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The Favorite Malice edited by Thomas J. Harrison

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tion of the text, which in turn resolved itself in trends and tendencies which at times contradict one another. (p. 28)

This "relativamente vago rapporto di genere a specie" between (Derrida's) deconstruction and (de Man's) "textualism" is anything but vague. The synecdochal relation that would characterize it is in actuality the locus of a disruption, the deconstruction of the synecdoche, the trope of philosophy, by the trope of literature. It is, however, destined to remain "relativamente vago" for the sake of a philosophical discourse or for the type of analysis exemplified by *La Svolta Testuale*.

It is inevitable, in fact, that books like Ferraris's, whether conscious of it or not, perpetuate the same aberrant distinctions just as it is inevitable that they be disrupted by a reading that takes into account the literary, the only genuine *svolta testuale*.

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***The Favorite Malice:
Ontology and Reference in
Contemporary Italian Poetry***
Ed. and trans. by
Thomas J. Harrison
New York-Norristown-Milan:
Out of London Press, 1983

What does it mean to write and to read poetry in a post-Nietzschean and post-Heideggerian era? An era, that is, whose notion of language is devoid of historical or ontological foundations? *The Favorite Malice*, a bilingual anthol-

ogy of poetry, poetics, theory and criticism—including texts by some of the most interesting contemporary Italian poets (Zanzotto, Porta, Cagnone, and others), as well as philosophers (Gianni Vattimo and Jacques Garelli) and literary critics (Fredí Chiappelli, Stefano Agosti, Angus Fletcher, etc.)—attempts to address some of the issues related to these questions. "The Favorite Malice" (a quote taken from the "On the Mount of Olives" section of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: "It is my favorite malice and art, that my silence has learned not to betray itself by silence") was originally the title of a symposium held at New York University in 1979. The anthology contains an account of the symposium and some of the texts read there, but most of the material is more recent and was written at the request of the principal organizer, Luigi Ballerini, as an "update" and a response to the questions and debates that emerged during the symposium.

The purification of lyrical language, the attempt to reach a "zero degree" of writing, the creation of an improbable or impossible syntax, the proliferation of signifiers without regard for the referent, and the use of margins and typographical space to establish a frame of visual "silence": all these strategies, as found in the anthologized poems, testify to a post-Nietzschean and post-Heideggerian use and abuse of language as an experience of the limits of the word as well as the limits of Being. Poetry, writes Heidegger, "brings the unsayable as such into a world." According to Vattimo (the most prominent interpreter of Nietzsche and Heidegger in Italy today), this is a language whose horizon is the anticipation of death, and whose expressive power is defined paradoxically by silence. However, it is extremely difficult to ascertain whether this kind of threshold language which speaks the silence of lived temporality

is in any way "of" our era, or of the twentieth century, or of poetry in every and any age, or even of poetry *per se*. In 1852, Flaubert was already attempting to write "a book about nothing, with no external pretexts." *Tristram Shandy* seems to speak of the silence of lived temporality which has death as its limit and foundation just as much as, for example, Cagnone's *What's Hecuba to Him or He to Hecuba? The Magic Flute* is, as noted by Angus Fletcher in his parodic pastiche, "Letter to Nanni Cagnone" (p. 336), our best work on the range of senses of silence. But perhaps the two main issues raised in *The Favorite Malice*—the paradoxical ontology of the poetic word and the silent groundlessness of language—define neither the essence of aesthetic expression nor the mode of writing of contemporary Italian poetry. Rather, they represent our way of reading and looking at the past; therefore, they constitute only a single episode in the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of Western aesthetics.

This way of reading, which is also a way of writing, takes on a variety of stylistic configurations in this anthology, ranging from the "high" style of epic and tragedy, to the middle style of comedy, common poetry and critical prose, to the "low" style of satire. The most biting piece of satire is confined to the end of the volume: it is an ironic résumé of the symposium by Alain Arias-Misson entitled "From Offstage," and—in the tradition of Woody Allen—is full of jokes about Heidegger. The long introductory essay in five sections by Thomas Harrison, "Nietzsche, Heidegger and the Language of Contemporary Italian Poetry," is an impeccable example of the "high" style. It is a five-act epic drama which opens, appropriately enough, with a myth of genesis, and then traces the fateful predicament of Writing and Reading in search of Being and Language through the labyrinth of

reference and difference. Harrison's translations appear no less heroic in view of the sometimes extreme difficulty of the original texts. Translation, like poetry, is indeed "subject to a tragic paradox: knowing the frailty of its language, it persists in its quest for disclosure" (Harrison, p. 26).

It is the chief value of this anthology that highly serious and elegant texts such as those by Cagnone, Ballerini, Vattimo and Jacques Garelli ("poetry is an ontology of reference . . . by way of negated and transformed memories") are offset by a number of playful, parodic and nonsensical texts, such as the works by Zanzotto and Giuliani. And it is to the editor's credit (I believe) to have chosen a line from Giuliani, *le vacche mi svaccano*, as the inspiration for the illustration on the cover of the volume, which acts as a counterpoint to its somewhat forbidding title.

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Writers and Society in Contemporary Italy

Michael Caesar and
Peter Hainsworth, eds.

NY: St. Martin's Press, 1984

Writers and Society in Contemporary Italy is an interesting example of a very familiar kind of book. Employing the talents of a number of specialists, usefully equipped with bibliographies and suggestions for further reading, a book of this sort proposes to assume the role of cultural tour guide, introducing its