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Theatrocracy:

From Ancient to Modern

by

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Hence the theater-goers became noisy
instead of silent, as though they knew the
difference between good and bad music,
and in place of an aristocracy in music
there sprang up a kind of base theatrocracy
Plato, *Laws*

The early modern stage did more than
reflect relations occurring elsewhere: it
modeled and in important respects
materialized those relations
J-C Agnew, *Worlds Apart*

Theatre governed Rome
Cicero

Plato's life-long struggle for diagnosing the Sophist: A Prologue

Plato's entire work, following the 'mission' of Socrates, was set in motion by a passionate effort of trying to understand what is going on in his beloved Athens; why it happens that the city, at the height of its greatest glory, is being – or rather had already been – subsumed into a repulsive kind of decadence and decay.

Still following the spirit and guiding example of Socrates, he attributed the greatest role in this to the corrupting influence of the Sophists, and his first series of Dialogues, centring around the figure of Socrates, attempt to give a precise illustration and diagnosis of this nefarious activity. Given that the Sophists were teachers and rhetoricians, this undertaking understandably focused on the power of words. It was rendered particularly difficult by a major paradox: the diagnosis of the Sophists required the use of words, thus the possibility was eminent that such a diagnosis would use the power of words in a manner not so dissimilar from the Sophists. Even further, as words are artefacts, they do not have a real, material substance on their own, not possessing concrete, personal characteristics, and thus the same words can be deployed, cunningly, cynically or sophistically, for a variety of different and often opposed meanings. The core of Plato's philosophy touches upon human virtue, the good life, the beauty of the world, but all these terms can be used to question, denigrate or ridicule the very same ideas.

However, and even further, after a time Plato came to realise that the central concern of the Sophists, which was the radical revaluation of life by promoting non-being, thus placing at the centre of attention their non-personality and even procuring in this way a certain 'good life' – not the Platonic one, but the life of fame, fortune and fun – is even more effectively served by images than by words: by a strategic deployment of 'invented images', products of pure fancy, imagination and fantasy. This is the reason why his planned, conclusive assessment of the Sophists, the dialogue bearing that title, has as its centre the power of the image to insinuate itself in reality and thus alter it.

Yet, evidently, and just around the time that he finished this assessment that he intended to be in a way conclusive – after all, decades passed between the early Socratic dialogues and the *Sophist* – his analysis/diagnosis moved to a third level. We get a glimpse of this in what I consider traces of a genuine 'vision-experience' Plato had while working on the next dialogue, the *Statesmen*: the core of the lethal activities of the Sophists reside

in the particular combination of words and images that is represented by theatre (see 291a-b and 303c-d). This experience, however, evidently came after Plato already finished the Sophist; at least, it is only in this way that one can explain that it is not part of Plato's characterisation of the Sophist in the *Sophist*.

Yet, the issue of theatricality was touched upon by Plato before. From the perspective of the diagnosis of 'theatrocracy' in the *Laws* one gains the impression that such a connection between the Sophists and the theatre was somehow lurking behind in the work of Plato in several and central places. It was certainly there in the *Ion*, and even the *Symposium* has strong theatrical aspects - we should recall that it even ends on the note of Socrates discussing the identity of writing tragedies and comedies – though, being so drunk, nobody could remember what exactly he was saying. These two dialogues are notoriously difficult to date, considered to have a transitional character, which might indicate that Plato was not yet ready to formulate his diagnosis of theatricality.

Theatrocracy in the *Laws* in context

The central aim of the *Laws*, this last Dialogue of Plato, intended to be conclusive, is the proper foundation of a city. It is not possible here to go into any details about the meaning of such an undertaking, except for indicating that Plato was aware of the paradox that a perfectly functioning city can actually be counterproductive in the sense that people then would be deprived of the experience of suffering that is necessary to gain wisdom, and thus could eventually easily subsume to the forces of corruption (*Republic* 609c). For our purposes the important question is the analysis of the sources that could derail the functioning of a polity; and here the Sophists are again at the centre of Plato's concern, as it is shown with particular clarity in the comprehensive analysis, evidently delayed so far, of the central teaching of Protagoras – who was the eponymous hero of Plato's first Socratic dialogue – concerning the Sophist attitude with respect to the divine, and its untenability (*Laws* 886b-7c).

Plato starts by stating the problem: discussion of the right constitution is necessary, as the city has lost its way, following now the advice of the 'pleasure principle', being captivated not simply by doing whatever brings immediate pleasure and avoids pain, but also 'opinions about the future, which go by the general name of "expectations" (644b-c). It is in, and against, such a context, and the popular forces ruling in it, that a philosopher must follow the proper attitude, which 'require a bold man who, valuing candour above all else, will declare what he deems best for the city and citizens […] in the midst of corrupted souls' (835c).[1]

This leads us to the diagnosis offered by Plato about such confusion. He proceeds is three steps. In the first, he identifies its basic, anthropological sources in the *imitative arts* (668c). Imitation is a fundamental aspect of human life, and the condition of possibility of learning and education. It is exactly this characteristic that the imitative arts use to the full, reproducing and enacting certain aspects of life and forms of behaviour, trying to make them 'pleasing'. The problem concerns the manner in which one can judge and recognise the rightfulness of such imitations (668d-9a).

The third discussion of the theme returns to the problem, with particular clarity, and also offers a crucial personal insight. It starts by restating that there indeed are dangerous works which should not be produced, read, shown or played; but that it is quite difficult to discuss such matters, as 'it is no easy matter to gainsay tens of thousands of tongues' (810d). The problem, however, cannot be reduced to external opposition and the courage required facing it, as there is a thornier matter – and here we get a rare glimpse of personal tone. Plato admits his own perplexity, as he himself is quite fond of

mimetic art (811d-e). It is well worth recalling here a somewhat earlier passage, which discussed, in a kind astonishing and 'non-Platonic' way, the relationship between the playful and the serious. Plato formulates here one of his most important and also perplexing claims about humans being not merely the playthings of the divine, as if puppets on a string (about this, see 644d-5b), rather that the most important aspects of human life are rooted in playfulness; and play of course is not only closely related to art, both being highly mimetic, but also to education and culture, which in Greek are even etymologically connected (*paideia*). Here Plato restates that genuine priorities are exactly the opposite as people think today; and that, in particular, wars are not serious matters, meriting the attention of a philosopher. Plato performs such a genuinely and etymologically radical revaluation of values, returning to the original, uncorrupted state of human affairs, that it is well worth quoting in full: people now 'imagine that serious work should be done for the sake of play; for they think that it is for the sake of peace that the serious work of war needs to be well conducted. But as a matter of fact we, it would seem, do not find in war, either as existing or likely to exist, either real play or education worthy of the name, which is what we assert to be in our eyes the most serious thing' (803d).

However, we now must return to the second major discussion, as it is the most important and specific of the three, and as it is there that Plato presents the diagnosis of a 'theatrocracy'.

The concrete context in which the diagnosis is offered is a central element of the preparatory discussion: in order to find the right constitution, one must have a good knowledge of the existing ones. As this right constitution must have a balance between two opposite, equally disastrous positions, excessive centralisation and decentralisation of rule, monarchy and democracy, the question is to strike the right, harmonious balance. It is exactly in this sense that the term 'laws' (*nomos*) is understood by Plato, and so this is the reason why music plays such a central role in the argument, as metaphor of the right constitution. And it is exactly through music that one can capture the heart of what has gone wrong in Athens. Here it is necessary to quote Plato in great detail.

Music implies harmony, and harmony implies the rightful coexistence of different sounds and kinds of music; thus, 'it was forbidden to set one kind of words to a different class of tune' (in Greek called *nomes*, root of the term used for 'law', *nomos*) (700b-c). Those who were producing music, or listening to it, had to recognize and follow such rules, and not 'the mob's unmusical shoutings, nor yet the clappings which mark applause' (700c). Such rules were accepted as legitimate without any dissent; yet, 'with the progress of time, there arose as leaders of unmusical illegality poets who, though by nature poetical, were ignorant of what was just and lawful in music; and they, being frenzied and unduly possessed by a spirit of pleasure, mixed' the different genres, pretending as 'the best criterion […] the pleasure of the auditor, be he a good man or a bad' (700d-e). The consequences were fatal – and here the quote has to be quite long: in this way 'they bred in the populace a spirit of lawlessness in regard to music, and the effrontery of supposing themselves capable of passing judgment on it. Hence the theater-goers became noisy instead of silent, as though they knew the difference between good and bad music, and in place of an aristocracy in music there sprang up a kind of base theatrocracy. For if in music, and music only, there had arisen a democracy of free men, such a result would not have been so very alarming; but as it was, the universal conceit of universal wisdom and the contempt for law originated in the music, and on the heels of these came liberty. For, thinking themselves knowing, men became fearless; and audacity begat effrontery. For to be fearless of the opinion of a better man, owing to

self-confidence, is nothing else than base effrontery; and it is brought about by a liberty that is audacious to excess' (700e-1b).

In the next passage, the consequences are shortly elaborated. They contain two points are of particular interest for our modern world. First, the eventual consequences of such decay, through a series of steps, would be a reverting to the 'original' state, the idea that would be taken up by Hobbes. Second, the main figures who exemplify such an error are the Titans, alluding to the figure of Prometheus and his revolt, hero of the Sophists, in particular Protagoras, and hero again of the modern champions of Enlightenment and technological progress.

It would seem that Plato and his ideas have won. Intellectually, the Sophists were certainly defeated. Even their writings were lost, with only a few fragments surviving; our textbooks about the history of philosophy tell us, literally without exception, that all philosophy since then follows the footsteps of Plato and Aristotle. Similarly, the theatre had also disappeared from both the Eastern and Western parts of the Roman Empire, well before the Goths sacked Rome. Yet, one should be on guard from complacency. The theatre returned, towards the end of the Renaissance, not only marking and representing its end but being one of the main operators of this collapse, and so today we happen to live again in a kind of 'theatrocracy'. Similarly, our intellectual environment is dominated by all kinds of intellectual movements and schools of thought that can technically be defined as Sophist.

We now need to investigate how did this happen. Given the limits of this paper, two episodes will be singled out for attention, both having a decisive role in the rise of the modern theatrocracy: the survival of the Sophist schools in the Byzantine Empire; and their transmission to the West, around the Fall of Constantinople, that sparked the re-birth of theatre in the West.

The striking resiliance of Sophistry

The intellectual victory of Plato by no means represented the disappearance of Sophists from the public scene. Their schools survived as part of the Hellenistic landscape, and were as if waiting for the occasion to multiply and gain dominance again. We need to recall here that the Sophists were first of all mimetic teachers, requiring liminal situations for their influence to spread quickly; and that therefore their activities showed particular affinities with the emergence of Empires, or Empire-like entities. One of their most lethal impacts was to influence Athenian politicians in the direction of Empire-building activities. This is why they again came back to prominence in the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD, with the transformation of the Roman Republic into an Empire, and its consolidation (Brunschwig and Lloyd 2000: 973); again in several steps in the Byzantine Empire; and then again, in the 19-20th centuries, with the rise of colonialisation and the transformation of the US into a quasi-Empire.

The teachings of the Sophists had a much greater affinity with the 'needs' of an Empire than that of the philosophers, as they were not interested in an autonomous educational system concerned with the search for truth and the academic freedom associated with such research, rather with the training of certain skills in public officials, and the freedom of rhetoric. While pretending to create a genuine 'Renaissance' of learning, they were only 'courtier Sophists' who could be best described as 'wordsmiths' (Anderson 1993: 35). The interest in the Byzantine world for Plato and Aristotle was very limited: among the writings of Aristotle, it was restricted to logics, and it was this Aristotle that was transmitted to the Paris scholastics, seriously side-tracking European thinking already in the 12th century;[2] while Plato was even more neglected, given that his

metaphysics was considered as a competitor of Christian orthodoxy, and that the *Symposium* was widely (mis)read as the propagation of some kind of drunken orgy as the philosophical way of life (Anderson 1993: 178-9). Interest in Plato was only rekindled by Michael Psellos, by far the most important Byzantine thinker, who considered himself ' "a lone philosopher in an age without philosophy" ' (Duffy 2002: 148), bringing philosophy " 'back to life" ' (Ibid.: 155); but who, driven by his insatiable curiosity and thirst for knowledge, mingled Plato's ideas with Chaldean oracles and Hermetic writings (Ibid.: 147-8), which would generate enormous confusions on its own.

Concerning the actual content of their teaching, members of this 'Second Sophistry' focused on the so-called 'progymnasmata' exercises, which meant the systematic hammering of a limited number of selected texts in order to perform oratory speeches, including the explicit play with paradoxes. Such techniques include 'ekphratic description', which implied learning how to do a systematic, rhetorical description of a piece of poetry or a painting; the technique of proofs and refutations; and *encomium*, that would be rendered famous by Erasmus, which meant the appropriation of the right technique of flattery through lavishing praise and blame, rendering it intellectually exciting through paradoxes and double meanings (Anderson 1993: 47-8). The Second Sophistry also devoted particular attention to novels, focusing in particular on learning 'pleasurable', erotic storytelling.

The central figures whose writings and exercises would be endlessly reproduced, until the end of the Byzantine world, were Philostratus of Athens (who was really from Lemnos), and Hermogenes of Tarsus (which was the city of St Paul). Philostratus was the main ideologue of the 'Second Sophistry', giving even its name. His main contribution in this respect was to turn the tables against the philosophers. While Plato famously argued that the Sophists were mere imitators, for Philostratus these are the philosophers who are *pseudos*, only trying to imitate the Sophists (Brunschwig and Lloyd 2000: 972-3). This is because the Second Sophistry operated a radical operation on the meaning of 'truth', the central term of philosophy. On the one hand, with its explicit interest in novels, it purported to rebuke the philosophical charge of *pseudos* by acknowledging that such novels were indeed products of fantasy, while claiming that philosophers, acting in bad faith, pretended that their dialogues were not constructs of the human intellectual but literally true. On the other hand it pretended a genuine interest in truth by complementing such explicitly fictional works with the collection of an enormous amount of disjoined historical facts. In this way the 'paradigm of truth has thus been transformed' (Ibid.: 973); the unity of the philosophical undertaking was broken into the schismogenic doubles of seductive fantasy writing and a positivistic gathering of facts, combined with an interest in lifeless grammar and logic. The texts of Hermogenes were transmitted with particular care by the important 9th century scholar Photius (820-91), considered as a great preserver of the writings of the classics (Lemerle 1986). Photius, however, had little interest in Plato (Duffy 2002: 144), but was strongly influenced by Hermogenes (Lemerle 1986: 226-7), whose writings he knew 'perfectly' – just as it was true of his most highly regarded contemporary, another figure of 'Byzantine humanism', Arethas (c.850-944). Strikingly, even Chrysoloras, who is supposed to have 'transplanted' the true Plato from Constantinople to Italy, was interested in Hermogenes, not in Plato or Aristotle (Monfasani 2004, I:13).

The most important Sophist schools of Late Antiquity are associated with Libanius in Antioch (4th century) and Procopius and Choricius in Gaza (late 5th-early 6th centuries) – interestingly enough, both in the Levant. Libanius loved to present himself as a persecuted victim of officialdom (Anderson 1993: 26), but he led the comfortable life of a court Sophist, heading a school of rhetoric, and leaving behind an enormous amount of indigestible and repetitive writings. Libanius was a great bore,[3] but also a lover

of actors and dancers, having written an Oration on dancing and in defence of pantomimes.

The Gaza School of Sophists, led by Procopius and then Choricius, flourished shortly before the Islamic conquest, and was particularly renowned of its eloquence. This area, perhaps paradoxically given its closeness to the Holy Land, was one of the last in the region to convert to Christianity, and the extent to which its main figures were Christian is still debated. Choricius in particular is a highly enigmatic figure, given that very little is know concerning the details of his life (Pummer 2002: 245), and for some strange reasons any reference to him is absent in the extant correspondence of his teacher and predecessor as head of the Gaza School, Procopius (Amato 2009: 261). His 'Oration in Defence of Mimes' is an extremely strange and paradoxical text, given that mimes were uniformly considered disreputable, and even Lucian or Libanius only defended the more acceptable pantomimes. Such defence was based on a standard model: on the one hand, such shows were simple and trivial matters, harmless pastimes, and only dry pedants would find them objectionable; on the other, through a twist of argument so typical of the Sophists, they were declared as having a positive educational value, as the committers of moral faults are punished; but in order to understand the nature of the error, such acts – in particular adultery – had to be reproduced on the stage, and in great graphic detail.[4] This text was therefore possibly written as a deliberate provocation, and at any rate rules out the possibility of Choricius being a Christian (Barnes 1996: 179).

Choricius exerted a particularly strong influence on the teaching of rhetoric in the 10-11th centuries, when he was revered for the educational value of his writings (Amato 2009: 264). Thus, for e.g. in the *Florilegium Marcianum*, the earliest and widely used educational compendium, he is the leading authority with 92 citations, followed by famed Cappadocian Church fathers like Basil of Caesarea (74 citations), and Gregory of Nazianzus (70 citations), and then the Old Testament (63 citations) (Ibid.: 267).

Such a great resilience on the part of the Sophists must have had a reason, beyond their skill in rhetorical flattery and in training the officials of an Empire. Graham Anderson offers a very simple and convincing argument, which is also quite depressing, as it shows that the claim about truth always winning in the end might not be so self-evident. Sophists are imitators, so they can imitate philosophers, even very carefully, so drawing a distinction between a Sophist and a philosopher can be quite difficult; while philosophers don't imitate the Sophists, and therefore can be at a loss (Anderson 1993: 142-3). We might add that the only tools at their disposal is 'Socratic irony' – which, however, again requires the flair of recognition.

Ferrara, the incubator of modern theatrocracy

The idea of attributing a major role to Ferrara in the history of Italy in the 15th century would immediately seem to be a Sophist search for paradox. Still, such a role was indeed recognised by one of the greatest, if today not often cited classic figure of the field, Jacob Burckhardt, who dared to call Ferrara 'the first really modern city in Europe' (Burckhardt 1995: 33). The fact of this claim, and the reasons given for it, deserves utmost interest. Burckhardt did not simply call Ferrara a major centre of the Renaissance, but outright modern. This is due to its championing a number of features that we associate with 'modern' cities (and which Lewis Mumford connected to the baroque): it had large and well-built residential quarters; it promoted the formation of 'true capital', through the concentration of the official classes and the active promotion of trade; it attracted as a

matter of policy wealthy fugitives, much the way the Switzerland would do it later; its power was based on a very extensive and effective taxation system; and as a result the state employees deemed most important, soldiers and university professors, were always paid promptly (Ibid.).

Such a well-ordered state, however, had to pay a price in a feature that we don't like to associate with the adjective 'modern': it was also perhaps the most ruthless despotism in its own time. The term 'despotism' here is not an exercise in labelling, but was the self-definition of the state, and in a manner that is not far from the contemporary meaning of the term (Gundersheimer 1973). In the 12th century, during the formation of the Italian city-states, Ferrara opted not for a Republic, but for a despotic form of government, offering the city to the Este family in a manner that almost anticipates the Leviathan of Hobbes. Despotism in Ferrara was therefore legitimate, surviving until 1597 (when the city, for reasons of succession, was yielded to the Papal State), while the Este rule survived in Modena until 1797, to be ended by the Napoleonic troops – coincidentally in the same year when Napoleon also terminated the millennial Republic of Venice. The 'modernity' of Ferrara thus implied pioneering a kind of absolutist 'court society' that became the rule of Europe only by the 17th century.

A crucial element of this 'modernity' was a truly unique promoting of a particular kind of humanist studies and the arts which, both literally (geographically and historically) and metaphorically in between Florence and Venice, Ferrara came to champion. In this, and in manifold ways, theatre and theatricality played a prominent role.

Even further, Ferrara not only 'played' a pioneering role in the re-birth of theatre, but itself *was* theatrical: its promotion of the arts and humanities 'emanated from a theatrical Ferrara that was itself a stage, a protagonist, a producer and generator of theatre, an object of representation' (Clubb 2005: 345). Perhaps the best way to characterise such an overwhelming theatricality is through the words of Torquato Tasso, Ferrara's most famous poet, who in a dialogue (incidentally subtitled 'On Masks') records the first impressions he had when seeing the city in the following manner: ' "When I first saw Ferrara … it seemed to me that the whole city was a marvellous, painted shining stage never seen before, full of thousands of shapes and apparitions. And the goings-on of that time seemed similar to those performed in theatres in different languages by various players" ' (as in Bruscagli 2005: 42-3).

Just as the putting into motion of any engine requires the use of several gears, the launching of Ferrara as a major centre of the humanities and the arts went through a series of accelerating steps. It started under Alberto d'Este (1388-93), who founded the University in 1391 (Lockwood 2009: 11). It continued with Niccolo III d'Este, who ruled almost for half a century (1393-1441), entrusting Donato with the task of building up a library, and who used his long journeys abroad, especially in France, collecting works of art and musical instruments (Ibid.: 13). The most important developments in Ferrara, however, are to be connected with Leonello d'Este.

Leonello was younger brother and designated heir of Niccolo III, trained to be a ruler and a commander, and so after his return to the court in 1424 had to find himself idle. Intriguingly, nothing is known of his life in between 1424 and 1429, arrival of Guarino in Ferrara, though one can safely conjecture that two events of 1425 left a profound mark on it: one of his brothers and a consort of his father were executed on charges of adultery; and the humanist Panormita published a much discussed poem entitled *Hermaphrodite*, which reached unprecedented heights in pornography, so much so that it contained a whole series of invented Latin words. All that we know is that Guarino was repeatedly called to Ferrara in order to become Leonello's tutor; and that in

1429 he finally accepted. The result was the literal transformation of the court itself (or at least Leonello's part) into the most famous humanist school of Italy.

The question now is to assess what such a thing exactly meant. For this, we need to present who Guarino was; what he promised; and what he actually did.

Guarino: Humanist Educator or Corrupter of Youth?

The bare facts concerning the life of Guarino are rather well known. Born in 1374, Guarino da Verona (or Guarino Veronese) did his humanistic studies in the 1390s in Verona (Baxandall 1965: 185). He then became one of the main students of the famed Manuel Chrysoloras, the first known Greek scholar to spend a long time in Europe,[5] following him back to Constantinople in 1403, where stayed for five years as his house-guest, gaining good knowledge of Greek language, and also of Greek theatricality (Villoresi 1994: 65ff). Upon his return, he lived and taught in Florence (1410-14), and then in Venice (1414 and 1419), after which he moved back to his home-town, Verona. In 1429 he finally accepted the call to Ferrara, where he died in the advanced age of 86 years. Since then, his students and acolytes celebrate him as one of the biggest figures of the Renaissance; certainly its greatest pedagogue. However, there are quite a few aspects of his life that require closer scrutiny.

This starts with the fact that Guarino was not exactly a youngster when he became a student of Chrysoloras. The exact date of Chrysoloras's first trip to Europe is quite controversial; but what is certain is that Guarino was almost thirty when he went with Chrysoloras to Constantinople. It is even stranger how he got into Chrysoloras' entourage in the first instance. Chrysoloras was a high level diplomat of the Empire, while Guarino was not even a noble. Concerning his unique chance of spending five full years in the place where everybody wanted to be, there is no record of his experiences. The years spent upon his return are also perplexing. Five years in Florence, five years in Venice, yet not settling in any of them; then seemingly wasting ten years of his life in the backwaters of Verona. What was Guarino waiting for? What was he up to?!

At one level, the answer to this question seems to be straightforward, told endlessly by his students and acolytes ever since. Guarino was a great pedagogue; his only aim was to teach, to educate, instilling knowledge and virtue into every one of his students. Yet, these are exactly the loftiest of such praises, attempting to secure belief about the perfect orthodoxy and modernity of Guarino's aims that strike such high note, and peculiar pitch, to render one suspicious. Accordingly, the aim of Guarino was not simply to teach, but outright to 'form living souls' (as quoted in Grafton and Jardine 1982: 51), in order to 'transform the world'. Thus, students were 'altered' in his schools, literally transformed, so they 'came out as new men'. When reading such passages one has to wonder whether Garin had in mind the manner in which Protestant evangelist are trying to transform their flock born again Christians, or the Soviet Bolshevik vision of the 'smithery of the new man'. However, it is also evident that in such an ambitious undertaking Guarino had rather more partial, quite strategic and less evidently praiseworthy aims. His presumed promotion of ancient values had a very concrete and earthly target: 'Guarino not only founded and developed a premier humanistic tradition in the city, he also tried to disconnect Ferrara from traditional northern culture by rejecting it as obsolete and unacceptable' (Bruscagli 2005: 31). This might still be conceived of as merely promoting the values in which he sincerely believed; but – given the life experiences of Guarino – it makes one wonder whether Guarino wanted to reanimate the ancient glory of the Greco-Roman world, or whether, more simply, he wanted to 'byzantinise' Europe. Given that his beloved teacher, Chrysoloras was a prime diplomat of the Byzantine Empire, trying to secure the survival of Byzantine culture and values in the West, this by no means was an unlikely scenario. And if this were the case,

one can by no means rule out, given the importance the alchemic writings of the hermetic corpus had for the Byzantine *dotti*, that Guarino was well aware of the 'need' for an environment where such Byzantine values could be incubated; and that for such purposes Ferrara offered a better case that Florence or Venice – even that delay, in the proper manner, leaving the patient 'cooked' in his own sweat, might be the best way to prepare for the opportunity.

From this perspective, the events of 1429 even suggest a reason for making the decisive move. It is usually explained by a 'push' motive, the plague outbreak that supposedly chased Guarino out of Verona, ready to accept the Ferrara offer. But there was also a pull motive: it was exactly at that moment that a number of new plays by Plautus were discovered. Guarino was absolutely adamant to obtain them; and Ferrara seemed the ideal place both for procuring them and for turning them to use.

In order to understand Guarino's – on surface, quite surprising – interest in the comedies of Plautus, we need to turn to the actual content of his teachings – all the more so as we need to assess whether he managed to satisfy the high and lofty expectation that he himself evoked.

Guarino is usually presented as a great erudite scholar, a true Renaissance man, 'the greatest teacher in a century of great teachers' (Grafton and Jardine 1982: 52), at home in all areas of knowledge and wisdom, and making a fundamental contribution to the revitalisation of interest in Plato. This assessment is hugely off the mark. Guarino was indeed very competent, but only in a very narrow field of knowledge, which by no means included Plato (Thomson 1976), and which moreover was closely based on monopolising the advantage that he acquired by spending five years in Constantinople. This explains the life-long hostility between himself and Filelfo, the only other significant contemporary scholar who shared this monopoly of being the first, last and only ones being able to gain first-hand knowledge of Greek.

Far from being guided by the works and spirit of Plato, Guarino based his teaching on a veneration of Chrysoloras's work and person that bordered on the fanatical (Baxandall 1965: 190). He was convinced that Chrysoloras was the greatest thinker of his times. Yet, the Byzantine was more of a diplomat than a genuine scholar, and his true worth can be better gained from a recent, comprehensive overview of Byzantine philosophy, where his works are not discussed, nor is his name mentioned in an extensive list of important thinkers in the Palaeologan period (13^{th}-15^{th} centuries) (Ierodaikonou 2002: 5-6). The crucial point was not the significance of his own ideas – as he had none; neither his support for Plato – which was non-existent; but that he rejected, on false premises, the entire line of humanism started by Petrarch, inaugurating and break and a new – false – start. The continuity was only maintained, as a 'rock', by Cusanus (Berschin 1988: 276) and, after some *pentimenti*, by Alberti; but the 'spirit of the times' preferred the line of Chrysoloras and his students.

But what was actually taught in the lectures and seminars of this 'great, great' teacher and scholar? A relatively recent overview by two major scholars came up with a rather striking reassessment. Between the lofty claims made by and on behalf of Guarino and his actual teaching practice there was a yawning gap. It was pretended that the studies would help to set ' "in order the impulses of our souls, and reins in our desires" '; to teach ' "faith, constancy, fairness and liberality towards friends and foreigners, and respect for all sorts of men" '; in sum the ' "very philosophy that once upon a time brought men from their wild life into this gentle and domesticated condition and which gave them the laws that enabled those assembled together to become a civil society" ' (as in Grafton and Jardine 1982: 54). In actual fact, the lectures were exclusively devoted, in

painstaking, indeed gruesome detail, to the hammering of linguistic, grammatical and rhetorical skills (Ibid.: 52). The core of the curriculum was the reading of epic poetry and drama; fundamentally the very same curriculum taught by the Greek Sophists in Athens, in the transition from oral to written culture, which then was taken over by the Romans from Greece, then by the Byzantines, and now re-imported into Italy and adapted as the fountainhead of all wisdom (pp. 55-8).

Yet, even within these broad and rather unsatisfactory coordinates, the insufficiencies of which composed a central part of Plato's complaints against Sophist education, Guarino followed a particularly gruelling practice. The teaching had two main characteristics. On the one hand, the grammatical rules and rhetorical exercised were put into short, rhythmic and rhyming, easily memorisable verses. The silliness of all this can be illustrate with four lines (p.64):

> A hill is a *collis*; a *caules*, I'm told,
> Is a plant, and a *caula* keeps sheep in the fold.
> A *collum* bows down with the weight of the head
> That it holds, while a *colum*'s for spinning a thread.

Second, literally every single line read in the lectures was expanded upon and illustrated with commentaries, which in print usually run up to a full page length. The purported reason was to illustrate the need for erudition, and Guarino certainly did everything to show off his; but the effective outcome was that students were inundated with words, just as with an 'as comprehensive a catalogue as possible of disconnected "facts" ' (67). Thus they became bewildered and lost in details, not being able even to copy the flood of words pouring on them as a result of this 'linguistic drilling' (66).

The course on grammar was followed by a course on rhetoric; but the method of teaching did not change. Instead of providing living contact with the subject matter, Guarino focused on a single text, which was not even an important classic work, rather a forgery of Cicero's style (70). He thus revealed himself a Sophist, in the technical sense assigned to the term by Plato, who is quite able of dissecting and fragmenting every piece of living reality, but is not able to put it back harmoniously together (*Sophist* 259d-60e).

The result of attending such lectures, devoid of even trying to cater for genuine attention and to render alive great classic texts was utter boredom. Guarino justified his way of proceeding as the 'price' students had to pay in order to gain access to the 'mysteries' into which he was initiating them (Grafton and Jardine 1982: 66), and was gravely pondering, as a true pedant – a stock figure of the rising 'erudite comedy', of which he was model – about the 'heavy responsibility' that befall upon him, in directing the soul of youth in the right direction. Yet, at the same time, and inevitably, given the gruesome boredom to which he subjected his students day by day, and pretending to be a 'good father', he also showed lenience and understanding towards them. This is best visible in his interest in and support for comedies.

Already contemporaries were puzzled by the fact that this supposed great scholar and unmistakable pedant had a penchant for comedies. Already during his time in Constantinople he translated three satirical dialogues of the 'irreverent prose satirist' Lucian, whose writings exuded the 'spirit of hedonism and paradox' (Marsh 1994: 419-21). His justification for this was paradoxical, modelled on the paradoxical character of Lucian's writings: comedies, by staging 'bad' forms of conduct, actually help the students (or readers or listeners) to become aware of such errors, and therefore follow now 'consciously' the 'good' way of conduct. The source is again Chrysoloras: recent research

has shown that already in 1397-1400, when teaching in Florence, Chrysoloras used the writings of Lucian as a pedagogical tool (Marsh 1994: 419).

It is very important not to take such an argument at face value, and especially not consider it in isolation, rather capture the core of the entire pedagogical attitude of which it lies at its heart. The central point concerns the schismatic nature of the combination of extreme boredom on the one hand, and the subsequent need for 'relaxation' and 'divertissement'. From this perspective the support for lascivious comedy is not an understandable gesture towards the necessities of human nature, rather a pact of complicity tied between the 'master' and his students, who tolerate the dreadful dreg of the lectures in compensation for the master closing his eyes, or even adding a complacent, self-gratulatory wink, over such 'understandable' pranks. Education in this way is transformed into a genuine corruption of the youth, in the etymological sense of corruption as a joint break, implying the 'understanding' and complicity of both sides in sabotaging the true, Platonic aim of education, which is to elevate the soul into the apprehension, perception and comprehension of the true, the good, and the beautiful. The effects of this educational policy is visible in particular clarity through as series of poems written by one of his students, Janus Pannonius (1434-72), considered the first and foremost Hungarian humanist and poet of the century, which give a glimpse into an astonishing proliferation of debauched promiscuity, whoring, and sodomising. One of the more striking of these poems in entitled 'To Guarino of Verona'; it is organised around the – rhetorical – question whether Guarino was truly oblivious of what was going on around him, or just faked ignorance.

That this matter is not just a minor taint on the otherwise noble character of Guarino's educational programme is best visible in the very core of the education philosophy of Chrysoloras; a point where, by the way, he indeed deviated even from the basic principles of Byzantine aesthetics, presenting again a thoroughly anti-Platonic argument. The argument concerns the nature of beauty, and has fundamental relevance both for the arts, and for education in general.

According to Chrysoloras, 'real' beauty is not external, but internal. It does not reside in objects, whether these are natural or works of art, but only in the intellect that contemplates them, as it is only through such activity that we come close to the maker of these objects, God. So the only ' "truly philosophical activity" ' is to think about the Mind that shaped all these things; and this activity can only be acquired through *watching*. However, he immediately adds, in order to avoid any misunderstanding, that he by no means have in mind some kind of voyeurism; quite on the contrary, 'looking at the beauties of women […] is licentious and base' (Baxandall 1965: 197-8).

This position is an extremely shrewd and dangerous piece of sophistry. It start by distracting the attention of the listener, as the first point about 'inner' beauty seem just a standard piece of Platonic or Christian orthodoxy. Its spirit, however, is the exactly opposite of that of the *Timaeus*, or the *Itinerary* of St Bonaventure. For Plato, just as for Bonaventure, the starting point for an elevation towards the divine is a recognition of beauty, thus leaving behind the self. For Chrysoloras, however, the denigration of objective beauty is compounded with the elevation of the contemplating mind, the mind of the pure theorist, thus his *own* mind, into some kind of direct contact with the divine. At the same time, it propels the mere activity of *watching*, or the position of the external spectator, or the outsider, who does not participate, into *the* par excellence philosophical position, while still promoting misogyny, and even transforms act of voyeurism into a secret mystery and forbidden fruit.

One might consider that such a position is imminently alien to artistic activity. Guarino, and many of the 'humanists', were indeed hostile to the visual arts. Yet,

Guarino's teaching exerted a crucial impact on two arts that would play a central role in and through Ferrara: painting and dancing.

Pisanello: the Sophist as painter

The painter most closely associated with the Ferrara of Guarino is one of the most enigmatic figures of *Quattrocento* painting, Pisanello. Details of his life are little known even by the standards of the age, while his works fared particularly badly, with only three frescoes and four tables surviving, and not all in good condition. But a large number of his drawings are available, allowing a clear understanding of the mind of this extremely particular, and in many respects very 'modern' painter – though we have to be aware of the fact that being a 'modern' painter in *Quattrocento* Italy is not necessarily a praise.

The modernity of Pisanello can be shown by applying to his paintings a term coined by Tom Wolfe for 20th century art: 'painted words'. They put into practice the principles taught by Guarino about 'ekphratic exercises', best represented in the famous description given by Lucian about Apelles's *Calumny*. In such a description the emphasis was not on the aesthetical qualities of the painting, the evocation of beauty that it impressed on the soul of those who contemplated the image, rather on idiosyncratic connections that existed among its elements, and which allowed themselves to be decoded and described in a coherent and consistent manner by the initiate.

The ekphratic aspect of Pisanello's paintings can be reconstructed with particular clarity with the help of his drawings. Their two main characteristic features are a primary interest in variety, combined with a focus on internal consistency as well, and a focus on physiognomic expressiveness (Baxandall 1965: 194-5). Pisanello prepared every minute detail on his frescoes through painstaking and minuscule exercises in drawing. If he had to paint a horse, he prepared a series of drawings about horses, after nature, that showed in minute detail the nostrils of the horses; just as the spur on the boot of the knight had to be absolutely perfect (see Fig. 1.; Syson and Gordon 2001). All this only demonstrated the true craftsmanship and dedication of Pisanello as a professional artist, one could say, and this is certainly true; however, the overall impression of his paintings leaves one wondering, as such a profusion of details not only seems superfluous, but also renders the viewer first lost and then outright disoriented. With all their undeniable virtuosity, the images of Pisanello are dead and cold. They reflect the mind of an anatomist who dissected with great precision every single component, but exactly for this very reason they assume, and reproduce, a frightening, deadly distance: the void that separated the artist from the beings he 'dissected' in his drawings. It is this experience that is reproduced in the viewer, and not some kind of awe or marvelling, the Platonic *thaumazein*, which is the truly philosophical counterpart of artistic experience.

Such an impression is reinforced by the second aspect of these paintings, their physiognomic expressiveness. While this in a way complements the first aspect, the outcome is not the harmonious coexistence of parts, rather a schismatic tension emerging between two opposite extremes. Time and again, the cold objectivity of the artist, and of the viewer, is changed into a kind of emotional involvement, but one that is procured not by loving care, rather by the discovery of a protruding, ugly or disgusting, revolting yet strangely attractive detail. In the Verona fresco 'Saint George and the Princess of Silena' in the background, just above the saint, there are the corpses of two hanged man twisting around, for which Pisanello again carefully prepared drawings, after 'nature', and which have absolutely nothing to do with the narrative (Fig.2.). But Pisanello is not guided by Alberti's concern with narrative unity, which only put into words the long practice of Western art, emphasizing narrativity; rather by the spirit of ekphrasis, where the painting is only made for the clever Sophist who is smart enough to perceive all these minuscule details and to collect them together in a poem that celebrates

the 'fantasy' and 'inventiveness' of the artist, and also his 'closeness' to nature. Such wanton emotionality is raised to a new pitch on the left side of the image, where the dragon is visible, not done with by the hero, as it is usually represented. Quite on the contrary, it rather 'lurks on the shores of the lake', and its effective presence is marked 'by a grisly assortment of bones, lizards and a slain doe', and – as this were not gruesome enough – Pisanello even captures 'a lion [that] prepares to spring on to a frightened stag' (Fig.3.) (Syson and Gordon 2001: 25). The description of not simply hunting scenes, but the way in which animals were actually, physically captured and killed off by dogs was also a pet subject matter of Pisanello, just as for one of his main sources, the Limbourg brothers – who, just as himself, worked for courts, in their case the Burgundy court; but, where, in both cases, the models were Byzantine. The representation of the dragon as alive is by no means incidental, as in the London National Gallery table 'The Virgin and Child with Saints Anthony Abbot and George' the dragon is again alive and kicking, or rather twisting and twirling around the legs of St George, and is snarling at the boar – or perhaps at Saint Anthony next to the boar (pp. 140-1, 143).

Moving from unsolicited scenes of violence to a different but not less perplexing register, another weird feature of the Verona fresco, certainly inserted in order to be identified in ekphratic exercises, is the protruding back of a horse that takes up centre stage just between the Saint and the Princess (Fig.4.). One might wonder what the horse, and especially such an enormous back, has to do with the story, or in general with aesthetic experience. The solution lies in another table, again in the London National Gallery, 'The Vision of Saint Eustace', which has again a huge horse dominating it, and – even though this time it is not put on centre stage – it has its back part open towards the viewer, depicted in absolute natural details. The intentions of the artist are rendered crystal clear by study drawings for the horse in the Louvre, where not only the horse's nose, eyes and hoofs are coloured, but in the 'horse's hindquarters' specifically 'the testicles and the anus' as well (Fig.5.) (pp. 171, 4).

There is every reason to assume that not simply Pisanello's painting style had affinities with Guarino's style, but that he was trained, or initiated, into the 'mysteries' of ekphratic painting by Guarino. The praises heaped on him by Guarino are widely quoted, and an allusion in a 1416 Guarino letter almost certainly refers to him. A series of circumstantial evidence indicates even longer and stricter contacts. Pisanello was brought up in Verona, which was Guarino's native city as well, and at the time Guarino was back from Constantinople Pisanello was just about 16-18 years old. They were then in Venice again at the same time, in between 1414/5 and 1419, when Guarino was teaching there, and Pisanello is supposed to work with Gentile da Fabriano; then again in the 1420s, when both Guarino and Pisanello were living in Verona; and then again in much of the 1430s and especially 1440s, when Guarino always and Pisanello often were in Ferrara. If we add that Pisanello's father, who died when his son was very young, was from Pisa, which after Venice was the most important port and community linked to the Byzantine world, it is not too risky to assume that there was a long-standing and thoroughly Byzantine connection between the two.

Something similar can be said about another area of the arts where Ferrara played a pioneering role in the Quattrocento, and where the decisive influence of Guarino was hardly at all recognized so far, the field of court dancing – moving closer to explicit connections with the theatre.

Domenico: The 'Dancing Revolution'

It is well known that in the 15th century Ferrara was the main centre of dance music in Europe: 'All of the best known masters of the newly codified art of court dance in Italy, down to the 1480s, are closely linked to Ferrara, in some cases for long periods as members of the official entourage' (Lockwood 2009: 76). The three main figures in this regard were Domenico da Piacenza (c.1390-1470), Giovanni Ambrosio (or Guglielmo Ebreo da Pesaro, c.1420-1484), and Antonio Cornazzano (c.1430-1484), forming a kind of whole trinity (Arcangeli 2000: 26-7; Castelli 2005: 37-8). These developments started in Ferrara eventually resulted in the rise of French ballet and English court masque. However, such developments so far, except for some pioneering pages by Michael Baxandall, were not connected to the simultaneous presence in Ferrara of humanist education.

According to Baxandall, the figures in Pisanello's paintings are arranged in groupings and patterns that much recall the arrangement of the dances that were characteristic of Ferrara court music (Baxandall 1988: 77). Even further, not only these paintings demonstrate a characteristically dance-like concern with body movements and gestures, but are also preoccupied with expressing, through such physical movements, the emotional states of the soul as it was explicitly propagated by dancing masters on the one hand, and theorists of painting like Alberti and Guarino on the other. The most important recognition of Baxandall, however, concerns the 'semi-dramatic' character of some of the best known Ferrara dances, like the ones entitled 'Cupido', 'Jealousy' or 'Phoebus', each capturing a particular scenery related to erotic conquest, with the character of their movements being reminiscent of paintings by Pisanello, following Guarino, or Botticelli's *Primavera*, that followed Alberti.

The most important impact of Guarino's methodology, however, can be shown in the character of Domenico da Piacenza's seminal book, which is credited to have created, almost ex nihilo, modern 'academic' dancing. That the dire sophistic pedantry of Guarino could have contributed to the foundation of modern dance music is such an extraordinary fact that so far it has remained unobserved.

Domenico started his treatise by a defence of dancing along lines recalling Guarino's (or Lucian's) similar arguments (Tani 1957: 828). But his most important and properly sophistic achievement was the classification of the major dancing steps, considered as a 'capital moment' in the history of dance. By such a classificatory scheme Domenico 'created a vocabulary of movements that could be used independently of the figurative scheme of individual dances, offering in this way "the possibility of extending almost to infinity the field of choreographic creation" ' (Ibid.: 829, quoting Reyna). This claim, and the underlying achievement, is indeed extraordinary – but we need to analyse carefully what we are exactly talking about.

Dancing is one of the most involving, participatory human activities, which is highly mimetic, both in the sense that in any festivity once people start to dance – which is often not easy to initiate – then more or less everybody follows suit; and also in the sense that the knowledge of dancing is to be acquired by imitating the way others dance. Domenico's idea of breaking this overwhelming, involving movement down into single moves seems trivial, and is indeed very simple to accomplish, almost mechanically, once one acquired the idea; but it requires, in the first instance, a frame of mind, comparable to Newton and the apples, of disconnecting oneself, almost violently, from the impulse of taking up the smooth, rhythmic movement, and becoming part of it, and instead concentrating on its simple component, by breaking the continuous movement up into its constitutive elements, comparable to the frames of a motion picture: one step on the left, two on the right; the hands here now, the head there then. The suspension of rhythm and the fragmentation of continuous movement is by no means a simple and

natural act, rather it is highly counter-intuitive, as it requires a prior step: assuming the position of the outsider; a position which one either has, or acquires, but that always implies a substantial price to pay: that of not participating, of not belonging, of not being part of the game.

And yet, this sacrifice, if properly executed, has a high, literally almost infinite reward: once the movement is broken up into small segments, these segments can be taught and learned, and more or less everybody can acquire them, thus charming and seducing the objects of desire. Even further, these segments can be combined in a variety of ways, thus inventing ever newer steps and patterns of dancing. In other words, from a participatory experience in which somebody is swept away by the movement, abandoning himself or herself to the experience of dancing, and thus eventually making a spiritual contact with other human beings of the opposite gender who similarly abandoned themselves to the swaying movements, dancing becomes a carefully calculated art in which certain movements are skilfully or – which is the same thing – trick-fully executed in order to please, charm, hunt down and seduce.

This, however, is still not the last word, as anybody who follows that logic to its conclusion soon realizes. Breaking up a continuous movement into a series of *instrumentally* conceived *technical* segments in order to acquire a predefined *purpose* or *goal* indeed involves the greatest sacrifice, as it has the consequence of losing forever the meaning of the aim. Dancing performed in order to purposefully evoke or provoke erotic feelings, thus to seduce, is a double-edged sword; it is easy to make it work: it is easy to seduce somebody, just as it is easy to make money; but it would never produce a genuine result, a real, involving feeling; it cannot lead to love.

Having broken movement down into segments, Domenico proceeds to a meticulous interpretation of the differences between the various types of dances. The aim is to teach the steps, which he – again closely recalling Guarino – offers through a 'mnemonic frame' and a 'rhythmic prose' (829). In this way a genuine alchemic transformation is produced, as he can switch from one dance to another without breaking a (mechanised) rhythm – which certainly procured a tremendous success for those who took up his lesson, to the envy of all others watching it; though what was not realised is the enormous internal emptying produced by such a trick-ful exteriorisation of human emotions and movements.

Domenico's innovations also implied a general change in the kind of dances performed; a shift away from the popular *bassadanze*, which consisted of a limited number of similar movements, the emphasis being on the participatory aspect of common dancing, to balls, where the movements were at the same time more organised and more varied, incorporating extensive mimic elements. This Domenico used to the full, on the one hand by starting to compose elaborate choreographies which mimicked the goings-on of everyday social life, preparing the way to theatrical like presentations, and eventually the ballet – a word whose first appearance can indeed be traced to his treatise; and on the other hand to more *osé* kind of allusive and bodily moves, away from the 'noble' dances where the bodies were not supposed to touch each other, into patterns were males took up carefully studied and ever more aggressive positions, purposefully not letting off the hands of the partner, and making ever more explicit simulating movements. In sum, Domenico not only founded dance as a technique, but his work has a 'definitely modern' character, founding a 'new grammar of movements and steps', and a 'syntax of rigorously defined figurations' (830).

Given that practically nothing is known of the life of Domenico, we cannot know anything about the possible personal connections between him and Guarino. However,

just as in the case of Pisanello, a few conjectures can be formulated. Piacenza and Verona are mid-Northern cities in Italy, not that far from each other. We know that Domenico was in Ferrara by 1430, perhaps already before, thus arriving almost together with Guarino; and while he did not know Italian well, his writing had evident rhetorical qualities. So it might well have been that he had Byzantine origins, perhaps through his father, who might have been part of the first main spurt of Byzantine migrations, the last decade of the 14th century, the period associated with his birth.

Masquerades and the cult of Hercules

A central theme connecting the city of Ferrara, its humanist and artists was the cult of Hercules. Here the alchemic genius of Guarino was again working: the patron Saint of Ferrara was St George, which Guarino connected to the myth of Hercules, helping Pietro Andrea de' Bassi to compose an epic poem that combined the features of St George and Hercules. The figure became so 'essential to Este image-making' that the heir to the throne, born just in 1431, was named Ercole; and that the d'Este even claimed descent from him (Bull 2004: 91; Syson and Gordon 2001: 100). Scenes taken from de' Bassi's epic poem became favourite themes of court artists, both in Ferrara and also Firenze, and it was through the representation of the naked Hercules in his various exploits, especially his struggle with Antaeus, that the central homoerotic theme of Renaissance arte developed, in particular by Pollaiuolo and Michelangelo (Simons 2008).

As it is only proper to a city which on the one hand all but transformed itself to a stage, and on the other pretended to trace its origins back to Hercules, that Hercules would even appear on its streets, as part of the famed 1433 masquerade procession, 'a parade of gods led by Apollo with Hercules bringing up the rear', dressed ' "wearing the skin of a lion and holding a club in his hand" ' (Syson and Gordon 2001: 100), widely remembered as one of the first main masked processions in Italy, and a major step towards the birth of theatre, and the politics of spectacle, given that Cosimo de' Medici was probably also in attendance, in exile from Florence.

From this Ferrara masquerade the first recognised theatrical spectacle was only a small step away. It was staged in Venice, but Ferrara and Guarino were thoroughly implicated, as Tito Livio de' Frulivisi, the author, organiser and director of the staging was a native of Ferrara, and a student of Guarino.

Tito Livio de' Frulovisi

One would expect that the pioneering figure of Renaissance theatre was an interesting character, and Frulovisi indeed fulfils such expectations. He was one of the most peculiar characters of Renaissance humanism, and yet exactly due to this he was also most revealing of this movement. His character stands out with particular clarity against the background of Venetian Renaissance humanism, as provided by Margaret King in her excellent 1986 book. Alone among the Venetian humanists of his age, Frulovisi rejected the central values of Venice, in particular the idea of *unanimitas*, and rather made fun of them in his impudent comedies, explicitly mocking them and defying the uniqueness and legitimacy of Venice (King 1986: 194-5). This makes one wonder about the specific life experiences that predisposed Frulovisi for such attitudes – and there are indeed a number of most interesting such details.

Frulovisi was born in Ferrara just around 1400, but about 1404 his father was exiled from the city and came to settle in Venice (King 1986: 378). He eventually became a resident there, but could never become happy with its constitution. He became a student of Guarino in Venice, when Frulovisi was in his late teens. In 1433 he offered to

the public two different sort of works, each milestones on their own: a humanist treatise on politics, entitled *De Republica*; and a series of humanist comedies. The first broke new ground by explicitly rejected the authority of Aristotle, arguing that political government is a purely human matter, having nothing to do with divine order. The latter inaugurated modern theatre. The first spectacle was performed in September 1433, followed by four other performances in the coming two years; all in Latin, and presented without any interlude or break (Paduan 1982: 12-6). As a most significant detail, mimes were present in the first spectacle, but – though announced in the prologue – were excluded from the second (Ibid.: 16).

Frulovisi was evidently searching for major recognition, as he dedicated his political work to Leonello d'Este, and staged his comedies in the Santo Basso church in Venice, which is just off the St Mark square, literally next to the main Cathedral. Such recognition, however, and understandably, was not granted; Ferrara ignored him, while the Venetians felt insulted, and he eventually had to leave the city. All this, and especially the details of his activities, already reveal what scholars working on him called a 'character' or 'personality' fault: Frulovisi evidently lacked both virtue and judgment. In his first play he proclaimed himself as the proud author of the text, in contrast to the old, boring and trite comedies of the ancients (Smith 1998: 232); but when he was charged with plagiarism (see also Radcliff-Umstead 1969: 36), he retracted and in the Prologue of his second play he argued that himself and the author who accused him were both using a common source, Plautus. In this Prologue he also adamantly defended his sincere loyalty to the city, yet the fourth play amounted to a generalised attack on Venetian institutions and values, while his fifth and ultimate Venetian play contained a series of sharp personalised attacks, so evidently he was burning bridges (Smith 1998: 232-3).

From Venice, as a genuine masterstroke, he travelled to England, which at that time also started to become interested in Italian Renaissance humanism, in particular Ferrarese music, so he presented himself as a main representative of the movement. He filled a vacuum, and nobody was there to pull the plug, as genuine Venetian humanists were not interested in leaving their city. But his errors of judgment stayed with him. His epic poem written to flatter his host, Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester, produced the opposite result, as the story lingered too close to some troubled moments of his past. Frulovisi therefore had to leave again, and eventually abandoned humanism, retraining himself as a medic. Not before, however, that he actually made a major impact in England, as his biography of Henry V, the first biography ever written about an English monarch, of course written in the worst Sophist style of flattery, set a model there, and was used, whether directly or through secondary sources, even by Shakespeare; and is generally acknowledged as having set the stage for the 'increasingly pervasive presence of Italians in England' (Wyatt 2005: 29).

There are two issues of vital relevance concerning the career of Frulovisi, from the perspective of a Nietzschean 'genealogy': the exact nature of his formative influences, and the lasting effect exerted by him. Concerning the first, Frulovisi evidently misunderstood the teachings of Guarino, but he is by no means less interesting due to this fact; quite on the contrary. Guarino pitched his teaching for the sons of the high aristocracy, though it contained a fair amount of paradox and double play. Frulovisi evidently understood this only too well, but somehow did not manage to realise the exact intentions of Guarino, and the limitations of his own place, thus took the systematic undermining of aristocratic values and virtues only too seriously, trying to outsmart his master in his nihilistic critique, and of course failed. Concerning the effects, however, his work turned out to be genuinely epoch setting and momentous, in ways that are still far from being recognised.[6] The best way to see it is through Leon Battista Alberti's *Momus*, of which he might well have served as the model.

The point here is not an antiquarian concern in identifying the exact source of Alberti's work. But *Momus* has been recently identified as a seminal work that represents the reappearance of the Trickster in the horizon of the medieval world (Horvath 2008); and the fact that this coincides with the reappearance of the theatre in Europe, after an absence lasting for more than a millennia, is a matter of no minor interest.

The nature of the connections between Alberti and Frulovisi, and Alberti and Guarino and his school in general, makes the idea even more likely. Alberti got also lured by Guarino's version of humanism, and in 1424 he wrote his famous play *Philodoxeos*, modelled among others after Guarino's Lucian translations. Alberti imitated the models so well that contemporaries thought the play was written in Antiquity. It was this play on which Frulovisi's efforts were modelled (Previté Orton 1915: 76), even in its being dedicated to Leonello (Lockwood 2009: 32). But Alberti would eventually realise the corrupting influence exerted by Guarino, in painting and beyond (concerning painting, see Baxandall 1965: 201), and in particular was hostile to the misogynous aspects of Frulovisi's plays; at least the latter was bitterly complaining in 1435 that in Venice a certain 'Leo Bestia' (no doubt alluding to Leon Battista Alberti) had 'excited the women against him' (Previté Orton 1915: 76-7). Thus, if it has been argued that Guarino's translation of Lucian's *Parasite* was a model for Alberti's *Momus* (Marsh 1994: 421), it is more than reasonable to add that the figure of Frulovisi could have given the inspiration for the main character of the work.

Market society and the theatricalisation of social life: An Epilogue

In order to pull the argument together, and connect it to the present, I offer a series of reflections prompted by a book by the Yale historian Jean-Christophe Agnew about the role of theatre in the genesis of modern capitalism. According to Agnew, this role was quite crucial: the theatre was the 'laboratory' (Agnew 1986: xi, 54) or the 'incubator' where the new type of social relationships, characteristics of the market society, and hostile to the very logic of ordinary human interaction and social life, were 'experimented' with.

The starting point of the argument is the widespread recognition that 'market relations' are not natural, rather imply a certain kind of violence to the normal logic of social life: Agnew goes beyond the standard argument – without denying its partial relevance – that such relations are simply imposed by force. It is here that theatre comes to play a central role. The central element of market society, better identified in Simmel *Philosophy of Money* than in Marx's *Capital*, is a certain kind of boundlessness, leading to ' "infinite purposiveness" ' (p.4).[7] Everything 'on the market' can be exchanged with everything else, which generates a vortex feeling of forever spiralling change; but this assumes that something, or someone, first of all enters this market, eliminating those boundaries and borderlines which previously tied human beings, spheres of lives and activities to concrete realms of existence. This can be done by physically destroying buildings and objects or by forcing humans to live at a certain place and in a certain way; but this can also be accomplished, in a much more peaceful and piecemeal but not less lethal way, by enacting life on a theatre, and thus stealing its substance, spirit and value.

According to Agnew, the way in which the theatre accomplished this feat was by combining imitation and fragmentation. Here we have a concrete example of the general point realised by Plato concerning the activities of the Sophist. There are two ways in which two equal and therefore replaceable and individually worthless pieces can be produced out of a single whole: by breaking it into two halves, or by copying it into a double. Theatre performed this trick by representing artificial persons on the stage who reduced concrete, living human beings into abstractions (the 'merchant', the 'doctor', the

'knight', the 'servant'), often already on the stage doubling such generic figures (thus we often have two servants and two pairs of lovers; see for e.g. Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors*); and by doing so reducing the complex net of human relations and motivations to a very simple and identical moving force, desire or gain. In the next step, through the already mentioned 'infinite purposiveness', it managed to reduce human life to 'an infinitely divisible series of trade-offs consciously or unconsciously entertained by the individual' (Agnew 1986: 3). This was performed on the stage, where human life was represented as a combination of either antagonistic struggles, usually in the form of duels (usually with the purpose of erotic conquest), or as bargains, to which human conversation was reduced.

The central figure in the first period of the theatricalisation of social life (1550-1650) was the actor, who possessed this 'Protean' character – a central metaphor of the times – of being able to literally metamorphose himself from one personality into another. This resulted in a schismogenic duel with the Puritans. The Puritans correctly identified the central problem of boundlessness, even recognised the crucial role played by the actor in dissolving boundaries and borderlines, jumping in between the liminal and the liminoid, and that therefore the world was 'threatened to become, in effect, a permanent carnival' (p.54), but erroneously thought that all this could be resolved by administrative and police action against the entertainers. They thus failed to realise, with Shakespeare, that if time is out of joint, or if the spirit is let loose, it is not so easy to tuck it back into the bottle.

Even further, the actors returned the challenge, accusing the Puritans with hypocrisy on their own.[8] The fight between the actors and the Puritans was staged on the new public sphere, and it was not realised, just as it is not seen even today, that the public arena is indeed the par excellence place for wearing masks; and so the pretence of being totally straight and honest is the biggest and most ludicrous mask of all.

A particularly interesting and important aspect of this struggle was connected to sexual identity. One of the strongest challenges formulated against the actors concerned their promiscuity, helped by the altering of sexual identity due to male actors playing female roles. Actors, however, could rebuke that the Protestants, by denying any significance of sexuality and trying to wear identical, asexual clothes, approached in their indiscriminate and nondescript androgyny the most promiscuous hermaphroditism of the actors.

One of the most interesting points of Agnew is the idea that a kind of 'pact' emerged between the actors and the audience (pp. 114, 124); an implicit complicity best seen through the frequent use of asides, addressing the audience – a special feature of the English theatre. Such complicity and duplicity in breaking the codes and boundaries of social existence amounted to a *joint* breaking, or literally corruption.

If in the first part of the theatricalisation of social life the public scene was dominated by the actor, in the second (1650-1750) focus shifted to the spectator. The central figure here is Adam Smith, who first identified the position of the 'neutral spectator' as a privileged point for moral philosophy, and from *there* could pronounce his well known judgments about laissez faire, the universality of the human motivation concerning gain, and the similar universality of the division of labour.

Two points will be made here, in order to close the argument. First, in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* Adam Smith considered that human society is built on the foundation of sympathy, and this is often used to connect his argument to Mauss's gift relations or Dilthey's empathy. The point of Smith, however, was radically different. Sympathy for him did not mean some kind of natural feeling or predisposition that any human being had for any other in his own living space. Quite on the contrary, it meant a purely *mental*

state that could only be acquired from a distance, by somebody *detached* from the action, being a *pure* spectator. This, however, implies a prior rupture of intimate social relations that indeed can only emerge concretely, between embodied living human beings. Smith counterattacked by claiming that human beings who lived in the past without such distancing – a precondition of civilised life – were actually ignorant and poor, so *could not have* possessed any positive emotionality towards each other. It is here, in the idealisation of the position of the spectator, that we have the origin of the Enlightenment idea of progress, and the Darwin-Spencerian argument of linear evolution, carried further by Durkheim in his *Division of Labour*.

The second point is exactly concerned with the division of labour, the central analytical tool of Adam Smith's economic theory; indeed the vantage point from which moral philosophy and political economy are all but equal. Here we again must take things at a face value: the division of labour literally implies the fragmentation of an activity; it therefore *breaks* a process, or a continuous participatory aspect of human life into segments. It does and perpetuates violence. Human life, just as Plato's music, has its own rhythms; and the harmonious performance of various activities implies a respect for such rhythms, borderlines and identities. Rupturing takes place when a certain activity, say the making of a chair, is broken down into identical segments, where different people can become 'specialised' in the performance of this or that part of the process, and where eventually they can be replaced, through technological 'progress', by machines. Such fragmentation can continue into infinity; this is the meaning of digitalisation. This is rendered possible by the previous fragmentation, governed by the principle of gain and substitutability. The two halves complement each other, and form the taken for granted framework of rational choice theory, where the 'autonomous' and 'rational' individuals can increase their 'earnings' by infinitely fragmenting and breaking into pieces their own human and social lives. As human beings thus fragment and break their own life together, through 'contracts' that prepare and sanction such 'mutual advantages', the system works on the basis of 'joint fragmentations' or 'joint breaking', thus – literally – 'corruption'. The basic moving principle of market society is corruption; and the model through which corruption as guiding principle was invested and disseminated in social life was the theatre.

We indeed live in a 'theatrocratic' society; and just as the Athenians, we happen to call it democracy. According to Plato, and also Aristotle, the best form of government is 'mixed government', which harmoniously blends together the best elements of the two poles.[9] In Europe, the best embodiment of mixed government for centuries was considered to be Venice; and it was exactly Venice where the theatricality experimented and 'bred' in Ferrara was transmitted to, and further developed, resulting around the middle of the 16th century in the *Commedia dell'Arte* which constitutes the background of Agnew's analysis.

The reasons for this development, however, require a different paper.

Illustrations

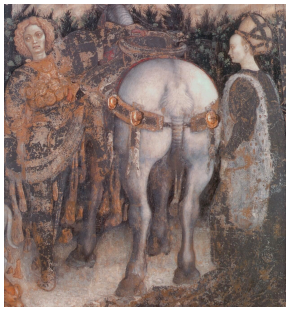





Fig.1.



Fig.2





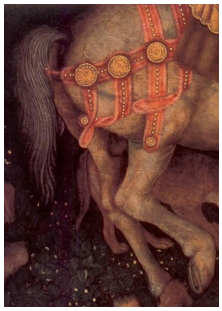


Fig.3. Fig.4. Fig.5.

Notes

[1] This is the famous spot where Plato uses the term *parrhesia*.
[2] This is what was discovered by Heidegger when writing his dissertation, leading him to the claim that the entire history of Western metaphysics is a commentary on five passages from Aristotle.
[3] Significantly, his Second Oration is devoted to objecting being called 'ponderous', the best proof how much he was (Anderson 1993: 43).
[4] This idea reached its extreme under Emperor Elagabalus (218-22), who ordered that all sexual acts performed on stage must be real and not simulated.
[5] In fact, after Chrysoloras's death he edited a collection of essays entitled *Chrysolorina* for his memory.
[6] For some appreciation of his epochal importance see: 'It was Frulovisi who launched the classical theatre in Venice'; Radcliff-Umstead (1969: 39); and 'As a technician Frulovisi stands as a pioneer in the mechanics of the stage' (Ibid.: 40).
[7] According to Agnew, a particularly good example for this is *The Merchant of Venice*.
[8] The term 'hypocrite' originally meant actor.
[9] For details on Plato's related views, see the end of the *Statesman*.

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