Chapter 10

Imitation and Animality: On the Relationship between Nature and History in Chapter XVIII of The Prince

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Although the envious nature of men has always made it no less dangerous to find new modes and orders than to seek unknown waters and lands [...] nonetheless [...] I have decided to take path as yet untrodden by anyone, and if it brings me trouble and difficulty, it could also bring me reward [...].

With his historical investigation of political orders – which constitutes an authentic rediscovery of the continent of History – Machiavelli poses a new challenge: not a venture into unknown waters, with the risk of failing or, like the Vikings, inadvertently reaching new lands, but a mindful, unequivocal and explicit discovery, as the illustrious Florentine Amerigo Vespucci had announced in his epistle from the New World. This discovery challenges ‘the envious nature of men’ and yet is paradoxically based on it: with the same move Machiavelli intends to inquire both the nature of history and human nature itself (of which envy and ambition are major features). The rest of the Preface, its methodological assumption, the compass and the charts that guide him in the Atlantic crossing, are part of a mimetic theory that is articulated with great originality, within the classical and general context of Humanism. Getting straight to the point, I would like to compare this oceanic opening of the Machiavellian masterpiece with the well-known metaphor of the centaur in Il Principe chapter 18. Here, imitation is put forward without mediation – in a

* Cicero edited the posthumous work De rerum natura (ed. Ferguson Smith) of Lucretius in the middle of the first century BC and composed his De officiis in 44 BC. In fine, the Historiarum florentini populi libri XII of Leonardo Bruni were published between 1439 and 1444 and translated in Italian by Donato Acciaiuoli (Historia fiorentina) in 1473.

1 D Preface.
short circuit – and its object is a liminal figure that stands between animality and humanity, as the waves of the sea and those of history overlapped in the minds of those who sought less travelled routes.

‘The imitation of the beast takes the place of the imitation of God’ – is Leo Strauss’s graphic declaration; the Beast Man opposed to the God Man includes and understands man in light of the sub-human rather than of the super-human and of contemplative life. More precisely, the key feature of the Machiavellian anti-theology is the assumption that modern imitation is based not on the dual nature, human and divine, of Christ (as Auerbach interprets the medieval creatural figurativeness) nor on the king’s double body, but on the dual nature, human and animal, of Chiron the centaur. In the figure all the carnal and fleeting traits of the ‘creatura’ – firstly Christ’s suffering – vertically refer to a moment of the providential plan of our sacred history, explaining or anticipating it. The human body stands for the divine one, incarnating and representing it, following Kantorowicz’s metaphorical reading: the metaphors of regality are traced up to Dante’s Humanism, where the corpus mysticum is straightened out and secularised into the humana civilitas. This duplicity therefore implies that mundane power is a tangible representation of the transcendent, that is to say precisely the theory of papal and secular imperial sovereignty from which Machiavelli distances himself, refusing a theological-political approach and embracing an empirical one.

Il Principe chapter 18 notoriously deals with the virtues that the new prince needs to have, ruthlessly playing on appearances: ‘Therefore it is unnecessary for a prince to have all the good qualities I have enumerated, but it is very necessary to appear to have them.’ The issue of the re-qualification of virtues through mere appearance, and the correspondence between means and ends, led some scholars to interpret the chapter 18 – explicitly linked to the sixth chapter on Valentino – as a vivid illustration of the divorce between politics and morals. Nevertheless we should try to focus on the opening of chapter 18,

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2 Strauss 1958, pp. 78 and 295–7. Machiavelli himself is a Chiron of a new kind, because he candidates himself as “teacher” of the new Prince, Lorenzo de’ Medici, to whom Il Principe is dedicated.

3 Auerbach, 2013 passim see, for example, chapter 3, ‘The Arrest of Peter Valvomeres’, pp. 73–5. On figural interpretation, see Auerbach 1938, pp. 436–89. See also Singleton 1954, and 1958.

4 A late Latin term from Evangelium.

5 Kantorowicz 1957, pp. 467–8. See Kahn 2009, pp. 79–88 and 91–5, for the reconfiguration of the humana civilitas as cosmopolitan empire, in diametrical opposition to the Schmitt’s notion of Catholic political theology.

6 P 18.

7 Sasso 1993, pp. 455–72.