

1992

From: "Dante in North America 1970-91" Steven Botten
Lectura Dantis 1.1: 3-27

progressive and continual revision and rewriting, on the verbal, thematic, and narrative levels, over the course of more than a decade? What can any of these patterns, proportions, and quantifications have meant to a reading (or listening) public that had only the most rudimentary idea (for lack of that useful modern invention, the marginal line-number) of exactly what point in the text, at any given moment, they had reached? Or that may not have been using a manuscript of the complete poem anyway? Or that did not know as much about math as Dante and Professor Hart seemingly did and do? Granting for the sake of argument both the reality and the intentionality of these mathematical phenomena, what, in the end, is their contribution to anybody else's understanding of the verbal and conceptual artifact that is Dante's poem? Why, in short, *should* we read the *Commedia* in this way? Hart has not yet addressed these questions, and I sincerely hope that one day he will.

Time to dismount from the hobby-horse: Hart's uniquely unconventional article is, in its way, a *tour de force*, and readers must decide for themselves if its way is also theirs. Certainly those who do find work of this kind useful may rest assured that it is hard to imagine it being better or more thoroughly carried out.

Hart's work would also be strongly resistant to inclusion in the «Italianist»/«medievalist»/«comparativist» model proposed above, so it is something of a relief to find so many other publications this year that do seem to fit that particular mold. Two weighty books deserve notice in the «medievalist» category, though one of them, as its title makes plain, would probably be happier to appropriate Dante for the Renaissance: this is John J. Demaray, *Cosmos and Epic Representation: Dante, Spenser, Milton and the Transformation of Renaissance Heroic Poetry*. Though its subject-matter and expository technique are utterly different, this book has something in common with the article by Thomas Hart just mentioned: once again a keen intelligence and an extraordinary variety of arcane learning are placed at the service of a subtle and complex argument that remains, ultimately, implausible, because it fails to engage sufficiently with the material experience of *reading*. Demaray knows all that there is to know about medieval windows, maps, pilgrimages, and cathedral architecture, and the first two chapters of his handsomely illustrated book knit these elements into a richly suggestive essay in the «architectural-literary figural criticism of the *Commedia*» (15); but, as in the case of Hart, it is never made clear what all this has to do with the workings of the poem *as poem*, or with its impact on readers, medieval or modern. Demaray is well aware that a «cultural gulf separates the modern historical consciousness... from the medieval typological and iconographical consciousness» (40) that he

sees as generating the *Commedia*, and he recognizes clearly enough the interpretative difficulties that this separation inspires; but he never quite makes the case for his brand of criticism, erudite and fascinating though it frequently is, as indispensable. Bluntly, the question is whether we *need* to know how to read the poem in this way; and, bluntly, the answer is no.

Richard Neuse's *Chaucer's Dante* is altogether more predictable and less provocative; though full of clear and perceptive writing about Chaucer, and adorned with a modish patina of theory (chiefly of an intertextual shade), its treatment of Dante, while respectful, is probably not sufficiently responsive, or sufficiently grounded in the tradition of Dantean commentary and scholarship, to satisfy the average reader of *Lectura Dantis*. Neuse was doubtless unwise to irritate his more pedantic readers at the outset, by perpetrating a crass factual error in the footnote on his very first page (the epithet «divina» was added to «*Commedia*» in the sixteenth century, not the fifteenth); and, all in all, like most books on Chaucer-and-Dante, this one is much more comfortable when dealing with the English branch of the partnership. Perhaps the time has come for a few books by «Italianists» on Dante-and-Chaucer — let's see how well *that* goes down in the English Department.

Speaking nationally, that Department rounded up the usual suspects for a whole series of «comparativist» studies in a wide range of journals: Joyce (Sicari 1990), Milton (DuRocher, Schork), Shelley (Herson), Melville (Young), Pound (Sicari 1991, Dasenbrock) — almost the whole *galère* is present and correct, though T. S. Eliot, Blake, and Tennyson seem, unaccountably, to be AWOL, possibly together. But 1990-1991 also saw a number of «comparativist» exercises emerge from North America, not all of them performed by card-carrying comparativists, that extended this approach to Dante along other, less well-trodden, paths: specifically, forwards to nineteenth- and twentieth-century Italy (and Argentina), and backwards to ancient Rome.

Maria Rosa Menocal's *Writing in Dante's Cult of Truth* ranges further and faster than any other comparable work this year, from the medieval vernacular lyric to Jorge Luis Borges, with a number of entertaining and enlightening stops along the way in the company of such as Boccaccio, T. S. Eliot (at last!) and even Silvio Pellico — who is surely, if any Italian writer is, overdue for reappraisal and restoration to the canon (and then again, on his showing here, perhaps not). The journey begins from the *Vita nuova*, re-read by Menocal in Jungian and kabbalistic terms, and then proceeds via Pellico's re-writing of *Inferno* V, Dante's and Pound's triangular relationship with Arnaut Daniel, and Borges's Beatriz (with Petrarch and Arnaut, again, lurking in the

background), to end in the *paradiso terrestre* of the *Decameron*. Menocal possesses a quicksilver intellect and a vivacious style, and these more than once help to hurry the reader past some slight weakness in her argument; but on the whole this is one of the more exciting contributions to comparative Dante studies to appear in recent years. One could perhaps wish that the book were not so rhetorically heated or so relentlessly self-conscious of its own originality — but original it indubitably is.

The same could not honestly be said of Risa B. Sodi's book on Primo Levi, *A Dante of Our Time*. This is a book that should have been left to marinate a good deal longer before being placed on the Dante scholar's menu: its three short, slight chapters trace a superficial outline of Dante's concept of justice, based on plainly inadequate reading in the subject, and then attempt to integrate this with a none too profound reading of Levi's life and works. The result will surely satisfy nobody — not even, in five or ten years' time, its author. (The existence of series like that in which this book is published [Peter Lang's «American University Studies»] is doing a serious disservice to scholarship, to libraries, and, most of all, to the anxious junior scholars who are inveigled into publishing there, prematurely and often with no discernible benefit to their careers, work that would do them credit if they gave themselves — or, alas, were given by their superiors — time to perfect it.) As it is, Sodi's rightly tentative suggestion that Levi's appalling experiences (and painful subsequent transformation of them into writing) may make him «a Dante of our time» never quite manages to overcome the obvious dangers of anachronism or meaninglessness that a historical abyss six centuries wide necessarily brings with it.

The abyss between Dante and classical Rome was, of course, a good deal wider than that; and anachronism (though not meaninglessness) is definitely one of the dangers Dante courts when reading, and rewriting, the poets of Limbo's «bella scola» or any of their more prosaic contemporaries — not that that fact would have troubled, or even interested, him as much as it may do us. Since the earliest days of the revival in Dante scholarship in the nineteenth century, Dante's use of classical culture has been a constant preoccupation of North American Dantists, as of their European colleagues; but there have, of course, been intermittent fluctuations in readerly taste and choice of object for critical analysis — though Virgil's claim to attention has never been seriously questioned. In his «Foreword» to the first volume of the *Lectura Dantis Americana* series (launched by the University of Pennsylvania Press in 1989 but regrettably — one hopes, not permanently — on hiatus since), Robert Hollander remarked, *à propos*

of contemporary scholarly interest in Dante's relationship with his classical forebears, that «an American *aetas ovidiana* is probably about to begin» (xiv). That hunch is confirmed by the simultaneous appearance in 1991 of two hefty collections of articles, one wholly and one partially devoted to Dante's reading(s) of Ovid.

The two volumes have much in common, including high quality, a broadly intertextual orientation, and at least two contributors; but, like all such collections, they are also variegated, wide-ranging, and difficult to characterize economically. *Dante and Ovid: Essays in Intertextuality* is the more concentrated: it begins with a fine survey of the eponymous relationship, by Peter S. Hawkins, and proceeds via consistently interesting close readings of Ovid-influenced passages from all three *cantiche* (by the likes of Madison U. Sowell and R. A. Shoaf) to a pointed comparison of the two poets' self-conceptions in terms of their respective treatments of Ulysses (by Janet Levarie Smarr). It is agreeably complemented by the second part («Ovid in Dante») of *The Poetry of Allusion* (where Hawkins and Pamela Royston Macfie reappear from the other collection, though naturally in different guise): although there are, inevitably, one or two points of contact between the two collections (notably an essay apiece centered on Erysichthon, one by Shoaf and one by William Stephany), in general they deal with different specific texts, and do so in usefully and instructively diverse styles. Part I of *The Poetry of Allusion*, however, is devoted to Virgil: John Freccero, Robert Hollander, Rachel Jacoff and Jeffrey Schnapp are among the stellar cast of contributors, all of them on excellent form, and the volume as a whole, like its more purely Ovidian counterpart, is full of unusually toothsome food for thought, of a classical and intertextual variety. If we are indeed now entering an *aetas ovidiana* in North American Dante studies — and let us hope that we are — it is beginning under a fortunate star. (Let us also hope, in passing, that Robert Hollander was right to foresee a similar revival of interest in Statius and, especially, the too-long neglected figure of Lucan.) At least Ovid will be better company, for us and for Dante, than Ezra Pound.

And so the curtain falls, the auditorium empties, the limos purr away into the starlit Californian night, each bearing a passenger who fiercely clutches something — a gilded statuette, a burning resentment — to his, or her, bosom. Winners and losers alike, let them, along with your presenter for the evening, recall the healing wisdom of Samuel Johnson, LL.D., the most intelligent and genuinely humane literary critic (I repeat) of the last three hundred years, with whom our ceremony began. Pay captious critics no more heed than they deserve, the great