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Elise Boillet

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Aretino's "simple" religious prose: literary features, doctrinal and moral contents, evolution

In 1551 and 1552, Pietro Aretino had his religious works re-edited and printed in Venice by Paolo Manuzio. The first volume included *Genesi, Umanità di Cristo* and *Sette salmi della penitenza di David*, while the second contained *Vita di Maria Vergine, Vita di santa Caterina* and *Vita di san Tommaso*. The author dedicated the two volumes to Pope Julius III, who had just been elected, in the hope of obtaining a cardinal's hat. What was at stake, the culmination of a career spent in Venice without renouncing to be rewarded by Rome, justified this ambitious editorial project, which consisted in offering, during the Tridentine period, a set of religious works published for the first time between 1534 and 1543, in order to display its importance and coherence. These works, criticized by Aretino's enemies during his lifetime, banned by the Roman Catholic Church just after his death, and for a long time severely judged by the historians of Italian literature, suffered more than the rest of his production from the author's *damnatio memoriae*. However, after the 1970s, they aroused a new interest among scholarship, the moral and aesthetical prejudices being progressively abandoned. This contribution will first underline the importance of Aretino's religious works in his oeuvre and career. Secondly, it will show, concentrating on the biblical paraphrases, their significance in the landscape of Italian religious literature. Thirdly, it will deal with the issue of the evolution of Aretino's religious prose from the "biblical" to the "hagiographic" works, paying attention to some neglected literary and religious elements of continuity.

1. Aretino's biblical works in the context of his career

The dark legend of the author, depicted as a licentious and impious man by his enemies, had long hung over the study of his life and production. In 1870, it determined the severity of Francesco De Sanctis' evaluation, which preceded the statement on Aretino's lack of morality by scholars such as Arturo Graf, Pierre Gauthiez, Giuseppe Toffanin and Francesco Flora.¹ In

¹ Francesco De Sanctis, "Pietro Aretino," *Nuova antologia* XV (1870): 524–535; Arturo Graf, "Un processo a Pietro Aretino," in id., *Attraverso il Cinquecento* (Turin, 1888), 89–117; Pierre Gauthiez, *L'Italie au XVIe siècle. L'Arétin* (Paris, 1895), 409–410; Giuseppe Toffanin, "Pietro Aretino," in id., *Storia letteraria d'Italia*, V, *Il Cinquecento* (Milan, 1960; 1st ed. 1927), 291–292; Francesco Flora, "Aretino e il mestiere della parola," in id., *Storia della letteratura italiana*, II-I, *Il Cinquecento* (Milan, 1952; 1st ed. 1940), 487–488 [references corrected in the published version].

their view, Aretino's religious works were deprived of the sincerity and the genuine inspiration which are necessary to a successful literary work. In the early 1970s, however, Paul Larivaille replaced Aretino's literary production, including the religious works, in the specific context of Aretino's career and time in order to clarify its purposes, importance and impact.² This path was then also undertaken by Giovanni Aquilecchia, Christopher Cairns, Andrea Gareffi, Paolo Procaccioli, Raymond Waddington, and other critics, who paid attention to the religious works as an important part of the production of the most famous among sixteenth-century polygraph authors, contributing to define their religious and literary outlines.³

The first important fact which has to be underlined is that Aretino's religious works corresponded neither to a distinct phase in the author's career nor to a separate field in his production.⁴ The 1530s, during which the biblical paraphrases were published in alternation with the two dialogues on the three states of women (*Ragionamento*, 1534) and on prostitution and procuring (*Dialogo*, 1536), and with the first comedies (*Cortigiana*, 1534, and *Marescalco*, 1536), were the years of the "conquest of the press" with the collaboration of the editor and printer Francesco Marcolini.⁵ The triumph of the polygraph author was publicized by the first volume of Aretino's *Letters*, printed in January 1538, and including the famous letter of 6 December 1537 to Gian Iacopo Leonardi. This letter described a vision in which Apollo crowned Aretino for his various literary skills, the crown of thorns being given to him for his "Christian books."⁶ At that time, he had released the *Passione di Gesù* (June 1534) and the *Sette salmi della penitenza di David* (November 1534), the *Passione* being re-elaborated in the longer *Umanità di Cristo* (May 1535). After the first issue of the *Lettere*, Aretino went on with publishing a variety of profane and sacred works, including the *Genesi* (1538) and three hagiographic works, the *Vita di Maria Vergine* (1539), the *Vita di santa Caterina* (1540) and the *Vita di san Tommaso* (1543).⁷

In fact, Aretino promoted his religious works as complementary to his satirical ones. He viewed his literary activity as that of a writer involved in a constructive socio-political criticism,

² Paul Larivaille, *L'Arétin entre Renaissance et Maniérisme (1492-1537)*, Doctoral Thesis, 1972; id., *Pietro Aretino fra Rinascimento e Manierismo* (Rome, 1980).

³ Their contributions will be mentioned in the course of this essay. See also the re-evaluation by A. Gareffi, P. Procaccioli and G. Aquilecchia in the debate included in *Cinquecento capriccioso e irregolare. Eresie letterarie nell'Italia del classicismo*, ed. Paolo Procaccioli and Angelo Romano (Manziana, 1998), 180–184.

⁴ See *ibid.*, and Élise Boillet, *L'Arétin et la Bible* (Genève, 2007), 25–42.

⁵ Paul Larivaille talked about "l'assalto alla stampa", in *id.*, *Pietro Aretino* (Rome, 1997), 177.

⁶ Procaccioli, *Lettere I*, 389.

⁷ The three hagiographic works are edited in Marini, *Opere Religiose II.*. The four biblical works are edited in Boillet, *Opere Religiose I.*

describing himself as “keenest revealer of vice and fervent preacher of virtue” (“acerrimo dimostratore del vizio e fervido predicatore della virtù”): this expression, first used in the dedicatory letter of the *Sette salmi*, also appeared as a Latin inscription above the author’s portrait reproduced at the end of the first volume of the *Lettere*⁸. This identity ennobled that of “scourge of princes,” also based on the complementary use of blame and praise as a tool for encouraging the princes to behave as such.⁹ From 1538, having to defend his image against attacks intended to reduce him to no more than a malicious and backbiting man, Aretino came to declare his activity as a religious writer as more valuable than that as a satirist, the idea of a hierarchy between satirical and religious writing pervading the author’s printed correspondence, including the letters sent to him and printed in two volumes in 1550-1551.¹⁰

That Aretino did not consider, however, these two veins as separated ones in his production appears in the editions of his works. Indeed, from the 1530s to the early 1550s, the editions of his profane and sacred works printed by Francesco Marcolini showed successive common editorial features, which were not conditioned by the specific profile of the works: the author’s portrait and the typographical mark changed in connection with the evolution of an editorial strategy aiming at creating, defending and promoting his literary and moral personality, valorized as unique in its very plurality.¹¹ In the same way, Aretino’s dedicatory and promotional strategy of his religious works was not determined by their literary genre, but by the evolution of his relations with the princes, both lay and ecclesiastical, with the use of the same techniques and protocols than those used for the profane works.¹² In his attempt to achieve

⁸ « DIVVS P. ARETINVS / ACERRIMVS / VIRTVTVM ET / VITIORVM / DEMONSTRATOR » (Procaccioli, *Lettere II*, 548).

⁹ On the different expressions qualifying Aretino’s activity as both a profane and religious writer, and on their uses and combinations in the editions of his printed works, see Élise Boillet, “L’autore e il suo editore. I ritratti di Pietro Aretino nelle stampe di Francesco Marcolini (1534-1553),” in *Officine del nuovo. Sodalizi fra letterati, artisti ed editori nella culture italiana fra Riforma e Controriforma*, ed. Harald Hendrix and Paolo Procaccioli (Manziana, 2008).

¹⁰ Boillet, *L’Arétin et la Bible*, 40. In 1538, Giovanni Alberto Albicante published a libellous biography of Aretino (Giovanni Alberto Albicante, *Occasioni aretiniane (Vita di Pietro Aretino del Berna, Abbattimento, Nuova contentione)*, ed. Paolo Procaccioli (Manziana, 1999), 9-12). In 1542, Nicolò Franco published his *Rime contro Pietro Aretino*. On Aretino’s and Marcolini’s reactions, see Boillet, “L’autore e il suo editore,” 190 et seq., 196 et seq.

¹¹ On the successive phases of Aretino’s and Marcolini’s collaboration with their specific motivations and aims, and on the promotion of Aretino’s literary personality through them, see *ibid.*

¹² See Élise Boillet, “L’adaptation des ambitions romaines de l’Arétin aux événements de 1533-1534: du *Pronostic de l’année 1534* aux lettres de dédicace des *Psaumes*,” in *L’actualité et sa mise en écriture (Espagne, France, Italie et Portugal XVe-XVIIe siècles)*, ed. Pierre Civil and Danielle Boillet (Paris, 2005), 169–189; ead., “L’Arétin et l’actualité des années 1538-1539. Les attentes du ‘Fléau des princes’,” in *L’actualité et sa mise en écriture dans l’Italie des XVe-XVIIe siècles*, ed. Danielle Boillet and Corinne Lucas (Paris, 2005), 103–117. On the detailed circumstances of the publication and promotion of the four biblical works, see ead., “Introduzione,” in ead., *Opere Religiose I*, 34–53.

his clerical ambitions, relying more and more on the valorization of his growing religious production, Aretino managed to substantially maintain his strategy as “keenest revealer of vice and fervent preacher of virtue” until the early 1550s.¹³

Moreover, Aretino’s profane and sacred works are characterized by common stylistic features, particularly the large use of similes and stylistic devices such as binary and ternary rhythm, enumeration, anaphor, chiasmus, oxymoron; furthermore, intertextuality is not rare, appearing in single sentences and short passages, as well as in entire episodes.¹⁴ It can play with both external and internal sources, displaying the author’s skill for *variatio*. For instance, the Virgilian episode of Dido’s death after being abandoned by Aeneas was revisited by Aretino three times, in the farewell scene between Jesus and his mother in the *Passione di Gesù* (1534), in the story of the lady abandoned by her unscrupulous lover in the *Dialogo* (1536), and in the scene of Abraham leaving Sarah in order to go accomplish the sacrifice of their son in the *Genesi* (1538).¹⁵

2. Aretino’s biblical works in the panorama of religious literature

Aretino’s biblical works can be separated neither from the rest of his production nor from the panorama of religious literature. Indeed, they are clearly part of the Venetian context of the 1530s, occupying moreover a significant place in the whole landscape of sixteenth-century Italian literature. Giovanni Aquilecchia underlined the close situation of Antonio Brucioli and

¹³ On Aretino’s clerical ambitions, see n. 11 [footnote number corrected in the published version], and Paul Larivaille, *Pietro Aretino*, 338–356; Paolo Procaccioli, “Due re in Parnaso. Aretino e Bembo nella Venezia del doge Gritti,” in *Sylva. Studi in onore di Nino Borsellino*, ed. Giorgio Patrizi (Roma, 2002), I, 207–231; id., “Un cappello per il divino. Note sul miraggio cardinesco di Pietro Aretino,” in *Studi sul Rinascimento italiano. Italian Renaissance Studies. In memoria di Giovanni Aquilecchia*, ed. Paolo Procaccioli and Angelo Romano (Manziana, 2005), 189–226; id., “1542: Pietro Aretino sulla via di Damasco,” in *Il Rinascimento italiano di fronte alla Riforma: letteratura e arte. Sixteenth-century Italian Art and Literature and the Reformation*, ed. Chrysa Damianaki, Paolo Procaccioli and Angelo Romano (Manziana, 2005), 129–154; Élise Boillet, “L’Arétin et les papes de son temps. Les formes et la fortune d’une écriture au service de la papauté,” in *La Papauté à la Renaissance*, ed. Florence Alazard and Frank La Brasca (Paris, 2007), 326–345; Paolo Marini, “Introduzione,” in id., *Opere Religiose II*, 45–55; Boillet, “Introduzione,” in ead. *Opere Religiose I*, 40–53. [page numbers corrected in the published version]

¹⁴ See Andrea Gareffi, “Doppi sensi di Roma Cortigiana,” in *Roma nella svolta tra Quattro e Cinquecento*, ed. Stefano Colonna (Rome, 2004), 101–102; Boillet, *L’Arétin et la Bible*, 34–36.

¹⁵ See ead., “Riscrittura sacra e riscrittura profana dell’*Eneide* in Pietro Aretino,” in *Autorità, modelli e antimodelli nella cultura artistica e letteraria tra Riforma e Controriforma*, ed. Antonio Corsaro, Harald Hendrix and Paolo Procaccioli (Manziana, 2007), 227–242; ead., “Rewriting the Bible in Pietro Aretino’s *Genesi* (1538),” in *Renaissance Rewritings*, ed. Helmut Pfeiffer, Irene Fantappiè, Tobias Roth (Berlin-Boston, 2017) 253–272.

Pietro Aretino in Venice, being both laymen involved in spreading the Word of God in the vernacular for the benefit of a large audience, the former offering translations and commentaries, the latter paraphrases.¹⁶ On the other hand, Giorgio Petrocchi evoked the duel at a distance between Aretino and Teofilo Folengo, a Benedictine monk, author of *La Umanità del figliuolo di Dio*, which was printed in Venice in 1533, and whose title anticipated Aretino's *Umanità di Cristo*.¹⁷ I deepened these parallels between Aretino and Brucioli, and between Aretino and Folengo, showing intertextual links in publications which valorize the notion of evangelical “purity” and “simplicity”.¹⁸ Indeed, in the 1530s, Brucioli and Aretino were both following Erasmus in his call of universal access to the Bible and his promotion of the “philosophy of Christ”, a non speculative philosophy directly drawn from the Scriptures. On the other hand, for Aretino and Folengo, who had strong literary ambitions, the faithfulness to the purity and simplicity of the Gospels did not mean that the freedom to create a literary rewriting should be compromised, the author – whether he was lay or cleric – being divinely inspired.

Aretino emulated not only Folengo, but also Iacopo Sannazaro and Marco Girolamo Vida, who renewed the genre of the sacred poem in the Latin, being encouraged in their enterprise by Pope Leon X. While Sannazaro's *De Partu Virginis* appeared in 1526, Vida's *Christias* was released in 1535 after a manuscript circulation. Choosing to simply follow the chronological order of the evangelical story, and thus rejecting classical devices such as beginning *in medias res* and the frequent insertion of recollections and predictions, Aretino nonetheless divided his own work in books, using this division to compete with the well-known high models of the sacred poems. Emulation is particularly striking in the initial narrative sequence of the first book, in which God in heaven takes the decision to save humanity, sending Gabriel on earth to visit Mary,¹⁹ and in that of the fourth book,²⁰ in which Jesus goes down into

¹⁶ Giovanni Aquilecchia, “Pietro Aretino e la Riforma cattolica,” *Nouvelles de la République des Lettres* (1996-II), 15. After his monograph on Pietro Aretino (see n. 51) **[footnote number corrected in the published version]**, Christopher Cairns added Brucioli to the circle of Aretino's friends in “Some absent friends from the circle of Aretino: Antonio Brucioli, Gian Pietro Carafa and Ortensio Lando,” in *Il Rinascimento italiano di fronte alla Riforma*, 115–117.

¹⁷ Giorgio Petrocchi, “Aretino e Folengo”, in id., *Saggi sul Rinascimento italiano* (Firenze, 1990), 51–56.

¹⁸ Élise Boillet, “L'Écriture traduite, commentée, réécrite: Antonio Brucioli, Teofilo Folengo, l'Arétin,” in *Les années Trente du XVIe siècle italien*, ed. Danièle Boillet and Michel Plaisance (Paris, 2007), 163–181.

¹⁹ See the analysis of this sequence in Boillet, *L'Arétin et la Bible*, 487–501.

²⁰ It is the third book in the 1535 version, where the second book includes both Jesus' ministry and passion, while these two phases of Jesus' life occupy respectively the second and the third book in the 1538 version.

the underworld, where he frees the Patriarchs and the Holy Innocents from limbo, putting them in the elysian field, and where he chains Satan in the depths of hell. This latter sequence, which echoes the epilogue of the slaughter of innocents, plays with Latin and Italian models from Virgil to Sannazaro and Vida, and from Dante to Folengo, trying to offer a literary representation faithful to the Christian doctrine regarding Redemption.²¹

Some biblical passages lent themselves to the deployment of *inventio*, the author drawing inspiration from other sources than the canonical Gospels, in order to recount some grand episode (like the aforementioned visit to the underworld), or to create some large *fresco* (like the description of the magnificent architecture and riches of the Temple of Jerusalem). On the other hand, other biblical passages, in particular Jesus' speeches, such as the Sermon on the Mount and the *Pater Noster*, were not suitable for this kind of expansion. The *Pater Noster*, faithfully repeated in the liturgy and the devotional life for centuries, and abundantly commented by exegetes, was to be carefully paraphrased. In this passage, Aretino chose to follow the model of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's exposition, from which he took several comments, adding the mention of the value of the good works with regard to salvation.²² Aretino had already drawn inspiration from devotional literature in the *Passione di Gesù*, published a year before the *Umanità di Cristo*, which expanded from it. Indeed, the opening of the work established an immediate connection with the literature on meditation and prayer. It begins with the account of a vision that the author had in a church during the Lenten mass listening to the priests' voices and contemplating Jesus on the cross: the four Evangelists appeared to him, holding the Gospels, in which he could read all about Jesus' passion, exploring new meanings of it; by the time the vision ended, he was inspired to write down what he had just witnessed right away. Interestingly enough on behalf of an author who called himself "fifth evangelist",²³ this vision actually anticipates that of John in the episode of Lord's Supper, during which the beloved disciple sees what is laying ahead for Jesus and the apostles. After the account of the vision provided by the author, the narrator draws the attention of the reader to the central theme of the story he is about to narrate: the suffering of Christ for the love of humanity. The description of Christ's suffering starts with the very first episode, the farewell

²¹ See Boillet, *L'Arétin et la Bible*, 443–448, and ead., "David, personnage et masque de l'Arétin entre XVIe et XVIIe siècle, in *Les figures de David à la Renaissance*," ed. Élise Boillet, Sonia Cavicchioli and Paul-Alexis Mellet (Genève, 2015), 338–339. **[page numbers corrected in the published version]**

²² Boillet, *L'Arétin et la Bible*, 457–461.

²³ It was the author of astrological prognostications who announced the birth of the religious writer: in the 1534 prognostication, Aretino described himself as "scourge of the princes and fifth evangelist" (Faini, *Operette politiche e satiriche II*, 90, 172).

scene between Jesus and his mother, inspired by an apocryphal episode included in the *Meditationes vitae Christi*, which also circulated widely in Italian versions and appeared in several *sacre rappresentazioni*²⁴. The theme of the reading of the Gospels as an aid for meditation on God's love, as well as the importance given to the initial farewell scene, and to Mary as a primary and active character, clearly connect Aretino's *Passione di Gesù* to the Italian devotional literature, which developed from the *Trattato dell'amor di Gesù Cristo* by Savonarola (1492) and the *Arte del ben pensare e meditare la Passione del nostro Signor Gesù Cristo* by Pietro da Lucca (1525).²⁵

The *Sette salmi*, published a few months after the *Passione*, shares common features with this first biblical paraphrase. Both works are relatively short, with a strong unity due to the focus on a set of biblical texts, fundamental in Christian exegesis, liturgy and devotion. Indeed, while the four Gospels of the passion are fused into one single narration (like in any Gospel harmony), the seven psalms of the penitence are gathered so as to form one long prayer divided in seven moments. Moreover, both works are narrative, as the *Sette salmi* reconstructs the story of David's penitence, not only through the psalms, whose rewriting defines a spiritual itinerary from despair to hope, but also through their insertion in a narrative framework, which describes how King David, after having committed adultery and murder, and after having been warned by Nathan about the gravity of his sins, chose to enter in an isolated and obscure cave in order to pray God and ask forgiveness. The framework shows him having meditative breaks after each hymn, and benefiting after the sixth from a vision which encourages him to keep on doing penance, obtaining mercy in the end and being able to come back among his subjects with a renewed heart and soul.²⁶ The theme of meditation and prayer, central in the *Passione* and the *Umanità*, is thus essential in this work too.

Also fundamental in this work is the connection with Italian religious literature. In the dedicatory letter to Gian Pietro Carafa, Agostino Ricchi describes Aretino's *Sette salmi* as a "simple paraphrase upon the penitential psalms", using the notion of "simplicity" recurrent in the *Passione* and the *Umanità*. Aretino maintains the psalms in the mouth of David, each biblical verse being reformulated and developed in a paragraph written in prose, the reformulation being rather close to the translation so that the biblical verse remains identifiable

²⁴ Forty-eight editions of the *Meditationes* in Italian were printed before the publication of Aretino's *Passione di Gesù*, cfr. Erminia Ardissino, Élise Boillet, *Repertorio di letteratura biblica in italiano a stampa (ca 1462/63-1650)* (Turnhout, in press).

²⁵ See Élise Boillet, "Il congedo di Cristo dalla madre dipinto da Lorenzo Lotto e narrato da Pietro Aretino," *Venezia Cinquecento* 25 (2003), 99–130.

²⁶ See ead., "David, personnage et masque de l'Arétin," 334–336.

within the paragraph²⁷. From this point of view, Aretino's paraphrase of the psalms is close to Savonarola's exposition of the *Miserere*, written in the Latin by the author before dying in 1498, with an immediate and large circulation also in the Italian vernacular.²⁸ As for the intention to arrange the seven penitential psalms in one long prayer, Aretino's psalms show resemblance with the *Psalmi penitentiali di David* composed by Girolamo Benivieni – who was an ardent follower of Savonarola –, and printed only once, in Florence in 1505. This work combined a translation in verse with a commentary in prose, which the author intended as “a perpetual and continuous prayer,” viewing it more as “a simple narrative speech” than as a commentary.²⁹ This simple narration recounts a spiritual itinerary which anticipates Aretino's paraphrase, where the complex relation between God's justice and mercy leads to the superior notion of divine equity, and the problem of human freedom finally results in the idea of a servitude freely chosen by the penitent who becomes son of God.³⁰ Here, like in the paraphrase of the *Pater Noster*, Aretino, who wrote after the roman condemnation of Luther's doctrine, included the mention of the value of good works, not present in the aforementioned texts by Savonarola and Benivieni.

The definition of Aretino's *Sette salmi* as a “simple paraphrase” also reminds of the exegetical experiment conducted by Erasmus on the psalms. After having written paraphrases upon the Gospels, and after having applied this genre to Psalm 3, Erasmus chose the commentary and the sermon as more suitable genres for rendering the multiple meanings of the psalms. Indeed, maintaining the purpose of enhancing piety, these two genres allowed him to comment the biblical text taking into account the notion of *persona*, which enables to distinguish which verses are to be interpreted as said by King David, and which ones as said by Christ, the Church, or the faithful. The word “paraphrase”, found in the *Sette salmi* but not in other Aretino's biblical works, highlights that Aretino met the challenge of providing a paraphrase in the first person without renouncing to a rich interpretation of the biblical text.³¹ Indeed, Aretino's psalms contain prophetic passages regarding the story of the Salvation, which

²⁷ See ead., *L'Arétin et la Bible*, 319–373.

²⁸ Ten editions in Italian were printed before the publication of Aretino's *Salmi*, see Ardissino, Boillet, *Repertorio di letteratura biblica in italiano a stampa (ca 1462/63-1650)* (in press).

²⁹ Girolamo Benivieni, *Psalmi penitentiali di David tradotti in lingua fiorentina et commentati* (Florence, Antonio Tubini and Andrea Ghirlandi, 1505), f. a2v. On Benivieni's *Psalmi*, see Élise Boillet, “Vernacular Biblical Literature in Sixteenth Century Italy: universal reading and specific readers,” in *Discovering the Riches of the Word. Religious Reading in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Sabrina Corbellini, Margriet Hoogvliet and Bart Ramakers (Leiden, 2015), 217-219 and 227.

³⁰ See Boillet, *L'Arétin et la Bible*, 233, 240, 243, 258, 297–319.

³¹ See *ibid.*, 240–241.

alter neither the continuity of David's penitence, as these ecstatic moments are granted to him as a reward for his penance, nor the fluidity of his prayer, as David himself specifies when he is speaking on behalf of God or of the Church, all these specific passages included in the psalms III to VI coming to progressively constitute one long prophecy.³²

The pattern of the vision and the prophecy, present in the *Passione* and in the *Sette salmi*, went back again in the *Genesi*, Aretino's fourth biblical publication. As the complete title of the work – *Il genesi di M. Pietro Aretino con la visione di Noè ne la quale vede i misterii del Testamento Vecchio e del Nuovo, diviso in tre libri* – emphasizes, the free invention of Noah's vision is indeed a powerful and defining point in the text.³³ In the first book, which recounts the story from the creation to the last judgment, the events which occur after the flood are narrated through the vision granted to Noah in the ark while he is waiting for the water to recede. Contrarily to the detailed narrative of the rest of the work, the part dedicated to Noah's vision consists in an historical *compendium* that runs from the life of Moses to the end of the world and the last judgment, also retracing briefly the life of Christ and of the apostles. In the second book, the narrative takes up from the flood and goes on to the life of Jacob, while the third book recounts the story of his son Joseph. As we said, in the *Umanità*, loyalty to the "simplicity" of the evangelical story had determined, against Sannazaro's and Vida's models, the choice of a chronological narrative. Here, the revisiting of religious history in its entirety accompanies variations which, without breaking away from the preceding arrangement, allows the author to emphasize the close tie between the history of the Old and the New Testaments.³⁴

In this work again, the connections with Italian religious literature are multiple. Noah's vision includes precise intertextual links with literary works such as Dante's *Paradiso*, Petrarch's *Trionfo dell'eternità*, and Sannazaro's *De Partu Virginis*,³⁵ as well as the clear influence of the literature of meditation, Noah being able to spiritually "see" and "hear" all the events as real ones, which determines his strong emotional and moral reactions.³⁶ In the line of the *Passione* (the farewell scene between Jesus and his mother) and the *Umanità* (the

³² See *ibid.*, 286–297.

³³ See the analysis of Noah's vision in *ead.*, "La visione di Noè nel *Genesi* dell'Aretino (1538)," in *Sogno e Racconto. Archetipi e funzioni*, ed. Gabriele Cingolani and Marco Riccini (Firenze, 2003), 174–190.

³⁴ Besides the invention of Noah's vision, Aretino accomplishes a minor modification in the organization of the Biblical material, moving a genealogy. Apart from that, he follows the order of the Biblical story within Noah's vision, as well as in the rest of the work. See Boillet, "Rewriting the Bible in Pietro Aretino's *Genesi*," 254–255.

³⁵ See *ead.*, "La visione di Noè," respectively 178, 188–189, and 174–175.

³⁶ See *ibid.*, 183–184.

conversion of Mary Magdalene),³⁷ the influence of the genre of the *sacra rappresentazione* is also a clear trait of the *Genesi*. The episode of the sacrifice of Abraham can indeed be connected with Feo Belcari's *Rappresentazione di Abramo e Isacco*, appeared in 1485 and released in various editions during the sixteenth century.³⁸ Like Belcari but in a much freer manner, Aretino exploits both the biblical indication of the three days before accomplishing the sacrifice, as well as the dramatic potential tied to Sarah's involvement, which is not mentioned in the Bible in this episode.³⁹ The reference to the pastoral codes is another trait of the *Genesi*, a more specific one since this work especially deals with the representation of an ancient world of shepherds and herdsmen. In particular, the romance between Jacob and Rachel is amplified at the point of constituting a true love story in the second book of the *Genesi*. Jacob's innocent behaviour is represented through a variety of gestures: we see him kissing the flowers touched by Rachel, writing and then removing the name of his beloved on the trees, and picking up a stone but not daring to throw it into the river where she is washing her feet. In a work in which the ethics of love and sexuality is extensively developed, Aretino uses the codes of pastoral idyll to build a model of Christian chastity.⁴⁰

Replacing Aretino's biblical paraphrases in the panorama of Italian biblical literature, which largely circulated in urban literate areas through the printing press since the end of the fifteenth-century, particularly highlights their major trait: the author's capacity to simultaneously refer to different genres in order to offer the reader a polyvalent text which is needed to visualize the biblical story concretely, to contemplate it spiritually, to take the prayers from it, to understand its doctrinal implications, and to extract its moral 'fruit', all at once. This explains their editorial success, as well as their large and long-lasting influence. They indeed aroused an immediate interest in different spiritual *milieus*: in Italy, the *Passione* was echoed by Vittoria Colonna's *Pianto sopra la Passione di Christo* (1539),⁴¹ and the *Umanità* by the Canon Regular don Cherubino's homonymous work;⁴² in France, all Aretino's biblical paraphrases were translated by Jean de Vauzelles in the *entourage* of the Queen of Navarre and

³⁷ See the analysis of this episode in Boillet, *L'Arétin et la Bible*, 512–526.

³⁸ Among these editions, one was presumably printed in Florence in 1536 (Max Sander, *Le livre à figures italien depuis 1467 jusqu'à 1530* (Milano, 1942), I, n. 6110).

³⁹ See Boillet, "Rewriting the Bible in Pietro Aretino's *Genesi*", 265–266.

⁴⁰ See below pp. ? **[completed in the published version]** and n. 70-72.

⁴¹ See Boillet, *L'Arétin et la Bible*, 119–123.

⁴² *Fascicolo della mirrata, redentrice e salutifera Umanità di Cristo* (Ferrara, Francesco Rosso, 1538). See Mario Chiesa, "Poemi biblici fra Quattro e Cinquecento," *Giornale Storico della letteratura italiana*, CLXXIX-586 (2002), 165.

were printed in Lyon between 1539 and 1541.⁴³ They also forecasted the adaptation of Italian biblical literature to ecclesiastical censorship after the Council of Trent. Indeed, the programming choice of rejecting poetry in favor of a “simple paraphrase” of the penitential psalms anticipated Flaminio Nobili’s and Francesco Panigarola’s choice of a simple paraphrase in prose intended as a devotional aid made in the years 1580s, these two texts being the only rewritings of the Psalms in Italian authorized by the Roman Church after the 1596 Index.⁴⁴ In the same way, the lively survey of the whole biblical history in the *Genesi*, after the publication of which, in 1540, the Florentine man of letters Niccolò Martelli said that he found it as enjoyable as the Bible was boring,⁴⁵ announced the success, starting from the 1570s, of the genre of the historical *compendium*, limited to biblical history or including it. In particular, Bartolomeo Dionigi, a cleric from Fano, published in 1586 a very successful *Compendio storico del Vecchio e del Nuovo Testamento*, intended as a means of overcoming the difficulty in gaining access to the vernacular Bible because of ecclesiastical censorship. This work, comparable to Aretino’s *Genesi* in its literary mould and continuous narrative form,⁴⁶ found itself included in the list of banned books delivered to bishops and inquisitors in application of the 1596 Index.⁴⁷ Later, the program of re-edition of Aretino’s biblical works conducted by Marco Ginammi in Venice at the end of the years 1620s⁴⁸ preceded the new literary experiments by Giovan Battista Marino, whose sacred poem *La Strage degli Innocenti* (1632) was inspired by the correspondent episode in Aretino’s *Umanità*, and Ferrante Pallavicino, whose career and

⁴³ See Pietro Aretino, *Trois livres de l’humanité de Jésus-Christ, Extrait de la traduction de Jean de Vauzelles (1539)*, ed. Elsa Kammerer, intr. Marie-Madeleine Fontaine (Paris, 2004), 129–208 ; Élise Boillet, “Tra sacro e profano: Jean de Vauzelles traduttore dell’Aretino sacro,” in *Dynamic translations in the European Renaissance. La traduzione del moderno nel Cinquecento europeo*, ed. Philiep Bossier, Harald Hendrix and Paolo Procaccioli (Manziana, 2011), 169–206; Elsa Kammerer, *Jean de Vauzelles et le creuset lyonnais (1520-1550)* (Genève, 2013), chap. IV, 155-176; ead., “Marguerite de Navarre et la Bible: batailles pour la langue française,” in *Les femmes et la Bible de la fin du Moyen Âge à l’époque moderne. Pratiques de lecture et d’écriture (Italie, France, Angleterre)*, ed. Élise Boillet and Maria-Teresa Ricci (Paris, 2017), 77–89.

⁴⁴ Gigliola Fragnito, *La Bibbia la rogo. La censura ecclesiastica e i volgarizzamenti della Scrittura* (Bologna, 1997), 204, 303, 307.

⁴⁵ Aretino’s *Genesi* is enjoyable because it is clear and beautiful, while the Bible is boring because it is long and incomprehensible (Procaccioli, *LSA II*, 72). See Boillet, “La visione di Noè,” 189–190, and “Rewriting the Bible in Pietro Aretino’s *Genesi*,” 253–254.

⁴⁶ See *ibid.*, 264.

⁴⁷ See Fragnito, *La Bibbia al rogo*, 109, 290-292, and ead., *Proibito capire. La Chiesa e il volgare nella prima età moderna* (Bologna, 2005), 110–112.

⁴⁸ The biblical works were re-edited under the name Partenio Etiro (see Élise Boillet, “Nota ai testi,” in ead., *Opere Religiose I*), the *Sette salmi* being re-edited as *Aretino pentito* in Lione in 1648 (see Boillet, “David, personnage et masque de l’Arétin,” 357–361) [**rephrased in the published version**].

production had much in common with Aretino's, being also the author of sacred novels dedicated to Joseph, Suzanne, Samson and Bathsheba (1636-1639).⁴⁹

3. From biblical to hagiographic works: the evolution of Aretino's religious prose

Following the suggestion offered by the two volumes of the 1551-1552 complete edition of Aretino's religious works, modern criticism established a distinction between the group of the "biblical works" and that of the "hagiographic works". As we said, Aretino's biblical works share recurrent themes (biblical reading, meditation and prayer) and structures (visions, *compendia*, theatrical dialogues, and long rhetorical speeches). They are also characterized by recurrent figures: Christ is indeed present not only in the *Passione* and the *Umanità*, but also in the *Sette salmi* through David's prophecy and the *Genesi* through Noah's vision. In the same way, David is present in the *Sette salmi*, but also in the *Umanità* in three passages mentioning the underworld and dealing with the mystery of Redemption, and in the *Genesi*, Noah's vision reconstructing the lineage of the patriarchs from Noah to Moses and David.⁵⁰ These common patterns of Aretino's biblical works illustrate religious contents which are not abandoned in the hagiographic works, but adapted to them in order to balance old convictions with new requirements. After a quick overview of the state of the art regarding the issue of the evolution of Aretino's religious production, we will give examples of this continuity, focusing on the relation between prose and theology.

The distinction made by modern criticism between the biblical and the hagiographic works was related to the study of the individual and historical context in which they were produced. Paul Larivaille interpreted the evolution of Aretino's religious production in the context of the author's career and relations with the princes, underlining growing opportunistic and utilitarian motivations.⁵¹ Christopher Cairns interpreted it in the context of the "religious restlessness" of the 1530s and 1540s: he spoke of a "confessional phase" of enthusiastic adherence to new religious ideas of Erasmian origin, followed by a "hagiographic phase" during which the author aligned himself with the emerging culture of the Counter Reformation.⁵²

⁴⁹ Jean-François Lattarico, "Du Livre au livre libertin. La *Bersabee* de Ferrante Pallavicino (Venise, 1639)," in *Les figures de David à la Renaissance*, 449–471.

⁵⁰ Boillet, "David, personnage et masque de l'Arétin," 337–343.

⁵¹ Larivaille, *Pietro Aretino*, 206, 210, 340.

⁵² Christopher Cairns, *Pietro Aretino and the republic of Venice. Researches on Aretino and his circle in Venice 1527-1556* (Firenze, 1985), 121–122. The expression coined by Paul Grendler appears in the title of the two chapters which describe these two phases: IV. "Religious restlessness:" I. From the *Opere*

Deepening this line of research, Paolo Procaccioli shed light on two essential turning points in this evolution, 1542 and 1545-1546, arguing that most probably the author played a part in the evangelist movement, having then to progressively adjust his activity to the new Roman injunctions.⁵³ While Giulio Ferroni had caught in the first biblical works the influence of Juan de Valdés' thinking,⁵⁴ Raymond Waddington described Aretino as probably heretic, viewing the evolution from the biblical to the hagiographic works as the result of a "prudent nicodemism" more than as the adaptation to the renewal of Catholic orthodoxy.⁵⁵ Drawing from Paul Larivaille's and Christopher Cairns' analysis, Paolo Marini described the *Vita di Maria Vergine* as holding "an intermediary position" in Aretino's religious production, being at once the last biblical and the first hagiographic work.⁵⁶ He defined the last two lives of saints as forming a "hagiographic diptych" which suffered from the difficult relationship with their sponsor Alfonso d'Avalos.⁵⁷

Being considered as more genuinely inspired (because spontaneously written in line with deep personal convictions), the biblical works were evaluated as more successful than the hagiographic works also from a literary point of view. After the *Passione*, Paul Larivaille declared the increasingly mechanical exploitation of religious material for opportunistic means to be a trend already noticeable in the latest part of the *Sette salmi* and in the *Umanità* and a distinctive characteristic of the successive works.⁵⁸ However, the *Umanità* was generally considered as the highest result of Aretino's religious project, while the *Genesi*, often ignored altogether or mentioned merely in parentheses, was deemed long and repetitive: the judgment expressed in 1948 by Giorgio Petrocchi, one of the first critics to have taken Aretino's religious

sacre to the *Corte del Cielo*, 1534-1539," 69–96; V. "Religious restlessness:" II. From Clerical ambitions to the Council of Trent," 97–124.

⁵³ Paolo Procaccioli, "1542: Pietro Aretino sulla via di Damasco," 129–154. See also id., "Un cappello per il divino," 189–226.

⁵⁴ Giulio Ferroni, "Introduzione," in *Pietro Aretino*, ed. Carlo Serafini and Luciana Zampolli (Rome, 2002), p. XXI; id., "Premessa," in Boillet, *Opere Religiose I*, 15.

⁵⁵ Raymond Waddington, "Pietro Aretino, religious writer," in *Renaissance studies* 20-3 (2006), 277–292: 278, n. 7, and 291–292, and in id., *Pietro Aretino: Subverting the System in Renaissance Italy* (Farnham-Burlington, 2013), VII. See also id., "Aretino, Titian, and *La Humanità di Cristo*," in *Forms of Faith in Sixteenth-Century Italy*, ed. Abigail Brundin and Matthew Treherne (Aldershot, 2009), 171–198, and in id., *Pietro Aretino: Subverting the System in Renaissance Italy* (Farnham-Burlington, 2013), VIII. See also Marco Faini, "Pietro Aretino, St. John the Baptist and the Rewriting of the Psalms," in *Renaissance Rewritings*, 225–251: 230, 248–249.

⁵⁶ Marini, "Introduzione," in id., *Opere Religiose II*, 11, 56.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 61. The two lives of saints were gathered in a modern edition by Flavia Santin: *Pietro Aretino, Le vite dei santi: Santa Caterina vergine, San Tommaso d'Aquino, 1540-1543* (Rome, 1978). They were also the object of Paolo Fasoli's contribution "'Con la penna della fragilità'. Considerazioni sull'Aretino ascetico," in *Pietro Aretino nel Cinquecentenario della nascita* (Rome, 1995), Vol. II, 619–639.

⁵⁸ Larivaille, *Pietro Aretino*, 210 e 340.

writing seriously,⁵⁹ was substantially corroborated in 1995 by Mario Scotti during the Italian-American conference dedicated to the author.⁶⁰ Whereas the three hagiographies generally received more attention than the *Genesi*, they were nonetheless also deemed as inferior with regard to the first biblical works. However, Paolo Marini qualified this appreciation indicating that the *Vita di Maria Vergine* should be recognized as holding “an objective pre-eminent position” for its length and superior quality, while the last two lives of saints suffered from a forced process of creation.⁶¹ He also underlined the importance of the hagiographic works, regardless of the fact that they correspond to the “crepuscular phase” of Aretino’s religious project, since they represent “the completion of a stylistic route” which consisted in the novelty of applying “a modern and versatile prose” to the sacred matter.⁶²

Though historically justified, the distinction inspired by the division offered in the 1551-1552 edition must not prevent to better specify, as did Paolo Marini for the group of the three hagiographies, the evolution of Aretino’s religious production. In the biblical works, I have observed that the modifications introduced as early as in 1535 in the re-editions of the biblical works sponsored by the author show linguistic and stylistic tendencies, such as the preference for subordination over coordination, as well as reinforced literary and religious requirements, such as the attention to *decorum* in the representation of the deeds of the holy characters, which will all be accentuated in the *Genesi* and in the three hagiographic works.⁶³ I have also observed that the *Genesi* can be placed in the “intermediary position” which Paolo Marini discussed regarding the *Vita di Maria Vergine* appeared a year later.⁶⁴ Indeed, while the *Genesi* anticipates characteristics of the subsequent religious works, especially the extension of the speeches pronounced by the principal characters,⁶⁵ the *Vita di Maria Vergine* relates directly to the recent *Genesi*, as illustrated more particularly by two correlated passages. The first passage concerns Mary’s youth, spent in the temple in Jerusalem with other virgins of noble ascendancy. Aretino

⁵⁹ “[...] son rari momenti (assieme con il Diluvio universale, la visione di Noè, e, all’inizio, il Paradiso Terrestre) che rompono la noiosa parafrasi del Genesi biblico” (Giorgio Petrocchi, “Intorno alle prose sacre,” in id., *Pietro Aretino tra Rinascimento e Controriforma* (Milano, 1948), 295).

⁶⁰ “[...] salvo l’impennata di qualche capitolo e paragrafo, il libro del *Genesi* [...] offr[e] di sé, nel suo insieme, l’immagine di una monotonia sbiadita” (Mario Scotti, *Gli scritti religiosi*, in *Pietro Aretino nel cinquecentenario della nascita* (Rome, 1995), Vol. I, 139).

⁶¹ Marini, “Introduzione,” in id., *Opere Religiose II*, 61.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 10.

⁶³ Boillet, “Nota ai testi,” in ead., *Opere Religiose I*, 726, 729.

⁶⁴ Ead., “Rewriting the Bible in Pietro Aretino’s *Genesi*”, 255–256, and ead., “Introduzione”, in ead., *Opere Religiose I*, 71–72.

⁶⁵ Marini, “Introduzione,” in id., *Opere Religiose II*, 58, 60–61, 66; Boillet, “Introduzione,” in ead., *Opere Religiose II*, 725 [reference corrected in the published version]. See an example of this tendency already in the revision of the *Passione di Gesù* in the *Umanità di Cristo*: Boillet, *L’Arétin et la Bible*, 397.

describes their life as that of a monastic community, emphasizing the familiarity with the Holy Scriptures and imagining that Mary read and interpreted the *Genesi* and the other books of the Bible for her companions, making its essential truths clear to them. The second passage concerns the episode of twelve-year-old Christ amongst the doctors of the temple of Jerusalem. In the *Passione* and the *Umanità*, Aretino paraphrased and in part invented the words spoken by God, the angels and Jesus himself, in this emulating Sannazaro and Vida, however introducing qualifying terms such as “he said *similar* words” or “he *perhaps* said these words”.⁶⁶ Yet in the extract under attention, the “fifth evangelist” proves himself to be particularly audacious, in that it is no longer Aretino taking the liberty of making Jesus speak, but Jesus himself quoting word by word Aretino’s grandiose opening of the *Genesi*. So the “true interpretations” which were attributed to the Virgin in the first passage, in which the centrality of the Bible, in this instance the Old Testament in so far as it prefigures the coming of Christ and is a source of Christian ethics and wisdom, was reaffirmed, are demonstrated concretely in this second passage, which offers a literary representation of the abstract idea of the eternal and immutable presence of God.⁶⁷ The *Genesi* and the *Vita di Maria Vergine* can be also compared for the valorization of family bonds, especially between spouses (but also between parents and children, uncles and nephews, and between brothers or cousins). Several couples are indeed represented in the *Genesi*, Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, and Jacob and Rachel, while in the *Vita di Maria Vergine* the couple formed by Joachim and Anne anticipates that formed by Joseph and the Virgin. Moreover, the *Genesi* expressly represents a world regulated by a sexual ethic based on chastity, contrary to the concupiscence that leads to lust, even within marriage, and to adultery.⁶⁸ In line with this work, the successive lives of saints extol a superior, virginal level of chastity, Mary being the incarnation of a virginity which remains inviolate through motherhood and marriage, St Catherine of Alexandria entering into a mystic marriage to the infant Jesus, and St Thomas Aquinas withstanding steadily carnal temptation. On the other hand, the representation of prostitutes and luxurious women assimilated to prostitutes, which were central figures in the *Ragionamento* and the *Dialogo*, is a recurrent pattern, used as counter-example of Christian chastity, in Aretino’s religious works: in the *Umanità*, Mary Magdalene is compared, before her conversion, to the goddess Venus; in the *Genesi*, Potiphar’s wife is driven by her lust to seduce Joseph, whereas Tamar seeks redress

⁶⁶ Ibid., 382–383.

⁶⁷ See the detailed analysis of these two passages in Boillet, “Rewriting the Bible in Pietro Aretino’s *Genesi*”, 256–258.

⁶⁸ See *ibid.*, 266–269.

after her father-in-law deprived her of a new husband against the custom; in the *Vita di san Tommaso*, the enemies of the saint try to tempt him introducing a prostitute in the monastery, but he pushes her off with a firebrand, provoking her conversion and decision to be entombed in a wall of the church.⁶⁹ The distance between the conversion of this prostitute and that of Mary Magdalene in the *Umanità*, where the saint engages in self-flagellation and her sister Martha, finding her almost dead, evokes the more moderate penitence she should practice, results from a tendency, common to Aretino's last two lives of saints, to stretch the representation of the *contemptus mundi*.⁷⁰ We have here the illustration of a continuity between profane and sacred works (to which we already refer speaking about intertextuality and common stylistic features), as well as between biblical and hagiographic works.

These observations support the idea of a progressive evolution in Aretino's religious production rather than that of a sudden change of direction producing a break between a first and a second group of works. From this point of view, a closer look at the relation between prose and theology reveals strong elements of continuity. During the 1540s, while the Roman Inquisition was re-established and the Council of Trent was finally opened, Aretino gave account in his letters of the suspicions of the clergy against his religious works.⁷¹ In 1542, he assured his editor Francesco Marcolini that he was not paying attention to the "cawing of the friars" who say that he does not know how to discuss faith.⁷² But, in 1545, after three cardinals of the Roman curia asked Pope Paul III to ban his religious works, he wrote to Paolo Giovio in order to defend their orthodoxy, declaring that he was neither a "Chietino" (papist) nor a Lutheran.⁷³ In 1548, he reported that some friars came to his house to ask him to justify in his *Genesi* a sentence of his *Genesi* containing an illogic statement on the relation between God and the nature ("God is the nature, and the nature is not God") and that he was able to answer just by using common sense.⁷⁴ In 1556, not much before his death, Girolamo Muzio denounced

⁶⁹ *Vita di san Tommaso*, II, § 49–64, in Marini, *Opere Religiose II*, 512–522.

⁷⁰ Marini, "Introduzione," in id., *Opere Religiose II*, 67.

⁷¹ See the analysis of these suspicions and attacks in Boillet, "L'Arétin et les papes de son temps," 350–362.

⁷² "Che è a me, o Compare, il gracchiar de i frati, che dicono che io non so disputar de la fede?" (Procaccioli, *Lettere II*, 447–448).

⁷³ "[...] tre Prelati (forse per obviare il Concilio) han mosso querela a N.S. acciò la sua beatitudine gli conceda potestade sopra lo incendio de le mie cristiane, religiose, e catoliche scritture [...] io di continuo rendo a Cristo grazie, che né Chietino mi sento, né Luterano [...]" (id., *Lettere III*, 160).

⁷⁴ "[...] ecco arrivarmi in casa non so quanti dal capuccio in testa e da i zoccoli in piedi [...] e mi dicano: 'Aretino, tu scrivi nel principio del *Genesi*, che Iddio è la natura, e la natura non è Dio [...]'! Io, che son meno dotto che la ignoranza, non sapendo rispondere per lettera, gli dissi in vulgare: 'O voi da le cappe e da i cordoni fate sì che la natura, come Iddio, risusciti un morto, e poi confessarò che l'uno è l'altra, e l'altra l'uno' [...]" (id., *Lettere IV*, 247).

the *Umanità* to a member of the Inquisition pointing out blasphemy concerning the nature of Christ and the incarnation of the Word.⁷⁵ These attacks aimed at pointing out the inadequacy of a religious prose written by a layman with no theological training. However, Aretino's self-definition as being neither a "Chietino" (papist) nor a Lutheran was taken seriously by modern critics who interpreted it as the position of who was taking part in the promotion of a "third way", in connection with the myth of Venice intended as a place of political and religious freedom and with the philosophical influence of Erasmus.⁷⁶ Following this line of interpretation, it can be observed that the position taken by Aretino in the mid-1540s, that is after the release of all his religious works, relate not only to the first biblical works, in which the link with Erasmus' philosophy is evident, but also to the hagiographic works, in which, as we will see now, the ideal of a simple prose faithful to the biblical truth is still promoted.

The choice of prose, and more specifically of a "simple" prose, is a polemical one: according to the dedication letter signed by Agostino Ricchi in the *Passione*, the author refused to turn the "true story" into "vain poetry", in order not to remove the Gospel from its "simplicity".⁷⁷ The choice of a simple prose is made not only against poetry but also against "science:" the account of the vision at the beginning of the *Passione* is followed by an apostrophe to the reader in which the narrator announces that, Christ being "pure and simple," he will talk about him "in a pure and simple manner," as Christians are so sure of what they believe that they do not need other scriptures than the Gospels, unlike the arrogant minds who try to "put a veil on the eyes of the truth with the confusion of science."⁷⁸ In the *Umanità*, the author repeated this assertion in the final sentences of the first book, saying that Christ did not

⁷⁵ "La Santa chiesa [...] ha in vita sua determinato che lo sterco della lingua de' suoi scritti sia, et sieno, per esservi mille detti heretici maledichi, dannati, et la parola de' suoi libri abruciata, per havere con lucifera pronuntia (due bestemmie sole voglio farvi udire, et intendere) affermato che la divinità dalla humanità, del salvator nostro Giesù Cristo, per le battiture de' ladroni fu separata, et che la divina colomba (l'altra) prese carne humana in Maria Vergine sempre" (Girolamo Muzio, *Battaglie per la difesa dell'italica lingua*, ed. Carmelo Scavuzzo (Messina, 1995) 71).

⁷⁶ Michele Di Monte, Francesco Mozzetti and Giovanna Sarti, "Pietro Aretino 1992. Proposte e propositi", *Venezia Cinquecento*, II-4 (1992): 142.

⁷⁷ "[...] la bontà di Messer Pietro non ha ardito di torre il puro al latte e il bianco a la neve, che così arìa fatto traendo lo Evangelo de la sua semplicitade, e ciò facendo sarìa stato un convertire la Istoria vera in Poesia vana" (*Al vescovo Palavicino Agostino Ricchi*, § 2, in Boillet, *Opere Religiose I*, 588. See the analysis of this passage in ead., "L'Écriture traduite, commentée, réécrite", 165–167).

⁷⁸ "E per esser egli un atto puro e semplice, parlerò di lui puramente e semplicemente. E sol co 'l testimonio dell'Evangelò vi rappresenterò il martiro della bontà divina. Perché siamo tanto chiari di Dio, che senza altre scritture e senza altri miracoli abbiam certezza di quello di che non fur mai in dubbio, se non alcuni intelletti, che, per acquistar nome filosofando, cercano malignamente di por la benda dinanzi a gli occhi del vero con la confusione della scienza, della quale gli pare esser pieni" (*Passione di Gesù*, § 8, in Boillet, *Opere Religiose I*, 517). See the analysis of this passage in ead., "L'Écriture traduite, commentée, réécrite", 168–169.

choose authors of “mendacious and haughty stories,” full of style and color, to write about his truth and humility, but he selected “pure and simple” authors to write about his purity and simplicity, as men need to believe in Christ with pure and simple minds and hearts.⁷⁹ In the second book, Aretino paraphrased the Sermon on the Mount making Christ bless the simple believers who do not let the “foolhardiness of science” corrupt their minds.⁸⁰ In both passages, the recommended attitude is to “content” oneself with a simple faith. In the second one, like in the above-mentioned apostrophe to the reader in the *Passione*, maintained in the *Umanità*, “science” is guilty of introducing “doubt” in the faithful’s mind and therefore of threatening their faith. Thus, in these works, Aretino states that, the point for a religious writer is not to discuss faith, but to assert it without leaving space for doubt. This can be achieved through neither complicated argumentations nor scholarly references, but only through the simple narrative of the life of Christ or the simple paraphrase of the penitential psalms composed by David.

If the repeated statement about simplicity brought Aretino close to Brucioli, the opening of the *Passione* with both the initial account of the vision and the apostrophe to the reader valorized immediately the literary nature of Aretino’s new enterprise, as did then the elaborate *incipits* of the books which make up the *Umanità* and the *Genesi*. In the same way, the dedication letter of the *Sette salmi* signed by Agostino Ricchi underlined Aretino’s stylistic skills, to which are connected both Aretino’s “goodness” and “doctrine.”⁸¹ As we said, even if Aretino wanted to offer the new model of a simple prose, he emulated in many ways the authors of sacred poems, like them entrusting the disclosure of doctrinal contents to literary means. Indeed, in the *Passione*, the doctrine on the human and divine nature of Christ is progressively exposed through the narration of his sufferings: before the passion, the perfect beauty of Jesus reveals his divinity; during the passion, while this external beauty is altered by the beatings, Jesus’ divine nature interiorizes completely, so as to become invisible externally; after his

⁷⁹ Here is an extract of this rather long passage: “Si maraviglia forse alcuno come Cristo non elegesse scrittori eguali al merito de le opre sue: sciocchi, se pensano che Cristo consentisse che l’istorie mendaci e superbe parlassino de la sua veritade e de l’umiltà sua! [...] La semplicità e la purità di Cristo ha voluto puri e semplici scrittori, i quali hanno ritratto il suo vero puramente e semplicemente. [...] E beati coloro che vivano ne la purità e ne la semplicità natia, e credendo si contentano in quella credenza verace che fa pro a l’anima con piacere disusato” (*Umanità di Cristo*, I, § 192–193, in ead., *Opere Religiose I*, 307–308).

⁸⁰ “Beati coloro il cui spirito mendico di argomenti si sta contento ne la credenza sua, e ciò che vede, e ciò che spera, e ciò che possiede tiene dono d’Iddio, né sa confondersi nel dubbio in cui pone la temerità de le scienze’ [...]” (ibid., II, § 171, 352).

⁸¹ Boillet, “L’Écriture traduite, comentée, réécrite,” 167, 169; ead., “Introduzione”, in ead., *Opere Religiose I*, 55–57. [page numbers corrected in the published version]

death, a supernatural light, sign of the triumph of his divinity over death, emanates from his body.⁸² This visual representation of the doctrine of the double nature of Christ was one of the contents of the *Umanità* incriminated by Girolamo Muzio.⁸³ In the same work, the doctrine on the holy communion is exposed through the use of a comparison first with modern liturgy and then with everyday objects and situations which make this mystery familiar for readers: as they can have no “doubt” about the concrete examples provided by the author, they cannot have doubt about the reality of the presence of Christ in the holy bread.⁸⁴ In the *Sette salmi*, the doctrine on penitence and salvation is exposed through the literary use, based on repetitions and variations, of a range of theological terms (justice, mercy, grace, merit, confession, contrition, correction, etc.), which unfolds progressively a doctrine influenced by the idea of the infinite mercy of God.⁸⁵

Giulio Ferroni underlined the “gigantic paradox” of an author who succeeds in conveying the Gospels’ simplicity only through the complexity of a style based on the use of a profusion of stylistic devices.⁸⁶ So, what can be the difference with “vain poetry,” or with the sacred poems from which Aretino distinguished his own narratives, nonetheless emulating them in specific episodes? The author declares that his style serves a simple prose which conveys truthful doctrinal and moral contents with the only aim to exalt God and convert readers. In the *Passione*, the initial apostrophe, in which the narrator uses the tone and style of a preacher, suggests that this spiritual conversion of the reader is more emotional than intellectual, and that it requires the persuasive eloquence of a preacher more than the argumentative ability of a theologian. As we will now expose, the inspiration drawn from predication is indeed an essential aspect of Aretino’s religious production from the *Passione* to the *Vita di san Tommaso*.

At the end of the 1530s, Aretino preserved his self-image as a free “tongue,” not silenced by the ambiguous gift King Francis I offered to him, and as a loud “voice,” spoken by the man whose portrait appeared in every edition of his books.⁸⁷ While the “fifth evangelist” of the

⁸² See the treatment of the doctrinal question of the double nature of Christ in ead., *L’Arétin et la Bible*, 164–174.

⁸³ Ead., “L’Arétin et les papes de son temps,” 360–362.

⁸⁴ The apostles are like the penitents who receive the sacrament from the priest (later, during the washing of the feet, Christ is compared with the pope); the holy bread, through which Christ enters in each believer, is compared successively with a mirror broken in many pieces, with several open balconies receiving sun light, and with the multiple images reflected by the water when one throws a piece of wood in it. See ead., *L’Arétin et la Bible*, 151–156.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 297–319.

⁸⁶ Ferroni, “Introduzione,” XXI; id. “Premessa,” 17–18.

⁸⁷ Élise Boillet, “Service courtisan et liberté du lettré : Castiglione, l’Arioste, l’Arétin,” in *Hasard et Providence XIVe-XVIIe siècles*, ed. Marie-Luce Demonet, <http://www.cesr.univ->

satirical *pronostici* became the divinely inspired author of the *Passione*, his prognostications regarding the princes became in the *Sette salmi* Nathan's warnings to King David, echoed and enlarged by the final authorial declaration directed to all modern princes.⁸⁸ The latter work valorized the figure of "keenest revealer of vice and preacher of virtue," **[quotation corrected in the published version]** while in a letter dated 1537 Aretino declared to be a "prophet" more than a "poet".⁸⁹ This self-promotion as a divinely inspired preacher is what allowed Aretino to combine the ideal of a simple prose, far away from both poetry and science, with the freedom of the literary writer.

What were Aretino's models in this? Between 1537 and 1548, the author took a stand on ecclesiastical predication. In 1537, writing to Antonio Brucioli, he criticized the obscure speculative preaching of the Florentine Dominicans who vociferate from the pulpit quibbling over difficult questions, whereas who is a simple believer with no doubt about the coming of Christ can easily handle all connected issues such as the Virgin birth, the immortality of the soul and the resurrection of the dead, all issues which are narrative objects in Aretino's biblical works.⁹⁰ In 1538, writing to the Augustinian Andrea Ghetti, he praised the ability of the Capuchin Bernardino Ochino to bring out the simple truth of the Scriptures.⁹¹ In 1542, writing to Francesco Marcolini, he expressed his disdain for the friars who vociferate against him;⁹² as a defense, he included in the re-edition of the first volume of his letters the positive evaluation of his *Genesi* by Ochino.⁹³ Besides these well-known letters dated between 1537 and 1542, other letters dated 1548 also deal with the merits and limitations of ecclesiastical predication. In March, Aretino wrote to Captain Giovan Francesco Faloppia, saying that he does not listen to the fathers who cried out from the pulpit penetrating into the believer's mind with theological and philosophical doctrines and no moral teaching.⁹⁴ Also in March, then, he wrote the above-mentioned letter to the friar and preacher Andrea Ghetti, present in Venice for Lent, referring to him that observant friars came to his home to question his *Genesi*.⁹⁵ In April, he wrote to

tours.fr/Publications/HasardetProvidence/ (12 February 2008), 5–7. **[URL corrected in the published version]**

⁸⁸ Ead., *L'Arétin et la Bible*, 284–286.

⁸⁹ Procaccioli, *Lettere I*, 347. The last letter in the second volume of letters written to Aretino printed in 1551 is by the friar Giovan Battista Diedo, who declares that Aretino, who was first a poet, became a prophet (Procaccioli, *LSA II*, 387).

⁹⁰ Procaccioli, *Lettere I*, 220.

⁹¹ Id., *Lettere II*, 65.

⁹² Ibid., 461.

⁹³ Procaccioli, *Lettere I, Lettere diverse a l'autore*, XLIV.

⁹⁴ Id., *Lettere IV*, 375.

⁹⁵ See n. 76. **[footnote number corrected in the published version]**

another friar, Paolo Antonio, offering him his support, after Andrea Ghetti had informed him that this man had been imprisoned.⁹⁶ In May, he wrote again to Andrea Ghetti, praising his preaching,⁹⁷ and to Captain Nicolò Franciotti, discussing the limitations of many friars, with the exception of Andrea Ghetti and other preachers like the Franciscan Cornelio Musso who thus appears amongst the good examples of preaching.⁹⁸ This reference to Cornelio Musso, to which modern criticism did not pay attention, deserves a closer look.

Between 1539 and 1542, Musso delivered sermons in Rome where Pope Paul III had called him. The sermon on the second penitential psalm, *Del peccato e della penitentia*, was preached in 1541 and included in the *Terzo libro delle prediche* published in 1562.⁹⁹ In the dedication letter to Cardinal Borromeo, Musso explains that, despite the fact that most preachers embellish their sermons before publishing them, his own printed sermons are faithful to “the accent of the words” he pronounced, underlining the natural virtue of his preaching, quite similar to that of the first oracles of the Holy Spirit.¹⁰⁰ He also exposes an ambitious literary and editorial program, announcing the forthcoming fourth volume of his sermons, in which the life of Christ, largely addressed in the third volume, will be completed with the addition of the Last Judgment. Musso concludes: “The world will thus finally have from the printing what I always desired, an entirely depicted Christ from his First to his Second Coming, in all his deeds portrayed from nature with the brush of the Scriptures.”¹⁰¹ In the edition of Musso’s sermons printed in 1554, Bernardino Tomitano had called him a “Michelangelo of words”.

It thus appears that both Aretino and Musso had the ambition to offer the world a complete overview of sacred history, centered on the figure of Christ, in the form of a lively and moving representation. Moreover, they both wanted the believer to simply receive the clear doctrine contained in it. Indeed, in his sermon on the second penitential psalm, Musso addresses the difficult issue of predestination. After having mentioned the definition by St Augustin and referred to other sources, he comes to this conclusion: “Consider the predestination the way you want, it cannot be that predestination obliges the predestinate.”¹⁰² Then he enlarges on the

⁹⁶ Procaccioli, *Lettere IV*, 485.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 562.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 577.

⁹⁹ I have been able to check out the edition printed in 1563: *Predica del peccato, et della penitentia sopra il salmo, Beati quorum remissae sunt iniquitates fatta in Roma nella Chiesa di San Lorenzo in Damaso, l'anno. M D XLI. [...]*, in *Il terzo libro delle prediche del reverendiss. monsignor Cornelio Musso vescovo di Bitonto [...]* (Venice, Gabriel Giolito de' Ferrari, 1563), 53–142.

¹⁰⁰ *All' Illustrissimo, et reverendiss. Monsig. il Cardinale Borromeo*, in *Il terzo libro delle prediche*, cc. 2v-3r.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, c. 4r-v.

¹⁰² *Predica del peccato, et della penitentia*, 67.

incredible force of the Davidic psalms which “moves, fires, ravishes, and almost with violence urges the sinner to do penance.”¹⁰³ He underlines the poetic nature of the psalms whose force he tries to transpose in his own prose, using many stylistic devices, and he declares that what David teaches through his moving psalms is “one unique big fundamental point, which can be seen and touched by everyone:” “one can discuss pros and cons,” he says, “arguments, answers, imagines, as a lot of high intellects have done, but the truth is clear, everybody can prove it and nobody can deny it. What is it? That every man is first of all a sinner and needs penitence.”¹⁰⁴ These simple statements which leave no space for doubt, associated to a strong rhetoric which moves the heart and the mind, are very close to Aretino’s approach of religious writing.

It is worth noticing that the last two lives of saints remain in the line of the biblical works and the *Vita di Maria Vergine*, which all valorize the reading of the Bible and the clear and easy preaching, by speech or by pen, of its doctrinal meanings and moral teachings. Indeed, the opening of the first book in the *Vita di santa Caterina* describes the young noblewoman as a superior mind more interested in reading books than in doing needlework.¹⁰⁵ One night, she hears a divine voice urging her to read the Holy Scriptures.¹⁰⁶ Soon after, she meets an old hermit who presses her to disdain Plato’s philosophy in favor of Christian truth.¹⁰⁷ Convinced by his speeches, she prays the divine wisdom to make her understand the mystery of his son Christ in order to “transform herself in him, to act for him and to relate to him.”¹⁰⁸ She actually receives from above the clear comprehension of all the obscure passages of the Bible, understanding the truth regarding Jesus’ birth and the reason of his coming on earth, and asking forgiveness for the days she spent studying “useless and doubtful doctrines.”¹⁰⁹ Like in the *Passione*, the conversion ensured by the reading of the Bible and the divine illumination of its true meanings lead to the faith in Christ and the imitation of his life and virtues. After her conversion, Catherine herself delivers many speeches in order to convert the members of her family and then her torturers.

The *Vita di san Tommaso* valorizes the saint more than the philosopher, focusing on his private praying and public preaching.¹¹⁰ While a hermit urged Catherine to contemplate Christ in order to understand him as did Moses and Paul, a hermit now reveals to Thomas’ parents the

¹⁰³ Ibid., 78.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 83-84.

¹⁰⁵ *Vita di santa Caterina*, I, § 3–4, in Marini, *Opere Religiose II*, 305–306.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., § 12, 308.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., §13–24, 308–311.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., § 27, 311.

¹⁰⁹ “dottrine disutili e incerte” (ibid., § 28–29, 312).

¹¹⁰ Marini, “Introduzione”, in id., *Opere Religiose II*, 66-67.

greatness of their son, who will be able to comprehend the incomprehensible essence of God as did Moses and Paul.¹¹¹ Like Catherine, Thomas will have “the inherent knowledge of [God]” and his writing will illuminate any “doubt,” so that “the malice of unbelief” will not be able to “confuse” human minds anymore.¹¹² Thomas will understand God’s “simplicity” as well as all his other divine qualities,¹¹³ and “he will talk, dictate and write about Moses’ books, the psalms, the gospels, [and] Paul’s letters” in such a way that “his writing will be confirmed by Christ’s voice.”¹¹⁴ The second book is particularly explicit about the ideal of the simple exposition of the message of the Bible. At its beginning, Thomas’ brothers, who live in a different part of the kingdom, are notified that their father is dead and their mother is gone to Rome, where she hopes to convince Thomas to leave the Dominican order. They decide to go to the monastery where Thomas has found protection and, before taking him away by force, they formulate harsh accusations against monastic rule and life. Even if they are said to be part of an “illicit speech,” these accusations, to which the father superior will answer acknowledging that the friars do not always live the perfect life they should, echo the generic attacks formulated at the beginning of the *Passione* against philosophers and theologians and the more specific ones expressed in the letter written in defense of Antonio Brucioli: the Dominican preachers use science to put “confusion” and “doubt” in the minds of their audience, while “it is much better to believe well in Christ than to preach him badly.”¹¹⁵ In a later episode, just after the conversion of the prostitute who tried to tempt him, Thomas has the great desire to read the Bible. Three angels appear to him holding a cloth, a white belt and a book. They dress him and put the book in front of him.¹¹⁶ While he starts to read this Bible whose letters are illuminated, he feels “his mind moved by a sudden inherent knowledge,” which stimulates him to profess his faith in God, who punishes the men he created “with the means of his justice,” but do not leave them “without the hope of his mercy.”¹¹⁷ In Paris, while he is teaching on Salomon’s proverbs what a good life is,¹¹⁸ he is interrupted by a man, who first declares that because of God’s prescience men cannot

¹¹¹ *Vita di santa Caterina*, I, § 20, in Marini, *Opere Religiose II*, 310; *Vita di san Tommaso*, I, § 21, in Marini, *Opere Religiose II*, 463, and § 24, in *ibid.*, 464.

¹¹² “[...] la perfezione de le sue scritture per consenso divino rischiarerà di sorte i dubbi e di qualità illuminerà le loro iscuritadi, che la nequizia de la incredulità non è per istamparci punto de le sue confusioni [...]” (*ibid.*, § 25, 465).

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, § 26, 465.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, § 30, 466.

¹¹⁵ Here is an extract of this passage: “[...] essi empiono i lor detti di confusione, perché lo auditore gli tenga dotti nel dubbio. Onde è assai meglio di sapere ben credere a Cristo che mal predicarne [...]” (*ibid.*, II, § 12, 509–510).

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, § 65–68, 522–523.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, § 69–70, 524.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.* § 175–181, 551–552.

have free will, but then, thinking of the grave consequences of such a statement for social order, affirms that men do have free will.¹¹⁹ Thomas answers to this doubt addressing the double issue of divine prescience and human free will and arriving to a conclusion whose style can be compared to Musso's rhetoric: "It is thus clear, certain and resolved that men sin with the will to do so, and that without this will they do not sin, although their will, bad and good, is foreseen by God."¹²⁰ At the end of book two, before leaving Paris to go to Bologna, Thomas gathered his students for a last lesson, warning them against science and urging them to abandon philosophy in order to learn exclusively the doctrine of Christ, whose "wisdom measures everything with justice and judges everything with kindness."¹²¹ So, in the line of Aretino's precedent religious works, even the life of the major theologian of Christian Tradition, printed one year after the re-establishment of the Inquisition in Italy, clearly maintained the connection with Erasmus' "philosophy of Christ."

Aretino's religious production surely deserves further enquiry from a literary and religious point of view. Considering it as a whole, from the biblical to the hagiographic works, studying it in connection with the author's profane production, and putting it into perspective in the panorama of Italian religious literature seem necessary to understand this specific production, as well as the author's position in the political, religious and cultural framework of sixteenth-century Italy before and during the Council of Trent. The ideal of biblical "simplicity" cannot be interpreted as a mere excuse that Aretino used to defend himself from the accusation of being ignorant. In its various formulations from the *Passione* to the *Vita di san Tommaso*, this ideal clearly and simultaneously resonates with Erasmus' philosophy of Christ, Valdés' teaching about individual enlightenment, Ochino's but also Musso's preaching, in different ways centered on Christ and connected to the Scriptures, the doctrine of the infinite mercy of God but also that of the value of sacraments and good works. In the same way, a plurality of inspirations characterizes the literary profile of Aretino's religious works, which simultaneously refer to different genres from the spiritual meditation to the historical *compendium*, from the Gospel harmony to the sacred poem, and from the *sacra rappresentazione* to the sermon, offering the reader an enjoyable and polyvalent text.

Élise Boillet (CNRS – CESR, Tours)

¹¹⁹ Ibid., § 182–183, 552–553.

¹²⁰ Ibid., § 192, 555.

¹²¹ Ibid., § 204–207, 558–559.