On the Dignity of *Voluptas*: Valla’s Philosophy of Pleasure

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What is it that sets man apart from beast? If we come across this question in reading one of the fifteenth-century humanists, the answer that we almost automatically expect to be given is *reason*—unless we happen to be reading the unconventional Lorenzo Valla, for whom that distinction was grounded in the senses, which are refined in man, but primitive in beast. The difference between the human and the animal kingdoms appears to be more of degree than type, since an animal can use its senses only for survival whereas a man can also employ his in the pursuit of *voluptas*, guided by no utilitarian goal other than the pleasurable enrichment of his being. Among all the animals, man is the one born to seek pleasure, from simple self-gratification on earth to the ultimate bliss which is union with God in heaven.

Valla first focused on the notion of pleasure in 1427, when he was only twenty years old, and immediately began to explore it in a philosophical dialogue entitled *De voluptate*, which he completed in 1431. But possessed as he was—and as few others are—by a powerful demon of self-clarification, Valla recast that dialogue another three times in the course of his life, calling it *De vero falsoque bono* in 1433, *De vero bono* between 1444 and 1449, and *De vero falsoque bono* once again in the remaining eight years of his life. After the first redaction he added new passages, excised or revised others, redefined the setting, and reassigned the leading roles to different men, all in the effort to bring into brighter light the increasing conceptual plenitude that the word *voluptas* denoted for him in his intellectual development. For though this term disappears from the title of the dialogue after the first redaction, the work remained a
theory of voluptas, progressively understood not only as a general anthropological characteristic but also as the ontological foundation and orientation of man. The pursuit of greater voluptas brings to the enrichment of being by making possible the emergence of being’s true essence, which is a core of voluptas in latency. Remove the concept of voluptas from the idea of man and you are left with an empty shell suspended in a directionless universe.

Maristella Lorch’s *A Defense of Life: Lorenzo Valla’s Theory of Pleasure* is a thorough analysis of this principle and a guided philosophical tour of the many ancillary concepts that Valla brought into his field of focus in the four redactions of his text. It comes at the height of a scholarly career largely devoted to the exploration of Valla’s thought and to its dissemination in the English-speaking world. It is a book that represents the net result of several decades of research on Valla’s philosophy of pleasure, which, since Lorch wrote her first article on the topic forty-five years ago (Lorch 1942), has increasingly claimed her attention, inducing her to prepare a masterful critical edition of the definitive redaction of the *De vero falsoque bono* (1970) which she later translated into English with Kent Hieatt (1977), all the while vindicating Valla’s philosophical importance in independent articles and conference presentations on both sides of the Atlantic. *A Defense of Life* is a critical achievement of the highest calibre, for the contribution that it makes to our understanding of Valla’s theory of pleasure and for the effectiveness of the method that it illustrates.

Readers familiar with Professor Lorch’s other contributions to Val- lian scholarship have no difficulty recognizing that the teleology of this book is rooted in concerns of long standing for her, namely the precise text(s) of Valla’s dialogue, its philosophical significance, and the conceptual paradigm of humanism that can best allow that significance to come into clarity. With respect to textual criticism, it is profitable to regard *A Defense of Life* as a topical commentary on the critical edition of 1970. This does not mean that the book is not a self-contained unit incapable of being read on its own. It means rather that its conception and methodology rely heavily on the variorum structure of that edition, which offers a critical text of the definitive version of the dialogue together with the philological apparatus necessary to retrieve the text of its individual redactions and
editions, that is to say together with all that one needs to assess its literary and philosophical configuration at each stage of development and transmission.

The issue of the conditioning role played by authorial revisions in the preparation of modern critical texts and in their interpretation has frequently been at the centre of debate among literary textual critics, for whom the acceptance or rejection of authorial excisions and additions results in general from the reader's arbitrary decision to privilege one redaction—usually the earliest or the latest—on the basis of perceived artistic merit (Pizer, 144–45). But the question has not enjoyed the same kind of attention among students of philosophical works, who frequently find it necessary to explore at great length the etymological, grammatical, and rhetorical connotations of key terms in the final redaction of a work, but in general do not feel compelled to examine the textual gestation of these terms. Even in the field of Vico scholarship—which offers perhaps the most spectacular Italian case of variorum philosophical development—we find that the variants of the intermediary versions of the Scienza nuova are given scant attention. The premise is clear throughout: only the definitive statement of a philosophy is important because it represents the author's most mature, correct, systematic, and economical expression of his thought. The validity of this premise—which stems from an exclusively rationalist paradigm of philosophy, utterly insensitive to the issue of textual growth and incapable of discerning significant biographical correlates in the development of a philosophical configuration of ideas—is increasingly being threatened, as the link between rhetoric and philosophy is made clearer together with the principle that the study of the history of philosophy is not a disinterested exercise in erudition but the examination of insights into thinking, some of which can be analogically enlisted in the pursuit of an adequate understanding of reality hic et nunc. Even the philosophy of science is becoming increasingly aware of the need to study not only the conclusions of a man—Einstein, for example—but also the "story of his thinking" (Wertheimer, 213). Maristella Lorch's A Defense of Life is—in the network of expectations constituted by such awareness—methodologically exemplary. The philosophy of the dialogue, as textualised in the final version of the De vero falsoque bono, is atomised into its chief conceptual elements, each of
which is then traced in its textual—and hence intellectual—history, from its first tentative formulation in the *De voluptate* through the additions, excisions and corrections of its later stages. The net result is that the understanding of Valla that it proposes is at once systematic, in that it determines the significance of each idea by examining its relation to the conceptual framework of the *De vero falsoque bono*, and genetic, in that it seeks to establish and explain the nature of that significance by examining its earlier stages of development.

Indispensable in all cases with significant variants, this method is especially fruitful in the analysis of the third book of the *De vero falsoque bono*. Philologically, this is the most interesting part of the dialogue, since it was subjected to greater revision than the other two books. The question of whether Valla altered or merely clarified his thesis in going from one redaction to another can be answered best by looking at the variants of this book in chronological sequence. Lorch does this and concludes that the revisions strengthen but do not alter the course of Valla’s thinking, which is already expressed *in toto* in the first redaction, albeit in an elementary form. It is true that the *De voluptate* leaves some questions unanswered. For one thing, the proem to the third book suggests that the dialogue should have a fourfold rather than a threefold structure—and this suggestion is not meant in a figurative way, as an oblique reference to the fact that the rational and the fictional arguments of the third book are conceptually distinct, but in a literal way, as a direct reference to a structure possessing four books rather than three. Lorch advances the hypothesis that a hitherto untraced version of the dialogue had four books, perhaps separating the third book into two precisely at the change in style or argumentation. This is clearly a matter that deserves to be followed up. Another difficulty is that in the *De voluptate*, and to some extent even in the *De vero falsoque bono* of 1433, Valla pursues the ideal of *breviatus* with undue rigour, especially in light of his later condemnation of extreme concision in his *Antidotum* against Poggio Bracciolini. But Lorch demonstrates that such problems do not reveal contradictions between the first and final versions, arguing instead that the textual history of the third book shows how the development of Valla’s thinking is ultimately a unidirectional movement towards greater entelechy.

Book III is also the most interesting from a rhetorical point of
view because it represents the clearest illustration of Valla’s original use of the genre that he chose for his work. Lorch is very sensitive to this aspect of the *De vero falsoque bono* in its entirety, and throughout *A Defense of Life* she frequently invites the reader to muse on the rhetorical skill and literary significance of the work. But it is in her analysis of the third book that she deals with the question in the most direct and systematic manner. For in this book the issue of the canonical use of the structural ingredients of the humanistic dialogue comes naturally to the fore. The chief of these structural elements is the landscape, usually a *locus amoenus*, in which the conversation takes place. In general, in the humanisitic dialogue the beautiful setting has a framing function. It is meant to create a space conducive to conversation in the relaxed manner required by clear philosophical thinking. It is a pleasance in whose seclusion the mind naturally delights in interacting with other minds for the purpose of a collective intellectual gratification. But in the *De vero falsoque bono*, in which pleasure is the topic of conversation as the one true good, the garden becomes part of the thing on which the interlocutors exercise their minds. Hence the description of paradise (which is “garden” in Greek) that closes the Christian argument in support of the thesis that only in heaven, when the soul is united with God, is the experience of pleasure possible in its totality. The fictional description gives rise in the interlocutors to a sense of pleasure which becomes in turn the means of an insight into the nature of divine pleasure by making it possible for them to intuit prior to their death the reality of what they may experience when they return to their maker in the *locus voluptatis* of paradise. The medium of understanding is part of the message understood. If in Dante’s expression of his own concept of the highest good, “ché il bene, come s’intende, / così accende amore, e tanto maggio / quanto piú bontade in sé comprende” (*Par. XXVI*, 28–30), we could rhetorically force the verses to serve a Vallian function by simply understanding the highest good as the *divina res* of pleasure and *amore* as a foretaste of it, we would have a perfect epigraph for Valla’s Christian oration. A fundamental inference that can be drawn from Lorch’s analysis of the *fictio* in the third book is that for Valla poetic writing is far superior to syllogistic discourse, since, in the cognitive process, the latter leads the mind to knowledge by restraining its movement to
the logical range of the initial premise, whereas the former presents
the mind with many hermeneutical possibilities while inducing it to
take the right metaphorical leap to the intuition of new ideas. The
humanistic philosophisation of poetic language is to a large extent
an invitation to the openness and responsibility of creative thinking.

It is clear from this that the third book is also philosophically the
most interesting one, for here Valla’s Christian persona, rather than
accepting the expected role of adjudicator with respect to the stoic
and Epicurean orations in the first two books, makes his own case for
a superior Christian understanding of the concept of pleasure. The
fulcrum that balances the entire network of ideas in the book is the
principle—which is still of great relevance to the theory of proof—
that the demonstration of a thesis presupposes an act of faith or belief
in the validity of the logic of proof. This being given, the problem
for the orator is how to construct his discourse so that it can generate
its own authority and persuade its listeners that it is a valid avenue
to truth. Lorch examines the question in great detail, focusing on
all key words and turns of phrase, and appraising Valla’s definitive
view in the light of its variants, examined in correlation with ideas
found in contemporaneous works. She stresses Valla’s originality in
rejecting appeals to any authority that lies outside one’s discourse—
whether that appeal is made by the scholastics or the humanists—and
in suggesting that the process to which the listeners (or readers) give
their assent is essentially the rhetorical process that leads to a well-
constructed and self-contained discourse. The variants confirm that
in the years between the De voluptate and the De vero falsoque bono
Valla sought to develop his thinking in an increasingly “linguistic”
manner. Valla’s Christian orator uses the philologist’s chief instru-
ment, emendatio, to establish discursive authority, while striving to
attain the rhetorical goal of persuasio, principally by means of Ci-
ceronian inductive argumentation (cf. De inventione I, 31, 51) on
the basis of carefully chosen examples; and in doing so, he keeps
an eye on brevitas, while sufficiently indulging in measured copia
to dispell the potential obscurity of what remains unspoken (as in
the De voluptate), all in the awareness that it is an illusion to think
that truth can be grasped by reason without the mediation of elo-
quentia. The fact that language is the only point of contact between
the self and alterity implies that it is the thinker’s only point of ac-
cess to the nature of things. Furthermore, because the rex of divine pleasure is not within the reach of rational discourse—which would have the impossible task of deriving it from principles of an inferior order—we must have recourse to poetic language. Through and in poetic language—especially the poetic language of the vates, which is infused with primordial religiousness—we discover its essence by direct intuition.

The Heideggerian ring of this statement will surprise only readers who feel insufficiently at home with the notion of humanism in which Lorch’s reading of Valla is couched. It is not by accident that she published her book in the prestigious Humanistische Bibliothek of Fink Verlag codirected by Eckhard Kessler and Ernesto Grassi, the distinguished first editor of Heidegger’s Letter on Humanism and, until his retirement, director of the Institut fur Geistesgeschichte des Humanismus in Munich. Nor is it insignificant that Lorch begins her acknowledgements with the statement that the writing of A Defense of Life was directly inspired by Grassi. Thereafter Grassi’s name almost totally disappears from the book, because the book is an original study of Valla and not an application of Grassi’s theories to Valla, but his philosophical vindication of the humanists’ concern with the nature of language and of their postulation of rhetoric as an alternative to traditional philosophy is discernible throughout as a silent orientative and paradigmatic presence. Grassi’s work has long been admired by Lorch, who in 1982 invited him to Columbia to give a series of lectures on Heidegger and the humanist tradition, lectures which now constitute one of Grassi’s most important books in the field. And admiration for his work is in general growing, especially in North America, where he has already issued two monographs on his fusion of Heideggerian ideas with the tenets of that “Latin” culture that Heidegger so underestimated and where he has been offered—with increasing frequency—hospitality, in distinguished journals and collections of essays.

In the past fifteen years or so, paradigms for the philosophical consideration of humanistic rhetoric in general and that of Valla in particular have gained increasing acceptance, in proportion to the ability of scholarship to loose itself from the Kristellerian notion that to regard the humanists as philosophers is to disregard their historical self-understanding. Certainly Valla would not include himself
among the philosophers ("semper mendaces, male bestie, ventres pigri," De vero falsoque bono III, viii, 4), but this does not entitle us to do the same thing, since our idea of the discipline, aware as it is of what Richard Rorty calls the ubiquity of language, includes the kind of alternative auspicated by Valla, who, in the preface to the Dialectica, describes himself as a lover of wisdom (sophia) in its integrity. The legitimacy of fruitfully regarding his conception of language and rhetoric as an alternative to the then dominant form of philosophy, that is to say the legitimacy of studying Valla from a perspective interested in rhetoric as philosophy rather than in rhetoric and philosophy (Vasoli, Seigel), was broached by Camporeale and pursued by Gerl in the early seventies, and has recently been accepted even by Trinkaus, who had early in his career peremptorily dismissed it (Trinkaus 1948: 149; 1983: 216). Now that critical attitude is so widely accepted that it no longer needs to be defended. Accounts of humanistic rhetoric cast in self-conscious Kristellerian paradigms—such as those recently offered by Concetta Greenfield (1981) and Michael Mooney (1984)—are the exception rather than the rule. The real issue is rather the intrinsic theoretical soundness of the philosophical perspectives assumed and the hermeneutical implications that these bring to the texts in the form of explicit associations with modern philosophy.

In A Defense of Life Lorch candidly states that it was Grassi’s philosophy that gave direction to her research (4), and in a recent article on Valla’s reception of Virgil, which is a longer treatment of a question also contemplated in the book, she observes that the first part of the title of Grassi’s Rhetoric as Philosophy: The Humanist Tradition is an exact description of Valla’s view of rhetoric (Lorch 1984: 36). Now Grassi’s several formulations of the foundational capacity of metaphorical language and consequently of the philosophical dignity of rhetoric are not all equally invulnerable to radical criticism and have not all gone unchallenged. Already in 1952 Grassi was taken to task by no less daunting a representative of rationalism than Karl Popper, who found his ideas on humanism and his reading of Coluccio Salutati’s De nobilitate legum et medicinae utterly unclear (Popper, 377–84). But, unshaken by such opposition, Grassi has continued to clarify and to disseminate his thought with increasing cogency, so much so that the prediction that he will exert
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considerable influence on the future study of Renaissance humanism is not hazardous in the least. In choosing to ground her perspective in *Rhetoric as Philosophy* Lorch has selected one of Grassi’s most mature and clearest statements of his position and has contributed to the domestication of that paradigm in North American scholarship. The influence of this paradigm is bound to be salutary in future research, not so much if modern philosophy is mechanically applied to or compared with the views of the humanists—though this exercise by itself might fruitfully link the study of Renaissance philosophy with the problematics of modern thought—but if contemporary philosophy is allowed to inspire, as in the case at hand, a close rereading of the writings of the humanists in the awareness that the time has come for an integral reclamation of their thought in a contemporary philosophy of man.

The modernity of Valla’s views that emerges from *A Defense of Life* points unambiguously in that direction. Therefore, if, in reading that Valla regards language as “the best disclosure of reality” (12) we are reminded of Heidegger’s theory of *Lichtung*; and if, in reading that, for Valla, the philosopher—that is to say, the speculative philosopher of rational *Geist* rather than the oratorical philosopher of integral *Leben*—is a *latrunculus* who has seized and surreptitiously uses the instruments of the orator while fraudolently claiming that his discourse is in possession of an avenue to truth denied to the orator’s speech, we recall Rorty’s reduction of philosophy to another literary genre; if, in reading these and other passages in *A Defense of Life*, we automatically think of some of the central problems of contemporary philosophy and wonder at how Valla can speak to the concerns of our age, we can be sure that Valla has not been forcibly assimilated to the present, but that the present, having come to know the inner vacuity of rationalism and hence the absurdity of its claim to exclusive epistemological dignity, shows a natural desire to recover its humanist tradition and to identify with it in analogy.

As a philologist Lorch is careful not to let her discourse soar beyond the historical circumscription of the text, but careful readers can retrieve nonetheless the modernity of her interpretation from within the textual commentary itself. That in her reading of Valla there is an encounter between the horizon of expectations that defines the philosophical climate of our day and the horizon of expectations projected
by Valla’s dialogue is implicit in her argument for a philosophical valuation of rhetoric, in her references to Grassi, and in the language that she uses. Besides, we know from general hermeneutics and from the theory of reception that such an encounter is inevitable in the interpretation of historically distant texts. The difference between Lorch and Grassi is that Grassi views the encounter from the present (see especially Grassi 1984, 132), as a philosopher driven to seek in humanist texts a philological conception of philosophy by the failure of the metaphysical tradition to deliver the truth of Being to which it claimed exclusive access, whereas Lorch views the encounter from the past, as a philologist anchored to those texts but impelled by their epistemological self-understanding to reach beyond their specificity to a general philosophical validation of philology. We might say that Grassi begins with concepts of res and discovers—with Heidegger, the humanists, and Vico—that it is the verba that found them and lead back to them, while Lorch examines the humanist conception of verba only to find out that the res to which they are an avenue may well possess that epistemological value that the humanists claim for them.

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