LORENZO VALLA AND THE DE FALSO CREDITA DONATIONE: RHETORIC, FREEDOM, AND ECCLESIOLOGY IN THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY

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(translated by Patrick Baker)

“No one will ever get to the very bottom of Valla’s arguments, which were most certainly not ignorant, without first grasping canon law and arriving at a true understanding of theology.”

— Felino Sandei

In 1433 Lorenzo Valla presented his De voluptate (On Pleasure) to prominent members of the humanist circle in Florence: Leonardo Bruni, Carlo Marsuppini, and Ambrogio Traversari. From these three readers he knew to expect a rather critical response, or at least one not without reservations. Nevertheless, his respect for the Florentine humanists and for their special competence in both Greek and Latin literature moved Valla to offer up his De voluptate to their reading and judgment.

Contrary to what would be said of him later, and above all in the wake of Poggio Bracciolini’s invectives against him, Valla always submitted his own writings, especially the most demanding, to the judgment of those he esteemed and admired. He had already done so with his first essay, De comparisone Ciceronis Quintilianique (A Comparison of Cicero and Quintilian). This he sent by way of his friend Antonio Beccadelli to Marsuppini, whom he (Valla) considered the greatest connoisseur of the classical tradition among all his contemporaries.

In the specific case of De voluptate, Valla nurtured the desire for a positive, even if critical, reaction from the Florentines. With this his most demanding work since the Comparatio, he even hoped for the affirmation

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1 Wolfram Setz, Lorenzo Vallas Schrift gegen die Konstantinische Schenkung, De falsa credita et ementita Constantini donatione: Zur Interpretation und Wirkungsgeschichte. (Tübingen: M. Niemeyer, 1975), 123: “Rationes autem, quibus Valla non certe omnino indecte motus est, ... nemo unquam medulitus evacuabit, nisi pontificium ius et veram theologie cognitionem adeptus fuerit.”
of the humanists of the Roman curia, and in particular of Bracciolini. What he got instead was heavy criticism from Poggio, who, to Guarino Veronese (and others), denounced both the *Comparatio* – for its anti-Ciceronianism – and *De voluptate* – for its fully elaborated anti-Stoicism and neo-Epicureanism. Poggio was the first of all his contemporaries to perceive the young Valla's originality and "arrogance" toward authority and tradition, as he (Poggio) wrote to Guarino and was wont to repeat thereafter.²

The letters that Bruni and Marsuppini wrote to Valla in response to his *De voluptate* are well known, although they have perhaps not yet been adequately analyzed. Traversari's response is also known, but it will be worth our while to recapitulate its salient aspects here. The Camaldolese monk admits first that he is incapable, at least for the present, of giving a considered response to the theses argued in *De voluptate*; his many duties have permitted him only a hasty reading. Nevertheless, he does not neglect to make known (and with a certain insistence, it must be added) his personal approval for the freedom with which Valla, in imitation of the ancients, criticized the classical ethics of the philosophers and elaborated new ideas. Traversari concludes his letter to Valla thus:

> Everyone is free to defend and steadfastly argue his own opinions; there is nothing inappropriate in coming to conclusions contrary to the judgments of the philosophers, as long as we defend them with worthy and true arguments.³

Now, it is undoubtedly true that Traversari was busy with activities that denied him the leisure to discuss in detail Valla's ethics of the Good (*summum bonum*) as pleasure (*voluptas*). Nevertheless, one has the impression

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³ The text of Traversari's letter to Valla is in Luciano Barozzi and Remigio Sabbadini, *Studi sul Panormita e sul Valla* (Firenze: Le Monnier, 1891), 6aff.: "Liberverum [est] semper cuique et tueri et constanter asserere opiniones suas; non itaque improbo si quid contra philosophorum sentiamus inventa, si modo nostra probabilibus verisque rationibus muniamus."