

"These wasps behave just like those men who...": Irony and Optimism in Baroncelli's writings

by Fabrizio Veneziano

Deeply influenced by Hume, he considers scepticism a reasonable philosophy and the analytic-ironical style an appropriate means of communication. He then faces with inexplicable optimism the task of making this compatible with his commitments to egalitarianism and solidarity¹.

So reads Flavio Baroncelli's biography on the official website of the University of Genoa, where he taught for thirty years moral and political philosophy. We shall see how this definition accurately describes Baroncelli's philosophy as can be found in his writings published over the years, even in short or minor ones.

The author of the mini-biography is, of course, Baroncelli himself. Anyone who had the chance of attending his lessons or speaking with him could easily tell. First of all because of the style, which, following his implicit suggestion, we are tempted to describe as ironic. Still, although such a description would not be wrong, scholars use irony far too often as a falsely friendly decoy that hides highbrow, sophisticated argumentation doomed to oblivion and to the neglect of the majority of readers, i.e. something that Baroncelli's unpretentious and far-reaching attitude vis-à-vis philosophical matters attempted to avoid. Moreover, in philosophy, "irony" reminds inevitably of Socrates, and probably Baroncelli would not have appreciated to be compared to him considering that, with his usual heterodoxy, he could not resist defining Socrates as "well-known for his fondness of bumming food and drinks at banquets".

Amongst all the available stylistic and philosophical classifications, we would rather define Baroncelli's touch as rich of sense of humour. Besides, if irony is often a child of pessimism, "inexplicable optimism" is the attitude that F.B. (as he sometimes refers to himself in his articles) displays in dealing with his favourite topics: tolerance, racism, social and linguistic discrimination, and moral relativism. All these

are “strong” topics, which almost call out for ideological clashes and fundamentalist approaches, the latter chosen by authors familiar with these kinds of issues, who are always ready to enlighten their readership with ultimate truths. After all, it is probably not by chance that the tone of his mini-bio has a Gramscian echo (in that it recalls the opposition between the pessimism of reason versus the optimism of the will). Due perhaps to the cultural context of his higher education, it is reasonable to expect that the debates of those days had an influence on Baroncelli.² The present author can still recall a conversation during which Baroncelli, paying homage to his mentor and thesis advisor Prof. Romeo Crippa, mimicked a younger and generational himself, desperate to write on “MARX! LENIN!” - as he yells out, wildly gesturing and mocking the ideological exaltation of that period. Prof. Crippa’s prescription to study a Scottish sceptical philosopher like David Hume will have a very positive impact on the future moral thought of Baroncelli qua established scholar – while resulting in sudden depression for him qua young graduating student (“I spent weeks walking close to buses hoping to get run over...”).

If all these elements can be found also in the books published by Baroncelli, they may well be more evident in his newspaper and magazine articles, in which he is more apt to display his “sceptical” but “reasonable”, « analytic-ironical”, “communication-intended” style, perhaps owing to the colloquial tone he employs. Going through his editorials in the section called “Scostumando” (an intentionally ambiguous gerund suggesting to “de-clothe”, “reveal” or to be “ill-mannered”) published over the Nineties in the Italian newspaper *Il Secolo XIX*, one can find these kinds of remarks:

They woke up a few weeks ago, when a chess master succeeded in beating a powerful computer. Almost all of them stated, more or less: ‘This is great news: man is more intelligent than computers’. Do you get it? IBM sets up a machine on purpose, and is beaten. Why should this be great news? Did we need that to reckon how good the best chess players are? We did not. There is no evidence that chess players have become smarter. It ultimately turns out that IT specialists were not intelligent enough (to put it this way) to produce a machine capable of beating a man in the most mechanical of all games. Since computers are useful, and the more ‘intelligent’ they are, the more useful, and since nobody takes seriously anymore the idea that they are dangerous, I don’t really see why it should be good news. If tomorrow all cars should start moving so slow that a good athlete could easily overtake them, that wouldn’t be good news, would it? There is a lot to say about what seems to be the last hideout for ‘humanities’: waiting all

alone in a corner hoping that machine will stop working; but I can't quite be the one ready to throw the first stone³.

In these articles Baroncelli often plays the role of the advocate of common sense, going as far as discussing unlikely or low-to-ground subjects such as meteorology and millenarianism:

At the roots of our culture we are still querulous peasants and we still behave as though we were sharecroppers: we never admit that things are going well otherwise the landlord will increase his share. But on top of that, today we are exacerbated by the mass-media: an exacerbation that we accept and provoke because if global warming makes the news, then we – and our sweat make them too. We need it badly. Maybe because at this obnoxious turn of the Millennium nobody dares any longer to say that the Third Millennium is going to be something special. No global adventure is expected. Uncunningly, we have used up all our messianic and millenarian myths a few decades before the big date, like someone who thoughtlessly eats his birthday cake the day before his birthday. So here we are now, forced to feast with leftovers; here we are, cherishing every disgraceful event, any temperature jolt, every shower of rain in order to convince ourselves that, after all, something special is going on. Nobody – since Virgil's or St. Paul's days – likes to admit it: 'I live in trivial times; I have trivial hopes and trivial fears'. Let alone if we are proceeding towards the end of a Millennium: can we afford to dismiss an unprecedented heat?⁴.

Elsewhere, more seriously, after having sketched a village fair, Baroncelli gives us an example of the moral and anthropological remarks that he fully develops in his major works:

Two hours later I understand: I cannot tell tourists from villagers. Once upon a time there were locals and holiday-makers. You could spot holiday-makers right away, and even from a distance you could tell they felt different, more or less like 'the white man'. They could have strolled around with white boots and a whip. Often they were addressed with deference; yes bwana, take a seat bwana; if I can I'll rip you off, me poor peasant; you are superior and that gives me the right to get reimbursed by selling you dearly this rotten chicken. That was not so long ago; let's say thirty-five years ago. If a car stopped to ask for directions, we used to jump up and then we'd share our extraordinary experience with everyone. I don't know what happened in the

meantime. I wasn't looking. And now, all of a sudden, on a Sunday night, I realize I cannot tell people's origin - young ones especially, but even forty or fifty year old. I cannot tell natives from white men. [...] It must be the thing they call homologation. They say it's a bad thing. They say you lose diversity and that diversity is precious; maybe. Thirty years ago some friends of mine would feel a little too different on Saturday nights, so they'd burn out their calluses with lime. The next day they'd wear a too-obviously-ironed white shirt, shiny trousers, they'd buy a pack of American cigarettes and they'd go to the beach pretending to be engineers. They had boiled hands, they would walk as if carrying a weight on their shoulders, and they'd keep silent to avoid mistakes. Some of them made pathetic efforts to speak the elegant Riviera's dialect, but then swore in their rough peasant dialect. The emotional variety of their dialect was useful mostly to curse at their fate as country people. Maybe their diversity was precious to an ethnologist, but they didn't know that.

[...]

I've never known of a diversity that – except in ethnological or social history textbooks – didn't bear a mark of superiority or inferiority. Therefore, this crowd of people without evident marks of diversity – well, I like it, a lot. I'm not that stupid to think they're all happy. But at least they don't have a surplus of shame allotted in advance, by birth. Quite the contrary: finally, after three thousands years of poets' lies, people who live in the countryside (at least in my region) have some real advantages over city dwellers. And they know it⁵.

This quotation shows clearly his author's ability to deal with ready-made thoughts that illegitimately establish semantic equivalences like the one – rather common – regarding homologation as a negative value, even despite the egalitarian and solidaristic side-effects stressed by Baroncelli – maybe too modest compared to some utopian ideals. Not shy when defiantly confronting some ideologies, Baroncelli wasn't kind to any *maître à penser* if caught while reasoning unsoundly. That is exactly the case of an article that reproves the theologian Sergio Quinzio according to whom “women from Bosnia who have been raped for 'ethnic purposes' should reject abortion because that would be acting on the basis of racial hatred against their progeny”.

How intelligent, how refined. Nobody got it right. It was the job for him, with his long

white beard and the ample bookcase in the background. What has Quinzio done? He played the mental experiment of 'ethnic rape' and forced delivery, and he assumed he could reproduce in his mind those women's emotions. Amongst those emotions, manufactured following a DIY manual for universal genius, he thought he found a speck of sawdust and started to wave it as a plank. That's all. A fantasy, similar to the one defendants in rape trials are forced to stage. Besides an obvious violation of a simple evangelical norm, theology and history of religions have little to say in this matter. You don't need to be an expert of nothing to see that racism doesn't play any role here, since there are no observable racial differences between these people. And that the same advice had already been given to those women – with more charity, less human-geographical mistakes, less misplaced psychology, and less presumption – encouraging them to transform those children of hate into children of love. But Quinzio can't help spilling cleverness, which has him producing a fantastic trial against these women's intentions, an unnecessary insult, and a lecture, after which those women should have learned to better understand their own feelings⁶.

Anyone who is familiar with Baroncelli will not be surprised by the tone of the last sentence, where the usual humour thinly veils a deep indignation, rooted in the high esteem Baroncelli had for any human being and his or her weakness, without turning him or her into a monument or a sacred statue. The people, individuals like the "natives" or "white men" are often the starting point and the conclusion of Baroncelli's reasoning. Great authors are simply tools to use and exploit in order to try to understand (and possibly modify) behaviours or mechanisms in social, political or psychological domains which – in extreme situations – produce racism and intolerance. It is not about a patronizing and rationalizing program following which the wise scholar, equipped with his favourite authors' fine arguments, would proceed to radically restyle human nature. As a true Hume reader, Baroncelli would not rely on such a flight of fancy, but most of all he would be annoyed by the arrogance of it and the total lack of respect for the individuals that, inevitably, would represent the target of such a programme.

Consistently with this point of view, Baroncelli is sincerely – although only half-seriously – fond of "the dedicators", ordinary people who spent an entire summer, a few years ago, ringing up *Secolo XIX* to publish in that newspapers compliments or wishes for friends and relatives.

You dozens of *cucciolotti, birolì, Bubu, Bibi, topini, caramelline, cozze maruche, orsetti, Gugù, Cucci, Cucce, Cocò, pulci, pippi, caruzzette, ganascine*;⁷ multitudes of champions, number ones, the best, but also – democratically – people ‘whom the world will ignore’ but are ‘everything to her’: I must thank you. Thank you, thank you, thank you; endless thanks ‘endless like the grains of the sand’ and ‘deeper than the open sea’, a thank you ‘whose flame will never die’. Why? For two reasons⁸.

These reasons, humorously soon revealed, can be reported as the right to “self-replication” that every dedicator is putting into practice, thus showing the nature of the fourth kind of rights that the future is bringing in, after history has provided us with civic, political and economic rights. We are not arguing that in these few lines Baroncelli was developing a new theory in philosophy of history. What we consider worth stressing is his attitude, clearly focused and analytical, but also welcoming to a new kind of society he feels he no longer belongs to:

May my sympathy be with you on the path that leads to the future. I cannot come with you; I will remain here, surrounded by the ghosts of Nunzio Filogamo and Silvio Gigli.⁹ I am deeply sorry and honestly ashamed; but even my dearest friend's answering machine annihilates me: I blush, hang up and stand there to stare at the phone, full of guilt and frustration¹⁰.

There is no sign of the rejection of a new state of things that can often be found in the lay sociology of newspapers, and the usual sense of humour is not tinged with sarcasm. After all, there is some Rousseau in Baroncelli's perception of human kind: with all its weakness and flaws it is still better, when acting naturally, than any given highbrow pundit, tragically locked up in his ivory tower even when pretending to be a man of the people.

I like linguistic mistakes and misunderstandings. Not all of them, of course. For instance I like ‘Poor guy, he had a *liptus* and now is paralyzed’. Where the unfamiliar ‘ictus’ is replaced by a noun closer to us thanks to TV advertising. [...] I appreciate high level of ‘polystyrene’ in the blood, although too common and technological; I favour more ancestral form of diagnosis: ‘The doctor says my husband has a *liver*’, for instance; when reported with a concerned tone of voice it warms up my heart¹¹.

This human warmth that makes Baroncelli a gentle grown-up is rather unknown to

the intellectual resentment he suffered in his youth:

When I was twenty my opinion leader peers took up quoting Paul Nizan [...] and I made him one of my references, so much that I used to put up a gloomy expression just because Nizan once said that twenty is the worst of all ages. We used to live in perpetual mourning, waiting for the end of youth as liberation, and, if someone asked why we were so blue, we called him ignorant and sent him to read Nizan¹².

The “intellectualisation” of life, a largely narcissistic project, would never really thrill Baroncelli in his later life, as it can be argued from another remark – subtle as usual but humorously stated – that seems to get rid, once for all, of this kind of sadness à la Nizan.

So I took some information and learned that Jean-Paul Sartre had written an endless introduction to a book by Nizan where he kept saying that he ‘had things’ while he – Jean-Paul – ‘had only words’. Sartre was rather obsessed with this idea: since his childhood he used to spend his day and night-time writing and, whenever he bumped into someone, like Nizan or Jean Genet, who had done something else besides writing, he got all excited and buried him with words repeating that: ‘That guy, boy, had he done and seen stuff!’¹³.

Baroncelli didn't lack confidence with words either. But he always used them with economy, proving capable of resisting the temptation of drawing boisterous philosophical conclusions from his insights. Is he maybe making fun of this feature of his in this other article from the *Secolo XIX*? After the description of a peculiar natural event he happened to notice in his garden, he reaches this conclusion:

As for me, as a moralist by now I should be saying something like ‘these wasps behave just like those men who...’; but I can't come up with anything relevant. The only one who actually behaves like those wasps, I'm afraid, is me, calmly waiting for my bus at the usual stop – that has been moved farther up –, quite happy because, for once, there is no crowd¹⁴.

¹ <http://www.dif.unige.it/dot/baroncelli/>

² Here are his remarks about that period: “The second recollection dates back to the end of the Sixties.

A sociologist tries to explain what sociology is, this discipline that, in Italy, seems to develop and spread with the purpose of sneering at to Croce's memory. A group of students is trying to refute his arguments, convinced of using common sense and Marxism at the same time. After about half an hour the sociologist is fed up with pleas for life, matter-of-factness, perpetual change, reality-as-history; he loses his temper and yells: 'You're a bunch of 'crociani'!'. It almost ended up in a fight; it is true that those students are similar to the worst of Croce; but they don't know it, and for them, as for the sociologist - but for different reasons - 'crociano' is an insult. What if somebody told them that they're less 'crociani' than 'gentiliani'?..."

[3](#) from "Scostumando", *Il Secolo XIX*, 20/4/1993

[4](#) from "Scostumando", *Il Secolo XIX*, 29/8/1995

[5](#) from "Scostumando", *Il Secolo XIX*, 6/8/1996

[6](#) from "Scostumando", *Il Secolo XIX*, 23/3/1993

[7](#) The corny or sentimental nicknames the readers used to sign their messages are left in the original Italian.

[8](#) from "Scostumando", *Il Secolo XIX*, 15/7/1997

[9](#) Italian radio-journalists of the Fifties.

[10](#) Ibid.

[11](#) from "Scostumando", *Il Secolo XIX*, 28/10/1997. 'Liptus' lies somewhere in between 'Lipton' (Ice Tea) and 'ictus', medical term for stroke.

[12](#) from "Scostumando", *Il Secolo XIX*, 28/11/1995

[13](#) Ibid.

[14](#) from "Scostumando", *Il Secolo XIX*, 4/9/1995

In 1998 Fabrizio Veneziano wrote a thesis ("Justice and Benevolence During The British Enlightenment") under the direction of Flavio Baroncelli. His ears are still ringing with all the criticism and precious remarks received over the phone or in

Baroncelli's office during that period. He currently works at "Schiller International University", Paris, where he tries his best to trasmit at least a small percentage of all that he learnt from FB.