards the perfect circularity of the closing lines of the poem. Freccero is also able to explain (which no commentator had satisfactorily done) the two apparently anomalous moments in Hell when, if only briefly, Dante moves to the right and breaks the pattern.

The spiral proves to be a geometric model for many aspects of the poem's organization: the pilgrim's path; the logic of conversion narrative itself; even the metrical scheme. The critical commonplace that the *terza rima* is an act of homage to the Trinity (with which it shares the structural principle of three-in-one) is dismissed on the grounds that the essence of *terza rima* is movement through time (forward propulsion but with a retrospective dimension – the spiral), and “it is not self-evident that a temporal scheme could serve to represent a timeless deity”. The clue to the identification of the metrical scheme with temporality is the failure to rhyme on the name of Christ (*Cristo* “rhymes” only with itself in the poem, on some twelve separate occasions in the *Paradiso*): no mere pietistic reticence, Freccero argues, but a pointer to the truth that Christ transcends time. (But, one is forced to ask, what of the other two occasions on which Dante fails to rhyme, *per ammenda* in *Purg* 20 and *vidi* in *Par* 30, the first of which at least is in a fiercely secular, i.e. “temporal”, context.)

Although not all parts of Freccero's argument are equally compelling – his reading of the Ugolino episode requires a degree of sophistication in the reader which few may feel equal to – he is constantly illuminating, whether his point of departure is an obscure phrase which has baffled commentators for centuries (the *pié fermo* of *Inf.* I, 30, for example, which he links with the Platonic representation of disorder in the soul by the figure of a limping man), or “one of the most familiar passages in Western literature”, the inscription over the Gate of Hell, whose function within the text he invites us to ponder as a preliminary to considering the status of the text in relation to reality. It is a constant and fertile theme that Dante's poem constructs, rather than describes, the reality it portrays; less obviously and more paradoxically, that the pilgrim's journey and the poet's enterprise are one and the same thing. But no summary can do justice to the subtlety, richness and learning of this invigorating book, whose author, equally at home with the complexities of medieval theology and the complexities of modern critical theory, has the rare gift of bringing both to bear on the elucidation of Dante's poem.