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THE MATTER OF THE IMAGINATION

THE RENAISSANCE DEBATE OVER ICASTIC AND FANTASTIC IMITATION

During the Renaissance, the question concerning the difference between icastic and fantastic imitation theorised by Plato in the *Sophist*, evolved from being a specific philosophical controversy into a broader debate regarding the limits of representation and imagination. Topics such as the contrast between reality and appearance, truth and falsehood, possibility and impossibility, likelihood and wonder, went beyond the realm of philosophical technicalities (Eleatic monism, sophistic relativism and Platonic idealism) to influence such diverse fields as literary criticism, theories of aesthetic reception, demonology and directions to religious devotion and poetic decorum. The topic concerning the nature of artistic imitation was still at the centre of the debate on icastic and fantastic representation, but the very notion of imitation underwent a momentous process of redefinition, involving not only the sphere of Aristotelian literary criticism, but also theories regarding the nature of affects and empathy, the power of rituals and the principles of magical mimesis.

In the *Sophist*, Plato had associated the interrelated skills of imitation, persuasion and deception with the rhetorical activity of the sophist. Ficino's reaffirmation of the sophistic nature of demonic illusions in his commentary on the *Sophist* was a double-edged sword : it could be interpreted as a philosophical foundation for aesthetic theories that emphasised the demonic roots of artistic imagination (in which 'demonic' had the neutral meaning of the innermost power of the soul), but it could also confirm the sophistic, that is, deceptive nature of the devil's machinations. In this sense, given his close proximity to the demonic aspects of fantastic imitation, the sophist could hardly be taken as a proper model for artistic imagination. And yet, for all Ficino's strictures, the art of sophistic imitation did enjoy a dramatic revival during the sixteenth century. The world of the Renaissance stands out as a place crowded with all host of appearance-makers : poets, painters, rhetoricians, politicians, adepts of natural magic, practitioners of jugglery and theatrical illusions, all busy creating and inhabiting universes built on the fragile but powerful constructions of semblances and simulacra.¹

Since Gorgias' time, the very delicate matter of dealing with appearances had been associated with the protean figure of the sophist, the elusive master of human beliefs and opinions. Plato, no wonder, had defined the sophist as an image-maker (*eidolopoios*) in the dialogue he devoted to examining the characteristic features of this figure. Here Theaetetus, one of the interlocutors, had acknowledged the tenuous and fleeting nature of images (*eidola*) — «images in water and in mirrors, and those in paintings, too, and sculptures, and all the other things of the same sort»². To the character known in the dialogue as the Stranger from Elea, who had advanced the possibility that likenesses of things were deceitful and unreal («that which is like, then, you say does not really exist, if you say it is

¹ A magisterial history of early modern responses to the elusive world of appearances is S. Clark, *Vanities of the Eye. Vision in Early Modern European Culture*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007.

² Plato, *The Sophist*, 239D, tr. H. N. Fowler, Cambridge (MA), Harvard University Press, 1928, p. 347. See *ibid.*, 240A, p. 349.

not true»³, Theaetetus could reply by saying that, in fact, that which is *like* «does exist in a way».

STRANGER : But not truly, you mean.

THEAETETUS : No, except that it is really a likeness (*eikon ontois*).

STRANGER : Then what we call a likeness, though not really existing, really does exist?

THEAETETUS : Not-being does seem to have got into some such entanglement with being, and it is very absurd.

STRANGER : Of course it is absurd. You see, at any rate, how by this interchange of words the many-headed sophist has once more forced us against our will to admit that not-being exists in a way⁴.

In the dialogue, the Stranger's and Theaetetus' discussion point to the seemingly paradoxical situation of having being and not-being, truth and falsehood interwoven in the very fabric of things. They look at speech, sensations and opinions as evidence that human beings are constantly exposed in their lives to a disquieting blend of being and not-being. «Since speech, as we found, is true and false», the Stranger points out, «we saw that thought is conversation of the soul with itself, and opinion is the final result of thought, and what we mean when we say 'it seems' (*phainetai*) is a mixture of sensation and opinion (*symmixis aistheseos kai doxes*), it is inevitable that, since these are all akin to speech, some of them must sometimes be false»⁵.

David Marsh has characterised the humanistic movement of the early Renaissance as a third wave in recurring manifestations of sophistic thought⁶. The question of whether not-being can somehow be represented and whether such a representation may be persuasive and sometimes have even positive effects on human life can be viewed as part of the sophist's agenda throughout the history of such a figure (assuming the word 'sophist' in a sense devoid of all disparaging meanings). In a broader meaning, what Ficino called the 'fantastic art' (*ars imaginaria*) of the sophist covers the domain of imitation understood as the sphere of illusion, wonder and suspension of disbelief, and as such it points to a remarkable range of cognitive and aesthetic situations, from poetry to love, from magic to demonic possession. As we will see in this essay, from Marsilio Ficino to Gregorio Comanini the interplay of imitation and imagination underwent a number of intriguing permutations. Indeed, Jacopo Mazzoni went so far as to rehabilitate the 'fantastic art' of the sophist and to present it as that faculty of the human soul capable of restoring the original link between philosophy, art and statesmanship.

MARSILIO FICINO, OR THE DEFINITION OF THE ESSENCE (*ESSENTIA*) AND POWER (*VIS*) OF APPEARANCES

The fortunes of the fantastic art of the sophist until late in the Renaissance owe a great deal to Marsilio Ficino's translation and commentary of Plato's *Sophist*. Ficino translated the

³ *Ibid.*, 240B, p. 349.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 240E-241A, p. 353

⁵ *Ibid.*, 264AB, p. 443. For a recent treatment of Plato's notion of *eidolon*, see L. M. Napolitano Valditara, *Platone e le 'ragioni' dell'immagine. Percorsi filosofici e deviazioni tra metafore e miti*, Milan, Vita & Pensiero, 2007.

⁶ D. Marsh, *Lucian and the Latins. Humor and Humanism in the Early Renaissance*, Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 1998, p. 3.

dialogue between 1464 and 1466 and wrote his notes of commentary between 1494 and 1496.⁷ He characterised the relationship between reality and representation as two kinds of imitation :

One kind looks at something that is true, and, committed to using the true as its exemplar, it fabricates likenesses (*similitudines*), just as a painter and others do. The other kind has not yet gazed upon the true and yet strives to fabricate images (*imagines*) of it. In the process, however, it produces phantasms (*machinatur phantasmata*) that appear perhaps to resemble realities but are not true likenesses (*quae apparent forte similia veris, neque sunt revera similia*). We must put the sophist in the latter kind⁸.

Likewise, the art of dealing with images (*ars imaginaria*) is twofold :

One kind is assimilative and it portrays something according to the model of something that actually exists. The other kind is fantastic and it feigns fantastic simulacra of what do not exist⁹.

Philosophers are icastic in that they imitate true reality, *i.e.*, the intelligible being ; sophists are fantastic in that their knowledge is confined to the deceiving appearances of the sensible world.

It is in the very nature of imaginary realities to be suspended in the space that separates being from not-being. As was well known to Ficino at the time, the ontologically evanescent matter of images had long questioned the monolithic compactness of Parmenidean metaphysics :

Whoever believes or says something (*qui opinatur vel loquitur aliquid*) seems to be believing or saying something that in a way exists (*videtur aliquid quodammodo ens opinari vel loqui*), and therefore in a way to be saying something true (*et aliquid quodammodo verum*). So the problem becomes whether we can rightly maintain that anyone may believe or say what is false and does not exist. This is especially because what appears to us and is as it were presented to our imagination appears too to possess some power and essence (*quod apparet nobis, et quasi imaginationi se obicit, videtur vim aliquam essentiamque habere*). But what is simply nothing, as Parmenides says, possesses no essence whatsoever¹⁰.

That certain kind of reality, the *aliquo modo esse* which belongs to not-being, is precisely the territory shared by both opinion and imagination when they build likely and credible worlds out of the perceptions of our senses. As Ficino explains in his commentary to the *Sophist*, the imagination — the *phantastica passio vel apparitio* — may precede or follow opinion, that is to say, it can either colour the way we conceive of things or be the end result of our thinking processes. In both cases, the imagination affects the way we form opinions and make sense of the world.¹¹

At a time when the question of the nature of appearances had gained momentum and urgency, Ficino had the merit, through his translation and commentary, of re-enacting a

⁷ See M. J. B. Allen, *Icastes: Marsilio Ficino's Interpretation of Plato's Sophist*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1989, pp. 31-34.

⁸ M. Ficino, *Commentaria in Platonis Sophistam*, in Allen, *Icastes*, p. 228.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 268.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 228.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 269.

key philosophical discussion. In his *Sophist*, Plato had explored the treacherous territory of false words and false opinions, which feed on images (*eidola*), likenesses (*eikona*), imitations (*mimemata*) and appearances (*phantasmata*), where in a sense non-being is and being is not¹². In doing so, he tried to break the spell cast by the severe diktat of Parmenides' ontology whereby thinking is always true and it is always thinking of reality. In the dialogue, the Stranger from Elea, who committed Parmenides' parricide, objected that, if not-being does not mingle with opinion (*doxa*) and speech (*logos*), «the necessary result is that all things are true, but if it does, then false opinion and false discourse come into being ; for to think or say what is not — that is, I suppose, falsehood arising in mind or in words». But if falsehood exists, the Stranger went on to say, then «deceit exists», and if deceit exists, «all things must be henceforth full of images and likenesses and appearances»¹³. Images, appearances, *phantasmata* originate where being and not-being intersect.

Within the broader domain of productive and imitative arts, Plato had divided the image-making art (*eidolopoïike technē*) into the 'likeness-making art' (*eikastike technē*) and the 'fantastic art' (*phantastike technē*). The former deals with *likenesses* (*eikona*), which are 'other' than the original, but «like» the original ; the latter with *appearances* (*phantasmata*), which seem to be «like» the original, but are not. The difference between likenesses and appearances was for Plato of a perspective order, for it referred to the contrast between a view «from near at hand» and a view «from a distance». We have an «icastic» artist, argued Plato, «whenever anyone produces the imitation by following the proportions of the original in length, breadth and depth, and giving, besides, the appropriate colours to each part». By contrast, 'fantastic' artists «abandon the truth and give their figures not the actual proportions but those which seem to be beautiful». In this context, Plato meant by 'appearance' (*phantasma*) and 'that which appears' (*to phainomenon*) a representation of a real thing which, «because it is seen from an unfavourable position», is like the thing it represents, beautiful, but which «would not even be likely to resemble that which it claims to be like, if a person were able to see such large works adequately»¹⁴. Unlike *likenesses* (*eikona*), in which the link between original and copy is saved through patterns of geometrical correspondences, *appearances* (*phantasmata*) lay bare the contrast between reality and its representation in its full glory¹⁵.

¹² Plato, *The Sophist*, 241E, p. 355.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 260C, p. 429 (I have changed Fowler's translation of *phantasiai* from 'fancies' into 'appearances').

¹⁴ Plato, *The Sophist*, 235C-236C ; 264C ; pp. 332-334, 443. As rightly pointed out by Erwin Panofsky in his *Idea*, the difference theorised by Plato between icastic and fantastic imitation corresponds to «the contrast between objectively correct and *trompe l'oeil* imitation». Panofsky also noted how the sixteenth-century theorist Gregorio Comanini misinterpreted Plato's original meaning into a «contrast between the representation of actually existing objects and the representation of actually nonexistent objects (i.e., those created by phantasy)» (*Idea. A Concept in Art Theory*, tr. by J. J. S. Peake, Columbia, University of South Carolina Press, 1968, p. 215). In fact, as we will see, Comanini is simply at the end of a process, started with Ficino, of both ontological reorientation and aestheticisation involving the categories of icastic and fantastic imagination.

¹⁵ All images look like the original, but Plato distinguished between two meanings of such 'looking like'. One is a projection of the original proportions that not necessarily is like the original, the other a copy of the original that is reached through a deceitful alteration of the original proportions. The former is a code to see things as they are, the latter is an image that resembles a real thing, but in fact it is a distorted representation of such thing. *Eikona* are accurate rendering of the original proportions, *phantasmata* are accommodated to the conditions of perception and perspective. See S. Rosen, *Plato's Sophist. The Drama of Original and Image*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1983, pp. 170-174 ; M. Villela-Petit, «La

In Plato's dialogue, the Stranger had poignantly recognised the difficulty in investigating the nature of appearances : «the matter of appearing and seeming, but not being, and of saying things, but not true ones — all this is now and always has been very perplexing»¹⁶. For Ficino, the point represented a matter of the utmost importance in his philosophy. In keeping with the principles of Platonic philosophy, he understood philosophy to be an attempt to imitate divine reality. Accordingly, he maintained that philosophers were dealing with being, sophists with not-being, and that incorporeal things constituted the domain of true reality (*vera essentia*), while corporeal things belonged to the world of imaginary beings. Echoing famous passages from Plato's works, Ficino had clearly distinguished between the production of things (*effectio rerum*) and the production of images (*effectio imaginum*).¹⁷ «Natural things» were the indisputable «works of God», but all «shadowy and deceptive things (*res umbratiles et fallaces*)» were unhesitatingly relegated to the realm of the «illusory tricks of demons (*daemonicae praestigiae*)»¹⁸. This was also the realm of the sophist, whom, in keeping with Plato, Ficino had defined as *prestigiator* and *imitator*¹⁹. Through his *phantastica*, the sophist was able to create (*ingit*) appearances (*simulachra*) that imitate the actual things²⁰. By assuming that «what exists does not exist» and «what does not exist exists», the sophist was for Ficino a «clever disseminator of false opinions»²¹.

As has been clearly illustrated by Michael J. B. Allen in his edition of Ficino's commentary on Plato's *Sophist*, Ficino's authoritative reading of this important dialogue had a cultural impact that did not remain confined to the sphere of philosophy. Allen argues very persuasively that Ficino's text «adumbrates some of the magical themes and preoccupations that were to obsess Platonizing mages, artists, and philosophers for two centuries after Ficino's death»²². This point is evidenced by the way Jacopo Mazzoni, Francesco Patrizi and Torquato Tasso expanded on the relationship between likeness (*eikon*) and appearance (*phantasma*), icastic and fantastic imitation. Throughout the debate, the Platonic notion of image (*eidolon*) remained firmly in the background, but its meaning blended seamlessly with the interrelated questions of aesthetic representation, credibility and verisimilitude, questions that had been triggered by the rediscovery of Aristotle's *Poetics* during the Renaissance.

JACOPO MAZZONI, OR THE ART OF PLAUSIBLE WONDERS

The premises of Mazzoni's discussion over the nature of icastic and fantastic imitation lie in an original uptake of Renaissance Thomism. In the introduction to his *Della difesa della Comedia di Dante* (1587), Mazzoni maintains that arts and sciences should be differentiated according to the nature of their objects. However, in line with the principles of Thomas Cajetan's metaphysics, he argues that the objects of the corresponding disciplines were not to be understood as different things («non in quanto che sono cose»), but different ways of considering the same reality («in quanto che sono (perdonimi in questa necessità ogni puro

question de l'image artistique dans le *Sophiste*», in *Etudes sur le Sophiste de Platon*, ed. by M. Narcy, Naples, Bibliopolis, 1991, pp. 55-90.

¹⁶ Plato, *The Sophist*, 236E, p. 337.

¹⁷ Ficino, *Commentaria in Platonis Sophistam*, ed. Allen, *Icastes*, p. 271.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 218.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 227.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 230.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 232.

²² Allen, *Icastes*, p. 210.

scrittore toscano) scibili, e se così si potesse dire, artificiabili»²³. The objects of the various disciplines, Mazzoni continues, are not things, but ways of knowing (*scibili*) and making (*artificiabili*) things. With respect to art and its object ('that which can be made', *i.e.*, the *artificiabile*), Mazzoni follows the division that Plato outlined in book 10 of *The Republic* and distinguishes between three kinds of art, *i.e.*, mimetic (*imitanti*), productive (*facitrici*) and executive (*imperanti* or *comandanti*) arts. They consider the same reality, but their objects are, respectively, 'representation' (*idolo*), 'work' (*opera*) and 'idea' (*idea*)²⁴. By *idolo*, Mazzoni means, in a truly Platonic sense, a representation of things («simulacro e immagine di qualch'altra cosa»; «immagine e similitudine di qualch'altra cosa»). He maintains that the arts dealing with *idoli* are only concerned with representations and likenesses («non ha altro fine nel suo artificio che di rappresentare e di rassomigliare»)²⁵. Within such a division, poetry has no specific object. For Mazzoni, it is the way the object is conceived and expressed (*i.e.*, as an *idolo*) that make such an object 'poetic'.

The metaphysical assumptions underpinning Mazzoni's aesthetics are eclectically Platonic and Aristotelian. As is known, Plato had divided the sphere of being into intelligible and visible things, which he then had further subdivided into clearly and obscurely intelligible things and clearly and obscurely visible things. Clearly visible things were plants, animals and all the mixed bodies of the sublunary world; obscurely visible things, all kinds of reflections and shadows of material reality, including the 'species'. Species are precisely Mazzoni's *idoli*. Through the species, Mazzoni argues, «knowledge of the senses and the intellect takes shape, in both waking and sleeping condition»²⁶. Mazzoni then mentions *idoli* which originate from «spiritual things» with or without mediation of human art. The *idoli* that are produced without human intervention (*senza l'artificio umano*) may derive from the «pure intellect» or from «the soul separated from the body». The dichotomous process continues with the subdivision of the *idoli* of the pure intellect into good (God and the angels) and bad *idoli* (demons). In Mazzoni's opinion, evil demons had the power to represent 'phantasms' of this kind²⁷. Finally, Mazzoni lists the *idoli* produced through human artifice (*c'ha l'origine dall'artificio nostro*), which have their origin from «our

²³ J. Mazzoni, *Introduzione alla Difesa della 'Commedia' di Dante*, ed. E. Musacchio and G. Pellegrini, Bologna, Cappelli, 1982, p. 21; *Della difesa della Comedia di Dante, distinta in sette libri. Nella quale si risponde alle opposizioni fatte al Discorso di M. Iacopo Mazzoni, e si tratta pienamente dell'arte Poetica, e di molt'altre cose pertinenti alla filosofia, et alle belle lettere*, Cesena, Raveri, 1587, sig. a2 v°. Mazzoni identifies two philosophical shortcomings («due conclusioni molto straordinarie») that derive from assuming that each discipline has a specific object, *i.e.*, the reification of metaphysics into a separate, abstract discipline, and lack of communication among the individual disciplines («La prima è che la metafisica sia una scienza totale, come quella che considera, per così dire, l'ente universale e che l'altre scienze e l'altr'arti sieno parti di quella, considerando ciascuna di queste qualche parte dell'ente universale. L'altra è che se così fosse, ciascun'arte e ciascuna scienza particolare avrebbe qualche cosa per soggetto, la quale non potrebbe esser in modo alcuno soggetto d'altra»). On Mazzoni, see B. Weinberg, *A History of Literary Criticism in the Italian Renaissance*, 2 vol., Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1961, II, pp. 636-646; F. Purnell, jr, *Jacopo Mazzoni and His Comparison of Plato and Aristotle*, PhD dissertation, Columbia University, New York, 197.

²⁴ Mazzoni, *Introduzione alla Difesa della 'Commedia' di Dante*, p. 24; *Della difesa della Comedia di Dante*, sig. a3 r°.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 24-26; sig. a3 r°-v°. See also *ibid.*, p. 397: «l'Idolo è quello, che non ha per se stesso altr'uso, che di rappresentare, e di rassomigliare. E però li concetti della philosophia, dell'arte, e dell'historia non sono veri, e perfetti Idoli poichè non sono fatti solamente per rappresentare: ma per insegnare, e per iscoprire la verità delle cose».

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 27; sig. a3 v°.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 27-30; sig. a4 r°-v°.

imagination and intellect, by virtue of our decisions and will», such as paintings and sculptures. This, for Mazzoni, is the *idolo* that is «the adequate object of human imitation».

Mazzoni's definition of the *idolo* is fraught with meaning : it is a representation of things made up of appearances, which may refer to both existing (*similitudini*) and non existing things (*il capriccio della fantasia*)²⁸. By doing so, Mazzoni resumes the division into icastic and fantastic imitation theorised by Plato in the *Sophist*. Icastic imitation «represents things that can be found in reality or that have been found», while an example of fantastic imitations are «paintings which are produced by the artist's whim». Mazzoni agrees with Plato's distinction, but against too neat a division he reminds the reader that Plato himself in book 10 of the *Republic* had reduced all forms of imitation to the *idolo*²⁹. Most of all, Mazzoni accentuates the Platonic difference between *likenesses* (*eikona*) and *appearances* (*phantasmata*) in the direction of a clear contrast between reality and imagination. Plato, as already said, looked at the distinction between the two kinds of imitation in terms of projections and perspectives ; Mazzoni, on the contrary, as a contrast between reproductions of reality and productions of imaginary beings.³⁰ The icastic or 'similitudinarian' imitation (*imitatione similitudinaria*) is more appropriate for the writing of history ; the fantastic imitation is closer to the very essence of poetic invention : «the true and perfect poet is the one who follows the fantastic imitation»³¹.

The characteristic feature of Mazzoni's theory of imitation is the way in which he stresses the importance of belief and believability in the definition of poetic creation. Someone may think — erroneously, adds Mazzoni — that the «true poet» is the one who creates his poems out of nothing («il quale fabbrica da sé l'invenzione del suo poema») and that «poetry has no subject other than fables and falsehoods, combined, however, with the likely, for, according to Aristotle's rules, likelihood is what one should look for in the fables of the poets»³². Mazzoni rejects this opinion by showing, first, that many disciplines different from poetry make use of the «likely falsehood», and therefore the «likely falsehood» cannot be considered as the specific prerogative of poetry. Indeed, Mazzoni refers to Gabriele Paleotti, who in his *Discorso intorno alle immagini sacre e profane* (1582) has demonstrated «with most powerful arguments and real proofs» that «likely falsehood is, with great abuse of the corrupted world, almost the universal subject of arts, sciences and beliefs». On the other hand, poetry can be about truth and things that really happened, as is also maintained sometimes by both Plato and Aristotle³³.

To illustrate the complex interplay of reality and imagination, of *similitudine* e *capriccio*, and the key role of believable wonder, Mazzoni examines the extent to which the 'false', the 'possible' and the 'believable' enter the definition of poetic imitation :

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 30-31 ; sig. a4 v°.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 32 ; unsigned leaf.

³⁰ The original Platonic meaning of 'fantastic' imitation is hinted at by Tasso in the dedication to Cardinal Aldobrandini that opens his *Discorsi del poema eroico* : «Laonde potrà di lei avvenire quel ch'aviene de le le piccole statue, le quali, collocate in altissima parte, non sono occulte, paiono assai minori nondimeno a' risguardanti» (T. Tasso, *Discorsi del poema eroico*, in *Discorsi dell'arte poetica e del poema eroico*, ed. L. Poma, Bari, Laterza, 1964, p. 59 ; *Discourses on the Heroic Poem*, transl. M. Cavalchini and I. Samuel, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1973, p. 3).

³¹ Mazzoni, *Della difesa della Comedia di Dante*, p. 395: «il vero, e perfetto Poeta è quello, che prende l'imitatione phantastica, e che per conseguente ha il falso, e la bugia per soggetto».

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 60-61 ; sig. b4 r°.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 62-63 ; sig. ab r°.

If we take away the false and in its place we assume the true, by doing so we do not destroy poetry, for we have already said that poetry can be in place with the true. The same holds true of the possible, for, if in poetry the impossible is introduced in the place of the possible, poetry is not ruined and destroyed provided that the impossible is believable. However, if one takes away the believable and put the unbelievable in its place, the nature of poetry is completely destroyed. On the contrary, when one introduces a believable object, even if the possible is eliminated, the poetic subject is nevertheless introduced, as is clearly testified by Aristotle in the following words : ‘As far as poetry is concerned, one should prefer the believable impossible rather than the unbelievable and the possible’³⁴.

The hallmark of poetic imitation is therefore the ‘believable’ (*il credibile*)³⁵. Mazzoni assumes that there is a clear limit in the imagination’s ability to suspend one’s disbelief. What is utterly unbelievable cannot be the matter for a poetic subject. By ‘believable’, Mazzoni means «the object corresponding to belief, conviction or faith»³⁶. Insofar as they are believable, artistic representations of reality are of an individual nature, can be perceived by the senses and affect one’s appetite. Unlike opinions, which can reach the level of the universals, beliefs and convictions deal with particulars. In addition, while opinions rest only on intellectual arguments, persuasion relies on both the intellect and the appetite³⁷. For this reasons, the means used by poets to make their creations believable are particular and sensible. Most of all, by making their creations believable, poets are accessible to the people :

the poet must involve the people in his arguments (*deve ragionare col popolo*), among whom there are many who are uncouth and scarcely intelligent. Therefore, if a poet argued about knowable things (*cose scibili*) following the standards of science, he would not be understood by them. For this reason, he deals with these topics along the lines of believability, that is, teaching them through comparisons and similarities taken from sensible things, and the people — who knows that in the sensible things the truth lies in the way it is demonstrated by the poet — will easily believe that the same happens with the intelligible things. Therefore, we can conclude that it is not inappropriate for the poet to deal with things belonging to the sciences and the speculative intellect, provided that he deals with them in a believable manner, making representations (*idoli*) and poetic images out of them. This is certainly what Dante did relying on an outstanding and noble skill. He represented all the intellectual nature and the intelligible world itself through representations (*idoli*) and splendid images before everyone’s eyes³⁸.

Mazzoni has a great admiration for Dante’s poetic achievements. He thinks that Plato in his *Phaedrus* would have never reached the conclusion that no poet can ever manage to

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 64 ; sig. b4 v°. Cf. Aristotle, *Poetica*, 25, 1461b : «*airetoteron pithanon adynaton e apithanon kai dynaton*».

³⁵ Mazzoni, *Introduzione alla Difesa della ‘Commedia’ di Dante*, p. 64 ; *Della difesa della Comedia di Dante*, sig. a4 v°: «Adunque si deve dire che fra tutti questi non ci sia il più proprio soggetto della poesia che il credibile. E tanto più quanto ch’egli per sua natura contiene il vero e il falso, poiché molte volte non solamente il vero, ma eziandio il falso sono credibili».

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 64 ; sig. a4 r°.

³⁷ Mazzoni, *Della difesa della Comedia di Dante*, p. 401 : «per questi tre habiti sono stati fabbricati tre stromenti rationali, cioè la Demonstratione per la scienza, la Dialettica per l’opinione, e la Rhetorica per la credenza».

³⁸ Mazzoni, *Introduzione alla Difesa della ‘Commedia’ di Dante*, p. 69 ; *Della difesa della Comedia di Dante*, unsigned leaf.

represent the intelligible world, had he read Dante's *Paradiso*. Most of all, he would have acknowledged that poets are capable of producing «representations (*idoli*) and images suitable to make common people understand the nature of the supercelestial world». Dante's greatness, in Mazzoni's opinion, lies in his ability to access the world of knowledge (*scibile*) «without ever departing from what is believable»³⁹.

That the 'believable' is the true object of poetic imitation is for Mazzoni demonstrated by the fact that, when placed before the alternative of representing a believable falsehood or an unbelievable truth, a real poet would chose the former option. Ariosto succeeded poetically in representing the mouth of the river Ganges because he described it in a completely untrue but likely manner. The consequence Mazzoni draws from this discussion is that poetry, «to the extent that it considers likelihood more important than the truth, has to be rightly placed under the rational faculty which the ancients called 'sophistic'»⁴⁰. In a way, with Mazzoni the discussion of the Platonic *locus* comes full circle. Plato had put sophists and poets together as the great manipulators of collective imaginations and, as technicians of the imagination, they ranked below the philosophers. On the contrary, Mazzoni argues that, precisely because they are sophists and know how to use likely and probable arguments, poets have a better sense of what is *rational* and *real*. By all means, Mazzoni is fully aware that he is departing from the usual, derogatory meaning of the word 'sophist'⁴¹. His positive view comes from Philostratus (c. 170-247), the author of the *Lives of the Sophists*, who had described the ancient sophistic art as a «philosophising rhetoric (*una retorica filosofante*)»⁴². This, Mazzoni adds, is a kind of knowledge that deals with all things «in a rhetorical, *i.e.*, believable way»⁴³. What is more, Mazzoni thinks that there is no real contrast between Philostratus' view of sophistic expertise as the ability to represent things through images (*rappresentare per idoli e per immagini*) and Plato's definition of sophistic art as 'idol-making' (*facitrice d'idoli*)⁴⁴.

By describing poetry as an expression of the ancient sophistic learning, Mazzoni reconciles the aspects of fantasy and believability that constitute the essence of a work of art. Beneath the husk of fiction (*sotto la scorza della finzione*), poetry contains the truth of many noble concepts⁴⁵. To the objection that, once one accepts the common 'sophistic' root, poetry may lose the specific character that differentiates it from rhetoric, Mazzoni replies that, while rhetoric deals with the 'believable' *qua* 'believable', poetry uses the 'believable' *qua* 'marvellous', for the poet «should not only say believable things, but also marvellous ones»⁴⁶. The result of this series of arguments is that the notion of «believable

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 70 ; unsigned leaf.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 69 ; unsigned leaf.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 71 ; unsigned leaf : «io m'accorgo d'aver alterati gli animi de' poeti ponendo all'arte loro, riputata finora divina, il nome di sofistica che vien stimato brutto ed infame».

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 71 ; unsigned leaf.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 72 ; unsigned leaf. See also *ibid.*, p. 401 : Rhetoric relies on sensible reasons and credulity : «ragioni prese dalle cose sensibili, e particolari, le quali sono però per sua natura persuasibili, e nasce quell'habito, o per meglio dire quella dispositione, che da' Rhetorici fu nomata credulità, o credenza».

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 72 ; unsigned leaf.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 76 ; unsigned leaf.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 78 ; unsigned leaf. See also *ibid.*, p. 403 : «Hora egli ha da sapere, che questo medesimo oggetto della Rhetorica è anchora commune alla Poesia conciosiacosa che il Poeta sia obligato a rimirare sempre questo credibile [...] Sia adunque stabilita per ferma conclusione, che la Poesia habbia per oggetto il credibile, e per conseguente, che cercando ella di persuaderlo con ogni maniera a lei possibile, si deua riporre tra le facultà rationali. Ma egli nasce un bellissimo dubbio, et è che per le cose fin'hora dette, e prouate, pare, che la Rhetorica non si possa distinguere dalla Poesia, poichè l'una, e l'altra ha il medesimo oggetto. Dico

wonder» (*credibile meraviglioso*) is the defining characteristic of Mazzoni's poetics. Such a unique conflation of likelihood and awe which constitutes the very nature of the aesthetic phenomenon is closely connected with other key aspects of Mazzoni's aesthetic theory, such as the emphasis on common sense as the foundation of sophistic arguments, the belief in the realism of believable expectations and the view of poetic imitation as an experience of rational verisimilitude. Dealing with things in a 'believable' way means for a poet to shape images (*idoli*) that can be accommodated to the senses rather than the intellect and that, above all, can have a cathartic effect on the riotous domain of the appetites⁴⁷. Mazzoni has no qualms about saying that «poetry is a rational faculty»⁴⁸.

For Mazzoni, therefore, both icastic and fantastic mimesis, to the extent that they stimulate in human beings a natural response to rational assent and belief, may have a lasting impact on the ethical and political dimensions of human life. The faculty of the intellect that presides over poetic production is the civil faculty (*la facoltà civile*) of the intellect, which regulates both activity and leisure, for «interruptions» (cessation and rest) are for human beings as important as the condition of activity⁴⁹. Within the sphere of political action, games and leisurely recreations are as necessary as the administrative work that holds a State together. The faculty that governs the activity designated to interrupt the functions of civic government without disrupting them is the poetic faculty, and the highest form of play is poetry⁵⁰. Politics and poetics are therefore different subdivisions of the same civil faculty of the intellect : «poetics is part of the civil faculty and it is that part that prescribes the norm, the rule and the laws of the poetic *idolo* of poetry». Three aspects converge into Mazzoni's definition of poetry and aesthetic pleasure : the «believable wonder» (*credibile meraviglioso*), the «play of imitation» (*gioco imitatorio*) and the useful entertainment of the people («per dilettere il popolo utilmente»)⁵¹. Imitation (images that represent things), play (pleasure) and moral betterment (usefulness) are at the very centre of a work of art. In Mazzoni's view of aesthetic experience, there is a vital tension between political commitment and playfulness, between moral consciousness and creative freedom. It is precisely this synthesis of imitation as the carrier of believable experiences, imagination as a source of internal creativity and the need for poetry to connect with a set of original beliefs shared by a community that Patrizi criticised in Mazzoni's aesthetic theory.

adunque per risposta, che il credibile si può considerare in due modi differenti. Il primo de' quali è, quando si prende il credibile, inquanto ch'egli è credibile e persuasibile, e in questa maniera è proprio oggetto della Rhetorica. Il secondo modo è, quando egli vien considerato, come marauiglioso». Mazzoni's notion of wonder is connected to the rational faculty and is a cognitive process : la marauiglia «auiene quando gli Auditori imparano quello, che non credeuano potere auenire».

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 80 ; unsigned leaf.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 77 ; unsigned leaf.

⁴⁹ Mazzoni's notion of «cessazione dell'operazione» implies a sense of active rest that is more than mere inertia : «nella suddetta voce di cessazione comprendiamo le operazioni da gioco e da trastullo, che sono da noi fatte per ricreazione e per trattenimento» (Mazzoni, *Introduzione alla Difesa della 'Commedia' di Dante*, p. 83 ; *Della difesa della Comedia di Dante*, sig. c r°). Cf. Tasso's account of the close link between aesthetic pleasure, exemplary imitation and civic virtue in his *Discorsi del poema eroico* : «Laonde per avventura questo fine [*i.e.*, the end of pleasure] non è così da sprezzare come parve al Fracastoro nel suo Dialogo della poesia ; anzi paragonandolo all'utile, è più nobile fine quel del piacere, perciocché egli è desiderato per se stesso, e l'altre cose per lui sono desiderate. Laonde in ciò è tanto simile alla felicità, la quale è il fine dell'uomo civile, che niuna cosa cosa si può trovar più somigliante.» (*Discorsi del poema eroico*, p. 68).

⁵⁰ Mazzoni, *Introduzione alla Difesa della 'Commedia' di Dante*, p. 83 ; *Della difesa della Comedia di Dante*, sig. c v°.

⁵¹ See E. Musacchio and G. Pellegrini, «Prefazione» to J. Mazzoni, *Introduzione alla Difesa della 'Commedia di Dante*, p. 14.

FRANCESCO PATRIZI, OR THE PARADOXICAL COEXISTENCE OF BELIEVABLE AND UNBELIEVABLE REALITIES (*CREDIBLE INCREDIBILITIES*) WITHIN THE AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

Unlike Mazzoni, Patrizi maintains that the aspects of believable and unbelievable representation cannot be reconciled and that the sense of amazement created by the abrupt appearance of aesthetic novelty in one's life cannot be tamed into a manageable condition of marvellous likelihood. To reconciliation and synthesis, Patrizi opposes tension and juxtaposition. Rhetorical figures, for instance, are constitutively believable and unbelievable at the same time ; they are precarious but powerful combinations of likelihood and wonder, clarity and obscurity⁵². In Patrizi's aesthetic theory, the two parallel orders of believable and unbelievable realities form two distinct universes that, when they come into contact, create the spark of a disquieting yet pleasurable wonder.

Patrizi wrote his *Poetica* between 1586 and 1588. In it, as noted by Lina Bolzoni, he continued his long cherished project of devising a «universal model of poetry», already outlined in the dialogues on history and rhetoric.⁵³ Two of the seven sections — *deche* — into which the work is divided were published in Ferrara in 1586, the *Deca istoriale* and the *Deca disputata*. Patrizi and Mazzoni had been quarrelling since the author of the *Difesa della Comedia di Dante* had drawn the readers' attention on some wrong assumptions in Patrizi's text, but it was in the *Deca mirabile* that Patrizi criticised Mazzoni for having misinterpreted the meaning of Plato's distinction between icastic and fantastic imitation⁵⁴. Patrizi pointed out that, far from signifying a production of fantastic notions out of the faculty of the imagination (what he called *concetto formato dalla fantasia*), Plato's fantastic mimesis, as well as its twin icastic imitation, was to be understood as a production of images that have their ontological counterpart in the reality outside the mind⁵⁵. Indeed, Mazzoni's idea of fantastic art as a result of the spontaneous, sometimes even capricious activity of the imagination was for Patrizi a blatant misappropriation of Plato's notion of 'fantastic art', for, properly speaking, Mazzoni's fantastic representations (*specie concette nella fantasia*) could not even be called imitations⁵⁶.

The contrast between Patrizi and Mazzoni concerning the meaning of icastic and fantastic imitation betrays a difference of wider significance between the two authors. For Patrizi, the poet is no imitator, for poetry is not about resembling images (*facitrice di idoli*)⁵⁷.

⁵² F. Patrizi, *La deca plastica*, in *Della poetica*, ed. D. Aguzzi Barbagli, 3 vol., Florence, Istituto Nazionale di Studi sul Rinascimento, 1969, III, p. 29. See L. Bolzoni, *L'universo dei poemi possibili. Studi su Francesco Patrizi da Cherso*, Rome, Bulzoni, 1980, p. 137.

⁵³ Bolzoni, *L'universo dei poemi possibili*, p. 98.

⁵⁴ See F. Patrizi, *Risposta a due opposizioni fattegli dal sig. Giacompo Mazzoni*, Ferrara, Baldini, 1587 ; J. Mazzoni, *Discorso intorno alla risposta, et alle opposizioni fattegli dal sig. Francesco Patrizi pertinente alla storia del poema Dafni o Litiarsa di Sositeo, poeta della Pleiade*, Cesena, Raverii, 1587 ; F. Patrizi, *Difesa dalle cento accuse dategli dal sig. Iacopo Mazzoni*, Ferrara, Baldini, 1587. See Bolzoni, *L'universo dei poemi possibili*, pp. 107, 150-151.

⁵⁵ Patrizi, *La deca ammirabile*, in *Della poetica*, II, p. 278 : «sono secondo lui e la icastica e la fantastica imitazione facitrici di idoli posti fuori di noi, somigliati, o veramente o apparenti tali, e formati ad esempi similmente posti fuor di noi».

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 279 : «E la ragione del nostro niego si è perché ella non è *omoïoma tou ontos*, somiglianza dell'ente, né cosa altra tale alla vera assomigliata».

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 280-282. On Patrizi's aesthetic views, see Bolzoni, *L'universo dei poemi possibili*, pp. 97-204 ; A. Andrisano, «Patrizi e il 'meraviglioso' : le fonti classiche», in *Francesco Patrizi filosofo platonico nel crepuscolo del Rinascimento*, ed. P. Castelli, Florence, Olschki, 2002, pp. 65-72 ; L. Schiffler, «Idee estetico-poetiche di

Here is the way Patrizi presents the aesthetic conundrum underlying the definition of poetry :

if poetry is image (*idolo*), it is imitation. But it is not imitation, therefore it is not image. Furthermore, if it is image, it is either icastic or fantastic, that is, either it is a likeness or it is not. If it is not a likeness and it is fantastic, it does not have to do with imitation. If it is a likeness or is icastic, it is not poetic, but historic⁵⁸.

If poetry represents reality, and therefore the imitation is of the icastic kind, then it is not truly poetry but history ; if poetry does not represent reality, and therefore the imitation is of the fantastic kind, then the reproduction of fantastic ideas cannot still be considered an imitation, but it is rather the production of a reality that transcends the likelihood of a believable experience. Patrizi argues that, as a creation of marvellous ideas and words (*fattura di concetti e parole maravigliose*),⁵⁹ «poetry has that which is unbelievable as its object, for this is the true foundation of what is marvellous»⁶⁰. The feeling of wonder that results from «poetic deceit» is an intermediate state between the state of complete knowledge associated with the highest level of wisdom (*somma sapienza*) and the condition of absolute ignorance (*somma ignoranza*). Wise and ignorant men are the two opposite categories of people who are refractory to the feeling of wonder. Between them, the most exposed to wonder are children, then people who are the most similar to children, such as common people (*huom di plebe*), women, unlearned (*chi non è ancora stato insegnato*) and moderately learned people (*quello che mezzanamente è stato indottrinato*)⁶¹. Following Plato and Aristotle, Patrizi adds philosophers and prudent people to the list of persons who can be subject to wonder and therefore capable of being enticed by the pleasures of art⁶².

At the time, Lodovico Castelvetro (*La poetica d'Aristotile volgarizzata et sposta*, 1570), Torquato Tasso (*I discorsi dell'arte poetica*, 1587) and Mazzoni (*Della difesa della Comedia di Dante*, 1587) had all argued in different ways that wonder derives from the «believable» (*credibile*)⁶³. Patrizi counters this position by saying that that which is believable cannot produce wonder because it presupposes a condition of awareness in which one believes something to be the case, and this knowledge thwarts the very source of awe⁶⁴. Patrizi

Francesco Patrizi», in *Francesco Patrizi filosofo platonico*, pp. 87-102 ; P. Castelli, «Estetica e gusto nell'opera del Patrizi e nella trattatistica », in *Francesco Patrizi filosofo platonico*, pp. 103-113.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 283. Patrizi is criticizing Mazzoni. See Mazzoni, *Difesa della Comedia di Dante*, p. 394 : «Ma grande, e malagevole quistione è quella ch'ora prendiamo a trattare, cioè se la Poetica possa rappresentare colla imitatione similitudinaria. E certo ch'egli pare a molti <and later Mazzoni confirms he is of the same opinion>, che la Poetica non possa riceuere questa sorte d'Imitatione, poiché riceuendola non veggano, come si possa distinguere dall'istoria, la quale forma l'Idolo, che rappresenta le cose fatte fuori dell'anima nostra, e per conseguente imita (per così dire) similitudinariamente».

⁵⁹ Patrizi, *La deca ammirabile*, in *Della poetica*, II, p. 284.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 307.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 291.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 292 : «Cinque ragioni adunque d'huomini, in cinque gradi naturalmente disposti, sottogiacciono al sentire meraviglia : i fanciulli, i non ammaestrati, quelli che mezzanamente hanno imparato, i prudenti, e i filosofi. E se questi due sopravanzano in intendere il communale popolo, e non sono perciò da noverar fra'l volgo, grande inganno presono certi moderni maestri di poetica, e fra questi alcuni di gran nome, i quali insegnarono che il popolo e il volgo ignorante fosse adeguato uditore della poesia, volendo il contrario i maggior di loro Plutarco, Aristotile, e Platone, e la ragione stessa ora divisata, che tra gli uditori di poetica si compredessono e i prudenti e i filosofanti».

⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 295, 298.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 297. See Andrisano, «Patrizi e il 'meraviglioso' : le fonti classiche», p. 70.

explores the interconnected questions of wonder, imagination and belief by outlining four points concerning the limits of wonder and poetry : whether the ‘unbelievable’ can be the subject of poetry, whether the ‘unbelievable’ can generate wonder, whether Mazzoni’s notion of «believable wonder» (*credibile meraviglioso*) is the true subject of poetry, and whether the poet ought to represent believable matters⁶⁵.

To the first question, Patrizi answers in the affirmative by reminding the reader that poets have always represented incredible, impossible and paradoxical subjects, such as fantastic metamorphoses, gods driven by human passions, and monstrous creatures. Referring to the already mentioned locus in Aristotle’s *Poetics* (25, 1461b : the *pitbanon adynaton* is to be preferred to both the *apitbanon* and the *dynaton*), Patrizi argues that the poet’s true excellence lies in his ability «to make believable what in itself is unbelievable». In contrast to Mazzoni, who thinks that a poet demonstrates his or her excellence by transforming the experience of believable matters into an extraordinary experience, for Patrizi the real poet should make the impossible believable rather than ending in failure by making the possible unbelievable («che non abbia saputo mantener credibile quello che per sua natura era tale, anzi rendutolo incredibile»).⁶⁶ With respect to the second question (whether the believable can generate wonder), Patrizi lists twelve possible sources of wonder — «ignorance», «fable», «novelty», «paradox», «raising» (to a higher level of reality), «the unusual», «the supernatural», «the divine», «the great benefit», «the most exact», «the unexpected» and «the sudden» — and he shows how they all are based on the unbelievable⁶⁷.

Patrizi’s third question concerns Mazzoni’s definition of «believable wonder» (*credibile meraviglioso*) as the true subject of poetry. To show that this definition is untenable, Patrizi delves further deep into the notions of believability and unbelievability. He identifies «two orders of reality», the one leading to the believable, the other to the unbelievable (what Dante expressed in that line from the *Purgatorio* (XIV, 15) «quanto vuol cosa che non fu più mai»). In the first series, we find such categories as «necessary», «possible», «happened», «true» and «likely (*verisimile*)» ; in the second series, Dante’s «cosa che non fu più mai» (‘that which never was before’), «impossible», «not happened», «false», «similar to false (*falsosimile*)»⁶⁸. Patrizi is convinced that «an order that is purely believable cannot produce any wonder»⁶⁹. On the other hand, something that is utterly unbelievable would be so remote from the representative powers of the imagination that one would lose the ability to be amazed at it. Real wonder, therefore, is for Patrizi a feeling that is produced every time the two orders overlap (accidentally, as in natural wonders, or deliberately, as in artistic wonders) :

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 298.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 300 : «viene preferito lo impossibile, che per sua natura è incredibile (quando sia fatto credibile dal poeta) al possibile, che per sua natura è credibile (quando o per accidente, o per opera del poeta, è fatto incredibile), mostrandosi in quello somma eccellenza del poeta, il quale sappia quello ch’è per sé incredibile far credibile ; e per questo la insufficienza sua, che non abbia saputo mantener credibile quello che per sua natura era tale, anzi rendutolo incredibile».

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 303-305.

⁶⁸ To indicate the category that is parallel and opposite to «necessary», Patrizi uses a periphrasis from Dante’s *Purgatorio* (XIV, 15) : «tu ne fai / tanto maravigliar de la tua grazia, / quanto vuol cosa che non fu più mai». See Patrizi, *La decima ammirabile*, in *Della poetica*, II, p. 309 : «Per lo contrario <that which is contrary to the ‘necessary’>, che nome non ha e che per avventura è quello che Dante disse ‘quanto vuol cosa che non fu più mai’. An example of literature belonging to the order of the ‘unbelievable’ is, according to Patrizi, «*Il Pantagruel* d’un fantastico poeta francese».

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 309.

by its nature, the marvellous does not originate exclusively from the order of believable things, nor from that of the unbelievable things, but it emerges when the one order is mixed with the other, and something that is believable takes on the appearance of something unbelievable, or something unbelievable takes on the appearance of something believable.⁷⁰

Patrizi's conclusion is that the feeling of «wonder is a mixture or a combination of opposites (*lontani*), the believable and the unbelievable»⁷¹. He sees a dialectic tension between belief and unbelief that is productive of wonder :

what is unbelievable penetrates into what previously looked believable (*il credibile precedente*) and turns this into a new form of believable reality (*un credibile seguente*). This new believable does not quench that which is unbelievable completely, but it keeps it unbelievable until the reason for it being unbelievable is discovered. As long as this reason remains hidden, wholly or partially, that which is unbelievable lives in a condition of mixed coexistence with that which is believable, so that wonder is born and kept alive⁷².

Plato's paradoxical and unstable 'mixture' (*symmixis*) of opinion and sensation becomes Patrizi's paradoxical and unstable 'mixture' of belief and unbelief. One 'order' of reality cannot generate wonder without being connected to the other 'order' : the 'order' of the unbelievable is the «root or matter, and mother, and support and foundation» of the marvellous, while the 'order' of the believable cannot be properly considered as the father, but as a «painter, colourer, dyer, sower, or tiller» of wonders⁷³, which is the same to say that the *believable* — *pace* Mazzoni — has an accidental function with respect to the essential role played by the unbelievable. Patrizi goes so far as to outline a combinatorial table of all the possible oppositions (*lontananzè*) between the categories that form the «order» of the believables ('necessary', 'possible', 'happened', 'true' and 'likely') and the corresponding categories in the «order» of the unbelievables (Dante's 'that-which-never-was-before', 'impossible', 'not-happened', 'false' and 'similar to false'). Then Patrizi introduces oppositions (*lontananzè*) between the various subjects (*materie*) to which the previous set of oppositions can be applied. These 'subjects' are 'God', 'nature' and 'human beings'. The possible combinations between *materie* and *lontananzè* amount to seventy-five. However, Patrizi explains that the multiplication of the subjects as a result of the various levels of reality can increase exponentially when subjects are combined with their attributes ('causes', 'essences', 'powers', 'knowledge', 'will', 'actions', 'passions' and 'effects'). The grand total of the possible combinations (*congiungimenti*) amounts to 33.600. Patrizi warns that «no poet should feel overwhelmed, or doubt that he does not have sufficient combinations between oppositions (*congiungimenti di lontani*) that are capable of producing miracles and wonders»⁷⁴. In Patrizi's aesthetic theory, the scope of wonder expands to encompass the whole field of

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 310.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 318.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 319.

⁷³ *Ibid.* : «E per tanto si potrà tener per fermo che un ordine senza congiunzione dell'altro non possa in niun modo per se stesso il mirabile generare, ma fie uopo e dell'uno e dell'altro a farlo. L'un de' quali, cioè è l'incredibile, vi starà come radice o materia, e madre, e sostegno e fondamento del mirabile ; e l'altro, cioè è il credibile, vi sarà non a pieno come padre, ma come dipintore, o coloratore, o tintore, o seminatore, o coltore. E sarà tale quale è quella cagione, la quale da alcuni filosofanti è dimandata *causa sine qua nom.*»

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 314.

poetic matter because the domain of incredible subjects that are susceptible of poetic imitation is intertwined with myriad attributes in the universe of likely subjects.

TORQUATO TASSO, OR THE ICASTIC NATURE OF TRUE REALITY

According to Baxter Hathaway, both Mazzoni and Patrizi «were motivated in large measure by the desire to refute the Aristotelized Platonism of Tasso». ⁷⁵ In 1587, Tasso had published in Venice his *Discorsi dell'arte poetica*, on which he had been working for quite some time, in all likelihood as early as the 1560s. A modified version of the work was printed in 1594 under the title of *Discorsi del poema eroico*. Here Tasso attributed to Mazzoni the same fundamental error with which he had charged Francesco Robortello, who in his *In librum Aristotelis De arte poetica explicationes* (1548) had considered «the false» to be the matter of poems. On the contrary, for Tasso the false is the matter of the sophist, who, as Plato and Aristotle had demonstrated, «works with what is not» :

the poet bases his work on some true action and considers it as verisimilar ; hence his matter is the verisimilar, which may be true and false, but is generally closer to true. It would not be at all reasonable that the verisimilar should be closer to the false, from which it greatly differs. For where there is unlikeness (*dissimilitudine*), there cannot be identity, whereas things that resemble each other can be the same, if not in substance at least in quality⁷⁶.

While Mazzoni had characterised poetry as the most ancient kind of sophistic art, Tasso, going back to Socrates', Plato's and Aristotle's condemnation of sophistic practices, rejected any association of poetry with sophistry. He also distanced himself from Mazzoni's opinion that fantastic poetry was superior to the icastic one :

I cannot therefore concede either that poetry is to be placed under the sophists' art or that the phantastic is the most perfect kind of poetry. And even if I did concede that poetry like the sophistic art creates idols, and not merely idols but gods (since the highest praise of poetry is properly that they deify just and valorous princes and set them among the immortals, consecrating their memory to eternity), I still would not concede that the sophist's art and the poet's are the same.⁷⁷

In keeping with Aristotle, that which happened or might happen or might have happened is what circumscribes the otherwise infinite expanse of poetic matter, while that which is not, never was and never will be — the possible object of fantastic imitation — cannot find adequate poetic representation.

And Mazzoni is even less right in saying that the most perfect poetry is phantastic imitation. Such imitation is of things that are not and never were, whereas the most perfect poetry imitates things that are, were, or may be, such as the Trojan war, the wrath of Achilles,

⁷⁵ B. Hathaway, *The Age of Criticism : The Late Renaissance in Italy*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1962, p. 13. On Tasso and Mazzoni see also E. Russo, «Il rifiuto della sofistica nelle postille tassiane a Jacopo Mazzoni», *La Cultura*, 38 (2000), pp. 279-318 ; C. Scarpati, «Icastico e fantastico. Iacopo Mazzoni tra Tasso e Marino», in Id., *Dire la verità al principe. Ricerche sulla letteratura del Rinascimento*, Milan, Vita & Pensiero, 1987, pp. 231-269 ; Id., «Tasso, Patrizi e Mazzoni», in Id., *Invenzione e scrittura. Saggi di letteratura italiana*, Milan, Vita & Pensiero, 2005, pp. 211-228.

⁷⁶ Tasso, *Discorsi del poema eroico*, p. 86 ; *Discourses on the Heroic Poem*, p. 28.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 87 ; p. 29.

Aeneas' piety, the battles of the Trojans and Latins, and other things that either happened or might have happened⁷⁸.

Tasso described the question of poetic 'matter' as an extraordinarily complex puzzle for human imagination, «like a dark forest, murky and without a ray of light»⁷⁹, and yet he also acknowledged that the matter of poetic imagination contained a boundless supply of virtual realities :

Poetic matter then seems vast beyond all others, since it embraces things lofty and lowly, serious and jocular, sad and happy, public and private, unfamiliar and familiar, new and old, national and foreign, sacred and secular, civilised and natural, human and divine, so that its boundaries seem to be not the mountains and seas that divide Italy from Spain, nor Taurus, Atlas, Bactra, Thule, nor south, north, east, or west, but heaven and earth, in fact the highest region of heaven and the deepest region of the heaviest element.⁸⁰

The question for Tasso then becomes how to assess the scope and the boundaries of poetic matter. Should the material for imitation — «the immense forest of poetic matter (*la grandissima selva della materia poetica*)»⁸¹ — be limited to existing things? What about impossibilities and falsities that are in fact 'imitated'? In a way, prosopopeias and all forms of personification are imitations of feigned realities. The question is for Tasso even more urgent given the Platonic premises of his argument, so much so that he cannot help but ask the question : «what shall we say exist, the intelligible or the visible?». Significantly, his answer is a surprising going back to the Eleatic predicament that Plato had described in the *Sophist* : «Surely the intelligible, in the opinion of Plato too, who put visible things in the genus of not-being and only the intelligible in the genus of being». Thus angels, winged lions, eagles and oxen, to the extent that they are «images of the evangelists», do not fall within the province of fantastic imitation, but are as icastic as any other representation of concrete reality. However, the price Tasso has to pay for advocating the icastic representability of intelligible ideas is high, for this solution implies a radical intellectualisation of the imagination and its representative powers :

phantasy is [a faculty] in the divisible part of the mind, not the indivisible, which is the intellect pure and simple, unless besides the phantasy which is a faculty of the sensitive soul there were another which is a faculty of the intellective. And this seems fitting enough since phantasy was thus named by the Greeks from light (as we may read in Plutarch's *On the Opinions Accepted by the Philosophers*) as the power which is like light in illuminating things and revealing itself. This is suitable rather to intellectual phantasy. But although both our theologians and the Platonic philosophers postulate this faculty, Aristotle neither knew of nor admitted it. Nor did Plato in the *Sophist* ; otherwise he would not have distinguished icastic from phantastic imitation, since the icastic too would belong to the intellectual imagination (*fantasia intellettuale*)⁸².

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 88 ; p. 31.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 78 («la materia è simile ad una selva oscura, tenebrosa, e priva d'ogni luce») ; p. 21.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 79 ; p. 22.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 90 ; pp. 32-33. See *Discorsi del poema eroico*, p. 91 : «e però la sua [del poeta] imitazione è più tosto icastica che fantastica ; e se pur fu operazione de la fantasia, intendasi d'una imaginazione intellettuale ; ma non si può contradistinguere dall'icastica».

Tasso compares this *fantasia intellettuale* to the *alta fantasia* mentioned by Dante in *Paradiso*⁸³. The tension is indeed high. If Mazzoni, while rereading Plato's locus on icastic and fantastic imitation, had in the end sided with the sophist, Tasso now sides with Parmenides.⁸⁴ His notion of «intellectual imagination» makes the matter of poetic imitation a part of the matter of the intellect : «We not only, therefore, speak of the matter of a speech, a syllogism, or a verse, but also call material a capacity of our intellect to receive all forms»⁸⁵.

GREGORIO COMANINI, OR THE UNRESTRAINED FREEDOM OF FANTASTIC REALITY

Later in the sixteenth century, in the dialogue *Il Figino*, published in Mantua in 1591, Gregorio Comanini, a Lateran canon friend of both Mazzoni and Tasso, applied the distinction between icastic and fantastic imitation to a discussion on the nature of painting⁸⁶. The *idolo* as «the adequate object of mimetic art», he wrote in that work, can represent either a «real thing, outside the artist's intellect» or an «imaginary thing», which «exists only in the imagination of the imitating man».⁸⁷ While the former is a *simolacro* and, to the extent that it refers to a real entity, it has a reality of its own, the *idolo* that is a pure figment of the imagination is of a different ontological level and is rather a *chimera*, a *capriccio*.⁸⁸ Referring like his predecessors to Plato's *Republic*, Comanini took *idolo* in a broad sense to signify «the object of any imitation», and then he further divided it, following the Platonic *Sophist*, into «resembling or icastic imitation» and «fantastic imitation» :

The former kind is the one that imitates things as they are, the latter is the one that invents things that do not exist. And he <*i.e.*, Plato> says that the *idolo* is the specific object of both imitations. Ficino, in his translation, called the *idolo* simulacrum.⁸⁹

⁸³ Cfr. Dante, *Paradiso*, XXXIII, 142 ; XVII, 25-26.

⁸⁴ Tasso, *Discorsi del poema eroico*, p. 91 : «È dunque il poeta, benché sia facitore de l'imagini, più tosto simile al dialettico e al teologo ch'al sofista».

⁸⁵ Tasso, *Discorsi del poema eroico*, p. 79 ; *Discourses on the Heroic Poem*, p. 21.

⁸⁶ On Comanini, see A. Ferrari-Bravo, *Il Figino del Comanini. Teoria della pittura di fine '500*, Rome, Bulzoni, 1975 ; A. Doyle-Anderson and G. Maiorino, «Introduction» to G. Comanini, *The Figino, or On the Purpose of Painting. Art Theory in the Late Renaissance*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2001, pp. ix-xxi.

⁸⁷ G. Comanini, *Il Figino ovvero del fine della pittura*, in *Trattati d'arte del Cinquecento fra Manierismo e Controriforma*, ed. by P. Barocchi, 3 vol., Bari, Laterza, 1960-1962, III, p. 254. On Comanini and the question of the appropriateness of fantastic and icastic representations with respect to both poetry and painting, see C. Ossola, *Autunno del Rinascimento*, Florence, Olschki, 1971 ; J. M. Cocking, *Imagination. A Study in the History of Ideas*, London, Routledge, 1991, pp. 225-226 ; Castelli, «Estetica e gusto nell'opera del Patrizi e nella trattatistica ». I would like to thank François Quiviger for drawing my attention to Comanini's *Il Figino*.

⁸⁸ Comanini, *Il Figino*, p. 255 : «Ma se 'l pittore dipingesse una chimera, o vogliam dire un capriccio non mai più da altro artefice imaginato et espresso, costui farebbe idolo di cosa imaginaria e che avrebbe il suo essere nella sola mente, e non fuori».

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*: «Per l'auttorità del qual Ficino voi vedete che ancora questa parola 'simolacro' è generale e commune a significare imagine di cosa sussistente (concedetemi questa voce) e non sussistente altresì. Quel pittore adunque, il quale imiterà cosa formata dalla natura, come sarebbe uomo, fiera, monte, mare, piano et altre simili, farà imitazione icastica ; ma quegli che dipingerà un suo capriccio non più disegnato da alcun altro, almeno che egli sappia, farà l'imitazione fantastica. Onde Virgilio nella persona d'Enea, l'Ariosto nella persona d'Orlando e 'l Tasso in quella di Goffredo saranno poeti icastici, come rappresentanti d'uomini che veramente sono stati ; ma i medesimi nella persona d'Acate, di Rodomonte e d'Argante, perché hanno finto uomini che mai non furono, poeti fantastici debbono essere appellati, e formatori d'idoli rappresentanti cose che non hanno l'esser fuor della mente».

For Comanini, Giuseppe Arcimboldo represented the perfect exemplification of the ‘fantastic’ painter (*ingegnosisimo pittor fantastico*).⁹⁰ This is certainly a clear indication that Plato’s notion of fantastic imitation had undergone a radical transformation, from his original suggestion that sculptors, painters and architects when creating «large works» need to apply optical corrections to Comanini’s praise of the playful and arbitrary forms in Arcimboldo’s paintings. This shift in tone is quite surprising if we think that in the climate of post-Tridentine Catholic Reformation, the *idolo* could be seen as dangerously close to the meaning of idolatrous worship. It is certainly no accident that Torquato Tasso had recovered precisely that meaning when condemning the implications of sophistic nihilism : «When we say then that the sophist is a maker of idols, we mean of idols that are images of non-existent things (*imagini di cose non sussistenti*), since the sophist’s subject is what is not. It was in this sense that St Paul said : «An idol is nothing» (*Idolum nihil est*)»⁹¹. Tasso included Mazzoni and Comanini in the same condemnation : «the poet as maker of images (*facitor de l’imagini*) is not a phantastic imitator (*fantastico imitatore*)»⁹².

In the *Sophist*, Plato had presented the absurd entanglement of not-being with being so much dreaded by the Eleatic thinkers as the appropriate context for his discussion of the nature and power of images. To qualify such an entanglement, Plato had distinguished among images (*eidola*), likenesses (*eikona*), imitations (*mimemata*) and appearances (*phantasmata*). During the Renaissance, after Ficino had recovered the Platonic distinction between icastic and fantastic representations of reality, Plato’s original question concerning the nature of the relationship that connects a copy (*eidolon*) to its original (*idea*) became a question about whether the imagination has the power to create worlds of its own, alternative to the existing one, and whether such worlds are aesthetically plausible. Among the authors examined in this essay, Mazzoni maintained that the imagination could legitimately create fictitious universes which even common people were entitled to enjoy provided that the images used by the artist were consistent with the beliefs shared by his community. For Mazzoni the imitation had to be marvellous but imitable, and imitable because credible. By contrast, Patrizi thought that Mazzoni’s poetics of the «believable wonder» (*credibile meraviglioso*) was a contradiction in terms. He maintained that the alleged imitation was in fact the creation of a different kind of reality, a birth constitutively ‘unbelievable’ because made out of nothing, but aesthetically plausible all the same. Tasso overcame the risks of ontological nihilism involved in Patrizi’s position by going back to the original Platonic assumption that the only true reality is the intelligible being and that in fact the distinction between icastic and fantastic imitation in the field of artistic mimesis is a false one problem : poetry is imitation, and as imitation it can only be of an icastic kind. Tasso distinguished two levels in the sphere of icastic imagination : the icastic imitation of sensible appearances and the icastic imitation of intelligible realities.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 257. See also *ibid.*, p. 270 : «Diciam pure quello che è la verità, e confessiamo, la virtù fantastica — l’ufficio della quale è di ricevere le specie apportate dagli esteriori sensi al senso comune, e di ritenerle, et ancora di comporle insieme — essere gagliardissima nell’Arcimboldo, poiché egli, componendo insieme l’imagini delle sensibili cose da lui vedute, ne forma strani capricci et idoli non più da forza di fantasia inventati, quello che pare impossibile a congiungersi accozzando con molta destrezza e facendone risuldar ciò che vuole».

⁹¹ Tasso, *Discorsi del poema eroico*, p. 89 ; *Discourses on the Heroic Poem*, p. 31. See Paul, I Cor. 8: 4.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 90 ; p. 32.

However, Tasso's defence of ontological realism premised on icastic intelligibility as the foundation of poetic mimesis — the most Platonic position in a way — was not the commonly accepted solution to the quarrel on icastic and fantastic imitation. With canons of taste and style evolving in line with Manneristic ideals of beauty and forms of post-Tridentine piety, the very notion of objective idealism lost its allure and it crumbled down into a sea of fantastic forms teeming with the most fanciful associations. An important consequence of this shift in philosophical exegesis and aesthetic taste is that late Renaissance Aristotelian and post-Aristotelian literary criticism created the ideal conditions for a thorough debate over the relationship between appearance and reality. In the context of Renaissance ontology, the Aristotelian view that poetic matter includes all that might possibly happen stretched the scope and the limits of representation and likelihood. Renaissance culture as a whole can be characterised as a culture of appearances. It obsession with semblances and images betrays a deeper, tragic sense of the irreconcilable split between reality and its many fleeting appearances.

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