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ARTS - LETTERS - SCIENCE

Se preziosi si fanno gli autentici inter-venti pubblici degli autentici lettori nota, sempre più spesso non esclusivamente dai gazzettieri polemisti, gli acridi certo deteriori attivismo l'volgarmente inutile, ora preanimato da astioso malve-

CASSOLA, Arnold

On Byron's relationship with the authorities in Italy.

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ARNOLD CASSOLA

ON BYRON'S RELATIONSHIP WITH THE AUTHORITIES IN ITALY



The romantic aspect of Lord Byron's character can be witnessed not only in his poetic works but also in his way of life. He can certainly be described as the «romantic» figure «par excellence», with an intense amorous activity on one side, and an immense urge for freedom, coupled with an innate sense of rebellion against oppression, on the other. Truly, the personification of the ideal «Sturm und Drang».

His visit to Italy contributed to the forging of this exceptional personality. In the second decade of the nineteenth century the Italians were passing through a period of great malcontent, dominated as they were, by foreign powers in general, and by the Austrian empire in particular. It was thus that an organised active resistance against these authoritative governments began to emerge, the main exponents being the Liberal Society of Free Masons (Massoneria), and the patriotic organisation known as «Carboneria»⁽¹⁾. Byron, himself a strong free mason, found no difficulty in adhering to the ideals of liberty of the Italian patriots, and in Venice, his first place of residence in Italy, he became a very close friend of the Gamba family, one of the acknowledged leaders of the Italian masonic society. This friendship, further cemented by Byron's sentimental relationship with Teresa Gamba, wife of Count Guiccioli, proved to be a very solid one, as can be witnessed by Byron's peregrinations throughout the peninsula, peregrinations dictated by contingent matters rather than by a foreigner's desire to see what the country, with its unique heritage, could offer.⁽²⁾

Byron's arrival in Pisa was quite a serene one. Surrounded by innumerable British friends (amongst whom Shelley, Leight Hunt, Trelawny), and under the affectionate care of his Teresa, he must have felt quite at home. However, a look at the documents of the period held in the state archives of the city of Pisa, reveals that the police of the Granduchy of Tuscany kept an eye open on Byron because of his previous involvement in political outbursts.

And indeed Byron's behaviour in Pisa confirmed the authorities' suspicions: it was an open secret that meetings of free masons and «carbonari» were held in Byron's house. Moreover, Byron's household staff included men of dubious reputation, and this certainly did not contribute much to his prestige and credibility⁽³⁾. However, the authorities in Pisa proved to be quite tolerant, and they did not object to the meeting being held in Byron's house. It was only later, after the attempted murder, on the 24th of March 1822, of Sergeant-Major Stefano Masi by one of Byron's servants, that the authorities in Pisa decided to keep Byron's movements under stricter control. The incident, in which even Byron was involved, is described by the poet himself in his letter from Pisa to Sir Walter Scott, dated May 4th, 1822:

I have lately had some anxiety, rather than trouble, about an awkward affair here, which you may perhaps have heard of: but our minister has behaved very handsomely, and the Tuscan government as well as it is possible for such a government to behave, which is not saying much for the latter. Some other English and Scots, and myself, had a brawl with a dragoon, who insulted one of the party, and whom we mistooke for an officer, as he was medalled and well mounted, etc.; but he turned out to be a Sergeant-Major. He called out the guards at the gates to arrest us (we being unarmed); upon which I and another (an Italian) rode throught the said guard; but they succeeded in detaining others of the party. I rode to my house, and sent my secretary to give an account of the attempted and illegal arrest to the authorities. and then, without dismounting, rode back towards the gates, which are near my present mansion. Half-way I met my

man vapouring away and threatening to draw upon me (who had a cane in my hand, and no other arms). I, still believing him an officer, demanded his name and address, and gave him my hand and glove thereupon. A servant of mine thrust in between us (totally without orders), but let him go on my command. He then rode off at full speed; but about forty paces further was stabbed, and very dangerously (so as to be in peril), by some "Callum Beg" or other of my people (for I have some rough-handed folks about me), I need hardly say without my direction or approval. The said dragoon had been sabring our unarmed countrymen, however, at the gate, after they were in arrest, and held by the guards, and wounded one, Captain Hay, very severely. However he got his paiks - having acted like an assassin, und being treated like one. Who wounded him, though it was done before thousands of people, they have never been able to ascertain, of prove, nor even the weapon; some said a pistol, an air-gun, a stiletto, a sword, a lance, a pitchfork, and what not. They have arrested and examined servants and people of all descriptions, but can make out nothing. Mr. Dawkins, our minister, assures me that no suspicion is entertained of the man who wounded him having been instigated by me, or any of the party. I enclose you copies of the depositions of those with us and Dr. Crauford, a canny scot (not an acquaintance), who saw the latter part of the affair. They are in Italian (...)"

Lord Byron: Letters, Pp. 325-326

What Byron fails to add is that indeed strong measures were taken by the police of the Granduchy. As can be confirmed from Letter 54, contained in the file entitled *Lettere al Governatore* (1822), in the Pisa State Archives, two immediate arrests were made from amongst Byron's retinue: Antonio Malucelli, one of Count Gamba's servants, and Gio. Batta Falcieri, Byron's own servant. Moreover, the letter reveals that there was great unrest amongst the population in Pisa, since Falcieri was considered by many, a common criminal. The people of Pisa demanded that the culprit be found and punished. Indeed another two arrests were made in connection with this case: Giuseppe Strunff, a German, and Giovanni Papi, an Italian, both Byron's servants. A decree of the 29th June 1822 banished all four from Tuscany.

With regards to Byron himself and to the British residents in Pisa, we can say that they were not really pestered by the authorities. The «Buongoverno Pisano» did not want to risk having any diplomatic complications with Britain because of this sad affair. However, the British Consul in Florence, Mr. Dawkins, immediately intervened on behalf of the British residents⁽⁴⁾ and, undoubtedly, his timely action spared Byron from the fate which awaited Count Gamba and his retinue; who, by the end of July 1822, were all expelled from the Granduchy of Tuscany.

Byron thus remained alone in Pisa with Teresa. His movements were now continuously checked by the police of the place⁽⁵⁾. And the poet, abhorring all restrictions imposed upon him by outsiders, found the situation unbearable. It was thus that he left for Greece, attracted by the Greeks' fight for liberty and independence. The fascinating cry of freedom maintained its grip on Byron's heart.

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Gamba's next stop. Byron followed Gamba both to Ravenna and Pisa. Although his allegiance to the Gambas can be attributed to his love for Teresa, undoubtedly his refusal of all kinds of repression contributed to his moving away from those places where freedom of expression was not to be found.

(3) The fact that men of doubtful character formed part of Byron's household can be confirmed not only by the police's suspicions but also by the poet himself. Talking about his servants in Pisa he says: «For I have some rough-handed folk around me». Lord Byron: Letters, selected and edited by R.G. Howarth,

(1) A secret society formed around 1806-1807 in the Calabria region by the southern bourgeoisie. Its ideal was the establishment of a constitutional regime.

(2) In February 1821, following the discovery of a plot by the «carbonari» and free masons against the Austrian government in the Lombardo-Veneto, Count Gamba decided to leave the dangerous Venezia to set up residence in tranquil Ravenna in the Papal states. However, his stay was short lived since a decree by Pius VII spelt banishment for all free masons from the Papal states. Pisa became

GEORGES ASTALOS

(AQUA-MATER)

1964/1967 • inédit

MON CRANE A POISSONS

peut-être que ce sont les crabes
de mon sommeil vitreux
qui se racontent indiscrets
mes rêves

ou les dauphins peut-être
avec leur sensualité suspecte
qui divulguent infidèles
ma révolte

ou peut-être les castors
avec leur perversité héréditaire
qui me rougent gracieusement
les chevilles

ou toi peut-être
poussant impudiquement
de mon crâne

toi
qui aplanis les eaux
avec des némophars enfammés
qu'y a-t-il de neuf dehors

poème
sélection

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