

Prologue:
Wilderness

*Can a Poet doubt the Vision of Jehovah? Nature has no Outline:
but Imagination has. Nature has no Tune: but Imagination has!
Nature has no Supernatural & dissolves: Imagination is Eternity*
—William Blake

*The Voice of the Serpent
dry hiss of age & steam
& leaves of gold
old books in ruined
Temples*

*I will not disturb
I will not go
Come, he says softly
an old man appears &
moves in tired dance
amid the scattered dead
gently they stir*
—Jim Morrison, *Wilderness*

I

I have resisted—and unsuccessfully, for practical reasons—writing this preface because it seems to me that many, if not most, of the premises and functions of the introduction are antithetical to the historical constructs this book is grounded in. There has been no shortage of meditation on the problem of beginnings: Said’s brilliant book of the same title; Vico, who frames and gives great proleptic life to Said’s discussion; Derrida’s highly influential “outwork”; even Hegel, who points out in his own preface to *The Phenomenology of Mind*¹ that it can be both inappropriate and misleading to begin by explaining the end the author had in mind (or, as perhaps few would admit, the end the author thinks she may have figured out after she has finally finished writing the book). A number of intimately linked classes of misrepresentation and misreadings are thereby encouraged: what is lyrical is flattened in explanation and clarification,² and retrospective light is made out to be guiding.

But the purposes of and the generally perceived need for introductions are clear: the material at the beginning neatly “restores” the harmony of diachrony that the writing process itself radically under-

1. In the edition I use I note the superb irony of the almost ridiculous number of introductions: the Introduction to the Torchbook edition, written by George Lichtheim; a Prefatory Note to the second edition by J. B. Baillie; a Translator’s Introduction, also by Baillie; and a Preface and an Introduction, the last two by Hegel himself.

2. Hegel states this in his own philosophical terms: “Moreover, because philosophy has its being essentially in the element of that universality which encloses the particular within it, the end or final result seems . . . to have absolutely expressed the complete fact itself in its very nature; contrasted with that the mere process of bringing it to light would seem, properly speaking, to have no essential significance” (68).

mines. At some level we all hew to that polite and reassuring fiction that these bits of ordering somehow did and do come first. And in part this book is about the parallel and comparable fiction that is the cornerstone of literary history as we have been narrating it in the modern period: that almost unchallengeable notion that literary history actually works in a diachronic fashion. Indeed, we are inordinately enamoured of the construct of diachrony and the linear history that narrates it, and their presumed attendant clarities; we believe them to constitute the most fundamental heuristic and hermeneutic realities. But this book argues—indirectly, through the structures of literary relations it sets out—that this narrative-historical model actually distorts a far more important element of truth and reality. For literary history is itself not diachronic but rather synchronistic: time is all jumbled up everywhere, authors from different centuries and different universes sit one next to another and shape each others' work, both proleptically and retrospectively, as well as in the “normal” diachronic ways we are used to expecting and analyzing. Although one can hear the accusations already (“anachronism,” “dehistoricization”), where is the historical truth, what contingency do we capture, in the retrospective linear order we impose? What reader, what writer, has ever read within an ordered history, much less written as part of it? Where is the falsehood in the history that tells us that Borges as a young man learned about literature not from the Argentine short story writers who preceded him (that, perhaps, is a different story) but rather as he was riding back and forth on the trolleys of Buenos Aires, sitting next to Dante and his *Commedia*? Literary history has all too often been an act of ordering and classifying, part and parcel of the strong scientific impulse from which philology was born and its many attendant post-Cartesianisms and positivisms. But why should we so strongly privilege the “reality” of diachrony and relegate other constructs of temporal relationships to a different and far less significant plane? One could easily argue that there is a far more compelling and influential reality in the orderings of personal histories—within which, for example, I first read Dante as an epigone of Eliot's, going from the *Animula* to the *Purgatorio*—than in other constructs. Thus, in part, this

book is about the problems of writing literary history in a way that does not flatten the uncanniness of literature and does not imagine history to be either linear or clearly distinguishable from literature itself.

The model which underlies this work is thus something like what my colleague Giuseppe Mazzotta calls Viconian: "To the idea of history as a linear series of discrete rational units Vico responds with a view of history as an ever shifting configuration whereby time and space are simultaneously entailed and all periods are present." Clearly, it also shares with Vico's thought that anti-Cartesianism which would emerge, with a different texture, of course, in another renegade philologist, Pound. Pound's own "New Science," his radical departure from what philology had become at Pennsylvania in the first part of this century (starkly more Cartesian than Viconian), was both *The Spirit of Romance* and the *Cantos*. My own reaction inscribed in these pages is not only transparently anti-Cartesian but embraces what literary history, particularly in the age of positivism and rivalry with the other "sciences," has believed should be erased and banished: belief in what some may call the fantastical and respect for the compelling power of the most subjective elements: personal histories and personal visions. I thus rely heavily on two renegade models for temporal and literary relations: synchronicity and kabbalism.

My own understanding and use of the kabbala—which has both traditionally as well as recently been the object of vast scholarship—is very simple and limited: the kabbala is the master text, the writing of the universe, the telling of history in the cosmos. Like the Dante of the *Vita nuova*, we sit at our desks and ponder the stories and the texts and the inscriptions of our lives, lives whose vicissitudes and meanings are not knowable until, chapter by chapter, vessel by vessel, the writing, the passage of time, sheds light and tells us what the words meant the first time around. Jung's concept of synchronicity, unlike the kabbala, is far less well known. (While the kabbala has been left for the true believers and the literary historians to figure out and enjoy, Jung's work is, most of the time, subjected to the positivist scrutiny of a scientific community quite unlikely to revel in its darkest corners—of which there are, of

course, many in Jung's extensive oeuvre.) Jung himself sets out the basic concept most starkly:

All natural phenomena of this kind [acausal phenomena, otherwise called miracles] are unique and exceedingly curious combinations of chance, held together by the common meaning of their parts to form an unmistakable whole. . . . Synchronicity designates the parallelism of time and meaning between psychic and psychophysical events, which scientific knowledge so far has been unable to reduce to a common principle. . . . The only recognizable and demonstrable link between them [parallel events] is a common meaning, or equivalence. (Jung, *On Synchronicity*, 517–18)

I understand this in terms that parallel my understanding of kabbala: they are both modes of describing the often uncanny relationship between self and universe, a relationship in which the universe speaks—at times indecipherably—to that soul which has become a central character.

II

I can also describe this book in other ways. It is about the great fertility of Dante's meditations on what poetry ought to be, notions emblazoned everywhere throughout his work but most conspicuous at a number of key literary moments: at the heart of the conversionary *Vita nuova*; in the stunning scene of Francesca and her book; with the burning up of the "miglior fabbro" Arnaut Daniel at the summit of Purgatory. The extraordinary power of the Dantesque vision of poetry and its potential to reflect the Truths of existence are rooted in the marriage of literature and literary history that Dante effects. And in his aftermath, from the most immediate possible well into the various cycles of our own poetic era, Dante himself, variously and often very differently conceived, of course, becomes the critical prism and anvil for the musings on the same subjects of a stunning range of other poets. From Borges in a century and world hardly conceivable in fourteenth-century

Florence to the Boccaccio who first lectured there and then on the *Commedia*, Dante, his recastings of literary history, and his beliefs in the needs and duties of poetry—all strongly articulated within the literary enterprise itself, the *Vita nuova* and the *Commedia* particularly—in turn become the literary tropes for the later poets' recastings of both history and theory. The allusive Dantes in later literature, reshaped and recast in the mainstream of the literary history being constantly rewritten by poets, come out in many disguises, in the shapes of his own creations, or versions of them: Beatrices, Francescas, Cavalcantis, Arnauts.

It is, most of all, that Dante so intent on mastering the discourse of literary history, both before and after himself, who will be used again and again as a strongly evocative but also highly malleable token of poetry as a version of ideology. In the inevitable paradox, Dante has thus both succeeded and failed remarkably. While he is immensely powerful, the seemingly necessary element in the imaginative expressions of views on the ethics of poetry in the entire range of both Old and New World literatures, as essential a tool in Ezra Pound's catalogue as in the now obscure Silvio Pellico's, he is, no less than the poets he manipulates in his own works, the object of interpretation and manipulation himself, as much a vulnerable ghost, at times, as the Guido lurking about the tombs.

I have treated these issues in what seems to me the only viable fashion: episodically. Each chapter deals with an episode in this literary history of poetic literary histories and with one or more of the theoretical issues that that episode forces on us. The initial chapter is a reading of the *Vita nuova* itself as Dante's most excruciatingly naked vision of the relationship between Poetry and Truth. Silvio Pellico's now neglected *Le mie prigioni*, once the only text to rival the *Commedia* in international popularity, is in a number of ways exemplary of the often negative burden of Dante in an Italian canon unsure whether to join him or fight him. Pellico's various Francescas and his explicit rewritings of the *Commedia* constitute the key episodes explored in the second chapter, as well as the issues of autobiographical and conversionary structures and the possibility of univocal interpretations of texts so excruciatingly present in all the versions of the Francesca story that converge here. The

central chapter of the book is an extended consideration of the apparently simple dedication to *The Waste Land*: the tribute paid by Eliot to his maker Pound, the same tribute paid by Dante to his maker Arnaut. The famous “miglior fabbro” epithet explicitly makes Dante a major player of a specific sort in the battles of modernism, and also sheds light on the nature of the literary history Dante was in the process of writing, a literary history Pound himself, a refugee from a Romance philology that served Dante too slavishly for Pound’s tastes, will aggressively revise and even reverse. And Dante and Eliot, as the wielders of the ambiguous praise of the epithet, are conspicuously playing the role of poet-critic which they so relished, an issue which will surface as central in this chapter as well.

Two of the strongest visions and revisions of Dante emerge from great silences: Borges’s always-dead Beatriz and Petrarch’s conspicuous denial, the powerful unnamings of Dante that helps shape the *Rime sparse*. Chapter 4 deals with the most fragmentary and unnerving of rewritings, Borges’s “The Aleph” and the eightieth of the three hundred and sixty-six poems of Petrarch’s vernacular triumph, and with the issues of poetic ideologies and the anguishes of fame and posterity that are so explicitly confronted by both of these “rivals.” Finally, in what I think of as an epilogue, the last chapter returns to the two most tantalizing figures glimpsed at the outset: the Guido who flickers briefly and brightly in the *Vita nuova* and the Francesca that obsessed Pellico (and, it sometimes seems, whole chunks of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries). But now they are part of a universe, that of the *Decameron*, remarkably close in time and space but also at what one might call an engaged distance: Boccaccio calls his own book a Galeotto, thus tying any interpretation of the *Decameron* to some interpretation of the *Commedia* (or at least of the Francesca episode), and at the same time dwells unflinchingly throughout on the enormous but inevitable and central difficulties of interpretation that are at the very heart of the literary and human enterprises. In what is my own attempt to avoid strict closure, I thus finish with Boccaccio’s essentially subversive reading of the lessons of a *Commedia* which has metamorphosed from the transparency preordained in the

Vita nuova to the inadvertent and unwilling bearer of interpretative difficulty, that great example of the necessary relativism of texts and their readings, that is everywhere in the *Decameron*.

III

Many of the thousands of bits and pieces of this book, which existed as fragments of my teaching, a number of talks, and much of my endless conversation for about ten years before I had the necessary time and insights to shape it into a book, have been colored and shaped by an embarrassingly large number of people. I hope the insights from many, perhaps most, of those countless conversations are appropriately embedded and refracted in the chapters that follow; an attempt to recount them would be a far poorer acknowledgement than the reflections I think are everywhere in my text. Much "influence" is best left in its uncanny forms, and the acts of memory of a text are probably more honest and full than any long list, perforce dismissive, of names could conceivably be. There is a smaller crowd of individuals, however, whose presences have been so crucial to the very existence of the book that they can safely be named without diminishment.

Two extraordinary students, Linda Armao and Virginia Jewiss Campbell, both symbolize and embody the many and varied benefits and pleasures of the teaching half of our lives. In a different universe, Linda would have been co-author of an article that never took shape but that, in a substantially modified form, became the central chapter of this book on "Faint Praise"; to her I am indebted for not only the critical research assistance she provided in the initial phases of my inexpert thinking on Pound and Eliot, but far more for an unflinching loyalty and key, superb readings of the most difficult texts, both qualities which have sustained and encouraged me at crucial junctures in the writing of this text. Ginny, too, is the sort of student, and thus teacher, imagined in much sentimental pulp about teaching and learning, and which very occasionally comes to life with poignant immediacy. For this book, as it has evolved slowly from scattered readings in undergraduate survey courses at Penn to the synchronically ordered readings that fell into place at

Yale, and for many chapters that lie far outside this book, she has been the indispensable ally, the too-smart interlocutor, the loving recipient, blackboard and mirror, the dresser without whom the actress might well forget her lines.

Others have played crucial roles: George Calhoun rescues me daily from the many traps of banal domesticity and wields a meaner blue pencil than any other editor. He makes the articulations of my life possible and has always left the right books lying around for me to bump into. My debt to Giuseppe Mazzotta, aspects of which are conspicuous and detailed on most pages of this book, is actually mostly of the unacknowledgable sort: this is a book he encouraged and enabled, for the most part unknowingly, in hundreds of conversations and dozens of arguments about literary history and its articulations. Without his superb intellect and generosity I might not have dared to write such a book. And the magical Frances Howland has given all the alternates a perfect home these last four years. In far greater measure than she knows she makes my soul and intellect thrive in New Haven—and thus everywhere—and I have written this book basking in that sunshine.

But most of all, I think, this book would probably not exist without Roberto González Echevarría, who in many crucial ways practices what most people in our profession only preach. As the inimitably pithy Stanley Fish has most recently put it, being “interdisciplinary” is “so very hard to do”—mostly, to brutally reinterpret his argument, because interdisciplinarity is a theoretical posture that scarcely, if at all, affects disciplinary practices. In practice, of course, institutional pressures of vast proportions have in recent years essentially and functionally dismembered the discipline of Romance philology—at least that version of it that one can see prefigured in Dante’s *De vulgari* and that Pound rewrote in his *Spirit of Romance*—so that with the rare, usually aging exception, medieval literary studies in practice is now neatly divided into discrete linguistic and temporal packages that tag us—and largely delimit our work—as Italianists or Hispanists, as modernists or medievalists, as experts in the new world or the old. Within such a universe Roberto has unflinchingly encouraged and defended my own largely idiosyncratic critical practice and thus, given the imperatives of practical

realities, made it possible. At the end of the day of my first visit to New Haven, Roberto quite literally threw himself into the middle of the street, directly in front of an oncoming cab which showed no interest in stopping until it confronted him—all so that I might not miss my train. The event, as Dante might say, prefigured the Truth; and for all his subsequent reenactments of that generous and fearless gesture, this book is, in part, a token of thanks.