

A RECURRING IMAGE IN FRANCESCO PATRIZI OF CHERSO: THE RUINS*

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Abstract: In this article, I start by examining the myth of the «great ruin» contained in Francesco Patrizi's *Dialoghi della retorica* (Venice, 1562), highlighting one particular aspect of this story: the theme of «vestiges», that is, of what remains after the destructive occurrence of a catastrophe. I then explore the different meanings of that story by using Patrizi's previously published *Dialoghi della historia* (Venice, 1560) and I point out how the theme of the erosion, recovery and restoration of cultural traditions constitutes a leitmotif that runs through Patrizi's whole oeuvre. In the last part of the article, finally, I focus on the specific interplay of nature and history, as this clarifies the equivalence between history and memory advocated by Patrizi as well as his conception of the relationship between the past and the future.

Keywords: Francesco Patrizi of Cherso; Renaissance theories of history; ruins; history of nature; *prisca theologia*.

1. Introduction

Let us begin with a story. In the first of his *Della retorica dieci dialoghi* (*Ten Dialogues on Rhetoric*, Venice, 1562), Francesco Patrizi (1529-1597), then in his thirties, presents the world we live in as a heap of ruins. On this subject, he writes, the Ethiopian annals tell us a very curious story; someone may consider it a mere «fairy tale», while «wise people will greatly praise it». ¹ That story is reported by Giulio Strozzi, one of the three characters of the dialogue. He claims to have heard it from Baldassare Castiglione who, in turn, had heard it from an Ethiopian sage during a diplomatic mission to Spain.

According to this story, originally the world looked like a vast «sponge». Human beings lived happily in its cavities «like little worms», in harmony with the other animals and the rest of creation. Then, suddenly, one of the peoples that inhabited that perfect world (the Assyrians) «became proud»: they challenged the god (Saturn), who reacted by letting Jupiter and Pluto strike the Earth with violence. The tremors generated a terrible earthquake and the various cavities of

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¹ Patrizi (1562, f. 5v). On the use of myths in Patrizi's dialogues, see Gambino Longo (2016: 193-212), Muccillo (1989; 1996a), Plastina (1992) and Puliafito Bleuel (2017).

the Earth opened up, collapsing inside. The whole Earth, which formerly extended as far as the place now occupied by the heavens, shrunk and became completely irregular from being perfectly round. The memory of the episode was passed on thanks to the few survivors of the catastrophe, deliberately left alive by Jupiter, so that «a vestige of the first form of the world could remain».² They were in a comatose state for a long time; once awoken, «they remained forever stunned and full of horror».³ Common fear of death caused our ancestors to join together again, giving rise to new forms of civilization, which were handed down to successive generations in the form of an inheritance. Since then, this fear characterises the basic attitude of humans towards nature, other animals and their fellow human beings.⁴

2. Debris and Relics

According to this myth, the world as is seen today is but a great expanse of rubble from the destruction of a once perfect world. The bodies which make up the world in which we live are nothing but «vestiges» of that primordial life, shattered like pieces of a lost mosaic.⁵ For example, mountains derive from mounds of soil formed after the earthquake and condensed by the action of cold (the world, before the ruin, was much warmer, as it was much closer to the Sun). Other disrupted parts of land exposed underground waterways: there rivers, lakes and seas appeared. Precious stones themselves are nothing but debris:

Metals, gold, silver, and other substances that originally were beautiful and very precious trees, stayed buried as a result of the destruction [...]. And the diamonds, carbuncles, rubies, emeralds, chrysolites, sapphires, topazes, beryls and other gems that can be found now are fragments (*spezzature*) of the stones of the first era. These were not different from the ones we have now, for all the rest of the Earth was even and similar to itself. And, because of the memory we have of those early ages, they are nowadays held in so high value, and revered and admired as very ancient things.⁶

² Patrizi (1562, ff. 6v-7r).

³ *Ibidem*, f. 7r.

⁴ See *ibidem*, ff. 7r-8r.

⁵ See Plato (*Phaedo*, 109A-111C).

⁶ Patrizi (1562, f. 6v): «i metalli, l'oro, l'argento, et gli altri, che erano nel primo tempo alberi bellissimi et preciosissimi, rimasero dalla ruina ricoperti [...]. Et i diamanti, i carbonchi, i rubini, gli smeraldi, i crisoliti, i zaffiri, i topazi, i berilli et l'altre gioie, che hor si trovano, sono spezzature delle pietre del primo secolo, le quali, d'altra maniera non erano allhora, essendo tutto il resto della terra eguale, et a se stesso simile. Et sono elle, per la memoria di quelle prime età, hoggidi havute in tanto pregio, et come antichissime cose ammirate, et riverite».

Even «the porphyries, the alabasters, the serpentines, and the other beautiful marbles [...] are nothing but more particles (*particelle*) of the first virgin soil [...] which randomly came together during the cataclysm».⁷ Not to mention those figures of humans and animals set in stone:

those people who inspect metals and marbles have found many things of the early life turned into stone. They are marine, terrestrial and airy beings, even human beings, which are all day quarried [...] enclosed in very firm stones, with no opening at all. And therefore this – and not any other – is the reason why many miles between the earth and underneath we see frozen fishes, oysters and shells, and figures of different animals, which others, out of ignorance of past things, admire so much.⁸

From mountains to waterways, from marbles to fossil findings, everything can be considered as a «vestige» of a past life that gets lost in the maze of human memory.

In Patrizi's intention, this story exposes his readers to a wide range of possible interpretations. Firstly, on a metaphysical level, we may suppose that Patrizi's myth of the «great ruin» explains on a narrative level the origin of multiplicity out of the metaphysical unity, in which everything was perfectly identical – what a few decades later Patrizi will name «*unomnia*».⁹ It also accounts for the apparent disorder of the world that is given to our senses.¹⁰ Before the catastrophe, everything looked like everything else, everything was 'one'. Now, Patrizi seems to tell us, everything is varied, chaotic and different. In this respect, his story recounts the complex metaphysical development that leads from unity to multiplicity. Incidentally, this story seems to closely resemble the atomistic explanation of the origin of the world. By describing how the earth resulted from the random aggregation of «particles» according to the latter's different weights and their gradual condensation through the action of cold, Patrizi was certainly evoking characteristic atomistic images.

Secondly, this myth, included in a dialogue that is specifically concerned with shedding light on the essence of human language, is reminiscent of the story of

⁷ *Ibidem*: «i porfidi, gli alabastru, le serpentine, et gli altri bei marmi [...] non sono altra cosa, che più particelle del primo vergine terreno [...] nella caduta, venute a caso insieme».

⁸ *Ibidem*: «da gli investigatori de metalli, et de marmi, si son trovate, di molte cose della primiera vita, fatte pietra, et animai marini, et terrestri, et volatili, et anco humani, che tutto di si cavano [...] chiusi in sodissime pietre, non haventi apertura alcuna. Et quindi è, et non d'altronde, che si veggano molte miglia fra terra, et sotto, pesci, et ostrache, et nichì, congelati, et figure di animali diversi, che altri per la ignoranza delle passate cose tanto ammira». On fossil theory in Renaissance, see at least Rudwick (1976: 1-48).

⁹ See Patrizi (1591, II, f. 13v).

¹⁰ The idea of a metaphysical process by which, from a perfect unity, the multiplicity is produced, is already present in Patrizi's *Discorsi* contained, together with his *Argomenti*, in L. Contile's *Rime* (see Patrizi, 1560b, ff. 14r-24v, 25r-36v).

Babel. In the transition from a single, simple and natural language to the confusion of tongues, human beings lost the very meaning of words. Words now are ambiguous and distant from the things they should indicate, just like fragments of a previous perfect language. In its second meaning, therefore, this myth tells us of the rapid rising of a culture of words over a culture of things, of persuasion (rhetoric) over reason (dialectic).

Finally, from a historical-political perspective, this myth can be read as the story of a sudden decline from peaceful coexistence among human beings in the 'state of nature' to voluntary submission to the laws and their interpretations. As seen, human beings, after waking up from their sleep, began to unite. Driven by the fear which pervaded them, they established physical safety perimeters separating them from nature. By «confining themselves as it were within an enclosure», they invented some kind of virtual barriers separating people from each other.¹¹ These barriers are the «chains of words» with which they «tied justice and peace by the feet, by the arms, by the side and by the neck [...] so that they would not leave their cities»: they created laws, and entrusted them to judges and magistrates.¹² This was the end of natural coexistence between human beings and the beginning of the cyclical history of political regimes (*ἀνακύκλωσις*).¹³

The three levels of interpretation (metaphysical-cosmological, linguistic and historical-political) underlying the narrative of Patrizi's myth are linked by a common pattern, though. He considers the historical transition made by humankind from nature to culture as a moment of crisis, the effects of which can still be felt in sixteenth-century Europe. Although Patrizi acknowledges that Europe was experiencing a major renewal of the arts since Petrarch's time, in the part of the myth we have analysed so far, he gives us a rather gloomy picture of the present.¹⁴ The relationship with nature that characterized the life of our ancestors is vanished; words have replaced things, fear has replaced freedom. All that remains of that true philosophy understood as genuine wisdom – such was the philosophy of the ancients – are fragments: «debris» (*rottami*) and «relics» (*reliquie*) of a clearer way of thinking that we have almost completely lost.

¹¹ Patrizi (1562, f. 7v): «chiudendosi quasi in una mandra».

¹² See *Ibidem*: «i paurosi [...] [t]esserono appresso, molte, et lunghe catene di parole, con le quali, legando la giustitia et la pace per gli piedi, per le braccia, et pel traverso, et per lo collo, in mille guise annodandole andarono, acciocché elle delle loro città non dipartissero, raccomandando i capi delle catene, che essi addimandarono leggi, in mano ad huomini del loro animo, et paurosi. I quali nominarono giudici, et magistrati».

¹³ See *ibidem*, f. 8r: «And his is how human societies have gone until that time, and are going now, and will go in the future, always crossing and changing, and passing from one hand to another» (*Et così andarono, fino a que tempi, le compagnie de gli huomini, et vanno di presente, et anderanno per l'avvenire, valicando sempre, et mutandosi, et passando d'una in altra mano*).

¹⁴ For example, Patrizi mentions a recent 'Renaissance' in poetic art (see Patrizi, 1969-1971, I: 9).

Beyond the myth, the theme of metaphysical decadence confronts us with the historical problem of its origins: what are the causes of this decline?

3. *Manipulating Memory*

In one of his most influential works, the *Della historia diece dialoghi* (*Ten Dialogues on History*, published in Venice in 1560), Partizi defines his own theory «of writing and observing» history in stark contrast to the Ciceronian tradition and to his former teacher Francesco Robortello, and takes the first step towards a new «science of all eloquence». ¹⁵ Here, he seems to provide us with the right tools to answer the question of the origins of decadence. Like the fossils, the metals and the infinite other «particles» of the primordial wreckage described by the myth, the fragments of the philosophical ‘golden age’, that is, the pristine wisdom of the Chaldean, Egyptian and pre-Socratic sages, persist as a fragile memory of shattered cultures. The causes behind the «corruption» affecting the memory of these important civilizations may be attributed to natural «disasters», such as fires, floods and earthquakes, as well as to the guilty tampering of the past carried out for political purposes by «princes», by nations and even by certain philosophical sects. ¹⁶

The shattering of previous worlds, when it is not attributed to the vast expanse of time past (*lunghissima antichità del tempo*) or to natural disasters, derives in fact from the power relations between nations. ¹⁷ For example, the mixture of «flattery» and «fear» with which historians address their princes generates a series of adulterations and omissions in the writing of the history of their own nations. While flattery «magnifies» the prince’s actions through lying, fear «is silent on the truth». ¹⁸ Furthermore, each nation naturally tends to produce the self-narrative that best suits their interests:

because of the competition that has always existed among all peoples [...] people have said countless things of other peoples, which are not true [...].

¹⁵ See Patrizi (1560a, sig. A2r). The dialogues *Della historia* were translated into Latin by Johann Nikolaus Stupanus in 1570, for Sixtus Petri’s editions (see Gambino Longo, 2017) and summarised in English by Thomas Blundeville, together with Jacopo Aconcio’s *Delle osseruationi, et avvertimenti che hauer si debbono nel legger delle historie* (see Blundeville, 1574). The Latin translation was later integrated in the first volume of the well-known *Artis historicae penus* edited by Johannes Wolf and published in Basel by Pietro Perna in (1579: 397-543). On Patrizi’s theory of history, see Blum (2000), Bolzoni (1980: 63-95), Cotroneo (1971: 205-267), Couzinet (2007; 2014), Grafton (2007: 123-142) and Vasoli (1989: 25-90).

¹⁶ See Patrizi (1560a, ff. 24v-30r).

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, f. 31r.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, f. 27v. On this point, see Puliafito Bleuel (2016).

And many, to illustrate their obscure origins, made them up and turned them into mythological marvels.¹⁹

By narrating a past adapted to their self-representation, national myths have erased everything that did not fit their needs. To better understand this point, we should highlight Patrizi's epistemological distinction between «history» and «fame». History, as we will see shortly, means the communication of anything that can fall under our senses, regardless of whether it is based on direct eyewitnessing or critical examination of sources.²⁰ «Fame», on the other hand, means hearsay and it may lead to either traditions accepted without further verification or false narratives imposed for political purposes.²¹ These are two different channels of transmission that result in two different cultural paradigms, although it is not always that easy to decide where to draw the line between them.²²

We could say that for Patrizi European civilization has been fully marked by the paradigm of fame. This presupposes a worldview that recalls that generalised fear described by the myth of the *Dialoghi della retorica*. «Fame» is expressed through political propaganda, a tendency to alter and falsify sources and a generalized acceptance of the principle of authority. This paradigm is centred on a single narrative, which receives general assent and becomes unassailable, thus preventing any free search for counter-narratives that might contradict the prevailing view. Patrizi will later maintain that in the history of philosophy this paradigm initiated with Aristotle, who broke the great chain of wisdom that originated at the beginning of civilization (*prisca sapientia*, or *prisca theologia*). According to Patrizi, the peripatetic school has systematically denigrated the platonic and pre-Socratic tradition, constructing the false myth of a philosophical wisdom that would begin and end with the work of Aristotle. It was in this way that the principle of authority was introduced into European culture.

Although the seeds of this argument were already present in the dialogues on history and rhetoric, in the *Discussiones peripateticæ* (Basel, 1581; the first volume had already been published in Venice, in 1571), Patrizi unambiguously stated that Aristotle had plagiarised his predecessors while reviling the pre-Socratic body of knowledge and thus preventing posterity from accessing the

¹⁹ Patrizi (1560a, f. 31r): «per la gara che hanno sempre tutte le genti fra loro havuto [...] esse hanno infinite cose d'altrui detto, che vere non sono [...]. Et molte, per illustrare i loro oscuri principii ne finsero, et le ferono favolose et ammirabili».

²⁰ See *ibidem*, f. 8r.

²¹ The notion of «fame» is present since Patrizi's dialogues, and constitutes an enduring theme in his work. Patrizi provides a precise definition of it, as opposed to history, in his *Poetics*: see Patrizi (1969-1971, III: 98).

²² This is the case, for instance, with ancient stories, in which «it is very difficult [...] to trace the truth of things» because sources are scarce and it is difficult to distinguish between facts and «fables». See Patrizi (1969-1971, I: 14).

sources of this tradition of thought.²³ Through the tools of history and philology, Patrizi intended to recover this legacy and rehabilitate a critical way of considering the history of culture. Historical and philological expertise was tasked with re-establishing a link between words and things, between discourses and facts, between the fragments and the bodies to which they belonged. Patrizi deemed demystification to be necessary in order to restore a proper philosophical, religious and political state of affairs. If fragments were all we had of a glorious past, their recovery and proper assessment were perceived as all the more urgent.

4. *Fragments*

Patrizi's intention, therefore, was to go back to the sources of that ravaged wisdom left in ruins and reintroduce it to a culturally and politically divided audience. This would demonstrate that a common past existed behind the historical separation of nations and confessions. Between 1561 and 1568, just after writing the dialogues on history and rhetoric, Patrizi left Venice and moved to Cyprus, first on behalf of Giorgio II Contarini, member of one of the oldest Venetian families, and then at the service of the archbishop Filippo Mocenigo.²⁴ There he devoted himself to searching and collecting manuscripts that belonged to the Greek and Byzantine tradition. In Patrizi's plans, many of these materials were to be included in a new anti-Aristotelian *Thesaurus* of human wisdom.²⁵ On 27th and 31th of May 1571, in two letters addressed to Vincenzo Pinelli – a renowned Neapolitan scholar who corresponded with (among others) Aldo Manuzio, Ulisse Aldovrandi, Torquato Tasso and Galileo Galilei – Patrizi, then back to Venice, reported that he had «collected a lot of fragments and little things and dogmas by some very ancient Gentile and Greek philosophers, *qui ante Platonem et Aristotelem scripserunt*», and that he intended to print them in a single volume, in order to «establish (*istituire*) that ancient philosophy as much as we can».²⁶ The programmatic title of the volume was supposed to be: *Tracts, fragments and doctrines of the most ancient sages, both gentile and Greek, who philosophized before Plato and Aristotle, collected by Francesco Patrizi*.²⁷ The book was expected to include fragments attributed to Zoroaster, a summary of the principal *dogmata* by Assyrians, ancient Brahmins and Egyptians, as well as several fragments attributed to Orpheus, Pythagoras and his disciples,

²³ See at least Deitz (2007), Gulizia (2019), Leinkauf (1990), Muccillo (1996b: 73-193; 2002) and Vasoli (1989: 149-179).

²⁴ See Patrizi (1975: 48-49).

²⁵ See Grivaud (2012) and Muccillo (1993).

²⁶ Patrizi (1975: 7-9); see also Artese (1986: 341).

²⁷ *Antiquissimorum sapientium, tam Gentilium quam Graecorum, qui ante Platonem atque Aristotele philosophati sunt, libelli, fragmenta, dogmata, a F. P. collecta* (Patrizi, 1975: 8).

Xenocrates, Parmenides, Zeno, Democritus and Anaxagoras. In fact, the volume remained unfinished and was never published.²⁸ Patrizi was forced to sell part of the material he had discovered in Cyprus to the library fund of the Escorial in Madrid, and only a part of it was later published as an appendix to the more famous (and more controversial) of Patrizi's works, the *Nova de universis philosophia* (*A New Philosophy on Everything*), published in Ferrara in 1591.

Conceived as a complex synthesis of metaphysics and natural philosophy, the *Nova de universis philosophia* was meant to reform the teaching of philosophy in European universities, while remaining faithful to the original project of recovering the «ancient philosophy» to which Patrizi had devoted most of his life. He planned to use his philosophical summa to oust Aristotle's «impious» system while rehabilitating the teaching of Hermetic and Chaldean philosophy and the tradition leading from Plato to Damascius, passing through Plotinus, Proclus and Iamblichus.²⁹ From Patrizi's point of view, the research, the restoration and the edition of the *libelli* and fragments of the pre-Socratic and Platonic tradition were therefore directly linked to the elaboration of new philosophies of nature and new metaphysics. The *new* philosophy that Patrizi «not without effort» had «barely unearthed from the ruins»³⁰ sought the possibility of a better future from a philosophical, political and religious point of view among the debris of ancient and platonic wisdom.

The motif of the fragments and their important role in helping reconstruct vanished human worlds, which I have extrapolated from the myth contained in the first of the *Dialoghi della retorica* and which I have explained through the *Dialoghi della historia*, reveals itself as a guiding thread in Patrizi's long and extremely varied philosophical production. At first glance, this theme may look marginal. In fact, it sheds much needed light on what doing philosophy meant for Patrizi. In a world dominated by the principle of unchecked authority, truth can only be hinted at; it lies in details, fragments and remains, that is, in all that is left from the programmatic destruction of past cultural lineages perpetrated by both politicians and intellectual élites. To do philosophy, for Patrizi, is therefore to restore the lost sense of truth and critical inquiry.

A restoration must be done by following criteria and – this should be made clear – must never be an end in itself. As we can read in Patrizi's *Roman militia*

²⁸ Seventeen years later, in 1588, as Patrizi explained in a letter addressed to Sigismund Schnitzer, the volume he planned to publish in the meantime had taken on a new form, and consisted then of ten books, divided into two sections: the first dealt with *exterae sapientiae* and reported a series of documents related to the figures of Zoroaster, Hermes Trismegistus and Moses, while the second was to include some texts belonging to Greek philosophy preceding Plato and Aristotle, and contain fragments of Orpheus, Pythagoras, Empedocles, Xenophanes, Thales, Solon and Socrates. See Patrizi (1975: 61-62).

²⁹ See Patrizi (1591, sigs a2r-a3v). See also Muslow (2004), Puliafito Bleuel (2002) and Vasoli (1980).

³⁰ Patrizi (1591, sig. a2r): «nobis [...] non minimo labore, e ruinis vix erutas».

of Polybius, Livy and Dionysius of Halicarnassus published in Ferrara in 1583 (but it was ready since the early 70s), those who attempted, in good faith, to revive that science of the *militia* who lay buried «completely removed from the memory and thoughts of human beings», have given her their hand and helped her to sit, leaving her «in the same wet and tattered garment with which she had already been buried; without bothering at all to lift her and to wash her from the dust and the dirt in which she had already miserably lain for so many ages». ³¹ The past should not simply be reconstructed and possibly imitated; on the contrary, it should be reappropriated and collated with contemporary models. As stated in the subtitle of the treatise, if «fully understood», the Roman *militia* will not only surprise the reader for its good laws and discipline, but it also will demonstrate «how defective and imperfect modern military science is when compared with the ancient one». ³²

One point, however, remains to be clarified. Through the analysis of Patrizi's early myths and a quick survey of the theme of debris and ruins in his later philosophical work we have seen that, according to him, the truth lies in fragments that the passing of time and all kinds of propagandistic strategies inadvertently forget to destroy. As intimated in the myth recounted in the *Dialoghi della retorica*, catastrophes always leave behind some «vestiges» of what preceded them. What we still don't understand is whether the past to which the vestiges refer can return or not. A theory stating that the return is possible would be quite paradoxical, at least for a modern mind. And yet, if this were not achievable, what would be the point of celebrating the debris of the past?

5. Between Past and Future

To answer this question, let's go back to the third of Patrizi's *Dialoghi della historia*. Here Patrizi is looking for the first history ever written and selects several possible candidates. One of these, which is particularly intriguing in the context of our research, concerns the floods and shallows of the Nile and the instrument used by the ancient Egyptians to measure them, the «Niloscope» or «Nilometer» (*Niloscopia*):

Several times, I have heard from numerous people of high rank in sciences that history began to be written in Egypt. This history concerned not the deeds of human beings, but the swellings and floods of the Nile. People from

³¹ Patrizi (1583, sig. †3r): «le ha porto la mano, e la ha posta a sedere, con le medesime veste fradicie e lacere, con le quali ella fu già sepolta; senza curarsi di sollevarla affatto, e di lavarla dalla polvere, e da' succidumi, ne' quali ella già tante età miserabilmente si è giaciuta».

³² *Ibidem*: «La quale a pieno intesa, non solo darà altrui stupore de' suoi buoni ordini e disciplina. Ma ancora, in paragone, farà chiaro quanto la moderna sia difettosa e imperfetta».

Memphis had driven a large column upright somewhere in the city, which was called Niloscope. As the river flooded from year to year, and inundated the country all around, they used to mark in the column the rise of water. While doing so, they also were taking note of the effects of either abundance or hunger which took place according to the rise of the river. And having diligently done and observed this for many years, they always knew in advance, when the flood was over, what kind of harvest they should either hope for or fear, depending on the water reaching the marks that had already been noted and observed in the column. And taking these marks in the column was nothing but recording the memory of the effects of that water. Following this example, they then began to write the deeds of illustrious men.³³

In this passage Patrizi addresses the classic problem of the relationship between history and nature. Here the description of a natural event – the floods and shallows of Nile – provides the basis for the writing of the lives of «illustrious» men. Nature served as a model for human history. The other example of potentially first histories of humankind selected by Patrizi seems to confirm this correlation between nature and culture. According to some people, the first history was that of Osiris' deeds, written by the Egyptians in columns, which served as a model for the writing of astrological observations: here is the human history that serves as a model for natural philosophy. For others, it was Noah who first told the history of the flood – once again, a natural «ruin» – or, lastly, the first history was written before the flood by those «great first fathers» (Adam's children) who foretold the catastrophe «by astrology, or by divine inspiration», and who carved their visions on stone.³⁴

All these stories, however different they may be, tell us three things. Firstly, history was born long before Herodotus and the first Greek historians, as it went back to the earliest forms of human communication, expressed not yet in words, but through simple signs. The first semiotic act of humankind, according to Patrizi, was 'history': «history began to be made from the beginning of the world

³³ Patrizi (1560a, f. 14v): «Più volte io ho da molti huomini d'alto affare nelle scienze udito dire, che l'historia cominciò a scriversi in Egitto; non de' fatti degli huomini, ma delle crescenze et delle inondazioni del Nilo. Perché havendo quelli di Menfi piantato in alcun luogo della città dritta una gran colonna, che Niloscopio si chiamò; si come il fiume d'anno in anno faceva la piena, et inondava il paese d'ogni intorno, così essi andavano segnando nella colonna la crescita dell'acqua. Et notavanvi insieme l'effetto dell'abondanza, o della fame, che secondo la crescita ella faceva. Et havendo essi questo diligentemente per molti anni fatto et osservato, seppero in avanti sempre, finito di far la piena, quale annata essi dovessero o sperare, o temere: secondo che ella a segni già notati nella colonna, et osservati, era salita. Et questi notamenti nella colonna fatti, egli non fu fare altro, che una memoria degli effetti di quell'acqua. Dal qual essemplio poi, essi incominciarono a scrivere i fatti degli huomini illustri». See Quaratesi (1550, ff. 281r-284r), who in turn quotes Diodorus Siculus as the main source of this story.

³⁴ Patrizi (1560a, ff. 14v-15r).

[...] so that it can be said that it was the first writing ever done».³⁵ Secondly, history is nothing but memory, and, more specifically, «memory that is outside the soul, placed either in writing or on marble or something else».³⁶ History, for Patrizi, is memory, not narration. Finally, the first histories written by humans had as their object not the past, but the future.³⁷

What therefore the story of the Niloscope teaches us is that the need to transmit information relating to the past arose not out of simple curiosity about what no longer existed, but out of a practical need to foresee and control, as far as possible, the future. The past and the future were tied together in the earliest forms of written history. The history of the Niloscope, for instance, was nothing but a «a memory of the effects of water», a history made up of signs that served to communicate objective data concerning a cyclical natural phenomenon with the practical aims of predicting, as far as possible, the repetition of the event in the future and acting accordingly. In a way, history for Patrizi was born as a statistic science: the past provides us with information that allow us to anticipate (however limitedly) the future.

The relationship between past and future in Patrizi's theory of history is also linked to his personal reinterpretation of the Platonic and Stoic theme of the 'Great year'.³⁸ Without going into the details of this doctrine, it is worth pointing out that, as Patrizi writes in his *Dialoghi della historia*, the period of time from the «great ruin» to the present constituted a historical cycle (of about 6,000 years). For the European mind, this cycle tended to coincide with the entire history of humanity, while the Egyptians retained a memory of «infinite thousands of years»³⁹ and knew in total «two universal corruptions (*corrottioni*) and two universal renaissances (*rinascimenti*) of the whole worldly machine».⁴⁰ Owing to their testimonies – once again, catastrophes always leave behind traces of the impact they have on nature – we understand that the universe proceeds through regular cycles of generation and corruption and that the history of humankind does not begin where the memory that the European mind has of itself, but much earlier.

These same cycles of generation and corruption rhythm the life of a human being, a discipline, an empire and the entire human species. In Patrizi's account, «it is necessary that all things have their beginning, growth, state, decline and

³⁵ *Ibidem*, f. 18r: «da principio del mondo si incominciò la storia a fare [...]. Si che ella si può dire la prima scrittura, che fatta fosse».

³⁶ *Ibidem*, f. 19r: «memoria che sia fuor dell'anima, o in iscritto, o in marmo, o in altro posta».

³⁷ See *ibidem*, f. 15r: «la prima historia che al mondo scritta fosse, non delle passate cose fu, ma delle future».

³⁸ On the influence «and refutation» of the Stoic philosophy of nature on Patrizi's thought, see Leinkauf (2019).

³⁹ Patrizi (1560a, f. 16v).

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, f. 15v.

end».⁴¹ The same pattern unites the life (and the history) of a single body, a political *imperio*, a cultural phenomenon and a cosmic cycle (the ‘Great Year’). This kind of repetition should not be understood in a strict sense: Patrizi does not think of an eternal repetition of the same, but of a constant reproduction of recurring natural and cosmological patterns. Behind the contingency of historical changes there are immutable rules, which both the historian and the reader of history should know to make the most of this discipline.⁴² In this specific sense, human history is ‘cyclical’ as well as nature, and in a cyclical paradigm to remember is, in some way, to foresee.

Remembering what happened in a cycle before ours own, however, is not easy, since cycles end with catastrophes that erase almost all memories. The investigation I have carried out in this article heavily depends on the meaning of this term: *almost*. As I have shown by adopting different points of view on this issue, for Patrizi there is necessarily a residue of memory that resists political or environmental catastrophes. It is this residue that allows us to reconstruct what was before them and, perhaps, to prevent them.

6. *Conclusions*

The conception of history that emerges from Patrizi’s various considerations on the motif of the ruins is that of a temporal development that is neither linear nor strictly cyclical. Patrizi was fully aware that that moment in history (or in myth) in which words and things were harmoniously aligned to each other could not be re-established any longer. He was convinced, however, that that moment could be re-enacted as a state of mind. As such, an intellectual attitude directed at identifying the original vital nexus between facts and reasons was for Patrizi plausible and needed to be restored.

As seen while discussing the theme of the «ruins» and «vestiges» in Patrizi’s work, he was not simply interested in the past as such. His pursuit was directed towards what history in some way rejects. He wished to break the cycle of decadent Aristotelianism and to open the doors to a new (and yet ancient) way of reading the connection between things, words and concepts. Paradoxically, through history and philology Patrizi wanted to search for the ahistorical element of thought, the best expression of which, he believed, could be found in the authors belonging to the classical theory of perennial philosophy as well as in the pre-Socratic and Platonic tradition.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, f. 32v.

⁴² It is no coincidence that Thomas Blundeville places this principle at the very beginning of his ‘summary’. See Blundeville (1574, sig. A2v).

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