

representation suggests the outlines of a reading of the whole work as well as the diverse poetics of each of the *cantiche*.

John Freccero's essays have had a profound effect on Dante studies in America; they continue to inspire new work and references to them show up in an unusual number of other people's footnotes. This is not only because of their insightfulness, but also because of a certain modesty or courtesy with which they leave many of their conclusions or analogues to be worked out by the reader. They are suggestive rather than exhaustive. In their power to engage the reader, as well as in their meticulous conceptual elegance and their sense of the inherent fascination of the issues they raise, they are continuous with Freccero's teaching. These essays teach us how to find the questions, or how to make limited questions into much larger ones: they have the rare ability both to lead the way and to open it.

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I. The Prologue Scene

IN THE SHADOWY WORLD OF THE prologue scene, things both are and are not what they seem. For all its familiarity, the scenery seems to have no real poetic existence independent of the allegorical statement it was meant to convey. Moreover, the statement itself, judging from the vast bibliography dedicated to it, is by no means obvious to the contemporary reader. The ambiguous nature of the moral landscape lends itself too readily to arbitrary allegorization, but scarcely to formal analysis. In this respect, the prologue is radically unlike any other part of the *Commedia* and matches the abortive journey of the pilgrim with an apparent failure that is the poet's own.

The Region of Unlikeness

Any fresh interpretation of the prologue, if it is to contribute measurably to our understanding, must not only attempt an exploration of this well-travelled critical terrain, but also account for the presence, in this most substantial of poetic visions, of a region whose outlines are decidedly blurred. It is such an accounting that I hope to offer. My thesis is that the landscape in which the pilgrim finds himself bears a striking, indeed at times a textual, resemblance to the "region of unlikeness" in which the young Augustine finds himself in the seventh book of the *Confessions*. Moreover, the resemblance is not simply an isolated fact of purely historical interest but is also of some significance for an interpretation of the poem. If the point of departure, as well as the goal, of Dante's spiritual itinerary deliberately recalls the experience of Augustine in the *Confessions*,

then it may be that we are to regard Dante's entire spiritual autobiography as essentially Augustinian in structure.

There is good evidence, apart from the prologue scene, for considering Dante's poem as a spiritual testament in the manner of Augustine. Toward the end of the *Purgatorio*, at a moment that is of great dramatic importance, Beatrice calls to the pilgrim by name:

in su la sponda del carro sinistra,
quando mi volsi al suon del nome mio,
che di necessità qui si registra,
vidi la donna . . . (XXX, 61-64)

so on the left side of the chariot—when I turned
at the sound of my name, which of necessity
is registered here—I saw the lady . . .

Thus, in defiance of medieval convention, the author identifies himself with his protagonist, insisting that he does so "di necessità." The apology is so pointed and the word "necessità" so strong that the passage seems to call for some interpretation. It happens that in the *Convivio* Dante had discussed the circumstances under which it might be considered necessary to speak of oneself. One of his examples, precisely the *Confessions*, is described in terms that seem almost to herald Dante's own "testament":

Per necessarie cagioni lo parlare di sè è conceduto: e intra l'altre necessarie cagioni due sono più manifeste. L'Una è quando senza ragionare di sè grande infamia o pericolo non si può cessare . . . L'Altra è quando, per ragionare di sè, grandissima utilitate ne segue altrui per via di dottrina; e questra ragione mosse Agostino ne le sue confessioni a parlare di sè, *chè per lo processo de la sua vita, lo quale fu di [non] buono in buono, e di buono in migliore, e di migliore in ottimo, ne diede esemplo e dottrina, la quale per sì vero testimonio ricevere non si potea.*¹

Speaking of oneself is allowed, when it is necessary, and among other necessary occasions two are most obvious: One is when it is impossible to silence great infamy and danger without doing so . . . The other is when, by speaking of himself, the greatest advantage follows for others by way of instruction; and this reason moved Augustine to speak of himself in his confessions, so that in the progress of his life, which was from bad to good,

and from good to better, and from better to best, he furnished example and teaching which could not have been obtained from any other equally truthful testimony.

Critics have usually been content with rather generic explanations for Dante's mention of his own name in the *Purgatorio*, none of which seem as relevant as does this passage in the *Convivio*.² It is clear from the beginning of the poem that Dante, like Augustine, intends his work to have exemplary force for "*nostra vita*." Elsewhere Dante makes this explicit, when he says that he writes "in pro del mondo che mal vive" (*Purg.* XXXII, 103). By naming himself at the moment of his confession, however, he gives to the abstract *exemplum* the full weight of *vero testimonio*, exactly as had St. Augustine before him. Furthermore, the three stages of Augustine's progress are described in the *Convivio* in terms that are partially echoed in the *Paradiso*:

È Bëatrice quella che sì scorge
di bene in meglio, sì subitamente
che l'atto suo per tempo non si sporge. (X, 37-39)

It is Beatrice who thus conducts from good to better, so swiftly that her act does not extend through time.

The phrase "di bene in meglio," for all of its apparent banality, has technical force,³ describing the second stage of the pilgrim's progress. Beatrice is virtually defined here as the guide for the second stage of spiritual progress⁴ in terms that the *Convivio* had used for the second stage of Augustine's conversion from sinner to saint: "di buono in migliore." It seems likely that in the *Convivio* Dante perceived in Augustine's life the same pattern of conversion that he was later to read retrospectively in his own experience.

Dante speaks of Augustine's life as giving an "esemplo," implying the transformation of personal experience into intelligible, perhaps even symbolic, form. We may observe in passing that it is the exemplary quality of the *Confessions* that distinguishes it from its modern descendants. Augustine's purpose is not to establish his own uniqueness (nor, therefore, innocence, in terms of the standards by which ordinary men are judged), but rather to demonstrate how the apparently unique experience was, from the perspective of eternity,

a manifestation of Providence's design for all men. The scholarly debates about the historicity of Augustine's conversion scene, where a real garden in Milan seems to enclose the fig tree of Nathanael (John 1:48),⁵ are paralleled by the scholarly debates about Beatrice who, on one hand, was a woman of flesh and blood and yet, on the other hand, seems to be surrounded at Dante's confession scene with unmistakably Christological language and mystery. The point is that in the "then" of experience, grace came in intensely personal form, whereas in the "now" of witness, the particular event is read retrospectively as a repetition in one's own history of the entire history of the Redemption. For both Dante and Augustine the exegetical language seems to structure experience, identifying it as part of the redemptive process, while the irreducibly personal elements lend to the *exemplum* the force of personal witness. Together, *exemplum* and experience, allegory and biography, form a confession of faith for other men.

Conversion, a death and resurrection of the self, is the experience that marks the difference between such confessions and facile counterfeits. In the poem, the difference between the attempt to scale the mountain, the journey that fails, and the successful journey that it prefigures is a descent in humility, a death of the self represented by the journey through hell. Augustine alludes briefly to a similar *askesis* in order to describe his suffering during his stay in Rome:

And lo, there was I received by the scourge of bodily sickness, and I was going down to Hell, carrying all the sins which I had committed, both against Thee, and myself, and others, many and grievous, over and above that bond of original sin, whereby we all die in Adam. . . . So true, then, was the death of my soul, as that of His flesh seemed to me false; and how true the death of His body, so false was the life of my soul.⁶

The descent into hell, whether metaphorical as in the *Confessions*, or dramatically real as in Dante's poem, is the first step on the journey to the truth. It has the effect of shattering the inverted values of this life (which is death, according to Christian rhetoric) and transforming death into authentic life. The inversion of values is represented in Dante's poem by the curious prefiguration in the first canto of the ascent of the mountain of purgatory: the light at the summit, the mountain itself, the attempted climb. Although the landscape is anal-

ogous to the scenery that comes into sharper focus in the second *cantica*, all directions are reversed. What seems up is in fact down; what seems transcendence is in fact descent. Just as the reversed world of Plato's myth in the *Statesman* represented a world of negative values, so the reversed directions of the prologue stand for spiritual distortion. Augustine alludes in the seventh book to Plato's myth when he describes his spiritual world before his conversion as a "regio dissimilitudinis."⁷ Although Dante nowhere uses the phrase, he borrowed several of Augustine's topographical details to describe his own spiritual condition.

Augustine's journey to God, like Dante's, is immediately preceded by a journey that fails, an attempt at philosophical transcendence in the seventh book of the *Confessions* that amounts to a conversion *manquée*. Lost in what he refers to as a "region of unlikeness," Augustine turns to the light of Platonic vision, only to discover that he is too weak to endure it. He is beaten back by the light and falls, weeping, to the things of this world. At that point in the narrative, the author asks himself why God should have given him certain books of neoplatonic philosophy to read before leading him to Scripture. He answers: "[So that] I might know the difference between presumption and confession; between those who saw where they were to go, yet saw not the way, and the way itself, that led not to behold only, but to dwell in the beatific country."⁸ The answer applies exactly to the dramatic purpose of Dante's prologue scene.

There are some excellent reasons for believing Dante meant that first ascent to be read as a purely *intellectual* attempt at conversion, where the mind sees its objective but is unable to reach it. After the pilgrim's fear is somewhat quieted, the poet uses a famous simile:

E come quei che con lena affannata,
uscito fuor del pelago a la riva,
si volge a l'acqua perigliosa e guata,
così l'animo mio, ch'ancor fuggiva,
si volse a retro a rimirar lo passo
che non lasciò già mai persona viva.
Poi ch'èi posato un poco il corpo lasso,
ripresi via per la piaggia diserta,
sì che 'l piè fermo sempre era 'l piè più basso. (I, 22-30)

And as he who with laboring breath has es-

aped from the deep to the shore turns to look back on the dangerous waters, so my mind which was still fleeing turned back to gaze upon the pass that never left anyone alive.

Charles Singleton has called our attention to the shift, in these lines, from the flight of an *animo*, the mind of the pilgrim, to the lagging of a *corpo lasso*, a tired body.⁹ He was primarily concerned with the radical shift in poetic tone, the beginning of what he referred to as Dante's vision "made flesh." It should be observed that such a shift, besides being a radical poetical departure, has a precise conceptual significance in this context. The whole reason for the failure of all such journeys of the mind resides precisely in that laggard body. The *animo* is perfectly willing, but it is joined to flesh that is bound to fail.

The phrase "l'animo mio ch'ancor fuggiva" has an unmistakable philosophical ring. For one thing, the word *animo* is decidedly intellectual, rather than theological in meaning, quite distinct from the more common *anima*. For another, the phrase recalls, or at least would have recalled to the Church fathers, the flight of the soul from the terrestrial to the spiritual realm according to the Platonists and especially to Plotinus. In the *Enneads*, the latter urges such a flight: "Let us therefore flee to our dear homeland . . . But what manner of flight is this? . . . it is not with our feet that it can be accomplished, for our feet, no matter where they take us, take us only from one land to another; nor must we prepare for ourselves a team of horses or a ship . . . it is rather necessary to change our sight and look with the inner eye."¹⁰

This flight of the soul by means of the "interior eye" was destined to have an interesting history. It is perhaps the ancestor of Dante's abortive journey. The point of it is that the Plotinian sage can safely ignore his body in his attempts at ecstasy. By chance this passage was well known in the Middle Ages, having been paraphrased, indeed almost translated, as Pierre Courcelle has shown, by St. Ambrose. In one of his sermons, he adds an interesting detail to Plotinus' exhortation: "Let us therefore flee to our true homeland . . . But what manner of flight is this? It is not with our bodily feet that it is accomplished, for our steps, no matter where they run, take us only from one land to another. Nor let us flee in ships, in chariots, or with horses that stumble and fall, but let us flee with our

minds (*fugiamus animo*), with our eyes or with our interior feet."¹¹ It is not essential, for my purposes, to suggest that Dante knew this passage, although there is no reason why he could not have. The phrase *fugiamus animo* is not so bizarre that its resemblance to Dante's phrase could establish it as the poet's source. But even if Dante did not know it, the point can still be made that since Ambrose's phrase was meant to sound Platonic, it is likely that the similar phrase, "l'animo mio ch'ancor fuggiva," especially in a context of failure, was likewise meant by Dante to have philosophical rather than theological force.

The division between body and soul was of course a commonplace in ancient "flights" of the soul. For Christians, however, it was not the body *per se* that constituted the impediment, but rather the fallen flesh. It is not physical reality that the soul must flee, but sin itself. Before looking at Augustine's view of the dichotomy, it might be well to show how a less original thinker saw the effect of the division of body and soul in the psychology of conversion. Gregory the Great provides us with the kind of theological context in which I believe we are to read the "animo" and "corpo" of Dante's verses. His remarks are suggestive, too, for a reading of the impediments that beset the pilgrim:

Indeed, one suffers initially after conversion, considering one's past sins, wishing to break immediately the bonds of secular concerns, to walk in tranquillity the ways of the Lord, to throw off the heavy burden of earthly desires and in free servitude to put on the light yoke of God. Yet while one thinks of these things, there arises a familiar delight in the flesh which quickly takes root. The longer it holds on, the tighter it becomes, the later does one manage to leave it behind. What suffering in such a situation, what anxiety of the heart! *When the spirit calls and the flesh calls us back.* On one hand the intimacy of a new love invites us, on the other the old habits of vice hold us back.¹²

This is the "flesh" that was ignored by Plotinus in his rather optimistic invitation to the soul to fly to the Truth.

To return to Ambrose's influential statement for a moment, we notice that he added the detail of the "interior feet" to Plotinus' remarks. No reader of Dante's first canto can fail to remember that after resting his tired body, the pilgrim sets off to his objective "sì che 'l piè fermo sempre era 'l più basso." In another essay (chapter

2 in this book), I attempt to explain the meaning of that verse in terms of the allegory of the "interior feet" of the soul. The "più fermo" signifies the pilgrim's will, unable to respond to the promptings of the reason because of the Pauline malady, characteristic of fallen man whose mind far outstrips the ability of a wounded will to attain the truth. The fallen will limps in its efforts to reach God. Augustine, who uses the theme in a submerged way, was himself very probably Dante's direct source for the image of an *homo claudus*, unable to advance to the summit. In a passage from the *Confessions* paraphrasing precisely the Plotinian, then Ambrosian passage, Augustine insists upon the inability of a crippled will to complete the journey. He does so with an extended comparison of the movement of the limbs with the movement of the will:

I was troubled in spirit, most vehemently indignant that I entered not into Thy Will and Covenant, O my God, which all my bones cried out unto me to enter, and praised it to the skies. And therein we enter not by ships, or chariots, or feet, nor move not so far as I had come from the house to that place where we were sitting. For, not to go only, but to go *in* thither was nothing else but to will to go, but to will resolutely and thoroughly; not to turn and toss, this way and that, *a maimed and half-divided will, struggling, with one part sinking as another rose.*¹³

In this magnificent passage, Augustine uses Platonic words and turns them against the Platonists. The goal is not some world of Ideas, but the covenant of Jehovah. Moreover, the problem is not of the body as a purely physical impediment, but rather of the fallen and crippled will, shortcomings the Platonists had not considered. As Augustine was unable to achieve the ecstasy of the Platonists, so Dante's pilgrim is unable to reach the truth of the mind with a will that "sempre era 'l più basso." The parallel is close enough to suggest on Dante's part a conscious evocation.

Apart from the parallels between Dante's journey and Augustine's with respect both to the need for the journey and to the fatal flaws in the wayfarers, there are also parallels to be drawn with regard to the objective. The light of God, even as perceived with the neoplatonic eyes of the soul, proves too much for Augustine in the seventh book of his *Confessions*: "And Thou didst beat back the weakness of my sight, streaming forth Thy beams of light upon me most strongly, and I trembled with love and awe: and I perceived

myself to be far off from Thee, in the region of unlikeness, as if I heard this Thy voice from on high: 'I am the food of grown men, grow, and thou shalt feed upon Me.'"¹⁴ In spite of his repeated attempts to reach the light, the weight of "fleshly habit" causes him to fall back, "sinking with sorrow into these inferior things—*ruebam in ista cum gemitu.*"¹⁵ Dante might well have been remembering that phrase when he described himself as beaten back by the wolf: "i rovinava in basso loco." Augustine seems to hear the voice of God in the light that he sees. The synaesthetic effect is rhetorically appropriate in this interior journey, for all of the senses here stand for movements of the mind, moved by a single God in all of His various manifestations. It may not be purely coincidental that Dante also insists on a mystical synaesthesia in his experience. After he is beaten back to the dark wood, he describes it as the place "dove 'l sol tace." The implication is that the light which he saw before spoke to him with a voice that was divine.

Pierre Courcelle has traced Augustine's "vain attempts at Plotinian ecstasy" back to their neoplatonic sources.¹⁶ What emerges clearly from his study is that the ancients saw no need for a guide on such a journey. Plotinus explicitly says that one requires self-confidence to reach the goal, rather than a guide.¹⁷ This self-confidence was precisely what Augustine interpreted as philosophical pride, the element that in his view vitiated all such attempts. His own interior journey begins with an insistence upon his need for help: "And being thence admonished to return to myself, I entered even into my inward self, *Thou being my Guide*: and able I was, for *Thou wert become my Helper*. And I entered and beheld with the eye of my soul (such as it was), above the same eye of my soul, above my mind, the Light Unchangeable."¹⁸ Christian virtue, unlike Socratic virtue, is more than knowledge and vice is more than ignorance. The Platonic conversion toward the light is doomed to failure because it neglects to take account of man's fallen condition. To put the matter in Platonic terms, the pilgrim must struggle even to reach the cave from which Plato assumed the journey began. That struggle, the descent in humility, helps remove the barrier that philosophy leaves intact. God's guidance, represented dramatically in the poem by the pilgrim's three guides, transforms philosophical presumption into Christian confession. St. Bernard, an outspoken critic of philosophical presumption, speaks of the opposition between humility and pride in the itinerary to God. His remarks serve as an excellent

illustration of how familiar Augustine's struggle was in the Middle Ages and of how readily the struggle lent itself to dramatization in terms that are strikingly like Dante's:

"Who dares climb the mountain of the Lord or who will stand in His holy place?" . . . Only the humble man can safely climb the mountain, because only the humble man has nothing to trip him up. The proud man may climb it indeed, yet he cannot stand for long . . . The proud man has only one foot to stand on: love of his own excellence . . . Therefore to stand firmly, we must stand humbly. So that our feet may never stumble we must stand, not on the single foot of pride, but on the two feet of humility.¹⁹

There can be scarcely any doubt that Dante's pilgrim climbs the mountain in the same tradition.

The final passage from Augustine's seventh book provides a series of images which offer the closest analogue to the landscape with which Dante begins his poem. The theme is humility, which provides a transition to the eighth book, from attempts at Plotinian ecstasy to the conversion under the fig tree. Speaking of Christ against the philosophers he says:

They disdain to learn of Him, because He is gentle and humble of heart; for these things hast Thou hid from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes. For it is one thing, from a wooded mountain-top (*de silvestre cacumine*) to see the land of peace and to find no way thither; and in vain to essay through ways unpassable, opposed and beset by fugitives and deserters, under their captain the lion and the dragon: and another to keep on the way that leads thither, guarded by the host of the heavenly General (*cura caelestis imperatoris*); where they spoil not who have deserted the heavenly army (*qui caelestem militiam deseruerunt*)²⁰

The Augustinian phrase, "de silvestre cacumine," may at first seem a trifle remote as an analogue for the "selva oscura," but if we read on in the *Confessions* we find that Augustine elaborates on the description of his former life with an alternate image: "In this so vast wilderness [*immensa silva*], full of snares and dangers, behold many of them I have cut off and thrust out of my heart."²¹ Of greater significance is the fact that elements of the former passage echo not only in the first canto of the *Inferno*, but perhaps also in the eighth

canto of the *Purgatorio*. In other words, there seem to exist between the two authors not only analogies of detail but also of structure, for in these few lines Augustine distinguishes between success and failure in the journey to God by a series of oppositions that match the opposition between the journey of the prologue and the successful journey that it foreshadows. One need only paraphrase Augustine in Dantesque terms in order to make this apparent: it is one thing to be beset by wild beasts and quite another to be guarded by the "essercito gentile" (*Purg.* VIII, 22) of the "imperador che là sù regna" (*Inf.* I, 124), safe from the chief deserter, "l nostro avversaro" (*Purg.* VIII, 95).

A further word must be said here about the most famous image of the prologue scene, that of the "selva oscura." If we are in fact dealing in the prologue with an attempt at transcendence that is neoplatonic in origin, then the temptation is strong to identify Dante's "selva" with the prime matter of Plato's *Timaeus*, the traditional enemy of philosophical flights of the soul. The Greek word for matter, *hylē*, was rendered into Latin as "silva" by Chalcidius and the phrase "silva Platonis" became proverbial in the Middle Ages. Bernardus Silvestris uses the word with a force that sometimes suggests a totally unchristian equation of matter with evil: *silva rigens, praeponderante malitia, silvestris malignitas*.²² Some critics recently have attempted to associate Dante's "selva" with the Platonic "silva," thereby reviving a gloss that goes back to the Renaissance commentary of Cristoforo Landino.²³ The gloss runs the risk, however, of leading to a serious misunderstanding. In the dark wood, we are not dealing with man's hylomorphic composition, but rather with *sin*. Landino's facile equation, "corpo, cioè vizio" will not do for the "selva," for it obscures the fundamental point of Christianity's quarrel with metaphysical dualism. Ultimately, to obscure the difference between "corpo" and "vizio" is to forget the doctrine of the Incarnation and this Dante was no more likely to forget than was Augustine, who spent much of his life refuting the Manicheans.

Nevertheless, it is possible to show that Dante used the opposition "selva—luce" in exactly the same way that he used the opposition "corpo—animò"; that is, as a Platonic commonplace used to signify a struggle of which the Platonists were unaware. The distinctive characteristic of the dark wood in Dante's poem is not that it is a *selva*, but rather that it is *oscura*, as the following textual parallel reveals:

Già m'avean trasportato
i lenti *passi*
dentro a *la selva antica*
tanto, ch'io

non potea rivedere *ond'*
io mi 'ntrassi;

ed ecco più andar mi tolse
un rio
(*Purg.* XXVIII, 22–25)

Now my slow steps had carried me on into the ancient wood so far that I could not see back to where I had entered it, when lo, a stream took from me further progress

The resemblance can hardly be fortuitous. Dante's descent into hell and his ascent of the mountain of purgatory bring him to a point from which he can begin his climb to the light, his entrance into sanctifying grace, without fear of the impediments that blocked his way before. That new point of departure, the garden of Eden, was the home of man before the fall. Through Adam's transgression, the prelapsarian state of man was transformed into the state of sin. In poetic terms, Adam transformed the *selva antica* into a *selva oscura*. Although the "rio" forever separates the pilgrim from original justice and Matelda, he can, with the help of Beatrice, go far beyond:

"Qui sarai tu poco tempo *silvano*;
e sarai meco senza fine cive
di quella Roma onde Cristo è romano.
(*Purg.* XXXII, 100–102)

Here shall you be short time a forester, and

Nel mezzo del *cammin*
di nostra vita
mi ritrovai per *una*
selva oscura

.....

Io non so ben ridir com'
i' v'intrai

.....

Ed ecco, quasi al cominciar
de l'erta
(*Inf.* I, 1–2, 10, 31)

Midway in the journey of our life I found myself in a dark wood I cannot rightly say how I entered it And behold, near the beginning of the steep

you shall be with me forever a citizen of that Rome whereof Christ is Roman.

To say that the pilgrim is a *silvano* is to say that he still inhabits the *selva* of human existence; only in the *selva* darkened by sin, what Dante called "la selva erronea di questa vita,"²⁴ does it become impossible to follow the path to the heavenly city.

Augustine chose to describe the impediments on his journey to the mountain top in terms of the wild beasts of the Psalms, the lion and the dragon. Dante, on the other hand, described them in terms of the three beasts of Jeremiah 5:6. I take these to be the basic wounds to the rational, irascible, and concupiscent appetites suffered by all men as a result of the fall (see chap. 2 in this book). What is of particular poetic interest here is that in the text of Jeremiah, those three beasts are said to be enemies of all the sinners of Jerusalem. The question is, why should the three beasts associated with Jerusalem, the promised land, be the obstacles to the pilgrim in his climb?

The answer, I believe, resides in the fact that the pilgrim's goal is in a sense Jerusalem, or at least the heavenly Jerusalem, although he cannot know that until he reaches it, which is to say, until he assumes the perspective of the poet. Earlier I suggested that both Augustine and Dante used scriptural exegesis in order to structure their experience, superimposing (or discovering, they would insist) a biblical pattern of meaning upon their own history. Thus far I have tried to compare the shadowy world of the pilgrim with Augustine's region of unlikeness. There is nothing shadowy about the interpretative view of the poet, however, for, as Charles Singleton has shown, part of the poet's strategy is to introduce into both the prologue and the *Purgatorio*, superimposed upon the narrative, the *figura* which was considered to be the pattern of conversion.²⁵ We have already cited the verses that relate the emergence from the dark wood to the crossing of a "passo" through the open sea. Again, as the pilgrim struggles up the slope of the mountain, the poet refers to him as being in a "gran deserto," as far from woods or water as can be imagined. Finally, when the wolf blocks the pilgrim's passage, Lucy, looking down from heaven, sees him as though he were standing before a flooded river of death, weeping and unable to cross. In the sea, desert, and river, any medieval exegete would discern the three

stages of the exodus of the Jews, en route from Egypt to Jerusalem, the promised land.

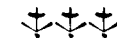
In this respect too, Dante probably owed much to the Augustinian tradition. For the representation of his attempts at purely intellectual conversion, Augustine drew upon the traditional neoplatonic motifs of the conversion to the light. At the same time, he reinterpreted those motifs in the light of Revelation. On at least one occasion, the death of Monica, his allusion to the figure of exodus is explicit: "May they [God's servants] with devout affection remember my parents in this transitory light, my brethren under Thee our Father in our Catholic Mother, and my fellow-citizens in that eternal Jerusalem which Thy pilgrim people sigheth after from their Exodus, even unto their return thither."²⁶ There may be as well an allusion to the exodus in the passage in the seventh book, which seems so important for Dante's representation: "For it is one thing, from the wooded mountain top to see the land of peace and to find no way thither." In the sixteenth century, the passage was annotated with a reference to Deut. 32:48-52, where Moses is permitted by God to see the land of Canaan from the mountain, but not to reach it: "Yet thou shalt see the land before thee; but thou shalt not go thither unto the land which I give the children of Israel."²⁷

These references are admittedly too few to enable us to demonstrate that the presence of the figure of exodus is of importance in Augustine's narrative, but if Augustine was merely allusive with respect to the figure, commentators on his work throughout the Middle Ages were explicit. Courcelle's repertory of commentaries on the "region of unlikeness" provides many citations that are suggestive for the interpretation of Dante's prologue scene. Among them are several which specifically relate Augustine's conversion to the traditional biblical figure of conversion. Richard of St. Victor will serve as an example:

The first miracle was accomplished in the exodus of Israel from Egypt (*In exitu Israel de Aegypto*), the second was in the exodus of Israel from the desert. Who will give me the power to leave behind the region of unlikeness? Who will enable me to enter the promised land, so that I may see both the flight of the sea and the turning back of the Jordan.²⁸

Richard makes clear, first of all, that Egypt is a state of mind, and, secondly, that even after leaving it, the soul must traverse a desert

region which is precisely like the "gran diserto" in which the pilgrim is blocked: "Coming forth from the darkness of Egypt, from worldly error to the more secret places of the heart, you discover nothing else but a place of terror and vast solitude. This is that desert land, arid and unpassable . . . filled with all terrible things."²⁹ In this desert place, where "all is confused, all is disturbed; where nothing is in its proper place, nothing proceeds in proper order,"³⁰ the impediments one encounters are the vices and passions (usually three-fold, according to Augustine's commentators)³¹ to which man is subject, since "vulnerati sumus ingredienti mundum"³² (we are already wounded when we enter the world).



The Wings of Ulysses (Inf. XXVI, 125)

The canto of Ulysses contains a striking instance of Dante's use of neoplatonic imagery to describe, not simply the flight of the soul to the absolute, but also the inevitable failure attendant upon any such journey when it is undertaken without the help of God. This instance of neoplatonic imagery is therefore analogous, perhaps even coordinate, to the imagery the poet uses to describe his own unsuccessful journey in the first canto.

Since Giorgio Padoan's essay of some years ago,³³ there can no longer be any doubt that Dante's Ulysses is the Ulysses of medieval tradition, whose journey was considered to have a moral significance. The knowledge which is the object of his quest is of a metaphysical, rather than navigational, order. In Dante's reading, as in the reading of the neoplatonists, the voyage was an allegory for the flight of the soul to transcendent truth; one could extend Padoan's argument to suggest that Dante's Ulysses ends up a shipwreck rather than in the arms of some paradisiac Penelope in order to indicate what Dante thought of such purely philosophical excursions. It is this dimension of meaning that gives the episode its structural importance throughout the poem, beyond the limits of the canto in which it is contained. The ancient voyager is recalled at the beginning of the *Purgatorio* and again toward the end of the *Paradiso* precisely to mark the contrast between his abortive journey and that of the pilgrim. Dante's descent into hell enables him to reach the shore which Ulysses was able only to make out in the distance, a contrast that evokes once again, as we shall see, Augustine's distinction between philosophical presumption and Christian conversion.

At one point in his famous speech, Ulysses describes his journey in terms that directly allude to the traditional flight of the soul:

e volta nostra poppa nel mattino,
de' remi facemmo ali al folle volo . . . (vv. 124-125)

And turning our stern to the morning, we made
of our oars wings for the mad flight . . .

Critics have seized on the phrase "folle volo" and have used it to characterize the daring of Ulysses' voyage. The adjective is particularly apt, as Rocco Montano has observed,³⁴ for it can reflect both Ulysses' regret for the disastrous consequences of his voyage, as well as the author's moral judgment on the entire undertaking. However, the first part of the verse is of potentially much greater significance. By itself, the word "volo" might be taken as a simple rhetorical twist, a faint suggestion at best of Platonic flights. A careful look at the preceding metaphor, however, transforms the suggestion into a certainty. When Dante has Ulysses say "dei remi facemmo ali," he is echoing a classical metaphor, the "remigium alarum" used by Virgil to describe the flight of Daedalus. The metaphor was eventually endowed with meaning in a philosophical context, a meaning which is relevant to our understanding of the entire episode.

In the sixth book of the *Aeneid*, Virgil summarizes in a few words the story of Daedalus and Icarus. He then describes the temple built by Daedalus and the votive offering made to Phoebus:

Redditus his primum terris, tibi, Phoebus, sacrauit
remigium alarum posuitque immania templa.
(*Aeneid* VI, 18-19)

Here first restored to earth, he consecrated to
you, O Phoebus, the oarage of his wings, and
built a vast temple.

It is to Pierre Courcelle that we are indebted for the history of the neoplatonic interpretation of Daedalus' "wingèd oarage."³⁵ In the article to which Padoan alludes in his essay, Courcelle shows that both the story of Ulysses and the flight of Daedalus were interpreted by neoplatonists to signify the flight of the soul: "il faut que l'âme prenne son vol pour regagner sa patrie."³⁶ St. Ambrose refers to the

myth of Daedalus to describe the liberation of the soul from matter and uses the phrase "remigium alarum," as does St. Augustine on several occasions.³⁷ I should like merely to add to Courcelle's vast documentation a passage that lies outside the scope of his study but is exactly within mine, since it occurs in the only medieval neoplatonic commentary of the *Aeneid* which Dante was likely to have known. Bernardus Silvestris simply echoed a long tradition when he identified the temple with contemplation and the "remigium alarum" with reason, but in doing so, he probably made that gloss directly accessible to Dante:

Daedalus came to the temple of Apollo, that is, to the contemplation of sublime things with the reason. And journeying with the intellect he turned his attention completely to the study of philosophy, and there he dedicated the oarage of his wings, that is, the exercise of his reason and intellect (*alarum remigium i.e. rationis et intellectus exercitium sacrauit*).³⁸

Just as Virgil's *remigium alarum* metaphorically transformed Daedalus' flight into a sea voyage, so the phrase, "de' remi facemmo ali" transformed Ulysses' voyage into a Platonic "volo." Ulysses' journey is an extended dramatization of an interior journey through what Padoan has called "le vie della sapienza"; the very oars that he used were traditional metaphors for the power of intellect.

I should like to underscore what I take to be an important implication of the phrase that Dante puts into the mouth of Ulysses. The "wingèd oarage" of tradition was usually associated with Daedalus, rather than Icarus.³⁹ In Virgil's story it was mentioned in connection with a flight that was not "folle" at all, for Daedalus, unlike his son, reached his objective. This element is what the allegory of Ulysses has in common with the allegory of Daedalus: the return of Daedalus to safety ("*Redditus his primum terris*") and the return of Homer's Ulysses to his home made those stories excellent analogues for the Platonic *regressus* of the soul to its heavenly *patria*.⁴⁰ The fact that Dante associated the "remigium alarum" of tradition with Ulysses' voyage seems to suggest that he was aware of an allegorical significance common to the two stories; yet, by describing the flight as a "folle volo," he seems deliberately to have turned the allegory against its authors. In spite of the opinion of most modern com-

mentators, he may even have known of Ulysses' return to Ithaca through several indirect sources;⁴¹ he certainly knew that the "wingèd oarage" of the soul was usually associated with the return of Daedalus. Nevertheless, it is *because* he accepts the common allegorical significance and interprets it as a Christian must that his version of the story ends in shipwreck. If Ulysses is shipwrecked and if the wings of Daedalus seem rather to recall Icarus, it is because the *regressus* that both stories came to represent is, in Dante's view, philosophical presumption that is bound to end in failure. I should like to suggest that the voyage of Dante's Ulysses exists on the same plane of reality as its counterpart, the journey of the pilgrim; that is, as a dramatic representation of the journey of the mind. It is for this reason that Dante takes it as an admonition:

Allor mi dolsi, e ora mi ridoglio
 quando drizzo la mente a ciò ch'io vidi,
 e più lo 'ngegno affreno ch'ì non soglio,
 perché non corra che virtù nol guidi. (Inf. XXVI, 19–22)

I sorrowed then, and sorrow now again, when
 I turn my mind to what I saw; and I curb my
 genius more than I am wont, lest it run where
 virtue does not guide it.

His insistence on the distinction between *ingegno* and *virtù*, between the motive power of his journey and his guide, contrasts sharply with the speech of Ulysses, in which "virtute e canoscenza" (v. 120) seem almost synonymous, the single, somewhat exterior objective of the "folle volo." Just as the ancients equated knowledge and virtue, so too Ulysses seems to equate them, making no provision in his calculations for the journey within, the personal *askesis* upon which all such attempts at transcendence must be based. The distinction between Ulysses' journey and the journey of the pilgrim is not in the objective, for both are directed toward that mountain in the southern hemisphere, but rather in how the journey is accomplished. The difference is quite literally the journey through hell, the descent *intra nos* which transforms philosophical presumption into a journey of the mind and heart to God.

For Plotinus the power of intellect was a sufficient vehicle for the flight to the truth; the great neoplatonist specifically denied the

need for any guide on such a journey. For Augustine, on the contrary, and for all Christian thinkers thereafter, the journey had to be accomplished "et per intellectum et per affectum."⁴² Such insistence on the volitive power of the soul is the constant theme of Augustine's polemic against neoplatonism in the *Confessions*. This polemic, I believe, lies at the heart of Dante's representation in the canto of Ulysses. Toward the beginning of the *Confessions*, Augustine uses the example of the prodigal son in order to illustrate his thesis that one moves toward or away from God with the will:

For darkened affections is removal from Thee. For it is not by our feet, or change of place, that men leave Thee or return unto Thee, nor did Thy younger son look out for *horses* or *chariots*, or *ships*, or *fly with visible wings*, or journey by the *motion of his limbs* that he might in a far country waste in riotous living all Thou gavest at his departure.⁴³

Again, in the passage offered earlier as a background text for understanding Dante's "piè fermo" verse, some of these images of flight reappear:

And therein [Thy Covenant] we enter not by *ships*, or *chariots* or *feet*, nor move not so far as I had come from the house to that place where we were sitting. For, not to go only, but to go *in* thither was nothing else but to will to go, but to will resolutely and thoroughly; not to turn and toss, this way and that, a maimed and half-divided will, struggling, with one part sinking as another rose.⁴⁴

Each of Augustine's neoplatonic images of flight has its counterpart in the canto of Ulysses. Ulysses describes his navigation as a wingèd flight, but to the pilgrim the sight of the Greek hero recalls a celestial chariot:

E qual colui che si vengìo con li orsi
 vide 'l carro d'Elia al dipartire,
 quando *i cavalli* al cielo erti levorsi . . . (vv. 34–36)

And as he who was avenged by the bears saw
 Elijah's chariot at its departure, when the horses
 rose erect to heaven . . .

Whatever else Dante may have intended to suggest by the somewhat gratuitous comparison, the fact remains that, like the ship of Ulysses and the wings of Daedalus, the chariot of Elijah is on a flight to the absolute. The presence of these comparisons, although stripped of all trace of Platonic banality by Dante's poetic power, nevertheless reinforces the figurative significance of Ulysses' voyage and generalizes that significance beyond the limits of one man's experience. At first glance the passages from the *Confessions* just quoted and the episode of Ulysses seem to have nothing more in common than these images of flight, schematic and allusive in Augustine, dramatic and powerful in Dante's verses. But the allusions in Augustine's words can lead us back to a complex of literary and philosophical motifs to which, I believe, the figure of Dante's Ulysses owes its origin.

As Pierre Courcelle has shown, the neoplatonic images in the Augustinian passage derive from a text of Plotinus, incorporated virtually unchanged by St. Ambrose and quoted partially above. A fuller citation of the passage reveals that Plotinus is in fact thinking of Ulysses when he urges his reader on to the journey without a guide to the heavenly *patria*:

Let us therefore flee to our dear homeland . . . But what manner of flight is this? How shall we reascend? Like Ulysses, who, they say, escaped from Circe the magician and from Calypso, that is, who refused to stay with them in spite of the pleasures of the eyes and the beauty of the senses that he found there . . . it is not with our feet that it can be accomplished . . . nor must we prepare for ourselves a team of horses or a ship . . . we must rather look with the inner eye.⁴⁵

Both St. Ambrose and St. Augustine suppressed the reference to Ulysses when they paraphrased Plotinus' exhortation. Several other passages in Augustine's work, however, suggest that Ulysses came to represent for him the archetype of the presumptuous philosopher who would reach the truth unaided.⁴⁶ One text in particular, the prologue to the *De beata vita*, seems, according to Courcelle, to refer to Ulysses in a lengthy allegory of voyage.⁴⁷ Padoan in his essay quoted from it, yet failed to refer to some of the passages which seem most relevant for understanding Dante's Ulysses. Of considerable importance for the purpose of this study is that Augustine helps us to understand the significance of shipwreck on a journey such as that undertaken by Ulysses. More important still is the fact

that he seems to read in the voyage his own philosophical experience.

Augustine begins his allegory by explaining that an unknown power has launched us on the sea of life and that each of us seeks, with more or less success, the port of philosophy: "how would we know how to get there, except by the power of some tempest, (which fools believe to be adverse) hurling us, unknowing wanderers, toward that most desired land?"⁴⁸ He then distinguishes three types of philosophers. The first never wander very far, yet find the place of tranquillity and become beacons to their fellow men. The second,

deceived by the deceptive appearance of the sea, choose to set out on the open sea and dare to wander far from their country, often forgetting it. If . . . the wind, which they deem favorable, keeps blowing from the poop, they enter proudly and rejoicing into an abyss of misery . . . What else can we wish them but . . . a violent tempest and contrary winds, to lead them in spite of their sighs and tears, to certain and solid joys?⁴⁹

Padoan observed that the element of forgetfulness in this passage seems to recall Ulysses' neglect of family and home, while the following paragraph seems more reminiscent of Aeneas.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, the hazards described in the latter, are instructive for glossing Ulysses' journey as well:

Those of the third category . . . perceive certain signs which remind them of their dear homeland . . . and, either they find their home again without wandering or delay, or more often, they lose their way in the fog or fix upon stars that sink in the sea. Again, they are sometimes held back by various seductions and miss the best time for setting sail. They wander for a long time and even risk shipwreck. It often happens to such men that some calamity, arising in the midst of their good fortune, like a tempest opposing their efforts, drives them back to the homeland of their desires and of their peace.⁵¹

There is an undeniable, although somewhat generic, resemblance between these sea-going adventures of philosophical quest and Ulysses' own story. The reference to the navigational "fix" on stars that sink beneath the waters is perhaps less generic. It is paralleled by the apparently descriptive but probably significant detail mentioned by Ulysses:

Tutte le stelle già de l'altro polo
vedea la notte, e 'l nostro tanto basso,
che non surgëa fuor del marin suolo. (vv. 127-129)

The night now saw the other pole and all its
stars, and ours so low that it did not rise from
the ocean floor.

The point is that the ship is "off course," since the pole star, upon which all mariners must fix for guidance, has disappeared beneath the ocean floor. But the most startling detail of Augustine's allegory follows the paragraph just cited, and one that Padoan omitted; it may be the clue to why Ulysses should be sailing toward a *mountain*, rather than back to Ithaca:

Now all of these men who, in some manner, are borne toward the land of happiness, have to fear and desperately to avoid a huge mountain set up before the port, creating a great danger to those entering. It shines so and is clothed with such a deceptive light that it seems to offer to those who enter a haven, promising to satisfy their longing for the land of happiness . . . For what other mountain does the reason designate as fearful to those who are entering upon or have entered philosophical study than the mountain of proud vainglory?⁵²

At this point Augustine concludes his allegorical exposition and proceeds to apply the allegory of his own life. In his youth, he had fixed his eyes on stars that sank into the ocean and therefore led him astray. The study of various philosophies kept him afloat, but the attractions of a woman and the love of honor prevented him from flying "totis velis omnibusque remis" (with full sail and all the oars) into the embrace of philosophy. Finally, a tempest that he took to be adverse (his illness), forced him to abandon the career that was leading him toward the sirens and drove his shaky and leaking boat toward the haven of tranquillity.⁵³

The prologue of the *De beata vita* is a dramatic representation of the events recounted with apologetic intent in the *Confessions*. The attempts at Plotinian ecstasy are represented in the seventh book of the *Confessions* in largely traditional philosophical terms while in the prologue to the dialogue, under the influence of a long tradition of Homeric allegoresis, autobiography takes a more literary form. There

is a similar relationship between the experience of Dante's pilgrim and that of Ulysses. For both men, the object of the journey seems to be the mountain in the southern hemisphere. Again, the pilgrim takes Ulysses' fate to be a specific admonition for himself. Ulysses dies shipwrecked before the looming mountain, but in the first canto of the poem the pilgrim seems to have survived, by pure accident, a metaphorical shipwreck of his own:

E come quei che con lena affannata,
uscito fuor del pelago a la riva,
si volge a l'acqua perigliosa e guata,
così l'animo mio, ch'ancor fuggiva,
si volse a retro a rimirar lo passo
che non lasciò già mai persona viva. (Inf. I, 22-27)

And as he who with laboring breath has escaped from the deep to the shore turns to look back on the dangerous waters, so my mind which was still fleeing turned back to gaze upon the pass that never left anyone alive.

Ulysses' experience with the "alto passo" (*Inf.* XXVI, 132) seems to be what one would expect of such a "varco folle." (*Par.* XXVII, 82-83). It is the pilgrim's survival that is gratuitous, both on the mountain of the prologue and the mountain of purgatory. In the latter instance, just before he is girded with the rush of humility, he remembers Ulysses' pride:

Venimmo poi in sul lito deserto,
che mai non vide navicar sue acque
omo, che di tornar sia poscia esperto. (*Purg.* I, 130-132)

Then we came on to the desert shore, that never saw any man navigate its waters who afterwards had experience of return.

The return is the element of the story that is given new meaning, in the Christian perspective. The mountain of philosophic pride, says Augustine, "swallows up into its depths the proud men who walk upon it and covers them over in its darkness, snatching from them that shining abode of which they had caught but a glimpse."⁵⁴ For

some that shipwreck was definitive; for others it was the prelude to a new life, "com'Altrui piacque."



At the beginning of this essay I suggested that Dante's borrowing from Augustine in the *Confessions* was not simply an isolated fact of purely historical interest but was also of some significance for the interpretation of the poem. If Dante chose to echo Augustine's attempt to reach the truth through philosophy alone, then the implication is that Dante undertook a similar attempt and also met with failure. For all of his efforts in the *Convivio* to define philosophic truth in theological terms, Dante's philosophical experience may have been as ultimately disillusioning for him as was Augustine's with the neoplatonists. Whatever that experience, we know that it was shared by Guido Cavalcanti, who seems to have remained obdurate in his philosophical presumption. In the fourth book of the *Confessions*, a deathbed conversion of a dear friend separates Augustine from one who was "of one soul with me." Although the roles are reversed, it is the same drama of conversion that seems to come between Dante and his "first friend" in the tenth canto of the *Inferno*.

The myth of Ulysses serves as an exemplar of philosophical pride and, as we have seen, an antitype of Dante's own philosophical experience. In concretely historical terms, however, Guido fulfilled the role of alter ego and antitype. Some of the words used by Augustine in his generic condemnation of the Platonists are repeated in intensely personal terms when Dante refers to his friend. In the seventh book of the *Confessions*, Augustine says that he was able to find in the teaching of the Platonists all of the prologue to the Gospel of John except for the doctrine of the Word made flesh. The philosophers "disdain to learn of Him because He is gentle and humble of heart." Similarly, in the *Inferno*, we learn that Guido "disdained" guidance for a descent into hell: "ebbe a disdegno" (*Inf.* X, 63). The past absolute tense with reference to a subject who is still alive requires us to understand "disdained" as a perfected action—disdained *to come*—rather than as some habitual attitude toward Virgil or Beatrice. In sense and in syntax, it is exactly equivalent to the refusal of the philosophers to learn from Christ's humility—*dedignantur ab eo discere*—as exemplified by His descent into hell. Like Ulysses or the pilgrim of the prologue, Guido was lost, perhaps definitively ("forse . . ."), by his philosophical presumption.

Beyond this biographical analogy, there is the more important analogy, or perhaps *homology*, of literary structure. As in all spiritual autobiographies, so in the *Confessions* and in the *Divine Comedy* there is a radical division between the protagonist and the author who tells his story. The question of the relative "sincerity" of such autobiographies is the question of how real we take that division to be. Augustine and Dante took it to be almost ontologically real, for it was their conviction that the experience of conversion, the subject matter of their respective stories, was tantamount to a death of their former selves and the beginning of a new life.

For Dante, the distance between protagonist and author is at its maximum at the beginning of the story and is gradually closed by the dialectic of poetic process until pilgrim and poet coincide at the ending of the poem, which gives a unity and a coherence to all that went before. From the outset, the poet's voice expresses the detached point of view toward which his pilgrim strives, while the journey of the pilgrim is history in the making, a tentative, problematic view constantly subject to revision, approaching certitude as a limit. It is at the last moment that the metamorphosis of the pilgrim's view of the world is completed, when he himself has become metamorphosed into the poet, capable at last of writing the story that we have read.

This metamorphosis accounts for much of the ambiguity in the characterizations of the *Inferno*. The critical uncertainties about whether Francesca is a heroine of spontaneous human love or merely a deluded medieval Emma Bovary, whether Ulysses embodies the spirit of the Renaissance or simply *mala curiositas*, whether Ugolino is a father suffering with Dostoevskian dignity or a Pisan cannibal, arise from the dialectical relationship of the pilgrim's view to that of the poet. Further, it is no accident that we generally side with the pilgrim in his human response to these great figures, against the crushing exigencies of the poet's structure. The pilgrim's view is much like our own view of history and of ourselves: partial, perhaps confused, still in the making. But the poet's view is far different, for it is global and comprehensive, the total view of a man who looks at the world, his neighborhood, and indeed himself with all the detachment of a cultural anthropologist. The process of the poem, which is to say the progress of the pilgrim, is the transformation of the problematic and humanistic into the certain and transcendent, from novelistic involvement to epic detachment, from a synchronic view of the self in a dark wood to a diachronic total view of the entire world as if it

were, to use Dante's powerful image, a humble threshing floor upon which a providential history will one day separate the wheat from the chaff.

The view from paradise is a spatial translation of what might be called a memory of universal history. The coherence of the whole poem may be grasped only with a view to its totality, a view from the ending, just as the coherence of the poet's life could be grasped only in retrospect, from the perspective of totality in death. Clearly the same may be said of universal history, whose coherence may be perceived only from the perspective of eschatology, when the evolution is finally concluded. In the linear time that is ours, such a perspective is impossible, for it implies a survival of our own death and the death of the world. For Dante, however, as for Augustine, there was a death which enabled the mind to grasp such totalities, not by virtue of linear evolution, but rather by transcendence: a death of detachment. To perceive the pattern of one's life in its totality was to see the structure or *figura* of God's redemptive act, the master-plan of all history. In the *Paradiso*, Dante describes the cognition of the blessed as he addresses Cacciaguida:

... come veggion le terrene menti
non capere in triángol due ottusi,
così vedi le cose contingenti
anzi che sieno in sé, mirando il punto
a cui tutti li tempi son presenti; (*Par.* XVII, 14-18)

even as earthly minds see that two obtuse angles can not be contained in a triangle, so you, gazing upon the Point to which all times are present, do see contingent things before they exist in themselves.

This "now" of the blessed, like a geometric *figura*, enables Cacciaguida to prophesy Dante's future without ambiguity. It provides the place to stand from which the pilgrim comes ultimately to see himself and the world around him under the aspect of eternity.

Augustine first saw the need to define that "present moment," the position from which one could see one's former self, in the totality that is present in God. He was also the first to see the metaphysical significance of what used to be referred to as "organic unity." For Augustine, as well as for Dante, a poem had to be understood as a

unity, not because it was a "literary object," but rather because its significance could be grasped only when its process was completed. This was not simply a literary fact, but rather the outward sign of a spiritual reality. A passage from the *Confessions* makes clear how the progression to greater and greater totalities can lead from a poem to universal history:

I am about to repeat a Psalm that I know. Before I begin, my expectation is extended over the totality; but when I have begun, however much of it I shall separate off into the past is extended along my memory . . . until the whole expectation be at length exhausted, when that whole action being ended, shall have passed into memory . . . the same takes place in the whole life of man, whereof all the actions of man are parts; the same holds through the whole age of the sons of men, whereof all the lives of men are parts.⁵⁵

Formal criticism helps us to see how the poem must be read in retrospect, but to see all of reality in that way requires a perspective more privileged than that of the critic. From such a perspective, the "present moment" of conversion, levels of meaning are not arbitrarily superimposed by the human mind, but are rather discovered to be exponential recurrences of the structure of God's Providence in history, life, and the whole universe. The passage from Augustine contains within it at once the essence of biblical allegory and the essence of Dante's spiritual autobiography, even to the stylistic level.

I should like to close with a verse to which I have already alluded. As he moves with the stars, Dante looks down upon "l'aiuola che *ci* fa tanto feroci" (*Par.* XXII, 151). For all the distance implied by the poetic fiction, the pronoun "*ci*" strains to have it both ways: to claim the perspective of eternity without a surrender of the poet's place in time. The synthesis of eternity and time is the goal of the entire journey: the vision of the Incarnation. At the end of the poem, the dramatic convergence of pilgrim and poet is matched by the conceptual convergence of humanity and the divine.

Augustine's autobiography, like Sartre's, is primarily concerned with words, but the ending of Christian autobiography is silence:

For that voice passed by and passed away, began and ended; the syllables sounded and passed away, the second after the first, the third after the second, and so forth in order, until the last

after the rest, and silence after the last. . . . And these Thy words, created for a time, the outward ear reported to the intelligent soul, whose inward ear lay listening to Thy Eternal Word.⁵⁶

So the literary unity of Dante's poem is no formal artifact, but is rather the testament of a spiritual journey from a region of unlikeness to likeness, from the "selva oscura" to "la nostra effige."



2. The Firm Foot on a Journey Without a Guide

THE JOURNEY OF THE *Divine Comedy* begins with a conversion. The pilgrim "comes to" after somehow having lost his way in a dark wood. He looks up from that tangle and sees the rays of the sun striking upon a mountain-top, and knows that he must attain the summit. From that moment, the problem is no longer where to go, but rather how to get there, and the problem proves to be insoluble. Try as he may, he cannot achieve the goal which is the beginning and the cause of all joy, for three formidable beasts drive him back into the wood from which he has come, and he retreats, no longer able to help himself, exhausted, and very nearly defeated.

This attempted journey, the "corto andare" which the pilgrim never completes, contrasts with that longer journey, the circuitous route through hell and purgatory to the same objective. In recent years, we have come to understand more and more of the meaning of Dante's itinerary to God.¹ It is in the light of that meaning that I will seek to understand the pilgrim's initial frustration and suggest a new reading for a traditionally obscure line. The allegory of this all-important scene seems clear when we see the prologue in the poem and the poem in the tradition.

The type of frustration felt by the pilgrim arises not from a defect of the mind, but rather from an incapacity of the will. It is not enough to know what must be done; one must also know how to do it. Ever since the Socratic equating of knowledge with virtue, moralists have objected that these are not the same. To say that



Dante
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JOHN FRECCERO
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