The importance of dialogue as a literary genre for the Renaissance is clear to anyone with even a limited knowledge of the literature of the period. Despite, however, the massive output in the genre by Renaissance writers, the debate surrounding the form appears as a mere footnote in the history of literary criticism when compared to the theoretical importance given to other Renaissance literary forms such as the epic and drama.¹ The list of Renaissance writers who concerned themselves directly with the theory of dialogue is notoriously brief — Carlo Sigionio, Sperone Speroni, Lodovico Castelvetro, Torquato Tasso.² This list parallels the near total absence of any theoretical consideration of the form by ancient writers. Indeed, for the ancients the loci classici on dialogue as a literary form are pretty much limited to Book Three of Plato’s Republic (III, 394), and, as we shall see, to the opening pages of Aristotle’s Poetics.³

It is puzzling, however, to find only a limited number of extended discussions of dialogue at a time in the literary history of the medieval and modern worlds when it was probably most popular — the Renaissance. Although the Cinquecento debate on dialogue does not at first glance appear to be the breeding ground for serious philosophical discussion when compared to the debate on the epic, the theorists of dialogue nonetheless raise philosophical, social, and political questions of significant value in their discussions surrounding the form. If Speroni’s Apologia del dialogo “attempts to deal with the cultural politics of the genre” (Cox 70), Torquato Tasso’s Discorso dell’arte del dialogo, a response to Castelvetro’s condemnation of the form, raises, as recent scholarship has shown,⁴ thoughtful philosophical questions in its own right. Indeed, Tasso’s seemingly thin theoretical treatment of dialogue in his Discorso on the dialogical art is much more than simply a response to Lodovico Castelvetro’s equally brief treatment of the genre in his Poetica d’Aristotele vulgarizzata e sposta. The Castelvetro-Tasso metadiscourse on the legitimacy of dialogue both as a literary genre and as a valid form of philosophical enquiry implicates the fundamental philosophical problem of the relationship between form and content, or, in humanist terms, verba and res.⁵

Castelvetro’s position on dialogue is, to say the least, negative: questioning both its status as a literary art as well as its claim to represent truth in a philo-
sophically valid way, Castelvetro wishes both to banish dialogue from the realm of human discourse and to separate philosophical enquiry from the "form" of dialogical writing. Castelvetro’s views on dialogue thus raise interesting questions about the nature of truth and its expression, about the relationship between any truth-content and the form of its utterance. For Tasso, on the other hand, the theoretical legitimacy of dialogue implies the union of form and content, verba and res: no truth-content can be understood apart from the form of its utterance. Indeed, the form of dialogue reflects for Tasso the fundamentally dialectical nature of all human knowledge, of all first principles, and of all enquiry after truth. Dialogue thus has a valid gnoseological function insofar as it is tied to the very "shape" of any true philosophical enquiry. The purpose of this essay, then, is to analyse Tasso’s Discorso as a response to Castelvetro and to point out the theoretical strategies employed by the author of the Jerusalem Delivered in trying to save the union of verba and res.

In order to understand the nature of Castelvetro’s attack on dialogue, we must turn to the opening pages of Aristotle’s Poetics. Aristotle begins his treatise on poetry by first dividing the mimetic or imitative arts into various branches according to the several “media of representation,” such as colour (painting), shape (sculpture and architecture), and the more general category “voice.” Those arts which employ a form of “voice” or sound as their medium of representation are in turn further subdivided: the use of rhythm alone gives dance, while the flute and lyre use a combination of rhythm and music. Aristotle wishes, however, to separate those arts which use music and dance, or a combination of the two, from arts that are strictly literary insofar as they use language alone as their medium of representation. It is at this point that Aristotle raises the famous question of the name that is to be applied to a whole category of art, including the Socratic dialogues, that uses language alone:

But the art which employs words either in bare prose or in metres, either in one kind of metre or combining several, happens up to the present day to have no name. For we can find no common term to apply to the mimes of Sophron and Xenarchus and to the Socratic dialogues: nor again supposing a poet were to make his representation in iambics or elegiacs or any other such metre [emphasis added]. (1447b8-10; Fyfe translation)

For Aristotle, moreover, poets use language artistically only insofar as they “make imitations” (Dorsch translation, 32) and not insofar as they use verse. Thus mimesis and not the medium of representation — verse — is the category which distinguishes the various poetic arts from other kinds of discourse, e.g. medical or scientific. Yet the questionable status of the Socratic dialogues leaves open the following question: is dialogue itself mimetic in the poetic sense and thus fully literary, or is it rather to be categorized as another form of
scientific, non-mimetic writing? Aristotle thus leaves dialogue caught somewhere between poetry and truth, art and philosophy.

It is at this critical point in Aristotle’s analysis that Lodovico Castelvetro, in the few pages he dedicates in his *Poetica d’Aristotele vulgarizzata e sposta* to the problem of dialogue, makes his attack on the form. Castelvetro’s strategy involves first of all the division of dialogue into three sub-genres – rappresentativo (mimetic), istorico or narrativo (diegetic or narrative), and mescolato (a mixture of the two previous forms) – based upon the manner of representation. From there, Castelvetro makes two general criticisms of the form as a whole, followed by a series of individual objections against each dialogical sub-form. Of interest to us here are the theoretical implications of Castelvetro’s two general criticisms.

In his first general criticism, Castelvetro argues that dialogue fails as a literary genre insofar as it presumes to treat a subject matter “che non è popolesco, nè atto ad essere inteso da uno commune cittadino il quale non sia assottigliato negli studi delle scienze e delle arti” (36). If “il palco e la maniera rappresentativa” were devised or “discovered” (“trovato”) only in order to delight “[l]a moltitudine rozza” (37), then dialogue’s desire to appropriate the outer forms of an art meant only as a diversion for a rude public is a serious contradiction. Jon R. Snyder is certainly correct when he points out that the basis of Castelvetro’s attack on dialogue is essentially rhetorical: the “moltitudine rozza” is no doubt for Castelvetro “the privileged measure of all things in dramatic/mimetic dialogue” (Snyder 141). Yet Snyder does not give sufficient weight to the gnoseological problems Castelvetro implicitly raises in his attack on dialogue. If, as Castelvetro argues, drama is an art form suited only to a rude public capable of understanding nothing more than “gli avvenimenti fortunosi del mondo” (*Poetica d’Aristotele*, 37), then its outer structure can enclose nothing more than the representation of a wholly contingent materia. Thus, not only do poetic forms treat subjects that are wholly contingent and hence fall somehow short of the “truth,” but poetic forms themselves are nothing more than window dressing. The only real truth – necessary truth – is to be found in some sort of pure discourse divorced from all form; Castelvetro’s attack on dialogue is thus an attempt to separate the matter from the form, the res from the verba, of all human discourse.

Castelvetro’s second general criticism of dialogue reaffirms the radical division between res and verba, content and form, truth and poetry, established by the first criticism:

L’altro difetto, che è o può essere commune a tutte e tre le maniere [Castelvetro’s second general criticism of dialogue], s’è che i predetti ragionamenti sono tessuti in prosa, la qual prosa non si conviene a’ ragionamenti di soggetto rassomigliativo e trovato dallo ‘ngeo dello scrittore e che in verità non sia mai stato tenuto da quelle persone che
By “fixing” verse to an imaginary materia or subject matter, Castelvetro once again condemns all poetic discourse to a lower gnoseological order. The language of poetry can treat only that which is in some way “less true” than the materia or subject matter of prose. Dialogue thus contradicts itself insofar as it wishes to use the language of truth – prose – to represent that which is contingent or imaginary. Yet the contradictory nature of dialogue contains a significant theoretical implication: if the materia of any discourse is in some sense the “pre-text” of that discourse, then prose as the language of truth must offer a pure “presentation,” as opposed to “re-presentation” or imitation, of its pre-text. If prose “non si conviene a’ ragionamenti di soggetto rassomigliativo,” then the truth-content it conveys is at a zero-level of remove from its pre-text. As such, prose has no need for the mediating poetic forms of dialogue: truth or res, once again, has no need of any form or verba.

If we read Tasso’s Discorso dell’arte del dialogo meta-critically – if we read it, that is, as a response to Castelvetro’s critical treatment of dialogue – then it makes sense to see it above all as an attempt to hold together, not only for dialogue but for all literary forms, the union of matter and form, res and verba. The Discorso thus becomes an important philosophical as well as theoretical document. Within its limited number of pages Tasso is able to frame not only the most important theoretical questions pertaining to the art of dialogical writing, but also to raise serious questions about the nature and limits of human knowledge itself. Indeed, for Tasso the two problems are inseparable: in order to discuss the legitimacy of dialogue as a literary form, he must necessarily establish a gnoseological ground upon which to rest his theory.

Tasso’s Discorso opens with a polemical response to Castelvetro’s narrow view of literary mimesis:

Nell’imitazione o s’imitano l’azioni degli uomini, o i ragionamenti; e quantunque poche operazioni si facciano alla mutola, e pochi discorsi senza operazione, almeno dell’intelletto, nondimeno assai diverse giudico quelle da questi; e degli speculativi è proprio il discorrere, si come degli attivi l’operare. Due saran dunque i primi generi dell’imitazione; l’uno dell’azione, nel qual sono rassomigliati gli operanti; l’altro delle parole, nel quale sono introdotti i ragionanti (18).17

For Tasso, not only are the realms of thought and action two very different things, but language itself is capable of imitating the one just as it does the other. If, moreover, the imitation of pure thought is possible, then it may just be
that any attempt to "write" thought is nothing more than an act of "re-presentation." And if philosophical thought can be imitated, then it, too, may be not only wholly contingent but also in large measure dependent upon the literary form which conveys it; that is, the literary form in which the "re-presentation" of thought is made has great significance for the real meaning of thought itself. Thus Tasso's theory of dialogue will be an attempt to undermine Castelvetro's implied division between dramatic materia as purely contingent and the materia appropriate to prose as the pure content of a "pre-text" which has already been "thought" and hence has no need of a form that "mimics" its unfolding.

If one of the fundamental difficulties facing all theorists of dialogue is the problem of its sub-genres, then Tasso's strategy in bringing the debate on dialogue to the ground-level of epistemological theory involves pointing out the critical faults of both ancient and modern theories on the nature of the various dialogical sub-genres. Tasso begins by dismissing the attempts of the ancient thinker Aristides to divide dialogue into tragic and comic modes. In his attempt to understand the various dialogical forms, Aristides makes the error of falling back on what Tasso considers to be an element inessential to dialogue, the action. Yet action, or, in Castelvetro's formulation, "gli avvenimenti fortunosi del mondo," is the object of imitation of tragedy and comedy proper. As an object of imitation, action is essential to altogether different literary forms. No dialogical form can be either tragic or comic in any real sense; rather, it is considered so only by analogy ("per similitudine" (20)).

Tasso's next move is to attack Castelvetro's attempt to base the division of the dialogical sub-genres upon the Aristotelian category of the "manner of representation." For Castelvetro, dialogues are mimetic, diegetic or mixed based upon the degree to which the poet is present or not in the work. This distinction "dal modo di ragionare" is for Tasso as inessential a criterion as the ancient one:

Dunque in lui [the dialogue] queste differenze [generic differences based on action] sono accidentali più tosto ch'altamente; ma le proprie si toranno dal ragionamento istesso, e da' problemi in lui contenuti, ciò è dalle cose ragionate, non sol dal modo di ragionare: perch' i ragionamenti sono o di cose ch' appartengono alla contemplazione, o pur di quelle che son convenevoli all'azione [emphasis added] (20-22).

Tasso's principal category for dividing dialogue depends upon a characteristic of the materia or the object of representation and not upon the manner of representation (or upon an element that is not essential to the materia of dialogue, the action). By basing his own distinction of the various dialogical sub-genres on the nature of the "cose ragionate," Tasso makes the materia or "pre-text" of dialogue the very ground upon which any serious discussion of the form must be held. In this way, Tasso effectively directs an ostensibly purely theoretical
discussion on dialogue toward the problem of human knowledge itself, a problem which he tackles in his treatment of the mythos of dialogue, the quistione.

Aristotelian mythos, a qualitative part of tragedy belonging to the object of representation, corresponds, in Tasso’s theory of dialogue, to the quistione. For Tasso, the dialogical quistione or discussion can go in one of two directions, either toward “la contemplazione” or toward those things that are “convenevoli all’azione.” This means that dialogue can treat not only contingent matters, but also matters which are purely speculative and thus aimed at the discovery of necessary or transcendent truths:

E ne gli uni [dialogues directed toward things “convenevoli all’azione”) sono i problemi intenti all’elezione ed alla fuga; ne gli altri [dialogues directed toward “la contemplazione”) quelli che riguardano la scienza e la verità: laonde alcuni dialoghi debbono esser detti civili e costumati, altri speculativi: e ‘l soggetto de gli uni e de gli altri o sarà la quistione infinita: come la virtù si possa insegnare; o la finita: che debba far Socrate condannato alla morte [emphasis added] (22).

Tasso’s point here is to undermine Castelvetro’s argument linking the form of tragedy and comedy to a subject matter that is wholly contingent. Literary forms are thus no longer tied necessarily to a lower gnoseological order; there is no longer any separating out of the content of a discourse from its form based upon the “degree of necessity” contained in the subject matter.

The elements of Tasso’s quistione, derived mainly from Aristotle’s Prior Analytics, Posterior Analytics, and On Interpretation, are all concerned with the nature of the unfolding of human knowledge, much as mythos involves the “discovery” of some previously “unknown” existential condition. Any dialectical question, therefore, is “una dimanda della risposta, o vero della proposizione, o vero dell’altra parte della contraddizione” (26). If the dialogical quistione is about intellectual discovery, then its elements have to do both with the nature of first principles and with the ways in which secondary truths are derived from them. The first principles of all human knowledge are for Tasso fundamentally dialectical in nature, for if “l’interrogazione sillogistica” is the same as “la proposizione,” and “le proposizioni si fanno in ciascuna scienza,” then questions can be raised about all kinds of knowledge: “in ciascuna scienza ancora si posson fare le dimande” (26). Tasso concludes from this that “in tutte le arti ed in tutte le scienze si posson fare le richieste e conseguentemente i dialogi” (26). Thus any first principle is not only fundamentally dialectical in nature insofar as it is subject to interrogation, but the very articulation of its assertion and questioning is in some way a function of the form, dialectical or otherwise, in which it is written. Tasso’s theory of dialogical imitation thus implies the fundamental “re-presentationality” of all writing: no thought-event, just as no historical event, can ever be presented as if it were at a zero-level of ontological remove from the ground-level of natural process. Thus
Tasso must first establish the dialectical nature of all first principles before discussing the various dialectical methods of enquiring after truth — “il dottrinale, il dialettico, il tentativo e il contenzioso” (28). Only when the articulation of any truth-content can be shown somehow to be inextricably tied to the external form or structure of its “writing” does it make sense to distinguish different dialogical forms.

Tasso’s polemical approach to literary mimesis, his desire to extend it to thought as well as to action, has significance for the rhetorical function of literary discourse as well. Presentation of a contingent materia before a “moltitudine rozza” is no longer the radical, or root function, of dramatic literary forms. By severing the tie between dramatic forms and the rude multitude, Tasso renders Aristotelian opsis, or spectacle in the dramatic sense, inoperative in any attempt to theorize dialogue.22 Tasso’s claim that dialogues can be read “dallo scrittore medesimo” without the aid of spectacle implies that the rhetorical dimension of literary forms is not devoid of all epistemological value. Rhetoric itself is much more than mere window dressing apt to arouse the emotions of a public interested only in seeing represented “gli avvenimenti fortunosi del mondo.”

Tasso follows Aristotle’s Poetics in limiting the amount of space he devotes to dianoia or thought.23 He treats it together with ethos as a function of the disputa: the character and opinions of the personages of dialogue emerge out of the discussion itself.24 The dialogical nature of all truth thus determines not only the various forms of its representation, but also the nature and moral quality of the persons involved in its quest. The extent to which any dialectical enquiry after truth is shaped by the use of one type of argumentation or persuasion over another determines the extent to which a dialogue is maieutic (didactic), peirastico (dialectical) or eristico (polemical). Thus while the guistione provides, to use the terminology of Northrop Frye, the “grammar” and “logic” of dialogue,25 ethos and dianoia together with lexis provide the rhetorical basis for its formal arrangement.

This rhetorical reading of Tasso’s limited consideration of ethos and dianoia prepares the way for a lengthier meditation on lexis (elocutio or style) as the medium of the fundamentally figural thought appropriate to dialogue. Tasso begins his discussion by recalling ancient theories on the style appropriate for dialogue. Artemon, the transcriber of Aristotle’s letters, argues that the dialogue ought to be written in the style of the epistle because “il dialogo è quasi una sua parte” (Dialogues 34). Demetrius of Phalerum, however, points out the fundamental rhetorical and mimetic differences between the two genres: the language of dialogue must be plainer because it imitates “an extempory utterance,” while the epistolary style “should be a little more studied” because the letter is to be “sent as a gift” (“On Style” 4.224; Rhys Roberts translation). For Demetrius, the more figural language of the epistle must obey certain purely external rhetorical proprieties, while the style of dialogue is tied to a
strict mimetic “realism” insofar as it must come as close as possible to the natural processes of human thought. Indeed, of Demetrius’ three periodic sentences – “storico,” “dialogico,” and “oratorio” – the dialogical one is placed on the least figural of levels.27

Tasso builds his own argument in favour of the figural quality of dialogical writing by distancing himself from both of these authorities. He argues, firstly, against any position that would seek to link the lexis of dialogue to that of any other literary genre (in this case, the epistle). Next, he tacitly challenges Demetrius’s classification of the period. For Tasso, Demetrius seeks to fix dialogical writing in some sort of elocutionary hierarchy in which it is brought as close as possible to some false ideal of pure thought. Even though the Demetrian dialogical period – “più semplice dell’istorico” – is appropriate to that part of the dialogue “nella qual si disputa” (36), it nonetheless diminishes the rhetorical and figural potential of dialogical writing best exemplified by Plato:

egli molto s’inalzava sovra il parlar pedestre; [...] il suo parlare non era in tutto simile al verso, nè ’n tutto simile alla prosa, [...] egli usava l’ingegno non altramente ch’i re facciano la podestà. Ed in somma niun ornamento di parole, niun color retorico, niun lume d’oratore par che sia rifiutato da Platone (Dialogues 36).

The effectiveness of the figural language of dialogue can be measured only by that which the Latin writers call evidentia,28 or, as Tasso defines it, “chiarezza” (38). Evidentia, or in Greek terms enargeia, means “to put before the eyes,” the Ciceronian dictum is ponite ante oculos.29 Tasso’s use of this term to describe a series of powerfully evocative dramatic scenes from Plato suggests that his notion of dialogical lexis is meant to absorb the rhetorical function of opsis. For Tasso, since dialogue has no use for opsis as spectacle in the dramatic sense30 – the sense in which Castelvetro intended it when he spoke of the materia of drama as “gli avvenimenti fortunosi del mondo” – it gets absorbed by lexis. Thus while the three objects of representation – mythos, ethos and dianoia – remain essentially intact in Tasso’s theory of dialogue, the manner of representation gets absorbed into the media of representation. If the image31 which Tasso’s evidentia produces absorbs the function of opsis, then the rhetorical nature of dialogue is radically transformed: even though dialogue is meant to be read by or before an audience of civil and speculative men, that does not mean that it is only a combination of grammar and logic, of narrative and meaning, with no “rhetorical arrangement.”

Indeed, Tasso’s definition of dialogue – “Direm che ’l dialogo sia imitazione di ragionamento scritto in prosa senza rappresentazione per giovamento de gli uomini civili e speculativi” (24)32 – is nothing other than the most synthetic of attempts to hold together the union of verba and res while also valorizing the necessary rhetorical arrangement of all dialogical discourse: the imitative dimension of dialogue, its “re-presentation” of a materia or “pre-text,”
allows for a formal ordering of the discussion much as *mythos* or plot rearranges the real, chronological events of history into a fictional order; prose is the kind of diction or *lexis* best able to convey the content of a discourse suited to civil and speculative men; the principle of *giovamento*, finally, valorizes the rhetorical dimension of dialogue, lending both its form and its content a serious though not necessarily purely speculative value. Thus the fundamental “representationality” of all truth, together with the serious rhetorical power of the poetic image (*Discorsi del poema eroico* 607), bestows upon the form or “rhetorical arrangement” of any utterance serious gnoseological value. For Tasso, no truth-content, no *res*, can have any real value apart from the shape of its utterance, its *verba.*

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**NOTES**

1 Weinberg devotes two chapters to the Ariosto-Tasso debate, and a chapter each on the debates over Guarini’s *Pastor Fido* and Speroni’s *Canace*. Even among modern critics the Renaissance theory of dialogue does not become a topic worthy of full book-length study until the 1980s with the work of Wilson, Snyder, Cox, and, most recently, Pugliese. See also Perelman, Kushner, Bialostosky, Burke, Le Guem.

2 Cfr. Cox: “For a brief period in the sixteenth century in Italy, when the vogue for literary dialogue was at its height, there was a sustained attempt to bring the dialogue into the fold of Aristotelian genre criticism” (1). For individual studies on the four authors mentioned, see Snyder.

3 For a discussion, on the other hand, on the broad and extensive influence that the dialogue and notions of the dialogue have had on modern thought, see Pugliese 7-14.


5 The importance of the union of *res* and *verba* for humanistic thought is discussed by Ernesto Grassi in his *Rhetoric as Philosophy*. See especially pp. 46ff. Croce, although failing to see Tasso’s theory of dialogue as a response to Castelvetro, nonetheless provides an instructive reading of Tasso’s *Discorso*. Criticizing Rudolf Hirzel’s history of dialogue, *Der Dialog. Ein literaristorische Versuch* (Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1895), Croce writes: “Tutta la storia, in effetto, che in essa [Hirzel’s history of dialogue] si vuol costruire degli inizi, dei successivi perfezionamenti, del culmine che nell’antichità il dialogo raggiunse in Platone, e della sua decadenza dopo Platone, con rare soste e fuggevoli riprese, è una storia fantasiosa o, piuttosto, mancante di soggetto storico, non essendo mai esistita la presunta forma sintetica filosofico-poetica che le dovrebbe dare il soggetto. Ciò che ha avuto luogo è stata talora la lotta tra il poeta e il dialettico, con la vittoria ora dell’uno ora dell’altro, o con un estrinseco equilibrio, che accostava, senza poterli fondere, i due diversi atteggiamenti spirituali. E la cosiddetta ‘decadenza del dialogo’ è nient’altro che la successiva eliminazione di questo ibrido, la liberazione della dialettica e della scienza dai pezzi di poesia, o di veltèità di poesia, che (né solo nel cosiddetto dialogo) si trascinava dietro o dai quali era contornata” [emphasis added] (2.120-21).

6 “[Castelvetro] has little patience for the paradoxes of dialogue, and no interest whatsoever in exploring the ambiguities of its position at the crossroads of fiction and dialectic. The notion of a philosophical fiction is just as monstrous, and just as impossible, he contends, as a centaur or a minotaur in nature. If an identity is to be maintained between prose and truth on the one hand and verse and verisimilitude on the other hand, such hybrid forms have to be expelled entirely from the literary system” (Snyder 146). Snyder also points out that Castelvetro’s “hidden
agenda is to dissolve the authority of the classical canon and thus challenge the very basis of the humanist culture of the Renaissance" (137-38). He goes on to argue that Castelvetro's "theory [of dialogue] represents an effort – the opposite, strategically speaking, of Speroni's defense – to undermine the privileges of dialogue, and the culture that produces dialogue, by discovering the logical self-contradictions of the form and illuminating them through the analytical power of his poetics" (159).

7 "For just as by the use both of colour and form people represent many objects, making likeness of them – some having a knowledge of art and some working empirically – and others use the human voice; so is it also in the arts which we have mentioned, they all make their representations in rhythm and language and tune, using these means either separately or in combination [emphasis added]" (1447a3-5; Fyfe translation). "Voice" is the English term most frequently used to translate the Greek phone. Cfr., for example, Dorsch 32, Hutton 45, Else 17; Hardison, however, prefers to translate phone as "sound" (3).

8 For a detailed analysis of the difficulties involved in a proper understanding of Aristotle's treatment of the various media of representation belonging to those arts which use voice, see Else 17-38.

9 "[People] do not call them poets in virtue of their representation but apply the name indiscriminately in virtue of the metre. For if people publish medical or scientific treatises in metre the custom is to call them poets. But Homer and Empedocles have nothing in common except their metre, so that it would be proper to call the one a poet and the other not a poet but a scientist [emphasis added]" (1447b10-12; Fyfe translation).

10 "Simili ragionamenti adunque sono di tre maniere, l'una delle quali può montare in palco e si può nominare rappresentativa, perciocché in essi vi sono persone introdotte a ragionare ὑστεροτικος, cioè in atto, come è usanza di farsi nelle tragedie e nelle comedie; e simile maniera è tenuta da Platone ne' suoi Ragionamenti e da Luciano ne' suoi per lo più. Ma un'altra ce n'è che non può montare in palco, perciocché, conservando l'autore la sua persona, come istorico narra quello che disse il tale e il cotale: e questi ragionamenti si posson dinominare o storici o narrativi, e tali sono per lo più que' di Cicerone. E ci è ancora la terza maniera, e è di quelli che sono mescolati della prima e della seconda maniera, conservando l'autore da prima la sua persona e narrando come istorico, e poi introducendo le persone a favellare ὑστεροτικος, come s'usa pur di fare nelle tragedie e nelle comedie, in guisa che questa ultima maniera può e non può montare in palco: cioè non può montarvi in quanto l'autore conserva da prima la sua persona e è come istorico, e può montarvi in quanto s'introducono le persone rappresentativamente a favellare; e Cicerone fece alcun ragionamento così fatto" (Castelvetro 36). Tasso quotes this passage in his Discorso dell'arte del dialogo (Dialogues 18-20).

11 "Ora queste maniere di ragionamenti hanno o possono avere alcuni difetti che sono communi a tutte e tre loro, e n'hanono o ne possono avere alcuni che sono speciali a ciascuna di loro" (Castelvetro 36).

12 For Castelvetro, moreover, "every dialogist is by definition a rhetorician as well...for dialogues are oriented completely toward the production of a single specific effect – il diletto – in the mind of the spectator" (Snyder 141). Cfr. also Baldassarri: "La distinzione avanzata nelle pagine della Poetica fra i vari tipi di dialogo, è, a guardar bene, tutta fondata sulla possibilità o meno che essi vengano rappresentati scenicamente, raggiguendosi così o meno il pubblico cui sono destinati in quanto 'rassomigliativi'" ("L'arte" 9). Baldassarri also points out that Castelvetro "non concepisce un pubblico intermedio fra la 'rozza moltitudine' e l'élite dei dotti" ("L'arte" 14).

13 Castelvetro covers all three dialogical genres – rappresentativo, storico or narrativo, and mescolato – in his indictment of the form by arguing that the materia of history is also contin gent: "Il quale soggetto popolesco e d'avvenimenti fortunosì è, come dico, non pur richiesto a' ragionamenti del palco, ma ancora a' ragionamenti istorici, come si mostrerà quando si parlerà del soggetto proprio e convenevole all'istoria; e in ciò pecca gravemente Platone e Cicerone e molti altri" (37).
Tasso’s Discorso dell’arte del dialogo

14 On the late-Cinquecento desire to reduce everything to strict verisimilitude, cfr. Renato Barilli’s comments in Retorica: “la poetica sìatta dal novero delle arti discorsive (razionali) in quello delle arti ‘reali’, interessate a rappresentare, ovvero a imitare dei contenuti: legate quindi alla scienza dei costumi (oggi diremmo: alla psicologia, alla morale). L’obbligo primario per il buon poeta diventa quello di essere verosimile, cioè di conoscere e rispettare i dati contenuti-stistici dell’ordine pratico-morale. La poetica quindi non appare più come una specie di raddoppiamento delle esigenze retoriche di eleganza, il suo fine non è più di mirare a un bene dicere in assoluto, ma al contrario risulta ormai subordinata e strumentale al compito di rendere la verosimiglianza dei personaggi. In sostanza, essa subisce un ridimensionamento in cui trascina con sé anche la retorica” (83).

15 As Snyder points out, Tasso had attentively read Castelvetro’s Poetica d’Aristotele in the 1570s and “had been both intrigued and irritated by it” (148). For Snyder, “Castelvetro’s treatise serves as one of the chief target-texts for the Discorso dell’arte del dialogo, a fact not as widely recognized by scholars as it should be” (148). He also points out that “modern scholarship has demonstrated beyond reasonable doubt that Tasso’s Discorso dell’arte del dialogo is a metacritical reading of both Castelvetro’s and Signonio’s theories of dialogue” (150). Cfr. also Baldassarri, “L’arte” 5-14.

16 The irony implicit in Tasso’s claim that in discussing dialogue he will “[vestir] di corto” (16) cannot be missed: not only is it a stab at Castelvetro’s enormous sposizione of Aristotle’s Poetics, but it also indicates the approach best suited to the treatment of a topic of great civil and speculative importance.

17 All passages from the Discorso dell’arte del dialogo are from the Lord and Trafford edition.

18 On the importance of the form of writing to its philosophical content, cfr. Mark D. Johnson: “The question of philosophical genres [...] must be understood [...] as a question about the presence in philosophy of certain shapes of composition, which happen also to be studied in the trivium and by rhetoricians” (201).

19 “E questa divisione [into tragic and comic], perché è fatta in due membri, è più perfetta: nondimeno i dialoghi sono stati detti tragici e comici per similitudine, perché le tragedie e le comodie propriamente sono l’imitazioni dell’azioni; ma ‘l dialogo è imitazione di ragionamento, e tanto partecipa del tragico e del comico quanto in lui si scrive dell’azione’” (Dialogues 20).

20 Platonic theory involves a similar division of the sub-genres of dialogue based upon the “manner of representation;” see Republic 3.393-94.

21 Modern theorists such as Michel Le Guem distinguish three types of disputation and hence dialogical form: the didactic, the polemical and the dialectical; Chaim Perelman divides dialogue into eristic, critical and dialectical forms, while Peter Burke comes closest to Tasso in dividing dialogue into four groups: catechism, disputation, conversation and drama.

22 “Nel dialogo principalmente s’imita il ragionamento, il qual non ha bisogno di palco; e quantunque vi fosse recitato qualche dialogo di Platone, l’usanza fu ritrovata dopo lui senza necessità. Perché s’in alcuni luoghi l’elocuzione pare accommodata all’istrione, come nell’Eutidemo, può leggersi dallo scrittore medesimo, ed aiutarsi con la pronuncia” (Dialogues 22).

23 Cfr. Snyder: “[Tasso] evinces practically no interest of his own in discussing either dianoia (thought) or ethos (character)” (167).

24 Tasso writes: “Ma perché, come abbiamo detto, il dialogo è imitazione del ragionamento, e ’l dialogo dialettico imitazione della disputa, è necessario ch’i ragionanti e disputanti abbiano qualche opinione delle cose disputate e qualche costume, il qual si manifesta alcuna volta nel disputare; e quindi derivano l’altre due parti del dialogo, io dico la sentenza e ’l costume; e lo scrittore del dialogo deve imitarlo non altramente che faccia il poeta” (Dialogues 32).

25 In his essay “Rhetorical Criticism: Theory of Genres,” Anatomy of Criticism, Frye describes literature as “the rhetorical organization of grammar and logic” (245), where grammar is the “art of ordering words” and logic is “the art of producing meaning” (244).

27 Cfr. Tasso: “Ma la forma dell’oratorio sia contorta e circolare, e quella del dialogico più simplice dell’istorico, in guisa ch’a pena dimostrì d’esser periodo” (arte del dialogo 36).
28 Cfr. Lausberg 197-98. Snyder devotes a substantial part of his chapter on Tasso, “The Reasons for Asking,” to lexis and evidentia or enargeia (170 ff.)
30 Cfr. Aristotle’s treatment of opsis or spectacle in connection with the arousal of fear and pity: “Fear and pity may be excited by means of spectacle; but they can also take their rise from the very structure of the action, which is the preferable method and the mark of a better dramatic poet” (1453b2-3; Dorsch’s translation 49). Although spectacle is part of the “radical of presentation” (Frye 247) of drama and hence an essential characteristic of its generic differentiation, yet the arrangement of mythis is a nobler way of arousing fear and pity in the spectator. Since opsis as spectacle is inoperative in Tasso’s theory of dialogue, and mythis gets replaced by the quistione, the supreme function of awakening the minds and hearts of the listeners of dialogue falls to lexis.

31 On the importance of the image in Tasso’s gnoseological theory, cfr. Discorsi del poema eroico: “Il condurre a la contemplazione de le cose divine e il destare in questa guisa con l’imagini, come fa il teologo mistico e il poeta, è molto piu nobile operazione che l’ammaestrar con le dimostrazioni com’e ufficio del teologo scolastico” (607).

32 Not only does Tasso’s definition of dialogue recall Aristotle’s definition of tragedy, but it comes at the same point in the Discorso as Aristotle’s does in the Poetics: immediately before, that is, the discussion of the qualitative parts of dialogue (compare Poetics 1450a2-3 with the Dialogues 24). Tasso goes on in the same passage to discuss in greater detail the parts of dialogue: “Ne porrem due spezie [of dialogue], l’una contemplativa, e l’altra costumata; e l’ soggetto nella prima spezie sarà la quistione infinita; nella seconda può esser l’infinita o la finita; e quale è la favola nel poema, tale è nel dialogo la quistione; e dico la sua forma e quasi l’anima. Però s’una è la favola, uno dovrebbe esser il soggetto del quale si propongono i problemi. E nel dialogo sono oltre di ciò l’altri parti, ciò è la sentenza, e l’costume, e l’elocuzione” (24).

WORKS CITED


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