

## Remembering Joseph Anthony Mazzeo

Joseph Anthony Mazzeo, who died on July 6, 1998, is best known to the readers of *Dante Studies* as the author of two volumes on Dante. Published back to back in 1958 and 1960, these books—*Structure and Thought in the 'Paradiso'* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1958) and *Medieval Cultural Tradition in Dante's 'Comedy'* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1960)—bear witness to a white-hot period of meditation on Dante and his cultural matrix that took place in the 1950s, in Mazzeo's scholarly youth. (He graduated from Columbia College in 1946, received his Ph.D., also from Columbia in 1950; the chapters of the Dante books were previously published as essays that appeared between 1952 and 1959.) The concentration and intensity of this meditation, remarkable in any career, is anomalous in Mazzeo's, who was a scholar characterized by intellectual breadth, indeed by a kind of Ulyssean restlessness that kept him from remaining too long on any one period or topic. Clearly, the intellectual engagement that produced these volumes was considerable. It is an engagement one feels while reading them, and that also accounts for their durability (to which their subsequent reprinting by Greenwood Press further attests).

Mazzeo was an intellectual historian, with an interest in large-scale cultural and philosophical problems; his Dante is painted with broad but rigorous brushstrokes. In the long debate over Dante's philosophical affiliations, conceived in terms that cast the poet as either primarily Thomistic or primarily Neoplatonic, Mazzeo takes a measured but strong stand for his Neoplatonism, writing in the Preface to *Structure and Thought in the 'Paradiso'* that “The *Paradiso* as a work of the imagination is basically artic-

ulated in terms of medieval neoplatonic doctrines of light and love” and that “Dante’s view of the meaning of love and beauty in human experience” is “strikingly like Plato’s” (vii-viii). And, in fact, in chapters on “Dante and the Phaedrus Tradition of Poetic Inspiration,” “Dante’s Conception of Poetic Expression,” “Dante’s Conception of Love and Beauty,” “Dante and the Pauline Modes of Vision,” “Plato’s ‘Eros’ and Dante’s ‘Amore’,” and “Dante’s Sun Symbolism and the Visions of the Blessed,” Mazzeo delineates a Neoplatonic—if not Platonic—paradise. Mazzeo takes on these enormous topics with characteristic verve, putting his stamp—especially in “Dante and the Pauline Modes of Vision” and “Plato’s ‘Eros’ and Dante’s ‘Amore’”—on issues that we will continue to debate as long as Dante is discussed.

Rereading Mazzeo now, what strikes one is the freshness and originality—the passion—of his thinking about Dante. While he was stimulated by other scholars, and particularly by Bruno Nardi, it is clear that the positions he takes are the fruit of his personal “lungo studio” of certain authors (Plato, Dante, Donne), and that while he refines his beliefs in the light of previous scholarship, he does not alter them, because they are deeply held convictions—as much about life, one feels while reading him, as about texts. Mazzeo’s scholarship is felt, and as a result it is original, as is apparent from his choices: his choice of *Paradiso*, his choice of Plato, his choice of the guiding themes to which he always returns—love, beauty, light. The chapter titles of *Medieval Cultural Tradition in Dante’s ‘Comedy’* bear witness to those ongoing interests: “The Medieval Concept of Hierarchy,” “The Light-Metaphysics Tradition,” “Light Metaphysics in the Works of Dante,” “The Analogy of Creation in Dante,” “Dante and Epicurus: The Making of a Type,” and the Appendix, an uncharacteristic and important intervention on a particular passage, “The ‘Sirens’ of *Purgatorio* xxxi, 45.” Mazzeo’s passionate reading of Dante is not, however, doctrinaire or heavy handed. Thus, we find him, in *Medieval Cultural Tradition in Dante’s ‘Comedy’*, nuancing his presentation of Dante’s affiliations: “The literature on the degree and kind of Dante’s Neoplatonism tends to push him too far into either the Thomistic or Neoplatonic camp. His universe is startlingly Neoplatonic, but also colored by Aristotelianism and governed by the doctrines of Christian theism” (112). And it is still today refreshing to find a scholar writing that “I doubt that it is ‘medieval’ to deny all worth to the damned. In fact, it seems like the Manichean heresy to do so. . . . Gravest among these [risks] is the simplification of

the moral vision of the medieval period in order to imply that the men of that time were insensitive to moral paradox, to the antinomies present in any life of choice” (8).

By the time I knew Joseph Mazzeo at Columbia in the mid-seventies, his intense Dante meditation was long behind him, but not his passion. One studied other things with him then, but Dante was a point on his intellectual compass to which—in class as in conversation—he would keep returning. He was the only teacher I knew who asked his class who among them felt nostalgia for the past. Talking with him during his office hours in Philosophy Hall was exhilarating, for whatever it was we talked about that day—the Battle of the Bulge, Italian domestic life, religious vocation—his questing, roving, Ulyssean spirit was present. This presence, let me make clear, had nothing to do with conventional “closeness”; he was, in my experience, rather austere, a distant man but very present, to use a paradox that might have come from his beloved Dionysius. When I think of him now, not a tall man, and somewhat rounded, but with long tapered elegant fingers that he would tap on the desk as he spoke, it seems appropriate to say that he brought a kind of mystic’s intensity to teaching and scholarship, but that what he wrote of Dante was true also of him: “Dante must have remained fascinated to the end by the very diversity of experience that the mystic ignores” (*Medieval Cultural Tradition in Dante’s ‘Comedy’*, 8).

Teodolinda Barolini  
Columbia University  
New York, New York



This is going to be hard. On the one hand, I can hear Joe admonishing me not to be sloppily sentimental; on the other hand, I can also hear him asking tartly why I could not find at least one tear to shed for him. Actually I have already shed more than one tear since that gloomy morning of July 6 when I heard of his death. As is my wont since retirement, I re-read and study a different literary text—one of the big ones—each summer. This past summer it was time for Dante again, so I brought with me to the country the text of the *Comedy* and a batch of critical studies, including Joe’s two books on Dante’s medieval cultural context and the

*Paradiso*. Having read the first of these, I turned to the second and finished it also, but as a merciless fate would have it, on the morning of July 6. I turned to my wife Julia as I closed the book and remarked on what a wonderful read it had been—"Joe," I said, "is really good at this stuff." Shortly thereafter, the phone rang.

Joe played several roles in my life. Thanks to his precociousness and my tardiness, I first met him as a mentor and reader of my dissertation, which was inspired by his work on wit theory; soon after I knew him as a colleague, and then, most happily, as a dear friend. When I think of being with Joe I think of his endless and delicious talk, sometimes in English and sometimes in Italian, but always wittily learned and insightful. Joe was the department's reigning intellectual at that time, and frankly he just bowled me over: it seemed that he knew everything about all the things that interested me, from the Renaissance to the contemporary world of academic and national mores and manners. And of course you could also go to him and have questions answered about the classical tradition, the Church Fathers, the Bible, Scholastic Theology—you name it. And then there was the sciences—he was the only colleague I knew in the Humanities (and have ever known since) who subscribed to and actually read *The Scientific American* (I think that was what it was called—I saw it on his desk).

We didn't always agree. He greatly admired Machiavelli, for example, and regarded my distaste for him as a sign of weakness—"You're just too nice a guy," he opined. It was also a kind of ethnic betrayal, since Machiavelli's anti-clericalism he regarded as an essential Italian trait, imbibed with mother's milk. We also talked endlessly about religion, and about the Church into which we both had been born and which we had come to believe was not worthy of our membership. And inevitably too we wasted some precious time on academic politics, which he loathed.

In the end, though, the greatest bond between us was the ethnic thing. He loved to be called Peppino and to call me Giacomino; he delighted in two-to-three hour lunches at local Italian restaurants in the Chelsea district of Manhattan. He was particularly tickled by their titles—one of them, for instance, calling itself Napoli Centro (Naples Central) even though it was on Seventh Avenue and Nineteenth Street! A quintessential New Yorker, he loved to stroll the Chelsea district, cane in hand, as though he was its *sindaco* (or mayor), as I called him. As for his common touch, you should have heard him converse and commiserate with the shopkeepers and waiters and newsstand owners—some of whom called

him “dottore” or “professore”—as he exchanged with them utter commonplaces about life, its pleasures and sorrows: “sì, la vita è dura!” (life is hard!). He told me he enjoyed talking to these folk about ordinary stuff more than talking to some of his colleagues about weightier matters, a feeling we have all shared at times, I suspect.

I guess what I have been trying to say is that in many ways Joe Mazzeo was my Virgil. And so I return where I began, and to Dante’s *Comedy*. When I heard of Joe’s passing on that July morning I thought of these lines from the thirtieth canto of the *Purgatorio*, when Dante, seeing Beatrice and turning to Virgil, discovers that he has disappeared:

Ma Virgilio n’avea lasciati scemi  
di sé, Virgilio dolcissimo patre,  
Virgilio a cui per mia salute die’mi  
né quantunque perdeo l’antica matre,  
valse a le guance nette di rugiada  
che, lagrimando, non tornasser atre.

But Virgil had left us bereft of himself, Virgil sweetest  
father, Virgil to whom I gave myself for my salvation;  
nor did all that our ancient mother lost keep my dew-  
washed cheeks from turning dark again with tears.

Ciao, Peppino!

James V. Mirollo  
*Columbia University*  
*New York, New York*

(Remarks given at the memorial service for Joseph A. Mazzeo on October 8, 1998)

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I took Joe Mazzeo’s Dante course in the fall of my senior year at Cornell at the recommendation of a friend. It was an extraordinary course, taught with rare passion and intellectual energy. No one had ever made ideas seem so exciting. He spoke about Plato and Neoplatonism, theology, poetry, and a whole range of subjects as he explicated the *Comedy*. Like many English majors I was captivated by the cultural richness of Dante

and by the beauty of Italian which I was hearing virtually for the first time when Joe read us *stilnovo* lyrics and parts of the *Commedia*. I memorized *Perch'io non spero di tornar* before I knew any Italian just because I loved the sound of it. And after reading *Inferno* v, I was hooked. Joe's book on the *Paradiso* had just come out, and his lectures on that *cantica* were especially stimulating. (I've always been grateful that both of my teachers loved the *Paradiso* and opened its richness to me.) I wrote my final paper on the last cantos of the *Paradiso*, and Joe was very proud when it won the Dante Society Prize that year.

When I finally got over my shyness and spoke with Joe, he urged me to go to Italy and learn Italian. I had never been out of New York State, but after graduation I did get on a prop-jet and set out for a summer in Florence. Joe was there on a Guggenheim and gave me a tour of his favorite places. (I also met Charles Davis on this fateful trip.) After three months in Florence I went to Cambridge where I was scheduled to begin work on a Ph.D. in English. I had decided to go to Harvard because Joe told me that he might end up there as Singleton's replacement. In the fall of my first semester he came to Harvard to lecture; it was a tense time and didn't work out as he had hoped. During that visit he spoke of my working on Dante as something I was fated to do, paraphrasing *Vita nuova* xiv to say that I had set foot on a path from which there was no turning back. It took me a long time to end up on that path, but I always knew that Joe had set me in that direction.

For several years in the sixties I would meet Joe annually in New York. I usually met him at his office at Columbia, and then we would go to the Café Madison on 69th and Madison where we drank Manhattans and talked about Dante, Plato, Montaigne, Greece, astronomy, and whatever else Joe was currently fascinated by. These were heady, inspiring conversations; they came to an end when Joe announced one year that he had nothing more to teach. The next time (and the last time) we talked was in January of 1984 when I was going to Cornell for a semester to teach the course he had taught me.

Joe was a very generous, but a very private person. I regret having lost touch with him and not knowing anything about his later years. But I am sure that he continued to be an intellectually curious, passionate, and kind presence wherever he was.

Rachel Jacoff  
Wellesley College  
Wellesley, Massachusetts



Joseph A. Mazzeo was above all a consummate teacher. I think of him as teaching continually, in lecture and seminars rooms, of course, and almost every other place he went. He believed that everyone could, and should, understand something of Dante, Augustine, Plato. I met Joe after I had completed my dissertation and, luckily, just as I was embarking on studies of medieval women mystics. Joe had a huge intellectual map, and when I had thought my way into a couple of culs-de-sac, he could usually tell me whether I might find a path between them or I should retrace my steps.

Joe listened as intently as he lectured, probably because he respected his students so much. Many of his graduate students have recalled his ability to connect an idea voiced by one student with an apparently unrelated comment by a classmate. Also, he had mastered the art of responding to students' papers: he said just enough to reorient the student, but never so much that he overwhelmed him or her with suggestions and corrections.

I had the good fortune of staying in touch with him after he retired from Columbia's Department of English and Comparative Literature. He then turned his full attention toward learning. He taught himself to read Egyptian hieroglyphs and Hebrew; he translated poetry from several languages; he wrote essays on culture, technology, and education; and he continued to broaden his map, extending it farther geographically and temporally.

As his work on Dante reveals, he was ever fascinated by ideas about the afterlife. Toward the end of his life he began working on a book on what he called "the transcendental self," the self he found promised by Colossians 3:3: "your life is hidden with Christ in God." He considered Dante's Statius to be the most fully realized literary representation of a transcendental self. As Joe interpreted him, Statius retained the fruit of his life experience, his individuality, but was freed from the guilt of that experience. I can easily imagine Joe in the scene of *Purgatorio* xxxiii, conversing with Dante and Statius, guided by Matilda toward the revivifying waters of Eünoè.

Carol Slade  
*Columbia University*  
*New York, New York*