Albert Russell Ascoli. *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author*.
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. xviii + 458 pp. index. bibl. $99. ISBN: 978–0–521–88236–1.

In three decades of teaching and writing about Dante, I do not recall a more meticulously researched study, at least in English, of the Florentine poet's total *oeuvre*. Albert Ascoli's tome registers in excess of 400 pages of close readings of Dantean texts (*Convivio*, *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, *Vita Nova*, *Monarchia*, and

Commedia); in addition, it includes 581 footnotes, the meatier of which extend to over twenty lines set in very small font. The list of Works Consulted alone fills thirty-nine pages. In terms of painstaking research and stimulating analysis this volume represents a *tour de force* worthy of Ascoli's chief mentor, Giuseppe Mazzotta, *'l maestro di color che sanno'* and the scholar cited in the preface as the "*sine qua non* of *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author*" (xii).

Though wide-ranging in the Latin and Italian texts treated, this extended study nevertheless focuses tightly on the related but complicated medieval concepts of *author* (*auctor* or *autore*) and *authority* (*auctoritas* or *autoritade*). As Ascoli acknowledges, in diverse ways the entire book serves as "a protracted gloss" (301) to Dante-Pilgrim's welcoming words to Virgil: "Tu se' lo mio maestro e 'l mio *autore*" (*Inf.* 1.85, emphasis mine). The book is also highly and logically structured. It starts with an historical foundation addressing the notion of "What is an *auctor*?"; then it traces the concepts of authorship and authority through each of Dante's works. An Introduction (chapter 1, "The Author in History") is followed by part 1 (entitled "An Author in the Works: Dante before the *Commedia*"), which is subdivided into three chapters (ch. 2, "Definitions: The Vowels of Authority"; ch. 3, "Language: '*Neminem ante nos*'"; and ch. 4, "Auto-Commentary: Dividing Dante"), and then part 2 ("Authority in Person: Dante between *Monarchia* and the *Commedia*"), divided into another three chapters (ch. 5, "'No judgment among equals': Dividing Authority in Dante's *Monarchia*"; ch. 6, "Palinode and History"; and ch. 7, "The Author of the *Commedia*").

Ascoli's ambitious goal is "to describe a temporal line of emergent ideas and strategies that resist the typically monolithic, *Commedia*-centered characterizations of Dantean authority" (55). The Florentine's so-called *opere minori*, therefore, play a much more prominent role in this book than in most North American Dante criticism. For example, in the discussion of *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, I appreciate the remarkable insight that "if the *vulgare illustre* is, on the one hand figuratively equated with God, the Author of authors, on the other it is indirectly identified with an individual human writer, Dante himself" (155). Likewise I value the author's observation that "*Vita Nova* may well be the single most innovative text Dante ever composed" and "certainly . . . the most opaque to critical deciphering" (181). I agree that, in the *Convivio*, in order to establish his authority "Dante implicitly stages himself, via his poetry and commentary, as the philosopher who stands as a necessary complement to the Emperor, embodied by Frederick [II]" (288). In the case of the *Commedia* I concur that, in *Purgatorio* 22, Statius's (and Dante-Poet's) "deliberate wrenching of Virgil's words to a meaning exactly opposite to that appropriate to the original context suggests a notion of medieval textuality . . . in which signification is out of the control of a text's author and in that of the *lector*, who discovers meanings that suit his own moral and spiritual needs and do not necessarily correspond to the writer's original intentions" (320). Such gems are scattered throughout the volume.

Ascoli never shies away from presenting conflicting views or divergent scholarly interpretations of key Dantean passages. He never tires of noting how

"complex" the issues are that he himself raises. He is not afraid to pose a question and then respond that "there are plural *answers*" (316, his emphasis). Phrases such as "on the one hand" and "on the other hand" pepper his prolix prose; invariably they are accompanied by lengthy citations of relevant scholarly authorities. And yet, for all of Ascoli's remarkable research and reflection on autotextuality or autoreflexivity, Anita Obermeier's foundational study, *The History and Anatomy of Auctorial Self-Criticism in the European Middle Ages*, does not appear on the radar screen (or in the Works Consulted). Likewise Gérard Genette's useful theoretical framework and discriminating vocabulary (e.g., hypertextuality and architextuality) are noticeably absent from the many lengthy passages devoted to various forms of intertextuality. Such quibbles aside, this book is definitely required reading for all earnest scholars of Dante's *opera omnia*.

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