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## **Encounters and Misencounters in the Albertian Theater**



## The Author-Text

Having explored Alberti's literary ontology and its concomitant domain of aesthetics as the primary alienating phenomena of the human psyche, we will now investigate in more depth how Alberti viewed the various roles that humanism plays in its protracted confrontation with the arch-aesthetic world.

If Alberti was not the first Renaissance thinker to notice the tension between knowledge and power as one of the essential problems of his age, he was the first to create an elaborate speculative system in response to it. By the mid-fourteenth century humanists had secured for themselves highly privileged access to power. Petrarch sitting at the table of the Colonna, Giannozzo Manetti writing the biography of Nicholas V, and Giovanni Pontano in the service of Alfonso I of Naples are only several of the famous instances of humanists' influence in politics. There were of course patrons who enjoyed the purely intellectual benefits in their contacts with the humanists. Piero de' Pazzi's famous "conversion" from princely pleasures to princely learning, Isabella d'Este's court at Ferrara, and Montefeltro's support of humanists are well-known examples. But the alliance of knowledge and power was by no means a happy marriage and was subject to suspicions, abuses, and excesses. One need only think of the numerous invective battles, of the popes and princes who competed for the employment of certain humanists, of the biases Poggio and Salutati displayed in their writings, of the bitter polemics against the Church waged by Valla, and of the purging of humanists, including Alberti, from the curia in 1464 by Paul II.

Alberti today may, in some circles, still be defined as a Renaissance Man, but Alberti himself would hardly have defined his age as a renaissance. What he saw were the ominous signs of cultural deterioration in general and of a faulty definition of the humanist task in particular. Instead of eagerly submitting to the powers that be, humanism should stand back so that the specific roles of knowledge and power can come into full view. But Alberti does not opt for simple solutions. Humanism is itself a paradox, for, as Alberti envisioned it, the humanist writer, having to reveal the underlying evil in society and to

postulate a cure, faces the situation of having to “know man through and through” and yet remain uncontaminated. It is through this paradox and the anxieties it produces in the writer’s psyche that the turbulent nature of the communal psyche is revealed, even if at the same time the possibility of hope is diminished.

Because of this paradox, humanism of the Albertian cast, though it aims at a better world, is suspicious of aloof Neoplatonic idealism. Whereas Neoplatonists would see the world as a degenerate form of the ideal, Alberti sees the world and the ideal as leading separate existences. The humanist program as he envisions it can attempt to create contact between the two realms, but it cannot necessarily change the real world for the better. In fact, instead of postulating a distant but potentially attainable concordance of words and things and of man and identity, it exposes and grieves over all instances of “misfitting,” itself included. Its own separation from society (equivalent to historical time itself) in a sort of ripple effect initiates a series of other separations, beginning with that of the writer from society (something artists are challenged to repair, as we shall see) and ending with that of author from text, which, in its finality, is the *terminus ad quem* of social existence, standing for and replicating the original separation of word from meaning, image from being, and necessity from endurance. Though Alberti’s humanist saints suffer and articulate the troubles of the temporal world through their expression of hope, the Albertian cynics point to the omnipresence of aesthetic alienation and to the fact that the temporal world is not perishable at all but rather prevailing. It is the spiritual world, not the temporal, that is ephemeral and endangered.

Alberti has learned from his own autobiographical method that the struggle to arrive at an authentic self—possessing reason, piety, and a sense of social responsibility—is complicated by the difficulty of fusing aesthetics (an ontological problem) with ethics (an epistemological one) in a seemingly spontaneous and natural way. In facing this difficulty humanism cannot avoid employing the very thing it attempts to counteract, namely aesthetic alienation, as this is the only human means of effecting change. The humanist aesthetic, employed in full

consciousness of its double-edged nature and its primordial drift, makes the writer potentially more potent than those officially in charge, but also painfully complicit in the arch-aesthetic he is combating.

Alberti would always remain in the ivory tower, for to enter the fray would deny him critical distance and indeed the validity of his theoretical speculations. There were those, however, who, thinking along more simplistic lines, seem to have wanted to bring ideas very similar to his into the real world. Girolamo Savonarola (1454–98), for example, hardly ever mentioned in discussions on Alberti and in some ways miles apart, is in other respects oddly close. What Alberti saw in the abstract—and through the veil of irony—Savonarola took literally as a program of political reform. Does not Alberti’s writer-saint suddenly come to life in the figure of Savonarola? Indeed the problem posed by Alberti, namely how the writer can wage a war for the spirit of mankind without himself becoming contaminated, describes the very problem faced by Savonarola. This is not to say that Alberti’s works, ciphered as they are, were meant to call forth a real fighter-saint, but only that Alberti placed his finger on the pulse of his times.

Though the issue of knowledge and power constantly seems to weigh on Alberti’s mind, he does not search for easy answers to the problem but asks the polemical question: Can knowledge and power coexist and contribute to a better world? His answer is an ironic yes and no. Such a union can only contribute to a better world if both parties are recognized as combatants with differing *raisons d’être*. Only then can any clarity be achieved between “who you are and who I am,” to use the words of Baptista. All-too-peaceful coexistence hints at falsification, whether it be the misappropriation of power by false intellectuals or the drawing of intellectuals into temporal matters. The underlying tensions between the literary self—the only possible locus of uncorrupted knowledge—and the ever shifting world of power can never be allowed to fall from view. Moral consciousness and political consciousness must coexist in a dialectic so as to maintain the myth of compatibility. The Albertian humanist, therefore, can never attempt a unilateral, Savonarola-style takeover, for he must by definition be in retreat.

To make visible the struggle between the world and the Albertian humanist, between *Realpolitik* and the exiled voice of conscience, and between the arch-aesthetic and ethics, Alberti appropriated, as we have seen, the historical model of the struggle between emperor and Church, rephrasing it as the struggle between temporal government on the one hand and the humanist government in exile on the other. The aims of the two enterprises are legitimately at variance. They should not and ultimately cannot coincide. Each has its specific function in the aesthetic realm, the first to perpetuate it, the second to transform it from barbarism to culture.

As we have seen, Alberti outlines not one, but several different interrelated humanist encounters with the arch-aesthetic. There are four ways in which contact between the two realms can be achieved instead of three because the middle proposition (the functionaries) is composed of two variants. The following chapters will cover the various scenarios, which can be briefly summarized. First, there is the attempt to bypass the arch-aesthetic by envisioning an implausible totalizing domination of society by the writer-text constellation. Second are the civic functionaries who, well aware of the dangers inherent in the arch-aesthetic, attempt to restrain it by means of its own weapons. Unlike Machiavelli's, Alberti's princes are bothered by their consciences because on the one hand they are unable to fulfill their saintly destiny and on the other hand they feel threatened by the potential incursion of a paralyzing cynicism in their psyche. Third are the artists, ignorant of the arch-aesthetic altogether—instruments of a counter-aesthetic strategy enacted by the humanist mentor. Finally, there is the vagabond unmasker, the ultimate cynic who, destroying all illusions, prefers vagabonding to the artifice of the first, the openly advocated astuteness of the second, and the naiveté of the third.

The functionaries, proposed by Alberti as a fusion of cynics and saints and represented by the prince, Agnolo, and other "fathers," embody the reconciliation of these contradictions and the realization of a moral life, thereby charting a potential course for human action. Alberti's definition of the functionary, which begins to appear only in the middle dialogues *Della*

*Famiglia*, *Profugiorum ab aerumna*, and *Theogenius*, is part of a broadening investigation into the civic humanist compromise with *Realpolitik*. It is clear, however, that Alberti's functionaries are intended to demonstrate the unmanageability of the arch-aesthetic. In the final analysis, they turn into failure postulates. The search for real-life prototypes like Agnolo and Benedetto stalls, as we find out in *De Ichiarcia*, Alberti's last dialogue, where Baptista spins out a fantasy of a utopian functionary prince in front of a crackling fireplace on a winter's night.

The failure of civic humanism leaves the field open for painters and architects to enter the fray and attempt to infuse humanist ideals into the unwilling world. Their lack of power and vested interest makes them immensely suitable vehicles for the implementation of a humanist ideology suspicious of all collusion with *Realpolitik*. The absence of a power base makes them innocuous enough in that world so as not to provoke its rapacious forces. Practicing simulation openly and as it were naively, they are not perceived as a threat in the arch-aesthetic realm and thus unknowingly import the contraband ethics. They are a Trojan horse left behind by the Albertian humanist—the ultimate counter-deception in a deceptive world.

Ironically, the artists are themselves deceived, for the text they must follow hides the author's textual stratagem. While in *Philodoxeus* it is still implied that the real author will throw off the mask and take his bows, as indeed he does, in the treatises on painting and architecture the impenetrable mask hints at no irony. Here Alberti, exploring the totalizing mask, has structured himself out of the text. Knowing that Alberti did nothing without profound deliberation, could we not speculate that the extinction of the author in *De re aedificatoria* and *De pictura* was intended to abolish the lingering presence of the authorial aesthetic—Alberti's *own*, that is—in the allegedly nonaesthetic text and enforce a congruence of word and meaning? If we hesitate to suspect Alberti of devising this elaborate mask, we need only remind ourselves of the creation myth in *Momus*, where it is stated that only with the greatest difficulty and by looking carefully into the eye sockets can one detect the mask. Thus it is fitting that we end with *Momus*, where Alberti, in the fourth and final attempt to formulate a position

against the arch-aesthetic, articulates the reversal that has long been rumbling underground. In *Momus* the shifting strategies of masking, counter-masking, and unmasking that take place between Alberti and his authorial poses, between writer, text, and audience, and between the power structure of society and humanist conscience are brought to their logical, ironic conclusion.

### **The Mortal Gods**

In *Corolle* and *Fatum et Fortuna*, Alberti evokes the fantasy of the successful union of writer, text, and society. This union is not forwarded as a utopian ideal since it exists outside of historical time. As long as it remains in the realm of humanist fantasy its validity seems plausible, but placed within the context of *Realpolitik* it becomes, of course, a travesty, which is the ambiguity played out in *Corolle*, where a “rhetorician” outlines the rules that supposedly guide his life. His complicated diction and his flowery style are intended to show that he has not forgotten what a humanist writer is, but he does not follow what he espouses. Alberti uses this fallen writer not only to exemplify the arch-aesthetic alienation from the ethical foundation but also to exemplify the implausibility of utopian hopes for mankind. The rhetorician, as in a trance, parrots the high ideals of humanism in a tortuous, labyrinthine, unending sentence. Contained therein, however, is a list that moves from that which is “given” to that which the writer must acquire, from divine talent to earthly learnedness. The list, in fact, is almost an outline, albeit in an ironic setting, of the *Vita* that describes the life of Baptista.

Authors must be endowed with singular and outstanding talent.  
They must model themselves on venerable, serious, and learned men.  
They will win special thanks from good men, a type of divine regard.  
They must hope from the immortal gods for immortality.  
They must not only have good character and learning but virtue and fortitude.  
They must provide strenuous lucubrations for their state and fellow citizens.



They must work with highest devotion, vigilance, and effort.  
They must not neglect the standards of ancient learning.  
These famous men will cling together in mind and thought.  
Nature must be their guide.  
They bolster the fragile and failing hopes of men.  
They must know that it is from the depravity and the corrupt reasoning of the inexperienced that improper reasonings emerge.  
They must strive for what the Greeks call *pronoia* (providence).  
Through virtue (manly excellence) they build the path to the heavens.  
Their art of exposition must not be loose and free-flowing but should be based on an ordered method of speaking.<sup>1</sup>

The rhetorician's failure to understand what he is saying exposes the mistake inherent in the creation of the world; it has no built-in affinity for textuality. That was the great flaw described so colorfully in *Momus*, where, as we have seen, the "painter" fails to hand a text over to his proto-humans ("The Prerogative"). As opposed to the dire reality ironized in Corolle, Alberti describes in *Fatum et Fortuna* of *Intercoenales* a counter-creation myth that shows the "simple and uncorrupted" writer-saint at work. In this *somnium* Alberti describes a "demigod" standing on a mountain looking down on the circular River of Life that girdles it. Existence in this river is precarious and endangered: some souls are struggling on inflated bladders, others on overloaded ships; some are even swimming unaided. A shade, speaking to the dreamer about the difficulty of negotiating survival in this river, draws attention to a group standing apart from the multitude; they are described as *diis persimiles*. Carried by their wings, which represent "truth, simplicity, and talent" (Alythia and Phroneus we have already encountered in *Philodoxeus*), they put their "divine endowments to good use" in the "admirable enterprise of constructing rafts" (texts?) to help others negotiate the toilsome River of Life. Alberti understandably claims that "in a marvelous way," he "sees himself among them."

*Shades:* But now, offer supreme honor to those you see there set apart from the multitude.

Looking in all directions, I said: "In truth, I see no one who is separated from the multitude."

And the shades: “How can you miss those who with wings on their feet, fly with such agility and rapidity over the waves?”

Then I said: “I see but one; but why should I do homage to him? What have these done?”

Answered the shades: “Does it seem to you that those have little merit who—simple and uncorrupted—are considered by men to be divine? Their wings represent truth and simplicity, and their winged sandals signify contempt for transitory things. Justly, therefore, are they considered divine, not only because of their divine endowments but also because they were the first to construct the boards that you see floating on the river. Those boards, upon which they carved the name of each of the liberal arts [lit., the good arts] are a great help to those who are swimming.

“Those others are also similar to the gods, but they do not entirely emerge from the waters because their winged sandals are imperfect; these are demigods, and they are most deserving of honor and veneration as they are immediately below the gods. It is their merit to have enlarged the boards by adding pieces of flotsam to them. Further they engage in the admirable enterprise of collecting the boards from the reefs and the beaches, in order to construct new ones and to proffer these works to those who still swim in midstream.

“Render, O mortal, honor to these. Render them the thanks that they are due for having offered excellent help with these boards to those negotiating the toilsome River of life.”

This is what I saw and heard in my sleep; and I seemed, in a marvelous way, to have somehow managed to be numbered among the winged gods.<sup>2</sup>

As the passage makes clear, there are two different types of rafts, those made *ex nihilo* and those that are repaired. The theme draws on a commonplace medieval theological distinction between first and second planks.<sup>3</sup> The first plank is the ritual of baptism that neutralizes original sin. The “second plank after shipwreck,” as it was commonly labeled, is the ongoing sacrament of penance, which helps against the constant threat of actual sin. Just as the first launches the soul into temporal time, the second helps in restoration when underway. In defining his demigod humanists who are engaged in either writing new texts on the “good arts” (i.e., counter-proposals to the “bad arts” of the arch-aesthetic) or restoring old ones, Alberti transposes these most basic of Christian principles into working propositions of his salvation myth.

That Alberti—ever so modestly—sees himself in such an exalted position should come as no surprise. Is not *De pictura* a “new raft?”<sup>4</sup> Alberti lets it be known that “This is a topic never treated before.”<sup>5</sup> *De re aedificatoria*, on the other hand, is like a repaired raft, reassembled as it is from Vitruvius’s shipwreck.<sup>6</sup> These texts then are part of the alternative creation myth, in which mortals are given the option to make use of a textual raft in the dangerous River of Life, a raft ordered according to divine principles and devoid of vested interests. A paradox emerges. The world as it historically developed is an aesthetic one; the counter-proposition, however, which aims to diffuse mankind’s aesthetic nature so that it once again can recognize the “pure and simple,” also involves an aesthetic both ontologically and textually and is far from spontaneous. In this strange postulate involving an allegedly nonaesthetic art of text making, the demigod writers, represented as “most deserving of honor and veneration,” should be nothing less than the guardians of society. And in *De re aedificatoria*, we hear that “The guardians (*intellegeret genus*), appointed over men, should be some other kind of beings of superior wisdom and greater excellence than common men.”<sup>7</sup>

*Intelligentia*, which comes “directly and simply” and was commonly associated with angels and deities, differs from *ratio*, a more limited human knowledge. It is not accidental that the young Philoponius was saved from death by some quasi-divine guardians, *intelligentes honestissimi*, as he was to join their ranks (*Pupillus*) after having been purged of his initial resentment (*Erumna*).<sup>8</sup> Only then could he emerge metamorphosed as a lawgiver speaking only what is pure and simple, as dictated by his second ring. Baptista, not so much the lawgiver as the ideal uncontaminated guardian-mentor, also speaks in *De pictura* in a manner “that is simple and beautiful,” perfectly simulating an intact bond of trust between students and humanist instructor.

The humanist writers are deserving of honors because, as Alberti asserts in *De commodis litterarum atque incommodis*, they place others on a path toward “an honorable and happy life very much similar to that of the gods (*deorum persimilem*)” and thus may claim to stand *outside* the arch-aesthetic compulsion.<sup>9</sup>

Alberti leaves little doubt that his humanist godlike instructors have a sacred trust: “The virtues of painting are that its instructors, seeing their exertion so praised, feel themselves to be almost simulating God (*simillimos intellégant*).”<sup>10</sup> Embodying the spirit of social conscience and preserving all excellent things into posterity, the phantasmagoric Albertian demigods, “uniquely and exquisitely singular” and designed in opposition to the hard-nosed *Realpolitik* of fifteenth-century Italy, preside over the ethical-aesthetic realm without falling prey to its premise of distortion: “My fond wish is that whatever is most proper and most beautiful, and that whatever helps run the republic and preserves all remarkable things to posterity should be termed, one might go so far as to say, sacred.”<sup>11</sup>

While Plato held that the arts lead man ever further from the ideal and cloud all memory of the authentic, Alberti held that the authentic is irretrievably lost, for it was locked off from mankind by a faulty creation. The alternative creation myth that attempts to define an unpolluted writer will later parallel Alberti’s attempt to create an artist similarly unpolluted. The former is conceived essentially as a messenger from God, the latter as a messenger from the humanist realm. Both are equally implausible postulates. But whereas the inflated claims of the writer-saint collapse when exposed to the reality principle, the unrealistic claims of the artists miraculously escape unscathed.

### **The Discourse on the Good and Happy Life**

The “good and happy life” (variously phrased as *ad bene beateque vivendum* or *vivere bene e lodati*) appears frequently in Alberti’s writings, as it is essential to the *società natura e vera religione*. It designates a hoped for reconciliation between God and the world. It is in *De iure*, a text rarely studied, that Alberti comes closest to spelling out his vision of a successful union. Alberti here proposes two quasi-legal systems—one vertical, one horizontal. The former is the divine law which defines the relationships between good and evil, the latter is that of the bonds of kinship, which are enumerated as those of marriage, family, and friendship.

The good and happy life hinges on the proper implementation of the divine law, which differs from written law just as spirit differs from body.<sup>12</sup> The first has primacy over the second, but the latter sometimes forbids things demanded by the first. The Albertian judge, so we are led to understand, would never let that happen: “Divine things should be left to God and his ministers whereas human things only are to be weighed by a judge and handled through awards and punishments according to human laws. But the judge has to administer them mindful of God and as a very good priest of duty.”<sup>13</sup>

Whereas divine law speaks in absolutes, human law knows many shades of grey (such as things that are good at first, but ultimately evil, and things that may seem evil but lead to a good end). Despite these complications, the true judge can never forget the primacy of divine law, which “has such a power and value that it orders one to act well and despise evil.”<sup>14</sup> If the intactness of the divine law prevails, the bonds of kinship will also remain intact. In an ideal scenario the intersection is the locus of the humanist enterprise. In the fallen world, however, a dislocation has taken place. In *Discordia*, from *Intercoenales*, Alberti explains how the goddess Discord subverts the two systems: “She can subvert at will all human and divine laws, and even against the gods’ wishes dissolve and destroy all bonds of kinship, marriage and friendship.”<sup>15</sup>

*De iure* still needs to be investigated in the context of legal history by specialists of medieval and Renaissance law. For my purpose, it is enough to point out that a parallel exists between Alberti’s concept of the arch-aesthetic realm and his concept of written law. Written law arose in response to mankind’s defective human psyche, which “forgot” how to simulate properly and is under the sway of Discord. The more faulty the simulation becomes, the more laws are required *ad infinitum*: “For the Romans, twelve [laws] were enough for them to enlarge their republic. We, however, have sixty cabinets full of laws, and to this we add every day new laws.”<sup>16</sup> The residual natural and divine law that still exists in mankind as conscience could perhaps be compared to the pre-Narcissistic realm that Baptista and Philoponius attempt to reintroduce into society, for it is this law that should guide man’s actions, prior to any

written law, for it alone “brings us closer to God.”<sup>17</sup> Alberti’s thesis is straightforward, yet by insisting on a trans-legal ethical system, he is consistent with his definition of a humanism that stands in naive and archaic contrast to *Realpolitik*. Alberti’s ethical system must be seen within the context of other systems, such as the one devised by the archbishop of Florence, St. Antoninus (1389–1459), Alberti’s contemporary and a legal theorist of repute. He envisioned a complex hierarchy of laws divided into seven categories, which were, theoretically at least, held to be capable of dealing with all possible contingencies occurring in secular society.<sup>18</sup> Alberti’s schema is much less workable, but infinitely more powerful in its attempt to bond mythic and temporal time. Philoponius’s twelve rings must be seen in this context; they are by definition “pure, simple, free of charge.”<sup>19</sup> It is for this reason, as we have already seen, that Baptista gave “every artist copies of his great and worthy treatise.”<sup>20</sup> Like all humanist texts, they instill in the readers “a zeal for a better life” (the vertical connection) and amuse them as well (the horizontal connection). “If a writer succeeds, by the force of expression, with variety and elegance of argumentation to give to the readers the zeal for a better life and at the same time to amuse them with friendliness and ease—this didn’t occur too frequently at the time of the ancient Latin authors either—then without doubt, he must not be confused with the mass of contemporary writers.”<sup>21</sup>

The Albertian writer must demonstrate that he has purged himself to qualify as spokesman for the good and happy life.

I have always held writing in the highest consideration, and to apply oneself to it I have accepted in my life anxieties of all types, great fatigues, unpleasantness, damages, dangers, torments, and misfortune unending, to the point that it seemed that I had dedicated myself to them completely. . . . I took upon myself poverty, enemies, and injuries, which were, as is well known, neither indifferent nor light.<sup>22</sup>

The writer, of course, cannot allow his otherness to manifest itself in his writings, for they should “not be employed to excite discord, or bring harm to others,” Alberti holds, “but only to turn our affection, our senses, and our understanding towards a good and happy life.”<sup>23</sup> This discourse on the good and

happy life, held out as a counterbalancing vision in the temporal world, has, of course, few practitioners and is on the verge of dying out altogether.

Good literature, the noble arts, and the divine disciplines, have fallen so low as to prostitute themselves. And have you gone so far, O knowledge of things divine and human, custodian over good customs and glory, inventor and generator of everything that is high, you, who used to adorn the spirit of mankind, elevating his intelligence, conferring praise, esteem and dignity, governing the state and guiding the world with the highest law and order?<sup>24</sup>

Alberti's polemic points to the belated and quixotic nature of his heroes, who are still fighting in the forlorn cause of "good literature, the noble arts, and the divine disciplines." They and they alone still point to the absolute, herald the exalted, elevate their intelligence, and stand guard over good customs and good arts; in short, they are perfect models for simulation. It is not "scholarship, but divine virtue" that will motivate them and lead them to a comprehension of "the essences and the causes of things, beauty and the pursuit of virtue and glory," all necessary for "the good and happy life."<sup>25</sup>

### **Mother Humanism**

If there is an ideal representative of the discourse on the good and happy life, bringing about the artificially envisioned counter-creation myth, it is Baptista, in whom the jousting for position between humanist writer and society begins to be played out in earnest. As a counter proposition to the arch-aesthetic, Baptista hopes to defeat the fragmented society by an additive and agglutinative construction that unites cultural values in great density; he can penetrate the human psyche, paint, make music, excel in mathematics, and write, among other things. This synthetic identity is modeled on the principles inherent in the image of Mother Humanism, which is described in a piece called *Picture*, from *Intercoenales*. As mother of Peace, Happiness, Benevolence, and Contentment she demonstrates the seamless fusion of cultural attributes (see figure 7):



**Figure 7**  
“Mother Humanism” (sketch by the author).

On the panel was the marvelous image of a woman with many different faces coming together on one neck: old, young, sad, happy, joyous, serious, humorous, and so forth. Similarly, the image had many hands extending from the shoulders. One hand held a quill, another a lyre, another a symmetrically shaped gemstone, another instruments used by mathematicians, and still another books. Above this picture was the title Mother Humanism.<sup>26</sup>

This description is startling. Multi-limbed Indian figures, known only vaguely from the tales of travelers, were often viewed as representing the devil.<sup>27</sup> More significantly, they were frequently employed in representations of Fortuna to symbolize her innate ambiguity (see figure 8). Alberti’s Mother Hu-

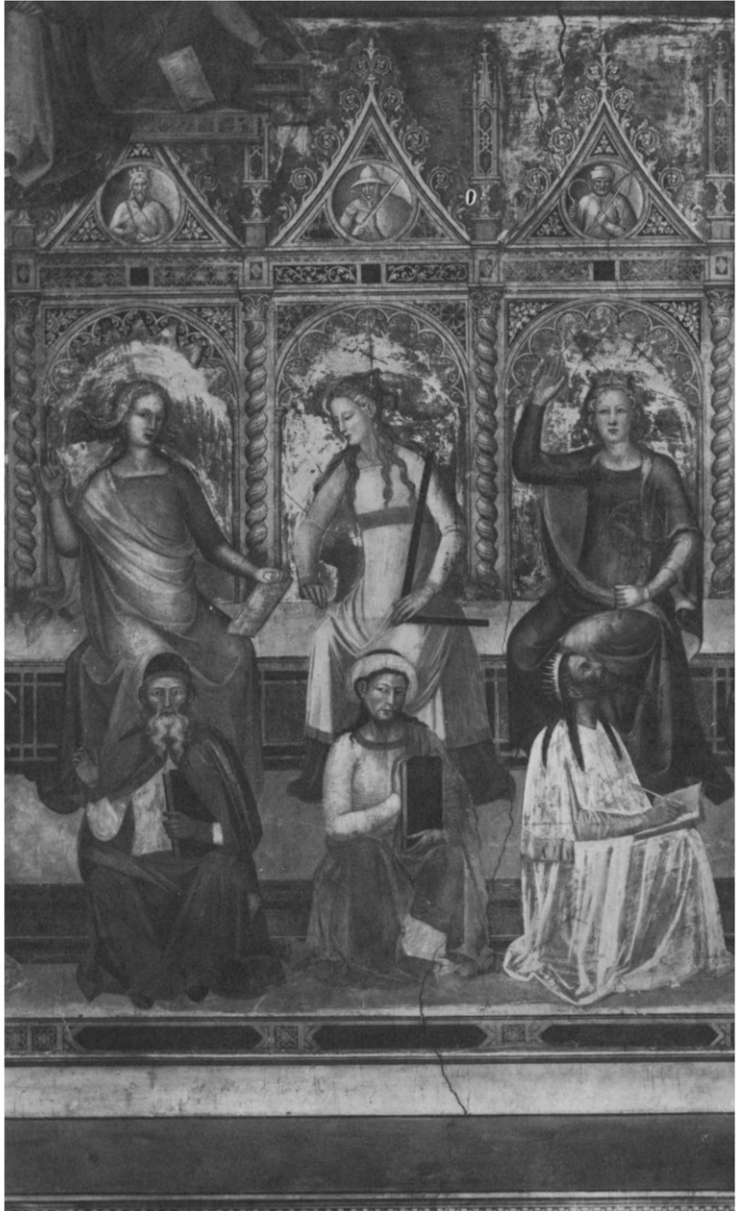




**Figure 8**  
Multi-limbed Fortuna in a fifteenth-century painting (British Library, London).

manism, however, triumphs as the ultimate warrior against Fortuna, of which she is the counterimage; what Fortuna dismembers, Mother Humanism reassembles. She embodies the various aspects of human life (represented by the numerous faces); she is a writer (symbolized by the pen); a Promethean bringer of the divine light (symbolized by the gem);<sup>28</sup> a creator of beauty (symbolized by the carefully crafted painting); an organizer of human activities (symbolized by mathematical instruments); and finally a transmitter of texts (symbolized by the manuscript).

The iconography of the individual elements, of course, was not new. We only have to look at Andrea Bonaiuti's fresco *The Triumph of St. Thomas of Aquinas*, painted in 1366, in the Spanish Chapel of S. Maria Novella in Florence (figure 9). Bonaiuti organizes knowledge into fourteen subcategories, seven sacred



**Figure 9**  
Detail from Andrea Bonaiuti's "Triumph of St. Thomas of Aquinas"  
(1366), in S. Maria Novella. (Art Resources)



and seven profane, each represented by a woman holding the appropriate object. Alberti, in creating his Mother Humanism, conflates in one image five of Bonaiuti's; the result is an oddly shaped being intended to demonstrate the principle of unification; it unites what is dispersed, much as does the figure of Baptista. Though Aristotle specifically condemns such grotesqueries, he does permit assemblage if the aims are benevolent or noble, as for example in the definition of a "great man." "Great men are distinguished from ordinary men in the same way as beautiful people from plain ones, or as an artfully painted object from a real one, namely, in that what is dispersed has been gathered into one."<sup>29</sup> As a literary topos, it can be found, for example, in Geoffrey of Vinsauf's description of Pope Innocent I and in de Lille's *Anticlaudianus*.<sup>30</sup>

In excellent lineage you compare with Bartholomew, in gentle heart with Andrew, in precious youth with John, in steadfast faith with Peter, and in perfect learning with Paul: all these qualities are found together in one.<sup>31</sup>

The skilled zeal of Nature brings together in one work the individual gifts she has bestowed here and there on others.<sup>32</sup>

Above all, it was the essential principle of hagiographic constructions. Already in the fourth century it was explained by a hagiographer that

No one should take offense if any of these deeds were done by some other saint since the holy apostle, through the mystery of the member saints united in one body, has so brought them into union that, by a comparison with a living body, we may harmonize the members, one with another, in turn. . . . Hence if any of those acts which we have written down were not of that man . . . nevertheless we should little doubt that they too belong to so great a man. The holy man himself teaches that, of all living things, there should always be attributed to one what was discovered in others.<sup>33</sup>

Alberti employed the hagiographic topos not only as a guiding principle in his theory of how to make works of art but also in developing his own synthetic literary ontology. Baptista is thus by no means to be construed as an emblem of pleasant universality but must be interpreted as making manifest the

difficult battle against the centrifugality of society. While the world is dispersive, Baptista collects, and in collecting, saves.

### Baptista and his Texts

A case where a hypothesized fusion of author and text is enacted by Alberti can be found in Baptista and *De pictura*, which as an ensemble constitutes an important thesis in Alberti's speculations. This constellation was constructed as a public *exemplum* that in the symbiotic interaction of its parts demonstrates permanence in a world continually in flux. In terms of Alberti's cosmology, this can be seen as an alternative to Neofronus (*Defunctus*) and the tragic death of the literary identity. Thus Alberti bares his chest, disingenuously informing the painter that the "learned and unlearned" will agree with him, knowing full well that they together will strive to separate writer from text (*Scriptor*).<sup>34</sup> Similarly, Alberti states that *De pictura* "will prove worthy in the ears of the *eruditi*."<sup>35</sup> The author pretends that it is not his opponents who are blind to him but he who is blind to them.

Ironically and appropriately he trusts the painters more than his erudite readers, begging them as a reward for his labors to paint his portrait in their "historiae" and thereby proclaim to posterity that "I was a student of this art and they are mindful of and grateful for this favor."<sup>36</sup> The painting is more permanent than the text. Alberti should know, for Baptista is an idealized self-portrait barely hiding Alberti's vested interest in posterity. Like a genius loci dwelling in the *profugiorum* at the center of the city or like "Ennio, the poet, whose name hovers on the lips of cultured men," Baptista-Alberti, as painting, will live on in society.<sup>37</sup> (Little did Alberti know that it would be nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholars who would do him the honor.)

Whereas in *Philodoxeus* Alberti plants himself back in a classical age to establish himself as a myth, in *De pictura* he projects his myth into the future. In the first, the difference between protagonist and author is played up; in the second, the difference is played down. In the first, the author hopes that all will notice his claim to a higher identity; in the second, he hopes

that it will remain a secret. (One should recall that Alberti wrote *De pictura* in 1436, shortly after the *Commentarium Philodoxeos Fabule*.)

With Baptista, Alberti has provided for history the necessary bipolar constellation of man and product—one that for him defines the essential characteristics of the humanist task, which, on one level at least, alleges to bypass the arch-aesthetic by placing therein an intact text-writer postulate without provoking critical rejection. The result, however, is as much a product of the arch-aesthetic as an attempt to bypass it. Both man and product are fiction—artifice. This circularity is only saved by the implication that by the time it is discovered—as scholars attempt to look behind the mask—Baptista, one of the *diis-persimiles*, will have long since anchored his creator in the realm of immortality.

If Alberti had hoped that this would elevate *him* into the realm of immortality, earthly fame was slow in coming. After his death his modest legacy was squandered, his plan for an Alberti Foundation for the aid of poor students ignored, his tomb forgotten, and, worst of all, many of his texts irretrievably lost.<sup>38</sup> Only much later was Neofronus to emerge from the silence of Hades.

### **Versipellem**

What is not and must never be evident in the Baptista-*De pictura* combination is Baptista's secret flaw. Irony, a potent counter-agent, resides in his "house." In the *Vita*, we are told the following perplexing anecdote: "He [Baptista] was questioned by a mathematician why he harbored in his house double-tongued people (*bilinguem*) who could metamorphose themselves into different shapes (*versipellem*). He responded: 'Don't you know that the sphere touches the plane on only one point?'"<sup>39</sup> Because the image of the sphere touching the plane indicates instability and represents Fortuna, the retort to a mathematician signifies that the supposedly stable world of geometry is as much a phantom as the perfectability of human discourse. Alberti does not yet allow this hidden *terribilitá* to

surface because he has first to let the humanist salvation myth play itself out. As we shall see in *Momus*, the “guest” in Baptista’s house is Momus, the great artificer of metamorphosis and the cynic *par excellence*. Seemingly, Alberti planned them as a paired proposition and counter-proposition, much as the winged eye and the *quid tum* on the medallion. This, by the way, is one reason why we can never interpret Baptista as being identical with Alberti himself.

This pairing of mutually exclusive character propositions and the dynamic that develops between them could be viewed as the central dramatic event in Alberti’s exposition. It builds from the rather simple confrontation between Leopis and Libripeta (*Scriptor*) through many intermediary stages to the complex and sophisticated pair of Baptista and Momus and to Alberti’s own satire on his method in the Gelasto and Enopo pair. In the above quote Alberti foreshadows Momus’s eventual ascendancy—equivalent to the dubious ascendancy of aesthetics—from the confines of Baptista’s house, where ethics still attempts to bind aesthetics. As will be shown, Momus exposes the untenable artificiality of Baptista’s synthetic unity. With Momus the Albertian autobiographical method is brought up to date, as the humanist vision finally comes face to face with the contemporary world in which any utopian potential is shown to be a pipe dream.

### The Civic Functionary

In contrast with the distanced relationship of writer and society, the civic functionaries, representing the urban audience of the humanist writers, are trained in the practical wisdom of *astuzia* that places them *in media res*. They employ masking benignly and officially. The functionary—as we have seen with Gianozzo—is a man of experience, oriented toward the real world and adept not only at detecting deception but also at employing it.

At the beginning of book 1 of *Della Famiglia* we find an example of *astuzia* expressed by Alberti’s deceased father Ben-

edetto Alberti and recalled by Adovardo. Summarized, his arguments are as follows:

Watch over the family from all sides.

Use authority rather than power.

In every thought put the good, the peace, and the tranquility of the family first.

Know how to steer toward the harbor of honor, prestige, and authority.

Fill the young with good council.

Remain alert.

Be like a common father to all the young.

Benedetto Alberti, a “humanist” functionary, demonstrates *astuzia* by interlocking abstract morality with the practical realities of life, ethics with aesthetics. Even Jove, if he is to be an effective ruler, should do the same, but unfortunately Jove reads Momus’s *tabella* “too late” (belatedness is the curse Alberti attaches to ethics). The text given to Jove is also a pragmatic blueprint, as opposed to the text on the good and happy life:

The prince must not do nothing, nor should he do everything either. Whatever he does, he should not do it by himself nor should he do it with everyone.

He has to make sure that nobody is extravagantly rich and that not too many people are poor.

He has to help the good ones even if this is against their will.

He should not damage the evil ones unless he is forced to do so against his will (so that they do not become vindictive).

He has to be a good judge for the people.

He should abstain from reform except when he is forced to save the dignity of the state, or when reform offers itself as a secure opportunity of increasing his glory.

He must conduct himself magnificently in public and economically in private.

He has to fight against pleasures no less than he does against his enemies.

He should promote peace among his people, and gain glory and popularity for himself by acts of peace rather than with warlike enterprises.



He should listen patiently to the prayers of the humble people and should tolerate their problems with moderation if he wants the small people to support his luxury.<sup>40</sup>

Civic functionaries live in a realm that is neither entirely public nor entirely private. Therefore, “given the common treachery of mankind,” Alberti writes in *De componendis cifris*, a treatise on coding, one must not only “discover the machinations and deceptions of others, but one must also cloak one’s innermost thoughts.”<sup>41</sup> In *Profugiorum ab aerumna* Agnolo, the civic humanist *par excellence*, explains that one must always keep in mind the destructive tendency of the masses. The sovereignty of one’s thought must be guarded.

You can’t show yourself to be free. Obey the power of the masses. For Euripides, the poet, the bad actions of the multitude appeared more powerful than fire itself, and more suitable for destroying and consuming things. And they say that the multitude is always undefeatable. . . . But how much, where and whom it is necessary to believe, necessity will teach you.<sup>42</sup>

And elsewhere it is affirmed that “One’s domestic and private thought and life should not be exposed to the censure of the masses.”<sup>43</sup> One fights *astuzia* with *astuzia*,” Giannozzo admits.<sup>44</sup>

This anxious awareness of public and private realms, which determines the existence of the functionary, mirrors an identical anxious state between being and image and shows that the civic functionary lives precariously close to the arch-aesthetic—so close in fact, that the two possible alternatives in Alberti’s cosmology, saint and cynic, become ever more tempting as poles of refuge should things go wrong, as indeed they do for Benedetto Alberti. Benedetto, as described in *Intercoenales*, recants his “erroneous way of thinking” and accepts exile, complete with the change in mental states that it requires. Alberti shows him transformed from the patronal figure portrayed in *Della Famiglia* to an author type, renouncing *all* pecuniary ties with society in favor of the pure life of a humanist in exile. Just as the writers will have to face the loss of their text, the functionaries will have to face a separation from the city. In exile, Benedetto comes to realize that “From my youth on I have been susceptible to a certain erroneous way of think-

ing that led me to suppose unwisely that I truly possessed the things that most men say a man can have. I used to say ‘my lands,’ ‘my possessions,’ ‘my riches,’ according to the common habit of speaking among men. . . . But now I have the feeling that this very body in which I am trapped is not really mine.”<sup>45</sup>

### **Operae Perdae**

Albertian humanism, pointing out as well as struggling against the faulty creation, could be viewed as based on a sort of deism in which God, once having created the world, no longer interferes in its fate. Since meaning cannot be infused organically into life, texts as the potential embodiment of meaning are by definition the bizarre holdover from the Great First Cause.

Ideally the functionaries pave the way for the humanist reconquest of the memory of the originally benign creation. Hypothetically there was a time when Genipatro’s writings, modeled on the principles of the good and happy life, found no resistance among the “first citizens,” who frequently read and discuss his writings on how to live in a manner *bene e beato*.<sup>46</sup> In reality the functionaries cannot escape the impact of the arch-aesthetic and either succumb to it or flee (the topic of *Theogenius*). Thus Alberti’s thought, by suggesting a cure while annulling it, points out that the humanist in essence speaks into the void and has no agent in the earthly realm and certainly no audience with power. The absence of an audience endangers the text-life of the writer on a fundamental level. The “plebians,” of course, “can make only dreadful and obscene judgments . . . and [are] wholly negligent of those things that are absolutely necessary for the Good and Happy Life.”<sup>47</sup> They are incapable of receiving the unmediated message.

*Libripeta*: Are you trying this on Tuscan soil? Ha, ha, ha.<sup>48</sup>

*Agnolo*: The multitude lives perpetually; they change progeny by progeny, their age flies away; they live on the earth tardy in wisdom, quick in dying and complaining in life.<sup>49</sup>

Without a local spokesman there is no one to uphold the high humanist ideals, which are soon forgotten. In *Profugiorum ab aerumna* Agnolo (Baptista’s “father”) prophesizes that Bap-

tista's writings will fall on deaf ears, though they "are an ornament to the Tuscan language . . . and praise the value and glory of our fellow citizens."<sup>50</sup> He continues: "But I doubt, Baptista, that you will be able to act out your works, for there is so much envy and perverseness among mortals that divides this age of ours. . . . Oh, my fellow citizens, will you continue to offend him who loves you?"<sup>51</sup> And indeed, Baptista's *Della Famiglia* is not safe from the relatives who cause him, in a temporary fit of despair, to turn against his own work. Only the timely appearance of a "prince" saves the work from the hands of its own author: "He gave the three books of *Della Famiglia* to his relatives so they could read it. But he couldn't stand it that among all the lazy Albertis, only one bothered to read the title, though the books were being requested by others from outside. . . . Because of this insult he decided to burn the books, and would have done so, if just then some princes hadn't asked him for the books."<sup>52</sup>

In *De commodis litterarum atque incommodis* Alberti describes how the texts become mere objects of the marketplace. Book dealers are speculators in writers' souls.

Law, theology, natural philosophy and ethics, and all of the other forms of literature that is worthy, excellent, and suitable only for free men (oh, abominable crime!) first were set up for auction, then sold publicly. A large number of merchants, quick to present their offers, came from all parts. From the fields, from forests, from the serf lands, and from the dung heaps came a vast multitude. They were not really men, but, on the contrary, they were beasts, born for servile work, who, after having despised the countryside, made a sudden burst to put in sale and desecrate the discipline of writing. Oh the plague of literature! Those who should use the rake and pitch fork shamelessly manage books and writings!<sup>53</sup>

As has already been pointed out, the "texts" of Alberti's authors, unlike those of the book dealers, are given to society free of charge. (One could compare this to having a pamphlet of Jehovah's Witnesses thrust into one's hand as one emerges from the subway.) *De pictura*, "handed down from the heavens and dug up from under the earth," stands outside the context of the marketplace and the relativizing effect of the money economy.<sup>54</sup> Baptista, by definition optimistic has a vested inter-

est, being the teacher voice in *De pictura*. Thus, “in the future,” there will be those—meaning of course those similar to him—who will see to it that his text is preserved: “There will probably be some who will correct my mistakes and who will be of far greater assistance to painters than I in this excellent and honorable art. I implore them, should they in the future exist, to take up this task eagerly and to readily exercise their talents on it and perfect this most noble art.”<sup>55</sup>

In contrast to Baptista’s necessarily hopeful frame of mind stands Neofronus’s chagrin: “I am convinced that these times are exceedingly deplorable, so disgraced because there are so few men, truly erudite, who are capable of amending my writings. . . . Do you not remember what diligence, what sacrifice, and what constancy I employed in writing my works? . . . Oh yes, wasted . . . all wasted.”<sup>56</sup> Naively believing that “posterity is grateful for one’s lucubrations,” Neofronus learns too late that he cannot prevent the destruction of his writings, which are ripped apart and used by his relatives as wrapping paper for the perfume that they find in his study. The perfume was “given to him” by Crantor. Crantor, of course, was a fourth-century Greek philosopher, whose famous work *On Grief* was described by Cicero as “not a large book but golden, to be learnt word by word.”<sup>57</sup> The “gift,” a self-fulfilling prophecy, both foreshadows and actually causes the destruction of Neofronus’s work. On the level of allegorical signifiers, the clandestine presence of Crantor’s perfume stands for a flaw in Neofronus’s construction. While he did not use the perfume, neither did he comprehend its deceptive nature. Masks are more important than truth in the age of the arch-aesthetic.

*Neofronus*: I thought that my vigils would be richly rewarded and that my studies would be welcomed by future generations. In my madness, I envisioned my little treatises winning immortality. . . . My literary works, created by my own hands, elaborated with such care in the course of lucubrate vigils, were, in large part, already refined. They tore apart my works to use the sheets to wrap the perfume in!

*Politropo*: Oh! What a tremendous sin!

*Neofronus*: It seems I spent my whole existence producing only the most erudite of wrapping paper; I witness the humiliating descent of my studies, my vigils, and all my hopes.<sup>58</sup>

By demonstrating the vulnerability of the author-text constellation, Alberti set the stage for the planting of Baptista's text *De pictura*—a perfume in its own right—in the heart of society and for the entry of the painters and architects into the vacuum created by the flight of the civic functionaries.

### The Humanist and the Artist

So much scholarly attention has been focused on Alberti's differentiation between the architect and the craftsman that the more important difference between the humanist and the architects and painters has fallen by the wayside.<sup>59</sup> As opposed to humanists, who are fully aware of the dual-edged archaesthetic, architects and painters must never gain access to potentially paralyzing insights, question the stability of the world, or suspect demonic dimensions. "We are obliged to the architect for the stability, dignity, and glory of public things"—a specious statement that seems to bestow on the architect duties reserved for the Humanist.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, painters and architects are primed to bring the humanist dream into a civic context. The Albertian humanist, "rejecting the patronage of princes,"<sup>61</sup> speaking a language incomprehensible to the temporal world, and with only a narrow and fragile base of civic humanism, turns to painters and architects as ultimate implementors.

Like all functionaries, architects must practice with a certain amount of *astuzia*. At the close of book 9 we read:

You should not run and offer your services to every man.  
It is enough if you give honest advice and correct draughts.  
You must take care to have the assistance of honest diligent overseers.  
Concern yourself with none but persons of highest rank and quality.  
Do not be carried away by a desire for glory. (Glory is reserved for Alberti's humanist saints.)  
Never make alterations without advice.

Unlike the civic functionaries, however, the architects and painters are never made aware of the saint-cynic dilemma. They thus belong to a special category of functionaries, primed

and groomed directly by the Albertian humanist to serve as his ultimate delegates. They are the implementors of an elaborately conceived literary strategy which places them in a privileged position. But in order for them to function within the strategy they must not be aware of its artifice. The humanist saints, the ultimate artificers in that they can create and conceal without being contaminated by the arch-aesthetic, create the ultimate illusion when it comes to defining the artists.

*De pictura* and *De re aedificatoria* are not so much theory relating to the practice of painting and architecture as the setting into practice of Alberti's cultural theory. For example, in order for the artist to perform his task, he must have absolute faith in the public domain, much as Benedetto had *before* his exile, when he was "never discontent with his private fortune and always willing to defend the public trust with the greatest vigilance and faith."<sup>62</sup> In *De re aedificatoria* the following words evoke his presence: "Without your generous wealth, you would not be able to honor yourself, your family, your descendants, or your city."<sup>63</sup> But Benedetto recants his "erroneous way of thinking" to take on the more exalted identity of exiled writer aspiring to sainthood.<sup>64</sup> To keep the artist from doing the same, he must be barred the way to transcendence; he must be prevented from undergoing painful transformations and must be protected from disillusionment with public life. He must be kept in blinders. Baptista, guardian of artists, cautions his charges against the seditious whisperings of the philosophers. Though Alberti himself is proud of his philosophical training,<sup>65</sup> the author of *De pictura* quietly advises the painter to "leave aside the disputes of the philosophers."<sup>66</sup> In *De re aedificatoria*, too, the author states: "I shall not discuss here those philosophical questions."<sup>67</sup>

Limits must be set on the development of the artist's critical faculties, resulting in a tremendous gulf between humanist and artist. Whereas the writer must continually struggle in the library, plow through "infinite books," ruin his eyes reading, spend long nights in thought, the *one and only* book the architect is advised to study, apart from *De re aedificatoria* itself, is *De pictura*—thus enclosing the artist in a clearly delimited and artificially controlled textual world. The architect should, of

course, know geometry, mathematics, and a “little astronomy and oratory,” but there is a noticeable sense of caution in Alberti’s words:

I do not expect the architect to be a Zeuxis in painting, nor a Nicomachus at numbers, nor an Archimedes in the drawing of lines and angles. It is enough if he knows the *Elements of Painting*, which I wrote, be adept in mathematical things . . . as is necessary for the measuring of weights, surfaces, and solids. . . . These arts, together with study and diligence may serve the architect to obtain favor and deliver his name down to posterity.<sup>68</sup>

There is good reason why Alberti does not want the architect to be an “Archimedes in drawing.” Archimedes, as he appears in *Profugiorum ab aerumna*, is so withdrawn from the public domain, that it becomes totally irrelevant for him. He is forced to live his obsession, like Theogenius and the exiled Benedetto, in meditative exile. He is forwarded as an *exemplum* not for the artist to follow, but for the writer “hearing and seeing nothing but himself.”

*Agnolo*: Marcello, nearing Syracuse, ordered his army, despite the slaughter of such a noble land, to save Archimedes, the mathematician. . . . They found Archimedes absorbed by geometrical things, which he was drawing on the floor of his house. He was so removed from his senses that even the din of the weapons, the groans of the injured citizens, and yells of the dying multitude, who were killed by fire and collapsing roofs of the temples, didn’t move him at all. It seems a miracle that such a din, such a thick fog of smoke and dust, didn’t distract him from the investigations and reasonings to which he was devoting himself. . . .<sup>69</sup>

If the architect would be wise to that other world he would soon see through his activities on behalf of the patron. Thus we hear in *Theogenius* that man’s insatiable greed causes him to “bore into mountains, build ships, rebuild valleys, and suspend granite from the ceiling, . . . all artifices that reflect our stupidity.”<sup>70</sup> But in the preface of *De re aedificatoria*, architects in the patron’s employment are praised when they “cut up rocks, bore through mountains, build ships, fill up valleys, and confine lakes.”<sup>71</sup> The architect, who by his very nature legitimizes the powers of the establishment, can “perform works of great use and glory,” and fulfill his function as long as he does

not fathom the depths of society's evil or question the patron's motives.<sup>72</sup> He cannot leave society, even in imagination. He must fuse the artifact into the public realm without friction, and without having to overcome internal obstacles.

It is not surprising that Alberti never refers to his own architectural activity even in *De re aedificatoria*, where, given his autobiographical propensity, this would be not only natural but expected. Alberti's image of himself as a writer, would have made it implausible that he could also recognize himself as an artist under the limited terms of his own definition. Alberti knew all too well that he neither could nor wanted to aspire to the role of naive simulator.

The artists are barred not only from entry into mankind's subconscious, but also into their own. Whereas Alberti explores the psychological problems that arise in the mind of humanists in their ongoing struggle with and against society, nowhere in Alberti's so-called aesthetic treatises (themselves the product of an aesthetic) does he deal with the psychology of the artist. In fact, since collective criteria must structure the psyche of the civic artist, his private thoughts should not be too probing. Baptista, speaking as interlocutor for the prince in *De Iciarchia*, advises his nephews to temper their desire to excel if they want to be good citizens and, ultimately, good patrons in the style of Benedetto before his exile: "Don't trust your talent more than the judgment of benevolent ones, relatives, or those expert scholars in that which you are dealing, since with them rarely will it happen that you will regret it. It is not likely that the judgment of many good and experienced people could be fallacious."<sup>73</sup> Benevolent ones, however, don't exist: relatives are vindictive, and expert scholars are fakes. The writer himself, being exiled, is not in a position of power. Though Baptista's advice is artificial, its deceptive purpose is sanctified by its good intent. The artists must function within the larger context of the postulated myth of cultural continuity and more specifically within the patronage system.

The Albertian humanist, dealing with the night world (*Fatum et Fortuna* and *Somnium*) in which the turbulent workings of society are revealed, may on occasion reach for art as a palliative, but it is a different form of art from that practiced by



public artists. Like wine and games, it is a temporary remedy for the anguish of the soul. Agnolo states: “And at times, such investigations being lacking, I built in my mind some very elaborate buildings, conceived with many different orders and numbers of pillars and with various capitals and unusual bases. I connected to these a convenient and graceful framing with wooden floors. And with similar occupations I occupied myself until sleep overcame me.”<sup>74</sup> Art as palliative is an indulgence not permitted painters, architects, or sculptors. Metaphysical speculation, insight into man’s soul, and understanding of the arch-aesthetic are anathema to their purpose. There is no need for them to be concerned with potentially rebellious thoughts. The architect’s world has to be governed by rational discourse that upholds the fiction of a perennially stable society.<sup>75</sup> Agnolo seems to be addressing the artists in the following admonition: “When you don’t see and don’t hear the many things that can distress you, you see enough when you discern good things from bad things, worthy things from unworthy things, and you hear enough when you hear yourself in those things that are good for virtue and praise. The night has within itself its own pleasures.”<sup>76</sup>

Indeed there is something inherently restrictive in Baptista’s seemingly harmless assertion that the painter “has nothing to do with things that are not visible. The painter is concerned only with representing what can be seen.”<sup>77</sup>

We should not interpret this in a negative light. On the contrary, Alberti is putting together the pieces of a powerful strategy, hoping to engage and ultimately work against the arch-aesthetic. The artists are planted in society as humanist seeds in a polluted soil. Seeing only the *superficie* of existence, they can inhabit the defunct patronly domain in lieu of the humanist writer and execute his intent.

Since the artists are kept from the dark side of life, Alberti can invite them to communicate openly. The unsuspecting artists, though maskless, serve as mask for the humanist. It is an excellent strategy that fools even the realm of *Realpolitik*. Practicing open, naive simulation in candid execution of their profession, the artists are perceived as no threat to society. All they need to know is that “if a man happens to think of any-

thing new [in the arts], he likes to communicate and divulge it for the use of others, *as if coerced by nature* to do so. . . .”<sup>78</sup> And because “there is no one who does not think it an honor to express his opinion on someone else’s work,” the artist lives exclusively in the public eye.<sup>79</sup> Painting is in itself already so much part of all of mankind that it is intrinsically a public act: “You will not easily find anyone who does not earnestly desire to be accomplished in painting.”<sup>80</sup>

Furthermore, Alberti conceals that his artists are actually in direct competition with the arch-aesthetic when he blithely tells the painter that “there is no need to fear that the judgments of censorious and envious critics can in any way detract from the merit of the painting.”<sup>81</sup> Just ask Lepidus. Alberti encourages the painter to practice what he himself as a writer skillfully avoids, namely, open and direct communication. The artist is even admonished to take advice from the public, proving thereby that his work is performed within the limited boundaries of society’s self-awareness.

We will work out the whole painting and each of its parts by making sketches on paper and taking advice on it with our friends. . . . Friends should be consulted, and, while the work is in progress, any chance spectators should be welcomed and their opinions heard. The painter’s work is intended to please the public. So he will not despise the public’s criticism and judgment when he is still in a position to meet its opinion. They say that Apelles used to hide behind his painting, so that the viewers could speak more freely, and he could more decently listen to them enumerating the defects of his work.<sup>82</sup>

To close the circle, Alberti realizes that since the artist functions in the public realm, the art theorist is bound to the conditions of public communication as well. Thus, public texts such as *De pictura* are brought forward *as if* society were functioning properly. As a consequence, Alberti—in the authorial guise of Baptista—acts out the principle of open communication. Whereas in *Scriptor* the writer “discovers” the combined antagonism of “the learned and the unlearned,” the author of *De re aedificatoria* and *De pictura* calmly points out that “the learned and the unlearned will agree with me (*doctis et indoctis consentibus*).”<sup>83</sup> In fact, all public artifacts, whether they be treatises, paintings, or buildings, are something in which “the

learned and the unlearned both take delight.”<sup>84</sup> In *De pictura* Alberti even bows in ironic courtesy to the hated *eruditi*.<sup>85</sup> By alleging congruence of author and society, Alberti masterfully implements his textual strategy.

The textual strategy inherent in the making of *De pictura* and *De re aedificatoria* must be totalizing for there is much at stake. Artists and architects must function less as servants of the corrupt patronage system than as delegates of the spiritual elite. Though they “deal only with those of the highest rank and quality,” their ultimate patron is the Albertian writer.<sup>86</sup> If they follow him, they can attain what writers themselves cannot, namely “praise [from the learned and unlearned], riches, and endless fame.”<sup>87</sup> (Ironically, Alberti the architect, as the delegate of Alberti the writer, has proven the effectiveness of this policy.)

It is tempting for me here to point out how closely related Alberti’s thought is to our modern idea of the professional, who is expected to set aside his personal life and interests in the service of the public. This is parallel in a way to the Apollonian categories seen in *Oraculum*, where each person (representing a category) executes only his limited function. Clearly Alberti thought that society would function more smoothly if professional disinterestedness were meticulously adhered to. It is the contrivance of the private person behind the persona that allows the pernicious workings of the arch-aesthetic to disrupt the workings of society.

What is today a routine division of modern life was for Alberti a monumental discovery. In Alberti’s scenario architects and painters are pressed into an elaborate ideology that relieves them of ultimate responsibility. This raises a question as to the ethical component of Alberti’s counter-aesthetic. Painters and architects have to be above all moral; on this Alberti insists. After all, it links them with the humanistic ethical system. But since they do not set out to reveal the lack of ethics in the real world (something reserved for the saints and cynics) they need not concern themselves with the moral stance of others. Does it not represent an apologia for Alberti’s own building activities in the service of Sigismondo Malatesta, who was infamous for

his cruelty, perversion, and sadism? In grappling with this issue Alberti, theoretically at least, outfoxed the foxes, envisioning a two-tiered patronal system. The Albertian artists may owe their temporal existence to the patron, but their unquestioning and blind allegiance goes to the humanist cause, which is uncontestedly anchored in the absolute.

From the point of view of Alberti's arch-aesthetic, the painter narrows the Narcissistic gap; image and reality come closer. The good artist, by means of perspective, will finally create the illusion of unity. It is, of course, Baptista who leads the way to a reunification of "image and being" and of "learned and unlearned."

He [Baptista] made some incredible things to be closed up in a small box to be seen through a small hole. Vast planes could be seen here, spreading around a huge sea, and far-off regions lost in the distance. He used to call these things demonstrations. They were such that the learned and the unlearned would affirm that they could not recognize it as having been made with a brush, but as true to nature.<sup>88</sup>

In this way the Albertian artists—textual fantasies of the Albertian writers—are the last holdout of the myth of intactness. Their simulation is carried on publicly and without deceptive intent. The learned and unlearned share a common ground in their antagonism to the true humanist conscience but by a clever artifice are led to accept the art of the humanist painters and architects who, unlike mankind at large, function *without* artifice. In essence Alberti's aesthetic theory is based on the ironic proposition that artists alone operate without deception.

The architects and painters present an ironic counter-image to the ambivalent world of the humanist functionaries. Whereas the world at large is adept at self-manipulation (Albertian humanists included), the Albertian artists manipulate at one remove. They are the only characters in Alberti's mental theater who do *not* speculate in aesthetics (a thesis that flies in the face of current scholarly opinion). In a way, we can visualize them as ideal functionaries who set forth from the humanist base camp alongside Theogenius's reflecting pool in the forest to enter the city, where they infiltrate the vicious political and

temporal establishments with their “good art.” Ostensibly they give their temporal allegiance to the prince, but their spirit, it is hoped, is under the control of the remote, exiled humanist.

### The New—Artless—World

*Momus* opens with the creation of the world. Jove organizes the gods, builds a celestial dwelling, and leans back to “receive the just reward,” a life without preoccupations, with the lesser gods and mankind singing his praises. Things do not go as planned. Prometheus steals the sacred fire—the art of simulation—entrusted to the goddess Fate, and gives it to mankind.

The sacred hearth came from the beginning of time. It had, among its other properties, one that was marvelous and unique, namely without the nourishment of any substance, and without support of any liquid it ignited itself, a perpetual flame. Whoever possessed of it became immortal and incorruptible. . . . The sacred fire was maintained among the threads of the material made by the god Virtue. From this sacred fire there derived the threads which were resplendent on the top of the forehead of all the gods. The power of those to whom it was given was that they could transform themselves according to their own talent into any desired figure. . . . When Prometheus stole a ray from the hearth, he was chained for this sacrilege to the Caucasian Mountains.<sup>89</sup>

As noble as the action of Prometheus may seem, it sets in motion an irreversible chain of events. Allegorically, it is equivalent to the moment in which Narcissus saw his image in the pool. The aesthetic age has dawned, but mankind’s newly awakened simulative psychology lacks “any sort of regulation or law” and so the prerogative of transformation is soon abused.<sup>90</sup> Human beings quickly learn to copy the very visage of god.<sup>91</sup> The gods are unaware of the implications, but Momus realizes that the celestial order is about to be weakened (the theme of *Oraculum*). As a sign of skepticism Momus, when asked by Jove to contribute to the divine creation, gives the cockroach and the moth, alluding to Libripeta’s subterranean world beneath the illusion of order. Momus’s warnings are interpreted only as cynicism. To get rid of Momus the gods unite, exile him from the heavens, and force him to lead a life

among mortals. Momus turns his exile into a triumphant demonstration of his complaint. Using his own ability to change form at will, he takes on myriad identities. He becomes a philosopher, a poet, and a woman; in fact, he is capable of a “hundred disguises.”<sup>92</sup> He is a parody, a counter-image of Baptista: “Momus told [afterward] long stories of his exile [on earth] and of the jokes he played, and also of how he desired to experience all the principles and systems of human life so as to find the best, searching to unite theory with practice, diligence, and exercise, to become the most expert in all the arts.”<sup>93</sup>

Momus (and we must not forget that Momus is Alberti’s self-critical incarnation) joins the ranks of humans not to help them control their simulation capacity, but to increase it to its ultimate potential; he even teaches women how to use make-up, so that they too can become experts at masking and deception.

Momus has broken through all barriers of constraint, be they from society or from the humanist direction. He realizes that both attempt to control mankind’s aesthetic obsession, if for different purposes. He therefore proposes simulation for the sake of simulation, which brings the humanist enterprise to a new extreme—the vagabond intellectual. The world of vagabonding is both artless and the highest form of art. There, simulation *qua* simulation reaches perfection as it is in the service of neither *Realpolitik* nor Albertian humanism. Even Baptista’s art of geometry cannot compete: it requires disciplined artifice and is thus on par with a society that has transformed its own evil into a discipline.

*Momus:* There is this difference between the art of geometry and the art of vagabonding: the future geometrician needs an instructor. The art of vagabonding, however, requires no formal education. Geometry and the other arts require a period of study, fatiguing study, and the active exercise of rules well coordinated with application. They demand instructions of all types, none of which are needed in the art of vagabonding. The vagabond does not have to do anything except act according to his own convenience. He can laugh, accuse, rebuke at will all according to his individual talents, without any evil consequences. He can do what he wants without having his words and actions censured. Under the reign of evil princes, others escape

and flee into exile, while you, O vagabond, animate the very fortress of the tyrant.<sup>94</sup>

Momus, a maskless vagabond *au nature*, the humanist dream out of control (in contrast to the artificially created maskless artists), can confidently live “in the theaters, loggias, and public buildings of all types” without experiencing the anxiety of the functionary and without needing blinders, an ironic shadow of Genipatro. The humanist spirit gone haywire has finally managed to infiltrate the defunct body of society. Animating “the very fortress of the tyrant,” Momus, like the life-giving parasite that accompanies the shark, can succeed where Jove—not to mention all of the other humanist functionaries—failed.<sup>95</sup> “The vagabond can lead a life free of perturbation and can sleep peacefully, while others dream of flying over the earth, excavating the mountains, going to the edge of the earth and building structures to the sky.”<sup>96</sup>

But let us go on with the story. Too late Jove sees that the world he created has gone awry and decides to create a better one (*novum quaerebamus exaedificare mundum*).<sup>97</sup> He begins with a great destruction of men and animals in order to clear the way for the new universe. The inhabitants of the earth, for a moment shocked into self-awareness, try to appease the gods by building a great theater “adorned with gold, gems, flowers, crowns and incense, alabaster panels, and mirrors, with statues of heroes between the columns.”<sup>98</sup> The gods, flattered, relent, but still have not come up with a blueprint for a better world. (The theater will become important in the close of the work.) Jove calls a convention of all the gods. In the clamor of disparate voices three groups emerge. Parodying his own humanist program, Alberti describes mock-versions of his saint, cynic, and functionary, now all working at cross-purposes.

As the gods took sides, the passions degenerated into hostility and tumult, until finally there were at least three camps. On one side was Jove, outside of himself with a great desire to construct and collect, by good or bad means, a group of adherents, as many as possible, and organize them for the salvation of mankind.

Opposed to him was assembled a throng of common [gods] prejudiced to their own interests, but who attempted to mask that immod-

erate love of novelty that inflamed them with their zeal to demonstrate their obsequiousness toward the king of the gods.

In the middle there was a third group formed by those who believed heavily and dangerously that they could put themselves in charge of the ignoble and inconstant masses.<sup>99</sup>

In a bizarre turn Momus gives to Jove a *tabella*, a text—it is a functionary’s text—as his contribution for the “redesigning of the new world” and even contrives to have Jove restore him to his “rightful” place, the one to which the humanist had aspired. Jove is fascinated by the knowledge Momus has gained while on earth and amazed to learn that human beings with all their sophistication fail to understand that they are indebted to His Supreme Sovereignty. Alberti, again elaborating ironically on his cosmological theory, has Momus tell Jove that there are three types of men: those who do not believe that the gods exist (the cynics and soldiers of fortune, *Virtus*), those who believe that the gods do not exist but that a belief in them must be maintained so that the populace can be controlled (corrupted politicians), and those who abuse their knowledge of the good arts in their vainglorious search for praise (false intellectuals).

As the honored confidant of Jove, Momus seems to have finally gained an audience with power, the ultimate dream of the false humanist. The other gods, who once ridiculed him, overwhelm him now with praise. Momus argues that his experiences have taught him how to cure the world of its ills. Jove need not destroy the entire earth but only the “perverse race of writers,” together with their “schools, books, and libraries.”<sup>100</sup> His *tabella*, presumably, would stand then in radiant isolation. It would help to construct a world without masks and without simulation, in which there would be neither art nor artifice.

Many other such pieces of advice were in the manuscript, but the most useful against the boring difficulty of government was that of all existent things one should make three piles. One pile should have what is good and desirable. In the second there should be that which is bad, and in the third, there should be all that which is by itself neither good nor bad. The distribution should take place like this. The gods Activity, Eagerness, Zeal, and Diligence, along with other



similar gods, should fill their laps with objects taken from the first pile and, walking through the porticoes, theaters, temples, squares, and all other public places, should offer these things spontaneously to whomever they meet and to whoever shows that they desired these things. In the same way Envy, Ambition, Desire, Laziness, Sloth, and other goddesses of this kind, with their laps filled and open, should distribute willingly the bad things to those who desire them. Regarding the things that are neither good nor bad in and of themselves, but become good or bad on the basis of use, such as wealth, honor, and similar privileges searched for by man, these things should be left all to the decision of Fortuna. She should collect them with full hands and distribute them in the quantity she desires and to whom she likes the best.<sup>101</sup>

### **The Prophet Unmasked**

The plan for a new world where being and image are identical is never implemented. Jove, prompted by Hercules and other gods jealous of Momus's learning, claims to have continued faith in the philosophers. He throws Momus's manuscript carelessly into the library, where it becomes just one of many rotting books. By implication, Jove has rejected the functionary's text because he aspires to the higher tone of the philosophers who flatter Jove with their expectations.

*Momus:* Some [of the philosophers] asserted that there must exist a single divine leader who regulates all things.

Others argued that there was a perfect correspondence of equal qualities and that thus the number of immortals corresponds to that of the mortals.

Others demonstrated that there existed one mind free of all material presence and of all contact and contamination with corruptible and material things, a mind that is mother and father of all divine and human essences.

Others affirmed that God must create a certain force that is infused in things, making them move, and which radiates in the spirit of men. However, this discordance of opinion among the philosophers was not such that it impeded them all from the single proposition, expressed in diverse ways, to oppose Momus most aggressively.<sup>102</sup>

Momus here exposes in an ironic mode the secret implicit in the humanist ambition to introduce an ideal world of proper

correspondences between the divine and the earthly that affords total control and eliminates the ambiguity between word and meaning and the separation of being from image. Like the humanists, Jove too wants a world of total correspondences, where all contingencies are abolished. But only after he has realized the gap in congruences—which can only come about from the alienated perspective of exile—can he confront the falsity of these ideals. We can already anticipate that his aspirations, as articulated by the philosophers, will have to be challenged, and indeed that occurs at the end of *Momus*. But for the moment Jove, not satisfied with the functionary's text, searches for a real philosopher. Momus, now without his text, is unable to maintain control over the volatile gods and loses his exalted position. The ultimate separation of writer from text has now occurred. Momus is expelled once again, this time permanently—castrated and chained to a rock in the ocean with only his head above water. Once a free-roaming vagabond, he is now unable to move. Like the statue Apollo (*Oraculum*), he can neither simulate nor expose simulation, having been reduced to the static condition of mythic time.

Gods and mankind, for a moment united, celebrate his condemnation. Singing and dancing spread over the earth. Only Hercules knows that there is a hollowness to the festivities, but no one listens to his Laocoonian warning of impending doom. The jubilant gods take up residence in statues placed in the great and sumptuous theater constructed in their honor to celebrate the supposed unification; from the vantage point of their statues, the gods witness the “rites of purification.” The theater, a microcosm of the heavens, caricatures of course the presence of mythic time on earth. At first everything goes well, and after the ceremony the gods laugh cynically at events surrounding the life of Momus. But when the nymphs of the winds attempt to enter the theater to participate in the festivities, the building collapses in an immense whirlwind of destruction. Because of the storm, in which many statues are damaged and gods injured, the gods retreat hastily and ignobly into the heavens. In the confusion Stupor, Pluto (God of Money), Night, and, fortunately, Hope are left behind on earth.<sup>103</sup>

Jove surveys the debacle. His feeble attempt to create a better world has resulted in disaster; the gods and mankind are more alienated from each other than ever. In the closing paragraphs he realizes that everything was prompted by his own incompetence. Wise now to the logic of alienation, as he is now permanently separated from the mortals (much as Momus is separated from his text), he decides too late to clean his long ignored library and finds Momus's *tabella* on good government. It is doubtful, however, that he will initiate improvements based on the principles it outlines now that the author is permanently severed from his text, much as God is from man.

The all-too-predictable failure of Momus results from an imbalance in Alberti's humanist system. The writer theoretically masks himself from the world, however benign the reason, while remaining on guard against his own masking that, as a genetic predisposition, poses an interior threat to his psyche. Alberti uncannily anticipated his dilemma in *Philodoxeus*, where an intricate system of semiotic pointing passes the hot potato from one authorial interlocutor to the other. Even the artificially contrived masklessness of Baptista results in an inner falsification. And so it is that Momus, a genius of "simulation and dissimulation" and an artisan of "many-tonguedness (*versipellem*)," exposes Baptista as a hagiographic phony.<sup>104</sup> It is Momus who is the mysterious inhabitant of Baptista's house in *Vita*. He is at once counter-humanist and humanist *par excellence*.

*Momus*: Feign and yet do not [appear to be feigning]. . . . The essential principle is this one only; namely, that there is no feeling that one cannot cover with perfection under the appearance of honesty and innocence. Adapting our words, we will brilliantly attain our image, and whatever particular externality of our persona, in a manner that seems to be similar to those who are believed to be beautiful and moderate. What a splendid thing it is to know how to hide the more secret thoughts with the wise artifice of colorful and deceptive fiction.<sup>105</sup>

This "wise artifice" that enables one to survive in the arch-aesthetic is the ultimate art. Momus, ironically, "simulating those who are believed to be beautiful and moderate" (like Baptista), comprehends that the discourse on the good and

happy life is a sham, and passes himself off as “beautiful and moderate,” fooling even Jove into allowing him to head the commission in charge of establishing a better world. His ironic playacting is so perfect that even the keen-eyed goddess Fraud considers him a disciple.<sup>106</sup> The total identification of Alberti’s humanist enterprise with Fraud (equivalent to the totalizing mask inherent in the writing of *De pictura* and *De re aedificatoria*) closes the circle that began with Narcissus’s alienation.

Exposed to irony, Alberti’s humanist program collapses on its initial and seemingly unproblematic premise of the author in search of himself. The pardonable attempt to project an ideal model (*De commodis litterarum atque incommodis*) is itself revealed as the symptom of an incurable disease. The writer cannot find the authentic voice, because “mortal gods” cannot duplicate what is ultimately God’s prize possession, ethics, and so even the effort to improve the world cannot escape the arch-aesthetic curse. There is no Archimedian point in the absolute. By implication, ethics and aesthetics do not interact according to the law of correspondences. Instead of pointing beyond itself to *autorità*, the text becomes a mere physical object, words on paper, another dusty *codex*, and worse, the *velum* on which is painted a deceptive discourse.

### **Peniplusius: The True One**

Unlike Plato in the *Republic* Alberti never argues that power and knowledge should coalesce in one person. In fact, one might view Jove as a caricature of Plato’s philosopher-king. The divergent aims of humanism and temporal power have to be made visible to prevent such a fusion from taking place under cover. Once their separate and antithetical natures have been accepted, contact can be made between the two, as Alberti charts out, in four ways: the writer-saint, the civic functionary, the artist or architect, and the cynic-vagabond. The first transcends the arch-aesthetic by embodying a supposedly uncontaminated realm of textual authority. The second compromises with the arch-aesthetic and employs artifice in an ostensibly benign way. The third is sent to infiltrate the power base, text in hand. The fourth is the uprooted vagabond living in public

streets and for that very reason “invisible” in a world of mask makers.

An alternative to all these possibilities would be, of course, a miracle, which brings us to Peniplusius (Poor-Rich Man, i.e., poor in wealth, rich in virtue) and Megalophos (Grand and Plumed) and their competition for the last vacant seat in Caronte’s boat, as described in the final pages of *Momus*. Peniplusius, a whimsical utopic afterthought, represents the impossible—as we now know—ideal scenario of the living text. He is “the true one” whom Baptista, Momus, Gelastus, and Philoponius had vainly tried to become. Caronte, seeking refuge in Hades and aware of the fate of the now textless Momus, recounts the remarkable tale of Peniplusius to Gelastus. Peniplusius, Caronte relates, was once among a group of shades whom he ferried across the river Styx; there was only one seat left, and Peniplusius successfully challenged the tyrant Megalophos for it. Such a power struggle, in which a humanist claimed the seat of honor over the representative of temporal government, would, of course, be inconceivable in real life. Peniplusius, first encountered in *Intercoenales*, had been immensely effective in his lifetime. His virtue had been recognized, his true leadership acclaimed, and his numerous efforts on behalf of the city acknowledged by all except Megalophos, whom he addressed thus:

*Peniplusius:* You have betrayed your function and behaved not as a king but as a tyrant. If you had procured your wealth for the state, then you would have accomplished your duty, but even then, no glory would have come to you. The merit does not belong to you, but to all the citizens, for they conquered wealth by wars or increased it by their own devices. I ornamented the capital and empire with monuments, and with my love I maintained peace and tranquility, and by my guidance I provide many subjects with fame and grandeur. All that we undertake in this field, however, is futile if we get carried away by the approval of the masses and want to be one with them. I don’t see why you should receive merit. You passed the night in sleeping if you were drunk or you passed it [merit] up for lust. I on the other hand was watching from my tower, protecting the city from fires, the citizens from the enemy and you yourself from the plots of your people. You passed by the laws, but I had to enforce them. Very often when you gave a speech, the people snickered, but everyone

would listen to me with the greatest of attention when I gave a general order. In the battle you exhorted your soldiers, but I gave the signal for them to fight. Soldiers paid homage to you but they assaulted the enemy and they returned only when I blew my trumpet.

Finally, while everybody was flattering you, they were obeying me. Furthermore, you have caused laziness in citizens, and isn't this exactly the cause of many misfortunes and troubles which took place in the city, and isn't it the reason for all the envy, strife, and misfortune that has invaded public, private, religious, and lay life? For what purpose do you tell of your silly ostentations and other ignoble deeds of your rule? How could you boast of having built temples and theaters, when they were for your own glory and the survival of your name and not as ornaments of the city?<sup>107</sup>

Peniplusius prevails; "everyone obeyed him." The very spirit of social conscience, doing everything silently, effortlessly, and with modesty and strength, he is the *only* figure in Alberti's mental theater representing the successful bonding of mythic and historical time, a functioning of ethics in aesthetic time, and the impossible fusion of humanism with power. Peniplusius does not suffer, is never exiled, needs no text, and requires no legal system. He *is* the text, the icon come to life. This story, told in the darkening hours before the whirlwinds circle the earth, is accompanied by a Mephistolian laugh from the wings of Alberti's theater.

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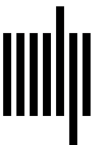
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