

CROSSING LINES
BETWEEN THE MEDITERRANEAN,
THE *ECCLESIA SPECULARIS*, AND THE SELF
NOTES ON A RECENT BOOK ON
OPICINO DE CANISTRIS*

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Me voici, l'Europe, qui confesse mes délits, non pas aux oreilles mais aux yeux de tous les présents, selon les propriétés des membres à mon service. Mon bras de Provence, que l'Afrique m'a enlevé quand les barbares ont envahi la Provence, se réjouit pour rien de la paix sur terre; mon bras d'Allemagne souffre de l'absence d'empire temporel; mon pied de Calabre a l'espoir absurde de traverser la mer pour obtenir la victoire en Terre Sainte; mon pied de Béotie a la vaine crainte de devoir se défendre d'une servitude misérable. Le Seigneur, par sa miséricorde, en me ramenant à la lumière, a transpercé mes chairs de clous par sa crainte, comme vous pouvez le voir clairement. [...] Désormais toutes mes affections sont transformées de vices en vertus. Je me réjouis de la joie spirituelle de mon prochain, je m'afflige de la méchanceté des pervers, j'espère la conversion du plus grand nombre et je crains les périls de ceux qui vont chuter, et cela envers mon prochain. Quant à moi, je me réjouis de l'adversité, je m'afflige de la prospérité temporelle, j'espère être sauvé par la miséricorde divine et je crains les jugements secrets de Dieu. Derrière mon pied gauche, dans mon dos, coule le grand fleuve Danube, de 'Dan' qui veut dire jugement, et 'dubium', comme tous les jugements dont je doute.¹

* SYLVAIN PIRON, *Dialectique du monstre. Enquête sur Opicino de Canistris*, Éditions Zones Sensibles, Bruxelles 2015. These notes benefited from a meeting with the author at the Philosophical Review Club (University of Leuven, 23 November 2016).

¹ OPICINO DE CANISTRIS, « De la disposition spirituelle de l'Europe comparée à celle de l'homme », trans. in PIRON, *Dialectique du monstre*, p. 125–126. For the original Latin, see MURIEL LAHARIE (ed.), *Le journal singulier d'Opicinus de Canistris (1337-vers 1341): Vaticanus latinus 6435*, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Città del Vaticano 2008, vol. II (Studi e testi, 448), p. 460–462.

The Pavian priest Opicino de Canistris (1296–c. 1353) wrote these lines in his daybook on 13 September 1337, putting into words a glimpse of his most personal version of the microcosm/macrocosm topos which he had been illustrating for three years in a series of complex and mesmerizing drawings. In these words, hereabove reported in the French translation provided by Sylvain Piron in his *Dialectique du monstre*, one can indeed find the breadth of the visionary cosmography which Opicino displayed in his graphic creations, in which the body of the *œcumene* is represented as intersected with the body of the human creature – with its passions, guilts, doubts, anguishes, and hopes –, with the body of Christ, and with that of His Church.

Brought back to light beginning in the 1920s after centuries of neglect, the textual and graphic works of Opicino have since fascinated many art historians, historians of ideas, and psychiatrists, who have tried in their differing ways to describe it, understand its meaning, and explain the causes of its singularity.² Born in Lomello, near Pavia, into a family of merchants and notaries involved in the Guelf party during the factional strife afflicting Lombardy, Opicino spent the first part of his troubled life moving between his homeland and other cities of northern Italy, resorting to different jobs to help support his family. Initiated early into an ecclesiastic career, he studied the liberal arts, theology, canon law, and was trained as manuscript illuminator; he probably learnt how to copy maps in Genoa, where he lived in exile for a short period after Stefano Visconti had taken Pavia. After his ordination, Opicino became rector of the Pavian parish of Santa Maria Capella, which he left in 1328. Settled in Avignon, at that time site of the Holy See, he gained, after a period spent in poverty, the favor of Pope John XXII, and became *scriptor* at the Apostolic Penitentiary. He probably remained in Avignon until his death, afflicted by inner turmoil, in a long-lasting exile.

The composition of those pieces of work by which he caught the attention of twentieth-century scholars followed a distressing episode in his life. During the

² For a richer account of literature on Opicino and his intellectual context to supplement the list of titles I will mention in this review-article, I refer to Piron's book; see also the bibliography provided in LAHARIE (ed.), *Le journal singulier*, p. LXIII–LXXXVI. Among the scholarship published at the same time or right after Piron's monograph, one should mention MARIA TERESA FUMAGALLI BEONIO-BROCCHIERI, ROBERTO LIMONTA, *Volando sul mondo. Opicino de Canistris (1296-1352)*, Archinto, Milano 2016; as well as SYLVAIN PIRON, « Les exils d'Opicino de Canistris », in ELISA BRILLI, LAURA FENELLI, GERHARD WOLF (eds.), *Images and Words in Exile. Avignon and Italy during the First Half of the 14th Century (1310-1352)*, SISMEL, Firenze 2015 (Millennio medievale, 107; Strumenti e studi, n.s., 40), p. 193–207; and ID., « L'Europe d'Opicino », in JOËL BLANCHARD, RENATE BLUMENFELD-KOSINSKI (eds.), *Philippe de Mézières et l'Europe médiévale: nouvelle histoire, nouveaux espaces, nouveaux langages*, Droz, Geneva 2017 (Cahiers d'humanisme et Renaissance, 140), p. 191–202. Sarah Griffin (University of Oxford) has recently completed a Ph.D. dissertation on the calendrical components in Opicino's work in relation to contemporary calendars and the understanding of time and temporality in the Middle-Ages (« Diagram and Dimension: The Visualisation of Time in the Drawings of Opicinus de Canistris [1296–c. 1352] »).

Holy week of 1334, Opicino was hit by a sudden *infirmetas* which brought him to a state of half-death, leaving him mute, partially paralyzed in the right arm, deprived of his *memoria litteralis*, but strengthened in his *scientia spiritualis*. After this event, which has been read by many as a mental breakdown accompanied by hallucinatory visions, he started drawing complex diagrams – often including maps or geographical references – interwoven with texts and inhabited by geometrical, human, animal, angelic and diabolic figures. Particularly impressive are his anthropomorphic portolan charts – or « body-worlds », according to the fitting expression employed by Karl Whittington in his recent monograph.³ Herein, the sea-lines of Europe, North Africa and Asia Minor transform into profiles of male or female figures in dialogue with one another, while the waters of the Mediterranean and of the Atlantic Ocean take the shape of monstrous or disturbing characters. What remains of the outcome of this creative activity is preserved at the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana: a collection of 27 sheets of large format parchment, mostly containing diagrams and drawings on both the recto and the verso (MS Palatinus latinus 1993, henceforth P);⁴ a codex in paper of 87 folios of texts and pictures (MS Vaticanus latinus 6435, henceforth V);⁵ and a fragment of parchment contained in the codex Barberinianus Latinus 2999.⁶ Of the many writings in prose and poetry that Opicino reported to have composed before his illness in 1334, only two works are known to have survived. The first is a description of the city of Pavia, entitled *Liber de laudibus civitatis Ticinensis*, which was long ascribed to an ‘Anonymus Ticiniensis’.⁷ The second, the *De preeminencia spiritualis imperii*, is a treatise on the relationship between the papal and imperial power, composed in support of John XXII during his conflict with Ludwig of Bavaria.⁸

³ KARL WHITTINGTON, *Body-Worlds. Opicinus de Canistris and the Medieval Cartographic Imagination*, PIMS, Toronto 2014 (PIMS Studies and Texts, 186; Text Image Context: Studies in Medieval Manuscript Illumination, 1).

⁴ Partially edited in RICHARD G. SALOMON, *Opicinus de Canistris. Weltbild und Bekenntnisse eines Avignonesischen Klerikers des 14. Jahrhunderts*, The Warburg Institute, London 1936 (Studies of the Warburg Institute, 1); the plates are available at <http://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/bav_pal_lat_1993>.

⁵ Edited and translated in French by LAHARIE (*Le journal singulier*, see fn. 1). The manuscript is available at <http://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Vat.lat.6435>.

⁶ SIMONETTA NICCOLINI, MICHELE FEO, « Una scoperta di Augusto Campana: il frammento inedito di Opizzino de Canistris », in CINO PEDRELLI (ed.), *Omaggio ad Augusto Campana*, Società di studi Romagnoli, Cesena 2003 (Saggi e repertori, 31), p. 205–348.

⁷ OPICINUS DE CANISTRIS [ANONYMUS TICINENSIS]. *Liber de laudibus civitatis Ticinensis*, ed. RODOLFO MAIIOCCHI, FERRUCCIO QUINTAVALLE, Lapi, Città di Castello 1903 (*Rerum italicarum scriptores*, 11).

⁸ Partially edited in RICHARD SCHOLZ, *Unbekannte Kirchenpolitische Streitschriften aus der Zeit Ludwig des Bayern (1327-1354)*, Loescher, Rom 1911–1914, (Bibliothek des Kgl. Preußischen Historischen Instituts in Rom, 9–10), vol. I, p. 37–43, and vol. II, p. 89–104.

From the first rediscovery of Opicino's œuvre – thanks to the interest of the Vatican librarians and the circle of scholars gathered around Aby Warburg – until the present day, one line of scholarship has tended to follow a biographical approach to the study of this material, taking an interest more in what the work could say about the man and his mind, rather than its intrinsic value and its possible connection with the imagery and theological debates of that time. More specifically, many have considered Opicino's drawings as the symptom of a psychiatric disorder, suitable for use as a case study for the history of the relationship between art and madness. The pivotal reference in this regard is a 1952 study by Ernst Kris, who defined Opicino as a « a psychotic artist of the Middle Ages » and diagnosed him with schizophrenia.⁹ This line of research – which Carl Gustav Jung had encouraged during his Eranos seminar in 1943 –¹⁰ has been developed since the 1990s by Muriel Laharie and Guy Roux, who identified Opicino's condition as a form of fantastic paraphrenia or « délire chronique fantastique », finding in his texts and drawings signs of megalomaniac delirium together with attempts at dissimulation.¹¹

On the other hand, a number of scholars rejected or payed only minor attention to the possible diagnosis of mental illness, trying instead to understand Opicino's work in relation to the fourteenth-century visual, spiritual and intellectual culture. A particularly harsh reaction against a purely clinical reading, considered unproductive as much as dishonest, is that of Michele Feo.¹² One could mention also the studies of Eugenio Randi¹³ and, more recently, of

⁹ ERNST KRIS, *Psychoanalytic Explorations in Art*, International Universities Press, New York 1952, p. 118–127.

¹⁰ RICCARDO BERNARDINI, GIAN PIERO QUAGLINO, AUGUSTO ROMANO (eds.), « Opicinus de Canistris: Concluding Lecture by C. G. Jung, Eranos, Ascona, 1943. Notes Taken [Probably] by Rivkah Schärf Kluger », *Journal of Analytical Psychology*, 58/2 (2013), p. 163–183, here p. 175: « Unfortunately, [Richard Salomon] had too little psychological and psychopathological knowledge. It would surely have given this investigation a great advantage if these pictures had been looked at through the eyes of a modern psychologist ». See also EAD., « Further Studies on Jung's Eranos Seminar on Opicinus de Canistris », *The Journal of Analytical Psychology*, 58/2 (2013), p. 184–199.

¹¹ Among the many studies published by the authors, together or individually, one should at the very least mention GUY ROUX, MURIEL LAHARIE, *Art et Folie au Moyen Âge. Aventures et Énigmes d'Opicinus de Canistris (1296-1351?)*, Le Léopard d'Or, Paris 1997.

¹² MICHELE FEO, « La vita come vaso. L'autobiografia figurale di Opizzino de Canistris », in FRANCESCO BRUNI (ed.), *In quella parte del libro de la mia memoria. Verità e finzioni dell'io' autobiografico*, Marsilio, Venezia 2003 (Saggi Marsilio. Presente storico, 26), p. 69–101, esp. in §2 « L'impostura dell'artista pazzo », in which Kris's work is defined as « uno sciagurato capolavoro di ciarlataneria scientifica esposta con le migliori arti del lenocinio verbale ».

¹³ EUGENIO RANDI, « La vergine e il papa: *potentia absoluta* e *plenitudo potestatis* papale nel XIV secolo », *History of Political Thought*, 5 (1984), p. 425–445, esp. 437; Id., « La tartaruga e il Leviatano », *Leggere*, 2/11 (May 1989), p. 54–63.

Agostino Paravicini Bagliani,¹⁴ in which considerations of Opicino's (in)sanity are very limited, focusing rather on his place within the contemporary politico-ecclesiological discussions and iconography. In Anglophone scholarship, this historical perspective has been pursued by Victoria Morse¹⁵ and Catherine Harding,¹⁶ who both dismissed the hypothesis of the mad artist, understanding the shift following the episode of 1334, respectively, as a conversion to a higher degree of religiosity, or as a case to be studied in comparison with the experiences of the great visionaries of Christian mysticism.¹⁷ Among the most recent and relevant contributions, the above-mentioned work by Whittington explicitly follows the way paved by Morse and Harding. Putting aside the *vexata quaestio* of Opicino's mental disease, Whittington instead provides a formal analysis of the anthropomorphic maps: he analyses those cartographic models which Opicino might have referred to, and studies the graphic techniques and modalities of composition which Opicino devised in order to pursue his 'experimentations'. From this perspective, these diagrams are indeed seen as intentional and progressively improving attempts to give visible form to (and understand the meaning of) the « images of the earth and the sea » that inhabited his vision.¹⁸

¹⁴ AGOSTINO PARAVICINI BAGLIANI, « Opicinus de Canistris et la symbolique pontificale », in JEAN MARIE MARTIN, BERNADETTE MARTIN-HISARD, AGOSTINO PARAVICINI BAGLIANI (eds.), *Vaticana et medievalia. Études offertes à Louis Duval-Arnould*, SISMEL, Firenze 2008 (Millennio medievale, 71; Strumenti e studi, n.s., 16), p. 427–435, repr. in Id., *Il potere del papa. Corporeità, autorappresentazione, simboli*, SISMEL, Firenze 2009 (Millennio medievale, 78; Strumenti e studi, n.s., 21), p. 227–236.

¹⁵ VICTORIA MORSE, *A Complex Terrain: Church, Society, and the Individual in the Works of Opicino de Canistris (1296-ca.1354)*, Ph.D. Diss. University of California, 1996. See also EAD., « The *Vita mediocris*: The Secular Priesthood in the Thought of Opicino de Canistris », in COSIMO DAMIANO FONSECA (ed.), *Prete nel medioevo*, Cierre, Verona 1997 (Quaderni di storia religiosa, 4), p. 257–282; EAD., « Seeing and believing. The problem of idolatry in the thought of Opicino de Canistris », in SUSANNA ELM, ÉRIC REBILLARD, ANTONELLA ROMANO (eds.), *Orthodoxie, Christianisme, Histoire*, École française de Rome, Rome 2000 (Collection de l'École française de Rome, 270), p. 163–176; EAD., « The Role of Maps in Later Medieval Society: Twelfth to Fourteenth Century », *The History of Cartography*, 2 (2007), p. 23–52.

¹⁶ CATHERINE HARDING, « Opening to God: the Cosmographical Diagrams of Opicinus de Canistris », *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, 61/1 (1998), p. 18–39; EAD., « Madness, Reason, Vision and the Cosmos: Evaluating the Drawings of Opicinus de Canistris (1296–c. 1351) », in GABRIELE NEHER, RUPERT SHEPHERD (eds.), *Revaluing Renaissance Art*, Ashgate, Aldershot 2000, p. 201–210.

¹⁷ A comparison between Opicino's visionary cosmography and the visions of Hildegard of Bingen has been recently proposed by MARIA TERESA FUMAGALLI BEONIO-BROCCHIERI, « Il mondo di Opicino », in FUMAGALLI BEONIO-BROCCHIERI, LIMONTA, *Volando sul mondo*, p. 46.

¹⁸ WHITTINGTON, *Body-Worlds*. See also Id., « Experimenting with Opicinus de Canistris (1296–c. 1354) », *Gesta*, 51 (2012), p. 147–174. For the entire passage on Opicino's opening of his inner eyes to the *ymagines terre et maris*, see PIRON, *Dialectique du monstre*, p. 75–76 (Latin in LAHARIE [ed.], *Le journal singulier*, vol. II, p. 522–524).

Published in 2015 by Zone Sensibles, Sylvain Piron's *Dialectique du monstre* is a new chapter of this *enquête* – as the subtitle says – on Opicino and his world. It is the outcome of a fruitful collaboration with the editor Alexandre Laumonier, graphic designer and anthropologist, who in the final acknowledgments is defined « au sens les plus fort, le co-auteur » of the book (p. 202). Throughout the volume, Piron's study is intertwined with color illustrations of Opicino's diagrams (several on fold-out inserts, plus one additional plate of 60 × 40 cm used as book jacket), schemas explaining their basic structure, marginal notes (which become more and more dense towards the end of the book), and *excerpta* from Opicino's writings in French translation, usually placed at the end of each chapter and often announcing the theme of the one that follows.¹⁹ The result is a rich but compact volume, which can be read and handled as a paperback novel without compromising the quality of the images.

Piron's inquiry cannot but start with an evaluation of the previous scholarship and with a methodological premise. In Chapter 1 (« Travaux d'approche ») the author reconstructs the historiographical tendencies of the last century, distancing himself from the research method followed by Laharie and Roux. Firstly, he questions the suitability of applying modern nosographic classifications to a fourteenth-century man, since psychoses are « maladies culturelles » and cannot be identified outside their particular historical context (p. 27). Secondly, he contests the validity, in historical research, of a hermeneutical approach which attributes to an author, with no hard evidence, attempts at dissimulation or bad faith, and overinterprets his works in the light of that undemonstrated presupposition. A historian should instead approach the object of his research applying, *prima facie*, a sort of willing suspension of disbelief: he should look at the documents with « bienveillance », taking them seriously, reading them for what they are and what they say, or would want to say, and this, on the basis of correct editions and translations.²⁰ In our specific case, a 'benevolent' reading of Opicino would involve looking at the Vaticanus and Palatinus codices under the assumption that they sincerely express the intention of their author, are somewhat in continuity with his earlier treatises, and give voice to Opicino's efforts at elaborating a (more or less) coherent

¹⁹ More specifically, one can find reproductions of P, fol. 3v, 4r, 4v, 16r, 17r, 17v, 11r, 11v, 13r, 15v, 18v, 20r, 22v, 23r, 24r, and 27v; and V, fol. 52r, 52v, 53v, 61r, 61v, 78r, and 84v. Piron provides a first French translation of Opicino's autobiography (P, fol. 11v), and a new translation of the following passages from his journal: *Comment cette œuvre a été composée; De la conservation du trésor cache jusqu'au temps voulu; Des nombreuses tentations par lesquelles je suis passé, et le perplexités qu'elles m'ont causées; Comparaison du corps personnel au corps de l'Europe; De la disposition spirituelle de l'Europe comparée à celle de l'homme; Les propriétés du cœur de la mer, de la poitrine et du ventre de l'Europe; Du savoir naturel.*

²⁰ Piron remarks the presence of some inaccuracies in Laharie's translation of the journal (p. 24); see also his review in *Revue de l'histoire des religions*, 3 (2010), p. 400–403.

theological and spiritual discourse, which was in conversation with the cultural and historical context of his time. To a certain extent, Piron therefore endorses the project of the first Opicino scholar, Richard Salomon, who, starting from the principle that « le tâche de l'historien [...] n'est pas de formuler des jugements mais d'exposer et de comprendre des documents », expressed the (unachieved) wish of analyzing Opicino's works not only as a « produit pathologique » but as a « symptôme des mutations spirituelles du XIV siècle » (p. 22). Indeed, in order to understand Opicino's work, the issue of his personal suffering and psychological condition cannot be ignored; however, that issue cannot be addressed with anachronism nor constitute the starting point and the main benchmark of a historical research.²¹

In *Dialectique du monstre*, the attempt to define Opicino's suffering from a clinical point of view is delegated to the psychiatrist Philippe Nuss, who authored the postscript of the volume (« Esquisse de cartographie psychique des œuvres d'Opicino de Canistris », p. 175–180). Reserving all judgments on the specific nature of the « changement d'activité cérébrale » that might have occurred to Opicino in 1334, Nuss describes the priest as a man affected by anguish more than by psychosis, obsessed by the idea of sin and a victim of his inner struggle. Opicino's work is not the expression of a pathological deviance, the product of a disordered mind, but rather a therapeutic « travail de reconstruction, d'élaboration, d'élucidation » (p. 180) aimed at reconstituting a unity out of a fragmented reality: « une représentation du monde au sein duquel son débat intérieur, les dogmes de l'Église catholique et la topographie du monde ne font plus qu'un » (p. 178).

Approaching Opicino's works from a different perspective, Piron's own analysis comes to similar conclusions. He utilizes Aby Warburg's idea of *Dialektik des Monstrums* to describe Opicino's drawings as the battlefield on which he fought his own demons, as well as the place where one can see emerging the *Seelendrama* of a culture as a whole.²² A second reference explicitly used by Piron is Gregory Bateson, and more specifically his concept of the double bind. According to this paradigm, Opicino's trouble is to find himself trapped between contradictory instances, these being identified as the intrinsic paradoxes of the

²¹ Similar remarks on the historical interest of Opicino's creations can be found, although with a different perspective (i.e. in the framework of a study of the individuality and personality during the Middle Ages) in AARON GOUREVITCH, « L'individualité au Moyen Âge. Le cas d'Opicinus de Canistris », *Annales: Économies, sociétés, civilisations*, 48/5 (1993), p. 1263–1280, e.g. p. 1268: « Opicinus mérite l'intérêt de l'historien, non parce que c'est un malade mental, mais parce qu'il incarne un phénomène de son époque », and p. 1278: « ce n'est pas la maladie psychique elle-même, mais son expression culturelle qui présente quelque intérêt pour l'historien ».

²² The Warburghian perspective is further addressed in Chapter 7 (« Dialectique du Monstre »). For a study of this concept see, for instance, GEORGES DIDI-HUBERMAN, « *Dialektik des Monstrums*: Aby Warburg and the Symptom Paradigm », *Art History*, 24/5 (2001), p. 621–645.

Avignon papacy, of the Roman Church, and maybe of Christianity itself: his being a sinner while simultaneously a professional worker at the Penitentiary; the validity of the sacraments being based on the pure formal execution of the rite, independently from the moral worth of the minister who celebrates it; the relationship between spiritual and temporal power of the Church and secular rulers (and the consequent political situation in northern Italy at the time); the « conflit non résolu entre différents niveaux de normativité » (p. 109) within the ecclesiastical institution, which professes humility and poverty as virtues, but is rich, hierarchically structured, and governed by individuals driven by ambition. Opicino therefore superimposed different levels of reality on a single sheet of paper or parchment as a way for him to find a unitarian, although multifaceted, sense of his life, and to delineate penitential and salvific paths.

From this perspective, understanding the context is essential in order to correctly (although not fully) understand the personal sufferance of Opicino and his works; at the same time, however, his individual case becomes the gateway for a discourse on that very historical context and its contradictions. Moreover, it can serve as a privileged witness to how the spiritual, cultural, and political transformation of the time might have been perceived by simple priests or mid-level functionaries working out of the spotlight.²³

The scope of Piron's book is to provide reading keys for approaching Opicino's œuvre, both as an artist and as a writer, understanding, first of all, its « conditions de production et de fonctionnement ». He tries to fulfill this aim, on the one hand, through a description of the material and formal aspects of the manuscripts, and, on the other hand, by taking into consideration Opicino's specific historical context and analyzing the contradictions he found in the Christian Church.

As for the material and formal aspects of his drawings, Piron notes how in Opicino's autographs one can find several similarities with the visual codes of his time: he made use, for example, of the techniques of contemporary cartography, of the fourteenth-century Italian style of drawing portraits, and of graphical norms linked to the notarial practices. What is unique is the way in which he used these tools and how he put them together in order to express his inner-world. As for his writings, « son originalité est d'avoir pratiqué, à une échelle inhabituelle à cette date, l'écriture de soi », which goes beyond the medieval genre of confessions, since it lacks the public dimension, instead carrying on « le projet d'une écriture rigoureusement intime, vouée à l'analyse de soi-même » (p. 14).

²³ In this regards, Roberto Limonta recognize the value of the case-Opicino as a perfect subject for a microhistorical study, comparable to Carlo Ginzburg's Menocchio (« Il cartografo di Dio », in FUMAGALLI BEONIO-BROCCHIERI, LIMONTA, *Volando sul mondo*, p. 67 and 92, fn. 10).

The most explicit example of this « écriture de soi » is his autobiography (P, fol. 11v), of which Piron provides a French translation at the end of Chapter 1 (p. 37–47), and an analysis in Chapter 2 (« Dans le labyrinthe »).²⁴ This consists of a diagram containing concentric circles representing the inner sections of a vase or basket, and therefore referring to the very meaning of Opicino's surname. Opicino annotated each ring of this basket, divided according to months and days, with the events defining his years of life, giving form to a graphic confession of his sins, a « histoire de mes sacrements » (p. 51), or « un documento d'anima », as defined by Faustino Gianani.²⁵ Piron uses the autobiography, together with the *De preeminentia spiritualis imperii* and the *Liber de laudibus civitatis Ticiniensis*, as a basis for reconstructing Opicino's biography and historical framework. These texts are indeed read in the light of the political conflict between Guelph and Ghibellines in northern Italy, the conflict between the Pope and Pavia (put under interdict since 1316), the institutional environment of the Avignon Papacy (« un Eldorado de bénéfiques ecclésiastiques pour intellectuels ambitieux » [p. 64]), as well as the intellectual background of the disputes over the poverty of Christ and over the relationship between papal and imperial power, which pitted the Papal curia against the Franciscan refugees at the court of Ludwig of Bavaria. Addressing Opicino's radical hierocratic position in the *De preeminentia*, Piron shows the presence of themes and references used by Marsilius of Padua amongst the arguments rejected by the priest, which might signal the circulation of Marsilian-inspired texts in Pavia among the Ghibelline allies of Ludwig of Bavaria. To date, there exists no critical edition of the *De preeminentia*, which is only partially edited by Scholz and rather understudied.²⁶ Piron's book has the merit, among other things, of making recurring use of this text in his analysis.

Chapter 3 (« La confession infinie ») presents the formal features of the « écriture de soi » that Opicino displays in V and P. In this regard, the author focuses on their material aspect and tries to reconstruct their modalities of composition, recalling the principles of the *nouvelle école* of Latin paleography promoted by Jean Mallon and later by Armando Petrucci (« une histoire des

²⁴ An Italian translation of the autobiography has been made available in FUMAGALLI BEONIO-BROCCHIERI, LIMONTA, *Volando sul mondo*, p. 13–25.

²⁵ OPICINUS DE CANISTRIS. *L'Anonimo Ticinese (Cod. Vaticano Palatino latino 1993)*, ed. FAUSTINO GIANANI, Fusi, Pavia 1927 (repr. 1996), p. 19.

²⁶ For the edition, see *infra*, fn. 8. Among the scarce literature discussing this work, one should mention MICHAEL WILKS, *The Problem of Sovereignty in the Later Middle Ages: the Papal Monarchy with Augustinus Triumphus and the Publicists*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1963 (Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought, n.s., 9), *passim*; RANDI, « La vergine e il papa », p. 437; and THOMAS TURLEY, « The Impact of Marsilius: Papalist Responses to the Defensor Pacis », in GERSON MOREÑO-RIANO (ed.), *The World of Marsilius of Padua*, Brepols, Turnhout 2006 (Disputatio, 5), p. 59–60.

pratiques de l'écrit » [p. 79]). In *V*, a journal (or « manuscrit d'auteur » [p. 79]) in which Opicino gathers his theological thoughts, Piron observes the differing predominance of text over images (and vice versa) throughout the codex, and he notices the emergence of an ordered system of paratexts, recalling the notarial indexing techniques with which Opicino might have become familiarized while working at the Penitentiary. The first approach to the study of the illustrations gathered in *P* is instead that of providing a formal categorization of the diagrams according to their basic structure, together with an attempt to establish the chronological sequence of their composition.

In Chapter 4 (« Combat contre soi-même »), Piron describes how Opicino's works can be read as both a witness (*testimonium*) and a trial (*iudicium*) against himself. It may also be read as the site of a threefold fight which he describes in a page of his journal in 1337: a fight against himself and his attachment to the world; against the temptation to judge others; and against the pride resulting from having defeated the first two. In this chapter, Piron addresses the feeling of intimate dissociation expressed by Opicino between his *homo exterior* and *interior*, his being a priest and his being a Christian, especially with regard to anxieties connected to the nature and functioning of the sacraments, which could cause a paralyzing « panique sacramentelle ». If the validity of the sacraments does not depend on the morality of the minister, but rather on the efficacy of his gestures and words – his « parole efficace », using the title of a study by Rosier-Catach²⁷, then any formal mistake in the execution of the rite has tragic consequences for the soul of the one who receives it.

Chapter 5 (« Les mondes superposés ») deals directly with Opicino's cartography and the logic and analogies that can be found underlying his way of projecting different spatial realities one above the other, according to a « rêverie géographique qui donne un accès imaginaire au monde en ouvrant les territoires décrits à toutes les trajectoires et projections possibles », a « rêverie méthodique et fondée sur des plans rigoureusement tracés » (p. 128). Particularly interesting here is the analysis of *P*, fol. 4v, in which Opicino represented the basin of the river Po as superimposed on a portolan chart of Europe (« Le salut de la Lombardie », p. 133–134, fig. 16), and of *V*, fol. 84v, where the plan of Pavia is projected over the *œcumene* (p. 135–137, fig. 17).

Finally Chapter 6 (« Dans un miroir ») is dedicated to Opicino's ecclesiological imagery. After analyzing how he introduced into his diagrams representations of concepts such as militant/triumphant Church, « dignité générale des pères qui ne mourra jamais »/« dignité personnelle, transmise par succession canonique », and *Ecclesia corticalis/spiritualis* or *specularis*, (p. 151–160), Piron suggests an interesting link between Opicino's works and the debate on beatific vision which

²⁷ IRENE ROSIER-CATACH, *La parole efficace. Signe, rituel, sacré*, Seuil, Paris 2008.

distressed the Avignon papacy in the early 1330s.²⁸ The controversy was triggered by a series of sermons delivered by Pope John XXII, in which the Pope suggested that the souls of the blessed would not see the divine essence face-to-face immediately after death, but that they would simply rest in the contemplation of the humanity of Christ, waiting to be rejoined to their body at the Final Judgment, when they could contemplate his divinity. As a member of the Penitentiary, Opicino was possibly asked to copy the papal sermons to enable their circulation. After three years of discussion, on his death-bed, John XXII revoked his position, and his successor, Benedict XII, dogmatically stated that the souls of the blessed can have, immediately after their death, an intuitive and face-to-face vision of the divine essence, asking that any further debate on this matter be suspended. According to Piron, « Opicino transforme cette mesure disciplinaire en un principe épistémologique », renouncing any investigation (or representation) of the after-life while *in via*, as a vain and impossible task:

Si je cherchais à rendre raison de la patrie éternelle, ce serait le signe que je cherche la gloire du paradis en ce monde [...]. Seule doit être proclamée la présente Église miroir, et pas une autre, reflétée en énigme dans les raisons visibles (p. 162).

The *Ecclesia* is conceived by Opicino as a mirror which reflects the divine, and the only accessible vision of God in this life is, *per speculum et in aenigmate*, through the contemplation of his Church. Opicino's mysticism is therefore « une mystique de l'Église, qui atteint une connaissance supérieure par la pure contemplation de l'institution » (p. 162). And it is probably in this ecclesiological imagery – in which the body of the *Ecclesia specularis* intersects with the body of the Mediterranean basin, of his hometown Pavia, of the individual himself – that Opicino tries to find that unity necessary to overcome the contradictions which afflicted his soul:

la cartographie stratifiée d'Opicino lui fournit comme un escabeau spirituel. En lui permettant de superposer et d'intégrer dans un schéma unique des plans de représentation hétérogènes, cette technique graphique se révèle comme un moyen particulièrement efficace d'élévation du monde visible vers l'invisible (p. 164).

Dialectique du monstre is a work that has much to say to both specialists of Opicino and those who approach this figure for the first time. It is not the definitive

²⁸ Among the classical studies on the debate, one can mention at least MARC DYKMANS, *Les sermons de Jean XXII sur la vision béatifique*, Presse de l'Université Grégorienne, Rome 1973 (*Miscellanea Historiae Pontificiae*, 34); and CHRISTIAN TROTTMANN, *La vision béatifique. Des disputes scolastiques à sa définition par Benoît XII*, École Française de Rome, Rome 1995 (*Bibliothèque des écoles françaises d'Athènes et de Rome*, 289).

monograph on Opicino, nor does it claim to be so. It does not have the pretension of giving an exhaustive description and interpretation of his texts and drawings – these are indeed marked by a certain opacity that probably could never be fully overcome. It rather indicates gateways to approach the study of this author, of his world, and of his reception by his twentieth-century readers. It is a piece of work grounded on a conscious meditation on the purpose and modality of historical research which gives rise to a respectful dialogue between past and present, where scientific rigor coexists with the acknowledgment of the fascination and echoes that Opicino's works can raise in the eyes of a post-modern reader.

One of the strengths of this volume is that it presents a fair balance between these elements, constituting a meeting point of different voices. The first, of course, is that of Opicino, as an artist and as a writer, made directly available thanks to the illustrations and the long translations. In counterpoint, one can find the voices of the Warburg scholars; of Antonin Artaud and his *Cahiers de Rodez*; and, above all, the first-hand voice of the author, who, besides putting on paper the results of his study and providing methodological insights concerning the rules of historical research, catches himself in the act of pursuing his enquiry, describing the moment when, flying over northern Italy and looking out the window, he recognized the course of the Ticino river and the lands of Pavia that Opicino portrayed in his drawings (p. 148). The last voice – or, at least, potential voice – is that of the reader, who, carrying on Piron's *enquête*, might let his gaze linger on the extraordinary imagery created by the Pavian priest that is displayed in the volume, and find in it new evidences that might reveal different sides of this story.