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A Universal Message: Freemasonry and Poetry in 18th Century Italy and France

Abstract

Since the 18th Freemasonry has always had a universal vocation: its principles were molded on the new Enlightenment ethos, based on values such as Tolerance, Equality, Freedom, Friendship, Benevolence, Truth and Virtue. Thus Freemasons struggled to spread all over the world a message of universal Fraternity. How did they do? Historians agree that this message circulated through poems and *chansons* and not only by means of treatises and constitutions. During the 18th century poetry was, in fact, a fundamental and powerful media. It is said that for whatever event (birth, baptism, graduation, marriage, victory, death, etc...) everyone composed poetic texts, namely poetry was 'epidemic'. The connection between Freemasonry and literary world was particularly strong in France and Italy, where Freemasons wrote indeed a multitude of poetic texts. These poems were written and recited in order to transmit ethical and political messages to all the social classes. The analysis of these texts can clearly show how French and Italian Freemasons paved the way for the key concepts from which modern society stemmed.

Text

During the 18th century poetry was indeed a powerful and fundamental media. It is said that for whatever event (birth, baptism, graduation, marriage, victory, death, etc...) everyone composed poetic texts, namely poetry was 'epidemic'. Historians such as Daniel Ligou and Jacques Brengues clearly stated that Masonic principles were spread throughout the Western world by means of songs and poems and not through treatises¹. Furthermore poems circulated rapidly on pamphlets or through oral transmission and were more likely to avoid the censorship.

The connection between Freemasonry and literary world was particularly strong in France and Italy. Brengues even affirmed that French Freemasonry was characterized by an intellectual and

¹ Daniel Ligou (ed.), *Histoire des francs-maçons en France*, Toulouse, Privat, 1981, I, p. 156 : «Contrairement à ce que l'on croit souvent, l'idéologie maçonnique n'a pas été diffusée par les *Constitutions* d'Anderson, mais bien par le message diversifié des chansons et poèmes véhiculés par toute l'Europe»; Jacques Brengues, *Les écrivains francs-maçons au XVIII^e siècle*, in *Franc-Maçonnerie et Lumières au seuil de la Révolution française. Actes du Colloque international du samedi 28 avril 1984*, Paris, GODF, 1985, p. 85: «La production maçonnique proprement littéraire est, au XVIII^e siècle, la poésie. Elle constitue le véhicule privilégié des principes maçonniques».

artistic commitment². The same happened in Italy, where the very first example of Masonic poetry is the work of Tommaso Crudeli (1703-1745).

Moreover France and Italy had strong cultural and Masonic ties. This relationship is very well documented in the *Fonds maçonnique* of the *Bibliothèque Nationale de France* in Paris. Among the many documents, I came across a very significant letter written by the Grande Oriente Provinciale of Sicily to the Grand Orient in Paris in 1789 (*il dì primo del II mese dell'anno V.L. 5789*). This letter reflects the strength of these connections, affirming the will of reinforcing their friendship and rendering it eternal («La brama di sempre mai stringere, ed indissolubili rendere i dolci, e grati legami di vera e candida amicizia»)³.

The poetic *corpus* I analyzed is formed by 290 Italian and French poetic texts consulted at the Bibliothèque du Grand Orient de France (Paris), the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (Paris), the Biblioteca del Grande Oriente d'Italia (Rome) and the Biblioteca Universitaria (Pavia).

It is then well established that poetry had a relevant role in the circulation of the Masonic message, but which were the contents? Which message did Freemasonry wished to convey to its brethren, but also to the 'profanes'?

Masonic poetry is characterized both in France and Italy by a strong political and ethical engagement. Gian Mario Cazzaniga underlined that 18th century Freemasonry was a Republic of Letters which wanted to become a Republic *tout-court*⁴. Poetry was one of the means to achieve this purpose. Therefore poets struggled to educate people to Masonic universal principles such as *Tolerance, Equality, Freedom, Friendship, Benevolence, Truth* and *Virtue*, which had been molded on the new Enlightenment ethos. All these themes are present from the beginning of the 18th century in the very early poetic production, albeit in an embryonic stage. Subsequently, in the last two decades of the century, they became central and predominant. The already quoted terms, in fact, progressively evolved into a more political and more concrete meaning. Especially during the French Revolution from being elitist they became universal.

² Jacques Brengues, *La Franc-Maçonnerie et la fête révolutionnaire*, 'Humanisme', 1974, n. 102, p. 33 : «L'originalité de la France en matière maçonnique se manifestera dans l'institution de la loge comme lieu de production intellectuelle et artistique».

³ BNF FM2 573, Grand Orient Provincial de la Sicilie ultérieure, *Lettera al Grand Orient National de Paris*, 1789.

⁴ Gian Mario Cazzaniga (ed.), *Symboles, signes, langages sacres : pour une sémiologie de la franc-maçonnerie. Actes du Colloque franco-italien, Paris, le 25 mars 1994*, Pisa, ETS, 1995, p. 11.

Naturally the vast majority of these poems are very simple (and not particularly beautiful I must admit), given their ‘want of communication’. The authors wanted to be understood and to transmit clear and strong ideas. Thus the language is easy and often repetitive, insisting over and over again on the same key-concepts. Note also that usually these text were set to music and publicly recited.

I think that a few examples can better illustrate the previous concepts.

First of all we can quote an anonymous French *chanson* (b. 1765): a true ‘manifesto’ of Freemasonry itself. It, in fact, describes in a very understandable language the essence of being a brethren, namely following the path of virtue, avoiding vice, doing good - note that one of the most important Masonic Virtue is Beneficence (fr. *Bienfaisance*, it. *Beneficenza*)⁵ - and being a true, loyal and perfect friend. The text has very a singable rhythm, marked by the continuous repetition of the refrain *V'la ce que c'est les Francs-Maçons*:

Dans nos Loges, nous bâtissons / V'la ce que c'est les Francs-Maçons / sur les **vertus** nous élevons/ tous nos édifices / et jamais les **vices** / n'ont pénétré dans nos maisons / V'la... //Nos ouvrages sont toujours **bons** / V'la... / dans les plans que nous en traçons / notre règle est sûre / car est la Nature / qui guide et conduit nos crayons. / V'la... // Modérés dans leurs passions / discrets près des belles / **Sincères et fidèles / amis parfaits**, bons compagnons. / V'la...

The same themes can be found in the poems *La preghiera* (The Prayer) and *La Guerra della virtù* (The War of Virtue) by Antonio Jerocades. Jerocades was a very active and politically engaged Italian Freemason and composed many poems, then collected in *La lira focense*, a book printed in Naples in 1784. The poet assembled his anthology with the declared intention to spread the Masonic message. He wished to highlight the importance of values such as Fraternity, Friendship, Virtue and Humanitarianism. He also exalted Liberty and conversely condemned Tyranny:

Siam **fratelli**, e siamo **amici**. / Senza impero e servitù. / Qui meniamo i dì felici, / dove ha regno la Virtù. / [...] / Qui si sente, qui si spira / l'amistà del germe uman.

(We are brothers and friends, without dominion and servitude. / Here we are happy / here where Virtue presides. / Friendship among human being resides here).

Io pugno per l'arbitrio / e per la libertà. / Io pianto in cor l'immagine /dell'alma Verità.

(I fight for free will / and for liberty / I engrave in my hearth the image / of the holy Truth).

⁵ Béatrice Didier, *Le siècle des Lumières*, Paris, MA Éditions, 1987, p. 58: «[La bienfaisance] C'est un forme de laïcisée de la charité chrétienne»; see also Lynn Hunt *Filantropia*, in *L'Illuminismo: dizionario storico*, eds. V. Ferrone e D. Roche, Roma, Laterza, 2007, pp. 326-32.

Secondly we can consider the semantic evolution of Equality, which clearly shows the universalization of the Masonic values: from lodges to humankind.

The term Equality appears in the early French *chansons maçonniques*: nevertheless it is used in a sort of 'restricted' meaning. Equality, along with Fraternity, is indeed a privilege of Freemasons and so it was only applied in the lodges. As we could see in the first quotation, a few lines from an anonymous *chanson* entitled the *Des fre-Maçons* (1738):

L'égalité; / chez eux, préside en souveraine; / l'égalité, / charme de la société, / et par une suite certaine, / L'aimable liberté qu'amène / l'égalité // San nul égard / du haut rang, ni de la noblesse / sans nul égard / de la science ni de l'art / ce n'est qu'un frère et par tendresse / que l'un à l'autre on s'intéresse / sans nul égard.

Although restricted to the Freemasons, however Equality had a sort of 'universal' character. It had, in fact, a worldly dimension and it was deeply connected to the idea of Cosmopolitanism, thus making Freemasons from different countries equal, friends and brother, as the following lines from the anonymous song *Chantons le bonheur des Maçons* show (b. 1777):

Unis par des nœuds solennels / que dicte la justice, / nous écartons des nos autels / jusqu'à l'ombre du vice. / L'Amitié nous rende tous égaux, / Enfants de la Lumière. / Ici, l'on a point de rivaux, / chacun n'y voit qu'un frère. // Nous ne faisons dans l'Univers / qu'une seule famille. / Qu'on aille en cent climats divers, / partout elle fourmille. / Aucun pays n'est étranger / pour la Maçonnerie. / Le Frère n'a qu'à voyager / le monde est sa Patrie.

During the Revolution things finally changed. Freemason poets participated very actively and Michel de Cubières was among the most prolific bards of the *République*. Previously he had been member of the famous lodge of the *Neuf Soeurs* of Paris since its foundation. In his poem *Portrait de la République* of 1795, Equality and Fraternity were celebrated as universal values, which Freemasons shared with all the men:

Par elle rendus tous égaux, / les citoyens sont frères.

In Italy language and motives are mostly the same as their French counterparts, but the Italian situation was somewhat different. Italian Freemasons lived in a status of less liberty than their French Brothers, if not in open persecution. So they soon became bearers of political and social claims in their poems. Equality had been seen as an universal heritage and had been claimed for all humankind long before the French Revolution. This is well exemplified in the poem *Il tempio della felicità* (The Temple of Happiness) written by the Freemason Giuseppe Cerretesi in 1760:

L'uguaglianza / stabilita dal Ciel fra gl'Enti umani / deve formar reciprochi contenti /
gl'Uomini uguali in lor natura.

(Equality was established by the Heaven among human beings and must make all the men
happy and equal).

In conclusion I believe that since the dawning phase of modern Freemasonry poetry had been providing an effective and resourceful instrument through which the universal Masonic message could circulate. The analysis of texts is able to witness (from the very inside of Freemasonry itself) which were the contents of this message: a set of renovated and 'secularized' principles and values from which modern society stemmed. Whence the importance of studying this 'minor' literary production⁶, but especially of doing research (on interdisciplinary basis) into Freemasonry, considering it a 'key-player' in the 18th century scenario⁷.

⁶ Robert Darnton, *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France*, New York-London, Norton, 1996, p. 68: «'Minor' authors and 'major' best-sellers inevitably get lost in the shuffle. We do not expect the best-sellers of our own day to be read two hundred years from now. But do we think that literary history should take account of the literature that reached most people? Should not literary historians study the ordinary varieties of Mornet's *la littérature vécue*, the sort of thing that we refer to loosely by expressions such as 'taste' and 'demand' among 'the general public'?» Darnton himself underlines the importance of literary texts as historical sources, p. 149: «Of course, we do not really know how the French perceived the great crisis of 1769-74: that is the fascination in reading *Anecdotes sur Mme la comtesse du Barry* today, because it provides a contemporary account of the events with a running commentary on them». He highlights also their role in the reconstruction of past events, being texts direct witnesses of the contemporary point of view, p. 244: «The contemporary view of events was as important as the events themselves; in fact, it cannot be separated from them»

⁷ G. M. Cazzaniga (ed.), *Symboles quot.*, p. 11 «Il devrait être très difficile de s'occuper de la modernité, et en particulier des Lumières, sans se poser le problème de la signification et du rôle de la Franc-maçonnerie. Il s'agit d'une institution qui a eu une remarquable fonction d'organisation culturelle [...]. C'est à ce projet que se sont référés en tant qu'hommes de culture, mais souvent aussi en tant que réformateurs politiques, les maçons Montesquieu, Hélietius, Mirabeau en France, Franklin, Washington et Hamilton aux États Unis, Folkes, Ramsay et Pope en Angleterre, Lessing, Goethe et Herder en Allemagne, Maffei, Bertola et Filangieri en Italie».