

## Introduction. New Perspectives on Veneto: Literary and Cultural Itineraries

Nella collezione dei luoghi comuni, popolari, letterari, colti e idioti (le definizioni possono anche coincidere), che hanno dipinto dall'unità in poi, i popoli che compongono il mosaico italiano, tra l'"austero" Piemonte e l'Abruzzo "forte e gentile," tra i "fieri" siciliani e gli "industri" Lombardi ... al Veneto, ai Veneti, è toccata e tocca ancora, una patente di grossolana bonarietà, poca apparenza e grandi virtù di fondo, con una nota di compatimento. Soldati valorosi, gran lavoratori ... e devotissimi a Bacco, i Veneti; e il Veneto, terra di serve fedeli e devote, di frati e monsignori, regione patriottica e subalterna, legalitaria, clericale, insomma la Vandea d'Italia, come l'hanno spesso classificata, bontà loro, inviati speciali e titolisti di quattro quinti della stampa italiana. Cinema e televisione: attendenti fedelissimi e "tose" saporite ma stupidelle, domestiche sceme, preti lepidi, pace agreste, virtù palesi e vizi nascosti.

Alvise Zorzi's entertaining selection of notorious commonplaces on the region and its inhabitants, inaugurates the introduction of a comprehensive volume dedicated to what was then considered (we are in 1983), "contemporary" Veneto.<sup>1</sup> The famed Venetian author and journalist's *ouverture* unfolds into a brief but passionate overview of the region's glorious past, for the most part linked to the grandeur and power of its undisputed queen, Venice. While Zorzi's piece is an emotional, subjective tapestry of a Veneto more imagined than real, replete with nostalgia for virtues that were already by then long extinct, the many contributions that form the collection point to a more objective and systematic exploration of the subject matter. The table of contents illustrates the variety and comprehensiveness of the volume's scope, with articles dedicated, most notably, to Veneto's cultural traditions, literature, cinema, architecture, theater and society, schools, landscape, and environment. Observed from today's lens, *Veneto contemporaneo* is a rare document that depicts a region in the midst of a series of sudden and, in many

---

<sup>1</sup> AAVV. *Veneto contemporaneo (Società e cultura)*. Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 1983. xiii.

## INTRODUCTION

ways traumatic, economic, social, and cultural transformations. The Eighties and Nineties of the Novecento marked for Veneto a distinct historical moment, a time of unprecedented economic growth marked by the robust expansion of family owned businesses driven by flexible and dynamic manufacturing standards. Needless to say, the passage from what was mainly an agrarian culture to the industrial model, with its corresponding escalation of wealth, was not painless. On the contrary, its flaws and limitations became immediately evident. And they are particularly manifest today, when a series of political impasses and the rapid economic downturn produced by the introduction of the euro have drastically reduced the number of businesses, leaving many without a job, looking at a most uncertain, unsettling future.

That is why, exploring Veneto's cultural and social horizon today is again a most interesting project, an idea that was borne of the common interest of the editors, both native of the region, in understanding the historical moment, in presenting how some of the contradicting dimensions of the economic development have played out in the local realities, and in locating some of the forces and energies that are active on the territory, indicating that amid a crisis that is both economic and cultural, significant experiences are taking place, pointing to a social substratum still infused with vitality and creativity.

The volume is divided into three parts, to situate each article in a contextually meaningful setting that renders thematic connections, interactions, and impollinations possible. In the first part, the frame of the investigation is historical.

Luigi Andrea Berto's meticulous reading of late Roman and early Venetian documents functions as a preface to the volume, examining both the semantic shifts connected to the province originally created by Octavian Augustus in 7 A.D. and the territorial expansions that gradually brought the *Venetia* "of the islands" to control the mainland and the region that we know as Veneto today. Within the shifts in geographic borders and the consequent semantic adjustments, Berto's study points at the process, still ongoing today, that identifies the limits of the district that can be defined, economically, politically, and culturally as *Venetia*.

Chiara Frison's articulate study of the Dolfin family sheds

## INTRODUCTION

light on one of the most influential patrician lineages of the Venetian republic and their ascent to power, which parallels Venice's rise to supremacy in the Adriatic and Eastern Mediterranean from the XIV to the XVI century. Among the Dolfin notables examined by Frison is Giorgio, whose administrative position in the Venetian Chancellery played a key role in the composition of his "Cronicha dela nobil città de Venetia e dela sua provintia et destretto." Highlighting Dolfin's historiographical merit in selecting celebratory episodes and figures of the past, Frison notes the author's distinctive trait, his understated tribute to the city's political and judicial foundations and the defense of those under attack, among them Doge Francesco Foscari, whose fierce loyalty to the city and its institutions the author championed as a critical trademark of Venetian citizenship. Thus the history of the Dolfin family, as Frison's title reminds us, is layered and multifaceted, spanning from the political sphere to the historiographical, where it left its mark as chronicler of the city's noble institutions.

In her thought-provoking essay, Irene Zanini-Cordi studies eighteen century Venetian coffee houses as spheres of social and cultural transformation. Departing from Jürgen Habermas' definition of bourgeois public sphere, Zanini-Cordi investigates the public and private dimension of coffee houses in Venice, reflecting on how they fostered the dissemination of ideas, the democratization of society and the growing participation of women in the public discourse. A trait that was particular to Venice, the inclusion of women in the space of the coffeehouses, is explored both through archival sources as well as literary texts, primarily Goldoni's intermezzo, *Bottega da caffè* and later play, *La bottega del caffè*. It was Goldoni who first recorded in literary terms the shift in the forms of sociability on the Venetian scene, changes that had significant social and cultural implications. Coffee and coffeehouses, in McLuhan terms the medium and the message, were instrumental to the exchanging, moving, processing and making of information that characterized the new world and that, Zanini-Cordi's study substantiates, promoted the rise of a new and virtuous middle class so well documented in Goldoni's *Locandiera*.

Stefano Trovato's well documented essay reveals the details of the 1935 investigation conducted by the fascist government against Luigi Ferrari, Director of the Biblioteca Marciana between 1920

## INTRODUCTION

and 1948, after he had been anonymously denounced of antifascism and anti-patriotic activities. Trovato's work presents this episode as exemplary to illustrate the non interference of the fascist administration, at least not until the late 1930s, in the management of the national libraries and other institutes of higher learning. The examination is supported by several archival documents, such as letters, testimonials, and official records that back the thesis, suggested by historians such as Guido Melis and Alberto Petrucciani, that the Ferrari case was handled rather inattentively by the regime. Trovato's careful work is not only useful to shed light on the often ignored history of Italian libraries during fascism but it is also valuable to understand the cultural and intellectual environment of the time and the reaction of the cultural establishment against possible political interferences. Notable is the universal support for Ferrari that the investigation reveals, and the loyalty of the institutions to their own professional cadres as well as the disinterest of fascism to replace positions of cultural relevance with incompetent but loyal bureaucrats.

The second part of the volume, dedicated to literature, cinema, and theater, opens with Paolo Pucci's original study of the correspondence between Venetian aristocrat Maria Savorgnan and the illustrious Pietro Bembo. Discovered at the beginning of the twentieth century by Monseigneur Luigi Grammatica, the identity of Bembo's secret lover elicits the interest of the author not only because it allows the exploration of the more than amicable relation between these historical figures but, most significantly, for what the correspondence reveals in terms of social practices, societal restrictions, and moral norms *vis-à-vis* women and their role in the public and private spheres. Examining the composite style and content of Savorgnan's correspondence, Pucci locates the authoress' practices of resistance to the patriarchal system she inhabits. The correspondence reveals in fact the stages of the development of her female subjectivity, which enables Savorgnan to enact subversive practices of self-representation, to open spaces of agency, and to challenge the stringent limitations imposed to her as a widow and noblewoman. Pucci recognizes Savorgnan's ability to expand the restrictive public space she could influence and to define her role as self-affirming subject even within the rigid structure of Venetian patriarchal morality and traditions.

## INTRODUCTION

Marco Pacioni's essay focuses on the poetics of the sublime as a continuous dimension of the work of the late Andrea Zanzotto, one of the most important Italian poets of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Pacioni identifies three principal phases of the sublime in the late poet's work, as it has ventured into different territories: the realm of the semantic, of the signifier or subject, and finally of the referent or the landscape. The scholar correctly points out how in the last two collections of poetry by the poet from Pieve di Soligo there is an evolution in the relationship between the sublime and the aesthetics of the beautiful: Zanzotto explores the components made sublime by the human destruction of the beauty of the landscape understood both as nature and as the result of mankind's interaction with it. Pacioni demonstrates therefore how this direct confrontation with nature in Zanzotto's final works renders his poetry more sublime as it is more environmentally conscious.

Enrico Minardi analyzes the three collections of poetry published by Riccardo Held (*Per questa rilassata acida voglia*, 1985; *Il guzzo irriverente dell'azzurro*, 1995; *La paura*, 2008), affirming that the entire *oeuvre* is to be considered a *liber unicum* since the poet re-thinks many of his earliest compositions in order to present them in more recent editions of his poetry. Minardi underlines how in Held's vision of the world there is a progressive acceptance of the sentiments of love and brotherhood that goes beyond the narcissism present in the early work of the Venetian poet.

The originality of the article by Anna Rinaldin lies in the presentation of six unpublished poems written *between* 1954 and 1984 by Ernesto Calzavara and chosen from the 150 belonging to the "Calzavara Collection" (located at the *Centro Interuniversitario di Studi Veneti*, Venice). Rinaldin provides a preview of a larger work that will result in the publication of a critical edition with commentary of the entire poetic production of the author from Treviso.

Landscape has played a major role in the artistic production of Venetian artists since the Middle Ages and has affected considerably the poetic, literary, and cinematic production of the last few decades. Since the 1980s, authors have witnessed and recorded the sudden modifications imposed by a rash industrialization that reshaped both the landscape of the region and its people. As Enrichetta Frezzato's study points out, landscape is never passive, but rather becomes enacted

## INTRODUCTION

and internalized by the gaze that observes it, producing a subjective awareness that is inner and empirical rather than objective and physical. When this “landscape consciousness” becomes representation, as in Massimo Carlotto’s investigative writing, it functions as a shared cultural framework, a literary space that engages the reader in ethical and political matters as it simultaneously locates issues in a specific localized territory, in a collectively experienced reality.

While Carlotto’s crime novels mirror the cultural disorientation and eradication of the historical memory that characterizes the social fabric of contemporary Veneto, Piovene’s landscape, as examined by Maria Pia Arpioni, is memorialized to reflect the inner disposition and emotions of the poetic voice. An unfairly overlooked literary figure, Piovene is appreciated by many critics who have remarked in particular the symbolic implications of his lyrical geography. Connoted by subtle pictorial, literary, and artistic reminiscences, the gentleness and even the “mollezza” of the landscape around the “colli” Berici is contrapuntal to the psychological dimension of Piovene’s protagonists. Their labyrinthine consciousness fluctuates between light and darkness, carefully rendered with enigmatic and elusive images of the surrounding countryside and by idealized architectures that suggest an inner emotional vacuum.

Ron Kubati’s explorations of Mazzacurati’s, Segre’s, and Patierno’s most recent cinematography depart from Zygmunt Bauman’s concept of territoriality as regulating principle of contemporary living. “Voglia di comunità” is the desire to form community, to live in a safe and unthreatening surrounding, yet in this idealized space, where identity is conceptualized as uniformity, outside intruders are not welcome, become ostracized, and are ultimately removed. Kubati’s analysis of *La giusta distanza*, *Io sono Li*, and *Cose dell’altro mondo* points at the social and cultural gap that manifests itself, tragically, when the quiet surface of existence is disrupted by unexpected events. Emotional attachments become suspect, relations of trust are broken, and civility is disturbed when the “other” reveals his/her performative, and therefore threatening, subjectivity. Kubati dissects the practices of representation selected in the narratives to reveal how communities are still closed, “chiuse,” and how any unauthorized cultural “extraterritoriality” is sanctioned and even punished.

## INTRODUCTION

Similarly to literature and cinema, theater has also been instrumental in confronting the transformations produced in the recent past by the industrial reconfiguration of Veneto's territory. Marco Paolini's *teatro di narrazione* is an example of social and political engagement with issues of global relevance such as the destruction of the agrarian culture (*Vajont*), the corporate indifference to the environment (*Bhopal*), and the nazis' practice of eugenics (*Ausmerzen*). In her essay, Cristina Perissinotto examines Paolini's staging of Galileo's life and theories (*ITIS Galileo*), interrogating his relations with power and his contribution to the sciences. Embedded in the triad faith, science, superstition, Paolini's portrait applies an epistemological approach to the understanding of the historical period the Florentine scientist inhabited, not dismissing the entertaining informality of biographical anecdotes. Perissinotto's close examination of the play highlights the dichotomic paradigm, simplicity versus complexity, Ptolemy versus Copernicus, science versus the pseudo sciences, rationality versus irrationality, on which Paolini founds his theoretical framework. It is the latter, the play of rational and irrational forces, that Paolini complicates with most attention in his play, as he offers a less hyper-rational and indeed more biographical and sociological reading of Galileo as an intellectual and scientist.

The third, anthological part of the volume is inaugurated by Alessandro Canzian's essay, *The place to be*, and contains a selection of works by some of the most interesting and promising poets of contemporary Veneto. Fabio Franzin, Giovanna Frene, Sebastiano Gatto, Giulia Rusconi, Sergio Maria Serraiotto, Piero Simon Ostan, Alberto Trentin, and Giovanni Turra are only a few of the many notable poets worthy of attention and study. The variety of their voices, styles, philological experiments, and thematic approaches confirms the blossoming of a dynamic literary movement, supported by a network of well attended cultural events. As Alessandro Canzian points out in his introductory essay, the crisis that has so profoundly affected the Northeast has also produced the urge for an earnest re-evaluation of the notions that contributed to its short-lived economic miracle: productivity, success at all costs, annihilation of local identities, erasure of cultural and historical traditions, and, last but not least, devastation of landscape. From the edge of the economic downturn,

## INTRODUCTION

however, Veneto is emerging today again as a dynamic workshop, where the artifact is, undeniably, a “fact of art.” Canzian’s essay offers a sample of the larger region’s cultural vitality. Larger as it includes, geographically, Friuli Venezia Giulia, a territory that has been, since the edict of Octavian Augustus, part of the *Venetia* province. Larger also, however, because of its historical memory, because of its deep roots and far reaching cultural horizons.

The present volume is by no means a complete overview of today’s Veneto; it is rather an invitation to explore its realities, contradictions, literary and cinematic representations, and to recognize, in its changing social fabric, the fertile humus in which the poetic word can still be heard, can still make of Veneto *the place to be*.

Simona Wright  
Giovanni Spani

THE COLLEGE OF NEW JERSEY  
COLLEGE OF THE HOLY CROSS