

# The Instatement of the Vernacular as Language of Culture

A New Aristotelian Paradigm in Sixteenth-Century Italy

di Marco Sgarbi

## 1. The «questione della lingua»

The purpose of this study is to look at the instatement of the vernacular as a «language of culture» from a strictly philosophical standpoint, in other words to examine the various philosophical approaches that might have affected the genesis of certain linguistic theories and determined the adoption of specific features of a given language.

By «language of culture» I mean a language that is used to transmit any form of knowledge and is not restricted to any specific literary genre or area of interest. Framing the matter in this way makes the assertion that the vernacular became a language of culture only during the Renaissance, in the Cinquecento in particular, is shared by almost all scholars. Of course, the vernacular had already left its mark as a literary language with the so-called *Tre Corone* (Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio), as well as beyond the confines of poetry with Dante's *Convivio* or Boccaccio's *Decameron*. But its use remained highly restricted<sup>1</sup>. More importantly, in a century that has been de-

*For citations from works published between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries I follow the numbering used by the authors themselves. My general rule has been to preserve original spelling and punctuation except where the best editions happen to be in modernized form. When not signaled, the translations are mine. I gratefully acknowledge the help and suggestions of Alessio Cotugno, Clorinda Donato, Bernard Huß, Laura Refe, Mirko Tavoni and Lorenzo Tomasin, and of the anonymous referees during the writing of this paper. This research has been possible thanks to the ERC Starting Grant 2013, n. 335949, «Aristotle in the Italian Vernacular: Rethinking Renaissance and Early-Modern Intellectual History (c. 1400 – c. 1650)», <http://aristotleinthevernacular.org>.*

<sup>1</sup> On the sporadic use of vernacular in science and philosophy before the Cinquecento, see the papers collected in the following volumes: *Filosofia in volgare nel Medioevo*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2003; *Lo scaffale della biblioteca scientifica in volgare (secc. XIII-XVI)*, Florence, Sismel, 2006; *Thinking Politics in the Vernacular from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance*, Fribourg, Fribourg Academic Press, 2011.

fined as the «long fifteenth century»<sup>2</sup>, the vernacular went through a marked downturn in theoretical and literary output which has been referred to as an «elimination of the autonomy and very existence of the vernacular by the humanists»<sup>3</sup>. Needless to say, the same period also produced some notable exceptions such as Leon Battista Alberti, Lorenzo the Magnificent, and Cristoforo Landino.

It was only with the end of the Quattrocento and the invention of the printing press that the vernacular made a definitive comeback in the cultural panorama of the Italian Renaissance. Although oral and manuscript culture continued to thrive, the rise and spread of printing was a key development that revolutionized the way culture was consumed at the turn of the century, no doubt serving also as a catalyst, if not the single most important catalyst, that led to the establishment of the vernacular in Italy. Even so, in the age of the incunabula and the early years of the Cinquecento the output of printed works in the vernacular remained very limited, as many printers were still unwilling to include works that were not written in Latin in their catalogues. This was the case not only in Italy, arguably the cradle of humanism, but also across Europe<sup>4</sup>, and it went hand-in-hand with the gradual spread of literacy in a growing cross-section of society.

The political unrest that followed the death of Lorenzo the Magnificent continued until the Sack of Rome in 1527, leading to the disempowerment of the courtly system and resulting indirectly in the vernacular becoming the language of culture in Italy later than elsewhere in Europe and at a time of acute national upheaval. Not until the 1540s, in fact, did the vernacular begin to come into its own. Aldo Manuzio's printing house in Venice, for instance, perhaps the most renowned printing house in Italy, if not Europe, also for vernacular literature, until 1529 included in its catalogue only Petrarch's *Canzoniere*, Dante's *Commedia* (both edited by Pietro Bembo), *Gli Asolani* by Pietro Bembo, and Jacopo Sannazaro's *Arcadia*. The flow slowly gathered pace in subsequent years with the *Cortegiano* by Castiglione, the *Rime* by Sannazaro, and the *Libri tre delle cose de' Turchi* by Rambaldi, followed in the '40s by the works of Machiavelli (the *Discorsi*, *Storie Fiorentine*, *L'arte della guerra*, and *Il principe*), the *Regole Grammaticali* by Fortunio, Poliziano's *Stanze*, Leone d'Ebbero's *Dialoghi d'amore*, and the highly successful *Lettere*

<sup>2</sup> Cfr. C.S. Celenza, *Il Rinascimento perduto. La letteratura latina nella cultura italiana del Quattrocento*, Roma, Carocci, 2004, pp. 241-263.

<sup>3</sup> M. Tavoni, *Storia della lingua italiana. Il Quattrocento*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1992, p. 65.

<sup>4</sup> Cfr. N. Harris, *Marin Sanudo, forerunner of Melzi*, in «La bibliofilia», 95, 1993, pp. 101-145; P. Trovato, *Storia della lingua italiana. Il primo Cinquecento*, Bologna, Il Mulino 1994, p. 22.

*volgari di diversi nobilissimi huomini, et eccellentissimi ingegni, scritte in diverse materie* and *Dialoghi* by Sperone Speroni.

The '30s and '40s marked a turning point, as well as an important incubation period for the development of new ideas and theories on the vernacular that were deeply influenced by the shifting cultural landscape in Italy at that time. The book, with its potentially limitless readership, became the new focus of cultural production. The market shift from the court and the universities to a wider public sparked a demand for a language stripped of local expressions and allowed books to be consulted or purchased by anyone anywhere in the peninsula<sup>5</sup>.

It was in this quest for linguistic cohesiveness and understandability that the vernacular established itself as a language of culture<sup>6</sup>, a process that proved to be anything but peaceful<sup>7</sup>. The migration of intellectuals from one region to another fanned the flames of the debate about which language to adopt, and the many currents that formed made Italian-language production at the end of the Quattrocento a somewhat inharmonious affair. Venetian nobleman Pietro Bembo emerged as a figure of authority in the medley of linguistic theories. The degree to which he influenced the debate about language in the Cinquecento may be evinced from the letter written by Claudio Tolomei to Agnolo Firenzuola, dated 3 November 1531, in which the Venetian intellectual is described as «guide and master» of the Italian language, «the pinnacle and foundation» of any linguistic theory that seeks to establish the vernacular as a language of culture<sup>8</sup>.

## 2. Pietro Bembo

Bembo's theory is contained in *Prose della volgar lingua*, which was eventually published in 1525 after a long gestation period that began at least as early as 1501. In that year, while preparing Petrarch's *Rime* for Aldo Manuzio's printing press and restoring the Florentine language to its former fourteenth-century glory, Bembo was able to lay his hands on the original manuscript of the work, a real treasure-trove which until then had been in the possession of the Santasofia family of Padua. Thanks to this manuscript, he was able to undertake a comprehensive review of Petrarch's language and thus, as noted, to make linguistic choices that marked a rad-

<sup>5</sup> Cfr. P. Trovato, *Storia della lingua italiana. Il primo Cinquecento*, cit., p. 78.

<sup>6</sup> Cfr. *ibidem*; P. Trifone, *Rinascimento dal basso. Il nuovo spazio del volgare tra Quattrocento e Cinquecento*, Roma, Bulzoni, 2006, p. 17.

<sup>7</sup> On this topic see C. Mongiat Farina, *Questione di lingua. L'ideologia del dibattito sull'italiano nel Cinquecento*, Ravenna, Longo, 2014.

<sup>8</sup> A. Firenzuola, *Opere*, Firenze, Baronchelli, 1761, vol. IV, pp. 51-52.

ical departure from the ones he had defended prior to seeing the manuscript<sup>9</sup>. It was a turning point for Bembo that allowed him to establish the norms of a linguistic practice that could be applied to other texts, such as Dante's *Commedia*, as well as to assert Petrarch's «pure» fourteenth-century Florentine as the language of literature<sup>10</sup>. In his *Prose della volgar lingua* Bembo aims to definitively codify vernacular on the blueprint of Latin in order to give it solid and durable foundations and to elevate it to the status of literary language.

To avoid misapprehension, however, it is important to note that adopting the vernacular language did not entail paving the way for «vulgar» or «popular» contents for Bembo. Writing in the vernacular was not the same as writing like the people; on the contrary, Bembo's intention was quite the opposite, namely to save the vernacular from the changeability of the living language spoken by the people. As long as the vernacular was subject to the vagaries of popular language, in Bembo's view, it would never become the language to replace Latin. Humanist to the core, Bembo's views were informed by the example of Classical authors. The great models of the past – Homer, Demosthenes, Virgil, and Cicero – never wrote in the «idiom that was in use and on the tongue of the populace in their times», rather they wrote «according to how they felt would be appreciated for a longer time»<sup>11</sup>. The same for Petrarch, who never wrote his poems «in the language used by the people of his times». Neither did Boccaccio «reason with the mouth of the people», even when attempting to make people speak «with the voices that the populace used»; sure enough his works are replete with expressions that were «not used by the people»<sup>12</sup>. The vernacular therefore cannot be codified according to how the people speak, but rather on the blueprint of antique models

they reasoned with the people in a way that the people could understand, but not in the same way as the people reasoned with them ... that writers should reason so that they may be understood by the people I can accept not in all writers, but in some; but that they should reason in the same way as the people do, this will never be acceptable in any writer<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> Cfr. S. Pillinini, *Traguardi linguistici nel Petrarca bembino del 1501*, in «Studi di filologia italiana», 29, 1981, pp. 57-76; G. Frasso, *Appunti sul Petrarca Aldino del 1501*, in *Vestigia. Studi in onore di Giuseppe Billanovich*, Roma, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1984, vol. I, pp. 315-336; L. Marcozzi, *Pietro Bembo e le varianti d'autore petrarchesche. Teoria del «mutamento» nelle Prose e pratica variantistica nelle Rime*, in *Prose della volgar lingua di Pietro Bembo*, Milano, Cisalpino, 2000, pp. 209-253; S. Giarin, *Petrarca e Bembo: l'edizione aldina del Canzoniere*, in «Studi di filologia italiana», 62, 2004, pp. 161-193.

<sup>10</sup> The «alcune notazioni della lingua», which were written for his beloved Maria Savorgnan and would later feed into the *Prose*, date back to this period.

<sup>11</sup> P. Bembo, *Prose della volgar lingua*, introduction and notes by C. Dionisotti, Torino, UTET, 1931, p. 31.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 32.

Bembo retained something of the aristocratic view of culture that had characterized his humanist teachers<sup>14</sup>. It was not the living language of the people, by which was meant the «masses», that would lead to the establishment of the vernacular language, but the sophisticated idiom that was accessible only to «very few men in each century»<sup>15</sup>. Bembo in other words sought justification for the literary use of the vernacular within, rather than beyond, humanist culture, based on the style and rhetorical devices of Classical oratory, Ciceronian Latin especially. In applying the rules of Cicero's Latin to the vernacular, Bembo effectively brought about a renaissance of the Classical culture that was so close to the heart of Humanism. Humanism taught not only imitation (*imitatio*), but also and above all emulation (*aemulatio*), the aim therefore being not only to imitate the style of Cicero in order to produce a Latin prose that was the same as Classical Latin, but to *emulate* him, and in so doing to create something new which today we can reasonably call humanist vernacular literature. Living Florentine and the language of the courts both promoted the adoption of vernacular, but neither was a valid solution for Bembo. In his view, their lack of rules and style prevented the vernacular language from becoming a genuine literary language. For this reason Bembo rejected the idea that there can be a language without writing, in other words without a literature: «an idiom without a writer cannot be said to be a real language»<sup>16</sup>. Living, lawless Florentine dialect was not a suitable model. As Carlo Dionisotti has pointed out, the spontaneity of the living language prevented the necessary compliance with Classical rhetoric that for Bembo was required for a literary use of the vernacular language<sup>17</sup>. Elegance in writing thus derives «in Latin like in the vernacular from the accurate observance of the norms of the language, as they appear in the stylistically more polished works written in that language»<sup>18</sup>. Stylistic perfection thus presupposes a standardized, ordered, and pure language, which is why the focus in the *Prose* is not «on the content of what is written, but how it is written»<sup>19</sup>. In the *Prose*, therefore, Bembo refers to rhetoric only as form, without any connection to content, and on the strength of its compliance to the rules of style, rhetoric, and grammar he can «safely» judge the vernacular literature, for instance arguing that Petrarch and Boccaccio were superior to Dante, who was a little loose in his rhyming and choice

<sup>14</sup> For an aristocratic conception of «humanism», cfr. G. Toffanin, *Che cosa fu l'umanesimo*, Firenze, Sansoni, 1929.

<sup>15</sup> P. Bembo, *Prose della volgar lingua*, cit., p. 32.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 24-25.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, p. XIX.

<sup>18</sup> C. Dionisotti, *Scritti sul Bembo*, Torino, Einaudi, 2002, p. 215.

<sup>19</sup> P. Bembo, *Prose della volgar lingua*, cit., p. 43.

of vocabulary despite being sublime for the content. Form in Bembo thus took precedence over content. Petrarch and Boccaccio were the models of the vernacular literature, hence it was in their writings, according to Bembo, that the rules of grammar were to be sought. What mattered above all else was to discover the rules and ideas that would shape timeless models, on the basis of which it would be possible for the vernacular to compete on a par with Latin. On this point, as we have seen in the case of Dante, Bembo was uncompromising, and it is from this standpoint that we must approach the third book of the *Prose*, which deals with the rules of grammar. Yet, for all his rigidity, in the second book of his *Prose* he displays a certain malleability, «especially as regards prose, a field that is far more open and wide and free than verse»<sup>20</sup>. And it is this rare instance of malleability that the following generation of scholars would exploit.

The linguistic model developed by Bembo, with its insistence upon the stylistic and grammatical rules of fourteenth-century Tuscan, was adopted outright in the Cinquecento as the model of reference for all vernacular compositions, of course with some distinctions in prose and poetry. Bembism became the buzzword in printing houses, convents, chancelleries, and even pulpits all over Italy, and from the second half of the Cinquecento onwards, the vernacular evolved from the traditions of the late fifteenth century to embrace Bembian ideals of language and style<sup>21</sup>.

The Cinquecento thus marked «the decisive spread throughout Italy of a unitary linguistic type»<sup>22</sup>, the Bembian type, whose founding principles, as Claudio Marazzini has argued,

had won over the majority of the men of culture: 1. The vernacular was equal to Latin in terms of dignity; 2. The vernacular was excellently suited to producing literature, when used at a “high” level with “noble” forms; 3. Such a “high” level could be reached by adhering to the model set out in the *Prose della volgar lingua* by Pietro Bembo (1525), in other words imitating the great Tuscan authors of the Trecento, especially Petrarch and Boccaccio ...; 4. In itself, “Florentineness”, being a necessary condition of “natural Tuscanness”, that is the advantage of being born in Tuscany, was no guarantee for *a priori* possession of the literary language, because the literary language had to be modelled upon the example of written texts (especially Petrarch’s *Canzoniere* and Boccaccio’s *Decameron*), not on the variety of language that was used<sup>23</sup>.

<sup>20</sup> P. Bembo, *Prose della volgar lingua*, cit., p. 72.

<sup>21</sup> Cfr. P. Trovato, *Storia della lingua italiana. Il primo Cinquecento*, cit., pp. 48, 57, 72; M. Tavoni, *Le Prose della volgar lingua di Pietro Bembo*, in *Letteratura italiana. Le opere. I: Dalle Origini al Cinquecento*, Torino, Einaudi, 1992, pp. 1084-1086.

<sup>22</sup> Cfr. G. Ghinassi, *Sulla lingua del Cinquecento*, in «Cultura e scuola», 3, 1964, p. 34. Cfr. M. Vitale, *L'oro nella lingua. Contributi per una storia del tradizionalismo e del purismo italiano*, Milano-Napoli, Ricciardi, 1986.

<sup>23</sup> Cfr. C. Marazzini, *Storia della lingua italiana. Il secondo Cinquecento e il Seicento*, cit., pp. 149-150.

The point, which is established here as an incontrovertible datum in the research, in my view stands in contradiction to another that is equally as important, but has so far been overlooked by the scholarship. Most theorists of the vernacular language who contributed to the establishment of vernacular as a language of culture appear to criticize Bembo's theory, whether directly or indirectly, saying that:

1. The vernacular was sometimes superior to Latin in terms of its expressive capacity;

2. The vernacular suited all literary genres, whether poetry or prose, and all styles, from low to high;

3. The dignity of the vernacular does not depend necessarily on predetermined norms, which on the contrary are often seen as a barrier to communication and hence the advancement of knowledge;

4. Spoken language sometimes has even greater dignity than the written language in that it represents the primary form of communication.

From Sperone Speroni onwards, passing through Alessandro Piccolomini, Giovan Battista Gelli and Benedetto Varchi, to name but a few of the authors we shall examine here, there was a general shift away from Bembo's theoretical model, even when there was compliance on a practical level. The manner in which they read Bembo's text was to seal the fate of the *Prose*, which came to play «a role in Italian culture that was opposite to what it had been written for, namely as a weapon of divisiveness rather than a means for approaching Classical culture»<sup>24</sup>. In the memorable words of Giancarlo Mazzacurati: Bembo's *Prose* is «one of the most dramatic works of the century, not for what is there, but for what is not there and should have been there; for the crisis of values that hangs over it and provides a backdrop to it, and for the superficial acceptance of a situation which in and of itself marks the end of all those ideals which its author nonetheless believed in; and for the sense of emptiness it left in its wake»<sup>25</sup>.

### 3. A New Paradigm

On a theoretical level, Bembo's project was betrayed. The serious question to ask is why. Why was Bembo's theory betrayed when his grammatical and stylistic precepts prevailed in practical terms? How can we explain this discrepancy between the failure of a theoretical

<sup>24</sup> Cfr. G. Mazzacurati, *La crisi della retorica umanistica nel Cinquecento* (Antonio Riccobono), Napoli, Libreria scientifica editrice, 1961, p. 47; M. Tavoni, *Le «Prose della volgar lingua» di Pietro Bembo*, cit., p. 1084.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*.

model and the assertion of a practical one? The answer in my view is philosophical more than philological or historical-linguistic, because the difference between Bembo and, say, Speroni, or Piccolomini, is theoretical. In terms of style, in other words in the act of writing and composing texts, these authors, through the mediation of the printers, followed Bembo's rules; but they thought differently on a theoretical level.

There is no easy and simple answer to these questions. A partial explanation could be that Bembo's *Prose* was published at a time when an paradigm shift was underway which his work probably even helped to advance. The shift is best represented by the transition from Plato to Aristotle, which can be grasped intuitively by looking at Raphael's famous fresco, *School of Athens*. Plato points towards the heavens, Hyperuranion, and the world of ideas, while in the other hand holding the *Timaeus*, the text that deals with the shaping of the cosmos by the Demiurge according to ideal archetypes. He stands for the otherworldly, transcendent dimension towards which man must advance. This image clearly suggests a vertical conception of man, whose purpose and fulfilment is to be sought above and beyond himself. Aristotle, on the other hand, stretches one hand forwards, above the earth, while in the other he clutches the *Ethics*, the book that teaches us to fulfil our human nature in this life. He stands for mundane life in the world inhabited by man, which man can fully embrace and understand. This is a horizontal conception in which man's fulfilment is before him and around him. The same motif recurs in the two relief sculptures in the medallions at the base of the dome, as if reiterating the dual perspective of the fresco presented by the opposition of these two different philosophies. There is therefore a transition in the Renaissance from the traditional vertical model represented by Plato, which was also that of Christianity and Scholasticism, to the model represented by the recently rediscovered Aristotle<sup>26</sup>, which is also the model of the new naturalism<sup>27</sup>.

If we view this paradigm change in the light of the theory of language, we can explain Bembo's theoretical defeat. To anticipate briefly my argument, in the field of linguistic theory Bembo reflected the Platonic view, while Speroni, Piccolomini, Gelli, and Varchi reflected the Aristotelian view. With his attachment to norms, rules, and the

<sup>26</sup> I speak here of a «rediscovered Aristotle» and a «pure Aristotelianism» in juxtaposition to the Aristotle and Aristotelianism of Scholasticism. The latter was heavily influenced by Neo-Platonism, whereas the former was informed by the recent rediscovery of Greek commentators, and promoted, primarily in the form of Alexandrism, a naturalistic, de-theologized view of Aristotelian philosophy.

<sup>27</sup> «Naturalism» does denote a greater intellectual interest in nature, rather a reappraisal of man's relationship with the whole of nature. E. Garin, *Storia della filosofia italiana*, Torino, Einaudi, 1966, vol. II, pp. 500-501.



perfect codification of the vernacular according to the timeless stylistic models of Petrarch and Boccaccio, Bembo effectively presented a Platonic-Ciceronian linguistic theory with a clear vertical tension towards an ideal form. The document that most clearly illustrates Bembo's position is the letter to Giovanfrancesco Pico della Mirandola, dated 1 January 1513, and commonly referred to as *De imitatione*. Bembo here states that one must keep before one's eyes «the most beautiful and perfect image, working diligently to reproduce it»<sup>28</sup>. In opposition to Giovanfrancesco, he denies that it is possible to imitate many excellent authors, because when imitating «we should imitate not what is good but what is best and most perfect»<sup>29</sup>. There can be only one model in the composition of verse or prose<sup>30</sup>. That he is in fact upholding an entirely Platonic position is made clear when he reproaches Giovanfrancesco for bad Platonism. Bembo considers himself to be the true interpreter of Platonic teachings:

I know that you uphold the view of the school of Plato, which related what was best in nature to divine ideas and images; and I agree that there exists in God, author and founder of the universe, not only a certain divine and altogether perfect image of justice, temperance, and the other virtues, but also of correct writing. Xenophon, Demosthenes and Plato, Crassus, Antonius, Julius, and, most of all Cicero, when composing and writing, directed their minds and their style to this as far as they could. And I think we must try to do the same<sup>31</sup>.

Gianfrancesco's Platonism is not in question, but his approach is anodyne because it presumes to take the best from multiple authors rather than adhering to a single ideal. To be truly Platonic in Bembo's view is therefore to embrace a single model and a single ideal rather than multiple ones, as appears to be the case with Mirandolese. Although one has to embrace a single model in order to be consistently Platonic, however, it is not Bembo's intention to set up an imaginary ideal, «as Plato and Cicero did»<sup>32</sup>, that is to say one that is fictive and invented. His desire is for a concrete model represented by Cicero's style, but his concrete model nonetheless

<sup>28</sup> I. Scott, *Controversies over the Imitation of Cicero as a Model for Style and Some Phases of their Influence on the Schools of the Renaissance*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1910, p. 9. On this topic see the insightful remarks of Martin McLaughlin in Id., *Literary Imitation in the Italian Renaissance*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1995.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>30</sup> The genesis of the model, or how the model is revealed for Bembo, has been defined by turn as both Aristotelian and Stoic; but that the use he makes of the model as the ideal of reference is Platonic is not in question. Cfr. J. Robert, *Norm, Kritik, Autorität. Der Briefwechsel De imitatione zwischen Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola und Pietro Bembo und der Nachahmungsdiskurs in der Frühen Neuzeit*, in «Daphnis», 30, 2001, pp. 597-644. Here we see also the contradiction in Bembo's linguistic theory: he «discovers» the model of language in a specific historical language, namely Petrarch's Ciceronianism, while attempting to make this language eternal and atemporal.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 9-10.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 10.

remains an ideal towards which to aspire, and in this sense Bembo can be considered linguistically Platonic.

On the other hand, the linguistic theories of Speroni, Piccolomini and all the others leave aside any reference to models and timeless ideals. They do not pursue a norm that is hidden or lost in some Hyperuranion, or in the various regional forms, rather their aim is the communication and sharing of ideas in a world made of men who can only realize their true natures in horizontal relationships. The betrayal of Bemboism – which is to all intents and purposes a betrayal of humanism itself – became possible only thanks to a change of mindset among the intellectuals of the Cinquecento resulting from a paradigm-shift in the conception of man followed by a change in linguistic theory: man went from being construed in terms of his relationship with God and his divine and immortal nature to being studied in relation to other men (and the surrounding cosmos), in those features that are closest to his mortal nature<sup>33</sup>. More specifically, my purpose is to emphasize that it was thanks to the rediscovery of an Aristotelianism cleansed of the theological conditionings of Scholasticism, itself very much Plato-oriented, that it was possible for the likes of Speroni, Piccolomini, Varchi, etc., to advance a linguistic model that undermined Bembo's.

From examining each one of these intellectuals by turn, it will become clear how this paradigm shift favoured the establishment of the vernacular as the language of culture for all literary genres and styles, while the Platonic model could only limit the use of the vernacular to certain genres where the norm could be applied without compromising the communication involved in the linguistic act.

#### 4. Pietro Pomponazzi

In order to understand this change in anthropological outlook and to see how the new conception took root among the language theorists of the Cinquecento, one must start with Pietro Pomponazzi. Teacher to Speroni and mentor to Varchi, this Mantuan philosopher is best known for the claim that it is impossible to demonstrate the immortality of the soul rationally. Despite being renowned for «not knowing any language other than Mantuan»<sup>34</sup>, his contribution to the development of a new theory of language had a lasting, albeit indirect impact on the assertion of the vernacular as a language of

<sup>33</sup> Just consider the shift that occurred over a period of a century from works such as *De dignitate hominis* by Giannozzo Manetti, *De excellentia ac praestantia hominis* by Bartolomeo Fazio and *De hominis dignitate* by Pico Della Mirandola to a work such as *De humani corporis fabrica* by Andrea Vesalio.

<sup>34</sup> S. Speroni, *Dialogo delle lingue*, Pescara, Libreria dell'Università, 1999, p. 180.

culture. Pomponazzi's Aristotelian anthropology is first outlined in the *Tractatus de immortalitate animae*, published in 1516. The book opens with a simple observation that seemingly places him squarely within the fold of fifteenth-century Platonic philosophy: the nature of man is complex and ancipital, standing midway between mortals and immortals, between beasts and angels and God<sup>35</sup>. But he then goes on to offer a quintessentially Aristotelian definition of man based on reference to what he calls *pure men*: «those who have lived moderately according to moral virtue, but have not given themselves completely to the intellect, nor to the bodily functions»<sup>36</sup>. Man is defined by his pre-eminently moral and ethical nature, and it is here, within the sphere of Aristotelian ethics, that Pomponazzi's anthropology takes root.

The first step to understanding human nature, therefore, is to grasp its purpose. As the ultimate fulfilment of a thing, that is to say insofar as it defines a perfect thing<sup>37</sup>, every purpose is good for Pomponazzi<sup>38</sup>. But that which is good in an absolute sense cannot be attributed as a purpose to every thing, but only insofar as it is suited to a given nature: seeing is better than not seeing, but is not suited to a plant, and therefore cannot be something truly good for it. Similarly, one must not attribute to man the same purpose that is attributed to God, because it would not be appropriate. Pomponazzi goes on to say that that which is good for one thing is good for all individuals of the same type; hence what is good for one man is good for all men. The aim is to determine what is the common good for all men.

Pomponazzi believes that all men share speculative, practical, and factive intellect. The speculative intellect is the theoretical capacity to know the essence of things scientifically; the factive intellect provides man with everything he needs to survive; and the practical intellect is concerned with customs, politics, and domestic economy. But it is the practical intellect that characterizes man as man. The factive intellect is common not only to men but also to beasts, whereas only a handful of wise men possess the speculative intellect in its fullest and most perfect form<sup>39</sup>. If only a few can speculate fully, then this faculty cannot be common to the whole human race, because that must be something that belongs to all. Pomponazzi's thesis thus overturns the conception of man, whose primary activity in the Platonic and Scholastic tradition was contemplative and speculative. Hence

<sup>35</sup> Cfr. P. Pomponazzi, *Tractatus acutissimi, utillimi et mere peripatetici*, Venezia, Scoto, 1525, p. 41r.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 48r.

<sup>38</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, II.2, 994 b 12-13.

<sup>39</sup> Cfr. Pomponazzi, *Tractatus acutissimi, utillimi et mere peripatetici*, cit., pp. 48v-49r.

in Pomponazzi man is defined by his *vita activa*, while only very few individuals have the capacity to know that which pertains exclusively to higher intelligences and to God<sup>40</sup>. Any characteristic that would suggest a connection between man and transcendence is eschewed in Pomponazzi's anthropology, where man's true essence resides in the practical and moral sphere that is fulfilled in the world, hence in politics, and in time, hence history. And it is in the field of history that we find the most original aspects of Pomponazzi's thought, which will be reflected also in his linguistic theories. In *De fato*, he states that men in the world are subject to necessity, infinity, and the cyclicity of the universe and history<sup>41</sup>. Not only the natural elements are subject to these necessary and cyclical laws, but also human civilizations and their languages. In *De incantationibus* he explicitly states that each city, people, or any other convention, including religions<sup>42</sup>, arise, develop, and die in cycles, just as under one prince certain words, customs and flags are used, and when he is replaced they are changed, vituperated, and destroyed<sup>43</sup>. If words, like civilizations, are destined to go through the cycle of birth, zenith, and destruction, then languages are too. Thus, if we follow Pomponazzi's thought, all philosophical and theoretical assumptions concerning the superiority of the Latin language and fourteenth-century Italian come to nothing: every epoch is characterized by its own language, and the language of the Cinquecento is the vernacular, the mother tongue.

## 5. Sperone Speroni

These ideas are echoed in Sperone Speroni. Speroni's first programmatic text to deal with the vernacular language is the treatise *Del modo di studiare*. From the outset, Speroni develops an Aristotelian anthropology along Pomponazzian lines. He asserts that words are signs or figures of the concepts and thoughts of the intellect<sup>44</sup>. Only the intellect with its concepts sets us apart from beasts, because however beautiful and ornate words and languages are, they alone do not make the difference between man and other living beings. Experience and history teach us that animals can produce them too<sup>45</sup>. Language is nothing more than a means for expressing and

<sup>40</sup> Pomponazzi finds support for his interpretation in Aristotle himself, a passage in *Metaphysics*, XII.7, 1072 b 15, 24 where it is stated that the contemplative life is given to men only briefly and only sporadically.

<sup>41</sup> P. Pomponazzi, *Il fato, il libero arbitrio e la predestinazione*, Torino, Aragno, 2004, V, Epilogus, 4.

<sup>42</sup> Cfr. P. Pomponazzi, *De incantationibus*, Firenze, Olschki, 2011, p. 148.

<sup>43</sup> Cfr. *Ibidem*, p. 151.

<sup>44</sup> Cfr. S. Speroni, *Opere*, Venezia, Occhi, 1740, vol. II, p. 487.

<sup>45</sup> Cfr. *Ibidem*.

articulating the concepts that are contained within the mind<sup>46</sup>. Hence the quest for the perfect language is entirely secondary and subordinate to the knowledge of the concepts that give rise to wisdom. He is deeply critical of those who waste their time «not learning why the truth is manifested, but what diction a Greek or Latin author used to signify any given thing back in their day»<sup>47</sup>. Interestingly, for Speroni there are two types of wisdom. One is called contemplative, and concerns the knowledge of God and nature, whereas the other is civil or active, and concerns all man's virtuous actions<sup>48</sup>. He states, echoing Pomponazzi, that the contemplative life pertains properly only to God, and to man only in a diminished way. Hence a man may be described as wise only because sometimes he may have an inkling of the knowledge that God has at all times. But man can never be completely wise<sup>49</sup>, because the human intellect is hazy and illuminates only that which is closest to man, namely that which pertains to natural philosophy<sup>50</sup>. Hence, if the complete knowledge of «contemplative wisdom is not the vocation of mortal creatures, then active wisdom must be; otherwise, there is nothing that can properly be called human»<sup>51</sup>. Here we find a clear reference to the anthropological conception outlined in Pomponazzi's *De immortalitate*: active life is the only one to be properly human, whereas contemplative life is not accessible to the common man. Pomponazzi's influence is even more obvious when Speroni asserts that civil science teaches according to the true nature of man, which is to live as a citizen, how to acquire good moral behaviour (ethics), the government of the republic (politics), and the government of the house (economics)<sup>52</sup>, the three areas that the Mantuan philosopher viewed as constituting the practical intellect<sup>53</sup>. Speroni also adopts Pomponazzi's theory of the cyclicity of history and the historicity of languages<sup>54</sup>: every age has its particular culture and language<sup>55</sup>. If the purpose of a language is to communicate, then it is advisable to use the language that is most widely understood. This is even more relevant for someone wishing to speak rhetorically and ornately, because his job is easier if he accommodates the variety of customs of people living under different laws and at different times, rather than speaking in dead languages<sup>56</sup>.

<sup>46</sup> Cfr. *Ibidem*, p. 488.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>48</sup> Cfr. *Ibidem*.

<sup>49</sup> Cfr. *Ibidem*, pp. 490-491.

<sup>50</sup> Cfr. *Ibidem*, p. 496.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 494.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 498.

<sup>53</sup> These ideas receive further treatment in the longer work *Dialogo della vita attiva e contemplativa*.

<sup>54</sup> Cfr. *Ibidem*, pp. 503-505.

<sup>55</sup> Cfr. *Ibidem*, p. 504.

<sup>56</sup> Cfr. *Ibidem*, p. 508.

Such themes all receive fuller treatment in the more renowned *Dialogo delle lingue*, a genuine new Renaissance agenda that attested to the growing discrepancy with humanism. The text is a dialogue between multiple interlocutors, and the most interesting position is Scholar's defence of the position of a fictional Pomponazzi, according to which every vernacular language can be used, as long as it is can express concepts. Like elsewhere, Speroni's arguments are rooted in Pomponazzian anthropology. In many ways man is different from animals and brutes, the main difference being that «we communicate our heart to one another, which beasts do not do»<sup>57</sup>. Note that it is not ornate language or reason that sets man apart from other animals, but the capacity to communicate. Speroni's entire theory of the vernacular, expressed by the Scholar, is based upon this concept of the communicability of thoughts. His arguments in favour of the vernacular as the language of culture are clear and simple. It is not necessary to know Greek and Latin to be educated, on the contrary. The «study of Greek and Latin is the cause of our ignorance», and if we were not devoting so much time and effort to study them, we would probably have philosophers like Plato and Aristotle in the «new age» too, because in terms of genius, the moderns are no less than the ancients<sup>58</sup>. For this reason, the Mantuan philosopher hopes that all knowledge may some day be communicated in the vernacular<sup>59</sup>, because this is the only way in which also those who do not know Greek or Latin will be able to expand their horizons and contribute to new scientific discoveries. Hence for Pomponazzi it is to be hoped that one day «of every thing in every country I may speak every language» and that the sciences and the arts should be under the tyranny of the Classical languages no longer<sup>60</sup>. All languages are equally worthy of expressing the concepts of the mind<sup>61</sup>, including scientific and philosophical concepts, because languages are an artificial instrument that «without distinction of words» signifies the passions of men, and does so all the more effectively when each person uses their own language. Naturally, therefore, men start reasoning and communicating their thoughts in their native language, which is the easiest and most suitable<sup>62</sup>. Speaking and reasoning in a language that is different from one's own native language is in every sense secondary and artificial, if not indeed unnatural. Writing and languages are tools that men have invented for their own use and convenience to express «the secrets of the heart to one another», and by means of which it is possible to attain the happiness

<sup>57</sup> S. Speroni, *Dialogo delle lingue*, cit., p. 124.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. *Ibidem*, pp. 186, 188.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 184.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. *Ibidem*, p. 188.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 192.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. *Ibidem*, p. 202.

that resides not so much in the words themselves, but in the concepts and doctrines<sup>63</sup>. The Bembian notion that a language acquired dignity only through being codified in writing is thus abandoned completely in Speroni, at the heart of whose linguistic project is the power of communication. Speroni's project was carried forward by Bernardino Tomitano. His ideas are collected in the *Ragionamenti della lingua toscana* (1545), a wholehearted endorsement of the vernacular language and its dissemination in fields of learning traditionally claimed by Latin, such as philosophy and the natural sciences. Tomitano's compliance with Speroni's agenda is total:

I set out to show that knowledge, being cognition of things that separates us from beasts ... the things make the human being wise, and the words make him appear so. The voice places us in common with and makes us similar to beasts, while thought separates us from them, making us similar to God<sup>64</sup>.

Like Speroni, Tomitano believes that it is not the word, but the possibility of sharing and communicating knowledge that sets men apart from all other beings. The quest for a codified language is thus of marginal importance, and adds nothing new to the content of knowledge that exists behind the words:

In addition to this, Aristotle and Plato's speaking in Greek rather than Latin adds nothing to the power of cognition of the things they say; ... the Tuscan, Venetian, Paduan and Brescian words and the other languages will convey the same essence to anyone who reads in the Greek<sup>65</sup>.

Searching for a sophisticated language adds nothing to the capacity to communicate; hence it is entirely legitimate to use Tuscan, Venetian, Paduan, or Lombard, rather than Greek or Latin.

## 6. Alessandro Piccolomini

Also greatly indebted to Speroni's linguistic project is Alessandro Piccolomini. When eventually, at around the age of thirty, he moved to Padua, Speroni's works had already been circulating in manuscript form for some time. The fact of Piccolomini's dependence on Speroni's work is made clear in the treatise *De la Institutione di tutta la vita de l'homo* (1542). Like Speroni's *Del modo di studiare*, the *Institutione* by Piccolomini is based on Pomponazzi's anthropology. The end, that is the ultimate fulfilment of a human's life, in Piccolomini's view, is happiness, and it is attained by operating according

<sup>63</sup> Cfr. *Ibidem*.

<sup>64</sup> B. Tomitano, *Ragionamenti della lingua toscana*, Venezia, De Farri, 1546, pp. 4-5.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 40.

to virtue, in other words by achieving the form that is specific to the human being<sup>66</sup>. Virtue consists in the triumph of the noble part of the soul, namely reason, over the irrational appetites that make men similar to beasts<sup>67</sup>. There are two paths to victory: either through contemplation by means of the speculative intellect, or through actions by means of the practical intellect. There can therefore be two types of happiness: one speculative and one practical. Only practical happiness is common to all men, however, because speculative happiness, as we have already seen in Pomponazzi, is restricted to very few individuals, and anyway is the prerogative only of theologians<sup>68</sup>. In order for practical happiness to be reached, it is best to educate people to perform good actions from childhood. During its third year especially, the child must learn its «mother's language», which is its first means of expressing the concepts of the mind using signs that allow it to converse with other people in society. This characteristic sets men apart from other animals, because it allows them to manifest will and thought, which would otherwise be overshadowed by the basest appetites<sup>69</sup>. Like Speroni and Tomitano, Piccolomini bases his thesis on the primordial expressive capacity of the vernacular. Unlike Speroni, however, who considered all languages to be worthy of use as a means of communication, Piccolomini favours the Tuscan language as the gentlest, easiest, and fairest sounding<sup>70</sup>, distinguishing between a literary Tuscan spoken by «men of sound judgement» and the language of the populace, which must not be taught at all<sup>71</sup>. This does not detract from the idea of the vernacular as a language of culture that is capable of expressing even the most complex contents, however. He is simply acknowledging the fact that the excessive variability of the spoken language might inhibit the correct understanding of a communication. By distinguishing between an educated vernacular and a vernacular of the common people, Piccolomini is not supporting the Bembian project to codify the language. In his letter to Pietro Aretino, dated 20 March 1541, he expresses his aversion to the classicist notion of reviving the «dead language» of Petrarch and Boccaccio, advocating instead for a language that is capable of coining new terms for new concepts.<sup>72</sup> The letter is nothing short of an outline for a theory of language. He asserts that translation into the vernacular does not mean to trans-

<sup>66</sup> Cfr. A. Piccolomini, *De la Institutione di tutta la vita de l'homo nato nobile e in città libera*, Venezia, Scoto, 1545, p. 16r.

<sup>67</sup> Cfr. *Ibidem*, p. 21v.

<sup>68</sup> Cfr. *Ibidem*, pp. 22r-23v.

<sup>69</sup> Cfr. *Ibidem*, p. 29r.

<sup>70</sup> Cfr. *Ibidem*, p. 29v.

<sup>71</sup> Cfr. *Ibidem*, p. 43r.

<sup>72</sup> P. Aretino, *Lettere scritte al Sig. Pietro Aretino da molti signori, comunità, donne di ualore, poeti, et altri eccellentissimi spiriti*, Venezia, Marcolini, 1552, pp. 143r-146v.



late literally, rather it involves summarizing, paraphrasing, presenting doctrines that are articulated in Greek and Latin so that they may be understood even by the roughest of intellects<sup>73</sup>. His aims are

One, to bring those doctrines which I intended to deal with into our language, which is perfectly capable, in my view, of handling any science; and the other to unravel and open up and illuminate matters so that their intelligence becomes so easy and open that anyone who is not entirely uncouth and intellectually incapable may understand it, or at least most of it<sup>74</sup>.

Piccolomini's purpose is to show how the vernacular can be put to use as a language of culture and science that will supplant Greek and Latin. In order to achieve this, however, it is necessary first to break with the rigid parameters of Bemboism, which is defined as an «unreasonable proposition» because of the idea that one cannot write using words and forms that are different from those that have been codified in the fourteenth-century Italian of Petrarch and Boccaccio<sup>75</sup>. His rebellion against Bembo is clear in the *Sfera del mondo*:

And to make this text less confused and easier to understand, I took some concepts that have no proper name in our language, to use words that perhaps cannot be found in either Boccaccio or Petrarch because they never had occasion to handle such concepts. And I was zealous in my intent because I judged it to be better to be understood with words that were not entirely ours than, whether by circumlocution or illustrating with some other forced reduction, to make my words so confused and hazy that what I essay to communicate through them cannot be understood by others, let alone by myself<sup>76</sup>.

The primary objective is to communicate and be understood, and in order to do this it is necessary to introduce new words. Hence the endeavour to establish the vernacular language is also an endeavour to introduce new words, a topic that is by no means marginal, becoming indeed something of an obsession for Piccolomini. He was aware about the fact that it is only by introducing new words to designate new discoveries and concepts that it is possible to contribute to the advancement of knowledge, which otherwise would be inhibited<sup>77</sup>. It is a significant point in his theory, because it corroborates the view that it is only by adopting a living vernacular that knowledge may effectively be advanced<sup>78</sup>. Piccolomini's vernacular is

<sup>73</sup> Cfr. A. Piccolomini, *Libro della Poetica d'Aristotele*, Siena, Bonetti, 1572, *Ai lettori*.

<sup>74</sup> A. Piccolomini, *Copiosissima parafrase di M. Alessandro Piccolomini nel primo libro della Retorica di Aristotele*, Venezia, Varisco, 1565, pp. 4-5.

<sup>75</sup> Cfr. A. Virgili, *Francesco Berni*, Firenze, Le Monnier, 1881, pp. 229-246.

<sup>76</sup> A. Piccolomini, *Della sfera del mondo*, Venezia, Del Pozzo, 1552, p. 3v.

<sup>77</sup> A. Piccolomini, *La prima parte della filosofia naturale*, Roma, Valgrisi, 1551, pp. 1br-v.

<sup>78</sup> Cfr. A. Siekiera, *La questione della lingua in Alessandro Piccolomini*, in *Alessandro Piccolomini (1508-1579)*, Paris, Centre Interuniversitaire de Recherche sur la Renaissance Italienne, 2012, p. 227.

thus chameleon-like, not hidebound by rules of grammar and style, because knowledge evolves constantly and must be communicated to as wide a public as possible.

In his *Ragguagli di Parnaso* (1612), Traiano Boccalini remembers Piccolomini for his particular approach to vulgarization, as a kind of Promethean hero who assails the decision by the god Apollo to prohibit the dissemination of knowledge in the vernacular to as wide a public as possible<sup>79</sup>.

## 7. Giovan Battista Gelli

The writings of Giovan Battista Gelli clearly show that the ideas of Sperone Speroni and Alessandro Piccolomini gained currency also beyond the borders of Veneto. Gelli's revolt against Bembo is voiced in *Ragionamento sopra la difficoltà di mettere in regole la nostra lingua*, published in 1551 along with *Della lingua che si parla e si scrive in Firenze* by Pier Francesco Giambullari. This short work by Gelli has often been considered the fiercest attack on the use of rules to codify a living language that is in constant change, and therefore a determined defence of spoken Florentine<sup>80</sup>. But such a view holds true only within the narrow context of the debate surrounding the founding of a Florentine grammar that was taking place in the Accademia fiorentina, not if we look further into his theory of language as presented in *I capricci del Bottaio* (1546). Gelli certainly rejects the idea of fossilizing and codifying the Florentine language along Bembian lines by modelling it on a Trecento-esque ideal, but not, as is often assumed, because such a project was partly conceived by a man from Venice who was a non-native speaker. Gelli's concern was not to normalize and standardize the vernacular, but rather to promote a language that could be understood by and communicated to everyone. The ideas presented in *I capricci* are identical to Speroni's, and are expressed in a very similar language. That Gelli, the son of a cobbler, should express his ideas through the words of a barrel-maker is a telling point. His work is in fact a critique of the artisan and merchant class of his time, which is concerned with acquiring wealth more than culture. The fact of not being able to devote oneself to culture, however, is determined not only by the myopia of needing to acquire wealth, but also by the difficulty of gaining access to knowledge which was still transmitted primarily in the classical languages. The ultimate aim of a language, as for Speroni and Piccolomini,

<sup>79</sup> Cfr. T. Boccalini, *De' Ragguagli di Parnaso*, Venezia, Farri, 1612, pp. 315-316.

<sup>80</sup> Cfr. C. Marazzini, *Storia della lingua italiana. Il secondo Cinquecento e il Seicento*, cit., p. 165.

is to communicate the concepts of the soul. In Gelli's words, «the vernacular language is thus as suitable for expressing its concepts as Latin»<sup>81</sup>. Any concept may be expressed in the vernacular, even «the difficult matters of philosophy, no less easily and perfectly than by any Latin author»<sup>82</sup>. Contrary to those who say that «any who do not know grammar are unworthy», in other words the humanists, including Bembo, Gelli states that «grammar, or rather Latin, is a language, and languages are not what make men learned, rather concepts and sciences ... it is the things, not the languages, that make men learned; and although they are signified with words, a person who understands only the words would never be worth anything»<sup>83</sup>. Speronian Pomponazzi and Gelli are thus in perfect accord<sup>84</sup>. To whomever believes that knowledge is closed within the confines of the Greek and Latin languages Gelli writes that

Our language is perfectly suited to expressing any concept of philosophy or astrology, or any other science, and every bit as well as Latin, perhaps even Greek too, about which they make such a fuss<sup>85</sup>.

The point that «it is not languages that make men learned, but the sciences; and that one learns languages to acquire the sciences they contain» is repeated several times in Gelli<sup>86</sup>. Language and words are only tools that can help in the acquisition of knowledge, and there is no fixed or codified language that can somehow describe the new developments in knowledge. Gelli here echoes Piccolomini, stating that it is legitimate for native speakers of a given living language to introduce new terms because such terms follow the evolution of knowledge. The vernacular must follow the example of Latin, and the Tuscans should follow the example of the Romans, who, «loving their own things (as is right and reasonable) more than those of others, studied foreign languages only to see if they could get something positive out of them and enrich their own»<sup>87</sup>. To establish the vernacular as a language of culture in the same way as the Romans did for Latin and Greek, is almost a moral imperative, because «the true responsibility of the citizens is always, in whichever way possible, to benefit their country, to which we are no less obliged than to our own fathers and mothers»<sup>88</sup>. Gelli pursues the same aims as Speroni and Piccolomini, hoping that one day

<sup>81</sup> G.B. Gelli, *Opere*, Torino, UTET, 1976, p. 177.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 178.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>84</sup> Cfr. Gelli, *Opere*, cit., p. 183.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 182.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 195.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 196.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 198.

whoever wishes to learn will not need to waste four to six of his best years learning a language, only to then use it to go on to the sciences. Beyond this, they could be learned more easily and safely. ... because one never learns a foreign language as well as one's own<sup>89</sup>.

Vernacular languages give access to knowledge that would be difficult without many years of instruction and experience. Unlike Speroni and Piccolomini, however, Gelli is advocating for the establishment of the vernacular as a language not only of culture but also of politics, in line with the view upheld by Cosimo I in the Accademia fiorentina. The Romans did not allow ambassadors to be heard in Rome unless they spoke Latin, hence the political establishment should run the public affairs of their citizens in a similar fashion. As to which the vernacular he is referring to, while his specific focus is on Florentine, he is in fact encompassing all living languages, because they alone are capable of communicating and disseminating knowledge. Only natural language can adequately communicate thoughts, and there is no need for refinement because «outsiders, through trying too hard to clean it up, spoil it: thus the same happens to a language as to a beautiful woman who, thinking she is making herself more beautiful, in fact spoils her beauty with excessive grooming»<sup>90</sup>. Gelli here is openly attacking Bembo<sup>91</sup>, not because he wants to promote Florentine, but because he is deeply convinced of the value of the vernacular as the natural language of culture. The greatness of the vernacular language, which is also its beauty, consists in the natural order in which it expresses concepts. Such ease and beauty do not exist in Latin, or Latinate vernacular.

This is why Gelli and his immediate predecessors wished for the Tuscans to start «translating the sciences into their language»<sup>92</sup>. Even so, Gelli states, many, motivated purely by «accursed jealousy», say that the vernacular «is neither suitable nor worthy of translating» sciences, because «it detracts from their reputation and greatly deems them»<sup>93</sup>. Gelli is therefore pursuing the democratization of knowledge, and states that

finding myself recently in the presence of certain literati, one of whom said that Bernardo Segni had translated Aristotle's *Rhetoric* into vernacular, to which another replied that he had performed a great disservice; and when asked why, he said: «Because it is not good that every uneducated person should be allowed to know what another has acquired over many years with great effort from Greek and Latin books»<sup>94</sup>.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 200.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 201.

These words are, in Gelli's view, «inappropriate» because the main purpose of man is no longer the theoretical aim of gaining knowledge by closing himself in an almost monastic pursuit of ideas. Man lives in society with other men, and everyone's duty is to «love all and benefit each other, the soul much more than the body, and there can be no greater benefit to the soul than to help it to understand»<sup>95</sup>. The practical dimension developed by Gelli follows the lines set out by Pomponazzi, according to which a properly «human» life may be realized only in a society in which man can truly be himself. This Aristotelian position is borne out by the structure of another of Gelli's works, *La circe*, which presents a «civil life» on the blueprint of the *Nicomachean Ethics*<sup>96</sup>. In order to make the understanding and sharing of knowledge easier, everything that is written in Greek and Latin should be translated «according to sense rather than the words»<sup>97</sup>. Once again, Gelli attacks Bembo's attempt to codify the vernacular according to rules derived from Latin and explicitly states that «wanting to say things in one language with the manners of another has no grace at all»<sup>98</sup>. The first and only criterion for establishing the power of the vernacular as a language of culture is its capacity to communicate concepts, because «anyone who writes does so for no other reason than because his things, preserved as letters, which do not disappear like voices, may be understood by the whole world»<sup>99</sup>. For this reason, it is best to adopt a natural language rather than an artificial one, a language in other words that is spoken by everyone, which does not necessarily make it uncouth, rather than a language that is simply written. With these ideas Gelli goes far beyond Bembo's project, and much further than Speroni and Piccolomini themselves could have hoped.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>96</sup> On Aristotelianism in Gelli, Cfr. V. Perrone Compagni, *Cose di filosofia si possono dire in volgare. Il programma culturale di Giambattista Gelli, in Il volgare come lingua di cultura dal Trecento al Cinquecento*, cura di A. Calzona, F. P. Fiore, A. Tenenti, C. Vasoli, Firenze, Olschki, 2003, pp. 301-337; M.P. Ellero, *Aristotele tra Dante e Petrarca: la ricezione della Poetica nelle lezioni di Giambattista Gelli all'Accademia Fiorentina*, in «Bruniana & Campanelliana», 13, 2007, pp. 463-476; A.L. Puliafito, *Ostriche e talpe. A proposito della Circe di G.B. Gelli*, in «Versants. Rivista svizzera delle letterature romanze», 55, 2008, pp. 35-46; A.L. Puliafito, *Volgarizzamento e propaganda: Giovan Battista Gelli e l'Accademia Fiorentina*, in *Mecenati, artisti e pubblico nel Rinascimento*, a cura di L. Secchi Tarugi, Firenze, Cesati, 2011, pp. 383-390; A.L. Puliafito, *Filosofia, letteratura e vita civile: Giovan Battista Gelli e il volgare*, in «Modernidades», 11, 2011, pp. 1-15.

<sup>97</sup> G.B. Gelli, *Opere*, cit., p. 202.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibidem*.

## 8. Benedetto Varchi

The project to establish the vernacular as a language of culture was brought to completion by a Florentine intellectual who was certainly no friend of Gelli's. Like Gelli, however, he believes that the dignity of the vernacular resides in its expressive capacity, and therefore that a language must be judged primarily on the fact that it can be spoken and understood. It has been insightfully observed that Benedetto Varchi represents «a genuine betrayal of the promises of the vernacular Classicism» advanced by Bembo<sup>100</sup>. It has often been assumed that the redesign of Bembo's project began with a reappraisal of spoken Florentine, and that a central theme in Varchi's work was «the connection between the ideas of Bembo on the primacy of written language and the authority of the Tuscan vernacular»<sup>101</sup>. In my view, however, Varchi's project must be viewed in the light of Speroni, Tomitano, and Piccolomini, and of the fact that it is not simply posited on a reappraisal of spoken language, but is in fact driven by a desire to establish the vernacular as a language of culture.

His most complex work is the treatise *Hercolano, dialogo nel qual si ragiona generalmente delle lingue e in particolare della fiorentina e della Toscana*, which was published posthumously in Florence in 1570. As well as developing a personal theory of the vernacular not unlike Speroni and Tomitano's, it also shows a clear connection with Pomponazzian anthropology. Varchi believes that «speech, in other words exterior human discourse, is nothing other than manifesting to others the concepts of the soul using words»<sup>102</sup>. By «human» discourse he means discourse between men, whereas angels communicate with each other and with God through divine discourse<sup>103</sup>. Discourse may be exterior or extrinsic, as opposed to interior or intrinsic, because men often speak to themselves within their own minds, such as when reasoning, but in so doing they neither speak nor communicate<sup>104</sup>. Speaking is defined by manifesting, that is by expressing and stating something to someone, because it is characteristic of men not only to speak to themselves, but also to other men<sup>105</sup>. Analysis of these two aspects of human discourse shows that Varchi's conception is in every way similar to Speroni's, and that the dignity of a language is based

<sup>100</sup> Cfr. F. Bruni, *Sistemi critici e strutture narrative (ricerche sulla cultura fiorentina del Rinascimento)*, Napoli, Liguori, 1969, p. 79; C. Marazzini, *Storia della lingua italiana. Il secondo Cinquecento e il Seicento*, cit., p. 153.

<sup>101</sup> C. Marazzini, *Storia della lingua italiana. Il secondo Cinquecento e il Seicento*, cit., p. 154.

<sup>102</sup> B. Varchi, *L'Hercolano*, a cura di A. Sorella, Pescara, Libreria dell'Università, 1995, p. 530.

<sup>103</sup> Cfr. *Ibidem*, p. 531.

<sup>104</sup> Cfr. *Ibidem*.

<sup>105</sup> Cfr. *Ibidem*.

on its capacity to communicate. What is communicated is thought, or the «concepts of the soul», because the aim of speech is to reveal to the outside world what is in the mind.

Varchi stresses that speech is a specific type of communication by means of words, because it is also possible to communicate with acts, signs, and gestures, as if they too were instruments for signifying things. Words, however, are more suitable for conveying thoughts, as well as being specific to man<sup>106</sup>. It is typical for man to speak<sup>107</sup>. No other creature apart from man can speak, not because man, unlike other creatures, has voice, but because only man is a social animal<sup>108</sup>. Clearly for Varchi man's essence is to be a civil animal, or a citizen, and this is why man can speak. Speech is not what makes man a civil animal, therefore, otherwise parrots, which can imitate the voice of men, could also potentially be citizens<sup>109</sup>. Man is by nature different from other animals in virtue of the fact that he is a social being, and it is only as a social being that he can speak. The fact that men are by nature social animals and therefore have the capacity to speak, and not that they are social because they can speak, is an incontrovertible fact for Varchi: their capacity to speak comes from nature, and was given to them so that they could talk to and be with one another<sup>110</sup>, and it is this social dimension that sets them apart from other animals. Unlike other animals, men also know and signify that which is beneficial and damaging, useful and harmful, good and bad, beautiful and ugly, just unjust and honest; by means of language, in other words, they realize their ethical and moral dimension<sup>111</sup>. Like Pomponazzi, therefore, Varchi claims that what sets man apart from other living beings is his strictly practical and ethical nature.

Varchi states that speech is a good that is common and natural to all men, but speaking many languages, or speaking one language rather than another, is anything but natural<sup>112</sup>. Hence there is no evidence to suggest that men need to learn Latin in order to communicate. This is because man does not naturally possess the characteristic of *speech*, but he does naturally possess the *capacity* to speak, just as laughing is not proper to man, but being able to laugh is<sup>113</sup>. For instance, a child growing up in the desert on his own without communicating with anyone would have the capacity to speak with-

<sup>106</sup> Cfr. *Ibidem*.

<sup>107</sup> Cfr. *Ibidem*, p. 534.

<sup>108</sup> Cfr. *Ibidem*, p. 535.

<sup>109</sup> Cfr. *Ibidem*.

<sup>110</sup> Cfr. *Ibidem*, p. 539.

<sup>111</sup> Cfr. *Ibidem*, p. 540.

<sup>112</sup> Cfr. *Ibidem*, p. 542.

<sup>113</sup> Cfr. *Ibidem*, p. 543.

out actually speaking. He has the capacity to articulate sounds, but not to produce discourse. So if it is true that anyone who speaks has voice, the opposite is not true<sup>114</sup>. Speaking for Varchi is clearly natural, but it is also clear that speaking in this or that language, or in Latin or Greek, with or without rhetoric, depends entirely on circumstance, study, or will, in other words on factors that are merely anthropological, historical, and cultural.

Language is the «speech of one or more peoples who use the same words with the same meaning with the same accidents to express their concepts»<sup>115</sup>. Language is therefore distinctly characterized by a capacity to univocally designate the same concepts with the same words. If a concept were expressed with different words, in Varchi's view, there would be grounds for questioning the unity of the language. Language is also characterized by being predominantly spoken rather than written. Contrary to Bembo, Varchi states that writing is not essential to language, but purely accidental, because the true nature of language is that it be spoken. Developing the innate capacity to speak is difficult enough in his view, so learning how to write is even more arduous and unnatural. Hence Varchi correctly identifies one of the reasons for the failure of Bembo's project of a vernacular based on the codification of writing. The aim of language is communication, and there is no need for it to be written. It is sufficient that it be spoken<sup>116</sup>. A person who speaks wishes to open up his soul to a person who listens, and he has no need for writing in order to do so, because writing is an artificial instrument designed for utility or ornamentation<sup>117</sup>. Varchi therefore concludes that eloquence could be confined to writing, because if the purpose of speaking is to manifest concepts, it is sufficient for a speaker to be understood and for a listener to understand; oratorical artifice and embellishment are not important<sup>118</sup>.

In *Dichiarazione sopra que' versi del trionfo d'amore* therefore, using words that closely reflect Speroni's, Varchi expresses the hope that one day all knowledge may be expressed in the vernacular:

The Latins were followed by the Tuscans, who are able to write in a simple manner and with marvellous dexterity pretty much all that they turn their hand to. And I for my part have no doubt that in the course of time, despite the novelty of the language and the contrariness of the people as much as of the times, we shall see all or most of the sciences translated or at least treated very satisfactorily in the Tuscan language ... nor does it seem to me to be true what many, basing themselves on the authority of the ancients, criticize so much,

<sup>114</sup> Cfr. *Ibidem*, p. 548.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 635.

<sup>116</sup> Cfr. *Ibidem*, p. 640.

<sup>117</sup> Cfr. *Ibidem*, p. 657.

<sup>118</sup> Cfr. *Ibidem*, p. 636.



namely that the sciences should not be made manifest and explained to the populace ... but I say that each and every man of prudence and discernment must dedicate himself with all his might to making idiots and vulgar men less so as much as possible, and there is no other way than to teach them first the virtues, then the sciences<sup>119</sup>.

For Varchi it is therefore important not only that language transmits knowledge, but also that it be understood by the people, including «idiots», or illiterates. Varchi's linguistic needs are therefore met with theoretical and philosophical assumptions that are entirely alien to figures such as Bembo, still attached as they are to an aristocratic idea of culture and language. Such a conception of language necessarily entailed a reappraisal of the principles of Aristotelianism stripped of all Scholastic and Neoplatonic assumptions regarding the ideas, or linguistic ideals, as eternal and unchangeable models that have to be adhered to in order to provide a definitively codified image of the world. With Varchi, Gelli, Piccolomini and Speroni, the Cinquecento offers a new model of man characterized according to the devices of Aristotelian philosophy. This «new» Aristotelianism embraced a mundane and no longer only transcendental view of the individual, and this in turn allowed the vernacular to assert itself as a language of culture, which is precisely what did not happen after Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, Alberti, and Lorenzo the Magnificent, who all lived in an age that was still heavily influenced by transcendentalism. This «new» Aristotelian perspective gave a powerful impetus to the establishment of vernacular as a language of culture, a language that was no longer limited to a narrow circle of intellectuals, but open to the people for the people<sup>120</sup>.

**Abstract:** The Instatement of the Vernacular as Language of Culture. A New Aristotelian Paradigm in Sixteenth-Century Italy

The purpose of this study is to look at the instatement of the vernacular as a «language of culture» from a strictly philosophical standpoint, that is to examine the various philosophical approaches that might have affected the genesis of certain linguistic theories and determined the adoption of specific features of a given language. It focuses on the Aristotelian traces in Sperone Speroni, Alessandro Piccolomini, Giovan Battista Gelli and Benedetto Varchi, in order to explain why most theorists of the vernacular language who contributed to the establishment of vernacular as a

<sup>119</sup> B. Varchi, *Opere*, Trieste, Lloyd, 1859, vol. II, p. 490.

<sup>120</sup> Cfr. L. Bianchi, *Volgarizzare Aristotele: per chi?*, in «Freiburger Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie», 59, 2012, pp. 480-495; D.A. Lines, *Beyond Latin in Renaissance Philosophy: A Plea for New Critical Perspectives*, in «Intellectual History Review», 25, 2015, pp. 373-389; M. Sgarbi, *Aristotle and the People*, in «Renaissance and Reformation», 39, 2016, pp. 59-109.

Marco Sgarbi

language of culture appear to criticize Bembo's theoretical model, whether directly or indirectly, even when there was compliance on a practical level.

*Keywords:* Aristotelianism, Italian vernacular language, language of culture anthropology, philosophy of language, Bembo, Speroni, Varchi, Gelli

Marco Sgarbi, Dipartimento di Filosofia e Beni Culturali, Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Dorsoduro 3484/D, 30123 Venezia, marco.sgarbi@unive.it