Review Essay: Antonio C. Mastrobuono, *Dante's Journey of Sanctification*

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McMahon supplies a useful, though limited, review of recent scholarship—particularly that of John Freccero, Robert Durling, and Kenneth Burke—upon which he builds his own insights. McMahon’s emphasis on Scripture as well as the Church in the Confessions is a corrective to other views, as is his awareness of the unity of narrative and instructive styles that the Confessions shares with the Bible. Some important elements have, however, been omitted from McMahon’s study. I wish, for example, that he had clarified what Augustine means by reason and in what ways it is the same as and different from spirit.

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What follows is a review (by Sowell) of a book (by Mastrobuono) whose key sections review other volumes (by Charles Singleton, John Freccero, and Giuseppe Mazzotta) that are devoted to interpreting a poem (by Dante) that often incorporates other writings (by Thomas Aquinas) that interpret, among other books, the Book of Books (the Bible). Although this entire bookish enterprise may strike some as an exercise in frivolity, most literary scholars feel that nothing could be further from the truth. Indeed, the matter is most serious, for the question of how to interpret another’s book fuels most of the debates that rage today concerning literary theory. In the case of Dante’s Commedia, the debate over how best to read the text has become especially heated in the last half-dozen years. For ever since a deeply depressed Charles Singleton committed suicide on October 11, 1985, the competition for the coveted title of “leading American Dantista” has proven intense. Now Antonio Mastrobuono has thrown his hat into the ring.

Unfortunately, the reviewer’s task becomes unduly complicated when, as in the case of Dante’s Journey of Sanctification, the author’s rhetoric appears calculated to create controversy. To cite a few parenthetical examples: Mastrobuono stridently accuses Singleton of “sheer absurdity” (53) in reading Thomas Aquinas, and of a “fundamentally false interpretation of the entire structure of the Comedy” (73); he accuses Freccero of “pure improvisation” and “sophistry” (78) in explaining Dante’s theology, and he accuses Mazzotta of “irrationalism or nihilism” (89) in arriving at a methodology. When a scholar employs invective, the reviewer must attempt to separate intemperate style from underlying argument, even if that reviewer ultimately must evaluate both.
Mastrobuono divides his truly important study into three chapters—
"Sanctifying Grace: Justification and Merit," "This is the day the Lord has made [sic]," and "The Powerful Enigma: A Mortification of the Intellect"—each with a somewhat different polemical target. The first chapter seeks "to demonstrate that Singleton’s thesis of the *Comedy* is based on an erroneous interpretation of St. Thomas, and that Dante’s journey under Virgil’s guidance . . . is an effect of (not a preparation for) sanctifying grace, which Dante has already received before entering the world beyond" (v). The chief arguments Mastrobuono adduces to show Singleton’s mistaken understanding of Aquinas are reasonable and convincing. Singleton apparently quoted the *Summa theologica* in a highly selective and fragmentary manner to buttress his peculiar theories about grace; in the process he oversimplified the theology of Aquinas and consequently misread Dante at various points. But Mastrobuono perhaps makes too much of this, for his insistence that "sanctifying grace as it pertains to man [is] the most fundamental problem in the *Divine Comedy*" (30) raises more questions than it settles. How does the problem of grace relate, for instance, to what Dante himself placed at the foci of his poem—that is, the extended discussion of free will and love in *Purgatorio* 16 and 17?

Having bitterly attacked Singleton in chapter one, our author inexplicably cites him with approval in the second chapter (137). Mastrobuono, in search of a dual philosophical justification for his analogical approach to the *Purgatorio*, turns first to Singleton and then to the pseudo-Dantean Epistle to Cangrande on which Singleton unwisely relied. (I say "unwisely" because of the Epistle’s spurious authorship, as I and many others have shown.) Mastrobuono’s purpose in the second essay is to introduce new evidence in support of his unusual belief that the first day in Purgatory is not Easter Sunday, as most critics believe, but "simply a day that corresponds to the night of the Vigil between Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday in Jerusalem" (131). This chapter fails to convince even as to its basic premise. Resurrection imagery hardly begins, as Mastrobuono argues, with the singing of *Te Deum* in *Purgatorio* 9; it appears subtly and powerfully, for example, in *Purgatorio* 1, from the initial verbs of rising to the final potent image of the regenerating reed. Also, Mastrobuono’s repeated and uncritical acceptance, in this chapter and throughout the book, of Dante’s authorship of the Epistle to Cangrande (see 8, 34, 86, 101-2, 137, 168, 238) smacks of scholarly naiveté.

The third chapter focuses on Beatrice’s highly enigmatic "DXV" prophecy and proposes "a philosophical approach that makes the meaning of the prophecy proceed from the text of the poem" (vii). In this case, the author’s "proposed translation of ‘cinquecento diece e cinque’ into the figure of a cross" (201) is quite helpful as an example of a new way to approach an old problem.
Unfortunately, Mastrobuono does not marshal enough evidence to prove that his solution is the final one. Too many of his extrapolations about “wax under the seal” (Purg. 33.79) and palmieri (palmers) rely on questionable assumptions or forced analogies.

An acrimonious appendix, “A Book Twenty-Five Years in the Making,” rounds out the volume. A lengthy and scathing book review of Freccero’s collected essays, the review was, according to Mastrobuono, originally commissioned by a former editor of Italian Culture but not published in that forum. Length was, I suspect, but one reason for its failure to appear in a refereed journal; another was undoubtedly its vitriolic language. The author self-righteously proclaims that Freccero “cannot be exonerated” of disregarding “proper theological facts” (247). This is the main thrust of Mastrobuono’s quarrel. Furthermore, Freccero is supposedly guilty of an “overworked imagination” (267), “gross misunderstanding” (269), and “interpretative perversion” (270). Such harsh language and ad hominem attacks sadly characterize the style of the book as a whole and tend to obfuscate valid points that need to be made about contemporary Dante studies.

What, then, are we to make of Dante’s Journey of Sanctification? In its pages Mastrobuono purports, above all else, to rescue the Commedia from the Singletonian school. But in doing this, he imitates too closely, from the viewpoint of style and tone, the voice of his irascible mentor and the book’s dedicatee, Rocco Montano. Even more telling, perhaps, is that Mastrobuono himself goes to amazing lengths to provide the “correct” interpretation of his book. He attempts this in the first chapter, which constitutes almost half of the book, primarily through restating his argument every few pages: Dante’s journey with Virgil is an effect of sanctifying grace, not—as Singleton “asininely” believed—a preparation for it; the pilgrim receives this boon in Inferno 2, not in the Purgatorio’s Terrestrial Paradise, as Singleton naively argued (see 5, 12, 25, 28, 42, 60, 62, etc.). And so it goes. Instead of making his point and moving on, Mastrobuono continually derides Singleton for having “put the cart in front of the horse,” a trite metaphor he employs at least four times (see xi, 45, 107, and 216).

A much better example of Mastrobuono’s desire to lead the reader by the hand occurs in the Preface (x–xiii), when he quotes verbatim—including senseless endnote numbers and a dangling colon—pages 54–57 from later in the same book. The point of this incredible redundancy seems to be to underscore, in as dramatic a fashion as possible, the “terrible confusion, on Singleton’s part, between the order of nature and the order of grace” (ix). Most significantly of all, Mastrobuono offers a built-in book review, located opposite the table of contents, that reproduces the seven detailed and laudatory appraisals of his book (by acknowledged friends—see iv) found on the back cover of his paperback. This
defensive and vainglorious act would appear much less troublesome had Mastrobuono not devoted the entire last paragraph of his book to attacking Freccero for the promotional blurb on the dust jacket of the latter's Dante: The Poetics of Conversion. The notion, found on the dust cover and accepted by many American Dantists, that Freccero "is the best contemporary critic of Dante" is, to quote Mastrobuono, "a shameless, if not shameful, example of advertising hype, altogether unbecoming in a scholarly book on Dante, whose Comedy, after all, is also a celebration of humility" (279). Needless to say, such contradictions will likely confuse the sentient reader trying to make sense of the book's overall purpose.

One final warning: Mastrobuono's book is not particularly user-friendly; it lacks an index and confusingly locates the Contents page after the Preface. In conclusion, Dante's Journey contains important revelations but could have benefitted enormously from a good editor.

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This special issue of Quaderni d'italianistica brings together fourteen essays and five notes by some of the most distinguished Dantists working today and cumulatively offers a panoramic view of the current "state of the art" from a predominantly Anglo-American perspective. It also contains brief notices on twenty-six recent books and a sixty-page bibliography of Dante research published between 1984 and 1988.

The editor, Amilcare A. Iannucci, leads with his own essay, "Dante, Television, and Education," which critiques a 1988 Italian series on the Commedia, a British production of the Inferno in progress, and finally the University of Toronto classroom videos that Iannucci himself conceived. Teodolinda Barolini's groundbreaking "Detheologizing Dante: For a 'New Formalism' in Dante Studies" authoritatively proposes a new course for future research on the poem: "The time has come for us to be more interested in how the Commedia works than in what it says" (46). Massimo Verdicchio, in "Error in Dante's Convivio," considers Dante's error in believing and leading his readers to believe that one can improve oneself simply through the study of philosophy. Dino Cervigni persuasively interprets Dante's loss of consciousness at the end of Inferno 3 in terms of a Dantean rhetoric of silence in "L'Acheronte dantesco: Morte del Pellegrino