



THE ITALIAN ACADEMY
for Advanced Studies in America

Canon-Making and the
Italian Tradition of Moral Enquiry

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This paper will focus on the tradition which, departing to some degree from the Renaissance treatises on manners, embodied, on the threshold of the modern age, a new ideal of citizenship. I am especially interested in examining the influence of the *Galateo* by Giovanni della Casa, the seminal text of a minor tradition of “moral enquiry” which I plan to re-read and situate in a different context¹. I will seek to show that this text is a breakthrough within the tradition which originated from early-modern treatises on courtesy. With the *Galateo* the age-old tradition of Courtesy Books is at a crossroad.

This paper is a preliminary draft of a chapter of a book I have been planning to write on the ‘Italian canon’, namely, of that stock of books “eminente citabili”² which have been accorded a special condition of eminence in curricula. If we assume that a canon is a cultural artefact whose construction depends on specific policies of inclusion/exclusion, my thesis is that in the making of such a cultural construction as an Italian canon, the *Galateo* seems to have been confined to a rank which part brings to the fore its literary eminence, part purges the text of its significance for moral philosophy. This process of marginalization, which will be explored in the third section of this essay, ends up jeopardizing the moral teaching the text aims to convey. I will argue that the ‘loss’ of this text, in other words, the dwindling of its condition of eminence as a piece of moral philosophy, entails a loss in our ability to make sense of some of the ways - ways I deem highly valuable – by which we may be encouraged to interact with one another in society. What we have lost is a set of linguistic ‘practices’, namely, those modes of moral speech which give us the moral options we can have, by giving us the means (the moral vocabularies) we can have of performing them. I argue that by losing touch with this text we have been deprived of a meaningful supply of speech acts and workable practices; I

* Quotation of *Galateo* in the text is made in accordance with the Penguin translation (G. della Casa, *Galateo*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1959). I have constantly compared – and sometimes slightly edited – this translation with the Italian: G. della Casa, *Galateo*, a cura di S. Prandi, Einaudi, Torino, 2000.

¹ We can define, quite tentatively, a tradition of moral enquiry as a ‘stock-in-trade’ of rules and concepts furnishing a recognizable vocabulary by means of which we strive to understand the duties and obligations we incur towards each other qua human beings, citizens, family members or whasotever. See A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, Notre Dame University Press, 1981.

am also convinced that this loss can be easily detected by paying attention to several “random symptoms of a sickness of contact” which testify to the increasing exposure of our lives to the willfulness of the insolent³. To resume Adorno’s terminology, we may say that the Italian tradition, by focussing on an ethics of *manners*, tries to address that “elimination of distance between people” which is not being registered as a relevant problem by contemporary moral theory. On the contrary, there is a widespread insensitivity, let alone a general sense of suspicion, towards manners, for manners are regarded as “the tools of the snob. Snobs raise etiquette to the level of ethics. The purpose of manners [...] is to exclude people from fastidious, worthy society”⁴.

In what follows I will be doing two things: at first I will undertake an examination of the various ways by means of which the *Galateo* has imposed itself on the attention of its ‘public’ (first Italian and then more widely European); then I will seek to show how the tradition of moral enquiry which originates from this text managed to survive through subterranean channels of influence and reception. As suggested by the title, I will do all of this with the eye of a student of the canons and canon-making process as well as with the eye of a moral philosopher.

1. On the history of reception

I intend to provide a new reading of the *Galateo*, which will review the ‘familiar’ climate in which the text has been received and possibly de-familiarize us with some ingrained intellectual habits as, for instance, reading the text as a ‘minor’ work, as a literary distraction. I will suggest that the text “eminente citabile” of the tradition of Italian treatises on manners, after enjoying a remarkable success with an Italian and European readership, fell into a state of almost complete illegibility, thus becoming obsolete coinage of a tradition that today we consider as belonging to the prehistory of our moral customs. The habit of reading the text within a predefined ‘model of legibility’ has prevented us from considering the *Galateo* not only as a serious work, but, all things considered, as a ‘tragic’ one, which epitomizes the end of a genre or a tradition, and of an

² This expression is in G. Contini, *Un'idea di Dante. Saggi danteschi*, Torino, Einaudi, 1976.

³ See T.W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia. Reflections from Damaged Life*, London, Verso, 1987.

⁴ A. Margalit, *The Decent Society*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard Univ Press, 1998.

epoch too. That it is necessary to obey “not the good, but the modern custom” is, then, the philosophical statement which I take as my point of departure⁵.

The “moderna usanza”, then. For Della Casa it was a question of rejecting ‘perfection’, overcoming the constraint of modes of thinking which demanded unlimited perfection in moral action. In this sense the *Galateo*, in rejecting the ideal of Baldassarre Castiglione’s *Book of the Courtier*, broke off from the tradition of moral enquiry which had privileged the moment of moral excellence, of the heroic action, in a word, of civil perfection⁶.

In this regard one might consider Machiavelli’s warning against gentlemen, and see how his invective fits his heroic ideal of citizenship, namely, his conviction that the quest for excellence and the pursuit of glory were motives of action applying to everyone⁷. With Della Casa and later with Stefano Guazzo, author of *La civil conversazione*, we witness a radical inversion, in the sense that these authors rediscover and value the small virtue of *mediocritas* and see in the heroic virtues of Machiavelli’s armed citizen, a threat to the anti-heroic peace of civilized conversation.

However, the tradition under scrutiny - despite its presumed success - was not destined to last. Moral philosophy turned to other manifestations of human commonalty and lost the specific interest for phenomena like “decency of behaviour: as how one man should salute another, or how a man should wash his mouth, or pick his teeth before company, and such other points of Small Morals”⁸.

I have called this tradition an *Italian* tradition, to some extent inappropriately, because the Man of the Cinquecento was the last “to still receive an Italian cultural education”⁹. Thus the *Galateo* - despite the numerous attempts to neutralize it and banish

⁵ That Della Casa was “versatissimo nello studio della filosofia morale” (extremely well-versed in the study of moral philosophy) is suggested by C. Berra, *Il Galateo "Fatto per scherzo"*, in G. Barbisi-C. Berra (eds), *Per Giovanni della Casa. Ricerche e contributi*, Bologna, Monduzzi Editore, 1997, p. 283.

⁶ Carlo Ossola – in its introduction to G. della Casa, *Galateo*, edited by S. Prandi, Torino, Einaudi, 1994 (the edition from which I quote in the text) – emphasizes this discontinuity.

⁷ “[...] to explain more clearly what is meant by the term gentlemen, I say that those are called gentlemen who live idly upon the proceeds of their extensive possessions, without devoting themselves to agriculture or any other useful pursuit to gain a living. Such men are pernicious to any country or republic [...] for that class of men are everywhere enemies of all civil government”; N. Machiavelli, *Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio* I, 55.

⁸ T. Hobbes, *Leviathan* i, 11.

⁹ On the Italian education of the Man of the Cinquecento, see S. Battaglia, *Mitografia del personaggio*, Milano, Rizzoli, 1970.

it from cultural history - remains the institutional book about a model of 'civility of behaviour' which was born and developed in Italy. This enables us to limit the area of enquiry to the several lineages of influence (not all visible as yet) which come together in the text to form an entirely new amalgam.

When we come to explore the reasons why the 'Italian' tradition seems to have dried up, and its canonical text displaced, the whole issue seems to be open to the most diverse speculations. What the moral philosopher cannot but regret is that not much remains after such a displacement. What is left is, in any case, something which hesitates to disclose itself to a superficial gaze: it is, in all probability, that almost invisible ideology of *civilitas* "from which even today our everyday life depends and which as yet lacks a serious philosophical and historical reflection capable of enunciating the problem - which has made of its non-enunciability, of its anonymous state, one of its ways of unfolding and survival - withdrawing it from the dominion of chat to which it seems, for the time being, relegated"¹⁰.

It is easy to agree with Giorgio Patrizi's assessment of anonymity, and non-enunciability of themes which were articulated with extraordinary force in our Cinquecento and which, by various routes, have ended up becoming crystallized in our habits, so much so that they have been rendered invisible to our very attention. And perhaps, it is because of this veil of familiarity, that for such a long time those themes have remained anonymous, and could not be enunciated in philosophical terms. Moreover, it is in common conversation, that the legacy of this minor literature has been preserved. In everyday conversation this minor literature has perhaps found a *milieu* more suitable for incubation than in the philosophical speculations of the erudite. Proof of this seems to be the fact that certain modes of behaviour have remained familiar to us, despite the fact that we have ceased to reflect on their meaning within the discipline of philosophy for quite some time. This is because, by surviving in literature, they have continued to offer a reflected image of the real world, however stylized it might be¹¹.

¹⁰ G. Patrizi, *La "Civil conversazione" libro europeo*, in Id. (ed.), *Stefano Guazzo e la civil conversazione*, Roma, Bulzoni, 1990, p. 11.

¹¹ On the influence of the Italian tradition through literature, especially in twentieth century, see below, section 4.

My aim in this paper is to plumb the depths of the *chiacchiera* (chit-chat), to reach those deposits of meaning in which the awareness of a democratic ethos of social roles has remained immobile and undisturbed for centuries. What I shall endeavour to uncover is a tradition awaiting complete reappraisal for the validity of ideas and suggestions which time has crystallized within it. Patrizi's observation is the point of departure to enquire into the modernity of a minor tradition of moral enquiry still awaiting interpreters able to carry out a methodical work of exegesis and systematization.

2. A plea for a civil conversation

But let us come to discuss the point of interest, that is to say, the philosophical and moralizing 'character' of the tradition under scrutiny (here, so to say, the eye of the 'moral philosopher' comes into play). The central theme of the *Galateo* consists "nel favellar disteso e continuato", (*Galateo*, 54), (*the continued and relaxed conversation*). The interlocutor, the recurring "tu" in Della Casa's text (almost certainly Annibale Rucellai, Della Casa's nephew), is invited to share the custom of a liberal and disciplined conversation: "you should grow accustomed to use kind, modest, and sweet words, such that they contain no bitterness" (*Galateo*, 62). And further, "you will not speak of low, or frivolous, or vulgar, or abominable topics" (*Galateo*, 65), consequently "people will listen to your speech with pleasure and interest, and you will retain the station and the dignity which is appropriate to a well brought up and behaved gentleman" (*Galateo*, 66).

Let us consider, then, precisely this theme of conversation as the thread which joins together the Italian tradition of treatises of this kind. The Italian tradition derives from the medieval moral treatises for the edification of prince and courtesan. This reaches a turning point with the *Galateo* and finds in Stefano Guazzo's *Conversazione* a European dimension of high significance. The work of Guazzo is very important in my reconstruction because in a certain sense it sums up and 'urbanizes' Della Casa's proposal, in my view, in a predominantly moralizing and normative way. It stages a dialogue between a Cavalier who wishes to establish "la scienza sopra la solitudine" (*the*

science upon solitude), and Hannibal, for whom “the beginning and end of the science depends on the conversation”¹².

Here, as in the *Galateo*, we find, about the *locus deputatus* of conversation, the opposition between the “romitori” (*hermitages*) to which one withdraws to live a life of solitude, and the city. Here the city is a different place in relation to the court (with what Ezio Raimondi defines as its “scenic role ethos”¹³), which corresponds neither to the State nor to the Principality. It does not coincide with the Republic either, although a republic might be a city or contain many cities. The city corresponds to an emerging social phenomenon in which individuals live in close proximity, immersed in the common medium of conversation, where ‘conversation’ doesn’t comprise a mere exchange of information: the practice of getting on with one’s neighbours by means of conversation cannot be abstracted from an *ethos* in which formulae of greetings, thanking and addressing each other in public were embedded.

It is worth noting that the city still represents the elective place in which a new way of thinking is formed, a new science, in opposition to a solitary conception of action, and to a conception of knowledge founded on contemplation¹⁴. The city, then is the place in which Italian authors of treatises ‘experiment’ upon the normative functioning of that ‘new’ ethics which Hobbes was to scornfully call *parva moralia*. Here, the discovery of these Italian authors was that the ‘space’ of communication is never smooth, perfectly transparent to the communicative sincerity of participants, but is continually perturbed by obfuscations and obstacles that make a mutual understanding problematic. This idea of conversation, as worked out by the Italian writers, contained the possibility of disagreeing: the art of conversation the Italian writers wanted to introduce was the art of ‘agreeing to disagree’, of learning how to arrange forms of civilized disagreement. In other words, the moral enquiry of Italian treatise writers is the expression of a culture which adopted a strong form of protection against the violence of disputants¹⁵.

¹² S. Guazzo, *La civil conversazione* (1574), ed. A. Quondam, Modena, Panini, 1993.

¹³ The expression “ethos scenografico del ruolo” is in E. Raimondi, *Letteratura barocca*, Firenze, Olschki, 1985.

¹⁴ Hannibal’s science is actually that same experimental science which progressed modern Europe beyond the “immobile and petrified intelligence of the Indian Brahmin and the Chinese Mandarin”; C. Cattaneo, *La città*, Milano, Bompiani, 1949, p. 119

¹⁵ D. Quinton, *Duelling and Civility in Sixteenth Century Italy*, in “I Tatti Studies. Essays in the Renaissance”, Vol. 7, 1998, pp. 231-266 (: 249), cites the *Discorsi* by Annibale Romei published in 1585,

The ideal of ‘politezza’ sets a limit to opening up the full horizon of total communication. For these Italian authors of treatises, it was a question of safeguarding the cultural and civil singularity of those individuals who participate in democratic conversation, a type of conversation *that does not necessarily result in agreement*: the possibility is left open that a meeting between participants may not reach a satisfactory conclusion; that a reservation, an irreconcilable zone of disagreement and non-communication, may be expressed. If we look at the contemporary debate on ethics, whereas communication ethics hypothesize an action which is perfectly inclusive of the reasons of the other, the proposed ethics (or *Italian* ethics), which do not recognize any virtuous action outside their own inherited codes of civility, consider as a priority the uses and the conventions by means of which individuals endeavour to reach mutual agreement.

One point requires clarification: promoting conversation as a value of civilization does not mean protecting the dishonest, those who are capable of confounding their interlocutor by dissimulating a favor: in particular, Della Casa’s reservation is towards those “uomini letterati” who “per pompa di loro parlare fanno bene spesso che il torto vince e che la ragione perde” (*those men of letters who by the pomp of their eloquence are often able to secure the victory of wrong and the defeat of reason*). It seems to me that Torquato Tasso’s fictitious character of the deceiving Alete “gran fabro di calunnie, adorne in modi / novi, che sono accuse, e paion lodi” (*great fabricator of lies, dressed in novel ways / which, though they seem to be praises, are accusations*), is based on this type¹⁶.

In the following section I will seek to show how these Italian writers on manners succeeded in creating a living code of transmission of workable models of co-existence

in which cavalier Camilio Gualengo states that “the matter of duels belongs to jurists and not to moral philosophers”. Quinton rightly observes that duels prove the survival of an *ancien regime* mentality, and are the sign of a widespread discontent among the aristocratic class towards the process of ‘civilization’. It is, in my view, in this context of widespread conflict and litigation that the proposal of Della Casa seen as a moral philosopher should be situated. In particular, I would like to focus on his idea of self-discipline, of refusal to enter into conflict (in conformity with a truly ‘modern’ ideal, as yet not shared by the codes of honor which were still in force at the time). It constitutes, ultimately, the idea of a ‘Cadmean victory’, that is to say, the ability to activate ethics of restraint, to put into operation those bracketing strategies that allow a rational escape route from the threat of conflict. On this ‘philosophical’ point, see S. Wall, *Liberalism, Perfectionism and Restraint*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 32.

¹⁶ T. Tasso, *Gerusalemme liberata* ii, 58.

and of conversation which was going to establish itself as canonical all over Europe and which still has currency in some areas of our cultural universe. I believe that the diffusion - and subsequent translation - of a work like the *Galateo*, enabled a collection of symbols and 'characters' to be established. These would have served the purpose of guaranteeing the constitution of 'texts' or 'codes' which could be recognized and interpreted. At a certain point it seemed that a certain code of *civilitas* was about to become progressively authoritative in Europe as a result of the formation of a common lexicon of the traits, of a European canon which had become familiar to a broad social spectrum. But, as I have stated above, this canon represents an interrupted pathway of the Italian Renaissance, a route which at a certain point petered out.

My aim is to re-establish a tradition whose provenance has been partly lost, and piecing together the historical narratives of an influence, which, as I have said above, at a certain point in time, was interrupted. It is a matter of recovering both the key concepts of the *Galateo*, as well as those characteristics of the tradition under consideration which were, for some time, icons or recognizable symbols of a European *koiné* which had accepted certain rules and conventions of *civilitas* that seem to us, centuries later, arbitrary and vague.

3. A non-canonical tradition of moral enquiry

My aim in this section is to show that the seminal text of the Renaissance traditions of manners paved the way to an enduring speculative fashion by which writers on manners articulated a pattern of moral enquiry which had currency all over Europe for a long time¹⁷.

¹⁷ A. St George, *The Descent into Manners, Etiquette, Rules and the Victorians*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1993, was the first sign of a renewed interest for the Italian tradition. The book rediscovered the central relevance of a reflection on etiquette and manners in the mid-Victorian period that was not only associated with the salons, but also the literary world and public sphere. St George maintains that in 1576, with the first translation into English of the *Galateo*, "the tradition which was to flower in the mid-Victorian summer had been planted": *ibidem*, p. 3. In the course of a few years, works which do not appear to have found a place in the official channels of the debate on ethics have been published: M. Kingwell, *A Civil Tongue. Justice, Dialogue, and the Politics of Pluralism*, University Park-Penn., The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995. D. Anderson, *Gentility Recalled. Mere Manners and the Making of Social Order*, London, Social Affairs Unit, 1996. J. Martin, *Who Killed Modern Manners?*, in A. Etzioni (ed.), *The Essential Communitarian Reader*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 1998, pp. 295-301. J. Ardit, *A Genealogy of Manners. Transformation of Social Relations in France and England from the Fourteenth to the Eighteenth Century*, Chicago & London, Chicago University Pr., 1998. I myself have expanded on this

The Italian tradition is a minor tradition, which within modernity has suffered a condition of subordinateness towards the hegemonic tradition, which came about as a comprehensive commentary on Hobbes's claim that moral philosophy shouldn't busy itself with issues of small morals. A key-concept which enables us to distinguish these two traditions on the basis of how they employ this concept, albeit towards opposite ends, is the concept of 'imitation'.

We are used to taking for granted that the tradition of moral enquiry which goes back to Hobbes is the 'dominant' tradition in so far as the the concepts and practical modalities of interaction to which that tradition accords viability and authoritativeness are concepts and modalities of interactions which stand as indisputed fragment of the kind of moral discourse with which we are most familiar in the Western world. Thus, the so-called Hobbesian tradition is currently the strongest candidate, among a number of viable traditions of moral enquiry, to offer a comprehensive moral vision, one which allows us to articulate consistently our mutual moral commitments. But at closer scrutiny we can see that almost every day we employ resources of moral understanding which didn't occur in that Hobbesian framework and nevertheless have remained unexplored. Indeed it was Hobbes himself who promoted his view on man in society by discrediting a flourishing tradition of moral enquiry which had not relied – as Hobbes did – on the rational autonomy of the individual, but had stressed the significance of imitation in modeling human relationship. Hobbes's critique aims to unveil the negative implications of assuming the positive ethical function of habits and role models¹⁸.

But what is the distinctive feature of this hegemonic tradition of moral enquiry? I may reply to this question by saying that from Hobbes onwards, moral philosophy focusses on the individual as an independent moral agent: human beings, according to Hobbes, have "to be taught that they ought not be led with admiration of the virtue of any of their fellow subjects" (xxx; 8). Emphasis is on the ideal of a person capable mentally, and able in the real world to navigate a course through life, to be part creator of himself, and part

retrieval of the 'Italian tradition': see R. Farneti, *Una civile conversazione. Una proposta di etica italiana*, in "Iride" 3, 2000.

¹⁸ Hobbes maintains that "ignorance of the causes and original constitution of right, equity, law, and justice disposeth a man to make custom and example the rule of his actions, in such manner as to think that unjust which it hath been the custom to punish, and that just, of the impunity and approbation whereof they can

author of his life; such a person is the creator of her own moral world and by no means is subjected to the will of others¹⁹. As a matter of fact, when we describe ourselves and account for the several ways we move through society we rely on a normative pattern which goes back to a moral vision that is at least partly constitutive of the ways in which we continue to make sense of our own political practices. And it is worth noting that such a vision also has bearing on a theory of morality which has selected itself as a dominant strain in the history of moral thought.

The ‘minor’ tradition holds a different conception about imitation. This tradition is motivated by the perception that when moral agents think about moral questions, they do so not in terms of abstract principles with an aim to systematise some large chunk of moral experience, but in terms of concrete relationships with other people within the context of their understanding of those relationships, and the institutions and practices in which they are embedded.

It is worth noting that Giovanni della Casa, as well as other Italian moralists, draws extensively on this distinction between “role models” and the self-expression of an autonomous, rational moral point of view: in his book he rhetorically asks “how much more likely is it that we should become better under the guidance of our own reason, if we gave it our ears?” (*G*, 71). In a recent restatement of this Italian tradition, Mark Kingwell recurs to the argument originally put forward by Della Casa, and points out that “civility” “has to do with getting along with one another in society, not with reaching the truth or articulating the best possible theory or moral vision”²⁰.

This tradition doesn’t bring forward any abstract model of moral behaviour; it relies entirely on the function of role models in transmitting valuable chunks of moral experience. Its emphasis is not on the idea of communication, of a mutual understanding which is disembodied from those habits and practices which regulate the criteria of how participants get along with each other. The tradition under scrutiny refers instead to *conversation*, that is to the *practice* of conversation. The main concern of the Italian writers is not self expression but a ‘modern’ habit of conversation: that is, how to

produce an example [...] like little children, that have no other rule of good and evil manners but the corrections they receive from their parents and masters” (*Leviathan* xi, 21).

¹⁹ See J. Raz, *The Morality of Freedom*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1986. Raz has expanded on this topic in an interview: *Filosofia e pratica della libertà*, in “Iride” 37, 2002, pp. 475-509.

elaborate a workable ideal of conversation which may balance expression of oneself with respect towards the other participants to conversation.

The central theme of the *Galateo* consists in entertaining others with speeches which must “be well arranged and expressed, with description of the conduct, demeanour, dispositions, and habits of the people of whom you are talking, so that the audience may be given the impression, not of listening to a tale, but of seeing the action unfold before their eyes” (*Galateo*, 54).

This concern for the practice of conversation and for its apprehension through a repeated usage is one of the distinctive features of this tradition. One of the most direct statements of this idea of ‘practice’ has been made by A.S. Byatt, who clearly points out in her novel *The Game* that “we learn virtue by putting ourselves in a position where we cannot refuse to exercise it”²¹. Byatt refers certainly not to the tradition which goes back to Hobbes. She implicitly refers to a pragmatic tradition of moral enquiry, more attentive towards the significance of role models in the developing of human behaviour, a tradition in which are embedded the fundamental values cherished by Della Casa.

The Hobbesian trail is in the nineteenth century the major trail of moral enquiry. John Stuart Mill, one of the prominent representatives of this tradition, claimed that one cannot attribute to human beings “the mimetic talent of monkeys”: it seems to me that here the thread of the Italian tradition is definitely broken. Think of the dedicatory letter of Guazzo’s *Civil Conversation*, to Vespasiano Gonzaga Colonna, where the author recalled the conversation that had inspired his book, and proclaimed he had “come over as a monkey, trying to imitate the better I could that very first example”²².

4. The anxiety of influence

One question which seems to be natural to ask is whether this tradition still has a grasp on our implicit strategies of moral understanding, and how, and by what means, we may manage to preserve its *influence*. A tentative answer to this question is that the moral legacy of this ‘minor’ tradition has been preserved in *literature*. I cannot give here an

²⁰ M. Kingwell, *A Civil Tongue*, p. 218.

²¹ A.S. Byatt, *The Game*, London, Vintage, 1999.

²² I am quoting from the first enlarged edition of the *Conversazione*: In Vinegia, Presso Altobello Salicato, 1588, *Dedicatoria*.

exhaustive account of how that influence has been developed, but I can indicate a few interesting cases in point, which seem to offer some clues as to the survival of the Italian tradition in literature: examples may be cited from the work of Italian writers such as Curzio Malaparte, Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa and Elsa Morante, to name but a few²³. It is worth noting that this tradition is subsumed in a *Wirkungsgeschichte*, or a history of effects, in which that which is to be influenced loses all sense of its own developmental history in the very process of transformation: the tradition, in other words, loses its Italian background and comes to be regarded as a kind of pseudo-cultural universal emptied of its original form and content²⁴. Thus, the *influence* of this tradition, namely its ability to provide a workable set of role models and codes by which individuals may attune their behaviour to a pre-defined and easily recognizable standard of decorum, is consigned to narrow channels of cultural exchange and communication. It would also be interesting to identify the dynamics by which the influence of the texts “eminente citabili” of the Italian tradition has been quenched, and to see how this process has occasioned the demise of certain modes of structuring human behaviour.

In the *Independent* of 1 March 2001 columnist Angela Lambert pointed to the incapacity of feminism to articulate an effective moral discourse on role models. She maintained that young people have lost tenderness, judgement, any realistic sense of their own place and value, decorum (not an absurd attribute, at least in public) and self control. Lambert asks to herself “how did things get so far? What are the *influences, role models*

²³ See Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, *Il Gattopardo*, Milano, Giangiacomo Feltrinelli Editore, 1958, p. 129 (Engl. transl. by A. Colquhoun: *The Leopard*, New York, Pantheon, p. 159): Let’s read from Tomasi di Lampedusa’s *The Leopard*: “many problems that had seemed insoluble to the Prince were resolved in a trice by Don Calogero; free as he was from the shackles imposed on many other men by honesty, decency, and plain good manners, he moved through the jungle of life with the confidence of an elephant which advances in a straight line, rooting up trees and trampling down lairs, without even noticing scratches of thorns and moans from the crushed. Reared and tended in tranquil vales across which blew the courtesies of ‘please’, ‘I’d be so grateful’, ‘How very kind’, the Prince, when talking to Don Calogero, now found himself on an open heath swept by searing winds, and although continuing in his heart to prefer defiles in the hills he could not help admiring this surge and sweep which drew from the plane trees and cedars of Donnafugata notes never heard before”.

²⁴ Think of the extraordinary monologue of Mr Stevens in Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day*, in which at stake is the superior capacity of the English of that ‘emotional countenance’ which distinguishes them from the Continentals: “Continentals [...] are as a rule unable to control themselves in moments of strong emotion, and are thus unable to maintain a professional demeanour other than in the least challenging of situations. [...] they are like a man who will, at the slightest provocation, tear off his suit and his shirt and run about screaming. In a word, ‘dignity’ is beyond such persons”; K. Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day*, London, Faber, 1999.



and aspirations of these violent young women who form gangs, drink, smoke, swear and parade themselves halfnaked, laughing, sneering, leering *like their male counterparts*”²⁵. Lambert points out that more self-conscious and purposeful moral thinking must address this set of questions. Even if it cannot reverse the trend, it must go on tentatively to argue about the social implications of decent behaviour. Lambert concludes asking: “where are the role models?”

I wonder if the time hasn't come for the dominant tradition of moral enquiry, which relies upon autonomy and self-expression, to confront its failure. We all in modern Western democracies enjoy the extraordinary liberty we have struggled for centuries to achieve, but apparently have lost the sense of how to use it. Perhaps we have to look back beyond the threshold of influence, and turn our attention to the Italian tradition of moral enquiry.

²⁵ I added the italics at the end of the quote to stress my sympathy with a colleague at the Italian Academy, who remarked that this quote might sound insensitive towards women.