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## “Equally unknown and unimaginable among the ancients”: Brunelleschi’s Dome and Alberti’s *Lingua Toscana*

Heather A. Horton

*What man, however hard of heart or jealous, would not praise Pippo the architect [Filippo Brunelleschi] when he sees here such an enormous construction towering above the skies, vast enough to cover the entire Tuscan population with its shadow, and done without the aid of beams or elaborate wooden supports? Surely a feat of engineering, if I am not mistaken, that people did not believe possible these days and was probably equally unknown and unimaginable among the ancients.*<sup>1</sup>

--Alberti’s letter to Filippo Brunelleschi, attached to *Della pittura*

The Renaissance humanist Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472) famously produced two versions of his ground-breaking treatise on painting: one in Latin, *De Pictura*, and another in the Italian vernacular, *Della pittura*.<sup>2</sup> Alberti recorded the date he completed *Della pittura* (July 17, 1436), but scholars have long debated whether it preceded or followed its Latin twin, which can only be securely fixed



Figure 1. Dome of the Cathedral of Florence  
(photo: Frank Kovalchek)

<sup>1</sup> Leon Battista Alberti (1972, 32-33): “Chi mai si duro o si invido non lodasse Pippo architetto vedendo qui struttura sì grande, erta sopra e’ cieli, ampla da coprire con sua ombra tutti e’ popoli toscani, fatta senza alcuno aiuto di travamenti o di copia di legname, quale artificio certo, se io ben iudico, come a questi tempi era incredibile potersi, così forse appresso gli antichi fu non saputo né conosciuto?” Subsequent citations from the letter follow Alberti (1972, 32-33). A critical edition of the entire *Della pittura* can be found in Alberti (1973).

<sup>2</sup> Alberti also wrote *Elementi di pittura* and *Elementa Pictura* (in that order chronologically), as well as *Uxoriam* and *Naufragus*, two selections from the *Intercenales*, in both the vernacular and Latin. Other texts indicate a linguistic multiplicity, combining formal Latin dedications with vernacular bodies, as in *Ludi Rerum Mathematicarum* or the double title of *Profugorium ab Aerumna/Della tranquillità dell’animo*, both headings preserved in fifteenth-century manuscripts. For the former title see Cod. No. 738 of the fondo Vittorio Emanuele, Biblioteca Nazionale, Rome; for the latter see MS Gaddiano 84 and Medic. Palat. 112 both in the Biblioteca Laurenziana, Florence.

to the mid-1430s.<sup>3</sup> At stake is the related question: which treatise is the original, best representative of Alberti's intentions and which is merely a derivative translation? But this approach misses the mark. Although there are few and slight differences in content between the painting treatises, Alberti's authorial production of the "same" text in mirroring languages is unusual in the early Quattrocento, an exception that has been overlooked. Turning away from the oft-addressed question, "which came first?" and de-naturalizing Alberti's integrally reflexive textual strategy, I pose the critical question: "why did Alberti write dual treatises on painting?"

The latter inquiry is made more acute by the dedication letter attached to *Della pittura* and addressed to the architect Filippo Brunelleschi (1377-1446), quoted above. Dedications can indicate a reading audience, but they also present an opportunity for the humanist writer to shape the reception of his words. Many treatises were directed at political leaders (e.g., Alberti's 1440 dedication of *De Pictura* to Gianfrancesco Gonzaga, Marquis of Mantua), which grounded the writer's credibility in external authority. As scholars have noted before, Alberti's *Della pittura* letter to Brunelleschi is unusual since it addresses a living, working artist and architect. It is praised as a seminal moment when "Pippo architetto" and by extension his artistic peers were raised above the level of mere mechanical practitioners, the sort of reader Cennino Cennini speaks to in *Il libro dell'arte* (*The Craftsman's Handbook*). Affirming and subverting this commonplace, I argue that Alberti and his letter re-imagined the role and status of the artist, but for different reasons and in different ways than has previously been suggested. The initial question is augmented to include, "what does Alberti's use of the vernacular in his treatise on painting reveal about his conception of the relationship between arts and letters?"

The *Della pittura* letter opens by looking backward. Alberti states that before coming to Florence, "I used both to marvel and to regret that so many excellent and divine arts and sciences, which we know from their works and from historical accounts were possessed in great abundance by the most talented men of antiquity, have now disappeared and are almost entirely lost." The near total loss of ancient arts and sciences caused him to believe "what I heard many say," that "Nature, mistress of all things, had grown old and weary, and was no longer producing intellects any more than giants." In the rest of the letter, Alberti thoroughly refutes the unnamed "many" by celebrating the talent he sees in "the sculptor Donatello...Nencio [Ghiberti], Luca [della Robbia], and Masaccio," but "above all in you Filippo." Alberti recognizes in Brunelleschi, "a genius for every laudable enterprise in no way inferior to any of the ancients who gained fame from these arts." In turn, he writes, "I then realized that the ability to achieve the highest distinction in any meritorious activity lies in our own industry and diligence no less than in the favors of Nature and of the times."<sup>4</sup> Stating this crucial point twice, Alberti insists, "I admit that for the ancients, who had many precedents to learn from and to imitate, it was less difficult to master those noble arts which for us today prove arduous; but it

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<sup>3</sup> Rocco Sinisgalli summarizes the debate (2006, 25-56) and argues for vernacular precedence. See also Bertolini (2000). On the slight differences in content between the two versions see Maraschio (1972) and McLaughlin (2006).

<sup>4</sup> "[L]a natura, maestro delle cose, fatta antica e stracca, più non producea come né giuganti così né ingegni...compresi in molti ma prima in te, Filippo, e in quel nostro amicissimo Donato scultore, e in quegli altri Nencio e Luca e Masaccio, essere a ogni lodata cosa ingegno da non posporli a qual si sia stato antiquo e famoso in queste arti. Pertanto m'avidì in nostra industria e diligenza non meno che in beneficio della natura e de' tempi stare il potere acquistarsi ogni laude di qual si sia virtù."

follows that our fame should be all the greater if without preceptors and without any model to imitate we discover arts and sciences hitherto unheard of and unseen.”<sup>5</sup> Alberti proclaims that the modern painter, sculptor, architect, musician, geometer, rhetorician, or augur (the depleted categories he lists), should generate unprecedented arts and sciences. The loss of ancient guides demands and justifies contemporary innovation.

While Ernst Gombrich (1957) recognized that Alberti’s letter is modeled on an ancient metaphor of weary Nature revived, borrowed from Pliny the Younger, Christine Smith (1992, 22-23) has shown how Alberti breaks with Pliny’s letter in his declaration of Brunelleschi’s “absolute originality.” Indeed, Alberti’s vernacular prescription stands in direct contrast to a similar, earlier statement—in Latin—written by his eminent humanist contemporary Leonardo Bruni (1370-1444) in the *Dialogi ad Petrum Paulum Vergerio* (ca. 1402-03; 1972, 29): “no one without instruction, without teachers, without books can attain any excellence in his studies. Since we have been deprived of the possibility of such things, who then will wonder if no one for a long time now has come near that greatness of the ancients?” Bruni and Alberti describe the same loss of ancient teachers, but apprehending such desolation, Bruni advocates restoring ancient texts and Cicero’s Latin in the *Dialogi* and in his approach to study at large.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, the *Della pittura* letter defines a horizon of possibility, the potential to conceive and express modern, authorial ideas—independent of ancient exemplars—in painting or architecture, and as I will contend, in language.

Alberti’s painting treatises are acclaimed by scholars especially for the description of linear perspective in Book One, a key Renaissance revolution. But strangely, in the dedication letter Alberti never mentions perspective, even though his dedicatee, Brunelleschi, is commonly credited as its inventor.<sup>7</sup> (Likewise, Brunelleschi is never mentioned in the body of the treatise, even in Alberti’s explication of perspective.) Nor does Alberti enumerate a single example of painting in the letter. The sole exemplar of modern ingenuity cited is the recently completed dome of S. Maria del Fiore, the Cathedral of Florence [Figure 1]. Alberti lauds the *cupola* for its massive size and splendor, but especially for its clever construction, which avoided the expensive necessity of erecting wooden centering to support the entire dome as it rose. As the quotation above indicates, this “feat of engineering” defied expectations and shattered precedent. The dome’s inventive construction was not only believed impossible in the fifteenth-century, but in Alberti’s words was “probably equally unknown and unimaginable among the ancients.” It is hard to identify a more explicit, profound testament to the promise of modern culture in the fifteenth century. Nevertheless, a third question arises: why does Alberti choose an architectural example to accompany his vernacular treatise on painting?

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<sup>5</sup> “Confessoti sì a quegli antiqui, avendo quale aveano copia da chi imparare e imitarli, meno era difficile salire in cognizione di quelle supreme arti qual oggi a noi sono faticosissime; ma quince tanto più el nostro nome più debba essere maggiore, se noi senza precettori, senza essempla alcuno, troviamo arti e scienze non udite e mai vedute.”

<sup>6</sup> On Bruni’s efforts to restore ancient language see Witt (2003, 392-494).

<sup>7</sup> Brunelleschi’s biographer from the 1480’s, Antonio Manetti (1970, 42) writes that “he propounded and realized what painters today call perspective...he originated the rule...” Giorgio Vasari (1996, 327) elaborates the story, describing Brunelleschi experimenting with perspective “until he found by himself a method whereby it might become true and perfect.”

Art historians tend to interpret Alberti's use of the vernacular in *Della pittura* as a sign that he meant for artists to read and use the treatise, an aim Alberti asserts in the letter when he invites Brunelleschi to "read my work carefully, and if anything seems to you to need amendment, correct it...I want above all to be corrected by you, so as not to be criticized by detractors."<sup>8</sup> This request is typically read as a sincere desire, without asking why Brunelleschi, the famously jealous guardian of his ideas (Prager 1968), would have been interested in a treatise that expunged all mention of him while describing his revolutionary perspectival painting technique. Instead, I suggest that the letter's impressive list of studious artist-readers, Brunelleschi first among them, grounds *Della pittura* in the implied approval of the most celebrated practitioners of the day. Alberti's letter obscures his humanist audience, intimating that famous masters were his target, to emphasize his connection to contemporary practices and thereby establish and deepen the credibility of his statements. With this reality effect, Alberti smartly, if possibly disingenuously, predicates his standing as an authority on painting on the idea that he directs actual practice.

Art historians are also pressed to explain why painters would venture beyond the active workshop world and turn to a humanistic tract for instruction. As an alternative, I suggest that the same reality-effect strategy suffuses both of Alberti's treatises on painting. In Latin and the vernacular, Alberti continually identifies himself as a teacher to painters. For instance at 1.12, "I beg studious painters to listen to me. It was never shameful to learn from any teacher things that are useful to know."<sup>9</sup> Moreover, he internalizes the expertise of practitioners in his own identity: "I speak in these matters...as a painter" (1.1); "Let me tell you what I do when I am painting" (1.19).<sup>10</sup> In short, Alberti's address of painters—as a painter—situates his theoretical expertise in his own purported practice. Considering Alberti's exceptional place of importance in histories of Renaissance painting, despite the fact that no surviving fresco or panel has been securely attributed to him, his tactic is extremely successful.<sup>11</sup>

But since painters are no less the putative reading audience for the Latin *De Pictura*, my reality-effect suggestion does not, on its own, explain the dual versions of the treatise. Additionally, in my reading, the difference between *De Pictura* and *Della pittura* is informed by pushing the distinction between form and content, utterance and meaning to the foreground. Between the two treatises, although the content is reflected, the mode of communication and thus the authorial intention implied by the languages diverges. I propose that far more than simple translation for artists, the duplicity of Alberti's texts on painting is a linguistic and authorial argument in itself. Since *Della pittura* was written amid the 1430's humanistic language debates over the origin and validity of the Italian vernacular, commonly referred to as the *Questione della lingua*, I assert that it was aimed at Alberti's humanist contemporaries who suspected the *volgare*, without a basis in

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<sup>8</sup> In the original: "leggermi con diligenza, e se cosa vi ti par da emendarla, correggimi...io in prima da te desidero essere emendato per non essere morso da' detrattori." On this tendency see Trachtenberg (2010, 363), who describes an audience shift away from the "elite Latinate world of humanistic practice toward the mundane realm of artists and makers of things."

<sup>9</sup> Alberti (1972, 49). Or at 1.24 (59): "We will now go on to instruct the painter how he can represent with his hand what he has understood with his mind."

<sup>10</sup> Alberti (1972, 37 and 55). Additionally at 1.16 (53): "Let us proceed to deal with the matter as painters"; and at 2.28 (65): "Let me speak of my own experience."

<sup>11</sup> The most often cited attempt to attribute a painting to Alberti is Beck (1989).

ancient texts, was unable to give voice to a learned treatise. While *De Pictura* demonstrates Alberti's humanistic *bona fides* with its erudite, but idiosyncratic Latin, *Della pittura* stands as a compelling assertion that the vernacular, bejeweled with historicist vocabulary borrowed from Latin and Greek, and structured with Latin grammatical discipline, is a capable and even superior means to communicate modern, learned thought.

In *Della pittura* generally, but especially in the dedication letter, the connections between Alberti's arguments for the potential of modern culture, for the vernacular, for the authorial architect, and for himself as an author are laid bare. To summarize, in the letter Alberti cites the *cupola* as a dramatic, manifest achievement, explicitly crediting the inventive construction of the dome, which was in truth a collaborative project realized over generations, to the genius of one living, exceptional man, "Pippo the architect." In the first half of the letter, Alberti establishes Brunelleschi as a contemporary architectural author and authority. In the second half, by dedicating the treatise to Brunelleschi and calling him the first reader, Alberti reflects that authority back onto himself. Alberti's deft authorial maneuvers are particularly necessary not only because writing a treatise on painting was novel, meaning there were no direct, ancient authorities (painted or written) available to validate Alberti's statements, but even more so because the letter accompanies a vernacular treatise on painting. Just at the moment when humanists were emphatically debating whether the *volgare* could be a suitable vehicle for learned expression, Alberti smartly channels admiration for Brunelleschi's architectural feat into justification for his own innovative use of the vernacular in a humanistic treatise. He exploits the disjunction between linguistic conservatism and architectural innovation since the latter provides an opportunity to upend the former. In Alberti's letter, the dome's stupendous originality, tied to Brunelleschi and to present culture, cannot be captured with a word from a remote culture in the distant past. The personal and historical situation of Brunelleschi's dome necessitates and authorizes a concurrent language, Alberti's *lingua toscana*.

In its linguistic, humanistic context, *Della pittura* and Alberti's argument for modern culture intriguingly presage the "Ciceronian Controversies," the recurring, widely influential literary disputes over correct imitation.<sup>12</sup> Over the later Quattrocento and Cinquecento, the debate was realized principally through a series of epistolary exchanges between Angelo Poliziano and Paolo Cortesi (mid-1480's), Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola and Pietro Bembo (1512-13), and Giovambattista Giraldi Cinzio and his mentor Celio Calcagnini (1532-37). Proponents of Ciceronian Neo-Latin, who aimed to reinstate ancient language by imitating Cicero alone, vied with writers who drew from an eclectic pool of literary models. The debate can also be cast in an authorial light, positioned as two poles on a spectrum: in the former, a writer's agency is concealed behind precise imitation of Cicero and the new work derives its authority from perceived fidelity to a discreet, remote origin; in the latter a writer's agency is emphasized through the choice and combination of many models, but lacks the authoritative foundation of seemingly pure, direct imitation. At their core, both the *questione della lingua* and the Ciceronian Controversies dispute whether words are validated by professed adherence to distant, ancient origins or whether those origins are pulled ever closer, into the mind of an

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<sup>12</sup> The letters and tracts of the debate are reproduced and translated in DellaNeva (2007).

author who is fixed to a time and place.<sup>13</sup> Casting a wider net, Desiderius Erasmus's biting dialogue *Ciceronianus* (1528), which mocks slavish imitators of Cicero, returns to what I see as Alberti's essential argument in the *Della pittura* letter: precise imitation of antiquity limits modern language and culture by trapping each in futile attempts to return to ancient sources; modern authors, like the best painters and architects, must forge their own modes of communication to assert their individual voices.

### *Alberti's Vernacular*

While there is a long history of a learned vernacular and a literate citizenry in Florence, professional humanists increasingly enacted a cultural sea change in the early fifteenth century, advocating the restoration of ancient texts to reflect the original authors' language, ancient Latin (Witt 2003). In turn, many humanists endorsed Cicero's letters and orations as dominant exemplars for writing and education. In actuality, the invention of pseudo-ancient Latin (today called Ciceronian Neo-Latin or *all'antica* Latin) in the Renaissance was a dialogic process redefining present and ancient language together. But in the early Quattrocento, the turn toward *all'antica* Latin was accomplished by emphasizing the stable survival and deep age of ancient words in contrast to the contemporary and contingent vernacular.

When Alberti first came to Florence, sometime after 1428, he stepped into this humanistic milieu and sought fame within and against it. The documentary record provides evidence of Alberti's intermittent presence in Florence between 1435 and 1447.<sup>14</sup> The majority of his vernacular writings are clustered around these years: *I Libri Della famiglia* (ca. 1433-41), *Della pittura* (1436), *Teogenio* (ca. 1442), and *Della tranquillità dell'animo* (ca. 1442). Even his later vernacular works (the *Cena Familiaris*, ca. 1462 and *De Iciarchia*, ca. 1468) are specifically connected to the city since they describe events there with Florentine interlocutors. Moreover, between 1434 and 1443 the papal *curia*, which employed Alberti as an abbreviator, fled Rome with Pope Eugenius IV and frequently resided in Florence.

Despite his strong connection to the city, Alberti did not tailor his vernacular to the Tuscan dialect or any other dialect tradition. Instead he applied a Latinizing style to every genre he approached in the *volgare*, both prose and poetic.<sup>15</sup> While today, Alberti is often cited as a forerunner of sixteenth-century champions of "*la lingua fiorentina*," in that century his vernacular was criticized for its Latinity. Cosimo Bartoli (1503-72), Alberti's Cinquecento translator, even corrected many of his vernacular, Latinized spellings changing *antiquo* to *antico* or *philosopho* to *filosofo* (Bryce 1983, 202-3). In actuality, Alberti's "*lingua toscana*" is deeply historicist, imitating Latin grammatically and incorporating Latin and Greek words, along with his own frequent neologisms to form a hybrid, macaronic vocabulary. Alberti's friend, Cristoforo Landino (1424-98), described this tendency: "notice with what industry [Alberti] has contrived to transfer to our tongue

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<sup>13</sup> This formulation is particularly indebted to Quint (1983).

<sup>14</sup> See Documents 1-38 in Boschetto (2000, 189-271).

<sup>15</sup> For Alberti's Latinized poetry see (2002). For a Cinquecento evaluation, see Vasari (1996, 415): "[Alberti] was the first who tried to reduce Italian verse to the measure of Latin..."

all the eloquence, composition, and nobility which is found in Latin.”<sup>16</sup> Alberti’s eclectic vocabulary was not always met with praise. On the vernacular *Della famiglia*, Leonardo Dati (1408-72) wrote to the author, in Latin, “especially in the proem to the work [you write] in a style that is too grandiose and perhaps harder (*ac forsā asperior*) than the Florentine language or judgment of men who know no Latin can tolerate.”<sup>17</sup> Dati’s use of “asperior” does not literally mean firm, but that Alberti’s words are not softened by common use, that is, they are stiff and unusual. Dati’s criticism and Landino’s praise suggest that those ignorant of Latin would struggle with Alberti’s *volgare*, but they reinforce my proposal that Alberti wrote, even in the vernacular, toward a humanistically-educated audience.

Defining erudite terms to describe modern painting is a prime goal of both *De Pictura* and *Della pittura*. Phrases such as “let us call these...” and “let us describe it in our own rough terms” interrupt Alberti’s discussions frequently. While Alberti’s learned terminology often draws on ancient authors, including Cicero and Greek exemplars, he persistently suggests that it comes from conversations with friends.<sup>18</sup> This legerdemain situates his words (Latin and the vernacular) in contemporary conversation rather than the textual tradition, another indication of the reality-effect strategy observed above. Moreover, Alberti specifically worries about clarity when describing markedly new techniques (1.21): “I fear [my description of linear perspective] may be little understood by readers on account of the novelty of the subject and the brevity of our description.” In other words, the novelty of linear perspective presents a *linguistic* problem. Alberti continues, “As we can easily judge from the works of former ages, this matter probably remained completely unknown to our ancestors...”<sup>19</sup> In both Latin and the *volgare*, he stresses that there is no ancient word for linear perspective since it was “unknown” to past painters. Alberti’s linguistic exhibitionism is especially pronounced in *Della pittura* where he is not only incorporating new terms into the already learned Latin as in *De Pictura*, but enmeshing a sophisticated vocabulary to prove the capability of the vernacular.

In addition to incorporating a wide vocabulary, Alberti overtly argues that the vernacular possessed the disciplined structure necessary to endure intact over many generations in his *Grammatica della lingua Toscana* (1437-41), a handbook explicitly wedding the *volgare* to Latin structure. Using transposed Latin grammatical terms (e.g., *avverbio*, *appellativo*, *articolo*), he presents rules for the correct use of “vowels,” “verbs,” “prepositions,” etc. to demonstrate that the vernacular follows a coherent logic and is therefore sufficiently sophisticated to convey learned topics. To make this point plain, Alberti largely and obviously modeled his grammar book on Priscian’s *Institutiones*, which lays out the grammatical structure of the ancient language.

For humanists, the advantage of Latin rests in its *copia*, richness of vocabulary, and grammar, structure that ensures consistency. Terence Cave (1985) emphasizes how *copia*

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<sup>16</sup> Mancini (1967, 441). The vernacular appears in Mazzocco (1993, 96): “attendete con quanta industria ogni eleganzia, composizione e dignità che appresso a’ Latini si truova si sia ingegnato a noi trasferire.”

<sup>17</sup> Alberti (1960, 380): “in stylo grandiori ac forsā asperiori praesertim in libri primordio quam Florentina lingua aut non literatorum hominum iudicia toleratura esse videantur.”

<sup>18</sup> See for example, Alberti (1972, 67-69): “So attention should be devoted to circumscription; and to do this well, I believe nothing more convenient can be found than the veil, which among my friends I call the intersection, and whose usage I was the first to discover.”

<sup>19</sup> Alberti (1972, 58).



abets brevity, allowing for precision and wit. Moreover, Sarah Stever Gravelle (1988) describes how *copia* allows a writer to choose just the right word, indicating the ability to distinguish precise differences, linguistically and logically. Varied terms not only make prose elegant and full, but do the same for an author's thought. Likewise, grammar not only indicates the structure of language, but the organization of the mind. Thus when Alberti insists on generating a widely eclectic vocabulary for the *volgare* and promotes its grammar, he is equally arguing for its ability to cultivate and voice the refined thought of modern men.

Alberti's peer, Pier Candido Decembrio (1399-1477), describes the language-mind connection in his Latin *Grammaticon*: "Those who diligently pursue the study of eloquence do not so much aim at license in writing or the noise of empty speech, but rather they imitate the sense and propriety of words, in which there is such a power that whatever we conceive in the mind (*quae animo concepimus*) we can elegantly express and clearly articulate and easily fashion."<sup>20</sup> Decembrio specifically admires Cicero's texts as brief because of his superior vocabulary, which provides a word for every concept, and as elegantly arranged, which shows the sharpness of his thinking. Petrarch (1304-1374) articulated the language-mind equivalence already in the Trecento when, in imitation of Horace (*Epistulae* 1.1.95), he compared an author's Latin to a well-tailored vestment: "I much prefer that my style be my own, uncultivated and rude, but made to fit, as a garment, to the measure of my mind (*ad mensuram ingenii*)."<sup>21</sup> Correspondingly, Petrarch described ancient Latin as a single entity, ill-defined chronologically and employed uniquely by various authors—Cicero's Latin, Pliny's Latin, Virgil's Latin. He fused a style of writing eclectically, bringing together biblical vocabulary and modern ecclesiastical terms with classicizing words into a palimpsest language—Petrarch's Latin.<sup>22</sup> Reaching back further, the concept of language as an individual expression of the author's mind is a central assertion of Dante's Latin *De Vulgare Eloquentia* (probably 1302-08, unfinished). Dante (1890, 6) argues that only humans have need of words to express their thoughts, unlike angels and God who "communicate their thoughts, the meaning they conceive in the mind, directly to the minds of each other." While it is unclear that later humanists, Petrarch, Alberti, or beyond knew Dante's statement, his description of language as the (imperfect) expression of the mind across the opacity of the body indicates an emerging way of thinking about language that has undeniable implications for later debates.

A broader, bird's-eye view of linguistic changes between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries elucidates the coeval, evolving role of the early modern author. For medieval philosophers, the meaning of words corresponded to an ontological order invested by God that existed outside time or any individual. While Augustine and Aquinas acknowledged the arbitrariness of signs at some level, the common assumption tended toward words according to mental concepts or to things in the world (or both)

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<sup>20</sup> Gravelle (1988, 372, n. 16): "Qui eloquentiae studio diligentius occupantur non tam scribendi lasciviam et inanis dicendi sonos consecrari solent quam verborum sensus ac proprietatem imitari quibus tanta vis inest ut quae animo concepimus eleganter exponere dilucide exorare facilliter imprimere possimus."

<sup>21</sup> Petrarch (1975, 3:213); Petrarch (1933, XXII:2): "Alioquin multo malim meus michi stilus sit, incultus licet atque horridus, sed in morem toge habilis, ad mensuram ingenii mei factus."

<sup>22</sup> On Petrarch's synthetic style see Witt (2003, 270) and Greene (1982, 98), who writes: "Petrarch sees that a man's style is as personal as his face, and that both reflect the essential core of selfhood...that makes him unique."

automatically (Elsky 1989). Thus language is ahistorical and static. Similarly, as Alastair Minnis (1984) explicates, the twelfth-century author (*auctor*) acted as a remote origin point legitimating traditions of knowledge by the authority of his name (e.g., Aristotle). The author's authority is defined through continual transmission and reference, *through* time, yet he did not exist *in* time as a historical figure. As Albert Ascoli (2008) explores with Dante, over the course of the Trecento the *auctor* emerges less as an abstract origin point and source of authority and more as a historical figure. Whereas Aristotle was an unquestionable authority to the scholastic philosophers Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas, Petrarch imagined Cicero as a historical man who possessed differing degrees of authority on moral, linguistic, or stylistic matters. This gradual, non-linear change is vital; knowledge can be internalized in specific historical individuals (authors) and their words, their ideas can be consequently bound to a time and place. The legitimacy of a word, its authority, is then established by the writer or speaker, newly conceived as an author in his own right.

But there is a catch: in refuting the *a priori* foundation of language, humanists required new standards of linguistic meaning. Many attempted to return to a time before the fall of Rome and the Latin linguistic diaspora, to a perfect font of language situated not in the theological realm, but in newly uncovered and restored ancient texts. Instead of investing meaning in words because of God's authority, humanists substituted the authority of ancient *auctores*, Cicero especially, to find (and often invent) meaning. The static *all'antica* standard was then applied across historical times indiscriminately—writers from antiquity, the so-called Middle Ages, and the present were all found wanting in the face of Ciceronian perfection. Attempts to restore ancient Latin gave rise to Ciceronian Neo-Latin, which excluded post-antique neologisms and reinstated classical rhetorical forms. I argue that much as the scholastics described themselves in a post-Babel world where the original meanings of words were lost through dispersion and time, the Ciceronians described similar consequences in a post-antique world. Time and alteration conquered and destroyed the perfection of the past. The present is charged with reconnecting words to things by tracing them to their origin—ancient texts. In this way a new immutable, transcendent standard for language and, in turn, culture could be gradually constructed and enforced by Ciceronian humanists. Like the story of the Renaissance more broadly, the restoration of ancient Latin relied on the persuasive fiction of a return to an invented past.

The establishment of *all'antica* Latin was not embraced by humanists monolithically. Most controversially, *all'antica* Latin presented a serious obstacle for concepts invented after antiquity. In practice, restoring ancient Latin meant scouring ancient texts to determine the legitimacy of words and eliminating medieval interlopers.<sup>23</sup> Terminology and thus inventions developed over a millennium of cultural change were suddenly deemed inadequate. As a result, linguistic arguments extended into the cultural realm generally.

Heated debates arose on whether modern men should follow ancient authorities or whether they should adapt to current needs. Poggio Bracciolini (1380-1459), who challenged Lorenzo Valla (1407-57) in a 1452 exchange, laid out these terms explicitly, in Latin: "The propriety, the force, the meaning, the construction of Latin words is

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<sup>23</sup> On this method, see the lexicons cited by Baxandall (1971, 14, n. 18), especially the discussion of Guarino's *De Vocabulorum Observatione*.

established, not so much by reason as by the authority (*autoritate*) of ancient writers (*veterum scriptorum*). If this is taken away, the foundations and maintenance of the Latin language necessarily will perish. For usage (*usus*) was always the master of Latin speech, and this is contained only in the books and writings of the ancient authors (*autorum*).<sup>24</sup> Poggio contextualizes language by asserting its connection to use, but much more aggressively he decontextualizes it, removing language from the particularities of changing culture and cementing it in ancient books. He resolves, “this mad critic [Valla], having removed the authority of all the superior writers, inserts a new meaning into words, introduces a new manner of writing, a practice (*usus*) of such great presumption that he attributes to himself alone more authority (*autoritatis*) than to all the rest.”<sup>25</sup> The most telling charge Poggio levels against Valla is that he “prefers himself to Cicero.”<sup>26</sup> Valla responded, also in Latin, by questioning Poggio’s insistence on ancient superiority and returning the charge of poor mental health: “Oh incredible insanity, as if these two [Cicero and Augustine] had judged future men and not only those who had been or were. What if someone after them should be more learned than Varro, more excellent than Virgil or a better historian than Sallust and Livy? Would you deny him to be more learned, excellent, and better because the ancients had not so judged?”<sup>27</sup> For Valla, trapping Latin at its origin rendered future generations mute.

Valla, who consistently wrote in Latin, is usually hailed as one of the first humanists to argue for modern referential language, but I submit that Alberti’s promotion of the vernacular was no less innovative. Famously, Valla discredited the *Donation of Constantine*, the document granting the papacy control of Rome and the Western Roman Empire, by proving philologically that it was written between the eighth to ninth centuries rather than the third to fourth. Looking backward, he persuasively connected a specific historical Latin to a particular moment and culture. I contend that Alberti, looking forward, used the same connection between language and culture to argue for the validity of the vernacular to match modern society. Valla’s insistence on the temporality of language is driven off the historical timeline into the future by Alberti’s vernacular project. Moreover, by arguing that cultural, social, and temporal use determines language, Alberti makes the speaker or writer, Alberti himself, the origin and authorizing force of words (the author). Framed this way, it is little wonder that many humanists saw Alberti’s attempts to refine and elevate the vernacular as a kamikaze flight of self-absorption that eroded the originative power of the past. The question remains: if use determines linguistic meaning, then whose use predominates: ancient authors’, whose words are

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<sup>24</sup> Trinkaus (1987, 16): “Latinorum verborum proprietates, vis, significatio, constructio non tantum ratione, quantum veterum scriptorum autoritate constant. Qua sublata latinae linguae fundamentum et sustentaculum pereat necesse est. Latine enim loquendi usus semper fuit magister, qui solum autorum priscorum libris et scriptis continetur.”

<sup>25</sup> Trinkaus (1987, 16): “Iste vesanus convitiator, superiorum omnium autoritate semota, nova sensa verbis indidit, novum scribendi morem introducit, tanta praesumptione usus, ut sibi soli plus quam reliquis omnibus tribuat autoritatis.”

<sup>26</sup> Trinkaus (1987, 15): “Ciceroni se preaeferit in elegantia.”

<sup>27</sup> Gravelle (1981, 199, n. 16): “Sed quid plura de stultitia tua, qui ais me nunc posse meipsum praeferre Varroni (quod verbum, sicut caetera abs te confictum est) quod Cicero et beatus Augustinus illum praeferant omnibus latinis sapientia et doctrina; quasi vero (O, incredibilem amentiam) hi duo sententiam tulerint de futuris hominibus et non de his solum qui fuerant aut errant. Quid enim si post illos existat aliquis Varrone doctior aut Vergilio praestantior, aut Sallustio Livioque melior historicus? Negabis tu eum esse doctorem, praestantior, meliorem quod non ita veteres iudicant?”

preserved in texts; or present speakers', whose words capture current civilization? Is language validated by time and long duration, or by immediate application and present speakers?

### *The Questione della Lingua*

The *questione della lingua*—or debate on the origin of the vernacular—erupted among the *curia* in March 1435 when Pope Eugenius and his secretaries were in Florence.<sup>28</sup> The imbroglio centered on whether all ancient Romans spoke Latin in their daily lives or whether there was another more common language, a precursor to the modern *volgare*. Flavio Biondo (1392-1463), in his Latin tract *De Verbis Romanae Locutionis* (1435), which was pointedly dedicated to Leonardo Bruni, argued that everyone in antiquity spoke Latin and that the vernacular developed after the fall of Rome. Bruni responded shortly thereafter with a letter, also in Latin, arguing that the vernacular originated in antiquity when common people spoke in one language and learned people wrote in another. The key for both Bruni and Biondo is whether Latin was an artificial language acquired with education (a “*grammaticae artis usu*” in Bruni’s words) or a natal language (“*materno vulgate idiomate*”).<sup>29</sup> This initial exchange ignited a long-simmering controversy over the origin and use of the vernacular that quickly expanded. In Alberti’s Prologue to Book Three of *Della famiglia* (1437), written in the vernacular, he joins Biondo’s side, arguing that Latin was a natal language common in antiquity. Angelo Mazzocco (1993, 84-5) has identified specific echoes of Bruni’s language in Alberti’s Prologue, indicating that he composed it as a direct response to Bruni.

Alberti’s case for the vernacular, assertively written in the vernacular, argued that contingent use and present need, not aged authority, define language. In the Prologue Alberti describes the destruction of Rome and the erosion of ancient Latin as the result of inevitable change over time via constant use: “[the mixing of many peoples and languages] made our originally refined and polished language [ancient Latin] grow from day to day more rustic and degenerate.”<sup>30</sup> He writes that the contemporary vernacular is the product of “necessity or the wish to communicate,” of the adaptation and integration required over changing governments and populations. Alberti then encourages his peers to embrace change over time and to channel its irresistible effects to create a new language that integrates ancient learning with the contemporary idiom: “As to the great authority among all nations which my critics attribute to the ancient language, this authority exists simply because many learned men have written in it. Our own tongue [the modern vernacular] will have no less power as soon as learned men decide to refine and polish it by zealous and arduous labors.”<sup>31</sup> Significantly, and this point should be

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<sup>28</sup> On the debate see Mazzocco (1993) and Tavoni (1982). On Alberti’s role specifically see Grayson (1960 and 1963).

<sup>29</sup> Mazzocco (1993, 13).

<sup>30</sup> Alberti (2004, 152); Alberti (1994, 188): “Onde per questa mistura di dí in dí insalvatichí e viziosi la nostra prima cultissima ed emendatissima lingua.”

<sup>31</sup> Alberti (2004, 153); Alberti (1994, 190-91): “E sia quanto dicono quella antica apresso di tutte le genti piena d'autorità, solo perché in essa molti dotti scrissero, simile certo sarà la nostra s'e' dotti la vorranno molto con suo studio e vigilie essere elimata e polita.”

emphasized, the parity between the vernacular and Latin was not a reality, but a potentiality. For Alberti contingent, mutable use and, by implication, individual authors are the consistent shapers of language across time, its destroyers and creators.

Alberti's contribution to the *questione della lingua* puts the entire debate about the origins of the vernacular in a new light. To my mind, the Quattrocento humanists are not only debating a question of Florentine patriotism as Hans Baron (1955, 285-346) sees Bruni's position, or historical development as Mazzocco positions the debate with respect to Dante, but also the relationship between the individual and language. Bruni's assertion that the uneducated in antiquity could not understand Latin is predicated on his idea that (in any era) Latin can only be employed after the logical relationships it expresses are mastered. He writes (1987, 233): "Tell me are your shopgirls and wet nurses and the illiterate vulgar [the uneducated] going to say what we, the lettered [the educated], can scarcely manage to say?" The uneducated could communicate, but did so in a simpler tongue (a *volgare*). Bruni's position toward the vernacular was not a demonizing disdain, but a limited categorization of its capabilities. This important distinction clarifies Bruni's own vernacular writings and translations on civic values as well. When translated by a knowledgeable intermediary (Bruni), ancient Latin lessons of "civic gospel," to borrow James Hankins' apt phrase (2006, 138), can be conveyed to the larger population in the *volgare*.

More than snobbery, Bruni argues that only those schooled in logic and reading, especially in authoritative tracts such as Cicero, could communicate in Latin. Learned language is external to human experience and resides in immutable texts. Bruni's argument is an extension of the humanist drive to reconnect words to ancient authorities and to revive ancient Latin by carefully imitating a static, textual standard. At stake is the possibility that by channeling the ancient tongue passively and precisely, without inserting any fresh interruptions, a modern reader could also imitate ancient logic. In this sense, the restoration of ancient Latin extended beyond the textual and (theoretically) really did provide a glimpse into ancient authors' minds. Yet when applied to new compositions, strict ancient imitation limits the language and cabins the ideas of its proponents.

Alberti, on the other hand, argues that natal language structures logical thinking. He insists that without formal training a woman (an uneducated person), who natively spoke Latin, could also understand Latin grammar.<sup>32</sup> Alberti's question in the *Della famiglia* Book Three Prologue, do "foreigners today find our present language less difficult to use with precision and clarity than we the ancient tongue?" accordingly takes on deeper meaning.<sup>33</sup> As the foreigner fumbles with the conjugation of a verb, he is truly striving to think in a foreign idiom. Alberti concedes that when ancient language expresses ancient thought it was "rich and beautiful," but he argues that it cannot express modern,

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<sup>32</sup> Alberti (2004, 152); Alberti (1994, 188-89): "Né a me qui pare da udire coloro, e' quali di tanta perdita maravigliandosi, affermano in que' tempi e prima sempre in Italia essere stata questa una qual oggi adoperiamo lingua commune, e dicono non poter credere che in que' tempi le femmine sapessero quante cose oggi sono in quella lingua latina molto a' bene dottissimi difficile e oscure, e per questo concludono la lingua in quale scrissero e' dotti essere una quasi arte e invenzione scolastica piú tosto intesa che saputa da' molti."

<sup>33</sup> Alberti (2004, 152); Alberti (1994, 189): "E ancora domanderei se credono meno alle strane genti essere difficile, netto e sincero profferire questa oggi nostra quale usiamo lingua, che a noi quella quale usavano gli antichi."

innovative concepts as fully as the present vernacular can. Alberti concludes, “I cannot approve of the contempt so many people show for what they themselves speak, while they praise what they neither understand nor cultivate by reading.”<sup>34</sup> He chastises his *all’antica* peers for neglecting their own minds and praising long-dead ancients who, because they spoke and thought in a temporally-foreign tongue, cannot truly be grasped by modern men.<sup>35</sup> Such a method keeps scholars in silence, neither comprehending antiquity nor themselves.

The debate continued in October 1441, when Alberti organized a vernacular poetry competition, the *certame coronario* (poetic contest for the crown), with the patronage of Piero de’Medici (Bertolini 1993 and 2003). While modeled on ancient, perhaps Greek, competitions, the tournament’s aim was to demonstrate the potential of the vernacular to treat a refined subject (friendship, a classical *topos*, was the theme). The contest, held at Santa Maria del Fiore and judged by ten members of the papal curia, brought together all the major contributors to the nearly decade-long argument over the origin and role of the vernacular. It ended in a stalemate when the judges, deadlocked by debate over the suitability of the vernacular for oratory, were unable to choose a winner.

In a *Protesta* letter composed after the debacle, possibly written by Alberti, one critic, possibly Leonardo Bruni, is singled out: “there is one among you who...claims it is unworthy for a vernacular to strive against a very noble literary language, and that such contests should accordingly be forbidden.”<sup>36</sup> Stubbornly, Alberti persisted in promoting the vernacular and planned a second contest for 1442 with *envy*, another classical *topos*, as the theme. At this point, Bruni publicly mocked the contest and Alberti in a letter to their mutual colleague Leonardo Dati: “a good bit more could be said against stupidity than against envy. Both are evils, to be sure, but stupidity is the worse one.”

The *questione della lingua* and *certame coronario* reveal two divergent approaches to language, antiquity, and authorship. Bruni finds (or devises) a model for the Quattrocento separation between common and learned language in antiquity and argues that this separation should be upheld. Alberti, to the contrary, sees a rupture between ancient and modern languages that he would heal not by reinstating the older Latin, but by integrating its best aspects (*copia* and grammar) into the newer language, the vernacular. Bruni describes learned, authoritative language outside historical time or individual use; it is preserved and communicated in texts. In contrast, Alberti argues that use, time, and human experience define language. More than simply humanistic sparring, the *curia* debate and the collapse of the *certame* are clashes of temporal and authoritative perspectives.

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<sup>34</sup> Alberti (2004, 153); Alberti (1994, 190): “Né posso io patire che a molti dispiaccia quello che pur usano, e pur lodino quello che né intendono, né in sé curano d’intendere.”

<sup>35</sup> Alberti (2004, 153); Alberti (1994, 190): “...questi biasimatori in quella antica sanno se non tacere, e in questa moderna sanno se non vituperare chi non tace.”

<sup>36</sup> On the exchange of letters see Grafton (2000, 173).

*Brunelleschi's Dome and the Della Pittura Dedication Letter*

The *Della Pittura* letter, written in July 1436, falls exactly amid the initial 1435 *Questione della lingua* exchange and Alberti's 1437 contribution to the debate in *Della famiglia*. Moreover, just a few months before Alberti wrote the letter, he watched as Santa Maria del Fiore was dedicated on the Feast of the Annunciation, March 25, 1436, after numerous construction pauses and crises of uncertainty.<sup>37</sup> Standing among the crowd, which included the Pope and *curia*, heads of state such as Alberti's future architectural patron Sigismondo Malatesta from Rimini, and the city chancellor Leonardo Bruni, Alberti saw proof that modern culture was neither lost, nor dead, but vital. The cathedral and its *cupola* stood as the *opera* patrons intended, as an attestation to the dominance of Florence, the ability of its citizens, and above all the capacity of contemporary men to rival the ancients.

Moreover, Alberti writes that the *cupola* stood as a witness to the inventive ingenuity of one man, Brunelleschi. Alberti condenses the collaborative plan to raise the dome without the aid of massive wooden centering, which in actuality was conceived by many including the mathematician Giovanni dell'Abbaco, Nanni di Banco, Donatello, and especially Ghiberti, into a representation of Brunelleschi's singular genius.<sup>38</sup> The actual fabricators of the structure (i.e., carpenters, brick-layers, etc.), not to mention the Cathedral *opera* patrons do not merit inclusion. Alberti describes the "enormous construction towering above the skies, vast enough to cover the entire Tuscan population with its shadow," as if it were willed into place almost instantly. He entirely obscures the complexity and contradiction inherent to monumental architecture and portrays the dome as the idea of a single individual in a flash of inspiration. Alberti transforms Brunelleschi "architetto" into an "auctor," who expresses his interior, personal genius in stone, like Dante or Petrarch employ words. Simultaneously, by fixing the *cupola* design to a single, living person, Alberti tethers it to a time. He insists that the ancients could not even have imagined the ingenious dome. It is specifically emblematic of present-day Florence.

Much as he praises Brunelleschi's temporally and culturally contingent originality, throughout his treatises on painting, Alberti repeatedly asserts his own novelty. He explicitly rejects a probing search for the ancient origins of painting (2.26): "It is of little concern to us to discover the first painters or the inventors of the art, since we are not writing a history of painting like Pliny, but treating the art in an entirely new way. On this subject there exist none of the writings of the ancients."<sup>39</sup> His treatises are not rooted in the past, but in the immediate present, projecting toward the future. Furthermore, he defines his own efforts as new origin points (1.23): "I have outlined here, as a painter speaking to painters, only the first rudiments of the art of painting. And I have called

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<sup>37</sup> Saalman (1993, 275-76) describes the cathedral dedication ceremony and attendance. The *cupola* was additionally blessed by the Bishop of Fiesole on 30 August 1436. Bruni records the March cathedral dedication in his *Memoirs* (2007, 381-83), but never mentions Brunelleschi or the particular architectural achievement of the dome.

<sup>38</sup> On the collaborative construction of the *cupola* see Saalman (1980, 58-134) and Trachtenberg (1983).

<sup>39</sup> Alberti (1972, 61). See also 2.48 (85): "whether if it was once written about by others, we have rediscovered this art of painting and restored it to light from the dead, or whether if it was never treated before, we have brought it down from the heavens, let us go on as we intended, using our own intelligence as we have done up until now."

them rudiments because they lay the first foundations of the art for unlearned painters” (Alberti 1972, 59). The close of the treatises repeats this assertion, speaking to future generations directly: “I implore [later writers on painting], should they in the future exist, to take up this task eagerly and readily, to exercise their talents on it, and perfect this most noble art” (ibid. 107). Alberti cites models for the idea of writing a treatise on painting (2.26), referencing Euphranor the Isthmian, Antigonus, Xenocrates, Apelles, Demetrius and possible unnamed Italian authors, but he emphasizes that they are all lost to corrupting time and obscurity.<sup>40</sup> He avers, immodestly but correctly, that his treatments are decidedly new, to redirect his description of the *cupola*, without “precedents” and “without any [existing] models to imitate.”

The challenge of branching outside the canon, and particularly with calling so much attention to his novelty, is that Alberti is building beyond the cultural, authoritative foundations, so to speak. While there are no authorial rivals for his treatise on painting, there are also no direct, time-proven authorities to validate his statements. The authoritative obstacle is amplified with the vernacular *Della pittura*. In this delicate situation, Alberti needs Brunelleschi and the visible, manifest authority of the ingeniously-built *cupola* as a legitimating basis for his learned, *volgare* treatise. If Brunelleschi is a cultural authority, as Alberti suggests, and if he reads and corrects *Della pittura*, as Alberti requests, then *Della pittura* is inferentially validated by the most celebrated practitioner of the day. The letter certainly advances Brunelleschi as a man of learning, a well-established elevation (Grafton 2000, 76), but the association equally makes Alberti someone to be learned from.

Alberti’s efforts to link himself as theorist to Brunelleschi as practitioner succeeded already in the Quattrocento. The two are paired as evidence of flourishing letters and architecture respectively by Alamanno Rinuccini in the dedication of his Greek to Latin translation of Philostratus’s *Life of Apollonius* (1473) for Federigo da Montefeltro, which as Gombrich (1978, 3) has noted, was modeled on Alberti’s *Della pittura* letter. Rinuccini praised Brunelleschi, “architect of the Florentine basilica,” and Alberti, “[writer of] books on architectural precepts and furthermore on painting,” together since they shared the “greatest genius (*ingenii*).”<sup>41</sup> Given Rinuccini’s unified admiration of

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<sup>40</sup> Alberti (1972, 63-64): “On this subject there exist today none of the writings of the ancients, as far as I have seen, although they say that Euphranor the Isthmian wrote something about symmetry and colors, that Antigonus and Xenocrates set down some works about paintings, and that Apelles wrote on painting to Perseus. Diogenes Laertius tells us that the philosopher Demetrius also wrote about painting. Since all the other liberal arts were committed to writing by our ancestors, I believe that painting too was not neglected by our authors of Italy, for the ancient Etruscans were the most expert of all in Italy in the art of painting.” Additionally at the opening of Book One (37), Alberti stresses his taking up a “difficult subject, which as far as I can see has not been treated by anyone else.” Finally, at the conclusion of Book Three (107): “I consider it a great satisfaction to have taken the palm in this subject, as I was the first to write about this most subtle art.”

<sup>41</sup> The passage from Rinuccini is printed in Canfield (1984, 117-18, n. 12): “In qua duo praecipue claruerunt summis ingenii homines et omnis antiquitatis indagatores accuratissimi, unus quidem Philippus, Brunelleschi scribae filius, florentinae basilicae architector, alter autem Baptista Albertus, vir et familiae nobilitate et ingenii praestantia clarissimus, qui etiam de picturae architecturaeque praeceptis libros aliquot scripsit accuratissime.” My translation: “In which two men with the greatest *ingenii* became especially famous and also very accurate investigators of all things relating to antiquity, one a certain Philippus, son of the scribe Brunelleschi, and builder of the Florentine basilica, and the other Baptista Albertus, a most illustrious man with nobility of family and excellence of *ingenii*, who also very accurately wrote several



Brunelleschi and Alberti and his imitation of Alberti's letter, it is even possible that Rinuccini recognized and echoed a sentiment of interconnected, thriving arts and language already implicit in Alberti's words.

I propose that Alberti subtly, yet forcefully, links his linguistic innovation, composing a sophisticated treatise in the *volgare*, one meant to rival ancient authors such as Pliny, to Brunelleschi's architectural innovation at the *cupola*, itself meant to rival ancient buildings. Alberti's grammar indicates that the letter is not only a declaration about Brunelleschi and the modern artists, who undoubtedly stand at its center, but also celebrates his innovative use of the vernacular to discuss an erudite topic. Throughout the letter Alberti employs the first person plural, explicitly writing in this key passage: "our fame (*nostro nome*) should be all the greater if without preceptors and without any model to imitate we discover (*troviamo*) arts and sciences hitherto unheard of and unseen." The first person plural places the letter writer, Alberti himself, alongside Brunelleschi, perhaps even in the guise of one of the "*retorici*" cited among the flourishing arts. In this light, the first sentence of Pliny's letter, Alberti's Latin model, is newly illuminating: "I am an admirer of the Ancients, but not like some people, so as to despise the talent of our own times (*temporum nostrorum*)."<sup>42</sup> Like Alberti's statement above, Pliny's sentence praises its author (Pliny himself). Writing a humanistic treatise on painting, a subject not treated since antiquity, is a feat Alberti would have judged noteworthy since he repeatedly reminds the reader of his innovation. Writing a humanistic treatise in the vernacular compounded this provocative innovation, especially since it appeared just as the linguistic debates over the capacity of the vernacular flared.

Alberti's juxtaposition of architectural and linguistic innovation, attached to his treatise describing a perspectival revolution in painting, is cunning. What better way to demonstrate that language must respond to contemporary needs and accommodate change than by choosing subjects (early fifteenth-century painting generally and the *cupola* specifically) that because they are undeniably, stupendously innovative demand up-to-the-minute language? As the elaborate and widely-attended dedication of Santa Maria del Fiore conveys, Alberti was one among many who recognized the promise of modern culture manifested in the soaring dome. I would even suggest that five years later, Alberti and his humanist allies capitalized on the architectural exhibition of contemporary ingenuity when the *certame coronario* was held in the cathedral, well within sight and the "shadow" of the *cupola*. The poems, testaments of the modern vernacular, were read at precisely the setting of modern architectural accomplishment, presenting a multimedia tableau of linguistic and built innovation.

### *Conclusion*

The Latin *De Pictura* qualifies and even contradicts Alberti's linguistic argument and some of the authorial autonomy Alberti asserted in *Della pittura*. In the 1440 Latin

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books concerning the precepts of painting and architecture." Notably, although Rinuccini is writing well after Alberti's architectural career, he does not praise Alberti as an architect.

<sup>42</sup> Pliny (1969, 446): "Sum ex iis qui mirer antiquos, non tamen (ut quidam) temporum nostrorum ingenia despicio."

dedication to Gianfrancesco Gonzaga, Alberti alludes to his language, hoping that his treatise “may prove worthy by [its] art of the ears of learned men.” In the same breath, he trusts that his words “may also easily please scholars by the novelty (*novitate*) of their subject.”<sup>43</sup> In Latin *De Pictura* is sanctioned by the weight of ancient language rather than the modern Brunelleschi, who in name is completely absent. By the time Alberti turned to architecture, both in his treatise *De Re Aedificatoria* begun around 1450, and in actuality, when he designed the exterior of San Francesco for Sigismondo Malatesta in Rimini shortly after, Brunelleschi was wholly expelled from Alberti’s writing.<sup>44</sup> Alberti’s later architectural projects either bury Brunelleschi’s originality, as in *De re* where the *cupola* is categorized as a “spherical vault,” one type among many, or competitively emulate it, as in the proposed design for San Francesco’s preposterously ambitious, never-built dome. After originating the legend of “Brunelleschi’s Dome,” an epithet which lives on today, and crowning Brunelleschi an architectural authority, Alberti defeats his hero by omission and challenge, increasingly claiming the role of authorial architect himself.

By the mid-1440’s Alberti’s strategy of asserting himself as author through his Latinizing vernacular had gained little traction. In the dedication of the vernacular *Teogenio* to Leonello d’Este, Prince of Ferrara, Alberti himself cites criticism for having written in it.<sup>45</sup> Although Cosimo Bartoli titled his *Seicento* translation of *De Pictura, Della pittura*, he seems to have been unaware of Alberti’s vernacular version and instead worked from the 1540 Basle Latin redaction. In later centuries, Bartoli’s 1568 translation, mistaken for Alberti’s vernacular, was itself translated into French and English as the painting treatise became a canonical text for the Royal Academies of Art.<sup>46</sup> For all practical purposes Alberti’s innovative iteration disappeared until the nineteenth century when Anicio Bonucci printed it in Florence in 1847. By that time and throughout the twentieth-century, Alberti was enshrined (and consigned) as a dogmatic Neo-Classical authority.

While Alberti’s *Della pittura* faded into the background, his arguments for the modern author, the authorial architect, and the Italian vernacular lived on, albeit transformed, over the later Quattrocento. When the scholar-poet Angelo Poliziano dedicated the *editio princeps* of Alberti’s architectural treatise, *De Re Aedificatoria*, to Lorenzo de’Medici in 1486, he specifically called Alberti an “*auctor*” (1966a, iv). At just the same moment, Poliziano faulted his former student, Paolo Cortesi, for his pedantic stylistic imitation of Cicero in a letter from the mid-1480’s.<sup>47</sup> Poliziano argues that imitation should convey the writer’s particular mind and talent, writing: “I am not Cicero. Yet I do express myself.”<sup>48</sup> Cortesi, in turn praised Alberti’s sparring partner, Leonardo Bruni, for restoring the “harmonious sound” of ancient Latin to modern, “irregular” practice. Similarly, in 1512, Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola argued eloquently

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<sup>43</sup> Alberti (1972, 34-35): “Nam esse eos eiusmodi intelliges ut quae in illis tractentur cum arte ipsa auribus eruditus digna tum rei novitate facile delectare studiosos queant.”

<sup>44</sup> On this dynamic see Trachtenberg (1999).

<sup>45</sup> Alberti (1966b, 56): “molti m’ascrivono a biasimo, e dicono che io offesi la maiestà litteraria non scrivendo materia sì elegante in lingua più tosto latina.”

<sup>46</sup> On the reception of *De Pictura* see Grayson’s “Introduction” in Alberti (1972, vii).

<sup>47</sup> DellaNeva (2007, 3). Cortesi also knew Alberti and singled him out as especially learned in *De hominibus doctis dialogus* (c. 1490).

<sup>48</sup> DellaNeva (2007, 2-3): “Non enim sum Cicero. Me tamen exprimo.”

against Pietro Bembo that each person is imbued with an individual beauty and that linguistic style should express this particular quality. To argue that “no one could be like Cicero,” he specifically conjures an architectural metaphor: “the construction [of words] won’t be Cicero’s since he didn’t construct it. Somebody else will have built a wall, as it were, from his stones.”<sup>49</sup>

These exchanges are usually positioned as the first of the Renaissance polemical writings on how Cicero should be imitated, which in turn incubated the present-day notions of individual authorship and originality. But I propose that Alberti and Brunni’s recurring disagreement on how the ancient relates to the modern, how the otherness of history is masked or made plain, can be seen as a predecessor. Rather than attempting to bridge the centuries separating ancients and moderns, Alberti called his contemporaries to strive toward the future, toward an architectural and linguistic culture “equally unknown and unimaginable among the ancients.”

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<sup>49</sup> DellaNeva (2007 36-37): “quod propterea quispiam non esset Ciceroni similis. Huius enim verba, etiam si loca mutant, erunt tamen verba Ciceronis, non autem Ciceronis ea constructio, quam ipse non struxerit, sed tamquam ex lapidibus illius alius murum confecerit.”

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