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Abstract

This study investigates the transformations of the epic code of Western tradition in Dante's *Commedia*, Boccaccio's *Teseida*, and Petrarch's *Africa*. Although none of the foundational works of early Italian literature between XIII and XIV century can be defined as an epic in the canonical sense of the term, in that age of cultural transition in which vernacular culture emerged and new subjectivities took shape, an "epic intention" was at work in a culture that was in search of new articulations for its sense of beginning, continuity, and totality. In particular, a new relation to the past, especially to antiquity, had to be negotiated. For all their differences as to form, outcome, language, intention, context, and composition history, the *Commedia*, *Teseida*, and *Africa* were based on the awareness of the historicity of the epic genre as it had been transmitted to late medieval Italy, hence they were conscious of variation as the motor of the evolution of a genre that from antiquity had to be translated into modern culture. The generative presence of the epic in the Italian Trecento has been scarcely acknowledged by scholars in Italian Studies; at the same time, in the domains of comparative literature or literary theory very little attention has been paid to the ways in which the *Commedia*, *Teseida*, and *Africa* both explore and transform the epic tradition. While in theoretico-historical accounts of the epic they have been mostly considered as deviations from the epic models of the classical age, I contend that they provide us with an extraordinary vantage point to understand the dynamics of the epic as such, because of their unique focus on variation. With an introductory chapter on variation in the theory and practice of the epic, I lay the groundwork for the subsequent chapters, where with an alternation of close readings and theoretical vistas I examine the ways in which Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch articulate variation and historicity through an epic code that is polyvalent, polyphonic, and polygenetic. The epic of the Italian Trecento shows us the dynamics of a genre always in the flux of temporality.

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TRECENTO VARIATIONS IN THE EPIC TRADITION: DANTE'S *COMMEDIA*, BOCCACCIO'S
TESEIDA, AND PETRARCH'S *AFRICA*

Andrea Gazzoni

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TRECENTO VARIATIONS IN THE EPIC TRADITION: DANTE'S *COMMEDIA*, BOCCACCIO'S
TESEIDA, AND PETRARCH'S *AFRICA*

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Andrea Gazzoni

To the memory of my grandmothers and my father

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Toward the end of this long journey at the University of Pennsylvania, I hesitate and look back at the road traveled. What I see is not the road itself, but the people who have made it worthwhile: teachers, colleagues, friends, loved ones. With them, to study has turned out to be one and the same with *studium*.

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I came to Penn with an interest in modern and contemporary epic and ended up by writing a dissertation on medieval Italian epic. In the beginning, I could not expect such a turn in my path; if that happened, it was thanks to the inspiration I received from teachers. To them, I owe more than I can say. If I had not attended their classes, I would have done something else, and certainly would not have had as much fun.

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ABSTRACT

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Andrea Gazzoni

David Wallace

This study investigates the transformations of the epic code of Western tradition in Dante's *Commedia*, Boccaccio's *Teseida*, and Petrarch's *Africa*. Although none of the foundational works of early Italian literature between XIII and XIV century can be defined as an epic in the canonical sense of the term, in that age of cultural transition in which vernacular culture emerged and new subjectivities took shape, an "epic intention" was at work in a culture that was in search of new articulations for its sense of beginning, continuity, and totality. In particular, a new relation to the past, especially to antiquity, had to be negotiated. For all their differences as to form, outcome, language, intention, context, and composition history, the *Commedia*, *Teseida*, and *Africa* were based on the awareness of the historicity of the epic genre as it had been transmitted to late medieval Italy, hence they were conscious of variation as the motor of the evolution of a genre that from antiquity had to be translated into modern culture. The generative presence of the epic in the Italian Trecento has been scarcely acknowledged by scholars in Italian Studies; at the same time, in the domains of comparative literature or literary theory very little attention has been paid to the ways in which the *Commedia*, *Teseida*, and *Africa* both explore and transform the epic tradition. While in theoretico-historical accounts of

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iv
ABSTRACT	v
PREFACE	viii
1. A Tradition at Variance	1
1.1. In Theory	6
1.1.1. Matrix, Variation, Tradition	6
1.1.2. Polyphony and Dialogue	19
1.2. In History	24
1.2.1. The Polyvalent Text: The Existence of the Epic in the Middle Ages	25
1.2.2. Epics of Late Antiquity: A Code Pagan and Christian	32
1.2.3. Allegorical Epic: Universalization and Interiorization	38
1.2.4. <i>Historiae</i>	45
1.3. Authorial Self-Inscriptions	52
1.3.1. <i>Commedia</i> : Dante's Epic <i>Io</i>	53
1.3.2. <i>Teseida</i> : The Epic Poet as Lover	61
1.3.3. <i>Africa</i> : Composite Epic, Composite Self	68
1.3.4. Possibilities, Totalities	82
2. Architectures of Totality: Dante's <i>Commedia</i>	84
2.1. Dante and the Epic: Situating the Question	84
2.2. <i>Itinerarium Mentis in Genera</i>	101
2.2.1. " <i>Commedia</i> " as a Title, or: "This is Not a Genre"	102
2.2.2. Genre-Names in the <i>Commedia</i>	108
2.2.3. The <i>Commedia</i> as a Commentary	120
2.3. Patterns of Transformation: Amplification and Miniaturization	125
2.4. "Forse di retro a me": Dante to Boccaccio and Petrarch	135
3. A Middleman's Epic: Boccaccio's <i>Teseida</i>	140
3.1. The <i>Teseida</i> and the Epic: Situating the Question	140
3.2. How (Not) to Begin an Epic: On <i>Teseida</i> I and II	149
3.2.1. Inconsistency: An Epistle, Two <i>Premessioni</i> , and a Gloss	151

3.2.2. Dyptich: Emilia from Scythia; Arcita and Palemone from Thebes	158
3.2.3. <i>Thebaid</i> and <i>Metamorphoses</i> : Epic Networks	165
3.2.4. To Begin with the Matter of Love (I): Dantean Subtexts	176
3.2.5. To Begin with the Matter of Love (II): The Amazons	180
3.3. Epic and Romance	191
3.3.1. To Give Mars Some Rest: Interval and Detour in <i>Teseida</i> III	200
3.3.2. Indeterminacy	212
3.4. Epic as a Go-Between	214
4. Epic Dreamed: Petrarch's <i>Africa</i>	225
4.1. The <i>Africa</i> and the Epic: Situating the Question	225
4.2 The Architecture of the Poem: <i>Historia</i> and Digressions	239
4.3. Speech and Fable: On the Oratorical Quality of the <i>Africa</i>	246
4.4 Scipio's Dream: The Field of Epic Individuation	252
4.4.1. Overture: Scipio as <i>Imago</i>	256
4.4.2 Contractions and Expansions: The Scale of Epic Experience	262
4.4.3 Recollections, Individual and Collective: Memories of Fallen Heroes	266
4.4.4 Making Epic Experience Cohere: Patterns of <i>Pietas</i>	273
4.4.5 A Catalog from the Past: <i>Ardor</i> and <i>Amor</i>	278
4.4.6. Epic and <i>Vanitas</i> : Rise, Fall, and Persistence	292
4.4.7. Petrarch in a Loop: Unfinishedness	298
4.5. Ennius' Speech: Foundations of Epic Truth	301
CONCLUSION.	307
BIBLIOGRAPHY	310

PREFACE

This is a project about the uses and revisions of the epic in Dante's *Commedia*, Boccaccio's *Teseida*, and Petrarch's *Africa*, three major scenes in the long history of the genre. My overall goal is twofold. As a study in literary history, the dissertation will analyze how these poems explored the potentialities of the epic in dialogue with its post-classical and medieval traditions, at a specific juncture in time and place. As a study in poetics, it will discuss the poems as three vantage points for a re-examination of a genre made up in time by the hybridization of its models.

The two perspectives go hand in hand. For a fuller understanding of Dante's, Boccaccio's, and Petrarch's uses of the epic, we need to rely on models more dynamic than the ones resting on standard assumptions about genre identity and division. For a better realization of the epic's transformative nature, we have to pay closer attention to texts written in the wake of its tradition but usually excluded from its canon, as has been the case with the *Commedia*, *Teseida*, and *Africa*. Hence my purpose will be to say not what an epic is, but what writers and readers can do with the signs of the epic.

The reason for writing a critical triptych on those poems only seemingly derives from the outdated but still current notion of Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch as *le tre corone* of Italian literature. Even if we ignored the fact that the *corone* of the Italian Trecento might well be more than three, and not all male,¹ the following examination of the *Commedia*, *Teseida*, and *Africa* does not aim to crown, for the umpteenth time, Dante, Boccaccio, and

¹ See Wallace, "General Introduction," xxxiii-xxxiv.

Petrarch as the literary peaks of the Trecento. The rationale of analyzing them in a sequence is their engagement with the epic tradition, independent of the quality of their outcome and of the old hierarchy of *opere maggiori* and *minori* (provided that holding to such distinction still makes sense). Each and all of the works analyzed here develops a complex, profound, innovative, and sometimes contradictory discourse on many aspects of the epic tradition, conceived of more as an evolving network, a living archive, than as a corpus written in stone.

The *Commedia* is a masterpiece of world literature, and unquestionably the culmination of Dante's life and writing. The *Teseida* is a work begun and completed by the young Boccaccio at the end of his Neapolitan and the beginning of his Florentine years, and did not go through any substantial revision afterward; until the end of the XVI century the *Teseida* was quite popular with audiences both low (i.e., that of the *cantari*) and high; Tasso still spoke about it with admiration, then its status declined to one of Boccaccio's *opere minori*.² It is easy to say that, of the three poems, *Africa* is the one with the worst reputation: a canonical failure, it was begun in the early years of Petrarch's career, soon before his coronation, then intermittently resumed and never brought to completion; the mild responses of the poem's first posthumous readers were superseded, in time, by a mostly negative reception, due to the comparison with the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* (a "real" classic to be opposed to the *Africa* as a would-be classic) but also to the difficulty of enjoying a poem written in Latin, with a highly erudite but hardly captivating style. It

² Not by chance, a number of studies on Boccaccio's *Teseida* – and some of the most innovative, among them – come from the field of Chaucer studies: the *Knights Tale* has provides in fact a different, often more productive vantage point for the appreciation of Boccaccio's work.

would, therefore, be wrong to compare the outcome of these three epic projects. What really matters, instead, is to try to see how each poem was undertaken as an experiment affiliated to the Western epic tradition and written in the epic code. From this perspective, the unevenness of the *Commedia*, *Teseida*, and *Africa* as to their intention, circumstances, context, and reception provides an ideal ground for the investigation of the nature and practice of the epic as a variation, in the Trecento as well as in the whole course of the epic tradition.

It is true that within each poem the author claims, longs for, or just dreams of poetic coronation. This might be the ideal triplet of works to document each of their desires to become a *corona*, and yet such desire turns out to be more complicated and contradictory than it sounds, once it has been situated in the field of tensions constituting the texts. Generally speaking, it might be argued that the desire to be crowned is an author's performance on the stage of his own text, in dialogue with a range of traditions, old and new, Christian, and pagan, Latin and vernacular. In other words, that desire serves not only to write the scene of an author's self-celebration but also, and especially, to negotiate the terms of his affiliation with those traditions.

That said, several critical approaches could be employed to investigate the matter. Here, at the risk of oversimplifying, I would say that my way of analyzing each poem is mostly theoretical, but the theory of literature or genre is only a starting point; what I focus on in chapter 2, 3, and 4 is the "practical theory" written *in re* within the works themselves, not necessarily in explicitly theoretical terms on the authors' part. It is the "empirical criticism" at work in the *Commedia*, *Teseida*, and *Africa* that makes them so relevant to a discourse on the nature, history, and evolution of the epic.

The three poems are not analyzed from beginning to end, nor from the multiplicity of perspectives demanded by the texts themselves or by their reception history. Completion, an impossible dream that haunts the epic tradition, would not have been a viable purpose, not even if I had taken into consideration only one of those works, so intricate and multi-layered is their affiliation with the corpus of that tradition – which is, in turn, a corpus of variations. To be sure, some issues would deserve a section by themselves (e.g., the relation between Latin and vernacular, the variety of sources employed by the authors, and the position of their epic projects within their oeuvre), and more connections with social and historical contexts could have been drawn; that, however, would mean to write a different dissertation. The same could be said apropos of the format: I wrote one introductory theoretico-historical chapter and one chapter on each poem. Direct comparison among Dante's, Boccaccio's, and Petrarch's approach to the epic is left to the reader, who can deal with the three chapters sequentially or in a different order; again, another research work could be written if, rather than separately, the three poems were considered together and compared in a series of discussion on specific themes.

Therefore, what we are left with? The answer is simple: with the outline of variations by which the epic tradition is investigated, reassessed, and recast with new orientations, rooted in the here-and-now of the writers and yet in dialogue with the past and the future.

Chapter 1 builds a theoretical and historical frame for the analyses developed in the following chapters on the *Commedia*, *Teseida*, and *Africa*. The preliminary issue raised here is that, while epic as a specific genre (according to the Western epic canon with its

ruling classical and early modern models) did not play a primary role in the beginnings of Italian literature, in the Italian Trecento “epic potential” or “epic intention” was at work, that is, a cultural force giving shape to a collective consciousness. Epic did not fulfill a program; rather, it emerged through a series of attempts, in literature, to make sense of a process of *translatio* and transformation characterizing the moments of the emergence of the epic in history; that effort to orient the evolution of change may be recognized for its affinities with what lies at the core of the Western epic tradition, namely, an ongoing struggle for the negotiation of the sense of beginnings, origins, and continuations of a culture. In the two main sections of this chapter, “epic” is discussed as a two-fold category that defines both a genre (with its tradition) and meta-genre, to lay the groundwork for the discussion of the function of the epic in *Commedia*, *Teseida*, and *Africa*. In theory, I try to describe the epic as a process that revolves around the dynamics of tradition, variation, and totality; in history, I sketch out some scene of post-classical variation from late antiquity to the late Middle Ages (i.e., the Christianization of epic, the use of allegory, the function of commentaries, and the opposition of fable and *historia*). Finally, as a prelude to the subsequent chapters, I analyze the passages at the beginning of the three poems, where their authors inscribe their poetic personae into the network of the epic tradition.

Chapter 2 examines Dante’s *Commedia* as an architecture of totality, that is, as a structure or container that creates the condition for a total response to reality in all of its aspects. This is a function typical of the epic tradition (commentaries no less than texts), which Dante transforms by centering the unfolding of the text on the persona of the *personaggio-autore*, who not only is an ordinary man (though allowed an extraordinary

experience) but becomes a new kind of hero not so much for his action as for his receptiveness to what he perceives and feels in the realms of afterlife. Genre itself is an architecture of totality; by tracking the evolution of the ways Dante refers to his poem, I describe the intention of going beyond genres and reaching the very matrix of totality. And of reality itself. This is the dynamics of the epic, as far as it aims for the representation of totality but also of the force that gives shape to totality before it stabilizes in categories or genres. A brief coda discusses Dante's intention to found a tradition: the *Commedia* is a call to which somebody will respond to further that tradition.

Chapter 3 on Boccaccio's *Teseida*, like the following chapter on Petrarch's *Africa*, focuses mainly on books I-II (presented as premises to the poem proper) and on book III (introduced as a turning point as to plot and genre). The reason why I have chosen to write extensively on the early sections of these poems is that they constitute long asides or digressions by which the orientation of the text as a whole is formed. In the *Teseida*, the practical problem of how to begin an epic (the terms of which were authoritatively defined by Aristotle and Horace, but also by every classical epic *auctor*) is a ground on which Boccaccio can develop his own poetics of generic variation and hybridization. His most salient strategies are inconsistency, repetition, bifurcation, self-glossing, and time-framing, all implemented through a range of variation-practices. The dialogue of love and war qualifies the way Boccaccio grafts his poem on the epic tradition; the evolution of the epic, as summarized and thematized in the *Teseida*, runs along gender lines, with love functioning as a genre-shifter. Love in fact brings about a sort of "Ovidianization" of the epic, along with an oscillation between epic and romance, and between action and pathos.

Writing in a post-Dantean age, Boccaccio actively fosters the growth of a new Italian vernacular tradition that needs an epic, but it is not exactly the song of *arma* indicated by Dante as still missing; the *Teseida* is a work intentionally situated in the middle of various possibilities, as attested to by its full title: *Teseida delle nozze d'Emilia*. The epic exists only in hybridizing forms

Chapter 4 explores the ideal center of *Africa*, that is, the long *Somnium Scipionis* of books I-II, modeled on the dream that concludes Cicero's *De re publica*. Here two key features of the *Africa* are fully developed and employed to investigate into the constitution of the epic, as the dream serves to prepare Scipio for his imminent *gesta* in the Second Punic War, but also for life itself: 1) the oratorical quality of the *Africa*, in which speech prevails over action, in extension and importance; 2) the reduction of action proper, as if the center of man's experience lay elsewhere, in his inward life. Thus the *Somnium* is the textual space where the totality of experience is outlined and, at the same time, interiorized by a hero who is marked more by his receptiveness to both fortunate and unfortunate events (the basis for the ethics of the care of the self) than by his martial deeds. In what Africanus' father and uncle (both fallen against the Carthaginians) say to him in dream, in the heavens, the entire history of the Roman *imperium* is covered, not in a linear fashion but by interweaving different perspectives, as to time (past, present, and future), space (from Carthage to the cosmos), and especially ethics (the dialectics of the individual and the collective). The forces beyond the history of Rome are ethical and pathological: *ardor* and *amor*, which Scipio discovers in himself as well as in the crowd of dead virtuous Romans. Existence in history, however, is also subject to the *vanitas* of worldly things. This is why,

to Petrarch, the core of the epic intention lies in an ethical response to life's instability: *melius vivere*. When the three poet-figures of Petrarch himself, Ennius, and Homer intervene in the poem, they all struggle against the destruction brought about by time, in the inevitable senescence of things, individuals, glory, books, and the world itself. On this unstable ground, poetry grows; epic poetry tries to embrace the totality of experience and give, to our impermanent substance, the duration and solidity of a monument. Of this dream, and of its contradictions, the unfinished *Africa* itself is the most faithful witness.

CHAPTER 1

A Tradition at Variance

This chapter builds a theoretical and historical frame for the analyses developed in the following chapters on the *Commedia*, *Teseida*, and *Africa*. The preliminary issue raised here is that, while epic as a specific genre (according to the Western epic canon with its ruling classical and early modern models) did not play a primary role in the beginnings of Italian literature, in the Italian Trecento “epic potential” or “epic intention” was at work, that is, a cultural force giving shape to a collective consciousness. At that critical junction in Italian cultural history, epic did not fulfill a program; rather, it emerged through a series of attempts, in literature, to make sense of a process of *translatio* and transformation characterizing that very moment of its emergence. In other European contexts, like the German, French, and English, an epic tradition derived from some ancient vernacular text, and was recognized as such especially in the Romantic era, when literature and philology investigated origins with a new approach, trying to understand and even revive the generative force of the “primitive.”³ That was not the case in Italy; no ancient primitive text lent itself to the purpose, unless that be the *Aeneid*, but that would have undermined any possibility of seeing a culture evolving in one flow from its beginnings to modern

³ The third chapter of Vico’s *Scienza nuova* (“Della scoperta del vero Omero”), Schiller’s essay *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry*, and the section on the epic in Hegel’s *Aesthetics* are among the most theoretically engaging examples of this approach. A comprehensive history of the theories on epic literature has still to be done, as it exists only in fragmentary form within general accounts on the evolution of literary theory. For a fine critico-historical sketch that touches on the Romantic turn in the reception of epic, see Neiva, “Épopée.” On the “fertile illusion” of the loss of primitive naïveté, in the age of Schiller as well as in Virgil’s, see Conte, *Poetry of Pathos*, 24-27.

times: the time gap separating late medieval Italy from classical Rome is too wide, and their linguistic and cultural conditions are too different. On the other hand, the experiments with the epic that I will examine in this research are too cultivated and self-conscious, as works of literature, to be put in the same category of *Beowulf*, *Chanson de Roland*, and *Nibelungendlied*.⁴ It might be argued that there is no primary epic at the beginning of Italian literature; there are, however, major instances of secondary epic like the *Commedia*, *Teseida*, and *Africa*.⁵ Debatable as the post-Romantic dichotomy of primary/secondary might be, it serves here to give shape to a preliminary question: what does it mean to begin with secondary epic? Or: how does secondary epic claim a generative, foundational function when it is far in time and culture from the era of alleged primitive, if not mythical origins? The experiments in epic literature undertaken by Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch try to find an answer, each in its own way but all dealing with that past (and lost) world of origins that for them was classical antiquity.

The tradition of the classical and post-classical epic was deeply embedded in late medieval Italian culture, but the sense of discontinuity felt by artists and intellectuals (though it was not the philological consciousness of the distance from the past as pioneered by Petrarch) attests to the impossibility of assuming Roman epic as a foundational corpus.

⁴ See Ker, *Epic and Romance*, for a comparative study that covers Teutonic, Icelandic, and Old French tradition, along a temporal axis that goes from the epic of heroic ages to the romance of the late Middle Ages. Though outdated, Ker's volume (first published in 1908) is still useful as a mine of information and as a document of a certain view of the epic.

⁵ A candidate for primary epic in Italian would be the *cantari* in *ottava rima*, the tradition of which dates back to the XIV century, but that makes for no straightforward distinction; the *cantari*, in fact, appeared in a period and in a culture that can by no means be defined as "primitive" or "oral," and having derived perhaps from the written (secondary) tradition itself, i.e. from Boccaccio's early poems in *ottava rima*, *Filostrato* and *Teseida*. On the *cantari* as a mix of high and low, popular and erudite, "primary" and "secondary," see Bendinelli Predelli, *Storie e cantari medievali*. Still useful on that matter is Branca, *Cantare trecentesco*.

Its legacy, together with the legacy of the Christian tradition, had to be negotiated and incorporated into a *secondary and yet new beginning*. This was the program of the *Commedia*, *Teseida*, and *Africa*, as well as of other less prominent works both in Latin and vernacular, but, indeed, Italian literature was not born of texts that we might conventionally define as epic. There are exceptions, of course, one of them being the *Africa*, the work that strived the most to imitate the form and rhetoric of Roman epic, but neither this nor other “properly” epic texts have the force to stand out as landmarks capable of defining an age and originating a tradition.

The *Africa* is an unfinished work whose reception was far less enthusiastic than the long wait for its publication; the *Teseida*, in turn, is a poem which had been quite popular until the Renaissance but then was filed as one of the *opere minori* of the author of the *Decameron*. While Boccaccio’s *Teseida* and Petrarch’s *Africa* originated or fostered the growth of the vernacular *cantari* in *ottava rima* and of the humanistic epic respectively, in neither case we can speak of a work capable of synthesizing the zeitgeist of late medieval Italian and European culture. In the same context, there also flourished pre-Petrarchan Latin epics that, bound as they were to a narrow historical or even municipal perspective, did not articulate a major cultural transition. The same could be said apropos of the series of *volgarizzamenti* which made ancient epics accessible to non-Latinate readers. They did not let the genre begin a new life in the domain of vernacular culture, although it true, as noted by Cornish, that “the vernacular epic [of Dante’s *Commedia*] would have been

simply unthinkable without a readership and a literature already in place” thanks also to the circulation vernacular translations of the classics.⁶

Non-epic, therefore, is the view offered by the literary landscape of late medieval Italy, in its multiplicity of writing forms and genres. A look at its peaks – *Commedia*, *Decameron*, and *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*, does not alter the impression we get. By and large, and with no risk of oversimplifying, we could say that the original genius of Italian literature was essentially non-epic – and such it remained until the age of Ariosto and Tasso.⁷ Nevertheless, even though the epic does not stand out as a “dominant” in Tynyanov’s sense,⁸ the presence of elements from the epic tradition (characters, stories, topoi, etc.) is so thick at any level of the corpus of early Italian literature that a census would be hardly possible, also because such elements are often hybridized or intermingled with other materials not marked as epic.⁹ More than of dialogues with the epic tradition, we should speak of borrowings and sources, of the kind that has been amply tracked down first of all in the works of Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch by the painstaking accuracy of scholars; despite reasonable margins of uncertainty, the references of the *tre corone* to the

⁶ On late medieval Latin epics in Italy, see Feo, “Poema epico latino,” and “Tradizione classica.” On translations from Roman literature in the Duecento and Trecento, see Segre, “Volgarizzamenti,” and Cornish, *Vernacular Translation* – the quote is from p. 11 of this study.

⁷ As reflected in most literary histories. In a volume highly focused on the rhetoric of genres, for instance, only with Ariosto the epic is seen as a genre adequate to the zeitgeist: “La voce concertante del racconto epico è anche la sua unità profonda, la sua regola soggettiva, che può inglobare nelle trame o nelle spirali del discorso, come *sermo*, ogni aspetto dello spettacolo umano,” in Battistini and Ramondi, *Figure della retorica*, 92. By the way, part of my purpose in this study is to show that *Commedia*, *Teseida*, and *Africa* already experimented with the capacity of the epic code to include and connect.

⁸ “Since a system is not an equal interaction of all elements but places a group of elements in the foreground – the “dominant” – and thus involves the deformation of the remaining elements, a work enters into literature and takes on its literary function through this dominant,” in Tynyanov, “On Literary Evolution,” 72-73.

⁹ See, for instance, Dante’s use of passages from the *Thebaid*, *Aeneid*, *Metamorphoses*, and *Pharsalia* in philosophical discussion of the four ages of man in *Convivio* IV, 25-28.

corpus of the epic tradition has been substantially mapped out, despite reasonable margins for adjustments. An archive of references, however, does not explain how and why specific texts try to negotiate an affiliation with the corpus referred to.

The present study does not go source-hunting, nor does it reconstruct in a socio-cultural fresco the weight, influence, and function of the epic in the Trecento. Its aim, instead, is to explore how a triad of works different in nature and outcome can articulate a sense of beginnings in response to a specific historical transition and to do so in dialogue with the code handed down by the Western epic tradition. Focus on origins and continuations, encyclopedic scope, inclusiveness in form and content: these were the main qualities that made the epic so generative a code for authors that, like Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch, had the keenest awareness of the cultural transformation of which they were, from diverse perspectives, both spectators and agents. An assumption underlying this work is that the composite field we call “Italian literature” was, in that very age, inherently charged with an *epic intention*, etymologically a “tension toward” the foundation of a new collective discourse. Such a tension ran through the polymorph body of Italian culture (whose outline, we must not forget, were not at all clear-cut) and urged the birth of a new frame within which it would be possible to connect, relate, and transform what had been inherited from the past and what was more or less latent in the present. In the context of transition, there is a compelling need to negotiate conditions of beginnings, continuations, and endings, as is shown first and foremost by the great classical epics.

An ambiguity must be acknowledged here: “epic” is a mode characterized by particular thematic, formal, historical, theoretical features; “epic” is also an intention, that

underlies writing but in itself is neither fully formed nor inherently dependent on a specific set of features.¹⁰ While the former can be recognized and discussed as an actual cultural entity, the latter is something more elusive, like a force the assessment of which is always relative, and never measurable with the protocols of positive knowledge.¹¹ To solve the ambiguity is not the purpose of this study, which instead aims at exploring the in-between ground where epic-as-object and epic-as-force have always been in dialogue. This will be discussed in this chapter, first in a quite theoretical and then in a more decidedly historical perspective.

1.1. In Theory

1.1.1. Matrix, Variation, Tradition

As a point of attack, let us consider a passage from an essay in which Richard P. Martin reflects on the possibility of defining the function and meaning of epic in a comparative perspective:

“epic,” applied to similar categories across cultures, plays a necessary role that *transcends* genre (thus making fruitless the attempt to pin down a single genre). In other words, “epic” stands out precisely by presenting itself, time after time, as the “natural” state of speech, the pre-existent mode, the word-before-genre, the matrix of other forms.¹²

There are two interrelated dimensions for the epic: one as a series of contingent and local generic categories, by which works can be compared and connected according to genealogy

¹⁰ The ambiguity, as we will see later in this chapter, implicitly characterizes the Western epic tradition since antiquity; yet, it becomes explicit only in the modern age when, starting with Vico, the core of Homeric poetry is found neither in the rhetorico-formal apparatus nor in its subject matter but in its function as a discourse articulating the individuation of a collective subject. Only with this modern turn the term “epic” began to identify – and confound, as it occurs in practice – two different dimensions: object and force

¹¹ A corollary is that not any text affiliated to the series known as epic tradition is driven by an epic intention. Textual markers of a genre or a tradition may well be only simulacra of intention.

¹² Martin, “Epic as Genre,” 9-10.

(within the same tradition) or analogy (between different traditions, i.e. ancient Greece and medieval Japan); another as a meta-genre or matrix, where a culture is represented in its generativeness and totality. One dimension does not go without the other, as we need the singularity of actual texts (the incarnation of their epic intention, so to speak) to mediate our access to the matrix of culture. And of course, from text to text, and even within one text, there might be discrepancies and conflicts about the nature, configuration, and lineage of their very cultural matrix. What Martin calls “matrix” is neither natural or neutral: everything in the two-fold existence of the epic is historically determined, and what a text proposes as the beginning of a culture is always partial in its orientation and in the selection and elaboration of its materials. In short, the pre-conditions of beginnings result from what we can call “epic labor”:¹³ a reconfiguration of the matrix. No matter how frequently, at the level of representation, epic texts immobilize the dynamics of historical change into the quasi-eternity of a monument or a myth; at an earlier and deeper stage, the epic prepares a beginning by producing the difference from which a rupture with past and present can emerge.¹⁴ By certain strange loops, a text marked as epic would describe and make sense of a beginning not as an event – whether fictional or true – that happened once and for all in time, but as the ongoing possibility of producing a difference from within a cultural matrix. In this process, the epic text tends to be not only a material part of totality but a

¹³ I derive the phrase “epic labor” from the title of Florence Goyet’s comparative study of *Iliad*, *Chanson de Roland*, *Hôgen*, and *Heiji monogatari: Penser sans concepts*.

¹⁴ Cf. the opposition of *origin* as a myth and *beginning* as “making or producing difference,” in Said, *Beginnings*, xiii.

very special part of it: a synecdoche that, though partial, stands out as a total response to reality.¹⁵

Not only “epic labor” is related to change; the totality it recapitulates is never static but always in process, to the extent that “epic labor” can be more precisely conceived of as a response to changes that affect a collective subject in history. We can see it, for instance, in the functional definition of the epic given by Florence Goyet at the end of her study of *Penser sans concepts*:

l'épopée est un texte qui résout une crise politique contemporaine, insoluble autrement, en affrontant les valeurs antagonistes dans des personnages qu'elle construit pour cela. Elle permet ainsi au public de voir ces valeurs “jouer” avant lui, elle lui donne une prise intellectuelle sur le présent chaotique. Finalement, elle lui permet de “juger”: de visualiser obscurément, mais profondément, quelle sortie se peut trouver à la crise, selon quelles lignes radicalement nouvelles la société peut être reconstruite.¹⁶

Three points must be highlighted. First, the epic has an intimate connection with the the experience of crisis as an irruption of difference that destabilizes a situation that might have appeared to be solid at an earlier time; crisis, in other words, is not an accident but the very substance of the epic.¹⁷ Second, since that type of crisis is collective, it can be fully articulated only in a form inclusive enough to address the multiplicity of forces and structures in collective life (a multiplicity of characters, for instance, can embody a set of conflicting values about major ethical or historical issues). Third, the epic develops on a

¹⁵ On the relation between epic poems and totality, cf. Lukács, *Theory of the Novel*, 56: “The novel is the epic in an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given, in which the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem, yet which still thinks in terms of totality.” My assumption in the present study is that such a distinction does not hold true, as “the extensive totality of life” in the epic is more of a result than of a premise; in other words, the epic does question the notion and experience of totality – its matrix. For an overview of the many facets of the notion of epic totality, cf. also Cowan, “Epic as Cosmopoiesis.”

¹⁶ Florence Goyet, *Penser sans concepts*, 557.

¹⁷ I.e., a particular mode of experiencing crisis, different from the modes that characterize other literary forms.

broader scale and spectrum the special capacity of literature as such to allow its readers (or listeners) an understanding that is obscure and yet profound, “without concepts” (*sans concepts*), as maintained by Goyet.¹⁸

The sense of crisis at the root of the epic develops within a tradition, that is, in the *longue durée* of the formation and transformation of a corpus. No vantage point is more productive than a tradition to study the articulation of difference in a cultural matrix; difference materializes through variation, which makes sense only if put against a standard, a state of balance that might be either lost or to be found, never achievable in any case in the present time of the text.

In other words, with its labor epic imagines a transition from crisis to new beginnings, a transition that, in literary terms, is articulated through variation within a tradition. Variation, on the other hand, is the way a new text explores the vastness of the network of tradition, with its principles, precepts, potentialities, and contradictions. Thus, variation has both an ontogenetic and a phylogenetic function, as it qualifies in one and the same process the evolution of both individual texts and trans-individual genres.

How variation is central to the origin and evolution of the epic tradition can be seen from the transition that led from the Homeric poems to Callimachus’ short and extremely refined epics. A useful articulation of that passage in literary history can be found in Newman’s history of Western epic, where Callimachus is presented as the first great continuator and true imitator of the Homeric poems, precisely because he avoided straight

¹⁸ But also by Giambattista Vico, almost three centuries earlier, with his notion of *sapienza poetica*, on which the great edifice of the *Scienza nuova* rests.

imitation of the exterior features of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*,¹⁹ and practiced instead variation as the main road to understand and continue the work of Homer. According to Newman, it is with Callimachus that a tradition began, as he acknowledges, in practice, that the dynamics of literary succession, which negotiates continuity and discontinuity in time, is rooted in variation. The possibility of a tradition, indeed, lies in the inevitability of transformation. Callimachus responded to the cliché-ridden reception of Homer, which was typical not only of “cyclic epics” but also of his own age’s readers.

To understand a tradition, we must know what is being handed down. What was it in the first instance that Callimachus could conceivably have censured in the simple continuation of the Homeric style with other themes, whether legendary or historical? Precisely the notion that Homer is simple.²⁰

Callimachus’ Alexandrian variations on Homeric models and themes (via Aristotle) form the first and most cogent objection to the long-standing opinion that Homer – and the origin of the epic itself – is simple. Complexity, on the contrary, turns out to be an essential quality of the epic, which reveals to readers and writers a range of potentialities through the interplay of difference and repetition.²¹ Retrospectively, variation is a principle inherent in the Homeric poems, which to the reader and writer educated in variation stand out as a compound of potentialities; coherence, in this sense, is less crucial than the generative

¹⁹ Exterior imitation of rhetorico-formal elements characterized so-called “cyclic epics,” chastised as non-Homeric by, among others, Aristotle (*Poetics*) and Horace (*Ars poetica*).

²⁰ Newman, *Classical Epic Tradition*, 6.

²¹ Cf. Ker, *Epic and Romance*, 16, where the complexity of the epic is mainly seen as a matter of inclusiveness and comprehensiveness in terms of style and subject, provided that the “magnificence and aristocratic dignity of epic” is the key of the poem. Capaciousness is the sign of the greatest epic imagination: “In an epic poem where the characters are vividly imagined, it follows naturally that their various moods and problems involve a variety of scenery and properties, and so the whole business of life come to the story,” in *ibid.* 17. In this chapter, I advocate a notion of epic that is made complex not only by a direct relation with “the whole business of life” but also, and primarily, by the mediation of the epic code that configures (and re-configures) that very business.

quality that allows successors to find in the source-text new roads to explore rather than templates for imitation. Developing the motif of women's lament as a subtle indictment of the history fashioned by male winners, for instance, does not have the same implications as amplifying the allegorical layer that is present but not dominant in the Homeric texts.²²

The work of Homer would thus embody the dual nature of the epic: the actuality of texts on the one hand, and a matrix of potentialities on the other. Projecting the notion of simplicity onto a model as complex as Homer only reduces its capacity to trigger new beginnings (as instances of the production of difference, as recalled above). Being "simple" is a non-productive status, to the extent that it implies the exhaustion of all potentialities for difference latent in the texts; a living tradition, on the contrary, is an evolutionary process that rejects simple imitations (and simple refusals) and grows out of dialogue with the predecessors. Callimachus' variations on Homer result from selection, combination, and transformation of some fundamental elements in the source-texts, while others are deemed secondary; the poet has to be partial and yet rigorous in his critico-creative response so that Homer does resonate in the new texts, but to a different music.

The relation between predecessor and successor, properly speaking, can never really be one-on-one, as in the scene of tradition there are at least two other types of agents at work: negative agents, that represent what the new poet should avoid (for example by rehashing a dead, non-evolutionary practice of poetry such as with cyclical epic); and collaborative agents, that co-operate with the poet to a novel understanding of the models. In other words, for a tradition to grow, foils and mediators are necessary. As Newman points

²² Cf. Murnaghan, "Poetics of Loss," and Ford, "Performing Interpretation," respectively.

out, Callimachus' chief mediator is Aristotle's *Poetics*, whose "legacy to practical criticism" was crucial in ways other than those prescribed by orthodox Aristotelian scholarship.²³ Two lines of reasoning are worthy of note for the present discussion. First, a notion of "unity" that is not only narrative but depends on the consistency of the component of the text on different levels; hence Aristotle makes room for epic variations shorter in length than the Homeric poems (the so-called Callimachean small epic, an experiment that we can rightly see, more than in terms of deviations from an epic standard, as an experiment in textual configuration),²⁴ Second, to understand genres, either synchronically or diachronically, we must be aware of their deep inter-generic nature, as Aristotle is when discussing epic and tragedy. "Epic has less unity," Aristotle says with Homer as his main reference;²⁵ this paves the ways for experiments like Callimachus' because the acknowledgment that coherence is lesser in epic than in tragic texts entails that in the epic there is more room for variation. Capacious and inclusive, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* appeared to Aristotle as containers of many variations in speech, style, form, and content, not to mention the lost comical poem *Margites*, attributed to Homer, which authorized even the carnivalesque in the epic. Callimachus' penchant for variations shows a profound understanding of Homer as it goes in a direction contrary to conventional, one-sided epic

²³ Newman, *Classical Epic Tradition*, 47.

²⁴ Also known as *epyllion*: "The word is not used in this sense until late antiquity. An Alexandrian experiment in techniques to refresh the failing epic of the day. Not a genre separated from - or intended to replace the - large-scale epic, except insofar as all attempts at novelty and originality must oppose the trite and stale. Eventually the teaching of epyllion were subsumed into the larger epic, notably by Virgil," in *ibid.*, 521. See also Jouteur, "Épyllion," for a perspective that bridges the ancient and the modern, the practical and the theoretical.

²⁵ Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1462 a18-b4. Newman, *Classical Epic Tradition*, 41, glosses as follows: "Presumably Aristotle means that tragedy makes a more concentrated assault on the emotions, and so secures its cathartic effect more powerfully."

grandeur: “parody, laughter, mixed feelings, masking and unmasking, are at home,” and grow into a classical tradition that, retrospectively, does reveal the rationale of its beginnings: “The ultimate triumph of the carnival in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, a profoundly Alexandrian work, should alert the reader to its presence at the beginning of the Alexandrian experiment.”²⁶ Along these lines, the whole Western epic tradition might be defined as “Alexandrian,” to emphasize Callimachus’ generative response to Homer, or “parodic,” not for the occasional presence of laughter but the interplay of repetition and difference underscored by the etymology of the word. In sum, variation in the epic tradition is neither accidental nor digressive, but substantial and generative. And if we consider the two-fold dimension of the epic, as text and matrix (or meta-genre), it will be clear that the movement of variation has to do with the potential (what could be generated through texts) no less than with the actual (what a text “is,” materially and historically).²⁷

In a nutshell, the transition from Homer to Callimachus epitomizes the complex nature of the epic, simplicity being only a desire, or a retrospective view projected by readers who long for a mythical origin, lost and irretrievable. “Complexity” makes variation possible, and must not be confused with “difficulty,” namely the condition of a text that, for a range of reasons, requires from readers a certain amount of interpretive labor and the support of an erudite apparatus. Besides, that kind of complexity brings into the relation of a poet (or a text) with the tradition the notion of recursiveness: variation in the

²⁶ Ibid., 29-30. Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque is explicitly recalled by Newman to make his case. In “Epic and novel,” Bakhtin’s own view of the epic as foil to the novel is strongly anti-carnavalesque. Of the utility of a use of Bakhtin *contra* Bakhtin with regard to the epic, more will be said later in this chapter.

²⁷ Cf. Wilkie, *Romantic Poets*, 68: “Epic [...] exists first in the mind of the poet, as an undirected, potential force which must then be channeled into a particular theme.”

epic tradition, in fact, is a matter of producing difference through a return to the predecessors, in spiral-like movement. And recursive the tradition itself must be, as its growth is modulated by the tension toward beginnings – both old and new.²⁸

Epos (“word”) in ancient Greece was a rather unmarked term if compared to *mythos* in the Homeric context, yet it became increasingly marked in post-Homeric times when it came to mean “epic” or “hexameter verses.”²⁹ As a result of this semantic transformation, the status of *epos* came to be “both *marked* (in literary history) and *unmarked* (in Homeric diction).” We can see here reflected the dual dimension of the epic as meta-genre:

On the one hand, it is as pervasive as everyday speech: intimate, simple, potential in any utterance. it can happen at any time; it can embody any matter and make it significant. On the other, “epic” [...] is a mode of total communication, undertaking nothing less than the ideal expression of a culture.³⁰

In so far as it is the potential of language as such, and is synonymous with the human faculty of speech, epic is “generic”: non-specific, non-particular, it embraces the totality of experience mediated by language, including the actual and the potential (or, in other words, what has been already articulated and what is still inarticulate). If instead the faculty of speech is channeled and shaped by a certain textual configuration, geared for “total communication” and yet particular (being discernible from other configurations), then epic

²⁸ On the notion of recursiveness in the epic, cf. Downes, *Recursive Desire*, 23: “epic focuses [...] on the *recursion* to the traditional script, on the quite deliberate (as well as inevitable) assumption of the forms of epic power, voice, and story. [...] epic poets are not really trying to evade or even stage a conflict with their precursors, but instead deliberately recur to them, aiming primarily to repeat them. [...] Belatedness, thus, is a chosen burden or reward, not a cause of deliberately violent misprision.” As an operative notion for the investigation of recursiveness in the epic, variation is a better notion than repetition.

²⁹ Nagy, “Epic as Genre,” 25-26.

³⁰ Martin, “Epic as Genre,” 15.

is “generic” in a different sense: a literary genre, a tradition, series, or class of texts. These two different modes of being “generic” are interrelated, and the very life and evolution of the epic depend on their ongoing dialogue. At the center of this chiasmus, where two planes of “generic” existence intersect, variation occurs, connecting what is identifiable as a genre and what is a meta-genre that as such reveals the relativity of any generic configuration.

Such dynamics generate “evolutionary mistakes,” that is, variations of elements that, by breaking the repetition of a model, open up new possibilities for the life of genre itself. As a meta-genre, the epic thematizes and dramatizes the dynamics that for Tynyanov lie at the heart of the evolution of genres: what is perceived as “*an exception to the system* [of genres], *a mistake*” of genre can actually be nothing less than “*a dislocation of the system*” that occurs not by “*regular evolution*” but by a “*leap*.”³¹ (31). Genres do not evolve along a continuum but by ruptures and deviations that can alter the balance of a genre-system. For texts to be grouped, either synchronically or diachronically, a kind of continuity must be recognizable, which for Tynyanov is constructive rather than rhetorico-formal, and results in dislocation rather than in stasis:

a *static* definition of genre, one which would cover all of its manifestations, is impossible: the genre dislocates itself; we see before us the broken line, not the straight line of its evolution – and this evolution precisely takes place at the expense of the “fundamental” features of the genre.³²

Size, for instance, would be one of the stock features of the epic that Callimachus could shed while seeking to maintain and evolve Homer’s constructive principles. Hence, like any genre with a tradition, epic exists only as *the non-finite series of its variants*. Such

³¹ Tynyanov, “Literary Fact,” 31.

³² *Ibid.*, 32.

hyper-Alexandrine or hyper-Hellenistic quality is central to the life of the epic tradition insofar as it leads to the exploration of the matrix of its variation, which is also – *pars pro toto* – the matrix of its own culture.

In this regard, a key theoretical reference is the distinction made by Gian Biagio Conte, apropos of Roman literature, between two modes of imitation by which the life of genres evolves: by reproducing an “exemplary model” (a major canonical text) and by exploring the possibilities of a “code model” (a set of variants made possible by a tradition at a certain moment in its history). An exemplary model is a single authoritative text to be imitated in the features that identify it as a standard (e.g., meter, length, and *topoi* – formal and thematic – of the Homeric poems); a code model, instead, is “a system of conscious, deliberate rules that the author [of a new work] identifies as indicators of ways in which the text must be interpreted,” thus giving priority to variance over standard.³³ This can only happen because the model, as we saw with Homer for Callimachus, is not simple but complex; one mode of relation, indeed, does not exclude the other, so that, for instance, in the *Aeneid* Virgil responded to the Homeric texts both as exemplary and code models. Variants occur not in a vacuum but in a context and through a subject (who is writer *and* reader) provided with the competence of the code and the memory of its tradition.³⁴

“Memory,” as maintained by Conte, “is not an inert, fragmented piece of culture but an already ‘shaped’ substance to be reckoned with”.³⁵ the literary archive onto which

³³ Conte, *Rhetoric of Imitation*, 30-31.

³⁴ The mind of the writer-and-reader is already an intertextual network: “Readers or imitators (also a type of reader) who approach the text are themselves already a plurality of texts and different codes,” in *ibid.* 29.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 49.

the new writer operates is never formless; in fact, it orients the writer's responses (what we call "variations") only because it has entered cultural memory as a pre-formed object. However, no response is automatic by authors producing something new and significant. A text, as Conte argues, may well construct a "Model Reader" and predict his or her "moves,"³⁶ but ultimately the variations that constitute a tradition as long and diverse as the epic are most often "wrong" if judged according to the models – *generatively wrong*. A reader engaging a text at a given stage of its afterlife may be incapable of comprehending, from a philological perspective, the model's "original" operation on the code; lacking the competence that supported the model's work, that same reader can address the model through another set of competences, thus bringing a new intention into the code itself. If no Model Reader exists, the same holds for Model Epic: "literary history has nothing to show but epic texts, individual works that constitute single acts of utterance," instances of *parole* more real than the phantasm of their *langue*.³⁷

Yet *langue*, phantasmal as it is with its norms vis-à-vis the reality of variations, does play a crucial role in the process. Amidst all its variations, the epic holds to norms that, despite their contingent nature, are often presented as absolute, being guarantors of a truth handed down from the past of a cultural lineage. It is indeed from the tension between the variability of its code and the absoluteness of its norms that epic evolves; norms are assumed, respected and, to some degree, infringed, for the reader to glimpse "a structure of wider scope,"³⁸ that meta-generic matrix that appears as a totality in transformation. It

³⁶ Ibid., 30.

³⁷ Ibid., 143.

³⁸ Ibid., 150.

is also a field of generative variation that precedes the emergence of a text but becomes perceptible only through the mediation of the incarnate text. Conte sums it up brilliantly apropos of Virgil:

By making the epic norm – its field of signification and the system of values it represents – relative rather than absolute, this contamination between modes of language opened up new poetic horizons. The dialectic of contamination reactivated the critical function of epic language, brought history back into it, and set it evolving again after a period of fossilization. By demonstrating the contingent partisanship of the Latin epic form, the *Aeneid* renewed the epos. The ambiguity of language so complex forced the epic genre to adopt a structure that left greater scope for the production of meaning, involving new forms of interpretation of the world that were still unanticipated, still in flux.³⁹

The historicity of epic is precisely this opening up of the code which, by infringement of generic norms, creates the conditions for the meaning of that individual text (an Escher-like effect), and for a renewal of the epic tradition as a whole. In the hands of a writer like Virgil, the epic code turns out to be critical and generative: while decomposing old structures, it gives shape to new ones.

1.1.2. Polyphony and Dialogue

The “life” of the epic as sketched out so far evolves according to the principle of literary composition that Mikhail Bakhtin named “dialogic.” It is well-known that epic served to him as a foil to his theory of the novel: whereas the epic is monologic, absolute, and recalcitrant to variation and change, the novel (in its various manifestations since antiquity) is polyphonic, relative and driven by the force of socio-cultural transformations. From various angles, scholars have already demonstrated the untenability of Bakhtin’s theory as

³⁹Ibid., 150-151.

regards the historical reality of epic traditions in world literature.⁴⁰ What Bakhtin said about the epic, taken as a foil for the historico-theoretical definition of the novel as *the* literary mode of modernity, appears to be wrong in philologico-historical terms but in a certain way true as it unintentionally represents one of the tensions in the network of forces that shape the epic: the projection, onto texts and traditions, of expectations of absoluteness and stability. Such expectations form part of the textuality of the epic itself because since antiquity writers knew well (in practice, and in spite of theories professed by themselves or by critics) how to play with generic expectations, operating beyond the “legal” territory of a genre and within the larger game of generic hybridity. And to the question of genres in antiquity we have to turn again now, to better see the paradoxical truth of Bakhtin’s essentialist theory insofar as it not merely wrong, but *generatively wrong*.

Classical genre theory was a “powerfully essentializing discourse,” though “not uniform nor wholly self-consistent, and this fact opened the door for poets to exploit the tendentiousness of such essentializing assumptions.”⁴¹ The discourse on genres, must be taken not at face value because, under the surface of the literal meaning of theoretical statements, another discourse may be at work; critical statements, in other words, function in practice like lines uttered by a character in a theatrical play. Thus, any theoretical stance takes up its meaning only if considered together with the empirical work of writers. The latter shows indeed that “violating generic boundaries was not merely an inevitable and accidental consequence of writing in any genre, but an important aspect of the poet’s

⁴⁰See for instance Fusillo, “Epic, Novel.”

⁴¹ Farrell, “Classical Genre,” 383-384.

craft.”⁴² Of such practical criticism, that did not enter the discourse of ancient theorists, nor match ancient poets’ explicit statements on literature, Horace’s *Ars poetica* and Ovid’s play between elegy and epic are major instances. Farrell synthesizes this approach as follows:

The Roman poets were, indeed, demonstrably concerned, even obsessed with genre as a discursive device, probably as much as or more than any other group of poets who ever lived. But their interest in genre as a set of prescriptive rules - which is just about the only way in which they ever articulate their generic self-awareness - is powerfully undermined, even to the point of parody, by an attitude of practical inventiveness and what looks like nothing so much as an interest in the untenability of any position founded on the idea of generic essence. What seems clear, however, is that (for whatever reason), generation after generation found the idea of genre as essence or recipe to be the perfect foil for a poetics that was more concerned with teasing indeterminacy than with purity of any kind.⁴³

In this respect, the reality of a genre lies in a constant renegotiation of the terms of its code. Its meaning being only contextual, a generic statement can thus be duplicitous, protean, open to new possibilities in the drama of literature. The act of transgression of generic norms is of limited interest if we overlook its most crucial unstated assumption, namely that indeterminacy and variation lie at the heart of all generic configurations.

The more poets experiment with intra- and inter-generic variation, the more they don the mask of generic essentialism. As Stephen Hinds argues, “the more Roman poets mix, blur, and hybridize categories in their poetic practice, the more persistently they tend to appeal to unmixed, essentialized, and unchanging conceptions of the genre in their poetological policy statements,”⁴⁴ first and foremost Ovid, who is perhaps the most radical investigator of the potentialities of that generic indeterminacy that lies within the particular

⁴² Ibid., 388.

⁴³ Ibid., 396.

⁴⁴ Hinds, “Essential Epic,” 223-224.

configurations of genres in a context.⁴⁵ Ultimately, all the great Roman epics are failed attempts – and rightly so – “to come up with an essentially essential epic”;⁴⁶ failure is a generative condition for the evolution of the epic – it would be tempting to say that it is, paradoxically, a condition for the success of an epic work. The “critical myth” of epic as the genre of absolute origins⁴⁷ is therefore not to discard but to read within a field of variations. While the critical lineage represented by Bakhtin sees that myth as a reality, the practical criticism of writers has “performed” it as a partial voice, or tension, within a broader dialogic play.⁴⁸ Inconsistency has a generative function that, since the Alexandrian age, allowed poets to lay claim on a truth to be experienced by the meanderings of texts rather than by the philosophers’ principle of non-contradiction.⁴⁹ O’Hara’s analysis of the poets’ use of alternate, even discrepant versions of myths within the same text, implies the practical notion of the epic as “polyvalent” mode,⁵⁰ at work in the Roman epic tradition and consequently, we might add, in the post-classical tradition that followed.

Again and from another angle, we come to the same conclusion: the practice of variation in the epic tradition (its Alexandrian nature, so to speak) undermines any alleged fixity of genres; at the same time, it does not allow us to reduce them to merely unsubstantial categories (without the reality of differences, any polyphonic play on genres

⁴⁵ For analytical examinations of Ovid’s approach to epic and elegy, see Farrell, “Dialogue of Genres,” and Hinds, *Metamorphosis of Persephone*, 99-134.

⁴⁶ Hinds, “Essential Epic,” 244.

⁴⁷ Fusillo, “Epic, Novel,” 34.

⁴⁸ In this sense, the observation that “declarations of the death of epic are practically as old as epic itself,” in Downes, *Recursive Desire*, 22, reminds us that the drama of genres played on the stage of the text is no less diachronic (history of genres) than synchronic (typology of genres).

⁴⁹ O’Hara, *Inconsistency in Latin Epic*, 19.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 102.

– such as what we see most evidently in Ovid – would not be effective). By force of variation, the epic has always been novelized and polyvalent in Bakhtin’s sense. Therefore, while “epic” as a form or a tradition precisely identifiable as such does exist, a wider epic network does exist too.

Not having acknowledged that network might be the reason that has severely limited modern readers’ reception of the innovations brought about by Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch with their experiment in the epic code. What is epic for us, the moderns (or post-moderns)? No direct answer seems to be possible if we look for a definition capable of coherently accounting for all the texts or traditions in various ways referable to what our culture labels as “epic.” In *The Architext*, Genette ironically demystified the conventional triad of Western poetics (epic, lyric, and dramatic), as it cannot stand a thorough examination of its formal, thematic, and modal attributes; no other genre-system built on homogeneity and separation seems apt to replace worn-out taxonomies on which modern readers still rely. Instead, Genette calls upon a set of closely related notions such as “intertextuality,” “transtextuality,” “metaextuality,” and finally “architextuality,” all meant to describe with degrees of nuance “everything that brings [a text] into relation (manifest or hidden) with other texts.”⁵¹ It follows that to talk about genres as trans-individual categories of our relation with the literary fact, we need to

⁵¹ Genette, *Architext*, 81-82. For another “destructive” approach, see Étiemble, “Épopée,” where a comparative review of the many forms and contexts of what Western culture has grouped under the label “epic” supports a call to start from scratch in the definition of the epic.

acknowledge variation and connectedness as the generative forces of literature. This is where we can start in order to search for novel ways of thinking the epic.⁵²

1.2. In History

Historicity is the mode by which *the text as a text* responds to and enters the culture of its own time in the process of being constructed from elements of that culture.⁵³ If history is the pre-individual, which includes such entities as genre and tradition, historicity is the very process of individuation by which a subject (for instance a human being, a living organism, or a text) is formed.⁵⁴ The notion of “double historicity” was proposed by Paul Zumthor to articulate the complex relationship that ties us modern readers to medieval texts, and that in turn tied medieval readers to the classics.

Historicity is the trait, which, in the study of ancient cultures, in the critical reading of the ancient or medieval texts, characterizes simultaneously, but separately and differently, the one who reads and that which is read. [...] Thus, in the medievalist’s reading, two historicities touch, without merging into one another. [...] We steer a course between Scylla and Charybdis. The ultimate term we aim for is really to bring the ancient text into the present, that is, to integrate it into that historicity which is ours.⁵⁵

To integrate, here, does not mean to dilute or instrumentalize, but to put into dialogue subjects rooted in temporalities that are related and yet different. When we deal with genres and traditions that run through the entire history of Western culture, the perspectives that meet and merge in that dialogue are more than two, to the extent that we should rather speak of multiple historicities. The course of the epic tradition bears traces from multiple

⁵² For a review of contemporary approaches to epic that go in that direction, see Goyet, “L’épopée.”

⁵³ I am rephrasing the definition provided in Zumthor, “Comments,” 372: “the formal aspects of the manner in which this text entered into the culture of its own time.”

⁵⁴ We must not forget that the subject “does not coincide with the individuated individual, but always includes a certain ratio of pre-individual reality. It is an unstable, impure composite,” in Virno, *When the Word*, 228.

⁵⁵ Zumthor, *Speaking of the Middle Ages*, 32-33.

periods and authors, part of them being legible to a given writer or reader in a specific place and time. Other traces remain latent are but nonetheless experienced indirectly (let us think of what medieval European readers could experience of Greek literature through its explicit and implicit incorporation in Latin authors), and others remain invisible to the readers' and writers' cultural memory.

The epic tradition is an archive of historicities. Grappling with this Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch had to find one or more points of entry into the course of that tradition, inscribing into its lineage their poems and themselves as authors. Even if not in theory, they did know that *in practice*, and did know also a few major questions underlying the present study: *What are the dynamics that the authors shared with the epic tradition they had received through diverse mediation? What interpretive operations did they perform to adjust the epic matrix to their own historicity and purpose? How did all of this translate into the form of poems at the micro- and macro-level? How can we integrate them into our experience and knowledge of the epic?*

The following section in this chapter will outline what was – historically - the epic field into which Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch entered, and to which they responded.

1.2.1. The Polyvalent Text: The Practical Existence of the Epic in the Middle Ages

Terminology does not come to our assistance if we search for the epic in the Middle Ages. Such a verbal shortage, however, is far from being insignificant; we could rather deem it fortunate, as it clears the ground of the illusion that the name should coincide with the thing. Neither in medieval poets' works, nor in the *accessus ad auctores*, nor in encyclopedic/etymological repertoires can we find the word *epos*, with a few exceptions

that are in any case ridden by serious misunderstandings of its usage in Roman authors (especially when indicating hexametrical poetry).⁵⁶

The modern reader might be led to believe that, not having a name for what we call “epic,” medieval culture did not have any significant experience of the epic qua epic.⁵⁷ Another pitfall is that the same reader might feel authorized to look for medieval epic only through the lens of the two dominant notions of epic in modern criticism, one based on classical and Renaissance models, the other on the Romantic notion of primary epic. The latter focuses on texts originating in orality such as the *chansons de geste*, and overlooks the post-classical epic tradition that elaborated and transmitted the practice of the epic to the age of Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch. The former believes to see only a wide gap bridging late antiquity and late Middle Ages, Both approaches suffer from the same one-sided assumption, namely that there is only one major, true model of the epic, be it the epic of non-literate societies or the great epic of Homer and his literary successors.

A piece of criticism useful to break that deadlock is a study by Barański on genre in Dante’s *Commedia*.⁵⁸ He maintains that in the Middle Ages diverse generic configurations coexist without being haunted by the need for total coherence; hence, he proposes to drop the notion “genre” itself, since no generic term in that context has a fixed meaning within a consistent system. Epic would be one of those phantom genres, resulting

⁵⁶ Schaller, “La poesia epica,” 11. Gillespie, “From the twelfth century,” 206, remarks that the lack of rigorous terminological distinction is related to the indeterminacy and relativity that characterized generic distinctions in the Middle Ages.

⁵⁷ In Old French vernacular culture there was indeed the phrase *chanson de geste*, but it was not meant to cover the range of literary manifestations that we mean with the term “epic”; in particular, *chanson de geste* did not speak to the corpus of classical epic.

⁵⁸ Baranski, “Tres enim sunt.”

more from our projections than from the reality of literary theory and practice. Variations and similarities in the multiform corpus of medieval literature would be just too nuanced and fluid to be subsumed into categories.

Yet we meet a paradox here: what Báranski advocates for is in step with the dynamics of the epic as both a genre and a meta-genre, as discussed above. Labels are not stable and monovalent, nor are literary texts in their actual configurations; this does not imply that genre as a mediation is useless, since writers and readers did discern different configurations – and their traditions – even without a name for each of them. Epic did exist practically, even if without a name, to the extent that it was identified (by readers and writers alike) in a core set of canonical texts from antiquity and in their later offshoots. Even if we cannot suppose that medieval culture consciously articulated the subtleties of practical criticism at work in such writers as Horace and Ovid, for example, we can accept the idea that medieval readers and writers, in practice, learned to use a set of generic strategies and recognized particular generic threads in the vast fabric of literature. The existence of an epic code with its variants was a reality.

An interesting document in this regard is an annotated bibliography in Alexander Neckam's *Sacerdos ad altare* (c. 1210), where we find Virgil, Lucan, and Statius grouped together as a reading block. The want of a label for "epic" notwithstanding, the passage betrays the author's (and his readers') awareness of the "family air" that makes the great classical epics recognizable as part of the same category.

A Thebaide iocunda transeat ad diuinam Eneida nec negligat uatem, quem
Corduba genuit, qui non solum ciuilia bella describit, set et intestina.⁵⁹

The same three *auctores* are mentioned by Petrarch as epic predecessors in the proem of the *Africa* (I.50-52); by Boccaccio in the *recusatio* contained in the envoy of the *Filocolo* (a typical site of genre negotiation), with the addition of Ovid *maior*; by Dante in the *Convivio* (IV.25-28), where *Thebaid*, *Aeneid*, *Metamorphoses*, and *Bellum civile* provide allegorical examples for the discussion of the four ages of man. Not to mention Dante's *Inferno* IV, where the quintet of classical poets he joins is composed of Homer, Virgil, Lucan, Ovid, and Horace, the latter being the only non-epic poet – the epic Statius will appear later in *Purgatorio* XXII, to renegotiate the link that connects Virgil and Dante. Suffice these few examples to show that classical epic was both a canon reaffirmed over and over and a site of variation generating a plurality of discourses. Some key issues relevant to the Italian Trecento will be briefly outlined in what follows.

First, we must point out that the evolution of the Western epic tradition cannot be properly understood if separated from the reality of material transmission of texts. New potentialities in epic individuation, indeed, were revealed only thanks to the way texts were

⁵⁹Alexander Neckam, *Sacerdos ad altare*, 174 (chapter 8, “De eruditione scholarium). The passage is commented and presented in an English translation in Copeland and Sluiter, *Medieval Grammar and Rhetoric*, 531-544. At p. 10, the authors write: “to know certain texts is to know the art that they represent”; knowledge of the epic as a genre and tradition, we might infer, is primarily inductive. Cf. the “Dialogus super auctores” by Conrad d’Hirsau (c.1070-c.1150), in Huygens, *Accessus ad auctores*, 71-131, partially translated and commented in Minnis, Scott, and Wallace, *Medieval Literary Theory*, 36-64, where the list of authors is thus summarized at p. 36-37: “The twenty-one authors formally discussed are not in chronological order but arranged in an ascending scale of the difficulties they present to the student. The first four – Donatus, Cato, Aesop, and Avianus – are classified as beginners’ reading. The Christian poets Juvencus, Prosper, Theodolus, Arator, and Prudentius then appear. Clearly Conrad was anxious that his pupils had a grounding in wholesome Christian poetry before moving forward to its pagan counterpart. But first three prose writers were to be studied, namely Cicero, Sallust, and Boethius. Finally, we come to the following sequence of pagan poets: Lucan, Horace, Ovid, Juvenal, Homer, Persius, Statius, and, topping them all, Virgil.” Homer was included in the reading list only with the *Ilias latina*, a reduction of the *Iliad* (1070 lines) that gained popularity in the Middle Ages; it was attributed to one Baebius Italicus, who allegedly wrote it during the reign of Nero.

handed down, in a process where material practices were interwoven with hermeneutic approaches. Early on, starting with the Alexandrian reception of Homer's works, as we have already seen, the epic began to stand out as a multi-layered and polyvalent textuality; it constituted an ideal platform for the development of a range of discourses which were supposed to be already contained in the source texts, in layers other than that of literal sense. This was the root of one of the most innovative textual practices in the evolution of the Western epic code: commentary, a compound of primary and secondary textuality which, materially and hermeneutically, showed the multiplicity of discourses at work in the tradition, as well as its encyclopedic scope.

The basic function of commentaries was to expound the text of an *auctor* by addressing a set of aspects (from letter to *sententia*), distinctly or in connection with each other.⁶⁰ Naturally, the letter is the first step toward understanding, especially in educational contexts, where the study of *auctores* was conducive to the learning of Latin; then, once literal comprehension was secured, commentaries let readers enter a more challenging hermeneutic dimension, in which the letter was to be expanded or interpreted or connected to other texts and discourses. Of the many subtleties of the art of commentary in classical and medieval times, here we need to retain one fundamental implication: an *auctor's* text is never finished in itself, as it waits for a supplement of writing to perform a two-fold operation, that is, to further articulate the text, and to bring it back to its genesis and

⁶⁰ For an overview of the practice and theory of commentary see Copeland, "Gloss and Commentary," and Holtz, "Le rôle des commentaires." Though not properly a commentary, the *accessus ad auctores* as a form of secondary writing can be considered as another important mediation in the circulation of classical texts in medieval culture; for a description of the various type of *accessus* and their purposes, with a differentiation between classical and Scriptural *auctores*, see Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship*, 9-7.

intention. The secondary writer will do so in a writing mode different from the *auctor*'s, so that it won't be possible (except for interpolated mistakes) to confound the original and the supplement.

The resulting textual artifact consisted of either a text with glosses or a standalone commentary to be read next to the text. Readers, therefore, got to know the classics in the form of a compound that, while not mixing up voices and authorships, was polyvocal, multi-layered, and in progress: *polyvocal*, because the compound included at least two voices, evidently different in status but nonetheless in dialogue in the mind of the reader; *multi-layered*, because manuscripts of the *auctores* included glosses or commentaries visually combined with the source texts, thus materializing the modes of primary and secondary writing; *in progress*, because the commentators' writing participated in the unfolding of the source's truth, hence revealing the temporal dimension inherent to the construction or revelation of meaning - the commentator being always a latecomer, and often just one of many commenting voices accumulating in time.

The hierarchy of the texts (source and commentary) was never put into question, and yet, from the end of the Carolingian era, what determined the mise-en-page of a classical authoritative text was the commentary rather than the text itself.⁶¹ A major implication for our discussion of the epic in medieval culture is that the forms of reception could give a different shape to the understanding of texts. All the areas consciously left on the page for commentary amounted to a material and symbolical space, which allowed for both an unveiling of and a supplement to the primary text.

⁶¹ See Holtz, "Glosse e commenti," 89-96.

One might argue that the practice of commentary was not exclusive to the epic, as it applied to a range of forms, and to secular as well as religious texts. It is true that generic distinctions did not play a role in the construction of a canon of commented texts; nonetheless, since antiquity epic has stood out as the most inclusive and encyclopedic of literary forms, both in breadth (the range of subjects it can touch on and its extension) and depth (the number of dimensions it can speak to). In sum, ancient epic already had the qualities of the commentary described above, and in a sense called for secondary writings as responses to be legitimately incorporated in the network of texts in the epic tradition.

What took place in the medieval commentary tradition was that, while the canon of *auctores* did remain stable and unchanged, the modes by which the great classical epics produced meaning and difference were scrutinized from a variety of angles, though always in observance of the relatively strict protocols of commentary itself, as they had crystallized in schools. Far from being a sign of the alleged absence or paralysis of the epic in medieval Europe, that kind of intense hermeneutic activity created the conditions for future generic developments, not the least in Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio.

On the other hand, late antiquity and the Middle Ages yielded several experiments on the epic by means of primary rather than secondary writing. That they were not part of the classical canon led to an underestimating of their role in the exploration of new possibilities in the Homeric and Virgilian epic code. Here we can touch upon only a few of them, sketching out a minimal constellation of historical variants that prepared the ground, so to speak, for the *Commedia*, *Teseida*, and *Africa*.

1.2.2. Epics of Late Antiquity: A Code Pagan and Christian

In Claudian's short epics – historical like the *De bello Gildonico* or mythological like the unfinished *De raptu Proserpinae* (late IV century) - the narrative momentum typical of the classical epics is outweighed by elaborate imagery, finely intricate ekphrastic passages, and set speeches shining with an abundance of rhetorical devices.⁶² Despite the lack of profundity attributed to Claudian, his shift of focus from action to speech, and from broad frescoes to miniature descriptions – raised the issue of the nature of epic itself: Does it need a strong narrative apparatus? To what extent can it subsume or mix with other genres without losing its generic identity and its affiliation with the tradition begun with Homer?

Though with different responses, the same questions underlie the revision of the epic code attempted by early Christian poets. Some of them entered the canon of medieval school education (e.g., Sedulius' *Paschale carmen* and Juvencus' *Evangeliorum libri quattuor*), though they were always held to be inferior, in literary and pedagogical terms, to classical *auctores*; in medieval curricula, the reading of Biblical epics came at earlier stage than that of *Aeneid*, *Metamorphoses*, *Pharsalia*, and *Thebaid*, the style and language of which was deemed more appropriate for advanced students.⁶³ Independently from its literary achievement, this Christianization of the epic tradition rooted in a pagan world raised once again a question that had driven the evolution of Western epic since its inception: how to bring a new intention into a tradition? How to employ forms and modes consolidated in the past in another context? How to express a new content, and how to

⁶² On Claudian's style, see Barnes, 543-546. On the revival of miniature epic in late antiquity, see Toohey, *Reading Epic*, 212-215.

⁶³ For an overview of early Christian epics see Trout, "Latin Christian Epics," and Putter, "Prudentius."

negotiate a relationship with the past so that a sense of continuity is kept even after the establishment of a most radical difference (the Christ-event)?

As argued by Auerbach in the first chapter of *Mimesis*, Christian Scripture was the example of a discourse hardly compatible, in ethics and structure, with the classical modes of representing reality;⁶⁴ with the Bible as a supreme alternative model, why should Christian poets try to articulate Christian matters through the forms and topoi of Virgilian epic? To be sure, the greater literary prestige of the Roman canon made a case for this hybridizing program, by which Biblical epicists had to dress Christian truth and history in literary clothes of the highest rank, no matter if that contradicted the purpose of *sermo humilis*. Another motivation, more profound and long-lasting, was the awareness that the reality of Christianity as a total experience, both individual and collective, might be adequately articulated through the secular code of that generic tradition which more than any other tried to articulate the totality of human experience (as did the Bible, in sacred terms) and the force of beginnings (as did the *conversio* to a new life made possible by Christ). A third reason had to do with the need to establish a continuity: the connection in form between the pagan and the Christian could entail a connection in history. The achievements of non-Christian culture were too important to be discarded; hence Christianity had to find ways in which the legacy of the past could be maintained and yet converted, so to speak, in the language of Christian truth. To use the epic code to rewrite episodes from the Bible from the lives of saints implied that, in Christian totality, room

⁶⁴ Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 3-23. A passage from the *Odyssey* serves as a foil to the prophetic *sermo humilis* of the Scripture.

could be made for the history and culture of classical antiquity. Moreover, we must not forget that the Christian *conversio* of epic can also be associated with the dynamics of succession that characterized the Roman epic.⁶⁵ Such questions will trouble the Middle Ages and reach the age of Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch, who further revised the relation between Christian and classical pagan culture. The Christian epics of late antiquity were naïve in their ways of negotiating the terms of such a complex cultural *translatio* (for instance by often reducing epic grandeur to a shallow bombastic style), and yet they show to what extent the epic code could evolve through variation in order to articulate a different epic matrix.⁶⁶

Variation, as already said, characterized Christian epics along lines of development already at work in non-Christian literature. At a micro-textual level, the key features were “an accentuated taste for miniaturization and description, a preference for episodic structure at the expense of narrative flow, and a delight in sophisticated verbal patterning that yields dense textures of repetition and variation”; at a macro-textual level, the incorporation and blurring of genres such as historiography, panegyric, hagiography, and commentary.⁶⁷ Another seminal feature is that Christian authors wrote exegetical epics or

⁶⁵On which see Hardie, *The Epic Successors*.

⁶⁶See for example Lactantius’ foundational hermeneutic move in *Divinae institutiones*, I.5., where he discusses to what extent pagan poets and philosophers could be used to prove the truth of Christianity. They did not possess the truth, but nonetheless were exposed to truth: “ex his unum deum probemus necesse est, non quod illi habuerint cognitam ueritatem, sed quod ueritatis ipsius tanta uis est, ut nemo possit esse tam caecus, quin uideat ingerentem se oculis diuinam claritatem.” Poets sung of pagan gods, but some among them acknowledged that all things are governed by “spiritu uel mente una,” and that one god was “fabricatorem mundi.” Orpheus, Virgil, and Ovid are the three poets that Lactantius mentioned as naturally driven toward the truth of Christian doctrine: “quodsi uel Orpheus uel hi nostri [Virgil and Ovid] quae natura ducente senserunt in perpetuum defendissent, eandem quam nos sequimur doctrinam comprehensa ueritate tenuissent.” Thus Lactantius articulated the notion that one truth can be understood and expressed in different modes and from different cultural premises.

⁶⁷ Trout, “Latin Christian Epics,” 551.

verse commentaries, which explicitly took a primary text (the Scripture) as the layer on which they would compose a secondary text. What might appear as a derivative approach, reveals a practical knowledge of one of the most salient characteristics of epic: its multi-layered structure, where *fabula* and commentary, primary and secondary writing, interact in the construction of meaning.

In this context, Prudentius stands out with his *Psychomachia*, an hexametrical brief poem (915 lines) written between late IV and early V century, which does away with the *fabulae* or *historiae* of classical epic and narrates, instead, an allegorical war between Christian virtues and pagan vices. This shift in the nature of epic narrative, for two reasons: first, it established a model for medieval allegorical poems, showing that the epic code was not limited to the examples of the *auctores*; second, it proved that epic individuation could be articulated *directly* within man's soul, in which the totality of our experience must ultimately be subsumed. The human soul is the real, dominant stage of the epic, as is claimed by the very title of Prudentius' poem, which means "battle of the soul": external wars, like the ones narrated by Homer, Virgil, Lucan, and Statius, are a reflection or derivation of the primal war waged in the souls of each and all of us. It is as if there were no longer heroes who were exceptional by origin, rank, or destiny; every human being constitutes the ideal site for the *Psychomachia* - this turn is implied by the absence of traditional male heroes, while the personifications of virtues fighting against their opposite

vices are female figures only, though they are not gendered along the lines of male/female dichotomies).⁶⁸

Allegorization goes hand in hand with the internalization of the epic. Such shift both broadens the range of possibilities of the epic code and reconfigures the code itself around a new center. Prudentius highlights the historical and literary novelty of this transformation in the progression from the 68-line proem to the narrative proper. The proem begins with a praise of Abraham, who counseled humankind to battle against pagan tribes with a fight sustained by the *spiritus bellicosus* of our hearts. The passage envisaged is from external to an internal war.

pugnare nosmet cum profanis gentibus
suasit, suumque suasor exemplum dedit,
nec ante prolem coniugalem gignere
deo placentem, matre virtute editam,
quam strage multa bellicosus spiritus
portenta cordis servientis vicerit. (*Psych.*, praefatio, 9-14)

For 30 more lines, Prudentius goes on by narrating Abraham's liberation of his nephew Lot as if it were a military expedition, with the language and style of martial epic. Once it is clear that the poet knows only too well his classical models, the text takes a different path: Abraham's biographical sketch ends in fact with a double departure from war narrative: first, in lines 45-49, old Sara conceives a child and rejoices at that; then, until the end of the proem, Prudentius allegorically explains the life of Abraham as an example of how men should prepare their hearts for Christ and the Trinity. This is the ground on which the most important epic battle has to be perpetually fought, yet with the outer battles of Virgilian

⁶⁸ Curtius, *European Literature*, 205, notes that since late antiquity "personified beings of a supersensual nature [...] could become the principal personages of poetic creations."

epic always in sight for the reader, as suggested by a number of echoes and allusions interspersed in the poem. Suffice it to mention here the final recontextualization plus internalization of a most renowned Virgilian phrase from *Aeneid* VI: “fervent horrida bella, fervent / ossibus inclusa, fremit et discordibus armis / non simplex natura hominis” (*Psych.* 902-904).⁶⁹ Internalization is tantamount to universalization of the epic, as it potentially speaks of every man’s battle; the allusions to Aeneas’ nekyia, in this respect, are meant to situate the inner battle of the *Psychomachia* at the very center of human experience, in a dimension that is at once metaphysical, historical, prophetic, and psychical. From there, Prudentius can implicitly claim to succeed, though not suppress, Virgil.⁷⁰

It must be noted also that the structure of the *Psychomachia* is partially indebted to the epic catalog of heroes, insofar as Prudentius has his virtues enter the stage and fight one after another in a strongly partitioned sequence that recalls the way in which catalogs present and describe individuals as parts of a collective subject. Prudentius’ revision of this topos is rigid and static if compared to the complexity, in form and content, of the catalogs at the end of *Aeneid* VII (641-813) or in *Thebaid* IV (32-344). What is most relevant here, in any case, is that Prudentius extracts from his classical model two presentational topoi (catalog and battle), strips them naked of all their stylistic and narrative nuances, and combines them against a sort of abstract background. The more decontextualized the topoi, the more abstract and universal the presentation of Christian heroic virtues: the totality of the world has been translated into the experience of a different totality.

⁶⁹ The lines quoted are “bella, horrida bella / et Thybrim multo spumantem sanguine cerno” (*Aen.* VI.86-87).

⁷⁰ On Prudentius’ dialogue with the Roman epic tradition, see Mastrangelo, *Roman Self*, especially 14-40 (the chapter “An epic successor? Prudentius, *Aeneid* 6, and Roman epic tradition”).

1.2.3. Allegorical Epic: Universalization and Interiorization

In the evolution of the epic tradition in the Middle Ages, allegorical commentary played an important role as allegorical poetry. Both proved to be major points of entry into epic individuation. Two commentaries, by Fulgentius and Bernardus Silvestris, well represent a mode of reading epic that considered the classical text as the manifestation – in poetic disguise – of a truth that the modern commentator can reveal, thus writing a new layer of meaning on the letter of the classical text. The outer narrative, as conveyed by the letter, appears to be less substantial than the “deep” narrative unlocked by the commentary, a narrative dealing with the formation of the perfect *vir*, the pattern of which is universal and ultimately unrelated with the particular *historia* narrated by Virgil. As a multimodal, multi-dimensional textuality, epic is made up of signs that, as *integumenta*, are inherently uncertain, relative, and in need of interpretation. Even the most canonical and authoritative secular text holds in itself a truth that, to come out, must be translated from the language of poetical fiction to that of philosophy.⁷¹

Fulgentius’s *Expositio Virgilianae continentiae secundus philosophos moralis*, probably composed between V and VI century, shows the potential of allegorical interpretation by going over the entire *Aeneid* through the fiction of a dialogue between the author and Virgil himself. Fulgentius, whose persona is presented as *homunculus*, puts himself in a minor role vis-à-vis Virgil himself, “depicted as a stern *magister* – as the

⁷¹ As Bernardus Silvestris writes: “Integumentum est genus demonstrationis sub fabulosa narratione veritatis involvens intellectum, unde dicitur involucreum” (*Comm.* 3). This work is cited, here and afterward in this section, the number of the sections in the edition cited.

interpreter of his own text.”⁷² Not a mere strategy to gain authority for Fulgentius’ commentary (who would have been so naïve to take it as a transcript of a vision?), the use of Virgil as a character dramatizes the capacity of the epic code of producing and revealing different layers of meaning: in time, Virgil and the epic tradition continue to speak, and speak differently when the conditions of their reception change. In other words, Fulgentius’ Virgil, as an epitome of the epic, both produces and interprets the meaning of his texts, thus materializing a process of ongoing renewal in time. To take up again the dual nature of the epic already analyzed in this chapter, this Virgil is both a text (the letter of the *Aeneid*) and a matrix (an unfinished genesis of meaning).

In the exordium that precedes the sudden apparition of Virgil, the authorial persona of Fulgentius claims that *Bucolics* and *Georgics* are far too mystical for their meaning to be disclosed, given the limitations of the culture of his own age; to which Virgil later adds that contemporary men are not able to fully understand the complex treasure of knowledge contained in the *Aeneid*, either. A partial understanding can be achieved, though, as Virgil himself acknowledges:

In omnibus nostris opusculis physici ordinis argumenta induximus, quo per duodena librorum volumina plenior humanae vitae monstrassem statum. Denique ideo talem dicendi exordium sumpsimus: ‘arma virumque cano’, in armis virtutem, in viro sapientiam demonstrantes; omnis enim perfectio in virtute constat corporis et sapientia ingenii. (*Exp.* 90-97)⁷³

At this point, Fulgentius the *homunculus* notes that “ideo etiam divina lex nostrum mundi redentorem Christum virtutem et sapientiam cecinit” (*Exp.* 99-100): although the commentary does not venture into direct Christian interpretation, that preliminary remark

⁷² Baswell, *Virgil in Medieval England*, 96.

⁷³ This work is cited, here and afterward in this section, by the line numbers of the edition consulted.

invites the reader to incorporate the meaning of the *Aeneid* into Christian culture. As Virgil says: “Videris ipse quid te vera maiestas docuerit; nobis interim quod visus sit edicamus” (*Exp.* 103-104); the *vates*’ wariness, which leaves the reader the task to further develop the interpretive labor of the *Expositio*, signals that Fulgentius is conscious of the historicity of his commentary.⁷⁴

The reader is instructed to read the text *sub figuralitatem*, looking for the steps of the epic individuation of a universal subject, that is, humankind as such. As Fulgentius’ Virgil maintains: “sub figuralitatem historia historiae plenum hominis monstravimus statum, ut prima sit natura, secunda doctrina, tertia felicitas” (*Exp.* 167-170). In the *Aeneid*, individuation neither covers the entire span of human life nor does it explicitly unfold in a systematic way, being instead mediated by the narrative shape of the poem; in Fulgentius’ *Expositio*, instead, individuation becomes the dominant narrative. The order of its development results in an allegorical view which aims to be consistent both diachronically (the succession of stages in man’s life) and synchronically (the coherently tripartite domain of humankind: nature, knowledge, and happiness).

On the other hand, the commentary does not fulfill this plan, because of its unsystematic and uneven composition; yet this does not diminish the importance of Fulgentius’ reading, which laid the groundwork for further hermeneutic investigations of the two-fold issue of ontogenesis and phylogenesis in the epic tradition. New is the domain

⁷⁴ On this issue, see Copeland and Melville, “Allegory and Allegoresis,” 164 : “Medieval allegoresis may be a move to recover the sign which has become alien, but even as it proposes fixed and stable meanings, it must work by thematizing the problem of historical alienation: it thematizes interpretation, not simply as vertical archaeology (e.g., digging out kernels from their shells), but as a productive act that locates itself in the temporal circumstances of both writing and reading.”

within which epic individuation primarily takes place, and new is its mode of generating a secondary text (the commentary); the latter, in turn, has the purpose of restoring a truth initially hidden in the apparent primary text (*Aeneid*), and then to reveal the “real” or “original” primary text which, properly speaking, is not even a text but the truth that drove the composition of the poem. Nevertheless, only through the actual poem that original truth could be first articulated and made legible.

To read the text as allegorical (which is what allegoresis does) is to propose a structure of reference which is presented as anterior to the text and from which the text is seen to emerge as if organically. While allegoresis figures itself - even modestly - as disclosure, it in fact operates as a deep recausing of the text as if from within the text. In supplying an anterior structure of reference the allegoresis radically changes the status of the text.⁷⁵

From this vantage point, allegoresis shares with epic a dual structure that consists of a text (or a series of texts) and its matrix or code. No less than epic, allegory moves both forward and backward: forward by producing new variations, expanding the code, and prolonging the life of a tradition; backward by bringing the discourse back to what precedes and generates the text and the tradition. At the intersection of these two lines, a new ground for variation emerges. The corpus of the epic is two-headed, like Virgil, who in Bernardus Silvestris’ XII-century commentary on *Aeneid* I-VI is called “poeta et philosophus,” one capacity not excluding the other: “et veritatem docuit et ficmentum poeticum non pretermisit” (*Comm.* 1). Along those two lines, Virgil wrote allegorically, so allegorically his poem must be read:

in integumentum describit quid agat vel quid paciatur humanus spiritus in humano corpore temporaliter positus. Atque in hoc describendo naturali utitur ordine atque ita utrumque ordine narrationis observat, artificialem poeta, naturalem philosophus. (*Comm.* 3)

⁷⁵ Copeland, *Rhetoric*, 81.

Two modes of writing and reading overlap in the *Aeneid*, so that the same text can be read as the artificial progression of the tale (*integumentum*), according to the letter of Virgil's text, or as the natural progression of human life; the artificial needs the natural to open up dimensions other than the letter of the narrative, while the natural needs the artificial to find a body of words and resonate through that. The individuation of the soul in its journey out of imprisonment in a body of flesh and bone (which is the philosophical narrative of the commentary) goes together but does not coincide with the individuation of the text as a poetic artifact (the letter of the *Aeneid*).⁷⁶

The multimodal nature of allegoresis does, therefore, match the nature of the epic. A very conscious statement about that can be found in the prose prologue to Alan de Lille's allegorical epic *Anticlaudianus* (1181-1183), where the exegetical work of the commentator and the poetico-narrative work of the poet merge into one hybrid mode, as stated in the prose prologue "In hoc etenim opera literalis sensus suavitas puerilem demulcebit auditum, moralis instructio perficientem imbuet sensum, acutior allegorie subtilitas proficientem acuet intellectum." The tripartite progression of faculties (*auditus, sensus, intellectus*) corresponds to the three-fold mode of reading which must be possessed in its entirety by the reader. Thus equipped, we can experience through the poem the sense of beginnings which runs through the epic tradition; though origins might be back and lost in time, the possibility of beginning is permanent. The verse prologue makes it clear:

Autoris mendico stilum falerasque poete,
Ne mea segnicie Clio directa senescat,
Ne iaceat calamus scabra rubigine torpens.

⁷⁶ For an analysis of this duality, that affects also the labor of the commentator as a teacher, see Pike, "Bernard Silvestris' Descent."

Scribendi nouitate uetus iuuenescere carta
Gaudet, et antiquas cupiens exire latebras
Ridet, et in tenui lasciuit harundine musa.
Fonte tuo sic, Phebe, tuum perfunde poetam,
Vt compluta tuo mens arida flumine, germen
Donet, et in fructus concludat germinis usum.

A writing surface, writing tools, the poet's mind, and his Muse: everything in this brief self-portrait of the writer is senescent, and yet about to rejuvenate. Such forthcoming transformation speaks not only to the poet but also to humankind as the subject of the *Anticlaudianus*, in its potential to be perfected with the help of nature, liberal arts, and theology. This is also the dynamics of epic tradition, torn continuously between obsolescence and renewal.⁷⁷ Alan's critique of modern poets believed to have overcome the ancient *auctores* is harsh,⁷⁸ and by no means does the new beginning invoked in the verse prologue imply the erasure of the past; on the contrary, the motif of senescence of world and culture (frequently thematized in Western epic) serves to claim that the present day's decadence can be countered only by going back to the ancient sources and humbly building on their legacy, as dwarfs standing on the shoulder of giants.⁷⁹ Accordingly, the

⁷⁷ On the question of obsolescence, see the chapter "From Homer to Virgil: The Obsolescence of the Epic," in Otis, *Virgil*, 5-40.

⁷⁸ As in I.165-170: "Illic pannoso plebescit carmine noster / Ennius et Priami fortunas intonat; illic / Meuius, in celos audens os ponere mutum, / Gesta ducis Macedum tenebrosi carminis umbra / Pingere dum temptat, in primo limine fessus / Heret et ignauam queritur torpescere musam."

⁷⁹ As said in the prose prologue, "cum pigmea humilitas excessui superposta giganteo, altitudine gigantem preveniat." This medieval topos can be read together with the classical humility-topos worked out in the envoy of the *Anticlaudianus* (echoing the last lines of Statius' *Thebaid* but also Virgil's fourth eclogue): "O mihi continuo multa sudata labore / Pagina, cuius ad hoc minuit detractio famam, / Viue, nec antiquos temptes equare poetas, Sed pocius ueterum uestigia semper adorans / Subsequere et lauris humile submitte miricas" (IX.410-414).

kind of epic individuation at work in Alan's poem combines Virgilian with allegorical epic, poem-writing, and commentary-writing.⁸⁰

Let us turn to the incipit of book I: even if there is no classical protasis, the inception of the narrative well represents the individuation of man as the theme and intention of the poem:

Vt sibi iuncta magis Nature dona resultent,
Vt proprium donet donis mixture fauorem,
Solers nature stadium, que singula sparsim
Munera contulerat aliis, concludit in unum.
Cudit opus, per quod operi concluditur omni:
Pristina sic operum peccata repensat in uno,
Vt quod deliquit alias cumpenset in isto. (I.1-7)

The focus is on the formation of an individual - *unus* - a figure analogous to the Aeneas of commentaries which read the life of man in the story of the *Aeneid*. More abstract and universal than Aeneas, this figure will result from the poem as the possibility of a new golden age or beginning for humankind. He is also an *opus*, which is to correct all unfinished and flawed *opera* made in the past: this, as was implicit in Prudentius, is the particular twist that Christianity gives to the dynamics of epic succession, since the task of the Christian epic poem is to inherit, correct, transform, and incorporate the legacy of an imperfect past in order to actualize a potential latent in humankind since its creation. Once again, a new text moves further as an innovative variant in the epic tradition and, at the same time, moves backward, spiral-wise way, to reconnect to the epic tradition. Alan of Lille's *Anticlaudianus* takes innovation one step further by combining in the same text epic narrative (the making of the perfect man) and allegorical hermeneutics (an interpretation

⁸⁰ On this combination see Haynes, *Recovering the Classic*, 32-79.

of its own fable). Differently from allegorical commentaries, allegorical epic does not need a secondary text to give readers access to the matrix of the primary text.

1.2.4. *Historiae*

As allegorical writers themselves well knew, allegory was not the only line of evolution of the epic. Alan chastised the modern historical epics of Walter de Chatillôn (*Alexandreis*) and Joseph of Exeter (*De bello troiano*); Bernardus Silvestris, instead, looked back to the past when informing his reader that Virgil wrote about Aeneas in a poetic mode – “ficmentis” – and not “secundum historie veritatem, quod Frigius describit” (*Comm.* 1). Here Bernardus refers to Dares the Phrygian, who was believed to be a Trojan who survived the war with the Greeks and wrote an eyewitness prose account of the destruction of his city, *De excidio Trojae historia*; actually, this Latin text dates back to the VI century CE. Dares the Trojan never went alone in medieval reception, as he was paired with the Dictys the Cretan, another alleged eyewitness. He too claimed to have fought at Troy, and then wrote the prose history *Ephemeris belli Troiani*, a free Latin translation from a Greek original that, according to recent scholarship, dates back to the early III century CE. What contributed to Dares and Dictys’ fortune is that they provided versions of the Trojan war alternative to what was handed down by the Virgilian tradition (Homer and other Greek authors not being available to medieval readership yet). A most interesting divergence, undoubtedly alluded to by Bernardus, is that Dares and Dictys depicted Aeneas as a traitor of his own people rather than as a hero; according to that version, the responsible for the introduction of the wooden horse within the city walls is Aeneas himself, not Sinon. No one ever questioned the literary and philosophical superiority of the *Aeneid*, and yet Dares and Dictys could compete with Virgil in terms of trustworthiness, because of their special

status as first-hand chroniclers. On this basis, a harsh critique of the foundations of Roman culture and history, and a no less harsh attack against poetic invention, could potentially be incorporated as a variant into the corpus of the epic tradition.⁸¹

The opposition of the truth of *historia* to the fabrications of poetry was another key motif in the evolution of the epic throughout the Middle Ages. Certain this problem concerned poetry as such, but inevitably it found its main site of contention in the epic tradition, for to no other literary genre had the relation with history been so central, since Homer himself. Allegorical epic distanced itself from history, considering it only as a part of an *integumentum* meant to veil a more substantial kind of truth. For those who still intended to make sense of both the truth of history and the truth of poetry, a question remained on the table: how to relate history and poetry as two modes of the same hermeneutic process? The question was not new, having already been debated in the past by such authorities as Cicero, Macrobius, and Isidore.

Historia was the literally true record of actual happenings (*gestae res, res factae*), which were removed in time from the recollection of our age, whereas *fabula* comprised untrue events, fictitious things (*res fictae*) which neither happened nor could have happened. But it was also believed that certain authors had chosen to convey truths of morality, physics, and even metaphysics under a fictitious veil or covering (*integumentum, involucreum*).⁸²

Lucan had dramatically raised the issue with his *Pharsalia*, a poem that mostly dispenses with the mythological and supernatural apparatus first established by Homer, and that focuses on events that occurred only a few generations earlier rather than in a mythologico-historical past. This experiment was so radical that Servius, commenting on *Aeneid* I. 382,

⁸¹ For an overview of the medieval fortune of Dares' and Dictys' versions of the story of Aeneas, see Spence.

⁸² Minnis, Scott, and Wallace, *Medieval Literary Theory*, 113.

observed that Lucan was more of a historian than a poet (“Lucanum namque ideo in numero poetarum esse non meruit, quia videtur historia composuisse, non poema”). In the prologue to his glosses on the *Pharsalia*, Arnulf of Orléans (late XII century) took up the question again by defining Lucan as both *poeta* and *historiographus*, by virtue of his capacity to combine and yet to keep distinct two different modes under one major ethical purpose, that is, to show readers how to strive after the virtues of courage, wisdom, self-control, and justice (of which the character of Cato was the best representative).⁸³ Thus Lucan served to medieval writers and readers as the best example to understand how the relation between poetry and history could transform the dynamics of epic individuation. To be “*verax in historiae veritate*,” however, did not mean to be thoroughly consistent. Lucan, in fact, was the author of a text at war with itself, as modern interpreters would put it, in the sense that he played with the theme of civil war even at the level of composition, with contradictions and ambiguities that let conflicting variants give an ambiguous shape to the poem – and to its relation with different orders of truth (historical, moral, poetical).⁸⁴ Though this quality remained untheorized, it does illustrate in practice that *historia*, no less than allegory, provided an opportunity to explore potentialities of the epic code not fully developed up to then, but also to highlight contradictions that demanded new responses (for example about the question of truth – factual, poetical, and hermeneutic).

⁸³ In *ibid.*, 155. See also Conrad d’Hirsau’s “*Dialogus super auctores*”: “Lucanus, poeta, gemina illustris virtute, [...] curialem et grandiloquium modum in stilo tenuit, verax in historiae veritate, validissimi ingenii, poematis ratione, strenuitate animi et militia iam depositae, pulcra verborum et sententiarum ordinatione,” in Huygens, *Accessus ad auctores*, 110.

⁸⁴ See for instance Masters, *Poetry and Civil War*.

Such could be, therefore, a crucial though unstated motivation for the medieval interest in alternative versions of the Trojan war, such as those penned by Dares and Dycitis. From this point of view, anti-Homeric attacks in the name of truthful *historia* are instances of a strategy that characterized the epic tradition since its beginnings: the spinning of stories related to an established corpus of narratives – stories that could emerge as sequels, prequels, addenda, synthesis, variations, or deviations. The *Aeneid* itself originated in this way; along these lines, another work of epic scope but different in kind, such as Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, can be seen as a collection of modes of generating stories-as-variants out of a given corpus. The result is that the epic tradition ends up resembling more a network of stories and variants than a static set of norms or models. There are gaps to be filled, narratives to be continued or anticipated, and new versions to be created - all supplements that make the tradition evolve.

Historia itself is a mode less restraining than we might think. Let us consider some offshoots of Dares' and Dycitis' histories. Between 1160 and 1170, they were freely adapted in Old French octosyllabic verse by Benoît Saint-Maure, who was also inspired by the corpus known as the "Matter of Troy." Benoît's *Roman de Troie*, like all the *romans d'antiquité*, was a far cry not only from classical epic but from Dares and Dycitis too, as it was composed in verse for an audience captivated by such themes as chivalric adventure, courtly love, and aristocratic ethos. The *Roman de Troie* was then adapted into Latin prose by Guido delle Colonne (1287), who in turn provided the subject matter to Giovanni Boccaccio's *Filostrato*. Hence, with one variant growing from the others, late medieval culture could find in the epic tradition (including its less canonical pieces) an immense

repertoire, whose different items (formal, thematic, historical, and philosophical) were ordered and interrelated through narrative threads. Even though no individual work could practically sum up the corpus in its entirety, it was clear that the parts of that very corpus were interconnected, as in an encyclopedia organized narratively rather than alphabetically. The boundaries between *fabula* and *historia* were, in this sense, less than cogent, since both were based on a narrative order.⁸⁵ One of the main pedagogical functions of commentaries was indeed to make readers aware of such connections (implied, for example, in the genealogy of a character, or in the antecedent to a particular story). The multiplicity of approaches allowed by the epic code demonstrated, in practice, that the epics of the *auctores* achieved their canonical status precisely because they provided multiple potential points of entrances to their individual texts, and to the epic tradition as a whole. Precisely by virtue of their multi-dimensional and multi-layered nature, canonical epics showed a range of modes by which it was possible to reorient the tradition according to a new epic intention.

That was the case with Christianity, which incorporated the legacy of classical epic into a teleologically oriented universal history, with a double purpose: to negotiate the continuities and discontinuities between Christian and pagan culture, and to transform epic into a universal faculty of humankind (that is, no longer a genre limited to Greeks and Romans), though differentiated in different traditions. If early Christian epics adapted truth-bearing Christian *historia* into poems that formally and rhetorically imitated classical

⁸⁵ That makes for a substantial continuity between the two epic models proposed in Derive, “À quoi sert l’épopée?”: 1) the historico-mythical, focused on the past as a “site of memory” that legitimates a certain ethos and reinforces it by means of a mythical color; 2) the mythico-historical, based on the revelation of an absolute, transcendent ethos, that can be translated into the concrete world of a distant historical past.

epics, in Christian historiographers the opposite process was at work: the matter of Troy, Thebes, and Rome treated in the epics of antiquity was incorporated as a set of historical cycles into the narrative of universal history.⁸⁶ Not only could the content of the poems of Homer, Virgil, Statius, and Ovid be taken as a source for historiography (cleansed, of course, of its most fictitious elements); more importantly, events such as the war of the Seven against Thebes, the Trojan War, and Aeneas' escape from Troy were inserted in a composite history that included events and characters drawn from other types of sources, from the Bible to Greek and Roman historiography. The uses of epic in discourses on history were manifold and cannot be covered here, but suffice it to think of Dante's *De monarchia*, which in book II takes Virgil's *Aeneid* as its main source to demonstrate the legitimacy of the Roman Empire in the progress of humankind toward the Christian era.

Pagan and Christian narratives could be combined within the same historical fresco. Another possibility was to read them comparatively, by analogy.⁸⁷ In point of fact, any discourse on genre is ultimately analogical. In this field, Vico's principle of *verum factum* holds sway: if we can properly know only what is man-made, the truth of literary typologies amounts to what we make with them, in the practice of reading and writing. What determines the truth-value of analogy in genre-making is not the philological exactitude of an association or affiliation, but its potential for establishing new meaningful connections. In this sense, an analogy that may appear to us as sheer inexactitude, and yet is driven by the intention to transform the network of the epic tradition, cannot be wrong.

⁸⁶ See for example the first book of Orosius' *Historiarum adversos paganos libri septem*. Its general purpose was to illustrate how the state of humankind was unquestionably worse before the advent of Christianity.

⁸⁷ On the role of analogy in genre-making, see Fishelov, *Metaphors of Genre*.

Such is the case of the comparison of classical epic and biblical histories (what was in the Bible itself, not its adaptations) as if they were two chief ramifications of one and the same narrative typology.

In Isidore's section on meters in the *Etymologies*, for example, analogy brings about a major turn in the discourse on epic. The *metrum heroicum* or dactylic hexameter, Isidore says, was the earliest of all meters, used by Moses and Job long before ancient Greek authors such as Pherecydes and Homer. Thus, "apparet antiquiorem fuisse apud Hebraeos studium carminum quam apud gentiles, siquidem et Iob Moysi temporibus adaequatus hexametro versu, dactylo spondeoque, decurrit" (*Etym.* I.39.11). Two remarkable points deserve some comment. First, Isidore drops a significant hint to a comparative poetics of the heroic poem as a typology to be redefined in the context of a Christian culture, a perspective that implies the re-negotiation of the relation between pagan culture and the epic (could the epic be a mode that precedes, and can eventually go beyond, the context of pagan culture?). The discourse suddenly turns from metrics to poetry as such (*stadium carminum*): to Isidore the question of the *metrum heroicum* is but a synecdoche of a much broader question about the origins and traditions of poetic expression. Second, the incorporation-by-comparison of biblical and classical traditions into one history implies that the *heroicum*, what we call epic, is a mode bound not to a particular culture but to the potential of humankind as such. It follows that the epic as a possibility is universal, and that on this common ground the evolution of a tradition occurs also through encounters or hybridizations between different cultures. From the perspective of Christian universal history, the possibility of the epic is not constrained within the code

originated in Homer, which unquestionably remains a major model for the *heroicum*, but not the only, nor the most ancient one. Christian history, on the contrary, can incorporate classical epic and re-orient it within a new context.⁸⁸ In the wake of Isidore's comparative turn, the way was paved for the search for new ways of epic individuation.

1.3. Authorial Self-Inscriptions

It is by inscribing their own authorial self within the text that Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch first enter the epic tradition at the inception of the *Commedia*, *Teseida*, and *Africa*. Self-inscription is tantamount to affiliation, and has to be read as an act that orients the individuation both of an author and of the culture or collectivity he participates in. The emphasis on the author as an individual, though not a complete novelty in the epic tradition, marks a new turn in its evolution: the epic-affiliated poet of the Italian Trecento fashions his persona as someone who starts from his own historicity (that is, at the intersection of multiple historicities) in order to bridge the individual and the trans-individual, the historical and the trans-historical. Dante made the first breakthrough; Boccaccio and Petrarch followed in his footsteps, in their own ways. The following examination of the self-inscription of the three poets at the beginning of the *Commedia*, *Teseida*, and *Africa* aims at introducing each author's own, distinctive way of articulating the epic code.

Neither the author nor the tradition enters the text in a raw, unmediated form: they are translated into writing under the influence of "networks of signification" installed in

⁸⁸ Cf. Astell, *Job*, on incorporations of the Book of Job within the domain of the *heroicum* in late antiquity and in the Middle Ages.

the author's cultural memory and textual practice. Once the author and the epic tradition have been inscribed into the text, they are no longer what they were "before" the text. Thus translated, they become variables.

None of these inscriptions is final, as they all lie open to revision in the unfolding of the texts. Nonetheless, they blaze a trail and establish a ground where Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio find for their texts a point of entry into the epic code.

1.3.1. *Commedia*: Dante's Epic *Io*

Dante meets Virgil: one is the living modern who meets the past, the other is a shadow from antiquity brought back to life. Virgil, who represents the history of epic, did not realize all of its possibilities, some of which will indeed be unfolded in the *Commedia*. Dante goes back to the origin of epic (Virgil as source, "fonte") but with the awareness that behind this origin (now weakened, as Virgil is "fioco") there is another origin or matrix: Christian truth, now incarnate in a historically determined everyman named Dante Alighieri – neither a hero nor a saint, just a man facing humankind's possibilities to be saved or damned. Synthetic rather than oppositional, Dante's approach allows him to preserve the widest possible range of relations between poetry and history as they were made available to his age by post-classical and medieval reception. All of this, however, is condensed in and filtered by the authorial *io* of Dante: in the individuation of his incarnate self lies the potentiality for the transformation of the epic code, that is, for the negotiation of a different kind of epic truth.

Ma io, perchè venirvi? O chi'l concede?
Io non Enëa, io non Paulo sono;
me degno a ciò né altri 'l crede (*Inf.* II.31-33)

Dante expresses fear and doubt on the salvation journey announced by Virgil. The statement is placed in a key position towards the end of Dante's longest direct speech so far and is reinforced by a most daring comparison, expressed in reverse by the topos of affected modesty. This is how, for the first time in the *Commedia*, Dante writes himself into the epic tradition represented by the shade of the Roman poet,⁸⁹ with a *terzina* that functions as an authorial inscription that brings to a climax the strategy of generic affiliation developed in *Inferno* I (the meeting with Virgil and the first intimations of Dante's special status as a visitor to the realms of afterlife). As two characters who are also poets, Dante and Virgil dramatize the difference of two points of entry into the subject matter of the poem and into the epic as genre and tradition. This difference, which is to be negotiated throughout the *Commedia*, makes us alert to the nature of the epic as a site of multiple historicities.

The first step in this process is the appearance of "chi per lungo silenzio pareo fioco," suddenly seen by Dante "nel gran diserto" (*Inf.* I.63-64). Whether *fioco* is to be read as an aural or visual detail,⁹⁰ the description amounts to a figurative statement on the fortune of Virgil; for the early commentators of the *Commedia*'s *fioco* clearly meant "not in use," "neglected" by contemporary readers,⁹¹ hence a biting reference to a long decline in the study and imitation of Virgil. There is indeed evidence of a weaker presence of the classics in secondary education in XIII-century Italy, and of a quasi-collapse in manuscript

⁸⁹ On the tradition of the modesty *topos* see Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature*, 83-85.

⁹⁰ Cf. Hollander, *Virgilio dantesco*, 23-79, on "fioco" as the indication of an incomplete (i.e., non-Christian) relationship with the Truth of God.

⁹¹ See for instance Jacopo della Lana, *Commento*, ad *Inf.* I.63: "lo non essere in uso a li mondani, che a questo tempo sono, lo libro di Virgilio sichè per non usanza pare fioco, cioè arocato, né non desso suona alcuna cosa."

production after the flourishing of the XII century;⁹² it is also true that a growing anti-classical and anti-literary bias reduced the engagement of XIII-century students with Roman literature in general; yet such a crisis does not seem to have diminished Virgil's long-standing prestige as one of the greatest *auctoritates* of antiquity – an invaluable repertoire of language, style, history, mythology, geography, tropes, actions, and emotions.⁹³ Certainly, Virgil was not much read as the poet of a total experience,⁹⁴ which is the way Dante reads and rewrites the *Aeneid*, but he was still *auctor* and *magister*; therefore, his qualifications as “lo mio maestro e ‘l mio autore” (*Inf.* I.84) do not come at all as unexpected.⁹⁵ So we should read *Inf.* I.63 less as if *fioco* were a historical record than as if it were a concise but compelling hint at the reorientation of the reception of the Virgilian tradition along the lines dictated by Dante's poem.

The inscription of Virgil in the text occurs through a partial falsification of a cultural context, which sheds light on the role of fabrication in the process of genre-revision. First, “falsifying” or “dramatizing” a tradition serves first as an anticipation of the new that is about to come. Second, the fabrication of a reception scene alludes to the plurality of

⁹² See Black, “Classical antiquity”: from the census of manuscripts texts of classical authors used as schoolbooks in Italy, we know that while the XII century produced twenty-four manuscripts of Virgil, in the XII only three of that kind were made. That said, schoolbooks may not represent the whole reception of the classics. And as noted by Black himself, a classical revival was promoted by the Paduan circle of early humanists (Lovato, Mussato) and then extended south to Bologna and Florence.

⁹³ On the uses of Virgil (and Lucan and the *Ilias Latina*), see Curry Woods, “Experiencing the Classics,” and the collection of sources included in Ziolkowski and Putnam, *Virgilian Tradition*.

⁹⁴ See Alessio and Villa, “Per *inferno* 1.67-87,” 41-42, for some hypotheses on the decline of the “poetic” relation with Virgil as a classic in the XIII century, and on Dante's implicit rejection of the most recent discourses on Virgil.

⁹⁵ One generation earlier, Brunetto Latini's encounter with Ovid in the *Tesoretto* attested to the inalienable function of classical authors as guides: “Poi mi tornai da canto, / e in un ricco manto / vidi Ovidio maggiore, / che gli atti dell'amore, / che son cosi diversi, / rasembra ‘n motti e versi” (2357-2362).

generic possibilities always available, though not visible, in a given historical context, no matter the author's efforts in concealing or suppressing them.⁹⁶

In *Inferno* I, Virgil is endowed with all the authority of an origin, both historical and trans-historical (the latter is indicated by the topos of the “fonte,” a perpetual source, in *Inf.* I.79). To appropriate and transform such authority, Dante has to represent the moderns' relation with Virgil as weakened, almost non-existent, despite its pervasiveness in medieval culture and education. The origin-effect separates Virgil from contemporary culture, to which he stands out as its “other.” Significantly, by a strange loop, as a silent or faint shadow (“ombra” in *Inf.* I.66) Virgil literally echoes the “umbraeque silentes” he addressed as a narrator in *Aeneid* VI: in the invocation that marks the transition from the rites of passage officiated by the Sybil to Aeneas's descent to the Underworld (*Aen.* VI.264).⁹⁷ This *mise-en-abîme* assigns to Virgil the role of one of the silent shadows he described. Consistently with past tense in the phrase “Poeta fui” of *Inf.* I.73, he is no longer a poet writing as an external narrator, though he bears the memory of his historical existence in this world.⁹⁸ In turn, Dante assumes and conflates in himself the double role of poet (*alter* Virgil) and protagonist in flesh and blood (*alter* Aeneas). Therefore, the inscription of Dante in the Virgilian tradition initiates, at the same time, the *restitutio* of an

⁹⁶ See Ascoli, *Dante*, 3-64, on the difficulty to read Dante outside the box of the discourse on authority he himself imposed on his readers. The *Commedia* is meant to appear as inevitable, transcendent, and totalizing, thus erasing the contingency of its making.

⁹⁷ The intertextual echo is noted in Niccolò Tommaseo's 1837 commentary, ad *Inf.* I.61-63. Virgil's passage reads as follows: “Di, quibus imperium est animarum, umbraeque silentes, / et Chaos, et Phlegethon, loca nocte tacentia late, / sit mihi fas audita loqui; sit numine vestro / pandere res alta terra et caligine mersas!” (*Aen.* VI.264-267).

⁹⁸ “Nacqui *sub Iulio*, ancor che fosse tardi, / e vissi a Roma sotto ‘l buono Augusto / nel tempo de li dèi falsi e bugiardi. / Poeta fui e cantai di quel giusto / figliuol d’ Anchise che venne di Troia, / poi che ‘l superbo Ilïon fu combusto,” (*Inf.* I.70-75).

origin (the “real” Virgil as seen by Dante) and the creation of a two-headed author-figure (a Dante-Virgilio that stands apart from the contemporaries). By making the two poet-figures into characters, Dante underscores the importance of *poetarum vitae* in the negotiation of multiple historicities. The irreducible otherness contained in an individual’s biography is the token of a difference that should be not erased but channeled into the making of the new, in the process of poetic succession (which works by such complementary operations as *restitutio* and *recusatio*). While Virgil’s *vita* bears the mark of canonicity and closure (his “cantai” push the verb *cano* of *Aen.* I.1 back into the past), Dante’s *vita* is in the making, *nel mezzo*.

In *Inferno* 1 and 2 Dante refers only to the *Aeneid*. The predominance of the epic Virgil was typical of his medieval reception, and in the progression-model of a writer’s career, the *Aeneid* stood out as the work of greatest scope and ambition, surpassing and culminating the poetry of the *Bucolics* and *Georgics*.⁹⁹ Accordingly, the *Aeneid* is the first sign used by Dante to identify Virgil as a poet: “Poeta fui, e cantai di quell giusto / figliuol d’Anchise che venne di Troia, / poi che ‘l superbo Ilión fu combusto” (*Inf.* I.73-75). While “Poeta fui, e cantai” implies the fictional character of Aeneas’s story, the *Aeneid* is soon after mentioned within Dante’s prophecy on the coming of the *Veltro*, a context that gives the epic reference a decidedly historical status: “Di quella umile Italia fia salute / per cui morì la vergine Cammilla, / Eurialo e Turno e Niso di ferute” (*Inf.* I.106-108). Virgil’s epic is thus addressed in the *Commedia* in a dual way: as both fiction and history, the twin

⁹⁹ As represented in the *Rota Virgilii*. This wheel offered a range of modes to reference Virgil, as evident in the writings of Dante himself. In *Purg.* XXII.57 he uses the *Bucolics* to construct a paraphrase indicating Virgil: “cantor de’ buccolici carmi.”

domains not only of Dante's mission, but also of the medieval debate on poetry, to which epic served as a major proving ground. The generic tradition of the *Aeneid* speaks different languages: there is not one layer of discourse fully comprehensive of Dante's views and operations on the epic.

The distribution of references to the sections of the *Aeneid* is another important point in Dante's strategy. Since in *Inferno* I Virgil recalls in order first the Odyssean part of the *Aeneid* (74-75), and then the Iliadic one (107-108), his poem seems to be addressed in its completeness, a well-known result of the conflation of the two Homeric epic models. In the following canto, however, we are required to refocus our attention on the *Aeneid* as Dante refers to book VI: "Tu dici che di Silvio il parente, / corruttibile ancora, ad immortale / secolo andò, e fu sensibilmente" (*Inf.* II.13-16). It is as if Dante had waited to mention the central locus of the *Aeneid* until when he could use it to establish first a parallel and then a succession pattern between himself and Aeneas (*personaggio*) and Virgil (*poeta*).¹⁰⁰

With the mention of *Aeneid* VI, one section is singled out and magnified as the new whole, that is, the ideal container of what unfolds in twelve books divided in two halves, of exile and war respectively. Such refocusing assumes significance against the background of universal history, of which Aeneas's story is just a part. Dante's new recontextualization of the *Aeneid* within a Christian historical and theological frame becomes manifest when he recalls how Aeneas paved the way for Christianity: "ch'e' [Aeneas] fu de l'alma Roma e di suo impero / ne l'empireo del ciel per padre eletto: / la

¹⁰⁰ The phrase *personaggio-poeta* was notably formulated in Contini, "Dante come personaggio-poeta." For a recent contribution on that notion, see Ledda, "Dante Alighieri."

quale e il quale, a voler dir lo vero, / fu stabilita per lo loco santo / u' siede il successor del maggior Piero" (*Inf.* II.20-24). Written into a different historical teleology, the *Aeneid* speaks differently to readers aware of its cultural otherness.

Dante's hints at the fictionality of the *Aeneid* in opposition to historical and theological Truth mark this very difference in graciously doubting phrases like "Tu dici che" and "a voler dir lo vero," assuming that Virgil's story is fictional. What is at stake is the relationship between two temporalities, namely Virgil's "tempo degli dei falsi e bugiardi" (*Inf.* I.72) and the new time brought about by the Christ-event. They speak to each other by the iteration of *andare* and of the journey-motif, in two lines about Aeneas and Paul respectively: "Per quest'andata onde li dai tu vanto" and "Andovvi poi lo Vas d'elezione" (*Inf.* II.25, 28). With the repetition of the epic pattern, rewritten into Paul's *raptus*, Dante further establishes the multiple historicities of his most radical claim: "Io non Enëa, io non Paulo sono."

We can now better understand the force of the repetition of the same verbal structure for Aeneas and Paul, one pagan, the other Christian; one to the Underworld, the other to the Third Heaven (2 Cor. 12.3-4), both recalled directly, not by way of paraphrase as in the previous lines ("di Silvïo il parente," "lo Vas d'elezione"). *Io* is the pivot of the connection of multiple historicities: *io* and Aeneas; *io* and Paul; Aeneas and Paul. In light of the inclusion of the *Aeneid* in Christian history since late antiquity, the juxtaposition of Aeneas and Paul works here as both a pairing and a sequencing: one *and* the other, one *after* another. Through the rhetorical veil of the double *recusatio*, Dante's relationship with the two great figures follows the same pattern. Thus, his self-inscription in the epic tradition

demonstrates, in practice, the non-existence of such a thing as the epic *per se*: what we have, instead, is the repetition and variation of patterns that assume a particular meaning from the historicity of the subjects involved in the discourse. The juxtaposition of Paul's ecstatic experience to the memory of the *Aeneid* may be read, correctly, as the recourse to a source or model not traditionally marked as epic but potentially capable of transforming the epic tradition represented by Aeneas. On another level, the conjunction of Aeneas and Paul is an aspect of a new epic compound that has its fulcrum in the incarnate individual: *poeta-personaggio*.¹⁰¹

Dante's *io* appears as the other of both Aeneas and Paul. An ordinary man and a sinner, he is inadequate to their foundational role as figures of the origin of the Roman Empire and the Church.¹⁰² However, he is granted their exceptional privilege. This is why Dante combines two rhetorical tropes: hendiadys and *recusatio*. Hendiadys pairs differences; *recusatio* acknowledges differences. Hence the negation *non* in "Io non Enëa, io non Paulo sono" serves to pose cultural, historical, and linguistic differences as the necessary condition for the continuation of the epic tradition.

Represented by Virgil's *Aeneid* and expanded/countered by Paul's *raptus*, the epic tradition can now be read differently, though in continuity with the past, through the inscription of Dante's *io*, which produces new conditions of legibility. *Personaggio* and

¹⁰¹ Cf. Galligan, "Dante and the Epic," where the focus is on the poet as the new hero. My view is that before becoming an epic hero, the poet as an incarnate man is the mediator of the epic experience as a total response to reality. Of course, Dante tailors on himself a heroic role according to his Christian ethos, but that role is just one side (however crucial) of the mediation that gives us access to the matrix of culture. Focusing on the hero-role, in other words, does not properly address the epic as an architecture of totality. See Feeney, "Epic Hero," for a critique of views of the epic that emphasize the meaning of the hero at the expense of the text as a whole.

¹⁰² The issue of double origin and authority has a parallel in Dante's *De Monarchia*.

poeta, Dante is able to reveal how epic functions through a network of shifting relations: *io*, Aeneas, and Paul. Virgil and Aeneas as genre-markers undergo a process of change in status, signification, and configuration. Genre-marking turns into genre-making.

1.3.2. *Teseida*: The Epic Poet as Lover

In Boccaccio's *Teseida* it is love, a domain apparently alien to the canons of epic, that is the ground for the first inscription of the author-figure within the epic tradition. In the dedicatory epistle to Fiammetta, which serves as a prose prologue, love is at the center of a narrative that bridges poet and poem, biography and fiction. Here Boccaccio's persona is constructed as that of a lover - in line with his previous work, but not exactly the kind of poem he declares to offer to Italian vernacular readers.

In the envoy of the *Teseida*, titled "Parole dell'autore al libro suo," there is an *ottava* well-renowned for its statement about genre. This passage ideally crowns the whole poem and claims for it a foundational role in the new Italian tradition, under the sign of martial epic:

Poi che le Muse nude cominciaro
nel cospetto degli uomini ad andare,
già fur di quelli i quai l'esercitaro
con bello stilo in onesto parlare,
et altri in amoroso l'operaro;
ma tu, o libro, primo a lor cantare
di Marte fai gli affanni sostenuti,
nel volgar lazio più mai non veduti. (XII.84) 103

¹⁰³ The *Teseida* is quoted from the classical Limentani edition, its text being slightly though conveniently modernized according to the standards of Italian modern spelling. I have also consulted the recent critical edition by Agostinelli and Coleman, spelling in which strictly adheres to Boccaccio's only extant manuscript of the poem (Ms Acquisti e Doni 325, Biblioteca Laurenziana, Firenze).

Before the *Teseida*, nobody sang of Mars (war and *arma*) in the vernacular of Italy, as earlier remarked by Dante in the *De vulgari eloquentia*, II.2.¹⁰⁴ By virtue of his poem, now Boccaccio has the right to occupy that place, although Dante was actually speaking of a variety of *canzone* rather than of a poem modeled on classical epics.

This initial epic inscription of the *Teseida* as a symptom of the generic transformations initiated by the elegiac beginnings of the book. While the envoy addresses an ideally vast readership, the prologue speaks privately, in its fiction, to Fiammetta, the object of the author's unrequited love. Boccaccio presents her with the book by recalling how, when they were both burning with love, she was an avid reader of and sometimes listener to love tales: "vaga d'udire e talvolta di leggere una e altra istoria, et massimamente l'amorose" (Prol.).¹⁰⁵ Let us consider the author's fictional statement about the origins of his poem:

Trovata una antichissima istoria e alle più delle genti non manifesta, bella sì per la materia della quale parla, che è d'amore, e sì per coloro de' quali dice, che nobili giovani furono e di regal sangue discesi, in latino volgare e per rima, acciò che più dilettaesse, e massimamente a voi che già con sommo titolo le mie esaltaste, con quella sollecitudine che conceduta mi fu da l'altre più gravi desiderando di piacervi, ho ridotta. (Prol.)

Under the very Ovidian conditions of elegy, the discourse of the prologue holds love as the literary and biographical matrix of the poem, in contrast with the epic tradition from which Boccaccio actually drew his subject matter (Statius's *Thebaid*, never named in the *Teseida*), as well as many genre-marked tropes and patterns incorporated in the poem. The seeming

¹⁰⁴ The treatise says that Cino da Pistoia was the poet *amoris accensio*, Dante of *directio voluntatis*, but no one had properly sung *armorum probitas* so far.

¹⁰⁵ Passages from the prose prologue of the *Teseida* are cited without numbers, as that section has neither lines nor paragraph numbers.

inconsistency of Boccaccio's generic program has been a leitmotif of modern criticism on the *Teseida*. It is possible, however, to read inconsistently as a subtle experiment in genre-writing, of which in this section I will point out only the elements relevant to Boccaccio's self-inscription in the prologue, leaving for chapter three a broader discussion of the issue.

In the wake of Dante, though not with his robust and radical intelligence of literary and universal history, Boccaccio takes up the task of negotiating the conditions of his text's historicity. The first condition is the difference (which is also an interference) between the time of the poem (as written, read, or heard) and that of the "antichissima istoria." As shown by Anderson, Boccaccio owes Statius not only his Theban subject matter, with books I and II stemming directly from *Thebaid* XII, but also its structure and an overall idea of what an epic should be (mediated by the way in which it was read and circulated in medieval culture).¹⁰⁶ Such adaptation of the epic form, however, is initiated by the prologue itself, as it prepares readers for a process of genre revision.

By evoking Statius in the prologue, whether explicitly or allusively, Boccaccio would have called forth the legacy of classical epic tradition, pointing it out right away as the origin of the *Teseida*. Instead, aiming at a less straightforward affiliation with the epic, he preferred to keep the classical source anonymous (only in the narrative of the author-figure, of course, not to a learned audience receptive to his allusive art), and to let the genre-markers of epic appear in the prologue only marginally, almost incidentally. In its very tone and structure reminiscent of such a love-centered genre as elegy, the epistle to Fiammetta

¹⁰⁶ See Anderson, *Before the Knight's Tale*. On Boccaccio's Statian manuscripts see also Anderson, "Boccaccio's Glosses."

explains the recourse to the allegedly “very ancient story” from the standpoint of the authorial *persona*’s biography (whether or not fictional in its details). In other words, Boccaccio writes himself into the prologue as an experienced narrator of love stories in the vernacular for a love-driven audience; his status implicitly recalls the scene at the end of the prologue of the *Filocolo* (I.1.23-30), where Fiammetta invites him to narrate the firmness of Florio and Biancifiore’s love. As affection, mode and theme, desire emerges at the intersection of three major axes in relation to which the not-yet-epic author defines his position: present/past, male/female, vernacular/classical. Delighting his audience (i.e., Fiammetta) is the first goal of the author of the *Teseida*; therefore, the narrative of the prologue anchors the ancient tale to the here-and-now of the poem’s existence as a text. Fiammetta is identified with Emilia, the female protagonist, and Boccaccio with one of the two rivals in love, Arcita and Palemone (only Fiammetta could discern between the two):

sotto il nome dell’uno de’ due amanti e della giovane amata si conta essere stato, ricordandovi bene, e io a voi di me, e voi ad me di voi, se non mentiste potreste conoscere essere stato detto e fatto in parte: quale de’ due sia non discopro, ché so ben che ve ne avederete. (Prol.)

Justified here as a narrative mirror of a love story recast on the vast canvas of the mythical tales of Thebes and Athens, the *Teseida* is meant to appear as a text unfolding on two different scales. The same is true of Boccaccio’s earlier poem, the *Filostrato*, the prologue of which is based on a similar situation. The narrative taking place during the Trojan war is explicitly used, in fact, as a disguise of Boccaccio’s lovesickness: “Meco adunque con sollicita cura cominciai a rivolgere l’antiche storie per trovare cui io potessi fare scudo verisimilmente del mio segreto e amoroso dolore” (Prol). In the *Teseida* too, without giving out any name, Boccaccio creates a parallel between his individual present situation and a

story from the repertoire of antiquity, which has come to him only with the mediation of Latin and French medieval works such as Guido delle Colonne's *Historia Destructionis Troiae* and Benoît de Sainte-Maure's *Roman de Troie*.

In the prologue of Boccaccio's *Filostrato* the transition from supposedly non-fictional biography to fictional history does not entail a change in genre; in the prologue of the *Teseida*, instead, elegy and romance make room for elements marked as epic, thus triggering a subtler generic strategy. Moreover, although claiming ancient stories as a source is a topos common to both poems, in the *Teseida* Boccaccio engages antiquity in a more problematical way, and with a more decided focus on the epic, opposed and yet linked to the theme of individual love. It follows that the ground on which Boccaccio inscribes his authorial persona would hardly comply with its status, claimed in the envoy, as a song of arms.

The second reason alleged by the author for the offering of the poem to his beloved further complicates this scene, with cunning naïveté. For Fiammetta to read the poem, the author did not have to simplify the text, even though that operation would be commonly reputed indispensable to a female audience, according to Boccaccio:

il non avere cessate né storia né favola né chiuso parlare in altra guisa, con ciò sia cosa che le donne sì come poco intelligenti ne sogliano essere schife, ma però che per intelletto e notizia delle cose predette voi dalla turba dell'altre separate conosco, libero mi concessi il porle a mio piacere. (Prol.)

Fiammetta is familiar with “storia,” “favola” and “chiuso parlare,” that is, the vernacular equivalents of *historia*, *fabula*, and *integumentum* respectively. They are three modes of writing and interpretation that potentially expand the scope of the text presented by the author, opening it up to multiple dimensions of meaning. Hence readers may well expect a

text goes beyond the typical boundaries of love and elegy.¹⁰⁷ Relying on a corpus of commentaries which unfold on different levels the meaning of the primary text, the tradition of the epic in the Middle Ages provided the perfect secular example of a multi-dimensional and multi-generic approach to literature. It is in this light that we will have to consider Boccaccio's self-glosses in the *Teseida* as a layer of secondary writing that can lead the reader in the transition between one mode of reading and another (the glosses, however, are not mentioned in the prologue).

Not clear-cut separations but subtle shifts negotiate the generic affiliations of the author-figure and his addressee. We may well say that, when a kneeling Boccaccio presents an enthroned Fiammetta with the book in the miniature on the first page of the autograph, the scene depicts a lover's homage to his beloved but also to a subject endowed with *auctoritas* (another discrepancy from the humbleness of elegy).¹⁰⁸ It is the whole *Teseida* that Fiammetta receives in her hands, not just its elegiac component; in the sonnet "Risposte delle Muse" at the end of the book, the more-than-elegiac authority to decide on its title is indeed bestowed on her.

Elegy leads to epic, if we follow the prologue's account of the genesis of the *Teseida*. Epic leads to love, if we consider the poem's alleged purpose of pleasing Fiammetta and rekindling her love. In other words, the epic tradition that shapes the *Teseida*

¹⁰⁷ Cf. Sherberg, "Girl Outside the Window," 102: "[Fiammetta] emerges as an exemplary female reader, open to the full range of allegorical possibilities and susceptible to the poem's erotic force." It could be said that the text's possibilities are related not only to allegory but to genre, and that the unstable combination of *historia*, *fabula* and *integumentum* translates the erotic force into other kinds of forces, and vice versa, as we will see in the chapter on Boccaccio.

¹⁰⁸ The miniature is on the *recto* of the first folio of the Ms Acquisti e e Doni 325 and is reproduced in Agostinelli and Coleman's critical edition.

is erratically inscribed in the domain of love, hence alluding to genre-formation and genre-affiliation as processes characterized by hybridization of models.¹⁰⁹ Discrepant temporalities participate in the same tradition.¹¹⁰

The fiction of translating “una antichissima istoria” from Greek to Italian¹¹¹ dramatizes these multiple processes on another level, by staging linguistic translation as a foreshadowing of cultural translation. On the one hand, we may speak of the vernacular Boccaccio following in the footsteps of the classical epic poets; however, the imagined source is said to be so remote in time that it has remained unknown to modern readers.¹¹² The subject matter is therefore presented as a tale *from* the origins of a culture (ancient Greece) and a tale *of* the origins of the author’s elegiac predicament (Fiammetta): artfully set up by Boccaccio, this double historicity interweaves with the historicities brought in by his array of sources (Virgil, Statius, the commentators, the *romans*, Dante, etc.). That is to say, all the materials can be presented or re-presented through a multiple focus that allows the poet to play with both the origin-effect and distance-effect characteristic of the epic tradition.

¹⁰⁹ From this perspective, it will be useful to keep in mind how the prologue delineates a succession from elegy to epic, or from love to war, while most studies consider them as subjects introduced and treated simultaneously – which is true for the beginning of the poem (see the double invocation to Mars and Venus in the *ottava* I.3), not for its prologue.

¹¹⁰ In this sense we will see in Boccaccio a revision of the contrast between epic and romance. On romance as an alternative tradition that triggered changes in the epic, see the reference to the *romans d’antiquité* in Wetherbee, “History and Romance,” 178.

¹¹¹ That the imagined source was Greek and not Latin is stated in the gloss to I.2.4.

¹¹² Cf. in Kahane and Kahane, “Byzantine source,” the hypothesis that the story of Arcita and Palemone derived from a Greek text from late antiquity. In any event, the Byzantine tale retrieved by the Kahanes would not have been known by Boccaccio’s readers. To work effectively, the procedures of allusive art need an audience familiar with sources and models.

Boccaccio posits a dual principle, narrative and hermeneutical, that is represented by the duality of sexes. As indicated by the translation-motive, the motor of epic individuation in the *Teseida* is a troublesome relation with otherness – of women, of antiquity, of language; here a space is created for generic shift and change. The very dual title imposed on the poem by Fiammetta, its prime exegete, reflects the hybridization of Boccaccio's text: *Teseida* (a male-oriented epic marker) *delle nozze d'Emilia* (a female-oriented non-epic motif, which gives the bride priority over Palemone, the bridegroom who remains unnamed in the title). Love, an anti-epic feeling par excellence, when neither lawful nor oriented by higher purposes (such as Aeneas' love for Lavinia), is the seemingly narrow door through which Boccaccio lets us enter a text modelled on the epic canon and wired into the epic network of tradition.

1.3.3. *Africa*: Composite Epic, Composite Self

The very first words of the *Africa* inscribe Petrarch in the lineage of the great classical epics, more decidedly and straightforwardly than in the *Commedia* and *Teseida*:

Et michi conspicuum meritis belloque tremendum
Musa, virum referes, Italis cui fracta sub armis
Nobilis eternum prius attulit Africa nomen. (I.1-3)¹¹³

¹¹³ The *Africa* is badly in need of a critical edition. Nicola Festa's critical edition, published in 1926, is still reprinted in the Edizione nazionale delle opere di Francesco Petrarca (Festa's *Africa* was actually the first volume of the series, and was dedicated to King Vittorio Emanuele III in praise of Italian colonialism in Africa). In time, however, scholarly scrutiny has pointed out a series of flaws, part due to Festa's choices, and part due to the finding and identification of new manuscripts. The codex Acquisti e Doni 441, discovered in 1950 and now held at the Biblioteca Laurenziana in Firenze, provided a new basis for a critical edition still to come, particularly because it includes the transcription of Petrarch's own working glosses; the manuscript – a copy of another manuscript transcribed directly from Petrarch's autograph – includes three other set of glosses, by Coluccio Salutati, Pietro da Parma, and Donato de Pretis. Vincenzo Fera, who must be credited for the identification, published and commented Petrarch's glosses in *La revisione del testo*; see also his *Antichi editori e lettori* for a study of the other glosses and of the early transmission of the poem. That those findings have not solved all the problems raised by the text of the *Africa* - composed and revised intermittently during Petrarch's life and then edited and published posthumously – is witnessed by the fact that Fera's critical edition, announced since 1990s, has not appeared yet. So far, the only two volumes which reproduce

“To me, too” connects the poet within a double narrative of literary succession. On a more literal level, Petrarch comes after Ennius, who in the poem *Scipio* (of which we know only through accounts by other Roman writers) sang the deeds of Africanus, his own patron and the hero of the Second Punic War; the continuity from one poet to the other is granted by the subject matter, which is presented in the stately protasis. At the same time, in a broader and no less compelling sense, “Et michi” is the sign of an affiliation with the entire Western epic tradition initiated by Homer, then transplanted to Rome and brought to a climax by the three Roman poets recalled later in Petrarch’s prologue (I.50-52): Virgil, Lucan, and Statius. Invocation to the Muse, statement of the subject matter, and inscription of the authorial subject are unmistakable epic markers. For all the similarities, however, “et michi” introduces a difference within the frame: the inscription of the *Africa*’s otherness in relation to its models.

Et points out Petrarch’s distance from his predecessors, and the desire to bridge the historical and cultural gap that makes the modern epic into a supplement to the ancient canon.¹¹⁴ Hence the non-naturalness of the poem’s literary program: writing a poem in the wake of the great Roman epics can only be the result of an authorial intention. The classical epic model is not immediately available and reproducible but needs to be sought after, recognized, rebuilt, and varied under the pressure of the new poem’s historicity.

the Latin text of the *Africa*, with a facing translation and a set of informative and interpretive annotations, have been published in France, edited by Rebecca Lenoir (the whole poem) and by Pierre Laurens (books I-V); both are based on Festa’s text, with some integrations derived from Festa’s work on Ms Acquisti e Doni 441. Festa, “L’*Affrica*,” bitingly critiques those two volumes, in particular Laurens’, for their philological inaccuracies. Be that as it may, for lack of anything better a readable, handy though imperfect edition is preferable to having none. For this reason, I will quote the *Africa* from Lenoir’s volume, which has the advantage of reproducing the entire text.

¹¹⁴ See Hardie, “After Rome,” 297.

Conjunctive and disjunctive, therefore, is the relation that binds the modern poet to the ancient tradition. *Michi* introduces the subjectivity of the author-figure, quite unlike the epic attacks of the *auctores*, whose first words are on the main theme of the poem, not on the position and intention of the poet himself: “Arma virumque” (*Aeneid*), “Bella per Emathios” (*Pharsalia*), and “Fraternas acies” (*Thebaid*).

Another epic model, indirectly known, provides a different pattern. The attack of the *Africa*, in fact, echoes the incipit of the *Odyssey* as rendered in lines 141-142 of Horace’s *Ars Poetica*: “Dic mihi, Musa, virum, captae post tempora Troiae / qui mores hominum multorum vidit et urbes.”¹¹⁵ The similarity with the first lines of the *Africa* is thematic (the great *vir*) and rhetorical (the invocation to the Muse), but the most striking feature is the lexical and metrical identity of *michi* in Petrarch and Homer/Horace. Yet, while in “Dic mihi” the figure of the poet remains undefined, in “Et mihi” a narrative is presupposed that concerns both the biography of the poet and the history of literature.

Another function of the Horatian/Homeric subtext is to push Petrarch’s affiliation back to the “origin” of the epic tradition, earlier than Virgil, Lucan, and Statius, and earlier than Ennius himself. There we find the *Odyssey*, but also the *Iliad* as echoed by “armis”, in *Africa* I.2. Thus, we have the man and the arms, a pairing inevitably mediated by the combination of Homeric patterns announced in *Aen.* I.1: “Arma virumque cano.” Petrarch turns back (and beyond Dante and his Virgil) to an origin unknown because not legible to a reader and writer ignorant of Greek, but also back to the figure that, only with its renown,

¹¹⁵ See Boccaccio’s *Esposizioni*, ad *Inf.* II.7 (Dante’s invocation to the Muse): the first two lines of the *Africa* are quoted along with attacks and invocations from the *Aeneid*, the *Metamorphoses*, and the *Odyssey* (still in Horace’s rendering).

embraces the possibilities offered by the epic tradition.¹¹⁶ Therefore, the inscription of Petrarch as an epic poet occurs through a range of modes: origin-effect (looking back to a model-past and a model-genre), continuation of a tradition, erasure of the post-classical corpus that stands between him and the *auctores*, repetition of a narrative already told by Ennius, supplement to the fragmentary knowledge of the predecessors (Homer but Ennius too, whose *Scipio* is more of a blank space than of a real presence in corpus of the epic tradition).

The analysis here concentrates upon the passages of the proem of the *Africa* where Petrarch constructs his persona as an epic poet, in a way more extensive than any other major author has attempted up to then. From the first line in which Petrarch claims his affiliation with the epic tradition as both a continuator and a latecomer (“Et mihi”), a triple invocation follows, to the Muse, Christ, and King Robert of Anjou. This apparent rhetorical abundance is in itself an instance of the multiplicity of approaches that Petrarch incorporates in his epic (while pretending to be strictly observant of the alleged propriety of the genre).

The seventy-line long prologue of the *Africa* is more extensive than those of the great classical epics. Among them, the only one with a prologue of a comparable length is the *Pharsalia* (sixty-six lines), and certainly Petrarch as an epic poet shares some of Lucan’s oratorical qualities. Not even Lucan, however, wrote such an author-centered

¹¹⁶ Though not able to read Greek, Petrarch was very careful in examining and evaluating comparisons between Virgilian and Homeric passages (rendered in Latin) in such late classical authors as Macrobius and Servius. See for example the presence of Homer in Petrarch’s glosses to his Virgilian codex (Ms S.P. 10/27, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Milan), now collected in *Postille del Virgilio Ambrosiano*.

prologue. Though not motivated by the main subject matter of the poem, the prologue's length serves to create a ground for the inscription of the author-figure's otherness, in apparent contrast with its legitimate status as a successor of the epic *auctores*. In such a combination of conjunction and disjunction, the problem Petrarch has to face is the same that troubles Dante and Boccaccio: the subjectivity of the poet must be dramatized in the text, and his voice must be situated.¹¹⁷ Compared to the sparse representation of an authorial self in works like the *Aeneid*, *Pharsalia*, and *Thebaid*, Petrarch's prologue shows the distance that separates him from the *auctores* (thus emphasizing his historical persona) and the intricacies of his philological relation to the past, with the awareness of a distance and the longing for a restoration).¹¹⁸

Paradoxically, a genre that has historically limited the direct presence of the author as a subject on the stage of the text, finds new ground in the domain of the self – the self as both an *exemplum* and a biographical entity. This is a sign of the epic intention in modern times: only one generation earlier, Dante made of his biographical and allegorical persona the mediator of an epic undertaking; the poet's self – the vernacular *io* in the *Commedia* and the Latin *ego* in the *Africa* – turns into a new site for the variation potential that has defined the epic tradition since its Alexandrian inception.¹¹⁹ And Alexandrian, in the prologue of the *Africa*, is the author's persona, as it emerges through repetition and

¹¹⁷ Newman, *Classical Epic Tradition*, 282, rightly defines the situation of the prologue of the *Africa* as a dilemma.

¹¹⁸ The formula "philological epic" (with an emphasis on the discontinuity brought about by philology) comes from Marchesi, "'Petrarch's Philological Epic.'"

¹¹⁹ For another perspective on the importance of a subjective turn in the notion of the epic implied in the *Africa*, cf. Warner, *Augustinian Epic*, 1-50, where the emphasis is on Augustine as a biographical, ethical, and literary model rather than on the potential for variation integral to the epic tradition.

variation from a sequence of three invocations - to the Muses (I.1-10), to Christ (I.11-18), and to Robert d'Anjou, King of Naples (I.19-70). The composite nature of the epic tradition is translated here into the multiplicity of intentions and circumstances of Petrarch's three-fold opening address, where we see at work his "consciousness of deviation."¹²⁰

Hunc precor exhausto liceat michi sugere fontem
Ex Elicone sacrum, dulcis mea cura, Sorores,
Si uobis miranda cano. Iam ruris amici
Prata quidem et fontes uacuisque silentia campis
Fluminaque et colles et apricis otia siluis
Restituit Fortuna michi: uos carmina uati
Reddite, uos animos. (I.4-10)

With the rest of the invocation to the Muses, after the opening lines, the poet further articulates his presence. If "exhausto" refers to "michi" and not to "Elicone" (both constructions are grammatically possible), these lines contain the first direct autobiographical statement in the poem.¹²¹ Begun in Vacluse on Good Friday 1338 or 1339 (according to the epistle "Posteritati"), soon the writing of the *Africa* suffered from a decline in inspiration until in 1341 Petrarch moved further away from the Papal Court, to Selvapiana and then Parma, where he went back to the project with new élan.¹²² Therefore, a crisis at a precise juncture in the author's life provides the (real or fictional) starting point of the poem, analogously to what happened with the *Commedia* (Dante in the dark wood) and the *Teseida* (lovesick Boccaccio). This might be a necessary condition for authorial

¹²⁰ Greene, "Petrarch *Viator*," 50.

¹²¹ As noted in Velli, *Petrarca e Boccaccio*, 49-52, with a discussion of the textual issue raised by verb *sugere*, "to suck," ill-suited to the norm of stylistic decorum. Since lines 1-54 are missing in the codex Acquisti e Doni 440, there is no definitive evidence about the term. Supported by intertextual echoes from classical authors, Velli, propose to read *surgere* instead of *sugere*, to preserve a consistently high diction. Interestingly, Newman, *Classical Epic Tradition*, 283, reads *sugere* a symptom of Petrarch's hesitation about epic norms.

¹²² The progress in the composition of the poem is one of the most investigated issues in studies on the *Africa*. See for example Fenzi, *Saggi petrarcheschi*, 227-364. A clear and much-informative account of the stages of Petrarch's work on the *Africa* can be found in many sections of Dotti, *Vita di Petrarca*.

inscriptions which initiate a movement from imbalance to a wished-for restoration of balance, in the life of the author's persona as well as in the subject matter of the poem at large. The signal that adumbrates a restoration, biographical and poetical, is the verb "cano," a quasi-hesitating reprise, within an if clause, of Virgil's assertive "cano" in *Aen.* I.1, and of Statius's less assertive "canam" in *Theb.* I.33, where another poem, not written yet, is promised to Emperor Domitian. The epic intention to sing proves to be contradictory, as suggested also by the *iunctura* "dulcis mea cura," an oxymoron that bears the trademark of Petrarch's poetics in non-epic work such as the *Rerum Vulgarium Fragmenta* and the *Secretum*.¹²³

The view of peaceful rural scene is another biographical element, a topos throughout Petrarch's Latin and vernacular works, particularly in relation to Vacluse (it will be recalled, with the author-figure, in IX.275-279). At the end of the landscape description, "Restituit Fortuna michi" builds on the personal narrative that Petrarch has outlined out so far, while the pronoun looks back at the attack of line 1, "Et michi": there appears the public self of a *vates*, here the self of a poet secluded from *negotia*, in a counterpoint of public and private, collective and individual life. Similarly, that landscape sketch includes in the genesis of an epic poem some bucolic and georgic fragments by which Petrarch visualizes the composite origin and nature of the epic itself. It must be noted, though, that Petrarch's fields are empty and silent, that is, an ideal scenery for his *otium*: the focus shifts from the outer circumstances of the poet's life to his interiority. If in

¹²³ One-sided readings of the proem (as in Fedi, *Invito alla lettura*, 56: "nel proemio l'invocazione alle Muse è, non certo a caso, una reale denuncia di impotenza dell'*epos*") miss exactly that point, and the generative ambiguity of Petrarch's "failures" in the *Africa*.

the prologue of the *Teseida* it was the duality of male and female that epitomized the composite and contradictory nature of the epic, in this passage of the *Africa* that role is played by the duality of inner and outer life.

Let us now turn to the second invocation. Here the wounds of Christ's body allude to the poem's first inspiration, which came to Petrarch on Good Friday, the same day of his first encounter with in 1327. An intergeneric and intertextual relation is thus presupposed between the *Africa* and the *Rerum Vulgarium Fragmenta*. The coincidence of the calendrical element makes the epic *Africa* both an analog and an alternative to Petrarch's lyrical poetry.¹²⁴

Tuque, o certissima mundi
Spes superumque decus, quem secula nostra deorum
Victorem atque Herebi memorant, quem quina uidemus
Larga per innocuum retegentem uulnera corpus,
Auxilium fer, summe parens. Tibi multa reuertens
Vertice Parnasi referam pia carmina, si te
Carmina delectant; uel si minus illa placebunt,
Forte etiam lacrimas, quas (sic mens fallitur) olim
Fundendas longo demens tibi tempore seruo. (I.10-18)

Like Scipio, Christ is *victor*, and he shows open wounds; the same will do Scipio's father and uncle, at a later point in the dream section of books I and II. Petrarch seeks after a parallel between secular and sacred history, even though he does not strive for a fusion (as is the case with Dante). The horizon of Petrarch's "pia carmina" is not shaped by the theological and historical *tours de force* undertaken in the *Commedia* to unify pagan and Christian sources within a narrative of universal scope. Rather, in the proem of the *Africa* Petrarch makes visible and legible the range of inspirations (i.e., of poetic modes) that

¹²⁴ See Marchesi, "Petrarch's Philological Epic," 117.

coexist in his authorial persona. The “pia carmina” offered to Christ, for instance, may allude to the *Psalmi Penitentiales*, which Petrarch composed around 1348-1350; if that were the case, even the second invocation would include a reference to another non-epic genre or tradition central to the poet’s cultural memory. Moreover, the very offer of long-due penitential tears foresees the development of the author’s poetry in a different, non-epic direction; in other words, Petrarch obliquely speaks to the readers of the plurality of directions in his literary work. Not that one path is disconnected from the others. The topos of songs promised by the author but deferred to the future is employed by Petrarch here in the second invocation, to Christ, and then in the third, to King Robert; the repetition of the pattern links the secular and the sacred, the contingency of modern times and the eternity of God. And beneath both instances lies the subtext of Virgil’s *Georgics*, where a temple-poem is promised to Augustus.¹²⁵ Not to mention the ethical theme of deferral in the *Secretum*, where even at the very end Franciscus defers the thorough *conversio* dictated by Augustinus to the moment when he will be through with his current *desideria* and *studia* (including the *Africa* itself).¹²⁶ What is deferred – be it a series of penitential poems, an historical epic in praise of a living king, or a moral and literary turn – is actually included as a possibility in what constitutes the here-and-now of a book, or of a life. In brief, the

¹²⁵ *Georg.* III.10-16: “primus ego in patriam mecum, modo vita supersot, / Aonio rediens deducam uertice Musas; / primus Idumeas referam tibi, mantua, palmas, / et uiridi in campo templum demarmore ponam / propter aquam, tardis ingens ubi flexibus errat / Mincius et tenera praetexit harundine ripas / in medio mihi Caesar erit templumque tenebit.” See Velli, *Petrarca e Boccaccio*, 56-57, for a detailed analysis of the presence of this passage in the proem of the *Africa*.

¹²⁶ See Petrarca, *Secretum*, 282: “Fateor: neque aliam ob causam propero nunc tam studiosus ad reliqua, nisi ut, illis explicitis, ad haec reddeam: non ignarus [...] multo michi futurum esse securius studium hoc unum sectari et, deviis pretermisissis, rectum callem salutis apprehendere. Sed desiderium frenare non valeo.”

poet writes into his text his multiple affiliations: though dominant in the *Africa*, epic is not all; we will later see to what extent it is shaped by the twin tensions of totality and partiality.

In the third and last invocation, which addresses Robert d'Anjou, Petrarch no longer plays with non-epic generic markers: only a canonical epic poem would properly become such a magnificent ruler. King Robert, however, passed away in 1343, only two years after Petrarch's coronation in Rome. This passage has raised diverse hypotheses on the composition of the poem;¹²⁷ here it will suffice to observe that Petrarch never edited the poem in the light of the death of King Robert, who is still invoked as if he were alive and waiting for the poem on his life and deeds that Petrarch purported to write. At the other end of the *Africa*, though, the dedicatee is already dead and buried; Petrarch's lament for his passing toward the end of the poem, in IX 421-447, acknowledges the disappearance of the conditions that, under Robert's patronage, made possible the project of the *Africa* and, on a broader level, of a cultural *renovatio* in dark times.

A double representation of the epic ensues: as a project crystallized in time, and as an unfinished monument exposed to the erosion of time. No other poem in the epic tradition, except for the *Commedia* (always in sight for Petrarch, his denials notwithstanding), has ever been framed in time so explicitly and dramatically. Moreover, it is the poet's historical persona – not an impersonal voice – that in the *Africa*, like in the *Commedia*, registers the passing of time and accounts for the changes it has brought about. In book I, nonetheless, biographical details and affective impetus, are infused with pride and confidence in the expected outcome of the poem:

¹²⁷ See Fenzi, *Saggi petrarcheschi*, 310-318.

Te quoque, Trinacrii moderator maxime regni,
Hesperieque decus atque eui gloria nostri,
Iudice quo merui uatumque in sede sedere
Optatasque diu lauros titulumque poete,
Te precor (I.19-21)

Biographical and literary history grow intertwined. With his coronation, sponsored by King Robert, Petrarch publicly became a member of the family of great poets of the past: “vatumque in sede” indicates not merely Rome as a place but the very field of literature at its highest level, that of the *auctoritates*. There might be another underlying comparison with Dante, who in *Par.* XXV.1-9 finally claims for himself the title of *poeta*, while expressing his desire (and his painstakingly earned right) to be crowned in Florence. While Dante’s title is gained in the poem as the result of a long process of authority-making (although no recognition will come to him in his life as an exile), Petrarch presents himself as a *poeta* right at the beginning of the *Africa*. Of course, the difference in age and status between the Dante of *Paradiso* XXV and the Petrarch of *Africa* I could explain their divergent approaches to the title of *poeta*. However, we should not forget that Petrarch’s coronation occurred when the *Africa* was already in the making, and that on the occasion of the examination Robert heard an excerpt of the poem; the result is that the inscription of the poet in his text already includes the scene of its actual successful reception.

Yet Petrarch casts on his triumph the shadow of the *vanitas* of human undertakings, including the composition of a monumental poem. After recalling the coronation in 1341, he envisages a second one in the future, deserved thanks to the poem on King Robert promised in the proem of the *Africa* but never written.

Tunc validos carpam ramos; tu nempe iuvabis
Materia, generose, tua, calamumque labantem

Firmabis, meritumque decus continget amanti
Altera temporibus pulcherrima laurea nostris. (I.67-70)

That for this unrealized event Petrarch uses the Latin verb *contingere*, which is the equivalent of the vernacular used by Dante in the first line of *Paradiso XXV* (“Se mai continga che il poema sacro”) suggests that in spite of the coronation of the young epic poet in 1341 the outcome remains uncertain, subject to the contingencies of history and time. Petrarch shares Dante’s concern for the public acknowledgment of himself as a poet and intellectual; yet, the proem and epilogue of the *Africa* bear another kind of foreboding, namely that the text itself might not be brought to completion (white-haired Dante, instead, does not doubt about the completion of the *Paradiso*). King Robert’s mortality, in sum, is a figure of the mortality of the poet, as well as of his texts.¹²⁸

Some details of Petrarch’s *recusatio* are worth considering here. His second and allegedly greater epic poem, he declares, will be on Robert’s virtues and deeds: “Ipse tuos actus meritis ad sidera tollam / Laudibus, atque alio fortassis carmine quondam / (Mors modo me paulum expectet! non longa petuntur) / Nomen et alta canam Siculi miracula regis” (I.40-43). As noted above, the topos of deferral has already been utilized in the second invocation, to Christ, with echoes from a passage in *Georgics III*. In terms of generic interplay, it is remarkable that Virgil’s promise of a presumably epic poem (the only genre adequate to celebrate Augustus as if it were the equivalent of a monumental temple) is situated within a non-martial poem like the *Georgics*.¹²⁹ In the *Africa*, on one

¹²⁸ As noted in Regn and Huss, “Petrarch’s Rome”: “The genesis of the *Africa* thus reflects a process of experience which affects not only the intricacy of the work’s structure; Petrarch has also, and intentionally, set the work in relation to the passing of time.”

¹²⁹ It is generally imagined as the *Aeneid*, of course, but there are numerous allusions to victory poems by Pindarus and Callimachus.

hand Petrarch reverses this move, by writing an invocation to Christ, which from within a martial epic poem gestures toward non-epic penitential poetry; on the other hand, he normalizes the promise, which remains within the boundaries of a single generic tradition, since the offering of a future epic poem in praise of King Robert comes from within a would-be canonical epic poem such as the *Africa*. While in practice Petrarch operations are profoundly inter-generic, as is the nature of the epic tradition itself, his explicit aim is still to adhere to a standard vision of genres as distinct modes of expression.

The epic-to-epic deferral articulated in the invocation to Robert also follows the two examples provided by Statius in *Thebaid* I.32-33 and *Achilleid* I.17-19, where the dedication to Domitian contains the promise of a poem for which the author is not yet strong enough, his skill being disproportionate to the subject matter.¹³⁰ Like Statius, Petrarch would never write that encomiastic epic. Sharing this “failure” amounts to sharing the ancient poet’s authority (not to mention the unfinished status of the *Aeneid* as Virgil left it).¹³¹ Hence, the epic tradition may also appear as an archive of unfinished or unattempted

¹³⁰ *Theb.* I.32-33: “tempus erit, cum Pierio tua fortior oestro / facta canam”; *Ach.* I.17-19: “da veniam ac trepidum patere hoc sudare parumper / pulvere: te longo necdum fidente paratu / molimur magnusque tibi praeludit Achilles.”

¹³¹As explicitly recalled in the *Secretum*, 262, where Franciscus speaks of a time when, seriously ill and fearing death, he thought of burning the manuscript of the *Africa*, as Virgil intended to do with the *Aeneid*: “Gravi enim morbo correptus viciniam mortis expavi, nichil in eo statu sentiens molestius quam quod Africam ipsam semiexplicitam linquebam. Itaque, alienam dedignatus limam, ignibus eam propriis manibus mandare decreveram, nulli amicorum satis fidens, qui post emissum spiritum id michi prestaret; proptereaquod Virgilium nostrum ab imperatore Cesare Augusto hac in re sola non exauditum esse memineram. Quid te moror? Parum affuit quin Africa preter vicini solis ardores, quibus eternum subiacet, ac preter Romanorum faces, quibus ter olim longe lateque perusta est, meis etiam flammis arderet. Sed de hoc alias. Est enim amara recordatio.” Marsh, “The Burning Question,” 214, comments as follows: “As Franciscus describes it, the episode is laden with irony. By alluding to Virgil’s deathbed wish to burn his *Aeneid*, Franciscus both celebrates the supremacy of his poetic model and mocks the imperfection of his own work.” Beyond comparisons in terms of poetic achievement, the difference between the classic and the modern is that, while the former lives in the *perfectum*, the modern inevitably lives in the *imperfectum* or in the *futurum*, unfinishedness being the nature of a work in progress.

projects that are as ambitious in scope as frail and unpredictable in their making. Epic programs do not coincide with the what the epic tradition actually is. And yet, an unrealized or misleading program cannot be merely taken as “false.”

At this point, Petrarch can restate his affiliation with the epic lineage of Virgil, Lucan, and Statius: he pretends to be tempted by the project of poem on the present time (that is, on King Robert), while actually yielding, with his *Africa* on the Second Punic War, to the pressure of tradition that demands a poem on events set back in a remote past. In this respect, the divergence with Dante’s *Commedia*, set in 1300, could not be greater.

Nullus ad etatem propriam respexit, ut erret
Musa parum notos nullo prohibente per annos
Liberior: Troiamque adeo canit ille ruentem,
Ille refert Thebas iuuenemque occultat Achillem,
Ille autem Emathiam Romanis ossibus implet.
Ipse ego non nostri referam modo temporis acta,
Marte sed Ausonio sceleratos funditus Afros
Eruere est animus nimiasque retundere uires. (I.48-55)

The three *auctores* recalled by the iteration of *ille* constitute a compendium of classical epic, by which non-canonical possibilities are seemingly warded off. *Ipse* follows *ille*, thus repeating a pattern, with a difference due to the poet’s historicity: because of the distance from his predecessors (as indicated by the deictic *ille*), Petrarch is – and is not - quite not the same as Virgil, Lucan, and Statius.

That restricted canon should be compared to Dante’s and Boccaccio’s strategy of self-inscription. The “bella scola” of classical poets in the *Commedia* (*Inf.* IV.94) is mainly but not entirely epic, since together with Homer, Virgil, and Lucan (with the later addition of Statius in the *Purgatorio*) Dante meets Ovid and Horace; Boccaccio’s hide-and-seek with his sources cunningly puts aside names (e.g., Statius) and subdues the generic

orientation they may impose on the reader, so that more room is made for the “othering” of epic into romance and elegy. Petrarch, on the contrary, sticks to a more orthodox list, which entails stricter genre identity. Yet, this reflects only one of the tensions that shape the poem of the *Africa*; considered as a whole, this section shows many possible directions for the epic labor of the poet.

1.4 Possibilities, Totalies

To conclude this chapter, let us turn back to where it started: Italian culture in the early Trecento. Socio-historical references to that context have been sparse, minimal, and hardly adequate, of course, to provide a context to the variations on the epic tradition that we have seen first with quick sketches from post-classical and medieval literary history, and then with analyses of authorial self-inscriptions (and genre-inscriptions) in the beginnings of the *Commedia*, *Teseida*, and the *Africa*. That does not mean that social, political, and cultural issues do not have relevance to what I have discussed so far; on the contrary, each variation discussed is rooted in a context, where it finds its motivations, and to that very context is directed, to produce, foster, and govern transformations – more or less utopian. A sort of counter-chapter might be written, indeed, to fill the gaps left in the theoretical and historical pictures sketched out with a predominant interest for literary forms and their potential for variation. But that would have resulted in a very different line of research. This one, instead, focuses on how the epic is a tradition that continually evolves and negotiates its relation with our total experience of the world.

Experiments in the epic code, such as the ones discussed here, are not direct reflections of the reality of their times, whatever we might mean by “reality.” Works like

the *Commedia*, *Teseida*, and *Africa* do not portray or symbolize the totality of the world or a culture “as it is.” Instead, they do speak of the forces that bring about, actually or virtually, a transformation of reality. The totality addressed by the epic is the *possibility of a totality*; as such, it escapes any definition and yet potentially embraces any aspect of life. In the early Italian Trecento, as elsewhere in Europe, that meant the search for new ways of articulating the sense of being at a turning point in history, in the middle of dramatic change that affected economics, politics, culture, and religion. Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch, following in the footsteps of the classical and post-classical epic tradition, sought after new possibilities of life, or after new forms of total response to the world, after modes by which personal and collective individuation (ontogenesis and phylogenesis) could be explored and articulated - in different ways, as we will see in the following chapters.

Architectures of Totality: Dante's *Commedia*

2.1. Dante and the Epic: Situating the Question

Widely and inevitably, the epic is recalled as a notion critical to the understanding of many aspects of the *Commedia*: background, structure, purpose, style, characters, references, intertextuality, literary and historical vistas, cultural and individual transformation, relation with antiquity, to name a few, although the meaning of “epic” might vary on occasion, according to the circumstances of the observation of the poem. Yet, in the ever-expanding archive of Dante scholarship epic does not appear under its own rubric. The skein is in a tangle, to the extent that mapping out the uses and fortunes of the epic as a category in the corpus of Dante studies would constitute a vast research of its own, perhaps no less extensive than cataloging all the elements marked as “epic” in the text of the *Commedia*.

This should not come as a surprise, given the complexity that characterizes the epic. The *Commedia* displays, in its unfolding, the polyvalent presence of the epic; the archive of scholarship on the *Commedia*, instead, amounts to a diachronic catalog of different conceptions of the epic, from the age of the early commentaries (when terms such as “epic” or “epos” were not part of the vocabulary of the literati) to the present day. The aim of this chapter is to propose an overall reading of the *Commedia* within the frame of the epic tradition rather than to draw a comprehensive map of the presence of the epic in either the *Commedia* or its reception. For this reason, I will begin by following some of the threads

in the skein, to extract from them a few key questions underlying Dante's dialogue with the epic tradition.

With a tolerable degree of simplification, the major lines of scholarly work on the nexus between the *Commedia* and the epic could be summed up as follows. First and foremost, the corpus of classical Roman epic has always served as a major reservoir of sources for the poem, which by Dante's admission in the "bella scola" of the poets in limbo (*Inf.* IV.94) explicitly indicated a mostly epic canon of predecessors (Homer, Virgil, Ovid, Lucan, plus Horace the satirist). In time, the search for sources has been of invaluable importance and has formed the bedrock of scholarship on intertextual matters in the *Commedia*.¹³² For all its accuracy in philological scrutiny, this approach has not taken into account the question of the epic qua epic, that is, of the epic as a code that governs and orients the generation and reception of texts. In itself, a source from the corpus of the classical epic tradition is not substantially different from another set of texts tracked down in other fields of Latin literature.

Intertextual is the nature of another major mode of inquiry, which examines the presence of elements from the Roman epic tradition in the the *Commedia* and tries to understand them as clues to Dante's complex dialogue with texts, authors, and genres from antiquity. The scope of this type of inquiry is multifaceted, as it includes references, allusions, micro- and macro-textual structures, themes, but also characters that either directly or indirectly (e.g., Virgil and Ulysses, respectively) embody part of that literary

¹³² The results of this approach have been usefully collected in commentaries and repertoires (see for example Hollander's repertoire "Opere di Virgilio nella *Commedia* di Dante"). Digital platforms have made possible new formats for the archiving of sources, e.g. in the online database *Per un'enciclopedia dantesca digitale*.

heritage on the level of narrative representation. What Dante draws from the epic tradition is generally taken as a synecdoche for antiquity as such; the epic of Roman *auctores* were in fact handed down, in medieval culture, as the master-genre of the pre-Christian world. From this perspective, ancient epic serves as a foil to the literary and cultural turn initiated by the *Commedia*, in so far as it continues, incorporates, and transcends the culture of pagan antiquity through a Christian *translatio*, grounded in the emergent vernacular culture of modern times. How Dante performs (and possibly accomplishes) such a task is one of the most recurring – and certainly one of the most productive - issues in Dante studies. So compelling is the program of transformation of antiquity carried out in the *Commedia* that scholars are invited, if not forced, by the poem itself to follow Dante in the creation of what has been oftentimes dubbed as a “new Christian epic” or a new epic style.

The implications of this label, however, have not been adequately explored: while the formula is able of intuitively indicating a crucial motive in Dante’s work on genres, it leaves unstated what configuration and what orientation that new epic could assume. In short, what remains unthought is not Dante’s way of utilizing epic materials, but Dante’s reconfiguration of the epic code as the architecture that shapes a total response to the human experience. In some cases, the examination of intertextual connections between the *Commedia* and ancient epic does not question what epic is, and what Dante makes of it. More than the epic as such, it is the transformation of themes and motifs from the epic tradition that has caught most of the attention of scholarly readers.¹³³ To illustrate this

¹³³ Representative examples of this trend, based more on a thematic than on a generic framework, are Thompson’s *Dante’s Epic Journeys* and Hollander’s “Dante and the Martial Epic.” See also the third and last section of Barolini’s *Dante’s Poets*, 188-286, eloquently titled “Epic Resolution,” as it outlines Dante’s emancipation as a poet through the encounters with Virgil and Statius; at p. xiii in her preface, Barolini

approach, I will briefly comment on two book-long studies that, though driven by different critical programs, raise the question of Dante's dialogue with classical epic.

The first study is Wetherbee's *The Ancient Flame*. As he observes, the *Commedia*

incorporates the worldview of ancient epic more completely than any previous vernacular poem, and it is from the directness and honesty with which [*Dante*] both assimilates and challenges the tragic vision of the Roman poets that the *Commedia* and the transcendent experience it reports derive much of their extraordinary power.¹³⁴

Dante's multiple encounters with classical epics are equivalent to confrontations with and negotiations of their tragic nature, alien to Christianity's teleological perspective on redemption. As Wetherbee convincingly argues, in those encounters Dante situates characters and motifs from his *auctores* within a new perspective while preserving their tragic human dimension, which cannot be completely assimilated into Christian poetics. In sum, if "Dante's dealings with epic tradition are integral to the narrative of the *Commedia*," we must acknowledge that the epic tradition exists - and affects Dante - *outside* the representation it is given by the *Commedia* itself. The epic tradition, in other words, is experienced as the site of an otherness that cannot be fully systematized in his Dante's poem, in spite of his ethical program.

It might be added that Dante draws tremendous energy from the epic tradition, with its authoritativeness and its capacity for variation. At the same time, since variation is generated by the combination of sameness and otherness, Dante strikes a very fine balance

contends that, differently from lyrical poets in the vernacular, "the epic poets, Vergil and Statius, move in geographic and discursive space, i.e. physically and in their discourses, which cover a broad range of topics from the nature of free will to the generation of the human soul."

¹³⁴ Wetherbee, *Ancient Flame*, 4.

between expansion (incorporation of otherness) and containment (control of otherness). This point leads us to the unstated implication of Wetherbee's study: the epic tradition cannot be reduced to a matter that Dante truly controls, outdoes, and supersedes, for ultimately it is not an object; rather, the epic proves to be a ground that cannot be stabilized, even by a poetics as compelling and assimilating as Dante's. On the contrary, the instability of the field of epic tradition seems to be what Dante – in practice - understood and challenged more than anyone else. His operation appears to be two-fold: the poem's teleological development accomplishes a program of succession and transcendence; however, if we read the poem outside the box of Dante's teleological and theological intention, we can see that Dante's program does not represent an inevitable progress. Therefore, a crucial implication of Wetherbee's study is that Dante's affiliation with the tradition should be "detheologized," to borrow Barolini's notion,¹³⁵ so as to acknowledge Dante's capacity to tune in with the potential for variation of the epic code.

The second study to be considered here is Schnapp's *The Transfiguration of History at the Center of Dante's "Paradise,"* which focuses on the cantos of the Heaven of Mars, the god par excellence of martial epic. The overall pattern of Schnapp's argument is that of Christian conversion, specifically articulated as "the transformation of Classical conceptions of epic heroism that results from the Christian understanding of heroism as

¹³⁵ See Barolini, *Undivine Comedy*, 17: "We must detheologize our reading if we are to understand what makes the theology stick. For the final irony of our tradition of Dante exegesis is that, as a direct result of our *theologus-poeta* dichotomy, and frequently in the name of preserving the poetry, we have obscured its greatness by accepting uncritically its directives and its premises, its 'theology'. To the extent that we read as the poet directs us to read, we have not fully appreciated the magnificence of his direction. To the extent that we hearken always to what Dante says rather than take note of what he has done, we treat him as he would have us treat him: not as a poet, but as an authority, a 'theologian'."

martyrdom in imitation of Christ's sacrifice on the cross," a novel conception that "inextricably identifies epic action with verbal action, thus making possible Dante's reenactment of Book 6 [of the *Aeneid*] as the story of the writing of his own *Commedia*."¹³⁶ Schnapp's summary of his own thesis must be attentively considered, for it starts from the critical commonplace of Dante's conversion of classical epic but then – a quite rare occurrence – tries to articulate the ethos of the new epic individuation proposed in the central cantos of the *Paradiso*, following what readers such as Auerbach and Freccero already highlighted.¹³⁷ The Christ-event as a turning-point in universal history is reenacted and renewed in the story of Dante *personaggio-poeta*: it is in himself as an imitator of Christ that word and action can coincide, in a new version of epic heroism. Schnapp precisely calls "internalization" the shift from outer to inner and verbal action;¹³⁸ in terms of epic ethos, it entails a passive, so to speak, rather than an active mode. It is, of course, a special kind of passivity, which is not inertia but receptiveness to the highest degree.

It could be argued that Dante's outward action in the *Commedia* is severely limited, if compared to the action in classical epics. On the other hand, immense is the growing capacity of the pilgrim's mind to receive the universe in itself, as a whole and in every detail. Moreover, such a receptiveness heightens, rather than dilutes, the agonistic quality of martial epic, which is taken to another dimension, explicitly investigated in Christian epic since Prudentius: that of the "wars" the soul has to fight. The figure of the

¹³⁶ Schnapp, *Transfiguration of History*, 11.

¹³⁷ See Auerbach, *Dante*, and Freccero, *Dante*.

¹³⁸ See in particular the section "Martyrdom and the Internalization of Epic" in Schnapp, *Transfiguration of History*, 215-231.

martyr, so critical to the heaven of Mars, is etymologically that of the witness (*testis*): he bears witness to his faith by refusing to deny it, in any circumstance, even under the most harrowing pressure. The martyr's capacity for outer action can be reduced to a minimum or be completely effaced, but that does not affect the possibility for him to manifest his faith. As the site of faith, interiority is not severed from but connected to the secular world by means of the martyr's receptiveness. In the act of sacrifice, as countless *exempla* from saints' lives remind us, the lack of outer action turns into another level of action: in the experience of the martyr, passive in the face of his persecutors, is the culmination of religious *pathos*. Passivity of this special kind is the capacity to receive God and the world into one's own soul, as did Paul, aptly recalled as a container in the phrase "Vas d'elezione" (*Inf.* II.28), significantly placed in the passage where Paul himself is paired with Virgil's Aeneas (the spectator-hero of *Aeneid* VI) and proposed as a model for Dante. Indeed, Paul as a receptacle orients Dante's dialogue with pre-Christian epic.

Schnapp's analysis allows us to understand Dante's work on the epic within a larger poetic, moral, and theological frames. The teleological momentum of this interpretive approach, however, tends to foreclose discussion of Dante's variations on the epic tradition, whose contradictory network is veiled, or simplified, by the critic's pattern of incorporation-cum-transfiguration. Moreover, a question remains unanswered, if not unasked: what is left of Dante's "new Christian epic," once we consider it not only as a facet of a poet's unique program but as a node in the network of tradition? And what can be said, from the vantage point of the epic, about the universality so strongly claimed by Dante and his exegetes, once they have reduced the *Commedia* to a project bound to be

unrepeatable, inimitable, incomparable, and so on? It is in dialogue with the history of Western epic that we should read the transformation of epic in the *Commedia*, because in history no work is an island, so to speak. Another dictum of Barolini's can be profitably borrowed here: "Only historicize," as the title of one of her articles goes.¹³⁹

To historicize the *Commedia*'s work on the epic means, first of all, to see it within a "field of tensions, of centripetal and centrifugal forces produced in the dialectical relation between that which aspires to remain intact by inertia and that which advances with the force of rupture and transformation: where there is differentiation there is tension, therefore movement."¹⁴⁰ No work, not even the most compelling in its fiction of totalization and universality, can be separated from the dynamic system it has grown from, in history. In short, the historicity of the *Commedia* as a new Christian epic takes its significance only from the movement by which "every text is subject to changing position diachronically in the intertextual network."¹⁴¹ This is what we saw in the previous chapter, apropos of the epic as a code in variation in a network.

Let us turn now to critical investigations that have tried to determine the position of the *Commedia* within the epic tradition, from the vantage point of comparative literature or literary theory rather than that of Dante studies. Such a perspective, however, has yielded results that are no less problematic than those presented by the work of *dantisti*.

¹³⁹ Though with a different purpose and scope: while this chapter has to do mainly with the history of genres and forms, Barolini in "Only Historicize" actually focuses on the need to study the material and societal contexts of Dante's life and works. Her historicizing, by the way, hardly goes beyond the boundaries determined by the reception of Dante.

¹⁴⁰ Corti, *Introduction to Literary Semiotics*, 7.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 18.

Some critics in the past have wondered whether the *Commedia* is an epic; no doubt this question has now lost much of the relevance it might have had, and rightly so. In light of the dynamics of literary genres, we are no longer interested in pigeonholing a work, let alone a masterpiece of extraordinary complexity, into this or that category. Of course, only the advent of a critical lexicon during the Renaissance, in the wake of the reemergence of Aristotle's *Poetics*, could allow scholars to explicitly analyze the *Commedia* as an epic, as for example did Jacopo Mazzoni, in a passage of his 1572 *Discorso in difesa della "Commedia" del divino poeta Dante*. At odds with making the poem fit in with Aristotelian categories, Mazzoni was forced to add further generic references to comic writers of antiquity in order to explain the title and genre of the *Commedia*, "really both epic and dramatic."¹⁴² The new vocabulary of early modern literary theory was not sufficient to answer the question of the genre of the *Commedia*, which has intrigued and puzzled commentators since the XIV century.

A quick look at theoretical and historical accounts of the epic demonstrates that the position of the *Commedia* is unique. It appears that it belongs to the field of epic but at the same time lies at its margins, as a work of a genre all of its own (again, the inimitability topos) or as a threshold into something new (the transition topos). For all the differences we might find in scholarly interpretations, the function of the *Commedia* in the history and theory of the epic seems to be that of de-centering the epic tradition, in a two-fold sense: the tradition Dante received from his age's culture, and the representation of that tradition held by modern culture. De-centering is another term for *translatio*.

¹⁴² Qtd. in Caesar, *Dante*, 290.

The *Commedia* is admitted reluctantly to comparative and historical overviews of the epic; it cannot be kept out because of its compelling presence in the literary canon, and yet often ends up in a limbo that is historical and theoretical. Madelénat, the author of a rich study on the epic, interestingly devotes to Dante only a very short section,¹⁴³ in which the *Commedia* is defined as “summe prophétique, épopée anomique,” and characterized by the interiorization of a number of epic motifs that cohere thanks to the unifying force of the poet’s historically incarnate self. “Anomic” – literally “without law,” the law of the genre – attests to the difficulty in situating the *Commedia*, which Madelénat’s volume serves, in fact, only to open the section on Renaissance epic. All in all, Dante’s poem is never taken as a paradigm.¹⁴⁴ In another book on Western epic, Hainsworth says that the *Commedia* is “epic” in everything but form; its epic quality would result from Dante’s fortunate ignorance of epic theory, in an age when “even an intuitive perception of the literary kinds was lost.”¹⁴⁵ In the light of what was discussed in the previous chapter, views like Madelénat’s and Hainsworth’s only de-historicize Dante’s own generic labor; more than that, they misunderstand the reality of epic as a practical theory not bound by the theory of critics and theoreticians. In respect of the epic, Dante’s status still appears uncertain in the domain of comparative literature, as if scholars did not know what to make

¹⁴³ Madelénat, *Épopée*, 214-216.

¹⁴⁴ It must be added, however, that while Madelénat does not see any immediate posterity to the *Commedia*, he is able to see, no less succinctly than lucidly, its deferred posterity in the XIX century (Blake, Milton, and Hugo are name). This critical vista, which exceeds the scope of the present research, is indeed crucial to see the *Commedia* as a work constantly in movement within the life of the epic.

¹⁴⁵ Hainsworth, *Idea of Epic*, 139-140.

of the *Commedia*, too great in scope and force to be ignored, and yet too peculiar to be taken as a paradigm of the dynamics of the epic.¹⁴⁶

A notable exception is Newman's *The Classical Epic Tradition*, a study already mentioned in the previous chapter for its emphasis on epic as variation. Like other scholars, Newman points out the decline of the epic in postclassical literature, but he makes an original case for a decline due to the loss of the Virgilian (and before that, Homeric and Alexandrian) sense of transformation and contradiction. As Newman puts it, a "whole dimension was thus lost from the *Aeneid*, as the epic was compressed into a stereotype of uniformly exalted narrative that made no allowance for its involuted contours," so that "the constituent parts of the original creation fell asunder," namely the contradictory "interplay between human weakness and divine necessity."¹⁴⁷ Literary theory in Dante's age inherited a crucial fault of ancient criticism, that is, "to neglect the question of unified structure" in the epic;¹⁴⁸ as a consequence, a living tradition ended up dismembered into a set of separate features, while theoretician rejected the nature of literature as "a total response to the world," a response thematized and maximized in the epic tradition.¹⁴⁹ Differently from theorists,

¹⁴⁶ Two more example might give a better sense of the problems underlying a variety of comparative approaches. A fine but rapid discussion is included in Zatti, *Modo epico*, 54-56, where amplification of Virgilian catabasis and conversion of the epic *nostos* in Christian *itinerarium ad Deum* are pointed out as two major characters of the *Commedia*, though such a critical sketch does not further develop historical and theoretical implications. Nor are they developed in *The Cambridge Companion to Epic*, where Freccero's chapter "Dante and the Epic of Transcendence" is a brilliant piece the perspective of which, though, is still totally Dante-centered and Dante-oriented, with minimal contextualization of the *Commedia* within the discourse of the Western epic tradition. It is also true that there is no conversation among the chapters the *Companion*, as if there were no common ground for a discussion of the epic as a field that, for all its transformations and contradictions, does actually exist, and does claim its own coherence in theory and practice.

¹⁴⁷ Newman, *Classical Epic Tradition*, 247-248.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 253.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 249.

however, we know that poets – along with commentators like Fulgentius and Bernardus, who shared poetry’s transformative force – kept alive a practical sense for unity and totality, whatever their explicit theoretical statements, if any, on the subject. In this respect, Newman’s dismissal of all that came before Dante might sound hasty and one-sided: it severs theory from practice as if they could exist as two fully distinct realms. Yet, he justly tries to see the *Commedia* in the light of “the central problem of recovering the classical tradition,” which was “instinctively seized by Dante in the face of contemporary misconceptions, and which alone can explain why his epic deserves the status conferred on it by the judgment of posterity.”¹⁵⁰ What Newman calls “instinct” pertains to practical theory, or “poetic criticism.”¹⁵¹

The question, therefore, is not whether the *Commedia* is an epic, but how it recreates the possibilities of epic, in dialogue with the epic tradition. To be sure, in doing so Dante is far less alone than Newman wants him to be, and yet no other writer of his age captured and transformed the force of variation at the core of epic tradition with the same intensity and scope. In his reflections on Dante, however, shifts his attention from one particular episode or passage to another, hence losing sight of the sense of totality on which he declaredly puts much emphasis. Instead, in this chapter I intend to concentrate precisely on some aspects of the architecture of totality that makes the *Commedia* a paradigm of epic poetry as a total response. How does Dante organize his text and its movement in order to

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 253.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 266. As Newman further comments at p. 260, “What is surprising is Dante’s ability to rediscover [classical] tradition in face of critical misunderstandings of the type evinced by both Giovanni [*del Virgilio*]’s letter and by Virgil’s Wheel’, and even in spite of his own theoretical writings.” An argument similar to Newman’s, though more concise, is developed in Jenkyns, “Unconscious Classical Sources.”

articulate the experience of a living, evolving totality? A satisfactory answer, were it ever possible, would obviously exceed the means and scope of the present research; yet some lines and patterns of interpretation can be sketched out.

The articulation of the experience of totality is an issue raised by the critical writings discussed above as representative of a historico-hermeneutical approach: Dante's intention to incorporate and transform (in a word, to convert) the tragic matter of ancient epic within a new totality (Wetherbee); the heroic ethos of war and martyrdom (Schnapp); and the dynamics of tradition-as-variation represented by Virgil's *Aeneid* (Newman). To these references we must add Ascoli's *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author*, though it does not directly touch on the question of epic. Ascoli contends that the ultimate result of Dante's search for an authority transhistorical and non-contingent "the theme of radical human contingency."¹⁵² This is the very question underlying the *Commedia*'s variations on the epic, a special kind of contingency that pertains not only to Dante's individual poem but, first and foremost, to the epic tradition itself. In Dante as *personaggio-poeta* two architectures of totality (the contingent and the transcendent, the human and the divine, the temporal and the eternal) meet and communicate, as if they were one and the same thing.

From Hegel to Lukács there extends a line of philosophical criticism that with a few rapid but insightful discussions helps us understand the nature of the epic as an architecture of totality, no matter all the misconceptions due to philological inexactitudes and politico-cultural agendas. Let us consider a couple of passages, starting with an excerpt from Hegel's *Aesthetics*:

¹⁵² Ascoli, *Dante*, 402.

the epic, having *what is* as its topic, acquires as its object the occurrence of an action which in the whole breadth of its circumstances and relations must gain access to our contemplation as a rich event connected with the total world of a nation and epoch. Consequently the content and form of epic proper is the entire world-outlook and objective manifestation of a national spirit presented in its self-objectifying shape as an actual event. This whole comprises both the religious consciousness, springing from all the depths of the human spirit, and also concrete political and domestic life right down to the details of external existence, human needs and means for their satisfaction; and epic animates this whole by developing it in close contact with individuals, because what is universal and substantive enters poetry only as the living presence of the spirit.¹⁵³

Before seeing how Dante enters the picture, some elements must be pointed out in this complex passage: 1) the epic is a mode based on an event (whether *fabula* or *historia*) that is connected with the “total world” we experience as a collectivity (not necessarily as a “nation,” though that was the notion privileged in Hegel’s age); 2) totality is a network, that is, a connection of diverse elements rather than a uniform, static reality; 3) totality is a nexus of content and form, by which an outlook on the experience of the “world” as such is possible. Epic as a genre must thus face the question of how literature, as mediation, can give shape to a container for the totality of experience – collective and individual. Lukács’ *Theory of the Novel* is indeed based on the rift that would separate epic and novel as two historically different modes of containing life as a totality. As he puts it, in opposition to drama, the epic is a total relation with the world *as it is*.

Great epic writing gives form to the extensive totality of life, drama to the intensive totality of essence. That is why, when essence has lost its spontaneously rounded, sensually present totality, drama can nevertheless, in its formal a priori nature, find a world that is perhaps problematic but which still is all-embracing and closed within itself. But this is impossible for the great epic. For the epic, the world at any given moment is an ultimate principle; it is empirical at its deepest, most decisive, all-determining transcendental base; it can sometimes accelerate the rhythm of life, can

¹⁵³ Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 1044.

carry something that was hidden or neglected to a utopian end which was always immanent within it, but it can never, while remaining epic, transcend the breadth and depth, the rounded, sensual, richly ordered nature of life as historically given. Any attempt at a properly utopian epic must fail because it is bound, subjectively or objectively, to transcend the empirical and spill over into the lyrical or dramatic; and such overlapping can never be fruitful for the epic.¹⁵⁴

Although still enmeshed in a genre-tripartition (lyric, drama, epic) that no longer works for us in those terms, Lukács tries to theorize totality or extensiveness as a quality of the epic that has not enough investigated by philology and literary history alike (in his age but, *mutatis mutandis*, in ours too). Not to misinterpret his notion of the epic, we must understand “the breadth and depth, the rounded, sensual, richly ordered nature of life as historically given” as a network of relations rather than an object to be represented. As an “ultimate principle,” the world is the horizon that both contains and originate experience (what in the first chapter we called “matrix”).

In both Hegel and Lukács, Homer is not only the origin of the epic; he is also its highest manifestation. After him, there is only decadence of the epic, not because of the lesser quality of epic writers but because the conditions of experience have irremediably changed with the end of the age that begot the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. The main change, dramatically depicted in the incipit of the *Theory of the Novel*, is that “integrated civilizations,” self-contained and balanced in their totality, are no longer possible in the modern age.¹⁵⁵ But when did the world first become too large, unbalanced, and complex? Today from the field of classical studies comes the answer that no such line can be drawn; yet, our relationship with antiquity has been historically shaped by that assumption, either

¹⁵⁴ Lukács, *Theory of the Novel*, 46.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 29-39.

consciously or unconsciously. Speaking of the epic, Hegel and Lukács had to reflect on the transition from antiquity to modernity, from epic to novel; to them, Dante is the site of that transition.

The hybrid world of the *Commedia* – secular and transcendent, dynamic and eternal, objective and subjective – would mark the transition from the well-rounded, complete epic totality of classical antiquity to the open and changing totality of the modern age, in which proper epic morphs into the novel. Dante is strongly epic in representing life in its totality, both Hegel and Lukács maintain, and yet his relation with the world is no longer epic.¹⁵⁶ In this respect, the philosophers have not seized the opportunity to use Dante as a springboard to a redefinition of what epic may be. What if, instead of being an extraordinary work that rests on the edge between antiquity and modernity, the *Commedia* as a quasi-epic and a quasi-novel were the most adequate standpoint for the understanding of the epic as a mode based on variation and tradition? The idealization of the Homeric age, in fact, leads to a blindness to the temporal quality of the epic: as a tradition, it grows in time. Not by chance, Roman epic was far less present than Homeric epic in philosophical reflections: Roman literature too conscious of the realities of time, tradition, and change to comply with the expectation of unity and stability held by the likes of Hegel and Lukács. And questions of time, tradition, and change were absolutely central to Dante's epic labor in an age of transition. In other words, the *Commedia* is evidently an *unicum* in the epic

¹⁵⁶ Hegel speaks directly of Dante and the epic in *Aesthetics* 1103-1104, and Lukács does so in *Theory of the Novel*, 68-69, 82-83. See also Freccero, *Dante*, 138, and Mori, *Epic Grandeur*, 19-20, on Lukács's views on Dante. Auerbach's chapter on Dante in *Mimesis*, 174-202, contends that the *Commedia* is the work where two modes of representations – the classical and the biblical – converge and combine, each with its own sense for totality.

tradition, and yet it understands and dramatizes the dynamics of that very tradition. The epic totality of Dante's poem is articulated through the incarnate presence of the *personaggio-poeta*: he becomes something other than himself, in time. The same occurs to his text: even the eternal reality that the poem aims to convey changes along with the unfolding of the text. And the same, on another level, occurs to the epic tradition. The architecture of totality is an architecture of change.

Epic, as we have seen, is a form of totality, and a discourse on totality. To create meaning, it puts us in relation to a total experience, which the text not only contains but makes accessible and thinkable. In this sense, the epic could be seen as an intensification of the category of genre as such: a form of totality, which functions as a frame that regulates the production of meaning in a text. As a frame, however, genre is total but not exclusive, since hybridization and dialogue are part and parcel of its life, in the *longue durée* of history and in the reality of individual texts. The following section will sketch out a diagram of how, in the *Commedia*, genre works as an architecture of totality and change and, by doing so, realizes the potentiality of the epic as a genre-beyond-genres, or a matrix of genre.

2.2. *Itinerarium Mentis in Genera*

An encyclopedia of genres which goes beyond genre itself and ultimately shows an extra-generic intention: this is how the *Commedia* has been widely characterized. According to Curtius, for example, the form created by Dante in the *Commedia* "can be assigned to no genre":¹⁵⁷ it results from the reworking of many genres historically available to Dante, but

¹⁵⁷ Curtius, *European Literature*, 361.

does not fit into any of them, not even into those that Curtius himself mentions as the two most influential on the poem as a whole: the classical epic of the *Aeneid* and the philosophico-theological epic of the *Anticlaudianus*. Curtius' statement is a good example of the impasse to which moderns come whenever they try to inscribe the *Commedia* within a discourse on genre, namely on the relationship between the individual text and the general series of texts to which it belongs. That some readers did find the way of pigeonholing Dante's poem or to do away with genre as such does not mean that the impasse has been overcome. Rephrasing a problem, however, always tells us more than barely suppressing or simplifying it. Not to mention that, since genres continually change over time both in theory and practice, the question itself changes along with its theoretical and historical horizon. In this section I will first outline the conditions for a genre-oriented reading of the *Commedia*; afterward, I will comment on the passages where Dante, in order to describe the status of the *Commedia* in its unfolding, gives new meaning to genre categories; finally, I will discuss commentary as a structure profoundly shaping the way the *Commedia* represents itself as a work that incorporates and transfigures genres. The epic will not be discussed as a specific category; yet, the whole discourse on genre developed in the poem bears profound similarity, in form and intention, to the practical and theoretical notion of epic as variation discussed so far. Like Christian incarnation, the epic provides a pattern for the relation between the individual and the general.

2.2.1. “*Commedia*” as a Title, or: “This is Not a Genre”

Let us go back to Curtius' dictum: no genre in itself can define the *Commedia*. This impossibility may be articulated on three levels: first, if viewed from the outside, the poem

as a whole does not match any genre as a “specific organization of texts with thematic, rhetorical and formal dimensions”;¹⁵⁸ second, if viewed from the inside, the poem represents itself as an artifact incommensurable with any generic classification, because of its unique subject matter and intention; third, the poem did not originate a tradition based on strict imitation of its generic patterns. For modern readers, the explanation of this unusual situation has been in step with the still widespread assumption that the greatness of a work of art is inversely proportional to its observance of generic categories. Developed by the Romantics and then passed on as a commonplace to post-Romantic readers, that critical myth is a perfect complement to the opposite view on genre as a sort of fixed determination, either literary (e.g., Classicism in its regulative and prescriptive tendencies) or anthropological (e.g., genres as manifestations of archetypes of human experience). No question about the genre of the *Commedia* could be properly raised as far as we are torn between the legacies of these two perspectives: “nominalist skepticism that allows for only a posteriori classifications” on the one hand, and a “regression into timeless typologies” on the other.¹⁵⁹ If the former option makes genre secondary and even merely accidental, the latter cannot account for the historicity of literary genres as they emerge, live, die, and resurface in time.

A good starting point to rethink the question could be Jauss’ study of the system of genres in Medieval literature. His main contention is that the heterogeneity of textual determinations in the Middle Ages calls for a perspective that “no longer applies the genre

¹⁵⁸ Frow, *Genre*, 67.

¹⁵⁹ Jauss, “Theory of Genres,” 78.

normatively (*ante rem*) or in a classificatory manner (*post rem*), but rather historically (*in re*),” and “according to *various* generic aspects”:¹⁶⁰ genres do not exist as Platonic ideas, and their truth lies not in a supposedly pure separateness but in the mixings that occur at any given moment in time. Heterogeneity, however, is not chaos, and that is why Jaus introduces, as a principle of order, the notion of “generic dominant,” which orients the ensemble of a text or a group of texts without erasing the interweaving of genres or making it forcibly cohere. This way, “the so-called mixing of genres [...] can be made into a methodologically productive category.”¹⁶¹ Even more importantly, Jaus points out that genres exist only in time and through change, because “the series of texts formative of a genre presents itself as a process of the continual founding and altering of horizons,” as if the life of a genre were nothing but an ongoing feedback initiated by new texts in a series. It is not a matter of adequacy to an ideal, but a process made up of “[v]ariation, extension and correction.”¹⁶² In this respect, rather than a text belonging to one genre the *Commedia* might be read as a miniaturized genre system, where the general or trans-individual (“genre”) is embedded into the individual (“text”), and where the individual itself, in turn, struggles to become the general, in a sort of reduplication of the logic of Christian incarnation.

As a contemporary genre theorist puts it, “our concern should not be with matters of taxonomic substance (‘What classes and sub-classes are there? To which class does this text belong?’), to which there are never correct answers, but rather with questions of

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 80-81.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 81.

¹⁶² Ibid., 88.

use.”¹⁶³ *Use* is what writers do with a genre as a set of relations connecting the individual to a series, in accordance with a context and a purpose. This is the condition of generic discourse in the *Commedia*, and in the epic tradition as well.¹⁶⁴ It is thus tempting to propose a partial analogy between the uncertain nature of genre as a textual determination in our time and in the late Middle Ages, after “[t]he antique system of poetic genres had, in the millennium before Dante, disintegrated until it was unrecognizable and incomprehensible.”¹⁶⁵

The genre of the *Commedia* is a paradox, starting from its very title. Whether or not Dante himself chose it, and whether or not he meant to tag the poem as a whole, is not crucial to my argument,¹⁶⁶ since this is what the earliest tradition of the text established as its proper name, and we have no alternate title to deal with realistically. What matters is that “*Commedia*” as a title does not identify the poem with its specific subject matter, very differently from Dante’s *auctoritates* on the long narrative poem, namely the *Aeneid*, *Thebaid*, *Metamorphoses*, *Pharsalia* (or *Bellum civile*), *Iliad*, and *Odyssey*. The indirect and vague knowledge of the Homeric poems did not prevent the circulation of their titles.

¹⁶³ Frow, *Genre*, 54.

¹⁶⁴ On the uncertainty of medieval writers and readers in the identification of genres, see Barański, “Tres,” and Gillespie, “From the twelfth century.” See also Jauss, “Theory of Genres,” 95-101 for a more general discussion of the fluid, context-based determination of Medieval genres.

¹⁶⁵ Curtius, *European Literature*, 358.

¹⁶⁶ It would actually make the discussion bog down in conjectures, as we have no ultimate evidence in favor or against any of these positions. See Casadei, *Dante oltre la “Commedia,”* 15-24 for a recent account of arguments against “*Commedia*” as a title intentionally chosen by Dante for the whole poem. For the opposing view see for example Iannucci, “Dante’s Theory of Genres,” 4. Cf. Barański, “Dante,” 64-66, on the appropriateness of the title if read in the light of the *Commedia*’s innovative treatment of the “comic.” See Kelly, *Tragedy and Comedy*, for a review of the discussion on the tragedy/comedy opposition in early commentators of Dante (from his son Jacopo to Filippo Villani).

Well-defined by a character, a place or an event,¹⁶⁷ these titles pick up one of the most peculiar narrative elements of a text and use it as a synecdoche, a signifier for the whole - no matter whether the authors themselves, their editors or their readers were responsible for that. Compared to the classics, “*Commedia*” not only sounds far less specific but also reverses the direction of the synecdoche, as the poem is named after a category larger than itself. In other words, the title works not as a synecdoche but as a metonymy for the poem (a general class is named for the individual). The difference between the *Commedia* (a single text) and “comedy” in Medieval poetics (a potentially infinite series) forecloses any matching, as implied by the hesitations over the title of some of the finest early commentators (e.g., Boccaccio and Benvenuto).¹⁶⁸ Their uncertainty derives precisely from the use of a genre label instead of a proper name: “*Commedia*” tags the poem as an example of a historical genre with which it does not ultimately comply.

Certainly, “comedy” seems an appropriate tag because of its wide-ranging and flexible nature, potentially as inclusive as literature itself, which is how Dante intended his poem to be.¹⁶⁹ Jacopo Aligheri, as early as 1322, wrote in the introduction to his

¹⁶⁷ The case of Horace, the other poet Dante meets in Limbo, is not really an exception, because “Orazio satiro” did not write an extensive narrative in verse, or an Ovidian-like set of narratives.

¹⁶⁸ Boccaccio inconclusively reflects on the title in the introductory *accessus* in his *Esposizioni*. Early commentators like Jacopo della Lana (ad *Inf.* XX.112-114) or Guido da Pisa (*Inf.* Intro.) define *comedia*, according to its subject matter and in line with the Epistle to Can Grande, as a progression from a foul beginning to a happy ending; yet Benvenuto da Imola writes: “Nec dicat, ut aliqui dixerunt, quod materia libri sit Comoedia; nam Comoedia est stylus, non materia” (*Inf.* Intro.), and later punctualizes: “non tam ratione materiae, quam ratione styli vulgaris umilis” (ad *Inf.* XVI.124-132). In the introduction to his commentary, however, Benvenuto says that the poem may also be described as having a “triplex stylus, scilicet tragoedia, satyra, et comoedia.” Benvenuto’s problematic and admittedly unsatisfactory position, very close to Boccaccio’s, is probably the farthest we can get if we consider the *Commedia* as a genre from a point of view that ignores the poem’s temporal structure and tries to enclose it within a fixed system or *genus*.

¹⁶⁹ “The ‘comic’ seems to touch on every subject and style – it seems to stand for literature *tout court*,” in Barański, “Dante,” 82. The status of “comedy” in the system on medieval genres, and Dante’s receptiveness of its fluidity, is also considered in Barański, “Tres,” 46-49, as a proof against the authenticity of the *Epistle*

commentary on the *Inferno* that, of the four styles, comedy is the one “sotto il quale generalmente, e universalmente si tratta di tutte le cose.” The point is that, as a title, “*Commedia*” turns into a floating genre-signifier, which holds an undetermined potential for signification and, on the other hand, remains a proper name referring to this particular poem. Given its semantic instability, “*Commedia*” is justified by virtue of *use*: the more contingent, the more transcendent. If “from the perspective of *Par[adiso]* it becomes clear that this poem, like the God it attempts to represent, does not have one *proper* name at all,”¹⁷⁰ from the perspective of the theory and history of genres the *Commedia* does not have a proper name, just like the genre or genre system it strives to become: the poem combines contingent use and transcendent intention, and pushes them beyond any pre-existing definition of comedy.¹⁷¹ “This is not a genre,” we might say paraphrasing Magritte’s famous “C’est n’est pas une pipe,”¹⁷² because proper name and generic name

to Can Grande, a piece in which the thorny question of title and genre is merely normalized by means of straightforward explanation. Cf. Inglese, *Dante*, 26-27, where the title is considered as a metonymy for the style of the poem and, through that, also for the ensemble of the literary resources Dante drew from (language first of all, but also characters, objects, and setting), to mark the opposition to Virgil’s “tragedia” in a decidedly Christian and Scriptural key. See also Cachey Jr., “Title, Genre,” 83, where it is noted that “To designate the poem by its genre corresponded to a standard type of medieval title (that based on a literary category rather than the name of the author or the subject of the work), and that in calling the poem a *comedia*, Dante associated it with the most varied and fluid of all medieval literary categories” - a fundamental instance of the interplay between the individual and the generic in the genre discourse of the poem.

¹⁷⁰Ascoli, *Dante*, 403.

¹⁷¹ Nor the Scripture as whole has a proper name: both *Biblia* and *Scriptura* are in themselves signifiers that do not refer to a specific object.

¹⁷² Cf. Barolini, *Dante’s Poets*, 285-286, on the title: it is “a sign of the text’s marginal status, its self-imposed difference, its newness” and “the pivotal element of the poet’s revisionist poetics,” announcing that the text will be place “in a condition of outsidership, eternal liminality with respect to both past and future, the traditions that exist in a normal genealogical flow on either side of it. All texts end with the *Comedy*, but none come out of it, for the price of inimitability is not to be imitated.” While the remark on the production of difference and marginality from within the poem could not be more precise, the discourse seems to go astray when it moves to genre, tradition and imitation: these three notions cannot be so easily overcome, unless we accept as the rule of the critical game the very rules that (we believe) Dante provides. That the *Commedia* works as a genre system rather than as genre specimen does not mean it is absolutely beyond genres; that it did not originate a tradition like, for instance, Petrarch’s *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* did, is due to historical contingency rather than to inherent inimitability. The post-Romantic myth of the genreless original as a

undermine and paradoxically reinforce each other, just like image and writing in the painting. However, just as Magritte needed the signs of a pipe to go beyond our preconceived ideas on reality and its representation, to go beyond genres and draw from the generative force Dante needed to play with the signs of historical genres that his readers could recognize. In other words, even in the impossibility of determining the genre of the *Commedia* we can deal with the inner structure of genre as a mediation between two orders of reality, that is, the individual and the general.

There are multiple ways in which Dante re-orientes genre-signs to build his discourse on genre in the *Commedia*. The first and most explicit is his use of meta-literary terms, which we should be alert enough to read contextually. Second, Dante has vernacular and classical authors as part of the cast of the poem, and his poetics relies on the assumption that each author is its own work, and that a work in turns represent its genre, in a sort of narrative condensation of the steps of a Medieval commentary on an *auctor* (*intentio auctoris, titulus, modus agendi, ordo, utilitas, materia, cui parti philosophiae supponitur*).¹⁷³ Third, we have intertextual strategies ranging from overt quotation to subtle allusiveness. Fourth, Dante alludes to genres also through adaptation of their distinctive structures, which are either stretched out over the poem or condensed in a very limited space (e.g., the metamorphoses or the praise topoi, that may extend for the space of a line as well as of the whole poem). Last, but not least, the *Commedia*'s interplay of genres relies

literary absolute is clearly at work here. As to the present paper, while not touching upon the historical genres in Dante's time, I am trying to investigate how the genre-program of the *Commedia* never discards genre as historical mediation, not even when it is pushed to the extremes of dissolution and self-reference. As we will see later on, genre mediation in the *Commedia* is intimately incarnational.

¹⁷³ This however does not entail perfect coincidence on any level between the poet as character and his texts. See Brownlee, "Dante and the Classical Poets," 101.

on a formal continuity made possible by devices like *terza rima*. Thorough examination of these procedures would amount to an examination of the whole poem on different layers, from line-by-line to overarching patterns. So, a choice has to be made for a relatively short analysis. In the following section I will focus on the elements of the first type, that is, the terminology by which Dante refers to the kind of the poem.

2.2.2. Genre-Names in the *Commedia*

The term *comedia* as *genus dicendi* or *stilus* appears twice in the *Inferno*. The first instance, approximately at the middle point of the *cantica*, is in *Inf.* XVII, in a passage where the narrator announces Geryon's arrival. To make sure the reader will believe in the apparition of such a wondrous monster, the narrator swears on his own poem: "per le note / di questa comedia, lettor, ti giuro, / s'elle non sien di lunga grazia vote, / ch'i vidi per quel'aere grosso e scuro / venir notando una figura in suso / meravigliosa ad ogni cor sicuro" (*Inf.* IV.127-132). The question of genre goes hand in hand with the question of truth. Many scholars have seen this moment as pivotal in the definition of both the *Commedia*-poem and the *comedia*-genre as a fiction that must be read as literally true, its fictional appearance notwithstanding: "quello vero c'ha faccia di menzogna" (*Inf.* XVI.124).¹⁷⁴

However, a case could also be made for *comedia* as a site where the question of literal truth, introduced just one *terzina* before, is temporarily suspended because of the recursive structure of the oath: *comedia* is at once the guarantee and the guaranteed. Thus, the truth-value of the narrator's claim is all but certain. Earlier on, with the

¹⁷⁴ See, for instance, Barolini, *Dante's Poets*, 213-214, and Hollander, "Dante *Theologus-Poeta*," 111-112. Pasquini, *Dante*, 75, observes that with Geryon ends the Virgilian section of the *Inferno*: the question of genre and truth marks signals, therefore, a turning point in Dante's affiliation and response to the epic tradition.

recommendation “mirate la dottrina che s’asconde / sotto’l velame de li versi strani” (*Inf.* IX.62-62), Dante showed that the definition of poetry given in the *De vulgari eloquentia* (II.IV.2), “fictio rhetorica musicaque poita,” is still valid, as *versi*, just like *comedia*, comes from the semantic field of fiction and artifice. Then, in coming across the term *comedia*, we are invited to question the truth-like narration of Dante’s descent through Hell. This is the pre-condition for interpreting the *comedia* (genre and poem) on which the narrator swears. Dante must have meant *comedia* to be part of a shared reservoir of practical and theoretical notions about literature, no matter how nuanced or inconsistent; otherwise, the term would not have been placed in an address to the reader, who by definition should be able to understand what it might mean. Whatever its ultimate meaning may be in the oath, *comedia* as a general category inscribes the poem within a genre system; in making this genre paradoxically singular – recursively, a genre of itself – Dante intends to exalt rather than shed its generic function as a form of totality.

The second occurrence of *comedia*, in *Inf.* XXI.1-2 (“Così di ponte in ponte altro parlando / che la mia comedia cantar non cura”), further elaborates on *comedia* as mediation, as we can first notice from its alliterative pairing with another rhetorical though less specific term: “cantar.” The fact that the mention of genre closely follows Virgil’s reference to his *Aeneid* as “l’alta mia tragedia” (*Inf.* XX.115) hints at the relational and oppositional nature of genres. There is of course a parallel emphasized by the fact that the two terms have the same prosodic structure and are preceded by the possessive in the first person singular, while referring to two different characters: Dante is comic, Virgil is tragic. They share a genre system, as pointed out by Virgil’s remark on Dante’s thorough

knowledge of the *Aeneid* in *Inf.* XX.116 (“Ben lo sai tu, che la sai tutta quanta”), but they orient their poems through two different genres, which bear the marks of two discrepant temporalities. Speaking the same metaliterary language, the two poets find themselves on a common ground, where mutual transformation of genres may be performed through imitation, redoubling, correction, and other kinds of feedback.

The orientation Dante gives to such a relationship is clear: the transition from a Pagan to a Christian poetics.¹⁷⁵ The very reduction of the broader taxonomy of *genera dicendi* illustrated in the second book of the *De Vulgari Eloquentia* to only two determinations, *tragedia* and *comedia*, is functional to a dramatization of genres, now re-inscribed within the history of salvation. Hence the indirect attack against *tragedia* via Virgil’s correction of the *Aeneid*’s account on the origins of Mantua (*Inf.* XX.58-99). Once again, we have to deal with the problem of truth and falsehood in poetic discourse. Could we distinguish genres according to their degree of truth? Not in themselves. Yet Dante subtly changes the conditions of the question by forcing his readers to identify a given genre with a text and an author: Dante and his *Comedy* are the Christian *comedia*; Virgil and his *Aeneid* are the pagan *tragedia*. In this field of tensions, Dante’s practical knowledge of epic splits into two “epics”: one is incorporated and developed as *comedia*, for its capacity for inclusiveness and transformation; the other, which belongs pre-Christian antiquity, in a poetry of the highest quality and value, though dead or merely insufficient in the present context.

¹⁷⁵ See for example Barolini, *Dante’s Poets*, 201-251.

Consequently, the position of each poet/text in history determines the quantity and quality of truth contained in either genre, a paradoxical reversal of what we would ordinarily assume: the general (e.g. Christianity) determines the individual (e.g. Dante and the *Commedia*), as well as the individual determines the general. The former orientation, the less logical from a strictly rational point of view, has to do with the dynamics of literary evolution: the force of an individual author or text can be enough, in a given context, to found a new *genus*, to allow a new set of possibilities mediating between past and future.

Of course, we do not have to believe in Dante's redemptive version of literary history in order to understand his steps toward a new transformative notion of genre, and especially of the epic as a meta-genre: all-embracing, encyclopedic, and foundational. Differently from the substantially static taxonomy exposed in the *De vulgari eloquentia*, the *contextual* genre system of the *Commedia* does evolve, starting from the dialogue between comedy and tragedy. Its perspective is contingent, as generic determinations exist only in their incarnate embodiments; it is also transcendent, as rhetorical changes are first of all theological and ontological. Hence the genre of the *Commedia* coincides with the ongoing drama of its own genesis.

To find other explicit mentions of the genre of the poem, we will now move forward to the *Paradiso*. All that stands in the middle works toward the poem's self-definition (most notably the episodes of literary history punctuating the *Purgatorio*), yet only when a new formula emerges do we have special moments of recapitulation and transition.

Comic and tragic poetry are recalled by Dante just one more time, in the Empyrean; from *Inferno* XX-XXI Dante retains their oppositional and complementary presentation, and puts even more emphasis on that by juxtaposing the two terms within the same line. The context is Dante's most sublime *recusatio* of the possibility of rendering Beatrice's beauty with our inadequate human language.

Se quanto infino a qui di lei si dice
fosse conchiuso tutto in una loda,
poca sarebbe a fornir questa vice.
La bellezza ch'io vidi si trasmoda
non pur di là da noi, ma certo io credo
che solo il suo fattor tutta la goda.
Da questo passo vinto mi concedo
più che già mai da punto di suo tema
soprato fosse comico o tragedo (*Par.* XXX.16-24)

The ineffability topos contains a key reference to the “stilo de la sua loda” from the *Vita nuova* (XXVI.4) as the ideal starting point of the genesis of the *Commedia*.¹⁷⁶ The poetry of praise turns out to be as inadequate to its object as the genres of *comedia* and *tragedia*; ultimately, any genre is fated to inadequacy, since in Dante's rhetorical fiction only God can fully see Beatrice in all her glory. Nonetheless, Dante does not put his poetry on the same ground as comedy and tragedy, because his “tema” determines a failure even greater than the impasse any “comico” or “tragedo” may ever experience. Such a turning point cannot be underestimated from our perspective, because it advocates for non-normative criteria of judgment: it is not the full realization of one genre's set of rules that determines the value of poetry, but the alteration or even the dissolution of the rules themselves in

¹⁷⁶ On the rhetoric of ineffability in the *Commedia*, see Ledda, *La guerra della lingua*.

order to achieve greater possibilities of expression. The result, it must be noted, is not absolute freedom, but the awareness of the historical life of genres.

To be sure, change in genres is not only a matter of the effect of the passing of time on poets and poetics. The reworking of existing genres and the establishing of new ones does in fact does happen only kairotically, when the “fullness of time” opens up the possibility for newness to enter history – a situation which in Dante frequently occurs through palinode.¹⁷⁷ To put it differently, the poet can make a qualitative leap beyond pre-existing genres only when he responds to an event that belongs to teleological history (i.e., the complete revelation of Beatrice’s beauty. *Trasmodare*, a newly coined verb in the typical fashion of the *Paradiso*, literally refers to Beatrice’s beauty beyond any measure, but its meaning implicitly affects the poetry that should - and yet cannot – find a generic mediation (*modo*) adequate to its object.

To account for his ascent to the vision of God, Dante must therefore rearrange the system of literary mediations by which he connects individual texts to general series. This is why *Paradiso* XXIII and XXV Dante introduces a new phrase that does not belong to the taxonomy of genres of his age: *sacrato poema* or *poema sacro*. The genre-changing or genre-transcending event is the same as in the passage from *Paradiso* XXX commented above: the vision of Beatrice, for the first time perceived by the pilgrim’s eyes in her full radiance. Moreover, the context from which emerges the name for a new genre is a *recusatio*, whose meta-literary nature is explicitly indicated by the reference to the Muses:

Se mo sonasser tutte quelle lingue

¹⁷⁷ See Ascoli, *Dante*, 274-300, for an extensive discussion of palinode in Dante’s strategy of authority-making.

che Polimnia con le suore fero
del latte lor dolcissimo più pingue,
per aiutarmi, al millesmo del vero
non si verria, canando il santo riso
e quanto il santo aspetto facea mero;
e così, figurando il paradiso,
convien saltar lo sacrato poema,
come chi trova il suo cammin riciso. (*Par.* XXIII.55-63)

The Muses cannot measure up to the impossible task of describing the sight of Beatrice in the Heaven of the Fixed Stars, so that a new genre is now required. It must be a genre of a special kind, since it must respond to an event qualitatively different from anything else experienced before (or, from another perspective, since the response of Dante *personaggio-poeta*, at this point in his formation, can no longer be the same as before). By comparison, let us think of the ending of the *Vita nuova*, the “mirabile visione” (XLII.1) after which Dante declares that he will stop writing about Beatrice, already transfigured in Heaven, until he becomes able to “dicere di lei quello che man non fue ditto d’alcuna” (XLII.2). Certainly, the deferral of the task proposed has to do with the poet’s skills, but that is only part of the picture; what Dante lacks is also a genre: a form capable of articulating the Beatrice-event in the language of human communication. The “stilo de la sua loda” is no longer enough. Both in the *Vita nuova* and the *Paradiso*, the poet writing on Beatrice must surrender to the impossibility of a full account, “come chi trova il suo cammin riciso”; and yet, while in the earlier work Dante does materially come to a stop, in the latter he takes advantage of the impasse in order to declare that a change in the genre of the poem has occurred. Therefore he goes on, even if, in principle, he could not (“convien saltar”). Everything continues as before (there are no breaks in the continuity of Dante’s language and form, let alone in the materiality of the text), and yet everything is altered into the new

dimension named here “sacrato poema.” The transformation could well have started before, but the designation of this new genre serves to direct the readers’ attention to that process.

Is “sacrato poema” a genre qualification? Certainly not, from the point of view of genre taxonomy. Both *sacrato* and *poema* are non-specific terms, a far cry from the specificity of *comedia* and *tragedià* (whatever they could mean in the Dantean text). Yet, “sacrato poema” does also indicate a genre, the qualities of which (sacredness and sublime) result from the *kairos* of the compelling urgency of sacred history rather than from rhetorical definitions. It is a genre beyond genre, though, a meta-genre, or a genre of genres, as the epic intended to be since its origins: a series of potentialities without a fixed model.

On the one hand, genre is the general configuration of all it can include; on the other hand, it is the contingent configuration (it would be tempting to say: incarnation) of a text in a given moment in time. Again, as we have already seen apropos the title of the poem, the general and the individual (or the series and the single text) turn into each other, paradoxically. The beginning of *Paradiso* XXV further elaborates on that:

Se mai continga che il poema sacro
al quale ha posto mano e cielo e terra,
sì che m’ha fatto per molti anni macro,
vinca la crudeltà che fuor mi serra
del bello ovile ov’io dormì agnello,
nimico ai lupi che li danno guerra;
con altra voce omai, con altro vello
ritornerò poeta, e in sul fonte del mio
battesmo prenderò il cappello (*Par.* XXV.1-9)

No locus in Dante’s discourse on genre terminology nor any of the loci of generic revision in the *Commedia* weaves contingency and transcendence so powerfully and inextricably as this opening. This is the most vivid description, in the entire poem, of the poet’s earthly

life. Sounding as a deliberate reprise and a slight variation of *Paradiso* XXIII.62 (“sacrato poema”), “poema sacro” is now authoritatively placed at the beginning of the canto, in key rhyme position, and in the middle of two theologically crucial moments: St. Peter’s blissful approval of Dante’s answer on faith and St. James’ examination on hope, in cantos XXIV and XXV respectively. Unmistakably, this definition has replaced all the others through inclusion, correction, and revision.¹⁷⁸

The most likely source for “poema sacro” is Macrobius’ *Saturnalia* I.24.13,179 where Symmachus, one of the characters, refers to the *Aeneid* as *sacratum poema*, to the innermost secrets of which learned readers should be properly introduced (“adyta sacri poematis”). Differently from the oppositional pairing of Dantean *comedia* and Virgilian *tragedia* in the *Inferno*, no opposition is set up in *Paradiso* XXV; “poema sacro” entails inclusiveness along the lines of teleological and figural time (the Virgilian epic genre would be fully accomplished and transfigured by Dante’s new epic as a genre-beyond-genres, or a genre-before-genre, its only equivalent being the Scripture). The same orientation emerges from the polar expression “cielo e terra”: the dynamic totality of the poem virtually

¹⁷⁸ I will not explore extensively, here, the implications of *teodia*, used in *Par.* XXV.72, when Dante refers to David’s Psalms. This neologism, modeled on *comedia* and *tragedia*, means “God’s song” or, according to Jacopo della Lana’s commentary, “parola informata e sillabata da Dio.” It is tempting to consider it the ultimate and all-encompassing self-reflexive definition put forward by Dante’s poem, with the protagonist as a David figure, and yet *teodia*, for all its sublime tension, seems no less partial than *comedia*, as it indicates *one* mode of speech. There is with a significant drawback too: if *comedia* may still indicate the evolution in the subject matter of the poem from one *cantica* to the other, *teodia* may work well only with the *Paradiso*. When, not being able of remembering the splendor of Beatrice’s smile in the Empyrean, Dante-poet says: “Da questo passo vinto mi concede / più che già mai da punto di suo tema / soprato fosse comico o tragedo” (*Par.* XXX.22-24), the dismissal of both *comedia* and *tragedia* sounds like a final dismissal of the very nature of genre itself as ultimately inadequate to the task of the poem.

¹⁷⁹ As noted in Curtius, *European Literature*, 358.

draws from every dimension of reality and life, thus taking to an extreme degree the inclusive nature of the epic.

Nevertheless, the rhyming contrast between the transfigured quality of the poem (“sacro”) and the terrestrial status of the poet (“macro”) newly and most radically rephrases the two-fold experience of the contingent and the transcendent at the heart of the revision of genres in the *Commedia*. Dante is now pushing both conditions to the extremes, on multiple levels: fictional, biographical, and metapoetical. The expansion of the poem embracing “cielo e terra” in its sacredness makes a powerful counterpoint with the contraction of the poet’s mundane existence, reduced to his own lean body, that of an exile in the desert, excluded from the city he longs to return back to (we should remember, by contrast, that the *Vita nuova* unfolds almost entirely within an urban setting, as if the city were the shared space of mediation between contingency and transcendence: such balance is no longer possible, and this very condition opens up, literally, a utopian space). Dante is “poeta,” but that does not grant him refuge: the wished-for acknowledgment of his life as a poet and a citizen rests on a hypothetical clause: “Se mai continga.”¹⁸⁰ And hypothetical is the celebration of the “poema sacro” in Florence; all but certain is its place in our mundane world. The contingency of Dante Alighieri thus mirrors that of his text, which is at once an individual and the genre to which it belongs.

¹⁸⁰ “Dante’s coronation with the poetic *cappello* is posited as radically contingent, subject to the constraints of history – and it is deliberately set in contrast with the heavenly coronation just carried out by St. Peter,” in Ascoli, *Dante*, 402. We may also add that, in the passage now examined, a touch of melancholy comes from the echo of Virgil’s return to Limbo: “Onorate l’altissimo *poeta*; / l’ombra sua *torna*, ch’era dipartita” (*Inf.* IV.80-12).

Such is the paradox of genres in the *Commedia*: at the end of the itinerary, the genre of the poem is its own spiral-wise history.¹⁸¹ The itinerary of the mind *in Deum* includes an itinerary of the mind *in genera*, toward incarnation as the ultimate mediation: particular *and* universal.¹⁸² The broad question of the *genus* is not only literary but primarily human. As such, it both opens and closes the *Commedia* with two variations on the same pattern of mediation, namely the shift from the first-person plural to the singular.

With the attack “Nel mezzo del cammin di *nostra* vita / *mi ritrovai* in una selva oscura” (*Inf.* I.1-2) Dante *personaggio-poeta* emerges from the collective frame of humankind, bearing in himself the recapitulation of universal history: the verb is in the first person singular, while the adjective speaks of life in the first person plural. A pattern is set up here which will come full circle with the final vision of Christ in the circles of the Trinity: “mi parve pinta de la *nostra* effige: / per che ‘l *mio* viso in lei tutto era messo” (*Par.* XXXIII.131-132). Bridging these two ends, the poem could be read as the transformation of the mediation between Dante and humankind (the individual and its *genus*), finally re-inscribed within that special *mediation of mediation* which is Christ incarnated. Here lies the origin of epic individuation, which interweaves the *singulus* and the *genus*.

Once again by means of a nexus of contingency and transcendence, Christ pushes both the individual and the general beyond themselves, opening up their seemingly fixed

¹⁸¹ On the spiral as a figure of the forward recapitulatory motion of the poem see Freccero, *Dante*, 263.

¹⁸² Cf. Derrida, “Law of Genre,” 65: “The question of literary genres bears a paradox, a text cannot belong to no genre, it cannot be without or less a genre. Every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genreless text; there is always a genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging” (65). One of the ways in which Dante goes much further than Derrida is that in the *Commedia* the question of genre is a qualitative distinction of textual determinations according to the *kairos* they respond to. The question of genre, in other words, is also the question of the historicity of an individual and of the series it belongs to, which is what Derrida tends to overlook.

and distinct configurations. From “nostra vita,” no more than a commonplace reference to the human genus, to “nostra effige” we find the alpha and omega of *genus*, since every human being can recognize his or her face in there, but also find a non-*genus* because it conflates general and individual, as did the Word that became flesh as an individual man.¹⁸³ The articulation of the one and the many is the motor of the epic, and the architecture of totality is an architecture of mediation. For this reason, the *Commedia* might tell us more about the dynamics of the epic than critics have imagined so far. Furthermore, for the same reason, no other work in the epic tradition seems to display its roots in historical contingency with the same force and insistence as the *Commedia*. As a variation in the epic tradition, the poem present itself as a *Trecento variation*.

2.2.3. The *Commedia* as a Commentary

As a miniaturized genre system, the *Commedia* retains everything it can from the range of textual determinations historically available to Dante; at the same time, it assumes them as if they were always on the verge of becoming something else, or of entering a new configuration shaped by the forces of history (human and divine). This pattern of genre evolution, disseminated throughout the poem, characterizes the presentation of the generic tradition incorporated in the *Commedia*: from epic and courtly love poetry, quoted and revised from start to finish, to other genres treated in a more fragmentary fashion such as

¹⁸³ The parallel between genus and genre could be tested also in the encounter with Adam in *Par.* XXVI: Dante meets the individual from whom humankind descended. Moreover, Adam’s speech on language (correcting *De vulgari eloquentia* I.7, he says that no language – not even Hebrew – escape from the transformations brought about by time) provides a new variation on the same motive: language is completely contingent (depending on its very transient “uso”) and *as such* it is celebrated as sacred. The fact that in this context the angels speak vernacular is part of this program. See Brownlee, “Why the Angels,” esp. 600-601 on Adam.

prayer, allegorical pageant, *tenzone*, philosophico-theological dispute, invective, panegyric, and so on. What earlier on I called a “dramatization of genres” is one of the typical strategies on which Dante relies to write literary history into the *Commedia*. A series of writers from classical and vernacular literatures appear as characters: everything in their narrative existence represents a statement on genres (e.g., what they say, the place where they are met, the characters with whom they interact, the references they make to other writers’ works). One has only to think of the evolution of Virgil as a guide, for example, or of the program of encounters with vernacular lyrical poets in the *Purgatorio*, which leads to a profound revision of the notion of “love” as the driving force and subject matter of poetry.

What Dante does with any genre-marked element can be read as a commentary embedded in the poem, though he does not retain the conventional distinction between commenting text and commented text. We will now see a few points that illustrate the importance of commentary as the hermeneutical and temporal structure underlying Dante’s spiral-wise journey towards inclusiveness of the “poema sacro.” Alternatively, with Jaus’s vocabulary, we may say that the commentary as a meta-generic impulse is the “dominant” generic function. And commentary, as we have seen, is one of the modes of the epic as a meta-genre.

Before the *Commedia*, Dante made explicit use of commentary as both mindset and form in the *Vita nuova* and the *Convivio*, the two works that are repeatedly recalled by the autobiographical palinode performed in the poem. Self-commentary in vernacular was devised and developed by Dante as a way of building his own figure as a new *auctor* who

is at the same time a *lector*.¹⁸⁴ Commentary was also valuable to Dante as a discourse built on the combination of different genres: on the one hand, there is the genre of the *auctor*'s text, and on the other, the commentator's explanatory prose. More specifically, commentary as a genre is based on "secondary" writing elicited by an already existing piece written in another genre (except for a commentary on a commentary, which is not what one would expect, of course). Two features should be highlighted as crucial to Dante, though: the heterogeneity of the components of the commentary, and the different voices that are organized in the spatial and temporal configuration of the text (the most influential model was that of the Scripture, transmitted as a compound of text and commentary).

First the *auctor*, then the *interpretes*: so a commentary ordinarily goes. In the *Commedia* Dante radically counters this dichotomy so that the continuity between one and the other becomes manifest. The conflation of *auctor* and *interpretes*, as well as the mixing of their languages, creates a common ground on which both figures – with their respective modes - might be seen as coils in the same spiral. One after the other, one into the other: such a sequencing bears consequence in terms of both writing and exegesis, as the *Vita Nuova* and the *Convivio* illustrated well before the *Commedia*. Conventionally, the genre commented on is invested with the authority of being "primary," but at the same time, only the commentary – later in time - can bring to light its truth or *sententia*.¹⁸⁵ This is precisely how the process of inclusion functions by way of quotation, correction, and revision, with the difference that the poem's self-commentary is part not only of a literary project (new

¹⁸⁴ See Minnis, Scott, and Wallace, *Medieval literary Theory*, 374-387 and Ascoli, *Dante*, 174-226.

¹⁸⁵ See for instance Picone, "Strutture poetiche," 12, on the interplay between poetry and prose in the *Vita nuova*.

and revolutionary in itself), but of a far wider dynamics, since what Dante intends to comment on is no less than the teleological history of humankind, in the wake of Scripture. His “poema sacro,” as the genre that includes and transcends any other genre, cannot but be a commentary.

From this point of view, we should rephrase Ascoli’s contention that with the integration of Dante-*lector* and Dante-*auctor* in one persona (the *poeta-personaggio* of the *Commedia*) self-commentary is abandoned, while Dante himself becomes *auctor* for his reader, thus transforming the traditional model.¹⁸⁶ Self-commentary as a genre is abandoned. At the same time, commentary enters the poem and, on a self-exegetical level, becomes the generic dominant. Thus, with an act of practical criticism, Dante elaborated the two-fold legacy of the epic tradition: the combination of text and commentary in the medieval reception of the epic, and the commenting function that the primary text of the tradition exerted on themselves (though none as explicitly and pervasively as the *Commedia*. No longer relying on the established writing and reading protocols based on the *lector/auctor* division, the *Commedia* turns into commentary *in re*, inseparable and inextricable from the “text” it glosses.

Dante’s figurative use of such terms as *chiosa* or *chiosare* shows to what extent commentary turns from a distinct form of secondary writing into a mode of total response to reality. “Ciò che narrate di mio corso scrivo, e serbolo a chiosar con altro testo / a donna che sapra, s’a lei arrivo” (*Inf.* XV.88-90), Dante says to Brunetto Latini. What the old master obscurely prophesizes to the living poet is part of a growing corpus of predictions,

¹⁸⁶Ascoli, *Dante*, 225.

whose *sententia* will be transparently exposed only by Cacciaguida, later and in a different realm of afterlife (“Figlio, queste son le chiose / di quell che ti fu detto,” Dante’s ancestor says in *Par.* XVII.94-95). On the purgatorial terrace of pride, Oderisi warns Dante in a similar fashion: “più non dirò, e scuro so che parlo; / ma poco tempo andrà, che ‘tuoi vicini / faranno sì che tu potrai chiosarlo” (*Purg.* XI.139-141), thus attributing the role of the *lector* not to a character in the poem but to the events in Dante’s own life.¹⁸⁷

Like God’s writing – the words recorded in the Bible but also the reality that the “verace autore” (*Par.* XXVI.40) continuously writes – the poem is both gloss and glossator. Unfolding itself only in time, commentary is the dominant (in Jauss’ sense) of the system of genres in the *Commedia*: not a protocol with specific instructions but an architecture of totality (which is also the totality of genres), it gradually evolves into a non-genre, or a genre that constantly redefines itself and culminates in the “poema sacro.” The latter is the revelation of the potentialities latent in the epic tradition. It seems to originate from an “impossible” incarnational genre: recapitulation, singularization, and transfiguration of all *genera*.¹⁸⁸ This is the matrix of the epic, and this is how it serves the purpose of establishing a new tradition – local and universal – in the early Italian Trecento.

2.3. Patterns of Transformation: Amplification and Miniaturization

The epic as an architecture of totality is a question of the container and the contained. Their relation creates the conditions for a total response to a subject’s experience of the world. Such conditions do not exist in a vacuum; they emerge and evolve in history, being

¹⁸⁷ Hugh Capet also uses the word *chiosa* when he refers to Dante’s request for clarification: “verso me volger per alcuna chiosa” (*Purg.* XX.99).

¹⁸⁸ With the partial exception of the scriptural genre, profoundly revised by Dante but never explicitly outdone.

mediated by the network of the epic tradition, which in turn is connected with a range of literary and extra-literary realities. In time, those conditions alter. It is on this changing ground, which is made up of both continuities and discontinuities, that writers' or critics' pretenses of having established the correct ultimate, or original, set of conditions to capture and articulate totality must always be set in the context of the practical criticism. In the earlier chapter, we briefly saw this at work, especially in Roman literature. Even in the *Commedia*, which most compellingly strives for progression and closure within a perfectly structured totality, the container cannot but bear the marks of change and multiplicity. First, because history – and literary history - move on and thus alter the conditions for the reception of the container and the contained. Second, because each container of totality leads to other containers, as if its architecture were also made by doors and passages that allow shifts in our perspective on totality. Suffice it to think of how, in an encyclopedic work such as the *Aeneid*, our total response is mediated by different containers, which all together form a multi-dimensional compound: history, myth, literature, philosophy, and religion.

No container is without entrances and passages to other dimensions and containers. By navigating a text, we drift or step through containers and from one container to another; the nature, form, and meaning of what is contained are modulated by that very shifting. The architectures of totality archived in the epic tradition can thus mediate our access to a total experience of reality as a “thing-in-itself,” but can neither circumscribe nor contain it. Significantly, while building an architecture of totality canto after canto, Dante warns the reader of the impossibility of one representation of totality. If we could see the “thing-in-

itself,” the container (a language artifact) and the contained (reality) would coincide. In getting closer and closer to the experience of that coincidence, which is the direct vision of God, Dante leads the reader forward by means of the rhetoric of sublime indirection, of which we will consider just an example.

Nel suo profondo vidi che s’interna,
legato con amore in un volume,
ciò che per l’universo si squaderna. (*Par.* XXXIII.85-87).

The direct vision of what *is*, or of the *isness* of a totality experienced as a universal book, is expressed through the indirection of the metaphor. The architecture of totality built by Dante in the wake of the epic tradition is an architecture of indirection and mediation. Significantly, Dante’s account of this passage in his final vision abruptly shifts from the universal to the individual, and from the iconic to the pathetic, as if to emphasize the protean and plural nature of the experience of totality:

la forma universal di questo nodo
credo ch’i’ vidi, perché più di largo
dicendo questo, mi sento ch’i’ godo. (*Par.* XXXIII.91-93).

From seeing to feeling, from vision to affection, this turn in the last canto of *Paradiso* is no less than a change of dimension, the shift from one container (the outer reality of God-as-the-universe) to the other (man’s capacity to inwardly receive and feel the reality of God as the origin of man). These two perspectives are going to coincide in the unutterable reality of the final vision of the poem. Any potential pattern of transformation of container and contained is implied by this passage in the text. Here too lies the possibility of founding a new tradition: a new container for an individual and collective experience that is both contingent and transcendent. In this section I will consider just one of the many patterns

that would be possible to analyze, namely the interplay of amplification and miniaturization in Dante's use of *Aeneid* VI.

The *Commedia*'s affiliation with the epic tradition is mediated, first and foremost, by the *Aeneid*.¹⁸⁹ One of the modes by which Dante bridges Virgil's poem of antiquity and his own poem of modernity consists of a series of changes of scale: miniaturizations and amplifications that forms an architecture of totality new to the epic tradition and yet consistent with its dynamics. Miniaturizing a whole epic or large segments of it, as well as amplifying some of its particular elements, has been a common practice since antiquity. Almost any element recognizable as part and parcel of the epic tradition bears the impress of its provenance, and invites readers to work out interpretations of the new context through the old one, and vice versa. Dante brings to its climax that two-fold operation, thus inviting us to rethink the notion of epic totality.¹⁹⁰

The most critical miniaturizations and amplifications in the *Commedia* are those operated on book VI of the *Aeneid*, with its *nekylia* that provides a model for a more extensive journey through the realms of afterlife. Let us consider the double nature of *Aeneid* VI. On the one hand, it functions as a *digression* from the main narrative action, to

¹⁸⁹ See Quint, "Epic Tradition," for the contention that through interplay of intertextual references to Virgil, Lucan, and Statius, Dante confirms the *Aeneid*'s underworld descent as the primary model for his journey, in opposition to the *Pharsalia* and *Thebaid*. Dante's practical labor on the epic tradition is selective rather than merely syncretic. On Dante's choice of a dominant model cf. Picone, "Dante and the Classics," 54: "Ovid, dethroned as a guide and almost absent as a character in the *Commedia*, obtains his revenge by becoming the secret but continual inspiration of Dante's new epic style."

¹⁹⁰ Here I will not follow the progress of Dante's response to the *Aeneid*, and to the epic tradition, from *Inferno* I to *Paradiso* XXXIII, but it is important to note, with Brownlee, "Dante and The Classical Poets," 143, that "a dynamic development takes place with regard to the function of the *Aeneid* as textual model," and that in the work in progress on Virgil's poem "an unrelenting ambiguity is at issue." Dante, in fact, consciously plays with both his own *Virgilio* and the "real" Virgil, and with both his version of the *Aeneid* and the "real" *Aeneid*.

the extent that in his journey through the Underworld Aeneas plays the role more of a receptive spectator than of a outwardly active hero; his ethos throughout the descent is in fact qualified more by pathos than by deeds. On the other hand, Aeneas' descent serves as a *center* to the whole poem, as if only by a suspension of the main action we – along with the poem's hero - could understand the very root, intention, and meaning of the *res gestae*. Whether digression or center, the more it is separated from the rest of the narrative, the more the *nekyia* effects its epic purpose of constructing an architecture of totality. The paradox is that what is most central (in every sense of the adjective) to the poem can turn into a piece potentially autonomous from the poem's extended narrative, precisely because of the way the *nekyia* is framed within the text. Hardie rightly speaks of the “detachable nature of the Virgilian *katabasis*,” which is “fully realized by Dante in a full-scale ‘epic’ that consists entirely in a journey through the afterlife, a journey that is also a panorama of all the aspects of human life in this world.”¹⁹¹ Amplification of the model results in a change not only of scale but of nature, since the very experience of totality changes, according to a new program. A shift from the model already occurred with Virgil's revision of the *nekyia* of *Odyssey* XI. What in Homer is just a part of the poem, in Virgil becomes a new container that, in the span of a book digressive but situated halfway through the poem, virtually embraces and reorients the very poem by which it is contained. And on another level, *Aeneid* VI ideally embraces the totalities of universal history and of the epic tradition.

The centrality of *Aeneid* VI was strongly emphasized by the commentary tradition. With the *Commedia*, Dante transforms that emphasis into a new textual architecture, which

¹⁹¹ Hardie, *Last Trojan Hero*, 38.

he meant as a response to the classical architecture of the *Aeneid*. What in Virgil was the center of the poem, reached in book VI by means of digression from or suspension of the main action, in Dante becomes the poem itself: what was only a part of the text (central and critical as it might be) in the *Commedia* is coextensive with the poem itself. It is true that Aeneas' *nekyia* is characterized by a complex internal articulation, and yet the whole *Commedia* as a vaster journey through afterlife unquestionably unfolds with a higher degree of articulation and differentiation. The totality that *Aeneid* VI could only evoke in a kind of shorthand (more extensive, for instance, in the prophetic catalog of Roman history, and more synthetic in the passages on souls' punishments and reincarnations) is expanded, depicted, and almost materialized by Dante as if in a tightly structured fresco. If Vergil adds a teleological narrative to the Homeric topos of the meeting with the dead and inscribes it at the center of a half-Odyssean, half-Iliadic narrative, Dante writes all the possible action *within* the topos itself. A circumscribed topos is amplified by the *Commedia* into a container of totality: both a text and a cosmos. In this new field, outer epic action becomes secondary or, more precisely, is replaced by what we could call an epic of spectatorship, an epic of perception, or an epic of pathos: a quest for the right way of seeing, perceiving, and feeling. In short, the *Commedia* turns the Virgilian model into an epic of receptiveness.

The transmission of the epic tradition via allegorizing commentaries is a premise to that transformation: being potentially "detachable," the Virgilian text, especially its action, can be broken down into relatively autonomous scenes, in which the epic quest for totality can be re-contextualized by commentators along non-narrative lines (e.g.,

allegory).¹⁹² Hence the balance of the sections can be altered. The *Commedia*'s unique operation on the epic tradition relies on its capacity to break the unity of a classical pattern and, above all, to restore it on another level and to a higher degree of unity. The topos, which in Virgil was meant as a narrative suspension at a turning point in the poem's storyline, with Dante turns into a container of virtually every possible story, and of all the possibilities of life and literature, ordered within an architecture of totality that becomes manifest not all at once, as if from a single vantage point, but through a journey that implies time and movement, for both the *personaggio-poeta* and his readers.

Many are the retrospective passages that serve to reinforce the sense of progress in the experience and realization of totality. One of the most striking is the description of the downward retrospective glance that Dante, prompted by Beatrice, cast at the cosmos from the Heaven of the Fixed Stars. The description begins and ends with the Earth. Dante's sight darts through the seven heavens below and reaches our planet, which seen within the totality of God's cosmos stimulates an ethical and pathetic response:

Col viso ritornai per tutte quante
le sette spere, e vidi questo globo
tal, ch'io sorrisi del suo vil sembiante;
e quel consiglio per migliore approbo
che l'ha per meno; e chi ad altro pensa
chiamar si puote veramente probo. (*Par.* XXII.133-138)

These lines are followed by a description of the heavens, a virtuoso piece in which Dante recapitulates the structure of the cosmos through a series of periphrases that play on the

¹⁹² The *Aeneid* was not the only great text with "detachable" parts, and commentary was not the only modality of detaching parts from the totality of texts. See for instance the five excerpts of classical Roman poetry included in the *Carmina Cantabrigensia* (the manuscript is from the XI century): all are laments, from the *Thebaid* (songs 29, 31, 32), the *Aeneid* (song 34), and Horace's *Carmina* 3.12 (song 46).

mythological names of the planets. In this astronomical account, no emotion wells up in Dante's heart; serene, almost unperturbed, is the tone of the recollection of his heavenly journey. In the end, however, Dante redirects his eyes on the Earth, which is seen as a micro-totality within the totality of the cosmos, and is considered once again in terms that are no less ethical than perceptual:

L'aiuola che ci fa tanto feroci,
volgondom' io con li etterni Gemelli,
tutta m'apparve da' colli a le foci (*Par.* XXII.149-151)

The change in the scale of totality is therefore marked by changes in tone that underline the nature of Dante's of totality as an architecture in time, since we come to experience it only through its unfolding in the consciousness of Dante, and as an architecture of receptiveness, since our capacity to receive the world in ourselves evolves with our consciousness of totality.

Among the operations on the epic code concurrent to the amplification of the Virgilian *nekylia*, we must thus consider once again the importance of Dante's entrance into the poem as a *personaggio-poeta*, who proves to be (at least partially) a hero in the classical lineage but of a radically different kind, in so far as his "merit" lies not in outer action but in inner reception and elaboration of everything that occurs to him. Hence Dante's persona evolves into a micro-architecture of totality different from the heroes of classical epic, who are typically presented in the third person: the *personaggio-poeta* is a receptacle – a container – of the universal history of man and God, though from a perspective that is individual and incarnate, and that calls for the identification of the readers with Dante as a living Everyman. The individual becomes the trans-individual container of epic totality, although this transformation takes place only partially (Dante's point of view never

coincides with God's), gradually (it takes a hundred cantos to get there), and inconclusively (Dante is brought back to earthly life and to the task of writing down what he can recollect).

The ground for an individual's receptiveness, in the *Commedia*, is pathos. In this respect, too, Dante develops the lesson of ancient epics. In different ways, Lucan, Ovid, and Statius are remarkable examples of how pathos can function in an epic text; behind them, however, stands Virgil, who made pathos into an active force of the epic. Virgilian pathos, Conte argues, can be understood along the lines of the later distinction between primary and secondary epics, independently from their philological exactitude: "Virgil, as a 'pathetic' poet of feeling, reflects on the impression which things make upon him: this gesture of reflection is the focus of the emotion that he himself experiences and conveys to the reader."¹⁹³ If in the naïve poetry of Homer pathos is a "plain impression" recorded by a narrator in his pure detachment from the subject matter, in the sentimental poetry of Virgil the author brings into the text his own subjectivity, which emerges not (as in Dante) through an authorial persona but through contradictory identifications (on the readers' part) that do not let the narrative rest in its pure objectivity. Hence pathos comes from the multiplication of the points of view in the text: things narrated exist not in themselves but within a recipient – and tension results from a multiplicity of recipients. With Virgil, pathos allows for a new development of the polycentric and polyphonic qualities of the epic. Let us see it apropos of the poem's hero:

[Aeneas], positive in his triumph as he is, does not live only by his glory and virtue, but is forced to absorb the trauma of victory and the subjugated rights of the defeated. He could not have won without destroying other men's rights, thus making himself to a degree like his own enemies. Epic,

¹⁹³ Conte, *Poetry of Pathos*, 30-31.

through its modern nature as “poetry of pathos,” has ended by equipping itself with conflicting registers. Now that truth is divided, epic language too has become double, and cannot any longer be simply representative of the “real” world: it must also convey suppressed desires and ideals. No longer just the glories of the conqueror, but also the grievous cost of his self-affirmation.¹⁹⁴

Going over the subtleties of Virgil’s poetics of pathos would take too long. Suffice it here to point out that Virgil draws from drama a sharp sense for conflict (of registers, perspectives, feelings, etc.) and incorporates it into the *Aeneid*. Totality is a field where conflicting subjects interact, with no perfect resolution of their tension. Of course, Dante does away with the ambiguity that characterizes Virgilian pathos, as every conflict must potentially be solved within God’s perspective – as far as the incarnate *personaggio-poeta* can approach it. Nonetheless, Virgil’s polycentric pathos is an antecedent to Dante’s pathos: while being the mediator of our access to totality, Dante’s persona is partial and in conflict.

A question crucial to the *Commedia* is raised by Virgil’s operation on Homer and, in turn, by Dante’s operation on Virgil: is Aeneas passive or active in the Underworld? Or, better to say: how does book VI, as a combination of digression of re-centering, redefine the sense of epic action and pathos? Is pathos a special form of action, and action a special mode of receptiveness? Therefore, what are the possibilities of epic individuation and in what modes can they be realized?

In comparison with classical epics, the *Commedia* contains both more and less action: more, if we consider that the number and variety of actions carried on, suffered, or recalled by Dante’s vast cast of characters, far exceeds the range of what can be found in

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 47.

Virgil, Statius, or Lucan; less, because these very actions, with the exception of the quasi-action of the *personaggio-poeta* and his guides,¹⁹⁵ are not comparable, in extension, with the actions developed in classical and post-classical epic. Add also that the frame that connects all those actions is not the main storyline, which branches into secondary lines, but an architecture of totality that functions more as an archive or repository rather than as a unifying narrative structure. The totality of experience, therefore, must pass through a process of miniaturization in order to be interiorized by the *viator* who experiences the afterlife as the truthful and complete image of totality.

Dante, as a recipient of totality, gives us access to a series of miniature actions, interiorized into the narrator's memory and placed in the system of God's totality. Such a double perspective takes over narrative action. In other words, the amplification of the classical descent into the Underworld creates the possibility for the poet to build an encyclopedia or catalog of stories, the recipient of which is the author's persona in his pilgrimage in the realms of the afterlife. By doing so, Dante *personaggio-poeta* gathers stories from a repertoire that is both universal and local, both trans-historical and contingent. It is a network that potentially coincides with the archive of universal history and literature, and that, on the other hand, is made accessible to us only through Dante's own incarnate figure, by which the individual joins the trans-individual of the epic.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁵ As noted in Inglese, *Dante*, 73, only in Dante, Virgil, and Beatrice we can find a progression or evolution; all the other characters are necessarily locked in a portrait.

¹⁹⁶ Cf. Inglese, *Dante*, 34-35: "Lo spostamento strategico effettuato da Dante rispetto al modello *Eneide* (e ai modelli complementari: la *Farsaglia* di Lucano e la *Tebaide* di Stazio) consiste nella narrazione in prima persona. Questa non sarebbe una novità nella tradizione dei poemi allegorico-didattici della seconda metà del Duecento. [...] Ma I precedenti di questa scelta non vanno ricercati tanto nella tradizione del 'genere', quanto nella storia letteraria dell'autore. L'*io* della *Commedia* non è altri, infatti, che l'*io* della *Vita nova*: un *io* di origine lirica, ma storicizzato e personalizzato nella prospettiva cristiana della prova e della

2.4. “Forse di retro a me”: Dante to Boccaccio and Petrarch

In the epic invocation to Apollo in *Paradiso* I (13-36), Dante’s self-fashioned image as a poet is once again, and more assertively, that of a trailblazer and a founder of a new tradition. In the *Inferno*, Dante corrected Virgil’s *Aeneid* (most remarkably in XX.52-120) and challenged Ovid and Lucan (XXV.94-102); in the *Purgatorio*, he depicted himself as bound to outdo such modern predecessors as Guinizelli and Cavalcanti (XI.97-99), and Giacomo da Lentini and Guittone d’Arezzo (XXIV.49-62). Now, at the opening of the third and final cantica, the poet of the *Commedia* first envisages the possibility of posterity, namely a tradition of poets following in his own footsteps. Significantly, this forward-looking moment comes at the end of the invocation to Apollo, as if divine inspiration should drive not only Dante as an individual poet but a whole new tradition of vernacular poets.

Poca favilla gran fiamma seconda:
forse di retro a me con miglior voci
si pregherà perché Cirra risponda. (*Par.* I.34-36)

It is hard to tell whether Dante thinks of Italian vernacular literature only, or of literature as such (i.e., the Western tradition as a whole composed by ancient and modern, classical and Christian, Latin and vernacular). Moreover, the modesty topos is at work here; to pair greatness and humbleness in the locus Dante claims the unique character, even the inimitability of his *Commedia*. However, the literal meaning of those lines cannot be obliterated: Dante does prepare the ground for successors to come; that very ground belongs to the vast field of the epic tradition.

salvezza.”The lyric origin of Dante’s *io* in the *Commedia* concurs, with the Christian notion of every man as a site for redemption, to make the individual self into the mediator of the experience of totality.

In the history of Italian vernacular literature sketched out by Dante in his works, but especially with the poetic encounters in the *Purgatorio* from Casella to Arnaut Daniel, the site of contention was lyrical or erotic poetry, mentioned in *Vita nuova* XXV as the founding genre for vernacular writers. In the *Commedia* (with some anticipations in the *Convivio*), this literary history is grafted on a more extended history that embraces antiquity, Greek and Roman (though the former was known only indirectly). Epic poetry was the main field where the ancients negotiated poetic succession as a motor of tradition. Hence, for the new vernacular tradition to reach the authority and scope of the classics, an epic field is necessary: there the original beginnings in love poetry would develop into an architecture of totality, capable of speaking to every aspect of life and literature.

To the generation of Boccaccio and Petrarch, Dante leaves what he could not find in the corpus of vernacular literature from XIII-century Italy: an original work of epic intention and scope, which could merge in itself the qualities of poem, commentary, and encyclopedia, bridging the ancients and the moderns. Before Dante, modern Italian culture was in want not only of a repository of knowledge, histories, and stories, but also, and especially, of a foundational text that could show in practice the epic potential of literature. First, what Dante rediscovered from antiquity and retrieved as a fresh poetic experience was the possibility of variation within and between genres, particularly when we deal with epic as a meta-genre or a network of texts and textualities. Secondly, variation was motivated, propelled and structured by the Christian consciousness of the incarnate and historical quality of our relationship with life and literature. Last but not least, Dante created an epic of receptiveness, balancing (and even outweighing) outer action with inner

pathos. This does not mean that Dante steps back from the realities of human life; on the contrary, such a refinement of receptiveness as it occurs from the *selva oscura* to the ecstatic vision of God serves to prepare human beings to inhabit the secular world, individually and trans-individually.

The epic intention articulated in the *Commedia* can be seen as none other than the translation, in the language of poetry, of the ethical truth assumed by Dante in the inception of the *De monarchia* (I.3.7-8):

Patet igitur quod ultimum de potentia ispius humanitatis est potentia sive virtus intellectiva. Et quia potentia ista per unum hominem seu per aliquam particularium comunitatum [...] tota simul in actum reduci non potest, necesse est multitudinem in humano genere, per quam quidem tota potentia hec actuetur; sicut necesse est multitudinem rerum generabilium ut potentia tota materie prime semper sub actu sit: aliter esset dare potentiam separatam, quod est impossibile.

The ultimate potential of humankind is *virtus intellectiva*, not merely “reason” in our modern sense but the capacity to know, understand, interpret, and give inner shape and order to what comes from outer experience. In the following paragraph of the treatise, Dante clearly explains how such *virtus*, always in the process of being actualized, responds to reality in the form of a circular movement, both inward (*speculare*) and outward (*operare*), the latter being an extension and of the former into the sphere of action: “per prius ad speculandum et secundo propter hoc ad operandum per suam extensionem” (I.4.1). *Virtus intellectiva* as receptiveness is thus inherently ethical; it also trans-individual, while being the force that drives through the individuation of human subjects.

The potentiality of humankind turns into act only in a *multitudo*, that is, in a totality of which the individual *personaggio-poeta* Dante Alighieri wants to be the mediator, for the culture of early XIV-century Italy, but at the same time for human culture – or human

collective intellect (*intellectus possibilis*) - as such. If no individual per se can realize our potentiality as human beings, because full realization is a prerogative of the *multitudo* only, the epic intention of the *Commedia* aims at creating the conditions for the actualization of *intellectus possibilis* or, in other words, for the emergence of a multitude of texts that will form one great network with the texts of classical and post-classical traditions. For all the emphasis that Dante as a poet puts on his fate, tasks, and achievement, the *Commedia* should be read together with that early passage of the *De monarchia*: the poem would then sound like a text meant to establish a network or *multitudo* of traditions and texts.

In this sense, Dante's *terzina* about poetic succession, in *Paradiso* I, must be taken as sincere rather than rhetorical. The *gran fiamma* that should follow his *poca favilla* is not the flame of a single text continuing and outdoing the *Commedia* (as it might be argued by those who see literature as an agonistic undertaking where writers are athlete-like competitors rather than individuals in the *multitudo* of human intellect). The blaze of which Dante lets us catch a glimpse, instead, is that of a tradition or a network prepared or foreshadowed by the *Commedia*.

In *Paradiso* XXXI, the canto where the blessed souls appears as the highest actualization of human *multitudo*, "In forma di candida rosa" (1), Dante recapitulates his journey by means of three opposition articulated in one *terzina*, lest we forget the dimension we all have to deal with once the journey of the poem is over: "io, che al divino da l'umano, / a l'eterno dal tempo era venuto, / e di Fiorenza in popol giusto e sano" (37-39). The divine and the human, eternity and time, Florence and the rose of blessed souls: between this set of oppositions the flame of the post-Dantean tradition has to blaze; within

that fire, will blaze the Italian literary tradition, which must be both local and universal, just like the life experience of a Christian, which recapitulates of the history of humankind.

In the midst of those oppositions, materialized first and foremost by the text of *Commedia*, Boccaccio and Petrarch, tried to find their own way to epic. The secular world, with time and place, was the field where Dante's spark had to be re-ignited (even through what, on Boccaccio's and Petrarch's part, may appear as a refusal). From the empyrean we are brought back to earth, where a new literary history begins to unfold, thanks also to the foundational effort of the *Commedia*.

A Middleman's Epic: Boccaccio's *Teseida*

3.1. The *Teseida* and the Epic: Situating the Question

The system of literary genres as an evolving organism with variable configurations has proved an excellent framework for a critical study of the genesis, intention, and reception of Boccaccio's texts. From Branca's seminal 1975 paper on Boccaccio as a renovator of literary genres to most recent studies,¹⁹⁷ critical vistas on the subject have been opened up in ways that, rather than by an exhaustive bibliographical survey, can be better presented, for this chapter on the *Teseida*, in three main points.

First, to read Boccaccio's multiform corpus, it is not only possible but necessary to leave behind the traditional divide between the masterpiece (*Decameron*) and a multitude of *opere minori*. The interpretive teleology that typically binds any consideration of an author to his greatest achievement does not work with Boccaccio.¹⁹⁸ To abandon a critical narrative depending on the *Decameron* as its ultimate horizon, in fact, leads to the recognition that one of the keys to the *opere minori* is their extraordinary inclination to experiment with different genres (imitating, fashioning, distorting or combining them), to

¹⁹⁷ Branca's "Boccaccio's Role in the Renewal of Literary Genres" was first delivered in Italian 1975 and published one year later. Here I will quote from the English translation published in 1984. As to modern studies, apart from those concentrating on particular works or genres, see Candido, "Boccaccio rinnovatore," for an attempt to map out Boccaccio's system of genres as emerged throughout his career.

¹⁹⁸ Properly speaking, this approach may not work with the study of literature as such. It must be noted, however, that differently from authors who tend to self-fashion the narrative of their career's progress, with a teleological orientation towards a climax (Dante's *Commedia* in only the most compelling example of this strategy), Boccaccio builds, work by work, a corpus that appears as a series of additions and variations rather than a progression. This does not mean, of course, that the continuities that shape and unify Boccaccio's *œuvre* have to be overlooked.

write not only literature but literary history too. As early as the *Filocolo* and the *Teseida*, Boccaccio shows a precise determination to write as a “founder of new traditions,”¹⁹⁹ bridging classical and modern, Latin and vernacular culture. Genres serve to mediate between traditions. More precisely, they are one of the major languages by which the Middle Ages articulated, in a set of mobile variants, the continuity of ancient culture into the present.

A second major point ensues: a tension toward cultural innovation drives Boccaccio's generic innovation. Calling for a dialogue between (post)classical and modern canons,²⁰⁰ he intervenes in the long *universal* history of genres while serving the cause of the new *local* history of Italian literature, which to realize its potential must grow into a system of genres (in the vernacular as well as in Latin). That happens both when Boccaccio fills a generic gap in the corpus of Italian literature, for example by writing a long martial epic such as the *Teseida*, and when he fashions a new genre out of existing ones, as is the case with the *Decameron*.

A third point follows: Boccaccio's texts, as a whole and individually, must be read by standards other than a unity supposed to connect and harmonize his writings coherently.²⁰¹ Since genre is “the place where individual work enters a complex network of relations with other works,”²⁰² it can be said that, by playing the game of genres,

¹⁹⁹ Branca, “Boccaccio's Role,” 37.

²⁰⁰ Candido, “Boccaccio rinnovatore,” 226-229.

²⁰¹ See Bruni, *Boccaccio*, 13-14, and Orvieto, “Boccaccio mediatore di generi,” 9-11, for important reflections on the limits of any critical perspective that puts too much emphasis on Boccaccio's works as a self-contained, internally consistent whole.

²⁰² Corti, *Introduction to Literary Semiotics*, 119.

Boccaccio writes his texts within an intertextual network. Writing in genres occurs at the intersection of two axes: one vertically extending into the past, either remote or recent, a repertoire in which models, patterns, and possibilities are stored; the other horizontally speaking to Boccaccio's contemporaries, for whom he re-orientes what he retrieves from the past. Both diachronic and synchronic, Boccaccio's generic programs are practical realizations of "the history of literary genres as a temporal process of the continual founding and altering of horizons."²⁰³ Hence his texts can be read as variants of the series into which they inscribe themselves (e.g., epic, romance, elegy, pastoral), in a dialogue with past and present texts; as variants, they are inevitably and intentionally hybridized, with the awareness that no genre historically exists as an entirely autonomous series. Dissonance, conflict, and transformation are integral to the process. This is what underlies Boccaccio's operation on the epic in the *Teseida*: the epic qua genre begins with variations that are written into a tradition and shaped by the historicity of the text.

In this respect, most critical approaches to the *Teseida* have not thoroughly investigated its relevance to a re-examination of the epic as genre and tradition, for the reason that they have used "epic" as a category more fixed and stable than it actually is in Boccaccio's writing. A more dynamic notion of the epic is needed, one that may accommodate the apparent inconsistencies of Boccaccio's project without explaining them away. It is precisely through these inconsistencies that we can appreciate Boccaccio's awareness of the limits and potentialities of the epic as a generic tradition.

²⁰³ Jauss, "Theory of Genres," 94.

Boccaccio himself held the poem in great esteem for quite a long time after its composition, even if he did not leave any explicit statement about that. As maintained by Agostinelli and Coleman in the introduction to their recent critical edition, the *Teseida* was a “text in progress,” revised in time “from the late 1340s to c.1360,”²⁰⁴ especially in its rich paratext (glosses, drawings, spaces for planned drawings, etc.), which was meant to reinforce the notion of a poem inscribed into the great classical tradition. The very mise-en-page of the only extant autograph,²⁰⁵ which dates back to the 1350s, complies with standard features of valuable late Medieval manuscripts of classical *auctores* (by then, a status reached in the vernacular only recently by Dante’s *Commedia*). To take seriously Boccaccio’s operation on the epic, however, does not mean to downplay the many passages where it does not meet typical standards of epic seriousness (of the kind pursued, for example, in Petrarch’s *Africa*), or to ignore that the poem does not resolve itself into a synthesis of the conflict of its generic strands (as Dante’s *Commedia* did instead).

This system of tensions with no full closure is indeed vital to the exploration of the epic as a possibility *and* a problem. It is therefore essential to keep in mind a caveat from a recent overview of the *Teseida*: “While today we use the shorthand ‘epic’ to describe this genre, it may be somewhat risky to apply such a label to the *Teseida*. It is not clear that Boccaccio would have defined epic in this way, or even that he had a stable generic understanding of the epic.”²⁰⁶ With this indeterminacy as a starting point, different critical roads can be taken. On the one hand, “epic” may sound too problematic a category to be

²⁰⁴ At page xxiii of their introduction.

²⁰⁵ Held at the Biblioteca Laurenziana in Florence, Cod. Acquisti e Doni 325.

²⁰⁶ Sherberg, “Girl Outside the Window,” 97.

profitably used in analyzing the *Teseida* (or, which amounts to the same thing, “epic” may be considered as too fixed a notion to be applied to the complexities of the *Teseida*); on the other hand, “epic” is a subject worth investigating precisely because of the problematic nature that characterizes its entire tradition, not only the *Teseida* as a late offshoot written by a literary genius in his early years. In a number of critical views of the *Teseida* we come across, to a varying extent, the pitfalls of taking “epic” as an unproblematic category, be it in support or against the definition of the poem as a proper “epic.” In fact, generic labeling is not the point; rather, we must look for traces of generic instability, and investigate their meaning.

A groundbreaking contribution to this discussion is David Anderson’s 1989 volume, which for the first time studied the epic orientation of the *Teseida* within a context and a tradition shaped by the forms of transmission of the major classical epics in late medieval times (most notably the use of commentaries). Anderson overtly counters the modern tendency to assess (and unfavorably judge) the *Teseida* by standards of the epic formed only in the XIX century, from a combination of classicist and romantic elements. Implicitly, he also calls for a de-centering of the most typical frame of theoretical and historical accounts of the epic: Greek and Roman times, then a millennium-long blank (occasionally and only partially filled by *chansons de geste*), and finally Humanist and Renaissance revivals followed by later transformations until the aging and fading of the genre in modern times. From the edge of that blank, the *Teseida* invites us to examine more attentively the *longue durée* of the epic. To be sure, since the Renaissance the *Teseida* has been credited with the foundation of a model that culminated with Ariosto and Tasso: *armi*

and *amore*, or Mars and Venus (as the proem of the *Teseida* goes), variously intertwined in a long narrative in *ottava rima*.²⁰⁷

The relevance of the *Teseida* to the epic, however, exceeds its role as an antecedent. Indeed, it first and foremost plays the role of a successor – of the ancient no less than of modern predecessors such as the *romans d'antiquité* and, closer to Boccaccio's times, Dante and Cavalcanti. Anderson's study is a critical landmark also for its investigation of the ways in which Boccaccio imitates Statius's *Thebaid*,²⁰⁸ along the same lines, another key contribution is Battles' exploration of how the *Teseida* functions as a “transitional epic” within the Thebes-Troy-Rome mythical-historical succession.²⁰⁹ Significantly, the transition/translation called for in the poem's narrative doubles the condition in which Boccaccio himself wrote his work, as both a continuator and a renovator of traditions old and new.

What still remains to explore, indeed, is how Boccaccio's operation on ancient epic plays with different models, through different affiliation strategies by which a new vernacular culture can be founded and oriented. Boccaccio pursued this aim in many fashions during his life. One of the most remarkable, for its impact on the foundation of Italian literature, was the production of the Chigi codex, in which he first assembled what would be the canon of Italian literature (Cavalcanti, Dante, Petrarch). Eisner aptly sums up

²⁰⁷ See Anderson, *Before the Knight's Tale*, 16-17, on Trissino's and Tasso's acknowledgments of the *Teseida*. See also Everson, *Italian Romance Epic*, where the *Teseida* is analyzed from a number of angles as a predecessor of later romance epics in Italian.

²⁰⁸ Cf. McGregor, *Shade of Aeneas*, 44-103, for a more allegorical study of the *Aeneid* as the exemplary-model of the *Teseida*.

²⁰⁹ Battles, *Medieval Tradition of Thebes*, 62.

Boccaccio's strategy in the making of that codex: "constructing explicit arguments and composing narratives; collecting, compiling, and commenting on texts; and manipulating material forms."²¹⁰ It is along these very lines that Boccaccio carried on his operation on the epic code, only at an earlier stage of his career, and as a poet rather than as an editor.²¹¹

All in all, what really matters is not whether the *Teseida* is an epic (as if epic itself were not a mobile category), but the extent to which the poem provisionally intertwines Boccaccio's lifelong vocation for cultural mediation and the literary and anthropological function of the epic as a cultural mediator in times of transition. If "Boccaccio is above all else *mobile*," and if "as an author and scribe, [he] makes the mobility of texts his signature compositional manoeuvre,"²¹² then the *Teseida* is the textual locus where the mobility of the epic is first recognized and implemented as a "field of tensions," to borrow Maria Corti's phrase.²¹³

One last preliminary word about how major scholarly contributions have left the mobility of the epic in the *Teseida* partially inarticulate. As this is not the place for a detailed critical review, I will point out only what is essential as a foil or a background to my argument. A typical limiting assumption is that the function of the epic in the poem is

²¹⁰ Eisner, *Boccaccio*, 2. Chigi LV 176 includes: the second version of Boccaccio's life of Dante, Boccaccio's edition of the *Vita Nuova*, Cavalcanti's "Donna mi prega" with Dino del Garbo's commentary, Boccaccio's poem "Ytalie iam certus honor" addressing Petrarch, fifteen long *canzoni* by Dante, and an early version of the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*.

²¹¹ Similarly, what Martinez, "Before the *Teseida*," 205, maintains about the combination of the classical Statius and the Dantean *Stazio* in the *Teseida* can be taken as an instance of the multiple historicity of Boccaccio's program. And again, it is by the manoeuvres listed by Eisner that Boccaccio can enter, as argued in Schnapp, "Un commento all'autocommento," 194, in a "comic" territory that is mainly Dantean and Ovidian.

²¹² Armstrong, Daniels, and Milner, "Boccaccio as Cultural Mediator," 6-7.

²¹³ Corti, *Introduction to Literary Semiotics*, 7.

insubstantial, being confined to Theseus's military campaigns in books I and II, hence a pretext for the non-epic to come in the rest of the poem.²¹⁴ A more nuanced view can be found in Bruni, who acutely speaks of the epic as a code filtered and reworked through the centrality of the matter of love, which yields a reduction of the epic and of its meaning.²¹⁵ The import of this transformation, however, must be assessed against a dynamic generic horizon: more than a narrowing of possibilities, Boccaccio's *reductio*, as we will see, is a changing of scale and mode that opens up *other* possibilities. The change of the configuration of the epic does not result only from Boccaccio's ingenious sleight of hand; the possibility of a transformation in structure and meaning has been, instead, a characteristic of the epic code throughout its long history.

The duality of "true" versus "reduced" or "insubstantial" epic is a critical topos that recurs in those studies on the *Teseida* which mainly focuses on the transition from epic to romance. Wetherbee, who along this line has written two of the most perceptive essays on the *Teseida*, has analyzed, from a historicizing perspective, Boccaccio's transformation of the apparatus of the old classical and postclassical epic into a new configuration mediated by the Old French *romans d'antiquité*.²¹⁶ More about that will be said later, in the section on the issue of epic and romance; for now, suffice it to note that Wetherbee's thesis too seems to rest on the assumption that there is a "proper" ancient epic, the spirit of which is alien to its late medieval re-elaborations in courtly vernacular contexts.

²¹⁴ See for instance Surdich, *Boccaccio*, 51.

²¹⁵ The epic is "condizionata e ristrutturata dalla visuale amorosa, la quale non è un episodio periferico (come nella 'vera' epica), ma funziona come filtro e adattamento consapevolmente riduttivo delle sequenze del poema epico e del suo significato ideologico," in Bruni, *Boccaccio*, 197.

²¹⁶ Wetherbee, "History and Romance," and "Romance and Epic."

Another kind of problem is raised by readings that establish allegory as the ultimate horizon of the poem's meaning, that is, as a layer of signification onto which all of Boccaccio's inconsistencies might be resolved.²¹⁷ For all the importance of allegory in the epic tradition since classical times, and for all the allegorical elements that the *Teseida* presents in both text and glosses, allegory should be considered as *one* voice in a polyphony rather than as *the* voice subsuming the whole poem.²¹⁸ Inconsistency cannot be eradicated from the compound of discourses that the poem came to be.

Less space is needed to situate the *Teseida* within another branch of criticism, namely the corpus of theoretical and historical accounts of the epic. Apart from passing mentions related to the combination of arms and love,²¹⁹ Boccaccio's poem has received hardly any attention in this more decidedly comparative field, as if the poem did not offer elements that are useful to historicize the epic as a genre and a tradition. The main exception is again Newman, who includes a succinct but insightful account of the *Teseida* in his historical overview of the epic; the poem is presented as an example of the "carnival inspiration" that characterizes the epic tradition.²²⁰ What follows here is in step with

²¹⁷ The most relevant contributions to this line of interpretation are, with some differences between them, Hollander, "Validity of Boccaccio Self-Exegesis," Kirkham, "Chiuso Parlare," McGregor, *The Shade of Aeneas*, and Smarr, "*Teseida*."

²¹⁸ The problematic nature of allegorical readings of the *Teseida* is touched upon in Everson, *Italian Romance Epic*, 12 and in Wetherbee, "History and Romance," 175.

²¹⁹ See for instance Zatti, *Modo epico*, 54. Cf. Everson, *Italian Romance Epic*, 165, for the passing remark that the epic's "strong warlike bias with only minor episodes relating to Venus is corrected in the *Metamorphoses*, which is almost evenly divided between a first part concerned with various manifestations of love and a second part concerned with retelling the story of Troy, devoted to Mars and his creatures." This description can be misleading, as it ignores the actual presence of Venus in martial epics; one has only to think of the *Aeneid*. Along another line of investigation, more based on the Ovid the elegist, I will later make the case for the role played by Ovid in the generic operations of the *Teseida*, especially in book I.

²²⁰ Newman, *Classical Epic Tradition*, 298.

Newman's intuition of the Alexandrian (or Ovidian, I would rather say) nature of the epic orientation of the *Teseida*.

3.2. How (Not) to Begin an Epic: On *Teseida* I and II

The beginning is the locus where an epic poem has first to negotiate its affiliation with a tradition. That is to say, writing a work inscribed in the epic tradition is not a "natural" operation, nor is succession a condition to which the poet has immediate access. On the contrary, to begin is to find or construct a form of mediation specific to the historicity of a text, and to its relationship with a tradition and its models. Horace still has the last word in the issue when, in the *Ars poetica*, he recommends not to follow the example of a "scriptor cyclicus" (136) who announced his plan to cover the entire Trojan war only to end up like the mountain which gives birth to the mouse: "Fortunam Priami cantabo et nobile bellum". / Quid dignum tanto feret hic promisso hiatu?" (137-138). Instead, a point of attack must be found, and a subject matter cut out from a whole:

Quanto rectius hic, qui nil molitur inepte:
"Dic mihi, Musa, uirum, captae post tempora Troiae
qui mores hominum multorum uidit et urbes."
Non fumum ex fulgore, sed ex fumo dare lucem
cogitat, ut speciosa dehinc miracula promat,
Antiphaten Scyllamque et cum Cyclope Charybdim.
Nec reditum Diomedis ab interitu Meleagri,
nec gemino bellum Troianum orditur ab ouo;
semper ad euentum festinat et in medias res
non secus ac notas auditorem rapit, et quae
desperat tractata nitescere posse relinquit (140-150)

Selection is the key, in terms not only of the narrative economy but also of the poet's engagement with the tradition. To begin *in medias res* means to begin *critically*, as the poet is conscious of the non-naturalness of his affiliation with the epic genre, and consequently

must reflect on how to become a successor. A focus has to be chosen (e.g., Odysseus) through which a dialectics between the part and the whole, the text and its generic tradition, can be established. In the incipit of the *Thebaid* Statius makes the issue manifest by means of an eloquent rhetorical move: the topos of “where shall I begin from?”

Fraternas acies alternaque regna profanes
Decertata odiis sontesque evolvere Thebas
Pierius menti calor incidit. Unde iubetis
Ire, deae? (I.1-4)

The question is followed by a list of possible points of departure in Theban history, “longa retro series” (I.7), from which Statius will select the moment when blind Oedipus cast a curse on his twin sons. Here too the act of beginning is staged as an artifice that the poet has to devise in order to position himself and his work vis-à-vis the tradition and subject matter he is drawing from. Later we will see in greater detail how the *Teseida* responds to Statius’ rhetorical question. For the time being, from that very question we can infer a principle that, in practice, qualifies the epic tradition and rules out Bakhtin’s narrow vision of the epic as a monologic genre dealing with the absolute time of beginnings and surviving only as a tradition frozen, dead, and already saturated.²²¹ In Statius’ wake, Boccaccio in the *Teseida* demonstrates that there are no absolute but only relative beginnings, in which a dialogue takes place between poet, text, and tradition, at the crossroads of multiple temporalities. All of this is implied in the process of succession in Roman epic poetry, which offered Boccaccio authoritative patterns for starting out a poem dialogically.

The reason why a large portion of this chapter will be devoted to books I and II of the *Teseida* is that Boccaccio wrote and presented them as a prologue long enough to

²²¹ Bakhtin, “Epic and Novel,” 13-14.

constitute one or two miniature poems within the poem.²²² Books I and II are therefore *pars pro toto*, especially because they announce, foresee, and pre-determine the generic moves that will define the status of the poem as a whole. Moreover, they are intentionally designed to create a space for generic inscription and variation, a space much larger than generally allowed to an introductory section.²²³ Give this proportion, a tension or a counterpoint emerges between the books of Theseus's wars (I-II) and those of Arcita and Palemone's strife (III-XII). These features, as we will immediately see, make the *premessioni* of the *Teseida* the ideal locus for an examination of Boccaccio's approach to the epic as a code of variations.

3.2.1 Inconsistency: An Epistle, Two *Premessioni*, and a Gloss

Before the actual beginning of the text in verse of the *Teseida*, the question of beginnings is posed by Boccaccio in the prefatory prose epistle to Fiammetta, which we partially discussed in the first chapter. With this letter the author addresses his beloved to explain what the *Teseida* is about and why it is inspired by and dedicated to her. In terms of theme and focus, the way in which Boccaccio presents his subject to Fiammetta - the tale of Arcita and Palemone's rivalry over Emilia - does not fully match the actual text that follows the

²²² Smarr, *Boccaccio*, 68, and Wetherbee, "History and Romance," 178, already proposed to read book I as a *mise-en-abîme* of the whole poem.

²²³ A comparison could be made with Chrétien de Troyes's *Cligès*, which also starts with the topos of the retrieval of an unknown story, and then goes one more than one third of its length before introducing the eponymous protagonist. However, in the first portion of *Cligès* (where the adventures of Cligès father are narrated), we cannot find anything comparable to what happens in the *Teseida* in terms of engagement with the traditions and the expectations of a genre. Nor can we find a metaliterary dimension constructed with the same degree of complexity and subtlety as in Boccaccio. Before the *Teseida*, Boccaccio experimented with a long introductory section in the *Filocolo*, where the first of its five books serves to build a background to Florio and Biancifiore story.

epistle in book I and II, as we have already noted.²²⁴ Indirectly, this raises the issue of how this kind of poem would be expected to begin.

What immediately comes to the fore is the non-coincidence of the three authorial voices of which the *Teseida* consists of, all interrelated although each is responsible for a different discourse and shaped by different generic features: 1) the poet of the verse narrative, 2) the commentator that adds glosses to the narrative, 3) the lover that speaks in the elegiac mode in an epistle that pretends to reduce the poem to its biographical and erotic origin, since it is said to have been written to please and win back Fiammetta, who will be able read their own love story under the disguise of fiction.²²⁵ Only in the gloss to III.35.7 (“che sono io”) the three voices do converge into one.

It is the elegy-driven lover who speaks in the prologue of “una antichissima istoria e alle più delle genti non manifesta, bella sì per la materia della quale parla che è d’amore, sì per coloro de’ quali dice, che nobili giovani furono e di real sangue discesi” (Prologue). Yet the first two books of the *Teseida* do not fit this description as to subject and characters.

²²⁴ Books I-II are on Theseus’ military campaigns against the Amazons in Scythia and Creon in Thebes. From Scythia, Theseus brings to Athens the former queen of the Amazons, Ipolita, and her younger sister, Emilia; from Thebes, he brings as prisoners Arcita and Palemone, the only two survivors from the cursed lineage of Oedipus. From their prison in Athens (III), Arcita and Palemone see Emilia and fall in love with her. Helped by a friend, Arcita is freed but forced to exile; yet he comes back to Athens in disguise only to see Emilia (IV). Then Palemone too manages to escape and meet Arcita: they start a fight because of their rivalry over Emilia, but are seen and stopped by Theseus, who decides that the matter will be decided by a “palestral giuoco” in the amphitheatre, a battle between two team of fighters lead by Arcita and Palemone respectively (V). An all-star cast comes to Athens, ready to fight (VI). Arcita prays to Mars for victory; Palemone prays to Venus for Emilia’s love (VII). Thus, Arcita wins this ritualized war, but Tisiphone, the Infernal fury, makes him fall under his horse (VIII). Mortally wounded Arcita marries Emilia, but cannot consummate their marriage, as he dies and leaves Emilia to Palemone (IX-X). After Arcita’s stately funeral (XI), with Theseus’s approval, Palemone marries Emilia (XII).

²²⁵ See the prologue: “ciò che sotto il nome di uno de’ due amanti e della giovane amata si conta essere stato, ricordandovi bene, e io ad voi di me e voi ad me di voi, se non mentiste potreste conoscere essere stato detto et fatto in parte: quale de’ due sia non discuopro, ché so che ve ne avederete.”

Love is not their main theme, as they are conceived as miniature warlike epics on two expeditions lead by Theseus, Duke of Athens, one against the Amazons in Scythia and the other against Creon in Thebes. Nor are books I and II centered on Arcita, Palemone, and Emilia, the protagonists of the tale as summed up in the epistle, for in the verse narrative they are introduced only peripherally and incidentally, in the appendix to Theseus's martial deeds. That Boccaccio himself acknowledged such a discrepancy is revealed, when in the preface he goes over the plot more in detail, by his need to put forward a justification for the apparent misalignment between the first sixth (I-II) and the rest (III-XII) of the poem:

Dico adunque che dovendo narrare di due giovani nobilissimi tebani, Arcita e Palemone, come, innamorati d'Emilia amazona, per lei combattessero, primamente posta la invocazione poetica, mi parve da dimostrare e donde la donna fosse e come ad Attene venisse, e chi fossero essi e come quivi venissero similmente; laonde si come premissioni alla loro istoria due se ne pongono. (Prol.)

With false naïveté, Boccaccio claims to have written two out of twelve books of his long poem just to inform the reader about where the protagonists of the love triangle came from (Emilia from Scythia, and Arcita and Palemone from Thebes) and how they met Theseus, who would take them to Athens, the place where their story properly begins in book III. So weak is the alleged authorial explanation, that we are expected to notice this inconsistency, and use it as a key to the game of generic expectations in the *Teseida*.²²⁶

²²⁶ See O'Hara, *Inconsistency in Roman Epic*, on how inconsistencies were integral to the allusive art of classical Roman literature: deliberate allusions to alternate versions of a myth or refusals to make a text cohere into a seamless unity are expressions of a most sophisticated poetics that in practice distinguished its own truths from the truth of referential philosophical discourses. Boccaccio, like any other writer familiar with the classics, must have learned this practically, by reading and imitation – the same as with the sense of generic interplay inherited from antiquity practically much more than theoretically.

As *premissioni*, on the one hand, books I and II support not the development of the main storyline but the inscription of the poem as a whole within the epic tradition from which, according to a number of critics, Boccaccio substantially would draw back. On the other hand, the two books' separation from the main body of the poem, stated both early in the epistle and later in the text with the transition to book III, is the signal of a shift in genre. This shift has been commonly read as a transition from arms to love, or from epic to romance, but the reality of the generic affiliations of the *Teseida* seems more complicated than that, particularly in respect of its epic inscription in books I and II.

The more Boccaccio downplays the epic component of his poem in the prefatory love letter, the more the epic stands out from the very beginning as an inclusive code which is not merely superseded or read away with the unfolding of the text. On the contrary, it persists and changes as the author explores its connections with elements typically marked as non-epic. Hence, a paradox worth investigating: epic preambles to a non-epic or, better to say, a *differently* epic text. What is at stake with the epic beginning is the establishment of the nature and extent of such a difference.

That we are dealing with the variations of a code rather than with a fixed system of genres is emphasized by Boccaccio's restatement of the justification for Book 1 and 2, this time through the voice of the writer of the glosses, who uses the third person to refer the *autore* of the verse.

Con ciò sia cosa che la principale intenzione dell'autore di questo libretto sia di trattare dell'amore e delle cose avvenute per quello, da due giovani tebani, cioè Arcita e Palemone, ad Emilia amazona, sì come nel suo proemio appare, potrebbe alcuno, e giustamente, adimandare che avesse qui a fare la guerra di Teseo con le donne amazone, della quale solamente parla il libro primo di quest'opera. Dico, et brevemente, che l'autore a niuno altro fine

queste cose scrisse se non per mostrare onde Emilia fosse venuta ad Attene; e perciò che la materia, cioè li costumi delle predette donne amazone, è alquanto pellegrina alle più genti, e perciò più piacevole, la volle alquanto più distesamente porre che per avventura non bisognava; e il simigliante fa della sconfitta data da Teseo a Creonte, re di Tebe, per dichiarare donde e come alle mani di Teseo pervenissero Arcita e Palemone. Le quali cose mostrate, assai delle seguenti rimangono a' lettori molto più chiare. (ad I.6)

The situation of the text in *ottave* is similar to that of the epistle and has again Fiammetta playing the role of the addressee (I.4). In the verse proem the author states the love triangle as his theme,²²⁷ which is partly at odds, from a rhetorical point of view, with the lofty invocation to the Muses (I.1), meant to prepare the reader for something of a scope far broader than a love story of individuals (none of the protagonists is, in fact, socially and historically as important as Theseus). With the addition of that gloss, Boccaccio intends to tease his readers, who would rightly wonder what the Amazonian and Theban wars have to do with the rivalry of Arcita and Palemone. By contrast, the restatement of a motivation we cannot take at face value (books I-II as *premissioni*) redirects our attention to its generic implication: that the epic is a most unstable code. Furthermore, the mention in the gloss of a new motive (the readers' pleasure), apparently alien to the seriousness and nobility typically associated with the epic, calls for a reconsideration of the epic as a frame for poetic discourse.²²⁸

Being mostly unknown and thus more pleasurable, the Amazonian war deserves to be expanded more than necessary to the plot. Tellingly, this quality is associated first and

²²⁷ “E questo con assai chiara ragione / comprenderete, udendo raccontare / d’Arcita i fatti e del buon Palemone, / di real sangue nati, come appare, / e amendue tebani, e a quistione, / parenti essendo, per soverchio amare / Emilia bella, vennero, amazona: / donde l’un diessi perdeo la persona” (I.5).

²²⁸ What we have, in miniature, is a version – or perversion – of the duality between “epic” and “romance” that in Quint, *Epic and Empire*, 50-96 is analyzed as a conflict between teleology and desire in narrative.

foremost with female figures involved in a narrative led by a male actor, Theseus: the equation between non-familiarity and pleasure points to the role of desire in the production and reception of epic textuality. Dido, only to mention the most prominent case, was a textual site for gender and genre variations that still troubled the late Middle Ages.²²⁹ However, the classical tendency was to mark the presence of women in epic poems as unepic, no matter how often they were present as characters. As maintained by Stephen Hinds, this ambiguity is central to the understanding of the epic genre through the counterpoint of prescription (or expectation) and practice:

The role of the female in actual epics never becomes canonized within stereotyped descriptions of genre, but a case can be made that *surprise* at the role of the female in actual epics *does* become so canonized: women never become theorized into epic as an essential element of the genre, but woman does achieve a kind of essentialized theoretical status as an *ambusher* of the purity of epic.²³⁰

Therefore, whereas Boccaccio's epistle to Fiammetta must exclude epic from its discourse in accordance with the gender of the addressee, and with the lover-to-beloved relationship it implies, the verse text of the 12-book *Teseida* does include the epic (I and II) within a love story. From the point of view of book I, the poem does include the subject of love into a mini-epic (Theseus and Ipolita's conflict turned into marriage). These perspectives coexist, none of them being erased by the other. In this sense, Boccaccio's practical criticism not only hints at a historical transition from epic to romance, a recurrent motif in medieval studies in general and in Boccaccio studies in particular; he also writes (and re-writes) the dynamics that have characterized the tradition of the epic since antiquity,

²²⁹ See Desmond, especially 23-73 for an overview of Dido's variants in her classical and medieval fortune.

²³⁰ Hinds, "Essential Epic," 223.

practically *and* theoretically. The justification added to the gloss to *Teseida* I.6 serves to highlight the kind of heterogeneity vital to Boccaccio's text as well as to the epic tradition.

The second inconsistency in that very gloss calls for further reflection. In themselves, the Amazons were anything but an unknown subject, as many an ancient or medieval writer had discussed their origins, costumes and, in some cases, key episodes regarding them in the universal history of antiquity. While an educated reader could only pretend to ignore who the Amazons were, Boccaccio not only wrote on them more extensively than any of his possible sources²³¹ but also concentrated on an episode that in its specificity cannot be found in any previous text. Hence, he gathers and rewrites into an original tale a series of narrative elements scattered throughout a variety of texts and contexts (poetry and historiography, pagan and Christian culture, encyclopedic entries, and excerpts from classical works). We will turn later to this issue when dealing with the contrast of Theseus and Ipolita; for now, suffice it to say that Boccaccio's claim in the gloss about the novelty of his writing on the Amazons, allegedly due not to the uniqueness of his narrative but to the strange mores of the female warriors ("la materia, cioè li predetti costume delle donne amazone"), is an intriguingly misleading justification for book I. What we can read here is another instance of the *scandalous pleasurable surprise* that women as such are supposed to be in the epic,²³² and at the same time an oblique acknowledgment of

²³¹ A number of sources is discussed in Crescini, *Contributo agli studi*, 222-229, although his review is admittedly inconclusive, no single text really corresponding to Boccaccio's version. As a background to *Teseida* I, Battles, *Medieval Tradition of Thebes*, 64, mentions two other brief accounts of the Amazonian campaign in books that had a wide circulation in the Middle Ages, namely Orosius's *Historiae adversus paganos* (I.15-16) and Eusebius's *Chronicon* (X). Still today, the derivation of Boccaccio's narrative of the Amazon, if any, remains hypothetical.

²³² Scandalous according to male-centered views of the epic; pleasurable according to Ovid, for example.

their presence as foundational in the economy of the tradition of the genre. According to the gloss, indeed, women give the first book of the poem its special appeal as well as the individual character (Emilia) who, as the object of Arcita and Palemone's desire, will be crucial to the evolution of the *Teseida* in narrative and genre.

Underlying the inconsistencies in the epistle to Fiammetta and in the gloss to I.6 is the practical knowledge that the epic is a tradition of variants accommodating for many generic orientations and resisting expectations of generic purity. To get the genre wrong in theory is, paradoxically, the way of getting it right in practice.

3.2.2. Dyptich: Emilia from Scythia; Arcita and Palemone from Thebes

Not one but two *premissioni* are required to start the *Teseida* properly. This condition, as was laid down by Boccaccio, has received scarce critical attention so far, even if it is crucial to his strategy. He aims, in fact, to both displace and diffract the epic beginning of his love tale, in order to explore the genre's potential for variation by means of symmetries and differences. There is not a single version of the epic from which to draw, since its tradition is inherently plural and composite; consequently, Boccaccio needs a diptych to represent in practice the reality of generic multiplicity.

This tension is manifest even in the verse *argumentum* placed immediately after the epistle to Fiammetta, ("Sonetto nel quale si contiene uno argomento generale a tutto il libro"). In the first two lines ("Nel primo vince Teseo l'Amazone, / nel secondo Creon certamente"), the summary of books I and II consists of two coordinate clauses governed by the same verb: it is a construction syntactically opposed to the descriptions, in the same sonnet, of each of the following books, presented in separate clauses each governed by its

own verb.²³³ Logically, *vincere* is Theseus's main action repeated in *Teseida* I and II, against Ipolita the Amazon and Creon the Theban, respectively. The ways of his victories cannot be more dissimilar (first a siege leading to peaceful marriage, and then another siege leading to the destruction of a city), and yet they are part of the same narrative and generic block. Although chronologically they take place one after another, their symmetries turn succession into a repetition of variants, as if they were to be read more like a juxtaposition than like a sequence.

A telltale symptom of this intention is Boccaccio's twisting of the epic trope of the divine messenger who descends from the heavens to call the hero back to his heroic duty (*Teseida* II.4-7). Its major model, for Boccaccio, was certainly *Aeneid* IV.219-278. Like Aeneas in Carthage, Theseus is dissuaded from spending his time in the idleness of love in post-war Scythia; however, there is no historical mission he is reminded of, only glory ("Perché in Grecia oramai / non torni, ove più gloria avrai assai?," the messenger disguised as Pirithous says in II.4.7-8). In other words, there is not destiny to fulfill, but only new deeds to add to Theseus's heroic record. Not by chance, the messenger urges him to become a new Hercules, the protagonist of a series of heroic actions whose glory is cumulative. Books I and II, therefore, must also be read as two episodes extracted from a hypothetical Thesean cycle, and then juxtaposed, as variants of the manifestation of the hero's valor and virtue. For all the emphasis on Theseus as a tentative civilizing hero, it

²³³ "Nel primo vince Teseo l'Amazone, / nel secondo Creon certamente; / nel terzo amore Arcita e Palemone / occupa, e 'l quarto mostra la dolente // vita d'Arcita uscito di prigione; / il quinto la battaglia virilmente / da Penteo fatta col suo compagno, / e 'l sesto poi convoca molta gente // alla battaglia; il settimo li afrena, / l'ottavo l'un di lor fa vincitore, / il nono mostra il trionfo e la pena // d'Arcita, e l'altro il suo mortal dolore; e l'undecimo Arcita al rogo mena; / l'ultimo Emilia dona all'amadore."

appears that he does not provide a closure to the poem; on the contrary, he is a site for variations and hybridizations (the last of which will be, in the end, the hybrid title assigned by Fiammetta to the poem: *Teseida delle nozze di Emilia*).

As we have seen, Boccaccio claimed in the preface and in the gloss to I.6 that books I and II serve to introduce his main characters, even though their actual presentation is quite brief and incidental. A closer look will show how Boccaccio's unsubstantial assertion conceals a truth critical to his generic operation.

In *Teseida* I, Emilia appears only three *ottave* from the end. The war is over: Ipolita has surrendered to Theseus's siege after he showed her envoys the tunnel which would easily lead the Greeks into the Amazons' fortress; as soon as she yields to him, violence is replaced by eros with the re-opening of Venus' temple, and then with the marriage of the Greek duke and the Amazon queen. As a corollary, Theseus' Greek fellows marry other Amazons converted from war to love. Amid general elation, unannounced, the adolescent beauty of Emilia suddenly stands out to Theseus' eyes:

Tra l'altre belle vedove e donzelle
Che fossero in quel loco, una ve n'era
Che di bellezze passava le belle,
come la rosa i fior di primavera;
la qual Teseo, vedendola tra quelle,
fé prestamente domandar chi era.
Detto li fu: - Sorella alla reina,
e Emilia nominata è la fantina. (I.136)

Narratively, genealogically, and symbolically, the modality of Emilia's introduction can be described in terms of contiguity rather than centrality, even though in book III she will become central to the poem, as the object of Arcita and Palemone's desire (it is otherwise noteworthy that she is not even mentioned in the sonnet exposing the argument of book I,

so marginal her role is). Necessarily taking up Theseus's point of view, we come across Emilia in an incidental way which perfectly matches her position at the edge of book I, when the military campaign has already come to an end. Differently from her elder sister Ipolita, Emilia is absent from the epic section of the first *premissione*; instead, she marks the transition to a post-epic time in which, of the two gods invoked by the poet in the proem (I.3), it is Venus that prevails.²³⁴

Along these lines, Boccaccio's tongue-in-cheek remark at the close of book I must be read not only as a hint at the impropriety of female warriors in an epic setting (in step with the conventional inclusion/exclusion of the female in the epic tradition), but also as a comment on the transformation of the genre of the *Teseida* by means of the contiguity of arms and love: "e le donne sapeano or che si fare, / sé ristorando del tempo perduto / mentre nel regno non era uomo issuto" (I.138.6-8). Emilia belongs to the defeated Amazons, but her absence from the text until I.136 excludes her from that wild group. Differently from her sister Ipolita, she does not go through the transition from an epic to a post-epic frame, as if she had always been a post-epic character, contiguous and not central to the Amazonian war. Once again, Boccaccio's narrative pivots on a generative contradiction: women, erotic desire, and the matter of love are both internal (Ipolita) and external (Emilia) to the epic frame that is displayed and re-oriented at the outset of the *Teseida*. It must be

²³⁴ Venus prevails over Diana too, to whom she appeals most notably in VII.70-93 and XII.42. It must be noted that, since Boccaccio does not gloss the stanzas on the temple of Diana (addressed by Emilia) as extensively and accurately as he does with the temples of Mars (addressed by Arcita) and Venus (addressed by Palemone), the goddess of chastity does not appear as a viable alternative to resolve the erotic rivalry of the poem. In book XII, instead, Theseus rules out the victory of Diana *post-factum*, in his reply to Emilia's objections: "A cui Teseo: 'Questo dire è niente; / ché se Diana ne fosse turbata, / sopra di te verria l'ira dolente, / non sopra quelle all' quali se' donate; / e perciò fa che lieta immantinente / di cuor ti vegga e d' abito tornata; / la forma tua non è atta a Diana / servir ne' templi né 'n selva montana" (XII.43).

noted, though, that the generic transition from epic to romance is never accomplished. Instead, the *Teseida* moves back and forth between the two poles, reshaping them at every new turn. On a macro-narrative level, for instance, Arcita and Palemone's conflict will reintroduce epic patterns throughout the entire poem, though changed in scale and motivation, as we will see later in relation to the intersections of epic and romance.

Arcita and Palemone are presented, like Emilia, only in the post-war section of book II, as wounded survivors casually found among the rubble of Thebes and the corpses of its inhabitants, only fourteen *ottave* from the end. They are noticed *per avventura*, just as Emilia was seen by Theseus:

Mentre li Greci i loro givan cercando,
et ruvistando il campo sangunoso,
e' corpi sottosopra rivoltando,
per avventura in caso assai dubbioso
due giovani feriti dolorando
quivi trovaron, senza alcun riposo;
et ciaschedun la morte domandava,
tanto dolor del lor mal li agravava. (II.85)

As was the case with Emilia, our casual encounter with the two noble young Thebans is subsequent and contiguous to the main narrative event of book II (the campaign against Creon), as if all that came earlier were but a preparation for this final digression, or for a change of direction in the poem. It follows that there is not only one center from which the poem originates. Rather, by de-centering the beginning of the *Teseida*, Boccaccio creates a narrative from which the epic may emerge as a network of stories and traditions. To reinforce this point, he writes book II as symmetrical to book I (such a symmetry is absent all from *Thebaid* XII, the main source for Boccaccio's *premessioni*): the continuation of Theseus's epic from the first to the second book only repeats the pattern.

The parallel between the Amazons and the Thebans rests on their defeat at the hands of Theseus, whose campaigns are stirred by the need to redress two wrongs that, from the point of view of genre and gender, are exactly opposite: first the Amazons' violence against Greek men crossing Scythia and, more generally, against "natural" gender roles; then Creon's violence against the Greek women's right to bury their husbands fallen in the Theban war. Another opposition, between the outcomes of the two expeditions, is implied by the parallel: if in book I Theseus' war ends up in the conversion to erotic and nuptial happiness, in book II war results in nothing but ruin and destruction. In sum, the diptych paves the ground for the double tension of the main story of the *Teseida*, driven by male-to-male aggression (Arcita against Palemone) and male-to-female desire (Arcita and Palemone longing for Emilia).

On a different level, however, this dichotomy can be read as the unfolding of one and the same transformative pattern: despite the conflicting endings of books I and II, both Emilia from Scythia and Arcita and Palemone from Thebes are individuals, previously unnoticed, who will prolong, in themselves, the life of two collective subjects (the Amazons and the Thebans) defeated in epic warfare. Singled out from their group ("*una ve n'era*" in I.136.2, "*due giovani*" in II.85.5), they embody the passage from the collective to the individual, which entails a transformation of the epic and of the genres with which it forms a network. Certainly, Boccaccio has its narrative *premissioni* revolve around Theseus' eminent individuality: the latter still bears the traditional traits of the epic hero who, in one way or another, is bound to represent a community. Emilia, Arcita, and Palemone, on the contrary, descend from a community but are like branches that are

narratively and symbolically severed from their trunk, when they are transferred to Athens, the site of a new narrative and of new generic developments of the premises laid out in the first two books.

As a diptych, therefore, *Teseida* I and II introduce the protagonists of the main storyline as markers of a generic shift that occurs at the edge of the epic martial setting that precedes the appearance of Emilia in book I, and of Arcita and Palemone in book II. In this sense Boccaccio's justification for his *premessioni* may not be true to his narrative economy, but is none the less consistent with the introduction of his characters as a move that, by means of repetition and difference, opens up a new in-between space where the generic affiliation of the poem can be renegotiated so to avoid generic closure. The formal figure of this dynamic is the double beginning of the poem in books I and II; at the end of each, Boccaccio brings to closure an epic micro-narrative of war only to find an anti-closure force represented first by Emilia and then by Arcita and Palemone. Through them, the main body of the poem grows from its *premessioni* as a textual grafting, not in a direct line of descent but by addition and hybridization.

To conclude this section by touching upon another aspect of Boccaccio's dual beginning, we may consider its relationship with Statius's *Thebaid* in terms of *inventio*. While *Teseida* II is a quite orderly rewriting of the Statian text, book I is an adaptation and recreation of historico-mythographic materials that, not being pre-arranged in an authoritative narrative text, did not guide Boccaccio with a tight blueprint, thus leaving him enough room for a more inventive mode, closer to the vernacular tradition of the *romans d'antiquité*. What we have, in sum, is the illustration of two complementary ways in which

a poem can be inscribed in the epic tradition: either as a supplement (to *Thebaid* I) or as a rewriting (of *Thebaid* XII). To further explore the implication of *Teseida* I and II as Boccaccio's epic compendium, we must now examine more in detail how they connect with an intertextual network of narratives, the most important of which are Statius' *Thebaid* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

3.2.3. *Thebaid* and *Metamorphoses*: Epic Networks

The marginal position of the introduction of Emilia, Arcita, and Palemone in *Teseida* I and II is a recursive structure that fashions, on a larger scale, the relationship of the two *premissioni* with the architecture of Statius' poem. It is toward the end of the *Thebaid* (book XII) that Boccaccio finds the loci from which his new and different poem will emerge as a digression from and a continuation of its source. *Thebaid* XII is indeed the book where, after the death of Eteocles and Polynices, the circularity of Thebes's cursed history is interrupted by the intervention of Theseus, who makes the story (and history itself) steer to a new direction. For this reason, *Thebaid* XII might be considered as an appendix to the fraternal strife of books I-XI. From this moment of transition, Boccaccio has his new poem grow sideways and intertextually.

From an intertextual point of view, *Teseida* I is a prequel to a few lines in *Thebaid* XII, where Theseus's victory over the Amazons is first announced as a rumor (164-165: "prope namque et Thesea fama est / Thermodontiaco laetum remeare triumpho") and then celebrated at his entrance in Athens, with Hippolyta as his wife and other Amazons as prisoners of war (519-539). This too is a relatively short transitional moment that connects the Argive women's stationing at the altar of *Clementia* in wait for Theseus (481-518) and

Capaneus' wife successful plea for Theseus intervention against Creon's ban on the burial of the Greeks fallen in battle (540-586). Of this intermezzo-like passage, *Teseida* I should be read as a lateral and retrospective expansion: this is the generative rhetorical move that precedes rewriting (book II) and digressive continuation (books III-XII).

Intertextual time-framing is a structural feature of *Teseida* I (no other book, with the exception of the all-star heroic catalog in book VI, has so many intertextual time-markers) and provides the framework of connections on which the relation with the epic tradition can be modulated.²³⁵ The first time-marker comes right after the proem, when the narrator dates the Scythian women's rebellion against their men:

Al tempo che Egeo re d'Attene era,
fur donne in Scizia crude e dispietate,
alle qua' forse pareva cosa fiera
esser da maschi lor signoreggiate;
per che, adunate, con sentenza altiera
dilaterar non esser soggiogate,
ma di voler per lor la signoria;
e trovar modo a fornir lor follia. (I.6)

Here is the conflation of two mythographic timelines, one from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and the other from Statius's *Thebaid*. This combination of sources diffracts the origin of the *Teseida* in the network of ancient epic stories, analogously to how the introduction of Emilia, Arcita, and Palemone diffracts the centrality of characters, places, and genres. The Amazon turned against their men before Theseus's expedition, the end of which, in Statius,

²³⁵ The relation with the Italian vernacular tradition too is modulated by time-markers, as we can see from the famous *ottava* (XII.84) written as a response to the *De vulgari eloquentia*: "Poi che le Muse nude cominciaro / nel cospetto degli uomini ad andare," that is, when the naked Muses (i.e., the muses of vernacular literature) began to circulate, in the Italian Duecento.

is approximately concurrent to the end of the war of the Seven against Thebes, with Eteocles and Polynices killing each other (*Thebaid* XI).

What is not in line with Statius, however, is the reference to Aegeus, Theseus's father: when the son enters *Thebaid* XII, the father is already dead, as indicated by a reference to his suicide by jumping into the sea, in the mistaken belief that Theseus had been slain by the Minotaur.²³⁶ This chronology is confirmed later in *Thebaid* XII.666-671, a hardly negligible passage, with the great ekphrasis of Theseus' shield, on which the emblems of his deeds in Crete are depicted: the labyrinth, the Minotaur, and Ariadne with her thread. Why this inconsistency on the part of Boccaccio? Although he wrote *Teseida* I and II with the *Thebaid* on his desk, in his poem Aegeus is alive and the Crete episode is not mentioned.

While Patterson maintains that the exclusion of Ariadne's rejection from the career of Boccaccio's Theseus serves to write off an action potentially detrimental to the celebratory treatment of the hero,²³⁷ Hagedorn reads the exclusion as part of a subtle critique of Theseus: his less than honorable behavior toward Ariadne would be recalled by its very omission in the *Teseida*, and by a few oblique allusions such as the mentions of Theseus' abduction of Helen (I.130.7, XI.62.4, and the glosses ad V.92.5-6, VII.4.8, and VII.50.1) and the presentation of Minos in the heroic catalog (VI.46-50).²³⁸ If this is true

²³⁶ The Athenians "linquitur Eois longe speculabile proris / Sunion, unde vagi casurum in nomina pointi / Cresia decepti falso ratis Aegea velo" (*Theb.* XII.624-626). Theseus forgot to follow Aegeus' instructions to put up white sails to communicate from the sea that he had killed the Minotaur; when seeing black sails, Aegeus thought his son had died.

²³⁷ Patterson, *Chaucer*, 241.

²³⁸ Hagedorn, *Abandoned Women*, 81-82.

for Theseus as a character, we should also consider how the alteration of the chronology accepted by Statius affects the whole intertextual time-frame of the *Teseida*.

The attack “Al tempo che Egeo re d’Attene era” displaces the beginning of the poem from the *Thebaid* to the *Metamorphoses*. Ovid’s poem was the most obvious place where Boccaccio might have found a substantial piece of narrative about Theseus which could precede, in mythographic time, the episode covered by Statius. In *Metamorphoses* VII.402-403 Aegeus takes in and marries Medea after she had killed her sons and escaped from Jason; then Ovid narrates Medea’s failed attempt to poison Theseus, then Aegeus’ recognition and celebration of his son (arrived home incognito), and finally Minos’ preparations for the attack against Athens, in revenge for the death of his son Androgeus by order of Aegeus.

Two other passages in the *Teseida* allow us to delimit the time frame with greater precision: it fits the blank space, so to speak, between two lines of Ovid’s poem. The *terminus post quem* is Medea’s failed attempt to poison Theseus. Ipolita reminds Theseus of that very event, with the purpose of defusing his anger against the Amazons: “Certo di ciò la cagion non conosco, / ch’io non ti offesi mai, né son Medea / che per invidia ti voglia dar toscò” (I.102.1-3).²³⁹ Boccaccio’s beginning is thus set in the aftermath of Medea’s getaway and of Aegeus’s celebration for the return of his son, which ends in *Metamorphoses* VII.452. The *terminus ante quem* is pinpointed, at a much later point in the *Teseida*, by the figure of Minos, king of Crete, and corresponds to the following line of

²³⁹ The gloss ad I.102.2 duly sums up Ovid’s narrative.

the *Metamorphoses*, that is VII.453, from which Ovid begins the narrative of Minos' preparation for the war against Aegeus.

In the catalog of Greek heroes arriving to Athens to fight for either Arcita or Palemone, Boccaccio allusively reminds his readers that then Androgeus was still alive. Hence, we can situate the *Teseida* within the chronological coordinates provided by Ovid with *Met.* VII.452-453: “[Minos] vi venne, che ancora non avea / del suo bello Androgeo sentito il duolo” (VI.46.4-5).²⁴⁰ It should also be noted that, while at first Boccaccio's Minos does not appear to be hostile to Athens, after his defeat in the tournament-like battle of book VIII he is presented in a more aggressive light, as with an indirect anticipation of events yet to come but most likely known to any reader familiar with the *Metamorphoses*. Minos appears for the last time in the poem during Arcita's triumph: “Molto era ancor mirato disdegnoso / Minòs da chi 'l vedea, e in dispetto / pareva la vita avesse, sì stizzoso / andando si mostrava nello aspetto” (IX.45.1-4). Boccaccio's echoing of the description of Dante's Farinata in *Inferno* X.35-36 (“ed el s'ergea col petto e con la fronte / come avesse l'inferno in gran dispetto”), with its connotations of civil strife and ill-omened prophecy, only makes the future opposition of Minos to Athens more salient.

Boccaccio's precision in placing all these intertextual signposts (summarized in figure 1) implies that the *Teseida* was also meant to be read as if it had been written in an

²⁴⁰ To be even clearer, Boccaccio adds in a gloss: “questo Androgeo, figliuolo di Minòs, essendo poi, *dopo queste cose*, ad Atene in istudio, vi fu ucciso” (ad VI.46.5, emphasis added). Hagedorn too uses the reference to Ovid's Minos in order to delimit the time-frame of the *Teseida*, but does not go as far as to see exactly *where* in the *Metamorphoses* Boccaccio's poem could be grafted. In particular Hagedorn, *Abandoned Women*, 80, puts emphasis on Scylla's tragic falling in love with Minos while he is besieging Megara, the place ruled by her father – a story that spans *Met.* VIII. 1-151, and that is recalled in *Teseida* VI.50.4-8 and its gloss. As I have shown, intertextual clues make for a narrower, even exact time-frame, contained between two Ovidian lines.

interlinear space within Ovid's text, as a gloss grown into an autonomous textual entity and incorporated in the great encyclopedia of ancient narratives. Rather than one-to-one intertextuality we have a poem that originates from two ancient classics, the combination of which, in turn, hints at a broader intertextual dimension: any work in the epic tradition begins within a vast network of stories and texts, to which it connects on a variety of scales, from the minimal space between two lines or sentences to the vast span of universal history going from Thebes to Troy to Rome to Christianity and, in Boccaccio's case, to vernacular Italy.

The specific forms taken by this intertextual transition are instances of the sweeping movement of *translatio* that the *Teseida* tries to imagine on new cultural premises. In doing this, Boccaccio demonstrates his practical understanding of what the epic tradition was: a combination and hybridization of models. To turn from a micro- to a macro-textual analysis, for example, it has not been noted as yet that *Teseida*'s affiliation with the *Thebaid* as both a supplement and a continuation is narratively constructed by sequences which, in their transitions (as the ones we have seen in books I and II), have something of the sequencing of the *Metamorphoses*. When Ovid passes from one story to another, the transition is generally characterized by variable combinations of contiguity and continuity, only rarely resulting from a direct development, either narrative or genealogical. Complexity – Alexandrian or Ovidian, however define it – is the nature of epic transitions.

To sew the *Teseida* onto the *Thebaid* and the *Metamorphoses*, and more widely onto the epic encyclopedia of antiquity, Boccaccio the narrator must share the mindset of the glossator, who writes into the marginal and interstitial spaces of the *auctores*, as a

latecomer.²⁴¹ This form of secondary writing shapes Boccaccio's practical notion of an epic which is consciously and creatively *secondary*. In Boccaccio's view, there is no such thing as a primary epic: what Bakhtin calls "epic absolute past" would be merely an idea or an expectation against which to play with a mobile network of narratives.²⁴² More to the point would be to describe Boccaccio's epic practice and his understanding of the epic tradition, with the features that Bakhtin employs to define the novel as the opposite of the epic itself, as suggested in the first chapter: "the novel inserts into these other genres an indeterminacy, a certain semantic openendedness, a living contact with unfinished, still evolving contemporary reality (the open ended present)."²⁴³ Boccaccio's gloss-like writing – both in text and paratext – would then make manifest the novelization inherent in the epic tradition itself as one of its generative forces. In short, the epic begins with variation.

Let us now turn back to *Thebaid* to consider an explicit intertextual time-marker that Boccaccio places in book I, after the description of the foundation of the Amazons' kingdom in I.6-13. Returning to his house in Thrace in the aftermath of a long vivid episode narrated in *Thebaid* II, 527-743, Mars inspires Theseus to set off his campaign against the

²⁴¹ More than Hollander's influential interpretation of Boccaccio's glosses as a strategy to create an "instant classic" and to "attack the religion of [mundane] love" (in "Validity of Boccaccio's Self Exegesis," 164 and 175), we should turn to Ricci's definition of the glosses as "enciclopedia di procedimenti letterari" (66), an inherently dynamic set of references that is even capable of presenting the same mythographic events from different angles and on different lights (in *Scrittura, riscrittura autoesegesi*, 66- 67).

²⁴² See the passage that includes Bakhtin's phrase: "Whatever its origins, the epic as it has come down to us is an absolutely completed and finished generic form, whose constitutive feature is the transferral of the world it describes to an absolute past of national beginnings and peak times. The absolute past is a specifically evaluating (hierarchical) category. In the epic world view, "beginning," "first," "founder," "ancestor," "that which occurred earlier" and so forth are not merely temporal categories but valorized temporal categories, and valorized to an extreme degree. This is as true for relationships among people as for relations among all the other items and phenomena of the epic world. In the past, everything is good: all the really good things (i.e., the "first" things) occur only in this past," in "Epic and Novel," 15.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 7.

rebellious women. As the gloss to I.14.1 says, the author's aim is "mostrare, poeticamente fingendo, qual fosse la cagione che movesse Teseo contra le donne amazone."

Marte tornava allora sanguinoso
Dal bosco dietro al qual guidati avea,
con tristo augurio del re furioso
di Tebe, l'aspra schiera, e si tenea
lo scudo di Tideo, il qual pomposo
della vittoria, sì come potea
ad una quercia l'aveva appiccato
cotal qual era, a Marte consecrato.

E 'n cotal guisa, in Trazia ritornando,
si fé sentire al crucciato Teseo,
in lui di sé un fier caldo lasciando;
e col suo carro avanti procedeo,
dovunque giva lo cielo infiammando;
poi nelle valli del monte Rifeo,
ne' templi suoi posando, si raffisse,
sperando ben che ciò che fu seguisse. (I.14-15)

The first *ottava* recalls Tydeus's falling into an ambush after his visit to Thebes where, as an ambassador of Polynices, he reminds Eteocles of the turns the two brothers must take each year, according to the rule established by their father Oedipus: after a year's exile, Polynices now has the right to come back and be king. On his way back to Argo Tydeus is treacherously attacked in the forest by fifty of Eteocles' men. Yet he manages to face and kill them all, heroically, except for one left alive to witness his *aristeia*. Then, to thank Athena for her protection, he consecrates to her the booty of his deed, "fracta virum spolia informesque [...] exuvias" (*Theb.* II.725-726). Here is another intertextual inconsistency, as Boccaccio changes the god addressed by Tydeus: not Athena but Mars. The reference is unpacked in the gloss to *Teseida* I.14.1, which diligently summarizes *Thebaid* I and II for the reader to retrace the exact correspondence between the chronologies of the two poems. Boccaccio the glossator writes that Tydeus "consacrò a Marte, iddio delle battaglie, il suo

scudo.” Why did Boccaccio alter Statius’ text in the locus that bears the first intertextual marker that connects, explicitly and precisely, the *Teseida* to the *Thebaid*?

While in the *Thebaid* Tydeus collects his enemies’ spoils and fixes them to an oak, in the *Teseida* he hangs his own shield to the branches: the purpose of such a twist might be to shift our focus from the multiplicity of broken arms and bodies in Statius’ scene to the strong individuality of the epic character of Tydeus, a model of martial *furor* that the Boccaccian Theseus is eager to emulate.²⁴⁴ Furthermore, Mars “iddio delle battaglie” sums up a connection between two characters (Tydeus/Theseus) and two poems (*Thebaid*/*Teseida*) to emphasize one strand of generic affiliation, namely martial epic. This is undoubtedly the generic dominant of *Teseida* I and II, in so far as it conforms to the expectation that the epic must be male-oriented and war-focused (it must be noted that Boccaccio alters the gender of the god thanked by Tydeus, to consolidate the hero’s masculinity in step with the male/female divide that motivates the Amazonian campaign).²⁴⁵ By recognizing this strategy, we realize that Boccaccio plays a double game in the field of epic, as taught him by the epic tradition itself. On the one hand, the *Teseida* begins with an intertextual presentation of the epic as normative code centered on male *furor*; on the other hand, such presentation must be read as only one voice (though a major one) in the polyphony of variations of which the epic code consists, in its capacity for variation.

²⁴⁴ See Anderson, *Before the Knight’s Tale*, 154-160 for an analysis of Mars as a figure of *furor*.

²⁴⁵ As observed by Limentani in his comment to the passage, Boccaccio’s octaves echo a locus in *Thebaid* III (218ff) where Jupiter summons Mars returning from the ravages of Bistones and Getae, his buckler red with blood (“sanguinoso,” Boccaccio says). Also, in *Thebaid* VII.34 we find Thrace mentioned as the location of Mars’ house, then visited by Mercury on Jupiter’s behalf (Statius’s famous passage on the house of Mars will be rewritten and extensively glossed in *Teseida* VII). Traces of Tydeus’s Athena are erased, no matter if Theseus is Duke of Athens.

The inconsistency of genre-markers plays, therefore, a generative role in the conflict or counterpoint made up by a set of variations and a set of expectations. Generic orientations embodied in a character or suggested by the author must not be taken as absolute, being only parts of a more complex and unstable whole.

We should be able now to clearly see the multi-dimensional configuration of the epic genre in the *Teseida*: we have, for instance, classical mythological history, Christian universal history (e.g., the account of the Amazonian war in book I of Orosius's *Historiae*, right before the Trojan War and Aeneas's arrival to Italy), the great archive of classical and post-classical literature, and the internal timelines of individual texts. The resulting architecture is peculiarly unstable and can accommodate different orientations. If the entire *Teseida* unfolds between two lines of the *Metamorphoses* and if, in turn, almost the entire *Thebaid* unfolds in the time covered by Theseus's expedition and post-war marital leisure in *Teseida* I, it follows that the temporality of the epic is composed only in progress, by means of changes of scales, gloss-like additions, and ramifications into intertextual networks (see figure below).²⁴⁶

²⁴⁶ Cf. Nokes, *Timely Reading* 91: "To establish successful transitions in this way [by means of mythographic glosses] among temporally disparate levels or episodes of a text is to accomplish a first step in creating the illusion that the text is in some way freed from ordinary notions of time and history [...] a sense that the text belongs to a time that is plural rather than singular." Cf. also Schnapp, "Commento all'autocommento," 194, on Boccaccio's strategies of imitation: "emulation," which keeps the temporal hiatus visible, and "simulation," which aims at hiding the discrepancy of temporalities. Both are possible in the plural temporality allowed by the epic code. and by Boccaccio's sense for cultural *translatio*.

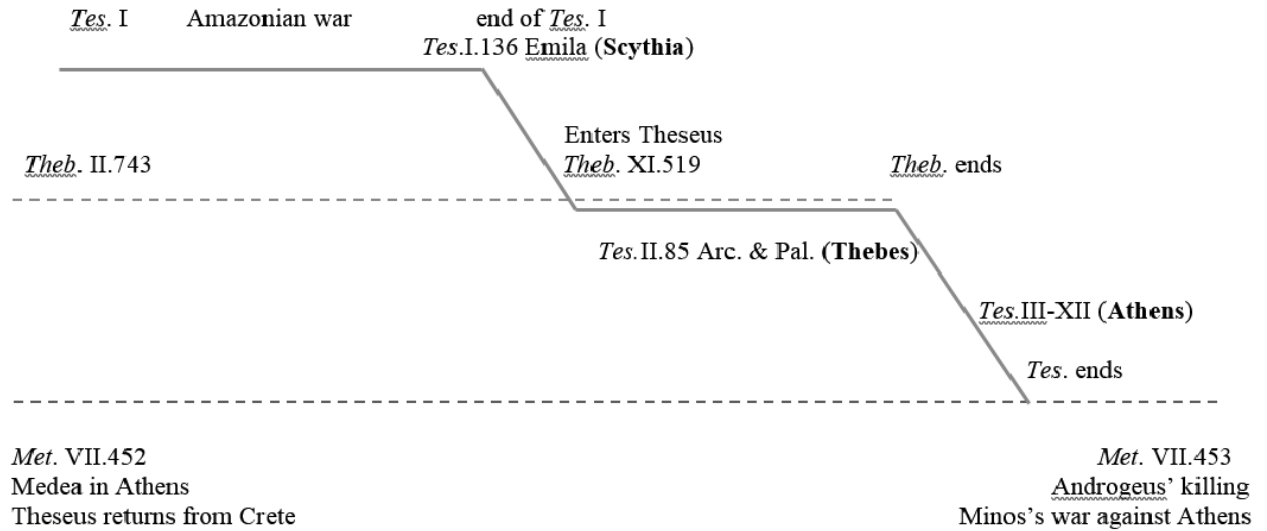


Figure 1. Intertextual time-frame of the *Teseida*.

Beginning from the beginning, the *Teseida* does not mechanically comply with Horace's golden rule of the beginning in *medias res*, since the proportions and boundaries of the network of stories into which the poem is written are essentially mobile. At the beginning of the poem, we cannot be sure about where we are in the course of the narrative - whether in the beginning, middle or end. Nor is the *Teseida* as linear as the *romans d'antiquité*, the storylines of which unfold with a more homogeneous development, no matter their additions and subtractions from the source-texts. Nor, like Statius, does Boccaccio attach his poem to a single long continuous genealogical line of people and events as in the *Thebaid* (from Cadmus to Eteocles and Polynices), because the *Teseida* both continues Thebes and digresses from its history.

Yet the de-centered place of *Teseida* I as a digression from and a supplement to the *Thebaid* may be read as a response to question Statius asks the Muses: "Fraternas acies alternaque regna profanes / Decertata odiis sontesque evolvere Thebas / Pierius menti calor incidit. Unde iubetis / Ire, deae?" (I.1-4). Boccaccio's sideways or digressive beginning is

a practical demonstration of the multiple directions and points of entrance allowed by the epic tradition. That they are very often concealed by the authority-effect produced by the rhetorical apparatus of epic itself is only part of the theatricalization of genre we have seen so far. With a keen awareness of how Statius's problem about beginnings is the problem of the epic tradition as such, Boccaccio begins the *Teseida* with contradictory signals that are tied to another kind of beginning, that of a new vernacular culture.²⁴⁷ In this sense, Boccaccio may paradoxically agree with Horace, provided that *in medias res* refers not to a moment in the course a single unified narrative (e.g., the cycle of Thebes or Troy) but to a condition that qualifies text and author alike: both are historical and transitional, that is, never absolute but always in the middle of a bundle of discourses that branch off in many directions.²⁴⁸

3.2.4. To Begin with the Matter of Love (I): Dantean Subtexts

The divine imperative that in *Teseida* II.4-7 urges Theseus to abandon the pleasures of love in Scythia and look for further martial glory overtly echoes *Aeneid* IV, as we have seen above, with a twist worthy of note: while Aeneas must leave Dido, Theseus has already married Hippolyta and decided to take her to Greece with him. Comedy replaces tragedy.

²⁴⁷ To my knowledge, only in Sherberg, "Girl Outside the Window," 99-100, can we find observations on the relevance of the question posed by incipit of the *Thebaid* to the poetics of the *Teseida*. Sherberg's prospective differs from mine in that, while I consider Statius' opening gesture as a pre-condition of the epic genre learned and written in practice by Boccaccio, he reads that very gesture as an indication of Boccaccio's difficulty in providing the readers with the mythographic references that the verse narrative alone is incapable of supplying. Hence the glosses that expand on stories connected to the main narrative (for the benefit of sophisticated readers, more than for listeners).

²⁴⁸ In this respect, the implications of the allegorical apparatus in Boccaccio's glosses are consistent with the in-between textuality typical of the epic tradition. Allegoresis posits a discourse that exists temporally and ontologically prior to the text as *integumentum*. As put in Copeland and Melville, "Allegory and Allegoresis," 178, allegoresis presents itself "in a position of rhetorical anteriority by refusing the direct or 'proper' character of the given text's discourse."

Such a divergence, already foregrounded in the double invocation to Mars and Venus (plus Cupid) in the proem (I.3),²⁴⁹ reveals that Boccaccio is aware of the historicity of his project of composing vernacular epic in a tradition newly-founded on the themes and genres of love and virtue, not so much of arms. This at least is what was authoritatively said by Dante in *De vulgari eloquentia* II.2 (“Arma vero nullum latium adhuc invenio poetasse”), an authoritative passage unmistakably echoed (and wittily misinterpreted) in the envoy of the *Teseida*, in an *ottava* that must be quoted once again:

Poi che le Muse nude cominciaro
 nel conspetto degli uomini ad andare,
 già fur di quelli i quai l’esercitaro
 con bello stilo in onesto parlare,
 e altri in amoroso l’operaro;
 ma tu, o libro, primo a loro cantare
 di Marte fai gli affanni sostenuti,
 nel volgar lazio più mai non veduti. (XII.84)

Much has been written on this *ottava*, possibly the most famous and quoted in the whole poem.²⁵⁰ My purpose here is to read it along with another *ottava* that hints at the poem’s program of literary history-making: a post-Dantean contribution toward a vernacular *translatio* that, as such, requires the capacity and scope of the epic, but at the same time originated from a form of subjectivity mainly shaped by the experience of love.

E m’è venuto in voglia con pietosa
 rima di scrivere una istoria antica,
 tanto negli anni riposta e nascosa
 che latino autor non par ne dica,
 per quel ch’io senta, in libro alcuna cosa;
 dunque sì fate che la mia fatica

²⁴⁹ “Siate presenti, o Marte rubicondo, / nelle tue armi rigido e feroce, / e tu, madre d’Amor, col tuo giocondo / e lieto aspetto, e ‘l tuo figliuol veloce / co’ dardi suoi possenti in ogni mondo ; / e sostenete e la mano e la voce / di me che ‘ntendo I vostri effetti dire / con poco bene e pin d’assai martire.”

²⁵⁰ Almost every critic has addressed it, in a more or less detailed way. See for instance Anderson, *Before the Knight’s Tale*, 14-17 and 20-21, Bruni, *Boccaccio*, 190, Martinez, “Before the *Teseida*,” 205-207, and Sherberg, “Girl Outside the Window,” 96, for important reflections on the passage.

sia graziosa a chi ne fia lettore
o in altra maniera ascoltatore. (I.2)

Here, in the proem, *Vita nuova* XXV is directly referenced as the beginning of the discourse on Italian vernacular literature and its origins in love poetry. Associated in such a prominent position in the poem, key words like “rima,” “antica,” and “latino” do resonate with that foundational Dantean passage:

prima è da intendere che *anticamente non erano dicitori d'amore in lingua volgare, anzi erano dicitori d'amore certi poete in lingua latina*; tra noi, dico [...] non volgari ma litterati poete queste cose trattavano. E non è molto numero d'anni passati, che appariro prima questi poete volgari; ché dire per rima in volgare tanto è quanto dire per versi in latino, secondo alcuna proporzione. [...]. E lo primo che cominciò a dire sì come poeta volgare, si mosse però che volle fare intendere le sue parole a donna, a la quale era malagevole d'intendere li versi latini. E questo è contra coloro che rimano sopra altra matera che amorosa, con ciò sia cosa che cotale modo di parlare fosse dal principio trovato per dire d'amore. (*Vita nuova*, XXV.3-6, emphasis added)

Love poetry is the only genre allowed here by Dante, as the one through which Italian vernacular literature first emerged (this orientation will not remain the same in the *Commedia*, though even there the history of vernacular literature is mainly reconstructed through the presence – direct or indirect – of love poets). Even if this might be meant as a critique of another vernacular poet like Guittone, and despite the range of genres, styles, and modes authorized by the *Commedia*, Boccaccio astutely seizes the opportunity to follow and twist the pre-*Commedia* dictum of *Vita nuova* XXV, so as to present the *Teseida* as a legitimate development of the poetics of both *Vita nuova* and *Commedia*. Dante's alleged etiology of vernacular poetry (i.e., the necessity to be understood by a woman not familiar with Latin) is mirrored by Boccaccio in the framing device of an elegiac epistle from the author to his beloved: the motor of writing is love (similar erotic framings characterize two earlier works, the *Filostrato* and *Filocolo*).

While reenacting the primal scene of the origins of Italian literature in the frame and the proem of the *Teseida* (where the subject matter is accordingly introduced as more erotic than epic or martial), Boccaccio recast it within the new perspective given by the dominant generic affiliation of the poem: the epic, as a continuation or development of love. Such perspective is concurrent with the converse one (love as a continuation or development of the epic) authorized by the fact, manifest to moderately cultivated readers, that the *Teseida* derives and digresses from the *Thebaid*. In this post-Dantean discourse (at once pre- and post-*Commedia*), love constitutes the origin of the genres of Italian literature. In the beginning is the matter of love, but that is not enough; hence the epic.

As recommended in *De vulgari eloquentia* II.6.7, the vernacular writer should profitably study the canon of antiquity's *regulate poetae*, whose works are the core of the epic tradition: "Virgilium videlicet, Ovidium Metamorfoseos, Statium atque Lucanum." Following this advice, the *Teseida* illustrates how the vast scope of epic *translatio* originates from and returns to love as the primary force of *translatio* itself. If we consider again the *ottava* XII.84, where Boccaccio claims to have occupied the seat of the song of arms declared vacant by Dante in the field of Italian literature, it will become clearer why Boccaccio left for the envoy his most explicit authorial claim to epic authority. In terms of literary history, this newly-acquired status is made possible by the potentialities of eros as an agent of generic evolution; the epic stems from love poetry as a differentiation in the growing corpus of Italian vernacular poetry – a differentiation necessary to establish a new tradition.

Boccaccio significantly juxtaposes the triumph of courtly eros to the epic-minded envoy: when book XII is over, the poem comes to an end with the author's sonnet to the Muses, who reply with another sonnet that embeds Fiammetta's response to the poem, in a sort of double female voice. In proposing a hybrid epic/erotic title – *Teseida delle nozze d'Emilia* – Fiammetta echos *Inferno* V.113-114: “Ahi, quante d'amor forze in costor foro!,” that brings us back to the very beginning of the prologue of the *Teseida* (“Come che ad memoria tornandomi le felicità trapassate, nella miseria vedendomi dov'io sono mi sieno di grave dolore manifesta cagione”), where echoed *Inferno* V.121-123 has been already echoed.²⁵¹ The narratives of the text and of its frame must be read through each other;²⁵² more importantly, epic and eros must be read through each other, in a dialogue set in motion by on love as a genre-builder and genre-shifter. A successor of Dante's *Commedia*, Boccaccio includes the authorial *persona* in the text's generic interplay. Yet he refrains from placing the *poeta-personaggio* at the center of the verse narrative: from beginning to end, the *Teseida* remains a poem of multiple generic perspectives, without a unifying perspective that could transcend all the differences and contradictions of the text.

3.2.5. To Begin with the Matter of Love (II): The Amazons

To better appreciate the potential for variation in Boccaccio's relationship with the encyclopedia of the epic, we should now reflect on the presence of the love-motif in *Teseida* I, and on its implications in terms of genre and gender. This section will lay the ground for the dialectic between the epic and romance in books III-XII.

²⁵¹ *Inf.* V.113-114: “quanti dolci pensier, quanto disio / menò costoro al doloroso passo!.” *Inf.* V.121-123: “Nessun maggior dolore / che ricordarsi del tempo felice / ne la miseria.”

²⁵² As suggested by Smarr, *Boccaccio*, 64.

As noted above, the role of women is one of the more generative paradoxes of the epic as a genre. The range of positions defined by a desire of which they can be either subjects or objects is well represented by the two opposite Virgilian poles of Dido and Lavinia. Whatever the outcome caused by their actions, or even by their mere presence, they bear the marks of an otherness that is at the root of the epic, though as something that must ultimately be suppressed or controlled. Emilia is a new Helen of Troy, transposed from the vast scenario of a collective war (such as in the *Iliad* or in the second half of the *Aeneid*) to the private rivalry of two individuals in a courtly setting: before reaching book III, where this change of scale and scope first takes place, the poem tackles the male-against-female conflict through Theseus's Amazonian war in *Teseida* I.

His campaign has rightly attracted critical attention from a variety of angles: as a fight against difference and otherness, to impose order on the uncivilized²⁵³ and to domesticate transgressive femininity,²⁵⁴ or as an attempt to erase the tragic memory of the epic genre from a medievalized courtly version of antiquity.²⁵⁵ Nevertheless, all scholarly readers seem to agree on the fact that Theseus cannot fully accomplish his task. It must be noted, however, that the intention of the *Teseida* may not coincide with the intention of its eponymous hero:²⁵⁶ from the point of view of the text as a whole, the Amazons are there certainly to be tamed and then loved, but also to give Boccaccio an opportunity to explore and open up the epic code.

²⁵³ Maisch, "Boccaccio's *Teseida*," 90.

²⁵⁴ Freccero, "Amazon to Courtly Lady," 227.

²⁵⁵ Wetherbee, "History and Romance," 178.

²⁵⁶ Half-eponymous, to put it correctly: we should not forget that Theseus represents only half of the title.

The war against the Amazons moves from the collective (the women as a group slaughtering Greek men) to the private (Theseus and Hippolyta as a married couple, and Emilia as an individual presented after the war); book II with the Theban war and the rescue of Arcita and Palemone follows the same pattern. Then, with *Teseida* V, the focus shifts again, from private to collective action: the eruption of Arcita and Palemone's private violence is soon to be tempered and regulated by Theseus's intervention, particularly by his decision to translate the Thebans' rivalry into a miniature epic battle in the Athenian amphitheater. This symmetry of patterns alerts us to what is at the core of Boccaccio's operation on the epic as integral to the process of vernacular *translatio*: war and love, epic and anti-epic, are reversible motifs, that represent different points of entry into and exit from the configuration of genres. If *Teseida* I is a *mise-en-abîme* of the whole poem, it is so precisely because it displays, in miniature, that very reversibility.

When the cause of Arcita and Palemone's rivalry is first exposed in the proem, we have the first mention of the Amazons, by an adjective that qualifies Emilia: "a quistione, / parenti essendo, per soverchio amare / Emilia bella, vennero, amazona; / donde l'un d'essi perdeo la persona" (I.5.5-8). "Amazona" might have been a word demanded by the rhyming couplet at the end of the *ottava*; nonetheless, the association is striking in retrospect, for two reasons. First, as we have already seen, Emilia appears in the post-war section of book I, and for the entire poem she seems free from the ominous marks of Amazonian violence; "amazona" in rhyme-position, however, underscores an unsettling

aspect of Emilia - and of her gender - in respect of the poem's dominant epic genre.²⁵⁷ Second, "Emilia bella [...] amazona" implies a revision of the representation of the Amazons in the *Thebaid* and in other historical accounts, where they are portrayed as barbarous and unnatural, hostile to both love and civilization.²⁵⁸

The "beautiful Amazon" is a figure that reveals the way Boccaccio rewrites Statius in another direction, that is, by turning epic into eros. Ovid, who took the opposite path from epic to eros, provides Boccaccio with a general revisionary strategy,²⁵⁹ but also with a more specific pattern of generic change. It is the male-to-female turn occurring in the transition between books II and III of the *Ars amatoria* that is recalled in the *Teseida*, which echoes Ovid's playful epic reference to the Amazons:

Me vatem celebrate, viri, mihi dicite laudes,
 Cantetur toto nomen in orbe meum.
 Arma dedi vobis: dederat Vulcanus Achilli;
 Vincite muneribus, vicit ut ille, datis.
 Sed quicumque meo superarit Amazona ferro,
 Inscibat spoliis "NASO MAGISTER ERAT."
 Ecce, rogant tenerae, sibi dem praecepta, puellae:
 Vos eritis chartae proxima cura meae! (*Ars am.* II.739-744)

Arma dedi Danais in Amazonas; arma supersunt,
 Quae tibi dem et turmae, Penthesilea, tuae.
 Ite in bella pares; vincant, quibus alma Dione

²⁵⁷ That would be part of the strategy of "recognition and containment," or "domestication" which, according to Freccero, "Amazon to Courtly Lady," 241, underlies Boccaccio's generic hybridizations. I would contend that what could be a "containment" of the characters' potential development (e.g., the female warriors turned into docile wives) results in a broadening of perspectives on a broader textual level. If the evolution of the female characters is unquestionably thwarted, the text still evolves, through femininity, toward an Ovidian feminization and eroticization of the epic code. Cf. Feeney, "Epic Hero," for a critique of the centering of the total meaning of an epic text on a single hero.

²⁵⁸ See how the Amazons appear in Theseus's triumph: "ipsae autem nondum trepidae sexumue fatentur, / nec uulgare gemunt, aspernanturque precari, / et tantum innuptae quaerunt delubra Mineruae" (*Theb.* XII.529-531). The Boccaccian remark on the beautiful Amazon would be totally out of place here. Even the following lines in the *Thebaid*, which show Hyppolita pregnant, "tamed" and "civilized" by Theseus, are substantially devoid of eroticism.

²⁵⁹ See Hagedorn, *Abandoned Women*, 11-12.

Faverit et toto qui volat orbe puer.
Non erat armatis aequum concurrere nudas;
Sic etiam vobis vincere turpe, viri. (*Ars. am.* III.1-6)

Rhetorically, *arma* and Amazons are the pivots of gender transition. After equipping men with the arms necessary to win female warriors in an epicized erotic struggle, Ovid reverses the orientation of his instructions and addresses the “Amazons” themselves, so that they too could win the prize of love – or could at least be “armed” enough to give men the satisfaction of having conquered a valorous foe.

In a way certainly meaningful to Boccaccio, Ovid alters the sense of female resistance: first, women are named “Amazons” because they resist male assaults; then, they are “Amazons” because they too are capable of erotically engaging the enemy. Ovid’s “beautiful Amazons,” in other words, are radically different both from Statius’ abject war captives, as well as from Virgil’s beautiful and chaste Camilla. In Ovid’s trope, every generic marker proves to be twofold, as it can lean towards either love or war, as illustrated by the passage quoted above: while the art of love turns into the art of epic war, the Trojan war evoked through Achilles and Penthesilea turns into a matter of love.

The incipit of the *Amores*, too, assigns to this kind of generic hybridization an ironically foundational role: “Arma gravi numero violentaque bella parabam / edere, materia conveniente modis. / Par erat inferior versus — risisse Cupido / dicitur atque unum surripuisse pedem” (I.1.1-4). Uncontrollable Cupid subtracts a “foot” from the poet ready to start a martial epic in hexameters so that what remains is the elegiac meter. The potentiality for code-variation summed up in this vignette is the same that underlies Boccaccio’s poem as a whole, beyond mere parody or reduction of the “major” genre.

Hence inconsistency takes up a special meaning. The presentation of the Amazons in the *Teseida*, for instance, juxtaposes the language of power and that of desire. The Scythian women's revolt against the male rule is described by means of a reference to the Danaids, "come fer le nipoti di Belo" (I.7.1.), urged to kill their husbands by their father Danaus' fear of losing his kingdom, as Boccaccio's gloss duly explains. In the following *ottava*, Ipolita is introduced on quite a different note: "Ipolita gentil, mastra di guerra" (I.8.8), a beautiful oxymoron that introduces us to the discourse of *disio* together with the discourse of war. This conflicting combination in the subsequent *ottava*, through a concessive clause that de-centers the theme of *gentilezza* (one of the most important notions in the recent tradition of Italian poetry, especially in the *stil novo*) only to make room again for the theme of the Amazons' unnatural self-rule:

La quale, ancora che femina fosse
 e di bellezze piena oltre misura,
 prese la signoria, e sì rimosse
 da sé ciascuna feminil paura,
 e in tal guisa ordinò le sue posse
 che 'l regno suo e sé fece sicura;
 né di vicine genti avea dottanza,
 sì si fidava nella sua possanza. (I.9)

The text of the *ottava* interweaves the language of power and the language of desire, no matter if the Amazons as characters reject the connection. In the gloss to I.6.1, discussed above, Boccaccio speaks about the pleasure that his readers will take from the narrative of the Amazonian war, allegedly foreign and unusual, we can now see that such a claim implies the interweaving of political and sexual desire.²⁶⁰ Therefore, to say that "the epic

²⁶⁰ The very use of stock phrasings from the *cantari* tradition as well as from vernacular love poetry in the description of Ipolita and the Amazons, so often played down by critics as a set of commonplaces, serves to highlight the extent to which the epic has always been both driven and ridden by the passion of love:

character of the female warriors is suppressed by Teseo's complete control over them, by the introduction of the courtly object of love, and by the insistence of the language of courtly description,"²⁶¹ does not do justice to Boccaccio's genius for hybridization, since from the outset the *Teseida* undermines the possibility of drawing a fixed dividing line between the epic and the courtly. There is instead a dynamics of variation, that runs through the poem and brings to the fore unexpected proximities between the subjects involved in the generic construction of the text, even if in themselves (e.g., "Theseus" or "the Amazons") they might seem utterly incompatible.²⁶² Multiple possibilities are simultaneously present; for instance, Ipolita can be *bella* and *gentile*, while being compared to a boar in the first epic simile of the *Teseida*, in I.38-39. We can call this process an Ovidianization of the epic code – inspired not only by the *Ovidius maior* of the *Metamorphoses* but also, and maybe chiefly, by the other Ovid, the elegist and master of love. In the *Filocolo*, Boccaccio already celebrated *Ovidius minor* as *the* author shaping Florio and Biancifiore's sentimental education: "santo libro d'Ovidio, nel quale il sommo poeta mostra come i santi fuochi di Venere si deano ne' freddi cuori con sollecitudine accendere" (I.45.6).²⁶³

Boccaccio disseminates his early texts with easily recognizable markers of epic no less than of erotic commonplaces.

²⁶¹ Freccero, "Amazon to Courtly Lady," 234.

²⁶² E.g. it is a similar situation in a warlike setting (preparations for the conflict) that characters as divergent as Ipolita and Theseus address their group by means of phrasings and stylistic features taken from Ulysses's "orazion picciola" in *Inferno* XXVI (see respectively I.23-35 and II.44-47).

²⁶³ Velli, *Petrarca e Boccaccio*, 153, quotes *Tristia* II. 371-372 as a sample of what Boccaccio could find in Ovid the elegist to support the notion that even the Trojan war was a love-driven war. It might be argued that the Ovidian patterns for the reversibility of love and war, or elegy and epic, work on a variety of scales, ranging from the private to the collective.

The most Ovidian moment in the book on the Amazonian campaign is the epistolary exchange between Theseus and Ipolita, which breaks the narrative continuum with a device that has no precedents in the great ancient epics; instead, it harks back to Ovid's *Heroides*, a text that thematizes "the multiplicity of roles that all readers, all writers, and all texts must play in the production of literary meaning."²⁶⁴ Theseus's campaign is in a stalemate: he has already put the Amazons to rout on the shore of Scythia, but cannot conquer their citadel, so valiant is the women's defense. Until he contrives a different strategy: to dig tunnels in order to make the citadel's walls crumble. Having heard of this plan, Ipolita raises a new internal wall and finally decides to write a letter to Theseus:

Quando la donna del cavare intese,
dubbiò, e tosto di mura novelle
un cerchio dentro più stretto comprese,
il qual fer tosto donne e damigelle;
appresso inchiostro e carta tosto prese
e con mani delicate e belle
una pistola scrisse: e trovar feo
due savie donne, e mandòlla a Teseo. (I.96.5-8).

The contrast between the first and the second half of the *ottava* opposes action to letter-writing, with a sudden change of scale and imagery from the fortress's walls to ink, paper, and hands. If "delicate e belle," another *cantare*-like phrasing, serves to redirect our attention from warfare to beauty, the delivery and reception of Ipolita's letter suspends the

²⁶⁴ Farrell, "Reading and Writing the *Heroides*," 309. A modern precedent in the epic tradition in Walter de Chatillon's *Alexandreis* (II.18-44), with an exchange of epistles between Darius and Alexander. If, as in the *Teseida*, here we have a correspondence between two enemy leaders threatening each other, an ingredient essential to Boccaccio's poem is still missing, that is, the gender/genre opposition that could have been retrieved from Ovid only. This, however, could be one of the numberless instances of Boccaccio's genius for hybridization and interpolation of sources. For a hypothesis on the source the *Teseida*'s epistles see Corsi, "Corrispondenza Ippolita-Teseo," where the proposed model is the *vita* of Aurelianus written by Flavius Vopiscus and included in the *Historia Augusta*: an exchange between the emperor Aurelianus and his enemy Zenobia, queen of Palmira. Whether or not this is actually Boccaccio's source, Corsi rightly acknowledges that incomparable are the quite flat usage of the epistolary device in the *Historia* and its poetic and metapoetic reinvention in the *Teseida*.

conflict and gives rise to a courtly scene in the Greek camp (I.97-98). There, Theseus gathers his “baroni” and reads the epistle brought by Ipolita’s envoys, “donne belle e di gran core, / con compagnia leggiadra disarmate, / vestite in drappi di molto valore.” To be sure, such a description well represents that elegant and pleasing middle style that Auerbach singled out as a trademark feature of the *romans d’antiquité*,²⁶⁵ with which Boccaccio was extremely familiar. Yet there is more to that, since such scene provides an ideal background to a major pattern that the epistles draw from the *Heroides*, and that overlaps with the military conflict in progress: a woman that finds herself in a position of inferiority or disadvantage or hopelessness, having being abandoned or deceived or rejected by a man, writes to that very man to try to win back his favor, by means of verbal persuasion.

Ipolita’s epistle indirectly recalls the traditional predominance of femininity (albeit fictional) in this kind of writing, in step with the *Heroides* themselves. Ovid’s collection consists of a first series (I-XV) of letters written by women only, and a second shorter series with letters by men followed by women’s responses (XV-XXII, for a total of three exchanges): with nine *ottave*, Ipolita’s letter is more extended than Theseus’ reply (only three *ottave*), and more supple and varied in terms of tones, undertones, constructions, and arguments, although in the end, as is the case with most of Ovid’s heroines, her verbal art proves of no avail against Theseus’s will to win the war. In sum, Ipolita’s epistle can be properly read as a gendered elegy framed within an epic setting.²⁶⁶ Accordingly, her writing

²⁶⁵ Auerbach, “Camilla,” 205.

²⁶⁶ Boccaccio’s exploration of femininity and elegy will find its climax in the *Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta* which, differently from Ipolita’s letter, is presented as a post-factum speech.

is interspersed with the language of *disio*, in such a nuanced fashion that it ranges from violence to enchantment and pleasure. The following stanzas, one after another, eloquently illustrate such variety:

E poi venuto sé ad assediarmi,
come nemica d'ogni tuo piacere,
e hai più volte provate tue armi
a le mie mura, e ancor potere
da quelle non avesti di cacciarmi;
per che, per adempiere lo reo volere
ch'hai contro a me, la terra fai cavare,
per poi potermi senza arme pigliare.

Certo di ciò la cagion non conosco,
ch'io non ti offesi mai, né son Medea
che per invidia ti voglia dar toscio;
anzi la tua virtute mi piaceva
quando sì ragionava talor nosco,
e di vederti gran disio avea,
e ancor disiava tua contezza,
tanto gradiva tua somma prodezza. (I.101-102)

While *ottava* 101 depicts Theseus's attack and siege as a rape-like conquering of the object of his desire,²⁶⁷ in *ottava* 102 Ipolita portrays herself as the subject of a less violent and more noble desire, expressed by echoing the style and especially the lexicon of *stil novo*, with an accumulation of desire-related words ("piaceva," "gran disio avea, / et ancor disiava," "tanto gradiva"). Like Ovid's heroines, she opposes male and female desire, trying to persuade the addressee of the more genuine nature of her love, which entails sincere appreciation of the quality of Theseus and righteous disapproval of his less-than-honorable

²⁶⁷ Cf. the simile describing Theseus fighting the Amazons in I.74.1-4: "Né altramente infra le pecorelle / si ficca il lupo per fame rabbioso, / col morso strangolando or queste or quelle, / finch'è satiate il suo disio guloso."

strategy to conquer the citadel.²⁶⁸ Consequently, Theseus's sarcasm upon reading the letter is not a mere reflection of Boccaccio's misogyny but the kind of response traditionally demanded by the elegiac code of the *Heroides*: almost all letter-writing is ultimately ineffectual ("Ma di cio veggò contrario l'effecto," I.103.1).

Why, then, did Boccaccio insert this epistolary interlude or digression? The reason has to do more with the dialogue of genres and traditions than with narrative per se: contrary to Theseus's letter, Ipolita's implies that it is the female subject who acts as a genre-shifter, even before the end of the military campaign and the beginning of marriage time. It is not Theseus's who "converts" the Amazon queen to love; in fact, her letter already bears the marks of love, a force which is creating a change in her, in the narrative, in the text, and in the reader. If further evidence were needed, one could turn to the Dantean *tessera* in the fifth *ottava* of the letter: "sanza di te avere alcun sospetto," manifestly echoing *Inferno* V.129: although post-war marital love, in the *Teseida*, fortunately turns potential tragedy into comedy, the Amazon's complaint to Theseus resonates with Francesca's speech, where most notably Dante writes an etiology of the growth of love from *cor gentil*.

Once Ipolita surrenders to Theseus's siege, the erotic code becomes dominant and influences Theseus' himself, who falls in love with the Amazon as soon as he has won the war. Yet Boccaccio continually moves back and forth between epic and eros, even when either one appears to hold sway over the narrative. A most interesting example is when

²⁶⁸ A dichotomy remarked by the rhyming of "cavaliere" and "barattiere" in I.104.1, 3, reminiscent of the incipit of *Ars amatoria* III where, as we have seen, the real conquest takes place only when "Amazons" too have *arma*: "per poi potermi sanz'arme pigliare" is the sharp conclusion of *ottava* 101.

Theseus is rapt in the contemplation of Ipolita's beauty that he literally cannot see the fortress he has just taken after so many labors: "ma Teseo gli occhi non teneva attesi / a ciò [the Amazons' palace] guardar, ma il viso dilicato / d'Ipolita mirando, con accesi / sospir dicea: 'Costei trapassa Elena, / cui io furtaì, d'ogni bellezza piena'" (I.130.4-8).²⁶⁹ Theseus is speaking about his own abduction of Helen, but of course Paris's rape and the war that will ensue are all present, as a background in the reader's memory (significantly, at the other end of the poem, in XII.68, Menelaus will compare Emilia, Ipolita's sister, to Helen). With that reference to the *Iliad* and its mythographic antecedent, the epic resurfaces in a seemingly incidental fashion as soon as it ceases to provide the overall pattern to Boccaccio's narrative: no genre transition is stable in the *Teseida*. This is what characterizes most of the epistles in the *Heroides*, which are meant to be read against the background of epic wars (e.g., Troy) and epic journeys (e.g., Ulysses, the Argonauts): Ovid's allusive art hints at how erotic elegy branches off into other genres, particularly the epic. This hybridization principle is at the core of Boccaccio's generic strategy and orients the development of the *Teseida*.

3.3. Epic and Romance

At the beginning of *Teseida* II, in the transition from the Amazonian to the Theban campaign, love and the peaceful enjoyment of its pleasures are seen as a disturbance of

²⁶⁹ The significance of this turn, conveyed through Theseus's forgetfulness of his very recent epic memory, is indirectly remarked in book III, after Arcita and Palemone's falling in love for Emilia. Longing for her in their prison, they do forget Thebes: "Era a costor della memoria uscita / l'antica Tebe e 'l loro alto legnaggio, / e similmente se n'era partita / la 'nfelicità loro, e il dammaggio / ch'avevan ricevuto, e la loro vita / ch'era cattiva, e 'l lor grande eretaggio; / e dove queste cose esser soleano / Emilia solamente vi teneano." Affected by erotic desire is both their long- and short-term epic memory, namely, Thebes's long history (Statius's *longa retro series*) and Theseus's recent destruction of Thebes, which led to their imprisonment.

Theseus's epic call. This sounds like a tentative normalization of the treatment of erotic matter in *Teseida* I as a whole (that is, not only from Theseus's perspective but from the book as a system of relations); that treatment, in fact, is much closer to the poetics of dynamic impurity that Boccaccio had empirically learned by assimilating "the ability of the Augustan to expose an enduring generic prejudice" - i.e., the essentialized opposition of epic and elegy, or war and love - "to continual renegotiation."²⁷⁰ Whereas a narrative under the sign of the epic has to struggle with eros as a destabilizing agent (as in *Aeneid* IV), a text qualified as elegiac has, among its typical generic markers, the rhetorical move of stepping back from the grandiloquence and scope of the epic, particularly from the theme of *arma* (as shown by Ovid in the incipit of the *Amores*). A tendency toward the essentialization of the genre is not only apparent; it is necessary as a springboard for the explorations of the possibilities of generic hybridization. So when Ovid in the *Remedia amoris* writes: "Tantum se nobis elegi debere fatentur, / quantum Vergilio nobile debet epos" (395-396), his statement of generic and authorial dichotomy must be taken not at face value or one-sidedly, but in light of all the interplay of elegy and epic in his works.²⁷¹

What Boccaccio shows us in *Teseida* I, in step with Virgil and Ovid, is the polyphony of genre in poetry. More importantly, he demonstrates how any genre, even one as highly subject to essentialization as the epic, results from modulation of elements (formal, thematic, rhetorical, anthropological, etc.) shared with other genres, as if they all sprang from a common origin historically articulated through a range of variations. To

²⁷⁰ Hinds, "Essential Epic," 223.

²⁷¹ It is noteworthy, as an instance of the ineradicable indeterminacy of genre, that the tradition of the *Remedia*, until this successful conjectural reading proposed by Muretus, had "opus" instead of "epos."

rephrase this notion in Bakhtinian and anti-Bakhtinian terms: if genre-as-monologue is a myth taken by poets and critics alike as a foil to their practice of genre-as-dialogue, then novelization is the “natural” condition of any genre at any point in its historical existence. The more so for the epic: its traditional encyclopedic tension allows writers to experiment with a most comprehensive range of variations, triggered by proximity with other genres. This possibility, however, is not readily at hand, as if it were automatically granted; it must be obtained, instead, through the practical labor of writing. A set of elements must be leveraged in order to give way to intra- and inter-generic circulations. The major element used by Boccaccio in the *Teseida* is the experience of love, of which some generic implications will be further explored in this section.

If earlier we saw how in *Teseida* I the theme of love functions as a genre-shifter that multiplies and entangles the traditions to which the poem is affiliated, we will now consider the shifts that love brings about in the continuation of the *Teseida*, right after its two *premissioni*. It is a transition critical to the entire architecture of the *Teseida*, and its effect has been commonly called “romance.” It is indeed from the critical topos of epic-versus-romance or epic-to-romance that the subject must be approached.

In the *Teseida* epic and romance cannot be clearly discerned from each other; almost any generic shift then generates another shift in another direction. In other words, both romance and epic can span the entire text of the *Teseida* and characterize it in relation to the ancients as well as to the moderns (the French *romans d’antiquité* and the Italian

tradition).²⁷² What we have, in short, is the co-existence, and combination, of two narrative forms that are partially similar in some key formal features and in their aspiration to totality, yet are non-coincident in their relationship with the world and in the forms of subjectivity they imply.

To define “romance” is no less a complicated and tricky task than to define “epic.” In either case, to merely venture in a terminological exercise does not seem suitable to the matter. Again, it is the practice of reading and writing that has the last word on genre, even if only provisionally. Much more to the point is to start from the mutual articulation of romance and epic, as if they shared a certain indeterminacy that lies behind their generic articulation. This is what has been overlooked by many readings of the *Teseida*, which have taken genre (either epic or romance) as a given instead of considering it as a work in progress. Nonetheless, some lines of criticism do problematize epic and romance: a quick summary of their contributions and impasses will help us find a way into the generic evolution of the poem.

Undoubtedly, Wetherbee’s studies are the most lucid representatives of an approach that historicizes the movement from epic to romance, seeing generic transformation as part of a larger cultural *translatio*. Not differently from any medieval writer engaging the classical tradition “to come to terms with the conflicting tendencies of the literary modes he seeks to align,” Boccaccio moves towards a “suppression of the historical and emotional

²⁷² Segre, “What Bakhtin Left Unsaid,” 34, observes that romance, established as an autonomous genre in the XII and XIII centuries, reveals “a clear hegemonic tendency since it aspires to somehow encompass other genres, becoming, rather than a ‘guide’ genre, a ‘total’ genre.”

realities that create the tragic density of classical epic.”²⁷³ As in the Old French *romans d’antiquité*, the meaning of the *Teseida* would thus result from “a tension between the memory of epic tragedy and the demands of courtly ideology,” the latter being implemented within the frame of courtly rituals.²⁷⁴ The problem with medieval romance, in other words, would lie in its effort to create an unproblematic world, in which courtly rituals contain and defuse the epic’s friction with history. Theseus’s Athens is the most representative figure of this tendency, which culminates with the amphitheater where the unruly violence of Arcita and Palemone’s rivalry is contained and translated into a regulated miniature epic battle; the same tendency, however, is disrupted by incidental returns of the repressed (e.g., Arcita’s death after his victory, or the many hints at Theseus’s rape of Helen in the past). In Wetherbee’s view, Boccaccio is both influenced by the inclination of romance towards the neutralization or suspension of history, and aware of the limitations imposed by such a de-problematizing approach.²⁷⁵ Similarly to Bruni’s interpretation of the *Teseida* as a *reductio* of the epic,²⁷⁶ Wetherbee’s critical stance implies that the medieval romance is ultimately alien to the epic, whose genuine intentionality loses scope and momentum under the trappings of an incongruous “pseudo-classicism.”²⁷⁷ Therefore, Wetherbee’s remarkable historicization of the epic-to-romance *translatio* still holds, partially, to a critical opposition that can hardly fit the generic interplay established in *Teseida* I and II. What spaces of transformation *and* continuity between epic and romance can be found in Boccaccio’s text?

²⁷³ Wetherbee, “Romance and Epic,” 304.

²⁷⁴ Wetherbee, “History and Romance,” 178.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 181-182.

²⁷⁶ Bruni, *Boccaccio*, 197.

²⁷⁷ Wetherbee, “History and Romance,” 177.

Does the *Teseida* invite us to read differently into this duality of narrative and ideological possibilities?

Another way of addressing the issue can be found in Anderson's volume. One of his crucial assumptions is that the "much maligned 'romance'," frequently highlighted as a flaw in the young Boccaccio's grand epic project, is actually the result of his "creative transformation of a single epic," namely Statius's *Thebaid*, imitated not directly and sequentially but through a skilful use of "learned allusions," which for Anderson mostly lie on two levels: "formal similes" and "main action."²⁷⁸ These would be the rules of the game Boccaccio learned through his readings of classical epics as they were mediated by their post-classical and medieval transmission. It is impossible to underestimate the contribution given by Anderson to a proper understanding of the epic orientation of *Teseida*: Boccaccio's poem must be studied *iuxta propria principia*, which does not coincide with modern readers' conceptions (if not misconceptions) of the epic, in so far they are only based on classical models – better to say, on a certain reading of classical models. While Wetherbee proposes a historicization of the discontinuity of epic and romance, Anderson invites us to historicize epic itself and to notice how the generic operations of the *Teseida* must be read within the range of possibilities offered by the epic code at that historical juncture. His study, however, seems to bracket the issue of romance in the *Teseida*. Could it really be only a sort of optical illusion, a consequence of the difficulty in reading the historical variant of the epic assumed and refashioned by Boccaccio? What is the function of romance if we can explain (and dissolve) its presence through a set of allusive references

²⁷⁸ Anderson, *Before the Knight's Tale*, 22.

to the *Thebaid*? While opening up new interpretive vistas about the *Teseida* as an epic, Anderson also narrows the code of epic variants Boccaccio engages with: the *Teseida* would imitate only one work, the *Thebaid*, and all its transformations would amount to a series of creative responses to the Statian model. As the analysis of *Teseida* I and II should have illustrated sufficiently, the relationship with the *Thebaid* as a primary matrix and model of the poem is complicated by means of additions, deviations, and variations that make room for a variety of genres and traditions, from Latin antiquity to vernacular modernity. Romance does emerge from this heterogeneous space, which extends both at the edge and the core of the epic.

A third complementary line of interpretation is exemplified by Warren Ginsberg's brief but lucid essay on the *Filostrato* and *Teseida*. His discussion of the manifestations of irascible and concupiscible love, by the long gloss to VII.50 (the passage on the temple of Venus) attributed to Arcita and Palemone respectively, ends with the presentation of Theseus's Amazonian campaign as an announcement and anticipation of the story of the two Thebans: "With Teseo, in whom the irascible dominates and gives birth to the concupiscible, Boccaccio presents as epic what Palemone and Arcite play out as romance."²⁷⁹ Whether or not the irascible/concupiscible opposition might be taken as the key to the meaning of the poem as a whole, what counts for us here is the function of epic and romance as two modulations of the same theme through different characters, actions, scales, and narrative blocks.²⁸⁰ More than an opposition, the dialogue of epic and romance

²⁷⁹ Ginsberg, "Boccaccio's Early Romances," 41.

²⁸⁰ Cf. Wetherbee, "Romance and Epic," 177-178, where the function of the Amazonian war as a *mise-en-abyme* of the main narrative is aligned with the "legendary prehistory" condensed at the beginning of the

reveals an analogy that, paradoxically, is possible only because a degree of distinction remains which cannot be done away with; otherwise, the two poles of the analogy would irremediably blur. As configurations of experience, epic and romance are modes of relationship with the two-fold matter of the *Teseida*, which is the domain of both Mars and Venus. Thus, we cannot merely associate epic with Mars and romance with Venus, since each genre brings into the poem its particular orientation toward war *and* love. Historicization remains out of Ginsberg's analysis and yet, from his insight on the rephrasing of Theseus's epic as Arcita and Palemone's romance, a sort of history of the epic can be retraced via its interplay with romance. Another point should be added: to say that the poem begins with epic and develops into romance is still not enough to account for the many bifurcations and intersections of those two generic modulations throughout the *Teseida*, a complexity that affects Boccaccio's self-inscription in the tradition of Italian literature no less than in the tradition of classical and post-classical epic.

In the wake of the three approaches here exposed, we can now try to outline another version of the dialogue of epic and romance in the *Teseida*. The following analysis, focused on passages of the poem where love is the agent of a generic adjustment, will be based on a working definition of romance as a non-essentialized orientation. Romance, in fact, "has no meaningful existence as a static category. Rather, it is a question of genre as a process: the literary life of romance involves a series of generic transformations over time resulting in a kind of dynamic continuum."²⁸¹ What must be elucidated in Boccaccio is how, under

Roman de Thèbes and the *Roman d'Eneas* – an epic prehistory charged with the tragic historical forces that the romance-oriented evolution of the narrative will try to suppress and de-problematize.

²⁸¹ Brownlee and Scordilis Brownlee, introduction to *Romance*, 1.

the pressure of eros, the interaction of epic and romance leads to a constant diffraction of the generic configuration of the *Teseida*. As maintained by Nichols in an essay on the *Enéas*, in romance love is the main mediator between word and object, and does so by exposing itself “to the intrusion of other viewpoints while still focusing on the central perspective.”²⁸² Romance as a process may thus be also better qualified, with Fuchs, as a “literary and textual *strategy*” than as a category into which the whole of a text can fit.²⁸³ Among the strategies of romance, a few are crucial to the *Teseida*: 1) a tension between “the quest and the constant delays or detours from that quest”; 2) “a much greater emphasis on the private over the public, on the perspective of women, and on the knight’s experience of love”; 3) courtly love as “an ongoing social negotiation over the place and import of love,” in the wake of the “Ovidian erotic tradition, particularly its sophisticated conception of love as a textual performance and its imagery of erotic oxymoron.”²⁸⁴ Love, in sum, modifies and is modified in turn, as a form of experience and textuality that modulates the transformations of the epic intention of the *Teseida* within its vernacular context. Let us see it in some passages representative of Boccaccio’s overall approach.

3.3.1. To Give Mars Some Rest: Interval and Detour in *Teseida* III

At the end of book I, the first *premissione* of the poem, love prevails as a subject matter. In book II, Theseus’s enjoyment of marital love in Scythia is suspended because of its unsuitability to the hero’s calling. The new narrative of Arcita and Palemone’s rivalry, starting in book III, has love as a starting point rather than as an endpoint; in the following

²⁸² Nichols, “Amorous Imitation,” 49.

²⁸³ Fuchs, *Romance*, 9.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 19, 39, and 43.

books, the narrative will shift again from love to war again, though not because love ought to be ruled out or suspended in favor of heroic decorum. On the contrary, conflict follows when Arcita and Palemone fully yield themselves to erotic desire. Some specific textual moves rhetorically mark this shift in reverse.

To begin again from love, it is war that must be suspended, only to resurface later in a new form. Theseus had to resist the temptation of the suspension of war by undertaking one military expedition after the other, with no interval. Now, an interval is announced as early as in the introductory sonnet of book III, to set up the context in which love will emerge as the dominant force in the development of the narrative:

Nel terzo a Marte dona alcuna posa
l'autore, e discrive come Amore
d'Emilia, ella più che fresca rosa,
a' duo prigion con li suoi dardi il core
ferendo, elli accendesse in amorosa
fiamma, mostrando poi l'aspro dolore
del soverchio disio e l'animosa
voglia di far sentire il lor valore. (1-8)

Boccaccio introduces the detour of romance (“alcuna posa”) by informing the reader about the imminent suspension of his martial narrative, to be replaced by the typical patterns of erotic passion, manifest even in the vocabulary of the two quatrains of the sonnet. Another field for the variation and evolution of the text is opened, with a love triangle whose protagonists act as individuals rather than as leaders or representative of a collectivity (as was instead the case with Theseus the Greek, Hyppolita the Amazon, and Creon the Theban, in books I and II). The collective-oriented momentum of the epic narrative will not be lost, as highlighted by remembrances of Theban history: it occasionally comes to the fore

through Arcita and Palemone.²⁸⁵ However, it is love as a primarily individual experience that from now on will give shape, in contradictory ways, to Boccaccio's epic orientation.

Generic transformation is thus accurately staged by the author, who consciously presents the poem as a code in variation. In this regard, another reversal must be noted: while in book I it is the male hero, Theseus, who has to rule the situation in order to militarily and symbolically tame the transgressiveness of the Amazons, in book III a different gender-relationship is established, when the apparently passive figure of Emilia spurs the two male lovers to action. Their action, indeed, originates from a particular condition of passivity, that is, from their being exposed to the effects of eros (love as pathos). Let us remember, in any case, that in the complexity of the Boccaccian text no dominant tendency goes without its opposite, as if our reading always had to be contrapuntal: in the transition from the *premissioni* to the main storyline, we have not so much a generic interruption as a shift in the generic configuration of that section.²⁸⁶

Significantly, the introductory sonnet of book III is the only one, with the exception of that of book XII, where Boccaccio explicitly mentions himself as *l'autore* (the same term he uses to refer to himself in the glosses); the other sonnets either expose the matter impersonally or attribute the agency of the discourse to *il libro*. The mention of the author-figure reminds us of the turning point or code-variation of which he is responsible: to give Mars some rest and take a detour, from which will stem the main storyline of the

²⁸⁵ See Battles, *Medieval Tradition of Thebes*, 45-48.

²⁸⁶ Everson, *Italian Romance Epic*, 174, rightly speaks of an "alternation" of Mars and Venus (or Cupid – Venus's son), strategically established here to introduce generic variation in the rest of the poem.

poem. Consistently, *l'autore* begins book III with two *ottave* in the first person, to better accompany his readers in the transition:

Poi che alquanto il furor di Iunone
fu per Tebe distrutta temperato,
Marte nella sua fredda regione
con le sue Furie insieme s'è tornato
per che omai con più pio sermone
sarà da me di Cupido cantato
e delle sue battaglie, il quale io priego
che sia presente a ciò che di lui spiego.

Ponga ne' versi miei la sua potenza
quale e' la pose ne' cuor de' Tebani
imprigionati, sì che differenza
non sia da essi alli loro atti insani;
li qua', lontani a degna sofferenza
venir li fero a l'ultimo a le mani,
in guisa che a ciascun fu discaro,
e a l'un fu di morte caso amaro. (III.1-2)

From the war of Theseus against Creon in Thebes to the wars (“battaglie”) of Cupid, the transition is modeled on the generic turns in Ovid’s elegiac verse. Boccaccio, in fact, narrows down the scope of the narrative (from war to love) in three steps: 1) with the end of book II the narrative of Statius’s *Thebaid* is over; 2) Cupid’s battles will be the new main subject matter, with its three protagonists (Arcita, Palemone, and Emilia) tangentially introduced in book I and II; 3) Arcita and Palemone’s rivalry will echo the ruinous fight of Eteocles and Polynices over Thebes, now displaced in Athens and transposed on another scale, more erotic and individual than political and collective. The *ottava* II.2 can be read as a rephrasing of the incipit of the *Thebaid*, which here too, in subdued light, provides the pattern for a new beginning. Let us quote it again: “Fraternas acies alternasque regna profanes / decertata odiis sontesque eolvere Thebas / Pierius menti calor incidit” (1-3). Boccaccio’s “atti insani” echoes Statius’s “profanis [...] odiis,” as if with the second

beginning of the *Teseida* the subject matter remained the same as in the *Thebaid*, though in another form and dimension. Moreover, the wicked, spiral-like sequentiality of the “longa retro series” of Theban history (*Theb.* I.4) is brilliantly resumed by Boccaccio with the juxtaposition of a reference to the ending of the *Thebaid* (the destruction of the city) and a variation on its incipit. The very fact of beginning again *with Thebes but in Athens* indicates the double process of continuity and discontinuity implied by the shift of focus from war to love.

Incipit romance, we could say. The generic operation of the *Teseida* stands out from the tradition of romance, especially its Old French corpus, thanks to Boccaccio’s genius for inscribing literary history and its variations within the text. Secondly, if the poem oscillates between epic and romance as “total” genres, it is otherwise true that, from a post-Dantean angle, we do have a “reduction” that consists in the miniaturization and internalization of epic patterns, recontextualized accordingly.

For Dante the door to generic reframing is the experience of the individual within the universal history of sin and redemption and, at the same time, within a particular moment of historical, cultural, and social transition; for Boccaccio, in a less transcendent perspective and yet within the same *translatio*, it is the mundane experience of love as a passion. The passivity of being struck and driven by love, as Arcita and Palemone are, is to a certain extent structurally similar to Dante’s pathos-based receptiveness, as seen in the previous chapter. To put it in a slightly different perspective, the passivity of love-struck characters in the *Teseida*, and the way it translates into action, points at something that lies beneath the more action-oriented examples in the epic tradition: receptiveness as the origin

of action (the content of a narrative) and speech (the formation of the narrative, which not by chance is attributed to the Muses in the invocation topos typical of the epic incipit). We should only think of how these two kinds of receptiveness merge in the author-figure whose voice we hear in the epistle to Fiammetta: love and poetry.

In book III, the two young Theban's falling in love bears the marks of passivity characteristic of the tradition of courtly love. Their prison with a little window ("finestretta") on the garden from which Emilia can be seen and heard ("giardino amoroso," a phrase that qualifies the *locus amoenus*) materializes this very condition of forced inactivity and heightened receptiveness:

Al suon di quella voce grazioso
Arcita si levò, ch'era in prigione
allato allato al giardino amoroso,
senza niente dire a Palemone,
e una finestretta disioso
apri per meglio udir quella canzone,
e per vedere ancor chi la cantasse,
tra' ferri il capo fuori alquanto trasse.

Egli era ancora alquanto il dì scuretto,
ché l'orizzonte in parte il sol teneva,
ma non sì ch'elli con l'occhio ristretto
non iscorresse ciò che lì faceva
la giovinetta con sommo diletto,
la quale ancora esso non conosceva;
e rimirando lei fisa nel viso,
disse fra sé: "Quest'è di paradiso!." (III.11-12)

In his forced inactivity, Arcita can only hear and see. Boccaccio creates a counterpoint by connecting two spaces, the interior and the exterior. The young Theban hears a voice and instantly shines with its grace ("grazioso"), only to be enclosed, one line later, within the solid wall of his "prigione"; then the following line, which pinpoints the juxtaposition of prison and garden, conveys the urgency of desire through the doubling of an adverb ("allato

allato”) that suggests de-centering and repetition. Arcita is now affected by a new and strange longing, which makes him eager to perceive more of the origin of that voice: “una finestretta disioso / aprì.” He is a spectator exposed to the effects of his receptiveness (“sommo diletto”), visualized in dynamic and yet non-active postures such as “con l’occhio ristretto” and “rimirando lei fissa nel viso.”²⁸⁷ Palemone is invited to participate in this enchantment, in the same terms: “O Palemon, vieni a *vedere*: / Vener è qui discesa veramente! / Non l’odi tu cantar?” (III.13.2-4). The receptiveness of the two young men reaches a climax of pain and joy when, one after another, Arcita and Palemone sees in Emilia’s eyes Cupid with two golden arrows:

Arcita disse: “Sì, e’ m’ha piagato
in guisa tal che di dolor m’acora,
se io non son da quella dea atato. –
Allora Palemon tutto stordito
gridò: – Omè, che l’altro m’ha ferito!” (III.17.5-8)

“Sì” and “Omè” function as indexes of the pathos which makes Arcita and Palemone’s epic subjectivity partially different from Theseus’s, as well as from that of the great epic characters of ancient epic. And yet, given the hybridizations of epic and eros in the *Teseida* as well in the epic tradition, in Boccaccio pathos proves to be the ground from which both epic and romance originate, as narrative articulations of desire.

The language that expresses Arcita and Palemone’s affection vividly echoes that of Italian love poetry, particularly of the *stil novo*, with stock tropes (e.g., the beloved compared to an angel), although Boccaccio is closer to a fairly conventional poetic *koiné*

²⁸⁷ The male gaze of Arcita and Palemone is discussed in Gambera, “Women and Walls,” 53-56 and Weissman, “Aphrodite/Artemis // Emilia/Alison,” 100-105. My analysis does not tackle that issue, as it is concerned with gaze more as a site of receptiveness than as a means of control.

than to Dante's or Cavalcanti's semantic and conceptual density.²⁸⁸ "Questa è di paradiso" is Arcita's first comment, and then he speaks of "angelica bellezza / a noi discesa da somma altezza" (III.13.7-8). Not being able to satisfy their desire, the two lovesick Thebans turns their amorous *furor* into a source of verbal creativity and thus speak the language of *disio*, the same spoken in Ipolita's epistle to Theseus:

Così costor da amor faticati,
vedendo questa donna, il loro ardore
più leve sostenean; poi ritornati,
partita lei, nel lor primo furore,
in lor conforto versi misurati
sovente componean, l'alto valore
di lei cantando; e in cotale effetto
nelli lor mal sentieno alcun diletto. (III.38)

As they compose songs in meter to find solace by praising the object of their love, Arcita and Palemone re-stage the original scene of Italian literature outlined in *Vita nuova* XXV, with a variant: there occurs no direct communication between poet and woman. What matters, however, is that they are intentionally presented as lyric poets, oblivious of their epic memory and not yet entered into a romance-like succession of events. "Era a costor della memoria uscita / l'antica Tebe e 'l loro alto lignaggio" (III.36.1-2): if Theseus forgot his barely accomplished martial deeds at the sight of Ipolita in book I, now Arcita and Palemone forget the intertextuality and the genre they emerged from. Neither the narrator nor the readers can forget about it, though: Boccaccio's subtle remarks serve to remind us

²⁸⁸ On the influence of *stil novo* on the *Teseida* see some general remarks in Boitani, *Chaucer and Boccaccio*, 35-37. Cavalcanti's *canzone* "Donna me prega" and its commentary by Dino del Garbo (the only extant copy of which is in Boccaccio's codex Chigi L V 176) are explicitly referred to in the long gloss to the temples of Venus *ad* VII.50: "Il quale amore voler mostrare come per le sopradette cose si generi in noi, quantunque alla presente opera si converrebbe di dichiarare, non è mio intendimento di farlo, perciò che troppo sarebbe lunga la storia: chi desidera di vederlo, legga la canzone di Guido Cavalcanti 'Donna mi priega, etc.', e le chiose che sopra vi fece Maestro Dino del Garbo."

of the large literary and historical frame (epic and Theban history) behind the two lovers' lyrical *furor*.²⁸⁹

The text, however, is already in the mode of romance, since the forgetting of Thebes is a most extreme delay or detour, one of the typical marks of romance. At the same time, the passage under discussion is a remarkable instance of reduction or internalization, as well shown in Palemone's speech about "Amore, / ladro sottil di ciascun gentil core. // E dicoti che già sua prigionia / m'è grave più che quella di Teseo" (III.22.7-8 and 23.1-2). From now on, the narrative (especially the core conflict of Arcita and Palemone) will oscillate between the domains of Amore and of Theseus. Shifts in scale ensue, as illustrated by an epic simile about the lover's internal turmoil:

Né escon delle sicule caverne,
allora ch'Eol l'apre, sì furenti,
ora le basse e ora le superne
parti cercando, li rabbiosi venti,
come costor delle parti più interne
producean fuor sospiri assai cocenti,
ma con picciole voci, perché ancora
era la piaga fresca che gli accora. (III.27)

The construction of the comparison which runs through this *ottava* reproduces, in miniature, the pattern of the generic transition of the *Teseida*: the grand mythological and geographical image of Mount Aetna, where Aeolus compresses and then lets out the winds, is out of

²⁸⁹ That Boccaccio was aware of the metaliterary implications of the scene with Arcita and Palemone composing love songs seems out of question if we think of the passage in the *Filostrato* where lovestruck Troilo composes a song which, reported as the character's direct speech (V.65-67), turns to be a rewriting of Cino da Pistoia's famous *canzone* "La dolce vista e 'l bel guardo soave." The *ottava* introducing the song resonates with the *Teseida*: "Per che gli piacque di mostrare in versi / chi ne fosse cagione, e sospirando, / quando era assai stanco di dolersi, / alcuna sosta quasi al dolor dando, / mentre aspettava nelli tempi avversi, / con bassa voce si giva cantando / e ricreando l'anima conquisa / dal soperchio d'amore, in cotal guisa" (V.61). The reference to the *stil novo*, so explicit in the earlier poem is indirect but not less effective in the *Teseida*, a work more intensely in dialogue with the epic tradition. In the *Teseida* the contrast between the lyric and the epic is sharper, and more problematic.

proportion with the two all too human individuals; we are therefore meant to notice the change of scale. The “rabbiosi venti” that blow out from within their bodies as “sospiri assai cocenti” might still be one of those hyperboles characteristic of the descriptions of the effect on love on the lovers, but the couplet at the end of the stanza, with the adversative conjunction *ma*, clearly insists on the divergence between the two series of elements (human and divine) in the epic simile. Arcita and Palemone, in fact, vent their passion in “picciole voci”: through this phrase, in which the auditory combines with the visual, Boccaccio gives the reader a more acute sense of the change that takes place when the *Teseida* turns from epic to romance or, more precisely, when its epic apparatus starts revolving around a situation (i.e., love) marginal to the epic tradition but central to romance.²⁹⁰

That makes the *ottava* a statement both on the *Teseida* and on literary history: the epic tradition will persist only in new hybrid forms. In the micro-context of the epic simile, love is the force that brings about the change. This trope allows us to appreciate the value of analogy as a mental operation that guarantees the perception of continuity and discontinuity between genres, and between texts, at many levels. Such is the principle underlying Anderson’s argument about the romance-quality of the *Teseida*: Boccaccio “substitutes rivalry in love for rivalry in political affairs, with the distant image of Emilia

²⁹⁰ To a more limited extent, Emilia too is a locus of contradictions that are generically marked. Still in book III, after her realization that in the garden she is heard and observed from somebody at window (Arcita and Palemone), she is said to appear as “d’umiltà vestuta” (III.29.6), a Stilnovistic and especially Dantean *tessera* employed here as a cliché. Then her pleasure in being watched is described according to the misogynistic stereotypes of medieval literature: “Né la recava a ciò pensier d’amore / che ella avesse, ma la vanitate / che innata han le femine nel core, / di fare altrui veder la loro biltate” (III.30.1-4). One generic pattern does not exclude the other.

standing in place of the throne of Thebes as the object disputed by the two Theban kinsmen.”²⁹¹ Further on, he adds that the kind of imitation elaborated by Boccaccio, based on the analogy of the main action, “has its roots in the epic poem themselves and in critical traditions associated with them, rather than in the rhetorical tradition, where imitation is discussed primarily as a way of mastering literary style.”²⁹² We cannot underestimate the importance of this remark about the analogical mind of the epic, in which Boccaccio fully participates. For all his attention to Boccaccio’s analogical variation on the patterns of the *Thebaid*, Anderson seems to leave unnoticed the fact that they entail a transformation in the principle of individuation of epic subjectivity, which alters its contours through the incorporation of war into love. From book III on, Boccaccio encapsulates the epic into a rivalry of individuals. Neither a disturbance nor a detour of a vast epic enterprise, the matter of love itself becomes the epic narrative.²⁹³

The only precedent from which Boccaccio has learned the double operation of *reductio* and *amplificatio* of the architecture of epic is Dante’s *Commedia*. In opposition to *Commedia* and *Teseida*, we should think of the medieval allegorical tradition that revised the epic code through a weakening of its narrative momentum, and consequently of its

²⁹¹ Anderson, *Before the Knight’s Tale*, 52.

²⁹² *Ibid.*, 56.

²⁹³ This is a major difference from the treatment of love in the *romans d’antiquité*. If we think of the *Enéas*, we will see that, as noted for instance by Segre, “What Bahktin Left Unsaid,” 3.), the Ovidian portrayal of the love of Aeneas and Lavinia is certainly conditioned by the structure of the *Aeneid* but remains substantially disjointed from the main narrative action. For the same reason, Boccaccio’s interweaving of epic and romance (not a fusion but a counterpoint, interspersed with moments of generic transition and transformation) would hardly fit David Quint’s theory in which epic as teleology is countered by romance as a tendency to deviation and repetition. In the *Teseida*, in fact, the hijacking of the epic orientation (of book I and II, but also of the epic tradition as such) does become the main thread in the text: an individual love rivalry. No mission with its *telos* holds sway over the text as a whole (but such poems as the *Thebaid* and the *Phrasalia* were already un-teleological). In this light, even Theseus’s civilizing role must not be overemphasized, given that he is no longer the main motor of the text from book III on.

multidimensionality; in Dante and then in Boccaccio (and Petrarch), the narrative structure remains strong, thus functioning as a platform for all further senses of the text, which combine in the individuation of a new subjectivity. One has only to compare how individuation is one with the narrative in the *Teseida* and *Commedia*, and how the two layers diverge in a masterpiece of allegoresis like Bernard Silvestris's commentary on the *Aeneid*.²⁹⁴

We can now interpret the expression “pio sermone” (III.1.5), by which Boccaccio the *autore* describes the change caused by love as a subject matter. Two traditions are conflated in the adjective *pio*. On the one hand, Boccaccio recalls the Virgilian *pious Aeneas*, which in the *Filocolo* (V.6.3) is precisely rendered as “pio Enea”: *pietas* is a quality that defines the hero in a range of relational contexts (i.e., “dutiful” to gods, religion, ancestors, and countrymen). On the other hand, *pio* means “pitiful,” “compassionate,” independently from the appropriateness of such a feeling in respect of one's own higher duties, as is the case with *Inferno* V.116-117, where Dante-protagonist says: “Francesca, i tuoi martiri / a lagrimar mi fanno tristo e pio” (in his *Esposizioni* Boccaccio glosses the pair of adjectives as “dolente e pietoso”). Compassion for the consequences of Francesca's erotic sin is what Dante and his readers *should not* feel, as the program of response-correction throughout the *Inferno* will show. Yet the reader cannot but feel *triste e pio* too: the contradiction is

²⁹⁴ The allegorical framework provided by Boccaccio, particularly with the two long glosses on the temples of Mars and Venus in book VII, does not write off the narrative of the *ottave*; rather, glosses speak along with the text so to form a multidimensional textuality. Allegory in Boccaccio is not totalizing for two reasons: first, it is rooted in the narrative of the poem and is inseparable from the individuation of its characters; second, however extended and placed in a key position, the long allegorical glosses of *Teseida* VII are just a segment of a very long text, a detour that takes place more like an offshoot than like a systematic interpretation of the whole text.

inescapable. Thus in Boccaccio's "pio sermone," the kind of speech announced by the new beginning of *Teseida* III, we hear both the constructive orientation of Aeneas and the destructive inner agitation of Dante before Francesca; while the former has to do with the ethos of a community, the latter is utterly individual.²⁹⁵ The dialogue of epic and romance is propelled by this contradiction, which Boccaccio does not aim to bring to a resolution. And since "pio" defines the *autore*'s response to his subject, this very contradiction is also his own, as illustrated at both ends of the poem by the twofold call to erotic literature and song of arms.

At this point, we might ask again a question posed by Victoria Kirkham: "Why does Boccaccio postpone the beginning of his love story until this moment in the poem?"²⁹⁶ Her answer is based on numerological interpretation, three being the number of Venus, already validated by Dante's cosmology (e.g., the canzone "Voi che 'ntendendo il terzo ciel movete" and *Par.* VIII). A case might be made, however, for a different genre-based strategy. First of all, the beginning is double - or triple, if we put in a sequence 1) the Amazonian campaign, 2) the Theban war, 3) the story of Arcita and Palemone. The purpose of this series of beginnings is to embody in the narrative the dialogic interplay of genres: none of them can be pure, isolated. This very interplay exists only in history and can be varied in accordance with the historicity of its composition. Boccaccio's turn toward romance at the outset of book III is thus a repositioning of the poem in the wake of Dante

²⁹⁵ The love-driven "atti insani" of Arcita and Palemone sung by the Boccaccio with his "pio sermone" aren't analogous to the sins of the circle of lust? See *Inf.* V.37-39: "Intesi ch'a così fatto tormento / enno dannati i peccator carnali / che la ragion sommettono al talento."

²⁹⁶ Kirkham, "Chiuso Parlare," 21.

and vernacular Italian literature. That beginnings are not absolute (*pace* Bakhtin), even when they are rhetorically disguised to be so, is a truth that Boccaccio empirically gathered from the epic tradition and then translated into a textual architecture where the counterpoint of genres is visible and legible.²⁹⁷

3.3.2. Indeterminacy

“The great invention of medieval romancers was to link love to glorious deeds so as to make love the direct cause and heroic personal identity and social position the indirect consequences,” Segre says.²⁹⁸ This is true for the *Teseida*, too, to the extent that the personalities of Arcita and Palemone are hardly distinguishable from the other as if they were but analogous “heroic” effects of the same erotic passion or *furor*. Only external circumstances seem to create a difference, as does the liberation of Arcita from imprisonment only thanks to his earlier friendship with Pirithous, or the substantially unmotivated choice of the two young men to pray one to Mars and the other to Venus, before the battle in the amphitheater. The glosses on the temple of Mars and Venus, as allegorical loci of irascible and concupiscent appetite respectively, are extremely rich but provide no clue as to Arcita’s and Palemone’s particular inclination toward the gods they address. Hence their individual allegorical import is legible only *post-factum*. We know that their physical features are quite the opposite (III.49-50), yet that hint remains

²⁹⁷ Newman, *Classical Epic Tradition*, 295, speaks of the *Teseida* in its relation to classical epic as an example of what the formalist would call “*la denudation du procédé*.” This concept illuminates all the meta-literary turns of the *Teseida*, although we do not have to accept Newman’s dichotomous assumption that the greatest works end up with a perfect “amalgam” while the lesser ones let the elements of the compound “fall apart.” True, in Boccaccio the exposition of the procedure is a chief way (though not the only one) to historicize writing.

²⁹⁸ Segre, “What Bakhtin Left Unsaid,” 35.

undeveloped: more than their outer differences, what in fact leaves its impression on the reader (who in that passage sees them with the eyes of Pirithous visiting the prison) is the overall sense of nobility conveyed by their descriptions, which all in all are two modulations of the same theme. Not even the battle of book VIII, supposed to show which is worthier of Emilia, presents them in a specific individual way.²⁹⁹ So Boccaccio has set up a paradox that questions the meaning of genre: the translation of epic patterns into the forms of private erotic passion reveals a degree of indeterminacy that potentially undermines the individuation of a subject through the configuration provided by generic traditions. It could be argued that the twin figures of Eteocles and Polynices in the *Thebaid* serve as models. Arcita and Palemone's rivalry may be a variation of the internecine strife of Thebes, as many have pointed out; the political desire for a kingdom would thus be as de-individualizing as the erotic desire for a woman.

So, whose romance is the *Teseida*? Whose quest did Boccaccio write? This is the question raised by the very title of the poem in its full length, *Teseida delle nozze d'Emilia*, which has been rightly said to compound Boccaccio's double inspiration, from both Venus and Mars, or from erotic and epic poetry, or from vernacular and classical tradition. None of these pairs, however, completely parallels the others, as we have seen. The place of Arcita and Palemone in the whole economy of the poem becomes problematic, because their role in the narrative manifestly outweighs that of Theseus and Emilia, who are represented by the title of the poem. Moreover, it is with either Arcita or Palemone that

²⁹⁹ A slight difference might be that, in book V, Arcita seems more capable of self-control, perhaps because he learned that in his exile far from Athens, and then in his life in disguise in Athens.

Boccaccio identifies in the prefatory letter. Why Theseus and Emilia instead of the two Thebans?

Emilia is the object of desire, and Theseus is the civilizing figure who tries to restrain and ritualize the violence of that very desire. What is the generic function of the two Thebans, given that the title of the poem is a brilliant conflation of genres and traditions? My contention is that, being overwhelmed by desire, they function as genre-shifters, more unstable and ambiguous than either Theseus or Emilia can be. Arcita and Palemone, in other words, shift along the continuum that goes from Theseus to Emilia and back. They are not named in the title because they *are* the title – its duplicity, its modulation of genres. The indeterminacy of the individuation of Arcita and Palemone is also the indeterminacy of generic individuation.

3.4. Epic as a Go-Between

The previous analysis of the foundational textual moves of books I-III must now lead us to a condensed view of the *Teseida* as a whole. Bifurcation and continuation: this is the double movement by which the *Teseida* unfolds. The multiplicity of directions in the poem, on many levels, condenses and makes apparent the multiplicity inscribed in the epic tradition itself, with its always renovated tension between centering and de-centering the generic identity of the texts. Boccaccio, in sum, addresses the epic as a container of variations. One model, one center, and one direction: this image of the epic (more desired than real, and more retrospectively modern than ancient or medieval) does not match Boccaccio's ambition, which was not simply to write a grand poem but, more intriguingly, to write a code of variations.

The diegetic architecture of the *Teseida* is shaped by an ongoing tension between sameness and alterity, a tension that unfolds in a succession of moments of union and division of the two Thebans. At the end of book III, the first bifurcation occurs: by Pirithous's intervention Arcita is freed, though exiled, while Palemone remains in prison, with the paradoxical privilege of still being able to see Emilia from the window. Thus, in book IV, one is free but far from the object of his desire, while the other is close to it but unable to attain it: love has turned the balance of their kinship, friendship, and sameness into the imbalance of conflict. Significantly, it is a *locus amoenus* (the "boschetto" where Arcita back in Athens in disguise goes and complains about his unfortunate condition) that provides the background for their reunion, bound to end up with a violent fight stopped only by the arrival of Emilia and Theseus. The closer Arcita and Palemone are, the stronger their opposition. Yet, is this really an instance of duality?

Thanks to Theseus's intervention, the two Thebans can be reunited once again for a year at his court, waiting for that battle and living a most ritualized life with all the topoi of courtly ethos. It is as if Boccaccio based his main storyline on the epic pattern of the heroic duel, only altering its motivation and scope: it is a duel to resolve a private rivalry, and it remains so even when re-framed by Theseus as a regulated collective fight, "palestral giuoco" (VII.4.8) involving one hundred participants on each side. Indeed, this seems precisely the reverse of what we have in the *Aeneid*, with Aeneas and Turnus fighting one-on-one in the last book to put an end to the war, and also of what we have in the *Thebaid*, where the fraternal strife of Eteocles and Polynices turns into the collective war of the Seven against Thebes but concludes with the twins killing each other in a one-on-one fight. In the

Teseida, Arcita wins the battle without fighting directly against Palemone, who is not even defeated by a man: it is Cromis' horse, eager to bite a man, that makes him suddenly fall.³⁰⁰ It has not been observed with enough emphasis that not only Palemone's temporary defeat and Arcita's mortal wound are both due to a horse's erratic move, but that in this way the very structure of the epic duel (even of the regulated version designed by Theseus) is undermined: if there is a resolution, it is the one imposed by *Fortuna*, not by the hero's force.

All in all, Arcita and Palemone's fates are interchangeable, and only an incident such as praying to one god instead of another brings about a partial distinction. No wonder that, beyond a courtly spirit of friendship, it is their interchangeability that allows Boccaccio to replace Arcita with Palemone as Emilia's husband. So, Arcita's apotheosis as a serene Boethian indictment of the vanity of our earthly life (including the passion that drove him to death) and Palemone's enjoyment of the pleasures of sex with Emilia coexist as two divergent outcomes of *Fortuna* – and of literary memory as well: the former draws on Pompey's apotheosis in the *Pharsalia* (IX.1.14); the latter parodies the shipwreck of Dante's Ulysses and strikes a *cantare*-like note (*Inf.* XXVI.130-132).³⁰¹ Boccaccio does not

³⁰⁰ “Cromis avea sì stancato Almeone, / che non poteva più, ma si tirav / indietro; ma di Cromis il roncione, / ch'ancora che soleva si ricordava / gli uomin mangiar, pel braccio Palemone / co' denti prese forte, e sì l'agrava / col duol, che 'l fece alla terra cadere / mal grado ch'e n'avesse, e rimanere” (VIII.120).

³⁰¹ “Finito Arcita colei nominando / la qual nel mondo più che altro amava, / l'anima leve se ne gí volando / ver la concavità del cielo ottava, / degli elementi i convessi lasciando; / quivi le stelle ratiche ammirava, / l'ordine loro e la somma bellezza, / suoni ascoltando pien d'ogni dolcezza. // Quindi si volse in giù a rimirare / le cose abbandonate, e vide il poco / globo terreno, a cui intorno il mare / girava e l'aere e di sopra il foco, / e ogni cosa da nulla stimare / a rispetto del ciel; ma poi al loco / là dove aveva il suo corpo lasciato / gli occhi fermò alquanto rivoltato; // e seco rise de' pianti dolenti / della turba lerne, la vanitate / forte dannando dell'umane genti, / li quai, da tenebrosa cechitate / mattamente oscurati nelle menti, seguon del mondo la falsa biltate, / lasciando il cielo; e quindi se ne gio / nel loco che Mercurio li sortio” (XI.1-3). “Qual quella notte fosse all'amadore / qui non si dice; quelli il può sapere, / che già trafitto da soverchio amore / alcuna volta fu, se mai piacere / ne ricevette dopo lungo ardore. / Credom'io ben che estimando vedere / il possa

extol one Theban over the other: worldly things are contradictory, and the epic is the generic architecture capacious enough to contain them both. In other words, whereas the duel as a trope of the epic does not ultimately work towards a resolution in the *Teseida*, the epic as a code is vast and flexible enough to make room for a range of resolutions – which figuratively stands for a range of generic, rhetorical, and ethical developments. There is no duality in the *Teseida*, only an endless interplay of sameness and alterity, always turning into each other.³⁰² More precisely, the *Teseida* both investigates and innovates the epic tradition as a field that evolves only through polygenesis. In their quasi-coincidence, the twin stories of Arcita and Palemone serves as one and the same textual vehicle for the emergence of a subjectivity specific to the context in which Boccaccio wrote the poem.

Enough has been already said about the prefatory epistle to Fiammetta to give an adequate picture of its twofold function, that is, to inscribe the author-figure in the text and to inscribe the text, in turn, in the intergeneric network of the epic tradition. As it is meant to create sideways points of entrance into the epic code, that generic inscription marks the non-totalizing approach of the *Teseida* to the epic, which is neither subsumed into a transcendent all-incorporating and ultra-generic program as in Dante's *Commedia*, nor is bound to an ancient model to be restored as in Petrarch's *Africa*. In Boccaccio's

quei che nol provò giammai, / che lieta fu più ch'altra lieta assai. // Vero è che per l'offerte che andaro / poi la mattina a' templi, s'argomenta / che Venere, anzi che 'l di fosse chiaro, / sette volte raccesa e tante spenta / fosse nel fonte amoroso, ove raro / buon pescator con util si diventa: / el si levò, venuta la mattina, / più bello e fresco che rosa di spina" (XII.76-77).

³⁰² Cf. Velli, *Petrarca e Boccaccio*, 139, where Arcita's *contemptus mundi* is considered as a secondary and marginal episode in the economy of the poem as a whole, as it is not aligned with the rest of the poem, especially with its erotic finale. My point is that the *Teseida* uses the patterns provided by the epic tradition as structures capable of accommodating for inconsistencies, given that this tradition itself, as a code of variations, is an encyclopedia of variants not fully compatible.

performance on the epic, the potential for variation does remain in the foreground without being absorbed, corrected, or contained by a more consistent generic program (transcendent in Dante, secular in Petrarch).

To move toward a conclusion, let us consider the last two *ottave* of the poem and the two closing sonnets. After the stanza claiming for the poem the seat left vacant by the *De vulgari eloquentia*, Boccaccio closes his address to the book with the topoi of navigation and dedication, combining allusions to Statius and Dante:

E perciò che tu primo col tuo legno
seghi queste onde, non solcate mai
davanti a te da nessuno altro ingegno,
ben che infimo sii, pure starai
forse tra gli altri d'alcuno onor degno;
intra li qual se vieni, onorerai
come maggior ciaschedun tuo passato,
materia dando a cui dietro hai lasciato.

E però che i porti disiati
in sì lungo peleggio già tegnamo,
da varii venti in essi trasportati,
le vaghe nostre vele qui caliamo,
e le ghirlande e i don meritati,
con l'ancore fermati, qui spettiamo,
lodando l'Orsa che con la sua luce
qui n'ha condotti, a noi essendo duce. (XII.85-86)

Navigation as a figure of conclusion is a classical topos employed by Statius right before the envoy of the *Thebaid*: “et mea iam longo meruit ratis aequore portum” (XII.89).³⁰³ The reference to precise Dantean loci (*Purg.* I.1-3 and especially *Par.* II.1-15) brings in a different temporal orientation, that is, continuation and new beginning rather than conclusion. This is not a mere instance of Boccaccio’s inclination to insert *tessera*-like

³⁰³ See Curtius, *European Literature*, 128-130 for a short but fundamental section on this topos.

quotations, which would be more decorative than substantial.³⁰⁴ Instead, the two-fold temporal tension implied by Boccaccio's interpolation of Dante and Statius (beginning/conclusion) results in a double movement which reproduces, whether consciously or not, a pattern central to the epic tradition, possibly one of the patterns that most distinctively define its cultural function: the articulation of a threefold sense of an ending, a continuation, and a beginning.³⁰⁵

By completing its journey as a Dantean and Statian boat, the *Teseida* reasserts its role in the constitution of a new literature in the vernacular of Italy, a sea it has navigated for the first time in the mode of martial epic. The echo of Dante underscores and legitimates this intention. The poem's navigation, at the same time, brought an ancient tradition (Thebes) to a close - though not to a closure, as it bifurcates into Arcita's ascension to the Eighth Heaven and Palemone's sexual enjoyment of Emilia. It would thus be tempting to insist on the comparison of the different contents conveyed by the formal analogy of the metaphor in Dante and Boccaccio: on the one hand, the quasi-ineffable experience of the *Paradiso*, where subject, world, and history are framed within the ultimate totality of God and the Heavens; on the other, the newly-opened, secular field of a literary tradition that, out of a cultural and historical *translatio*, grows into a corpus of genres and works. If Boccaccio finds his unheard-of paradise in exploring the potential of vernacular literature in its emergent phase, the epic text functions as a threshold into that finding.

³⁰⁴ Boitani, *Chaucer and Boccaccio*, 39-40, for example, considers as *tesserae* most of the *Teseida*'s quotes from Dante and the *auctores*.

³⁰⁵ A sense concisely and insightfully exposed in Hardie, *Epic Successors*, 1-18, in regard to Virgil and his successors in Roman literature. Similar considerations on the epic as a tradition negotiating the historicity of a text could be extended to the postclassical tradition that spanned the long time intervening between late antiquity and Boccaccio.

Another twist is noteworthy in Boccaccio's envoy: the last *ottava* closes with an homage to the "Orsa," that is, the dedicatee of the poem who, like "fermo segno" of the North Star, has lead the poem to its destination.³⁰⁶ The prefatory epistle and the proem already prepared the reader for this outcome, but whereas there Boccaccio keeps Fiammetta and the memory of the epic genre on two distinct though interrelated planes, here she is recalled by a reworking of the nautical metaphor taken from the *Thebaid*: if the poem sailed well, it was because she was its North Star. Not an erotic but an epic trope reintroduces the figure of Fiammetta into the poem, thus attesting to the polygenesis of the configuration of genre and gender in the *Teseida*.

Boccaccio adds other two topoi from the very end of the *Thebaid*.³⁰⁷ One is the self-celebration of the poet whom posterity will acknowledge as he deserves ("le vaghe nostre vele qui caliamo, / e le ghirlande e i don meritati, / con l'ancore fermata, qui spettiamo"). The other, more important, is the succession-pattern by which Statius acknowledges the greatness of the *Aeneid* and declares to have followed in its footsteps. The way in which Boccaccio rephrases it, in conjunction with the humility topos ("ben che infimo sii, pure starai / forse tra gli altri d'alcuno onor degno / intra li qual se vieni, onorerai / come maggiore ciaschedun tuo passato / material dando a cui dietro hai lasciato"), is reminiscent of two renowned Dantean passages: one is the inclusion of Dante as "sesto fra

³⁰⁶ See the gloss ad XII.86.7, where the sense of the homage is made explicit: "I marinari navicano al segno della tramontana, la quale, come di sopra ho mostrato, è nella coda della minore Orsa; così l'autore in questo suo navicare, cioè nel comporre questo libro, ebbe per Orsa, cioè per fermo segno, una sua donna, ad onore e piacere della quale egli il compose; e perciò che ella, sì come vero segno, l'ha condotto a buono porto, dice al libro suo e a sé queste ultime parole."

³⁰⁷ *Theb.* XII.816-819: "vive, precor, nec tu divinam Aeneida tempta, / sed longe sequere et vestigia semper adora. Mox, tibi si quis adhuc praetendit nubila livor, / occidet, et meriti post me referentur honores."

contanto senno” in the group of *auctores* in *Inferno* IV; the second is the end of the invocation to Apollo in *Paradiso* II.34-36 (“Poca favilla gran fiamma seconda: / forse di retro a me con miglior voci / si pregherà perchè Cirra risponda”).

Of this intricate layering of Dantean and Statian quotations, which also hint at Dante’s own handling of the succession topos in *Purgatorio* XXI and XXII, we must notice only one point, in which Boccaccio diverges from his sources: succession is not dependent on an individual text (as in the *Thebaid*) or on a group of named authors (as in *Inferno* IV). That his *maggiori* in the past are not named, just like his successors to come, implies that what counts for the *Teseida* is tradition itself, which comes from the past and moves toward the future. That Dante as the sixth of six already connected ancients and moderns, thus reshaping the epic code to found a new tradition, is taken for granted by Boccaccio; he himself, in the *Filocolo* (V.97), has already played the role of the sixth of six, admittedly following in the footsteps of Virgil, Lucan, Statius, Ovid, and Dante. Therefore, not one but many authors or texts of the ancient/modern, Latin/vernacular tradition must be venerated as predecessors. What counts is the code that connects them all.

Yet, from another angle, the poet of the *Teseida* does follow an individual figure: “l’Orsa che con la sua luce / qui n’ha condotti, a noi essendo duce.” Fiammetta plays the role that was of the *Aeneid* in Statius’s envoy, as a “duce” (another form of *duca*, by which so often Dante refers to Vergil as his guide).³⁰⁸ Hence we found ourselves once again on a post-Dantean ground, with love as the motor of poetry. However, here desire both precedes and exceeds any determined generic configuration. More than that, desire drives an

³⁰⁸ Smarr, *Boccaccio*, 80-81, sees in Fiammetta the proper reader of the poem; she is also its proper leader.

apparently stable configuration to transform and hybridize, as we have seen apropos of romance. *Teseida delle nozze d'Emilia*: in this double title, proposed by Fiammetta in the final sonnet by which the Muses respond to the author, lies the sense of multiplicity that Boccaccio recognized in the epic tradition and translated into his work and into the beginnings of Italian literature.³⁰⁹

Before the end of the *Filocolo*, the narrator says to his book that it cannot rise to the heights of Virgil, Lucan, Statius, Ovid, and Dante, as what suits it is a “mezzana via” (V.97).³¹⁰ The meaning of this middle way has been rightly extended by critics so to cover many aspects of Boccaccio’s activity and poetics, beyond that passage’s immediate reference to a stylistic middle ground, in which the *Teseida* too is firmly rooted.

In respect of the *Teseida* and of the many layers of its discourse, no qualification seems more adequate to Boccaccio as an author, glossator, and lover, than that of middleman or go-between. In the ways discussed throughout this chapter, Boccaccio connects a range of possibilities into an open-ended network, which in turn appears to be a partial but trustful reflection of a more extensive intertextual network.

Other facets of the *Teseida* could be analyzed along the same lines, such as the co-existence of three textual layers, evident at first glance on the autograph: text in *ottave*,

³⁰⁹ That from beginning to end the epic remains the major code in which the *Teseida* speaks is materially illustrated by its autograph, the layout of which imitates that of manuscripts with texts of the *auctores* accompanied by a set of paratexts (such as glosses, summaries, and pictures). No matter what the letter of the text says, and how, its material existence in the autograph visually speaks with the “voice” of the epic.

³¹⁰ “Lascia a costoro il debito onore, il quale volere usurpare con vergogna t’acquisterebbe danno. Elle son tutte cose da lasciare agli alti ingegni. La cicogna figliante nell’alte torri discende a vivere a’ fiumi. A te bisogna di volare abasso, però che la bassezza t’è mezzana via.” A wide-ranging investigation of Boccaccio’s work through the lens of “mezzana via” is in Bruni, *Boccaccio*, the subtitle of which significantly reads *L’invenzione della letteratura mezzana*.

glosses (interlinear and marginal), and blank spaces reserved for a set of illustrations never realized. However we might interpret Boccaccio's extant commentary and his only hypothetical figurative program,³¹¹ what matters is that they multiply the discourse of the *ottave* and create, together with it, a rhythm by which the text turns into an encyclopedic, composite whole that is representative not as much of an epic model as of the epic as a tradition of possibilities.

While in the *rota Virgili* the epic (with the *Aeneid*) stays high above, the *Teseida* speaks - in practice - of the epic as a process taking place in a middle ground where a heterogeneity of elements can thrive and make sense, even though it does not achieve (and does not even seek) overall consistency.³¹² Arcita and Palemone are the heroes and the epitome of this process, as they are affected by all of the digressions, deviations, suspensions, and transformations in the poem. Although they are the most important characters, they are not included in the poem's title: speculating again on that question from the point of view of genre, we might say that they are not less generically marked than Theseus and Emilia, the two characters named in the title. Arcita and Palemone do

³¹¹ None of these aspects can be adequately treated here. On the glosses, discussed by most modern critics of the *Teseida*, the most extensive contribution is Ricci, *Scrittura, riscrittura, autoesegesi*, 37-102. On the figurative program of the autograph see Malagnini, "Sul programma illustrativo," with a list of all the passages where a blank space was inserted by Boccaccio. They are signalled also in Agostinelli and Coleman's critical edition of the poem.

³¹² A significant component of such heterogeneity must be mentioned, although not directly discussed in this chapter: the tradition of the *cantari*. In the notes to his edition of the *Teseida*, Limentani points out a number of passages where, by means of phrasing, lexicon, tropes, and rhythm, Boccaccio speaks in a *cantare*-like tone. It is still uncertain whether Boccaccio was the inventor of the narrative poem in *ottave* in the Italian vernacular, a form that became quite popular in the Trecento. In this respect, Branca's old study *Il cantare trecentesco* is still useful to approach the question. What might be reconsidered of Branca's and later critics' take on the issue is the inconsistency of the tone of the *cantare* vis-à-vis the high style of epic or the fine psychological nuances of romance. In this chapter's perspective the *cantare*-like moments are neither a disturbance of the poem's "proper" tone nor a lack in taste. On the contrary, they contribute to the *stile mezzano* and to the generic go-betweenness of Boccaccio's variations on the epic code.

represent the epic, but elude the fixity of a model, also by their being newly-invented heroes without a mythographic background, differently from Theseus. Theirs is an epic hard to pin down. It is mainly a process: *epica mezzana*, the go-between of traditions, the truth of which is always partial, changing, and negotiable.³¹³

³¹³ Different points of view coexist in the poem as well as in a larger network in which the poem has a place. If we read a passage such as the following from the *Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta*, can't we glimpse the possibility of an alternate version of the *Teseida*, once its frame (a fictional frame that generates a fictional poem) turns to be an astutely insincere strategy to circumvent a lover? "Oimè! quante volte già in mia presenza e de' miei più cari, caldo di festa, di cibo e d'amore, fingendo Fiammetta e Panfilo essere stati greci, narrò egli come io di lui e esso di me primamente stati eravamo presi, con quanti accidenti poi n'erano seguitati, e a' luoghi e alle persone pertinenti alla novella dando convenevoli nomi!" (I.23). On Boccaccio's part, this is not a palinode, but an exploration of another point of view which coexists but does not necessarily coincide with the others.

Epic Dreamed: Petrarch's *Africa*

4.1. The *Africa* and the Epic: Situating the Question

The more apparent the epic features of Petrarch's *Africa*, the more elusive the center of its epic inspiration. Such is the paradox of a poem unquestionably, even ostentatiously inscribed within the tradition of classical and post-classical epic and capable of raising the issue of the nature of the epic. In Petrarch's life, the unfinished *Africa* never came to be a book, and yet it was something more than a book: an early project in a modern author's self-fashioning, a document of the restoration of antiquity, a dream of how antiquity should come back to life in destitute times, and the symbol of the half-substantial, half-delusive realities of poetry, fame, and glory. What the *Africa* meant to Petrarch dramatically changed in the course of his life: first it was the peak of a pioneering humanistic enterprise, then the contradictory vehicle of a literary search for glory, and finally a ruin from an age of the poet's life definitely past and gone but also the reminder of a cultural dream. As we have seen with the address to King Robert in the proem, time is an active force in the construction of the poem, as if it were Petrarch's co-author.

“Animi mei effigies atque ingenii simulacrum”: thus Petrarch refers to the *Africa* in the first letter of the *Familiars*.³¹⁴ It is indeed a poem on the growth of a mind: the mind

³¹⁴ In the first chapter we saw how in the proem of the *Africa* Petrarch addresses King Robert by the topos of the promise/deferral of a higher and worthier poem. The *Africa* itself, in turn, in Petrarch works is often referred to by that very topos, so that its status oscillates between an actual work in progress and the dream of an impossible achievement. Too long would be a list, let alone an analysis, of all the passages in which

of the poet, of a military leader, and of man as such. It is, in other words, part “a new ethical program, a new philosophy of self [...] at the center of which is the assertion that ‘self’ is not a given presence but a state of mind from which we are exiled, or absent, and which we need to attain through constant cultivation and care, and particularly through the use of writing as a spiritual technique.”³¹⁵ The *Africa* cannot but share the nature of the self of which it is supposed to be the image. Through all the references to the *Africa* scattered in Petrarch’s works we do hear a caveat: the existence and outcome poem cannot be taken for granted. Neither can the configuration and meaning of its genre.

Petrarch’s promise of bringing forth an epic or *heroicum carmen* worthy of poetic coronation was a dream the realization of which turned, in time, from imminent to impossible – a dream, however, that had the power to orient (and re-orient, in successive stages) the intention of the author and the expectations of his readers.³¹⁶ It could be argued that the generic labor of the *Africa*, both as an epic and as a discourse on the epic, is neither univocal nor steady. To articulate that labor is the aim of the present chapter. A comprehensive discussion of the poem and its reception is out of its scope; instead, to see the epic at work as an *animi effigie* I will mostly concentrate on a limited portion of the poem, the *Somnium Scipionis* that stretches through books I and II.

Two reasons make it an ideal vantage point. First, the *Somnium* is an early long digression that, while suspending the narrative action set in motion shortly before, alters

Petrarch speaks of the *Africa*, more or less directly. A good number of loci is mentioned in Pacca, *Petrarca*, 45-55, Ariani, *Petrarca*, 87-97, Martinez, “Latin exámetro Works,” 93-98, and Dotti, *Vita di Petrarca*, passim.
³¹⁵ Zak, *Petrarch’s Humanism*, 10.

³¹⁶ First of all the readers who could not have access to the *Africa* during the poet’s life, and the first readers who have access to it after his death. See Fera, *Antichi editori e commentatori*.

the balance of the classical epic models that Petrarch recalls (and throw slightly off-balance) as early as in the proem discussed in chapter one. As a *pars pro toto*, the long dream sequence well represents the dynamics and encyclopedism of the epic, as it is urged by the force of all the potential variants latent in the body of the text as well as in the corpus of the genre. Far from merely being a stock trope in the epic repertoire, digression is a generative process that allows the genre to explore new possibilities, create spaces for self-reflection, and draw new connections – intra-generic no less than inter-generic. With Scipio’s dream, we move away from the main storyline but at the same time, move toward the center of the life of the text, as Virgil did in *Aeneid* VI (while, as we have seen, Dante transforms that digressive model into the structure of the poem as a whole, Petrarch never obliterates the distinction between the main trunk of the narrative and its ramifications, extended as they might be).

The second reason for concentrating on the *Somnium* is that it functions as a premise. Though redundant and excessive if read from a strictly narratological point of view (the more so if compared to other prominent dream-visions in classical epic models), Scipio’s dream serves to introduce the reader to the *fabula*, to the poem as a whole, and to the vast network of the epic tradition as recalled and interpreted by the *Africa*. Both a premise and a digression, the *Somnium* serves as a complex threshold or vestibule, a locus where the very possibility of epic variations is established.

The question of the composition of the dream is an integral part of the broader question of the composition of the poem. As such, it has been highly debated by scholars. Suffice here to mention Fenzi’s convincing hypothesis that the extant dream of Scipio does

not date back to an earlier version written between 1338-1339 and Petrarch's coronation in 1341 (*vetus Africa*), of which we have no extant text; instead, the poem as we read it would be the result of a revision that took place in the early 1350s, jointly with the composition of the third book of the *Secretum*.³¹⁷ As a later addition, the *Somnium* might have been retrospectively conceived as the most proper introduction to the poem precisely because it reinforces, rather than lessens, the imbalance of the project as a whole.

This might also have been a consequence of Petrarch's reflection on the *Commedia* as a kind of epic that opened new possibilities while proposing a kind of relationship classical history and culture that Petrarch deemed no longer viable. Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis* is one of the possible sources for Dante's journey through the realms of the afterlife; philologically, Petrarch's insertion of a long dream sequence straddling two books of the *Africa* is far closer to the source than the rewriting plus amplification carried on by Dante. More than a challenge to a modern predecessor, the *Africa* can be seen as a response to the novelty of the *Commedia* as an epic but also as an attempt to limit the range of its potential variations. No radical transformation of the classical structure of the epic occurs in the *Africa*; within this continuity, however, a number of variations take place and bring about a sense of discontinuity alien to the *Commedia*, where even the boldest transformations in the epic code are incorporated into a transcendent, teleological, and unifying perspective.

It was indeed a sharper sense of the discontinuity between ancient and modern culture that made possible, in the context of the Italian and European Trecento, the *Africa*

³¹⁷ Fenzi, *Saggi petrarcheschi*, 305-364.

as a project that, in the intention of the author, should initiate a restoration of the ethos of Roman antiquity. Hence the poem's qualification as a "philological epic."³¹⁸ Of course, the *restitutio* sought after by Petrarch through his Latin epic (as part of a broader literary activity in dialogue with the language and the culture of the classics) cannot be adequately understood independently from the rise of the vernacular as the medium of new emergent cultures. The polarization of Latin and vernacular was not absolute, as attested to by the very oeuvre of Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch himself: to them, vernacular and Latin represented divergent though not incompatible cultural orientations. The Latin of the *Africa* was motivated by a conscious affiliation, which in itself was an answer to the questions posed by the Italian Trecento: how can the epic adapt its form and function in a time of transition toward vernacular culture? Where should a recently born Italian tradition look for its sources and foundations? How could the legacy of the classics transmit its codes to the present and the future? The long *Somnium* of the *Africa* speaks about all those questions. In fact, the narrative is set in a time of transition in individual and collective history, when Scipio Africanus' ethics of responsibility toward the past, present, and future of Rome proved crucial to the destiny of his community; the same could be said about the intention of Petrarch in composing the *Africa*. Against this background, the present chapter develops an analysis of the epic as a mode of writing and shaping ethics: the individuation of the text through a generic code corresponds to the individuation of the self of the author, and of man as such.³¹⁹

³¹⁸ See Marchesi, "Petrarch's Philological Epic."

³¹⁹ Cf. Zak, *Petrarch's Humanism*, on the practical goal of Petrarch's view of philosophy.

Until recent times the bibliography on the *Africa* has been dominated by historico-philological concerns: the various phases in the composition and revision of the text, the relation with the making (and remaking) of other Petrarchan works, and the imitation-cum-transformation of classical and medieval sources. On the other hand, a number of studies have been devoted to single relevant sections or motifs of the *Africa* (e.g., the episode of Sophonisba and Massinissa, the extended use of dream visions, the archaeological dimension of the poem, the figure of Scipio, Petrarch's self-fashioning, and the use of Ennius and Homer as spokespersons and precursors). Quite predictably, virtually every entry in the scholarly bibliography on the *Africa* speaks of the epic, but only a few have scrutinized the poem in terms of genre dynamic, that is, in order to reflect on how the *Africa* works as an epic.

In an annotated bibliography on the *Africa* covering the years 1900 to 2002, Voce remarks that scholars have given prominence to the question of Petrarch's transgression of the norms of the epic genre, a critical theme explored chiefly through the autobiographical, lyrical, and elegiac moments in the poem, and through its relationship with history and historiography.³²⁰ Imitation of classical epic (i.e., of the generic configuration still widely held as the standard of epic as such) provides a general frame for the interpretation of the *Africa*; in this sense, the poem resonates with the Petrarchan paradigm of *mutatio insignis*, that is, an imitation at slight variance with its model and capable of weaving new threads into the network of tradition by means of an interplay of continuities and discontinuities. Scholarship on the *Africa* has variously dealt with the nature of Petrarch's epic imitation;

³²⁰ Voce, *Bibliografia sull'Africa*, 143.144.

nevertheless, a review of twentieth-century criticism shows that, in terms of scholarly attention, particular issues prevailed and the broad, underlying question of what kind of epic the *Africa* might represent was not adequately discussed. This critical dichotomy that opposes compliance with and transgression of epic norms actually overlooks the potential for variation demonstrated in practice by the epic tradition that Petrarch knew so well.³²¹

Early on in Petrarch's reception (XV century), a separation was established between two Petrarchs, that is, the vernacular poet and the Latin humanist. If the former became an immensely influential figure, nothing less than a founding father of European poetry, the latter was relatively soon outdone in scholarship by the generations of humanists who came after him; his profile then became that of an immensely erudite but ultimately arid author (with the exception of the *Secretum*, a more intimate philosophical work). The *Africa* just lay on the wrong side of history, and in the light of the incompleteness of its unappealing text, it turned into the epitome of Petrarch the scholar as opposed to Petrarch the poet. Such a stark opposition, which reached its climax in the Romantic period, still affects the non-specialist reception of Petrarch,³²² but around the mid-XX century Petrarch's work began to be considered as a complex whole rather than as the corpus of a two-headed author with two opposite sides. Such a critical reassessment resulted from a change of perspective in Petrarch studies: in his oeuvre scholars found a dynamic system,

³²¹ This trend would date back to early XX-century studies, and especially to Nicola Festa's 1926 companion essay to his own critical edition of the poem (*Saggio sull'Africa*). Festa's monograph can be taken as a representative of a *global* interpretive approach long forgotten in favor of more particular angles. At the same time, it is a good example of how the epic should *not* been addressed, that is, as a fixed category against which Petrarch's variations inevitably prove to be transgressions or improprieties rather than investigations into the patterns of a generic tradition.

³²² A quick look at the current availability and circulation of his texts would unquestionably attest to that separation, especially in the Italian book market.

a network in progress that eluded strict dichotomies (e.g., vernacular and Latin, poetry and prose, erotic and epic).³²³ The *Africa* is part of such a system and participates in its variety and variance.

This vision does not exclude contradiction; on the contrary, it creates the condition for a proper appreciation of contradictory tensions in Petrarch's work. In this way, *dissidio* as a key motif in Petrarch's self-fashioning appears to be a generative force at work in his entire corpus. The *labor limae* by which Petrarch revised in time some of his works – either continuously or intermittently – did not aim at full consistency. Even if philologists and literary historians have touched upon the question of the *Africa* as an epic only rarely and partially, they laid the groundwork for any further discussion related to the intertextual and intergeneric nature of Petrarch's writings.

One of the major merits of late XX-century philology is that it has relativized genre assumptions in regard to Petrarch's corpus. Hence, for example, writing in Latin and imitating the classical epic can no longer be explained away as mere backward attempts that were bound to failure – historically and poetically – vis-à-vis the immense success of the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*. The very notion of failure must also be relativized, as it characterizes different forms and discourses in Petrarch's oeuvre. Along these lines, the *Africa* must be seen as a work that de-essentializes the theory and practice of the epic, and yet does not do away with its generative function. The present chapter is only a step toward a broader investigation of that dynamics. Recent scholarly contributions, more on the

³²³ Philologists played a key role in this critical turn. Probably the two most influential contributions, in terms of method, came from Billanovich and Martellotti, of whom see the collections *Petrarca e il primo Umanesimo* and *Scritti petrarcheschi* respectively.

interpretive than on the philological side, have paved the way for further analysis, by proposing new readings of the *Africa* based on a reconsideration of Petrarch's generic strategies.

As to general overviews of the poem, one can profitably turn to the chapters on the *Africa* by Pacca and Ariani, or to Laurens's long introduction to his edition of books I-V of the poem.³²⁴ In these studies the vicissitudes of the composition are put in relation to other Petrarchan texts that share the same moral and thematic concerns; furthermore, essential information is provided about the evolution of the project and of the extant text. Within the limits of a focus dictated by language and meter, Martinez's chapter on *Africa*, *Epystole*, and *Bucolicum Carmen* describes in fair detail the commonality of these works and discusses the failure of the *Africa* as a symptom of issues troubling Petrarch's poetics at large.³²⁵ Two other important studies focus on the use of the epic as a culmination or pivotal moment in the self-fashioning of a modern *auctor*: while Laird examines Petrarch's adaptation of the tripartite progression of pastoral, georgic, and epic typified by Virgil's works (as illustrated in the illumination on the frontispiece of the Virgilio Ambrosiano codex), Brownlee explores how in the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*, *Triumpho*, and *Africa*, Petrarch establishes his own authority as an anti-Dante (or alter-Dante) figure, implicitly countering the *Commedia* and its vernacularized Virgil through a different relation to the classics.³²⁶

³²⁴ Pacca, *Petrarca*, 45-55; Ariani, *Petrarca*, 87-97, and Laurens, introduction to *Afrique*, xiv-cxviii.

³²⁵ Martinez, "Latin hexameter works."

³²⁶ Laird, "Re-inventing Virgil's wheel"; Brownlee, "Power Plays."

Only a few works explicitly tackle the issue of what kind of epic is at work in the *Africa*. As to comparative studies of the epic, to my knowledge Newman's is the only one where the *Africa* is presented with more than a passing mention. Significantly placed at the end of a section titled "The Critical Failure: Dante and Petrarch," Newman's chapter on the *Africa* starts off with the standard critical topos of the Latinate poet as a victim of his own respect for scholarship and erudition: "What would happen to a poet of genius who was too eager to please the schoolmen? The answer is found in the fate of Petrarch's *Africa*."³²⁷ In step with the typical view of Petrarch's work as two-headed, Newman argues that ambition stifled the *Africa*, as if the author had intended to immunize his poem against that process of variance and metamorphosis which characterizes the vitality of the Callimachean strand in the epic tradition – a vitality that for the critic has its ideal ground in the lyric mode of the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* only. Yet, adds Newman, the poem is not completely blind to that variance, which is the reason why we still read the *Africa*, "to discover there the continued tension between native brilliance and academic precept."³²⁸ As is the case also with his section on Boccaccio's *Teseida*, Newman's reflections are a useful starting point for a reflection on how the *Africa* questions the nature and evolution of the epic, even though Newman himself does not reach as far as his discourse would allow, and remains attached to the critical cliché of Petrarch's dichotomy.

³²⁷ Newman, *Classical Epic Tradition*, 282, where it also reads: "The poet took a theme from Roman history, and wished to latch onto the Ennian tradition. He opted against Callimachus because that was what the critics said or implied he should do. His own inmost poetic instincts rebelled against such serfdom, and in the unresolved struggle his epic languished and died."

³²⁸ *Ibid.*, 287

It does not come as a surprise that some scholars, from various angles, studied the *Africa* and its variance against classical and post-classical backgrounds. According to Kallendorf,³²⁹ the *Africa* stemmed from the tradition of epideitic rhetoric that had grown through a millennium of readings of Virgil's *Aeneid* as a poem in praise of Aeneas, the perfect man. In step with the Virgil, Petrarch composed a poem to praise Scipio as an *alter Aeneas*, and to bestow poetic authority on himself as an *alter Ennius*. Reductive as it might appear in the light of the composite nature of the Western epic tradition, Kallendorf's approach takes into account a major strand in the reception of Virgil's *Aeneid* until the Renaissance. Petrarch himself alludes to that view in his reflections on poetry and hermeneutics, for example in *Seniles* IV.5.330; commentaries such as Fulgentius' *Expositio* and Bernard Silvestris' glosses on *Aeneid* I-VI could have played a role as mediator of that line of interpretation, which Petrarch would then incorporate not only in his reflection but also in the creative writing of his epic. Whether or not that reading does justice to the many-sidedness of the *Africa*, an essential implication of Kallendorf's thesis is that Petrarch's theory and practice of the epic are eminently contextual, hence at variance with any fixed model that readers of any time (including ours) may stick to. For instance, Scipio's unexciting flawlessness, a trait that typically irritates modern readers, was meant to imitate Aeneas' perfection as Petrarch imagined it. The failure of the *Africa* would then coincide with the readers' failure to match their generic expectations with Petrarch's variations.³³¹

³²⁹ Kallendorf, *In Praise of Aeneas*, 19-58.

³³⁰ For an overview of Petrarch's hermeneutic approaches along the lines of the medieval *accessus ad auctores* see Ariani, *Petrarca*, 70-86.

³³¹ On the other hand, what Feeney, "Epic Hero," 144, says about the *Aeneid* applies to the *Africa*: "Aeneas does not embody *the* meaning of the poem; such a myopic focus attenuates the extensive power of the *Aeneid*." Feeney's overall argument in favour of the genre's capaciousness and against the post-Renaissance emphasis

Another interpretation of the *Africa* based on medieval hermeneutics is Warner's, which sees the *Africa* as an allegorical poem that "replays Augustine's quelling of his own youthful passions, his own escape from the fires of Carthage, and it claims the same achievement for Petrarch. The *Africa*, as such, is Petrarch's other *Secretum*."³³² Against this view, however, are the weight and scope of Roman history in the *Africa*; the collective destiny of Rome can be hardly compressed into an allegory of the self torn between salvation and sin. On a larger scale, although Warner's chapter is short of a problematization of the epic as a category, it hints at the possibility of the epic of functioning simultaneously (though not always harmoniously) on multiple scales, from individual autobiography to universal history. If the Augustinian mediation alone is not sufficient to read the *Africa* (even in the *Secretum* Augustine cannot ultimately bring Franciscus' inner conflict to a resolution), we are nevertheless urged to inquire what mediations are at work in the poem, and how they combine.

A third study that, in its assumptions, suggests a new perspective on the epic is Bartuschat's comparison of the versions of the episode of Massinissa and Sophonisba in the *Africa*, *De viris illustribus*, and *Triumphus* ("Triumphus cupidinis"). Apropos of the treatment of the story in the *Africa*, Bartuschat speaks of "epica delle passioni,"³³³ characterized by a double tension toward subjective lyrical pathos and objective epic representation. Petrarch's obsessive celebration of Scipio's heroic *and* non-erotic virtue

on the hero as the center of gravity of the epic poem, demonstrates that the epic has actually many centers, all connected and distributed through the text. The epic is more than any of its heroes, even more than their sum.

³³² Warner, *Augustinian Epic*, 11.

³³³ Bartuschat, "Sofonisba and Massinissa," 116.

shifts the poem's focus from historical narrative to individual psychology (which does not necessarily lead to the formation of the *vir perfectus* of the allegorical tradition). This point is worth further inquiry, as it invites us to reflect on the forms of subjectivity at work in Petrarch's epic, in relation to models both ancient (Aeneas and Dido in *Aeneid* IV) and modern (Paolo and Francesca in *Inferno* V, and the personae of Petrarch's own love poetry). What are the principles of individuation of epic subjectivity? What kind of subjectivity is implied by the text, beyond identification with just one of its characters?

The issue is brilliantly tackled by Hardie in the Petrarch chapter of his volume on representations of *Fama*, which in its dual tension (e.g., permanence/impermanence, glory/vanity, individuality/collectivity) especially resonate with the epic labor of the *Africa*. *Fama* is structured by oppositions that produce in texts a dialectics of openings and closures: an excellent vista on the dynamics of the epic tradition. The instability of *Fama* calls into question the monumentality of the epic, and we will see how the *Somnium* of *Africa* I-II intently focuses on the monument-function of the epic.³³⁴

Very useful to frame the *Africa* within another set of contradictory coordinates is Feo's essay on Latin epic in medieval Italy, with a special focus on the genre's ideological momentum, which embraces history from a municipal to a universal scale. Against this background, Feo argues that the *Africa* is not the outmoded, alien textual object that most modern critics believe to see: "credo si possa sostenere che il Petrarca intendesse attribuire alla sua *Africa* un compito di dimensioni storiche simile a quello dell'*Eneide*, che

³³⁴ Hardie, *Rumour and Renown*, 1-47 on *Fama* in Western literature, and 439-484 in Petrarch's *Trionfi* and *Africa*.

intendesse cioè con la sua opera di poeta rendere un servizio alla sua società.”³³⁵ Along the same lines, Feo speaks briefly but decisively of the *Africa* in an overview of the Latin tradition in Italian literature, and does so by pointing out how Petrarch moved away from his time’s expectations on the epic. If attempts at writing a Latin epic poem in late medieval Italy were constrained by the demands of municipal politics, the *Africa* was meant to exhort Italians to settle their conflicts and join forces against the modern barbarians: “È in queste condizioni, da una ferita profonda e non da una fuga umanistica, che nasce l’idea dell’*Africa*. occorre, per Petrarca, ridare alle membra divise dell’Italia la coscienza di essere tutte parti di un unico corpo”;³³⁶ the reunification of the body and corpus of Scipio’s deeds is a key image, as we will see at the end of this chapter, in Ennius’ prophecy in book IX. Moreover, while medieval historical epics tended to focus only on public issues, Petrarch reintroduced, in Virgil’s wake, the clash of individual feelings and collective interest in the tragic episode of Massinissa and Sophonisba, or in the lament of a pagan (Mago, Hannibal’s brother) on the fragility of human life vis-à-vis dreams and expectations.

More decidedly than any other scholar, Feo asserts that Petrarch’s longed-for restoration of the virtues of antiquity serves to articulate a relation to – if not an intervention into – the world of history in its complexity. This intention, with its corollary of hopes and delusions on the poet’s part, is indicative of the friction of temporalities in the poem. To study the the *Africa* as an epic entails an investigation of the poem’s irregularities and imperfections – seams, twists, inversions, substitutions, interruptions, gaps, hesitations,

³³⁵ Feo, “Poema epico latino,” 55.

³³⁶ Feo, “Tradizione latina,” 336.

heterogeneities; they can be signs of a literary failure as well as of an epic labor which does not result in what we would expect to be a “perfect” epic work. As Hardie warned, even failure to complete is a literary gesture with authoritative antecedents; as such, it requires to be considered not as an objective fact but as a polyvalent discourse.³³⁷ Through micro-textual analyses of Petrarch’s strategies of quoting, hiding, rewriting, and combining ancient sources, Velli focuses on a series of loci from the *Africa* as examples of Petrarchan *imitatio* and its attendant variance, given that the distance between the ancients and the moderns is unbridgeable.³³⁸ To sum up, the alleged flaws of the *Africa* turn out to be the most interesting elements in its epic fabric.

4.2 The Architecture of the Poem: *Historia* and Digressions

The *Africa* addresses the reader through the enigma of its architecture. The *Somnium* functions as an ideal center but placed in an asymmetrical position within the text. Estranging, almost unfamiliar, is the family air that the *imitatio* of the epic brings about; not the least because differently from what happens with other Petrarchan works (especially those in the vernacular) compositional frictions in the *Africa* are not resolved into a second-degree naturalness obtained by force of art. Here, the poet’s artifice never recedes from the reader’s attention.

Petrarch himself referred to his poem as it were an architecture. At the beginning of the *Secretum*, Veritas recalls that in the *Africa* there is a passage on the Palace of Truth,

³³⁷ Hardie, “After Rome,” 294.

³³⁸ Velli, *Petrarca e Boccaccio*, 1-37, and 46-57. On the notion of Petrarch as *poeta philologus* see Marchesi, “Petrarch’s Philological Epic.”

a passage erased or most likely rewritten into the extant description of the palace of Syphax, the king of Numidia (in book III). A few scholars have suggested that by the Palace of Truth Petrarch might have been alluding to the poem as a whole: a majestic building dedicated to historical and ethical Truth.³³⁹ Of that very palace, the extant text bears no explicit trace.

Ille ego sum [...] quam tu in *Africa* nostra curiosa quadam elegantia descripsisti; cui, non segnius quam Amphion ille dirceus, in extreme quidem occidentis summoque Atlantis vertice habitationem clarissimam atque pulcerrimam mirabilis artificio ac poeticis, ut proprie dicam, manibus erexisti. (*Secr.* 94) 340

Whereas scholars substantially agree on the fact that Petrarch adapted this palace into Syphax's palace, specific hypotheses on how the transformation took place substantially differ. Leaving aside the complications of this philological crux in respect of the text's composition, we can still consider Petrarch's real and phantasmal palace as an image of the whole poem's generic architecture. The exordium of *Georgics* III, already discussed in chapter I apropos of its deferral topos, must be considered once again here as an authoritative source for the well-established topos of the poem as a monument. There Virgil announces to Mantua the building of a temple celebrating the deeds of Augustus:

Primus ego in patriam mecum, modo vita supersit,
Aonio rediens deducam vertice Musas;
primus Idumaeas referam tibi, Mantua, palmas
et viridi in campo templum de marmore ponam
propter aquam" (*Georg.* III.11-14).

Like Virgil's temple, Petrarch's palace is raised in a precise locale (Numidia); yet, while Virgil only fantasizes about a poetical building rhetorically deferred to later times, in the *Secretum* Petrarch looks back at what, of the *Africa*, has been already written but not

³³⁹ See Fenzi, *Saggi petrarcheschi*, 227-304, and Martellotti, *Scritti petrarcheschi*, 497-500. Their hypotheses are supported also in Laurens, introduction to *L'Afrique*, XLVIII-LIII

³⁴⁰ Here and afterwards, the *Secretum* is cited by the page numbers of the edition consulted .

finished. A shadow of disruption is cast, which matches Augustine's later remarks on the *vanitas* of Franciscus' epic ambition. Hence the instability of the architecture of the *Africa* as an epic in progress, soon to be abandoned in a state of imbalance.

That the very palace of Truth originally meant to be the allegory of the whole poem shrank to the home of a such a side character as Syphax only reveals the impossibility, for Petrarch, of envisioning an epic totality consistent enough to be figuratively represented by an architecture (Syphax's palace does not have that function). The poetic fate of that building, whatever its philological genesis and metamorphosis, well represents the instability of the *Africa* and its struggle to strike a balance between the particular and the general. Petrarch develops this theme in the unfolding of the *Somnium*, where the vanity of the aesthetic meets the permanence of the ethical. It is the *Somnium*, in sum, that becomes the new "palace," capacious to include and illustrate the major tensions in the poem.

Such an instability gave rise to the appreciation of the *Africa* far more as a collection of fragments or ruins than as one single text or architecture.³⁴¹ Surprisingly enough, this is still the position held by Fera, one of the leading scholars on the *Africa*, who sees the poem as an uneven text disseminated with literary gems, in a sort of backlash of Croce's distinction between *poesia* and *non poesia*.³⁴² As remarked by Fenzi, it is because

³⁴¹ In Italy this is attested to also by the editorial history of the poem: there is not a single modern edition of the whole poem accessible to a non-specialist reader, of the kind published in English and in French.

³⁴² "Ma nonostante vistosi difetti, dovuti soprattutto appunto alla carenza assoluta di organicità nel racconto, l'*Africa* [...] è una miniera di poesia, un insieme di frammenti, slegati, irregolari, una cospicua serie di quadri più o meno grandi che consegnano emozioni, trasmettono messaggi, suggestioni, aprono improvvisamente varchi tra memorie di poeti antichi e moderni. Non c'è concatenazione tra i frammenti che appaiono come luci inattese in un *ordo* spesso greve e uniforme, si insinuano in cornici rese opache dalla pesante e dura versificazione liviana. Ma è come se nell'*Africa* fossero sotterrati mille sonetti che il lettore impegnato cui anelava Petrarca deve riportare alla luce," in Fera, "Interpretare e tradurre," 83.

of the lack of a strong narrative structure that the *Africa* has been read mostly as fragments, that is, as a text with only a few outstanding passages, or as a repertoire of typical Petrarchan themes.³⁴³ By the way, it must not be forgotten that the *Africa* began to circulate by the semi-clandestine transmission of a few excerpts (the incipit of book I, Mago's lament entrusted to Barbato, Syphax's palace copied by Pierre Bersuire).

All in all, two tensions combine to shape the puzzling architecture the *Africa*: a linear succession of historical facts as recorded by historiography (especially in the text of Livy, which is Petrarch's primary documentary source) and a set of digressive textual manoeuvres that suspend or deviate the impulse toward narrative action (an impulse traditionally central to a project of a military epic). The development of the *Somnium* incorporates and transforms both tensions.

To the purpose of reading the *Somnium*, we first need to quickly review the architecture of the poem from beginning to end.

After the proem, the narrative in book I begins in orderly fashion with a recapitulation of the origins of the Second Punic War, its main cause being the Carthaginians' *invidia* for the greatness of the Roman Republic on the other shore of the Mediterranean. A shift from reality to vision soon occurs, though: in a long dream modeled on Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis*, Scipio Africanus meets his father and uncle, both fallen in

³⁴³ "Questo carattere [the lack of action] rende incerto e divagante il filo propriamente narrativo, ma dall'altra parte fa sì che l'opera appaia come un concentrato dei temi che più stavano a cuore Petrarca [...]. Con la doppia conseguenza che i lettori sono sempre stati indotti a una lettura fortemente antologica (l'ultima parte del sogno di Scipione; la storia di Sofonisba e Massinissa; la morte di Magone sono le parti [...] che da sempre hanno goduto di questo privilegio), ma che, insieme, l'opera tutta si presenti come un deposito *in progress* di idee e motivi che intrecciano un dialogo fitto e suggestivo con l'insieme delle altre opere," in Fenzi, *Petrarca*, 29.

Spain against the Carthaginian army and now in heaven among the blessed souls, including the greatest heroes of Rome's history. The dream continues through book II, where the conversation turns to the future of Rome, of which Africanus' father foresees the immense glory but also the inevitable decadence, as must be the case with any human thing. The elder Scipio adds that Rome's glory, nonetheless, will be posthumously celebrated and perhaps restored by Petrarch himself.³⁴⁴

The dream is over, and book III resumes the narrative with Scipio sending his friend Laelius on a diplomatic mission to Syphax, the Numidian king: it is a digression from the centrality of Scipio that is established in the proem and in books I-II. Action is further deferred by the lengthy description of Syphax's royal palace and by the banquet at which a local bard and Laelius speak in praise of Carthaginian glory and Roman virtue, respectively. Laelius' panegyric of Rome continues in book IV, zooming in on Scipio, who is extolled over any other mortal. Then a lacuna interrupts the text, which resumes in book V with the love affair between the Massilian king Massinissa and Sophonisba, Syphax's wife. All the action that takes place in the intervening time (Syphax's alliance with the Carthaginians and his defeat at the hands of Laelius and Massinissa) is omitted: all the historical information we may need can be easily found outside of the *Africa* in Livy, but we have no clue as to how Petrarch would have handled that matter in detail. With a mixture of pathos and beguilement, Sophonisba successfully seduces the young king, who is soon torn between yielding to his passion and resisting for the sake of the political and moral

³⁴⁴ In this resumé of the poem many articulations of the *Somnium* are omitted that will be discussed later in the present chapter.

virtue embodied by Scipio. The latter eventually addresses Massinissa in a fatherly fashion and persuades him to repudiate Sophonisba, who is then induced by Massinissa himself to commit suicide. As a coda to this tragic book, the woman's soul is taken to the Underworld, like Dido's in the *Aeneid*.

It is only in book VI, when the Carthaginians call back Hannibal from Italy, that the engine of historical narrative fully starts up. The most intense passage, however, is once again an aside from proper action, namely a beautiful coda with the lament of Hannibal's younger brother, Mago, who is dying on a boat taking him home to Carthage: his dreams of a life of heroic deeds must give way to the *vanitas* of humankind – a motif anticipated and explored in the *Somnium*.

Book VII hosts most of the military action in the *Africa*, including the decisive battle at Zama, and yet warfare is outweighed by two sets of long speeches, first on earth (Hannibal tries in vain to persuade Scipio to choose peace instead of war) and then in heaven (the allegorical personification of Rome and Carthage contend for Jupiter's favor).

In book VIII, Scipio calls a truce and dictates to the defeated Carthaginians his very harsh terms of surrender; then, he sets sail for Italy after ordering the destruction by fire of the entire Carthaginian fleet. In the midst of these events, another outstanding digression is the conversation in which Scipio, Laelius, and Massinissa discuss the worth of Hannibal as a military leader able to stand next to other commanders of antiquity, like Alexander and Pyrrhus (and implicitly Scipio himself). Book VIII also includes an antiquarian description of Rome, on the occasion of the Carthaginian ambassadors' visit to the city to negotiate peace conditions.

No less a piece of antiquarian bravura is Scipio's triumph in book IX, a scene set between two relatively long transition moments. First comes Scipio's dialogue with Ennius on the boat that is taking them back to Italy; the poet expounds his (and Petrarch's) idea of poetry as truthful *historia* gently veiled by poetic artifice, and then reports a dream in which he met Homer, who in turn showed him Franciscus, a young Tuscan poet destined to sing Scipio's glory in a distant and darker future. After the triumph comes the poem's envoy, no less Petrarch-centered than the poem: threatened by the stings of *Invidia*, the author of the *Africa* takes leave of his work and regrets the death of the dedicatee, King Robert of Anjou.

Here we have neither the teleological unity of Dante's *Commedia* nor the exuberant flow of Boccaccio's *Teseida*. "Il riassunto non deve dare l'impressione di un ordine che in realtà non c'è," comments a scholar that puts the discontinuity of the poem down to Petrarch's alleged unsuitability to the epic mode.³⁴⁵ This is one of the critical topoi that have shaped the reception of the *Africa* as a failed epic: the most serious of its pitfalls would be the lack of action, which results from an overabundance of digressions and interruptions. And yet, to a genre-oriented reading, these very points might best represent Petrarch's experimental dialogue with the epic tradition.

If the *Africa* does not reach the poetico-cosmological consistency of Dante's *Commedia*, and if it does not even achieve the unity of lesser scope and complexity that characterizes Boccaccio's *Teseida* as a hybrid of epic and romance, what is then Petrarch's

³⁴⁵ Pacca, *Petrarca*, 48. See also *ibid.*, 53: "L'*Africa* appare minata alla base da un contrasto di fondo tra un'aspirazione epica e una tendenza lirica. L'ambizione di riesumare la più illustre delle forme letterarie antiche nutre il volontarismo di Petrarca, tuttavia egli non sa essere epico: l'azione vera e propria è pochissima, e c'è la continua tendenza a divagare su argomenti e personaggi secondari."

epic focus? Petrarch's philological awareness of the rhetorical apparatus of the epic is acute, and clear is his sense that coherence must be sought not in its antiquarian apparatus but in its underlying forces. As we will see in the next section, the *Africa* revises the code of epic by means of digressions and extensive oratorio-like speeches. Whereas scholars generally see those oratorical devices as ornamental rather than substantial, we will see to what extent, in Petrarch's generic labor, the use of rhetoric has a generative role.

4.3. Speech and Fable: On the Oratorical Quality of the *Africa*

The unbalanced architecture of the *Africa* functions as a revolving door, providing both entrances into and exits from the epic. The poem can be thus read like a long, uneven rehearsal of the epic genre itself, with a historiographically accurate fable that makes room for digressions in which the oratorical prevails over the diegetic. What do we gain, in our understanding of the epic, from such a reduction of epic action?

To begin to answer the question, we need to consider three different ways in which the oratorical quality *Africa* speaks to the epic tradition. First, speeches have always been integral to the theory and practice of the epic. One has only to think of the foundational though problematic taxonomy proposed in Plato's *Republic* 392-394, where the epic is defined as a mixed mode that combines pure third-person narrative and imitation of the characters' speeches – or, to put it differently, the voice of the narrator and the voices of the characters. Virtually any major or minor epic text from the Western tradition is based on that combination, and on the possibilities it offers. In this sense, the *Africa* only amplifies a typical feature of the epic genre, thus altering the canonical balance modeled by the *auctores*. Petrarch pushed his text toward one end of the narrative/speech continuum;

he brackets “pure” action, partially at least, hence shifting the center of gravity of the epic. What is decisive, in the *Africa*, mainly occurs in speeches that unfold through diegetic suspensions. Speeches articulate the individuation of a personal and collective epic subject no less than a plot that is canonically robust, tense, and well-modulated.

To tell the truth, this is often at odds with Petrarch’s sources and models (e.g., Livy and Lucan), whose work is certainly rich with speeches even though its main purpose is to narrate Roman *historia*. Let us recall some long spoken passages in the *Africa*: 1) the *Somnium* of books I-II, where the characters observe the heavens and the heavenly souls, while discussing a vast range of events that embrace past, present, and future; 2) Massinissa’s love-sickness in book V, where his doubts, hesitations, and second thoughts are presented and discussed (in dialogues and monologues) as events taking place in the theatre of his interiority; 3) the conversation in book VIII on the military leaders of antiquity, where war as *res gesta* is distanced from the speakers as the topic of a verbal exchange modelled on philosophical dialogues (Scipio himself, still involved in the operations of war following the battle of Zama, can speak of Hannibal’s skills in a most lucid and detached way); 4) Ennius’ speech to Scipio, in which Homer’s speech is nested as a meta-discourse on poetry that leads us toward the conclusion of the poem. In fact, Ennius’ explanation the origins of the two-fold use of the laurel crown, for both military leaders and poets (IX.108-123), establishes a parallel between war as action and poetry as meta-action.

A major difference between Ennius and Petrarch (*alter Ennius*) is that the modern poet, as we will see at the end of this chapter, has the privilege of not being too close to the

material reality of the fable, while the ancient poet was with Scipio on the battlefield, as an eyewitness to his virtue and actions. His philologico-historical accuracy notwithstanding, Petrarch relates to the subject matter of the *Africa* with an intimacy that is all in all phantasmal, much more than in Dante's *Commedia* (where the *personaggio-poeta* is totally involved in the fable) and Boccaccio's *Teseida* (where the paratexts subjugate the author to the same power of *Amore* that drives the protagonists of the fable).

To be sure, the classical proportion of narrative and speech in the epic as a mixed genre did not require the author to participate in the fable, differently from what happened in the Italian Trecento, when the new authors had to negotiate the historicity of their work through the inscription of their authorial self. Always at least one step away from the matter of the fable, speech in Petrarch does not erase action; it rather transforms it into a phantasmal dimension that poets and readers experience only through verbal representation (what a character's voice relates, in a manner interestingly close to how in ancient tragedy decisive events often took place off-stage). Petrarch's emphasis on speech as the center of the *Africa* symptomatize a new configuration of objectivity and subjectivity, of exteriority and interiority.

The second main implication of the oratorical character of the *Africa* is that epic labor presupposes a subject that is both active and passive; in other words, passivity as receptiveness is the force that drives epic individuation. Scipio himself, in the poem, is far more passive than active, in the sense that the virtue resulting in his *gesta* comes from a capacity to perceive, read, and interpret reality: it is the "active" passivity of a reader or a dreamer. Not by chance the *Somnium* is the real preparation or initiation Scipio has to go

through, a formation in receptiveness while no “real” action takes place and actions present, past, and future are being reviewed.³⁴⁶ His ethos is at one with his pathos, as already indicated by Macrobius, who toward the end of his commentary on Cicero’s *Somnium* poignantly attributes to Africanus the *gemina perfectio* of harmonizing in himself the virtues of both contemplative and active life (*otiosae* and *negotiosae virtutes*): “Saepe tamen euenit ut idem pectus et agendi et disputandi perfectione sublime sit, et caelum utroque adipiscatur exercitio uirtutum” (II.17.7). Pathos is another form of action.³⁴⁷

The third implication of the use of speech in the *Africa* as a way of reconfiguring the orientation of the epic is that what the characters say compose, in its entirety, an encyclopedic totality. The epic for Petrarch remains the most capacious poetic form, and this quality is made manifest through speeches exploring different aspects of totality. Encyclopedic was the Virgilio Ambrosiano codex, a multi-layered work in progress in which the original texts, their commentaries, and Petrarch’s own notes (scholarly and private) combine into an evolving though unsystematic totality.³⁴⁸ No work in the epic tradition has been structured exactly like an encyclopedia or a repertoire, and yet the reception of the epic attests to that very function, which is embedded within the narrative, though with different degrees and orientations. This feature emerges in the *Africa* in a

³⁴⁶ “Like Lucan, Petrarch is more concerned with the impact of events upon human beings than with the events themselves,” in Bruère, “Lucan and Petrarch’s *Africa*,” 98.

³⁴⁷ Cf. Fedi, *Invito alla lettura*, 58: “L’intensa commozione trascende la vita romana, e non viene sollecitata dalle vicende della narrazione.” This statement is right in noticing that pathos in the *Africa* goes beyond the historical matter of Rome, but it is also true that commotion is always rooted in a concrete, historical experience, even in the *Somnium*. There is certainly an imbalance, not a separation, between pathos and subject matter.

³⁴⁸ On the Virgilio Ambrosiano see Billanovich, *Petrarca e il primo Umanesimo*, 3-40, Feo, “Poema epico latino,” 53-60, and the volume with Petrarch’s glosses edited by Baglio, Nebuloni, and Petoletti.

fragmentary way: while the main storyline presents the Second Punic War, the speeches in the poem present elements of cosmology, ethics, aesthetics, psychology, polemology, and so on. Organizing all that matter in a consistent structure was not the purpose – let alone the outcome – of the *Africa*; we should speak of intimations of totality rather than of visions or understandings of totality (of the kind offered by the *Commedia* or, in a far less cogent way, by the allegories underlying Boccaccio's *Teseida*). It is telling that the totality hypothetically represented by the Palace of Truth at an earlier stage of the *Africa* is, in the extant text, replaced by fragments not perfectly composed in a formal or cosmological architecture.³⁴⁹ Furthermore, through speech, Petrarch introduces contradictions, hesitations, and second thoughts that make the poem less stable than it is supposed to be.

An important example of encyclopedic commentary was Macrobius' exposition of Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis*. This text is not only the mediator of Petrarch's reading and rewriting of Cicero's *Somnium* in *Africa* I and II, but also a frequently quoted source in the glosses of the Virgilio Ambrosiano: Virgil, Petrarch, Macrobius, Servius and all the other authors quoted in the text and glosses of that codex, work together as if they were part of a vast encyclopedic network. And it must not have passed unnoticed to Petrarch that Macrobius, at the very end of his commentary, declares Cicero's *Somnium* (in itself a long speech delivered by Scipio Aemilianus at the end of the *De re publica*) to be the most complete work of philosophy. All the branches of knowledge have been condensed in a

³⁴⁹ Fenzi, *Saggi petrarcheschi*, 275-278, brilliantly argues that the problem of the composition and revision of the Palace-section in the *Africa* is in fact a problem of Petrarch's relation with a notion of encyclopedic totality (modelled on a mix of ancient and medieval sources) that he felt as no longer tenable. Such an evolution, Fenzi says, takes full meaning only if read against the composition of the *Secretum* – a private text in which the motivations of the epic poem are subjected to harsh scrutiny.

relatively short text: *philosophia moralis, naturalis, rationalis*: “Vere igitur pronuntiandum est nihil hoc opere perfectius, / quo uniuersa philosophiae continetur integritas” (II.17.17). That the *Africa* “was also somehow to encompass ‘the entire body of philosophy’,”³⁵⁰ in the footsteps of Macrobius, is an intriguing view that might suit the notion of totality allegedly pursued by the Palace of the Truth in the *vetus Africa*; however, in the extant poem that sense of totality emerges only intermittently, through a collection of fragments and digressions.³⁵¹ To Petrarch, the experience of epic totality cannot be but digressive.

4.4. Scipio’s Dream: The Field of Epic Individuation

The dream of Scipio Africanus is the first and most extended digression in the *Africa*, stretching from I.161 to the end of book II, for a total of 992 lines (12,8% of the entire poem, which is 7730 lines long). Just as Petrarch’s proem exceeds, in extension, any major proem in the classical and post-classical epic, so does Scipio’s dream is longer than any comparable dream sequence. Digression of comparable length in the classical epic (e.g., *Aeneid* II-III or *Thebaid* V) has the precise function of sustaining – rather than suspending or diverting – the main *fabula* of the poem through the twists of *ordo artificialis*; in the *Africa*, instead, the dream of Scipio arrests the unfolding of the *historia* announced soon before in the proem and opens up a space for the establishment of a new epic program. The

³⁵⁰ Bernardo, *Petrarch, Scipio and the “Africa,”* 121.

³⁵¹ Andreoni Fontecedro, “*Somnium Scipionis*,” 340, appropriately observes that one the most relevant differences between Cicero’s and Petrarch’s *Somnium* is that the latter greatly reduces the role played in the former by cosmology, that is, by a discourse on the cosmos functioning as an architecture of totality within which every aspect of the dream vision can be contained and harmonized.

dream combines epic, philosophy, and *historia* within a suspension of the “ordinary course” of the epic text.³⁵²

Narratively, the dream develops from Africanus’ meeting with his father and uncle, Publius Cornelius and Gnaeus Cornelius, both fallen during the Roman army’s Spanish campaign against the Carthaginians in 211 BC. Petrarch’s model here is Cicero’s *Somnium Scipionis*, one of the most successful and widely-diffused examples of classic dream literature, via Macrobius’ commentary. Before analyzing the ways in which Petrarch made the dream into the epic center of the *Africa*, we have to briefly review the sequencing of the dream itself.

The shade of Publius Cornelius (Africanus’ father) says that Jupiter (“moderator Olympi,” I.172, foreshadowing the monotheistic God of Christianity) granted him the possibility of this meeting, so that he could share with his son a treasure of knowledge: of the cosmos, of Scipios’ and Rome’s fate, and of the condition of souls after death. It is a “perrarum munus” (I.174) that inevitably echoes Dante’s unique privilege to travel the realms of the afterlife.³⁵³ From the heavens, Publius looks down on Carthage and exposes the reasons for the just war (“iusto / Marte,” I.189-190) by which his own death will be avenged, at the hands of his son. The wounds on the father’s body are a dramatic pre-

³⁵² Cf. the rapid contextualization of the *Somnium Scipionis* within the tradition of medieval *visio* in Ariani, *Petrarca*, 92: “il sogno di Scipione [...] ripropone di fatto la medievale *visio in somnis* (analoga, del resto, al contenitore onirico dei *Triumph* e all’*incipit* visionario, anche se ad occhi aperti, del *Secretum*) come l’irrinunciabile abbrivo dinamico per ogni *narratio* che si proponga come fondamento di verità.”

³⁵³ “Ille meis victus precibus stellantia caeli / Limina - perrarum munus - patefecit et ambos / Viventem penetrare polos permisit, ut astra / Me duce et obliquos calles, patriaeque labores / Atque tuos, et adhuc terris ignota Sororum / Stamina” (I.173-178).

Christian reminder, as well as an echo of Dante's Manfred.³⁵⁴ To Scipio, seized by anxiety and grief at that sight, Publius narrates in detail his own heroic death and that of his brother Gnaeus. The detachment with which the elder Scipio looks at earthly life makes Africanus wonder whether his father and uncle still live after their death; Publius replies that only their present state can be truly called life, while life on earth could be more properly seen as death.

Then the dream takes a decidedly ethical and philosophical turn. It is through this new vantage point that we are invited to reconsider earthly life, rapidly zooming out from the events of the Spanish campaign to the great fresco of Roman history: the heroes from the past of Rome are in heaven too, and no less alive than the two elder Scipios. The transition is finely articulated in a retrospective movement, from the most recent past to the earliest stages of the life of Rome. Accordingly, first Publius shows his son a crowd of Romans fallen against the Carthaginians. Then, after a sort philosophical interlude in which Africanus asks his uncle Gnaeus how and why our mortal existence must be justly lived, Gnaeus himself describes the heavenly procession of the kings and heroes of ancient Rome, with which book I comes to a close.

Book II reverses the direction of our perspective on Roman history: it is not the past but the future that Publius speaks about to his son. The prophecy is long and covers centuries from Hannibal's imminent defeat to the apogee of the Republic and, finally, the rise and fall of the Empire. The dream turns from history to philosophy again: to the son

³⁵⁴ "Io mi volsi ver' lui e guardail fiso: / biondo era e bello e di gentile aspetto, / ma l'un de' cigli un colpo avea diviso. // Quand'io mi fui umilmente disdetto / d'averlo visto mai, el disse: 'Or vedi'; / e mostrommi una piaga a sommo 'l petto," in *Purg.* III.106-111.

who asks why the *imperium* of Rome must end, the father replies with a discourse on fortune, memory, and glory – of Rome as well as of worldly matters in general. Of Rome he says: “nam Roma potentibus olim / Conditas sideribus, quamvis lacerate malorum / Consiliis manibusque, due durabit eritque / Has inter pestes nudo vel nomine mundi regina” (II.314-318). This leads to a reflection on universal impermanence: “Omnia nata quidem pereunt et adulta fatiscunt; / Nec manet in rebus quicquam mortalibus” (II.345-346). Another change, in the scale of space, alters our perspective on history: “Cernis quam parva pudenda / imperii pateant circum confinia nostril?” (II.354-355). What is Rome’s territory when compared to the extension of the Earth, let alone the cosmos? This philosophical stance comes directly from Cicero’s *Somnium Scipionis*, from which Petrarch also derives the critique of *Fama* as an unsatisfiable ambition: “nulli toto cognoscier orbe / Contigit” (II.397-398). The different climate zones of the terrestrial globe are a reality sufficient to reduce the dream of worldwide fame to vain folly: “Mortalia quorsum / Vota runt? Amplam cupiunt diffundere famam; / Septa sed arcta vetant. Angusto carcere clausos / Somnia magna iuvant” (II.402-404); only too late men realize the insanity of that longing.

Back to the desire to immortalize one’s own name, Publius firmly says: “Vivere post mortem, violentas spernere Parcas / Dulcia sunt, fateor, sed nomine vivere nil est” (II.414-415). At this point, the question is *bene vivere*: “Vivere sed melius, sed certius” and “Sine tempore vivite” (II.416, 423), not to become slave of “falsa [...] gloria” (II.429). *Fama* is not an exception in the inevitable decay brought about by the passing of time, not even if it passes down the greatest *gesta*, like Scipio’s: “Ipsa tuas laudes etas ventura loquetur: / Immemor ipsa eadem, seu tempore fessa, tacebit / Immemoresque dabit post

secula longa nepotes” (II.436-438). His fame will shine again, says Publius, only many centuries later, thanks to an Etruscan youth (Petrarch himself) who will stand out as an “alter Ennius” (II.444). Later we will consider Petrarch’s self-inscription more in detail; for the time being, suffice it to say that even the *Africa* (along with its historiographic companion: the *Vita Scipionis* in the *De viris illustribus*) is bound to be dissolved by the course of *tempus edax*: “Iam sua mors libris aderit; mortalia namque / Esse decet quecumque labor nortalis inani / Edidit ingenio” (II.456-458).

To conclude his long speech, Publius ponders on what the just man must do in the face of the *vanitas* of human condition: “Illecebris trahat ipsa suis pulcherrima Virtus” (II.478), because only by cultivating virtue for virtue’s sake a man ascends to the heavens and, while still on the earth, gains transient glory and happiness (not as objects of his longing, though, but as inevitable consequences of his virtue). Love of one’s own fatherland and friends must be pursued, and hardships must be endured: this is the simple truth that Publius finally commits to his son. He must bear that in mind, as his deeds will be repaid by his fellow citizens with ungratefulness and exile. At this point the dream ends, similarly to how it began, on a biographical and historical note, and yet by now the *vita* of Scipio and the *historia* of Rome are seen in a more complex way, as if they could embrace all the dimensions explored throughout books I and II. And it is the movement from one dimension to another that makes Scipio’s dream unique as a sort of essay on the foundations of the epic (both this epic poem and the epic genre at large).

4.4.1. Ouverture: Scipio as *Imago*

The suspension of outer action, which is about to open up a different epic field, begins with the scene that leads to the falling asleep of Scipio Africanus. Though already successful as “domitor telluris Hibere,” he is not satisfied yet. Hannibal, in fact, is still a threat for Italy, and Scipio’s father and uncle are still to be avenged: “Urgebat vindicta patris pietasque movebat / Ut ceptum sequeretur opus” (I.145-146). It is the first time that in the *Africa* Petrarch uses the Virgilian key word *pietas*, after the “pia carmina” (I.15) promised to the Christian God in the proem. That *vindicta* is a necessary manifestation of *pietas* is an assumption typical of the medieval reception of the *Aeneid* (a far cry from modern assessments of Aeneas as a contradictory hero torn between *pietas* and *furor*).³⁵⁵ Before the beginning of his long dream vision, Scipio appears as an Aeneas-figure, but with a psychological tension that derives more from a certain philosophical and ethical discourse (e.g., Seneca, Augustine, Boethius) than from the *Aeneid* and its tradition: *cura*, a key motif in Petrarch’s life and works.

Anxia nox, operosa dies, vix ulla quietis
Hora duci: tanta indomito sub pectore virtus!
Has inter curas, ubi sensim amplexibus atris
Nox udam laxabat humum, Tithonia quamvis
Uxor adhuc gelidumque senem complexa foveret,
Necdum purpureo nitidas a cardine valvas
Vellere seu roseas ause reserare fenestras
Excirent Famule que secula volvunt,
fessus et ipse caput posuit. Tum lumina dulcis
Victa sopor clausit (I.153-161)

³⁵⁵ See Kallendorf, *In Praise of Aeneas*, 1-18 (on the reception of the *Aeneid*) and 24 (on Laelius’ praise of Scipio’s Aeneas-like *pietas* in *Africa* IV).

As night falls and Scipio's *vita activa* must be forcefully suspended, one sense of *cura* (the hero's actions and desire for military actions) suddenly morphs into another, a more Petrarchan one, that has to do with the restlessness of the human soul (of which Franciscus in the *Secretum* is perhaps the best example). In the sentence "Anxia nox, operosa dies, vix ulla quietis / hora duci," the tense rhythm of *cura*, so reminiscent of Seneca's prose, is recreated by the succession of two very short phrases and of a third that is longer but broken in two by enjambment, and by the contraction of the time scale from the length of night and day to brevity of *hora*.

Scipio's *virtus* does check the potentially deconstructive force of *curae* much more than the Petrarchan self can actually do: the Roman's *pectus indomitum* is an emblem of the resolution necessary to enter a dimension in which epic action is suspended but the hero still have to curb his own feelings. The historical frame of the epic narrative changes configuration when Scipio must finally let go of his *gestae* – suspended and made phantasmal by *cura*, and then by sleep.

Similar is the effect of the mythological sketch with Tithonus and Aurora, as a parenthetical element within a very short matter-of-fact sentence marking the passage to the dream: "Has inter curas [...] / Et ipse caput posit." Petrarch's variation on the topos of the rosy-fingered Dawn serves to present not sunrise but the transition from nightfall to the middle of the night. It might be argued that this is just a decorative instance of Petrarch's extraordinary taste for *mutatio insignis*, a most refined practice of imitation-cum-variation; yet that mythographic parenthesis might have a more constructive function, that is, to both

evoke and write out the epic dawn, just as the *Somnium* both evokes and writes out the narrative protocols of the great classical epic models.

In a note to the phrase “Has inter curas,” Lenoir quotes *Aeneid* V.720 with no further comment, but Virgil’s passage is worth quoting more extensively, since it leads to Aeneas’s first encounter with the shade of Anchises, at night: “tum vero in curas animo didicitur omnis. / Et Nox atra polum bigis subvecta tenebat. / Visa dehinc caelo facies delapsa parentis / Anchisae subito talis effundere voces” (V.720-723). The analogies are striking, as in both poems *cura* leads to a vision that orients the destiny of the protagonist; only in Petrarch, however, *cura* leads to a long suspension of the action. Bracketed,³⁵⁶ the mythological time-marker of epic narratives signals that its frame of reference is being altered into something else. Scipio’s *cura* is fueled by a longing for the military action that will realize *vindicta* and *pietas*; as a response to that *cura* comes the dream.

The overall frame of the dream vision is drawn from Cicero’s *Somnium Scipionis*. It was part of part of book VI of *De re publica*, and served as a conclusion to the dialogue. In the Middle Ages the *Somnium* circulated as a separated writing, although it was most often accompanied by Macrobius’ extensive commentary.

Scipius Aemilianus, grandson of Africanus, narrates a dream he had when, as a military tribune, he went to Africa and met Massinissa, an old king who had been both a friend and an ally to Africanus. Aemilianus’ dream comes after a conversation with Massinissa, who until late into the night recalls Africanus’ deeds and words with the

³⁵⁶ Materially bracketed In Laurens’ translation, which materializes, typographically, a twist that in Petrarch is only semantic.

greatest admiration: “cum senex nihil nisi de Africano loqueretur omniaque eius non facta solum, sed etiam dicta meminisset” (*De re. VI.10*). The appearance of Africanus is depicted as follows:

Hic mihi (credo equidem ex hoc quod eramus locuti; fit enim fere, ut cogitationes sermonesque nostri pariant aliquid in somno tale quale de Homero scribit Ennius, de quo uidelicet saepissime uigilans solebat cogitare et loqui) Africanus se ostendit ea forma, quae mihi ex imagine eius quam ex ipso erat notior; quem ubi agnouit, equidem cohorrui, sed ille “Ades” inquit “animo et omitte timorem, Scipio, et, quae dicam, trade memoriae.” (*Rep. VI.10*)

In both Cicero and Petrarch, what takes place when the dreamer is still awake is directly connected with the dream itself.³⁵⁷ Two other elements in Cicero’s presentation might have influenced Petrarch’s imagination. The first is the remark on Ennius and Homer, which indicates a poet-to-poet transmission of a body of knowledge that serves as a philosophical and ethical ground for the unfolding of the epic narrative. The proem of the *Annales*, in fact, speaks of how Homer appeared to Ennius to illustrate the nature of the universe and particularly the process of metempsychosis, by which he himself was reincarnated into Ennius, literally “alter Homerus” as Horace puts it (*Ep. II.1.50*). Thus, analogously to how Homer’s speech establishes the truthful vatic dimension of the *Annales*, the teachings and prophecies of the two elder Scipios in Petrarch’s *Somnium* are placed at the beginning of the *Africa*. The foreseeing of Petrarch as “alter Ennius” in books II and IX of the *Africa* accurately fits in such a frame: the *Somnium* will lay down the principles of the poem and become its ideal center, the repository of its ultimate truth. The length of Cicero’s *Somnium* authorizes Petrarch’s amplification into two books of what could have been the vision in

³⁵⁷ Andreoni Fontecedro, “*Somnium Scipionis*,” 336, notes that the interpretation of Aemilianus himself orients our interpretation of his dream in the sequence that precedes it.

Ennius' poem. By the way, Petrarch's knowledge of the *Annales* was by force indirect and fragmentary.

The second pivotal element in Aemilianus' introduction to his own dream is a remark on the figure of Africanus: his face was familiar to his grandson not out of direct memories but because of the resemblance with the wax-made *imago* that, as allowed to the greatest Roman magistrates, was hung in the hall of the family *domus* and exposed on funerals and other solemn occasions: "Africanus se ostendit ea forma, quae mihi ex imagine eius quam ex ipso erat notior." Besides being a most realistic note,³⁵⁸ this passage implies a distinction between a kind of memory that is direct and private and another one that is public and, above all, mediated and made long-lasting by an iconic artifact. Doesn't the *Africa* intend to stand out as a representation of this kind? Scipio Africanus must be commemorated by Petrarch's poem; the key difference from Cicero's *Somnium* is that in the *Africa* Scipio's *imago* is a construction in progress, and the dream of books I-II articulates his figure much more than Cicero does.

Replacing his grandson as the dreamer, and being replaced in turn by his father Publius and uncle Gnaeus as the ancestor in heaven, Petrarch's Africanus plays both roles: literally he is the dreamer, and indirectly (via intertextual substitution) he is the ancestor. Significantly, the two elder Scipios in the dream of the *Africa* eloquently suggest that in their own martyr-like deaths is already depicted Africanus' destiny within the vast fresco of Rome's history. The two-fold status of Scipio in the *Africa* is thus outlined: a public

³⁵⁸ In the *De senectute*, XIX, Cicero dates Africanus' death and Aemilianus' birth back to the same year, namely, 185 BC, so that the grandson could not directly remember his ancestors.

imago for the collectivity, and yet an individual who is representative of the challenges of human condition as such.

In the beginning of the dream, we notice first the body of Publius Cornelius and then, with a better focus, his *imago*-like face (“Umbra ingens faciesque patris,” I.162), as if it had been monumentalized by death, along with his chest wounded in battle: Africanus’ post-mortem iconic status (manifestly recalled in Cicero) is here foreseen. This was also the intention by which Petrarch wrote Scipio’s life in the *De viris illustribus*; that is the most extended biography in the collection. Differently Dante, who is bold enough to place himself – poet and character – in the role of the hero whose *imago* is being built throughout the *Commedia*, and differently from Boccaccio, who in the *Teseida* has the fame of Theseus counterbalanced by the newness of Arcita and Palemone as heroes, Petrarch writes his epic around a character, Scipio, who is already in the pantheon of Western culture, already an *imago* charged with power and authority. Yet, that very *imago* is subject to the variance of his own representations and to the ultimate *vanitas* of mundane life.³⁵⁹ Hence Scipio’s double valence: a dreamer who, through his ancestor, dreams of the making (and unmaking) of his destiny as part of the course of Roman history.

In this sense, the *Africa* itself is an *imago* in process. While not having direct knowledge of the *De republica*, Petrarch makes an extraordinary inversion by moving to the beginning of his martial epic a dream-sequence that was originally at the end of a

³⁵⁹ That Africanus is already an icon is attested to by the first words addressed to him by his father Publius: “O decus eternum generisque amplissima nostri / Gloria” (I.168-169). The formulaic address echoes two moments in the proem, when Petrarch dedicates the *Africa* first to Christ and then to King Robert: both are *decus*, and the latter is also *gloria* (“Tuque, o certissima mundi / Spes superumque decus,” I.10-11; “Te quoque, Trinacrii moderator maxime regni, / Hesperieque decus atque evi gloria nostri” I.19-20).

philosophical conversation: the *Somnium* turns from culmination to foundation of the text of which it is part. In sum, the *Somnium* creates an imbalance in the generic architecture of the *Africa* to suspend direct imitation of the epic models recalled in the proem (Virgil, Lucan, and Statius), and to reflect on the nature and scope of the epic code.

4.4.2 Contractions and Expansions: The Scale of Epic Experience

The dream is a textual enclosure where the experience of reality (as space and time) passes through a series of contractions and expansions, altering the scale of experience: the rhythm that modulates the individuation of the poem and of its hero can be read as an epitome of the epic tradition itself.

As soon as Scipio falls asleep, he is immediately transported to the heavens. The broadening of his spatial perspective is the first shift we experience. Later in the dream the extension of space will be doubled by the extension of time, forward and backward. Expansion is balanced by contraction, as preliminarily noted in terms of time (only “brevem [...] horam” is allowed, in I.172) and space (“Huc flecte animum. Viden illa sub Austro / Menia,” says Africanus’ father, directing the son’s gaze down on Carthage only, in I.179-180).

“Uidesne illam urbem,” says Africanus to Aemilianus in the *Somnium* (*Rep.* VI.11), pointing down at Carthage. Petrarch replicates and predates this gesture in the chronology of Rome’s history: both Scipios are bound to destroy the city, on which both texts zoom in. Then, in Cicero, Africanus quickly presents to the Aemilianus his future deeds as a military leader in the Third Punic War and then zooms out to speak of philosophical truths at large; Petrarch, instead, makes the individual lives of the three

Scipios (son, father, and uncle) a substantial motif of the philosophical discourse in the dream of *Africa* I-II, as they function as a counterpoint to the vast scales of Roman history, of the cosmos, and of time and eternity. Zooming in and out, Petrarch shifts from one mode to the other, to compose the dream as a multi-dimensional epic totality.

A transition passage where this dynamics can be appreciated comes right after the first speech of Scipio's father, who vehemently speaks against Carthage with his proto-Christian wounds well in sight: "Talia narrantem, [Scipio] percurrit et impia mestis / Vulnera luminibus tpotumque a vertice corpus / Lustrat adusque pedes: at mens pia prominet extra, / Ubertimque fluunt lacrimae" (I.199-202). The son's response to his father's speech and bodily presence is phrased as an excess. Driven by this overflowing of pathos, in sobs and tears Scipio has to interrupt his father and ask him about his wounds. Predictable as this response might be, it is none the less relevant for two reasons: first, it connects the dream to the *curae* that occupied Scipio's wake (the two dimensions are communicating); second, within the dream Scipio's crying disturb the harmony that regulates the life of the heavens and of its inhabitants, who are now beyond passions that are just too human. This breaking of a superior and vaster balance, a disturbance absent in Cicero's *Somnium*, is pivotal for it serves to relate two worlds – earthly and heavenly – and to set Scipio as a channel between the two. Historical pain meets trans-historical imperturbability; neither one can fully subsume the other. Petrarch says it with a simile:

Infima si liceat summis equare, marina
Piscis aqua profugus fluvioque repostus ameno
Non aliter stupeat, si iam dulcedine captum
Vis salis insoliti et subitus circumstet amaror,
Quam sacer ille chorus stupuit. Namque hactenus ire
Et dolor et gemitus et mens incerta futuri

Atque metus mortis mundique miserrima nostri
Milia curarum, rapide quibus optima vite
Tempora et in tenebris meliores ducimus annos:
Illic pura dies, quam lux eterna serenat,
Quam nec luctus edax nec tristia murmura turbant,
Non odia incendunt. Nova res, auremque deorum
Insuetus pulsare fragor, pietate recessus
Lucis inaccessa tacitumque impleverat axem. (I.210-.223)

The simile of the fish moving between salt and fresh water is not only adequate to describe the surprise of the inhabitants of the heavens when cosmic harmony is disturbed by Africanus' laments; it is also, and more importantly, a compositional element that reproduces with the greatest evidence the very change of scale that qualifies the dream as a foundation and recapitulation of the dynamics of the epic. "Infima si liceat summis equare" functions, in fact, like a bridge that covers the potential extension of the epic, from the widest to the tiniest scale. Moreover, the simile materializes the circulation of the micro into the macro and vice versa, which is always at work in the epic tradition, although we mostly tend to fixate only on a particular scale of reality.

In the simile, the deictics *hactenus* and *illic* (I.241 and 219) further articulate the difference in scale along a decidedly ethical axis, probably reminiscent of the Dantean "l'aiola che ci fa tanto feroci" (*Par.* XXII.151), as well as of other loci comparing earth and heaven, such as "Io, che al divino da l'umano, / a l'eterno dal tempo era venuto, / e di Fiorenza in popol giusto e sano" (*Par.* XXXI.37-39). The motif of *cura* is explicitly recalled: it includes rage, pain, uncertainty, and fear of death, namely the passions that obscure our life on earth. This is part of the stuff of which the epic is made; we must not forget that as a key to the understanding of the Punic Wars - and of the *Africa* itself - in I.77-78 Petrarch points out a specific human passion as the cause of the Carthaginian war,

and of worldly evil as such: “radix cunctorum infecta malorum / Invidia.”³⁶⁰ This psychologization of the causes of the war provides the first frame for the experience narrated in the epic; other frames are established during the poem, and first of all in the *Somnium*.

When the *curae* of human beings can be considered from above, at the greatest distance and with the largest scope, in the “pura dies” and “lux serena” of the heavens, three major images characterizing the tradition of the epic can be written off: “luctus edax,” “tristia murmura,” and “odia.” It is noteworthy that in the fish-simile passage we also find the verbs *turbare* and *incendere*, which can describe the collective no less than the individual, the psychological no less than the historical. One just has to think of book II of the *Aeneid* and of its reception.

Once the dream is over, however, the *Africa* will unfold its narrative in the earthly world, in the reality of *historia* (with the exception of the allegories of Rome and Carthage addressing Jupiter in VII.663-971). Here death levels out everybody’s life, no matter whether evil or good. Yet a typical Petrarchan (and Senecan) motif reintroduces a difference in a psycho-historical landscape that has death as its vanishing point: the way we approach death makes the difference, so that virtue and happiness (the two are synonyms) can be substantially separated from their opposite. Thus, for a moment, Petrarch steps back from the collective dimension of epic only to find in the individual the ultimate *ubi consistam*. Through the account of the old Scipios’ deaths, the individual is posited as

³⁶⁰ That both in the proem and in the epilogue Petrarch portrays himself and his work as attacked by the bites of *invidia* only confirms that the poet identifies with his poem, once again intertwining the collective and the individual.

the field in which true and false collective values are experienced. Classical *exemplum* coincides, in structure and purpose, with Christian *martyrium* or *testimonium*: it is centered on the individual and celebrated by the collective.

4.4.3 Recollections, Individual and Collective: Memories of Fallen Heroes

In this section, a close analysis of the shifts in the narrative of the deaths of the elder Scipios explores how Petrarch connects different dimensions of epic individuation. *Mors* is the horizon of them all, as it forces us to reflect on what makes life meaningful.

The recollection starts with a precise temporal reference that shifts the focus from heavenly afterlife in the eternity to worldly history: “Sexta per Hesperios penitus victricia campos / Nostraque signa simul Romanaque viderat estas” (I.230-231). Immediately the elder Scipio situates himself within a double frame of action, individual and collective (the relation with the collectivity of Rome is mediated here by the relation with his brother Gnaeus Cornelius): “infelix fido ut *cum fratre* viritim / Sollicitum *partirer* onus *geminumque* moranti / Incuterem bello calcar” (I.234-236). The hero is not a separated individual, as the two brothers’ joining of forces reminds us; similarly, Scipio Africanus will reach the status of an exceptional hero certainly by his own virtue, but also by being together with his fellow-citizens on the battlefield of Zama and in the course of Roman history at large.

As an *exemplum* of the epic spirit of Rome, Publius and Gnaeus’s fraternal harmony must tolerate separation and yet never breaks, because their intent remains one and the same: “Sic alite leva / *Distrahimur* tandem et *scissis* legionibus *ambo* / insequimur late *sparsis regionibus* hostem” (I.236-238). Each brother witnesses to his own *martyrium* for

the sake of a collective cause, through his own individual fate: “Me [...] distantem” (I.256), and “vetitum caro me iungere frati” (I.259), says Publius about the impossibility of reuniting with his brother, that is, with his mirror-like peer and double. A lacuna occurs when Publius is about to narrate Gnaeus’ death (between I.318 and 319), but the extant text is enough to make a case for the interweaving of individual and collective *mors*.

Publius’ testimony about his earthly life ends with an impressive shift to the plural, highlighting the fusion of himself, the leader, with the soldiers: “In tela micantia primus / Et circumfusos feror irrediurus in hostes. / Consequitur devota neci fortissima pubes. / Sternimur et morimur” (I.313-316). The fusive quality of such a death would not have been possible if Publius had not exhorted his soldiers with a relatively long speech that suddenly suspends the agitation of the historical military scene and turns the attention of soldiers and readers alike to the most intimate realization of the ethical truth of existence, which only can distinguish the *fortis* from the *ignavus*:

Ignavum fortemque mori – ne tangere damno –
Nature lex una iubet. Breve tempus utrique:
Iam, licet et terre pelagique pericula cessent,
Ultrò aderit suspecta dies. Hoc fortibus unum
Contigit, ut leti morentur; cetera flendo
Turba perit lacrimasque metu diffundit inertes.
Hora brevis longe testis venit ultima vite. (I.292-298)

“Hora [...] ultima” is a foil to the strong ones: like Africanus’ father and uncle, they actively accept their fate. *Amor fati* is the opposite of resignation: instead of being passively shaped by the event (death and defeat) they have to suffer, Petrarch’s *fortes* face their inevitable destiny but transform (outer) passivity into (inner) activity. Thus, their personal and collective individuation is brought to a climax. Those ethical truths precede the particular reality of history within which they can be experienced: nature is ruled by one law; time

goes by for everyone, no matter his virtues or vices; the only choice is between being *fortis* or *ignavus*, that is, active when forcibly passive or passive even when outwardly active.

Line I.298, “Hora brevis longe testis venit ultima vite,” sums up the ethical dynamics that for Petrarch is at the root of the epic, conceived as the collective and historical unfolding of an inner movement of man’s soul: life is short, and far shorter is its very last hour, which *venit* independently from us and holds in itself our ultimate chance to give life a meaning. The last hour is *testis* to an entire life; the epic function of Scipio’s life consists of an experience potentially shared with other subjects, whether they are fellow countrymen, relatives, or readers.

The use of the word *testis* implies this possibility of trans-individual communication, staged in the conversation between Africanus and his father, both *testes* to an event that shines with the light of the epic and connects the individual and the collective (collectivity is an entity changing in time, only temporarily identifiable with a given community, so that latecomers such as Petrarch and any future reader can share the testimony of the Scipios).

It must be noted that *amor fati* instantly transforms the passivity of the elder Scipios (the undeletable marks of which are their *vulnera*) into the harmony of their intents. Out of this minimal though fundamental structure of a collectivity grow the vast frescoes of past and future historical catalogs that come later in the dream. The fraternal *concordia* of the Scipios leads to the heavenly *concordia* of the afterlife, where again, and with the greatest evidence, ethical truth appears to be the real source of personal and collective individuation. *Libertas* is the root of ethics:

Nec mors magis ulla decebat
Altera quam fratris. Fuerat concordia vite
Mira, vel exiguis nunquam interrupta querelis:
Una domus victusque idem, mens una duobus,
Et mors una fuit. Locus idem corpora servat
Amborum ac cineres. Huc tempus forte sub unum
Venimus. Hic nobis nulla est iactura vetusti
Carceris: ex alto sparsos contemnimus artus.
Odimus et laqueos et vincula nota timemus,
Libertatis onus. Quod non sumus, illud amamus. (I.321-330)

Unus is the keyword of this locus, where the transition from the individual to the collective is recapitulated (the fraternal bond prefigures the epic bond that shapes Roman history), and is founded on the comprehension of the ethical truth of existence. This transition is also brought on another level: from earth to heaven, from *historia* to *philosophia*, from prison to freedom, from conflict to peace and harmony. Individuation *in unum* leads to *libertas*, a word that here radiates with all of its senses (political and spiritual, collective and individual). A cosmic collective body (heaven) incorporates Africanus' father and uncle: the first person plural used by the speaker first refers to himself and his brother, *una voce*, then morphs into a broader subject, that is, the inhabitants of heaven who live in the light of the individual and universal truth of existence. From one to two to everyone: this is the direction of the speech, and yet, as revealed by the ethical digressions inserted into the dream, the reverse is also true, that is, the passage from everyone to one, to an individual who is *testis* to a larger, collective form of life.

Historia lies between these two poles, as a field in which both the collective and the individual are a work in progress, a combination of potentiality and actuality. Petrarch's handling of the dream's architecture is extraordinarily significant in this respect. When Africanus asks whether those in heaven are dead or alive, the father's reply operates a sort

of cinematic manoeuvre that rephrases the transition: from one to two to all to many (i.e., not humankind as such but only a partial collective body that emerged in the course of history: the Romans). Our gaze is directed first to Scipio's uncle and then to what lies behind him, visually and symbolically: the *generosum agmen* of Roman heroes.

Hec [...] sola est certissima vita.
Vestra autem mors est, quam vitam dicitis. At tu
Aspice germanum. *Viden* ut contemptor acerbe
Mortis eat? *Viden* indomitum sub pectore robur
Et vivum decus et flammantia lumina fronti?
Quin etiam a tergo *generosum respicis* agmen?
Hos michi defunctos audebit dicere quisquam?
Et tamen egregios humani sorte tributi
Efflavere animos ac debita corpora terre
Liquerunt. Cernis nitido venientia contra
Purpureum radiare diem leta agmina vultu? (I.339-349, emphasis added)

This is the most solid form of life, or even the only real form of life when compared to life on earth. The *exemplum* is both philosophical and historical, both individual (everyone among them knows what *certissima vita* is) and collective (as the elder Scipio will explain, responding to his son's curiosity about such a splendid crowd).

This first catalog (two more will come in the dream) is now brought on the page with a fine rhetorical move: Petrarch arranges the encounter between the young Africanus and those he had the chance to see on earth when they were still alive. In other words, the individuation of an epic collectivity via the heroic catalog begins from the direct experience of Scipio as a *testis*. He says: "Aut ego fallor enim, aut quosdam hoc ex agmine novi, / Et mores habitusque virum faciesque gradusque, / Insolitum licet ora micent, tamen ora recorder: / Vidi etenim et patria nuper conviximus urbe," and "Vera quidem memoras" his father replies (I.356-359). The strange light that makes those faces in the *agmen* both recognizable and unfamiliar is certainly a materialization of *Gloria*, but at the same time is

the intensification of life brought about by the reunion of individual fragments into a *corpus* (a collective body, but also a repertoire of splendid historical lives, akin to what Petrarch did with the *De viris illustribus*). The larger body is a network in which individual bodies are placed.

In this catalog, the smallest of the three as to the number of lines (I.360-418) and characters, a few fallen Romans are presented, all from the present time of the narrative. It might thus be a catalog of lesser importance than the following ones, with their vast frescoes of Rome's past and future. Yet this short catalog plays a key structural role in the personal and collective individuation at the core of the *Somnium*. Petrarch lingers on the death of consul Aemilius Paulus with a pathetic climax, with a purpose that is not simply rhetorical. Again, great emphasis rests on the figure of the *testis*: to the young military tribune Cornelius Lentulus the consul leaves a message for his superior, the *dictator* Quintus Fabius: "Fabio mea verba novissima prefer: / Dic me iussorum memore vixisse suorum, / Dic memorem te teste mori. [...] / Nuda loco caruit Virtus" (I.392-394, 396). *Virtus* can always find its place in heaven or in the hearts of men on earth, yet external circumstances (the errors of the other consul in this case) may reduce to almost nothing the ground where virtue can unfold in the here and now. *Virtus* is what the *testis* must bear witness to in the midst of a military catastrophe that immediately extends from the destiny of a single magistrate to the whole of an army and of a people. Africanus must identify with Lentulus the tribune as a witness: at the dying consul command he flees, and painfully looks back at the battlefield, where the defeat is both individual and collective: "videt ingens surgere campis / Naufragium; videt immitem post publica Penum / Funera scra ducis

[Aemilius Paulus] fodientem pectoral diris / Ictibus” (I.410.413). Then, the catalog rapidly comes to an end with the numberless crowd of the virtuous Roman soldiers fallen against Hannibal and then ascended to heaven, where they are part of another collective body:

Innumeram hoc licet inter noscere turbam
Cesorum hoc bello iuvenum patriae cadentum.
Scilicet immenso studio dum leder quei,
Civibus atque inopie spoliat dum forti bus urbem,
Complevit celum nostris feras Hanibal umbris. (I.414-418).

Epic individuation takes place through multiple dimensions: whether on earth or in heaven, as a single figure or as part of a collective body, the epic truth of republican Rome is configured by Petrarch as the perpetual recreation of the conditions of unity and difference.

4.4.4. Making Epic Experience Cohere: Patterns of *Pietas*

The next textual transition is from the unfortunate memory of Cannae to Gnaeus Cornelius’ politico-philosophical reflection (borrowed from Cicero) on man’s duty on earth, namely the *pietas* due to the forms of collective life - from family to *res publica* - by which our lives take up meaning and become a preparation to the afterlife. At this junction, Gnaeus remarks that an extraordinary but not accidental privilege he has been accorded to his nephew, in the wake of Dante no less than of Aeneas:

Si iussu superum mortalia cello
Membra vehis – nec enim tam magni muneris auctor
Alter erit: summum hoc equidem tibi contigit uni
Eximiumque decus – quam de te concipiam spem
Dictu difficile est. Cui tantam numina vivo
Concessere viam? (I.438-442)

The ordinary laws of the world have been suspended for this visit to the realm of afterlife, from which Africanus will come back with a clearer sense of his epic mission, defined by *pietas* and by its corollary, that is, the kind of *fama* that does not derive from vain ambition:

“fractos passimque iacentes / Hesperie campis totiens despeximus hostes, / Vidimus et nostre vindictam mortis. Ab illa / Egregie pietatis habens per secula famam (I.453-456). Exceptionally allowed by the gods to “archana videre / Celica” (I.445-446), Scipio stands out as a medium between different spheres of existence, such as the cosmos and the battlefield. It is indeed Africanus himself who asks Gnaeus about what relation connects the two worlds, and about the possibility, for our earthly life, not to be utterly discredited as *vanitas* in the face of the *certissima* vita that is enjoyed by the virtuous ones after death.

Africanus’ question and Gnaeus’ reply follow the Ciceronian subtext, where Aemilianus asks and Africanus answers: “si vita manet post busta, [...] sique hec est vera perennis, / Nostra autem morti similis, quod demoror ultra / In terris? quin huc potius, quacumque licebit, / Evolat assurgens animus tellure relicta?” (I.460-464). What the question pursues is the possibility of a meaningful coherence of all the dimensions of human existence: the sense of a totality embracing heaven and hearth, action and contemplation, *fama* and *vanitas*, time and eternity. Petrarch’s keenest understanding of the epic as an experience of totality relies on the assumption that in works such as the *Aeneid*, *Thebaid*, *Bellum civile* - and the *Africa* itself – inclusiveness is not enough if there is not a pattern by which the text can connect different layers of reality, with the *littera* of historical narrative (no matter if mixed with mythographic elements) as its basis. Here lies the rationale of Petrarch’s infamous epic eclecticism (e.g., the combination of Ciceronian and Virgilian motifs, or of elements from the traditions of epic, philosophy, and historiography).

In the *Africa*, a major pattern that runs through different dimensions, realms, traditions, and genres is *pietas*. Its development outlines a primarily ethical totality. Less

concerned with the order of experience, in the *Somnium* Petrarch indeed demonstrates, through the old Scipios, that the ethical, political and religious duty of *pietas* forms the bedrock of all the possibilities of the epic – in very general terms, the possibility of a collective form of life capable of articulating the individual, the historico-political, and the cosmic in a totality that is never fully realized but is more or less clearly sensed from within a situation of conflict.

To Africanus' question on the *vanitas* of human life and, one might think, of virtue itself, his uncle Gnaeus answers that a divine law requires men to take care of our earthly world (“illis custodia credita terre,” in I. 472) with justice and equanimity. This is the ethical form of life that opens the way to eternal bliss in heaven. The duty of *pietas* is as transversal as the possibility of the epic:

Tu sacra fidemque
Iustitiamque cole. Pietas sit pectoris hospes
Sancta tui morumque comes, que debita virtus
Magna patri, patrie maior, sed maxima summo
Ac perfecta Deo (I.482-486)

The crescendo of *pietas* draws a sort of ideal line connecting three spheres of existence: family, fatherland, and God. In each and all, the individuation of the subject is both personal and collective. Its tension toward totality is manifest, even though for Petrarch it excludes any active female principle, as is shown later by the story of Massinissa and Sophonisba in book V, where the poem is purged of the destructive instability traditionally attributed to female desire. That reminds us, by the way, that the totality of epic is never without frictions. Nor is it impartial.

Pietas has its most fundamental manifestation in the field of politics and war (the two being poles of the self-same continuum of collective history). The core of Petrarch's epic intention is the celebration of a sense of duty that becomes manifest and cogent through a collective event in which all the dimensions of human existence connect, from the cosmos to the soul. That political life is the center of the epic is implied by the way in which Petrarch recasts an argument of Cicero's *Republic*:

nil gratius illi,
Qui celum terrasque regit, dominoque patrique,
Actibus ex nostris, quam iustis legibus urbes
Conciliumque hominum sociatum legibus equis.
Quisquis enim ingenio patriam seu viribus alte
Sustulerit sumptisque oppressam adiuverit armis,
Hic certum sine fine diem in regione serena
Expectet vereque petat sibi premia vite (I. 490-497)

Sed quo sis Africane [i.e. Scipio Emilianus] alacrior ad tutandam rem publicam, sic habeto: omnibus qui patriam conservaverint, adiuverint, auxerint, certum esse in caelo definitum locum, ubi beati aevo sempiterno fruuntur; nihil enim est illi principi deo, qui omnem mundum regit, quod quidem in terris fiat acceptius, quam concilia coetusque hominum iure sociati, quae civitates appellantur; harum rectores et conservatores hinc profecti hic revertuntur. (*Rep.* VI.13)

The closeness of Petrarch's lines to Cicero's passage is impressive if we think of how subtle Petrarch can be in his *imitationes*, in which decomposition and recomposition of the subtext create a complex system of analogies and differences. Here, on the contrary, Petrarch versifies his source with minimal variations, as if his aim were more to quote than to recreate a passage from Cicero's *Somnium*. Far from being an instance of unoriginality, quotation serves here to establish the *Africa*'s connection with the core of the Roman ethos, as conceived of by Petrarch: the center of epic individuation is the duty of *pietas* perfectly phrased by one of the greatest Roman *auctores*. As readers, we are called to acknowledge

that the *urbs* or *civitas* formed by an assembly of men and ruled by good laws – whether actual or utopian – is the motor of the epic, which ultimately lies beyond genres and forms. Significantly, Petrarch retrieves it in a non-epic, non-poetic text, which nonetheless speaks to the epic tradition.

Collective life is the fulcrum of existence and the ground where conflicts must be faced and resolved. In this very sense, Beatrice says to Dante:

Qui sarai tu poco tempo silvano;
e sarai meco senza fine cive
di quella Roma onde Cristo è romano.
Però, in pro del mondo che mal vive,
al carro tieni or li occhi, e quel che vedi,
ritornato di là, fa che tu scrivi (*Purg.* XXXII.100-105)

The strong allegorical signification of Dante's Christian Rome as *Civitas Dei* notwithstanding, the *Commedia* and the *Africa* share the same assumption, absolutely relevant to their particular redefinition of the epic: historical Rome is the sign – the *figura*, we may say – of the just collectivity for which longs the epic intention. The political form of life evoked by “Rome” as a sign (pre-Christian and classical in Petrarch, Christian and post-classical in Dante) foreshadows the forms of individuation implied by each text. In both cases, however, Rome is a door to the realization of a totality that connects earth and heaven are connected, past and future. Beatrice reminds Dante of his duty to write what he sees once he gets back to the world of the living, for the benefit of his readers; Scipio's ancestors remind him of his duty as a vehicle for the realization of Rome's virtues. In sum, the experience of totality made possible by *pietas* originates from an ethos in which the reader is then called to participate, through the mediation of the text. In Cicero, “quo sis Africane [i.e. Scipio Aemilianus] *alacrior* ad tutandam rem publicam”; (*Rep.* VI.13); in

Petrarch, “Sic fatus *amoris* / *admovitque faces* avido *stimulosque* nepoti” (I.499-500); in Dante, with the widest scope, “l’*amor* che *move* il sole e l’altre stelle” (*Par.* XXXIII.145).³⁶¹

Along this spiral, we recognize that our bodily life is a prison – “*istud carnis onus*” (*Afr.* I.489) – but also that the ethical and political life made possible by our flesh-and-blood existence is our main *medium* to eternal bliss. Thus, although history might be unsubstantial because of this world’s *vanitas*, it is fully legitimized as a field of struggle, realization, and ascesis. This is why the dream goes on with an element typical of the epic but absent from Cicero’s *Somnium*: another catalog of heroes. If that “coming together” or “calling together” of subjects – in the etymological sense of *coetus* and *concilium*, two keywords in Cicero’s piece – first emerged from the present, Africanus must now see a catalog from the past, and then in book II a catalog from the future.

4.4.5. A Catalog from the Past: *Ardor* and *Amor*

It is no wonder that the *turba* in the form of a catalog appears right after Scipio is lit by *faces amoris*. More precisely, the crowd has already come forward, but Scipio realizes its presence only when a deictic – *ecce* – directs his (and our) attention to that group of souls.

This shift marks the passage to a vast historical fresco.

Ecce autem interea venientum turba, nc ulli
Nota fuit facies; habitus tamen omnibus unus
Sidereoque levis fulgebat lumine amictus” (I. 501-503).

³⁶¹ That this feature is central to the entire epic tradition, even to works that are not usually considered as “epic” in the conventional classical (or pseudo-classical) sense, is proved by a poem such as Alan de Lille’s *Anticlaudianus*, where the realization of the good and perfect man in heaven is meant to reform life on earth. While in the *Anticlaudianus* the *vir bonus et perfectus* comes to life only toward the end of the poem, in the *Africa* the *vir* (Scipio Africanus) is presented as such at the beginning: the *Somnium* is precisely the *formation* of Scipio, in every sense of the word.

The fact that the *turba* was already present before being noticed by Africanus implies that collectivity is always present as a sort of epic unconscious that at some point must surface in the conscience of the individual. The figures seen by Scipio are characterized by *unus habitus*: this phrase emblemizes the real tenor of the epic as a personal and collective individuation. More than referring to the souls' attire (actually indicated soon after by another word, *amictus*), here *habitus* indicates their deportment, a characteristic that is then further articulated in visual terms, to let Scipio recognize in them a family air: "Augusta pauci procul omnes fronte preibant / Iam senioque graves et maiestate verendi" (I.504-505). According to the organization of the text, single heroes emerge from a collective subject which is processional in a double sense: it changes and it becomes manifest through a procession, a spatial sequence where a series of characters/events are recast from their appearance in historical time into the trans-historical time of the heavens and the *somnium*.

The time of Rome as a kingdom unfolds spatially in front of Africanus: "Hec acies regum est, quos tempora prima tuleront / Urbis," says Gnaeus (I.506-507). The use of the word *acies* is noteworthy as it visualizes the group of ancient kings as an army ready for the battle, in step with the warlike context of the *Africa*, and with the function of the dream as the historico-philosophical preparation of Africanus prior the fight against the Carthaginians. The present Roman army is accompanied and sustained by a ghostly army arrayed not on battlefield but in Rome's collective memory.

Two models of heroic catalog are combined: the military, with a list of characters mustered for battle in the time of the narrative (*Iliad* II, *Aeneid* VII, and *Thebaid* IV),³⁶² and the commemorative/prophetic, with a crowd of figures not from the world of the living but from either the past (*Odyssey* XI) or the future (*Aeneid* VI). As we will see, in book II Petrarch will write the epic catalog prophetically, while in this last section of book I he does so commemoratively and militarily, although the kings are not preparing for a real battle. The force concentrated in catalogs, in fact, must be channeled and brought to the world through Africanus as the recipient of the vision: catalogs recapitulate a legacy from the past or a prophecy from the future.

The temporality of Petrarch's catalog remains distinct from that of the main narrative of the *Africa*, as the *agmen* of Roman heroes seen in dreams is not the one that will fight the upcoming battle at Zama. The display of virtuous figures from the past in a military array not fighting a real war is, in sum, consistent with the *Africa*'s infamous lack of action, which in more objective terms can be rephrased as a shift of the weight of the epic from action to ethics, that is, from outwardness to inwardness. This, however, does not entail a detachment from history; on the contrary, it implies a more complex relation to the different dimensions of history. As early as Virgil, the epic tradition demonstrated the potentialities of varying the structure of the catalog, hence of the relation with history: the *Aeneid* has the prophetic and the military catalog shortly before and after the midpoint of the poem (in books VI and VII respectively); the latter describes the Italic warriors, the

³⁶² With a variant called *teichoschopy* when the armies are watched from a higher point of observation (e.g., the city walls), as is the case with *Iliad* III and *Thebaid* VII.

former the Roman descendants of the Trojans. The *Africa*, in turn, has a tripartite catalog with a temporal articulation: present, past, and future.

It is intriguing, therefore, to think of Petrarch's catalog of heroes in the light of Dante's *Paradiso*, an immense catalog of blessed souls who recapitulate humankind's entire history. More specifically, this catalog from *Africa* I is akin to the Heaven of Mars populated by those who fought for Christian faith (including Dante's ancestor Cacciaguida), a crowd that, reunited to form a luminous crusader's cross, constitutes a sub-catalog of its own. For all the differences in handling of the subject, Petrarch and Dante share a concern in recombining memory, prophecy, and warfare into a catalog-structure that revisits and reinterprets the forms of ancient epic – the catalog being one of the most renowned topoi in the epic tradition. A difference must be noted: while the *Commedia* is entirely a catalog, an extraordinary amplification of this distinctive epic topos, Petrarch follows in the footsteps of his classical models and gives the catalog a role that is poetically foundational but textually circumscribed (or that is foundational because of its being circumscribed as a suspension of the main narrative). In sum, Petrarch's poem appears to be connected to and very distant from Dante's *Commedia*, especially the *Paradiso*, a potential model for the representation of large historical groups with foregrounded individuals. While the influence of the *Paradiso* might have inspired Petrarch's variation on Cicero's *Somnium*, where there is no such handling of large groups, the *Africa* reduces the temporal, spatial, and cultural scope of Dante's composition of collective bodies. In fact, Dante's radical amplification which makes the pilgrim embrace the totality of human experience in history is alien to Petrarch, who instead writes his catalogs with a sense of measure and limitation

typical of the ancient classical epic tradition: one tribe, people, alliance, or army is translated into one corresponding catalog, for all the nuances that we can appreciate in the iteration (three times) of that topos in the *Somnium*. Dante, instead, can create heavenly (but also infernal and purgatorial) collective bodies by putting together characters along lines dictated by the order of afterlife, so that, for instance, the *corona* of wise men in *Paradiso* X shown by the Aquinas includes such diverse figures as Albertus Magnus, Gratian, Peter Lombard, Solomon, Dionysius the Aeropagite, Orosius, Boethius, Isidore, Bede, Richard of St. Victor, and Sigier of Brabant. In the *Africa* it is history, instead, that provides a group and its foregrounded individuals with a common ground, which expands as far as Rome's *imperium* but never becomes universal.

Gnaeus' review of Roman kings follows their chronology and makes accurate use of Livy to qualify each character with his own peculiar traits. No figure from Rome's mythical, pre-Romulus origins is included in the catalog, in step with Petrarch's inclination for *historia* over *fabula*. Let us see how Romulus is introduced:

Romulus ecce prior, famosi nominis auctor,
Publicus ille parens. Cernis, dulcissime, quantus
ardor inest animo. Talem ventura petebant
Regna virum" (I.508-511).

By presenting Romulus the founder as *auctor*, Petrarch relies on the multiple meaning of the word: father in a biological and genealogical sense, but also maker, builder and author of an artifact, as if an act of creation was involved in originating a lineage (as well as an act of destruction, attested to by Remus' killing, although that pre-history of Rome does not enter Petrarch's catalog). Literally, Romulus originates a name (Roma), that is, the sign that carries Rome's *fama* in time, even in ages when its greatness is no longer embodied

by a living political body. As a name, Rome is an entity that can persist beyond its time, given the double existence of its referent, half-substantial and half-phantasmal.

The second phrase qualifying Romulus, *publicus parens*, sounds of course as “father of the Roman State” or “of the Roman people,” thus recalling the function of the catalog as a form representing the individuation of a collectivity. More than biological, the fatherhood of Rome is political (Romulus himself is not succeeded by any of his kin). As we have seen elsewhere, however, Petrarch intentionally combines more than one dimension in the events or figures he refers to; the dream-conversation of Africanus with his own *parentes* shows that their role as fathers is both biological and political. A series of father figures, from Romulus to the Scipios, serves to recontextualize the specific subject matter of the *Africa* (the final part of the Second Punic War) within a broader history.

Scipio himself is bound to become *parens*. A precise connection with Romulus is suggested by the notion of *ardor*, a passion to which Gnaeus’ words expressly direct our attention. The relation with the past established by the catalog is first founded on pathos, as only later we are informed about the deeds that constitute the “Romulus entry” in the catalog. The primacy of the ethical over the historical bridges the distance between Rome’s first king and Africanus himself, who was “prepared” for the understanding of the catalog by the *amor* ignited in his soul by his uncle’s speech (I.499-500). *Ardor* pertains to *animus*, as appears from Petrarch’s phrasing: it is a powerful intimation that Scipio’s *animus* is the real site where the catalog and the *Somnium* as a whole unfold. The catalog as a spatialized topos is rewritten within the temporal dimension of the human soul: past, present, future. Soul is in history and is the stage where history takes place as either memory or anticipation

of events. Accordingly, Romulus is introduced as a figure from the past (he is *prior* spatially and temporally) and from the future perfect (oriented towards things to come, *ventura*). The time of the catalog is thus multiple and yet unified in the dream-consciousness of Scipio, where *historia* is composed into the collective body of Rome.

Romulus's five successors follow (I.511-536): Numa, who established religion, law and calendar; Tullus Hostilius, who like Scipio was excellent in the art of war; Ancus Marcius, who raised the city walls, founded Ostia, and built the Pons Sublicius on the Tiber; Tarquinius Priscus, who was of Greek descent, and gave Rome an increasingly complex socio-political articulation, with "tunicasque togasque / Et fasces trabeasque graves sellasque curules / Atque leve faleras et cuncta insignia nostri / imperii, currusque et equos pompasque triumphii" (I.527-530) – all symbols of different social roles ranging from ordinary citizen (*tunica*) to king (*trabea*), and recapitulated by the phrase "cuncta insignia nostri / imperii," artfully put slightly after the middle of the list to avoid too static a sequencing; sixth comes Servius Tullius, who in the opposition between his name and character well illustrates the ethical contrast between contingency and virtue central to the *Somnium*: the lines "Et nomen servile manet, sed regia mens est. / Dedecus hic generis virtute piavit et actis" (I.533-534), mark a philosophical turn in the catalog, as reasserted in the next two lines, where a matter-of-fact historical deed (the founding of the Roman census) is presented as a collective version of Socrates' *nosce te ipsum*: "Condit hic censum prior, ut se noscere posset / Roma potens, altumque nichil sibi nota timeret" (I.535-536).

The historico-philosophical presentation of the sixth king brings to completion the first cycle of Roman history: Romulus' *ardor* – individual but potentially collective in

light of the future to come – evolves into the consciousness of Rome itself, as it was made possible by the census. Scipio Africanus is already part and parcel of this consciousness, though half-consciously; he realizes his own relation to the historical process called “Rome” only with the dream, and particularly with the catalog, as an experience that puts him in the particular position of a receptive spectator, Aeneas-like (in *Aen.* VI) but also Dante-like. Gnaeus himself, being the speaker who describes for us the host of kings, shows that recognition of the figures in the catalog requires an effort of concentration for the spectator to notice and make sense of any *signum*: “Frons quinti michi nota parum, sed suspicor illum / Quem nobis longe regem dedit alta Chorinthus. / Ille est haud dubie” (I.525-527). Without a response from the spectator, a catalog is merely a list that does not reveal any underlying unity or force.

The unity of the catalog is finally confirmed by the omission of Tarquinius Superbus, promptly noted by Africanus, who of course knows the names of the seven kings (I.537-540). While things he has read (*lecta*) speak of seven kings, the catalog in the dream has only six of them. As Gnaeus says, providing the rationale for the omission, the age of Roman kingdom ended with a king marred with “luxus iners et dura superbia,” hence punished in the Avernus for his “pessima crimina” (I.541-542), utterly separated from the souls in heaven. The vision and revision of *historia* appear to be not a simple presentation of facts, as it implies interpretation and selection. Hence Petrarch’s catalog serves to articulate a difference between Romans and Carthaginians (no catalog of the latter is given in the *Africa*), and also within Rome’s historical body that was torn by civil wars,

ungratefulness, and treachery. While drawing fault lines between Romans and Carthaginians, the catalog draws fault lines within the body of Roman history too

Moreover, those fault lines are subject to time and change. This is why, after the missing Tarquinius Superbus, the catalog moves on with Brutus, the agent of a major turn in Roman history, as he established a republican state out of a virtuous response to the last king's savagery. Paradoxically, the first republican *parens* is described as “ferus et feritate bonus; nam tristia passe / Hic Libertatis primum Urbi ingessit amorem” (I.545); we know that by accepting death punishment for his sons guilty of anti-republican conspiracy, Brutus gave priority to political over biological parenthood. *Amor* is rooted – politically and ethically – in *Libertas*: its manifestation might change in time, but its force remains the same, individual and collective at once.

A series of passages indicate the primarily affective nature of Scipio's (and the reader's) participation in the catalog: *amor* is the force than gives epic its coherence. The best example is the catalog entry on the Horatii, the combination par excellence of the one and the many. Scipio cannot consciously identify them from their appearance, and yet he can profoundly understand them just by looking at how they shine with *amor libertatis*, connected as if they were one body: “Tres simul ante alacres alternaque brachia nexi / Ibant” (I.549-550). Participation in the collective history represented in the catalog is primarily affective, and in this sense it is most appropriate that exactly here, upon the appearance of the Horatii, Petrarch has the crowd of heavenly shades rejoice as an audience that mirrors, by anticipation, the response that should be elicited in Africanus (in I.550 he is “admirans”) and, in turn, in the reader of the *Africa*: “Hos leto celebrabant agmina plausu / Umbrarum

atque omni devotum ex ordine vulgus” (I.550-551). Not dissimilarly rejoices the *candida rosa*, the collective epic body of Dante’s *Paradiso*: to the Horatii greater and lesser souls respond in unison, those visualized in a military fashion (*agmina*) as well as all the other ones (*vulgus*).

As implied in Africanus’ comment, pathos binds us to those figures from the past, as if there were an affective form of knowledge that, in the constitution of an epic collectivity, precedes knowledge in a purely cognitive or informative sense: “Que tanta est gratia [...] ista trium? Quis tantum amor connectit euntes?” (I.552-553). Physically and affectively connected by *amor*, the force that gives epic its coherence, the Horatii come from the past, still unidentified to Scipio. *Amor* and *libertas* are celebrated as ethical and political forces in Gnaeus’ reply: “His idemque parens eademque [...] extulit alvus: / Hinc amor. His ipsis libertas credita quondam: Hic favour” (I. 554-556). As we noticed apropos of Romulus’ presentation as *publicus parens*, fatherhood and generation are motives that go well beyond the biological to establish a more profound sense of relation. The symmetry of the two short phrases “Hinc amor” (of family) and “Hic favor” (of fellow countrymen) underscores the connectedness, in pathos, of the individual and the collective.

In his quite extended catalog entry on the Horatii, Petrarch focuses on the *vulnera* received by the Horatii, which bring us back to the *Somnium* (where Publius shows his wounds) and to the proem (where Christ’s wounds are mentioned). *Vulnera* must be looked at and meditated upon, as indicated by the imperative addressed to Scipio the spectator: “Heu iugulos et vulnera cruda duorum! / Aspice: utrique recens nitet ut generosa cicatrix / pectore in adverso!” (I.556-568). Far from being a mere metrical padding, the exclamation

is a reminder of the spectators' involvement in the loss and grief crystallized in the *exemplum*. Accordingly, Petrarch closes the Horatii entry with another scene of collective rejoicing in heaven, marked by another transition between the affective and the historico-political. Roman souls rejoice at the memory of the Horatii's deed because of what their virtue made possible, that is, Rome's *imperium*: "Id recolens nunc [the third Horatius] exultat: gaudentque vicissim / Germani adsuperos nec inulto funere missi. / At quibus imperium virtus ea contulit, ultro / Circumstant memores" (I.573-576). And *memores* we are, along with Africanus, who was initially *immemor*. In sum, Petrarch's catalog plays with the disposition of its crowd on the stage of the narrative, having its affective response function as a counterpoint to Scipio's individual responses.

The coda of the catalog, which leads to the end of book I, demonstrates once again Petrarch's finesse in manoeuvring the epic topos with another variation. Redirecting the spectator's and the reader's attention from the particular figures described in the catalog to the countless figures they stand for – as *partes pro toto* – Petrarch wants us to realize afresh the presence of an epic multitude of souls against the background of the heavens. The change of scale from *singula* to *milia* is huge and abrupt: "Sed quid per singular versor? / Milia none vides spatiosum implentia celum? / Publicolam ante alios, tanto cognomina dignum, / Preclarum pietate ducem patrieque parentem," says Gnaeus, who redirects Africanus's gaze towards the cosmos:

Lumina visendi cupidus flectebat, et ingens
 Agmen era iuxta, stabilem qua vergit ad Arcton
 Lacteus innumeris redimitus circulus astris.
 Obstupuit, queritque viros et nomina et actus.
 "Care nepos, si cuncta velim memoranda referre,
 Altera nox optanda tibi est" [...]

Iam pater admonuit fugientia sidera nutu
Ostendens, vetuitque moras. Hoc nosse satis sit,
Romanas has esse animas, quibus una tuende
Cura fuit patrie. Proprio pars magna cruore
Diffuso has petit sedes, meritoque caduce
Pretulit eternam per acerba piacula vitam.” (I.580-585, 589-594)

Thus book I ends. Here takes place a variation of that distinctive movement by which Petrarch weaves his figures into an epic tapestry: in a group of “thousands” souls in heaven, he zooms in on Publicola, and finally lets us see the multitude of the virtuous Romans again, as many and as shining like the stars of the Milky Way, against which they appear to Africanus. With him, we look at the heavens around and see no longer a relatively small band of individuals but a crowd of thousands of souls, all led by the *cura* of their country.

To reinforce the sense of unity through the variations of scale and perspective, Petrarch uses military terms again to characterize the Roman crowd in heaven: “ingens / Agmen,” just as in I.344 he spoke of a “generosum [...] agmen.” This is how Petrarch prepares, in heaven and in dream, the subsequent historical narrative of the Second Punic War: not so much its chronicle (which in the poem is actually full of lacunae) as the way by which we can be receptive to its events. Petrarch’s lexical variations are noteworthy in this respect: while before and after the catalog the term used is *agmen*, an army in motion, within the catalog itself, which crystalize the motion of history into a series of short portraits, the term used is *acies*, an army drawn up in order of battle, with an emphasis on its array rather than on its motion. In their combination, those two modes define epic individuation in the *Africa* as a process of variation. All the Roman souls gained “eternam [...] vitam” with their martyrdom: a transient form of life is translated into an eternal one, *memoranda* in the forms of epic memory.

Innumerable are the Roman souls in heaven, and yet a unifying principle determines their individuation: “una tuende / Cura fuit patrie.” The theme of *cura* here recalls the *cura* by which Africanus was affected on the threshold of sleep, but that feeling now affects a group rather than a single individual. Neither fully individual nor fully collective, *cura* shines as a trans-individual emotion – by analogy with the epic as a trans-individual form.

4.4.6. Epic and *Vanitas*: Rise, Fall, and Persistence

Book II turns to Rome’s future, by means of a prophecy which extends from the fight against Hannibal to the age of Petrarch himself – the poet being the endpoint of the catalog’s temporal perspective (as in book IX with Ennius’ dream). The *Africa*’s novelty lies not so much in the forward stretch of its prophecies as in the presence of the poet as the endpoint point of its temporal perspective, analogously to what occurs in book IX, when Ennius meets in dream Homer who in turn announces the coming of Petrarch. This is how the epic of history turns into the epic of historicity: what Petrarch does achieve, beyond his self-legitimizing, self-fashioning and self-aggrandizing purpose, is to inscribe or embed the poem in history and to present it as an event in progress and which takes place within a network that connects different times (ancient to modern) and discourses (literature, historiography, philosophy). The *Africa* demands to be read both as a monument in the making: while being part of a tradition, the poem reproduces, from its partial perspective, the movement of this very tradition as an evolving totality.

At the beginning of book II, Scipio the son is intently looking at the heavenly crowd of virtuous Romans, just like a reader intently fixated on what is on a page of poetry or historiography illustrating the lives and deeds of great men. That Petrarch fixated on them

as an avid reader is manifestly declared not only by countless autobiographical sketches scattered through his works but also by projects such as the *De viris illustribus* – projects that remained unfinished, their destiny being similar to that of the *Africa*: at a certain point, Petrarch the author turned his attention to something else, away from the text he was fixating on. Publius Cornelius invites Scipio to do the same: “Talibus intentum pater arripit atque benigne: / ‘Tempus’ ait ‘celo descendere. Gratia paucis / Huc venisse fuit: patienter ab ire decorum est” (II.1-3). The son understandably resists, eager to remove his doubts: “‘Ne propera, precor, alme parens. Quin digeris’ inquit / ‘pauca michi dubio? Certumque remitte futuri” (II.4-5). The father replies that the entire dream vision will remain in Scipio’s mind as an uncertain and fragmented memory. Dreams are ambiguous, uncertain in meaning, and do not last in our memory: such a warning, brief as it is, questions the foundational quality of what has unfolded so far in *Africa* I and II.³⁶³ A crack therefore runs through the foundation of the epic. That Publius says that he cannot refuse to answer his son’s question about Rome’s future, and accordingly speaks on the subject at great length, implies that the uncertainty that follows our visions of truth is inevitable but not enough to stop the labor of ethics and poetry.

“O nate, exigui solatia temporis” inquit
 “Exigis. Ambigue subito tibi somnia noctis
 Omniaque implicite vanescent visa quietis:
 Si qua animo memori vestigia forte manebunt,
 Somnia vana tamen, mentemque errasse putabis.
 Sed nequeo sprevisse preces. (II.6-11)

³⁶³ Virgil in *Aeneid* VI authoritatively though enigmatically speaks of the two gates of sleep, one of horn and the other of ivory, giving access to true and false visions respectively; that Anchises accompanies Aeneas and the Sybil through the ivory gate have puzzled many a reader. Inconsistency might play a role in making the reader pay attention to whether and how the text coheres, beyond any superficial notion of consistency. This metapoetic intention in the use of dream vision goes beyond the taxonomy of dreams provided by Macrobius in his commentary on Cicero’s *Somnium*.

We can hear the echo of the reflections on *vanitas* in books I and II: *vanitas* is the condition of the historicity of the epic. By saying “Tempus [...] celo descendere,” Publius invites Scipio to consider the *vanitas* of what he sees in heaven: the text of the *Africa*, as well as the knowledge of Petrarch’s implied reader, does not authorize any delegitimization of what we read. Rather, in a more subtle way, the text implies that the truth we come to know – individually and collectively – might be disfigured or erased by time but also restored, as was the case with the civilization of Rome, the rise and fall of which is then depicted to Scipio by his father’s prophetic speech. To restore the greatness of the past, as Petrarch aims to do, is to be aware of how it had already been eroded by *vanitas*. It is the irremediable melancholy of the epic that Petrarch thematizes in his dream books, more decidedly and explicitly than any of his predecessors in the epic tradition. “Dimitte Africam” is Augustine’s injunction in the *Secretum* (274): whether or not this means that Petrarch should actually stop working on his poem, the point is that he must be aware of the *vanitas* of human condition, and impress its traces in the textual artifact he is composing.

Africanus, eager to know the course of “venturum [...] tempus” (II.14), is not discouraged by his father’s caveat about the elusiveness of dreams. Publius Cornelius then begins the third catalog of the *Somnium*. This long review of Rome’s future begins from the imminent victory in the Second Punic War: the narrative follows the pattern of the rise and fall of Roman *imperium*, ending with the uncertain possibility of a modern restoration of antiquity.

The prophetic-historical chronicle is punctuated by the succession of Rome’s great men (II.31-258), from Scipio himself to Augustus, the latter representing not only a

watershed between Republic and Empire but also a climax after which there is only decline (II.259-296), first because of emperors coming from the provinces of Spain and Africa, and then for the barbarians' invasions. "Romanus cadat, stet barbarus induperator" (II.296): the concessive subjunctive of this sentence, which Petrarch added on the margins of Ms Lr Acquisti e Doni 441 to replace the line "Romanusque reget non barbarus induperator,"³⁶⁴ indicates that even though rulers of different ethnicities will govern Rome in its long decline, Rome's *honos* will still survive and shine with new light after the end of the Empire. The ultimate reality of Rome, as seen through Petrarch's distance from antiquity (a distance that Publius is capable of traveling in his speech) is that it sums up the potentiality of human history:

Vivat honos Latius, semperque vocabitur uno
Nomine Romanum imperium; sed rector habenas
Non sempr Romanus aget (II.288-290)

In the time of its decline, and even more after its fall, the name of Rome is a signifier without its signified, which has become a thing of the past (and it is even more so in Petrarch's time). Yet this cleavage gives Rome a future opportunity, that is, to be newly imagined, written, and brought back to life against what Petrarch sees as the destitution of his times. Like a dream, the great history of Rome will leave traces – names and memories – to be restored and made legible to future generations. With its foundational *Somnium*, the *Africa* speaks of the fragility and persistence of Rome as the possibility of collective epic individuation.

³⁶⁴ In Fera, *La revisione petrarchesca*, 80-81.

Petrarch writes *vanitas* into his poem: the more precise the historical reconstruction carried out in the *Africa*, the more phantasmal and utopian its reality. Never to fall at the hands of its enemies, differently from any other community, Rome will go through a slow, steady decline: “Vincetur ab annis / Rimososque situ paulatim fessa senescet / Et per frustra cadet” (II.302-304). A name charged with age and with the force of authority is what remains at the end of Publius Cornelius’ prophecy:

Hoc solamen habe: nam Roma potentibus olim
Conditā sideribus, quamvis lacerata malorum
Consiliis manibusque, diu durabit eritque
Has inter pestes nudo vel nomine mundi
Regina. Hic numquam titulus sacer excidet illi;
Qualiter annosum vires animusque leonem
Destituunt, sed prisca manet reverentia fronti
Horrificusque sonus, quamquam sit ad omnia tardus,
Umbra sit ille licet, circum tamen omnis inermi
Paret silva seni. (II.314-323)

Such is the force of the name of Rome, in the age of the senescence of its referent (that is, Rome as the *imperium* of a collectivity in history). The epic must translate this force into a language that turns back to what has already been and, at the same time, look forward to what is yet to come.³⁶⁵ In the *Africa*, the notion of *Roma* is literally utopian, that is not at home in Petrarch’s time, displaced as it is in the realms of memory and imagination.

Petrarch’s view of Rome as a sign of discontinuity is not only the result of his extraordinary philological intelligence but also the unavoidable condition of an epic that celebrates and tries to bring back to life the ghost of a collective body. This is actually a

³⁶⁵ From a wider perspective, isn’t it an instance of that combination of death and regeneration, alterity and identity, past and future, which defines Western culture’s foundational relation with the classical past? As suggested in Settis, *Futuro del classico?*, 92-124, this might be the rhythm itself of the historical existence of the classics, between persistence and change. Petrarch is of course a champion, in this history, of the turning point we call “Humanism.”

symptom not of an age of “decadence” of the epic (whatever such a negative connotation might mean) but of an intention that lies within any manifestation of the epic: the existence of the referent of the epic is inherently uncertain, ambiguous, even if it may coincide with a historical subject. In this sense, and no less than all the lives of illustrious men and all the *res memoranda* of antiquity, the Second Punic War oscillates between the concrete and the phantasmal, as a compound of reality and possibility.

Omnia nata quidem pereunt et adulta fatiscunt;
Nec manet in rebus quicquam mortalibus; unde
Vir etenim sperare potest populusve quod alma
Roma nequit? Facili labuntur secula passu:
Tempra diffugiunt; ad mortem curritis; umbra,
umbra estis pulvisque levis vel in ethere fumus
Exiguus, quem ventus agat. Quo sanguine parta
gloria? (II.345-352)

The fall and decline of Rome are already present to Africanus’ father well before Rome itself will reach the apogee of its power and glory. The mutability of all things is in itself a teaching that is inscribed everywhere in every man’s experience, and yet it becomes compelling when extended from an individual’s narrow perspective to the breadth and duration of Rome’s *imperium* (and to its posthumous persistence in history and memory). Even though such a change of scale might decree the *vanitas* of any epic intention, it is through this universal mutability that something both ancient and new can enter the world and revive the trace or name of the ancient Roman ethos. Closely following Cicero and Macrobius, Petrarch is implacable in undermining the pretenses of *fama*, by circumscribing its extent within narrow geo-historical limits. The *pars destruens*, however, is doubled by a *pars construens*: against the impermanence of *fama* stands the permanence of an ethos

that is *sine tempore* only because it is characterized by the uttermost awareness of the transient nature of what humankind creates and accomplishes.

nomine vivere nil est.
Vivite sed melius, sed certius: ardua celi
Scandite felices, misersque relinquite terras.
[...] Sine tempore vivite: nam vos
Et magno partum delebunt tempora nomen,
Transibunque cito que vos mansura putatis.
Una manere potest occasus nescia virtus. (II.415-417, 423-426)

Reduced to its ethical core (“Vivite, sed melius, sed certius”), the history of Rome is but a vast *exemplum* of how we could live *melius* and *certius* in history and of how we could not yield to the sense of annihilation that history brings about. The paradox of virtue, which is at the center of the *Africa* and as well as of the epic tradition itself, is that it makes a monument out of life’s impermanence.

The fact that the *Africa* was composed in the aftermath of what Petrarch could have considered as a millennium-long senescence of classical culture and ethos is therefore crucial to an understanding of the poem’s emphasis on *vanitas* as a theme central to the individuation of an epic subjectivity. In *Seniles* II.1 to Boccaccio, Petrarch recalls King Robert’s interest for his poem: “accidit ut in *Africa* mea, que tunc iuvenis notior iam famosiorque qual vellem, curis postea multis et gravis pressa consenuit, aliquot illi tali amico versiculi placuissent.” Incidental to the context, the dichotomy of youth and senescence (“iuvenis,” “consenuit”) refers to the risk, only too real, that the poem would lose losing its generative force, that is, the *iuventus* that the epic should bring into the world. When *iuventus* is not there, *vanitas* is left unopposed, and the dream of epic amounts to nothing more than the kind of delusion described by Publius:

Angusto carcere clausos

Somnia magna iuvant; at cum lux ultima somnum
Excudit ac tenebras adimit, tum cernere verum
Heu miseri sero incipiunt, et tempora retro
Necququam aspiciunt, abeuntque amissa gementes. (II.403-407)

As the genre broadest in scope and ambition, the epic can well represent the delusions of “Somnia magna” in literature, if it does not face the *verum* that Petrarch has so analytically discussed in *Africa* I-II (an ethical *verum*, by the way, which is not exactly the same as the historical *verum* claimed by Ennius in book IX). When we dream of the epic as if it were separated from the world we live in, the result is self-deception. A sense of individual senescence emerges within the broader frame of the world’s senescence, which Petrarch’s interprets also as oblivion of the cultural, ethical, and political achievements of the classical age.

4.4.7. Petrarch in a Loop: Unfinishedness

It is most significant that, right after Publius Cornelius’ consideration of the *vanitas* of books and literary fame at the end of his long prophetic and ethical speech, Petrarch the author decided to announce his own coming as the poet of the *Africa*. After the oblivion of Africanus’ contemporaries and the oblivion of posterity, the deeds and virtues of the hero will be celebrated again by a new poet, a second Ennius. Introduced here in the future tense, Petrarch’s persona only partially coincides with the poet who so prominently spoke about himself in the proem of the *Africa*.

If the course of the world in history is described by Publius Cornelius as an irreversible process of senescence, which dissolves even the *fama* of noblest deeds (including books: “Clara quidem libris felicibus insita vivet / Fama diu, tamen issa suas passura tenebras,” in II.434-435), the future coming of Petrarch as a *iuvenis* shows that a

new beginning is possible. The awareness of *vanitas* goes hand in hand with the desire to celebrate Scipio with a monument built with words. Petrarch is not a poet of origins but of a world already senescent; yet as a poet who can reconnect with the past he has all the force of *iuventus* – his own biographical youth and a transpersonal youth that is latent in the world as a possibility of *renovatio*. This more-than-biological youth emerges from a loop in the text, where the poet announces his own coming (which is the emergence of the potentialities that lie in himself).

Cernere iam videor genitum post secula multa
Finibus Etruscis iuvenem qui gesta renarret,
Nate, tua et nobis veniat velut Ennius alter.
Carus uterque michi, studio memorandus uterque:
Iste rudes Latio duro modulamine Musas
Intulit; ille autem fugientes carmine sistet:
Et nostros vario cantabit uterque labores
Eloquio, nobisque brevem producere vitam
Contendet (II.442-450)

Paradoxically, the use of the adverb *iam* gives a sense of imminence to the coming of Petrarch about fifteen centuries after the time of this prophetic scene. The poet's persona is both "present" (as the writer of what we are reading) and "imminent" (as an individual yet to come). "Cernere iam videor," which translates the discourse of prophecy into a quasi-direct vision, serves to intertwine those two temporal dimensions. However, not only Petrarch the Etruscan *iuvenis* comes from the future to the present of the poem's narrative; Ennius, too, as the first poet singing Scipio's *gesta*, belongs to the future (a much closer one though), as indicated by the verbal tense in lines 448-450. The pairing of Ennius's and Petrarch's poems on the the Second Punic War is another instance of the temporal loop by which the *Africa* brings to realization the nature of tradition as a dialogue of multiple temporalities. No matter how biased Petrarch's reconstructed genealogy can

sound, the poem being written in the XIV century is a variant of the epic tradition originated in Italy with Ennius (“rudes” in the new language, he brought the Muses from Greece to Rome) and evolved until Petrarch’s age. The implication is that the *Africa* is part of the living network of the epic, a corpus grown by recursiveness (the intention to be an “alter Ennius”) and evolution (the intention to rewrite and transform the repertoire with a new intention, in a different historical context: whereas Ennius introduces the Muses, Petrarch tries to prevent them from abandoning Italy).

Both poets deserve praise because, in light of the philosophical view exposed in the *Somnium*, they write to extend the brief earthly life of the Scipios (“nobisque brevem producere vitam.”) More than that, they have to be held dear. *Carus* is the adjective used to establish an affective connection between the narrator (Publius Cornelius) and the two poets: the relationship with poets and poems is not neutral, as it is sustained by an ethical impulse. Poets and poems have to be remembered with *studium*, which is a disposition explicitly attributed to Petrarch:

verum multo mihi carior ille est
Qui procul ad nostrum reflectet lumina tempus.
In quod eum studium non vis pretiumve movebit,
Non metus aut odium, non spes aut gratia nostri;
Magnarum sed sola quidem admiratio rerum,
Solus amor veri. (II.450-455)

The ethical stance of the *iuvenis* author of the *Africa* corresponds to the principles exposed by the elder Scipios in book I and II: the Etruscan poet to come must be held dearer than Ennius (the first to sing Scipio’s deeds) because the *studium* that binds him to his subject depends not on such things as force, gain, fear, hate, hope, and favor, but on genuine, unbiased admiration and on love of truth. The wise man’s *libertas* characterizes Petrarch’s

distant, backward look at the historical events; only distance in time seems to grant such a condition of equanimity. His disinterested pathos is a proper response to the exhortation “Vivite, sed certius, sed melius” (II.414).

4.5. Ennius’ Speech: Foundations of Epic Truth

These very issues are discussed again in book IX, in Ennius’ long speech to Scipio, which, similarly to Publius Cornelius’ speech, consists of both exposition (of the principles of poetry) and prophecy (of Petrarch’s coming).

To Scipio, who on the boat heading from Carthage to Italy asks “que sint permissa poetis / Famoseque rei certos agnoscere fines / Te liceat monstrante michi” (IX.70-72), Ennius reply with the following statement:

Non illa licentia vatum est
Quam multis placuisse palam est.
Scripturum iecisse prius firmissima veri
Fundamenta decet, quibus innixus amena
Et varia sub nube potest abscondere sese,
Lectori longum cumulans placidumque laborem,
Questito asperior quo sit sententia, verum
Dulcior inventu. (IX.90-97)

Ennius puts emphasis on “veri / Fundamenta,” thus harking back to the ethical perspective built in the *Somnium Scipionis* (the relation to *verum* as the pivot of human experience) and also, more specifically, to Petrarch’s special “amor veri” as praised in the prophecy of book II. Ethics and aesthetics are one and the same here: in art no less than in life *licentia* must be kept under control, for the sake what is true. And yet, what is truth? In the *Africa* it consists, of course, of the historical facts to which Petrarch as an author devoted so much of its work; on the other hand, *verum* is our experience of reality, and the ethical responses it generates. *Amor veri* and *certissima fundamenta veri* do not yield absolute aesthetic and

ethical certainties, given the indirection by which truth is experienced. Ennius adds, as a corollary to his poetic principles, that “sub ignoto tamen nunc celentur amictu, / Nuda alibi, et tenui frustrentur lumina velo, / Interdumque palam veniant, fugiantque vicissim” (IX.100-102): the truth that goes naked elsewhere (“alibi”), in other forms of writing, has to be veiled by a cloud that appears to be the very essence of poetry. *Verum* consists of the reader’s *labor*, in response to the text. Many are the modes of the epic, as acknowledged in the proem of the *Africa*, and yet what constitutes the specificity of the epic is its way of creating a form that calls for a certain kind of response on the reader’s part – a response that makes us aware of our experience of life in its totality (in the *Somnium*, totality is articulated in historical, cosmological, and ethical terms).

Another element that in book IX relates to the *Somnium* is the second prophecy of Petrarch’s coming, which Ennius is shown in a dream by Homer. Of this presentation, longer than that in book II, I will point out only a few elements. First of all, we must notice again the status of Petrarch as a *iuvenis* (“Aspexi iuvenem,” says Ennius in IX.217), his youth being not biographical but symbolical, in a reprise of the dialectics of senescence and beginnings discussed above. With his poetic work, young Franciscus will start a new cycle within Rome’s history, as the newborn of an aged mother that seemed no longer able to bear children:

Iste senescenti tantum illo in tempore Rome
Carior, annose quantum contingere matri
Filius ille solet, quem post lacrimosa sepulcra
Natorum vidue sterilis tandem attulit alvus. (IX.246-249)

Petrarch’s and Rome’s individuation intertwine, thus inspiring new possibilities into history. This potentiality lies in the collective dimension of history as well as in individual life, as

Petrarch implies by composing his self-portrait with the signs of both old and young age: “Conspicio curis gravidum sub flore iuente” (IX.274).³⁶⁶ That young Franciscus is also old (because of his uncommonly precocious wisdom) implies that the dialectics of senescence and rejuvenation unfolds in the poet, and affects his own individuation. Within and beyond biographical and historical circumstances, the ethical and aesthetic force of *renovatio* drives the poet’s efforts, their *vanitas* notwithstanding. This is the core of the epic intention of the *Africa*, which attempts to restore the memory of great deeds from antiquity, for modern readers to respond to them in a fresh way. The poet’s and the readers’ experience is a variant of Scipio Africanus’, as it was framed by the *Somnium*. A totality exists, which we must recompose; the painstaking labor of the poet will serve us as an *exemplum* of how and why to recompose the fragments of the past. In his prophecy to Ennius, Homer says it clearly:

Franciscus cui nome erit; qui grandia facta,
 Vidisti que cunta oculis, ceu corpus in unum
 Colliget: Hispanas acies Libiesque labores
 Scipidiamque tuum: titulus poematis illi
 AFRICA. (IX.233-236)

As in one body, “ceus corpus in unum”: here the issue of unity in the epic is dramatically raised, the more so in the light of the fact that the *Africa* was not finished when Petrarch wrote those lines, nor would it be in the future. Through Homer’s voice prophesying to Ennius the poem we are reading, Petrarch represents himself as an author able to bring to unity Scipio’s great deeds, that have to be assembled in a body of writing. The choice of

³⁶⁶ Cf. Petrarch’s words to his own poem in the envoy: “annosa fronte senescas, / Donec ad alterius primordial veneris evi. / Tum iuvenesce precor, cum iam lux alma poetis / Commodiorque bonis cum primum affulserit etas” (IX.474-477).

“corpus” as the word to indicate this goal is insightful in that it points at the problematic desire for unity which characterizes the epic tradition.

Africa IX, in fact, outlines a genealogy at one end of which lies Homer, a body of writing that cannot be read yet; at the other end, there is a poem or *corpus* in progress, which will never be completed “*ceu corpus in unum.*” The present of epic-writing, both for Ennius and Petrarch, each in his own time, bears the marks of incompleteness and non-unity. Could Dante’s *Commedia* be an example of achieved epic unity which Petrarch’s recognized, implicitly and *obtorto collo*, but from which he tried to distance the *Africa* as much as possible, so that he could open up once again the genealogy of epic tradition and become its last and most legitimate offshoot? In classical and post-classical age, isn’t epic a living and unstable genre that results from the desire to embrace reality “*ceu corpus in unum,*” and from the ongoing deferral of the realization of that very desire (as acknowledged in the proem of the *Africa*)? Through the contrast between Franciscus’ literary *corpus* (on Scipio) as it is foreseen by Homer and the imperfect body of the *Africa*, Petrarch brilliantly resumes the questions of unity and totality in a way substantially different from Dante, who instead transfigured and transcended the question with the all-recapitulating image of the “volume” (*Par.* XXXIII.86).

The lines prophesying the coming of Petrarch and praising his “*Solus amor veri*” (II.455) are followed by a sudden change in tone and mood, as it to evoke once again the uncertain movement of human life, so thoroughly illustrated in the *Somnium*:

Sed quid tamen omnia prosunt?
Iam sua mors libris aderit; mortalia namque
Esse decet quecumque labor mortalis inani
Edidit ingenio. (II.455-458)

What good is it to write, when books, as any product of human creation, are bound to die and dissolve? These lines are perhaps the passage where Petrarch most profoundly undermines the stability conventionally attributed to the epic. Mortality is the ultimate *verum* the poet has to investigate while being pulled by the two opposite forces of senescence and rejuvenation. Here lies the fundamental rhythm that universally generates human culture, and that the epic articulates through its treatment of a specific subject matter. The poet must write with the keenest awareness of the ultimate *inanity* of his intellectual and creative powers.³⁶⁷

Is this a sort of nihilism, a philosophical surrender that turns the poem into a ruin while it is still being written? To be sure, in the *Somnium* Petrarch has prepared the ground from which will emerge all the imperfections for which the *Africa* has been long indicted. There is, in a word, an intention to fail, and through the experience of failure, either real or imagined, Petrarch does explore the contradictory impulses that move the epic tradition. It is precisely as a work of great ambition left unfinished and haunted by the impossibility of restoring the life of the ancient epic tradition, that the *Africa* makes us understand the dynamics of the epic tradition.³⁶⁸

It should not come as a surprise that Petrarch commits this truth to the most decidedly non-epic of his nine books, namely I and II, where the the suspension of narrative

³⁶⁷ This realization goes together, in any case, with Petrarch's obsessive self-celebration. The point is that any consideration of the poet's self-fashioning that does not take into account the *vanitas* poetry as a human activity (e.g., in Vonner, "Dall'*Africa* alla gloria poetica"), is only partial. See instead Hardie, *Rumour and Renown*, 464-468, on the vanity of *fama*, including that of books, as treated in the *Somnium*.

³⁶⁸ On this contradictory yet concurrent stances, see Paratore, "Elaborazione padovana," 90-91, which sees the ending of the poem in the context of Petrarch's late years.

action makes room, in the *Somnium*, for a long reflection on what lies beyond action itself. From its place in the network of the epic tradition, the *Africa* reveals something that runs through the whole network: the in-progress nature of the epic in the flux of temporality. That such a truth was articulated in the Italian Trecento is not accidental: the question of how to begin a new tradition and connect it to other traditions is articulated by Petrarch as a question about the fundamentals of the epic in their relation with the here-and-now of human beings (whether they be characters, authors, or reader): “*Huc decet, huc animos attollere*” (II.473). All the temporalities of history and imagination, their past and their future, can enter the world and the poem from this *punctum* of historicity, the here-an-now, which only gives the epic its momentum.³⁶⁹

³⁶⁹ And through this *punctum* they enter the individual, by contraction, and then in his soul unfold again in a sort of an inner theatre of the world. In Petrarch, interiorization is a step necessary to the epic program. Crevatin, “Poeta dell’*Africa*,” 147, interestingly notices how Petrarch portrays himself as a poet at work in the seclusion of Vacluse, mentioned in *Africa* IX.278-279 (“*Respice [...] que sint umbracula ruris / effigiesque suis*”), and comments: “Sembra insomma che la poesia epica epica dell’*Africa* non possa nascere e svilupparsi se non in questi luoghi chiusi e oscuri, dove la vista del mondo è occultata da un orizzonte ristretto, che apre gli spazi immensi della vista interiore.” This rhythm of contraction and expansion qualifies, for Petrarch, not only the *Africa* but the epic tradition as such. The *Somnium* of book I-II is but a contraction or suspension of outer life, only to gain a better experience of its totality.

CONCLUSION

Call and Response

In the context of the Italian Trecento, Dante's *Commedia*, Boccaccio's *Teseida*, and Petrarch's *Africa* are responses to the need for new beginnings in an age of crisis and change. Increasingly rapid transformations, socio-political and cultural, shaped a context in which the question of transition could not be evaded. All those three poems deal with transitions and beginnings as subject matter: Dante's passage from sin to salvation; Arcita, Palemone, and Emilia's new life in Theseus' Athens; Scipio Africanus' victory as a turning point in Roman history. On such fables or histories of transition grows another layer of meaning in which the experience of translation connects with a broader experience of transition in the history, culture, and literature of the late Middle Ages; from that layer a third one unfolds, which virtually embraces the totality of humankind's experience in space and time.

This is how a culture emerges, as a form of collective life that is radically contingent and yet longs for duration. That culture bases its identity upon a set of local characters (e.g., language, history, tradition) and yet sees itself as part of the network of totality, which consists of variable connections with a range or archive of other experiences (e.g., pagan antiquity). Any literary genre or tradition can contribute to this process, but the epic is unique for its capacity to incorporate it into the text at every level. If a culture is a collective form of life that relates the individual self on the one hand and the sense of totality on the other, we can say that the epic consciously takes up the function of mediation between the

different but interrelated domains of our individuation. The great historical merit of the *Commedia*, *Teseida*, and *Africa* is to explore, from their here-and-now, how the epic tradition works. They do question the purpose, meaning, and configuration of that tradition, and by doing so they investigate the nature of the three domains of culture that the epic connects: self, collectivity, totality. Moreover, they reflect on and try to make sense of the contingency of our world, in which self, collectivity, and totality are multi-faceted “realities” always in transformation. Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch found in the epic a form capable of articulating their desire to give shape to a culture that was emerging from their context. None did so in a way that we would define “nationalistic” in a modern sense, but each rooted his epic project into a local collective ground that could be either contracted or expanded to different scales (think only of Dante’s intentional change of scale in the body politic addressed in the sixth canto of *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*).

To write all of that into a poem, our three writers claimed an affiliation with the epic tradition, drawing from its classics but also from the dynamics of the tradition as a whole, to the extent it included minor works and secondary writings. The greatest lesson they learned from that corpus, by their practice of reading and writing, is the importance of variation, which is the motor not only of the life of the epic but of life as such. Variation is an ethical no less than an aesthetic potential; it is set in motion and governed in a text by the activity of author as a maker, but originates from the pathos/passivity by which the self receives in itself the possibility of variation offered by experience (both individual and collective, both direct and indirect, such as through literature). As we have seen, in the *Commedia*, *Teseida*, and *Africa* the epic is sustained by the receptiveness of human beings,

and by the ways in which they respond to what the world brings to them. The *Commedia*, *Teseida*, and *Africa* show in practice that the epic is a way of articulating our call-and-response relation with “reality” (as an experience that goes from the here-and-now to the times and spaces included in a totality we can never fully grasp): “reality” calls and the response that comes forth and never becomes final tries to embrace every meaningful aspect and connect every dimension of existence. As taught by the epic tradition itself, that response is directed toward the past, the present, and the future.

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