

THE RELIGION OF BEAUTY AND THE VEIL OF THE GRACES

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Sommario

Le Grazie, carme materialmente incompiuto, viene qui inteso come un testo organico e compiuto da una prospettiva mitico-simbolica. Si sottolinea come Foscolo intenda il testo poetico come luogo d'origine del bello sensibile. Assolto il testo delle Grazie da ogni forma di decorativismo, l'autore interpreta il carme come fonte di una religione poetica tesa alla rinascita spirituale, culturale e politica dell'Italia. Se nei Sepolcri si celebra il passaggio dalla barbarie alla civiltà, nelle Grazie il mito dell'eros sublimato si manifesta come moderna configurazione della poesia elevata, custode di quella antica.

The conception of *The Graces* initiates in 1803 (on the occasion of a gloss to *La chioma di Berenice*, Milano, Dal Genio Tipografico, 114-115) and ends with the Poem materially unfinished. In a letter to Countess Albrizzi (24 August 1814, Milano), the poet writes: “Delle mie Grazie sono assai contento [...] quelle mie *vergini Dive* si stanno terminate ma non finite”.

From a thematic-philologic viewpoint *Le Grazie* shows a fragmentary structure indeed, but from a mytho-symbolic point of view it may claim an unforgettable organic unity. It is the case of the Poem guardian of the soul and letter of the religion of beauty, a temple made of words and verse that “outlives the marble and

the gilded monuments of princes". In 1817 in Venice, Lord Byron writes

Italian beauty! [...]
— in what guise,
Though flashing from the fervour of the lyre,
Would words describe thy past and present glow,
While yet Canova can create below?
(Beppo: A Venetian Story, vv. 362-368)

It's Ugo Foscolo's word able to tackle the gap between "Italian beauty" and the filth of the modern history and the world; it's a word that encloses within itself the lyric tension of the Orphic hymns, Pindar's heroic fire and Catullus' erotic glow, grafting the Greek-Roman harmony into modern Italy's idiom. The birth of this astonishing grafting is symbolically represented in the Prelude of the Third Hymn (vv. 1-31).

In the Poem the poet points to the origin of the beautiful form, as the gift of the "bella Dea", Venus:

[...] Al cor men fece
dono la bella Dea che in riva d'Arno
sacrasti alle tranquille arti custode;
ed ella d'immortal lume e d'ambrosia
la santo immago sua tutta precinse.
(Inno Primo, vv. 16-20)

The quoted verses are to be found in the Dedication (vv. 1-27) of the Poem to Antonio Canova and they evoke his Venere Italica (1812), a sculpture placed in the Galleria Pitti. The Goddess, divine in her beauty, shows to be tender and colourful through the different elaboration of the drapery and of the snow-white body. She is made human by her bashful covering herself.

The marvellous Venus was carved by Canova to replace the

Hellenistic Venus de' Medici, taken away by the French troops. Encharged to carry out a copy, Canova preferred to create a new Venus and to take his liberties relatively to well-known classical models, whose radiance he transfigures through the delicate elaboration of the epidermis. And we should not forget that the Venus d' Medici was, since Renaissance, considered to be one of the very rare models of unequalled perfection.

In a letter to Countess Albrizzi (15 October 1812), Foscolo writes: “Io dunque ho visitata e rivisitata, e amoreggiata, e baciata, e — ma che nessuno à risappia — ho anche una volta accarezzata questa Venere nuova. Ho sospirato con mille desiderii e con mille rimembranze nell'anima; insomma, se la Venere de' Medici è bellissima Dea, questa che io guardo e riguardo è bellissima donna; l'una mi faceva sperare il Paradiso fuori da questo mondo, e questa mi lusinga del Paradiso anche in questa valle di lacrime”.

In the first Hymn, in the quoted Dedication, Foscolo points out how the art of painting and sculpture in Greece were inspired by poetry (figuratively Phidias and Appelles were driven by Apollo). Without Homer and Hesiod the Olympian gods wouldn't appear in marble sculptures, poetry being the birthplace of beauty perceptible.

Thus, without Foscolo's verses, Canova's *Graces* would perhaps never have risen from marble. The poet forms noble alliance with the sculptor, as it turns out from the following passage:

Forse (o ch'io spero!) artefice di Numi,
nuovo meco darai spirto alle Grazie
ch'or di tua man sorgon dal marmo. Anch'io
pingo e spiro a' fantasmi anima eterna:
sdegno il verso che suona e che non crea;

perchè Febo mi disse: Io Fidia primo
ed Apelle guidai con la mia lira.
(Inno Primo, vv. 24-27)

Thus, the new beauty, preserver of the ancient which it transforms, appears in the *Graces* by Canova, wavering between ideal and reality. The sculptor, yearning for Juliette Récamier, moulds the Graces from June to August 1813 and completes them in 1816.

The ancient radiance comes back to life with traces of Raffaello's tenderness, and through the kind rhythm of heads and arms assembled in a soft expansion unknown in Athens and Rome. The archaic "d'Amor sorelle" with the metaphysical brightness of the marble, through differentiated tactile valencies of the drapery, of the naked bodies and of the hair, reach a plastic-pictorial daintiness never seen before in the field of sculpture.

Those who have read *Ultime Lettere di Jacopo Ortis* (1802), will recognise Teresa's posture, as described in Jacopo's 12 May 1798 letter ("Giacea il suo bel corpo abbandonato sopra un sofà. Un braccio le sosteneva la testa e l'altro pendea mollemente"), as a possible model for Canova's Paolina Bonaparte, transformed by the sculptor in *Venere Vincitrice* (Museo Borghese, 1808). Canova spread a layer of rosy wax on the statue in order to emphasise the illusionistic effects.

Foscolo's *Le Grazie* is an organic work of poetry as its polished forms succeed in symbolising the birth of a world redeemed by the same Graces. Here the poetic work consecrates a new possible youth to earth, and gives to the world a new tradition of spiritual fecundity and of energy poured from Venus' body divine, turning it into an event sublime through the Grace's veil. An organic work of poetry, *Le Grazie*, at the same

time is complementary to *Dei Sepolcri*, where the passage from primitive state to civilisation is celebrated

Dal dì che nozze e tribunali e are
dier alle umane belve essere pietose
di sé stesse e d'altrui [...]

(vv. 91-93)

In *The Graces* the birth of these invisible deities is evoked; Venus created them, as she was moved by the wretched condition of men, prey of ghastly instincts. So brutish passions, at the birth of the Graces, took on a demure hue and the chaste sentiment of beauty heightened men, suggesting dreams of generous deeds. The sublimation of primary instincts, gift of the Graces, enables men to comply with a fate of glorious discoveries. As the Graces appeared, bestowing beauty to nature and to the life of men

molte purpuree rose amabilmente
si conversero in candide [...]

(Inno Primo, vv. 85-86)

Already in *Dei Sepolcri*, the dimness of history is dispersed by the graves of scientists, artists, poets and thinkers, whose heroic life is stimulus of most excellent enterprises

A egregie cose il forte animo accendono
l'urne dei forti, o Pindemonte; e bella
e santa fanno al peregrin la terra
che le ricetta [...]

(vv. 151-154)

And while Michelangelo “[...] nuovo Olimpo / alzò in Roma a’ Celesti [...]”, it is Petrarca who transforms the expressions of the

heathen passion into the sublime peaks of Italian speech

[...] e l'idioma
desti a quel dolce di Calliope labbro
che Amore in Grecia nudo e nudo in Roma
d'un velo candidissimo adornando,
rende nel grembo a Venere Celeste [...]
(vv. 175-179)

And if the Italian language itself produces erotic buds, as Lord Byron testifies in the following passage

I love the language, that soft bastard Latin,
Which melts like kisses from a female mouth [...]
(*Beppo: A Venetian Story*, vv. 345-346)

it's Foscolo in *The Graces* to arrange the language for hymns, rituals and worship in the form of an altar beyond the river Arno, in Florence, the new Athens

Nella convalle fra gli aerei poggi
di Bellosguardo, ov'io cinta d'un fonte
limpido fra le quete ombre di mille
giovinetti cipressi alle tre Dive
l'ara innalzo [...]
(Inno Primo, vv. 9-13)

The hymns to the Graces, for the first time have been sung in the city of Orcomenos in Boeotia

la beata Orcomeno, ove il primiero
dalle ninfe alternato e da' garzoni,

amabil inno udirono le Grazie.
(Inno Primo, vv. 206-208)

As Orcomenos, Florence is defined as *beata* in *Ultime Lettere di Jacopo Ortis*: “In queste terre beate si ridestarono le sacre muse e le lettere. Dovunque io mi volga trovo le case ove nacquero, e le pie zolle dove riposarono que’ primi grandi Toscani: ad ogni passo pavento di calpestare le loro reliquie. La Toscana è un giardino” (Firenze, 25 September). The same happens in *Dei Sepolcri*

te beata, gridai, per le felici
aure pregne di vita, e pe’ lavacri
che da’ suoi gioghi a te versa Appennino!

e tu prima, Firenze, udivi il carme
che allegrò l’ira al Ghibellin fuggiasco [...]

After Athens and Attica, Florence and Tuscany become the cosmic centre of the rebirth of beauty

[...] immensa di città e di selve
scena e di templi e d’arator beati,
or cento colli, onde Appennin corona
d’ulivi e d’antri e di marmoree ville
l’elegante città, dove con Flora
le Grazie han serti e amabile idioma.

(Inno Secondo, vv. 21-26)

When first the Graces appeared, the earth was covered with flowers. The elemental forces of nature took on human forms and along rivers, lakes, fountain-heads, woods, among the waves of the seas and in the forests water nymphs, naiads, dryads and sylvans were seen and the humans offered them honey, milk, wine and flowers.

But at the time of rising modernity, not the common people only, but poets too, became forgetful of the Muses, of Graces and of the Deities of the Olympus (see U. Foscolo, *Lettere*

dall'Inghilterra) “e rompono lance in onore della *poésie romantique*”, making the divine creatures invisible

[...] Oggi le umane
orme evitando, e de' poeti il volgo,
che con la lira inesperta a sè li chiama
invisibili e muti per le selve
tacquero [...]

(Inno Primo, vv. 213-217)

The poet then opposes Parnassus, abode of Gods and Muses, and nature's divine personifications to the northern sagas and to the “spauracchi di que castelli”, to the spirit of the Gothic Revival. Against the pleasure of gothic terror he evokes the sublime delight of the Grace's candour, always ready for bestowing bliss upon “le nate a delirar vite mortali” (Inno Primo, v. 261).

And the myth arose from the “onda ionia” (Inno Primo, v. 43), from the Ionian sea; Venus “symbol of universal nature” (cfr. Foscolo, *Di un antico inno alle Grazie, Dissertazione*, 1822), permeates life with love, triumphs over death, darkness and scatters terror, brutishness and violence. Creating the Graces, Venus establishes a new teleology as sign of eternal beauty, the real purpose of human life.

In this dimension, myth is not to be reduced to primordial thought only; on the contrary, it coincides with the thought of lofty poetry and doesn't dissolve in the pleasure produced by verbal representation. Myth can be narrated through series of images which represent the original appetites transformed in configurations of living symbols: they tie nature to history, man to divine energy which through inexhaustible metamorphoses, designates itself as the boundless order of the universe.

At the same time, women as such, make up or the original sin, which brands female behaviour in all the monotheist religions. Unwittingly innocent beauty, femininity here exceeds

classic naturalness disclosing metaphors of a superior civilization. As the appearance of a new civilization, the Graces transform the tragic violence of life, consisting in the law of who is stronger in nature and in history. The Graces suggest the worship of human dignity, and a model of heroic behaviour which changes death in a symbol of possible redemption for the coming descendants.

But man must be free in order to live an aesthetically oriented life. As a matter of fact, nothing is uglier than forms of historical, social and individual slavery. This may be read in the opening lines of *Ultime Lettere di Jacopo Ortis*: “Il sacrificio della nostra patria è consumato: tutto è perduto; e la vita seppure verrà concessa, non ci resterà che per piangere le nostre sciagure e le nostre infamie” (Da’ colli Euganei, 11 ottobre 1797).

The immediate, unforgettable and extraordinary experience of the beauty spread on earth by the Graces, in modern times becomes “atopic”, i.e. it doesn’t find anywhere a place in the world:

Ma e dove or io vi seguirò, se il Fato
ah da gran giorni omai profughe in terra
alla Grecia vi tolse, e se l’Italia
che v’è patria seconda i doni vostri
misera ostenta e il vostro nume obblia?

(Inno Primo, vv. 289-293)

Foscolo’s poetry evokes the art of urging the soul to devoutness for Venus and the Graces. Myth through his verse diffuses the energy necessary to the spirit in order to change the ways of life on the globe. In the Third Hymn, the decisive moment is represented when Pallas (“dea delle arti consolatrici della vita e maestra di ingegni”) in a present eternal flies to the isle of Atlantis

and against love's sprightly assaults, the whole world's tyrant, calls for help many a divine woman to weave the veil, the only one able to defend the Graces from passion's devouring fire, without preventing mortals from the vision of the sublime limbs in their heavenly nakedness.

Pallas conducts the work of the three Hours able to transform the sunbeams into the golden threads, which are then rolled up on the bobbin of the "Parche di purpurei pepli/velate" (Inno Terzo, vv. 120-121).

Attenuando i rai aurei del sole,
volgeano i fusi nitidi tre nude
Ore, e del velo distendean l'ordito.

(Inno Terzo, vv. 117-119)

Pallas herself, Psyche and Hebe do their best to render the veil immortal, while Iris, Flora and Dawn adorn it in thousand varieties of hues and allegoric characters exalting youth, loving faithfulness, hospitality, filial piety and maternal tenderness.

The embroidery is favoured by three Muses, three as the hymns dedicated to Venus (symbol of the beauty of the universe), to Vesta (guardian of eternal fire, encouraging noble hearts) and to the same Pallas.

The first Muse, Thalys, the blooming, here the Muse of sound, makes the lyre fertile; Terpsichore dances and Erato, Muse of love poetry sings

[...] e come il canto
Flora inendeva, e si pingea con l'ago.

(Inno Terzo, vv. 142-143)

And three are the priestesses, identifiable as Eleonora Nencini,

Cornelia Martinetti and Maddalena Bignami, three women loved
by the poet himself

Tre vaghissime donne a cui le trece
infiora di felici itale rose
giovinezza

(Inno Secondo, vv. 1-3)

The three young Italian women sacrifice to the Graces on the altar at Bellosguardo; their beauty, wit and virtue bear witness of the return of the Graces on earth.

And the poet invites Canova to take upon himself the divine task of rendering the three priestesses eternally young. In everyday conflicts, the Graces and their priestesses will guide nations and single persons to stand up to the decline of values in the modern age.

Thus, on the stage of an age of progressive spiritual impoverishment, the veiled Graces shall burst into everyday life in order to nourish the soul of heroes

[...] E tu che ardisci in terra
vestir d'eterna giovinezza il marmo,
or l'armonia della bellezza, il vivo
spirar de' vezzi nelle tre ministre,
che all'arpa io guido agli inni e alle carole,
vedrai qui al certo; e tu potrai lasciarle
immortali fra noi, pria che all'Eliso
su l'ali occulte fuggano gli anni.

(Inno Secondo, vv. 45-52)

Thus on the stage of an age of progressive spiritual impoverishment, the veiled Graces will burst into everyday life in order to nourish the soul of heroes. And while the battle, from a historical viewpoint, has already been lost, the war shall never

end as

[...] senza pianto
l'uomo non vede la beltà celeste.

(Inno Terzo, vv. 74-75)

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