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The Rhetoric of Work in Leon Battista Alberti's Writings

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ABSTRACT

One source of interest in doing research on Leon Battista Alberti is to see how a man of multiple talents from the 15th-century elites viewed the world of work, including craftsmanship and manual work in the broadest sense.

Numerous references to this broad canvas occur throughout Alberti's output. Analysis of such passages reveals too multi-faceted a mind to be reduced to one line of interpretation. The author touches on subjects like discipline in learning, the importance of practice and natural aptitude for work, but also on higher concepts like nature's unattainable perfection eluding the artist, or the basic distinction between art and crafts. Craftsmanship and the mechanical arts emerge in an unusually noble light for the times. Pursuing that line of thought, Alberti sees work as a means of social betterment and personal improvement, thanks especially to the economic independence that only professional know-how can ensure anyone lacking a source of unearned income.

The complex perspectives dealt with are the mirror of the author, torn as he was between theory and application, between technical science and philosophy or letters.

L'opera di Leon Battista Alberti risulta essere un campo di indagine interessante per ricercare la prospettiva con cui un uomo di ingegno e di lettere e, insieme, di elevata estrazione sociale, nel XV secolo guardava al mondo del lavoro, all'artigianato e, in generale, alle attività manuali nella loro accezione più ampia.

Numerosi sono i temi connessi a questo vasto argomento che compaiono nell'opera di Leon Battista Alberti. Attraverso l'analisi dei passi di alcune delle opere prese in considerazione emerge una visuale complessa e sfaccettata, non riassumibile in un'unica linea interpretativa. Vengono toccati dall'autore temi come la disciplina necessaria nel processo di apprendimento, la pratica, l'attitudine naturale alle attività lavorative, ma anche temi più complessi ed elevati, come l'irraggiungibile perfezione della natura ineguagliabile dall'opera dell'uomo e, infine, la distinzione sostanziale tra artigianato e arte. Da tutto ciò emerge una sorta di nobilitazione delle arti meccaniche e dell'attività dell'artigiano inusuale per

l'epoca. Andando ancora oltre in questa direzione, il lavoro è visto dall'Alberti come un mezzo di ascesa sociale e di perfezionamento personale reso possibile da quell'indipendenza economica che solo l'esercizio di un'attività professionale può garantire a tutti coloro che non posseggono rendite e vaste proprietà.

La visione dell'Alberti rispetto a un argomento così vasto, la complessità e la molteplicità di prospettiva nell'analisi del medesimo tema, sono lo specchio stesso della personalità dell'autore, teso tra speculazione teorica e applicazione pratica, e ancora, tra scienza, tecnica, filosofia e lettere.

A FEW NOTES ON THE POLITICAL-CULTURAL CONTEXT OF 15TH-CENTURY EUROPE

Before getting to the heart of the research on the semantic use of language inherent in the world of work in its broadest sense, I believe it is necessary first to give some background information on the life and work of Leon Battista Alberti, which for clarity's sake will be presented in nearly chronological order. We will then explore the literary passages dealing with work directly, or indirectly as an expedient for illustrating other areas of Alberti's thought. Thereafter we will give some general information on the works from which the passages of interest to this chapter are taken.

The 15th century was a crucial moment in European history, suspended between the development of pre-existent structures and radical transformations. All the same, the Renaissance, standing halfway between the medieval and modern eras, is still recognised as an important phase in European or even world cultural history. The 15th and early 16th centuries left their mark on the history, art and thought of European civilization.

The political coordinates of the era are known. The expanding Ottoman power was knocking at the door of the by then declining Constantinople. In 1422 Murad II laid siege to the city, which fell in 1453 under the relentless force of Mehmet II. This political event can easily be understood as epoch-making. One of its numerous consequences was that it spurred the rediscovery by Western European scholars of the thought, philosophy and language of Ancient Greek civilization. In reality this interest had already begun during attempts at reunion of the Roman church with the Eastern churches, thanks to which contacts vastly increased, until they reached a climax with the 'Greek diaspora' throughout Europe.

The end of the millenary Roman Empire of the East was not the only event to leave its mark on the mid-15th century. It was also the age of the invention of movable type printing techniques, perfected by Flemish and German goldsmiths. The result was that texts on European culture became widely available. To call the proliferation of these 'exponential' would be an understatement.

The 15th century and early 16th centuries were also marked by great cultural and political unrest. Whatever the “modern state” is or is not, these centuries were marked by nearly continuous warfare, civil war, wars of conquest and for defence. To confine the perspective to the political scene of the 15th century, one thinks of the numerous dynastic disputes that involved entire regions of Europe. While in England the War of the Roses was being fought, 15th-century Spain also knew near continuous dynastic struggle, which was to end only with the victory of Isabella of Castile. In the Italian peninsula, a mosaic of states, large and small, there were also struggles between great families, including such lords as the Visconti and Sforza. We find wars between cities that had formed states of regional dimensions or more, such as Florence or even an exceptional case such that of Venice, considered one of the most powerful states in Europe at that time. Over these decades many European dynasties sought a basis of compromise, usually achieved by bloody wars: the Hundred Year's War, the battle between the Aragoneses and Angevins for the Kingdom of Naples. There were strong pressures towards consolidation of power when possible, and as ancient Byzantium fell to the Turks in the east, in the west Granada, the last Muslim stronghold in Europe, fell to Isabella's armies.

Concise though it is, this summary gives an idea of the inherent contrast that was part of 15th-century European history. While a nearly generalized state of war was raging, the Renaissance reached peak levels in the history of art, culture, and science. It was understood that culture and art could be, and had to be, ancillary instruments of solid prestigious political power. The Renaissance courts flourished and patronage allowed scholars and artists to express their full potential. Painters, sculptors and writers were called from all parts of Europe to Italy. It may be claimed with Braudel that every wave of humanism was twofold: above all national but also European because of the continuous movement of men and ideas². One can hardly ignore the existence of a chronological gap between the Italian Renaissance and European Renaissances, occurring at later intervals. The gap was long explained by the theory that every other Renaissance was an effect and offshoot of the Italian one and was therefore subsequent, although today the Renaissance is no longer considered to have purely Italian origins³.

What is essential to establish is the success of a *res publica literaria europea*, a single community recognizing itself as belonging to a single Christian world and the same culture⁴. By the early 16th century, a letter from Cardinal Jacopo Sadoletto to the reformed German humanist Johan Sturm would bemoan the damage caused by doctrinal differences, and how, alas, they had put an end to the feeling of belonging to a single cultural community⁵. In the 19th century, the Renaissance appeared as a fundamental stage in the formation of modern Europe. A cultural community, long before it became a political one, in which artists, writers and scientists rediscovered their identity, origin and history.

LEON BATTISTA ALBERTI: LIFE AND WORKS OF A 15TH-CENTURY HUMANIST

A laborious and eclectic working life like that of Alberti cannot properly be summarized in the few pages allowed for this chapter. The interest he aroused as a figure has claimed the attention of scholars from various fields. The bulk of 19th and 20th century studies has in the past few decades been swelled by the discovery of new written documents, new critical editions and a vast body of critical analyses of his thought, personal history and influence on other artists.

As Eugenio Garin⁶ lamented in the late 1980s and repeated in the mid 1990s⁷, historians have long falsified the figures of men like Leon Battista Alberti, Leonardo da Vinci and Marsilio Ficino by hedging them about with themes and problems not of their epoch or thought, and especially by labelling them as “universal men”⁸. This seemingly positive, indeed, superlative label actually missed the central point: their restless insatiable desire for theoretical and hands-on knowledge. From the minds of these intellectuals of the Renaissance, there arose not only a unitary vision of the world and of man but also an extraordinarily rich understanding of the link between craftsmanship and the natural world⁹. This is the essential premise, which was deemed important to relate in this introductory part, which will be followed by other necessary notions to illuminate, at least in part, the view of and use of language relevant to the world of work that is employed in the literary output of Leon Battista Alberti.

Battista Alberti¹⁰, illegitimate son of Lorenzo Alberti, was born in Genoa on 14 February 1404. His father had been exiled by that time for years from his hometown, Florence, along with a good part of the Alberti family. There is not much known about the years of his education. It is certain that he started school in Venice where his father had transferred on business. He continued his studies in Padua¹¹, where he was a student of the Gasparino Barzizza¹² school, and thereafter in Bologna, where he studied in the Faculty of Law and where, in 1428, he received his degree in canonical law, after having studied mathematics and physics as well.

The works Alberti produced during these years were permeated with the concept that man is in charge of his own destiny, able to resist adversity with the aid of the humanities¹³. Dating from these years are the *Philodoxes*, a Latin comedy dated 1424, *De commodis litterarum atque incommodis* (1428-1429)¹⁴, in which he expounds on the difficulties, not only economic, of those who embrace the life of the intellectual, and the *Intercoenales*¹⁵, with its numerous autobiographical references.

Alberti's language was not exclusively Latin, but included the vernacular, or Vulgar Italian¹⁶, which he considered appropriate for even the most serious topics. He wrote poetry and prose in the vernacular (the two dialogues *Deiphira* and *Ecantofilea*) displaying the genius and versatility of an intellectual open to every field of art and knowledge.

During these same years he found employment with the Papal Legate, Cardinal Albergati. It was in the Church milieu that Alberti found the solution to the career problems to which he referred in the *De commodis*. Leon Battista was ordained and became the secretary of Biagio Molin, Patriarch of Grado. He thus entered the papal chancellery and that group of brilliant humanists in the service of Pope Eugene IV. It was in this period that he wrote the *Della famiglia*, which will be examined in the ensuing pages, and the *Descriptio urbis Romae* to prepare for which he measured ancient Roman monuments with optical instruments and experiments of his own invention.

In June 1434, following the pope, Alberti was finally able to stay in Florence¹⁷, the city of his forefathers, where he had his first telling contact with the new art of the Florentine Renaissance. On this occasion he admired the works of Brunelleschi, Masaccio, and Donatello, whom he had probably already met in person in Rome. In Florence he wrote the *De statua*¹⁸, in which he described the methods for portraying the human figure, and the *De pictura*, in Latin, dedicated to Giovan Francesco Gonzaga, while the vernacular version¹⁹ of that work was dedicated to Brunelleschi.

In 1438 he stayed in Ferrara at the court of Lionello d'Este, to whom he probably gave the ideas and drawings for the "Arch of the Horse" and the Duomo bell tower, the first architectural works in which Alberti's participation can be recognized. After another sojourn in Florence in the years 1439-43, he returned to Rome where he settled permanently, being able at long last to enjoy the economic and intellectual freedom²⁰ he had longed for. Despite Alberti's debt to the Church, which allowed him and a host of intellectuals to cultivate their talent, religious life was certainly not his vocation. Religion was the subject of his work, but in a figurative sense. In speaking of religion and religious choices, he refers to other 'levels' of inquiry, meaning continuous philosophical, even psychological, research. 'Redemption' seems entrusted more to man himself who with his works and virtue holds the responsibility for his own salvation. In reality, it is hazardous to make generalizations when talking about the literary work of Alberti. While the *Della Famiglia* and *Iciarchia* praise virtue in connection with worldly activities and the fundamental need for it in society, virtually the exact opposite argument is put forward²¹ in the *Vita Sancti Potiti*, written in approximately 1433. It is evident that in each of Alberti's works themes and arguments intertwine and proliferate with no real progressive order, according to the moment of Alberti's thought which is being studied.

During the pontificate of Niccolò V, Alberti supervised a broad programme of building, urban redevelopment and restoration of ancient buildings. In 1450 he wrote the *De re aedificatoria*²², a literary work which combined with his fame as an architect to bring him numerous commissions for religious and other types of buildings. In this work, recapturing and recreating the work of Vitruvius, he codifies the idea of architecture respecting natural proportions and serving human needs. Guardian of the Renaissance conception of architecture, Alberti presides in person over the construction of his

projects, consistent with the idea of not separating the mathematical sciences from the literary disciplines, or theoretical disquisition from the material effort of moulding the material according to the principles of one's art.

Soon afterwards Alberti composed the *Ludi rerum mathematicarum*, dedicated to Me-liaduse d'Este, in which he set down rules for measuring plots of land, the depth of wells, the height of towers, and the distances between cities, recalling the trigonometric methods described in the *Descriptio Urbis Romae*. Once again, theory and practice appear inseparable elements of Albertian thought.

From 1435 to 1453 he wrote numerous works on various topics: *Sofrona* and *Uxoria* on love and marriage; on justice he wrote the *De iure*²³; the *Pontifex*²⁴ describes the virtues and duties of a bishop; while the two booklets, *Canis*²⁵ and *Musca*, recalled the work of Lucian in its mixture of the serious and the humorous. He also composed two important dialogues of a moral nature, one of them in the vernacular: the *Teogenio* and *Profugiorum ab aerumna libri*. In 1441 he composed the booklet *De equo animante*²⁶, dedicated to the marquis Lionello d'Este. These years must have been the setting for Alberti's autobiography²⁷. Entitled *Vita*, it reaches us in anonymous form, acting as a sort of background to the life and work of the young Leon Battista Alberti.

The literary works by Alberti that have not yet been mentioned in this chapter are numerous, as are the architectural works he designed and directed. One thinks of the Church of Santo Stefano Rotondo in Rome, the Malatestiano Temple in Rimini, the project for the Rucellai Palace in Florence, the façade of Santa Maria Novella, the Chapel of Santo Sepolcro in San Pancrazio and the apse of the Annunziata Church. Between 1459 and 1460 Alberti designed and began the Church of San Sebastiano in Mantua for the Gonzagas and, in the same city, the Church of Sant'Andrea was planned in 1470.

Leon Battista Alberti died in Rome in April 1472. In his will he requested that his remains be brought to Padua and put in his father's tomb, but there is no trace of the burial either in Rome or in Padua.

Before reading and analyzing the texts, it may be useful to add a few simple considerations.

Leon Battista Alberti was a member of that typically Renaissance world of knowledge and culture where science was seen in a fluid unitary sense, without separating the literary and mathematical, technical or theoretical disciplines. A unified vision of knowledge that will be broken with the 'engineering' specialization that follows the Renaissance phase, when knowledge and the arts became ever more drastically separated. Alberti was not the only exponent of this school which stemmed from the Middle Ages and reached its peak in the 15th century in the figures of Alberti himself, Leonardo da Vinci and, somewhat later, Galileo Galilei. The versatility of such figures has been interpreted as the fruit of a genius that made them masters in every artistic, scientific

and literary field. But beyond their undeniable ingenuity, sufficient weight has not been given to the aforementioned view of unified human knowledge. Evidence of this diverse perception of man *vis-à-vis* science is reflected in the reciprocal influences between the works of these personages, in which science, letters and arts live through a sole inspiration and a single creative tension.

It is in this broad perspective that we will be analyzing Alberti's references to work, at times directly and specifically, at others, as a metaphor for various ideas.

THE RHETORIC OF WORK

Work is a prominent theme for Leon Battista Alberti. True to the overall complexity of his thought, he offers the reader (and researcher) various angles of analysis on one and the same subject. As we shall see, he breaks the broad issue down into a number of different parts, treatment of which recurs throughout most of his literary output without a specific treatise being devoted to the subject.

Two approaches can be discerned from the start. The first is where Alberti deals with work-related issues directly, often going into considerable detail. On other occasions, as we have hinted and will be seeing shortly, the whole semantic field of work is treated as a metaphor and sometimes as a sudden cue for complex theorizing not directly connected with any work activity or argument.

How he relates to the world of work is at once clear from his autobiography. In the *Vita*²⁸ he spells out the importance of learning from those plying the humblest trades, seemingly remote from art or architecture.

*[...] Cum appulisse doctum quemvis audisset, villico sese in illius familiaritatem insinuabat, et a quocumque quaeque ignorasset ediscebat. A fabris, ab architectis, a naviculariis, ab ipsis sutoribus et sartoribus sciscitabatur, si quidnam forte rarum sua in arte et reconditum quasi peculiare servarent; et eadem illico suis civibus volentibus communicabat. Ignarum se multis in rebus simulabat, quo alterius ingenium, mores peritamque scrutaretur*²⁹.

[...] When he heard that some learned person had arrived, he at once tried to get to know him and to learn from whoever it might be anything that he did not know. From craftsmen, architects, shipbuilders, and even from cobblers and tailors, he tried to learn, wishing to acquire any rare and secret knowledge contained in their particular arts. And such knowledge he at once gladly shared with those of his fellow citizens who were interested. He often pretended ignorance of things in order better to examine the mind, the values, and the knowledge of another (...)]³⁰.

He begins by showing us a 'passive' stance to the work in hand, as one who still needs instructing.

*Itaque rerum, quae ad ingenium artesque pertinerent, scrutator fuit assivuus*³¹

[...] Thus did he search assiduously into diverse kinds of knowledge and skills (...)].

Alberti is ready to learn anything he realizes he does not know which might come in useful. He will not disdain what blacksmiths, sailors, tailors and cobblers have to teach. He posits a complementary relationship between the humble workman, with all the know-how behind his trade, and the high form of artistic expression he will come to achieve in his own heyday.

One point will be found to recur wherever Alberti's writings deal with work issues. Discipline is a much-needed factor before one can learn the secrets and skills that spell success in any job, be it handicraft or art. The discipline, patience and humility necessary for learning are key moments in Alberti's own development. These points he never tires of repeating as pillars of learning, as a method not just for 'professional' training, but also for reinforcing the virtues that should underpin any human being's life. Only he who rejects virtue is virtue-less. By discipline, the very thing one needs in one's own job, anyone can attain to virtue.

The notion of discipline occurs in many passages from Alberti's works. *Momus*³² treats the subject with irony:

*[...] Postremo nullum genus vitae se aiebat comperisse quod quidem omni ex parte eligibilis appetibilisque sit quam eorum qui quidem vulgo mendicant, quos erroneos nuncupant. Hanc esse quidem omnium unam facilem artem, in promptu utilem, vacuam incommodis, plenam libertatis ac voluptatis, quam rem ita esse multa cum festivitate Momus cum plerisque aliis argumentis, tum his rationibus demonstrabat. «Etenim sic» inquit «dicunt quidem geometrae, quaeque versentur in arte sua aequae teneri a quovis rudi discipulo atque ab eruditissimo, modo semel ea percepta sint. Idem ferme ipsum in hac erroneum arte evenit, ut uno temporis momento perspecta planeque cognita atque imbuta sit. Sed in hoc differunt, quod geometra instructore qui futurus est geometra indiget, erroneum vero ars nullo adhibito magistro perdiscitur. Aliae artes et facultates habent edocendi tempora, ediscendi laborem, exercendi industriam, agendive quendam definitum descriptumque modum; item adminicula, instrumenta et pleraque istiusmodi exigunt atque desiderant, quae hac una in arte minime requiruntur. Una haec artium est incuria, negligentia inopiaque rerum omnium, quas aliis in rebus ducunt esse necessarias, satis fulta atque tuta» [...]*³³.

[...] In the end, he said, he'd found no way of life more eligible and desirable in every way than the life of common beggars, whom people call vagabonds. Momus said that this was the only easy profession of them all: convenient, useful, harmless, full of freedom and pleasure. With great wit, he went on to prove why this was the case, using many other arguments in addition to the following reasons. "Geometricians say that everything studied in their discipline can be understood equally well by an inexperienced pupil or by an expert, once it has been initially grasped. More or less the same thing happens in the beggar's profession: at the same moment you realize what the job is, it all becomes crystal clear to you and you can slip into the role. Yet there's one difference. A would-be geometrician needs a geometrician as his instructor, while the beggar's art can be learned without a teacher. Other arts and skills require time for instruction, hard work while learning, application while practising, and a strict, systematic method of procedure. They also need and want tools, equipment and other things of that kind. Only the beggar's profession does not require these. The one

skill it needs is carelessness, negligence, and a complete lack of everything thought necessary in other situations - for it is sufficiently bolstered and secure as it is]³⁴.

To learn the job of a tramp, he writes, no long apprenticeship is needed. All other forms of profession require periods of training, the rigours of apprenticeship, constant practice and study helped by the right tools of learning. Not so what he ironically calls the 'art' of vagrancy. All one has to do to start is to lose one's own chattels and beg those of other people. In negative, as it were, by the device of irony, Leon Battista Alberti states the case he will uphold in other works like *Villa*³⁵: the importance of pondered behaviour, eschewing extremes, and the discipline to do one's duty, whatever it may be, to the best of one's ability.

In *Villa* we read:

*[...] Piace ad Esiodo, elegantissimo poeta greco, quel lavoratore quale partirà il pane in quattro parti e d'ogni parte farà otto bocconi; e voglionlo tale ch'è domi il campo, non che il campo stracchi lui. A' servi, a' giumenti mai darai ozio. E dicono che la fame e il bisogno abita vicina all'ozio. A questi comanderai cose utili, darai quello che sia necessario, e adopererai li in quello a che e' sieno atti e accomodati. Non vorrai facciano il dì quello possono poi fare la notte, né in dì da lavorare gli occuperai in faccende quale e' possano essequire il dì della festa. E instituirà li che in luogo niuno stieno più assidui che nel campo, e nulla meno facciano che fare nulla. E tu, quando sia sereno il dì, stima turbulenta e brutta l'ombra della casa. Quello che tu puoi con l'asino, non vi adoperare il servo. Tua sia l'industria del comandare; de' servi sia opera ubidirti e fare quanto comandasti. Studia di comandare una volta per più opere e per più dì. Schifa il comandare più volte o a più persone per una cosa. Assai ti satisfa colui a cui s'appartiene ubidire, se fa quanto e quando tu gli comandasti e ordinasti. Chi da sé fa le cose utili e lodate, costui ène ottimo. Chi fa quando tu l'ordinasti, costui secondo luogo presso a quell'ottimo ène buono. Chi non fa né da sé, né quando altri gliel ricorda, costui ène di tutti pessimo. Tutti e' buoni amici fuori di casa non rimedieranno a' danni che farà un mal servo in casa. In cosa niuna meno ti nuoce un mal uomo in casa che in tòrti la roba. Chi non ha che perdere e perde, perde quello che dovea avere. Niuno animale teme la collotola dell'uomo, ma, per bestiale e ferocissimo che sia, teme il fronte. E solo il fien greco dicono gode esser negletto: ad ogni altra cosa affermano sempre nuocere la negligenza. [...]*³⁶

[...] Hesiod, the most elegant Greek poet, praises the worker who divides his bread in four parts and of each part makes eight mouthfuls; it would be right that such a worker be able to dominate the fields, not that the fields should exhaust him. The servants and work animals will never be given rest. It is said that hunger and need are bedmates of idleness. You will command useful things of your workers, you will give them what is necessary, and you will employ them in work for which they are appropriate. You will not allow them to do during the day that which can be done at night, nor will you command them on any given day to quickly do chores that can be done on holidays. And you will teach them that the fields are the place in which they must work most diligently. And even when it is a sunny day, do not underestimate the shadow over the house; remind yourself that a storm can surprise you at every moment. Do not have a servant do work that can be done by an animal. Your job is to command, that of your servants is to obey you and carry out all your orders.

Aim at commanding only once for various chores. Avoid repeating commands or giving commands to several people to do a single job. He who is always ready to obey you and do as you order must satisfy you. He who does useful things on his own is to be considered an excellent worker. He who works when you give orders is a good worker. He who does not work of his own initiative or when ordered to do so is a poor worker. All the good friends you may have outside the household are no remedy for the damage that a bad servant at home can cause. He who has nothing to lose and loses just the same, loses that which he could have had. (...)]³⁷

Discipline is not just needed for personal improvement, of course. It is the basis of all work, the quality that best defines the ‘good’ worker, be he servant, craftsman or artist like Alberti.

Another recurrent theme in Alberti’s literary opera is practice and innate aptitude for work. Once again, *Momus* is a key source for this view. In the episode where Charon sets off in company with Gelasto, a lively scene depicts the dead applying to learn a ‘trade’ for the next world.

[...] *Itaque Charon, dum ad iter accingitur, subducta navi multum ac diu cogitavit conferatne hanc alicubi apud inferos relinquere; tandem, quod ita praestare arbitrabatur, navim reversam sustulit suoque imposuit capiti ut staret quasi pusillo mapalio opertus, manuque remum collibrans graditur. Arduum et praeter aetatem firmissimum senem proficiscentem turbae admirabantur. Verum illi inter pergendum in sermones incidere istiusmodi, ut quaereret Gelastus de Charonte quid ita navim portaret aut quidni praestitisset eam in litore subductam sinere. Cui Charon “Et quid” inquit “tibi defunctorum ineptias referam? Nemo est illorum quin me suis velit imperiis navigare. Quin et fuit pridie polyphagus nescio quis, qui quidem raptio remo se pro argonauta gereret. Illi ego “Et quis tu?” inquam. “Classiumne fuisti fortassis praefectus in vita?” “At” inquit ille “nostra in familia olim fuere plures remiges”. Ego illius insolentiam non tam admiratus quam ineptias risi, com viderem tam impudenter et temere id profiteri et aggredi cui esset rei minime aptus. At ex comitibus defuncti unus “Mentitur” inquit “o Charon, ne pictum quidem uspiam aut hic aut suorum aliquis vidit mare: alpibus enim aeternum lapidicinis ascripti exercebantur”. Is cum ita fuerit insolens, quales tu put as futuros ceteros aut tranandi studio, aut insolescendi voluptate, si fortassis detur relicta illic navi occasio?”. Hic Gelastus “Quid” inquit “illi quidem si neque insolentia neque arrogantia, sed discendi libidine id ita aggredierentur?”. Tum Charon “Novasne” inquit “isthic, ut apud inferos artes condiscant? Minime: sed temerarii sunt. Vel quis hoc ferat ut Charontem remigare quisquam instruat?”³⁸.*

[(...) While preparing for the journey, Charon beached his boat and thought long and hard about whether he should leave it somewhere in the underworld. In the end, reckoning it the best thing to do, he turned the boat over and carried it on top of his head, covering himself as though with a little hut. He then balances his oar in his hand and set out. Crowds marvelled at the old man as he went along, hardy and powerful beyond his years. As Charon and Gelastus went along, they fell into a conversation like this. Gelastus inquired of Charon why he was carrying the boat, and why he had not left it aground by the shore. “Should I tell you about the follies of the dead?” said Charon. “Every single one of them wants me to steer the boat at their command. Just yesterday there was somebody called Polyphagus

who snatched the oar and began acting like an Argonaut. I said to him, "Who the hell are you? Were you an admiral maybe when you were alive?" "No", he replied, "but there were once several rowers in my family". I was surprised at his insolence, but I laughed still more at his stupidity when I saw how shamelessly and rashly he laid claim to and took on a task for which he was plainly not suited. Then one of dead man's companions said, "He's lying, Charon, neither he nor any of his relatives have ever seen the ocean, even in pictures. They've always worked as forced laborers in Alpine quarries". "If this one man could be so presumptuous, how do you think the rest are going to act – with their keenness to cross and their positive pleasure at lording it over me – if given the chance to get hold of my ship?" – "But what if they try, not out of high-handedness or arrogance, but out of a desire to learn?" – "Are they about to learn new skills in the underworld?" said Charon. "I hardly think so; but they are a reckless lot. It's outrageous that they try to teach me to row". [...]

The dispute between Charon and Gelasto hinges on the fecklessness of the dead, their lack of know-how or training in the art of ferrying. Under the irony there once again emerges the need for meek and docile learning of any trade and censure for those too impatient to undergo the necessary apprenticeship.

The ability to learn techniques and rules to improve one's craftsmanship artistic skills is once more the issue, though this time the slant is apparently the opposite of before. That man is unable to attain nature's perfection seems to throw the artist into despondency. Man's work can only imitate imperfectly the beauty of a flower, and never hope to equal it. As Charon points out to Gelasto, the work of man is only amazing for the vast waste of energy employed in producing something that will always look like a poor copy of nature's perfection.

[...] Medio in theatro cum illi advenissent, "Etenim quid tibi haec, o Charon?" inquit Gelastus. Negavit Charon videri sibi aut theatrum aut ornamenta istiusmodi talia ut ulla ex parte cum floribus quos apud pratum excerpserat essent comparanda. Et mirari quidem professus est quod pluris faciant homines quae possint vilissimorum manu assequi quam ea quae ne cogitatione quidem satis queant attingere. "Et flores" inquit "quidem negligitis: saxa admirabimur? In flore ad venustatem, ad gratiam omnia conveniunt. In his hominum operibus nihil invenies dignum admiratione praeter id, ut vituperes tantorum laborum tam stultam profusionem. Dehinc tu, o" inquit "philosophe, principio ex te fieri certior volo, quandoquidem, ut praedicis, multa hoc loco quae ad vitam bene degendam faciant in medium afferuntur, cuinam ea commodent. Maioribus natu? Stultum si eos aggrediantur commonefacere, qui didicerint usu quae conferant. An adolescentibus? Ineptum eos velle dictis regere, qui non auscultent. Proxime item velim dicas ab poetis, nequaquam a philosophis vitae degendae rationes expetant"³⁹.

[...] When they reached the middle of the theatre, Gelastus said, "So, Charon, what do you think?" Charon answered that the theatre and its decorations were nothing compared with the flowers he'd picked in the meadow. He professes himself amazed at how men placed more value on things that the vilest hands could accomplish, rather than on things that defied understanding. "You spurn flowers", he said; "shall I admire stones? Everything about a flower is beautiful and pleasing. In these man-made constructions, you won't find

anything wondrous apart from the wondrous extravagance of misplaced labor. Now explain to me first, O philosopher – since you claim that in this place they perform publicly many things which contribute to the good life – who benefits from them? Adults? How foolish they must be if they try to teach people who have already learned from experience what they're talking about! Youngsters? What a stupid idea, trying to govern with words young people who don't listen! Second, I want you to tell me: who asks poets how to live rather than philosophers?" (...)]

The talk falls on events unfolding in a theatre which the two characters have just entered. Gelasto explains that the stories being acted there are meant to educate youngsters and adults. This introduces another nuance of Alberti's philosophy of learning. He declares himself suspicious of all teaching based on theoretical rules. Teaching adults seems pointless: experience should already have taught them all they need to know, while teaching the young will not bear results since you cannot use words to teach those who refuse to listen.

Education and experience play a central part in both *Momus* and the *De Iciarchia*⁴⁰.

[...] *La natura fece l'omo disciplinabile, prono ad umanità. El crescere con dissoluta licenza lo rende contumace. E nasce tanto male più dalla troppa indulgenza de' maggiori che altronde, però che quando e' suoi sono teneri d'età, e' maggiori desidiosi e negligenti non curano e lascianlo' ausarsi a costumi parte leziosi parte provani, onde imparano superare la onestà colle insolenze e caparbità. [...]. Non nego a questo nostro patrocínio così come nell'altre buone arti, bisogna ragione e modo, e conviensi avere a te non tanto quello che facci allo officio tuo, quanto sapere bene adoperarlo. Altro sarà tenere in mano la squadra, la linea, lo stile; altro adattarlo bene al tuo lavoro. In teatro non si concederebbe che uno imperito in musica fusse duttore de' danzatori. Molto più si conviene darsi a questa nostra opera con maturata professione quanto ella è molto più degna. Mai condurerai gli altri a buono diporto, se a te non sarà la via ben nota. Aggiugni che forse come el pesce nato in acqua salsa richiede ancora condimento di più salina, così qui a' precetti vulgari e noti in questa amministrazione ora per ora bisogna adattarvi nuovo temperamento. Preterea, quando ben fusse questa provincia laboriosa, non dovete però voi omini ottimi recusarla. Fuggire la cura de' suoi perché ella è faticosa, viene da lentezza d'animo desidioso; e recusarla forse perché ella viene senza utilità, sentirebbe di villania e sarebbe inumanità. Degnissimo ricordo quello de' nostri maggiori: richieggono e' tempi da te fatica, non la recusare; prendesti questa sollecitudine, reggila con tolleranza e fermezza d'animo, e modera tutto con buon consiglio*⁴¹.

[...] Nature makes man disciplinable, inclined to humaneness. But when he is raised in a climate of dissolution and license, he becomes hostile. In fact, much more damage is done to a young person whose educators indulge him too much than to one whose educators are too strict. If educators are negligent, they allow young people from a tender age to assume mincing and incorrect ways, thus learning to get the better of honesty through insolence and obstinacy (...). I do not deny that for this duty of ours of guardianship, as in all the other good arts, it is necessary to reason and understand that it is better to have not too many tools for the job, but rather to make the most proper use of them. It is one thing to hold a square, ruler and style in hand, and quite another to use them well in your job. In the theatre it would never be permissible for someone who did not know music to instruct the dancers.

We had best apply ourselves to this work in hand of educating with mature professionalism, given that this is one of the most important duties to be had. You will never manage to lead others to safe ground, if you yourself do not know clearly the route to follow. Keep in mind also that a fish born in saltwater needs even more salt, just as in the precepts for this matter it is necessary to adapt new expedients from one moment to the next. Furthermore, inasmuch as this is a difficult duty, which of course creates numerous worries, it cannot be denied. Avoiding worries so as to avoid difficulty is the way of a lazy soul, while refusing a difficulty because it does not bring advantage is that of an inhumane and uncivil spirit. That the memory of our elders may be an inspiration: that they should remind us not to balk at a difficulty we are faced with. And from there, to learn the diligence appropriate to that duty. Look to your duties with the utmost care, manage them with tolerance and strength of mind, tempering everything with good counsel.]

Nature, we read, made man such as to be 'disciplinable.' Hence educating the young is a fundamental task and not to be neglected: they must be shown the road to virtue, if necessary with severity. In describing the duties of an educator Alberti uses the surveyor's profession as a metaphor. It is not enough to know how to handle the tools of the trade, like set-square and line. One needs to be able to adapt them to the task in hand. The metaphor suggests that in educating the young we must reckon with specific talents and inclinations. Such echoes of schoolroom problems can only recall the suffering the author describes in his own autobiography, when he was forced to study canon law at Bologna. Physical and mental suffering were caused by an inappropriate application of the young Alberti's gifts.

But there is one activity it is not wearisome to learn. In the *De Pictura*⁴² painting is called the art where *periti e imperiti* (skilled and unskilled) willingly toil to acquire technique.

[...] *Tamesti haec una ars et doctis et indoctis aequae admodum grata est, quae res nulla fere alia in arte evenit ut quod peritos delectat imperitos quoque moveat. Neque facile quempiam invenies qui non maiorem in modum optet se in pictura profecisse. Ipsam denique naturam pingendo delectari manifestum est [...]. Adde his quod nulla ferme ars est in qua prediscenda ac exercenda omnis aetas et peritorum et imperitorum tanta cum voluptate versetur. Liceat de me ipso profiteri. Si quando me animi voluptatis causa ad pingendam confero, quod facio sane persaeptius cum ab aliis negotiis otium suppediat, tanta cum voluptate in opere perficiendo insisto ut tertiam et quartam quoque horam elapsam esse postea vix possim cedere [...]*⁴³.

[(...) Although this art alone is equally pleasing to both learned and unlearned; and it rarely happens in any other art that which pleases the knowledgeable also attracts the ignorant. You will not easily find anyone who does not earnestly desire to be accomplished in painting (...). Furthermore, there is no other art in whose study and practice all ages that are learned and unlearned alike may engage with such pleasure. Let me speak of my own experience. Whenever I devote myself to painting for pleasure, which I very often do when I have leisure from other affairs, I persevere with such pleasure in finishing my work that I can hardly believe later on that three or even four hours have gone by.]⁴⁴

In the passage from *Momus* where the dead souls want to learn an other-worldly trade, another work-related issue is raised (it will be picked up elsewhere by Alberti): one's innate bent for some job, be one a craftsman or an artist. *Esset rei minime aptus*: the dead soul was just not cut out for handling a boat. Personal inclination and gifts of nature are never underestimated by Alberti, whether he is talking about what we mean by an artist, or of a simple artisan. Personal aptitude is gone into in depth and detail in the second book of the *De famiglia*⁴⁵. Aptitude is there strictly related to gain.

[...] *E' guadagni vengono parte da noi, parte dalle cose fuor di noi. In noi sono atte a guadagnare l'industrie, lo 'ngegno e simili virtù riposte negli animi nostri come son queste: essere, chiamiallo per nomi suoi, argonauta, architetto, medico e simili, da' quali in prima si richiede giudicio e opera d'animo. Sonci ancora a guadagnare atte le operazioni del corpo, come di tutte l'opere fabrili e meccanice e mercenali, andare, lavorare colle braccia, e simili essercizii, ne' quali e' primi premi si rendono alla fatica e sudore dell'artefice. E sono ancora in noi accomodati a guadagnare quegli essercizii ne' quali l'animo e le membra insieme concorrono all'opera e lavoro, nel quale numero sono e' pittori, scultori, e citaristi, e altri simili. Tutti questi modi del guadagnare, e' quali sono in noi si chiamano arti, e sono quelle le quali sempre con noi dimorano, le quali col naufragio non periscono, anzi insieme co' nudi nuotano, e al continuo seguono compagne della vita nostra, nutrice e custode delle lode e fama nostra. Fuori di noi le cose atte a guadagnare sono poste sotto imperio della fortuna, come trovare tesauri ascosi, venirti eredità, donazioni, alle quali cose sono dati uomini non pochi. Molti fanno suo essercizio acquistarsi amicizie di signori, rendersi familiari a ricchi cittadini, solo sperando indi riceverne qualche parte di ricchezza, de' quali si dirà a pieno nel luogo suo. E sono que' tutti essercizii nella fortuna posti, da' quali la nostra industria umana lungi sarà esclusa. Solo el caso e corso delle cose in essi potrà soddisfare alle esptazioni e desiderii nostri. Niuna nostra opera o consiglio potrà ivi acquistarvi se non quanto la fortuna vorrà con noi liberale essere e facile. E fuor di noi ancora si truovano posti guadagni, e' quali si tranno delle cose, come sono usure, e come si piglia frutto da' nostri armenti, dall'agricoltura, da' boschi, e in Toscana da' nostri scopeti, le quali cose senza umana fatica, senza molta industria fruttano. Sono poi da questi usciti essercizii quasi infiniti, ne' quali adoperano chi una, chi una altra parte, chi piú e chi tutte queste da me dette cose, animo, corpo, fortuna, e cose. [...]*⁴⁶

[...] Earnings depend partly on ourselves and partly on things beyond our control. We have control over industry, intelligence, and similar and natural qualities. If we possess these virtues, we can then earn money by becoming navigators, architects, or doctors, or by practising other professions similar to these in that they require judgment and intelligence above all. We can also earn money by engaging in trades requiring physical labour, such as walking or working with our hands; for these mechanical skills the worker is compensated primarily for his labour and sweat. We can also earn money in occupations which require the participation of both mind and body. Among those engaged in this type of work we find painters, sculptors, musicians and others. All these occupations which depend on ourselves and enable us to make money are called arts. They are such that they always remain with us. They cannot perish in a shipwreck, but come along with us even while we swim naked; they are companions throughout life, nurses and custodians of our glory and fame. Those things through which we can gain money but are not under our control are under the dominion

of Fortune. They consist in finding hidden treasure, inheriting, and receiving gifts, all things for which quite a few men hope. Many make it their practice to acquire the friendship of noblemen and rich citizens in the hope of sharing in their wealth. We shall speak of these at the proper time. All these practices depend on Fortune only, and our own human industry plays no part in them. Only change and circumstances can satisfy our expectation and our wishes in these matters; no deed or thought of ours can gain anything but what Fortune grants us in her generosity. Also beyond our own control are those profits which we derive from such things as interest in money and earnings from flocks, mules, wood, and our broom shrubs which abound in Tuscany. All these things bear fruit without human work and industry. From all the occupations we have mentioned, endless others derive which involve, in different proportions, one or all the factors discussed: intellect, body, Fortune, and possessions (...).⁴⁷

Profit may come from qualities a person possesses, or from uncontrollable outside phenomena blown by fortune or fate. The former, one's natural bent, are the focus of interest here. Alberti further divides the qualities we may call "innate". On one side he places talent and virtue, qualities that call for intellectual activity and powers of decision. As examples he cites the navigator, doctor and architect. Then there is gainful employment that stems less from intellect than from "bodily operations", meaning crafts like the blacksmith's and all work that requires elbow-grease and effort. There is a third category which is interesting in that it posits artist's work, the product of a creator, as distinct from both the artisan's and that of the person who works by his 'wits alone'. Such creativity involves body and soul cooperating: to this category belong the sculptor, painter and musician. It is curious that activities so bound up with artistic flair should be included as gainful occupation. Such skills, whether of the wits or manual technique, or both together, are described in a particularly happy phrase: they do not perish by shipwreck, they swim away with the naked swimmer. This evidently makes them precious to Alberti who saw personal gifts as an inalienable treasure-house. No quirk of fortune can deprive a man of his skills; wherever he goes (even into exile, Leon Battista must have reflected) his gifts follow him. He can turn them to good account by virtue and discipline.

One criterion for dividing human pursuits and the skills needed to attain them is money. Thus money becomes what may be considered a definition of a 'trade'. *Il nervo di tutti e' mestieri è il danaro*⁴⁸. The core and heart of all jobs is money, again linking artist and artisan alike.

[...] Puoi con danari avere e casa e villa; e tutti e' mestieri, e tutti gli artigiani quasi come servi s'afaticano per colui il quale abbia danari. A chi non ha danari manca quasi ogni cosa, e a tutte le cose bisogna danari; alla villa, alla casa, alla bottega sono necessari i servi, fattori, strumenti, buoi, e simili altre, le quali cose non si posseggono e ottengono senza spendere danari. Se adunque il danaio supplisce a tutti i bisogni, che fa mestiere occupare l'animo in altra masserizia che in sola questa del danaro?⁴⁹

[...] With money one can have a house and property. Artisans of all guilds will work almost like servants for those who have money. One who has no money lacks almost everything, for it is needed for whatever you want to do. You must have servants, managers, tools, oxen, and similar things for your house, lands, and business and cannot obtain these things without spending money. If money, then, takes care of all these needs, why should we bother to manage anything else but our money? (...).]⁵⁰

Anyone in possession of wealth can get servants and craftsmen to do his bidding. The point still needs carefully checking throughout Alberti's works, but one may tentatively claim that the prime definition and function he associates with work is material gain. The rhetoric of virtue acquired by correct and minute observance of one's duty seems secondary to what Leon Battista Alberti considers the main purpose.

Another *leit motif* of Alberti's literary corpus is *medietas*. We have already referred to this moderation which is somehow 'philosophical rationality' and must be applied to management of the estate (*villa*) and all that that entails. One particularly important passage in the *Villa*, already quoted above, deals with the master's proper relationship to his servants. Naturally *medietas* comes into that aspect of management. It is hard to make out whether the advice not to use servant labour when animals can be employed forms part of rationalizing resources, or whether it is a form of respect for the lowest orders of worker. The latter view is nowhere contradicted and seems in fact to be partly confirmed by Alberti's treatment of jobs in which the "*first rewards yield to the artificer's toil and sweat*". Then again, his appreciation for a prompt obedient servant who does not need telling but helps run the estate on his own initiative seems to go beyond mere praise of efficiency. "*He who does useful and praiseworthy things of his own accord is excellent*", he who carries out orders is good, while he who fails to do as he is told is very bad.

The *Villa* is not the only place where praise is given to efficiency at work along with promptness and exactitude. "*Useful and praiseworthy things*" are to be appreciated, whether it is a servant that achieves them, or Fate (the latter is described in characteristic *Momus* irony as prompt and efficient and one that never omits a detail through idleness).

The importance of diligence and exactitude in performing a trade is picked up in the treatise *De pictura*. When depicting a story one needs "*nimbleness of action combined with diligence*", which is to say swift application and efficiency, eschewing the kind of haste that leaves a job approximate or unfinished.

*In opere vero perficiendo eam diligentiam adhibebimus quae sit coniuncta celeritati agendi, quum neque taedium a prosequendo deterreat, neque cupiditas perficiendi peracipitet. Interlaxandus interdum negotii labor est recreandusque animus, neque di agendum quod plerique faciunt, ut plura opera assumant, hoc ordiantur, hoc inchoatum atque imperfectum abiciant. Sed quae coepereis opera, ea omni ex parte perfecta reddenda sunt [...]*⁵¹

[...] From time to time we should interrupt our work and refresh our minds, and not do what many do, namely take on several works at once, starting on one, setting another one aside unfinished. Whatever works you begin should be completed in every respect (...).]⁵²

He adds a piece of advice: when tiredness comes on, one should break off and “restore the spirit”.

One last point needs covering by any even approximate attempt to sketch Alberti's views on the broad subject we are here considering. We have briefly reviewed the passages where work is dealt with, as it were, head on. Let us now go on to another and no less important facet shedding light on the author's view of life. As we have already anticipated, work is also taken as a metaphor for issues of a different order. Once again *Momus* is found to contain the full range of Alberti's thought. At the point where he is dealing with the creation of the world and its perfection, ranging across the milestones of classical philosophy, the mode of presentation chosen is that of an ironical dialogue between Socrates and an anonymous cobbler. Through the philosopher's questions and the cobbler's answers Alberti states the basic issues as to the perfection of Creation and its completeness.

[...] *Ex urbe igitur excedenti evenit ut cum prope vallum atque sepem horti cuiusdam pervaderet sensisse visus sit nonnullos intus disceptantes de diis et maiorem in modum altercantes. Adstitit. Hic altercantium unus elata voce forte sic dicere aggressus est: 'Ut intelligatis quid sentiam, hoc affirmo, rerum orbem non factum manu, neque tanti operis ullos inveniri posse architectos: immortalem quidem ipsum esse mundum atque aeternum; et cum tam multa in eo divina quas membra conspiciantur, statuo totam hanc machinam deum esse. Si ullus in rerum natura deus aut mortalis aut immortalis est, qui vero contra periturum mundum opinetur? Num is insanire quidem deum posse putabit, an ipse potius insaniet, ubi non conservatorem tantorum tamque absolutorum operum deum, sed peremptorem futurum possit arbitrari?'*⁵³.

[...] Leaving the city, he came up near a trench and hedge enclosing someone's garden. Inside, he glimpsed several people who were discussing the gods and arguing vehemently. Jupiter froze. One of the debaters began to speak, saying in a loud voice: «Let me tell you this, so you'll know what I think: no person's hand made the universe, and you could never find an architect for such a big job. The world itself is immortal and eternal, and since so many things in it look like parts of the divine, I argue that the whole edifice is a god. If there is in nature any god, either mortal or immortal, who would claim that the world will perish? Won't you have to think either that the god could be mad, or that you are mad to be able to reckon that a god would not preserve such a great and perfect work, but destroy it instead? (...)]

Under the simple description of the techniques used to produce the shoemaker's wares, Alberti poses all the key questions regarding the origin of Creation.

[...] *"Agesis, o artifex, si quid in mentem tibi veniat ut velis optimum calceum conficere, non tibi corio esse opus statues optimo?" "Statuam" inquit ille. Tum Socrates: "Quaecumque dabitur corium ad id opus accipiesne an putabis interesse ut ex multis commodius eligas?" "Putabo" inquit. Tum vero Socrates: "Quo id pacto" inquit "dinosces corium? An tibi aliquid quod expe-*

riundo videris corium peropportunum et accommodatissimum propones tibi, cuius comparatione hoc tuum pensites et quid cuique desit ampliusve sit apertius discernas?. “Proponam” inquit ille. Tum Socrates: “Qui vero optimum illud condidit corium casune an ratione assecutus est ut illi nullae adessent mendae?.” “Ratione potius” inquit artifex. “Et quaenam” inquit Socrates “illa fuit ratio ad id munus obeundum? Eane fortassis quam concidendi corii usu et experientia perceperat?” “Ea” inquit artifex. “Fortassis” inquit Socrates “aeque ac tu in seligendo ita ille in parando corio similitudinibus utebatur, partes partibus integrumque integro comparans, quoad futurum corium omnibus numeris responderet suo huic quod menti memoriaeque ascriptum tenebat corium”. “Est” inquit ille “ut dicis”. “Tum” inquit Socrates “quid, si ille nunquam fieri vidisset corium? Eam optimi corii conficiendi descriptionem et similitudinem unde hausisset?”⁵⁴

[...] “Tell me, craftsman, if you intend to make an excellent shoe, don’t you decide to use the best leather?” - “I do decide that”, said he. Then Socrates said, “Do you take whatever leather is on offer, or do you think it makes a difference to choose the best leather from among those offered?” - “That’s what I think”, he said. - “And how do you know the best leather? Do you do anything else but see which leather will be most fitting and suitable, and use the comparison to evaluate it and decide clearly whether it is too small or too big?” - “That’s my position” he said.- “Does someone who works with the best leather rely on chance or method to verify that there are no faults in it?” asked Socrates. - “Method”, said the craftsman.- “And what method did you use to perform the job? Does one perhaps learn it from the experience and practice of preparing leather?” - “Yup,” said the craftsman. - “Perhaps” said Socrates, “you used only analogous procedures both to select and to prepare the leather, comparing parts with parts and the whole with whole, so that the future leather corresponded with mathematical precision to the leather recorded in your mind and memory.” - “Whatever you said,” replied the craftsman. - “So what happens,” said Socrates, “if a man has never seen leather made? Where does the description and likeness of the best kind of leather to prepare come from?”⁵⁵

Irony reigns throughout these pages and again underlies Jupiter’s claim that what Apollo had to say about the Creation could never have been as interesting as the points emerging from Socrates’ dialogue with the cobbler.

Hic Iuppiter: “Tritum istud et vulgatum quidem est dictum, utcumque sit, quod minime cum illo superiori de coriario compares”⁵⁶.

[Jupiter said, “That’s a commonplace, trite thing to say, however it may be, and you can’t put it in the same class as the previous discourse about leather.”]⁵⁷

It is no easy matter at this point to draw any consistent overall viewpoint from the passages analyzed, by way of a conclusion.

What does emerge quite clearly is the image of an intellectual for whom theoretical speculation is part and parcel of practical material life and occupational activity. Theory and practice, thinking and “working” twine together in Alberti’s life as in his literary corpus which is virtually a hymn to manual labour and craftsmanship, activities he refuses to look down on or regard as degrading for a man of intellect. Work is both a

necessary means of survival and livelihood, and a means of communication, a metaphor for subtle and complex ideas.

NOTES

- ¹ One need only think of the movement of men, intellectuals, and therefore ideas, which took place for the councils of Florence-Ferrara of 1438-1439.
- ² F. Braudel, *Il secondo Rinascimento. Due secoli e tre Italie*, Turin 1986, p. 35; cf. e.g. P. Burke, *The European Renaissance. Centres and Peripheries*, Oxford 1998.
- ³ O. Niccoli, *Il Rinascimento*, in F. Benigno, C. Donzelli, C. Fumian, S. Lupo, E. I. Mineo (eds.), *Storia moderna*, Rome 1998, pp. 102-123.
- ⁴ Braudel, *Il secondo Rinascimento* cit., p. 3; Niccoli, *Il Rinascimento* cit., pp. 102-123.
- ⁵ E. Garin, *Medioevo e Rinascimento*, Bari 1961, pp. 90.
- ⁶ Id., *Il filosofo e il mago*, in Id. (ed.), *L'uomo del rinascimento*, Rome 1988, pp. 169-202.
- ⁷ E. Garin, *Il filosofo e il mago*, in Id. (ed.), *L'intellettuale tra Medioevo e Rinascimento*, Rome 1994, pp. 65-131.
- ⁸ Elaborated, among others, by Burckhardt, in his portrait of Alberti, the portrait of an intellectual and 'athlete', eclectic and open to all types of experimentation. See the overall portrait of Alberti that emerges from J. Burckhardt, *La civiltà del Rinascimento in Italia*, Florence 1955 (orig. ed., *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien*, Basel 1860; revised Italian ed. and translation, Florence 1876).
- ⁹ Garin, *Il filosofo*, 1994 cit., p. 110.
- ¹⁰ The name *Leone* (Italian for "lion") was most likely a personal addition following the baptismal name. Grayson deduced so from the praise of the lion's qualities found in the pages of *Intercoenales*. C. Grayson, *Studi su Leon Battista Alberti*, ed. P. Claut, Florence 1998, pp. 419.
- ¹¹ S. Collodo, *L'esperienza e l'opera di Leon Battista Alberti alla luce dei suoi rapporti con la città di Padova*, (in the course of publication).
- ¹² Id., *L'esperienza* cit.; G. Mastellotti, *Barzizza, Gasperino*, in *Dizionario Biografico degli italiani*, VII, Rome 1965, pp. 259-267.; D. Girgensohn, *Gasparino Barzizza, cittadino padovano, onorato dalla repubblica di Venezia(1417)*, in "Quaderni per la storia dell'Università di Padova", 1986, 19, pp. 1-13.
- ¹³ Grayson, *Studi* cit., p. 420.
- ¹⁴ Id., *De commodis litterarum atque incommodis*, in "The modern Language Review", 1988, 83, pp. 1-13.
- ¹⁵ M. Martelli, *Motivi politici nelle Intercoenales di Leon Battista Alberti*, in *Leon Battista Alberti*, Actes du Congrès International de Paris, 10-15 Avril 1995, Turin - Paris 2000, vol. I, pp. 477-489.
- ¹⁶ C. Grayson, *Appunti sulla lingua dell'Alberti*, in C.Grayson., *Studi su Leon Battista Alberti*, ed. P. Claut., Florence 1998, pp. 81-90, pp. 105-110; A. Siekiera, *Bibliografia linguistica albertiana*, Florence 2004; *Il volgare come lingua di cultura dal Trecento al Cinquecento*, Atti del convegno internazionale Mantova 18-20 October 2001, Florence 2003.
- ¹⁷ The exile hanging over the Alberti family ended in 1428. L. Boschetto, *Leon Battista Alberti e Firenze. Biografia, storia e letteratura*, Florence 2000.
- ¹⁸ M. Collareta, *Rileggendo il De statua dell'Alberti*, in L. Chiavoni, G. Ferlisi, M. V. Grassi (eds.), *Leon Battista Alberti e il Quattrocento. Studi in onore di Cecil Grayson e Ernst Gombrich*, Florence 2001, pp. 285-290; L. B. Alberti, *De statua*, ed. M. Collareta, Livorno 1998; L. B. Alberti, *On Painting and On Sculpture. The Latin Texts of the De pictura and the De statua*, ed. and transl. C. Grayson, London 1972, pp. 18-20.

- ¹⁹ N. Maraschio, *Aspetti del bilinguismo albertiano nel "De pictura"*, in "Rinascimento", 1972, 12, pp. 187-199.
- ²⁰ Grayson, *Studi cit.*, p. 423.
- ²¹ E. Garin, *Il pensiero di Leon Battista Alberti: caratteri e contrasti*, in "Rinascimento", 1972, 12, p. 13. In the *Vita S. Potiti* the *De officiis* by Cicero, which according to Cardini can be considered the Bible of civic humanism, finishes in the devil's mouth. That which was expressed in other works as the foundation of civic Florentine humanism becomes an instrument of the devil: R. Cardini, *Mosaici. Il «nemico» dell'Alberti*, Rome 1990, p. 25.
- ²² C. Grayson, *The composition of L. B. Alberti's "Decem libri de re aedificatoria"*, in "Münchener Jahrbuch der bildenden Kunst", 1960, 11, pp. 152-161; F. Choay, *Le De re aedificatoria comme métaphore du fondement*, in *Leon Battista Alberti*, Actes du Congrès International de Paris, 10-15 Avril 1995, Turin - Paris 2000.
- ²³ C. Grayson, *Il «De iure» di Leon Battista Alberti*, in R. Cardini, E. Garin, L. Cesarini Martinelli, G. Pascucci (eds.), *Tradizione classica e letteratura umanistica. Per Alessandro Perosa*, Rome 1985, pp. 173-194.
- ²⁴ L. B. Alberti, *Opera inedita et pauca separatim impressa*, ed. H. Mancini, Florence 1890, pp. 69-121
- ²⁵ The critical edition can be found in C. Grayson, *Il "Canis" di Leon Battista Alberti*, in *Studi in onore di Vittore Branca*, III, Florence 1983, pp. 193-204.
- ²⁶ C. Grayson, *Leon Battista Alberti's "De equo animante"*, in C.E.T. Griffith, R. Hastings (eds.), *Cultural Heritage of the Italian Renaissance. Essays in Honour of T.G. Griffith*, Lampeter 1993, pp. 110-122; J. Schiesari, *Alberti's Cavallo vivo, or the "Art" of Domination*, in "Rinascimento", 2003, 43, pp. 3-13; S. Salomone, *Fonti greche nel "De equo animante" di Leon Battista Alberti*, in "Rinascimento", 2002, 42, pp. 241-250.
- ²⁷ In 1437: R. Watkins, *The Authorship of the «Vita anonyma» of Leon Battista Alberti*, in "Studies in the Renaissance", 1957, 4, pp. 101-112; in 1438 according to R. Fubini, A. Menci Gallorini, *L'autobiografia di Leon Battista Alberti. Studio e edizione*, in "Rinascimento", 1972, 12, pp. 54-56.
- ²⁸ The biographical profile *Vita* is fragmentary. This is most likely not due to any defect in the transmission of the manuscript, but is an effect sought by the author (Fubini, Menci Gallorini, *L'autobiografia cit.*, p. 34). In the first part we do not find the traditional presentation of the personage and his family. Yet the scheme of the *Vita* depends heavily on the classical biography model of the Graeco-Roman school. The impersonal form of the biography recalls the rhetorical model elaborated by Aristotle, according to which when speaking of oneself it is necessary to have another character speak so as to not expose oneself to envy (G. Misch, *Geschichte der Autobiographie. I, Das Altertum, 2 Hälfte*, Frankfurt 1949, p. 300). Even the medieval tradition gave preference to attributing one's own assertions to others in order to enhance their reliability in the eyes of the public. The auto-encomiastic opera character, so broadly discussed by the critics, was particularly appreciated in the Graeco-Roman tradition. One need only think of Isocrates (Fubini, Menci Gallorini, *L'autobiografia cit.*, p. 35), certainly familiar to Alberti, to which tradition he felt connected. Even the transferring of action to the past forms a traditional part of the biographical genre though it should be specified that in the context of Alberti's works (reference is made to *Philodoxeos fabula* and the central theme of glory, interlaced with the personified figures of fame, fortune, virtue, memory and so on) such information assumes an additional meaning that distances it from the genre itself. The theme of fame and glory attributed to him in the biography, which is carefully phrased in the past, goes to show that the author entrusts to time the judgement of his work and, I would venture to say, of his entire figure and personality, not attaching importance to the ephemeral allurements of success in his time. One last note needs to be added. The reader's attention will be caught by another feature besides that explained above. Apart from a fleeting reference to the city of Bologna, the indefinite atmosphere of the work and lack of spatial and temporal coordinates

makes it impossible to place the work in real time: it remains in its subjective dimension. The sensation given is that of skating over the real dimension of human existence, as if the narration of life takes the guise of an "ascetic dream". In the long, difficult path of self-perfection, Alberti perceives those years of his youth as a stage on the way towards elevation to an ideal, yearned for in several passages of his work; whether he ever felt he had reached it is never made clear.

²⁹ See Fubini, Menci Gallorini, *L'autobiografia* cit., p. 72.

³⁰ English translation: R. Wartkins, *L. B. Alberti in the mirror: an interpretation of the Vita with a new translation*, in "Italian Quarterly", 1989, 117, p. 10.

³¹ Wartkins, *L. B. Alberti* cit., p. 10.

³² *Momus* is an allegorical work that "often strikes profound notes" (Garin, *Medioevo* cit., p. 97). According to scholars it is the most complex, disturbing and enigmatic work written by Alberti (S. Simoncini, *L'avventura di Momo nel Rinascimento. Il nume della critica tra Leon Battista Alberti e Giordano Bruno*, in "Rinascimento", 1998, 38, p. 405). In *Momus*, written around 1447, it is possible to notice the highest and most explicit form of Alberti's 'dark' nihilistic side. In this work he overturns stoic ethics making a parody of them by subjecting everything to the yoke of Fate (F. Baccelli, L. D'Ascia, "Delusione" e "invenzione" nelle "Intercenali" di Leon Battista Alberti, Bologna 2003, pp. 44-71). The cosmos is represented here, in apparent contrast to the traditional 'vulgate' of the Renaissance, as an authentic battlefield where all illusions meet their death and the impotence of reason and the perpetual disorder of reality are unmasked. Man as portrayed in *Momus* is vulnerable in the face of fate and fortune, unable to follow through on his own initiatives, abandoned to his baleful destiny without being able to count on credible prospects of redemption. Alberti aspires to formulate, in a *humoristic and disenchanting* key, an *overall judgment on his times*, and more in general *on human vicissitudes in history* (C. Vasoli, *Potere e follia nel Momus*, in *Leon Battista Alberti, Actes du Congrès International de Paris, 10-15 Avril 1995*, Turin - Paris 2000, pp. 443-463). Rising above random events and with an extraordinary instrument at his disposal, *risus* (S. Stolf, *La dérision et le risible dans le Momus de Leon Battista Alberti*, in "Filigrana", 1995, 5, pp. 91-125), he seems intent on undertaking the painful but wholesome task of unmasking the hypocrisies in which men throughout time have cloaked themselves in order to accept themselves and be accepted by the community they belong to. The allegories that he knowingly introduces, the unadorned human condition, reveal the remarkable philosophical depth of this disquieting 'comic' novel, which may be said to belong to a "comical-philosophical" genre (L. Boschetto, *Democrito e la fisiologia della follia. La parodia della filosofia e della medicina nel Momus di Leon Battista Alberti*, in "Rinascimento", 1995, 35, p. 3). And the metaphorical narration of the vicissitudes of *Momus* is functional to the rhetorical device that allows Alberti, in a calmly collected, perfectly literary form, to express a reality that is in actual fact dark, permeated by the shadow of pain and evil (M. Marassi, *Metamorfosi della storia. Momus e Alberti*, Milan 2004, p. 27). His resort to irony and humor allows him, in short, to pillory those didactic aspects present in other works (like *Villa*). While in the *Vita* he will defend the active life and the arts, here he goes so far as to mock the appeal and delights of a secluded existence as nothing short of begging.

³³ L. B. Alberti, *Momus*, ed. and transl. S. Knight, V. Brown, London 2003, I, pp. 130, 132.

³⁴ English translation: Alberti, *Momus* cit., I, pp. 131, 133.

³⁵ This work is probably the reduction of or an extract from a greater work, never written or lost. *Villa* seeks to be the ideal continuation of that genre dedicated to management of the land which developed in the classical epoch and extended all the way to 15th-century literati. One of the leading themes of the work is precisely that *medietas* passed down from Hesiod via Stoic-Epicurean philosophy and the works of Latin writers, such as Virgil with the *Georgics*. *Medietas* (translatable as a combination of measure, equilibrium and knowledge) stands as a model lifestyle geared to avoidance of every excess, facing the unpredictability of fortune and control of reality, just as in agriculture the field must be controlled to get the best for oneself and the surrounding environment, in the conviction that excess, too little or too

much, causes damage that is hard to remedy (L. Pavan, *Il mito della villa*, in *Leon Battista Alberti*, Actes du Congrès International de Paris, 10-15 Avril 1995, Turin - Paris 2000, pp. 317-325). *Medietas* is again found in the economic choice of investing half in the country and half in the city, a choice made by the Alberti family in the 14th century. Moderation must govern management of finances, education of children and obviously running the household, avoiding superfluous costs, without ever being without essentials. *Medietas* is also necessary in relations between servants and masters, as will be seen in the passages reported. Moderation is shown, finally, in the method by which wealth is accumulated: honestly, seeing that all deceit is nothing but deviation from virtue. Perhaps, as has been noted, the language used in the work, the calm direct style, itself answers to the precepts of that *medietas* which is the inspiration of *Villa*.

³⁶ L. B. Alberti, *Villa*, in *Opere volgari*, ed. C. Grayson, Bari 1966, I, p. 3-4.

³⁷ English translation: *ibid.*

³⁸ Alberti, *Momus* cit., I, p. 58.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, I, pp. 60-61

⁴⁰ Most likely composed in 1470, the work was intimately tied to the political and cultural events in Florence. It may be said that the *De Iciarchia* concludes the civil address that Alberti begins in *De famiglia* (L. Boschetto, *Note sul "De Iciarchia" di Leon Battista Alberti*, in "Rinascimento", 1991, 31, p. 185): like that book, this work is set in the circle of the Alberti family. For many years the work has been regarded as one of the numerous treaties on the Prince that so occupied the political-literary production of those centuries, though in fact the distance between the *De Iciarchia* and those treaties is evident. In any case one needs to look at the contemporary political situation in Florence to understand fully the aims of this work. The *De Iciarchia* is certainly making reference to the consolidation of power by the Medicis at the point where it discourses on the danger of such great power in the hands of a single citizen. In the simultaneous presence of multiple semantic levels, Alberti combines a political with a moral note: in the *De Iciarchia* as in numerous other works we again find the moral theme of *medietas*, which in this case is also applied to the political sphere. In this way one can educate the perfect 'civil man' (Boschetto, *Note* cit., p. 185. On the same work see also the recent F. La Brasca, *Alcune considerazioni sul "De Iciarchia" con saggio di commento al prologo*, in "Humanistica", 2006, 1, pp. 81-94). This work devotes only a few pages to the topic of principality, to demonstrate the absence of any sycophancy towards Medici rule, strengthened by the argument for the need to submit to the laws of the person who leads the city, the chief magistrate. Private moderation, at this point appears necessary for attainment of the common good. The most virtuous citizens, in fact, must take a prominent role in government, to counter the aristocratic regime.

⁴¹ L.B. Alberti, *De Iciarchia*, in *Opere volgari*, ed. C. Grayson, Bari 1966, II, p. 41.

⁴² Passage taken from L.B. Alberti, *De Pictura*, ed. C. Grayson, Bari 1980. The work, which was in bilingual version as mentioned above, is one of the most important works on painting to have come down to us from the 15th century. It was based in part on ancient sources like Pliny, and probably on recent experiments on perspective by Brunelleschi (Grayson, *Studi* cit., p. 423), as well as on Alberti's own painting experience. The numerous allusions to ancient history and mythology lead us to suspect that the work was not addressed only to a public of painters and artists but directly to an audience of humanists (C. Hope, *The structure and purpose of De pictura*, in Chiavoni, Ferlisi, Grassi, *Leon Battista Alberti* cit., p. 252). The work has the structure of a classical treatise, with three sections devoted to *ars*, *opus* and *artifex*, in other words, the same structure as Quintilian's treatise on rhetoric (R. E. Wright, *Alberti's "De pictura": Its Literary Structure and Purpose*, in "Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes", 1984, 47, pp. 52-71). That must not however lead one to think that the treatise addressed teaching and didactics. It is certainly more of an exercise in rhetoric. In the work we read of painting in the author's times and of the application of mathematics to the portrayal of perspective. It also conceives the artist not as 'artisan' (on the problem of the identity of artist and artisan in this epoch, the bibliography is as

wide-ranging as it is unwieldy), but *quasi un altro iddio*, almost another god, capable of recreating the universe through depiction.

⁴³ Alberti, *On Painting* cit., p. 64.

⁴⁴ English translation: *ibid.*, pp. 65, 67.

⁴⁵ Reference is made to L. B. Alberti, *I libri della famiglia*, eds. R. Romano, A. Tenenti, F. Furlan, Turin 1994. The theme of "household management" has ancient roots, in Xenophon and in pseudo-Aristotle. These texts had such success in the Middle Ages that they gave rise to a literary trend that culminated in the Middle Ages when thoughts on the *domus* were accorded the status of a science (M. Danzi, *Governo della casa e "scientia oeconomica" fra Medioevo e Rinascimento: nota sul De familia di L. B. Alberti*, in *Leon Battista Alberti*, Actes du Congrès International de Paris, 10-15 Avril 1995, Turin - Paris 2000, pp. 151-170). Continuity with the medieval phase of this literary genre is evident from the structure given to the topic under discussion (M. Danzi, "*In bene e utile della famiglia*": *appunti sulla precettistica albertiana del governo domestico e la sua tradizione*, in Chiavoni, Ferlisi, Grassi, *Leon Battista Alberti* cit., p. 109). The work is divided into four books, which deal with household management, the role of parents in the family, the upbringing of children, and finally, the importance of solid friendships functional to the well-being of the family. *De familia* is not a realistic text, as it may appear at first glance regarding domestic and family issues. In this work Alberti is writing on two planes. Though ultimately concerned with philosophy, he starts from everyday and apparently humble issues, but such reality is not treated metaphorically or toned down: philosophy is not alienated from the pragmatic issues of life. It has been observed that this transposition from the plane of precepts to that of philosophy has something 'Socratic' in it, a philosophical attitude also occurring in *Momus*, in which Socrates himself is a character (Danzi, *In bene* cit., p. 113). In elevating to an art that which pertains to household management, Alberti is once again able to show the great versatility of the Italian vernacular as a support for moral and philosophical themes. The *De Famiglia* is certainly one of the most important works on the subject, not only in the whole Renaissance, but also throughout Italian literature (Grayson, *Studi* cit., p. 422). Despite the difficult rapport with his paternal family, it is to them that Leon Battista turns with his difficulties, couched in the form of a dialogue, dealing with the education of children, all that is necessary for maintaining a happy family, household goods, and finally friendship.

⁴⁶ Alberti, *I libri* cit., Libro II, p. 64.

⁴⁷ English translation: L. B. Alberti, *The Albertis of Florence: Leon Battista Alberti's Della Famiglia*, ed. and transl. G. A. Guarino, Lewisburg 1971, pp. 150-151.

⁴⁸ Alberti, *I libri* cit., p. 109.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 109-110.

⁵⁰ English translation: Alberti, *The Albertis* cit., pp. 240-241.

⁵¹ Alberti, *On Painting* cit., pp. 102, 104.

⁵² English translation: *ibid.*, pp. 103, 105.

⁵³ Alberti, *Momus* cit., I, pp. 214. An English translation can be found in Alberti, *Momus* cit., I, pp. 215.

⁵⁴ Alberti, *Momus* cit., I, pp. 252, 254, 256.

⁵⁵ English translation: *ibid.*, pp. 253, 255, 257.

⁵⁶ Alberti, *Momus* cit., I, pp. 252, 254, 256.

⁵⁷ English translation: *ibid.*, pp. 253, 255, 257.

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