

## Pleasure in the Writing of Alberto Arbasino

Endlessly reproducible, starting from the most disparate combinations or “positions,” such as Barthes’ “erotic enchantment,” the pleasure of writing is first and foremost the effect of a correspondence, or at least an agreement, a relation between two parts put into play in the course of composition. When the modern philosopher Carlo Dossi reflected in *Note azzurre* (Blue notes) on his own relentless creative *souffrance*, he managed to highlight a dissonance between these parts, between ideas and words, an imbalance from the exuberance of thought untranslatable into the work itself:

In writing, I suffer. Every line, for me, is pain. To one condemned to think much, God should have afforded at least a pair of brains independent of one another, just as He afforded all of us a pair of arms so that one can work while the other rests. As it is now, one must be subject to the mental stupors produced by freeing oneself from one’s nerves: as it is, one has to wait for the ebb of ideas, like waves in the sea. – Most writers have words and not thoughts: I, with my thoughts, have no words.

How many must have suffered from this very same “pain”? Moreover, how many works has the absence of the pleasure of writing spoiled? Even without going as far as substituting ink with blood (as Dossi himself does: “To write is to deplete blood”), every modern writer that no longer believes in ecstasy, in inspiration, or in a Bréton-type automatism, knows that the absence of the word is a constraint, a persistent evil of art, a tiny abyss that reopens at the end of each sentence—and knows that part of the “pain” of finding oneself without words is contained in even the most sublime pages of the masters. Completely autonomous, independent from any transcendent “dictatorship,” the aesthetic of the *mot juste* that Flaubert admirably described in a famous letter to George Sand is simply one (the most demanding, perhaps) of the possible ways out of this condition of the sorrow of form:

The preoccupation with exterior beauty for which you reproach me is my own method. When I discover a displeasing assonance or a repetition during one of my spells, I am sure that I have fallen into falsity; in the frenzy of searching, I end up finding the expression that fits, that was the only one possible, one that is altogether harmonious. The word is always there, when one has an idea.

Without relinquishing the construction of an antinaturalistic literature and of a “novel of ideas” in Dossi’s sense (“nature does not reach us except third-hand. – Ours is no longer a literature of sentiments but of ideas.”), the essayist Alberto Arbasino masterfully circles around the mechanism that condemns Dossi himself to the “pain of writing.” Arbasino refuses to hesitate, to agonize for hours over a sentence that does not come to a close or to remain wordless for any period of time. Even Flaubert himself, with his variations and his “frenzied search” for the *mot juste*, would seem to be far too pedantic for Arbasino.

Not wasting time chasing these *mots justes*, not suffering, not being pedantic—all of these mean, first and foremost, for Arbasino, being *less* Italian, sidestepping a tradition that produced Petrarch and the Petrarchans, the Cinquecento, hundreds of rhetoric manuals for schools, the Manzoni-esque Claudio Achillini, and the Accademia della Crusca, all the way down to the “beautiful and well-sounding words” loved by Gabriele D’Annunzio and studied by philologist Mario Praz. Why has the same tradition not produced fewer tears, fewer precepts, and more entertaining books? Why does “our country,” as we read in Arbasino’s *L’Anonimo lombardo* (Anonymous Lombard, 1959) seem to be “traditionally hopeless” when it comes to that “brilliant, ironic, humorous style much admired by the English and even the French”? Like a distinguished eighteenth-century Lombard *homme d’esprit*, more Austrian than Italian, a collaborator with the journal *Caffè* who associated with Alessandro Verri and Cesare Beccaria, Arbasino might respond that the exasperated, arduous formal craft of the Italian “beautiful style” represents in and of itself a prohibition on pleasure in writing, and hence, the ideal premise for a boring literature. Of course, coming out of a tradition of rhetoricians and grammarians, of rules and their exceptions, it’s true, as Verri wrote, that “we are extremely sincere in letting the reader know the effort we endured in the act of composition...in the harmony, in the vanity

of selected vocabularies, in the laborious transposition of the syntax. Our style,” he continues, “contains a matchless amount of anxiety, a mountain of minutiae and small, extremely severe prescriptions that have rendered it complex, burdensome, ‘overly manufactured.’” Arbasino’s prognosis is even more dire: our “written language” is simply “false by definition.”

The falseness of language is its “labor,” its rigidity, its lack of nimbleness that impedes it from positive contact with reality and diverts it from “*a je ne sais quoi* that binds it, that makes it whirl, something shy, something mixed up.” For Arbasino, the false is primarily the effect of an “affected” style, just as it was for Manzoni in his introduction to *I promessi sposi* (*The Betrothed*, 1827; trans. 1834), which Arbasino cites, acknowledging: “He already knew it all.” To erase these limits and prohibitions, the writing of *L’Anonimo lombardo* and *Fratelli d’Italia* (Brothers of Italy, 1963) proceeds along the thread of a happy paradox: continuing the lineage of *Caffè*, it reaffirms the primacy of ideas over the sumptuous, inert falsity of “rhetoric” and of mere words. This writing makes itself less Italian precisely to propose anew, “even with quotation marks and italics, the optimal *sound* of spoken Italian”—a language “among the most subtle and free possible,” which exists “in a few households” but never “in serial novels.” Without this Lombardy precedent, an apology for poise or for linguistic self-possession from which Gadda himself descends and from which Arbasino never strays too far, Arbasino’s language would be barely comprehensible. (“I would have sat at the Caffè of Alessandro Verri,” claims Gadda. “The ‘Repudiation the Vocabulary Sanctioned by the Crusca before a Notary by the Authors of this Periodical.’ Here it is, it’s always right here: ‘We consider it a reasonable thing, that words serve the ideas, not the ideas the words.’”) All the neologisms, the pronunciation errors (the *ma ccche ccce fffrega*, the *mio pvossimo pvogvamma*, and so on), the fragments in dialect, the ellipses, all the words in English, French, German, Spanish that he uses increasingly in the rewriting of *Fratelli d’Italia* and *L’Anonimo lombardo* (following the instructions laid out in Verri’s “repudiation”: “if a term were furnished from India, or from the American language, that expressed one of our ideas, better that we adopt it in our Italian language”)—all of these language experiments would be pure rhetorical caprices, just as they were for that other anonymous Lombard.

In truth, the aim of this extension of the code, of this opening of literary language, is first and foremost to bring language closer to the variety that exists in the real world and to contribute to what is known about it through the novel. A novel-essay like *Fratelli d'Italia*, without sacrificing “ideas,” integrates “eccentric” words and materials “expropriated from the most heterogeneous, extraliterary disciplines,” and fosters legitimate “cognitive aspirations.” The construction of a language of ideas that does not prohibit, as for Dossi, the pleasure of writing, even at the cost of “little stylistic stains” is an aim that is no less relevant for Arbasino (“And who cares about a few little stylistic stains where thoughts abound?” Alessandro Verri asked himself). If in literature pain and suffering coincide in the absence of the word, with silence, with not knowing how to express one’s ideas, and if part of this hardship lasts as long as the writing itself, then stretching the available vocabulary out of all proportion and “being not so much correct as efficient” means working toward the utterability of ideas and toward the pleasure that arises from them. This pleasure is paradoxically defined by Forster, that “master of reticence”: “the right word arrives not without difficulty, but without suffering.”

*Translated by Dylan J. Montanari*