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The Autobiography of Pietro Giannone

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Pietro Giannone (1676-1748), although born in the Gargano region of Northern Apulia, was a prominent figure in the forensic circles which governed intellectual life in the final years of the Seicento in Naples. He trained as a lawyer, but he is chiefly remembered today for his historical writings, the *Istoria civile del regno di Napoli* and the *Tirregno*. However, in this paper I shall examine another work by Giannone, the *Vita scritta da lui medesimo*, his autobiography. This was Giannone's last work, written in the final years of his life during his imprisonment for heresy in the castle of Miolans in Piedmont and it was published posthumously in the nineteenth century. Naples was home to the birth of the great autobiographical production of the Settecento,¹ and Giannone's work was an integral part of this tradition, although it is very much overshadowed by the justly famous contemporary autobiography of Giambattista Vico. Nonetheless, the *Vita scritta da lui medesimo* by Pietro Giannone is a work which merits its place among the paradigms of the genre in Eighteenth Century Italy.

Before the recognition of autobiography as an autonomous genre in the nineteenth century,² the few examples of "*vite*" are often hybrid texts. Perhaps the most famous example is that of Giambattista Vico's *Vita scritta da se medesimo* in which the author describes the act of writing his autobiography as both a philosopher's and a historian's task. Vico is the most famous participant of the "*Progetto ai letterati d'Italia*" proposed by the Venetian scholar, Giovannartico di Porcia, with the idea of preparing a collection of the intellectual autobiographies of his most illustrious contemporaries.³

In the following study of the literary character of Giannone's autobiography, I shall seek to understand the author's formal and stylistic models.⁴ Within the context of a non-canonical genre such as autobiography, Giannone's *Vita* respects the definition, offered by Philippe Lejeune, of the autobiographical pact with the reader: the triumvirate of protagonist-narrator-author professes his sincerity to the reader.⁵ In order better to understand Giannone's concept of this "*genere non-canonical*," I intend to focus on two types of personal writing which seem to have been his principal models.

In order to arrive at a more complete understanding of the literary merit of the work, I shall focus first on the apologetical nature of the text and second on its relationship to historiography. It is my contention that the dual concerns of apology and memoirs, or rather the historical rendering of a life, are the two ingredients central to the text and to Giannone's concept of the emerging genre of autobiography.

Let us define our use of the terms "apology" and "memoirs." Both are sub-genres of autobiography. Apology can be defined as a justification of the author's own perspective in the face of opposition and controversy, whereas memoir is more historical in content, form and style. The latter is a life story written with a view to providing a personal record of an epoch, or of the world in which the protagonist lived. The autobiographies of statesmen often take the form of memoirs. Apology and memoirs date from classical times and are both usually written by a first person narrator.

Because the introduction ("proemio") to the *Vita* offers the reader a very clear explanation of the author's intentions, it is an opportune starting point for my analysis. Using the metaphor of the voyage of life, which has been a commonplace of Italian literature since Dante's *Commedia*, Giannone describes himself as a ship on a stormy sea. Yet his voyage is portrayed by a negative metaphor, with the image of a little boat struggling not to capsize on the tempestuous seas. Here the author-narrator-protagonist states his motivation for writing, not as a vehicle for self promotion but as a means of passing his time in prison and of enjoying the experience of reliving his memories:

Prendo a scriverla perché, trovandomi ritenuto fra le angustie di un castello, dove privo di ogni umano commercio traggo miseramente i miei giorni; e dubitando, per la mia età cadente, non dovessi quivi finirla; quindi, per alleggerire in parte la noia e il tedio, e perché, avvicinandomi alla fine, rammentando con la mente tutte le mie passate gesta, possa ritrarre conforto dalle buone e pentimento delle ree.⁶

His principal intent is apologetic rather than didactic, as he attempts to underscore the iniquity of his situation. He also admits to the reader that he derives comfort from remembering the past, thereby banishing somewhat the tedium of prison. He seeks to leave behind, as his intellectual testament, the story of his life: "*perché sia a gli altri di documento*" (Giannone 4), and to comfort not only himself but others by addressing the work "*massimamente a chi avrà sortito la disgrazia di nascere sotto grave e pesante cielo*" (Giannone 4). The tone of the introduction is decidedly solemn, as indicated by the metaphor of the boat on the stormy

sea. He expresses the desire that his text might serve as a warning to his readers of the evil of the world and of the misfortunes which they too might encounter:

Se, adunque, in essa non vi leggeranno fatti illustri ed egregi, avrà almanco questo pregio: che altri, avendola inanzi agli occhi, prenda da se guardia e abbiala per guida e scorta in passando un mare sì crudele e tempestuoso, pieno di irti e di perigliosi scogli, dove facilmente potrebbe urtare e sommergersi. (Giannone 4)

The apology was one of the few forms of self expression that could not be frowned upon by the post-Reformation culture of Italy as it implies a frank criticism of one's own life rather than self-glorification.⁷ Most other known examples of contemporary autobiography in Italy have a didactic intent.⁸ The use of the first person narration is a feature of this tradition apparent in Giannone's work which renders it distinctive from the other texts which use the third person singular narrative.

Giannone begins a brilliant career and moves in all the right circles until the envy of his less fortunate colleagues renders his life miserable and he is forced into exile in Vienna. This watershed can be compared to the experience of conversion in other autobiographies because it marks the precise moment in which the narrative changes direction. It is also in contrast to the linear progression of the didactic model proposed by Porcia and adopted by such contemporaries as Muratori and Vico. This turning point in Giannone's fortunes is described at the end of chapter V, when he narrates the events surrounding the publication of the *Istoria civile* and his hasty departure from Naples. The greater part of the work is then dedicated to his misfortunes.

Among the literary paradigms of this *epistola calamitatum* are the negative anecdotes narrated, such as chronic ill health, miscomprehension, the envy of peers and economic hardships.⁹ Giannone's tribulations constitute a major portion of the narrative. A sense of regret and misfortune permeates the work even in the description of his early years in Naples when he suffered not only the envy of his peers but also the persecution of the Church and the State. Giannone feels that he has been mistreated and misunderstood. For this reason he is prone to self-pity and considers himself very much alone. Thus he feels the need to seek solace and justification in the act of writing.

According to his self-portrait in the *Vita*, Giannone never enjoyed good health. He describes in detail the visit to a nun with healing powers who might help him cure his indigestion. "*Assalito da una grava ipocondria*" (Giannone 61), he learned that he must give up wine if he wished to

continue his research with some profit. During his time in Venice he suffered from the damp climate of the lagoon and thereafter complaints about his health were even more frequent until his imprisonment, from which point he was often seriously ill for months at a time. The winters were particularly difficult:

In novembre caddi infermo, e durò la grave mia infermità per tutto febbraio del 1739.... A 4 di novembre di nuovo m'infermai dell'istessa malattia, non così forte come l'anno scorso, e mi durò due mesi, con tre altri mesi di convalescenza.... (Giannone 340)

The envy of his peers is a prominent topic throughout the *Vita*, both in Naples, where he emerged as a very competent and successful young lawyer, and in Vienna, where the Spaniards persecuted him. These envious people are blamed by Giannone for the misfortunes which later fell upon him, causing great suffering, and he refers to these people bitterly as "*maligni persecutori*" (Giannone 74).

Giannone was also plagued by economic difficulties from the time of his departure from Naples. After the success of his forensic career in Italy, he arrived in Vienna a refugee with inadequate savings. Although he obtained a small pension from the Emperor, it was almost insufficient and arrived in irregular instalments. Giannone was greatly concerned about his precarious economic state which progressively worsened. Finding himself in Venice without the support of a stipend, his financial situation—in addition to everything else—was almost more than Giannone could bear:

Ciocché maggiormente mi angustiava era che, con tutto questo aiuto, non poteva tirar molto in lungo la dimora, senz'altro soccorso. Né da Napoli da mio fratello era di sperarlo; anzi dal medesimo sperimentai, in questo mio infelice stato, le più estreme ed inudite crudeltà. (Giannone 101)

The style of the *Vita* is also determined by the apologetic character of the text. The tone is very subjective and the author often complains bitterly of his treatment by others and the desperate situations in which he finds himself. His narrative is more subjective than that of contemporary texts on a didactic rather than apologetic model.

Indeed, Giannone's use of the first person narrative, "*io*," is shunned by Vico and other contemporary autobiographers. The desire to maintain at least the semblance of objectivity through the literary convention of a third

person narrative mask was often used to deflect ecclesiastical criticism and underscore didactic intent while maintaining close ties to the more established genre of biography. Giannone, however, can be more free in his writing as he is already a condemned prisoner. As noted above, he is not writing for publication, or an audience, but rather for his own solace. Thus it can be suggested that the apologetic, rather than the didactic, nature of the text is directly responsible for Giannone's choice of the more personal first person narrative.

Let us now examine the historical component in the text as a memoir. Memoir, as already stated, is the historical chronicle of a life. In its length, detail and chronological organization, the work reads like a history. The *Vita scritta da lui medesimo* is a centripetal work, concerned with the world around the protagonist as much as with his personal struggles and triumphs. It provides historians of the period with invaluable documentary evidence. Such historical quality inherent in the text is in fact to be understood within the coordinates of the Neapolitan narrative tradition.

Giannone's autobiography is not only the story of his own life but also the chronicle of Naples and Vienna in his time. Long portions of the text record the events of the Imperial Court in Vienna. As a historian, Giannone is very much aware of the linear passage of time. Every chapter begins with precise indications of the year and place.¹⁰ The narration proceeds chronologically with frequent references to the month and year up to the moment in which the author-narrator-protagonist is imprisoned in the castle of Miolans. He then decides to write the story of his difficult life. Like many autobiographers he finds it difficult to place an ending to his life in order to stop time and achieve a retrospective point of view. Giannone's autobiography thus disintegrates into a series of notes made in a quasi-diaristic form, perhaps with the intent of being eventually elaborated for incorporation into the full text of the autobiography. Moreover, in the final pages of the narrative before the note form begins, the author expresses his difficulty in ending the *Vita*:

...cominciai a scrivere queste memorie, le quali, se non sono compite, è perché non è ancor finita la mia vita, non sapendo se dovrò qui finirla, ovvero il rimanente non l'avesse il mio fiero destino serbato ai più duri e crudeli strazi. (Giannone 334)

In a certain sense, though, Giannone does complete the work by the use of the literary convention of the epitaph. At the end of the narrative portion of the text and before the beginning of the diaristic notes, he completes his account of the summer of 1737 with a quotation from

Dante: "*Di nuove pene mi convien far versi.*" This quotation from the deepest circles of the *Inferno* (XX, 1) gives a tragic and dark tone to the close of the autobiography.

This work, unlike all other contemporary "*vite*," is a very long text (340 pages in the Feltrinelli edition). As a historian, Giannone looks for his chief paradigm in chronicles and histories. Indeed, the lengthy nature of the volume is typical of historical chronicles rather than contemporary autobiography. After the first five chapters, which roughly correspond to the didactic intentions of contemporary intellectual autobiography as envisioned by Vico and Porcia, in the Vienna period Giannone goes on to the new form of a memorial of his time. He offers the reader a detailed and interesting portrait not only of himself but also of his milieu. At this point, the chapters become more lengthy and the narration is more historical in tone with comments on several aspects of life at court in Vienna and the contemporary political scene. This information is of great value to scholars of intellectual history and historians of the period.

The *Vita scritta da lui medesimo* adheres to the Neapolitan "*filone memorialistico*" of which it is a principal example. This historical-chronology writing style is apparent in such disparate texts as Giambattista Basile's *Cunto de li cunti* and the *Avvertimenti ai nipoti* of Francesco d'Andrea. It has been compared by Battistini to the disposition of "*perle su una collana*," by which the critic seeks to express the chronological exposition of a series of otherwise unrelated anecdotes.¹¹ In the Neapolitan tradition of autobiography, the historical aspect of a text is almost as important as the personal one. Unique to Naples and developed in this period is the local tradition of memoirs, the first exponent of which was Francesco d'Andrea, author of the *Avvertimenti ai nipoti*. This work is the history of the D'Andrea family and of their relationship to the "*ceto forense*," which at that time guided political and social life in Naples. This model greatly influenced Giannone and it also appears in later Neapolitan autobiographies such as those of Genovesi and Galante. D'Andrea's work was well known in Naples where it was widely distributed at the turn of the century. Another reader of d'Andrea was Giannone's contemporary, Giambattista Vico, whose intellectual autobiography is also closely associated with the Neapolitan "*filone memorialista*." He applies his own providential view of history deliberated in the *Scienza nuova* to the reconstruction of his own life history.

Despite some formal instability in the early autobiographical production of the Italian literary tradition due to its non-canonical nature, the authors are aware of working within the coordinates of a tradition and they seek to model their autobiographical acts on the available corpus and prose models from contiguous genres. In the case of Pietro Giannone, both

the Neapolitan "*filone memorialista*" of prose writing and also his own expertise as a historian shape his text. The two models of memoirs and apology govern the *Vita scritta da lui medesimo* and thus, at the same time, Giannone conforms to local tradition in Naples and distinguishes himself by following an apologetical rather than a didactic presentation of his life. Precisely these aspects of the work render his text significant within the context of the Italian corpus of autobiography.

• NOTES

¹ Simona Costa, "Alfieri autobiografico e l'autocoscienza narrativa," *La rassegna della letteratura italiana* 82 (1978): 390.

² James Olney dates the first appearance of the word autobiography in 1834 with the publication in England of Rev. Mr. Scargill's *Autobiography*. "Autobiography and the Cultural Moment," ed. James Olney (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980) 6.

³ See also de Michelis & Pizzamiglio and Battistini listed in the bibliography.

⁴ But it may be of interest to remember first the warning of Michele Cataudella:

Se l'autobiografia è un genere non-canonico, o magari osservante contraddittoriamente più canonici, pare implicito che in assenza di caratteri generali la descrizione storica del genere si rende problematica e ancor più rischioso appare il rilevamento nell'ipotetico asse diacronico di connotazioni.

"Scrittura egocentrica e modello culturale nell'autobiografia dei riformatori napoletani del Settecento," *Quaderni di retorica e poesia* 2 (1986): 105.

⁵ Philippe Lejeune's definition of autobiography is as follows: "Récit rétrospectif en prose qu'une personne réelle fait de sa propre existence, lorsqu'elle met l'accent sur sa vie individuelle, en particulier de sa personnalité." (*Le pacte autobiographique*, Paris: Seuil, 1975, 14). The description touches four points with regard to genre: the form (a prose account), the subject (an individual life or the history of a personality), and the situation of the author and the narrator. The last two terms are closely related and indeed become ultimately identical, since the author is the narrator and the narrator is the protagonist. Such a trinity in one is the central concern for Lejeune in defining autobiography as a distinct genre: "Pourqu'il y ait autobiographie...il faut qu'il y ait identité de l'auteur, du narrateur et de personnage." (*Le pacte autobiographique* 15). The autobiographical pact is the relationship between the reader and this triumvirate and is grounded by Lejeune on the aesthetics of reception as outlined by Hans Jauss in "Littérature médiévale et théorie des genres," *Poétique* (1970): 79-101.

⁶ Pietro Giannone, *Vita scritta da se medesimo*. (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1960) 3.

⁷ "Sino a questo periodo esisteva una sorta di complesso di Narciso che inibiva la scrittura intorno a se stessi, tollerata solamente, da Dante in poi, o per fini autoapologetici o per intenti didascalici." Andrea Battistini, "Commenti." in Giambattista Vico, *Opere*, ed. Andrea Battistini. (Milano, Mondadori, 1990) 1235.

⁸ The literary manifesto for the didactic model of early Eighteenth Century Italian autobiography is Giovannartico di Porcia's "Progetto ai letterati d'Italia." in *Raccolta d'opuscoli scientifici e filologici*, ed. Angelo Calogerà, 1 (1728): 127-44.

⁹ The same themes form a significant portion of the content of Giannone's letters, as evidenced in the *Epistolario*, ed. Pantaleo Minervini, Bari: Schena, 1983.

¹⁰ The following is an example:

Capitolo ottavo

Anni 1731, 1732 e 1733. In Vienna

I

Intanto eravamo entrati nell'anno 1731....

(Giannone 182)

¹¹ Nell'Italia del Sud, anche per tutto il Seicento, il romanzo (almeno a livello di produzione, se non di funzione) e una forma che non riesce a imporsi, laddove il Basile è a testimoniare della fortuna della novellistica. Sicché le prime esperienze autobiografiche sono prive della compatezza primordiale di un intreccio conseguente.

Andrea Battistini, *Lo specchio di Dedalo*, (Bologna: Il mulino, 1990) 56.

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