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Chiara Lastraioli

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***Circles of Interpretation and the Printing World:
the Case of the Community of "Italian Exiles"
in French-Speaking Countries in the Sixteenth Century***

Chiara Lastraioli

(CESR – Université François Rabelais, Tours)

The renewal of religious thought in fifteenth- and sixteenth- century Italy was largely determined by the peninsula's geopolitical fragmentation – a fragmentation which manifested in the emergence of multiple centres of interpretation of sacred texts, located in many different places. The spread of evangelist and the reformation theories were likewise linked, especially in the lay population, to regional variations; notably those concerning the literacy rates of the middle and lower classes, which varied according to the economic models adopted by the different regions. The presence of a literate, administrating and trading class in Italy's principal commercial and financial centres (Venice, Genoa, Siena and Florence) frequently went hand in hand with a certain degree of literacy in the lower classes; it was not uncommon, for example, to find craftsmen, artists, barber-surgeons, small shopkeepers and traders who could and did read in the vernacular. In addition, the existence of a network of *studii* and universities – often situated in relatively out-of-the-way towns with respect to the main religious and political centres of Italy (Padua, Bologna, Pisa) – favoured the development of written culture and reading practices centred, first, around the workshops of copyists and, later, around the first printing presses. If, in addition, we consider the massive presence of literate, regular and secular clergy in the urban *milieux*, and the organisation of councils in various Italian towns during the 15th and 16th centuries, it comes as no surprise that the reinterpretation of religious thought became at this time a major subject of interest for the middle- and, to a certain extent, lower-class urban *milieux*. The rural world was less affected by these phenomena, at least during the 15th century. In southern Italy, where the *latifundia* and general urban rarefaction determined the acculturation of the poorest classes, new circles of interpretation do not seem to have emerged at all. However, in Calabria, Puglia (as in some regions of north-western Italy), a number of Vaudian communities would respond, in the 16th century, to the call from transalpine reformation movements.

It is of course undeniable that, in the course of the 15th century, the first reforming inclinations emerged among the most educated members of Italian society, notably the high clergy, jurists, high-placed civil administrators and humanists. It is only later that can this

movement be observed amongst merchants and craftsmen. The return of the papal court to Rome, the hegemonic ambitions of the pontiffs during the second half of the 15th century and the intensely dissenting spiritualism of certain religious orders – notably exemplified by Girolamo Savonarola – all prepared the ground for the reception of Erasmian theories – at the heart of the Roman Catholic Church as among the lay population. Calls for institutional and moral reform within the Church went hand in hand with insistent voicing of the need to return to the simplicity of Christ's message. It was also accompanied, in humanist and Neoplatonist circles, by a philological and individual approach to sacred texts. The mix of Neoplatonism, millennialism and aspirations to renew the Church could hardly fail to be explosive. Indeed the shattering impact on confessional unity echoed on for decades, eventually resulting in the strong and carefully-concerted reaction organised by the Roman Catholic Church from the 1540s onwards.

As presses spread and the Italian publishing industry flourished, new intellectual and socio-economic figures emerged. Presses became centres of instruction and learning. Press workers frequently learnt to read and write, sometimes even the women and youth hired for the simplest tasks. But above all, presses were meeting places for booksellers, pedlars, humanists, polygraphs, translators, type-founders, book-binders, engravers and other illustrators. A whole world of people met up to exchange knowledge, know-how and new ideas, in addition to money and commercial strategies for trading within Italy and with the transalpine countries. The mobility of almost all the people involved in the intellectual and material production of books, as well as that of the merchants, agents and pedlars who ensured their diffusion, was an important factor in the dissemination of reformed confessions of faiths throughout Europe. Over the past few decades, the role of the press in the dissemination of religious ideas during the early modern period has frequently been underlined. It is however almost always the books which these presses produced that are highlighted as a major means of conveying all kinds of religious messages – orthodox, heterodox, dissenting and Counter-Reformation. Certainly books did play a major role: read by believers, alone or in groups, the ideas they contained were reflected on, annotated, commentated, underlined and re-elaborated. But presses were more than just the books they produced. Very much less studied, but equally determinant, is the role played by presses as places of exchange, crossroads which brought together figures from diverse social and cultural backgrounds. Some of these figures spent more or less all their time on the press premises, some collaborated constantly, but lived elsewhere, others still only passed by

occasionally, to hand over a manuscript, receive a translation or deliver a set of letters. All, however, ended up coming into contact with others printers and merchant-booksellers and other economic and cultural *milieux*: universities, academies, religious institutions, etc. And all the while, these press workers and associates were weaving a fabric of connections which would serve as an important base for both new commercial societies and new cultural and confessional networks.

It is in this light that the community of Italian exiles is such an interesting case-study. This community played a key role in the diffusion of humanism, the development of the European book market and, at different periods, in the emergence and dissemination of alternative religious thought. Italian merchants and bankers had been installed in many parts of Western Europe since the Middle Ages. Originally from Milan, Venice, Genoa, Florence, Lucca and Siena, these Italian immigrants were often well integrated in the countries they had settled in. They nevertheless continued to maintain strong familial and commercial ties with the motherland. Whence also came a good part of their staff: accountants, brokers, secretaries – that is to say, a whole range of specialised and literate workers. When, at the very beginning of the 16th century, many Italians were more or less forced to emigrate across the Alps, due to the Italian wars and the political turbulence which successively convulsed the Kingdom of Naples and the Republic of Florence, the exiles naturally sought refuge among the Italian communities already installed in France, Switzerland and Flanders. Among these exiles were certain Neapolitan humanists and aristocrats who brought with them, besides their retainers, a number of impoverished politicians and scholars. The latter often roamed from one country to another seeking employment or benefactors, mixing, as they did so, with a wide variety of learned and religious *milieux*. The examples are numerous; I shall only mention one: Antonio Brucioli, the first Italian translator of the Bible, who I single out because his itinerary seems to me to be emblematic of a whole generation. Brucioli's first period of exile was passed in France from 1522 to 1526/27. He was forced to leave Italy after being implicated, along with several fellow-members of the humanist set *Orti Oricellari*, in a series of conspiracies against Cardinal Giulio di Giuliano de' Medici (the future Clement VII). In France, Brucioli entered into contact with the famous Hebraist Sante Pagnini, who taught him Hebrew. Also while in France, he probably wrote the first version of his *Dialogi*, a composite work, dealing principally with a series of moral and political questions, but which also gave vent to a number of religious queries. Conceived to please Francis I, Brucioli hoped the work would help him obtain a university chair. This hope was however thwarted and Brucioli was forced

to quit Paris for Lyon. Lyon was at the time home to an important Tuscan community; it also boasted a flourishing publishing industry. Besides meeting up with a number of fellow-exiles from Florence (Alamanni, Buondelmonti, Giovambattista della Palla), Brucioli thus came into contact with the printing milieu. Both the personal contacts and the experience of the publishing industry he acquired at this time served him in good stead later, when he opened in Venice, with his brothers, a publishing house specialised in ancient texts. Brucioli's contacts in Paris, Lyon and Germany (where he went in 1525, to defend the rights of the Duke of Milan before the Emperor), enabled him acquire the works of Erasmus, Thomas More, Jean de Bovelles and Bucer. In France, he also maintained connections with the evangelist *milieux* surrounding Margaret of Navarre. Once back in Florence and, later, in his Venetian refuge, he continued to maintain strong ties with the *fuoriusciti* and with certain French printers, who had published translated extracts from his *Dialogi*. Brucioli significantly dedicated the *editio princeps* of his Italian translation of the Bible, published in 1532, to Francis I, in spite of the recent condemnation of Lefèvre d'Étaples' French translation and the Sorbonne's ban, issued in 1526, on all French translations of the Bible.

The years Brucioli spent in exile during the 1520s do not constitute an isolated example. On the contrary, Brucioli's path was followed by dozens and dozens of political and *religionis causa* exiles, who, fleeing Italy from the 1540s onwards, found refuge in France and Switzerland, before migrating elsewhere. Among these exiles, some issued from the aristocracy and/or the higher ranks of the Church; for example, Bernardino Ochino, the vicar-general of the Capuchins, and Ortensio Lando, member of the Augustinian order. Others, such as Celio Secondo Curione, Ludovico Castelvetro and Giovanni Michel Bruto, came from scholarly and academic *milieux*. The prize for the most torturous itinerary certainly goes to Giovanni Michel Bruto. He lived in France, Switzerland, Flanders, Hungary, Transylvania, as well as in Cracow – as did Fausto Sozzini, Prospero Provana and the famous doctor, Simone Simoni. All collaborated at one time or another with Italian or Italian-speaking printers established in France and Switzerland (both the French- and German-speaking parts). Some also worked with printers based in Antwerp. Naturally, the poorest and least well-connected ex-patriarchs rarely travelled as far afield as these men. By the middle of the 16th century, a good many craftsmen of Italian origin were to be found in France; many also settled in Switzerland and Strasbourg, but they thin out considerably in the other Germanic provinces of the empire. The majority of these craftsmen were weavers, armourers and, especially in Lyon, press workers. At least some of them came into contact with reformed circles in their adopted

countries. The cause of their exile and the places they passed through before settling vary according to their original provenance and the period; political conflicts, famines and, for those who had already embraced the Reformation, the repressions of the Roman Catholic Church were all determining factors. Those who came from Naples, Cremona, Milan and Calabria almost all left their homes during the same period to escape persecution by the Inquisition; they thus travelled up through the peninsula in small groups and all crossed the Alps within a relatively short period of time. Those who came from Piedmont, on the other hand, migrated over a lengthy period of time, crossing the border in a slow but steady stream all through the 16th century. This, together with the fact that some were French-speaking and/or of Vaudian confession, greatly facilitated their integration into the economic and social fabric of countries they settled in.

As far as the publishing *milieu* is concerned, the migration of printers from Piedmont and Lombardy to France noticeably accelerated from the end of the 15th century onwards. The resulting immigrant communities increased still further in the course of the 16th century, when bookseller-printers from the Veneto region and Tuscany also started moving to France. Jean Suigo di San Romano, Nicola Benedetti, Bonino Bonini, Bartolomeo Trotti, Baldassarre I and Lussemburgo I da Gabiano, Vincenzo Portonari and Simone Bevilacqua all belong to the first generation of printers who settled in Lyon between 1490 and 1530. Their catalogues are rather eclectic, bringing together classical authors, fifteenth-century humanists (Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, Zabarella) and religious works (liturgies, devotional works, etc.), and often associating these different genres. While collaborations with local printers were not uncommon, these Italian printers tended to maintain strong links with printers in Italy, both with an eye to commercialising their publications and in order to exchange tricks of the trade and tips on typographic equipment and materials. Amongst the printers I have just mentioned, some founded veritable publishing dynasties, which continued to be active for many decades and survived the multiple upheavals that shook France during the wars of religion. The commercial astuteness of the Gabiano family is exemplary. In addition to their activities as printer-booksellers, the two founders of the enterprise in Lyon, the brothers Baldassarre I and Lussemburgo I, specialised in counterfeiting the prestigious Aldine editions. Numerous collaborations and agreements between the Gabiano family and other Italian and French printers – either occasional or long-running –, were “doubled” by carefully arranged marriages, aimed at consolidating the family's presence on the French and international market. After converting to Calvinism, probably around 1550, the family opened a trading

post in Geneva where they could acquire books banned in France and liquidate a part of the stock produced in Lyon, essentially comprised of texts in Latin. Another family member, Giovanni Bartolomeo, set up a society in Flanders with a certain Francesco Bonanome, and another in Venice with Aliprandi. The Gabiano family, similarly to other Italian publishers like the Giunti and the Honorati, built their reputation on scholarly publications rather than on works of divulgation or propaganda. Their catalogue thus contains neither publication in Italian, nor works dealing with religious reform. This did not, however, hinder new ideas from circulating in their *milieu*. In the 1550s, Calvinist typographic workers in Lyon took part in armed marches and committed acts of iconoclasm. After the meeting of the fourth national synod in Lyon in 1563, rich Italian booksellers who had passed over to the Reformation publicly assumed their status as eminent members of the Protestant community. Already in 1554, Bartolomeo da Gabiano had bought a house in the rue des Estableries to serve as a place of Protestant worship. Ten years later, he bought, together with the French printer François Desgouttes, another building which would be transformed into the Protestant church known as “The Paradise”, before being destroyed a few years later. Sebastian Honorati was similarly engaged, becoming, in 1563, a member of the Consistory and going on to play a major role therein. When in 1567, the Catholics retook control of Lyon, numerous reformed Italians joined the growing flux of migrants who left for Geneva between 1555 and 1572, the year of the St Bartholomew's Day massacre. These migrants included members of the Tinghi, Honorati and Gabiano families, a number of rich merchants and bankers, several nobles and a multitude of workers and craftsmen. The registers listing the inhabitants and the bourgeoisie of Geneva, though incomplete, enable us to evaluate this exodus both quantitatively and qualitatively. They also attest to the solidarity between members of the Italian Protestant congregation – of which Bernardino Ochino was the first minister –, as well as between the new arrivals and the Italian immigrants who had settled on the banks of Lake Geneva several decades earlier.

The activities of the Italian printer-booksellers established in Geneva since the 1540s were – for good reasons – very different from those of the printers of Lyon. The catalogues of the Piedmont-born Jean Girard, of Giovanni Battista Pinerolo and Fabio Todesco, as well as the work of translators such as Scipione Calandrini, Giulio Domenico Gallo and Giulio Cesare Pascali, all testify to these Geneva-based Italians' involvement in the diffusion and vulgarisation of Calvinism – aimed at both French-speaking and Italian-speaking Swiss, as well as the populations of other European countries. During certain periods, the publishing

milieux of Lyon and Geneva were frequented by Italian Protestant scholars and theologians such as Hellenist Francesco Porto, the humanist Celio Secondo Curione (founder of the Academy of Lausanne), Ludovico Castelvetro and Niccolo Balbani. For some of them, Geneva and Lausanne would only be temporary stops, the progressive institutionalism of Calvinism causing them to move on. Indeed Calvinism's evolution into a dogmatic church, keen to impose civil customs and a rigid orthodoxy, finished by disappointing a number of Italian heterodox Christians, who either went on to embrace more radical reforms or chose to remain in the “grey zone” occupied by numerous non-conformists. As a rule, it would seem that the reformed circles whose members were converted in France and Switzerland, in contact with the emerging national churches, were less critical of the new orthodoxies than those who had developed a heterodox confession in one of Italy's multiple centres of religious renewal. If we compare the human and religious progression of those who, in France and Geneva, before and during the wars of religion, had found in Calvin an inspiring source of revolutionary renewal, with that of those who, following the example of Juan de Valdes, had been won over to reformism by reading the *Beneficio di Cristo* (Giovanni Michele Bruto and Marcantonio Flaminio) or influenced by Nontrinitarianism (Giorgio Biandrata, the Sozzini family and Simone Simoni), we are forced to observe that the liberating authorities defended by each group were founded on very different principles. From the moment the claims of the Huguenots ceased to be purely theological and started to encompass social issues – of particular relevance for the urban middle classes, which of course included printers, booksellers and typographic workers –, it was clear that the confessional question had exceeded the limits of the theological interpretation of sacred texts and religious practices and become a major socio-political issue. From this point of view, the only viable option seemed to be to found a new Church – a Church capable of protecting its members from enemies and ensuring confessional freedom. Italian heterodox Christians, however, were nourished by a more syncretic tradition, assimilating highly diverse theological points of view (Luther, Zwingli, Erasmus, Bucer, Calvin, etc); the *milieux* they moved in too were highly diversified, if essentially anti-ecclesiastical and open to communitarianism. These Italian heterodox Christians, having turned away from the Catholic Church and fled Italy after multiple failed attempts to reform the Roman Catholic *ecclesia*, were naturally mistrustful of any church keen to institute a rigid orthodoxy with a view to banishing all forms of dissent. To a certain extent, the circles of the Italian publishers in French-speaking Europe reflects these contradictions: on one hand, these *milieux* included a growing community of workers,

engravers, illustrators and booksellers who embraced Calvinism and played a key role in its European diffusion; on the other, these *milieux* promoted debates and the coexistence of different interpretations of canonical texts, thus simultaneously contributing to a less dogmatic and resolutely anti-conformist reformation movement.