

#### **Vita Nuova.**

DANTE ALIGHIERI. TRANS. RALPH WALDO EMERSON. ED. IGOR CANDIDO. Torino: Nino Aragno Editore, 2012. xxx + 305 pp. € 15.00 cloth.

Igor Candido has found an opportunity to perform a number of services for Emerson's readers in Italy and around the globe. It takes some imagination, however, to appreciate fully the contribution Candido makes by publishing an annotated edition of Emerson's 1843 translation of Dante's *Vita Nuova* in 2012 and in, of all places, Italy. After all, excellent editions of Dante's early work abound there, and the locals are native speakers of Italian. Moreover, Emerson's English version has been available since 1957, when J. Chesley Mathews's edition of that translation appeared in the *Harvard Library Bulletin*. Subsequently, it was also reprinted in 1960 in the University of North Carolina Press series, *Studies in Comparative Literature*.

Candido's book, however, performs at least a double service. He not only re-edits, re-annotates, and presents for the first time *en face* both Emerson's translation and his source text, Bartolomeo Sermontelli's 1576 *editio princeps* of Dante's little book. He also recognizes that, because Emerson's translation was not published until 1957, this notable intervention in the belated nineteenth-century Anglo-American reception of Dante has been overlooked.

It is easy to forget (or never know) how slowly Dante's modern English-speaking readership came into being. The Italian Renaissance itself demoted Dante and crowned new laureates. The sixteenth century, when Ariosto and Tasso became rivals for pre-eminence in narrative poetry, deemed Dante "gothic" and "medieval." Even the "medievalizing" Edmund Spenser, an English Christian allegorical poet of the highest accomplishment, bears virtually no trace of his Italian Catholic precursor in that enterprise. The Puritan Milton, as ever, is a complicated case. He finds it hard to separate religion from church government, so the anti-papal Dante had a certain appeal even though, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, he would enjoy nothing close to his modern reputation.

Candido appreciates the belatedness of Dante's nineteenth-century achievement of prominence in the western canon. He is aware of what popular fiction, like Matthew Pearl's *The Dante Club* (2003), and celebrated scholarship, like Dennis Looney's *Freedom Readers: The African American Reception of Dante Alighieri and the Divine Comedy* (2011), have recently helped us learn about that process of canonization. Candido's edition of the *Vita Nuova* includes a virtual monograph on the previously under-reported Emersonian reception not only of the minor work by Dante that Emerson translated but of the major work that Americans nowadays seem, almost compulsively, unable not to translate and retranslate—the *Divine Comedy*, and especially its first cantic. In a wide array of English-ings, the *Inferno* has remained a familiar feature of undergraduate education in the humanities even as such staple courses have undergone alarming drops in enrollment and in prestige.

Candido's monograph sets Emerson the *Dantista* amid his pertinent precursors, companions, and heirs: Longfellow, Carlyle, Fuller, Santayana, Eliot, and Pound, among others. In the process of recounting his story of an Emersonian Dante, Candido is also acquainting Italian readers with central figures of the American canon, and none more so than Emerson himself, whose life and work are thus made available to a wider transatlantic audience. Charles Singleton is one of the most prominent American interpreters in this literary history, and his role could be an increasingly interesting one for Emersonians.

Singleton's reputation in Italy especially rests on his detailed elaboration of how allegory works in the *Commedia*, and he achieved influence abroad at a time when such readings of Dante were not fashionable. The historicism of DeSanctis and the aestheticism of Croce still prevailed in Italy, just as Longfellow's historicism had long dominated American approaches to Dante in the nineteenth century. Singleton was notably a lover of Emerson with a transcendental turn of mind that oriented him toward "the senses of Emerson"—metaphysical, neoplatonic, symbolic, allegorical, etc.—as well as those of Dante. Though Emerson was by no means as systematic as Dante in attending to such resonances and significations, he was almost forever open to their transformative power. Emerson remains so thanks to such readers as Stanley Cavell and the many who, thanks to Cavell, have found their way afresh in Emerson. As Igor Candido recounts it, Emerson's role in the American reception of Dante, via Charles Singleton, can give us yet another compelling way to appreciate the manifold senses in Emerson's writing.

And in Dante's too. Long ago, in the seventh paragraph of his famous letter to his patron, Can Grande della Scala, Dante explained that his work was "polysemous, that is, having many meanings... Though these mystic senses may be called by various names, they can all generally be spoken of as allegorical." As Emerson puts it in a lecture he first delivered during the year he translated the *Vita Nuova*, "In nature, every word we speak is million-faced or convertible to an indefinite number of applications. If it were not so, we could read no book. For each sentence would only fit the single case which the author had in view. Dante, who described his circumstance, would be unintelligible now. But a thousand readers, in a thousand different years and towns, shall read his story and find it a version of their story by making a new application of every word."

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