

LOCAL ANTHROPOGENIES - LINGUISTICS

LOGICS OF TEN INDO-EUROPEAN LANGUAGES

4. ITALIAN AND THE STAGE

De antiquissima Italorum sapientia, Vico

4A. The language

If Cicerone resuscitated today and heard ‘Cicciolina’, he would recall the way in which he himself shouted out ‘Catilina’ in his renowned invective. Such continuity through two millennia must first be explained, before measuring the ethical, political and cultural consequences.

4A1. Phonosemics

Latin made the distinction between short syllables and long syllables, by root, by position, by syntax: the ‘a’ of ‘rosa’ marked the ablative or the nominative depending whether it was long or brief. In poetry, this distinction gave way to the iambic (.-) or the trochee (-.), to the dactyl (-..), to the spondee (--), to the anapaest (..-), a short syllable being intuited like half of a long syllable. In the oratory prose, if habits were suppler and if one had to avoid making verses, it was in an aim of privileging other combinations, such as the famous clausula: Cretan (-.-) + dichorée (-.-.). Hence, combined with very frank pitch accents, which did not necessarily coincide with lengthened syllables, the rhythm developed a varied prosody, affecting even daily language. This is what Cicerone called the ‘vis numerose dicendi’, the strength of speaking in a numbered manner ‘numerously’. Still, every Italian speaker today who goes into a fit of anger or congratulates his neighbour on her child’s beautiful blue eyes, every street peddler continues to mark pitch accents and syllabic quantities, remaining for a great part a Ciceronian speaker.

Assuredly, some transformations did take place through two millenaries. Under the influence of the invaders and the cultural stagnation of the high Middle Ages, and also because of the new orientations of the thought, the six cases of the ancient language made place to prepositions and positions of words in the sentence to mark the functions. And, like elsewhere in Romanic languages, a distinction between ablative from a nominative through the simple

opposition between a long 'a' and a brief 'a' was no longer made. However, Latin diction subsisted for the most part.

It is probable that extra-linguistic reasons played their role: Latin speakers were less shaken by the invasions on the Italian soil where they represented a majority even if we consider the Visigoths, than in France, where they represented a minority. However, this is not enough, as French, English, and German continued to strongly evolve since the 16th century without undergoing any more notorious invasions. It is perhaps then that a diction with pitch accents and syllabic quantities, hence with pneumatic activations and very strong and very regular phonical pitches, enjoys a hysterical autarky upon which exterior events have very little influence.

Adding further is an astonishing coincidence, or in any event since the 16th century, since western music progressively settled in an equal measure, with double or half lengths, from the semibreve to the hemidemisemi-quaver. This was conforming to the enthusiasm for clock making, founded on the regularity of the escapement, or quite simply to the demands of any polyphony, as testifies the most precise measurement of the precisely polyphonic. Simultaneously, in a polyphony that extends over several octaves, in the 1500, the purity of fifths and of thirds imposed itself. Then, the Italian language with its pitches and measured quantities found a powerful confirmation in classical music, in a concordance of structure. The birth of the opera, which is precisely Italian, dedicated the reciprocal confrontation of an intermarrying music and a language around 1600.

Thereby, since the late 16th century, the Italian diction found its confirmation *in* classical music and therefore also *as* classical music, in the same way as the Spanish diction will find its confirmation as the flamenco in the 18th century, and the English diction as today's rock and disco.

The first sung bars of *Don Giovanni* are exemplary. Leporello, a popular character, declines the complete major fifth C-D-E-F-G, as well as the downward fundamental gaps: fourth (C-G), fifth (D-G), major third (E-C), minor third (F-D), fifth (G-C). This takes place in an unforgiving 4/4 tempo, where all the syllables pronounced are crotchets. For the sake of convenience, we shall transcribe in C what Mozart wrote in F.

(do) Notte e/ giorno/ fati/car; do-sol (descendant)

(ré) Per chi/nulla/sà gra/dir; ré-sol "

(C) Notte e/ giorno/ fati/car; C-G (downward)

(D) Per chi/nulla/sà gra/dir; D-G "

(E) Piova e/vento/soppor/tar, E-C "

(F) Mangiar/male e/ mal dor/mir, F-D "

(G) Voglio far il gentiluomo G: (E) G-C "

We understand the present state better. The Italian accent placed on the penultimate, which has remained a pitch accent, has maintained a slightly sonorous last syllable: 'pronto' faced to 'prompt', 'pavimento' faced to 'pavement'. French is iambic (-), Italian is trochaic (-), remarked Montesquieu, for whom English was dactylic (-..). Pitches are so important that, in 'buono', a 'u' has come to serve as a stepping stone to the 'o' that ran the risk of being pulled down by the 'b' of 'bonum'. The liquid 'l' and 'r' are rolled higher and more than anywhere else. As for the long syllabic quantity, if it lost its syntactic function, it maintained itself in the accentuated syllables and double consonants: *Il co<rr>iere de<ll>a sera*.

To preserve these metered pitches, if two consonants are too distinct, then the former not only assimilates, but equalizes with the second: 'inte<ll>e<tt>uale' for 'intelle(ct)uale', 'o<nn>ipotente' for 'o(mn)ipotente', 'stra' for 'extra'; unless it quite simply drops: 'Tolomeo' for 'Ptolemaeus'. This can go right down to the metathesis of the 'r', going from 'crocodilus' to 'cocodri<ll>o'. Obviously, the aspirations and guttural sounds, perceived as being rough, were erased. In dictionaries, the chapter 'H', apart from the interrogative 'hem' and the exclamatory 'hui', only lists borrowed words. The nasal vowels of Latin have disappeared, erased by the exact pitch.

4A2. Semantics

The same vocal practice has favoured long words ('infrequentemente'), composed words ('gravisonante'), superlative words ('eccelentissimo'), and repetitive words ('povero povero'). Conjugation enjoys opulent forms: 'parlerebbero', 'quelli che possiedono come se non possedessero'. To this corresponded an ideal overstatement, particularly in the extension of the subjunctive (a mode of thought that is reputed complex, indirect, subtle) right to the conditional: 'se lo sapessi, glielo direi'. A proliferating echo occurs at every level, and to the French adjective 'retentissant' correspond a cohort of synonyms: 'risonante', 'rimbombante', 'eccheggianti', 'fragoroso', 'squillante', 'clamoroso', 'strepitoso', 'gravisonante', etc. It is rare that eloquence should bring forward words in the general flux, which is a constant resort in French. The usual process usually consists in following up an important word with a second reinforcing word.

Moreover, the phonic boost married well with an easy and abundant derivation of verbal classes: 'numero', 'numero', 'numerosamente', 'numerosità'. This last formation even had important ideological consequences, since it encouraged envisaging reduplications and reflexivity a little everywhere; the easiness of moving from 'arte' and 'artista' to 'artisticità' was probably no stranger to the vigour of the *arte povera*, the Italian form of conceptual art. Hence, this hysterical language is also a theoretician and semiological language, and familiarity with German is not only due to the proximity of Austria. The risk being that the exaggeration, even the flatulence of the expression sometimes dissimulates the absence of distinct ideas in the academic discourse.

In any case, the result of the smoothing of the consonants - 'patto' for 'pactum', 'è' for 'est' - is that Italian etymology is even less apparent than French. This means that the written text, without frank monemes, forces the reader to re-establish from within the proffered word, with its peaks and sonorous qualities, in the only aim of structuring itself. We see the consequence of this for the theatricality of any Italian writing, even when it is not theatrical, postulated by Marcello Verdenelli, in *La Teatralità della scrittura*.

4A3. Syntax

All the more so that, from the ever-present Latin remained a certain freedom in the place of words, despite the disappearance of cases: 'Tutto so'; 'Ma in guerra l'Italia non c'è ancora'; 'Da nient'altro che da quella innocenza traeva spiegazione l'irresistibile forza'. And the nominalized substantive can still govern verbal complements: 'l'infanzia non è che un vigile raccogliere gli aromi del mondo'. Therefore, the Italian sentence retains the Latin possibility of marrying the successive shoot of fantasies. Its supple punctuation tunes to the perceptive and memorative irruptions.

In this system, it is obvious that the person withdraws. The speaker is generally not expressed. Saying 'io' is generally thought of as an insistence, and is equivalent to 'me, myself and I'. An interlocutor who is not a close friend does not have more individuation either, as he is directed at by the third person of the verb. Far from being grasped as a Cartesian's or Maine de Biran's 'me', the human specimen sticks here to his etymological role status (lat. *persona* = actor's mask), a temporary confluent of close or distant forces. Cicerone attributes a 'vis' to speech. Here, 'vis' designates a natural force, such as a beast or a river. It is not so much so that someone speaks of his anger, his love, and the words that spring to his mind and deploy him into archetypal gestures. Hence the obsession of Pavese with Aeschylus. And his way of understanding, as he reads Frazer, that the vine, the grain, the harvest, the sheaf, had all been tragedies: 'che l'uva, il grano, la mietitura, il covone erano stati drammi', or still, that the 'la bestiola che fuggiva nel grano era lo spirito'.

The withdrawing of oneself, the pantheistic mimetism of the diction, the mobility and the trochaics of the accent have the effect that foreign words, which are often themselves trochaic or dactylic, are very welcome even with something of their native music, something to which the iambicism or anapesticism of French repulses. Italian novels offer entire Latin phrases, but also in German, without translating them.

Therefore, since three quarters of a millennium, there has been an orator speaker who speaks as much in the past as he does in the present, in the subjunctive or the indicative, perceiving and remembering everything from a spatial-temporal within, and that a symptomatic preposition summarises well: 'da'. Memoria filtrata in un sogno sognato a distanza' writes Ramat on Campana. A perpetual crossing of the circus and the pathetic, of brief thrusts and abdications. Elsewhere, the pathetic can be found in situations, never in the very fabric of the language itself.

But we would not see the extent to which this alternation of mania and depression goes if we did not consider the originality of the regretted language, Latin. This language did not produce great philosophers, but was in itself so philosophical that it gave us all our truly general operating terms: function, reason, presence, absence, conscience, freedom, creation, person, faith, charity, pity, recollection, - alongside which Greek terms such as 'democracy' seem secondary. A language where the poverty and generality of the vocabulary invited to a permanent abstraction. Where the complete absence of articles reinforced the ambiguity between the particular and the general. Where the reduction of prepositions combined with the liberty of the placing of words that cases allow forced to unceasing suppositions on the thought of others, moreover confirmed by the prestige of the indirect style. Where the nasalization of

some vowels added to the abstraction and the generalisation to create a language of sentiments (Virgil, Catullus), meaning of lasting mental states, whereas Greek, devoid of nasal vowels, was a language of emotion and curiosity.

Therefore, it is not only because it is the memory of a prestigious and imperial language that Italian is so recalling, but because the language it recalls is already so incredibly intro-reverberating to the point of not having been able to truly transform itself, as with Greek, and to have disappeared as such in its descendents, the Romanic languages. Nowhere has the distinction between 'antico' and 'vetusto' and the liaison between nature and culture, timeless historical occurrence and archetype, been so omnipresent. Meaning that the language he spoke was not international, like Spanish and French, an Italian semiologist recently declared that it was a 'dead' language. Without slip of the tongue. Here, there is a presence of the active death, of Latin and of the empire, - which in fact concords with a certain quality of the Mediterranean light, - that we do not find anywhere else. In any event, in this phonation devoid of nasal vowels, there is not place for the continuous and haunting nostalgia of Portuguese, with its reinforced nasalization.

4B. Cultural consonances

Animated by the Ciceronian 'vis' of the speech, natural forces are omnipresent. First and foremost, there are those of the sea, in a narrow peninsula where the Adriatic, the Tyrrhenian and the Apennines are nearby all along. Those of the bodies too, powerfully grasped as 'mascolinità' and 'fe<mm>inilità'. With or without volcanoes, polytheism continues to rage under the Christian unifications: 'Le nuvole (the clouds) ...le aveva guardate come fe<mm>ine capaci di so<mm>are il ma<ss>imo di castità e d'impudicizia'. Religious, political, legal rituals stir the obscene of the world more than they rationalise, 'che ogni orgasmo che avviene sulla terra libera un'anima del Purgatorio'.

If nowhere do nature and culture articulate so spontaneously, - for many French speakers culture is first and foremost proper - it is that nowhere else is the present felt like a reduced portion of the past, the living like a tiny portion of the dead, the Etruscan cities continuing in the opera of contemporary cemeteries: 'Infine senti solo l'assurdo di appartenere a quelle minoranza scandalosa et ridicola che sono i vivi'. *Come se* (as if) by Luigi Santucci, this summary of Italianizing from which all our quotations are excerpted when not otherwise referred, relates what a Kapellmeister sees again during the Extreme Unction given to his five senses: 'quidquid per visum, per auditum, per olfactum, per gustum et locutionem, per tactum, per gressum deliquisti'.

Hence the specifically Roman feeling that, in a bimillenary posture, we have seen everything, heard everything, said anything, and that we should no longer be surprised by anything. This pessimism is compatible with the grandeur – or rather – it is grandeur itself. Onkel Kaus, commenting his taste for women: 'Ogni volta pompo da quei bei ventri la linfa della continuità biologica', immediately adds 'che l'unica coerenza dell'uomo è il suicidio' (recalling the 'suicidio ottimistico' of Pavese?). In a word, this is the last area of language where there is still a true aristocracy, meaning masters enjoying by themselves, beyond any

convention, any politeness, up to the theatrical death on the beach of *Death In Venice*, right to the voluptuous death in the stable of *1900*. Il Tasso specified that these aristocrats are ordinary people as much as nobility.

In such a way that he who thinks that he will escape the communion of the mad ‘della comunione dei matti, che è molto più alta in cielo di quella dei santi’ is an imbecile (imbecillus, weak). God himself is mad and rude: ‘Dio è piu grosso, ti scappa da tutte le parti. E matto, non lo sai?’. No deformed ‘Boojum’ of Englishman Lewis Carroll. Because madness (between follia et pazzia), which is contained by the syllabic quantification and the exactitude of pitches, remains articulated, fiercely respectful of the well-tuned sound, and thereby socialised: ‘Suoni il fa diesis quinto : cinquanta, cento volte. C'è la risposta a tutte le guerre’.

In view of the antique sapience, the declared philosophy does not weigh much. Giordano Bruno only retells with emphasis what everyone thinks, meaning that the individual is more individual than it is infinite: ‘Più altamente individuo è quello che ha tutto l'essere naturale ; più altamente lo che ha tutto lo essere intellettuale ; altissimamente quello che ha tutto lo essere che puo essere.’ And also that pantheism and polytheism are equivalent: ‘Lodati sieno gli dèi, e magnificata da tutti viventi la infinita semplicissima, unissima, altissima, et absolutissima causa, principio, et uno’ (where we shall note the Latin remanence). In turn, in *Scienza Nuova*, Vico articulates what everyone knows: that specific laws emanate from ideal laws, so-called Providence out of respect, and that in any event the human age is only ever a last time after the divine age and the heroic age, before they start again. Every gesture has its magnifying and relativizing archetype. Hence the restrained and defined number of secularly revisited themes. Close to us, the couple Croce-Gramsci has continued its historical-archetypal consonances.

Daily comedy (kômos + aeidein, singing not without bacchius drunkenness), the Italian language will have been the only language that dared, in a *Divine Comedy*, to physically visit Hell, the Purgatory and Paradise. However, this journey through the great sea of the being ‘per lo gran mar del essere’, was only made possible by the fact that Dante placed himself phonetically, semantically, syntactically at the exact turn of the Latin spirit into the Italian spirit, meaning that he enjoyed the direct and familiar thrust of the ‘dolce stil novo’ while holding on to the ‘virtus’, the ‘vis’, the almost ferocious naturalness of the senatorial and imperial grandeur: ‘E spira tue / Si come quando Marsia traesti / della vagina delle membra sue’. Driven by a Beatrix who never smiles, but who laughs. Whence the unmistakable pride: ‘L'acqua qu'io prendo jamai non si corse (...). Tornate a riveder li vostri liti’. For centuries, Dante had overtaken, right down to love, the trivial lamentation of the possession and the loss with the intensity of admiration.

Already crushed by the memory of Latin, it is not certain that Italian literature ever really got over its initial culmination. But since then, it has displayed if not empires, at least a few beautiful provinces. The concrete ideality of Petrarch. The combinatory energy of Boccaccio. The intrepidity of Machiavel, the first, he of the personal power in the ‘riscontro coi tempi’ of the *Il Principe*; and even more so the second, he of the ideal Power, of the collegial State, senatorial in the Roma way, of the *Discorsi sulla prima deca de Tito Livio*. The comical epopee of Ariosto and il Tasso had to counterbalance the divine comedy. Otherwise, prison played a strange role in this literature, from Silvio Pellico to Gramsci and to Campana, as though its purifying solitude was essential to bring out the hard wheat in a language that was too prone to verbosity.

The theatre is in the street, and professional actors are merely the temporal curates of daily speakers. Conveyed by this language and the gestures that it conceals, every action provokes a stagecraft, and everyday life is a *commedia dell'arte* from the very start, with its Pantaloon, Harlequin, Scaramouch, and its Fellinian clowns: 'tutto è vero quello che inventano gli uomini'. However, adds Montesquieu, Italian trochaics could not carry a Corneille or Racine tragedy, or a great Molière comedy, both of which are so much favoured by the decision of the French iambus and anapaest. On the other hand, what a source for Pirandello's 'characters seeking an author'!

The atmosphere of visual arts is perfectly concordant. Supporting the spoken comic and dramatic gesture (not tragic), Italian architecture was in no way globalising like its French counterpart, but it was indeed prominent, enjoying the fact that it triggered emphatic events right down to the innermost recesses: immense facades in tiny streets where they cannot be totalised; places formed by the encounter of heterogeneous spaces; banal living rooms animated by a single wall light punctuating the nakedness of the wall where it is least expected. Painting and sculptures, sometime imaging sometimes programming these environments stir or deploy the oratory gesture in statures and postures, amongst perspective effects that distribute less than they are energetic; 'vis' and 'virtù' still. Michelangelo's Moses carries out the same prominent bendy effect than Saint Peter's cupola. Accomplishing absolutely the Italian phrasing, Raphael is the most 'pneumatic' of all painters. In a word, graphic arts, supported by language, were more perfect than it was. They did not have the same inbred limitations. They did not have the same crushing memory of Latin and Dante. Of the Antique Rome, some columns standing erect and some capitals on the ground. And Saint Paul Outside the Walls. Enough to want to reconstruct St. John Lateran several times over.

Music alone creates a paradox, because it engendered on the one hand the brilliance of Verdi's opera, and on the other Vivaldi's chamber music, where the same agreement, which is repeated or even slightly offbeat strives to the pure presence of the 'nota solitaria'. But the combination of the syllabic quantity and the strict agreement of pitches comprised these two faces of lyricism, for viols, stradivari, guarneri, conveyors of the most sinusoidal sound. The Mico of *Come se*, beholder of ultimate wisdom, is said 'il più grande accordatore di tutti i tempi'. The instruments almost compose: 'la musica è solo ciò che *latet* in un oboe, un clavicembalo o un violoncello perfettamente accordati'. Nothing better reveals the Italianism than these first compositions of Vivaldi where the voice (Nella Anfuso's for instance) ostensibly reaches its accuracy from the physiological machinery of its organs. Luciano Berio, who exploited the vocal animality of Cathy Berberian, continued the same organic engendering in serialism.

This last case signals the extent to which the antiquissima sapientia sometimes lives in great harmony with some aspects of our contemporaneousness. It underpinned the movement of the *Arte Povera* but also the 'catastrophes' of Cucchi and Paladino's *Trans-avanguardia*; an industrial design that is globally uncomfortable (neighbouring with the optimistic suicide, furniture is austere, just like the cheese), but is capable of envisaging the *resemantizzazione* of all the sign systems, right to the tolerably 'gay' supple and broken fullness of Gianni Versace's clothes.

Perhaps specifically, the antiquissima sapientia has inspired a cinema that Pavese, impressed by the 'immagine-racconto' had already felt would go further than literature one day.

Because his photonic mobility and the ruptures of his editing would allow to exactly marry the antique innocence of the outlook, that of Visconti's *Innocente*, supplanting d'Annunzio. And particularly of building a veritable pertinent semiology, with the essentially Shakespearian Fellini. In ceaseless top-bottom zoom shots miming the Italian phrasing, *Casanova* creates a contrast, right down to the inmost depths of their consciousness (there is probably no true unconscious in distant memoration), of the hallucinating signs that Venice and Rome were, but also France, England and Germany. The *Satiricon* provides the most intense genetic psychology of man as a signed animal, or progressively becoming signed. Beyond any particular protestation or prediction, *Prova d'orchestra* touches at politics as an anthropogenic structure. What understanding of the logic of languages when, in conclusion, the conductor taking over the control of his musicians with his baton switches from Italian to German!

In Roma, 'immagine-racconto' of the brilliant topoï of the eternal Urbs, the author probably uttered the last word when he confides, over God knows what spaghetti or cappuccino (so many volutes here again!), that 'Rome is the best place where to wait for the end of the world'.

Henri Van Lier

Translated by Paula Cook