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## **Confrontation with the Arch-Aesthetic**



## Terminus a Quo

The divergence of word from meaning and being from image is the fundamental problematic in Alberti's writings. He returns to it again and again in one way or another. On the one hand, it represents the loss of authentic values. On the other hand, it represents an opportunity, a creative potential. The separation of being from image, the bane of existence and its very *raison d'être*, develops into a question of aesthetics since the experience of self-knowledge turns everyone into a master "in the methods of artificial (self-)construction."<sup>1</sup> This is exemplified in Alberti's willful interpretation of the figure of Narcissus in *De pictura*. Whereas medieval Neoplatonists thought of Narcissus as having lost himself in a transitory world of copies, Alberti holds that Narcissus was the first "painter": "I used to tell my friends that the inventor of painting, according to the poets, was Narcissus. . . . What is painting but the act of embracing, by means of art, the surface of the pool?"<sup>2</sup> Narcissus was not only the first painter but also the first human, having discovered the difference between being and image. Once the Narcissistic moment, equivalent to Adam's fall from grace, had occurred, man, severed from *società natura e vera religione* (as known by Apollo in *Oraculum*), was posited in chronological time (*Vaticinium*). Simulative obsession now dominates his psyche, and he is free to manipulate his image to the point where "in simulating we become what we want to appear."<sup>3</sup>

The area of dislocation, equivalent to an area of tension between subject and object, is the locus of an all-encompassing aesthetic in which all are "artists." Since the practice of simulation more than anything determines human behavior, from its most bestial to its most spiritual, the aesthetic moment cannot be reduced to a mere question of beauty. It is much more than that; it is the *terminus a quo* of human existence.

Aristotelians perceived man as preeminently rational, Stoics perceived him as social, and Neoplatonists as potentially divine. For Alberti, man is thinker *and* actor, a genetically coded masker. And, since aesthetics is not *eo ipso* linked to ethics, man creates an ambivalent world of displaced signifiers in which

rationality becomes a mask for irrationality, virtue for evil, honesty for lies, and laws for lawlessness. Man, lost in a world of a thousand mirrors, can never reencounter his own authenticity. The humanist enterprise has the dubious mission of catering to this futile task.

In this respect Alberti's thought, though related to the classical theory of *mimesis*, differs from it in several important aspects. For Aristotle, imitation is natural to man from childhood on and constitutes one of his advantages over the lower animals (*Poetics*, 4). Not only is the mimetic capacity a potential source of delight, but it is equivalent to an innate urge to order the world, augment and complete nature, and in the process discover its rational organization. For Alberti, mankind's imitative capacity has no such optimistic connotation; it is devoid of that all-important ethical component fundamental to the ordering process. Art, far from being above everyday experience, is equivalent to it, for there is no human activity that is not in some way aesthetic. Indeed, it is mankind's aesthetic nature that drags him downward and that keeps him from becoming a rational, civic, and spiritual being. As we shall see, the Albertian humanist attempts an implausible critical rescue of the aesthetic domain. However, since aesthetics is an ontological given and ethics an unnatural, synthetic, and belated counterthrust, the struggle goes against the divine plan and must by definition fail.

### **The Human Prerogative**

In a mock creation myth in a subplot of *Momus*, which I shall briefly summarize, Alberti gives us his version of the origin of man's art-making capacity.<sup>4</sup> An unnamed "painter," after fashioning men and women out of mud and shaping them in precast molds of copper, directs his creatures to his habitat, located "on top of a mountain," a place where they will find all "good things in abundance." They are exhorted to ascend directly and speedily. (In *De pictura* the comprehension of the rule of perspective is also "direct and simple," that is, for the "intelligent minds."<sup>5</sup>) The path to the land of "abundant good" is described by the painter as posing only initial difficulties (an

argument also found in *De pictura*<sup>6</sup>). Men, willful in the face of choices, do not recognize the “simple and good” and break away in a foolish effort to imitate animals; this, as Alberti states sarcastically, is “a prerogative that had been permitted them by their creator.”

Given the pattern of Alberti’s thought, we may construe that the newly created beings stray from the path because they lack a text. As we shall see, Baptista with *De pictura* and Momus with his *tabella* attempt to correct the painter’s “mistake,” the former by handing to the painters a text that will guide their work, the latter by handing to Jove a text for the construction of a “new and better world.” However, in the world created by the Promethean painter in *Momus*, which metaphorically describes the status quo of our world, there is no text, and mankind’s art-making prerogative emerges as the source of eternal perplexity.

Having left the indicated path for the precipitous wilderness of brambles and thorns (society), the new men in uncontrolled simulative response to their environment progressively deteriorate from animals into monsters. (In *De pictura* Alberti relates how individuals who do not heed his instructions will tap around among unknown paths like blind men and get lost.<sup>7</sup>) When these violently transfigured men eventually try to return to the main path, they find themselves rejected. Constructing masks for themselves, they are able to mingle unrecognized with the few that had ascended directly.

No longer passive imitator, man has become an active speculator in the ontological realm. The differentiation between the good ones and the *fictiones* has disappeared. “Only with the greatest difficulty, by looking closely at the eye sockets, can one perhaps make out the difference.”<sup>8</sup> Society, unable to distinguish between true and deceptive orders and between true and false discourses, feeds exclusively on the nervous energy generated by the perverse struggle it is waging against itself.

### **The Lost Ointment**

The separation of word from meaning, of being from image, leads to an ambiguous relationship between man and himself

(as reflected, for example, in Alberti's struggle to reconcile himself with Baptista and Baptista with Libripeta). The painful deviation from the principle of ontological immediacy, negating authentic existence condemns mankind to live and create in a shadowy world of wandering signification. This is the theme of the allegory *Patientia* (Endurance) from *Intercoenales*, which I will briefly summarize.<sup>9</sup> Exhausted from curing the diseases of mankind, the goddess Endurance, daughter of Necessity, has sought refuge on a deserted mountain side. Necessity, worried that her daughter's absence may cause even more harm among mortals, goes in search of her. When she finds her, Endurance explains that she went into hiding because she realized how ineffective her healing efforts really were; they consist only of "chants learned from old Chronos."

Necessity admits that such "inexpensive" cures cannot heal the truly ill and gives her daughter an ointment "prepared from the essence of hard work and diligence, expensive stuff indeed" (ethics). For a brief moment there seems some hope that mankind will have its primordial intactness returned. Predictably, Endurance "accidentally" drops the vial (the painter delivered no text, and Jove rejects Momus's manuscript) and the ointment is lost forever. Endurance returns to her previous practice of giving to the ill "berries of flattery . . . the herbal plaster hope, [and] little speeches of consolation." The potion that could cure is replaced by a palliative, truth by deceit, and Necessity, representing the congruence of word and action, by Endurance, a "student of Chronos."

### **The Art of Simulation**

The simulative urge, part of the ontological definition of mankind, running concomitant with the dialectic of spirit and body and presided over by Chronos, develops its own trajectory through time. The "art" of simulation, "a gift by the goddess Deception at the beginning of time," plays itself out as history.<sup>10</sup> "In the beginning," Alberti writes in *De re aedificatoria*, there were a few basic building types, all "derived from nature." Eventually, however, society developed into such complexity

that “the various kinds of buildings have become almost infinite.”<sup>11</sup> Not only did the types of buildings increase, but buildings became subdivided into component parts that are themselves “like smaller houses.”<sup>12</sup> The momentum away from “nature” cannot be arrested, but the resulting fragmentation could be controlled by a continuous and conscious ordering process. The absence of an aesthetic “theory,” however, has carried architects along on the drifting currents of time. They have lost the “footsteps of nature” and now produce buildings “out of whim.”<sup>13</sup> In *De statua* we hear Alberti complain that “not surprisingly artists” (much like rhetoricians) “in creating similitudes, eventually arrived at the stage where . . . they were able to make any similarities they wished.”<sup>14</sup>

This movement toward ever greater arbitrariness is also the thesis of Alberti’s often ignored panegyric *Canis* (1441), a tongue-in-cheek eulogy on his dog. In spite of the humor implicit in the situation, Alberti begins on a rather serious note with a discussion of the function of eulogies in contemporary literature. He holds that over time there has been an increase in the writer’s ability to create rhetorical images, as compared to ancient times “when excellent men first began proclaiming in their writings the immortality and virtue of their contemporaries.”<sup>15</sup> Just as in *De statua* Alberti here claims that “things went so far that some, not satisfied simply with praise and honor, raised with their writings the reputation of those who have behaved most virtuously to the point where they were called gods.”<sup>16</sup> Alberti then points out that now we can even create things which have never existed in reality. “Besides all this, others invented fabulous things that could not be absolutely believed, only to isolate and exalt manly excellence.”<sup>17</sup>

Alberti’s panegyric is a ribald metaphor for the compulsive progression inherent in the simulative process. Not without self-ironizing humor Alberti, living up to the historiographic expectations of the present, endows the dog with all the characteristics typical of a Philoponius or a Baptista. He is prudent, virtuous, brave, and blessed with a singular talent and moral wisdom. Not only does he come from an ancient and illustrious lineage (his father was Megastomo: Big Mouth), but his image

is linked with all of the famous canine heroes of the past. We even find him credited with a knowledge of the liberal arts!

In *De re aedificatoria* Alberti, in a more serious vein, delicately inserting a piece of social criticism into the text, contrasts his own age—hoping that someone will “rise to reform it”—with an earlier one where the “writings of the fathers were still extant.”<sup>18</sup> He then describes how princes of old were content with modest statues depicting their victories, but after learning to associate their victories with divine power, they began to create grander monuments to perpetuate their own names rather than honor the name of god, “all rising to such a pitch that whole towns were built simply to honor the fame of an individual.”<sup>19</sup> A few paragraphs later we hear of sculptors who, prompted by the excesses of their princely patrons, repeat the historical pattern. They create sculptures so large that they required many pieces of stone. In painting the same seems to hold true, for today, when “incredible prices are asked for painted panels,” the art of painting is far beyond the stage where “man was mindful of his nature and origins.”<sup>20</sup>

Paddy Chayefsky’s 1960s play *Gideon* seems to take the words out of Alberti’s mouth. The theme of the play is the progressive rebellion of Gideon against God. At the play’s opening God inspires Gideon, who is absolutely obedient to him, to win battles over Israel’s enemies “for God’s sake.” As the play progresses, Gideon begins to win battles “for God and Gideon,” then “for Gideon and God,” and finally “for Gideon” alone. As the play closes, Gideon declares full independence from God.<sup>21</sup>

### **Civitas Perversa**

Whereas medieval Aristotelians argued that art and nature form a symbiotic pair, Alberti argues that mankind’s art-making capacity is a by-product of his native instinct to deceive and is equivalent to a separation from the wholesomeness of nature.<sup>22</sup> Aesthetics and ethics derive from divergent impulses: the former is given as a troublesome prerogative free of charge; the latter—“expensive stuff indeed”—is distilled from hard work and discipline, the ingredients of the “lost oint-



ment.” Since the simulative capacity is without the imprint of an ethical coding, society, left to itself, degenerates into a quasi-Augustinian *civitas perversa*.<sup>23</sup> Alberti, at his most medieval, sees the city as marked by persistent worldly clamor; in his cosmology the true God is remote, and Fortuna has replaced Virtus and the Soothsayer, Apollo.<sup>24</sup> Given over to the “fraudulent, false, perfidious, reckless, audacious, and rapacious,” the city, a “spectacle of frenzy,” sways in the growing tyranny of “human variety, differences of opinion, changes of heart, perversity of customs, moral ambiguity, and obscurity of values.”<sup>25</sup> It is a “vision of horror, stupefaction and monstrosity!”<sup>26</sup> Greed reigns in the proverbial marketplace, the realm of Fraud and Chronos—the two gods that Alberti associates with the alienated realm of the arch-aesthetic. Man, far from being a potential candidate for spiritual transcendence, is despised by the rest of creation. “There is no animal as hated as man himself.”<sup>27</sup> His disruptive activities prevail wherever one looks:

*Theogenius*: The other animals are happy with the food their nature requires. . . . Only man is constantly investigating new things and hurting himself in the process. Not satisfied with the space he has on earth, he wanted to cross the sea, venturing I believe out of this world. He wanted to rummage about beneath the waters and the earth, inside the mountains, and he even tried to get above the clouds.<sup>28</sup>

Instead of serving as the model for mankind’s activity, nature is the target for his criminality. It cannot defend itself. Sounding a theme from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Alberti has Theogenius describe man’s relentless defilement of nature.

Nature had the metals; she hid the gold and other minerals underneath the mountains and desert places. We, miserable men, dig them up and bring them to light and use them. Nature scattered shining gems in a way and in a form that to her, as an excellent teacher, seemed the most appropriate. We collected them even from the farthest and most remote regions and chop them up and give them new shape and a new look. Nature separated one tree from the other; we adulterate them by bending them and joining them together. She gave us rivers for our thirst and ordered their course to be free and speedy. But rivers and springs, like all things of nature, though perfect, bothered us and so, in spite of all this, we go looking for wells. And still not satisfied, with a lot of efforts, and so many ex-

penses, and so much solicitude, we—the only ones among the animated creatures who are annoyed by natural water and other excellent liquids—found how to make wine, and that not for our thirst, but in order to pour it as if the only way to pour it was by the cask. . . . We like nothing except that which nature denies us, and we are delighted only when we make efforts to displease nature in many ways. . . . In fact, we so dislike things that are natural and free that we turn ourselves into servants.<sup>29</sup>

Man, the fabricator of *fictiones*, unable to tame and order his creative urgency and driven by a “homicidal urge,” wages a battle against all forms of stability. In *Templum* foundation stones, jealous of capitals, rise up in revolution; in a short subplot in *Momus* sailors mutiny and murder the captain after a cruel game; in *Profugiorum ab aerumna* Ulysses’s house is transformed into a tavern; and in *De commodis litterarum atque incommodis* the blind mob turns a deaf ear to “solid and clear virtue.”

Priests, the “henchmen” of the painted gods and devoted to Mammon, are “befouled with every blot of shame.<sup>30</sup> [They are] lazy, indolent, arrogant, greedy . . . and distinguished as authors and artificers of crimes and evil deeds.”<sup>31</sup> There is also the “treacherous tribe of merchants” and, above all, there are the defective rulers.<sup>32</sup>

In character and life they were intoxicated with conceit, and were cruel and merciless. In presiding over their magistracies at home and in interpreting the law, they plundered wards of the state, widows, and all the weaker citizens. In performing their duty they did not safeguard liberty but rather conducted everything arbitrarily in relation to their intolerable lust. They detested all citizens who seemed desirous of freedom. They raped adolescent boys and freeborn girls. Those who opposed them in these crimes, either by intervening or openly resisting, were punished by being forced into exile or into prison.<sup>33</sup>

At the root of all this evil is the separation of mankind’s art-making propensity from his ethical potential. “Industry, constancy, diligence, and art” are put to evil purposes instead of good ones; even virtue serves “as a cloak for sin and a veil for crime—a stain from which no human thought, no discourse, no judgments, no custom, and no opinion is free.”<sup>34</sup> Mankind’s aesthetic abilities do not elevate him into the realm of higher

potential, but rather alienate him from his ability to distinguish good from bad. “Asked whom he [Baptista] thought to be the worst of men, he answered, the wicked ones who want to behave like good ones.”<sup>35</sup>

### **False Intellectuals**

The ambiguity of artifice may separate man from himself, but it is, ironically, the bond that connects him to society. The unlearned and the learned share this knowledge, the unlearned in the form of blind instinct, the learned in the form of conscious strategy. Thus the ultimate artificers in the historiographically determined realm of the arch-aesthetic are the intellectuals. Far from advocating, let alone practicing, an ethical life, they exploit the disjunction between word and truth. *Philosophi, poeti, litterati, eruditi, docti in lettere, obtrectatori, and eloquenti*, all “instructed and educated in *gymnasii* and libraries,” have usurped the intellectual center of society under the veil of a mystifying discourse.<sup>36</sup> As always, we should not be too zealous in asking which particular philosopher or writer Alberti may have had in mind. Each group represents a different manifestation of the separation of ethics from aesthetics.

### **Philosophers**

The Albertian humanist saints and the philosophers are, or should be, “the trustees of the human mind and moderators of our souls.”<sup>37</sup> The Albertian humanist interprets this as a plan of action, the humanists-gone-wrong as a smokescreen for bombastic discourse: “Ah, I can almost see them now, disputing with such majesty in their words and gestures, with such severity in their sentences suitable for syllogism, with such weightiness of opinion that they darken our souls. It would appear a sacrilege to think them wrong. . . .”<sup>38</sup>

Full of overblown pride, these philosophers reject the path of true virtue “to pretend and dissimulate things on the outside of their faces.”<sup>39</sup> Isolating themselves so that no one can accidentally look behind the mask, they undermine the relation-

ship of trust they should have with society: “Whenever he used to see those vain and ambitious ones, who styled themselves philosophers, walking through the city and displaying themselves, he [Baptista] used to say: ‘Look! Here are our wild fig trees that love their sublime and sterile solitude—because it is public!’”<sup>40</sup> Instead of shedding light on “the good and just life,” they speak about “forms, accidents, substances, rest, and motion,”<sup>41</sup> when they are not otherwise trying to “invent, defend, and adorn sentences that are more beautiful than true,” reinforcing an aesthetic that separates words from actions.

So it is that many [philosophers] when they loaf about can reason well about difficult and hard things that they themselves would not be able to bear well at all. . . . Thus, if these very learned and outstanding men, inventors, defenders, and adorners of sentences that are more marvelous than they are true, could not—according to less learned men like us . . . value the ephemeral as worthless and could not reduce their fear of adversity, then we—inferior in mind, condition, and profession, and weaker in position—what can we do?<sup>42</sup>

In a *Prohemium* to one of the eleven books of *Intercoenales* addressed to Poggio, Alberti allegorically describes the philosophers as vultures “swooping down from the very ether under the stars in search of some lifeless cadaver.”<sup>43</sup> Despicable also are the sophists who cannot be trusted even if they speak the right words.

*Philosophers:* Mercury, we are your favorites. . . . Phoebus, show us favor, for we preserved the dignity and divine influence of the gods among men in all our writings. In our way of life we kept ourselves aloof from any intercourse with corporeal and mortal concerns, since we always kept heavenly and divine things in view, and as a result the task is on you to see that we are not again thrust back into any hateful heap of flesh.

*Cynic:* O wanton tribe! Dishonest! Insolent! Are you not utterly ashamed to proclaim the law even to the gods? Do you judge this your right because you were so imbued with such great and glorious arrogance while you lived among men that you dared to prescribe ill-considered laws of universal nature not only to private citizens, peoples, and kings but even to the whole earth, and to the stars above? I advise you of one thing Phoebus: If you give ear to these sophists, they will argue face to face with you that you are not a god!

They [the philosophers] claim that they deserve grand things from the gods, claiming that they shed much light on the good and just life (*ad bene beateque vivendum*), and that they made men fear the gods. In short they demand that you give them the form of a lion, others the form of elephants, eagles, whales, and of other grand and noble bodies of this sort.<sup>44</sup>

In summary, one could say that philosophers are unsuitable models for imitation; they “stifle that which with so much power determines our soul.”<sup>45</sup>

### The Holy Disciplines

Alberti’s criticism of the philosophers cannot be reduced to the level of the general humanist protest against dry Scholasticism, as it is only one segment of a broader critique that includes all writers, be they poets, rhetoricians, *litterati*, or *eruditi*. Since this aspect of Alberti’s thoughts has been rarely analyzed, it is necessary to turn to each one separately. To start with, the poets. Though defended by Boccaccio, Petrarch, and Salutati, poets too perpetuate intellectual fallenness.<sup>46</sup> The Cynic states: “Watch out, Phoebus! Don’t think that those men here have such talent that they can imitate the ancients who created such humorous stories about you gods. They have only plucked one or another line from the ancient authors, and yet they want to be held in such esteem that they claim Musaeus and Orpheus their inferior.”<sup>47</sup>

Under more violent attack are the *eruditi* and *docti in lettere*, among whom Alberti certainly numbers his humanist colleagues. In *De commodis litterarum atque incommodis* Alberti argues that the *eruditi* “know only how to offer their delicate ears, almost as if it were sufficient for them to refine their ears by erudition, rather than to refine their souls and hearts.”<sup>48</sup> Because knowledge for them is purely an aesthetic issue, they remain morally immature and thus unfit to direct society. “The learned are nothing more than stuttering babies,” blind to the true potential inherent in their craft.<sup>49</sup> Having long since abandoned the kind of knowledge necessary to improve the lives of

others,<sup>50</sup> the “humanist academic” (*docto in lettere*) prefers the lure of money.

Among the [various] classes, there are the literary men. The common folk see them as ridiculous, deride and despise them, especially when they are not rich. Then again, as for those who manage to become rich (a rare event) let those men know that honors are not due to literary pursuits, but to wealth, not to virtue, but to fortune. Indeed, let them note how many would be worthy if only their eyes were not blinded by the splendor of gold or of the toga. Without your gold or with the toga laid aside, you will be ignored. So it is. Whoever is richest is deemed worthy of honor and respect. Therefore, no one is esteemed a sage on account of his wisdom, expertness, illustriousness, and knowledge of excellent questions. [He is esteemed a sage] only if he can proffer something thought worthy of praise and admiration in the midst of the mob with the aid of gold and riches.<sup>51</sup>

Since writers not only seek monetary gain with their efforts but also burn with envy, wallow in frivolity, and cannot function outside their libraries, Phoebus turns them into mice. Theoretically, “writers commit the deeds [of the gods] to literature, describe the cycles of time and the changes of fortune,” but the humanist Cynic sees them as gnawing mice.

*Cynic:* Ours is not the same care and concern as theirs in the study of literature. These are the sort who, when you read their works, can say nothing that is free from untruth. They have created invincible leaders, stirring addresses, mountains climbed and seas crossed, and finally conquered people who have never seen an enemy!

Furthermore, holed up in their libraries they thought they appeared learned far and wide by gnawing away at the reputation of truly accomplished men. And they burned with such great envy that they did not want anyone but themselves to be considered learned. In the midst of such frivolity they brag that they have bequeathed to posterity the immortality of their names.

*Phoebus:* I do not think it laudable that these men set about to appear like flesh and blood as they were so insubstantial. Therefore, they shall become mice.<sup>52</sup>

Rhetoricians, the next in line in Alberti’s critique, feed the fires of alienation by readily exploiting the circumstance that “there is nothing more flexible and malleable than the word; it yields and inclines in any direction you choose to move it.”<sup>53</sup> As a consequence, their efforts “destroy truth, reason, and all

the very holy and rare things.”<sup>54</sup> They are far worse than the relatively harmless poets. The Cynic declares: “You are more worthless than the poets because you have staked your primary claim to glory on the fact that you are trained to win favor by applauding and flattering, and by dragging into hatred and contempt whomever you wish by slandering them with your curses.”<sup>55</sup> In *De commodis litterarum atque incommodis* Alberti gives an example of the abuses practiced by rhetoricians: “It would not be appropriate for us to imitate the famous Greek rhetorician Isocrates, who is said to have praised with his orations that worthless tyrant Busiribe, but to have attacked Socrates, the most noble and venerable of philosophers.”<sup>56</sup>

Contemporary rhetoricians who “impudently employ portents and fictions and other bold abuses” are treated with particularly heavy sarcasm in *Vaticinium*.<sup>57</sup> Most of the clients of the Soothsayer are wise to his deceptive discourse and seem to escape relatively unharmed, yet both the Soothsayer and his supplicants are trapped in a world of mutual suspicion. Only one client naively believes that the soothsayer “speaks as a friend.”<sup>58</sup> “Let us have a good laugh at that character,” the soothsayer snickers to himself after having enticed the man to give up four gold coins for nothing but empty promises, “he is genuinely insane.”<sup>59</sup> One cannot describe the alienation of discourse more aptly.

Ironically, rhetoricians, specialists in the art of manipulation, drag along the dead weight of accumulated formulas. In the introduction to one of his *Intercoenales* dialogues Alberti compares their art to a flute that has been rendered useless by the overlay of unnecessary decoration: “The flute was made of ivory, and on it were decorations in precious stones, and a representation, beautifully etched by the inspired hand of a craftsman, of the whole history of antiquity. Indeed, the king of gods himself could have played it with no slight to his dignity. This pipe had one flaw: it produced absolutely no sound.”<sup>60</sup> Alberti emphatically distances his own work from these abuses. In *De commodis litterarum atque incommodis* he carefully points out: “My discussion will leave aside many of the rhetorical forms, devised to strike one’s imagination, and [it will] ignore various other ways of arguing, because I don’t want

to bring about the contempt of students by showing them myself how writing can be so lacking of values.”<sup>61</sup>

Let us now turn to the critics, who, instead of engaging in productive discourse, are accused of settling for pedantry and self-congratulatory bookishness. Though Alberti conceded the excellence of old texts, he felt that critics used them to browbeat contemporary writers: “It is not our task to look with great watchfulness at the most famous and elegant examples of ancient eloquence which, no matter how hard we strain, we can never reach.”<sup>62</sup> Because of their destructiveness, critics are numbered among the most spiteful of human beings.

From their eagerness to dispute and their lust for conquest it developed that, even at great danger to themselves, each worked to bring disaster on all the others. . . . I will not recount the bitter struggle to do injury and seek revenge that arose from this situation, nor will I recount the grave discord [present in the field of literature], from which utter destruction easily follows; the whole sad matter lies before your eyes.<sup>63</sup>

Libripeta, of course, is the critic *par excellence*; he keeps his vast library “under lock and key” and no longer writes.<sup>64</sup> In *Oraculum* he is chastised by Apollo for nonproductivity. “Give men a reason to praise you,” Apollo advises. Libripeta, however, knows that Apollo, locked in the stony confines of his statue, is ignorant of the arch-aesthetic the knowledge of which is his own expertise. He answers with stubborn finality: “Hard study is all too tedious and anyway it is easier to appear learned than to actually be so.”<sup>65</sup> “So become a detractor,” Apollo advises. The goddess Envy recognizes the Libripetian detractor as her offspring: “Do you think I do not know my own offspring . . . ? To criticize everything, to condemn the acts and words of all, to be irritated by the common sewer of good and depraved, learned and ignorant, to damn to ignominy the true and the false without discrimination.”<sup>66</sup>

In the description of the River of Life in *Fatum et Fortuna*, critics, while not singled out by name, obviously belong to those “suspicious, jealous, and calculating” swimmers who frustrate the progress of others while they themselves cannot swim at all. Their hands are forever soiled by the muddy reeds to which they hang.



“Who are those that I see struggling in the waves amidst the reeds with their heads barely above water? Tell me, I pray you, about all that I see.”

And the shades answered: “They are among the worst of mortals: ‘suspicious,’ ‘jealous,’ and ‘calculating,’ as you call them; with their perverse nature and depraved habits they do not swim, but amuse themselves by impeding the strokes of others. They are similar to those that you see contriving, by fraud, to steal with one of their hands, now a floating skin, now a board, while the other hand clings tenaciously onto the rushes that grow in the mud under the water. These rushes are the most irksome of things in the river; and this kind of activity is such that those who engaged in it muddy their hands which remain muddy forever.”<sup>67</sup>

Most critics employ an “anything goes” mode. What is needed instead are reliable critics giving nuanced judgments.

Each man will criticize the writings of others according to his own whim and not according to the subject itself, and he should. Furthermore, no more learned men will be on hand to supply a reliable verdict; instead, there will be mere opinions that contradict the views of others. Some critics find pleasure only in things that are ornate and bombastic. Others view what is painstakingly executed as cold and harsh. Others eagerly read only to taste and sniff the flowery elegance of well-rounded sentences.<sup>68</sup>

Normally quite discrete, Alberti felt strongly enough about the abuse of literary power to write a public letter, *Protesta*, sent anonymously to the judges of *Certame Coronario*, the famous literary competition held in Florence in 1441, in response to their refusal to name a winner.<sup>69</sup> He accuses the judges of having, out of political considerations, sabotaged the selection of the most deserving work—presumably his own: “There are probably people who would judge you as not upright since you did not forbid in time what you knew to be harmful.”<sup>70</sup> “In your divine wisdom,” Alberti continues, speciously, “you knew this to be harmful . . . for which one of the participants did not put aside all his private cares and domestic matters to perfect his poems,” only to find his efforts wasted.<sup>71</sup> Taking up the position of the “common people,” Alberti points out that not only were the participants injured, but the judges, those “learned men” with “delicate ears” full of “nothingness,” lost an important opportunity to stem the suspicions and dis-

content rampant among the citizens of Florence. In a sarcastic tone, Alberti addresses the judges:

If Orpheus, Musaeus, Homer, Virgil, Ovid, Status, and your Apollo too were living in this age and had found that a certain other poet competitor had been crowned with victory, on what basis would they blame the person who crowned him? If they said: "This crown—and a laurel crown at that—is unbecoming," at this point, if you, most eloquent men, were mute and without tongue, we commoners would answer in your place with these words: "And for what reason is the crown your own insignia, when the harlots have it too? If the laurel is what makes you poets, would sausages make a poetess? This man was crowned because in that contest he was indeed excellent and above the good ones; and you were inferior to the lowest and very bad poets by remaining silent. Given that he who writes is called a writer, and he who sings a singer, and he who plows a ploughman, doesn't he who writes poems, tell us, deserve to be called a poet [especially] when those [namely the judges] who just stay silent and reprove the others demand to be considered poets, nay, the princes of poets?"<sup>72</sup>

The rapacious hunt for fame endangers the integrity of literature and turns it into a free-for-all. In a short allegory, *Fama* from *Intercoenales*, Libripeta describes how writers dismember the sacrificial bull (of literature) in the vestibule of the temple of Fame, which significantly enough "is not far from the temple of Fortune": "We decided to slaughter the bull right there in the vestibule of the temple and to distribute him cut up in pieces so that each of us could individually carry the pieces into the sanctuary. Some of us got a whole limb, but each took up his respectable piece, but I myself took up the belly that had been left behind on the ground."<sup>73</sup> The quote refers to the appropriation of literary material to carve out an ill-gotten fame. The story continues with the priests attempting to drive the writers away. In the struggle, however, the belly Libripeta is carrying breaks over his head, its contents spilling over him. This associates him with the bad odor of nihilism.

The *litterati* are also chastised in the preface of book 7 of the *Intercoenali*, where Alberti sets forth a fable in which contemporary writers are shown desperately and ludicrously chasing after the moon (Ciceronian eloquence) which night after night

eludes the traps set for it.<sup>74</sup> The story is a warning to those who believe that in imitating excellence one can become excellent oneself: “If indeed things are now as I see them, then there is no one with however brief exposure to literature [the “moon of erudition“], no one who has glimpsed some species of eloquence even from afar, who at the same time is not quick to conceive a hope that he will soon turn out to be the greatest of orators.”<sup>75</sup> In actuality, “eloquence, is a variegated thing” and not as simple as the image of the moon would suggest<sup>76</sup>: “In judging the written work of others, almost to a man, we are all so fastidious that we want to be in perfect harmony with the eloquence of Cicero, as if everyone in that earlier time thought the best authors to be also duplications of Cicero. Fools!”<sup>77</sup>

It was perhaps the discovery of Cicero’s *De oratore* at Lodi in 1421, which excited the fantasy of fifteenth-century humanists, that elicited this statement.<sup>78</sup> At any rate, the seeming ease of a skilled orator such as Cicero is a carefully guarded artifice that cannot be mechanically copied just by having the right books.

When they realize that mastering the act requires more work than they imagined in their indolence, they merely rush out armed with a supply of books, as if through books alone, and not through rigorous study, they could achieve an understanding of oratory. Since each person imagines that he himself has sufficiently mastered the study of oratory surpassing all others, the result among us is that we are worn out, not by striving for recognition, but by criticizing and attacking the good reputation of others.<sup>79</sup>

We come now to the final group of writers, the *eloquenti*, who, “eager only to taste and sniff ornamental elegance,” are described in a *Prohemium* of book 4 in *Intercoenales* to Poggio as gluttons relishing the “full juice of vulgar eloquence.” *Eloquenti* are compared to heavy-set oxen wallowing in the muddy riverbanks. In their indolence they follow the path of least resistance. A she-goat feeding on a scraggly fig tree (wisdom) in the ancient ruins of a fallen temple is Alberti himself.

“Hey there, lusty one,” said the oxen, “what recklessness led you to spurn the grassy bank and make for that steep and thoroughly in-

accessible path? Don't you know that it is better to fill yourself on sweet succulent grass than to crave rough stubble and the bitter fruit of the wild fig tree? Not least of all, you should take care that you don't learn to regret such precarious travel on the cliff's edge."

They say that the she-goat had an answer for the oxen: "Come now, you lumpish, soft-footed wretch, don't you know that, as the mouth assists the stomach, the feet dutifully assist the mouth? Besides, I have the appetite of a goat, not an ox. What I eat is all the less agreeable to you because you are not permitted to touch it. Moreover, your sedge is less pleasing to me because it is available everywhere even to the most indolent creatures." Alberti then concludes: "My dear Poggio, I feel that this very thing is clearly happening to me while I am engaged in writing my *Intercoenali*. There are quite a few readers who wish to graze and be nourished in more luxuriant and spacious fields of eloquence than I offer. . . . However, once my audience has heard the story of the she-goat they will have no cause, I hope, to criticize me."<sup>80</sup>

The demise of the literary world, as Alberti sees it, is not simply an internal problem; it has come about because society demands a defective spiritual center. The "tempestuous and violent changes in mores (*morum tempestates procellas*)" have left literature "in a shipwrecked state (*naufragium in litteris*)."<sup>81</sup> The multitude is free to dictate its will to the *litterati* and infiltrate their ranks without seeking spiritual improvement: "Thus we see all the holy disciplines of writing loaded and disfigured by the dregs of humanity. . . . The bumpy, scrofulous, twisted, ramshackle, stupid, dull, and incapable ones, unable to do anything else, all these devote themselves to literature."<sup>82</sup> As a result writers instead of fighting the arch-aesthetic, support it, thus polluting the "spirit" of humanism. Literature no longer attracts the "noble and illustrious ones," for they are turned away by the very image of an art so debased.<sup>83</sup> A painter comes forth and asks: "Who does not have before his eyes, as in a painting, the ruins and the slaughter of the disciplines and of the arts? Who cannot experience sadness at the loss and great shipwreck which happened in literature?"<sup>84</sup> Philosophers, rhetoricians, critics, and men of letters are all afloat on a defective barge—

A small ramshackle barge without oars,  
Made up of broken-bottomed wicker baskets,  
It is not possible for the Muses to do something anymore,  
Since the bow leaks so copiously.<sup>85</sup>

### Nature as Patron

*Società natura e vera religione* is the immovable and permanently unattainable vanishing point toward which existence needs to be ordered. It stands between the crumbling authority of intellectual discourse and the dubiousness of mass judgment. The “beginning in nature,” therefore, has to be interpreted on a semiotic level both by Alberti when he writes and by his artist-postulates when they make works of art; the writer has to orient his soul according to the principles of a society supposedly at one with nature. Only by means of this illusion can an attempt be made to take control of mankind’s simulative urge.

When Alberti states in *De pictura* that the theory of painting is taken “from the basic principles of nature,” he does not mean that he is going to nature as an empirical “observer” but simply that he is not under the sway of temporally contaminated conditions.<sup>86</sup> The writer enacts the Narcissistic process of “returning to nature,” in order to harness it to ethics. Leopis, for example, spent nearly a month in isolation<sup>87</sup>; Baptista “withdrew for over ninety days” to write *Della Famiglia*,<sup>88</sup> and Philoponius spent thirty days at the fountain on Mount Helicon.<sup>89</sup> Even Agnolo points out that “when I write, I see and hear nothing but myself,”<sup>90</sup> thus guaranteeing the purity of the authorial psyche. The Albertian writers bracket themselves out of temporal time to demonstrate that they are orienting themselves “to nature.” The student painter follows suit, for the mathematical rules of perspective that the painter employs to organize his painting are said to be a type of mental imitation of nature.<sup>91</sup> “A spherical surface is like (*imitatur*) the outside of a ball.”<sup>92</sup> Though both the painter and the writer later make changes, the beginning of each enterprise has to be anchored in an assumed original oneness of being and image. This was the case, for example, when the first architects designed shelters “in imitation of animals.”<sup>93</sup> “The ancients . . . made their

works chiefly in imitation of nature. They made apertures always in uneven numbers, as nature herself has done.”<sup>94</sup>

Nature is the metaphoric locus of integration. In the lyrical opening paragraphs of *Theogenius* we encounter Theogenius (The One whose Origin is in the Gods) composing his treatises in the blissful solitude of a forest far away from the city.<sup>95</sup> In the vicinity bubbles a fresh spring that yearns to greet Theogenius with his own reflection so that he will have near to hand the means to activate his imagination. Within the context of Alberti’s thought, we must read Theogenius as representing the joyous, untroubled, and humanist union of being and image.

*Theogenius*: Here columns erected by nature are the steep trees that you can see. There, above us, are the delightful beeches and firs whose shadows cover us from the sun. All around wherever you turn your eye, you will see thousands of reflected colors of various flowers shining among the green grass and the shadows, surpassing the brilliance and the light of the sky. . . . And here close by is this silver and pure spring, witness and arbiter in part of my studies, which always smiles at me and flows around me, caressing and hiding at times among the foliage of these very fresh and charming grasses, and at times with its exuberant waves it raises itself and babbling sweetly as it bends toward me, greets me; at other times it shows its tranquil and joyful waters to my eyes, anxiously waiting for me to look at my images (*specchi*) reflected in it and in so doing contemplate myself.<sup>96</sup>

Alberti’s use of the nature topos stands in marked contrast to the debonair Renaissance attitude that saw nature as that ambiguous realm of physical delights. The forest in both Petrarch’s *Canzoniere* and Boccaccio’s *Amorosa Visione* serves as a metaphor for both innocence and seduction, whereas Theogenius’s forest is a metaphor for the intact realm.<sup>97</sup> It brings to mind such medieval writings as the *Descriptions of Clairvaux* by an anonymous Cistercian, where sturdy oaks, graceful lime trees and pools of pure water inspire the devout toward meditative quietude.<sup>98</sup> But Alberti’s humanism is not a monastic escape. Its arena is the unnatural city. When Baptista and Microtiro, for example, enter its “turbulence” as humanist missionaries, they are endangered; they speak a foreign language

and do not aspire to the urban ways. As Agnolo points out, true philosophers though dedicated to the “good and praised life” can live only on the periphery.

*Agnolo:* And if we have to speak about their lives and customs and establish the reason and manners of the good and praised life (*modo del vivere bene e lodati*), let us discuss those many other people, and even the philosophers, who are happy with one worn-out piece of clothing and with a study much as a putrid and despicable vase, and living only on cauliflower and rejecting all fragile and ephemeral things to such a point that they don't even want to take for themselves a bowl. I won't tell you about this because I don't want to be wordy, but you, O man of letters, remember this well and think how these people acted.<sup>99</sup>

If nature had not become their symbolic patron *in absentia*, they could easily have “rotted away in literary vigils.”<sup>100</sup> Even Baptista needs nature to remind him of his higher commitment: “Seeing the fields flower in springtime . . . he would be seized with melancholy and rebuke himself thus: ‘Baptista, you must give man the fruit of your studies.’”<sup>101</sup> Since his writings were created in response to a demand by nature and not contaminated by temporal ambitions, Baptista freely “gave every artist copies of his great and worthy treatises”—a sign of his spiritual otherness.<sup>102</sup>

### The Belated Aesthetics

Whereas true writers can circumvent the patronal system by declaring their allegiance to the invoked purity of nature, artists and painters are dependent on the patronal system for their very existence. Despite this and other differences which will be discussed later, both writer and artist share the historiographically determined condition that points them back to nature. As opposed to those who have “lost the way,” Alberti's fictive “humanist” architects as defined in *De re aedificatoria* follow “the justness of noble works” and actively bring the memory of an intact society to public recall.<sup>103</sup> “Beauty, here, is in the service of cultural survival and helps counteract self-destructive impulses in society: ”I would go so far as to say that

a work cannot be better protected against violence and injury of man than if its forms have dignity and beauty."<sup>104</sup>

Dignity and beauty, therefore, must be understood within the context of Alberti's historiography of simulation. The first architects may have "imitated" nature, but today's architects live in the given arch-aesthetic zone of self-objectivization. Thus, the beauty they strive for in their work ironically involves the same masking principle employed in negative simulation; ugly parts should be concealed and handsome elements should be enhanced: "Beauty . . . is obtained by means of ornament, by painting and concealing things that are deformed, and by trimming and polishing that which is handsome, so that the unsightly parts might be rendered in colors less offensive, and the more lovely parts with more delight. If this be granted, we may define ornament to be a kind of heightened brightness and improvement."<sup>105</sup>

The main difference between the arch-aesthetic and the new aesthetic is that the latter is performed openly and is, in principle, almost a communal effort. Above all, it is a process dominated by an ethical point of view that keeps it from being subject to abuse. The inauthentic is no longer a threat but an advantage for those seeking permanence and true beauty. Thus Alberti advises his brother Carlo to review the treatise that he had dedicated to him, *De commodis litterarum atque incommodis*, and "make changes according to your judgment, and by removing these errors render the work grander and more dignified," and, so it is implied, more permanent.<sup>106</sup> The new aesthetic, which "corrects, as far as possible, defects in the model while still maintaining a likeness (*similitudine*)" hinges exclusively on the proper, public and positive use of simulation.<sup>107</sup> The process of "taking away, increasing, and altering" as described in *De re aedificatoria* constitutes a counter-aesthetic in step with a complex society.<sup>108</sup>

The painter, cleansed of moral imperfections according to the exhortations outlined in book 3 of *De pictura*, is free to collect the beautiful things that "are dispersed here and there."<sup>109</sup> In this way he simulates Baptista who, "anxious to know everything, simulated ignorance to learn the knowledge of others. . . ."<sup>110</sup> Ultimately, the functionaries of Alberti's aes-



thetic “theory,” painters, writers, and architects, arrive at *similitudine* by choosing only the beautiful and assembling it into a new configuration: “[Zeuxis] believed that . . . beauty . . . could not be discovered in nature in one body alone; thus he chose from all the youth of the city five outstandingly beautiful girls, so that he might represent in his painting whatever feature of feminine beauty was most praiseworthy in each of them.”<sup>111</sup> Alberti’s counter-aesthetic theory thus suggests that an attempt must be made to entice man back to a consciousness of Apollonian order. The artist, entering quasi-deceptively into the faulty scenario, learns its rules in order to take presimulative control of mankind’s compulsive, a priori urge to simulate.

This is the implied premise in Alberti’s address in *De pictura* to “his” painters, who are in direct competition with the arch-aesthetic world of shifting images, of *varietà e varietà*, of a thousand masks, where “everyone can express an opinion” and everyone is an “artist,” even if a false one.<sup>112</sup> Knowing “how impossible it is to imitate something which does not continually present the same aspect,” Alberti instructs the painter to follow the rules of perspective and insert a “veil” between himself and the image to be painted, to stabilize the constantly shifting aspect of the image. Thereby “the object seen will continually keep the same appearances.”<sup>113</sup> This does not mean that Alberti disapproves of painterly variety; on the contrary, “The mind takes great pleasure in variety and abundance.”<sup>114</sup> To say anything else would imply that the painter is out of touch with the reality of the historiographical dilemma that attempts to link mankind’s expert understanding of variety with an illusory immutable reality.

The procedure is equivalent to the attempt to unite fame with glory and the physical with the spiritual. The man in the street is attracted to the painting by its “variety,” as that is what he understands. “When spectators dwell on observing details, then the painter’s richness will acquire favor.”<sup>115</sup> Once the spectator is in the proximity of the image, simulative habit takes over. The spectator cannot help but “mourn with the mourners, laugh with those who laugh and grieve with the grief-stricken.”<sup>116</sup> The perspectival order, by which all “random confusion” and “tumultuous appearances” have been deleted, then

guides the spectator from the vacillating to the stable. *Società natura e vera religione*, instead of disappearing at the vanishing point, will issue forth from the picture plane into the real world. The spectator becomes an extension of the *istoria* which, since it has been ordered in the soul of the humanist painter, orders the spectator's soul as well (or so it is hoped).

In Alberti's theory there is no place for an autonomous work of art, and, therefore, there can be no concept of beauty that can be reduced simply to a set of criteria; much less can there be art as a pure expression of inner feeling, as later centuries might view it. A work of art is an alternative to, but also a product of, aesthetic forces that already exist and have been at work in society since the beginning of time. In this way Alberti's counter aesthetic challenges not only the original historiographic, aesthetic moment in which the incongruity of reality and image was created but also the arch-aesthetic that is so serviceable in the proverbial marketplace. In the process of becoming complex, the world became impoverished, as evil could be more easily simulated than truth. There was, as Momus discovered, no way of looking behind the mask. Alberti's aesthetic theory does not propose to look behind the mask (it is, after all, a mask in its own right). It does not aim at ultimate truth or, for that matter, at a return to archaic simplicity or austere Benedictine rules, as one might suspect, but points beyond the variety of existence to the vanishing point of human existence, the *società natura e vera religione*. Instead of stripping the artist of historical dimension, it makes him functional within the given disjunction—indeed, able to celebrate it—as he attempts to engage the potential latent in the irreparable break with reality. It literally throws him back into the face of “history” as a counter proposition. The artist must attempt, one could say, a critical rescue of the simulative capacity of mankind.

### **The Prince and his Ottimo Artefice**

Numbering among the members of a select group of *perfecti* in a position to order the simulative principle both within themselves and in others and thereby to link the aesthetic with the

ethical is, of course, the Prince, as defined in *De Iciarchia*. As humanist functionary, he is “first guide and moderator for others,” a philosopher in the true and original sense.<sup>117</sup> Since *De Iciarchia* is spoken in the hagiographic voice of Baptista, we should perceive him as being sponsored by the humanist and educated in the humanist ideology of textual *autorità*. The Prince, like all the *pochi e rari*, must integrate *ragione* and *virtus*, social consciousness and manly excellence.<sup>118</sup> Thus he must not only have “prudence, ability, cognition of things, and authority” to guide others toward “a good and desired end,” but he must also be “illustrious on account of his wisdom, experience, and talent.”<sup>119</sup> This distinguishes him from the “common multitude” that, in an ideal scenario, sees him as an emulative ideal. As Baptista, the appropriate mentor, says: “One becomes virtuous by imitating and getting accustomed to becoming similar to those who are just, free, magnificent, magnanimous, prudent, constant, and who in all aspects of their life are governed uprightly by discretion and reason.”<sup>120</sup> In this ideal situation, the members of the multitude, living under the benign rule of the prince, see themselves as part of a “blissful family” where everyone “becomes important and brings to excellence the capacity residing in him, rather than relying on fortune; one can wish for nothing more than that together with the whole family all will be blissful, honored, and most happy.”<sup>121</sup>

As the goal of Alberti’s civic functionaries is to serve as arbitrators in the realm of disjunction, they must move from ontological ideal to epistemological action by descending to the level of the “many” who cannot bridge the gap. This excellent cleverness (labeled variously *ottima astuzia* or *ottimo artefice*), “which is rare in this world,” was something Apollo, in *Oraculum*, was, rather comically, unable to accomplish.<sup>122</sup> Alcibiades, however, as described in *Della Famiglia*, excelled in the art of adaption.

In Sparta, the land of thrift and exercise . . . he appeared frugal, rugged, and unlettered: in Ionia he was delicate and charming; in Thrace he learned to drink hard and enjoy himself with these people as well. He knew how to adapt himself to situations so well that in Persia, a land full of pomp and delighting in show, he surpassed

Tissaphrenes the king in his haughtiness of manner and magnificence of display. To adapt quickly to situations and to make friends, it is necessary to study the gestures, words, customs, and conversations of others. One must learn what pleases, what saddens each one, what moves him to anger, to laughter, to talk, and to silence.<sup>123</sup>

The Prince especially must be skilled in infiltrating the mentality of his subjects so that he can assert himself beneficially. Baptista is the model, for he “simulated ignorance to discover the talent and ability of others.”<sup>124</sup> But Baptista has no political ambitions; he prefers the pose of distant saint. Yet Alberti can extrapolate from the definition of Baptista the ideal ruler-functionary who must adapt, quickly and easily, to the different types of people in his domain.

*Baptista:* Various and different are the souls and minds of mankind. Some are quick to anger, some turn easily to mercy, some are acute, suspicious, credulous, contemptuous, experienced, bitter . . . [etc. etc.]. It would be profitable that our prudent prince continually explore, probe, and understand hour after hour the mores, life, and facts of each of them so that he can use with each excellent, most suitable and motivated ways of commanding and so that he can adapt the variety of his orders according to the variety of souls.<sup>125</sup>

The ideal Prince has to realize his “aesthetic” self-consciously. But whereas others would lose themselves to the mask, the Prince, the brainchild of Philodoxus, Baptista, and St. Potitus, must be shown as pure in his intent to unite fame *and* glory in his *persona mixta*. Baptista states: “This emulation, with which you search for fame and glory above all others, comes from the correct bearing of talent and the generosity of spirit, acquired not with slander but only with the virtue which sits in you.”<sup>126</sup>

The theory of simulation which lies at the heart of Alberti’s theoretical edifice has, of course, a long history in Western intellectual thought. For our purpose, it will be adequate to point out that Alberti’s thoughts follow along the lines of Averroes, whose theories dominated the school of Bologna, Alberti’s alma mater. Averroes saw the inherent divisions in society as a potential source of strife, isolating the intellectual and theological elites from each other and from the masses.<sup>127</sup> Averroes argued that the ultimate task of leaders should be to

establish parallel but not identical understandings of what was good for society on all levels of its hierarchy. Leaders have the responsibility not only to rule those below them but to guide them toward goals beneficial for all. The highest form of intelligence is that which can infiltrate others. In his treatise *Philosophy and Religion* Averroes describes a certain Abu Hamid who “tried to awaken the nature of men, for he never attached himself to his books. He was an Asharite with the Asharites, a Sufi with the Sufis, and a philosopher with the philosophers; so much so that he was, as has been said [sic]: ‘I am a Yeminite, when I meet a Yeminite: if I meet a Ma’adi, I am one of Banu Adnan.’”<sup>128</sup>

Averroes makes it clear that these singular individuals do not use their simulative capacities to deceive but to draw men upward. Similarly, for Alberti, the talented individual dissembles the resistance of the unlearned for their own and society’s benefit. In a remarkable affirmation of the theory of simulative pedagogy Alberti-Agnolo explains in *Profugiorum ab aerumna* that the teacher of dance does not begin by laying down the abstract rules of a theory which the student must learn but by following the student’s own unlearned movements. Only when he has completely empathized with the student’s movements can he begin to exert his control. Eventually, a reversal takes place, and the student imitates the teacher. The student thus not only acquires the art of dancing but also comprehends the art of simulative transfer.<sup>129</sup>

Since astute cloaking of intent is something “that must not be visible,” as Giannozzo warns in *Della Famiglia*, the Albertian humanist may be forced on occasion to compromise his virtue.<sup>130</sup> But this, according to Averroes’s well-known interpretation of Aristotle and Plato, should not be feared, as long as astuteness is concomitant with salutary intent; in fact, rulers may even lie in order to encourage the virtuous conduct of the citizens.<sup>131</sup> In his *Elementa picturae*, a technical treatise on geometry, Alberti warns his colleague Theodorus, to whom he is sending a manual for his classes, that “in order to avoid skepticism [on the part of the students] I think from the first you should direct the work of your students *before* they realize what ends you are determined to accomplish” (my emphasis).<sup>132</sup>

“When all is said and done, the students will judge and evaluate us as they wish.”<sup>133</sup> The instructor, anticipating this, however, will obviously conduct himself in such a manner that “the students shall be exceedingly grateful.”<sup>134</sup> Alberti’s Prince embodies this line of reasoning; it is not enough for him to possess the valued tools of perspective, the insignia of his identity; he must make good use of them. Baptista states: “It is one thing [for the prince] to hold the right angle, the straight edge, and the pen, and it is another to put them to good use.”<sup>135</sup>

If the prince does not absorb the instructions, that is, if he does not use the tools of perspective or the text or the advice of the humanist-saint by his side, then he will inevitably fall into the practice of false pre-simulation. This is the scenario in *Momus*, where Jove refuses the role of humanist functionary. *De Iciarchia*, written after *Momus*, is like an answer to Jove. More about that later.

### **The Intact City**

In an ideal situation there would be no disjunction between humanist and society. The two would be in tune, the world would be at peace, and the relationship between being and image, on the one hand, and word and meaning, on the other, would be ordered. Above all, the arch-aesthetic would not have risen independent of ethics. This *società natura e vera religione* is, though eternally inaccessible, a perspectival vanishing point that must order the discordant world. The closest we come to a description of this humanist fantasy is book 8 of *De re aedificatoria*, which describes a leisurely itinerary from the country to the center of town. It portrays the intact city in harmony with the humanist and the memory of the *natura società e vera religione*.

In the first two of the ten chapters into which book 8 is divided, we find the author in the countryside, traveling along a highway, viewing “houses, villas, a fine hill, now a river, and now a spring, now an open spot and a rock, now a plain, wood, or valley.”<sup>136</sup> As he nears the city he comes upon sepulchers of great families and monuments to heroes. In chapter 3, still on the outskirts, he passes graveyards with obelisks, pyramids, and

small chapels. In chapter 4 he pauses to read some of the inspiring inscriptions. In chapter 5 he describes large watch-towers that symbolize the city's watchfulness and sturdiness.

At the beginning of chapter 6 he announces: "It is now time to make our entrance into the city."<sup>137</sup> Going through the city gates and over bridges and following the streets, he observes the bustling squares, the protected porticos, the triumphal arches, and the various types of markets. In chapters 7 and 8 he comes to the public theaters and other places of diversion such as amphitheaters, public walks, and porticos where philosophers converse. In chapter 9 he comes to the end of his journey, the spiritual, political, and intellectual center of the city, "to be used only by the principal citizens."<sup>138</sup> He describes the senate house, the temple, "free from all contagion of secular things,"<sup>139</sup> lakes for swimming, groves dedicated to the gods, arsenals, and finally a library that also houses a collection of mathematical instruments. The last chapter describes the bathing establishments, which are not part of the central city because they require too much space. By closing his discussion with *terme* Alberti makes a conceptual link to the spring that the traveler had seen at the outset of his journey, alluding as much to spiritual as to physical cleanliness.<sup>140</sup>

A city controlled by a tyrant would be prisonlike so that the inhabitants could be controlled (V,1); a city ruled by a king would be dominated by his palace (V,3). But in this city the library takes the central position, preserving textual consciousness and standing for civic intactness. It contributes to the same collective memory evoked at the beginning of the itinerary by the sepulchers and monuments.

We must not automatically lump this description in *De re aedificatoria* together with other writings of the time that were also part of the general fifteenth-century groundswell of urban consciousness. The descriptions of Florence by Leonardo Bruni, a papal secretary, and Goro Dati, a silk merchant, are for all practical purposes descriptions of the secular city, its institutions, political armature, and great buildings.<sup>141</sup> The journey described by Alberti is inherently theological. The essential clue is Alberti's discussion of the mathematical instruments in the library, the instruments needed to observe the

planets. This, of course, is in line with the Augustinian undercurrent running through Alberti's thought. Augustine defined Christ as one person, two natures: "He is far above all heavens, but his feet he has on earth."<sup>142</sup> The optical instruments at the end of the itinerary and the activity of walking at the beginning are unmistakable allusions to this Augustinian metaphor, which can be perceived as defining the ideal humanist city. Again ecclesiastical concepts are shifted into the humanist camp; the image of church as the body of Christ is elegantly translated into the city as body of the humanist.

Genipatro (*Theogenius*) and Agnolo di Pandolfini (*Profugiorum ab aerumna*) would be ideal inhabitants of the humanist city, the first the ideal writer-saint and "father of the country," the latter the ideal civic functionary. Members of great lineages, they developed themselves physically and spiritually, entered the public domain, and, late in life, were elevated to prominence. Culminating their careers, they delivered the texts that secured permanent fame: Agnolo, the *documenti* "gathered" by Baptista and assembled in book 3 of *Profugiorum ab aerumna*; Genipatro, "numerous well composed books . . . , very correct, full of teachings and wonderful kindness, and welcomed by good people and scholars alike. They will make him, as we hope, immortal."<sup>143</sup> Immortal indeed, as he combines—recalling a discussion earlier in this book—Apollo's prophetic wisdom<sup>144</sup> with heavenly talent, because his father, so we are told, "is his sincere intellect" and his "mother his upright reason."<sup>145</sup> Thus his writings are enjoyed by scholars and citizens alike; they represent *autorità*<sup>146</sup>: "I frequently go to temples, theaters, and the houses of the first citizens, where they among themselves often read and discuss me and my studies."<sup>147</sup> Genipatro is veritably identical with the city. He embodies permanence in a world of flux. Everything is "in him": "Every single thing is in me and cannot be robbed. Mine and with me are the knowledge of letters, certain parts of the Good Arts, and the care and love of virtue, all excellent things for a good and blissful life."<sup>148</sup>

In this ideal setting, Genipatro's function as a "trustee and moderator of the human soul" would be highly valued; a seat would most certainly be reserved for him in the *palaestra* as



defined in *De re aedificatoria*<sup>149</sup>: “The ancients, and especially the Greeks, erected in the very middle of their cities those edifices which they called Palestre, where those who applied themselves to philosophy attended public disputations. They were large spacious places, full of windows, with a free prospect on all sides and raised seats and porticoes running around a flowery green meadow.”<sup>150</sup>

The flowery meadow in the very heart of the city symbolizes mythic time successfully embedded in historical time. The image also appears in a letter to Leonardo Bruni, Alberti’s superior in the curia, in which Alberti describes a series of ten paintings. The first portrays Mother Humanism, followed by her daughter Kindness, who begot Benevolence, who begot Peace, who begot Contentment. The last painting, that of Contentment, focuses once again on the peaceful, meadowy courtyard of the library: “The painting shows a woman with a serious and mature aspect. Using a small bundle of beautifully arranged flowers as a pillow, she rests in a flowery field among a multitude of books. With uplifted eyes she praises the sun and holds her hands out in adoration.”<sup>151</sup> If the humanist scholar can stretch out contentedly in the inner sanctum of the palestre at the center of the city, then the city is at peace. His own soul pre-simulates a well-ordered state.

This leads us to Alberti’s drawing of himself standing in a flowery meadow with a book in his left hand (figure 6). The stance is a well-known commonplace—it can be seen in hundreds of medieval frescoes and drawings—that Alberti wants to claim for his hagiographic self-definition of the humanist. The new authorial icon is not that of a Christian saint handing down the text of God but, once again, of a humanist saint embodying the reconcilability of irreconcilable realms. Alberti, of course, is not above presenting himself in the elevated role of ultimate model.

In the city of contented humanists the public gladly renders to the princes and humanist instructors “the thanks they are due.” Glory and Fame can now exist alongside each other in harmony, as if their dialectical opposition had never been set in motion.



**Figure 6**  
Self-portrait of Leon Baptista Alberti (Biblioteca Nazionale, Rome).

Glory springs up in public squares; reputation is nourished by the voice and judgment of many persons of honor, and in the midst of people. Fame flees from all solitary and private spots to dwell gladly in the arena [together with Glory], where crowds are gathered and celebrity is found; there the name is bright and luminous of one who with hard sweat and assiduous toil for noble ends has projected himself up out of silence, darkness, ignorance, and vice.<sup>152</sup>

This city exists without friction between those who govern and those who are governed, between those who define the urban identity in their texts and those, including the writers, who put it into practice. It is the implied counter-proposal to a creation-gone-wrong.

It is in the [ideal] city that one learns to be a citizen. There people acquire valuable knowledge, see many models to teach them the avoidance of evil. As they look around, they notice how handsome is honor, how lovely is fame, how divine a thing is glory. There they taste the sweets of praise, of being named and esteemed and admired. By these most honorable joys, the young are awakened to the pursuits of excellence and come to devote themselves to attempt difficult things worthy of immortality.<sup>153</sup>

### **A Iove Principium Musae**

At the end of book 2 of *De re aedificatoria* Alberti pauses to outline, in the form of a “holy and religious” prayer, the main features of the city.<sup>154</sup> Moving from the physical to the spiritual—in accordance with the principles outlined in book 8—Alberti mentions first the public domain of the city: “We pray that we may have a happy and prosperous ending, with strength and happiness to the city and its inhabitants, their fortunes increased, their efforts successful.” There follows an allusion to the contented humanist who inhabits the central precinct: “[We pray] that we may have a contented mind.” Then comes a reference to the city’s historical consciousness: “[We pray] that we may acquire glory.” Alberti then speaks of the purpose of the central precinct, where the principles of continuity are preserved: “[We pray] that the good and benevolent things are continuous and follow one on the other.” Or, as it sounds in Alberti’s Latin:

Caeterum praestare quidem arbitror, si omni opinionum incerta superstitione despecta rem ipsam sancte et religiose aggrediemur. “A Iove principium Musae: Iovis omnia plena.” Ergo purificato animo et sancte pieque adorato sacrificio inchoari tantam rem perplacebit, his maxime habitis precibus ad superos, quibus poscatur, ut opem auxiliumque praebeant operi et faveant caeptis, quoad fauste feliciter prospereque eveniat res, sitque longa cum sua suorumque hospitumque salute et salubritate, cum rerum firmitate animi aequabilitate fortunarum incremento et industriae fructu et gloriae propagatione bonorumque omnium perhennitate atque posteritate. De his hactenus.

### The Great Defect

Past prickly thorns, through sharp underbrush  
Across rough waves, through cruel war,  
Wherever I pass, one thought overwhelms me  
And will make me white-haired and old before my time.

My thoughts are so many that  
If yes and no in my head take hold of me,  
When one closes and the other recloses  
I will certainly shrivel up from pain.

But you, sincere Father, who knows  
the works and the hearts of us the accursed,  
Why don't you concern yourself with our great defect?

Your justice which is so waited for,  
As Dante says so well, from which I take strength:  
The sword from above does not fall quickly enough.<sup>155</sup>

Alberti's reference to Dante in his sonnet involves a misreading of *Paradiso*. Dante's “La spada di qua su non taglia in fretta,” which Alberti rewrites as “la spada di lassù non taglia in fretta,” is only one part of a sentence that goes on to say “nè tardo, ma ch'al parere di colui che disiando o temendo l'aspetta,” which means that the sword from above strikes neither in haste nor tardily “expect as it seems to him who awaits it with desire or with fear” (canto 22, line 16). Dante believes that mortals should console themselves in the knowledge that the clock of

God's justice functions at its own imperturbable speed; Alberti, however, sees a "great defect," a miscommunication between the divine and earthy time frames. Earthly time lacks consistency; at one moment it speeds up—turning the author "white-haired and old" before his time—and at another slows down—"the sword doesn't fall fast enough."

Because of the great defect, the realms of the psyche, much like Freud's concepts of the id, the ego, and the superego, cannot communicate with one another. Neither the sewer below nor the divine realms above serve as poles for the orientation of the earthly, which is trapped in the horizontal world of Chronos. Alberti's tripartite system of saint, functionary, and cynic can be viewed as an effort to bring the problem into the open and thereby make it accessible to healing efforts. Each attempts to break the barriers that insulate chronological time, one from above, one from below, and one from within. This is the purpose of the counter-aesthetic that functions on all three levels: on the first to postulate a pure and uncontaminated realm, on the second to compromise with it, and on the third to accept total but open disorder.

### **Microtiro**

In the Albertian view of history Adam's eating the forbidden apple developed into the ongoing feast in which mankind now revels. Theogenius, surviving only on that which he can grow with his own hands, expounds on the symbolic of devouring: "Man has taken an oath to go all the way to the bitter end to commit cruelty and atrocity. His stomach desires to be the public graveyard of everything; herbs, plants, fruits, birds, quadrupeds, worms, and fish. There is nothing on earth or beneath the earth that he does not devour. He is a fierce enemy of what he sees, and of what he does not see. He wants them all to serve him."<sup>156</sup>

The Albertian humanists, not partaking of the feast, are driven back into the garden of Eden, as it were. This is enacted in *Theogenius*, where we witness the collapse of the Albertian humanist enterprise in the face of the powerful arch-aesthetic. History has to return to the status quo of temporality and

humanism to its status as peripheral. *Theogenius* is actually a before and after shot compressed into one piece. If Genipatro represents the “after” (namely Baptista in exile), Microtiro, a “young recruit” of the humanist cadre, represents the “before.” He is not yet a Baptista and on the verge of becoming a Libripeta. At this fragile juncture Microtiro has to learn of the arch-aesthetic before he can be channeled into one or the other of the types of counter-aesthetic. He has to realize that he will find himself surrounded by “betrayers, adulators, petitioners, obstructors, lascivious, frivolous, immodest, vicious, and harmful men.”<sup>157</sup> They had pushed Genipatro into exile where he finds “wholesome work” in the garden at the expense of being no longer capable of improving society, which is ruled now by the arrogant Tichipedo (Child of Fortune). (The similarities to *Philodoxeus* are numerous.) Tichipedo, who had taken the path to riches and fame, meets with all the predictable consequences; his sons are murdered, his brother commits suicide in prison, his house is plundered, his wife dies during an aborted childbirth, and he himself is eventually sold into slavery. Tichipedo has all too well adapted to the arch-aesthetic and as a negative *exemplum* serves as a demonstration of its consequences. Genipatro in order to escape the arch-aesthetic was forced to renounce all interest in urban affairs, even though he is the “father of the country.” By implication he leaves behind an orphaned family. Fully aware of the irresolvable dialectic of fame and glory, he knows that the proud procession of a humanist into the town can never be enacted. He laments that “rarely does it happen that the good ones are able to lead in their republic against the wicked ones. The more they know the more they live in danger of expecting a terrible fortune.”<sup>158</sup>

Alberti never resolves the suspense he introduces. We are left to wonder whether Microtiro will attain Philoponian transcendence or opt for a limited personal peace, as even St. Potitus originally had intended. Should he return, a negative ending is in store for him, for Alberti pointedly refers to Alcidiabes, who initially in *Della Famiglia* seemed the very model of princely control but who in *Theogenius* has become the tragic victim of envy and his own spiritual otherness: “Alcidiabes,

who was rich, fortunate, and beloved and who had an almost divine mind, was in every way prince of his citizens. However, after having ennobled his fatherland with his virtue and victories, he died in exile and in poverty, having lost all his possessions, because the masses always dislike those who are not similar to them in life and customs.”<sup>159</sup>

The message Alberti wishes to convey in his dedication of *Theogenius* to Leonello d’Este is never clearly stated. Is he being advised to abandon politics and exile himself, as an Albertian humanist would? Or does it suggest that he avail himself of the services of a humanist adviser, such as Alberti, to effect a reconciliation of humanist and society, bringing him back from exile, as it were? Though these options are never spelled out, Alberti’s *Theogenius* is clearly unlike contemporary dialogues by Leonardo Bruni and Poggio Bracciolini, who portray the humanist movement in glorious action; here it is shown embattled, on the defensive, and of dubious effectiveness. The ideals that govern its existence, namely frugality, modesty, and perseverance, are useless within the urban confines. With a certain longing, Alberti looks to distant India where “those who are good and very learned rule the republic and take care of its laws.”<sup>160</sup> The Albertian humanist is not accorded such a central position in the city, which has been usurped by “barbarians” who live not outside it but within it like “caged and dangerous animals.”<sup>161</sup>

### **The Final Shriek**

Without memory of the origins (*Theogenius*) and its father (*Genipatro*), the city speeds toward destruction. The “I” of social conscience is inevitably, and paradoxically, dragged along with it. Time (historical time) is untrustworthy, and Virtue (mythic time) is “tired,” leaving the Albertian humanist abandoned in the middle.

If I suffer, no one should be surprised,  
Because one wants what one likes.  
I don’t know when the soul, lost among so  
Many perils, will have any peace.

Miserable that I am! On what should  
My vain hope, weak and false, hang?  
I cannot dislike the ones who do this to me.  
Love, what does one do? Why don't you advise me?  
  
Time would be good to advance your course,  
But since tired virtue is already failing,  
I can no longer trust either of them.  
  
But if restraint extends to compassion,  
I believe that help will come in time.  
If not, you will soon hear the final shriek.<sup>162</sup>



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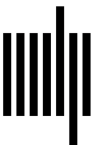
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