

The Simulacrum Precedes the Truth:

Padre Onofrio Branda's Linguistic Counterfeit

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Giambattista Vico in his aptly titled *Principi di scienza nuova d'intorno alla commune natura delle nazioni*, or simply *The New Science*, presents the axiom “Men of limited ideas take for law what the words expressly say” (Vico 93). Vico’s assessment is not one meant to be a caveat isolated to one event in time. Vico’s work attempts to align facts, erroneous and exaggerated as they may be due to inaccurate or limited resources, so as to fashion not only an original approach to historiography, but also a theory and methodology. He does so by presenting history and its structures as *corsi e ricorsi*; it is a theory that recognizes history is not the linear history bar on the wall of classrooms marked with *pertinent* historical dates, undeviating in its appearance as unique events, but rather as a configuration that is cyclical in nature, and therefore with a repetitive schema. Vico’s axiom’s relevance lies in the theory he sets forth that owing to *corsi e ricorsi*, history (in its recurrent quality with the obvious supposition of man using ostentatiously dubious observations and contestations subjective in nature to fashion consent through misinformation) will repeat as a function of humanity to persistently be examined.

This ostensible barrage of falsehoods obtains realization even in the Enlightenment era, clouded with its cliché of adages on truth and knowledge from Immanuel Kant’s *Sapere aude*¹ to Cesare Beccaria’s *La massima felicità divisa nel maggior numero*.² Padre Onofrio Branda, a Milanese scholar, educator, and cohort to members of *Il Caffè* including Beccaria, endeavored to further his own renown by creating a simulacrum fashioned as a Socratic dialogue that addresses the Tuscan language as a primary didactic and social commodity to be diffused. It is not a mimetic expedient, as the simulacrum precedes a truth still nonexistent; rather it is a simulacrum of *ὁμοίωσις* (similitude, likeness, assimilation, resemblance), and thus gives an air of unaccountability to its creation. At dispute is how to dispel the simulacrum grounded in falsehoods, invented data, the lambasting of the Milanese, and inevitably those that question the

¹ “Dare to know.” All the translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

² “The maximum happiness divided into the greatest number.”

progenitor of the simulacrum. Three members of the *Accademia dei Trasformati*, a body of intellectuals (part of the salon culture of Milan's Enlightenment), Carl Antonio Tanzi, Giuseppe Parini, and Domenico Balestrieri would nullify Branda's nonsensical creation by seeking truth through questioning, amassing, employing, publishing facts, and holding Branda accountable for his words. In so doing they extinguish Branda's attempt to commoditize and diffuse by false means a linguistic drift in extremis. The veracity unfurls through a series of published letters, invectives really, that inexorably form a factual Socratic dialogue and thus reaches to or gains a truth – post-simulacrum. At the center of this epistolary exchange is Tanzi's *La nuova antibrandana*, a titled letter because of its significance that sets the tone of the debate and sounds the initial alarms. Along with this text is a copious number of letters by Parini, Tanzi, and their supporters, and Branda and his supporters. Balestrieri, although taking less part in the epistolary polemic, decides to respond with a Socratic dialogue on the uses of Milanese versus Tuscan analogous to Branda's, but in Milanese.

The use of the word simulacrum that is intended for this research is the general use of the word that came into the English language as early as the 16th century employed to mean a likeness through representation. Jean Baudrillard, however, and his *Precession of the Simulacra*, are worthy of mention, and in keeping with the theme of *corsi e ricorsi* is in fact applicable to an 18th century text. In his analysis, Baudrillard delineates at the outset that a simulacrum implies an absence, has a negative connotation, and devises a reality. He reasons:

To dissimulate is to feign not to have what one has. To simulate is to feign to have what one hasn't. One implies a presence, the other an absence. But the matter is more complicated, since to simulate is not simply to feign: 'Someone who feigns an illness can simply go to bed and make believe he is ill. Someone who simulates an illness produces in himself some of the symptoms.' (Littre) Thus, feigning or dissimulating leaves the reality principle intact: the difference is always clear, it is only masked; whereas simulation threatens the difference between 'true' and 'false', between 'real' and 'imaginary.' (Baudrillard 3-4)

Baudrillard is, I believe, not asserting that the simulacra produced represents an absence of a truth, but rather undiscovered truths that remain as of yet unexposed because the simulacrum

produces the exigency to seek out the truth. It raises questions. What does this simulacrum simulate/represent? Why was it created? What has it counterfeited? What exigency for truth does it command? These are questions with which anyone who seeks to unveil the unknown truth and destroy the simulacrum must begin. Branda's *Della lingua toscana: dialogo* is the simulacrum.

Branda from the outset surrenders to self-inflicted sabotage in naming his fictitious interlocutors for his *Dialogo*. In stark contrast to prior Socratic dialogues that flourished during the Renaissance, most notably Pietro Bembo's *Prose della volgar lingua* which used actual people – scholars of that epoch that Bembo knew, Branda's *Dialogo* uses fictional students as interlocutors, and as they are invented, so too are their names. Branda does not intend to hide the fallaciousness of the material proffering the following:

Sicchè di quelli, che non mai della Patria usciron fuori, il primo *Ansioso* chiameremo, *Sollecito* l'altro, *Animoso* il terzo, ed il quarto *Intraprendente*: siccome a quelli, che fingiamo poco fa da Firenze ritornati, i nomi daremo di *Sincero*, di *Rifiorito*, di *Accorto*, e di *Desto* (Branda 7).³

Branda's choice of the verb *fingiamo*, or we pretend (from *fingere* -to feign), in naming his eight interlocutors demonstrates a disclosure of the simulacrum thereafter contained in the work, as well as a flippant assertiveness of subjectivity in approach. The names of the interlocutors that have not left the *Patria*, and thus are in wait of the others' account are *Ansioso* (Anxious), *Sollecito* (Reminder), *Animoso* (courageous, or inimical and mettlesome), and *Intraprendente* (enterprising or aggressive and offensive). Their names bear negative to neutral connotations with only two having positive connotations and undercut the students' aptitude. They are four simulacra, or images of the inept Milanese, unawakened to the discoveries of *Sincero* (sincere), *Rifiorito* (thriving), *Accorto* (shrewd), and *Desto* (awake), the four simulacra of those enlightened by their travels – icons of discovery and truth that don't exist.

³ “So of those that never leave the Fatherland, the first we will call *Ansioso*, the other *Sollecito*, the third *Animoso*, and the fourth *Intraprendente*. Then to those that we pretend have returned from Florence a little while ago, we will give the names of *Sincero*, *Rifiorito*, *Accorto*, and *Desto*.”

The dialogue begins with the narration of Branda averring that *Ansioso* yearns to enter into dialogue with those that have just returned, and urges the others on in accordance with his name. It is *Sollecito* who first answers and *reminds* the others of thoughts to augment his opening. Instead of commencing an objective analysis and comparison of the Milanese dialect versus Tuscan, Branda via *Sollecito* launches a dialogue of prevarication based on the physical attributes of the city of Florence and the Tuscan region. Evading a linguistic discussion in fact, the dialogue, picked up by *Desto* causes envy and desire for phenomena unknown, triggering *Animoso* to respond in kind:

O quanto invidio la forte di chi nasce in que' paesi! E quanto avventurati noi saremmo se nelle case nostre invece di gaglioffi, che ci servono, di que' pascibietola, e fantocci, e scimuniti, che non ci sanno altro suffolare agli orecchi, che melansaggini, e gagliofferie, e motti da taverna . . . se invece di que' Franciosi affamati, che ficcano in casa, per insegnarci il galante, e metterci in susta, a stare su' lezzi, e smancerie, a smozzicare le parole, per cinguettare in lingua papagalesca (Branda 9).⁴

In absence of any objective information other than irrelevant bits and pieces, and furnished with only extolments of Tuscan landscape, life, and quality of the citizenry, *Animoso* does not question or seek some transcendent truth as in Socratic dialogue, but in this simulacrum chooses to refer to all levels of the Milanese society in castigating terms using idler or oaf (*gaglioffi*) to describe the people that act as his servants. Instead he bastardizes various nondescript people as dunces, puppets, and little idiots who only speak nonsense and the idiomatic expressions that sound from the depths of drunken tavern patrons. Next are the youth and their starving French tutors who teach them to mumble and slur their words.

If Branda wanted to offer at least an opinion based on objective facts, he could have discussed the characteristics of the Milanese dialect. As a Gallo-Italic language, Milanese is characterized by *Le vocali arrotondate*, the termination of the final vowel, and the palatalization of

⁴ “Oh how I envy the strength of those who are born in those regions! And how fortunate we would be if in our houses if instead of oafs, dunces, dummies, and blockheads that serve us, who don't know other than to whistle in our ears, such follies, knaveries, and tavern slogans . . . if instead of these starving French that they shove in our homes to teach us gallantry, to slur words, in order to chirp a parroted language, and to put us in fear, to stay in filth and mawkishness . . .”

certain sounds. With these traits we end up with words like *el mond*, *el fœu* (*el fiö*), and *ciama* instead *chiama*. Branda could reason that these factors create a language with stops, one that does not flow as the Tuscan language with its constant termination in vowels and fewer vowel sounds. But to lambast these is to lambast the French and German languages. Influence leaves a Milanese dialect intact that is Gallo-Italic, heavily influenced by the sounds of French and German through occupation/colonization via Milan's significance culturally and strategically to both France and the Hapsburgs. Branda's text lacks pertinent query and investigation; as such it is a counterfeit of a Socratic dialogue, and it purports a simulacrum, one that according to Baudrillard masks the fact that there is no truth in it.

In his *Nuova antibrandana*, Tanzi discerns these weaknesses in the arguments and insults, and hurls their baselessness back at Branda in the form a published invective triggering a flurry of published letters between members of the debate that compile hundreds of pages that had to be stopped by the authorities. Tanzi's text reveals the initiation of a true Socratic dialogue, not fictional nor in a pastoral or garden setting, but real through the process of letters and most importantly communication – in this case, publication for public scrutiny. He addresses his approach immediately as such: “Io stimo di prima trascrivervi di parola in parola varj de' passi, che non potrete negare, e poi di farvi toccare con mano e la giustizia del risentirsene, e quella importanza, che tutti gli uomini avveduti ne' medesimi riconoscono, e voi fate vista di non comprendere”⁵ (Tanzi 4). Given this statement, Tanzi sets out to unravel Branda's *Dialogo*, exposing it as deceptive. Tanzi's work is broken into two primary parts. The first recalls information from Branda, and questions the spurious nature of it. The second section deals with Branda's motive, his station, and his responsibility as a teacher of young scholars. From the cited declaration, Tanzi ignites a tone that is both implacable and justice-seeking due in part to the fact that Tanzi is himself a poet in dialect and *lingua*, and because of his abhorrence of Branda's injurious slander.

⁵ “I reckon to first transcribe for you word for word various passages that you will not be able to deny, and then to make you touch with your own hand the justice of resenting them, and that substance that all alike recognize in circumspect men, but that you make aware you do not understand.”

The *Nuova antibrandana*, after Tanzi's intentions are made clear, moves to various examples. The poet first attacks the dialogue regarding the descriptions of the Tuscan and Florentine landscape, not only because the argument is spurious for a linguistic treatise, but also because Branda contrasts the Milanese and Lombard environment to them negatively. He moves to the children of Milan, which he pronounces stupid due to speech or language, and environment. He takes up the issue of physical weather, citing Branda's comment "QUEST' aria pesante, e grossa pare, che mi leghi i sentimenti, e mi chiude la mente"⁶ (Branda in Tanzi 5). Tanzi does not identify the speaker in Branda's text, one of his fictitious inventions, as every voice is essentially Branda's. He reasserts Branda's claim that ambience fosters the caprice to write poetry in Florence before repeating his degrading comments towards servants, those with little education, but nevertheless are not free from Branda's scorn. The listing of information undertaken for the remainder of the text is: Branda's despondency upon re-entering Milan; a misogynistic attack on the women of Lombardy and Milan in contrast to the fine ladies of Florence; the religious factor (the fact that as a religious figure, Branda is lambasting his congregates as he compares those in his congregation to those that bay at the moon); and the subjective attacks on the Milanese dialect as unpleasant. There is a comparison to a Latin text by Marco Girolamo Vida, whom Tanzi describes as less injurious as he attacks only one deceased author instead of a blanket attack on the dialect and all that use it. Branda attacks all of his living compatriots. Tanzi undertakes Branda's second dialogue, meant to assuage any misgivings, but instead continues with its derision of the Milanese. He repeats the spurious description of the landscape as a basis for a linguistic treatise and the ridicule of a people, in addition to repeating Branda's description "il più fetido volgare detto per ingiuria della Patria Milanese.' Il non avere 'nelle nostre case, che gaglioffi, che ci servono . . . motti da taverna'"⁷ (Tanzi 17-18)

He ends with a demand that he recognize his obligation to publish a dialogue for the benefit of his students' education, not his renown. His renown comes through the proper education of his Milanese pupils as professor of *belle lettere* at *Ginasio Arcimboldi*.

⁶ "This heavy and thick air, that seems to me ties up the sentiments and closes the mind."

⁷ "The most fetid vernacular spoken for injury of the Milanese Fatherland.' The absence of having 'in our houses, oafs, that serve us . . . tavern slogans.'" See Footnote 4.

Tanzi's friend and colleague Giuseppe Parini, in addressing Branda in one of his many expansive letters, takes the approach of being one of Branda's former students. He thereby speaks with authority over his former teacher as one to whom he owed the same responsibility with which his fellow *Trasformato*, Tanzi, charged him. Parini queries him "Che dite ora voi, o mio stimmissimo Maestro, ch'io mi glorierò pur sempre di chiamarvi con questo nome, che dite?"⁸ (Parini 117). Approaching his former teacher from this angle, as his student and as one who was nurtured by him, Parini affronts Branda for his particularly misogynistic tone and his ludicrous assertion that one would benefit from speaking a foreign tongue more than one's own native tongue.

These two topics concern Parini throughout his letters and, in what could be called his principal letter due to its length and focus on repudiating Branda's *Dialogo* whereas others following are a mixed expression of critique on the dialogue and insult done to the parties involved, Parini reasons:

Parlando voi poscia dell'affettazione, e a tal proposito di ciò, che intendano i Lombardi, o i Milanesi, per affettazione coloro, dopo aver eccettuato ciò, che ne intendano i Dotti, veniste a parlare di ciò, che intendano per affettazione coloro, che sanno altra lingua, che quella, ch'essi appresero dalla nutrice, e questa lingua chiamaste sgraziata, e goffa. In altra luogo voi rimproveraste i Lombardi, perché nel loro Paese parlino conitualmente la loro lingua; e diceste, ch'essa troppo pute di unto (Parini 122).⁹

Calling, as Branda does, the language that one learns from the wet-nurse (and the connotation here is from the wet-nurse on), clumsy and awkward – lacking grace, is inconsistent with the way one speaks their own native language, with skill and ease. Parini further exposes the futility

⁸ "What do you say now, my most esteemed Maestro, while I too will always please myself to call you by this name, what do you say?"

⁹ You are speaking afterwards about affectation, and in this regard, what may the Lombards or the Milanese hear through affectation after having excluded this? What do they the scholars say of it? You came to speak of this, what they may hear through affectation, those who know another language, one which they learned from the wet-nurse, and this language you call disgraceful and ungainly. In another part, you reproach the Lombards because in their land they continue to speak their language; and you said that it smells greasy."

of an argument of trivial condemnations based on superfluous non-information by restating Branda's description of the Milanese dialect as one that *pute di unto*, or smells greasy.

Parini ends his letter to his former teacher on a conciliatory note asking "Che dobbiamo noi fare a questo Mondo, fuorchè cercar d'illuminarci vicendevolmente?"¹⁰ (Parini 150). It is a clear reference to the spirit of the Enlightenment as expressed in Kant's *sapere aude*, as is his offering of respect to his maestro, Branda ". . . e permettetemi, che come sincero amico vi abbracci, e come scolare vi baci ossequiosamente le mani"¹¹ (Parini 150). His extension of affection goes unanswered as Branda addresses his ills directly to the public, bypassing Parini, and causing an *Avvertimento* with *Imprimatur* on its face to be published. It challenges Branda's disgraceful approach of taking the issue public and lambasting him in print, before first addressing Parini directly thereby breaking the actual unfolding Socratic dialogue created by the flurry of letters. The *Avvertimento* is an indictment.

Balestrieri, in his simulacrum of a simulacrum, reveals that a semblance of the counterfeit can reflect the truth by uncovering its unfounded nature. By being mimetic in his approach instead of crafting a simulacrum of *Ὀμοίωσις*, his dialogue, *Brandana: La badia di Meneghitt a consulta sora el dialegh de la lengua Toscana – Recitata el dì 27 d'agost del 1759 de cert student de rettorega, e stampaa 8 de settember de l'istess ann*¹², provides both an argument against Branda's, but also attempts to draw a conclusion in favor of using one's one native tongue. He is in essence putting the theory of Milanese as an elevated language capable of the same expression as Tuscan into practice by furnishing an eloquent, objective, and playful text complete with students and their Milanese names meant to both mirror and correct Branda's ostentatious text. Balestrieri examines the benefit to Branda having one of the students, *Tizazz* (Evil or Ungodly), ask "Perchè stampà quell liber con quell titol?"¹³ *Pecc* (Stern) calls into question his motives for writing the text responding "Perchè el vœur imitità cert ost che metten su la ventalina cap de bon vin, quand

¹⁰ "What else is there to do in this world, except to enlighten each other?"

¹¹ ". . . and permit me, that as a dear friend I may embrace you, and as a scholar may kiss your hands obsequiously."

¹² *Brandana; The magistrate of the Milanese goes over the dialogue of the Tuscan language – recited on the day of August 27th, 1759 by certain students of rhetoric, e published on the 8th of September of the same year.*

¹³ "Why print that book with that title?"

gh’han posca in cantina”¹⁴ (Balestrieri 289). He snidely but correctly identifies the reason as feigned relevance and renown or simply fame based on a text of dubious quality.

Immediately preceding this section of the text, Balestrieri declares the need for his text, an aspect that Branda avoids in earnest. *Tizzù* declares: “El sa che impegn l’è el nost de defend sto lenguagg tant infamaa de chi el n’ha straparalaa . . .”¹⁵ (Balestrieri 285). Balestrieri’s attitude revealed in this citation is the custom of his epoch. Italian or Tuscan was a communicative language between the Italian regions, still at this time disjointed. The dialect, however, would serve as the communicative language between members of one’s own community. As is worthy of note, the letters were written in Italian – the very language Branda is supporting to replace the dialect entirely. This was common practice as the argument would have been meant for an audience beyond Milan. Finally Balestrieri tosses Branda’s own words back at him as the others do, but this time the words reflected are in Milanese – not Tuscan, and Parini wondered and asked Branda directly if he had ever read the remarkable Milanese poetry of Balestrieri or Tanzi.¹⁶ *Tizzù* asserts “El peccaa l’è parland d’omen de ben, a trattaj de balord, gasgiott e goff, gonzi, ciall, babbuass, fatov, e gajoff. El peccaa l’è a vorè paragon con termen odios i nost femmen de chì coi donn de là”¹⁷ (Balestrieri 295). Echoing Branda’s words as well as providing an objective argument for the Milanese dialect is a two-pronged approach serving the sole purpose of dismissing Tuscan not as a communicative language amongst Italians, but as a sole replacement for a language that he is proving functions as adequately as Tuscan.

Inevitably the question remains: why is the simulacrum generated? The members of the *Trasformati* contend with Branda’s desire to advance his prominence but can only question and demand explanation regarding his brutal lambasting. Branda reveals in his first *Dialogo* and second that he is not willing to correct his errors, only reword them and deride those that seek truth. He reveals himself to be a man that commoditizes linguistic destiny not for a benefit to the Milanese, but to profit in repute. His willingness to attack all levels of citizens (children,

¹⁴ “Because he wants to imitate certain innkeepers that feign a good cup of wine when what they have in cantina is a liquor of vinegar and water.”

¹⁵ “One knows that it is our obligation to defend this language from such infamy and those that have ranted about it.”

¹⁶ See Parini.

¹⁷ “The sin is speaking of good men as stupid, simpletons and clumsy, fools, little idiots, dunces, insipid, and oafs. He sins by wanting to compare with odious terms our ladies from here with those women from there.”

servants, and women of all social strata) is a reminder of the significance of the resistance professed by the *Trasformati*. As Baudrillard notes “When the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. There is a proliferation of myths of origins and signs of reality, of second-hand truth, objectivity, and authenticity” (Baudrillard 5).

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