The Centre and the Margins in Eighteenth-Century British and Italian Cultures

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Edited by

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OFF THE BEATEN TRACK: THE MARGINAL IN MAINSTREAM CULTURAL CONNECTIONS BETWEEN GREAT BRITAIN AND ITALY[*]

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An Introduction

I would like to advance a few reflections that will probably take me "off the beaten track,"[1] as a well-known metaphor of travel writing would suggest, in an effort to highlight what is marginal in mainstream connections between the two countries under scrutiny—Great Britain and Italy.

If we examine the terms "margin" and "centre," the *OED* for Margin *n*. is not particularly illuminating, providing the obvious definitions most of which are still in use, a fixity which proves curiously at odds with the instability of the relevant frame of reference. In point of fact, according to current usage (Collins Cobuild 1995), the two terms "margin" and "centre" are usually employed to mean absolutely opposite referents— "margin" and "centre," "marginal" and "mainstream," are contrary and parallel terms, and are hard to connect. Actually, the interesting thing is

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[*] *Most of the topics discussed in the essays published in the following pages were at the core of a two-day rendezvous in York in September 2011. What is here finalized in essay form is the development of those discussions and it is hoped it can constitute a useful and stimulating investigation into a fascinating issue:"The Centre and the Margins in Eighteenth-Century British and Italian Cultures." Professor Frank O'Gorman and myself took it upon ourselves to stimulate responses from eighteenth-century scholars from different areas of the world who had something to say on the topic from the point of view of various disciplines. The results can easily be inferred from the Table of Contents: a shared emphasis on Literature and on the Visual Arts and a solitary but highly emblematic foray into Science, with Philosophy playing a connecting role in the form of Aesthetics.*

the instability of their connotations not only in the period we are analyzing but, as a matter of fact, in almost all historical periods. One thing that guided our discussions here was the necessity of avoiding the anachronism implicit in any talk of what is conventional and normal and what is different and marginal, since these categories are by no means "given" once and for all, but are continuously redefined. Andrea Gatti's paper will discuss these theoretical problems with competent philosophical insight in the opening paper of the Section on "Philosophy, Arts and Science." Therefore, in order to establish and to determine what and how—in eighteenth century culture—was marginal, and what eventually struggled to become central and mainstream, it is necessary to take up a definite stance with regard to the cultural process that took place during the century. The movement from periphery to centre will be followed and witnessed in the capacity of different forms of culture to speak for themselves through a process of becoming "public" in one way or another (for example print, painting or scientific experiment).

Categories such as marginal and mainstream, and the actual relationships between them, can also become a privileged stance for analyzing and understanding the mechanisms through which the eighteenth century identity process was being built. I would also point out from the start that culture marginality in itself could be taken as—perhaps paradoxically—a quality allowing greater freedom in comparison with the mainstream. It is true that centrality affords authority, strength, belief in one culture, one perspective, while marginality is the *locus* of exposition to solitude and differences (in cultures and perspectives). But being at the margins can definitely shape and influence subjects, entailing higher awareness and wider perspectives. Moving at the borders is certainly not easy, but also only slightly conditioned by rules and customs.

Next, at the risk of stating the obvious, I would like to briefly point out some peculiarities of the two countries Great Britain and Italy and their cultures in terms of marginality and centrality. Great Britain in the eighteenth century, though geographically and structurally marginal (as an island in the northern sea), had gradually but steadily gained a central position among the European powers, especially after 1763, and was rapidly expanding its power to the East, the West and the South of the globe, thus taking on a centrality whose boundaries now extended to include the Orient. On the other side Italy, the former core of European civilization, was an open air museum to travellers but economically and politically at the margins.[2] Within Great Britain, literally the most marginal of places were the colonies, but the impact of India on British culture at large is acknowledged as a complex aspect of the cultural

negotiations taking place in the last part of the eighteenth century. It is in fact in this century that the two concepts of centre versus margin/periphery start to make sense, where the centre is obviously Great Britain and the periphery the new colonies. Italy, on the other hand, was itself a borderline country, separating Europe from the exotic culture of the East and the South.

From the standpoint of a scholar of literature, similarly, there is no doubting the instability of the canon of national literatures—a kind of instability capable of moving mainstream works from the centre to the periphery, and marginal ones into focus. Of course, no official canon of English Literature as such[3] existed before Samuel Johnson's first ordering of the Poets (1779–81), in spite of his protestations;[4] however, a canon of sorts had been evolving both before and during the century. Still, the fundamental stance of the eighteenth century for modern conceptions of the canon is probably also undeniable—witness Blair's *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1783) that, together with his edition of the first vast compilation of *The British Poets* (44 vols., 1773), could stand as a Scottish precursor to Johnson's *English Poets*.

A cursory browse through the English Literature handbooks available to Italian undergraduates in the 1960s reveals the central position of authors and texts that are now considered to only partially reflect Western culture and the canon, marginal *genres* and authors having in the meantime moved into the main sphere. According to a very picturesque term employed by Rosamaria Loretelli,[5] the canon of eighteenth century literature appears to be now "*frastagliato ai bordi*" (indented, jagged at the margins) thanks to the inclusion of many female writers who are also being translated into Italian. The eighteenth century circulation of culture not only provided stimuli to the theory of reception but also the process of translation. Thus, a good history of reader response should allow us to establish a viable map of movements to and from the mainstream and to study the circulation of texts within and across countries. Translation is a focal aspect of this process and a very interesting document in this direction is provided by Stanphill-Donato's joint paper on Carlo Gozzi's translation of Cleland's *Fanny Hill* (1764).

Thus, a number of texts that used to be marginal to the point of not even being mentioned in footnotes are now quietly assumed to be part of the canon of the individual national literatures. It is reasonably well acknowledged that genres that had been relegated to the margins of the literary world in fact exhibited an extremely solid anchorage in contemporary culture, and were actually writings at the margin of history. I am referring in particular to those genres that were not received as

literary proper, like letters, journals and private notes, frequently the medium for the very popular genre of travel literature, and sometimes just a mode of it. Autobiographical writing was also marginal, remaining for a great part of the century a utilitarian or practical prose form, particularly with women's production.

The metaphor of the "beaten track" employed at the beginning of this introduction is taken from a seminal book on nineteenth-century tourism that undertook to record the shifts in tourists' attitudes. It serves my purpose here mainly as a fair image of "common" versus "unusual," easy roads versus untrodden paths, and as an introduction to the topic of travelogue that I mean to assume as a paradigmatic example. Travel literature in the eighteenth century in fact provides both extremes of the picture—from the repetitive stereotypical itineraries and reports (from Addison on) to rare but fertile forays into wild areas, Mary Montagu's oriental scenes at the beginning of the century compared with Elizabeth Craven's late Eastern Journeys (1789), or Mary Wollstonecraft's northern travels at the end of the century (1796). The shape-shifting quality of travelogues is probably responsible for both the initial marginality of its literary role and also for its subsequent slide into the mainstream channel of literature. Lidia De Michelis and Matteo Ubezio both take up the stance of the eighteenth-century traveller in order to question stereotypes, cultural differences and cosmopolitan urges.

Travel literature, the "most polyphonous of genres" as Mary Louise Pratt once defined it,[6] and the English gaze on Italy it prompted in the eighteenth century, is a strong instance of the relationships between the two countries, especially in light of the reason Pratt gives for such a polyphonic quality—its resistance to the "disciplined mediation of cultural differences." The Italian-traveller's gaze on Britain, as is well known, only attracted the careful attention of scholars in the last quarter of the twentieth century, even though the relationships between the two countries were at the core of noteworthy research carried out and published in Italy as early as 1911 by Arturo Graf.[7] However, very marginal attention was paid to travel books in that pioneering work. Although marginal in terms of recognition, the genre was certainly relevant for the number of published works and the impact on the mutual relationships between the two countries (Matteo Ubezio's paper plunges into this issue dealing with the infamous case Sharp-Baretti). Within a marginal genre, the marginality of women travelling with their companions or by themselves and sometimes writing their own travel accounts provides the interesting phenomenon of a marginalized gaze on marginal subjects.

Travel literature took it upon itself to thematize cultural differences, displacement and the possibility to offer a vicarious experience to the reader. If a travel book like Berkeley's journal of his travels to the south of Italy had been published in the course of the eighteenth century, a different picture of Italy would have been available, and a lot of information would have made southern Italy central to the analysis of British travellers, instead of being a *terra incognita*. Especially when compared with the almost contemporary Addisonian travel book, Berkeley's description of the most marginal of "Italies" acquires a tremendous poignancy. Certainly in the eighteenth century the traveller's gaze is not on the Book of God as it was with the pilgrims of the Middle Ages, and not yet on the Book of Nature of the late eighteenth century; rather, it is on the Book of Man. Most of the British writers, from Gibbon to Sharp to Smollett to Northall in the 1760s, communicate a stereotypical image of Italy as a superstitious land, to some extent brutalized and rendered idle by tyranny, yet still, in some respect, centred around human institutions and activities. De Michelis' paper on Alessandro Verri's letters from London highlights the sharp contrast between an attractive cosmopolitan centre (London) and the marginality of his Milanese milieu.

Travel can be transformed into a "transitive" action when both the traveller and the travellee are part of the picture. The writer of travel books works according to a metonymic procedure—from the detail of a road, from a family picture, a picture of the whole nation can be gleaned, an anticipation of what the art of photography was to effect by indicating the details, the particulars, and by losing the panoramic perspective. I think the best example is the Sternian Yorick "locus" of liminality, whose identity is constantly moving and ever defining itself, living on the border of fragility and duplicity. It is only when pushing beyond the limits that he can discover his identity.

But to resume our paradox about the freedom of marginality, I would like to examine the genre of the novel as it started to develop in the eighteenth century. The traditional picture is one of experiment, even anarchy, with experimental forms very different from one another popping up at various times during the century, but all in the end contributing to the settlement of the complex form we now recognize as the novel. Thus, a marginalized genre, possibly the most marginalized of genres, could capitalize on a freedom that mainstream genres could not afford, and in so doing gaining for itself the access to mainstream culture. Its movements from margins to centre have been related in many important books and still arouse the interest of scholars. Here, three papers are engaged with complementary issues. Rosamaria Loretelli's opening essay on Digression,

which seemed so ground breaking and encompassing as to serve as a perfect introduction to the whole literary section, illuminates the issue of form, while Nerozzi's paper on Ugo Foscolo's *Ortis* approaches the momentous shift to the sentimental novel and the role Richardson's *Clarissa* played in shaping the emerging Italian novel. Finally, Stanphill-Donato's paper on the Italian translation of *Fanny Hill* opens up the whole scene of translation and the Italian book market behind it.

Sometimes, the transition from marginal to mainstream could take many decades, as is instanced by the curious history of the Della Cruscans. This movement produced a very internationalist and poetically heterogeneous poetry thanks to a coterie of English poets who happened to be living in Florence in 1785 (among them was Hester Thrale Piozzi). They produced *The Arno Miscellany* (1784) and *The Florence Miscellany* (1785), a collection of amateurish works by British and Italian poets such as Pindemonte and Parini, addressed by the members to each other in an international climate and with very composite poetical characteristics, including a dominant theme of strong sentimentalism and sometimes erotic hues. In the Preface to the *Florence Miscellany,* Hester Piozzi insists on the occasional nature of the poems, whose authors had "no ambition to success" and were "aware that their book of poetry will have little influence on the present and future generations of readers."[8] However, the Dedication by William Parsons, who acted as editor, advanced a political dimension to the enterprise, refusing all patronage from the Prince, in order to "signal the opposition of the poets to the repressive Tuscan government of their day."[9] The name Della Cruscan was itself significant—the liberal Accademia della Crusca had been suppressed by Duke Leopold of Tuscany just a couple of years before in 1783. To refuse all patronage from the Prince meant to open for the poets a free space for literary expression. The poets acted in tight cooperation with Italian literati,[10] translated from the most famous authors like Dante and Petrarch, and actually contributed to introduce that strict link with Italian poetry that was to play such an important role in the Italian Risorgimento. The Della Cruscans were probably "the first to call British attention to the political situation of Italy" and can also be seen as anticipating Byron's experimentation in 1822 with *The Liberal*, also the product of a few British exiles in Italy and also advertised as an Anglo-Italian journal, in spite of Byron's denial of his interest in the movement.[11] Thus, marginal genres were not necessarily minor genres in terms of popular impact and dialogism, rather fostering exchanges and debates that went to the core of the culture of the time.

Sometimes the issue of marginality comes close to attaining the status of a mainstream field of research but without receiving the amount of light necessary to be visible. This is the case discussed in Silvia Granata's paper on the Italian natural philosopher Tiberio Cavallo, whose books in English she was able to approach thanks to the rich patrimony of eighteenth-century scientific books that is part of Lombardy's Enlightenment legacy.

As to the visual arts, a rich panorama is provided by three essays in the second section, where the connotation of marginality seems to shift to Britain and centrality to pertain to Italy. But in fact the balance is re-established as we examine the papers. Carly Collier discusses the significance of a strict canon of artistry for art patronage and production and the way British artists tried to resist it through the case studies of Thomas Patch and Augustus Wall Callcott, who published the first copies in England of important fresco cycles by *Tre-* and *Quattrocento* Italian artists. In his analysis of foreign artists' circles in Rome in the second half of the century, Tomas Macsotay focuses on the role played by British collector George Cumberland and on how the "Cumberland bequest" can allow us to reconstruct some aspects of the Roman market for contemporary art, so momentous for eighteenth-century British travellers. Finally, Rosalie McCrea really plunges us between the most marginal of British countries—Jamaica—and Rome through her analysis of the portrait painted by famous Pompeo Batoni of John Blagrove, apparently the only portrait of an Anglo-Creole Jamaican planter painted by an established Italian artist.

This Introduction would not be complete without at least a brief reference to a paper that should have been published here because of the interest it had aroused in York, but that cannot because its author is not with us any more. Angelo Canavesi, from the Università di Pavia, left us less than three months after our meeting at York. He left no written track of his essay, so it is only the memory of what he said that can provide some hint. He spoke of what, at the time, was the focus of his research— the philosophical and juridical notion of "person" and "individual" through a subtle analysis of eighteenth-century narratives, with Tobias Smollett's *Humphry Clinker* as a case study.

I can only conclude with someone else's words:

Che la terra ti sia finalmente lieve
Io non ho bisogno di denaro.
Ho bisogno di sentimenti,
di parole, di parole scelte sapientemente,

    di fiori detti pensieri,
    di rose dette presenze,
    di sogni che abitino gli alberi,
    di canzoni che facciano danzare le statue,
    di stelle che mormorino all' orecchio degli amanti.
    Ho bisogno di poesia,
    questa magia che brucia la pesantezza delle parole,
    che risveglia le emozioni e dà colori nuovi.
    (Alda Merini, *Terra d'Amore*, 2003)

Notes

[1] James Buzard, *The Beaten Track: European Tourism, Literature, and the Ways to Culture, 1800–1918,* (Oxford and New York: Clarendon Press, 1993).

[2] Frank O'Gorman, *The Long Eighteenth Century: British Political and Social History, 1688–1832* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1997)

[3] The *OED* for "canon," DRAFT ADDITIONS JULY 2002, has: **a.** *Literary Criticism.* A body of literary works traditionally regarded as the most important, significant, and worthy of study; those works of esp. Western literature considered to be established as being of the highest quality and most enduring value; the classics (now freq. in ***the canon***). Also (usu. with qualifying word): such a body of literature in a particular language, or from a particular culture, period, genre, etc., and provides examples from 1929 on. **b.** In extended use (esp. with reference to art or music): a body of works, etc., considered to be established as the most important or significant in a particular field. Freq. with qualifying word. Again examples start in 1977. So not only the concept was unknown, but no proper word existed to define what was valuable and what not. As a "rule" or "standard" quite obviously the idea of what is worth remembering has always existed. It was just the judgment of the contemporaries.

[4] The label "Johnson's Poets" appeared on the spines of 58 volumes of poetry, including two volumes of indexes, from Cowley to Gray. Johnson's reaction in his Letters complains rather sharply: "It is great impudence to put Johnson's Poets on the back of books which Johnson neither recommended nor revised. This is indecent." Samuel Johnson, *The Letters of Samuel Johnson 1731–1772*, ed. Bruce Redford (Princeton: The Hyde Edition, 1992–94), 5:32.

[5] Rosamaria Loretelli, "*Gli studi inglesi. Problemi e possibili prospettive*" in Anna Maria Rao, Alberto Postigliola (eds) *Il Settecento negli studi italiani. Problemi e prospettive,* (Roma: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2010), 468.

[6] Mary Louis Pratt, "Scratches on the face or the Country: or, what Mr Barrow saw in the Land of the Bushmen," in *Critical Inquiry* Vol.12, No.1 (1985), 141.

[7] Arturo Graf, *L'Anglomania e l'influsso inglese in Italia nel secolo XVIII* (Torino: Loescher, 1911)

[8] Silvia Bordoni, "Lord Byron and the Della Cruscans," The Byron Study Centre, The University of Nottingham, 2006.

[9] Silvia Bordoni, "Lord Byron and the Della Cruscans."
[10] Michael Gamer "'Bell's Poetics': *The Baviad,* the Della Cruscans, and the Book of *The World*," in *The Satiric Eye: Forms of Satire in the Romantic Period,* ed. Steven E. Jones (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003), 31–54.
[11] Silvia Bordoni, "Lord Byron and the Della Cruscans."

LITERATURE

TOWARDS A HISTORY OF DIGRESSION: A MARGINAL FORM AT THE CENTRE OF THE CANON[1]

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The chapters of a recent book entitled *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains*[1] are interspersed with four sections each labelled "a digression." The term recalls an ancient narrative form that was challenged, became marginal and was discarded between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, but appears to be resurfacing today in the hypertextual discourse discussed in the work.

The digression has a long history and one that, to the best of my knowledge, has yet to be written in full.[2] Only by doing so, however, can we ever understand the reasons for its existence, its transformations, the forces acting against it, and the possibility of its reappearance in the present. While the space of an article is certainly not enough to provide sufficient evidence for such a history, it does allow us to sketch out a framework and put forward a plausible interpretive hypothesis grounded on a body of sector-specific but consolidated studies, some of which are by the present author.

The digression stretches back as far as the oral epic, of which it is the constituent form. In a world where information was mostly passed from mouth to ear and lasted in time only if memorised, the oral epic recognised the digression as its structural element—not as simple rhetorical artifice but as absolute necessity. As is known, the oral poets composed (and indeed compose, where they still exist) their songs in the act of public performance, adapting them on every occasion to the particular audience

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[1] A slightly different Italian version of this article is in *L'antico nel moderno. Il recupero del classico nelle forme del pensiero moderno,* Annali della Uguccione Ranieri di Sorbello Foundation, 1, Concetto Nicosia, Gianfranco Tortorelli eds. (Bologna: Pendragon, 2013).

and situation. The stories were always the same and universally known, being drawn from the vast treasury of tradition and collective memory, but descriptions and themes were added for development in relation to the context and the listeners. As we know, this is how the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey* and the earliest medieval poems were born.

The singer's problem was speed. The song had to be constructed one verse after the other with no interruption so as to hold the listener's attention, and it was precisely for this reason that set modules were developed during the years of training for mechanical repetition in order to gain time. Some of these modules were of the lexical type, the so-called formulae, with descriptive epithets used to refer to characters always in the same terms—Hermes the Argeiphontes or slayer of Argus, flashing-eyed Athena, Odysseus the man of many devices.[3] Others were authentic digressions, "themes" found not only in the Homeric poems but also in the *Golden Ass*, *Beowulf*, the *Chanson de Roland* and the Arthurian cycle, like the banquet gathering of gods, peoples or warriors, lamentation over the death of a hero—which occurs six times in the *Iliad* alone—and festive scenes, of which the *Odyssey* presents no fewer than thirty-two.[4]

Albert Lord engaged with Milman Parry, the revolutioniser of Homeric studies, during the 1930s through field research in areas characterised by the highest rates of illiteracy and the survival of the oral epic. He observed that the oral poets had a story they meant to tell and a plan very clearly in mind when they began a song. But since they lacked any form of written aid and had to proceed at a certain speed so as to hold the listener's attention, they sometimes ended up being sidetracked into other tales: "a word may set off a chain of associations which the performer follows into a cul de sac from which only the skilled narrator can extricate himself."[5] These other tales are in fact narrative digressions that can—if everything works out and the singer does not lose the thread—become "stories within the story"[6] and constitute the labyrinthine pathways of the oral epic. As shown by Milman Parry, the narrative structure of the oral poems is therefore the result of bricolage, an "additive style," in which digression is the norm.[7]

As the oral narrative obviously did not codify its forms, it is not there that the digression found its theoretical legitimisation. This happened later in the oratory of the fifth century BC, where it was placed in the division of speech after the proemium and the narrative of the case as argued on either side, and before the epilogue. Aristotelian rhetoric, which is above all the art of reasoning, proof and truth, subsequently placed it at the service of argument and persuasion. Aristotle wrote in the *Rhetoric* about the departure from the subject of the discourse as enthymeme and

paradeigma (example), which are two different forms of digression. The former is more incisive, being syllogistic, deductive and general in character (II(B), 22), whereas the latter persuades by less obvious means. In the paradeigma, the causes and the effects are embodied in the facts related and it is by induction that those listening to the orator discover the analogy with the case constituting the object of the discourse and let themselves be convinced (II(B), 20). The truth thus emerges by itself in a certain sense.[8]

Digression was developed as a way of introducing new material in Cicero's rhetoric but without being assigned a precise position. Anywhere would do, as shown by the inclusion of the praise of Sicily and the abduction of Proserpine in the speeches against Verres (II, 2; IV, 106), as well as the celebration of the merits of Pompey in the oration in defence of Gaius Cornelius (*Pro Cornelio*, VII, 47). Enthymeme and example are still fundamental in Quintilian, but importance is also attached to amplificatory digressions, albeit in full awareness of the risk of losing the thread of discourse. As Quintilian wrote, "This part the Greeks call the παράκβασις (*parekbasis*), the Latins the *egressus* or *egressio*. But such sallies, as I remarked, are of several kinds and may be directed to different subjects from any part of the cause, as eulogies of men and places, descriptions of countries, or recitals of occurrences true or fictitious … as a speech may swerve from the right path in so many ways."[9]

The period from the second to the fourth century AD saw digression broken down into a series of "pieces," syntagmatic units juxtaposed in accordance with a rhapsodic model, from which the later medieval *topoi* probably originated. As Roland Barthes wrote, "Such a unit (landscape, portrait) … easily fits into the narrative, the continuum of the novel,"[10] which in any case maintained links with oratory. We refer to the Greek and Latin "novels" written in the period from the first century BC to the fourth AD,[11] in which digressions are frequent both as extended descriptions of places and as long narratives that interrupt the main story and halt its temporal flow. This "proclivity for the parentheric," to quote Shadi Bartsch,[12] emerges in Chariton's *Chaereas and Callirhoe*, *Daphnis and Chloe* by Longus and *Leucippe and Clitophon* by Achilles Tatius[13] but above all in the *Aethiopica* of Heliodorus, of which they form the constituent element.

Though composed in writing, the *Aethiopica* appears to have been usually read aloud at the time, as suggested by the presence of various hallmarks of orality,[14] including the exceptional length of the sentences which must have necessitated examination before reading in order to comprehend their meaning; the abundance of aphorisms and set themes

borrowed from tradition; and meta-narrative indications showing that reading to listeners was envisaged.[15] A further mark of orality is the rapid flow of events, which gives the impression of quick and superficial succession when silently read from a printed book today, an effect that probably did not obtain when the text was read aloud to an audience with all the accompaniment of gestures, tones of voice, movements of the body and pauses that slow down the narrative, arouse emotion in the listeners, and impart substance to the meaning.[16] This is probably what prompts the parallel frequently drawn today between Greek novels and modern para-literature and described by Massimo Fusillo as based on factors like "the repetitive character of their *topoi* and narrative situations, elementary psychological characterisation, absolute sentimental dominance, snobbish upper-class setting, reassurance in the inevitable happy ending, and abundant recapitulation to assist the reader."[17] In actual fact, some of these features—recapitulation and repetitive *topoi*—are directly connected with the oral tradition, and the others, although appearing also in many modern novels, are there represented in verbal forms that rid them of any sense of artless simplicity.

As a matter of fact, ancient narrative has this effect on us today because the way we read it is not appropriate to the medium for which it was created. We have direct, individual contact with these texts, now printed and hence susceptible to quick reading. Our impression of superficiality is largely attributable, in my view, to its lack of the verbal fullness to which modern narrative has accustomed us, being the result of the gradual replacement over the centuries of the physical context of oral performance with one created by the narrative word in texts. To quote David Olson, "The history of literacy … is the struggle to recover what was lost in simple transcription."[18]

As stated above, digressions constitute the structural body of the *Aethiopica* and their elimination would leave us with precious little. While the story begins with a narrator recounting the tale of Chariclea and Theagenes in the third person, Cnemon steps in almost immediately to tell his own long story to the listening protagonists. He is then followed in turn by Calasiris, Charicles and Sisimithres in an accumulation of first-person narratives embedded within one another—a series of narrative digressions.

Nor is there any lack in this text of descriptive digressions where cities, natural landscapes and people appear. Here is one example:

> When they had gone about two furlongs by the seaside, they moved straight toward the crest of the hill, and left the sea on their right hand. And having with difficulty gone over the top of the said hill, they hastened to a pool that lay on the other side thereof, the manner whereof was thus. The

whole place is called by the Egyptians The Pasture Land, about the which
is a low valley which receiveth certain exundations of the Nile, by means
whereof it becomes a pool, and is in the midst very deep, while about its
brims are marshes or fens. For look, as the shore is to the sea, so are the
fens to every great pool. In that place have the thieves of Egypt, however
many they be, their commonwealth. And as there is but little land above
the water, some live in small cottages, others in boats, which they use as
well for their house as for passage over the pool. In these do their women
serve them and, if need require, be also brought to bed. When a child is
born, they let him suck his mother's milk a while; but afterwards they feed
him with fishes taken in the lake and roasted in the hot sun. And when they
perceive that he begins to go, they tie a cord about his ankles and suffer
him only to crawl the length of the boat or the cottage, teaching him even
at the first after a new fashion to go by a halter. Many a herdsman is born
and bred in the pool, which he accounts to be his country and a sufficient
defence for the safety of the thieves. And for that cause all such people
flock thither, for they all do use the water instead of a wall. Moreover the
great plenty of weeds that groweth there in the moozy ground is as good as
a bulwark unto them. For by devising many crooked and cumbrous ways,
through which the passages to them by frequent use are very easy but to
others hard, they have made it a sure defence, so that by no sudden
invasion they may be endamaged. And thus much as touching the Lake,
and those rogues that inhabit the same.

   About the sun setting cometh home the captain with all his retinue.
Then took they the young couple from their houses and laid their prey
aboard certain boats, and the rest of the robbers that tarried at home, who
were a great number, ran to meet the captain from out of every part of the
fen, and welcomed him as if he had been their king.[19]

"The manner whereof was thus"—here the landscape appears almost
as it would in a periegesis, which describes a place minutely without a
story as a basis for selecting the elements for inclusion. While the
vegetation and water that conceal the robbers and protect them from attack
are relevant details with respect to the rest of the story, the information
about children is not; it is a simple excrescence that contributes nothing to
its overall economy.

   Yet, though partially extraneous and devoid of emotional colouring,
this description is placed at a strategically opportune moment, namely
when the protagonists, taken prisoner by a band of robbers, reach the top
of a mountain from where they can see the lake beside which the
community lives. The point which should be recalled here is that the
Aethiopica was written at the peak of Greek and Roman literacy.

   After the fourth century there came the great contraction of the Middle
Ages, when the epic rose again in the sphere of orality, this time in the

vernacular. Here, too, descriptive digressions are completely detached from the narrative. This can be seen in one of the many recordings transcribed by Albert Lord in Yugoslavia during the 1930s:

> Now the old woman went to the chest and took from it a bundle of clothing. First there were line breeches and a shir—not made on a loom, not spun, but woven of gold from Stambol. Then she gave him a breastplate and vest. The breastplate was made throughout of golden chain mail. On his shoulders she placed two golden caftans and on them two grey falcons. All this billowed on the young man's shoulders. Then she gave him a cloak, with twelve buttons, each one containing a litter of gold. And she gave him breeches of fine cloth, even of green Venetian velvet. They were of Bulgarian make. All the seams were covered with gold braid. Along the calves of his legs were concealed fasteners, and on them were woven serpents, their heads embroidered on the knees. At every step he took the snake swayed, and they might well have frightened a hero! Then she gave him his belt and weapons, in the belt two mother of pearl pistols, neither forged nor hammered, but cast in Venice. The butts were decorated with golden ducats, and their barrels were of deadly steel. The signs were of precious stones. Two small pistols they were, which shot well. Then he girded on golden powder boxes, and above them a curved sabre. The whole hilt was of yellow ducats, and the scabbard of deadly steel. On the hilt was a precious stone. He put on his head a four-cornered hat with twelve crosses. On one of them was the name of Niko, the standard-bearer, from Ćpanur hard by the Turkish border. Then he drew on his boots and leggings and took the saddlebags of Moroccan leather.[20]

What we have here is the arming of the hero, a *traditional* scene of the oral epic, and a recurrent *theme* like the banquet and the assembly. It appears strange to us because it does not take place realistically just before the battle but when the hero decides to set off and face the enemy, and therefore long before he needs to don his armour. This detailed scene of arming, the specific purpose of which is not our concern here, thus has no connection with the point in the narrative at which it occurs and interrupts the tale abruptly—digression in the highest degree.

As narrative gradually lost contact with the voice and the context of vocalised reading over the centuries, digressions in the form of occasional blocks of prolonged narrative or description became increasingly linked to the rest of the story. Gradual impoverishment of the situation (context) and reduced presence of the body—gestures, movements and voice reading aloud—was accompanied by progressive enrichment in the utterance (text), into which digressions dissolved to become one with the action. This long, slow process was not completed until the eighteenth century.[21]

Up to the fourth century AD, when the practice of reading attained its greatest extent in the Greek and Roman societies before the medieval hiatus, digression was still a fundamental element of the story, the only way to combine a number of narrative threads. With the subsequent rebirth of the oral epic in the Middle Ages, this time in the vernacular, we find it once again firmly rooted in the method of composition until the invention of printing with movable type.

In the second half of the fifteenth century, however, it began to constitute a problem. As Elizabeth Eisenstein writes with respect to the first generation of printer-scholars, contemporaries of Machiavelli:

> the preparation of indexes and other procedures entailed in copy-editing pointed scholarly activities in a somewhat different direction than had the preparation of orations, dialogues, and other occasional commemorative pieces which had preoccupied earlier humanists. Objections posed by the latter to the barbarous language and bookhands used by the schoolmen were supplemented by new objections to the barbarous arrangement of medieval compendia with their great mass of elaborate digressions and seemingly unrelated details.[22]

Digressions then became a subject of cultured debate, criticised on the one hand and recognised on the other as endowed with potential that made them irreplaceable, at least for the time being.

Let us now see what the criticism and the potential were, starting with the words of the first modern theorist of literature to identify the roles assigned to digression. In the early decades of the twentieth century Viktor Shklovsky pinpointed three particular functions:

> First, it makes it possible to bring new material into a novel. Don Quixote's discourses thus enabled Cervantes to introduce critical, philosophical and suchlike material into the novel. Much more important is the second function of digressions, namely to slow down the action … The third function of digression is to create contrast.[23]

We shall first translate this passage into still more modern terms and then take a look at what was said in this connection between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries.

Digressions introduce a variety of materials that may also clash with one another. They make possible, at least in principle, the presence in narrative of a polyphony of dialogically juxtaposed voices, which is the fundamentally democratic hallmark of the novelistic form. These are the first and third functions attributed by Shklovsky to digression, while the second is "to slow down the action," which can work for better or for

worse—better because it prevents a story from beginning and ending in no time at all. What would the hundreds of pages of the *Aethiopica* boil down to without digressions? Theagenes and Chariclea have decided to marry (their meeting and this decision are recounted in an analeptic digression, not as part of the primary narrative thread). They are taken prisoner for a couple of pages, then again for another couple of pages, and in the end are brought before Chariclea's parents, who recognise her as their daughter and give their consent to the wedding. This is all, perhaps a score of pages. The rest is digression, sometimes descriptive but mostly narrative. The second function that Shklovsky identifies—and considers the most important—is therefore the one that makes digression essential to the story as a way of slowing down the action and delaying the conclusion.

What did the rhetoricians and theorists of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries call these functions? They conflated the first and third in the term "variety," a characteristic of the world and an aesthetic element that gives pleasure when encountered. Digressions endow texts with variety, a positive element that can, however, also have the drawback of impairing the "unity" of the story, another source of pleasure and moreover one possessing cognitive and ethical value. While they prevent the story from reaching a conclusion too soon, digressions interrupt it, suspending its development and halting narrative time. In short, they distract the reader from the main thread.

It is in these terms that digression was discussed between the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries. Unquestionably an integral part of Baroque poetics and encountered at every turn in that era, it is, however, a form of discourse that extends beyond it in both directions. This must be stressed, otherwise there is the risk of reasoning only in terms of poetics and styles without seeing that some mental and aesthetic attitudes have broader implications and constitute the emergence of spontaneous tastes and needs with an epistemological basis. In point of fact, digression already existed in the Renaissance and outlived the Baroque.

Clear proof of this is provided for the French Renaissance by Gérard Milhe Poutingon's recent work *Poétique du digressif. La digression dans la littérature de la Renaissance*, which gathers together and examines a vast array of material on digressions in the expanded sixteenth century.[24]

In the Hispanic and Italian territories, as is known, the debate developed around chivalric romance such as Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* and Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata*. As an example, we have chosen a passage from the *Discorso intorno al comporre dei romanzi* (1543), where the author Giambattista Giraldi Cintio discusses whether a romance should recount a single action or a number of actions and states that he prefers

appigliarsi a molte attioni d'un huomo, che ad una sola. Perché mi pare che più sia atto questo modo al comporre in forma di Romanzi, che una sola attione. Però che porta questa diversità delle attioni con esso lei la varietà, la quale è di condimento del diletto, et si da largo campo lo Scrittore di fare Episodij, cio è digressioni grate.[25]

He also notes, however, that digressions "*rompono la continuatione e fanno vitiosa la favola.*"[26] While digressions are not condemned:

deve in queste digressioni essere molto avveduto il Poeta in trattarle di modo, che una dipenda dall'altra, et siano bene aggiunte con le parti della materia, che si ha preso a dire con continuo filo et continua catena, et che portino cõ esso loro il verosimile.[27]

Digressions are therefore pleasing and lend variety, but at the same time interrupt narrative continuity by their very nature.

This humanist was not the only one[28] to consider the significance and value of digressions. The dilemma of variety and unity was to remain unresolved until the late eighteenth century, when a way was found to secure both without resorting to digressions. If the disappearance of the gestures, tones of voice and pauses used in reading aloud to endow digressive tales with unity induced silent readers to perceive digressions as irreparable interruptions, in the eighteenth century it was the narrated context that took over the integrating function. Digressions were thus swallowed up by contexts created and enriched within the story itself; they were broken down into a host of details—adjectives, verbs denoting habitual and repeated actions, passing comments, and conversations that present the reader with a range of different viewpoints.

Let us now return to our survey of pre-eighteenth-century discussions about digression. Le Bossu, who took a keen interest in the narrative framework, wrote as follows in his *Traité du poème épique* (1674): "But can an author place in his poem nothing other than its subject matter? Or will he instead be free to include whatever he wants and, as Horace put it, to sew on some piece of rich and striking material unrelated to the background?" The answer is that an author does enjoy this freedom but only if what he includes also makes it possible: "to infer some incident that serves to account for a part of the action."[29] Further on, in a general discussion of "episodes," he states that these are acceptable only if they are "necessary parts of the action developed in plausible circumstances," and upon which the story as a whole rests (161). Those unconnected with one another are instead condemned: "This irregularity can be recognised when it is possible to remove an entire episode without putting anything in

its place and without this elimination causing any gap or defect in the poem" (157). In this case, the episode would be a digression.

The "episodes" lacking any connection with the rest of the text, and hence constituting digressions, are seen most decidedly as "irregularities." But what does this really mean? As suggested by Du Plaisir and stated a long time afterwards in lucidly convincing terms by Henry Home, Lord Kames, it is a cognitive element that has to do with the psychology of reading.

In the *Sentimens* [sic] *sur les Lettres et sur l'Histoire, avec des scrupules sur le style* (1683), Du Plaisir writes that digressions should be eliminated because: "the mixing of particular stories with the main story goes against the reader's wishes … Readers are annoyed and irritated when they are interrupted with the details of the adventures of people who interest them little." Their memory and patience are thus sorely tried.[30] It is therefore a question of perception and memory. Readers are irritated because they are forced to turn their attention from the characters in whom they have taken an interest and with whom they presumably identify.

And who are these readers? Certainly the ever-increasing ranks of those silently engrossed in reading and captivated by the text,[31] whose numbers attained critical mass when the eighteenth century was in full swing. "Narrative cohesion"[32] was the indispensable prerequisite to keep these readers glued to the text and so entranced as to go on reading all the way to the end.

The efforts made to keep the positive functions of digression alive while eliminating the negative ones are evident in eighteenth-century British writers. Joseph Addison criticised this device repeatedly in the *Spectator* at the beginning of the century, demonstrating a clear understanding of the problem but not of the existence of a solution. Having stated in one of his essays on Milton that *Paradise Lost*, the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid* are too full of episodes and digressions that constitute simple excrescences rather than parts of the action, he makes this assertion: "Digressions are by no means to be allowed of in an Epic Poem. If the Poet, even in the ordinary Course of his Narration, should speak as little as possible, he should certainly never let his Narration sleep for the sake of any Reflections of his own." Then, with reference to the slaying of Pallas by Turnus, he goes on to say that Virgil "went out of his way to make this Reflection upon it," and is therefore to be criticised for thus interrupting the story. His censure is, however, attenuated by acknowledgement that without a digression: "so small a Circumstance might possibly have slipped out of his Readers' Memory."[33]

Daniel Defoe is still more drastic with respect to digressions. He wants none in his narrative and prefers not to follow the stories of various characters. For example, Moll Flanders, the protagonist and narrating voice of the novel of the same name, listens attentively when her "Lancashire husband" tells her about his life during their long separation, but nothing of what he says is recorded in the text. As Moll says: "this is my story, not his." Nor is the primary narrative thread interrupted when one of Moll's lovers tells her about his wife's unfaithfulness: "he went on to tell me all the circumstances of his case, too long to relate here." The same thing happens when the friend who taught her the art of picking pockets recounts her adventurous life: "she … played a hundred pranks, which she gave me a little history of."[34] This is all we are told. In three situations where the narrative of antiquity and the sixteenth and seventeenth century would have embarked on long digressions, Defoe deliberately refrains.

Two more fathers of the novel expressed their views on this subject. While Samuel Richardson deplores works: "where the *Novelist* moves on, at his own dull Pace, to the End of his Chapter and Book, interweaving impertinent Digressions,"[35] Henry Fielding is prevented from eliminating them entirely by his aim of representing the "prodigious variety" of human nature, but seeks in any case to multiply their links with the main story.[36] Finally, Samuel Johnson joins in with an attack on authors guilty of "losing themselves and their Auditors in the Wilds of Digression, or the Mazes of Confusion."[37] In short, the question of digressions was still unresolved halfway through the eighteenth century.

Ten years later the Scottish philosopher Henry Home, Lord Kames, published the *Elements of Criticism* (1762), a book that was to prove very influential, and not only in the English-speaking world.[38] Its stated purpose was to "explain in what manner we are affected by uniformity and variety." Attention is focused on the reception of the text but within a perspective that goes beyond the elements of poetics to encompass an overall epistemological vision:

> The world we inhabit is replete with things not less remarkable for their variety than their number. These … furnish the mind with many perceptions, which, joined with the ideas of memory, of imagination, and of reflection form a complete train that has not a gap or interval[39] … Some emotions, by hurrying the mind from object to object, accelerate the succession, where the train is composed of connected objects the succession is quick … An unconnected object, finding no ready access to the mind, requires time to make an impression.[40]

The picture is clear—the great variety of things and people in the world offer stimuli to the human mind, whose thoughts are seamlessly connected with one another through relations of similarity, contiguity and causality. Literature, whose task it is to represent the variety of this world, must seek to recreate its effect in the reader's mind in accordance with the mind's rules of operation. Writers will therefore structure their stories so as to connect a diversity of elements through a narrative form capable of creating a virtual experience during the act of reading, similar to the one encountered by the mind in reality.

With the classical rules discarded, we find the "subject of artistic perception" at the very centre. It was this philosophical leap that led to the solution of the age-old problem of digressions and the creation of a narrative form that "silent readers could perceive" as endowed at once with unity and variety.[41] This marked the end of the long process during which digressions were progressively absorbed into the narration of facts, thus giving shape to the richly detailed plot acutely described, albeit within theoretical perspectives differing from mine, by Lia Guerra and Franco Moretti,[42] and for which empiricism initially supplied the vocabulary.[43] In this way, written narrative discourse takes over all the functions that oralised reading assigned to gestures, tones of voice and pauses. It is certainly no coincidence that digression was the last characteristic of the oral epic to disappear.[44]

In my view, it is against this background that we must observe the use and misuse of digressions on the part of Laurence Sterne. *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* (1760–67) is usually interpreted, following Viktor Shklovsky, as a text seeking to debunk an already codified novelistic form. Proof of this is supposedly provided by the use of a digressive style for which the Russian Formalist sees precursors only in *Don Quixote* and *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. He regards the novel form in Sterne, like Futurist writing and the paintings of Picasso, as "the violation and shifting of customary forms."[45]

In actual fact, no codified form of the novel as yet existed in 1760, and Sterne's was a narrative experiment like others, albeit certainly one that was deliberately impracticable and took aspects of contemporary culture, not least philosophical associationism, to paradoxical extremes.[46]

Shklovsky was therefore mistaken. It should be noted, however, that his interest in Sterne was of an exclusively formal rather than historical or generative nature. He chose *Tristram Shandy* in order "to illustrate the general laws of the *plot*," distinguished in his theory from the *fabula* by the presence of "inserted material." It is from this standpoint alone that his

view of Laurece Sterne's novel as the most typical in world literature does
not prove contradictory.

Described by the author as "rhapsodical" (I,13). Sterne's compositional
system is the one attributed by the associationist philosophy and
psychology of the age to the "idiosyncratic" mental processes, which he
uses for comic purposes. At the same time, his assertion that "I shall
confine myself neither to his (Horace's) rules, nor to any man's rules that
ever lived" (I, 4) simply repeats in different words the programme of
Richardson and Fielding, who also opposed the classical rules.

The problem clearly highlighted by Sterne was once again how to
reconcile variety and unity, which he places in the very centre of his stage:

> Digressions incontestably are the sunshine;—they are the life, the soul of
> reading;—take them out of this book for instance,—you might as well
> take the book along with them;—one cold eternal winter would reign in
> every page of it; restore them to the writer;—and he steps forth like a
> bridegroom,—bids All hail; brings variety, and forbid the appetite to fail.
> (*Tristram Shandy*, I, 22)

How splendid this agent of variety is! But a perverse force is at work
within it. If an author "begins a digression,from that moment, I observe his
whole work stands stock still,—and if he goes on with his main work,—
then there is an end of his digression" (I, 22). But, the author assures us, "I
constantly take care to order affairs so, that my main business does not
stand still in my absence."

The last assertion is another paradox, but not one to be addressed here.
We shall rather point out that Sterne says nothing in the three quotations
other than what had been repeated for centuries—it is necessary to ensure
that the digressive material does not block the main story and sever its
narrative thread.

While *Tristram Shandy* was not translated into Italian until 1922, it
circulated in Italy throughout the nineteenth century in a French version.[47]
As Giancarlo Mazzacurati wrote, it had a crucial influence on the
development of the Italian tradition of humour, particularly the work of
Ippolito Nievo,[48] upon which the critic called for scholarly efforts—now
marshalled by Ugo Olivieri[49]—to examine the "exchange and elaboration
of material."

In discussing digressions in Italian narrative, however, attention is
immediately attracted by Alessandro Manzoni,[50] who addressed this point
in the drafting and organisation of his novel. Let us take a brief look at
some aspects of this with all due caution and humility.[51]