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Natale Vacalebre, University of Pennsylvania


Bolzoni’s book presents the reader with the Italian version of a book soon to be published in English by Harvard University Press. The volume originates from a series of “Berenson Lectures” delivered by Bolzoni in Fall 2012 at the Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies (Villa I Tatti, Florence). Made out of seven chapters, *Una meravigliosa solitudine* explores the manifold ways in which early-modern European readers conceived of books as a privileged way to gain access to and converse with the past. In Bolzoni’s book, reading is a very special thing: by giving readers the opportunity to encounter and interact with bygone authors, it allows them to negotiate and shape their own identity. The close tie between reading and self-fashioning in Bolzoni’s book is investigated further by examining the very interesting case of private libraries. By taking inspiration from Berenson’s famous assertion that his own library “could furnish the surest and completest biography” of himself (p. XXIX), Bolzoni considers the book collections of some prominent early-modern intellectuals (Federico da Montefeltro, Michel de Montaigne) as the place that best reflects, and also contributes to shape, their identities.

The first author Bolzoni takes into account is Francesco Petrarca (1304–1374). Petrarca’s prominent position in the book seems in fact totally justifiable: he was the first European author who consciously and coherently fashioned himself not just as a writer or scholar, but specifically as a reader. In his many works, Petrarca devoted a great deal of attention in picturing his own image as book hunter, voracious reader, and direct interlocutor (via books) with the ancients. In the second chapter, Bolzoni shifts towards Italian humanism as a movement committed to the re-appropriation of the cultural heritage of antiquity. In particular, Bolzoni expands on two specific aspects of this phenomenon: the rise of the philological method, according to which books start to be looked at as real entities or bodies (Bolzoni examines the case of Fiammetta’s manuscript in Boccaccio’s *elegia di madonna Fiammetta*); and texts as a channel permitting the resurrection of, and the dialogue with, the ancients (in addition to Boccaccio, Bolzoni also considers leading humanists from the following two centuries, namely Angelo Poliziano and Pietro Bembo). Chapter 3 moves from texts to figurative art and architecture. It first examines the interesting case of Renaissance portraits of classical authors as a way to gain access to, visualize, and interact with the ancients. It then considers early-modern private
libraries as spaces that both reflect and contribute to shaping the image of the reader who commissions the work (for example, Bolzoni selects Federico da Montefeltro’s famous Studiolo). The theme of Renaissance private libraries as reflective of the reader’s identity serves as transition towards the fourth chapter, where Bolzoni examines the issue of imitation as a way in which early-modern authors built their identities as both writers and readers. By taking Desiderius Erasmus as her primary focus, Bolzoni considers imitation as the privileged mirror through which Renaissance authors measured and defined themselves in relation to the classical world. Chapter 5 is devoted to what can be considered as the most famous piece in Western epistolary tradition: Niccolò Machiavelli’s letter to Francesco Vettori (10 December 1513). This letter, which Bolzoni examines in light of the most recent developments in scholarship, dramatically captures the reading habits of one of the most representative figures of Renaissance Italy. It also tells us a lot about the multilayered nature of books (in terms of format, content, and material features) and their possible utilizations at the outset of the sixteenth century. Chapter 6 turns back to the theme of private libraries and examines Michel de Montaigne’s library as a place of memory and freedom, a place that also served as a sort of “paratext” (as Bolzoni labels it) for the composition of Montaigne’s Essays. Differently from Federico da Montefeltro, Montaigne is however also aware of the hidden danger of relying on the ancients: by listening to the voice of the brightest and unparalleled spirits of all humankind, he argues, we run the risk of losing our intellectual autonomy and even our own identity. In the last chapter, the danger of conversing with the ancients that was described by Montaigne becomes, so to speak, reality. At the threshold of the Scientific Revolution, the intellectuals’ dialogue with the authorities of antiquity began to transform. Torquato Tasso is a striking example of that: since the ancients’ words move our imagination, he claims, they invade our inner nature and destabilize our feelings and our thoughts. Finally, a brief appendix devoted to John Ruskin’s and Marcel Proust’s notions of reading concludes the book.

_Una meravigliosa solitudine_ is a journey across the reading experiences of some of the leading lights in the cultural landscape of early-modern Europe. It uncovers the diverse – sometimes even contrasting – ways in which intellectuals defined their relationship with books and authors, their expectations as readers, and the significance of this experience within their own intellectual life. Given the breadth and the manifold implications of the topic examined, Bolzoni’s selecting criteria of both authors and texts are necessarily restrictive. Reading, in Bolzoni’s book, is always a solitary, self-confined enterprise. A number of alternative modalities remain excluded from the discussion (including public reading, or group reading), and so do possible different protagonists of this story (such as female readers). Bolzoni is aware of these limitations (pp. XX–XXI), and her narrow approach does not seem to make her arguments any weaker. _Una meravigliosa solitudine_ offers a stimulating, well-structured account of the intrinsically dialogic nature of reading in early-modern Europe.

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