Reading, Rewriting and Encoding Petrarca's *Rvf* as Hypertext

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The resources of the Oregon Petrarch Open Book (henceforth OPOB), a working database-driven hypertext in and around Francesco Petrarca's *opus magnum* allow the digital reader to approach the text in an unprecedented hypertextual configuration. Digital and hypertext technology create the condition necessary to appreciate the importance of each configuration of the *Rvf* in relation to the others conceived by Petrarch and/or the Petrarchan tradition from manuscript to digital culture.

1. Reading Petrarca's *Rvf* as hypertext

The ideal reader of the OPOB may read and study the evolution of Petrarch's masterpiece from manuscript to digital culture. The *Rvf* were a lifelong endeavor and took different configurations throughout the years. Petrarch was still operating on the partially holograph ms. Vat. lat. 3195 –that includes the supposedly last one of these configurations– until the last days of his life, when he was rearranging the numbering of poems 336-366. The digital copy of Ettore Modigliani's Diplomatic edition of Petrarca's last manuscript published by in 1904 can be a good point of departure for our reader. Next, he or she may read the text in the manuscript tradition represented by the cod. Queriniano D II 21, one of the most precious witnesses of the history of the *Rvf* that represents the pre-definitive form. Thanks to a 2012 ACLS digital innovation grant we digitized and transcribed this manuscript and now in the OPOB it is possible to read the digital copy along with transcriptions of the poems.

After this exposure to the manuscript tradition, our readers may approach the earliest printed edition of the *Rvf*, published in Venice in 1470 by Vindelin de Spira (Inc. Queriniano G V 15), that we digitized and transcribed as well. It is a unique and marvelous edition of the *Rvf* including extensive illustrations that serve as elaborate visual glosses of fundamental natural and psychological motifs in the poems. The marginalia handwritten glosses are another unique feature of this edition. The written glosses and the illustrations are integrated and provide a remarkable and exceptional interpretation of the *Rvf*.

In the OPOB these readings may be complemented with and compared to Renaissance and modern commentaries such as Vellutello's; recent critical editions of Petrarca's *Rvf* such as Contini's and Savoca's, the Spanish and French translations by Enrique Garcés and Vasquin Philieul (16th century), a contemporary English translation (A. S. Kline), and partial translations in Russian, Chinese, Japanese and German.

Furthermore, the reader may decide to experience the text along with intersemiotic transpositions, including artworks and musical renderings utilizing the archives of the OPOB. Finally, the users may read the entire *Rvf* in tweet format: in the Apparatus menu they may find 366 tweets, one for each poem. As it will become apparent in the next section of this essay, readers and students in the context of seminars and specific reading projects created these apparatuses. In this perspective, the OPOB introduces new hopes for the possible positive effects of digital innovation in the Humanities by documenting inventive academic reading strategies in which the typical hyper attention required by the digital environment is conveniently combined with cognitive approaches oriented toward deep reading. The ideal reader that the OPOB has in mind is for sure a hyper reader that has to come to terms with multiple layers of meaning in the text as prompted by the hypertext and the intertextual setting in which the reading takes place.

We are working to create the conditions for deep reading within a hypertext approach to reading. The recent technological changes have radically modified the relationship between reading and writing to the point that the reader may now be

considered a co- author. In fact, whereas from the appearance of the first incunabula the room for reader intervention was limited to the blank spaces in a page, in the new era opened by digital texts the reader may now intervene at any moment in the production of the text not only by annotating, copying, and indexing, but also by recomposing the texts in new ways different from the original (Cavallo, Chartier). As I show in the next section, the OPOB encourages the use of the resources available in the hypertext to rewrite Petrarca's poem for example in a tweet format.

To better illustrate this important point I will now introduce two reading projects that I have elaborated in two seminars on re-reading *Petrarca's Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* that I taught at the University of Oregon in 2011 and 2014 using the resources of the OPOB. The first seminar was directed toward re-writing Petrarca's poem in tweet format, the second explored thematic close reading of Petrarca's masterpiece.

2. Rewriting Petrarca's *Rvf* in the OPOB

The idea of translating Petrarca's *Rvf* into Twitterature was developed and implemented for the first time during a seminar on Re-reading Petrarca's *Rvf* in the Digital Era taught at the University of Oregon in winter 2011. This class created the first Twitter Edition of Petrarca's *Rvf* in Italian and focused mostly on the Italian text.

The students had to read all the poems but concentrated their weekly work as *wreaders* on the poems assigned to their group. After reading the original text and the paraphrases the different groups had to provide the summaries, keywords and tweets for the poems assigned. It was clear from the start that the sequence of philological and writing activities represented an exceptional tool for reading and comprehending the text. One could argue that this way of "reading" somehow regenerated a reading practice that originated in the early Middle Ages when people

started to read in order to write, and to write in order to be read, as it happened in the *compilatio*, the method of composition of scholasticism.

As for the early medieval readers described by Cavallo and Chartier, for us reading was not exclusively aimed at a simple comprehension of the literal meaning (*littera*) of writing. This first stage consisted of a movement from the original text to the paraphrase. This initial comprehension was followed by the composition of the summary of the general meaning (*sensus*) of the poem. Finally, the individuation of the keywords and the writing of the tweet allowed the students to arrive at a proposition that more nearly captures the profundity of the poem (*sententia*). In other words, we used the tweet as a creative interpretive tool, something different from the summary and the collection of keywords; ultimately, in our view the tweet had to extrapolate the quintessential element of each poem allowing an immediate and insightful grasp of it.

In the general discussion that followed the reading of the 366 tweets created by the class, most students appreciated the sense of continuity from one tweet to the other and the comprehensiveness of our interpretative reading that allowed a complete review of the entire *Rvf* in just three hours. The consecutive reading of all the 366 tweets gave them a sense of the entire *Rvf* better than the one possible through an anthology of poems selected by the instructor. In their written comments all the students in the class were convinced that the reading of the tweet cannot substitute for the reading of the actual poem; they would recommend the reader of the OPOB to read the tweet after having read the poem itself. Conversely, the reading of the tweet should trigger an engagement with the original text. Also, they suggest that occasional readers of poetry use the tweets as a reference tool to acquire a basic knowledge of the *Rvf*. Nevertheless, the instructor's basic criterion for editing the tweets created in this course suggests a greater role for the tweet, beyond its use as a hermeneutic and reference tool. This criterion is based on the idea of including direct or indirect quotes from the original poems in the attempt at capturing Petrarca's poetic style. In this perspective the tweet incorporates a poetic flavor in what otherwise would remain a pure prose rendering of Petrarca's *Rvf*.

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The work done by the class is propedeutic for and interconnected with a complex and articulated reading of Petrarca's masterpiece in hypertext format, which is now possible to perform through the Compare poems and assets tool included in the OPOB. The readers and students of Petrarca's *Rvf* may now retrieve the philological experience of the class, opening in different coordinated small windows on the same web page, the original text, the paraphrase, the summary and the tweet of each poem. Taking advantage of these apparatuses and other resources and tools our readers may become *wreaders* (Landow) themselves and produce new tweets out of Petrarca poems as a synthesis of an interpretation different from ours. Then, they may submit the new tweets to the hypertext to the OPOB adding a new contribution to the hypertext.

If we consider this important interactive dimension of reading in a digital environment we may conclude that digital humanities are providing new and more comprehensive ways to realize traditional humanities goals. One may argue that the OPOB hypertext reproduces the kind of extensive reading made possible by the reading wheel that was already known to the Medieval and Renaissance humanist. We are convinced that in this wheel the tweet becomes just a component that acquires sense and value in relation to the others. The experience of the students in the seminar proved that the tweet may not be just a tool to avoid the burden of reading Petrarca's poems but on the contrary a way to deepen their comprehension and better interpret them.

3. Encoding Petrarca's *Rvf* in the OPOB

As part of the seminar Re-reading Petrarch in the Digital Age –taught at the University of Oregon in Winter 2014– a digital close reading of Francesco Petrarca's *Rerum Vulgarium Fragmenta* (*Rvf*) led to a series of parallel and entwined activities and projects. Deeply integrated with the Oregon Petrarch Open Book Project (OPOB), the course was oriented towards the encoding of Petrarca's masterpiece

based on the implementation of a network of different themes (Poet, Laura, Metaphysics, Nature, Metamorphoses and Urban Culture). The various occurrences and data obtained from the encoding were collected into an online database that is still operating and updatable. The results of this qualitative data collection were also compared with a quantitative computer-based research of selected keywords extracted from the various themes. From the beginning of the seminar, the class was divided into groups and each of them read the *Rvf* focusing on one of themes chosen while at the same time paying attention to the others. The different groups considered these themes as interrelated and interdependent. The poet is the sphere in which all the topics emerge in their specific connotations. However, his sphere is related to, dependent on and intersected with the other four spheres. The encoding allowed measuring the different manifestations, levels and meanings of the intersecting relationships. The study of the visual interpretation of the Rvf in the Inc. Queriniano G V 15 paralleled the close reading and encoding activity and helped students to develop a visual rendering of their themes and a pointed and original and creative interpretation of Petrarca's masterpiece.

In this way we rejected the idea that meaning is embedded solely in the text and avoided what is called textualism in favor of openness to reader response and to different textualities and intersemiotic renderings available in the hypertext OPOB. Reading in our class was conceived as an activity that combined individual and group work. The semantic encoding of the poems allowed us to ponder that the meaning of the poems rather than being simply imbedded in formal features is the result of the reader's interpretive strategy. To work in groups allowed the class to maximize the value of interpretive communities in looking for some agreement on the different meanings of texts. Thus, the most innovative results are related precisely to the group and collective dimension of our experiment.

Our digital reading and interpretation was documented in a publication in the 2015 issue of the E-Journal *Humanist Studies & the Digital Age*; it does not pretend or want to be "exemplary," since we believe that each act of reading is in some way always singular, original, and sui generis. In this perspective our encoding is not

meant to introduce a fixed and stable layer to the text. As Buzzetti and McGann write, "to approach textuality in this way [that is, as susceptible to a definitive reading] is to approach it in illusion." They go on the say that "markup should be conceived, instead, as the expression of a highly reflexive act, a mapping of text back onto itself;" and that "as soon as a (marked) text is (re) marked, the metamarkings open themselves to indeterminacy. "(Buzzetti and McGann 2006). It is clear that in this perspective quantitative reading can only be a tool of a digital reading of literary texts.

Our reading and encoding may be considered as a groundwork for other layers of encoding that will be introduced in the near future in the OPOB. All acts of interpretation occur in some context or other; our context is the late print time or digital era in Western capitalist society in which there is an unprecedented abundance of textualities and images that we need to learn to master in order to preserve the cultural memory of the past while pursuing at the same time the humanist project in original ways. To this goal digital close reading, encoding and visualization may become fundamental tools available to an ethical reader aware that reading is not simply a cognitive and epistemological matter and that the new nature of reading in the digital era is characterized not only by hyper and pervasive attention but also by a deep involvement with the text.