CHAPTER 2

Approaching Censorial Reading

Sapendo quanto nocumento del Demonio et per mezzo trovato de buoni
la lettione de diversi libri scritti per istinto del Demonio et mezzo trovato
da lui per seminare zizania nel Campo della Chiesa de Dio . . .

*Editto per ordine della Santa Inquisitione*

2.1 The Virgin Text

“Censorship” (“censura”) is more than an “examination”, “judgment” or an
“authoritarian instrument of communication control.”¹ Such definitions focus
on a central motive of censorship, and express only a part of the entire phe-

omenon. Counter-Reformation censorship is to be understood as a complex
instrument of the Roman Catholic Church, which had its own complex view
of spiritual and intellectual experience. As Vittorio Frajese argues, its censor-
ship was woven into the spiritual ideological concept of the Catholic faith and
linked to the theology of sin.² While it might sound quite simple, it opens a
perspective on censorship that is more extensive than the idea of censorship as
an examination and judgment. It helps approach censorship’s complex devel-

opment during the sixteenth century.

Exactly what the *censura* of books implied becomes clearer when one
examines the field of canon law. Frajese calls to mind that in medieval canon
law, ecclesiastical censure (“censura”) was a spiritual punishment to cor-
rect Christians. He emphasizes that the same aim of spiritual correction was
present in censorship practice. He understood censorship to be an opera-

tion derived from canon law where it not only aimed to correct texts but also
human consciousness as a form of “spiritual medicine” (“medicina spirituale”).
The language of the Roman Catholic Church’s official documents justifying
censorship suggests that censorship originated in the cult of purity linked to
the cult of virginity.³ In 1543, for instance, the Roman Inquisition explained the

¹ See Stephan Fitos, *Zensur als Misserfolg. Die Verbreitung indizierter deutscher Druckschriften in der zweiten Hälft

des 16. Jahrhunderts* (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 2000), 1, or Hubert Wolf, *Index. Der Vatikan und die verbotenen Büch

² Cf. Vittorio Frajese, *Nascita dell’Indice. La censura ecclesiastica dal Rinascimento alla

Controriforma* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2006), iii, 2, 1.

³ Ibid., esp. 290–1, 274–7.
need to combat heresy for the purpose of maintaining the purity of the faith. A few years later the *Index* was introduced as a means of protecting purity and restoring good morals. Consequently, censorship measures taken to restore the purity of texts were conceived as “purification” (“purgatio”, “expurgatio” or “repurgatio”); this reflects the same policy. But what did ‘purifying’ a text actually mean? The concept implied the restoration of a pure or virginal state and was viewed as the “reform” (“ri-forma”) or “restoration” of an original condition (“restauratio originis”).4

If the Roman Church claimed to “re-form” or “restore” a text to its pure virginal state, the implication was that the Church aimed to give shape to a text that had previously not existed, at least not in written form. How could this concept be explained? The Roman Church provides an answer in *Apostolici regiminis*, where Leo X claims that there is only one truth known to the one Church. All ideas and doctrines deviating from the one truth are considered false distortions.

Augustine’s treatise *De civitate Dei* may help to elucidate the idea of the presence of truth in a “pure” text. Augustine sketches a vivid picture of a city of God (“civitas Dei”) and an earthly city (“terrena civitas”) by drawing upon the opposition of purity and impurity.5 According to Augustine, the city of God originated in the world of angels, while the earthly city was produced by fallen angels who rebelled against God. The former existed prior to the latter and contains “the good men,” whereas the “wicked men” belong to the latter.6 These two cities sprang from two kinds of love: the earthly city from self-love “to the contempt of God” and the celestial one from divine love “to the contempt of self.” Whereas the citizens of God’s realm yearn for God, the citizens of the earthly realm are slaves to their desire for power and other earthly vanities.

This concept implies that a citizen of the eternal city creates something through his faith, divine love and enlightenment. His product is thus a product of the eternal city. Likewise, a product created by a citizen of the earthly city is

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4 Ibid. 274–8, 280, 282. Cf. *ILLI*, viii, 100–6. For examples of the use of the word *repurgatio* see the prohibition of Teofilo Folengo’s *Opus macaronicum, Index* of 1590, *ILLI*, ix, 833: “Nisi ex ratione superiorum regularum repurgatum fuerit.” and Indexes of 1593 and 1596, in ibid. 893 and 963: “Nisi repurgatum fuerit.” By contrast, the remark on the subsequent entry in the *Index* of 1590, works by Marcantonio Flaminio, speaks of “correction”: “Quamdiu ex supradicta regularum ratione correcta non fuerint.”
