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Waking to find himself shipwrecked on a strange shore before a dark wood, the pilgrim of the Divine Comedy realizes he must set his sights higher and guide his ship to a radically different port. Starting on the sand of that very shore with Dante, John Freccero begins retracing the famous voyage recounted by the poet nearly 700 years ago. Freccero follows pilgrim and poet through the Comedy and then beyond, inviting readers both uninitiated and accomplished to join him in navigating this complex medieval masterpiece and its influence on later literature. Perfectly impenetrable in its poetry and unabashedly ambitious in its content, the Divine Comedy is the cosmos collapsed on itself, heavy with dense matter and impossible to expand. Yet Dante's great triumph is seen in the tiny, subtle fragments that make up the seamless whole, pieces that the poet painstakingly sewed together to form a work that insinuates itself into the reader and inspires the work of the next author. Freccero magnifies the most infinitesimal elements of that intricate construction to identify self-similar parts, revealing the full breadth of the great poem. Using this same technique, Freccero then turns to later giants of literature—Petrarch, Machiavelli, Donne, Joyce, and Svevo—demonstrating how these authors absorbed these smallest parts and reproduced Dante in their own work. In the process, he confronts questions of faith, friendship, gender, politics, poetry, and sexuality, so that traveling with Freccero, the reader will both cross unknown territory and reimagine familiar faces, swimming always in Dante's wake.
