

## New Vistas in Eighteenth Century Critical Methodology: The Contribution of Gian Vincenzo Gravina

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Gian Vincenzo Gravina, distinguished juriconsult, energetic reformer, particularly in the field of Dante scholarship, and founding member of the literary movement *Arcadia*, is vividly remembered for his part in the 1711 schism within the Society. For twenty-one years Gravina had been an active participant and organiser within the fraternity whose original intention had been that of serving as a point of reference ("uno sforzo di organizzazione culturale su scala nazionale"<sup>1</sup>) for scholars throughout the peninsula. During that time, Gravina had helped organize and administer the activities of the *Accademia* and her eight *colonie*. However, the "semplice conversazione letteraria" had eventually given way to ceremonies and the conferring of *titoli*, activities that diminished opportunities for effective intellectual exchange. Gravina, who had been responsible for the presentation of the Society's ten rules in May 1696, had begun to feel that the ceremonies and the hierarchical structure of the *Ragunanza* were detracting from the initial literary aims of her founding members. Moreover, the attitudes of many Italian scholars were being influenced by the legacy of the seventeenth century writers, whom Croce targets as "i primi a considerare frigida e antiquata l'antieriore letteratura italiana; nel modo medesimo che, in quel tempo, vennero spregiati e disfatti molti monumenti dell'arte medievale e soffocati sotto la nuova decorazione barocca".<sup>2</sup>

Gravina's growing impatience with the attitudes of his comrades in the *Ragunanza* arose from his perception of their preoccupation with civility and superficial ritual rather than the promotion of incisive critical discussion. Evidence of his concern for *Arcadia's* state of deterioration is documented in his letter to Scipione Maffei, first published in Naples in 1711 by Felice Mosca, in which Gravina defended the poet Alessandro Guidi. The sentiments expressed in this missive were a leading factor in the subsequent quarrel among members of the Society:

Era in sul principio l'Arcadia né repubblica né regno, come la vecchia ragunanza è divenuta, ma semplice conversazion letteraria: alla quale perché spesso s'accoppiavano merende e cene, Arcadia fu secondo il comune idiotismo appellata; e per divertimento della brigata ministri furon costituiti, i quali ricevevano con serietà quei riti e titoli da mascherate che per buria s'introduceano e trattasser l'ombra come cosa salda. Crebbe poi il numero, ed oltre i semidotti convennero anche alcuni pochi di soda e scelta letteratura; ma fu in quella conversazione chi contra me prese sdegno; e sopra tutto per la lode che io dava al signor Alessandro Guidi, che il primo nella lirica, senza interpolare il Petrarca, si è saputo dalla corruttela dello stil moderno liberare.<sup>3</sup>

Eventually in 1714 *La Seconda Arcadia* was founded (later to become *l'Accademia dei Quirini*), but Gravina's dissatisfaction with the critical precepts of his fellow scholars continued and eventually found expression in the formulation of a methodological approach to literary activities. It is this attempt to formalise and prioritize research tasks that makes memorable Gravina's contribution to eighteenth century scholarship.

Gravina's quarrel with fellow-members of the *Accademia* stemmed from his rejection of Arcadian literary models and his belief in the need to promote the great works of the past. In his estimation, the Settecento needed a new approach to study based on a curriculum of the classics enriched by centuries of tradition. He hoped to discourage contemporary styles that emulated the Baroque tradition, and to revive in his fellow scholars an appreciation for the great writers of the past such as Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio:

Dante, Petrarca, Boccaccio, Ariosto, Bembo, Casa, Sannazaro ed altri, lungo tempo nella greca e latina lingua esercitati, i quali, togliendo a scrivere nella volgare favella, hanno in casa trasportati i più bei fiori che nel materno seno della greca e della latina raccolsero.<sup>4</sup>

An openness to all areas of learning and the promotion of serious scholarship, that is the study and glossing of old texts and manuscripts rather than the slavish imitation of them, was the basis for Gravina's new approach in the areas of both critical methodology and creative writing. To this end he set out a programme of reform for scholars and writers, in an attempt to discourage both the placid acceptance of the

seventeenth century's critical precepts, as well as the imitative versifying of the eighteenth century poets who continued to cling to Baroque traditions and styles. Indeed, Gravina's insistence on a methodology of scholarly research that fostered familiarity with the primary texts of writers in order to stimulate original, creative thought and expression was a laudable aim. He asserted that modern-day writers and scholars should familiarize themselves with the works of the great writers of the past, whether Homer, Virgil or Dante, and that the texts themselves should form the basis for discussion, rather than the rituals that had been built up around them.

Gravina also held the view that modern writers would benefit from the close study of authors living and working at different stages of Western history and that this knowledge would encourage them to re-evaluate their own literary endeavours. In particular, he believed that the study of Dante's *Commedia* was an essential prerequisite for burgeoning writers in the Settecento. As Cambini observes, Gravina recommends the close study of the poet's text:

lo studio, più che l'imitazione, dell'Alighieri: così come propugna lo studio, e non l'imitazione, dei classici Greci, dei Latini, del Petrarca. Studio, non imitazione: la conoscenza diretta del poema dantesco deve formare l'anima dei nuovi poeti, deve irrobustirne la fantasia, deve dare solidità e saldezza di rilievo alle loro figure.<sup>5</sup>

Gravina was sensitive to the creative vision behind Dante's poetic enterprise and, like Dante, he believed in the reforming power of the writer. This can be seen in Gravina's own critical works which attest to his belief in the potential within each individual to effect positive reform through the rekindling of moral, social and creative tensions. Furthermore, he recognized the power and authority of Dante's vision in the *Commedia* and the magnitude of the poem's allegorical, theological and philosophical unity. Aldo Vallone states:

È indubbio che col Gravina [...] si promuove una nuova intelligenza della *Commedia* o meglio ancora un richiamo più consapevole e razionalmente esatto del valore di quella poesia.<sup>6</sup>

Gravina was keen to demonstrate how Dante's various works displayed his talents as teacher, philosopher, theologian, political and social reformer - all aspects of Dante's prime commitment as a reforming poet with a unique message. Gravina's familiarity with the text of the *Commedia* and with the vicissitudes of that time enabled him to appreciate the breadth of Dante's achievement. In this he showed little of the "timidezza" towards the works of the past which Fubini identifies in the attitudes of the Settecento Arcadian critics:

Vero è che un'esperienza troppo ristretta di poesia e, vorremmo dire, di vita, non concedette ai critici dell'Arcadia di sviluppare adeguatamente le loro premesse: timidi dinanzi alla poesia di Omero e di Dante, essi furono portati a confondere, nel loro proposito di restaurazione classica, poeti originali e imitatori anche mediocri, valori poetici autentici e valori letterari.<sup>7</sup>

Unlike many of his contemporaries, Gravina was keen to explore the creative workings of the poetic imagination. He was unique among his compeers for his unwavering belief in the ability of the creative artist to fuse the powers of reason and *fantasia* in order to express truths about the interior world of the imagination and the exterior physical domain. In his analysis of the *vero poetico*, that is the creative urge of the poet, he concluded that the poetic text could be considered a documentation or "history" of the poet's creative impulse. Poetic expression was therefore to be considered an active manifestation of the faculty of reason and the workings of the intellect.

In a closer comparison of Gravina's outlook to that of some of his contemporaries, notable differences emerge. For example, the Milanese Jesuit Tommaso Ceva in his *Memorie di alcune virtù del conte Francesco De Lemene con alcune riflessioni su le poesie* regarded poetry, especially lyric poetry, as an element of *fantasia* that belonged to the realm of dreams: "può quasi chiamarsi un sogno".<sup>8</sup> At the same time, the prolific and learned Ludovico Muratori, of whom Baretto declared that "non poteva vivere se non s'inchiostrava le dita ogni dì che Dio gli mandava",<sup>9</sup> was of the opinion that the chief ingredient required for poetry was *giudizio*, with an admixture of *ingegno* and *fantasia*:

Aggiungasi all'ingegno, e alla fantasia, il giudizio, che è la potenza maestra,

e siede come ajo delle altre due; ed allora avremo tutta la perfezion delle parti richieste per divenir gran Poeta.<sup>10</sup>

Gravina came closer to grasping Dante's achievement because he was aware of the close relationship between imagination and the intellect. He rejected the view that the poetic imagination functioned purely within a sensory domain. For Gravina, the artist's intellect and imaginative spirit were inextricably bound and required mutual stimulus. According to Carlo Calcaterra, Gravina "pensa che l'incanto della fantasia, la quale rapisce con la rappresentazione viva e verisimile del falso apparente e del finto, avvenga entro la mente stessa".<sup>11</sup>

A further comparison may be made with Giovan Mario Crescimbeni, best remembered for his office as the first *Custode Generale* of *Arcadia*. Crescimbeni championed the dictates of the eighteenth century's "fashionable" verse and his belief in the potential of the modern-day writers set him on a collision course with the indomitable Gravina. In his scathing *Frusta Letteraria*, Giuseppe Baretto took great delight in giving his version of the falling-out between Alfesibèo Cario (Crescimbeni) and Opico Erimantèo (Gravina).<sup>12</sup> In brief terms, while Gravina was well disposed to ingenuity and all-encompassing vision, Crescimbeni preferred to adhere to the dictates of decorum and *buon gusto*: "la Poesia [...] à per oggetto la bellezza".<sup>13</sup> In such a climate, Dante's metrical structure was deemed rigid and his *stile aspro* abhorrent to finely-moulded Arcadian tastes:

non poco mi maraviglio, che Dante, e gli altri antichi di risguardo, i quali molto ben sapevano il fine della Poesia (ammettendo la rozzezza della locuzione, perciocchè in quel tempo la Lingua Toscana era bambina) affettassero di chiuder sotto sì oscure, e difficili macchine sì nobili sentimenti.<sup>14</sup>

Crescimbeni and Gravina were never able to resolve their differences fully, and Crescimbeni continued to regard the modern-day authors as comparable, if not superior, to the classical writers. However, the controversy had its positive side because it obliged members of the Society to formulate viewpoints and discuss them openly, and, undeniably, the influence of both men helped shape the outcome of the Settecento's literary course.<sup>15</sup>

In Gravina's view, Dante's synthesising capacity was developed to an extraordinary degree, as evidenced by his comments in Book II of *Della ragion poetica* where he discussed Dante's imaginative cohesion and vision:

la poesia è la scienza delle umane e divine cose convertita in immagine fantastica ed armoniosa. La qual'immagine noi sopr'ogn'altro poema italiano ravvisiamo vivamente nella *divina Commedia* di Dante, il quale s'innalzò al sommo dell'esprimere, ed alla maggior vivezza pervenne, perchè più largamente e più profondamente d'ogn'altro nella nostra lingua concepiva: essendo la locuzione immagine dell'intelligenza, da cui il favellare trae la forza e il calore. E giunse egli a sì alto segno d'intendere e profferire, perchè dedusse la sua scienza dalla cognizione delle cose divine, in cui le naturali e le umane e civili come in terso cristallo riflettono.<sup>16</sup>

He considered Dante's epic poem as both the science of an individual's quest for self-awareness and a history of moral and political questions and also maintained that Dante's poem was a work to benefit future generations of Christian men and women. Gravina believed that knowledge brought individuals in closer communion with God, the All-Knowing, Dante's *Primo Vero*, and that it should be the duty of all Christians to promote learning and instruction: "Onde chi più cresce di cognizione, cresce anche di mente e fassi più presso a Dio, il quale è una mente universale ed infinita".<sup>17</sup>

Gravina's credo was the belief in the power of each individual to discover his/her strengths and limitations without conforming to the dictums imposed by others. For this reason, he encouraged the development of a literary style that reflected the erudition and commitment of the writer. In Luciana Martinelli's view, Gravina's critical work demonstrates "l'aspirazione a un'arte teoricamente e umanamente impegnata".<sup>18</sup> Whilst this is certainly one aspect of his work, Gravina also celebrated originality and variety as positive aspects of the creative spirit and felt that a zenith had been reached with the Florentine poet:

Largamente ancora spiegò le piume del suo ingegno Dante, il quale felicemente ardì di sollevare le forze del suo spirito all'alto disegno di 'descrivere fondo a tutto l'universo', sicché in un'opera, non solamente le umane e le civili cose, ma le divine e le spirituali mirabilmente comprese.<sup>19</sup>

Gravina's evaluation of the *Commedia* offered fresh scope for future in-depth critical work and his specific comments on linguistic invention were a spur to young writers. He considered, for example, that in formulating strategies to meet the needs of his poetic vision, Dante used invention to its fullest potential. Both in his use of metrics, "tramischando in mezzo di due rime una nuova, ed interrompendole con quella, per fuggire la fazieta: com'egli ha fatto il primo con le terzine",<sup>20</sup> and through the employment of a rich vocabulary, the poet transformed the inner world of imagination and dreams into the document of a multifarious reality:

Dante volle le parole alle cose sottoporre, e queste quantunque minime si studiò co' proprj lor vocaboli d'esprimere, quando la ragione e la necessità ed il fine suo il richiedea: donde il suo poema divenne per tutte le grandi, mediocri e piccole idee, di locuzioni tanto figurate, quanto proprie abbondante e fecondo.<sup>21</sup>

In Gravina's consideration of the evolution and enrichment of the Italian language, Dante's contribution outweighed that of other *Trecento* poets, and he depicted the Florentine exile as a poet of ingenuity fashioning his *cantiche* from the raw poetic materials available to him. Innovative in characterisation, style and metrical structure, Dante was viewed as a precursor to the later poetic development of writers such as Petrarca, Ariosto and Tasso.

Seeing Dante as a forerunner of Italian poetic language led Gravina to a cultural and linguistic comparison between Dante and Homer. Both poets were identified as inaugurating significant linguistic developments during their respective careers. In Homer, Gravina identified a more "open" style that made for ready comprehension, whereas Dante was seen as consolidating his material into a more compact structure:

Dante [è] simile ad Omero con la vivezza della rappresentazione, si è reso però dissimile collo stile suo contorto, acuto e penetrante, quando l'omerico è aperto ed ondeggiante e spazioso.<sup>22</sup>

By placing his research within an historical context, Gravina facilitated the possibility of an overall synthesis. As *padri* to new poetic languages,

Dante and Homer anticipated the increasingly polished approach of successive writers and Gravina considered both Homer and Dante worthy craftsmen whose example would be beneficial to contemporary scholars. Furthermore, he reflected on the possible benefits that other Trecento poets might have enjoyed if they had studied Dante's example more closely and developed his linguistic base-work:

Poichè essendo la lingua prole ed immagine della mente, e nunzia degli umani concetti, quanto più largamente in concetto si distende, più la lingua liberamente cresce ed abbonda. Onde perchè Dante abbracciò tutta l'università delle cose tanto in generale, quanto in particolare, tanto scientifiche, quanto comuni, fu costretto a pigliar parole dalla matrice lingua latina, e da altri più ascosi fonti; le quali si sarebbero rese comuni e piacevoli coll'uso domator delle parole, se il Petrarca e 'l Boccaccio avessero preso a volgarmente scrivere di cose alla grandezza del loro ingegno, ed alla Dantesca materia somiglianti.<sup>23</sup>

Gravina firmly believed that the complex structural and thematic components of the *Commedia* had a place in the Settecento's portfolio of Rationality and Good Taste. He viewed the work as an integrated and harmonious whole and one that reflected the poet's responsibility to his linguistic art, as Dante himself observed:

ché non è impresa da pigliare a gabbo  
discriver fondo a tutto l'universo,  
né da lingua che chiami mamma o babbo (Inferno XXXII, 7-9)

Through his critical writings, Gravina sought to promote a flexibility in outlook among scholars and writers of his age and for this reason he could not stress enough the importance of the continuity of tradition. This was in order to enhance creative energy in young writers, since, in his estimation, the recognition of the validity of past literary achievements did not equate with the servile imitation of them. In his work, Gravina exhibited the traits of an aggressive, discriminating personality who wished to discover for himself the virtues or improprieties of the work in question. He rejected the exclusive cultivation of *bellezza* and *buon gusto*, and actively participated in critical debates, defending his opinions and commending the value of self-criticism.

In the surrounding climate of self-congratulatory effusiveness, Gravina rejected the efforts of the glib-tongued *poeti facili* and reserved his praise for creative and original contributions. The eighteenth century critic opened the door to the great works of the past in the hope of initiating change in his own era. While Gravina's observations on Dante served as a focal point for a broadening of critical vistas in the Settecento, his positive attitude towards learning and his practical approach to critical methodology ably demonstrated that he was a scholar in tune with the needs of his time.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>*Storia della Letteratura Italiana*, dir. Emilio Cecchi & Natalino Sapegno, vol. VI: *Il Settecento*, Milano, Garzanti, 1976, p. 335. The constitution of *Arcadia* was drawn up on October 5th 1690 at San Pietro in Montorio. The poet Agostino Taja is credited with the naming of the Society.

<sup>2</sup>Benedetto Croce, *Problemi di estetica*, Bari, Laterza, 1923, p. 451.

<sup>3</sup>"Della divisione d'Arcadia al marchese Scipione Maffei" (Roma, settembre 1712), G.V. Gravina, *Scritti critici e teorici*, a cura di Amedeo Quondam, Bari, Laterza, 1973, p. 483.

<sup>4</sup>"Regolamento degli studi di nobile e valorosa donna", with dedication "all'illustrissima signora marchesa Isabella Vecchiarelli Santacroce", Gravina, *ibid.*, p. 180.

<sup>5</sup>Leonardo Cambini, *Il pastore aligerio: appunti per la storia della fortuna di Dante nel secolo XVIII*, Città di Castello, Lapi, 1913, p. 21.

<sup>6</sup>Aldo Vallone, *La critica dantesca nel Settecento*, Firenze, Olschki, 1961, p. 21.

<sup>7</sup>Mario Fubini, *Dal Muratori al Baretti, Studi sulla critica e sulla cultura del Settecento*, Bari, Laterza, 1975, p. 279.

<sup>8</sup>Milano, Bellagatta, 1706, p. 132. A second edition was published in 1718.

<sup>9</sup>Giuseppe Baretti, *Scelta delle lettere familiari*, ed. Luigi Piccioni, Bari, Laterza, 1912, p. 143.

<sup>10</sup>*Della perfetta poesia italiana, spiegata e dimostrata con varie osservazioni*, Venezia, Coleti, 1770, vol. I, 1, vii, p. 55.

<sup>11</sup>*Il Barocco in Arcadia e altri scritti sul Settecento*, Bologna, Zanichelli, 1950, p. 27. He goes on to elaborate that this constitutes the difference between "l'autore della *Ragion poetica*, da un lato, e il Muratori, col Ceva, dall'altro, i quali concepivano la fantasia, come tutta senso, corporea, "amens" (senza mente), senza logica".

<sup>12</sup>"Memorie storiche dell'adunanze degli Arcadi di M.G.M. Custode generale d'Arcadia" published in the first edition of *La Frusta Letteraria di Aristarco Scannabue*, a cura di Luigi Piccioni, Bari, Laterza, 1932, vol. I, p. 11: "venne una tremenda e crudelissima guerra, la quale poco mancò non rovinasse l'augusto impero arcadico pochi giorni dopo che fu fondato. Due segnalati campioni si fecero molto distinguere con le loro braverie in quella guerra. Uno fu Alfesibeo, primo califfe d'Arcadia. L'altro fu un certo Opico, il quale, non contento forse di essere stato solamente creato uno de' principali argaliffi dell'arcadico regno, e pretendendo d'essere anch'egli califfe, o almeno indipendente dal califfe Alfesibeo, si ribellò, e menò un vampo terribile per le arcadiche provincie, minacciando di metterle tutte a saccomanno, anzi pure di mandarle a fuoco e fiamma".

<sup>13</sup>Giovan Mario Crescimbeni, *La bellezza della volgar poesia spiegata in otto dialoghi*, Roma, Buagni, 1700, Dialogo I, p. 4.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, Dialogo II, p. 24.

<sup>15</sup>Ferruccio Ulivi makes the following observation: "(L'Arcadia) non fu solo invenzione artificiale di una cultura, prospetto scenico su cui farà le sue prove la nuova poesia (quella che arriverà alle allusioni liberamente musicali dei Rolli o Metastasio), ma prodotto relativamente comprensivo; e ciò parve specchiarsi fin dall'origine nel dualismo, alla fine corroborante, dei fondatori e legislatori, il Crescimbeni e il Gravina", "Prima dell'Arcadia", *Paragone*, 28 (1952), 3-4. See also Anna Celsi Gaspari, "Strategie retoriche ne *La Storia dell'Accademia degli Arcadi*", *Quaderni d'italianistica*, vol. XII, n. 2 (1991), 237-44.

<sup>16</sup>*Della ragion poetica ... e della tragedia*, Venezia, Geremia, 1731, p. 70. For a most illuminating discussion of Gravina's definition of poetry, see Domenico Pietropaolo, "La definizione della poesia nella *Ragion poetica* del Gravina", *Quaderni d'italianistica*, vol. VI, n. 1 (1985), 52-63, where Pietropaolo affirms "nella *Ragion poetica* il poeta è colui che ha la responsabilità intellettuale e l'autorità culturale di presentare nelle sue opere modelli di comportamento orientati al miglioramento della società", pp. 59-60.

<sup>17</sup>"Regolamento degli studi di nobile e valorosa donna", *Scritti critici*, p. 178.

<sup>18</sup>*Dante*, Palermo, Palumbo, 1973, p. 118.

<sup>19</sup>"Discorso sopra l'Endimione", *Scritti critici*, p. 58.

<sup>20</sup>*Della ragion poetica*, II, p. 78.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 89.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 89.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 88.

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