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Labyrinthine Language-Games

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Marcello Corrente, *Semiotica dell'*Eros *Maschile: Rivelazione e Sublimazione del Desiderio Fisico nel Soggettivismo Lirico di Philip Sidney, John Donne e William Shakespeare* [*Semiotics of Masculine* Eros*: Revelation and Refinement of the Physical Desire in the Love Poetry of Philip Sidney, John Donne, and William Shakespeare*], Milano: La Quercia Fiorita, 2010. 510 pp.

This is a work about the ways in which, between the end of the sixteenth century and the beginning of the seventeenth, basic elements of sonnets and love poems (like sexual desire, male subjectivity, and the tension between suitor and mistress) changed together with other aspects of the contextual English culture of that period. In his five-hundred-page-long study, Marcello Corrente finds a compelling way to delineate the traits of what he calls "the linguistic and expressive forms" and "the semantic structures" of the time, presenting them as the means used by Philip Sidney, John Donne, and William Shakespeare, whether consciously or not, to express and manifest erotic desire and love feelings (p. 11).[1] Corrente builds his work on what he calls "the semiotics of masculine *eros*," a system of signification from which ensue the different literary elaborations of love, eroticism, and subjectivity proper to the English Renaissance. As the author specifies in a footnote (which I would have liked to see appear in the very body of the book), in this study of the semiotics of *eros,* the latter are not merely interpreted on the basis of "the linguistic and non-linguistic signs" which fashioned them as a particular language at the end of the sixteenth

[1]All translations of quotations from Corrente's text are my own.

century, but also as a result of "cultural models," "behavioral forms," and "all those corresponding behavioral forms which can be traced back to literary conventions, communication codes, social praxis, customs and *forma mentis* of the Elizabethan era" (p. 11, n. 1). Corrente thus traces the historical, generic, and thematic development of the love lyrics, with a strong penchant for sonnets, as the fashioning of a language-game with strongly "self-reflexive" characteristics, a manifestation of erotic desire which the poem both celebrates and reveals in a form of verbal narcissism, or, as Corrente quotes from Yvor Winters, "the pleasures of rhetoric for its own sake" (p. 13).

The author's argument is basically a methodological one: vis-à-vis the traditional interpretation of the relationships and tensions existing between "the formal aspects" of poetry, "the lexical statutes of a literary convention" to which it belongs, and the author's "subjective voice" revealed in it, Corrente frees the voices "that emerge from the texts" and that allows him to acknowledge "the complexity inherent in a poet's writing" (pp. 19, 20). It is in this way that Corrente formulates his compelling statement in favor of the uniqueness of the poet's "lyrical *I*" and the ways in which it both "conforms and does not conform" to "the standard literary models and genres of a specific historical context" (p. 19). This distinction is, in Corrente's argument, "particularly evident . . . in the lyric self-consciousness of sonneteers as the genre developed and spread" and a sign of the decadence of this specific model (p. 42). Poetic self-consciousness is attained when the author understands the role of a specific cultural tradition within the socio-historical context in which he lives and writes, and upon conceiving the significance of his specific work within that context *and* vis-à-vis the literary tradition to which he affiliates himself. In this way, Corrente builds a fascinating historical and theoretical discussion of the dynamics and tensions between the poet's voice, the lyrical speaker of the poem who eulogizes the feminine interlocutor, and the feminine addressee of his love poetry. The higher the degree of self-consciousness in the author's voice, the more he would deviate from the poetic model expected from a sonneteer, and the more he would abandon the elision of his personal voice behind the lyrical speaker for a clearer revelation of his intellectual independence. This process is traced by Corrente as parallel to the distinction between "speaker and speech," or, to use De Saussure's terms, between *langue* and *parole*: in these terms, the author's *mens auctoris* is, in

an advanced, even decadent, moment of generic elaboration, not merely a reflection of the contextual discourses which fashioned his *sermo*, but actually a move of dissociation from that web of language-games in or by which it was fashioned, as part of a moment of authorial self-awareness and generic refusal/modification. Although Corrente's distinction between "the formal aspects" of a genre and "the semantic aspects" of the individual poem is certainly a powerful and a compelling way to shed light on what he describes as the processes of "revelation *and* sublimation of physical desire in the lyrical subjectivity" of Renaissance poets, it belongs to a methodological and theoretical tradition to which the author does not seem to know he belongs. Eminent absentees in Corrente's bibliography are historians like J. G. A. Pocock and Quentin Skinner who, throughout the last three decades of the twentieth century, established a methodology for the understanding of meaning in context, based on the proposition that any author writing a text is like a player making moves within a game ruled by laws. Skinner's and Pocock's authors endorse, refuse, and even change the existing rules of the game, and resemble, in interesting and productive ways, the model developed by Corrente in the first chapter of his book.

In tracing the origins and underlying formal mechanisms of epidictic poetry in the Renaissance from Ovid through the pagan revival of the troubadours and the mystified eroticism of Petrarch and Dante, Corrente follows what appears to be a line of thought composed of formalist, historicist, and psychoanalytical components. His sharp understanding of Freudian conceptions of literary pleasure, his knowledge of late medieval love poetry, and his admirable mastery of the history of the sonnet from Petrarch to Shakespeare, form what is a composite, eclectic, though not always clearly coherent, study of the erotic verbal revelation of subjectivity in Renaissance epidictic poetry. While the first chapter provides the reader with a thick description of the theoretical tools used to read into the semiotics of erotic pleasure, the following sections of the book lead the reader through very detailed analyses of the sonnets composing *Astrophil and Stella*, through the revealed and mystified eros of John Donne's *Songs and Sonnets*, ending with the idealism and dualism inherent in the revolutionary presentation of male *eros* in Shakespeare's *Sonnets*. Dedicating more than four-hundred pages to very detailed close readings of single poems by Sidney, Donne, and Shakespeare, Corrente over-zealously applies, it seems to me, the interpretational foundations

spelled out in the first chapter of his book, turning what could have been an innovative monograph on the uses of *eros* in Renaissance literature into a somewhat labyrinthine, though intimidatingly erudite, case study. Lost in the myriads of semiotic interpretations of verses, the reader may experience, upon reaching the end of the book, my confusion in finding no conclusions and no final statement of arguments made in the first chapter invigorated by the readings proposed in the body of the book. To use Corrente's own lexicon, the author's witty and knowledgeable presentation of poetic *eros* succeeds in causing the reader a textual sense of pleasure induced by the speaker's contradictory self-elision *and* forceful self-representation, but fails in suspending that pleasure throughout most of the book.

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