

Renaissance Medicine, Magic, and Alchemy in Benvenuto Cellini's *Vita*¹

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Abstract

The article aims to rethink the several stereotypes of Romantic tradition, which are still reproduced in regard to Benvenuto Cellini and his *Vita*. Using the approaches of intellectual history and iconographical studies, the present study pays attention to the coherent system of lay, scientific and 'secret' knowledge of the epoch lurking under the surface of the simplicity and even naivety of the author's language. I argue that this autobiographical writing embodies a certain type of culture of the self deeply rooted in contemporary medical, alchemical and magical contexts. Organized around the concept of "getting pleasure," Cellini's practices of the self are built into the Neo-Platonic picture of the world. Analyzing the two passages of *Vita*, I demonstrate the author's spiritual ascent from the corporeal suffering to union with 'the One' by means of individual and collective magic rituals, transforming his Life into a work of art.

Keywords

Benvenuto Cellini, Vita, Renaissance Neo-Platonism, Renaissance medicine, Hermetic tradition, animation of the statue, practice of the self

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1. Introduction

Benvenuto Cellini (1500–1571) was an Italian Renaissance sculptor, goldsmith, medalist and one of the emblematic figures of Mannerism. His autobiography, *The Life of Benvenuto Cellini, son of Master Giovanni Cellini, the Florentine, written (by himself) in Florence*² (or just *Vita*) created between 1558 and 1562 attracts special attention to this day. It is commonly believed that within the text Cellini simply portrays himself as a prominent artist, who is constantly engaged in a fight either with patrons and guild-colleagues or with the material of his masterpieces and with himself. However, a thorough reading of this autobiographical adventure novel introduces to us a true encyclopedia of Renaissance knowledge –

¹ The main part of this article appeared thanks to the careful attention and helpful assistance of Yulia Ivanova and Pavel Sokolov (Poletayev Institute for Theoretical and Historical Studies in the Humanities of the National Research University – Higher School of Economics), who introduced me to an abundance of specific material on the Renaissance intellectual history and without whom I cannot imagine this text ever to have been written.

² In Italian, *La Vita di Benvenuto di Maestro Giovanni Cellini fiorentino, scritta, per lui medesimo, in Firenze*. Further in quotations we will refer only to the number of book and chapter – in accordance with the standard division of the Italian text (Cellini *La Vita*). Quotations in English are given in the translation of J. A. Symonds (Cellini *The Autobiography*).

from the Hermetic tradition to disciplines such as medicine and the theory of art. In the article I will show how these contexts are woven into the fabric of *Vita's* narrative and how they define the self-understanding of the Renaissance artist, being transformed into the language of interpretation of reality that is centered on the figure of artist. I presume that the syncretic language of the text, on the one hand captures the shape of author's thought, in which a wide variety of modern theories, prejudices and facts constitute a bizarre constellation, and on the other hand his thought forms an artistic whole of *Vita's* text – from the macro-level (composition) to details of particular episodes and descriptions.

In accordance with the above, by means of textual analysis, my study aims to show how this variety of cultural contexts is transformed by Cellini into writing about his life-world and the model of self-construction – or *zbižnjestroitel'stvo* (*Lebensgestaltung*).³ In the beginning a few words have to be said about the tradition of contextualization and reception of Cellini's autobiographical writing – a tradition dating back to the intellectual culture of Romanticism. I believe that this 'literal' and 'realistic' way of interpretation should be overcome to demonstrate the *Vita's* embeddedness in the Renaissance life-world and to highlight as much as possible of the author's meanings.

Interpreting the chosen episodes of *Vita*, I will simultaneously use the methodologies of different schools: this composition of research strategies is due not only to the exceptional complexity of the text but also to the modern achievements of Renaissance intellectual history.

Two case studies of the episodes from *Vita* will be demonstrated: the first one narrates the story of a plague in Rome, the second one consists of the protagonist's incarceration in the Castel Sant'Angelo. These two close readings will form the basis of my original interpretation of Cellini's autobiographical writing as a special model of radical reconstruction of the self. The process of writing the *Vita*, as I am going to show, implements a specific set of practices aimed at transforming all levels of the author's 'self' – from the bodily to the intellectual. As a result of that transformation the universal (perhaps even total) work of art appears from the private life and destiny of Cellini as an artist.

2. Towards the Intellectual History of Benvenuto Cellini's Vita

The historiographical sketch presented here is not intended to be complete; it should only indicate the starting point of recent studies. The array of interpretations of Cellini's *Vita* can be divided into three main groups: Romantic, social-historic and that of modern literary theory. Rather than being different approaches they are more like the different stages of studying Cellini as a writer, viewed from a historiographical perspective. The synchronic dimension of historiography, as we are getting closer to the present state of Humanities, is unfolding as a sum of the main results in the aforementioned groups –

³ In vein of the introductory essay *The Boundaries of Fictio* of Yulia Ivanova in the previous issue of "Enthymema," it could be said that Cellini's *Vita* presents us the highly interesting case of the "changeable relations between literature and various aspects of ... private life," or a special form of Renaissance *Lebensgestaltung* (Ivanova 1).

with the emphasis on literary theory, while Romantic stereotypes circulate as a common framework (or common metaphors).⁴

The manuscript of *Vita* was not published immediately (the first printed edition is dated 1728), which caused its 'marginalization' resulting in a peripheral position in the discourse of Pre-Modern literature and in the rather arrogant attitude of the next research generations. Thus, the view of the Modern era was committed not to the actual 'place' of the book among contemporary texts but to the 'desired' image,⁵ gradually adapted to the new ideas on Cellini's epoch.

Such romantic historiography set up the basic stereotypes for interpreters of *Vita* that have been reproduced until now. Besides the adventurous plot, there is the colloquial style: the author allegedly does not refine his narrative, accepting gaps and using repetitions. He frequently goes into seemingly unimportant details, breaking the reader's expectations, and even leaves particular episodes without the appropriate endings; their connection in many cases is not of his interest. Evidently, the narration of his own life is of value *per se*, and Cellini does not feel any obligation to motivate its validity by the metanarrative. The *Vita's* readers belonging to the Modern culture suppose this manner to reflect the heroic habitus of the Renaissance genius (*Uomo Universale*) and Cellini's desires to overcome the boundaries of society, emulating contemporaries that attracted more fame than our hero.

Throughout the twentieth century, studies within the framework of social history devoted less attention to Cellini and promoted the view that ⁶ that Cellini followed the logic of the legitimation of his social group, which became the basic 'motive' of *Vita*. According to this logic, artists in their writings reinforced themselves as no longer craftsmen but as creators familiar with *studia humanitatis* and equal to the patrons. This kind of scholarly work displays Cellini not only as an imitator of Michelangelo and other famous Renaissance personalities but as a writer copying models of perception and even "exaltation" of the artistic self – models, which became widespread in the contemporary milieu⁷.

The 'linguistic turn' in literary studies renewed the interest in Cellini. His "violent temper" came to be regarded as "transgression," the sodomy charges became the basis for his gender studies (of 'masculinity' and homosexuality).⁸ Instead of deconstructed romantic narratives, such studies as *Cellini and the culture of cleanliness in Renaissance Italy* (Biow 56ff.), *Cellini's Roma* (Trottein), *Benvenuto Buonarrotti* (Barolsky) etc. can now be observed. A small but extremely interesting group of works inspired by the Warburg Institute's tradition can be ascribed to the latter group of studies, promoting an iconographic analysis which allows us to see the author's oeuvre as a coherent system and simultaneously features it embedded in the symbolic world of the epoch. Erwin Panofsky, Ernst Gombrich, Frances Yates, and Daniel Walker have demonstrated how to analyze effi-

⁴ One of the most representative examples is the widely referred chapter *Benvenuto Buonarrotti* from *Michelangelo's Nose: A Myth and Its Maker* (141–146) where Paul Barolsky examining Cellini in a fashion of literary studies refers to *The Civilization of the Renaissance Italy* of Burckhardt.

⁵ This idea, for instance, was expressed in notes of Benedetto Croce about Cellini. He argues there that Giuseppe Baretta, who initially introduced the figure of Cellini to the scholars, was amused by Cellini's brilliant style, anticipating it as if Cellini was his contemporary.

⁶ Soviet Renaissance studies, for instance, had formed a very resistant social-historic view of Cellini, which is partly reproduced in Russian Humanities to this day (cf. Staf; Tomashevsky).

⁷ See, for instance, Burke 43–88; Gardener; Wackernagel 348–370.

⁸ This approach is presented, for instance, in the works of Margaret Gallucci and Lois Crompton.

ciently the multi-layered symbolism of the Pre-Modern texts, displaying the features of human consciousness framed by this map of the world. The practice of identifying the Hermetic contexts of Pre-Modern visual images and literary texts is closely allied with my approach to Cellini's *Vita*. The results of these studies are extremely important to us, even though the mentioned scholars study Marsilio Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, several famous Renaissance artists but not Cellini. From the available researches I could mention only several works written precisely on him by Gwendolyn Trottein.⁹ Examining the symbolic component of Cellini's art, she comes to the conclusion that under the surface of the *Vita's* adventures is lurking a coherent but not explicit philosophic conception generated by the criticism of Vasari's art system ("Le Problème de l'ornement...").

Immersing Cellini's autobiographical narrative into different cultural and historical contexts (Hermetic, medical, alchemical), I will show the congruity of its hidden (or 'secret') part and the general context of Renaissance lay and scientific knowledge.

My interpretation of the symbolic layer of Cellini's *Vita* is also based on the concept of "exegetical narrative" introduced by the Russian scholars Nina Braginskaya and Irina Protopopova. They consider a certain type of storytelling appeared during the Hellenistic period as a byproduct of exegesis. According to their analysis, first, the possibility of allegorical reading should be indicated in the text, and second, the allegory itself historically existed both in the way of learning and thinking of reality. Such 'modus' of intellectual activity finds its origin in the Neo-Platonic mysteries, facilitating the way of transformation from the individual sensual world into the intelligible one with the aim of merging it with the divine intellect. The text and the intellectual 'microcosm' both have a more literal 'body' and hidden 'soul' which can be revealed only by the special type of reading. (Protopopova 278ff.) In this regard, sacred knowledge can reside even in the obscene descriptions, because the corporeal level is the first step to the divine. This model of thought was widespread not only in Antiquity, but also during the Middle Ages and among the authors of the 16th century (of which Benvenuto Cellini was one).

Nevertheless, Modern studies of Cellini's *Vita*, begun in the literary Romantic tradition, and in spite of the declared author's naivety and literalism, continue to bear fruit in a later period, which we could hardly blame in naivety. The heavily transformed Romantic legacy (to the concepts of "ego-centrism," "care of the self" and "care of the soul" as the techniques of constructing the self-identity) appears to be productive in the study of Cellini's "self-fashioning,"¹⁰ and it helps us to move on to a new research level towards the intellectual history of *Vita*.

This study, however, is trying to show the legitimacy of both readings – the naïve, prevailing through the historiography, and the intellectual historical with elements of iconographical analysis.¹¹

I would like to add some particular statements on studying Cellini's *Vita* as a matter of Renaissance intellectual history. By these means I am going to explain the historio-

⁹ See: Trottein "Le Problème de l'ornement" "Cellini as Iconographer," "Benvenuto Cellini: simbologia e autobiografia," "Idea et disegno.

¹⁰ Stephen Greenblatt, who introduced the concept of self-fashioning in regard to Renaissance culture (1ff), as it is believed, was influenced by Michel Foucault's works (cf. Dzelzainis 213ff).

¹¹ The possibility of a naïve reading of Cellini's *Vita* should always be kept in mind, because "while evaluating the relationship between literature and other practices, we should get rid of the aboriginal naivety with respect to the 'form' and 'material', in order to tackle to another kind of naivety. We intend by the aboriginal naivety the view according to which the literature arises from the necessity to shape preexisting passive material by the active form." (Ivanova 1f.)

graphical possibility of both “naive” and “hermetic” readings in concern to the specificity of Renaissance episteme. In *The Order of Things* (64ff.) Michel Foucault argues that since the Modern period a radically different model of the representation of reality appeared. During the Renaissance ideas were built (epistemically and ontologically) in the real world and referred one to another as real things on the basis of some similarity. Later the structure of knowing a subject and knowledge become identical. Prior to that, the ‘subject’ and his knowledge had been perceived only as part of the overall plan for the world, and were interpreted only with regard to the whole. In the Classical period however, ‘knowledge’ was placed in a speculative reality, reflecting and doubling the world, hence being deprived of physicality and tangibility. This way since Romantic epoch the space of language (hence of meaning) turned up to be on the other side of bodily experience of the self.

Given that, I will demonstrate the text of Cellini's *Vita* as not merely the fruit of the author's idealistic speculation but as a part of the Renaissance physical world and the author's reality *sui generis*. I argue for the necessity of reading *Vita* in a movement from a naïve and fleshly plot towards the complex symbolism of magic rituals, alchemy and medical knowledge, lying beneath the surface.

3. From Corporeal Disease to the Art – as a Practice of the Self

Random at first glance, the fragments of *Vita* concerning the author's bodily health could be gathered through his language: at the core is the notion of *pigliare piacere* (to get pleasure in a fashion of medicine) textually embedded in the conceptual greed of humoral theory.¹² This regime of hygiene works also on the level of Cellini's soul: by means of autobiographical writing he practices a specific “care of the self.”¹³ One of the leading motives for Cellini to write his *Vita* was “getting pleasure” (*pigliare piacere*) from recollecting its episodes as he himself says in the introduction: the way his heart leapt up with joy and work was going much better and faster. This kind of pleasure is not a simple one, and we will see later how he tries to magically cure with it different maladies. First of all, while dictating, he gives the pleasure to an ill boy, who writes down artist's *Vita* (*Proemio*).¹⁴

I argue that Cellini narrating the *Vita* sublimates his experience from the profane to a sacred level, elevating his soul from the physical struggles to aesthetic contemplation of the divine. This recurrent movement could be called either a “practice of the self” or a “spiritual exercise.” The former concept, introduced by Michel Foucault, emphasizes the process of constructing the self-identity, while Pierre Hadot introducing the latter notion, puts the emphasis on attaining the universal status of the self.¹⁵ One way or another

¹² I should mark here the involvement of this concept in the contexts of the diseases and virulent influence of the celestial in Machiavelli's *Mandrake* and even much earlier, in Boccaccio's *Decameron*.

¹³ This concept is partially borrowed from later works of Foucault (cf. *History of Sexuality* 54–58): its usage is a kind of metaphorical, emphasizing Cellini's own concepts.

¹⁴ “Io lo [un ammalatuccio figliuolo di Michele di Goro dalla Pieve a Groppine] cominciai a fare scrivere e in mentre che io lavoravo, gli dittavo la Vita mia; e perché ne *pigliavo qualche piacere*, lavoravo molto più assiduo e facevo assai più opera (*Proemio*).” Italics mine.

¹⁵ Pierre Hadot argues that Foucault misunderstands the true nature of the “care of the self”: while he puts in its center “the pleasure one takes in oneself,” it has “the universal sense of thinking and acting in unison with universal reason.” (207)

er (or practicing them in conjunction) Cellini leaves the sphere of the physical world and arrives in the sphere of aesthetics, harmonizing his body and soul – as the objects constituting the artistic identity.

In his tractates on art he says: “All works of nature created by God in heaven and on earth are works of sculpture.”¹⁶ Many episodes of *Vita*, as narrated by Cellini, enable us to see the dominant cultural principle of analogy between the macrocosm and microcosm: the *Vita*'s protagonist develops a coherent practice to transform different ordinary episodes into masterpieces (including sculpture), and through the narrative he wills to infuse life into these creatures. The author perceives storytelling as a ritual, taking place in the reality of his life/*Vita*. This ‘ritual’ practice (or “spiritual exercise,” or “technology of the self”) usually begins with physicalist descriptions in which our hero struggles with the reality (be it a plague or imprisonment in a castle). In the next stage Cellini performs special spiritual activities to overcome the threat (be it a participation in the Neo-Platonic mystery or invocation of the divine). At the final stage the practical result of this invocation materializes in front of the reader in some aesthetic form. In our cases these forms are the spiritual vision that later takes the shape of a carved marble crucifix and the animated monument of antiquity – *Antinous as Vertumnus*.

It is worth mentioning here that the transition from the first to the second and third stages is accompanied by an abundance of alchemical symbols corresponding to the ‘black’, ‘white’ and ‘gold’ stages of *magnum opus*. The process is very similar to the Neo-Platonic ascent to union with ‘the One’ described, for example, in Marsilio Ficino’s *Platonic theology* (Celenza).

We can then proceed directly to the reading of these two passages. The first (I.) extended in *Vita* from chapter XXVII to XXXI of the first book tells us a story of Cellini being in Rome during a violent plague, trying to prevent contamination but later becoming ill after intercourse with the young serving girl of a prostitute (*meretrice*). Though managing to recover, he continues the narration, displaying the banquet or even *symposium* of the best artists in Rome who survived precisely because they understand better the nature of life and art and therefore know how to harmonize their life, thus saving their health during the plague. The second passage (II.) consists of chapters CVII – CXXXVIII of the first book, telling us about the author’s incarceration in the Castel Sant’Angelo. First allowed to walk freely within the territory of the prison, he was then thrown into the dungeon after an unsuccessful escape attempt and the worsening of the castellan’s¹⁷ mental health. There Cellini endures highly negative bodily experiences such as severe physical and spiritual decay, however the care of his own soul (reading the Bible, composing sonnets, singing spiritual songs) leads him first to a miraculous recovery and then – to a vision of Christ and Madonna. Let us begin in the declared order.

I. Benvenuto Cellini of 23 years (ca. 1523) resides in Rome during “the extraordinary violent plague” and says that his *animo* prompts him to “receive certain pleasures” (...*pigliare certi piaceri, come mi dittava l’animo...*), (I.XXVII) preventing the contamination. These “pleasures” were granted by the following things: during the feast-days to avoid commerce with the people, he went to the ancient ruins where he was copying ancient art in wax or with a pencil, shooting pigeons, buying “antique medals, [and the jewelry

¹⁶ From *Discorso di Messer Benvenuto Cellini sopra la differenza nata tra gli Scultori e Pittori, circa il luogo destro stato dato alla Pittura nelle Essequie del Gran Michelagnolo Buonarroti*. (Cellini Opera 1113)

¹⁷ The castellan was the captain of the Castel Sant’Angelo.

and gemstones] ... of such good colors,” in which art corresponded to nature. Being melancholic by nature, when he was getting these pleasures his heart leapt up, and he found himself working “better when he spent the whole time in study and manual labour” (Ibid.).

Why being melancholic by nature was Benvenuto Cellini “getting pleasures” and why was he trying to make his heart leap up and herewith prevent the plague? Why the jewels of such good color, the ancient medals and pigeon hunting, – why were all these things like medicine for Benvenuto? Finally, why was it exactly the *animo* that prompted him and what was the way in which all these things had pleased his heart?

The plague was commonplace in Renaissance culture, and one of the most shared ‘popular-science’ tractates about it was *Il Consilio contro la Pestilentia*, written by Marsilio Ficino. This text was most likely well-known to Benvenuto Cellini (regardless it could elucidate best the horizon and the logic of Cellini’s thought). Ficino’s later fundamental work *De Vita* (*Three books of Life* in which the ideas of *Consilio* were expanded and his whole cosmological Neo-platonic philosophy was proposed) became just as popular as *Consilio*. I am going to show that these writings were congruent to Cellini’s lifeworld, but one amendment should be made. He wrote the *Vita* in vernacular Italian, in which Ficino’s well-developed Latin concept of pleasures (cf. *Three Books of Life* 208–15) had undergone the simplification that corresponded to the author’s milieu.

Here a brief outline of Marsilio Ficino’s cosmology should be given to understand properly the logic of Cellini’s world. According to *De Vita*, the human being mirrors the structure of the Universe that consists of the World-Body (*corpus mundanum*) and the World-Soul (*anima mundi*), hence the human being itself consists of the body (*corpus*) and the soul (*anima/animus*). Above the Universe there is the World-Intellect, which is like the Sun or the Divine light and it consists of Ideas. “In the soul of the world are “seminal reasons” corresponding to ideas; to these seminal reasons in the soul there correspond the species in matter, or in the body of the world, which are formed by them.” (Yates 64)

World-Spiritus folds the space in-between and it is “a kind of very fine air and also very fine heat.” (Ibid.) A human’s spiritus ‘drinks’ it, hence, a human’s anima through a human’s spiritus partakes the species in matter, which consist of “seminal reasons” and even contain the reflections of Divine Ideas. The humours of the human body are linked to and proportioned accordingly to partaking in the stars’ influence. Humours produce spiritus in the heart and the anima controls the process from the brain, the inverted influence of spiritus on humours is also possible. Ficino suggests: “Spiritus ... after being generated by the heat of the heart out of the more subtle blood... flies to the brain; and there the soul uses it continually for the exercise of the interior as well as the exterior senses.” (*Three Books of Life* 110)

The system of world correspondences and reflections is completed on the anthropological level, in Ficino’s view on how man has to partake in World-Spiritus. Species in matter contain the proportions of the Divine mind, (Gombrich 177) and by bringing some closer and moving others away, a human being can tune his body and soul in accordance with the highest proportions, possibly even with ‘the music of the spheres’. Certain species in matter, as Gombrich said, are “linked through the network of correspondences and sympathies with the supra-celestial essence which it embodies, it is only consistent to expect it to partake not only of the “meaning” and “effect” of what it represents but to become interchangeable with it.” (176) Precisely because amulets and talismans “are made under the influence of a harmony, similar to the celestial harmony, this

excites their virtue,” (Yates 73) Ficino's *De Vita* includes the third book *On Obtaining Life from the Heavens* (*De vita coelitus compranda*). Talismans “in the remote past, did actually have within the reflection of an Idea,” as it was believed. (Yates 66)

The plague in this framework appears and transmits to other people like a demonic influence, which you can partake in through the *spiritus* of intemperate people and of certain world species. All of them convey to us the virulent features of planets and stars, the most hazardous being Saturn.

Benvenuto Cellini, having a melancholic nature, is the person most exposed to the plague, because the divine gift of melancholy is governed by Saturn. An ambiguous planet, the star of geniuses, its influence could bring you closer to the contemplation of the Heavens but simultaneously could make your humours and spiritus intemperate, hence unmanageable – by the glut or excess of hot black bile, produced under the influence of corresponding tokens. “...Vice versa, intellectual work reacts on men and places them under the dominion of Saturn,” according to Ficino (Klebansky 259ff.). That is why Benvenuto Cellini chose “getting pleasures”: it was not only the avoidance of commerce with those possessed by demons but also the way to partake with certain species, which are not governed by Saturn and are capable of harmonizing its influence.

The small details, which sometimes may seem to overwhelm Cellini's narrative and perhaps display his writing's inexperience, in fact are charged with an important symbolic meaning, written with the carefully developed concept of “care of the self” as “getting pleasures” – to prevent or even heal the different diseases.

In the very nature of plague is the poisonous heat and moisture, and to minimize the risks of contamination the human being should reduce the amount of things of alike nature and surround himself by the opposite ones. Not without cause Benvenuto tells about Jupiter's head and the emerald of a beautiful color in the form of a dolphin's head, acquired from peasants: tokens of Jupiter embodying the clarity of mind and wisdom and help to obtain, as well the tempering health (cf. *Three Books of Life* 187, 195). The magnificent topaz with the head of Minerva cues to Cellini *How Radical Heat and Moisture Must be Proportioned to One Another by a Plan of Minerva's*, as Ficino said in *De Vita* (169ff.). Strolling or just walking, Cellini resides under the Sun, which interchanges with the Divine mind in Ficino's cosmology. By hunting with the best gun one is able to invent, the narrator embodies the fancy-free search for truth in likeness with Ficino's ideas,¹⁸ while the wounded pigeons symbolize the protagonist's fight with the tokens of Venus.

However, after the fancy-free intercourse with a “little serving girl of a prostitute” Cellini has found himself sick, and he thinks it is the plague. He feels stifled at the heart; several boils appear on his left arm together with a carbuncle. The doctor feels his pulse and foresees something terribly wrong. He asks if Cellini had intercourse on the eve. This strange interest is explained by the cause that the intercourse seemed to be monstrous both to the brain and to the heart “and no evil can be worse for one's intelli-

¹⁸ “...An expert craftsman takes most diligent care of his instruments – a painter his pencils, a copper-smith his hammers and anvils, a soldier his horses and arms, a hunter his dogs and birds, a lute-player his lute, and the same goes for anyone and the tools of his trade.” (*Three Books of Life* 111) “Aptly have I called men who philosophize “hunters,” because they always labor, panting to encircle the truth. So are they aptly called dogs? “Most aptly,” says Socrates in the Republic.” (403)

gence,”¹⁹ again in accordance with *De Vita*. All the symptoms are witnessing that Saturn's influence has induced the uncontrolled virulent heat in Cellini's heart²⁰. The most notable point here is the following pathogenesis: disease starts from a headache and proceeds to the stifling of the heart – precisely from his soul to humours.

“The admirable remedies,” suspiciously lacking in description, caused “a great improvement.” With an unhealed wound Cellini went to painter Rossio to recover after the illness, and he “spent there about a month enjoying good wines and excellent food. Every day [he] used to ride out alone along the sea-shore... and filled [his] pockets with all sorts of pebbles, snail shells, and sea shells of great rarity and beauty.” (I.XXIX) As we can see, Cellini “gets pleasures” as a medicine, practicing “care of the self” again with the emphasis on good wines and food that is also mentioned in *De Vita* (133ff.) with concern to the tempering of black bile²¹. The only difference is that instead of artificial talismans he uses the natural tokens of the celestial. Then he “went back sound and with good cheer to Rome.” (I.XXIX)

In this optics the plague has killed all the people being possessed by the virulent influence of the stars, hence the surviving painters, sculptors and goldsmiths are literally the best people in Rome: “getting pleasures,” they were able to harmonize their spiritus with the spiritus of the world and to partake in the Divine mind through the species in matter. In their community the best of men decide to organize a dinner party, which, considering all the above, should be a Neo-Platonic mystery aimed at contemplating Divine Ideas.

Symposiarch sets the task before them to bring a “crow” (*la sua cornacchia*) – as Cellini said, it is the nickname for fallen women. The tricky goldsmith instead of this “crow” takes “in his light” (*sotto il mio lume*) a beautiful boy dressed as a woman: “the boy's head was far more beautiful than those of the antique Antinous.” (Hereinafter I.XXX) At the appointed time all the guests come, and Cellini's companion turns out to be a “the charming creature,” and while singing and reciting, “its infinite charms [are] heightened beyond the powers of language”: all the artists set their eyes on it. Sitting among the other dull “crows,” the beautiful boy starts to turn restlessly upon the chair, saying that during the last month ‘she’ feels a growth in the body (pregnancy in other words) and discomfort in the stomach bottom.²² Sympathizing, women palm this part of the body but withdraw their hands as they feel something “male.” Supposedly, here is a play on words: in Italian the said thing is named as *mastio*, which means both a “tower” (as well as a tool to perforate the wood in Cellini's tractates) and the adjective “male.” In other words, the

¹⁹ “The first monster is sexual intercourse, especially if it proceeds even a little beyond one's strength; for indeed it suddenly drains the spirits, especially the more subtle ones, it weakens the brain, and it ruins the stomach and the heart no evil can be worse for one's intelligence.” (123)

²⁰ “Moreover, excessive dryness of the body increases black bile, whether it be the result of long wakefulness or much agitation of the mind, or worry, or frequent sexual intercourse and the use of things which are very hot and dry, or the result of any immoderate flux and purgation, or strenuous exercise, or fasting, or thirst, or heat, or a too dry wind, or cold.” (133)

²¹ Mentioning such kind of a diet is very common to this genre. Since 14th century the most part of popular tractates on plague consists of a big passages about good food and wine. Following this Ficino relies on the tradition rather than invents his own medical program (Ficino *Consilio*). More information on the genre of *Consilio* you could find, for instance, in Agrimi; Katinis “A Humanist Confronts the Plague...”; Russel.

²² Si pensava d'esser grossa di qualche mese, e che si sentiva dar noia alla donna del corpo. (I.XXX)

boy has an erection. For this great joke Symposiarch “lifted Cellini aloft... crying “Long live, Our Lord!” (*Viva il Signore!*)”

Most likely, in this passage the Neo-Platonic mystery has been acted out in the manner of Plato's Symposium, and the fallen woman, Cellini's “charming creature,” came “in its master's light” and had revealed the real nature of love and virtue. The meaning and its mechanism subjoin us through the concrete species in matter to the divine idea of beauty. Several complementary interpretations are possible. First, in Ficino's *De Vita* it is said that “for curing diseases [the ancients] fashioned an image of the Sun in gold... : a king on a throne in a yellow garment and a raven and the form of the Sun.”²³ It can explain why each of the artists has to bring a “crow” and why Cellini brings it “in his light.” After the joke he has obtained the name *Il Signore* which means in Ficino's perspective the Divinity or the Sun.

This pattern could have another symbolic side. The image in a Neo-Platonic framework exists in a special way – as a substitute of the Divine reality, the real meaning of which you should investigate. Ernst Gombrich said with the reference to Ficino: “The names of the Gods ... were not thought of as conventional counters. They belong to them “by nature,” and those who first used them still knew their “true” meaning. Correctly analysed they too must reveal something of the essence of the divinity they signify... Thus the artistic genius catches a glimpse of the Platonic Idea.” (Gombrich 170f.) Even before the dinner-party Cellini is told that the head of his “creature” “was far more beautiful than those of the antique Antinous,” the Antique god. After that the young boy has been appearing in the eyes of the event participants as, firstly, a “crow,” then as a “peacock,” and then an “angel.” Sitting in front of the blooming background, he becomes “Pomona,” who together with Vertumnus symbolizes fruitful abundance. A festival in their honor was celebrated on 13 August and there is also a grove sacred to Pomona near Rome, in Ostia, and maybe the depicted event had occurred right there and then. (*Art and Love* 194)

Here, through the images of crow, peacock, angel and Pomona we can trace the ascension to the very idea of beauty: Cellini had inflicted it before the party, when he compared the boy with Antinous, and as a result Cellini joined the Divine Mind through seeing the essence of the image. But what does the final transformation of the fallen woman into the beautiful man mean? Cellini alludes here to Ovid's story of Vertumnus, who, disguised as an old woman, came to Pomona and after displaying his real image made her fall in love with him. (*Metamorphoses* 14) Herewith the author simultaneously demonstrates the meaning of the myth and the meaning of the current events: Eros has an ambiguous, deceiving nature, as we know from Plato.²⁴

In addition, we could think of the statue depicting Antinous with the body of Vertumnus, which was found in Ostia, near Pomona's grove,²⁵ and I suppose that this very thing had been the source of Cellini's inspiration. From there the possibility of another

²³ “For curing diseases they fashioned an image of the Sun in gold, in his hour, when the first face of Leo was ascending with him: a king on a throne in a yellow garment and a raven and the form of the Sun.” (*Three Books of Life* 337)

²⁴ In this respect I should notice the hermaphroditic nature of Cellini's “creature,” which could signify the existence of the other cross-cutting Renaissance symbolic contexts of the story (in particular, that of Ficino's translation of *Symposium*).

²⁵ Ostia and the Hadrian's Villa (Tivoli) were places of cult, organized in the early 2nd cent. in Antinous' honor by Emperor Hadrian, his lover. At places several statues and depictions of this kind had been founded. See: Varner 56; Harmon 1960–1965; Waagen 407.

interpretation appears. The 'secret' part of our story could be acted out around this statue, a sign of which Cellini reveals a little bit later (I.XXXI) as without any concern he moves on to the next passage. He tells us about *grotesques*, employed by him from time to time in art and deconstructs their etymological myth of the *Cave*.²⁶

Grotesques, rediscovered by his contemporaries, were like the iconographic programs to mannerists, who tried to establish harmony and order among the depictions of bizarre creatures rendering the metamorphosis of reality (Ovid's *Metamorphoses* were often taken as a source of inspiration). No matter how seemingly strange, though the most famous 'grotesques' displaying metamorphosis related to such images as "raven," "peacock," "angel" and deities, are the famous illustrations to several well-known alchemical tractates. For instance, those of Basil Valentine and Johann Daniel Mylius were fashioned with such engravings in the early 17th cent. by Matthäus Merian der Ältere (the animalistic images are given concentrically, from left to right and from bottom to top).²⁷ Marsilio Ficino, who was not once mentioned above, translated not only Plato but also the *Corpus Hermeticum*, to which this kind of tractates are necessarily referring. Thus, the Neo-Platonic tradition and the traditions of ancient magic and alchemy could be bound together in a solid space, unified in the oeuvre of the Renaissance thinker, resulting in such symbolic vision.

The mentioned images, typical to the Hermetic tradition, depict the 'grotesque' with the raven, dove, peacock, dragon, angels and deities. Their transformation illustrates both the initial cleansing of the material that turns in the end to gold, as well as the way by which the human soul ascends to 'the One', since the birds with their characteristic color symbolize the different volatile substances of *magnum opus* (Berk 271; Feinstein 678ff.) (as well as our soul in this epoch, which seems to be a kind of volatile substance (McLean)).

The 'black', or the initial stage of *magnum opus*, for alchemists was associated with the image of the raven (or black crow) presented by Cellini at the very beginning of the symposium. Transmutation into a peacock signifies a successfully completed higher, 'white' stage (Haefner 89ff.). At the final 'gold' stage, when refined matter transmutes into gold, the presence of the Divine is evident. That is why Cellini describes his "crow" as an "angel" and "Pomona/Vertumnus" at the end, explaining the "metamorphosis" that occurs with the Cellini's creature (*creatura*). At the 'gold' stage the 'author' himself turns out to be the 'Lord' accompanied by the 'Sun'.

Keeping in mind that the statue of *Antinous as Vertumnus* stands at the very center of the story and assuming here the presence of the Hermetic context, we can understand this ongoing Neo-Platonic mystery as an ancient ritual of animation of statues, knowledge of which left a mark not only in the *De Vita* of Ficino but in the texts of Asclepius ('father' of ancient Greek medicine) and of Plotinus himself (*Three Books of Life* 348–353). The animation of the statue occurs with singing, manipulating with herbs and flowers, and alluding to certain 'true names' – to bring down the deity into the statue. That is why Cellini had mentioned that the poems were composed, the songs were sung

²⁶ This reference to the myth of the Cave somehow could be linked with the previous fragment that depicts Symposium in a manner of Plato, being another Cellini's hint to the 'secret' layer of his narrative.

²⁷ For instance, Illustrations of Alchemical Tree, Philosopher's stone and the Serpent of Alchemy from *Philosophia Reformata*, illustrated by J. D. Mylius (1622); Tabula Smaragdina from *Opus Medico-Chymicum* (1618).

in honor of his boy-crow, and the artists placed said 'creature' against the blossoming background. Moreover, as we have seen, the narrator recollected the 'true names' corresponding to the iconography of Hermetic 'grotesques'.

Thus, the analyzed fragment played in a single key becomes like a practice of "care of the self," or of "getting pleasures" during the plague. These pleasures were like a medicine able to conjoin the celestial and terrestrial worlds as well as the profane and sacred, individual soul and 'the One', matter and art. The self of Benvenuto Cellini is a 'medium' here; being both an author and an artist, he captures with the autobiographical narrative certain medical rituals and the practices of individual talismanic magic turned later into the animation of the statue, the highest form of a collective one.

II. From the above analysis it is evident that Cellini objectively has a coherent system of medical views, in which the concepts of humoral medicine are in certain relations; not only does he understand the physiology of the human body built in the Renaissance episteme but also willingly influences it to produce various medical effects. Cellini's key concept of "getting pleasures" (*pigliare piacere*) stands for the harmonization of complex relations between microcosm and macrocosm in any adverse context.

I have demonstrated how the use of pleasure in a situation of plague acquires the connotations of the Hermetic magical and alchemical discourses: now let us look at the fragment in which Cellini is faced with the experience of physical illnesses (of himself and of the castellan) as he narrates the story of incarceration in the Castel Sant'Angelo. To overcome the diseases, he renders again the particular spiritual exercises very similar to those of the first fragment (**I**). Cellini's care of the self starts again from the physiological suffering then leads through the praying rituals to the mystical experience, becoming later the sculptor's masterpiece.

As the author says, the captain of the Castel Sant'Angelo (the castellan) has a kind of disease:

...Castellano aveva ogni anno certe infermità che lo traevano del cervello a fatto; ...e questi *umori* sua erano ogni anno diversi... Li medici sua, che se ne erano avveduti, così li sua servitori vecchi, li *davano tutti i piaceri* che immaginar potevano: e perché e' pareva loro che *pigliassi gran piacere* di sentirmi ragionare, a ogni poco e' venivano per me e menavanmi da lui (I.CVII).

Il Castellano, con tutto che i medici non avessino punto di speranza della sua salute, ancora era restato in lui *spirito saldo* e si era partito quelli *umori* della pazzia, che gli sollevano dar noia ogni anno: e datosi in tutto e per tutto all'*anima*, la coscienza lo rimordeva... (I.CXXIII). (Italics mine.)

Here Cellini's discourse literally turns into the pleasure or *piacere* capable of curing the castellan from his malady. This is also apparent to medics treating the disordered humours (*umori*) of the castellan by means of Cellini's speech. Besides the disordered humours, castellan's *spiritus* and soul (*anima*) are present here, and as long as it harmonizes with the *spiritus*, castellan is sane.

The third book of Ficino's *De Vita* tells us that just as the celestial spiritus descends to the statues and amulets (that Cellini knew by heart), it can penetrate a man through overheated bodily humors, spiritus or emotions. This becomes possible since the higher spiritus captures our imagination, replacing vital spiritus in the human body. An individual who knows this type of magic, can fashion the images in the right way, replacing

the corrupted images of another individual with them (*Three Books of Life* 352–355), and hence is capable of treating one.

Through the prism of Ficino's views on this type of magic we can look closer at Cellini's description of a conversation with the sick castellan that carries a beneficial effect on his health and occurs (like psychoanalytic sessions) "at times for four or five stricken hours." This year castellan was afflicted by the bat's humour and "used to scream like bats in a high thin tone" and "he would flap his hands and body as though he were about to fly." Cellini, chatting with him, feels himself "dry" but "makes a good meal." Here we should recall the idea that dryness causes a disproportion of bodily humors, and therefore Ficino for instance, gives us advice to avoid an excess of black bile through good meals and wine (as we remember, Cellini, being melancholic, ate well during the time of plague).

Castellan asked Cellini if he ever had a "fantasy of flight" (*fantasia di volare*). To which he replied that "the God of nature had gifted [him] with a body" that with the help of his "genius" and with the imitation of nature by art (*imitare con l'arte*) could possibly fly using "a pair of wings out of waxed linen." However Cellini was named "a devil genius," and restricted from demonstrating this flight to prevent him escaping.²⁸

The two key concepts (*imitation* and *fantasia*) characteristic to the Renaissance view of how the human body interacts with reality are presented in the passage. These faculties of man, according to Ficino, carry out 'contact' with the intelligible world that is the World-Soul and World-Intellect. To understand better, we can consider Ficino's example with the music men listen to. According to him, "song and sound arise from the cogitation of the mind, the impetus of the phantasy, and the feeling of the heart, and, together with the air they have broken up and tempered, strike the aerial spirit of the hearer, which is the junction of the soul and body, they easily move the phantasy, affect the heart and penetrate into the deep recesses of the mind." It becomes possible because of the similarity between the spiritus and the 'matter' of music, affecting our feelings more intensively than other sensations.²⁹

As a result, to replace the bat's humour possessing castellan, Cellini had to fashion his image (or *fantasia*) of the true flight, which would not consist of the transformation into the bat but only imitate the nature by rational means of art. Referring to Ficino, Daniel Walker comments capaciously on this kind of intersubjective imaginative magic: "The imaginations of the operator and of the patient are so violently affected by the words or images that their spirits are suddenly and greatly altered. This alteration can produce directly a subjective effect in the patient's body, and it can indirectly produce transitive effects by means of the flow of altered spirits evaporating from the operator, which influence the patient's spirit or form visions in the air." (Walker 108)

Indeed, the most important thing here is the belief of the 'patient' in the fantasia of the 'doctor', in which microcosm is attuned correctly to the macrocosm. The require-

²⁸ "Al quale io dissi, che se lui mi voleva dar libertà da poi, che mi bastava la vista di volare insino in Prati, faccendomi un paio d'alie di tela di rensa incerate. Allora e' disse: – E anche a me ne basterebbe la vista; ma perché il Papa m'ha comandato che io tenga cura di te come degli occhi suoi; io cognosco che tu sei un diavolo ingegnoso che ti fuggiresti." (I.CVII)

²⁹ "Nor is this surprising; for, since song and sound arise from the cogitation of the mind, the impetus of the phantasy, and the feeling of the heart, and, together with the air they have broken up and tempered, strike the aerial spirit of the hearer, which is the junction of the soul and body, they easily move the phantasy, affect the heart and penetrate into the deep recesses of the mind." (Ficino qtd. in Walker 6)

ment of belief forces castellan either to try by his own or to observe the adequacy of Cellini's fantasia with concern to nature. If it could be tested, he would have received the healthy spiritus, while the humour of bat would have passed away. At that moment it was not possible yet, but this happened later at the very end of the passage, when castellan had "devoted himself entirely to the care of his soul" (*datosi in tutto e per tutto all'anima*) (I.CXXIII).

Cellini started suffering physically after the failed attempt to escape (a detailed description of which is given in chapters I.CIX – I.CXVII). An unlucky twist of a plot was caused by the hero's severe injury: his broken leg entailed his immediate seizure, and he was placed under surveillance. Cellini pictures here the regular bodily treatment: the surgeon "set the bone with dexterity, then bound the limb up, and bled" him, and "the blood ... spurting with such force into his face." (I.CX). This very 'materially-minded' picture is mirrored by the complex authorial meta-interpretation: supposedly, the situation resulted from the "evil conjunction of stars" sent by God, and "those celestial influences must be wreaking their malignity upon" him (I.CXV). He gradually had become accustomed to God's will, and his "vigorous temperament had become adapted to that purgatory" (I.CXVII). Here we can see, that Cellini follows Ficino's advice: not to rely blindly on influence of the stars but instead – on love and faith towards the Heavens, while still living on Earth.³⁰

He uses intensively a rare time, while daylight flows into his prison, to read the Bible, write sonnets or sing psalms. As Cellini concluded, his intellectual spiritus wanted death, however the body was showing him some hope.³¹

Being in the absence of natural and artificial talismans during the difficult time, Cellini prays to "God the Father... and a Christ arising victorious..., sketched upon the wall with a little piece of charcoal." (I.CXX) When the guards come to him, he is standing with his back to them, praying and says: "[To Him] I have turned my soul, my contemplation, and all my vital spirits; to you I have turned precisely what belongs to you." (Ibid.)³² This bodily joke or innuendo like we have seen earlier (when the 'crow' with growth in the bottom of the body became a beautiful boy with an erection (I.CXX)) points out again the shift from the profane to the sacred narrative level, forcing us to look at the Divine with Cellini instead of being at the corporeal level with the guards.

By the virtue of wonderful preys and intellectual practices Cellini was visited in his dreams by the angels who treated his ill body, thus the guards point out that he became strong as a "poison-breathing dragon." When the deadly punishment becomes so close,

³⁰ "But if, as Hippocrates and Galen teach, the love and faith of the sick person towards the doctor, a lower and external agent, are very conducive to health (or rather, as Avicenna says, this faith does more than medicine), how much good for achieving help from heaven should we expect from our passion and faith in a celestial influence already implanted within us, working within and penetrating our vitals? Now the same love and faith toward a celestial gift are often the cause of celestial aid, and love and faith in their turn perhaps sometimes get their start from this fact — that the kindness of the heavens is already befriending us for this very gift." (*Three Books of Life* 351f.).

³¹ "...E riprendevo gli spiriti mia dello intelletto, isdegnati di non voler più istare in vita; i quali rispondevano a il corpo mio, iscusandosi della loro disgrazia: e il corpo dava loro isperanza di bene." (I.CXIX).

³² "– A questo Idio che mi porta a quello de' cieli ho volto l'anima mia e le mie contemplazione e tutti i mia spiriti vitali; e a voi ha volto appunto quello che vi si appartiene, perché quello che è di buono in me voi non sete degni di guardarlo, né potete toccarlo: sí che fate, a quello che è vostro, tutto quello che voi potete." (I.CXX)

he sings loudly *De profundis clamavit, Miserere, In te Domine speravi* and *Qui habitat in aiutorium* (I.CXX). As a result, the castellan has decided to give him a mercy and to not execute him.

On the next morning (3 October, 1539, as Cellini points out) a marvelous vision occurred to him: lifted up with the wind and levitated to some room, he finds himself standing in a white robe. Ascending the stairs, he sees the first rays of the morning Sun, then the golden sphere itself, which seems to him a jar filled “with the purest molten gold.” From this sphere “suddenly a Christ upon the cross formed itself out of the same substance,” who then was transformed “into the shape of a most beautiful Madonna” sitting aloft between two angels. After a few next chapters Cellini’s incarceration is over. (I.CXXII)

To Cellini’s mind, this marvelous event has testified his innocence; hence he praised it in the sonnet read not with big surprise by the Pope and the castellan, who unfairly kept him in custody. After a while he immortalizes it in a marble crucifix (in 1562, therefore towards the end of *Vita’s* script), which is situated now in the Monastery of San Lorenzo (El Escorial), near Madrid.

To summarize, the fragment begins with the descriptions of specific types of imaginative magic. The first of them displays the treatment of the castellan by means of an image (*fantasia*) of flight; the second one consists of the contemplation of the divine images on the walls of a prison cell. The latter episode leads the author to the vision of the Sun, which in the Neo-Platonic tradition symbolizes ‘the One’. If we look again at this sequence of events, just as we did with the passage (I.), we discover the very similar Hermetic context, woven from alchemical images, which accompany the stages of *magnum opus*.

At the moment when Cellini had been taken again under surveillance after his attempt to escape, a “dog, black as mulberry,” which “followed him admirably when he went out shooting,” attacked the guards from under the bed. This dog is so aggressive that everyone thinks it “must be mad” (I.CXV). The image of a black mad dog is pictured as a sign of the ‘black’ stage (*nigredo*) of the alchemical *magnum opus*.³³ Reading further, we meet Cellini’s self-description as “a poison-breathing dragon”: in prison his “nails had grown so long that he could not touch his body without wounding it,” and “the dead teeth were pushed out by the living ones.” The image of a dragon is again a sign of a ‘black’ stage, however with the sense of a movement to the ‘white’ one (*albedo*), which is why Cellini refers to his cell as a “purgatory” (I.CXIX). The Divine vision, as we can remember, starts with the fact that Cellini wears a white robe, which means that his soul has been purified as a result of the ‘white’ stage. However, the most evident and vivid symbolism is presented in the imagery accompanying the ‘golden’ stage (*rubedo*) of the author’s *magnum opus* – the Sun as a jar with gold from which Christ and Madonna appear. The angels are standing at their sides, and their images are not only related to the appearance of a Deity; the presence of angels symbolizes the highest steps of ascension to ‘the One’ as in the imagery of the first passage (I.).

³³ Surprisingly, Carl Jung was one of the first scholars who had noticed the alchemical context of Cellini’s *Vita* in his psychoanalytic studies of alchemical imagery. He mentions the author’s “double vision of salamander,” that is the sign of the ‘gold’ stage of *magnum opus*. The images of dog and dragon (as well as of crow and peacock) are also analyzed in his works with regards to alchemy (Jung 34, 146ff., 291, 350ff. etc.).

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to stress some similarities of displayed practices of the self, which have been found in the two passages (I. and II.) by means of the analysis. First, these practices are inscribed in a more general context of the author's 'care of the self', identified by him as a concept of "getting pleasures" (*pigliare piacere*) in a fashion of medicine. Second, they have the same structural pattern, consisting of the resembling elements and transitions. Third, they are accompanied with imagery, characteristic to the stages of *magnum opus*.

In the beginning of the passages the author's focus lies on some corrupted physiological processes, and Cellini seeks to correct them by the involvement of the Neo-Platonic magic that corresponds to the general frame of "getting pleasures": it happens both in the case of plague and in the case of treatment of the castellan. Further development elevates the course of events from the corporeal to the spiritual level, therefore Cellini uses the magic of a higher order: whether it be the collective ritual of animating statues or his prayers in the cell, accompanied with "contemplations" or singings. Then, at the highest stage, as Cellini reaches the point of greatest tension, by means of obscene jokes he switches the narration to the level of deities – whether it be these of an Orphic nature at the feast or Christian in prison. At the end a quite materialized form of story appears to the reader's eye as an embodiment of Cellini's memoirs sculptured in art. *Antinous as Ver-tumnus*, which most likely had been seen by the author in Ostia, not far from Rome, and a *Crucifix*, carved by the inspiration of his dream, – they both could be interpreted as if they had simultaneously physical and literary dimensions, perfectly suiting the *Vita* and the reality.

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