

Report by Kathleen Sunshine, Professor of Communications, Ramapo College of New Jersey, on Professor Murray Baumgarten's presentation, "The Autobiography of Leon Modena"

Only the first recorded Jewish autobiography since Maimonides, Modena's complex work presents several challenges to interpretation. The work exemplifies the contrast between the era of tribalism, which he represents, and the movement toward modernity. In personal terms, this contrast is reflected in Modena's difficulty reconciling the pulls of his own individualism with the pulls and pressures of his familial and professional responsibilities and relationships.

Prominent in this internal conflict is Modena's difficulty reconciling his professional role as rabbi with his gambling problem. In 1560, Jews in Venice engaged in gambling at least partially because of their various expulsions. In the early modern world, gambling, a form of risk taking, was an obvious characteristic of early capitalism, which bloomed in Venice because of the concentration of capital. The resulting ability to take risks and to become flexible in business dealings became fundamental to early migrants from Eastern Europe who ventured to the U.S., Amsterdam, Latin America as well as Venice because of expulsions and persecution.

The unique structure of Modena's work poses problems for historians, who mined the picture he paints of the Jewish community and his leadership. Scholarly analysis concentrates on context, languages, rhetorical skill, his distinguished family, and his professional prominence. He is treated as an historical figure, with little attention paid to the disconnect between this historical personage and the conflict apparent in his Autobiography. Modena's historical image is inconsistent with the incoherence of the structure of his work.

The fragmented structure of Modena's Autobiography is manifest in several ways. His training and knowledge are obvious in his biblical allusions and the rabbinical structure of some of his arguments. He represents a distinguished family and is an arch rhetorician, a very skilled literary craftsman. As a rabbi, he is proud of his achievements, of his ability to galvanize masses with his speeches. He writes both for a Hebrew and Italian audience- the first book written for non-Jews about Jewish practice- and he is proud he is quoted outside the ghetto. But it is not a redemptive account, an apologia for Venice. In many ways it is a narrative of failure and penury by someone who was an heroic success.

Perhaps even more obvious are his personal confusion and internal conflict when he considers his personal achievements, public acknowledgements of his importance in the context of family tragedies and personal angst. For example, he articulates a very public position regarding the sinfulness of gambling and simultaneously expresses his own personal pain regarding his failure to overcome his own powerful addiction to gambling, to which he turned upon the decline of his family fortune. He opposes Kabbalists but also chronicles his own use of alchemy and sales of amulets.

If literary form is regarded as a reflection of the writer's "weltanschauung," or world view, then there is further difficulty reconciling his mastery of rhetorical forms with the "schizophrenic" style of his journal. It is difficult to determine his audience, since at

times he seems to be writing for himself, as a means of self-flagellation and self-analysis, and at other times, his words appear directed at a variety of audiences. If the audience is himself, the fragmentation reveals a crisis of identity in this world. The form of the Autobiography poses several questions. Is it to be perceived as a whole? Was it revised or is it in its spontaneous first form? Is it a proto-modern form specifically designed to reflect the author's crisis of identity by internal structural disconnections? Why did he not write a more polished autobiography instead of focusing on his own crises? Perhaps he didn't know how to think about his life; perhaps he is an exemplum of the cultural incoherence of his time. One suggestion relates the form of the work to that of the picaresque novel, but the central character, the picaresque, is usually a poor boy who attaches himself to a variety of masters and subsequently improves his status. Professor Baumgarten contends that in this instance, Modena himself might be considered to be playing both roles in the picaresque tradition: that of the boy as well as the master, a further exemplification of the divided self, and the assumption of multiple guises.

Modena's book was written over twenty-four years, and it was not necessarily polished or revised. This could perhaps be a reflection of the cultural incoherence of the era as well as the personal struggle. It might also result from Modena's emotional inability to create a coherent persona, a confusion reflected stylistically in his inability to reconcile opposites, both internal and stylistic.

It is also suggested that the form of Modena's work might be related to the format of the "libro di ricordi" of the 14th century, a common form of journal which included accounts, personal reflections and memories. There is no indication, however, that Modena was familiar with such works.

Modena's work is an example of a modern, self-conscious writer's attempt to reconcile his many roles with the many groups with which he is involved. He struggles actively to define a modern identity, playing many roles, responding to different groups. It defies historians' attempts to create a coherent picture that ignores the obvious inner turmoil of the writer. As a modern form, the Autobiography reveals the real contradictions in his life, both Jewish and Venetian. It is written in Hebrew but reflects intersecting cultural forms, themes and narratives which in turn reflect what was happening in Venice and Jewish life at the time. He mirrors the chaos, and his work is an inspirational relief from the formulaic; the confusion it reflects demonstrates a self-conscious, complex analytic writer whose personal odyssey finds expression in a liberated form.