

Petrarch and Boccaccio between Materiality and Textuality

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Francesco Marco Aresu

1.

Q. Your academic training and philological apprenticeship took place on both sides of the Atlantic. You earned your doctorate at Columbia University, while also spending two years at the Università degli Studi di Firenze, focusing on Romance Philology and Manuscript Studies. What were the most significant intellectual contributions or influences you received from these two academic environments? Who were the most formative or inspiring figures in your scholarly journey, whether in the United States or Italy?

A. My training was anything but ‘orthodox’ and Latin was always at the center of that unorthodoxy. For several reasons, I didn’t graduate from high school but found my way into college thanks to the director of the honors program at Texas Tech, Peder Christiansen, a professor of Classics. I quickly finished a B.A. in English before heading off to Brown, where my most memorable influence was studying with the poet, literary critic and translator of Pessoa, Edwin Honig, who encouraged me to trust my doubt and not settle for cookie-cutter solutions. In a year of retreat back at Texas Tech teaching Italian, intro to English literature and first-year Portuguese, I worked with Joe Mogan, for whom I transcribed manuscripts of the Parsons Tale from negative microfilm (those were the days!), and from whom I learned that philology and medieval studies were both best conducted with irreverence and doubt since they had both been reduced to rules that satisfied modern editorial eyes and ears. An

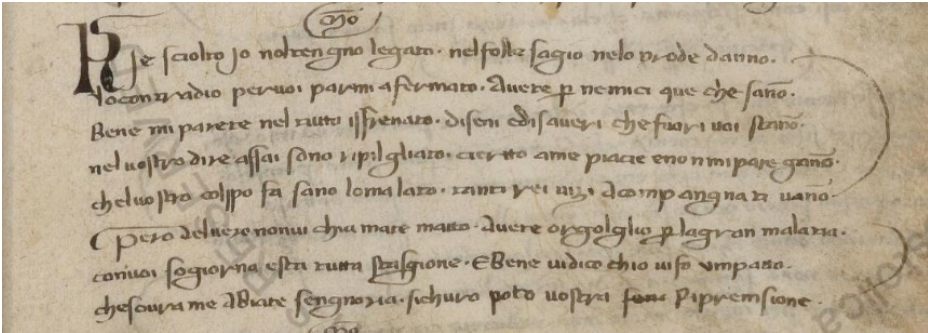
editor of Chaucer, Joe insisted upon reading — whenever possible — medieval literature in its manuscript form. He was not a high-minded theoretician but a reader who reveled in the gritty culture of manuscript production. He should have inspired a generation of Chaucerians in the trenches of documents and parchment, but his work was not deemed fashionable for the times. In Florence, one of my greatest teachers were the student strikes. When classes were canceled, I quickly got in the habit of spending every day in the reading rooms of the Laurenziana, the Riccardiana and the Nazionale (BNCF), studying texts, scripts, chartulation, *fascicolazioni* of unknown manuscripts and some holographs that today you can't get your hands on. My professor of *codicologia*, Luciana Mosiici, often in the Laurenziana, would stop and answer my questions (I doubt anybody knew *pecia* manuscripts better than she did). But it was my course with d'Arco Silvio Avalle on Guittone's letters that introduced me to Monte, the wide array of Guittone's *societas amicorum*, formal logic as a required element of textual criticism (if you wanted to work with Avalle), the rhetorical intricacies of medieval epistles, and Sebastiano Timpanaro's *Genesi del metodo del Lachmann* and his then hot-off-the-presses *Lapsus freudiano. Psicanalisi e critica testuale* (1975). Happily adrift in Avalle's intellectual brilliance, Timpanaro's eye-opening insights and two glorious years in the manuscript reading rooms mostly of Florence and Rome, I lived in halcyon days every day. The shock of my 1977 reentry into the States was softened by Columbia's library and the Morgan Library, where I continued my Florentine trajectory. The most memorable intellectual encounters at Columbia in those years were in two courses I sat in on, Steele Commager's brilliant course on Vergil and Joan Ferrante's classes on Old Occitan poetry. Joanie became the de-facto director of my dissertation on Monte and the influence of Old Occitan *trobar clus* on his poetry and poetics. To this day she is a dear friend. Only some years later would I become life-long friends with and a collaborator of a person whom I met only briefly at Paterno Library when I first got to Columbia: Teodolinda Barolini.

2.

Q. In your first book, *Transcription and Visual Poetics in the Early Italian Lyric* (New York: Garland Press, 1993), you introduced the concept of *visual poetics* — the interconnectedness between the poetic text and its layout on the manuscript page or *charta* — beginning with the extant poems of Monte Andrea. What initially drew your attention to Monte Andrea, and how did the notion of visual poetics first emerge and develop in your research?

A. Your sense of the development of *Transcription* is spot on. Three things drew my attention to Monte: his virtually impenetrable and puzzle-like hermeticism, the devilish intricacy of his poetics that depended upon and were entwined with how they were transcribed on the manuscript ‘page,’ and his rhetorical orientation toward economic pessimism and social injustice: “Ch’Avere, nel mondo, fa l’omo sovro!” (“In this world, it’s wealth that puts you on top!” ... never truer than today). But the larger context in which Monte informed my thinking resides in one of the principal tenets of material philology: that every culture that reproduces a text alters that text to fit the current editorial norms. The sonnet form that we know today is not the form to which Monte’s, Boccaccio’s and even Bembo’s sonnets conformed in their originals. For all three poets had distinct forms of the sonnet and other genres in mind in which they wrote, forms that would be altered in editions even in their own lifetimes. The major thirteenth-century anthology that transmits much of Monte’s poetry, Vaticano Latino 3793, sought a conformity of its hundreds of compositions that imposed then-standardized forms on poets and poems composed over fifty years from cultural centers as diverse as Frederick II’s court, to Guittone’s Pisa and the Florence of Dante’s early years, the sonnets exchanged with Cavalcanti and the *Vita nova*. Among tell-tale moments of this editorial conversion in Latino 3793, Monte’s sonnet “Ki è sciolto, io no-l tengno legato” (c. 145r) — part of a *tenzone* of 24 compositions exchanged with Ischiatta Pallavillani (cc. 143r-45v) — demonstrates the subtle but meaningful alteration that this standardization has on the poems. At v. 16 of Monte’s sonnet, the scribe copies “vostra sen” and then,

realizing his error, crosses out the *sen* he has started to copy from the close of v. 15 (“che sopra me abiate sengnoria”) and concludes with [r]ipremione. It is an odd error, one that hardly makes sense in the context of the Latino 3793’s *mise en page* for this and most sonnets in the manuscript (two verses per transcriptional line with the tercets’ six verses signaled by a simple paragraph marker, a layout that Petrarch would impose on all his sonnets in his partial holograph Vaticano Latino 3195).



The error only makes sense if the exemplar from which the copyist is transcribing (and converting) is written a single verse per transcriptional line, so that *sengnoria* is directly above the end of v. 16 rather than buried in the sonnet’s eighth and final transcriptional line. The example, which comes from n. 37 on p. 169 of my 1982 dissertation on Monte, represents the origins of my work on visual poetics.

The modern treatment of what was deemed by Italian literary historians as Monte’s “bizarre poetics” brought me to question exactly what late nineteenth- and twentieth-century critical editions were representing as medieval Italian and Old Occitan poetry as they inevitably recast ancient verses to fit modern reading and printing practices while claiming for themselves more authentic readings. The problem of modern philology’s abandonment of a visual-poetic dynamic is at the heart of my work in material philology, the notion that a more honest textual reconstruction must consider editorial forms and not just the variants extant in various manuscript traditions. This essential misrepresentation in modern editions is nowhere more evident than in Monte’s *sonetto rinterzato* “Coralment’ò me stesso in ira, ca ppo-,” which relies on rhyming half of the *parola-rima*,

which is split across two verses, resulting in unpronounceable forms (“rgo,” “rta,” “rto”). The editorial role of the copyist in transferring this kind of lyric experimentation, typical in much of Monte’s and Guittone’s poetry and the topic of my 1989 essay in *Romance Philology*, led me to much deeper interrogations of the production of medieval manuscripts such as Vaticano Latino 3793, Laurenziano Rediano 9, Barberiniano 4036 (where the copyist is befuddled by the *sonetto rinterzato* form), Magliabechiano Cl. VI 143, Martelli 12 and the fascinating workshop manuscript Escorial e.III.23, but also to many other codices, some in Petrarch’s and Boccaccio’s own hands. But the study also led me places far from codicology and philology. Initially intrigued by Irvin Rock’s *Perception* (1984), I started reading everything I could get my hands on concerning scientific experiments in visual and aural cognition. I confess that the results of studies by cognitive scientists such as Gunnar Johansson (“Projective Transformations as Determining Visual Space Perception” [1974]) and Sheldon Ebenholtz (“The Constancies in Object Orientation” [1977]) have perhaps been more determinative in how I see the work of medieval copyists than that of paleographers I have greatly admired, such as Armando Petrucci and Malcolm Parkes. As I have sat over the parchment and paper of texts, whether the medieval legal documents of the Memoriali bolognesi or Boccaccio’s transcriptions of Petrarch’s *Fragmentorum liber* or of the partial letter of a supposedly poor monk about Dante’s stay in the Lunigiana, or even copies of Emily Dickinson’s poems and letters in her own hand through the analyses of Marta Werner, from whom I learned immeasurably (in particular from her *Gorgeous Nothings* [New Directions] and *Writing in Time* [Amherst]), the concepts of “mediation,” “proximity conditioning” and “constancy-stability” have informed my work just as much as the essays of Domenico De Robertis, Michele Barbi, Furio Brugnolo and other brilliant Italianists who have clarified so much about the relationship between medieval texts and their copyists. Ultimately, the question revolves around mediation: What is the relationship between what might have been an author’s original poetics instilled in the layout of the poem and the transcription of poems and their inherent poetics by later scribes and typographers?

Or, even more important, what were the formulae of expectation for any numbers of genres, including legal documents, transcribed by copyists? And how do they change over time? To get back to my example, I have no doubt that the copyist of Vaticano Latino 3793 saw in Monte's extended sonnet "Coralment'ò" a fierce challenge to the norms of the poet's and his own transcriptional systems that was designed to bend the dynamics of visual and aural poetics.

3.

Q. The book is currently being translated into Italian (*Pratica di copia e poetica visiva nella lirica italiana delle Origini*, forthcoming in 2026 with Cesati, Florence). In what ways has your understanding or interpretation of visual poetics evolved over the three decades that separate the original edition from its forthcoming Italian translation?

A. Yes, there have been 'enhancements' and expansions in my views on the methodology that evolved out of my early studies that, in fact, are not present in *Pratica*. They have all come from the experience of trying to explain what Avalle called the "fenomenologia della copia" and, in some cases, its representation in modern editions. One category, for example, that is not in *Pratica* is what I call "accretions," the entry into later editions — from manuscripts to modern printed editions — of commentary and glosses in the margins that eventually work their way into the text itself. I became especially interested in the problem with Dante's letter to Cangrande and the very tricky manuscript tradition of Joachim of Flora's works, which were often copied with commentary that, because of the construction of the scholastic 'page,' had multiple ways to enter the text. And if we need evidence of the porousness between text and marginal gloss, we only need to look at Boccaccio's editions of the *Vita nova* and their influence even into the eighteenth century. The issue of accretion is most glaring and expansive in the case of the controversies surrounding Dante's "Epistle to Cangrande" (Epistle 13), a topic that was hammered home in Francesco Mazzoni's year-long course that I took many years ago on editorial problems in

the *Quaestio de aqua et terra*. While the base-text of the *Quaestio* is the 1508 printed edition and Epistle 13 enjoys a manuscript tradition, both demonstrate opportunities for movement between commentary and text. In the case of Epistle 13, Mazzoni utilized complex formulae of medieval *cursus* to resolve those integrations and ‘accretions’ and to establish the work’s authenticity, a methodology still confronted in Luca Azzetta’s 2023 edition (Antenore) of the epistle. But some occurrences of accretion are even more problematic because they are so widespread and accepted as a *textus receptus* and because it has affected interpretation so profoundly. We need only think of the small caps that highlight the syllables of the name of Laura (laure-ta) in *Rvf* 5 (“Quando io movo i sospiri a chiamar voi”), a sonnet I have written about in several places. Only after years of examining manuscripts of the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*, I discovered what I believe is the source of this unfortunate graphic misinterpretation in the margin of a late fifteenth-century Mazzatosta manuscript that spells out the syllables. Of course, such a visual-interpretative construction never appeared in Petrarch’s partial holograph (the celebrated Vaticano Latino 3195), which Gianfranco Contini declared in his earliest Tallone edition to be the absolute guide for scholarly editors of the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*, a rule he does not, however, follow in *Rvf* 5 as well as in some other places. And to bring it all back to Boccaccio, the primary interest of readers of *Heliotropia*, one of the primary goals of my work on Boccaccio’s partial transcription of the ‘letter’ of frate Ilaro was what I perceived as the need to cleanse as much as possible the critical accretions that had entered the text of Boccaccio’s work by reestablishing its material context and text in ms. Laurenziano XXIX 8, precisely in a fascicle where Boccaccio is collecting Dante materials and texts for his seemingly life-long study of Dante’s life.

And finally, in a related vein, I would be remiss if I didn’t mention a key component of visual poetics that I did not develop sufficiently in *Transcription*, already a book of 476 pages that probably should have been published as two books: the intricate question of the interpretation of texts in manuscript illuminations. I subsequently went on to write about any number of instances, even in early printed editions, of the interpretative ‘val-

ues' of and visual poetics at work in illustrations and illuminations in textual contexts. I raise it here to express a debt of gratitude for a study to which I return still to reread and ponder and that has served me as guiding principles in my own studies: Jonathan Alexander's *Medieval Illuminators and their Methods of Work*, a book I have bought numerous times and given away to friends and students. Published in 1992, right as *Transcription* (1993) was at press, I could not cite it nor call upon the richness of its research results that demonstrate, in essence and especially to literary scholars and those interested in the relationship between text and image, just how distant medieval images can be — in space, time, comprehension and accuracy — from the texts that they are called upon to illustrate, or — in all truth and more accurately — to decorate. Alexander's chapters on "illustrative programmes" and illuminators' contracts alone reveal how speed, skill and money — and not interpretation — tended to guide the execution of illuminations in medieval codices.

4.

- Q. Your scholarship has explored various dimensions of Boccaccio's literary production and intellectual profile, including his philological vocabulary, his editorial and critical engagement with Dante and Petrarch, and specific works such as the *Filocolo* and the *Decameron* (notably *novella 2.4* and the *Conclusion*). Is there a *fil rouge* — a guiding thread — that connects your studies on Boccaccio? To what extent does the concept of visual poetics, or more broadly a materially grounded philological approach, inform your interpretation of his work?
- A. If there is a single thread that connects my work on Boccaccio, it is the attempt to lessen the distance between the very real materiality of Boccaccio's texts in their contextual significance and their later interpretation. Some of the essays you cite represent efforts to read what is actually there often in Boccaccio's own hand, not necessarily in opposition to the reconfigurations of our notions of 'Boccaccio' that have developed over centuries but in light of them, in full awareness of how the reconstructions of Boccaccio reinvent him and how those reinventions linger, even in more scrupulous philological studies and editions. This

is one of the primary tenets of material philology, the importance of understanding the cultural role of individual historical witnesses of Boccaccio's texts that have contributed, sometimes in ways heretofore unbeknownst to us, to constructs and interpretations upon which our more modern readings have been built. Part of this approach has been my early orientation to Boccaccio first and foremost in his role as a copyist-editor, which I consider an essential part of his intellectual and scholarly commitment and production. This was at the core, for example, of my 2015 essay "Boccaccio narra la vita di Dante dagli Zibaldoni alle *Esposizioni*" (in *Boccaccio e la nuova ars narrandi*, 11-20), an examination of the scholar at the life-long task of researching and revising a biography that is precious to him and to his cultural view of that figure, one that is in certain instances still, in their writing, uncertain to him ("come che questa cosa si sia avvenuta o potuta avvenire, lascerò nel giudicio de' lettori: ciascuno ne creda quello che più vero o più verisimile gli pare" [*Esposizioni* 8.17; ed. Padoan 1:450/trans. Papio 386]).

I always seem to return to the cultural orientation of Boccaccio the copyist. The cultural politics, then and now, of Boccaccio's transcription of Petrarch's early *Fragmentorum liber* (*Heliotropia* 15-16: 305-30) in Chigiano L.v.176, ca. 1362, revolved around an essential tension on the one hand between Petrarch's by-then already clearly defined visual poetics and Boccaccio's reductive and archaic transcription and, on the other, the modern assessments of that transcription in the context of Wilkins' conjectured manuscript families based solely on the order of the poems rather than on the variants of diverse traditions. It is hard to know which is the more remarkable, culturally political response. Since the essay on the *Decameron*'s "Conclusione dell'autore" awaits publication in the *Lectura Boccaccii* series, I will only note that once again the role of the material production of the very long and arduous task of copying and revising his final draft of the *Decameron* (ms. Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Hamilton 90) is at the heart of the study. In many cases in the Middle Ages, the sense of relief at completing such a physically and intellectually demanding project is expressed in the manuscript's colophon, from a simple "Deo gratias" to short sentences to identify the scribe, the work, how long

it took to complete and even the travails of the work's completion. Ever the resourceful copyist-editor, Boccaccio reinvents the colophon as an extended conclusion that unites key moments of his narrative frame of the author's voice with the physical act of putting ink to parchment and crafting the whole out of diverse genre layouts and systems of textual hierarchy and function.

5.

Q. Drawing on the material presentation of the *Decameron* autograph (Berlin, Staatsbibliothek Preußischer Kulturbesitz, ms. Hamilton 90), Lucia Battaglia Ricci has proposed that what modern readers regard as a quintessential work of fiction might instead be read as a scholastic treatise. According to her argument, the codicological features of the autograph foreground the argumentative prefaces and their ethical framing of the novellas, rather than the novellas themselves. Do you find this to be a compelling or fruitful line of interpretation? Building on this line of inquiry, do you see comparable cases — either within Boccaccio's broader literary production or in the work of other authors — where codicological features, material presentation, or authorial design similarly shape, reframe, or redirect the interpretive focus of the text?

A. Given the fact that Boccaccio was a master of scribal genres and, as Branca described him back in the 1970s, a writer who reformed and renewed medieval genres, Battaglia Ricci's theory is intriguing. And we certainly have evidence of his engagement with the codicological formulae of scholastic treatises' treatments of text and commentary in his copy of, among other works, Dino Del Garbo's commentary of Guido Cavalcanti's canzone "Donna mi priega" [*sic*], at some point inserted into Chigiano L.v.176, now cc. 29-32. Of course, part of the problem rests in how you wisely formulate the question: that for modern readers the *Decameron* is "a quintessential work of fiction." We know that in his work Boccaccio blends diverse, traditional forms of genre (song/poetry, authorial *accessus*, chronicle, *narratio* and even epistolary forms with traditional structures), to

which he has added an organizing and unifying system of layouts and punctuational initials to define textual space. It is an excellent point of departure for re-examining not only the *Decameron*, but also the *Filocolo*, the *Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta*, and any number of other works (among them the *De montibus* and the *Esposizioni*, which Michael Papio has studied in new textual contexts). But there is a key element to be observed in this methodological equation: authorial/scribal control over production vs. subsequent copies of varying degrees of graphic accuracy, establishing the critical distinction between the author's original scribal culture and the textual cultures that inevitably take control of that production in diverse periods and with diverse rules and norms for the reproduction of texts. This does not mean that there is, for example, a sole visual poetics applicable to Petrarch's *Fragmenta*. As I believe you [Francesco Marco Aresu] and I have recently demonstrated in an essay in *Textual Cultures* 18.1 (2025), by the late fifteenth century there are new and very different cultural norms that generally rule the presentational layout of his work. At the same time and throughout most of the sixteenth century, the layout for epic *ottava rima*, from Nicolò degli Agostini's translations of Ovid's *Metamorphosi in ottava rima* (Venezia: Nicolò di Aristotile detto Zoppino, 1522 & 1533 and Venezia: Bernardino di Bindoni, 1538) to the *Gerusalemme liberata* (Ferrara: Bonnà, 1581) and Giovanni Giorgini's *Il mondo nuovo* (Iesi: Pietro Farri, 1596), was always printed in two vertically read columns with intervening single, full-page columns for prose allegories, introductions and descriptions. In other words, there are intricate equations in print and handwritten copies, not to mention the few holographs that have survived, that constitute profoundly important cultural information that we have not tapped in our efforts to understand not just literary history but to interpret at any number of levels individual works produced according to the norms of places and historical periods when they were reproduced. Just as we once had in the sixteenth century a purged *Decameron*, from which certain tales disappeared and others were altered almost out of recognition, today we still read in most editions a Petrarchan *Canzoniere* invented in the Renaissance by Italian print culture.

6.

- Q. Your scholarship has made significant contributions to Petrarch studies, particularly through your work on the partial autograph of the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* (Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, ms. Vaticano Latino 3195), which culminated in both a facsimile edition with commentary — coedited with Gino Belloni, Furio Brugnolo and Stefano Zamponi — and a digital edition of the manuscript. What were the principal challenges you encountered in undertaking these two ambitious projects, and what aspects did you find most intellectually or personally rewarding/exciting?
- A. Yes, the challenges shared by the Petrarch facsimile/commentary project and the digital edition of the *Fragmenta*! I appreciate this question because it gives me the opportunity to deliver what I think is the salient lesson of my career: the opportunities that come from failure. Since you've narrowed it down, I won't go through them all. With the completion of my work on *Transcription*, it was obvious that a new and different kind of edition of the *Rvf* was needed. The chasm between the lessons of Vat-tasso's 1904 facsimile and Modigliani's 1905 diplomatic edition, on the one hand, and, on the other, the numerous edited versions of the work that purported to reflect "Petrarch's original," even in the first half of the fifteenth century, was wide and disconcerting. In addition to the elimination and occasionally poor imitation of the *Rvf*'s visual poetics in early manuscripts, the rapid standardization of Petrarch's syntax and prosody to fit then 'modern' norms had guaranteed early in its tradition anything other than an "authentic Petrarch." Over six years I worked particularly on the problem of the erasures in Vaticano Latino 3195 and developed an approach based on what I called "reportable surfaces," now expanded thanks to years of work on the holograph under ultraviolet light. Drawing on François Masai's formula of a hybrid, diplomatic-interpretative edition, I produced a thorough and — I hoped — richer edition, but one that became simply too complicated for print, right down to color coding to distinguish some textual phenomena. (The Singleton-Petrucci diplomatic-interpretative edition of the *Deca-*

meron [1974] is tame by comparison.) This was the new diplomatic edition that was supposed to find its way into the 2004 commentary volume. But Antenore was skeptical about the layering of the surfaces and opted to reprint Modigliani's diplomatic edition with my essay of annotations, or *minimalia*, which follows the edition in the *Commentario*.

For the next seven years I continued my work on the diplomatic rendering of the manuscript and a new edition of the *Fragmenta* based on the partial holograph, in which now I had come to the realization that the manuscript's two major stages of preparation (Malpaghini's section and Petrarch's subsequent expansion — from 1368 to 1374 — of the seven fascicles that he had sent to the rubricator in 1368 by adding four more fascicles [a quaternion and three bifolia]) amounted to a dramatic change in the register of the manuscript, never bound in Petrarch's lifetime, from fair copy for 'publication' to a draft or working copy destined for subsequent copying by a professional scribe. This methodological change in approach to those sections in which Petrarch is the primary copyist required a change in the editorial treatment of at least parts of Vaticano Latino 3195, precisely cc. 41-49 and 62-70. With these changes, the relationship between the new edition and the diplomatic and facsimile editions became even more important and the prospect of a print edition more remote. If I had published the diplomatic edition in 2004, this fundamental dynamic would not have been represented.

It wasn't until I met John Walsh in a faculty working group I had organized at Indiana University in 2011 on textual problems that I realized, in large part thanks to John, that the solution was a digital edition. In 2012-13, we met weekly with Isabella Magni to begin planning a digital infrastructure for the edition, hash out issues of visual presentation for the *PetrArchive*, and construct prototypes of significant visual-poetic structures for an NEH application. Even though I had worked for years on these issues in Petrarch's *Ruf*, I confess there wasn't a weekly meeting in which I didn't come to see additional nuance and perspectives in Petrarch's poetics thanks to the process of talking through digital solutions to major and minor features. The watchword of the *PetrArchive* quickly became simplicity: no bells and whistles, just clean text and high-resolution

images to fold into a single site a diplomatic edition with a facsimile, a new scholarly edition and, eventually, what I call a “material commentary” for each of the poems. The challenges included — among others — progress in design and encoding, additional personnel, the unique problems of constructing alternate forms that inhabited the same space, right down to inventing code for redefining the spaces, micro and macro, of Petrarch’s partial holograph. If my overly intricate diplomatic edition that plumbed the text’s “reportable surfaces” had not failed in 2004, the extraordinary opportunities for expanded interpretation and study as well as for intellectual formations that have been forged in the *PetrArchive*’s development and elaboration would never have occurred.

As with any long-term, expansive project, one needs support, sustained support. In countless documents we were always asked to describe our plans for sustainability. But the truth is that it is one thing to design, develop, mount and even modify the *PetrArchive*; it is something else to maintain the site. Funding agencies and universities were, before 2017, willing to fund the first four steps but seldom the last. And I am sincerely grateful to right-minded people being in positions of power to say yes when that support was critical: my friend and colleague the late Father Leonard Boyle, the prefect of the Vatican Library when I approached him with the idea of a new facsimile and commentary, Robert Carrubba at Fordham University, who paved the financial way for the 2004 publication of the *Commentario* and Michael McRobbie at Indiana University who believed in DH and literature. But it has been the intellectual collaboration and support of colleagues like Furio Brugnolo, Gino Belloni, Roberta Capelli, the late Stefano Zamponi, John Walsh, Isabella Magni and countless others, such as yourself, Marco, and all of our colleagues who devote their skill and passion to the project, who are continuing the *PetrArchive* and have given me the precious gift of their and your intellectual brilliance in conceiving of, carrying out and continuing this work, both through the site and in subsequent publications (among them your 2023 *Manuscript Poetics*). From my early years of collaborations with Teodolinda Barolini and Dario Del Puppo, two of my dear friends, I learned that collective work improved insights and happiness in producing what I hoped would be useful tools for others to continue

the work I started. I feel honored to have worked with such excellent scholars and intellectually gifted colleagues.

While I was visiting the Bodmer Library in Cologne some years ago to study one of their Petrarch manuscripts, the director took me on a tour of the adjacent museum, where some medieval manuscripts of Cicero were open on the bottom shelf of a glass case. I leaned down and recognized, even from a distance, Petrarch's miniscule gloss hand in the margin of one of the manuscripts, clearly one that he had owned. That moment brought to mind the kind of paleographic muscle-memory of a writer's hand, a memory only possible because of years of study. It is less a passion than the pleasure of a practiced methodical intimacy that speaks quickly but is savored by seasoned practitioners. Those who know me understand that I am not particularly obsessed with Petrarch as a figure. Instead, it is his strategies for the assembly and representation of works (and their genres) and his poetics writ large that have driven me to devote years of my life to his manuscripts and to the codices and editions that have reproduced his works, especially the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*. From as early as my research for *Transcription and Visual Poetics* in the 1980s, 1984 to be exact, I have been glued with magnifying glass and ultraviolet light at the uncomfortable height of just 5-10 centimeters from the surfaces of Petrarch manuscripts. In my line of work, there has been no greater challenge and no greater pleasure.

7.

Q. At a recent conference on medieval and early modern Italian literature, a panel was devoted to the relationship between Petrarch and Boccaccio. In discussing their respective legacies and contemporary reception, the panelists — who were, unsurprisingly, all Boccaccio scholars — concurred that Petrarch has not 'aged' as well as Boccaccio. Would you agree with this assessment? If so, what factors do you believe contribute to this difference in their current reception and perceived relevance?

A. Since so many Boccaccio scholars said it, it must be true. My late friend Peppino Velli, who knew Petrarch's and Boccaccio's works in ways I could never hope to, was fond of saying that

Boccaccio was the more intellectually powerful scholar of the two. And I remember Branca saying, during an evening at my house in Charlottesville, that of the three *corone*, the only one with whom he would have wanted to go on vacation was Boccaccio. But somehow, I don't think that's what the panel had in mind by 'ageing' well or poorly. I would imagine, instead, that Boccaccio's popularity today, and in essence for some time now, resides in the richness of his narrative in all genres, not just in his prose and not just in his fiction. He knows how to tell a good story, even in his scholarly analyses, like the *Esposizioni*. And just as genres have their day, narrative has been in 'cultural ascendancy' for some time now. Years ago, Antonia Arslan observed that the short prose narrative is the proving ground where the mettle of Italian writers has, since Boccaccio, been tested and verified. How else does one explain the fate of the *Decameron* in hands as different as Vittorio De Sica, Federico Fellini, Luchino Visconti, Pier Paolo Pasolini and Kathleen Jordan? What some fail to see is that his extraordinary narrative skill is very much part of his much wider intellectual portfolio, which perhaps leads us back to Battaglia Ricci's proposal for Boccaccio's project in Hamilton 90.

8.

- Q. This next question reframes, to some extent, the previous one. Petrarch is often credited with the invention of the *libro d'autore*. Yet, the number of manuscripts written in his own hand is relatively limited compared to those of Boccaccio, and they reflect a narrower range of textual genres, particularly when we also account for the copies of the works of others that he edits and transcribes in his own hand, such as Boccaccio's autograph of Terence's *Comoediae* (Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, ms. Pluteo 38.17). In light of this, do you believe that Petrarch's and Boccaccio's respective roles in the history of the book should be reassessed? What do you see as the defining characteristics of each figure in their role as *copyist*?
- A. The term *copista* is one that when applied to Boccaccio and Petrarch conveys to me two slightly different cultural orientations and intellectual trajectories. I think each can actually be defined

as a *grafomane* but with very different relationships to texts. About the time that I grow comfortable with the careful precision of Petrarch's marginal glosses in the manuscripts he owned, I recall that extraordinary passage in *Familiaris* 18.12, in which he describes how he excitedly reads and copies Cicero, his reading eyes pushing his slower pen. And though — as he notes — writing (*scriptura*) is remembered longer than what we simply read, his hand grows tired and he begins to regret his decision to engage in an activity (*negotium*) which is not his, that is performing the duties of a copyist. And indeed, especially in his later years, Petrarch preferred the services of professional copyists. But when the young Malpaghini flees his employ in 1368, he must take back up the very *negotium* in which he considers himself unpracticed to continue working on the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* (Vaticano Latino 3195). All the while, even in 1372 and 1373, Petrarch seems to be having scribes make his fair copies of the evolving stages of the *Fragmenta* to respond to requests for the work. Contrast this with the extraordinary copying activities of Boccaccio, from his earliest *zibaldoni* executed in his teens to his multiple copies of Dante's texts and, in his last years, his complete, revised copy of the *Decameron* and what we can imagine were his extensive notes for the unfinished *Esposizioni*. If Petrarch reopened finished texts, such as even Malpaghini's completed and rubricated sections of the *Fragmenta*, to tinker and hone and make often microscopic emendations, Boccaccio's efforts as a copyist extended to the macro, while not overlooking *raffinatezze* such as the figures of characters that surround and accompany the catchwords (*richiami*) in Hamilton 90. Petrarch complained about the overspecialization in book production and the resulting lack of unity in works made by such artisans, Boccaccio seems to have been dedicated to the total design and execution of his books and copies, right down to — among others — his drawing of Alatiel, whose image on c. 23v of ms. Hamilton 90 tells us that the next quire begins with the word *vivere*.

If we had to reduce it to schematic terms, we could say that Petrarch more readily revived and glossed traditions via the books he owned and had copied, while Boccaccio edited and copied works that were part of a cultural program he sponsored and promoted, that included not just classical texts but the new

classics of a vernacular tradition. If Petrarch's extraordinary material, prosodic and thematic experiment in the author's book of poetry had faltered in its reception by the early Quattrocento and failed completely by ca. 1440 with the advent of the work's early Renaissance visual poetics, the influence of Boccaccio's copies even of his *Vita di Dante* extends well into the mid-nineteenth century (*Rime profane e sacre di Dante Alighieri precedute dalla sua biografia e seguite dalla varianti della Divina Commedia, impressa in Udine nel 1823*, Firenze, per Leonardo Ciardetti, 1850), and many of his historical and literary interpretations, especially about Francesca da Rimini, remain today (in spite of Teo Barolini's clarifying essay on the historical Francesca [*Speculum* 2000]). Petrocchi's editorial rationale for his edition of the *Commedia* (1966-67) pivots — with errors — on the 'contaminations' that Boccaccio's editions introduced into the tradition. In a certain sense, Boccaccio's cultural agenda and program succeeded where Petrarch's failed, especially when we think of the fact that the deep poetics in Petrarch's *Fragmenta* were — until recently — lost in the early Quattrocento to Renaissance editions that reinvented the material forms of his song book. But we should not ignore the decades that were spent editing and publishing 'reformed' versions of the *Decameron*, in which the naughty nuns were replaced by "una Contessa [...] rimasa vedova havendo una usanza di ritenere appresso di se alcune damigelle povere, et ben nate," and the 'trials' of Rustico (*Dec.* 3.10), who gets only a brief mention, vanish in many of the expurgated editions (such as *Il Decameron [...] ricorretto in Roma et emendato secondo l'ordine del Sacro Concilio di Trento, et riscontrato in Firenze con Testi Antichi et alla sua vera lezione ridotto da' Deputati di loro* Alt. Ser, Giunti, 1573). This of course is a text that was cleansed even more for school use in subsequent centuries. Does the history of the Italian book need to be rewritten? Constantly.

9.

Q. You have taught at several institutions — among them, the University of Virginia, UC Berkeley and Fordham University — but

most of your academic career was spent at Indiana University, Bloomington, where you taught from 2000 to 2018. How would you characterize your experience teaching and mentoring both undergraduate and graduate students in the fields of Medieval and Italian Studies? What do you consider to be the most rewarding or challenging aspects of this work?

- A. This is a tender and tricky topic. The students in my courses were always major investments for me. Nor can I imagine that my own trajectory as a student of literature, history and manuscript studies would have been the same without that engagement and investment. But over time, new and usually poorly motivated processes of outcome evaluation and teaching assessments — that, by the way, did nothing to improve instruction and that were insisted upon by colleagues and administrators who knew not of intellectual discourse nor of student preparation — changed that engagement and my life-long investment. Every year since their inception I witnessed how ‘outcome assessments’ and statistical renderings of student preparation helped significantly to reduce teaching effectiveness and the importance of a university education. There are many contributing factors to the complex equations of learning. The pages of this conversation would increase exponentially if I tried to preface my own experience and views on teaching. Suffice it here to observe that dogma and the dogmatic who love to hear themselves talk only suppress learning that leads to invention, creativity and honest, careful analysis. For five years I served as the director of graduate prestigious fellowships at Fordham, a position created by the dean of the graduate school not only to oversee the university’s awarding of internal fellowships, but also to work individually with graduate students across the disciplines to apply for any number of awards: from Fulbrights and Henry Luce Scholars to Rhodes and Soros scholarships. It was amazingly intense, one-on-one work designed to benefit a single applicant who would go on to make important contributions to other students and professionals, even if the application were not successful. Over the years it became obvious to me that the only real commitment was made one fellowship draft at a time, one small lesson at a time, one student at a time in the manuscript reading room. And ultimately teaching and mentoring

were about imparting respect for the complexities of the thing at hand, including our own processes of thinking and writing and questioning the question and the cultural *textus receptus* and especially our own presuppositions about that text.

Your question deserves, however, a reply beyond the previous recollection. The long history of my mentoring students and even some junior faculty at IU and elsewhere is still — seven years after my retirement — difficult for me, not because of the students nor the junior faculty I tried to help, but because of the battles I had to wage for them and too often to defend them within the department. In each case I tried to listen to the talents and research goals of each young scholar, remembering that my own path had been anything but traditional. But the traditionalism of some academic degree programs is, to the detriment of the program and their students, both unforgiving and at risk of collapse by continuing to send those paraded through a stale, one-size-fits-all preparation out to face a much more challenging future than the one faced by those delivering *ex cathedra* lectures and waiting to hear it read back to them by acolytes. All those who wrote their dissertations with me have gone on to have distinguished academic careers, just as others in the program did. The gratification of this fact alone made the struggles worthwhile. Beyond this I can say that I am very proud of their accomplishments, their continued work, and their ethical stances. Some of them have become collaborators on projects. We all enjoy a mutual respect and affection for the years of hard work under difficult and in some cases almost unbearable circumstances. A dear friend and colleague at the University of Pisa is fond of saying that he can spot even at some distance “il metodo storeyano” in those who studied with me and read me and have gone on to influence others. I have absolutely no doubt that “storeyano” will soon fade from that equation. But my fervent hope is that the “metodo” will endure, that weighing and reconsidering the entire artifact and its multiple cultural contexts across decades and centuries will be the goal of generations of material philologists. It is not a method based on authority *ex cathedra* nor in proving theories, but in listening, looking carefully and building from the evidence, especially when it is not what we expected to find. My friend from graduate

school days in Italy, Gabriella Pomaro, called it the “zen of codicology.” The surprise of discovery that leads us to textual truth is always golden. If it doesn’t tell us what we had hoped, it will probably tell us a truth that is better than our limited thinking had allowed us to wander. We simply must have the courage to let it lead us there, to new thinking.

10.

- Q. Last but not least, as one examines your work over the last forty plus years, one is struck by your collaborative efforts in the service of the profession and especially Italian and textual studies. How have both collaboration and your work in the production of journals, both in the US and in Italy, played a role in your development?
- A. We live in academic environments where collaboration is not particularly valued by the institution but is ever more important in how we perform our studies and teaching. Young scholars, and some old ones too, are — and have been — for the most part taught to aspire to the brilliant monograph intended to reteach the world solely from a singular and “groundbreaking” perspective, to become the Stephen Greenblatt of *The Swerve* (of which I recently saw a remainders copy for \$3.76). I have seen perfectly mediocre colleagues describe their own work as “cutting-edge” and “groundbreaking,” even “pioneering” without their realizing that sometimes pioneers don’t survive the experience and are, at best, buried on the prairie — if they are fortunate — in a marked grave. The big splash is what gets rewarded by the institution, but it is extremely shortsighted for scholarship. This goes for “the digital” too, too often frontloaded with little follow through or sustained support. I have been very lucky; my rewards have been in the realm of the personal satisfaction of knowing that I have had the opportunity to work with and learn from and contribute together with very smart and well-intentioned scholars interested in helping to build — not in building by themselves — intellectual and textual structures that will endure. Collaboration has allowed me to test much of my research and what I’ve written against the scholarly experience of others with whom I have worked. It is a slower, far less glamorous style

of scholarship, designed to be a part of a larger conversation, not the entire conversation itself. As I always reminded my students, it is more honest and satisfying to contribute even a small, solid part to a knowledge base that can serve others as well, as they advance the interest of exploring texts, methodology and the past. In the end, the production of a lot of conjectures means more for the next generation to wade through and discard as they try to find the truth. And therein is always the risk that scholarship makes its way by names rather than hard research. This is driven home by one example with which my *PetrArchive* collaborators and I live and work: Wilkins' *Making of the Canzoniere and Other Petrarchan Studies* (1951), a collection of essays published from the 1920s on to 1949, that posit a history of the stages of the evolution (originally in Wilkins' title but rejected by the publisher) of the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*. In many ways, the work is monumental, containing — as don Giuseppe De Luca had asked for in his letters to the American — all of Wilkins' "Petrarca." But the work is a vast house of conjectures that suggests "forms" and "editions" for the work based solely on the order of the poems and changes in the pens and ink that Petrarch used, all without ever laying eyes directly on the Italian manuscripts he cites. Though Wilkins' erroneous hypothetical reconstruction has been disproven multiple times in print (Stefano Zamponi called it "radicalmente errato" [*Commentario*, 2004, p. 29]), many continue to site forms such as the "Queriniana" and the "Malatesta" versions as if they were real texts. Wilkins' monumental conjectures will take monumental efforts to overcome in Petrarch studies. (I recently had occasion to turn to Wilkins' *The Making* to check his report on the order of the compositions of the *Rvf* in Trivulziano 904, which is in fact — as in the case of other manuscripts — erroneous.)

My collaborations have always been conversations, often with people who became dear friends. And certainly from parts of those conversations have resulted much larger missions inherent in the very practical work of forming journals and establishing fora for a collective intellectual vision. This kind of collaboration, however, is not a line on a person's CV, but part of a commitment to fields of inquiry and to the profession that also requires a lonely devotion, a willingness to dedicate a lot of time

to details and the work of others to try and make it part of a better conversation. The job of editing a journal means reading and negotiating a large percentage of essays that you won't publish. But good journals are the tools by which we understand and measure what feeds us intellectually. Guiding that work is an awesome responsibility that is seldom rewarded. It often requires the most basic sacrifices that teach you how to survive on much less sleep and on the thin fuel of the satisfaction that you've hammered together an issue with care. In my own case, there have been plenty of failures. However, from that failure have come some of the best lessons. Rejected as the editor of *Dante Studies* in 2002, a journal which I had saved by moving it from the New York State University Press to Fordham University Press, I began to see that my path was not through the inscrutable politics of early Italian literary studies but down the road that I had already actually chosen: texts and textuality. (I did return to the editorial board of *Dante Studies* in 2004 and, in 2007, guest-edited with Michelangelo Zaccarello volume 124 (2006), devoted to essays on Dante and the Lunigiana.) In 2003, in Via Val D'Aposa in Bologna, four friends and I established *Medioevo letterario d'Italia*, still published by Fabrizio Serra. And a year later, in 2004, I had just finished the Vatican Petrarch facsimile and commentary project and was amid the flurry of talks for the centennial celebrations of Petrarch's birth, when I was asked to take on the editorship of *TEXT*, the journal of the Society for Textual Scholarship. I agreed but only if the frequency of publication, the publisher, the number of languages in which we published studies, the style sheet and the title could be changed. This is how *Textual Cultures. Texts, Contexts, Interpretation* was born, both as a biannual journal and, more importantly, as a working concept that recognized the multiplicity of cultural norms that govern the production of texts and that are also the object of resistance and militancy for change. With an ever-stronger commitment to all that final -s in *Cultures* entails, and in the good hands of subsequent editors, Daniel O'Sullivan and Marta Werner, the journal has only improved and grown in its interests and commitments, proving perhaps that collaboration stretches over not just decades but also generations. In truth, rather than creators of impressive CVs, we are stewards and guarantors of the foundations of the

future and of what our profession and students and their students will become.