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REVIEWS

María Rosa Menocal. *Writing in Dante's Cult of Truth: From Borges to Boccaccio.*
Durham, N.C., and London: Duke University Press, 1991. 223 pages.

"By means of a new technique, Ménard has (perhaps unwittingly) enriched the belated and rudimentary art of reading: the technique of deliberate anachronism and erroneous attributions. As it is infinitely applicable this technique compels us to peruse the Odyssey as if it came after the Eneid . . ." In the field of serious academic criticism, no scholar dared until recently to put into practice the suggestive method of interpretation which Borges, in his *Fictions*, had bestowed upon his literary character Pierre Ménard. But María Rosa Menocal, author of a previous study on *The Arabic Rôle in Medieval History* and associate professor at Yale University, has now been courageous enough to give such a "Ménardian" account of literary history in her highly exciting new book on Dante's writing in the Western tradition. Other than one would have expected, Menocal does not consider the *Divine Comedy* as if it came before Virgil, but ironically she reads Dante as if he were a successor to Borges himself and, by the way, to T. S. Eliot. Inversely, Petrarch and Ezra Pound become, so to speak, Dante's precursors. Boccaccio is apparently the only one to safeguard his accustomed place after Dante in both time and literature, but in this way he turns out to be Borges's grandson.

As Menocal states in her prologue, the literary process is far from being a chronological one. Its very uncanniness consists precisely in the possible confrontation, nay, eventual merger of temporally distant texts. There, if anywhere, the contingencies of personal biography and reading preferences will bring about a particular literary vision and thus prevail against the diachronical linearity of what we used to call literary history. Basically, every reader constitutes his or her own history of literature. This is even truer for a writer who is not born from a pre-existing literary history, but who necessarily begets it anew as he constantly erases and rewrites his antecedents. Moreover, from the beginnings to the 19th century, most literary history was written by ambitious authors. And after the rise of academic criticism, too, the examples of Pound, Eliot and Borges make

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clear that in the 20th century we still cannot easily separate a pure poetic or literary substance from the mere accidents of critical history. The author as critic is anxious about being outdistanced by earlier writers. By creating his own version of literary history he therefore strives to triumph over his rivals and inscribe his own name on the registers of literary fame.

But even if literature itself does escape from the constraints of time, how will a scholar comment on it without reintroducing implicitly the premises of regular chronology? Menocal appeals to a "renegade model of temporal and literary relations" (4), as she calls it, i.e., to Cabbala. In the wake of postmodern criticism, acquaintance with some aspects of Cabbalism has undoubtedly become a fashionable sine qua non of contemporary theory. Nevertheless one may regret that Menocal takes Cabbalistic knowledge for all too granted and does not further develop her own understanding of it. Instead of returning to the pertinent studies of Gershom Scholem's to whom Borges as well as Harold Bloom are so much indebted, she only refers to, and strongly depends on, the latter, whose own "misprision" of Cabbalism is, to say the least, controversial (cf. Susan A. Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses*). Such shortcomings do not invalidate, however, Menocal's remarkable insights into the potentially Cabbalistic nature of a good deal of Western literature. Quite on the contrary, her original argument deserves a more detailed justification.

According to the Cabbalists, the created world emanates from the *sephirot*, which essentially are written characters. So there exists no fundamental difference between the organism of the Torah and the universe which is but the material manifestation of this previously written text. Hence the human subject is constantly engaged in a virtually endless process of reading and (re) writing *the universe that others call the Library* (Borges). Consequently, the reading and writing Cabbalist enters into relation with truth so that truth, universe, and written text can no longer be differentiated from one another. Reading and writing equal learning and telling the truth. Although not all literature is bound to the Cabbalistic way of writing, there is, as a matter of fact, one branch of it that willingly does embrace Cabbala, and Dante's *Commedia* can be regarded as its most prestigious expression. It is one of Menocal's disturbing paradoxes that the practice of Cabbalistic writing may thus be discerned in the heart of mediaeval Western Christianity.

Approaching the *Vita Nuova* in her first chapter, Menocal accepts Charles S. Singleton's thesis on its conversionary pattern, but transposes it from the religious to the poetic level. Dante converts himself from love-poetry to Cabbalistic writing. This literary conversion mainly unfolds in the "liminal sequence" (35) of chapters XIX to XXVIII where the mediating God of Love disappears from the scene of writing (ch. XXV) and Dante stops adding pedantic glosses or *divisioni* to his poems (so after ch. XXVI). Obviously, the conversion is centred upon Beatrice's death and culminates when the poet realizes, in ch. XXIX, that she actually is a

number nine, a written character, not metaphorically but literally speaking. As Dante thereby learns to read and rewrite the book of memory, his own past becomes a Cabbalistic text. The new literature of his new life forsakes the poetry of courtly love with its unfulfilling solipsism and adheres instead to a writing of the truth where the dichotomy of fact and fiction cannot be maintained any longer. As is already announced in the final paragraph of the *Vita Nuova*, Dante's Commedia will be the logical extension and coronation of his Cabbalistic project. Its text also establishes itself as a truth that the reader may recognize in deciphering it.

Provocatively, the chapter on the *Vita Nuova* is named after Carl Jung's concept of "synchronicity." Menocal pretends that it can serve as a complementary model to Cabbalism. Jung called synchronistic those temporally and causally unrelated phaenomena that carry the same meaning. Of course, the many numerical symbols of the *Vita Nuova* are such synchronistic effects to which Dante gives a meaning only "retrospectively" (49). One doubts, therefore, whether synchronicity is an appropriate explanation of it (even if Jung insists that it is not synonymous with synchrony). In my view, Menocal is describing a significant example of Freudian belatedness, "Nachträglichkeit," rather than Jungian synchronicity. Relying on the unquestioned presence of the signified, synchronicity is closely connected with Western logocentrism. Belatedness, on the other hand, is grounded in the continuous deferment of the signified. Meaning and truth are nowhere present previously, but can only emerge from a postponed act of decipherment. In Cabbala, the catastrophic breaking of the vessels leads to a similar loss which can only be restored belatedly, in the stage of *tikkun*. So belatedness corresponds perhaps more strikingly to Cabbalistic reading than synchronicity does.

Here I cannot give an extensive summary of the refreshing, if sometimes disputable, interpretations that follow. With respect to the Paolo and Francesca episode in *Inferno* V, Menocal analyzes, in her second chapter, how Silvio Pellico (1789-1854) tries, though unsuccessfully, to perpetuate Dante's cult of truth. He reinscribes different versions of Francesca's not only into his famous tragedy *Francesca da Rimini* (1815), but also into his spiritual autobiography *Le mie prigioni* (1832). Refusing to translate literally the *Song of Solomon* to his gaoler's daughter Zanze, the imprisoned autobiographer escapes Paolo's temptation, but at the same time he fails as a literary writer (ch. XXX-XXXI). It is in her epilogue on Boccaccio that Menocal returns to this couple of lovers seduced by the Romance of *Galahalt*. When the *Decameron* is called a *Galeotto* or go-between, this implies a sceptical displacement of the *Commedia* from safe Cabbalistic truth to perilous uncertainty and doubt. Moreover, it exhibits an ambiguity hidden already in Dante's text. Here at last, Menocal questions her deliberately partial reading of the *Commedia* as a written record of almost exclusively sacred truths.

Revisiting *Purgatorio* XXVI in her third chapter, Menocal argues that

the epithet "miglior fabbro," which Dante obliquely assigns to the troubadour Arnaut Daniel, and Eliot to his editor Pound in the dedication of *The Waste Land,* is at least ambiguous, if not altogether "faint praise" (91). Surprisingly, the conflict between the merely playful craftsman Arnaut and Dante the Cabbalist propagating truth, between hermetic *trobar clus* and visionary writing, is re-enacted by Pound and Eliot in their problematic relationship between a censoring master and his grown disciple. While Pound translates and celebrates Arnaut's sestinas, Eliot identifies himself with Dante the prophet and hopes to leave Pound behind him. The uncanny and achronological nature of literature appears most clearly from this sudden return of two age-old antagonists to the 20th century.

The splendid fourth chapter concentrates on Dante's unhappy love for Beatrice, even in *Paradiso.* In a spectacular reversal, Menocal, however, examines which influence Petrarch and later Borges exerted on Dante. As his successful rivals and epigones they radically modified our understanding of his work. In Petrarch's famous *Canzone* LXX, Dante is introduced as the frustrated love-poet of the *Rime petrose* and not as a Cabbalist writing the truth. So Petrarch cunningly succeeds in outdistancing the earlier and more inoffensive version of Dante's. Even today, most Italianists would agree that *Canzone* LXX is an early and authoritative history of vernacular love-poetry. Menocal instead pleads that it is an astute stratagem in which Petrarch misreads Dante in order to exercise his own authority on his rival and give more grandeur to his lyrical work. Uncannily, Borges's attitude towards Dante is analogous when he labels him as a resentful lover, both in his essays and, more indirectly, in the first-person tale of the *Aleph.* Petrarch as well as Borges are opposed to Dante's Cabbalistic cult of truth and addicted rather to a self-referential play of literature without any truth value. Therefore they do not rewrite the *Commedia* (as the ridiculous Carlos Argentino Daneri tries to do), but they admit that their own relation to Dante must be a supplementary one.

Menocal pays a fine tribute to Roberto González Echevarría when she displaces Bloom's relentless enquiry into influence to the scrutiny of textual authority itself. While the Bloomian paradigm is virtually haunted by the Oedipal scene of instruction and the ephebe's belatedness, Menocal demonstrates that a writer can cope with textual authority and eschew influence by (re) constructing his literary genealogy and defining his position towards tradition as a supplement to its henceforward irreparable centre. Certainly, Derrida's concept of supplement applies fairly well to Latin American literature. But as Petrarch's example impressively shows, it is neither restricted to the New World nor to Modernity.

In a few words, Menocal's study is much more challenging from a theoretical point of view than from the perspective of an old-fashioned philologist who will inevitably miss some nuances and presumably attack her crudely literal reading of the *Vita Nuova* and the *Commedia.* But after all, describing Dante's authority in the Western tradition and vice versa means

so much more than a scholarly case study, for it concerns one of the central narratives on which Romance literary history, if not Romance philology as a whole, has been built ever since. Like a Foucauldian archaeologist, Menocal dismantles this labyrinthine edifice step by step and lays bare its shockingly frail foundations. Whatever some fierce New Historicists will find to object against her, Menocal proves convincingly that criticism in a somewhat deconstructionist mood has not yet come to an end, whereas diachronical literary history may have. Admirers of it should by all means avoid reading Menocal. Otherwise they will have to dispense with a long-cherished illusion: *the family romance of Romance philology.*

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Adrienne Laskier Martín. *Cervantes and the Burlesque Sonnet.* Berkeley-Los Angeles-Oxford: University of California Press, 1991. 295 pp.

Professor Martín divides her book into five chapters and an appendix. Her stated purpose is "to provide an artistic [sic] analysis of Cervantes's burlesque sonnets . . . [and] . . . to contribute to a new understanding and reappraisal of Cervantes as both an accomplished poet and a comic genius" (pp. 1-2). There may also be a less explicit agenda, namely that criticism of *Don Quijote* and of other prose works by Cervantes has outweighed—if not in quality, in quantity—the attention paid to his poetry. Martín hopes to readjust the scales through her analysis of the "burlesque sonnet" and its parodic and comic overtones.

For Martín, the burlesque sonnet is a historically defined genre—an "artistic invention" (p. 5) she calls it—first written at the thirteenth-century Sicilian Court of Frederick II by poets such as Lentino, delle Vigne and Mostacci, among others. The tradition was extended in the fourteenth century by Folgore da San Gemignano of Siena, Cenne da la Chitarra, Antonio Pucci, and Franco Sacchetti, and in the fifteenth century by Domenico di Giovanni ("il Burchiello") and Antonio Cammelli. It is not until the sixteenth century, however, that Spanish poetry finds an explicit and immediate precedent in the work of Francesco Berni, a poet referred to by Luis Barahona de Soto as "Por un no sé qué Bernia italiano, / De donde fue en España advenedizo." And it was Diego Hurtado de Mendoza who first practiced the burlesque sonnet with any seriousness.

Having established firm and convincing links between Italy and Spain, Martín goes on to flesh out the identities and poems of the Spanish practitioners of "burlesque and tailed sonnets": Diego Ramírez-Pagán, Baltasar de Escobar, Baltasar de Alcázar and Juan de Salinas y Castro, all—with the exception of Alcázar—relatively unknown and rarely read poets. A joke once told, it seems, is not as amusing when repeated; criticizing and satirizing the state of poetry or the style of particular poets (at the time the