I

BEGINNINGS

History of any sort involves choices about where to begin. Any cultural development, political movement, or religious evolution can be extended backward almost infinitely. One can find causes, of causes, of causes . . . without end. This dilemma – where to begin – comes into special relief when thinking about Italian Renaissance culture, since the one thing that most of the intellectuals we will meet in this book had in common was that they looked to the distant past, to the epoch of ancient Greece and Rome, to find cultural ideals. Yet in many ways they were all fundamentally connected to the social and material conditions of their day, medieval people looking to distinguish themselves from the culture they saw around them and in which they were embedded. At some point, you simply have to decide that you need a beginning. So we'll begin in the fourteenth century. For in many ways, when it comes to intellectual life, developments that occurred in the fourteenth century shaped the evolution of the Renaissance definitively.

More specifically we'll begin in 1364, with a letter. Intellectuals were and are many different things, but above all they are readers and writers. Listening carefully to what they say by analyzing what they write offers the best entryway into their world. Done right, it can give us context, a sense of the thinker's personality, and an opening to consider the various perspectives from which we can consider the writer. So here is what Petrarch wrote to Boccaccio in 1364. The two were close friends, Boccaccio a little younger and, sometimes, in awe of Petrarch. Petrarch had heard that Boccaccio had burned some of his Italian poetry when he encountered Petrarch's poetry, so in awe was Boccaccio of Petrarch's talent. Petrarch writes that he too had undergone some ambivalence in his career. While now he was devoted primarily to Latin literature, there had been a time when he hoped "to devote most of my time to this enterprise of writing in the vernacular." Latin, he went on,

had been cultivated to such an extent and by such great geniuses of antiquity that nothing significant could be added, either by me or by anyone else. On the other hand, the vernacular, having been but recently discovered and still quite rustic owing to recent ravagers and to the fact that few have cultivated it, seemed capable of ornament and augmentation.[1]

Petrarch lived from 1304 to 1374 in a tumultuous century. By 1364, he was immensely famous by the standards of his day, as a vernacular poet and as a learned writer in Latin whose accomplishments were the envy of the educated.

What then does this letter tell us? First, Petrarch reveals an assumption regarding the Latin language that was widespread in his time, something that, considered in its fullness, should stop modern readers in their tracks. Educated people in Petrarch's time and place were bilingual in ways difficult to imagine today, with their education after the elementary level occurring in Latin. To be educated was to be considered *litteratus*, a word that meant not only "literate" the way we consider this status today, which is to say "able to read and write in one's native language." Being *litteratus* also signified fluency as a reader (especially) but also as a writer and to an extent speaker of Latin specifically.

Part of Latin's appeal had to do with permanence and tradition. This was an era before mass transit and well before anything like radio or television, when many people could not hear "standard" versions of native languages in a relatively uniform way. Owing to these factors, vernaculars (native languages, learned by children in the home) seemed inherently unstable. In Italy, the dialect of Tuscany differed substantially from that of Naples, which was very different from that of Milan, and so on. Decade by decade and region by region, people's "mother tongues" proved so variable that they did not seem appropriate for serious writing. Latin, on the other hand, did.

Latin, first, had a long and continuous history by the time the fourteenth century rolled around. Latin itself ceased to be a native language about two centuries after the Roman Empire fell in 478. But it experienced great success as an official language used by the Church in all its dealings, from the Mass to the many theological and administrative writings the Church's growth inspired. The twelfth and thirteenth centuries saw the rise of universities, where new, standardized forms of Latin evolved. Meanwhile, in what are now France, Spain, Portugal, and Italy, the "Romance" languages of French,

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[1] Francesco Petrarca, *Res Seniles: Libri V-VIII*, ed. Silvia Rizzo (Florence: Le Lettere, 2009), 30–50, at 42–44. My translation.

Spanish, Portuguese, and Italian developed. Yet they did so in unorganized ways, emerging as they did from spoken versions of Latin but developing their own grammars, vocabularies, and, importantly, dialects. This latter aspect, dialects, proves crucially important in understanding why, from the time of the Roman Empire's fall to the fifteenth century, little attention was given to writing and promoting grammars of those languages (one noteworthy exception occurred in the case of Tuscan, as we shall see in Chapter 6). These vernaculars, or commonly spoken languages, did not exist in one fixed form in the European Middle Ages. Instead, even within one broad language group, Italian, for instance, there would be countless local variants, from region to region and, importantly, decade to decade.

Only one language was thought to stand the test of time, to be permanent enough to study, to teach, and to use for official purposes: Latin. Indeed, the word "grammar" – *grammatica* – meant one thing throughout the Middle Ages: Latin. When we observe, as we often do in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, someone saying that he studied *grammatica*, what that meant was he studied Latin. When Petrarch says that at a certain point he believed "nothing significant could be added, either by me or by anyone else" to the store of Latin literature, he reveals an anxiety shared by many when they looked at ancient literary achievements. What could you add to something already perfect?

It is also worth highlighting that Petrarch says that the vernacular was "recently discovered and still quite rustic." "Recently discovered": Petrarch points here to two communities of writers: first, to the "Sicilian school" of poets, who, inspired by medieval French troubadours and their tales of love and heroism, flourished in the thirteenth century and wrote love poetry of great beauty in the vernacular. Elsewhere, in another work of his, Petrarch says that the Sicilian poets "were the first."[2] Certain writers in Tuscany, members of the so-called Sicilian-Tuscan school, joined them in the early canon of recognized and important Italian poets. In other words, relatively recently (from Petrarch's perspective), a group of writers had succeeded in writing literature in the vernacular that was worthy of being read and considered seriously. It was poetry, to be sure, and it dealt with matters of love, predominantly, rather than history, philosophy, or theology. But it was worth taking seriously. If these early poets represented one of the two communities of writers, the other community was, instead, a community of one: Dante Alighieri (1265–1321).

[2] Petrarch, "Triumphus cupidinis," in Francesco Petrarca, *Opere di Francesco Petrarca*, Emilio Bigi, ed. (Milan: Mursia, 1963), 4.35–36: "i ciciliani / che fur già primi."

Absences often tell as much, or more, about a writer's frame of mind than things that are overtly present. The fact that Petrarch could say that the vernacular possessed "that few have cultivated it" is astonishing, since by the time he was writing this letter, Dante's *Comedy* (*Commedia*) was well known. In its three "canticles," *Inferno* (Hell), *Purgatorio* (Purgatory), and *Paradiso* (Paradise), Dante had expressed with beauty and elegance a magnificent journey. Dante, the poet himself, is the *Comedy*'s principal character, and we follow him as he explores the realms of hell, purgatory, and heaven. Along the way we meet notable figures from the ancient world; famous characters from Italian history; and, most importantly, Dante's two main guides, the ancient Latin poet Virgil, who accompanies Dante through purgatory, and then, in paradise, Beatrice, the woman who served as Dante's muse.

Dante wrote, very deliberately, in the Tuscan vernacular, that variety of Italian spoken most purely in Florence, that would later serve as the model for "literary" Italian. The work that we know as *The Divine Comedy* (the adjective "Divine" was added only later) elicited admiration, fascination, and comment, so much so that a bit later, in 1373, the city of Florence asked Boccaccio himself to lecture publicly on Dante's *Comedy*.[3] Another thing, then, that we learn from this letter of Petrarch's is that he had a ghost hanging over his head, the ghost of a writer, Dante, who had so perfectly expressed a vision of the cosmos that his work seemed indeed divine. He had done so not in Latin, but in Italian: a surprising fact, given that many of the themes that pop up in the *Comedy* deal with subjects – philosophy, theology, science – that traditionally would have been addressed in Latin.

Dante himself had early on written a work called *On the Elegance of the Vernacular* (*De vulgari eloquentia*), a work in which he argued that the vernacular should be cultivated as a serious language. Paradoxically, he wrote this text in Latin, in the hopes that it would reach intellectuals, but the arguments he made there were powerful: the vernacular was natural and learned in the home, and matters expressed in the vernacular could reach more than just a small section of the well educated. To be sure, it would need cultivation, rules, and hard work to make it worthy of serious literature, since man was "a most unstable, variable animal" (*instabilissimum et variabilissimum animal*).[4]

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[3] See Michael Papio, "Introduction: Boccaccio as *Lector Dantis*," in Giovanni Boccaccio, *Boccaccio's* Expositions *on Dante's* Comedy, tr. with introductions and notes by Michael Papio (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 3–37, at 7–10.

[4] Dante, *De vulgari eloquentia*, ed. Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo, in Dante, *Opere minori*, 2 vols. (Milan: Ricciardi, 1979), 1.9.6.

As to Petrarch, he informs us in that letter that, if early in his life he too thought one might raise the vernacular to the level of a language of craft and precision, soon thereafter he abandoned that plan. What Petrarch is doing is making a symbolic leap over Dante, shaping and refining a carefully polished persona: Petrarch the serious, pious, scholarly intellectual who has left vernacular poetry behind. He is offering a carefully staged presentation of self.

The truth is that Petrarch worked on his vernacular poetry his entire life: a manuscript in the Vatican Library shows that throughout his life he revised and reordered his poems, called *Rime sparse* in Italian – "Scattered Rhymes" – or, as he would refer to them in Latin, *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*: "Fragments of things in the vernacular."[5] All of this might sound terribly academic, but for one fact: Petrarch's definitive shifting of gears – moving from the vernacular to Latin, from idealizing love poetry to historical studies, from a more or less secular attitude toward life to one marked by a profoundly religious outlook – effected a definitive change in attitudes toward literature and scholarship in Italy. For the next five generations, the field on which leading Italian intellectuals would play, work, and occasionally battle was a primarily Latinate one. The long fifteenth century saw a lot of attention to the Italian vernacular, increasingly so as the fifteenth century wore on. But Petrarch's powerful presence signaled the beginning of a cultural movement whose main linguistic vehicle was the Latin language.

Backgrounds

When we study the past, we tend to examine it through categories that make the most sense to us. This tendency is natural and unsurprising. But a problem arises: sometimes the categories that make the most sense to us would not have made sense in the same way to the people from the past whom we are studying. The question becomes: should we use the categories that make sense to us or try to understand what categories were operative in the period we are studying? The perspective I am advocating in this book is the latter. Take one example: philosophy. Today, those who study philosophy are disposed to believe that it deals primarily with verbal arguments: that the best philosophy is one in which a thinker makes clear, rationally delineated arguments that cohere with one another into a system. Religion, with all its

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[5] MS Vatican City, Biblioteca apostolica vaticana, Vat. Lat. 3196; see also Luca Marcozzi, "Making the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*," in Albert Russell Ascoli and Unn Falkeid, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Petrarch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 51–62.

ambiguities and its necessity of appealing to a higher power above human reason, has no place in this scheme. But in the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries things were different.

On the one hand, as we shall see, in universities one could find significant antecedents for the more modern view. The notion was common and widely accepted that philosophy as a discipline was separate from religion, based on human reason alone, and as such could function autonomously within a limited intellectual realm. On the other, when we look at university life as it was situated within intellectual life generally, we can see that this view, though operative, is misleading. Most thinkers would have thought of academic philosophy (considered in this just-sketched way) as the minor partner when it came to religion. And indeed, universities were structured in such a way that philosophy served as basic preparation for the study of theology, seen as something higher and more important. The relationship between the two fields, philosophy and religion, is the reverse today in academic, intellectual circles, with philosophy seen as the higher intellectual discipline. The example of "philosophy" as a discipline is one among many that one could name to make this case: certain categories as we understand them today were different in the past, despite their name, which on the surface might have been the same.

So a word to the wise: looking into the past, we should not fear difference. There is nothing wrong with looking for antecedents to the way we think and live today, to find things that "look like us" in the past. But history would not be history if we did not recognize fundamental differences in outlook (when these are clearly present and can be substantiated by evidence) that shaped thinkers in the past. Since we are dealing with intellectuals, the best place to begin is with education.

Grammatica

Sometime between the years 1369 and 1373, a Neapolitan intellectual, Guglielmo Maramauro, wrote a commentary to Dante's *Inferno* (Dante had died in 1321 and by then his work was considered a classic). In the preface to his commentary, Guglielmo explains that what he was doing involved compiling resources, including prior commentaries on Dante. Of one of these he notes, "it is in *grammatica*" (*el quale è in grammatica*).[6] Maramauro, this otherwise little known figure, notes this fact in passing, simply as a way of

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[6] Guglielmo Maramauro, *Expositione sopra l' "Inferno" di Dante Alighieri*, ed. Pier Giacomo Pisoni and Saverio Bellomo (Padua: Antenore, 1998), pref.

acknowledging the resources he had consulted when preparing his Dante commentary. It was worth noting for him that one of the resources he had used was in *grammatica*. By this term he means simply Latin. It will serve as a good jumping off point for us, as we try to see what was distinctive about education in Italy's long fifteenth century. It would be impossible here to summarize adequately all the diverse local conditions in which young people were educated, with all their specific differences.[7] But there was one thing all educated children would have had in common after an elementary-level understanding of basic arithmetic and vernacular reading: that much of their education thenceforth proceeded in Latin. Indeed, three characteristics serve to distinguish their education and to highlight its substantial differences from norms in our own era: the presence of Latin, the premium placed on memorization, and the relatively small set of resources people had at their disposal.

Education is a conservative enterprise, in the most literal sense of that word: dedicated to preserving what has gone before and passing it down. In Italy by the fourteenth century, despite local differences, certain tried-and-true methods had been developed to ensure that students could reach their goals, stage by stage in their education. If the word *grammatica* signified "Latin," it also had embedded in it its more literal meaning, "grammar." This is to say, young students needed a method to learn a foreign language that was not spoken in the home anymore but was nonetheless necessary as an instrument. The first things they had to learn were basic vocabulary and basic grammar, and one of the basic texts used was called *Janua*, or "the doorway," so called because it was seen as a gateway to Latin, itself an entryway to all the other liberal arts.

Imagine, today, if your education occurred in a language not only different from your own native language but also in a "dead" language – a language, that is, that was not spoken naturally by anyone. Your teachers would be speaking the language in class, and gradually you would grow used to hearing it spoken, with the accents and pronunciations, in most cases, of the native language of the speakers. But its status would have been unquestioned, and you would have come to think of it, indeed of language in general, in a special way: native languages were for jokes, for basic commerce, and for

[7] See Robert Black, *Humanism and Education in Medieval and Renaissance Italy: Tradition and Innovation in Latin Schools from the Twelfth to the Fifteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Paul F. Grendler, *Schooling in Renaissance Italy: Literacy and Learning, 1300–1600* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989); Ronald G. Witt, "What Did Giovanni Read and Write? Literacy in Early Renaissance Florence," *I Tatti Studies* 6 (1995), 83–114.

intimate occasions, from those basic ones in the home to those between lovers. Latin, on the other hand, would have been seen as the language appropriate for serious matters, as the official language of religion, as a language of international diplomacy, of learning. Most importantly, these impressions would have been formed at a young age, if you were one of those few people fortunate enough to receive this kind of education.

Given the distinctive status of Latin (as a dead language but also as one that was required for higher matters), it needed special vehicles to be taught and learned. If the presence of Latin serves as the first factor distinguishing the long fifteenth century from our own, the second is the main vehicle: standard texts taught by memorization.

The most notable of these texts was *Janua*, divided into eight parts, which corresponded to the parts of speech: nouns, verbs, participles, pronouns, prepositions, adverbs, interjections, and conjunctions.[8] It assumed little basic knowledge on the part of young students; it was designed to teach them both what the parts of speech were and how they functioned, as well as basic word forms, what grammarians today call "morphology." The first few lines of *Janua*'s poetic preface give us a sense of what it was like:

> *Ianua sum rudibus primam cupientibus artem / Nec prae me quisquam recte peritus erit*: "I am the doorway for the ignorant who desire the first art / And without me no one will be truly learned."

The preface goes on:

> For I teach gender and case, species and number, and formation in their parts, which are inflected. I put method in the remaining parts of speech, explaining what agrees the best. And no use of the word remains that I do not teach. Therefore, unskilled beginner, read and dedicate yourself to study, because you can learn many things with rapid study.[9]

Much of this will ring unfamiliar today, even to students who have studied foreign languages.

The key is the notion that Latin is "inflected." Practically speaking, this means that words have different endings depending on where they appear in a sentence: a noun that is the subject of a sentence will have a different ending if it appears as the direct object, different again if it is the indirect object, and so on. This aspect represents the noun's "case." "Gender" in Latin is three-fold (masculine, feminine, and neuter), and nouns and adjectives will, again,

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[8] Federica Ciccolella, *Donati Graeci: Learning Greek in the Renaissance* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 22.
[9] Cit. in Ciccolella, *Donati Graeci*, 21; tr. in Paul Gehl, *A Moral Art: Grammar, Culture, and Society in Trecento Florence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 88–89.

have different spellings and will "decline" (meaning move among the cases) differently according to their gender. To put it all more simply, Latin is like a puzzle: the student needs to learn how to match the right words one with the other, to make sense of any text.

To help teach these matters, *Janua* was structured in a question and answer format, a time-honored method then for teaching basic materials of all sorts. *Poeta quae pars est?* "What part of speech is 'poet'?" *Nomen.* "Noun." *Quare est nomen*? "For what reason is it a noun?" *Quia significat substantiam et qualitatem propriam vel communem cum casu*. "Because it signifies a substance and a quality proper to the thing itself or held in common with other things along with case."[10] And so on. A text such as this was learned by oral repetition, over and over, until it was fixed in the student's mind, deeply embedded and giving him (in rare cases "her") a lifelong knowledge of its contents. The use of *Janua* represents one aspect of teaching, and (needless to say) the way it was used and taught would have varied from region to region. But certain aspects of this style of education are worth bringing into relief, since they are so different from what we are used to today.

Take the oral part of this process. We are much more habituated than were premodern people to thinking of literacy in at least two ways: first, as composed of reading and writing together, in roughly equal parts and, second, having to do with texts outside the reader, meaning simply on a printed page or on a screen. For us, at least implicitly, texts inside one's head – memorized – do not necessarily "count" when we think of literacy. Moreover, our notion of literacy is changing radically with the advent of new media, as we free up our memories to accommodate more and more short-term content. The more you can count on having material available online, the less you need to store in your memory. This was another fundamental difference between Petrarch's day and our own. When we think of literacy in the long fifteenth century, we need to adjust the balance a bit, to reflect the fact that they possessed much more knowledge "inside" the reader, meaning that much of what they learned (much more at least than in our own cases) they memorized. This process had consequences, since of course there are limits to what a person can memorize. One of these con-sequences was that thinkers, all throughout the long fifteenth century (much as in the case of their medieval predecessors), fervently believed in the authority of a relatively limited variety of important texts. This mentality emerged also from a simple fact: in an era when books were hand produced, there were far fewer of them than we might intuitively assume today. Not

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[10] Cit. in Ciccolella, *Donati Graeci*, 22.

only that, but – especially in the fourteenth century – there were no real "public" libraries, such as would come into existence in a limited way in the fifteenth century.[11]

If our hope is to offer some context for Petrarch and the educational world that formed him and his contemporaries up to adolescence, we can highlight these distinctive general features: a lot of Latin, a lot of memorization, and a heavy reliance on a relatively small series of authoritative texts. These factors represented the basic general formation of all educated Italians, however diverse they were when it came to particulars.

Moving on from secondary schooling, universities represented the other major factor influencing thinkers at the outset of the long fifteenth century. Most Italian intellectuals during this period had substantial experience at universities. Though some would criticize universities and position themselves as "outsiders," these powerful medieval institutions had a profound and shaping effect on many people.

Universities had their roots in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in Europe, and they emerged almost spontaneously, as respected teachers, known as "masters" (*magistri*) developed followings among students.[12] As these masters habitually gravitated to certain parts of major cities, institutions grew up around those gathering places. Some of the earliest such institutions arose in Bologna, Paris, and Oxford. By the middle of the thirteenth century these universities came to be designated with the term *studium generale*, a term that implied that they were places of teaching and learning (*studium*) and that aspects of any given university superseded its local context. For example, a student who earned the title "master" (*magister*) also possessed by virtue of that title a "license to teach anywhere" (*licentia ubique docendi*), which meant that the skills learned were transferable.

Universities were generally divided into four "faculties," sections responsible for teaching certain subject matters: the "lower" faculty of "arts" and the three "higher" faculties of medicine, theology, and law. It was in the arts faculty that the "liberal arts" were taught, which included seven subjects. Three were verbally oriented: grammar, rhetoric, and logic. The other four were more mathematical in nature and included arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music. A student proceeded through study of these various subjects and earned the status of Bachelor of Arts (*baccalaureus artium*, the origins of our modern B.A. degree) and Master of Arts (*magister artium*, the

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[11] See Chapter 11.
[12] See Marsha Colish, *Medieval Foundations of the Western Intellectual Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 265–73.