



Review: [untitled]

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Source: *Poetics Today*, Vol. 7, No. 4, Literature in Society (1986), pp. 781-785

Published by: [Duke University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1772945>

Accessed: 08/10/2010 15:19

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Acute and engaging, with a subtle argument, *The Self as Mind* should be read as an important intervention in the larger project of bringing the study of English Romanticism back into the social and historical world without relinquishing the philosophical and psychological insights and methods that have, in the last twenty years, altered the terrain of literary study.

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John Freccero, *Dante. The Poetics of Conversion*. Ed. Rachel Jacoff. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1986. 328 pp.

The value of virtually any reprinting, in a collection, of a scholar's essays written over a period of years, depends on the extent to which time (and shifting currents in criticism) has ravaged the original essays and, to a lesser extent, on the (primarily editorial) mechanics of the volume. The appearance of Freccero's collected essays, a volume awaited with enthusiasm by many Dante scholars, is a superb example of how valuable such collections can be, even though what can only be assumed to be stinginess on the part of the press has made parts of the critical apparatus less than fully satisfactory. Freccero's earliest essays are certainly not outdated, the development in his work on the *Commedia* parallels much of the best work in criticism and theory as it developed in the twenty-five year span during which they were written.

Ordering the essays, Jacoff was faced with the choice between the chronological order in which they were written or the order that parallels the *Commedia* itself. In choosing the latter, the volume thus acquires more of a "book"-like texture, taking the reader from an initial essay on the Prologue scene through ten further essays on the *Inferno*, two on the *Purgatorio*, three on the *Paradiso* and a final (and by coincidence, quite recent) one on "The Significance of *Terza Rima*." Thus, for the relative newcomer to Dante, reading the collection from beginning to end would be an exceptionally good course on the *Commedia* — a guide that is richer (quantitatively, if nothing else) at the outset than when we get to the second two *cantiche* but one so consistently concerned with the overall structures of the work that most, if not all, of the material on the *Inferno* will stand the reader in very good stead as he follows the pilgrim into ever-increasing abstractions. The decision to leave all the essays — and accompanying notes — essentially as they originally appeared does not present difficulties, since the later essays fill in whatever gaps might otherwise exist in more recent bibliography. There is, moreover, a profitable back-and-forth between the earlier essays, more "traditional" in their concern with resolving seemingly small textual cruxes and the later ones, increasingly concerned with the problem of interpretation as it is presented within the *Commedia*. This provides a stimulating alternation of the range of possibilities in Dante criticism. There are technical details in the arrangement, nevertheless, that one could quibble with. Each essay is not accompanied by an indication of where and, more importantly, when, it first appeared — for this one must flip to the back of the book. The back of the book is also the repository of the notes for all seventeen essays, a frugal arrangement, no doubt, but one that means an inordinate amount of searching about, particularly given the density of notes in many of the essays. This is made even more difficult by the identification of notes by page numbers, rather than titles of the essays to which they

correspond. But these are minor inconveniences and the value of the work transcends them amply.

Part of the value of Freccero's work on Dante, work which has had a profound impact on most Dante studies in this country, as Jacoff notes in her brief but lucid introduction, is the remarkable extent to which it reaches out beyond the critical, exegetical world of *Dantisti* and places the problems he identifies as central to the *Commedia* as being no less central to the broader study of literature itself. His increasing preoccupation with and eloquent articulation of the issue of interpretation (first unmistakably apparent, appropriately enough in his 1972 piece on Medusa) which informs the last (chronologically) seven articles, serves two important needs. It clearly exposes the general problem — and its resolution — that binds the *Commedia* together for the many who are novices in the study of Dante but experts in other literary studies and may be daunted by the intricate arcana of the exegetical and often fragmenting approach to Dante, whose only alternative has often been the road of the *amateur*. Thus, what is arguably a "classic," second only to the Bible in its impact on readers and writers of European literature, is rendered accessible in that most difficult of all mid-paths, the one informed and informing the most exacting of specialists' standards but no less informed and informing in the arena of hermeneutics. The second advantage, therefore, is the extent to which Freccero demonstrates that this is a text of supreme importance for the overlapping questions of what literature is and how we interpret it, questions it repeatedly posed within the text itself. A text that has always been central to other writers is thus deftly made central to the critics who have been concerned with other writers — and not for "source studies" as has been the case in the past — and with writing, and reading, in general. This study constitutes one more contribution to the "modernization" of medieval literature as we perceive it, contributing amply to our appreciation of the self-consciousness of the medieval writer and text.

The most recently written essay in the collection (1983), on "Infernal Irony" and the inscription on the gates of Hell, is placed fifth in this collection. This relatively brief exploration of the meaning and nature of the inscription that signals and signifies the beginning of the descent into Hell is indicative of the weaving of critical strands. Minute attention is paid to the Biblical exegetical and, most importantly, the Augustinian tradition, in which the concept of the inscription is rooted. But Freccero then goes on to show how Dante inscribes the theoretical question of the difficulty of interpreting signs into the narration of the *Commedia* itself. Thus, in the dual context of the New Testament tradition of the difficulty of interpreting Christ's words (Gospel of John, "Durus est hic sermo") and Augustine's discussion of the difference between *vision* (the province of prophets) versus *representation* (that of poets), the Pilgrim's confusion on seeing the inscription (he immediately says to Virgil: "Maestro, il senso lor m'è duro") is to be read as a posing of the problem of the difficulties of interpretation. Freccero is at pains to point out that, because the apparent meaning of the inscription itself has seemed clear to later readers and critics, we have by and large missed the point that the real message concerns the value and meaning of signs, here encountered graphically and visually by the pilgrim and the difficulty of their interpretation. Moreover, the irony (the unexpressed negation of what is expressly affirmed) of this and most other "mimetic" representation, for which the *Inferno* is so well-known, ties together the narrative of self with the narrative of interpretation. Thus, "conversion is a metamorphosis, which implies the destruction of an anterior form, the goal of the first part of the journey" (109). The difficulty of interpretation is the "hardness" of the written message (and the pun, given that the inscription is in stone, is not incidental or merely playful) and it is to be resolved only after meditation on its

meaning is turned back on itself and "reified in the letter of the text" (99). The insistence here is on the difference — essential to Biblical exegesis and contemporary hermeneutics — between vision and understanding, a gap whose narrowing and eventual dissolution is the explicit purpose, if we follow Freccero, of the *Commedia* itself.

The dual themes of the mystery of language and representation, on the one hand, and, on the other, of the narration of self, partly dependent on the destruction of earlier (linguistic) versions of the self, are explored further and in greater detail in several different essays: most cogently, I believe, in the seventh, on Medusa, and in the ninth, on Ugolino, "Bestial Signs and Bread of Angels" (written in 1977). In the latter he also emphasizes the related problem of the relationship between the levels of meaning and representation referred to as "letter and spirit" and, on a different plane, the intriguing notion that much Dante criticism has troped — itself acted out — the problems presented and represented in the *Commedia* itself: "Like virtually all of the sinners in Hell, Ugolino does not grasp the import of his own words and so demands, on our part, an ironic reading . . . the significance of Ugolino's story is revealed by the struggle of his critics to arrive at that significance" (153). Ugolino, the father who (mis)interpreted his children's offer of their flesh by taking it literally, rather than spiritually, is one more in the long line of sinners whose crime is, in its ultimate reduction, the inability to interpret language properly, in this specific case echoing the choice of "bread" as letter rather than as spirit as presented in the Gospel of St. John and calling up the critical distinction of the Word and the Flesh.

Ugolino thus exists only as an exemplar of his own story, as literature, in other words, much as the more famous Francesca. In this regard, it is to be lamented that Freccero deals only summarily with the famous Canto V, where Francesca, with her unnamed Paolo at her side, delivers her (in)famous "reading as seduction" soliloquy. The many critics who have interpreted these — and many other passages — literally — (Ugolino merely dies, Francesca and Paolo fall into temptation because they read of Lancelot's kiss of Guenevere) are thus guilty of the same "sin" of interpretation or, more accurately, of lack of interpretation (of transcending apparent meaning), as Ugolino and Francesca themselves: "They are undoubtedly correct for any *literal* reading of the episode, but that is the point: a literalist who refuses to acknowledge the spirit that animates the text reifies it as a cannibal reifies the human body. The letter alone is dead" (166).

It would be misleading, however, to imply that only the pieces written in the last ten or fifteen years deal with broader issues or are of import and help to those who do not already know Freccero's work. From his earliest essay on "Dante's Firm Root and the Journey Without a Guide," first published in 1959, Freccero's meditations and research on whatever bit of the *Commedia* he chooses to study are concerned with their significance for both the overall structure and the history, which is often textual and may follow as well as precede Dante's text, of which it is a part. One of the best examples of the integration of these various concerns and of the exposition of the unifying structure of narrative of self and spiritual autobiography is the third essay in the book, on "The River of Death," which first appeared in 1966. Here, as in several other essays, we find Freccero's reading of the *Commedia* elaborated as a circular text, whose end point, paradoxically but in the tradition of much autobiography, is its beginning. It is only when both pilgrim and reader, who are fused in the final moment, have understood the significance of the "outcome" that one can go back and properly interpret all that was either obscured or only partially understandable earlier, when interpretation was more difficult. Again,

we are led to perceive the difficulty of interpretation and understanding as the central subject of the work itself.

No less important, however, is the textual tradition of which Dante's text is explicitly a part. Freccero is at pains to point out and trace the Biblical exegetical tradition Dante draws on and which he rewrites and explicates in the passage describing the crossing of the mysterious *fiumana* in Canto II of the *Inferno*. An understanding of the textual—historical— theological tradition is no less important and relevant to the modern reader than it would have been to the medieval one, to whom it would have been more familiar. The decoding of this narrative of conversion cannot be undertaken without knowledge of the code itself, which for Dante was firmly rooted in a number of different Biblical exegetical traditions. Freccero's detailed exploration of these historical codes, here and elsewhere, is a necessary guide to the modern reader, a necessary prelude to his discussion of narrative structure and the circularity of the spiritual autobiography, which are more familiar codes to the modern reader. Thus, it is in the identification, through a painstaking examination of earlier exegesis exemplary of older Dante criticism, of the *fiumana* with Christianity's river, that the modern reader is most clearly able to see the beginnings of the pilgrim-reader's process of conversion which gives such singular prose and coherence to this narrative of self and interpretation. I quote at length from the concluding paragraphs of the essay to illustrate:

It has perhaps not occurred to Dante commentators to identify the *fiumana* with Christianity's river because Dante's river is so clearly terrifying while the Jordan was traditionally a river of salvation . . . however, this is to read the river entirely from the pilgrim's perspective and to forget that the purpose of the journey is to correct that perspective. In a Christian context, all salvation is a consequence of the death of the self. In a literary context, the poem, the triumph of the author, entails a death of the protagonist, a detachment of the self that was from the self that is . . . It would be as if we refused to believe that the Dostoevskian hero is really frightened by the firing squad, because we know from the existence of the story that the reprieve from the Czar came through . . . The story is testimony of the fact that this extinction of a false self in an inverted world is a necessary step before authentic life, and the story, can be born (68–69).

The integration of the appropriate textual history and the complex of perspectives (poet/pilgrim/reader) to be sorted out and that are eventually unified in the poetic closure of the text that leads to its creation are explored in a number of other essays. In the 1965 "Sign of Satan," Freccero guides us from a rejection of Eliot's dismissal of Dante's Satan to an understanding that it is the pilgrim's (temporary) perception that makes the Emperor of hell immobile and makes explicit that this is the difference between Dante's "novel of the self" and Milton's "epic of creation." In the introduction to the *Paradiso* that accompanies Ciardi's translation, Freccero draws on Augustine's meditations on the relationship of language to theology to help us understand the fundamental modernity of the final *cantica*, the poet's attempt to create a completely non-representational poetic world. The recurring insistence on the inseparability of traditional, often minute, scriptural exegesis and the broadest, most "modern" attempts to deal with structure and meaning is both compelling and enlightening to the critic of the latter half of the twentieth century, who might otherwise see them as separate avenues.

In making these essays so readily available, Professor Jacoff has thus performed several useful deeds. For the many who have long been familiar, who have "grown up" as *Dantisti*, with Freccero as one of the *Commedia's* most compelling critics, we are given the pleasure of reading and rereading, "discovering" with pleasure, interpretations of the text that have become canonical, such as the "firm foot," one of the more cogent readings of Dante's

four-fold theory of Christian allegory and *contrapasso* as the literalization of the punishment, to name just a few. Freccero's work, dispersed until now in articles and notes and introductions in a wide variety of original sources, is brought together and there is a great convenience afforded by such a compilation of a number of seminal pieces. Beyond that, however, one can perceive the progression and unity of the critic's work, which is, indeed, greater than the sum of its parts. This text thus becomes the explicit revelation of Freccero's enormous impact, as teacher as well as writer, on Dante criticism in the last several decades. For many others, as I have tried to emphasize in this review, Jacoff is publishing what may constitute the best possible "introduction" to this most seminal of literary texts, an introduction that reconciles traditional and contemporary approaches to the *Commedia*, that is concerned with coherence, unity and the recovery of meaning opened up by the presumption of coherence, as Jacoff states in the introduction but which is also explicitly conscious of the text's fascination with its own textuality and its awareness of itself as message.

If other Dante critics, as Freccero shows, have troped the behavior of many of the *Commedia*'s characters, Freccero's essays to a great extent trope much of the text itself in their reconciliation of history and language, of the concern with what lies beyond the sign with the sign itself, of self-referentiality with more traditional "meaning." One is tempted to point out a further trope: The last essay in the book, on "The Significance of *Terza Rima*," is an apt "conclusions" chapter but no less so is it a necessary introduction to the poetics of the *Commedia*. Not only does Freccero use this discussion of the poem's form to reiterate the text's fundamental unity of form and purpose and the indistinguishability of theology and poetry but it is also here that he explicitly addresses the application of Jakobson's principle of the proper concern of poetics — not with the message itself but rather with the message's awareness of itself as message — to medieval texts in general and to the *Commedia* in particular. The reconciliation of this with Burke's "logological" principal, the reduction of theological principles back to the realm of words, is both apposite closure for the essays and exemplary of the fine synthesis of seemingly irreconcilable concerns that Freccero, like the *Commedia*, as he reads it, provides. It is an essay that could profitably be at the beginning, as well as at the end, of the collection, being the explicit "revelation" of meaning and coherence that puts all that precedes it into the perspective that made other insights possible.

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Armene Kotin Mortimer, *La clôture narrative*. Paris: José Corti, 1985. 246 pp.

In an article of a few years ago that, oddly enough, looms large in the shadowy background of *La clôture narrative*, J. Hillis Miller writes, "Attempts to characterize the fiction of a given period by its commitment to closure or to open-endedness are blocked from the beginning by the impossibility of ever demonstrating whether a given narrative is closed or open" (Miller 1978:7). It would be difficult to find a better description of Mortimer's project than the one so summarily rejected by Miller in the conclusion to his short article. For her part, Mortimer seems acutely aware of Miller's approach to the question and thus knowingly takes an adversarial stance vis-à-vis so-called deconstructionist analyses of closure and their futility ("quand on l'a dit on n'a rien dit,