

Christine Ott

Veils and Naked Words

Girolamo Benivieni's Self-Commentaries

Commentaries on poetry usually aim to make the poetic text more understandable, and sometimes also attempt to fill in the gaps caused by time, culture, and language. But what happens when a poet comments on his own poetry, becoming at once the one who is commented on and the one who comments? The perils of misinterpretation due to the lack of knowledge about the production context are thus reduced to a minimum. Nevertheless, the commenting poet cannot be perfectly identifiable with the poet being commented upon. Often, a relevant time gap exists between the composition of the poem and of the commentary. In this case, the commentator also takes on the role of a recipient of his own work.

There are only a few studies on early modern self-commentary. With her book *Italian Poetic Self-Commentary from Dante to Tommaso Campanella*, which examines six self-commentaries from the 14th to the 17th centuries, Sherry Roush has contributed an important, pioneering study. Roush stresses the fact that self-commentary does not have the primary intention of providing a better understanding of the texts; she claims that, on the contrary, they tend »to subvert the pedagogical intent« of commentary.¹ However, a look at the few known Italian,

1 Sherry Roush, *Hermes' Lyre. Italian Poetic Self-Commentary from Dante to Tommaso Campanella*, Toronto 2002, p. 6. In her study on five self-commentaries to poetic works, Roush stresses the fact that self-commentaries do not necessarily serve a better understanding of the text. Against the background of a problematisation of the »author's intention« the idea that self-commentaries can best reveal the meaning of the text appears as misleading (ibid., p. 7). Instead, Roush claims that a main feature of self-commentaries is their remodelling the original text and their originating »an entirely new poetic vision«. She also claims their tendency »to subvert pedagogical intent« (ibid., p. 6). This does certainly not apply to those religiously motivated authors who want to impede a misreading of their texts. Because of this declared intent, Roush evaluates Benivieni's self-commentary as less successful: »The essence of Dante's and Lorenzo's transformations rests in the dialogue with the Other. By yoking reform to human will (to the intention of the poet/ author) Benivieni, on the other hand, effectively denies the possibility of the Other's power to transform his lyrics« (ibid., p. 113). Roush seems to privilege a somewhat numinous concept of poetry; not in vain does she theorize self-commentary under the sign of Hermes (ibid., p. 160). However, her book contains many precious observations about the concept and the functions of »poetic« self-commentaries. As for Lorenzo's und Benivieni's self-commentaries, see also Bernhard Huss, »Über das Verse-Schreiben im Spannungsfeld

French, and Spanish self-commentaries in the 16th and 17th centuries reveals that a pedagogical and spiritual impetus is quite frequent.²

It is true, as Roush states, that not all authors strive towards an unambiguous text and that they do not necessarily want everybody to understand their poetry, but they use the figurative language of poetry and the related commentary to create a profane equivalent to the Bible. Behind the literal meaning, often seen as problematic from a moral point of view, a deeper, religious or philosophical meaning shall shine through. Thus, it is not only about liberating the ambiguity of poetic language, as Roush often states, or opening up the text for a »divinatory or prophetic-poetic« dimension, or letting an »Other« complete the meaning of the texts.³ On the contrary, some of the authors write their commentaries because they want to restrict dangerous ambivalences. Commentators like Girolamo Benivieni or Gabriel Fiamma subscribe to a »purifying« tendency of commentary that starts way before the Counter-Reformation. Already in his 1525 Commentary to Petrarch's poems, Vellutello criticizes the »lascivious love« inherent to most of the love poems for Laura – a critique that will lead, a few decades later, to numerous religious rewritings of Petrarch's poems.⁴

In this article, I will analyze the self-commentaries by Girolamo Benivieni, a worldly poet from the Medici circle who became a follower of the Dominican preacher Savonarola. His commentary does not necessarily serve the commented text; sometimes the text rather acts as a pretext for commentary. But clearly, the author does not want to put the texts' meanings into the readers' hands; he is,

von literarischem, philosophischem und religiösem Diskurs: der Fall Benivieni«, in: Klaus W. Hempfer (ed.), *Sprachen der Lyrik. Von der Antike zur digitalen Poesie*, Stuttgart 2008, pp. 239-263 and Bernhard Huss, »Dichtung und Philosophie in Lorenzo de' Medicis Comento de' miei sonetti«, in: Bernhard Huss, Patrizia Marzillo, and Thomas Ricklin (eds.), *Paral/Textuelle Verhandlungen zwischen Dichtung und Philosophie in der Frühen Neuzeit*, Berlin 2011, pp. 309-335. Albert Russell Ascoli studies Dante's self-commentaries in the light of his self-authorization strategies (»Auto-Commentary: Dividing Dante«, in: id., *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author*, Cambridge 2008, pp. 175-226). For a very recent survey see also Francesco Venturi, *Self-Commentary in Early Modern European Literature, 1400 – 1700*, Leiden, Boston 2019.

2 A clearly religious and pedagogical intention is manifest in Juan de la Cruz, *Canciones del alma y declaración*, around 1582 – 1585, Gabriel Fiamma, *Rime spirituali del reverendo domino Gabriel Fiamma, canonico regolare lateranense, esposte da lui medesimo*, Venezia 1570, Jean de la Ceppède, *Les Théorèmes sur le sacré mystère de notre redemption*, Toulouse 1613 – 1622. The model of religious commentary is also adopted by the heretical philosopher Giordano Bruno, *De gli eroici furori*, London 1585 (where Bruno comments his own poems and some of the poet Luigi Tansillo), and Tommaso Campanella, *Scelta d'alcune poesie filosofiche di Settimontano Squilla, cavate da' suoi libri detti la Cantica, con esposizione*, Weimar 1622 (where »Settimontano Squilla« serves as the author's pseudonym).

3 Roush (as note 1), p. VIII.

4 *Le volgari opere del Petrarca con la esposizione di Alessandro Vellutello da Lucca*, Venezia 1525.

instead, obsessed by the desire to control his writings. This is also the case of Torquato Tasso's self-commentary of his own love poems of 1591, which will be studied in the following article of this volume (by Philip Stockbrugger), and may indeed be seen as the author's reaction to several unauthorized editions that circulated before.

At the time when Benivieni and Tasso are writing their commentaries, love poetry has a precarious and somewhat contradictory status. In the hierarchy of genres, it occupies the lowest – or, at best, a middle – position. As opposed to dramatic and epic literature, the theorization of lyric poetry proves to be difficult, especially when attempted in an Aristotelian way. While its figurative language encouraged Dante (and, after him, early humanists like Boccaccio and others) to the claim that poets utter the truth under the veil of beautiful fables, and that poetry may contain a hidden, allegorical dimension, many religious thinkers condemned poetry precisely because of its use of rhetoric and its reference to pagan mythology. Of course, in the 91 years that lay between Benivieni's and Tasso's self-commentaries much had changed. Around 1600, religious poetry was more popular than ever and the conflation of the language of the worldly and that of spiritual poetry was (mostly) not seen as a problem. Also, Benivieni's and Tasso's goals are different from the start: while Benivieni is preoccupied by spiritual issues, Tasso's interest lies in validating his literary theories. Nonetheless, the unspoken issue which associates these two different enterprises is the problem of the functions, the status and the possibilities of poetic language. Therefore, studying and comparing the two self-commentaries should bring some new insight about the status of lyrical poetry in the 16th century.

1) Pico and Girolamo

Embedded in the outer wall of the San Marco Church, in Florence, one finds the original stone of the tomb where Girolamo Benivieni, age 89, was buried together with his friend Pico della Mirandola (1463 – 1494), who died very young, at the age of 31. The inscription says:

Girolamo Benivieni put (this tomb) for Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and for himself in the year of the Saviour 1542.

I pray to God, Girolamo, that you may be united in peace with your Pico in heaven as you were on earth, and as your dead body lies now here, together with his bones.

(Hieronymus Benivenius Ioanni Pico Mirandulae et sibi pos. an. Salv. DMD XXXXII. Io priego Dio Girolamo ch'en pace così in ciel sia col tuo Pico

congiunto come'n terra eri. Et come il tuo defunto corpo hor con le sacre ossa hor qui iace.)

Since he had become a follower of the Dominican monk Savonarola, it had been Pico's wish to be buried in San Marco (the home church of the Predecessor), and Benivieni had fulfilled his friend's last wish. As a testimony to the very close relationship between these two intellectuals, who at first were both members of the Medici circle, and later followed the anti-Medici faction and its leader, Savonarola, this tombstone is a sort of key to Benivieni's lifelong struggle with commentary and practices of self-commentary.⁵

But let us start from the beginning. As a young man, Benivieni was renowned for the love poetry he wrote under the patronage of Lorenzo de' Medici.⁶ It was in the Medici circle that he met the young count Pico della Mirandola in the 1480s. In 1486, the two friends prepared a publication of Benivieni's *Canzone dell'amore* with a vernacular commentary written by Pico. In his poem, Benivieni had put into verse the content of Marsilio Ficino's Neoplatonic treatise on love. Benivieni describes the birth of Cupido from Aphrodite in order to explain the functioning of divine love. Pico's commentary, also written in the spirit of Neoplatonism, contains however a few critiques to Ficino's theories. Like Pico's famous philosophical theses, the *Conclusiones*, this text is an audacious attempt to bring together heterogenous and contrasting lines of thought, such as Kabbalah, scholastic theology, and Neoplatonism. As Thorsten Bürklin states, the very form of the commentary gives Pico the option to juxtapose various and contradicting theological and philosophical concepts as well as poetic images, without having to draw conclusions or to take sides in the debate.⁷

For example, in the introduction that precedes the word for word commentary of the poem, Pico juxtaposes Neoplatonic and Christian thought:

Questa prima creatura [i.e. l'anima nostra], da' Platonici e da antiqui filosofi Mercurio Trimegisto e Zoroastre è chiamata ora figliuolo di Dio, ora sapi-

5 For the practice of tombs shared by male friends (a practice that did not necessarily involve a homoerotic relationship), see Alan Bray, »Homosexuality and the Signs of Male Friendship in Elizabethan England«, in: Jonathan Goldberg (ed.), *Queering the Renaissance*, Durham 1994, pp. 40-61.

6 These poems were published in a collection whose print version is no longer available, probably due to Benivieni's efforts to destroy all proves of his former love poetry. A reconstruction of this so-called »Canzoniere laurenziano«, has been published by Roberto Leporatti, who gives also most useful information on Benivieni's remodelings of his former poetry in his different editions (Leporatti, »*Canzone e sonetti* di Girolamo Benivieni fiorentino. Edizione critica«, in: *Interpres* XXVII (2008), pp. 144-298.

7 Thorsten Bürklin, »Einleitung«, in: Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Kommentar zu einem Lied der Liebe*, italienisch-deutsch, trs. and ed. by Thorsten Bürklin, pp. VII-XXXI, here p. XIV.

enzia ora mente, ora ragione divina, il che alcuni interpretano ancora Verbo. Ed abbi ciascuno diligente avvertenzia di non intendere che questo sia quello che da' nostri Teologi è detto figliuolo di Dio, perché noi intendiamo per il figliuolo una medesima essenza con il padre [...] ma debbesi comparare quello che e' Platonici chiamano figliuolo di Dio al primo e più nobile angelo da Dio creato.

The Platonists and the ancient philosophers Hermes Trismegistos and Zoroaster call this first creature sometimes »son of God« sometimes »Wisdom«, sometimes »Mind«, and sometimes »Divine Reason«, which some even interpret as »the word«. But everyone should be careful not to suppose that this word is the same »Word« that our theologians call »the Son of God«. For what we mean by »the Son« is of one and the same essence as the Father [...] whereas what the Platonists call »the son of God« must be identified [orig. text: compared] with the first and noblest angel created by God.⁸

Pico states that the human soul is called the son of God, but also »knowledge« or »mens« by the Neoplatonic philosophers, but that they do not mean the son of God in the Christian sense of the word. It is true that the author places himself with the Christians – »noi intendiamo«, »we understand«. But instead of solving this contradiction by a refutation of the »Platonici«, he proposes a comparison, »comparare«. Moreover, the present stand-off from Neoplatonic thought is most probably due to a posthumous alteration of Pico's manuscript. In fact, the original text has been lost and the present commentary is the product of a quite intriguing process of revision and repentance – a process in which Benivieni's commenting activity plays a major role.⁹ While the young philosopher had gotten into trouble with the Inquisition for publishing the *Conclusiones* (in the same year as he had written his commentary), he experienced a religious conversion a few years later, around 1493. He, as well as Benivieni, became followers of Savonarola, who banished the Medici from Florence. In 1494 Pico died under somewhat mysterious circumstances.¹⁰ Girolamo Benivieni continued to be an active supporter of Savonarola's spiritual reform and remained his follower well after Savonarola's execution in 1498.

At the same time, his worldly poetry continued to be very popular, and was circulated even in manuscript form. The poet's aim was to stop this unauthorized circulation by composing a new edition, in a commented form – the 1500

⁸ Pico della Mirandola, *Commentary on a Canzone of Benivieni*, trs. by Sears Jayne, New York 1984, p. 81.

⁹ For the complex publication history, see below.

¹⁰ Pico died »con sospetto di veleno« (Caterina Re, *Girolamo Benivieni Fiorentino. Cenni sulla vita e sulla opera*, Città di Castello 1906, p. 97).

commented edition *Commento sopra a più sue canzone et sonetti dello amore et della bellezza divina*.¹¹

In his prefatory letter to Giovanfrancesco Pico della Mirandola, nephew of the more famous Giovanni, Benivieni states that it had been the latter who encouraged him to publish a new version of his poems, this time in a commented edition, and at the same time coherent with the teachings of the Catholic Church.¹² After many doubts about the publication, he claims that he now wants to stop any misinterpretation of his poems by the so-called »huomini animali« (fol. Ir), that is, those people who know only love through lust. Through a »più libera interpretation« (ibid.), he wants to show what kind of love he was truly referring to in his work. To justify his enterprise, he invokes Dante (fol. IIIIr), whose influence on Benivieni's self-commentary is remarkable and in the same time obvious: it was Dante who was the first to provide a philosophical commentary to his own love poems in his *Vita nuova* and *Convivio*, and Benivieni mentions the *Convivio* explicitly (fol. IIIIr).

In describing his undertaking, Benivieni makes very frequent use of the metaphoric and metatextual opposition of »nakedness« vs. »ornament« or »dress«. He starts by saying that it seemed risky to him to present his poems to the public in a »naked« form, without any interpretation, because the concepts presented in the verses, although pure, could be easily distorted by the aforementioned »beastly« men:

e dubitando che se così nudi, cioè senza alcuna esposizione in pubblico si mostrassino, che i loro quantunque per sé puri e inviolabili concetti non fussero da alcuni huomini animali etiam in contrari sensi distorti (fol. Ir).

And doubting that, if they would show themselves naked and without any exposition in public, their meanings (even if pure and inviolable in themselves) would be distorted to opposite meanings by some beastly men.

11 *Commento sopra a più sue canzone et sonetti dello amore et della bellezza divina*, Firenze per S. Antonio Tubini & Lorenzo di Francesco Venetiano & Andrea Ghyr. Da Pistoia, 1500. I quote the PDF-version provided by the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München, <http://daten.digital-sammlungen.de/-db/0006/bsb00065623/images/> (which lacks the pages CXI-CXX – probably omitted in this print because they contain a description of Savonarola's »bruciamenti delle vanità«, see Huss, »Über das Verse-Schreiben« [as note 1], p. 254), but I have also consulted the copy of the Biblioteca Riccardiana, Florence, which is complete (Ed. R. 134). The English translations from Benivieni's works are mine.

12 For Benivieni's religiosity, see Olga Zorzi Pugliese, »Girolamo Benivieni: umanista riformatore (dalla corrispondenza inedita)«, in: *La Bibliofilia*, 72, 3 (1970), pp. 253-288, who represents him as »membro notevole del movimento laico di riforma religiosa« (p. 253).

But Benivieni presents at the same time a completely opposite image: Even if his poems were without blame (which would be impossible because they are, after all, a human product), they still would be imperfect, because the poetic verse could not fully express the »simplicità della nostra christiana professione« (the simplicity of our Christian confession), which ideally should show itself in its perfect and pure nudity:

sono versi, & consequentemente che in loro è qualche cosa, in ella quale non così schiettamente apparisce epsa nuda & per se sempre pura & inviolabile simplicità de la nostra christiana professione (fol. IIrv).

They are verses, and therefore there is something in them, in which the naked & intrinsically pure & inviolable simplicity of our Christian faith does not appear so clearly.

Nudity appears here not as a flaw, but rather as an ideal. But Benivieni's verses, for their inherent quality of being poetic language, and thus rhetorically embellished, could not attain this ideal without a commentary attached to them. The commentary, thus, while it covers the nudity of poetry, shall uncover the pure nakedness of Christian truth.

In order to fully understand these propositions, it is necessary to show to which theoretical positions Benivieni is referring. As already stated, Dante is the direct model for his self-commentary, but the presence of another authority is also very perceptible: Savonarola and his condemnation of poetry in the treatise *Apologeticus*.

2) Veils and Naked Words – Commentary as Un/Veiling

In using the concept of naked verses that have to be ›dressed up‹ by a commentary, Benivieni points to a typical metatextual metaphor. Dante had already used a similar metaphor in his *Vita nuova* and *Convivio*: in these two works, written in Italian vernacular, the author had commented his own poetry, thereby elevating himself to an authoritative status. In the *Vita nuova*, Dante not only recounts the story of his spiritual love for Beatrice but also of his poetic apprenticeship: Self-commentary in this case equals self-authorization as a poet. The unfinished *Convivio*, on the other hand, had the aim of divulging knowledge through the commentary to some of Dante's philosophical canzoni.

In the *Vita nuova*, Dante concedes that a vernacular poet may, in the same way as the Latin poets, use the cloth of rhetorical ornamentation; he must, however, be able to unveil the ›true sense‹ of his words:

E acciò che non ne pigli alcuna baldanza persona grossa, dico che né li poete parlavano così senza ragione, né quelli che rimano deono parlare così non avendo alcuno ragionamento in loro di quello che dicono; però che grande vergogna sarebbe a colui che rimasse cose sotto veste di figura o colore rettorico, e poscia, domandato, non sapesse denudare le sue parole da cotal vesta, in guisa che avessero verace intendimento.¹³

And so that no crude person may become overbold because of this, I say that the [classical] poets did not speak this way without reason, and that the vernacular rhymers should not speak thus if they cannot give a rational account of what they say. For it would be a great shame to one who, rhyming of matters under the cloak of figurative language or rhetorical colours, did not when asked know how to strip his words of said cloak so that they could be truly understood.¹⁴

Dante thus demands that the poet, besides his competence in rhetoric, should also be able to give his poems a consistent ›rational‹ dimension, a ›deeper‹ meaning that can be expressed in plain prose. In doing this, he qualifies poetry with a hitherto unknown philosophical and spiritual dignity. Like the Sacred Scriptures, poetry possesses an allegorical meaning that commentary must bring to light.

Commentary appears thus as an unveiling of the naked truth of poetry – an idea that Dante perhaps adumbrates in the first oneiric scene in the *Vita nuova*, where the poet sees his beloved, Beatrice, as a half-naked body, »nuda, salvo che involta mi pareva in uno drappo sanguigno leggermente« (naked, except that she seemed to me to be covered lightly with a crimson cloth).¹⁵

Dante also uses the dress-body-opposition in order to express a metalinguistic position. In the *Convivio* he assigns to the commentary the function of revealing the beauty of the »volgare« (the vernacular). This beauty cannot be fully visible because of poetry's embellishments, just as the natural beauty of a woman cannot be visible when she is overdressed:

Ché per questo comento la grande bontade del volgare di sì [si vedrà]; però che si vedrà la sua vertù, sì come per esso altissimi e novissimi concetti convenevolmente, sufficientemente e acconciamente, quasi come per esso latino, manifestare, [la quale non si potea bene manifestare] ne le cose rimate, per

13 Dante Alighieri, *Vita nuova*, Garzanti ¹⁴1999, chap. 25.10, p. 50.

14 Translation: Ascoli (as note 1), p. 197.

15 Dante Alighieri, *Vita nuova* (as note 13), p. 4, my translation. The promise of a naked truth will not go further than this striptease, because the sense of this scene is never revealed to the reader. This is noted, for example, by Robert Pogue Harrison, *The Body of Beatrice*, Baltimore 1988, p. 62. A similar playful analogy between philosophical truth and the most intimate, naked parts of a woman is to be found in Dante's poem *Tre donne*.

le accidentali adornezze che quivi sono connesse, cioè la rima e lo ri[ti]mo e lo numero regolato; sì come non si può bene manifestare la bellezza d'una donna, quando li adornamenti de l'azzimare e de le vestimenta la fanno più ammirare che essa medesima. Onde chi vuole ben giudicare d'una donna, guardi quella quando solo sua naturale bellezza si sta con lei, da tutto accidentale adornamento discompagnata; sì come sarà questo comento, nel quale si vedrà l'agevolezza delle sue sillabe, le proprietadi de le sue co[st]ruzioni e le soave orazione che di lui si fanno; le quali chi bene agguarderà, vedrà essere piene di dolcissima e d'amabilissima bellezza (Dante, *Convivio*, Trattato primo X, 12-13, pp. 43-44).¹⁶

For through this commentary people will be led to recognize the great goodness of the Italian vernacular: They will see the power it has as it expresses the most sublime and new ideas aptly, fully and attractively, almost as in Latin. This power cannot be displayed well in rhymed works, because of the incidental embellishments, such as rhyme and rhythm and regulated meter, just as the beauty of a woman cannot be displayed well when the embellishments of her finery and her clothes, rather than she herself, draws people's admiration. So whoever wishes best to appreciate a woman should see her when she is graced by her natural beauty, unadorned by any incidental embellishment. Such is how this commentary will appear, in which will be seen the smoothness of the syllables of this language, the propriety of its constructions and the sweet orations fashioned from it, which will be recognized, by anyone who pays them careful attention, to be full of the sweetest and loveliest beauty.¹⁷

The passage is somewhat contradictory. At first, Dante seems to say that the »volgare« can express philosophical contents as well as Latin, and it seems that the »natural beauty« of the »woman« should mean the beauty of plain vernacular prose. But in the end he focuses rather on the »beauty« than on the lucidity of the vernacular.

In fact, Dante's position on the relationship of Latin and vernacular, as well as his conception of vernacular poetry, is quite unstable and contradictory. As Albert Russel Ascoli and others have recently argued, the unstableness of his positions in the *Convivio* is certainly (also) due to the precarious definitory status of poetry itself: on the one hand, it may be conceptualized by means of its use of meter and rhetoric (with the risk of being perceived as unsubstantial

¹⁶ All quotes from the *Convivio* are based on Dante Alighieri, *Convivio*, ed. Franca Brambilla Ageno, Firenze 1995.

¹⁷ Translation: Ascoli (as note 1), p. 211, slightly changed. Ascoli quotes another edition of the *Convivio* and omits »almost as in Latin«.

»bellezza«); on the other hand, its claim to contain allegorical truth has to rely on the topos of divine inspiration.¹⁸

The humanist theories on poetry will respond to this legitimation issue by continuing what Dante had already begun to conceptualize: The rhetorical language of poetry is not just beautiful, but a beautiful veil that contains truth. By these means, it is also possible to subsume the references to pagan mythology under the idea of *integumentum*. At Benivieni's time, the *integumentum* theory is forcefully defended by the Neoplatonist Cristoforo Landino. But in the climate of the religious crisis, the old accusations against poetry become sharper. In his *Contra poetas*, Ermolao Barbaro compares poetry to »a woman who, although covered by ornaments, is inwardly dishonest and indecent«.¹⁹ Under the influence of Savonarola, Pico juxtaposes »naked« philosophy with rhetorical playfulness and lasciviousness.²⁰ But the most inexorable adversary of poetry is, of course, Savonarola himself. In his treatise *Apologeticus de rationae poeticae artis* (1491 – 1494)²¹, he defines poetry as a purely human art and puts it at the lowest level of the sciences.²²

Its goal should be to prompt men to act virtuously by means of examples (*similitudo*), using simple language and aimed at simple people.²³ The verse form is not an essential part of poetry, and in opposition to the Sacred Scriptures, poetic metaphors do not have a hidden, spiritual meaning.²⁴ Finally, Savonarola concedes that the writings of humanist poets about virtue and religion may – in some rare cases – trigger ruefulness in their readers – but as for himself, he has

18 The inspirational definition is precarious because it inevitably raises the question of which poets may claim to »have« divine inspiration, and of who is authorized to interpret the poem (the author himself or others) etc.

19 Concetta Carestia Greenfield, *Humanist and Scholastic Poetics, 1250 – 1500*, Lewisburg 1981, p. 205.

20 Pico della Mirandola, »Lettera a Ermolao Barbaro«, in: Eugenio Garin (ed.), *Prosatori latini del Quattrocento*, Milano, Napoli 1952, pp. 805–823, here p. 818. See also Greenfield (as note 19), p. 241.

21 Girolamo Savonarola, *Apologeticus de rationae poeticae artis*, in: id., *Scritti filosofici*, ed. Giancarlo Garfagnini, Eugenio Garin, Vol. I, Roma 1982, pp. 209–272.

22 »Cum enim ars poetica sit infima scientiarum [...]« (ibid., p. 271).

23 »Finis autem poetae est inducere homines ad aliquid virtuosum per aliquam decentem representationem, ad modum, quo fit homini abominatio alicuius cibi, si representetur ei sub similitudine alicuius abominabilis.« (ibid., p. 248).

24 »Nulla ergo scientia praeter Sacram Scripturam proprie et vere sensum habet spirituales, quia sensus metaphorarum poeticarum est literalis tantum, sicut et sensus parabolarum evangeliorum nostrorum.« (ibid., p. 262).

never encountered a book of this sort.²⁵ Savonarola's condemnation of poetry, even of religious poetry, appears to be relentless and even radical.²⁶

From this perspective, it becomes clear why Benivieni utters his persisting doubts about his publication. No poetry, even the one that avoids all references to worldly or pagan contents, may claim to have a hidden spiritual meaning. Therefore, a commentary with the implicit claim of an allegorical dimension inherent to poetry that needs to be clarified is incompatible with Savonarola's definition of poetry. Very aware of this problem, Benivieni repeatedly insists on the futility of his pursuit, especially in the final part of his commentary. Here, the commentator finally renounces any effort to comment about his own verses any further. Instead, he wishes to present concepts in their purest form, without any rhetorical embellishment, in order to represent his nobler pursuits:

Considerando io che gli extrinseci ornamenti & male forse inumbrate spoglie non tanto di questa quanto di qualunque altra Canzona, o Sonetto della opera precedente hariano per ventura in qualche modo potuto ritenere l'occhio di alcuno in ella sola superficie delle loro *nude parole*: et consequentemente dubitando che da questo non fussi data occasione ad altri di qualche sinistra interpretatione, mi piacque in el fine di questa ultima Canzona convertirmi non secondo che suole esser di consuetudine ad epsa Canzone, perche questo non serviva a tutto el precedente discorso: ma a Amore, pregandolo che per rimedio di questo lui o deponga & si spogli gli extrinseci & in ciascuna parte della opera presente inumbrati suoi vestimenti: & cosi *nudo & fuori d'ogni ombra* dimostri la intrinseca pura & da noi prima intesa verità de' suoi altri-menti candidissimi concepti (fol. CXXXVIIIv, my emphasis).

With the thought, that the exterior ornaments and the perhaps badly shaped exterior traits not as much of this particular *canzone*, but of any other *canzone*, or sonnet of this collection of poems could have drawn the eye of the reader only to the surface of their naked words, and with the consequent doubt, that those exteriorities could engender a malicious interpretation, I preferred, at the end of this song, not to speak directly to the *canzone*, as it is usual, but rather to Amor, to beseech him, to show firstly the intended truth of his otherwise candid concepts, naked and without any shadow, by undressing all his exterior and ambiguous layers.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 271.

²⁶ Girardi is probably right in stating that the fact that Savonarola wrote some religious poems himself does not make him more moderate in his judgement, since he considered his own verses no more than occasional compositions (Enzo Noé Girardi, «L'Apologetico» del Savonarola e il problema di una poesia Cristiana» (1952), in: id., *Letteratura come bellezza. Studi sulla Letteratura italiana del Rinascimento*, Roma 1991, pp. 45-67, here p. 65).

Here, »nude parole« means a superficial level of signification that could lead to misunderstanding the »true« sense of the poem. The only possible consequence is to abandon any verbal attempt to utter spiritual issues and to let divine love manifest itself in a – this time again positively evaluated – nudity, free from all rhetorical vanity.²⁷

3) The Commentary's Structure – a Problematic Conversion History

Bernhard Huss concludes his essay on Benivieni by stating that he is absolutely in line with Savonarola's harsh evaluation of poetry, and this is certainly true. However, Benivieni does not totally purify his commentary from his former Neoplatonic credo. Therefore, a closer look at his strategies in composing his commentary seems necessary.

Despite his persisting doubts, Benivieni comments on 101 of his own poems over about 300 pages. A closer look at the structure and the rhetorical gesture of his enterprise makes clear that this text is intended to tell and to perform the history of a redemption. His main strategy consists in recycling and rewriting. Benivieni writes about 45 new poems for the 1500 edition,²⁸ but he also recycles his former love poetry by adapting parts of the texts to his new spiritual orientation and leaving several other parts completely unchanged. In this revision process, he makes use of the already existing convergence of Christian spirituality and Neoplatonism in the tradition of Italian poetry for a reinterpretation in which love for a woman becomes love towards God. Sometimes, it suffices to exchange »donna« with »signore« (meaning the Christian God) in order to obtain an acceptable text. In his revision process, Benivieni has to remodel his former poems, written alternatively in a Petrarchist or in a Neoplatonist fashion – both unacceptable in the light of Savonarola's conception of poetry.²⁹

But much more surprisingly, Benivieni also recycles Pico's commentary (while his own *Canzone* about love is never quoted). For example, the introduction to the second part of his auto-commentary quotes Pico word by word (and also mentions him)³⁰, and he explicitly refers to his commentary on several occasions.

27 This »linguistic« dilemma is paralleled by a spiritual one: especially in the last part, Benivieni insists on the assumption that only the final departure of the soul from the body (that is, not the temporary departure that is possible in a mystical rapture, but the effective death of the body) allows the soul to fully unite with God.

28 Leporatti (as note 6), p. 191.

29 Huss, »Über das Verse-Schreiben« (as note 1) gives detailed examples about the functioning of this revision process.

30 Benivieni quotes from Pico's commentary to the first verse of his *canzone* (Benivieni, *Commento*, fol. XLIIv-XLIIIr). Apart from a few changes in the word order (and, at one point,

The second strategy consists in creating a sort of contemporary hagiography which act as testimony for the ›miracles‹ happening in a spiritually renewed Florence. Among the new poems Benivieni writes for his commentary, the most interesting are certainly those he devotes to this goal in the third part (fol. CX-CXX). In sonnet XXXII (folio CXrv) the poet describes the vision a friend of his had ›in the year of our salvation 1476‹: He saw a young Florentine woman ›all encircled by the purest light‹ (›circundata tutta di purissima luce‹). He then makes comments about the *Canzonas* he wrote for the religious happenings organized by Savonarola and gives a detailed description of the ›bruciamento delle vanità‹ of 1497 (cf. 110). In opposition to this pro-Savonarola direction, Benivieni leaves out or modifies poems dedicated to the Medici's praise.³¹

A third strategy consists in structuring: Benivieni divides his commentary into three parts. The first part, as he announces in his introduction, shows how the love for God's creation may lead the soul to the love of God. The second part performs a sort of leap to sin of the soul, which is vanquished by mortal temptation. The third part tells about the final triumph of the love for God. However, when one compares the poems of these three parts, the differences between them seem quite imperceptible. For instance, no poem of the second part portrays the speaker in a state of sinful lasciviousness: Rather, the speaker is shown in an albeit sinful, but nevertheless already repentant attitude. However, precisely this conflict between an attachment to the body and to the senses and Christian repentance can already be seen in the first part (for example *Prima parte*, sonetto III, fol. XIIr) – and it continues into the third part. Consequently, there seems to be no real change, no psychological development in the attitude of the speaker, and this is, as it happens, a typical feature of Petrarca's *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*.³²

Furthermore, while many poems lend themselves easily to a spiritual interpretation, in others their original signification as worldly love poems remains quite manifest: The speaker talks about the beautiful eyes of his lady, or even imagines the taste of her lips (interpreted by the commentary as a kiss between

›ruina‹ instead of ›cade‹), his text is identical with the text Eugenio Garin established in his critical edition of Pico's *Commento* (Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Kommentar zu einem Lied der Liebe* [as note 7], pp. 154-156). In the quoted passage, Pico describes the hierarchal order of all creatures and insists on the importance for the human soul being guided by divine love.

31 The most blatant example: the first verse of the introductory poem *Sotto un bel Lauro a l'ombra*, where ›Lauro‹ clearly is meant to glorify Lorenzo de' Medici (Leporatti [as note 6], p. 214) becomes *Sopra un bel prato a l'ombra* in the Commentary version (fol. XIVv).

32 The difference is of course that the Petrarchan speaker exchanges Laura for a divine beloved (the mother of God) only in the very last poem, while Benivieni's speaker puts divine love over worldly love from the beginning.

the God-loving soul and God).³³ A particularly interesting case is sonnet V in Part 3 (fol. LXXVIIv):

Era già benché in van contenta fora
di questo ingrato carcere mortale
l'alma, & dietro al disio battendo l'ale
si tornava ad quel ben che l'inamora.

Quando, ah lasso, udi dir che volto ancora
non era in tutto el suo corso fatale
là donde al cor, perché pugnar non vale
col cielo, tornossi: ivi si affligge & plora.

Dolce gli era el partir: sol l'alma Amore
pietoso rintenea: che ben sentiva
meco in parte perir tuo flebil core.

Che s'egli è che in due corpi una alma viva
da Amor nutriti, advien che se l'un more
l'altro in gran parte di sua vita priva.

The first quartet describes how the speaker's soul happily leaves the prison of the mortal body in order to reach God. But fatally and to its great dismay, the soul is forced to return into the body (second quartet). As the first tercet explains, it was love that held the soul back: feeling that its departure would also cause the death of his beloved's heart, it refrained from leaving definitively. The final tercet then explicitly refers to the Neoplatonic theory of the exchange of hearts, or, as it is stated here, the union of souls living simultaneously in two bodies. The death of the speaker would therefore also cause (at least »in gran parte«) the death of his beloved.

While Benivieni also uses the Neoplatonic motif of the exchange of hearts in other poems, this case is particular because of the identity of the beloved »you« (»tuo flebil cuore«, V. 11). It refers not, as usual, to God. While in all other commentaries the beloved »donna« or »signor« is interpreted as God, divine love, etc., here we learn that »you« refers to Pico della Mirandola. While Benivieni had modified some other poems originally dedicated to Pico in order to expunge any allusion to a human addressee, here he allows himself to let the

33 For example, the sonnets *Quando el primo ineffabil mio ben quella, Se'l foco che da e belli occhi ognhora* in Part I (sonnet XII, fol. XXIIIv, sonnet XXII, fol. XL1r); or the sonnets *Dal volto piove di madonna amore, Chi potessi ben gli occhi mirar fiso* in Part III, (sonnet XXIII, fol. LXXXVIIIr; sonnet XXXIII, fol. CXXIIr).

mortal win over the immortal affection.³⁴ Since the commentary alludes to a severe illness of the poet, the original occasion of the text may have been such a malady. However, the text focuses less on the trouble this deadly danger may have caused in Pico than on the conflict of the poet, who appears torn between his desire to abandon his mortal life, and his affection for his friend, who would be condemned to die with him. Curiously, the real circumstances are inverted, since in real life it is Benivieni who is left behind. But, on the other hand, the sense of loss and death appears as mutual.

The function of this poem, which appears in a series focused on the relationship between body and soul, and the soul's conflict between its love to the body and the love to God, seems to precisely illustrate the poet's still lasting attachment to earthly things. But the commentary does not in any way condemn this attachment. Despite all his efforts to purify his poetry, Benivieni remains attached to his former Neoplatonic ›identity‹; his commentary cannot be in line with Savonarola's claims.

4) Benivieni's Last Self-Commentary

His final refusal of all poetry notwithstanding, Benivieni continues to publish. In 1519, he edits a new edition of selected works (without commentary). This edition contains unpublished poetry composed in his youth, such as several amicable verses addressed to the Medici family, religious poetry and – for the first time – his Neoplatonic *Canzone d'amore* together with Pico's commentary.³⁵ We learn from Benivieni's own foreword that he wished for this latter poem not to be published, but that he was forced to do so because his fellow publisher, Biagio Buonaccorsi, had already entrusted a copy to the editor (fol. 4r). As shown by Eugenio Garin, this edition is not identical with Pico's original (lost) version. In this edition of Pico's commentary all objections to Ficino are missing – possibly because Buonaccorsi was a relative of Ficino, who thus had some interest in

34 For example, the sonnet *S'i potessi explicare l'alto concetto* originally celebrates Pico's superior intellect and claims the poet's incapacity of adequately expressing his feelings for him (Leporatti [as note 6], p. 238); in the new version it is about the impossibility of expressing God's perfection (Part 3, sonnet XXVII, fol. CIIrv).

35 Girolamo Benivieni, *Opere*, Firenze, Giunti 1519. This version does not contain any poem from the 1500 edition, so Benivieni deems this former edition as still valid (Leporatti (as note 6), p. 193). The fact that Benivieni now also publishes his youthful poetry results, according to Leporatti (ibid.), from a »più indulgente atteggiamento documentario«.

suppressing any negative commentary.³⁶ In the preface to this edition, Benivieni briefly explains the story behind the edition of this commentary. Pico and Benivieni himself had had doubts at an early stage if it was morally just to talk about Love, the divine kind in particular, as Platonists, not Christians («come Platonico, & non come christiano», fol. 3v). This is the reason why they distanced themselves from the publication, in order to verify that by correcting the work, they could turn it from Platonist to Christian («sospendere la publicatione», «per qualche reformatione potissi di platonica diventare Christiana», fol. 3v-4r). After Pico's death, Benivieni had wished to abandon this work, along with some others, but as it had become available to publishers, without his personal effort, he could not impede its publication (fol. 4r). Benivieni nevertheless asks the reader to be guided by the authority of Jesus Christ, the Saints and the theologians, in particular Thomas Aquinas, rather than by those of a «huomo gentile» (i. e. the pagan Plato, 4v) in those parts of the text that seem to diverge from Christian Doctrine.

The reader should excuse Benivieni and Pico, because their mistake exists merely in the fact that they represented the opinions of others (Platonists), without thereby condoning or approving of them. The title itself should furthermore explain that in this case only the opinion of Platonists is intended. Nonetheless, the reading of this text could help any Plato scholar to better understand the «remote significations» («remoti sensi») of the great ancient philosopher (fol. 4v). The reader should thus understand Pico's commentary and correct it where it deviates from Christian doctrine. The insistence with which Benivieni tries to control the reception process of his (and Pico's) work shows how vital this is for him. From a letter he wrote to a friend, we understand clearly that what is important to him is nothing less than for his and Pico's souls to be saved.³⁷

36 For the complex publication history of Pico's *Commento* and his own attempt to reconstruct the original version in a critical edition see Eugenio Garin, «Introduzione», in: Pico della Mirandola, *De hominis dignitate. Heptaplus. De ente et uno e scritti vari*, a cura di Eugenio Garin, Firenze 1942, pp. 3-59, especially pp. 12-15.

37 Benivieni is worried about his and Pico's souls. In a letter to his friend Lorenzo Strozzi, he mentions Pico's opinion on Petrarch's regret about his poetic activity. He recalls that Pico, in a conversation about Petrarch's sonnets, had declared his conviction that the poet, if he had not, while living, had deep regret and had not made that penance, which should be adequate for that kind of sin, he now would be weeping about it, because never again could he be purged from it in eternity («E' mi ricorda, diletto mio Lorenzo, che ragionando, come si fa, uno giorno con la felice memoria del conte Giovanni de La Mirandola, de' sonetti del Petrarca, che mi disse che credeva assolutamente che, se vivendo non aveva avuto quello dispiacere, e fattane quella penitenza che si ricerca a purgare una tale colpa, colpa come esso per li effetti che gli avevano operati in lui gravissima, che la piangessi ora, per non poterla ma' più in eterno purgare», Caterina Re [as note 10], p. 323).

It is reasonable to think that, in his older years, this spiritual anxiety engendered the desire to compose a further self-commentary. The manuscript, which today can be found at the Florentine Biblioteca Riccardiana (Ricc. 2811), was composed by Benivieni himself, and his nephew Lorenzo. It is not clear to what extent Lorenzo made his own editorial decisions, and the date of the manuscript, perhaps composed over a quite long period (1525 – 1540), is also uncertain. This manuscript has only partly been published.³⁸ It is undeniable that this self-commentary is identical for the most part to the one published in 1500: it includes the same poems and their same respective commentaries. Why then did the author compose this remake?

In his introductory note, Lorenzo Benivieni gives a very pragmatic answer. He had tried to somewhat shorten the commentary, thereby sparing the reader from boredom. On the other hand, the commentary was necessary, since the poems are clothed with a veil of rhetorical figures, which are difficult to understand without some explanation:

Con ciò sia che le canzoni et i sonetti nel presente volume compresi fussino così dallo autore composti, et sotto tali velami di poetiche figure tessuti, che male senza i loro giusti commenti intendere pienamente si possono, et che la expositione copiosa di quelli possa nella mente di chi legge generare qualche tedio, ho più volte meco medesimo pensato se fussi opera di qualche utilità il restringere et abbreviare in qualche parte epsi commenti.

As the canzoni and the sonnets contained in this book were composed by the author in such a way, and veiled by entangled poetic figures, so that it is difficult to understand them fully without their pertinent comments, and as the rich explanations of them may cause some boredom in the mind of the readers, I oftentimes thought it to be a useful endeavour to shorten and abbreviate the commentary in some parts.

A more profound motivation for this remake, anyway, seems to be present in the final part of the manuscript. Here, once again, we find Benivieni's *Canzone* with its Neoplatonic commentary, but thereafter a new, ›Christian Orthodox‹ version of this poem, again with commentary.³⁹ This last version is accompanied by a

³⁸ I want to thank Andrea Baldan, who helped me to decipher and transcribe some portions of this text. For the question of the authorship, Lorenzo's own agenda and the dating, see Sergio Di Benedetto, ›Girolamo Benivieni e la questione della lingua«, in: *ACME* LXIII,1 (2010), pp. 139-156.

³⁹ For a transcription and discussion of this Christian *Canzone* see Sears Jayne, ›Benivieni's Christian Canzone«, in: *Rinascimento* XXIV (1984), pp. 153-179. Jayne states that it is not known when Benivieni wrote this *Canzone* (*ibid.*, p. 158); Leporatti thinks it was in last years of his life (Leporatti [as note 6], p. 147). The title says ›Canzone by Girolamo Benivieni [...]

tortuous ›Apology‹ by Benivieni. Here we can read that Benivieni himself has commented the Christian version, and that both versions are inscribed by the author in a conversion scheme, an operation similar to the one enacted in the 1500 *Commento* to his poems. Consequently, it is made possible for the reader to distinguish the »gold« of Christian love from the »alchemy« of Platonic love:

ho più volte pensato come si potessi [...] recompensare questo mio errore et non mi occorrendo altro migliore modo che scoprire col paragone della verità et scoperto discernere lo oro dello amore christiano dalla alchimia dello amore platonico, di nuovo mi messi a comporre una altra canzone d'epso medesimo amore, ma secondo la traditione de sani/savi/suoi theologi crestiani [...] pensando che per comparatione [...] dell'uno amore a l'altro si potessi assai facilmente discernere la luce dalle tenebre.

I thought several times how I could [...] make up for this error of mine, and not knowing a better way than unveiling with the comparison of truth and distinguishing the gold of Christian love from the alchemy of Platonic love, I wrote once more a poem about this same love, but according to the tradition of the wise Christian theologians [...], thinking that comparing [...] one love to the other one could distinguish very easily the light from the shadow.

In conclusion, we can say that Benivieni uses different concepts of readership and of commentary in his three editions of his work. His 1500 self-commentary first wants to cover the ›naked‹ verses with ›a cloth of commentary‹ in order to prohibit lascivious misreadings. He seems to think about most of his readers as »huomini animali« and supposes that they mostly tend to pervert the true sense of the poems (›perversità di molti«, fol. Ir). But finally, he changes his mind and thinks that the problem lies in the very ambiguity of his verses. Only the naked concepts, not words or verses, can then express the true love for God. In his 1519 version, the reader is asked to read Pico's commentary, correcting it according to the authority of Christian authors (especially Thomas Aquinas); and the reader of the 1540 self-commentary should be able to compare the Platonic and the Christian version of the *Canzone* in order to separate the Catholic truth from the pagan error. So finally, Benivieni addresses knowing readers, who should be able to relativize the author's juvenile poetry, and Pico's commentary thereto. The fact that in his manuscript commentary the author leaves the comparison of both versions to the reader can also be understood as an act of piety towards his friend Pico. To exclude Pico's commentary would be equal to condemning

according to the truth of Christian religion and Catholic faith«: Around 1540, in a Counter-Reformation atmosphere, Benivieni feels urged to clarify that this is not only a Christian, but a Catholic version.

him, but leaving the comparison open to the reader, on the other hand, makes a redemption of the Count's writing possible.

By this modified attitude towards his readership, Benivieni somewhat loosens the control he wanted to exercise in his first self-commentary. However, this does not mean that Benivieni wants to open the texts up for literary polyvalence; it rather means that Benivieni challenges the reader to participate in a redemptive mission. Despite his Savonarolian idea that all poetry, even spiritual verses, implies an enormous risk for the soul because it may lead to hubris and deals with idle rhetoric, Benivieni does not give up the idea of a possible purification of his and Pico's common work.