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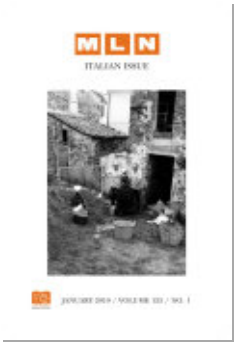

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The *Novellino* or "How to Do Things with Words": An Early Italian Reflection on a Specific Western Way of Using Language

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John L. Austin's lectures, "How to Do Things with Words," have caused a stir in the scientific community from the 1950s on. His thinking about what can be done with words allowed for new approaches to the use of language, considerably enlarging the then prevailing issues of language as a copy or a representation of things or, generally speaking, the origins of language. Since then, even if Austin's reflections have been re-evaluated, and in some cases corrected, they continue to spur a wide range of scientific and humanistic approaches to language.[1] In analytical philosophy, it was John Searle who, on the basis of Austin's lectures, coined the generic term "speech act," which covers all aspects of doing things with words. International scholars of linguistics and literature went on to elaborate and adapt Austin's ideas for their respective fields: in the area of literary criticism it has become common usage to read literary texts as speech acts embedded in a specific and pragmatically aligned cultural context. The distinguished German professor of Romance Philology, Karlheinz Stierle, even went as far as to claim that it is only through application to literary works that

[1] A recent discussion can be found in *Performanz*, ed. Uwe Wirth (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2003).

MLN 125 (2010): 1–25

Austin's theory can reach "ihre volle Entfaltung," or it can achieve its full significance (Stierle, *Text als Handlung* 8). For Stierle, Austin's reasoning suggests a way out of the impasse of literary criticism by separating, if not opposing, its current methods. Considering a writerly text as a speech act, Stierle continues, permits us to conflate the aspects of production and reception of texts because the written is notably based on, and conditioned by, the respective cultural contexts (Stierle, *Text als Handlung* 9).

In the mid-seventies, when Stierle wanted to show how fertile such a pragmatic textual approach could prove to be, he selected the "einfachen Formen," the simple forms, and in particular, the transition from the *exemplum* to the novella in the Trecento. In his opinion, the *Decameron* offers telling insights into the emergence of genuinely literary writings, or, as Stierle puts it: into a "Quellbereich für den Ursprung poetischer Formen" ("Geschichte als Exemplum" 361). Supported by Neuschäfer's study on the novella, Stierle argues that Boccaccio takes up existing narrative patterns, in this instance the *exemplum*, and renders them more complicated.[2] The *exemplum*, which had been employed as a means of acknowledging a difficult situation, and thus attempting to anticipate its outcome, no longer corresponded to the increasingly complex social and anthropological reality of the fourteenth century. Stierle emphasizes that by driving the *exemplum* to its extremes, Boccaccio's novellas incite the reader's consciousness of the text's underlying pattern, and hence of the limitations inherent in the usual ways of thinking. The *literarity* of the texts comes about at the very moment in which the novella starts reflecting upon what it does with words and, therefore, the speech act becomes the subject of telling. Moreover, the *Decameron* deploys a novel framing device and inserts the hundred single tales within the *cornice* of the *brigata*. The frame of the *brigata*, a group of young women and men who strive for a conciliation of nature and reason, is meant to direct the understanding of the reader, encouraging him to participate in the building of an ideal community. Italian researchers have insisted that the *Decameron*, and hence the formation of the novella, didn't grow out of nothing—that it was not unprecedented. Therefore, it proves to be much more likely that the formation of the novella and, within it, the emergence of a new perception of literary prose underwent a

[2] See Hans-Jörg Neuschäfer, *Boccaccio und der Beginn der Novelle. Strukturen der Kurzerzählung auf der Schwelle zwischen Mittelalter und Neuzeit* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1969).

slow, sinuous process, which culminated in the *Decameron*. This essay lays bare further insights into the formation of consciousness of literary prose by studying one of Boccaccio's precursors and by concentrating on the peculiar circumstances in which an awareness of acting with, and by, words could start to bud.

Regarding the phenomenon of "doing things with words," the theory of speech acts is not actually new. The ancients of the Mediterranean Sea region had certainly established that we act by using language. Greek antiquity and successive cultures, including the Arabs, differ from modern theory in that performance, functioning as reasoning about language, led principally to the foundation of an art to be learned and transmitted. Rhetoric was thus comprised of a set of select rules that defined the best ways to use words in order to trigger specific reactions from the audience. The reflection upon language, in ancient times, was induced to sharpen consciousness and, no less, to improve the instrumentalization of words and phrases in service of *eloquentia* and *persuasio*. Therefore, the power to generate acts overshadowed the concept of language, being an act in its own right. For many centuries, following the decline of the Roman Empire, the study of rhetoric continued to be prized as a pillar of the educational system in both Western and Eastern, namely Arab, cultures. Within the heavily oral-based cultures of the European Middle Ages, the study of rhetoric was restricted to the clergy and only later, and particularly in Italy, to lawyers, whereas in the Arab-Islamic world, characterized by the praise of the written word, ancient rhetoric developed into the ideal of perfect expression during the ninth century.[3] In addition to these differences, the interdependency of doing and saying was considered a common thought in both the Eastern and Western hemispheres, and was by no means the prerogative of those who knew how to write.

At the decline of the Middle Ages in Italy, around the year 1300, the first prose to be written in the *vulgare* was composed in Tuscany, and as far as we know, in Florence. In the sixteenth century, Giovanni Della Casa referred to this collection of tales as the "Novellino," because he considered it the younger brother of the *Decameron*. The first prose writing consisted of a still undetermined number of very short tales, which came from a great variety of narrative traditions. The selection of the stories is based on a precise criterion, which the

[3]For further information, see: Sebastian Günther, "Praise to the Book! Al-Jahiz and Ibn Qutayba on the Excellence of the Written Word in Medieval Islam," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 32 (2006): 125–43.

Prologue explicitly mentions: "fiori di parlare, di belle cortesie e di be' risposi e di belle valentie e doni." It is evident that the collection is centered on the issue of speech as a communication act that precedes (in both its senses of the word: to go before and to prevail over) the exchange of gifts or real acts. Modern critics, such as Luisa Mulas, have emphasized the large extent to which the *Novellino* draws on medieval manuals of rhetoric, and the resembling *sermonarii*. Conversely, Cesare Segre is not alone in challenging the view that the stories of the *Novellino* reveal a distancing from the prevailing form of the *exempla*.[4] In Segre's reading, the short tales shed light on a gradual process of overcoming, of growing independent from the dominant concept of telling *exempla*. The events which warrant memorization, and which are written down, are not to be read paradigmatically; rather, as singular, peculiar moments that the author tellingly names "nova."[5] In this, the *Novellino* goes beyond the usual verbalization of examples common to rhetorical interest in language; it ventures to search for new ways.

The problem with this, the earliest Italian prose document, is that we cannot rely on a stable text, and hence we are only able to speculate about the reasons which led to the need, or desire, to reconsider the ways in which stories were told. One reason, and that which this essay wants to make plausible, may have been that towards the end of the thirteenth century the perception of language and the consciousness of the actual potentials hidden within language shifted. This might be described as a rather down-to-earth way of posing Austin's question: "how to do things with words." The *Novellino,* while deeply rooted in the world of the Middle Ages, tentatively engaged in an experiment on the use of language. It does not doubt the existing medieval social hierarchy, nor the established beliefs or privileges. Its original purpose is to simply propose and enhance a courteous way of behaving. Telling stories about courtesy to a mercantile audience in Florence meets the burgeoning desire of the communal elite to enrich their financial wealth and improve their social and cultural standing. Yet,

[4] The clear-cut distinction of the "novella" from the *Novellino*, which Neuschäfer suggests in his study, *Boccaccio und der Beginn der Novelle*, is partially dismissed by Segre, who stresses the first signs of breaking away from the current scheme of the *exemplum*: Cesare Segre, "La novella e i generi letterari," *La Novella Italiana. Atti del Convegno di Caprarola* (Rome: Salerno, 1989) 1: 47–57.

[5] Likewise Alberto Conte comments on the development from the *Ur-Novellino* to the *vulgata* (XXIII): "invece la *vulgata* tende a orientarsi con maggior decisione verso la novità, cioè verso la novella vera e propria (o 'novella-novella')."

by presenting a courteous code of behavior that is focused on doing things with words, the *Novellino* is sensitive to the possibilities, if not of the chances, inherent in verbal acting. Thus, in the first Italian prose writing we can detect a shift from the simple intention of advocating a social code towards a more generalized reflection on the use of language and its implications. Following Karlheinz Stierle, this essay argues that the *Novellino*, the stories themselves, and the gradual formation of the collection, can be read as a move towards a major sensibility of speech acting, and, finally, even of *literarity*.

I. The Prologue

The title of the *Ur-Novellino*, "Libro di novelle e di bel parlare gentile," and its self-presentation in the Prologue do not seem to leave the reader in any doubt about the tenor of the "florilegium" that awaits him.[6] Both appear in the earliest existing copy and are commonly read as proof of a "raccolta d'autore," or an authorial intention underlying the manuscript.[7] The concise self-presentation clearly asserts that although the collection draws on the traditions of rhetorical manuals and *sermonarii* it transcends both. Contrary to rhetoric, the adjectives "bel," "gentile" and "nobile"—the words employed by the Prologue—propose a more aesthetic and socio-cultural interest. In regard to the *sermonarii*, although the Prologue quotes a verse from the New Testament, it intends and uses the Biblical sentence in a non-religious way. The reader is told that the quotation goes back to the time in which Christ "parlava umanamente con noi." While the adjective "umanamente" dates the sentence in Jesus's lifetime, it may also imply the idea of a much more earthly way of speaking. Whereas Christ angrily refutes the Pharisee's fraudulent accusation that he is

[6] See my critical discussion of Walter Pabst's book, *Novellentheorie und Novellendichtung. Zur Geschichte ihrer Antinomie in den romanischen Literaturen* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1967), which concerns the relationship between the *proemium* and the body of the *novae* in the *Novellino*. In Pabst's opinion, the *proemium* of medieval and Renaissance collections of tales are only "showing off" the current *topoi*: in order to indulge in the entertaining world of storytelling, the editors had to claim a moralistic and/or educational purpose. See Franziska Meier, "Die unversehrte Zunge. Überlegungen zum Handeln mit Sprache im *Novellino*," forthcoming in *Romanistisches Jahrbuch* 60.

[7] "Il Prologo dà alla raccolta un'identità che si conferma attraverso le varie metamorfosi del testo": Luisa Mulas, *Lettura del* Novellino (Rome: Bulzoni, 1984) 39. See also: Michelangelo Picone, "L'invenzione della novella italiana," *La Novella italiana* (Rome, 1989) 1: 127: "non di una semplice collezione di racconti, ma di un insieme organico dove confluiscono diverse e sparse narrazioni tradizionali trascritte secondo l'unica prospettiva memoriale dell'autore."

"of Beelzebub" ("Oh generation of vipers, how can ye, being evil, speak good things? for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh" [Matthew 12.34]), the Prologue prescribes a courteous mode of speaking as a kind of proxy for a kind heart, or for "gentilezza." The collection is centered on a code of verbal communication that distinguished the aristocracy and the court, and thereby displays the nobility of the speaker.

Criticism has long focused on the relationship between the self-conception, which comes up in the Prologue, and the content of the stories, regardless of which copy the argumentation is based upon. Determining the significance of the "fiori di parlare" in the tales and the kind of lesson they want to impart is an awkward problem.[8] Most scholars agree that the *Novellino* is distinguished from the earlier Latin *Disciplina clericalis* by a thorough pruning of didactic comments.[9] Tellingly, the sentences of wisdom that are still found in the *Ur-Novellino* almost completely disappear in the *vulgata.*[10] Many scholars have therefore jumped to the conclusion that the stories in the *Novellino* are narrated for the sake of pure entertainment;[11] with the exception of Luisa Mulas, who argued that the reader might take instruction by interpreting the "performances" of the characters (Mulas 48ff). Nevertheless, the overall interpretation remains questionable: firstly because the intention to teach is mentioned twice in the Prologue, and secondly because on behalf of the emerging communal public, two stories strongly refute the mere consumption of tales.[12]

[8] See: Maurizio Dardano, *Lingua e tecnica narrativa nel Duecento* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1969) 155: "L'esaltazione di taluni pretesi intenti ideologici dell'opera non giova ad una sua retta comprensione. Falsa completamente il carattere del *Novellino* la tesi secondo la quale il fine sarebbe quello di introdurre il culto del bel parlare nella società."

[9] See, for instance, Segre, "La novella e i generi letterari" 51. In the *Novellino* the unity of the text no longer depends on counseling good living to younger people, as the *Disciplina clericalis* does. Whereas the latter frames its *exempla* in a multiplied series of dialogues between seniors and juniors, and thereby remains essentially unchanged, the *Novellino* deploys a variety of possibilities joined loosely by shared expectation of language.

[10] See Alberto Conte's commentary to his edition of *Il Novellino* (Rome: Salerno, 2001) xxi.

[11] See Achille Tartaro, "La prosa narrativa antica," *La letteratura italiana,* ed. Alberto Asor Rosa (Torino: Einaudi, 1984) 3: 639; and Enrico Malato, "La nascita della novella italiana: Un'alternativa letteraria borghese alla tradizione cortese," *La novella italiana* (Rome, 1989) 1: 3–45, in particular 19ff. Similarly, Picone points out that aesthetic joy is the primary aim of the collection: "L'invenzione della novella," 130.

[12] Anna Fontes Barrato hints at the metanarrative implications of LXXXIX in, "Narrateur, beffatore, nécromancien: les avatars de l'homme de cour dans le *Novellino,*" *Chroniques italiennes* 106 (2000): 29–38.

Similarly, the significance of the "bel parlare gentile" is unclear. The stories do not realize what the adjective "bel" promises: a beautiful eloquence, a neat style. In the narrated dialogues the reader does not sense any particular concern with rhetorical refinement, but rather a concern with the efficacy, the "potere della parola," as Mulas titles a chapter of her study. Although a large number of stories are set in the imperial court or in the environment of knights and barons, those dedicated to merchants and doctors, and representative of the middle class, are just as prevalent in both quantity and quality. The extent to which the different social classes are equally represented can also be deduced from Cesare Segre's suggestion that the succession of the stories is based on the unities of the various social groups.[13] Of course, the fact that many middle class characters show up is hardly a surprise in a medieval collection. It is not easy to determine exactly how their presence matches the intent to gather "belle cortesie" in order to evoke the ideal behavior of the "gentili [. . .] come uno specchio alli minori" for an audience of merchants. The class contrast, in fact, lessens if one takes into account the characterization the Prologue provides of its primary readership. The collection addresses its public of merchants as being distinguished by "cori gentili e nobili." Repeatedly critics have highlighted how close these ideas on aristocracy are to Dante's discussion of "gentilezza" in the *Vita Nova,* and more precisely in the *Convivio.* Likewise, the *Novellino* does not restrict "gentilezza" to noble origins.[14] Yet, within these stories it is by no means straightforward as to whether the middle class characters actually fulfill the ideal of "gentilezza."

All of these ambiguities are exacerbated by the notorious fact that we do not know the textual form of the first *Novellino.* Even Alberto Conte's annotated edition cannot dispel these uncertainties entirely.[15] We have a heterogeneous corpus made at least a decade after the first collection in the first half of the Trecento, and the two further editions, which are likely to have been initiated and directed by Pietro Bembo,

[13] Segre, "Sull'ordine delle novelle nel *Novellino,*" *Dal Medioevo al Petrarca. Miscellanea di studi in onore di Vittore Branca* (Florence: Olschki, 1983) 1: 129–39.

[14] According to Mulas, "lo spostamento semantico della parola *gentile* dal senso *feudale-cortese* a quello stilnovista si opera tramite un mutamento della sua funzione grammaticale da sostantivo ad aggettivo" (41). Regarding the general discussion of "gentilezza," Maria Corti's essay is still useful: "Le fonti del *Fiore di virtù* e la teoria della nobiltà nel Duecento," *Giornale storico della letteratura italiana* 136 (1958): 1–82.

[15] For an exhaustive review of the *Novellino*'s editorial history and the present state of the debate, see Conte, ed., *Il Novellino,* and Lucia Battaglia Ricci, "Novellino," *Letteratura italiana. Le Opere,* ed. Alberto Asor Rosa (Torino: Einaudi, 1992) 1: 61–83.

in the Cinquecento. We know nothing certain about the authorship of the first collection and its circumstances, nor the backdrop of collecting *nove*—presumably in Florence in the last twenty years of the Duecento. We are equally unaware of the authentic lexical form, and the number and succession of the stories. All these uncertainties are, indeed, the unsurprising consequences of the medieval practice of transmission, which proved even more "careless" in the field of story-telling. Yet, looking at the highly elaborate Prologue, it is quite natural to wonder whether some part of what we experience as the intricate and tormented editorial history of the *Novellino* could not permit a kind of positive reversal, that it was somehow foreseen and even calculated upon by the original author. The indications in the Prologue might have served as a guideline for readers as well as for copyists in how to use and continue the "libro."[16] Such an understanding is further confirmed by the explicit soliciting that the first small group of readers with "cori nobili" ought to pass the "moduli" on to larger, illiterate audiences.[17]

The aim of the Prologue was to confine any use or sequel to the "moduli." The social and cultural needs of the emerging merchant elite had to be met and the sharpening interest in communication had to be respected. This seems to have happened with the later copyists, among them the constructor of the *vulgata*, who set out to purge the first manuscript of any remaining moral comment, install a new order proceeded by social groups or main characters, and introduce intricate links and mirror effects in order to unify loose stories.[18] It would be rather anachronistic to refer to the *Novellino* as a "work in progress"; however, it may be telling to conceive of it as a kind of experimental laboratory. The *Novellino*, under the influence of a shifting consciousness of language, could have engaged in a protracted trial of thoroughly sounding out the ramifications of speech acts in different social contexts and, by doing so, a new conception of written records and of the literary text could have taken shape: the "libro di

[16] See Mulas 38: "Ma, nelle grandi linee, possiamo considerarlo (prologo; F. M.) espressione delle idee del compilatore originario circa la natura e le finalità del testo, i suoi destinatari e i suoi modelli; e potremmo anche credere che i successivi redattori abbiano cercato di attenersi a tali idee, se le hanno volute conservare come insegna del libro."

[17] It is Mulas who pointed out the two types of readers outlined in the Prologue: Mulas 40ff.

[18] In his essay Gianni Celati says that, "nella novella non esiste l'idea del racconto originale, il racconto d'autore come lo intendiamo ora, bensì una ripetizione con continue varianti": "Lo spirito della novella," *Griseldaonline* 6 (2006–07).

novella." Collecting known and highly diffused stories around specific topics and having several copyists continue the work could have gradually led to the constitution of the "coscienza letteraria" in Italy around 1300.[19] The sequence of copies, made by a group consisting of readers and "writers," may be read as a movement from gathering and memorizing stories towards writing prose and constructing a literary text as a textual world in its own right.

II. Reliance on and Praise of Language

A strong reliance on language and a high appreciation for the word emerge from almost all the stories. Rulers particularly appreciate the efficient use of words, while it is as if the writer of the *Novellino* sought the blessing of the very highest class, namely the Emperor. The appraisal of language is indeed unanimous and ubiquitous; it is the assumption upon which the ambitious concept rests and it is the incentive to experiment with speech acts. At the end of the thirteenth century faith in language no longer derived from a magical concept of language—the topic of magic, in fact, has largely disappeared from the narrated world. Instead, it is based on the practice and pragmatics of verbal acting. Incidentally, the stories show no interest in the origins of words or in their reference to things.[20] At most, the narrator and the characters are fascinated by playing with the ambiguous or double meanings of the *signifiant* in their quick-witted replies.

A series of *novelle* illustrates how a possibly obscure and incomprehensible world can by enlightened by plain words. When Alexander the Great calls a knight to court after a "giullare" has accused him of suddenly breaking a contract, both suspicion and confusion are dissipated the moment the knight starts to explain the reason for his behavior, alluding to the specific mode of thought of social classes (IV). The resumption of transparency comes from a wording that is capable of bringing light into the hidden motivations of actions. In the world of the *Novellino,* there is always space for speech and dialogue.[21]

[19] Quoted from Salvatore Battaglia's fundamental study on the transition from the *exemplum* to the novella: *La coscienza letteraria del Medioevo* (Naples: Liguori, 1965).

[20] On this, see Story XIV wherein an educational exercise fails and a woman is called "dimoní" in order to scare the youth. An exception is LXXXIV, where the misunderstanding is caused by a different pronunciation.

[21] See Mulas 81: "La parola è dunque chiamata a svolgere la funzione essenziale di ricondurre entro il quadro di un ordine universale quelle che ad un osservatore rozzo (il giullare) o privo di tutti i necessari elementi interpretativi (Alessandro non sa che il querelante è un giullare) potevano apparire azioni devianti."

Moreover, to verbalize also entails a contribution to the improvement of one's knowledge of the other, as well as of oneself: a knight's somber fears concerning a friend's possible inability to live up to the ideal of selfless friendship are dissolved as soon as they are uttered (XXXIV); a king's recognition of his own failure when he learns from what signs a Greek sage deduced that he is the son of a shepherd initiates his transformation into a generous ruler (III); an astronomer's playful response to a fool's question that in the celestial hierarchy a hat is placed above God, renders his science both questionable to himself and his peers (XXIX).

Behind the reliance on language, of course, is the *ratio*, the *ingegno*; however, because the stories are so strongly focused on the exchange of replies, the *ratio* is transformed into verbal doing. For this, evidence may be found in the stories about Seneca and the coming to terms with strokes of fate by engaging in colloquy (LXXI, LXXII). Seneca's consolations draw on concepts of stoic philosophy, but the ideas mainly rely on words to set off their effect. Whereas this remains concealed in a conversation with a young widow, it becomes clear when Seneca himself stages an inner dialogue to gain awareness of the unintelligible and selfish side of his suffering. The *Novellino* does not want to propagate the stoic attitude toward life; rather, it stresses the efficacy of language as a marvelous device to compare and contrast different point of views. Language is, so to speak, praised for facilitating characters to look at themselves from the outside and thus, in this instance, enabling them to free themselves from their suffering.

A few stories from legal backgrounds accentuate the truthfulness of spoken words. The *Novellino* does not satirize lawyers and judges: though appearing overly-sophisticated, the purpose of the verdicts is to show the true and just meanings contained in the verbalized utterances. Initially, the judges concede an absurd claim to a merchant wanting to be compensated by a beggar who held his bread in the vapor steaming from one of the merchant's kettles. Their concession reflects their fear of breaking away from the principal rules of mercantile manners and thought. In the end, however, they reject the claim because the compensation will take the form of the sound coins make. Similarly relevant for this belief in language is the case of a man who, before leaving for a pilgrimage, entrusted his money to a friend. After his fortunate return the friend returned only a small part of the money, intentionally misunderstanding their accord: "ciò che tu vorrai mi renderai" (X). The verdict, however, is also based on this sentence: the friend is ordered to repay the portion that he himself wanted to

keep, that is, the lion's share. The legal hairsplitting in the *Novellino* proves to be a fine philological, and simultaneously just, exegesis of the word which hides the truth.

In this respect, the *Novellino* can be conceived of as a sequel to the Socratic art of asking questions—a tradition that is explicitly referred to in Story LXI. Even if Socrates is erroneously defined as a Roman citizen, the story is true to his mode of questioning, which demonstrates his ability to verbally stage different points of view in order to find the proper answer. The fact that the Roman Senate has sent the two Greek ambassadors to Socrates and consigned to him the duty of answering their request rests on this particular way of proceeding, of considering things dialogically and dialectically: Socrates as the privileged warrantor for the virtual possibilities of speech acting. Language is not only used as an instrument to advance personal purposes, it is appreciated as a virtual space in which heterogeneous motivations and attitudes can be discussed and resolved.

The same linguistic capacity is featured in a slightly different way in the *vulgata*, in a story about a *fedele* who is punished because he has delivered a box of valueless figs to his ruler. The *fedele* is punished by having the figs thrown at him. This punishment is however interrupted when the *fedele* shouts: "Domine, te lodo" (LXXIV). Questioned by the baffled ruler the *fedele* explains his gratefulness towards his God, who prevented him from bringing peaches, which would have hurt him much more. For this unexpected statement the *fedele* is benevolently excused from the remainder of his punishment. Coming from a Jewish tradition, the plot is once again focused on puzzling nature of words. Again, the point is not to be saved by furnishing a quick-witted reply, but rather to surprise with plain words—here, by expressing an unforeseen, self-distanced and humorous look at oneself. To curiously twist language is a joyful novelty the ruler is always eager to reward. Language is put on stage as a promising mode of stepping out of pre-established roles.

Similar, albeit more complicated, is the story about a blacksmith (VI). Found only in the second edition of the *Novellino,* supervised by Vincenzo Borghini in 1572, it is unlikely to have been written much earlier. A blacksmith is released by the Emperor after he defends working on Sunday with a riddle that even the court sages could not solve. Again, novelty crops up through unexpected ways of speaking which immediately provoke admiration—to the extent that the illegal act is no longer the center of attention. When the blacksmith finds himself in another intricate and perilous situation brought about

by the Emperor, he is able to remain true to his obligation (not revealing the meaning of his riddle until after he sees the Emperor a hundred times), while managing to satisfy the sages who press him to disclose the meaning. The striking novelty is that the blacksmith treats the Emperor's likeness, which appears on the face of coins, as the Emperor himself (he looks at a hundred coins with the Emperor's face). Thanks to his taking the significant for the *signifié*—a way of perception that is based on the then ontological status of a picture as real presence—the blacksmith draws himself out of danger, creates a secure margin for his actions and, moreover, is rewarded for his inventive ingenuity.

In the *Novellino,* one senses a great fascination with the surprising sentence that is able to open new perspectives on an absolutely fixed reality for one joyful instant. Rarely is it more than one sentence embedded in a concise narrative plot that underscores the marvel of the phrase, which is itself simultaneously a speech act directed towards the reader. The collector calls these verbal surprises "nova," as they deserve being recorded and promulgated. In our twenty-first-century perception, it is striking that he does not fear the fading of novelty by repetition. It is further evidence that the notion of "nova," as Mulas has mentioned, does not only imply another arrangement of traditional stories, but presents something original, something unpredicted (Mulas 60). For this reason the stories should not be read in a paradigmatic mode; instead, they try to drive readers out of the common, rather passive attitude of *imitatio* and to induce them to reflect upon the principles conveyed in the narrated speech acts, upon the social margins the use of language opens and, further, to carry out these principles. The lesson which the *Novellino* imparts is the familiarization of readers with the possibilities of speech acts by giving a range of examples, and thereby convincing them to pass on the insights. The traditional function of "memoria," the *Novellino* continues, is modified by transforming the "telling of a speech act" into "a speech act" proper, addressed to a reader who is no longer allowed to remain passive. The memorizing and recording of these kinds of novelties do not imply repetition, or standing still, but set off a process of active adaptation and promulgation, a movement by which the role of the reader is rebuilt as an active counterpart in the text.

III. On *cortesia* or "How to Do Things with Words"

In contrast to their counterparts in Northern and Southern Italy, Tuscan communities knew *cortesia*—the ideal code of behavior in feudal courts—even if they often only knew it indirectly through the medium of chivalric epics or the poetry of troubadours. Whatever the courteous reality in the Middle Ages may have looked like, the literary depiction of a refined form of social behavior fascinated the Tuscan merchant elite. Up until the sixteenth century the Florentine middle class strove to follow and observe the model of courteous-feudal forms of representation and lifestyle as soon as they became wealthy—an attitude that had already left its mark on Italian literature from the late thirteenth century. An intense reflection and attempt to adopt the code of *cortesia,* or of *gentilezza,* can be traced back to the *Novellino,* as well as to the contemporary poems of the young Dante and the poets of the *Dolce Stil Novo*, who expounded their "cor gentil" by the way they lived, and the way in which they lyrically described love. Whereas the *Dolce Stil Novo* addressed a small, handpicked circle of "fedeli d'Amore," the prose—following in the footsteps of Brunetto Latini's engagement with educating the laic readership in Florence—was evidently directed at a much larger and more heterogeneous public, anxious to learn.

That said, this hardly means that in the *Novellino, cortesia* becomes bourgeois, as Michelangelo Picone asserts: "la condensazione della virtus mondana per eccellenza, la declinazione borghese del grande ideale cavalleresco, che può attuarsi sia attraverso l'impiego della parola efficace (i risposi) sia per mezzo dell'azione valorosa (le valentie) nel parlare e nell'opera" (131). The stories are far from wanting to adapt the high ideal to their common bourgeois ambiance: they sincerely aspire to sublimate and refine their conditions. An anecdote of the *vulgata*, though focused on science, makes this point quite clear when a muse is crying about the increasing tendency of writing *volgarizzamenti*—a term that in this case does not only hint at the growing production of translations in the *volgare,* but stresses the lamented outcome: a literal vulgarization of high-flying science (LXXVIII). According to the desire for refinement, the *Novellino* deploys its strategy of breaking away from anything suspected of being vulgar, while it aims towards the use of higher stylistic devices, such as the insertion of verses from a troubadour's lyrical song (LXIV). However, this is less true for the *Ur-Novellino* than for the *vulgata*, which

seems to have furthered the outlined program and to have widened it to the concept of the prose-writing itself.

The *Ur-Novellino* limits its interest to the social manifestations of *cortesia*. First of all, it presents a multifaceted exterior behavior, which the writer apparently advises his readers to imitate. It soon becomes clear, however, that behavior-forming is strongly based on the assumption that the individual has a refined heart—in Freud's terms, it is based on "Triebbändigung." Secondly, the collection is increasingly curious about the implicit ramifications linked to *cortesia*, and about what the prevailing forms of verbal communication mean for the middle classes. The intent to elevate forms of social behavior seems to have brought about linguistic consciousness. Social mobility, which is a characteristic of the *Decameron*, is not familiar to the *Novellino*.

The high significance that *cortesia* enjoys in the world of the *Novellino* is emphasized in the story about an imperial siege of the city of Milan (XXII), in which there can be no doubt about the political sympathies of the Florentine writer and readers. In this case, though, the criticism is directed against the Milanese council because of its decision to keep the Emperor's strayed falcon and thus violating the essential rules of *cortesia*. The Emperor, however, is too canny to assume that such a decision could have been suggested by the elders of the city; actually, it was put forward by a "matto," a fool. Moreover, by running the risk of imperial revenge, the "foolishness" of the decision is underscored. Again, in this story the focus lies on the importance of a courteous sociability that softens harsh realities, or at least allows margins in them. This view is confirmed by other stories that admiringly emphasize the gentle behavior knights show towards their rivals in love, and even towards their worst enemies (LXIII).[22] The *Novellino* wants to spread and install, far beyond the world of the courts, a code of behavior and a way of speaking that permit the building of a parallel realm, and perhaps thereby pervading and transforming the brute reality of lived experience.

In the case of the siege of Milan, it is the Emperor himself who teaches the reader the limitations of anti-courteous attitudes. In most other stories, it is the reader who comes to a similar conclusion by acknowledging the actions of the uncouth via their shortcomings and failures. Moreover, old-school characters prove to be ridiculous.[23]

[22] Although they have to learn how to react against dishonest adversaries; see LXXVI.

[23] See, in particular, XCVI about ser Frulli. Fontes Baratto reads the story as follows: "ser Frulli est aussi un dérisoire antihéros épique qui, l'espace d'un geste incongru, fait

Most of these stories, however, were not in the *Ur-Novellino,* which was concentrated on the search for nobilitation. It was thus the constructor of the *vulgata* who inserted these negative cases as a backdrop to underscore the main ambition of the text. Significantly, from the earliest copy on, as far as anything certain can be said about it, the abstinence from the large range of obscene episodes is palpable.[24] Among the few that do appear, an abnormally large male genital organ is most often featured. Although these well-endowed male characters attract females, they generally appear clumsy and involuntarily funny, almost despised by their peers. The collection is distinguished by a conscious withdrawal from the physical body, which—following Mikhail Bakhtin—carnevalesque narratives loved to celebrate.

In the *Novellino,* the joyful and enjoying body of carnevalesque origin is replaced by the word, which can be deployed in a similarly joyful and enjoying manner. Still, the presentation of *cortesia* does not stop at mere entertainment. It is concerned with how witty replies can defeat mighty adversaries. "How to do things with words," in this context, means to learn that the word is a good device and can be used as a weapon, especially in the service of self-defense. The issue of a powerful word has attracted most of the criticism about the *Novellino*. Luisa Mulas has underlined the influence of rhetoric behind the use of words as weapon, and Luisa Cuomo has presented a fascinating analysis of an intriguing play on the relationship between *res* and *verba*.[25] In all these studies, however, the "fiori di parlare" have not been contextualized within the Prologue's program. Therefore, the manifestations of the powerful word remain somewhat isolated and commonplace—an impression that the *brevitas* of the *nove* seemingly enhance.

The importance the *Novellino* places on seeing the context can be deduced from the famous example of the rescue by words, known as the parable of the three rings (LXXIII). Of course, the *ingegno*, the

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resurgir, pour la liquider définitivement, l'opposition inaugurale entre le chevalier et l'homme de cour (N 4) en se proposant comme la dernière incarnation de l'inexorable déchéance à laquelle est vouée la chevalerie dans le monde urbain, ou elle ne peut plus engendrer que des silhouettes ridicules [. . .] Aussi ser Frulli, petit noble décavé et avare qui se prend tantôt pour un marchand avisé tantôt pour un héros épique, est-il la première victime, tour à tour bernée, sanctionnée et ridiculisée, du nouveau héros de l' 'époque marchande' à venir, qui se présente, pour l'heure, sous les traits comiques du *beffatore*" (33): *Chroniques italiennes* 29–38.

[24] Most of the strange interventions in the text that occur even in the first sixteenth-century edition concern obscene episodes. On this, see the abrupt ending in LXXXVI.

[25] See Cuomo, "Sillogizzare motteggiando e motteggiare sillogizzando: dal *Novellino* alla VI giornata del *Decameron*," *Studi sul Boccaccio* (1981–82): 217–69.

wittiness of a Jewish merchant, is central in his fortunate answer to the sultan's embarrassing question. Incidentally, neither the *Novellino* nor Boccaccio, who takes up the *modulo*, are interested in the underlying message of religious tolerance, but in communication. The witty answer, however, would not have happened had the sultan not been willing to engage in the conversation. The story is enabled by the sultan's decision not to extort money from the merchant—which his God-given status grants him the right to do—but to cover and justify his ungentle intents by giving the illusion of a riddle to be solved. Whereas the sultan or his sages accounted for only two possible answers, the merchant surprised them by telling a story that expounded the impossibility of an answer. Therefore, language, once more, is a means of installing a virtual space in which every point of view is equally dealt with. Above that, the story sheds light on a movement triggered by the implementation of a refined code of sociability among the rulers, as well as the ruled. The path to success is therefore a movement introducing and stabilizing a territory wherein language—which is is not just a representation of things, but a medium in its own right and comprised of a variety of unpredictable ways of perceiving and thinking—is mastered.

As can be seen in the speech of a doctor from Toulouse, middle class characters often prove to master language better than the higher classes (XLIX). Having sent home his young wife, the niece of a bishop, the doctor is forced to defend the separation. Joan Hall has emphasized the humorous aspects originating in "the contrast between the absurd fiction of the two-month pregnancy and the grave, diplomatic and businesslike manner in which the case is expounded" (Hall, "Bel parlare" 3). To me, however, it seems more relevant to take into account the fact that in the defense, the doctor comprehensively adapts the bishop's mode of thought and takes it to its extreme. The doctor confirms his own inferiority in comparison with the high-ranked bishop, and accuses himself of being inadequate, specifically in his want of wealth in order to maintain a wife. It is by adopting the language of the bishop that the doctor imposes his will. The *Novellino* is not interested in satirizing the arrogance that flaws the higher classes, it illustrates the extent to which the doctor is in control first of his emotions and then of the different social language codes in play. Implicitly, it is a further piece of evidence for the sharpened consciousness of language—in other words, what Mikhail Bakhtin has called the "polyphony" of the word. Obviously, the *Novellino* does not want to literarily capture the world of languages as Bakhtin demanded,

it is much more interested in showing how to instrumentalize it for the benefit of its readership, and, beyond that, in its major concern, simply put: "how to do things with words."

It is probable that the doctor's acceptance of a two month pregnancy, and therefore of his paternity, hints slightly at another peculiarity of language: the capacity to deal with "signs" as "truth." The speech may be read as a careful insight into the "as-if" mode of speech acting, or in Freud's terminology, its ability to stage "Probehandlungen." Words may replace reality in the common world, too. Cuomo has based her research into the relationship between *res* and *verba* on Abaelardus's thesis that things can be made visible by language. According to her, the story of Polo Traversaro (LXI)—who, although his gentleness is honored by everybody, is not admitted to the inner core of the aristocracy—is a good example of the transition from being to appearing, as well as the part language or, in general, signs play in order to maintain appearances.[26] It is striking that the unjustified segregation of a class as being noble remains uncriticized both in this story and in the doctor's—of course, should the *Novellino* have done so it would have put its own strategy of refinement and nobilitation at risk. However, it does acknowledge that appearances are built on signs and words, which it accepts as a legitimate approach; the appearances have a value that none of the middle class characters doubt. They only differ in their acting towards it: whereas Polo is suffering from his exclusion, the doctor knows how to play with, and how to take advantage of, class prejudices.

The consciousness of the "as-if" mode is accurately presented in the story of a thief who goes to confession only to reject the idea of doing penance for a loot he has failed to steal (XCI). The confessor's claim that the intent must also be repented and atoned for as if a real deed were legitimate according to the Church. The thief sets out to play a trick on the confessor, presenting him a similarly imaginative penance. The moral is that the biter is bitten, but once more an overriding interest in verbal acting draws our attention to the capacity of language to posit the imaginary in place of the real. At this point, it would be inspiring to go on and enlarge the hypothesis of a new consciousness of language by guessing at the emergence of a specific literary and, hence, fictional mode of writing, but the way the *Novellino* deals with language is primarily rooted in a social and cultural context, beyond which it does not move. The implicit insight one can

[26] See Cuomo 220ff.

grasp could, at most, be understood as an example of how the later pragmaticism of literary texts owes a debt to the merchant's desire for social and cultural reconsideration and re-orientation.

As soon as the conflicts between the doctor and the bishop, the Jewish merchant and the sultan, the thief and the priest are lived out and, if possible, solved in verbal interactions, the *Novellino* is on the brink of questioning the dominance of the clergy and the rulers over the word, the spoken as well as the written.[27] The way in which *cortesia* is described remains ambivalent. The code the nobility employs to segregate itself is admired to the utmost and copied by the middle classes; at the same time the code is revealed as an arrogance that does not stand the test of real virtues and facts. The code of appearances, however, maintains its fascination because of a past and present capability of leaving its mark on factual reality. It is not challenged by this reality; on the contrary, the code aspires to resettle the social world. In this, it is quite different from the magically evoked worlds that characters and readers swiftly recognize as futile deception, and which do not leave any traces (XXI). The *cortesia* proves to be the paradox of a noble, gentle appearance that, in the form of signs, can cover being and partially permeate, if not transform, it. It is the *cortesia* conceived of as an influential speech-act that the writer and the reader of the first Italian prose are tackling and trying to adapt for their benefit.

IV. On the Language of Rulers

Communal pride, particularly in the *Ur-Novellino*, does not go unnoticed. A political self-consciousness affects the manner in which stories about rulers, whether they come from the Old Testament, the ancients or medieval history, are amended and adapted. In contrast to the curiosity in speech acts that concerns most of the collection, this group of stories remains close to a more traditional, paradigmatic style of narration—indeed to the extent that the *Novellino* could be understood as a an early kind of *Fürstenspiegel* as conceptualized by the mercantile class. The *exempla* clearly witness a desire to confine and enclose the power that is supposedly conferred by God. This can be seen in the Old Testament monarchs that the Middle Ages venerated

[27] On the word's monopolization by the clergy and the political rulers, see Paul Zumthor, *La lettre et la voix. De la 'littérature' médiévale* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1987) 83–106.

as ideal kings. They are mostly depicted in plights they can only overcome by recognizing their tasks and obligations towards their people. Symptomatic in the *Novellino* is the wishful thinking that any arbitrary exercise of sovereignty will be followed by its punishment; the ruler's power will be limited from above—from God—and from below, the aristocracy which counterbalance the tyranny, and the people driven to revolt by poverty or exploitation.

The *exempla* featuring David, Solomon and his son Rehoboam are focused on the authority of God calling the kings to account for their mischievous government—he avenges any order decreed out of "hubris" or megalomania (VI, VII). In contrast to the subjects of an earthly regime, the witty use of the word is no help, in the case of the rulers, only a sincere repentance, the confession of one's own failure, can save the protagonist (VI). It is worth noticing that the verse quoted from the Gospel in the Prologue—"for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh"—exactly matches the dialogue between God and kings, whereas it has to be modified for the tales of middle class characters. In front of God, language is nothing but the expression of feelings. What God demands from a king is the virtue of *pietas*, his pity for the sufferings of the people entrusted to him by God.[28] This virtue should subsequently pervade the speech of a ruler addressing both the aristocracy and the people. In fact, the advice the elders give to the newly crowned king Rehoboam makes a point of expounding the benefits of a soft, mild style of speaking. Driven by youthful presumption and inexperience Rehoboam, however, follows the suggestions of some young advisors: he imposes his authority in a harsh, random way and therefore does not have to wait long for the consequences of his mischief (VII). The kings in the *Novellino* do have names, they are singled out, but primarily they are regarded as standing for a type of monarch. In the view of this early and rudimentary *Fürstenspiegel*, the more they exclusively live up to their offices, the less they can keep their own interests in mind.

In chivalrous stories the rulers are depicted as being entangled in a net of obligations towards the—mostly impoverished—knights. Therefore, they are almost on the brink of self-abandonment.[29] In this, there seems to be no worthier ruler than the English *re giovane*

[28] See the educational method of sages who, punishing the mistakes of the prince, beat others in order to teach future responsibility and "corporeal" unity with the people, thereby training the prince's "gentil cuore" (XLVIII).

[29] See Story XXXV from the second sixteenth-century edition of the *Novellino,* which tells of the English king in a more complex way.

who unselfishly gives away all he possesses and who even declares the bold-faced looting by his barons to be royal gifts.[30] It is interesting that the mercantile writers and readers of the *Novellino*, who made their living by trade, take up the point of view that the barons and, in particular, the knights had assumed by "force of poverty." The stories leave no doubt about the superiority of the chivalrous friendship over treasured riches or the social status of a king.[31] At the end of the story, the defeated *re giovane*, who at the moment of death does not hesitate to bond his soul for the benefit of one of his subjects, is to be recognized and admired as a "valente uomo" by his worst enemy, his father. Once more, the lesson the *Novellino* imparts is not to question and even less to rebel against the throne; rather it makes the rulers aware of their impending obligations and responsibilities.

The *Novellino* is confident in its authority over factions and intends to mediate among diverging positions; it has an authority to which every man can appeal. In this aspect, the stories resemble Dante's concept of "monarchia universale," his defense of the Roman Empire. The *Ur-Novellino* contains a story about the Roman Emperor, Trajan, whose outstanding administering of justice was so celebrated in the medieval tradition of *exempla* that Dante assigns him—a pagan ruler—a place in Paradise without any hesitation. However, the version the *Novellino* tells is much more down-to-earth (LXIX, *Ur*-62). It adds another episode to the famous anecdote about fulfilling the wish of a mother to see justice prevail on behalf of her murdered son—one that, as far as the vastness of the sources permits such a statement, seems to be unknown in the *exempla*-tradition. The story tells of Pope Gregory who has exhumed the Emperor. He finds a well-preserved skeleton and, more importantly, a well-preserved tongue. The preservation of this particularly virtuous or vicious organ is a recurring feature in hagiographic literature. Therefore the preservation of the tongue—the organ thanks to which the Emperor administered the law, is by no means extraordinary. What is striking is that we do not know about a previous occurrence of this in the *exempla*-tradition. One wonders whether the writer of the *Novellino* could have taken advantage of the well-introduced device and, against the backdrop of "fiori di parlare," had wanted to set an iconic equivalent that suited the paradigmatic representation of the rulers. Moreover, the device

[30] The worthy English king has its negative counterpart in the despotic ruler, Ezzolino, whose behavior is characterized by peasant-like cunning and brutality (LXXXIV).

[31] See Stories XX and LXXXIV.

matches Cesare Segre's observation that the Duecento had an inclination towards myth-forming.[32]

In the final analysis, the *Novellino* uses the natural authority of rulers as a kind of mouthpiece to confirm the Florentine middle class's concept of order. The rulers, for instance, share their curiosity and pleasure in linguistic wittiness; they honor and reward the manifestations of "ingegno" and promote a hygienic concern with cleanliness; they are keen on civilizing their people. In all these occurrences the *Novellino* favors the "imperadore Federigo," who—historically speaking—can be identified either with Frederick II or with Frederick Barbarossa. The ahistorical world of the *Novellino* does not care to trace the exact historical sets and personas—the "imperadore Federigo" represents the model of the medieval emperor. He is referred to as the second Frederick since no one had yet succeeded him by the time the collection was being shaped. The choice of Federigo, however, raises the question of why the Guelphic city of Florence selected for the last Emperor—out of all other rulers, their worst enemy—one who was still reviled by the *leggenda nera.* One reason may have been that he happened to be the last Emperor—Dante would call him "ultimo imperadore de li Romani"—and, therefore, in the minds of the *Novellino*'s makers, still the representative of the Roman Empire. Another reason may have been the political vacuum that Frederick's death had created in Italy in 1250; it may have provided the writer with more freedom to transform Frederick into a representative of the notions the communal elites were about to shape. Additionally, in some ways the peculiarities of this specific Emperor made him perhaps all the more suitable for this purpose.

In this regard, the two stories about an exchange between the Eastern and the Western world are telling. The *Novellino* apparently exploits Frederick's controversial openness towards Arab culture; he meets, or better, he has to deal with two legendary Eastern rulers, Prester John and the Old Man of the mountain. Editions from the Cinquecento have placed these two stories significantly at the beginning (II) and at the end (C) of the collection.[33] In the *Ur-Novellino,* though, such a "cornice," as Michelangelo Picone calls it, cannot be traced. Only

[32] See the Introduction of *La Prosa del Duecento* (Milan: Ricciardi, 1959) xviii. Segre mentions the "scarsa maturità storica" as a reason why historical events are often transformed into myths. The same can be applied to the figure of Frederick II.

[33] Battaglia Ricci reminds us rightly that the hundredth story in the copy of *Ciento Novelle Antike* must originally have been followed by another one that was withdrawn. See her essay, "Novellino" in *Letteratura Italiana. Le Opere* 63.

the first story appears and it is divided into two parts.[34] Excepting Picone, the two stories have not yet been regarded as a reflection on the relationship between East and West.[35] Joan Hall and Luisa Mulas have described the first one as deploying the common pattern of a "beffa."[36] They agree with the opinion of Prester John that the Emperor has proved to be sage in words but not in deeds. Of course, the duping of an Emperor would not come as a surprise in Guelphic Florence, but this interpretation does not fit the linguistic program outlined in the preceding Prologue, nor is the contrast between words and deeds, as Hall has stressed, matched in other stories.[37] Finally, the division of the original story weakens this interpretation.

Picone's thesis of a second meaning—the underlying revenge of the Western Emperor—is stimulating, but needs some specification. His argument is too strongly affected by a later understanding of the relationship between East and West. According to Picone, the two stories admit the cultural debt the West owes to the East in furnishing the variety of narrative traditions on which the *Novellino,* as well as other collections, draw. Also, both stories assert a "translatio studii," the cultural superiority of the West. It is, however, very unlikely to presume that by the end of the Duecento a sensibility for the different cultural origins of the plots had arisen. Furthermore Italian prose was, and remained, permeated by the admiration of a rich, gigantic and

[34] See Conte, who is convinced that the subtle organization of the stories is due to the constructor of the *vulgata*. See Picone, "La 'cornice' del *Novellino*," *Studi di filologia e letteratura italiana in onore di Maria Picchio Simonelli,* ed. Pietro Frassica (Alessandria: dell'Orso, 1992) 221–37. Conte himself is more interested in contrasting mirroring effects in the *vulgata:* XXIV.

[35] See "Il racconto," *Manuale di Letteratura Italiana,* ed. Franco Brioschi (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 1995) 1: 589–696, 614: "Le due novelle hanno pertanto un valore metanarrativo capitale da veicolare. Sul piano della *historia* esse vogliono significare il riconoscimento di una primazia culturale dell'Oriente, e quindi il debito contratto dall'Occidente nel campo delle esperienze narrative. Sul piano del *sensus* esse intendono alludere alla *traslatio studii*, alla grande mutazione della narrativa orientale in quella occidentale, e quindi al superamento dei modelli semitici (dal *Libro dei sette savi*, alla *Disciplina clericalis*) da parte del nuovo racconto cristiano." He resumes his interpretation in "L'invenzione delle novella italiana," in *La novella italiana* 135ff.

[36] See Hall, "Words and Deeds in the *Novellino*: An Analysis of the First Tale," *Modern Language Review* 77 (1982): 63–73; 72: "Within the traditional, popular narrative form, the story makes a complex statement about the interrelationships of certain values—especially, if implicitly, about the relation of language to experience. It continues and develops the message of the Prologue, with its rhetorical exaltation of the word; but it corrects that message with the merciless laughter of Prester John." Mulas argues that the *Novellino* does not appreciate the speculative word but the pragmatic wording: 76ff.

[37] An exception is story LXXXI, with tells how Troians spoke before and behaved during the war. This contrast, however, is soon lost.

marvelous East. As can also be seen in Dante, the Italian Duecento was profoundly impressed with the medieval idea of a unified universe.[38] Up to the middle of the fourteenth century, the idea of one existing universe did not leave enough space to sharpen the contrast between East and West into a polarized opposition.[39]

As Picone has asserted, the first story is played on two levels: at the surface it stages a rivalry between the self-confident Prester John and Frederick, whose "sapienza" is undergoing an examination. When the Emperor answers the Prester's question as to what is the best thing in the world with the answer, "la misura," the Prester has to concede admiration. Nevertheless, in his view, Frederick does not stand up to the test since he did not ask for the magical "virtues" of the precious stones John had sent him. From the reader's point of view, however, the answer "la misura" might contain a cue for a second meaning. By failing to ask, Frederick may live up to the principle of moderation which allows him to enjoy the extraordinary beauty of the stones, but prevents him from the danger of exploiting the enormous magical powers the stones possess. Above that, the superiority of Prester John is open to discussion when he gives way to his anger concerning the unused stones and orders a jeweler to purloin them. By doing so, he breaks the code of *cortesia*. The trick he plays on Frederick not only aims at making clear the power the Emperor is about to lose, but exposes John as someone who uses dishonest, deceptive means.[40] In synthesis, to the extent which the Emperor realizes the project of a social and political order as it is conceptualized by the emerging middle classes in Tuscany, which is apparent in his being duped (wherein his confined power is manifest), he is a useful symbol for a self-conception that is to become the conception of Western particularity.

In a similar manner the hundredth story requires a reading on two

[38] Story VIII reports the case of a Syrian king who was chased by his people and whose misery is meant to be a lesson to a young Greek prince. The East is not yet fixed on eternal despotism.

[39] The opposition only becomes installed when Petrarca conveys a humanistic superstructure to the common religious propaganda about crusading and, in the wake of ancient models, enlarges the clash of religions to the clash of civilizations. He thoroughly blanks out the virtues and sense of marvel the Middle Ages had assigned to the East. See my essay, "Francesco Petrarcas Orient und die Idee Europas. Zum *Canzoniere* (Canzone Nr. 28), dem *Itinerarium* und den *Triumphi*," *Romanische Forschungen* 119 (2007): 39–72.

[40] In Hall's view, the story deals with the contrast between "courtly idealism" and "mercantile practicality": 72. The commonplace connection of the East with deception is confirmed in Story LXXVI, when the Sultan sends a treacherous present to the crusader, Richard Lionheart.

levels. Superficially, the Old Man of the mountain is far superior to Frederick. In contrast to the Old Man who demonstrates his unlimited power by making two assassins jump from a tower to their death, Frederick does not dare to test his authority upon his vassals or his barons and, instead, chooses perhaps the weakest member, his wife, who, actually, does not fear him either. Of course, in the West the authority of the Emperor is ridiculously shaken; in the "nova" Frederick even happens to be humiliated into a character of the low-style *fabliau* which was not common in Italy. However, within a collection that highly appreciates the chances inherent to communicative acting, the demonstration of power—the single mute gesture, at which the assassins jump—is puzzling. The notorious infertile and murderous effects of despotism are too eye-catching not to be intended. In contrast, the wife's "battuta," although it reveals the Emperor to be a cuckold, evokes liveliness and pleasure. A reflection on authority emerges from the obvious *fabliau*-scenery. Beside this, the "battuta" once more stages a speech act, namely the woman's self-confident refusal of her body.

In conclusion, the early fascination with feudal civilization that gripped Florentine merchants at the end of the Middle Ages was responsible for the impulse to collect and collate a long work, in which oft told stories were recorded and reconstructed. However, the more the code of social behavior, the "fiori di parlare," was portrayed, the more the men working on the *Novellino* seem to have become sensitive to the far-reaching ramifications of speech acting. Writers and audiences both began to acknowledge the extent to which their pleasure of linguistic wit implied the idea of verbal communication as a substitute of physical acts. The process of civilization had brought to light how a primarily linguistic manner of social interchange could suit the interests of the rising social classes. Beyond their *memoria* function, the stories increasingly set out to convince the reader of the code's advantages and subsequently to pass the knowledge on to other people. In doing so, the writers of the *Novellino* began to perceive the stories themselves as speech acts, and to recognize the pragmatic value of written texts. This emerging, burgeoning reflection on *literarity* can be followed up in the sequence of the Trecento copies.

The *Novellino*'s interest in redesigning the social and political order, along with its growing consciousness of language, finally led to an enlargement of the Tuscans' self-conception into the somewhat fanciful idea of a specific Western civilization. Once more, the editorial history of the *Novellino*, spanning three centuries, unfolds in a slow, and

probably unforeseen, process of transformation of the reflection on language into a self-conscious insight of "Western" or, more precisely, European peculiarities, as the term "West" was not current at that time. The emerging Tuscan communities seem to have played an important part in the later burgeoning self-consciousness of Western culture by appreciating and fashioning the impact of language on human reality. Although the *Novellino*'s notion of language is deeply rooted in the social and cultural context, which the early versions do not move beyond, a new interest in language that triggered a broad range of consequences becomes palpable in the later versions. It pushed language to gain autonomy; to develop into an independent medium in its own right and based on its own rules. By focusing on the topic of acting with words, the *Novellino* manages to give an original twist to a rich variety of tales emanating from different cultures and, by doing so, to gradually loosen its bonds to these ancient traditions of storytelling. This early Italian collection, over time and along with other currents, brought about an increasing sense of one's own specificity. It installed and broadened the gap towards an "East" that seemed to be firmly fixed on God's written *verb*.

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