Julia V. Ivanova

Spectacularity before the “Renaissance” of Theater: Visuality and Self-Image of the *Quattrocento* Papacy

The humanist culture of the *Quattrocento* has left no visible traces in dramatic genres. Humanists paid a most respectful attention to the legacy of ancient theater, but their attention was scholarly in nature, manifesting itself in commentaries on plays by Plautus and Terence and citations of the playwrights' words in research papers—but rarely, with very few exceptions, in imitations. The whole *Quattrocento* era produced about fifty comedies, but only two plays, *Polyxena*, attributed to Leonardo Bruni (Aretino), and *Chrysis*, by Enea Silvio Bartolomeo Piccolomini (Pope Pius II), can be considered as outstanding products of the humanist culture.¹ It seems that tragedies were even more rare; their study seems to be a matter for the future. It could be assumed that, given the weakness of theater as a social institution, humanists invested all of their potential as playwrights into the dialogue, the genre that prevails in humanist literature.² Dialogue was particularly in demand as it not only served the purpose of “art for art's sake” successfully, but, being close to Menippean satire, it also allowed the author to probe the limits of any accepted truth freely, testing its resistance to various kinds of critique, putting it into serious and funny contexts alternatively, and listening to how it sounded in a polyphony of voices, stated by different characters. In that period, searching for solutions to scholarly or ethical problems was considered to be more important than aesthetic objectivizations of possible solutions through individual characters, and the logic of scholarly inquiry was more attractive to intellectuals than the attempt at building a well-wrought dramatic plot. It was not until the late fifteenth

1 On the latter play see E. O'Brien, “Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini's *Chrysis*: Prurient Pastime—or Something More?”, in: *MLN*, vol. 124, 2009, pp. 111–136.

2 On the genre of the humanist dialogue, see D. Marsh, *The Quattrocento Dialogue: Classical Tradition and Humanist Innovation*, Cambridge, MA 1980.

Note: The research that is at the basis of this paper was conducted within the framework of the Basic Research Program at the National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE) and supported within the framework of a subsidy granted to the HSE by the Government of the Russian Federation for the implementation of the Global Competitiveness Program.

century that Giovanni Pontano's dialogues began to present scenes the very emergence of which announced the (re-)birth of comedy.

The dramatization of ideological positions developed in the genre of the dialogue is one of the processes leading to the renaissance of theater. However, this study will focus on another aspect—namely on the spectacularity of political life in *Quattrocento* Europe, i.e. spectacularity as a means of self-presentation for authorities during that era.

The transformation of the sociocultural construct of power that Italy witnessed throughout the fifteenth century has been a frequent object of historical and sociological research. R. Fubini sees one of the origins of humanism in Italy of the late *Trecento* in the mutation of the self-image of papal authority,³ which had been transformed from the force embodying and implementing the Law, uniform and unalterable for every member of society, into nothing more than a representation of the personal will of an individual (or a group of individuals) within the power echelon. Having lost its legal justification and broken the link with the social context of traditions (whether feudal/patriarchal or municipal/republican) that had endowed it with power, this new guise of papal authority needed to identify and legitimize itself. This was the situation in which heroism of the ancient type, with its strong mythological element and blatant unconventionality manifested in the motif of resisting fate, ever-present in the hero's journeys, became the center of rhetorical deliberations among the advocates of the new order representing the rising humanist movement. These were able, relying on their historical erudition and oratorical endowment, to dignify the crude materiality of the tyranny of power as a truly heroic conduct, which transcended the boredom of everyday traditions with an imperious gesture to create a "brave new world".

The strategy of "classicizing" becomes one of the pivotal aspects of internal and external policies pursued by the numerous Italian city-states of differing sizes in the fifteenth century. During that period, the Holy See's economic and political weakness was balanced by the stability and conservatism of the symbolic institution of the papacy. The means of representing the power of St. Peter's successors were produced at a rapid-fire pace and in huge volumes: the concept of strong individual rule in Rome was far ahead of the full-fledged actual consolidation of this type of power throughout the fifteenth and even in the early sixteenth century. The strategy of materializing the symbolic capital adopted by the See of Rome was as ambitious as it is hard for us to understand, being an attempt to *directly produce* real out of symbolic power. At the basis of this strategy was

3 R. Fubini, *L'umanesimo italiano e i suoi storici: Origini rinascimentali, critica moderna*, Milan 2001, pp. 30ff.

the attempt—after having created an all-embracing, integral, and impeccably shaped *image of authority* in the verbal and figurative arts, first of all in architectural forms—to translate that image into real life, as if it were possible to make historical reality a function of such a fabricated image by exerting purely *aesthetic* influence on the public and producing a performance with real-world authorities occupying the lead role.

This paper focuses on the strategies (mainly aesthetic and gravitating toward visibility) that the Holy See, represented by Pope Pius II as one of its most prominent agents,⁴ used during that period to construct its self-image and proclaim its mission and intentions.⁵ This new type of power largely drew on the means of self-representation, enabling the subject of power to mark his position as exclusively significant—both in space and in historical time. But in fact, the Pope remains in the same space as his subjects (among whom are many of his relatives, friends, opponents, and rivals—i.e. those who know him closely and have no reasons to acknowledge his superiority over them) and lives the same historical moment with them. Therefore, the Pope was looking for spatial-visual means that would create a radical contrast between him and his audience. In addition, he needed a narrative and self-image that would confirm his supremacy as uncontested. He finally came to the solution to use the perspectival organization of space and self-staging, the positioning of himself at the point of intersection of the convergence of visual rays and sightlines of the spectators, as a visual means of portraying the exclusiveness of his position. Elaborating, in addition, narrative means of self-presentation, the Pope drew on the methods of typological exegesis—a specifically Christian way of interpreting texts as containing a “veiled” prophetic dimension. Typology presupposes that the events depicted in the Old Testament are not ontologically complete in themselves, because their authentic sense is revealed only in analogous events narrated in the New Testament: the “true” meaning of Abraham’s (finally not performed)

4 On Piccolomini’s “Renaissance world”, see A. White, *Plague and Pleasure: The Renaissance World of Pius II*, Washington, D.C. 2014.

5 On Piccolomini’s visual and performative strategies of self-representation, see M. Maskarinec, “Mobilizing Sanctity: Pius II and the Head of Andrew in Rome”, in: *Authority and Spectacle in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: Essays in Honor of Teofilo F. Ruiz*, ed. Y.-G. Liang and J. Rodriguez, New York, NY 2017, pp. 186–215; F. Nevola, “‘La più gloriosa solemnità che a di de padri nostri giammai fusse veduta’: Feste ed apparati urbani durante il pontificato di Pio II Piccolomini”, in: *I luoghi del sacro: Il sacro e le città fra medioevo ed età moderna*, ed. F. Ricciardelli, Florence 2008, pp. 173–188; F. Nevola, “Metaurbanistica e cerimoniale: Pio II e la corte papale in Siena”, in: *Enea Silvio Piccolomini: Arte, storia e cultura nell’Europa di Pio II*, ed. R. Di Paola, A. Antoniutti, and M. Gallo, Rome 2006, pp. 357–369; F. Nevola, “Le patronage architectural du Pape Pie II Piccolomini à Sienne”, in: *Médiévales*, vol. 47, 2004, pp. 139–152.

sacrifice of his son, for instance, becomes manifest in the Crucifixion. The implication of typological exegesis consists in the claim that the *raison d'être* of the events portrayed in the Old Testament is to indicate those of the New, to be the “*typoi*”—the “prefiguration” of these latter events, with a view to pedagogically preparing the Israelites and the pagans of the ancient world so that they will be able to perceive the “true truth” of Christian dogma. Pius II uses the resources offered by this approach, traditionally confined to biblical exegesis, in two ways: at times, he constructs prophecies concerning himself; the *typoi* he makes use of for that purpose are not only the characters of Christian salvation history (first of all, Jesus himself), but also the heroes of the pagan world, above all Aeneas and Cesar.

I shall now consider the visual means of self-representation that Piccolomini applied in his two most ambitious cultural-political projects: the architectural ensemble of Pienza, conceived by Bernardo Rossellino with the active participation of the Pontiff, and the narratives created by Piccolomini to be staged on the occasion of mass festivities in different regions of Italy, directed by the Pope himself.

The few literary works of the second third of the *Quattrocento* that could be labelled as relating to the theory of art present the principles of perspectivism and architecture as a rather abstract, rigidly regulated model of “proper” artistic and architectural creation. E. Panofsky was the first to emphasize the entirely abstract nature of the early works of perspectivism, their deliberate, often excessive resistance to the conventional (medieval) logic of the viewer’s gaze.⁶ The simple mimetic reproduction of a spatial body evolves into rational harmonization and structural decomposition of the space perceived, elevating the deliberation concerning the organization of space to a reflection on the very conditions and patterns of visual perception. For instance, Alberti’s books on artistic and architectural works contain spatial metaphors that serve to overcome the limitations and habits of trivial visual experiences.⁷ Alberti suggests devising a wall as a row of pillars punctuated by the spaces between them, a house as a series of openings connecting it to other spatial zones in the city, a town district as a frame of outdoor open spaces, and a network of streets as a frame of an urban open space. He also recommends representing a town as a house in which all the rooms must be interconnected; all of his architectural plans of houses and villas include an “antique” patio that interconnects all the

⁶ E. Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, New York, NY 1991, pp. 47–66.

⁷ On Alberti’s notion of space and the social-political significance of architecture and city-planning, see B. Mitrović, “Leon Battista Alberti and the Homogeneity of Space”, in: *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, vol. 63, 2004, pp. 424–439; C. W. Westfall, “Society, Beauty, and the Humanist Architect in Alberti’s *De re aedificatoria*”, in: *Studies in the Renaissance*, vol. 16, 1969, pp. 61–69, p. 66.

residential premises and is used for relaxation and communication, similar to an urban open space. Meanwhile, the vertical structure of the town is levelled and smoothed so that the horizontal space has a uniform size and represents an ideal model of a linear geometrical perspective.⁸ Such ascetic discipline designed to “geometrize” the viewer’s gaze is supposed to eventually result in the pure perception of the inner space of a picture or architectural landscape as an ideal system of coordinates in which a visual narrative evolves, whether it is a fictional plot or real events in the town’s political life.

Being guided by the seemingly “natural” laws of visibility, the early art of perspectivism in fact creates a space that is not inherently consistent with any real perception. Rather than imitating real-life spatial forms, artistic and architectural perspectivists uncover the principles of their construction. They expose visual *patterns* of reality—and only when such patterns have been calculated and measured do they translate them into an image, allowing the abstract geometric principle to become an ideal platform for images and events. They thus create a *new*, totally fictional reality relying on the laws and rules that are subject to calculation, articulation, and replication. The field of visual perception becomes dominated by the logic of structuring rational space. The urban planners who created the architectural utopias of *Quattrocento* perspectivism would first draw perfect geometric shapes and perfectly straight lines and only then try plotting structures and, rarely, human figures on city maps. As for urban landscapes, it was obviously extremely rare that the architectural ideas of perspectivism, perceived in the context of consolidating the power of some prominent political figure, were brought to life in full, probably with the only exception of the small town of Pienza with its unique central square ensemble.

Piccolomini, who called himself Pius II at the beginning of his pontificate, attached enormous importance to perspective: he perfectly realized its semantic potential and used it skillfully to represent his own personality. This is manifest, apart from the architectural plan of Pienza that he designed in cooperation with Rossellino,⁹ in his autobiographical *Commentarii rerum memorabilium quae temporibus suis contingerunt* (1463), in which he describes every part of his architectural concept and explicates to his readers and to visitors of the town the meaning that should be recognized in the plan of the *borgo* and its structures. If

⁸ See I. Danilova, “Gorod v italyanskikh arkhitekturnykh traktatakh Kvatrochento” [The Town in Italian Architectural Tractates of the Quattrocento], in: I. Danilova, *Italyanskiy gorod XV veka: real'nost', mif, obraz* [Italian City-States of the 15th Century: Reality, Myth, and Image], Moscow 2000, pp. 29–84.

⁹ On Pienza as a *Quattrocento* city, see *Pienza: The Creation of a Renaissance City*, ed. Ch. R. Mack, Ithaca, NY 1987.

the *Commentarii* contain Pope Pius's verbalized self-image, Pienza is his self-image carved in stone. In order to convey this dimension, the Pope had renamed his small native *borgo* Corsignano this way. The verbal image of the Pope's personality and biography is illustrated by the Pienza ensemble, while the details of the latter find their explication as well as interpretation in the *Commentarii*.¹⁰

The lack of space into which the newly designed central square ensemble—the cathedral as well as the Pope's, the Bishop's, and the Municipal Palaces—had to be squeezed encouraged Rossellino to invent new methods of creating an illusion of perspective centered around the cathedral façade, despite all the disadvantages as to landscape and topography that marked Corsignano. The small town of a few streets sits on a cliff overlooking the Val d'Orcia. Its central avenue (now named after Rossellino), as conceived by the architect, separates the square with the cathedral at its back from the Municipal Palace, the square being only slightly wider than the avenue. The lanes running perpendicular to Corso Rossellino and leading away from the cathedral are aligned so that the sight of the cathedral is lost as soon as one dives into any of them. For this reason, it is virtually impossible to observe the cathedral and the Pope's Palace from a remote perspective; meanwhile, a perspective was indispensable to grasp the meanings intended by the contractor and the architect. The square paved with dark stone was divided into nine rectangles by straight lines of pale tufa and flanked by four more trapezoids (two on either side), quadrilaterals truncated by the buildings of the Pope's and the Bishop's Palaces that frame the square in front of the cathedral on both sides. A passer-by would think that the palace façades are perpendicular to the façade of the cathedral, but a bird's-eye viewer will see that they actually form a trapezoid with the line of the cathedral's façade as its shorter base; in fact, the outer corners of the palaces facing the Corso Rossellino diverge from each other while the inner ones converge and almost reach the cathedral.¹¹

D. del Grande called the Pienza ensemble a collage of Piccolomini's personal impressions and memories, comparing Pienza to Hadrian's Villa, which was also designed in the so-called genre of "architecture of a philosopher king's memories". Piccolomini commissioned the Cathedral of Assumption of the Virgin Mary; the

10 On the ensemble of Pienza as Piccolomini's "project" and as a manifestation of the "humanist worldview", see J. Pieper, *Der Entwurf einer humanistischen Weltansicht*, Stuttgart and London 1997; S. J. May, "Pienza: Relics, Ritual and Architecture in the City of a Renaissance Pope", in: *Foundation, Dedication and Consecration in Early Modern Europe*, ed. M. Delbeke and M. Schraven, Leiden 2012, pp. 99–128.

11 See D. del Grande's article "Pienza: La città di Pio" in a digest of studies and materials on the issues of the history of Pienza's architecture and its restoration: *Pio II, la città, le arti: La rifondazione umanistica dell'architettura e del paesaggio*, ed. G. Giorgianni, Siena 2006, pp. 17–34.

Pope, consistently referring to himself in the third person, says: “Pius wished the cathedral to be built by the example of churches that he had admired in Austria, the land of German peoples.”¹² At the same time, the massive pilasters and large vault arches give the visitor an impression of being inside a Romanesque structure rather than a Gothic one. The low, regular-shaped triangular roof and the pillars splitting the façade into three parts and making the cathedral resemble an ancient triumphal arch are to bring, in addition, an image of a classical pagan temple to the viewer’s mind: “The seventy-two-feet-high cathedral façade made of travertine-like stone as glittering as marble has a form similar to that of ancient temples; it is magnificently adorned with pillars, vaults, and semicircular niches that could hold statues.”¹³ The complexity and polysynthetism of Rossellino’s architectural plan can partly be explained by the landscape: the cathedral erected on a cliff seems to be hanging over the valley, so those who conceptualized the building sought to take as much advantage of the location as possible, trying to transform the topographical challenges into unique strengths of the structure.¹⁴ By no means did Piccolomini intend to reproduce fragments of familiar examples of Gothic or ancient architecture. His project is an ambitious (if not unprecedented) combination of features of all the styles known at his time, subordinated to the single idea of representing the builder’s self-image. On the one hand, the cathedral is meant to become a sort of microcosm embodying the whole history of Western European architecture; on the other hand, both the cathedral and the palace are involved in a special type of elaborated relationship with the space they belong to.

The Palazzo Piccolomini and the Cathedral of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, representing secular and religious power, capture precisely the semantics of supremacy in their respective domains not only by their appearance but also by the way they are organized spatially. The palace, which looks strikingly similar to Florentine palaces of those times to a viewer in the street (its façade resembling the Palazzo Rucellai most of all), is bordered by hanging gardens on the side of the valley. While the façade represents ancient times and the windows are a tribute to Gothic architecture, the gardens evoke the distant age of Queen Semiramis, to whom the construction of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon is attributed. The Pope could enjoy the view of the gardens from the palace loggia, which also provided a magnificent view of the whole Val d’Orcia. The

¹² The text of Piccolomini’s “Commentaries” is quoted after the Italian edition: Enea Silvio Piccolomini, *I commentari*, ed. G. Bernetti, vol. 2, Milan 1981, pp. 840–841, IX, 24.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ For example, the choir adjacent to the hall area and bordering the base of the cliff on the outside required devising an intricate form of a rectangular with a trapezoid based on one of its sides (a hexagon obtained by truncating a regular octagon).

valley is dominated by the dark silhouette of Mount Amiata, the “sacred mountain”, as Enea Silvio himself called it.¹⁵ The symbolic meaning of the three planes of landscapes that one was able to observe from the loggia is obvious: the hanging gardens supported by pillars represent nature that has been refined and transformed into a work of art by man; the Val d’Orcia is nature cultivated by man and serving the needs of humans; Mount Amiata is nature untamed, unbowed by human dominion. Piccolomini’s gardens, built around a four-sector regular quadrilateral with a bowl in the middle, enclosed by a high wall and raised above the ground, recall the image of Eden, where man used to live when he had absolute power over nature.

The cathedral was constructed so that the noon shadow cast by its façade on an equinox day is exactly aligned with the travertine-lined boundaries of the square; the church thus assumes the role of a giant sundial. “The façade has three finely refined doors of appropriate size; the middle one is wider than the other two and has an open eye above it, similar to that of a cyclops; above the eye looms the Piccolomini family’s coat of arms with the Keys of Heaven, and above it all there are the Pope’s mitre and the papal triple tiara.”¹⁶ The circle—a round window in the upper part of the façade referred to as the “eye”¹⁷—is echoed by a white tufa circle in the middle of the central regular quadrilateral (which is one of the nine into which Pienza’s square is divided). The two circles of the same size are located at the same distance from the façade-square plane intersection line. The “living” eye of the church is symmetrical to the dead, blind one on the ground. Opposing Christianity, associated with life and vision, to all other religions and philosophies as dead and blind has always been an extremely popular motif in Christian iconography, and the shadow of the cathedral crawling over the square and covering it completely from time to time is another symbol of false knowledge and death—the architect and his contractor bear in mind the antithesis of light and shadow, pagan (subterranean heathen sanctuary) and Christian (cathedral, erected by the Pope). Del Grande points out that the figure ‘9’, which is at the basis of the square’s spatial organization, has been associated with death in both pagan and Christian contexts.¹⁸ The travertine-covered cathedral, the source and home of light and truth, is opposed to the ground from which it rises, the square, which is on behalf of its geometry a symbol of everything that is opposed to light and truth. Within the urban context,

¹⁵ The mountain is situated 47 km from Pienza and is more than 1,500 m high.

¹⁶ Piccolomini, *Comm.*, IX, 24.

¹⁷ Piccolomini uses the term *occhio*, which was regularly used at his time to denote a small round window in the upper part of a façade.

¹⁸ Del Grande, “Pienza”, pp. 24–25.

the cathedral and the square thus realize the same idea of contrast that determines the relationship between the palace with its hanging gardens and Mount Amiata outside the town¹⁹: the gardens are anthropogenic images of spiritual power and beauty dominating the chthonic ones of earth and death. However, the latter are not allowed to reign supreme even underground, as the crypt—the lower part of the cathedral—occupies the area that had allegedly been home to an Etruscan sanctuary in most ancient times.

An orientation of pure space that does not inhibit the viewer's gaze toward a distant visual object does not only organize the optics of inanimate objects. The Pope's throne inside the cathedral is situated opposite the central choir chapel so that on a sunny day the pontiff is shaded by the silhouette of Mount Amiata, which is well discernible through the chapel window. It cannot go unnoticed by the reader of the *Commentarii* that the author attaches an extremely high importance to the visual effects that accentuate the central, dominant, and exclusive status of the protagonist. Piccolomini creates a literary correlate to composition in perspectivist art by elaborating his fabulous ekphrases of the buildings to be constructed in Pienza, which must have saved trouble for Pinturicchio, who was commissioned to paint frescoes based on plots from Pope Pius's life for the so-called Piccolomini Library in the cathedral of Siena almost half a century after the Pope died. If in the ekphrases of the popular feasts the figure of the Pope becomes the point of convergence of the geometrical lines, structuring the perspectivist image, in the episodes of the *Commentarii*, dealing with miracles centering around the figure of Pius, the epiphany of the Pontiff becomes the culmination of history; time becomes a manifestation of Providence—it provides a transcendent justification of Piccolomini's exclusive position.

Piccolomini was not the first to utilize this strategy of self-positioning, which was based on methods of Christian typological exegesis.²⁰ It existed prior to as well as during the Pope's lifetime, but nobody had ever reached such a virtuosity and versatility in dealing with it. The strategy as such can be traced back to the tendency of the fourteenth and fifteenth-century authors to comment on and evaluate their own achievements against the background of the literary tradition they belonged to. Dante, for instance, presents his appearance on the literary stage as the coming of the "fullness of time", prefigured by earlier poets. He

¹⁹ On the Pope's hydraulic utopias concerning the Val d'Orcia and the Monte Amiata, see F. Pellegrini, *L'utopia idraulica di Pio II nell'immaginario antico e moderno della Val d'Orcia*, San Quirico d'Orcia 2006.

²⁰ Cf. the classical work on typology as an exegetical method, including its differences from allegory: H. de Lubac, "Typologie et Allégorisme", in: *Recherches des sciences religieuses*, vol. 34, 1947, pp. 180–226.

thematizes this self-conceptualization in the *Vita Nova*, in the *Convivio*, and in the *Divine Comedy*.²¹ Petrarch stylizes himself in a similar way: in his *Africa*, he has Scipio and Ennius prophesy a “son of the Etruscan land”, named Franciscus, who will become the glorious restorer of Latin poetry after centuries of decline.²² When Lorenzo Medici, Pius II’s junior contemporary, writes “A Commentary on my Sonnets” (“Comento de’ miei sonetti”), he obviously suggests that he should be perceived as a new Dante: the plot, shaped by the sequence of poems and interpolated fragments of comments, is very similar to that of the *Vita Nova*.²³ In a letter to Lorenzo, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola traces the prehistory of the Magnifico’s poetic genius: his arrival in the world of poetry is considered as a culmination of the whole history of literary production in *volgare*.²⁴ The head of the first Neapolitan Academy, Gioviano Pontano (1429–1503), exposes in the final part of his eclogue “Lepidina”²⁵ a version of the history of literature culminating in his own literary activity. This lengthy—more than 800 lines long—eclogue deals with the festivities on the occasion of the (mythical) wedding of the nymph Parthenope and the river god Sebes. A huge number of deities—protectors of a variety of Neapolitan villages, forests, fields, and rivers—take part in the procession. The eclogue ends, rather than with a praise of Parthenope and Sebes, with the apotheosis of Pontano himself. The nymph Antiniana, the patroness of a *villa urbana* in Antignano which belonged to the poet, predicts in her song the coming of Virgil and of Pontano—the latter appearing on Neapolitan soil some centuries later than the descendants of Parthenope and Sebes. In the song, both poets are said to have supernatural creative abilities; and the nymph even predicts the rituals of the Academia Pontaniana established by the author. Another of Piccolomini’s junior contemporaries, Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499), stated that Cosimo de’ Medici the Elder decided, when Ficino was only six years old, to make of him a son of the Medici family and

21 O. Holmes, *Assembling the Lyric Self: Authorship from Troubadour Song to Italian Poetry Book*, London and Minneapolis, MN 1999, p. 123.

22 Petrarch, *Africa*, I, vv. 237–245. On the typological way of thinking of Petrarch in its relation to Virgil and Dante, see G. Regn and B. Huss, “Petrarch’s Rome: The History of the *Africa* and the Renaissance Project”, in: *MLN*, vol. 124, 2009, pp. 86–102.

23 On Lorenzo’s commentary, see M. Shapiro, “Poetry and Politics in the *Comento* of Lorenzo de’ Medici”, in: *Renaissance Quarterly*, vol. 26, 1973, pp. 444–453; on the chronological inversion of the biographic events, effectuated by Lorenzo in order to reach a closer similarity to the plot of the *Vita Nova*, see Ch. Poncet, “The Judgment of Lorenzo”, in: *Bruniana & Campanelliana*, vol. 14, 2008, pp. 541–561; esp. on Simonetta Cattaneo and Lucretia Donati, see pp. 545–547.

24 The date of Pico’s letter is 15 July 1484; see Lorenzo de’ Medici, *Selected Writings*, ed. C. Salvadori, intr. L. Bartoli, Dublin 1992, p. 192.

25 *Poeti latini del Quattrocento*, ed. F. Arnaldi, L. Gualdo Rosa, and L. Monti Saba, Milan and Naples 1964, pp. 316ff.

predicted that one day he would be a physician and a Platonic philosopher.²⁶ Ficino, indeed, conceived a full-fledged historiosophic design according to which he, together with the Florentine rulers from the Medici family, was the one in whom the history of the pagan world and Christianity found its completion.

In his *De christiana religione* (Ital. 1474, Lat. 1476), Ficino divides the history of mankind into the periods of inspiration (*inspiratio*) and interpretation (*interpretatio*). In the periods of inspiration, the Creator granted knowledge of the divine law and mysteries only to the chosen, to whom Moses and other Hebrew prophets as well as Plato and further pagan theologians belonged. Christ's incarnation marks the beginning of the era of interpretation: the disciples and, subsequently, all Christian believers obtain the key to the full truth of divine Revelation, hidden in the law and the prophecies. The era of interpretation reaches its peak in the figure of Dionysius the Areopagite (Ficino identifies the author of the *Corpus Areopagiticum* with Paul's disciple from Athens). After Dionysius, religious wisdom suffers a new decline, but is restored by the *platonici*, who have read the writings of St. Paul, St. John, Hierotheos, and Dionysius, and reaches perfection once again in the works of Origen and St. Augustine. After that, there were again "Dark Ages" that lasted until the times of Ficino, who, backed by Cosimo and Piero Medici, dedicated himself to Platonic philosophy and was ordained a priest not least thanks to the support of Lorenzo de' Medici. The coming of Ficino, who combined in his person a priest and a philosopher, brings to an end the thousand-year (!) silence of God.

Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, Ficino—all of them exploit the same myth in order to mark the position they lay claim to in the pantheon of culture: they present their arrival as an epiphany that is predicted in a number of prophecies and prefigured in a variety of prototypes, which would never have obtained the plenitude of the meaning implied in them had the latter men not been born. Typology allows for the endowment of each particular period with the attribute of the "plenitude of time", of being more perfect in comparison to the epoch of the founding of the tradition; the "plenitude of time" comes only in the present and involves all who are fortunate enough to witness the coming of the messianic hero. The series of events which come to pass between the founding of the tradition and the epiphany of the hero are provided with a vector. And the significance of the personality of the hero grows to such an extent that this personality becomes commensurable with all that took place during the lifetime of this tradition. Thus the author's

²⁶ On Ficino's biography and legacy, see R. Marcel, *Marsile Ficin (1443–1499)*, Paris 1958; *Marsilio Ficino e il ritorno di Platone: Studi e documenti*, ed. G. C. Garfagnini, 2 vols., Florence 1986; on Ficino's Platonism in its connection with his historiosophy, cf. J. Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, Leiden, Cologne, and New York, NY 1990.

narration about himself finds a resource of auto-justification in the exploitation of the entire tradition including its inherent antinomies.

In order to illustrate this rhetorical strategy with respect to Piccolomini, I will present two examples from the *Commentarii* dealing with the taming of the elements—majestic deeds comparable not merely to those of the Christian saints, but rather to those of the Old Testament prophets: As the Pope was on a visit to Perugia, a severe storm churned up the waters of Lake Trasimeno for many days—sailing was unthinkable.²⁷ However, as soon as the pontiff finally decides to approach the lake, the gale suddenly drops to a calm, “as if obeying a divine sign”, and by the moment the Pope reaches one of the islands located in the lake, the elements “resemble a tamed beast”. Crossing the still waters, the protagonist enjoys the wonderful sounds of flutes greeting him from the island. The fishermen he passes by will have an almost miraculously abundant catch of fish later that day. The Pope spends a night and the following morning on the island, the lake remaining still all the time; but as soon as his boat touches mainland, the storm rages again. Those who observed the Pope sailing and landing are left bewildered—everyone knows that navigation on Trasimeno Lake is impossible in winter.

The cycle of scenes describing the events related to the translation of Andrew the Apostle’s relics to Rome is probably one of the most spectacular examples of self-representation created by Piccolomini, not least due to its aesthetic coherence.²⁸ It seems that the author was eager to perform in every genre he was skilled in: refined descriptions of preparation for the event flow smoothly into an elaborate epideictic speech pronounced by the Pope in front of vast crowds of people of all ranks and classes; this is followed by Sapphic stanzas from a hymn composed by Agapito Rustici-Cenci, Archbishop of Ancona, and an elegant impromptu Latin poem created by the Pope himself, while the description of the clergy’s procession is reminiscent of Homer’s Catalogue of Ships. Piccolomini describes the blooming meadows that line the road from Ostia to the Gates of Rome; subsequently, there is the description of the procession carrying the Honorable Head of Apostle Andrew from the harbor to the city. Amidst a vast field of flowers, the pontiff orders the erection of a wooden tribune with an altar in the middle. This had to be spacious and durable enough to hold all the clergy present, and high enough to allow anyone in the meadows to view every detail of the ceremony. Accompanied by nearly all the members of the senate, by numerous clerics, legates, princes, and other grand

²⁷ Piccolomini, *Comm.*, pp. 162–164, II, 19.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 708–731, VIII, 2; the following quotes are from the same section. See also the above-mentioned article by Maskarinec, “Mobilizing Sanctity”.

people of Rome, and followed by an endless crowd, the Pope exits the Porta Flaminia holding a palm branch—the day before was, indeed, the *Domenica delle Palme*. Palm branches are also held by all the clerics. The crowds cover the whole area as far as the eye can see, leaving no single section of meadow or vineyard visible. Having reached the field with the wooden tribune, the Pope orders the prelates to dismount their horses and walk the distance of a bow-shot by foot before mounting the tribune together with him. Pius admires the majestic scene greeting him: the white brightness of luxurious clerical robes looks even more splendid against the background of lush greenery. “As if spell-bound, the gazes were anchored on the miraculous order, the dignified and glorious procession of many priests divided in pairs, with palm branches in their hands, walking slowly beside the pontiff and praying together with him, surrounded by a massive crowd resembling a halo.”

The tribune can be mounted by two sets of steps, one on the side of the city and the other on the side of the harbor. According to the ceremonial procedure, the Pope and his retinue ascend the former, while the latter one is reserved for Basilios Bessarion carrying the sacred head. After the keys and seals have been presented to the public, the urn containing the relics is opened in complete silence. Bessarion “passes the head to the Pontiff, crying with excitement”. Before accepting the relics, the Pope kneels before the altar “and then speaks, his pale face down, his eyes filled with tears, his voice trembling”—next comes a two-page speech, which makes everyone weep. According to Piccolomini, there was no one left on the tribune, whether layman or cleric, who did not cry or pray for the Apostle’s protection and pound his or her chest. Some even recorded the Pope’s speech verbatim immediately after returning home and then showed the manuscript to the Pope. The ceremony ends with a Sapphic hymn, and the whole giant procession sets off to Rome. The sacred head is left overnight in a suburban church. The next day, according to Pius’s plan, it should cross the City and arrive at St. Peter’s Basilica. Suddenly, the weather changes, and the bright sun that lit the festive event the day before gives way to a heavy rain. Crowds of pilgrims, countless ambassadors, the clergy and folks of Rome are all in dismay and sorrow, for the procession which began so solemnly, as it seems, cannot be completed appropriately on account of the elements. The Pope is likewise aggrieved. He begins to pray, and a miracle happens: shortly after dawn, the clouds are blown away by the wind and the sun shines brighter than ever.

The list of miracles performed by the Pope is nearly endless: supernatural phenomena occur in the protagonist’s life every now and then. Most often, they are witnessed by the public. As they are mainly described from the viewer’s perspective, they do not appear as something actually *performed* by the main actor of the scenario. Presented as eyewitness testimony, a description of a miracle

looks more credible. However, feigned humility, which is in fact an ill-disguised craving for public recognition, is not the only reason to recount one's own deeds in the third person. As a writer, Piccolomini needs a spectator whose admiring or jealous gaze would follow Pius, the protagonist of his narration. This is one of the constants in his writing style: third-party observers shape the Pope's image, making it integral. It does not even matter who the observer is—a peasant watching the papal retinue pass by, an unknown cleric attending a papal mass, or a noble seignior obliged to carry the gestatorial chair. Piccolomini's audience is indiscriminate with regard to social rank, the spectator only being required to have feelings strong enough to match the protagonist's grandeur and perfection. It could be jubilation at seeing the Pope, anger, envy, etc. Yet, admiration is what the overwhelming majority of spectators feel. The reactions of people as background actors, be it to the Pope's arrival, his departure, the festivities organized by Pius himself or in his honor, never remain unaddressed by the author. They vary from ordinary expressions of joy and awe worthy of the occasion to emotional extremes such as tears, crying, and pounding one's chest. Justifying the strong reactions of people observing the self-presentation of Pope Pius, the pontiff—whose self-description in the third person may be inspired by Julius Caesar—indulges in self-laudations that are far from being moderate.

It should be noted that Piccolomini uses this method of self-positioning not only in his literary works, but in his political activity as well. After his election to the papacy, he “confirmed” his first name—Aeneas—with the epithet of “Pius”, which had been that of the legendary ancestor of the founders of Rome and of the whole *orbis romanus*.²⁹ The scale of Piccolomini's ambitions becomes clear when he—at first sight—modestly summons his flock “to reject Aeneas and to accept Pius”. The pattern of third-person autobiography and the very title of *Commentarii* refer to Caesar, the founder of imperial Rome.³⁰ In this way, the Pope explicitly indicates his predecessors on the Roman throne, mythical as well as authentic ones. In the *Commentarii*, he does not refrain from praising his own integrity (*integritas*), strength of mind (*vis animi*), perseverance (*animus invictus*), large-heartedness (*magnanimitas*), piety (*pietas*), prudence (*prudentia*), invincible constancy (*invicta constantia*), unlimited benevolence (*imminuta benignitas*), justice (*iustitia*), humility (*clementia*), and determination (*firma deliberatio*). Ekphrasis, which has its origin in classical antiquity, together with medieval Christian hagiography, are the templates

²⁹ Virgil apostrophized the protagonist of his epic as *pius Aeneas*.

³⁰ The authentic title of the text known as *De bello Gallico* is, indeed, *Commentarii de bello Gallico*.

Piccolomini draws upon alternatively to create his own image. Enea Silvio's intentions as a writer bring these two genres into a complementary relationship: ekphrasis is used to demonstrate the "exterior" perfection of the protagonist, while hagiographic techniques with a generous touch of ancient moralist literature (for the most part classical historical writings) expose his perfect inner qualities. In other words, the exemplary form is filled with equally exemplary content, either pious or heroic.

In order to present the protagonist, i.e. himself, as an agent of Providence, the papal autobiographer has to isolate him aesthetically as much as possible by placing every single event in his life in a transcendental context, raising his image far above ordinary human existence and attributing extremely high spiritual and moral qualities to his character. The pious effort of an exegete trying to understand the design of Providence for his own life is thus merged with a narcissistic desire for self-completion and the sheer obsession with others' opinions. Pius's self-reflective I is only able to perceive himself in forms dependent on others. This dependence on the viewer is embodied spatially in the protagonist's position in the point of convergence of perspectives and verbally in the concentration of epithets indicating superiority and excellence around his own figure, in ekphrastic self-admiration from a third-person perspective, and in the assertion of his life as unique by means of a self-exegesis based on the concept of divine mission.

In the scenes depicting the Pope's triumph, which constitute the semantic axis of imagery in the *Commentarii*, the appearances of the protagonist and the way they are perceived by admiring audiences seem to be perfectly in unison; they are organized according to a phenomenon that could be described as a *predetermined harmony of contemplation*. The other's position turns out to have been utterly and completely predetermined in a unified panoptical perspective: taking no active part in self-affirmation on the outside, the protagonist has already made use of the author's absolute power over the audience and taken possession of their will in advance. Piccolomini transforms the entirely predetermined opinions of others into moments of his own aesthetic self-assertion, thus avoiding any personal responsibility for his self-image: individual others conceal the figure of the Absolute Other, the author of the *Commentarii*, who has become the source of divine will and justification of himself. Transcendental intuition of an unseen deity is thus translated into aesthetic language, providing ultimate descriptive visualization—that is how the aesthetic microcosm of the *Commentarii* (and Piccolomini's life as such) reaches the ontological extremes of faith and reason, leaving nothing but itself on or above the earth.