

# “A Little Embroidery of His Own”: Giuseppe Baretti as Cultural Mediator in Eighteenth-Century Europe

Paolo Bugliani, Università di Pisa

---

Citation: Bugliani, Paolo (2019) “ “A Little Embroidery of His Own”: Giuseppe Baretti as Cultural Mediator in Eighteenth-Century Europe”, *mediAzioni* 25, <http://mediazioni.sitlec.unibo.it>, ISSN 1974-4382.

---

## 1. Baretti as go-between

The eighteenth century in England witnessed the emergence of a number of celebrated Italian cultural mediators, including such distinguished figures as Paolo Rolli (1687-1765) and Giuseppe Baretti (1719-1789), whose careers paved the way for the more widely known Ugo Foscolo (1778-1827), who spent the last fourteen years of his life in London. Rolli and Baretti can be said to have carried on a more or less permanent conversation between England and Italy that dated back in writing at least to Chaucer’s age. During the eighteenth century, this cultural exchange was subsumed into the complex network of connections and exchanges that came to be known as the *Res Publica Litterarum*. From the very first appearance of that phrase, in a letter of July 6, 1417 from Francesco Barbaro to Poggio Bracciolini, this network of European erudites engendered an intellectual community that outstripped national boundaries, advocating an intellectual kinship between its learned “citizens” who pursued a common epistemological goal (Fumaroli 2015: 24). This supranational entity was, at its apex, practically as concrete a reality as any later modern state (Bots-Waquet 2005: 31).

Baretti was strongly embedded within this ideal of a transnational community of the learned. His determined exposure to foreign milieus, entailing both geographical and cultural displacement, distinguished him as a writer and intellectual whose decision to leave Piedmont was explicitly prompted by a “spregiudicatezza [che] aveva bisogno di terreni meno sterili per fiorire

liberamente” (Mauri 1988: 850). During his years in England, even though this “rhetoric of community” (Klancher 2007: 300) was destined to progressively give way to a more localised and nationalistic vision of literature, Baretti ranked among the most illustrious examples of this literary network.

Similarly to John Florio (1553-1625), Baretti played the part of the go-between, joining the ranks of those literary intermediaries (Höfele and Koppenfels 2003: 6) who have fostered dialogue between cultural traditions since the beginning of the modern era. Baretti’s great contribution to eighteenth-century Anglo-Italian relations is his ability to establish a common ground on which to rethink contemporary national literatures that drew on the adjacent fields of travel and translation. Such a reading of Baretti emphasises an appreciation of his function rather than of his individual significance as an author. Pascale Casanova’s ideal of a *World Republic of Letters*, an updated, globalised version of the earlier *Republic of Letters*, offers a recent take on the agency that go-between figures such as Baretti practiced:

The great, often polyglot cosmopolitan figures of the world of letters act [...] as foreign exchange brokers, responsible for exporting from one territory to another texts whose literary value they determine by virtue of this very activity. (Casanova 2004: 21)

What is striking in Baretti’s case is the intensity with which he carried out his duties as negotiator between England and Italy, whose cultural relations had been intermittently strained ever since the notoriously virulent attack of Roger Ascham in *The Scholemaster* (1570)<sup>1</sup>. During the Augustan Age, these prejudices found expression in travel accounts such as that of the surgeon Samuel Sharp (Costa 2002; Ferrari 2011), and it was at precisely this moment that Baretti entered the field with the publication of his *Account of the Manners and Customs of Italy* (1767), which represents

un nuovo approccio alla letteratura basato sul buon senso [...] e su un vivace apprezzamento del reale, oltre che sul dono dello ‘spirito poetico’, che egli

---

<sup>1</sup> As Michael Wyatt points out, however, Ascham critique is concentrated on a specific typology of Italian, more connected to the social domain of manners and habits, rather than to the intellectual realm of literary advancement (Wyatt 2005: 159-63).

riteneva fondamentale per comprendere appieno la poesia e poter di conseguenza formulare giudizi su di essa (Ferrari 2011: 337).

This “common-sense” criticism, which will also be shown to have informed the *Frusta*, has a parallel in another example that demonstrates Baretti’s role as go-between: the fundamental importance of language learning. This linguistically-centred orientation is presented as the propaedeutic to a truly European literary criticism that Baretti delineates as an “imaginary landscape” (Appadurai 1994: 31). He appears to be mindful of John Florio’s didactic legacy, viewed not merely as the passive transmission of knowledge, but as a performative act entailing dynamic participation:

The first and most important thing to note about Florio’s dialogic method is its performative aspect. To speak Italian in England is to be performing a role, assuming another identity in a way similar to the actor taking on another’s persona on stage. (Wyatt 2005: 167)

Thanks to this image, we can appreciate the inherently dialogic nature of Florio’s commitment to promote Italian culture in England, which anticipates what I seek here to argue with regard to Baretti.

## **2. Baretti and cultural translation**

Such cultural agents ideally stand at the intersection of the theoretical domains of travel, as a means “to collect information, to verify rumors, to witness marvels, to distinguish between fables and truth” and thus “to escape from the cultural narrowness that attends knowing only one’s own people” (Greenblatt 1991: 123); and that of translation, as the process “that re-situates the cultural phenomena of a period variously demarcated [...] in a dynamic relation with the future” (Wyatt 2005: 1). In other words, in order to appreciate the role played by Baretti, we need to position his works within a wider framework, one that necessarily exceeds the scope of the *Republic of Letters* and that is best investigated with the tools of cultural studies.

To serve as a cultural go-between requires, on a basic level, the displacement of a message between two parties. Go-betweens inhabit the “third space”

postulated by Homi Bhabha's grammar of cultural exchange: the act of communication between the two parties necessarily implies an unstable interpretation that generates a new meaning (Bhabha 1994: 36). Given this fundamental premise, it follows that the process of translation enacted by a go-between is not merely "a simple process of linguistic transfer, whereby whatever is written in one language [...] can be transferred unproblematically into another language" (Bassnett 2014: 2). If translation has to a great extent recently managed to free itself from the limited (and limiting) rubric of servitude to an "original" master text<sup>2</sup>, it is due to scholars who not only study this practice as an exercise in linguistic code switching, but also see in it the use of a more general and complex set of cultural skills that ultimately aim at reinforcing "the relationship between a text created in one moment of time and its transmission to a new set of readers in another" (Bassnett 2014: 81).

This idea of cultural translation has been evolving in many directions, but one particular declination of it seems best fitted to the case of Baretta. In her 2006 study, Emily Apter proposes the "translation zone" as a cultural space where it is possible to define "the epistemological interstices" (Apter 2006: 6) in which even the most disparate disciplines are able to communicate with one another. The translation zone draws clearly on Mary Louise Pratt's notion of a "contact perspective" that highlights "how subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other" and treats these relations "not in terms of separateness or apartheid, but in terms of copresence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, often within radically asymmetrical relations of power" (Pratt 1992: 7). In this sense, Apter's idea of translation can be seen as the intellectual catalyst of an associative process:

Cast as an act of love, and as an act of disruption, translation becomes a means of repositioning the subject in the world and in history; a means of rendering self-knowledge foreign to itself; a way of denaturalizing citizens,

---

<sup>2</sup> "But slaves we [translators] are, and labor on another man's plantation; we dress the vineyard, but the wine is the owner's: if the soil be sometimes barren, then we are sure to be scourg'd; if it be fruitful, and our care succeeds, we are not thank'd; for the proud reader will only say the poor drudge has done his duty" (Dryden 1909: 68).

taking them out of the comfort zone of national space, daily ritual, and pre-given domestic arrangements. (Apter 2006: 6).

In the case of late eighteenth-century English writers' absorption of Italian cultural heritage, the "comfort zone of national space" can be adapted into the "comfort zone of newly instituted national literatures". The "zone" around which Apter structures her core argument is an imaginary "broad intellectual topography that is neither the property of a single nation, nor an amorphous condition associated with postnationalism, but rather a zone of critical engagement that connects the 'l' and the 'n' of transLation and transNation" (Apter 2006: 5). Apter's reflections on "translating humanism", albeit brief/tangential to her own primary argument/etc., prove particularly fruitful to my focus here: her reflections on the process she labels "Translating Humanism" and undertaken by such figures as Leo Spitzer, Erich Auerbach, and more recently, Edward Said. This re-articulation of translation studies is accomplished by incorporating its practices into the parameters of comparative studies (Apter 2006: 53). The compelling import of Apter's theory, for a contextual and material study of translational relations, is its focus on the personal histories of these founders of comparative literature, and in particular on Spitzer's and Auerbach's experiences of exile in mid-twentieth-century Turkey, following the rise of National Socialism in their native countries.

Returning to Giuseppe Baretti – whose exile from Italy was determined by very different circumstances – it is worthwhile considering how he himself described his role as mediator. In *A Journey from London to Genoa, Through England, Portugal, Spain and France* (1770), Baretti postulated the universally valid unity of human nature that functions as a fertile habitat for cultural mingling, of which he sees himself as a prime mover:

Sober reason would make us easily comprehend, that human nature has always been the same throughout the world, though the nations into which the world is divided, may temporarily vary from each other in several respects, and be alternatively active or inactive, brave or cowardly, learned or ignorant, honest or dishonest. Sober reason would inform us, that particular virtues and particular vices will at times take possession of this or that tract of land, sway its inhabitants for a while in such a manner as to appear irresistible; then lose their power by degrees, shift away imperceptibly, and make room for other virtues and other vices, which will raise or sink the people according to the nature of their tendency. This rotation is incessant, though sometimes quicker and sometimes slower; but

men continue still to be essentially the same, still endowed with the same susceptibility of good and bad qualities, with the same inclinations, still with the same general nature (Baretti 1770: III.3).

Given this ethnological premise, Baretti's self-description as an "Italian in English", an inversion of John Florio's earlier "Englishman in Italian" (Florio 1591: 'To the reader', sig. \*r), becomes more comprehensible. By defining himself as a cultural hybrid (Antosa 2018: 15), Baretti sought to bridge the gap between England and Italy from Bhabha's "third space" through his wide-ranging knowledge of both parties, between which he assumed the role of cultural and intellectual ambassador. Two specific instances of Baretti's cultural hybridization will help us to understand the dynamics driving his identity as go-between.

### 3. "Voltato in inglese": a *Spectator* in Venice

The first such instance is Baretti's attempt to launch a literary magazine during his brief return to Italy in the mid-1760s. The *Frusta Letteraria di Aristarco Scannabue* was founded in Venice on October 1, 1763, but by early 1765 – despite, perhaps even because of, its notable success with a wide readership – the periodical had attracted the attention of the Venetian censors, and Baretti moved the operation to Ancona, where its final eight issues were published. The case of the *Frusta* might not seem significantly different from that of the Milanese Verri brothers' *Il Caffè*, the most renowned of Italy's periodicals of that era, issued between 1764 and 1766 and representing the voice of Italian Enlightenment. But before addressing the differences between these two contemporaneous cultural artefacts, it will be useful to cite Verri's manifesto on the efficacy of periodical literature:

Ma un foglio periodico, che ti si presenta come un amico che vuol quasi dirti una sola parola all'orecchio, e che or l'una o l'altra delle utili verità ti suggerisce non in massa, ma in dettaglio, e che or l'uno o l'altro errore della mente ti toglie quasi senza che te ne avveda, è per lo più il più ben accetto, il più ascoltato. (Verri and Verri 1766: 1)

Although unquestionably moved by the same intentions, Baretti's case is notably different, given that he adopted an antagonistic stance towards French literary

conventions. The notorious “infranciosamento” (Asor Rosa 2009: 232-3) of which all Italian literature was at the time in thrall, was countered by Baretti through a direct quarrel with the most illustrious of the French *philosophes*, Voltaire, whom he accused of transmitting a biased image of English letters – of being, in other words, a “bad” go-between. Baretti had had direct and sustained exposure to English culture, and his literary production has been characterised as distinctly English-dominated<sup>3</sup> (Fido 1989: 122), a feature of his cultural identity which was already clear to contemporaries such as Ugo Foscolo, who defined him a “rigid critic, who had perfected, if not begun, his literary education in England, and who was the first to introduce into Italy the new code of criticism which he had received from Dr Johnson” (Foscolo 1958: 344).

In this same essay – “Italian Periodical Literature” – Foscolo acknowledges that literary journalism was a widespread practice in Italy, calling it “[o]ne of the most characteristic, and perhaps most prominent features of our age” (Foscolo 1958: 327). The English press gave rise to a number of prominent literary personae that served as mouthpieces for authors’ own opinions, and, it was these “eidolons” (Powell 2012: 7) that provided Baretti with the idea for Aristarco Scannabue. Testifying to the centrality of English periodical literature in Baretti’s early English-centred career – and, significantly, independent of his much-invoked personal and intellectual relationship with Samuel Johnson – is a commonplace book preserved in the Horace Howard Furness Memorial Library of the University of Pennsylvania, which contains numerous essays and other pieces “pazientemente copiati dallo *Spectator* e da altri giornali inglesi, per il loro duplice

---

<sup>3</sup> Another interesting case of this periodical anglomania is to be found in an anonymous magazine printed in Venice, the *Foglio in cui certamente qualche cosa è stampata* (1764), whose author may have been Zaccaria Seriman; he, like Baretti, was very much influenced by English models, and he published a lumbering imitation of *Gulliver’s Travels*, the *Viaggi di Enrico Wanton alle terre incognite australi ed ai regni delle Scimmie e dei Cinocefali* (1749). The *Foglio* fashions itself a “Storia dei Giornali, Gazzetta, ed altri fogli periodici veneti”, wherein Baretti and his *Frusta* are featured; indicative of its distinct anglomania are positions such as these: “Gli Inglesi prima di ogni altra nazione rilevarono la necessità di questi libri, o Fogli. Procurarono esemplari dalle altre nazioni, e specialmente dalla italiana e regalarono la loro di Dizionarii, Giornali, e un numero immenso di Fogli periodici, dalli quali il Governo anche ricava con imposizioni giustissime sopra la curiosità umana, non poca rendita” (Anon. 2002: 32).

valore di patrimonio di saggezza e di perfetta esemplificazione di uno stile medio, conversevole ed elegante allo stesso tempo” (Fido 1989: 127).

Baretti justifies his use of a proxy from the very outset of the *Frusta Letteraria*. Aristarco Scannabue’s “Introduzione a’ leggitori” not only outlines Baretti’s project, but also introduces the character of Aristarco, imbuing him with a vivid theatricality in claiming that the *Frusta* was intended as a scourge on bad writers. Aristarco states unequivocally that his magazine will not interest itself in the “vita di quella mansueta ed innocua gente, che noi volgarmente chiamiamo letterati” (Baretti 1972: 65), for the implication is that it would otherwise be as tedious and petty as their work is. Baretti creates an adventurous personal history for Aristarco: he was a relentless traveller (“passò dieci intieri [lustri] sempre avvolgendosi come una fiamma per diverse regioni del mondo”, Baretti 1972: 65); a soldier (“vibrando spuntone o sciabla per gli eserciti d’Europa e d’Asia”, Baretti 1972: 66); and a courtier (“avvolgendosi per palagi e corti”, Baretti 1972: 66), who has lately opted for a sedentary life in the country in order to become a literary critic:

Lo scrivere questi fogli gioverà anche ad Aristarco a sfogare l’innata bizzarria, a fargli purgare un po’ di quella stizza che la lettura d’un cattivo libro naturalmente gli muove, ed a finir di consumare quel breve spazio di vita che gli resta a vivere [...] Avvertite dunque, signori leggitori, che Aristarco si mette a malmenare tutti i moderni cattivi autori [...]; onde badate a non iscrivere, o a scriver bene, e cose di sustanza, se non volete toccare qualche maledetta frustata (Baretti 1972: 69)

This introductory statement casts Aristarco Scannabue as the epitome of the pompous literary critic, closely following the example of several earlier English practitioners, such as Addison and Steele’s famous account of the birth of Mr Spectator, which was accompanied by an ominous dream his mother had while pregnant “that she was brought to bed of a judge”, which apparently shaped Mr Spectator’s “gravity of [...] behaviour” (Gigante 2009: 44)<sup>4</sup>. Other notable periodical *personae* introduced themselves to their readership in an equally

---

<sup>4</sup> For these citations, I refer to Gigante’s anthology of British essayists, which offers a glimpse into the abundance of such picturesque introductions to the essayistic *persona*. Samuel Johnson’s example is quite different, his *Rambler* and *Idler* being less interested in the characterisation of the voices of these personae and more specifically in the abstract quality that their names bear.



engaging manner: Sir Isaac Bickerstaff, son of Jonathan Swift and borrowed by Richard Steele to be the imaginary editor-in-chief of the *Tatler*, tells the story of a public skirmish between an Irish clergyman and an astrologer; Sir Andrew Drawcansir, the voice of Henry Fielding's *The Covent Garden Journal*, presents himself as a lonely knight "in the Warfare of Writing" against the *Army of Grubstreet* (*ibid.*: 163); and the *raconteuse* of Eliza Haywood's *The Parrot* narrates a series of startling adventures, passing from Java to Versailles, and from Flanders to Italy (*ibid.*: 97).

These richly delineated, occasionally braggart, introductions provide a means of both characterising and justifying their author's opinions, as Haywood's female periodical alter-ego justly remarks, boasting of her many daring exploits. This narrator also interestingly cites cosmopolitanism as a justification of the very sharing of opinion in print:

I shall make my endeavour that they [the readers] may not be disappointed, and at the same time also to answer the expectations of those who have a better opinion of my abilities: I say *abilities*, for most people who know me, will allow me to be a *Bird of Parts*; and, indeed, I cannot well be otherwise, considering the various scenes of life I have gone through, the many different nations I have lived among, the conversation I have had with all degrees of people, the opportunities Fortune has thrown in my way of improving myself, under the most learned and witty persons of their times, and the wonderful events that have fallen within the compass of my observation. (Gigante 2009: 93-4)

#### **4. "To animadvert upon the mistakes": the partiality of the travelogue**

The second example of Baretti's cultural mediation is to be found in two texts: the *Account* quoted above, and the travelogue of his voyage back to Italy in 1760. Whereas his Venetian periodical represented an attempt to translate a quintessentially English cultural product into the Italian context, here Baretti aimed to transmit an authentic image of *italianità* in a manner readily intelligible to an English audience. *A Journey from London to Genoa Through England, Portugal, Spain and France* (1770) fittingly demonstrates Baretti's attitude toward chronicling and reconstructing his own "experience of displacement, encounter, and travail" (Smith and Watson 2001: 207) that characterised his return to Italy

after a decade abroad, where he had achieved the cultural and economic recognition he had failed to secure at home. *A Journey*, and its Italian counterpart, the *Lettere familiari a' suoi tre fratelli* (1762-3) – whose publication was blocked by the Portuguese ambassador in Milan, who objected to Baretti's critical description of Lisbon – reveal a position that Baretti would re-propose in the *Account*. There, his aim was to counter the ignorant and malicious accounts of Italians put forward by outsiders with his own knowledge of his native country.

The *Journey* is notable not only for its inherent transnational character, but also for the fact that it existed in two different versions, demonstrating the author's singular ability to adapt his style to diverse linguistic – and hence cultural – communities:

Baretti's decision to write a version of his travels for English readers represents a novel strategy in developing 'geographies of belonging': an infiltration of the cultural space of the other, in this case to access a dominant culture of travel. In the English-language *Journey*, a text usually considered somewhere between an adaptation and a translation of the *Lettere familiari*, Baretti refashions his own work for a culture with – unlike Italy – an extensive and recognized tradition of travel literature. Taking a new metatextual avenue, the revised version also criticizes superficial and often negative descriptions of 'other' national groups. (Hester 2003: 295)

Baretti's self-translation signals his own process of Anglicization, his active insertion into the dynamics of the "geographies of belonging" that Hester claims are the building blocks of national identity (Hester 2003: 287-8). Whereas eighteenth-century Italy lacked a developed culture of travel – and a corresponding literature – Baretti's progressive assimilation into the English milieu exposed him to a canon of material with which to develop an approach to cultural difference virtually inaccessible to writers with more limited horizons, in Italy and elsewhere.

On the other hand, Baretti's *Account* opens with an overt criticism of Samuel Sharp's short-sighted "strange judgements on men and things" for being "taken from sudden and superficial impressions" (Baretti 1768: ix). Baretti's reproach is directed primarily against Sharp's ignorance of its object, supplied in his case by his own *italianità*:

In the following pages I may be thought prejudiced in favour of my own country; and I am not sure whether I can wholly clear myself of this imputation. But I hope my partiality will be thought connected with some knowledge and experience of the matters about which I write (Baretti 1768: ix)

Baretti thus assumes a position that stands out as:

esattamente opposta a quella dello scrittore di viaggi tradizionale [...] [lui] scrive un libro sul proprio paese a beneficio di un pubblico straniero, di cui tuttavia conosce talmente bene la cultura e la mentalità da poter orientare le proprie scelte e osservazioni in modo da rendere il testo più piacevole possibile per il suo lettore, senza peraltro perdere di vista l'intento di promozione e divulgazione della cultura italiana all'estero. (Ferrari 2011: 339-40)

The originality of such a re-positioning is quite significant, but can only be fully understood if read against the framework of translation that any legitimate cultural go-between necessarily embodies. As evidence, one can refer to the work of an English satirist, John Shebbeare, who in this same period produced a series of *Letters on the English Nation* (1755), modelled on Montesquieu's *Lettres Persanes* (1721), in which Shebbeare describes English mores from the point of view of an Italian Jesuit traveller, Battista Angeloni. In such a protean environment of confrontation and critique between apparently clear-cut national identities, Baretti's liminal presence underscores the porousness of such a concept, challenging the monolithically stable and immutable character that such constructs assume. National identity was, and is, a "contact zone", continuously modified by "intercultural performances and interactions" (Pfister 2008: 9).

In Baretti's view, the first and foremost of these performances, and accordingly the primary requirement for an effective literary go-between – as Wyatt's analysis of Florio's example cited above suggests – was a complete mastery of the languages in which texts are initially produced and into which they are to be translated. Like Florio before him, Baretti had been a tutor of Italian in London, most notably to Hester Thrale Piozzi's daughters, providing a whole range of lexicographical (Iamartino 1990) and didactic outputs (Iamartino 1994; Martino 2009), and thus possessed greater linguistic technical expertise than many of his contemporaries:

Too large a part of a man's life must necessarily be spent in acquiring that infinite association of ideas, which is indispensably required to taste, as a native, the language of any foreign poet. Few men enjoy leisure enough for so difficult an acquisition: and its owing to the want of this leisure, as well as to their arrogance and self-conceit, that so many critics of all nations blunder at every word, whenever they sit in judgement of this and that foreign poet. I am presumptuous enough to think myself a tolerable master of the English, but I am likewise humble enough to abstain from pronouncing, that many passages in Milton and Shakespeare are not striking, because they do not strike me when I read them: and this my reserve and timidity arises from an observation I have had many times occasion to make, that many of those passages which did not strike me when I read them, myself, have struck me forcibly when I heard them read by those who knew how they are to be read. (Baretti 1768: 154-5)

In typically Barettian fashion, this humble acceptance of one's own not-entirely-foreign culture finds its counterpart in the sharp criticism that he reserves for those who fail to exercise such restraint in judging something written in a foreign language. This attitude is most visible – perhaps even more so than in the case of Samuel Sharp, whose “utter ignorance of the Italian language ought to have awed him into silence about the customs and manners of Italy” (Baretti 1768: 8) – in Baretti's public quarrels with two literary critics.

The first of these was his famous offensive against Voltaire, most conspicuously in the case of the direct attacks of the French *philosophe* against Baretti's friend Samuel Johnson (Costa 2002: 530); and then, with a philologically oriented objective, in his *Discours sur Shakespeare et sur Monsieur de Voltaire* (1777), where the bone of contention was Voltaire's utterly incompetent translation of Shakespeare<sup>5</sup>.

The second, lesser known, example of Baretti's intolerance of cultural presumption was directed against Carlo Denina's *Discorso sopra le vicende della letteratura* (1761), reviewed by Aristarco in the eighth issue of the *Frusta*. For

---

<sup>5</sup> Cfr. Mario Domenichelli's stance on this subject, which he labels “The Last *Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes*”, animated by the utter impossibility of mutual comprehension between Voltaire on the one hand and Baretti and Johnson on the other. The latter two considered the French *philosophe* “a sad, and deplorable example of wit and reason gone sour by way of presumption” (Domenichelli 1996: 138).

Baretti, the chief fault of Denina's work is its reliance on biased, second-hand ideas about England:

Volete ch'io ve ne dica una in confidenza signor Denina? Shakespeare, come l'Ariosto, è uno di que' trascendenti poeti *whose genius soars beyond the reach of art*. Un po' d'inglese vedo dal vostro discorso che già l'intendete, onde non vi vo' far il torto di spiegarvi queste poche parole. Vi voglio ben confortare a studiare quella lingua meglio che non avete ancora potuto fare, prima di sentenziare degl'inglesi, e massimamente di Shakespeare e di Milton: altrimenti sarà sempre un porre il carro avanti a' buoi. Vedo pure da questo vostro libro che avete una buona porzione d'ingegno. Esercitate lo con violenza, e diventerete quel letterato grande che avete la nobile voglia di diventare; ma, per l'amor del cielo, non mi calcate l'orme degli abbé Le Blanc e d'altri tali francesi, che sono male guide su per l'erta via, per dirla alla loro moda, della bella letteratura. (Baretti 1972: 244-45)

Rather than a direct and engaged immersion in England's vigorous culture, Baretti saw in Denina's dismissal of Shakespeare and Milton both a scarcity of the tools necessary to come to such a conclusion and an unthinking acceptance of French superiority.

## 5. Baretti and the dream of a European literature

What these examples of Baretti's cultural mediation suggest is not solely his relevance to the material enhancement of Anglo-Italian relations, but also his significance for the emerging sense of a more expansive world of letters to which Goethe referred in 1827: "National literature is now a rather unmeaning term; the epoch of world literature [*Weltliteratur*] is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach" (Goethe 1984: 132; cf. also Luzzi 2008: 77-8). Dying two months before the storming of the Bastille, Baretti only just missed the Romantic foundation of a European literary space that, even if ideologically distinct from the *Republic of Letters*, was in fact akin to it, the former based on a quasi-mystical sense of communitarian literary relations, the latter on a tangible network of learned *translatio* (Fumaroli 2015: 24). Straddling the E. and R. eras, Baretti's *sui generis* intellectual profile marks the end of the earlier "Republic" while

anticipating Goethe's vision<sup>6</sup>. The need for a truly transnational literary perspective was also reflected by Giacomo Leopardi, who wrote in 1821:

Fu un tempo dove agli uomini ed agli scrittori bastava di giovare, di farsi intendere, di rendersi famosi dentro i limiti della propria nazione. Ma oggi, nello stato d'Europa che ho detto di sopra, non acquista fama né grande né durevole quello scrittore il cui nome e i cui scritti non passano i termini del proprio paese. Né in questa presente condizione di cose può molto e immortalmemente giovare alla sua patria chi non viene almeno indirettamente a giovare più o meno anche nel resto del mondo civile. (Leopardi 1997: 883)

Unlike Foscolo, Goethe, or Madame de Staël, Leopardi never experienced exile, nor had he had any direct and prolonged exposure to a foreign culture; and he was not immersed in areas of cultural circulation such as the editorial marketplace or language pedagogy that formed such an important dimension of Baretto's work. And yet, from the relative isolation of the extraordinary library that his father had created for him in Recanati, Leopardi developed from his deep reading in both classical and vernacular European languages a keen sense that the world of letters was moving in a new direction.

As has already been noted, addressing the transnational dimension of literature entails a discussion of its globalist nature. Baretto's case was first considered in this light by one of his most insightful Italian interpreters, Franco Fido, who believed that a reconsideration of England's role in the study of Italian literature was urgently needed (Fido 1989: 116). Baretto's "globalism" set the stage for the phenomenon that is at the heart of contemporary comparative literary studies, and Frederic Jameson – whose postmodern critical approach would seem to be worlds away from Baretto's late eighteenth-century cultural coordinates – provides a useful synthesis of how the globalist impulse can be seen not merely as a social effect typical of capitalist modernity, but also as a philosophical concept that can and must be applied to other historical periods (Jameson 1998). More recent studies – *The Global Eighteenth Century* (2005), edited by Felicity

---

<sup>6</sup> Baretto's cultural mediation also encompassed the French, Portuguese, and Spanish linguistic "translation zones", as attested by the *Discours*, the *Journey / Lettere familiari*, and *A dictionary Spanish and English, and English and Spanish: containing the signification of words, and their different uses, together with the terms of arts, sciences, trades, and the Spanish words accented and spelled according to the regulation of the Royal Spanish Academy of Madrid* (1778).

Nussbaum; and both the monograph *Romantic Globalism: British Literature and Modern World Order, 1750–1830* (2014) and edited volume *Global Romanticism: Origins, Orientations, and Engagements, 1760–1820* (2015) by Evan Gottlieb – have further developed this idea, demonstrating how New Historicism has opened up promising new lines of inquiry into the Long Eighteenth Century.

David Damrosch's *What is World Literature?* (2003) provides a useful working definition which can, tentatively, be adapted to Baretto's case: world literature is that discipline which is meant "to encompass all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language" (Damrosch 2003: 4). But since inclusiveness as such might be seen as generating huge and unmanageable sets of heterogeneous works whose only prerequisite would be the capacity to move "beyond [a] home base", Damrosch qualifies his definition by asserting that "world literature is not an infinite, ungraspable canon of works but rather a mode of circulation and of reading". This important reconceptualization of world literature not as a repository, but as a dynamic event emerges in Damrosch's conclusion:

The great conversation of world literature takes place on two very different levels: among authors who know and react to one another's work, and in the mind of the reader where works meet and interact in ways that may have little to do with cultural and historical proximity [...] World literature is fully in play once several foreign works begin to resonate together in our mind. This provides a further solution to the comparatist's lurking panic: world literature is not an immense body of material that must somehow, impossibly, be mastered; it is a mode of reading that can be experienced intensively with a few works just as effectively as it can be explored extensively with a large number. (Damrosch 2003: 298-299)

This image of a globalised counterpoint of writers and readers helps to re-situate Baretto's work of cultural mediation within a broad critical framework. In a more recent book, however, Damrosch strikes a cautionary note about the ideal of cultural "progress":

With the rise of the modern nation-state in recent centuries, national traditions have grown up within an international matrix, as a nascent nation's writers have defined themselves in and against the context of the literatures before and around their own, often reading these works in translation. Translations have had both creative and destructive consequences in times of cultural ferment, particularly when the literature of an imperial power was

introduced into (or imposed upon) a colony or client state. (Damrosch 2014: 349-350)

It is well to recall that, as with all such historical dislocations, the shift from the eighteenth-century ideal of the *Republic of Letters* to the commonality of the elected intrinsic to the concept of *Weltliteratur* was subject to counteracting forces, most threateningly by the nationalistic involution of nineteenth-century European letters that accompanied the political and social upheavals of the period, a discomfiting legacy that is still very much with us.

Central to this fraught dialectic is the position of the stranger, and a provisional conclusion to these considerations can be found in Baretti's discussion of the term in the fifth chapter of the *Account*, where, again castigating Sharp for his poor grasp of the Italian language, he makes these observations:

*A stranger* is no very honourable appellation in England<sup>7</sup>. In some parts of Spain, and still more in Portugal, it is opprobrious: but in some parts of Italy, *A stranger* means *a fine fellow*, and in some others, *a wise man*: I mean always amongst the common people. Let any body with a foreign dress or accent speak in their hearing, the Italians will imperceptibly steal near, and listen with attention to his words; then go home and tell their wives, children, or friends what they have heard; and seldom omit, in the warm elation of their goodness, a little embroidery of their own, in commendation of the stranger. (Baretti 1768: 55)

While the *vis polemica* that became his most distinctive characteristic frequently landed Baretti in enormous difficulty, here he puts his best foot forward as a paragon of the generous and sensitive go-between who, through “a little embroidery”, saved himself by adopting a new voice, and a new culture, in learning English.

---

<sup>7</sup> The situation had hardly changed from the one that Wyatt describes in sixteenth-century England (Wyatt 2005: 134-40, 283).



## Works Cited

- Anon. (2002) *Foglio in cui Certamente Qualche Cosa È Stampata*, G. Pizzamiglio (ed), Venezia: Marsilio.
- Antosa, S. (2018) *Frances Elliot and Italy: Writing Travel, Writing the Self*, Milano: Mimesis.
- Appadurai, A. (1996) *Modernity at Large. Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Apter, E. (2006) *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Asor Rosa, A. (2009) *Storia Europea della Letteratura Italiana* vol. 2, Torino: Einaudi.
- Bhabha, H. (1996) *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge.
- Baretti, G. (1768) *An Account of the Manners and customs of Italy; with Observations on the Mistakes of Some Travellers, with regard to that Country*, vol. 1, London: T. Davies.
- (1770) *A Journey from London to Genoa, Through England, Portugal, Spain and France* vol. 3, London: T. Davies.
- (1972) *Opere Scelte* vol. 1, B. Maier (ed), Torino: UTET.
- Bassnett, S. (2014) *Translation*, London-New York: Routledge.
- Bots, H. and F. Waquet (2005) *La Repubblica delle Lettere*, Bologna: il Mulino.
- Casanova, P. (1999) *La République Mondiale des Lettres*, Paris : Seuil. English translation by M. de Bevoise (2004) *The World Republic of Letters*, New Haven: Harvard University Press.
- (2015) *La Langue Mondiale. Traduction et Domination*, Paris: Seuil.

- Costa, G. (2002) "Il Risveglio dell'Attenzione alla Cultura Italiana", in L. Formisano and E. Malato (eds) *Storia della Letteratura Italiana* vol. 12 (La Letteratura Italiana Fuori d'Italia), Roma: Salerno Editore, 529-577.
- Damrosch, D. (2003) *What is World Literature?* Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Damrosch D. (2014) "Translation and National Literature", in S. Bermann and C. Porter (eds) *A Companion to Translation Studies*, Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, 349-360.
- Dionisotti, C. (1988) *Appunti sui Moderni. Foscolo, Leopardi, Manzoni e Altri*, Bologna: il Mulino.
- Domenichelli, M. (1996) "Voltaire, Shakespeare, Barette: The Last *Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes*", in P. Kennan and M. Tempera (eds), *International Shakespeare: The Tragedies*, Bologna: Clueb, 127-141.
- Dryden, J. (1909) *Virgil's Aeneid*, New York: P. F. Collier & Son.
- Ferrari, R. (2011) "'That Both English and Italian... May Be Civil and Humane to Each Other': L'Account of the Manners and Customs of Italy di Giuseppe Barette", in C. Dell'Aversano, S. Beccone and C. Serani (eds) *Hammered Gold and Gold Enamelling*, Roma: Aracne, 333-352.
- Fido, F. (1989) "Tra un Genere e l'Altro: Vagabondaggi del Barette", in F. Fido (ed) *Le Muse Perdute e Ritrovate. Il Divenire dei Generi Letterari fra Sette e Ottocento*, Firenze: Vallecchi, 115-146.
- Florio, J. (1591) *Florio's Second Frutes*, London: Thomas Woodcock.
- Foscolo, U. (1958) "Italian Periodical Literature", in C. Foligno (ed) *Saggi di Letteratura Italiana* Vol 11 (pt. 2), Firenze: Le Monnier.
- Fumaroli, M. (2015) *La Repubblica delle Lettere*, Milano: Adelphi.
- Fusillo, M. (2014) "Passato, Presente, Futuro" in F. De Cristofalo (ed) *Letterature Compare*, Roma: Carocci.

- Gigante, D. (2009) *The Great Age of the English Essay*, New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Goethe, J.W. (1984) *Conversations with Eckermann*. English translation by J. Oxenford (1994) *Conversations with Eckermann*, San Francisco: North Point Press.
- Gottlieb, E. (2014) *Romantic Globalism: British Literature and Modern World Order, 1750-1830*, Columbus OH: Ohio State University Press.
- (2015) *Global Romanticism: Origins, Orientations, and Engagements, 1760–1820*, Lewisburg PA: Bucknell University Press.
- Greenblatt S. (1991) *Marvelous Possessions. The Wonder of the New World*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- (2010) “Cultural Mobility: An Introduction”, in S. Greenblatt (ed) *Cultural Mobility: A Manifesto*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1-23.
- Hester, N. (2003) “Geographies of Belonging: Italian Travel Writing and Italian Identity in the Age of Early European Tourism”, *Annali di Italianistica* 21: 287-300.
- Höfele, A. and W. Koppenfels (2003) “Introduction”, in A. Höfele and W. Koppenfels (eds) *Renaissance Go-Betweens. Cultural Exchange in Early Modern Europe*, Berlin-New York, De Gruyter, 1-16.
- Iamartino, G. (1990) “The Lexicographer as a Biased Witness: Social, Political and Religious Criticism in Baretto’s *English-Italian Dictionary*”, *Aevum* 64: 435-444.
- (1994) “Baretto Maestro d’Italiano in Inghilterra e l’Easy Phraseology”, in R.S. Crivelli and L. Sampietro (eds) *Il Passaggiere Italiano. Saggi sulle Letterature di Lingua Inglese in Onore di Sergio Rossi*, Roma: Bulzoni, 383-419.

- Jacobson, R. (1992) "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation", in R. Schulte and J. Biguenet (eds) *Theories of Translation: An Anthology of Essays from Dryden to Derrida*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 144-151.
- Jameson, F. (1998) "Notes on Globalisation as a Philosophical Issue", in M. Miyoshi and F. Jameson (eds) *The Cultures of Globalisation*, Durham & London: Duke University Press, 54-77.
- Klancher, J. (2007) "The Vocation of Criticism and the Crisis of the Republic of Letters", in M. Brown (ed) *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism* vol. 5 (Romanticism), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 296-320.
- Luzzi, J. (2008) *Romantic Europe and the Ghost of Italy*, New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Leopardi G. (1997) *Zibaldone* vol. 1, R. Damiani (ed), Milano: Mondadori.
- Martino, M.G. (2009) "L'interesse Glottodidattico di Giuseppe Baretta Durante gli Anni Londinesi", *Studi di Glottodidattica* 3: 44-59.
- Mauri, P. (1988) "Il Piemonte", in A. Asor Rosa (ed) *Letteratura Italiana: Storia e Geografia*, vol. 2 (L'età moderna), 823-874.
- Nussbaum, F. (2005) *The Global Eighteenth Century*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.
- Pratt, M.L. (1992) *Imperial Eye. Travel Writing and Transculturation*, London-New York: Routledge.
- Pfister, M. (2008) "Introduction: Performing National Identity", in M. Pfister and R. Hertel (eds) *Performing National Identity: Anglo-Italian Cultural Transactions*, Amsterdam-New York: Rodopi, 9-28.
- Said, E. (2003) "Introduction to the Fiftieth-Anniversary Edition", in E. Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. English translation by W.R. Trask, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Smith, S. and J. Watson (2001) *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Verri, P. and G. Verri (1766) *Il Caffé, o sia Brevi e Varj Discorsi già Distribuiti in Fogli Periodici*, Venezia: Pietro Pizzolato. Available online <http://www.senato.it/teca/giornalistorici/a9741a6a-fe58-4205-8663-25e2cc653871.html> (visited 15/11/2018)

Wyatt, M. (2005) *The Italian Encounter with Tudor England. A Cultural Politics of Translation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.