Canto XXXI: The Central Pit of Malebolge

The Giants: Nimrod, Ephialtes and Briareus, Tityos and Typhon, and Antaeus

Giants are sons of earth, embodiments of elemental forces unbalanced by love, desire without restraint, and without acknowledgement of moral and theological law. A son of the earth, Antaeus grows stronger each time he touches it. He did not join in the revolt against the gods, so he is unchained. Dante is afraid of the giants, saying “for where the instrument of intelligence/ is added to brute power and evil will,/ mankind is powerless in its own defense (Dante XXXI: 54-57)

Literal /Historical-Mythical: Nimrod (First King of Babylon who built the Tower of Babel) “through whose evil mankind no longer speaks a common tongue” (Dante XXXI:77-78). He is punished by his own tongue being unable to speak sensibly and by the confusion of his own understanding. “Augustine had shown Nimrod as the giant who instigated the building of the tower of Babel, [and] Dante accepts this…. [In his Latin work, De vulgari eloquentia, Dante] “argues that language was given to man alone, because only to him—not to angels or animals—it was necessary” (Pesaresi 409).

Moral/Psychological: The Giants preview Freud’s theory of the id, the uncontrolled, wild and crazy desire within. What the giants want is to be free. They are the guardians of Cocytus, the depth below them. Dante is having trouble seeing the Giants clearly. Pesaresi says “The visual delusions of Dante the pilgrim who, at the embankment past the tenth bolgia, mistakes the giants for towers add a sinister but not fearsome ambivalence to the whole episode. The delusory image of the towers lingers as a [motif] throughout the canto… The pilgrim’s grasp of reality is shaken…. Misconception and misrepresentation seem to be the fate of one who is about to confront the utmost horror just before he escapes from it…. The monsters he encounters are, in a certain sense, towers. They are as lifeless and harmless as immobile shadows…. Dante demythologizes the giants to tame them. Huge, humanlike beings, they are devoid of all the fabulous attributes of mythical tradition. Dante is thus preparing a background for Lucifer, the rebel par excellence, who defied not the pagan deities but the true God and nevertheless appears more grotesque and undignified than the giants themselves, outstripped as he is even of the grim majesty of a tower seen in murky air” (Pesaresi 407).

Spiritual

In the center of Cocytus, Dante’s Satan seems an anticlimax. One critic suggests that this is deliberate. According to Massimo Mandolini Pesaresi, in Canto XXXI, the description of the Giants prepares the reader for Ptolomea and the description of Satan. The Giants, “frightening and comic, huge and stupid, deafening and speechless…. still preserve a [sort of] undiminished… grandeur. They are impotent and brutish creatures; their arcane, towering shadows in the misty plain haunt [the reader’s] memory.” When Dante first saw the Giants he thought they were towers. In the dim twilight and silence, Dante is confused; the whole scene is ambiguous, fantastic and melancholy. The Giants’ ambivalence mirrors the ambivalence of evil as depicted in the last cantos.
Pesaresi, writes “Evil, if we are to overcome it, must be deprived of its allure and appear devoid of any seductive or majestic power: Lucifer must therefore become a ludicrous monster, which seems to come out of a child’s nightmare of hairy and horned beasts. And yet such evil can damn our souls for ever. Dante’s insight into the nature of sin (which we call weakness or error, or confusion) bears on this fundamental duplicity” (Pesaresi 407).

Works Cited

