

Boccaccio and the Appearance of Reality (*Decameron* 8.3/9.3)*

I. The title of the essay advances terms in need of definition; the entire shape of its remarks, in fact, could take the form of a question mark. How does Boccaccio appraise reality, as a writer or poet of fiction? Where does he make this appraisal, in the sense that reality ‘appears’ in his work? Does his appraisal announce something new or unusual, so that reality, in his writings, appears in a new light, indeed, with a different degree of brilliance? Not least, what does “appearance” mean: a coming to light and into view; or a mimetic seeming, an illusion? These types of questions in their implications are as much philosophical or historical as literary.

Many scholars have addressed the sense of reality (*realità*) in Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, yet I would begin with the last lectures of Italo Calvino, entitled *Lezioni americane*, which he held in 1985. Calvino discusses the importance of *leggerezza* — lightness — as a quality that poets may use to view the world in a philosophical way:

Tanto in Lucrezio quanto in Ovidio la leggerezza è un modo di vedere il mondo che si fonda sulla filosofia e sulla scienza.... [I]n entrambi i casi la leggerezza è qualcosa che si crea nella scrittura, con i mezzi linguistici che sono quelli del poeta, indipendentemente dalla dottrina del filosofo che il poeta dichiara di voler seguire.

For both Lucretius and Ovid, lightness is a way of seeing the world based on philosophy and science [...]. In both cases, however, this lightness is something created in the writing, using the linguistic tools of the poet, independent of whatever philosophic doctrine the poet claims to be following.¹

As an example of this poetic-philosophical lightness, Calvino cites the story from the *Decameron* of the poet Guido Cavalcanti, *Decameron* 6.9, told by

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¹ Calvino 2003, 14. English in Calvino 2016, 11.

Elissa, the queen of the Day's narrations. Cavalcanti is wandering one night in Florence among the tombs near San Giovanni, when he finds himself surrounded by rich young Florentines who mock him for his supposed atheism. Cavalcanti responds

«Signori, voi mi potete dire a casa vostra ciò che vi piace»; e posta la mano sopra una di quelle arche, che grandi erano, sì come colui che leggerissimo era, prese un salto e fusi gittato dall'altra parte, e sviluppatosi da loro se n'andò. (6.9.12)

“*Signori*, in your house you can say to me anything you'd like.” And placing his hand upon one of the tombs that were very large, he — being very light and agile — leapt in the air and threw himself beyond the cemetery, and went his way as he escaped from their sight.²

What captures Calvino's imagination more than Cavalcanti's retort is

l'agile salto improvviso del poeta-filosofo che si solleva sulla pesantezza del mondo, dimostrando che la sua gravità contiene il segreto della leggerezza, mentre quella che molti credono essere la vitalità dei tempi, rumorosa, aggressiva, scalpitante e rombante, appartiene al regno della morte, come un cimitero d'automobili arrugginite.

the sudden nimble leap of the poet/philosopher who lifts himself against the weight of the world, proving that all his gravity contains the secret of lightness, while what many believe to be the life force of the times — loud and aggressive, roaring and rumbling — belongs to the realm of death, like a graveyard of rusted automobiles.³

Let us consider this moment as we ask our questions about Boccaccio and the appearance of reality. Two observations come to the fore. First of all, Boccaccio, like Cavalcanti, Ovid and Lucretius, not to mention his fellow humanist Petrarch, are part of a tradition of poet-philosophers.⁴ Second, as a poet-philosopher, Boccaccio delighted in contrasts or paradoxes that posed riddles about reality. Calvino notes how the poet's gravity, his earthliness, concealed his lightness or agility, whereas the levity of the worldly crowd surrounding him masked their inner lifelessness.

These are contrasts we will pursue, with two revisions. Our first revision is that Boccaccio as a poet-philosopher did not simply add a formal vividness independent from philosophical teaching. Rather than redressing this teaching with poetic form, he made his language part and parcel of his philosophizing. As the second reappraisal of Calvino's conception of gravity

² All quotations of the *Decameron* are from Boccaccio 1992. All English translations are mine, unless otherwise noted.

³ Calvino 2003, 15–16; Calvino 2016, 12–14, revised.

⁴ See also Trinkaus 1979 and Kircher 2006.

and lightness, we may note the contrasts Boccaccio's work identifies as critical to his philosophical inquiry are those between rationality and imagination, in which seriousness and calculation are matched against playfulness. Calvino alludes to this playfulness in Cavalcanti, noticing how his agility is contained or concealed by his gravity; it is a secret lightness. For our question, Boccaccio advances alternative, often opposing ways of seeing reality that are at the source of his comic play, since the comic, as Kierkegaard noted, is always founded on a profound sense of contradiction.⁵ The Decameronian protagonists who illuminate this comic play in this inquiry are not poets like Cavalcanti, but the artists from Days 8 and 9 of the storytelling, Bruno, Buffalmacco and especially Calandrino. While Erich Auerbach and Giuseppe Mazzotta have stressed the comic, playful treatment of reality in the *Decameron*, my inquiry stands apart from theirs by suggesting that Boccaccio's poetic vision places both his narrators and readers in a world where reality is not simply mastered by narrative art and language; more fundamentally, Boccaccio muses about how narrative time (diegetic and extradiegetic) conditions, conceals and discloses reality through language to speakers and listeners, the charmers and the charmed alike.⁶

Let me rephrase our point of departure. Reality, in the *Decameron*, appears through play, even more than through mental acuity or objective reasoning, though this calculus is at hand, too. The nature of things, Lucretius' *rerum natura*, is discovered, or comes to light, through one's play in the world. This play in the world is, in the language of Boccaccio, deeply intersubjective. The characters' thoughts and impressions of the reality around them are colored by their discourse with one another and more generally by their environment, as they experience them over time. I can sharpen what this means by considering other approaches to reality that Boccaccio knew well, but that he chose to adapt, or with which he chose to play, in his *Centonovelle*.

These other approaches to reality are the scholastic and mercantile. They both appeal to rational thought. Vittore Branca, in his *Boccaccio medievale*, declared the scholastic and mercantile aspects *the* key features of Boccaccio's masterpiece, and his assertion has provided food for thought to later scholars. Thus the medieval world of the *Decameron*, Branca writes, embraces

la realtà del pensiero domenicano e francescano in cui il Comune e le sue strutture sociali e economiche sono teoreticamente e praticamente sorelle;

⁵ Kierkegaard 1970, 2:266.

⁶ I am using the English "charm" for the Greek θέλω (thélgo), the power of the bard in archaic Greece. See Detienne 1996, 77.

della prima società capitalistica, cioè di quel mondo mercantile in cui la civiltà comunale nei suoi più diversi aspetti [...] si sviluppa e si inverte; delle esperienze culturali di San Tomaso, di Dante, di Giotto, insieme culte e volgari, che proprio per il loro rigore concettuale e per la loro concretezza umana possono giungere a un nuovo realismo.

the reality [*realtà*] of Dominican and Franciscan thought in which the Florentine commune and its social and economic structures are sisters, both theoretically and practically; of the first capitalist society, namely the mercantile world in which the communal civilization develops and actualizes itself in its more diverse aspects; and of the cultural experiences of Saint Thomas, of Dante, of Giotto, both those of ritual and public piety, that precisely through their conceptual rigor and their human concreteness can attain a new realism [*realismo*].⁷

Readers have thus found in the work the influence of Thomas Aquinas and his mediated Aristotelianism.⁸ These scholars have emphasized Boccaccio's manuscript copy of Aquinas' commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Realism was among the medieval scholastics a topic of fierce debate, beginning with Abelard in the twelfth century. We can understand the Realism of the scholastics as their sense that they — in accord with Plato and Aristotle — proclaimed that reality is ontologically (or our purposes, 'actually' or 'really') separate from our mental discernment. Truth consisted in the mind's alignment or correspondence with this separate reality, or as Aquinas expressed it, "truth is the equation of intellect and thing" ("veritas est aequatio intellectus et rei").⁹ Rationality or acuteness of mind was the key to identifying and expressing reality. Readers of the *Decameron* have seen this higher sort of rationality not only in the *cornice* or frame of the work, in the regulation of the storytelling, but also in the work's ethical design, its movement from the self-interest of Cepparello in Day One of the narratives to the generosity of Griselda in Day Ten.¹⁰ A more practical rationality appears in the many examples of mercantile *astuzia* or calculation, for example in the second story of Day One, when the Jewish merchant Abraam travels to Rome and reasons about the superiority of Christianity in the face of clerical depravity. Reason and prudence, scholars have claimed, are personified by Pampinea, the *Decameron's* first ruler and Queen.¹¹ She embodies those faculties that help humanity solve problems in the new, realistic world that formed in the aftermath of the Black Death. In the work's *cornice*, she

⁷ Branca 1996, ix.

⁸ Kirkham 1995, 259–63; Forni 1995, 312–13; Bausi 1999; Barsella 2012; Ellero 2012.

⁹ Senner 2006 and Kobusch 2006.

¹⁰ E.g., Branca 1996, 149–53.

¹¹ Branca 1996, 20, 43n; Kirkham 1995, 261.

organizes the ten young Florentines into a *brigata*, or group, to leave their plague-ridden city for the countryside. Humanity therefore discovers itself, or realizes its identity as an *animal rationale*, a being that, through reason, may discern and objectively represent the reality of things.

These visions of reality, the scholastic and the mercantile, have left an obvious impression on Boccaccio's work. Yet Erich Auerbach in his study of the Frate Alberto story (*Decameron* 4.2) offers another vantage point on Boccaccio's expression of reality (*Wirklichkeit*). He underlines how the *Decameron's* elegant, "intermediate" prose style paints reality in a new, sophisticated way. Boccaccio and his readers "delight in vivid representation"; henceforth literature, through its new linguistic resources, acquires "a world of reality and of the present." His "realism [...] is free, rich, and assured in its mastery of phenomena [*Erscheinungen*: appearances]" and is "completely natural within the limits of the intermediate style."¹² Auerbach sees Boccaccio's language "centered on phenomena [*Erscheinungen*]: this earthly and often erotic focus is, in Auerbach's eyes, "anti-Christian" and a break from the medieval past.¹³

Auerbach helpfully, and acutely, turns the readers' attention to the artistry of Boccaccio's prose in its attempt to capture the phenomenal world, the world of appearances. My study would further inquire into this linguistic effort and emphasize how the phenomenal world to Boccaccio also must be experienced and expressed in its playful transience. Author and readers, storytellers and their characters, all contend with the way reality can appear in different lights and at different times. Boccaccio and his audience therefore do not, as Auerbach claims, "stand far above the subject matter [...] viewing it from above with a critical eye"; they too are subject to time's play, and its impression on language.¹⁴ The play is the thing, involving everyone in the game; and the game is finite, reminding them, too, of their mortality.

Giuseppe Mazzotta, in his study *The World at Play in Boccaccio's Decameron*, takes issue with Auerbach's reluctance to probe the nature of the *Decameron's* laughter and comic sense, which he locates first of all in the work's theatricality and staging of spectacle; the storytellers inhabit and re-create a mimetic playground that would restore order to their lives. Yet

¹² Auerbach 1953, 216, 218, 219, 231; Auerbach 1946, 223 for the German reference.

¹³ Auerbach 1953, 220, 227; Auerbach 1946, 212 for German reference. It is beyond the scope of this essay, of course, to evaluate the merit of Auerbach's claim about Boccaccio's Christian or anti-Christian, medieval or post-medieval message.

¹⁴ Auerbach 1953, 218. On Auerbach, see Ascoli 1991–92 and Steinberg 2017. My approach, in contrast to theirs, examines how language discloses reality to both narrators and audience, and this approach does not see the poet always in command over the choice of linguistic register or style.

this play also acknowledges the order's fragility, since so much of their storytelling turns upon the subversive trick, or joke (*beffa*), that upends a character's imagined reality. In the vein of Branca's thinking, he asserts that its "merchants are the true tricksters who manipulate events and are in full possession of rationality." Even so the very tricks played by various characters critique this "world of rationality," and Boccaccio instead puts forward the idea that "the fool, dispossessed of value, is always right."¹⁵ For this claim, Mazzotta draws upon the tales of Calandrino, which we will explore in a moment. In Mazzotta's reading, Calandrino's folly is not only a weakness but also a strength:

For in the measure that he is a fool, he asserts the value of the imagination and at the same time sanctions its inevitable failure to create vital resemblances. [...] By mistaking what are only words for reality, Calandrino ultimately obliterates the value of words. [...] As he is visible, he opens our eyes to a world which is too small, to a vision which is too narrow. [...] Calandrino's] stupidity is an *imaginative* value against which the tricksters' intelligent, ironic plans unavoidable stumble.¹⁶

Mazzotta considers the trickster-artists Bruno and Buffalmacco the ones bound by the "laws of logic and reality," much like the merchants.¹⁷ Calandrino's "imaginative reality" transcends or crosses these laws, pointing out the limits to create or capture reality through language.

Mazzotta's reading rightly addresses the liminal position of Calandrino in a rational world, and he underscores the difficulty of pinning fixed interpretations on the comic storytelling. Yet I would bring Calandrino together with Bruno and Buffalmacco in investigating Boccaccio's enterprise to show how language remains — in fact, is upheld as — the dynamic medium by which reality is disclosed. Calandrino does not undermine "the value of words"; on the contrary, his play with his fellow artists, and their play with him, demonstrates the way the flow of discourse shapes the awareness of reality among both trickster and tricked, storyteller and audience.

My view is that Boccaccio's *leggerezza* leaps over Mazzotta's distinction between merchant/artist and fool in order to bring to light another, fundamental critique of the *animal rationale's* self-assurance to know the way things are. This second approach to reality is that of the *homo ludens*. The *homo ludens* is one who plays in the world, who imagines philosophy more as a game than as a doctrine. The term is the theme and title of Johan

¹⁵ Mazzotta 1986, 192.

¹⁶ Mazzotta 1986, 198–99 (emphasis in original).

¹⁷ Mazzotta 1986, 199.

Huizinga's 1938 groundbreaking work. Huizinga writes of the idea of play in philosophy:

In order to establish for all time the fundamental errors of the sophists, their logical and ethical deficiencies, Plato was not above borrowing their loose, easy manner of dialogue. For, much as he deepened philosophy, he still saw it as a noble game. If both he and Aristotle deemed the fallacious arguments and quibbles of the sophists worthy of so serious and so elaborate a refutation, it could only be because their own philosophic thought had not yet broken loose from the archaic sphere of play. But, we may ask, can philosophy ever do this?¹⁸

The *Decameron* ponders this question. In the *Decameron*, and perhaps also for Renaissance thinking more generally, the *homo ludens* offers an avenue to discovering reality and truth according to shifting circumstance. Play is a philosophizing process; it encounters reality through a mobile understanding, rather than the rational apperception of the *animal rationale*. The *homo ludens* in this work appreciates the conditional nature of reality and human awareness of it.

The *Decameron* displays three features of this ludic orientation to reality. First of all, the reality of things is often masked or hidden from view. Second, this reality discloses itself through language in varying degrees and in ways beyond people's conscious efforts: there is a play of reality at hand. And third, one's surroundings constantly qualify the sense of reality. These surroundings include the conditions of life, not least conversations with others, what philosophers have called intersubjectivity.¹⁹ Dialogue, then, is a form of play, at times a contest, through which illusions about reality are both fostered and unmasked. Even more basic conditions of life are the challenges of personal existence that transcend and influence reasoning: time, aging and mortality. Thus, to play in the world is to walk through the theater of life with all its shadows and partial illuminations, and with a ready susceptibility to exchange being for seeming, reality for the semblances of things. Illusion — *illusio* < *in-ludo* — is characteristic of the game.

II. We now turn to the figure of Calandrino who, in Branca's words, is "quell'immortale babbeo [...] nel veloce e sottile gioco dell'astuzia e dell'intelligenza [...] sempre derubato, picchiato di santa ragione e per giunta beffato" ("that immortal chump [who] in the rapid and subtle game of wit and intelligence is always robbed, beaten by holy reason and mocked to boot").

¹⁸ Huizinga 1950, 150–51.

¹⁹ On intersubjectivity, Heidegger 1996, 84–85; Merleau-Ponty 1945, 412–15; and Moran 2000, 61, 175–76. Stone 1998 has examined Boccaccio's poetics in light of a reading of Heidegger: see especially 97–101 for Boccaccio's revision of scholastic ideas of nature.

To Mario Baratto, “realtà e invenzione si fondano nel [suo] personaggio” (“reality and invention rely upon his personality”); in contrast to his clever comrades Bruno and Buffalmacco, he is “il personaggio antifrastico per eccellenza” (the antiphrastic character *par excellence*).²⁰ He is the protagonist of four stories, all on Days Eight and Nine, in which he is invariably the butt of his friends’ jokes. On account of Calandrino’s foolishness and irrationality, commentators, among them Millicent Marcus, Ronald Martinez and Olivia Holmes, have often viewed his character in moral terms: his lack of self-awareness, his proclivity to greed and lust, merit his comeuppance, and he is also a paragon of self-deception.²¹

These are valid reflections that indict his labile susceptibility to illusion. For our purposes, however, we are considering his personality as a gateway to weighing Boccaccio’s inquiry into the way things are or the way they appear to be. We read two of the Calandrino tales: in the third story of the Day Eight, the narrator Elissa (who told the Cavalcanti tale from Day Six) describes how Calandrino seeks the heliotrope, the magic stone that would make him invisible; in the third story of Day Nine, Filostrato explains the way Calandrino comes to imagine he is pregnant. As often noted, his comrades are fellow painters, and thus all of them are devoted to creating images and appearances, or alternate realities. We will take each story in turn, and then in relation to one another, for this relation, let me signal, is of the utmost philosophical importance.²²

In the first of our tales, Calandrino runs to Bruno and Buffalmacco after hearing of the heliotrope. He finds them painting in a convent near the Faenza gate and says:

io ho inteso da uomo degno di fede che in Mugnone si truova una pietra, la qual chi si porta sopra non è veduto da niun’altra persona; per che a me **parebbe** che noi senza alcuno indugio, prima che altra persona v’andasse, v’andassimo a cercar (8.3.28)

I learned from a trustworthy fellow that in the Mugnone there is a stone, and if anyone carries it he or she can not be seen by anyone else. So it would **seem or appear** to me that we should rush off to find it without any delay, before someone else does.

Bruno asks what these stones look like, and Calandrino responds:

²⁰ Branca 1996, 174; Baratto 1984, 309, 315.

²¹ Marcus 1979, 79–92; Martinez 2003; Holmes 2013, 361–64. Wallace 1991, 91–98 also remarks on Calandrino’s gullibility.

²² On the relation between the two stories 8.3 and 9.3, see Marchesi 2004, 105–36, which examines the intertextual connections of the tales to Ovid and Patristic and Biblical sources.

Egli ne son d'ogni fatta ma tutte son quasi nere; per che a me **pare** che noi abbiamo a ricogliere tutte quelle che noi vederem nere, tanto che ci abbattiamo a essa.

They are like other stones but all of them are black or dark grey. So it **seems/appears** to me that we have to gather all those that we would see as black so that we stumble across the right one.

Bruno then remarks to Buffalmacco:

A me **pare** che Calandrino dica bene, ma non mi **pare** che questa sia ora da ciò, per ciò che il sole è alto e dà per lo Mugnone entro e ha tutte le pietre rasciutte, per che tali **paion** testé bianche, delle pietre che vi sono, che la mattina, anzi che il sole l'abbia rasciutte, **paion** nere. [...] A me **pare**, se **pare** a voi, che questa sia opera da dover fare la mattina, che si conoscon meglio le nere dalle bianche, e in dí di festa, che non vi sarà persona che ci vegga. (8.3.33–34, 36)

It **seems/appears** to me that Calandrino makes sense, but it does not **seem/appear** to me that now is the time to go, since the sun is bright above the Mugnone and has dried all the stones, so that those that **seem/appear** black in the morning, before the sun has dried them, now **seem/appear** as all the others there. [...] It **appears** to me, if it **appears** the same to you, that this is a job for the morning, so that we can tell more easily the black from white, and also for a feast day, when no one will be there to see us.

This delay allows Bruno and Buffalmacco to ready their plan of deception.²³ They persuade Calandrino on the day of their search that he really has found the heliotrope and become invisible, and they pelt him with pebbles in apparent frustration all the way back to Florence. Our concern is not so much with their machinations, or its moral qualities, as it is with the play of appearances, especially between reality and illusion, that the story entertains.

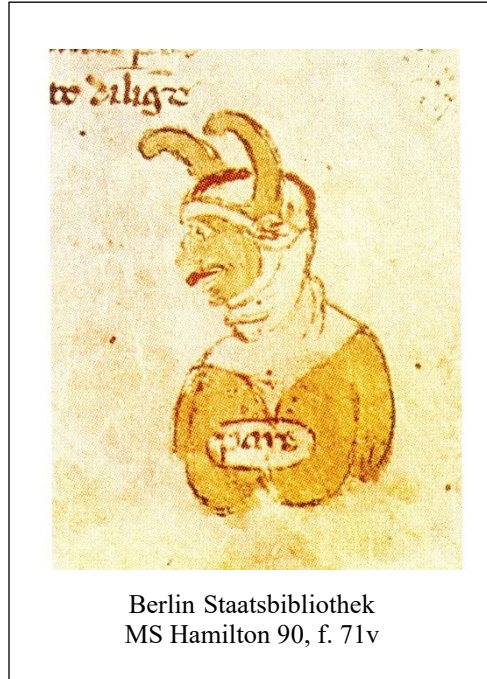
Calandrino, hobbled by their blows and weighed down with his stones, has none of Cavalcanti's *leggerezza*. The tale itself possesses this lightness and agility, and locates it in the word *parere*, the word I have been highlighting. Boccaccio, in his illustrations in the *Decameron*, drew an illustration of *pare* using the figure of Gianni Lotteringhi, the husband cuckolded by the werewolf in Emilia's story of Day Seven (right).²⁴

Parere connotes seeming: Gianni thinks there is a werewolf at the door, but it is his wife's lover. But to Boccaccio *parere* can also, as to Dante, mean

²³ Cf. Marchesi's comment on this passage (2004, 122), which he relates to *Ecclesiastes*.

²⁴ Branca 1999, 1:17 and 2:64.

manifest appearance.²⁵ It is precisely this playground between semblance and authenticity, concealment and disclosure of reality, that interests Boccaccio. Gianni, believing his wife's stories, appears as he truly is, the cuckolded fool. The artists in Elissa's story — so it seems [*pare*] to them — must be able to see [*vedere*] the black stones from the white, and the stones truly appear [*paion*] black before they are bleached by the sun. Possessing these stones leads Calandrino to imagine that he is hidden from others. He finds invisibility disproved, or destroyed, only by his unfortunate appearance of his wife, Monna Tessa, who sees him for who he is. Calandrino tells his friends, “Alla fine,



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giunto qui a casa, questo diavolo di questa femina maladetta mi si **parò** dinanzi e ebbemi veduto” (“When I finally got home, this cursed devil of a woman **appeared** before me and saw me,” 8.3.61). Calandrino is a man of fixed imaginings; the heliotrope, he claims, was real, and only lost its power in the presence of a woman. Bruno and Buffalmacco must then work within this illusion and rebuke him for not telling Monna Tessa to stay out of sight. The comic contradiction of the tale involves appearances, in the senses of seeming and also coming to light. Calandrino, an artist of sorts, professes an ocular trade, one reliant on vision, but then imagines himself invisible. Tessa exposes the lie, which the two friends repair the best they can. It is their intersubjective role, as friends who condition and color Calandrino's view of reality, that the story stages. Filostrato develops this role the following day, taking his cue from Elissa, while at the same time grounding his tale's *leggerezza* on the gravity surrounding the storytellers as a whole, exiled in the Tuscan countryside.

Seeming and appearing, conjured by the word *parere*, are at the heart of his story, that of Calandrino's imaginary pregnancy. Once again, his friends,

²⁵ Contini 2001, 23–24; Boccaccio 1992, notes to *Dec.* 4.2.25 and 4.4.14. See also Wlassics 1988 for Dante's use of *parere* as an oneiric cue to the reader in the opening verses of *Inferno*.

now including Nello, another painter, join forces to lead him to believe something unreal. The way they succeed is condensed into a brief exchange:

Nello disse a lui: «Haiti tu sentita stanotte cosa niuna? Tu non mi **par** desso». Calandrino incontanente incominciò a dubitare e disse: «Ohimè, come? che ti **pare** egli che io abbia?» Disse Nello: «Deh! io nol dico per ciò, ma tu mi **pari** tutto cambiato: fia forse altro»; e lasciollo andare. (9.3.8–10)

Nello said to him, “Has anything happened to you last night? You don’t **seem** right.” Calandrino immediately began to wonder and said, “But why? What sort of problem do I **appear** to have?” Nello replied, “Oh, I’m not saying something is wrong; but you **appear** to me completely different; it could be something else.” And he went his way.

Calandrino then encounters Buffalmacco, who tells him: “tu **par** mezzo morto” (“you appear half dead,” 9.3.12). Filostrato continues:

A Calandrino **pareva** già avere la febbre; e ecco Bruno sopravvenire, e prima che altro dicesse disse: «Calandrino, che viso è quello? E’ **par** che tu sie morto: che ti senti tu?» Calandrino, udendo ciascun di costoro così dire, per certissimo ebbe seco medesimo d’esser malato, e tutto sgomentato gli domandò: «Che fo?» (9.3.13–14)

In Calandrino’s mind, it **seemed** he was already feverish, when then Bruno came up, and said to him before he could speak: ‘Calandrino, what face is that? It **appears** that you are on the brink of death. Are you OK?’ Calandrino, hearing each of them say the same thing, became certain he was ill, and asked them in a quaking voice: “What do I do?”

The friends employ the doctor Maestro Simone to treat him. He diagnoses Calandrino as pregnant, and they extort a fine fee for the remedy.

This story repeats and concentrates the trajectory of the jest from the previous day, focusing the readers’ attention on how language and discourse alter Calandrino’s perception of reality. The point of the joke is that Calandrino conjures something unreal; the philosophical point is the way he develops the illusion, namely through dialogue with his friends, through conversation and exchange of views. Philosophically speaking, his sense of reality and illusion is fostered intersubjectively, by his susceptibility to the impressions he receives from the world around him.²⁶

In both stories, Calandrino requires a second illusion to restore his equilibrium: either the ‘demonic’ power of his unfortunate wife or the doctor’s potion. He seems the eternal fool, immutably subject to the tricks of his friends. The stories seem to present the reader, at first glance, with separate

²⁶ On this point, of Calandrino’s auto-suggestion of his own illness, see Marchesi 2004, 112.

worlds of illusion and reality, occupied by alternate figures of ἀλαζών (*alazon*) and εἴρων (*eiron*), the duped, prone to fantasy, and the deceiver, who ably discerns the fictive from the real.²⁷

The stasis, however, is itself a seeming. On the diegetic level, within the stories, the jest requires time and timing in order to succeed. The pregnancy cure needs, the doctor says, three days to work; for the heliotrope ruse, Bruno and Buffalmacco set their plan on a Sunday, when the city and countryside are quiet, and even here they do not foresee the intervention of Monna Tessa. As with the color of the magic stone, its blackness turning invisible in the sun, *parere* suggests not only how things appear, but also *when*, and at what particular *moment*. And this moment is not always under the control of the players in the game.

“A me pare,” Bruno says, “se pare a voi, che questa sia opera da dover far la mattina” (“It appears to me, if it appears the same to you, that this is a job for the morning,” 8.3.34). Looking outside the story to the *cornice* or frame, we notice that his words echo those of the narrator Pampinea at the outset of the *Decameron*, when she speaks to her friends in the church of Santa Maria Novella: as she advances her idea of leaving the plague-ridden city, she tells them, “non so se a voi quello se ne parrà che a me ne parrebbe” (“I do not know whether it will appear to you the same as it would appear to me,” 1.intro.65). The game of appearances, of the way time affects the appraisal of reality, resounds therefore outside the stories on the narrative or extradiegetic level, among the storytellers in the *cornice*. If the tricksters in the two stories, Calandrino’s fellow painters, seem masters of illusion, their creators, the storytellers, play both with and within linguistic shade and shadow. Their own observations bear more than a trace of Calandrino’s susceptibility, for their conversations across the days of the *Decameron* show how time as much as place conditions their sense of realism.

If we return to Elissa’s story of the heliotrope, we find that Calandrino first learns about the magical stone also in a church, the baptistery of San Giovanni, the very one favored by the agile Cavalcanti. He hears of its powers from the raconteur Maso del Saggio, a painter of words. He is, Elissa says, “un giovane di maravigliosa piacevolezza in ciascuna cosa che far voleva, astuto e avvenevole” (“a most agreeable and astute young man, successful in every enterprise,” 8.3.5). This Maso becomes the protagonist in the story Filostrato recounts later that same Day. In his story, Maso literally uncovers the pretentiousness of a judge by pulling down his pants while he is holding court. Filostrato begins this tale of unmasking hypocrisy and illusion with the words:

²⁷ On the distinction between *alazon* and *eiron*, see Frye 2006, 38, 159–60.

Diletteose donne, il giovane che Elissa poca avanti nominò, cioè Maso del Saggio, mi farà lasciare stare una novella la quale io di dire intendeva, per dirne una di lui e d'alcuni suoi compagni. (8.5.3)

Delightful ladies, the young man that Elissa named just now, Maso del Saggio, leads me to forgo a story I intended to tell you, in order to tell one about him and some of his companions.

The tale that Filostrato omits, or rather postpones, is that of Calandrino's pregnancy that he recounts the following day, Day Nine. He begins this tale by reminding his listeners:

Bellissime donne, lo scostumato giudice marchigiano, di cui ieri vi novel-lai, mi trasse di bocca una novella di Calandrino lo quale era per dirvi. (9.3.3)

Most beautiful ladies, that uncouth judge from the Marches I told you about yesterday snatched from my lips a tale of Calandrino that I was about to tell you.

Elissa's tale therefore influences Filostrato to alter his plans, and to delay his tale, with its play of intersubjective meaning, by one day.

The intertextual weavings within the *Decameron* among the storytellers of the *cornice* as well as diegetically, among the stories themselves, complicate any straightforward unfolding of the work's moral or ethical message. On the contrary, this complexity, based upon the weaving of impressions, echoes, and influence, is at the heart of the work's philosophical inquiry into the nature of reality. Reality presents itself to, and is filtered by, the personalities of the storytellers and the author himself as they move in time.

The author of the *Decameron* certainly has a personality. He sounds his voice directly in a number of interventions: the Preface, the introductions to Days One and Four, and the Conclusion. He tells his readers that the source of his entire account of the *brigata* or group is highly reliable, in fact from a "persona degna di fede" ("a trustworthy person," 1.intro.49). These words echo in Calandrino's report of Maso's story: "io ho inteso da uomo degno di fede che in Mugnone si truova una pietra" ("I learned from a trustworthy fellow that in the Mugnone there is a stone," 8.3.28). So greatly do readers need to trust or take on good faith the work's reality, or its fiction: they must trust in narrators, who are consistently subject not only to the charms of illusion but also to the ways illusion may color others' sense of reality. The "others" include the author's audience, the heartsick ladies that, in the very opening of the work, he seeks to console.

The *brigata*, the group of storytellers that he describes, is apparently real and representative of the women whom he would comfort in his Preface. Both the *brigata* and his female readers are distressed: the first by the

Plague; and the second by the pains of love, by their experience of repressed emotions and repressive families.²⁸ Both the brigata and the author's readers hear stories designed to remedy their *noia*, their grief. The *brigata*, dwelling in the *cornice*, presents an example for his readers by their engagement in their world, and by regulating their activities and by ordering their storytelling. Nonetheless, the regulations are not rigid, but allow for modifications through play, in which storytellers both embellish and improvise themes, influencing one another in their imaginings of reality and illusion. The author reveals that the *brigata's* sense of reality changes through the course of their time together, just as his own sense of the work changes from the Proem to the Conclusion.²⁹

One instance of this shifting sense of reality among the *brigata* occurs at the midpoint between our two Calandrino tales, at the beginning of Day Nine. Emilia, Queen of the Day, takes the group to a nearby woods. The scene there is almost magical:

e per quello entrati, videro gli animali, sì come cavriuoli, cervi e altri, quasi sicuri da' cacciatori per la soprastante pistolenza, non altramenti aspettargli che se senza tema e dimestichi fossero divenuti. [...] Essi [i giovani] eran tutti di frondi di quercia inghirlandati, con le man piene o d'erbe odorifere or di fiori; e chi scontrati gli avesse, niuna altra cosa avrebbe potuto dire se non: "O costor non saranno dalla morte vinti o ella gli ucciderà lieti." (9.intro.2-5)

On entering the woods, they saw the animals — roebucks, stags and others — which, as if protected from hunters on account of the widespread plague, stood quietly still as if they lacked all fear and had become domesticated. [...] The youths were all garlanded with oak fronds, their hands were full of fragrant herbs and flowers, so that if anyone had encountered them, he or she could only have said: "Either they will not be conquered by death, or they will perish joyfully."

The world of the narrators has changed, not only inwardly, but also, it seems, outwardly. They wander among gentle animals, and their gaiety and serenity would lead an observer to exclaim that they dwelled among the blessed.

How real is this scene the author presents? Have the storytellers themselves become Calandrini, so beguiled by fiction as to conceive themselves living in an alternate reality? The woods are a common locus of personal transformation in medieval literature, for example with Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* or with the pilgrim Dante. Boccaccio's design in this vein is more steadily temporal and more implicitly philosophical. Time in the

²⁸ See Levenstein 1996.

²⁹ On the intersubjective relation between the author and his audience, see Kircher 2017.

Decameron is marked by language, and language is inflected with time. Storytelling and conversation change the *brigata's* — and their readers' — awareness of reality, to the point where, for a passing moment, they may imagine themselves free from time and death. But it is passing, and it contains too the reminder of death, recalling the *pistolenzia* that shattered their city and motivated their departure from it. So, the reality of their lives, their timebound existence and partial shading of its truth, are brought home to them and their readers, even in, and also because of, this moment of respite. Thus, death casts its shadow in the first story of Day Nine, that of Madonna Francesca's test of the tomb, told by Filomena, and it also colors Filostrato's story of Calandrino's pregnancy: "tu par mezzo morto" ("you seem half dead," 9.3.12); "e par che tu sie morto" ("it seems that you are dead," 9.3.13), his friends tell him, and this fear of death comes forth comically in his words to Maestro Simone, "se io avessi quel dolore [del parto], che io mi morrei prima che io partorissi" ("If I had all that pain to contend with, I honestly think I should die before I ever gave birth," 9.3.27). Calandrino, then, not only provokes laughter on account of his moral failings, but he also elicits compassion, since he displays the human condition as susceptible to illusion and subject to mortality.

III. Calvino, considering the *leggerezza* of Cavalcanti and Boccaccio, looked backward to the classical philosophies of Epicurus in Lucretius and of Pythagoras in Ovid. Our inquiry has been largely forward-looking, towards modern notions of intersubjectivity, phenomenology and temporal, anti-metaphysical orientation to reality. For the *Decameron*, reality appears to the observer in different lights at different times, so that the verb *parere* can capture the subtle relation between seeming and becoming manifest. I would conclude these observations by noting briefly how the *Decameron's* playful treatment of reality resonated in other Renaissance writers and thinkers.

It has often been observed that humanists in the generations following Boccaccio, well into the fifteenth century, focused more on Neo-Latin eloquence than vernacular compositions. Yet these humanists, for example Poggio Bracciolini (1380–1459), illustrate these discursive and dialogic games in their Neo-Latin works. Poggio, the fifteenth-century bookhunter, chancellor and papal secretary, wrote little if anything in the vernacular. But he adapted Boccaccio's ludic approach to intersubjective philosophical inquiry in many works, as in his *Facetiae*, a collection of 273 witty stories and ribald anecdotes from his time at the papal Curia.³⁰ In one of the tales, a

³⁰ Bracciolini 2005.

Florentine simpleton, similar to Calandrino in *Decameron* 9.3, is persuaded that he is sick by the concerned questioning from a number of children. In contrast to Filostrato's novella, the fool ends up imagining, upon a doctor's diagnosis, that he has died, and he raises his voice only on his funeral bier in order to deny the insults of the crowd, who are in on the joke.³¹ On the metadiegetic level, Poggio consciously arranged his stories so that a certain personality, a Bruno or a Calandrino, so to speak, appears in consecutive tales. Even more significantly, he provided a *cornice* for the stories, as he says in his conclusion:

Visum est mihi eum quoque nostris confabulationibus locum adiciere, in quo plures earum, tamquam in scena, recitatae sunt. Is est Bugiale nostrum, hoc est, mendaciorum veluti officina quaedam, olim a Secretariis instituta, iocandi gratia.

It strikes me that I should include the place of our conversations, where most of them were held in an almost theatrical fashion. That was our Liars' Club, that is the special laboratory for lies, so to speak, established at that time by the papal secretaries for the sake of trading jokes.³²

At this moment in the work, at the close, Poggio thinks to inform his readers of the situation in which the tales were told. "Visum est mihi," he says, using a neo-Latin equivalent of "mi parse." His "Liars' Club" has a theatrical quality, *tamquam in scena*: stories about liars and gamblers are told by professional liars, all of whom proclaim the truth or at least the verisimilitude of their stories. Reality is therefore mediated, as in Boccaccio's work, by players and authors who delight in *personae*. And as for the un-Ciceronian qualities of its content and form, its humble style, why, Poggio says, may his critics polish these words, "quo lingua latina etiam levioribus in rebus hac nostra aetate fiat opulentior" ("whereby for our time the Latin language may be enriched even in these lighter matters").³³ The remark echoes the *Decameron* author's ironic apology to his critics in the Introduction to Day Four, on account of writing "in istilo umilissimo e rimesso" ("in a most humble and low style"; 4.intro.3).

Similar to the *Decameron*, wit and games, the *homo ludens* and his apparent frivolity, have philosophical weight, since readers are required, or enticed, to navigate to a meaning of reality through the work's protean and often commonplace figures and dialect. Poggio's colleague, Leon Battista Alberti (1404–72), while developing a playful Latin in his *Intercenales* and

³¹ Bracciolini 2005, 157–58 (no. 268). Pittaluga's note (203) refers to *Dec.* 3.8.

³² On the arrangement of successive narrators, see Barbaro 2014. Bracciolini 2005, 161–62.

³³ Bracciolini 2005, 1–2.

Momus, also advanced these ludic qualities in the vernacular. He exchanged verses with the barber-poet Burchiello and composed the first Tuscan grammar, the *Grammaticchetta*. His Tuscan dialogues, employing new, neo-vernacular syntax and constructions, showcase the ways that *personae* and personality foster the reader's intersubjective awareness of things.³⁴ His *Libri della famiglia* contains four books of conversations among members of the Alberti clan. Like Boccaccio, Alberti explores how seeming and appearing determine the understanding of reality. In the second book, Alberti's uncle Lionardo debates the nature of pedagogy with his cousin Adovardo. He then tells the young Battista, Alberti's own *persona*, how he marks his words in measure with the moment, according to time, place and person. His knowledge of Adovardo's life conditions and qualifies his responses:

E quanto non rispuosi io ad Adovardo come forse tu aspettavi, fecilo, Battista, perché io il conosceva non a' figliuoli solo, ma a qualunque di casa amorevole, piatoso, più che altri alcuno quale io conosca. [...] Adunque non mi **parse** da negarli quello che lui giudicava per affezione più che per ragione.

And insofar as I did not respond to Adovardo in the way you may have expected, I did so, Battista, because I knew him to be more affectionate and loyal than anyone I knew not only toward his own children but also toward all his relations. [...] Thus it did not **seem** to me fitting to counter what he valued through affection more than through reason.³⁵

“Adunque non mi parse da negarli” (“Thus it did not seem to me fitting”): the play of *parere*, with its crossings of personalities — of Adovardo, Lionardo and Battista — shapes and guides the humanist investigation into the nature of things.

Niccolò Machiavelli, an avid reader of Boccaccio, continued and developed the game of appearances. That the prince should be a master of this game is well-known, as he writes, “A uno principe, adunque, non è necessario avere tutte le soprascritte qualità [pietà, fede, umanità, integrità, religione], ma è bene necessario **parere** di averle” (“Therefore for a prince it is not necessary to have all the aforementioned qualities [piety, faith, kindness integrity, religion], but it is very necessary **to appear/seem** to have them”).³⁶ Here the prince is a political Bruno or Buffalmacco, who knows how to show himself in various lights, according to circumstance. That this mutability of appearances, however, could be more than a political choice,

³⁴ Kircher 2016 and more generally Kircher 2012.

³⁵ Alberti 1960, 84.

³⁶ Machiavelli 1969, 80–81 (*Il principe*, ch. 18).

and instead a fact of life and condition of existence for Machiavelli himself, is expressed in the Proem to the *Mandragola*, his stage play of deceptions:

E, se questa materia non è degna,
per esser pur leggieri,
d'un uom, che voglia **parer** saggio e grave,
scusatelo con questo, che s'ingegna
con questi van' pensieri,
fare el suo tristo tempo più suave.

And if the theme is not worthy,
Being so light,
Of a man who wishes to **seem/appear** grave and wise,
Forgive him for this reason: he works his wit
With these small trifles, to brighten his sad life.³⁷

Like Boccaccio and Alberti, Machiavelli not only considers the way to address his audience through shifting faces and alternate linguistic idioms, but also notes the effect his world — his environment, including his readers and listeners — has upon him. This world is an intersubjective one. The nature of things demands that he express both lightness and gravity in tune with, or least in measure with his times. Thus, he remarks on his changing expression to his close friend Francesco Vettori:

Chi vedesse le nostre lettere, honorando compare, et vedesse le diversità di quelle, si maraviglierebbe assai, perché gli **parrebbe** hora che noi fusimo huomini gravi, tutti volti a cose grandi, et che ne' petti nostri non potesse cascare alcuno pensiero che non havesse in sé honestà et grandezza. Però dipoi, voltando carta, gli **parrebbe** quelli noi medesimi essere leggieri, inconstanti, lascivi, volti a cose vane. Et questo modo di procedere, se a qualcuno **pare** sia vituperoso, a me **pare** laudabile, perché noi imitiamo la natura, che è varia; et chi imita quella non può essere ripreso.

Anybody who saw our letters, honored friend, and saw their diversity, would wonder greatly, because **it would seem or appear to him** now that we were grave men, wholly concerned with important matters, and that into our breasts no thought could fall that did not have in itself honor and greatness. But then, turning the page, **it would seem / appear to him** that we, the very same persons, were lightminded, inconstant, lascivious, concerned with empty things. And this way of proceeding, if to some it may **appear** censurable, to me **seems** praiseworthy, because we are imitating Nature, who is variable; and he who imitates her cannot be blamed.³⁸

Gravità and *leggerezza* are two faces or expressions of the poet-philosopher, each one hiding the other, according to the reality of the moment.

³⁷ Machiavelli 1990, 70.

³⁸ Machiavelli 1883, 392–93 (31 January 1515). I thank Maurizio Viroli for this reference.

They appear, in turn, as nature showcases its mutability. What seems or appears blameworthy to the critic, actually appears to Machiavelli as deserving of praise, since he is imitating and expressing the nature of things.

But this play begins in the Trecento, also with Boccaccio's friend Petrarch, a writer equally important to these later humanists. Here too personality, and imagined personalities, are at play in poetic-philosophical expression. A first example is from sonnet *Rvf* 247:

Parrà forse ad alcun che 'n lodar quella
ch'i' adoro in terra, errante sia 'l mio stile,
faccendo lei sovr'ogni altra gentile,
santa, saggia, **leggiadra**, honesta et bella.

A me **par** il contrario; e temo ch'ella
non abbia a schifo il mio dir troppo humile,
degnà d'assai più alto et più sottile:
e chi nol crede, venga egli a vedella.

Someone perhaps may think, in praise of her
whom I adore on earth, my style is wrong
in making her beyond all others gracious,
saintly and wise, charming and chaste and lovely.

I think the opposite, and fear that she
disdains the humble words I use for her;
she merits higher, finer ones than mine —
who does not trust me, come and gaze on her. ³⁹

To his skeptics, the reality of Laura, by Petrarch's pen, may appear to be enskied, sainted, or light (*leggiadra*). Yet in his eyes, he worries that he has shown it in too much shadow. And his own vision of Laura, throughout the *rime sparse*, is hardly static, consistent, or systematic, but is rather marked by temporal shifts, and marks them in turn.

As with Boccaccio, the *homo ludens* in Petrarch finds his greatest playground in time. The *Rime* continually try to bend time through recollection, anniversary poems and verbal monuments: past, present and future coexist in poetic reality, a fourth dimension, which is a deeper, more authentic reality than a conventional understanding would admit. And, in concord with the *Decameron*, the play with time has a mortal end. In Petrarch's late *Triumphus temporis*, the poet sees Time itself "andar leggero / dopo la guida sua [il Sole]" ("travel lightly after his guide [the Sun]"); his graceful pace never rests. To seek its stay is among the greatest illusions:

³⁹ The *Canzoniere* is cited from Petrarch 2001. English in Petrarch 1996, 350–51 (Musa translation).

e **parvemi** terribil vanitate
fermare in cose il cor che 'l Tempo preme,
che, mentre più le stringi, son passate.

An arrant vanity it now **appeared**
To set one's heart on things that Time may press,
For while one thinks to hold them they are gone.

Echoing Pindar, he asks this final question:

Che più d'un giorno è la vita mortale?
Nubil' e brev' e freddo e pien di noia,
che po bella **parer** ma nulla vale.

What more is this our life than a single day,
Cloudy and cold and short and filled with grief,
That hath no value, fair though it may **appear or seem**?⁴⁰

His poetic statement is more overtly philosophical than that of the *Decameron* and captures the twofold meaning of *parere*. Mortal life can *seem* beautiful, but this is a tragic error of judgment, since its beauty is unreal, a passing semblance compared to real, eternal beauty. And life can *appear* truly beautiful, show forth its flower, but its beauty, though real, is still naught, because existence, and not merely judgment, is shaped by Time's unbending swiftness. For Petrarch, as for Boccaccio and other humanists, existence conditions both life and thought. So, the moments of our world color our assessments of what is real; and reality, in its own right, has its momentary efflorescence, which poets may, with light and grace, convey through language.

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⁴⁰ Petrarch 1996b, *Triumphus temporis*, lines 46–47; 40–42; and 61–63. English in Petrarch 1962, 96–97, revised.

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