"The Mobile Text: Studying Literature in the Digital Age"

Massimo Lollini, Editor, Humanist Studies & the Digital Age

Welcome to the second issue of *Humanist Studies & the Digital Age*. It is entirely devoted to the proceedings of a symposium held at the University of Roma Tre, "Il testo è mobile. Studiare la letteratura dopo i nuovi media" ("The Mobile Text: Studying Literature in the Digital Age") on January 10, 2012. The symposium gathered a group of prominent Italian scholars who for years have been studying the impact of digital technology on humanist studies, from philology to literature, from the philosophy of the mind to pedagogy and art. We thought that the nature of the discussion and the quality of the contributions deserved immediate circulation among scholars working on these issues. All the papers are published in the original language in which they were delivered (all in Italian, except for one in English); however, we are providing all abstracts in English translation as well; moreover, I include a rapid summary of the main arguments developed by the various scholars in my editorial. We hope that our publication will contribute to enhancing and broadening the dialogue among scholars rooted in different national traditions. To this goal we encourage our readers to take advantage of one of the most interesting features of our software that allows users to make comments on the articles published in our e-journal and to contact the authors directly.

In the Introduction to the volume, Francesco Fiorentino and Domenico Fiormonte—the symposium organizers and guest editors of this volume—draw readers' attention to the current crisis in the humanistic sciences as a positive regenerative moment that may favor a transition to new forms of human sciences. In their view, new forms of knowledge should be based on interdisciplinary work and close collaboration between "hard" and "soft" sciences. The digital revolution plays a crucial role in this process, producing a new textual culture, one in which the text rediscovers its proper nature as a bio-anthropological medium, returning to its constitutive fluidity and opening up to interdisciplinary hypermediality.

The volume is divided into two parts. Part one addresses the question "Is the text mobile?" In answering this question, Alberto Sobrero emphasizes that the internet changes our ways of both knowing and thinking. The internet replaces a linear and centralized model with a circular and diffused framework for self-learning that presents certain familiar limits: it demands speed or, at least, not pausing. The internet user is omnivorous, in a rush, and develops a memory that is limited to the short term. However, there are some positive aspects of circular learning that should be emphasized: the possibility of constructing personal paths, comparing different opinions, innovating, overcoming old disciplinary

divisions, surmounting the drawbacks of linear learning that often lead to uncritical and purely molecular thinking.

Mario Ricciardi's contribution presents two theses. The first holds that the text, due to its genetic and historic nature, is always immutable and never mobile. The second thesis is based on the assertion that hypertext technology and culture represent the most transformative location and agency; they are the actors of the paradigm shift in which we are implicated. The hypertext revolution is based on the criticism of and attack against the material supports of writing and reading, as well as typographic technologies. For Ricciardi, hypertext fights and wins this battle but hypertext technology is not able to reach the deep structure of alphabetic culture that is made not only of material support but also mental and bodily experience, consolidated and evolving, and of social relationships that are implied in the materiality of the support.

For Raul Mordenti the transformation of the text from the pre-information technology and Gutenberg modes to the model marked by information or digital technology is such that it substantially changes not only the concept of the text but also the nature of philology itself. Mordenti's contribution presents and discusses the problems encountered in producing a digital edition of the *Zibaldone Laurenziano*, Giovanni Boccaccio's handwritten manuscript conserved in the Laurenziana Library in Florence (Pluteo XXIX, 8). The Medieval text in general, and even more in the case of a *zibaldone*-type text, has intrinsic characteristics that clash with the immobility and definitive nature typical of the print text. The digital edition, Mordenti concludes, can be based on hypertextuality and hypermediality, using the internet as a resource, and is perfectly able to render textual movement, restoring the text to its specific mobility.

Domenico Fiormonte's article underlines the strict interdependence of the concepts of text, time and truth in relation to textual transmission. He develops the thesis that the identity of the text is a function of a series of actors playing on different levels, including the historic and the religious. Fiormonte points out the example of the origination of the Old Testament, which he considers the real foundational act of Western practices of identity construction/reconstruction. This event generated the metaphysics of the text that produced the overlapping of theological and philological truth. Nonetheless, for Fiormonte, the digital dimension seems potentially able to call into crisis the pact of identity that is based on the assumed stability of the written document and the idea of time that derives from it. However, he concludes, we are facing a dialogue and interaction with and between machines that the methods and traditional tools of the humanist sciences find increasingly difficult to understand, describe, and map.

Rocco Ronchi, in the last contribution in Part one, addresses the modern crisis of the philosophical project that conceived of literature as *mathesis universalis*. He holds that in the digital universe literature maintains its relationship with truth, which is no longer considered as transcending the process of knowing, but as given in unity with it. Ronchi thinks that the new statute of the text is captured well by Carlo Sini's idea of "foglio-mondo" ("world-page"). Sini suggests that the desacralized text is not situated "outside" of

truth; it does not become, as happens in many postmodern thinkers, play, deceit, and gratuitous narration. Rather, "foglio-mondo" is the text freed from the tutelage of transcendental truth to become an "event" of truth.

In the contribution that opens Part two ("Literature and the New Media"), Arturo Mazzarella invites us to go beyond the difference between literary writing and new communication technologies. For him, this appears to be possible through a genealogical perspective that can recognize the underlying relationships between communication strategies that on the surface seem different. For Mazzarella, it is necessary to identify the remote and unexpected ascendancies of diverse languages at a moment in which the various media express themselves in an increasingly similar style. Even literary language should be considered a medium that shapes and models reality, using codes that are anthropological before being aesthetic. As Viktor Shklovsky, Italo Calvino, and Paolo Fabbri have shown, literary language explores reality by revealing its incompleteness. On the contrary, Mazzarella concludes, ordinary language is confined precisely to that incompleteness with its standard lexicon that would claim to enclose reality within a net of pre-established recurrences.

In her contribution, Laura Fortini dialogues with the other interventions from the point of view represented by feminist literary criticism. This diverse positioning in relation to the work of women writers has allowed feminist criticism to develop a path that has deconstructed the Italian literary canon and the promotion of critical stances that are no longer abstract or monologic, but rather situated in the point of view of the subject and its relational component. Works by Italian women writers, Fortini concludes, present themselves as a body of texts of high material density that transfer questions of textual mobility both within digital and print culture onto the subject and its style of enunciation.

Finally, Massimo Riva, argues that the "liquefying" of (literary) canons and the emergence of new forms of mobile textuality, as intrinsically kinetic or fluid, require a critical assessment that does not prematurely celebrate the funeral of the text as humanists know it but pays close attention to what seems to be waiting to be revealed beyond the text. For Riva, this means paying attention to what he calls *digital incunabula*: objects/textual tools, devices programmed in a twofold, reciprocal sense, whose linguistic properties and rules interact and interfere with the algorithmic procedures of artificial languages. In this programmed and programmable interaction and intermediation one can perceive the horizon of incomprehensibility of what Riva calls "posthuman language."

Even this very short summary gives an idea of the richness of the papers presented at the symposium "The Mobile Text: Studying Literature in the Digital Age. " A few months later, a similar symposium on "[Textualities in the Digital Age](#)" was held at the University of Oregon, focusing on a range of approaches to digital texts, from digital critical editions to computer-assisted historical inquiry. Stanley Fish was the keynote speaker at this symposium which included presentations from Richard Furuta, Abigail Firey, and James Ginther, among others. The 2013 issue of *Humanist Studies & the Digital Age* will publish the proceedings of this symposium and include, in addition to the other essays, a

presentation of the Princeton Dante Project by John Hollander. Finally, in closing this brief editorial let me anticipate the topic of the 2014 issue of *Humanist Studies & the Digital Age*: "Lector in Rete: Figures of the Reader in Digital Humanities," which will address the complex questions of readership in digital projects.