INTRODUCTION

The Making of Domenico Comparetti's *Vergil in the Middle Ages*

Because in English the name of the great Roman poet *Vergil* is spelled far more routinely with an *i* (*Virgil*) than with an *e*, the very orthography of the first word in the title of Domenico Comparetti's (1835–1927) *Vergil in the Middle Ages* (henceforth designated VMA) highlights the utility of studying Vergil's fate in earlier times as an aid to comprehending his nature in our own day. Upon inquiry, we discover the spelling of Vergil with an *i* to be a corruption that had become entrenched in Latin already by the fourth or fifth century and that passed subsequently into the modern European languages.¹ In other words, even to fathom why we call Vergil what we do, we must pay attention to what has been loosely tagged "the Vergilian tradition"—the corpus of scholarship and stories, learned lore and folklore, that has taken shape around Vergil and his poetry during the past two thousand years.

The success of Vergil's *Aeneid* was so much greater than that of other poems for so long a time that to describe the epic as a bestseller would make sense only if the customary noun were "betterseller." The *Aeneid* was not just an epic but *the* epic, even *the* poem, the most enduring of schoolbooks, a repository of pure speech, history, and mythology. Revered in tandem with his poem, Vergil was not just the master of Latin poetic style but also the poet whose creation at once described and enacted the founding of a nation and dynasty. He was a culture hero, the cynosure of a cult that sometimes bordered on a mania—Vergiliomania. Not surprisingly, an extensive scholarly—or *scholastic*—equipment of biographies, commentaries, glosses, and the like was elaborated by ancient and medieval teachers to assist their charges in the mandatory reading of *the* preeminent

¹ Hardie, p. 1123.

poet, to identify whom referring to "the *poeta*" sufficed. Over the centuries the schoolmasters and clerics remade this poet in their own image, as a cleric, an author of a celebrated textbook and a schoolmaster, a sage and a seer, the wisest man of antiquity and the type of the universal philosopher, and even a Christian poet and a guide of a Christian poet. This portion of the medieval Vergilian tradition—which bestowed upon us the Vergil who escorted Dante through the *Inferno* and beyond—has its undeniable oddities, but it is the legends of Vergil that have earned a richly deserved reputation for their flamboyance. The legends, which first surfaced around the middle of the twelfth century, converted Vergil into a magician, endowed him with supernatural powers, and attributed to him characteristics that had been ascribed to the other prophet-sages and magicians whom he soon overshadowed.

Delving into the legends can become a psychotropic experience, not to be undertaken by anyone without a stout appetite or at least a strong stomach for the bizarre, a sense of humor, and a keen realization of the differences between fiction and reality. In investigating the legends we learn that Vergil cherished especially tender feelings toward Naples. To take three examples that have nothing in common except Naples and a very literal brazenness, the poet is reputed to have given the Neapolitans a bronze horse, which prevented horses from breaking their backs; a bronze fly, which repelled flies from the city; and a bronze statue of an archer, which kept Mount Vesuvius from erupting (*VMA*, p. 259). All we would need to round out the picture would be Vergil's appropriately bronzed baby shoes.

Predictably, Vergil was also associated with Rome in numerous colorful anecdotes. According to the famous escapade of "Vergil in the Basket," the poet becomes enamored of a daughter of the emperor. Although the feeling is not mutual, the young woman pretends to love him so that she can make a fool of him. She proposes to infiltrate him into her room by a Rapunzel-like ruse: by drawing him up in a basket to the window of her tower. Vergil arrives, notices the hamper, clambers into it, and is overjoyed to observe it moving upward according to plan. But suddenly the ascent stops when the young woman

leaves the basket dangling only halfway up the tower. Vergil is left stranded until daybreak, whereupon he becomes a source of ridicule to the common people and of fury to the emperor. Consequently the poet-sage resolves to avenge himself. Through his craft as a necromancer he causes all the fires in Rome to be extinguished and arranges matters so that the only way they can be rekindled is for torches to be lit from a particularly private part on the person of the emperor's daughter (*VMA*, pp. 326–27)—an episode that gives radically new meaning to the concept of inflammation!

Such tales represent one wild extreme of Vergil in medieval legend. Other notions—e.g., that Vergil prophesied the nativity of Christ in the fourth bucolic (the “messianic” eclogue) and that he had a magic tome that contained all wisdom—were also widespread. Yet the oddity of these narratives should not make us forget that serious study of Vergil in the commentary tradition proceeded ceaselessly, and that the poet and his poems were never suppressed altogether by the legends. In fact, one of Comparetti's signal achievements in *VMA* was integrating into a single book and train of thought the dual aspects of Vergil in the Middle Ages—the literary reputation and the legends. Although the magical Vergil has tended to stand out in the minds of those concerned with the fate of the poet in the Middle Ages, Comparetti devoted more pages of *VMA* to the learned or literary tradition (pp. 1–238) than to the popular or folkloric Vergil (pp. 239–376). Most notably, he presented a tripartite classification of the main interpretative tacks taken toward the *Aeneid* in the Middle Ages: grammatical, philosophical or allegorical, and historical interpretation.

After the publication of *VMA*, a few major studies of the legends were composed, but they have by no means dislodged Comparetti's book.² The real advances have come in our appreciation of Vergil as a literary or textual phenomenon—and in our heightened awareness of the fine distinctions to be drawn between one phase in late antiquity or the Middle Ages and

² Alongside the minor contribution of Graf is the larger one of Tunison and the massive work of Spargo. Bronzini provides the most thorough reassessment of *VMA* from the point of view of its folkloristics.

another. Our comprehension of classrooms and schoolmasters has deepened remarkably. Ever closer attention has been paid to the ways in which Vergil's poems interact with late antique and medieval texts. Sometimes this scrutiny has focused upon verbal borrowings or allusions;³ occasionally upon characters in the *Aeneid* who led unusual lives in medieval literature;⁴ and often upon methods of allegorical reading practiced in the Middle Ages.⁵ Despite the nearly unanimous praise for Comparetti's approach to the question (*VMA*, pp. 195–231), the complexities of Dante's outlook upon Vergil and upon the classical antiquity Vergil embodied have impelled *Dantisti* to release an incessant flood of chapters, articles, and monographs.⁶ Of late most of the research into "the Medieval Vergil" has gone into manuscripts: how many survive, which of them were glossed or commented and how, which contain musical notation, which have illuminations or drawings, and so forth.⁷ Much more is now known than a century ago about the spectrum of interpretations that the *Aeneid* elicited.⁸ Finally, laborers in the vineyard of Humanist and Renaissance literature have applied themselves to the enormous task of sorting out how the treatment of Vergil in their period differed from that of Vergil in the Middle Ages.⁹ What has been lacking is an effort to consolidate all the new findings into a coherent unit—in other words, what has been and will probably always be missing is a new *VMA* on the scale of Comparetti's book.¹⁰ All the centuries of reading

³ Courcelle; Hagendahl.

⁴ For example, Desmond.

⁵ See Lubac; Jones, "Allegorical Interpretation" and "Allegorical Traditions."

⁶ Three entire pages of references will be found in Suerbaum (pp. 346–48).

⁷ For information on MSS, see Munk Olsen and Kaster. The next major repertory of information about MSS will be the entry on Vergil in the *Catalogus*. An outstanding recent book on Vergil in medieval literature with an emphasis on manuscripts is Baswell.

⁸ For instance, Comparetti had little to say about the commentary on the *Aeneid* that is often attributed to Bernardus Silvestris; and unfortunately he confuses Bernardus Silvestris with Bernard of Chartres (Padoan, p. 227, n. 4).

⁹ Early work was done by Zabughin. More recently the most active scholars have been Kallendorf and Stok.

¹⁰ Baswell's fine monograph is the closest that we are likely to come, although as its title signals, this work is delimited more narrowly than Comparetti's, both geographically and chronologically.

and explication that have been devoted to Vergil have not exhausted the need for more to be said, but they have made it ever more arduous for anyone to achieve the overarching command of previous work that must precede any practical attempt to synthesize; and the lofty reputation of *VMA* has intimidated its readers and deterred them from the risk of trying to transcend it.¹¹

As these remarks about *VMA* suggest, one intellectual of extraordinary range and versatility helped more than anyone else in the nineteenth century to blaze a trail through the phantasmagorically tangled jungle of lore about Vergil in the Middle Ages—and indeed he accomplished his pathfinding so effectively and so visibly that his name fused with that of the Latin poet as soon as his study appeared and remains so today: it is rare to encounter any substantial discussion of Vergil in the Middle Ages that does not begin with or at least include mention of Domenico Comparetti.

But Comparetti was hardly a one-project scholar. His more than one hundred articles and books pursue such diverse enterprises as editions of papyri and inscriptions, dialectology, textual criticism, prosopography, folklore, comparative mythology, Renaissance novellas, literary criticism, and literary history. His book on the *Kalevala*—which in recent years has continued to garner praise from Albert Bates Lord (1912–1991) and other American scholars of oral literature—was put into English early (1898) and has been reprinted more than once in Italian. Also translated into English (1881) soon after publication was his monograph on *The Book of Sindibad*. Yet among his many writings the work on Vergil is universally recognized as his masterpiece, partly because the topic enabled him to draw together so much of his knowledge and so many of his skills, partly because Comparetti's handling of the topic responded so powerfully (both knowingly and unwittingly) to preoccupations of his day that abide with us even today.

To identify the early 1870s as a time of unusual intellectual foment would be an amusing understatement. The book des-

¹¹ Rossi, p. 281; Graf, quoted by De Liguori, p. 163; Croce, vol. 2, p. 86.

tined to have the greatest impact on both science and society was Charles Darwin's (1809–1882) *The Descent of Man*, which appeared in 1871. In the realm of classical studies, the *annus mirabilis* was 1872, since it saw the publication of two books that have exercised enormous influence for more than a century. One was an investigation of Greek tragedy written by a prodigy who occupied the chair of classical philology at Basel University from 1869 to 1879. I refer of course to Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, which emphasized the Dionysiac constituent in Greek civilization and especially in Greek Tragedy—and which paid tribute to the *oeuvre* of Richard Wagner. The other marvel of 1872 was Comparetti's *VMA*, the two volumes of which culminated research that had started coming into print in 1866.¹²

Like both *The Descent of Man* and *The Birth of Tragedy*, *VMA* has been acknowledged continuously as a magnum opus by many who have perused it, from its first printing down to the present day. Again and again it has been labeled *magisterial*, *indispensable*, and *fundamental*: it is a *classic* about a *classic*.¹³ In a preamble to the English translation that appeared in 1895, Robinson Ellis (1834–1913) referred to *VMA* as “already a world-famed book.” At that point *VMA* had long since been translated into German (1875), was on the verge of seeing the second of its three Italian editions (1872, 1896, 1937–1941), and was poised for the first of several editions in English (1895, 1908, 1929, 1966). Ellis also prophesied rightly that the book seemed “hardly likely to be superseded.” When in 1985—nearly a century later—the French school of Rome issued a collection of essays on “Medieval Readings of Vergil,” the very first page of the general editor's preface contained the following profession:

The learned bibliography pertaining to the medieval Vergil is naturally considerable and there can be no question of my providing a detailed critique. However, the afterlife of Vergil continues to

¹² Comparetti, “Virgilio nella tradizione,” followed by Comparetti, “Virgilio mago.”

¹³ For “magisterial,” see Ziolkowski, p. 217; for “indispensable,” Ogle, p. 63, n. 1; for “fundamental,” Rostagni, p. 346; for “classic,” see Ogle, p. 63, n. 1; Hardie, p. 1127; Courcelle, vol. 1, p. 9; Jones, “Allegorical Traditions,” p. 129, n. 1; Schnapp, p. 131, n. 69.

offer researchers a worksite which is far from being conclusively organized. Yet one thing is striking on first approach: it is the absence of a synthetic work devoted to the problem which occupies us. With one exception, granted, and it is appreciable: the great book of Domenico Comparetti, *VMA*, which, in many regards, is still authoritative . . . Doubtless "Comparetti" has taken on a few wrinkles . . . but it remains that, on a good number of points, his analyses have not been superseded.¹⁴

Among all the products of nineteenth-century Italian classical studies—and even of Italian historical and literary scholarship as a whole—*VMA* has been singled out as uniquely deserving of continuing to be consulted.¹⁵ The final paragraph on Comparetti in the *Enciclopedia virgiliana* declares: "One hundred years after its appearance, Comparetti's *VMA*, written in an academic prose of rare intensity and beauty, remains a great book, still readable, the masterwork not only of nineteenth-century classical philology but also the best Italian preamble to Medieval Latin studies."¹⁶

In addition to its canonicity, another quality bonds *VMA* to both *The Descent of Man* and *The Birth of Tragedy*. Darwin attempted nothing less than to account for the origins of homo sapiens, while Nietzsche strove to explain the genesis of an entire literary genre. Like these other two books, *VMA* represents a quest for origins—a pursuit that typified much philology in the nineteenth century.¹⁷ In it Comparetti undertook to demonstrate a continuity and a growth in literary consciousness in classical and medieval western Europe. His book has been called "a true and proper history of European consciousness from antiquity up through Dante."¹⁸ Whether or not it achieved a breadth sufficient to warrant such a global—or, to be more precise, *continental*—tribute, it certainly probed the extent and meaning of Latinity by anatomizing the destiny of its most important poet. Nor did it stop there, since it delved into the rich

¹⁴ Tilliette, p. 2 (my translation).

¹⁵ Chiappelli, "La mente," p. 242; Rostagni, p. 346; Treves, *Lo studio*, p. 1065; Leonardi, p. 860.

¹⁶ Leonardi, p. 860 (my translation).

¹⁷ For this argument in relation to the study of Old English in the nineteenth century, see Frantzen.

¹⁸ Leonardi, p. 860.

relationship between Latinity and what we could call "Italianity" by elucidating the context around Dante's choice of Vergil as his guide. To judge by the continued obeisance done to him in footnotes, Comparetti's achievement in this last regard endures.

It is a truism that most stemmata—"family trees" of manuscripts—generated according to the principles of Karl Lachmann's (1793–1851) genealogical filiation are bipartite; that is, they lead back to one common ancestor but show an almost immediate split into two principal families.¹⁹ If we apply terminology of the "Lachmannian method" to *VMA*, we find that Comparetti identifies two "branches" in the family tree of Vergilian influences. Indeed, one of the few criticisms leveled against the book in the first round of reviews—and one to which he replied in the second edition, although only fleetingly—was that he drew an excessively rigid dividing line between the learned and popular (and, by implication, between the written and oral as well as between the clerical and lay). Comparetti's boldly stated endeavor "to give a complete history of the medieval conception of Vergil" (p. ix) led him to conclude that the Roman poet had two distinct but interrelated destinies, the one in the literary heritage culminating in Dante (the first volume of the original Italian edition) and the other in the popular legend (the second of the two volumes). The literary tradition was argued to be broadly European, whereas according to Comparetti the popular was more parochially Neapolitan—a viewpoint that has been contested by most of his successors.²⁰ In the case of Vergil, both the literary and the popular traditions could be traced back to brief biographies related in late antiquity and the Middle Ages. These concise "lives" had been streamlined to

¹⁹ Timpanaro, *La genesi*.

²⁰ Vietor, Tunison, Stecher, and Graf denied at least partially the popularity of the legend. In the revised edition Comparetti limits explicit polemic with them to two notes (*VMA*, pp. 255–56, n. 21, and 262, n. 4). But a comparison between the first and second edition shows that in the initial chapters of the second part he was preoccupied with justifying and attenuating the disjunction between the two chief threads of the Virgilian tradition, although he never overcame it. The criticism continues to the present day: see Bronzini, p. 80.

serve the relatively narrow purposes of the schools. At the same time, they contained rudiments that were later extended as Vergil gained renown as a prophet-sage and magician.

Although Comparetti may be remembered most often in conjunction with the fantastic legends of the magician Vergil, he expended just as much effort in satisfying the need for "an adequate history of the classical studies of the middle ages" (p. xi). His compass is truly astounding. He begins his overview with the period in which Vergil himself lived (p. xiii) and moves steadily forward, always seeking to evaluate how the later images of Vergil—the later legends—dovetail with the more scholarly *vitae* of the poet. To bring out these interpenetrations, he presents a far-reaching survey of Vergil's success and influence from the poet's own day to the beginning of the Renaissance. Thus his book covers a grand sweep from the first century B.C.E. through the end of the Middle Ages, with implications even into the nineteenth century.

Authors who aspire to formulate general truths about much more than a millennium of European cultural history cannot do so meaningfully without having first acquired extensive knowledge about the natures of Roman antiquity and the Christian Middle Ages and a conceptual framework into which to fit that knowledge. Like both *The Descent of Man* and *The Birth of Tragedy*, Comparetti's book at once reflects its times and transcends them in its author's basic outlook. To attune ourselves to his attitudes—and in this case the most relevant ones are those concerning antiquity and the Middle Ages—necessitates uncovering and synthesizing what we can about his own early intellectual formation and milieu.

Domenico Comparetti was born in Rome on July 7, 1835, into a family of modest means and background. At first the plan was for him to follow in his father's footsteps by becoming a pharmacist. Accordingly, he took his diploma (*laurea*) in pharmaceuticals from the University of Rome (Sapienza romana) in 1855 and practiced as a druggist in a shop that belonged to his maternal uncle.²¹ But all along his thoughts and ambitions seem to

²¹ Treves, *Lo studio*, p. 1051, states that Comparetti was one of only nine people who before 1859 received their laurea in *farmacia*.

have gravitated elsewhere—toward the study of languages and literatures.²² As much time as he could, he spent not in the pharmacy but in a nearby library.

Already at a young age he evidenced a strong attraction and aptitude for philology and history, especially involving Greek, Latin, and Romance languages. He received his early training in Classics at the Collegio Romano, a Jesuit institution. Later he frequented lectures and meetings at the German archaeological institute in Rome. Yet of formal higher learning in Classics, medieval and modern languages and literatures, or any other discipline except pharmacology he had no part.

Like virtually all Italian historians and philologists of his generation, Comparetti may be regarded accurately as an autodidact.²³ He had nothing corresponding to postgraduate studies in the humanities of the sort that have become conventional in Europe or North America today—and not even anything equivalent to a present-day Italian *laurea* in Classics. His detachment from the foremost institutions—both Italian and German—in the Rome of his youth was an advantage intellectually, since a stale classicism which is sometimes labeled “antiquarianism” held sway there.²⁴ Whatever name we attach to the approach to antiquity that dominated in Rome, it was based on Latin epigraphy, and its practitioners rarely ventured beyond the narrowest of prosopographic and topographic concerns.

Comparetti was the first Roman of his century to evince an interest in a philology applied to historicist aims.²⁵ In addition, he exhibited an exceptional gift for foreign languages and be-

²² The liveliest picture of this phase in Comparetti's life comes from his own correspondence in Italian and Latin with Gherardo Nerucci, a representative sampling of which can be found in De Gubernatis, p. 306.

²³ Carratelli, p. 672; Chiappelli, “Per Domenico Comparetti,” p. 361; De Liguori, p. 195; Pasquali, “Domenico Comparetti,” p. 4; Pasquali, “Prefazione,” p. xix; Timpanaro, “Domenico Comparetti,” p. 349; Treves, *Lo studio*, p. 1051.

²⁴ The standard study of this antiquarianism is that of Momigliano. The most distinguished of the antiquarians at the time would have been Giovanni Battista De Rossi (1822–1894), for Comparetti's attitude toward whom see Milani, p. 208.

²⁵ Gigante, p. 160, describes Comparetti as “pursu[ing] historicist goals along the lines of Boeckh's *Methodenlehre*.”

came an adept conversationalist in a gamut that eventually included Russian and even Finnish. In his case the taste for foreign languages came with an appetite for travel abroad; at a time when relatively few Italians made a habit of crossing the Alps except when constrained to do so, Comparetti was by choice a frequent traveler on the Continent.²⁶

More important for our purposes, he read voraciously in a variety of languages. Although to determine precisely all the books that he perused in his youth lies beyond the grasp of anyone today, he would surely have been acquainted with works of prominent figures such as, among others, the French historian Jules Michelet (1798–1874), the Swiss French historian and economist Jean Charles Léonard de Sismondi (1773–1842), and the Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico (1668–1774).²⁷ Of these three, Michelet would have provided a particularly inspirational model. None of the Frenchman's trips to Italy could have brought him face to face with Comparetti before 1870–1871;²⁸ but Michelet's writings would have found in Comparetti a responsive reader, since the older Frenchman and the younger Italian shared several important convictions. In the 1840s Michelet became outspoken in attacks against both Catholicism and the Middle Ages; his criticisms of the two were interwoven, since he saw the Catholic Church as having nurtured passivity and the Middle Ages as having been "barbarous" and "a world of illusion."²⁹ Like Michelet, Comparetti tended to view the Middle Ages reductively as a monolith, without recognizing many of the gradations between one medieval time and place and another that have become apparent to twentieth-century medievalists.

Because Comparetti's life centered upon Rome until 1859, his receptiveness to contacts with scholars abroad and with foreigners in Rome (especially those affiliated with the German archaeological institute) was indispensable for his intellectual maturation.

²⁶ Pais, p. 385.

²⁷ Comparetti's indebtedness to Vico can be seen in the polemic with Lambruschini: G. Landucci, p. 64.

²⁸ Scharten, p. 162, quotes a letter from Pasquale Villari (March 5, 1871), which was sent to Michelet together with a letter for Comparetti.

²⁹ Kippur, p. 85, and Mitzman, p. 30.

tion; many of the most illustrious Italian intellectuals had fled Italy into exile after 1849.³⁰ During his Roman years Comparetti produced three articles, which showed him already equipped in his early twenties to engage as a peer with the greatest foreign philologists. Each of the three items was prompted by the publication of a document, but only this feature connected him with the antiquarians.³¹ This triad of articles also provided a measure of the virtuosic scope that he would later display: his first article, written in Latin and published in a German periodical in 1858, identified a papyrus as a funeral oration by Hyperides; his second, also in Latin and in the same journal in 1858, was based on a freshly discovered palimpsest of a Late Latin text of the annalist Granius Licinianus; and his third reviewed an edition of the *Composizione del mondo* of Ristoro di Arezzo; in it Comparetti revealed that he had already constructed his own conception of the cultural history of the Middle Ages.³² His interests continued to span these two eras, antiquity and the Middle Ages, and often guided him to the confluences of different disciplines and fields.

Exactly one decade before the *Wunderkind*—or *enfant terrible*—Nietzsche was elected at the age of twenty-five to a chair of classical philology at Basel University, Comparetti was nominated at the even more precocious age of twenty-four to be professor of Greek literature at the University of Pisa. He received his appointment in 1859 and stayed there until 1872, when he transferred to Florence—and when the first edition of *VMA* was printed.

Comparetti had formed himself very rapidly. At thirty he had already sketched out the basic contours of *VMA*; by thirty-seven he had published it in substantially its definitive outlines.³³ But

³⁰ Timpanaro, "Domenico Comparetti," p. 349.

³¹ Pasquali, "Domenico Comparetti," pp. 6–8.

³² "Observationes in Hyperidis orationem funebrem," *Rheinisches Museum* N.F. 13 (1858); "Epistula ad Fridericum Ritschelium de Liciniani analium scriptoris aetate," *Rheinisches Museum* N.F. 13 (1858), reprinted in an expanded Italian version in *Archivio storico italiano* N.S. 10 (1859); and "Intorno all'opera sulla composizione del Mondo di Ristoro d'Arezzo, pubblicata da E. Narducci," *Giornale Arcadico* aprile 1859. See Pasquali, "Domenico Comparetti," p. 7.

³³ Pasquali, "Domenico Comparetti," p. 5

his intellectual energies and creativities were in no way depleted. Nietzsche, who was born in 1844 (nearly a decade after Comparetti), died in 1900. Comparetti lived on to become the Nestor of philologists in Italy, leading a highly active or even *hyperactive* career of research and publishing to the ripe old age of ninety-two: he died on January 20, 1927, with the proofs of his final book on his desk.³⁴

Comparetti's academic appointment may have been as a classicist, but in terms of the profile that he has left in his writings, such a designation is inaccurate solely through being partial. He was a classicist, both Hellenist and Latinist, equally epigrapher, papyrologist, and archaeologist. By the same token he was a folklorist and comparative mythographer.

Comparetti also had ample justification to be called a medievalist, even though often he was far less complimentary about the Middle Ages than most medievalists are prone to be. Three examples will confirm his capacity for voicing the harshest judgments of medieval intellectuals and their writings. First is his assessment of the writer Fulgentius, who flourished around 500 C.E. (VMA, p. 112):

But the process of Fulgentius is so violent and incoherent, it disregards every law of common sense in such a patent and well-nigh brutal manner, that it is hard to conceive how any sane man can seriously have undertaken such a work, and harder still to believe that other sane men should have accepted it as an object for serious consideration.

However fierce that quotation may seem, it pales beside Comparetti's verdict on the infamous seventh-century Virgilius Maro Grammaticus (VMA, p. 124):

To attempt to follow the processes of these minds would be at once a wasted endeavour and an outrage on common sense. . . . [Vergil of Toulouse] is perhaps the only medieval grammarian who deserves to be called original, but his originality takes a strange turn. . . . This strange writer . . . reminds one irresistibly in the squalor of his time (6th–7th century) of those hideous and putrid fungi which are generated in the rotting leaves of autumn.

³⁴ For the likening of Comparetti to Nestor, see Pais, p. 385; for the description of his deskwork at death, see Milani, p. 203.

Nor are these passages on individual authors isolated aberrations. Rather, they reflect a viewpoint pervasive in his book that is sharply dismissive of medieval clerical culture (*VMA*, pp. 171–72):

The culture of the middle ages, in everything concerned with secular matters, was too poor and feeble a thing to raise the mind far above the common level. Humanism was essentially foreign to this period; the most worldly monk, the most passionate admirer of the ancient writers, is yet infinitely more Philistine than the worst Latinist of the Renaissance could possibly be.

Such intemperate generalizations occur too abundantly in *VMA* to be overlooked. Yet unless they are put in the context of late-nineteenth-century attitudes, any condemnation of them runs the risk of being just as rash and simplistic as they seem to be themselves.

A good way to begin sizing up Comparetti's conception of the Middle Ages is to explore his notions of antiquity and the Classics. In the range of his interests and researches, Comparetti bears a resemblance to at least two other classicists of the nineteenth century: Karl Lachmann and Moriz Haupt (1808–1874), both of whom demonstrated comparable mastery of classical and medieval studies (in their cases, as classical philologists and Germanists).³⁵ Part of what motivated and enabled Lachmann and Haupt to attain this dual competence was perhaps the very fact that they did not regard it as dual at all. In the case of Comparetti the answer for his receptivity to both antiquity and the Middle Ages seems to be that he wedded elements of two major cultural movements that would have been current in his youth, namely, classicism and Romanticism. Even though he professed in the diary he kept in his early twenties "to be antiromantic in body and soul,"³⁶ his intellect was still largely Romantic in some regards—for instance, in his desire to achieve a panoptic view and in his fascination with the vitality of traditions.³⁷

³⁵ Pasquali, "Domenico Comparetti," pp. 7–8, drew this comparison.

³⁶ Milani, p. 207 (later quoted by Timpanaro, "Domenico Comparetti," p. 356).

³⁷ Pasquali, "Domenico Comparetti," p. 12.

What unites him with the most brilliant of Romantics is that he did not dichotomize too starkly between popular and literary or popular and learned. He recognized that in coming to grips with almost all earlier periods the popular can be apprehended only with the help of texts that are anything but popular in their basic assumptions (*VMA*, pp. 253–54).³⁸ Yet at the same time he is a classicist, not just professionally but also in his admiration of classicism—and of the Classics.

To Italian scholars who have sought to devise a term that encompasses all the methods Comparetti deployed in his poly-mathic researches and writings, the one that has been used most often—by Benedetto Croce (1866–1952) and Giorgio Pasquali (1885–1952), among others—is *philology*. In the annals of Italian humanistic scholarship, Comparetti is credited with having created or founded modern philology—as having been the first “master” of what was in Italy in the second half of the nineteenth century “the new philology.”³⁹ And what was this philology? It was not confined to such technical matters as grammar, textual criticism, and prosody—in all of which (by the bye) Comparetti showed scant interest. Formal philology was not his forte. As has been seen, Comparetti’s definition of philology pushed him to ask big questions that held interest to classicists, medievalists, and comparatists alike. And, in good humanistic style, these questions were ones that pertained to the human condition as evidenced in texts. Every chapter of *VMA* attests that Comparetti saw the study of a textual tradition as inevitably entailing the examination of both national tradition and a human event in its public dimension. Finally, Comparetti’s philology required a comprehensive knowledge of the period under analysis—a knowledge that was grounded in history as well as in a faith in historicism.⁴⁰ Although his method has been dubbed cultural history, it is propelled by a zeal for contextualizing texts that separates it from much of what pass-

³⁸ Leonardi, p. 859.

³⁹ Croce, vol. 2, p. 76; Pasquali, “Domenico Comparetti,” p. 9; Timpanaro, “Comparetti, Vitelli, Hemmerdinger.”

⁴⁰ Pasquali, “Domenico Comparetti,” p. 9 (quoted by Leonardi, p. 859).

es under the name of cultural studies today.⁴¹ It is philology, a historical or rather a historicist philology.⁴²

What spurred Comparetti's choice of topic? Because Comparetti produced the first edition of *VMA* in 1872 and the second in 1896, it would appear superficially that he made no gesture to capitalize upon the swell of interest in Vergil that coincided with the nineteenth centenary of Vergil's death in 1882. As the author of a recent book on the Vergilian tradition put it, "The 1882 commemorations would seem to bear out Robert Graves's thesis that 'whenever a golden age of stable government, full churches, and expanding wealth dawns among the Western nations, Virgil always returns to supreme favour.'"⁴³ Did Comparetti distance himself deliberately from the festivities of 1882? Or was the political and social climate that made Vergil so logical a point of orientation—or, as the case may be, *occidentation*—already present in the 1860s and early 1870s?

Much support can be adduced for the latter view. Although sometimes Comparetti has been cast as apolitical or politically detached, his book betrays signs, hardly hidden, of certain political opinions he held. In particular, *VMA* cries out to be situated in the public and intellectual life of Italy in the third quarter of the nineteenth century; for Comparetti was assembling his insights into the afterlife of Vergil just as the establishment of modern Italy—the *Risorgimento*—was taking place. The Kingdom of United Italy under King Victor Emmanuel II (1820–1878) was recognized in 1861, and Rome was made the capital in 1872—which, at the risk of being very tedious, I will point out again was the very year in which *VMA* appeared.⁴⁴ Setting the book against the backdrop of Italian history may make it easier to determine why Comparetti chose to see Vergil as the supporting structure of Latinity's own self-consciousness and of the new nations that arose out of the Roman Empire and its

⁴¹ Croce, vol. 2, pp. 77–78 (drawing a parallel to Burckhardt's book on the Renaissance); Leonardi, p. 859, following Timpanaro; Treves, *Lo Studio*, pp. 1051 and 1059; De Liguori, pp. 170–71.

⁴² Timpanaro, "Comparetti, Vitelli, Hemmerdinger," p. 699.

⁴³ Ziolkowski, p. 6.

⁴⁴ Ziolkowski, p. 4.

heirs—among which nations we would have to number the Italy of his day.

Once reconstituted (and it bears noting that the process was regarded as a *reconstitution*), Italy quickly took measures to revitalize its culture. Many fine minds had been distracted or diverted from artistic creation and intellectual endeavor while the *Risorgimento* was being prepared. Afterward creative energies poured forth suddenly, at both personal and collective levels. The government set up universities and, in so doing, accorded central importance to classical philology and stimulated it by appointing professors of Classics. The year 1859 marked the turning point in this process from political resurgence to cultural rebirth, as can be documented very neatly in letters to Comparetti from one of his mentors—and subsequently the posthumous dedicatee of *VMA*—Gian Pietro Vieusseux (1779–1863).⁴⁵ In the summer of that year Vieusseux sent a letter in which he exhorted Comparetti to hold off on scholarship and publication projects because people owed their all to the cause of Italian independence.⁴⁶ But circumstances changed swiftly. In mid November Vieusseux wrote to the minister of public instruction to nominate Comparetti for a chair at Florence or Pisa.⁴⁷

A decree of December 22, 1859, inaugurated what would ultimately become the University of Florence, with the explicit aim of making Florence the cultural capital of Italy. As it turned out, Comparetti would not assume a position there until 1872. Instead, he played a pivotal role in creating the so-called school of Pisa, together with the Romance philologist Alessandro D'Ancona (1835–1914), the Semiticist Fausto Lasinio (1831–

⁴⁵ Vieusseux is best known for having founded a series of Florentine cultural and political journals: see Mori, pp. 266–67. For Comparetti he would have exemplified ways to be receptive to Europe beyond the Alps and yet to be attentive to Italian and Tuscan traditions, to be politically engaged and yet to be committed to culture, to be open to both a controlled Romanticism and an enlightened Classicism, and to be alert to the past and yet wary of a Romantic nostalgia for the Middle Ages: see Spadolini, *L'Idea*, and Timpanaro, *Classicismo*, p. 21.

⁴⁶ Garin, pp. 30–31, n. 2 (June 11, 1859), and Conti, p. 17, n. 43.

⁴⁷ Garin, p. 41, n. 16 (November 11, 1859).

1914), and the Sanskritist Emilio Teza (1831–1912).⁴⁸ Comparetti himself gives a glimpse of this circle in his memoir of D'Ancona.⁴⁹

Intellectually, D'Ancona was probably the most intimate of Comparetti's colleagues in this cohort; the same age, appointed to a chair at Pisa very soon after Comparetti, D'Ancona had also been a protégé of Vieusseux.⁵⁰ A few years before coming to Pisa, D'Ancona had attended the acclaimed series of lectures on the *Divine Comedy* by Francesco De Sanctis (1817–1883) in Turin in 1854–1855; in fact, D'Ancona even transcribed and published the lecture on Pier delle Vigne in a Florentine newspaper.⁵¹ Relations between D'Ancona and De Sanctis remained close over the next two decades; De Sanctis referred laudatorily to articles written by D'Ancona, and even in his old age D'Ancona professed admiration for De Sanctis.⁵²

But D'Ancona was not just a bridge between De Sanctis and Comparetti. More significantly, he was a colleague and collaborator of Comparetti's.⁵³ While Comparetti mapped the legends that grew up in the Middle Ages around Vergil, D'Ancona followed sacred legends and novelistic legends that could be found in both popular literature and artistic literature.⁵⁴ Both men, like many of their contemporaries in Tuscany at this time, forged enduring links with European culture outside Italy and manifested an impatience with abstraction when it was not firmly based in history and texts.⁵⁵ As a team D'Ancona and Comparetti edited the oldest and richest collection of Italian lyric literature, the *rime*.⁵⁶ The two also attracted many students who had successful careers as professors of Classics and

⁴⁸ Chiappelli, "La mente," p. 245; Leonardi; Milani, pp. 206–7.

⁴⁹ Comparetti's memoir was published first in the *Giornale d'Italia*, December 12, 1914, and later reprinted by Treves, *Lo Studio*.

⁵⁰ Pais, p. 388; Cocchiara, pp. 376–77.

⁵¹ Muscetta, p. 31.

⁵² S. Landucci, p. 245.

⁵³ On the intellectual influence of D'Ancona on Comparetti, see Pasquali, "Prefazione," pp. xx–xxi.

⁵⁴ Levi, pp. 3–4.

⁵⁵ S. Landucci, p. 242.

⁵⁶ Mazzoni, p. 528.

Romance Languages.⁵⁷ Comparetti continued to foster such renewal when he transferred to the chair of Greek literature in Florence in 1872, where he remained until his retirement (apart from a short stint of teaching at the University of Rome in 1882). There he influenced many students, among whom the classicist Giorgio Pasquali has had the greatest renown in the twentieth century.

Thanks to his activities in both Pisa and Florence, Comparetti established classical philology on a solid footing in Italy; but although Comparetti was important in the intellectual development and careers of students from both Pisa and Florence, there was never a "school of Comparetti." One reason is that Comparetti taught for much less than half of his life; another is that because his own interests were so far-flung, it would have been proper to speak of *schools* of Comparetti in the plural: his students went in as many directions as he did himself, but none managed to replicate anything approaching the entire span of his achievements.

No one would question the value of analyzing the interplay between cultural concerns and ideology in the literary-historical and aesthetic writings of Comparetti's contemporary, De Sanctis (who served as minister of education in 1861–1862 before becoming professor at the University of Naples in 1871);⁵⁸ but would many people perceive the prospect of similar benefits from subjecting the works of Comparetti to the same type of analysis? After all, throughout his career Comparetti gave the impression of being aloof from political concerns.⁵⁹ Even after becoming a senator, Comparetti never participated actively in politics as did De Sanctis. Yet however little engaged he was personally in public politics, it would be mistaken to believe either that his

⁵⁷ To name only three, Pio Rajna (1847–1930), Francesco D'Ovidio (1849–1925), and Girolamo Vitelli (1849–1935), who succeeded Comparetti in the chair of Greek literature at Florence.

⁵⁸ See S. Landucci and Cione (with section headings such as "Esperienze culturali e politiche durante l'esilio" and "L'armonia fra pensiero ed azione").

⁵⁹ On Comparetti's apoliticism and "natural inclination to *ataraxia*," see Carratelli, p. 674; Treves, *Lo Studio*, p. 1052; Vitelli, p. 222.

university appointments had no political dimensions or that his research lacked them. His step of writing a book on Vergil was also to some extent ideologically implicated.

Most of the faults that have been found in Comparetti's *VMA* can be explained—and *not* explained *away*—by the specific climate in which he conceived and composed it. Chief among these failings would be its anticlericalism and distrust of Catholicism (and even of Christianity in general?) as well as its pro-Italian nationalism and its anti-Germanicism.⁶⁰

Let us inspect these flaws more closely. To start with anticlericalism, we find Comparetti stating of Dante (*VMA*, p. 199): "With him there is not only an absence of that hatred of the pagans which inspired so many of the early monks and ascetics, but also of that doubt and suspicion, that feeling of restriction in dealing with secular studies, which characterises so many of the more enlightened men of the Church." If this declaration does not seem forceful enough to prove the point, then we can turn to a note at the end of the same chapter in which, mincing no words, Comparetti underlines the differences in view between the fifth-century ecclesiastic writers Augustine and Orosius, on the one hand, and the early fourteenth-century Dante Alighieri, on the other (*VMA*, p. 231 n.): "Pagan Rome was still too near them, and they had not seen Christianity grown a persecutor in its turn and the history of the Church changed into a chronicle of obscenities."

Finally, there is Comparetti's introspection about his appraisal of Charlemagne's role in European history.⁶¹ With candid self-awareness, Comparetti concedes that his judgment may be colored by an anticlericalism that derives from Italy's political circumstances (*VMA*, p. 185): "I do not know whether my judgment of this prince is prejudiced by that repugnance which an Italian cannot fail to feel towards one who did such harm to all Europe and has been till recently the curse of our unfortunate country. It certainly seems to me as if about his historical per-

⁶⁰ On these biases, see Rand, pp. 420–21; Pasquali, "Prefazione," p. xviii; Timpanaro, "Domenico Comparetti," p. 358.

⁶¹ Boissier, p. 526.

sonality of prince, legislator and warrior there hung an unpleasant odour of sanctity. He was the 'homo Papae' *par excellence*." As this little editorial and others (e.g., *VMA*, p. 177) make crystal clear, Comparetti felt depressed as an Italian at the political ramifications, throughout and even beyond the Middle Ages, of a papacy that partook in secular affairs.

But Comparetti's dissatisfaction with the Church surpassed mere distrust of the papacy's involvement in worldly politics. One aspect of Comparetti's conflicted outlook on Christianity has been called "rationalist laicism": a predisposition to accentuate those beliefs and practices of medieval Christianity that appeared to be adaptations of paganism.⁶² Elsewhere in *VMA* Comparetti makes asides that are caustically dismissive of Catholic doctrines. For instance, at one juncture he brands the Catholic promotion of celibacy as "a doctrine not only absurd, but also immoral, in that it is egotistical, is contrary to the first principles of human society, and places human perfection in direct opposition to natural laws and the continued existence of the human race" (*VMA*, p. 325).

Catholicism collides with Darwinism more than once in *VMA*. Even though Darwinism had not been fully elaborated when Comparetti wrote the heart of his book—a few more years would pass before Florence's society would be thrown into upheaval by bitter debate over the relationship between man and monkeys—the first shock-waves of evolutionary thinking had already struck.⁶³ Indeed, in 1862 Comparetti had fought a skirmish about linguistics (was it a science comparable to the natural sciences? what did it reveal about the origins and interrelations of man and races?) which took place on the outskirts of this battlefield.⁶⁴

If anticlericalism and distrust of Catholicism were one pole toward which the political climate pressed Comparetti, another was the passionate nationalism that obtrudes at many points in

⁶² Treves, *Lo Studio*, p. 1059; De Liguori 199–200.

⁶³ Mori, pp. 267–68.

⁶⁴ On Comparetti's contention on behalf of his friend Gherardo Nerucci with Raffaello Lambruschini (1788–1873), see Gentile, pp. 343–47; G. Landucci, pp. 56–75; Timpanaro, "Antileopardiani," p. 416, n. 37.

VMA.⁶⁵ Comparetti admitted to his pro-Italian sentiments already in the closing paragraph of the preface to the first edition (VMA, p. xiv):

As an Italian, I have never been able to forget how thoroughly Italian are the nature and the interest of my subject; but I have endeavoured to write calmly, and to eliminate as far as might be any subjective cause of prejudice. If any such feeling has in any place warped my judgment, I can only regret it; but at the same time I would ask any one who feels tempted to condemn me for this to look carefully in his own conscience whether it be in his place to cast the first stone at me.

A more acute or honest estimation of the struggles that take place within a person who is simultaneously a scholar and a political animal—as all academics are to varying degrees—would be hard to imagine.

For better or for worse, Comparetti was not always able to filter out his patriotic spirit. Thus he professed to take pride in the continuing classicism of medieval Italians—in their classifying distrust of the irrational. Take, for example, the observation (VMA, pp. 250–51): “One of the points in which the Italians, even in the middle ages, gave proof of their superiority to the other nations of Europe, was the small share which they took in the phantastic productions of that period.” The same national pride, which in his case was very much a *Latin* pride, accounts for the force and beauty of the passages about Dante, who represented to Comparetti a last, unique exponent of Latin universality.⁶⁶

Pro-Italian sometimes meant anti-German. Although Comparetti had close ties with German scholarship,⁶⁷ he built them before the creed took hold among Italians that what had been achieved in their own scholarship during the *Risorgimento* was worthless and that the one means of escaping from amateurish

⁶⁵ Remarkd upon early and intelligently by Boissier.

⁶⁶ The final phrase is translated directly from Chiappelli, “Per Domenico Comparetti,” p. 377.

⁶⁷ Early in his career he received support from Heinrich Brunn (1822–1894), who headed the German archaeological institute in Rome: Chiappelli, “Per Domenico Comparetti,” p. 361; Pasquali, “Domenico Comparetti,” pp. 3 and 9, n. 3; Treves, *Lo Studio*, p. 1054.

antiquarianism was to resort to the German philological method in its most positivist guise.⁶⁸ In other words, he came into his own as an intellect before it became conventional for aspiring scholars to go to Germany as a finishing school, even when their subject was Italian literature.⁶⁹ Comparetti and the other leading lights of his generation in Italian higher learning may have inclined toward positivism, but not yet toward a typically German positivism.⁷⁰

As a consequence of the political climate that enveloped Italy during the *Risorgimento*, Comparetti had developed propensities that would have to be called antiteutonic. Since Italians of his generation had witnessed decades of struggle to free their lands of German-speaking occupiers so that Italy could become one country, it is to be expected that they should feel a certain ambivalence toward German-speaking nations. Look at the vehement judgment of non-Italians to which he gives vent in verses written in 1853 or thereabouts, when he would have been around eighteen years old: "To the foreigners who visit the monuments of Italy, an epigram. These monuments admired by you still show you the Latin might, but the deep ruins which cover them show you of whom you are the descendants."⁷¹ It takes little acuity to discern the criticism of Germanic peoples implicit in these lines.

The understandable political suspicions of Italians toward the Austro-Hungarian empire were imposed retrospectively upon the Middle Ages. Most broadly, Comparetti's deep *Risorgimento* anticlericalism—or was it an Enlightenment anticlericalism that could be traced back to Voltaire (1694–1778)?—led him to distrust the clericization of Europe that had been advanced through the policies of Charlemagne.⁷² It also prompted him to

⁶⁸ Gigante, p. 198; Timpanaro, "Comparetti, Vitelli, Hemmerdinger," p. 702.

⁶⁹ De Lollis, p. 132.

⁷⁰ Treves, *Lo Studio*, p. 1058, and De Liguori, pp. 199–200. Pais, pp. 387–88, documents the increasingly German tilt of Italian scholarship and even tries wrongly to associate Comparetti with it.

⁷¹ Milani, p. 204, n. 1: "Agli stranieri che visitano/ i monumenti d'Italia/ Epigramma. Questi da voi ammirati monumenti/ Ancor vi mostran la virtù latina/ Ma quella che li copre alta rovina/ Vi mostra di chi siate discendenti."

⁷² On the Voltairean element, see Pasquali, "Prefazione," p. XVIII.

generalizations about Teutonic or Germanic races and cultures that were (if we were inclined to impose present-day standards with the same mirthless and remorseless anachronism) decidedly politically incorrect. My first two examples make sweeping assertions about antithetical traits of the Teutonic and Latin races:

The Teutonic and Latin races were diametrically opposed to one another and separated by lively antipathies, for which there was every historical justification; the Germans, though quickly corrupted themselves, yet retained certain ideas which they had inherited from those barbarous ancestors of theirs whom Tacitus had contrasted with the Romans. (*VMA*, pp. 178–79)

Moreover, the German races, whom the weakness of their superiors had suffered to gain the upper hand, were incapable, as may still be seen at the present day, of assimilation, and thus, so far from assimilating others, great masses of them were themselves assimilated when brought into contact with various of the neo-Latin nationalities. (*VMA*, p. 180)

Not unforeseeably, races as different in Comparetti's eyes as the Teutons and Latins produced art forms of their own sorts. Here too Comparetti makes no bones about his prejudice in favor of the Romans and their descendants: "It is a mere misuse of the word 'classic' to apply it, as is done in Germany, to Wolfgang von Eschenbach, Gottfried von Strassburg and the other writers of the Mittel-Hoch-Deutsch, who hardly deserve such a title for that period of literature to which they belong" (*VMA*, p. 194).

These observations furnish proof that Vergil constituted a flashpoint in cultural tensions—in what we could call anachronistically the culture wars—between Germans and Italians in the nineteenth century. It is a truism that until 1903, which saw not only the advent of both Richard Heinze's (1867–1929) book on Vergil's epic technique and Eduard Norden's (1858–1941) edition of *Aeneid* Book 6 but also the death of an even more eminent German classicist, Germans had tended to turn much more enthusiastically to Greece than to Rome.⁷³ For all of their services to the study of Latinity, many German scholars ex-

⁷³ Hardie, p. 1128.

pressed a distinct lack of admiration for Roman writers, such as Cicero, Horace . . . and Vergil.⁷⁴ Thus when Comparetti undertook his toils on Vergil, all the elements were in place to guarantee that there would be a Germano-Italian conflict over Vergil: questions of Vergil's worth in comparison with Homer's, of the fitness of Italian scholars to embark upon classical studies without having first received tutelage in Germany, and of Vergil's contribution to Romance versus Germanic civilization. These issues took many decades to be settled (if indeed they have been resolved yet!), and well into the twentieth century we happen upon authors writing in Romance languages who feel obliged to rehabilitate Vergil after the assaults against him from German scholars.⁷⁵

The tensions came to the fore in a coolness between Comparetti and Theodor Mommsen (1817–1903) that can be tracked in the actions and written words of both men, even before the publication of *VMA*.⁷⁶ Comparetti had none of the insecurity toward foreign scholars that became endemic in Italy not even a generation after him, when (partly out of the inferiority complex vis-à-vis the experimental sciences that ensued after Darwin) philology turned more positivist and less historicist and humanist.⁷⁷ Other Italian intellectuals of his day, such as De Sanctis, were able without contradiction to express admiration for Mommsen and pride in Italian achievements in ancient historiography.⁷⁸ Comparetti was unable or unwilling to strike such a balance. Although (or because?) younger than Mommsen by close to twenty years, he felt qualified already in the opening pages of *VMA* to react against Mommsen and against Mommsen's less than fervent embrace of Vergil, and in so doing perhaps to exaggerate Vergil's Romanness.⁷⁹ Perhaps he was egged

⁷⁴ Boissier, p. 517.

⁷⁵ On Espinosa Pólit's *Virgilio*, see Ziolkowski, p. 52.

⁷⁶ See Domenico Comparetti, "Sull'amovibilità dei manoscritti dalle pubbliche biblioteche," with a letter of Theodor Mommsen, *Giornale di Pisa*, March 27, 1864.

⁷⁷ Gigante, pp. 198–99.

⁷⁸ Cagnetta, p. 134.

⁷⁹ Pasquali, "Domenico Comparetti," p. 16; Timpanaro, "Domenico Comparetti," p. 353; Treves, "Ciceronianismo," p. 452 and notes.

on by his patrons, such as the antimommsenian Duke Michelangelo Caetani di Sermoneta (1804–1882).⁸⁰ In any case, Mommsen apparently responded to the criticism by preventing Comparetti from being named a fellow of the Berlin academy; and students in Italy were keenly aware that Mommsen and other Germans held *VMA* in low esteem.⁸¹

Questions about Comparetti's book linger—and not only in Germany. A book that unfolds a structure in which to view almost fifteen hundred years in the reception of a great poet and that lays claim to him as a national poet cannot help but stir controversy: Vergil is a poet whose interpreters have always been possessive. But even those people who criticize *VMA* for its shortcomings—and I have made no effort to conceal any of its drawbacks—grant that it is unmatched and utterly unsupplanted in its synthesis of ideas and information about Vergil and his *Aeneid* in both learned and popular culture in the Middle Ages. Of the much that has been written about Vergil since Comparetti and of the much more that will be written, not all will be mere marginalia to *VMA*;⁸² but Comparetti's book will continue to be the starting point for those curious about the poet's *Nachleben*—not only about Vergil the magician but also about Vergil the poet-sage, about Dante's Vergil. Moreover, despite any and all of its defects, *VMA* stands as a monument of nineteenth-century thought about the place of the greatest Roman poet in European civilization.

Because Comparetti's *VMA* has been widely read for a century in the English translation by E. F. M. Benecke, retranslating it and bringing it up-to-date in its annotation would pose messy problems for readers who wished to find in it pages or passages cited in earlier scholarship. This is to say nothing of the expenses that the publisher would incur, and the labor that the redactor would face. Accordingly, this edition has been left just as it was when first printed in 1895, except that the brief

⁸⁰ Treves, *Lo Studio*, p. 1053.

⁸¹ Treves, *Lo Studio*, p. 1051; De Lollis, p. 132.

⁸² The final clause alludes equally to Ussani, "In margine," and to Tillet, p. 2.

introduction by Robinson Ellis has been omitted. Readers who wish to consult a version in which the notes have been improved slightly and which contains the medieval texts that Comparetti incorporated as appendices in the two-volume Italian printings should refer to Pasquali's excellent edition; but even Pasquali refrained from tampering with Comparetti's style or from undertaking a thoroughgoing recasting of the notes. As Pasquali put it, "From the very beginning I have had no doubt that the text would have to be treated like that of a classic."⁸³ As the book is now reprinted in English exactly a hundred years after Comparetti's second edition, *VMA* deserves more than ever to be called a classic.

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