

Michael Edward Moore, review to appear in *The European Legacy*: (14:5), 2009.

**Allen Mandelbaum, Anthony Oldcorn, Charles Ross, eds., *Lectura Dantis: Purgatorio*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008. alk. paper, xiv + pp. 412.**

The 33 essays comprising this volume (one for each Canto of the *Purgatorio*) are written out of an awareness of the *longue-durée* of Dante scholarship, and provide generous guidance, valuable to any reflective reader of Dante. For many scholars, this book will be a well-thumbed companion for decades. The first volume of this series, on the *Inferno*, has already appeared, and a third, *Lectura Dantis: Paradiso* will be eagerly awaited. In the following discussion, essays are cited by author and page number.

Throughout the laborious climb of Mount Purgatory, Dante and his guide Virgil are in a hurry. At the outset, the venerable Cato shouts at them to quit dawdling: “Quick, to the mountain” (II, 122), and this becomes a steady theme. The sense of rapid movement is maintained as they ascend from cornice to cornice of the mountain. Virgil tells his pupil to stand up straight and turn his gaze toward the top of the mountain (Sara Sturm-Maddox, 200): “Let that suffice, and hurry on your way” (XIX, 61). Virgil curtly awakens the sleeping Dante: *surgi e vieni*: “rise and come” (XIX, 35). The haste and urgency of Dante and Virgil as they climb reflect the energetic tension and pace of the real Dante’s poetry. The upward glance and wakefulness mirror Dante’s own lucidity.

Dante wanted to reach a new level of artistry, and to keep his poem within strictly defined limits. At certain “moments of particular importance, passages of special difficulty and depth,” he highlighted the intensity of his task by calling on the Muses or directly addressing the reader (Hermann Gmelin, 101). The “transcendent power of poetry,” which he had always attributed to his beloved Virgil, was becoming his own, but now explicitly Christian and prophetic (Christopher Kleinhenz, 249). Smarr remarks that “Dante’s crossing the threshold from philosophy to religious poetry is a moment of birth related to his own salvation” (Janet Levarie Smarr, 226). Only by surpassing his pagan teacher Virgil could Dante become a “poet of rectitude,” and thus fulfill the prophetic charge given him by Beatrice in Canto XXXII, to return to earth and help

humanity through his prophetic teaching and the grandeur of his art: “to profit that world which / lives badly...[and] transcribe / what [he] has seen” (XXXII, 103-106).

The essays of this formidable group of scholars are also marked by elegance, and an urgent sense of conveyance. Some are deeply philological, others historically erudite. No time is wasted scoring scholarly points, and the focus is on crisp explanation and accompaniment, a restless search for *meaning*. Following the principle that “Dante gave each of his cantos a particular function” (Maria Picchio Simonelli, 56), each essay provides a complete reading of its canto, while focusing on a particular theme or structural component of the *Purgatorio*. The tone is one of admiration and friendship for Dante. Missing is the type of interpretation which “feeds on itself, with minimal interference from the object interpreted” (Leo Steinberg, qtd. Victoria Kirkham, 313). Nevertheless, it is demonstrated that in many passages “each detail resonates with multiple meanings” (Kirkham, 318). The authors are aware of the dangers lurking in such dense thickets of symbol and signal, pausing to inquire of a possible interpretation: “is it really in the text, or is it forced in there by some wishful thinking of ours?” (Lino Pertile, 271). Room is left to account for the sheer artistic play of Dante’s poem: “Not every detail... conveys an obvious meaning; some...are perhaps evocative and mystifying rather than strictly allegorical.” (Peter Armour, 335).

Without scholarly mediation and commentary, our understanding of Dante’s poetic art, and his message, would be quite limited. The three colored stairs, the gold and silver keys, the four stars, the bearded Cato, would repel the reader. His poetry is couched in an ancient-medieval-personal forest of signs, which had to be interpreted even for his contemporaries, who set out to provide the requisite explanations, lexicons and drawings. For some seven centuries, critical commentary and learned appreciation have been provided by the scholarly tradition of the *Lectura Dantis*.

This new *Lectura Dantis* is a continuation and celebration of this tradition. The aim of the commentary, which is designed to be used with the highly-regarded translation by Allen Mandelbaum, may be summarized as follows:

- to light up the volumes of medieval doctrine, cosmology and knowledge which undergird the poem
- to explain the poem's ancient and medieval symbols, numerology, mythic and historical references, but without pedantry
- to incorporate the principal achievements of the commentary tradition
- to provide a unified and convincing reading for each Canto
- to reveal the beauty of Dante's poetry and the character of his mind

Commentary on the Divine Comedy began soon after Dante's death in 1321. The essays of this volume often return to the most important ancient and modern readings: Pietro di Dante (1340), Boccaccio (1373), Landino (1481), Daniello (1568), Venturi (1732), L'Ottimo (1829), Vernon (1889) and Singleton (1970). Similarly, reference is made to the modern *Lectura* tradition: *Lectura Dantis Newberriana*, *Lectura Dantis Romana*, *Lectura Dantis Scaligera*, *Lectura Dantis Turicensis*, *Lectura Dantis Neapolitana*, *Lectura Dantis Virginiana* – and we are in touch with the centuries-long discussion about Dante among Lord Byron, Ruskin, Longfellow, Benedetto Croce, T.S. Eliot, Dorothy Sayers, Jacques Le Goff, Paul Ricoeur, and Martha Nussbaum.

The *Purgatorio* is political. As a condemned exile, Dante had an intense experience of the "black smoke of wrath" (Cavallo, 181). The agony of embittered political conflict was felt in all the city states of Dante's Italy as "quarrels, oppression, and the despotism of factions...raged on all sides" (M. Barbi, qtd. by Jo Ann Cavallo, 184). The problems Dante raised in his anguish are still with us, although the cast of characters has changed. The body of the ghostly, morally ambiguous Manfred, with terrible wounds on his brow, could have been lost on any modern battlefield. Our political thinkers offer cant rather than wisdom, and our religious leaders are avidly political. Corruption pervades the highest offices: "the impotency of the law in the face of evil intentions combined with power" (M. Picchio Simonelli, 58).

In response, Dante hoped fervently for the rise of a good political power able to curb mankind's thick-necked bestiality, "a guide or bridle." Such a righteous authority would combine the truth of law with sufficient force (John

Scott, 171). In the *Inferno*, Dante's prophetic image for this force was the *Veltro*, the fierce Greyhound who would rule as an emperor on earth, but with a spiritual effect (Vincent Moleta, 211).

Boccaccio, writing in 1373, claimed mendaciously that Dante in exile was reduced to throwing rocks at people in impotent rage. This hardly squares with the poet we meet in the *Purgatorio*, who thirsts for justice, more than revenge. His astonishing response to turmoil was to undertake a poetic and prophetic journey into absolutely new territory, in which the search for self-knowledge and salvation became the leading themes. Dante knew that political life was limited and defective. In John Scott's startling phrase, "Dante is the new Saint Paul" (John Scott, 168).

Far from a soothing politics of mediation, Dante looked for a confluence of political and spiritual liberation. Storey explains that Dante admired the "disruptive politics" and prophecies of the Spiritual Franciscans, although it is not known precisely which books he may have read in that tradition. Probably he knew the Biblical commentaries of Peter John Olivi (Storey, 362-363). Like Simone Weil in the 1930s, Dante wanted a politics of light.

What Dante was most urgently seeking in spiritual terms may be the most daunting for today's reader: he wanted to untie the knot of his own sinfulness. When at the summit of Mount Purgatory, Dante is confronted by Beatrice (and rebuked by her with a scalding reminder of his faults), he kneels in remorse, and discovers his face reflected in the waters of Lethe. Here Dante becomes "an anti-Narcissus" who sees in his reflection "an image of himself, but one that he turns away from in shame" (Rachel Jacoff, 344). Now his confession and contrition are complete, and he is prepared for the visionary experience, and the prophetic commission, to be gained in the last three cantos. Only now could Dante serve as "witness, scribe, and prophet of the mystery of human history and the corruption of the Church" (H. Wayne Storey, 360).

Czeslaw Milosz used to say that our religious imaginations are exiled from Dante's cosmos, so rich in meaning, so appropriate. But the reasons for reading and interpreting Dante are not confined to their original cosmic setting. We learn the lesson of gratitude for our teachers, and the possibility of liberation through the art and literature of the past. Canto XXI "celebrates the soul's

liberation, makes an offering of intensely loving gratitude to the unintended, unexpected, providential power of Virgil's poetry" (Janet Levarie Smarr, 234). Dante was seeking personal liberation in his attempt to establish a poetry of rectitude and prophecy. These goals are dramatized at the summit of Mount Purgatory.

The panorama of salvation, for Dante, never involves a vague, abstract humanity. We always have to do with particular historical persons, many of them known to the poet. Memory is vital to the prayerful connection between the living and the dead. The readings in this *Lectura Dantis* capture these subtleties, in a neo-humanist approach, similar to what I elsewhere proposed under the title 'Miloszan humanism' – a scholarly humanism which does not try to project an ideal humanity, or an historical plan, but which attempts to preserve and declare the delicate traces of past human existence, in order to humanize and liberate the self.

Historical and literary scholarship can provide a path toward self-knowledge and a philosophical therapy of the soul. In a wonderful passage, Kirkpatrick lays claim to just such a joyful approach:

our concern in reading Dante is not to command humanity but to re-create ourselves as human beings in the company of others. The courtesy required for this act is, simultaneously, an act of interpretation. The true community lies neither in Limbo nor in the sheepfold of the excommunicates but rather in our continued desire to understand others.  
(Robin Kirkpatrick, 37)

A scholarly approach to Dante can be an act of freedom, involving reading and writing, learned conversation and debate. The highest goal of historical and literary scholarship is personal liberation, realized in the search for knowledge and the community of kindred spirits. Liberation was also the ultimate goal of Dante's ascent of Mount Purgatory. Thus it is possible for the avocation of the scholar to coincide with the aspiration of the poet.