

CICERO'S *CORPUS* AND PETRARCA'S ANKLE. THE THEORY OF IMITATION AND ITS PRACTICES

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Abstract

This article focuses on the centrality provided to *auctores* and texts as *corpora*, in the framework of Francesco Petrarca and the theory of imitation by the humanists. Initially, animal images from Petrarca and the humanists are analysed, as well as the paths of their diffusion. These were used to express the role of the model, the involvement of the writer, *variatio*, the election of *stilus*, and the questions sustained by the new routes of interaction with Cicero. Then, three main methodological ways to study the relationship between texts as *corpora* are presented: semiosphere, intertextuality, and reception theory. A critic point of view towards the static methodologies is here expressed. Conclusively, the dialogue between Petrarca and Cicero, as text and *corpus*, is recalled in order to incorporate the *auctores* contamination.

Keywords: Petrarca, text as *corpus*, z, methodology.

1. Textual *corpus* and biological *corpus*

The centrality that Humanism and, more generally, the great epoch of Classicism¹ provide to the texts converts the paths of their transmission into

¹ Classicism is considered as the great system that covers the literary periods between Renaissance and the advent of Romanticism, following Quondam 1999.

a manifesto of the ideals of the new age. Word becomes the fundamental vehicle through which the past, its history, and its agents are renewed in the present.

Some medieval writers already recommended and practiced the imitation of good models. Among them were Saint Augustine, Macrobius, Alcuin, John of Salisbury or Pierre de Blois. However, this happened in a restricted area and without systemic incidence. The development of classical studies at the University of Padua and other centres of cultural production in Northeast Italy led to pioneering advances towards the exploration of new routes of interaction. The movement began to emerge by the end of the thirteenth century, with Lovato dei Lovati and Albertino da Mussato as the most representative figures. However, Francesco Petrarca was the greatest bridge-builder between *auctores*.

His library, which contained more than 200 volumes, collected over a lifetime, consisted mainly of Latin classics, plus glossaries, texts of rhetoric, and even a Homer in Greek that Petrarca was never able to decode, despite all of his efforts². One of the most delicate pearls in Petrarca's library was the so-called "Virgilio Ambrosiano", illustrated by Simone Martini. However, regarding mass and size, the *corpus* that stood out was Cicero. In the 1340s, Petrarca found in Verona's Cathedral Library the letter books *Ad Atticum*, *Ad Quintum Fratrem*, *Ad Brutum* and also an apocrypha. Petrarca himself copied them into a set of notebooks, which, along with other works by Cicero that he had compiled, formed a miscellaneous codex of unprecedented proportions. Cicero was, in fact, a key author of Petrarca's cultural project and consequently, a key author of the humanist program³.

² Vd. Feo 2003: 457-516; Marnoto 2016.

³ In such a way that Petrarca felt the necessity of writing, in the epistle that he addresses to his friend Neri Morando: *Scis olim me ex omnibus, qui apud ullas gentes quocunque tempore scripserint — tecum in hoc ut in multis unanimem — singulariter Ciceronem mirari et amare. Neque enim vereor ne parum cristianus sim, si ciceronianus fuero; nichil enim contra Cristum Cicero loquitur, quod certe meminere; et siquid forte contra Cristi doctrinam loqueretur, id unum est, quod nec Ciceroni nec Aristotili crederem nec Platoni (Fam. 21.10.8-9)*. For a broad view of Cicero's impact, vd. Altman 2015, and Kushner 2017, as well as the extensive bibliography presented. Eugenio Garin's anthology remains an essential textual basis (Garin 1952). More specific and very relevant information about the relationship between Petrarca and Cicero can be found in Feo 2006.

One of the main statements reflecting this past revival idea is identified in a celebrated passage of an epistle that Petrarca addressed to Tommaso da Messina⁴:

Cuius summa est: apes in inventionibus imitandas, que flores, non quales acceperint, referunt, sed ceras ac mella mirifica quadam permixtione conficiunt (*Fam.* 1.8.2).

The purposes and apology of the invention of the new, based in the *auctores* and what they wrote, are expressed in words that denote movement, variation and mixture: *inventionibus*, *referunt*, *permixtione*, *conficiunt*. The image of the bee-writer was launched back then for the centuries to come. Seneca and other authors of antiquity had already explored it. The bee collects the best part of several flowers and mixes it to create new quality materials. There lay the foundations of style which, in the manner of Cicero, is based on *variatio*.

However, Petrarca aspires to a creative process with a clear style even more unequivocally individual than in the example of the bee. So, in the previously mentioned epistle he also used the image of a silkworm:

Rursus nec huius stilum aut illius, sed unum nostrum conflatum ex pluribus habeamus; felicius quidem, non apium more passim sparsa colligere, sed quorundam haud multo maiorum vermium exemplo, quorum ex visceribus sericum prodit, ex se ipso sapere potius et loqui, dummodo et sensus gravis ac verus et sermo esset ornatus (*Fam.* 1.8.5).

Creation implies a process of transformation, which originates from the creator's guts, *ex visceribus*. For the first time in human history, word and discourse are segregated *ex se ipso*, from the biological body⁵. This is the silkworm-writer.

⁴ The epistles in which Petrarca most extensively dwells on the subject of imitation, besides *Fam.* 1.8, are *Fam.* 22.2, and *Fam.* 23.19. For literary sources of all the Petrarca quoted passages, see the relative editions, *ad loc.*

⁵ In a very fine essay on the dialogue between Petrarca and the book, Loredana Chines (2010: 15) recalls that in *Fam.* 22.2.12, referring to this relation, Petrarca uses the verb to ruminate: *Legi apud Virgilium apud Flaccum apud Severinum apud Tullium; nec semel legi sed milies, nec cucurri sed incubui, et totis ingenii nisibus immoratus sum; mane comedi quod sero digererem, hausi puer quod senior ruminarem.*

Stilus is therefore called upon to make the apology of the individual appropriation of someone else's lesson with gravity and elegance. Indeed, the apology of imitation is repeatedly calibrated in Petrarca's writings with warnings about its excesses. The resemblance of a text with the example that inspired it must be like the resemblance that binds a child to his father. It is present in the text as an interpretation challenge that stimulates the active cooperation of the reader. The writer must emphasize their masters' art and colours, without copying their words: *abstinendum verbis*. That is what Petrarca wrote in the epistle where he comments with Boccaccio on the work of his scribe Giovanni Malpaghini⁶.

In this same epistle to Boccaccio, another animal is referred to as an addition to the humanists' bestiary. It corresponds to the negative specular reference of the bee, the monkey: *illa poetas facit, hec simias* (*Fam.* 23.19.13).

Inherently, the reader is challenged to discover the treasures kept in the referred texts of Petrarca's epistles. This deepens the communication process in action, which is characteristic of the meta-literary implications of his rhetorical work. By evoking the example of the bee, Petrarca himself is working as *apes in inventionibus imitandas* (*Fam.* 1.8.2). He collects the pollens of Seneca's flowers (*Ep.* 84.3-5), referring to them in the epistle to Tommaso da Messina. Then he collects the pollens of Virgil's flowers in *Aeneid* (*Verg. A.* 1.432-433), to which Seneca himself refers in *Letters to Lucilius*. A very similar formulation was also used in *Georgics* (*Verg. G.* 4.161). Moreover, in his *Odes* Horace compared himself to a bee (*Carm.* 4.2.25-32), and so did Lucretius, in *On the nature of things* (*Lucr.* 3.11-12). Petrarca also collects the pollens from Macrobius (*Macr.* 1. praef 5-10), the second author he mentions in the epistle to Tommaso da Messina. Regarding the monkey, the reference is authorized by Horace, who used it to criticize the excess of mimicry (*Ep.* 1.10.18-19).

Indeed, the way Petrarca reuses these images from the biological sphere connects the issues and the questions sustained by Cicero to rhetoric, in a way that would last throughout all the Classicist epoch. The programmatic defence of the freedom to recreate and transform is indissolubly linked to the text and its rhetorical construction. The mediating practice, par excellence, is *variatio*. The expressive impact of this animal glossary will be put at the

⁶ *Sic et nobis providendum ut cum simile aliquit sit, multa sint dissimilia, et id ipsum simile lateat ne deprehendi possit nisi tacita mentis indagine, ut intelligi simile queat potiusquam dici. Utendum igitur ingenio alieno utendumque coloribus, abstinendum verbis* (*Fam.* 23.19.13).

service of the diffusion and the debate around fundamental questions that will be asked to modernity, in the realm of imitation theory.

Pedagogy is an area of primordial impact that shows the rapid incorporation of the humanist practice of *variatio*, in symbiosis with the bestiary that shapes it. The first known work contributing for this transmission process is a small treatise on the imitation by Gasparino Barzizza⁷. Barzizza was a commentator of Seneca and Cicero who taught at Pavia, Padua, and Milan. This text is a summary of his prelections on imitation, where he listed five types of similarities between example and copy: bees; digestive assimilation; a relationship between father and son; echo; and the voices of a choir. This scheme retakes, with some small variations, parts of the already mentioned Seneca's epistles (*Ep.* 84.4-9). Also, Barzizza introduces pragmatic modulations that transfer his spectrum to the didactic sphere, thus inaugurating a new and effective chapter of propagation.

There is an animal in the aforementioned bestiary that will enjoy great prominence in the discussion that will be fought in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries' debates about the imitation theory: the monkey.

The reuse of its symbology in the debate between Paolo Cortesi and Angelo Poliziano is a clear reflection of the controversy's liveliness. While debating with Poliziano, Cortesi resumes the biological images of Seneca (*Ep.* 84.4-9). Yet, he ingeniously transforms the question of how to imitate, in whom to imitate. His sharp arguments lead to the monkey's appraisal:

Quare, ut de me loquar, nihil est, Politiane, quod me a Ciceronis imitatione deterreas, sed quod potius obiurges inscitiam, quod nequam bene illum imitari, quamquam ego malo esse assecla et simia Ciceronis quam alumnus aut filius aliorum.⁸

Cortesi prefers to be Cicero's monkey rather than a lesser writer's son or pupil. While challenging the ancestral creators of these images, Cortesi was making a subtle reference to a contemporary authority, the Florentine secretary Colutio Salutati, who had used the same parallel⁹. However, it is up to the recipient of Cortesi's epistle and to other readers to uncover this allusion. Salutati had bragged about being Cicero's monkey. Therefore,

⁷ Presented and edited by Pigman III 1982.

⁸ In Garin 1952: 908.

⁹ Vd. Cian 1911; Coppini 2015.

Humanism was increasing the density of *auctoritates* dignified by the implantation of the past in its present.

This is not an opportune occasion to exhaustively study all the specimens of this bestiary, nor the ways they have been used and referred to throughout the following centuries. What is important is that the density and fluency of the word which strengthens Classicism's knowledge transmission makes it so solid that the word becomes a body. Its corporeality is parallel to biological organics: animal *corpus* is an effective and dynamic image of textual *corpus*. This correlation conveys the consistency of the debate around imitation theory by reconstructing identity values and reconfiguring positions. It does so by using rhetorical constructions, which accentuate its incidence and its effectiveness not only through textual but also through meta-textual paths. In the same way, they embody the movement, the freedom and the dynamics of a chain of transmission that brings the past into the present, dissolving its compactness.

[T]angere enim et tangi, nisi corpus, nulla potest re (Lucr. 1.303).
Nothing can touch and be touched without a body.

2. Semiosphere, intertextuality, reception theory

The critical theory of the twentieth century has set methodological ways to study the relationship between texts that offered a vital contribution to a better understanding of the processes set in motion. Due to the clear emphasis on the text's role, three methodologies are to be mainly evoked.

Semiosphere

The concept of the semiosphere unfolds the biosphere, thus updating a strategy that, as it was just explained, has ancient roots. The term has been coined by Yuri M. Lotman, a scholar from Tartu school¹⁰. Just like living beings integrate the biosphere, human beings live in the semiosphere, which is a more abstract semiotic world, although absolutely vital. It is full of signs tangled in the constant movement of discourse's interaction. Lotman follows the legacy of Kant and Bakhtin's notions of language, as he considers that all culture is text modelled in the space of discursive interaction.

This matter might be introduced with a meaningful example *a contrario*. When a literary text does not have a context strong enough to fit into a space

¹⁰ Lotman 2001.

of interaction, it becomes a problem for criticism. This is the case of the picaresque narrative in Portuguese literature, which is represented by one single text, *The miserable lover Peralvilho* (*O desgraçado amante Peralvilho*) from Father Gaspar Pires de Rebelo. That unique text has a rarefied semiosphere, which makes breathing difficult, for there is no code for the Portuguese picaresque. Although this case is the opposite of Classicism, it does not fail to offer us another opportunity to enrich the humanist bestiary.

I believe that the animal which best illustrates this idea is the platypus. Father Gaspar Pires de Rebelo, author of *The miserable lover Peralvilho*, is therefore a writer-platypus. The reference staying behind this image of the writer-platypus is Umberto Eco's essay *Kant and the platypus*¹¹. Platypuses have a beak and duck feet, they also lay eggs, but they are not a bird; they spend a lot of time underwater but they are not an amphibian; they are furry, they have a beaver tail, they breastfeed when they are new-borns, but they do not have nipples. That is why platypuses do not fit into any animals' category.

If we return to semiosphere, the following concepts should be considered. Within the semiosphere there are also boundaries that organize space, both internally and externally: time containers, cultural groups, languages, codes, and sub codes, which chart specific communication systems. The more advanced the awareness of the existence of these boundaries, the more complex and dynamic a culture is. The entropic connections between exterior and interior, or between the acquired and the new, are the propellant of the creation possibilities.

Humanists were acutely aware of the confines they inhabited as well as of the privileged situation they had reached. [*I]n confinio duorum populorum constitutus ac simul ante retroque prospiciens*, Petrarca wrote in *Rerum memorandarum libri* (*Mem.* 1.19.4). This turning point led to dynamic diachronic transferences and re-elaboration processes operated by inter-discursive intersections. They brought their own semiosphere to life by time modelling (to use yet another of Lotman's concepts), as well as by modelling *auctores* that traverse through it. In fact, this is precisely the same semiosphere that those who study *corpus* of their texts still breathe today.

¹¹ Eco 1997. The first European scientists who observed a platypus (gr. *platus pous*) believed it was a fake specie forged by Asian taxidermists. In 1799 the naturalist George Shaw gave it the scientific name *platypus anatinus*, but the name was already taken, as in 1793 *platypus* was used to identify a genus of beetle. Thus in 1803 Johann Friedrich Blumenbach renamed it as *ornithorhyncus paradoxus*.

Intertextuality

The concept of intertextuality was used by Julia Kristeva and some French critics in the 1960s. At that time, this concept was often in the company of psychoanalytic notions and deconstructivist ideas, although these associations did not inspire Roland Barthes' trust. Intertextuality has been such a successful concept that it now holds a number of different meanings, even hardly but not impossibly systematizable.

The concept of intertextuality, in its basic assessment, focuses on practices, methods and notions found in the genesis of Humanism and Classicism, regarding the relationships between texts. However, it matters to stress that specific texts are at stake, tangible *corpus*, *corpora*, *auctores*¹², not the great text of interdiscursivity¹³.

This approach ended up occupying a previously taken space, replacing critique of sources and influence¹⁴.

Critique of sources produced decisive development in nineteenth century literary history, when the advances of philology provided a better knowledge of the European circulation of texts and writers. It improved accuracy and precision to sail "upstream", to identify texts that had been used to create another text. But this tended to be a static process, for it only reached the invariable relationship with the "source" text, leaving behind the consideration of the riverbed that leads to the river mouth. Regarding the scheme of communications, critique of sources favours the sender, leaving the re-creation of the source to a secondary plan, and the receiving end as if the text were just passively received. Classicism is an individual *stilus*, segregated *ex se ipso*, as Petrarca stressed, and ignoring this movement questions the understanding of the entire process of imitation as the humanists considered and practiced it.

¹² The first humanists of the thirteenth century had already valued the text as a body, as it is meaningfully expressed in the not very well known epistle of Albertino da Mussato, to which Michele Feo draws attention. Albertino was asking his friend Guizzardo the Virgil that he had lent him, and to emphasise his will, he evokes the desire to recover the one with whom he had shared the bed: *Virgilius, thalamo mecum versatus in uno, tempore quo Patava pulsus ab urbe fui exul ad externas ultro se contulit oras, exilii penas sustinuisse volens* (in Feo 1990: 129-130).

¹³ The distinction between interdiscursivity and intertextuality has been clearly grounded by Cesare Segre (1984). The first is on the side of dialogism which is inherent to any utterance. The second of the transmission between textual *corpus* that are incorporated.

¹⁴ Vd. Marnoto 2009.

The notion of influence is closely related to this idea, even though it is in no way reducible to it. Its dissemination is owed to the French critic Paul van Tieghem, in particular through his work *La littérature comparée*, issued in 1931. Influence considers the effects which texts, authors or literary currents had on other texts, authors or currents. An active superior role is attributed to the influencing factor, whereas the element undergoing such influence is considered subaltern. This constructs a hierarchy between strata and literatures, which can very easily drift into teleological positions often conveying differentiating ideological systems. From this point of view, the re-elaboration chain inherent to Humanism, extended to contemporaneity through Classicism, would lose all its dynamic value, having the process concentrated and returned to the primordial texts of Antiquity, on the side lines of the dialogue between *corpora*.

Reception theory

Konstanz school incisively answered questions asked by the critique of sources and by the notion of influence, focusing on the interaction between all the factors involving the communication process. Hans Robert Jauss¹⁵ and Wolfgang Iser¹⁶ were these studies' great mentors in the nineteen sixties and the years following. The theory of reception is deeply conceptual, and it is in many ways synchronized with the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer's thoughts.

Just like there are no empty spaces, there is no true knowledge without questioning. Questioning is the act of humbleness that fills in the void, for the question implies the orientation sense of the answer. Thus, this process never flows in the vacant, because the question lies within an appropriate horizon to capture its answer. This possibility of exchange between mutual questions and answers defines the horizon of waiting and receiving a text, an author, or a literary current, by other texts, authors or currents. Hence the theory of reception allows us to approach this communicative relationship through a dialectical movement.

This receiving horizon, in its dynamic action, corresponds to the horizon of the theory of imitation. Humanists represented it through their historical horizon, using images of a bee, a silkworm, or a monkey. For them, the textual *corpus* was very concrete, and nothing could touch and be touched without a body — [*T*]angere enim et tangi, nisi corpus, nulla potest re (*Lucr.* 1.303). Humanism and Classicism are a culture of texts and *corpora*.

¹⁵ Jauss 1970.

¹⁶ Iser 1976.

3. Petrarca's ankle

Humanism's devotion to text is clear in the careful curatorship of *auctores* texts. Humanists dedicated extreme care to their *corpora* constantly working in copying, organizing, apostilling, translating, commenting, and applying the philological method. In this framework, textual *corpora* and biological *corpora* mutually relate not only through the virtual rhetoric of the bestiary of imitation. In fact, the matter regards Petrarca's ankle.

Among Petrarca's library diverse *corpora*, Cicero was his most cherished one, as it was above remembered, even motivating Petrarca's idea of organizing his epistles in the *Familiarum rerum libri*. Petrarca addresses to Cicero the third epistle of his twenty-fourth book (*Fam.* 24.3), which is the first one with an Antiquity writer as addressee. This book, which concludes the *Familiarum rerum libri* compilation, contains a set of letters addressed to Antique writers.

Cicero's voluminous codex treasured in Petrarca's library has required one of his life's greatest efforts. Such greatness had even been his body and arm fatigue when he copied the epistles of Verona. But other problems arose of a more strictly atomistic order, as Petrarca writes to Nero Morando:

Hunc librum, ut michi semper ad manum esset, in bibliothecae ostio, postquam innixum, stare solitum vidisti. Dum vero sepe locum, aliud cogitans, ingredior, accidit ut toge fimbria inadvertens librum ipsum impingerem; ille cadens levum michi crus non multo supra talum ictu exiguo perstrinxit. Erigo illum iocans, et: "Quid" inquam, "rei est, mi Cicero, cur me feris?". Ille nichil, sed eodem postridie redeuntem rursus ferit rursusque cum iocis erigitur in suam sedem. Quid te moror? Lesus iterum atque iterum expergiscor, et quasi indignantem humi esse, altius attollo; sed cum iam crebra concussionem repetiti loci fracta cutis nec spernendum ulcus extaret, sprevis tamen, potius rei causam quam rem ipsam librans; itaque nec acquis abstinui, nec equestri vectatione, nec pedestri itinere temperavi. Expectas finem? Paulatim quasi se sperni dolens vulnus intumuit, et subinde nescio quoniam caro discolor et virulenta succreverat (*Fam.* 21.10.17-19).

It is possible for Cicero's *corpus* to dialogue with Petrarca's *corpus* because the questions they ask incorporate a humanist receiving horizon—the same horizon which heals and cures it. The blend of horizons with different boundaries begins with a question, an oriented question.

And the questions Petrarca addresses to Cicero are insistent— *Quid rei est, mi Cicero, cur me feris?*, *Quid te moror?*.

Petrarca also extensively talks with his friend Boccaccio, particularly in the epistle *Disp.* 46, *Var.* 25, about his wound, his Ciceronian wound, *vulnus illud Ciceronianum*. A scar forever etched in his body, *stigma perpetuum Cicero mihi meus affixit*¹⁷. However, Petrarca does not seem to care much about healing and curing it, as a way of incorporating still more deeply a *corpus* into another *corpus*.

The same wound that, throughout the centuries and even today, has contaminated all those who care about Cicero and the humanist bestiary.

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¹⁷ *Sed ut omissis iocis rem ipsam plane noveris, vulnus illud Ciceronianum de quo ludere solebam, ludum michi vertit in luctum. Parum deerat anni circulo dum in dies peius habens, inter tedia et angores, inter medicos et fomenta senescerem. Ad extremum, dum non modo fastidii, sed vite quoque pertesum esset, statui sine medicis quemcunque rei exitum opperiri, meque Deo ac nature potius committere, quam his unguentariis in meo malo sue artis experimenta captantibus. Atque ita factum est. Illis exclusis, celestis ope medici, ac unius adolescentis qui michi servit et in meo ulcere meaque, ut dicitur, impensa medicus evasit, fomentorum memor, que michi ex omnibus salubriora notaveram, usus opera, et adiuta per abstinentiam natura, ad salutem ipsam, unde magnis passibus discesseram, pedetentim redeo. Habes rei summam, hoc addito, quod cum vita hec laborum dolorumque sit palestra, in qua ego saepe casibus miris exercitus sum (non in se inquam miris, sed in me quo nemo quietis appetentior; nemo fugacior est laborum talium), nunquam certe hactenus seu rei causam, seu animi dolorem, seu temporis spatium consideres, simile aliquid passus eram. Indelebilem memorie mee notam et stigma perpetuum Cicero michi meus affixit. Memineram sui, sed ne unquam oblivisci possim, intus et extra consultum est. (*Disp.* 46, *Var.* 25.10-11).*

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