Modern Critical Views

DANTE

Edited and with an introduction by
HAROLD BLOOM

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Editor's Note

This volume gathers together a representative selection of the best Dante criticism of the past thirty years, arranged in the chronological order of its publication. The editor acknowledges the invaluable assistance of Ms. Cathy Caruth, who introduced him to some of the essays collected here. His "Introduction" follows the approach to Dante of Ernst Robert Curtius, who is not represented here only because this book seeks to present the practical criticism of Dante, particularly as inspired by the exegetical principles of Charles S. Singleton and Erich Auerbach, rather than the theoretical speculations of Curtius. Nevertheless, the "Introduction" ventures to question aspects of their approach to Dante, while invoking the complex stance of Curtius towards the difficult question of Dante's originality.

The chronological sequence begins with Singleton's classic essay on the distinction between the allegory of the poets and the allegory of the theologians, with Dante's allegory assimilated to the latter. Two of Erich Auerbach's seminal essays on the Christian trope of *figura*, and Dante's relation to that trope, then follow. The discussion by R. E. Kaske of the splendidly perverse allusion to the "DXV" by Beatrice in *Purgatorio* XXXII also now has classic status, being an ingenious instance of learning and insight applied to Dante at his most difficult. Francis X. Newman's equally essential demonstration of an Augustinian element in the structure of the *Commedia* rounds out this introductory group of essays, all of which map the contexts of Dante's poem.

The remaining commentaries address themselves to specific dimensions of Dante's work, beginning with Marguerite Mills Chiarenza on the *Paradiso*, and her crucial insight that: "In the *Paradiso* it is the poet who struggles while the pilgrim is safe." John Freccero's powerful reading of the Medusa (*Inferno* IX) follows, with its important suggestion that Dante views petrification as "an interpretive as well as moral threat." With Robert Durling's discussion of "Seneca, Plato, and the Microcosm," the focus shifts to Dante's lyric poetry and then relates the group of "stony rhymes" to the *Commedia.* David Quint returns us to the *Inferno* with his analysis of epic tradition and a thematic crossroads in Canto IX.

Freccero, certainly the central Dante critic of his generation, is

represented by a second essay, his exquisite analysis of the poetics of the *Purgatorio* as a process of Dante's maturation out of and away from the precursor, Virgil. With the reading of the Paolo and Francesca episode (*Inferno* V) by Susan Noakes, we receive a remarkably fresh account of what is perhaps the best-known passage in Dante. Teodolinda Barolini's exegesis of "textuality and truth" in *Purgatorio* XXIV illuminates Dante by raising again, as Freccero does, everything that is problematic about a poet's relation to his precursors. In the essay following, by Kenneth Gross, an interpretation of a single word (for "counterpass") in the *Inferno* (Canto XXVIII) opens out into a revealing meditation upon Dante's poetics of pain and punishment.

The final essay, by Giuseppe Mazzotta, printed here for the first time, relates the *Vita Nuova* to *Inferno* XXVII in order to trace Dante's powerful and characteristic exploration of both the limits and the dangers of rhetoric in the language of love. In some sense, Mazzotta returns Dante full circle to his own poetic origins, and so brings this book to its appropriate close.

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Introduction

I

Dante, by common consent, stands with the supreme Western masters of literary representation: the Yahwist, Homer, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Milton, Tolstoi, Proust. Our ideas as to how reality can be represented by literary language depend, to a considerable extent, on this ninefold. Perhaps it can also be said that these writers have formed a large part of our experience of what is called reality. Certain aspects of reality might not be nearly so visible, had we not read these nine masters of mimesis. Setting the Yahwist and Homer aside as being both ancient and hypothetical, only Shakespeare, again by common consent, is judged to be Dante's rival as a great Original in representation. But Shakespearean representation has naturalized us in its domain. Dante is now an immensely difficult poet partly because we are so much at home with Shakespeare.

Erich Auerbach, who with Charles S. Singleton and John Freccero makes up a celestial trinity of Dante interpreters, gave us the definitive opening description of Dante's ways of representing reality:

> . . . Dante in the *Comedy* transcended tragic death by identifying man's ultimate fate with the earthly unity of his personality, and . . . the very plan of the work made it possible, and indeed confronted him with the obligation, to represent earthly reality exactly as he saw it. Thus it became necessary that the characters in Dante's other world, in their situation and attitude, should represent the sum of themselves; that they should disclose, in a single act, the character and fate that had filled out their lives . . .
>
> . . . from classical theory Dante took over only one principle, the *sibi constare*, or consistency, of his persons; all other tenets had lost their literal meaning for him . . . Dante's vision is a tragedy according to Aristotle's definition. In any event it is far more a tragedy than an epic, for the descriptive, epic elements in the poem are not autonomous, but serve other purposes, and the time, for Dante as well as his characters, is not the epic time in which destiny gradually unfolds, but the final time in which it is fulfilled.

If time is the final time, past all unfolding, then reality indeed can be represented in a single act that is at once character and fate. Dante's personages can reveal themselves totally in what they say and do, but they cannot change *because* of what Dante has them say and do. Chaucer, who owed Dante more than he would acknowledge, nevertheless departed from Dante in this, which is precisely where Chaucer most influenced Shakespeare. The Pardoner listens to himself speaking, listens to his own tale, and is darkly made doom-eager through just that listening. This mode of representation expands in Shakespeare to a point that no writer since has reached so consistently. Hamlet may be the most metamorphic of Shakespeare's people (or it may be Cleopatra, or Falstaff, or who you will), but as such he merely sets the mode. Nearly everyone of consequence in Shakespeare helps inaugurate a mimetic style we all now take too much for granted. They, like us, are strengthened or victimized, reach an apotheosis or are destroyed, by themselves reacting to what they say and do. It may be that we have learned to affect ourselves so strongly, in part because involuntarily we imitate Shakespeare's characters. We never imitate Dante's creatures because we do not live in finalities; we know that we are not fulfilled.

A literary text can represent a fulfilled reality only if it can persuade itself, and momentarily persuade us, that one text can fulfill another. Dante, as Auerbach demonstrated, relied upon the great Christian trope of *figura*, whose basis was the insistence that the Christian New Testament had fulfilled what it called "the Old Testament," itself a phrase deeply offensive to normative Jews who continue to trust in the Covenant as set forth in the Hebrew Bible. But the Hebrew Bible indeed must be the Old Testament, if Christianity is to retain its power. What must the New Testament be, if Dante's poem is to develop and maintain its force?

Auerbach, quoting the Church Father Tertullian's comments upon the renaming of Oshea, son of Nun, by Moses as Jehoshua (Joshua, Jesus), speaks of Joshua as "a figure of things to come." The definition of this figure of prophecy or *figura* by Auerbach is now classic: "*Figura* is something real and historical which announces something else that is real and historical." Equally classic is Auerbach's formulation of "figural interpretation":

> Figural interpretation establishes a connection between two events or persons, the first of which signifies not only itself but also the second, while the second encompasses or fulfills the first. The first two poles of the figure are separate in time, but both, being real events or figures, are within time, within the stream of historical life. Only the understanding of the two persons or events is a spiritual act, but this spriitual act deals

> with concrete events whether past, present, or future, and not with concepts or abstractions; these are quite secondary, since promise and fulfillment are real historical events, which have either happened in the incarnation of the word, or will happen in the second coming.

What happens when figural interpretation is transferred from sacred to secular literature? When Dante takes the historical Virgil and reads him as a *figura* of which Dante's character, Virgil, is the fulfillment, are we seeing the same pattern enacted as when Tertullian reads Joshua as the *figura* of which Jesus Christ was the fulfillment? Auerbach's answer is "yes," but this is a dialectical affirmative: "Thus Virgil in the *Divine Comedy* is the historical Virgil himself, but then again he is not; for the historical Virgil is only a *figura* of the fulfilled truth that the poem reveals, and this fulfillment is more real, more significant than the *figura*." Auerbach, writing on *figura* back in 1944, thought back to his book on Dante as poet of the secular world (1929), from which I quoted earlier, and insisted that he had acquired "a solid historical grounding" for his view of fifteen years before.

I am not certain that the earlier Auerbach is not to be preferred to the later. In secularizing *figura*, Auerbach dangerously idealized the relationship between literary texts. Appropriating the historical Virgil is not an idealizing gesture, as John Freccero shows in his superb essay, "Manfred's Wounds and the Poetics of the *Purgatorio*." Poetic fathers die hard, and Dante understood that he had made the historical Virgil the *figura*, and his own Virgil the fulfillment, partly in order to suggest that he himself was the poet Virgil's true fulfillment. Great poets are pragmatists when they deal with precursors; witness Blake's caricature of Milton as the hero of his poem *Milton*, or James Merrill's loving and witty portrayal of Stevens and Auden in *The Changing Light at Sandover*. Dante's Virgil is no more the historical Virgil than Blake's Milton is the historical Milton. If texts fulfill one another, it is always through some self-serving caricature of the earlier text by the later.

II

Charles S. Singleton, carefully reminding us that "Beatrice is not Christ," expounds Dante's use of the principle of analogy which likens the advent of Beatrice to the advent of Christ:

> Thus it is that the figure of a rising sun by which Beatrice comes at last to stand upon the triumphal chariot is the most revealing image which the poet might have found not only to affirm the analogy of her advent to

> Christ's in the present tense, but to stress, in so doing, the very basis upon which that analogy rests: the advent of light.

Whitman, certainly a poet antithetical to Dante, opposed himself to the rising sun as a greater rising sun:

> Dazzling and tremendous how quick the sun-rise would kill me,
> If I could not now and always send sun-rise out of me.
>
> We also ascend dazzling and tremendous as the sun,
> We found our own O my soul in the calm and cool of the daybreak.

This is not analogy but a subversive mode akin to Nietzsche's, and learned from Emerson. The figure of the Whitmanian sun here is not an advent of Christ ("a great defeat" Emerson called that advent) but is "now and always," a perpetual dawning ("we demand victory," as Emerson said for his Americans, prophesying Whitman). The figure of Beatrice, to Whitman, might as well have been the figure of Christ. Can we, with Singleton, accept her as an analogy, or is she now the principal embarrassment of Dante's poem? As a fiction she retains her force, but does not Dante present her as more than a fiction? If Dante wrote, as Singleton says, the allegory of the theologians rather than the allegory of the poets, how are we to recapture Dante's sense of Beatrice if we do not accept the analogy that likens her advent to Christ's?

Singleton's answer is that Beatrice is the representation of Wisdom in a Christian sense, or the light of Grace. This answer, though given in the allegorical language of the theologians rather than that of the poets, remains a poetic answer because its analogical matrix is light rather than Grace. Dante persuades us not by his theology but y his occult mastery of the trope of light, in which he surpasses even the blind Milton among the poets:

> There is a light up there which makes the Creator visible to the creature, who finds his peace only in seeing Him.
>
> (*Paradiso* XXX, 100–102)

This, as Singleton says, is the Light of Glory rather than the Light of Grace, which is Beatrice's, or the Natural Light, which is Virgil's. Dante's peculiar gift is to find perpetually valid analogies for all three lights. Since his poem's fiction of duration is not temporal, but final, all three modes of light must be portrayed by him as though they were beyond change. And yet an unchanging fiction cannot give pleasure, as Dante

clearly knew. What does he give us that more than compensates for his poem's apparent refusal of temporal anguish?

Auerbach, in his essay on St. Francis of Assisi in the *Commedia*, turned to *figura* again as his answer. To the medieval reader, according to Auerbach, the representations of forerunning and after-following repetitions were as familiar as the trope of "historical development" is (or was, to those who believe that Foucault forever exposed the trope). To us, now, "forerunning and after-following repetitions" suggest, not *figura* and its fulfillment, but the Freudian death-drive as the "fulfillment" of the compulsion-to-repeat. The repetition-compulsion perhaps is the final Western *figura*, prophesying our urge to drive beyond the pleasure principle. That is to say, for us the only text that can fulfill earlier texts, rather than correct or negate them, is what might be called "the text of death," which is totally opposed to what Dante sought to write.

III

What saves Dante from the idealizing lameness that necessarily haunts the allegorizing of the theologians? The earlier Auerbach was on the track of the answer when he meditated upon Dante's originality in the representation of persons. As seer, Dante identified character and fate, *ethos* and *daemon*, and what he saw in his contemporaries he transferred precisely to the three final worlds of *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*. Dante's friends and enemies alike are presented, without ambiguity or ambivalence, as being consistent with themselves, beyond change, their eternal destinies over-determined by their fixed characters.

There are endless surprises in his poem for Dante himself, as for us, but there are no accidents. Farinata standing upright in his tomb, as if of Hell he had a great disdain, is heroic because he is massively consistent with himself, in his own tomb, can be nothing but what he is. His marvelous disdain of Hell represents a kind of necessity, what Wallace Stevens called the inescapable necessity of being that inescapable animal, oneself. Such a necessity is presented by Dante as being the judgment of Heaven upon us.

In Shakespeare, there are always accidents, and character can be as metamorphic as personality. Hamlet yields himself up to accident, at the last, perhaps because he has all but exhausted the possibilities for change that even his protean character possesses. This is our mode of representation, inherited by us from Shakespeare, and we no longer are able to see how original it originally was. Shakespeare therefore seems "natural" to

us, even though we live in the age of Freud, who suspected darkly that there were no accidents, once we were past infancy. Dante no longer can be naturalized in our imaginations. His originality has not been lost for us, and yet his difficulty or strangeness for us is probably not caused by his authentic originality.

The allegory of the theologians simply is not an available mode for us, despite the labors of Auerbach and Singleton. Freccero has replaced them as the most relevant of Dante critics because he has returned Dante to what may be the truest, because least idealizing, allegory of the poets, which is the agon of poet against poet, the struggle for imaginative priority between forerunner and latecomer. Despite a marvelous parody by Borges, theologians are not primarily agonists. Dante understood that poets were. The light of glory, the light of grace, the light of nature are not competing lights, and yet all tropes for them necessarily compete, and always with other tropes.

Singleton, rejecting the allegory of the poets, said that it would reduce Dante's Virgil to a mere personification of Reason:

> For if this is the allegory of poets, then what Virgil does, like what Orpheus does, is a fiction devised to convey a hidden meaning which it ought to convey all the time, since only by conveying that other meaning is what he does justified at all. Instead, if this action is allegory as theologians take it, then this action must always have a literal sense which is historical and no fiction; and thus Virgil's deeds as part of the whole action may, in their turn, be as words signifying other things, but they do not have to do this all the time, because, being historical, those deeds exist simply in their own right.

But what if Virgil, as allegory of the poets, were to be read not as Reason, the light of nature, but as the trope of that light, reflecting among much else the lustres of the tears of universal nature? To say farewell to Virgil is to take leave not of Reason, but of the pathos of a certain natural light, perhaps of Wordsworth's "light of common day." Dante abandons Virgil not so as to substitute grace for reason, but so as to find his own image of voice, his own trope for all three lights. In the oldest and most authentic allegory of the poets, Virgil represents not reason but poetic fatherhood, the Scene of Instruction that Dante must transcend if he is to complete his journey to Beatrice.

IV

The figure of Beatrice, in my own experience as a reader, is now the most difficult of all Dante's tropes, because sublimation no longer seems to be a human possibility. What is lost, perhaps permanently, is the tradition that moves between Dante and Yeats, in which sublimated desire for a woman can be regarded as an enlargement of existence. One respected feminist critic has gone so far as to call Beatrice a "dumb broad," since she supposedly contemplates the One without understanding Him. What James Thurber grimly celebrated as the War between Men and Women has claimed many recent literary casualties, but none perhaps so unmerited as Dante's Beatrice. Dante, like tradition, thought that God's Wisdom, who daily played before His feet, was a woman, even as Nietzsche, with a gesture beyond irony, considered Truth to be a woman, presumably a deathly one. We possess art in order not to perish from the truth, Nietzsche insisted, which must mean that the aesthetic is a way of not being destroyed by a woman. Dante hardly would have agreed.

Beatrice is now so difficult to apprehend precisely because she participates both in the allegory of the poets and in the allegory of the philosophers. Her advent follows Dante's poetic maturation, or the vanishing of the precursor, Virgil. In the allegory of the poets, Beatrice is the Muse, whose function is to help the poet remember. Since remembering, in poetry, is the major mode of cognition, Beatrice is Dante's power of invention, the essence of his art. That means she is somehow the highest of the Muses, and yet far above them also, since in Dante's version of the allegory of the poets, Beatrice has "a place in the objective process of salvation," as Ernst Robert Curtius phrased it. Curtius rightly emphasized the extent of Dante's audacity:

> Guido Guinicelli (d. 1276) had made the exaltation of the beloved to an angel of paradise a topos of Italian lyric. To choose as guide in a poetic vision of the otherworld a loved woman who has been thus exalted is still within the bounds of Christian philosophy and faith. But Dante goes much further than this. He gives Beatrice a place in the objective process of salvation. Her function is thought of as not only for himself but also for all believers. Thus, on his own authority, he introduces into the Christian revelation an element which disrupts the doctrine of the church. This is either heresy—or myth.

It is now customary to speak of Dante as *the* Catholic poet, even as Milton is called *the* Protestant poet. Perhaps someday Kafka will be named as *the* Jewish writer, though his distance from normative Judaism was

infinite. Dante and Milton were not less idiosyncratic, each in his own time, than Kafka was in ours, and the figure of Beatrice would be heresy and not myth if Dante had not been so strong a poet that the Church of later centuries has been happy to claim him. Curtius centered upon Dante's vision of himself as a prophet, even insisting that Dante expected the prophecy's fulfillment in the immediate future, during his own lifetime. Since Dante died at the age of fifty-six, a quarter-century away from the "perfect" age of eighty-one set forth in his *Convivio*, the literal force of the prophecy presumably was voided. But the prophecy, still hidden from us, matters nevertheless, as Curtius again maintains:

> Even if we could interpret his prophecy, that would give it no meaning for us. What Dante hid, Dante scholarship need not now unriddle. But it must take seriously the fact that Dante believed that he had an apocalyptic mission. This must be taken into consideration in interpreting him. Hence the question of Beatrice is not mere idle curiosity. Dante's system is built up in the first two cantos of the *Inferno*, it supports the entire *Commedia*. Beatrice can be seen only within it. The Lady Nine has become a cosmic power which emanates from two superior powers. A hierarchy of celestial powers which intervene in the process of history—this concept is manifestly related to Gnosticism: as an intellectual construction, a schema of intellectual contemplation, if perhaps not in origin. Such constructions can and must be pointed out. We do not know what Dante meant by Lucia. The only proper procedure for the commentator, then, is to admit that we do not know and to say that neither the ophthalmological explanation nor the allegorical interpretations are satisfactory. Exegesis is also bound to give its full weight to all the passages at the end of the *Purgatorio* and in the *Paradiso* which are opposed to the identification of Beatrice with the daughter of the banker Portinari. Beatrice is a myth created by Dante.

Very little significant criticism of Dante has followed this suggestion of Curtius, and a distorted emphasis upon Dante's supposed orthodoxy has been the result. Curtius certainly does not mean that Dante was a Gnostic, but he does remind us that Dante's Beatrice is the central figure in a purely personal gnosis. Dante indeed was a ruthless visionary, passionate and willful, whose poem triumphantly expresses his own unique personality. The *Commedia*, though one would hardly know this from most of its critics (Freccero is the sublime exception), is an immense trope of pathos or power, the power of the individual who was Dante. The pathos of that personality is most felt, perhaps, in the great and final parting of Beatrice from her poet, in the middle of Canto XXXI of the *Paradiso*, at the moment when her place as guide is transferred to the aged St. Bernard:

> Already my glance had taken in the whole general form of Paradise but had not yet dwelt on any part of it, and I turned with new-kindled eagerness to question my Lady of things on which my mind was in suspense. One thing I intended, and another encountered me: I thought to see Beatrice, and I saw an old man, clothed like that glorious company. His eyes and his cheeks were suffused with a gracious gladness, and his aspect was of such kindness as befits a tender father. And "Where is she?" I said in haste; and he replied: "To end thy longing Beatrice sent me from my place; and if thou look up into the third circle from the highest tier thou shalt see her again, in the throne her merits have assigned to her."
>
> Without answering, I lifted up my eyes and saw her where she made for herself a crown, reflecting from her the eternal beams. From the highest region where it thunders no mortal eye is so far, were it lost in the depth of the sea, as was my sight there from Beatrice; but to me it made no difference, for her image came down to me undimmed by aught between.
>
> "O Lady in whom my hope has its strength and who didst bear for my salvation to leave thy footprints in Hell, of all the things that I have seen I acknowledge the grace and the virtue to be from thy power and from thy goodness. It is thou who hast drawn me from bondage into liberty by all those ways, by every means for it that was in thy power. Preserve in me thy great bounty, so that my spirit, which thou hast made whole, may be loosed from the body well-pleasing to thee." I prayed thus; and she, so far off as she seemed, smiled and looked at me, then turned again to the eternal fount.

It is difficult to comment upon the remorseless strength of this, upon its apparent sublimation of a mythmaking drive that here accepts a restraint which is more than rhetorical. Freud in his own great *summa*, the essay of 1937, "Analysis Terminable and Interminable," lamented his inability to cure those who could not accept the cure:

> A man will not be subject to a father-substitute or owe him anything and he therefore refuses to accept his cure from the physician.

Dante too would not owe any man anything, not even if the man were Virgil, his poetic father. The cure had been accepted by Dante from his physician, Beatrice. In smiling and looking at him, as they part, she confirms the cure.

CHARLES S. SINGLETON

Two Kinds of Allegory

In his *Convivio* Dante recognizes two kinds of allegory: an "allegory of poets" and an "allegory of theologians." And in the interpretation of his own poems in that work he declares that he intends to follow the allegory of poets, for the reason that the poems were composed after that manner of allegory.

It is well to recall that there is an unfortunate lacuna in the text of the *Convivio* at just this most interesting point, with the result that those words which defined the literal sense, as distinguished from the allegorical, are missing. But no one who knows the general argument of the whole work will, I think, make serious objection to the way the editors of the accepted critical text have filled the lacuna.

The passage in question, patched by them, reads as follows:

> Dico che, sì come nel primo capitolo è narrato, questa sposizione conviene essere literale e allegorica. E a ciò dare a intendere, si vuol sapere che le scritture si possono intendere e deonsi esponere massimamente per quattro sensi. L'uno si chiama litterale [e questo è quello che non si stende più oltre la lettera de le parole fittizie, sì come sono le favole de li poeti. L'altro si chiama allegorico] e questo è quello che si nasconde sotto'l manto di queste favole, ed è una veritade ascosa sotto bella menzogna: sì come quando dice Ovidio che Orfeo facea con la cetera mansuete le fiere, e li arbori e le pietre a sè muovere; che vuol dire che lo savio uomo con lo strumento de la sua voce fa[r]ia mansuescere e umiliare li crudeli cuori, a fa[r]ia muovere a la sua volontade coloro che non hanno vita di scienza e d'arte: e coloro che non hanno vita ragionevole alcuna sono quasi come pietre. E perchè questo nascondimento fosse trovato per li savi, nel penultimo trattato si mosterrà. Veramente li teologi questo senso