

Intellect and Imagination in Pallavicino's *Arte della perfezion cristiana*: A Close Reading

Alessandro Metlica

Sforza Pallavicino's literary career has been interpreted by Eraldo Bellini as a gradual passage from poetry to science and theology,¹ because the delight provided by literature (*delectare*), which Pallavicino praises in his youth, is progressively replaced by a more intellectual idea of beauty as objective truth. In *Del bene* (1644), poetry is still supposed to be free from any concerns about the falseness of his object, since the poetical process is enacted in a phase preceding the distinction between true and false. However, this phase, called 'first apprehension' ('prima apprehensione'), is rejected by Pallavicino in his *Trattato dello stile e del dialogo* (1662, reworking the *Considerazioni* published in 1646), where a univocal task is assigned to literature: 'to instruct, to teach' (*docere*).² The complex but coherent evolution of Pallavicino's ideas about poetry must be viewed in the context of Baroque Rome, especially during the Barberini papacy, when debates arose following the rhetorical and stylistic innovations of the so-called *marinismo*. This crucial topic is adequately discussed in some important contributions gathered in this volume.³

In my paper I examine the arrival point of this cultural trail, which could be seen, as acknowledged by Bellini, in Pallavicino's *Arte della perfezion cristiana* (1665). Indeed, from the first pages of this treatise Pallavicino openly affirms that the two poles of his thought and life—a life described as 'entirely cultured and ecclesiastical' ('tutta letterata e tutta ecclesiastica')⁴—maintain a relation much more unbalanced than in his earlier works. Even if the sacred played

1 Bellini E., "Scrittura letteraria e scrittura filosofica in Sforza Pallavicino", in Bellini E. – Scarpati C., *Il vero e il falso dei poeti: Tasso, Tesauro, Pallavicino, Muratori* (Milan: 1990) 73–189.

2 Benedetto Croce has underlined the remarkable difference between the ideas that Pallavicino expresses in *Del bene* and his later conception of poetry in the *Trattato*; see Croce B., "I trattatisti italiani del concettismo e Baltasar Gracián", in *Atti e memorie dell'Accademia Pontaniana* (Naples: 1899) 1–32, and idem, *Storia dell'età barocca in Italia* (Bari: 1929) 183–188.

3 See the papers by Giulio Pietro Riga, Jon Snyder, and Bellini himself in this volume.

4 All quotations are taken from the *princeps: Arte della perfezion cristiana del card. Sforza Pallavicino. Divisa in tre libri* (Rome, ad istanza di Iacomo Antonio Celsi, librario appresso al Collegio Romano/Angelo Bernabò: 1665) here 4. I have distinguished 'u' from 'v' and modernised the punctuation.

a main role in those works too, now Pallavicino plans to quit any profane or secular topics in favour of a truly devotional approach.

In my earlier works, the sacred is like gold in coins, which is always cast in a copper alloy; this was demanded by the topic of such works. The same goes for the medical virtues of flowers and fruits: to preserve such virtues, one has to blend them with a sweet taste that isn't beneficial in itself. Now that I am past my prime, I intend to tackle a topic in which all my knowledge could help me and others spiritually.⁵

Still, *Arte della perfezion cristiana* entails a peculiar attitude towards rhetoric and literature, particularly regarding the relation between intellect (*intelletto*) and imagination (*immaginazione* or *fantasia*). The tight connection between these two human faculties is the subject of an accurate analysis carried out in philosophical (i.e., Aristotelian) terms; nevertheless, to finally illustrate his main thesis, Pallavicino uses a series of intriguing metaphors, physically depicting the act of knowing and, consequently, the act of faith. My paper aims precisely to clarify this point.

Offering a solid and highly organised compendium of Pallavicino's late ideas, *Arte della perfezion cristiana* mainly consists of an in-depth meditation upon the self-evidence of Christian religion. Yet it is neither a mystical nor a theological work in the proper sense, since the argumentation is not grounded on the Scriptures. Even if Pallavicino tackles some articles of faith as he delves more deeply into his reasoning, he is basically creating an open and fast-paced model for the deontology of Christian ethics. As he states at the beginning of the work, his aim is 'to teach in an orderly and rational manner how to educate a man perfect in spirit, that is to say, a perfect Christian'.⁶ Indeed, to ease the reader's spiritual life, *Arte della perfezion cristiana* follows a very simple structure. The treatise is divided in three books, each of which is composed of short paragraphs committed to a specific question and introduced by a detailed rubric. Book two mainly deals with capital sins; book three with the value of sacraments. In book one, a more general matter is discussed, as Pallavicino

5 Pallavicino, *Arte della perfezion cristiana* 4: 'Nelle passate mie Opere il sacro è come l'oro nelle monete, il quale non è mai schietto da qualche lega di rame, havendo richiesto così l'argomento loro: in quella maniera che 'l salubre de' fiori e de' pomi non può conservarsi e confettarsi senza mischiarvi quel dolce che per sé non conferisce alla salute. Onde mi son proposto in quest'ultimo de' miei anni imprendere qualche soggetto in cui tutto il mio studio debba rivolgersi ad aiutare sì me, sì altrui nello spirito'.

6 Pallavicino, *Arte della perfezion cristiana* 8: 'S'apprenda con ordine e con ragione l'arte di formare un huomo perfetto nello spirito; il che val tanto, come un perfetto Cristiano'.

tries to define the epistemological process that should lead man to faith and repentance. The relation between *intelletto* and *fantasia*, on which my paper will focus, has a key part in this process.

Arte della perfezion cristiana opens with a *proemio* highly praising intellect, which Pallavicino considers the most noble and the most powerful faculty of man. 'All human faculties bend the knee to intellect', because it 'rules the world'.⁷ At first, *intelletto* is employed in a broad sense, as a synonym of 'intelligence, curiosity' to indicate man's thirst for knowledge. Further in the argument, it is more precisely defined as the faculty of 'judging and considering things' ('il qual giudica e discorre delle cose')⁸ and it is identified with the eternal part of man. Imagination, however, is finite and mortal, and is described as the 'power' or 'ability' (*potenza*) that is in charge of the perception of spiritual realities in the form of corporeal images.

Pallavicino's epistemological model appears to be inspired by the one in use in the Aristotelian tradition. Along this line, *fantasia* could be identified with *anima irrationalis*, and *intelletto* with *anima rationalis*. As a matter of fact, in the same terms as Aristotle, in *Arte della perfezion cristiana* imagination and intellect both contribute to the process of knowing: the first represents a sort of link that joins the senses to the intellect, as it allows sensible knowledge—knowledge apprehended through the senses—to evolve in a more solid and rationality-based comprehension of the world. However, Pallavicino remarkably stresses the role of *fantasia*. Imagination is not just a halfway step toward intellectual knowledge; the judgement of *intelletto* is unavoidably affected, if not misled, by the sensible representations. When imagination poorly displays a principle, the intellect can ignore it; but it always lets itself be captivated by a brilliant and colourful depiction. This idea leads Pallavicino to compare the images created by *fantasia* with Michelangelo and Titian's works:

A clear, strong, and lively image, as the ones by Michelangelo usually are, drives the intellect to approbation and esteem. [...] As it stares at the sun, our eye crafts an image that is more vivid and realistic than Titian's paintings.⁹

7 Ibid. 2: 'In fine tutte l'altre potenze dell'uomo s'inclinano all'intelletto: l'intelletto giudica di tutte le cose, l'intelletto governa il mondo'.

8 Ibid. 17.

9 Ibid. 19: 'Una immagine distinta, gagliarda e vivace, quali soglion essere quelle di Michel Agnolo, rapisce l'intelletto all'approvazione e all'estimazione'; Ibid. 25: 'Il nostro occhio, se rimira il sole, ne forma in sé una imagine più viva e più somigliante di quante ne sapesse dipigner Tiziano'.

In addition, the relation between imagination and intellect is not strictly hierarchical, as the first can deceive our senses even when the latter is aware of the deception. Pallavicino exemplifies this process with an example taken from the dramatic experience: even if *intelletto* can easily diagnose the fictional nature of a play, a viewer's *fantasia* is struck by the emotions represented on stage:

When a tragedy or a comedy is staged, the public is well aware that everything on scene is false; however, the art displayed by the playwright and by the actors strikes the audience's imagination so much that they mournfully cry or laugh with jubilation.¹⁰

To define how imagination works, Pallavicino brings up the sphere of the arts, which he has implicitly condemned in the *proemio*. The fact is that art, just like imagination, cannot be avoided, since the role it plays in man's life is far too important. This is why the true aim of *Arte della perfezion cristiana* is not to put down imagination, but rather to make use of it, by properly addressing its resources. Accordingly, both visual arts and theatre show up again, together with music, in the most important pages of *Arte della perfezion cristiana*, as we shall see shortly.

As far as literature is concerned, Pallavicino discusses a similar matter in *Del bene*, wondering whether poetry, dealing with an overtly false subject, can create true emotions. The answer given by Antonio Quarenghi, one of the dialogue's characters, is positive. For example, a man walking alone in the dark is scared for no logical reason. His imagination is touched and moved even if his intellect is not, and the same applies to poetry.¹¹ In *Del bene*, unlike in *Arte della perfezion cristiana*, literature is still a constructive value, as it is supposed to contribute to ethics and religion. Even so, poetical illusion is far from being considered beneficial: since it deeply affects imagination and bypasses intellect's judgement, poetry usually gives birth to false belief and misconception.

In *Arte della perfezion cristiana*, with these remarks Pallavicino provides a starting point to clarify the relation that intellect and imagination should entertain in a man 'perfect in spirit'. The topic is less theoretical than it is prescriptive, as it aims only to show the simplest way to reliable faith. In this

10 Ibid. 19: 'Quando rappresentansi tragedie o commedie, hanno contezza i riguardanti che tutto è finto; e nondimeno l'arte del compositore e de' recitatori muove sì fortemente la fantasia, che or tragge dal teatro lagrime di cordoglio, or giubilo di allegrezza'.

11 Pallavicino Sforza, *Del bene libri quattro* (Rome, Appresso gli Eredi di Francesco Corbelletti: 1644) 456–460.

respect, the main problem concerns the renunciation of material goods. By their nature, material goods are highly prized by the imagination. The rational part of man is able to understand their insignificance in light of eternal salvation; nevertheless, as previously stated, *intelletto* can be neither conquered nor engaged without the aid of *fantasia*. A genuine conversion thus requires both a rational commitment and an emotional involvement. But how to seize human imagination? And how to harmonise it with intellect?¹²

In Pallavicino's thought, the issue appears to be linked to a key topic of baroque culture—the purposes and features of homiletics. By depicting hell in the most horrifying way, for example, Spanish preachers move believers' imagination so deeply that they shout, cry, and bow down.¹³ However, *Arte della perfezion cristiana* openly disagrees with the usefulness of this practice. The fact is, as Pallavicino observes, this effect is not long lasting. Shortly after the end of such a sermon, believers are ready to restart their usual life, as if nothing had happened. This kind of behaviour is due to the nature of imagination: as a substantial faculty, involved with senses and physical appearances, *fantasia* mostly depends on the presence of the object. When this is lacking, its influence on the imagination rapidly disappears too. The example of theatre is also revealing in this case. While a play is performed, the actor's fake tears come with the true ones cried by the audience; yet, 'once the curtain is down, the deceit is revealed and the pity is extinguished'.¹⁴

Therefore, the eloquence of Spanish preachers is as intense as it is ephemeral. *Arte della perfezion cristiana* is aligned against the rhetorical principle of *movere* ('to move, to shake') that inspires this kind of oratory. Homiletics has to guarantee the spiritual health of believers, without the incitement of their amazement or admiration as a goal. Of course, this issue was the subject of much debate throughout the seventeenth century, especially within the Society of Jesus, where the matter had been discussed since Claudio Aquaviva's Generalate (1581–1615).¹⁵ Baroque features such as the emphatic tone, the vibrant metaphors, and the magniloquent descriptions are either condemned as corruptions of the holy message or commended as effective tools to capture people's attention. The former Jesuit Emanuele Tesauro (1592–1675),

12 Pallavicino, *Arte della perfezion cristiana* 22.

13 Ibid. 23–25.

14 Ibid. 24: 'Allo stesso modo nelle azioni rappresentate, finché il recitante piagne le finte sue sciagure sul palco, il teatro s'avvisa per poco ch'elle non sian ritratti, ma originali; ed accompagna le altrui simulate lagrime con le sue vere; ma calata la tenda, repente si discerne la falsità e s'estingue la compassione'.

15 See Mostaccio S., *Early Modern Jesuits between Obedience and Conscience during the Generalate of Claudio Acquaviva* (Farnham: 2015).

whose appreciation for baroque poetry is well known, supported the latter thesis: according to his *Trattato dei concetti predicabili* (published eleven years before *Arte della perfezion cristiana* as the ninth chapter of the *Cannocchiale aristotelico*),¹⁶ the preacher's *ingegno* ('wit') is able to cause more excitement in the public than any theological demonstration. On the contrary, Pallavicino argues that such an excitement, as a mere result of people's imagination, is neither long-lasting nor fruitful. Sermons have to capture the intellect as well, to effectively curb believers' *volontà* ('willpower').

This is the main reason why Pallavicino, in his last work, separates profane poetry from devotional literature in such a radical way: he totally refuses the inventive use of metaphors theorised by Tesauro. Yet, as previously mentioned, the metaphor itself plays a central role in *Arte della perfezion cristiana*. Pallavicino wants to avoid the flamboyant conceits typical of the so-called *marinismo*. The similitudes that *Arte della perfezion cristiana* resorts to serve instead as illustrations appear deliberately inspired, both in terms of imagery and rhetorical devices, by the parables of Jesus.¹⁷ Nevertheless, Pallavicino defines the correct balance between intellect and imagination through a long and intriguing metaphor. *Fantasia* is compared to a stone: it can be thrown up, as the sermons given by Spanish preachers do, but it will tend to fall, since it belongs to the earth by its nature. To raise imagination higher, to lift it up from sensible knowledge, it is useless to strike it violently with the fear of hell or the promise of heaven; sooner or later, it will fall down again. The stone of *fantasia* should rather be elevated with composure and perseverance, in the way architects build, so that it may be placed at the top of the tower of faith.¹⁸

16 Tesauro Emanuele, *Il cannocchiale aristotelico* (Torino, Giovanni Sinibaldo, Stampator Regio e Camerale: 1654).

17 Pallavicino, *Arte della perfezion cristiana*, 23.

18 Ibid. 27–28: 'Più vale a far che la pietra si posi nel luogo dove è scagliata l'impeto con cui la scagliamo verso la Terra che verso il Cielo: perochè, quantunque ambedue tali impeti sieno di momentanea durata, nondimeno la pietra quando è di fatto in terra, si ferma quivi per sua natura; ma quando è in alto non vi rimane se non è sostenuta da forza altrui. Non diversamente la fantasia, quando per virtù di qualche oggetto gagliardo rappresentato dal senso immagina per vero e gran bene un piacer terreno, quantunque poi cessi l'impressione del senso, non muta ella concetto, peroché riman nel suo naturale, essendo potenza terrena e inclinata a concepir vivamente il bene e 'l male terreno; là dove se con ordigni di rappresentazioni sensibili ella è innalzata ad immaginar come veri e grandi i beni e i mali spirituali, mancata che sia tal rappresentazione, ricade al suo passo; non potendo mantenersi in quell'altezza di concetti se non v'è sostenuta da forza superiore. Or sì come le pietre si pongono stabilmente in luogo sublime e quasi confinante alle nuvole non già sospignendole colà su per impeto di macchine, ma portandovele con lento molto, e poi collocandole sopra un fermo appoggio o di ben fondate torri, o di robustissime montagne, così, perché la fantasia durevolmente ascenda a un'alta estimazione delle

This compelling image provisionally stops Pallavicino's epistemological reflection. As a matter of fact, chapters six to eleven turn to moral philosophy, by focusing on more general topics such as the vanity of earthly wealth and power. However, before book one ends with a more conventional apology of Catholicism (chapters fourteen to seventeen), Pallavicino appeals to another metaphor to outline one last time the relation between intellect and imagination. At the opening of chapter thirteen, the two faculties are compared to two musical instruments ('due cetere', i.e., 'two citterns'):

Intellect and imagination are like two citterns tuned in unison and facing one another; they are like two corresponding echoes, since what sounds in the first, resounds in the latter. Intellect immediately receives the image of what has been conceived by imagination. Reciprocally, imagination portrays at once what has been contemplated by intellect; and to realise this portrait, imagination uses the most appropriate colours owned in its earthly workshop.¹⁹

The sympathy (*simpatia*) between intellect and imagination should be understood in an etymological sense, as a state of empathic concern affecting both faculties. In other words, imagination deeply influences intellect, but the reverse is also true. For example, as Pallavicino points out, many Christians believe in silly superstitions, and fear the coming of bad luck from breaking a mirror or spilling salt on the table.²⁰ Imagination does not play any role in the process, since the misfortune is not an emotion caused by a representation conveyed through the senses. Instead, such superstition primarily concerns intellect: in their youth, these people have rationally accepted bad luck to be true, and the notions they have learned since then, including religious truths, can heal neither their *intelletto* nor their *fantasia*. The latter has shared the judgement of the first for so many years that, when a mirror is broken or the salt is spilt, imagination is affected by the very same idea of misfortune.

As Pallavicino concludes, homiletics has to persuade both intellect and imagination; more importantly, the two faculties should be harmonised with

cose spirituali, convien darle qualche fermaglio che la sostenga tanto più su del basso e natio suo centro'.

19 Ibid. 59: 'L'intelletto e la fantasia sono come due cetere accordate in unissono, e poste l'una rimpetto all'altra; o due echi le quali si corrispondano, sicché quanto qui suona, colà risuoni. Di ciò che la fantasia concepisce, tramanda ella tosto l'immagine all'intelletto. Vicendevolmente ciò che l'intelletto contempla, è ritratto immantente dalla fantasia co' più adattati colori ch'ell'abbia nella sua terrena bottega'.

20 Ibid. 61–62.

one another. This explains the shift from the painting metaphor—recalled once again in ‘the most appropriate colours’ used by *fantasia*—to musical imagery. Like two citterns being played together, intellect and imagination have to be in tune; to execute the celestial music opening the gates of heaven, the human orchestra needs to find the perfect balance between its instruments. *Arte della perfezion cristiana* provides the music notation, and Pallavicino takes on the role of conductor.

