The Changing Nature of Reading
An Overview from Ancient Greece to the Technological Era

«Suppose you've killed someone: what can you do next?
Ulrich shrugged his shoulders.
He was tempted to answer, for the sake of the argument:
It might enable me to write a poem that would enrich
the inner life of thousands of people,
or to come up with a great invention!
[…]
On the other hand, he conceded, it did work
that way for primitive man.
He killed because human sacrifice was
a great religious poem!"»

Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*, 1918[1]

Introduction

The appeals to intensify the habit of reading are so recurrent and supported by so many different attitudes that it seems unnecessary to insist on its benefits for the development of the most important human faculties and its teaching is thus part of the compulsory education system.

Over time, however, this activity has been accomplished differently depending on its material conditions and, above all, on the functions that writing assumes. Therefore, it is interesting to compare the current ways of reading to the original ones, when alphabetical letters were invented in Greece.

Despite the cliché that records a decrease in the number of readers, today we read much more than the previous generations provided, that, as proof of it, not only canonized texts are allowed.

Nowadays the same value of writing is changing, after the tools to write have been multiplied and, once more, writing turns out to be inseparable from the object in which it is produced, revealing its last manifestation, the digital one, which creates texts that have not yet been transformed into actual works.

While texts reproduce themselves, also transforming into hypertexts, digital literary works are almost completely absent because their model of use remains the printed book.

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The aim of this article is to examine ways of reading and writing in the light of those, promoted and still in progress, after the so-called digital world has made its

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[1] Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*, Picador, London, 1995 (translated by Sophie Wilkins)

appearance, partially stabilized in its cyclical revolutions.

In order to avoid the repetition of themes soon hackneyed, we will approach even some less frequented points for understanding whether today any novelty invests two of the most prestigious and elementary practices of our cultural system as reading and writing have become.[2]

Indeed, in the year of this publication, using the best-known search engine available, if one types "*reading modes*", a list of pages appears to learn the rapid one, that is to speed up the ocular movement.

Apart from this purpose, it confirms that also the ability of reading is achieved by the acquisition of a specific technique. Hence what derives is a persistent need, renewed by compulsory education, so the following pages meet those who observe the actuality and who is at the beginning of the history of reading. More precisely the latter, for the first time in the West, saw in front of him the alphabetical transcription of what, from that time, could and had to be read. But not like today and with a very different social consideration of the reader.

So our path will be indicated by some historians of the ancient like Florence Dupont, who worked to better illuminate the consequences of the process of textualisation still dominant and philosophers like José Bergamin[3], who have attributed not only advantages for the development of human faculties to reading and writing, that have accustomed us to use them in a way as heteronomous at first as then interiorised.

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It is difficult to overestimate, even at a minimally diachronic glance, the importance of how the ways of reading have changed over time and it is a very ascertainable fact that today we read more and more on the screen.

To introduce the topic, we can observe what happened in the last few years with writing and therefore reading surfaces, just comparing the traditional cellulose paper page[4] and the pc screen, whose improvements, albeit in a short period of time, have been relevant.

Looking at the first monitors, developed with the cathode ray-tube technology, common at least until 2005, a macroscopic difference emerges with the paper sheet of the printed book. In fact, monitors are not created to be writing surfaces, which serve to engrave in them written signs but to display data of different origins.

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[2] Notwithstanding the fact that an example of cliché is also the current infatuation for the "new", which often removes rather than faces some essential questions: for example, the value assigned to the origins by societies, like the archaic Greek, where the politics category is unknown. It will be the consolidation of the public dimension, of which advertising represents a typical expression, to give the most important boost for the spread of the "new".
On the genesis of the politics, see Christian Meier, *The Greek Discovery of Politics*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.), 1990. For the relationships between public dimension, advertising and digital languages, literature is in a continuous and constant expansion.

[3] José Bergamin, *Decadenza dell'analfabetismo*, Rizzoli, Milano, 1972

[4] Some changes certainly concern these surfaces also, for which recycled paper and non-toxic inks are increasingly preferred.

As well known, the digitization process joins together what, in material and therefore sensorial terms, succeeds to be profoundly different.

In the specific case, the screen is part of an apparatus with at the center the computer and it is set at its service like all the other peripherals that complete it. Since the computer is a data processor, it needs to enter them and connections with the outside world are necessary. Therefore, mouse and keyboard have always accompanied it and nowadays are inserted, in turn, in a single device, as tablets and smartphones show.

Although the pc screen does not function as an exclusive reading surface, for it displays data of a different nature, provided they are digitized, nevertheless, the machine takes on multifunctional features thanks to writing:

"The exponential multiplication of its possibilities of use has made this machine a multifunctional object. Beyond the significant increase in memory capacity, processor speed and internal architecture - factors that have contributed significantly to the power of calculation - this multi-functionality is due to the writing of programs."[5]

Given the enormous importance that writing has assumed in our culture and because its digitization does not present serious difficulties, what serves to write, both on the hardware and software side, has been integrated into the personal computer since its first appearance.[6]

Therefore, its use is in continuity with the written tradition and the complaints of those who predicted the death of the book, for the advent of digital technology, are hardly acceptable, unless it can be attributed to an excess of writers, which many statistics confirm and to a decrease in the number of readers, instead, difficult to prove.

Looking then at the book and how it has been thought and made, with the development of printing, it is undeniable that it remains an object of reading and if we write on it,[7] such writing never will be confused with the printed one and the most immediate demonstration of the commonplace we are saying is that the page can only be noted on its margins.

Indeed, in the printed page, everything is functional to the readability of the writing and the problems of reading on the screen have always been traced back to a rather young stage of technological development and to the clumsy arrangement of

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[5] Alessandro Zinna, *Le interfacce degli oggetti di scrittura*, Meltemi, Roma, 2003, pag. 140. See also Alessandro Zinna, *The Object of Writing* in *"Language Sciences"* 33 (2011) pag. 634-646. For the issue concerning the potential and the limits of the computer, as a communication tool, that exploits multiple forms of writing, see Roy Harris, *Rethinking Writing*, The Athlon Press, London, 2000

[6] It is justifiable on this basis also the statement by Maurizio Ferraris who claims the recording of writing traces represents the main function of the mobile phone, one of the many objects transformed by the computer. See Maurizio Ferraris, *Dove sei? Ontologia del telefonino*, Bompiani, Milano, 2011

[7] See Armando Petrucci's observations on the learned reader who continually annotates the medieval code, while the modern proto reader does not write on the editions which Aldus Manutius published in italic type, in Armando Petrucci, *Libri, scrittura e pubblico nel Rinascimento*, Laterza, Bari, 1979 pagg. 139 seg. See also Armando Petrucci, *Writers and Readers in Medieval Italy: Studies in the History of Written Culture*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1995

information for overabundance of non-alphabetic parts, which conflict with and do not complete the written ones.

The regulative function of the book has been interiorized, when digital processes break out, even in the environments most prone to technological experimentation:

"Negroponte respects CD ROM technology just as it is more than the industry does: «I marvel constantly at the industry's tendency to want to make read-only disks into write-once disks into read-write-erase disks - to make them like magnetic disks, failing to realize they are a publishing medium and that read-only is a virtue, not a liability. If you publish data, you want it inviolable and that it already knows about itself.»"[8]

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What a 7th century BC Greek slave was used to do, at the moment of reading aloud for an entire almost illiterate audience, is very different from what the nowadays reader does, when he is reading with the smartphone. The act of the slave and the function of the technological tool are homologous since both actualize an alphabetic writing[9], while the social consideration of reading has very much changed.

Therefore, we must repeat that reading practices have diversified over time, first of all with the variation of the tools and then with the ways of writing.[10] This recognition entails the admission that printed book is just one of the objects of writing which has promoted a specific form of reading, associated with a corresponding idea of literature.

Hence the need to justify the appeals to reading, which is always reported in decline, and to explain to which form one refers and why it should increase.

There is no doubt that the type of reading imagined today is the silent one, done with the eyes, indeed with the brain alone, ascertained that, as many claim, the expert reader reads quickly, identifying groups of words in the sentence, not certainly spelling letter by letter or rather reading aloud.[11]

This leads us to recognize that alphabetical writing, and how it is taught to read ensues, has progressively become homogenized, since its forms pour, by a completely cultural process, into a printed page, from Gutenberg onwards, with compositional rules of its own, the first concerning the layout of the words.

This issue goes back to the differences between a continuous and non-continuous *scriptio*, the former a signal of the prevalence of a vocal reading and the latter of the rules that will accustom to read silently in places where this is an exclusive

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[8] Stewart Brand, The *Media Lab, Inventing the Future at MIT*, Viking, New York, 1987, pag. 23

[9] Note that also the name of the smartphone refers to the sound dimension, given its first use, to telephone.

[10] Martyn Lyons, *A History of Reading and Writing: In the Western World*, Palgrave McMillan, London, 2009

[11] Neuropsychology has been devoting to the subject, in particular see Stanislas Dehaene, *Reading in the Brain: The Science and Evolution of a Human Invention*, Viking Books, New York, 2007 and Maryanne Wolf, *Reader, Come Home: The Reading Brain in a Digital World*, Harper Collins, New York, 2017

practice.[12]

This way of reading is aimed to read texts realized in books and this very simple observation is still difficult to contest, to the point that, once it has become a printed text, alphabetic writing acquires autonomy and independence, first of all from his author.

It is not useful to insist on the differences between literal and global reading[13] but rather to repeat that reading has certainly involved other senses than just the sight and that the attributions of value of writing are less stable than one usually thinks.[14] This has been confirmed by observing how different social classes use it and by the very exploited distinction between author and writer for which:[15]

"The author performs a function, the writer an activity. Not that the author is a pure essence: he acts, but his action is immanent in its object, it is performed paradoxically on its own instrument: language; the author is the man who labors, who works up its utterance (even if he is inspired) and functionally absorbs himself in this labor, this work. His activity involves two kinds of norm: technical (of composition, genre, style) and artisanal (of patience, correctness, perfection). The paradox is that, the raw material becoming in a sense its own end, literature is at bottom a tautological activity, like that of cybernetic machines constructed form themselves (Asbhy's homeostat): the author is a man who radically absorbs the world's why in how to write. And the miracle, so to speak, is that this narcissistic activity has always provoked an interrogation of the world: by enclosing himself in the how to write, the author ultimately discovers the open question par excellence: why the world? What is the meaning of things?"

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[12] See Paul Saenger, *Space between words: the origins of silent reading*, Stanford Univiversity Press, Redwood (CA), 1997

[13] See Andrea Canevaro, *Il banco dell'asino e del poeta*, Emme Edizioni, Milano, 1978, pag. 17: "*The second problem consists in the interpretation of the meaning of reading and writing. It is said that an excessively restrictive interpretation belongs to the school. Hence a severe attitude of censorship and criticism towards schooling as a process of exclusion and alienation carried out to the detriment of many people. A restrictive interpretation is overcome - or is opposed - by a much broader interpretation of reading and writing. And it is what allows us, in everyday language, in familiar language, to say of reading a landscape, reading the signs of the weather, reading an advertising billboard; and so, in the same way, it allows us to say of writing by applying this word to many different abilities. Therefore there can be a restrictive interpretation, but there can be a much broader interpretation, which allows us to talk of reading for behaviors that are the most diverse.*"

[14] Here one could say that digital mobile devices, so criticized by the front of formal education, are among the main causes of increase in the opportunities of reading and writing.

[15] Roland Barthes, *Critical Essays*, Northwestern University Press, Evanson, 1972, pag. 144. A very different but equally significant distinction is due to St. Bonaventure, who lists the four different ways in which a *book* can be made, cited by Elizabet Eisenstein: "*The thirteenth-century Franciscan, San Bonaventura, said that there were four ways of making books: A man might write the works of others, adding and changing nothing, in which case he is simply called 'scribe' (scriptor). Another writes the works of others with additions which are not his own; and he is called a 'compiler' (compilator). Another writes both other's work and his own, but with other's work in principal place, adding his own for purposes of explanation; and he is called a 'commentator' (commentator)... Another writes both his own work and others' but with his own in principal place adding others' for purposes of confirmation; and such a man should be called an 'author', (auctor)."* In Elizabet Eisenstein, *The printing press as an agent of change*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1979, pag. 121

We add that the role of the writer knows variations that resemble real reversals[16], while writing has also served disreputable purposes such as the creation of false documents.[17]

Whereas intransitive writing[18] runs the risk of self-referentiality or of annulment in itself, every time that, separated from its author, it is fixed on the page, its reading always implies something other than itself, for the intervention of the reader's living body. The same origin of poetry demonstrates how voice, sound and music are its constituent elements, not to mention the rhythm.

These remarks lead also to consider the retro action on the language of writing, in this case of alphabetical type, for which we can assume the position of one who belongs to a highly literate culture:

"Sartre often had the desire to reflect on the activity of writing; and at a certain point in his reflection he distinguished between the prose writer's and the poet's. In both there may be art, but the distinction concerns the functional relationship with the word. While in prose words are not objects but designation of objects, in poetry there is a unity between word and thing, between word and emotion and the sentence becomes an object sentence. The prose writer's writing is utilitarian and for this he uses words; while the poet's writing has for its purpose the creation of an object (the poem) and serves the words."[19]

But in this way, writing rather than producing an object qualifies it as poetic[20], putting itself at service of the verbal language and it's not difficult to understand how this operation is conventional and realized through a specific use of writing. First of all, in an oral context, such as the Greek previous to Plato, the distinction between poetry and prose is unthinkable, since a written alphabetic tradition is almost inexistent. What the aedi repeat, in the presence of small groups of listeners

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[16] To literature is nowadays granted its own autonomy, separate from the practical and political reality, which for a Greek of the archaic period is difficult to understand and justifiable. "*All the anecdotage about the seven wise men is based, moreover, on the idea of a poetic wisdom that is both legislative art and political skill.*" See Bruno Gentili, *Poeta e musico in Grecia*, in Mario Vegetti (ed.) *Oralità, scrittura, spettacolo*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino, 1983, pag. 55

[17] Anthony Grafton, *Forgers and Critics*, Collins and Bronws , London, 1990, pag. 24:
"If literary and religious forgery and their counterpart modes of criticism survived the fall of the ancient world, however, forgery and criticism of legal authorities became the dominant new forms in the Middle Ages. Most practitioners of forgery and criticism were clerics and lawyers. Forgers usually wanted to equip a person or an institution with a basis for possession of lands or privileges. Their methods usually centered not on the production of literary texts - though these were written, especially when a religious order needed to justify its possession of the wonder-working bones of a saint by providing a narrative of their passage from their original home - but on the devising of faked documents, documents apparently legitimate in physical form, color, seals, and wording."

[18] Regarding the other pole, that of the transitive writing, which establishes, for example, the possession or transfer of possession of something, undoubtedly one of its original functions, the topic deserves a separate discussion.

[19] Andrea Canevaro, *op. cit.*, pag. 71

[20] See Walace Stevens, *The necessary angel: essays on reality and the imagination*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1951, pag. 32: *"A poet's word are of things that do not exist without the words. Thus, the image of the charioteer and of the winged horses, which has been held to the precious for all of time that matters, was created by words of things that never existed without the words."*

and the Muses, always results versified according to our canons and it is nonsense to adopt the criterion of versification to distinguish the poetic.

Furthermore, the versification has not a mnemonic function and memory serves to actualize rather than to preserve a common lore:

"Reasoning by analogy, we imagine that the Greeks, before the introduction of the alphabet, used versification for the purpose of mnemotechnics. Thus, the verse is considered a substitute for the written word, giving textual stability to the tradition. In short, we imagine that the Greeks before the use of the alphabet had a conception of memory identical to that of the written culture. But the reality is completely different. We know today that the Homeric versification was primarily used for improvisation; we know that "memory" as a rational category appeared rather late. In this oral culture, "memory" was a religious force and, from a sociological point of view, it could be said that "the memory" of the aedo was its ability to "remember" the past, in accordance with the unexpressed needs of its audience."[21]

At that time, writing with its preservative power is absent from "literature", also because alphabetic letters had not been invented yet. Instead, what really matters is let the language speak, that is Mnemosyne, Goddess of Memory and mother of the Muses.

To turn to reading, we assume that this practice always involves the reader in its entirety[22], even blocking them for hours on a chair, and only when their attention is circumscribed to the surface of the writing support, within which they have gradually come to concentrate, aimed at understanding what here is within contained, then the text[23] and literary dimension emerge as today are defined.

From an historical point of view, the fact that one always writes on something appears evident in the case of the alphabet, this form of writing being an epigraphy and even digital technologies reconfirm that there are no writings but only objects of writing:[24]

"To achieve the goal we set, let's start from the hypothesis that there are no scriptures. The observation is paradoxical in its formulation, but full of consequences for what we want to demonstrate: concretely, or like those who study seals, terracotta tablets, the ruins of houses, tomb inscriptions or correspondence exchanges, there are only written objects. To speak of 'scriptures' means to introduce

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[21] Jesper Svenbro, *La parola e il marmo*, Boringhieri, Torino, 1984, pagg. 10 seg. Original edition in French, *La parole et le marble, aux origines de la poétique greque,* Klassika Institutionem, Lund, 1976. For the topics below treated, see the important *Phrasikleia: An Anthropology of Reading in Ancient Greece*, Cornell Univiersity Press, Baltimore, 2018, first edition 1988

[22] On the level of long-lasting cultural processes, it is with the affirmation of the eighteenth-century novel, after the rise and expansion of the publishing companies, involving an ever-wider audience, that the concern about the dangers of reading, caused by the identification of the reader with the character's feelings, become recurrent. See, for example, James Grantham Turner, *Novel Panic: Picture and Performance in the Reception of Pamela's Richardson*, in "Representations" (48) 1984, University of California Press, pagg. 70–96. But for the original and theoretical questions posed by the act of reading, the studies of Svenbro represent a milestone.

[23] From the mid-sixties of the last century onwards, under the pressure of linguistics, and then also of semiotics, the textualization process has never stopped.

[24] Alessandro Zinna*, Le interfacce degli oggetti di scrittura,* op.cit., pag. 88

an abstraction such as that which has long nourished the theory of signs: like languages and signs, scriptures have no existence outside the other units' context or outside the support that determines their use."

But certainly for the alphabetic writing is thought as a means supposed[25] to transcribe the verbal language, so rich in meanings, that the reader is captured by it, leaving aside everything that surrounds and contributes to form the text, namely its context:[26]

«*Sed cum legebat, oculi ducebantur per paginas et cor rimabatur intellectum, vox autem et lingua quiescebant. Saepe cum adessemus [...] sic eum legentem vidimus tacite et aliter numquam [...].*

Ambrose is looking for the rhyme, that is, the gap that divides one word from another. Without the reassuring aid of his voice, he is fearlessly facing the misfortunes of the scriptio continua *which, from his own point of view a modern would say, was harassing the ancient reader. A compact array of letters, almost never interrupted by either white spaces or punctuation marks, even less differentiated by accents (or spirits), was used to lie before him. In such conditions, reading was much more demanding than it is usually conceived: it was to start interpreting immediately; reading was already informing, giving form (typos) to graphic signs (typoi). To the ancient reader distraction was not allowed and while a partial understanding is granted to the modern reader, from the very beginning it resulted into an absolute misunderstanding.*»[27]

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It is indisputable that today's reader and writer, when compared with the ones at the beginning of the history of the alphabet, reads and writes much more since these activities are so extended[28], that the problem of their learning has been

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[25] Alphabetic writing is supposed to be but it is not a neutral and completed transcription of the verbal language as well explained by Roy Harris.

[26] Augustinus, *Confessiones VI, 3, 3* (*Corpus Christianorum. Series Latina* XXVII, pag. 75). *"But when he was reading, his eyes were drawn along over the leaves, and his heart searched into the sense, but his voice and tongue were silent. Oftentimes when we were present [...] we still saw him reading to himself, and never otherwise [...]"* Translated whit a slight change by William Watts.

[27] Maria Tasinato, *L'occhio del silenzio*, Esedra, Padova, 1997, pag. 14

[28] For this process it is essential the introduction of compulsory education: in Italy, for example, up to the eighth grade, it is due to the Coppino law of 1887. Since then, statistical data confirm, the large-scale acquisition of reading and writing skills has become an irreversible process and stigmatizing, as it is often done today, the problem of returning illiteracy reaffirms the above stated. See in Bruno Migliorini, *Storia della lingua italiana*, Bompiani, Milano, 1994, pag. 603: "*Political unity entails a more intense circulation of ideas, things, words. [...] As far as the language is concerned, the lower classes in everyday life use dialects, and are still scarcely familiar with the national language. [...] Progress in elementary education is noteworthy but not yet sufficient: the obligation to educate all children over six years of age was sanctioned by the Coppino law in 1887 and entrusted to the municipalities: in this way the illiterate, who in 1861 were 78%, are reduced to less than 50% in 1910".* The statistical data that Migliorini reports are taken from R. Benini, *Demografia* in *Cinquant'anni di storia italiana*, per cura della Reale Accademia dei Lincei, I, Milano, 1911, pag. 40.

almost overcome, at least in industrial societies, given that the compulsory education teaches, first of all, to read and write, as well as to count, activities no longer specialized and professional but for the whole population.

Taken for granted because it is part of the compulsory education, we tend to forget that reading also follows from a technical acquisition and that just one of its forms have been imposed: private, solitary and silent reading. In this context, the first and sometimes unique value of new technologies lies in making it explicit, for the reading with eyes, practiced by a still and seated individual, is no more done on writing that has been *"mise en page"* in a printed book.

This process of duplication was achieved by machines that produced a very large number of exemplars compared to the past, fact in favor of who judges that the first capitalist enterprises have been developed from the proto industry of the book.[29]

The activity of the medieval copyist loses importance after the introduction and diffusion of the printing press, during the decisive decade of 1520-1530[30], because the problem from then on was no longer the conservation, by manual duplication, of a single manuscript at risk of disappearing but rather the mechanical multiplication of a normalized version of the text it contains.

The comparison is immediate with what today is occurring and the digital processes, which increase the number of copies, including the paper ones, simplifying their production and reducing their costs, even more so if in electronic form.[31]

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[29] It is significant that also the first giants of digital economy have grown with the so-called killer applications or business activity, all belonging to the written world: see Yhaoo and the email, i.e. the electronic letter, see Amazon and the sale of paper and digital books, see Facebook which refers already in its name to the last.

[30] See the introduction, for the Italian edition, written by Armando Petrucci pagg. XXVI seg. in Lucien Febvre e Henri-Jean Martin, *La nascita del libro*, Laterza, Bari, 1976: *"With the definitive affirmation of movable type, that is with approximately 1520-1530 (and this had already been intuited and expressed by Febvre in the distant 1925) the book became absolutely prevalent in every order and degree of teaching, imposing itself even at the elementary level, not only in the humanistic schools of Latin and Greek but also in the technical ones of abacus and writing, with some calligraphy treatises, which brought engraved in wood (later, in copper) the models of the different graphic types. It is very likely that the decisive affirmation of the book in European teaching has had considerable consequences in the field of individual and collective learning mechanisms, favoring, for example, individual reading and, through even minor and minimal formats, a freer and more modern way to read, deprived of the scholarly preoccupation of continuous annotation and therefore explicable also outdoors, on a journey, on the way. In this regard, it will be worth remembering that the new model of the "handbook", the "enchiridion" launched on the market by Aldus Manutius in 1501, [...] met the favor of a very large, cultured, but not professionally literary public, because it allowed a comfortable and, so to speak, "disengaged" way of reading."* English edition, Lucien Febvre and Henry-Jean Martin, *The Coming of the Book: The Impact of Printing 1450-1800*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1977. For these topics, the studies of Elizabeth Eisenstein are fundamental. See, for example, *The printing press as an agent of change*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1979

[31] Emerged with the spread of digitization, an interesting theme consists in identifying the differences, quite evident, between circulation and distribution of the work. If digital, it can circulate online without going through the traditional distribution channels. Once the resulting costs have been significantly lowered, to which must not be added the well-known of warehouse as for the paper books, two items of expenditure are remodeled, contributing to decide the social destiny of the work.

Then the work is always in search of an audience: although expanded, compared to the past and, indeed, ensured in theory thanks to compulsory education, the readers never keep up with the pace of new publications and it is quite reasonable to forecast that an increase in written messages will be accompanied by their fast and silent way of reading, just with the eyes, which characterizes the prevailing use of them.

But we must also recognize an element of discontinuity with the tradition of the printed book, introduced by digitization processes: the increased possibilities of writing. Indeed reading on the screen means to employ an apparatus that integrates the tools to write with the reading surface, no longer constituted by the pages of a book, which have been printed yet.

However, the naivety of a misunderstood technological determinism is confirmed by the fact that those who today usually write with electronic devices is not the scholar who glosses "*the bench book*" but rather a figure accustomed to writing for very different purposes or not accustomed to writing at all, so the results of these practices are often modest, when they do not drive to reflect on the value of the writing itself.

The irrefutable increase in the number of written messages for the use of the computer, wherever it nestles, has also showed the alphabetic is only a type of writing. Its diffusion as proved by the billions of messages written daily with smartphones, already being replaced by the vocal ones, even simpler and more immediate, must certainly urge to inquire if the social importance, attributed to writing, is nowadays changing again.

Briefly, does this form of communication, more and more in use, trivialize its value or, by further diversifications, reaffirm its own prestige?

Given that the reader and, moreover, the writer is a social subject, without which any novelty is impracticable, we should understand the reasons of their separation and what is happening with the so called digital world that would seem, in some ways, to mitigate it.

Thus, it is important to reflect over the context of production of written messages when the editorial processes became one of the ways of the cultural activity within groups of people which little knew such forms of publication:

"At the time of Cicero […] book production […] finds few shops: it is rather an accessory manufacture of a domestic economy of slave type, [...] as of the work, this is produced in the context of a tendentially or de facto self-sufficient apparatus, which coordinates the activity of the author and the performance of the manus servile to materialize his literary composition in writing/book; the "edited" work circulates in still restricted environments, mostly gravitating around the author himself.

Cicero has at his disposal a team of tachygraphs, scribes and correctors, through which he can intervene on the textuality process in each phase: from the first dictation to its structuring into a finished book, when the work is almost dismissed and entrusted to the "editorial" care of Atticus and when finally it is put into circulation.

In fact, he believes that certain corrections can be made on entire (obviously modest!)

editions or, again, he exploits the option of having an already written section of the roll replaced with a different one, containing another version of the text.
In practice, the author acts continuously and simultaneously on the production process of both the text and the book, but not in a direct form, since the two moments are closely connected; the entire cycle is entrusted to servile workers which he can use at every stage."[32]

The ceaseless chance of intervening on the text and on the ways in which to accomplish it, also with regards to page layout, is one of the transformations promoted by digital publishing which decreases, if not completely eliminates, the time necessary to transform the text into a book, when on electronic support.
But here is the thing.
With such a support, it is not legitimate to single out a book, having a text of which it is necessary not only to verify its homogeneity to the paper version but also consider the different ways of its realization and use.
Digital processes induce the author more than in the past to take care of how the text appears on the page and with modest digital skills to normalize and compose it graphically, ready for the publication, but on paper.
At this point, in fact, the questions become much more interesting, for one is in the position to change the text in hypertext and the alphabetical in multimedia form, if such operations are judged useful.
Although justified in theory, this transformation in practice is still to come, involving the affirmation of an object no longer inscribed on a material surface like the page, from which it can be separated and simulated elsewhere.
A process that becomes impossible in the reverse, authentically digital texts being non-transferable on paper support, given their multi or better cross media and hyper-textual nature, to which one must add the functions allowed by the computer, as research, information retrieval, networking and sharing.
Digital text derives from a system of signs, always written, whose organization exploits the characteristics of the support and, once published, it is immediately distributed, the spaces of its circulation as expanded as the number of potential readers has grown, with a differently active role both of the author and of the editor.
The spread and consolidation of digital technology have likewise involved some significant changes, with the novelty of a reading that is no longer exclusive, the reader being occupied by something else than the page of a printed book.
Once transformed the material and compositional norms that condition the modes, note again, of digital writing, time for reading is therefore interrupted and shortened because, in addition to reading with the eyes, the reader's operations are multiplied and it is necessary to understand whether they are provided and authorized by the text or induced by the electronic support, not at all redefinable and indeed structured in such a way that one can perform other than textual conventions. Therefore, with an ideal reader, it must be admitted that a text

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[32] Guglielmo Cavallo, *Testo, libro, lettura*, in Guglielmo Cavallo, Paolo Fedeli, Andrea Giardina (a cura di), *Lo spazio letterario di Roma antica*, Vol. II, Salerno Editrice, Roma, 1989, pagg. 316 seg.

promotes a typical way of reading, which depends not on the interpretations of its contents but on the forms they assume.

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"It was fortune that Lachmann was inspired by three difficult, and little read in the Middle Ages, Latin poets like Propertius, Catullus and Lucretius; because, in the conditions of our discipline at that time, if he had come across more complicated traditions, he would not have been able, despite his geometric cast of mind, to discover the rules of his own method, which worked for many years healthily.
But that method cannot legitimately be applied to the texts, for examples, of hexametric poets who were studied at school in the Middle Ages, to the texts by prose writers who were proposed as a stylistic model. It supposes mechanical or almost mechanical transmission: now the transmission for the authors I propose like Juvenal to quote a Latin and Plutarch or Eusebius to quote two Greeks isn't mechanical at all or for the most part; the most of the corruptions derives here from errors not of writing but of thought. Every amanuensis, every copyist innovates either unconsciously or semi-consciously or consciously.
Lachmann was used to considering interpolations and contamination as peculiar to the Renaissance, but in every period in which there has been interest in authors, in which therefore the authors were copied, learned scribes and editors tried to improve their text, both changing for conjecture and collating specimens that seemed better to them. Often the contamination precedes our tradition and so all our codes are contaminated. At the light of the papyri and of the indirect tradition, it is clear the variants of the mss. are much older than the archetypes, which collected in themselves the variants as in a basin and redistributed them to the medieval codes."[33]

And again:

"Precisely the examples were ready to demonstrate that the original text of a literary work, handed down to us from classical antiquity, can be reconstructed with the means of the comparison and the testimonies of the tradition, that is through recensio, only by one who knows the events such work underwent, subsequent to its publication, for centuries and centuries, up to the preserved witnesses.
One who aims to transform a complex of logical, then abstract rules, into an historical working method must not be afraid of the particular.
Hence the breadth of that recensio.
Given the special question of the "author's variants", I was used to overcome unscrupulously the boundaries of the classical antiquity and draw examples from much more recent writers for whom such variants are rigorously documented, because they are evident in our great fourteenth-century, Petrarch and Boccaccio; [...]
I will be satisfied if the reader of this book remains convinced that in order to

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[33] See the foreword by Dino Pieraccioni to the 1952 reprint of Giorgio Pasquali, *Storia della tradizione e critica del testo*, Le Monnier, Firenze, 1952, pag. IV. On these topics, it is still fundamental, Leighton D. Reynolds and Nigel G. Wilson, *Scribes and Scholars: A Guide to the Transmission of Greek and Latin Literature*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1968

reconstruct from manuscripts the original text of an ancient writer, by the very start, it is necessary to exercise the judgment, because this faculty cannot be replaced with any mechanical rule, so he will no longer believe anyone who, in good or bad faith, wants him to judge the activity of the critical editor to be mechanical. No, it is methodical, almost quite the opposite."[34]

The activity of the copyists, pivotal for the establishment of a written cultural heritage, indicates how the reading of a text could essentially be resolved in its rewriting, albeit in the interpretative and non-mechanical ways that Pasquali identified. For our discourse, this means also that the fruition of a written work has taken the path of its textualization, involving its copying, which constitutes, in philological terms, its tradition. Of other purposes and uses, classical philology has paid little or no attention, solicitous to the reconstruction of the correct lesson. But the polysemy already contained in the term 'lesson' should not escape,[35] meaning both reading aloud and genuine version of the text, that is always richer in author variants than it is generally recognized. However the semantic history of this term testifies to the decisive prevailing of the second meaning over the first, which is at a certain point relegated to silence.

Adding that Pasquali writes *"[...] in particular, it is worth considering that the conditions of propagation of the texts from the late antiquity throughout the Middle Ages have not essentially changed until the spread of the art of printing"*,[36] the degree of discontinuity such art has introduced will be ascertained better. Therefore it is important to count among its consequences also a thickening of silence in the act of reading and the attribution of a predominantly textual value to a literary work.

Elizabeth Eisenstein's considerations, on the ways of production and quantitative increase of texts, underline the differences with the past introduced by the printing press, two of which were the problem, from then more evident, of their correct version, as already said, and the new role of the writer, including his rights:

"It is very difficult to overcome skepticism by moving from the analysis of quantity to that of quality. If you compare a late handwritten copy of a given text with an early printed copy, you will probably doubt that any change has occurred, much less a sudden and revolutionary change. [...] It is necessary to give due weight to the existence of new features and their exploitation.

Despite his multiple attempts to reproduce the manuscripts as accurately as possible, the fact remains that Peter Schoeffer the printer followed different procedures from those previously followed by Peter Schoeffer the amanuensis. The absence of any obvious change in the product was combined with a complete transformation of production methods, giving rise to the paradoxical consideration, already noted, of apparent continuity and radical change."[37]

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[34] See the *Preface* by Giorgio Pasquali of the work cited in the previous note

[35] See Jacqueline Hamesse, *Il modello della lettura nell'età della scolastica*, in Guglielmo Cavallo e Roger Chartier, *Storia della lettura nel mondo occidentale*, Laterza, Bari, 1995, pagg. 91 seg.

[36] See the Preface by Giorgio Pasquali, *op. cit.*, pag. XIV

[37] Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The printing press as an agent of change, op. cit.*, pag. 51

Throughout the Middle Ages, reader and writer are generally not separate, for one of the most important aims of reading consists in writing, that is copying texts, and the reader's statute is very different from that of the current author, even though his job decided the survival of the ancient written tradition and, according to the categorization proposed by Barthes, we are in presence of writers rather than authors.

Also regarding the actualization of the text, the caesura produced by the printing press is confirmed, because the figure, which emerged with the introduction of the alphabet, the public reader obedient to the written text to which it lends its voice, is already far away from that of the copyist, who reproduces it in places, times and following rules, which marks the distance between the two and it is incomparable to that of the printer[38], whose work consists neither in its reading nor in its writing:

"The writer necessarily depends on the voice of the reader. At the moment of reading, the reader relinquishes his voice to what is written and to the absent writer. That means that his voice is not his own as he reads. While it is employed to bring the dead letters to life, it belongs to what is written. The reader is a vocal instrument used by the written word (or by the one who wrote it) in order to give the text a body, a sonorous reality. So when the reader of a funerary stele reads out the inscription: "I am the tomb of Glaukos", logically there is no contradiction for the voice that makes the "I" ring out belongs not to the reader, but to the stele bearing the inscription. No contradiction is involved, but a kind of violence undoubtedly is."[39]

Therefore, the polarization posed by Barthes for writing arises in inverted terms for reading, because it results transitive when it is completely devoted to the understanding of the text, its external referent, while it assumes the characteristics of intransitivity if leads to reflect on the ways of its fulfillment and then on what the reader is doing.

From this point of view, if the reader turns his attention to his practice, he does not read as required by the inscriptions intended to get silent objects speaking but rather, following to the prescriptions of literary texts,[40] he makes the verbal language act.

But the below considerations must be added, to indicate an important stage in the history of reading, when literary writing, which never served to give voice to objects, has acquired such an independence that the reading context is forgotten:

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[38] On the simultaneous production process which printed books usually involved, see Donald McKenzie, *Making Meaning: "Printers of the Mind" and Other Essays*, University of Massachusetts Press, 2002 and the article by Robert Darnton, *The Heresies of Bibliography* in "*The New York Review of Books*", 29 May, 2003: *"Compositors did not supply pressmen with "formes" (pages of type arranged inside an iron frame and locked in place so as to be ready for printing) in a consistent pattern. On the contrary, a compositor would send a completed forme to whatever press was free. So at one point or other, all the pressmen of the shop often ran off copies of a particular book. Moreover, compositors also switched frequently from one job to another."*

[39] See Jesper Svenbro, *Phrasikleia: An Anthropology of Reading in Ancient Greece*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca NY, 1993, pag. 3. Original French edition, *Phrasikleia, antropologie de la lecture en Grèce ancienne*, Editions La Decouverte, Paris, 1988

[40] Michel Charles, *La rhétorique de la lecture*, Le Seuil, Paris, 1977

"The «almost pragmatic» reception of fictional texts found its most memorable representation precisely in the literary sphere in the figure of Don Quixote. Don Quixote is the symbol of a reader for whom fiction is transformed into an illusion with such effectiveness that illusion ends up replacing reality. As the hero of the first modern anti-novel, Don Quixote is the classic figure of the reader overwhelmed by the illusory power of the text, a reader for whom the stereotypes of reading are transformed into stereotypes of the way of acting and speaking, since he has lost sight of the text itself. The fact that "the lost text" can also transform reality into a text is the ironic result of a reading that has succumbed to the centrifugal power of the reception".[41]

At the origin of this story, in Greek lands, the first proofs of alphabetic reading required a pragmatic that instead did not grant autonomy neither to the written composition nor to the mute objects and evermore it was necessary to invoke the Muses, in other words the inspiration of their memory, that is to say of the entire language, thus characterizing reading as a collective rather than an individual act:

"Go child, bring us
A cup so that, with a long draught,
I might open the banquet [propio].
[...]
Histories of Greek literature were to classify these songs as "lyric poetry", a literary genre, always complemented by a predictable commentary on "personal lyricism." But the real reason why these songs use "I" and "you" was that this fitted in with the social functioning of the symposion. This involved a group consisting of couples, in which each man was the equal of the other participants: their arrangement in a circle reflected that equality. "I" and "you" were defined solely by their presence at the banquet and their position within the system according to which speech circulated.
[...]
So it is not apposite to speak of "poetry in the first person", as if it were a matter of the expression of an intimate and unique experience. Quite the reverse. The "I" of the statement is used to engage a ritual situation, the symposion, circumscribed in time and place, so it detaches the subject from any biographical involvement: the speaker is simply the "I" of the speech act, the drinker, in that place at that time."[42]

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[41] Karlheinz Stierle, *La lettura dei testi di finzione*, in Robert Holub (a cura di), *Teoria della ricezione*, Einaudi, Torino, 1989, pag. 135. Of this latter, see Robert C. Holub, *Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction*, Methuen, London/New York, 1984

[42] Florence Dupont, *L'invention de la littérature*, Éditions La Découverte, Paris, 1988, pagg. 39 seg. (English translation, Florence Dupont, *The Invention of Literature*, The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 1999, pag. 29).
See also the analysis that Benveniste dedicates to personal pronouns and, in particular, to the

For this reason too, the Greek symposium has importance, a place of education of the aristocratic groups, where the still predominantly oral saying, accompanied by gestures, melodies and songs, does not serve to communicate to those present what, born in the individual intimacy, will constitute the content of a written work but to drive a rite of which the "*flourishing of the voice*" is an integral part:

"In short, it was necessary to Dio, for the sake of its own argument, that the subject of the statement, the "I" of the song, should be solely responsible for his speech. For if that speech had been the ephemeral speech of a singer celebrating Dyonisus in conformity with the ritual that governed all the banquets of his time, Dio would have had to discard his citation for fear of condemning the whole of Dyonisiac religion of the Greece of yesteryear. The same would have applied had Anacreon been a recognized master, a creator of models ensconced at the heart of the tradition. In short, Dio's point of view establishes a connection between the pure subjectivity of the poet's speech and the pretentiousness of his laying claim to the status of an artistic object for that speech. Such behaviour would have been inconceivable in antiquity, for it would have carried its own inherent condemnation: to address to the gods a prayer that was not part and parcel of a ritual was a religious and cultural offence."[43]

Words, in this case, carry out a rite and have no meaning outside it but such a regulated use of the language also makes them ready to become a written text, whose one of the most important qualities will be to express messages independent from their original context.

This text works by the special use of the personal pronouns, which do not identify a single individual but always performs the same act of enunciation, following the rules that govern the symposium.

Also this ritual takes place according to written rules but the writing is not alphabetic and, even less, its support is given by a printed page.

It is therefore necessary to point out that written messages, even more so, the literary one, inscribe in themselves not their interpretation but the ways of their reading, which incorporates the reader's here and now.

Remarks as those expressed by Roland Barthes in the early Seventies of the last century still offer many reasons for reflection:

"The work is normally the object of a consumption; no demagogy is intended here in referring to the so-called consumer culture but it has to be recognized that today it is

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couple I/you, whose existence is enunciative rather than linguistic: "*Then what is the "reality "to which the "I" and the "you" refer? Only a reality of discourse, which is a very particular thing. The self can only be defined in terms of a phrase and not in terms of an object, as a noun is instead. [...] "I" is the individual who enunciates the present instance of speech containing the linguistic instance "I".*" Émile Benveniste, *La nature des pronomes,* in *For Roman Jakobson,* Mouton & Co, The Hague/Paris, 1956

[43] *Ibid.*, pag. 26. For the whole story of Cleobulus's song, to which these few lines refer, and its reception over the time, Dupont's study is enlightening.

the 'quality' of the work (which supposes finally an appreciation of 'taste') and not the operation of reading itself which can differentiate between books: structurally, there is no difference between 'cultured' reading and casual reading in train. The Text (if only by its frequent 'un-readability') decants the work (the work permitting) from its consumption and gathers it up as play, activity, production, practice. This means that the Text requires that one try to abolish (or at the very least to diminish) the distance between writing and reading, in no way by intensifying the projection of the reader into the work but by joining them in a single signifying practice. The distance separating reading from writing is historical. In the times of the greatest social division (before the setting up of democratic cultures), reading and writing were equally privileges of class. Rhetoric, the great literary code of those times, taught one to write (even if what was then normally produced were speeches, not texts). Significantly, the coming of democracy reversed the word of command: what the (secondary) School prides itself on is teaching to read (well) and no longer to write (consciousness of the deficiency is becoming fashionable again today: the teacher is called upon to teach pupils to 'express themselves', which is a little like replacing a form of repression by a misconception)!"[44]

Therefore, with the use of digital technologies, not only new objects and subjects of knowledge nowadays enter the scene but also some foundational cultural practices are being rediscovered, outside the education system rather than within it. In the words of Barthes, if it is its *'un-readability'* to make the quality of a text, a different use of the work is also required, not only due to the actual multiplication of the written messages.

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Finally, let's resume some observations to clarify what was stated in the article.

1) The current digitization process, which also concerns the objects of writing and reading, is in continuity with the heritage of the written tradition and the most important transcription remains the alphabetical one, because it translates the verbal language, although not in a neutral way.
Digitization, in particular, has entailed the transition from reading on paper to the screen and therefore the well experientable coexistence of the two. The importance of the writing support has been emphasized and then it has been stated that the printed book was configured as a predominantly reading object while digital screen, namely the computer, allows a series of operations, which are not only those required by the written text but rather made available by the support.

2) Since our reading practice derives from the use of the printed book, today we read almost exclusively with the eyes, in a solitary way and for ourselves. This practice, however, has been accomplished in very different ways over time and the

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[44] See Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text*, Fontana Press, London, 2007 [original edition "*De l'oeuvre au texte*" in *Revue d'Estétique* (3, 1971) pag. 225-232]

reader's statute has undergone important changes. When alphabetic letters were invented and texts transcribed in such a form, began to be read, this activity which involved to hand one's own voice over a written object was deemed just worthy of slaves and entrusted only to them.

The retroaction of alphabetic writing on verbal language and thought is today disregarded and some literary theories tell us that the author's work consists in making the verbal language act.[45]

When written, it takes the form of the employed writing, no more actualized by memory, a force to be invoked in a rite, but it is created and preserved by alphabetic writing.[46]

3) What the object-book allows, in a decisive way, is to normalize the various versions of a text, thanks to the space of the page, especially when it will be printed. Once fixed, the written text becomes independent from its own author, also implying that the writing can roll into the hands of those who are unable to understand it (Plato, *Phaedro*, 274 seg.).

Recalling today's extensive uses of writing, we must question whether its social function is changing, so trivial to lose credit and return to its original lack of consideration or rather so diversified to reaffirm its prestige.

Electronic texts also presuppose a larger use of writing than the printed ones: however text and book should never be confused and to call a digital version of a printed text "e-book" is a misunderstanding, books being objects with even material characteristics that are well defined.[47]

Besides, the printed text of alphabetical type is separable from its support and reproducible elsewhere, an impossible operation for the digital one, whose most important qualities derive from the different nature of their support.

This remark, however, entails neither a devaluation of the alphabetical text on paper which, instead, reaffirms its transferability nor the negation for the printed page of presenting any hyper-textual structure.[48]

Indeed the prevalence of the alphabetic transcription is consolidated by keeping as a model, even for authentically digital works, the paper book.

4) The reader makes something that is never limited to the semantic interpretation of the signs before their eyes, the act of reading having immediate pragmatic consequences, conditioned by the forms the various types of writing assume and by their supports.

For example, the fact that alphabetic writing is organized within the material boundaries of a printed page, contrary to the statements by Michel Foucault[49],

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[45] Florence Dupont, *The Invention of Literature, op. cit.*, pag 9

[46] One could say that among things which never would exist without words, the first is verbal language

[47] Jan Tschichold, *The Form of the Book*, Lund Humphries, London, 1991

[48] For a printed book realized according to a hypertextual structure, see Luca Ferrieri, *Tra l'ultimo libro letto e il primo nuovo da aprire*, Olschki, Firenze, 2013

[49] Michel Foucault, *The archaeology of knowledge*, Routledge, London, 2002, pag. 25: *"The frontiers of a book are never clear-cut: beyond the title, the first lines, and the last full stop, beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other*

entails a decisive difference in its use, as shown by the difficulties and merits of digital editions of literary works.[50]

More than yesterday it is therefore necessary to question the ways in which reading is carried through, also aware that the alphabetical one was, at the time of its introduction, entrusted to slaves, because judged to limit the freedom of the reader, who loses his voice, in an oral culture, the main tool of expression. Today, on the contrary, reading with just your eyes, in a solitary and exclusive way, is considered a practice to derive pleasure from the text and, above all, to deepen the knowledge of oneself and of the world.

Some stages of this merrygo-round here have been at least indicated.

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texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network. And this network of references is not the same in the case of a mathematical treatise, a textual commentary, a historical account, and an episode in a novel cycle; the unity of the book, even in the sense of a group of relations, cannot be regarded as identical in each case. The book is not simply the object that one holds in one's hands; and it cannot remain within the little parallelepiped that contains it: its unity is variable and relative. As soon as one questions that unity, it loses its self-evidence; it indicates itself, constructs itself, only on the basis of a complex field of discourse."

[50] For the specific issue of digital editions of literary works and their novelty, see Domenico Fiormonte, *Per una critica del testo digitale*, Bulzoni, Roma, 2018. See also Domenico Fiormonte, *The Digital Humanist: A Critical Inquiry,* Punctum Book, New York, 2015. It is useful Dino Buzzetti, "*Digital Representation and the Text Model*" in *New Literary History* (33) pag. 61-88, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2002

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