EROS AND EVANESCENCE IN THE *DECAMERON*: THE WEAVE OF LOVE, TIME, AND MEMORY*

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Abstract: This essay studies the interplay between the emotion of love and the sense of its transience, as the interplay is featured in the three authorial interventions of the Proem, the Introduction to Day 4, and the Conclusion. The author returns time and again to this interplay, emphasizing the role of memory throughout these interventions. While Boccaccio identifies eros as a guiding impulse for his storytelling and showcases sexual desire as a main theme of both the comic and tragic novelle, this study looks at the way the passages present love as highlighting the temporal nature of human existence, which, in its mortal finitude, relies on remembrance, especially the recollection of love's transient sway, in order to foster a sensibility for life's wholeness.

The study's approach is phenomenological. It examines the manner in which Boccaccio displays appearances—of character, mood, or circumstance—within a temporal frame. Phenomena surface and vanish in time, while being retained in memory. Above all in these three interventions Boccaccio reminds his readers to keep in view the timing of love, its absence and presence, as they become aware of their own ageing and mortality while traveling with the author through his narrative.

The title of the essay conjoins eros and evanescence, love and transience, in Boccaccio's *Decameron*. These themes have typically been treated separately in scholarship. The analyses of the place of love in the *Centonovelle* are too numerous to mention, since it is the main focus of the storytelling. With respect to evanescence or transience, one may call to mind insightful studies about time and progression in the work, not least the two alternative models of its matrix

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proposed by Vittore Branca (14–24) and Teodolinda Barolini, one spiritual and linear, one secular and circular.¹

For this inquiry, eros and evanescence are placed in relation to one another. We ask why this relation is important, or indeed how it is even possible. How does the *Decameron* articulate the bearing of love on time, or of time on love? As the first great reader of Dante and Petrarch, Boccaccio might well have considered this question an important one. Guiding our analysis, the question in fact affords us a perspective into what we can call, with all due caution, the philosophical underpinnings of the work.

These underpinnings engage readers in two ways: first, on the level of their awareness of appearances, of how people and moods and conditions appear in time and over time, and within a temporal frame; and second, on the level of their attentiveness to the *Decameron's* narrative art, which reflects an ongoing conversation between author and audience, as well as between a storyteller and the others in the *brigata*. Both levels of engagement—the awareness of appearance and the attentiveness to dialogic narrative—seem to lead us, at first glance, further afield from the relation between eros and evanescence and its philosophical import. Certainly the study of appearances can be considered a philosophical problem, indeed a primal one; and dialogue, too, has a long-standing place as a philosophical genre.² But what of love and transience?

On closer scrutiny, both aspects—appearances and dialogue—have an intimate relation to time's passing, for phenomena appear in time, at a given instant, and dialogue, by its exchange, charts time's procession. And the *Decameron* examines, repeatedly and insistently, love or eros in relation to time, as something that both marks and is marked by time's passing. Love appears in time and changes with time and circumstance. Furthermore, by its very nature in the work, love binds people together; it is the source of joy or sorrow between one person and his or her companion. It is the theme and impetus for dialogue, grounding the compassion or empathy that the author cites at the work's inception.

In order to demonstrate the primal way eros relates to evanescence in the work, we limit ourselves to the three authorial interventions: the Proem, the Introduction to Day Four, and the Conclusion. These interventions span the course of the work from beginning to end and announce Boccaccio's evolving views

¹ See also Gagliardi.

² See for example Höslle.

toward his enterprise. Like the thematic of eros and evanescence, the interventions are typically considered either in tandem as various pairings or in isolation.³ But the relation we investigate leads us to consider all three as resonant of one another, amplifying the relation with periodic repetition. Our method makes use of the insights of phenomenology, since phenomenology, from its early formulation by Edmund Husserl, orients itself toward appearances and also to the fact of intersubjectivity, that is, the way the presence of others conditions one's understanding of reality and truth. Mario Baratto has called the *Decameron* a "phenomenology, at the narrative level, of earthly behavior" (19). We are concerned with the way love and transience intersect, so that the phenomena recounted by author and narrators do not remain isolated, passing instances, but on the contrary have transcendent meaning precisely through their passing, as they are shared and seen together across the course of the work.⁴

1. Phenomenological openings: a new approach to the *Decameron's* narratology

Phenomenology is one of the most important philosophical developments of the last century, embracing various fields such as epistemology, ontology, psychology, and hermeneutics. It merits consideration as an approach, especially in our time of postmodernism and poststructuralism, not least because many of the tenets of these movements respond to the phenomenological understanding of Husserl and in particular Martin Heidegger.⁵ Phenomenology, as Heidegger expressed it, is concerned with the question of how reality comes to light (*EM* 77).⁶ I would articulate this approach under two main headings:

³ See the bibliography cited by Branca in his edition of the *Decameron*, lxxiv; xcvi; cxxi. All references to the *Decameron* are from this edition; English translations are my own. Among the commentaries: Di Pino 209–220; Getto 1–12; Ramat 50–69; Potter 120–135; Mazzotta 30–32, 69–73, 132–137; D'Andrea 95–108; Hollander 90–93; Gittes 50–51, 175–180, 220–236. Exceptions to this trend include Marchesi, *Stratigrafie decameroniane* 1–26; Rossi 35–55; Sherberg 18–32.

⁴ "[...] il *Decameron* è innanzi tutto, potremmo dire, una fenomenologia, a livello narrativo, del comportamento mondano" (Baratto 19). See Kircher, "Movement, Moment, and Mission."

⁵ On this point, see Breisach. There are of course many noted differences among thinkers of the phenomenological orientation. For an overview, see Moran.

⁶ That is, *Einführung in die Metaphysik*, henceforth *EM*.

- a) what is a “phenomenon”?
- b) what are the implications for the condition of the observer, in relation to the phenomenon and also to others?

Both questions open up a coherent mode of inquiry into the play of appearances in the *Decameron* as they occur in the flux of the narrative.

A phenomenon, as Heidegger explains it, is basically something that shows itself (SZ §7; EM 74).⁷ Now we can designate as an appearance that which shows itself or comes to light. The word “appearance” possesses at least two senses: first, as *seeming*, as something that conceals or masks reality. Thus Tedaldo in *Decameron* III.7 “seems” or “appears” (*pari*) as a foreign pilgrim to his beloved mistress, Madonna Ermellina. He takes on the appearance of someone else; that is, he appears other than he actually is in order to fool Ermellina. And this sort of phenomenon as disguised character, we might argue, forms the central quality of Boccaccio’s work.

Yet a second sense of “appearance” is even more fundamental than the first: it is that something can be seen at all, that something “announces itself” (*sich meldet*) and so presents itself to be perceived. There can be no opportunity for deception or concealment if the phenomenon does not first present itself or come to light (Heidegger, EM 76). In the scene from *Decameron* III.7, Tedaldo, dressed as a pilgrim, encounters Ermellina with the words “Madonna, non vi tribulate: la vostra pace è vicina” (“My lady, do not be troubled: your peace is at hand”; 17). Boccaccio then writes: “La donna, udendo costui, levò alto il viso e piangendo disse: “Buon uomo, tu mi pari un pellegrin forestiere: che sai tu di pace o di mia afflizione?” (“The lady, upon hearing him, raised her gaze and said through her tears, ‘Fine sir, you seem to me a pilgrim from foreign lands; what do you know of my peace or my distress?’”; III.7.18). “Tu mi pari” may mean “you seem to me” in the first sense of an outward appearance that may conceal something different from its external aspect, its outward form, in the way that Tedaldo’s arguments that follow, Boccaccio writes, “verissime le parevan” (“seemed most true to her”; III.7.55). But “tu mi pari” also conveys the meaning of “you appear or come before me as” or “I see you as,” since, upon his greeting, Ermellina “raised her gaze.” In this light, Tedaldo’s greeting sounds forth like that of a sudden vision of a Biblical angel: “Madonna, non vi tribulate.” In our analysis, we will see how

⁷ That is, *Sein und Zeit*, henceforth SZ; section numbers are cited according to convention and convenience.

the verbs *parere* and *apparire* function in these phenomenological senses in the authorial interventions of the work.⁸

For now, the understanding of phenomenon as appearance, as that which comes to light, helps us appreciate the appeal of phenomenology as a way, in Husserl's words, of turning *zu den Sachen selbst*, to the things themselves, to that which lies before us. Phenomenology has thus been characterized as anti-theoretical and anti-metaphysical, since it starts with the moment, the spontaneous glance, the naïve encounter with the world around us or with the text in front of us, prior to any theoretical reckoning. Maurice Merleau-Ponty has deliberated on how each of us becomes a "perceptual field" (416), forming and integrating a run of perceptions over time. The field has its ground in the phenomenal, as each new event adds a "fresh layer of meaning" to our lives (406–407).

If we consider more carefully our discussion of the phenomenon as something that seems or that appears, we notice that both senses, "seeming" and "appearing," bear a relation to time and implicate the observer. Whenever appearances pretend to be something other than their true reality, the unmasking of their deception occurs *over* time. Tedaldo later doffs his pilgrim's hood before Ermellina, showing himself as a devoted, and tricky, lover. And for appearances to occur at all, to come to light, they happen *in* time, at a given moment, like the greeting between the two lovers. The upshot is that the time-bound quality of the phenomenon entails the temporal flow of perception itself. The perceiver, the observer, is "thrown" (to use Heidegger's term) into time, set out into existence, and is reliant upon his or her resources and the world at hand. An "authentic" understanding of the world and one's place in it involves a sensibility, therefore, for one's finitude and mortality, what Heidegger calls a "being towards death" ("Sein zum Tode"; *SZ* §62).

We exist, Heidegger writes, "finitely," "within limits" (*endlich*; *SZ* §65). What matters, therefore, is not only our recognition that the moment we perceive is fleeting, but also our awareness that our lives and our perceptions are fleeting,

⁸ See the continuous use of *parere* in the *Commedia*: e.g., *Inf.* II.19, III.33, VI.36, X.97, XVII.108, XXIII.108, XXXI.106, XXXI.136, XXXIII.103, XXXIII.134; *Purg.* I.25, I.120, II.53, II.116, III.7, III.60, IV.78, VI.18, VII.84, IX.19, IX.22, IX.28, IX.31, IX.74, IX.101, IX.140, X.3, X.27, X.37, X.58, X.79, X.83, X.139, XII.40, XII.51, XII.67, XII.116, XIII.73; *Par.* IX.135, XIII.91, XIV.72, XV.16, XXIV.15, XXIV.66, XXIV.96, XXVIII.14, XXVIII.19, XXVIII.20, XXVIII.22, XXX.92. For *apparire*, see *Pur.* II.127; III.58. Contini and Branca have noted that *parere* for Dante can convey the meaning of manifest appearance (Contini, esp. 23–24; Branca, notes for *Dec.* IV.2.25 and IV.4.14).

too. Each life is personal, individual, and “self-reliant” (*selbstständig*) in this fundamental way. Consider how this awareness may affect one’s understanding. A man may look at a tree as a botanist does, or at a text through a philological lens, as an object of study that possesses certain intrinsic qualities that one may systematically define. Or the man may stand before the tree, or the text, and be struck by thinking about its origin or its future; he may recall the first time he observed it, days, months, years ago. He may weigh how he has aged along with the tree, or the dog-eared text, and this affects his understanding. The tree or the text, then, has a different, existential meaning as a phenomenon. It comes to light for his life and his world of observations in a different way. It is marked by the various times in his life and, in turn, marks these times of his life, disclosing and concealing meanings from one moment to the next as he experiences the world around him, as he grows older (Heidegger, *Was heißt Denken?* 25–29).

This feeling for transience and finitude indicates how the concept of mood (*Stimmung*) is an important one for Heidegger as it relates to knowledge. This mood corresponds to our given life, our thrownness into time, and it colours what we perceive. What we see, think, and know lies outside our conscious cognition. We do not or cannot, in an authentic way, calibrate the meaning of things we study through a rational representation or a logical sequence of arguments. These calculations are one way of encountering the world but are ultimately inauthentic, since they are abstracted from the existential, temporal flow of life. According to Heidegger, the problem with Descartes’s formulation *cogito ergo sum* is that Descartes left the *sum* (“I am”) as an afterthought, when its expression of personal being in the world, at a certain time and for a finite span, first conditions the *cogito*, or its thinking (SZ §10). As we will see, the *Decameron* author begins the Proem by recounting a period of crisis in his life, before turning to the events of 1348. These crises are linked not only “artistically,” as a function of metanarrative art, but also philosophically, in the sense that they colour the thinking of author, audience, and *brigata*.⁹

In light of phenomenology, language—like mood, thinking, and perception—is not a deliberate human construct. The rationality of the human species, touted in the philosophical tradition as its highest capacity, is, in Heidegger’s view, a particular translation of the Greek conception of humanity. Humanity as the *animal rationale*, or the rational animal, derives from the Greek conception of

⁹ On the thematic association, see Levenstein.

humanity as a *zoon logon echon*, a living being that makes use of *logos*.¹⁰ *Logos* may be translated as *ratio*, or reason; Robert Grosseteste, the Scholastic translator of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, does so, and this was the version that Boccaccio read during his time in Naples, when copying the commentary of Thomas Aquinas.¹¹ But for Heidegger *logos* means "word," "speaking," and, even more primally, from the verbal form *legein*, "to reveal" and "to allow to be seen." Language and words may uncover the phenomenon at hand (*SZ* §6). Just as the phenomenon is not an object ascertained and secured by human cognition, language, too, speaks from its own domain, a domain that embraces both phenomena and those that may perceive them.

Language, therefore, is not a tool that the rational mind employs to represent reality, along the lines of a correspondence theory of truth. One of the first formulations of the correspondence theory has been found in the statement of Aquinas, "*veritas est aequatio rei et intellectus*," that is, "truth is the equation of thing and intellect" (Senner; Kobusch). While commentators have seen the impression of Scholastic thought on Boccaccio's work, a phenomenological orientation permits us to re-evaluate Boccaccio's relation to Scholasticism. This orientation questions the validity of the Thomist abstraction from existence. If Boccaccio understood truth to reside more in the moment of disclosure experienced in a specific situation rather than in the accuracy of conceptual description, then the Scholastic emphasis on rationality, intellect, and *ratio* is on another path from that of the *Decameron*.¹² The *Decameron*'s language instead inheres closely to the play of concealment and revelation as it occurs in the movement of eros over time. This linguistic play with seeming and appearing illustrates not so much a rational design as an existential condition common to author and audience.

The situational nature of perception, of both observer and observed, underscores the inter-subjective quality of knowledge. Heidegger articulates how the locus of truth is found not primarily in a statement but rather in the way an

¹⁰ See *Nicomachean Ethics* 1102a; also *Politics* 1254b.

¹¹ See Grosseteste 178–179 for one example from *Nic. Eth.* 1102a 23–32: "Dicuntur autem de hac et in exterioribus sermonibus sufficienter quaedam, ut utendum ipsis, puta hoc quidem irrationale ipsius esse, hoc vero rationem habens." On Boccaccio's manuscript (now Milan Biblioteca Ambrosiana A 204 inf.), see the entry by Petoletti in the catalogue *Boccaccio autore e copista*, 348–350; and see Barsella.

¹² Branca asserts the Thomist influence on the *Decameron*, ix and 22. Other studies emphasizing this influence include Kirkham, "Morale" 249–268; Bausi; Barsella; and Ellero.

existing human individual (*Dasein*) relates to reality, and this reality entails the individual's place among others. This place or existence alongside other people (*Miteinandersein*) is an ineluctable feature in the apprehension of any phenomenon. For something to appear or become manifest, it must appear to someone; and this perceiver, by his or her "thrownness" or historical nature, resides among and with others. The presence of others, like that of a constant *brigata*, conditions the perceiver's world in which the truth of things is disclosed (*Einleitung in die Philosophie* 84–85, 104, 109).

No one exists in sole possession of oneself as an isolated, solipsistic *cogito*. Edith Stein and Emmanuel Levinas therefore lay weight on this inter-subjectivity as the ground for empathy or compassion. Our own existence allows and, in fact, demands that we recognize the otherness of others. We are implicitly aware of our shared condition of personal finitude and temporal existence. On the basis of this awareness of common existential finitude, we can experience what others experience and take part in their joy and suffering.¹³ The opening line of the *Decameron's* Proem, "umana cosa è aver compassione degli afflitti" ("it is human to have compassion for those in distress"), speaks to the communicative foundation of compassion, as it introduces the intra-diegetic conversations among the *brigata* as they seek solace with one another outside the chaotic, plague-ridden city.

Boccaccio has a lot to say, I have suggested, about time and perception in the *Decameron*. If eros engages his thinking in all three authorial interventions, it is tied, intimately, to his feeling for temporal change, including the ageing of the author and of his audience in the course of their conversation. As a poet, Boccaccio has language convey and mask the force of eros and the sway of time, often in unexpected ways. It is time to observe Boccaccio as a speaking author, as a writer who understands how the play of words conceals and reveals the phenomena of life, depending on time and circumstance.¹⁴

¹³ Our experience of others' experience is, as Stein emphasizes, "non-primordial" or "founded," since it is not our own joy or suffering, but it is one we can intuit as others' primordial experience. See Moran 175–176. On Levinas, see Casper 27–37.

¹⁴ On a related level, studies of material culture, such as Cursi's research on *Decameron* manuscripts, Eisner's examination of Boccaccio's role in canon formation, and Fiorilla's "Nota al Testo" to the *Decameron* (109–123), show us how the texts we read are themselves hardly fixed, but, rather, are formed under the pressures of time, scribe, and circumstance.

2. Eros and the existential urgency of the human condition

Eros catalyzes all of the phenomena addressed by the author in the Proem, Introduction to Day Four, and the Conclusion. In the Proem, the *afflitti* needing compassion are suffering love's distress. The author himself, Boccaccio suggests, had sailed too far out upon its deep, dark waters ("ne' suoi cupi pelaghi," Proem.5); and his ostensible audience, *le vaghe donne* (the charming ladies), are closeted and confined away from love's temptations by their familial overseers. Both author and audience, he writes, have endured the *focoso disio* (fiery desire; 11) or the "soverchio fuoco nella mente" (overwhelming emotional fire; 3) of love.

This experience of love, of erotic passion, is the modality through which the author is able to perceive the secret agony of the women who, "temendo e vergognando, tengono l'amorose fiamme nascose" ("fearful and embarrassed, keep hidden the flames of passion"; 10). In an overt sense, the author says that the erotic condition has given him eyes to see what most men cannot and discern a phenomenon that is more complex than it may first appear. Women are in love and dare not show it. The familial authorities, exercising their oversight, confine them to their chambers. And this repression lends the secret emotional turmoil the women feel "piú di forza [...] che le palesi coloro il sanno che l'hanno provate" ("a greater power [...] than that shown openly, as all know who have experienced these things"; 10).

In this address, then, Boccaccio is showing how the love-struck poet has eyes for the subtle signs of suffering, for understanding the discrete turmoil of these women who are banned from openly expressing their inner life. A common element in all three authorial interventions announces itself in the plight of these young ladies: it is of eros and its enemies, of the force of love and the counter-measures undertaken to impede its progress. This Provençal theme assumed by the Proem has a broad social dimension, since the poet does not speak directly to a single *donna amata*, but, rather, he reaches out from his experience to those who are inwardly troubled yet show, outwardly, a more tranquil aspect. His compassionate understanding grounds itself in the belief that love has existential meaning in the phenomenological sense: it has an intimate connection to time and temporality. The restlessness that love provokes also permits him to "temporize" its influence; the phenomenon of love's *noia* and *malinconia* (distress and sadness) also heightens the sensibility for its *passamento* (passing; 12, 14).

Looking again at the Proem (3–5), we see how Boccaccio marks his discussion of eros with repeated references to time. “[D]alla mia prima giovanezza infino a questo tempo” (“From my early youth until now”), he writes, he has been given over to love. And the unruly desire “a niuno convenevole termine me lasciava un tempo stare” (“did not afford me a proper moment’s rest”). Death, the end of his earthly time, would have struck him down in love’s affliction, had God not “diede per legge incommutabile a tutte le cose mondane aver fine” (“decreed by His unchangeable laws that all earthly things should come to an end”). And thus his love “in processo di tempo si diminuì” (“lessened in the course of time”).

These opening five lines in the work therefore relate eros directly with time’s passing. Eros distinguishes the successive phases of the poet’s life—a note that will resound in the Introduction to Day Four—and time’s flow diminishes and assuages love’s force. These reciprocal impressions, of eros on time and time on eros, convey an existential understanding of love. Love is a phenomenon: as a phenomenon, it surfaces in time and is ultimately finite, like life itself. When scholarship has discussed eros in the *Decameron* as a moral problem or a natural instinct, it has not, as a rule, studied its affiliation with transience.¹⁵

The poet notes love’s forceful presence and its passing with the verbs *parere* and *apparire*. His “altissimo e nobile amore” (“high and noble love”) was “forse più assai che alla mia bassa condizione non parrebbe” (“perhaps greater than should appear to my lowly condition”); he does not wish to *parere ingrato* (appear or seem unthankful) for his rescue from love’s distress; and so, he writes, “parmi quello doversi più tosto porgere dove il bisogno apparisce maggiore” (“it appears or seems in my view that I set my obligation where there appears to be the greatest need”; 3, 7–8). None of these appearances would have occurred to him without his experience of love, which has made him more alert and attentive to the show of love in the world around him, even when this show (these phenomena) is disguised by others and to others.

These remarks indicate how I depart from those readings of the *Decameron* that claim that Boccaccio is now freed from love’s influence, and therefore he applies objective reason to analyze and resolve emotional turmoil.¹⁶ The writer of the book “cognominato prencipe Galeotto” perceives love’s traces on the basis

¹⁵ See, among others, Scaglione; Kirkham, *The Sign of Reason*; Gittes. See also Hollander 92; Marchesi, *Stratigrafie decameroniane* 31–33 and 50–66; Sherberg 25–30.

¹⁶ Smarr 166–167; see also Kirkham, *The Sign of Reason*.

of his experience of love and attunement to love. As love's detective, he is also its scribe. Language is the agency by which he follows love's course. His language unmasks love's power, but it also would mitigate it. Boccaccio writes that it was language, speech, *ragionamenti* of a certain friend (4) that attenuated love's sway over his life, and he applies the same remedy to the *malinconia* and *noia* (11) of the *vaghe donne*.

But how did Boccaccio experience, and how does he express the talking cure? How can these *ragionamenti* provide the *rifrigerio*, the *soccorso*, and the *rifugio* (that is, the cooling, the help, and the remedy; 4, 13) against the fires of love, when these stories also illuminate its power? It may seem obvious that they provide alternative realities for these ladies—illusory phenomena—that beguile them, as well as offer “quello che sia da fuggire e che sia similmente da seguitare” (“that which is to be avoided and by the same token to be pursued”; 14). The ability of language would accord with the Proem's Ovidian remedies and Horatian credo of pleasure and usefulness, on which Robert Hollander and others have written insightfully. I would suggest that language provides another remedy inherent in its phenomenological capacity. The stories the poet records occur in time and over time: they reveal the time-bound nature of love and life itself. The Galeotto contains “cento novelle in diece dí dette” (“a hundred stories told in ten days”; 1). At the close of the Proem he repeats how the *brigata* tells these stories “in diece giorni [...] nel pistelenzioso tempo dalla passata mortalità” (“in ten days [...] at the time of the plague and great mortality”; 13). How can recalling the time of the Plague offer consolation? Not only by showing a *lieta brigata*, but also by grounding these tales in an understanding of life's finitude, of its temporal duration. The stories can distract their female audience in the way of masculine diversions: they deprive the mind of its distress “almeno per alcuno spazio di tempo, appresso il quale, con un modo o con altro, o consolazion sopravviene o diventa la noia minore” (“at least for a certain period of time, through which, by one way or another, either consolation ensues or the affliction subsides”; 12). The moral overseers of the ladies in the Proem are, however, akin to the critics the author faces in the Introduction to Day Four. Their moral code not only opposes eros but also would deny the phenomenal, temporal nature of life, love, and language. To see this more clearly, we turn to this subsequent intervention.

3. The temporal triad of life, love, and language in the Introduction to Day Four

The Introduction to Day Four opens with a direct address: *carissime donne* (dearest ladies). The author speaks to his female audience, instead of speaking about them, as he did in the Proem.¹⁷ This move sets up a dynamic tension for the reader. The reader might first imagine that these women are the same as those whom the author would help at the outset of the book. And so they are. But they are also different: they have changed, as has the author himself, now “non essendo io ancora al terzo della mia fatica venuto” (“not yet arrived at the third of my task”; 10). He appears to trust his ladies more as readers who would appreciate his defence against the critics who have castigated his work. These *carissime donne*, he implies, have grown in the course of the work and weighed the work’s merit. The first words of this introduction, then, announce a shift in tone and address that departs from the Proem; but the note of departure also recalls the opening section, evoking its presence. One cannot read the Introduction to Day Four without remembering the Proem and its *vaghe donne*, and one may feel changed along with the work. While many scholars have noted intratextual echoes and references among various sections of the *Decameron*, I think this basic point is often overlooked: that the echoes ring out the passing of time, as well as the revisions among author and audience. The *carissime donne* present a “hermeneutic code,” to use the language of Roland Barthes; they are an enigma demanding ongoing and repeated interpretation across the course of the work (19, 75–76). The intervention now, at the Introduction to Day Four, offers a moment to disclose their meaning, while the reader passes by, and through, this moment toward the *donne* of the Conclusion. The *donne* therefore speak to the inter-subjectivity that the work would entertain, from *incipit* to *explicit*.¹⁸

The work’s merit, the author says to his ladies, “manifesto può apparire” (“could openly appear”) as meagre, since the book is written in vernacular prose, *senza titolo*, “ma ancora in istilo umilissimo e rimesso” (“and in the most humble and unassuming style”) (3). But in a way that the work itself—indeed, this intervention—makes clear, appearances could be other than what they seem. The

¹⁷ See Potter 120–135.

¹⁸ Among the many interpretations of this intervention, see Scaglione 101–106; Ramat 50–69; Marcus 50–51; Smarr 177, 280; Mazzotta 69–70; Potter 120–132; Fedi, esp. 42–44; Sherberg 22–25; and recently Psaki, “The One and the Many” 222–227. See also Baratto 56–59.

intervention is a highly crafted, ironic trap set for the author's critics. I would first like to look at the overall form of the intervention, and then the specific episode he relates about Filippo Balducci and his son. We will see how both the form and this episode illustrate Boccaccio's thinking on the way time relates to eros, and how this illustration provides Boccaccio with an even stronger argument for undertaking his work than the one he expressed in the Proem.

On the most apparent level of style and its ironic potential, Boccaccio draws our attention to his use of the vernacular. As scholars have noted, the vernacular was held at the time to belong to the *ordo naturalis*, as opposed to the *ordo artificialis* of Latin. Dante argues in both the *Convivio* and the *De vulgari eloquentia* that Latin has a higher linguistic value than the vernacular because it is conventional and artificial, and being conventionally crafted, it perdures: it has lasted across time and space, traversing epochs and ethnicities. The vernacular idiom is local and lowly; in the context of Trecento cultural conventions, it is "female," *mobile*, changing.¹⁹ The irony is that Tuscan is, therefore, a dialect well-suited to Boccaccio's purpose: it showcases time; it lays bare shifts of day, mood, setting, and story; and it illuminates how love itself dances in time.

To bring home this point to his educated reader, and even to entertain this reader's prejudices, Boccaccio crafts his apology in a Latinate form. Perhaps not all of his *carissime donne* would perceive this form; perhaps neither would his critics, unless to their irritation. But we may imagine Petrarch and other humanist friends noticing this formal arrangement. For when these humanists pursued Latinity, they sought its *vetustas*, its classical flavour, to use Ronald Witt's phrase. The Latinity that Boccaccio is mocking with his intervention is not *vetustas* but, to the humanists, its opposite: medieval Scholastic argument, introduced into Italy in the thirteenth century from French studies in grammar and logic.²⁰ Petrarch advanced an arsenal of opprobrium against Scholastic Latin. For his part, Boccaccio is challenging the pretence of Scholasticism to deduce atemporal conclusions about doctrine or morality on the basis of a dialectic that ignored the lived experience of author and reader.

By the second half of the twelfth century, Scholastics were incorporating newly-translated works of Aristotle, the so-called *logica nova*, into their intellectual

¹⁹ See Mazzocco 24–30; Celenza; Marchesi, *Dante and Augustine* 22–40. The source texts are *De vulgari eloquentia* 1.9.6 and *Convivio* 1.5.

²⁰ On humanist *vetustas*, see Witt, *In the Footsteps of the Ancients* 27–28. On medieval developments in logic, see Witt, *The Two Latin Cultures* 402–410.

armature. John of Salisbury wrote in his *Metalogicon* of 1159 that “natural and moral philosophers can construct their principles only by proofs derived from logic. Not one of them defines or divides correctly unless logic favors him with its art. Otherwise he will succeed not by science but by chance [non scientia sed casus promovet].”²¹ Codifying their manner of oral academic debate, Scholastics created a written form of argument known as the *quaestio disputata*, the question subject to disputation. The Dominican Thomas Aquinas composed one of its most influential formats. He investigates a given *quaestio* first by stating the *videtur quod*, “it appears or it seems that,” a series of arguments supporting one side, and the wrong side, of the question. The assertions are refuted by the following section, beginning with the *sed contra*, an “on the other hand” statement, most often an isolated quote from a recognized authority like Augustine or Aristotle (whom Thomas simply calls The Philosopher). The concluding part of the *sed contra* advances counter-assertions, using logic or authorities, for each of the claims proposed in the opening *videtur quod* section.²²

The authorial intervention of the Introduction to Day Four adapts the Thomistic *quaestio disputata*. This adaptation has been recognized by Simone Marchesi, among others; I would underscore here how Boccaccio submits the deductive Scholastic method to inductive scrutiny, transforming it in light of the changing stages of life experience.

The author’s critics, in the opening *videtur quod* section, argue that 1) he is too devoted to women, manifesting a devotion that is *disonesta* (unchaste or immoral); 2) he is too old to be chatting about them or seeking to please them; 3) he should be among the Muses rather than among women *con queste ciance* (with these trifles); 4) he should be earning his bread by another means; and 5) his reporting of the stories is inaccurate (5–7).

The author, composing as it were the closing section of the *sed contra*, answers these claims in turn (32–38). Contra 1) he has been given to loving women and their *onestà, dalla mia puerizia* (“since my boyhood”; 32); contra 2) he will pursue these efforts “infino nello stremo della mia vita” (“until my life’s final breath”; 33), just as Cavalcanti, Dante, and Cino have done; contra 3) we cannot reside among the Muses, but only those that resemble them, namely women, who have inspired his verses; contra 4) poets find their means to live, their bread

²¹ *Metalogicon* 2.5, cited by Lawn 21–22.

²² On this method, see Marenbon 27–29; see also Kenny and Pinburg 25–27.

and wealth, through their stories, “assai già, dietro alle lor favole andando, fecero la loro età fiorire, dove in contrario molti nel cercar d’aver più pane che bisogno non era loro, perirono acerbi” (“certainly enough to live to a flourishing old age, whereas many others, chasing more bread than they need, die green and bitter”; 38); and contra 5) if he has distorted the truth of things, let others provide *gli originali*, a veridical transcription of events.

Thus, if the *quaestio* under dispute is, Should the author be writing the *Decameron*?, the author has cited and countered numerous arguments. Hardly a Certaldan San Tommaso, he bases his replies on rhetorical more than logical arguments, on persuasion more than demonstration.²³ Parodying the Scholastic form, the author applies inference and induction to refer repeatedly to ageing and the passing of time, to boyhood and senectitude, to youthful sighs and dying breaths. Taking note of this transience, we may articulate the existential question of the Introduction to Day Four. If Boccaccio asked, at the outset of his work, What does it mean to be in love and young?, he asks now, What does it mean to be in love as one grows older? Implicit in this question is the evocation and recollection of the past—not only the emotional turbulence that the author recorded in the Proem, but also the feminine inspiration for his poetry. Boccaccio calls forth and gathers in the present moment both dimensions of eros, the perilous and the creative, as they form the contours of the writing of the author’s life. His answer to his existential question, and his critics, comes in the central moment of the intervention, where a Scholastic would cite a timeless, ahistorical authority. The intervention instead chooses the authority of “raccontare non una novella intera” (11) but, rather, an incomplete story.

The author tells the story of Filippo Balducci, who brings his son to Mount Asinaio to live in isolation, only to see him later enchanted by the women of Florence. Many scholars have discussed how the tale expresses Boccaccio’s praise of naturalism, his sense of morality, or his verbal dexterity. I would underline the story’s phenomenological quality, how it brings to light Boccaccio’s views on the temporal triad of life, love, and language.²⁴

²³ On the *quaestio* form, see Kircher, *Poet’s Wisdom*, 259–263; see the comment by Marchesi, *Stratigrafie decameroniane* 55. On Boccaccio’s use of rhetoric in this intervention, see Tronci 55–104.

²⁴ Among the many commentators: Di Pino 101–106; Ramat 50–69; Neuschäfer 56–58; Marcus 50–51; Sanguineti; Goldin, esp. 345–347; Degani; Mazzotta 133–137; D’Andrea 95–108; Mazzacurati, esp. 296–299; Battaglia Ricci 85–94; Marchesi, *Stratigrafie decameroniane*

That his novella is “unfinished” indicates its phenomenological aspect. It unveils its meaning in time and over time, as it encounters its various readers in inter-subjective crossings. Like Petrarch’s autobiographical letter *Ad posteritatem*, it claims to be incomplete, suggesting how the story and its meaning elude authoritative, conclusive definition. Carlo Delcorno and others have identified antecedents to the tale in the *Novellino*, religious *exempla*, and the lives of the desert fathers.²⁵ Fourteenth-century mendicants, in particular Domenico Cavalca, popularized these saints’ lives. The fictive Balducci could have read these *vitae* to his son, discoursing “sempre della gloria di vita eterna e di Dio e de’ santi” (“continually about the glory of eternal life, and of God and his saints”; 15). In at least one of these tales, a pious eremite fasts and prays for many years in the desert, only to find himself ill-prepared for temptation when he travels to a city.

Filippo’s mistake is to think his son spiritually fortified for his encounter with the beauties of Florence. Boccaccio uses this trope of disillusionment, however, in ways the holy stories do not address. The novella conveys a greater sensibility for the passing of time and for life’s ineluctable finitude. The story is about father and son, two generations, spanning a period of 16 years, as they grow older together. The father, Filippo, has lost the love of his life, his wife, to death, which “happens to us all,” the author remarks. Disconsolate, Filippo withdraws from the *mondo* (secular world) and abstains from *temporal cosa* (temporal things). The child is two years old at the time. Years later, he accompanies his father to Florence for the first time, “essendo già il garzone d’età di diciotto anni e Filippo vecchio” (“being now a youth of eighteen years and Filippo an old man”; 17). In asking to accompany him, the boy tells Filippo, “Padre mio, voi siete oggimai vecchio e potete male durare fatica” (“Father, you are old now and can bear the strain only with difficulty”), whereas “io che son giovane e posso meglio faticar di voi” (“I, who am young, can more easily bear the effort”; 17).

In light of the existential process of ageing, Filippo errs by overlooking his son’s maturation into manhood. His son becomes entranced by the appearance, the phenomena, of the “belle giovani donne e ornate” (“beautiful, elegant young ladies”; 20): “a me non è ancora paruta vedere alcuna così bella né così piacevole come queste sono. Elle son più belle che gli agnoli dipinti che voi m’avete più volte

49–64; Best; Gittes 50–51, 234–236; Sherberg 24–30; Psaki, *Boccaccio and Feminist Criticism* 222–225.

²⁵ See Delcorno, in addition to the writings by Scaglione; Goldin; and others mentioned above.

mostrati” (“there has never appeared to me anything so beautiful and pleasing. They are more beautiful than the painted angels that you have so often shown me”; 28).

With the aid of his painted angels, Filippo has sought to freeze time and, in a sense, deny his son’s maturation, only to discover himself powerless to do so. When the author writes that Filippo “sentí incontanente piú aver di forza la natura che il suo ingegno” (“realized, all of a sudden, that nature [*natura*] had more power than his efforts”; 29), *natura* can be understood not only as amorous desire but also as time’s passing. Understood this way, Filippo’s lesson reflects upon the familial authorities in the Proem, who would deny their daughters and sisters their moment in the sun, outside the “little rooms” (“piccole cellette”) in which they have been cloistered.

These authorities, like the author’s critics, take up arms against eros and, more importantly, against time, against life’s ripeness and its finitude. Their moral constructions are both physical—the small chambers and cells—and linguistic. Besides showing the pretensions of Scholastic Latinity, the *sed contra* novella reveals how language more generally may strive to conceal reality, the phenomena of love and life. The urban conversation between father and son consists in naming things, in using language to lay bare the phenomena they encounter. When they meet the young ladies, however, Filippo tells his son to avert his gaze, and he pronounces the women *mala cosa*, a wicked thing (21). Upon his son’s repeated request (and his fixed attention), Filippo calls them *papere*, baby geese. Giuseppe Mazzotta has stressed Filippo’s *equivocatio* in his attempt to use language to “control and mask what to Boccaccio is the irreducibility of the reality of desire” (137).

This may well be. We may observe, too, how Filippo’s lessons founder on the phenomenal, the reality of the moment. For what reason does he call the maidens *papere*?²⁶ In one of the story’s analogues, the thirteenth-century *exemplum* of Odo of Cheriton, an abbot names women *anserres*, or geese.²⁷ Filippo calls the women “goslings,” *young* or baby geese, and then adds, “non sai donde elle s’imbeccano”

²⁶ Marcus (51) states that it demonstrates Filippo’s verbal dexterity; others (e.g., Ramat 56; Marchesi, *Stratigrafie decameroniane* 55; Best), his hatred or fear of women.

²⁷ Hervieux 4.409, cited by Sanguineti 143. Branca (*Decameron*, note to IV.Intro.12) recounts a number of antecedents. The Middle High German analogue *Das genselîn* has a diminutive for its title, but the abbot calls the women *gense* (geese). See *Decameron*, ed. Cesare Segre 1271. Boccaccio distinguishes *oca* from *papero* in *Decameron* VIII.3.9. Best has written about *papere* as a misogynistic pejorative and as a word that also emphasizes sexuality while it tries to repress it. My reading places this fear of *donne*, of women and sexuality, into the context of Filippo’s larger

(“you do not know how they feed / how they fill their bills”; 29). His reply conceals and reveals how he fears not only women, but also the young, on account of their unpredictability and inconstancy. They change with time and are pushed out into the variable world by eros. Those “little geese” that the son sees, that is, the pretty young women, have just returned from two weddings and are flush with experiencing youth’s rite of passage in love. Filippo and the censors the author faces wish to govern the existential flow of life—and not only eros—through language, to register the phases of life according to a sense of propriety, a notion of *onestà*. This contrasts with Boccaccio and other vernacular poets who use the humble idiom to chart phenomena in their passing splendour.

4. The openness of the author’s Conclusion

The arguments of the Introduction to Day Four stamp the author’s Conclusion, as scholars have noted.²⁸ The Conclusion is another apology for his enterprise, and Boccaccio explicitly recalls the previous one in the opening lines (2). While the Conclusion also defends his work for consoling female readers, we may notice how it changes the tone and scale of the apology. Those changes reveal how Boccaccio ultimately develops his thinking on life, love, and language. If a central argument of the Introduction to Day Four is that acknowledging eros means accepting ageing, here the even more fundamental point seems to be the converse of this argument: that accepting ageing, and the passing of time, means also acknowledging eros as part of life.

Because the critics of the work have changed. They are no longer the familial guardians or the literary and scholarly watchmen; the critics are now among the women readers themselves: “Saranno per avventura alcune di voi che diranno che io abbia nello scriver queste novelle troppa licenzia usata” (“There may be by chance some of you who will say that I have used excessive license in recording these stories”; 3). These women object to the stories’ salacious language. The Conclusion, then, demonstrates how readers may respond differently to the *Decameron* as it progresses in its sequence, and as they, too, alter their views on life and eros over time. And the *carissime donne*, by recalling the past, also mark

anxiety over life’s finitude and ineluctable transience, in the face of which traditional spiritual assurances do not hold.

²⁸ E.g., Gittes 235; Sherberg 30–31; and Cervigni 527–534.

how the author, too, has changed in the course of his undertaking, as he confronts the headwinds of criticism; his dialogue with his *donne* undergoes inter-subjective shifts from the Proem to the Conclusion.

We have grown older with the text, the author implies. What pleased us at one time may offend us at another, if we have become *spigolistre* (5), prudish, or indeed one of the *pinzochere* (15), the women devoted to mendicant pieties. Looking back at the other interventions, we see how Boccaccio has moved from speaking about the suffering of women first, to eliciting their support against his critics next, to finally placing some of the women among his critics. His dialogue with women has deepened. A number of these women, perhaps now wives and mothers, appear to have enrolled in the Trecento moral legion.

In confronting these new members of the moral vanguard, Boccaccio focuses on their notions of language, linguistic propriety in particular. They would use language like Filippo and the earlier critics do in order to conceal the existential phenomenon of eros. These prudish women “più le parole pesan che’ fatti e più d’apparer s’ingegnan che d’esser buone” (“weigh words more than deeds, and use their wits more in appearing, rather than being good”; 5), while the *pinzochere* “altressí dicono e anche fanno delle cosette otta per vicenda” (“otherwise discuss and even engage in a number of similar trifles from time and time”; 15). Masquerading with propriety, seeming morally righteous, they privately follow their pleasures, like the friars who instruct them.

We have witnessed different ways in which Boccaccio relates language to reality, and these ways all come into play in the Conclusion. Similar to his Proem, it states how the stories were written “a chi per tempo passar legge” (“for those who read to pass the time”; 20). Like the Introduction to Day Four, it emphasizes the futility and indeed the hypocrisy of using language to disguise reality. But more than the previous interventions, the Conclusion looks at how his stories appear to his readers depending on time, place, and circumstance. It seems or appears to him (*mi pare*), he writes, to have used *onesti vocaboli* (chaste, moral terms) when telling a tale that may be somewhat *disonesta* (unchaste, immoral; 3). What matters is the view of his intended audience, which is neither clergy nor scholars but, rather, “persone giovani, benché mature e non pieghevoli per novelle, in tempo nel quale andar con le brache in capo per iscampo di sé era alli più onesti non disdicevole” (“young people, though mature and not seduced by stories, at a time when even the most proper people saw nothing unseemly in wearing their pants on their head if they found it a way to save themselves”; 7). This remark alludes to

Decameron IX.2, where the abbess, in order to rebuke a nun for a sexual dalliance, rushes from her own liaison with a priest and mistakes his pants for her veil. The remark more broadly engages the theme of false appearances, and holding forth in judgment when harbouring the same transgressive desires. Boccaccio suggests that the young listeners, since they know themselves and the power of love, are less prone to be misled or even offended by these tales. And the older readers, at least some of them, will protest too much, feeling the need to hide their erotic passions.

But “niuna corrotta mente intese mai sanamente parola” (“no corrupt mind ever understands language in a healthy way”; 11). The adjective *corrotta* recalls the *appetiti corrotti* of Boccaccio’s critics (IV.Intro.42), who wished to deny the laws of nature. Just as *natura* there, I have argued, connotes the flow of existence along with the power of eros, so *corrotta* here transcends a mere moral designation on Boccaccio’s part.²⁹ This adjective, rather, displays the proclivity for concealing the forces of eros and time by setting moral strictures on poet and audience. Boccaccio cannot resist the double-entendre and cannot refrain from suggesting how all things, especially language, have a sexual component that displays itself in time. He may, he writes, have developed a “mala lingua e velenosa” (“wicked and poisonous tongue”; 25) for writing the truth about friars. For nothing in the world is stable, but is “sempre [...] in mutamento” (“always in flux”; 27). The woman who lives next door, however, has assured him that he still has “la migliore e la più dolce [lingua] del mondo” (“the best and sweetest tongue in the world”; 27). Thus, he concludes “lasciando omai a ciascheduna e dire e credere come le pare” (“leaving now each lady to speak and to believe as it seems or appears to her”; 29). The *pare*, it bears repeating, shifts with time and personal experience.

Boccaccio’s Conclusion begins by recalling both the Proem and the Introduction to Day Four: “Nobilissime giovani, a consolazion delle quali io a così lunga fatica messo mi sono [...]” (“Most noble young ladies, for whose consolation I have undertaken this extended effort [...]). The *carissime donne* have become *nobilissime*, and the theme of consolation resounds once more. If he still calls them *giovani*, this may be for irony’s sake, or to intimate to them their abiding past: the ladies were once and hence still are young, as their youth remains in recollection. This leads us to our closing consideration about time: Boccaccio wants his readers to notice the passing of time, the “molto tempo passato [...] da poi che io a scriver cominciai” (“the long time that has passed since I began to write”; 20); and all this time is dedicated, he states again, “per cacciar la malinconia delle femine” (“to

²⁹ See the examination by Marchesi, *Stratigrafie decameroniane* 31–32.

disperse the sadness of women"; 23). In a phenomenological way, time ceases to be three-dimensional. It resides in a dimension beyond past, present, and future, for the past reaches out to the present through the modality of its absence, through the awareness of what has been, just as Boccaccio or the reader, at any place in the work, attends to what may come. Past and future wait upon the present and are present in the moment through memory or anticipation (Heidegger, *Zur Sache des Denkens* 15). They do not disappear or fade away in their absence, or become unreal, but, on the contrary, affect what the author and reader perceive at any given instant. It would be an inviting yet complex task to see this crossing of past, present, and future in Dante's progress in the *Commedia* or in Petrarch's composing of the *Canzoniere*. Time takes on a new meaning for Trecento poets, a meaning different from being linear or circular, spiritual or secular. For the *Decameron*, Boccaccio would show us how his devotion to his ladies, his erotic loyalty, made the music by which he kept time. In keeping time, he recorded its power over his whole enterprise.

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