to impose an Italian spiritual paternity upon his Geschlecht und Character and, on the other hand, to redeem the young Jewish prodigy by stressing his antisemitism (or is it anti-germanism?) in Über die letzten Dinge. The outstanding feature of this book is the comprehensive and cohesive coverage of a somewhat neglected field in Italian thought and letters. Mr. Cavaglion has demonstrated his scholarly ability, his wide-ranging familiarity with Italian intellectual life before and after World War I. In short, Otto Weininger in Italia is an excellent guidebook on a much debated period in Italian letters. I can recommend it for research libraries without reservations.

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The book focuses on a few passages from Dante (especially Paradiso, XVI. 124–26 dealing with the language spoken by Adam) and on the theories that several sixteenth-century Florentines expounded in relation to Dante’s statements on matters of language. The major figure dealt with is Guillaume Postel (1510–81), the French humanist, linguist, religious thinker and prophet, who is much less well known as a critic of Dante. Not only does Professor Simoncelli’s study provide new information in this area but it also challenges many of the interpretations offered by historians of the questione della lingua for this period. The author rejects facile labels and chooses instead to examine internal and external data thoroughly and objectively. Through a careful reading of the documents (both manuscript and printed) and judicious weighing of the impact of political and religious factors, in a manner which one might term interdisciplinary and which he used with much profit in a previous work entitled Evangelismo italiano del Cinquecento, Professor Simoncelli is able to pinpoint convincingly the subtle differences which characterize the individual theories of the various protagonists in this episode of the language controversy.

What emerges is a clear and well-documented exposition of the intricate interplay and evolution of the views each critic advanced and modified in the light of changing personal historical circumstances. The Florentine academician Giovambattista Gelli developed his early ideas on the Aramaean origin of Florentine probably after reading Postel’s work on the origin of the Hebrew language (1538), the author argues. This theory, as advanced by Pierfrancesco Giambullari, was a defence of Tuscan in the face of bembismo, but it also had political implications, Simoncelli shows. It indicates the far-reaching geographical boundary of the Medici state and
therefore was probably designed to support Cosimo I’s expansionist policy. However, the same critic, wishing to justify the accuracy of Dante’s verses, took exception to Postel’s belief that there had been a single incorruptible language right up to the time the tower of Babel was erected. Gelli too departed from Postel’s position when he later abandoned the Aramaean theory altogether. Yet in 1551, in his work on Etruria, Postel, oblivious to the current situation in Florence, took up the question again. He criticized the Florentine critics at a time when the Academy in Florence was engaged in establishing rules for the use of the vernacular. Simoncelli succinctly describes the pronounced divergence between the French thinker and the Italian critics as involving an increasing syncretist approach on the part of Postel, while the Florentines were moving toward a more rationalist position.

Another player dealt with in this work is Benedetto Varchi, one of the theorists who denied Dante’s authorship of the De Vulgari Eloquentia. Simoncelli’s assessment of the situation enables him to demonstrate that it was against Varchi and his colleagues that Jacopo Corbinelli, the Florentine republican exile in France, directed his Paris edition of the treatise in 1577. A close associate of Postel, as the documents show, he must have found in him a kindred soul who abhorred tyrannical regimes and official religions. To explain what might otherwise appear to be a fortuitous collaboration, Simoncelli singles out another common bond: both dreamt of reviving past civilization, even if for the persecuted Postel it was a religious one and for Corbinelli a political and literary one. Moreover, it was logical for the two “outsiders” to be interested in the publication of a treatise written by Dante precisely when he too was in exile. Postel’s total contribution to the publication consists of two brief letters he addressed to the editor Corbinelli. Overlooked by historians, they are now available in the Appendix of Simoncelli’s book (165–73). Using these texts as his point of departure, and elucidating them with many facts and serious reflection, the author sheds new light on a fascinating episode in the questione della lingua and, in the field of Postel studies, he adds to the research being done by other scholars like Francois Secret and Marion L. Kuntz.

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