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***Waiting for Unity:
The Hopes and Disappointments of Exiles***

1. Since Dante’s time, the idea that Italy, heir to the Roman Empire, is an impoverished and divided nation is accompanied by the hope for a rebirth, by the expectation of a unitary state and a renewed society.

Well-known hopes and delusions have been expressed in the past by poets and literary figures (Dante, Petrarch), political theorists (Machiavel, Guicciardini), and historians (Cuoco) who felt like they were exiles in a homeland that they did not recognize as their own.

By the way, this is a tragic attitude of people who were patriotic without having a homeland, of people, like the Neapolitan Jacobins, who according to Vincenzo Cuoco, had their feet in Naples and their heads in Paris (not to speak of many Italians who, after World War II had their feet in Italy, but their head either in Moscow or in Washington or in the Vatican City).

Looking back to the past, for Dante or Machiavel, however, the passage from desire to action was blocked. The unbridgeable distance between aspirations and reality gave way to invective, nostalgia, rhetoric, or cynicism. This is why no movement of national liberation arose until the 1820’s.

In the space of one year, from 1821 to 1822, aroused by Piedmontese and Neapolitan movements of 1821, hopes (quickly disappointed) were reborn and took shape for a reawakening of Italy from its political torpor, hopes for liberation from Italy’s servitude to the Austrian empire and from the politics of the Holy Alliance.

A Veltro had been long awaited, a liberator who would rise from Italy’s bosom or who would come from outside—a Henry VII or a Duke Valentine. The hope was that

Italians would now free themselves by themselves, that they would take up arms, that they would act. It was a matter of taking a decisive step from theory to action, from regret for glories past to the difficult construction of the future. From the insurrections in Naples and Piedmont in 1821 to the fall of the Roman Republic in 1849, from the attempts of Ciriaco De' Amico to the expeditions of the Bandiera brothers in 1844 and Carlo Pisacane in 1857, the history of that period is riddled with failures. Many of those who conspired and fought either died or, in successive waves, were locked in prison or forced into exile.¹

We have significant testimony, both literary and historical, of this fluctuation between hope and disappointment, between realistic disillusionment that led to abandonment of every project of national redemption and the necessity of not becoming discouraged and trying again every time. I will principally examine aspects of the two-year period from 1821 to 1822, the dawning of national insurrections. I will distinguish two typologies: first, the echo within great literature of the events of people who, disappointed in waiting for political change, felt pushed back in this historical phase into an interior sphere, driven to give voice to their sentiments on a poetic level. The second typology concerns the protagonists of the insurrections and plots who were subsequently condemned to death, prison, or exile.

A brief note. After the Carbonari in Naples had together requested a constitution on the Spanish model and the Austrian army had launched an expedition to repress those movements, the Piedmontese patriots, guided by Santorre di Santa Rosa, had contacted the heir to the Sardinian throne—the young prince of Carignano, Carlo Alberto—to declare war on Austria and, having passed the Ticino river, to invade Lombardy-Venetia, joining the conspirators in Milan. This phase could be said to begin symbolically on March 10, 1821, when the rebel troops of Alexandria raised the tricolor flag for the first time. You may recall that at the last minute, on the March 22, Carlo Alberto —“The Italian Hamlet”—withdrew from the enterprise, the insurrection failed, and with the return of his brother Carlo Felice from Modena, a harsh repression followed.

2. Precisely because it is better known, and yet not understood on a historical and theoretical level, I will begin with Manzoni’s poem “March 1821” and the chorus of Act III of *Adelchi* (published in 1822). Then I will analyze the testimony of an exile of the 1820’s, Carlo Beolchi.

Both works by Manzoni were composed during and immediately after the failure of the uprisings of 1821. In the poem, the insurrection is transformed according to the logic of desire, imagining in a dazzling manner—according to that “agile hope” that “ran through the events” evoked in *Adelchi*—that the Italians, with Carlo Alberto aligned on the side of the rebels and guiding the Sardinian-Piedmontese army, had effectively crossed the Ticino to wage war on Austria and thus begin the unification of Italy. For reasons of censorship, the poem would be published only in 1848 by the provisional government that succeeded the Five Days of Milan):

They swore: no longer would this wave

Flow between two foreign banks;
 It will not be a place where barriers rise
 Between Italy and Italy—never again!²

After the “betrayal” of Carlo Alberto and the conviction of the patriots, in *Adelchi* we become aware of the illusory character of the desires for national redemption, and we can reflect with resignation on the frustrated hopes. It is as if Manzoni realized that now, just as in the past, the Italians would always remain a “a people who have lost their name,” incapable (despite the generous attempts of a few) of emancipating themselves on their own.

In this drama, the descendants of the Italic peoples awake for a moment from their own passive torpor at the news that the Franks are defeating their masters, the Longobards (this was a backward projection of the struggles just completed between the Napoleonic and Austrian armies). The Italians are represented this way in famous verses as they emerge from the ruins of their past greatness and temporarily suspend their servile efforts (“Within mossy mansions, among city ruins, / Within silent forests, in hot noisy forges, / Among furrowed pastures by servants’ sweat sprinkled.”). Manzoni effectively points out the hesitation and uncertainty at the prospect that the Franks would liberate them from Longobard oppression. These common people “easily gather, then tremble and part, / And through twisted paths, with wandering steps, / With fear and desire, advance and recede.”

The bitter conclusion is that it is deceptive to believe that strangers might come to undermine the rule of those oppressing a people and give them their freedom:

Thus, how can you hope that, as their sole reward,
 These brave ones intended to bring you deliverance,
 To bring to an end the pains of some strangers?
 Return to your ruins replenished with pride,
 To the unmanly work of the hot, noisy forges,
 To those furrows sprinkled with the sweat of slaves.
 The brave ones will merge with the people they vanquished;
 The masters of old will remain with the new ones;
 They will steer together the plough that you pull.
 They jointly will own all the cattle and the men.
 They are taking possession of blood-drenched pastures,
 Belonging to a people who have lost their name.³

This bitter lesson of history was already known by the Jacobins and the by Italian patriots who had waited in vain for freedom from the French in 1798 and who felt tricked when, with the treaty of Campoformio, General Bonaparte ceded the Republic of Venice to Austria in exchange for the Duchy of Milan and, with the Treaty of Tolentino in 1797, seized the Papal State’s works of art. Foscolo’s disappointment, as is well known, was letterarily entrusted to the *Last Letters of Jacopo Ortis*. (This disillusionment is common to other peoples, as is shown by the reactions of the

German patriots to the treaty of Ranstadt, also in 1798, with which the French annexed the Rhenish ecclesiastical principalities of Cologne, Mainz, and Trier.)

3. Between the exiles of the failed Piedmontese movement and of the Lombard Carbonari conspiracies of 1821, there are, in addition to the most widely known names of Santorre di Santa Rosa, Silvio Pellico, and Federico Confalonieri, the lesser-known one of Carlo Beolchi, on whom I will focus.

Beolchi was part of that group of condemned men who moved and marked the destiny of the young Mazzini when he met them departing for exile from the port of Genoa, particularly when he saw a tall and bearded man who asked in a dignified manner for charity for the banished.

Beolchi had participated in the Piedmontese Carbonari uprisings of 1821, had promulgated the Spanish constitution (took as a model) together with Capitano V. Ferrero in the Piedmontese village of San Salvaro, and had courteously refused the hospitality of a Genovese patriot who, evading police surveillance, managed to bring him to his home. Returning with the others, he embarked on the brigantine *Licurgo*, bound for Spain. Here he continued to fight valiantly, defending Cartagena and finally, after the defeat of the Spanish constitutionalists, going from Gibraltar to Great Britain, where he remained from 1824 and where he earned his living first by giving private lessons in Italian and then by teaching at Queen's College. Condemned to death in 1824 by the royal Piedmontese government and given amnesty in 1842, he returned to Torino only in 1850. In London in 1830, Beolchi published the book *Reminiscences from Exile*, in which he related his adventures and repeated some *topoi* that, fruit of direct experience, can be found in all exiles.

Not to be confused with banalities, these commonplaces are similar to the piazzas and meeting places where human beings exchange their products and elaborate their lives. These are the places where the experiences and questions that anyone might share can not find the adequate words. Paradoxically, most of us do not know how to give voice to what is important, as if there were no word for it. This is how the experiences with which people are most likely to become involved and suffer through, those that strike everyone (birth, death, love, joy, suffering), end up seeming like the poorest. The pain of exile and the hopes for return, merged with the shame for the sad conditions of one's enslaved homeland and the acute desire for its redemption, are examples of such commonplaces. This is why, in their memoirs and poems, exiles continuously reiterate their feelings that although they are back in their homeland, they do not belong to it.

4. Let us try to imagine all the acts of eradication and of removal that are decreed publicly, beginning with the ritual ones (typical of some primitive societies), to ostracism, banning, and deportation to remote islands or unhealthy areas, and on to mass expulsions. Not only individuals but more or less broad groups—and even entire populations—have been expelled from their communities of origin. In ancient Greece, exile even involved the dead, because the bones of ancestors and family members of the exiled were often disinterred and cast outside the boundaries of the State.

But we might also think of the forced exile in 1819 of the entire Greek population of Parga, which had been ceded to the Turks by the English. This episode is recalled by Giovanni Berchet in his poem “The Refugees of Parga” (“I profughi di Parga”) from 1821 (which he wrote while in Belgian exile), and it was depicted by Francesco Hayez in his 1831 painting *The Inhabitants of Parga Abandoning Their Homeland*. Or, moving forward in time, we might think of the deportation, after 1872, of the French Communards defeated in Guyana and New Caledonia or of the Germans from the Volga and of the Tartars from Crimea torn from their own regions in Stalin’s Soviet Union. Or looking closer to home, we can note the expulsion of the Italians from Istria after the Second World War, because of their identification with the Fascists and due to Yugoslav retaliation. All of these peoples—and we are talking tens of millions of them—lost both home and homeland at the same time.

An enormous accumulation of pain and nostalgia is hidden behind every exile or emigration, behind the innumerable separations from loved places and people. After all, each of us experiences separation continuously in our lives: from the bodies of our mothers, from parents, from friends, from our own cities. Individual and social existence is a series of alternating separations and reunions, of fractures and repairs, of goodbyes to the past and discoveries of the new. It is as if we are continuously like cut off from ourselves and from others, from the houses of our birth and from our communities of origin: isolated, worn down, or rendered bitter from pain and from separation (an aspect that is often forgotten when we think of immigrant, having in mind our own discomfort and not theirs). For the most part, we struggle to get used to the separation and to find reasons for it, especially when it coincides with an irreparable loss. Thus, we survive separations by elaborating different strategies that permit us to stand once again above the sorrowful feeling of loss.

Those in a position of power who banish individuals and peoples have the intention of cutting the exiles’ roots, in the expectation that they might wither and die. This sort of exile is presented as more “humane” than assassination or genocide. And in fact, some redemption is possible. Someone who has lived in exile or as an emigrant has been subjected to the supreme test: that of reformulating himself and learning, in a foreign and often hostile environment, rules established for a world that is not his own. He must become a sort of amphibian, a being capable of living simultaneously in two worlds, inside and outside his original habitat. This is how exile makes someone less provincial; it constitutes a sort of pollination between different national cultures.

One element common to all these experiences is the sense of unreality that one feels immediately after his sentencing or defeat. That’s how it was for Silvio Pellico in the forth chapter of his book *Le mie prigioni*: “Waking up the first night in prison is a horrible thing! ‘Could it be possible!’ I said, remembering where I was. ‘Could it be possible: me, here? And it’s not a dream? Was it yesterday that they arrested me? Yesterday when they made me undergo that long interrogation? What about tomorrow, and who knows how long this will continue? Was it last night that I cried so much, before falling asleep, thinking of my parents?’”⁴

It was also this way, in a form even more intense and devastating, for Giuseppe Mazzini, who, after the fall of the Roman Republic in 1849, wrote in the moment of his

greatest dejection: "I can neither sleep nor wake as I would like, nor contemplate, nor act [...]. All sensations seem to me more a memory than something current. And action, the possibility of action, vanishes in the distant future."⁵

5. "Why," Beolchi asks himself in the preface to his *Reminiscences from Exile*, "does he who has fallen into misfortune find so much comfort in relating his case to others? Could it be that vanity has a place among bad luck? Or is this a revenge of the unlucky against the injury of fortune, publishing its wrongs, and trying to make others pity his suffering?"⁶

The response is, first, the need to share with others an intolerable pain at the loss of one's "sweet homeland" and for having passed "in cruel vicissitudes, the most florid days" of youth.⁷ For an exile saying farewell at the time of his departure, "the fearsome face of future troubles cries out that everything is over for you, all of your hopes extinguished, every plan ruined, that the star that shone above your days has set [...]. I wept for the deep, irreparable disaster of my homeland; I wept for my florid youth (and that of so many other), which saw itself led from the pleasant theater of joyful hopes to such a bitter situation in the brief space of a month."⁸

Second, we can ascribe Beolchi's need to write memoirs (but not only his) to the duty to "give honored name to so many of my companions of misfortune who perished, glorious, fighting for freedom in Spain." Here we begin to sketch out a fundamental characteristic of Italian exiles: their "internationalism" or cosmopolitanism, their inclination to fight anywhere they might find themselves (Spain, Portugal, Greece, South America) in the name of freedom of oppressed peoples.

Mazzini and Garibaldi followed this course on a grand scale. Mazzini, friend of Thomas Carlyle, author of *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (1841),⁹ was waiting for an Italian "genius" capable of uniting "thought and action" and becoming the catalyst of people, though remaining far from every sort of nationalism. For Mazzini, however, history is not the biography of great men: "The great men of the earth are but the marking-stones on the road of humanity: they are the priests of its religion. [...]. There is yet something greater, more divinely mysterious, than all the great men,—and this is the earth which bears them, the human race which includes them, the thought of God which stirs within them, and which the whole human race collectively can alone accomplish."¹⁰ Garibaldi, who for a time Mazzini considered to be this genius,¹¹ had as his model "a man who, by becoming cosmopolitan, adopts humanity as his country and, by offering his sword and his blood to every people that struggles against tyranny, becomes something more than a soldier: he becomes a hero."¹²

Many people from all social classes generously struggled for the unity of the nation. Alessandro Manzoni, in "March 1821," hoped that the Italy that was yet to unite would become:

One in arms, in language, in altar,
Of memories, of blood, and of heart.¹³

It would take another forty years to reach this goal, even if all of those factors that are not strictly necessary to form the national identity, except for “language” and, possibly, “heart”—the feeling of belonging. Religion and “blood” no longer constitute discriminating factors for belonging to the nation, nor do they characterize the entire figure of the citizen. Within the frame of globalization and the transformation of the cultures and customs of many western societies, what really seems to be lacking, particularly in Italy, is precisely “memory” and “heart”, that is the sense of belonging to a State and a community. And this is why it looks very difficult to come out from its decline.

Notes

1. There are now new and rich studies on Italian exiles. I note only, among the most recent: Agostino Bistarelli, *Cittadini del mondo? Gli esuli italiani del 1820-1821* (Viterbo: Edizioni Sette città, 2007), pp. 5-21; Donna R. Gabaccia, *Class, Exile and Nationalism at Home and Abroad: The Italian Risorgimento*, in *Italian Workers of the World: Labor, Migration, and the Making of Multi-Ethnic Nations*, ed. Ead and Fraser Otanelli (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), pp. 21-40; Grégoire Bron, *The Exiles of the Risorgimento: Italian Volunteers in the Portuguese Civil War (1832-34)*, pp. 427-444; Maurizio Isabella, *Risorgimento in Exile: Italian Émigrés and the Liberal International in the Post-Napoleonic Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
2. Alessandro Manzoni, “Marzo 1821,” vv. 5-8.
3. Alessandro Manzoni, *Adelchi*, Act III, Scene IX. English translation, *Alessandro Manzoni’s The County of Carmagnola and Adelchis*, trans. Federica Brunori Deigan (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), pp. 267-269.
4. Silvio Pellico, *Le mie prigioni*, Milano 1832, cap. IV.
5. G. Mazzini, *Edizione Nazionale. Scritti editi e inediti di Giuseppe Mazzini*, cit., vol. XL, p. 222.
6. Carlo Beolchi, *Reminiscenze dall’esilio* (London, 1830), pp. v, 93.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. vi-vii.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. vii, 3.
9. See Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (Lincoln and London, 1966) in particular, pp. 12-13, 198-199, where the author laments the disappearance of heroes in contemporary society, where they do not have the opportunity to assert themselves. But for the cult of the hero, even the literary ones

(Ivanhoe, D'Artagnan) central to nineteenth-century nationalism, see Lucy Riall, *Garibaldi: Invention of a Hero* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007).

10. Mazzini, *Scritti editi e inediti*, vol. XXIX, pp. 92-94 (the original is in English). See also, *Essays: Selected from the Writings, Literary, Political, and Religious, of Joseph Mazzini* (London: Walter Scott, 1887), p. 126.

11. See Lucy Riall, *Garibaldi. Invention of a hero*: New Haven-London, Yale University Press, 2007

12. Alexandre Dumas, *Memorie di Garibaldi* (Milano: Mursia, 1973), p. 22. See English translation in Alfonso Scirocco, *Garibaldi: Citizen of the World: A Biography*, trans. Allan Cameron (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2007), Chapter 1.

13. Alessandro Manzoni, "Marzo 1821," vv. 30-31.