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BOOK REVIEWS

Valerio Vianello, *Il letterato, l'Accademia, il libro. Contributi sulla cultura veneta del Cinquecento*. Padova: Editrice Antenore, 1988. 191.

Although the history of sixteenth-century Italian culture has been widely discussed, this fascinating period continues to inspire detailed documentary research. The propensity for such activity has been recently acknowledged by a branch of studies that has attempted to reconstruct the features of a literary activity subjected to strong historical and regional influences. Upon a worthy suggestion made by Dionisotti,¹ Valerio Vianello has performed a scrupulous investigation of the Venetian region, examining the lifestyle and the social status of the *hommes de lettres*, in accordance with the latest trends in literary criticism.

This area was of primary importance in the promotion and codification of philosophical and literary directions as early as the third decade of the century, beginning with Bembo's *Prose della volgar lingua*. Published in 1525, but begun before 1512, this treatise is the most complete and authoritative work, as well as the most prescriptive, among a series of grammatical texts authored by northern Italian scholars.²

Venice and Padua gained a position of preeminence after the decline of Florence and as a consequence of the diminished fervor of the courtly environment, notwithstanding the presence of exceptional literary personalities. During the delicate transition to previously unknown cultural structures, these two cities acquired a leading role, Venice with a broad editorial production following the principles of a new philology, and Padua with the capabilities of an intelligentsia divided between the *Studio* and the *Accademia*. At the seat of the University of Padua, cultural life was animated by the relationship between these two extremes without a rigid distinction between the ranks, although there was a partial diversity of jurisdictions.

The *Infiammati* Academy, formed in June 1540, expressed as its goal that of spreading a more specialized knowledge. This direction agreed with a general movement that attempted to regenerate the academic establishment. Without sharing the playful inclination which was characteristic of

similar organizations, its members (who included Tuscans Benedetto Varchi and Alessandro Piccolomini) pursued an avant-garde strategy. The Infiammati Academy's interests were focused on philosophical speculation and the defense of the "lingua volgare." A close relationship between the Academicians and the University is shown by the coherence of their Aristotelian approach, according to Pomponazzi's teaching, and a literary practice inspired by Bembo's theory. These premises notwithstanding, the solution tried and tested by the Infiammati went beyond previous formulas.

Although some influential figures, including Speroni, played an effective role in both circles, this integration did not bridge the division of the two spheres. In their common respect for exact inquiry, the Infiammati's orientation was characterized by the clear purpose, as attested by the Academicians' activity, of rendering philosophical thought more accessible. Even though they were partly conceived before the birth of the Infiammati, the *Dialoghi*, written by Speroni, inaugurated a renewed pedagogy in terms of linguistics and rhetoric, launching a project of rationalistic arrangement.

In the heat of the discussion, as the frequent correspondence shows, the Paduan circle engaged in a debate concerning Aristotelian poetics and rhetoric and asserted the supremacy of logic over other disciplines. In opposition to the humanistic primacy of the arts of discourse, the Infiammati insisted on the validity of sciences and upheld the cause of *docere*, placing it before *movere* and *delectare*, encouraging an extensive translation into the "volgare."

The relevance attributed to the *res* implied the devaluation of a fetishistic cult of the *verba*, thus ratifying the superiority of the *sapientia*, and supporting the sound principles of doctrine as compared to the erratic circumvolutions of the *eloquentia*. Abandoning the universalistic model, the Academy acknowledged the division of the various branches of study and took up the acquisition of philosophical thought in the "volgare" language. If it was again Speroni who offered an ideological base to this linguistic plan and launched a conspicuous production of treatises on these conceptual presuppositions, it was Varchi and Piccolomini who distinguished themselves by a lively exercise of divulgation. Their activity was pursued for many years after the Infiammati's fleeting season (which ended at the beginning of 1542) had come to a close.

While the Florentine Varchi combined diverse *specimina* of comments on and translation of the Aristotelian *corpus* and then stimulated similar inclinations at the Umidi Academy, the Siense Piccolomini propagated, upon his return home, the interest in the aesthetic theories of the Greek philosopher. At the end of a long process of reflection, Piccolomini finally dismissed in the 1570s an ample exegetic recognition conducted on *Poetics*

and *Rhetoric*. The lesson of the Academy was above all entrusted to the works of these personalities, so different in their intellectual origin and physiognomy and destined to follow divergent paths.

With less adherence to the Sienese, Vianello closely examines the role of Speroni and Varchi. Specifically, the latter assumed the responsibility of a dedicated activist, serving as the intermediary between Paduan ideas and Florentine circles hoping to be updated. Credit for having exhumed the history of the Academy through patient research and a display of extensive documentation goes to Vianello, previously noted for his excavations of sixteenth-century Venetian culture.³ Beyond the extensive range of unpublished testimonies, this study provides a meticulous outline of collegial activity, examined also in regard to the contribution of less important figures, who nevertheless demonstrated similar tendencies.

During the short life of the *Infiammati*, one can recognize the imprint of three generations of intellectuals. The first group of intellectuals was comprised of noblemen who approached the letters *per otium*. The second group was made up of professional scholars who were ultimately the most influential. The last generation, instead, consisted of the less dynamic followers. The analysis of this interwoven relationship, performed as far as archive documents allow, emphasizes the ties between the *Infiammati* and other cultural centers (including not only the Florentine and Bolognese circles, but also Roman ones) while keeping in mind Paduan cultural developments. Discussion of contact with the political elite, which came through the enrollment of patrician members in Academic registers, completes the sketch of these links.

Vianello's research offers a clear image of the Academy's inner stratigraphy and the ties with its contemporary directions and applies a research method that could be extended to similar sixteenth-century institutions, perhaps peripheral yet representative of the endemic movement.

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NOTES

1. See Carlo Dionisotti, "Chierici e laici," in *Geografia e storia della letteratura italiana* (Torino: Einaudi, 1967).

2. Regarding this linguistic debate, see Piero Floriani, "Grammatici e teorici della lingua volgare," in *Storia della cultura veneta. Dal primo Quattrocento al Concilio di Trento* (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 1980), II: 139-81.

3. See his "Res e verba nel *Dialogo della Retorica* di Sperone Speroni," *Atti dell'*

Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti 138 (1979–1980): 231–53, and Tiziana Agostini Nordio—Valerio Vianello, *Contributi rinascimentali. Venezia e Firenze* (Abano: Francisci, 1982). Ultimately, Vianello produced a critical survey of recent publications on the author of the *Dialoghi*: “Sperone Speroni: opere, stile e tradizione. Un ventennio di studi (1968–1988),” *Quaderni veneti* 9 (June 1989): 203–22. Of further interest in regard to the texts discussed in this article is Jon R. Snyder’s “Writing Under Pressure: Speroni and the Dialogical Mask,” in *Writing the Scene of Speaking* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), 87–133.

Daniel R. Lesnick, *Preaching in Medieval Florence: The Social World of Franciscan and Dominican Spirituality*. Athens GA and London: University of Georgia Press, 1989. xii + 306.

With this book Daniel Lesnick adds to the growing number of studies of preaching and its social context in the later Middle Ages. As with many academic books, the subtitle reveals more of the book’s contents than does the title. Lesnick focuses his inquiry on the social position of Dominicans and Franciscans in Florence during the pivotal years at the end of the thirteenth and beginning of the fourteenth centuries, paying considerable attention to the political content of their preaching. In this period Florence underwent considerable political turmoil, including the disenfranchisement of the *magnati* (old nobility), and factional struggles within the dominant Guelf party. These changes capped the thirteenth-century transformation of the city from a provincial backwater to a leading commercial and manufacturing center. Lesnick’s book studies the roles played by the major mendicant orders in this period of extreme stress in Florentine society as reflected in their sermons and writings.

The book consists of three major sections and six prosopographical appendices. The two chapters of the first section recapitulate Florentine social, economic, and political development in the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. Lesnick pays particular attention to the development of a ruling elite of merchant and banking families, the *popolo grasso*, which gained control of the city and displaced the other component of the city’s patriciate, the *magnati*, older noble lineages whose wealth was based on land holdings. There follows a discussion of the growth of the orders of artisans, craftsmen, shopkeepers, and professionals who coalesced politically into the *popolo*. The analysis of Florentine class structure shapes the two remaining sections on the social origins of recruits to the two major mendicant orders and on the preaching techniques, audience, and goals of each order.