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DIBATTITI

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Sezione: Dibattiti: *The Italian Exception: A Debate on Ronald Witt's "Two Latin Cultures of Medieval Italy"*

Narrative Telos and the Great Beauty

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«What was Italian exceptionalism and how did it come about?». For Ronald Witt, answering this question requires a comprehensive, structural overview of an entire cultural system. In this section, I will briefly touch on some of the key-points of Witt's interpretative paradigm, which entails some specific (albeit not always explicit) conceptualization of notions such as 'literature', 'creativity', 'innovation', as well as an implicit focus on Renaissance humanism as the final cause of a coherent teleological pattern

In Paolo Sorrentino's movie *The Great Beauty* (2013), the *décadence* of Rome is assumed as a metaphorical extension of what Italy has become in the last decades. Beautiful and impassive, the *città eterna* stands resigned and patient, embalmed in its vesture of gold, dreaming of its once great past. Within this realm of nostalgia and decrepitude, there is no space left for political action or cultural innovation. The past inhibits the present, inspiring nothing more than apathy, frustration, and consolatory fantasies.

The same pattern, with a few variations, could be applied to Ronald Witt's interpretation of north-Italian 'traditional book culture' between the eight and the mid-thirteenth centuries.

For Witt, «scholars of medieval northern Europe confronting the Latin culture of the *regnum* for the first time cannot but be surprised by the narrowness of its literary and intellectual life» [Witt 2012, 12-13 (2017, 29-30)]. The impression of Italy's low cultural productivity (going back to the works of Adolfo Gaspary [1885-1888] and Francesco Novati, Angelo Monteverdi [1926]) results primarily from the small number of literary works for the 9th-12th century. Although tempered by some degree of caution (Witt is acutely aware of the problems affecting the survival of texts and manuscripts in the area belonging to the *regnum*, where losses of books and other library material were comparatively more frequent than across the Alps[1]), the paucity of textual evidence from medieval northern Italy still calls for some explanation.

Closely connected to the central question of Witt's book (why and when did Renaissance humanism begin in Italy?), is another puzzling (and fascinating) question: why did the medieval Kingdom of Italy produce so little literature, compared to transalpine Europe? How are we to explain the disconcertingly low number of literary works written in the *regnum* up to the thirteenth century?

Witt addresses those questions by bringing together, in a stimulating if not always compelling way, a variety of arguments, including the 'brain drain' of the early Carolingian period, the long-standing absence of political patronage, the lack of intellectual competition between cathedral schools and monastic institutions (given the alleged 'marginality' of the latter in the *regnum*'s intellectual life), the practical-liturgical concerns of local ecclesiastical élites, the reverence for the Ottonian and Salian educational ideal of *litterae et mores* («which envisaged education as directed at creating men of high moral character rather than learned scholars or literary artists» [Witt 2012, 175, (2017, 211)][2]), the 'anti-intellectual prejudice' which would be the legacy of eleventh-century

1 Witt 2011, 10-11; 175, n. 248 (2017, 27-28; 211, n. 249).

2 For detailed observations on this point, see G. Vignodelli above.

Reform, and – *supra alia* – the 'conservative attitude' of Italian cathedral culture, devoted to *grammatica* and focused on preserving ancient texts rather than creating new ones:

> Because of the depth of understanding that Italian teachers possessed of the ancient language and its artefacts, schools of the *regnum* attracted students of grammar and rhetoric from abroad. That understanding, however, did not necessarily translate into the production of scholarly and literary works. Instead, the reverence that scholars held for the traditional book culture tended to check their creative powers, rendering them guardians of a scholarly tradition that passed down from one generation of teachers to the next [Witt 2012, 175 (2017, 211-212) – referring to the 11th century)]

> The role of conservator fitted the Italian perspective on learning well. Deeply knowledgeable in the classics, having easy access to manuscripts of most ancient Latin authors, scholars in the *regnum* tended to see their role as passing on the learned tradition that they had received to the next generation, with no obligation on their part to increase the patrimony [Witt 2012, 474 (2017, 545) – referring to the period going from the late 9th to the 11th century]

The scarcity of Latin literary production in the *regnum* would seem at first sight to confirm Witt's view of Italian book culture as a realm of cautious conservatism and low creativity. Yet it must be said that the impression of Italy's literary poverty also results from some deliberate (albeit not always explicit) authorial choices. This is particularly true for Witt's tendency to *de facto* limit 'literature' to 'high literature' (lyric poetry, historical narrative, speculative theology, etc.), thus excluding from consideration those literary genres (exegesis, hagiography) which served primarily ritual, practical, and devotional needs. It is also worthwhile to underline that Witt's analysis of Italian Latin culture is strictly limited to Italian natives, neglecting those authors who, although born elsewhere, lived and wrote in the *regnum* for much of their life (Claudius of Turin, Rather of Verona, etc.).

This «conservative conception underlying the traditional culture of the book» [Witt 2012, 70 (2017, 92)]) strongly contrasts with the vitality, resilience, and competitiveness of the 'second Latin culture' of medieval Italy: that 'legal book culture' which emerged in the course of the eleventh century and whose progressive refinement is at the very heart of Italian exceptionalism. From textual criticism to speculative grammar, from syllogistic reasoning to *ars dictaminis*[3], all the most advanced tools and techniques of the time are presented by Witt as successful achievements, or rediscoveries, by that progressive pole. To cite one passage, in which Witt discusses the role played respectively by the secular notariate and cathedral schools in the revival of dialectic in the eleventh century:

> Had the cathedral school had another string to its bow in the form of the study of dialectic, the institution could possibly have reclaimed its central role in higher education, but this possibility was largely precluded by a widely held suspicion that dialectic would inevitably be used in theology to the detriment of the faith. (...) Dialectic in Italy, including the Italian kingdom, survived (...), but only as an anemic appendage to rhetoric and law [Witt 2012, 178 (2017, 215)].

Equally interesting is the long chapter discussing the advanced philological skills (*emendatio ope ingenii* and *ope codicum*, recourse to the oldest and most valuable manuscripts, *loci paralleli*) that Pavian jurists precociously developed in editing both Lombard and Roman law texts. By the mid-eleventh century, against the background of conservative tendencies dominating traditional book culture, Italian legal professionals embarked on what was to become, in Witt's words, «perhaps the greatest philological achievement of the Middle Ages» [Witt 2012, 475

[3] Witt assumes that the *art dictaminis* did not begin with the monk Alberic, who taught grammar and rhetoric at Monte Cassino during the late eleventh century, but rather with the Bolognese 'lay' teacher Adalbert of Samaria and his *Praecepta dictaminum*: Schmale 1961. For the incertitude concerning Adalbert's status and career, see Bartoli 2015, 955.

(2017, 546)], i.e. the recovery, reconstruction and interpretation of Justinian's *Corpus*. In this way, they pioneered the 'humanistic' notion of philology as an historical and hermeneutical discipline. It must be said, however, that the philological competences mastered by Italian jurists were far more widespread than is shown in Witt's book, which always tends to highlight the 'pioneering' value of lay initiative[4].

In many respects, the eleventh century represents the turning-point of the book. The related chapter 3 has a clearly dramaturgical development. Whereas Italian cathedral schools, outpost of the traditional *enarratio auctorum*, experience their last 'golden age', the legal activity of Pavian *notarii et iudices* marks the foundation of a new area of intellectual life: from the twelfth century onwards, the study of Roman law – and of two newer disciplines, Canon law and the *ars dictaminis* – would constitute the *regnum*'s major contribution to European cultural history. Conversely, the increasing complexity of Italian economy and society encourages the development of a secular and pragmatic attitude toward literacy: by 1100, the teaching of legal-rhetorical disciplines, monopolized by lay intellectuals and imparted in private schools, would constitute the most attractive segment of the 'new' educational market.

Cathedral schools, on the other hand, struggle to keep up with the rapid changes in society, culture, and politics. As a consequence, they become progressively less attractive. Starting from the last quarter of the eleventh century, they suffer a loss of institutional continuity due to the 'Investiture Struggle' [Witt 2012, 221-223 (2017, 263-265)]. Additionally, their reputation and prestige are threatened from within, Witt argues, by the emergence, among the supporters of Church Reform, of anti-intellectual sentiments, preeminently embodied by Peter Damian:

[4] Significantly, in the brief chapter describing the major cultural achievements of the Carolingian renaissance, no mention is made of the revised standard version of the Bible, the correction of liturgical texts, etc.

> By the second half of the eleventh century the disparity in scholarly and literary production of the *regnum* with that of northern Europe was affected by other negative factors besides lack of patronage and the absence of an active tradition of learning. Already by mid-century, the secular orientation of education that emphasized pagan literature, which informed the outlook of the ecclesiastical elite in bishoprics and monasteries, became an object of attack as one aspect of what reformers considered rampant secular tendencies in the Italian church. (...) Fired by his zeal for reform, Damiani crystallized the suspicion of learning (...) into an assault on the current program of education [Witt 2012, 176-177 (2017, 213)].

In Witt's view, the anti-secular and pietistic attitude of the Italian Reform movement had a huge detrimental effect on the intensity and quality of cathedral education, traditionally characterized by a «debilitating reverence for ancient writers» [Witt 2012, 311 (2017, 364)]. Even if manuscript evidence is not especially telling in this respect, «it seems fair to suppose that the strong pietistic sentiments aroused by the popular ascetic movements that <Peter Damian> represented, over time, dampened enthusiasm in the *regnum* for the study of the classics and for writing literary works they might have inspired» [Witt 2012, 177 (2017, 213-214)].

Such a descriptive model, though containing some elements of truth, also implies a certain number of compromises and accepted assumptions. Witt is perhaps overly categorical in depicting Peter Damian's skilled eloquence and acquaintance with *logica* as the result of «an unresolved conflict in the ascetic hermit convinced of the wretched human state, who could nevertheless never liberate himself from his early passion for the liberal arts» [Witt 2012, 158 (2017, 192-193)]. Also, it is difficult to verify empirically whether (and to what extent) papal reformers' hostility toward secular literature and rational theology actually affected the study of pagan authors in the *regnum*, for «the numerous surviving texts of ancient literature and history copied <in the twelfth century> indicate that these works still formed part of the cathedral *curriculum* in some ecclesiastical schools» [Witt 2012, 277 (2017, 325)].

Yet, an underlying rational principle operates to reverse the process, and eventually redeem Italy from its low literary productivity and lack of classical inspiration:

> The relative exile of the ancients, however, was only temporary. By late in the century they would be back, recalled by a society with a new appreciation of their importance for the further advancement of knowledge. They would be revived largely by laymen seeking to use them as the building blocks in creating a new intellectual culture [Witt 2012, 313 (2017, 365)].

Witt's emphasis on the 'temporary eclipse of the classics' is part of a larger 'narrative scheme' working beneath the structures of logical discourse and producing a captivating effect upon the reader. Here as elsewhere, the book's storytelling relies on a dialectic tension between opposites: the secular *vs*. the clerical, the pragmatic *vs*. the speculative, the forward march of the new 'lay culture' *vs*. a putatively narrow realm of 'traditional book culture'.

Italian humanism constitutes the final synthesis of this dialectic movement. Witt regards the *regnum*'s history as an intelligible process moving towards a specific *telos* and a moral epiphany: the emergence (at about 1250) of a new literary culture produced by laymen to fit the aesthetic and functional needs of a growing 'textual community' looking for a renewed *paideia*.

By the middle of thirteenth century, the spread of literacy among educated laymen had created a 'critical mass'. A considerable amount of people took delight in reading and writing. Latin literature was more and more appreciated, and the Roman world was increasingly regarded as a kind of Golden Age of peace and social harmony. Witt extensively discusses the role that classical Latin authors (Cicero and Seneca above all) played in the construction of a *praktische Vernunft*. Remote from both religious and juridical concerns, the revival of classical antiquity was explicitly oriented by pre-Renaissance authors – Witt argues – to shape moral and civic virtues, and to instil readers with a newfound

sense of 'patriotism' *vs*. the highly agonistic model of earlier medieval society.

In Witt's view, the distinctive mark of pre-humanism consists in a sort of 'creative solidarity' rooted in moral philosophy. In the writings of Albertan of Brescia (1195-1251), Brunetto Latini (1220 ca.-1294/5), and Lovato Lovati (1241-1309), one should discern – if not a coherent political program – then at least a common 'ethical tone':

> As the distinctive nature of their urban existence became apparent to Italian intellectuals, who became increasingly aware of the disruptive influence of the chivalric ethos that ennobled partisan violence and of the incongruity between their actual lives and the moral values emphasized by the clergy, they turned to ancient moral writings for solutions [Witt 2012, 438 (2017, 505)].

However, even though Witt's focus is primarily on the 'earthly goals' of pre-Renaissance authors, a closer inspection of their respective works reveals they can hardly be reduced to a purely immanentistic, secular point of view: Albertan's *ethos* is deeply grounded in both Augustinian theology and medieval prophetic discourse; in Lovato's poems, the appropriation of classical imagery by no means excludes recourse to biblical or medieval sources, as Witt himself remarks in somewhat negative terms: «At times Lovato *struggled unsuccessfully* to bend the language to his thought. (…) The work's antique facade was occasionally *blemished* by biblical references» [Witt 2012, 461 (2017, 531)] – an interesting choice of words, which brings us to the very question of what Witt regards as 'humanism'. As Robert Black has pointed out, «for Witt the essence of phenomenon is style». In this specific sense, «genuine humanism came into being in the second half of the thirteenth century when Lovato Lovati began to imitate classical Latin verse [Black 2000, 272]». Yet there is much more than just literary *aemulatio*. For Witt, humanism is also a state of mind, an attitude, a way of (re-)imagining the world with irreverence and doubt rather than piety and faithful acceptance. There is 'humanism' whenever intellectuals reflect in their works

«a belief in antiquity's relevance to their own intellectual concerns» [Witt 2012, 317 (2017, 369)]. And there is 'humanism' whenever reverence for Greco-Latin authors goes hand in hand with critical thinking and worldly values. There is much here that echoes Paul O. Kristeller's interpretation of humanism as an eminently 'secular' movement, «pursued without any explicit discourse on religious topics by individuals who otherwise might be fervent or nominal members of one of the Christian churches [Kristeller 1965, 74-75]».

Witt's insistence on the secular roots of humanism operates retrospectively on medieval authors, particularly on those who manifested – *despite* their Christian backgrounds – nonreligious intellectual interests; consider his distinction between 'sincere Christianity' (Peter Damian) and 'opportunistic Christianity' (Anselm of Besate) [Witt 2012, 155 (2017, 199)], or the paragraph discussing the 'authenticity' of Liudprand's Christian faith [Witt 2012, 92 (2017, 118-119)]. Also, the dominance of such paradigm is probably the chief reason for the conspicuous silence surrounding north-Italian monasteries, which still played a crucial role in the preservation of classical texts up into the thirteenth century (the monastic library of Pomposa, in particular, was essential to Lovato Lovati's return to antiquity[5]).

Ultimately, then, even though Witt's humanism begins to manifest itself (at least in a broad sense) long before the mid-thirteenth century, the deep prejudice in favour of the emerging 'new' literature tends to relegate such examples of medieval 'exceptionalism' (from Liutprand's *Antapodosis* to Moses of Bergamo's *Liber Pergaminus*, from Gunzo's *Epistola ad Augienses* to Anselmo of Besate's *Rhetorimachia*) to the *status* of a few sporadic lights emerging out of the darkness of a long, retrogressive night.

[5] Billanovich 1981, 333-334. On the Pomposa library between the 11th and 15th centuries see: Billanovich 1994.

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