CHAPTER FIVE

PETRARCH READING BOCCACCIO:
REVISITING THE GENESIS OF THE TRIUMPHI

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What are the origins of Petrarch’s Triumphi? The question posed in this manner admits of certain ambiguities. What can it mean to search for the origins of a work of art? Martin Heidegger addresses the question from an aesthetic perspective in one of his more influential essays and, after attempts to avoid the figure of the artist altogether, has to concede that one must examine “the activity of the artist in order to arrive at the origin of the work of art”.

How can we access an artist’s process of conceptualization? What materials are available to us? The world may have been created in six days, but the gestation period of a work of art, in which the artist faces the daunting task of creatio ex nihilo, lasts considerably longer. It is the product of long considered ideas, slowly accumulated observations, and sudden insights. It would be foolish to hope to perceive all of the elements that went into a work’s construction, or hope to reduce “the complexity of the Triumphi’s inspiration”, but it is worth attempting to discover the most decisive moment in its creation and the most decisive model of its literary form.

The philological apparatus of a work can furnish us with certain clues to this process, but the textual situation of Petrarch’s Triumphi is anything but certain. There is debate about which Triumphi constitute the final version and what their proper order should be, in addition to a high number of variants that further complicate the work’s textual stability.

The date of composition, furthermore, remains problematic and open...

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1 Heidegger 1971, 58.
2 Baranski 1990, 75.
3 Pasquini 1975 takes issue with the ordering of Appel 1901, which follows the vulgate of the poem that circulated following Petrarch’s death. While the vulgate version does have the advantage of presenting the work as it came to be known and interpreted, the possibility that Petrarch’s final version was different from the vulgate may be confirmed by Zenone Zenoni’s use of the first terzina of Triumphus Mortis II as the principio of the poem as a whole. On Zenone Zenoni, see Feo 1979, 30–36.
to various interpretations. It is no wonder that Emilio Pasquini has spent over thirty years preparing a new critical edition. While these materials may be an impediment to the establishment of a critical edition, they also present the critic with a wide array of opportunities to interrogate the work at various moments of its coming into being. The philological confusion that confronts the textual critic is a mine of possibilities for the critic who wants to investigate the work’s genesis.

Exploring these philological materials, this essay revisits a hypothesis first proposed by Vittore Branca and Giuseppe Billanovich, which sees Boccaccio’s *Amorosa visione* as the decisive mediating text in Petrarch’s conceptualization of the *Triumphi*. Scholars have proposed other works, both literary and visual, that may have influenced Petrarch’s poem, but according to this hypothesis there is no work that has contributed more to the inspiration of the unique literary form of the triumph.4

The reconstruction outlined by Branca and Billanovich needs to be revised in some significant ways, but the general pattern of circulation described by Branca whereby Boccaccio’s *Amorosa visione* influenced Petrarch’s *Triumphi*, which in their turn prompted Boccaccio to revise his poem, remains persuasive. Although Branca felt confident asserting this model as “certain” in *Boccaccio medievale*, recent editors of the *Triumphi* have been less convinced of Boccaccio’s role.5

In the introduction to his edition of the *Triumphi*, for example, Marco Ariani relegates the issue to a brief footnote, preferring instead to emphasize Petrarch’s relations to Dante’s poem.6 Marco Santagata, on the other hand, addresses the question in his introduction to Vinicio

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4 On possible visual influences, see Ciccuto 1988 and 1991b. Calcaterra (1942, 145–208) argues for the importance of the *Roman de la Rose* in the origins of the *Triumphi*.

5 Branca 1986, 315: “Ma quella circolazione è certa: come l’*Amorosa visione* suggerì il disegno e lo sviluppo dei *Trionfi*, così l’intervento—a diversi livelli—del Petrarca, il suo interesse per il poemetto ne sollecitò prepotentemente la ripresa e la nuova redazione da parte dell’autore. E se l’idea, la struttura, la tradizione stessa dei *trioufi* ha come iniziatore il Boccaccio, forse mai quella sua afosa ed infelice prova, in cinquanta canti in terza rima, avrebbe avuto la forza di avviare e di imporre e di far sviluppare largamente alla letteratura del Rinascimento un ‘genere’ di così caratteristico gusto tardogotico”.

6 In the same essay, Branca proposes the connections between *[Rf]* 323.6–11 and *Decameron* V 8.15 as another example of Boccaccian influence on Petrarch. On Boccaccio’s importance as a transmitter of genres to the Renaissance, see Orvieto 1978.

Ariani (1988, 10n12; 45–52) explores other possible sources, but not Boccaccio’s poem. Ariani (1999, 291) also briefly compares the works in terms of the experience of the narrators, but the distinction drawn seems too schematic and fails to give enough credit to the variety of narrative techniques adopted by Boccaccio in the poem.