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Poetic Inspiration and the Ethics of Writing as a Source of Higher Narrative in Cervantes and Manzoni

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In my essay I will address the problematic nature of the elevated style within the modern novel. My analysis will move from Cervantes *Don Quixote*—a fundamental point of reference for modern and post-modern theories of the novel—to Manzoni's *The Betrothed*, one of the greatest European novels of the nineteenth century. I shall first discuss two opposing readings of Cervantes' elevated style, Auerbach's and Pirandello's; then, I will introduce the Romantic theory of the novel and the question of 'poetic inspiration' and the ethics of writing in Manzoni's *The Betrothed*.

AUERBACH'S *QUIXOTE*: THE NEUTRAL GAIETY OF PLAY

Auerbach's 'Enchanted Dulcinea' focuses his analysis of Cervantes' *Quixote* on an episode that takes place in Part II of Chapter 10. The knight sends Sancho Panza to look for Dulcinea and to announce his intention of paying her a visit; Sancho, who lied to him about Dulcinea's identity, does not know how to find the imaginary lady. Finally, seeing three peasant women on donkeys riding toward him, he tells his master that Dulcinea and two of her ladies are coming to meet him. In this case, Don Quixote sees nothing except the actual reality, the vulgar language and behavior of

the three ladies who stand in sharp contrast to his noble and chivalric attitude and language. For a moment he does not believe that Sancho is praising the beauty of the three peasant women; but in the end he finds the way of saving his illusion by convincing himself that Dulcinea is under enchantment. Auerbach (1953: 339) sees in this episode the climax of ‘a clash between Don Quixote’s illusion and ordinary reality which contradicts it’ and a privileged moment to study the issue of elevated style in the entire text.

For Auerbach, Cervantes not only criticizes but also continues ‘the great epico-rhetorical tradition for which prose is an art too. As soon as great emotions and passions or sublime events are involved, this elevated style with all its devices appears’ (ibid.: 341). Quixote is a master of ‘articulated and musical bravura pieces of chivalric rhetoric’ through which he expresses his *humildad* for *la señora de sus pensamientos*. Yet, Auerbach admits that this elevated style—having shifted slightly from the sphere of high tragedy toward that of the ‘smoothly pleasant, which is capable of at least a trace of self-irony’—had become more and more conventional (ibid.). One can see an example of this shift in the episode just quoted where Don Quixote’s high style is introduced to create a stylistic contrast with the low speech of the peasant women to determine an ‘overwhelmingly comic’ situation. Nevertheless, Auerbach is convinced that in the ‘serious sphere’ the elevated style is still dominant even in Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*; he quotes in this case Dorotea’s speech to her unfaithful lover (part I, Chapter 36).

The fact that Quixote is so firmly fixed in his illusion represents for Auerbach the ‘acme of farce’. However, the fact that ‘the hidalgo’s madness translates him into another, imaginary sphere of life’ does not affect Cervantes’ realism. It is, on the contrary, emphasized precisely in contrast to that imaginary sphere (ibid.: 343). From this contrast comes the difficulty of determining the position of the individual scene and of the novel as a whole ‘on the scale of levels between tragic and comic’ (ibid.: 343). Nonetheless, Auerbach concludes that Don Quixote’s madness does not share the problematic and tragic conception of the world that emerges in Europe in his times: the whole book is a comedy in which ‘well-founded reality holds madness up to ridicule’ (Auerbach 1953: 347). For Auerbach there is only one answer to the question, ‘Where does Quixote’s madness come from?’ and that answer is the following: ‘Don Quixote read too many romances of chivalry and they deranged his mind’ (ibid.: 348).

Moreover, for Auerbach, Quixote’s madness ‘illuminates everything that

crosses his path and leaves it in a state of gay confusion' (ibid.: 352). Finally, Quixote's madness represents Cervantes' attitude toward life: 'I take it as a merry play on many levels, including in particular the level of everyday realism' (ibid.: 354). Cervantes creates this play to offer a refined intellectual diversion to his reader but he remains neutral and does not take sides (ibid.: 355). Auerbach is convinced that the play in Cervantes' masterpiece is never tragic and that the representation of personal and social problems is not at all intended to move the reader to compassion.

THE *FEELING OF THE CONTRARY* AND THE QUESTION OF STYLE IN MODERN NOVEL

Luigi Pirandello, one of the most sensitive readers of Cervantes, developed an entirely different, if not contrary to Auerbach's, interpretation of Don Quixote. He certainly admits the urge to laugh at all that is comic in the representation of this poor deranged man who involves everything surrounding him in the disguise of his madness. Yet, he feels that the laughter triggered by reading the *Don Quixote* is 'not natural and easy' and that there is something that troubles and hampers our laughing, and this is 'a feeling of pity, of sorrow' (Pirandello 1974: 115). Readers of this masterpiece of Pirandello end up admiring the heroic adventure of the poor hidalgo, who is a true hero precisely because of the absolute determination with which he pursues his lofty ideal and illusion. However, Pirandello believes that from an esthetic point of view the reader should take into account the state of mind and the inspiration of the author. This is the only way to fully appreciate the question of style in this text and to understand the reason why the laughter aroused by the Quixote is bitter, to the point that in reading this great work through the experience of the comic we also have the 'feeling of the opposite'. Pirandello believes that this is what happens all the time in what he considers a genuine work of humor (ibid.: 116).

Pirandello, like Auerbach, is convinced that what Cervantes says in the Prologue of part I and at the end of part II is true: that his book has no other goal than putting an end to the books of chivalry, and denouncing the falsity of their extravagant tales. However, Pirandello, more than Auerbach, emphasizes the new and modern dimension of Cervantes' realism that Don Quixote is not a literary character inspired by the *chansons de geste* or the traditional epic in the style of Boiardo and Ariosto but a real character,

inspired by the tragedies of his own time. Pirandello holds that Cervantes' choice has to be related to the fact that he had been directly involved in the dramatic war between Christianity and Islam. Indeed, Cervantes had been a knight who fought for 'faith' and 'justice', taking part in the battle of Lepanto (1571) during which his left hand was mutilated. He also was forced to live as a slave in Algiers and fought in other campaigns for his king. For Pirandello Cervantes' masterpiece was born in reaction to these dramatic experiences that made the writer transform military campaigns into windmills and 'the helmet that he was wearing into a cheap barber basin' (ibid.: 86).

The fundamental aim of *Don Quixote* is to demolish the books of chivalry because their idealism could no longer conform to the reality of modern times. This was the lesson that Cervantes himself had learned from his experience of contemporary war. The noble dreams that had motivated him to go to war clashed against the ordinary and vulgar reality he met both at war and upon his return to his native land. When he returned to civil life he had to suffer the pain and sorrow widespread among war survivors. He had to struggle to make a living, was excommunicated, swindled as a modest tax collector, and finally imprisoned again, this time in his own land. Pirandello insists that the *Quixote* was born from these dramatic life experiences, which were responsible for the 'feeling of the contrary' that transpires in the text; and finally, they represent the conditions necessary to achieve the kind of bitter comic tone that pervades this masterpiece.

Pirandello does not attribute any particular ethical value to the 'feeling of the opposite'. The ethical dimension for him is not a condition *a priori* but an eventual consequence of the aesthetic dimension, the possible result of an artistic representation (Pirandello 1974: 116–17). Cervantes' artistic representation for Pirandello is a genuine work of humor precisely because it perplexes the reader by its profound poetic inspiration. Yet, I argue that the ethical dimension in the text is not subordinated to the aesthetic one. The two aspects are equally important and interrelated. Only an ethics of writing and a conscious choice of different level of styles can allow Cervantes to express the tension between his dramatic life experiences and Don Quixote's comic attitude. Auerbach's 'Enchanted Dulcinea' for a moment appreciates the textual perplexity in front of the 'scale of levels between tragic and comic' (Auerbach 1953: 343), but eventually dismisses it and upholds the definite absence of any sort of tragic dimension in the

text. Auerbach maintains that in Cervantes' multifarious 'sensory play' there is a certain 'Southern reticence and pride' that 'prevents him from taking the play very seriously' (ibid.: 355). Nonetheless, Auerbach, like Pirandello, appreciates Cervantes' 'vigorous capacity for the vivid visualization and expression of very different people in very varied situations' (ibid.: 354). From this perspective, Cervantes' realism overcomes 'everything realistic written before him' as conventional and propagandistic. In other words, at the stylistic level, Auerbach admits a purposeless play of combinations of low and high styles that includes 'the element of genuine everyday reality' (ibid.: 355).

What Auerbach considers crucial in Cervantes' realism—the purposeless play of different styles—becomes for Pirandello the governing principle of humour as the aesthetic dimension that grasps the profound and tragic dimension underneath the comic surface of literary narrative. Pirandello developed an idea of literature that in certain aspects was already present in Friedrich Schlegel's theory of the novel. He conceived the novel not as a literary genre but 'an element of poetry' (Schlegel 1968: 101) inclusive of different genres, to the point of considering both Shakespeare's dramas and Cervantes' *Quixote* the 'true foundation of the novel' (ibid.: 102) along with very different works such as Rousseau's *Confessions*.¹ Schlegel holds that the novel as a romantic work of art presents 'a sentimental theme in a fantastic form' (ibid.: 98); and that its main feature is 'irony', the fact that 'no consideration is taken in it of difference between appearance and truth, play and seriousness' (ibid.: 100). One of the main sources of this idea of the novel for Schlegel—as for later theorist of the novel Bakhtin—is Socratic irony. Here is how Schlegel describes Socratic irony in his *Dialogue on Poetry and Literary Aphorisms*:

In it everything must be jest and yet seriousness, artless openness and yet deep dissimulation. It originates in the union of a sense of an art of living and a scientific intellect, in the meeting of accomplished natural philosophy and accomplished philosophy of art. It contains and incites a feeling of the insoluble conflict of the absolute and the relative, of the impossibility and necessity of total communication.²

(Schlegel 1968:131)

The main impulse that separates the novel from the 'epic style' is the individual state of mind and the influence of the subjective mood along with the 'humor and play (...) as often happens in the most excellent novels'

(Schlegel 1968: 102). On the other hand, the novel as an expression of Romantic poetry 'is based entirely on a historical foundation far more than we know and believe.' Whereas epic poetry and style had its source in myth, the novel finds its inspiration in a true story 'even if variously reshaped' (ibid.: 100). In this way Schlegel believes that 'what is best in the best novels is nothing but a more or less veiled confession of the author, the profit of his experience, the quintessence of his originality' (ibid.: 103).

Schlegel's theory of novel had already identified some features that would later be at the centre of Mikhail Bakhtin's interpretation. Bakhtin does not emphasize the poetic inspiration of the novel, but he certainly points to the multifaceted stylistic dimension of the 'most fluid of genres' that he sees as a consequence of the 'multi-linguaged consciousness realized in the novel' (Bakhtin 1981). Moreover, he qualifies the historical dimension of the novel as 'the zone of maximal contact with the present (with contemporary reality) in all its open-endedness' (ibid.:11).³ Bakhtin links these features of the novel to the radical shift that took place in European culture in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, from a 'socially isolated and culturally deaf semipatriarchal society to its exposure to international and interlingual contacts and relationships.' A new multitude of different languages and cultures became available to Europe and became a decisive factor in its cultural life, including the emergence of the modern novel. This profound cultural shift helps in understanding the 'first stylistic peculiarity of the novel', which is based on the *polyglossia* of the new world. In this new situation the style of novel is the result of an 'artistically conscious choice' between languages and different social and aesthetic strata of a language. This choice becomes the 'center of the literary and language process' (ibid.:12). A literary style cannot stand in isolation within the novel, it can only live in contact with other quite often opposite styles (that is, the comic and tragic) and become a function of a system of ironic relationships.

If these are the features of style in a novel, an author may achieve an elevated style within this genre only through a higher consciousness of the different levels of style included in the narrative. I am going to argue in the next section that this higher consciousness in Manzoni's *Betrothed* is a function of poetic inspiration and of the ethics of writing developed by the author.

COMEDY, TRAGEDY AND ETHICS OF WRITING
IN ALESSANDRO MANZONI'S *BETHROTED*

I propose a notion of the ethics of writing as the moment in which the novel reveals its profound poetic inspiration and meditates on the very idea of writing and reading as the fundamental vehicles for the production of meaning. A memorable narrative sequence from Chapter XXVII of Manzoni's *Betrothed* represents a striking instance of the notion of the ethics of writing. This sequence constitutes a turning point in the novel because from this moment on Manzoni inserts Renzo and Lucia's love story into a broader historical and tragic context—famine, plague and the war for the Mantuan succession in Northern Italy. Separated from Lucia and her mother Agnese, Renzo wants to communicate with them, but since he is illiterate, he must hire a letter-writer. At this point Manzoni comments:

The peasant who cannot write, and needs something written, turns to someone who has learned to use a pen . . . He tells him . . . what he wants to say. The literate friend understands part of what he says, and misunderstands another part . . . He takes up his pen, and puts the first man's thoughts in literary form, as best he can; corrects them or improves them, adds emphasis or takes it away, even leaves bits out, as seems best to him . . . Moreover the literate friend may not always succeed in saying what he means. Sometimes he says something quite different. *We professional writers of books do the same.*

(Manzoni 1983)

Manzoni points out the difficulties and limits implicit in narrative writing in general and literary writing for print in particular. Authors, whether provincial letter-writers or great literary artists, cannot give faithful expression to the thoughts of others and sometimes even of themselves. Manzoni is concerned with problems of textual meaning and authorial intention in the age of print; and by extending his ethics of writing to scribes and authors alike, he also addresses his own readers. He does not simply reflect on the fictional status of the novel, or on the different literary styles employed, but he meditates on how the poetic inspiration of the novel depends on the very idea of writing and reading as constitutive of meaning. Moreover, Manzoni is aware that the styles and meanings of the novel and of the world are always plural and elusive, and alludes to the difficulty in finding a balance between the referential and figural value of language.

Yet, for Manzoni this complexity is neither an assumption nor a conclusion, but only a possibility revealed in the writing process and also depends on the poetic inspiration of the novel. Ultimately, he presents to the reader the prospect that the poetic inspiration of the *Betrothed* as the result of his experience of the world—as both Schlegel and Bakhtin would suggest⁴—is disguised in the writing process and if one does not pay attention to the implications of the different levels in styles and media of communication, one cannot appreciate the profound meaning of the text. This episode of letter writing by an illiterate draws a relevant inference for the novel as a whole. It is not by chance that it takes place in Chapter XXVII, where, as I mentioned earlier, the focus of the novel shifts from the story of two young people who encounter hard times to get married in a violent local society, to the broader tragedies of historical context. I contend that this episode introduces this shift and prepares the reader to consider the fictional story of Renzo and Lucia as subsidiary to the meditation on history as a tragedy that takes place in the following chapters and represents the ‘philosophical’, poetic inspiration of the novel.

This crucial moment of the novel has been misunderstood by most criticism that has considered Manzoni’s *Betrothed* simply in terms of ideology, as a product of Manzoni’s Catholicism.⁵ Such readings treat the novel as having only one main focus and one level of style related to the comedy of Renzo and Lucia whose love is challenged by different evil figures and eventually in the end can triumph due to the positive intervention of divine Providence. The historical and philosophical part of the novel, dealing with the war and the plague, has been reduced to ‘digressions’ and ‘parentheses’, without any particular function besides providing a context to the story of Renzo and Lucia. This interpretation does not appreciate the irony and the *feeling of the contrary* that Schlegel and Pirandello respectively consider as constitutive of the novel as a form.

Pirandello himself sees this *feeling of the contrary* in the way Manzoni depicts religion in his novel. Manzoni has a very noble idea of religion and of its mission; he embodies this ideal in Cardinal Federico Borromeo’s elevated style through which the cardinal tries to persuade his subordinates to appreciate the absolute force of divine grace. However, Manzoni’s ‘humoristic temperament’ leads him to philosophical reflection and the realization that this abstract ideal is rare and extraordinary in a world characterized by human frailties. For this reason Manzoni created an opposite, comic character, Don Abbondio, the priest who is prevented to fulfill his religious mission by his fear and egotism. He is only preoccupied to secure

the means of living in relative comfort. To the noble theological rhetoric of Borromeo ('And don't you know that to suffer for the sake of justice is victory, for us? If you do not know that, what do you preach? What instruction can you give? What *good news* do you proclaim to the poor?'), he can only oppose, in a low and comic style, his fears: 'These saints have their oddities, like the rest of us. What it boils down to is that he cares more about the love that two young people have for each other than about the life of an unfortunate priest' (Manzoni 1983: 473–74)

For good reasons Pirandello argues that Manzoni conceived Don Abbondio in such a way that we cannot just feel scorn and indignation for this character much in the manner of Cervantes who does not want the reader to consider Don Quixote as simply a madman. If we are able to grasp the profound poetic inspiration of these writers and their ethics of writing, we are also moved to like their characters and feel compassion for them, appreciating the tragic dimension of their passions. As Pirandello suggests,

[T]he fearful person is ridiculous and comical when he invents imaginary threats and dangers; but when we see a man caught and trapped in a terrifying conflict who by natural temperament and by education wants to avoid all conflicts, even the minor ones, and who should be involved out of sacred duty in that terrifying conflict, this fearful person is no longer merely 'comical'.

(Pirandello 1974: 129)

From this perspective, one has to realize how in Manzoni's novel there is no authentic religious feeling that is not tried by the irony of the writer. Religion in the *Betrothed* tends to become an egoistic feeling, full of superstition. Even the supposedly best representative of sublime and noblest religious feelings, Cardinal Borromeo, who is considered a saint by the people, is not spared by this ironic gaze.

In a memorable page of *The Betrothed*, Alessandro Manzoni, after allowing himself the luxury of recounting the 'notable characteristics' of Federico Borromeo, hints, in passing, at Borromeo's limits, saying that

[W]e do not wish to claim that this man, admirable as he was in so many respects, was admirable in everything. For we do not want to give the impression of having composed a funeral oration for him (410).

(Manzoni 1983: 410)

The Enlightenment rationalism of Manzoni's youth led him to distance himself from the cardinal. He writes:

We must however admit that among the opinions which [Federico Borromeo] held with great conviction, and practised with long perseverance, were some which most people nowadays would regard as not merely wrong, but eccentric; even those of us who might be most anxious to find good in them.

(Ibid.:409)

Manzoni refers here to Borromeo's prejudices (which were in complete accord with the beliefs of the time) against anointers, witches and heretics. As a result of these prejudices, in the first decades of the seventeenth century several people alleged to be possessed were burned at the stake with the cardinal's blessing, after undergoing excruciating torture. Manzoni stresses Borromeo's personal responsibility; his actions can in no way be justified by the superstitions and errors of his time.

CONCLUSION

A more attentive reading of what has been considered by most criticism the quintessence of Italian Catholicism—the project of Italian society inspired by divine Providence, and celebrated by the happy ending and the marriage between Renzo and Lucia—would reveal *The Betrothed* to be a novel that, concerns itself with history as tragedy, disorder, chaos, human frailty and error. The plague and the war for Manzoni reveal that chaos governs the realm of nature and the human heart. The world in the novel appears to be ruled by an abusive and unjust violence, a place in which there is no room for the divine light. The conclusion of the novel in Chapter XXXVII can only be ironic and the two protagonists after their experience of life can only show a 'negative' knowledge of what one is not supposed to do (Renzo), or the conviction that religious faith can help facing the chaos and disorder that still govern the world (Lucia).

How can one summarize the question of elevated style and higher narrative within the novel? The main feature that I have illuminated is the relation of style to content within the novel; classic rhetoric is put into question and crisis by the nature of a literary genre able to incorporate every level and kind of style. It is the constant contiguity and exposure of epic, tragic and elevated style to their opposite that make the reader appreciate the differences and the substance of each style. The ironic paradox of

the novel comes to the fore in exemplary cases such as Cervantes' *Quixote* and Manzoni's *Betrothed*, where it is the low, comic and humorous style that gives substance and reality to the higher aims of narrative through irony and the *feeling of the contrary*. The only way for the novelist to realize the higher narrative in spite of the pervasive nature of irony is through what I call the ethics of writing, the deep awareness of literary language, conscious linguistic choices and a recognition of the conditioning limits of the process of signification.

NOTES

1. See Fredrick Schlegel's 'Letter about the Novel', in *Dialogue on Poetry and Literary Aphorisms* (1968: 101–02).
2. Also for Bakhtin the Socratic dialogues reflect the ' simultaneous birth of scientific thinking and of a new artistic-prose model for the novel' (Bakhtin 1981: 24).
3. See Bakhtin's essay, 'Epic and Novel. Toward a Methodology for the Study of the Novel' in *The Dialogical Imagination* (1981: 11).
4. Bakhtin (1981: 39) sees both 'personal experience and free creative imagination' at the core of the novel.
5. Aldo Spranzi (1995) more than any other critic denounced this deep misunderstanding of the novel. Ezio Raimondi (1974) is the literary critic that most effectively called to attention the complex irony of the novel.

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