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De Rentiis, Dina

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TRUTH IS JUST AN OPTION: DU BELLAY'S
PHILOSOPHICAL CRITIQUE OF IMITATION IN
CONTRE LES PÉTRARQUISTES

Dina De Rentiis

Among the 'friends and foes of the poet laureate' whom we encounter in the early modern ages, Joachim Du Bellay is one of the best known and most important.¹ As a lyrical author, Du Bellay was one of the prominent imitators of the *Canzoniere* who promoted and established Petrarchism in his country. In his *Deffence et illustration de la langue françoise*, the key poetical manifesto of Renaissance French literature, he contributed to establish Petrarch as a literary model comparable to Horace, Ovid, Tibullus and the other exemplary ancient authors.

In his love lyrics, Du Bellay appears as a very typical representative of French petrarchist *aemulatio*. For example, in the introductory sonnet of his collection *L'Olive*, he proudly announces that he does not wish to become a *poeta laureatus*:

Je ne quiers pas la fameuse couronne,
Saint ornement du Dieu au chef doré,
Ou que du Dieu aux Indes adoré
Le gay chapeau la teste m'environne.
Encores moins veulx-je que l'on me donne
Le mol rameau en Cypre décoré:
Celuy qui est d'Athenes honoré,
Seul je le veulx, et le Ciel me l'ordonne.
O tige heureux, que la sage Déesse
En sa tutelle, et garde a voulu prendre,
Pour faire honneur à son sacré autel!
Orne mon chef, donne moy hardiesse
De te chanter, qui espere te rendre
Egal un jour au laurier immortel.²

¹ On the reception of Petrarch in Renaissance France see the excellent volume Balsamo J. (ed.), *Les poètes français de la Renaissance et Pétrarque* (Genève: 2004).

² Du Bellay Joachim, *Oeuvres poétiques. Premiers recueils, 1549–1553* (Paris: 1993), URL (April 2005): <http://gallica.bnf.fr>.

The metaphorical game is quite transparent: By emulating the classical models, synecdotically represented by their crowning branches (e. g. laurel, vine leaf), Du Bellay declares to strive at creating a new literature which is meant to surpass Petrarch's and establish itself as exemplary. While Petrarch's literary *persona* tied the name of the lady (Laura) to a classical symbol of poetic glory (laurel), Du Bellay's *persona* uses the name of his lady (Olive) to transform Athena's branch—which is on the other hand one of the oldest symbols of Christian redemption—into a new mark of poetic glory. The goal of this *aemulatio* is to create and establish new aesthetic values.

Literary imitation in general and the imitation/emulation of Petrarch in particular is also an important issue in Joachim Du Bellay's *Deffence et illustration de la langue françoise*. According to the *Deffence*, *imitatio auctorum* is the foundation of linguistic achievement:

Se compose donq' celuy qui voudra enrichir sa langue, à l'imitation des meilleurs auteurs Grecs & Latins [. . .] car il n'y a point de doute, que la plus grand' part de l'artifice ne soit continue en l'imitation [. . .].³

In chapter IV of the second book, 'Quel genre de poèmes doit élire le Poète François', Du Bellay recalls this general rule and applies it more particularly to poetic achievement:

Ly donques, & rely premierement, ô poète future, feuillet de main nocturne & iournelle, les exemplaires Grecz & Latins, puis me laisse toutes ces vieilles poesies Françoises [. . .] comme Rondeaux, Ballades, Virelaiz, Chants Royaux, Chansons, & autres telles epicerics, qui corrompent le goust de nostre langue, & ne seruent sinon à porter tesmoignage de nostre ignorance.⁴

Immediately after this statement, Du Bellay explains more concretely which literary genres and models the 'poète future' has to choose. His list of exemplary authors includes only ancient *auctoritates* as Ovid, Tibullus, Propertius and Horace. But when he comes to the sonnet and exhorts to choose also this form ('Sonnet moy ces beaux sonnetz, non moins docte que plaisante inuention Italienne'),⁵ Du Bellay states apodictically: 'Pour le Sonnet donc tu as Petrarque; & quelque mo-

³ Du Bellay Joachim, *Les oeuvres françoises de Joachim Du Bellay, revues et de nouveau augmentées de plusieurs poésies non encore auparavant imprimées par J. de Morel et G. Aubert* (Paris: 1569) f. 10. URL (April 2005): <http://gallica.bnf.fr>.

⁴ Du Bellay, *Les oeuvres françoises* f. 24.

⁵ Du Bellay, *Les oeuvres françoises* f. 25.

dernes Italiens'.⁶ Together with the (creative, emulating) imitation of the 'exemplaires Grecz & Latins', Petrarchist imitation is a pillar of Du Bellay's new literary and theoretical program of 1549.

Yet just a few years later, he resumes the rhetoric of refusal he already practiced in 'Je ne quiers pas la fameuse couronne' for a completely different purpose. In *Contre les Pétrarquistes*, we hear him criticizing Petrarchist imitation as a hollow and artificial savant game, and praising the 'good old French love poets' exactly for the blessed ignorance he condemned in the *Deffence*.⁷

Of course, no respectable 'seizièmiste' would simply take this change from 'friend' to 'foe' by the word. The intertextual thickness and paradoxical character of Du Bellay's *Contre les pétrarquistes* is too well known.⁸ The litotes is quite transparently the grounding figure of the poem. In fact, Du Bellay imitates Petrarch by denying his intention to imitate him. However, as obvious as his game with Petrarchist tradition may seem to be, his verses convey a philosophical reflection on the matter of literary imitation which is all but self-evident.

Contre les pétrarquistes has a clear binary structure opposing two ranges of elements, framed by two contrary statements. At the beginning of the poem, the auctorial lyrical *persona* addresses his lady to tell her that he will not write her a petrarchist poem; at the end, he declares that he will, if she likes it better and wants to have one:

Si toutefois Pétrarque vous plaist mieux,
Je reprendray mon chant mélodieux,
Et voleray iusqu'au séjour des Dieux
D'une æle mieux guidée (82).⁹

In between these sequences, critical portraits of how petrarchists act and write alternate with descriptions of how, on the contrary, the lyrical *persona* intends to write and behave.

J'ay oublié l'art de pétrarquizer.
Je veulx d'Amour franchement deviser,
Sans vous flatter, et sans me déguizer (71).

⁶ Du Bellay, *Les oeuvres françaises* f. 25.

⁷ All key citations are recorded and analysed below in this article.

⁸ Cf. Balsamo J., "«Nous l'avons tous admiré, et imité: non sans cause». Pétrarque en France à la Renaissance: un livre, un modèle, un mythe", in Balsamo, *Les poètes français de la Renaissance et Pétrarque* 29.

⁹ All quotes are from Du Bellay Joachim, "Contre les pétrarquistes", in *Divers jeux rustiques*, ed. V.L. Saulnier (Genève: 1965) 71–82.

In the very first lines of the poem, the lyrical *persona* points out at two aspects: first, that he has ‘forgotten the art’ of imitating Petrarch; second, that this art, id est Petrarchist writing, is a *logos* which does not correspond to the *ethos* it seems to depict. Petrarchism is presented here as a form of discourse which is firstly and chiefly characterized by artful simulation and dissimulation.

In the following sequence, an *amplificatio* of the central thought expressed in the former lines, Du Bellay quotes and evokes a long series of petrarchist *loci communes*, unmasking them as artificial ethopoeitical strategies, artful *integumenta* of a constitutive discrepancy between *logos* and *ethos*. Thus, Petrarchist lovers are described as those who fake affection (‘n’ont pas le quart d’une vraie amitié’) and cry false tears (‘Jettent des larmes feintes’). Later on in this sequence Du Bellay uses a combination of parallelism and oxymoron, two of the central figures and perhaps *the* central figures of Petrarchist discourse, as a lever to unveil the artful artificiality of Petrarchist love lyrics:

Ce n’est que feu de leurs froides chaleurs,
Ce n’est qu’horreur de leurs feintes douleurs,
Ce n’est encor de leurs souspirs et pleurs,
Que vent, pluye, et orages (71).

The initial sequence is evidently based upon the classical proceeding of *memoria verborum* Du Bellay is doing nothing else than quoting and reproducing petrarchist *verba*. As it is well known, *memoria verborum* is the foundation stone of rhetorical and poetical *imitatio*. By using it so manifestly, our author demonstrates that he is imitating petrarchist discourse. At the same time however, and quite as overtly, he shows that he is doing so with the declared intention to criticize and to negate, not to make alike—which means in nuce: not to imitate. Thus, Du Bellay introduces a hiatus, a discontinuity between *memoria verborum* and imitation.

This gap immediately recalls a famous aspect of the theory of imitation which is traditionally related to the *topos* of the ‘forgetful imitator’ and refers back to the initial ‘J’ai oublié’ of the poem. In Seneca’s famous letter 82 to Lucilius, one of the key texts of ancient imitation theory, the Latin author points out at the fact that a truly successful, valuable imitation does not necessarily imply the author’s intention or even consciousness to imitate.¹⁰ In *Contre les pétrarquistes*,

¹⁰ Cf. De Rentiis D., “Der Beitrag der Bienen. Überlegungen zum *Bienengleichnis* bei Seneca und Macrobius”, *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie* 141 (1998) 30–44.

Du Bellay resumes this thought to present Petrarchism as a form of literary imitation which is fundamentally characterized by a discontinuity between the (auctorial) person inscribed in the text and the text itself. *Memoria verborum*, originally the first and foremost link between the acts of reading and writing and the final product of these acts (a new text) is broken in *Contre les pétrarquistes*: the text is beyond any doubt an imitation, whereas the act leading to its production is not.

This discontinuity prepares the dichotomy Du Bellay presents in the following sequence, resuming the theme of 'franchise': the dichotomy between *logos* and *ethos*. The lyrical *persona* asserts now that imitating petrarchist speech means 'appearing other than I am' ('sembler autre que je ne suis') and presenting the lady as what she is not, transforming her into a lifeless art object:

De voz deux yeux deux asters je ferois,
Voz blonds cheveux en or je changerois,
Et voz mains en ivoyre (73).

Du Bellay questions the ethical quality and—hereby—the philosophical dimension of Petrarchist love discourse, stating again and demonstrating that Petrarchism is a 'false' and 'fictional' *logos* which is not only separated from the true *ethos* and passions of the speaker, but also stands in clear opposition to both. The passions of the Petrarchist lover are 'vaines passions', 'belles fictions', 'peintures vaines':

Mais cest Enfer de vaines passions,
Ce Paradis de belles fictions,
Déguizemens de noz affections,
Ce sont peintures vaines:
Qui donnent plus de plaisir aux lisans
Que voz beautez à tous voz courtesans,
Et qu'au plus fol de tous ces bien-disans
Vous ne donnez de peines (74).

This means that Petrarchist *logos* generates a genuine aesthetical pleasure which is stronger than the feelings a lady can arouse in her lovers, and it does so exactly *because* it is fundamentally different from 'true life' and clearly separated from it. The beauty of the text not only is but also *has to be* fundamentally different from the beauty of the lady. Between these two forms of beauty lies an essential *hiatus*, an indispensable discontinuity.

Du Bellay is certainly not inventing this discontinuity (one only has to remember a little Ronsard to know), he is recalling it to reflect a very important consequence of Petrarchism, the separation of

person and text, and to demonstrate that it affects all personal instances involved in the process of literary creation.

After reaching this point, the first sequences are doubled and confirmed by a new list of Petrarchist *loci*. The central function of this second *amplificatio* is to show that Petrarchism and *imitatio auctorum* are one. Petrarchist lovers constantly strive to imitate not only their main model but also the ancient love *auctores* in general—Propertius, Ovid, Tibullus, Catullus:

Cestuy, voulant plus simplement aymer
Veult un Properse et Ovide exprimer,
Et voudroit bien encore se transformer
En l'esprit d'un Tibulle:
Mais cestuy-là, comme un Pétrarque ardent,
Cest autre après va le sien mignardant,
Comme un second Catulle (78).

From a critique of Petrarchism, the poem rises in the second half onto a more general level and aims at a fundamental critique of literary imitation. This critique is illustrated by a dichotomy opposing petrarchist models and 'old French models' of love discourse:

Noz bons Ayeulx, qui cest art démenoient,
Pour en parler, Pétrarque n'apprennoient,
Ains franchement leur Dame entretennoient
Sans fard ou couverture:
Mais aussi tost qu'Amour s'est faict sçavant,
Luy, qui estoit François au paravant,
Est devenu flatteur, et décevant,
Et de thusque nature (79).

Ergo: Being essentially nothing but poetical imitation, Petrarchist love discourse shows *per exemplum* that the humanist art of poetical imitation introduced by the 'modern' French authors stands constitutively in opposition to truthful speaking. To speak the truth one has to renounce to this art. The final and central dichotomy Du Bellay introduces in this penultimate sequence opposes nothing less than poetical *imitatio auctorum* and truth, leading to the logical conclusion that poetical imitation does not and cannot lead to the truth.

To prove and underline this, Du Bellay presents at the end of the poem a 'true' love discourse he would hold to his lady:

Mais quant a moy, sans feindre ny pleurer,
Touchant ce poinct, je vous puis asseurer,
Que je veulx sain et dispos demeurer
Pour vous faire service.

De voz beautez je diray seulement
 Que si mon œil ne juge folement
 Vostre beauté est joincte également
 A vostre bonne grace:
 De mon amour, que mon affection
 Est arrivée à la perfection
 De ce qu'on peult avoir de passion
 Pour une belle face (82).

Of course, these lines are no 'degree zero' of love *écriture*. The combination of 'beauté' and 'bonne grace' is in fact one of the most common *topoi* of love discourse, and this is—especially at Du Bellay's times—too well known to assume that our author would seriously hope for his readers not to notice that he is just faking a non-imitative love discourse. The purposeful transparency of the fake prepares and unveils the last sequence of the poem showing between the lines that, in fact, even the plainest and least artful love discourse is not and cannot be free from literary imitation, whether one professes Petrarchism or not.

Consequently to this construction, the last lines of the poem do not convey a refusal of (Petrarchist) imitation, on the contrary:

Si toutefois Petrarque vous plaist mieux,
 Je reprendray mon chant melodieux,
 Et voleray jusqu'au séjour des Dieux
 D'une æle mieux guide:
 Là dans le sein de leurs divinitez,
 Je choisiray cent mille nouveautez,
 Dont je peindray voz plus grandes beautez
 Sur la plus belle Idée (82).

The *memoria verborum* Du Bellay's *persona* has been practicing all throughout the poem does in the end—as ever—lead to imitation, and this imitation has all but little aesthetical value. According to Du Bellay, there is no constitutive dichotomy between petrarchism and literary originality. On the contrary, petrarchist imitation does not preclude the possibility and capability of creating 'one hundred thousand' new poetical *verba*. The issue in *Contre les pétrarquistes* is not opposing, negating or abolishing (Petrarchist) imitation, but exploring a very important philosophical consequence and implication of literary imitation.

At the end of his speech Du Bellay's lyrical *persona* states that he not only *can* use Petrarchist *logos* to create beautiful new love poems, but that he also *will*, if his lady (/reader) wants him to. At the same time, it follows from all that has been said up to this point that in

doing so the lyrical persona clearly and unmistakably will *not* seek or reach the truth. Thus, Du Bellay establishes a fundamental discontinuity between codified, sapient, imitative (and *per exemplum* Petrarchist) love discourse and the possibility of verbally reaching (telling/writing and hearing/reading) the truth.

At the same time—and here we reach the philosophical core of the matter—, the last lines of *Contre les pétrarquistes* state clearly that one *may* seek other things than the truth: If the lady wants Du Bellay's *persona* to tell her (petrarchist) lies, he will do so without hesitating or remorse.

Which means in sum: Truth itself is not the one and only thing one has to seek. It is not even what everyone necessarily wants to seek. In matters of love *and*—which is far more important—of literary imitation, truth is just an option.

The cultural and historical significance of this message can hardly be overestimated. In *Contre les pétrarquistes*, looking back on a long and strong tradition of poetical imitation, Joachim Du Bellay, who is one of the prominent theorists of literary imitation in Renaissance France, lays the finger on one of the major philosophical consequences of petrarchist and, generally, poetical imitation. He demonstrates that *imitatio auctorum* questions the status of truth as an absolute value.

Du Bellay's poem is neither a refusal of petrarchism nor a simple game with Petrarchist tradition, but a profound critique of imitation in the best philosophical sense of the word. Therefore, for us today, it is a fascinating document of the immense cultural and philosophical importance of Petrarchism in the Renaissance.

Far from counteracting his Petrarchist lyric and poetical manifesto, *Contre les Pétrarquistes* pursues and completes *per exemplum Petrarchae* the reflection on *imitatio auctorum* Du Bellay had conceived and formed in the *Deffence et illustration de la langue françoise*, showing once again, but this time in a surprising way, how very important the poet laureate was for Renaissance French literature.

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