

# The Italian Short Story through the Centuries



# The Italian Short Story through the Centuries:

*The Met(A)morphoses  
of the Novella*

Edited by

Roberto Nicosia

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*A mia figlia Luisa*



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## INTRODUCTION

ROBERTO NICOSIA

This volume intends to present to the English-speaking public the variety and continuity of an Italian genre *par excellence*, for the most part still *res nullius* or *no man's land*, as defined by Marziano Guglielminetti.<sup>1</sup> Far from providing any possible “anatomical dissection” or historical reconstruction aiming to delineate the uniqueness of a genre and its characteristics, the volume is a sort of “vertical” inspection where samples of criticism from a diverse pool of scholars, American as well as Italian, focus on a literary tradition devoted to the principles of flexibility and multiplicity (multiple narrative voices, multiple subjects, multiple cultures, etc.). The Italian short story holds a position of marginality in relation to other canonical literary genres such as the epic poem, the pastoral or the novel, but its “slanted” position guarantees the fertile ground where Eastern and Western literary traditions meet and come to dialogue, experimenting with a new language (vernacular prose) and stylistic codes (first of all through realism, then through verisimilitude). The diversity of the genre is also reflected in the new historical and socio-cultural background due to the appearance of new “literary agents” (receivers), such as merchants, women and, more generally, a larger group of readers. The result is a natural openness to diversity and change (*metamorphosis*), which characterizes and marks the modernity of its narrative through the ages. Since its beginnings, in fact, the short story, and the Italian short story in particular (*Novellino* or *Libro di detti e di bel parlar gentile*), appear in the literary tradition as a mosaic of voices and subjects, where the mix reflects literary values and qualities based on the possibility to explore and enact a continuous change of perspective. For example, can the *cornice* device be considered a sort of panopticon or can the multiplicity of the stories be a reaction against the mono-dimensional

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<sup>1</sup> *Novellieri del Cinquecento*, vol. 24, 2 vols., (Milan-Naples: Ricciardi, 1972), I, ix.

dominant voices of the tales of chivalry?<sup>2</sup> Consequentially, one of the strongest and most evocative examples chosen by Calvino in the Harvardian *Charles Eliot Norton Lectures* (1984)<sup>3</sup> is taken from Boccaccio's *Decameron* (VI, 9): the elegant jump over the tomb of Guido Cavalcanti is an emblem and a metaphor of an entire genre devoted to lightness and flexibility, as well as quickness, exactitude, visibility and multiplicity.

The 'genealogical tables' by Letterio di Francia at the beginning of 20th century show how the short story originated from an ancient oral tradition of Indian ancestry (*Life of Barlaam and Josafat, Panchatantra, The Seven Wise Masters*). During its passage to the Western medieval world, it was strongly influenced by the *exempla* (short narration aiming at inspiring moral edification) of the Middle Age Christian tradition, as well as *novellas*, *fabliaux*, *miracles*, *lais*, *vidas* and Occitanic and Provençal *novas*: an alternative to the cultivated Greek and Latin literary production, whose remains are nonetheless visible in the theory of the comic and in the models of the Apuleian *Metamorphosis* or the Milesian and sybaritic *fabulae* (e.g. the Ephesian matron tale, inserted in Petronius' *Satyricon* or the tale of Peronella in Boccaccio). This "adaptive" nature of the *novella* also reflects the wide landscape of the subjects treated: from stories based on the court and chivalric sagas to tales inspired from the Bible and the lives of Saints, fables and merchants' tales. Other than representing a "narrative displacement" characterized by an ample array of historically interwoven times and places (classical and medieval; diverse economies and cultures such as the ones related to the court, the city and the castle; the particular taste for details, the multiple registers of language; the centrality of wit; the definitive choice of prose over the rhythm of the octosyllabic verse, etc.), the variety expresses tension in the same etymology. *Novella* and *novellare*, in fact, other than referring to the act of "narrating, recounting, [and] telling stories," also recall the idea of "novelty" or "an inevitable response to the demands of a booming vernacular book culture already in the early Trecento," as referred to by Gloria Allaire.<sup>4</sup>

In the first essay in this collection, Carlo Vecce discusses the morphology of the short story as pointed out by E. Malato, C. Segre and

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<sup>2</sup> L. Surdich, "Il patto romanzesco nel Boccaccio", in *Le forme del narrare*, eds. Simona Costa, Marco Dondero and Laura Melosi, Atti del convegno nazionale dell'ADI. Macerata, 24-27 settembre 2003 (Florence: Edizioni Polistampa, 2003) 9-35.

<sup>3</sup> *Lezioni americane. Sei proposte per il prossimo millennio* (Milan: Mondadori, 1993, 2002) 15-19.

<sup>4</sup> *The Italian Novella* (New York – London: Routledge, 2003) 2.

Michelangelo Picone.<sup>5</sup> Vecce traces the origins of the medieval novella through the confrontation with the *exempla* (moral writings inspired by episodes of Saints' lives) and historiographical genres such as chronicles, history and annals. In particular, history broadened the horizon of the narration and offered room for a variety of episodes arranged along a chronologically predetermined narrative axis, specifically through the use of plots and subplots. Only when the univocal narration enhances and favors ambivalence does the short story take on the original character that we find, with all its complexity, in Boccaccio's *Decameron*. It is through *entrelacement* that it is possible to recount the reality, perceived as nonlinear. Vecce also stresses the significant role of Dante's *Comedia* in the development of the short story genre: it represents the *Comedia* as a literary model of reference where agency and authorial self appear particularly pivotal (the *Comedia* is a synthesis of different typologies of historical composition in the Middle Ages). In the *Comedia*, the travels through the three worlds (Hell, Purgatory and Paradise) can be seen as a frame containing single stories, repeatedly (re-)told by the protagonists, through the *adabbreviatio* technique, as seen in the *Poetria Nova* by Geoffrey of Vinsauf. Nonetheless, Boccaccio's stories result in something completely new: Cepparello cannot be a *figura* (as he would have been in the *Comedia*), while the exemplarity of his story exists only in the time of men and not in that of God.

The *Decameron* is also the subject of the second essay by Luigi Surdich. Surdich's essay is dedicated to the use of specific terms presented by Boccaccio in the *Conclusion* of the ten days of "bel parlar gentile" ("the fine and gentle telling"). The pestle, the mortar, the devil in Hell, the cage and the nightingale, all metaphors with strong sexual connotations, are treated as "internal references" later reused by short story authors (Sermini, Sacchetti, Sercambi), with significant variations and evolutions of meaning, especially the one regarding "the cage and the nightingale" in the tales of Caterina from Valbona and Ricciardo Mainardi. The essay concludes with the results of a first attempt to monitor and interpret the endurance of the erotic metaphor in the short story tradition during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, a study that produces important consequences for the genre itself. With time, the tradition divides: in some case the strength of the model maintains its intensity, in others the effect of

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<sup>5</sup> The three essays appear in *La novella Italiana*, Atti del Convegno di Caprarola, 19-24 settembre 1988 (Rome: Salerno ed., 1989) with the following titles respectively, "La nascita della novella italiana: un'alternativa letteraria borghese alla tradizione cortese," 3-45; "La novella e i generi letterari," 47-57; "L'invenzione della novella italiana. Tra tradizione e innovazione," 119-154.

its reuse diminishes and depletes its vitality, thus trivializing it. This “abuse” causes a sense of *inertia*, an effect that ultimately undermines and erodes the mechanisms of the short story.

The essay on *Romeo and Juliet* by Daria Perocco is another study dedicated to the transformation of the genre through its variations in time. Written by Luigi Da Porto (1485-1529), the story of the two lovers develops throughout the sixteenth century in an “amorphous metamorphosis” of the re-writings, famously recorded in octosyllabic verse in 1553 by Clizia Veronese and also by Matteo Bandello in 1554. If in Da Porto’s writing the novella had a specific comforting and reassuring meaning, within twenty years the same story undergoes two main variations: celebrative and auto-referential as well as didactic and moralistic. Such transformations are explained by Perocco as a product of socio-cultural changes in the sixteenth century, when literary consumption saw the dramatic rise of translations, versions, and adaptations to cope with the pressing requests of a new, larger public. These new productions, suited to be read more extensively in the vernacular, were backed by the theorization of Pietro Bembo’s *Prose della Volgar Lingua* and strongly enforced by the more widespread printing activity of the new presses. If, for Boldieri, texts are directed to a “consumer of lyrical texts, poetic anthologies, centos and Petrarch’s pocket versions of love poems,”<sup>6</sup> or even better toward a public that experiments with a new form of books, in Bandello the didactic meaning reflects the rules of a new form of society, bound to the court’s space, dictated by a new ethical code, which is proper and adjusted to the Catholic reform.

The role of ethics is also pivotal in Crystal Hall’s essay *Galileo and the Short Story*, particularly in Galileo’s short story the *Assayer*, also known as the *Tale of the Sounds*. This tale is justified by the necessity to rebut the accusation of Sarsi, who under the pseudonym of the Jesuit Orazio Grassi rejected the thesis of Galileo’s young pupil, Mario Guiducci, on the origin of the comets in a treatise entitled *Libra astronomica et philosophica*. The essay analyzes the rhetorical use of the short story as *exemplum*, an anecdote reduced to its logical essence, whose aim is to show the “useless roaming in an obscure labyrinth” for those who don’t recognize the mathematical knowledge and the revelation of truth, squandered in the book of Nature. Moreover, the short story, which was introduced to annihilate Grassi’s attacks, seems to take a more generic and programmatic meaning. Since it aims to overturn the exemplary status of the tale, rather than to learn something, this will be a tale of learning relatively nothing. The use of poetic language can be conceivable, for

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<sup>6</sup> *Infra*, 54.

Galileo, only if justified as a form of the process of teaching and learning obtained *per gradus observationis* (through gradual stages of observation), which excludes any possible interpretive mode of a reality *a priori*. Here, orality and the multiple voices of the dialogue neutralize the strong and absolute authority, *in absentia*, of Grassi's monologue.

The study of Erminia Ardissino, dedicated to the Baroque short story, traces the new trajectory of the *genre* production in the seventeenth century. The "experimental tendencies" and "the need to meet the requests of the readers"<sup>7</sup> cause the short story to find its center of gravity in the power of words more than in the curiosity of the plot. As noted by Marziano Guglielminetti, the fifteenth and sixteenth century there is a breakdown of the narrative bound between frame and novella.<sup>8</sup> Boccaccio's "frame" or main narration, which is constituted by the plague and the occasion of the young storytellers, is now either dismissed or reduced to a very tenuous thread, justified only by witty, idle conversations of the occasional "brigata," in order to generate pleasure and entertainment. This flexibility of forms introduces us to the variety of the short story in the sixteenth century, when pivotal results the literary process towards the metamorphosis as experimentation, more than the metamorphosis as a result of a literary process<sup>9</sup>. Along the *baroque* century, far from any attempt in order to generate a theory, the short story becomes a laboratory where the *genre* feels free to experiment, although claiming the sophistication of the language adopted.

Despite the modest attempts during the Enlightenment of authors such as Manfredi (1674-1739), Parini (1729-1799), the brothers Gasparo (1713-1786) and Carlo Gozzi (1720-1806), the Jacobin production in verses of Argelati (1685-1755), Casti (1724-1803), and the conservative *Novelle morali* of Francesco Soave (1743-1806), it is not until the nineteenth century that the short story records an exceptional increase in number (to more than 4000 texts), characterized also by an exceptional diversification of the subjects treated in said texts. Particularly focused on the fantastic tale is Morena Corradi's essay, which deals with the artistic anti-conformist movement of "Scapigliatura" (characterized by being disheveled and unkempt), in particular with Arrigo Boito who, through the phenomena of magnetism and spiritism, investigates the signs of an age of anxiety ("the anxieties experienced by the individual"<sup>10</sup>) in light of its reaction to positivism. Fantastic tales like "L'alfier nero" (The Black Bishop), "Il

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<sup>7</sup> *Infra*, 67.

<sup>8</sup> *Novellieri del Cinquecento*, 2 vols., I (Milan-Naples: Ricciardi, 1972), xiv.

<sup>9</sup> M. Capucci, "La Novella nel Seicento", in *La Novella Italiana*, 497-512.

<sup>10</sup> *Infra*, 83.

Pugno chiuso” (The Clenched Fist) and “La Musica in piazza” (The Music in the Square) become the narrative references through which paranormal visions and experiences, which are strongly dramatized, constitute the main focus of the narration. The fantastic jester Barbapedana, who bewitches his public with a dance of excitement after mastering the natural elements on stage, later becomes the morbid symbol of continual effort and mystery. The same happens in the rest of the short stories cited, in which the fixed idea and hypnotic obsession are the steering concepts mirroring the grade of irrationality (the culture of the marvelous) typical of a certain pathologizing of the first years of the twentieth century, such as contagion, nightmares, somnambulism and automatism. The same phenomenon of magnetism is tied to the idea of alienation and nightmares caused by a form of fixation which becomes destructive because it is dominant and absolute. It reveals itself to be a means used by Boito, and by the imaginary tale production in general, to react to the rationalistic faith of the so-called exact sciences. Nonetheless, it is only with Luigi Gualdo (1844-1898), one of the most important representatives of the second phase of Scapigliatura, that the supernatural becomes an instrument of analysis, although an unscientific one.

Remo Ceserani’s essay proposes the fantastic tale’s production as a problematic answer to a total reorientation of culture (historical, political, as well as ideological). In the fast and out-of-control processes of modernization, Ceserani pinpoints an incomplete revolution in which the pre-modern elements result in decisive developments for the short story genre. Although excluded from the anthology of the European fantasy genre edited by Italo Calvino, the Italian short story, thanks to such authors as Boito (1842 -1918) and Tarchetti (1839-1869), has shown a long continuity into the Modern and Postmodern era.<sup>11</sup> A continuity for which Tabucchi’s tales, as noticed by Ceserani, represents a *skillful balance* between *irony and nostalgia*.<sup>12</sup>

The clash of cultures is the focus of the essay by Linda Carroll, dedicated to Pirandello and the short story “La Giara” (*The Oil Jar*). Carroll uses the interpretive categories of Ian Hodder for social archeology and identifies in the underling binary opposition between *domus* and *foris*

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<sup>11</sup> Ferdinando Amigoni, *Fantasmî del Novecento* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2004); Stefano Lazzarin, *L'Ombre et la Forme. Du fantastique italienne au XX<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Caen: Presses universitaires de Caen, 2004). Lately, Remo Ceserani, “The Boundaries of the Fantastic”, in *The Italian Gothic and Fantastic*, eds. Francesca Billiani and Gigliola Sulis (Madison-Teaneck: Farleigh Dickinson U. P., 2007) 37-45, 43.

<sup>12</sup> *Infra*, 177.



cultures, the opposite cultures of Zi' Dima's and Don Lolo's, the novella's main characters.

The analysis of modernity and of alienating mechanisms of reality is the core of the study by Cristina Gragnani on the female writer Willy Dias (1872-1956). In the variants of the erotic map of the twentieth century, Gragnani locates and stresses the presence of provocative elements (elements of non-balance and disturbing situations) characterized by anxiety, uncertainty and puzzlement. The analysis of infidelity, masculine as well as feminine, becomes the element through which Dias shows how much instability, fragmentation and transgression affects the bourgeois and high society in Italy after World War I, as also demonstrated by Leckie<sup>13</sup> and Fiandra<sup>14</sup>.

Silvia Stoyanova's essay on Moravia's short stories is also dedicated to modernity. As a first attempt at a more extensive and general evaluation, the essay examines the dialectic contradiction between the blind exploitation of the means of production, enforced through repetition (e.g. the repetitiveness of a job) and the formation of agency, produced by a sudden short circuit (a "breakdown of functionality") inside the same automatic chain of repetition. Faced with their own state of being, the alienated "agents" (the protagonists of the tales as presented by Stoyanova) never become autonomous in their acts of rebellion, but instead are doomed to behave compulsively against the original state of alienation.

Free will and responsibility return as pivotal themes in Monica Farnetti's essay on the short narrative productions of Anna Maria Ortese. The Aristotelian idea of the *tabula rasa* of the child soul finds a reflection in the "devastated trajectory of Ortese's education,"<sup>15</sup> representing for the Italian scholar the guiding element of Ortese's narrative production. The isolation of the child's astonishment in tales such as "Il sogno" (The Dream), "Il continente sommerso" (The Submerged Continent), and *Il porto di Toledo* (The Harbor of Toledo) represents a possibility of further progress and development: inadequacy turns out to be a wonderful source of, and occasion to activate, the drive to write. The paradisiacal state and the pneumatic void (in the sense of a total absence of a superimposed dominant culture) of the writer is necessary to make her "think the unthinkable."<sup>16</sup> In this last oxymoron is also included another central idea to Farnetti's essay, the "not-excluding-contradiction," or the problem of

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<sup>13</sup> *Culture and Adultery*, *infra*, 64, n. 26.

<sup>14</sup> *Desiderio e tradimento*, *infra*, 58.

<sup>15</sup> *Infra*, 155.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

the coexistence of contraries. The rebuttal of a thought in dialectical terms, developing through two marked oppositions, heralds a reform of the human mind, where mind means above all “expression” or the base of the Aristotelian dialectics, and is formed by the connections of words and symbols. The unequalled sad gaiety and the marvelous confusion of Naples are the vivid representations of this painful joy. The contradiction present in Democritus’ aphorism *panta rei* (everything flows), does not lie in the continuous passage of the river’s waters, but rather in the contradiction of words as a medium of meaning: “an immense appropriation of the unexpressed.”<sup>17</sup> The same presence of the past in the components of history and memory becomes an emblematic theme in Ortese’s production, promoting, through exclusion of negativity, continuity as an inexhaustible resource of meaning. Farnetti’s essay rests also on cosmology and the relation with the world that Ortese presents in her writings, ranging from *Angelici dolori* to *Corpo Celeste*), where life—or better yet, the life of the universe—is the subject of the short stories. The past is an ideal generational center from where to start rebuilding a new culture of “human” and “humanity,” through which life, characterized by expansion, may be conceived only as an integral multiplicity of bonds and their strenuous defense. In the eyes of Ortese, the same isomorphism among things and people makes the universe egalitarian, although the variety of centrifugal forces push against that equalizing force. This isochronous-synchronous rhythm finds its ideal center in the simple soul of the young Ortese, whose *tabula rasa* multiplies indefinitely the oppositions, while abolishing the dangerous distances between.

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<sup>17</sup> *Infra*, 162.

# CHAPTER ONE

## AT THE ORIGIN OF THE NOVELLA: FROM HISTORY TO STORY

CARLO VECCE

The genre of the *novella*, as it affirmed itself in the European literature of modernity, finds the reasons for its vitality not in a unitary origin, but instead in a polymorphic beginning. Indeed, the *novella* has been the point of arrival of all forms of short narrative from the Middle Ages. As shown by Curtius in his fundamental *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, medieval literature was characterized by a circularity that continuously made different genres and linguistic codes communicate with each other, from Latin to Romance and Germanic vernaculars, up to Hebraic and Arabic (mostly in Spain and southern Italy).<sup>1</sup>

In the shared space of this large continental and Mediterranean laboratory, time—flowing in different ways along an almost millenary period—seems to have a sudden acceleration after the year 1000 AC at the time of the Crusades and the resumption of commercial trades between East and West, between coastal and inner areas of the continent. In this new historical dynamism, social, economic, and religious changes (it should be enough to think about the foundations or re-foundations of religious orders) between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries also prompted different storytelling forms to suffer a quick metamorphosis.

Articulated in a plurality of genres, codes and public contexts, they began now to contaminate and melt between themselves. The movement of the whole system of the *genera narrationis* was led to overcome the classical distinctions inherited from ancient rhetoric (Cicero, *Rhetorica ad Herennium* and Quintilian), according to which *Historia* was “events complied but far away from the memory of our age,”<sup>2</sup> and its principal

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<sup>1</sup> Ernst Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

<sup>2</sup> “Gesta res sed ab aetatis nostrae memoria remota,” Cicero, *De inventione* I.19.27.

purpose was to teach (*docere*). Half-way between *historia* and *fabula*, the *argumentum* was “fictitious contents that could have happened for real,”<sup>3</sup> and also focused on teaching moral facts that could well have happened. At last, the *fabula* was “something that includes neither the real nor verisimile,”<sup>4</sup> focused on the pleasure of the narrative (*delectare*), even if the moral teaching could always be present in the allegorical sense (for example, in the fables of animals derived from Aesop and Phaedrus, or the medieval bestiary).<sup>5</sup>

The ancient distinction depended not on formal elements of the structure (length, grammar, style), but more on the *veritas* of the story, its truth, which remained a fundamental matter also in medieval narrative. From *Historia* to *Fabula*, the main question was just this: did the “facts” recounted in the poem or story really happen? And what is the personal and direct relationship of the author to those “facts”? Was he a direct witness of the events, or did he hear the narration from someone else?

The truth of the story made it an *exemplum*, a moral example, a teaching to be followed and imitated also by the listener/reader of the tale, valid forever (like *parabola* in the gospels), while *exempla* were the most important models present in prayers and agiographies. Of course, in medieval literature the question of the *veritas* remained fundamental, which is easily understandable, if we think of how the model of the whole Christian narrative (and its peculiar idea of “realism,” as pointed out by Eric Auerbach) was the Bible, and above all the Gospel or the true story of the life of Christ.<sup>6</sup>

During the eleventh to the twelfth centuries, thanks to the renaissance of the poetics and the rhetorics (John of Garlandy, Geoffroy de Vinsauf) and the development of new vernacular literatures all over Europe, a greater attention was paid to stylistic characteristics and the formal setting of a text. One of the most evident elements of the short story (other than the question of whether it is history or fable, based on the truth present in the text) should be, of course, the *brevitas*. This is an important element, from the point of view of quality more than that of quantity, because it lets the author make a clear choice in regard to the form of the “long” composition, which is characterized by a linear structure, potentially

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<sup>3</sup> “Ficta res quae tamen fieri potuit,” Cicero, *Rhetorica ad Herennium* I.8.13

<sup>4</sup> “Quae neque veras neque verisimiles continet res,” Ibidem.

<sup>5</sup> Hans Jauss, “Littérature médiévale et théorie des genres,” *Poétique* 1 (1970), 79–101; Paul Zumthor, *Essai de poétique médiévale* (Paris: Seuil, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis. The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

unended in time and in space: a structure typical of the historical genre as well as of the epic and love narratives of *chansons* and *romans*.<sup>7</sup>

Short stories (usually in verses, as in ancient French literature, and entrusted to orality) cut the linear flow of the macro-history and become measurable in the time of their oral execution and listening; a time that is perceived together and in the same way both by the sender and the receiver.

In this kind of story, we can recognize the contamination of different rhetorical archetypes. There is the fable, with its *delectatio* and *vanitas*, and, of course, *brevitas*. There is history, which influences the linear progression of the *narration*. Like in an historic narrative, the genre uses a clear entry threshold, which is the beginning of the tale, clearly defining time (*when*) and space (*where*). In addition, the format marks itself by employing the elements of an opening situation, a main protagonist, the protagonist's social role and moral character, the development of action in the middle of the story, and at last, its conclusion.<sup>8</sup>

The original Latin and Italian word used for this new genre was *novella*, etymologically derived from *nova*, with the meaning of "something new" and "news" of true and recent events like those present in historical writings or chronicles. So then, the story became an original way of representing reality. Its "invention" retakes and perfects something that was already contained in the medieval narrative: the possibility of closing short narrative sequences, making them well distinguishable (like a "zoom" in contemporary cinema) within the unending flow of events in the story. The measure of time and space employed in the *novella*, and in most *novelle* staged in contemporary situations, is typical of the age in which the time of the merchant (the time that has to be measured in economic relationships, in order to define prices of traded goods or interest of loans) comes to be more important than the time of the Church.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Antonio D'Andrea, "Il 'sermo brevis.' Contributo alla tipologia del testo," in *Il nome della storia. Studi e ricerche di storia e letteratura* (Naples: Liguori, 1982), 86–97.

<sup>8</sup> Claude Bremond, *Logique du récit* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973); Cesare Segre, *Le strutture e il tempo. Narrazione, poesia, modelli* (Turin: Einaudi, 1974); Michelangelo Picone, *Il racconto*, in *Manuale della letteratura italiana*, ed. Franco Brioschi and C. Di Girolamo, 4 vols. (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1993), vol. 1, 587–696; Cesare Segre, *La novella e i generi letterari*, in *Notizie dalla crisi* (Turin: Einaudi 1993), 109–119; Massimo Bonafin, "Il racconto," in *Lo spazio letterario del Medioevo, Il Medioevo volgare*, ed. Piero Boitani, Mario Mancini and Achille Varvaro, vol. II, 2, (Rome: Salerno 1994), 433–462.

<sup>9</sup> Jacques LeGoff, *Time, Work and Culture in the Middle Ages* (Chicago: Chicago U.P., 1982).

Thirteenth-century Italy (the Italy of *Comuni*) played an essential role in the development of the genre. The necessity of self-representation of the bourgeois classes and merchants required greater attention than ever before.<sup>10</sup> Even if the stories remain *exempla*, they were more and more set in the present, with modern and contemporary actors, known by the author and by his public, documented in contemporary chronicles and the archives.

Another important change is the choice of prose, instead of that of poetry prevailing in former typologies of the medieval tale. Such a phenomenon is parallel to contemporary forms of historical narrative: it marks the definitive passage from orality to writing, and to a fruition of the genre through the reading of a manuscript, more widespread in urban cultural contexts, where the number of people able to read and write was rapidly increasing (including women of the upper classes). At the beginning the stories were confusedly transcribed in miscellaneous manuscripts or on absolutely casual material (isolated leaves, parts of notarial acts left blank), then collected in what would become a “book,” inspired by the basic principles of textual organization.

Let's look at the textual story of the most important collection of *novelle* in the origins of Italian literature, the so-called *Novellino*. The original title of the oldest part of the only ancient manuscript in the National Library in Florence, the Panciatichiano, was the *Libro di novelle e di bel parlare gentile*. The manuscript was copied by a Florentine at the end of the thirteenth century and because it is very likely that the same collection was written not much earlier, we could easily assume that it was the model of the short narrative in Florence in the age of Dante; that it is the kind of book that the same Dante could have read in his youth.<sup>11</sup>

In the introduction, the anonymous author/collector declares again the traditional scheme of *Historia magistra vitae*, even if in a new frame of hedonistic fruition:

Since the noble and courteous are in word and deed almost like a mirror for those of lesser standing, because their speech is more agreeable, as it is issues from a more delicate instrument; here let us remember certain flowers of speech, lovely courtesies and responses, and lovely aptitudes and gifts, and lovely love stories as they were set forth by many in times past.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Giancarlo Mazzacurati, “Rappresentazione,” in *Lessico critico decameroniano*, eds. R. Bragantini and P.M. Forni, (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1995), 269–299.

<sup>11</sup> *Il Novellino*, ed. Alberto Conte (Rome: Salerno editore, 2001).

<sup>12</sup> “Et acciò ke li nobili e gentili sono nel parlare e nell'opere molte volte quasi com'uno specchio appo i minori...facciamo qui memoria dal quanti fiori di

The Anonymous faithfully witnesses the *translatio* of customs and morals of courtesy from the nobles and aristocrats to the urban bourgeois, who can reflect themselves in the upper classes as in a mirror, and imitate their *fiori di parlare, di belle cortesie e di belli risposi e di belle valentie, di belli donari e di belli amori* (certain flowers of speech, lovely courtesies and responses, and lovely aptitudes and gifts, and lovely love stories), not only to read them *per diletto* (merely, as Dante's Francesca will say), or just to spend time (as Boccaccio will ironically state at the end of the *Decameron*).

According to the ideology shared by Guinizelli and Dante, the updating of *exemplum* to a contemporary actuality will also be possible in the *novellino* if nobility will be of the heart, more than of blood: "So whosoever has a noble heart and fine intelligence may imitate in time to come, and tell and make argument about them, when just occasion offers, for the use and delight of such as know them not and fain would know."<sup>13</sup>

It is worthy to observe that the last words (the statement about people who desire to know) are the echo of a famous Aristotelian phrase (well known in the medieval schools) at the beginning of the *Metaphysics*, and quoted by Dante at the beginning of *Convivio*: "As the Philosopher says at the beginning of the First Philosophy, all men by nature desire to know"<sup>14</sup>

What is important to know? In the special *convivium* that is the first redaction of the *Novellino*, there will be offered to readers the behavioral principle of courtesy, explained not through a theoretical treatise (as in, for example, the *De amore* by Andrea Cappellano), but *per exempla*. The

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*parlare, di belle cortesie e di belli risposi e di belle valentie, di belli donari e di belli amori, secondo ke per lo tempo passato hanno fatto già molti.*" Translation from *The Novellino, or One Hundred Ancient Tales: An Edition and Translation Based on the 1525 Gualteruzzi editio princeps*, ed. J. P. Consoli (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1997), 17.

<sup>13</sup> "E ki avrà cuore nobile & intelligenza sottile si li potrà simigliare per lo tempo ke verrà per innanzi et argomentare e dire e raccontare (in quelle parti dove avranno luogo), a prode & a piacere di coloro, ke non sanno e disiderano di sapere" (And may he who has a noble heart and subtle intellect attempt to initiate these in times to come, and to discuss, tell and relate these stories wherever he may find himself, for the profit and pleasure of those who do not know but desire such knowledge). Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> "Sì come dice lo Filosofo nel principio della Prima Filosofia, tutti li uomini naturalmente desiderano di sapere,"

*Il Convivio (The Banquet)*. Book 1, chapter 1. Translated by Richard H. Lansing (New York: Garland Library of Medieval Literature, 1990), now available on the internet at: <https://digitaldante.columbia.edu/text/dantes-works/the-convivio/book-01/>.

origins of the *novella* are strongly related to the genre of *exempla*, as in another important book at the beginning of the thirteenth century, the *Reggimento e costumi di donna* by Francesco da Barberino, who uses exactly the formula of “novella per essempla.”<sup>15</sup>

But the *exempla* are now presented in a laic, terrestrial, autonomous dimension, often rather different than the traditional medieval collections of *exempla* (Jacques de Vitry, Etienne de Bourbon, Caesarius of Heisterbach, Petrus Alfonsi, Jacopo da Varazze).<sup>16</sup> The single short tale is put in the background of a greater picture inside history. At the end of the Middle Ages, in fact, the meaning of history changes, in terms of duration, goals, relationships between general frame and details, divine and human spheres, *littera* and *allegoria*.

Another important problem was the communication and conservation of memory (private and collective, particular and universal), entrusted to the writing process. *Historia* is marked by a higher ethical aspiration (*magistra vitae*), which is based on the truth of the events and their certification by the author.

In the Middle Ages, the same word *author* could be written in Latin in different ways, each one with a different etymology: beside the more common word *auctor* (derived from the Latin verb *augeo*, “to augment, produce, give birth, generate”), there was also the form *author*, believed to come from the Greek word *authéntes*, “who has whole and true authority” (Priscianus, Evérard de Béthune, Uguccone da Pisa, the same Dante in *Convivio*). The idea of an “authentic,” “authoritative,” true author is of course parallel to the criterion of truth typical of the *exemplum*, as defined in the *Poetria* of John of Garlandy,<sup>17</sup> where “authentic” is not only the

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<sup>15</sup> Lucia Battaglia Ricci, *Novellistica, omiletica e trattatistica nel primo '300*, in *Favole Parabole Istorie. Le forme della scrittura novellistica dal Medioevo al Rinascimento*. Atti Convegno di Pisa, 26-28 ottobre 1998 (Rome: Salerno editrice, 2000), 31-53, in part. 44 and passim.

<sup>16</sup> Claude Bremond, Jaques Le Goff and Jean-Claude Schmitt, *L'exemplum* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1982); Salvatore Battaglia, *Capitoli per una storia della novellistica italiana: dalle origini al Cinquecento*, edited by Vittorio Russo (Naples: Liguori, 1993); Jacques Berlioz and Marie-Anne Polo de Beaulieu, *Les exempla médiévaux nouvelle perspectives* (Paris: Champion, 1998).

<sup>17</sup> “Exemplum est dictum vel factum alicuius autentice persone dignum imitationis” (An example is a saying or deed of some authoritative person that is worthy of imitation). *The Parisiana Poetria of John of Garland*, ed. and trans. Traugott Lawler (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), I, 49, 100 (trans. 101).



*author* but also the *persona*: the actor of the story, the hero, the protagonist.<sup>18</sup>

The *author* may be the writer, the narrator, the informer, the source through which the reliability, the veracity, the *auctoritas* is certified according to the levels of communication of the new events, seen directly and witnessed by the same narrator (*visa*), the ones reported and passed orally to the author by people who were present at the events (*audita*) or through stories read in written and highly reliable sources (*lecta*).<sup>19</sup>

So, the “truth” is a bond that separates *Historia* and *Fabula* (Greek and Latin mythology, the mythical origins of the world understood by a Christian reader of the Middle Ages only at an allegorical and moral level), even if, in the narrative *continuum* of medieval chronicles and histories, it is possible to find side by side events and persons that we may consider today belonging only to the fabulous space of myth, as in the *Chronicon* of Eusebius-Jerome-Pseudus Prosperus.<sup>20</sup>

According to Isidorus of Sevilla, *Historia* is “*narratio rei gestae*,” the narration of events that happened in the past. For this reason, the medieval author also cared about the definition of the past (*gestum*) and its relation with the present and the future, the latter oriented in the sense of Christian Providence, also readable in advance through prophecy. For Isidore the point of view is decisive and the preliminary choice among the main genres of historical composition, according to the *Typologie des sources du Moyen Age occidental*, can be distinguished into the categories of *Annales*, *Chronicae*, and *Historiae* (even if, as Guenée pointed out, these distinctions may often be interchangeable and without precise boundaries, particularly between *Chronica* and *Annales*).<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Edmond Faral, *Les arts poétiques du XIIe et du XIIIe siècle* (Paris: Champion, 1924); Albert Russel Ascoli, *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author* (Cambridge: Yale U. P., 2008); Carlo Vecce, “La crisi dell’autore nel Rinascimento,” *California Italian Studies* 1–2 (2010): 1–17. <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/8w30d0rx>.

<sup>19</sup> Girolamo Arnaldi, “Annali, cronache, storie,” in *Lo spazio letterario del Medioevo*, 1. *Il Medioevo latino*, eds. Guglielmo Cavallo, Claudio Leonardi and Enrico Menestò, vol. I. 2 (Rome: Salerno 1992), 463–513.

<sup>20</sup> Giuseppe Billanovich, *Un nuovo esempio delle scoperte e delle letture del Petrarca. L’“Eusebio-Girolamo-Pseudo Prospero”* (Krefeld: Scherpe, 1954).

<sup>21</sup> Léopold Genicot, *Typologie des sources du Moyen Âge occidental* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1972); Bernard Guenée, “Histoire, annales, chroniques. Essai sur les genres historiques au Moyen Âge,” *Annales. Economies. Sociétés. Civilisations* 28 (1973): 997–1016. Idem, *Histoire et culture historique dans l’Occident médiéval* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1980).

The basic level of historical narration is for sure that of the *Annales*, where the annalist accumulates information following the order in which it happens in a linear development that avoids any possible logical chain of causes and effects and is marked by the style of *brevitas* and the use of parataxis.<sup>22</sup> Even if the news (the *novellae*) may come from places very far away, and the temporal perspective goes back to the origins of the world, the point of view of the author is always a particular one: the *scriptorium* of his monastery or (after the birth of the urban *Annales*) the city palace, the chancery, the archive. The work is potentially “open,” ready to be continued by another author after the death of the first annalist.

Then it slightly changes in the *Chronicle*, when the focus becomes the series of causes and effects, and then in History, the universal narrative influenced by the historiography inspired by Saint Augustin (from the *De civitate Dei* and the *Historiae adversus paganos* by Paulus Orosius). History is guided by Divine Providence, the events are interpreted as the terrestrial manifestation of a divine project, and their meaning is assured by the linear sense of the whole of history toward its end, the Last Judgement, the End of Time and of the World.

So, *Chronicae* and *Annales* remain linked to the priority of the temporal axis, to characters of linearity and *brevitas*, while *Historiae* could enlarge the horizons of the narration and its structure. In the twelfth to thirteenth centuries the passage from *Annales/Chronicae* to *Historiae* is therefore parallel to the passage from poetical *romans* to prose *romans* like *Lancelot*, with the new narrative technique of *entrelacement*, an invention found by literary authors and then passed on to such chroniclers and historians as Giovanni Villani and Jean Froissart.<sup>23</sup>

In this way it is possible to speak of a reality that is perceived as more complex and non-linear: and in this reality the *novella* can at last have its own space, as an autonomous segment of History, readable and understandable with no need of a universal or metaphysical perspective. It remains the bond of truth and the necessity of a certification, that appear in an obsessive way in collections of *exempla* for predication, or in the various traditions of Franciscan legend. For example, in authors such as Domenico Cavalca or Iacopo Passavanti it is absolutely usual to find the incipitary formula “Leggesi / Si legge,” a proof that the text is based on *lecta*. At the end of the fourteenth century, in the *Assempri* collected by

<sup>22</sup> Michael McCormick, *Les annales du haut moyen âge* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1975).

<sup>23</sup> Alberto Varvaro, “Tra cronaca e novella,” in *La novella italiana* (Rome: Salerno, 1989), 155–71; Idem, “‘Noi leggiavamo un giorno per diletto.’ Esperienza letteraria ed esperienza storica nel Medioevo,” in *Identità linguistiche e letterarie nell’Europa romanica* (Rome: Salerno, 2004), 256–69.

Filippo Agazzari we find a lot of contemporary *visa aut audita*, with the aim of fortification of the faith. And the same certifications are to be found in the main Franciscan narrative texts, from the Anonimo Perugino of the *Legenda Sancti Francisci* to *Actus beati Francisci et sociorum eius* and the *Chronicon seu Historia septem tribulationum ordinis minorum* by Angelo Clareno, up to the so-called Toblerian Life of Iacopone da Todi.<sup>24</sup>

The situation is not much different in secular chronicles, as in the *Cronica delle cose occorrenti ne' tempi suoi* by Dino Compagni (direct witness of the great political changes in Florence between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries), the *Nuova cronica* by Giovanni Villani (where written sources prevail), and the *Cronica* attributed to the Anonimo Romano.<sup>25</sup> In comparison to religious chronicles, the secular ones reveal a horizon that could be called “pre-humanist,” with the veneration of the great facts of the ancient Romans.<sup>26</sup> It is decisively the position of the Self, its point of view, strongly marked in Compagni, but also in Villani and in Anonimo Romano, that talks about precisely those places where the most important events of its chronicles occurred.<sup>27</sup>

The awareness of the autonomy of human action continuously passes from the wide horizon of the Great History to the smallest details, to the physical and moral portraits of the main actors, and to the creation of *personae* by way of their external description (according to the rules of

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<sup>24</sup> Carlo Delcorno, *Exemplum e letteratura. Tra Medioevo e Rinascimento* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1989); Lorenzo Di Fonzo, “L’anonimo perugino tra le fonti francescane del sec. XIII. Rapporti letterari e testo critico,” *Miscellanea Franciscana* 72 (1972): 435; *Actus Beati Francisci et sociorum eius*, ed. Paul Sabatier (Paris: Fishbacher, 1902), 39; Angelo Clareno, *Chronicon seu Historia septem tribulationum ordinis minorum*, ed. Alberto Ghinato (Rome: 1959), 77.

<sup>25</sup> Dino Compagni, *Cronica delle cose occorrenti ne' tempi suoi*, ed. Davide Cappelletti (Rome: Istituto Storico Italiano per il Medio Evo, 2000); Giovanni Villani, *Nuova Cronica*, ed. Giovanni Porta, 3 vols. (Parma: Guanda, 1991); Anonimo Romano, *Cronica, (editio maior)* ed. Giovanni Porta (Milan: Adelphi, 1979). Giuseppe Billanovich, “Come nacque un capolavoro: la ‘Cronica’ del non più Anonimo Romano. Il vescovo Ildebrandino Conti, Francesco Petrarca e Bartolomeo di Iacovo di Valmontone,” *Rendiconti dell’Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei - Classe di scienze morali, storiche e filologiche* 6 (1995): 195–211; Franca Ragone, *Giovanni Villani e i suoi continuatori. La scrittura delle cronache a Firenze nel trecento* (Rome: Istituto Storico Italiano per il Medio Evo, 1998); Gustav Seibt, *Anonimo romano. Scrivere la storia alle soglie del Rinascimento*, ed. Roberto Delle Donne (Rome: Viella, 2000).

<sup>26</sup> Compagni, *Cronica*, *Proemio*, 31; Villani, *Nuova Cronica*, IX. 36, 562–563.

<sup>27</sup> Anonimo Romano, *Cronica*, II, 2.

ancient historiography, mostly Sallustius, who was also a stylistic archetype of the vernacular prose of chronicles and short stories).

Sometimes, it is a history that has to be “seen,” parallel to visual arts between thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, when we see the development of the painting of *storie* in the great crosses and in agiographic paintings (in particular, those belonging to Franciscan devotion, such as Berlinghiero Berlinghieri and the Master of Saint Francis), and in the cycles of Assisi by Cimabue, Giotto and his pupils, Simone Martini and others.

As in short narrative, visual arts need to reduce the tale of the Passion of Christ (or the life of the saint) to a few episodes (that just now begin to be called *storie*), painted as marginal scenes at the sides of the cross or the main figure at the center of the composition (the Holy Virgin, Saint Francis), or as *quadri*, “squares,” on the wall of the church, with similar techniques of selection and narrative shortening, anachronisms and exemplarity.

The same “squares,” true novel embryos, are distinguishable in medieval chronicles through the use of the dialogue, of *brevitas* and *rapiditas* in the style, and by employment of dramatic movement. Also in Compagni the legendary beginning of the florentine struggles between Guelphs and Ghibellines is told through an exemplary story: the tragic case of Buondalmonte de’ Buondalmonti. The story starts, similar to an erotic French *fabliau*, with Buondalmonte (who has already been given permission to marry the daughter of a Sir Oderigo) passing under the balconies of the Donati palace, where Madonna Aldruda tempts him by showing off her beautiful daughter. This is just the first step in a long chain of vengeance and murder, starting with the killing of Buondalmonte by another citizen called Mosca. Mosca happens to be the author of the famous phrase, “Cosa fatta capo ha” (*What’s done is done*), which has also been quoted also by Dante (who rightly put Mosca in the deepest part of Hell), and then by Villani, and also in *Pecorone*.<sup>28</sup>

Another significant phenomenon in the development of the genre was the invention of *personae*, with which a few traits of the external appearance or behavior manage to speak for an entire moral character. An example is the character Guido Cavalcanti in the chronicle of Compagni, who, barely escaping from the killers of Corso Donati, is really the archetype of the young “Epicurean” philosopher told by Boccaccio

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<sup>28</sup> Compagni, *Cronica*, I, 2, 9, 33; Villani, *Nuova Cronica*, VI, 38, 214-215; Giovanni Fiorentino, *Il Pecorone*, ed. Enzo Esposito (Ravenna: Longo, 1974), VIII,1, 181-187.

(*Decameron* 6, 9).<sup>29</sup> On the contrary, Donati could be considered the model of *antiexemplum*, the “evil” or “dark” hero of the story, a modern Catilina according to Compagni; but he is presented in a greatly complex way because of his mixed and opposed characteristics: physical beauty, courtesy, great intelligence, cultural background, and at the same time he is cruel and evil.<sup>30</sup>

Therefore, *personae* were not flattened to a single moral dimension (as the “bad” had to be in the former exemplary literature). In the new genre, *personae* are gifted with magnanimity and a capacity for great actions, like Farinata degli Uberti (in Dante and Villani), who is able to defend his Florence “a viso aperto” (*openly*) against the enemies who want to destroy it.<sup>31</sup>

Finally, in these chronicles as in contemporary collections of stories, we may recognize the contamination of different styles. The chronicle of the Anonimo Romano shows a high level of literary mixing, mostly in the tragic “holy representation” of the violent murder of Cola di Rienzi, which is the dramatic climax of the book. In the book, a generally tragic tone continuously alternates with extraordinary comic detail that corresponds precisely to actions that could be considered not “great,” noble, or worthy of ancient Romans or modern knights, but are signs, rather, of a lower and cowardly soul. For example, the desperate Cola, under siege in the Capitulum Palace, tries to escape the enraged crowd and imminent death by dressing up as a humble shepherd.<sup>32</sup>

But before these examples, of course, there was Dante’s *Commedia*. The *Commedia* was also perceived as a historical work by contemporary readers, as a special kind of contemporary chronicle in which the *auctor/author* is deeply involved because of his political passion and direct testimony.

In fact, the *Commedia* is a synthesis of the different typologies of historical composition in the Middle Ages (and also of prophetic writings, the “history of the future”). Told in the first person, it is a chronicle of a direct experience of a *visio* and of a journey beyond the limits of the human and of time. The first narrative level (the journey through Hell, Purgatory and Paradise) could be regarded as a frame for the plurality of individual stories (the *novelle*) told by the same protagonists, met by the poet-pilgrim.

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<sup>29</sup> Compagni, *Cronica*, I, 20, 96-97, 47.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., II, 20, 89, 70; III, 21, 100, 125.

<sup>31</sup> Villani, *Nuova Cronica*, VII, 81, 440-441.

<sup>32</sup> Anonimo Romano, *Cronica*, XXVII, 1-172, 258-265.

In comparison with traditional historiography, the *Commedia* entirely conquers the rhetoric strength of *evidentia* that brings in front of the eyes of the reader the most important *personae* in the history of humankind along with many private citizens and protagonists of contemporary events. The physical description of the *persona* always and forever refers to a figural and eternal dimension, through detail of the face or of the body (a wound, a grimace, a gesture), related to the decisive episode of the story (usually the moment of death).<sup>33</sup>

If the *Commedia* may also be considered a collection of stories, what is singular is that almost none of these *novelle* is fully told by their protagonists (Francesca, Ulysses, Ugolino, Manfredi, Buonconte, etc.). The greatest part of the story is simply omitted, and its comprehension would be absolutely compromised if not for a silent pact between the author and his public, who already “knows” the story (and it is not by chance that in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the commentaries to the *Commedia* will try to offer scholastic reconstructions of the *novelle*, in particular of those coming from oral tradition of Dante’s age).

Dante uses a technique of extremely shortened *abbreviatio*, that (according to *Poetria nova* of Geoffroy de Vinsauf) is based on *reticentia*, on the *emphasis* to details, on *evidentia* and visualization of the objects, the space of the action, and the movement of the actors through fast dramatic sequences. And everything, in Dante, is fast. It is the same “fatale andare” that doesn’t allow narrative delays or stops. Also the souls are aware of the short time available for talking with the living pilgrim, receiving news of the other world, or sending news or warnings to relatives that are still alive.

In this global “shortening,” the emphasis given to details and the little “signs of truth” are the more relevant semiotical elements (as Aby Warburg says, “The Good God is in the detail”). In the *Commedia*, the most famous case (and the first important meeting of the journey) is surely Francesca in the fifth Canto of *Inferno*. It is nothing but an almost-contemporary tragic story, perhaps known as a trivial case of a dark chronicle: the story of a young, beautiful lady betraying her ugly husband with a gentle lover, ending with the killing of the lovers by the jealous husband.

Dante didn’t care to tell the exact chronicle of the story, but only its exemplarity in the frame of medieval theories of love and courtly narrative (the book that Francesca and Paolo are reading is *Lancelot du Lac*,

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<sup>33</sup> Erich Auerbach, “Figura,” in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature*, foreword by Paolo Valesio (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 11–78.