Introduction

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That early modern England was an age of contradictions whose extent and cultural pervasiveness proved unprecedented is the tacit premise of all investigation of scepticism in a period whose cultural contours may be summed up by two epidemics: *Pseudodoxia*, as Thomas Browne put it in his famous treatise (1646), and *Paradoxa*, as Colie (1966) labelled it drawing inspiration from Browne. In an epoch of dramatic transition from one cultural system to another, when the remains of a late medieval frame coexisted with new and uncontrollable drives towards the refashioning of the entire *episteme*, paradox as a mode of thinking and configuring experience came to mirror the volatilisation of received knowledge at the roots of an increasing epistemological instability. Competing world-pictures favoured a growing perception of contradiction at the foundations of a fast changing reality whose irreconcilable views made stable knowing and judgment impossible. When in 1531, in his *The Book Named the Governour*, Sir Thomas Elyot offered a choreutic and harmonious picture of the universe and its cosmic dance, that universe was already taking a new shape with the «Copernican paradox» (1536); and while in 1596 Sir John Davies dedicated to that old world-view the 131 stanzas of his *Orchestra or a Poem of Dauncing*, scientific and literary paradoxes were penetrating and radically modifying that view. Within few years several discoveries would shatter the old system to pieces, opening it up to hosting infinite worlds and unveiling the emptiness of an Aristotelian dense universe which proved dense no longer.

All this caused euphoria as well as dismay. In his *First Anniversary* (1611) John Donne famously charged the «new philosophy» with calling all in doubt. Yet, at the same time, in a letter to Sir Henry Goodyear he reconciled the new heliocentric astronomy with religion. But later, in his *Devotions* (1624), he also wrote that «Mere vacuity, the first Agent, God, the first instrument of God, Nature, will not admit» because «Nothing can be utterly emptie» (Donne 1624, p. 93; see also Bigliazzi 2011). His continuous sway between opposite stances is epitomic of the sense of disorientation of those early modern generations, who responded to the rapid overthrowing of certainties with equal uncertainty. It is not coincidental that the continental genre of the paradoxes and problems took root on Brit-

ish soil precisely in those years, giving a literary garment to questions that in other quarters were beginning to be called with the name of scepticism.

Going slightly back in time, at the end of the sixteenth-century Sextus Empiricus's thought had been summarised and circulated by Raleigh's short tract *Sceptick* (to be published later in 1651), where an awareness of the mutability of opinions and the unreliability of appearances contributed to engendering an acute sense of the epistemological crisis which was then taking place. The ten modes of Pyrrhonist philosophy, underlining indeterminacy and instability in value judgment, and more generally in knowing, agreed with the sensibility of the time. In the same years, the soon Englished Montaigne voiced in the vernacular a radical perception of doubt (and self-doubt) as the fundamental mode of apprehending experience, thus destabilising human condition. The intellectuals' reaction was one of anxiety and ambiguity: taken aback by a new awareness of what they perceived to be an intrinsically absurd universe, they often advocated the power of paradoxical thinking to sustain unclear ideological commitment, thus imperceptibly shifting the focus from epistemic to moral questions. Indeed, the step from epistemology (what we can know) to ethics (what is good and bad, right and wrong) was not a long one, and taking that step meant making up one's mind as to the degree of self-commitment in moral disputes as well as in philosophical debates. A sceptical attitude came often to be the response in such cases, as the fit correlate to the contradiction that spurned doubt. In turn, the case of conscience was handled as the necessary locus of interrogation of subjectivity, to which decision-making was demanded through an individual probation of circumstances, no longer subjected to a solid moral rule. In religious casuistry, for instance, the Protestant William Perkins argued that goodness and rightness are relative concepts in order to demonstrate that, contrary to common opinion, cases and circumstances were to be weighed individually:

> Good things are of two sorts. Some simply good, in, and by themselves; as vertues, and all morall duties; and these are not to be eschewed. Some again are good only in some respects. Of this sort are things indifferent, which be neither commanded nor forbidden, but are good or evill in respect of circumstances. And these may be eschewed, unlesse we know that they be good for us. Now, persecution being of this kind, that is to say, not simply good, but only by accident, may be avoided; because no man can say that it is good or bad for him. (Perkins 1606, p. 370; see also Catchart 1975, pp. 5-7)

On the same premises of moral indeterminacy, John Donne sustained in *Biathanatos* (composed between 1607 and 1608, but published posthumously in 1644) the paradox or thesis that committing suicide «is not so Naturally Sinne, that it may never be otherwise» (frontispiece).

Scepticism, in other words, was the philosophical outcome of the logical impasse of paradox, which, combined with a pervasive rhetoric of contraries, sneaked into all forms of artistic or argumentative discourse, under the guise now of a new vogue of literary mock encomiums, now of logical nonsenses and figures of doxastic contradiction. For sure, it acquired a fundamental role in the writings of the age, providing a link between a new sensibility of doubt and its conceptual and discursive articulation.

Criticism has often discussed these issues, providing, especially in recent years, a quantity of information on both the hystorical context and the production of major writers. The solid reappraisal of Renaissance paradoxical thinking, bridging literary and non-literary expressions of the early modern cultural crisis, may safely be dated from 1966, when it was strongly advocated by Colie's seminal study published in that year. Although the issue had already aroused occasional interest in individual essays before then (Rice 1932, Wiley 1948, Burrell 1954, Miller 1956, Malloch 1956), it was Colie in fact who laid a peculiar emphasis on paradox as an intellectual and artistic form of political subversion and epistemological reconfiguration, laying the ground for further investigation in the following years (for instance Rabkin 1967, Vickers 1968, Peters 1980, Neill 1981; for references to Shakespeare and paradox see Platt 2009, p. 45 ff.). Close on the heels of its publication, in 1967 Yates's critiqued her excessive facility in finding paradoxes everywhere without adopting convincing discerning criteria. Then, after exactly thirty years, in 1996, an even heavier blow than Yates's was levelled by Paul Stevens who, bringing to its extremes the assumption that paradox dehistoricises and depoliticises those who use it (Bristol 1985, pp. 11 ff.; see also Platt 2009, p. 47), contended that the paradoxes Colie talked about were at best forms of equivocation, or falsidical paradoxes, and that paradox itself «has no essence or ideal significance»; what is worst, «it is a figure of self-contradiction that may be deployed to quiet political unrest every bit as to challenge orthodoxy or to suggest the incomprehensibility of God» (Stevens 1996, p. 214). In other words, it is a tool at the service of political quietism. This position has more recently been debated by Platt (2009), who, pace Stevens, has reappraised Colie's interpretation of paradox as «involved in dialectic», «challenging some orthodoxy», thus providing «an oblique criticism of absolute judgment or absolute convention» (Colie 1966, p. 10). Through a re-reading of Quine's discussion of the Liar's paradox (1966), used by Stevens to discard Colie's position, Platt in fact boomerangs Steven's own argument against itself and concludes that in fact «paradox poses a challenge to the doxa», further assuming that «there is no reason to limit this threat to the world of rhetoric» (p. 48) (see also Montrose 1996 and its discussion in Platt 2009, p. 51).

These few references to the political and ideological implications of paradox and the critical debate around it show how hot the topic still is and how varied the responses to its multiple forms and implications may be,

favouring research in ever new directions. While interest in the widespread contradictions of nothingness has spurned fresh inquiry in both philosophical and semiotic terms (Caygill 2000; Bigliazzi 2005), a reappraisal of an articulated tradition of paradoxes has recently prompted further investigation in the dissemination of models (Grimaldi-Pizzorno 2007); the question of typologies and effects, firstly raised by Yates against an indiscriminate use of the word paradox, has instead prompted new research in its performative function in drama, distinguishing paradox from both general figures of contraries and literary and rhetorical uses (Bigliazzi 2013), thus bringing the question more distinctly within the realm of performative studies in ways that bear on the implications raised above.

The culture of paradox looked at as an articulated and dynamic system of interlaced thoughts, views, practices, writings, policies, and behaviours, evoked by the title of this journal issue points precisely to the complexity of a topic irreducible to individual issues considered out of context. Epistemological, political, ideological, aesthetic and performative uses of contradiction intertwine within a cultural system where outright debate on unsolvable opposites paved the way to a sceptical engagement with knowledge. Scepticism – whether Academic or Pyrrhonist ('no knowledge is possible', or 'there is insufficient evidence to determine if knowledge is possible') – is one side of a coin showing paradox on the other. If paradox favours indeterminacy and «denies commitment» (Colie 1966, p. 38) it is because it suspends knowledge. Paradox denies received notions of the universe, causes awe and wonderment (Puttenham called it «the wonderer», p. 189), contradicts the logic of things known, offers undeniable truths against assumed evidence; yet once its truth is endorsed, it ceases to be a paradox. For a statement to be deemed a paradox, it must remain suspended in its contradiction (logical or doxastic, not semantic, as in the oxymoron - a figure of 'cross-coupling', not of nonsense; Puttenham 1589, p. 172), because paradox affirms and denies at the same time, asking for suspension of judgment, while not suffocating questioning. Indeed, it is precisely within a culture of paradox, where all the issues recalled above interact, that, contradictorily, scepticism best flourishes as an epistemological and political form of disengagement, yet also of commitment, as Colie argues with reference to paradox itself («failure to commit is a form of commitment», p. 38). It is not coincidental that in recent years essays and book-length studies of paradox and scepticism have separately but almost concomitantly appeared. In close succession the thoroughgoing works of Spolsky (2001), Bell (2002), Popkin (2003 – revised and expanded edition of 1979), Cavell (2003 – update edition of 1986), Bertram (2004), Hamlin (2005), and Cox (2007) have redrawn the outlines of studies of scepticism, while Platt, in turn, has shortly afterwards rediscussed the role of paradox (2009, 2011).

Our aim here is to look at how scepticism interacts with, a culture of paradox, in order to explore the diverse ways in which an increasingly

sceptical frame of mind in early modern England coupled with, and was expressed by, new literary forms, shaping up a culture of contraries that traversed, and joined together, different areas of intellectual and popular productions: from drama to poetry and literary paradoxes, as well as to theoretical writings. Several diverse questions will be raised in the following essays, examining various forms of paradox and their relation with sceptical stances. Spanning form the early sixteenth century to the Caroline period, the interrogation will embrace, through selected texts and authors, issues concerning the analysis and estimation of god-language (chapter 1); paradox as a carnivalised form of scepticism (chapter 2); the mock encomium as the reverse of eulogy in a culture of patronage (chapter 3); the language of paradoxical excess in metaphysical poetry (chapter 4); inwardness and the contradictions inherent in the theatrical expression of the self (chapter 5); two different versions of paradox and scepticism in Shakespeare (chapters 6 and 7); the staging of paradoxes of mathematics and geometry and the reaching of scepticism unto nihilism (chapter 8); finally, the dissolving of the sceptical tensions of metaphysical paradox into a more serene neoclassical «mixt witticism» with the advancing of time (chapter 9). The essays do not mean to offer an exhaustive panorama; they rather wish to provide significant, albeit individual, examples of how scepticism and paradox start taking the same path at the beginning of the sixteenth-century, and then gradually get adjusted to a new sensibility following the extraordinary theatrical and poetic season of the Elizabethan and Jacobean ages.

More specifically, the first essay («God-Language and Scepticism in Early Modern England: An Exploratory Study Using Corpus Linguistics Analysis as a Form of Distant Reading») offers a broad corpus-linguistics exploration of god-terms in a 250-year time span corresponding to the EEBO corpus of printed texts (1473-1700). Here William Hamlin tests the potential of «distant reading» – quoting Moretti on 'becoming digital' – and interrogates the mined data by raising questions that look to an integrated approach repositioning 'close reading' within the scope of the overall research. Cautiously admitting to the temporariness of his conclusions due to the incompleteness and implementability of the analysed corpus, Hamlin compares different corpora and sub-corpora (for instance Shakespeare's *Folio* and Montaigne's *Essays*), and by way of a thorough diachronic analysis, including keyword frequency and collocations, finds out that religious discourse deploys a sharp decline in the 1590s and 1600s, significantly underlining the rise of a moral preoccupation and doubting precisely when «Marlowe, Shakespeare, Jonson, Middleton, and other English playwrights wrote a substantial portion of their plays».

With the following essay («Radical Carnivalisation of Religion in Erasmus's *The Praise of Folly*»), the journal gets back to close reading and the discursive and cultural implications of paradox in a context of Christian

scepticism, offering a full discussion of Erasmus's multifaceted mock-en-comium of Folly. With a tour-de-force analysis of the carnivalesque features of Erasmus's discourse, Sarbani Chaudhury evokes paradox as a subversive stylistic format and a flexible tool for the accomplishment of the antiauthoritarian transgressive potential of the text. By delving into the inverted relation between worldly wisdom and Christian folly as a response to Christian scepticism, and then examining Erasmus's affinity with sectarian movements (such as Anabaptism) as well as his attempt to inscribe the « 'lowlest of the lowly' within the realm of high literature », Chaudhury frames an inquiry into a carnivalised religion within the boundaries of radicalism and conflict, on the one hand, and containment and reconciliation, on the other, showing the signifying drive of indeterminacy and instability in Erasmus's discourse.

Along the same lines of a mock encomium, however ingeniously concealed under the guise of eulogy, the third essay (« Of Lords and Stars: Spenser's Paradoxical Praise of Essex in the *Prothalamion* ») leads us to an appreciation of Edmund Spenser's poetical dismantling of the politics of patronage, subtly and bitterly unveiling the crisis of Tudor's court culture. Patrizia Grimaldi-Pizzorno analyses the amphibological strategies at work in the poet's 1596 *Prothalamion* by closely examining the double-edged catasterism of the figure of Essex addressed by Spenser via the ambiguous symbolism of Vesper/Lucifer and the myth of the falling Phaeton, which eventually turn him into an icon of the vanity of a world doomed to vanish soon. Deeply and secretly, almost hermetically, encrypted within the poem, Spenser's transgressive voice has nothing of the immediate joyous laughter of Folly, but reveals the mourning accents of a death-bell audible only by those who know how to listen to them.

The contiguity between scepticism and paradox forms the core of Carmen Gallo's subsequent investigation of John Donne's poetics of excess in his amorous poetry as a way to compensate for the loss of religious certainties. In « The Logic of Excess: Religious Paradox and Poetical Truth in Donne's Love Poetry », Gallo concentrates on the ways the once-reliable jargon of religion Donne borrows in his poems is turned upside-down to serve the purpose of erotic seduction. The reason-defeating fallacy of the paradoxes of the Word subsumed by the mystery of transubstantiation is explored in the *Songs and Sonnets* where it appears to be appropriated and translated into the fallacy of falsidical worldly paradoxes, in a continuous shifting of signification from the sacred to the profane and back. Manipulated for the sake of persuasion and amazement, the linguistic arbitrariness of these compositions mirrors the emptying out of *Logos*, thus reinforcing the perception of an epistemological crisis that affects communication itself, reduced to a rhetorical arena for exhibiting the final irreducibility of all opposites: an awareness that undermines Donne's precariously attained poetic truth through « witty unreliability » and the « logic frailties of language ».

Paradox is at the root of the sceptical awareness achieved by the characters of John Marston's and Thomas Middleton's revengers in Lucia Nigri's investigation of the theatricalisation of inwardness («Sceptical Responses in Early Modern Plays: from Self-knowledge to Self-doubt in Marston's *The Malcontent* and Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy*»). Largely disputed since the 1980s along drastically diverging lines (the self is or is not an issue in early modern time), the articulation of inwardness is explored here through an interrogation of how role-playing asks for socially constructed masks clashing with an opaque sense of selfhood, and how these diverse masks activate competing identity stances in the genres of tragicomedy and tragedy. The essay concentrates on the revengers' laboriously and painfully achieved awareness that selfhood is something both identical with, and other than, the fabricated mask. In a continuous interplay between private and public self-questioning, the final, and dismal, understanding they acquire is that the sole self-knowledge attainable is identical with Pyrrhonist self-doubt.

With Alessandra Marzola's essay on *Othello* («Shaping Scepticism, Arousing Belief: The Case Of *Othello*») the discussion reverses the sceptical overtones of paradoxes looked at so far into an exploration of the paradoxical effects of scepticism. Starting off in Cavell's wake and building on his philosophical and psychoanalytic premises, the essay copes with the tragic effects of disowning knowledge, showing its different repercussions on male and female characters caught in a drama of projections and introjections that destabilise the self, as a response to the equally destabilising awareness of an unredeemable cleavage inhering in language. The paradoxical effects of the infection of a scepticism that makes for self-dispossession by pushing to an utter possessing of the other are here revealed to have both gender and racial consequences. Marzola interrogates the play by delving into the paradoxes of the Moor's culturally-colonised self, only precariously safeguarding his hollowness from being exposed; at the same time, the author encapsulates within a larger discourse on masculine narcissism and scepticism the potentially subversive 'inclining' Desdemona, whose symbolic 'obliqueness' gestures both to patriarchal submission and death, and to a transgressive challenge of masculine sceptical verticality.

Paradox is the outcome of a sceptical attitude towards knowing also in Alessandra Squeo's reading of *The Tempest* («"For thou must now know farther": Representation, Illusion, and Unstable Perspectives in *The Tempest*»), where a paradoxical visuality is taken as proof of «the inconsistency of human perceptions» and the ensuing epistemological crisis. The essay is grounded on an investigation of the intersections between the play and the sceptical writings of the time, with special attention to Pyrrhonism and its circulation via Sextus Empiricus. Thus framed, the play's relativistic use of narrative proves akin to its extraordinary voco-visual and auditory spectacularity in emphasising indeterminacy and contradiction as the sole, yet unreliable, epistemological and cognitive modes. The problematisation of vision

and hearing, first astoundingly carried out in the tempest scene, is examined in its various possibilities and in relation to both nature and art, eventually leading to the unveiling, in the masque scene, of the make-believe artificiality of all human constructs, linear perspective included: a device showing what is and what is not in a spectacular pageant of unsolvable ambiguities.

Visuality and geometry as (dis)orienting modes of knowing heavily loaded with ideological implications feature also in Benjamin Bertram's study of one of the grimmest tragedies of the age, close in time to the *Tempest*: Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* («Webster's Geometry; or, the Irreducible Duchess»). As the author suggests, affinity may be perceived with both Donne's and Montaigne's scepticism, although paradox here does not lie on the way to transcendence, leaving little room for hope and «intimations of immortality». Logical aporias and «curious perspectives» undermine confidence in epistemological and ontological truths, while mathematical computations in the hands of Bosola become instruments of power to oppress women as well as «tools for protest». In a tragic context where redemption has no place and nihilism is the likely prospect of utter scepticism, questions of identity recalling the dramatisation of inwardness in chapter 5, provide the paradoxical antidote: the irreducibility of the Duchess to the nothing which is her doom in death, eventually leaving us wtith the feeling that «any affirmation of being, permanence, and truth must be paradoxical».

The final chapter («'Let savage Beasts lodge in a Country Den': Animals, plants and paradoxes in Abraham Cowley's writings») jumps ahead to a later period, providing a fair example of the relative quenching of sceptical implications in domesticated paradoxical wit. Through an extensive discussion of animal paradoxes in the poetry of several authors writing over a span of a few decades, from Donne to Marvell and Lovelace, with a focus on Cowley's «mixt wit», Milena Romero Allué follows paradoxical writing down to the Caroline age, providing a link between the late sixteenth century and the Civil War. The selected poems are peculiarly devoted to animals normally unincluded in the canon of poetic diction, such as grasshoppers or mice, here treated as figures of a humanity conceived of as 'amphibious' – man and beast, corporeal and heavenly, in Thomas Browne's famous definition. The subject itself belies Cowley's attempt to ally witticism with scientific concerns as well as with an ideal of sobriety and rural life. This choice is also good testimony of the poet's bridging two ages, the Metaphysical and the Neoclassical, favouring a tempering of anxiety, within the still vital energy of paradoxical thinking, through rural serenity. Thus scepticism appears defanged and, on the whole, toned down. Moral preoccupation and doubting seem now to belong to a different age, and the nihilistic prospect of radical questioning already far behind. Whether this was consistently true for the whole period is a question the journal passes down to the reader for further investigation.

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