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Bembo's and Firenzuola's Contribution to the Renaissance Idea of Literature

Agnolo Firenzuola (1493–1543) wrote *I Ragionamenti*, one of his earlier works, during the latter part of his stay (December 1524–May 1525) at the Roman Curia which he had joined in 1518 as a legal representative of his monastic order, the Vallombrosans. The work is incomplete. Firenzuola abandoned it upon completion of the first day, and—judging by other extant fragments—soon after sketching a plan for the second day.

The one unit which he did complete, however, allows us to reconstruct his initial work programme. It follows the structure of the *Decameron* in that it depicts a group of young men and women who leave the city for a pastoral retreat where they engage in story-telling, but it also modifies the quintessential model of the novella collection for it includes a dialogue on Neoplatonic love followed by lyric poems, a blending of genres which is the basic structure of the love treatise as exemplified by Bembo's *Asolani*. As a result, *I Ragionamenti* has always been considered by critics either as a work belonging to one genre or to the other; in both cases it has always seemed incomplete, contradictory, a strange hybrid somehow lacking the essentials of either genre.[1]

It is my contention that *I Ragionamenti* is neither a love treatise nor a mere collection of short stories. It is, rather, the artistic realization of Firenzuola's thoughts and theoretical considerations on literary language and, hence, on literature. In the sixteenth century, any attempt at new elaborations of literary language required coming to terms with Pietro Bembo and his codification of the same. In *I Ragionamenti* Firenzuola does exactly that: he squarely confronts the cardinal, a true "dictator" of cultural tastes, to oppose his concepts which inspired most of the high literary production of his times.

Throughout the centuries, what has always struck the readers of *I Ragionamenti* is the apparently casual mixture of various literary

genres, especially the combination of the love dialogue with the licentious short stories written in the style of Boccaccio. Both ancient and modern critics, faced with the contradictions inherent in the medley, rather than trying to find an explanation for them within the text, have found it easier to split up the text.

Some have considered the novellas as a separate body, an appendix to the dialogue which, at best, has no bearing on the discussions on love itself.[2] Alternatively, they have seen them as an appendix which proves either the hypocrisy of the social class which the author represents or his artistic shortcomings for they fail to illustrate the principles of Neoplatonic love.[3] Other critics have taken the work as a mere collection of short stories modelled on Boccaccio's masterpiece and have seen the dialogue on love as a mere component of the frame.[4] They have also pointed out that Firenzuola, intellectually incapable of understanding the deeper structures and meanings of his model, lacking any truly original inspiration, was doomed to failure from the start.

In either of these cases, the work is dismembered into several elements. These interpretations, in other words, tend to break up what the author saw fit to unite.

And unite them he did, taking great pains to make his work a cohesive, organic, seamless whole. Its outer structure appears perfect and perfectly symmetrical, in perfect conformity with the numerical scheme which the author had chosen for himself. There are six characters (three men and three women), and the sojourn in the country lasts six days. Each day consists of six separate activities, which include, we are told, the reciting by the interlocutors of six lyric poems, and the telling of six novellas and six *facetiae*. The dialogue on love is developed around six questions posed by the participants and it is intimately connected with the lyrical and narrative components which follow it for these, it is announced, shall further illustrate the philosophy of Neoplatonic love.

As it turns out, the schematic order of this composition, its structural symmetry, is merely external for it does not reflect a deeper internal order of the narrated matter. Indeed, every element which points to structural rigidity can be overturned and is, in fact, overturned in the text to demonstrate the exact opposite of the principle on which it originally was based.

For instance, one finds that, despite the ostentatious repetition of and the ostensible compliance with the numerical scheme, the grouping in sixes is not really adhered to and the figure is thus nonsensical. There are not six but actually seven poems. Furthermore, they contradict, some structurally and some thematically, the principles of Neoplatonic love which they are supposed to reflect. None of the short stories can be taken as the consequentially logical continuation of the philosophical discussions as the reader might expect, except for one which tells a truly exemplary story, but which is narrated, ironically, by Folchetto, the one character who is openly sensual, displaying throughout the text an irreverent cynicism towards that particular doctrine of love. Perhaps more significantly, one realizes that Costanza and Celso, the Neoplatonic lovers proposed as models to be emulated, are the ones who tell the most obscene stories, those least likely to submit to a moralistic interpretation.[5]

In other words, a close reading of *I Ragionamenti* reveals that the contradictions noted by readers in the past are far more numerous and, more importantly, far more systematic than at first suspected. They cannot, therefore, be attributed to the artistic deficiencies of the author, to his presumed lack of organizational skills, to his supposedly limited intellectual abilities. To a reader who is able to shed the biases which generations of often inattentive critics have fostered, it is evident that the eclecticism of *I Ragionamenti*, its deep-seated contradictions, the fundamental restlessness of its poetic material, the dialectic interaction of opposites, the ironic inversions both structural and thematic, are all factors with more far reaching implications than at first recognized and than previously acknowledged.

In another formulation, one may say that what is striking about this work is that Firenzuola is able to reiterate the cultural, artistic, social, and moral principles which inspire high literature and to repeat themes and motifs common to high genres while, at the same time, by means of ironic inversions, he systematically rejects them, seemingly for the purpose of freeing the writer from normative constraints. In order to highlight all this, which in my opinion constitutes the essence of *I Ragionamenti*, I have analyzed the work from a parodic perspective. A parodic reading of the text is a powerful tool to interpret it in its necessary wholeness. A parodic reading also represents a natural heuristic model of interpretation for the modern

reader, as it might not have been for readers of past epochs, for today we are more sensitive to the parodic construction of texts and better equipped to recognize it. It is only recently, after all, that the West has discovered the Russian formalists, Mikhail Bakhtin and their theories on parody, and it is only very recently that literary theoreticians, like Linda Hutcheon, have fully demonstrated the extent to which parody is used in every field of artistic expression in our century.[6]

Firenzuola's polemical idol is Pietro Bembo. The parodied text circumscribed in *I Ragionamenti* consists of the language, the style, the motifs, the aesthetic forms, and the literary conventions which Bembo had already displayed in the *Asolani* and which he had reduced to rigid norms in *Prose della volgar lingua*. Firenzuola's intention to parody Bembo's literary language manifests itself through the polemical pages of *I Ragionamenti* dedicated to language and to the poetics of imitation.[7] While Bembo recommended Petrarch and Boccaccio as the models for literary language, Firenzuola, through his characters, demands a more modern form of the vernacular as his model; he wants a language developed in contact with the real. He also casts doubts on the validity of imitation as a precept, and lashes out at "modern censors" and "tyrants."[8] In the text the polemic occupies a central position, both structurally and ideologically. The heated discussion, in fact, is not an end in itself. As one proceeds in the reading, it becomes increasingly evident that, for Firenzuola, to challenge Bembo's view on literary language is equivalent to challenging his concept of literature which, exactly like his concept of language, was static, motionless, detached from the present and from reality.

Moving from what Bakhtin calls the verbal-ideological centre of the text[9] to its outer structure, the frame, one notices that it is entirely modelled on the *Decameron*, but not because Firenzuola was incapable of original thought. Bembo, who had proposed Boccaccio's style as the prose model to be imitated, had a preference for the most noble language displayed in all its formal excellence precisely in the frame of the *Decameron*.[10] Firenzuola's repeated, and open, references to Boccaccio (who is also cited by name), while at first denoting a passive acceptance of Bembo's model, also function as a foreshadowing of an adherence to the book "cognominato Prencipe

Galeotto" which is more compromising and more outrageous, one certainly not sanctioned by Bembo.[11]

As for the number six, Firenzuola charges it with symbolical significance. The figure, according to Biblical exegesis, should represent the perfection of the hexameron. It should also stand for man's redemption and rebirth. Later, however, Firenzuola ironically empties the number of all meaning by plainly stating that it is devoid of any mysticism. He also denies its significance by deliberately sabotaging the textual organization which he had chosen for himself. By doing so, he is actually rejecting the technique of numerical composition, for a numerical scheme is nothing but order and stillness, the denial of dynamism. Within it, all is predicted and predictable right from the start. Such, of course, is not the nature of the real world. It is, therefore, unacceptable to Firenzuola.

That *I Ragionamenti* is constructed on a double plane of textual organization becomes even more evident in the dialogue on Neoplatonic love.[12] Firenzuola distorts the characteristic features of the love treatise, of which Bembo's *Asolani* was the quintessential model (since it was the first text of its kind written in the vernacular, and one which would indeed prove exemplary and influential throughout the sixteenth century) through structural, rhetorical, and thematic manipulations.

As far as the structure is concerned, the reader readily notices how atypical it is when compared to Bembo's dialogue. Little space is given to the expounding of the love doctrine itself while the ensuing discussion is prolonged to its limits. The issues raised by the other participants are of a practical nature and thus give Costanza, who is elected "queen" by the others, no opportunity to elaborate further on the strictly philosophical aspect of love. In the *Asolani* the monologues are longer, the interruptions far fewer; at times they are made up of specific questions, but more often they are simple invitations to proceed, very seldom are they real objections to what the speaker is explaining.

Furthermore, motifs which are specifically Neoplatonic in nature (such as the definition of beauty and the question of beauty as a necessary prerequisite for love)[13] are closely interwoven with the practical everyday considerations that the other interlocutors keep making. The two modes of thought are further distinguished on the stylistic

level. In fact, while the passages that deal with the more concrete manifestations of love are written in a style notable for its clarity and incisiveness, those that betray beliefs more in keeping with traditional Neoplatonism are burdened with rhetorical figures and artifices (which represent nothing else than parodic textual strategies). Most notable are the metaphors, especially the ones also found in Bembo's *Asolani*,[14] and the ones which establish analogies between the highest philosophical concepts and "things" (such as vases, candles, lanterns, lutes, etc.),[15] and which, therefore, tend to lower the tone of discourse.[16]

As for the contents, Firenzuola's version of the Neoplatonic doctrine of love represents an oversimplification of the problems inherent in this philosophy which he reduces to its lowest terms. There are two types of Love, explains Costanza: one is born of that Venus who is daughter of the Heavens, the other of that Venus who is daughter of some mortal woman. This latter kind can be further subdivided into two: 1. honest love, which is ruled by human laws and social conventions; 2. lustful love, which is not ruled by reason, renders us akin to beasts, and leads us to "mille vizi brutti" (a thousand ugly vices).[17]

In this brief and schematic representation of the Neoplatonic doctrine of love one can easily recognize the three stages of love expounded by Bembo in the *Asolani*. Firenzuola, however, chooses not to dwell on unrequited love (the only time he touches upon it, he dismisses it swiftly by citing Dante's famous verse: Amor . . . a nullo amato amar perdona[18]), nor to fathom Bembo's mystical rapture upon speculation of the celestial nature of love. In fact, love is virtually denied its traditional circular motion whereby it originates from God, descends upon man to return finally to Him. In Firenzuola's version, at the end there is no ecstatic contemplation of the presence of God. He chooses to dwell, instead, on Bembo's second stage of love, the one embodied by Gismondo who states that "giovevolissimo è Amore sopra tutte le giovevolissime cose."[19]

Firenzuola's interests lie not in the philosophical aspects of love as much as in its sociological aspects, as Costanza's final hymn to love clearly indicates.[20] For instance, he violently condemns sensual, homosexual, and adulterous love not for any moral reasons, but because they constitute elements of transgression of the estab-

lished social order. Furthermore, he sees love as the only generative principle of civilization for it brings peace, which produces the necessary conditions for men to found cities and to prosper; as the only force capable of refining man's soul and customs; as the basis of any religion.

Firenzuola, then, revises the Neoplatonic philosophy of love and changes its general structure by emphasizing some elements of its supporting framework while he purposely conceals some others. The distortions he carries out are always determined by his underlying interest in reality. However, if his version lacks any ascendental movement and any spiritualizing element, it does not lack other ideals. These never involve the trascendent, as any other more genuine form of Neoplatonism does, but they do keep their own ideal dignity, for love's ultimate goal is knowledge. In the author's view, in fact, it is love which induces man to pursue knowledge in general and to develop a passion for literature in particular. Costanza, after all, successfully asserts her authority over everybody else precisely because she is a "woman of letters"; she is portrayed as the living example of the ennobling abilities of love.

To conclude, then, we can say that these techniques of parodic construction all tend to one end: to remove Love from the idleness of the Neoplatonic celestial sphere and to bring it back to earth where it might be less perfect, but certainly more active and productive. Firenzuola, in fact, keeps love firmly within the realm of human activities. In its most noble of forms, then, love becomes not a mystical experience but rather a cultural one, for its force induces the lovers to pursue knowledge. Firenzuola, in other words, ironically inverts the supporting structures of Neoplatonic love: rather than spiritualizing the woman, beauty, the lover, he secularizes love and all that is connected to it; in Bakhtin's words, he *contemporizes* it, brings it in touch with reality and its constant becoming.[21] By doing so, he liberalizes it and its literary manifestations.

If not all, certainly some of the author's observations on the Neoplatonic concept of love could be considered as mannerist variations of other preceding and contemporary texts. This possible interpretation seems particularly obvious when one is interested only in some elements of *I Ragionamenti* and not in the text as a whole (Firenzuola's contribution to the evolution of the love treatise in the *Cin-*

quecento, for instance). Such a critical interpretation, however, no matter how useful and practical, would always amount to an unwarranted extrapolation (abstraction) of one element from its own literary system which constitutes a necessary whole. To treat *I Ragionamenti* only as a love treatise and to ignore the elaborate framework which surrounds the dialogue is equivalent to dismembering the text; more specifically, it is equivalent to removing from the work the ideology which produced it, for Firenzuola's manipulations on the philosophy of love dominant in his times are nothing else than the continuation of the controversy concerning literary language which he had engaged in with Bembo.[22]

In other words, one may say that Firenzuola challenges Bembo's *Asolani* both for its linguistic codification and for its philosophical contents because as its language strove to attain the status of dogmatic teaching, so its philosophy wanted to codify in normative terms the manner in which love was to be perceived, interpreted, and lived. This, of course, prevents the personal understanding of love; it denies individual experiences, new insights and new interpretations. More significantly, it also prevents new literary expressions of the phenomenon of love. Firenzuola rejects the idea of a literature which is static in nature because it is the mirror-image of a predetermined reality and which, as such, appears already codified in all its artistic forms thus placing itself beyond any new elaboration deemed desirable or even just possible by the very writers who were supposed to produce it.

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NOTES

1 That is, ultimately, the stand taken also by Danilo Romei, author of one of the latest and more comprehensive study on Firenzuola: *La "maniera" romana di Agnolo Firenzuola (dicembre 1524–maggio 1525)* (Firenze: Edizioni Centro 2P, 1983).

2 See, for instance, Adriano Seroni, "Firenzuola novelliere e favolista," in *Apologia di Laura e altri saggi* (Milano: Bompiani, 1948), pp. 25–45.

3 Among others, Luigi Tonelli, *L'amore nell'arte e nel pensiero del Rinascimento* (Firenze: Sansoni, 1933), pp. 191–193, 296–297.

4 See Marziano Guglielminetti, *La cornice e il furto. Studi sulla novella del '500* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1984), pp. 7–15; Eugenio Ragni, "Introduzione,"

Le novelle di Agnolo Firenzuola (Milano: Salerno, 1971), pp. 7–31.

5 These, of course, are not mere internal structural inversions. They establish ironic parallels, at the level of language, structure, and character, with the linguistic and philosophical models promoted by Bembo.

6 These are the specific texts to which I am referring: Vladimir Propp, "La parodia," in *Comicità e riso. Letteratura e vita quotidiana*, a cura di Giampaolo Gandolfo (Torino: Einaudi, 1988); Jurij Tynjanov, "Dostoevskij e Gogol (Per una teoria della parodia)," in *Avanguardia e tradizione* (Bari: Dedalo, 1968); Mikahil Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. by Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge, Mass.-London, England: The M.I.T. Press, 1968); *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, ed. by Michael Holoquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981); Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teaching of Twentieth-century Art Forms* (New York-London: Mathuen, 1984).

7 The intent to parody another work is absolutely crucial to any parodic text. It appears as an indispensable element in virtually all definitions of parody. Bakhtin, for instance, speaks of parody as an "intentional dialogized hybrid," "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse," in *The Dialogic Imagination*, p. 76. See also Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, pp. 22–23, and Tynjanov, "Dostoevskij e Gogol," pp. 152, 171.

Also necessary to the textual organization of any parodic form is the presence of irony. According to Hutcheon, irony is "the main rhetorical mechanism for activating the reader's awareness." It is the only element which distinguishes parody from other literary forms which are similar to it, such as Renaissancce imitation. See *A Theory of Parody*, pp. 10, 25, 31–32, 34, 40. For Mikahil Bakhtin irony is the means through which an author can fearlessly and freely investigate the world; it is, therefore, the means which allows him to demolish old aesthetic norms established by usage and create new ones. For him, then, as for the Russian formalists, irony is one of the major elements which give parody its central role in the evolution of literary forms.

8 See Agnolo Firenzuola, *I Ragionamenti* in *Opere*, a cura di Delmo Maestri (Torino: UTET, 1977), pp. 110–126.

9 It is only here, says Bakhtin, in this "center of language," in this "center of organization" that we can find the author as the "creator of the novelistic whole." "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse," pp. 48–49.

10 Bembo rejected any form of *sermo popularis* and cautioned writers against writing in the manner in which the people spoke. Indeed, he even accused Boccaccio of being unwise for having at times used in his masterpiece a popular form of discourse. The examples from Boccaccio's prose which Bembo offered in *Prose della volgar lingua* are, in fact, all taken either from the frame or from the introductions and the conclusions to the tales, not from the tales themselves, with one exception: he quotes from *Decameron* IV, 1, from the speech recited by Gismonda on her lover's heart. This, however, is

not a notable exception, for the modes of this speech are not at all unlike the ones found in the generally more noble language of the frame. In *Prose* see, in particular, I, xvii; II, ii, xv, xix.

11 I am referring here, of course, to the six novellas which follow the dialogue and the six poems. Firenzuola was the first short story writer, in the XVI century, to re-adopt the *Decameron*'s general design. His, therefore, was the first attempt to restore the novella to its former state, for the genre had been confined to the periphery of high official culture by Quattrocento humanism.

12 The double plane of textual organization is a distinguishing feature of any parodic form. In *A Theory of Parody* Hutcheon often speaks of the parodic text as a double-voiced, doubly coded, and doubly decodable text.

13 Firenzuola, *I Ragionamenti*, pp. 97–98.

14 The case of the metaphor of the sea, for instance, with which Bembo opened his text and which Firenzuola abuses by repeating it over and over again. See Bembo, *Gli Asolani* in *Opere in volgare*, a cura di Mario Marti (Firenze: Sansoni, 1961), I, i, pp. 11, and Firenzuola, *I Ragionamenti*, pp. 96–97, 99–102.

15 Firenzuola, *I Ragionamenti*, pp. 97–98.

16 These are the metaphors defined by Tynjanov as "metafore cosali" which are particularly effective in the construction of any parodic form. "Dostoevskij e Gogol," pp. 140–142.

17 Firenzuola, *I Ragionamenti*, p. 95.

18 Firenzuola, *I Ragionamenti*, p. 94.

19 Bembo, *Gli Asolani*, II, xx, p. 97.

20 Firenzuola, *I Ragionamenti*, p. 106.

21 Bakhtin, "Epic and Novel: Toward a Methodology for the Study of the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination*, p. 21.

22 The two processes are, after all, inseparable from one another, since every linguistic code implies a specific perspective on the world in which we live. As Bakhtin states, every parody shows "two languages . . . crossed with each other, . . . two styles, two linguistic points of view, and in the final analysis two speaking subjects," but every parody further indicates "to what extent forms of language, and forms of world view, [are] inseparable from each other." "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse," pp. 77, 82.