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# THE «AUTOGRAFI DEI LETTERATI ITALIANI» PROJECT\*

MATTEO MOTOLESE E EMILIO RUSSO

## 1. *The Project*

The first idea for a census of the autograph writings of Italian literates was conceived around 2003. The investigations we had conducted in during our PHD on Renaissance literature and language led us to face the problems connected with the individuation and recognition of the autography in xvth century manuscripts and printed books with marginalia. The lack of useful tools in that field inspired us to imagine a repertoire that could organize what was already known and provide the basis for new investigations.

The focus of the project developed progressively and underwent several changes. The first, unsuccessful attempt aimed at cataloguing the section of annotated texts individuated, some decades ago, by Armando Petrucci in the *Corsiniana* and *Accademia dei Lincei*'s library: a kind of pilot experiment that would allow us to define the settings of the research and the ways in which it should be carried out. After that first attempt we could outline in detail the main features of our project, which benefited from the specific bibliography provided by those scholars who, in recent years, relaunched interest on annotated texts and autograph writings with the publication of catalogues of libraries and conferences held on such topic.<sup>1</sup> In the first place, the research conducted by the

\* This paper was originally written in italian and then translated by Damiana Covre. 1-3 are by M. Motolese, 4-6 by E. Russo.

<sup>1</sup> Among them, the following should be mentioned: *Talking to the text: marginalia from papyri to print*, Proceedings of a conference held at Erice, 26 September-3 October 1998, edited by V. Fera, G. Ferrai, S. Rizzo, Messina, Centro interdipartimentale di studi umanistici, 2002; *Nel mondo delle postille. I libri a stampa con note manoscritte:*

just mentioned Armando Petrucci, starting from the volume on Petrarch's handwriting until the overview within the *Letteratura Italiana Einaudi* dedicated precisely to autograph writings;<sup>2</sup> then, the thirty years effort by Paul Oskar Kristeller on Renaissance Italian manuscripts, in which a specific attention was dedicated to autographic documents;<sup>3</sup> finally, the book by Albinia de la Mare, *The handwriting of Italian Humanists*, that was also a model in editorial terms: a series of studies on individual writing habits; the integration between manuscript descriptions and their reproductions.<sup>4</sup>

These investigations revealed the possibility of a perspective that would combine the detailed analysis of the writing of an individual author (his manuscripts, his annotated books) with an expanded census. A repertoire that could gather and integrate information on the materials of the work of the most significant personalities of our literary tradition with a series of reproductions. Something similar to the daily exchange of information among scholars, but organized and compiled in a large-scale. A documentary base that would support studies on the complex dynamics related to the production and sharing of original documents of Italian literature from the early centuries.

Notwithstanding the simplicity of its basic core, such endeavour was nonetheless a complex task to accomplish, especially for researchers who were at an early stage in their academic career, with no university endorsement supporting them. But our initial unreadiness turned

*una raccolta di studi*, edited by E. Barbieri, foreword by G. Frasso, Milano, CUSL, 2002; *Libri a stampa postillati*, proceedings of the Colloquio internazionale in Milan, 3-5 maggio 2001, edited by E. Barbieri and G. Frasso, Milano, CUSL, 2003. On the International scene, the British Library catalogue: R.C. Alston, *Books with manuscript: a short title catalogue of books with manuscript notes in the British library: including books with manuscript additions, proofsheets, illustrations, corrections, with indexes of owners and books with authorial annotations*, London, The British library, 1994.

<sup>2</sup> A. Petrucci, *La scrittura di Francesco Petrarca*, Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1967; Id., *La scrittura del testo*, in *Letteratura italiana*, directed by A. Asor Rosa, vol. IV. *L'interpretazione*, Torino, Einaudi, 1985, pp. 283-310 (with an appendix of 40 tables).

<sup>3</sup> *Iter Italicum. A finding list of uncatalogued or incompletely catalogued humanistic manuscripts of the Renaissance in Italian and other libraries*, compiled by P.O. Kristeller, London-Leiden, The Warburg Institute-Brill, 1963-1997, 6 vol.

<sup>4</sup> A. De La Mare, *The handwriting of Italian Humanists*, Oxford, Association internationale de bibliophilie, 1973 (the first volume was about Petrarch, Giovanni Boccaccio, Coluccio Salutati, Niccolò Niccoli, Poggio Bracciolini, Bartolomeo Aragazzi di Montepulciano, Sozomeno di Pistoia, Giorgio Antonio Vespucci); to be mentioned also A. De La Mare-L. Nuvoloni, *Bartolomeo Sanvito. The Life & Work of a Renaissance Scribe*, edited by A. Hobson and Ch. de Hamel, with contributions by S. Dickerson, E. Cooper Erdreich and A. Hobson, Paris, Association internationale de bibliophilie, 2009.

out unexpectedly to be our major strength: it facilitated the setting of the work in a widely shared way, without limitations due to funding or administrative snares. From the positive feedback and the enthusiasm with which many scholars and friends welcomed our working hypothesis we felt we could gather a double message: the now widely recognized need to have a useful tool to navigate the world of manuscripts from the early centuries of our literature (one that could generate a further leap in knowledge after the extraordinary feat of Kristeller), and the more general confirmation – in a moment of apparent weaknesses – of the strength and value of philological studies which, from the rearrangement of what is already known and through an organic investigative campaign, addressed a renewed look at authors and issues, precisely where autograph writings are concerned.<sup>5</sup> At this stage Paolo Procaccioli's support was pivotal: among many other advices, we owe to him the idea of organizing an international conference in Forlì to officially launch the project with a wide and careful consideration on the relationship between autography and Italian literature.<sup>6</sup>

## 2. Paper or digital?

One of the first issues we had to address was the shape we had to choose for our repertoire: paper or digital? We chose to focus on two levels: a series of printed volumes, which would form the primary and stable documentary basis of our work, followed by a digital version of data, ready for additions, corrections and improvements. Scientific as well as practical reasons persuaded us about the opportunity of such twin issue. In Italy, as well as abroad, it is still commonly held that publication on

<sup>5</sup> Particularly valuable were the initial discussions with Corrado Bologna, Giuseppe Frasso and Armando Petrucci, to whom we owe not only a great boost in confidence, but also suggestions and informations for the improvement of the project.

<sup>6</sup> The conference, organized in Forlì, Italy, by the Pio Rajna Centre, the Saffi Municipal Library and the Garzanti Foundation, was held from 24 to 27 November 2008: that was the official presentation of the project to the scientific community and we were able, thanks to the participation of many specialists, to collect the latest theoretical and operational guidelines for the implementation of our work. A few months later, with the publication of the first volume on the series dealing with Sixteenth century writers, which contained manuscripts and annotated books by on 30 authors, the project offered its first results. The conference proceedings were published in early 2010: *Di mano propria: gli autografi dei letterati italiani*. Proceedings of the International Conference of Forlì 24-27 November 2008, edited by G. Baldassarri, M. Motolese, P. Procaccioli, E. Russo, Rome, Salerno Editrice, 2010.

paper is crucial for the sharing and the circulation of the outcomes of a research in the field of humanities, not only to reach scholars yet unwilling to move into the digital environment, but also to allow a complete and attentive perusal of the dossier and of the iconographic apparatus. The purpose is indeed to stimulate that photographic memory of the writing habits of an author which can support the identification of an autograph but yet unknown document. Moreover, the choice for the publication on paper was suggested also by practical reasons: the publication on paper is still more recognizable in the scientific domain and this favoured the voluntary and free of charge participation of the scholars to our project; not to mention that the costs for the design and maintenance of a digital portal would have been far too high lacking adequate funding.

### 3. *Boundaries*

In designing the repertoire, we needed to face two difficult tasks. The first was to define its boundaries. Inspired by the precedent of the *Iter Italicum* by Kristeller we decided to start from the origins and ending at the decline of Sixteenth century: a period for which the study of autograph materials has often had a decisive importance for the reconstruction of the texts and represents an important key to grasp the dynamics of literary culture. The second issue was to decide how to organize the materials. We chose to proceed not in a chronological, alphabetical or topographical order, but to try as much as possible to tune the indexing of materials on the state of the research, in order to incorporate the most advanced fruits of ongoing investigations. The organization of the repertoire in different chronological sections (*The Origins and the Fourteenth Century*, *The Fifteenth Century*, *The Sixteenth Century*) and a conclusive and well organized indexing would guarantee a functional use of the work.

Another important step was the definition of the extent of the repertoire. Framing this choice was crucial for the scientific purpose of the project. We determined not to limit the research only to major writers, the authors of the many masterpieces that mark the first centuries of our literature, but to take into account – at the same time – the connective tissue of our literary society. This is reason why we welcomed authors of works nonetheless significant, protagonists of the circulation of our literature or of a theoretical reflection on its statutes and genres, ancient



commentators on the classics, representatives of the philological movement, and so on with an inclusive attitude in particular with the first chronological section, dedicated to the Origins and to the fourteenth century. The purpose of offering a full spectrum of autograph documents, suggested us to welcome not only the literary writings but all the documentary writings (legal papers, commercial agreements, private letters, travel memories, and so on). Hence, as a result of this inclusive attitude, we have chosen a broader and more comprehensive category: “literates”. Promoted by the title itself, it offers a clear and straight indication both of the overall extension of the repertoire and of the kind of research that our endeavor wants to foster.

#### 4. *Determining the author's dossier*

The first step in order to build the census was determining the model of the dossier dedicated to a single author. We arranged two *specimina* related to two different authors that could be representative samples of the typical problems and issues that could emerge in drawing the repertoire up. The expected abundance and variety of materials to be surveyed led us to choose an extremely synthetic filing system for each manuscript or annotated document, with a presentation in three sections.

1. The first section shows the city and the library where the annotated document is stored and the current shelfmark;
2. The second section contains a basic description of the contents, specifying the titles of the works and (up to five units) the recipients of the letters and the opening words of the poems;
3. The third and final section lists the specific literature on the individual item or on the annotated document, in order to provide the reader with a basic orientation on the available studies.

In the following lines we give a practical example, taken from the volume published in 2009, concerning a letter written by Pietro Aretino:

Mantua, ASMn, Autographs 8 3 cc. 20r-20bisv. · Letter with sonnet (*Qui iace Adrian sesto, homo divino*) to the Marquis Federico II Gonzaga (Milan, no date; Larivaille proposes to date it at the end of November 1523). · Luzio 1890: 690-92; Cesareo 1901: 177 n. 3, 183 n. 8, 190; *Pasquinate* 1983 328-29, 976; Larivaille 1989: 137; Kristeller: VI 21.

This pattern of description for each item – the brick of the entire building – shaped the scheme of each dossier:

1. an introductory section, aimed at reconstructing the vicissitudes of the literate's own papers and at providing future suggestions for the research still to be done;
2. the census of autograph writings and annotated documents based on the above mentioned model;<sup>7</sup>
3. a note on the handwriting, meant to provide a palaeographic description of the peculiarities of the different writing styles adopted by the author and to report their most significant features, which can be the starting point for new attributions;
4. a final section which contains plates, with examples of the handwriting of individual authors. Designed for printed volumes, this section has been limited to few items (typically 4 to 6 figures), selected in order to provide examples of the different seasons and different contexts: working notes and fair copies, letters and verses, annotated manuscripts or marginal notes on printed texts, etc.

This dossier-draft, written according to this detailed structure, was later submitted as a working hypothesis to a group of scholars. Their generous and attentive answers made us certain about the functionality and reliability of the structure of the dossier. Of course such answers also provided us many useful suggestions for the enhancement of the project. For instance we were asked to underline the link between the note on the handwriting and the plates of the manuscripts, through specific references, in order to provide an immediate illustration of the features that characterized that specific hand. Furthermore, we were suggested to provide the opportunity to include in the introductory section information about manuscripts whose authenticity was rejected, and about manuscripts mentioned in previous bibliography but actually lost or unavailable, as a support for subsequent findings. Finally, in order to leave to the reader the judgment on uncertain and still debated case, we

<sup>7</sup> A division which we chose due to its extreme simplicity, although some objection concerning the terminology could be expected. In fact, we consider that the annotated books and manuscripts are also autographs, and it is not always possible to distinguish clearly between the author's work on his own texts and his reading interventions (and this explains the fact that on some occasions the item appears in both sections). For the sake of clarity, this section also contains hybrid materials, which are worth documenting, such as the books with a dedication written by Giordano Bruno.

planned to integrate the section of the autograph documents and that of annotated ones with parallel sections for manuscripts and annotated documents of uncertain attribution.

### 5. *From the single dossier to the repertoire*

Once we had defined the basic form of the dossier (a model that would later be adapted in the case of the older manuscripts)<sup>8</sup>, we were able to start a new and different stage of the project. A dynamic phase that consisted in involving numerous other scholars, and above all in identifying the best group of editors for the various chronological sections.

As a result of this work, which was conducted side by side with several research groups, between 2009 and 2013 the first four volumes of the work were published, respectively dedicated to *Origini e Trecento* (vol. I, 2013), to *Quattrocento* (vol. I, 2013), and to *Cinquecento* (vol. I and II, 2009 and 2013)<sup>9</sup>. For each section, the teams managed independently the selection of the scholars involved in the project as well as the literary figures to include in the work plan.

We plan to complete the entire project by 2017, with the publication of the second volume of *Origini e Trecento* and of *Quattrocento* and the third volume of *Cinquecento* (the eighth and last volume will be dedicated to general indexes). This will lead to the census of autograph materials and annotated books by approximately two hundred authors active in Italy from the thirteenth to sixteenth century.

The total amount of autograph documents due to be described at the end of the project is difficult to estimate. Yet, what has been documented so far indicates that it will reach several thousands of catalogue items, both in the section of the autograph writings and in the section of annotated books. We must consider that in the first four volumes 2,771 catalographical units have been described in the autograph section (plus another 37 cases of uncertain attribution) and 1,222 in the section of the annotated documents (37 uncertain cases) for a total of 113 authors (tab. 1).

<sup>8</sup> See the *Foreword* of the volume *Le Origini e il Trecento*, edited by G. Brunetti, M. Fiorilla, M. Petoletti, Rome, Salerno Editrice, 2013, p. XIII.

<sup>9</sup> See *Le Origini e il Trecento I*, edited by G. Brunetti, M. Fiorilla, M. Petoletti, Rome, Salerno Editrice, 2013; *Il Quattrocento I*, edited by F. Bausi, M. Campanelli, S. Gentile, J. Hankins, palaeographic notes by T. De Robertis, Rome, Salerno Editrice, 2014; *Il Cinquecento I and II*, edited by M. Motolese, P. Procaccioli, E. Russo, palaeographic notes by A. Ciaralli, Rome, Salerno Editrice, respectively, 2009 and 2014.

Table 1<sup>10</sup>

	litterates	Autograph documents	Annotated books
<i>Le Origini e il Trecento I</i>	26	156 [+ 2]	50 [+ 2]
<i>Il Quattrocento I</i>	26	706 [+ 24]	424 [+ 18]
<i>Il Cinquecento I</i>	30	1230 [+ 10]	542 [+ 6]
<i>Il Cinquecento II</i>	31	679 [+ 1]	206 [+ 11]
Total	113	2,771 [+ 37]	1,222 [+ 37]

Such achievement was made possible by the effort of ninety-five scholars from different countries who – without any remuneration – have shared their knowledge and experience in the field of library research, have carried out investigations in archives, and finally have achieved the goal of outlining not only the framework of what was already known but also of clearing the paths for new studies. This overall reappraisal has naturally led, in many cases, to the identification of new materials and to the opening of new discussions on what was considered definitely attributed. It also contributed sometimes to the revision of the dating and the relationships between the manuscripts. To give but a few examples, we can mention the broad overall reappraisal of the autographs and the private library of Boccaccio conducted by Maurizio Fiorilla and Marco Cursi, with numerous new and timely amendments in the dating; the identification of writings by authors for whom no autograph document was known before, as for Iacomo della Lana, studied by Marco Petoletti; the large number of new attributions regarding the library of Cristoforo Landino, thanks to the investigations of Valerio Sanzotta and Teresa De Robertis, or the rearrangement of the philological laboratory which is the most important heritage of our humanism, that of Angelo Poliziano, thanks to Alessandro Daneloni’s work; and, again, for the section of the Sixteenth century, not only the systematic collection of informations gathered on such figures as Bembo and Sper-

<sup>10</sup> Uncertain attribution cases are indicated in square brackets. The terms «autograph» and «annotated books» refer to the catalogue items, or entries, of the different sections in the volumes. Please note that each catalogue item corresponds to a shelf mark which is provided by the library or archives where the material is stored (see, for further informations, the *Foreword* of each volume).

oni, Castelvetro and Vasari, but also on the many “polygraphs” (Aretino, Ruscelli, Dolce, Doni, and so on): a new light has been cast on their activity by the research findings of Paolo Procaccioli, Paolo Marini and Carlo Alberto Girotto.

However, we hope that the update in the description of the materials and the study of the individual writing habit of each author, may represent only the start for research to come, possibly fostered by the repertoire. We hope that the amount of information provided and the possibility to combine data through indexes will also promote a new discussion on working methods, on annotation practices, on the ways of sharing and circulating of books, as well as on the language of the authors of the first centuries of our literature.

## 6. *From paper to the WEB*

The digital stage of the project has started when, in 2011, we had a financing for basic research, assigned to academics under 40 years of age.<sup>11</sup> Currently is a work in progress and is still subject to changes, adaptations and additions: the website is due to be published by the end of 2016. This segment of the research will grant an amount of informations even greater than the paper repertoire, and will be the result of team work that will involve many people – coordinated by the heads of the three sites that are the headquarters of the research team – with the cooperation, at Sapienza (University of Rome), of the experience and skills in computer science of Francesca Ferrario and the fundamental scientific and creative support of a group of young scholars (Elisa De Roberto, Silvia Finazzi, Valeria Guarna, Irene Iocca, Angelo Piacentini, Veronica Ricotta).

Actually we can make it known that the design of the portal of the *Autografi dei letterati italiani* (ALI) has been outlined with two main targets:

<sup>11</sup> It is a FIRB 2010-*Futuro in ricerca* programme that involves the Sapienza-University of Rome (Matteo Motolese, principal investigator), the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore-University of Milan (manager: Marco Petoletti) and Università Roma 3-University of Rome 3 (manager: Maurizio Fiorilla). Prior to that, the project had received PRIN 2008 funding, with the participation of five different universities: Università della Tuscia (Paolo Procaccioli, national coordinator), Università di Perugia (manager: Antonio Ciaralli), Sapienza-University of Rome (manager: Matteo Motolese), Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore of Milan (manager: Marco Petoletti) and Università Roma 3-University of Rome (manager: Maurizio Fiorilla).

a) to ensure consultation of the whole repertoire with a significant increase in the section of photographic reproductions;

b) to foster cross-sectional research allowing flexible data aggregation.

Regarding the photographic reproductions – thanks to an agreement signed with the Italian Ministero dei Beni culturali (MiBAC) and Istituto per il Catalogo Unico (ICCU) in June 2013 – a photographic campaign was launched in state libraries to enable the digitizing of more than 30,000 manuscript pages; other agreements with Italian and foreign libraries and archives are being finalized and we are confident that they can help to significantly increase the number of reproduced materials. The goal is to be able to include partial or total reproduction of the various items that are in the census. However, much will depend on the spirit of cooperation of the institutions that preserve the originals and on the costs for the rights, which are still difficult to quantify in a comprehensive manner.

Starting with the possibility of re-aggregating data in an autonomous way, the numerous benefits offered by the digital world to perform searches within databases also involve the risk of losing the perception of the whole. For this reason, we created a special section in the Web site with paths that can provide an overview of some of the content of the database, thanks to the aggregation of materials by typologies and categories (e.g. working materials, a copy of own works, a copy of the work of others, and so on); there will also be a section dedicated to letters only (with a specific search mask). Alongside this essential structure, it is also our intention to develop further expansions of the database, including the linguistic section and providing the photographic reproduction with transcripts, which means that in a future – yet actually premature to state – every kind of search throughout the texts will be made possible.

Once the portal will be online, our work will not be finished. Each repertoire is only a work that lies on the line between what is known and what has yet to be discovered or, simply, has not been collected yet. For this reason the repertoire will be open to additions, corrections, improvements. A sort of common ownership where – according to the aims of the project at any stage of design and construction – data sharing is what worths more.

This dynamic approach in the maintenance and integration of the database is, at the moment, one of the biggest problems that we are facing. It is becoming clearer and clearer that the prosecution of the research can not rely on university support, but must seek support outside universities, through participation from national and international calls and by

trying to attract funding from foundations or private individuals or organizations. We are aware that the quality of the results that we will be able to present will be crucial for future developments. These results, available first in the volumes and then available on the web, have been the main goal of our work in these recent years.

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