CHAPTER 1

Art and Compunction: Francesco Bocchi’s Mystical Experience of Art

Compunction in Renaissance Literature on Art

The flowering of literature on art during the Italian Renaissance, as discussed in the introduction, has often been linked to humanist interest in classical culture. Despite the clear relationship between the two, it would be difficult to deny the presence of Christian themes in Renaissance writings on art, though no thorough attempt has been made to delineate their scope and character. Amidst the variety of devotional patterns and practices that shaped Renaissance attitudes toward art (and therefore, amidst the many possible starting points for this study), the theme of religious compunction and penitence is particularly rich and I have chosen it as a lens through which to view the myriad of spiritual motifs that are woven into fifteenth- and sixteenth-century texts on art in Italy. This chapter will outline the nature of religious compunction and illustrate how it can help unpack many spiritual terms, metaphors and concepts in Italian Renaissance writings on art. Following this, a more in-depth consideration of one particular sixteenth-century text on art, Francesco Bocchi’s treatise in praise of the miracle-working image of the Annunciation at the church of the Santissima Annunziata in Florence, will further reveal the complex interrelationships between the devotional experience of compunction and the writings on art of the Italian Renaissance. Throughout this book, compunction will continue to serve as a point of orientation, bringing into focus the spiritual qualities of writings on art.

Compunction is an enduring element in Christian spirituality. It had a strong presence in Latin patristic literature as well as in spiritual texts of the Middle Ages and the Early Modern period. Briefly stated, compunction is a movement of God within the soul causing man or woman to feel grief for his or her sins, inspiring him or her to reject worldly goods, to purge his or her soul, and finally to rebuild his or her soul in God alone.1 It is related to the guilt and misery that comes from worldly experience and, in contemporary parlance,

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1 For an overview, see New Catholic Encyclopaedia, 2nd ed., 15 vols. (Detroit: Thomson Gale, in association with the Catholic University of America, 2003), s.v. “compunction.” The literature on compunction is surveyed in Piroska Nagy, Le don des larmes au Moyen âge: un instrument
compunction often means simply guilt. In the medieval Christian tradition, as described by the medieval historian Jean Leclercq, within the worldly misery of terrestrial life, the grace of God was said to provoke an internal “piercing” or “pressing” (cum-pungere), a spiritual pain that motivated man to reject sensual pleasure and to love only the spiritual gifts of God. Leclercq writes that compunction was a “pain of the spirit” leading to “humility, detachment from the world . . . and the consciousness of our need for God.”

Compunction, therefore, entailed both the pain of guilt and the joy of God’s love. The notion of painful love, naturally, precedes Christianity, and occurs for instance in the Song of Songs, where the bridegroom reveals that the bride has “ravished [his] heart with a glance of [her] eyes” (Song of Sol. 4:9); equally, in pagan sources, cupid literally pierces the heart with love. In St. Augustine’s

4 On the double aspect of compunction see Leclercq, Love of Learning, 29–31. Also see Carol Straw, Gregory the Great: Perfection in Imperfection (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), chapter 11, 23n72. On the mystical meaning of compunction, and tears as signs of God’s grace, see Nagy, Le don des larmes au Moyen Âge. For a summary of mystical themes in Gregory the Great, including compunction, see McGinn, Essential Writings, 367 and McGinn, Presence of God, 2: 49. For a discussion of compunction as a meditative experience in the monastic tradition, see Mary Carruthers, The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric and the Making of Images, 400–1200 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 96.