Narrators and their Reporting, in the Prose Romance Trilogy of Giovanni Francesco Biondi

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In the judgement of some of his contemporaries, Giovanni Francesco Biondi, the first seventeenth-century Italian writer to publish a romance in prose, is among the few to distinguish themselves in the new genre.\(^1\) In a much quoted letter dated 4 March 1636, Tommaso Stigliani links Biondi and the poet Marino, rather grudgingly describing their work as "tollerabili in qualche parte" while citing them as initiators of trends that had led to stylistic abuses in their followers.\(^2\) Later in the century greater approbation comes from a different critical quarter: both Antonio Santacroce and Francesco Fulvio Frugoni, in the process of castigating the unknown Carlo Boer for his temerity in publishing a continuation to Biondi's trilogy, praise the "opere vaghe e dotte"\(^3\) and the "penna di Cigno"\(^4\) of the originator of the cycle of adventures involving Eromena, her daughter Lindadori (the Donzella desterrada) and Coralbo. Despite their varying degrees of positive comment on Biondi's work, the three writers generally disparage the new romances: Stigliani refers to "quel prosare in Romanzi con locuzion monca, e stopiata, che ultimamente s'è introdutto" - and here the author of Il Coralbo and La Donzella desterrada is specifically mentioned;\(^5\) Santacroce and Frugoni (themselves romanzieri) condemn the genre, saving only the rare work that both teaches and delights. La Critica in Frugoni's Del Cane di Diogene orders "che debban riprovarsi quelle opere, in qualsiasi genere, che son cortecce, ancorché dorate, e fiorite, senza midolla substantiosa", adding that "tali d'ordinario son tutt'i Romanzi ramosi, che sol di frasche, e di fiori son carichi, senza che ne possa carpir un frutto d'insegnamento, o morale, o Politico, o d'altra sorte che arrecchi l'utile col dilettot".\(^6\) The point is protracted in a series of conceits, ending in a statement concerning the style of writing that has caused the general unease evident in the critics: "Lo Stile di molti di questi Romanzi (dicea il Giudicio alla Critica) è somigliavole al Cavallo d'Antonio Abati, che d'ogni quattro passi (come quei ad ogni quattro parole) facea punto fermo".\(^7\) There is an interesting reflection...
both of Stigliziani’s lament at the “locuzion monca e storpiata” and of Frugoni’s quotation from Abati’s satire in the following description in Biondi’s L’Eromena (Book V) of an inarticulate messenger who reveals more than he means to:

[...] mandolle innanzi ch’entrare la lettera di credenza, la qual letta, e visita chi la mandava, fece crescere la curiosità di udirlo. Le parole non furono molte, le poche malamente espressi, e peggio concatenate. Le discorse il disegno del Principe di Tingitana [...] Stette la Principessa un pezzo, senza rispondergli nulla. Ma interrogatolo [...] gli diede occasione di dir più ch’ei non era richiesto, e che non aveva carico di dirle (p. 137 - emphasis added).

In the context of the above criticism of the romance genre, the fact that Biondi’s narrator draws attention to a character’s lack of eloquence (not to an example of “locuzion monca e storpiata”, but to a description of it, which is a more deliberate marker) may, by implication, be alluding to one of the author’s own principles of eloquence, that is, the use of good expression (whatever that may be found to mean) and of well-connected statement, which, if sufficiently translated into practice in his narrative, would deny the accuracy of Stigliziani’s claim about him. In this regard, the impression one gains from reading Biondi’s trilogy is that there has been stylistic vigilance in representing situation, in reporting speech and in guiding the narration, and that generally speaking the whole is indeed ben concatenato. The question of interest for the present study is that of the stylistic intention that might have been guiding the writing process, and of the relationship that one could identify between some of the stylistic effects achieved and the experience that lay behind that writing, in short, the way in which locuzione serves to convey cultural-social environment. In the hope of establishing such a link, this discussion of the trilogy concentrates on two stylistic aspects that clearly seem to point to such factors beyond the text, that is, on the way in which speech is reported and on the narrators who do the reporting. As recent criticism of the baroque has shown, a contextual study that rests on a consideration of the integration of style and world-view, represented within the period itself, is likely to give us a better-founded perception of that reality than resulted from earlier reliance on current sensibility.

The absence of literary comment in Biondi’s letters makes it even more regrettable that the Prefaces to L’Eromena, La donzella desterrata and Il Corallo are so generic, since they contain traces of an attitude on the question of ornamentation and an indication of the author’s stylistic ideal of fluent and simple eloquence that shows him to have been in touch with the points raised by the three critics mentioned above. The brief dedicatory letter (to the Duke of Richmond, not dated) at the commencement of L’Eromena says in part:

Ora vengo astretto dedicarla a Vostra Eccellenza così inculata, mentre dovria comparirle avanti altrettanto ricca d’ornamenti, che ella è di virtù.

The proclaimed lack of ornamentation is attributed here to haste in composition, whereas in the Preface to the third romance, Il Corallo, addressed to the Duchess Cristiana of Savoy, the excuse is that of age (Biondi was 55 at the time of the Preface - 26 March, 1632):

[...] il romanzo, soggetto da giovani, è nimico della gravità, e se non è, ricerca almeno d’esserle piuttosto ornato che vestito. Quale siasi il mio, che il legge ne farà giudizio, mentre io non so giudicarne altro se non che, nato nella rigidezza del mio inverno possa malamente vestirsì, se non si muola di freddo, d’affetti amorosì. Lo spero nondimeno non tanto nudo di vezzi, da non rendersi curioso a chi si complicherà della sua letture. Né avendo egli delizie di fiorì, mi do a credere ch’averà, per l’istessa giovanezza, solidità di cibi, e se leggermente aromatizzati, meno infiammanti e di miglior sostanza. [...] Le qualità che gli pretendono sono: semi di pietà separati dalla buccia dell’ignoranze popolari, ammaestramenti da promuovere gli animi ad azioni nobile e generose, ed una corrente non affettata eloquenza. [...]
In each case the question of ornamentation is given little more than a passing reference; interest is focused, instead, on the function of literature to edify and on stylistic merit based on honesty and simplicity. Ornamentation, it is implied, has not been a determining factor in the composition, but it has not been ignored, since the effect of being "leggiernemente aromatizzati", after all, is created by skilful, subtle blending. The phrase "una [...] non affettata eloquenza" suggests the aim is that of a balanced style, one that appeals through moderation, elegance, and variety, and especially through its control of rhetorical devices. The mention of fluency is a signal that Bioni shared, at least in theory, the distaste for an over-use of brevity, and the passage quoted above from L'Eromena supports this. These are slight references in themselves that need to be correlated with examples from his narrative in the wider context of his practical experience, but it seems that he holds what might be called a moderate-baroque attitude in which he seeks to maintain a reputation as a stylist who appreciates the current interest in ornamentation without taking it to excess, and as a writer who deals in elevated concepts.

Given the range of his European contacts and the variety of his experience over the ten or more years abroad before he began his first romance, it is more than likely that this experience is reflected in his writing. His themes and characterizations certainly call such resonances into play, but one can only speculate about the stylistic influences that contemporary sources had on his prose, since there is no explicit comment from him on the matter. As a voluntary exile from Venice, and Italy, because of his adherence to Protestantism, Bioni was living in the cosmopolitan world of court life and the seventeenth-century version of "shuttle-diplomacy", which placed him in the position of one who maintains a culture from a distance, with all that this can mean in precariousness as well as in benefits of greater objectivity and of unusual enrichment. His literary environment included not only his membership of the Venetian Accademia degli Incogniti but the chance of familiarizing himself with current writing and translation abroad, most notably in France and England: he had spent time in Paris as Secretary to the Venetian Ambassador before arriving in London at the

Court of James I in 1609, recommended by the then English Ambassador to Venice, Sir Henry Wotton. He later travelled in Europe in the service of King James. In the letters written in the exercise of his official duties Bioni gives no hint of how these cultural exchanges affected him, the only glimpse of possible literary discussions coming through the letters of friends such as Vincenzo Armanni:

Subito che giunsi a Londra, il sig. cavalier Gio Francesco Bioni si compiacque venire a vedermi, e non lasciò indietro espressione di cortesia, per farmi capire quanto gli fossero grate quelle mie fatiche giovani, che impiegai all'emenda delle sue Opere. Ci siamo veduti insieme altre volte, e sempre con soddisfazione scambievole. Egli è vecchio d'età, venerabile d'aspetto, e di maniera tutte soavi; né io so dir veramente il piacere che puglio dalla sua conversazione, trovandola di quelle medesime amabilità, delle quali va così lioretta la sua Eromena.13

Armanni had acted as publishing agent in Italy for Bioni's novels and it is possible that there were discussions between them on matters of literary style, although Armanni's letters are disappointing in this regard.14

As others have noted in regard to Bioni's trilogy, its structure is strongly reminiscent of that of the short-story collections of preceding centuries, each romance having in essence a frame of action within which an abundance of interrelating stories is told. Its other antecedents (the Romance of Chivalry and the early Greek Romances) had shown great success in inventing a seemingly unending chain of adventures involving new characters, and the prose romance of the seventeenth century was not ready to disappoint readers by foregoing this element. The development of the prose romance genre, however, involved the use of different stylistic emphases that would contribute to the shaping and control of a much wider and longer stream of narrative than either the more recent poetic or novellistica tradition had dealt with. It became necessary, for example, to give greater attention to the area of verbal interaction; many of the huge number of characters that inhabited the romance genre would continue to pass their fictive lives almost anonymously in battle or associated action, but it was now more likely that the principals would be longer on stage as individuals, and that an increased exchange of speech between them
would be a natural outcome. Presumably the romanziere were aware to some extent of the need to vary their treatment of such material so as to keep it as diverting as the rest of their strategies.15

When he began to compose L’Eromena, Biondi’s structural solution of two pairs of central protagonists may have been prompted in part by the desire to balance action, narrative description and speech. This first romance is generally considered more unified than either La donzella desterrada or Il Corali, with a symmetry of structure the others lack. The departure from Birsá early in Chapter I of L’Eromena of first Polimero and then Metaneone, his elder brother and heir to the throne of Mauritania, allows for parallel meetings, rescue operations and other adventures before each marries a Princess. The birth of Polimero and Eromena’s daughter Lindadori, at the end of L’Eromena, provides a central character for the second and third romances, whereas the chance landing by Metaneone and Eromilia on a “disinhabited” island, and their meeting with the (exiled) royal child Coralbo, introduces a possible future partner for that donzella (temporarily exiled in her turn, from Sardegna, and a wanderer, along with her parents). Distributed across the first romance in the role of listeners to the tales of others, these main protagonists, either singly or together, are privileged recipients of the three main embedded stories: in Book I, Polimero, on his way to Sardegna, hears from the Marquis of Chia the story of Eromena and her brother Perosfilo, including the recent death of Perosfilo and the war that has broken out between Sardegna and Corsica as a consequence; in Book IV, Eromena is the first to receive the story from Eleina of Arles concerning her husband Don Peplos Prince of Catalognia; in Book II, Metaneone receives details from the Countess of Falomerella of the strange vow taken by the Princess Eromilia to isolate herself on a rocky island in mourning for her deceased fiancé Perosfilo. As they listen to the tales recounted, Polimero, Eromena and Metaneone are drawn into expressions of interest that help to vivify their characterization, endowing them with a human dimension that is in contrast to the rather static characterization typically accorded to the regal figureheads of the past tradition.

In this first romance, the pattern is set for the involvement in the narrating process of minor protagonists who are not royal, though they live in proximity to the court; as narrators, these minor figures acquire a more socially interactive role than the one assigned to those who exist solely as the object of someone’s narration. The elevation of a courtier or equerry to the level of narrator is a step of some importance, both in social and in narrative terms: their frequent narratorial presence is one of the signs that the elitism for so long a condition of this tradition is being dismantled, and it can be seen also that their exchanges open the way to the use of slightly less formalized speech patterns and reactions. As a consequence of this change of register, greater dynamism in reporting speech is introduced into the trilogy in general. Such characters as Eutrofio Marchese de Chia, la Contessa di Palomera, Cataulo Cavaliere di Norgales, Carlo (scudiere to the Princess Corianna) and il Conte di Bona move in both narrative spheres, participating in the action within the primary level and functioning as witness/protagonist-narrator at the secondary (intra-diegetic) level. In communicating past experience, these story-tellers engage their companions verbally, with the intention of being persuasive, as some of their opening remarks will show. Most of the royal protagonists, on the other hand, are more restricted in their narrative function, coming as they do from a tradition that allowed them little chance of using words in order to delight and instruct an audience. Altogether, these fictive parallels for Biondi and for others in court service are given an importance, as narrators, that rivals that of the author-narrator himself.16

The new directions in narration are not linked so much to the speech and the display of courtly conventions, as to the human face that is emerging behind such protocol. The ideology supporting the ragione di stato continues in force in these early baroque romances and is to be found both in the concepts and in the manner in which they are manifested. In the following passages, that are couched in the appropriate language of formal address, we see an expression of this loyalty to the absolute power accomplished by an awareness of the duties imposed by courtly service. In the first passage, Polimero’s letter to his father King Catalampo begins:

Sire: Fra tutte le disgrazie, che fin’ora mi sì danno a conoscere in questi miei pochi anni, la maggiore è il partirmi senza licenza della Maestà
Vostra, il che, se m'avvenisse per disubbidienza o per altra cosa tale, la vita mi sarebbe noiosa, né troverei allegrezza che mi potesse sollevare. Ma, Sire, io non pensai mai né altro penserò in eterno, che ubbidirvi, e se l'obbligo me ne leva il merito, non mi toglie quella consolazione che un animo nobile riceve nel far quel che deve (L'Ermena, p. 12).

In the following, Polimero is seen responding to the Marchese d'Oristagno's appreciation of his valour:

Polimero, chinatogli alquanto, gli rispose:
- Signor Cavaliere, se le mite opere fussero tali, che meritassero i pregì che mi date, si stimerei molto felice, ma questo poco di tempo che mi fa conoscervi cost cortese m'avvisa del poco che ho da credermi valoroso, e quel poco sarà in quella parte solo in che sono favorito dalle vostre lodi (L'Ermena, p. 80).

The present discussion is more interested, however, in seeing how speech is represented in situations of slightly lesser formality, as, for example, in exchanges that provide information to satisfy curiosity, or in those related to emotional states. It will be seen that there is a tendency to include a reductive summary of what has been said, giving descriptions of some of the acts of narrativized speech alongside the more mimetic representation of speech through the use of direct or indirect forms. This may simply be a device for introducing variation and relieving the monotony of the fairly prevalent monologues, but it may also serve other purposes, as later examples will suggest. In the passages that follow, the occasional use of narrativized speech is italicized:

Il Principe, pago della loro fiera zze, e desideroso d'averli, non si saziava lodarli [i.e. the hounds]. Polimero, che se n'era accorto, gli disse: ma pregandolo accettarli, il Principe gli disse:
- Infante Polimero, io non li voglio in dono, se ho di averli, li vo dalla fortuna [...].
L'Infante, veduto tutto accesso, gli disse:
- Signore, poiché v'è piacuto che io vinca, per donarvi il cavalo, vi supplico favorirmi in ricever i cani. Ma negando volerli, dissero le scale nella corte della Cavallarizza [...] (L'Ermena, p. 6 - emphasis added).

[...] la Contessa, dopo averlo ringraziato con termini di nobile gratitudine, disse:

Liarta is recounting her story:

Essa gittatasi a terra per baciarmi la mano, m'assicurò di nuovo della sua fede, specificando ripetutissimi più obbligata ch'el Re medesimo. Io faticava levare, le dissi come il suo pastore era il mio Almadero, che la Lilla ch'egli volesse riavere era la sua, e che l'avera pregata d'interporsi col suo padre, che non era di prestigio l'opera sua in questo negozio, e che le offerte fattele in abito di pastore erano per eseguirsi in termine di Principe (Il Corallo, p. 39 - emphasis added).

As the above examples also indicate, there is abundant use of the past participle and gerundio, and the effect of these grammatical forms (commonly in absolute constructions) is one of progressive action without recourse to burdening detail. The further occasional use of an appositional phrase is to be recorded, which, in Marcello Durante's words, "è stilema che conferisce stringatezza al discorso":

Non vi si menarono, credo, più di quattro colpi per parte; tutti mortali (La donzella desterrata, p. 18).

In the following summary of a report given by il Conte di Bona to the King of Partenope these grammatical-syntactical uses add an even more marked degree of conciseness:
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Such characterization as we find in some of the descriptions accompanying or leading to speech are already more individualizing in their detail than one would have expected:


[...] il Conte, fatto curioso da quello che n’avea inteso, avrebbe volontieri saputo chi egli era, parutogli stravaganti estremi “la Corte”, e “la solitudine”, “il Regno” e “l’Eremo” (La donzella desterrada, p. 25).

La Dama, che dalla natura era dotata d’una vivacità disposta ad uno non intermittenente moto, non soffrendo così lungo discorso avea voluto interromperlo più volte, inclinata più al parlare che all’udire ma costretta da incognita forza se ne stette paziente nell’istesso modo che sta un generoso destriere, il quale, se ben stringe il treno e il morde, non resta però d’ubbidirlo (La donzella desterrada, p. 28).

Celitea, che fin’allora era stata sospesa, non sapendo immaginarsi dov’erano per cadere i propositi di Psemitide, volle inginocchiarsi, ma egli presala sotto il braccio, non glielo consenti, ed ella con signorile umiltà gli rispose [...] (Il Corallo, p. 3).

Restò sorpreso il Cavaliere, e benché non gli dispiacesse il proposito, gli dispiacque però no ‘l poter soddisfare, come sarebbe voluto; tuttavia gli rispose [...] (Il Corallo, p. 19).

Accompanying description and comment of this kind supplies the author with a tool for the development of psychological colouring, in the absence of other more subtle devices for making words and thought reveal character. In the trilogy we find no use, for example, of the so-called “free indirect discourse” that gives immediacy in the representation of internalized states and that allows modern writers to vary the point of view without recourse to omniscience. Although Giulio Herczeg has documented the use in Machiavelli, Pulci and Ariosto of the first appearances in Italian literature of the discorso indiretto libero, it seems that evidence of its use in Italian narrative as early as the
first decades of the seventeenth century has yet to be found. In the midst of the flow of omniscient narration, one accepts its absence and the resulting loss of individual expression. What is jarring, however, for the sensibility of modern readers, is the omniscience accorded to the I-narrator-character at the secondary level. That Biondi was in some way aware of the inappropriateness of this is attested by his care on occasions to have his character seek to verify his/her claim to knowledge of what was not witnessed or otherwise shared: in the first intercalated passage in L’Eromena concerning Perosfoilo’s tragic love for Talasia, the wife of l’Ammiraglio, il Marchese di Chia affirms that “Dalla sua confessione [di Prodotima] si seppe tutto quello ch’io vi ho detto” (p. 39) in an attempt to account for the implausible degree of his knowledge of the intimate conversations and thought that he has related. In La donnzella desterrada there is a more obvious attempt to meet the need for verisimilitude when conversation can no longer be overheard as the speakers move too far away. There are other examples of disclaimers, but on the whole Biondi has not observed (as, indeed, it would be anachronistic to expect) the restrictions that are today normally in force when perspective is so narrowly focused. Without dismissing his stylistic results in any way, one can nonetheless remark the awkwardness even while registering some opening into new directions. It seems that Biondi was far from complacent about the stylistic instruments that he inherited, as it is hoped this discussion shows.

The pointers to narrative change in the trilogy rest with the author’s overall approach to the interaction between characters and narrators within the text, and with the keen interest they excite in each other through their story-telling. A closer look at some examples of this embedded discourse in L’Eromena shows how narrative perspective is maintained or introduced: the first lengthy, and pivotal, episode (in Book I) in which il Marchese di Chia recounts events as a witness using third-person narration, and that in Book VI in which Eleina, wife of Don Peplasos, speaks in the first person as protagonist each gives an example of stylistic choice involving the reporting of speech. Secondary narration in Book I of La donnzella desterrada, on the other hand, links three stories (or scenes) into one episode - that from Carildo, minor protagonist in the story, who moves between third-person and first-person narration, another from il Cavaliere Cataulo as a third-person witness, and Bona’s reporting, essentially that of a witness but with occasional first-person involvement. The degree to which the three narrators in this combined episode are heterodiegetic (i.e. telling a story that concerns someone else and from which they are mostly absent) corresponds to the relationship they and their class hold to the centre of power: in each case the story told is not theirs in the accepted sense, but is open-ended largely because of their assistance, or the assistance of others like them who hold subsidiary roles that keep the machinery of government running.

In the first of our examples, in Book I of L’Eromena, il Marchese di Chia relates his information from a peripheral position, his narrative distance being for the most part at respectful remove, even though the protagonists that he mentions are ones to whom he owes devoted service. The level of his emotional participation in what he narrates is no more than what would be expected from his general concern as a subject for his Prince, and the narrative tone within his narration is almost identical with that used in the primary narrative. The emotional effect of the following, for example, is tempered by its formulaic nature as a statement of insufficiency that has a long tradition:

Non sa la mia lingua esprimere gli affetti del dolore e della stupefazione in quelle povere genti. né meno credo potersi imaginarne, se l’immaginazione non abbia l’esperimento d’ugual sciagura (p. 33).

Carildo, the narrator-witness who is also a protagonist in Corianna’s misadventures, moves closer to his subject matter on the occasion of the intensity of the moment’s peril. The variety of syntactical phrasing in the passages that follow from La donnzella desterrada shows that the degree of distance is greater when Carildo is describing past events and general situations (for which he gives extensive and extending detail) than when he re-experiences a more specific dramatic event as character, for which his report becomes sparsely detailed and more vivid.
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Corianna mia Signora s’innamorò di Lucano Duca di Lucania, Cavaliere per tutte le condizioni il più degno che fosse, non dirò tra tutti gli altri sudditi di suo Padre, ma fra quanti Principi sono oggidi al mondo, perché di nobiltà e di ricchezze non vi fu chi gli s’ugualissève nel Regno di Partenope, di valore e di bellezza chi l’eccedesse altrove. Ma queste qualità, bencché rare, erano ancora d’altre maggiori, di quelle almeno con le quali cattivava gli animi, come la liberalità, la modestia, e sopra tutto la discrezione moderatrici di tutte le virtù, e di se stessa, di modo che l’amor il Duca di Lucania allora tanto fu lontano dall’esser colpa, ch’anzi non era tenuto per ispirito gentile chi non l’adorava [...] . Sogliono per lo più i Principi e Baroni di quel Regno non venir a Corte che pochi mesi dell’anno, perché gli umori loro essendo di parer molto, le spese che vi fanno trappassano di tanto il potere che non potendo mantenervisi sono astretti vivere alle case ed ai propri stati per non rovinarne (p. 11). 

In contrast, he gives his report of Lucano’s death with emotional brevity.

« [...] Dille anche ... » Qui mancatogli lo spirito restò inespressa l’ultima sua volontà, con tanto mio dolore, che mi sarei facilmente ammazzato presso di lui, se non avesse avuto più riguardo alla padrona ch’a me stesso. Ma il pericolo non permettendo lagrime, corsi per chiamar i marinai, con intenzione di portarlo con esso noi in ogni modo, ma il compagno corsomi dietro mi disse che veniva gente, e dicea il vero. Fuggimmo in barca, gridando che s’andasse, il che si fece (p. 18).

One of the characteristics of this prose is the mixture already noted of direct and indirect speech along with narrativized, described speech (sometimes within the same utterance), as we have in these examples from L’Eromena:

Chiamato poi Carasio gli chiese s’era vero quello che coloro le avevano detto. Esso affermatolo, e veduto che ne facea gran feste le disse:
- Non credo che Vostra Altezza sappia tutto, per finir di rallegrarsi, e detto la prigionia dello schiavo.
- Come, diss’ella, lo schiavo è prigionie, ed io non so nulla?
- Egli è certo, rispose Carasio, narrandogli il modo, con che fu trovato in mare dal Marchese di Chia. (L’Eromena, p. 86 - emphasis added).

The alternation of indirect and direct speech is an effective way of giving change of pace, or of highlighting what is important in the direct speech, and the inclusion of summarized discourse balances the range of narratorial distance. It is interesting, in this regard, to see how the narrations by il Marchese di Chia and Eleina differ in their treatment of negative figures. The account of recent events in Sardegna is given by Chia, a narrator-character who by virtue of his position shares the ideology of this reigning house and of the aristocracy. This general attitude translates into a double-standard for judging the tragic love affair between Prince Perosfilo and Talasia, and that between the slaves Andrapodo and Prodotima; for the latter, it seems, love was a case of "cupidità disoneste". The colouring within the summarizing narrative characterizes Prodotima, who is said to be "artificiosa simulatrice" (p. 21), and "scelerata" (p. 22) in advising "povera" Talasia, before her direct speech is reported. (She tells Andrapodo her plan for betraying Perosfilo and Talasia to the Admiral in exchange for their liberty.) In this case the negative figures are reported through the perspective of third-person narration that carries, on the face of it, no expectations of reporting of inner consciousness; minimum colouration is provided by the narrator (the Marchese), and this can be done with seeming objectivity, letting the "facts" and direct speech stand for themselves. In the other embedded story, that concerning Don Peplasos, the first-person narrating voice brings into focus a much closer experience, which is reported without reliance on the less-controllable direct speech. The different approach to reporting the events and speech is suggestive of the author’s sensitivity to the stylistic possibilities in each situation. Before we are given his wife’s account of him and of their marriage, we have met Don Peplasos in Book II, where he was represented directly, in arrogant, uncourtly speech to Tolmido, the Captain of Metaneone’s ship:

- Non so chi voi siate Cavaliere, né l’ero; a me parrebbe che voi faceste lo stesso con esso meco. Non so perché da ieri in qua mi tracciate fuori di proposito. Non vo dirvi chi io mi sia, ma talone sono che se non andarete al vostro cammino saprò castigare la vostra indiscrezione (L’Eromena, p. 64).

He is marked by his deccit, as well as by the unusually brief description of him as "un cavaliere di bassa statura, di color ferigno" (p. 64):
Don Peplasos non sentendosi accusar del fallo, tutto allegro rispose ch'avebbe scritto a suo Padre, ringraziando l'un e l'altro con parole in apparenza le più cortesi del mondo, riservando nell'intrinseco un odio implacabile, più contra la virtù che contra la persona di Meteneone [...] (L'Eromena, p. 72).

[...] non volendo Don Peplasos mostrar violenza alcuna (già certo d'averla nelle mani perché non avendo vittovaglie, ne chi la difiendasse, le conveniva rendersi) se ne venne alla porta, dicendole le più umili ed amorose parole del mondo (L'Eromena, p. 150).

[...] pensò mutar apparenze per ingannarli, mostrandosi meno alterato e coll’animo più quieto, fingendo desiderio di quello che più abborriva, ch’era la vista d’Eleina (L’Eromena, p. 161).

When Eleina’s account begins we are already disposed to see her as victim - of some person or force yet to be discovered - since she has been rescued in a pitiful state after days at sea on a makeshift raft. In the sad story she eventually gives Eromena there is almost an absence of passion, underlined by the manner in which she reports communication between her husband and herself, substituting indirect and narrativized speech instead of mimetic representation.

[...] Si trova sopra i Firenzi un Tempio dedicato a Giunone dove i maritati che hanno avuto disgusti vengono di remote parti pellegrinando a pregare la Dea conceder loro concordia e reciprocamente amore. Don Peplasos, in cui non si vide mai segno di pietà, né di religione alcuna, divenuto pio in un istante, e religioso, m’invitò a questo pellegrinaggio. Ed io, che ben avea bisogno dell’aiuto celeste, ne fui contentissima. [...] Non volle di questo viaggio risolvere nulla con me, consigliando meco il modo di farlo, e la compagnia, che dovevamo menare, in che mostrandosi scrupolosissimo, e pieno di contrizione, ci risolvevamo d’andar senza pompa incogniti [...] ma parendomi di non poter per onestà essere servita nel mio bisogno da un uomo, gli dissi ch’io invece del servidore avrei menato una donna, e dicendomi ch’era ragione si soggiunse che per ogni caso mi menasse anco un servidore, non sapendo i pericoli che possono incontrarsi nel cammino, che però fosse bene eleggerne uno conosciuto per uomo di valore, a che condescendendo io più che volentieri, e levandomi questa proposta tutti sospetti che mi avessero potuto cadere nell’animo [...] mi propose uno il cui nome era Calaplo, giovane semplice, e bello. [...] Ed egli entrato fretto-

Because of the characterization that has already been built up, and the pity that Eleina arouses in her listener, there is no further need to dramatize the situation by immediate, direct speech, and the greater narratorial control, and distance, given by such summarizing of discourse is appropriate in the presentation of the husband’s attempts to discredit and finally murder her. A later story (in Book I of Il Corallo) by Liarta points up the difference between the two situations, Liarta’s happy memory of her husband Almadero, from whom she has been forcibly parted, being such that in her account to her listener (Corallo) she recalls their exchanges as ones of direct speech.

The secondary level of narration not only continues the various sub-plots, but is used to re-present them with slightly different, integrating aspects, an admission perhaps that authorial omniscience, and structuring, is open to correction; the story is now under the control of the narrating voice (and of the listener, Calvino would say), being no longer so much the property of the protagonist who is narrated. The embedding increases in intricacy in La donnella desterrata, where in Book I it offers an insistent focus on the acts of observing, overhearing and listening, as well as recounting. The three associated insertions that have already been mentioned, with their precise “stage directions”, have as much affinity to the theatre as they do to the romance. When Carildo’s account ends, he and il Conte di Bona observe a sleeping man near an outdoor shrine; Carildo departs and the Count observes and overhears (but only in part) two others, who in turn pause and observe the sleeper; when the two speakers separate the Count approaches one of them and is soon given the story he seeks (concerning the second speaker who has now withdrawn); in order for their conversation to
continue in confidence the Count is taken aside by his new raconteur, Cataulo, and we are told "il Conte, lasciato lo Scudiere, accompagnato all’altro, gli s’assise appresso, per ascoltarlo"; in their absence from centre-stage, the sleeper is awakened by the scent of incense that a young woman has brought and scattered at the nearby altar; these two people converse until she is called away, leaving him love-smitten and abstracted, with which the Count and his new acquaintance are brought back to our attention. The person discussed at this point is found to have been the subject of narration on another occasion when in a different disguise. Only through the re-telling of this story (later, to others, in the presence of Feredo its protagonist) does Cataulo persuade him to abandon disguise and return to his duties as Prince in his own country.

[...] lo supplicava con il silenzio e con le lagrime più efficacemente che non aveva fatto parlando, ma egli graziosamente sollevatolo, dopo una breve pausa gli disse:

- Cataulo, non più, che voi con il far l’ufficio vostro avete insegnato me a far il mio (La donzella desterrata, p. 64).

Biondi’s emphasis on the roles of both raconteur (narrator) and listener (narratee) is affirmed through frequent use of embedded discourse in the romances; while exhibiting little in the way of individual expression and little that is not a reporting device used in the primary level of narration, this embedded discourse offers, in its situation of exchange and its intention to elicit response, some ground for development. Listeners interrupt, entreat explanations, maintain a presence, show reactions, and generally lead to a process of enlivenment of the narration. Narrators expect to make an impression on their listeners through the content and the telling of their tales, and, on occasions, through their written eloquence. Metaneone, for example, is converted from hatred of his brother on reading his letter, and is left "appagato della modestia del fratello" (L’Eromena, p. 15), whereas Eromilla is finally alerted to the danger of her position, and is "spaventata [...] dalle ragioni della lettera" that her father writes (L’Eromena, p. 54). The response of Corianna’s father to her letter, presented to him by il Conte di Bona, is to turn "con allegro sembiante" and with a welcome.

The tone of confidence that surrounds the exchanges at secondary level and that is reflected in the lead into and out of these passages breaks the barriers of rigidity that once accompanied speech, and that we still have occasionally in the simple gli disse, gli rispose. The communicative act has grown in intensity, in variety and to a certain extent in range of expression. The opening of the first intercalated discourse of L’Eromena has already moved in this direction by keeping visible the narrative movement into and out of "the other" past situation and the personally-experienced present:

Il Nocchiero contentissimo d’ubbidirlo, assicurato ch’avrebbe sentito una bella, benché pietosa storia, così cominciò:

- Arato Re di Sardegna (dove noi andiamo) ebbe due figliuoli [...] Era il Principe Perosilfo cresciuto alla vostra età (che credo non passiate sedici anni) […] (pp. 16-17 - emphasis added).

In the use of comment that reaches beyond the intradiegetic plane, as in the above case, Biondi’s narrators were preparing the way for greater narratorial liberties later in the century, and in the following one.20 In step with this development, we see greater diversity of narratorial intrusion appearing in other ways in the primary level. Apart from such intrusions as the occasional general comment on characters or apostrophe to them, and the normal use of selective or integrating detail, the author-narrator allows himself the liberty of an interpretation from outside his diegetic plane:

Polimero disse voler trovarsi in questa guerra incognito, mosso dall’interesse comune a tutti i Principi contra i traditori dalla vendetta debita alle virtù del Principe Perosilfo, e dal valore d’una Principessa così chiara, come Eromena. Ma questa in effetto fu la sola cagione di rampergli il viaggio d’Ibernia (L’Eromena, p. 42 - emphasis added).

[L’Eromena] udit nel cerchio seguita dalle Valentine, e dal Marchese, cavan- dolo dal pericolo, senza aver poi di dirigli una sola parola, come che sempre vicina, ne sapesse (non ne sapendo cagione) scostarsi da lui. D’onde raccolgo (concedammi questa piccola digressione) tra le cose più occulte della natura, quella delle semplici essere tra le più vere (l’Eromena, p. 82 - emphasis added).
Tutto questo diceva il Cavaliere per la persona del Druido, non lo capendo il Conte, e ne disputarono lungamente (La donzella desterrata, p. 25).

On other occasions, the intrusion draws attention more deliberately to the narrator's presence as weaver of threads (to recall Ariosto):


We find the narrator referring to his text as an object existing outside his narration, and he not only addresses his readers but seeks to involve them in the making of it. The desire to effect a transition or create suspense, once the main motivations for drawing attention to and characterizing the narrator, is now only one of a wider set of strategies:

Polimero più che dianzi curioso, lo pregò fargliene favore, ed egli, ch'era Coralbo, figliuolo della Reina d'Arabia, gli contò i suoi casi, il principio dei quali è nel Sesto dell'Ermomena, seguendone il progresso, con queste parole (La Donzella desterrata, p. 93 - emphasis added).

Navigò felicemente la valorosa compagnia, senza avvenimento alcuno, per dar tempo a me d'andarmene altrove (La Donzella desterrata, p. 201 - emphasis added).

Cariello fra tutti gli scudieri del mondo, d'animo nobile, credutosi che Olmiero, per occultare i falli di Lucano, e suoi, avesse inventato così disonestà calunnia [...]. Ma mi si concedà passarmene altrove, data siguria di dover fra poco renderli sani, ed amici (La Donzella desterrata, p. 218 - emphasis added).

Ma restino a godere le delizie della gentile Partenope questi Principi, mentre noi richiamati da Feredo, parleremo di lui, ponendo fine alle sue disavventure (Il Coralbo, p. 63 - emphasis added).

Lasciatili dunque, corriamo alla città, dove Laodemia ci appella (Il Coralbo, p. 108 - emphasis added).

A century before, of course, Ariosto had been a predecessor in breaking the narrator's bonds, but Biondi's efforts were at the beginning of an impetus towards much more programmed use of narratorial awareness and freedom that was to become a continuing force, slight only at

first but irreversible. The openings to change that we have seen in his narratorial practice, and the links between such practice and the new type of character that is so much a counterpart for Biondi himself, lead us to the idea that there is a correspondence between these narrators in interaction with their fictive world and the writer's expression through them of his consciousness concerning his own society and his place in it. The writing of the trilogy that drew on his personal experience came in the "winter" of his years when such confidence could be allowed to find expression.

Notes

1 The biographical details we have concerning Giovanni Francesco Biondi (born on the island of Lesina off the Dalmatian coast in 1572, and a subject of the Venetian Republic) relate to his political career and make slight mention of his literary activities, which as far as is known began with the publication of his first romance (L'Ermomena, Venice, Pinelli, 1624). (For an account of Biondi's life and his work in diplomatic circles, cp. the article by Gino Benzioni "Giovanni Francesco Biondi un avventuroso dalmata del '600", Archivio veneto, LXXX (1967), 19-37, and his entry on Biondi in the Dizionario biografico degli Italiani, Roma, Treccani, 1968, vol. X, pp. 528-31.) Biondi studied law in Padua and is recorded as being in Paris in 1606-08 as private secretary to the Venetian Ambassador Priuli. The various sources quoted by Benzioni attest to his conversion to Protestantism and to his associations with the English representatives of King James I in Venice, as well as to his contacts with Paolo Serpi for whom he supplied (prohibited) books from abroad. Through such links he later obtained preferment in London at the Stuart Court, where he was given a pension, and in 1622 a knighthood. It seems that he was very active in the second decade of the century in the service of various people, involving him in considerable travel on the European continent from his base in London; in 1622 he married Maria Maynerne, the sister of the King's physician. He remained in England until 1640 when he moved to Aubonne in Switzerland, the home of his wife's relatives, where he died in 1644. Following the completion of his trilogy (La donzella desterrata, Venetia, Pinelli, 1627; Il Coralbo, Venetia, Pinelli, 1632), Biondi wrote L'istoria delle guerre civili d'Inghilterra tra le due case di Lancastro e Iorc (published in Venice by Pinelli, 1637-44). Translations of his romances appeared during the century in English, French and German.
This is an excerpt from a scholarly paper discussing the Prose Romance Trilogy of Giovanni Francesco Biondi. The text mentions the influence of the author, Antonio Santa Croce, and other scholars on the genre of Prose Romance. The author, Margaret Baker, notes the importance of Giovanni Battista Manzini's essay, "La prosa narrativa," in understanding the work of Biondi. The text also references the work of Francesco Fulvio Frugoni and Giambattista Marino, among others.

The excerpt highlights the challenges and controversies in defining and understanding the Prose Romance genre, particularly as it relates to Biondi's work. The author draws on a variety of critical perspectives, including Capucci's view that Biondi's work is an example of a "certa padronanza della sua materia." The excerpt concludes with a brief overview of the Prose Romance Trilogy, noting its influence and the difficulty in fully grasping its significance.

The paper also references other scholars and works, such as C. Boito, C. Palmieri, E. Carcassi, and others, who have contributed to the understanding of Biondi's work. The text concludes with a bibliography, listing key works and authors that have contributed to the study of the Prose Romance Trilogy.

The document is archived at Flinders University, and the page number is 66. The full text is available at dspace.flinders.edu.au.

In a letter to Biondi in the same volume (pp. 571-72) Armanni promises that on returning to London he will discuss the necessity of using the letter H in order to avoid ambiguities, adding ‘Odo poi quel che a V.S. era accorso ragionando con l’Eccellentissimo Signor Ambasciator Malvezzi in proposito della lingua [..].’

Any investigation of the models for reporting this speech would need to take account of the earlier traditions and of the Dialogue form in the sixteenth century, as well as the area of Renaissance Drama. There remains the tantalizing question of whether any influence on Biondi’s work may have come from an awareness of the London theatre in the reigns of James I and Charles I. For an interesting analysis of the links between the Romance genre and the theatre in Italy, cp. Davide Corrieri’s chapter, “La rielaborazione teatrale di romanzi nel Seicento: considerazioni e prime indagini”, in Sul romanzo secentesco (Atti dell’Incontro di studio di Lecce, 29 novembre 1985), Galatina, Congedo Editore, 1987, pp. 29-100.

Whereas the author-narrator is never described, the descriptions of the trusted cavaliere or scudiero who is witness-narrator of so many of the events chronicled in the trilogy carry perhaps some echoes of Biondi’s self-image. Vincenzo Armanni’s description of Biondi as “vecchio d’età, venerabile d’aspetto, e di maniere tutte soavi” is not far from the following characteristics of il conte di Bona and of il cavaliere Dinacre: “[..] Trovavasi fra gli altri passeggeri un attempato Cavaliere, che venerabile di canutezza, e d’aspetto, era il solo che fra le tante gridai era stato cheto.” (La donzella desterrada, p. 8) “[..] gli s’offrere in vista un attempato Cavaliere, il quale, mesto in aspetto, passeggiava poco lungi da lui, in atto di rivolget molte cose nel vasto spazio dei suoi pensieri. La qualità, l’abito, ma più di tutto il venerando sembiante, appagarono gli occhi del Principe, per renderlo desideroso del suo congresso.” (Il Carabio, p. 68).


The wider question of whether there is evidence of multiple point of view is not being taken up in this discussion of the author’s narratorial choices.


Giovanni Gotto, p. 324, and Jean-Michel Gardair, pp. 76-77 mention other examples.