

Scribal Culture and Theory of Authorship: The Case of the Marco Polo Manuscript Tradition

From its legendary inception in a Genoa prison cell to the 1928 critical edition by Luigi Foscolo Benedetto, Marco Polo's account of his travels has had a convoluted and complex history. According to Benedetto, Polo's work can rightly be considered a "lost book," of which modern editions are mere conjectural 'approximations' or 'reconstructions' of extant corrupt manuscripts, no two of which are exactly alike. The procession of copyists and translators who disseminated Polo's travel account justifiably free to alter and embellish the text to their own ends. Influenced by their own immediate interests, the interests of their patrons, and the cultural climate in which they worked, these scribes are thus responsible for the often radical divergences and digressions from the text that exist from one manuscript to another.

The absence of the original text and the proliferation of competing manuscripts raise significant questions—questions of authorial voice and intention, historical authenticity versus fictional embellishment, generic convention, and canon acceptance—questions which have been continually posed, tentatively answered, and endlessly debated by modern commentators. Hoping to reconstitute the integrity of the lost original, modern literary and historical scholars are left to disentangle and reassemble the traces from the pieces which remain. Ultimately the text we are familiar with today cannot be genuinely ascribed to a single, historical author, but to a collective of chroniclers, scribes, and editors.

This essay will concentrate primarily on the cultural and historical aspects of Marco Polo's travel account and its manuscript tradition, under the following headings: (I) the background and implications of the state of scribal culture up to the fifteenth century and the problems arising out of the copyists' habits of reading, writing and thinking; (II) the issue of co-responsibility of the text as demonstrated in the

prologue to the work; and (III) the oral and written environment as exemplified in the prologue and scribal additions to key manuscript editions of Marco Polo's work.

When one speaks about Marco Polo's text, the role of the copyists is often disregarded or underestimated. The scribes of that period were not only artists and artisans in their own right, but *readers* who, in their work, continually took into account their *own* expectations of the text in addition to those of contemporary and future reading publics. These scribes then, must also be considered responsible, with Rustichello da Pisa, Marco Polo's 'first' transcriber, for the continuity of the text not only in its physical transmission, but also in its editing. Fourteenth century copyists no longer managed their work as their scribal predecessors, who had convened in *scriptoria* found in monasteries. Monastic regulations stipulated that monks were to devote a number of hours to intellectual work, which meant mostly the copying of manuscripts.¹ In monasteries, the ancient system of *pronunciatio* was still practised, meaning that the text was dictated to the assembly of scribes. This demonstrates, in Zumthor's words, that *pronunciatio* "fonctionnait donc, en un premier temps, come réceptrice en situation orale-auditive."² Monastic scribes were also forbidden to make any changes to the text and, even though at times the text that was being copied had ortographic or transcriptive errors, it was expected that the scribe repeated them exactly as they were. By doing so, the transcriber was considered a true master of his craft since he was copying letter by letter. Only later were marginal glosses included to clarify difficult words or passages. As far as falsifying, altering or rewriting were concerned, such actions remained extremely rare.³

Manuscripts acquired further notoriety in the thirteenth century and became more widely used for they were part of the education and the culture of the more affluent order of society. Armando Petrucci writes that the production of manuscripts:

si accrebbe notevolmente in termini numerici rispetto al ruolo precedente, pur se ci è impossibile rendere tale rapporto in precisi dati percentuali; ma anche soltanto il fatto che nelle attuali biblioteche il numero di codici del secolo XII sia incomparabilmente maggiore rispetto a quelli attribuibili al secolo XI può costituire un probante indizio della giustezza della nostra affermazione.⁴

Brian Stock has pointed out that up to the thirteenth century, the act of writing belonged exclusively to higher culture but with the appearance of vernacular languages in textual form, there began an editing of experience and those individuals who had previously been relegated in the background, the "voiceless," had their words fixed in a textual form. This was caused by the emergence of more commercial occasions, and society then became more and more oriented towards the scribe. The placing of spoken testimony and the recording of oral transactions through the process of sifting, classifying and encoding, led to an interaction of language, text and society. Those elements incorporated into the textual framework the oral and the written.⁵ For the increasing number of emerging interests in the thirteenth century, manuscript production was also established in cities, and institutions made ample usage of these products, utilized for the preparation of future professionals.⁶

The *clericus*—a role that demonstrates the close connection between the scribe and the Church—had to have an excellent knowledge of Latin and of the vernacular. It is then correct to designate him as a man of letters, since by this time he had reached a position of importance in the workings of the medieval city. The scribal workplaces were transformed in true scriptorial laboratories similar to commercial enterprises,⁷ workshops with people compiling material and adapting texts, and editorial structures.⁸ The various *mechanical* operations led to assembly line copying, which meant that many manuscripts were no longer transcribed by one person but by a series of scribes.

In studying the manuscript tradition connected with Boccaccio, Vittore Branca has given us a portrait of the copyists which he distinguished in two groups: the professional and the *part-time* amateurs. This second group is particularly interesting because it included people from different backgrounds and interests, people who practised the art of embellishment which Gerald L. Bruns has described as "an art of disclosure as well as an art of amplification: [meaning that] the act of adding to a text is also the act of eliciting from it that which remains unspoken."⁹ Branca explains that:

Di fronte al *Decameron* i lettori non erano raccolti in un atteggiamento di ammirazione e di rispetto come di fronte ai capolavori di evidente e consacrata dignità letteraria.¹⁰

as was the case with the classics or, better still, the text *par excellence*, the Bible. The *Decameron* was continually rewritten and some of its passages were omitted because the *part-time* amateur transcriber, or reader, “tagliava il libro più suo . . . sui suoi gusti, sulle sue necessità, sulle sue preferenze,”¹¹ and what remained were transcriptions

ispirate a grande libertà e guidate da gusti personali assolutamente ignoti ai copisti di professione o ai letterati di stretta osservanza . . . La personalità dei trascrittori, il loro lavorare «en amateurs» lascia più facilmente margine a scelte personali, a ricerche e a tentativi di ricostruzione, a interventi di gusto più o meno notevoli, fino all'estremo di ritocchi o di rifacimenti.¹²

The basic text became then a pretext that permitted transcribers to shape the text, to disassemble it and reassemble a new text.

Paul Zumthor has pointed out, following Marshall McLuhan, the abysmal difference that distinguishes the scribal being from the typographic one, in that manuscript cultures remained tactile-oral and that writing was not as common as it is in our world.¹³ Walter J. Ong also believes that manuscript culture was a continuation of oral culture and he writes that “manuscript cultures remained largely oral-aural even in retrieval of material preserved in texts,”¹⁴ Franz Bäuml writes that

form and content of a written narrative can be manipulated by the writing author or scribe and the reciting reader to a much greater extent than a traditional oral poem by a performing oral poet.¹⁵

It is true that in manuscript culture, intertextuality pervades and proved to be interdependent on oral tradition: texts were *created* from other texts by “borrowing, adapting, sharing the common, originally oral, formulas and themes”¹⁶ and new literary forms were then produced.

In oral tradition, *jongleurs* repeated texts set by the *trouvères*,¹⁷ but at the same time they changed the language and the content, to create the best text possible for their public. The “illiterate oral epic singer” mentioned by Ong, was also without a written text but he did not need one since his thematic memory was filled with formulas that acted as texts.¹⁸ We cannot give at this point, a history of this tradition but *jongleurs* had in practical terms the same role as the “part-time” scribe, who can be rightly considered one of their

descendants. Unlike the *jongleur*, the copyist did have a written text but he did not feel forced to be faithful to its author's wishes, for two well-known reasons: (1) literature in the vernacular was not thought of in terms of literary and creative *ownership* (only with print culture will this factor be taken more into consideration¹⁹); and, (2) copyists of the time did not feel obliged to stick to the letter (or to the spirit, for that matter) of the original text, since they actually considered themselves as colleagues of the author²⁰, fully authorized to bring whatever changes and revisions they thought best suited the text (Zumthor calls them "auteurs successifs"²¹), and elevated their work to the same level of importance as that of the author. Ultimately whoever knew how to write would transcribe and authors such as Bacon, Petrarch, Leonardo Bruni, Chaucer and Reginald Peacock, complained in their writings about the carelessness shown by a number of scribes.²²

Cesare Segre has investigated the *Chanson de Roland* manuscript tradition and has described the scribes' insistent contribution to the transmission of the text, as an incessant creative activity.²³ The *Chanson* was reworked a number of times and each transcription has proven to be a new version and each copyist another rewriter,²⁴ Segre has concluded that such reworkings were not mere acts of improvisation but they were the product of "attività di aggiornamento dei testi al gusto via via predominante."²⁵ The issue at hand was to amend the texts according to the "bon usage"²⁶ that prevailed in a certain period, a process then of normalization and modernization.²⁷ The *chansons de geste* whose first models date back to approximately the year 1100, constituted a "special variety of lofty style,"²⁸ or, as Ramon Menéndez Pidal writes, "una poesía que vive variando" since

los que la cantan, alteran a veces algún detalle de la narración, y como estas raras variaciones de contexto se producen en fechas diversas y en diversos lugares donde el poema es cantado, el episodio o detalle de la fabulación que un refunditor varía en una versión dada, propagación seguirá caminos muy distintos de la propagación que logre otro episodio o detalle modificado en fecha y en lugar diferentes.²⁹

The constancy of genetic-compositional relations between the manuscripts shows the freedom and the creativity that romance scribes enjoyed which tended to reinvigorate the original exemplar. Menéndez Pidal asserts that "el trabajo poético de varias generaciones rean-

ima el texto tradicional, prolongando su extraordinaria vitalidad."³⁰ In spite of this, the lofty style mentioned by Auerbach did not live for long, and as far as the subject matter was concerned, it merged in courtly literature³¹ and hence was transmitted to other genres.

The consumption of the text is proven not only by the circulation of single manuscripts but by the propagation that followed which points out, to use Zumthor's words, "une mobilité essentielle du texte médiéval"³² that has allowed for a textual consumption. Copyists felt free to modify the text, for this reason "chaque version, chaque «état du texte» doit en principe être considéré, plutôt que comme le résultat d'une émendation, comme un ré-emploi, une ré-creation."³³ The literary work is then in a continuous state of flux "elle n'a pas de fin proprement dite: elle se contente, à un certain moment, pour des raisons quelconques, de cesser d'exister."³⁴ At this point Giorgio Manganelli's words regarding Marco Polo's book come to mind. The Italian writer and critic wrote that Polo's text, a work that refused to exist in the original, was, nevertheless, "un libro perduto da sempre e da sempre con noi."³⁵ For its incessant reproduction and reelaboration the book is in itself a fantastic object made for the reader, the copyist, the translator. Zumthor concludes that

L'oeuvre, ainsi conçue, est par définition dynamique. Elle croît, se transforme et décline. La multiplicité et la diversité des textes qui la manifestent constituent comme son bruitage interne. Ce que nous percevons, en chacun des énoncés écrits en quoi se décompose pour nous cette poésie et qui s'offrent à nous comme unité d'analyse, c'est moins un achèvement qu'un texte en train de se faire; plutôt qu'une essence, une production; plutôt qu'un sens accompli, une pratique constamment renouvelée, de signification; plutôt qu'une structure, une phase dans un procès de structuration.³⁶

There is a continuation of oral cultural characteristics, since manuscripts appear in a *quasi* independent transcription and fixity of different and successive moments of an oral transformation of the text brought about by evolutionary processes foreign to the very text. Paolo Merzi has stated that *chansons de geste* resemble theatrical texts filled with

spazio per l'improvvisazione dell'esecutore; cooperazione, dentro ogni nuova 'rappresentazione', tra testo di partenza, o testo trådito, e insieme delle esperienze esecutive, tra tradizione di un testo (orale o scritta che sia) e tradizione della sua rappresentazione; valore convenzionale del testo

verbale come richiamo e fissazione di una parte, forse la più importante, ma non esclusiva, dello spettacolo, ecc.³⁷

The scribe—a reader-colleague and reproducer—is above all an interpreter and a commentator who, in the process of placing the material through different cultural filters, aims at reaching the ideal *summa* of all possible readings to the point of building a *new* text, as Zumthor has stated, almost paradoxically superior to the archetype.³⁸

In the case of courtly poetry, Maria Luisa Meneghetti has discussed the dialectic rapport between reception and recreation, and has stated that readers and whoever dealt with the text made “un uso diretto ed esplicito del testo o dell’insieme di testi receipti.”³⁹ The original esthetic object is disassembled so that medieval readers and users may transform it and rebuild a text that will possibly be taken and transformed again by future readers-adapters for the production of further esthetic objects.

In manuscript culture the scribe, a descendant of that tradition not yet conscious of such terms as originality, imitation, translation and plagiarism, found himself in front of a series of possibilities set by his situational needs or by those of his readers and/or patrons. In the reading and re-writing of the text, the scribe is equipped with the meaning set by encyclopedias, bestiaries and lapidaries of the day, those texts that with the Bible constituted “una base di decodifica” and functioned as guarantors to spark a whole new series of further readings.⁴⁰ Marco Polo’s text has proven to be a dynamic structure in the way it has been continuously changed and renovated by reader-copyists to emphasize its multiplicity of aspects. With the disappearance of the original, there was the removal of the fixity that would not have permitted any permutability, which would have arrested the mechanism of dynamism. Despite the numerous translations, omissions, extensions, embellishments, Marco Polo’s text always belongs to its author who seems to have asked for the cooperation of members of scribal culture, who were as Bruns has written, “in the periphery of letters and [strived] to attain the privileged center where Virgil dwells.”⁴¹

Print culture fixed the work onto the page, where such notions as originality and creativity were clearly set,⁴² whereas in the Middle Ages, a work had been considered a container of

more than what it says, or what its letters contain, which is why we are

privileged to read between the lines, and not to read between them only but to write between them as well, because the text is simply not complete—not fully what it could be, as in the case of the dark story that requires an illuminating retelling . . . an art of disclosure as well as an art of amplification: the act of adding to a text is also the act of eliciting from it that which remains unspoken.⁴³

With the transcribing of manuscripts, scribes gave their own input to the text which changed with the passing of time and with the individual experience of each copyist.

The question of authorial voice and intention has been frequently posed in regards to Polo's text. The scribal role in the transmission of the text itself has been discussed from a historical and literary perspective. In his seminal work on medieval theory of authorship, Alastair Minnis suggests that a different set of medieval writings in which to find historically and theoretically valid material is provided particularly by the prologues on authoritative Latin writers, or *auctores* studied in the later Middle Ages. Those prologues are "valuable repositories of medieval theory of authorship, i.e. the literary theory centred on the concepts of *auctor* and *auctoritas*."⁴⁴ Minnis proceeds to delineate the composition of prologues employed to give information which would fill the text with *auctoritas*. In commentaries on *auctores*, a series of headings was employed to include:

the title of the work, the name of the author, the intention of the author, the material or subject matter of the work, its mode of literary procedure, its order or arrangement, its usefulness, and the branch of learning to which it belonged.⁴⁵

Following the thirteenth century successor to the type C prologue, the Aristotelian prologue, Minnis writes that "a series of terms came to be employed in theological commentaries which indicates a wish to define more precisely the literary activity characteristic of an *auctor*,"⁴⁶ namely those of the *scriptor* (scribe), *compiler* (compiler) and *commentator* (commentator). Minnis adds the following schema:

The *auctor* contributes most, the *scriptor* contributes nothing, of his own. The scribe is subject to materials composed by other men which he should copy as carefully as possible, *nihil mutando*. The *compiler* adds together or arranges the statements of other men, adding no opinion of his own (*addendo, sed non de suo*). The *commentator* strives to explain the views

of others, adding something of his own by way of explanations. Finally and most importantly, the *auctor* writes *de suo* but draws on the statements of other men to support his own views.⁴⁷

Despite the application of such a schema in a discussion involving scholastic literary attitudes in the Middle Ages, one must nevertheless remember that in the thinking of the period it was understood that for a text "to be good" it had to be old since it was widely thought that "the best writers were the more ancient,"⁴⁸ so it was only natural for a medieval "author" of a text to justify and ennoble his own text by repeating a schema previously proven to be reliable and tenable. In the Polo manuscript tradition, the issue of co-responsibility of the text, as well as the oral and written environment where the text was produced, come to the surface in a closer look at the prologue.

The vast and varied manuscript tradition of Marco Polo's travel account is strikingly illustrated in the employment of titles chosen for the work: from the most authoritative *Divisament dou monde*, to redactions entitled either *Livre des merveills du monde* or *De mirabilibus mundi*, to the title most commonly used in the Italian tradition *Milione* (taken from the familiar form attributed to the Polo family, an aphesis of *Emilione*).

Little more than what the reader is actually told in the preface is known about Marco Polo. In 1298, in a Genoa prison, two very diverse personalities met in what later turned out to be a most fortunate encounter: Marco Polo, a tireless Venetian traveller just back from a series of expeditions that had taken him from one end of Asia to the other, and Rustichello da Pisa, a humble writer of romances who transcribed from dictation. In the large family of Marco Polo manuscripts, the French-Italian group is the oldest and generally begins with a "lobrique" bearing the *incipit* "Ci comancent le lobrique de cest livre qui est appelé le divis[a]ment dou monde"⁴⁹ and certain elements of prologue-paradigms soon follow. The title illuminating the book is given and it is an obvious reminder of the literary genre of the *forma tractatus*, which also included such works as the *Chronica Libri Imaginis Mundi*, the *Image du monde*, the *Semeiança do mundo*, and medieval texts of a historical and geographic nature. The book is solemnly addressed to "Seignors enperaor et rois, dux et marquois, cuens, chevaliers et b[o]rgio[i]s, et toutes gens que volés savoir," a frequently used phrase that "indicate[d] the author's in-

tention that his work shall be read aloud, shall be heard,"⁵⁰ further stressed with the inclusion of "si prennés cestui livre et le faites lire" which could either mean: to have the book read in general or to have the book read to other people. A few lines below, there is another reference to the reader ("chascuns que cest livre liroie ou oiron") which emphasizes the acts of reading or of listening of the text.

The *materia libri* and the *intentio auctoris* are in a sense, amalgamated since the didactic purpose of the author in producing the text in question, as well as the objective, are given. This important passage consists of

les deverses jenerasions des homes et les deversités des deverses region dou monde . . . toutes les grandismes mervoilles et les grant diversités de la grande Harminie et de Persie et des Tartars et <de> Indie, et de maintes autres provinces

and in its entirety, the initial exposition of the subject matter resembles the information given on the jacket of a twentieth century publication, meant to entice the purchase and consumption of the work. The scribe-commentator then names the author and proceeds to discuss the method in which his information was gathered, thus indicating the text's authenticity and trustworthiness. The author is "meisser Marc Pol, sages et noble citaiens de Venece," a man who

raconte por ce que a seç iaus meisme il le voit. Mes auques hi n'i a qu'il ne vit pas, mes il l'entendi da homes citables et de verité, et por ce metreron les chouses veue por veue et l'entendue por entandue, por ce que notre livre soit droit et vertables sanç nulle ma<n>songe . . . por ce que toutes sunt chouses vertables.

A brief biographical sketch is then included, with recurrent references to the author's veracity:

je voç fais savoir que, puis que notre Sire Dieu pasme de seç mainç Adam notre primer pere jusque a cestui point, ne fu cristieng, ne paiens, ne tartar, ne yndiens, ne nulç homes de nulle generasion, que tant seust ne cherchast de les deverses partie dou monde et de les grant mervoilles come cestui messire Marc en cherche et soi. Et por ce dit il a soi meisme que tropo seroit grant maus se il ne feist metre en ecriture toutes les granç mervoilles qu'il vit et qu'il oi por verités, por ce que les autres jens que ne le virent ne <ne> sevent, le sachent por cest livre. Et si voç di qu'il demora a ce savoir en celles deverses parties et provences bien XXVI anç.

The subject pronouns *je* and *il* are repeated to increase the degree of truthfulness to assign to the information in the text,⁵¹ they vouch for its reliability. The *je* and *notre* also introduce the reader to "Rust[i]ciaus de Pise," who carries out the action of "mettre en écriture," the scribe to whom the Venetian "fist retraire toutes cestes chouses" when they were both in the "meisme chartre. . . , au tens qu'il avoit MCCXCVIII anç que Jesucrit nesqui." After having also referred to the stylistic method of procedure and to the order of the book ("notre libre voç contera por ordre apertement"), the initial prologue comes to an end. The specific reference to the year in which the book was dictated and transcribed, is further proof of a "volonté de 'crédibilité'" which, as Raymond Jean writes, "s'affirme dans la référence à une date précise, historiquement réperable, remplissant la même fonction qu'une référence à un document d'état civil."⁵² In the "lobrique" to the French-Italian edition, the basis for a comprehensive and informative prologue was then provided. The stock-schema of prologues to authoritative scholastic and classical texts was supplemented to signify a more literary dimension to texts in the vernacular.

At the end of the nineteenth chapter, we read: "Or puis que je voç ai contéç tot le fat dou prolegue, ensi com vos avés oi, adonc come n'cerau le livre." In the previous chapters, the adventures of the Venetian's direct predecessors, his father and his uncle, and Marco's arrival at the Court of the Great Khan and his departure were told. This "prolegue" is much more extensive than prologues found in vernacular texts, and acts as a type of testament, demonstrating the reliability of the author. Its form is that of an itinerary since the various human and geographic stages are listed: the first voyage by Marco's father and uncle, their return to Venice, their second voyage with Marco and their final return to Venice. In the semi-autobiographical prologue-itinerary, the narrator does not go into many details but mentions that the text to follow is where everything will be better explained.

The French group of Polo manuscripts is best remembered under the title of *Livre des merveilles du monde*, and it is the most elegant group since most manuscripts were provided with miniatures and arabesques. The components of the second set of manuscripts are based on a lost exemplar of the French-Italian redaction, brought to

France in the early fourteenth century, and re-written in French by a certain Grégoire who also modified it to reflect the literary trends of the period.⁵³ A number of manuscripts belonging to this group have survived, the most important one being the French 2810 which exists at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. This is the famous *Livre des Merveilles*, also renowned for its exquisite 84 miniatures. On the first folio we find the *incipit*: "Ci commence le livre de Marc Paul et des merveilles," which refers simultaneously to the title of the text, its author and the subject matter of the book. A second more typical *incipit* follows:

Cy après commence le livre de Marc Paule des Merveilles d'Aise la grant et d'Inde la maiour et minour et des diverses regions du monde. Pour savoir la pure verité des diverses regions du monde si prenés ce livre et le faites lire.⁵⁴

Here too the marvellous and its diversity are emphasized, and both reader and listener are addressed to indicate that the work may be both read and heard. The author and title appear again ("Messire Marc Pol son livre de la Division du Monde et des merveilles d'icellny"), and for a third time in the comment by Jean Flamel, the secretary of the Duke of Berry who had been given the manuscript by the Duke of Bourgogne. Flamel wrote: "Ce livre est des merveilles du monde, c'est assavoir de la Terre Sainte, du Grant Kaan empereur des Tartars et du pays d'Ynde." It is interesting to note that Marco Polo's book is here inserted in a manuscript which is a collection of authors recounting tales of the marvellous, such as Odorico da Pordenone, William of Boldensele, Jean de Mandeville, Hayton and Ricoldo da Montecroce. We can then conclude that the Venetian's text was not yet considered a pioneer of scientific geography but rather an informative and entertaining collection of marvellous facts and observations that struck the readers' and listeners' imagination.

In manuscript 125 of the Berne Civic Library, there is a note entitled "Préface de la copie donnée par Marco Polo à Thibaud de Cépoï." In this important manuscript edition there is one of the few references found regarding one of Polo's contemporaries. Thibaut de Chépoï was an envoy of Charles of Valois, and while he was on a visit to Venice in 1307, he procured a copy of Polo's book. In the "préface" the copyist writes that Thibault

eust la coppie a messir Marc Pol bourgeois et habitant en la cité de Venise. Et le dit sire Marc Pol, comme treshonorable et bien acoustumé en plusieurs regions et bien moriginé, et lui desirans que ce qu'il avoit veu fust sceu par l'univers monde . . . donna au dessus det seigneur de Cepoy la premiere coppie de son dit livre puis qu'il l'eust fait, et moult lui estoit agreables quant par si pseudomme estoit avanciez et portez es nobles parties de France.⁵⁵

Monseigneur de Valois was then given the copy and "depuis en a il donné coppie a sez amis qui l'en ont requis." This declaration should not be taken literally since, with the passing of time, it could likely have been altered as much as Polo's book. Nevertheless, there are some common points with the "lobrique" of the French-Italian. The noble spirit of the Venetian and his extraordinary knowledge of unknown regions are mentioned, as is his wish "que ce qu'il avoit veu fust sceu par l'univers monde."

The French-Italian and the French groups of manuscripts are filled with those *effets de littérature* so typical of romance, such as the introductory passages, the descriptions of duels and battles, and the overall characterization of figures such as the Great Khan. This example of literary production also consists of the principal forms of medieval Latin and romance narrative that evolved around the exposition of material of a practical nature. The two groups point at the fascination raised by a remote and legendary reality which persisted in the texture of historical and romance compilations, texts which were at times mere literary *divertissements*.

The fourteenth century Tuscan edition of Marco Polo's travels is best known as the *Milione*. This edition is connected with the reality of the fourteenth century and the interest for merchant literature closely linked with the marvellous, the fantastic and the fabulous of epic literature. The Tuscan version of Polo's book was shaped to include the most popular texts of the period and other texts that had been traditionally written in Latin, or that had been intended for a limited number of readers. The mixture of genres found in the *Milione* exemplifies the tastes of an emerging merchant class mixed with those of the *old* class and reformulated to meet the expectations of the readership of the day.

The *Milione* is subdivided into 209 chapters, 15 of which bear no *incipit*. The initial chapter essentially repeats what is found in the "lobrique" to the *Divisement dou monde* except for some revaling

divergences and omissions. Except for the reference to the *libro*, no title is given here. In the French-Italian edition, the reading/listening public is told to have the book read to them ("le faites lire") whereas in the Tuscan, they are told to read it ("leggete questo libro"⁵⁶). The following lines in the French-Italian are omitted from the Tuscan: "Et chascuns que cest livre liroie ou oiront le doivent croire, por ce que toutes sunt chouses vertables," to perhaps indicate the credibility that Polo's travel account has won in the Tuscan context and the higher prestige of a reading rather than a listening public. In the French-Italian edition, the reader is told that Polo lived and travelled in those far off lands for twenty-six years (according to the information in the book, it should be twenty-four), but in the Tuscan there is a translation error ("trentasei anni"). In manuscript II ii 61 (ancient Magliabechiano class XIII, No. 44) of the Biblioteca Nazionale of Florence, the copyist added information referring to the title ("Qui incomincia il libro di messer marchio polo da Vinegia che si chiama melione") and despite the fact that "non crediamo che mai fosse niuno che tanto cercasse il mondo quanto fecie messer marco figliuolo di messer nicholo polo nobile e gran cittadino della città di Vinegia," Amelio Bonaguisi, the podesta of Ciereto who copied the book "per passare tempo e malinconia," concludes:

E bene potrebbe essere vero quello di che ragiona ma io non lo credo, tuttavia per lo mondo si truovano assai isvariate cose d'uno paese a un altro. Ma queso mi pare ch'io lo rasenprasse a mio diletto cose da no credere ne di farvi fede, io dico quanto a me.⁵⁷

This is an instance where we have the copyist's name, a podesta who was an amateur and could not come to terms with the "cose incredibili" and "miracoli" he had transcribed, so he chose to dissociate himself from his transcription and excuse his labour as a mere exercise.

Examples of previous prose are characterized by the author's wish to *contare* and *devisare* which correspond in Achille Tartaro's terms to "le inclinazioni di un pubblico medio, identificabile con il ceto artigiano, mercantile e finanziario intorno al quale gravitava la vita dei Comuni italiani."⁵⁸ This class was attracted by these very popular historical, encyclopedic, esoteric and fascinating works of curiosity since they were filled with a reality foreign to their world. The first exemplars of prose in the vernacular met the needs of a practical

nature and "costituiscono un primo avvio sulla corrente spesso impetuosa della letteratura divulgativa."⁵⁹ Nevertheless, thirteenth century prose in the vernacular "consiste nello sforzo di dare anche al volgare prosastico una dignità formale, una tradizione."⁶⁰ At this point, one can see the degree of mixing of diverse material, a process that will clearly lead the way to the *Milione* which Tartaro has called "un'opera per molti aspetti eccentrica,"⁶¹ since in it there is a balance of didactic and pleasurable material.

The various transcriptions of Marco Polo's book have brought about a number of texts that reflect the period in which they were edited. In the case of the *Milione*, it is clear that the Tuscan edition could have been the only possible edition for the context in which it appeared and the readers that were to make use of it. Valeria Bertolucci Pizzorusso writes that the *Milione*

rappresenta la lettura che del libro poliano dette il ceto borghese mercantile, nell'ambito del quale, come indicano elementi esterni e interni, fu eseguita e diffusa. Orientata sui dati commerciali e sugli aspetti novellistici, essa collima perfettamente con gli interessi e i gusti che di questa classe, proprio allora in grande espansione, ci sono ormai noti.⁶²

The cultural climate at the very beginning of the fourteenth century was not far removed from the previous century in which there were few texts that dealt with the concrete. There is no doubt that in the *Milione* there is a pervasive merchant patina but in the text there are traits previously found in minor genres of narrative. One can postulate the influence of the encyclopedic genre but with the *Milione* we have an account of a true authorial experience and the inclusion of information from people who were trustworthy. Polo's text is to be considered exemplary since it is not a *mélange* of information borrowed from other works, so typical of medieval encyclopedias. The *Milione* exemplifies the fields of didactic and scientific literature: its chapters are geographic (typical of travel or geographic treatises); commercial-economic (such as those found in merchant manuals or navigation books); scientific (material found in lapidaries, bestiaries, herbals and scientific treatises); hagiographic; historical-ethnographic (for social, cultural and political material); literary (for the epic-chivalric aspects and the novellas). In the *Milione* there is a conglomerate of material and mixture of genres that elevates the encyclopedia from the stagnant and closed genre it had become,

to the more modern meaning of the encyclopedia: an authoritative source of reference in general. The composite format of the text and the multiplicity of readings it encourages reveal an embarrassing complexity, resistant to any generic reductionist framing.⁶³ There is then the meeting point between late medieval latin literature and humanistic culture which was then emerging. The experimentation and the heightened level of observation that pervade the entire work, remove it from the more medieval meaning of encyclopedia which reinforced, as Vittorio Cian wrote, that "istinto della conservazione intellettuale," to hand down the "avanzi della scienza,"⁶⁴ and was the outcome of a process of reproduction, repetition and assimilation.

The amateur nature of transcribers is raised again in the case of the redaction of Polo's book in the Veneto dialect which, nevertheless, proved to be a successful editorial source for the translations that ensued. Of the manuscripts belonging to the Veneto group, the CM 211 of the Biblioteca Civica of Padua essentially repeats the initial heading of the French-Italian ("Signori Re duchi marchexi chonti chavalieri prinzipi et baroni et tuta zente a chui diletta de saver le diversse zenerazion de zente e de I regniami del mondo") and readers/listeners are urged to take the book and have it read aloud ("tolè questo libro e fatelo lezer") whereas, in manuscript 557 of the Berne Civic Library, the public is simply told: "tollete questo libro."⁶⁵

At the beginning of the fourteenth century, Francesco Pipino da Bologna translated Polo's book into Latin. This proved to be a great success since a great number of manuscripts, scattered all over Europe, exist to this very day. The Pipino *edition* was also the source for re-translations into French, Irish, Bohemian, and Venetian. In the preface, Pipino wrote that the translation had been commissioned by the Dominican Order, whose interest for the lands described by Polo, for the propagation of the Christian faith was renowned. Pipino begins by stressing the faithfulness and veracity of his translation ("veridica et fideli translatione"⁶⁶) but in the course of the translation, he nonchalantly ignores those passages he considers amusing and not useful for the members of his Order who were to consult the book before setting off for those lands described by Polo. Pipino's anti-heretical fervour is evident whenever Mohammed's name is mentioned, with epithets such as: *pessimus*, *miserabilis* and *abominabilis*.⁶⁷ Pipino's translation entitled *De condi-*

tionibus et consuetudinibus orientalium regionum was read, consulted and commented by another great traveller, Christopher Columbus, whose copy bears 366 annotations in his own writing.

Following Marco Polo's death, most likely in 1324, his work lent itself to readings dependent on the particular interests of its various audiences and the edition-translation chosen. In France, long passages are to be found in various compilations whose content is both geographic-scientific and fantastic, such as the *Chronicon monasterii S. Bertini* by Jean le Long d'Ypres, the *Image du monde* by Jean Beauvau, the *Historia aurea* by Jean Tynemouth, the *Voyage d'outremer* by Jean de Mandeville and the *Baudouin de Sebourc*. Excerpts of Polo's work are also found in Italy, for instance in the *Liber de introductione loquendi* by Fra Filippo, in the *Libro di varie storie* by Antonio Pucci and in the *Fons memorabilium universi* by Domenico Bandino d'Arezzo. Here too we have the recognition of the *Milione* as an encyclopedic work of great didactic and scientific value, but also as a text that, precisely because of its factual content, would add credibility to the compilations themselves. In summary, Polo's text reveals that it does not belong to any one tradition or conventional genre. Its copyists' individual habits of reading, writing and thinking were incorporated into every single and unique version. Like the world Polo's book describes, it too is infinite and open to a myriad of interpretations. It has fostered a multiplicity of acts of writing, re-writing and translating, and in the process, nurtured the growth of culture beyond any circumscribed topographies of thought.

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NOTES

- 1 Cf. Lülfiing, p. 176, and Febvre, p. 20.
- 2 Zumthor, 1987, p. 114.
- 3 Cf. Madan, pp. 35–39, and Dain, p. 17.
- 4 Petrucci, p. 499.
- 5 Cf. Stock, pp. 3–36.
- 6 Armando Petrucci mentions that churches and monasteries needed "enciclopedie di trattati utili per lo studio e la preparazione professionale dell'ecclesiastico mediamente colto," p. 500.
- 7 Cf. Lülfiing, pp. 188–191, and Esposito, p. 43.
- 8 Cesare Segre, 1974, p. 85.
- 9 Bruns, p. 126.

- 10 Branca, p. 73.
- 11 Branca, p. 73.
- 12 Branca, p. 73.
- 13 Zumthor, 1987, p. 110.
- 14 Ong, 1982, p. 119.
- 15 Baüml, p. 250.
- 16 Ong, 1982, p. 133.
- 17 Cf. Crosby, p. 91.
- 18 Ong, 1967, p. 24.
- 19 Cf. Chaytor, p. 1.
- 20 Cf. Camesasca, p. 22.
- 21 Zumthor, 1972, p. 73.
- 22 Bühler, p. 40.
- 23 Segre, 1974, p. 87.
- 24 Segre, 1974, p.vii.
- 25 Segre, 1974, p. 87.
- 26 Jörn Gruber, *Die Dialektik des Trobars. Untersuchungen zur Struktur und Entwicklung des occitanische* (Tübingen: N. Niemeyer, 1983), pp. 28–29, quoted in Zumthor, 1987, p. 115.
- 27 Zumthor, 1987, p. 115.
- 28 Auerbach, p. 201.
- 29 Menéndez Pidal, p. 85.
- 30 Menéndez Pidal, p. 128.
- 31 Cf. Auerbach, p. 203.
- 32 Zumthor, 1972, p. 71.
- 33 Zumthor, 1972, p. 72.
- 34 Zumthor, 1972, p. 73.
- 35 Manganelli, p. 173.
- 36 Zumthor, 1972, p. 73.
- 37 Merci, p. 199.
- 38 Zumthor, 1987, pp. 114–115.
- 39 Meneghetti, p. 355.
- 40 Eco, p. 12.
- 41 Bruns, p. 124.
- 42 Ong, 1982, p. 133.
- 43 Bruns, pp. 125–126.
- 44 Minnis, p. 1.
- 45 Minnis, p. 4, also see pp. 41–72.
- 46 Minnis, p. 94.
- 47 Minnis, pp. 94–95.
- 48 Minnis, p. 9.
- 49 Unless otherwise mentioned, the quotations from the French-Italian will be taken from Marco Polo, *Milione. Le divisament dou monde*, ed. Gabriella Ronchi pp. 305–306.

- 50 Cf. Crosby, pp. 98–99.
 51 Cf. Segre, 1983, pp. 16–17.
 52 Jean, p. 424.
 53 Cf. Benedetto, pp. xxxiv–lxxix.
 54 The quotations are from Benedetto, p. xxxvi.
 55 This final notice is reproduced in *I viaggi di Marco Polo veneziano*, ed. Lodovico Pasini, p. 438.
 56 This prologue is quoted from the following edition: Marco Polo. *Milione*, ed. Valeria Bertolucci Pizzorusso, pp. 3–4.
 57 From the manuscript quoted in Benedetto, p. lxxxiv.
 58 Tartaro, p. 624.
 59 Segre, 1963, p. 19.
 60 Segre, 1963, p. 19.
 61 Tartaro, p. 627.
 62 Bertolucci Pizzorusso, 1975, p. xv.
 63 Cf. Bertolucci Pizzorusso, 1977, p. 5.
 64 Cian, p. 33.
 65 This manuscript is quoted from Benedetto, p. ci. *Part-time* amateur transcribers and/or translators made a number of errors of interpretation, included a few comments, new endings and glosses, which have been quickly discarded by filologists, cf. Benedetto, pp. cix–cxiii.
 66 Pipino's edition is quoted from Benedetto, p. cliv.
 67 For the manuscripts in Latin, cf. Benedetto, pp. cxxxiii–cxliv.

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