What is Authorial Philology?

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A stark departure from traditional philology, What is Authorial Philology? is the first comprehensive treatment of authorial philology as a discipline in its own right. It provides readers with an excellent introduction to the theory and practice of editing 'authorial texts' alongside an exploration of authorial philology in its cultural and conceptual architecture. The originality and distinction of this work lies in its clear systematization of a discipline whose autonomous status has only recently been recognised.

This pioneering volume offers both a methodical set of instructions on how to read critical editions, and a wide range of practical examples, expanding upon the conceptual and methodological apparatus laid out in the first two chapters. By presenting a thorough account of the historical and theoretical framework through which authorial philology developed, Paola Italia, Giulia Raboni and their co-authors successfully reconceptualize the authorial text as an ever-changing organism, subject to alteration and modification.

What is Authorial Philology? will be of great didactic value to students and researchers alike, providing readers with a fuller understanding of the rationale behind different editing practices, and addressing both traditional and newer methods such as the use of the digital medium and its implications. Spanning the whole Italian tradition from Petrarch to Carlo Emilio Gadda, and with examples from key works of European literature, this ground-breaking volume provokes us to consider important questions concerning a text's dynamism, the extent to which an author is 'agentive', and, most crucially, about the very nature of what we read.

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A definition of authorial philology

Authorial philology — a felicitous term coined by Dante Isella (Isella 1987) — differs from philology of the copy (which studies variants introduced through transmission) because it examines the variants introduced by the author himself/herself on the manuscript or on a print. These are variants that bear witness to a change in the author’s will, to a more or less significant change of perspective regarding a specific text. Hence, the object of study of authorial philology, on the one hand, consists in the study of how a text is elaborated, a text whose autograph has come down to us and which bears traces of authorial corrections and revisions (and is therefore an in fieri opus) and, on the other hand, the object of study involves the examination of the various editions themselves, be they handwritten or printed, of a work. Of course, from a material point of view, very different situations can arise. The most emblematic case of authorial variants is an unpublished manuscript, but there can also be authorial variants on printed copies or on apograph copies (made, for example, by a copyist), or we might find that the traces of the reworking process may not be directly testified by the autograph interventions but ‘recorded’ by the non-authorial manuscript tradition or by the prints.

The critical edition in authorial philology

In philology of the copy, setting up a critical edition means creating a text that comes as convincingly close as possible to the lost original.
In authorial philology, instead, it means deciding which text to pick as copy-text and reconstructing, through appropriate systems of representation, the corrections made during the gestation or revision of the work. When confronted with a text, therefore, the philologist’s work has two aims:

- *establishing the critical text*, that is, to decide which reading to pick as copy-text;
- *reconstructing and representing* in the clearest and most rational way the process of correction of the text itself.

Authorial philology therefore takes us directly into the writer’s workshop, leading us to know their secrets, their ‘recipes’, and allowing us to penetrate the inner workings of their texts. It is similar to the evidential process, in which we have objective data offered by our witnesses that must be connected and understood in the most rational and logical way possible, using all the elements we have at our disposal: letters, notes, other texts, knowledge about the literary environment, about the author’s linguistic skills, style, etc. This is a sort of *ex-post* reconstruction of what happened in the author’s mind to bring the work to fruition.

What is the purpose of this reconstruction? Given that we already have the text and could base our study on this alone, what other information can allow us to know about the factors that preceded or accompanied the text during its history? This is the key question which leads us to consider the critical implications of this branch of philology, the so-called *criticism of variants*.

*(Authorial) philology and critics (of variants)*

If, then, authorial philology investigates the process of how a text is elaborated, criticism of variants represents the critical application of the results of such philological study. Both disciplines focus their attention on the creative moment concerning the genesis of the text or its evolution, and both make assumptions, on the basis of the extant materials, about the relationship between the author and the text. The study of this relationship does not only concern the time of the creation
of the work, but also what follows its printing, including the more or less numerous and complex revisions which affect the printed text.

Philology is concerned with the representation of a text along with its corrections and variants; criticism deals with the interpretation of this collective information. Both modes of enquiry, description and interpretation, are closely intertwined, not least because the descriptive process is neither neutral nor limited to the literary aspect of the text, but requires one to take into account many different factors — historical, cultural and linguistic — that contribute to how we interpret and connect up the data in a reconstruction which is, in itself, an act of critical interpretation. We will see how the very evolution of the discipline leads to an increasingly interpretative philology, moving from the preference for synchronic and photographic apparatuses (i.e., methods for the representation of corrections) towards a diachronic and ‘systemic’ apparatus.

As we can see, then, we are dealing with a new way of looking at the texts, a new kind of approach which has only recently become an autonomous discipline. What distinguishes authorial philology and its critical application from other methods of literary criticism? The answer is, above all, the consideration of the text as a living organism that can evolve. In the past, the text was considered as a fixed, unmoving object, the result of a moment of creative genius that cannot be explained rationally and has to be evaluated largely as an artistic product according to different aesthetic canons. In authorial philology and criticism of variants, the text is instead considered as an expression of a process of research, whose final product is simply the result of subsequent ‘approximations to a value’ (according to a well-known phrase by Contini) — a value which is not absolute but relative, dependent on the relationship with the preceding texts.

This new approach modifies the aesthetic evaluation of a text as well. The text is not sharply judged according to the simple alternative ‘poetry’/ ‘non-poetry’ as proposed by the idealist philosopher Benedetto Croce at the beginning of the twentieth century. Rather, the text is constantly related to its internal history, which is embedded in its existence as a final product. It might be useful to start with a definition given by the founder of criticism of variants, Gianfranco Contini (in 1947; see now Contini 1982: 233–34):
What significance do the authors’ corrected manuscripts have for the critic? There are essentially two ways of considering a work of poetry. One is a static perspective, so to speak, that thinks of the work as an object or result, giving a characterizing description of it. The other is a dynamic one, which regards it as a human product or a work in progress and dramatically represents its dialectic life. The first approach evaluates the poetic work in terms of a ‘value’; the second perspective evaluates it in terms of a never-ending ‘approximation to a value’. This second approach, compared to that first, ‘absolute’ one, might be defined as ‘pedagogical’, in the most elevated meaning of the word. The interest in later versions and authorial variants (as with the *pentimenti* and repaintings of a painter) fits into this pedagogical vision of art, since it replaces the myth of the dialectic representation with more literal and documentarily-founded historical elements.

As we can see, this is not solely a philological problem, but also a philosophical one, even though it is striking that the critical, ideological and philosophical implications only began to be discussed after some tangible attempts had been made to prepare editions based on authorial philology.

**From Petrarch’s *Canzoniere* to modern texts**

The study of the elaboration of a text — from the first idea and the drafting of early preliminary sketches to the construction and refining that accompanies its genesis and subsequent evolution — is the critical approach that brings us closest to the author’s choices, eventually allowing us to evaluate more deeply his/her poetics. This is difficult to do for ancient and medieval texts, where the ‘vertical’ transmission — i.e., based on copies made from the original manuscript, which is lost — has cancelled and blurred the possible traces of any different authorial will. On the contrary, the reconstruction of the development of the variants — i.e., the adjustments and corrections made to the text while it was first being written, or later in time — is possible when the autograph documents have been preserved. In Italian literature, this means from the time of Petrarch’s *Canzoniere* (*Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*), of which we possess not only the idiograph of the final version, but also the so-called Codice degli abbozzi, which is a composite autograph manuscript preserving both initial and intermediate redactions of various poems in different
stages of their elaboration. The Codice degli abbozzi is a fundamental testimony, not only because of the importance of the documentation it preserves and of the canonical value of Petrarch’s *Canzoniere* for the whole development of Italian literature, but also because the Codice shows an awareness of the act of writing literature that differs from that seen in previous medieval literature (including Dante, for whom no autograph is preserved). Such awareness implies on the author’s part a special care for the preservation of his/her own papers and for their dissemination.

The presence of autographs — accompanied or replaced after the invention of printing in the 1450s by printed editions that the author may or may not have edited — is increasingly attested from this period onwards, and reaches its peak in the modern age, becoming the norm in twentieth century, when specific conservation centres have been established for autograph manuscripts, developing proper storage spaces and consultation policies and criteria for such purposes.

**History, methods, examples**

This work aims to follow the developments of the discipline of authorial philology, developments which have been fully clarified only recently, after almost a century of its history, thanks to a theoretical effort that has resulted in a substantial bibliography over the last few years. The main purpose of this book, in accordance with its introductory and didactic character, is however to provide a clear account of the methods of this discipline in its practical application by listing the fundamental elements of the critical edition and analysing some relevant cases.

The choice of the editions that we will analyze in their chronological order is based on the principle of presenting a case history of circumstances and critical methodologies that is as broad as possible, in order to offer innovative proposals regarding at least one of the following problems that the editor faces in dealing with a text:

- *Defining a base-text* (what redaction should be privileged? Should we take the one corresponding to the first authorial intention or to their final intention?): there are many different proposed solutions, as we can see by comparing the two cases
of Pietro Bembo’s *Prose della volgar lingua* (see section 3.2 below) and Giacomo Leopardi’s *Canti* (see section 3.5);

- Distinguishing *writing stages* (to be represented in the apparatus) and *intermediate versions* (which have to be published in full): this is the problem raised by the so-called *Seconda minuta* of *I promessi sposi* (see section 3.4);

- Dealing with the problem of the ‘untouchability’ of the text and of finding criteria for *representing the variants* (as can be seen again in the critical edition of Bembo’s *Prose della volgar lingua*);

- Explaining the relationship that a single text can have with a greater textual ‘whole’ as in the case of organized collections of poems, such as Petrarch’s *Canzoniere* and Tasso’s *Rime d’amore* (for which see section 3.3).

In each of these examples we have tried to highlight the advantages and possible side effects of the editorial choices undertaken, so as to encourage a reflective approach and offer further points for consideration. In this context, it is important to remember that the perfect critical edition does not exist, but within certain established criteria (coherence between text and apparatus; the need to avoid contamination between different chronological writing stages; the rationale for every editorial intervention on the text, etc.) each edition raises specific issues that can be resolved through individual philological solutions.

**One discipline, different skills**

We have already said that, as with philology of the copy, the practice of authorial philology requires different skills related to the author and his/her time. Useful information for interpreting and therefore properly ‘restoring’ a text includes both data that is historical, documentary and biographical (dating of the versions and their chronological sequence as they can be assessed through external elements) and a close knowledge of the *genre* (metrics, stylistics, etc.). Palaeographic expertise (the ability to assess the authorship of the autograph and knowledge of the author’s graphical habits, etc.), archival expertise (an understanding of whether, for instance, the order of the papers is original or has been modified)
and knowledge of the history of the language (the *usus scribendi* and the evolution of the author’s linguistic habits) are fundamental as well.

In this regard, the philologist also has to be a literary historian, a scholar of metrics and stylistics, a palaeographer and codicologist, an historian of language, one able to combine a very careful and detailed analysis of the object of study with an understanding of the general historical context, including the history of culture, of literary production and also publishing production, of the printing practice of the time, etc. In many specific textual cases (e.g., as with part of the witnesses of Petrarch’s *Canzoniere*), the interweaving of both a given author’s own innovative re-working and of textual tradition often makes it necessary to use both the methods of authorial philology and of philology of the copy. Likewise, for texts dating from after the introduction of printing, a particularly important contribution has been made by Textual Bibliography, a discipline with origins in Anglo-Saxon scholarship that was later introduced and developed in Italian Studies.

The study of how printed editions were prepared, and above all the acknowledgement of the existence of different exemplars of the same edition, testified to by so-called stop-press corrections, allow the editor to establish the author’s degree of involvement in the printing process. As a consequence, it is possible to evaluate how reliable an edition is both in its overall structuring of the text and in its single readings (editor’s interventions and possible censorship or alterations must be carefully taken into consideration), as well as with regard to the linguistic aspects of the text, which are often affected by a process of normalization which is not always due to the author.

Obviously, the more complex the textual circumstances are, the more difficult it will be to include in a single visual representation the whole set of information. For instance, when we are dealing with macro-organisms such as collection of poems or short stories, or epistolaries, there may be, just like in philology of the copy, organic witnesses (i.e., manuscripts or print copies that contain the entire collection of texts) and disorganic witnesses (i.e., copies with single texts in earlier versions that are sometimes autonomous from the overall project of the collection). There are also particular interventions connected to wider projects of revision which require us to evaluate the relationship between the individual correction and the wider writing phase. In this case, too, two
different perspectives have to be combined: one ‘from afar’, which allows us to embed the single text in an organic whole, and the other ‘from close up’, which analyzes the single text as an autonomous organism. The case-study of Petrarch’s *Canzoniere* and its different forms over time is the most conspicuous example in this sense. It is no accident that, even though various studies in the last decades have been devoted to its structure, no critical edition has been produced so far that is able to embrace the entire process of its elaboration. Similar problems arise in many other traditions, and, in several instances, modern editors have introduced unacceptable contaminations between global structure and single adopted readings of the poems, or have largely deliberately ignored the author’s ordering.

**Digital editions and common representations**

One possible solution to these problems might come from digital editions, which allow us to represent the textual tradition in ways that enable a focus on specific elements as well as the textual whole, for a more direct and, at the same time, more synoptic representation of the textual tradition. Digital editions are able to visually render the passage from one ‘system’ to another, by means of virtual technologies that simulate the gradual increments made to a text.

The above-mentioned idea of a text in progress suits very well a representation *in fieri* as offered by hyper-textual editions. In this way, the various ‘movements’ of the text can be visually represented through specific uses of space and colours.

Nevertheless, even though the value of studying the Italian *scartafacci* is well established nowadays (see Chapter 2 for the debate about this at the beginning of the twentieth century), the study of variants is in fact deeply conditioned by the lack of shared editorial criteria, both within Italy and outside. This makes it difficult to use editions, since with each edition, one has to deal with a new system of diacritical marks and symbols, without being able to rely on any form of standardization.

One consequence here is that, whereas the Italian philological school is undoubtedly very active in preparing critical authorial editions, the use of variants as a way of making incisive comment on texts is still lacking, although it has become more and more popular in the last few
years. At the same time, far less use is made in Italy compared to France of various kinds of apparatus in order to characterize the author’s *modus operandi* and the creative and elaborative mechanisms underlying the text (for the *critique génétique*, see Chapter 3).

A judicious balance between a practical approach and a more general critical concern is the best way to create more accessible and readable editions, above all with the aim of clearly offering the largest amount of available data, by having recourse as far as is possible to common systems of textual representation, while at the same time respecting the fact that every text is singular and unique. According to Isella (2009a: 245):

> the critical edition of an *in fieri* text is different from time to time: it depends on the different materials on which we work (loose papers, notebooks of any kind, autographs, idiographs, copies made by others — for instance, some lines and redactions by Montale are only known through photocopies, and so on). Because the phenomenology of the text that has multiple redactions or is *in fieri* extremely varied and articulated, it is necessary to establish common rules, as with classical philology.