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The evil of the world: a never-ending cycle or an abyss that keeps collapsing? Gozzi and Baretti: the observer and the whipper of the «corruzione de' costumi presenti»

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Gasparo Gozzi (1713-1786) and Giuseppe Baretti (1719-1789) have been intellectuals who dealt with varied and multiple interests, ranging from theatre, to critique, from reflections on language, to the argumentative or moralizing tendency that characterizes their periodical production.

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The former one from Venice, the second from Turin, they first met in 1738, when Baretti arrived in Venice and became a frequent visitor of the Gozzi household. In the following years they were both members of the Accademia dei Granelleschi, founded in 1747 by a group of men of letters who had been meeting since the 1730s around the Gozzi brothers. The multiformity of their interests is reflected in their production, of which, however, it is mainly a thematic aspect that we are interested in analyzing. It is worthwhile then, in order to compare the *modus operandi* of their condemnations of modern corruption, to narrow the field of our research to their most successful and most famous editorial attempts: Gozzi's *L'Osservatore veneto* and Baretti's *Frusta letteraria*.

These two periodicals, directed and edited almost entirely by their respective founders, were published bi-weekly for a fairly limited period of time: the *Osservatore veneto* from

February 1761 to January 1762, the *Frusta letteraria* from October 1763 to January 1765. Gozzi and Baretti brought to Italy, each with his own very personal approach, the national and then international revolution that had been the English periodical essay. Theirs was a true translation, not literal but *cultural*, of Joseph Addison's London-based *The Spectator*. The success of these Italian imitators' endeavours, though, is not even remotely comparable to that achieved by Addison and Steele in 1710s London, but as Michael Ende wrote, «...that's another story and shall be told another time.» ¹.

Gozzi reveals his debt to the English model in plain view, in that he refers to it in the very title of his *gazzetta*: the *osservatore* (lit. observer) was to be a *spectator* above the parties, an impartial voice that would correct the evils of contemporary society with no holds barred and without favoritisms nor discriminations. Just like Mr. Spectator in London, Gozzi had to play that part in Venice: being a *super partes* journalist, but using pungent satire, remaining objective, but also ironic and brilliant - evidently enough, this kind of oxymoron has no geographical or temporal barriers. Intellectuals keep pretending to believe that this is not a contradiction in terms and that being such a journalist is actually possible - thus, they keep falling into the insidious traps that such a paradox entails: venomous criticism, at best; at worst, censorship.

The most evident sign of the fact that Baretti's *Frusta letteraria* (The Literary Whip) was modelled after some of the most influential English satirical periodicals - among others *The Tatler* and *The Spectator* surely stand out - is that of the creation of an *eidolon*, that is to say a mask of the author who acts as a filter of the author's opinions. The *eidolon*'s voice is not that of a mere figurehead, but of an out-and-out fictitious character, with an adventurous biography, a strong personality, and, needless to say, a rather harsh quarrelsome inclination. This *eidolon*, in the *Frusta letteraria*, has a very eloquent name, to say the least: Aristarco Scannabue ².

And what aspects of the «*Corruzione de' Costumi presenti*» ³ did these two authors want to unmask, to strike, to chastise? The most effective way to find it out is to focus our attention on their proposals, some sort of manifesto placed at the opening of the first issue of their gazettes.

Gozzi begins his "Prefazione dell'Autore" (Author's Preface) bringing into play the brilliant orator Dio Chrysostom, who is awaited by a large and acclaiming crowd in Cyzica, where he is about to recite «una delle più armoniche dicerie che avesse fatte a' suoi giorni» ⁴. Dione, already proud of himself and his fame bordering on vainglory, will not have the opportunity to deliver his great speech, as a musician will arrive in the city and drag into the theatre all those people who had come to Cizica to listen to the orator. What is the moral of this story, which - not surprisingly - has its roots in a distant era, that of the Roman Empire? It is, for Gozzi, a warning to the readers - and to himself - as if he's already trying to prevent a possible failure: «qualunque uomo vuole scrivere intorno a' costumi e alle pratiche umane,

biasimando i vizj e lodando le virtù, appena verrà ascoltato in ogni tempo, perché da tutt' i lati zuffola il dolcissimo suono de' Fefautti »⁵. Then as now, even in a past he himself often considered as a model, this is the “occupational hazard” - and the author proves, with this disillusioned example, an awareness that is far from being naïve or gullible. Or maybe it's not awareness, maybe it's just concern for what might go wrong, when starting this new satirical project. Or perhaps we could see a certain presumption, in his placing himself among the ranks of those like Dio, while simultaneously distancing himself from the image of the crowd-pleasing singer. In any case, I think we can all agree on the awareness of the theorist, however disguised as a moralizing fairy tale.

Gozzi, in his *Osservatore*, wants to «ragionare di cose che dipingano costumi, facciano ritratti della vita umana e delle usanze del mondo »⁶. Up to this point, it would seem that the implicit features of the term *osservatore* are precisely respected: reasoning, describing, noting customs and habits. The author, however, goes on writing that «È un gracchiare al vento il notare i difetti suoi [del mondo] »⁷ and further on continues in this way: «Chi scrive, taglia ora questo ramo, ora quell'altro della *mala pianta* che torna a rampollare. Essa rampolla di nuovo, e lo scrittore di nuovo taglia. Altro non può fare. »⁸.

With these words, Gozzi's mission statement becomes clearer: it is the evils and the impoverished customs of society that he - like so many other writers before him - wants to criticize. It is interesting to note, however, that the *Corruzione* (“Corruption”), which is the central topic of the author's XVI Sermon, in loose hendecasyllables, is not mentioned here. The term “corruption” brings along a sense of decay, of progressive degeneration and degradation compared to an initial perfection. This idea is not alien to Gozzi's thought and production, and it can actually be found in the periodical *Il mondo morale* (“The Moral World”), that had been his previous attempt (it was published for nine months, starting from the 5th of May, 1760). *Il mondo morale* had been a hybrid publication, positioning itself between the novel and the periodical, and its allegorical structure aimed precisely at emphasizing the decadence of the present times.

Looking at the metaphor in the preface of the *Osservatore*, on the other hand, there seems to be a cyclical nature to evil and an equally cyclical attempt, on the part of intellectuals, to lash it out and unmask it. According to Gozzi, the world has always been split into two - unequal - halves: the largest part is the one where the roots of *malizia* (“malice”) are rooted and that has never accepted to surrender: «... mai voluto cedere forse da seimila anni in qua »⁹. The other faction, however - that of the people writing about the malice - which is less numerous, but no less tenacious, has never given up its fight either. And this second group, that of intellectuals, does not write, according to Gozzi, with the aim of improving the world - that, unfortunately, seems an impossible undertaking - but to «renderlo ingegnoso e vario nelle apparenze »¹⁰. It is a singular statement for a critic, a certainly original purpose for the preface of a periodical...

What can we say about Baretti's preface instead? The tone is undoubtedly very different and its author's quarrelsome *vis* is evident from the very first sentence. The opening words, as in the incipit of a classical epic poem, represent what will be the main subject of the Literary Whip's satire:

«That scourge of bad books, which have been printed daily for many, many years in all parts of Italy, and the bad taste with which they pollute it, and the perfidious customs they propagate, have finally moved the bile of a scholar and contemplative gentleman, so much that he has resolved to do in his too advanced age what he never had the will for in his youthful and virile years, that is, he has resolved to provide himself with a good metaphorical whip... »¹¹

The presentation of the content of Baretti's fortnightly magazine is, I would argue, very clear and well-structured, but what I think is interesting to notice is the figure of analogy created by the author, whereby the *good metaphorical Whip* will be used as a necessary corrective weapon – we could almost say a self-defence one – against an equally violent scourge: bad books and what generated them.

Baretti's periodical, as can already be foreseen, will have a more defined and restricted slant compared to the *Osservatore veneto* and to the English model of *The Spectator*, but what must be emphasized is that in Baretti's view the mediocre level of contemporary publications was but a reflection of *mal gusto* ("bad taste") and consequently a possible origin of *perfido costume* ("wicked custom"). For him, therefore, the core interest is, in a way, an educational purpose rooted in society and morality, just as it had been for Addison, or rather for Mr Spectator. In issue n.10 of the London periodical the *eidolon* stated that he wanted to refresh the memory of his readers from day to day, «till I have recovered them out of that desperate State of Vice and Folly, into which the Age has fallen. »¹². His means would have been a combination of morality and humour: «I shall endeavour to enliven Morality with Wit, and to temper Wit with Morality... »¹³. In *The Spectator* we read of a fall of the present age into a «State of Vice and Folly», while the image Baretti uses is not that of a general decay, but of an invasion. He states that he wants to declare «... a desperate battle against the many Goths and Vandals, who from the frozen North of ignorance have come to sabotage, to vituperate and to barbarize our beautiful and glorious Boot. »¹⁴. A barbarization of the *Boot*, that is to say an ideally united – but politically, it is evident, very fragmented – Italy. However, the direction of this movement of ignorance and barbarity is somewhat surprising: the "frozen North" is where *The Tatler* and *The Spectator* came from, as well as Pope's and Swift's satire – all of them, notoriously, Scannabue's models. Rather than an ignorant one, the North was believed to possibly bring a new political and social model that Baretti – after his first nine-year stay in London (1751-1760) – tended to idealize, rather than denigrate. We are faced here with an overlapping of temporal levels – collective imagery is inserted onto contemporary reality. That is to say, the myth of the so-called

“barbarian invasions” which contributed to the fall of the Roman empire played a stronger role, in this metaphor, than the undeniable debt to contemporary English models could do. As the *Frusta Letteraria*'s Introduction to the Readers does not fail to remind us several times, however, the person who is writing does not wish to reveal his true identity, and prefers to remain «una specie d'indovinello»¹⁵ (“a sort of riddle”) for now. Yet, we are informed about the fictitious Aristarco Scannabue in great detail: a grandiose profile bordering on the grotesque is outlined, together with a life devoted to study, but also to adventure and militia in various armies. We shall not fail to point out that all of this is done by our whipper «sempre sottilmente notando costumi»¹⁶ (“always acutely noticing the customs”): the *spectator*'s spirit of observation is clearly a distinctive feature of Baretti's *eidolon*, too.

While in the preface of the *Osservatore veneto* we have Gaspare Gozzi – the author himself – whose aim is to uncover the malice that seems to perpetually hide itself under a number of veils, Baretti's introduction shows us a character named Aristarco who is ready to «scold all modern bad authors» and to «slice them up without the slightest mercy». How to avoid the whip of this violent *eidolon*? Either by simply deciding «not to write», or by committing oneself «to writing well, and things of substance»¹⁷.

So who is the winner, who could read reality better? The one who tries to denounce the cyclical trend of evil in the world, in order to attempt, if not to correct it, at least to provoke a reflection and arouse a critical spirit in his readers? Or the one who whips the present times invaded by barbarians, placing an old retired soldier as a *super partes* judge who, having seen so much of the world, decides to withdraw from public life, move to the countryside and starts pontificating on society's corruption? We are all aware that understanding the present is more difficult than interpreting the past, and that temporal distance helps to get a clearer picture of the situation, but even now that the 18th century is history, and a quite distant one, I have the feeling that I still do not have the indispensable tools to give a definitive answer.

Gozzi's aim certainly seems more universal: in his introduction, *malice* is even compared to a *mascherajo* (“mask maker”) who dresses the truth in appearances, creating masks that are identified by the writer with increasing difficulty – as malice adapts to changing times and creates ever more natural and more deceptive disguises.

Baretti, on the other hand, has to wear a mask himself in order to unmask bad authors: an operation that is well known to his English colleagues, but less common among his compatriots. And, to think of it, this mask-remover in disguise is paradoxical: it seems to indicate that even the militant intellectual needs to play the same cards – rigged ones maybe, or with a couple of aces up his sleeve – as those members of the corrupt society he wants to denounce.

Perhaps this is precisely what corruption is: an implicit compulsion to change with the

changing world, to adapt oneself moving in the direction where society, or literature, are going. And if the world plays dirty, perhaps the intellectual has to play dirty too. How? Just like this: adapting, *corrupting* himself. Maybe it is just a matter of semantics, or maybe it is not.

Note

1. Michael Ende, *The Neverending Story*, London, Allen Lane, 1983 (the sentence, extremely famous, can be found several times throughout the novel).
2. The surname evokes the practice of “ox-slaughtering” (*scannare*); as for the name, Franco Fido provides us with interesting information: «al B. il nome fu quasi certamente suggerito - ed è strano che gli altri esegeti non se ne siano mai accorti - da certe *Hypercritics of Richardus Aristarchus* premesse dal Pope all'edizione definitiva del suo poema satirico *The Dunciad*», which translates as “the name was almost certainly suggested to Baretto - and it is strange that no other exegetes ever noticed- it - by the *Hypercritics of Richardus Aristarchus* in Pope's preface to the definitive edition of his satirical poem *The Dunciad*” (Giuseppe Baretto, *Opere*, ed. F. Fido, Milano, Rizzoli Editore, 1967, p. 286). This and all subsequent translations are my own.
3. “Corruption of Present Manners”. See the title of Gasparo Gozzi's Sermone n.XVI, addressed to the abbot don Pietro Fabris: “Contro alla Corruzione de' Costumi presenti”.
4. “one of the most harmonious speeches he had made in his day”. See *Opere scelte di Gasparo Gozzi*, Milano, Società Tip. de' Classici Italiani, 1821, p. 4.
5. “any man who wants to write about human customs and practices, blaming vices and praising virtues, will hardly be heard at all times, because from all sides whistles the sweetest sound of the pleasures (Fefautti)”. *Opere scelte di Gasparo Gozzi*, cit., p. 5. Such “Fefautti” have been mentioned earlier by Dio himself as the relentless force which diverted the spectators who were supposed to be his own audience, and not the singer's. They are interpreted by Gozzi as follows: «Io credo che sotto a questo vocabolo volesse significare i diletti universalmente» (“I think that, with this word, he meant pleasures as a whole”).
6. “reflect on things that describe manners, make portraits of human life and of the world's customs.”. See *Opere scelte di Gasparo Gozzi*, cit., p.5.
7. “It is a caw in the wind to note its [the world's] faults”. Emphasis mine. See *Opere scelte di Gasparo Gozzi*, cit., p.5.
8. “The one who writes cuts off first this branch, then that other one from the *evil plant*, which grows back

again. It grows again, and the writer again cuts. There is nothing else that he can do.”. Emphasis mine. See *Opere scelte di Gasparo Gozzi*, cit., p.6.

9. “never wanted to give in for maybe six thousand years” See *Opere scelte di Gasparo Gozzi*, cit., p.6.
10. “make it ingenious and varied in appearance” See *Opere scelte di Gasparo Gozzi*, cit., p.6.
11. «Quel flagello di cattivi libri, che si vanno da molti e molti anni quotidianamente stampando in tutte le parti della nostra Italia, e il mal gusto di cui l’empiono, e il perfido costume che in essa propagano, hanno alla fine mossa tanto la bile ad uno studioso e contemplativo galantuomo, che s’è pur risoluto di fare nella sua ormai troppo avanzata età quello che non ebbe mai voglia di fare negli anni suoi giovaneschi e virili, cioè si è risoluto di provvedersi d’una buona metaforica Frusta... ». See Giuseppe Baretti, *La frusta letteraria*, Luigi Piccioni (curated by) Scrittori d’Italia n.138 Vol. I, Laterza, 1932, p.1.
12. Joseph Addison, *The Spectator*, n. 10, 12 March 1711.
13. Ibidem.
14. «... una disperatissima guerra ai tanti goti e vandali, che dal gelato Settentrione dell’ignoranza sono venuti a manomettere, a vituperare e a imbarbarire il nostro bellissimo e gloriosissimo Stivale. ». See G. Baretti, *La frusta letteraria*, cit., p.1.
15. Ivi, p.2.
16. Ivi, p.4.
17. «malmenare tutti i moderni cattivi autori»; «proprio a fette senza la minima misericordia»; «non iscrivere»; «a scriver bene, e cose di sostanza». See G. Baretti, *La frusta letteraria*, cit., p.7.