



Afterword

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In the Atrium of the Writer's Memory

In at least two letters to Giovanni Boccaccio, Francesco Petrarca raised the issue of imitation and, more generally, of the way in which writers should manage their relationship with tradition. This relationship is shaped by the different ways in which reading and storing in one's memory are done. If you read a work only one time and in haste, you may keep in your memory fragments of that text which you can immediately reuse in your own work; these will be without fail recognized as someone else's doing, and appear in your work as evident copy. On the contrary, 'whatever we have slowly learned we know better': indeed, we have 'absorbed' so thoroughly those writings on which we have pondered with time and leisure that they have become our own: so much so that, when you re-use them, they look 'new and original'.

To Giovanni Boccaccio, concerning the law of imitation.
October 1359, from a villa near the river Adda

Soon after your departure and despite my distress, because I still do not know how to remain idle (yet, to tell the truth, everything that I do is nothing or very nearly nothing), I detained as a personal favor our friend to have him help with the work that I had begun with you: revising the transcripts of the *Bucolicum carmen*, a copy of which you had taken with you. As I conferred with that good man with his old-fashioned ways, not a slow-witted friend but a really slow reader, I noticed several short words repeated more frequently than I wished as well as some other things in need of more polish. Thus, I urged you not to hasten your transcription or to give a copy to our Francesco, knowing your interest in all that I possess, especially my writings; indeed, were your love not interfering with your judgment, they would be unworthy of your fingers or your eyes. I thought that I could easily make the corrections in a few hours after returning to my country dwelling, where I was preparing to hasten on the first of July; but I was mistaken. The frequent, and almost annual, revolts in Liguria kept me in the city despite my great love of the country and hatred of cities; very recently, since my fear was beginning to appear greater than the actual danger, around the beginning of October, which was quite late, my confidence managed to overcome the bothersome delay, and I arrived at the

Adda's banks, which for the time being is the site of my solitary retreat. I have now been here eight days where constant rain and an inclement autumn, or rather an early winter, promise an all too short respite. Nevertheless, during this brief interval, which forbidding skies and inclement weather threaten to cut short, I have concentrated on revising that poem, and in the process realized that a reader's slowness aids a corrector's labor. Unquestionably if a polished, quick, and intelligent reader makes the material being read a delight, then a slow, hesitant, and obtuse reader helps to uncover and detect errors. Nor, by Jove, does this differ from anything else. Give a faulty horse to a skillful rider, experienced in horsemanship, and faults remain hidden; with an inexperienced rider, they all will be evident. Entrust an unjust cause to a distinguished lawyer and he will skillfully obscure the injustice; bring an inexperienced lawyer to court and the unfairness of the case will be revealed along with the defender's ineptitude. Perhaps you forget the decision of Marcus Cato the Censor to replace at once the academic Carneades, leader of a philosophical delegation sent to Rome by the Athenians, giving as his reason that it was not easy to grasp how much truth or falsehood there was in anything he said. That truly is the way it is: an expert's skill conceals all defects. While our friend was reading, I saw what I had not seen while you were reading, and I have now really learned that when pleasure is sought from a work, one must have a quick and pleasing reader, whereas when corrections are sought, the reader must be slow and awkward. In any event, whatever changes I wish to make in the poem are indicated separately so as not to fill this letter with boring details.

There is one thing that I thought must not be kept from you or excluded from this letter, something that was unknown to me until today, and still is unbelievable and astonishing. Whenever we write something new, we often err in what is most familiar to us, for it deceives us in the very act of writing; whatever we have slowly learned we know better. You will ask: 'What are you saying? Isn't this a contradiction? It is impossible for opposites to be both true; how can you write that what we know better we know less, and what we absorbed more slowly we know more firmly? What Sphinx or enigma is this?' I shall explain. Something similar happens in other areas, as, for example, when something hidden more carefully by the head of a household is less readily available, or when something buried more deeply is uncovered with greater difficulty; but these apply to material things, with which I am not dealing. So as not to keep you in suspense with circumlocutions, here is an example. Only once have I read Ennius, Plautus, Felix Capella, and Apuleius, and then it was done hastily and quickly, brooking no delay except as one would in unknown territory. Proceeding in this fashion, I saw many things, culled a few, retained even fewer, and these I laid aside as common property in an open place, in the very atrium, so to speak, of my memory. Consequently, whenever I happen either to hear or use them, I quickly recognize that they are not mine, and recall whose they are; these really belong to others, and I have them in my possession with the awareness that they are not my own. I have read Virgil, Flaccus, Severinus, Tullius not once but countless times, nor was my reading rushed but leisurely, pondering them as I went with all the powers of my intellect; I ate in the morning what I would digest in the evening, I swallowed as a boy what I would ruminate upon as an older man. I have thoroughly absorbed these writings, implanting them not only in my memory but in my marrow, and they have so become one with my mind that were I never to read them for the remainder of my life, they would cling to me, having taken root in the innermost recesses of my mind. But sometimes I may forget the author, since through long usage and continual possession I may adopt them and for some time regard them as my own; and besieged by the mass of such writings, I may forget whose they are and whether they are mine or others'. This then is what I meant about more familiar things deceiving us more than others; if at times out of habit they return to the memory, it often happens that to the

preoccupied mind, deeply intent on something else, they seem not only to be yours but to your surprise, new and original. Why do I say you would be surprised? Surely, you too will readily admit to having experienced something similar. I have really spent a great deal of time trying to identify my sources; I call to witness our Apollo, the only son of the heavenly Jove and true God of wisdom, Christ, that I have not been eager to plunder, that I have refrained from intellectual as well as from material thefts. If anything contrary to this is found in my works, it results from an intellectual kinship in the case of authors whom I have not read (as I wrote you in my previous letter) or, in the case of others, from the type of error or forgetfulness that we are now discussing. I grant that I like to embellish my life with sayings and admonitions from others, but not my writings unless I acknowledge the author or make some significant change in arriving at my own concept from many and varied sources in imitation of the bees. Otherwise, I much prefer that my style be my own, uncultivated and rude, but made to fit, as a garment, to the measure of my mind, rather than to someone else's, which may be more elegant, ambitious, and adorned, but deriving from a greater genius, one that continually slips off, unfitted to the humble proportions of my intellect. Every garment befits the actor but not every style the writer; each must develop and keep his own lest either by dressing grotesquely in others' clothes or by being plucked of our feathers by birds flocking to reclaim their own, we may be ridiculed like the crow. Surely each of us naturally possesses something individual and personal in his voice and speech as well as in his looks and gestures that is easier, more useful, and more rewarding to cultivate and correct than to change. Someone may comment, 'And what do you think of yourself?' Not you, my dear friend, who know me well, but one of those who observe others, being totally secure in their silence and safe from critics, have learned to direct stinging barbs against our every word. Let them carefully listen since they bluster only on the basis of what they hear. I do not resemble Juvenal's description, 'A distinguished prophet not of public vein, who usually repeats nothing that has been said, nor strikes a poem with common and ordinary coin,' whom the writer himself did not wish to identify but simply to imagine. Nor am I like Horace: 'I was the first to plant free footsteps along an untrodden path,' or 'I first revealed Parian iambs to Latium'; nor am I like Lucretius: 'Alone do I wander over the remote pathways of the Muses, previously trodden by no man'; nor like Virgil: 'I love to climb gentle slopes to the heights where never had earlier footsteps gone to the Castalian fount.' And so? I am one who intends to follow our forebears' path but not always others' tracks; I am one who wishes upon occasion to make use of others' writings, not secretly but with their leave, and whenever possible I prefer my own; I am one who delights in imitation and not in sameness, in a resemblance that is not servile, where the imitator's genius shines forth rather than his blindness or his ineptitude; I am one who much prefers not having a guide than being compelled to follow one slavishly. I do want a guide who leads me, not one who binds me to him, one who leaves me free use of my own sight, judgment, and freedom; I do not want him to forbid me to step where I wish, to go beyond him in some things, to attempt the inaccessible, to follow a shorter or, if I wish, an easier path, and to hasten or stop or even to part ways and to return. But in my excessive wandering I have been distracting you unduly. At issue today is the tenth eclogue of my pastoral poem where I had written in a certain section, 'Solio sublimis acerno'; upon a later rereading of the verse, I noticed its close similarity to Virgil's words in the seventh book of his divine poem, 'Solioque invitat acerno.' Consequently, you are to change them and substitute the following, 'E sede verendus acerna.' For I wished the Roman imperial throne to be of maple because in Virgil the Trojan horse is of maple; and thus, as in theology wood was the first cause of human misery and later of human redemption, so in poetry not only that same wood in general but that same tree in particular caused the ruin of

the resurrected empire. There you have the gist of my thought, nor is there need of further explanation. In the same eclogue was a passage that was oddly overlooked because of my familiarity with it, and thus I made a mistake that would not have happened had I been less familiar with it; nor was it a passage merely resembling another, but identical. The same happened to me as to the person who cannot see a friend right before his eyes. The passage read in this fashion: 'Quid enim non carmina possum?' Finally coming to my senses, I realized that the end of the verse was not mine; but for a while I did not recognize whose it was for the simple reason that, as I said, I had made it already my own; but at length I discovered it in Naso's *Metamorphoses*. Therefore you are to change this as well, replacing it with the following: 'Quid enim vim carmines equet?' — a verse that is inferior neither in expression nor in content. Let this then be mine even if it must be mine as corrected; let the other return to its master and be Naso's, for I could not steal it from him if I wished, nor would I wish to if I could. Although I do know that some ancient writers, Virgil in particular (as when he boasts of having taken away Hercules's club), not only translated innumerable verses from Greek into Latin, but transferred them from foreign works into their own, not out of ignorance — since one cannot imagine such illustrious and evident examples being stolen from this or that source — nor, one gathers, for the sake of stealing, but rather for the sake of competing. In any case, they either had greater freedom or a different mentality. As for me, if forced by necessity, I would allow myself to use another's words knowingly, but for the purpose of looking better. If out of ignorance I ever do sin against this principle, make certain that I hear about it: I shall readily recognize your good faith and return what I have stolen. The two verses that we have been discussing fall into this category; and if you find more, feel free to correct them or admonish me in a friendly way. For you or any of my friends cannot do anything more pleasing for me than to show a truly friendly, free, and intrepid mind in correcting my errors. No criticism is more welcome than one that censures my ways: I stand ready to rectify most willingly my style and my life not only upon the advice of friends but also at the barkings of my rivals, provided amidst the shadows of envy there shines a glimmer of truth. Live happily, remember me, and farewell.¹

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