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Corinna Laude, *"Daz in swindelt in den sinnen": Die Poetik der Perspektive bei Heinrich Wittenweiler und Giovanni Boccaccio*, Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 2002, Pp. 363, € 49.80.

Kurt Flasch, *Vernunft und Vergnügen. Liebesgeschichten aus dem* Decameron, Munich: Verlag C. H. Beck, 2002, Pp. 287, € 24.90.

These two books on Boccaccio's *Decameron*, peculiarly symmetrical in their opposite but neatly complementary goals and methodologies, were published in Germany in 2002.

The first of the two, Corinna Laude's *"Daz in swindelt in den sinnen" ("His head swam": The Poetics of Perspective in Heinrich Wittenweiler and Giovanni Boccaccio*), aims at establishing a homology between the way in which reality is apprehended and represented in, respectively, Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Wittenweiler's *Der Ring* (*The Ring*), a satirical and pedagogical composition of about 10,000 verses written around the year 1400. On account of its encyclopedic attempt to combine theological, courtly and worldly teachings, as well as its recourse to a comic, amusing, and at times grotesque or uncanny storyline, *The Ring* can perhaps best be characterized as a peculiar cross between a *fabliau* and a didactic poem in the vein of the *Roman de la rose*. Laude's contention is that, although the *Decameron* and *The Ring* could hardly differ more from each other (not least, as she points out in her Conclusion, in the very different levels of success they have enjoyed with the public over the centuries), what they demonstrably have in common is an as yet insufficiently scrutinized liminal position: both, the author argues, belong to the cultural moment in Western civilization when, in the arts as well as in philosophy, the world began to be perceived on the new and, at first, problematic mode of perspectival representation. A "poetic of perspective," Laude thus argues, informs Boccaccio's and Wittenweiler's texts: both, on the one hand, reject a purely didactic construction of meaning, but also, on the other, both refuse to lapse into the nihilism of epistemological doubt. This middle path they tread by putting a creative self-assertion of the subject at the center of a perspectival grid: a grid that makes sense in new ways of a world which, within the earlier, medieval epistemological coordinates, had become, for all intents and purposes, all but opaque.

"Daz in swindelt in den sinnen" is published in a collection of philological studies, and quite self-explanatorily exhibits its nature as a barely modified reincarnation of a doctoral *Dissertation*. This brings with it the expected pluses and minuses typical of the genre. To no one's surprise, thoroughness and scholarly reliability find here their obverse in an erudite style that inevitably courts the disaster of a turbidity unredeemed by any, as it were, "perspectival" subjectivity. On the other hand, it clearly would be disingenuous to fault a philological study for being exactly what it aims to be: for taking, that is, more than 350 densely printed pages to argue what could be argued — and would probably turn out to be more cogently argued — in 35. No doubt, on the whole *"Daz in swindelt in den sinnen"* is a very solid book, which puts forward a compelling thesis. Would the author's efforts have proven more effective if they had concentrated on only one of the two widely disparate works that, as things stand, serve as the object of their scrutiny? To this doubt we cannot, of course, produce any counter-proof. All we can do is hope that the author's future production will testify

to the long-term fruitfulness of the hypothesis she has put at the vanishing point of her exhaustive inquiry.

At the opposite end of the stylistic spectrum we find Kurt Flasch's *Vernunft und Vergnügen. Liebesgeschichten aus dem* Decameron (*Reason and Pleasure: Love Stories from the* Decameron), which belongs to a collection aimed at the diffusion of broad cultural issues (from Western philosophy, Classical literature and history, to cognitive- and neuro-sciences, law, sociology, art history…) among the general public. To achieve this end, the author — a historian of philosophy in the Early Modern Age — devotes the first half of his book to a new translation, provided by himself, of love stories from the *Decameron*; and in the second part turns to a historico-cultural coming to grips with Boccaccio's text.

Flasch groups his selection of love-novellas under four rubrics: "News from the Other World" (VII.10, III.8 and III.10); "How Women Are" (II.10, IV.10, VII.1 and II.9); "Love as Unhappiness, Deceit and Folly" (IV.7, VIII.10 and IX.1); and finally, as a class of one and a group unto itself, "The Heroine of Love: Griselda" (X.10). The author then moves on to the argumentative part of his work (referring readers, when needed, to suitable passages in Part One), whose articulations comprise: first, a comparative/contrastive reading of the *Decameron*'s ethics vis-à-vis that of Dante's *Divine Comedy*; second, a thorough discussion of the notion of love at work throughout the *Decameron*, in its relation to morals, sensuality, the divine — and, as is to be expected on the basis of the book's title, also to reason and to pleasure; and third, an astute confrontation with Boccaccio's *Heiterkeit*, a German term elusively straddling the concepts of "mirth" and "serenity." Finally the fourth, and decidedly amplest, subunit in the book's Part Two consists of a critical engagement with what today seems to be the single most challenging (for us) among the *Decameron*'s stories: X.10, the story of Griselda, which closes Boccaccio's volume. Here Flasch — who had previously published a book entirely inspired by I.1: *Poesie nach der Pest. Der Anfang des* Decameron, 1992 (It. tr., *Poesia dopo la peste*, Bari: Laterza, 1995) — squarely takes on the challenge of elucidating what can appear to be an insoluble riddle: namely, the fact that, thanks to its privileged position *in fine*, the story of Griselda's predicament — depicting a woman's freely chosen submission to marital whim, injustice and cruelty — may appear to encapsulate some authorial statement about the *Decameron* as a whole, strikingly at odds with the principles we thought we had been hearing and learning from Boccaccio until the next-to-last novella.

While Flasch does not offer a quick-and-easy, slogan-like answer to the question that irrepressibly rises in our minds as we read about Griselda's boundless meekness — on what grounds exactly does she accept the torments her husband inflicts upon her? — the author rejects the anachronistic fallacy by which we might be tempted to read ourselves into her behavior, and points instead with painstaking thoroughness to the cultural constellations that, in his opinion, inspired Griselda's view of the world … *and* of love. "Griselda's story completes Boccaccio's turning to suffering women, by giving form, in the wake of Cicero's and Seneca's philosophies, to an ethical reflection on self-consistent love. […] Her *patientia* and her avoidance of all *superbia* are values of ancient philosophy, not Christian-Augustinian ones. The philosophy of antiquity, but also, during early Humanism, of St. Francis and Dante, had reinforced the correlation between poverty, *virtus* and true nobility. Griselda manifests Boccaccio's motto: 'Long live love! Down with money'" (267).

Not the least among the qualities of *Vernunft und Vergnügen* is the self-assuredness with which the formidably knowledgeable author takes us along a path from I.1 to X.10. His is a journey that makes inspired, and inspiring, detours into the richly nuanced — in fact, enor-

mously diverse — philosophy, religious history and general *Kulturgeschichte* of the period at hand, quickly persuading us of the inadequacy of the stereotypes that often seem to guide readers from our own century in their approach to the supposedly monolithic (or, worse still, "backward") world of the Middle Ages and of early Humanism. If only on account of the author's ability to shift, at a wink, from a close-up *explication de texte* to broad insights into an entire civilization, *Vernunft und Vergnügen* deserves to be commended as exemplary reading.

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