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Writing in Dante's Cult of Truth From Borges to Boccaccio. By María Rosa Menocal. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1991. 223 pp. \$37.00 (cloth), \$16.95 (paper).

One might wonder what could be said that is provocative and new about Dante Alighieri, one of the most enduring subjects of scholarship, particularly—but not solely—among Italianists. The author of this volume not only convinces us that there are no limits to the intelligent exploration, by ever new readers, of a much-perused text, she also provides us with a scholarly, widely informed, and original reading of several major authors. This reading that takes its point of departure from Dante's *Vita nuova* (*New Life*), reaches to T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, and stops along the way to include Petrarch, Boccaccio, Silvio Pellico, Borges, and an impressive array of canonical works of criticism. In other words, María Rosa Menocal's book accomplishes, to an eminent degree, what critical studies ideally should: it awakens in the reader a desire to rediscover texts that have become dulled by familiarity, bringing back the excitement one experienced upon first meeting them, and it stimulates our curiosity for a variety of new texts. In addition, Menocal invites us to re-examine, with a critical eye, the rich tradition of Dantean scholarship. The qualities of this volume—besides its choice of a persistently challenging topic—are: the evidence of very extensive and perceptive readings; an ecumenical critical consciousness that embraces literature and a lot besides it; and a lively, engaging style. Only in the last two chapters, and then only occasionally, are there a few atypical rough spots in the writing, due to misprints or less than felicitous constructions.

The focus of Menocal's exploration is Dante's reflection on what poetry ought to be, that is, "his recastings of literary history, and his beliefs in the needs and duties of poetry" (6), as well as the manner in which his meditation nourished the theory and practice of a number of other writers. Each chapter of the volume looks at a different episode in this history of interpretation and manipulation of texts, and addresses the theoretical issues raised by each episode. The premise to the entire volume is established by a rereading of Dante's *New Life*, which, according to the thesis proposed by Menocal—in contrast to readings inspired by Singleton's classic works—is not about an all-powerful religious conversion, but rather about a literary conversion. In other words, the *Vita*

nuova is a book on poetics, and a statement concerning a major shift in Dante's views on literature and his own position as a writer. Such metaliterary concerns, Menocal believes, explain the fascination that the *Vita nuova* and the *Commedia* still hold for readers far removed from the culture of the thirteenth century, and more especially for other writers. It is in the *Vita nuova* that Dante's *maestri*, the representatives of a glorious and prized European tradition, are left behind by the young poet as he comes to reject the very *troubadour* poetry that had so powerfully inspired him. That poetry now appears to him as being deeply solipsistic, and its insistence on pursuing impossible loves is the consequence of its absorption in the contemplation of its own excellence. Ultimately, *troubadour* poetry remains its own object of desire.

Any "new life" requires the death of the old life, and the death of Beatrice, told in piteous tones in the *Vita nuova* and foreshadowed by other deaths, in fact "constitutes the indispensable heart of [Dante's] conversion" (18). The conversion leads Dante from a poetry that was enchanted with its own music and verbal hermeticism to a poetry whose meaning exists outside itself and its own frame of reference. Dante's new poetry is preinscribed in the cosmos, and, far from being silenced by the ineffable, it can actually speak the Truth. Menocal's analysis of the moments that Dante singled out as crucial in the process of his "conversion" is supported by a subtle and convincing reading of several chapters of the *Vita nuova*. The hermetically literary concept of Love that dominates the first part of the "book of memory," with its personification of a Love-troubadour, its weeping adolescent poet, its unapproachable Beatrice, its linguistic and technical analyses, and the closed circle of its devotees composed of fellow poets, must give way to a different concept of Love. Dante's vision of poetry has totally changed, and because of that, Love becomes inclusive, as it is now serving a Truth that is everywhere to be read, rather than Love's change affecting the poet's vision. In his own way, Menocal says, Dante is a mystic, but one who does not fit the conventional definition of mystical expression, since he is convinced that when Truth is understood, poetry, its handmaiden, can say it.

Having established her ground principles—and in keeping with her assertion that literary history is not diachronic, but rather a rich tapestry of synchronic activities—Menocal proceeds to examine how certain writers defined themselves in relation to the forbidding presence of Dante and his poetics.

Italianists will be particularly intrigued by her analysis of Silvio Pellico's *Le mie prigioni* (*My Prisons*), an early nineteenth-century classic

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that has all but disappeared from reading lists. When he was a political prisoner of the Austrians, who then ruled Northern Italy, Pellico wrote a slim book that was at the same time a journal of his imprisonment and a spiritual autobiography. Menocal reminds us that the modest effort of that Romantic writer had an immense impact on entire generations of Italian patriots of all social classes, and also on foreign sympathizers of the Italian struggle for independence, thanks to a misreading. Where the patriots saw a political statement in support of the struggle against Austria, we actually find the story of a spiritual journey away from politics. Menocal also shows that Pellico made an implicit, and probably unwitting, contribution to Dante Alighieri's canonization by the Italian *Risorgimento* as a political icon, linguistic model, and moral *exemplum*. Most importantly for Menocal's thesis, *Le mie prigioni* reveals an entire interpretive system of Dante's text, based on what different readers would call either a misreading or a correction of the problem of sacred texts and literature in their relationship to history. By reviewing Pellico's two rewritings of one of the most famous encounters in the *Inferno*, the Pilgrim's meeting with Francesca da Rimini, Menocal illustrates the importance of so-called "misreadings," whose very idiosyncratic qualities are crucial and instructive. Pellico, in an episode of *Le mie prigioni* and in his tragedy entitled *Francesca da Rimini*, paid tribute to Dante, while at the same time rejecting Dante's post-conversionary poetics, as he, Pellico, could not subscribe to the assertion that "Truth and History and Literature and Text are all the same thing" (72). In Pellico's view, one cannot read certain texts without assuming their guilts. So, as he rejected his first love, political action, out of disillusionment with politics, he also confessed his mistrust of the Text (which happened to be the *Bible*, in a famous episode of naive seduction narrated in *Le mie prigioni*), because of its potential for sinful interpretation. Unconsciously, he parted ways with Dante, "whose incomparably influential text is a scripture of a logology" (72). One must add, at this point, that the very complex issues addressed by Menocal's analysis present some ambiguities worth exploring, since Dante saw reading, writing, and acting as one—whereas Pellico, for fear of the explosive power of their mingling, fenced them off from each other. By so doing, Pellico paradoxically stressed their profound connection, as well as literature's revolutionary potential.

The second half of Menocal's volume is an illustration of her assertion that "in any text unembarrassedly rewriting another, especially a 'master text' . . . the 'role models' serve in the same way language itself does, as the basic communal property within which any and all individuality

or originality must be expressed" (83). Returning to the issue of the idolatry of pure referentiality inherent in *troubadour* poetry, the author examines how Dante, and later two of his devotees, paid homage to and then rejected their respective Masters. Here, the complexities of literary relationships, and their not necessarily conscious ferocity, form an intriguing background to the discussion. Faint praise is a means of asserting one's own difference, and indeed of proclaiming covertly one's attained superiority vis-à-vis one's predecessors. On the basis of that observation, Menocal invites us to reread Dante's revisions, once he had reached his poetic maturity with his *Commedia*, of his earlier evaluations and ranking of the Provençals Arnaut Daniel and Bertran de Born, and Guido Cavalcanti. On the other hand, and centuries later, Ezra Pound, whom Menocal calls "a remarkable guide to those we might call Dante's discarded poets" (93), interestingly chose to translate those very poets, and again selected them when he wrote his literary essays. Moreover, in a fascinating cyclical pattern, it was Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot's first guide, whom Eliot addressed with the famous Dantean appellation: "*il miglior fabbro*," when Eliot himself more and more explicitly began parting ways with Pound on issues of poetics. In the same way that Dante had rejected in the *Vita Nuova* the poetry that was self-loving craftsmanship in favor of a poetry that holds moral power and can say the unsayable, Eliot rejected Pound's devotion to the beauty and music of language, and even resorted to using Dante's expression of faint praise. As Menocal says: "We come full circle . . . when we realize that the 'differences' with Pound that Eliot would later mention publicly are precisely those that separate Dante from Arnaut" (120). There is no doubt that Menocal shows great keenness of insight in treating these issues of literary patronage, and in pointing out the ambiguities that are inevitably present in the feelings of gratitude and obligation shown by the various generations of writers.

Further intriguing questions emerge from the exploration of such crosscurrents in literary relationships, and they are the focus of the last portion of Menocal's volume. How do unfaithful epigones shape the Master, and affect the readings of the Master's works? Petrarch's refusal to name Dante in the very instant he revisited the *dolce stil nuovo* in canzone 80 ("Lasso me, ch'i non so in qual parte pieghi . . .") introduces us not only to a rereading of Petrarch, but to a rereading of a short story written by Jorge Luís Borges, *The Aleph*, that Menocal sees as an irreverent rewriting of the Beatrice narrative. The conspicuousness of the two different, yet obvious, forms of denial of Dantean influence on the part of Petrarch and Borges, paradoxically testifies to the importance of Dante's

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presence in the two authors' experiences; it also confirms that Dante, in his turn, is left behind by two of his own disciples. What emerges from Menocal's rereadings of Petrarch and Borges is the construction of the image of a "Petrarchean" Dante, who is called to task both by Petrarch and by Borges, for his downgrading of craftsmanship, and his disdain for pure lyric. Petrarch and Borges similarly share a belief in, and faithfulness to, the shamanic power of sound and word. From their point of view, and in Menocal's critical reading, the poet who casts his lot with Truth is destined to have no real followers, while love poetry continues to reverberate through the ages, down to the lyrics of twentieth-century popular song: "in blindness creation may thrive, whereas vision, finally, yields but Truth" (175).

As for Boccaccio, who gave his major work in vernacular both a first name of *Decameron* and a family name of *Prince Galeotto*, his implicit statement is that the good and the true lie precisely in the uncertainty and multiplicity of interpretation. One must not yield to the seduction of the individual stories told by the ten storytellers—he warns us—but rather one needs to realize that "contingency is the most essential feature of all reading" (191). We know that Boccaccio, as the first lecturer on Dante's *Commedia*, practiced what amounts to an early version of *explication de texte* of his idol's work. Yet, Menocal says, Boccaccio provided his best commentary to Dante's *Commedia* when he wrote the *Decameron*, and redefined the fundamental premises of literature by asserting that we can only know partial and contradictory truths. Only in the afterlife will we be able to reach the total and unerring Truth. It is certainly attractive, in a mildly perverse way, to come to see Boccaccio as the most devout sort of believer, as Menocal depicts him: one who believes in the greater Truth, just like Boccaccio's own Abraham the Jew did (First day, 2), in spite of the impossibility for us to see it in human life and its tales.

Menocal's volume engages in a lucid and fruitful dialogue with a number of provocative writers and critics; because of that, it is recommended to all readers who cultivate scholarly interests, from the most experienced ones to those now entering the field of comparative or national literary studies. It is not often that one has the pleasure of reading a work that is at the same time unimpeachably scholarly, ample in scope, enlightening, and rich in humor.

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