

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

## ***De nostri temporis studiorum ratione* and the Digital Humanities**

How might Italian Studies scholars view their work differently in light of the digital turn? On a practical level, the examples explored here illustrate a variety of approaches in response to this question. Increasingly framed at the intersection of histories of race, gender, language, access, method, and scholarly practice, the digital humanities continues to make unique demands on scholars. It forces us to think through the media-specific practices of the humanities present and past and the assumptions which sustain them. It forces us to ask, what is the goal of our studies? And what are the advantages that we derive from said goal?

A similar question was posed by eighteenth-century philosopher Giambattista Vico's in his work *De nostri temporis studiorum ratione* (1709). Translated as "On the Study Methods of Our Time,"<sup>1</sup> this was Vico's first foray into philosophy and was the seventh in a series of inaugural lectures given at the University of Naples in his position as professor of rhetoric. Vico took aim at the inadequacy of the critical and pedagogical methods of his contemporaries while weighing the comparative merits of classical and modern culture. This reminds us of 21<sup>st</sup>-century debates about the value, both economic and cultural, of a liberal arts education. In order to discern just how current "study methods" might be superior or inferior to those of the Ancients, Vico set up a distinction between the new arts, sciences and inventions—the constituent material of learning—and the new instruments and aids to knowledge—the ways and means of learning. Vico's critique of the Moderns took issue with the logicians of Port-Royal, and their Cartesian method of compartmentalizing knowledge. For Vico, this reductive method of study precludes the human, and is inferior to that of the Ancients: "We devote all our efforts to the investigation of physical phenomena, because their nature seems unambiguous; but we fail to inquire into human nature which, because of the freedom of man's will, is difficult to determine" (33). The result, Vico warns, is that students "because of their training, which is focused on these studies, are unable to engage in the life of the community, to conduct themselves with sufficient wisdom and prudence" (33).

For Vico, the methods of logicians such as Antoine Arnaud and Pierre Nicole and their followers established the constituent material of

learning through a process of narrowing the domain of knowledge. While Francis Bacon took issue with the syllogisms of the scholastics to argue that knowledge of the world should be grounded in empirically verifiable facts, Vico doesn't simply propose a new method to achieve ancient knowledge. He redefines what it means to know. And, since the instruments (including logic) used by his contemporaries—the very ways and means to knowledge—were antecedent to the task of learning, the knowledge they yielded was determined by their premises for their creation. In the technology they harnessed, and in the aims they fulfilled, these instruments were restricted by the discourses which produced them. In reducing knowledge to the unambiguous, the logicians of Port Royal limited knowledge to what their minds, and their technology, permitted them to master. This narrowing allowed them to accelerate the production of knowledge, leading Vico to a mixed assessment. While he marveled at the abundance of books available “not only to Ptolemaic kings, but also to any private individual, and at a moderate cost” (72), he worried that such an abundance might result in a decline in intellectual industry. He compared his contemporaries to guests at a banquet who, having indulged in “gorgeous and sumptuous dinners, wave away ordinary and nourishing food and prefer to stuff themselves with elaborately prepared but less healthy repasts” (72). Elsewhere he underscores the importance of grappling with difficult ancient texts and being aware of the shortcomings of ancient methods of study, in order to better endure the “unavoidable inconveniences” of current methods (5).

Yet, in a digital environment, we are only beginning to see how the stuff of learning is radically transformed by the ways and means in which it is transmitted. Once again, we are faced with an imposing flood of data that is tied to the specific methods and tools used to obtain them. This time, technology has allowed us to expand knowledge into a vast domain, one whose complexity trumps our current theories and whose scale defies our individual and physiological capacity to grasp it. The digital humanities contends with this conundrum: by transforming what it means to know something, particularly in a boundless domain of culture, we grapple with ever-expanding multitudes, millions of pieces of human culture, past and present, digital and analog, while continuing to critically reflect on the very nature of human knowledge itself. Effective teaching in this environment is a daunting task. Digital pedagogy is not simply the use of these technologies for teaching, but approaching these technologies with both the critical awareness that they demand and a heightened attention on their impact on learning. Petrarch's *Canzoniere*, when presented to students as a hypertextual

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interface via the Oregon Petrarch Open Book, foregrounds not only the scholarly debates in textual criticism, but also prompts broader reflections on the nature of authority in scribal, print, and digital contexts. In a world where social platforms and editorial machines are used to generate both knowledge and noise—B.A.s and bots—a classroom introduction to the aims of projects like the OPOB is not simply good pedagogy, it acquires civic importance for an explicit engagement with methods and techniques of textual transmission.

Our current conception of the humanities is predicated on a certain historical iteration of the discipline, but as any intellectual historian will tell you, categories of knowledge, their hierarchies, even their “permanence” are bound into our society in contingent and distinct ways. Whether our technologies of knowledge consist in painting on the walls of a cave, or inscribing voices on wax cylinder phonograph records, we inevitably reduce knowledge to what our technological horizons enable us to deal with. If knowledge becomes “too big to know” in the words of David Weinberger, we should, like Vico, make use of a method that will allow us to better understand and endure its “unavoidable inconveniences” while still allowing us to ask, what is the goal of our studies and what are the advantages derived from that goal.

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### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Elio GianTurco’s translation, *On the Study Methods of Our Time*, Cornell University Press, 1990.

### WORKS CITED

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