Reshaping Virtue: the Case of Eighteenth-Century French and Italian Masonic Poetry

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Abstract

Virtue appears to be a central theme in eighteenth-century masonic poetry. Following Voltaire’s lead, who affirmed: “À chanter la vertu j’ai consacré ma voix. / Vainqueur des préjugés que l’imbécile encense,/ j’ose aux persécuteurs prêcher la tolérance” (Épître à Boileau ou mon testament, 1769), French freemason poets devoted their poetic efforts to virtue. The very same leit-motiv can be found in Italy: Tommaso Crudeli, the first martyr of Italian Freemasonry, solemnly committed his “lyre” to “virtue” in Il Trionfo della Ragione (1767). But what did this devotion to virtue imply? For many it meant putting poetry to the service of the common good, composing poems which on one hand disclosed the vices of society, on the other hinted virtuous models to be followed. This is the case of Emmanuel Carbon Flins des Oliviers. The French poet, who belonged to the renowned Parisian lodge des Neuf Sœurs, harshly criticized the Church, while making the great philosophe “un apôtre de la liberté politique et de la tolérance” in his poem Voltaire (1779). Conversely, virtue meant also retreat from the everyday mêlée, the ability to detach oneself from the basest human passions and to live accordingly a pristine ingenuity; in short virtue was the attribute of the Golden Age people. The freemason poets Jean-Baptiste Gresset, Jacques Delille, Aurelio de’ Giorgi Bertola and Ippolito Pindemonte all longed for the (lost) Age of Astraea, but they also tried to find possible modern replicas in the virtuous and simple “vie champêtre” of shepherds and farmers. Similarly, masonic chansons celebrated lodges as the true return to a natural egalitarian status and thus as ‘Schools of Virtue’. Between the late 1770s and the early 1780s new tendencies emerged, chiefly a syncretic and encyclopedic will, whose aim was to embrace the reality (and the super-reality) in its wholeness. Antoine Roucher and Antonio Jerocades well incarnate this new ‘poetry of fusion’, which applies also to virtue. In their poetic masterpieces, Les Mois and the Lira Focense respectively, the two freemason poets tried to present an ‘ecumenical’ version of virtue, blending together Enlightenment, masonic, Christian and classical motives.

My aim is to reconstruct the process through which freemason poets reshaped the concept of virtue in novel and productive ways. In fact, I believe that they contributed to create a new masonic morality, which combined spiritual and secular values. Moreover, I am convinced that a new model of Great Man stemmed from this renovated ethos: the virtuous freemason. Between the late Eighteenth-Century and the early Nineteenth-century, freemason savants such as Voltaire, Lalande, Dupaty, Filangieri and Mascheroni became the object of a true cult, thanks to the poetic composition of their Brothers, anticipating the revolutionary secular cult of Marat and Napoleon’s personal propaganda.

Paper

My research deals with Freemasonry, poetry and virtue and I think we should start by asking ourselves why Freemasonry? Why poetry? Why virtue?
The first question in easily answered: this is, after all, the World Conference on Fraternalism Freemasonry, and History. Out of joke, Italian historian Gian Mario Cazzaniga affirmed: it is impossible to study the Eighteenth century and the Enlightenment without taking into account Freemasonry.¹ For instance we can remember the importance of Freemasonry in shaping the routes of the Grand Tour, an importance which has been well established, particularly by Pierre-Yves Beaurepaire.² Freemasons travelled all over the Continent, meeting Brothers and savants, bringing new ideas with them. In other words, during the eighteenth century Freemasonry was a key player. Freemasonry had a European dimension, which fostered contacts between Brethren from different countries. The fascination for the square and compass affected ‘great men’ from Europe to the Americas. Voltaire, Lalande, Dupaty, Montesquieu, Mirabeau, Franklin, Washington, Hamilton, Pope, Lessing, Goethe, Herder, Maffei, Bertola and Filangieri (and I can continue, but I’m afraid we don’t have the time) – all were freemasons.

As far as poetry is concerned, during the Eighteenth century it was a fundamental and powerful medium. Poems, often oral and occasional in character, were less subject to censorship and thus circulated widely. Consequently, they were a perfect instrument for the diffusion of ideas. The traditional view of the age of the Enlightenment as an era of rationalism, and therefore not poetic, strongly contrasts with the reality of eighteenth century culture, in which poems and songs were composed for all manner of events (birth, baptism, graduation, marriage, monacation, victory, death) and countless people fancied themselves poets. In a word, poetry was epidemic.³ But why poetry was so powerful? Italian historian Luciano Guerci observes that while treatises and discourses spoke to the “mind”, poems were able to speak to the “heart”,⁴ or, as Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht puts it: “poetry can make things ‘present’”.⁵ In addition, as the French scholar Béatrice Didier maintains poetry could reach even the lowest social classes, thus having the “privilege to address even the illiterate”.⁶ Finally, Amedeo Quondam, referring to eighteenth and nineteenth century Italy, spoke of “supremacy of poetry”.⁷

Coming finally to virtue, the Eighteenth century was obsessed with the concept of virtue. The freemason poet Tommaso Crudeli solemnly committed his “lyre” to “virtue”, Brissot glowed to emulate the ancient virtues of Phocion and young Alessandro Manzoni identified the pillars of

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³ Darnton, Robert. The Devil in the Holy Water or the Art of Slander from Louis XIV to Napoleon. University of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia, 2010. 1. Print: “By 1789, France had developed a large subculture of indigent authors – 672 poets alone, according to one contemporary estimate”.
both morality and poetry in truth and virtue. In other words, virtue was omnipresent. Now, eighteenth-century virtue is a complex and multifaceted concept which embraces secular and spiritual meanings. It is therefore very difficult to grasp. Many underlined its secular character, reconstructing the disenchantment process which led towards a rediscovery of the ancient virtue of the Greeks and the Romans. This rediscovery, began during the Humanism and after that the Renaissance, had certainly a great influence in the way eighteenth-century people perceived virtue and ethics. However, religion continued to play a very important part: secularized though some intellectuals might have been, the vast majority of eighteenth century people still had a strong connection with religious beliefs.

I believe (and I’ll try to convince you too) that the best way to understand eighteenth-century virtue is analyzing it through masonic poetry. Masonic poems were exactly that kind of poems able to “speak to the heart” and therefore to show people the path towards virtue. The majority of the texts were, in fact, combined with a musical score. Hence the poems-songs were designed to be performed, usually in public ceremonies. All these characteristics made the language simpler and often repetitive, always insisting on recurring key-concepts. Masonic poetry had a long-standing and illustrious tradition related to virtue. From its very onset, in fact, both Italian and French masonic poetry were closely related to virtue. Voltaire, for instance, had composed an Épître à Boileau ou mon testament, a poetic manifesto, where he affirmed his guiding principles: “À chanter la vertu j’ai consacré ma voix. / Vainqueur des préjugés que l’imbécile encense, / j’ose aux persécuteurs prêcher la tolérance”.

Similarly Italian freemason Tommaso Crudeli solemnly committed his “lyre” to “virtue” in his collected poems, and in particular in the ode Il trionfo della ragione, published only many years after his death in 1767. Crudeli himself was a true symbol of masonic virtue having been imprisoned and mistreated on account of his belonging to Freemasonry by the Florentine Inquisition. Although later freed, he never recovered and died shortly afterwards, becoming the first martyr of Italian Freemasonry.

But what did this devotion to virtue imply? For many it meant putting poetry to the service of the common good, composing poems which on one hand disclosed the vices of society, on the other hinted virtuous models to be followed. This is the case of Emmanuel Carbon Flins des Oliviers. The French poet, who belonged to the renowned Parisian lodge of the Neuf Sœurs, in his poem Voltaire, harshly criticized the Church, while making the great philosophe “un apôtre de la liberté politique et de la tolérance”.

Ce Poète ennemi de l’erreur / qui des Tyrans pieux réprimait le fureur. […] Liberté, tu renaiss au tombeau de Voltaire; / Voltaire dans la tombe a fait citer les Rois / au tribunal sacré des peuples et des Loix.

Conversely, virtue meant also retreat from the everyday mêlée, the ability to detach oneself from the basest human passions and to live accordingly a pristine ingenuity; in short virtue was the attribute of

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the Golden Age people. So the freemason poets Jean-François de Saint-Lambert, Jean-Baptiste Gresset, Jacques Delille, Aurelio de’ Giorgi Bertola and Ippolito Pindemonte longed for the (lost) Age of Astraeea, but they also tried to find possible modern replicas in the virtuous and simple “vie champêtre” of shepherds and farmers. Similarly, masonic lodges were celebrated as the true return to a natural egalitarian status and thus as ‘Schools of Virtue’:

Dans nos Temples, tout est symbole / tous les préjugés sont vaincus, / La Maçonnerie est l’école / de la décence et des vertus. / Ici, nous domptons la faiblesse / qui dégrade l’Humanité / et le flambeau de la Sagesse / nous conduit à la volupté.

Between the late 1770s and the early 1780s new tendencies emerged, chiefly a syncretic and encyclopedic will, whose aim was to embrace the reality (and the super-reality) in its wholeness. Antoine Roucher and Antonio Jerocades well incarnate this new ‘poetry of fusion’, which applies also to virtue. In their poetic masterpieces, respectively Les Mois and La lira fiocense, the two freemason poets tried to present an ‘ecumenical’ version of virtue, blending together Enlightenment, masonic, Christian and classical motives.

Roucher belonged to the Parisian lodge of the Neuf Sœurs, and significantly, was referred to as the ‘French Lucretius’, an epithet forged by his ‘brother’ Nicolas Bricaire de la Dixmerie. Roucher composed Les Mois with the ‘encyclopedic’ intention of embracing all existence in a single poetic work. His lines are pervaded with an “Enlightenment sentiment” and characterized by faith in progress and science, love for truth and eagerness for knowledge. Antoine Roucher depicted a very original Pantheon of virtuous men and women, including his father, his mother, Jeanne d’Arc, Dupaty, Voltaire and Rousseau. Moreover, if in Carbon Flins des Oliviers’ already mentioned poem, Voltaire stands out as a gigantic figure, the defender of freedom and the enemy of error, Roucher went even further: alive Voltaire had been a grand homme, death not only has made him immortal, but it has also transformed him into a god:

Voltaire n’aurait point de tombe où ses reliques / Appelleraient le deuil et les larmes publiques! / Et qu’importe après tout à cet homme immortel / Le refus d’un asile à l’ombre d’un autel? /

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15 Stances chantées au banquet de la loge des Neuf Sœurs, Orient de Paris, le 7 juin 1778, après la réception du E Voltaire, Une Loge maçonnique d’avant 1789. La Loge des Neuf Sœurs. 33.
16 The category ‘Poetry of Fusion’ paraphrases the concept ‘Politics of Fusion’ as used by Robert Morisseys regarding Napoleon’s political action (Morisseys, Robert. The Economy of Glory: from Ancien Régime France to the Fall of Napoleon. The University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2014. 4. Print.). I believe, in fact, that the two very different cases have, nonetheless, common aspects: the will of harmonizing opposites and conciliating past and present, the respect of the tradition and the desire of creating something new.
Le cendre de Voltaire en tout lieu révéré / Eût fait de tous les lieux une terre sacrée, / Où repose un grand homme un dieu vient habiter.  

Antonio Jerocades, fancying himself a modern Orpheus and following on the very first Italian masonic poems by Tommaso Crudeli, wished to educate people through poetry, thus he dedicated his compositions to unveiling the importance of masonic values such as fraternity, friendship, virtue and liberty. The poem L’Amico is particularly significant because it is where the poet sketches a portrait of the ideal man, understood as amalgam of the virtuous freemason and the enlightened philosophe:

Two bodies and one heart, two minds and only one thought / two kingdoms and one throne: / or two chains and one foot / two sons of two fathers and only one heir; / frankly speaking and sincerely thinking. / Freely thinking and speaking the truth; / not changing rules when combining even opposites became very productive during the French Revolution. Michel de Cubières, a freemason himself, celebrated the martyr Jean-Paul Marat as the only one able to unite Epictetus, that is to say speculative skills and research of truth, and Brutus, namely civic engagement and fight for freedom:


The path towards the representation of Napoleon as great man was open. A few year later, in fact, Italian freemason Federico Todeschini would have exalted the French Emperor as “sublime monarch, great

18 Roucher’s few lines devoted to Voltaire’s memory, were censored in the 1779 first edition. However, these lines circulated widely. They had, in fact, been recited in a successful masonic ceremony held by the lodge of the Neuf Sœurs in 1778. The full version of the poems was finally published in 1792.
20 Jerocades, Antonio. La lira focense. Presso Gennaro Fonzo: Napoli, 1784. Pint: “Due corpi, e un cor, due menti, e un sol pensiero / due Regni, e un Trono; o due catene, e un pede, / di due padri due figli, e un solo erede; / un parlar franco, un ragionar sincero. / Pensar, e dir liberamente il vero; / non cangiare leggi col cangiare di sede; / il silenzio fedel, l’occulta fede; / sprezzar l’orgoglio, e tollerar l’impegno; / il vivere, e il morir porre in periglio / per ottener la libertà, la pace, / A prezzo della forza, e del consiglio, / dar lume all’ombre, e non mostrare la face, / salvar la patria, e ritener l’esilio; / dell’Amico è l’immagine verace”.
philosopher and excellent warrior” and as “prodigy of strength and wisdom”. The Italian poet made Napoleon into the ultimate incarnation of virtue, who unites both the meditative side of virtue, enhanced during the late Enlightenment, and the active one, exalted by the revolutionaries.


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22 Todeschini, Federico. I mali dell’Intolleranza. 1807. Print: “Ma il supremo del Mondo Architetto / Alle stragi prense un confin, / E ministro al grand’uopo fu eletto / Un Monarca che in mano ha il destin; / Un Monarca sublime Massone / Gran Filosofo, e sommo guerrier, / Che a sua voglia del mondo dispone, / Ch'è un prodigio di possa, e saper”.