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Saggi

An admirable war of Art and Nature. The first flights of the aerostatic balloon in the poems by Alfieri, Monti and Parini

Andrea Penso*

Abstract

The article investigates the reaction of the Italian literary community of the late Eighteenth century towards one of the scientific discoveries that revolutionized human life, namely the first balloon flight, which took place in 1783. A brief introduction dedicated to the context and the historical-literary debate gravitated around that epochal event will be followed by the analysis of three exemplary case studies, namely the poems dedicated to the balloon by Vittorio Alfieri, Vincenzo Monti and Giuseppe Parini. The choice of these three eminent authors is certainly not arbitrary, given that their work was undoubtedly among the most influential in Italy in the second half of the eighteenth century. Methodologically, the study focuses on the application of close reading and stylistics tools. The purpose of the analysis is to show how the intellectuals of the time reacted to the success of the first human flight experience, amid enthusiasm, invitations to prudence and condemnation of the *hybris* linked to technocratic progress.

L'articolo investiga la reazione della comunità letteraria italiana di fine Settecento davanti a una delle scoperte scientifiche che hanno rivoluzionato la vita dell'uomo, vale a dire il primo volo in pallone aerostatico, avvenuto nel 1783. A una breve introduzione dedicata al contesto e al dibattito storico-letterario che gravitava intorno a quell'evento epocale, farà seguito l'analisi di tre casi studio esemplari, vale a dire le poesie dedicate al

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pallone aerostatico da Vittorio Alfieri, Vincenzo Monti e Giuseppe Parini. La scelta di questi tre eminenti autori non è certamente arbitraria, dato che la loro opera fu senza dubbio tra le più influenti nell'Italia del secondo Settecento. Metodologicamente, lo studio verte sull'applicazione degli strumenti del cosiddetto *close reading* e della stilistica. Lo scopo dell'analisi è mostrare come gli intellettuali dell'epoca reagirono al successo della prima esperienza di volo di un essere umano, tra entusiasmo, inviti alla prudenza e condanna della *hybris* legata al progresso tecnocratico.

In 1783 a globe-shaped balloon flew in the sky over Paris for twenty-five minutes, carrying two people at the height of almost 3000 feet for the first time in history: the original idea of the Montgolfier brothers had finally resulted, thanks also to Jacques Charles' and the Robert brothers' work, in a relatable flying machine.¹ The sensational event gave rise to many different reactions, and sparked many debates around science, knowledge and progress. Scientists, philosophers and even politicians from all over the world were caught by fascination and wonder after a primordial human desire was fulfilled. The Italian literary community was no exception. While ballooning as an 18th century cultural phenomenon has been repeatedly investigated on a European scale, not many critical contributions have been produced in the Italian studies domain.² This article therefore aims to investigate the reactions the most prominent Italian poets of the time, namely Vincenzo Monti, Giuseppe Parini and Vittorio Alfieri, had towards this spectacle, and how they translated them into poetry. The choice of these three authors as a case study is due to their importance in the literary milieu of the time: their works, more than anybody else's, could have a relevant impact on the public and the intellectual community. In addition, the analyses connected to these exemplary case studies will serve as a starting point for future surveys on the reactions the Italian literates had towards the balloons and the early flights. Deeper investigations will potentially be aimed at understanding more extensively the debate sparked by the events within the literary community, unfolding still uncharted aspects of the phenomenon (i.e. how other, less prominent poets dealt with the flights and translated them into poetry: see for example the sonnet Francesco Cassoli wrote in response to Parini's).³ From civil engagement and moral issues, to an unconditional desire of exceeding the borders of human knowledge, the

¹ After the Montgolfier brothers' experiment on the 5th of June (a balloon with hot air and no people), two other flights took place in 1783. The first was organized by J. Charles and the Robert brothers the 27th of August, and the balloon was filled with hydrogen, still with no people on board. The second happened on the 1st of December, when Charles and N. L. Robert actually flew on the balloon.

² See for example the works of Topham 2002, Kim 2004, Caswall Rolt 2006, Keen 2006, Lynn 2010, Holmes 2013, Robbins 2015. In the field of Italian studies, it is worth to mention Rodler 2002 and Spaggiari 2015. For a deeper understanding of the relationship between science and literature see also Branca 1970, Cremante and Tega 1984, Baffetti 1997.

³ See Cassoli 1995.

analysis of the poems composed for the occasion offers an insight into the Italian intellectuals' perception of such an epochal event, which allows us to track how the wonder caused by the flights was perceived and translated into literature, from a stylistic, rhetorical and communicative point of view.

At the end of the Eighteenth century, Europe was crossed by many rumors concerning the first flight on an aerostatic balloon. After centuries of studies, calculations and attempts with the most diverse artifacts (from many different projects based on fake wings, to the flying boat conceived by Count Francesco Lana de' Terzi in the Seventeenth century),⁴ it looked like an ancestral ambition of mankind, flying in the sky, was about to be achieved. The process was of course not completely linear, and many accidents happened along the way. In France, on March 19, 1742, Jean-François Boyvin de Bonnetot, also known as the Marquis de Bacqueville, a noble court gentleman and inventor, climbed on a window of his palace facing the river Seine, provided with enormous wings, which he tailored proportionally to the weight of his body. The idea was to take off from that window, fly across the river and land in the Tuileries garden. For a short distance, he managed to majestically glide moving the wings, but only a few minutes later he fell and crashed on the roof of a large washerwomen's barge, breaking his leg. Jean-Jacques Rousseau was there to witness the event, and he recorded it in one long article emblematically entitled *Le nouveau Dédale*, which circulated during the very same year.⁵ In the booklet the Swiss philosopher showed his support and enthusiasm about the idea that mankind was finally conquering an environment it was previously excluded from, and he was optimistic about the fact that practice and experience would have helped in perfecting the technique. According to Rousseau, the first attempts to fly were mocked because pioneering innovations are always derided at the beginning of their ventures, but the advantages they would bring by persisting in this noble enterprise would have soon overcome all that skepticism.⁶

Of course, not everybody was optimistic and enthusiastic about the idea of people violating the sacred home of the gods. It is the case, for example, of the Italian Clemente Baroni Cavalcabò, who in his *Impotenza del demonio di trasportare per l'aere da un luogo all'altro i corpi umani* (Rovereto, Italy, 1753) stated that it would be impossible for the Devil to make people fly, but it would also be impossible for mankind to fly in artefacts produced by humans. He thinks that it is some kind of sorcery, and it is not a good idea to challenge God in His own territory.

⁴ See for more details Lana Terzi 2016.

⁵ See the edition *Le nouveau Dédale, ouvrage inédit de J. J. Rousseau, et copié sur son manuscrit original, daté de l'année 1742. Paris, Mme Masson, an IX (1801), in-8*. In this booklet Rousseau theorizes the possibility of ascending in the sky and flying through artefacts based only on mechanic principles and technologies: he was far, in other words, from involving chemistry in his plans, because the times were still not mature enough for that.

⁶ For what concerns Rousseau's perspective on the matter, see Parrochia 2003.

Thirty years of attempts and studies later, the first experiment led by the Montgolfier brothers and performed before the most heterogeneous public (farmers, members of the Scientific Academy, artisans, intellectuals, poets), was successful and sparked many different reactions. Between the two extreme positions I showed above, there was an ocean of disaccording voices: marvelled, scared, incredulous, mesmerized people were assisting to the debates gravitating around the events, which would have actually changed the course of history for ever. What was once only imagined became reality, and the flight gave rise to a sort of “balloon fever”: not only “regular” almanacs, journals, newspapers started publishing more and more articles on the topic, but specific reviews dedicated to the balloons and the technologies which allowed mankind to fly were founded. It is the case for example of *Almanacco dei globi aerostatici o Palloni volanti - Ragguagli di moda*, started in Florence in 1784; or of the *Giornale Aerostatico*, also published in 1784, in Milan. The latter example is particularly important, because it represents one of the first periodicals dedicated to the aeronautics, therefore being a pioneer in the field. The first flight became one of the favourite subjects for various artists, and the event was immortalized by celebrative paintings and illustrations.

Italian literary men were of course not indifferent to these events. The imagery of the man wandering through the skies like never before in history fuelled the production of countless sonnets, tales and odes. What better topic for the numerous encomiastic poets of the time, which animated the many *Accademie* and the many cultural circles of the peninsula, than an actual myth in the making? A plethora of minor poets gave their contribution to the effervescent poetical scene: from Giuseppe Antonio Taruffi, who in 1784 published a poem in Latin entitled *Montgolfieri machina volans. Carmen elegiacum*, to the sonnet written by Saverio Bettinelli for Paolo Andreani (*Al signor D. Paolo Andreani tolto alla rista di tutti nel suo volo, sonetto dell'Abate Bettinelli*), not to mention the many miscellaneous booklets that were quickly filled with encomiastic verses and circulated all over the peninsula.⁷ The link between science and literature is one of the most important axis for what concerns Italian poetry in the 18th century, as pointed out by Beniscelli and Tatti in their recent essay.⁸ The two authors stressed also the fact that only recently academics have started, or at least re-started, to give adequate attention to the relationship between literature and science, and specifically to how sciences have influenced poetry.⁹ In the 18th

⁷ One example for all is *Sopra i palloni volanti. Poesie dedicate a Montgolfier*, Mantova, nella Stamperia di Giuseppe Braglia, 1784, in 8° di pag. XIV.

⁸ Beniscelli and Tatti 2016. For the link between science and poetry in the 18th century see also Dillon Wanke and Tongiorgi 2004, Spaggiari 2009.

⁹ As confirmed by the two recent conferences *Letteratura e scienze* organized by ‘Associazione degli Italianisti’ (Pisa, 12-14 September 2019), and *Scienza, arte e letteratura: lingue, narrazioni, culture che si incrociano*, organized by ‘Associazione Internazionale Professori d’Italiano’ (Geneva, 7-9 September 2020).

century, Italian poetry and its manifestations were predominantly linked to the activities of the many *Accademie*, but not exclusively. Cultural, philosophical and scientific reasons were at the base of many verses composed in correspondence of the most salient social occasions and events of the time. The poems produced in those occasions were not only mere encomiastic works, but the results of various and diversified solicitations that were animating the cultural debates in the Cafes, the intellectual *salotti* and the press. With regard to this occasional poetry, Beniscelli and Tatti observed that its characteristics are:

la grande istanza comunicativa che condiziona codici, scelte lessicali e letterarie, linguaggi; la funzione sociale dell'evento culturale che anima salotti, accademie, teatri ed è al centro di dibattiti, carteggi, pubblicazioni periodiche, confronti accademici; la forza performativa alla quale concorrono energie visive e uditive, utili a amplificare il livello comunicativo, all'origine anche del successo del teatro musicale; il linguaggio critico dell'esperienza poetica che ne codifica e indirizza l'uso in modo consapevole e che inaugura un pensiero nuovo che ha ramificazioni che giungono fino ai nostri giorni e che ingloba un lessico ideale attorno a concetti come sublime, passione, favola, flusso emozionale, sensibilità, ma anche scienza, trasmissione, educazione, comunicazione. Nella poesia, che assume i codici della tradizione classica e italiana modificandoli dall'interno attraverso continue spinte di rottura, entrano in gioco la realtà dell'esperienza esistenziale e della dimensione sociale fatta di tempi, stagioni, scenari naturali, comportamenti, amicizia, intrattenimento intellettuale, ma anche di prospettive speculative e interessi scientifici.¹⁰

This article therefore engages with one of the most relevant scientific and social “occasions” of the 18th century, the discovery of the aerostatic balloon. The study aims to be included in the context of research I described in the previous paragraph, by deepening the topic of poetic renditions of scientific events, and focusing on the production of the three major poets of the time. The close reading of poems by Alfieri, Monti and Parini will show the communicative strategies and the stylistic choices they adopted in discussing and translating into poetry the revolutionary event of the balloons flight, uncovering some characteristics of the occasional poetry of the late 18th century that have not yet been investigated thoroughly.

Vittorio Alfieri

The first author I will consider is Vittorio Alfieri.¹¹ Certainly a complex personality, Alfieri could ideally be located between Enlightenment and Romanticism. In his life he always had an inclination towards titanism, and

¹⁰ Beniscelli and Tatti 2016, p. 2.

¹¹ For a contextualization of Alfieri's poetry with regard to the topic of the article see for example Alfieri 2015.

from a political point of view he was not a revolutionary nor a reactionary, being individual freedom the most important value to pursue by society, according to him. In his most famous work, *Vita*, Alfieri commented the successful experience of Jacques Charles and Noel Robert and their hydrogen balloon:

Spettacolo grandioso e sublime; tema più assai poetico che storico; e scoperta a cui, per ottenere il titolo di sublime, altro non manca finora che la possibilità o verisimiglianza di essere adattata a una qualche utilità.¹²

The passage shows that Alfieri was initially enchanted by the spectacle, and keen on underlining the fact that such a human achievement is deemed to transcend history in order to become a modern myth. But Alfieri doesn't forget his "enlightened" roots: to be labelled as a sublime accomplishment, the balloon and the flights have to prove of being somehow useful. This idea will return in the sonnet the poet wrote in 1784 about the topic, which reads as follows:

D'Arte a Natura ecco ammirabil guerra;
quasi infuocato razzo a vol lanciarsi
un globo immenso, e nell'aere librarsi
portando al ciel due figli della terra.

Amor, che l'intelletto a' suoi disserra,
Veggio turbato invidioso starsi
Del non aver fatt'ei di vanni armarsi
Uom, che dal nostro carcere si sferra.

Desio di prisca libertade è fama
ch'ali impennasse al volator primiero:
gloria i due che qui veggio al volo chiama.

Duolmene, Amor; ch'era da te il sentiero:
tu dovevi inspirar sì audace brama;
tu Leandro guidar per l'aure ad Ero.

Once again, Alfieri appears to be marvelled by the invention of the balloon, which brought two sons of the Earth to the sky (v. 4). In the first stanza it is possible to find some lexical hints of this enchantment. For instance, "ammirabil" ("admirable") is of course to connect with the idea of wonder that the flights were provoking all over Europe. The plastic image built on the words "a vol lanciarsi" (v. 2) aims at describing the event in an extremely majestic way: the balloon does not perform a simple take off, but somehow "it throws itself to fly", almost having the will to do it. Not to mention that the balloon looks like "a rocket in flame" (v. 2), and is "immense" (v. 3). All these hyperbolic references concur to underline the perception of the awe caused by the flight: Alfieri doesn't deny the revolutionary impact of such invention. Nonetheless,

¹² Alfieri 1851, p. 171.

things are more complicated than how they appear. In the first verse, the poet described the balloon's flight like a "guerra" between "Arte e Natura": that term shows the perception of the dangers that this scientific discover could bring if not applied in the right way. A war between Science and Nature has all the connotations of an unsafe process led by *hybris* more than by the will of actually being beneficial for mankind. This concept is made clear from the second stanza. With a complex metaphor, Alfieri states that he regrets the fact that it wasn't Love, obviously the most noble reason to act, who moved men towards the "colonization" of the sky. "Amor", the audacious for excellence, is depicted as upset and envious, because in this occasion he was belittled by the audacity and the ingenuity of two "simple" men. Maybe, behind this attitude, it is to notice also a little worry: what, if not Love, could have put wings (v. 7: "vanni" is a rhetorically marked word) on men to attempt such a dangerous venture outside the earthly "prison"?¹³

In the following stanzas the author clarifies his position. The first tercet contains a subtle reference to the first hazardous flight of the myth, namely that of Daedalus and Icarus. But the reason why the author chooses to quote that celebre episode is unexpected. The myth, in fact, is not brought to the table like a warning for the new sky explorers, who should remember how the father and son's flight ended up tragically. In no way Alfieri states that science should stay away from such a dangerous temptation. The poet draws from the myth to read it in a more positive way. Daedalus, writes Alfieri, built the wings to escape a situation where his liberty was in danger: it was the desire to recover his previous freedom that pushed him to craft such an audacious machinery. In this stanza Alfieri's ideas about politics and culture I tried to describe above are made extremely clear, and the pragmatic spirit of the Enlightenment emerges quite evidently: in the modern times it is the desire of (vain?) glory that moves people to try and achieve great objectives (v. 11), while in the past they were moved by a craving for liberty (v. 9). In other words, the invention was made for a practical goal, with an immediate advantage for the inventors, and it does not matter that in the end it did not work out very well. Now, the utility of the balloon is still to be proven, it is not self evident, and the war between Art and Nature could result in a useless, if not harmful, episode.

Alfieri drives the attention of the reader on the necessity to conserve a balance between the scientific progresses and nature, an extremely important topic of debate in the 18th century: the mankind's *hybris* should not be challenging Nature while leading to something vain or, even worse, damaging, and that is why the poet regrets the absence of Love in the process (v. 12), or the lack of a desire for liberty.

¹³ «Nostro carcere» is indeed another "spy" of the fact that Alfieri was not totally against the flight: it was not bad *per se* to try that extreme trip outside the canonical borders of mankind's life.

From a stylistic point of view, it is to notice that the last stanza ends on another mythological motif, a reference to the tragic story of Leander and Hero. Subtly, Alfieri is suggesting once again that only Love should have been the light that oriented the path which led men to conquer the sky. The myths, then, are used by Alfieri without considering their epilogue, but only as a strong example of how, and with which values, the most daring ventures should be conceived and realized. Lastly, it must be observed that “audace” (“audacious”, v. 13) might be a bit ambiguous: in Italian it has quite a positive meaning, but for the original Latin word “audax” the connotation is not entirely positive, as it recalls the idea of effrontery, boldness: *hybris*, precisely. This theory about the ambivalence of the word “audace” would be confirmed by the noun this adjective is referred to. In fact, “brama”, which can be translated as “crave”, has not a positive connotation, being often associated with something irrational, not led by reason.

Vincenzo Monti

A completely different attitude towards the balloon and the flights can be found in the poetry of the second author I will consider in this article. Vincenzo Monti, the *maestro* of the so called *Neoclassicismo minore*, was one of the most prominent poets of his times. He was quite far from an active, intellectual engagement with society from a political or civil standpoint, and his poetry was rather pursuing formal perfection and imaginative richness: his main goal was to create vivid and powerful images and choreographies. Monti’s occasional poetry, which found in the Arcadia academy its natural and ideal habitat, is arguably the most characterizing trait of his art.¹⁴ Based on the strong presence of mythology, both classical and Christian, it targeted the most variegated contemporary subjects in order to glorify them and elevate their status. Thanks to his laudatory verses, he was able to gain important protections from powerful figures of the time. His literary career, therefore, was mainly devoted to the praise and the celebration of the most notable people and events. For a poet like Monti, an epochal event such as the flight of the aerostatic balloon (the ascension of Charles and Robert in this case) was indeed a great occasion to write celebrative verses: what better subject could have been offered to a prolific laudatory poet than a modern myth in the making?¹⁵ In 1784 he wrote the

¹⁴ With regard to Monti’s laudatory poetry see for example Spaggiari 2006 and Penso 2018. See Nacinovich 2003 for the communicative and stylistic strategies adopted in laudatory verses by the Arcadia academy in the last decades of the 18th century.

¹⁵ For a deeper contextualization of Monti’s relationship with the scientific poetry of the late 18th century see Guagnini 2006.

Ode al Signor di Montgolfier, a *canzonetta* consisting of 140 *settenari*, whose rhythm gives the poem an agile and lively tone. The *Ode* was firstly recited on March 4, 1784 in the *Arcadia* academy in Rome, where it was very well received.

The choice of the form is the first big difference between Monti's and Alfieri's reaction to the balloons' flight (and with Parini's too, as I will show later on). While Alfieri opted for a classic, solemn sonnet, Monti's overabundant eloquence could not be contained in that short and 'closed' structure. His need to build an elaborate celebration through mythological references and sophisticated praises to the protagonists of the event translates into the choice of a much longer, more free poetical structure.

Monti's intent of creating a magniloquent commemoration drawing from mythological subjects is evident in the most important parts of the poem, and made clear from the very beginning. The text is opened by a reference to the myth of the Argonauts (vv. 1-16):

Quando Giason dal Pelio
spinse nel mar gli abeti,
e primo corse a fendere
co' remi il seno a Teti,

su l'alta poppa intrepido
col fior del sangue acheo
vide la Grecia ascendere
il giovinetto Orfeo.

Stendea le dita eburnee
sulla materna lira;
e al tracio suon chetavasi
de' venti il fischio e l'ira.

Meravigliando accorsero
di Doride le figlie;
Nettuno ai verdi alipedi
lasciò cader le briglie.

Monti might have taken the idea of the Argonauts from the roman journal *Giornale delle Belle Arti*, where on 14 February, 1784 an article about the balloon was published with the following passage:

L'immortalità che in quella nave d'Argo si guadagnarono Alcide e Teseo allora, oggi si è cercata dai signori Robert e Charles, i primi uomini saliti in aria dentro una macchina innalzata dal globo aerostatico.

Besides the inspiration he might have taken from this passage, Monti's choice of referring to the Argonauts is surely not casual. It derives from the necessity of exorcizing what the experience of flying had represented till that moment in the classical culture and in mythology. The first, "ancestral" experience in

the field was indeed traumatic: Icarus's first attempt had a tragic epilogue, and it was not the ideal point of reference for the modern celebration. The idea of flying humans was henceforth associated with *hybris* and arrogance, and with the reprehensible will of challenging the gods by refusing the limits imposed by Nature. The same awareness was rather clear in Alfieri, who in his sonnet praised that first attempt focusing more on Daedalus, and only because he was a symbol of a yearning for freedom, surely not for the epilogue, which in fact should warn people of the possible dangers.

Monti, aware of the negative implications a reference to that myth would have brought, decides to open the poem focusing on what he thought was the positive aspect of the flights: the conquest of a new territory for mankind. At this regard, the Argonauts' venture was the best example for Monti's celebrative goal: like the mythological ship that first navigated the sea, the balloon is now violating the sky for the first time. It is not casual, therefore, that the only reference to the first mythological flight in Monti's *Ode* appears very late (line 97: «di Francia il Dedalo...» - "the French Daedalus"), and is centred on Daedalus as the inventor, not the user, of the wings. Also, it surely does not suggest a comparison between the ascension of the balloon and Icarus's tragic flight. The myth is used once again to celebrate mankind's achievements: Daedalus is the symbol of humans craftiness and technical ability.

From a stylistic point of view, the first 16 verses give a good idea of the tone of the whole *Ode*. The verses based on seven syllables contribute to give the text a quick rhythm from the beginning, which results in a very enjoyable tone that involves the readers, introducing them quickly to the subject matter. The mythological motifs start to appear from the first stanza, opening the poem in a very solemn way. Jason, Thetis, Orpheus playing the lyre and finally Neptune letting loose his horses are a blatant signal of Monti's goal: it had to be clear that what he was going to sing about, the aerostatic balloon, needed to be associated with classic mythology, since it deserved recognition as a modern myth in the making. The lexical choices made by the poet go in the same direction, elevating the tone of the *incipit*: "dita eburnee" ("fingers white as ivory"), "verdi alipedi" ("green flying horses") and "di Doride le figlie" (the Nereids) are examples of a magniloquent rhetoric aimed at elevating the tone of the verses. It is also to notice that Monti doesn't name Argus, nor he says the word "ship". The poet calls the new mean of transport used by the Argonauts by metonymically referring to it as "abeti" ("firs"): this is not casual, as the poet wants to stress the element of novelty connected to the first ship, which, at that time, was not yet known by the word "ship", but just as a vehicle made out of wood. This is just one of the many elements that in the first four stanzas aim at underlining the revolutionary impact of that first navigation: Jason was the first ("primo") to cross Thetis's breast (again an elaborate metaphor!), and while doing this he was "intrepido" ("intrepid", which has a different connotation than for example "fearless"), therefore causing the marvel of the

Nereids (“meravigliando”). This stylistic trait can be found also in the following stanzas, like for example at the verses 21-36:

O della Senna, ascoltami,
novello Tifi invito:
vinse i portentosi argolici
l'aereo tuo tragitto.

Tentar del mare i vortici
forse è sì gran pensiero,
come occupar de' fulmini
l'inviolato impero?

Deh! perché al nostro secolo
non diè propizio il Fato
d'un altro Orfeo la cetera,
se Montgolfier n'ha dato?

Maggior del prode Esonide
surse di Gallia il figlio.
Applaudi, Europa attonita,
al volator naviglio.

Monti addresses Montgolfier directly and emphatically («ascoltami» – “listen to me”), and calls him “new Tiphys from the Seine”: «novella» (“new”), stressing once again the novelty of the event. Also, the mythological motif supports once again the contemporary event, dignifying it and elevating it to the same rank. In fact, Monti clearly states that the balloon’s flight overcame the prestige of the Argonauts’ venture: in vv. 22-23 the “conflicting” terms «invitto» (“undefeated”) and «vines» (“defeated”) are clearly put by Monti in contrast to underline the great success achieved by the French inventor, who surpassed the «portentosi argolici» (again, a stylistically marked expression for “the ventures of the Greeks”). Moreover, wonders Monti in the following stanza, is challenging the sea as dangerous, hazardous and demanding – therefore heroic – as trying to conquer the «de' fulmini l'inviolato impero» (“the inviolate empire of lightening” is a very pompous way to call the sky)? The question is of course rhetorical, and the answer consists in another question, which pretends to veil a regret: why Fate gave the present times the great Montgolfier, but not a poet able to properly sing about him? The tone starts to be more and more emphatic, as the rapid succession of interrogations suggests. It is interesting to notice that in order to praise the French inventor, Monti arrives to the point of faking a self depreciation, as he is actually the poet celebrating Montgolfier’s *res gestae*. The pretentious attenuation of the speaker’s voice (“I am not worth such a great topic”) is a well-established strategy to give the subject of the verses even more relevance.

The sequence is closed by a stanza that once again states the superiority of Montgolfier on Jason («maggior», “bigger”), while enlarging the scope of his laudatory verses and addressing the whole astonished Europe, which should

praise the “flying boat”. The fact that Monti defines the balloon as «volator naviglio» is strictly connected to what has been stated earlier about the metonymy “firs-ship”. Being a new, revolutionary invention, the poet chooses to depict it with the features of a well known object (the ship), which is now devoted to a new function: flying. The sense of estrangement that this metaphor should have caused to the readers reinforces the whole meaning of the poem: we are witnessing something completely revolutionary, a great achievement for mankind whose repercussions will only be positive. From the verse 37, in fact, a celebration of Science’s victory over Nature starts:

Non mai Natura, all’ordine
delle sue leggi intesa,
dalla potenza chimica
soffrì più bella offesa.

Mirabil arte, ond’alzasi
di Sthallio e Black la fama,
pèra lo stolto Cinico
che frenesia ti chiama.

De’ corpi entro le viscere
tu l’acre sguardo avventi,
e invan celarsi tentano
gl’indocili elementi.

Dalle tenaci tenebre
la verità traesti,
e delle rauche ipotesi
tregua al furor ponesti.

Monti has no doubt that Chemistry, represented here by Stahl and Black,¹⁶ won the war against Nature, since the “offence” it inflicted to its laws was the most beautiful ever. The distance from Alfieri’s sonnet, that spoke about a war between Art and Nature with an uncertain result, could not be clearer. In fact, Alfieri’s words seem to be present in this passage, but their ultimate goal is completely different. For example, Monti uses the terms «arte» and «ammirabil» (“mirabil”) like Alfieri did, but the adjective this time is referred only to “Art”, to human inventiveness and not to the whole conflict. It is clear, in other words, which side Monti picked in the “war”: he is absolutely sure that Nature has been defeated by mankind and its prodigious creation, and that this is a totally positive thing for the future of human beings. The poet actually does not stand the detractors, here nicknamed as “dumb cynical men”, who dared to be diffident towards all the hype surrounding the balloons, calling it a “frenzy”. Monti adheres with absolutely no doubts to the marvelled enthusiasm deriving from the invention, which defeated the darkness of ignorance pulling

¹⁶ Georg Stahl (1659-1734) and Joseph Black (1728-1799) were two famous chemists of the XVIII century.

out the truth, and silencing all the previous discussions. The poet does not even think about questioning the real utility of such machinery, or pondering which complications might derive from it. His position is, once again, completely different from Alfieri's and from what I will show about Parini's later on.

Monti embraces with no hesitations his role as celebrative poet, and he tries to accomplish his duty with no sign of (scientific) doubts. The verses 68-84 (included in a larger section mainly dedicated at the praise of Robert's experiment) are another clear example of what I just showed:

Il gran prodigio immobili
i riguardanti lassa,
e di terrore un palpito
in ogni cor trapassa.

Tace la terra, e suonano
del ciel le vie deserte:
stan mille volti pallidi,
e mille bocche aperte.

Sorge il diletto e l'estasi
in mezzo allo spavento,
e i piè mal fermi agognano
ir dietro al guardo attento.

Pace e silenzio, o turbini:
deh! non vi prenda sdegno
se umane salme varcano
delle tempeste il regno.

The poet is able to depict the sense of astonishment that captured the crowds and the people attending the ascensions. The lexical choices are functional to build it: the «gran prodigio» (“great prodigy”), left the spectators «immobili» (“motionless”), with «di terrore un palpito in ogni cor» (“a thrill of terror in every heart”); the faces are «pallide» (“pales”), the mouths are «aperte» (“open”), the ground «tace» (“is silent”); but ultimately, after the initial «spavento» (“disconcert”), among the crowd can finally rise «diletto e l'estasi», “delight and ecstasy”. Rhetorically, it is to notice the hyperbolic reference to the «mille...mille», “thousand and thousands” of people admiring the balloon and being mesmerised by it: the figure is a clear example of Monti's magniloquence. Also, worth to mention is the “plastic” image that portrays the feet of the people watching the flight as «mal fermi», “unsteady”, since they are, almost childishly, dreaming of following the path walked by the completely captured and mesmerised eyes.

The passage is closed by an invocation to the whirlwinds, that were making noise in the skies' roads, once deserted and now occupied by the intrepid men: they should maintain peace and silence, and not be offended if humans are now passing through the kingdom of the storms. In this series of stanzas Monti's rhetorical strategies are, on the one hand, aimed at stressing the wonder aroused

in the people watching the ascensions; on the other, to celebrate humans' intellect and braveness, that allowed mankind to defeat Nature and overcome its limits. Another important indication of this can be found at the verses 105-116:

Certo la vista orribile
l'alme agghiacciar dovrìa;
ma di *Robert* nell'anima
chiusa è al terror la via.

E già l'audace esempio
i più ritrosi acquista;
già cento globi ascendono
del cielo alla conquista.

Umano ardir, pacifica
filosofia sicura,
qual forza mai, qual limite
il tuo poter misura?

Robert's heart should have been frightened by what he was trying to accomplish, but it wasn't: Monti can do nothing but acknowledge and celebrate the intellectual independence and courage shown by the scientist. Also because the "numbers" are on his side: his example is attracting the attention of more and more people that were once reluctant, to the point that now «cento globi ascendono del cielo alla conquista» ("hundreds of balloons are ascending to the conquest of the sky"): another hyperbolic construction to stress the widespread consensus the scientific discovery was encountering. In Monti's case, the presence of the words «audace» and «ardir» has only positive connotations: once again, his poetry and his goals are completely different from Alfieri's, who used the same words with a dissimilar aim. Monti, instead, wonders: where will humans' audacity lead mankind's progress? To which heights? What could possibly measure its power?

Building on all these considerations, it is possible now to approach the conclusion of the long poem, which coherently sums up Monti's perception of the balloons' flights. In vv. 133-140 the poet is still addressing human audacity:

Oggi a calcar le nuvole
giunse la tua virtute,
e di natura stettero
le leggi inerti e mute.

Che più ti resta? Infrangere
anche alla Morte il telo,
e della vita il nettare
libar con Giove in cielo

Another question closes the poem: what is left to achieve for mankind, after it defeated the laws of Nature? Monti, hyperbolically, suggests that now humans

can aspire to defeat nothing less than Death itself, becoming immortal like the Gods. There is no trace of worries for the dangers that this kind of *hybris* can bring to mankind for challenging Nature, and no sign of scruples about whether or not to pursue this exciting, but surely full of unknown implications, journey, which is only at the beginning.

Giuseppe Parini

The third and last poet I will consider is Giuseppe Parini. One of the most relevant writers of the Italian Enlightenment, he was the most acute satirist of the aristocracy. His poetry was aimed at transmitting a civil, moral or political message. In his wide poetical production, Parini was always attentive to the events that were captivating the attention of the intellectual milieu and the public. Within the frame of his engagement with the scientific progress of the epoch, recently investigated by William Spaggiari,¹⁷ he also dedicated a sonnet to the topic of the flying balloon. This time the occasion was not given by the experiments carried out abroad: in March 1874 Paolo Andreani, a young noble man from Milan, ascended in a balloon over the Italian city. Parini then wrote the following verses:

Ecco del mondo e meraviglia e gioco
 Farmi grande in un punto e lieve io sento;
 E col fumo nel grembo e al piede il foco
 Salgo per l'aria e mi confido al vento.

E mentre aprir novo cammino io tento
 All'uom cui l'onda e cui la terra è poco,
 Fra i ciechi moti e l'ancor dubbio evento
 Alto gridando la Natura invoco:

O madre de le cose! Arbitrio prenda
 L'uomo per me di questo aereo regno,
 Se ciò fia mai che più beato il renda.

Ma se nocer poi dee, l'audace ingegno
 Perda l'opra e i consigli; e fa ch'io splenda
 Sol di stolta impotenza eterno segno.

The tone of the sonnet is completely different comparing to Monti's verses, and it is quite dissimilar in relation to Alfieri's too, since the aim here is of transmitting a deeper moral message. In order to do so, Parini builds his text on a personification, like he did before in many other occasions: objects and

¹⁷ See Spaggiari 2000 and 2018. On Parini's less known poetic production see also the old but still fruitful contribution by Zuradelli 1961.

symbols of his time come to life in various forms with playful, moral and satirical goals, which most of the time are pursued through the sense of estrangement provoked by the ironical words those objects pronounce. This time, the balloon has a «grembo» (“belly”) and a «piede» (“foot”), two attributes that must be obviously referred to a human imagery. The estrangement is also pursued in the second line through a paradox: the more the balloon grows, the more it becomes lighter, being inflated with hot air or hydrogen. This is, of course, very easy to understand nowadays, but back in those times of pioneering experiments the verse could have provoked a sense of estrangement in the readers, which concurs to transmit the fundamental message of the sonnet. In the first stanza Parini’s goal is to appease the general enthusiasm and emphasis that were gravitating around the flights and the balloons. The experiments were only at their early stages, and even if they were successful, people should have remained cautious about them. This is the reason why the balloon introduces itself as a «meraviglia e gioco», a “wonder and a toy”: it is aware of being something sensational, nothing less than a wonder of historical proportions, but at the same time it admits that it is a “toy”. In this word, which is significantly located at the end of the first verse in rhyme, it is to read all the prudence of the author: until the moment the balloon will have proven its utility to mankind, without being dangerous or harmful, it will remain only a toy, even though magnificent. Parini makes his ideas clear from the beginning: too many optimistic voices were raising around the event, most of them being too blindly confident in the progress such discoveries would have brought. This sonnet is radically different, for example, from Monti’s poem, where there was no trace of doubts about the fact that progress would have brought a golden era for mankind.

Another hint of Parini’s attitude is to be found in line 4. The balloon tells how it is raising in the air, and admits it is “confessing to the wind”: maybe because no human is paying attention to what it has to say, since humanity seems to be completely caught by wonder and awe, to the point of losing all the rational doubts? Even without pushing the interpretation this far, it appears clear that the balloon is not “stable”, being at the mercy of the wind while ascending. This idea of prudence, of not wanting to indulge in premature celebrations, is made more evident in the second stanza. The machinery keeps on speaking with lucid realism: the path the balloon is trying to open is «novo» (“new”), and it is indeed just an attempt at the moment, underlined by the word «tento» (“I try”) at the end of line 5.

Things get even more complicated: the ascending movements of the machinery, the «moti», are «ciechi», “blind”, and the event is labelled as «incerto», “unsure”. We are very far from the illuminated actions of the Enlightenment led by human reason, which, at least, allowed the path not to be blind. It is clear that Parini is drawing his words from the semantic fields of the uncertainty and the doubt: it is too soon to give any different value to the invention, and the reader should be aware of the fact that even if it was

mesmerizing, the flight of the balloon has still to bring evidence of any utility for mankind. Mankind is actually subtly reproached for its *hybris*: the dominance on the sea («onda») and on the earth («terra») was not enough for «l'uom», who felt the need to attempt at a dangerous venture, whose implications are still unknown and unpredictable. Humans, which are currently led by a blind optimism towards progress, need therefore to be illuminated and guided: in fact, at line 8 the balloon makes an invocation to Nature, which lasts for the following six verses, in order to ask for its help in directing the human actions. In this sense, the sonnet differs considerably in comparison to Alfieri's one, where Love, and not Nature, was called to see what mankind was doing, not without a shade of regret. Line 7 is open with a heartfelt appeal to the «madre delle cose» («mother of all things»), which is charged with a very delicate mission: Nature should make clear to humans whether the dominance of the skies will make them happier or more miserable. In the first case, «arbitrio prenda / l'uomo per me di questo aereo regno»: may mankind get in charge of the aerial Kingdom, through the balloon. But (a strong adversative «ma» opens the last stanza) otherwise, if the conquest of the sky turns out to be damaging, may humans lose the «opra e i consigli», «the work and the opinions»: in other words, may Nature intervene and make the balloon, if harmful, shine like «di stolta impotenza eterno segno», «the eternal symbol of dumb powerlessness». In the conclusion of the sonnet, Parini makes evident his attitude towards the great invention: he is keen on welcoming every new invention that can be beneficial for human beings, without being naïve to the point of not fearing the dangers the novelties can bring. The goal of the poem is eminently moral: Parini wants his voice to stand out of the crowd of other voices surrounding the flights, with the goal of driving people's attention on the exaggerated, optimistic emphasis given to the events. His invitation to prudence is entrusted to the balloon itself, which assumes the features of wisdom and foresight that should actually belong to mankind: the fact that the latter is lacking those qualities, attributed to a machine instead, with the usual personification, denotes that the poet is concerned by the drift humans have undertaken.

Conclusions

The analysis I proposed above led to comparing the approaches the most prominent Italian poets of the late 18th century had towards the poetical depiction of ballooning and the first human flight. The essay, built on the close reading of three different texts, with particular emphasis on the stylistic and rhetorical strategies adopted by the three authors, allowed to highlight the connections between their poetic choices and their ideological and intellectual stance. The different authors' perspectives cover a large spectrum of the feelings

the invention of the balloon generated, somehow mirroring the different reactions people were having by witnessing the first flights.

Alfieri's voice, even without a blatant moral intent, aimed at making people think about the possible consequences of replacing the desire for freedom with the thirst for glory. The author wanted to keep the distance from the widespread optimism that was surrounding the flights. Mankind should not forget that the source of its actions should be Love, and not a blind and arrogant aspiration to *grandeur*.

On the other hand, Monti only saw the possible advent of a new golden age for mankind, thanks to technological and scientific progress. His elegant and magniloquent celebration reveals his habitual attitude of laudatory poet, who always liked to indulge on the depiction of contemporary reality drawing from the myths, rather than engaging with the facts to deliver a moral or social message like Alfieri or Parini did. In this case, even if he stated the contrary at the beginning, Monti assumes the role of the ancient rhapsode, and sings about the modern myth with enthusiasm and passion.

Finally, Parini aimed at pointing out that the danger people were failing to see was not related to the balloon itself, but to the potential applications of the invention: the "toy", as it was defined at the beginning of his sonnet, could hide unforeseeable threats. Parini seems to wonder: where could this *hybris* lead? He, as well as the other poets, could have not imagined that only a few years after that sonnet, the aerostatic balloon would have flown over the battlefields, finding in the context of war strategy one of its most tragic applications.

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