tes of the poem” (316) e che Dante, in quanto al di là del tempo e dello spazio umani, apprende negli episodi di Marco Lombardo e Adriano V come “The denizens of the next life do not require such guidance [e cioè di filosofi o imperatori, ndr]” (348), per arrivare alla citata analisi dell’incontro con Adamo, culmine della sua fatica ermeneutica: “one must be able to argue that the beginnings of Language with Adam and the ends of Dante’s poetry are substantially identical. And so I have: Dante who names and praises, praises in naming, God is like Adam who first gave God a name, and so invented the first language” (404-405).

Lo studio si chiude con una vastissima bibliografia e con l’indice degli autori citati.

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Massimo Verdicchio. *Reading Dante Reading: A Postmodern Reading of Dante’s Commedia.* Edmonton: M.V. Dimic Research Institute, University of Alberta, 2008. Pp. 214. ISBN 0-921490-15-3. n.p.

If books have afterlives, then Mount Purgatory must surely be quaking at the happy release of Massimo Verdicchio’s collection of nine essays on “the allegory of irony that defines the *Commedia*” (p. 55). By the author’s own admission, the volume went through a long gestation period, a bitter birth, and a complicated rebirth. Conceived in the late 1970s when Verdicchio was a graduate student at Yale, it was first published in 1997 under the ponderous title *On Dissimulation: Allegory and Irony in Dante’s Commedia*. Owing to the bankruptcy of its Polish publisher, it suffered a sudden death during delivery. Undistributed, save for a few authorial copies presented to friends and libraries in Europe and North America, it swiftly sank into book-limbo.

That it would rise again, Verdicchio never despaired. He promptly translated it into Italian, and finding a publisher in Naples with a name full of bright prospects (“La Città del Sole”), had it republished in 2000 as *Della dissimulazione: allegoria e ironia nella Commedia di Dante*. Translation alone, however, was not enough to save his project from ending up as a dead link on Google-Scholar. Sharpening “the knife of judgment” (*Convivio* 1.2.3)—a motivational phrase which clearly spoke to him as the years went by—he turned his critical attention to revising the argument of his volume so that graduate students of today would recognize it as cutting-edge. Hopeful that the sweet light of academic recognition would still strike his eyes, he excised from the original English edition two vestigial essays on prophesy in *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* and replaced them with two new trenchant studies of irony in the thirteenth and fifteenth cantos of the *Inferno*.

Too bad the knife of editorial precision was dull when the volume was being retooled, for the Latin and Italian quotations supporting his argument contain so many word-processing misprints (e.g. “Voi *the* savete ragonar d’Amore” and “Amor *the* ne la mente mi ragione,” p. 5; “*Hand* incerta cano” and “intese cose *the*

furon cagione,” p.87) that its hasty third publisher, the M. V. Dimic Research Institute, seems to have eliminated the proofing stage. Nevertheless, the sacred number nine having been preserved during the revision, the new improved volume has risen Statius-like from oblivion as *Reading Dante Reading: A Postmodern Reading of Dante’s Commedia*.

Though a nine-word title with the keyterm “reading” repeated three times will have an immediate appeal for Dantean numerologists, it is not likely to be a grabber for theory-weary readers who would rather cling to modernist close readings than slip over the edge of pomo skepticism into a maddening *mise en abyme*. Who wants to fall back again into a discursive shadow-world where readings are problematized, and meanings destabilized, and texts infinitely intertextualized, and worlds of discourse always already ironized? Not Verdicchio, fortunately. While his new critical approach may seem ironically retrospective now that postmodernism is “post” itself, his new subtitle has the anxiety-provoking effect of a reader’s advisory. So be advised, readers: the critically expanded revision of his essays is meant to ward off not only deconstructionist skeptics of allegory *per se* but also the theologically committed foes of postmodern Dante criticism, namely Singleton’s converts with their baleful allegiance to medieval hermeneutics.

“Reading Dante Reading a Postmodern Reading of Dante” is how my anxious eyes searching for signs of an infinite regress initially read the colon-free inscription on the title page. So the new subtitle is not only apotropaic. It is pleonastic. I must say that pleonasm no longer distresses me as a sign of the Postmodern Condition. It can even be rhetorically effective as an emphatic premonition of the Ineffability Topos. But I wonder how many other readers besides me are reflexively put off by pleonasm as a sign of intellectual profundity, especially in recent Dante studies of a deconstructive or (more fashionably) “detheologizing” bent where the subtle art of reading readers reading readers’ readings is all too easily mistaken for metaphysical engagement with polysemous complexity.

As Dante-pilgrim complains before the inscription on the Gate of Hell, “il senso lor m’è duro” (*Inf.* 3.12), similarly hard is the sense of “Reading Dante Reading” even at a syntactic level. Is it a double gerund? Should we interpret “Dante Reading” as a noun phrase? Or is “Dante” the object of the first “Reading,” with the second “Reading” construed as a present participle? I suspect quite a few readers will refer to the volume as “Dante Reading Dante,” mistaking it for a study of the poet’s palinodic self-referentiality. But that’s not the kind of postmodern reading Verdicchio has in mind. Beyond the syntactic ambiguity of “Reading Dante Reading” lies a whirlpool of semantic perplexity for anyone who innocently sails through the volume hoping for anagogic uplift and resists the drowning impulse to subject Dante’s traditional fourfold method of reading to a *reductio ad abyssum*.

Needless to say, that Ulyssean project is always a downer. No impediment to readers is more infernal than a self-reflexive meditation on the infinitely expansive adventure of reading, which is what Verdicchio sets us up for on his title page. This is a strategy of self-positioning, no doubt, but it is also a pity, for his project is defiantly designed to be reader-friendly. What unfolds after the abysmal new title, sur-

prisingly, is an argument in which his conclusions are not foregone in his terminology, and therefore not predictable, as they so often are under the Gitmo-like conditions of postmodern reading.

The tortured term “postmodern,” for instance, finds fast relief in the soothingly simple definition provided for it in Verdicchio’s new preface. His rationale for revision is expressed as a hermeneutical injunction “to place the reading of Dante’s works not just within the specialized perspective of Dante Studies but in the wider framework of literature where the poem is read on its own terms as a poem” (pp. xi-xii). Hence the addition of “postmodern” to his project description: the term as he understands it simply refers to a strategic emphasis “on reading, on the rhetorical or literary structure that makes possible the writing of the poem” (p. xii). Readers fearful that Verdicchio may be embarking on a “folle volo” of literary theory can therefore relax. He will not be following Derrida into the Nimrodian horrors of freeplay, or shadowing Foucault through the Malebolgean Panopticon, or weeping over Butler’s twisted prose in the Tiresian circuit of gender performativity. His project, like his prose style, is resolutely straightforward.

While Verdicchio defines his authorial role primarily as the Postmodern Reader who will clear away the theological sediments of the Singletonian past, he also presents himself as the Close Reader who will ground his future theorizations of allegory on specific proof-texts drawn from the Dantean corpus itself rather than from the Scriptures or the Summa. Preferring the sharp knife of Lady Logic to the billowing veils of Lady Rhetoric, he cuts to the quick of his argument in a preliminary series of targeted analyses of Dante’s remarks on the correction of errors, both the poet’s own youthful indiscretions and the doctrinal mistakes produced by pagan folly (e.g. *Convivio* 1.2.1-3). By extending Dante’s corrective epistemology from the *Convivio* directly into the *Commedia*, Verdicchio aims to show that the Virgil-*ombra* who appears to the wanderer in the Dark Wood is a severely corrected version of the pagan poet who wrote the *Aeneid*. Though a coherent line of inquiry certainly develops from his preliminary insights about Dante’s ironic approach to Virgil, Verdicchio does not extend his corrective reading of Virgil as an anti-Dante very far into the *Commedia*. Throughout the volume his focus remains fixed on the *Inferno*, with a few side-glances at the *Purgatorio*. Nevertheless, he succeeds in making a collection of separate glosses on scattered cantos read like a through-composed treatise on allegory.

What his reading of the *Commedia* lacks in comprehensiveness it gains in coherence through its logical connection with three foundational theses established in his preface, introduction, and first chapter. Drawing his first thesis from classical rhetoric, he argues that the trope of “dissimulatio” or irony, as re-defined in the chivalric terms of the *Convivio* (3.10.6-7), becomes the one and only defining strategy of the *Commedia*. Turning from rhetoric to tropology for his second thesis, he contends that Dante-poet always treats Virgil ironically, dissimulating profound respect for the author of the *Aeneid* in the opening canto of the *Commedia* for the moral purpose of exposing the hypocrisy behind his illustrious predecessor’s tragic-heroic vision of Roman history. Returning to a notoriously confusing passage in the *Convivio* (2.1.2-4), he takes great pains to drive home the

validity of his third thesis, which is hermeneutical, by demonstrating that “Dante’s strategy of dissimulation is to equate the allegory of poets, which is a mode of poetic representation, with the allegory of theologians, which is a mode of reading Scripture” (pp. 20-21). If you accept the validity of these audaciously overstated theses—so refreshingly free of blithering qualifications, so enthusiastically propounded as breakthroughs—the rest of the Postmodern Reader’s argument will seem undeniably cogent.

Since I have doubts about all three of these theses, the cogency of the argument in the subsequent eight chapters succeeds in provoking more often than persuading me. No one can deny that Dante is a virtuoso rhetorician, a supremely competitive poet who out-Virgils Virgil with epic similes, out-Ovids Ovid with mythological allusions, and finally even out-Dantes Dante with amorous dissimulations. But why must irony be singled out, among all the tropes at the poet’s command, as the single all-encompassing strategy behind the allegorical workings of the *Commedia*? That Dante updated its definition in the *Convivio* indicates its importance for his mature palinodic reading of the *Vita Nuova*, to be sure, but that doesn’t immediately guarantee its strategic importance for the *Commedia* (which strikingly diverges from the *Convivio* in its treatment of classical authors and their authority) unless, of course, one assumes a direct line of evolutionary progress from Dante’s early poetry through his prose treatises to his allegorical masterwork. Surely other tropes – metaphor, hyperbole, oxymoron – are just as important as irony in the poet’s fiercely comic attack on the hypocritical “mondo” stung beyond tragedy by the point of Geryon’s waving tail.

Though this poisoned “punto” at the centre of the *Inferno* is an urgent stimulus for meditating on the ironies of allegory as a didactic vehicle, it is all but ignored by Verdicchio. When he does glance at *Inferno* 16-17 (pp. 106-108), he focuses exclusively on the monster’s relation to the Leopard in *Inferno* 1 and obscurely associates the pilgrim’s cord—supposedly once thrown at the Leopard before its use in luring Geryon—with the poet’s “ironic process of demystification” (p. 108). This satiric process, which amounts to the ultimate elimination of all anagogic meaning from the allegory, Verdicchio interprets as much more than a local function of the project-halting allegory of allegory in the Geryon episode. From his postmodern viewpoint it becomes the entire *raison d’être* for the *Commedia*. As the hypogogic embodiment of twisted rhetoric, Geryon might have been read as an ironic inversion of the “beautiful lie” that Dante defined as the literal level of the Allegory of the Poets. Now, on the brink of the Eighth Circle, he and his poet-guide are presented with the ugly lie that has the face of the truth, a mystical “ver” which ironically lingers like the memory of a fugitive dream at the anagogic level of the Allegory of the Theologians (cf. *Inf.* 16.124). Since Dante’s monster is an elaborately ironic take on Virgil’s Geryon (*Aeneid* 8.267-268), Verdicchio has missed an opportunity not only to weaken the theological bonds of the allegory here but also to strengthen the link between his first two theses beyond the evidence provided by the first canto of the *Inferno*.

My main difficulty with the second thesis stems from Verdicchio’s narrow tropological reading of the deaths of Camilla, Nisus, Euryalus, and Turnus. So

what brought these heroes down? Nasty old Italian greed, it turns out. "In all these cases," moralizes the Close Reader in a reflexively Augustinian vein, "their initial honorable and patriotic intentions become secondary to their self-interest and the desire to gain wealth which blinds them to their duty and drives them to commit murder" (p.41). Thus does tropology follow typology in his analysis—as Christian dawn follows Pagan darkness. Clearly the Close Reader has more trouble than the Postmodern Reader in resisting collusion with Dante-poet's mode of reading classical poetry according to the Allegory of the Theologians. But was it merely post-lapsarian "greed" (p.52) that moved these classical warriors to capture trophies from the battlefield? Were they only interested in grabbing as much loot as they could carry off with them on their steeds? Surely the ritual of trophy-acquisition in ancient warfare had deep anthropological roots in the cult of family honour and in the glorification of the victor as an embodiment of a city or tribe. Verdicchio assumes that Dante-poet looked back at the battle scenes in the *Aeneid* through an Augustinian mirror, darkly, with little soldierly interest in the continuities and contrasts between ancient and medieval warfare in Italy.

As for his hermeneutical thesis, which hinges on an insistence that the Allegory of the Poets chiefly (or perhaps *only*) concerns poetry at its literal level, I find it similarly overstated. While Dante's Ovidian choice of the Orpheus myth to illustrate poetic allegory certainly reveals his deep concern with "what poets do and have always done from time immemorial" (p. xv), does this predictable *exemplum* imply a manifesto-like injunction that poetic allegory must always concern the social value of poets or the civilizing impact of poetry on barbarous souls? If self-reflection lies at the wellspring of Dante's Allegory of the Poets, then perhaps Narcissus would have made a more persuasive exemplar than Orpheus.

Sometime in the intellectually restless interval between the publication of the Italian translation and its expansive re-rendering into English the shade of Croce must have appeared to Verdicchio in the dark wood of postmodern theory to guide him back towards the "diritta via" of formalist aestheticism. The ironically modernist agenda behind his project of "reading the poem on its own terms as a poem" is clearly Crocean in origin, and no doubt reflects his expertise in modern Italian aesthetics. I was not surprised to discover that he is also the author of *Naming Things: Aesthetics, Philosophy, and History in Benedetto Croce*, which was published by La Città del Sole in 2000 (the same year as *Della dissimulazione*).

Between Croce and Verdicchio falls the long shadow of Teodolinda Barolini, whose 1992 volume *The Undivine Comedy: Detheologizing Dante* remains the authoritative rallying cry against Singleton's glossatorial canonization of Dante as Thomas in tercets. I was also not surprised to discover that the first long footnote in *Reading Dante Reading* (p.188) is a direct quotation of Barolini's polemical definition of detheologized reading. Under her Neo-Crocean influence, Verdicchio is impelled to break free from the bad medievalizing mindset of the mid-century American School of Dantists, to liberate himself, and by audacious extension, Dante, from the prison of theological meanings overdetermined by the interpretive guidelines that the *Commedia* has deviously structured into itself.

What alternative image of the Poet, what Dante-*ombra*, is conjured up by a

detheologized reading of his works? That question haunted me as I puzzled my way through the preface and introduction into the nine essays. As their new title implies, the revised set of essays promises to deliver a new Poet for our guidance through the pit of deconstructive paradoxes we have dug for ourselves since the Death of God. Similarly, the new subtitle advertises not only a bold contemporary take on the *Commedia* but also, in some sense, a new Poem for our times, a collaborative work emerging from the convergent glosses of readers who read Dante as, well, just another reader. So he has now become one of Us—no longer the Divine Poet, a role supposedly unsustainable after the Death of the Author, but an honorary member in our disputatious school of self-authorizing allegorists of reading. Clearly, if Verdicchio's ironic Dante is to save us all from semantic vaticanization, we must never see him again as one of Them (e.g. Homer, Ovid, Virgil), the way Raphael envisioned him high up on Parnassus in the Stanza della Segnatura.

The cogency of Verdicchio's detheologized readings stems from his stalwart resistance to the neo-medieval pressure in postmodern criticism to argue *ex auctoritate*. His rhetorical analysis of Dante's dissimulating "praise" of Virgil in *Inferno* 1, for instance, follows a bathetic Barolinian trajectory away from the Parnassian heights of divine inspiration towards the dense intertextual thickets of classical allusion at the typological and tropological levels. Though Barolini urged Dantists to follow her lead if they wished to avoid the silly trap of Dantean fundamentalism, her counter-interpretive authority is not what impelled him to hack his way through the second half of the *Aeneid* to find out for himself why the heroic warriors "Camilla and Eurylaus, Turnus, and Nisus" died of their wounds and were praised for their patriotism by the faint-voiced shade of Virgil in a key Veltro tercet (*Inf.* 1. 106-108). Rather, it was Verdicchio's close reading of the tercet itself—the germinal project for the original volume—that first revealed to him Dante-poet's prevailing satiric project of exposing "the deceit inherent in encomiastic poetry" (p.44).

Verdicchio likes to present himself, and often proves to be, a glossator with a strongly independent turn of mind—just like his old graduate student persona, the bumptious non-Dantist who set out long ago to find "something new to say" (p. ix) about the opening canto of the *Commedia*. Years later, he proudly confirms that he did so, and his claim to originality is a stirring example of what might be called the "Effability Topos." A flicker of eighth-bolgia persuasiveness lights up this claim whenever it confirms itself against prevailing critical judgments (e.g. pp. 94, 141, 187), though it is a salient marker of the Ulyssean adventurousness behind his dialectical quest to follow the currents of Dantean irony as far as they will take him, even if that means towards conclusions admittedly far-fetched: e.g. "the siren is really a man when driven by passion and desire" (p. 78); "There are no gods or God in the *Commedia* that summon the hero to greater undertakings" (p. 87); and "Not only does [Brunetto] condemn this sin [sodomy] but he also writes frequently of it to the point of leaving no doubt that he himself is guilty of it" (p. 179). Critics of Pope Benedict's rigid stance on homosexuality can take heart at the prospect of the boundless ocean of ironies opened up by a postmodern reading of Dante as a secular satirist who emerges from the wars of truth as a

radical Humanist rather than as a rabid Catholic. It turns out that there are ever so many new things that *can* be said about the Sacred Poem if you trust your own demystifying instincts and read it from start to finish as a secular satire.

Despite the odd lapse here and there into Catholic allegoresis, Verdicchio does succeed in unveiling a perversely detheologized Dante in his reading of *Inferno* 1. While the Poet would have us read him as the new Jeremiah, or the new John, or even the new Jesus, the Postmodern Reader conjures him up for us as the new Juvenal. Like the old Juvenal, whose seventh satire harps on the economic rewards Virgil enjoyed for heaping hypocritical praise on the heroic ancestors of the Augustan elite while decrying the rapacious thirst for gold behind the violent rush of Roman history, the ruthless satirist of the *Commedia* “severs ironically the symbolic ties with the house of Augustus that compromise Virgil’s poetry” and rejects “the deceit engendered by the union of poetry and political power” (p.108). Strange as a perpetually vituperative Dante may seem from an anagogic viewpoint—and we’ll have to wait until a promised volume on *Paradiso* is published to see whether this glowering identification is sustainable in the long run – Verdicchio does rise to the challenge of persuading us in the short run that the *Inferno* at least, and possibly also the *Purgatorio*, were satirically designed by a Juvenalian critic of Christian Rome and of an Italy far from “umile.”

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Saverio Bellomo. *Filologia e critica dantesca*. Strumenti universitari di base. Sezione di italianistica. Brescia: La Scuola, 2008. Pp. 352. ISBN 978-88-350-2319-7. €27.

Uno strumento ideato per la formazione di studenti universitari del triennio e del biennio magistrale in Italia, questo volume è destinato ad occupare un posto di rilievo in ambito universitario nord-americano a tutti i livelli di studio. Costituito da quattro parti – una presentazione di Dante e delle sue opere con una fortuna della filologia dantesca, opera per opera; un’antologia di documenti e di testi filologici (brani tratti da edizioni critiche fondamentali e da saggi di filologi e studiosi importanti commentati e spiegati da Bellomo) che servono come materiale di base per l’organizzazione di laboratori e seminari universitari; una bibliografia delle risorse dantesche essenziali (bibliografie, periodici specializzati, edizioni complete, saggi sulla tradizione dei testi, concordanze, siti web di interesse dantesco, saggi complessivi sulla lingua e stile di Dante, principali commenti sulle opere); un glossario dei termini linguistici, filologici, metrici e retorici – il volume è di grandissima utilità, non solo come guida agli studi danteschi per chi incontra le opere o affronta i problemi critici danteschi per la prima volta, ma anche come testo di riferimento per chi prepara gli esami del dottorato, per chi organizza o insegna corsi su Dante, e per chi, essendosi specializzato in un campo ristretto della critica dantesca, potrà approfittare dei criteri e dei modelli filologici ideati in altri