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Sensible Translations: Vincenzo Cuoco and the Need for an Italian Novel

Abstract: The focus of this article is the early intuition by Vincenzo Cuoco of the role of fiction in the “imagination” of national communities. In particular, I show how Cuoco, building on the philosophy of Giambattista Vico, understood the potentiality of the novel as a medium capable of bridging the gap between the literate and the illiterate. Such a process of cultural translation was necessary, in his view, to forge a “public spirit,” *i.e.*, the necessary precondition for the creation of an Italian national community.

Keywords: Vincenzo Cuoco, Novel, Imagined Communities, Rhetoric, Nineteenth-Century Italian Literature, Habituation.

Introduction

Better known for his analysis of the failed Neapolitan revolution of 1799, Vincenzo Cuoco is also a key figure—although usually unacknowledged—in the history of the Italian novel: his ideas regarding the need to form a “public spirit,” and about the novel as the most appropriate form to do so, had an impact on the very intellectuals who are usually mentioned in schoolbooks as the promoters and realizers of the rise of the Italian novel.¹ Far from being disconnected, these two aspects of Cuoco’s activity—the historian investigating the reasons why the revolution had failed in Naples and the sociologist *ante litteram*—are strictly intertwined, to the extent that the latter is unthinkable without the former. As argued in the *Saggio storico sulla rivoluzione di Napoli*, the Neapolitan republic had fallen precisely because of the Jacobins’ failure to translate their revolutionary project for the popular classes. In view of the project to build an Italian nation, therefore, it appeared crucial to deal with this new political actor. Related to this

¹ Condemned to exile for his involvement with the Neapolitan revolution, and after a brief stay in France, Cuoco landed in Milan in the Summer of 1800, shortly after Napoleon had defeated the Austrians at Marengo. In the Lombard capital, he published *Saggio storico sulla rivoluzione di Napoli* in 1801 (reissued in a revised version in 1806), and a novel, *Platone in Italia*, between 1804 and 1806. In 1803 he was entrusted with the direction of the *Giornale italiano* by Francesco Melzi d’Eril, the vice president of the Italian Republic (its president being none other than Napoleon). In 1806 he returned to Naples where, in 1809, he was charged by Joachim Murat to outline a reform of public education that would be enacted two years later. The wide range of his activity, which also involved economic and statistical enquiry, must not conceal, however, its underlying, consistent political drive.