

UN INEDITO DI WASHINGTON IRVING

Il presente manoscritto, qui pubblicato integralmente per la prima volta, si compone di 14 pagine, ed è di proprietà della Yale University Library, che ringrazio per avermene concessa la pubblicazione. Esso non porta alcuna data, ma risale al 1821, secondo quanto è possibile dedurre dalla biografia che di Washington Irving scrisse il nipote Pierre (*Life and Letters of Washington Irving*, New York, 1864). Di quell'anno, infatti, è il secondo viaggio di Irving a Parigi, e fu allora che, tramite il drammaturgo americano John Howard Payne, conobbe il celebre attore francese Talma, noto interprete di Shakespeare, ed ebbe con lui un interessante colloquio sulle rappresentazioni shakespeariane in Francia. Frutto di quel colloquio e di una successiva interpretazione, o piuttosto rifacimento di *Hamlet* sulle scene parigine da parte dell'attore francese, è appunto questo manoscritto, che fu parzialmente utilizzato da Irving in «*Conversations with Talma*» (pubbl. nel 1855 in *Knickerbocker Gallery*) e negli «*Sketches in Paris in 1825*» (pubbl. nel 1840 nel *Knickerbocker Magazine* e poi in *The Crayon Papers* e *Wolfert's Roost*).

Riferimenti e citazioni shakespeariane ricorrono frequentemente negli scritti editi ed inediti di Washington Irving: da quelli compilati più o meno affrettatamente durante il suo primo gioioso viaggio in Europa, alle pagine a cui attese stancamente poco prima di morire, quando, tormentato dalla decadenza fisica e dall'approssimarsi della fine, citava *Othello*:

Not poppy, nor mandragora,
Nor all the drowsy syrups of the world...

A Shakespeare è inoltre dedicato uno dei saggi migliori

dello *Sketch Book*, ove si rievoca l'atmosfera dell'Inghilterra elisabettiana nei luoghi che videro la giovinezza del poeta e lo stesso Shakespeare assurge a simbolo della fantasia eterna di fronte al perpetuo divenire delle cose.

È tuttavia soprattutto dopo l'incontro con Payne e con Talma che Irving si volse a meditare su Shakespeare sotto un concreto aspetto drammatico. La vita stessa di Shakespeare gli si configurò come vicenda drammatica, come soggetto degno di rappresentazione scenica. Il diario degli anni 1823-24 (pubblicato da STANLEY WILLIAMS, *Journal of Washington Irving*, Cambridge, Mass., 1931) registra le sue intenzioni di scrivere egli stesso tale dramma: il giovane Shakespeare avrebbe dovuto apparirvi negli anni spensierati vissuti accanto ad Ann Hathaway ed agli amici, finché avrebbe avvertito in sé l'esigenza di una vita più piena e più ricca: « When in presence of nature his feelings expand — he longs for he knows not what feels as if he could embrace the landscape — The stars the moon delight him — chime of bells by midnight ». Un dramma, come è facile supporre, di ispirazione romantica e quanto mai discutibile, e il cui manoscritto, per quel che ne sappiamo, è andato perduto.

Ma se l'ambizione teatrale di Irving era destinata a rimanere infruttuosa (anche adattamenti drammatici quali *The Wild Huntsman* e *Abu Hassan*, composti durante il soggiorno in Germania nel 1823-24 sono tutt'altro che riusciti) essa lo portò a meditare più di quanto non avesse fatto prima anche sul gusto dominante nel pubblico. La sua qualità di scrittore americano fa sì che egli possa accostarsi alla polemica fra classicismo e romanticismo con maggiore libertà: certi concetti, ovviamente, sono tutt'altro che originali, ma talune osservazioni sull'inevitabile evoluzione del gusto, determinata dal corso della storia, rappresentano il superamento di uno dei più radicati pregiudizi neoclassici. Inoltre, nonostante i suoi errori ortografici e i difetti tipici dell'« abbozzo » (esso doveva essere il punto di partenza di un più ampio studio) il saggio è assai più che un semplice *note-Book*; appare invece compiuto in sé e reca l'impronta inconfondibile dello stile di Irving, dove il garbo, l'ironia, la chiarezza della

frase e il gusto per la scenetta di costume ereditati dalla migliore tradizione saggistica del Settecento inglese e americano, si accompagnano ad una sensibilità ormai aperta al Romanticismo in maniera critica e consapevole.

ROSA MARIA COLOMBO

FRENCH ROMANCE (rough sketch)

It begins to be the fashion at present in France to admire Shakespeare; and those who cannot read him in English, enjoy him diluted in a french translation. I have heard it often made a matter of ridicule that a Frenchman should pretend to understand and feel the merits of an author so recondite, and one who is a subject of study & comment even to his own countrymen; but really it is writers like Shakespeare, so full of thought, that are the most readily understood and enjoyed by strangers. An apothegm, a striking figure and a natural exhibition of character & passion can be felt though communicated in an imperfect manner; we can grope after them, and as it were feel them in the dark: but the merits of writers who are characterized by the beauty of diction and harmony of numbers are the last to be perceived and estimated by strangers. Where is the Englishman that does not pretend to decide upon the merits of Racine, before he is able to read one of his tragedies without repeated reference to his dictionary; and yet the beauties of Racine are infinitely more difficult to be rendered into another language or to be understood in the original than those of Shakespeare. A fine thought is like sterling gold, that goes for its weight in any country; but a beautiful turn of expression, a happy combination of word and phrases, are limited to the language in which they are written. Thought may be translated, style cannot be. The most that can be done is to substitute a parrallel and render grace for grace.

We should not be surprised therefore at finding liberal and intelligent strangers greatly delighted with Shakespeare, even though imperfectly acquainted with the delicacies of our language. He is so abundant in those excellencies that are addressed more to the mind than the ear, he is so exuberant in original & striking

thoughts that he who can in any degree enter into his meaning, is enriched.

His volumes are like the subterranean grottos of Alladin; full of jewels & precious things of which he who does but penetrate for a moment, may snatch enough to lead himself.

Indeed to persons imperfectly acquainted with a language the most powerful and clear thinking writers are most satisfactory. We are flattered at being able to bring off some spoils on the slightest inroad. We are gratified at being able to participate in the admiration of native readers; whereas it is mortifying to traverse a whole volume of elegant writing with which everyone else is in raptures, while we cannot perceive its beauties and refinements. Thus Montaigne gives more pleasure to one slightly acquainted with french, than the elaborate and harmonious periods of [---] where the chief merits is in the manner of expressing the thoughts. In italian also, the student derives considerable pleasure from the verses of Dante, though one of the most difficult poets even for an italian thoroughly to understand: while his ear is too unpractised in the language to be able to make anything of the exquisite sonnets of Petrarch.

The taste for Shakespeare, however, which is said to be encreasing in France, is, I apprehend, but one indication of a general revolution which is taking place in the national taste. The French taste has materially changed in the last thirty years; the present generation, who are just growing into the full exercise of talent, are a different people from the French of the old regime. They have grown up in rougher times, and among more adventurous, and romantic habitudes. They are less fine perhaps in their tact; but they are stronger in their feelings, and require more powerful stimulants. The frenchman of the camp, who has bivouacked on the Danube and the Wolga, who has brought back into peaceful life the habits of the soldier, who wears fierce moustaches, swaggers in his gait and smokes tobacco, is of course a different being in his literary tastes from the frenchman of former times who was effeminate in his habits, finical in his dress, & wore powder and perfumes. The whole nation has been accustomed for years to see the constant glitter of arms and parade of soldiery; their minds have been filled with accounts of battles, sieges; victories; they have seen the wild, [---] drama of the revolution and the

still wilder, fantastic history of Bonaparte passing before their eyes, like an arabian tale of enchantment; when the realities of such things have passed away a strong remembrance of them will remain in the public mind; and it will continue for a long time to delight in every thing that shall recall the strong emotions and sudden surprises which they excited.

This I think may account in a great measure for that taste which is growing upon the french nation for the romantick — a taste vehemently but vainly reprobated by their critics. You see it in every thing. In their pictures, in their engravings which fill their printshops; in their songs, in their spectacles & in their works of fiction. It has been for several years making its advances without exciting the jealousy of criticks; its advances being apparently confined to the lower regions of literature and the arts.

The circulating libraries have been filled with translations of extravagant English and german romances, tales of ghosts & robbers, and the theatres on the Boulevards occupied by the representation of melodramas. Still the higher regions of literature remained unaffected, and the national theatre retained all its classic stateliness and sanity. The critics consoled themselves with the idea that the romances were only read by women & children, and the melodramas only admired by the ignorant and vulgar. But the children that read the romances, & are delighted with the melodramas have grown up to men and women; they now begin to exercise their talents & to influence by their opinions. The tinge of romance which they received in their early years, has given a colouring to their imaginations, and we must now look for its effect, upon the forthcoming literature of the country.

There has indeed been a great dearth in french Belles Lettres for some years past. The public intellect has turned either to science or politics. For their literary amusement they have depended upon other nations, and chiefly upon the English & the Germans, as being most fertile in that sentiment and romance which at present is in fashion. It is astonishing with what promptness the Scottish works, notwithstanding their dialects, are translated into french, & how eagerly they are sought after: every work that teems with marvellous adventure or exaggerated passion is in universal demand; and above all they will devour the pages of Lord Byron, translated into a kind of stilted poetical prose. *O, que c'est charmante;*

exclaims a pretty little parisian enthusiast, clasping her hands *c'est si sombre!* Likenesses of Lord Byron are in every printshop, and he is the reigning favourite of all younger bards — the parisians enveloping him with melancholy and mystery, and believing him to be the hero of his own poems, a something of the vampyre order.

In original poetry the french have of late years been deficient, and it is remarkable that they should be so at a time when it is so abundant in England & Germany. A poem has lately appeared however, which has occasioned a great sensation, and is another proof of the progress of the romantic taste. It is entitled [- - -]¹ and is an imitation of Lord Byron; the author has caught in a great degree his gloomy style and deep & troubled thoughts. The great success that this production has met with ensures an inundation of the same kind of poetry. In a little while we shall see, as has been the case in England, every petty poet aping at the noble bard, affecting to be moody & melancholy, wrapping himself in a little mantle of mystery and misanthropy hinting obscurely at great sins, and affecting to despise the world². And it is more than probable that they will all have their day; for the world seems to have taken a wonderful liking of late for being ill treated and will pay any one well for abusing it in tolerable poetry.

The strongest symptom, however, of the increase of the romantic taste in France is, that it has absolutely made its appearance at the Theatre Francaise. This has at length aroused the slumbering vigilance of the french critics and they are now open mouthed in their defence of the classic purity of their stage. The successful performance of a translation of Hamlet has been an era in the french drama. It is true the play has been sadly mutilated; it has been stripped of its most natural and characteristic beauties, and an attempt has been made to reduce it to the naked stateliness of one of their own dramas; but it still retains enough of the wild magnificence of Shakespeares imagination, to give it an individual character on the french stage. Though the ghost of

1. Il titolo è stato omissso da Irving. (N.d.C.)

2. A tergo Irving annota: « French romantic in their habits — but not in their literature — The English romantic in their literature and taste — but not in their habits ». (N.d.C.)

Hamlets father does not actually tread the boards, yet he hovers in idea about his son; and the powerful acting of Talma gives an idea of this portentous visitation far more awful & mysterious than could be presented by any spectral representation. The effect of this play on the french audiences is astonishing. The doors of the Theatre are besieged at an early hour on the evenings of the representation: the houses are crowded to overflowing. The audience continually passes from intervals of breathless attention to bursts of ungovernable applause. I have seen a lady carried fainting from the boxes, overcome by the acting of Talma in the scene with his mother; where he fancies he sees the spectre of his father. In this translation Hamlets mother stabs herself before the audience, a catastrophe hitherto unknown on the great theatre & memorable therefore in the history of the drama. This tragedy may be considered as one of the great triumphs of the romantic style — but it has gained another still greater in the success of Marie Stuart; imitated from the german tragedy of Schiller. The critics thundered their tirades against this drama; they exclaimed against the apostasy of their countrymen, that, having from their infancy been accustomed to the touching beauties and harmonious verses of Athalie, Polyeucte & Merope, they should receive with transport the barbarous productions of a german muse. All in vain; the nightly receipts are the most eloquent critiques on a piece, and Marie Stuart maintains triumphant possession of the boards.

The amateurs of the old school are badly alarmed at these foreign innovations; they tremble for the ancient decorum and pompous proprieties of their drama, and notwithstanding Hamlet & Marie Stuart have both been put in the straight waistcoat of Aristotle, yet they are terribly affraid that they will do mischief and set others madding.

That the new taste which I have mentioned will have its way, and will give a decided tone to french literature, I am strongly inclined to believe. The human mind relieves and pleases itself by action and reaction; and receives stimulus from frequent change. A long course of rigid adherence to rule is apt to produce a perfect abandonment, when the rule is for a moment transcended. Nations grow tired of artificial refinements, and will sometimes indulge in barbarisms from the very capriciousness of highly pampered palates. I should not be surprised to see the romantic taste, which

has so long predominated in England, gradually transferred across the Channel; and while the English, tired of high seasoning, were once more returning to polished verse; probable fiction; easy narrative; classic drama & all the quiet delights of elegant literature, the french were dealing in direful romances; melodramatic plays; turgid prose; and glowing, rough written poetry.

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