

The Politics of Poetics

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Poetry and Social Activism in Early-Modern through Contemporary Italy

Edited by

Federica Santini

and Giovanna Summerfield

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INTRODUCTION

FEDERICA SANTINI
AND GIOVANNA SUMMERFIELD

Poetry is often viewed as a means of introspection or, at best, an instrument of self-representation. This widespread conception marginalizes, when it doesn't completely exclude, all those works in which writing results from a desire to "undergo an experience with language," to use Heidegger's words, and from the civic engagements the poet can in no way relinquish if s/he is to be a responsible member of the society within which the poetic subject is operating and composing. The root of "poetry" is, it cannot be forgotten, "poiesis," ancient Greek for making, creating. As Martin Heidegger and Giorgio Agamben underscore, there is a difference between what the Greeks knew of *praxis* and *poiesis*:

the first is an action, while the second is a revelation, an unveiling of something.¹

Through a series of original analyses of poetic works belonging to the Italian canon or purposely posing themselves at the margins of it, this project seeks to highlight poetry as an art form which has the capacity to show the incongruities of society, not just semantically, but especially through the use it makes of signifiers, which allow meaning to come through notwithstanding linear communication. Specifically, the project identifies and analyzes a line of diverse early modern to contemporary Italian poetic works in which the goal is not only to imitate or represent the world, but to enact a change upon it. Rather than resulting in an exercise in self-indulgence, these works focus on poetics as an agent of social transformation.

¹ Giorgio Agamben, "Poiesis and Praxis" in *The Man Without Content*. Stanford UP, 1999, 68-93; Martin Heidegger, "On the Origin of the Work of Art" in *Basic Writings*, 1st Harper Perennial Modern Thought Edition. Ed. David Farrell Knehl. NY: Harper Collins, 2008, 143-212.

Deleuze and Guattari used, in 1976, the metaphor of the *rhizome*: a subterranean – and therefore subversive – root, a growth that develops in hidden, unpredictable directions.² The rhizome is a figure of alterity and discontinuity, in opposition to the binary logic proper of hierarchical structures. Each of the works analyzed in this volume enhances, in different ways, this intuition by proposing a non-linear undergrowth that affects poetics and invades the very logic of society, finally enacting a revolt and transforming the world from within.

Because of this, the authors included in this volume are very different from one another. An obvious emphasis has been given to poets who are difficult to categorize or situate themselves at the margins of the canon. Thus, rather than attempting to offer a survey of outwardly engaged poets, we have focused on authors who offer a subterranean/rhizomatic revolt and the contributions included in this volume often unveil the works of little-known poets or delve into the analysis of the activism of authors who are not traditionally considered political or “engaged”.

The volume opens with an essay by Paul Howard, who aptly depicts for the readers the work of the eighteenth-century poet Giuseppe Gioachino Belli and his “silent rebellion.” In the words of the author, Belli “eschewed any outward sign of rebellion against the all-encompassing papal governments, and the insular Roman microcosm of his day, even to the point of denying authorship of his dialect sonnets. And yet, his Romanesco poetry is undoubtedly one of the most concentrated and sustained forms of social critique in Modern European literature, and can be seen as a manifesto denouncing the corruption and wrongdoings of the ruling classes whilst asserting the rights of the impotent poor.” Even though Belli explicitly remarks in his introduction to the *Sonetti romaneschi*, that he intends to leave a monument of the underclass, the ‘plebe di Roma,’ it is also true that the author himself recorded on his will the uncompromising wish to destroy those sonnets (and all dialectal works by his hand) upon his death. It is a privilege not to only to be able to read them but to analyse Belli’s prompts to his indomitable fury toward papal authority and thirst for social justice, with the able guidance of Paul Howard and his essay.

In the first of many chapters in this volume to focus on the Italian Novecento, Assunta De Crescenzo offers a new approach to the poetry of Rocco Scotellaro, another of those uncategorized authors and one who, for this very reason, has often been excluded from anthologies and critical studies of Italian poetry. De Crescenzo starts with an analysis of Scotellaro’s experimentalism to demonstrate not only his distance from

² G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *Rhizome*, Paris, Les Éditions de Minuit, 1976.

Neo-realistic poetry, but also his inherent efforts to recreate the reality of his Lucania and transform it through a linguistic operation: “a particular use of local peasantry lexicon and idioms, together with an ability to vividly represent his innermost thoughts and feelings, enlivens his poetry with an astounding variety of tones and creates a symbiotic relationship between art and life.” This journey through Scotellaro’s personal experiences and works of art inspires the readers to further their studies of this poet and his poetry, paying particular attention to the most recent contributions of Franco Vitelli.

Chapter Three introduces the poetry of Margherita Guidacci, whose idea of an *ars ethica* is analyzed here by Claudia Karagoz. As Karagoz notes, for Guidacci “poets foster change by showing the path to redemption and truth to their readers, not by engaging in traditional politics: ‘Se la poesia sarà vera, per il solo fatto di esistere ammonirà e consolerà, sarà messaggio e guida.’” There seems to be a renewed interest in Guidacci’s poetry in recent years. As Karagoz remarks, in 2005 a prominent study by Maura Del Serra, *Le foglie della Sibilla. Scritti su Margherita Guidacci*, was published by Edizioni Studium. Five years later, a collective volume edited by Giovanna Fozzer and titled *Poesia come un albero* was released by Marietti. The revamping of her poetry might be due to the uniqueness of the author’s background and themes and to the intimate approach she used to express herself. For her part, the author was not preoccupied with fame; she often remarked that her interest in poetry was not an act of will but a way of life. The following was her own advice to aspiring poets:

Better to write a great book in the desert, telling it, “You are a fruit of the desert, here you were born

And here you remain, only stones and the wind knowing you,” Than to gain fame by chance.

Meglio scrivere un libro importante nel deserto,

Dirgli «Sei frutto del deserto, qui sei nato e qui rimani, Solo le pietre e il vento ti avranno conosciuto»,

Che diventare celebri per equivoco.

(From *Paglia e polvere, Consigli a un giovane poeta*).³

The engagement of the Neo-Avant-Garde is represented in this volume by an article by Gianluca Rizzo on Elio Pagliarani and the theatrical aspects of this works. Rizzo, who has just completed an edition of the complete theatrical works of Pagliarani, analyzes some of the author’s

³ Giovanni Casoli, *Novecento letterario italiano ed europeo: autori e testi scelti*. Città Nuova, 2002. 158.

little known plays, and traces a close connection between those texts that were explicitly written for the theatre and the more performative aspects of his strictly "poetic" texts. In so doing, he extricates the relation between the "tyranny of the I" identified by the *Novissimi* poets and the problem of the connection among language and politics. Explains Rizzo: "No matter what the "content" or the "ideology" professed by a text, what really matters is its style, the linguistic choices that shaped it. For that is the true mandate of literature, its area of influence, its fundamental expertise. By reflecting critically on this dimension of the work, without being distracted by the "I" of the author, literature can give its contribution to the advancement of society."

In Chapter Five, Thomas Peterson approaches the later works of Paolo Volponi from the perspective of eco-politics. Peterson argues that "Volponi's ecological vision in his middle and late *poemetti* can be summarized as the concrete realization that by destroying its natural habitat, humanity is destroying its soul; that this deterioration of the environment is accompanied by a loss of self-knowledge and a pervasive state of moral degradation; and that the collective political welfare of the planet is increasingly at risk as these processes accelerate." Volponi's poems, many of which are analyzed in detail and presented through original English translations, emerge then as situated in an anthropological framework and connected to an idea of utopia that was dear to the author.

Volponi's criticism of industrialism and separation from nature is directly connected to the works of a very different author, Sergio Atzeni, who is the focus of the following chapter. As Beppe Cavatorta clarifies, "Atzeni is one of those writers that are not easily labeled, unflinching in his estrangement from literary cliques: a loner, and, as often happens, almost forgotten—if we exclude the island where he was born—because his work, with no support from the literary establishment, is easily cast aside." Cavatorta offers a much needed analysis of Atzeni's works, and their aim to provide "a voice and an identity" for his native land, Sardinia. An island himself, the poet has a voice drenched with melancholy, restlessness, and anger. Atzeni experiments with importation of Sardinian dialect and Spanish language alongside standard Italian to express his pride in his compatriots and his resistance to outside oppression. In this hybridization of his socio-cultural background transpires his singularity and desire to remain a "one-man gang."

Abiding by the volume's aim to break barriers and enact revolt from within by offering a vibrant mix of traditional and non-traditional authors and thus reshape the very essence of poetry, the last two chapters of the volume offer new avenues for the understanding of the essence of poetry

by concentrating respectively on an openly political experiment (the volumes *Calpestare l'oblio* and *Poesia del dissenso*, analyzed by Matteo Gilebbi) and by breaking the established borders by delving into the analysis, from a poetic perspective, of the works of songwriter Carmen Consoli written by Dario Accolla. In the former, Gilebbi analyzes texts from the two recent publications, “in which the attack to the culture of ‘berlusconismo’ is part and parcel of their ideological and engaged poetry.” The author is particularly interested in these works as embodiments of the “birth of a neo-modernist tendency in Italian literature. One of the main aspects of this neo-modernism is the return to the Italian epic tradition, and especially to its use of allegory as the most effective vehicle to convey politically controversial ideas and to challenge the status quo.” The latter proposes “proceeds from a short excursus of Carmen Consoli’s output to focus on the reading/interpretation and the analysis of the song *A finestra* (*The Window*), a tiny musical masterpiece which skillfully mixes literary elements and the powerful expressivity of spoken dialect.”

Carmen Consoli, the *cantatessa*, (*cantante-poetessa*, that is to say singer and poet), from Catania, Sicily is not only the emblem of her own land and time, but she serves as spokesperson of the injustices her herself and other women have experienced. The parade is endless and the reason for pointing out those innumerable cases is paramount, especially in times like these when the acts of violence against women do not bear any quantitative or geographical limits. Consoli’s lyrics are the offspring of linguistic and musical marriages and successful critiques of “bourgeois respectability, a certain anti-clericalism and the denunciation of the typical ills of the Italian society”

In his 1961 Introduction to the anthology *I Novissimi*, Alfredo Giuliani states, quoting Leopardi, that the aim of true, contemporary poetry is to increase vitality.⁴ Giuliani refers here to an entry from *Zibaldone* dated February 1, 1829: “By reading a piece of true, contemporary poetry, be it in prose or verse (but the impression is stronger when reading verse), even in our prosaic times, one can say, perhaps more appropriately, what Sterne said about a smile: that it adds a thread to the brief fabric of our life. It refreshes us, as one may say, and increases our vitality. But today such pieces are extremely rare.” (The exact quote from Laurence Sterne which Leopardi mentions is the following: “I am persuaded that every time a man smiles - but much more so when he laughs - it adds something to this

⁴ Alfredo Giuliani, “Introduzione” (1961), in *I Novissimi. Poesie per gli anni Sessanta*. Torino: Einaudi, 1965, 16. The English translations here and below are ours.

fragment of life.”) In a brief note added to the 1965 Introduction, Giuliani expands on his quote, explaining how, although Leopardi never referred to an ‘aim’ of poetry but only to its effect, the meaning doesn’t seem to change. Indeed, adds Giuliani, if according to Leopardi the instances of poetry capable of achieving an increase in vitality were so few, then “one can infer that that power of increase is a valuation method, and if a poem does not add a thread to our life it failed in its intent”.

With this volume, we purpose to add numerous threads to the current reflection on Italian poetry and to present our readers with new ways to conceive of poetry itself as an art form that can, and should, transform the world we live in.

CHAPTER ONE

IN STI TEMPI D'ABBISSI E RRIBBEJJONE: GIUSEPPE GIOACHINO BELLI'S SILENT REVOLUTION

PAUL HOWARD

When Pope Benedict XVI's majordomo, Paolo Gabriele, was unveiled in May 2012 as the "corvo vaticano" and charged with leaking a series of private documents that appear to reveal corruption and hypocrisy at the highest echelons of the Catholic Church, *La Repubblica* journalist, Filippo Ceccarelli, turned to a sonnet by the Roman dialect poet, Giuseppe Gioachino Belli.¹ It seemed Belli "aveva già raccontato tutto" in a poem entitled "Li complimenti" which showcases infighting and backstabbing beyond the guarded gates of St Peter's. As the ironic title suggests, the sonnet of 1834 exposes the vacuous pleasantries exchanged between two of the Pontiff's closest advisors in the Papal Household, "er Maggiordomo e ll'Uditor Zantissimo." The formal civilities are captured in the direct speech of the second quatrain:

«Entri, se servi; favorischi puro,
come sta?... ggrazzie: e llei? obbrigatissimo,
a li commanni sui, serv'umilissimo,
nun z'incomodi, ggìa, ccerto, sicuro...».²

[Do come in, help yourself; please, go ahead. How are you?...Thanks, and you? Most obliged, at your service, your most obedient servant, do not be

¹ "Quando Belli raccontò la perfidia vaticana", *La Repubblica*, accessed August 21, 2012, <http://video.repubblica.it/dossier/scandalo-vaticano/ceccarelli-quando-belli-raccontò-la-perfidia-vaticana/96452>.

² For the Romanesco, all references unless stated otherwise are to Belli, Giuseppe Gioachino. 1998. *Tutti i sonetti romaneschi*. Edited by Marcello Teodonio. 2 vols. Rome: Newton.

put out, of course, certainly, by all means...”]

The impact of the volta is devastating as the saccharine cordiality of appearance and spin is obliterated in the first tercet, leaving behind the bitter reality of hypocrisy and corruption:

Ciarle de moda: pulizzie de Corte:
smorfie de furbi: sscene de Palazzo:
carezze e amore de chi ss’odia a mmorte. (“Li complimenti”, II, 269)

[Fashionable gossip: Court politeness: cunning mock expressions: Palace theatricals: the love and endearment of those who hate one another to death.]

Such unbrotherly interactions at the apex of the organisation are the very antithesis of the Church’s teachings, and yet they come to symbolize the institution as a whole, shining a spotlight on the darker side of human nature in the cutthroat world of politics.

With the Vatican mired in the latest bout of scandal, the parallels are clear to see. What commentators seem to have missed, however, is that Belli apparently foretold the so-called Vatileaks affair to an eerie degree of accuracy in a poem aptly entitled “Monsignor Maggiordomo”. The opening quatrain runs as follows:

Ohé! Gguai a Ppalazzo. Er Zanto-Padre
è vvienuto a scoprí cch’er Maggiordomo,
che in tuttoquanto er resto è un galantomo
ha un tantinello le manine ladre.
 (“Monsignor Maggiordomo”, II, 179)

[Uh-oh! Trouble at the Palace. The Holy Father has discovered that the Majordomo, who in all other respects is an honest fellow, is ever so slightly sticky-fingered.]

If reports are to be believed, it could hardly be closer to the truth in terms of recent events. The comic recourse to the standard Tuscan in the fourth line sets a markedly different tone from the previous sonnet, but the criticism of the corruption is no less scathing. The severity of the offence is battled out between the sarcastic, innocent-sounding diminutives, as if committed by the childlike homunculus within, and the damning final presentment of “ladre”, made graver still by the suggestion of complicity in the unlikely rhyme with “Zanto-Padre”. So frequent are the indiscretions of the light-fingered majordomo, the speaker tells us in the second quatrain, “che cchi ssa scrive pò stampanne un tomo” [that those

who know how to write could fill a whole book with them]. Gianluigi Nuzzi, the investigative journalist whom Gabriele allegedly supplied with numerous documents pilfered from Benedict XVI's private office, looks to have been listening to the Roman poet all along. Even the uncertainty over the administration's response and its political implications, anticipated beautifully in the dynamics of the fourth line, has a familiar feel to it. In the poem, apparently based on historical personages, blanket silence is the preferred strategy, coupled with a presumably tactical promotion to secure the majordomo's future trust:

E 'r Papa, che nnun manca de scervello,
c'ha ffatto! Ha ddetto du' parole arabbiche
su in concistoro, e jje darà er cappello.
("Monsignor Maggiordomo", II, 179)³

[The Pope, who's not lacking in the brains department, guess what he's done! He said a few words in some foreign tongue up at the consistory, and he'll grant him his hat.]

The current regime may be in the midst of contriving a similar solution. After a lengthy period of house arrest, Gabriele is unlikely to obtain his cardinal's hat, but the papal pardon that had been widely rumoured was finally granted in December 2012 as the Vatican, in seemingly time-honoured fashion, seeks to sweep internal scandal under the palace carpet.

Important distinctions should be made, of course. The role of the majordomo has changed considerably. The modern incumbent may still enjoy closer daily contact with His Holiness than most cardinals, but the palatine prelate no longer provides theological advice or has any judicial powers, and thus occupies an essentially lay position within the Curia following structural changes heralded by the Capture of Rome in 1870. Equally, regardless of the veracity of Gabriele's claims and the paternity of the documents presented to Nuzzi, let alone the precision of any conclusions inferred by the latter, the aims of the former are ostensibly those of the honourable whistle-blower, rather than the financial self-interest of Belli's Maggiordomo. Indeed, Maria (Gabriele's alias in Nuzzi's book) claims a specific social function for his actions:

Penso che, se queste carte diverranno pubbliche, l'azione di riforma avviata

³ Luigi Morandi, responsible for the first complete edition of the sonnets, identified the majordomo in question as Mons. Costantino Patrizi, who was indeed made a cardinal in 1836 by Pope Gregory XVI (Belli 1896, II, 395).

da Ratzinger avrà una sua inevitabile accelerazione. La conoscenza determina il cambiamento. E sarà di ristoro per chi subisce in sofferenza e solitudine quanto accade nella curia romana, senza poter intervenire come vorrebbe. L'impotenza è il sentimento più diffuso. Non possiamo fare niente perché non ne abbiamo il potere. (Nuzzi 2012, 21)

In this sense, however, if the motivations and allegations are taken at face value, Gabriele and Nuzzi are purportedly fulfilling many of the same functions as Belli's poetry, namely the exposure of vice and malpractice for the greater good. More importantly, a further parallel can be drawn: such exposure of the powerful is being wrought from the viewpoint of the somehow powerless. Consistent in both sonnets is the standpoint of the persona, who embodies the impasse between the common folk and the wheels of power. Nevertheless, the outsider has a keen nose for the stench of corruption and is prepared to call a spade a spade. What undoubtedly remains a constant between the poems quoted and the Vatileaks affair are the portrayals of political machinations at work. The setting is decidedly Roman: the beating heart of the Catholic Church, and in the case of the sonnets, the language. Yet, in terms of power struggles, it reflects the type of comment likely to be passed by the masses on the ruling elite in any number of civic contexts. More than a century and a half on, Belli's voice remains as political, and as contemporary, as ever.

Giuseppe Gioachino Belli (1791-1863) was not socially active in the conventional sense. In fact, he eschewed any outward sign of rebellion against the all-encompassing papal governments, and the insular Roman microcosm of his day, even to the point of denying authorship of his dialect sonnets. And yet, his Romanesco poetry is undoubtedly one of the most concentrated and sustained forms of social critique in Modern European literature, and can be seen as a manifesto denouncing the corruption and wrongdoings of the ruling classes whilst asserting the rights of the impotent poor. The subjects of the sonnets are the various inhabitants of Rome, Belli's city-state of the six Ps (popes, priests, princes, prostitutes, parasites and the poor), and he has poems featuring, lauding, and deriding each of them, always from the viewpoint of the beleaguered. Never before, however, has the social underclass featured so heavily and so realistically in Italian literature. As Belli lays bare, those who are not in positions of influence are usually voiceless, first and foremost in society, but the sentiment applies equally to the province of literature, as encapsulated in the substantive "capitolo": "Chi abbita a sto monno senza er titolo / o dde Papa, o dde Re, o dd'Imperatore, / quello nun pò avé mmai vosce in capitolo" [those who inhabit this world without the title of Pope, King, or Emperor, can never have any voice] ("Li soprani der Monno

vecchio", I, 387). Yet, Belli gives them that voice for the first time, unbridled throughout literally thousands of lines of poetry, in an unprecedented corpus of sonnets numbering a staggering 2279 in all. Despite such a prolific output, the poet effectively states his premise in a single word, "nnoantri", the hitherto excluded members of Rome's *popolino* to which his poetic personae belong. The compound neologism succeeds in uniting a sense of defiance through the collective "noi" with a notion of illegitimacy and futility in the reference to otherness and the hint at negativity in "nno." What's more, it is of course all bound up in the immediately evident opposition of the dialect. With the world revolving around partitions, made unequivocal in such poems as "Li du' ggenger'umani" (II, 36), and the Roman populace on the wrong side of the dividing line, Belli's poetry should be considered as a highly committed form of socio-literary activism which aims to expose all modes of injustice and combat cultural hegemony.

Indeed, were it not for the linguistic straightjacket of the Roman dialect, Belli might well enjoy similar status to a Dickens or Hugo as a skilful trailblazer of nineteenth-century protest literature, occupying a commensurate position in the canon as a result. As it is, he remains largely unknown, especially outside of Italy, and marginalised within the historiography, relegated to afterthoughts on minor figures in literary histories, notwithstanding the uniquely plurilingual nature of the Italian literary tradition.⁴ It is true that the wave of interest in dialect poetry in the mid-twentieth century did much for Belli, growing out of the philological work spearheaded by Segre, Isella and Corti, following on from Contini, though this unsurprisingly arose in the wake of the wider trends of Marxist criticism. One of the first histories to temporarily buck the trend included the *Storia della letteratura italiana*, published by Garzanti in 1965-1969, under the editorship of Cecchi and Sapegno, with a significant entry on Belli written by Muscetta, all of whom shared obvious socio-political sympathies in terms of their critical approach. Class constructs are certainly exposed in Belli and his work can be read as progressive in this sense, but as a literary figure he has fallen back into obscurity since criticism has moved on. When he is known nowadays, he is often appreciated as the comic poet he undoubtedly is, but his absolute mastery of form, for example, goes unrecognised, despite being dubbed the most accomplished sonneteer in the Italian tradition by D'Annunzio and the

⁴ See, for example, *The Cambridge History of Italian Literature* in which Belli features in a single sentence within the section on "Popular poetry" in the already secondary chapter on "Other novelists and poets of the Risorgimento" [Brand and Pertile 2001, 447].

greatest Italian poet tout court by Pasolini (again broadly sympathetic to Marxism). The effects of anthologization too, as others in this volume make plain, can also be significant. In the case of Belli, his reputation has arguably been tarnished by the process. With the exception of Pascoli's far-sighted decision to include "La famijja poverella" in his anthology for schools, *Fior da fiore: prose e poesie scelte per le scuole secondarie inferiori* (1901), in which he crowns the Roman sonneteer simply as a "grande poeta" without drawing attention to the dialect, Belli's more notorious sonnets, the bawdy and inflammatory, have generally been prized at the expense of his more moderate pieces. The same is also true of anthological selections of the sonnets themselves, with the tendency stemming from the earliest complete edition, compiled by Luigi Morandi and published in 1886-89. The poet's first taste of posthumous fame was due in no small part to the sixth volume of the edition, to which the obscene and objectionable sonnets were confined according to a well-intentioned but puritanical editorial policy. "Il Sesto", as it came to be known, was hugely successful and outsold the other five volumes, but its undiluted content left Belli with something of a one-dimensional reputation.⁵ That said, certain anthologies have explicitly highlighted the political nature of the sonnets from an early stage, such as the unambiguously entitled *Sonetti politici e satirici in dialetto romanesco attribuiti a G. G. Belli* (1889).

The sonnet's scanty ground, as Wordsworth had it, for centuries the sole province of distilled lyricism, with notable exceptions particularly in the Italian tradition, seems an unlikely place for a manifesto of socio-political change, even more so under the imposing shadow of St Peter's and the watchful eyes of its thought police. In an ironic twist, too, Belli himself comes to work for the regime as a theatrical censor, of all things, upholding the image of the "morale politica". Yet the tradition of satire, quintessentially Roman according to Quintilian's famous early statement that "satura quidem tota nostra est", has a long history in the papal era, and from the early-modern period at least, political critique is tolerated by the powers that be. A particular feature of the Roman tradition is the production of satire in verse of all forms, including sonnets, which were frequently comic in nature but scathingly vicious in the criticism meted out against both the religious and secular establishment.⁶ As Peter Burke states

⁵ "L'edizione in sei volumi si vendeva a dodici lire: ma si poteva acquistare il solo sesto volume per dieci, il che anche venalmente veniva a dire che agli altri cinque volumi si attribuiva valore secondario" (Vigolo 1963, I, 8-9).

⁶ For evidence of the frequent use of the sonnet form as a politicized mouthorgan immediately prior to Belli, see, for example, De Cesare 1996, 113-153.

in *The Historical Anthropology of Early Modern Italy*, “insulting the authorities in this way was institutionalised around the year 1500 as a tradition grew up of attaching pungent verses in the vernacular to the mutilated classical statue known as ‘Pasquino’” (Burke 1989, 100). A further distinction of the “Pasquinate”, as these compositions (including some in prose) came to be known, and a reason for their being tolerated, was their anonymous authorship. Indeed, many were written by ecclesiastical insiders who wanted to expose corruption, in much the same way as the modern whistle-blower, whilst maintaining the cloak of silence. Perhaps the most important element in the success of the punchy and pithy pasquinate, however, is the high literary standard that they maintained. Indeed, they were sometimes the product of such literary masterminds as Pietro Aretino (whose literary transgressions Belli consciously follows in the *Sonetti*, most obviously in the sexualised content of many poems). By way of example, the octet of the following sonnet shows a typically fierce attack against political ambition and cronyism. The target is the future Paul III, Cardinal Farnese, whom Aretino accuses “of having prostituted his sister to the Borgia Pope Alexander VI” in order to secure his own political future (Anthony Oldcorn in Brand and Pertile 2001, 273):

Dimmi, o Farnese mio, padre coscritto,
che con sì grande onor fusti sensale
del sangue tuo per esser cardinale,
qual stella t’ha fra noi papa prescritto?

Tu piggior sei ch’un Crasso al mondo scritto
e della fe’ nimico capitale,
superbo e vile inventor d’ogni male,
che ’n croce hai Cristo mille volte fitto.
(Brand and Pertile 2001, 273)

On the back of such compositions, the political poet Francesco Berni, whose personal invective was often housed in the sonnet form, retorted the following as part of a poem entitled “Contro a Pietro Aretino”: “Il Papa è il Papa, e tu se’ un furfante / nodrito del pan d’altri e del dir male” (Silenzi and Silenzi 1968, 66). More than an echo of Berni’s response can be heard in the Belli sonnet “Li soprani der Monno vecchio” already quoted, in which the demonic king, with a distinctly papal air, sends out an edict to his people with the famous opening words “Io sò io, e vvoi nun zete un cazzo, / sori vassalli bbuggiaroni, e zzitto” [I am who I am, and you’re a set of fucking nobodies, you cheating rascals, now shut it] (I, 387).

Indeed, at the heart of the tradition’s popularity is the practice of giving expression to the voice of the masses, with writers often assuming the

mask of the people. An anonymous 17th century pasquinade against Innocent X, for example, has a simple critique of public policy and basic statement of need: “Noi volemo altro che guglie e fontane! / Pane volemo, pane, pane, pane!” (Dell’Arco 1957, LIV) Such concerns were perennial, and the conditions of the general population confirmed by external sources, particularly the accounts of travelling foreigners. Writing as late as 1859, for example, Frenchman Edmond About noted that in the Rome of Pius IX “the budget of public works is devoted to the repair of churches, and the building of basilicas” (About 1859, 188-189), even against a backdrop of blatant poverty and inequality. Belli certainly assumes the mask of the people in his sonnets and, despite his professed detachment from the world of his personae, there is no doubt that he shares their concerns at the state of injustice. He has surprisingly little to say directly on Pasquino, however, by which time the practice in its traditional form seems to have waned. Indeed, he states as much in a footnote to one poem, in which a popolano compares the features of people around him to those of Rome’s talking statues, including Pasquino: “Il popolo tiene Marforio per un soggetto ridicolo, e lo si fa interlocutore nelle così dette «pasquinate» o satire pubbliche, per le quali un tempo i Romani avevano spirito e rinomanza” (“Una casata” I, 652). Carlo Alberto Salustri (1873-1950), better known by his pseudonym Trilussa, who along with Giggi Zanazzo would take on the mantle of the satirical Roman dialect poet, albeit from a less mordant viewpoint, also confirms this impression in a poem entitled “Pasquino, sempre scontento”. Pasquino appears stripped of his former glories, as if his voice of protest has finally surrendered after centuries of strenuous use, as one of Trilussa’s typically anthropomorphised animal characters makes plain:

- Povero mutilato dar Destino,
come te sei ridotto!
- diceva un Cane che passava sotto
ar torso de Pasquino
(Trilussa 2004, 1294)

In their commentary, Costola and Felici offer a decidedly political reading of Pasquino’s “stato miserevole”, suggesting that Trilussa finds a timely emblematic quality in the decrepit bust. Following decades of upheavals in the tortuous Roman version of the long nineteenth century, it is plain to see why they might read Trilussa’s Pasquino as a “simbolo di un popolo calpestato e ridotto al silenzio” (Trilussa 2004, 1294). Yet the Hellenistic torso had of course long been maimed and its face disfigured, right from its rediscovery in 1500, as its earliest sixteenth-century

depictions show, hence its importance as a figurehead for the impotent, yet resilient, population at large. It is true that the tradition of the *pasquinate* all but comes to a close in the nineteenth century, unsurprisingly coinciding with the monumental shift in power relations associated with the definitive end, for all intents and purposes, of the temporal power of the papacy in 1870. As Italian troops breached Porta Pia on 20 September, bringing the Risorgimento to fruition, Cavour's vision of a "libera Chiesa in libero Stato" could finally be put into practice almost a decade on from his first speech to the new Italian parliament in 1861. At last Rome could soon begin a new existence as the civic capital of Italy, without the political meddling of the Church, at least formally. With the much heralded arrival of liberty, and the Pope now banished from the polis, it seemed that Pasquino was thoroughly outmoded. For some decades, politics had no longer been as myopically local, and certainly not as monocratic, as under the age-old order. In a sense, Pasquino had fulfilled his role of holding the Pope to account, bringing power to the people. Unless Costola and Felici are imposing the politics of the first quarter of the twentieth century onto Trilussa's Pasquino, it is difficult not to see his apparent silence as a cause for optimism and an endorsement of the causes of liberalism and nationalism. In any case, the point of Trilussa's poem, it seems to me, is that Pasquino defies all the odds by proving he remains alive, "sempre contento" as the title implies, and destined to remain obstinately disgruntled forevermore. After enduring the naïve dog's triumphant death knell, it is Pasquino who has the final word. The implication is that despite a hiatus in political malpractice, the propensity for protest remains unquenchable, and the vox populi easily resounded should the need again arise:

-Nun te se vede che la bocca sola
con una smorfia quasi strafottente...
Pasquino barbottò: -Segno evidente
che nun ha detto l'urtima parola.
(Trilussa 2004, 1294)

As early as 1870, in the introduction to one of the first anthologies, Morandi argues that the Belli sonnets can be read as "pasquinate d'autore" (Gibellini in Vigolo 2004, 630). More recently, Muscetta has legitimately pointed out "la puntigliosa precisione e il distacco con cui Belli parla delle «pasquinate»" in his footnotes to "Una casata", quoted above (Belli 1998, I, 652). Whilst it is clear that Belli by no means considers his new poetic creations to be "pasquinate" in the proper sense, there is no doubt that as a poet and champion of the popular voice, he is the heir to the Pasquino

tradition, many elements of which he unquestionably continues: the sonnet form, the satire of society's leading figures, the mixture of comedy and invective, and the pithiness of language. In a political context, at least, it is impossible not to see Belli's poetry as a continuation of the highly active Roman tradition of verse satire. And yet there is one major stumbling block to such a reading: the sonnets were never formally published in the poet's lifetime. Like the hooded members of the Curia, who preferred to stick their verses to Pasquino's chest under the cover of darkness, and Paolo Gabriele, who sought in vain to make his claims through the protected mouthpiece of an intermediary, so too does Belli maintain the pretence of anonymity. Unlike the others, however, in doing so he condemns his rebellious materials to the private sphere. His revolution is thus silent.

The enterprise of composing 2279 sonnets on the socio-politics of modern life, however, over a period of almost thirty years, only to commit them to the bottom drawer, scarcely seems credible. In fact, the poet actively debates publishing the poems, and takes clear steps in that direction, albeit with great caution in the knowledge that the content of his poetry is potentially dangerous. It is this process which gives rise to the full statement of his poetics, in which the scope and scale of his rebellion becomes clear. On 5 October 1831, he writes to his lifelong friend Francesco Spada especially to inform him that he now has "153 sonetti, sessantasei de' quali scritti da dopo la metà di settembre (crescono)," before putting forward his rationale behind his new form of poetry (prior to this point, he has written considerable amounts of classicizing verse). Already he is concerned of "possibili sciagure", and beseeches his friend not to divulge their contents: "persuaso che la delicatezza e l'amicizia d'entrambi non ne trarrà fuori che la sola lettura" (Belli 1961, I, 239-40). On 4 January 1832, when he writes to another close friend, Giacomo Ferretti, he forecasts that some will be "scandalizzato" by many of his "quadretti poetici" and again stresses the importance of keeping them under wraps within a tight circle of acquaintances: "queste cose restano (almeno per ora) nelle menti de' soli amici, i quali [...] mi usano certo la delicatezza di non conservarne altra nota che quella che resti loro nella memoria, lo che solo Iddio potrebbe togliere" (Belli 1961, I, 243). Belli is clearly envisaging publication, despite the risks, as the comment in parentheses suggests, with any doubt dispelled by the poet's decision to enclose a redrafted version of his poetics, copied out in a neat hand on separate paper, which he calls "l'introduzione". The statement was drafted a third time in 1839, and again at some point between 1843 and 1847 according to Vighi, suggesting Belli was still considering publication right

until the eve of the Roman Republic in 1849, though it is more than conceivable that the political climate and turbulence of those years was such to dissuade him.⁷ The statement has been used ever since as the introduction to the sonnets, and whilst it is a long way from revealing any credentials as a social activist, it does reveal the other sense of his rebellion: his heretical revolution within the literary tradition.

The first sentence of the introduction fits squarely with the wider historical preoccupations of the Romantic worldview, with Belli professing his aim to create a literary monument: “Io ho deliberato di lasciare un monumento di quello che oggi è la plebe di Roma” (Belli 1998, I, 3). Immediately, then, he has professed the social commitment of his poetry, to represent the lowest rank of the social order. Yet from the second sentence, we get a hint at what will be his innovation and chief weapon in his satire, namely language:

In lei sta certo un tipo di originalità: e la sua lingua, i suoi concetti, l'indole, il costume, gli usi, le pratiche, i lumi, la credenza, i pregiudizi, le superstizioni, tuttociò insomma che la riguarda, ritiene un'impronta che assai per avventura si distingue da qualunque altro carattere di popolo. (Belli 1998, I, 3)

Language is the first thing that distinguishes the plebeian members of society. As such it will be the primary ingredient in their characterisation, the precise method of which the poet gradually refines, and a full linguistic exposition of which he will set out in the introduction. Moreover, Belli recognizes their otherness and minority status within the wider society. Indeed, he enquires into the reasons behind their almost physiological difference: “Perché tanto queste diverse [fisionomie] nel volgo di una città da quelle degl'individui di ordini superiori?” (Belli 1998, I, 3) Belli is not quite enlightened enough to avoid adopting hegemonic positions of social hierarchy, offering facile comments on the dominance of passion among the poor, but his conjecturing does lead him to conclude that education is the basic reason for inequality. Remarkably, he even goes so far as to celebrate difference:

Vero però sempre mi par rimanere che la educazione che accompagna la parte dell'incivilimento, fa ogni sforzo per ridurre gli uomini alla

⁷ “Sappiamo, infatti, dai documenti che la revisione dei testi poetici al fine di ottenere l'«imprimatur» dalla censura pontifica era lasciata dal Belli ai Canonici Lateranensi [...] possiamo quindi immaginare che la consegna dei Sonetti al Tizzani venisse fatta dal poeta [...] affinché il prelado li esaminasse e li scegliesse per una eventuale pubblicazione” (Belli 1988, I, 6).

uniformità: e se non vi riesce quanto vorrebbe, è forse questo uno de' beneficii della creazione. (Belli 1998, I, 3)

If Belli is revelling in their inequality, he is doing so from an artistic point of view. What he recognizes above all is their originality as literary subjects: “Oltre a ciò, mi sembra la mia idea non iscompagnarsi da novità. Questo disegno così colorito, checché ne sia del soggetto, non trova lavoro da confronto che lo abbiano preceduto” (Belli 1998, I, 3).

The Roman of the sonnets does include peculiar vocabulary. Distinctly central-southern lexical terms, the most common of which is probably “mó”, meaning “now”, are often employed and if obscure are usually glossed (it is clear from the explanatory scope of Belli’s notes that his potential audience lies at least beyond Rome, if not the whole peninsula), but the language is otherwise largely intelligible.⁸ Indeed, Belli sees the dialect as a corrupt form of language, as it had been seen for centuries, ever since Dante branded it a “tristiloquium” in the *De vulgari eloquentia*. Although merely half a century before Ascoli and the birth of Italian dialectology, Belli evidently sees Romanesco as a corrupt version of the standard, and thus a social-class dialect or sociolect. In the introduction he distinguishes himself from previous Italian dialect writers, who had recourse to what he calls municipal languages, that is “parlari non esclusivamente appartenenti a tale o tal plebe o frazione di popolo, ma usate da tutte insieme le classi di una peculiare popolazione” (Belli 1998, I, 4). To a large extent, the distinction would remain even among his imitators. Uppermost in Belli’s mind is the use of Milanese by Carlo Porta (1775-1821), whose poetry had been a strong early influence. As Ettore Bonora points out, “il milanese era un dialetto parlato da un’intera città nei suoi diversi strati sociali” (Chiesa and Tesio 1978, 29). There is an irony, indeed exploited by Porta for the purposes of social commentary, in the fact that in a poem such as “Offerta a Dio”, a dialogue between Don Sigismond and Donna Fabia Fabron de Fabrian, both the priest and the noblewoman, despite her attempts to prove otherwise, essentially speak precisely the same language as the “verme vile” she so despises (Porta 2000, 620). Belli goes a step further too in declaring war on his Roman dialect predecessors, by apparently laying down the tenets of realism: “errarono quanti il dir romanesco vollero sin qui presentare in versi che tutta palesarono la lotta dell’arte colla natura e la vittoria della natura sull’arte” (Belli 1998, I, 3). In a particularly appropriate metaphor, he states that a poetic language with any literary pedigree, including dialectal standards, are wholly unsuited to representing the underclass, implying

⁸ On Belli’s annotations, see Di Nino 2008, 83-112.

that those who attempt such a venture not only stray from the principle of verisimilitude but commit the fallacy of rendering the plebeian “un fantoccio male e goffamente ricoperto di vesti non attagliate al suo dosso” (Belli 1998, I, 3). Necessarily, then, Belli's language is fundamentally different:

Io qui ritraggo le idee di una plebe ignorante, comunque in gran parte concettosa ed arguta, e le ritraggo, dirò, col soccorso di un idiotismo continuo, di una favella tutta guasta e corrotta, di una lingua infine non italiana e neppur romana, ma romanesca. (Belli 1998, I, 5)

The pregnant term “idiotismo” - idiom in the linguistic sense, but idiocy in its broader meaning - is deliberately chosen, and echoes the author's condescension already hinted at in “fantoccio”. Even the suffix *-esco* is imbued with negativity, relegating its speakers to the bottom of the linguistic ladder.⁹ This is the language not merely of the people, but of the lowest stratum of society, the illiterate common folk whose deficiencies are revealed in their speech. Indeed, Belli uses his poetry to probe this very theme. In “Avviso”, for instance, a frustrated and almost childlike member of the lower classes, perfectly embodying the “fantoccio goffo”, struggles to read a public notice advertising the sale of a house. The sonnet begins thus:

Bra-man-do — il — Rev-do — Ven-le— Mo-na-ste-ro
de — San-ti — Cos-ma virgola e — Da-mi-a-no
ven-de-re virgola o — af-fit-ta-re — un — pi-a-no
d'u-na — su-a — ca-sa virgola e — l'in-ti-e-ro¹⁰

The plebeian's patience is tried to breaking point by the laborious task of deciphering the Tuscan standard (although Belli is also taking a sideswipe at bureaucratic legalese) through which he is excluded from civilised life. The standard rules of orthography, sole province of the literate, are exploited brilliantly in such a way as to emphasize the poet's wider point. The use of the dashes of varying length to suggest hard-earned pauses between words and great effort even between syllables is coupled with the sporadic punctuation provided by the ironic “virgola”, the non-word being the only thing pronounced with any fluency. Similarly, Belli resorts to the device of ellipsis at the end of the penultimate line to

⁹ Ruzante's “fiorentinesco”, although contextually different, is a literary precedent and equally negative in relation to the authentic “pavan”. See Zancani 1996, 38.

¹⁰ Belli provides the original for the benefit of readers: “Bramando il Revdo Venle Monastero de Santi Cosma, e Damiano vendere, o affittare un piano d'una sua casa, e l'intiero [orto]” (Belli 1998, II, 76).

show that the reader finds the task too taxing to complete, succumbing to frustration without even getting to the end of the notice. The majority of the sestet is taken up with the painful rendition of the following: “Si avvisa tutti, e singoli aspiranti, che domani alla precisa ora d’ore 17 resta ingiunto al Notaro del Loco Sig. Briganti...” (II, 76) The momentary pause following the ellipsis, introduced after the aptly-named Signor Briganti, is broken as the speaker eventually blurts out the expletive final line in his own language: “Che sse vadi a ffà fotte, e mmetto er punto” [he can go and fuck himself, end of story] (Belli 1998, II, 76).¹¹ Not only is the gap laid bare between the popolino and the rest of society, the limits and deficiencies of linguistic standards are also clearly apparent in relation to the poet’s subjects, so that the sonnet becomes emblematic of Belli’s wider poetics.

A good way of quantifying the degree of impegno achieved by the adopted persona and the force of the newly created voice may be found in comparing compositions by the poet in lingua (much more numerous than the *Sonetti romaneschi*) with similar versions in dialect. The social order is frequently explored by Belli in the Roman sonnets, but some of his many poems in the standard share comparable thematics. The following both deal with the topic of social rank:

LE CLASSI SOCIALI

È un albergo la umana società
In tre piani distinto e forse più,
Dove gli uomini stan chi su e chi giù,
E chi, fra questi e quelli, a la metà.

Ma nessuno è contento dove sta,
E tutti anelan di salir più su;
E ciascun dice all’altro: scendi tu;
E quel vorria salire anche di là.

Meno i più alti che poi restan lì
Gridando che salir più non si può,
Tutti gli altri rispondono di sì.

Intanto, fra quei sì e fra quei no,
Quando il su non discese e il giù salì,

¹¹ The notary’s name, as with many in Belli, adds further comic characterisation by encapsulating the exploitation of the poor at the hands of the rich, who are seen as “briganti” (“swindlers”), and as such is a typically Boccaccian “nome parlante”, on which see Zaccarello 2003.

Chi al pianterren più rimarrà non so.
(Belli 1975, III, 622)

LI DU' GGENER'UMANI

Noi, se sa, ar Monno semo ussciti fori
impastati de mmerda e dde monnezza.
Er merito, er decoro e la grannezza
sò ttutta marcanzia de li Signori.

A su' Eccellenza, a ssu' Maestà, a ssu' Artezza
fumi, patacche, titoli e sprennori;
e a nnoantri artigiani e sservitori
er bastone, l'imbasto e la capezza.

Cristo creò le case e li palazzi
p'er prncipe, er marchese e 'r cavajjere,
e la terra pe nnoi facce de cazzi.

E cquanno morze in crosce, ebbe er penziere
de sparge, bbontà ssua, fra ttanti strazzi,
pe cquelli er zangue e ppe nnoantri er ziere.
(II, 36)

[We, it's well known, came out into the world covered in shit and scum. Merit, honour and grandeur are the stuff of the rich. For His Excellency, His Majesty, His Highness, titles and splendours, and for the rest of us artisans and servants, the stick, the cudgel and the halter. Christ created houses and palaces for the prince, the marquis and the nobleman, and the ground for us shitfaces. And when he died on the cross, he was thoughtful enough, out of the goodness of his heart, and amid all that agony, to shed blood for them and pus for the rest of us.]

Whilst Belli's voice can still be recognised in the standard sonnet, the poem pales into insignificance beside its dialect counterpart and does so precisely because of the language of delivery. The effect of the standard, that is the language of the learned or upper classes, is to betray the professed neutrality of the presentation. The portrait of the social ladder is thus painted from an implied position of bias, from the luxury of indifferent detachment associated with the bourgeois writer, lending the poem a rather diluted and confused message. The force of the Romanesco vision, on the other hand, comes from the expert delineation of the committed poetic voice: the persona's plight and that of his fellow caste is harmoniously presented, with the wholly biased yet authentic position being expressed through their own identifiable and impassioned language. The register is created in a number of ways in "Li du' ggener'umani." In

addition to the profanity, for instance, there are fewer narrative verbs than in “Le classi sociali” and a greater reliance on listing, suggesting a more direct idiom, though by no means rhetorically weaker. Indeed, the Romanesco displays a greater lexical breadth. Similarly, the portrayal of the social gap is then backed up poetically in several ways. The voice is established from the very first word, the collective pronoun “noi”, which resonates through each unit of verse, alternating with the more emphatically marginal “noantri” on which idea the poem concludes. Otherness and exclusion are also stressed from the outset by “fori”, itself conspicuously coupled with “Signori” in the first of a series of binary oppositions played out by end- rhymes. “Monnezza” is paired antithetically with “grannezza” and “palazzi” is undercut by the disyllabic “cazzi”. Perhaps the starkest opposition is contained in the rhyme pair of “Artezza”, which draws attention explicitly to the unreachable apex of the social hierarchy, and “capezza”, meaning “cavezza” or “halter”, which demotes the popolino to animalistic baseness, perhaps with a propensity for unruly rebellion, yet hardly worthy occupiers even of the bottom rung of the social ladder. “Capezza”, however, is equally suggestive of “capezzale” and illness, which when taken with other details is highly connotative of Kristeva’s concept of the abject. Abjection has often been associated with marginalized groups including the poor, but here such a reading seems strengthened by their associations with waste, their identities presented as mere by- products of subjectivity. Members of the underclass are “impastati de mmerda” (ironically contrasted at the phonic level with the “merito” of the ruling classes), and where the rich are made of honourable blood, the poor are made of “ziere” which strongly suggests coagulation and repulsion (even in its culinary sense it remains a by-product), signifying exclusion from the symbolic order. Inequality is certainly not skin deep; physiological otherness courses through the veins. The popolino is thus the class that is rejected absolutely by social reason, and condemned to occupy a space of liminality, even if Belli appears to implicate the divine in this wrongdoing. It is plain to see why some have considered this poem as “il colmo di quell’indignazione che innesca la protesta sociale del poeta nell’opera intera” (Belli 1988, V, 404).

There is no suggestion of idealism in this portrayal of the poor, however. Significantly, Belli’s social protest is essentially left in the largely incapable hands of his characters. For this reason, he cannot ultimately be seen as part of the nineteenth-century literary movement of populism, often associated with the social reform espoused directly by the likes of Herzen and Tolstoy in the Russian context. According to one definition, populism: