

Biscioni's Dante

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ABSTRACT

This essay focuses on the 1723 edition of two of Dante Alighieri's "minor texts", the *Vita Nova* and the *Convivio*, both of which had troubled editorial histories, within the volume *Prose di Dante Alighieri e di Messer Gio. Boccacci* prepared for the Tartini press in Florence by Anton Maria Biscioni. In intervening in the texts of both works in unique ways, this edition sought to return to Dante's original intentions when writing them. This essay argues that Anton Maria Biscioni's work offers modern readers a unique glimpse into the workshop of an editor of this eighteenth-century edition of Dante's texts, an editor who details all the facets of the editorial process, from the collation of manuscripts to the hard choices determined by that collation and by the current practices of the editorial trade. The authors argue that main achievements of this 1723 edition can be seen in its editor's promotion of bibliographical studies.

THIS PAPER OFFERS A GLIMPSE INTO THE HISTORY OF PRINTED EDITIONS OF Dante Alighieri's works, a history that has yet to be fully written. The following pages will focus on two of Dante's "minor works", namely the *Vita Nova* and the *Convivio*, as these were included in a 1723 volume entitled *Prose di Dante Alighieri e di Messer Gio. Boccacci* prepared for the Tartini press in Florence by Anton Maria Biscioni.¹ Of Dante's texts, the

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1. This essay emerges from two separate larger studies by Arduini and Todorović on the reception of Dante's *Vita Nova* and the *Convivio*, united here by an interest in the sole eighteenth-century edition to include the two works. Curated by Biscioni, the *Prose* thus embraced both the earliest of Dante's "minor" works to be printed, the *Convivio*, which saw its first edition in 1490 (second only to the *Commedia*) and the *Vita Nova*, the last of the poet's minor works to be printed, with its first edition appearing only in 1576. Todorović's contributions to this essay are drawn from her current book manuscript tentatively titled "Editing Dante's *Vita Nova* Between Dante and Boccaccio", which focuses on the *Vita Nova*'s print tradition. Arduini's contribution to this essay derives from her investigation of the reception of the *Convivio*, particularly between the 1330s and the 1530s, documented in her book *Dante's Convivio: The Creation of a Cultural Icon* (2020b).

volume contains the *Vita Nova*, the *Convivio*, and several of the poet's letters, and of Boccaccio's works it prints the *Trattatello in laude di Dante* and multiple letters. In pairing the *Vita Nova* with Boccaccio's *Trattatello*, Biscioni adheres to a centuries-long manuscript tradition that originated with Boccaccio's two autograph copies of the *Vita Nova*: Toledo, Archivo y Biblioteca Capitulares, Zelada 104.6, and the Vatican Apostolic Library's Chigiano L V 176. This tradition was adopted into print culture through the *Vita Nova's editio princeps*, published in Florence in 1576 by the Sermartelli press, which included Boccaccio's *Trattatello* and letters along with the *Vita Nova*. Although the *Convivio* did not belong to this particular tradition, Biscioni remarks at the opening of his volume that this text had in common with the *Vita Nova* its limited availability in manuscript or print form, hence the need to make both works available for those who wished to see them ("desiderosi di vederle" [1723, iii]). He further explains his decision to publish the two texts by dismissing previous editions as "very inaccurate and deficient" ("molto scorrette e manchevoli" [1723, xxxviii]), possibly because these were based on bad exemplars. The true meaning of the poet's words in these texts has consequently remained obscure: not researched at all (in the case of the *Vita Nova*), or satisfactorily (in the case of the *Convivio*). Promising to rectify his predecessors' errors and offer the public greater clarity ("la maggior chiarezza" [1723, iii]), Biscioni opts — in what we would later come to define as a Bédierian choice of a "best" manuscript — to base his edition on a single fifteenth-century codex in the editor's own collection, selected as "the best one that could be found" ("comechè egli sia il migliore, che si sia potuto trovare" [1723, xxxviii]).

The preface to the volume consists of a lengthy essay on the *Vita Nova*, dealing mainly with claims (which originated from Boccaccio) that Beatrice was a real woman. According to Biscioni, she is rather to be understood as a symbol and the *Vita Nova* as a treatise on Love. In the preface, Biscioni first quotes Boccaccio's observations about the beginnings of Dante's love for Beatrice, and then, one by one, he cites commentators of the *Commedia*, from the fourteenth to the late sixteenth century: some of the most revered names in the history of Italian literature, from Benvenuto da Imola to Leonardo Bruni [Lionardo Aretino], to Landino and Vellutello. Biscioni complains that these great masters, without exception, have repeated and reused Boccaccio's arguments. More pointedly, he accuses them of copying from one another ("l'uno scrittore ha copiato l'altro" [1723, vii, and again viii]), following Boccaccio in unison. Biscioni then asks himself and his reader:

Che stima si debba fare dell'autorità de' suddetti Scrittori, i quali, *avendo copiato l'uno dall'altro*, non fanno autorità che per uno, io voglio lasciarlo decider ad altri; che io per me non presumerò mai d'impugnare l'asserzione di coloro, che per l'antichità e pel sapere meritano piuttosto venerazione, che critica.

(1723, viii, emphasis mine)

(What respect one should have for these writers, who, having copied from one another, abdicated their authority altogether, I prefer to leave it up to others; for myself, I will never presume to contest assertions made by those who, because of their antiquity and wisdom, deserve worship rather than criticism.)

Criticizing his predecessors for having accepted even the story of Dante's mother's dream, Biscioni argues that their blind following of Boccaccio might be justifiable if he were an historian, but that because he wrote his biography of Dante as a poet, his claims are subject to doubt:

Ora se il Boccaccio non da storico, ma da poeta ha scritto la Vita di Dante; dunque non solo nelle suddette vanità o inverisimilitudini, ma in altre cose ancora si potrà dubitare della sua fede.

(1723, viii)

(Now, if Boccaccio wrote the Life of Dante not as a historian, but as a poet, one can doubt his faithfulness not only with respect to these abovementioned vanities or implausibilities, but in other things as well.)

In describing the spread of false information from Boccaccio to each subsequent generation of commentators, Biscioni sheds light on the basic mechanisms of transmission — from source to final destination — bringing to the reader's attention the lack of critical reasoning employed even by the most venerated of past authors. Within that context, Biscioni's essay opens the 1723 collection with an alternative view of the supposed history of Dante's love for Beatrice. This revision is based on a critical reading of Dante's own text and a critical analysis of the text's and the author's contexts, a reading that strips away interpretive layers added by Boccaccio and his followers, layers that were largely based on conjectures and straight-out creative inventions by poets and men of letters in response to Dante's words in the *Vita Nova* and in his other works. Supporting his argument with

Dante's own words from the theoretical paragraph about allegory in the *Vita Nova*, Biscioni ends by declaring that the text is, in fact, entirely allegorical (“si raggira tutta quanta sopra l'allegoria” [1723, xv]) and contains no trace of objective history (“restando affatto esclusa da quella [*Vita Nova*] ogni spezie di vera storia” [1723, xv]).

Biscioni's edition further offers relatively detailed notes to the text and what was, for the time, a handy apparatus. Most significant among Biscioni's editorial decisions — as clarified in the notes at the end of the volume (under the title “Annotazioni sopra la *Vita nuova* di Dante Alighieri e varie lezioni, e correzioni degli errori, occorsi nello stampare”) is the choice to restore the divisions to the text.² Biscioni asserts that these were Dante's legitimate work (“legittima opera di Dante” [1723, 329]) and that as such they were appropriately dispersed throughout the text (“da lui medesimo a' propri luoghi collocate” [1723, 329]). He openly admits that he has been unable to trace to a specific point in the text's circulation the origin of the existing practice of marginalizing the divisions, but he was deeply convinced that the divisions were a rightful part of the *Vita Nova* text and should be situated in their original proximity to the verses.

Of all the manuscripts he had used in preparing his edition, Biscioni remarks that only one, his own (identified by Michele Barbi as MS Marciano it. X 26), contained the integral version of the *Vita Nova*, while all the others belonged to same tradition that produced the Sermartelli 1576 edition (Biscioni reports six other manuscripts he had collated along with the *editio princeps*). The codex Marciano it. X 26, housed in the Marciana Library in Venice from the collection of Nicolò Panciatichi, is a compound manuscript, composed of two codices bound together, the first containing Dante's *Vita Nova* in humanistic writing, and the second the *Convivio*, copied on cc. 35–84, in a cursive hand. The transcriptions seem to have been carried out at different times, by different copyists, although both scribes remain anonymous and unidentified, but Biscioni also followed it for his edition of Dante's *Convivio* in the same volume.

Later in his preface, after admitting the limits of his search for the origins of this marginalization, Biscioni adds that by accident he had come across a manuscript that not only located the divisions in the margins, but

2. Divisions are a part of the *Vita Nova*'s text that derive from the Scholastic practice of dividing a text for the purpose of better explaining and understanding it. Thus, in the *Vita Nova*, Dante provides a formal analysis of the poems by identifying analytical units within them, most likely for the purpose of controlling the interpretation of his verses.

also included an editorial note “Maraviglierannosi molti” (“Many will be amazed”), written “by I do not know whom” (“da non so chi” [1723, 329]). This note — which we have now known for some time was authored and penned by Boccaccio — centers around a questioning assessment of the *Vita Nova* as too puerile (“troppo puerile”) and, hence, a questioning of Dante’s authority altogether, in a move that worked to establish Boccaccio’s own authority (see TODORVIĆ 2018).³ Because the Boccaccian critical tradition overwhelmingly dominated the circulation of the *Vita Nova* in manuscript, this note (which accompanies the *Vita Nova*’s incipit in both of Boccaccio’s copies), begins a long and troubled editorial history for Dante’s text.⁴ Unaware that Boccaccio had authored this note, Biscioni proposes that: “[f]rom this note one can understand how easily one dares to cut off

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3. After discussing the first reason for eliminating the divisions as his own literary sensibility that prompted him to consider them gloss rather than text, Boccaccio embarks on spelling out the second reason: “La seconda ragione ch’è secondo che io ho già udito più volte ragionare ad persone degne di fede avendo Da(n)te nella sua giovaneça composto questo libello e(t) poi essendo col tempo nella scienza e(t) nelle op(er)ationi cresciuto si vergognava aver facto questo, parendogli op(er)a troppo puerile”. (The second reason is that many times I have heard people worthy of trust say that Dante, having composed this little book in his youth and then with time having grown in his understanding of the arts, was ashamed of having written this, for it seemed to him too puerile). This second justification for his editorial decision transfers the responsibility to Dante himself and positions Boccaccio as a mere executioner of Dante’s wishes—whereas Boccaccio is in reality positioning himself as an authority on the Florentine poet.
 4. Boccaccio, however, decided that the divisions’ place was not within the text, and he extracted them into the margins of his two copies of the *Vita Nova*, MSS Toledo, Archivo y Biblioteca Capitulares, Zelada 104.6 and subsequently in a widely known copy of that same Toledo manuscript, the Vatican Library’s Chigiano L V 176. Boccaccio’s description of Dante’s *libello* as a youthful, immature work — to justify marginalizing from Dante’s text one type of prose — endured in Dante criticism for centuries, and Boccaccio’s name and authority played a crucial role in the subsequent circulation of the *Vita Nova*, both in manuscript and in print cultures. Boccaccio’s practice of marginalizing the divisions rapidly dominated in the circulation of the *Vita Nova*: by the end of the fifteenth century, the majority of manuscripts transmitted Dante’s text without the divisions. One of these manuscripts was used in preparation of the *editio princeps*, carrying over Boccaccio’s *Vita Nova* into the new medium. The text was finally “stabilized”, and the divisions included with the text, with Michele Barbi’s 1907 edition (see BARBI 1907).

portions of the works of supreme authors” (“Da questa nota si comprende con quanta facilità altri si porti a resecare dall’opere de’ sovrani Scrittori alcuna porzione delle medesime” [1723, 330]). He describes, however, as well known that the negative attitude towards the divisions originates with Boccaccio’s biography of Dante, thus indirectly connecting Boccaccio with this crucial editorial note:

Egli è ancora quasi certo che questa opinione ha origine dal Boccaccio, ritrovandosi registrata nella sua Vita di Dante; ond’è ch’ella si potrà porre (salva sempre la reverenza d’un tanto autore) trall’altre sue poetiche invenzioni.

(1723, 330)

(It is almost certain that this opinion has its origins in Boccaccio, as it is registered in his Life of Dante; it can thus be placed (reserving, of course, the reverence for such a great author) among his other poetic inventions.)

The editor does not mince words as he accuses Boccaccio of spreading misinformation in his biography of Dante, and he treats the handling of the divisions as central to that project of misinformation. He expands his annotations with examples from Dante’s other writings that support the inclusion of the divisions, first among these being the *Convivio*. Biscioni’s argument on Dante’s practice of including divisions in his works culminates as he conjectures that had he lived longer, Dante would have commented on his *Commedia* and included the divisions in his commentary (“avrebbe ancora fatto il medesimo, s’egli avesse comentata la sua *Commedia*” [1723, 330]). This task was completed by his son, Pietro, after the poet’s death, claims Biscioni in explaining the structure not only of Pietro’s but of all the other commentaries on the *Commedia*, including Boccaccio’s own so-called *Esposizioni sopra la Commedia di Dante*, where the divisions were placed before the analyses (“dichiarazione”). Biscioni concludes his formal analysis of the various texts by Dante by stating that the poems are, after all, at the heart of the *Vita Nova* and the *Convivio*. The poems are the very substance of the two texts, and everything else is commentary:

In somma è da sapere, che la sustanza, tanto della Vita Nuova, che del Convito sono le rime: il restante poi o sono sommari, o argomenti, o dichiarazioni, o dimostrazioni delle cagioni, il che tutto insieme fa figura di Commento.

(1723, 330)

(In sum, we should know that the substance of the *Vita Nuova* and of the *Convivio* are the poems: the rest are either summaries, or arguments, or declarations, or demonstrations, all of which form a commentary.)

In the 1723 edition, then, Biscioni prints the divisions within the text, in their proper locations, albeit with two crucial differences from Dante's text. First, Biscioni keeps — most likely following the exemplar he works from — the altered form of Boccaccio's marginalized divisions. Second, he always prints the divisions after the poems, unlike Dante who, as he announces Beatrice's death and opens the canzone *Gli occhi dolenti*, changes their position to precede the poems, thus emphasizing their loneliness and “widowhood” after Beatrice, the muse, dies. Biscioni's detailed discussion, comparisons, and remarks, however, convinced few editors and readers. Some editors in the 1800s opted to marginalize the divisions, some moved them to the end of their volumes in a precursor to endnotes, while others included them in the text, but printed them in italics and often in red ink. However, the 1723 Florence edition nevertheless represented an important stage in the *Vita Nova's* circulation, especially as in it Biscioni employed a philological interest that cannot be discerned in the *princeps*.

While the *Vita Nova's* editorial history was uniquely shaped by Boccaccio's early editorial intervention, the manuscript and print circulation of the *Convivio* were complicated by an originally complex manuscript and a tormented textual tradition. Between the first Florentine edition of 1490 and the text's inclusion in the volume of miscellaneous prose by Dante and Boccaccio curated by Anton Maria Biscioni in 1723, the *Convivio* appeared in only three printed editions, all of them Venetian: the Da Sabio edition in 1521, Zoppino's in 1529, and Sessa's edition in 1531. The eighteenth-century text, based partly on the three earlier printings and partly on a codex owned by Biscioni (the extant manuscript Venice, Biblioteca Marciana, X It. 26, which Biscioni had also described as the best source for his *Vita Nova* in this same collection), was then republished in later editions of Dante's *Opere* printed by Giambattista Pasquali (Venice, 1741–1772: the *Convivio* is in the first volume, printed in 1741), Antonio Zatta (Venice, 1757–1758), and Giovanni Gatti (in the first volume, Venice 1793).⁵ Biscioni's edition did not greatly enhance our understanding of the text's meaning, but would instead attract scholarly attention in the next century to the text's critical conditions, obscurity, and interpretive difficulty. Among the first nineteenth-century editors of the *Convivio*, the so-called Editori

5. For a fuller accounting of this history, see ARDUINI 2020a.

milanesi, Vincenzo Monti, Giangiacomo Trivulzio, and Giovanni Antonio Maggi, would take decisive steps to reconstruct a more authoritative text with their edition *Convito di Dante Alighieri ridotto a lezione migliore* and *Il Convito di Dante ridotto a lezione migliore* (see MONTI et al. 1826 and 1827). Vincenzo Monti explained the principles of their textual reconstruction in his *Saggio diviso in quattro parti dei molti e gravi errori trascorsi in tutte le edizioni del Convito di Dante* (MONTI 1823).

As Domenico Pietropaolo (1983, 41) has pointed out, Biscioni's 1723 publication represents "the first systematic effort to recover the precise text" of the *Convivio*, on pages 53 through 210 of his ambitious volume devoted to the *Prose di Dante Alighieri e di messer Giovanni Boccaccio*, discussed above for Dante's *Vita Nova*. In its interpretative approach, Biscioni's edition was representative of eighteenth-century medieval studies, a field of research that had only recently been created. Because it made one version of the *Convivio* more available, the volume was of particular use to the philological endeavors of Italian medieval studies, as Biscioni and other Tuscan scholars devoted themselves to reestablishing the language of what they considered authoritative texts of fourteenth-century key Tuscan vernacular works.

Pietropaolo has noticed that among other politically inspired philological endeavors of the 1720s, Biscioni's edition is "a prime example" of tentative philology motivated by a desire to circulate textually precise Tuscan works, "which had become extremely rare outside of Tuscany" (1983, 42). Biscioni thus perceived a relationship between textual criticism and the circulation of reliable texts. His aim was not to generate an extensive interpretative use of the *Convivio* in relation to the *Commedia*, as it was popular in sixteenth and seventeenth-century criticism, but rather to make medieval Tuscan works available in accessible and reliable editions that would enable correct interpretation and assessment of those works by eighteenth-century scholars.⁶

This challenge was arduous in the case of the *Convivio*, for which the circulation was extremely limited during the fourteenth century, and the more numerous copies of the fifteenth century reveal a seriously corrupted state of the manuscript tradition. But in his attempt to recover the original text of the *Convivio*, to render as close an approximation as possible, and to limit his interventions to the minimum required by the syntax, Biscioni examined only eleven of the then-available manuscripts (forty-four have

6. For the sixteenth-century use of the *Convivio* by commentators on the *Commedia*, see GILSON 2009.

now been identified, with the addition of a few fragments). From these eleven, he selected a single codex from his own collection, known today as manuscript Marciano it. X 26, which he also used for his edition of the *Vita Nova*. Biscioni heavily annotated the manuscript, which contains glosses by different hands, and reverently followed it according to the principle of the *codex optimus* (best manuscript).

Biscioni set out to resolve three major textual issues that characterize the manuscript and early printed tradition of the *Convivio*: discordant readings, scribal interpolations, and omissions, which often render passages unintelligible (PIETROPAOLO 1983, 44). He began by establishing some empirical rules for his practice of textual criticism, the first of which was to privilege obscurity when selecting among different readings, as in the case of *Convivio* IV vii 10: “la voce più oscura è sempre per lo più la legittima, talché le più usate sono glossemi o cattive interpretazioni, poste quivi da copisti per ispiegare le voci oscure, o mutate da loro, perché essi non intendevano le proprie” (“In general, the most obscure term is always the correct one. This is because the most common terms are either glosses or bad interpretations, placed there by scribes in order to explain the obscure terms or to replace them altogether if the scribes were unable to understand them” [1723, 357]). Biscioni’s explanation essentially matches the definition of the principle of *lectio difficilior*, in line with modern textual criticism, whereby common terms are understood as hypercorrections introduced by scribes unable to understand the archetype, although the formal elaboration of this principle in 1796 is credited to Johann Jakob Griesbach and more generally to late-eighteenth-century biblical studies. Biscioni’s second rule helped him to determine which spelling was closer to the original: “Le voci più corrotte, quando si vedono replicate in più testi, servono d’indizio per rintracciare le vere voci degli autori” (“The most corrupt variants, when they are repeated across several manuscripts, serve as useful indications of the authors’ original words” [1723, 357]) is more subjective, suggesting that a widely attested erroneous reading would thereby enable the critic to divine the correct one. For example, in the context of *Convivio* IV vii 10, the modern critical text, established by Franca Brambilla Ageno in 1995 and based on forty-four manuscripts plus the *editio princeps*, reads “detrimento” (AGENO 1995, 3: 304) instead of Biscioni’s “dottrimento” (preferred to the widely attested erroneous reading “doctrimento” that Biscioni considered inspired by “dottrina”). Pietropaolo has noted, however, that the modern corrections, here and in other passages, invalidate Biscioni’s textual choices by adopting the principle of *codices plurimi*, but not his philological formulation of the *lectio difficilior* and its early applications to the text of the *Convivio* (1983, 45).

Following his version of *lectio difficilior* and his belief in the indicative value of corrupt variants, and upholding the principle of the *codex optimus* before that had been established as a formal criterion, Biscioni also made use of glosses added by previous owners of the Marciano manuscript, namely Luca di Simone della Robbia, a fifteenth-century descendant of the Florentine sculptor Luca della Robbia. Michele Barbi (1907, LXXXV–LXXXVI) has criticized Biscioni's undue respect for and fidelity in reproducing the particularities of a single, and late, compound codex — a reliance that occasionally led Biscioni to overcorrect. For example, in his desire to surpass previous editions of the *Convivio*, he chose not to reproduce the chapter divisions of the four treatises in his edition and its reprints, simply because he did not believe they belonged to Dante's original work. Biscioni's is ultimately methodology that tended toward correction — correction that for him meant mainly restoration of the most antiquated reading/variant, which he tended to identify as the most correct and authentic.⁷

Moreover, most of Biscioni's emendations never found their way into the text of the *Convivio*, since he relegated them to the notes at the end of the volume, prepared “with grammarian's judgement” — as Foscolo later commented in his *Discorso sul testo della Commedia* (1887, 323) —, burying his explanations in a welter of erudition that is as burdensome now as it was fashionable then. Biscioni mainly studied the legacy of fourteenth-century Tuscan literary texts, the “testi di lingua”, considered almost exclusively as linguistic models, which served as a reconstruction, and celebration, of Florentine history understood to culminate in Dante and Boccaccio (though interestingly, not Petrarch).

Though Biscioni's practice has long since been defined as narrow-sighted and parochial (by Armando Petrucci, among others), in his time he represented literary erudition, his studies supported by his knowledge of Latin, ancient Greek, and the rudiments of Hebrew, albeit lacking in the interest in or talent for the recovery and study of documents that had informed the activity of Tuscan scholars such as Giovanni Lami or Uberto Benvoglianti, who had been influenced by Ludovico Muratori's positions. Rather, as Pietropaolo (1983, 49) has suggested, the significance of Biscioni's contribution to textual criticism lies in its heuristic dimension, seen in the

7. This methodology is in sharp contrast to that employed in contemporary philology. For example, Brambilla Ageno's edition of Dante's *Convivio* (1995) was criticized for its ample recourse to corrections that were based on the criterion of *codices plurimi*, from which she reconstructed the hypothesized most correct reading.

way his variants and notes induce the reader to consider the importance of textual precision in the interpretation of Dante. This view thus explains Biscioni's main activity of recovery and inventory of fourteenth-century Tuscan texts, and genealogical interests, conducted before and after his appointment as librarian at the Biblioteca Laurenziana in Florence in 1742. He had been temporarily appointed "custode" of the library in 1708, and again in 1713, 1725, 1729, and 1739, and the appointment to become permanent librarian was finally issued by the Grand Duke Francis I of Lorena in 1741 and became effective in 1742.

Although his bid to correct and change the misguided tendency to exclude the divisions from the *Vita Nova's* text was ultimately unsuccessful, Biscioni's 1723 edition offers modern readers a unique glimpse into the workshop of an editor of Dante's texts, an editor who details all the facets of the editorial process, from the collation of manuscripts to the hard choices determined by that collation and by the current practices of the editorial trade. Anton Maria Biscioni's main achievements can thus be seen in the promotion of bibliographical studies, and we would like to conclude with a quotation that informs, we believe, his erudite recovery both of the *Vita Nova* and the *Convivio* in the volume of the *Prose*: "È cosa utilissima nelle ristampe de' buoni libri il rendere informati coloro che gli leggeranno del fatto delle antecedenti edizioni, e di quanto appartenga alla sostanza dell'opera [. . .] perocché questa è parte della storia letteraria" (LIPPI 1750, vii): "It is a very useful thing, in the reprints of good books, to inform those who will read them of the fact that previous editions existed, and of how much they belong to the substance of the work [. . .] because this is part of literary history").

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