Alberti and the Autobiographical Imagination

Introduction

A network of interrelated *personae dramatis,* all with autobiographical overtones, links the various writings of Leon Baptista Alberti. Philodoxus, Philoponius, Microtiro, Genipatro, and even Baptista, to name only a few, represent different voices in the Albertian polyphonic song of self; though each is intimately connected with Alberti, no single voice carries the melody exclusively. To see the characters in isolation would be to take them out of the context of an autobiographical methodology in which they serve the purpose of developing, testing, and elaborating theoretical concerns.

Unlike other humanists such as Poggio Bracciolini, Leonardo Bruni, and Lorenzo Valla, who put their dialogues into the mouths of public figures, Alberti employs the fictitious quasi-autobiographical characters—developed in a range of dialogues, descriptions, dreams and fables—as tropes that articulate a type of private philosophical language. But it is not a language that can be interpreted simply as a psychological self-portrait. Alberti's autobiographical methodology stands nearer the medieval idea of *exempla,* of patterns that repeat themselves again and again, and thus aims beyond a description of individual reality.

Burckhardtian views regarding the rise of the concept of individuality in the Renaissance have prejudiced the recognition of Alberti's *modus operandi.* Even Giovanni Santinello, otherwise sensitive to overarching themes, tends to interpret Alberti's works with an eye toward personal experiences, anxieties, loves, and other "contacts with life."[1] No doubt personal experiences are drawn on as raw material, but they are instantly typified, depersonalized, and transformed into generalizing postulates. One could by no stretch of the imagination distill a biography, in the standard sense of the word, from them. These tropes hide more than they reveal.

Initially, Alberti may have developed his quasi-autobiographical characters in order to extrapolate an image of himself as writer, but almost from the beginning he honed in on the tensions between author, text, and society. Soon he began to explore a wide range of characters who represent success and

failure postulates, such as Philoponius, the radiant lawgiver, Libripeta, the weathered cynic, and Momus, the vagabond writer.[2] Beyond these characters, however, at the silent terminal point of his thought, is the search for a prototype humanist author.

Alberti's quasi-autobiographical method is part of an active, ongoing internal debate rather than a list of conclusions or a proclamation of received truths. Far from visualizing the ideal author as a static proposition or even as a sort of practical model, Alberti agonizes over the realization that his own definition of the writer involves a contradiction in terms. Writing is inherently unnatural both textually and ontologically; both texts and writers are artifices. Yet the ultimate aim is to enact the possibility of a life that is pure, simple, and spontaneously ethical—in other words, a life that is *not* the product of artifice. At what point Alberti arrives at this problem is not clear, but it takes shape very early on, certainly by the time he wrote *Intercoenales,* when he was in his early thirties.

This paradox is part of a historiographic proposition in which Alberti first constructs a positive theory of the relationship between writer and society and then disassembles his own carefully contrived theory. Whereas the temporal world, perceived from a conventional point of view, would appear mutable, and the spiritual one constant, Alberti shows, in ironic reversal, that the temporal world is ultimately immutable and the spiritual one ephemeral and endangered. As a result, Alberti defines the writer in a series of metamorphoses where writer and society, after their initial encounter, size each other up in a sort of bizarre dance involving masking and countermasking. Eventually the writer has to concede to the compulsive power of the temporal.

The implications for a theory of aesthetics, as we shall see, are profound. Art gives man the power to create a better world, but it cannot remove for him the consciousness of artifice. Unlike Plato, therefore, who held that only through the abolition of art can man prevent further alienation from the authentic, Alberti held that it is impossible to abolish man's predisposition to make art. For Plato the philosopher's task was to bring mankind into at least tenuous contact with a perma-

nent, artless realm; for Alberti philosophy cannot possibly make such presumptions, as it is itself a manifestation of mankind's defective aesthetic psyche. No access to the authentic exists. The humanists, as Alberti defines them, can try, as did the philosophers, to orient mankind toward it, but since their message is also a product of the world-aesthetic, they too are corrupted by it. Mankind remains forever on the wrong side of an existential veil.

Essential to a proper understanding not only of this particular argument but of all of Alberti's theoretical speculations is a tripartite schema of characters: the saint, the cynic, and the "functionary." The three form the basis of a complex cosmology of Alberti's own making that brings to life his ideas on humanism and its paradoxical role in society. All three are linked to the "novice" who stands for the identity crisis implied in this cosmological scenario. The tripartite scheme is, as we shall see, the foundation on which Alberti constructs his aesthetic theory, which together with his theory of humanism was intended to confront the fierce realities of fifteenth-century intellectual and spiritual life.

As the tendency in Alberti scholarship has been to look at his writings piece by piece, none of this has ever been apparent. As a result Alberti lives more in legend than in fact. Here he is accused of lacking a coherent philosophy, there he is elevated to a forerunner of enlightened liberalism. Here Momus represents the *true* Alberti, there Giannozzo. Traditional views on Alberti must be held in check until we have followed the autobiographical itinerary indicated by Alberti himself.

Since this itinerary has implications far beyond the story line—and touches on the nature of the humanist task and the interrelationship between power, knowledge, and artifice—we cannot view Alberti's aesthetics separate from the "literary" works, as is done so frequently. In no case can the writings be divided into either-or propositions. The famous treatises, *De re aedificatoria* and *De pictura,* like the other writings, must be read against the background of Alberti's cosmology. The characters Momus, Enopus, and Gelastus, for example, conceived in a piece written at the same time as *De re aedificatoria,* are no

whimsical vignettes; they are part of the theoretical matrix that must be understood before we can place *De re aedificatoria* and *De pictura* in the broader context of Alberti's thoughts. As I hope to show, Alberti's theoretical emphasis is neither on painting nor on architecture but on the nature of the literary task. To understand this task the reader must first acquaint himself with Alberti's quasi-autobiographical methodology.

Central to Alberti's thought edifice is the inseparable constellation of writer and text. The life of the writer and the life of the text are, for Alberti, interdependent. The appearance of one is synonymous with the appearance of the other—so too the disappearance. As Neofronus descends to Hades, his treatises are ripped apart by his relatives. When Momus is castrated and chained to the ocean floor, his *tabella,* having lost its force to convince, is thrown into Jove's unused library, where it falls into oblivion. The writer-text constellation can only be effective if it is both flexible and stable. The characters Baptista and Philoponius, as we shall see, represent such a success postulate. It is they who speak in the treatises where Alberti, once his attempt at authorial definition reaches maturity, implements a strategy of text-making.

But before we can follow Alberti's quasi-autobiographical journey and investigate the relationship between text and author, we must turn to his definition of humanism and the role it plays or should play in society. There is no better place to begin than his first two works, *Philodoxeus* (Lover of Glory, 1424) and *De commodis litterarum atque incommodis* (On the Advantages and Disadvantages of Literary Studies, 1429).

De Commodis Litterarum Atque Incommodis

Though *Philodoxeus* was written first, we will turn initially to *De commodis litterarum atque incommodis,* not only because it unambiguously states Alberti's definition of the novice writer but also—and significantly—because this text is not spoken through an interlocutor, as are so many of his other writings. We must not mistakenly assume though that it is spoken *in propria persona.* Carlo, Alberti's brother, to whom the text is addressed,

serves merely as a foil. Since Carlo mixes the study of literature with mercantile pursuits, the speaker, taking on the role of a father figure, talks instead to a future novice who will not accept such compromises.

> If they desire fame and praise, they should close themselves up at home and keep away everything outside that is elegant, pleasurable, and admired, so as to confine themselves to knowledge of literature with as much constancy as possible . . . . I would hope that my words can help students in this way: when they have grasped with their prudent reason all the things I have explained, then, with any assistance I can offer, they will be roused to see with greater clarity that literature does not look to wantonness nor promise empty or ephemeral things.[3]

In the opening paragraph "Alberti" contrasts his dedication to writing with Carlo's dilettantism.[4]

> You [Carlo] have always found time for business alongside literature. I, however, have dedicated myself completely to literature, leaving aside everything else. I prefer in fact to neglect all other things rather than let a day pass without reading and writing . . . . People who desire praise rightly think it better to attempt something, even if not in every respect finished and perfect, than to wind up old and unknown in the field of literature.[5]

As a student in Bologna, the speaker explains, he had come to a true understanding of the difficulties and attractions of writing. He learned of the "dangers, torments, and misfortunes unending" and discovered that few would help him in his fight against the "defrauders, parasites, and emulators" who gave him not a moment of respite.[6] All this has not weakened his ardor. While others were "enjoying themselves at banquets," dancing under the "noxious influence of Venus," he willingly endured "long nocturnal lucubrations," "unending fatigues," and "constant preoccupations."[7]

Without doubt Alberti organized his experiences according to a theoretical framework that identifies first the writer and then Leon Baptista Alberti. Anguish and suffering, however real, are medals of honor demonstrating that the author has passed the obligatory initiation ritual that admits him to the house of literature.[8] Of central importance is the implied parallel between literary and religious callings. Much as a novice,

the protagonist must endure suffering, reject riches and "futile fame," sidestep the "traps of ephemeral pleasure," and renounce family ties.[9] A pleasure of the spirit illuminates his path and makes him immune to "the infinite, inconstant, and unstable movements of life, and [to] the flux of desires and expectations."[10]

> For me literature is the most joyful thing that could exist. While others were maintaining that one should place the cult of literature after all other disciplines, I, by contrast, was convinced that literature had to be put before everything else. Consequently, I began to apply myself to the knowledge of literature with much engagement, desiring with ferocious tenacity everything that was considered illustrious. There was nothing that with fatigue, anguish, and watchfulness I didn't try to reach and look for with an inquiry that was as careful as possible. I was really convinced that I had begun the most praiseworthy of all labors. In fact, I considered it suitable to a lofty mind to bear with patience the anguish and nightly studies and all the other pains and difficulties, out of a desire to acquire not only knowledge but also the fame that through literature I hoped I would be able to reach.[11]

"Fame," the speaker explains, refers not to temporal fame, but to immortal "glory" acquired once the writer has liberated himself from any residual attraction to the urban "marketplace" and learned to avoid the "snares associated with places of government."[12] When all connections with the temporal world have been severed, the writer is free to "marry literature," enter "the prison house of sheepskin manuscripts," and "bury himself for eternity among his books."[13] But just as a monk in the solitude of his cell can never give up the struggle to perfect himself, the Albertian writer, once in the "refuge of the library," cannot abandon his labors.[14] In fact, he now faces his most daunting challenge, the struggle with the codexes themselves: the "immense baggage of manuscripts."[15] Their sheer physical size leaves him exhausted and their number threatens to undermine his confidence. He fears he can offer little that is new: "With all my effort nothing comes to mind that has not already been developed in an excellent manner by the famous and illustrious ancient writers. As a result, it is hardly possible for even the most learned man of this age to

say something better; nor can I produce the same sort of thing with equal skill."[16]

The novice undergoes these doubts and insecurities, so it is explained, not simply in order "to obtain praise and glory through writing . . . and become immortal" but also to learn about and to communicate everything essential for "a life that is good and blessed."[17] The message does not require the exercise of "rhetorical amplifications," for it has to remain "simple" and "humble," expressing only "truth, modesty, magnanimity, excellence, and knowledge."[18] Yet how is this message to be conveyed if the truly dedicated suffer "unending torments," if "everyone mocks them and despises them," and if other writers abuse the power of the word?[19] The "fallen" who give in to the "violent confusion of customs" no longer discern the difference between true and false efforts.[20] *De commodis litterarum atque incommodis* ends with an extensive exhortation from "an ancient author," who speaks as if in a vision, to the perplexed and exhausted young writer. It reads in part as follows:

> Remember the past. Look to us for the old teaching and the intact wisdom. Then you can elevate yourself and sustain yourself against the inroads and the assaults of fortune. Put away your greed. Free your soul from the inflated hopes for *grandezza*. Flee these enslaving labors on behalf of wealth, of futile fame, and of the praise that corrupts even though you try to link it to writing. It will be foolish to run after these with a desire for something that will not follow from your activity. You would be more foolish to endeavor to obtain that which, if it does not come about, will bring you recriminations for unnecessary fatigues, and which, if reached, will bring you shame because of it. Strain yourself with a certain moderation. Exercise virtue with a particular diligence; you will not merely win the knowledge of doctrines, which is rightly seen as the companion of virtue, without also making yourself in time more fit for virtue through your hope, reasoning, and thinking . . . . He who wants to make his soul more splendid must certainly despise, hate, and abhor those vulgarities that one calls Pleasures, as well as those enemies of the virtues, namely Opulence and Riches.[21]

Although Alberti claims that this is "an unusual topic that has not yet been developed enough," many of the arguments were well known.[22] For example, the thesis that sensual and

intellectual pleasures form antagonistic poles within the psyche was a topos reaching back to Boethius's *Philosophiae Consolationis,* which served as model throughout the Middle Ages for arguments that contrast the transitory nature of riches, honors, and power with the permanence of supreme good and perfect happiness.[23] Other topoi, such as the agonies associated with writing, the importance of maintaining faith in truth over riches, and even the difficulties associated with the immense bulk of books, can be found in a number of works, not the least of which was *Philobiblon* by Richard de Bury (1287–1345).[24]

De commodis litterarum atque incommodis, however, should not simply be brushed aside as a compilation of classical and medieval commonplaces. Here as elsewhere, Alberti deploys commonplaces strategically. In this case they serve to communicate not simply that writing requires self-abnegation but that it constitutes quasi-religious commitment. While the vocabulary may be classical, the syntax is medieval. The Albertian writer, as defined in this work, lives within the tried and tested realm of medieval piety. For example, in the thirteenth century it was often argued that *scientia litteratis* has small value unless the *homo litteratus* can prove his own high morality.[25] Even the thesis that the writer should dedicate himself to the "good and blessed life" derives from the late medieval criticism of empty intellectualism, which hankers only for adulation and ignores knowledge that leads to a good life with a clean conscience.[26] Alberti's devotional attitude to the undertaking of writing is meant to demonstrate lack of complicity with the temporal world. Writing, he would claim later, is "a holy and quasi-religious" act.[27]

While *De commodis litterarum atque incommodis* with its disdain for "the multitude" and its Ciceronian Stoicism goes through all the humanist routines, the thesis that writing is a quasi-religious activity is aberrant in the context of early fifteenth-century humanism.[28] Attacking an older generation of humanist writers (*maturis et perfecte eruditis viris*), Alberti envisions a new breed of writers who are not only moral agents of pivotal importance in society, but also men engaged neither in politics nor in *res gestae.* Alberti points out that these younger writers

should "avoid the snares associated with places of government" and "flee all public administration."[29] "Let them [the older writers] treat the characters of princes, affairs of state (*gesta rerum*), and events of war,"[30] he warns.

We need only think of Leonardo Bruni. As papal secretary, head of the Florentine chancery, and author of the famous *Historiae Florentini populi* and *Rerum suo tempore gestarum commentarius* (begun in 1415), Bruni would be, from Alberti's point of view, disqualified.[31] Bruni's writings are—and were considered even then—examples of the new humanist concern with clear language and scholarly accuracy and as such served as model for writers such as Poggio Bracciolini (who, as Bruni's successor to the chancellorship of Florence, authored his own *Historia fiorentina*).[32] Though Bruni and Poggio were Alberti's superiors in the papal curia and though, as far as one can tell, his relationship with them was amicable, Alberti felt that *res gestae* was and remained no proper subject for a true humanist.

Alberti not only questioned humanism's vested interest in politics and its literary expression in the writing of *res gestae* but also voiced sharp criticism of rhetorical practices, holding that his own "humble words" are "distant to all rhetorical affectations."[33] Here he seems to be casting a reproving glance at Coluccio Salutati, often listed as one of Alberti's mentors, who championed *stilus rhetoricus,* intricate syntax, and exotic vocabulary during his tenure as chancellor of Florence.[34] Alberti rejects "the debasing use of rhetoric" even if its goals are valid. Petrarch's definition of great writers as setting "their hearers afire" and urging them "toward love of virtue and hatred of vice" by means of "sharp burning words" that "penetrate the heart, rouse the torpid and warm the cold" is nowhere endorsed in Alberti's work.[35] Writers, having to demonstrate sobriety and discipline, must reform themselves before they can attempt to reform others.

Clearly, Alberti interprets the distinction between *stilus humilis* and *stilus rhetoricus* in Augustinian terms as a distinction between Christian eloquence and pagan rhetoric: the first guides mankind's spiritual aims; the second, temporal ambition.[36] From Alberti's perspective the contemporary emphasis on rhetoric was no harmless development but a deplorable

neopaganism. Rhetoricians and other "men of letters" embroiled in secular affairs serve as negative *exempla* of vanity, greed, self-display, and above all envy: "They try with great temerity to obfuscate and extinguish the glory, reputation, and fame of others."[37] As a consequence, the humanists, and not only the oft denounced Scholastics, guide the "ship of literature" to its destruction in the "tempest of society," prompting Alberti to ask,[38] "Who does not have before his eyes, as in a painting, the ruins and the destruction of the disciplines and of the good arts? Who has not lamented that such a loss, such a shipwreck, has happened in literature?"[39]

Alberti's advocating a return to the simplicity of an early Christian ideal in both style and life was meant to put the aberrations of contemporary humanism in perspective. He conceived of humanism not as a nascent movement but as one in a state of decline following a long history dating back to the founding of the Church. If humanism did not preserve itself as the dialectical alternative to temporal existence, then it had little to offer for the future. No naive believer, Alberti drew nonetheless on Christian thought patterns to launch a critique against contemporary humanism and perhaps against the Church itself. The humanist writer, in order to rid society of the "spirit of death," must conduct a martyrlike struggle on behalf of "good literature, the noble arts, and the divine disciplines."[40]

Though Alberti, in *De commodis litterarum atque incommodis,* outlines his literary ideology without interlocutors, theoretical concerns are already anthropomorphically animated in the autobiographical theater. The book, therefore, provides no empirically verifiable answers to specific questions about Alberti's life, as theory and autobiography appear in some circumstances as form and substance, in others as substance and form. A hermeneutical problem results: the discursive line yields a clear picture of the Albertian writer but a very unclear one of the author's *propria persona.* Does Alberti envision himself as a real protagonist or is he experimenting with an authorial pose? The historian is left in a quandary as to whether to read the work as reality, imagination, fantasy, or illusion.

Philodoxeus

The play *Philodoxeus,* written when Alberti was only twenty years old, set the stage for the exploration of the symbiotic relationship between writer and society that was to engage Alberti throughout his life.[41] The play contains in sketch form all the essential features of the private cosmology that Alberti was to develop and rearticulate in work after work. In 1434, ten years after the play was published, Alberti wrote a commentary on it and thus provided invaluable insights into the mechanics of his theoretical apparatus.

The allegorical plot centers around Philodoxus (Lover of Glory), son of Argos and Minerva. He is a poor but noble university student and evidently an aspiring writer, thus fitting into the novice pattern.[42] Alberti shows the protagonist already endowed with a saintly glow that will be an essential aspect of the historiographic pattern.

With the help of the sagacious and prudent Phroneus (Talent), married to Mnymia (Memory), Philodoxus attempts to woo the beautiful Doxia (Glory). He hopes that he can talk to her from the garden of the house of her neighbor, Ditonus (The Rich One). With some machinations Philodoxus is allowed into the house, sees Doxia through the window, and asks to meet her in the garden, but she invites him instead to the front door to make a public entrance, a gesture in keeping with the public nature of her allegorical function.[43] The quote describes the moment of conflict between the beckoning of riches and the call of Doxia: "I enter the house [of Ditonus, the Rich One]. I listen, I take a step, advance further, reflect, and turn back. Then I hear a voice, which, as it turns out, is that of Doxia. I beseech her for her help as I address her. She says that such behavior is not proper in such a private and secluded place and orders me to come to her house where she would wait for me."[44]

Philodoxus, "tormented with thoughts of doom and of anxious joy," does not jump at his opportunity, thinking himself unworthy, and so when Doxia's sister Phimia (Fame) asks him some questions to test his devotion, he leaves in order to meditate on his own worth. With Philodoxus gone, the sinister

Fortunius (son of Tychia, the Greek goddess of fortune), aided by Dynastes (Power), breaks the fence surrounding Doxia's garden and enters her house with the intention of abducting her.[45] In the tumult, however, he mistakenly seizes Phimia instead. Philodoxus, in his effort to save Phimia, calls on Chronos (Father Time), whose daughter Alithia (Truth) is a good friend of Doxia. Chronos, prodded by Tychia, eventually proclaims both men victorious; Philodoxus marries Doxia, and Fortunius marries Fame.[46]

In his *Commentarium* Alberti states that the play is meant to demonstrate that "the studious and industrious person, no less than the rich or fortunate one, can acquire glory."[47] We know better than to trust such a facile explanation. The play is a remarkably prophetical piece in which allegorical figures outline a complex historiographic program. To explain the play, some small digressions are necessary. Alberti's idea of Fortunius differs from the conventional topos. In the Middle Ages Fortune was imagined as a whimsical goddess whose interference in human affairs explained everything from accidents of fate to the impossiblity of an ordered society. Boccaccio's *De casibus virorum illustrium* is a typical example; fortune caused "the notable and alarming disgrace, miserable ruin, and death of kings, princes and other famous men."[48] Departing from this tradition, Alberti bestows on his Fortunius the sinister characteristics associated with infamy, generally defined as the practice of slandering the virtuous and supporting the vicious.[49] Fortunius, a conflation of Fortune and Infamy, is not arbitrary in his actions, as his "mother" Tychia would be, but willfully malicious; his attempts to wrong Philodoxus are calculated and deliberate.

Also central to the play is the differentiation between eternal and ephemeral fame,[50] each with its own time frame, a topos (dating back to Boethius and known to every medieval author) that contrasts the eternal configurations of the godhead with mankind's blind experience of earthly time.[51] Doxia represents the eternal, whereas her sister, corrupted and contaminated by Fortunius, represents the earthly. The three characters Glory, Fame, and Philodoxus, representing the spiritual, the political, and the literary, are, of course, also a reformulation of the

medieval commonplace that saw society as divided into *oratores, bellatores,* and *laboratores,* that is, into clergy, warriors, and workers.[52] Interestingly enough, Alberti transposes the lowest order into the highest, for the "laborers" are writers engaged in a labor of the spirit.[53] Their representative stand-in, Philodoxus, must be visualized as having to prepare for a "sharp and difficult life."[54] Philodoxus, however, initially assumes that earthly fame would be the natural by-product of his efforts. His desire, like that of the "writer" described in *De commodis litterarum atque incommodis,* is to attain "fame *and* glory."[55] In the world of medieval reality, this could be conceived as a wishful reconciliation between king and pope united in the ideal realm of humanism. What is enacted, however, points beyond this configuration to a tragic flaw in man's psyche.

Alberti's stand on the age-old theme of the conflict between the temporal and the spiritual is considerably more adamant than Petrarch's. In *Paradiso* and *Divina Comedia* Petrarch contrasts the tranquility of former times with the restlessness of the materially minded present in order to explain that the writer must search out solitude to open himself to the spiritual. In later writings such as *Secretum* Petrarch opts for a more moderate position and allows the humanist a type of anxious coexistence with the temporal world. Claiming to base himself on Augustine, Petrarch holds that glory and fame are not incompatible; fame is sure to follow in the wake of glory.[56] Alberti, by contrast, stresses the incompatibility of the two; the double marriage effectively precludes Philodoxeus ever "marrying" fame.[57]

Alberti also interprets the topos of literary anxiety differently. Whereas Petrarch enters into the psychological complexity of human nature, which he portrays as constantly vacillating between the earthly and the divine, the protagonists of Alberti's literary mission, following the light of "truth, modesty, magnanimity, excellence, and knowledge," discover their freedom not in a more profound understanding of their own individuality, but in a total and ongoing confrontation with society. The resulting anxieties are not a form of existential self-doubt but demonstrate the difference in substance between writer and world.

In its allegorical imagery, *Philodoxeus* is closer in spirit to Boccaccio's *Amorosa Visione*. A dreamer has to choose between two gates, one opening onto a straight and narrow path, the other onto a luxurious garden. The first leads to immortal glory, provided that all ephemeral things and earthly joys are abandoned.[58] The second is an invitation to wealth, dignity, and earthly fame. Boccaccio's dreamer, since he represents earthly society, chooses the second gate, against the advice of Philosophy, who foretells his future anguish. Alberti's hero corrects the decision, so to speak; he explores the life—equally anguished but for another reason—found through the first gate. If Boccaccio's dreamer is an allegorical representative of the fallen writer, Alberti's Philodoxus is an allegorical stand-in for the hypothetically unfallen redeemer.

Ultimately, Alberti implies that a harmonious coexistence between writer, Glory, and Fame is not possible. The rift parallels—indeed parodies—the separation in the Christian world of Church and state.[59] With the violation of the "garden" the writer, no longer central to society, becomes an alienated and orphaned voice, and historical time, symbolized by Chronos, begins its ceaseless and futile churning. Chronos, though seeming to resolve the conflict, presides in actuality over a state of permanent discord. The writer is shown as incongruously aspiring to Gloria while the rest of society aspires to Fame.

This historiographic pattern, drawing on the theological problem of the irreconcilability of sacred harmony and earthly disharmony and the difference between God's atemporal nature and His presence in historical time, is not meant to rearticulate Christian dogma. In fact, *Philodoxeus* endangers some of the very fundamentals on which that dogma is based. For example, the destruction of the garden comes about neither because of the writer's disobedience to divine will nor because of his acquisition of knowledge but because of the emergence of ominous forces of destruction and a moribund urge, represented by Fortunius. Even more unorthodox is the postulate that the Albertian writer did not undergo a fall, making him by definition a misfit in society. This *tour de force* boldly transposes the medieval distinction between body and spirit into a distinction between society and the ideal humanist.

Leopis-Alberti

It is all too clear that, through the figure of Philodoxus, Alberti wanted to forward himself as *exemplum* of the "unfallen" humanist. In his short *Commentarium Philodoxeos Fabule,* written while he was preparing *De pictura,* Alberti defends himself against his critics. He explains that autobiographical references were deliberately woven into the fabric of the play, and into the prologue in particular, in the form of a subtext that requires that the reader recognize the self-referential notations: "So that my efforts would not be lost I added a prologue which I sprinkled with references to my studies, my age, and other important allusions to myself. My object was to claim, when I wished, the work as my own—and this I did."[60]

Here, as elsewhere, Alberti's autobiographical notations take the form of phrases such as "continual peregrinations," "a disconsolate youth," "studies of philosophy deep into the night," and "the evil plottings of detractors." Alberti drew on this repertoire of quasi-iconographic attributes not only to give his characters their proper autobiographic connotation but, in reverse, to steep his own life in archetypal meaning, just as he had in *De commodis litterarum atque incommodis.* Philodoxus's battle with Fortunius points simultaneously upward—to illuminate the higher cosmological battle between writer and society—and downward, to introduce Alberti in the role of protagonist. As is implied in the following passage, the authorial "I" of *Philodoxeus* refers to both the real author and the *genus* writer struggling "with sacred devotion" to be heard over the cacophony of evil. With great pathos Alberti declares that to "defend your Leon Baptista Alberti" is to defend the metaphysical and spiritual essence of society.

> In sorrow at my misfortunes and at the bitterness of my enemies . . . I wrote this story as a kind of personal consolation . . . . Defend your Leon Baptista Alberti, who is the most devoted of all [writers] to his readers; defend me, I say, from the carping of the envious. Then, when time permits, strengthened by your hope and approval, I shall be able to peacefully publish other works of this type and, if Minerva wills it, greater works in time to come, so that you will be able to enjoy them and thereby come to love me better.[61]

The relationship between Philodoxus and Alberti is made even more complex by an additional distancing device. The play was allegedly written by a certain Lepidus (Pleasant and Witty)—of whom I shall have more to say later—whose manuscript Alberti claims to have discovered in an ancient Roman codex. "You want to know my real name?" Alberti-Lepidus taunts in the introduction to the play: "Here is the play, and its title is Philodoxus. Why do you stare at me? Why these gaping looks? That's what it's called! Oh, now I understand, you want to know my name. I will tell you. I am the mad dog, the idiot savant. You already know my name: Lepidus. Ha, ha, ha, and you are all charming as well!"[62] This sort of deceit had many fourteenth-century precedents, with some forgers actually specializing in the classicizing mode so as to tap into the lucrative market for ancient texts.[63] Alberti's purpose, however, is purely theoretical; he employed the ruse to make a stinging attack on a literary community which he saw as frozen in an attitude of blind deference to classical texts.

> The work is marked by an eloquence that men learned in Latin literature praise to this day and judge even now to be the product of some ancient author. As a result, no one can read the work without the greatest admiration. Many commit it to memory, and not a few expend considerable effort in repeated copying . . . . When I realized that the work found such favor and was sought everywhere by scholars because it was thought to be ancient, by a fabrication I persuaded those who sought the origin of the work that it had been excerpted from a very ancient codex. Everyone quickly agreed, for the work was redolent with a certain ancient, comic diction . . . . nor was it difficult to believe that a young papal scribe would be the last person capable of such eloquence.[64]

The *Commentarium* was an attempt by Alberti to reassert his authorship, revealing himself not only as Philodoxus but as Lepidus as well. This introduces a hermeneutical issue surrounding the authorial self that Alberti does not want to have overlooked, as it is central to the ultimate message of the play. Since society instinctively stifles spontaneous spirituality, living texts are ignored by a dead society that holds only dead texts in esteem. Whereas Philodoxus enacts, on an allegorical level, the Albertian author's entry into the defunct society, Lepidus

shows the play, as real object, thrust into the hands of the defunct literary establishment. The general and the particular, the allegorical and the real reinforce each other, with "Alberti" inhabiting both arenas.

In masking his identity so as to protect himself while attempting to gain a foothold in the polluted temporal world, however, the writer abandons his text and thereby actually loses his identity. But that is the plan, for the struggle to reassert himself is not so much a real one as another demonstration of the drawn out agony of a writer who, forced to go through the demeaning farce of disowning his text, will fail in his attempt to regain it. This spectacle both satisfies and ironizes the perversities that the temporal society inflicts on the writerly identity.

In this remarkable way Alberti commences the autobiographical game. He manipulates both commonplaces and autobiographical elements to create parallels between the plot of the play and the "history" of the play. The rejection of Philodoxus at the hands of Fortunius foreshadows the subsequent, and subsequently "proven," rejection of the play by the scholarly community. In reverse, by insinuating the text into the enemy camp of scholars, Alberti insinuates his now mythically tinged autobiographical self into the enemy camp of historical time once Lepidus is revealed to be Alberti and Alberti, Philodoxus.

Whether Alberti is an actor with cardboard weapons on an imaginary stage or a real warrior against a real enemy cannot be ascertained and is perhaps irrelevant. Nor can we determine to what degree we are dealing with a psychological profile, the profile of a historical reality, or something in between. However, in the distinction between Leon Baptista Alberti and Philodoxus, and between the text as authentic statement and the text as forgery, Alberti exposes the disjunction between the spirit of Albertian humanism and the flesh of society.

The problematical relationship between Alberti and his quasi-autobiographical personae and between writer and text maps out a sphere of aesthetic speculation that must be studied and understood prior to any investigation into Alberti's aesthetics proper. In the development of this personae, in moving

back and forth between them and himself, Alberti in a sense abnegates his true self. The circumstances of his life become transformed; things are added and taken away, obscuring if not dominating the author, as Alberti attempts to define the exalted role of a model humanist. But rather than simply define an ideal self, Alberti explores the more difficult issue of the inherently alienating nature of textuality. He presents it here almost emblematically by first distancing himself from the text so he can later reappropriate it. But the process of reappropriation is by no means clear-cut nor its outcome guaranteed. The initial alienation of author from text, forced on the author by a dead society, is made to haunt the literary enterprise (as Alberti envisions it) to the end, with the struggle to regain the text becoming the central issue of his philosophy. The reunification of author with text can never happen spontaneously for in the process of distancing both text and author become objectified. Yet, as will be shown, Alberti continues to search for an authentic reappropriation of the text.

Intercoenales

The failure of the Albertian writer to attain both glory and fame is offset by the failure of the temporal world to fully subdue the spirit of the Albertian humanist. Ironically, this conflict is the driving mechanism of society, which constantly tries to throw off its conscience. Were it not for the writer's desperate attempt to establish a foothold in a world abandoned by God and to coordinate the temporal with the eternal, there would be no hope. *Intercoenales* (Table Talks) not only elaborates this theme but brings the autobiographical methodology into full bloom with characters such as Leopis, Lepidus, Libripeta, Neofronus, and Philoponius. Taken singly, each character is a humble song; together they are an operatic ensemble.

Written over a period of years between the late 1420s and the mid-1430s, *Intercoenales* is a collection of forty-three pieces of varying lengths comprising dialogues, dreams, fables, and allegories, all divided into eleven books. In its entirety, the work is hardly a minor undertaking; if the pieces were assem-

bled into one continuous text, they would make a book of about two hundred and fifty pages. The original collection has come down to us in two sections, one dedicated to Alberti's friend, the mathematician and doctor Paolo Toscanelli, the other to Leonardo Bruni and Poggio Bracciolini.[1] Since the latter two were politically active and since both wrote histories of the Florentine republic, the dedication was not without ironic overtones.

Though some of the *Intercoenales* pieces show the influence of Horace, Lucian, and other Roman satirists, one should not view the work simply as an attempt to imitate classical authors or display classical learning. Over and above the common denominator Alberti always follows his own concerns, and indeed it is in the *Intercoenales* that the system of Albertian interlocutors comes for the first time into full view and helps to illuminate even earlier pieces. In the *Intercoenales* (though in piecemeal fashion) the truth begins to glitter through the rubble.[2] The interlocutors—I have chosen the most typical, though all of the others fit the pattern—connect the various stories and enable the reader to trace the broad theoretical issues. Each character defines a different segment of the larger ontological edifice, which is never revealed in its entirety but can be—and is meant to be—reconstructed by the initiate as if it were a jigsaw puzzle: Leopis, the aspiring writer; Libripeta, the bookish cynic; Philoponius, the student in a crisis of self-doubt; Neofronus, the victimized writer; Paleterus, the aged pragmatist; and Peniplusius, rich in literary talent, poor in money. Some are successful producers of texts, some are not; some speak with authority, some with cynicism; some live in the city, some in exile; some are inexperienced, others are mature. In later works many reappear, often transformed, to further expand the theoretical masterplan.

Apollo and Virtus

Before examining the "texts" of these *Intercoenales* writers, I shall focus on the "life" of the writer, from his initial appearance in society, as depicted in the first of the pieces, *Scriptor* (Writer), to his last appearance, as described in *Defunctus* (The

Deceased) and *Anuli* (Little Rings). This "life" symbolizes a struggle toward *beatitudo.* First, however, let us look briefly at the three *Intercoenales* dialogues *Oraculum, Vaticinium,* and *Virtus,* for they pick up where *Philodoxeus* and *De commodis litterarum atque incommodis* left off, namely in the postlapsarian world controlled by Fortunius and Chronos. They are the components of a cosmological system that will remain with Alberti to the end.

In *Oraculum*[3] Alberti employs a dream genre as defined by Macrobius in *Commentary on Scipio's Dream* (ca. A.D. 500), a book widely known in the Middle Ages and early Renaissance.[4] According to Macrobius, dreams can be divided into the following categories: *insomnium,* a nightmare; *visum,* a daydream; *visio,* a prevision of the future; *somnium,* a political allegory; and *oraculum,* a declaration by a venerable person. The first two Macrobius discounts, for they have no significance except for the dreamer. The last three—all of which appear in Alberti's writings—belong to the category of philosophical discourse. "We call a dream an *oraculum* in which a parent, or a pious or revered man, or a priest, or even a god clearly reveals what will or will not transpire, and what action to take or to avoid."[5] Such oracular figures appear throughout the Middle Ages in paintings, in literature, and in references to saints.[6] We only have to think of the oracles in Chaucer's *House of Fame* (I,ii).

In Alberti's *Oraculum* the role of venerable personage is played by Apollo, who speaks through a statue in a temple. As petitioners step before him in search of guidance, he attempts to orient them toward a productive life. The supplicants, however, want to bribe the god with gifts in the hope of achieving their goals by easy means. Since Apollo is made of stone, he obviously cannot receive the gifts. This proves his disinterest in worldly gain and keeps his message above suspicion. Having no human stake in society, he can return the gifts only with the admonition to put them to constructive use. Among the supplicants we find a Scholar, a Disputant, a Benefactor, a Lover, and, finally, a Poor Man. The first to appear before Apollo are a Money Grubber and a Magnate.

Money Grubber: Apollo, I beg you, grant my request. I bring this cart, laden with rustic tools as a gift to you.

Apollo: Keep these tools and use them by day; eventide you shall see yourself in them as in a golden mirror.

Money Grubber: Hm, I always tried to avoid hard labor.

Apollo: Well, that's the only way to avoid the shame of poverty.

Magnate: I beg you Apollo, grant my request. I bring you gems and gold coins. I fear envy.

Apollo: Distribute your money among deserving citizens.

Magnate: I don't know any.

Apollo: Then make sure that you are never alone with more than one person.

Magnate: That's impossible.

Apollo: Make an effort to keep many similar to you at your side.

Magnate: Too hard.

Apollo: Well, that's the only way to stop fearing envy.[7]

Obviously, the supplicants no longer live within the bounds of clear-cut categories where word and object coincide and to which Apollo wants to confine them. If each were to tend to his single and predictable task, society would function without friction, if automatically and blindly.

In the fifteenth century the term *virtus* often referred to a knowledge of the inherent logic of social interaction.[8] By combining *virtus* with *ratio* in the figure of Apollo, Alberti seems to be striving for a humanist amalgam of *virtus* and *doctrina,* the synthesis of which was one of the essential features of early humanist ethics. Salutati, for example, argued that philosophical speculation should strive to integrate the two concepts. Apollo's ancient wisdom, however, is not the bookish *doctrina* that Salutati had in mind. Alberti imagines Apollo more in the late medieval tradition that saw the god as a leader in the battle of the virtues against the vices.[9]

Oraculum, however, is not a mere homily or a static allegorical portrayal of reason. In fact, we have here one of the central themes of Alberti's exposition necessary to the proper understanding of later developments in his quasi-autobiographic journey. Because Apollo's advice falls consistently on deaf ears, attention is drawn to the fundamental miscommunication between mythic and historical time. The supplicants, caught up in temporal confusion, demand instant solutions to their prob-

lems, but Apollo, frozen in an archaic posture—indicative of the static nature of mythic time—refuses to comprehend the mad urgency and insists on the unilateral meaning of such terms as Scholar, Disputant, Benefactor, Magnate, and Lover. Apollo's immutability ironically places him at a disadvantage in his attempt to communicate in the ever-shifting panorama of historical time. This becomes apparent with the last supplicant, a Poor Man who has nothing to offer and thus provides no leverage. Literally lacking a name that would connect him to a primordial essence, he symbolizes the spiritual emptiness of the contemporary world. Apollo—from his point of view, quite logically—orders him to hang himself from the nearest tree.

Poorman: O Apollo, grant my request. Since I have nothing else to bring you, it is your power to enable me to bring even more than I could promise. If you will make me rich, I will give you silver tripods and golden candlesticks studded with emeralds. Well, what is your response? Apollo has grown silent; do the gods also spurn poor men? Please Apollo, grant me this one thing, I beg and beseech you. I cannot endure the poverty you gave me free of charge.

Apollo: Wretch! Hang your despair from a tree.[10]

The Poor Man, however, walks away undaunted, for the statue—literally out of touch—is unable to extend the arm of justice and enforce its pronouncement. The representatives of mythic time lack an effective foothold in the temporal world. Mankind has long since broken the contract that linked word to action, identity to being, and concept to definition. This scene embodies in a nutshell and even caricatures the futility of Alberti-Apollo's own humanist endeavor.

In a subsequent dialogue called *Vaticinium* (Prediction), which in many respects represents an inversion of *Oraculum,* we encounter Alberti's portrayal of the reality principle: man the deceiver and man the deceived. The dialogue centers on a Soothsayer who, though blind, can see directly into the hearts of men and spot their flaws.[11] Using his talent to drive a wedge between word and meaning, he is, of course, an Apollo-gone-wrong in historical time. Having set up shop in the city square, he extracts money in exchange for empty promises from all-

too-gullible passersby. While Apollo had returned all gifts to the supplicants along with advice on how to employ them, the false Apollo, reigning unchallenged in the public forum, eagerly solicits "donations."

The Soothsayer, not just anticipating distrust but already integrating it into his deceptive scheme, laughs at the foolishness of the last of his supplicants who believes the Soothsayer to be a friend who actually says what he means. The Soothsayer takes the man's money and begins a long series of mathematical calculations until the supplicant leaves empty-handed and confused. The supplicant, of "peaceful, innocent and modest character"—a novice?—naively believed that money would not pollute the "faithfulness and constancy" of words.[12] While in *Oraculum* gifts were transactions given and received in kind, the introduction of money in *Vaticinium* is indicative of relativizing and a dangerous undermining of society's fundamental values.

Oraculum and *Vaticinium* must be seen in tandem. The statue of Apollo, an anachronism from the timeless "garden," contrasts with the cunning Soothsayer. The first represents a view from above; the second, from below. *Oraculum* gives an example of the voice of mythic time, but it is distant and ineffectual in real time; *Vaticinium,* perhaps a pun on the papal establishment, portrays the corrupt and insistent voice of blind temporality.

Virtus takes these themes one step further.[13] The goddess Virtus, portrayed here in a dialogue with Mercury, does not represent piety or even, as might be expected, appropriate moral action, which is the realm of Apollo, who concerns himself with society in general. Virtus is here to be understood as the champion of the talented and creative, standing in defense of the exceptional few. Though she is female, she is based on the classical concept of manly excellence and its medieval derivative, spiritual power.[14] Among her protégés in the dialogue are Plato, Polyclitus, Archimedes, Cicero, and Praxiteles.[15] She is, however, no more effective than Apollo in bringing her plans to fruition. Fortuna, having organized the mortals into an "army," drives her from the heavens. The brushes, pens,

and chisels of Virtus's protégés prove of little use in her defense.

Virtus: Plato, the philosopher, began to offer some arguments directed against her [Fortuna], about the duties of the gods. But she was burning with rage. "Away with you, big mouth, she said, "for it is improper for slaves of the gods to speak for their masters in court!" Cicero also wanted to say something to sway her, but from the mass of armed men Mark Antony burst forth, mightily displaying his fighting form, and thrust a threatening fist into Cicero's face. Thereupon, all my other allies decided to make a hasty retreat. For Polyclitus with his brush, or Phidias with his chisel, or Archimedes with his sundial, or the rest of them having no weapons at all could hardly defend themselves against fierce armed men.[16]

With her allies in retreat, Virtus is left alone to face the barbarous army that "strips her and leaves her lying in the mud."[17] The other gods, unwilling to come to her aid, are only concerned with "seeing to it that the butterflies keep their beautiful wings . . . and that the melons ripen."[18] With the gods occupied with trifles and the *plebe* literally "soldiers of Fortune," Virtus finds that she has no place in the present scheme of things. At the end of the dialogue, she concludes: "I will forevermore be stripped of honor, despised, and exiled."[19]

Though *Virtus* is a piece essential to Alberti's cosmology, its general schema is a topos that strongly reminds us of Ovid's *Metamorphoses,* where "maiden Justice" fled the "bloody earth," inhabited as it was by "murder-hungry and violent men."[20] The topos was a common one. Richard de Bury, decrying the ignorance of many of his colleagues toward classical philosophy, tells of "admirable Minerva, [whose] soldiery is unmanned and languishing."[21] Richard felt that the restoration of high ideals could take place through the mechanism of improved scholarly research. Alberti, by contrast, suggests that the reintegration of society is not so much linked to the restoration of classical texts (as the ironies inherent in *Philodoxeus* imply) as to the reanimation of the lost arts that would lead to the revitalization of society's inner passion. This, his theory implies, can be accomplished by the writer who, as "son" of Apollo and Virtus, reactivates, by a sort of dialectic interaction, the waning potency of the exiled gods. "Whenever a man thinks and acts with

ragione e virtù, he will be like a mortal god," Alberti writes in *Della Famiglia,* pointing to the only type of man who can restore the knowledge of society's divine origins.[22] It is not the scholar who will lead the world to a better state, but the inspired writer who combines the *ragione* of social consciousness (*Oraculum*) with the *virtus* of manly excellence and spiritual power.

Blindness and Insight

The choice the novice has to make between two time frames that are, in Alberti's view, dangerously at odds—the theme of *Philodoxeus*—comes now more clearly into view. An archaic Apollo and an exiled Virtus, on the one hand, and a powerful Soothsayer and a princely Fortunius on the other set the stage for the arrival of a quasi-divine writer who will have to fight Fortuna on behalf of his "mother" and the Soothsayer on behalf of his "father."

Scriptor, the first dialogue of *Intercoenales,* consists of an exchange between two Albertian writer types, each representing a different value in the experimental spectrum.[23] The hopeful Leopis stands for the novice while Libripeta represents the antagonist, the cynic—a typical opposition employed by Alberti to develop his literary and aesthetic theories. Leopis, who has just emerged from a month of isolation, announces that "I have been busy with my books, striving to sow the seeds of my reputation as a writer."[24] He encounters Libripeta (Book Fanatic) in the public forum, and a conversation ensues that, though short, is significant, for it foreshadows Leopis's eventual failure.[25] Leopis, still *scriptor* and not *auctor,* is blind to the raging turmoil to which Libripeta wants to open his eyes. "Your literary efforts," Libripeta predicts, "will be wasted (*operam perdis*),"[26] to which he adds: "You will be attacked by the crowd of commoners (*vulgus*) who are especially quick to censure."[27] He warns that the public will not take well to Leopis's high tone: "Ha, ha ha, ridiculous fellow! Are you trying to accomplish this on Tuscan soil? In a land wholly shrouded in a fog of utter ignorance? Where the land is desiccated by men's burning ambition and greed."[28] But Leopis's writings will not

please the academic establishment either. Libripeta, "the darling of the learned," assures Leopis that he himself will readily and forcefully attempt to "tear him down in public."[29] The dialogue concludes with Libripeta's threat: "Watch out especially for *me*."[30]

This ominous confrontation between Leopis and Libripeta at the very beginning of *Intercoenales* sets the tone for Alberti's investigation into the literary experience. The motif will appear again and again, in various degrees of elaboration. The exchange is not between Leon Baptista Alberti and another person but between the two extremes of Albertian self-projection.[31] The name Leopis, though it may seem to imply Alberti's identification with the character, is by no means to be taken as a sign that he is identical with the author. Both Leopis and Libripeta are artificial constructs, purely theoretical, ontological propositions that move under their own momentum and serve as vehicles for the author's cultural critique. Leopis is "blind" whereas Libripeta "sees." Libripeta, cynically, anticipates that unless Leopis's eyes are opened, he will sooner or later succumb to enemies from among both the ignorant and the learned, who form an unlikely but powerful alliance in their combined effort to tear down all noble aspirations. Leopis, who represents the unity of author and text, a unity born in naiveté, is a type of pre-Lepidus figure. One could say that he hasn't "read" *Philodoxeus* yet, which means that he will not graduate into writer status until he has experienced both alienation from society and from his own text, at which time, ironically, the glow of hope will have given way to wary resignation.

The contrast between mythic innocence and worldly disillusionment is followed up in the dialogue *Religio,* where Leopis and Libripeta are once again the main characters, and where Libripeta continues his campaign of "enlightenment."[32] Libripeta waits for Leopis to return from his prayers at the temple. When he arrives, he is berated for being so naive as to believe the priests, who as Libripeta points out, have the same motives behind their actions as everyone else: greed, avarice, and lust for money. Libripeta then launches into an attack on piety, and

argues that it is foolish and irrational to assume that the gods can be swayed by human desires.

Libripeta: As for all your humble prayers, pious one, they will be utterly disregarded. Besides, do you think that the gods are so similar to us mortals? Do you think that just like blind and careless men, they will suddenly form a plan of action and then just as suddenly change their firm intentions? Really, in the great scheme of things, as I am informed by the scholars on the subject, in the complex administration of the universe the gods govern by virtually immutable laws. Given that such is the case you madmen truly rave if you think that on the basis of your persuasive pleas the gods will change in thought or deeds . . . to do some new and bizarre thing.[33]

Libripeta clearly has the upper hand in the dialogue. He accuses Leopis of allowing himself to be seduced by the cunning of the priests, those "henchmen of the painted gods."[34] Contemptuous of Leopis's innocence, he even questions the significance of Leopis's literary aspirations, sneering that "you wear yourself out by your frequent literary vigils, but you still have much to learn about the evil and impiety of mankind."[35] Instead of crumbling under the embittered onslaught, Leopis nonchalantly proclaims in parting: "I remain unshaken, . . . the prayers and pledges of good men (*i buoni*) are not unwelcome to the celestial beings."[36] By definition, there can be no reconciliation between the cynic, who represents the enlightened earthly stance, and *un buono,* who represents the mythic world. Leopis's innocence marks him as not of this world. He is a novice in historical time, ignorant of its fallen condition. We can imagine him as a seed from the mythic garden that has drifted into the polluted world of historical time without a genetic coding that would enable him to function under the new conditions.

The themes associated with Libripeta derive partially from classical sources. In Lucian we read that the cynic has no patience with popular religion, in Heraclitus that he despises the contemptible multitude that in turn hates him, in Crates that he does not avoid human contact but that his virtue remains untouched; and in Diogenes we read that, rather than being blamed for his offensive public acts, he should be praised for his trustworthiness.[37]

The Apostolic creed had absorbed and transmuted many of these ideas. The various currents, however, too complex to elaborate here, all acquire an independence of their own in Alberti's thought. In *Somnium* (Dream), one of the darkest and most sinister pieces in *Intercoenales,* we see how these concepts influence Alberti's theory of the relationship between writer and society.[38] Just like the *oraculi, somnia* are not dreams in the standard sense; they serve, as we know from Macrobius, to illuminate covert political realities and were thus seen as part of the mystique of kings and rulers, a famous example being the *somnium* of King Henry I of England in 1130, in which the king was attacked by representatives of different elements of society.[39] By the beginning of the thirteenth century dreams had become a widely used literary genre employed by philosophers, theologians, saints, and lay writers.[40] If the dream was that of hell, it was certain to include themes of magic spells, rivers, meadows, and vapors, all of which indeed appear in Alberti's *Somnium,* which should also be seen in the context of fourteenth-century staged events in which the various spectacles of hell were acted out.[41] In this work, however, religious aspects are downplayed; it is instead an exposition of the sinister and repressed realities of the communal psyche.

In *Somnium,* actually a dialogue, the autobiographical *baton* passes from Leopis to Lepidus, whom we have already encountered as the fictive author of *Philodoxeus.* He brings us to the next stage in the protracted confrontation between the young writer and the voice of cynicism. In this scenario, Lepidus is still a novice and has not yet discovered his self-alienation, which will be the topic of another *Intercoenales* dialogue. Here Libripeta has to be interpreted as representing a premonition of Lepidus's future self.

In the story, Lepidus sees Libripeta emerge from a sewer hole. Unperturbed by his awkward position and the foul stench he exudes, Libripeta excitedly relates that he has just completed a remarkable voyage made possible by means of a magic spell that enabled him to penetrate beyond the order of the real world to experience the otherwise inaccessible turmoil

beneath the surface.[42] In this subterranean world the insidious workings of society are shamelessly overt.

First, Libripeta came upon the River of Life, populated by horrible monsters—in actuality the unmasked visages of human beings. This was followed by the Valley of Forgotten Things, where he found such amazing objects as "great bags full of free speech, the sound of flutes and horns . . . charitable acts . . . and human authority"; he even found parts of his own brain![43] Only Stupidity was missing, the indispensable principle of human action.[44] Lepidus, aghast at what he considers to be Libripeta's "madness," interrupts the tale and asks, "*Quid tum*?" (What next?). As these are the same words that appear under the winged eye on the medallion made by Matteo de' Pasti—about which I will have more to say in a subsequent chapter—we may assume that this moment marks an important turning point.[45] Putting coal into the fire, Libripeta answers Lepidus's query by revealing that in the Valley of the Forgotten Things he saw all the literature on the "Good Arts."

Libripeta then continues his story, telling of a volcano that belched forth "objects of desire" in an ironically exaggerated response to the silly and vain demands of the men and women gathered at its base. Finally, after having crossed the putrid River of Life on the inflated carcass of a former lover, he came to his destination, the Meadow of Dreams, a place more horrible than any he had ever encountered. Instead of grass, the fields grew hair and were infested with lice. The lice, a metaphor for the voracious and evil urban populace (to which Libripeta had referred in his warning to Leopis), attacked the scholar, who was happy to find refuge in the sewers, through which he finally regained access to the deceptive calm of the world above.

Libripeta: Instead of turf and blades of grass, men's hair and beards, women's flowing locks, the fur of animals, and even lions' manes grew there [The Meadow of Dreams]. In fact you could see nothing in this field except hair of all sorts. Great God! How many dreamers I saw there! All of them digging up some sort of root which they ate, and they seemed wise and clever though clearly weren't. Suddenly a great mass of lice flew up from the field and nearly ate me alive. My

only salvation lay in finding an escape. And so, raving as I was from my experiences in such a place, I took to my heels and found my escape where it was offered. The fates provided this sewer for me.[46]

Libripeta's journey taught him that the world is so deformed that it is literally "unable to speak."[47] The newfound wisdom, "learned from the sewer (*cloacarium prudentiam*)," leaves Libripeta with permanent scars.[48] It paralyzes his creative potential as a writer and stymies his ability to communicate beneficially. Though Libripeta can no longer write, he attempts, nevertheless, to warn that an untrustworthy order masks an ominous reality.

Being trapped in a "speechless" society for which he has no sympathy, his commitment is mainly to himself and to his "texts," which he safeguards ferociously for an undetermined future by keeping them "under lock and key."[49] The alienation Libripeta exposes is contrasted by Alberti with Libripeta's obsessive urge to hold onto and protect his writings. To open them up to society would lead to their certain destruction. Writer and text are ironically unified only as a sterile proposition. It is an anxious preservation that denies the living function of the text in a dead society.

Lepidus, though fascinated by Libripeta's story, has difficulty recognizing in it a lesson for himself and returns to his friends. At this point Lepidus, *inscitus sapiens,* possesses only a type of fool's knowledge.[50] He admits that he learned from Libripeta "a few quips" that make him seem worldly, but it is clear that he is still far from making a genuine intellectual breakthrough even though the seeds for that germinate already in him, as we know from the *quid tum.*[51] Libripeta is frustrated by Lepidus's inability to see the truth so obvious to him, and at the end of the dialogue accuses him of being "insipid . . . insane, and naive."[52] Lepidus, in turn, thinks that Libripeta is the insane one and advises the malodorous cynic to "take a bath."[53] Libripeta, however, prefers the honest stench of the sewer to the more pervasive but odorless "stench" of social corruption.

Though *Somnium* seems to sound the theme of *contemptus mundi,* Libripeta, the cynic, does not flee the city but remains, the better to speak of its evil. His very presence is a living

reproof. Eventually Leopis and Lepidus will have to come to terms with Libripeta's negative wisdom, but that point has not yet been reached. The subconscious world is described as totally severed from the conscious world, which remains blithely ignorant of the enormity of its deviance. In almost Freudian terms, the subconscious is mute and refuses to communicate the trauma. While the *somnium* opens the dreamer's eyes, it simultaneously throws a pall over him; he is marked by the unmaskable and unmistakable stench of nihilism. In short, the dream is a form of catharsis that transforms the writer into an *auctor* with a type of x-ray insight into the workings of society, while simultaneously paralyzing his creative potential; he can no longer perform as author. In a society recognized as false the writer is alienated from his own identity and function. The joke Alberti plays on his audience in *Philodoxeus,* where he speaks through the mask of Lepidus, turns out in *Somnium* to be tragically serious. In *Philodoxeus* a mask was applied to permit the author to speak in a world that refuses to hear. In *Somnium* the argument is carried one step further; the only topic left to discuss is mankind's insanity. Blind sight opposes nihilistic insight.

Just as there is no communication between society and its repressed reality, there is no communication between society and its celestial counterpart. The gods, as we have already seen (*Oraculum*), living in a static unchanging sphere where norms are eternally valid, cannot comprehend the world given over to Chronos. As a result, they too suffer from blindness and speechlessness. This theme is developed in *Cynicus,* where Alberti elaborates once again Libripeta's negative wisdom.[54] Phoebus (the sun god Apollo) is sitting in judgment as the spirits of the dead come before him to be reincarnated as animals.[55] But as Phoebus is pronouncedly inept in his dealings with mortals, one of the shades with all the characteristics of Libripeta steps forth and confidently offers himself as interpreter. He declares himself well suited to the task, for "he knows mankind through and through" and indeed, as representatives of each social category approach, the Cynic (as he is labeled in the piece) lashes out in bitter words at their faith-

lessness, stupidity, arrogance, ambition, and criminality.[56] His judgments are used by Phoebus to transform the shades into animals, a stock device of medieval criticism.[57]

The shades can be divided into three categories: the religious, the temporal, and, for lack of a better word, the intellectual. The religious element of society is represented by the priests, who are accused of sluggishness, laziness, gluttony, and lasciviousness. They are turned into jackasses. The temporal world is represented by the magistrates and merchants. The former, because of heinous crimes, bloody murders, and sexual misdeeds, are turned into hawks, the latter, "that treacherous tribe," into dungbeetles. The Cynic focuses particularly on the third category, the producers of texts—philosophers, writers, poets, and rhetoricians—all of whom have abandoned the ideals of their profession. They are roundly condemned and are transformed into fireflies, mice, butterflies, and bees, respectively. One could read this critique as: a cold flaring fire, a gnawing away at books and reputations, a vain self-display, and an eager but mindless collecting.

This division of society parallels the arrangement in the garden of *Philodoxeus,* where Gloria, Phimia, and Philodexus had hoped to live in ideal harmony. Whereas *Philodoxeus* ends just as temporality has installed itself, *Cynicus* takes us further to show that in the mirror of truth each of the categories appears disrobed of its aura: Glory is polluted by her representatives, the priests; Fame by the magistrates, merchants, and other "soldiers of fortune"; and Philodoxus (the intellectual) by his latter-day equivalents, whether they be philosophers, who "no longer preserve divine dignity," writers, who "are no longer committed to wisdom," poets, who "suffer from hubris," or rhetoricians, who have "abandoned the principles of justice." Phoebus realizes that the Cynic's negative wisdom served him well and as a final fillip transforms him into a Socratic "golden-skinned gadfly."[58]

These four dialogues, *Scriptor, Somnium, Religio,* and *Cynicus,* map out two contrasting positions that create a dramatic tension calling for resolution. On the one hand we have Leopis and Lepidus, who represent primordial innocence. They enter

the public domain, manuscript under arm, ignorant of the conspiratorial alliance between the *plebe* and the defunct literary establishment and above all ignorant of the divergence of word from meaning. On the other hand there is the malodorous Libripeta, the nihilist gadfly with a permanent writer's cramp. Viewing positive actions as futile and suspect, he discovers the paradox that the only way not to be claimed by the evil world is to honestly proclaim one's nonparticipation.

The Lost Garland and Newfound Wisdom

Libripeta's prophecy that Lepidus will eventually follow in his footsteps once he sees behind the mask of order is realized in the next frame, *Corolle* (Garlands), which shows the metamorphosis of the Albertian writer. Here the novice, contaminated by Libripetian doubt—the *quid tum* has taken hold—turns into cynic.[59] The goddess Laus (Praise), daughter of Virtus, enters the marketplace in search of a writer worthy of her garland and her hand in marriage. Envy accompanies her as an ironic counterpart. Praise rejects various suitors, including a rhetorician, a poet, and even Envy's favorite, a Libripetian critic, and bestows the garland upon Lepidus, who responds in typically Albertian terms: "I am one of those who delight in letters; furthermore, I always make an effort, while preserving my dignity, to be cheerful in private and among my friends."[60] Yet all is no longer well; Lepidus is undergoing a crisis of self-confidence. As Lepidus speaks, we can almost hear Libripeta laugh off-stage.

> Fate has so determined it that from the time I first saw the light of day, not even the smallest thing has turned out the way I expected. It is a remarkable thing that all things happen contrary to my expectations and against my own plans. If I sow friends with service and kindness, I reap enemies. If I seek approval through liberal studies, envy is my repayment. If I strive to conduct myself peaceably and humbly by harming no one, I come upon detractors, accusers, secret enemies, and the most worthless traitors who disrupt all my plans and intentions. In sum, whatever I undertake, whatever I strive for, everything turns out different than I willed it.[61]

The nature of his transformation has not yet dawned on Lepidus himself, but is all too obvious to sharp-eyed Envy, who instantly tears the garland from his head. The "author" of *Philodoxeus,* who had once taunted his audience with "You know my name," is now stripped of the mask, to reveal not Alberti, as we might expect from *Philodoxeus,* but his Libripetian alter-image.

Lepidus: Why have you ripped off my crown so quickly? Why are you now destroying it [the garland] with your teeth in anger? Are you trying to kill me?

Envy: What is your real name?

Lepidus: My name? Lepidus.

Envy: You, Lepidus, the pleasant one? Nay, you are caustic, harsh, and mocking. Let us go, we will find no one in the whole forum worthy of the garland.[62]

Anxious and perplexed, his self-confidence shaken and his identity thrown into question, the previously amicable Lepidus suddenly finds himself revealed as a cynic. Praise returns to the heavens unwed; the attempt to reunite heaven with earth has failed.

Lepidus had assumed that his wholesome character, honesty, good intentions, and nobility of soul qualified him for the task. In reality, his mythic qualities have failed to take root. The gods, themselves unsure how to proceed (*Oraculum*), cannot forewarn him that the *naturale società a vera religione* is only a fiction.[63] Thus, instead of serving as link between the mythic garden and historical time, the Albertian writer finds no homeland in the temporal world; he, like Libripeta and Momus later on, can only wander through the city as through a foreign country. "Whatever road you choose, all is nothing."[64]

The metamorphosis played out in *Corolle,* where novice becomes cynic, is transposed in *Defunctus* into a different musical key. Here the metamorphosis is revealed as a type of death. An elderly novice, having failed while still alive to recognize that society is masked, undergoes the transformation to cynic only from the other side of the shroud.[65] The character Neofronus (Newfound Wisdom) brings this part of the quasi-autobiographical journey to its theoretical limits. On the surface

Neofronus had led a life worthy of much praise, as his funeral oration seems to indicate.

> O you, Neofronus, the wisest among men, the most just and most happy, whose memory we are celebrating now with praise, certainly inadequate; how much better would it have been if we had esteemed you higher when you were alive! What honors, what esteem would not have been appropriate to have been circulated publicly in your life, you, who are now dead and mourned on such a grand scale by us? How we hold in highest consideration your memory, your excellent virtue, known among men and the object of universal admiration![66]

Typically, Neofronus had dedicated himself to literary endeavors with "constancy, industry, and diligence," producing numerous "elegantly written" books.[67]

After his death and awaiting his entrance into Hades, Neofronus, perched as a shade on the chimney of his house, avidly follows the events unfolding below. Since he had led a pleasant and undisturbed life, "full of compliments and praise," he is amazed to see occurrences that he would never have thought possible.[68] He witnesses the infidelity of his wife, who rejoices at his death so that she can be united with the gardener. To his shock he learns that his marriage lacked spiritual substance and was defective. Furthermore, he sees his good name defamed by his friends and his money wasted by his heirs.

Decrying the "tyranny of evil," the all-pervasive *insania,* "the vacuity of the human spirit," and the "contamination of madness" that infects everything, Neofronus exclaims disgustedly that the world is a place to which "even if he could, he would never return."[69] He realizes that his "newfound wisdom" has come too late (*tardum ingenium*) and that despite his excellent virtues, energetic literary efforts, and noble intentions, he has made no impact on society.[70] His ghost in Hades has more substance than his memory among the living.

Libripeta's prediction in *Somnium* that the writer's literary works will be lost is here acted out. Some of the codices containing Neofronus's "clear and elegant" writings are carried away, while others have the pages torn from them to be used as packing paper.[71] The death of the writer is paralleled by the

death of the manuscript. Having left no living text, he discovers that he is unable to reach the level of those who are "eternal, incorruptible, and quasi-divine," for he and his texts have become victims of the "fallen, mortal, and fragile world."[72] Ironically, now that Neofronus can finally "see," his time on earth is up, and he must enter the eternal darkness of Hades.

In short, Alberti presents here the third stage of historical development. The first is the intact garden, the second, the destruction of that garden and the creation of two languages, that of mythic and that of historical time, and the third is an attempt to search for a common grammar—a search that fails (figure 1).[73] Alberti's prophets are ironic constructs; clad in the garb of mythic time, walking backward into society, they speak a foreign tongue behind enemy lines. Leopis (revealed as Libripeta) is eventually abandoned on earth by the higher powers that placed him there, and Lepidus (revealed as Neofronus) is lost to the echoless and sightless realm of Hades.

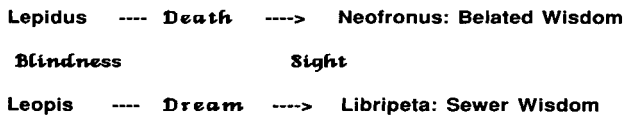

Figure 1

The Mendicant Exile

Leopis and Lepidus were demonstrated to be faulty postulates, as their inflexible, archaic natures refused to partake of earthly negative wisdom. Their suffering came too late to be transcended. In *Pupillus* (Orphan), Alberti sketches a different scenario—at once more tortured and more promising.[74] To regain the garland of Praise, and with it authorial power, the writer must be subjected to the negative aspects of the unnatural society and be functionable in it without losing his mythic core. He must withstand testing. This Herculean struggle, if successful, would result in saintly *beatitudo*.

The central character embodying this proposition is Philoponius (Lover of Hard Work). One of the most important figures in the Albertian laboratory, he appears as protagonist in two other *Intercoenales* pieces, *Erumna* (Mental Anguish) and *Anuli* (Little Rings), both of which will be discussed later in this chapter.

Philoponius, like Leopis and Philodoxus, is a "talented adolescent" full of literary ambition:[75] "He yearned to set himself above the rich and powerful simply on the basis of his literary accomplishments."[76] In the overall scheme of Albertian author figures, Philoponius is more advanced than Lepidus, taking up where the latter left off, outside the magic circle of complacency and untested hopefulness. Again we encounter the iconographic insignia indicative of the theoretical line. "Yes, the fortune of this young man was indeed bad"[77]; he "lost his father," was "abandoned by his family," "robbed by his relatives, rejected by his friends," "expelled from his native land," "ill to the point of death," and "on the verge of starvation."[78] Significantly, Philoponius is defined as a "mendicant beggar," foreshadowing a future incarnation, the vagabond Momo, who was to transform vagabonding into the ultimate art.[79]

We know now that *Pupillus* is no autobiographical narrative, even though the circumstances of Alberti's own life serve as props.[80] Philoponius, as experimental postulate, is driven out of the postlapsarian society once he is spotted as an outsider from the mythic garden. He is banished from the city not for political reasons but because he does not yet know how to play the game. Inverting the Old Testament story of Adam's expulsion from paradise, Alberti depicts Philoponius as expelled because he has *not* eaten from the tree of earthly knowledge. This rather unorthodox version of the origin of exile stresses the dialectical otherness of the Albertian writer who, as *exemplum,* is not a real mortal but an allegorical stand-in for society's primordial wholeness. His suffering not only attests to the painful initiation process that brings him face to face with reality but also assigns to him the required iconographic insignia betokening his eventual transcendence.

Of course, testing is a topos in classical and medieval literature. Ovid's *Tristia* is a particularly appropriate example, for

Ovid—unlike Aeneas, who was accompanied by his companions—went into exile alone, leaving family, friends, and a devoted wife. Solitary confrontation of one's destiny was a frequent topos in medieval romances, which often end in the hero's *beatitudo,* provided he survives the machinations of his enemies. Fortitude proved by solitary existence is also a prerequisite in hagiographies, which is essentially what we have here in *Pupillus*. Unlike Ovid, who left Rome with the sobs of his family in his ears, Philoponius, who has no friends even among his closest relatives, is the *exemplum* of Christian meekness in a "rapacious world."[81] Philoponius, however, is not yet aware of his higher destiny. The gods, so he feels, endowed him with a talent he is unable to bring to fruition. Forced from the city where he assumed he would be effective, he feels marked for misery.[82]

> Thus driven by so many misfortunes and overwhelmed in his raging mind by anger and indignation, the youth [Philoponius] lashed out in these words. "Why should I expect the gods to be kind to me in the future since I know that I am specifically marked from birth for perpetual misery? . . . I beg you, O divine audience, that hereafter no orphan shall rejoice for having obtained a better fate than I have endured. May they also find no sense of humanity among their fellow citizens; may they come upon no respect from their neighbors, and may they perceive no trust in their closest relatives . . . . May they receive all forms of hatred, envy, enemies, calamities, and miseries.[83]

There can be no doubt that Alberti is preparing Philoponius to discover the well-known Augustinian belief that life on earth is nothing more than an extended exile.

> Suppose we were wanderers who could not live in blessedness except at home, miserable in our wandering and desiring to end it and to return to our native country. We would need vehicles for land and sea which could be used to help us reach our homeland, which is to be enjoyed. But if the amenities of the journey and the motion of the vehicles itself delighted us, and we were led to enjoy those things which we should use, we should not wish to end our journey quickly, and, entangled in a perverse sweetness, we should be alienated from our country, whose sweetness would make us blessed. Thus, in this mortal life, wandering from our native country where we can be blessed, we should use this world and not enjoy it.[84]

Philoponius's mendicant status stands not only for his Augustinian exile on earth but also for his Franciscan disdain for a pecuniary world in which he, as all mendicants, prefers to live as a stranger and a beggar.[85]

In the Renaissance, the state of exile was assumed as a regular pose by a cultural elite in imitation of Petrarch. Petrarch's exile, unlike Dante's, was not a bitter experience but was perceived by him as liberation. In *Remedies* (1366) he listed the advantages of exile: one can develop one's free will, demonstrate one's illustriousness, perfect one's sense of justice, and prove one's incorruptibility; above all one can claim a metaphorical fatherland not tied to a geographical place or subject to the vicissitudes of politics.[86]

Petrarch was not alone in contemplating the paradoxical situation—a topos dating back to the classics—that authentic virtues exist better outside the binding social framework.[87] His contemporary, the poet Bindo di Cione del Frate, described Lady Rome wandering about on lonely roads after being driven from the city by Pride, Envy, and Avarice.[88] The Florentine Matteo Frescobaldi compressed these motifs into a single ideogram: Avarice, Pride, and Luxury have exiled Prudence, Fortitude, Justice, Temperance, and their sisters.[89] In this inverse world the good people live *fuori i muri,* and the "wild folk" live like caged and dangerous animals within the walls of the city. It is in this context that we perceive Philoponius's exile. It links him with those benevolent forces that breathe the uncontaminated air *fuori i muri.* The negative result, namely, that the central position in society is forsaken, was for Alberti a historical given.

By Alberti's time the exile theme had already become a cliché. Poggio Bracciolini, with his usual wit, twisted it into satire on the occasion of Cosimo de' Medici's exile from Florence in 1433, offering the Florentine the disingenuous consolation that—having lost dignities, dominion, honors, wealth, and riches, which are all external things—prudence, magnanimity, constancy, probity, virtue, and faith are finally at his command. "Let Cosimo take refuge in the fortress of his reason and virtue. Studies are the true glory of the wise man in the theater of the world. Let Cosimo continue to cultivate learned

men and abandon the troubled world of politics."[90] Giovanni Mario Filelfo even suggested that one should prepare oneself with a repertoire of stock refrains to be used like polite formulas in encounters with exiles.[91]

Unlike his contemporaries Alberti still saw exile and suffering in a cosmological context. They are the source of the writer's spiritual renewal and the iconographic attributes identifying the interlocutor as saint rather than cynic.

Intact Wisdom

The young novice, if he is to become saint rather than cynic, must acquire "intact wisdom"(*prudentiam integram*)—the mastery of the dialectic that synthesizes the physical with the metaphysical. In exile he will encounter his spiritual fathers, who symbolize this union. These patronal figures, "remarkable, illustrious, and known for their virtue and knowledge of writing," sponsor his writerly identity. In Alberti's treatise on oratory, *Trivia senatoria* (1460), the young Lorenzo de' Medici Giovanetto (b. 1449) is advised to view his teachers Landino and Gentile as his true "fathers": "Imitate these men, remarkable and illustrious, known for their virtues and knowledge of letters, as your fathers, so that the fatherland can be more glorious to have possessed in one single important family such citizens as you, stamped by virtue and literary merit."[92]

The spiritual father instills in the mind of the novice the principles of intact wisdom, with the hope that he can both adapt to and transcend "mankind's disease-ridden life."[93] The concept of intact wisdom is of profound importance in Alberti's thought; it is the counterproposal to Libripeta's paralyzing "wisdom learned from the sewer."[94] We find it described in the closing pages of *De commodis literarum atque incommodis,* where Alberti quotes from a supposedly ancient text. Much as in *Philodoxeus,* Alberti argues here that if the ancients would speak to us today they would insist on a metaphysical wisdom based on spiritual wholeness. In his last work, *De Iciarchia,* Alberti was to reaffirm this conviction. The spiritual father has to defy even the biological father in order to guarantee that his protégé can rise to the rank of "an earthly god of Virtue": "The papa

of the little one born in his house will say: 'He is my son.' I will reply, 'True. However, you have made him like all other animals born with two legs. I have made him like an earthly god of Virtue . . . . To whom would you say one who has been so ennobled is more indebted? To the papa (*babbo*), or to me, his true and best father (*vero e ottimo padre*)?'"[95]

It is one of these father figures, "a most honest, and quasi-angelic man," who in *Pupillus* saves Philoponius from death in the nick of time.[96] This process of growth is elaborated in another *Intercoenales* dialogue, *Erumna* (discussed in the next chapter), in which Philoponius is shown as graduating to a higher form of self-realization. For the moment, however, let us turn to *Naufragus,* where the theme of a father figure effecting a transcendence is beautifully epitomized in the allegory of a shipwreck.[97] Though the piece is told in the first person, we have by no means a personal experience, but a father figure addressing other *viri optimi.*

The voyage begins favorably enough with everyone in high spirits, but soon a storm breaks out and floods the ship. The only survivors are an evil-minded sailor, the "author," and an innocent young woman, standing for the novice; she is on her way to her marriage. Marriage here as elsewhere refers to a spiritual union. The three are trapped for several days in the damaged hold of the ship, which is filled with water up to the level of their necks. The foundering vessel is obviously a metaphor for society—a classical and medieval commonplace—and the three characters are allegories of human bestiality, hope, and innocence, respectively.[98]

As no salvation seems possible, the sailor attempts to murder the young woman to cannibalize her. His violent attempt to "feed on live limbs" threatens not only the life of the girl, who here takes the place of the ascendent Albertian writer, but the precarious stability of the vessel itself; the more the protagonist tries to restrain the sailor, the "more the sailor burns with rage." In an hour of desperate danger, as the ship is buffeted by high winds and the sailor goes raving mad, the paternal hero discovers that the goddess Hope has not abandoned them:

In this miserable situation, as you, gentlemen, might imagine with your understanding, what constant threats of death we overcame on one side only to await them on the other! With every swelling wave we saw our end grow nearer and nearer. Yet, O wonderful thing, never in so many dangers did hope abandon our minds, nor courage fail us, but rather we were always encouraged by the least little thing to hope for our salvation. And as I wondered at things and hardly believed that I would see the light of the sun again, I reflected that only one goddess remained to men in their wretchedness, Hope; she who "when all the gods ascended to the sky, fleeing the accursed earth, remained there as the sole companion to mankind [a theme Alberti elaborates in *Momus*]. She helps the shipwrecked man to see when no land is in sight, and to swim in mid-ocean . . . ." Therefore, it is no wonder that this goddess, who has never abandoned the wretched man beset by evils, even when all the other gods have deserted him, would not allow us to be overwhelmed by such evils.[99]

Sustained by their faith in Hope, the hero and the young woman manage to subdue the sailor and are eventually rescued by fishermen who bring them to shore. The young woman, now reunited with her bridegroom, is no longer the untested innocent; her impending marriage has become a metaphysical postulate.

A subplot of the story opens new vistas on the otherwise predictable resolution. Once rescued, the narrator learns that his brother, who had been traveling with him, has drowned and that his ring, taken from the body when it washed ashore, is, surprisingly, now in the possession of the young woman's bridegroom. The author, already the spiritual father of the girl, thus also becomes the spiritual brother of the groom. Once again conceptual links supercede biological ones. The death of the biological brother literally supplies the magic ring necessary to bond the bride and the groom under the sponsorship of the spiritual father. The novice status has been transcended.

The transformation of the girl into a bride allegorizes the transformation of the Albertian writer, when and if he survives the "shipwreck." Ideally the process must lead to a "marriage"—representing spiritual wholeness—as we have already seen in *De commodis literarum atque incommodis,* where the author marries literature, and in *Philodoxeus,* where the protagonist marries Glory.

Philoponius and the Twelve Rings

Let us now return to Philoponius, whom we have left in misery in *Pupillus,* to see how he achieves sainthood. In *Anuli* (Little Rings) a discussion as to Philoponius's destiny takes place among Philoponius's Guardian Spirit and Minerva, Hope, and the Council of Gods.[100] Philoponius's Spirit implores Minerva, Philoponius's "divine parent" (and the mother of Philodoxus, we may recall), to take note of her son, who, though tormented by Envy, Calumny, and Poverty, continues to worship assiduously at the spring on Mount Helicon sacred to Apollo and the Muses.[101]

Spirit: What an intolerable situation! Whenever he [Philoponius] goes to the sacred fountain on Helicon, he willingly and often performs the rite though it usually turns out badly for him. For example, once when he was there to perform the sacred rite, just as those do who claim to be totally dedicated to you, he looked at himself in the fountain and then lifted his eyes up to heaven. He then sampled the foliage hurled out by the source, when suddenly, as he started to raise a cry to posterity according to custom, Envy was there, and up ran Calumny. They came forth in a fierce and hostile attack and tormented him, disturbed and tore him away from the rite. Then the most savage of the gods, Poverty, persecuted him, wretched, oh, twice wretched Philoponius, with all variety of torment, with how many kinds of insult! I am a witness to this. In fact, I saw how the angry goddess was not able to turn this man away from his worship of you [Minerva], with all her insults and violence.[102]

Philoponius, in his own defense, explains that despite all his torments he has been able to fashion over thirty stones, with the intention of dedicating them to Minerva. The stones seem to refer to *Intercoenales,* which initially may have comprised around thirty pieces. Yet Philoponius, like Lepidus before him, complains to the goddess Hope that his literary efforts came to little.

Will you [Hope] deny that before thirty days were up I had produced more than thirty fine and excellent stones? You were there. Tell her [Minerva] what reward I was given for my efforts. One after another I produced them, ground and polished them and rendered them into various shapes. Even those stones that were more modest, these two [Hope and the Council of Gods] did not despise or openly scorn,

but instead approved of them in lowered tones, saying that these stones did not have the appearance of ancient pearls [unlike *Philodoxeus*]—far from it—and then they went on their way. But need I mention the rest of mankind, or how often I was given the opportunity for regret by harsh times and evil men—not to insult any god, of course—for one and all cursed my efforts. For this reason, I feel justified in hating the two of you, by whose direction I came up against such obstacles.[103]

Minerva, to the Spirit's surprise, exalts in Philoponius's agony, reminding the Spirit of "the common saying" that suffering tests virtue: "Oh, you are ridiculous, Spirit! As for Philoponius, aren't you grieving at what will only contribute to his virtue? Does it utterly escape you what that common saying means, namely that just as yellow gold is tested by fire, so virtue must be examined by a time of hardship?"[104] Philoponius does not see the logic and turns away from Minerva and even from the Hope: "Away! You have long been planning my destruction and it disgusts me to listen to you! Farewell, towers of Rome! Farewell, to you also [Hope] and to whatever friends I had! And Minerva, farewell to you! Let me make my escape from here."[105] Just when all seems lost, Minerva calls Philoponius back and announces that the period of testing is over. Not having understood that Minerva was only testing him, Philoponius is now ready to be elevated to a higher form of consciousness. Unlike Neofronus, he had not turned into a cynic, leaving the "towers of Rome" more in sadness than in disillusionment.

Before I continue with the circumstances of Philoponius's elevation into sainthood as described in the second half of *Anuli,* I must make a detour to *Erumna* (Mental Anguish), where Philoponius's transformation is also discussed.[106] The two dialogues must be seen as parallel. At the beginning of *Erumna* we find Philoponius, predictably, sitting "in his library," suffering "mental agony," lamenting his "ill health," complaining about the "infinite evil actions of others," and decrying that "despite my versatile talent . . . I am destined for a life of complete misery."[107] To compound matters the "malodorous cynic" (Libripeta) turns up yet again, "like someone roused from a dream, his eyes stormy and his voice loud."[108] Haunted

by his *somnium,* he ridicules Philoponius's melancholy and sadistically advises him to resign himself to his misery. Philoponius concedes that for a man of learning like himself, such a "rational" argument exerts a powerful attraction. This concurrence with Libripeta's diabolic rationalism indicates Philoponius's internal turmoil and incipient moral weakening.

An unnamed father figure now enters the scene. Aware that the Libripetian insights pose a danger to his student, he suggests a different line of reasoning to rescue Philoponius from his misery. He asks Philoponius to assume for a moment that he is engaged in a discussion with Fortune. What would Philoponius desire? Riches, perhaps? No, as a young scholar he must reject money because of the absolute evil attending it, not to mention the time-consuming process connected with its acquisition. Is it the patronage of princes that he wants? No, for a man of noble spirit cannot accept servitude (we shall return to this notion in a later chapter). Power, perhaps? No, for that would be in conflict with his literary calling. Thus, Philoponius, seeing "his own reflection" for the first time, finds his faith in the future restored. In gratitude, he praises his "father":

> O most eloquent paragon of humanity, how your words have such weight and moment in my soul! Filled as you are with the salt of charm and suavity you have swayed my mind from anger to the moderation of equanimity and turned my thoughts toward total self-examination . . . . I must be quiet, yet I also must confess that I have received a great relief from tribulation. I thank you and congratulate you.[109]

Philoponius is now secure in his identity as the "most fortunate and blessed of men"; he can walk "in the temples, theaters, and fora," knowing that he will never be tempted to be other than himself[110]: "The more I ponder and reflect, the more I understand that there is no man more blessed than I . . . . And so, I have determined that the wise man wishes to be who he is . . . Great Gods! How much wandering in my mind I have done, pondering with nimble thought and learning, to arrive at this idea."[111] The "eternal war with Fortune" no longer poses any danger, for Philoponius is now confirmed as an "honest man, grounded in the best learning."[112] Unlike

the cautious Philodoxus, the innocent Leopis, the confused Lepidus, the embittered Libripeta, and the belated Neofronus, he will become the true hero, the prototype, in whom temporal wisdom fuses with intact wisdom. As one element in a complex system of motifs, Philoponius is the only allegorical personification of stability.

Now that Philoponius has been "tested by the care of his elders and found to be free from any stain of vice or vulgar contamination"—that is, the contamination of Libripetian cynicism (*Erumna*)—the stage is set for his beatification, as recounted in the second half of *Anuli*.[113] Here Philoponius recounts that he was commissioned by Minerva to make twelve rings of gold, each with an engraved image (table 1). The rings symbolize the twelve rings of transcendence and define the spiritual essence of the author-hero.

The symbolism of the individual rings would hardly have struck fifteenth-century readers as farfetched; it has parallels in the mnemonic devices of biblical commentators and preachers, such as the seven mirrors representing the cardinal sins, or the nine magic springs representing the orders of angels.[114] One of the rings, depicting a fishing pole suspending a crown over a fish, alludes to the symbolism on the famous ring of St. Peter worn by popes to this day. This is, however, only the fourth of the rings, each of which is described and its *mysteria* explained. The order is such that the rings link the divine with the mortal, that which is guided by the spirit of God with that which is necessary for proper implementation of God's will on earth.

Minerva announces that Philoponius, having completed these rings, is prepared to stand on his own. The symbolic marriage of Minerva and Philoponius follows, presided over by Minerva's high priestess Hope. In a sense, Philoponius regains the garland Lepidus had lost. Not far from the marriage ceremony is a plane tree standing for charity and firmness of character.[115] Philoponius receives the first of his rings, significantly "the ring of the winged eye"—the symbol of the "all-embracing wisdom of God."[116] In lieu of the absent Virtus and the distant Apollo, Philoponius now takes his place as link

Table 1 The Twelve Rings of Philoponius

Symbol	Meaning
Winged eye in a crown	The reason and omnipotence of divine intelligence
Elephant ear in a net	The ability to hear everything and filter it through the net of reason
Diamond	One man needs many masks. Good friends combine as one.
Fishing pole suspending a crown over a fish	Learn to find good men among the rest.
Vestibule with open door and candelabrum	The spirit is like an open door seeking enlightenment.
Sailor on a ship gazing into the wind	Maintain wisdom in the flood of events.
Circle surrounded by hooks and flames	The circle of reason surrounded by hooks of passion and flames of anger
Janus with horn of plenty and staff of Bacchus	The public and private man with abundance and pleasure, tempered by justice and moderation, respectively
Theater stage with olive tree growing on it	One contributes the fruit of one's labors to the theater of public life.
Winged Pegasus flying over the ocean	The wings of talent that unite past and future
Bearded girl with plumb line hanging from her chin	The virgin spirit that guides pure judgment
Helmet covered with flies	Suffer the attacks of detractors with the steadfastness of a soldier.

between heaven and earth and in essence embodies the Albertian ideal of the perfect humanist.

Council [of Gods]: The ring is the symbol of joy and glory, and the eye is more powerful than anything, swifter, more worthy; what more need be said? It is such as to be the first, chief, king, like a god of human parts. Why else did the ancients consider God as something akin to an eye, seeing all things and distinguishing each separate one? By this we are reminded that we must render praise for all things to God, rejoice with the whole spirit in Him, fulfill a flourishing and manly ideal of excellence, knowing that he sees everything we do and everything we think. Then, on the other hand, we are reminded to be wide awake, all-embracing as far as the power of our intelligence allows, in order to find out all things that lead to the glory of excellence, delighting to pursue with labor and persistence what is good and divine.

Hope: Show your grace, gods! Oh happy omen! Give me that ring. Your hand, Philoponius! Hold out your ring finger. I promise you that you will enjoy a happy fate. Do you see high in the plane tree that pure white dove that softly coos and shows approval and sympathy for us with a flapping of the wings? Without a doubt . . . I see in this a promise that very soon those highest and mightiest fates which govern the affairs of even Jove the greatest and best, these fates shall be propitious toward you if ever they have neglected you till now. Oh, happy you! Minerva, show your support.

Minerva: Hurrah for him [Philoponius]!

Spirit: Congratulate him![117]

Philoponius, carrying his twelve rings, accompanied by Minerva, Hope, and the Council of Gods, joined by Zeal, Vigilance, and Industry, enters the law courts (*basilica*) where he will attempt to legislate over mankind. He has faith that the "learned will protect the learned" and that the message on his rings "will make the lives of princes, as well as of private citizens, happy and blessed."[118] This is the Albertian utopia: the Albertian humanist installed as honored lawgiver and quasi-divine prince. The program spelled out in the twelve rings is his platform.

Though Philoponius has attained *beatitudo,* uniting the "highest heaven and the deepest ocean," darkness still looms in his future. The plane tree to which the Council of Gods makes reference was commonly associated with martyrs (often St.

Sebastian) as it symbolized steadfastness and courage in the face of suffering.[119] The Spirit, in the closing of the dialogue, hints at a dark future awaiting Philoponius! "I can do nothing but shout [for joy] in a loud voice. I want the highest heaven and deepest ocean to hear me. But the times, the times! How few are found! Alas, I do not wish to contaminate the happy omens of this man with a sad prediction."[120]

The Writer-Saint

Philoponius is a proposition without equal in early Renaissance literature. He represents a challenge to contemporary humanist political opportunism. Having absorbed negative wisdom without becoming polluted by cynicism and having filtered out the "seeds of corruption, like a sieve" until all "is pure and simple," he is the ideal humanist author-lawgiver who has earned the laurels of *beatitudo* and the position of honor in the "basilica." The significance of Philoponius in respect to then-current humanist theories and practices needs to be discussed, especially since the character gives us fresh insight into Alberti's thoughts on the writer's role in society and his historiographic definition. I shall turn first to the thesis of literature as diversion and then to the Renaissance definition of the "great man" to show that the character Philoponius implies a rejection of both.

Throughout the Middle Ages, theologians in defining the role of literature emphasized those writings which profit the soul over those which merely please the senses.[1] *Joaca* and *fabula,* for example, were permitted by medieval theologians from Augustine on only if they carried a moral lesson. Even Dante argued that intellectual satisfaction must be set before sensual satisfaction.[2] By the fourteenth century, however, the orthodox position broke down as the recreational justification for literature gained in favor. The new approach was neatly summarized by Laurent de Premierfait in 1414 in his introduction to the translation of the *Decameron.*[3] Laurent explains that after the fall from grace, love turned into hate and joy into sadness. Man became "ignorant, worrying, brooding, grieving, and subject to the vagaries of fortune." Yet, Laurent

goes on, writers, while unable to eradicate these ills, could provide comfort and solace "for the survivors."[4] Boccaccio, he concludes, is the model author, for his works keep our mind from dwelling on the vicissitudes of life. Poggio's *Facetiae,* with its courtly jesting, ribald humor, and sexual innuendos, would fall within this category. On the surface *Intercoenales* does not seem all that different. In the preface Alberti points to alleged humor and gaity, but in reality the work is sobering, conceived as a "bitter emetic" to cure the "grave cares of the spirit" and not as entertainment.[5]

As to Philoponius, there is nothing whimsical about him. Being the implementor of a quasi-divine mission, he must obey the rules of frugality. In a dedication of part of the *Intercoenales*—significantly enough to Poggio—Alberti explains that whereas other writers "feed on sweet and succulent grasses," he (Alberti-Philoponius) nourishes himself on the sparse and bitter fruit of the fig tree that grows in the ruins of a "fallen temple atop a lofty crag."[6] The temple, certainly not Rome or classical antiquity but mankind's (destroyed) spiritual homeland, is the fitting background for the fig tree, a standard scriptural symbol of conversion which represented, ever since Augustine, the manifestation of the divine pattern in the life of the saintly.[7]

In keeping with their mission, Alberti's quasi-saintly authors are endowed with a "talent and intellect that is in large part divine."[8] They must display a properly disciplined manner and deliver a serious and effective text in the struggle against modern day paganism. In the introduction to *Momus* Alberti explains that such singular beings should receive the honor due to them: "Without doubt, we understand that all things that are rare have a sense of divinity about them to the extent that they tend toward the divine, and as a result are held to be unique, exquisitely singular, and segregated from close association with the multitude."[9] Alberti goes on to explain, "We are instructed to call them divine and admire and honor them as gods."[10] Nothing could be further removed from such a claim of divinity than a mere diversionary palliative for *Weltschmerz.*

Nor can we view the character Philoponius as a forerunner of Pico della Mirandola's "dignified man."[11] Briefly stated, Pico, in his *De hominis dignitate* of 1486, holds that since man is both outside of the fixed hierarchy of things and at the center of the divine universe, he can elevate himself by means of his free will to perfect his god-given potential. Pico hopes that man will want to choose for himself the highest possible form of moral and intellectual life. For Philoponius, however, there is no choice; he is from the start a schematic figure. Though learning was an important part of his development, free will has nothing to do with it. As is well known, *De hominis dignitate* caused much controversy and was even found to be heretical. Given the overall tenor of Alberti's thought, one could surmise that Alberti would have sided with the critics.[12] Free choice individualism, even if couched in Pico's optimistic terms, was for Alberti the ultimate source of evil. His ideal humanist is defined as free from temporal contingencies but not from the ethical system. It is the all-important bond between stable eternity and fluid time.

As we shall see, Alberti's theme of the writer-saint implies a heresy of its own, but in its imagery it reflects the orthodox definition of Christ, as defined by the Councils of Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451), in which Christ is declared as having two natures, one divine and one human, both perfectly united in one person and one substance. The concept of duality, soon claimed by kings and popes alike, defined them as *personae mixtae* (combining spiritual and secular), *personae geminatae* (human by nature and divine by grace), or *Deus-homo, una persona, duae naturae.*[13] As a twelfth-century theorist explains it,

> We thus have to recognize a *twin person,* one descending from nature, the other from grace . . . . One through which, by the condition of nature, he conformed with other men: another through which, by the eminence of [deification] and by the power of the sacrament [of consecration], he excelled over all others. Concerning one personality, he was, by nature, an individual man; concerning his other personality, he was by grace, a *Christus,* that is, a God-man.[14]

In my postscript I show that Alberti took this as the program for his design of the church of S. Sebastiano for Ludovico Gonzaga of Mantua. The open crypt represents the temporal nature of the patron, the chapel above, his spiritual essence.

But the concept of duality also carries with it a definition of power. A representation of Emperor Henry II, for example, shows the sacred dove above and the sword of justice below (see figure 2).[15] The king—but potentially any vicar of Christ—implements divine justice in the world. Is that not what is spelled out by Philoponius's iconographic emblems, the winged eye of ring number one right down to the helmet of ring twelve? Philoponius, as humanist saint-king, thus demonstrates the union of spiritual triumph and physical strength. Alberti is in a sense stealing the mana of invincibility to bestow it on his writers, who are effective not on account of their political abilities, rhetorical eloquence, or classical learning but due to their perfect "construction," which in an ideal world would be spontaneously welcomed. Philoponius, presiding not only in the earthly basilica but in the heavenly temple exemplifies the model humanist uniting law with devotion. The very words with which Alberti describes the temple in *De re aedificatoria* seem to evoke Philoponius's divine half: "The temple should be constructed so beautifully that the imagination is not able to conceive of a place more beautiful. Every part should be so prepared that the beholder is stupefied at the things so worthy of admiration and almost forced to cry out with astonishment: This place is worthy of God!"[16]

This brings us to the question of literary immortality. The unification of the two natures in the writer involves a new consciousness of the literary persona, an aesthetic which at first separates—all separations involve an aesthetic—the aspiring writer from his natural environment (*Pupillus*) but then attempts to close the distance between reality and ideal (*Erumna*) by means of the twelve rings. The writer, moving from novice to saint, can remove the aesthetic distance by means of a double marriage, for marriage symbolically annuls aesthetic distance, with Fame and Glory or with Praise and Minerva. Not only does he regain his literary identity, the separation from which (*Philodoxeos*) threatened to transform him into cynic (*Corolle*)

Figure 2
Emperor Henry II as Judge, in the Monte Cassino Gospel (1022–23). Vatican, Ottobon. lat. 74, fol. 193ᵛ (Vatican Library).

but he is a figure with all the attributes of power. This cosmological theory, outlined in the numerous stories of *Intercoenales,* is summarized in the closing words of *De commodis litterarum atque incommodis,* where literary pleasure is clearly a product of the *utilitas* that brings earthly praise, which in turn is a reflection of true glory: "You will find that writing is pleasurable, very useful to obtain praise and glory and very adaptable to produce the fruit that will transmit one to posterity and thereby guarantee immortality."[17] In this sense writers with their words wield a power that places them in direct conflict with other types of power. It is not politicians or soldiers who acquire glory but the writer. As Alberti would later reaffirm: "As the hand that warms and prepares wax so as to better receive the impression and seal of a gem, so studies cast the mind for all functions and rewards of glory and immortality."[18]

In this way Alberti answers the problematic raised in *Commentarium Philodoxeos Fabule,* where the ambiguous relationship between author and text was revealed as the result of stresses inherent in society. Because society is equated with the corrupt "body," writers uncontaminated by secular realities surprise their competitors (Fortunius, for example) by capturing glory *and* immortality for themselves.

Yet the equation is not without a remainder. Literary immortality, as Alberti defines it, involves a conscious manipulation of the persona in the present so that posterity will take, or rather mistake, its aesthetic nature as spontaneous reality, a ruse intended to throw a humanist shadow back over temporal power. In the process, however, the humanist writer violates the code of simplicity. Alberti confronts this issue in *Momus,* which will be discussed later.

Returning now to the more immediate question of literary ontology, it is clear that Alberti's concept of literary power challenges the Petrarchian notion of great men. Petrarch, in *De viris illustribus,* concentrates on Roman heroes in order to stress his thesis that the Dark Ages had destroyed the valuable patrimony of Italy.[19] These heroes demonstrate that fortune could be controlled by the strength of inner virtue; they were able "to perform deeds worthy of being remembered and imitated by posterity," a thesis continued by Lombardo della Seta

when he completed *De viris illustribus* after Petrarch's death[20]: "Always keep in sight those men whom you ought to be eager to love because of the greatness of their deeds."[21]

On the surface this sounds very Albertian, but if we probe deeper it becomes obvious that Alberti's writers would never find a place in Petrarch's world. According to Petrarch, "doctors, poets, and philosophers" can never be great, as they are neither politicians nor warriors.[22] But that, Alberti seems to argue, is exactly why his writers *are* great. Philoponius "set himself above the rich and powerful *simply on the basis of his literary accomplishments*" (my emphasis).[23] He is great because as an apolitical aristocrat of the spirit he transcends all secular ambition. Alberti was the first to point out that his concept of the humanist hero flies patently in the face of the "antique customs" of great men. His writers should be honored "without hesitation" and receive "numerous recompenses" as tokens of approval.

> What if, finally, contrary to all tradition and ancient customs of famous men, someone does find a way of becoming equally rich by means of his own learning; clearly, he would be someone possessed of better fortune, more profound knowledge, clearer authority, and greater attention to friends than other men. Likewise, his fluency of speech, ease of manner, talent, versatility, and shrewdness would be more acceptable and more adapted to the ears and minds of men. Indeed, such a man should be learned so that the state, not hesitating to entrust its existence to him, can become accustomed to sharing his frequent complaints and honors. But very few indeed are those who will attain this great height of renown.[24]

This brings us to Alberti's disenchantment with the prevalent humanist practice of serving political power (let us recall Dynastes's destructive alliance with Fortunius in *Philodoxeus*). According to this Albertian view Petrarch, Salutati, Poggio, Manetti, Bruni, Dati, and others had all betrayed the humanist cause by placing their talents wholeheartedly in the service of pope and prince alike. Petrarch was well known for his devoted services in the interests of the Colonna; Salutati, chancellor of Florence, was surely no objective recorder of the history of Florence. The famous pen of Poggio was put freely into the service of politics. Manetti, Nicholas V's secretary and private

confidant, enthusiastically toed the papal line; Bruni and Dati were both propagandists for Florence, their writings supported by the state government.[25] Already then their services were viewed as establishmentarian. Pius II in his *Historia de Europa* makes it very clear that *studia humanitatis* is a prerequisite for the political career of a Florentine chancellor.

> The prudence of the Florentines is to be commended in many things, but most of all in their selection of chancellors, for they do not seek out lawyers, as most states do, but those skilled in oratory and what is called the *studia humanitatis*. For they are aware that not Bartolus or Innocentius but Cicero and Quintilian teach the art of speaking and writing well. We have known three in that city, illustrious in Greek and Latin learning and in the reputation of their own works, who have held the post of chancellor in succession: Leonardo and Carlo of Arezzo and Poggio of the same city-state, who as apostolic secretary wrote letters for three popes. Preceding them was Coluccio, whose eloquence was such that Galeazzo, the ruler of Milan who waged a terrible war against Florence within the memory of our fathers, was often heard to say that a thousand Florentine knights did him less harm than Coluccio's pen.[26]

It has long been recognized that humanism moved outside of established scholarly channels, through state chancelleries or princely courts, and that it did not shy away from propaganda, official history writing, and panegyric praise.[27] But where humanists in general saw their actions as part of a new commitment to public life, Alberti saw only a selling out to temporal interests. Political power, academic approbation, and ecclesiastical garments all served to mask self-serving ambition (*Cynicus*). The perfect humanists of Albertian provenance received their patronage, so to speak, directly from God: "This intellect, this cognition, reason, and memory, all of it so infinite and immortal, where does it come from if not from him who is infinite and immortal?"[28]

Alberti held out the thesis of the independent author despite the fact that he owed his livelihood to the papal curia. None of Alberti's presently known writings, except *Vita S. Potiti,* which as we shall see later was also subverted to his purpose, were undertaken in the service of the curia. Thus he had no qualms when he accused his fellow intellectuals of betraying

the higher goals of humanism. If we see (as we should) figures such as Philoponius as critiques of humanist theories and practices, we can no longer put Alberti blithely into the camp of those who proposed an ideal of man who determined his life by the assertion of free will.

The Five Ages of History

If Alberti rejected the very elements that we today conceive of as the main contributions of Renaissance humanism, it is not because he was naively medieval or sentimentally pious. His medievalism was deliberate, nuanced, and precise. It could perhaps be considered a neo-medieval critique of mainstream humanism. Though Alberti's thought may seem in some respects conservative, indeed reactionary, it is actually quite bold, as it contains an astounding heretical element. To explain this we must first review Alberti's historiographic vision, unique and *sui generis* among fifteenth-century thinkers. Though never explicitly stated in the works already studied, there are five historical stages that constitute the setting of the Albertian theater[29]:

1. The mythic garden and the hypothetically intact link between god, writer, and society. The garden is the spiritual homeland, so to speak, of the Albertian humanist.

2. The destruction of the garden, the beginning of historical time with its irreversible aesthetic, and the appearance and increasing momentum of the Moloch society.

3. The introduction of Libripeta, who reveals the *incommunicando* condition of the two worlds. He presents the first stage of a coming into consciousness, and a mapping out of the extent of social ruin and of the remoteness of the godhead.

4. The attempt made to address the problem by means of a savior postulate (Philoponius). The new Albertian author is a quixotic warrior who fights for the restoration of a reciprocal relationship between mankind and the deity to save man and reactivate divine potency. In this age Fortunius controls society, whereas Philodoxus, the embodiment of society's con-

sciousness, attempts to bond the world to the distant godhead (figure 3).

5. The final historical stage (to be discussed later), a critique of the theory of restoration. Alberti points neither to an eschatological future nor to a Christian-Petrarchian "rebirth." The world remains eternally "dark."

Alberti's historiography might be seen as a counter version to the fivefold vision of history discernible in Leonardo Bruni's *History of Florence,* which first describes the Roman Republic, then the rule of the emperors, the invasion of the barbarians, the new empire under Charlemagne, and finally the rise of the city-states of Italy around 1250.[30] Whereas Bruni employs the scheme to describe the secular history of Florence and the theme of liberty, its struggles and achievements, Alberti's historiographic vision is more in the nature of a creation myth and echoes concepts from Hesiod and Ovid. In *The Works and Days* Hesiod demonstrates a pattern that moves from peace to war, from joy to sadness, and from blessedness to anguish.[31] Clearly Alberti was an avid reader of Ovid, for many of his drastic descriptions of evil directly reflect sentences out of the *Metamorphoses* (indeed the theme of metamorphosis itself aptly describes the transformations the Albertian characters undergo).

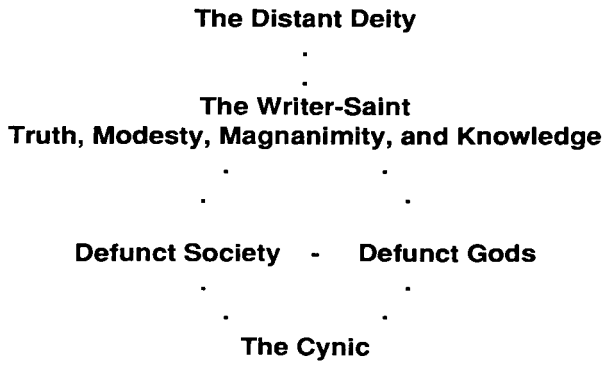

Figure 3
The fourth age of history.

The ultimate prototype for Alberti's idea of history, however, is the standard medieval understanding of history *sub specie aeternitatis,* which begins with the Garden of Eden and ends with judgment day, in all consisting of six periods. As first envisioned by Augustine and reiterated throughout the Middle Ages, the six ages were intended to illuminate the presence of a divine order that subsumed world history into the folds of a metahistorical progression.[32] *Sub specie aeternitatis* also argues that the only significant earthly events are those that portray the victory of faith, each incident subject of course to Apostolic approval. Though Alberti's historiographic concept has the outer form of history *sub specie aeternitatis,* it breaks the unquestionable ground rule, the precept of the centrality of the Church which dissolves only on judgement day, until which time the Church, with its organizational hierarchy, is the *only* possible means by which the faithful can attain salvation; the Church with its sacraments is the spiritual garrison against the armies of the devil. In Alberti's cosmology the humanist savior usurps the centrality of the Church. Taking up spiritualist arguments from the previous century—as well as anticipating reformist arguments yet to come—Alberti seems to suggest that the Church in its present state is a type of defective theocracy rather than a spiritual force.

To see the difference between Alberti's humanist historiography and the medieval canon more clearly, one need only recall the historiographic pattern developed by St. Bonaventure (1217–74) who, elaborating on St. Augustine, held that there were seven ages, the present being the sixth, in which the wine of revelation is adulterated by the water of philosophy.[33] The sixth age would end when the Holy Spirit would lead the Church into the full realization of the revelation of Christ. Though Alberti might have agreed that in the contemporary age philosophy was eroding society's spiritual core, he makes no concession to the role of the Church in mankind's salvation. It is nowhere indicated that Alberti's mystic humanist saints need the rituals of baptism, sacrament, or confession, much less an institutional backing. In Alberti's mystical humanism the writer-saints alone are responsible for God's commitment to human society and must be prepared for a mission

that while futile must necessarily consume them. Had Alberti written somewhat earlier or somewhat later, when any statement that denied the mediating function of the Church would have been deemed heretical, he might have been called upon to defend himself.[34] Even in his age he had reason to proceed carefully—and the cagey and ciphered mode of exposition might have served that purpose—for Church discipline judged conduct lightly but controlled opinion with an iron hand. He might not have been burned at the stake, but he could have incurred a writer's ban like that imposed on Ficino for his ideas on magic, or he could have drawn upon himself a papal condemnation, as was the case with Pico della Mirandola, who published a controversial criticism of theological practices.[35] It is interesting to realize here that Alberti's beliefs, expressed in the middle of the fifteenth century, were not dissimilar to those of Marsilius of Padua, who was condemned as a heretic in 1327 for arguing that the Church had abandoned its original spiritual mission in favor of temporal power.[36]

Even a comparison with the Cathari heresy, farfetched as it may seem, is not totally to be dismissed. Catharism (derived from the Greek for "pure"), a widespread spiritualist movement during the Middle Ages, conceived of a life as developing around an independent group of *perfecti* who are protected and honored by the community simply on account of their self-abnegating dedication.[37] The Cathari heresy, which developed out of the early Manichaeanism that attracted even Augustine in his youth, was eradicated for the most part by the late thirteenth century but survived in Florence and elsewhere in the households of Italian nobility well into the fourteenth century. Though it was very much dead as an organization by the fifteenth century, its general scheme (if not its complex cosmology and its many theological abstractions) were by no means forgotten. The Cathari rejection of the Church as institution and Alberti's own implicit rejection of it in the definition of his writer who exists as an independent spiritual agent seem too close to be accidental and might imply some reformist sentiments in Alberti's thoughts that have so far gone undetected.

For obvious reasons Alberti never overtly emphasized any of

these theological implications, making it difficult to speculate on them. At least he was never accused of heresy, and the political climate during his lifetime was more lenient than that of the previous centuries. Since Alberti's author types only strike the chords of heresy softly, they could be misread as Christian warriors. In this guise they would certainly appear not only as acceptable and uncomplicated theological propositions but also as a reflection of the church militant.[38]

The Winged Eye—Quid Tum?

An analysis of Philoponius is only complete if we do not overlook the strong undertow of irony. In that respect alone he has little in common with the radiant ideal man envisioned by the Neoplatonists. Philoponius and Libripeta are inseparably linked. The first is a *perfectus,* handing down the laws in the basilica, with Apollo as father, Virtus as mother; Libripeta is his sibling opposite. Having lost all faith in humanity, Libripeta willingly suffers ridicule in exposing the terrifying absence of human virtues. Both attempt to change humanity. One insists on the potential for stability, the other on the fundamental absence of stability. In a sense one could say that each haunts the system of the other.

This brings us to the famous medallion of Leon Baptista Alberti made by Matteo de' Pasti (figure 4). The front of the medallion portrays the profile of a youthful Alberti, the back, the famous winged eye; below the eye is the inscription: *quid tum* (What next?). The date of the medallion is uncertain.[39] However, since the eye and the inscription also appear on a manuscript of *Della pittura* dated 1436, it is clear that Alberti devised this emblem in conjunction not only with *Della pittura* but also with *Intercoenales,* which was written during that time.[40]

Various interpretations of the medallion have been proposed over the years, but since most of them do not deal with *quid tum,* they could not adequately address the symbolism of the ideogram.[41] I suggest that the medallion represents the paradox of the fourth age of history. The question *quid tum?,* asked by Lepidus in *Somnium* upon hearing Libripeta's tale, represents the moment of shock that marks the transition from

Figure 4
Matteo de'Pasti, commemorative medal of Leon Baptista Alberti (National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.). recto: Leone Battista Alberti (1404–72), architect and writer on art and science; Matteo de' Pasti; National Gallery of Art, Washington; Samuel H. Kress Collection (verso: within laurel wreath, a winged eye terminating in thunderbolts, and motto QVID TVM)

innocence to skepticism—from naiveté to an understanding that the "Good Arts," the major ordering principle in society, have been irredeemably lost in the sewer. Philoponius, with his winged eye, transcends Libripeta's sewer wisdom. As a *perfectus* defying all religious, political, and academic establishments he is free from temporal concerns, and flies like Pegasus—whose image appears on one of Philoponius's rings—with "wings of talent" over the "turbulent waters," much as the winged eye of the medallion seems to fly over *quid tum:* "We must be like Pegasus in the course of life and in this labile age which drags us along; in rushing to the port of a better life we must use our wings so that we are not drowned in the waves. The wings of men are the power of talent and the gifts of the spirit, by which we advance steadily up to the heavens with an understanding of things. And through virtue and piety we are joined to the gods."[42]

Against this background Alberti's medallion takes on a powerful meaning. Linking the voices of Philoponius and his bride Minerva on the one hand and Lepidus-Libripeta and his lost

bride Praise on the other, it portrays the two alter egos of the writer: the saint-king and the cynic. The two cannot be seen separately; they are a symbiotic pair. One is icon, the other iconoclast; one is triumphant, the other militant. There is nothing in between except the defunct religious, political, and intellectual establishments. The implication is that the Albertian writer faces the paradoxical situation of being *both* icon and iconoclast. To resolve this paradox Alberti devised a third type of humanist, the functionary, who attempts to reconcile the two in the real world. But though the writer can wistfully envision such a reconciliation, it remains a fantasy, because for Alberti nothing can alter mankind's self-alienation.

The Humanist Drama

Alberti's preoccupation with the writer, with the relationship between writer and society, and ultimately with the historiographic function of writing is by no means confined to *De commodis litterarum atque incommodis* and *Intercoenales* but extends to his entire oeuvre. Most of the characters that appear in his subsequent works not only fit the pattern but expand the theoretical structure of Alberti's tripartite definition of humanism: the humanist saint, the cynic, and between them, for lack of a better term, the "civic functionary." All too frequently scholars have had eyes only for the middle category. The functionaries, to be introduced in a few moments, are especially important in Alberti's aesthetics, as they, much like painters and architects, set out to inhabit the real world in a way that the humanist writers by definition cannot. Each type must be seen in the context of the others, as their interrelationship delineates different strategies of contact between humanism and temporal world. Those who "make peace treaties" (writer-saints) differ from those "who administer justice" (functionaries) and those "who cure illnesses" (the cynics).[1] The first bring into existence the "flowers, true doctrine, and all elegant and praiseworthy things."[2] The second inhabit the flexible world of urban existence, and the third preside over the realm of mankind's "disease-ridden life."

Interestingly enough, Alberti's tripartite view of the human-

ist endeavor finds a parallel in the thought of Pope Nicholas V, who was known to Alberti already from his student days in Bologna. Pope Nicholas described his objectives as establishing peace throughout the temporal and sacred realms of the papacy, rebuilding the city of Rome, and building a library for the papacy that could guide him in governing the Church.[3] Though the relationship between Nicholas and Alberti is too complex to be entered into here, it is notable that the first of Nicholas's objectives parallels Alberti's writer-saints and the second his functionaries. As to the third category, library and government, Alberti, as we have seen, has two alternatives, a success version (humanist "fathers") and a failure version (Libripeta). Whether these parallels between Nicholas V's program and Alberti's theory were due to their common educational roots, whether Alberti and Nicholas communicated on these issues in Rome, or whether Alberti is in fact critiquing the Pope we will never know, for there are no records to help us in our investigation.[4]

Using our knowledge of the roles played by Philodoxus, Fortunius, Libripeta, Leopis, Lepidus, Neofronus, and Philoponius, we turn now in chronological order to St. Potitus, Baptista, Agnolo, Theogenius, Genipatro, Microtiro, Gelastus, Momus, and Enopus. Like modern archeologists we must refrain from hunting only gold bracelets and sift through the shards as well, even if this results in certain redundancies. Only by showing the overwhelming evidence of the pattern can the point be made which so strongly contradicts traditional interpretation of Alberti's thought. The argument will move, conveniently, from saint, to functionary, to cynic.

Saint Potitus

In the spectrum of Albertian characters, St. Potitus stands at the extreme end of the saintly humanism. He serves as model *par excellence* for the hagiography of the humanist. *Vita S. Potiti* (1433), composed at the same time as *Intercoenales,* has been largely ignored because it was held to have been written on command and because its content fell outside the perimeter of scholarly interest.[5] As I will show, however, this hagiography

is particularly important in the definition of such transcendent writer types as Baptista, and reveals that Alberti, with his strategic skill, subverted all materials, undermining and ironizing their original context.

Vita S. Potiti, written by Alberti upon entering the curia as a sort of initiation exercise, was to be the first of a series of hagiographies ordered by the curia; for some reason, the series never progressed beyond the first installment. St. Potitus was by no means an obscure saint. A fresco of his decapitation painted by Spinella Aretino in 1391–92 in the Camposanto of Pisa was the centerpiece of a cult that survives to this day (see figure 5).[6] For the hagiography, however, there were few solid facts on which to draw. Predictably, Alberti used the opportunity to incorporate St. Potitus into his system. He not only produced "a more dignified version of the holy martyr's life," as he himself admits, but subverted the story surreptitiously to his own theoretical masterplan.[7] He transposed the illiterate young Sardinian into an articulate martyr, projecting onto him the now familiar autobiographic notations that point to the theoretical line.[8] St. Potitus is endowed with a gifted literary

Figure 5
Spinella Aretino, "The Martyrdom of St. Efesion and St. Potiti," in Camposanto of Pisa (1391). Reprinted from A. Lasinio, *Pittura a fresco del Campo Santo di Pisa* (Florence, 1832).

mind; his eloquence is such that "he was acclaimed and honored by even the most learned of men.[9]

The story begins with Potitus's elevation out of the physical into the metaphysical realm; he moves quickly from novice to sainthood by enduring the ridicule of the townspeople, by rejecting the wisdom of his biological father for the true wisdom of the Christian father, and by leaving home and country for exile in a secluded forest. Having no desire to pursue *vita civilis* or to acquire money and power, he enjoys his solitude far away from "the raw multitude" which "does not know how to make great things"[10]: "He thought it more beautiful to communicate with the beasts than with cruel and wicked men of which no city is without a great abundance."[11] However, as the story of St. Potitus proves and as the stories of other characters corroborate, the condition of exile too must be transcended. It is in essence only a form of testing. The humanist enterprise must not end in *contemptus mundi.*

The devil, eager to entrap Potitus, appears before him in the guise of a suave, handsome urbanite advocating the virtues of city life, the advantages of money, and the dishonor of intellectual solitude. When Potitus holds firm, the devil devises a more sophisticated strategy to entrap Potitus in temporal affairs. He infects the mind of the emperor's daughter with a profound illness so that the townspeople will call on Potitus to cure her with his miraculous healing abilities. And so it happens. Potitus gives up his life as a hermit, knowing that he must risk his life for the salvation of others. But he is stronger than the devil anticipated. Potitus not only heals the princess, but convinces her to become a Christian and even exorcizes the devil by striking her head, making the devil visible for all to see.

The emperor, afraid of Potitus's growing popularity, decides to kill him lest the entire populace embrace Christianity. Potitus, however, proves difficult to kill; the executioners try to burn him, feed him to the dogs, dismember him, and torture him, all to no avail; even when Potitus is thrown into the lions' den, the animals sit around and admire his "beautiful countenance." Only after a great struggle are the emperor's soldiers

able to decapitate him, the event that is the topic of the Camposanto fresco.

The story of St. Potitus's martyrdom had to follow the well established principles of hagiography that traditionally employed themes of suffering, temptation, spirituality, and miraculous indestructibility.[12] Miracles in which the saint forces men of evil to behave foolishly and ineffectively were typical of *vitae sancti.* But this does not mean that the work should be ignored. On the contrary, it confirms the hagiographic elements so frequently encountered in Alberti's quasi-autobiographic exposition. In fact, the story dovetails neatly into the scheme of quasi-autobiographical postulates. Alberti seems to admit as much in the opening paragraph: "I wanted the early life of Potitus to be the first subject on which I could test my abilities. His youth was marked by a singular perseverance and by a multitude of miracles. Whoever makes the effort to study this youth will find much material for discussion and much application to his own life."[13]

Vita S. Potiti further elaborates Alberti's idea of history as developed in *Philodoxeus,* where the dialectic of eternal versus ephemeral values is played out. Since society speeds ever more rapidly away from stability, restoration requires a commensurately greater counter effort. Thus the combat Potitus had to wage, Alberti pointedly mentions, is far more intense than that of Christ himself. The devil (equivalent here to Fortunius), who had appeared to Christ in human form, has become now, because of his successes, a monster "exceeding human strength."[14] Thus the devil is not seen as an independent agent of evil, but as a mirror of the growth of evil in man's psyche.

> Potitus knew the difference between these times and the ancient ones of Christ. In fact, the devil's tricks, namely the possession of ephemeral things, had in the beginning a human form as if to imply that the enjoyment and use of earthly goods was not adverse to mankind. Afterward the things [the devils] grew to a size more than human stature, because man—out of haughtiness and desire for grandeur—had become himself too haughty. And at the end they turned into beasts because of man's riches and excessive abundance of material things.[15]

Baptista

Baptista, appearing first in *Della Famiglia* (1433–34), then in *Vita anonyma* (1438), *Profugiorum ab aerumna* (1441), and finally in Alberti's last work, *De Iciarchia* (1468) assumes many of the hagiographic qualities of St. Potitus, in particular the saint's indestructibility. He too aspires to be one of the *uomini prestantissimi e rari* who resiliently and miraculously "emerge from life with undefeated and untroubled souls."[16] He inherits not only St. Potitus's early Christian meekness but his function; in the dangerous urban environment that is his home, he is triumphantly defenseless. The "bad-mouthers" are forced to admire him just as the lions felt compelled to admire Potitus: "He [Baptista] lived among envious and malevolent people with such modesty and equanimity that no matter how angry his rivals and detractors were with him, in the presence of the high and mighty they dared not say anything about him but praise and admiration."[17]

The best definition of Baptista is found in the *Vita anonyma* (as the text has been labeled by historians), written five or six years after *Vita St. Potiti.*[18] As usual, the character portrayed is not Alberti *in propria persona.* When Alberti wrote this *Vita,* he was a mere *abbreviatore* in the papal curia. Apart from the prestige of his post—which he shared with over a hundred others—Alberti had little power, money, or influence. At best he was known within a small circle of *literati.* Yet the *Vita* describes a man "famous," "known by not a few princes," and "loved by all."[19] Like a prophet, he was followed by admirers who "collected the utterances of his mouth as he walked."[20] He was so secure in his civic standing that "he did not need to wear the purple robes of his high office."[21] And, to top everything off, Alberti glowingly describes Baptista as "*meritamente elivato.*"[22]

"Baptista," like Philoponius, is the ultimate heretical *perfectus* endowed with an aura of mythic superiority. The *Vita* opens with these words: "In everything that was necessary for a noble and liberal education, he was—ever since the time of his childhood—master, sure of himself as a leading youth of his age."[23] Alberti even overplays Baptista's physical strength to demon-

strate that Baptista is a being of an altogether different scale: "In soldierly exercises, he was famous in his youth. . . . He could throw a small coin of silver up high in a temple with so much force that one could hear the sound of it hitting the vault."[24] Like Apollo, he was able "to determine at just a glance everyone's defects,"[25] and, based on what he saw, he could make actual predictions: "Standing in front of the palace of d'Este, where in the time of Niccolo the Tyrant, most of the city's youth would be slain, he said: 'Oh friends, this pavement will perforce be slippery in the future because much blood will flow within this wall. . . .'"[26]

And so Baptista too, a saint-king, combining spiritual and physical strength in one being, employs his "versatile talent" (the same term was applied to Philoponius) to connect the heavenly with the earthly but—as always—not through politics but through "literature."[27] Since the humanist renounces all mercantile contacts, literature is the *only* fragile link that connects him to the secular. Intrinsically—and importantly—the writer is no "universal man." His contact with the world is by way of a very narrow path.

The path takes the form of a protracted struggle. He must show through bodily suffering that his study of literature is not equivalent to the acquisition of evil (as we remember, this was the topic of *De commodis litterarum atque incommodis*). Thus Baptista, "giving everything in himself to literature," suffers bodily weakness, emaciation, abdominal pain, temporary loss of sight, and singing in the ears—all iconographic attributes indicating that entering the realm of "earthly knowledge" is for him not equivalent to entering a realm of earthly sin.[28] Even Baptista's abdominal pain was a typical hagiographic complaint. For example, a contemporary of Alberti, the Florentine prelate Antonio Degli Agli (ca. 1400–77), wrote a *vita* in 1475 in which he takes up many familiar themes: youthful poverty, many worries, familial problems, temptations of the flesh, false accusations, and, of course, those abdominal pains, all of which did not deter him from his dedication to God, learning, painting, sculpture, and theater.[29] Whether Agli was influenced by Alberti is a moot point, for both authors took the hagiographic

structure and filled it in with iconographical markers pointing to typical manifestations of the holy in the world.[30]

Alberti's *Vita,* however, is only one variation in the autobiographical subtext. Unlike Leopis, for example—who "lost the garland" and was unable to marry Praise and deliver his text—Baptista is portrayed as successful in elevating others to his level: "He was pleased with his writings, for his talent was not small . . . . He was praised by the good ones and the scholars . . . . Citizens who were still ignorant became so enraptured by his books that they became fond of literature."[31] Baptista's recreational habits serve only to demonstrate his purposefulness: Baptista, as was his custom, "would walk a few hours in the hills, or in the plain, for exercise, and then return to his study of literature and philosophy."[32]

Predictably, Baptista's efforts attract the jealousy of detractors, and on one occasion Baptista is forced to burn some of his writings to keep them out of the hands of numerous "slanderers."[33] Since Baptista possesses a steady, self-effacing patience, he transcends these trials and never permits himself any sign of spleen or irritability. Patience is important, for it allows talent to rise untainted to the surface: "He desired in all things a sense of moderation, all that is except for patience; in this regard he said: "One should possess either all of it or none of it."[34]

Baptista willingly and eagerly assumes his duty as a chosen one in the vanguard of those who preserve the myth of intactness. "Our real business," Alberti comments in the *Della Famiglia,* "is always to expose, by the very excellence of our conduct, those persons who are liars and frauds."[35] Baptista, representing the struggle of "the good, virtuous, and meek against the vicious, rapacious, and ambitious," forces evil men, assuming they are not won over by the innate beauty of his being, to resort to acts of jealousy, hatred, and violence thus exposing in piecemeal fashion the dark somniatic realities known to Libripeta.[36] Just as St. Potitus forces the devil into visibility, Baptista forces evil to demask itself. This cleansing function, which Apollo was unable to perform (*Oraculum*), is Baptista's cultural mission: "I [Baptista] will withstand you easily since with your lies you clarify for me who you are and who

I am. By grandstanding in this way, you reveal your arrogance rather than discomfit me by your insistent slander."[37]

Perambulating the city, Baptista, speaking through the voice of St. Potitus, points out in aphoristic manner the actions of evil men.

> When he saw a wicked judge who strode in with one shoulder higher than the other, he said: "Here it seems the equal is unequal since the scales of justice do not balance."[38]
>
> With the state safe from foreign threats, attention was directed at wicked citizens, and he said: "Doesn't it seem reasonable that after the rain stops, one repairs the roof?"[39]
>
> "False ones, detractors, ambiguous ones, liars, the infamous, and all sacriligious and great robbers ought to be punished," he used to say, "because they destroy truth, reason, and very holy and rare things."[40]
>
> Viewing the house of an ambitious man [he said]: "This inflated *palazzo* will blow its owner right out the door." And this indeed is what happened, for the mortgage on the house drove the proud owner into exile.[41]
>
> There are the Letters to Paolo the Doctor where he foresaw future events of the fatherland years before they happened. And in this way he predicted the destiny of the Pope that actually happened twelve years later, and his friends and associates recall that he predicted insurrections of many cities and rebellions against princes.[42]

Baptista, we must not forget, is the product of an ontological aesthetic, a self-conscious configuration that renders him as a neo-primitive and one could almost say a *provocateur.* Alberti, of course, was aware of this paradox, having gone to great length to contrive it, as will become clearer in *Momus.*

Agnolo and Giannozzo

While Baptista embodies the saintly in an urban setting, Agnolo di Pandolfini and Giannozzo Alberti belong to a separate category, the humanist functionaries. Agnolo appears in *Profugiorum ab aerumna* (1441) and Giannozzo in *Della Famiglia* (1434, completed 1440). Unlike most of Alberti's characters, Agnolo di Pandolfini (1360–1446) was taken from real life; he was a venerated Florentine statesman and ambassador.[43] Yet,

his real definition emerges only from within the context of the other Albertian characters. Unlike Libripeta, he remains free of cynicism and, at the age of ninety, is still a functioning member of society, burdened with law cases. He is, however, an intellectual mendicant, transcending love of country and even love of family and thus capable of bridging the gap between the Libripetian sewer and the humanist ideals. Although he never was in exile, he clearly perceives its intellectual advantages:

Agnolo: Some say: "Love your country, love your family, and benefit them as much as they want." But others say that the country of the human being is the whole world, and that the wise man, wherever he is, will make that place his own; he won't escape his country, but he will adopt another one, and he will be a lot better off there where he will not receive injury and where he can live without causing trouble to himself. Thus they praise that old saying of Teucer, a well-known and prominent man; he said that his country was where he could settle well.[44]

Agnolo, though not a writer in the hagiographic sense has produced numerous *documenti* dripping with good advice, for he—like all Albertian Humanists—understands the value of the text.[45] The *documenti* were collected by none other than "Baptista" and form the last of the three books into which the dialogue is divided.

For all excellent public affairs, for all well-thought-out plans of life, for all cultivation and ornamentation of the soul, it is essential to devote oneself to literature and to the learning and exercising of memories and warnings that scholars destine to posterity . . . . The documents collected and referred to . . . will be by themselves so cultured that I don't doubt you will be glad to recognize them in my writings, regardless of my own eloquence and accuracy in speaking.[46]

Since Agnolo is also "like a father to Baptista . . . who eagerly follows him around," he makes sure that Baptista maintains faith in his own literary mission[47]: "This is an age so full of envy and perversity that that which should be praised and approved is vituperated by all. Nevertheless, Baptista continue with your work so as to be useful to your fellow citizens."[48]

Agnolo's presence in the city portrays the fragile continuity of society's spiritual essence. This is allegorized by the setting

of the dialogue, which opens as the three interlocutors—Agnolo, Niccolo, from the family Veri de Medici, and Baptista—meet in a public temple. The temple, a *profugiorum* from mythic time, is described as a peaceful zone in a hostile world. On the inside, is a "quiet, springlike atmosphere, a pleasant grace, a majesty and a solidity, built for posterity"; on the outside is the "freezing" city, subjected to inconstant winds. The temple compares to Agnolo himself.

> And certainly this temple has within itself grace and majesty: and, as I have often thought about it, I think I see in this temple a graceful delicacy combined with a full and strong solidity, so that, on one hand, each part of it looks as if it was placed there for pleasantness. On the other hand, I understand that everything here has been done and declared for posterity. Furthermore, here lives, so to speak, a springlike climate. Outside it is windy and chilly and freezing, but inside the winds are closed off and the air is tepid and quiet. Outside there are summer and autumnal blasts; inside there is a very temperate refreshment.[49]

The circumstance that few people visit the temple "despite its worth" implies that there are few who value the principles of "intact wisdom."[50]

Another functionary figure is also borrowed from Alberti's own life, his uncle Giannozzo Alberti, as described in *Della Famiglia.* Like Agnolo, he is actively engaged in urban politics, his discussions touching on issues that deal with the house, the shop, the villa, the farm, the manufacturing process and the managing of tenants. Alberti explicitly connects the two men in *Profugiorum ab aerumna:* "Agnolo and Giannozzo are the only two men he [Baptista] knows who are complete in all the values of life."[51] The two represent *prudentiam integram.* Intact wisdom, however, is allowed many variations, according to the talents of the individual who possesses it.[52] Giannozzo, being a businessman, is "craftier" and more astute than Agnolo; Agnolo, a magistrate, is credited with "a greater knowledge of literature."[53]

Agnolo and Giannozzo, magistrate and businessman, the two "fathers" of Baptista, symbolize the survival of the garden in the city. It is their duty to make contact with those who, like Baptista and Philoponius, cannot make contact with the world

and can only communicate through their literary works and oracular statements. Both parties, however, face a difficult future, even if in *Della Famiglia* and *Profugiorum ab aerumna* Alberti portrays the "family" as functioning within the confines of the city. Baptista's paternal house, the mythical "ancestor of construction," as Alberti describes it in *Vita anonyma,* is "old, dark, badly lit and in ruins."[54] And indeed, in *Della Famiglia,* Lorenzo, Alberti's biological father, lies on his death bed, and Giannozzo is old, and in *Profugiorum ab aerumna* Agnolo is already ninety years old; obviously the *profugiorum* of civic humanism is an endangered realm.

Theogenius, Genipatro, and Microtiro

In *Theogenius* (The One whose Origin is with the Gods, 1441), a work written almost simultaneously with *Profugiorum ab aerumna* but in a way its sequel, Alberti describes a state of affairs wherein the humanist father figure retreats altogether. We are now moving closer to the third category of Albertian humanists. Though the two protagonists in the dialogue are not cynics, the tone of the book is dark. In contrast to the aged Agnolo, who demonstrates a modicum of authorial success—functioning uncontaminatedly within the city—the main characters in this dialogue, Theogenius and Genipatro (Father of Country), are in exile far from the city, which is now controlled by Tichipedo (The Child of Fortune) who is, of course, the Fortunius (Son of Tychia) of *Philodoxeus.* Theogenius and Genipatro, both refugees from the camp of the functionaries, find their task unfulfillable and embrace sainthood. Much as St. Potitus, they renounce life in the city and accept exile so as not to be numbered among the "bestial human beings" who "infest" everything they touch, desiring only to satisfy "the dark abyss of their stomachs."[55] In bucolic quietude they can now produce books which are "well composed, very correct, and full of teachings and wonderful kindness."[56] Their absence from the city, however, shows a deterioration of the scenario, for it is unlikely that they will return.

Alberti claims that the theme of "parental loss" was prompted by his own suffering on the occasion of the death

of his parents.[57] "I want only to console myself in my adverse fortunes."[58] Since Alberti's father had died twenty years earlier and his mother several years before that, it is clear that he is referring to the death of Niccolo d'Este (1384–1441) of Ferrara, whose son Leonello was a recipient of a copy of the book. But the tenor of the book is clearly metaphoric; Alberti employs the theme of parental loss as a springboard to the topic of the humanist's orphaned condition. It is Agnolo who has died, so to speak, and now everything sways in the nauseating tyranny of *varietà e varietà*.[59]

In the dialogue Microtiro (Young Recruit), a novice and would-be civic functionary, has traveled out into the forest to find Theogenius, but with the city abandoned to Fortunius, he cannot yet make head or tail of the perplexing aesthetic that constitutes the very fiber of the city: "I face the malignity of perfidious and evil men who, conspiring, blaming, feigning, and with deeds, cares, industry, study, constancy, and diligence, and all art and fraud, continually annoy me by saying, doing, and pursuing things which cause poverty, hate, envy, hostility, and a bad life and great infamy."[60] Theogenius's attempt to convince Microtiro "not to give any value to fragile and ephemeral things exposed to change" is clouded by his own resignation[61]: "The soul, as Heraclitus claimed, purged of the crassness of earthly weight, escapes this prison as an arrow flies to the sky. I believe that you will find nobody who, after having left this life, would wish to go back to it."[62]

Whether Microtiro will grow to the challenge and return to the city to become a new saintly Philoponius or whether he will become a cynic is purposefully left open. This recapitulates the theme of the novice having to choose between sainthood or cynicism or, as gradually comes into view, an ironic combination of the two.

Gelastus and Enopus

Momus (1443–45), a mock creation myth, is typical of Alberti's homonymic style, in which various layers of meaning are interwoven.[63] The surface screens a subtler and more difficult

message that deals with the inherent implausibility of the humanist program and the alienating nature of textuality.

This work introduces the category of the ultimate humanist cynic and will be dealt with more fully in a subsequent chapter. Investigating the fate of a writer who finds himself totally useless to society, it takes up the theme of a fatherless and textless society and brings it to a logical extreme. In *Philodoxeus* there had been no confrontation between the hero and the forces of cultural destruction. Philodoxus did not pursue Fortunius to the bitter end but accepted Gloria instead. In the *Intercoenales* stories *Corolle* and *Anuli* the struggle became more intense, and the possibility of a negative outcome was evoked; in the final analysis, however, Minerva guided her humanist suitor into the basilica. In *Theogenius* Fortunius was in ascendancy and the Albertian humanists were resigned to a life of isolation. In *Momus* many of these themes are brought to a conclusion with the character Momus attempting to hand over a *tabella* to Jove with a blueprint for a new and better world. Needless to say, the utopic moment will pass by unheeded.

Momus and a related character, Peniplusius, will be dealt with later. For the time being we will turn to the character pair of Enopus and Gelastus that functions in a self-contained subplot. Albertian voices in ironic antagonism to each other, the two bring the initial confrontation of Leopis and Libripeta full circle. One the innocent, the other the sophisticate, they speak to each other across the *terribilità* of existence. Gelastus (The Ridiculous One), a comic version of the novice Lepidus (*Corolle*), has recently died and is on his way to the river Styx. Like Lepidus of old, he still cannot understand that he speaks a "foreign" tongue. In his complaint, we recognize the familiar figure Alberti had first created some twenty-five years earlier.

Gelastus: Exiled from my country, I consumed the flower of youth in a continuous peregrination and in constant fatigue, pestered without respite by poverty and injuries from enemies. I have endured the evil deeds of friends, the pillage on the part of my relatives, the slander of rivals, and the cruelty of enemies. In escaping the hostile attacks of Fortuna, I fell into the abyss that was prepared for me. Though I was agitated by the convulsions of the times, burdened by preoccupations, oppressed by necessity, I endured everything with

moderation, hoping always to receive better treatment from the gods and my destiny than I received. Happy was I if I could manage to draw some satisfaction from the exercise of the arts, to which I am always dedicated. Whether or not my writings drew me any profit, that I will let others judge.[64]

Gelastus represents a dead branch on the ontological tree, as he still has not penetrated the causes of society's *insania,* while tragically experiencing its effects: "There where I should have been given gratitude, I was given abundant envy, there where I expected aid for living, I found injury; there where good men promised to share their good fortune, the wicked gave more wickedness. You will say: 'This is the common experience of mankind, and one ought to remember that one is just a man.'"[65]

Just as Lepidus originally was haunted by Libripeta, we find Gelastus still pursued, more relentlessly than ever, by the cynic Enopus (The Color of Wine). Though intoxicated, Enopus has not lost his former sting. He is now an actor sophisticated in the art of role-playing and masking. When he sees Gelastus wander onto his stage, he cannot restrain his biting tongue and accuses him of having been too innocent and of having failed to protect his work. Gelastus, he points out, only "resembles the true one" and is not who he thinks he is (*Corolle*). Enopus even suspects that Gelastus's benevolence is only a farce.

Enopus: Gelastus repeats nothing but old clichés. What especially pleases me is the perfect artificial make-up of this Gelastus who resembled the true one in a remarkable manner.

Caronte [who is accompanying Gelastus to Hades] heard several things about Gelastus during his life, in particular that he was wise and learned. He also heard, however, that he was foolish and silly, and that everyone renounced him for being pusillanimous and neglecting to protect his dignity against grave offenses. People did not approve his principle to be continually useful to others and thus each day he was tormented and insulted. It was quite a different thing to deal with Enopus who was able to protect himself from injury and from the audacity of insolent people which he suffered with great tolerance.[66]

Gelastus's efforts to preserve the myth of the intact society have proved ridiculous and comic because, like Neofronus, he remained inexplicably naive. Enopus, though more capable, is

not perfect either; and Gelastus, in turn, is quick to point this out to Caronte. Enopus lacks commitment to ennobling principles; "he accuses everybody, but represents nothing himself."

Appearing to be very different, both characters are similarly ineffectual. Neither seems to be able to escape from the other. The one is too uncritical, the other too critical; The one suffers because no one appreciates his benevolence, the other because no one appreciates his acrimonious wisdom. This debate, which represents the underside of Alberti's theory of humanism, featuring an ineffectual humanist cynic arguing with a ineffectual humanist saint, caricatures the ongoing struggle of society with itself. The fight between weak writer and drunk critic insanely accusing each other of falsity while the source of evil remains untouched emphasizes the ludicrousness of a crisis for which there is no cure. The gods, all the while observing this tragicomedy, break into sidesplitting laughter, which is certainly Alberti's own commentary on what he sees as the paradox inherent in intellectual commitment. It is this laughter that, as we shall see, precludes the theory of any utopian vision or any truly functionable plan for a better world.

The Autobiographical Trope

We have introduced almost all of the important Albertian characters and explored their respective roles. It should now be clear that the autobiographical elements are always and exclusively literary tropes. Alberti's exile from Florence (though terminated when he was twenty-four) is glorified into the writer's necessary exile from the city. The early loss of Alberti's father becomes the loss of society's center of gravity as allegorized by the figure of an inaccessible Genipatro. The youthful peregrination of the student changes into Leopis's journey in search of his literary identity.

With the help of these allegorical tropes, Alberti explored, almost in a workshop fashion, the variegated facets of the literary experience, projecting them onto a cosmological plane. The numerous variations of the writer-type are not isolated fictive elements, but are developed along diverse narrative tracks. One scenario begins with Leopis and ends with the

Neofronus, who belatedly laments the loss of his reputation and the loss of his writings. In another, Leopis becomes Libripeta, once he sees into society's subconscious. In still another, the novice becomes Philoponius, who emerges miraculously unscathed from the turbulence of society to be an effective practitioner in Alberti's tentative utopian vision. There is Baptista, whose *Werdegang* was modeled on St. Potitus. Novices, saints, functionaries, humanist fathers, and cynics all serve to map out the unrelenting history of mankind in a labyrinthian search for authenticity.

Libri Disvoluti

Seen individually, Alberti's writings always seem to swerve around something unexpressed. One piece ends with the author feigning suspense as to the outcome; another seems to have no resolution whatsoever. One is a fragment without ending, another a fragment without apparent beginning. Many pieces would be misunderstood without a broader context. In this manner Alberti continually points beyond each work and each character and challenges the reader to search for the external narrative. As a consequence, there can be no philosophy in the standard sense; the masterplan comes into focus only between the cracks, as it were.

Inconclusivity is both a reaction and a response to the virus of fragmentation against which there is no defense. Even Baptista's books are "fragmented and torn (*libris disvolutis*)."[67] The fragmented text thematizes the inherent uncertainty of intellectual life that separates image from argument and writer from text and refers to the authorial malaise that symbolizes society's malfunctioning. Since this applies to Alberti just as much as to his artificially created characters, Alberti's autobiographical journey cannot possibly be a mere rendition of his own life. Rather it stands in opposition to it, demonstrating the external pressures that disallow a naturally conceived autobiographical narrative.

Alberti seems prepared to accept the fact that as the theoretical armature takes on its ciphered characteristic the author disappears at the very moment he speaks; this is anticipated in

and is indeed the very theme of *Philodoxeus,* where Leopis becomes the spokesman for Alberti, who refuses to speak in his authentic voice, given the inauthenticity of society itself. The oscillation of the characters and their constantly changing metamorphic patterns obstruct the view toward the author. At the very moment the Leopis-mask is pulled off in *Corolle,* we discover an unexpected transformation: Leopis has become Libripeta, and the moment of truth is lost. Alberti has allowed his self to be stripped of eminently concrete and legitimate attributes only to see it exposed to its own inauthenticity and to his own inability to reclaim the text. With the characters of Philoponius and Baptista, some precious time is gained, and the moment of realization is for the moment pushed away, only to surge forward all the more violently in later works such as *Theogenius,* where Genipatro and Theogenius compose their books in peace and solitude, but without any hope that humanist knowledge will ever translate into effective and benign action.

Because Alberti merges his theory of disjunction with the method employed to investigate it, his writings are hard to penetrate. In one sense, literary ontology gives way to a literary cosmology that is both a private language, needing to be decoded, and a public language serving as decoy. In reverse, Alberti uses a public language to articulate the private sphere, much as Agnolo employs fragments from "great and noble buildings" to construct his private study.[68] This conflict was never meant to be resolved, as it points to and is the product of the underlying aesthetic nature of human existence that just as it is denied access to its ontological center cannot reach beyond into the objective.

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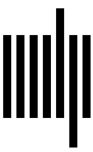

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