

## **The Return of the Giants: Leon Battista Alberti’s Letter to Filippo Brunelleschi**<sup>1</sup>

The letter to Filippo Brunelleschi with which Leon Battista Alberti prefaced the vernacular version of his treatise on painting, *De pictura*, has long been seen as a central document of the Italian Renaissance. Its praise of what seem like the members of a veritable artistic avant-garde – Masaccio, Donatello, Lorenzo Ghiberti, Luca della Robbia, and of course Brunelleschi himself – has held a lasting grip on the imaginations of readers. Moreover, Alberti’s suggestion that, in building the cupola of Florence cathedral, Brunelleschi not only matched but might even have surpassed the achievements of the ancients has echoed down the centuries (Fig. D). Taken up by subsequent writers, including Vasari, this notion continued to register in the prose of nineteenth-century historians such as Jules Michelet and Edgar Quinet, where it became a key component in their efforts to formalise the idea of the Renaissance itself.<sup>2</sup> Alberti’s short text – which had little impact during his own lifetime – has ultimately done much to establish the reputation of both its author and its addressee.<sup>3</sup> In the most recent reorganisation of the Museo

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<sup>1</sup> Much of the research for this article was conducted during a stay at Villa I Tatti, the Harvard University Centre for Italian Renaissance Studies, in 2018. I am especially grateful to the Director, Professor Alina Payne, for her generosity and support. The article was lucky to find three very expert and erudite anonymous reviewers. Their comments and suggestions have been invaluable, and I owe them a great debt of gratitude. I am also thankful to Professor Bronwen Wilson for some fruitful exchanges on the subject of shipwreck.

<sup>2</sup> Both offered heroic accounts of Brunelleschi. See J. Michelet, *Oeuvres Complètes*, 9 vols, Paris 1971-80, VII, pp. 77-82; and Edgar Quinet, *Oeuvres Complètes de Edgar Quinet*, 11 vols, Paris 1865, IV, pp. 239-240, and specifically p. 239 for the suggestion that Brunelleschi surpassed the ancients.

<sup>3</sup> Lucia Bertolini, ‘Nouvelles perspectives sur le *De pictura* et sa réception’, in *Alberti: humaniste, architecte*, ed. F. Choay and M. Paoli, Paris 2006, pp. 33-45, especially pp. pp. 40-45, remarks on the almost complete silence with which Alberti’s letter, and his treatise, were met in Florence for the greater part of his lifetime. This silence, she argues, indicates a poor reception among contemporary Florentine artists, including those named in the letter. Anthony

dell’Opera del Duomo in Florence, Brunelleschi’s sixteenth-century monument, displayed above his death mask and two wooden models for the cupola and lantern, is flanked by large plaques inscribed with an extract of Alberti’s letter, rendered in both English and Italian (Fig. II). In having one of the first words on Brunelleschi and the cupola, Alberti, not untypically, seems also to have had the last.

The passage that is picked out in crisp, gold lettering in the museum comes from a famous part of the letter in which Alberti considers Brunelleschi’s achievement as an engineer:

What man, however hard of heart or jealous, would not praise Pippo [Filippo Brunelleschi] the architect 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 among the ancients.<sup>4</sup>

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Grafton, *Leon Battista Alberti: Master Builder of the Italian Renaissance*, London 2002, p. 145, suggests that Brunelleschi himself would have reacted with ‘irritation.’ Rocco Sinisgali, in his introduction to Leon Battista Alberti, *Il Nuovo De pictura di Leon Battista Alberti = The New De pictura of Leon Battista Alberti*, ed. and tr. (English) R. Sinisgali, Rome 2006, pp. 31-2, argues instead for a positive reception. Stefano Borsi, *Leon Battista Alberti e la Cupola di Santa Maria del Fiore*, Mefli 2012, pp. 16-17, concludes that the true relationship between Alberti and Brunelleschi cannot be determined.

<sup>4</sup> Leon Battista Alberti, *De pictura (redazione volgare)*, ed. Lucia Bertolini, Florence 2011, p. 204: ‘Chi mai sì duro o sì invidio 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 a presso gli antichi fu non saputo né conosciuto.’ I

Alberti singles out for praise both the size of the cupola and the method of its construction. When he observes that it is ‘vast enough to cover the entire Tuscan population with its shadow’, he touches on a preoccupation that had driven the cathedral project from the start. The document of 1300 in which Arnolfo di Cambio is named *capomaestro* states explicitly that by employing such a famous master, ‘the *comune* and people of Florence hope to have a more beautiful and honourable temple than any other in any parts of Tuscany.’<sup>5</sup> Writing as the cupola was nearing completion, Alberti suggests that the entire region really had been overshadowed.<sup>6</sup>

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have, throughout, used the English translation in Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting and On Sculpture: the Latin Texts of De pictura and De statua*, ed. and tr. (English) C. Grayson, London 1972, p. 33, with some minor modifications. See also Sinisgalli’s literal translation in Alberti, *Il Nuovo De pictura di Leon Battista Alberti*, pp. 89-90.

<sup>5</sup> Howard Saalman, *Filippo Brunelleschi: The Cupola of Santa Maria del Fiore*, London 1980, p. 178. See also Cesare Guasti, *Santa Maria del Fiore: la costruzione della Chiesa e del campanile secondo i documenti tratti dall’Archivio dell’Opera Secolare e da quello di Stato*, Florence 1887, p. 20, document 24: ‘...comune et populus Florentie ex magnifico et visibili principio dicti operis ecclesie iamdicte inchoacti per ipsum magistrum Arnolphum habere sperat venustius et honorabilius templum aliquo alio quod sit in partibus Tuscie.’

<sup>6</sup> Christine Smith, *Architecture in the Culture of Early Humanism: Ethics, Aesthetics and Eloquence 1400-1480*, New York 1992, p. 45, argues that Alberti meant to link the dome to the pyramids of Egypt, which were said to cast shadows so extensive that it would take several days to journey along them. In this way, Smith argues, Alberti connects to the cupola to the Seven Wonders of the World and perhaps suggests that it exceeds them. Marvin Trachtenberg, *Building-in-Time: From Giotto to Alberti and Modern Oblivion*, New Haven 2010, p. 369, instead sees Alberti as summoning the idea of a ‘grim and menacing’ shadow in order to express his own envy at being ‘overshadowed’ by the achievements of an artisan (Brunelleschi). Alternatively, the shadow might be understood in relation to Giannozzo’s remark in Book III of the *De familia*, in which he says that when a family becomes so large that it can no longer be accommodated under one roof, its members ought nonetheless to live ‘sotto una ombra tutti d’uno volere.’ See Leon Battista Alberti, *Opere volgari*, ed. C. Grayson, 3 vols, Bari 1960-1973, I, pp. 192. The image would thus take on both communitarian and political connotations, not least in the light of Alberti’s later remark in the *De*

More importantly though, in building this structure without the support of wooden centring, and according to a new and previously untried technique, Brunelleschi, in Alberti’s view, had accomplished something once thought impossible. The passage powerfully conveys the overwhelming impression that the dome must have made on observers during the final stages of its construction. It also suggests the extent to which the cupola, and the experience of its making, had a transformative effect on Alberti personally, affecting his broader positions on history and culture and initiating what would become a lifelong engagement with architecture.<sup>7</sup>

This sense of transformation is inextricably bound up with Alberti’s ‘return’ to Florence from exile. During the fourteenth century, his family had been among the richest and, for a brief period, the most politically influential in the city. Subsequently, they had lost out in the power struggles of the 1380s, resulting in a series of prohibitions that led, in 1401, to the expulsion of all Alberti adult males. Still harsher measures were enacted against the family in 1412, and it was not until 1428 that these provisions were finally annulled, enabling them to return.<sup>8</sup> The

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*re aedificatoria* (I.9) that a city is like a large house, and a house a small city. In a similar vein, Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely*, Cambridge Mass. 1992, p. 178, sees the shadow as a figure for the community’s ‘metaphysical bonds.’ For further elaboration on the shadow, including its communitarian, political, and religious connotations, see Borsi, *Leon Battista Alberti e la Cupola*, p. 9.

<sup>7</sup> On this see Trachtenberg, *Building-in-Time*, p. 358; and Borsi, *Leon Battista Alberti e la Cupola*, p. 29.

<sup>8</sup> For the Alberti family and their exile, see Luigi Passerini, *Gli Alberti di Firenze: genealogia, storia e documenti*, 2 vols, Florence 1869, I, pp. 3-45; Girolamo Mancini, *Vita di Leon Battista Alberti*, Rome 1971, pp. 1-16; Susannah Kerr Foster, ‘The Ties That Bind: Kinship Association and Marriage in the Alberti Family 1378-1428’, Ph.D. thesis, Cornell University 1985; Susannah Foster Baxendale, ‘Exile in Practice: the Alberti Family In and Out of Florence 1401-1428’, *Renaissance Quarterly*, XLIV/4, 1991, pp. 720-756; Luca Boschetto, *Leon Battista Alberti e Firenze*, Florence 2000, especially pp. 3-10.

rehabilitation of the clan was thus still a relatively new fact when Alberti noted in a manuscript of Cicero’s *Brutus* that he had completed the *De pictura* in Florence at a quarter to nine on the evening of 26 August, 1435. At that point, nearly seven years had passed since the Alberti’s readmittance to the city. Nonetheless, they had only regained their political rights in 1434, with Cosimo de’ Medici’s return from exile and rise to supremacy.<sup>9</sup> As Alberti worked to finalise the text of the *De pictura*, the process of the family’s reintegration into the life of the city might have seemed to be nearing completion. Just six days after he recorded having finished his treatise, a member of the clan obtained one of the highest offices in the republic when Giannozzo di Tomaso Alberti was made Gonfaloniere di Compagnia.<sup>10</sup>

The *De pictura* exists in both Tuscan and Latin versions, of which the former almost certainly came first. It was therefore most likely the vernacular text to which Alberti referred in 1435.<sup>11</sup> Presumably, he continued to polish the treatise after that date, since the three surviving manuscripts in the *volgare* indicate a process of revision. The single manuscript that includes the letter to Brunelleschi is the most advanced and can thus be considered the last of the three – a chronology supported by the letter itself, which bears the date 17 July, 1436. As has often been noted, this date coincides with the impending closure of the cupola in the summer of that year, suggesting that the letter must have been occasioned directly by that momentous event.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Passerini, *Gli Alberti*, p. 40; Boschetto, *Leon Battista Alberti e Firenze*, p. 34.

<sup>10</sup> Boschetto, *Leon Battista Alberti e Firenze*, p. 35.

<sup>11</sup> Lucia Bertolini, ‘Sulla precedenza della redazione volgare del *De pictura* di Leon Battista Alberti’, in *Studi per Umberto Carpi. Un saluto da allievi e colleghi pisani*, ed. M. Santagata and A. Stussi, Pisa 2000, pp. 181-210; see also Rocco Sinisgalli, *Il nuovo De pictura*, pp. 25-45.

<sup>12</sup> The archival record of the cupola works can be found at the website *Gli anni della cupola*: <http://duomo.mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de/>

Alberti’s epistle ought therefore to be regarded not as an integral part of the treatise itself, but rather as a preface penned extemporaneously to accompany the gift of a manuscript to Brunelleschi; something that would cohere with what is known of Alberti’s broader ‘publication’ strategy.<sup>13</sup> In this light, the letter takes on a more contingent quality than has sometimes been ascribed to it in the past, whilst also demonstrating Alberti’s close engagement with contemporary Florentine events.

Alberti’s own presence in Florence at this time was due to his position as an *abbreviator* at the papal Curia. His employer, Pope Eugenius IV, had found refuge in the Tuscan city after being driven from Rome 1434, and Alberti followed on behind. By that time, he had already visited Florence, possibly as early as 1428 but at least by 1431. Around then, he was made prior of San Martino a Gangalandi, located high in the hills to the west of the city; a vantage point that would, whenever he went there, have afforded him an excellent view of the Duomo and the steadily rising cupola (Fig. III).<sup>14</sup> In any case, and regardless of the length of time for which he

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<sup>13</sup> See Lucia Bertolini, ‘Come “pubblicava” l’Alberti: ipotesi preliminari’, in *Storia della lingua e filologia: per Alfredo Stussi nel suo sessantacinquesimo compleanno*, ed. M. Zaccarello and L. Tomasin, Florence 2004, pp. 219-240, especially pp. 237-240. For a more complete picture of Bertolini’s wide-ranging analysis of *De pictura*, see also her introduction in *De pictura (redazione volgare)*, pp. 37-58; and ‘Nouvelles perspectives’. The vernacular version of *De pictura* exists in only three manuscripts, none of which are autograph: Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris, Cod. Ital. 1962, (P), 1r-31r; Biblioteca Capitolare, Verona, Cod. CCLXXIII (V), 144-169; and Biblioteca Nazionale, Florence, Cod. II, IV, 38, (FI), 120r-136v. Only the last of these includes the letter to Brunelleschi.

<sup>14</sup> The exact date on which Alberti received his benefice is not known. Boschetto, *Leon Battista Alberti e Firenze*, pp. 80-81, suggests that it was likely in 1430 (Florentine style). A notarial deed discovered by Lorenz Böninger places Alberti in Florence on 24 September 1431. The document confirms that the benefice of San Martino a Gangalandi had already been assigned to him by that date, although he had not yet taken material possession of it. See Lorenz

had known the city, the letter to Brunelleschi is undoubtedly animated by intense feelings regarding the family’s return, as is made clear from the outset:

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 men of antiquity, have now disappeared and are almost entirely lost. Painters, sculptors, architects, musicians, geometers, rhetoricians, augurs and suchlike distinguished and remarkable intellects, are very rarely to be found these days, and are of little merit. Consequently I believed 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 on a vast and wonderful scale as she did in what one might call her youthful and more glorious days. But after I came back here to this most beautiful of cities from the long exile in which we Albertis have grown old, I recognised in many, but above all in you, Filippo, and in our great friend the sculptor Donatello and in the others, Nencio, Luca and Masaccio, a genius for every laudable enterprise in no way inferior to any of the ancients who gained fame in these arts. I then realised that the ability to achieve the highest distinction in any meritorious activity lies in our own industry and diligence no less than the favours of Nature and of the times.<sup>15</sup>

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Böninger, ‘Scheda 5’, in Leon Battista Alberti, *Corpus epistolare e documentario di Leon Battista Alberti*, ed. P. Benigni, R. Cardini, M. Regoliosi, Florence 2007, pp. 111-113.

<sup>15</sup> Alberti, *De pictura (redazione volgare)*, p. 203-4: ‘Io solea maravigliarmi insieme e dolermi che tante ottime e divine arti e scienze, quali per loro opere e per le istorie veggiamo copiose erano in que’ virtuosissimi passati antichi, ora così siano mancate e quasi in tutto perdute: pittori, scultori, architetti, musici, ieometri, retorici, auguri e simili nobilissimi e maravigliosi intelletti oggi si truovano rarissimi e poco da lodarli. Onde stimai fusse, quanto da molti questo così essere udiva, che già la natura, maestra delle cose, fatta antica e stracca, più non producea, come né

The passage vividly conveys Alberti’s sense of elation upon experiencing Florence. Contact with Florentine culture has, he suggests, converted him from a fundamentally pessimistic view of the world and the course of human history to an optimistic one.<sup>16</sup> Of course, for Alberti personally, his entry into Florence was not a return. One can hardly return to a place that one has never been, and Alberti, who was born during the exile, was not coming back to a city that he had previously known. It was, nonetheless, a collective return – the return of the *casa Alberti* – and his words evoke a sense of the family’s rejuvenation. Where they had previously ‘grown old’ during a ‘long exile,’ it is implied that they might now once more be made young; no wonder the letter has for so long been inextricably bound up with the idea of the Renaissance itself.

### Homecoming

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giuganti così né ingegni, quali in que’ suoi quasi giovinili e più gloriosi tempi produsse amplissimi e maravigliosi. Ma poi che io dal lungo esilio in quale siamo noi Alberti invecchiati, qui fui in questa nostra sopra l’altre ornatissima patria ridotto, compresi in molti, ma prima in te, Filippo, e in quel nostro amicissimo Donato scultore e in quelli altri, Nencio e Luca e Masaccio, essere a ogni lodata cosa ingegno da non postporli a qual si sia stato antiquo e famoso in queste arti. Per tanto m’avidi 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.’ For the translation, see Alberti, *On Painting and On Sculpture*, p. 33.

<sup>16</sup> This is not to say that *De pictura* was composed purely as a reaction to Alberti’s contact with Florence. The treatise’s intellectual programme must largely have been formulated before his arrival in the city. On this see Lucia Bertolini’s introduction in Alberti, *De pictura (redazione volgare)*, pp. 54-5; and Peter Francis Weller, ‘Alberti Before Florence: Early Sources Informing Leon Battista Alberti’s *De pictura*’, Ph.D. thesis, UCLA 2014. On Alberti’s changing conception of history see Smith, *Architecture in the Culture*, pp. 19-39.



The sense of a homeland recovered after years of longing is perhaps best conveyed by the manner in which Alberti refers to Florence as ‘questa nostra sopra l’altre ornatissima patria.’ This phrase, which itself occurs within a lengthy periodic sentence, is marked both by the doubly-superlative ‘sopra l’altre ornatissima’ (literally, ‘above all the others most ornate’) and by the rhetorical figure sometimes known as *hyperbaton*, whereby words that would naturally run together are instead spaced apart.<sup>17</sup> In this case there is a sense of postponement and, through the build-up of superlatives, also a feeling of amplification and a heightening of energy, which increases until the reader arrives finally – almost victoriously – at the long-anticipated object of desire, represented by the word *patria*. Once again, we find hints here (as throughout the letter) regarding Alberti’s future intellectual preoccupations and activities. His use of the term *ornatissima* immediately causes us to think of rhetorical theory, in which the idea of *ornatus* is central.<sup>18</sup> In so doing, it points towards the important role that rhetoric would play in Alberti’s theorisation of the arts; something that is already evident in *De pictura* itself and that would continue to be so in *De re aedificatoria*, where Alberti devotes much energy to the separation of *ornatus* into a distinct category of architectural enquiry.<sup>19</sup> Alberti’s language here also echoes Leonardo Bruni’s description of Florence as ‘ornatissima urbs’ in his *Laudatio Florentinae urbis* (*Panegyric to the City of Florence*) of 1403-4. In this way, it perhaps announces his intent to direct lofty praise towards Florence, while gesturing towards Bruni’s repeatedly-stated position that the sight of the city will convince observers of its excellence (the exact context in which the phrase ‘ornatissima urbs’

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<sup>17</sup> Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, VIII.6.66-67.

<sup>18</sup> Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, VIII.3, characterises *ornatus* as the most prized virtue of the orator. See also Heinrich Lausberg, *Handbook of Literary Rhetoric: A Foundation for Literary Study*, ed. D. E. Orton and R. D. Anderson, tr. (English) M. T. Bliss, A. Jansen, and D. E. Orton, Leiden 1998, §§ 538-41, pp. 242-245.

<sup>19</sup> On this, see Alina Payne, *The Architectural Treatise in the Italian Renaissance: Architectural Invention, Ornament, and Literary Culture*, Cambridge 1999, p. 75.

occurs in the *Laudatio*).<sup>20</sup> At the same time, it foreshadows Alberti’s long-term project of introducing humanistic themes and modes of writing into vernacular literature.<sup>21</sup> And the vernacular version of *De pictura* certainly does employ a highly Latinate form of the *volgare*.<sup>22</sup>

This naturally raises the question of Alberti’s audience. Throughout the treatise, he emphasises that he writes as a painter (albeit an amateur) and that the treatise is addressed to other painters (presumably professionals). These last would not, first and foremost, have been the ‘avant-garde’ mentioned in the letter, none of whom, strictly speaking, were painters (assuming that Masaccio refers not to the now-celebrated painter of the Brancacci Chapel but to

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<sup>20</sup> Leonardo Bruni, *Opere letterarie e politiche*, ed. and tr. (Italian) P. Viti, Turin 1996, p. 586. Bruni says that the sight of Florence will convince any doubters of its excellence: ‘Sic, cum hec prestantissima et ornatissima urbs omnem admirationem de se conceptam, simul atque visa est, continuo expellat in contrariumque mentes hominum reformet, necesse est infinitam quandam vim magnificentie, ornamentorum opulentieque in se habere.’ Cicero makes frequent use of *ornatissima*, including in relation to cities. See, for example, *In Verrem* 2.1.20.55: ‘Syracusas urbem ornatissimam’; ‘urbem pulcherrimam atque ornatissimam Corinthum’; 2.4.52.115: ‘Unius etiam urbis omnium pulcherrimae atque ornatissimae, Syracusarum’; 2.5.48.127: ‘In urbe nostra pulcherrima atque ornatissima.’ *De lege agraria*, 2.28.76: ‘Capuam...urbem amplissimam atque ornatissimam.’

<sup>21</sup> Roberto Cardini has characterised Alberti and Cristoforo Landino as seeking a ‘rifondazione, su base umanistica, della lingua e della letteratura italiana.’ For a summary of Cardini’s positions on Alberti as a vernacular writer, see ‘Alberti scrittore e umanista’, in Leon Battista Alberti, *Opere latine*, ed. Roberto Cardini, Rome 2010, pp. 3-18, here pp. 5-8. That is not to say that Alberti aimed to produce a kind of Brunian vernacular literature. On the fundamental differences of outlook between Bruni and Alberti see Timothy Kircher, *Living Well in Renaissance Italy: the Virtues of Humanism and the Irony of Leon Battista Alberti*, Tempe 2012, p. 35-83.

<sup>22</sup> On this see Cecil Grayson, ‘Studi su Leon Battista Alberti’, *Rinascimento*, IV/1, 1953, pp. 45-62, especially 61. Cardini, ‘Alberti scrittore e umanista’, p. 8, notes the ‘inaudita latinizzazione del Toscano’ present in Alberti’s vernacular works.’

the sculptor Maso di Bartolommeo). Their inclusion in the letter presumably owes to the fact that all of them were at that time at work on the Duomo.<sup>23</sup> Instead, Alberti seems to have envisaged a new kind of painter: an artisan who was receptive to theoretical material and willing to accept it as the foundation of his practice.<sup>24</sup> As for the letter, if this was composed primarily with Brunelleschi and his circle in mind, its literary complexity nonetheless hints at its adaptation to another kind of audience. This, I would suggest, is Alberti himself. That is to say that whatever his original motivations might have been, Alberti, intentionally or otherwise, took the opportunity in writing to Brunelleschi to think through his feelings on witnessing the completion of the cupola, and he did so in terms appropriate to his own education and intertextual methods.

The letter is, after all, a sophisticated construction. It is not simply that it has a Latinate prose style, but also that it touches upon a number of classical *topoi* relating to newly-discovered texts; *topoi* that could have been identified only by those working at the cutting edge of humanistic research. Alberti’s discourse regarding the exhaustion of nature derives from a letter of Pliny the Younger, which had only recently been unearthed (1419).<sup>25</sup> One of the dominant

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<sup>23</sup> Mary Pardo, ‘On the identity of “Masaccio” in L. B. Alberti’s Dedication of *Della pittura*’, in *Perspectives on Early Modern and Modern Intellectual History: Essays in Honour of Nancy S. Streuver*, ed. J. Marino and M. W. Schlitt, Rochester 2001, pp. 223-258. Building on the analyses of Hubert Janitschek and Robert Oertel, Pardo argues convincingly for the identification with Maso di Bartolomeo, pointing out, among other things, that no document refers to the painter known as Maso or Tommaso as ‘Masaccio’ until the 1460s.

<sup>24</sup> On this see Bertolini’s introduction in Alberti, *De pictura (redazione volgare)*, pp. 45-52.

<sup>25</sup> E. H. Gombrich, ‘A Classical Topos in the Introduction to Alberti’s *Della Pittura*’, this *Journal*, XX/1-2, 1957, p. 173; and Pliny the Younger, *Letters and Panegyrics*, tr. (English) B. Radice, 2 vols, London 1969, I, pp. 446-447 (VI.21). Martin McLaughlin, ‘Leon Battista Alberti and the Redirection of Renaissance Humanism’, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, CLXVII, 2010, pp. 25-59, here 44, suggests Columella, *De re rustica*, 1. Preface 2, as another possible

ideas of the treatise – that the history of the arts is one of progress rather than decline – seems to have been inspired by Cicero’s *Brutus*, a text that had only been recovered in 1421.<sup>26</sup> It is also possible that Alberti wrote specifically to counter Lucretius’s *De rerum natura*, rediscovered in 1417, in which the history of the world appears as one of degeneration, and in which that idea is expressed specifically in relation to large and small creatures: ‘even now indeed the power of life is broken, and the earth exhausted scarce produces tiny creatures, she who once produced all kinds and gave birth to the huge bodies of wild beasts.’<sup>27</sup> As Christine Smith has argued, in praising the cupola as rising ‘sopra e’ cieli,’ Alberti perhaps sought to show not only that Brunelleschi had outdone antiquity in a general sense, but that he had surpassed specific examples that were described by ancient authors as reaching or piercing the heavens but not rising *above* them.<sup>28</sup> Through such complex literary means, Smith suggests, he sought to praise the

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source, and argues that Alberti might have had in mind Petrarch’s *Invective Against a Physician* of 1355, in which the author laments the lack of great men in a world that has grown old.

<sup>26</sup> Martin McLaughlin, ‘Alberti and the Classical Canon’, in *Italy and the Classical Tradition: Language, Thought, and Poetry 1300-1600*, ed. C. Caruso and A. Laird, London 2009, pp. 88-89; Cicero, *Brutus*, 70-71, uses painting and sculpture as examples of fields in which progress is easily identified and says that he considers the same to apply to all arts.

<sup>27</sup> Smith, *Architecture in the Culture of Early Humanism*, pp. 22-3; Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, tr. (English) W. H. D. Rouse, London 1975, II.1150-53, pp. 184-5: ‘iamque adeo fracta est aetas, effetaque tellus / vix animalia parva creat, quae cuncta creavit / saecula deditque ferarum ingentia corpora partu.’ This constitutes one expression, which Alberti would have been familiar with, of the widely-found notion of the ‘world grown old’. On this *topos* see James M. Dean, *The World Grown Old in Later Medieval Literature*, Cambridge Mass. 1997. The belief that men had been larger in early times was widespread in antiquity and the middle ages. See, for example, Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, VII.16.

<sup>28</sup> Smith, *Architecture in the Culture*, p. 44. She cites as examples the descriptions of a vault in Domitian’s palace on the Palatine (the Domus Flavia) in Statius, *Silvae*, IV.ii.30-31; and Martial, *Epigrams*, VIII.36; and a praise of the Temple

cupola on the basis of its size and, in a significant departure from Pliny the Younger, its absolute originality, ultimately offering it as a proof that history might be understood as progress.<sup>29</sup>

### *Ingegni and Giganti*

The identification of these sources undoubtedly adds much to our understanding, and it is worth considering some of the other writings that might also be at work in Alberti’s highly intertextual text.<sup>30</sup> Developing his initial thought about history as decline, Alberti says that he had previously worried that an exhausted nature was no longer producing ‘intellects [*ingegni*] any more than giants [*giganti*] on a vast and wonderful scale such as she did in what one might call her youthful and more glorious days.’ The introduction of giants into this passage – within a text that is strongly concerned with the issue of enormous size – is striking, and it is worth considering the cultural traditions that may have informed Alberti’s words. There are several accounts of the myths of the giants in ancient Greek and Roman literature, in which they are described as the creations of the earth (or ‘mother nature’) at an early stage of the cosmogony, and Alberti was

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of Artemis at Ephesus, in which it is said to outdo the other Wonders of the World, in an epigram by Antipater in the *Greek Anthology*, IX.58. For other possible sources see Borsi, *Leon Battista Alberti e la Cupola*, pp. 8-10.

<sup>29</sup> Smith, *Architecture in the Culture*, pp. 19-53. Smith sees Alberti as skilfully navigating, throughout his career, a course between a Greek tradition that praised large buildings (and the Seven Wonders of the ancient world in particular) as marvels of human ingenuity, and a Roman tradition that condemned those same buildings as immoderate structures exceeding all bounds of utility. In the letter to Brunelleschi, she argues, he aligns himself with the Greek tradition, taking inspiration from, among other things, Manuel Chrysoloras’s *Epistolae tres de comparatione veteris et novae Romae*.

<sup>30</sup> Roberto Cardini, *Mosaici: il ‘nemico’ dell’Alberti*, Rome 1990, provides perhaps the most influential study of Alberti’s intertextual method. See also Anthony Grafton, *Commerce with the Classics. Ancient Books and Renaissance Readers*, Ann Arbor 1997, pp. 53-92.

certainly familiar with many of these.<sup>31</sup> The giants also featured in some relatively recent medieval literature. For example, they are treated at length in Giovanni Boccaccio’s *Genealogiae Deorum gentilium* (*Genealogy of the Pagan Gods*), where the author considers the giants of both pagan mythology and the Bible.<sup>32</sup> Particularly important for Alberti on this occasion, however, might have been the writings of another of the ‘three crowns of Tuscan poetry’: Dante.

In the *Divina Commedia*, the giants occupy a prominent position. The poet encounters them in Canto XXXI of the *Inferno*, positioned around the well that leads, ultimately, to Satan himself (Fig. IV). These enormous figures, who include a mixture of giants from pagan mythology and Judeo-Christian scripture, cause Dante to reflect that:

Surely nature did well when she renounced  
the craft of making creatures such as these,  
depriving Mars of such practitioners.  
If she does not repent her elephants  
and whales, when one reviews the matter closely  
she will be found more cautious and more just.  
For when the power of thought

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<sup>31</sup> Perhaps the most important sources were Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 1.151-162; Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca*, 1.6.1-2; and Claudian, *Gigantomachia*. On this see Linda M. Lewis, *The Promethian Politics of Milton, Blake, and Shelley*, Columbia 1992, 31; and George F. Butler, ‘Claudian’s *De raptu Proserpinae* and Dante’s Vanquished Giants’, *Italica*, LXXXIV, 2007, p. 664. Other sources include Hesiod, *Theogony*, 185; Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca historica*, 4.21.5; Ovid, *Fasti* 3.439; Virgil, *Georgics*, 1. 276-283; Strabo, *Geographica* 7, Fragments 25 and 27; Valerius Flaccus, *Argonautica* 2.16-33.

<sup>32</sup> Giovanni Boccaccio, *Genealogy of the Pagan Gods*, ed. and tr. (English) J. Solomon, Cambridge, Mass. 2011, I, pp. 601-617 (V.68).

is coupled with ill will and naked force

there is no refuge from it for mankind.<sup>33</sup>

Here, as in Alberti’s letter, we encounter the notion that nature once used to make giants but has since ceased to do so.<sup>34</sup> However, Dante differs from Alberti in offering a clear assessment of this fact. For the poet, the disappearance of giants was a positive development. Because they combined great strength and evil will with reason (*l’argomento de la mente*), they were lethal to human beings. On the same grounds, nature need not repent (*non si pente*) that she continues to bring forth other large creatures such as elephants and whales, since, lacking reason, they do not pose the same threat. Size, in other words is not a problem *per se*, but only when it is joined to an evil intelligence.

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<sup>33</sup> *Inferno* XXXI, 49-57. All quotations from the *Divina Commedia* refer to *La Commedia secondo l’antica vulgata*, ed. G. Petrocchi, 4 vols, Florence 1994, for the Italian text; and *Inferno*, tr. (English) R. Hollander and J. Hollander, New York 2000, for the English translation. Both texts are reproduced at The Princeton Dante Project: <http://etcweb.princeton.edu/dante/pdp/>:

Natura certo, quando lasciò l’arte  
di sì fatti animali, assai fé bene  
per tòrre tali essecutori a Marte.  
E s’ella d’elefanti e di balene  
non si pente, chi guarda sottilmente,  
più giusta e più discreta la ne tene;  
ché dove l’argomento de la mente  
s’aggiugne al mal volere e a la possa,  
nessun riparo vi può far la gente.

<sup>34</sup> For the theme of the ‘world grown old’ in relation to Dante, see Dean, *The World Grown Old*, pp. 173-195.

Dante’s language itself recalls that of the Bible where, in the Book of Genesis, it is reported:

Now giants were upon the earth in those days. For after the sons of God went in to the daughters of men, and they brought forth children, these are the mighty men of old, men of renown.<sup>35</sup>

Those giants, who are also described as men of renown (*viri famosi* in the Latin of the Vulgate), had an evil nature, as quickly became apparent to their creator:

And God seeing that the wickedness of men was great on the earth, and that all the thought of their heart was bent upon evil at all times,

It repented him [*paenituit eum*] that he had made man on the earth.<sup>36</sup>

On this occasion God did indeed repent of having made these man-giants. Recoiling at their wickedness, He determined that:

I will destroy man, whom I have created, from the face of the earth, from man even to beasts, from the creeping thing even to the fowls of the air, for it repenteth me [*paenitet enim me*] that I have made them.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Genesis 6.4.

<sup>36</sup> Genesis 6.5-6.

<sup>37</sup> Genesis 7. On the Biblical giants see Stephens, *Giants in Those Days*, pp. 72-92.



Dante's words seem to reflect those of Genesis in their concern with repentance and non-repentance over different aspects of creation, and in the horror of combining evil thoughts with evil deeds. This only serves to reinforce the poet's depiction of the giants as images of *superbia*; towering pride that has, in this instance, been laid low and that prepares the way, in the *Inferno*, for the ultimate example of *superbia*: Satan.<sup>38</sup>

If we accept that Alberti's letter might evoke Dante's passage, and thus indirectly also the words of Genesis, what significance could this have? First, it is worth remembering that when Dante initially encounters the giants, gazing upon them from a distance, he mistakes them for buildings:

I had not looked that way for long  
when I saw what seemed a range of lofty towers,  
and I said: 'Master, tell me, what city is this?'<sup>39</sup>

Dante directs this question to Virgil, his guide, who informs him that his eyes, being unaccustomed to the thick gloom of Hell, deceive him and that what he sees are not the towers

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<sup>38</sup> A long tradition of Christian writing characterised the giants as signifiers of *superbia*. See Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages*, Minneapolis 1999, pp. 51-53, and 194, n. 34.

<sup>39</sup> *Inferno* XXXI, 19-21:

Poco portai in là volta la testa,  
che me parve veder molte alte torri;  
ond' io: 'Maestro, di, che terra è questa?'

of a city but giants, arranged around the inside of the well so that their bodies project above it from the torso upwards. Clarifying the scene, Dante continues with an architectural simile, explaining:

For, as all around her ring of walls  
Monteriggioni is crowned with towers,  
so at the cliff-edge that surrounds the pit  
loomed up like towers half the body bulk  
of horrifying giants, those whom Jove  
still threatens from the heavens when he thunders.<sup>40</sup>

The place that he refers to, Monteriggioni, is an imposing fortified outpost, built by Florence’s enemy Siena, whose walls still today bristle with tall towers (Fig. V); and this connection between giants and large architectural structures, in which one might be mistaken for the other, is highly significant.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> *Inferno*, XXXI, 40-45:

però che, come su la cerchia tonda  
Montereggion di torri si corona,  
così la proda che ’l pozzo circonda  
torreggiavan di mezza la persona  
li orribili giganti, cui minaccia  
Giove del cielo ancora quando tuona.

<sup>41</sup> There is an extensive literature on the giants in *Inferno*. Regarding their connection to large buildings, see especially Christopher Kleinhenz, ‘Dante’s Towering Giants: *Inferno* XXXI’, *Romance Philology*, XXVII/3, 1974, pp. 269-285; Giovanni Cecchetti, ‘Dante’s Giant-Towers and Tower-Giants’, *Forum Italicum*, VIII/2, 1974, pp. 200-222; Giorgio

Of course, it was not only in the Greek and Roman traditions that large buildings were seen as posing significant moral questions. As scholars have long recognised, many Christian thinkers were also preoccupied by these issues and were troubled by architectural height in particular.<sup>42</sup> Dante thus drew upon well-established conventions when he moved fluidly between towers and giants, each of which could be connected with *superbia*. In this light, it is no coincidence that the first giant that Dante comes to when he reaches the well is Nimrod, the maker of the Tower of Babel – the most notorious tower of all and widely regarded as the archetypal prideful building. Alberti, arguably, imports something of this discourse into his own text. When he reports that he had previously thought that nature ‘was no longer producing *ingegni* any more than *giganti*’, he leaves open the possibility that these two categories – *ingegni* and *giganti* – are somehow comparable. Brunelleschi’s contemporaries associated him above all with *ingegno*, ascribing this quality to him both while he was alive and, especially, in the memorialising discourses that followed his death.<sup>43</sup> Alberti is no exception, praising the *ingegno* of all of the

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Bàrberi Squarotti, ‘Parodia e dismisura: Minosse e i giganti’, *Lecture Classensi*, IX and X, 1982, pp. 279-300; Eleonora Stoppino, “Error Left Me and Fear Came in its Place”: the Arrested Sublime of the Giants in the *Divine Comedy*, Canto XXXI, in *Magnificence and the Sublime in Medieval Aesthetics: Art, Architecture, Literature, Music*, ed. C. S. Jaeger, New York 2010, pp. 179-192; Peter Dronke, *Dante and Medieval Latin Traditions*, Cambridge 1986, pp. 32-54. For an analysis of both Dante’s giants and the commentary tradition, see Stephens, *Giants in Those Days*, pp. 67-72.

<sup>42</sup> See John Onians, ‘The Last Judgment of Renaissance Architecture’, *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, CXXVIII/5291, 1980, pp. 701-720; Christine Smith, *Architecture in the Culture of Early Humanism*, pp. 40-53; Paul Binski, ‘Reflections on the “Wonderful Height and Size” of Gothic Great Churches and the Medieval Sublime’, in *Magnificence and the Sublime in Medieval Aesthetics: Art, Architecture, Literature, Music*, ed. C. S. Jaeger, New York 2010, pp. 129-156, especially pp. 135ff.

<sup>43</sup> Patricia A. Emison, *Creating the “Divine” Artist: from Dante to Michelangelo*, Leiden 2004, p. 7, notes that Brunelleschi was ‘the first visual artist deemed publicly to possess *ingegno*.’ See also pp. 73-75 for a discussion of Alberti’s letter

artists that he mentions in his letter, and extolling the ‘*ingegno meraviglioso*’ (wonderful *ingegno*) of Brunelleschi in particular.<sup>44</sup> However, there is in Alberti’s words perhaps the seed of recognition of the ambiguous nature of that *ingegno*; a feeling that it represents an enormous power that is both marvellous and, potentially, monstrous.<sup>45</sup>

Such a schism was recognised some time ago by Manfredo Tafuri, who presented Brunelleschi’s *ingegno* as a two-sided phenomenon, characterised on the one hand by the positive action of constructing the cupola and on the other by the strange and disturbing tale of the *Grasso Legnaiuolo*.<sup>46</sup> In that story, Brunelleschi, appearing as a literary character, orchestrates an elaborate *beffa* or practical joke, in which he is able to cause the wood-worker Manetto to lose his identity and believe that he is someone else, making him succumb to a totalising illusion that is

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and Brunelleschi’s *ingegno*, and pp. 321-348 on the historiography of *ingegno*. On Brunelleschi’s *ingegno* see also Smith, *Architecture in the Culture of Early Humanism*, pp. 28-34. Giuliano Tanturli, ‘Rapporti letterari del Brunelleschi con gli ambienti letterari fiorentini’, in *Filippo Brunelleschi: la sua opera e il suo tempo*, ed. P. Ragionieri, Florence 1980, pp. 125, 135, points out that while Brunelleschi was celebrated in his lifetime, humanist praise of the architect was largely posthumous.

<sup>44</sup> Alberti, *De pictura*, p. 204.

<sup>45</sup> Pardo, ‘On the Identity of “Masaccio”’, detects in Alberti’s letter a polemical note regarding the enormity of the dome – something that she connects with Alberti’s discussion of the colossus in the *De pictura* itself. She notes (pp. 232-3) that ‘Giants are prodigies or monsters, and so is the great dome, all at once an irresistible technical and emblematic demonstration. Thus, when Alberti closes the letter with an outline of his own *operetta di pictura*, one cannot help catching in this expression a subtle hint of irony, which contrastively reduces his praises to something like bombast.’

<sup>46</sup> Manfredo Tafuri, *Ricerca del Rinascimento*, Turin 1992, pp. 3-32, published in English as *Interpreting the Renaissance: Princes, Cities, Architects*, tr. (English) D. Sherer, New Haven 2006, pp. 1-22.

described as being akin to a ‘waking dream.’<sup>47</sup> As Tafuri observes of these two sides of Brunelleschi’s activities, ‘Alberti is known to have admired the first [the cupola]; however, the gratuitous, antinaturalistic quality of the second [the *beffa*] is completely un-Albertian. These two concrete results of Brunelleschi’s *ingenium* might be described, then, as a *Janus bifrons*; an apt figure for the moment of ethical decision implied by the *techne* of modernity.’<sup>48</sup> Tafuri connects this duality to the intuition (which he ascribes to Martin Heidegger) that a forceful will to power lay at the core of Renaissance humanism.<sup>49</sup> Certainly, it is true that Alberti seems to have been conscious of something of this sort. He devoted much energy to critiquing instrumentalist and ideological aspects of humanist practice and to picking apart humanism’s relationship with political authority. Regarding architecture, he appears often, in the *De re aedificatoria*, to be caught precisely in the ‘moment of ethical decision’ that Tafuri identifies, transfixed by the tension between different understandings of architecture as a civic good on the one hand and an ethically unmoored instrument of power on the other.<sup>50</sup> In this sense, the letter once again seems to gesture towards some of the key preoccupations that would drive Alberti’s intellectual activity throughout his entire career.

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<sup>47</sup> Antonio Manetti, *Vita di Filippo Brunelleschi: preceduta da La novella del Grasso*, ed. D. De Robertis, Milan 1976, pp. 1-44.

<sup>48</sup> Tafuri, *Interpreting the Renaissance*, p. 20. On Brunelleschi’s *ingegno* in relation to the story of Il Grasso, see also Emison, *Creating the “Divine” Artist*, pp. 239-40.

<sup>49</sup> Tafuri, *Interpreting the Renaissance*, p. 21. See also Martin Heidegger, ‘Letter on “Humanism”’, in *Pathmarks*, ed. W. McNeill, tr. (English) F. A. Capuzzi, Cambridge 1998, pp. 239-276.

<sup>50</sup> On this see Caspar Pearson, *Humanism and the Urban World: Leon Battista Alberti and the Renaissance City*, University Park 2011, pp. 56-105.

A good example of this ongoing concern occurs in the *Momus*, a work of the 1440s or 1450s, when the title character recounts stories of his time as a vagabond on earth, and, in a parody of Stoic detachment, explains how his lowly status allowed him to remain indifferent to disturbing phenomena. Here, there are distinct echoes of Brunelleschi’s activities:

Monstrous portents were recounted. Some people had ridden through a road that stretched across the sea, others had sailed a fleet through woodland passes, still others had dug through mountains, driving their carts right through the middle of rocks and through the very bowels of the earth. Some built enormous structures to reach the sky; others had diverted and drained rivers and lakes, and had enclosed seas in the middle of dry land.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Leon Battista Alberti, *Momus*, ed. V. Brown and S. Knight, tr. (English) S. Knight, Cambridge, Mass. 2003, pp. 138-9: ‘Narrabantur et rerum monstra: alios strata mari via obequitasse, alios per silvas perque saltus traduxisse classem, alios subfossis montibus media per saxa intimaque per viscera terrae suos traxisse currus, alios immani strue caelum aggressos petere, alios flumina et lacus eripuisse mari atque exstinxisse, mediumque intra aridum terrae solum acclusisse maria.’ Brown and Knight, pp. 387-8, n. 8 and 9, argue that Alberti parodies the kind of *apathia* found in Horace, *Carmina*, 3.3.1-8, while drawing on ancient accounts of portents of political upheaval, such as those related in Lucan, *Civil War*, I.522-695. Regarding the passage quoted here, they suggest that Alberti might have been influenced by a part of the *Hermetica* of Stobaeus, in which Momus warns Hermes about the overreaching nature of man. See Hermes Trismegistus, *Hermetica, the Ancient Greek and Latin Writings which Contain Religious or Philosophical Teachings Ascribed to Hermes Trismegistus*, ed. and tr. (English) W. Scott, 4 vols, Oxford 1924, I, p. 483 (Exc. XXIII.45).

The act of riding across the sea relates to a well-known *topos*, associated with folly and hubris, that also appears in Alberti’s architectural treatise.<sup>52</sup> The idea of sailing through woodland passes, however, might be associated with Brunelleschi’s most controversial invention, the giant boat, or *Badalone* (monster), that was designed to transport stone along the Arno even when the waters were at their lowest, and that may actually have been amphibious; a project that failed, bringing no little disgrace and financial loss to its maker.<sup>53</sup> The diverting and draining of waters, meanwhile, perhaps recalls another of the architect’s failed undertakings: the attempt, during the siege of Lucca, to change the direction of the river in order to drown the city and cut it off from the outside world. The plan backfired spectacularly when the encampment of the Florentine besiegers was inundated instead.<sup>54</sup> That said, it is not only the more outlandish and less successful of Brunelleschi’s projects that are evoked. The idea of burrowing into mountains and building tall structures that reach up to the sky might recall the construction of the cupola itself, which caused the architect to spend lengthy periods in mountain quarries overseeing the extraction of stone, and indeed to approach and even surmount the skies, as Alberti had himself

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<sup>52</sup> Leon Battista Alberti, *De re aedificatoria*, ed. and tr. (Italian) G. Orlandi and P. Portoghesi, 2 vols, Milan 1966, repr. 1988, I, pp. 101, 103 (II.2). Herodotus, VII.34.1-VII. 35.3, and Suetonius, *Caligula* 19, report, respectively, on Xerxes and Caligula riding over bridges made from ships.

<sup>53</sup> On the *Badalone* see the essay ‘Brunelleschi as Patentee and Contractor’ in Frank D. Prager and Gustina Scaglia, *Brunelleschi: Studies of His Technologies and Inventions*, Cambridge, Mass. 1970, pp. 111-134; Margaret Haines, ‘Myth and Management in the Construction of Brunelleschi’s Cupola’, *I Tatti Studies in the Italian Renaissance*, XIV/XV, 2011-2012, pp. 47-101, here 90-96; and Romano Nanni and Veronica Vestri, ‘Il “Badalone” di Filippo Brunelleschi e l’iconografia del ‘navigium’ tra Guido da Vigevano e Leonardo da Vinci’, *Annali di Storia di Firenze*, VI, 2001, pp. 65-119.

<sup>54</sup> Paola Benigni and Pietro Ruschi, ‘Il contributo di Filippo Brunelleschi all’assedio di Lucca’, in *Ricerche brunelleschiane: Interventi presentati al Convegno internazionale di studi brunelleschiani*, Florence 1977, pp. 55-82; and Haines, ‘Myth and Management’, pp. 55-56.

characterised it in his letter.<sup>55</sup> This passage might thus be connected with the prodigious view of Brunelleschian *tebne* that Tafuri felt was contained within the *novella* of the *Grasso Legnainolo* and that he saw as being at odds with the project of the cupola. In Alberti’s thought there would appear to be no such clear separation. Even in the letter to Brunelleschi, which undoubtedly is chiefly concerned with the positive force of the architect’s *ingegno*, there is already a hint of ambivalence. Alberti invites the giants into his discourse, and in so doing he acknowledges a form of moral jeopardy. He thus opens up a question regarding the moral status of Brunelleschian *ingegno* and *tebne*; a question with which he would continue to grapple for the rest of his life.

### Glory and Fame

Needless to say, such conclusions rest on a considerable degree of interpretation. If Alberti’s text does recall Dante then it is not in the manner of a citation but something altogether less determinate. There are, nonetheless, some compelling reasons to link the two passages. Like Alberti, Dante speaks of nature as having ceased any longer to make giants, and he also goes on to associate them with large buildings. It is also significant that when he describes the confusion of these two things – giants and buildings – Dante appears to draw upon the science of optics. This last was crucial for Alberti’s treatise, not least where he sets out the rules of perspective. Brunelleschi, of course, is also closely associated with perspective and a long art

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<sup>55</sup> Saalman, *Filippo Brunelleschi: The Cupola*, pp. 202-209; Haines, ‘Myth and Management’, pp. 78-83.



historical tradition has often considered him to be its originator.<sup>56</sup> Whether Alberti regarded him as such is an open question, and his silence on this matter, in the letter, has been the subject of much speculation. Be that as it may, it is notable that Canto XXXI does seem to touch upon the two things that most closely link Alberti and Brunelleschi: the building of large architectural structures, for which Alberti praises Brunelleschi in the letter; and an interest in the potential of optical theories to inform the practice of pictorial representation.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Jules Lubbock, *Storytelling in Christian Art from Giotto to Donatello*, London 2006, pp. 175-190, argues, on the basis of a close review of the primary sources, that the claim that Brunelleschi ‘invented’ perspective (and that his perspective system was essentially the same as that later expounded by Alberti) is unsustainable.

<sup>57</sup> In a seminal essay of 1958, Alessandro Parronchi observed that Dante seems to have been well-versed in the medieval science of *perspettiva* (optics). As Parronchi points out, Dante’s error in Canto XXXI, in which he at first believes that he sees towers and then comes to realise that they are in fact giants, is precisely the kind of *deceptio visus* that is frequently discussed in medieval *perspectivae*. In this case, the error arises from poor light quality and distance, and can be corrected under improved conditions. Alberti’s *De pictura* is itself of course deeply indebted to the science of optics. The first book demonstrates the influence of the optical theories of Euclid and Ptolemy, particularly in relation to the notion of the visual pyramid – something that, as Simon Gilson has demonstrated, was also influential for Dante. Assuming that Alberti was familiar with *Inferno* XXXI, it seems credible that he would have recognised Dante’s engagement there, and perhaps elsewhere, with optics. While the exact nature of Brunelleschi’s perspective demonstrations, as described by Antonio Manetti, cannot be known with certainty, they also undoubtedly touched significantly upon optics; not least in their use of reflection, a subject that was dealt with extensively in all of the *perspectivae*. See Alessandro Parronchi, ‘Dante e la prospettiva’, in *Studi Fiorentini. Conferenze raccolte a cura della Libera Cattedra della Civiltà Fiorentina*, Florence 1958, pp. 19-51. Simon A. Gilson, *Medieval Optics and Theories of Light in the Works of Dante*, Lewiston 2000, takes up Parronchi’s observations but argues that Dante’s works do not demonstrate direct knowledge of the *perspectivae* of Alhazen, Witelo, and so forth. Rather, the poet’s knowledge seems to have been drawn largely from writers such as Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas, as well as medieval encyclopedias. It should also be noted that in the *Ex ludis rerum mathematicarum* (c. 1450), Alberti would devote much attention to the use of optical means for calculating the height of towers from a distance, including in

Nonetheless, one might still object that Alberti’s characterisation of the age of the giants as belonging to nature’s ‘almost youthful and more glorious days’ seems altogether too positive; more redolent of Lucretius’s view that all creatures are begotten by mother earth and that:

even now many living creatures arise from the earth, formed by the rain and the warm heat of the sun, so that it is less wonderful if then more and larger ones arose, which grew up when earth and air were young.<sup>58</sup>

In fact, Lucretius’s text almost certainly is at work here, but this does not rule out there also being some echo of the passage from *Inferno*.<sup>59</sup> In any case, it must be acknowledged that even if Alberti does describe the giants as belonging to nature’s more glorious days (*più gloriosi tempi*), we should not take for granted the value that he ascribes to glory. Discussion of glory is

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cases where the base is not visible – a procedure that seems highly relevant to the visual challenges presented in Canto XXXI. See the dual text in Leon Battista Alberti, *The Mathematical Works of Leon Battista Alberti*, ed. K Williams, L. March, and R. Wassel, Basel 2010, especially pp. 10-15, 18-21, and the commentary by Stephen R. Wassell, pp. 75-87, 90-92.

<sup>58</sup> Lucretius *De rerum natura*, pp. 440-441 (V, 797-800): ‘multaque nunc etiam existunt animalia terris / imbribus et calido solis concreta vapore; / quo minus est mirum si tum sunt plura coorta / et maiora, nova tellure atque aethere adulta.’

<sup>59</sup> It is perhaps significant that one of the first Florentine texts that appears to respond to Alberti’s letter, Alamanno Rinuccini’s letter to Federico da Montefeltro of 1473, adopts markedly Lucretian terms. See Alamanno Rinuccini, *Lettere ed orazioni*, ed. V. R. Giustiniani, Florence 1953, pp. 104-116, letter XXXII. On the relationship of this letter to Alberti’s epistle, see E. H. Gombrich’s essay, ‘The Renaissance Conception of Artistic Progress and its Consequences’, in *Norm and Form: Studies in the Art of the Renaissance I*, Oxford 1966, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. 1985, pp. 1-10, and 137-8; and Bertolini, ‘Nouvelles perspectives’, p. 43.

present throughout Alberti’s works, from the play that he wrote as a twenty-year-old, the *Philodoxeos fabula* (which recounts the trials and tribulations of one who loves glory) to the *De iciarchia* of his final years.<sup>60</sup> However, his treatment of the theme is far from constant. Certainly, glory was a defining issue in the works that Alberti produced in the run-up to and alongside the *De pictura*. In the final passages of the *De commodis litterarum atque incommodis*, the waspish and ironic treatise that he penned, shortly after he completed his legal studies at Bologna, on the advantages and disadvantages of scholarship, glory is held up as one of the great rewards of the life of the mind.<sup>61</sup> And yet, the ferocious invective against academic life that makes up the bulk of the treatise causes the reader to question whether it is really worth the effort. In the *Vita Sancti Potiti* (life of Saint Potitus), written soon after the *De commodis*, the idea that one ought to pursue fame and glory is placed in the mouth of a demon.<sup>62</sup> In the second and third books of the vernacular dialogue *De familia*, which is roughly contemporaneous with the *De pictura*, the young humanist Lionardo speaks extensively of glory, but the dialogue is structured in such a way that we are left more, not less, perplexed about its moral standing.<sup>63</sup> Indeed, it has been suggested that Alberti set out, in this text, precisely to pick apart the correlation between glory and the

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<sup>60</sup> See Leon Battista Alberti, *Philodoxeos Fabula*, in *Humanist Comedies*, ed. and tr. (English) G. R. Grund, Cambridge, Mass. 2005, pp. 70-169; and *De iciarchia*, in *Opere volgari*, II, pp. 187-286. In Book II of the dialogue, Battista repeatedly names glory and fame as prime motives for ethical action, referring to ‘premio incomparabile, cioè gloria e immortal fama.’

<sup>61</sup> Alberti, *Opere latine*, pp. 49-50 (VI.16): ‘Quibus omnibus rebus si diligentissimam adhibueris operam, adolescens, comperies litteras esse voluptuosissimas, utilissimas ad laudem, ad gloriam atque ad fructum posteritatis et immortalitatis accomodatissimas.’

<sup>62</sup> Alberti, *Opere latine*, p. 127: ‘famam quidem gloriamque esse capessendam.’ On this see Kircher, *Living Well*, p. 28.

<sup>63</sup> Alberti, *Opere volgari*, I, 83-261. On the dating of the *De familia*, Bertolini, ‘Come pubblicava l’Alberti’, pp. 233-237, argues for a date after May 1435.

moral good found in humanist writers such as Leonardo Bruni and Matteo Palmieri; something that he achieved by subjecting their views to a fierce and thoroughgoing irony.<sup>64</sup>

The true merit and significance of glory is thus far from settled in Alberti’s thinking, and the same might be said of fame, to which glory is closely allied. The notion of fame is prominent in the letter, not least in relation to Brunelleschi, who is urged to continue making new inventions for which ‘il tuo ingegno meraviglioso s’acquista perpetua fama e nome’ (your marvellous *ingegno* [will] acquire perpetual fame and renown).<sup>65</sup> The association between fame and *ingegno* is thus clearly established. Indeed, Brunelleschi, who was for his contemporaries the very model of *ingegno*, was also in many ways the archetype of the Renaissance artist as *huomo famosissimo*.<sup>66</sup> Alberti, however, displays a deep ambivalence regarding fame throughout his works, and in so doing he responds to a longstanding tradition of scepticism and hostility towards the idea of worldly renown. The Biblical giants, according to the Genesis passage that seems to have informed Dante’s Canto XXXI, were also *viri famosi*, and they so offended God that they provoked the flood and occasioned the destruction of the greater part of creation.<sup>67</sup>

### The Poetics of Exile

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<sup>64</sup> Kircher, *Living Well*, pp. 175-176.

<sup>65</sup> Alberti, *De pictura (redazione volgare)*, p. 204. Trachtenberg, *Building-in-Time*, pp. 364-366, notes that nine of the letter’s 23 sentences mention praise, fame, or related ideas.

<sup>66</sup> On this see Emison, *Creating the “Divine” Artist*, pp. 255-301, and especially 282-295.

<sup>67</sup> That the giants, through their pride, brought about the Flood is emphasised in the Book of Wisdom 14.6.

Reading the letter alongside Dante’s text does allow us to see more clearly some of its internal tensions. Even so, it might be objected that Dante is not an author to whom Alberti frequently refers or offers praise. As such, Alberti stands in contrast to humanist contemporaries such as Leonardo Bruni and Matteo Palmieri, who did engage with the poet and who offered him qualified approval.<sup>68</sup> It is certainly true that Alberti does not habitually mention medieval authors in his writings, whereas ancient ones are named frequently. Nonetheless, the influence of the former can be detected in his works.<sup>69</sup> It seems safe to assume that Alberti, who was born into a prominent Florentine family, raised within a Florentine milieu (albeit in exile), and predisposed towards scholarship from a young age, would have been familiar with the works of Florence’s most significant literary figure.<sup>70</sup> Some of his vernacular *rime* are reminiscent of the Tuscan poet, and he mentions Dante by name in one poem, which he concludes with a quotation from the *Paradiso*.<sup>71</sup> Echoes of the Ugolino episode recounted in *Inferno* XXXIII (only two cantos beyond the encounter with the giants) can perhaps be detected in two of the *Intercenales*: the *Hostis* and the Tuscan version of the *Naufragus*.<sup>72</sup> Dante enjoyed a rare degree of

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<sup>68</sup> Differing arguments regarding this issue may be found in Kircher, *Living Well*, pp. 77-81, 90-91; and Martin McLaughlin, *Leon Battista Alberti. La vita, l’umanesimo, le opere*, Florence 2016, p. 123.

<sup>69</sup> This is a major contention of Kircher, *Living Well*. See also Roberto Cardini’s discussion of Alberti’s relationship to medieval sources (‘una questione fondamentale ma tuttora apertissima’) in ‘Attualità dell’Alberti’, *Professione Architetto*, No. 2, 1995, pp. 6-13, here 9-10. Cardini, *Mosaici*, undertakes an influential analysis of Alberti’s use of a fourteenth-century chronicle.

<sup>70</sup> On Alberti’s ‘Florentine’ upbringing and identity, see Boschetto, *Leon Battista Alberti e Firenze*.

<sup>71</sup> See *Rima* IV, ‘Per li pungenti spin’, per gli aspri istecchi’, in Leon Battista Alberti, *Rime / Poèmes, suivis de la Protesta / Protestation*, ed. G. Gorni, tr. (French) M. Sabbatini, Paris 2002, pp. 17-19. Alberti quotes from *Paradiso* XXII, 16, which he renders as ‘la spada di lassù non taglia in fretta.’

<sup>72</sup> For the *Hostis*, see Cardini, *Mosaici*, pp. 42-3; for the *Naufragus*, Martin McLaughlin, ‘Alberti traduttore di se stesso: *Uxorina* e *Naufragus*’, in *Autotraduzione. Teoria ed esempi fra Italia e Spagna (e oltre)*, ed. M. Rubio Arquez and N.

authority, such that his *Commedia* appears as the only vernacular work among a total of 68 volumes that are known to have been owned by Gasparino Barzizza, Alberti’s humanist schoolmaster in Padua. Barzizza even proposed to write a commentary on the work, and he also lectured on Dante at the Paduan *studium*.<sup>73</sup> Moreover, there are good reasons why Alberti might have had Dante in mind when composing the first version of *De pictura*. This text was, after all, part of his broader effort to create a new kind of Tuscan vernacular literature; something that Alberti described as a major challenge, since he had not grown up in the region.<sup>74</sup> Even if Alberti’s language was not specifically modelled on Dante’s – and might be considered polemically opposed to it – Dante nonetheless stood as the most important example of the vernacular’s capacity to produce significant writing.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, Alberti, who was himself a writer of vernacular poetry (albeit occasionally in a Latinate style), displays a marked poetic

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D’Antuono, Milan 2012, pp. 106, here pp. 101-2. McLaughlin (n. 45) suggests that the Ugolino episode might also find an echo in Alberti’s first work, the *Philodoxeos fabula*.

<sup>73</sup> R. G. G. Mercer, *The Teaching of Gasparino Barzizza, with Special Reference to his Place in Paduan Humanism*, London 1979, pp. 133-4, 82.

<sup>74</sup> In the *Vita*, Alberti expands upon the challenges he faced, and the success he achieved, when writing in the *volgare*. See Leon Battista Alberti, *Autobiografia e altre opere latine*, ed. L. Chines and A. Severi, Milan 2012, p. 70.

<sup>75</sup> The issue of Alberti’s language in relation to the meaning of the letter to Brunelleschi, and its connection with the broader *questione della lingua* (which had come to a head in 1435) and with both humanist Latinate and more ‘popular’ vernacular literary culture in Florence, is a rich topic for which space does not here allow. On this theme, see Heather A. Horton, “Equally Unknown and Unimaginable Among the Ancients”: Brunelleschi’s Dome and Alberti’s *Lingua Toscana*?, *California Italian Studies*, II/1, 2001; and Charles Burroughs, ‘Grammar and Expression in Early Renaissance Architecture: Brunelleschi and Alberti’, *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, No. 34, Autumn 1988, pp. 39-63.

sensibility in many of his works and often draws from poetic sources.<sup>76</sup> In light of Horace’s famous dictum regarding the correlation between painting and poetry, he had particular reason in the *De pictura* to turn his mind to the field of poetics.<sup>77</sup> Above all, Dante was the most important figure in a Tuscan poetic tradition in which exile was a central concern; and this is also one of the predominant themes – if not *the* predominant theme – of the letter.<sup>78</sup>

In this context, it is worth considering further that evocative phrase that Alberti uses when he speaks of the ‘lungo esilio’, or long exile, in which he says his family had grown old.<sup>79</sup> A similar expression may be found in two sources that he knew well. Like Dante’s *Commedia*, both

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<sup>76</sup> Discussing Alberti in relation to Boccaccio, Kircher, *Living Well*, chapter 3, argues that Alberti’s reception of the trecento author does not take the form of quotations or direct citations but rather of poetic mood and shared interests.

<sup>77</sup> Horace, *Ars poetica*, l.361.

<sup>78</sup> On exile as a central theme of Italian literature, and on Dante’s preeminent position within that tradition, see Elisa Brilli, ‘L’arte del dire l’esilio’, *Bollettino di italianistica. Rivista di critica, storia letteraria, filologia e linguistica*, n.s., VIII/2, 2001, pp. 17-41, especially 18; and Alberto Asor Rosa, ‘La Fondazione del laico’, in *Letteratura italiana*, directed by A. Asor Rosa, 20 vols, Turin 1986, V, pp. 91-91. On exile as a literary and poetic *topos* in pagan and Christian antiquity, see Randolph Starn, *Contrary Commonwealth: The Theme of Exile in Medieval and Renaissance Italy*, Berkeley 1982, pp. 24-30.

<sup>79</sup> Significantly, the same wording is used by Alberti’s friend Cristoforo Landino in his commentary on the *Divine Comedy* (1481), in the context of restoring Dante to his *patria* and insisting on his Tuscan language: ‘Questo solo affermo: havere liberato el nostro cittadino dalla barbarie di molti esterni idiomi ne’ quali da’ comentatori era stato corrotto ed al presente chosì puro et semplice è paruto mio officio apresentarlo ad voi illustrissimi signor nostri, acciòche per le mani di quel magistrato, el quale è sommo nella fiorentina rep. sia dopo lungo exilio restituito nella sua patria et riconosciuto né Romagnuolo essere né Lombardo, né degli idiomi di quegli che l’hanno comentato, ma mero fiorentino.’ Shortly afterwards, Landino praises Alberti and mentions *De pictura* specifically. See Cristoforo Landino, *Comento sopra la Comedia*, ed. Paolo Procaccioli, 4 vols, Rome 2001, I, pp. 221, 232.

are prominent examples of epic poetry, although they are Latin rather than Italian and ancient rather than medieval: Virgil’s *Aeneid* and Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. To begin with the former, the wording occurs in the second book, in one of the most gripping passages of the poem. Here, Aeneas offers Dido a chilling and pathos-laden account of the fall of Troy. Famously, he describes how, as the city was put to the sack and subjected to total destruction, he moved through its flaming streets carrying his elderly father Anchises on his shoulders and holding his young son Ascanius by the hand, with his wife Creüsa following just behind. In the melee, as he approached the city gates, Creüsa was lost and Aeneas turned back and rushed again through the streets, desperately trying to find her. Instead, he met with her ghost, who appeared to him ‘in a form larger than her wont’, and who, after issuing some calming words, delivered him a prophecy:

Long exile is your lot [*longa tibi exsilia*], a vast stretch of sea you must plough; and you will come to the land Hesperia, where amid the rich fields of husbandmen the Lydian Tiber flows with gentle sweep. There in store for you are happy days, kingship, and a royal wife.<sup>80</sup>

These words reveal, in the most schematic of forms, the overall shape of the entire narrative. They are delivered at the moment of maximum loss, as Aeneas, standing in the ruins of his city, learns that his wife is dead and that he must face a long exile. And yet at the same moment, his recovery is foretold – his ‘return’, as it were, not to Troy but to a new land; to the place where, ultimately, his lineage will give rise to Rome and its empire.

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<sup>80</sup> Virgil, *Virgil*, tr. (English) H. R. Fairclough, revised by G. P. Goold, 2 vols, Cambridge, Mass. 1999, I, pp. 368-9 (*Aeneid*, II.780-784): ‘longa tibi exsilia, et vastum maris aequor arandum; / et terram Hesperiam venies, ubi Lydius arva / inter opima virum leni fluit agmine Thybris. / illic res laetae regnumque et regia coniunx / parta tibi.’



One can well imagine that this passage, which touches so succinctly on the pain of exile and the joy of return, would have resonated with Alberti. The association of exile with seafaring finds many parallels in his works, where both are sometimes presented as forms of radical displacement from the land to which one belongs. In this way, he responds to a tradition that is already vital in Hesiod’s *Works and Days*, just as Virgil does when he contrasts the ‘ploughing’ of a vast sea to the settled life amid ‘rich fields.’ As Anthony Grafton has observed, Alberti frequently adopts sailing as a metaphor for the navigation of life itself, and the vicissitudes of fortune in particular.<sup>81</sup> An extended example occurs in *De familia*, where it is recounted how Alberti’s grandfather, Benedetto di Nerozzo Alberti, used to compare the role of the head of the family to that of a ship’s captain, emphasising the importance of steering a safe course through unforeseen obstacles and inclement weather.<sup>82</sup> Benedetto, one might think, would certainly have had cause to know. It was he who had brought the Alberti family to the apex of political life in Florence in 1378, and he who had precipitated their calamity when, nine years later, he overplayed his hand and was banished from the republic, along with his kinsman Cipriano, for a period of two years.<sup>83</sup> This was the beginning of the Alberti’s general catastrophe; the first of the measures that would eventually lead to the exclusion of the entire clan.

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<sup>81</sup> Grafton, *Leon Battista Alberti*, pp. 184-185.

<sup>82</sup> Alberti, *Opere volgari*, I, pp. 17-20.

<sup>83</sup> For the documents relating to the expulsion of Benedetto and Cipriano Alberti, see Passerini, *Gli Alberti*, II, pp. 231-240; for the circumstances of the family’s downfall see Gene Brucker, *The Civic World of Renaissance Florence*, Princeton 1977, pp. 75-80

Following his expulsion, Benedetto had taken to the sea in earnest, embarking from Genoa for a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. On the return journey, he contracted plague and died at Rhodes on 13 January, 1389. Alberti, who sought to defend his grandfather’s reputation in a number of his works, made Benedetto’s demise the subject of the *Intercenale* titled *Divitie* (Wealth).<sup>84</sup> Here, he demonstrated a heightened awareness of the poetic and philosophical possibilities inherent in this tale of death on an island far from home. In the *Intercenale*, Benedetto is urged by his friends to make his will as he lies on his deathbed. It is an important undertaking, they say, since he is surely the richest man in Tuscany. Benedetto replies in Stoic vein, saying that he has now realised that all of the things that he previously regarded as his possessions – estates, property, wealth, and even his own body – were never actually his at all but really belonged to fortune. What better demonstration of this could there be than the fact that ‘in a single day fortune, mistress of our affairs, has snatched from me all my wealth and goods and even my homeland, and has driven me into exile?’<sup>85</sup> In regard to wealth, he has learnt that it is not its possession that brings happiness but only its use. Thus, he concludes:

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<sup>84</sup> On Benedetto in Alberti’s writings, see Luca Boschetto, ‘Entre mémoire familiale et Histoire de la ville. Le portrait de “messer Benedetto” dans le *De familia* d’Alberti’, in *Les livres de la famille d’Alberti: sources, sense et influence*, directed by M. Paoli, with the collaboration of d’É. Leclerc and S. Duthellet de Lamothe, Paris 2013, pp. 81-94. Boschetto points out that in addition to the positive and negative portrayals of Benedetto in the chronicle tradition, discussion also entered into humanistic literature in the form of an unfavourable account by Leonardo Bruni. See Bruni’s *History of the Florentine People*, ed. and tr. (English) J. Hankins, with D. J. W Bradley, 3 vols, Cambridge, Mass. 2007, III, pp. 78-81 (IX.76).

<sup>85</sup> Leon Battista Alberti, *Dinner Pieces*, tr. (English) D. Marsh, Binghamton 1987, p. 53. See also Alberti, *Opere latine*, p. 294: ‘cumque animadverto ut divitias quidem opesque omnis patriamque fortuna rerum domina nobis die unica eripuerit in exiliumque pepulerit’.

I wish, therefore, to leave my heirs this sole inheritance. They may claim that, above all others in our city, I was the most devoted to my country, and the most desirous of peace, tranquillity, and freedom; that I was by no means ignorant of liberal studies, letters, and arts; and that I defended the public weal with great vigilance and faith, and was always content with my private estate. Let these deeds of mine pass to my heirs.<sup>86</sup>

Alberti might have had in mind here Aristotle’s views regarding the usefulness of wealth.<sup>87</sup> It is possible that he was also thinking of a story told by Vitruvius:

It is related of the Socratic philosopher Aristippus that, being shipwrecked and cast ashore on the coast of the Rhodians, he observed geometrical figures drawn thereon, and cried out to his companions: ‘Let us be of good cheer, for I see the traces of man.’ With that he made for the city of Rhodes, and went straight to the gymnasium. There he fell to discussing philosophical subjects, and presents were bestowed upon him, so that he could not only fit himself out, but could also provide for those who accompanied him with clothing and all other necessaries of life. When his companions wished to return to their country, and asked him what message he wished them to carry home, he bade them

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid.: ‘Itaque posteris meis hanc a me esse relictam hereditatem volo, ut possint profiteri me unum fuisse nostra in urbe civem amantissimum patrie, pacis, otii libertatisque cupidissimum, bonorum studiosum litterarumque et bonarum artium haudquaquam omnino rudem aut ignarum: qui quidem cum publica summa vigilantia et fide semper tutatus, tum privata mea re in primis nusquam fuerim non contentus. Mea igitur hec meorumque sunt.’

<sup>87</sup> See Cardini’s commentary and notes in Alberti, *Opere latine*, pp. 294-298, where he suggests Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, IV.1.1120a as a possible source. As he notes, the thought is here introduced into a stoic context. In Leon Battista Alberti, *Intervales*, ed. Franco Bacchelli and Luca D’Ascia, Bologna 2003, p. 163 n. 3, the editors suggest Seneca, *De beneficiis*, II.17.3 as another possible influence.

say this: that children ought to be provided with property and resources of a kind that could swim with them even out of a shipwreck.

These are indeed the true supports of life, and neither Fortune’s adverse gale, nor political revolution, nor ravages of war can do them any harm.<sup>88</sup>

Undoubtedly, there are some important differences. Aristippus has nothing to say on the relative importance of using and possessing wealth, and Benedetto does not use his skills, as the philosopher does, to provide for himself and his companions. Aristippus thrives; Benedetto dies. Nonetheless, both are shipwrecked on Rhodes, and both are moved by their experience to reflect on what a person may truly possess – each one ultimately finding that the only lasting resources are those that are carried inside of oneself.

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<sup>88</sup> Vitruvius, *The Ten Books on Architecture*, tr. (English) M. Hicky Morgan, New York 1960, p. 167 (6.1-2). For the Latin see Vitruvius, *On Architecture*, ed. and tr. (English) Frank Granger, 2 vols, London 1931, II, p. 2: ‘Aristippus philosophus Socraticus, naufragio cum eiectus ad Rhodiensium litus animadvertisset geometrica schemata descripta, exclamavisse ad comites ita dicitur: ‘bene speremus! hominum enim vestigia video.’ Statimque in oppidum Rhodum contendit et recta gymnasium devenit, ibique de philosophia disputans muneribus est donatus, ut non tantum se ornaret, sed etiam eis, qui una fuerunt, et vestitum et cetera, quae opus essent ad victum, praestaret. Cum autem eius comites in patriam reverti voluissent interrogarentque eum, quidnam vellet domum renuntiari, tunc ita mandavit dicere: eiusmodi possessiones et viatica liberis oportere parari, quae etiam e naufragio una possent enare. Namque ea vera praesidia sunt vitae, quibus neque fortunae tempestas iniqua neque publicarum rerum mutatio neque belli vastatio potest nocere.’ Vitruvius continues with a number of general remarks on the instability of fortune and the superiority of a liberal arts education to wealth.

If this story of Aristippus is at work in the background of the *Intercenale* text, then it introduces another important theme. Within his general concern with the metaphorical potential of sailing, one finds in Alberti’s writings a specific preoccupation with shipwreck. To be sure, shipwreck is a preeminent cultural commonplace; a polyvalent, almost ubiquitous metaphor.<sup>89</sup> Nonetheless, its place in Alberti’s *oeuvre* is particularly marked. Not only does it lend the title and the subject matter to the *Intercenale Naufragus*, it also appears at significant places in some of his other works.<sup>90</sup> In the *Momus*, for example, it is encountered at one of the most existentially pointed moments in the text, when Charon and Gelastus, having lost their way in a featureless sea, happen upon Momus, chained to a rock, and converse with him there in the ocean. In this passage, there appears to be a close connection between shipwreck and exile. When the two sailors tell Momus that they will help him in any way they can, he replies by asking ‘what help can a shipwrecked man offer to an exile, apart from sympathy?’ In fact, Gelastus is not merely shipwrecked but is also an exile himself, as he makes clear a little later on, in a speech that appears to be strongly autobiographical on Alberti’s part.<sup>91</sup> Here, and elsewhere in his writings, shipwreck emerges as a powerful signifier of the condition of those who must salvage what they can from the wreckage that fortune leaves in her wake.

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<sup>89</sup> On this, see Hans Blumenberg, *Shipwreck with Spectator: Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence*, tr. (English) Steven Rendall, Cambridge, Mass. 1997.

<sup>90</sup> The importance that Alberti attached to this work is underlined by his production of both Latin and vernacular versions. See Mclaughlin, ‘Alberti traduttore di se stesso: *Uxoriam e Naufragus*.’ Shipwreck is also a prominent theme in the *Fatum et Fortuna*, where life appears as a perilous watercourse in which human beings must survive the inevitable shipwrecks as best they can, while using the surrounding flotsam to better their condition.

<sup>91</sup> Alberti, *Momus*, pp. 334-341 (IV.80-86).

An important example from the same period as the *Momus* may be found in the *De re aedificatoria*. In the course of making some introductory remarks to the second half of the treatise, which focuses on beauty and ornament, Alberti discusses his motives for writing about architecture in the first place: ‘I grieved that so many works of such brilliant writers had been destroyed by the hostility of time and of man, and that almost the sole survivor from this vast shipwreck is Vitruvius, an author of unquestioned experience, though one whose writings have been so corrupted by time that there are many omissions and many shortcomings.’<sup>92</sup> Famously, he then proceeds to attack the Roman architect for using what he characterises as a kind of Greek-Latin hybrid language, which he claims is actually incomprehensible. Nonetheless, there is a strange sympathy with Vitruvius’s treatise here, for this reference to shipwreck occurs in the preface to Book VI; exactly the same place in which the Roman architect employs his own shipwreck anecdote about Aristippus. Just as the Socratic philosopher was able to recognise the signs of human civilisation from geometrical figures, and from there work out a path to recovery, Alberti goes on to explain that although the textual inheritance has been lost, enough remnants of buildings have survived to enable him – through observation and, above all, measurement – to recover much of the art of building. Like Aristippus with the geometrical forms, Alberti was able to recognise, in the numbers and ratios of columns and entablatures, the signs of a civilisation.

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<sup>92</sup> Leon Battista Alberti, *On the Art of Building in Ten Books*, tr. (English) J. Rykwert, N. Leach, R. Tavernor, Cambridge Mass. 1988, p. 154 (VI.1); and *L’architettura*, II, p. 441: ‘Nanque dolebam quidem tam multa tamque praeclarissima scriptorum monumenta interisse temporum hominumque iniuria, ut vix unum ex tanto naufragio Vitruvium superstitem haberemus, scriptorem procul dubio instructissimum, sed ita affectum tempestate atque lacerum, ut multis locis multa desint et multis plurima desideres.’

One can readily see the attraction of the idea of shipwreck for both Vitruvius and Alberti as a way of beginning new sections of their treatises, since it sets up a scenario in which the authors might move from a state of disorder to one of order. The metaphor also offers a point of departure for one of Alberti’s humanist contemporaries, Biondo Flavio, in his *Italia illustrata*, a treatise in which he attempts to provide a topographical account of ancient Italy. Lamenting that such knowledge has long been lost, due to the collapse of the discipline of history and the disappearance of its major written works, Biondo says that he intends to remedy this deficiency, enquiring into the history of places and their names:

Nevertheless, I should prefer not to pledge myself to give information regarding the full extent of the transformation of names, which would be rash and vainglorious, but I propose that I be thanked for having hauled ashore some planks from so vast a shipwreck, planks which were floating on the surface of the water or nearly lost to view, rather than be required to account for the entire lost ship.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Biondo Flavio, *Italy Illuminated*, ed. and tr. (English) J. A. White, 2 vols, Cambridge, Mass. 2005, I, pp. 4-5 (preface, 4): ‘Nec tamen ipsam omnem nominum mutationem temeraria et inani arrogancia indicare sponderim; sed gratias mihi potius de perductis ad litus e tanto naufragio supernatantibus, parum autem apparentibus, tabulis haberi, quam de tota navi desiderata rationem a me exposci debere contenderim.’ Leonardo Bruni makes similar use of the shipwreck metaphor in his *Dialogi ad Petrum Paolum Histrum*, where the character Niccolò Niccoli laments the present condition of learning ‘in hoc tanto doctrinarum omnium naufragio.’ See *Prosatori latini del Quattrocento*, ed. E. Garin, Milan and Naples 1952, p. 58. All of these writers might have looked back to the prefaces to the first and fourteenth books of Boccaccio’s *Genealogy of the Pagan Gods*, where the author compares himself to one who salvages material from a shipwreck and reassembles it as best he can. See Giovanni Boccaccio, *Genealogy of the Pagan Gods*, I, pp. pp. 18-19 (I. preface 1.40); and *Boccaccio in Defence of Poetry: Genealogiae deorum gentilium liber XIV*, ed. J. Reedy, Toronto 1978, p. 11.

The metaphor is particularly effective in this case. Shipwreck often results from a failure of navigation, so it is apt that a treatise on topography should begin from the worst effects of disorientation, in a featureless sea, and move to the accumulation of solid knowledge about the places of solid land. In a sense, this is also the case in *De re aedificatoria*. For both authors, the shipwreck represents the broader loss of antiquity, the vast cultural unmooring that the humanists felt had been occasioned by the collapse of the Roman world. In each case, the authors turned to the available fragments in order to salvage what remained and to undertake a partial reconstruction.<sup>94</sup> For Alberti, however, there was clearly also a strong association between the shipwreck of culture and the shipwreck of exile, both of which were encompassed within a broader shipwreck on what might be termed the sea of existence.<sup>95</sup> And in this context, we might think back once more to Virgil. For Aeneas, the pain of his personal circumstances would ultimately be outweighed by the making of the Roman world, even if he would not witness it personally. Similarly, for the humanists, the remedy for the cultural shipwreck was also the attainment – be it philological, archaeological, or architectural – of ‘Rome’ in the broadest sense; and for Alberti, there was no clear division between that larger shipwreck and the personal shipwreck of exile. It is for this reason that his coming to Florence could take on the flavour of a homecoming; because in that city he found, or affected to have found, evidence that cultural

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<sup>94</sup> Alberti discusses the assembly of fragments at several points in his works. The notion of the literary mosaic, as elaborated in Cardini, *Mosaici*, emphasises the importance of the fragment in literary composition. For the tragic overtones of the mosaic simile see Rinaldo Rinaldi, *Melancholia christiana: Studi sulle fonti di Leon Battista Alberti*, Florence 2002, pp. 10-11; on the relationship between literary and architectural fragments see Pearson, *Humanism and the Urban World*, pp. 51-54.

<sup>95</sup> Blumenberg, *Shipwreck with Spectator*, p. 23, discusses Friedrich Nietzsche’s metaphorical ‘sea of existence’, quoting from Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, tr. (English) W. Kaufmann, New York 1974, p. 110 (I.45).



decline was not total, and that the greatness of the Roman past might be not only matched but even exceeded.

### Techne

All of Alberti’s activities might, in one way or another, be connected with this will towards cultural recuperation and making whole, but it is in his engagement with *techne* that he is at his most positive in this regard. In this context, he often considers not merely how one might regain what has been lost, but also how the past might itself be exceeded by new and original achievements. This is nowhere truer than when he writes about architecture, both in the letter to Brunelleschi and in the *De re aedificatoria*. Yet, as we have seen, Alberti was also well aware of the political ramifications and the potential moral jeopardy associated with architectural *techne*. In this light, it is useful to consider the other previously mentioned example of the phrase ‘long exile,’ in the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid. The passage comes from the eighth book and belongs to the story of Daedalus. Here, the poet tells how the inventor constructed the Labyrinth for King Minos on Crete, but was then held on the island as a prisoner against his will:

Meanwhile Daedalus, hating Crete and his long exile [*Creten longumque perosus exilium*], and longing to see his native land, was shut in by the sea. ‘Though he may block escape by land and water,’ he said, ‘yet the sky is open, and by that way will I go. Though Minos rules over all, he does not rule the air.’ So saying, he sets his mind at work upon unknown arts, and changes the laws of nature.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, tr. (English) F. J. Miller, 2 vols, Cambridge, Mass. 1946, I, pp. 418-19 (VIII.183-189):

‘Daedalus interea Creten longumque perosus / exilium tactusque loci natalis amore / clausus erat pelago. “terras

Here, then, we encounter another strategy to combat the painful condition of exile and the nostalgia for a lost homeland: through undertaking original and daring feats of *ingegno*. This itself cannot help but remind us of Brunelleschi. Daedalus, according to Ovid was ‘famous for his skill in the builder’s art’ (*ingenio fabrae celeberrimus artis*), and, as we have seen, both fame and *ingegno* were important elements in Alberti’s characterisation of the Florentine architect.<sup>97</sup> The ancient inventor’s work upon ‘unknown arts’ (*ignotas artes*) finds its echo in the letter, where, building up to his praise of Brunelleschi, Alberti suggests that the artists of his own period might deserve even greater fame than those of antiquity if they succeed in discovering ‘arts and sciences hitherto unheard of and unseen’ (*arti e scienze non udite e mai vedute*) without having any models to learn from.<sup>98</sup> Ovid’s Daedalus sets out to conquer the skies; Alberti’s Brunelleschi does likewise.

Such parallels should not surprise us. Daedalus had long served as a personification of the ingenious architect. Around 1290, just before the project for Santa Maria del Fiore was born in Florence, the master masons of the cathedrals of Reims and Amiens had marked out huge labyrinths on the floors of their newly-constructed naves, placing their portraits within them and including inscriptions referring to Daedalus. In Tuscany, the cathedral of San Martino in Lucca displays a small labyrinth on the wall of its porch, also with an inscription that mentions Daedalus.<sup>99</sup> Brunelleschi himself was compared to Daedalus in an epitaph by the Florentine

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licet” inquit “et undas / obstruat: et caelum certe patet; ibimus illac: / omnia possideat, non possidet aera Minos.” / dixit et ignotas animum dimittit in artes / naturamque novat.’

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., pp. 416-417 (VIII.159).

<sup>98</sup> Alberti, *On Painting*, p. 33; and *De pictura (redazione volgare)*, p. 204.

<sup>99</sup> On the master masons’ auto-identification with Daedalus, see Binski, ‘Reflections on the “Wonderful Height and Size”’, p. 138; and “Working By Words Alone”: the Architect, Scholasticism and Rhetoric in Thirteenth-Century

chancellor Carlo Marsuppini, which was composed upon the architect’s death in 1446 and included in his monument in Santa Maria del Fiore.<sup>100</sup> Marsuppini observes that Brunelleschi excelled in the ‘Daedalian art’ (*arte Daedalaea*); an idea taken up in an encomiastic poem by another contemporary, Fra Domenico da Corella, who says that Brunelleschi was ‘another Daedalus for our own age’ (...*Philippus, tempore qui nostro Daedalus alter erat*).<sup>101</sup> Long before the cupola project was begun, the campanile of the cathedral was decorated with reliefs, designed in the late 1330s, showing the inventors of different crafts and arts. On its south side, Daedalus appears, airborne on his prosthetic wings, as a master of flight and of *ingegno*, or perhaps of all the arts combined (Fig. VI).<sup>102</sup> He gazes up to the place where the dome would eventually rise; a structure that would itself require ‘unknown arts’, to use Ovid’s phrase, for its completion.

Both Daedalus and Brunelleschi perhaps then served for Alberti as an image of how one might escape life’s catastrophes – exile and, as it were, the broader shipwreck of existence – through a triumphant soaring above circumstances.<sup>103</sup> As such, they go beyond a strategy of mere recuperation (something that, in Alberti’s thought, always carries within it the tragic knowledge

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France’, in *Rhetoric Beyond Words: Delight and Persuasion in the Arts of the Middle Ages*, ed. M. Carruthers, Cambridge 2010, pp. 14-51, especially pp. 15-18, with a select but extensive bibliography regarding labyrinth imagery in France and elsewhere at p. 42 n. 13.

<sup>100</sup> For the epitaph see Saalman, *Filippo Brunelleschi: The Cupola*, p. 12.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Marvin Trachtenberg, *The Campanile of Florence Cathedral: ‘Giotto’s Tower’*, New York 1971, pp. 86, 94.

<sup>103</sup> On Alberti’s treatment of the Daedalus myth in *De re aedificatoria*, see Charles Burroughs, ‘From Daedalus’s Cave to Florence Cathedral: Alberti, Architectural Bodies, and Bodies in Architecture’, in *Leon Battista Alberti: Humanist – Architect – Kunsttheoretiker*, ed. J. Poeschke and C. Syndikus, Münster 2008, pp. 171-184. Burroughs also makes a connection to the cupola.

of its own impossibility) and point instead towards the new and previously unheard-of. Nevertheless, the ancient inventor was also a troublingly ambiguous figure. Although Daedalus successfully took to the air, he lost his son Icarus in the process. Moreover, the next story in the *Metamorphoses* tells how, having been tasked with educating his nephew Talus, Daedalus instead grew jealous of the boy’s intelligence and attempted to murder him. Daedalus had in fact long been adopted by moralists as an example of the negative consequences of human *ingegno*.<sup>104</sup> Thus, at the same time that Daedalus rises before us as an example of how we might overcome adversity, he offers an alarming image of the moral possibilities inherent in such a path. Even those who take to the air may suffer the fate of the shipwrecked man and end by drowning in the ocean.

### Conclusion

Consideration of the letter in relation to these sources produces a complex picture of Alberti’s relationship to architecture and the city of Florence in the mid 1430s. The theme of exile runs through the text like an unbroken thread. Alberti’s elation at coming to know his long lost *patria* is palpable and, although highly staged, presumably also conveys genuine feelings. Nevertheless, a certain degree of caution is required in interpreting the letter in biographical terms. It is unsurprising that an author such as Alberti should have been highly sensitive to the poetics of exile.<sup>105</sup> Such sensitivity is demonstrated at many places in his works, and in this regard he might be seen as responding to a well-established tradition. Dante and Petrarch, to name only

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<sup>104</sup> See Binski, ‘Reflections on the “Wonderful Height and Size”’, p. 135.

<sup>105</sup> On the poetics of Alberti’s writing, see McLaughlin, ‘Leon Battista Alberti and the Redirection of Renaissance Humanism’, pp. 38-40.

the two most prominent examples, had both, in different ways, demonstrated the potential of exile for the making of poetic meaning and for the fashioning of an authorial identity.<sup>106</sup> Alberti, who asserts his status as an original author throughout the *De pictura*, and who appears so transfixed by Brunelleschi’s architectural authorship in the letter, makes full use of this literary inheritance.

In some ways, Alberti seems to have been the ideal observer of Brunelleschi’s engineering feat. He recognised and was thrilled by the immense power inherent in Brunelleschian *techne*. He understood its positive force and also saw that it was potentially morally troubling. His evocation of the giants, with its reverberations of Dante’s *Inferno* and the passage from Genesis, signals just this. Simultaneously, these themes are further inflected by the echoes of the *Aeneid* and the *Metamorphoses* discussed above. Embedded, as it were, within the part of the letter in which Alberti most explicitly raises the theme of exile, these texts seem to point to different means by which that condition might be remedied: through the ‘recovery’ of Roman antiquity in the first case, and the undertaking of new and original feats of invention, *ingegno*, and *techne* in the second; activities that were in fact closely allied, that touched upon a fundamental debate at the heart of Renaissance humanism, and that encompassed many of Alberti’s practical and intellectual interests. All such undertakings were, however, fraught with difficulty. Architecture and the other arts represent for Alberti one of the foremost means for achieving both cultural recuperation and innovation. Yet in the figure of Daedalus, we find ourselves faced once more with the moral problems that pertain to the giants.

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<sup>106</sup> Brilli, ‘L’arte del dire l’esilio’; Laurence E. Hooper, ‘Exile and Petrarch’s Reinvention of Authorship’, *Renaissance Quarterly*, LXIX, 2016, pp. 1217-56

Here, as so often, Alberti does not present systematic arguments about these things. Instead, he ruminates upon them in an allusive manner, fully availing himself of the fundamental indeterminacy of text. He does not cite the ancient and medieval poems that I have explored. In fact, it might be more appropriate to think of them, and the long traditions of moral thought from which they sprang, as returning to haunt his letter. These traditions had long weighed upon the medieval cathedral builders. Already in 1190, more than a century before the Florentines had enlisted Arnolfo in an attempt to overshadow their Tuscan rivals, Peter the Chanter had warned the masons of Notre-Dame in Paris: ‘do not imitate the art of Daedalus in building this church; do not imitate the giants in their height.’<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Petrus Cantor, *Verborum abbreviatum*, in *Patrologia Latina*, CCV, col. 258; quoted in Binski, ‘Rhetoric Beyond Words’, p. 15: ‘Non assimileris arte Daedalo in aedificando domo, non gigantibus altitudine.’ Cantor also warns against imitating the lavishness of Solomon.