

## ***A Bond Between Poetry and Belief***

**Dante, the Poetics of Conversion**, by  
John Freccero, edited and with an  
Introduction by Rachel Jacoff,  
*Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University  
Press, 1986. xvi + 328 pp. \$29.95.*

AT THE HIGH TABLE at St. John's College, Cambridge, in the summer of 1983 I was greeted with subtle disdain because it became apparent to one of the Masters present that I had come to Cambridge on a summer research grant in quest of what he was pleased to term a "Christian reading of Dante." Thus I was tolerated, but also encouraged to seek out Barbara Reynolds who, it seemed, held the same religious prejudices about Dante.

Such a reaction to the study of Dante's *Commedia* is obsessive in championing Dante as a practitioner of Italian syntax and a learned resource of medieval cosmology. But the idea that Dante could also marshal such learning as a religious witness to Christian belief is an embarrassment to the implicit aridity of those who would make Dante exclusively a master of words, yet indifferent to the Word. The attempt to claim Dante primarily as a philologist and philosopher, without the centrality of belief, is an unnecessary pedantic complication wrought by elements of the contemporary academy. Such efforts, no doubt, would have baffled Dante himself.

Professor John Freccero's collected essays, edited by Rachel Jacoff, counter the unnecessary compartmentalizing of Dante. The title of the volume, *The Poetics of Conversion*, evokes the right resonance in suggesting that Dante's poetics are integrally rooted in his religious beliefs. This splendid study shows that Dante's gifts as poet—for instance, his learning as a theologian and a philosopher, his cosmology as an astronomer—these and other intellectual disciplines cohere in his belief. Freccero's writings show that Dante's "poetics of conversion" originate in the ontological relation between poetry and belief that was integral to medieval poetics and was axiomatic to Dante. Donald Davidson in a splendid essay has called this synthesis between poetry and belief the "poetry of tradition."

Freccero discloses how the several disciplines that Dante utilizes are all a function of his evolving belief. With impressive erudition and learning the author shows how Dante embodies the unity of poetic and religious tradition that was inherent to medieval culture, but is fragmented in ours. Because of the overspecialization of the modern academy and the arcane nature of much graduate study in departments of English, Italian,

and theology, we increasingly sacrifice the unity of knowledge to the poetics of specialization or ideology. Freccero shows how Dante did not face such fragmentation. Instead, a unified tradition supports Dante that put the epic poet at the center of his culture and allowed him to speak for one tradition—which was not solely or exclusively literary or religious; rather, the tradition was at once literary, religious, mystic, and supernatural.

In the introduction to these essays, the editor, Professor Jacoff, alludes to this kind of unity that Freccero's essays emphasize. She observes that "Freccero's reading of the *Commedia* articulates Dante's intellectual and theological coordinates in specific relation to their narrative and poetic consequences." This approach combines the scholarly interest in philology, whose inspiration was Benedetto Croce, with the exegetical interests of two great *Dantisti*, Erich Auerbach and Charles Singleton. Jacoff notes that both "disciplines are necessary to a full discussion of Dante's poetry" and Freccero's essays "suggest a synthesis of both approaches." He accomplishes this in showing that "conversion is the central organizing principle and preoccupation of the essays—conversion understood both as religious experience and as poetic structure."

While Jacoff cites Singleton and Auerbach as influences on Freccero, she does not mention two others whom Freccero resembles in his writings. Because Freccero is so compelling and illuminating in showing the integral connection between conversion and poetics, it would seem that these essays also complement the work of Charles Williams and Dorothy Sayers. Williams wrote *The Figure of Beatrice* in 1961 (a work republished by Octagon books in 1980) and Miss Sayers wrote essays on Dante that were collected into two volumes—*Introductory Papers on Dante* (1954), and *Further Papers on Dante* (1957). In yet

another essay (not contained in these volumes) entitled "Dante and Charles Williams" Miss Sayers details the revolutionary influence of Charles Williams on twentieth-century studies of Dante, an influence that heavily shaped her own writings on the *Commedia*. Her observations are worth noting.

She shows how Williams resuscitated Dante from the dusty oblivion of "historical scholarship," of what Sayers calls the "period sense." Williams' work contrasts with this approach that Sayers observes in the "early twentieth century endeavored, with no very striking success, to divorce the form from the content, and to save Dante's reputation as a poet by considering the 'poetry' in abstraction from the religious experience—which they [the critics] did not recognize as an experience, or at least not as a poetic experience." Sayers observes further that Williams succeeds in breaking "down Dante's isolation and treats him quite freely and naturally as a poet among other poets." This accomplishment, she says, "had not ever been done for Dante in quite the same way before." Sayers finds in Williams' illumination of Dante the continuity of religious apologetics and the techniques of poetry. They are organically rooted in such a way that to study one aspect is to scrutinize the other.

We find a similar emphasis in this collection's organization of Freccero's essays. Jacoff notes that the volume contains Freccero's major essays written between 1959 and 1984. These are put in an order that follows, the editor informs us, "the *Commedia's* own trajectory rather than . . . [the] order of their dates of publication." In the process of collecting the essays conforming to the order of the *Commedia*, Jacoff observes that the unity of Freccero's writings on Dante emerges: the "empowering conviction of the reciprocity of Dante's theology and his poetics."

These collected essays strike an artful balance between apologetics and poetics. The conversion element is enlarged from the traditional treatment in Dante scholarship of Aristotelian philosophy and Thomistic philosophy to the influences of Saint Augustine and neoplatonic readings of the *Timaeus*. In tracing these influences, Freccero is lucid, compelling, even inspiring in his delineation of Augustinian influences in the *Commedia*. In Augustine, Freccero suggests, Dante discovers the *Commedia's* two characters—Dante the pilgrim of the epic and Dante the omniscient author whose faith is deepened by the pilgrim's journey to God.

Freccero traces the death of the old self in the epic's progress to the conversion to the new self. In the essay "Introduction to the *Paradiso*" Freccero observes, "the entire poem, from the dark wood to the Emyrean, traces the gradually transcendent view of Dante on his own culture, from his own bewilderment of the pilgrim in the first scene to the soaring view of the eagle in the upper reaches of the universe." This illumination of the author by the Pilgrim Dante completes the Augustinian paradigm, Freccero reveals. This does not emphasize the individual's own uniqueness, but rather "demonstrates how the apparently unique experience was from the perspective of eternity, a manifestation of Providence's design for all men." This insight allows Dante to trace in the poem how "grace comes in an intensely personal form" in the *Inferno's* first canto, but that eventually in the process of the poem that "particular event is read in retrospect as a repetition in one's own history of the entire history of Redemption." The *Commedia* is a "story of how the self that was becomes the self that is." The epic then has a "dramatic double-focus that is part of the story: the conversion of the Dante who *was* into the poet whose work we read."

The illumination of the Augustinian elements that run throughout the *Commedia* is compelling reading, particularly in an age that has become absorbed in egotism, narcissism, and other permutations of the self. Freccero's treatment of this material would suggest that Dante's *Commedia* is an integral text in discovering enduring self-identity and effacing versions of the false self lost in renditions of Dante's "dark wood." He would have us believe that the pilgrimage of Dante is a spiritual journey we all need to make in rediscovering how individual biography is of a piece with the immutable providential order. In a time of disorder and discontinuity, of being "lost in the cosmos," as Walker Percy has suggested, Freccero's tracing of Dante's evolving spiritual identity is profoundly therapeutic and instructive.

Freccero is attentive in balancing his writings so that the apologetic element is enhanced by impressive scholarship and erudition. Sometimes this erudition can become ostentatious and obscure. This is particularly evident in Freccero's presentation of the influence of Plato's *Timaeus* on Dante's astronomy. Freccero includes in his discussion a depth of learning that could absorb the most dedicated of those more interested in the scholarly influences on Dante. Yet this element in Freccero's writings makes for unevenness in the essays and occasional specialization of critical language and technical apparatus.

When Freccero tries to explain cosmological and astronomical spatial concepts and their relation to spiritual realities, he can leave his audience perplexed. The reader senses that the author knows a great deal about what he is attempting to impart, but the complexity of the critical language does not convey clearly his understanding. In attempting to illuminate what the meaning of Dante's "turning upside-down on the hide of Satan" means in *Inferno* XXXIV, Freccero ad-

vances the thesis that the scene "derives from the blending of a passage in Plato's *Timaeus*, the one Platonic work that Dante might have known directly, with a commonplace Christian motif"—the Crucifixion of Peter upside down. Yet in trying to explain the "gravity" of Hell, Freccero writes a sentence like this:

The following lines [from Jacopo da Voragine's *Legenda Aurea*] make it quite clear, however, that for all of its ostensible orthodoxy the *Legenda* is here dependent on the apocryphal Acts of Peter, which compares Peter's position to that of the Anthropos, whose inversion the gnostic original described in terms of the Platonic inversion and subsequent confusion of left and right.

The occasional presence of such a passage, however, does not detract from the overall invigorating clarity of the volume. Freccero's analysis of scenes such as Dante's meeting with Ulysses and the Ugolino-Archbishop Ruggieri episode are splendid and relate well to the thematic development of the conversion motif. Freccero is thoroughly familiar with the massive body of Dante criticism, as well as its intensity. He provides new insights confidently and with the kind of care that indicates he has thought his analysis through. He gives the kind of consideration his fellow *Dantisti* merit, yet he is prepared to spar with them on nuances of meaning. He shows us the inexhaustible capacity of the *Commedia* to engender valid readings and interpretations. The endnotes to the individual essays provide evidence of Freccero's diligent study and familiarity with source material that Dante himself studied. *Dante, the Politics of Conversion* shows the author's knowledge not only of the critical debate about various passages in Dante, but also his mastery of original sources and the ways in which Dante utilized this material. Yet this material is recurrently placed in the context of the compelling spiritual odyssey of the

*Commedia's* narrator: the thematic thread of the “poetics of conversion” is this collection’s most valuable asset. This emphasis ought to make this volume a permanent fixture in the criticism of the *Commedia* because it shows the ontological connection between Dante’s religious beliefs and the practice of his craft. The appearance of this volume goes a long way in challenging the unfortunate and unnecessary divorce of poetics from faith and in showing their unity in one of the great poets and believers of world literature.

— *Reviewed by Benjamin B. Alexander*