

Things Left Unsaid

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PROBABLY NOTHING ANGELO POLIZIANO WROTE has more often been quoted than this: “Non exprimis, inquit aliquis, Ciceronem. Quid tum? Non enim sum Cicero! Me tamen (ut opinor) exprimo” (Someone says to me, “You don’t express Cicero.” So what? I’m not Cicero! All the same, as I see it, I express myself).¹ These sixteen words comprise roughly one-half hundredth of a percent of Poliziano’s published Latin and Greek works, and one suspects that their author would be dismayed to find his vast, rich oeuvre—and his brief but extraordinary life—so often reduced to a single epigram.² And yet, there it is: abrupt, arresting, remarkable. One way or another, one cannot really reckon with Poliziano without reckoning with his most famous dictum, and this is especially true for the reader

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While an early, partial version of this essay was first presented at the former Villa Spelman in Florence in 2004, the full version was completed for a conference (at UCLA in 2007) and intended Festschrift in honor of Virginia Brown and James Hankins. The untimely death of the former eventually scuttled the planned book, and the essay, set aside for the sake of other tasks, has since overreached even the Horatian “ninth year.” I have revised it lightly for its delayed publication, with apologies for any bibliography I have missed from the period since my initial research. I would like to retain the essay’s original dedication, with gratitude to both and in fondest memory of one who left us far too soon. For their generous comments and suggestions, I would like to thank the two reviewers for the journal: David Quint and another, anonymous reader. Additional thanks are owed to Michael Rocke, both for help with the illustration and for many conversations over the years about Poliziano and his friends. All translations in this essay are my own.

1. Angelo Poliziano, *Letters* 8.16.2, which will appear in vol. 2, in the course of preparation, of my edition and translation of the *Letters* for the I Tatti Renaissance Library; the first volume is Angelo Poliziano, *Letters*, vol. 1, ed. and trans. Shane Butler (Cambridge, MA, 2006). All existing editions of this letter descend from the posthumous Aldine of Poliziano’s collected Latin and Greek works, *Omnia opera Angeli Politiani et alia quaedam lectu digna* (Venice, 1498), but two manuscript copies (one partial), with variants, are preserved in Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Ms. Capp. 235, fols. 108r–v, fols. 119v–120r. Other texts with translations of the same letter in its entirety: JoAnn Della-Neva, ed., *Ciceronian Controversies*, trans. Brian Duveck (Cambridge, MA, 2007), 2–5; Peter Godman, *From Poliziano to Machiavelli: Florentine Humanism in the High Renaissance* (Princeton, NJ, 1998), 46–47; Eugenio Garin, ed., *Prosatori latini del Quattrocento* (Milan, 1952), 902–4.

2. I base this calculation on a rough line and page count of the edition of Sébastien Gryphe, *Angeli Politiani opera* (Lyon, 1545–50).

(or translator) of his Latin *Letters*, including, but not limited to, the one in which these words were first delivered to an unsuspecting Paolo Cortesi.

Poliziano's were fighting words, aimed not at Cortesi alone, and their punch was felt throughout humanist circles in Italy and beyond. In context—a withering rejection of Cortesi's gift of his own epistolary collection in the style of Cicero—the jibe does not seem to need much explanation; indeed, that is part of what makes it so devastating.³ Nevertheless, the translator pauses a moment before *me exprimo*, searching for an accurate rendering that avoids the thoroughly modern freight of “I express myself.” Our self-expression comes, we seem to imagine, from deep within, a precious liquor extracted by a hidden and sometimes painful turning of the screw. We find something like this in many Renaissance writers, but to put things mildly, it is not our most immediate impression of Poliziano. He may indeed take Cortesi, Bartolomeo Scala, and others to task as superficial “apes” of Cicero, but with this famous insult (from the same letter to Cortesi) Poliziano himself is aping a letter of the late-antique writer Sidonius Apollinaris.⁴ Poliziano's self-expression seems to come not so much from deep inward looking as from ever-wider reading, for his writing, unlike that of the Ciceronians, is a bricolage of pieces from every corner and cavity of antiquity's vast ruin. Indeed, in this last regard, Poliziano seems rather less modern than Modernist (think of Eliot or Pound), or even postmodern.

“Quid tum?”—the question Poliziano partly answers with *me exprimo*—was, coincidentally, the personal motto of Leon Battista Alberti, that visionary architect who often has been thought to mean by the phrase (attached on his emblem to a

3. The present article largely will not address the Ciceronian controversy itself, on which there already exists a vast bibliography, from which one might select the following studies in English: Martin L. McLaughlin, *Literary Imitation in the Italian Renaissance: The Theory and Practice of Literary Imitation in Italy from Dante to Bembo* (Oxford, 1995), with a chapter specifically on “The Dispute Between Poliziano and Cortesi” (187–227), and with references to earlier discussions; Christopher S. Celenza, “End Game: Humanist Latin in the Late Fifteenth Century,” in *Latinitas Perennis*, vol. 2: *Appropriation and Latin Literature*, ed. Wim Verbaal, Yanick Maes, and Jan Papy (Leiden, 2009), 201–44; and DellaNeva, *Ciceronian Controversies*, vi–xxxv. The classic account is Remigio Sabbadini, *Storia del ciceronianismo e di altre questioni letterarie nell'età della rinascenza* (Turin, 1885).

4. Poliziano, *Letters* 8.16.1–2: “Non enim probare soles (ut accipi) nisi qui liniamenta Ciceronis effingat. Mihi vero longe honestior tauri facies, aut item leonis, quam simiae videtur, quae tamen homini similior est.” Here and in the *me exprimo* that soon follows, Poliziano is refashioning Sidonius Apollinaris, *Epistulae* 1.1.2, discussing the influence of the epistolary style of Cicero, whom a well-known “ape of the orators” (*oratorum simia*) imperfectly “expressed” (*expressit*). Scholars tend to miss this important source, distracted instead by Cicero, *De oratore* 2.69, and by Filippo Villani's description of Coluccio Salutati as a *scimia di Cicerone* (meant, however, as a compliment!), on which see Sabbadini, *Storia*, 11.

winged eye) something like “Okay, what’s next?”⁵ In Poliziano, however, “quid tum?” simply means “so what?” Far from peering into the future, the whole declaration (“quid tum . . . me exprimo”) comes from a man so determined to look back that he made that famous backward glancer Orpheus into a kind of personal obsession. It is true that no ancient author actually uses the phrase *me exprimo*; indeed, Poliziano may have been the first person to write “I express myself” in any language.⁶ But already the fact that he did so in Latin seems to have prevented many moderns—and most early modernists—from taking his precocity very seriously. Dante, though he preceded Poliziano by two centuries, gets far more respect as a harbinger of modernity, in part, of course, because he had the foresight to find himself (“mi ritrovai”) in the vernacular.

Naturally, the Latinist is skeptical of these last simplifications. But the translator’s dilemma is genuine. In truth, the exact meaning of *me exprimo* is only a passing problem: a much more serious one is posed by what the phrase suggests about everything that surrounds it in the Aldine corpus. Whatever he means by *me*, Poliziano tells us explicitly that he is in the business of expressing it, and whatever the author expresses, it is the translator’s job, surely, to try to render. But how to go about Englishing page after page of *Politianus ipse*? About to resume the task of doing just that, after a regrettably long hiatus, I offer here some thoughts on a question that cannot really be taken up in the narrow confines of my edition and translation of the *Letters* for the I Tatti Renaissance Library (ITRL). The following six notes aim to provide a series of differently angled perspectives on the relationship between saying and selfhood in Poliziano and, more broadly, in his world. We shall return to his *me exprimo* at the end. We begin, however, not with Poliziano, but with the man sometimes thought to have been his polar opposite.

* * *

Perhaps a dozen authentic poems, give or take a few, survive from the pen of the quattrocento’s most notorious anti-poet, Girolamo Savonarola, who called the *ars poetica* the “infima scientiarum” (lowest body of knowledge) and urged its practitioners to find something better to do.⁷ Most of these appear in a remarkable

5. For more on what Alberti may or may not have intended by the phrase, see the legendary exchange between David Marsh and Ingrid Rowland, “So What?,” *New York Review of Books* 42, no. 1 (January 12, 1995).

6. I hesitate to be more categorical, since to do so would be to risk easy contradiction by a more systematic search than I have undertaken. Still, Poliziano deserves full credit for making the phrase stick.

7. Girolamo Savonarola, *Scritti filosofici*, ed. Giancarlo Garfagnini and Eugenio Garin, vol. 1 (Rome, 1982), 271.

autograph collection of Savonarolan texts now in the Biblioteca Ambrosiana in Milan.⁸ On the inside face of the front cover of that manuscript appears an untitled poem that begins “Omnipotente Idio,” copied out by Savonarola himself in the early 1480s with striking calligraphic care.⁹

One struggles a bit to reconcile the boldness and elegance of the poem’s appearance on the page with the prosaic moralizing of the *Apologeticus de ratione poeticae artis*, written in 1491 and published the year after.¹⁰ Indeed, it is at first tempting to regard this and other poems, if not as a secret vice, nor even as a youthful indiscretion, then at least as a private pleasure that the very public preacher of the 1490s would have hesitated to acknowledge. And yet, beginning in 1492, a number of the poems, including the *Omnipotente Idio*, were printed and, indeed, repeatedly reprinted in Florence, presumably with Savonarola’s at least tacit consent.¹¹ On close inspection it turns out that, though the broad sweep of the *Apologeticus* rejects the utility even of religious poetry, what Savonarola means by “poetry” is emphatically formal. Regardless of its subject matter, poetry is perilous when made of dactyls and spondees, of “Tullian and Vergilian” words, of “Vergilian and Ovidian” verses, complaints not applicable *ad litteram* to poetry in the vernacular.¹² Not all Latin poetry is bad—Savonarola makes a pointed exception of the verses of “our prophets,” that is, those of the Vulgate Old Testament, separated morally and formally from the pagan poets by an “infinite distance”—but most if not all bad poetry is in Latin.¹³

On precisely this score, however, the *Omnipotente Idio* sheds unexpected light on the most basic instincts of the same quattrocento poets with whom Savonarola thought he had nothing in common. Generically speaking, the text is a *lauda*, a kind of devotional poem, often sung, that usually either expresses a prayer or ventriloquizes the divine. The form is sometimes called popular but could be less so, especially in the quattrocento; indeed, remarkable similarities have been noticed

8. Giulio Cattin, *Il primo Savonarola: Poesie e prediche autografe dal codice Borromeo* (Florence, 1973), which renders partially obsolete the *edizione nazionale*: Girolamo Savonarola, *Poesie*, ed. Mario Martelli (Rome, 1968).

9. For simplicity’s sake, I shall follow the modernized orthography of the edition of Martelli (Savonarola, *Poesie*, 31). A diplomatic transcription of the autograph is in Cattin, *Il primo Savonarola*, 207, with a reproduction of the manuscript text in plate 2.

10. The work nominally was in response to Ugolino Verino’s dedication to Savonarola of his own poem *De christianae religionis ac vitae monasticae felicitate*.

11. The *Omnipotente Idio* with other poems is reprinted several times as an appendix to the *Opere della d’Amore di Gesù*.

12. Savonarola, *Scritti filosofici*, 249, 253, 256, 269.

13. “Inter versus enim poetarum gentilium et prophetarum nostrorum infinita distantia est.” Ibid., 253.

between the surviving *laude* of Savonarola and those of Lorenzo de' Medici.¹⁴ The poem begins as follows:

Omnipotente Idio
 Tu sai quel che bisogna al mio lavoro
 e qual è il mio desio.
 Io non ti chiedo scettro né tesoro,
 Come quel cieco avaro,
 Né che città o castel per me si strua
 Ma sol, Signor mio caro, . . .

[Omnipotent God,
 you know what is required for my work
 and what kind is my desire.
 I ask of you neither scepter nor treasure,
 as did that blind miser,
 nor that city or castle be built for me,
 but only, my dear Lord, . . .]

So far, so good, as the poem builds to a climax in more than one sense, inasmuch as the poem has an unmistakably erotic tone, set in motion by the strong word *desio* (desire) and intensified by the repeated negations—not this, nor that, nor that—that defer the poem's meaning to its last line. But for that final resolution, Savonarola does something we have no reason to expect, by switching to Latin: “Vulnera cor meum caritate tua” (Wound my heart with your love). Note that Savonarola does not even pretend that the final line depends syntactically on the Italian above, retrospectively imagined in Latin, for this would require (*ut*) *vulneres*, or at least *vulnerare*. Rather, precisely at the point at which Savonarola invokes the image of a wound, a gap opens in the coherence of the text.

Why? It scarcely will do to imagine that this prophet of vernacular piety here reverts to Latin as the natural vehicle of prayer. Even for Savonarola, however, Latin remained the language of scripture. And indeed, the Christian image of the wound of love is inevitably redolent of some of the most passionate language of the Song of Songs:

Vulnerasti cor meum soror mea sponsa vulnerasti cor meum
 in uno oculorum tuorum et in uno crine colli tui.

14. Mario Martelli, “La politica culturale dell’ultimo Lorenzo,” *Il Ponte* 36 (1980): 1046–49; cf. Patrick Macey, “The Lauda and the Cult of Savonarola,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 45, no. 3 (1992): 477.

Quam pulchrae sunt mammae tuae soror mea sponsa
pulchriora ubera tua vino . . .¹⁵

[You have wounded my heart, my sister my wife, you have wounded
my heart on one of your eyes and on one hair of your neck.
How beautiful are your breasts, my sister my wife,
your nipples more beautiful than wine . . .]

The passage inspired rapturous commentary on the “wound of love” by the third-century exegete Origen,¹⁶ who in turn influenced the highly eroticized spirituality of Bernard of Clairvaux, who in turn inspired Savonarola, not least in his own incomplete series of sermons on the Song of Songs.¹⁷

Of course, the image of the heart wounded by love has had other traditions, including that associated with Cupid, who appears in Latin in this guise as early as Plautus: “sagitta Cupido cor meum transfixit” (Cupid has pierced my heart with his arrow).¹⁸ The image is frequent in the amorous works of Ovid—for example, “Amor . . . mea vulnerat arcu pectora” (Love wounds my breast with his bow),¹⁹ or “haeserunt tenues in corde sagittae / et possessa ferus pectora versat Amor” (delicate darts have stuck in my heart, and savage Love needles the breast he has claimed)²⁰—whence it exerted enduring influence on love poetry of the classical tradition. But especially for the Renaissance, the true locus classicus for the wound of love was found in the prologue of the *De rerum natura*, where Lucretius reminds Venus how Mars “has often thrown himself into your lap, utterly overcome by the eternal wound of love” (in gremium qui saepe tuum se / reiicit aeterno devictus vulnere amoris).²¹ This is part of the passage that inspired Angelo Poliziano’s description of the same scene in the *Stanze per la giostra*, which may, in turn, have influenced Botticelli’s famous painting, now in the National Gallery in London, of Venus reclining with a decidedly *devictus* Mars.²²

15. Song of Songs 4:9–10.

16. Origen, *Commentarium in Canticum canticorum*, Sources Chrétiennes 375, ed. Luc Brésard and Henri Crouzel (Paris, 1991), prol. 2.17.

17. Girolamo Savonarola, *Sermoni sopra il principio della Cantica*, ed. Silvia Cantelli Berarducci (Rome, 1996); on pages 220–37, the editor discusses the determinative influence of Bernard’s *Sermones in Cantica canticorum*.

18. Plautus, *Persa* 25.

19. Ovid, *Ars Amatoria* 1.21.

20. Ovid, *Amores* 1.2.7.

21. Lucretius, *De rerum natura* 1.34.

22. Poliziano, *Stanze* 122. Italian text with English translation by David Quint, *The “Stanze” of Angelo Poliziano* (University Park, PA, 1993), who notes (viii) the Botticelli connection and provides a

None of this, however, is an especially good reason to begin speaking of Savonarola the Lucretian—or even, heaven forbid, the Epicurean. As a matter of fact, Savonarola would appear to avoid any confusion about the tradition to which his imagery belongs by borrowing his language from a specific, recognizable source, indeed, from a source that often lurks behind the imagery of other *laude*: the *Confessions* of Augustine. Savonarola takes his finale almost word for word from the beginning of a sentence in the ninth book: “Sagittaveras tu cor nostrum caritate tua et gestabamus verba tua transfixa visceribus” (You have pierced our heart with your love, and we wear your words stuck deep in our flesh).²³ Nevertheless, in his substitution of *vulnerare* (to wound) for Augustine’s *sagittare* (to shoot arrows), Savonarola betrays an anxiety of wider influence that even the authority of Augustine is insufficient to dispel. For Savonarola must say *vulnera* instead of *sagitta* for the same reason that Augustine must say *caritate* instead of *amore*, though of course this is not Augustine’s choice, nor even really a Latin choice, but goes back at least to Paul, trying to keep Christian love (*agapè*, generally translated into Latin as *caritas*, which becomes “charity” in the King James Version) from sounding too much like *erôs*, that is, “erotic love,” for which Latin uses *amor*. Augustine—the same Augustine, let us not forget, who tells us in the *Confessions* that he was first led to a life of virtue not by Christ but by Cicero—potentially undoes the Pauline precision of *agapè/caritas* by inadvertently reintroducing the figure of *Eros/Amor*, who, for some readers at least, enters the image on the wings of *sagittaveras*, bow in hand.²⁴ With *vulnera* Savonarola would seem to take Augustine, and thereby himself, safely back to the Song of Songs, separated from the slings and arrows of the pagan poets by, we have been told, an “infinite distance.”

“The love of God has opened our eyes,” writes Savonarola in the *Apologeticus*, “so that, with the woods behind us (*relictis silvis*), we taste the sweet fruits of the orchards of the Church.”²⁵ The context makes it clear that the *silvae* are the “woods” as the classical tradition’s enduring metaphor for the reading and making of poetry; Savonarola surely here takes aim above all at Poliziano, author of didactic poems about classical poetry and poetics which he called *Silvae*, after the *Silvae*

bibliography (104) on the general question of the poet’s influence on the painter (first posed by Aby Warburg), to which add Stanley Meltzoff, *Botticelli, Signorelli and Savonarola: Theologica Poetica and Painting from Boccaccio to Poliziano* (Florence, 1987).

23. Augustine, *Confessions* 9.2.3.

24. In fairness, Augustine himself must have had in mind *biblical* passages (and his own discussions thereof) that invoke the arrow; for the relevant comparanda see Augustine, *Confessions*, text and commentary by James J. O’Donnell (Oxford, 1992), consulted in the electronic edition at <http://www.stoa.org/hippo/> (note on the *sagittaveras* of 9.2.3), to which add Isaiah 49:2.

25. Savonarola, *Scritti filosofici*, 245; cf. 257.

of Statius.²⁶ But in the *Omnipotente Idio*, does Savonarola really escape the woods? We may well ask why he chose to take the risk, switching to a language about which it would only be a slight exaggeration to say that every word had the potential to evoke a literary tradition then some seventeen centuries long, and counting.

The answer surely lies there in the question: Savonarola turns to Latin precisely because of the risk entailed. And the reason for this is to be found in the logic of the poem itself. In that final line, Savonarola gives in to two things that are greater than himself, beyond his control. One, of course, is God's love, but the other is Latin poetry, in the tangled woods of which he risks losing his meaning. Here, at the very moment at which he commands (*vulnera*, the imperative) his own passivity before the divine, he trades his authorial agency for the ineffable will of tradition.

Savonarola's switch to Latin, in other words, is like a trapdoor that snaps suddenly open, precipitating a brief free fall through the metaphorical realms he urged other poets to avoid. He himself, of course, expects finally to be caught—by the loving arms of the very God whom he has introduced, in his opening lines, as a sort of ideal reader who will “know” the real “kind” of his “desire.” The divine reader, in other words, will understand that this is Savonarola, not Lucretius, and will interpret accordingly. But what of other readers—what, indeed, of Savonarola himself? We ourselves have seen Cupid here, and the poet's substitution of *vulnera* for Augustine's (and Plautus's) *sagitta* suggests that he has too. Indeed, the reader who knows something of love in Latin finds here not just the end of a poem but also a kind of finale to a long crescendo in the language of love in all its forms, profane to sacred. Perhaps Savonarola even means to offer a definitive triumph of the latter over the former, thus redeeming this long tradition from its pagan and erotic roots. The danger remains, however, that he will be understood not on the basis of what he says but on that of what he does not say. For one need only read *sagitta* for *vulnera* and *amore* for *caritate* to hear words addressed not by a pious friar to his loving God, but by Mars to the Goddess of Love.

Little wonder that Savonarola brings this brief experiment with Latin verse to so rapid a close, never to repeat it. We return now to a man who, for better or for worse, knew no such limits. In the same Latin in which Savonarola risked losing sight of God, Poliziano was already finding, instead, endless opportunities for a somewhat different kind of reflection.

26. Verino too, however, produced *Silvae*, albeit on religious themes. See Francesco Bausi, “Ugolino Verino, Savonarola e la poesia religiosa tra quattro e cinquecento,” in *Studi Savonaroliani: Verso il V centenario*, ed. Gian Carlo Garfagnini (Florence, 1996), 129–30.

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From late 1479 to the summer of 1480, during a short but painful period of estrangement from his patron, Lorenzo de' Medici, Poliziano visited various cities in Italy, eventually making his way to Venice in the company of his constant friend and companion, Pico della Mirandola. He tells us rather less than we would like about what happened there; what we know comes largely from wistful asides in later letters to and from the lifelong friends made by both during what clearly was a very intense month or two.²⁷ The most famous of those friends was the great Ermolao Barbaro, but also among them was Girolamo Donà (or Donato), a poet, humanist, and politically active Venetian patrician, author or recipient of seven letters in the posthumously published collection of Poliziano's Latin correspondence.²⁸

Letters 2.10, written by Poliziano to Donà from Florence in 1485, combines an especially smooth stylistic finish with some intriguing glimpses between the lines. Let us begin with the former and with five ways in which the letter is exemplary of broader tendencies in the collection:

1. Poliziano revised the letter for publication, as is clear from two manuscripts that preserve what clearly is an earlier version.²⁹ Here—as is often the case throughout the collection—his changes comprised fairly minor linguistic and stylistic *pentimenti* designed to enhance, however subtly, the letter's literary polish. Thus, in the letter's first sentence, a fairly dull "facis" (you make) that seems to have been in the original letter as sent has been sharpened into a livelier "affers" (you proffer).
2. The original occasion for the letter was not a single, simple exchange between two people but, rather, a complex network of writers and readers. In this case, Donà had first written Pico della Mirandola; Pico had then shown Donà's letter to his dear friend Poliziano; and this had prompted Poliziano's "reply" to Donà, which he quietly assumes will also be shown to Barbaro.
3. The most pressing subject of the exchange is Poliziano's own genius, specifically the accomplishment of his *Rusticus*, which had led Donà to praise him

27. Evidence for Poliziano's activities in Venice is collected by Giovanni Battista Picotti, *Ricerche umanistiche* (Florence, 1955), 59–64. For thoughts on the period's impact on Poliziano's language and thought, see Vittore Branca, *Poliziano e l'umanesimo della parola* (Turin, 1983), 12–18.

28. For a résumé of Donà's life, including the brilliant political and oratorical career which, when he met Poliziano, was still entirely ahead of him (as it still largely was when they began corresponding), see Paola Riga's entry for him in the *Dizionario biografico degli italiani* (Rome, 1960–), 40:741–53.

29. Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana, Ms. Ricc. 974, fols. 39v–40r; and Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Ms. Capp. 235, fols. 129v–130v.

as a “splendor aetatis nostrae” (radiance of our age) in his original letter to Pico, conveniently included, just before our letter, in the collection.

4. Apart from this, the letter has very little to offer in the way of concrete content. It is mostly filled, instead, with lavish embroidery of epistolary pleasantries and commonplaces and with a sprawling elaboration of Poliziano’s obligatory protest that he does not merit Donà’s high praise. Here’s an especially tedious example:

And so, if you love me, as I know you do, then you surely can no longer doubt that I love you back. For love, they say, costs nothing more than—itself. Nevertheless, though I in turn love you loving me, I do not in the same way reciprocally praise you praising me. My reason? In repaying favors, one must maintain observance of that law of Hesiod, according to which you should give back in equal measure, or even, if you can, in more abundant measure. But since you, given the wealth of expression you have, since you, I say, a man in possession of that genius and that learning of yours, have heaped upon me, a single insignificant person from the crowd, so much praise—a whole barn-full, as they say—how can I measure back even just an equal amount, to say nothing of something extra, from the yield of my barren and uncultivated soil, unless, in spite of it all, I reflect your words and send them flowing back to you, like Echo?³⁰

5. In lieu of content in an ordinary sense, this letter, like much of what Poliziano wrote, offers a rich weave of citations, allusions, and even finer borrowings and intertexts, down to the level of the single, rare words with which Poliziano often confounded his critics, all of it stitched together with Poliziano’s consummate skill as a Latin stylist.

It is this last, familiar characteristic of Poliziano’s prose that most repays closer scrutiny here. On inspection, the classical embroidery of this particular text reveals itself to be even denser and more luxurious than is usual for Poliziano. In the brief notes of my ITRL edition, I note nods to Cicero, Horace, Catullus, Phaedrus, Persius, Homer, Hesiod, Plautus, Ovid, Plato, and Seneca. But an idea of how much *more* one could say is given by an edition of most of the letters published in the early sixteenth century by Josse Bade, better known by his Latin name, Badius

30. Poliziano, *Letters* 2.10.2. As David Quint has pointed out to me, Poliziano’s endless professions of modesty in the *Letters* are themselves a distinctly Ciceronian touch.

Ascensius, with limited notes by himself and extensive notes by François Dubois (Sylvius), almost entirely concerned with identifying the classical sources of Poliziano's language and imagery. For this letter, their combined commentary—in a smaller typeface, printed alongside and, eventually, following the text—is roughly four times as long as the letter itself (fig. 1).

This even higher-than-average density of classical echoes is made even more striking by Poliziano's appeal, throughout the letter, to antiquity's most powerful figures for imitation, from the magnet of Plato's *Ion*, to the divine "enthusiasm" of the *Phaedrus* (and thus implicitly to its later discussion of erotic emulation), to artistic possession by the Muses, to Icarus and his ill-fated effort to follow and outdo, to Echo herself, in the passage we already have seen. Certainly there is no anxiety of influence here, leading us to wonder once again how Poliziano can imagine that such borrowed, patchwork robes could dress—or express—a self.

More than simple Narcissism leads Poliziano to put his classical finery on such conspicuous display. Throughout his writing and like most other humanists, Poliziano is, at the simplest level, playing a kind of game of encryption and decipherment. Fail to break the code and you fail to take full pleasure in the text; succeed and you know that you are no outsider to the world of learning. A letter, in this regard, presents a very special prize, for the mere fact that Poliziano has sent Donà such a dense bundle presupposes—and makes plain to Donà and to anyone else who might see the letter—that the great Poliziano expects him to be able to unpack its meaning. This is already clear from Poliziano's frequent recourse to Greek in the letter, which assumes that Donà knew Greek, as indeed, like many Venetian humanists, he did. (Donà was, in point of fact, a translator of Aristotle.) But a wink and nod to Donà's erudition is potentially there in every other classical reference too, all of which ratify Donà's citizenship (indeed, his elite status) in the "Republic of the Learned" (*Res publica lit[t]eratorum*) over which Poliziano liked to see himself as presiding.

One does sometimes wonder, however, whether even a very erudite reader could discern with any ease all that Poliziano packed into prose like this. A good example comes in a complex knot of references in the letter's first paragraph: ". . . nisi forte ita me ludit illa poetarum (quod Horatius inquit) amabilis insania ut nunquam congrediar mecum, nunquam de tergo in pectus manticam revocem" (. . . unless by chance, to use Horace's words, that "gentle madness" of the poets so "makes sport of me" that I never come to grips with myself and never return the knapsack from my back to my chest).³¹ The classical sources lurking behind this

31. *Ibid.* 2.10.1.

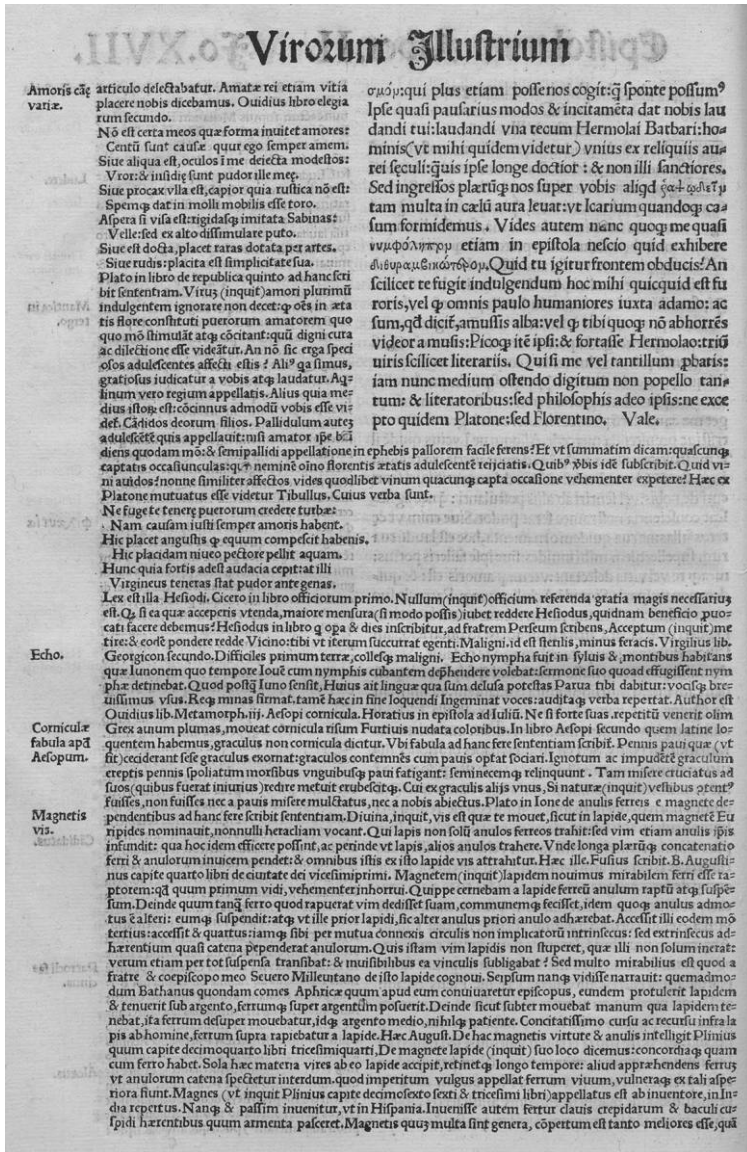


Figure 1. Angelo Poliziano, *Omnium Angeli Politiani operum (quae quidem extare nouimus) tomus prior*, ed. Josse Bade (Paris, 1519), fol. 17v, containing the end of *Letters* 2.10 and the surrounding commentary of François Dubois. From a copy in the Biblioteca Berenson, Villa I Tatti, Florence. Image courtesy of the Biblioteca Berenson. Color version available as an online enhancement.

single sentence include Catullus, Persius, and a half-dozen passages in Horace, the only author cited by name; explaining how they work together to complete Poliziano's meaning requires a miniature essay in my ITRL notes, which aim to be as brief as possible:

P. mingles numerous sources here. The quotation is of Horace, *Odes* 3.4.5–6 (*me ludit amabilis / insania*), though P. possibly is also thinking of the same author's *levis insania* at *Epistulae* 2.1.118. The image of the poet deluded about his own talent, however, comes not from these passages, though it is frequent in Horace (see *Epistulae* 2.2.105ff., and the *Ars Poetica* generally); P.'s most conspicuous source is instead Catullus 22 (on the bad poet Suffenus, see Pico's letter to P., 1.3), which ends with the Aesopian image of the knapsack (*mantica*; see Phaedrus 4.10), likewise deployed by Horace, *Satires* 2.3.299, and again by Persius, *Satires* 4.24, though neither is referring specifically to poets. The same poem by Persius is, in turn, a possible inspiration for P.'s general theme of self-knowledge, continued from the previous sentence (*mecum congređiar* perhaps paraphrases *in sese . . . descendere* of line 23).³²

Assuming that Poliziano expected an ideal reader to recover these sources (a question to which we shall return in a moment), we must somehow account for the fact that he clearly saw his craft as lying not only in making such references but in honing them down to the minimum visibility necessary.

A brief digression into another letter will help us to see him at work doing just that as he prepared the *Letters* for publication. *Letters* 1.3 employs the same image, ultimately from Aesop, of a man who cannot see the faults he carries on his back. The allusion in the original letter as sent reads as follows: "Ne sim, ut inquit ille, Suffenus timeam. Nimirum omnes fallimur, nec videmus manticam quae in tergo est" (I worry that I am being, as you-know-who says, a Suffenus. For "we all are deceived, of course," and "we do not see the knapsack we carry on our own backs").³³ The pronoun *ille*, which here, as often in the *Letters*, I have somewhat overtranslated as "you-know-who," is already cagey: the point, of course, is that the educated recipient scarcely needs to have the source explicitly named. That source is a poem by Catullus, satirizing a contemporary poet named Suffenus; the poem ends with the summation from which the original letter quotes:

nimirum idem omnes fallimur, neque est quisquam
quem non in aliqua re videre Suffenum

32. Poliziano, *Letters*, 1:334.

33. Poliziano, *Letters* 1.3.1.

possis. suus cuique attributus est error;
sed non videmus manticae quod in tergo est.³⁴

[We all, of course, make the same mistake. Nor is there anyone
you won't catch being a Suffenus in one way or another.
To each of us is assigned his lot of faults to bear,
but we don't see the part of the knapsack we carry on our backs.]

When, however, he revised the letter for publication, Poliziano eliminated the entire Catullan quotation, leaving just the name of its target: “metuam tamen ne sim, ut inquit ille, Suffenus” (I still worry that I am being, as you-know-who-says, a Suffenus). Why the omission? Part of the motivation must lie in the allusive game itself: paring down the allusion makes it harder to recognize and thus renders the reader's success in doing so that much more triumphant and significant. This can probably be related, however, to a more general economy of style: the name of Suffenus is enough to make the connection and, thus, the point. In either case, what is perhaps most remarkable about the change is the fact that it comes in a letter that Poliziano did not himself write: *Letters* 1.3 is a letter Poliziano received from Pico della Mirandola, along with erotic poems in Greek that the latter had written in his youth and that he later would burn. This is not the only instance in the collection in which Poliziano thought his friends—and especially his dearest friend Pico—needed help expressing themselves. And this included adherence to unwritten rules about precisely how and to what extent, especially in his own writing, a ubiquitous ancient substratum was to be visible through the surface of his page. But to go deeper, we take an abrupt detour through a sordid crime story.

* * *

One spring evening in 1464, a certain Benedetto, who was a man of some station in the Tuscan hill town where he made his home, took a walk after dinner. Passing through one of the city gates, in the company of a certain Tommaso, he made his way toward “quoddam palaczettum,” that is, a small but not entirely humble house, which belonged to relatives. We learn what happened along the steep descent from contemporary local court records, written, as the phrase just quoted already suggests, in thickly macaronic Latin. From the dark there emerged a certain Paolo, “armatus una partisgiana ferri et una claverina et una cultella,” in other words, armed to the teeth, the record using precise but hard-to-translate language for particular kinds of spear and javelin, along with a knife. Paolo made for

34. Catullus, *Poems* 22.18–20.

Benedetto, shouting—the record leaves his words in the vernacular—“Hai traditore, colto ti ci ò, questa volta tu non la camperai” (Ah, traitor, I’ve got you now, and this time you won’t get away). “Seeing and hearing which,” the record continues, returning to Latin, “the aforementioned sir Benedetto attempted to flee” (quod videns et audiens dictus dominus Benedictus cepit fugere). When Tommaso tried to come between them, Paolo repeatedly stabbed him, riddling his “entire cloak and skirt” with holes, whereupon Tommaso fell to the ground, exclaiming (again the record switches to the vernacular) “Oimé, tu m’ai morto” (Alas, you’ve killed me). Benedetto meanwhile had made his way to a nearby barley field, where Paolo caught up with him and stabbed him with his spear, piercing him all the way through. Watching the spear go in, Benedetto took hold of it “as best he could” and tried to fight off a second, deadly stroke. “Seeing which,” Paolo unsheathed the knife on his hip and stabbed Benedetto in the left hand, “cum maxima sanguinis effusione” (with a very great flow of blood). Discarding the knife, he then wrenched the spear from Benedetto’s bloody hands and stabbed him on the right side of his chest, in the front and out the back, “cum maxima sanguinis effusione.” Not yet content, Paolo took the spear and plunged it into Benedetto’s head, cracking his skull and penetrating his brain, “cum maxima sanguinis effusione.” Still not content, Paolo split Benedetto’s nose and the rest of his face in two, carving down to his tongue. The records here perversely repeat Benedetto’s name even as they describe the destruction of anything still resembling a person: “He wounded the aforementioned sir Benedetto with the aforementioned *partisgiana*, making one additional cruel and dishonorable wound to the face of the aforementioned sir Benedetto, with the splitting of the nose and face of the aforementioned sir Benedetto, all the way down to the tongue of the aforementioned sir Benedetto” (dictum dominum Benedictum vulneravit cum dicta *partisgiana* uno alio crudeli et inhonesto vulnere super facie dicti domini Benedicti, cum scisura nasi et faciei dicti domini Benedicti usque ad linguam dicti domini Benedicti). Only then did Paolo sink his weapon into Benedetto’s throat, piercing his esophagus, “cum magna sanguinis effusione.” The change here from *maxima* to *magna* is scarcely accidental. Indeed, it seems incredible that Benedetto by this point had any blood left at all.³⁵

This corpse would have nothing to do with the history of Latin literature were it not for the fact that the aforementioned Benedetto was the father of a boy, then ten

35. My summary is based on the publication of Montepulciano, Archivio Storico Comunale, Atti del Potestà, A, I, 8, by Giovanni Cecchini, *L’Assassinio del padre del Poliziano* (Siena, 1954), reprinted from *Bullettino Senese di Storia Patria* 60 (1953). Cf. Isidoro Del Lungo, “La Patria e gli antenati d’Angelo Poliziano,” *Archivio storico italiano* 9, no. 1 (1870): 9–44.

years old, who would soon be sent from Montepulciano, the scene of this horrific crime, to Florence. There he would become one of the brightest stars of the Florentine Renaissance and would write, inter alia, the letter with which we began. The story of the murder of Poliziano's father offers a bit of a reality check: however artificial his writing might seem, Poliziano's life had been, from an early age, real enough. Throughout his career he would show a persistent interest in ancient mythology's most famous victims of bodily dismemberment, from Orpheus, torn to pieces by angry Maenads, protagonist of his play *Orfeo* and subject of the preface to his first *Silva*, to Hippolytus, subject of the opening image of his final, unfinished work of antiquarian scholarship and textual criticism, the second installment of the *Miscellanea*. In his beautiful essay on the substance of Poliziano's style, Thomas Greene rightly sees these *disiecta membra* as metaphors for the "opposition between creativity and violence" that makes the poet-philologist a defender of "culture in its perennial struggle against time the destroyer" and "time the mutilator," one who "repairs patiently, endlessly, the immense mangled cadaver of the past."³⁶ But to Greene's picture of Poliziano's *horror fragmenti* as the fruit of the "historical solitude" with which he contemplated his "estrangement" from the "remote text" of the distant past, the Montepulciano court records add the less remote memories of a childhood shattered by violence and mutilation that were anything but metaphorical.³⁷ It is difficult not to find, in the genuine horror they produce, a glimpse, however fleeting or reductive, of what may have driven Poliziano to a lifetime of putting pieces back together.

But let us set aside these deeper thoughts to consider how the same records unexpectedly illuminate a famous aspect of Poliziano's literary style. To describe the sensibilities that characterize Poliziano's copious output in both Latin prose and poetry, no single word is used more often, including by Poliziano himself, than *varietas*. The classic definition comes from Cicero: "[Varietas] proprie quidem in disparibus coloribus dicitur, sed transfertur in multa disparia: varium poema, varia oratio, varii mores, varia fortuna, voluptas etiam varia dici solet . . ." ("Variety" is properly used regarding different colors, but it is extended to refer to many different things: a varied poem, a varied speech, varied habits, varied fortune—even pleasure is customarily said to be varied . . .).³⁸ For Poliziano, as for many in the Renaissance, the pursuit of *varietas* was closely linked to a theory of imitation most famously expressed in Seneca's metaphor of the reader-writer as

36. Thomas M. Greene, *The Light in Troy: Imitation and Discovery in Renaissance Poetry* (New Haven, CT, 1982), 160, 165, 168.

37. *Ibid.*, 27, 169.

38. Cicero, *De finibus* 2.3.10.

a bee who must go from flower to flower to gather nectar from which to make its honey.³⁹ From his eventual position of authority as the leading humanist of Lorenzo's court, Poliziano would famously argue, as we already have seen, that going from flower to flower meant above all reading more than just Cicero.⁴⁰

If we cannot know how Poliziano responded to the barbarity of his father's murder, we can fairly safely guess what he would have thought of the barbarism of the record that we have just considered, had he ever read it. Beyond its vernacularisms, grammatical errors, and other infelicities, there is an almost parodic way in which this text, like many such legal documents, embodies a kind of antithesis to the ideal of *varietas*, from the repetition of "the aforementioned sir Benedetto" to, even more strikingly, the insistence on the phrase "cum maxima sanguinis effusione" again and again, quite literally ad nauseam, at least for readers with sensitive stomachs. The problem here is perhaps more than one of style. One cannot escape an additional sickening feeling that the superfluous repetition of this detail in the court record is somehow culturally linked to the superfluous repetition of violence on that bloody night. Probably we can say that the court clerk could no more escape the formulaic repetitiveness of his legalese than the citizens of Montepulciano could escape the cycle of violence to which Benedetto Ambrogini's murder belonged. Indeed, we learn the details rehearsed thus far not from any trial for the murder of Benedetto but from the trial of the men who, in retribution, subsequently killed Paolo, mercilessly and repeatedly stabbing him, "cum maxima effusione sanguinis." Violence, we might say, is the most predictable of traditions.

* * *

As fate would have it, the young humanist Poliziano soon had occasion to set to words a scene of similar horror. Eyewitness to the assassination of Giuliano de' Medici in the cathedral of Florence on April 26, 1478, and participant in his own small way in the chaotic efforts to save Giuliano's brother Lorenzo from the same fate, Poliziano soon after published his first printed work, the *Coniurationis commentariolum*, which narrates the episode and its immediate aftermath in rig-

39. Seneca, *Moral Epistles* 84.5, on which see G. W. Pigman, III, "Versions of Imitation in the Renaissance," *Renaissance Quarterly* 33, no. 1 (1980): 1–32.

40. For more on Poliziano's particular stake in *varietas*, see Ida Maïer, *Ange Politien: La formation d'un poète humaniste (1469–1480)* (Geneva, 1966), 203–15; Jean-Marc Mandosio, "La 'docte variété' chez Ange Politien," in *La 'varietas' à la Renaissance: Actes de la journée d'étude organisée par l'École nationale des chartes, Paris, 27 avril 2000*, ed. Dominique de Courcelles (Paris, 2001), 33–41; Clare E. L. Guest, "Varietas, Poikilia and the *Silva* in Poliziano," *Hermathena* 183 (2007): 9–48. More broadly, see William Fitzgerald, *Variety: The Life of a Roman Concept* (Chicago, 2016), with sporadic discussion of Poliziano and additional bibliography regarding both ancient and early modern varieties of *varietas*.

orously classical Latin. Poliziano's choice of Sallust's account of the conspiracy of Catiline as his model served two purposes. On the one hand, it lent historical gravitas to the events and republican virtue to the Medici cause. At the same time, it represented a major public demonstration of Poliziano's willingness and ability to follow ancient literary models other than Cicero. Indeed, in his choice of Sallust, Poliziano privileged a writer who, both stylistically and politically, could well be seen as the first great anti-Ciceronian, especially given that, in Poliziano's time, it was still thought that the invectives against Cicero that circulated under the name of Sallust were genuine.

Sallust, however, is only Poliziano's most persistent model; in his edition and commentary, Alessandro Perosa finds, in the course of the brief work, echoes of more than thirty-five ancient authors, to which may be added a few more.⁴¹ Let us consider the actual scene of Giuliano's murder:

Ibi primum peracta sacerdotis communicatione, signo dato, Bernardus Bandinus, Franciscus Pactius alique ex coniuratis, orbe facto, Iulianum circumdant. Princeps Bandinus, ense per pectus adacto, iuvenem transverberat. Ille moribundus aliquot passus fugitare, insequi illi. Iuvenis, deficiente spiritu, terrae concidit; iacentem Franciscus, repetito saepe ictu, pugione traiecit. Ita pium iuvenem neci dedunt. Qui Iulianum sequebatur famulus, terrore exanimatus, in latebras se turpiter coniecerat.⁴²

[At that point, as soon as the priest had finished his communion, a signal was given, and Bernardo Bandini, Francesco de' Pazzi, and others of the conspirators, having formed a circle, surrounded Giuliano. Bandini took the lead and pierced the youth, driving his sword straight through his chest. Giuliano, dying, was allowed to flee a few steps away; they followed. The youth, as his breath gave out, fell to the ground; as he lay there, Francesco stabbed him with his dagger, thrusting again and again. Thus they delivered the pious youth to his death. The servant who had been in Giuliano's train, breathless with terror, shamefully hid himself in the shadows.]

The relative lack of connective words and the use of historical infinitives is Sallustian. But "ense per pectus adacto" is taken from Ovid, "ferro per pectus adacto."⁴³ Likewise, "iuvenis deficiente spiritu terrae concidit" is a reworking of Apuleius,

41. Angelo Poliziano, *Della congiura dei Pazzi (Coniurationis commentarium)*, ed. Alessandro Perosa (Padua, 1958). Cited henceforth by its usual title, *Commentariolum*, but with Perosa's pagination.

42. *Ibid.*, 30–31.

43. Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 6.271–2: "Nam pater Amphion ferro per pectus adacto / finierat moriens pariter cum luce dolorem."

“exanimatus adulescens ille terrae concidit.”⁴⁴ Even the slave who runs and hides does so in language taken from Vergil.⁴⁵ Later, Poliziano emerges from the sacristy where he and others had taken refuge with Lorenzo. Lorenzo himself has already been spirited away, surrounded by friends who successfully kept him from seeing his brother’s corpse. Poliziano, however, was not spared the sight: “Ego recta domum perrexi Iulianumque multis confectum vulneribus, multo cruore foedatum miserabiliter iacentem offendi. Ibi titubans et prae doloris magnitudine vix satis animi compos, a quibusdam amicis sublevatus domumque sum deductus” (I headed home by the most direct route and came upon Giuliano lying there pitifully, riddled with wounds, filthy with gore. As I stood there, swaying back and forth, scarcely in my own right mind as I faced the magnitude of my grief, I was kept from falling by a few of my friends and led away home).⁴⁶ Even at this poignantly personal moment in the text, Poliziano seems to borrow a phrase or two from Valerius Maximus.⁴⁷

Poliziano’s borrowings, though eclectic, are anything but random. Rather, they suggest that a deliberate program of reading was part of his working process here. The bits of Valerius, for example, are from his chapter on the vicissitudes of men’s fortunes and from pages on prodigies and dreams.⁴⁸ The words Poliziano imports convey, by themselves, nothing of these contexts, which nevertheless make their way into the scene’s general feel, as Poliziano pauses in horrified and dizzying reverie before Giuliano, brought low. Even more striking are the echoes of Ovid and Apuleius. The first is from one of Ovid’s goriest and most pathetic episodes, as Apollo and Diana slaughter the children of Niobe, sending geysers of blood up from their pierced necks and fragments of lung flying out of their backs. But, although Poliziano borrows his language from the passage’s description of violence (the words he uses actually describe the suicide of Niobe’s disconsolate husband), in his grief he surely was drawn to the myth by the sequel to the carnage, as Niobe, transformed into a rock from which a small fountain trickles, weeps and weeps for all eternity. Most striking of all is the borrowed language with which Poliziano describes Giuliano falling to the ground, which at first glance seems radically de-

44. Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* 9.37.

45. Vergil, *Aeneid* 10.657: “Huc sese trepida Aeneae fugientis imago / conicit in latebras . . .”

46. Poliziano, *Commentariolum* 37.

47. Valerius Maximus, *Memorable Doings and Sayings* 1.7.2, “multis eum confectum vulneribus” (describing the prophetic dream of Caesar’s wife the night before his assassination; the echo of Caesar repeats at *Commentariolum* 58, where Poliziano reports the number of holes later found in Giuliano’s clothing, to which compare Mark Antony’s funeral oration as reported by Plutarch, *Life of Antony* 13.3), and 6.9.9, “miserabiliter iacentibus.”

48. The former later receives this general echo: “Ex hac tanta rerum commutatione saepe ego de humanae fortunae instabilitate sum admonitus . . .” (Poliziano, *Commentariolum* 62).

tached from its original Apuleian context, in which nearly the same words appear in negation to describe not a mortally wounded man who falls to the ground but rather one whose body is so firmly pinned to the ground by a javelin that he remains suspended, still on his feet, an upright corpse.⁴⁹ But the broader context reveals the connection, for the Apuleian victim is one of three brothers attacked by a murderous enemy. So too, we are reminded, does the Niobe story commemorate a massacre of siblings.

Our own ability, armed with lexica, thesauri, concordances, and internet search engines, to track down the echoes of classical literature in Poliziano and others, coupled with a healthy humility before the learning and prodigious memories of Renaissance humanists, often leads us to assume that such echoes were always meant to be heard and recognized, at least by an ideal reader—that is to say, a reader as learned as the writer himself. This is the game of encryption and decipherment we already have encountered in the *Letters*: a series of shibboleths that offer entry into the “Republic of the Learned” and its lofty temples of literary pleasure. There can be no doubt that Poliziano sometimes—indeed, often—plays such games. But to take such a view of the classical sources we have just examined is to strain credulity. Poliziano’s borrowings here are simply too brief, too fragmentary, too transformed to have been recognizable except by sheer serendipity. If, on the other hand, we suppose that Poliziano was simply fishing out uncustomary, but genuinely antique, combinations of Latin words, then we are left at something of a loss to explain why he limited himself to contexts so poignantly, but invisibly, connected to his theme. After all, if Poliziano, in quest of *varietas*, had set out to describe first the murder and then the lifeless body of Giuliano by a bricolage of decontextualized fragments of violent Latinity, then surely he would have found abundant material more easily on any of ancient literature’s ubiquitous battlefields, for example. Something more complicated must be at work here.

The eclectic (and even anti-Ciceronian) classical sources behind the *Commentariolum* make it exemplary of Poliziano’s early progress along the path that would eventually bring him into frontal conflict with Cortesi and others and spark the rejoinder with which we began: “Me tamen (ut opinor) exprimo.” But once again, how can Poliziano say that he expresses *himself*? Doesn’t he instead express Sallust, Ovid, Apuleius, Valerius Maximus, and so on? Where—and what—is “Poliziano” in this composite? In other words, if we are to take Poliziano’s precociously modern avowal of “self-expression” on anything like our own terms, then

49. Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* 9.37: “Nec tamen peremptus ac prorsum exanimatus adulescens ille terrae concidit; nam telum transvectum atque ex maxima parte pone tergum elapsus soloque nisus violentia defixum rigore librato suspenderat corpus.”

we might reasonably expect it to mean, among other things, that he has to some extent broken free from tradition. But *varietas* seems an insufficient means to any such freedom; indeed, it looks rather more like a deeper entanglement.

Poliziano does literally succeed in expressing himself in the *Commentariolum*, in that he is present in the narrative itself, nowhere more so than when he stands before Giuliano's corpse, *titubans*, "swaying back and forth." Perhaps it is no accident that this is Cicero's favorite word to describe the telltale hesitations of a man confronted with his own guilt. This is not to suggest, of course, that Poliziano was in any way complicit in or sympathetic to the plot. But perhaps *titubans* describes not just grief but also a certain kind of ambivalence: at the center of his narrative, the author sways back and forth, as if unsure whether he is in this picture or out of it, touched by its violence or unstained and extraneous, part of this story—or not. In fact, Poliziano the tottering narrator forms an almost literal pendant to the Apuleian source from which he earlier borrowed language to describe Giuliano's fall. The grief that transfixes Poliziano barely allows him to stand; the javelin that transfixes the youth in Apuleius does not permit him to fall. This exquisite balance traces a remarkable moment of identification between Poliziano and the dead Giuliano, but the symmetry is invisible to anyone who does not recognize the borrowing from Apuleius and remember its context. As we already have said, that is unlikely to have included any of Poliziano's early readers—except, of course, for Poliziano himself. And this indeed is where our material leads us: to the conclusion that, even in the midst of spectacular performances of his erudition, Poliziano is constructing meaning behind the scenes that he does not expect—or even especially want—his reader to see.

We are now prepared to consider a final peculiarity of the *Commentariolum*. Since Poliziano, few who have written about the Pazzi conspiracy and the subsequent reprisals have failed to call the events "bloody." Lauro Martines, in fact, has offered an account that makes "blood" part of its title and tries to position the episode within a quattrocento that was hemorrhaging everywhere, from political murders to gruesome public executions to the self-flagellation of penitents to graphic paintings of Christian martyrdom.⁵⁰ Such impressions have their limits, of course, and over the violent course of human history it is usually risky to single out any particular age as being especially bloodthirsty. Nevertheless, it is certainly true that life in the quattrocento was scarcely *less* bloody than average, as the murder of Poliziano's father makes all too emphatically clear, "cum maxima sanguinis effusione." And it is in this regard that the very careful reader can notice a rather re-

50. Lauro Martines, *April Blood: Florence and the Plot Against the Medici* (London, 2003).

markable omission in Poliziano's often eyewitness narrative: nowhere does Poliziano himself use the word *sanguis*—not about Giuliano, nor about other casualties among the Medici entourage, nor about Lorenzo himself, whose wounds were sucked because of fear that the conspirators' blades were poisoned, nor about the ensuing slaughter of men implicated in the plot, many of whose bodies were subjected to gruesome humiliation and dismemberment, described in ghastly detail. *Sanguis* does appear once in the *Commentariolum*, but, significantly, Poliziano is quoting. "I remember that I next entered the piazza," writes Poliziano, who there finds people variously mocking the butchered bodies of the conspirators. He then gives a list of what he heard people in the crowd saying about the murder of Giuliano, and among these is the complaint that the church had been "defiled by human blood," *pollutum humano sanguine*, that is, by blood other than Christ's.⁵¹ *Sanguis* thus makes its unique appearance in a strange and superstitious phrase that is jarringly unlike anything that Poliziano himself would ever say; the complaint is thus itself one of the prodigies he confronts along the course of his surreal *passeggiata*.

Poliziano's avoidance of the word *sanguis* does not mean that the resulting narrative is not bloody. On the contrary, he describes the body of Giuliano, for example, as "multo cruore foedatum" (filthy with abundant gore)—*cruor* being, indeed, a far bloodier word than *sanguis* itself. Poliziano's *Commentariolum* differs from the record of his father's murder not by being less violent, but by being more varied. Nevertheless, by completely excluding from his palette the single term most essential to his subject matter, Poliziano achieves a kind of radical *varietas* fully visible only to himself—and to that surely unforeseen reader mechanical enough to search the text for that one word most in evidence in the Montepulciano transcripts, finding in its absence, perhaps, a kind of quiet freedom from the world's bludgeoning monotony.

* * *

We have begun to see how, in his silences, his omissions, his parings and prunings, his way of saying something only barely, Poliziano sometimes speaks "de profundis." And with this nod to the title Oscar Wilde borrowed from the 129th Psalm for his letter from Reading Gaol to Alfred Douglas, we return to Poliziano's letter to Donà and to questions not of violence, but of sex. The letter, as we have seen, is dense with classical references generally, but it is especially so with allusions to the literature of same-sex love. Poliziano borrows heavily from Socrates's coy flirtation with Phaedrus at the beginning of Plato's dialogue, which,

51. Poliziano, *Della congiura* 47.

of course, will go on to discuss the nature of (pederastic) love; he invokes Achilles and Patroclus, the precise age hierarchy of whose relationship would become the subject of a chapter of the *Miscellanea*; he cites a lost love poem of Alcaeus, poet of Lesbos, addressed to a boy; he offers a sly wink at Horace describing promiscuous passion for “a thousand girls, a thousand boys.” One could perhaps include the letter’s digressions on Narcissus and self-love. And in at least one instance, Poliziano redeploys an originally heterosexual erotic image in a same-sex context, describing Pico’s effect on him as like the sky’s rape, through rain, of the earth.

Erotic, and specifically homoerotic, moments are, of course, in no short supply in classical literature, nor is Poliziano one to shy away from them generally. But their frequency in this letter does give the text a distinct sexual tension, surpassed in the collection only by the electric sadomasochism of Poliziano’s exchange with Pico about the latter’s erotic poems, sent to Poliziano with the request that the verses, personified as Cupids, be “spanked” and “skewered.”⁵² As that other letter makes clear, sexual passages need not “mean” sex; there they refer, first and foremost, to the correction of poetry. Nevertheless, the tone raises eyebrows, and it has often been assumed, for example, on the basis of such language and, more generally, the intensity and duration of their friendship, that Poliziano and Pico (nine years younger and celebrated for his beauty) were lovers.

Poliziano died at the age of forty—lovesick for a boy, claims Paolo Giovio, a half century later.⁵³ William Roscoe, at the end of the eighteenth century, in his biography of Lorenzo de’ Medici, which offers de facto biographies of several of Lorenzo’s contemporaries, including Poliziano, devotes a dozen pages to refuting the report.⁵⁴ “It is painful to reflect,” he opens, “on the propensity which has appeared in all ages to sully the most illustrious characters by the imputation of the most degrading crimes.” (It was all a misunderstanding, Roscoe will conclude, the result of a misread poem about the loss of Lorenzo.) Giovio and Roscoe are, in fact, only two of the most conspicuous contributors to a long conversation about the dead humanist’s sexuality that began shortly after his death and has continued to the present, brilliantly reconstructed by Alan Stewart as the opening (and unexpectedly Italian) chapter of his *Close Readers: Humanism and Sodomy in Early Modern England*.⁵⁵ Stewart frames his discussion with three fleeting winks at the

52. Poliziano, *Letters* 1.3.1.

53. Paolo Giovio, *Ritratti degli uomini illustri*, ed. Carlo Caruso (Palermo, 1999), after the *editio princeps* of the *Imagines clarorum virorum* (Venice, 1546), 118: “Ferunt eum, ingenui adolescentis insano amore percitum, facile in laetalem morbum incidisse.”

54. William Roscoe, *The Life of Lorenzo de’ Medici, Called The Magnificent* (Philadelphia, 1803), 351–62; first published in 1796 and often reprinted, though eventually in abridged form.

55. Alan Stewart, *Close Readers: Humanism and Sodomy in Early Modern England* (Princeton, NJ, 1997), 3–37.

subject by John Addington Symonds in his monumental *Renaissance in Italy*, written alongside what would become one of the first scholarly defenses of same-sex love in English, “A Problem in Greek Ethics,” first “published” (in a limited edition of ten copies) in 1883,⁵⁶ which attempts to reconstruct ancient pederasty on the basis, for example, of Plato’s *Phaedrus* and the various accounts of Achilles and Patroclus—both used by Poliziano, as we have just seen, to decorate his letter to Donà. Among the three passages in *Renaissance* considered by Stewart is a brief appreciation of Poliziano’s Greek verses, which would have deserved a place, Symonds suggests, among the pederastic poems of the *Greek Anthology*; this occasions an even briefer footnote on the accounts of his death.⁵⁷ A shared connection to ancient homoerotic exempla is not, however, all that links Poliziano’s homosexuality to that of Symonds, Stewart argues. Rather, “it is in Poliziano’s specific place within the complex social structures of Quattrocento Florence, as much as in his homoerotic verse, that we can find his vulnerability both to contemporary accusations of sodomy and to later appropriations by gay criticism.”⁵⁸ Stewart reconstructs that place largely on the basis of the humanist’s obscure falling out with Lorenzo’s wife, Clarice, which Symonds darkly blames on the presence of “many points in the great scholar’s character that justified her thinking him unfit to be the constant companion of young men”⁵⁹ but which Stewart attributes instead to the rivalry of two insider-outsiders, competing for power in the Magnificent’s house.

Stewart will follow this Florentine lesson forward through his English material, culminating in an investigation of the paradoxical meanings of the princely and secretarial “closet” in its English architectural sense: at once secret and central, notionally solitary but, in practice, often shared.⁶⁰ He explicitly offers this as an extended gloss on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s landmark work of gay studies, *The Epistemology of the Closet*, which argues that the history of homosexuality belongs also to the history of a formalism (my word, not theirs), that is, of a complex modulation between surface and depth, between “secrecy and exposure,” between saying and not saying, that is perhaps best exemplified by—but which is hardly unique to—the gay closet.⁶¹ Sedgwick finds this mechanism throughout “the gender, sexual, and economic structures of heterosexist culture at large”; like Stewart, in other words,

56. John Addington Symonds, *John Addington Symonds (1840–1893) and Homosexuality: A Critical Edition of Sources*, ed. Sean Brady (Basingstoke, 2012), 39–121.

57. John Addington Symonds, *Renaissance in Italy*, vol. 2: *The Revival of Learning* (London, 1877), 348.

58. *Ibid.*, 3.

59. *Ibid.*, 354.

60. Stewart, *Close Readers*, 161–87.

61. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, CA, 1990), 70–71.

she grounds the closet as a literary force (the primary object of study of both) in socioeconomic and sociopolitical realities, insisting, however, also like Stewart, that these realities need not always be (homo)sexual, however much actual gay people (or their early modern prototypes) may have to bear the ultimate weight of the closet's chain of significance. We shall return to these questions in a moment.

Stewart wrote without the benefit of Michael Rocke's *Forbidden Friendships*, which somewhat corrects his view of Poliziano's sodomitical reputation as necessarily "scandalous" in late quattrocento Florence.⁶² It is true that Rocke uncovers records in Florentine archives of two accusations of sodomy against Poliziano, one made while he was alive, the other after his death.⁶³ But Rocke also demonstrates that "in the later fifteenth century, the majority of local males at least once during their lifetimes were officially incriminated for engaging in homosexual relations."⁶⁴ Stewart concentrates instead on Savonarola's instigation, at the height of his power, of a kind of antisodomite panic; better evidence of the normal state of affairs is to be had in the widely reported quip of an official in attendance at Savonarola's execution: "Thank God, now we can sodomize!"⁶⁵ To be sure, sodomy was a crime, sometimes brutally punished, but Rocke's study of actual arrests by Florence's notorious antisodomy police force, the "Office of the Night," provides more evidence of exceptional tolerance (relative to other places) than it does of exceptional repression, which helps to explain, inter alia, why contemporary Germans used *Florenzer* as a euphemism for "sodomite."⁶⁶ To this relative permissiveness under the law may be added an analogous wink-and-nod attitude in Florentine rhetoric and humor. Without apology, for example, Bartolomeo Scala, chancellor of Florence, inserts a dirty four-line joke-poem about the etymology of *adolescens* into a letter to Poliziano, professor of rhetoric and poetry at the Florentine Studium, which the latter, in turn, did not hesitate to include in his collected correspondence.⁶⁷ Written from one *Florenzer* to another, this can hardly be read as the anxious secret code

62. Michael Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships: Homosexuality and Male Culture in Renaissance Florence* (New York, 1996); "Scandalous": Stewart, *Close Readers*, 9.

63. "E fra gli altri uno garzone che si chiama Duccio Mancino ne squittinò assai, e fra gli altri messer Agnolo da Montepulciano che chome e' nominò lui intendo non ne volle più," Archivio Guicciardini, Florence, Legazioni e Commissarie I, III (April 7, 1492). "Dixit quod dominus Angelus de Monte Politiano, preceptor Pieri de Medicis, ad presens mortu[u]s, una vice tamen ante quam decedetur sodomitavit ex parte post dictum Johannem," UN 30, 78v (July 23, 1496). Both quoted here from Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships*, 317–18.

64. Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships*, 5.

65. For the comment, its possible sources, and its spread, see *ibid.*, 221, 325.

66. *Ibid.*, 3.

67. Bartolomeo Scala, *Humanist and Political Writings*, ed. Alison Brown (Tempe, AZ, 1997), 170–74; Poliziano, *Letters* 5.2.6.

of a sexual subculture. Humanist Florence, in other words, seems far from the world of Symonds's privately circulated essay, which was likewise the world of Alfred Douglas's "love that dare not speak its name" (the final line of a poem he published in an Oxford student magazine) and of Wilde's artful appeal to Plato, inter alios, when cross-examined in court as to Douglas's meaning.

Beyond the walls of Renaissance Florence, however, that distance shrinks somewhat. Over the Alps (and three decades later), Ascensius, commenting on the same letter from Scala to Poliziano, feels compelled to add this disclaimer: "cavillum autem satis argutum, sed Christiano homine indignum est, vel quod audiat, vel quod obiiciat" (a clever enough jibe, but unworthy for a Christian man either to hear or to deliver). Far closer to home, the great Roman humanist Pomponio Leto had been arrested in Venice in 1468 for sodomy, on the basis of erotic Latin poems written to his students.⁶⁸ Venice, in fact, had seen a dramatic escalation over the course of the fifteenth century in efforts to repress sodomy, sometimes with atrocious violence, carefully studied by Guido Ruggiero, who closes with a brief note on how such efforts paradoxically revealed and even shaped the very "subculture" they continued to fail to silence.⁶⁹ Poliziano's Venetian friends could scarcely be unaware of this backdrop, which surely raised the stakes for a letter replete with emblems of ancient pederasty, postmarked Florence. But we can hardly suppose that Poliziano himself, who had briefly lived with those friends in Venice and who would soon correspond with Leto in Rome, simply makes an indiscreet blunder. (Donà, certainly, responds with equally flowery warmth—though without homoerotic allusiveness, we note, beyond the fact that he shapes a few lines of Theocritus, whose shepherds often pine for one another, into a brief encomium of Poliziano's poetry, more dear to him than "blooms to bees."⁷⁰) Rather, both the conspicuousness and the circumspection of Poliziano's allusions make it clear that he knew not only his addressee, but also his address. In other words, in the face of Venetian repressiveness regarding sodomy, Poliziano did not opt for discreet silence. Rather, he exploits the minimalist approach to allusion that regularly made his stylistic polish impenetrable to anyone not in the know in order to deploy an even denser allusiveness than usual. On the one hand, this consolidation in the face of oppression (witnessed, as will often be the case, from partially outside) arguably marks the emergence of an early gay identity in (if not

68. On this, and Leto's subsequent torture and imprisonment for an alleged plot against the pope by members of his Roman Academy, see Anthony F. D'Elia, *A Sudden Terror: The Plot to Murder the Pope in Renaissance Rome* (Cambridge, MA, 2009).

69. Guido Ruggiero, *The Boundaries of Eros: Sex, Crime, and Sexuality in Renaissance Venice* (New York, 1985), 109–68; on "subculture," 144.

70. Poliziano, *Letters* 2.11.2.

necessarily from) its proto-closet.⁷¹ At the same time, it reveals in Poliziano, regarding sexuality, a doubly historical consciousness, one that recognizes the importance not only of variation over time, which is why ancient exempla matter, but also of variation across space, which is why they especially matter when writing, not to a fellow Florentine, but to a Venetian. But what is most remarkable is the fact that all of this is grounded, first and foremost, not in the architectural dynamics of any real “closet” (though one cannot help comparing the Renaissance *studiolo*⁷²), nor in the only slightly metaphorical question of Poliziano’s “place” in the world or the Medici household but, rather, in the hidden depths and surface tension of his Latin style. *Me exprimo*: “I push myself—out.”

* * *

At the risk of banalizing the extraordinary moment we have just contemplated, we turn, in this brief final note, to some even broader implications of this nexus of humanist Latin, the secret, and the self. One could argue, of course, that such a trilogy was there from the beginning, already in Petrarch’s *Secretum* (*De secreto conflictu curarum mearum*), which he seems to have allowed no one but himself to read, and in which Augustine, his interlocutor, claims, “I have seen you silently complaining that things most clear in thought, indeed most easy for the mind to think, are the very things that neither pen nor tongue can adequately express [*nec lingua nec calamus sufficienter exprimeret*].”⁷³ Emboldened by Petrarchan precedent, let us borrow Poliziano’s *me exprimo* back from the history of homosexuality and use it to suggest a provisional place for humanist Latin “expression” in the philosophical history of the self.

Gnôthi seauton, “Know thyself,” proclaimed the oracular temple of Apollo at Delphi, in gold letters, to all who entered, a message that would become emblematic of the thought of Socrates.⁷⁴ Two millennia later, René Descartes would conclude, “Je pense donc je suis” (only later translated into Latin as “Cogito ergo sum”).⁷⁵ Poliziano, temporally closer to the latter but syntactically closer, via his reflexive pronoun, to the former, shares something crucial with both: Socratic

71. For a spirited defense of the relevance of the early modern (and earlier) “closet” to later gay identity, see David M. Robinson, *Closeted Writing and Lesbian and Gay Literature: Classical, Early Modern, Eighteenth Century* (Aldershot, 2006), esp. 3–83.

72. On which, see Stephen J. Campbell, *The Cabinet of Eros: Renaissance Mythological Painting and the Studiolo of Isabella D’Este* (New Haven, CT, 2006), 29–57.

73. Petrarch, *Secretum* 2.

74. Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 10.24.1.

75. Descartes, *Discourse on Method* 4, and *The Principles of Philosophy* 1.7.

self-knowledge, the Cartesian knowing self, and Poliziano's self-expression are, all three, processes more than they are products. Like the French philosopher's famous lump of wax, brought increasingly closer to a flame that changes all that can be sensed about it, though he knows it is the same wax,⁷⁶ Poliziano's page is only the end of a story that has unfolded in time and in space, a story fully known only to himself. And time and space are essential, I would suggest, to the questions of why Latin mattered to the humanists, and why the humanists matter, in turn, to the history of the self.

Literary Latin, already in antiquity, came to imply, as a matter of course, an underlying stratigraphy through the famously intertextual practices of ancient authors. Beneath every text lay other texts; beneath these, others still. Time, of course, would burrow holes through this sediment, cratering the surface and weakening the foundation even of surviving texts, which were left, by the time they reached the Renaissance, with countless dead links, to mix a modern analogue into our metaphor. The humanists made this terrain, with all its surface and subterranean erosion, the basis of their own literary style. Some preferred to stand on relatively firm footing—surely this is part of what motivated the Ciceronians—while others ventured onto shakier ground. Poliziano dared more than most, even delighting in making direct reference to works that no longer existed, like that to the lost pederastic poetry of Alcaeus in the letter to Donà, which he knew only through a brief quotation by Cicero. The reference is not only “to the unspeakable vice of the Greeks”⁷⁷ but also to a possibly unrecoverable part of the Greek literary past, the “unspeakable” being only one particularly painful subset of all “that neither pen nor tongue can adequately express,” for whatever reason: want of sources, permission, words, or excess of pain, grief, desire—all of which we have seen above.

It is sometimes assumed that the humanists thought—or at least hoped—that they or their successors would eventually unearth all of antiquity's treasures, getting finally to the bottom of every last blind reference. An analogous assumption about the archeology of the early modern self has shaped the reading of Poliziano's *me exprimo*, sure to disappoint anyone who expects the *Letters* to reveal the life of their author in any great detail: opportunities even for the shallow sort of excavation attempted in this article are rare. But Poliziano's readers would do well to revise their view of his (and others') scholarly optimism. As energetically as he worked to uncover and reassemble the past, and as loudly as he trumpeted his suc-

76. Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* 2.

77. E. M. Forster, *Maurice* (New York, 1971), 37–38, parodying Oxbridge classicists.

cesses, Poliziano, in the end, seems drawn to antiquity precisely by the fact that it would always lie mostly buried, shattered, lost.⁷⁸ For this, finally, is what makes antiquity like the *me* of *me exprimo*: not a self that has been laid bare, down to its foundations but, rather, a largely unexcavated ruin, the mottled surface of which may finally be more compelling than anything that lies below or stood before.

“Renaissance self-fashioning,” to ape a famous phrase, is generally understood as the crafting of publicly facing surfaces: paradigmatically, the elegant but strategic “masks” (*personae* in Latin) worn by courtiers, such as Poliziano himself.⁷⁹ Poliziano’s complexly surfaced self, however, reveals cracks in this very metaphor. Beneath ruined surfaces always lie other surfaces; beneath these, others still. In other words, there is no final, irreducibly truthful depth to which such surfaces are opposed. At the same time, however, it would be a mistake to conclude from this that even the most intimate self is fundamentally “superficial.” Surface is not an impediment to truth or intimacy; on the contrary, it can be the very stuff of which both are made. Think of doubting Thomas, for example, feeling the holes in Christ’s body, or even of Savonarola, “wounded” in turn by God. Poliziano’s style, to be sure, is generally subtler, but it nonetheless aims to multiply the self’s surfaces and their affordances. As we have seen, some of those affordances are so fleeting as to seem best understood as private grapplings with what English aptly calls “feelings.” Elsewhere Poliziano reaches out—sometimes cautiously, as we have seen—toward intimates who may feel similarly about this or that. Beyond these close circles lie other readers, who, if they share the author’s feeling for language and letters, are welcomed with open arms. All of this, I would suggest, is what Poliziano thinks he has expressed, not just with style, but as style. His clear aim is to make his presence palpably felt, in and as words he does not so much use

78. On this point, and more generally on the complexity of the allusive webs Poliziano weaves, see David Quint, “Ascanius in Love: A Reconsideration of Poliziano’s *Stanze*,” in *The Afterlife of Virgil*, ed. Peter Mack and John North (London, 2017), 45–62. Quint unpacks Poliziano’s multiple sources with enviable dexterity, but his aim, as he explains, is to offer “a coherent reading of the poem, something which allows us to hear in it a constant, mournful undersong,” a lament for lost youth and innocence that “extends to the classical world itself, a world to which the humanist Poliziano knows that he cannot return, study and imitate it as he may” (49, 61).

79. Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (1980; Chicago, 2005), which opens with a useful set of “governing principles,” including this one: “Self-fashioning is always, though not exclusively, in language” (9). As Greenblatt rather obliquely acknowledges (xiii), his own attention to the figure of “fashioning” (Latin, *effingere*) the self in the Renaissance was anticipated by that of Thomas Greene, “The Flexibility of the Self in Renaissance Literature,” in *The Disciplines of Criticism: Essays in Literary Theory, Interpretation, and History*, ed. Peter Demetz, Thomas Greene, and Lowry Nelson Jr. (New Haven, CT, 1968), 241–64. Greene’s examples include Pico della Mirandola and Erasmus, the former of whom, we might note, was Poliziano’s closest friend, while the latter was probably his closest reader.

as inhabit. Metaphors of surface and depth, productive as they have been to parts of our analysis, finally collapse here: Poliziano's style does not privilege the former; rather, it resolutely refuses to draw any neat distinction between the two.

Such a style, of course, endlessly frustrates the impatient reader who instead wants to get to the bottom of things, and so wishes that the author would himself get to the point, full stop. But just as a self can never be expressed exhaustively, so too must the work of a more sensitive reader remain forever unfinished. For this better reader, Poliziano's self is no enigma. Rather, it is forever surfacing, page after page.