

stores to Boccaccio the dignity of being a serious classicist, not merely a decorative set-designer whose enthusiasm for the ancient world outran his expertise. It also reinstates Boccaccio in the pantheon of Christian ethicists, though how many Boccaccio scholars and students will be happy to see him there is open to question. Finally, it recuperates for serious scholarship a portion of Boccaccio's *oeuvre* which has endured more than its fair share of dismissive writing. If I have reservations about the form and content of McGregor's book, I would still by no means dismiss its usefulness as a close reading of these early texts.

Regina Psaki  
University of Oregon

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MARÍA ROSA MENOCAL, *Writing in Dante's Cult of Truth From Borges to Boccaccio*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1991. Pp. 216. ISBN 0-8223-1104-6 (0-8223-1117-8 paper). \$37.00 (16.95 paper).

It is one of the singular ironies of literary historiography that to be a "medievalist" is virtually synonymous with philological and historicist rigor in scholarship, whether or not the history then recounted is old or "new," static or dynamic (see, for example, Nichols, Patterson, "On the Margin," and Brownlee, *et al.*). The simpler part of the irony is that medieval scholars typically must exercise their historicist methods on a relatively small and fragmentary body of factual evidence – though this difficulty, of course, can be used to explain why the energetic recovery/re-creation of

context is so apparently necessary compared to later eras when evidence is abundant and contextual knowledge can, as it were, be taken for granted (even if that apparent accessibility is in fundamental ways quite illusory).

More poignant, in any case, is the contrast between the vaunted historicism of modern medievalists and the typically "transhistorical" or "ahistorical" perspectives of the texts they study (though the case for a "historicist" Middle Ages has recently been made: see Patterson, *Negotiating the Past* and "On the Margin"). To put it schematically, the values and practices of the dominant contemporary medievalist scholarship are directly descended from an early modern humanist movement which arose in polemical opposition to what its advocates already took to be the ahistorical procedures of their medieval predecessors, which they countered by developing the instruments of historical philology.

The operative contrast between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, most would now argue, is not between ignoring the classical past and embracing it, but rather between two modes of reading that past: one, the medieval, which projects the interests of the present moment (and above all of Christian ethics and theology) into prior texts, on the typological model of New Testament rereadings of the Hebrew Bible; another, the humanist, which attempts to acknowledge the specificity and difference of the past, tracing its relation to the present in linear, causal, and evolutionary terms rather than those of circular repetition or the "synchronic" order of time seen *sub specie aeternitatis*. And it would be hard to deny the special irony of humanism's most diligent heirs bringing to bear the full power of a method dedicated to respect for historical contingency and difference on the elucidation of a period which frequently did its level best to deny and/or repress the contingent in favor of the absolute.

Not that this opposition should itself be taken as absolute or as fully descriptive of the differences between one historical period and another (see Ascoli, "Petrarch's Middle Age"). In the best humanist tradition, for example, Auerbach argued that Dante's dramatization of the Christian transcendence of history in the *Commedia* is also what makes it possible to represent individual experience in its historical specificity and significance (cf. Ascoli, "Neminem ante nos"). To put it even more generally, in both medieval and Renaissance literary historiography, despite the clear differences in emphasis between the dominant intellectual cultures in the two periods, a tension subsists between the "synchronic" discovery of present meanings in

past texts – one which puts those texts directly to use for the needs and interests of contemporary readers – and the “diachronic” acknowledgement of textual and historical specificity and difference – one which emphasizes the distance of the text, its author, and its culture – from the world of its modern readers (see Zumthor 32).

It is within this complex problematic of historicist vs. anachronistic reading, especially of literature, that the provocative new study by María Rosa Menocal, *Writing in Dante's Cult of Truth: From Borges to Boccaccio*, must be seen. Menocal's polemical engagement with a diachronic historicism is double. She first attacks the historicist reading of Dante's “Cult of Truth” in the terms of medieval theology (synecdochally Singletonian), opting instead to read him, and particularly the *Vita nuova*, as a sheerly metapoetic narrative, whose focal point is the conversion from one mode of poetry (the “self-referential,” aestheticizing mode of the love lyric) to another (one which claims a “kabbalistic” access to larger, ontological Truth). In doing this, she argues, she focuses on what in Dante's text has immediate meaning for post-medieval readers, above all for our own time (15-16), and in this she joins the swelling chorus of voices that have recently challenged, in a variety of ways, the hegemony of a theologically oriented “Dantology” (see, for example, Harrison; Barolini, “Detheologizing Dante”). In the process, one could argue, she is exchanging the respectful, “Renaissance” reading of medieval texts for a more “medieval” mode of reading – although in fact her key critical concepts of “Kabbala” and “synchronicity” are more directly traceable, respectively, to Jewish mysticism mediated by Harold Bloom and to Carl Jung.

Her second assault on traditional literary historiography takes the form of a deliberate refusal to write the history of literary responses to Dante in a linear chronological form – arguing instead that the reader's experience of texts is neither linear or chronological. Rather, our responses are determined by the co-presence in memory of multiple literary experiences which we order according to any one of a number of logics – virtually none of them temporally sequential (3). Hence her polemically anti-chronological title (“From Borges to Boccaccio”), hence her insistence on a “synchronic” typology of literary readings of Dante that, apparently, has no essential relation to specific times and places (Dante's most “modern” reader, it would seem, is Boccaccio; Borges' twentieth-century reading of Dante is fundamentally indistinguishable from Petrarch's fourteenth-century gloss;

Pellico's apparent links to the nationalist politics of Risorgimento are illusory).

The book in fact unfolds as a series of readerly responses to Dante which then constitute an elegantly suggestive typology of modes of constructing "from the inside" a literary historical relationship to one's most significant predecessors. In this sense her work invites comparison, again, with Bloom, and with Thomas M. Greene's very differently articulated typology of imitative stances in *The Light in Troy*. Although the individual readings are often handled dexterously and have a certain intrinsic interest, they do not, on the whole, claim either exhaustiveness or great originality for themselves – typically deferring to the authority of a privileged critic or critics. Their value, instead, derives from the broad, comparative range of texts treated and, especially, from the way in which Menocal has systematically juxtaposed them to make her overarching points about the "synchronous" and "kabbalistic" nature of poetry and of literary history.

The first chapter, "Synchronicity," offers the image of a Dantean "poetics of truth," evolved in the course of the *Vita nuova*, with which we will see the other authors engaging (although, in fact, the responses of the later writers are all to the *Commedia*). But it also constitutes the first instance of "rereading," since the *Vita Nuova*, in Menocal's account, narrates Dante's conversion from a juvenile, post-Provençal poetics of hermetic, self-referential lyric (identified with Dante's "primo amico," Cavalcanti) to the mature stance, which will form the basis of the *Commedia*'s enterprise and which claims access to absolute, transhistorical truth. Though the thematic focus of the chapter is on the "synchronicity" of poetic truth, Menocal's procedure actually suggests something slightly different – namely the classic intersection of diachrony and synchrony in the narrative of conversion – the story, dilated in time, of a passage from one mode of being, and in this case, one mode of writing, to another, which, however, results in the acquisition of a transcendent interpretive perspective (a "view from the ending" in John Freccero's phrase [26]) which ostensibly places the protagonist/author beyond change and outside of history.

The second chapter is focused on the nineteenth-century Italian author, Silvio Pellico, whose now little-read *Le mie prigioni*, the story of his incarceration for participation in pre-Risorgimento politics of Italian unification, points to the failure of a "faithful" attempt to duplicate Dante's poetic transcendence of history. The chapter is especially appealing because it (re-)in-

introduces the reader to a truly marginal literary figure (the only such treated in the book), and thus figures the detours and byways that bind the canon and its margins. Pellico, in Menocal's suggestive reading, is, far from writing as a Risorgimento apologist, representing his spiritual turn away from the political interests that led to his incarceration. The special irony of Pellico's attempt is that he enjoyed great popularity for a very short time, leaving virtually no subsequent trace in "official" literary history, certainly not outside of Italy itself. The focal point of the chapter is Pellico's evocation and failed duplication of the Francesca episode from *Inferno* 5. This slavish mode of literary repetition Menocal aptly describes, with a metaphor derived from Pellico's "hellish" incarceration, as "bondage," implying, not unexpectedly, that it leads directly into obscurity.

The third chapter is entitled "Faint Praise and Proper Criticism" and examines the responses of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot to Dante – both in the way that they each echo and appropriate him directly and in their poetic relationship with each other, which Eliot deliberately compared to that of Dante (his own preferred model) and Arnaut Daniel (Pound's). Menocal's point is that Dante's apparent celebration of Arnaut in *Purgatorio* 26, where he is referred to by Dante's vernacular "father figure," Guinizelli, as the "miglior fabbro del parlar materno" ("the better maker of the mother tongue"), in fact "damns," or at least "purges," its object with faint praise, in as much as the concept of poetry as a *techne* or craft falls far short of the poetics of inspired truth-telling announced in the *Vita Nuova*, not to mention *Purgatorio* 24. By the same token, we are asked to believe that Eliot's acknowledgment of Pound's decisive editing of *The Waste Land*, expressed through the famous transfer of the Dantean epithet from Arnaut to Ezra, is as much dismissive and limiting as it is sincerely grateful.

A more fully philological and historicist exploration of the implications of the word "fabbro," on which "so much depends" for Menocal, might well have probed its relation to the classical topos of the "poet as maker," and quite possibly as well to God as "divine maker" (153), as it might also have shown greater appreciation of the emphasis which Dante puts here and elsewhere on the poetic "making" and perfecting of the "mother tongue" (*Convivio* I.xiii.6-7, IV.vi.3-4; *De vulgari eloquentia* II.viii; see Ascoli, "Vowels" and "Petrarch's Middle Age"). Nonetheless, this chapter is quite elegant in its illustration of a fundamental point concerning literary history: the way in which a later poet will construct, or rather "fabricate," a genea-

logical relationship with an earlier to suit his own purposes – and how this phenomenon transcends specific historical time and place, being equally suited to a fourteenth-century Florentine exile and to a twentieth-century American expatriate.

The fourth designated form of response is that of the studied “blindness” of the epigone to the poetic master, which Menocal sees at work equally in Petrarch’s well-known refusal to admit either envy of or indebtedness to his imposing precursor in a letter to Boccaccio, and in Borges’ curious, anti-Dantean, story of “Beatriz,” the dead beloved who eludes her devotee’s attempts to recover her, and the “Aleph,” the universal vision which one “Daneri” tries vainly to capture in a single, inclusive epic poem. Menocal argues that by both denying and obviously evoking Dante’s “total poem,” “both Petrarch and Borges look Vision and the possibilities of writing transcendent Truths in the face and turn away – perhaps, finally, because it could only be done by Dante, it had been done by Dante and thus could not possibly be redone” (168). The alternative then, as critics have already suggested in various ways (Bernardo; Contini), is Petrarch, whose lyric poetry returns us to a moment before the conversion of the *Vita Nuova*, and invites, even demands, the kind of “faithful” imitation that is impossible for would-be epigones of Dante.

In an epilogue, then, Menocal circles back “from Borges to Boccaccio,” and posits what is clearly the preferred form of response to Dante, one which merges, in fact, with her own approach to him: a “liberation” through “doubt,” poised against the “bondage” to which most Dantean readers, not Pellico alone, have felt subjected, precisely by the overt demand that they believe in the absolute Truth of his poem. The chapter takes as its focus the much-analyzed subtitle of the *Decameron* (“Cognominato Principe Galeotto”) with its obviously ironic references to Francesca’s sins of reading in *Inferno* 5. As the author herself notes, “It is a risky and potentially boring enterprise to go where virtually everyone has gone before” (184), and yet for all its own openly acknowledged indebtedness (Mazzotta, *The World at Play*; Durling, “Boccaccio on Interpretation”), the chapter provides a satisfying and even “uplifting” conclusion to the book. It does so by positing a mode, even an ethics, of reading which at once acknowledges the immensity of Dante’s achievement without succumbing to it – one which permits the coincidence of bondage and freedom, blindness and insight, Truth and contingency, doubt and belief. In short, it offers a mode of reading Dante in

close harmony with the predominant ethos of late twentieth-century American literary culture.

Menocal's double disruption of the historicist reading of Dante clearly has salutary effects: (1) it insists, along with numerous contemporary critics, that we understand literary history "from the inside," from the perspective of literary texts reacting to and rewriting their precursors; (2) it complicates our sense of what it means to read "historically," to the point of questioning whether it is really possible at all; and (3) it suggests some of the ways in which we can speak of a literary "synchronicity" which permits the transcendence of temporal and cultural difference and allows past and present to communicate in productive ways. Nonetheless, there are significant problems that haunt her reading, leaving the problematic relationship between kabbalistic synchrony and historicist diachrony as unsettled as ever.

To begin with, her own apparently dehistoricizing invocation of a non-specific, ecumenical "Truth," intimately connected with the immanence of poetic creation, which authors as diverse as Dante, Pellico, and Eliot aspire to communicate, certainly has its own historically locatable specificity. It might be seen, for example, as related to Romantic notions of the immanently expressive poetic symbol, to the Jungian "psychologization" of the materials of cosmic myth, to the Heideggerian phenomenology in which Being shines through beings (as in Robert Harrison's reading of the *Vita nuova*, which she cites approvingly), rather than manifesting itself directly, incarnationally for example. In other words, it might be seen as congruent with the modern and/or modernist appropriation and transformation of classical metaphysics. What is missing, by contrast, is the acknowledgment that for Dante "Truth" has a specificity, as well as a very particular relationship to poetic authorship, and that to deny those particularities would, for him, be a radical falsification. For instance, when she argues that Dante does what "all authors, at all times" have tried to do (17), she passes over the fact that the difficulty and hence the grandeur of Dante's struggle for identity in the *Vita Nuova* is precisely with very definite, and to us quite alien, medieval notions of what an "auctor" is – including the fact that poetry and theology are not necessarily congruent, and that this person writing in the nascent Italian vernacular at this time in this place has the slimmest of claims to authority (cf. Ascoli, "Neminem ante nos"). The same difficulty surfaces in her dismissive treatment of the "boring" scholastic *divisioni* which are both



structurally and historically the most direct links in the book to a perennial, platonizing, metaphysics of Truth (Durling and Martinez; Stillinger).

Another version of this difficulty emerges in Menocal's direct answer to possible charges of "anachronism" which might be leveled against her reading of Boccaccio's reading of Dante. She notes, persuasively enough, the perennial tension between fundamentalist, absolutist accounts of truth, on the one hand, and, on the other, a belief which allows room for skepticism and doubt – first of all in its awareness of the dangers inherent in all human claims to have access to transcendent Truth (195). This is not, however, the most basic issue. One might assent, with some qualification, to the transhistorical quality of the opposition she signals, and still argue that it can and should be understood as much as possible in the specific terms and the specific historical context in which it is produced – that actually the "Boccaccian" position, which in this sense is also Petrarchan (the proto-humanist Petrarch with "one foot in the [historicist] Renaissance"), would precisely argue that a humble and tolerant skepticism would always defer to the uncertainties of contingency and of the historical moment. Mazzotta and Durling, whose interpretations of Boccaccio Menocal acknowledges as the strongest influences on her own final "meta-interpretive" look at the relation of Dantean and Boccaccian theories of reading, both arrive at their relatively "modern" conclusions by way of a historicist, and especially philological, submission to the language of the interpreted text (Durling, "Boccaccio on Interpretation"; Mazzotta, *The World at Play*). In their different ways, they produce meaning in the clash between diachrony and synchrony, both at the level of noting the text's participation in and resistance to the historical flow, and at that of exploiting the tension between a desire to reproduce the otherness and difference of the past and a desire to find in that past meanings and problems that bear upon the present. Their example suggests, in other words, that while Menocal's approach may make Dante more apparently "accessible" to us, more "like" us, another approach would be to recognize that we are "like" Dante, above all, in the ways that we and our literature both are "enmeshed" in the specifics of our own time and place while simultaneously standing outside of it.

Finally, it may be argued that the concept of "synchronicity," which is ostensibly the remedy to an overbearing, avowedly historicist medievalism – and thus to the totalitarian, transcendent claims that Dante makes for his text – simply shifts the terms, rather than addressing the basic problem. In



other words, it is hard to see how much of a dent has really been made in "Dantology," inasmuch as Dante remains the fixed and dominant center of this book and a constant point of reference for each of the authors studied in it. He is the incomparable and indefatigable Poet (I capitalize advisedly) who has shaped virtually everything of value that has followed him. And in this the temporal scrambling of Borges and Boccaccio only reinforces the hidden premise, shared with Dantology, that everything is undifferentiatedly "after Dante." Perhaps the *real* problem with "Dantology" is not that it is too historicist, but that it virtually lacks a dynamic sense of history and of Dante's subjection to it, as has recently been argued of the "old medievalism" in general (Brownlee, *et al.*).

This point, however, should return us to the most important strength of this playful and polemical book. It reminds us how well Menocal has dramatized the special problem that Dante presents in literary history – unrepeatable yet ineluctable – demanding to be read and yet impossible to rewrite in any straightforward way. The prime virtue of her book lies in its structural embodiment of the paradoxes of the "new" – non-linear, oblique – literary history in a powerful and clarifying way. Its prime vice lies in falling into the age-old trap of seeking an extreme position, opposite, yet in a way equal, to the one it seeks to remedy – in this case, the theologically oriented historicism of traditional medieval (and Dante) scholarship. Or to put it differently, "beyond good and evil," Menocal's preferred mode is ludic, hyperbolic, and provoking – deliberately contravening critical decorum in ways that may not always command assent, but which may well elicit the kind of methodological and theoretical thought, at once synchronic and diachronic, that makes us better readers.

Albert Russell Ascoli  
Northwestern University

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As a reader of sacred writings, Augustine was daring (*temerarius*) and confident. In the *De doctrina christiana*, where he taught aspiring preachers how to understand (*modus inveniendi*) and how to express (*modus proferendi*) the meaning of Scripture, Augustine wrote that if readers perfected their lives and minds according to seven steps leading to *sapientia*, and if they were guided by charity as they read passages in Scripture that offended their faith when taken literally, they would be illuminated by understanding that was only partial, yet true. And even if such truth should ultimately