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**Classical culture for a classical country:
scholarship and the past in Vincenzo Cuoco's *Plato in Italy***

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Abstract: What is the place of the classical past and its study in Italy, a classical country whose roots reach back to antiquity, but has existed as an independent nation only since 1860? This essay (to be published in S. Stephen and P. Vasunia eds., *Classics and National Cultures*, OUP) explores this question through analysis of a historical novel set in ancient Greek South Italy and written by a founder of Italian Risorgimento. Cuoco's turn to the past in order to build a modern Italian identity is caught between European Hellenism and alternative ancient pasts of Italy. Moreover, as Cuoco co-opted Italian scholarship to bestow authority on his vision, a new relationship between classical scholars and national past emerged: scholars study, shape and preserve the nation's antiquity, but become at the same time, to an extent, themselves cultural patrimony.

Guide: When in 273 BC the Romans arrived here and here for the first time they encountered the Greeks, history took a great leap forward. What does this mean? Greek idealism, that is the civilization of music and philosophy, and Roman pragmatism, that is the civilization of law and rationality, perfectly blended and this created a new culture that is without doubt the fundamental basis of our western civilization, of which, we Italians, the greatest people on earth, should be proud heirs. In our blood we have the chromosomes of both the Greeks and the Romans, the greatest peoples who ever walked on this earth. Because of these chromosomes you feel the urge to leave behind the train of rationality at the station of your city, be it Verona, Turin, Milan ...

Mimmo: Pescara ...

Guide: ... yes, why not, Pescara too, and board the ship of fantasy to sail away along the routes of ancient peoples and, once on deck, to uncork the bottle of enthusiasm!

The lines above are the first words spoken in the 2000 movie *Pane e Tulipani* (*Bread and Tulips*).¹ The movie opens at Paestum, the site established by Greek settlers in the VIth century BCE on the Italian shore 60 miles south of Naples. The titles are in capital red fonts against a blue background; this same background becomes the blue sky as the camera descends to focus on one of the three temples of Paestum, that of Athena. The temple is shot from the right at an upwards angle, the same perspective from which this extremely well-preserved example of archaic Greek Doric architecture from ca. 510 BCE appears in numerous illustrations in art books and tourist postcards. The impression of stillness conveyed by the static frame is enhanced by the background noise that reproduces the sound of the Mediterranean noon summer hours - the cicadas singing in the intense heat when Pan roams and nature turns still. Slowly another sound emerges, that of indistinct human conversation and footsteps, and from the lower left angle of the frame a group of people climbs the path to the temple and thus transforms the still image into a moving one. With them the viewer enters the temple and the limited palette of the first frame - the white, blue and green of stone, sky and grass - gives way to a multitude of colors of hats, clothes and various gadgets. As the group morphs from a disorderly line to a loose circle listening to the guide who delivers the words quoted above, one recognizes a scene made familiar in the last 300 years, starting with paintings of the

¹ See *Pane e Tulipani* (*Bread and Tulips*), directed by Silvio Soldini, screenplay by Dorian Leondoff (released March 13 2000). All translations are my own unless otherwise stated. For talking with me about or reading some or all of these pages I wish to thank Melissa Bailey, Remo Ceserani, Emma Dench, Anthony Grafton, Suzanne Marchand, Miriam Leonard, Chris Rovee and the editors of this volume, Susan Stephens and Phiroze Vasunia.

Grand Tour and reaching to images of contemporary mass tourism. The tourists are bystanders - distracted, bored, tired and hot; the speaker's job (and in this movie the man is an actual Paestum guide playing himself) is to establish a connection with the monuments and the past. The guide is a *cicerone*, not quite a scholar, as revealed by his words: "We are now inside the temple of Cereres. Scholars however believe that it was dedicated to the goddess Athena." This guide is well suited to deal with interruptions such as Mimmo's and to engage such distracted audiences, in this case an Italian one. His rhetoric, appealing to their national roots, might not make them look any more genuinely interested but wins their final applause.

The film as a whole won applause with public and critics alike – some lauding it as a simple romantic comedy, others reading more complex statements in it.² Hailed as a sign of a renaissance in the Italian film industry, the movie succeeded in making powerful filmic moments out of features of contemporary Italian daily life. In the first minutes the camera lingers significantly on apparently banal scenes: 'cultural trips' on buses sponsored by companies whose employers sell kitchenware during the ride between sites; conversations about merits of different cell phone models; and queuing dynamics at the coffee counter of the service station. Beyond these visual statements lie deeper motifs. Already in the opening scene, but also as the setting moves to Venice lurk the themes of regional divisions between North and South, the tensions underlying consumerism and tourism (the latter an industry by and large sustained by the work of immigrants) and the contradictions of patriarchy and alternative female worlds. The main character is Rosalba, the wife of Mimmo who interrupts the guide in the first scene. When this housewife long-neglected by indifferent husband and sons, is inadvertently left behind by the group bus at the service station on the way from Paestum to Rome, she first plans to hitchhike back home to Pescara but then somehow accepts rides to Venice, a place she has never visited before, where she finds a new way of life working for an anarchic florist. The theme of Italian regional diversity is further reflected, for example, in the many dialectal accents spoken in the movie, which sharply and paradoxically

² See Scott (2001) versus Luciano (2002).

contrast to the single example of literary and elegant Italian eloquence: the speech of the middle-aged waiter, an ex-convict of Icelandic origins, with whom Rosalba falls in love.³

All these characteristics make this romantic comedy an ironic one, which subtly undermines the patriotism and machismo conventionally associated with traditional images of Italian identity. These same features have been the focus of recent scholarly attention.⁴ These studies understand the making of modern Italian national character as discursively constructed starting in the late 18th century; they claim that the literary and artistic representations elaborated at that time were to be crucial to the unification of Italy which was, up to 1860, divided into various states, many of which under foreign rule. In imagining the unity – ethnic, cultural and natural – of the Italian people certain themes came to the fore, such as the emotional attachment to the land and parental ideas of relationships, for example depicting Italians as guilty of brotherly infighting that was to the advantage of the tight grip held by foreigners on Italy. These studies have also highlighted how this moment can only be fully appreciated when placed in the wider European context. For example, scholars have analyzed the relation between, on the one hand, the gaze of outsiders reflecting on Italy's fall from past glory and the feminization of its modern countrymen, and, on the other, Italians' calls for Regeneration and virilization, key themes of *Risorgimento* that were to have long-standing and dark consequences in Italian ideologies.⁵

This reading allows a fuller appreciation of the first scene of *Bread and Tulips* and its ironies, since discourses of Italian identity have long involved the country's ancient past. The tension that appears in the opening scene between the definition of modern Italian identity, the Italian sense of the past, and Italian classical scholarship, is the focus of this essay. Most investigations of Italian modern patriotism begin, however fleetingly, with Vincenzo Cuoco and his 1806-1810 work *Platone in Italia (Plato in Italy)*, an historical epistolary novel concerning an hypothetical trip taken by the Athenian philosopher Plato to South Italy. One of the crucial scenes of Cuoco's novel is

³ See Borra and Pausini (2003) 99-110.

⁴ See Banti (2000), Banti and Bizzocchi (2002), Patriarca (2001) and (2005), Banti and Ginsborg (2007), all of whom credit as precursor the work of Giulio Bollati (1972) and (1983).

⁵ See particularly Patriarca (2005).

set at Paestum; thus, when the temples of Paestum open *Bread and Tulips* along with the guide's definition of what makes Italians who they are, the film inserts itself in a long chain of visions in which these monuments serve to articulate various national identities in relation to the classical past. For Paestum's temples are an important element in the history of Hellenism - that is the European modern passion for ancient Greece - and, at the same time, they embody the contradictions of Italy's place within this wider phenomenon.⁶ The experience of viewing Paestum is inescapably modern: despite the fact that the temples, well-preserved and easily visible since antiquity, did not need to be excavated, they were only noticed in the mid-18th century, in conjunction with a renewed interest in all things Greek. Yet, following the initial great appreciation for them expressed throughout Europe, when in the space of twenty years eight illustrated publications were dedicated to them, they gradually faded from prominence as mainland Greece became more accessible and was further explored. In the 19th century, the temples – along with the whole of Greek South Italy, or 'Magna Graecia' - shifted to the periphery of the modern vision of classical antiquity, coming to be viewed as products of colonial sites of the wider Greek world.

For Italians Paestum was never easy to categorize: neither Roman nor local, and also not quite purely Greek. Just after the temples' rediscovery, while Winckelmann enthused over them, A. S. Mazzocchi, the most established Neapolitan scholar of the time, argued for the Etruscan and Oriental nature of their architecture, casting a long embarrassing shadow over the international fortune of Italian scholarship. The issue of Italy's classical past and its scholarship was raised by Arnaldo Momigliano in a 1988 essay to which the title of my essay refers. In 'Classical scholarship for a classical country' Momigliano surveyed the strange paths taken by Classics in Italy - the ambivalent relationship of Italian scholars with Greece and Rome and their tendency, in his words, "to never ask fundamental questions of their classical past while worrying about it constantly."⁷ While Momigliano concluded on an upbeat note, claiming that by the 1980s Italian Classics had come of age, his story remained one of detours, failures

⁶ On the 'rediscovery' of Paestum see Lang (1950), Momigliano (1979) 142-3, Raspi Serra (1986) and (1990), Ceserani (2007) 253-7.

⁷ Momigliano (1988) 119.

and outsiders – for instance the Counter-Reformation preference for the Vulgate bible, the turn away from Rome in the 18th century, and the later uneasy dependence on German scholarship. Momigliano’s heroic figure is an academic outsider, Domenico Comparetti (1835-1927), the pharmacist-turned-classicist whose work set a model with lasting consequences for Italian classicists. Comparetti took a *longue durée* perspective on antiquity, engaging the whole Greek world from Homer to the Byzantines, and the whole Roman world from its Italic roots to its Romance transformation. Today, Momigliano’s picture could be updated, but overall it has retained its general value. Indeed one important characteristic of Italian classical scholarship in recent decades, in whose development Momigliano’s work played a role, has been the impulse to examine its own history, from regional varieties of antiquarianism to its tangled relationship with German scholarship.⁸ One feature in this wider story interests me in particular: how do Classics fit in a classical country? Momigliano kept his focus on scholarship, with the cultural world beyond academia serving as a mere backdrop;* he mentioned, for example, regarding the aftermath of the Fascist use of the classical past, that ‘Italian classical scholars had to clear up the mess of Fascism, not so much “at the upper level of research” as that of “ordinary teaching, ordinary conversation, ordinary behavior and ordinary common sense.”⁹ As my opening might suggest, I aim to question further the very dynamics of the interaction between scholars and ‘ordinary’ culture in modern Italy.

Momigliano identified as a defining characteristic of Italian scholarship the commitment to an interpretation of the ancient world spanning from pre- to post-classical. One cannot help here but think of the long-term, stratigraphic nature of the classical past in Italy, extending from pre-Roman times to late antiquity and beyond. But scholarly production is not necessarily a straightforward reflection of this multi-layered record. Italy’s unification is recent; it was the result of numerous military and political deeds but was also facilitated by scholars who shaped the past and its study. Momigliano highlighted the originality, within 19th-century Italian classical scholarship, of archaeology and of ethnographical research into classical survivals, both of which helped

⁸ See, among others, Settis (1993), Polverini (1990), (1998) and (2002), Barbanera and Terranato (1998), Brice (2001), Salmeri (2001), Bignamini (2004), Ceserani and Milanese (2007).

⁹ Momigliano (1988) 128.

to create ‘monuments’ and ‘folklore’ – that is modern national ‘heritage’. Undoubtedly there was a tradition of Italian scholarship before the country became a nation-state, and there always is a significant relationship between what students of the past study and the past of the places they inhabit. Yet probing what form this relationship took in the charged moments leading to Italy’s unification throws further light on the peculiar fate of Italian classical scholarship. What role was there for the classical past in a national culture? And what place for its scholars?

I explore these questions mainly by way of Cuoco’s novel, *Plato in Italy*, which extensively deals with ancient South Italy, both Greek and Italic.¹⁰ Cuoco’s life and writings established him as a crucial figure in Italian Risorgimento. For a long time attention has focused on his *Saggio storico sulla rivoluzione napoletana (Historical Essay on the Neapolitan Revolution, 1801)* - an analysis of the 1799 failed revolution in Naples, which philosophers and political scientists have analyzed in discussing whether a ‘moderate’ or ‘republican’ ideology most characterized 19th-century Italian Risorgimento thinkers.¹¹ But *Plato in Italy* has recently attracted interest in studies of Italian identity. These have placed the novel among the canonic texts that, in the early 19th century, contributed to a national mythology, turning Italy into an ethnic, cultural and natural entity, and investing *patria* (homeland) with new meanings, which inspired men and women of the *Risorgimento* to fight and die for it.¹² More remains to be said, however, about the significance of the classical past in *Plato in Italy*. While Momigliano swiftly dismissed Cuoco as one of the ‘disciples and followers’ of Vico, attracted by his ‘juvenile discovery’ of an archaic Italic wisdom (*antiquissima sapientia Italica*),¹³ Cuoco’s engagement with antiquity and its scholarship runs far deeper, and illuminates further the path that classical scholarship has since taken in Italy.

Cuoco’s life (1770-1823) crossed many divides. This Risorgimento writer who powerfully envisioned a unified Italy and is, retrospectively, placed at its foundations,

¹⁰ Studies of the *Plato in Italy* include Sansone (1966), Cerasuolo (1987), Themelly (1990), Casini (1993) and Andreoni (2003) 137-244. Crucial are De Francesco (2006) and Andreoni (2006).

¹¹ See for example Tessitore (2002).

¹² Banti (2000) 30-45 and Patriarca (2005) pars 11, but also Bollati (1983) 62-70.

¹³ Momigliano (1988) 120.

experienced a far more fragmented country, moving between the Southern Kingdom of Naples – and indeed originally Molise - and Milan in North Italy, and also between Italy and wider Europe, especially Paris. These were turbulent times: he lived against the background of the French revolution and of Napoleonic invasions, of Italian revolutionary politics and the subsequent Restoration. Cuoco also participated in varied intellectual circles, ranging from Neapolitan Enlightenment – he was apprenticed with Giuseppe Galanti, a pupil of the political economist Antonio Genovesi – to Milanese literary circles and their engagement of European Romanticism. The turning points in this complex life were the 1799 Neapolitan revolution that overthrew the Bourbon King Ferdinando IV to establish the short-lived Neapolitan Republic, and the bloody repression that soon terminated it, in which many Neapolitan cultural elites – among whom were several close friends of Cuoco – found their deaths. Cuoco’s involvement in these events is not clear. For many years, the dominant view was that he was only tangentially involved, mainly implicated by a laudatory reference by the authoress and revolutionary Eleonora Fonseca Pimentel that landed him in prison for nine months and a sentence of twenty years of exile and confiscation. More recently, it has become apparent that his role in the Revolution was more active, and that he may even have escaped the death sentence only through bribery.¹⁴ In any case, Cuoco survived to write about the history of the revolution. Displaced from Naples but newly connected to wider European and Italian networks, his pen became his strongest political tool. It was during exile, first in France and then in Milan, that Cuoco wrote the *Historical Essay on the Neapolitan Revolution* and *Plato in Italy* and started the journalistic career that he continued once back in Naples up until his retirement following the deposition of Joseph Bonaparte and the second reinstatement of Ferdinando IV in 1815.¹⁵

How did an interest in the past fit into Cuoco’s political life? As different as they might seem, the novel and the essay were in fact deeply connected.¹⁶ The *Essay* argued that the Neapolitan revolution had failed because the revolutionaries’ political and cultural project ultimately remained foreign to the people of Naples. The revolutionaries

¹⁴ See De Francesco (1997) 3-38.

¹⁵ De Francesco (2006) XLVI-XLVII and Banti (2000) 28.

¹⁶ De Francesco (2006) XIX-XXII.

and the people, Cuoco claimed, came from two different worlds: “one could well consider the Neapolitan nation as divided in two peoples, that differed by two centuries in time and two degrees in climate,” with elites steeped in foreign culture, and the people largely uneducated.¹⁷ *Plato in Italy* was Cuoco’s own response to this division. The book meant to educate Italians, to familiarize them with the ancient, glorious past of their country in order to inspire them to create an independent and unified Italy. This political and pedagogical goal would later become Cuoco’s project for the best part of his subsequent career as a journalist, indeed this very trajectory speaks to his investment in the making of the Italian nation.¹⁸ But it is important to see that Cuoco’s earlier venture into literary writing, and his turn to remote history, also suited Risorgimento concerns and practices. Scholars of Italian identity have emphasized the crucial role played by the emotional connections created by literature in imagining Italy as a nation: among Cuoco’s contemporaries, the poet Ugo Foscolo also wrote essays, while the political prose of Giuseppe Mazzini included highly emotional passages.¹⁹ Benedict Anderson, moreover, has shown how the imagination of modern nations repeatedly resorted to visions of the immemorial past.²⁰ *Plato in Italy* fits Cuoco’s political project well. The framework of new discursive approaches to Italian nationalism, in turn, sheds new light on Cuoco’s novel.

By Cuoco’s time historical novels set in antiquity had long flourished, with bestsellers including François de Fenelon’s *Telemachus* (1699) and J. J. Barthélemy’s *Le Voyage du jeune Anacharsis en Grèce, vers le milieu du quatrième siècle avant l’ère vulgaire* (1788). Much has been made of *Plato in Italy*’s Italian precedents - for example, Vittorio Barzoni’s 1797 *I Romani in Grecia* (*The Romans in Greece*, 1799 English translation) dealt with the calamities brought upon Italy by Napoleon’s invasion. Certainly, as in Barzoni’s allegorical novel, modern figures are concealed in *Plato in Italy*; Nearchus, for example, the young friend of the main protagonist, is likely to represent Cuoco’s friend and fellow writer Manzoni.²¹ But Cuoco repeatedly and

¹⁷ Cuoco (1998) 326.

¹⁸ See Anderson (1991) 32-6.

¹⁹ Banti (2000) 30-53.

²⁰ Anderson (1991) 11.

²¹ See Bollati (1983) 3-13 and Themelly (1990) 129.

explicitly invokes as a model the Frenchman Barthelémy.²² The *Anacharsis* traced the voyage of a young Scythian - descendant from the famous sage of the same name - through ancient Greece between the battles of Leuctra (371) and Cheronaea (338), interspersing conversations on religion, philosophy, art and literature with touristic and historical commentaries.²³ The novel was unique among the abundant and deeply scholarly production of its learned author, one of the most famous antiquarians of his time. Even Barthelémy must have been surprised, however, at how his vivid description of ancient Greece, saturated in a nostalgia that originated in a scholarly passion for the past, was transformed into a political cry for democracy. The *Anacharsis* in fact became one of the inspiring books of the French Revolution. The unexpected political impact of the not-very-political Barthelémy appealed to followers like Sylvain Maréchal (who in 1799 turned Pythagoreans into proto-communists in his 1799 *Les Voyages de Pythagoras*) and Cuoco. *Plato in Italy* adopted various tropes of the *Anacharsis*, but also significantly changed them. Most obviously, both feature an encounter between cultures, barbarian and civilized, but Cuoco turns his model on its head by imagining the Greek Plato as awestruck by the local Italians. To pull this vision off, Cuoco, no scholar himself, plunged deep in scholarly waters; recent archival work has revealed the full extent of this.²⁴ Many of his references were indeed Italian, but the urgency with which Cuoco approached them and the perspective he impressed on them must be understood within the wider European context – as is largely true of Risorgimento discourse. Cuoco’s carving of a distinctive space – in between previous Italian scholarly tradition and emerging European Hellenism – for the Italian past and its scholarship is one of the notable features of his work.

The very way in which Cuoco sets off his novel is revealing. Barthelémy’s preface explicitly discussed his work as fiction before returning the narrative voice to Anacharsis. Cuoco, on the other hand, addressed his readers in the voice of a fictitious ‘editor’ presenting the book as the modern transcription of an ancient Greek manuscript. Through this literary device the preface introduced several themes of *Plato in Italy*. The ‘editor’'s

²² Cuoco (1924) 337, (1999) 166 and (2007) 187.

²³ On *mAnacharsis* see Guerci (1979) 273-6, Vidal-Naquet (1995) 9-16, Hartog (2001) 44-5.

²⁴ Andreoni (2003) 137-244.

grandfather, the preface explains, discovered the ancient text in 1774 during foundational work for a countryside estate to be built in the area where once stood Heraclaea. The grandfather, who was learned in Greek, translated the manuscript but left it unpublished, seeing little use in “reminding Italians that they once were virtuous, powerful, happy ... the inventors of almost all knowledge that adorns human spirit”, when in contrast at present they consider “glory to be the disciples of foreigners”.²⁵ The question of whether to publish the manuscript thus touched on the decadence of modern Italians and their cultural and political dependence on outsiders – key themes of Risorgimento texts. The dedication seems to justify the grandson’s decision to publish the manuscript by expressing explicitly the parallels between the tumultuous political reversals of IVth century BCE Greece depicted in the novel and those unfolding in contemporary modern Italy.²⁶

Even prosaic elements of Cuoco’s anecdote of discovery illustrate the significance of the past for Italians. The choice of Heraclaea was not gratuitous: it was the site of one of the major archaeological finds of the century, the discovery in 1732 of two Greek inscriptions. It thus added weight to the claim that “every corner of south Italy guards immense treasures of antiquity.”²⁷ It also brought to mind Mazzocchi, the 18th-century Neapolitan antiquarian, much admired by Cuoco, who had published these inscriptions in a lavish, much appreciated volume – the same in which, though, he claimed the temples of Paestum to be oriental in architecture. The ‘editor’ indeed also mentioned in passing Paestum, deploring the lack of provisions made for the many tourists coming from all over Europe to visit its temples. This comment is double-edged: while criticizing modern Italians, at the same time it highlighted their particular stake in antiquities, since in Italy the past consists of monuments that emerge directly from the soil. There is a special connection with antiquity: like the editor’s grandfather, Italians dig and find the past in their own backyard and that past is rendered all the more valuable by the admiration it elicits from well beyond the country’s borders.

²⁵ Cuoco (2006) 6.

²⁶ Cuoco (2006) 5.

²⁷ Cuoco (2006) 6.

As the ‘editor’ discusses the difficulty of his task - that of dealing with a fragmentary text and the issues of its authenticity - more clues emerge about the nature of Cuoco’s work. The invented manuscript turns out to be fragmentary not only because of various lacunae but also because it consists of a set of letters. This epistolary quality, together with the novel’s title, evokes Plato’s 13 letters which largely deal with the philosopher’s travels to Syracuse and his relations with the tyrants Dionysius and Dion. The authenticity of these texts is still open to debate – the prevailing current view being that Letter 7, with its biographical details, is authentic, while most of the others, especially those claiming Pythagorean influences on Plato, are later additions that originated in Hellenistic neo-platonic circles.²⁸ Yet, since the 1st century CE and well into the Renaissance and later, these letters were published along with Plato’s other works. Even Bentley, who displayed his philological acumen in exposing the Hellenistic fabrication of Phalaris’ *epistulae*, maintained the authenticity of Plato’s letters. Some doubts were raised already at the end of the 17th century, but the modern skepticism about the letters that marked 19th-century professional philology, and which lives on in current debates, commenced with Cristoph Meiners in *Geschichte des Ursprungs, Fortgangs und Verfalls der Wissenschaften in Griechenland und Rom* (1781). Cuoco knew this work well, and by and large he admired it, though he resented its dismissal of the Pythagorean tradition that, as we will see, was crucial to his own view of Italy’s ancient greatness. By making the invented manuscript evocative of Plato’s letters and defending its authenticity, Cuoco was tacitly engaging with a hot contemporary scholarly issue and siding with defenders of the Pythagorean tradition.

The manuscript’s fragmentary structure, which includes speeches as well as letters by a variety of figures, is important in other ways as well. Cuoco sought to preempt criticism of this fragmentariness. The fictitious ‘editor’ reports a friend’s observation that the novel lacks unity of action and has too many foci - “laws, arts, politics, music, science and love -”²⁹ but claims that the travel motif reflected in the chronological ordering of the letters holds the book together. The result though is far from seamless, and one reason is that the journey is as much temporal as geographical. The novel’s fragments take the

²⁸ See Parente (2002) xi-xxxiv.

²⁹ Cuoco (2006) 12.

reader well beyond 4th-century Magna Graecia, where Plato's boat first touches ground, back to the age of Pythagoras, then, by land, to the idyllic and timeless region of native Samnium, and, finally, to Paestum where one ponders the primordial origins of Italy. The kaleidoscopic nature of the text with its unsettled focus well suits Cuoco's search for uncertain origins.

Surprisingly, the unifying protagonist of the novel is not Plato, but a young Athenian by the name of Cleobolus, who sets off from Athens in the company of the old philosopher. The question of his identity - "who on earth is this Cleobolus who plays such a great role in this book"? - is the source of tongue-in-cheek criticism of traditional erudition. The 'editor' has researched the topic extensively and could well add an appendix reporting "every inscription in which [Cleobolus'] name appears...; the name's etymology that might well turn out to be at the same time Phoenician, Hebraic, Chaldean, Punic and Ethiopian; and finally ... the use of the name in Athens," but, he writes, this would "never prove anything." His defining character - that "he was Athenian, young, well born and well educated" - appears clearly from the book itself.³⁰ Cleobolus, thus shaped as the typical protagonist of a *Bildungsroman*, is indeed the hinge of the novel, with his education in life, politics and philosophy giving the various fragments a sense of continuity. It is he who records with enthusiasm landscapes and interactions but who also prompts, and carefully reports, the opinions of Plato and the other great men he encounters. Cleobolus is the one who falls in love with Mnesilla, a young Pythagorean woman from Taranto, thus adding romance to the novel. And indeed it is Cleobolus who follows Plato through the Greek cities of South Italy - the main sites in Magna Graecia - and then, both to seek further knowledge and to satisfy his beloved's request to put their bond to test, travels to Samnium and finally arrives in Paestum to learn about the ancient origins of Italy.

The novel opens with letters by Cleobolus detailing his arrival in Italy by boat with Plato. There are lyrical descriptions of nighttime navigation and the sighting of land at sunrise; while sailors sleep, on deck the two men talk about homesickness. The boat lands at Taranto where most of the narrative elements are set in motion. Here Cleobolus meets

³⁰ Cuoco (2006) 8-9.

Mnesilla, attends her daily in-house Pythagorean discussion groups, and is enraptured alternately by her beauty and her wisdom. This passion prompts Plato's first reported speech - an indictment of the bad treatment that women suffer in Athens in contrast to the education and the just marriages they enjoy in Italy. In Taranto Cleobolus decides to become a Pythagorean, and so the novel includes accounts of his initiation and education in this philosophy as well as many speeches by his teachers, the philosopher Cleinias and the Pythagorean statesman and leader of the city, Architas. The climax of the stay in Taranto, however, consists of a dialogue on virtue between Plato, Architas and Pontius the Samnite – a dialogue referenced in Cicero (*Sen. XII, 41*) – which Pontius wins by claiming that “virtue is nothing more than moderation and love for work.”³¹ This dialogue first moves *Plato in Italy* beyond the themes concerning mainland Greeks and Magna Graecia and introduces the world of the Samnites and other native Italians, which will indeed be Cleobolus' ultimate destination.

Cleobolus' trajectory retracing Italian origins makes for a peculiar travel narrative, in which reported speeches and dialogue largely displace touristic description. The tour of Taranto guided by the new friend Nearchus sets the tone: monuments mainly feature as starting points for ethical and political discussions - for example, the sculpted relief depicting the city's foundation story is hardly described and it is appreciated for the civic lessons it imparts, rather than for its artistic quality. Similarly, on the way from Metapontum to Locri, human encounters dominate, in lieu of descriptions of places. Cuoco had little help from the ancient sources: but for a few pages in Dionysius of Halicarnassus on the temple of Hera in Croton, there was certainly nothing like the work of Pausanias that Barthélemy, for example, abundantly drew upon in recreating ancient Greece. Cuoco never visited Magna Graecia himself, nor had his most-quoted modern source, Mazzocchi, from whom he gleans references to foundational stories of sites and etymologies of place names. More striking, though, is that Cuoco never resorts to the recently published narratives by modern travelers to Magna Graecia – such as Riedesel (1773), Saint-Non (1781-6) and Swinburne (1783-5). These travelers had themselves struggled with a paucity of sources and hard-to-read ruins, yet still tried hard to give an

³¹ Cuoco (2006) 155.

account of these materials. Cuoco shows no such interest. The result is that Cleobolus' trip turns into a strangely immaterial travel narrative, in which sites mostly feature as backdrops for stories and speeches. Metapontum is a good example: here Cleobolus is mostly imagined reading Pythagorean verses written on the walls. Even the temples of Paestum are limited to a role as backdrop. Their fame at the time ensured evocative power with no need for close description, but it is hard not to notice that Cuoco has Cleobolus listening to the priest's crucial speech on the origins of Italy "having left the temples behind their backs"³² and while looking out at sea.

This speech about the ancient greatness of Italy given by the priest at Paestum is the climax of the novel's elaboration of ancient Italian greatness and its role in the Italian present. It opens by critiquing the cultivation of memory for its own sake. The priest faults his fellow countrymen, the inhabitants of Paestum who, as famously reported by Athaeneus (*Deipno.* 14.632),³³ met yearly to shed tears about their former glory. The reader, though, inevitably thinks of modern Italians whose memory of their glorious past is a primary concern of the novel, starting in the preface, with the question of whether even to publish the manuscript. Cuoco's take on the ancient anecdote is further revealing of his reworking of the ancient past. Athaeneus discusses Greeks who, in Lucanian-conquered Paestum, long for the days of Greek Poseidonia, but Cuoco has the priest refer to an ancient glorious past of Italian origins, reaching far beyond classical times. While the priest chastises remembering past glory but not the "errors and vices" that caused its decline,³⁴ Cuoco glosses over the great difference between the glorious past illustrated by the priest and the classical Greek one invoked in Athaeneus' anecdote and most familiar in modern Hellenism. Most of Cuoco's novel is dedicated building this Italian alternative to Hellenism, enlisting both ancient sources and modern scholarship, and arguing by way of playing down or appropriating achievements of classical Greece.

Plato's speech favorably comparing the treatment of women in Italy with that in Athens is the first of many instances in which Cuoco promotes the preeminence of

³² Cuoco (2006) 512.

³³ See Wonder (2002) for recent discussion of this passage with bibliography.

³⁴ Cuoco (2006) 513-4.

Greeks in Italy over their mother country. Other examples are his extensive discussion of Zeuxis' painting and Hippodamus's town planning. Furthermore, Italian peoples like the Samnites are extolled, first with Pontius carrying the day in the dialogue with Architas and Plato, then in the idealized description of Samnium, ranging from its agrarian economy to the details of its marriage ceremonies. Cuoco resorts here to 18th-century precedents in the Neapolitan tradition that pitted Rome against Samnium. Galanti himself had used the Samnites as ideal community for socio-political modeling³⁵ and indeed many pages of Cuoco closely reproduce some of his writings.³⁶ In Cuoco indeed the Romans feature as an erosive force, wearing away ancient Italian political unity – and thus as figures for modern foreign forces in Italy.³⁷ But the greater concern is the comparison of Italian with Greek culture, whose achievements are alternately played down or traced back to Italian origins, as with Cuoco's claims for the Italianness of Homer and Pythagoras.

A young man from Metapontum showing Cleobolus around town shocks him with the thesis that Homeric poems were written in Italy. The Metapontine builds on the variety of ancient traditions on Homer's birthplace³⁸ and argues Socratically, questioning Cleobolus' certainty about the Greekness of Homer. He asks questions like: Isn't there great disagreement about Homer's home country? Don't most of Homeric tales involve Italian vicissitudes? Weren't the poems originally composed well before writing was practiced, and wasn't Italy at that time a more advanced civilization than Greece? The Metapontine stops short of providing final proof for an Italian Homer, and similarly, when the young men recount their discussion to Plato and other elders, they offer general praise of the Metapontine's arguments but choose to drink to Homer rather than settling the question.³⁹ This hesitant way of arguing, together with its surprising suggestion, has long been taken as a sign of Cuoco's scholarly outmodedness. But recent archival work has revealed, on the contrary, his great investment in modern Homeric scholarship and has recovered, following his lead, the work of otherwise forgotten Italian scholars who at

³⁵ Calaresu (1997) 650-56.

³⁶ Andreoni (2003) 234-44.

³⁷ Andreoni (2003) 242-3.

³⁸ Graziosi (2002) 51-89.

³⁹ Cuoco (2006) 160-68.

the time also claimed the Italianness of Homer.⁴⁰ True, the main proponent, Ciro Minervini, never published his thesis in final form and his claim, which appears so alien to us today, seemed foolish also to his contemporary the French Baron de Sainte-Croix. Yet one should remember that de Sainte-Croix made the same judgment about the work of Wolf, the founder of the Homeric question as we know it.

The other controversial figure that looms large in Cuoco's vision of Italy's ancient greatness is Pythagoras. Since the Renaissance, south Italian antiquarians had claimed the philosopher as their own, even identifying a modern village named Samo in Calabria as his birthplace.⁴¹ Cuoco's claim for the Italianness of Pythagoras was, in some ways, a response to foreign appropriations such as that of Maréchal, and to the growing scholarly skepticism surrounding the Pythagorean tradition. *Plato in Italy* entertains a layered image of Pythagoras: Cleinias – Cleobolus' teacher – details Pythagorean philosophy and practices; Architas presents him as a town legislator; Plato, finally, tells Cleobolus that probably there never was a Pythagoras, that he simply embodies Italian popular knowledge, personified to exert greater authority. The fragmentary nature of the novel allows Cuoco to maintain the two antithetical views developed by Vico, whose *Antiquissima Sapienza Italica* presented Pythagoras as a Italic sage, and whose *Scienza Nuova* emphasized the poetically remote origins of his wisdom, beyond the grasp of any scholar's arrogant claims.⁴² At Paestum a further solution is offered: the priest explains to Cleobolus that once upon a time the Etruscan empire covered the whole of Italy and more, expanding from the Alps to the Scamander, and that then Italian culture reached as far as Greece. According to this picture, the Greeks who settled colonies in Magna Graecia brought back to Italy what they had learned from Italy in the first place. The question of Pythagoras' contested home country is resolved in this mirage of immemorial origins.

Cuoco's vision of an original Etruscan preeminence had precedents in the 18th-century Tuscan school that Mazzocchi also echoed in his interpretation of the temples of

⁴⁰ Andreoni (2003) 103-48.

⁴¹ Casini (1998) 145.

⁴² Casini (1998) 254-5.

Paestum. There were also differences. Cuoco was himself critical of the methodologies, such as etymology, employed by the 18th-century scholars whom he most admired (and abundantly quoted); the irony implicit in his discussion of the etymology of Cleobolus's name suggests that much. Cuoco believed, though, that he could maintain the same claims while resorting to new methods. The references by the priest of Paestum – echoed by Plato - to fossils – “fishes and shells changed into stones –” and the “strata” of Italian mountains in their arguments for Italy's precedence,⁴³ show Cuoco's involvement in the dialogue that, however short-lived, Italian scholars enthusiastically engaged in with Fortis and the new science of geology.⁴⁴ The greatest difference, however, between Cuoco and earlier Italian scholars is precisely the one to which he was oblivious, that is to say how seamlessly he enlisted them in his own Risorgimento project. His investment in an Italian unified nation explains, among other things, the consistent and anachronistic use of ‘Italian’ for the ancient inhabitants of the peninsula.⁴⁵ Indeed much in Cuoco's vocabulary aligns him with authors of the Risorgimento canon. For example, Cleobolus emphasizes his emotional response to the priest's lesson on Italy's origins – when “his heart won over intellect” in understanding.⁴⁶ Plato's final letter to Cleobolus, moreover, recalls some of his ancient model's guidelines for the good life. But the emphasis on the danger of fratricidal divisiveness for the good of a people, the parental language used to describe the political community, and the role given to conjugal love as its core speak rather to Italian Risorgimento tropes.

The investment in the nation also lies behind the differences between *Anacharsis* and the *Plato in Italy*, as the meticulously recreated classical Greece of the first gives way to the ancient Italy of the second, imagined by and large through didactic rhetoric, and designed to inspire a vision of future national unification. This divergence was inscribed already in Cuoco's framing, in which he writes of Italians' need for “popularizing books” of the sort Barthélemy had offered France.⁴⁷ But, while Barthélemy's Athens certainly reminded readers of contemporary Paris, it was not meant exclusively for Frenchmen, as

⁴³ Cuoco (2006) 483-84.

⁴⁴ Andreoni (2003) 147-99.

⁴⁵ Casini (1998) 259.

⁴⁶ Cuoco (2006) 512.

⁴⁷ Cuoco (1999) vol. II, 164.

its wide success in various cultural contexts shows.⁴⁸ Cuoco, on the other hand, wrote specifically for Italians. Not only was his intention explicitly political – he was, in effect, arguing for Italian unification - but it also referenced a political horizon deeply transformed from that of the *Anacharsis*. Precisely in the turn of years since Barthélemy's publication in 1788, the word *patria* (homeland) had been crystallizing in terms of the modern nationalism that appears in Cuoco.⁴⁹

This perspective also accounts for how differently sites and monuments feature in the *Anacharsis* and *Plato in Italy*. Cuoco certainly had fewer sources, either ancient or modern, textual or archaeological, to recreate the materiality of the past. But his very way of looking at material remains is different. For him ancient materials count as monuments on account of their connection with Italian identity. Plato's words in the final letter are revealing:

Italy is similar to a vast building ruined by time, the might of waters and the assaults of earthquakes; here a huge pillar still towers in its entirety, there only half a portico survives; on the ground in between them lies a mass of rubble, columns, rocks, precious remains, ancient but that today are no more than ruins ... Yet if you observe closely, with care and perseverance, you will notice that the rocks in these piles of ruins every day change their location; they are never today where you left them yesterday; and I think I detect a sort of internal ferment and the hand of an unknown architect at work to erect a new building.⁵⁰

Ruins are interesting to the extent that they promise national regeneration, and this interests Cuoco more than the historical recreation of old monuments. In fact the site that elicits his most involved description is the desolate plain where once Sybaris stood, and where the scattered ruins hold the memory of this great city's destruction. Yet for all these differences, Cuoco, envisioning a new country after a failed revolution, held Barthélemy as a model and the main reason was the latter's political success. How politically or culturally influential was Cuoco? A deeper look at his legacy suggests that if not crucial to Italy's unification, certainly Cuoco is an illuminating part of the peculiar story of Classics in Italy.

⁴⁸ An example in Winterer (2007) 111-2.

⁴⁹ Banti (2000) 3-17.

⁵⁰ Cuoco (2006) 528-9.

Greatly successful and reissued many times,⁵¹ *Plato in Italy* was hailed in 1831 as “one of the two immortal Italian novels of our age” together with Manzoni’s *Promessi sposi*.⁵² However, apart from a brief revival, associated with Fascist rule,⁵³ the novel’s fortunes soon faded. Explanations for its demise vary, with some citing its overall mediocre literary quality (which certainly did not compare to Manzoni);⁵⁴ others deeming its scholarly framework as already obsolete upon publication;⁵⁵ and others yet questioning the complexity of its vision of the past. Cuoco certainly familiarized northern intellectual elites with Vico. But his imagining of the past, which balanced an innate national character with historical identities shifting from Greek to Samnite to Etruscan, remained too vague and remote to achieve a powerful popular resonance. Interestingly these same criticisms also marred works that would later engage the ancient past of Italy. In 1810 Giuseppe Micali published *L’Italia avanti del dominio dei Romani (Italy before Roman dominance)* – a work that was inspired by a visit to Paestum. This comparative history of Etruscans and other early native cultures elevated source criticism and historical reconstruction over discussions of origins, and indeed remains respected today as an early landmark in Italian classical studies. Yet contemporaries deemed Micali’s book uninspiring, difficult to read, and – like Cuoco’s – populated by too many obscure names, which could never carry the same powerful attraction of famous figures from classical antiquity.⁵⁶ The theme of origins, on the other hand, was taken up in full in Vincenzo Gioberti’s essay *Il primato degli Italiani (The primacy of Italians)*, published in 1846. Gioberti presented Italy as the cradle of all civilizations, first with its original inhabitants, the Etrusco-Pelasgians, and later as the center of the spread of Christianity. Gioberti was a bestseller at the time,⁵⁷ but soon became an embarrassment to scholars in various disciplines.

Undoubtedly much of the scholarship deployed by Cuoco was problematic. Both Minervini’s Homeric claims and the Italian geological readings of history turned out to

⁵¹ Andreoni (2006) CXIV-CXXXVII.

⁵² A. Levati quoted in Andreoni (2003) 12.

⁵³ Galfré (2002).

⁵⁴ See Andreoni (2006) CXXX-CXXXI quoting Melchiorre Cesarotti’s negative judgements.

⁵⁵ See respectively Casini (1998) 261 and Banti (2000) 114-9.

⁵⁶ See Casini (1998) 262-67 and Banti (2000) 113.

⁵⁷ See Banti (2000) 43 and Casini (1998) 272-93.

be terribly short-lived. By the early 19th-century, when classical studies were taking professional shape, these ventures seemed speculative, naïve and quite alien to the emerging approach to Hellenism and classical scholarship. Gioberti, but also Cuoco, soon after became a ‘mess to be cleared up’, to use Momigliano’s terminology. When, following Italy’s unification, there was a need to configure a national past that would include the ancient one, the answer turned out in many ways to be different from Cuoco’s. In Ettore Pais’ *Storia d’Italia antica* (1893), Italy is of special interest precisely as original meeting point between Rome and Greece. This narrative has since remained dominant, as one sees even in the guide’s speech in *Bread and Tulips*. Yet traces of Cuoco’s project are apparent in this later narrative. For, however obliquely, Cuoco dealt with classical Greece more deeply than the previous Italian traditions that privileged the Etruscan or Roman past. He also was the first to urge a vision of the ancient past in national terms. In the process, moreover, Cuoco implicated scholarship itself, putting it in a predicament that goes a long way toward explaining the vexed place of Classics in Italy, which Momigliano has so aptly highlighted.

Cuoco’s engagement with Barthélemy is perhaps most revealing. In an 1807 article, Cuoco pleaded with Italians to stop writing learned histories, and to turn instead to novels bestowed with the drama that had made *Anacharsis* attractive.⁵⁸ He recommended Italian themes for these novels and suggested the glorious age of Leo X as a topic likely to enrich and inspire. The suggestion calls to mind the preface to *Anacharsis*: there Barthélemy explains that, inspired by his travels to Italy, he thought of writing just such a novel, but on second thought abandoned it for the more manageable context of 4th-century Greece.⁵⁹ Cuoco reclaims the age of Leo X for Italian Risorgimento. But there is more to it than this. Implicit in Barthélemy’s comment is the view of Italy’s scholarly decline following the Renaissance – a view that was widely held in the 18th-century and that was reinforced by many travel accounts including Barthélemy’s own 1802 *Voyage en Italie*.⁶⁰ Indeed, Cuoco’s project, in addition to glorifying the Italian ancient past, actively reevaluated Italian post-Renaissance scholarship, as attested by his emphasis on Vico and

⁵⁸ Cuoco (1999) ii 164-66.

⁵⁹ Barthélemy (1819) 83-95.

⁶⁰ This theme is extensively researched in Waquet (1989); see also De Francesco LXVI-LXIX.

Mazzocchi, but also Minervini and Fortis, with their Homeric and geological studies. In a later article, Cuoco wrote that the ancient history of the homeland was the most useful study not only for the philosopher but also for the citizen - “for other peoples it can just be object for mere literary curiosity: but for us it is the study of our things ... which one day we will be able to achieve again if dedicated observation will inspire a desire for emulation ... don’t we after all inhabit the same soil?” Lauding Joseph Bonaparte’s establishment of a new Academy of History and Antiquity, Cuoco lamented that glorious scholars like Mazzocchi had passed away: “Mazzocchi is no more, but don’t we inhabit a classical land? Isn’t in our country every stone famous for a great name? Don’t we hear at every step the voice of our ancestors who call us to contemplate their work, which has survived the passing of time and barbarism?”⁶¹ The association is significant: the scholars’ relation to monuments is so entwined that they seem themselves to become national heritage.

The peculiarity of Italian classical scholarship has to do in part with the strange place in which it was put by the cultural politics of the country’s unification. Unlike most of the international community of classicists, in Italy Classics has been for some time caught between the local and the classical, the national and the popular, with scholars called upon to clear up the ‘messes’ of ordinary culture while being monumentalized themselves by the inordinate pressure that such ‘messes’ place on them. Paestum provides a good vantage-point on this problem. The long afterlife of the classical past is here well represented: for example, the nearby medieval church shows a Madonna holding a pomegranate, just like the women in the surviving sculpted clay votives found at the site of the sanctuary of ancient Paestum. Yet any straightforward or uncomplicated reflection of this historical continuity in scholars’ work on the model of Comparetti is called into question by the divide between scholarly opinion and popular beliefs concerning even the names of Paestum’s temples. The local guide insists that the temple of Athena – as scholarly consensus has it - is in fact dedicated to Ceres. Against this background in *Bread and Tulips* the guide illustrates Italian national character in the most traditional, patriotic, and paternalistic terms. That for Rosalba the vision of Paestum is the

⁶¹ Cuoco (1999) ii, 117.

beginning of an alternative life serves as a reminder that such views are never definitely fixed nor is the classical past closed to new readings. As Momigliano already wrote, Italian classical scholarship has long since been providing important voices on the international scene. Yet, that Italian nationalism has recently attracted sophisticated analysis, allows us, as well, to appreciate further some of the strangely formative moments of its longer history.

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