

## BENVENUTO CELLINI'S 'MEDICAL IMAGINATION'

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1. In concern with the means of constructing and contemplating the Renaissance Neo-Platonic imagery Ernst Gombrich stated that we still know too little about the way in which philosophical ideas percolate and then direct the attitude of men towards certain values and standards (p.184). And I'm going to explore the part of this *terraincognita* and demonstrate Benvenuto Cellini as an example of how the Neo-Platonic theory direct the artist's practice, methodologically called the "medical imagination." (Slide 1.) At first I'm going to consider it simply as the means of constructing the artificial reality, and in due course it will be integrated into the historical-philosophical context (namely the Renaissance medicine) and it will be adjusted to the concrete autobiographical writing. I suppose a very tangible connection between Marsilio Ficino's magical cosmology and Benvenuto Cellini's 'medical imagination': Ficino's "De Vita" was told about "La Vita di Benvenuto."

2. Random at first glance, the fragments of "La Vita" concerning the Renaissance medicine could be gathered through the author's language: the core is the notion of "pigliare piacere" (to take pleasure in a manner of medicine) which is embedded in the medical, and then in the Neo-platonic contexts. I should mark here the extensive involvement of "pigliare piacere" earlier, in Boccaccio's 'Decameron.' Let's have a closer look at the two excerpts from "La Vita" (Slide 2): in the first Cellini clarifies the purpose and the process of his autobiographical writing, in the second one he tells the story of the insane castellan from Castel Sant'Angelo.

(1) Io lo (un figliuolo di Michele di Goro dalla Pieve a Groppine ... era ammalatuccio) cominciai a fare scrivere e in mentre che io lavoravo, gli dittavo la Vita mia; e perché ne pigliavo qualche piacere, lavoravo molto più assiduo e facevo assai più opera (Proemio).

(2) ...Castellano aveva ogni anno certe infermità che lo traevano del cervello a fatto; ...e questi umori sua erano ogni anno diversi... Li medici sua, che se ne erano avveduti, così li sua servitori vecchi, li davano tutti i piaceri che immaginar potevano: e perché e' pareva loro che pigliassi gran piacere di sentirmi ragionare, a ogni poco e' venivano per me e menavanmi da lui (I. CVII). Il Castellano, con tutto che i medici non avessino punto di speranza della sua salute, ancora era restato in lui spirito saldo e si era partito quelli umori della pazzia, che gli solevano dar noia ogni anno: e datosi in tutto e per tutto all'anima, la coscienza lo rimordeva... (I. CXXIII).

From these passages it clearly follows, that "pigliare piacere" is linked with the humoral theory, distinctive to the Renaissance medicine and its forerunners. The other conclusion is that Cellini's 'parole' (or 'speech') turns into the pleasure, or "piacere," capable to treat his apprentice or the castellan from their maladies. This was also apparent to medics who were curing the disordered *umori* (humors) of the castellan by means of Cellini's speech. Besides the disordered *umori*, castellan's *spiritus* and *animus* are present here, and as long as animus harmonizes spiritus, the castellan is sane.

3. The next excerpt plays the key role in our analysis (Slide 3). Benvenuto Cellini resides in Rome during "the extraordinary violent plague," and says that animus prompts him to take certain pleasures ("pigliare certi piaceri, come mi dittava l'animo") to prevent the contamination. These pleasures were inflicted by the following things<sup>1</sup>: during the feast-days, to avoid commerce with

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<sup>1</sup> In questo tempo, essendo io ancora giovane di ventitré anni in circa, si risentí un morbo pestilenziale tanto inistimabile, che in Roma ogni dí ne moriva molte migliaia. Di questo alquanto spaventato, mi cominciai a pigliare certi piaceri, come mi dittava l'animo, cosa che io dirò. Perché

people he went to the ancient ruins where he was copying ancient art in wax or with the pencil, shooting pigeons, buying up “antique medals, <and the jewelry and gemstones><sup>2</sup>... of such good colors,” in which the art corresponded to the nature. Being melancholic by nature, when he was taking these pleasures (“piaceri”) “his heart leapt up, and he found that he could work better when he spent the whole time in study and manual labour.”

Why having melancholy by nature was Benvenuto Cellini taking pleasures (“pigliare piacere”) and why was he trying to make his heartleap up and herewith prevent the plague? Why the jewels of such good color, the ancient medals and pigeon hunting, why all these things were like a medicine for Benvenuto? Finally, why was it exactly animo who prompted him and what was the way in which all these things had pleased his heart?

4. On the one hand, the plague was a commonplace of the Renaissance culture, on the other hand, one of the most shared ‘popular-science’ tractates on plague was “Consilio contro la Pestilentia” written by Marsilio Ficino, and this text was most likely well-known to Benvenuto Cellini. Also, the later Ficino’s work “De Vita,” in which the ideas of “Consiglio” were expanded and the whole cosmological and Neo-platonic philosophy of Ficino was proposed, became just as popular. I’m going to show that the latter writing had been occupying the imagination of Benvenuto. But the one amendment should be made: Cellini wrote his autobiography in vernacular Italian and the well-developed Latin concept of pleasures<sup>3</sup> had underwent the simplification corresponding to the author’s milieu.

(Slide 4) Now I will give the brief outline of Ficino’s cosmology. According to “De Vita,” the human being mirrors the structure of the Universe, consisting of the World-Body (*corpusmundanum*) and the World-Soul (*anima mundi*), hence the human being consists of the body (or corpus) and of the soul (or anima/animus). Above the Universe there is the World-Intellect, which is like the Sun or the Divine light and it consists of Ideas. “In the soul of the world are “seminal reasons” corresponding to ideas; to these seminal reasons in the soul there correspond the species in matter, or in the body of the world, which are formed by them.” Spiritus mundi folds the space in-between and it’s “a kind of very fine air and also very fine heat.” (Yates, p. 64). And human’s spiritus “drinks” the spiritus of the world. Hence, human’s anima through human’s spiritus partakes the species in matter, which consist of the “seminal reasons”, and even contain the reflections of Divine Ideas. Humours of human’s body are linked to and proportioned accordingly to the partaking the stars’ influence. Humours produce spiritus in the heart and anima controls the process from the brains, the inverted influence of spiritus on humors is also possible. Ficino suggests: “Spiritus... after being generated by the heat of the heart out of the more subtle blood, ... flies to the brain; and there the soul uses it continually for the exercise of the interior as well as the exterior senses.” (Ficino in Kaske and Clark 1988, 1.2, 11–15, p. 110)

The system of world correspondences and reflections is completed on the anthropological level, in Ficino’s view on how the man has to partake spiritus mundi. Species in matter contain the proportions of the Divine mind (Gombrich, 177), and by bringing ones closer and moving others away, human being can tune his animo in accordance with the highest proportions, possibly even with ‘the music of the spheres.’ Certain species in matter, as Gombrich said, is “linked through the

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io me ne andavo il giorno della festa volentieri alle anticaglie, ritraendo di quelle or con cera or con disegno... Essendo io per natura malinconico, come io mi trovavo a questi piaceri, subito mi si rallegrava il cuore, e venivami meglio operato e con più virtù assai, che quando io continuo stavo a’ miei studii ed esercizi... (I. XXVII).

<sup>2</sup>Chrysoprases, cornelians, and cameos; also sometimes jewels, as for instance emeralds, sapphires, diamonds, and rubies.

<sup>3</sup>Which we can see in 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of “De Vita”.

network of correspondences and sympathies with the supra-celestial essence which it embodies, it is only consistent to expect it to partake not only of the "meaning" and "effect" of what it represents but to become interchangeable with it." (Gombrich, 176) Precisely because amulets and talismans "are made under the influence of a harmony, similar to the celestial harmony, this excites their virtue," (Yates, p. 73) and that's why the Ficino's teaching includes the part "On Obtaining Life from the Heavens." ("De vita coelitus compranda") Talismans "in the remote past, did actually have within the reflection of an Idea," as it was believed. (Yates, p. 66)

The plague in this framework appears and transmits to other people like a demonic influence, which you can partake through spiritus of the intemperate people and of the particular world species. All of them convey to us the virulent features of planets and stars, the most hazardous being Saturn.

5. Benvenuto Cellini, having melancholy by nature, is the person most exposed to the plague, because the divine gift of melancholy is governed by Saturn. Ambiguous planet, the star of geniuses, Saturn could bring you closer to the contemplation of Heavens (through the furor divinum), but simultaneously it could make your humours and spiritus unmanageable hence insane through the glut or excess of the hot black bile, produced under the influence of corresponding species in matter. "...Vice versa, intellectual work reacts on men and places them under the dominion of Saturn," as Ficino said (Klebanisky, 259, 261). That's why Benvenuto Cellini chose taking pleasures: it was not only the avoidance of commerce with those possessed by demons, but also the partaking the species, which are not governed by Saturn and are able to harmonize its influence. Not without cause, Benvenuto tells that the emerald of a beautiful color in the form of dolphin's head is acquired from peasants: green color and dolphin are the tokens of Venus. The magnificent topaz with the head of Minerva cues to Cellini "How Radical Heat and Moisture Must be Proportioned to One Another by a Plan of Minerva's," as Ficino said in "De Vita." Jupiter's head on the medal helps to obtain tempering and health (Ficino, 187, 195). Strolling or just walking, Cellini resides under the Sun, which interchanges with the Divine mind in Ficino's cosmology. By hunting with the best gun one is able to invent, Cellini embodies the fancy-free search of truth, in likeness with Ficino's ideas<sup>4</sup>.

(Slide 5) After the fancy-free intercourse with the little serving girl of a prostitute Cellini has found himself sick and he thinks it's the plague. He feels stifled at the heart, several boils appear on the left arm together with a carbuncle. The doctor feels his pulse and foresees something terribly wrong. He asks if Cellini had an intercourse on the eve. The intercourse was monstrous both to the brain and to the heart "and no evil can be worse for one's intelligence,"<sup>5</sup> again in accordance with Ficino. All the symptoms are witnessing that Saturn's influence has induced the uncontrolled virulent heat in Cellini's heart<sup>6</sup>: the most notable point is its mechanics, from headache to stifling at the heart, - from animus to humours. It makes Cellini's plague the psychosomatic disorder.

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<sup>4</sup>Ficino: ...An expert craftsman takes most diligent care of his instruments – a painter his pencils, a coppersmith his hammers and anvils, a soldier his horses and arms, a hunter his dogs and birds, a lute-player his lute, and the same goes for anyone and the tools of his trade (p. 111). Aptly have I called men who philosophize "hunters," because they always labor, panting to encircle the truth. So are they aptly called dogs? "Most aptly," says Socrates in the Republic (p. 403).

<sup>5</sup>Ficino: The first monster is sexual intercourse, especially if it proceeds even a little beyond one's strength; for indeed it suddenly drains the spirits, especially the more subtle ones, it weakens the brain, and it ruins the stomach and the heart. No evil can be worse for one's intelligence (p. 123).

<sup>6</sup>Moreover, excessive dryness of the body increases black bile, whether it be the result of long wakefulness or much agitation of the mind, or worry, or frequent sexual intercourse and the use of things which are very hot and dry, or the result of any immoderate flux and purgation, or strenuous exercise, or fasting, or thirst, or heat, or a too dry wind, or cold (p. 133).

6. “The admirable remedies,” suspiciously lacking description, caused “a great improvement.” With an unhealed wound Cellini went to painter Rossio to recover after the illness and “he spend here about a month enjoying good wines and excellent food. Every day he used to ride out alone along the sea-shore... and filled his pockets with all sorts of pebbles, snail shells, and sea shells of great rarity and beauty.” As we can see, Cellini takes pleasures as a medicine again with the only difference that instead of artificial talismans they were the natural things. Then he “went back sound and with good cheer to Rome.”

In this optics the plague has killed all the people being possessed by demons, hence survived painters, sculptors and goldsmiths are the best people in Rome: their animus was able to take pleasures to harmonize their spiritus with spiritus mundi and to partake the Divine mind through the species in matter. The Best of Men decide to organize in their community the dinner party which considering all the above should be the Neo-platonic mystery aimed at contemplating the Divine Ideas. Symposiarch sets the task before them to bring a “crow”—the nickname for fallen women. Tricky Cellini takes “in his light” the beautiful boy dressed as a woman instead of this “crow”: “the boy’s head was far more beautiful than those of the antique Antinous.” At the appointed time all the guests come, and it turns out that Cellini’s companion is “the charming creature,” and while singing and reciting, “its infinite charms <are> heightened beyond the powers of language”: all the artists set their eyes on it. Sitting among the other dull “crows”, the beautiful boy starts to turn restlessly upon the chair saying that during the last month “she” feels the growth in the body, - pregnancy in other words, - and the discomfort in the stomach bottom<sup>7</sup>. Sympathizing, women palm this part of the body but withdraw their hands as they feel something “male.” I suppose the play on words here: in Italian the said thing sounds like “mastio” which means both “a tower” and adjective “male,” - in other words, he has an “erection”. For this great joke Symposiarch “lifted Cellini aloft ... crying ‘Long live, Our Lord!’ (Viva il Signore!)”

7. Most likely, in this passage the Neo-Platonic mystery has been acted in the manner of Plato’s Symposium, and the fallen woman, Cellini’s “charming creature” came into master’s light and had revealed the real nature of love and virtue. The meaning and its mechanism subjoin us through the concrete species in matter to the divine idea of beauty. The two complementary interpretations are possible. First, in Ficino’s “De Vita” it’s said that “for curing diseases <the ancients> fashioned an image of the Sun in gold ... : a king on a throne in a yellow garment and a raven and the form of the Sun.”<sup>8</sup> It can explain why each of artists has to bring the “crow” and why Cellini brings it “in his light.” After the joke he has obtained the name “Il Signore” which means in Ficino’s perspective the Divinity or the Sun.

(Slide 6) This imagery has the other side. As I previously said, the image in the Neo-Platonic framework exists in a special way – as a substitute of the Divine reality, the real meaning of which you should investigate. Ernst Gombrich said with the reference to Ficino: “The names of the Gods, for instance, were not thought of as conventional counters. They belong to them “by nature”, and those who first used them still knew their “true” meaning. Correctly analysed they too must reveal something of the essence of the divinity they signify.» (p. 170) “In these moments of rapture the genius is granted a glimpse of the Platonic Idea.” (p. 171) Even before the dinner-party Cellini told that the head of his “creature” “was far more beautiful than those of the antique Antinous,” the antique god. After that the young boy has been appearing in the eyes of the event participants as, firstly, a crow, then as a peacock, an angel, and sitting in front of the blooming background, he becomes Pomona, who together with Vertumnus symbolizes the fruitful abundance. Festival in their

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<sup>7</sup>Si pensava d’esser grossa di qualche mese, e che si sentiva dar noia alla donna del corpo.

<sup>8</sup>Ficino: For curing diseases they fashioned an image of the Sun in gold, in his hour, when the first face of Leo was ascending with him: a king on a throne in a yellow garment and a raven and the form of the Sun (p. 337).

honor was celebrated on the 13<sup>th</sup> of August and there is also a grove sacred to Pomona near Rome in Ostia, and maybe the depicted event had occurred right there and on this date.

Here, through the images of “the crow,” “the peacock,” “the angel” and Pomona, we can trace the ascension to the very idea of beauty: Cellini had inflicted it before the party, when he compared the boy with Antinous, and as a result Cellini joined the Divine Mind through seeing the essence of the image. But what is the meaning of the final transformation of the fallen woman into the beautiful man? Cellini alludes here to Ovid’s story of Vertumnus. Vertumnus disguised as an old woman, came to Pomona and after displaying his real image, made her fall in love with him. Here with Cellini simultaneously demonstrates the meaning of the myth and the meaning of the current events: Eros has an ambiguous, deceiving nature, as we know from Plato. (Slide 7) In addition, we know of the statue depicting Antinous with the body of Vertumnus, which was found in Ostia, near the Pomona’s grove, and we can suppose that this very thing possibly had been the subject of Cellini’s inspiration.

Even here, in the story of his charming creature, we see that Cellini follows Ficino’s advice: not to rely blindly on influence of the stars but instead on love and faith towards the Heavens—while still living on Earth.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>“The Arabs say that when we fashion images rightly, our spirit, if it has been intent upon the work and upon the stars through imagination and emotion, is joined together with the very spirit of the world and with the rays of the stars through which the world-spirit acts”. “But if, as Hippocrates and Galen teach, the love and faith of the sick person towards the doctor, a lower and external agent, are very conducive to health (or rather, as Avicenna says, this faith does more than medicine), how much good for achieving help from heaven should we expect from our passion and faith in a celestial influence already implanted within us, working within and penetrating our vitals? Now the same love and faith toward a celestial gift are often the cause of celestial aid, and love and faith in their turn perhaps sometimes get their start from this fact — that the kindness of the heavens is already befriending us for this very gift” (p. 351-355).