

**Cristina Cassina, *Soglie nel tempo.*
Storie di prefazioni ai classici
*del pensiero politico moderno***

Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino, 2015
[ISBN: 978-88-498-4503-7 Price: € 16]

ALESSIO PANICHI
Università di Pisa

Cristina Cassina's recent book takes into account the history of the transmission and reception of some classics of modern political thought from the sixteenth century onwards, by assuming a historiographical perspective that is uncommon and largely unexplored. Indeed, this history may be written by examining different but concomitant factors whose interplay is responsible for the fortune and misfortune of a book and, more generally, of an author. These factors are related, on the one hand, to the cultural, political, and social landscape within which a text is being published, translated, and read, and on the other hand to the strategies pursued by publishing houses, universities, and multiple political actors (governments, parties, institutions, etc.). Other factors directly concern the readers' mind, that is, their values, goals, and worries, which open a window into their thought patterns and the traditions to which they belong. Obviously, all these elements have to be considered by scholars attempting to reconstruct the reasons why, and the ways in which, certain knowledge has been transmitted and received. However, there is another element that can help scholars reach a better understanding of this practice: the allographic preface, whose main purpose is both to explain the textual contents and to influence the reading process by stressing some aspects rather than others. Analyzing this element and its role in shaping the textual circulation is what chiefly characterizes Cassina's book.

The starting points of this analysis are three remarks made by Cassina in the Foreword. The first remark is that the allographic prefaces did not always accompany the publication of political books, since they are an outcome of the transition to political modernity. «L'avvento del cittadino *elettore* va di pari passo con l'avvento del cittadino *lettore*» (p. 10), says the author, who also writes that the explanatory and didactic function performed by this type of preface «si è imposta parallelamente all'allargamento del diritto di cittadinanza politica, fino a diventare quello che oggi è: una presenza quasi dovuta» (p. 11). The second remark concerns a subtle difference between prefatory pages and introductory ones, due to the fact that the introduction - unlike the preface - gives scholars the chance to examine a book in depth, by sounding out its reasons, themes, and influences. Furthermore, the distinction between preface and introduction, far from being just a literary and conceptual matter, has social meaning, because it refers to the sex/gender distinction. According to Cassina,

«l'istanza prefativa non è (non è ancora) donna» (p. 12). Over the last few generations, in fact, female scholars have focused on writing introductions, giving relevant contributions to their respective fields of study, whereas they infrequently have written prefaces. In other words, «se penne femminili producono raffinati saggi introduttivi, assai raramente firmano pagine di apertura a edizioni in formato economico, cioè a larga diffusione» (p. 13). The third and last remark concerns the goal of the author. Cassina - besides asserting that she deals with an unthematized topic, «un campo dove c'è ancora molto da lavorare» (p. 14) – clearly states that the purpose of the book is not to sketch an overall history of allographic prefaces to classics of political thought, but to narrate some short stories by paying attention to new editions, translations, and reprints of these classics.

In order to achieve this purpose, Cassina bases her inquiry on the statements of the French scholar Gérard Genette in his well known books *Palimpsestes. La littérature au second degré* and *Seuils*¹. In particular, she borrows from Genette not only the distinction between autographic and allographic preface, but also the idea that the latter is more appropriate than the former for introducing and recommending texts. «Ciò che nelle pagine dell'autore medesimo», writes Cassina, «appariva un banale tentativo di informazione, ora, nelle pagine di un autore diverso prende una forma più strutturata e diventa "presentazione"» (p. 19). Similarly, «quello che da parte dell'autore stesso era un semplice abbozzo di valorizzazione, ora, sotto la penna del prefatore allografo diventa *sic et simpliciter* "raccomandazione"» (p. 19). By reflecting upon Genette's observations, Cassina, in the first part of her book, proposes two criteria for understanding when, how, and why an allographic preface was written or rewritten.

These criteria are figuratively represented by two specific optical tools, namely the magnifying lens and the telescope, which respectively signify the proximity to and distance from the prefaced text. Even though these criteria work in different ways and require different abilities, they both help to understand some peculiar features of the text that would not otherwise be noticed. Nonetheless, Cassina points out that they produce only virtual images, whose appearance do not faithfully mirror reality: «Che sia per mezzo di una *lente* o di un *cannocchiale*, la presentazione di un testo inevitabilmente tende a selezionare gli argomenti, ad accentuarne alcuni a discapito di altri» (pp. 31-32). Moreover, the author distinguishes three types of proximity and distance that, when blended together, give rise to two series of seven options. The first kind concerns the cultural distance - expressed above all by the linguistic difference – that exists between a writer and a book. The second kind has to do with every length of time, regardless of its duration, since «il fluire di *Cronos* non si può misurare solo in lustri, secoli o addirittura epoche. Vi può essere un abisso anche in tempi ravvicinati» (p. 28), as shown by the revolutionary periods. The third kind is about both gender

¹ See G. GENETTE, *Palimpsestes. La littérature au second degré*, Paris, Seuil, 1982; Id., *Seuils*, Paris, Seuil, 1987.

differences and the work activity performed by each writer, who may be an university professor, journalist or professional politician.

After describing these criteria and their different types, the author then proceeds to apply them to the study of some political classics, in order to show new aspects of their reception. In doing so Cassina, given her specific knowledge and the material at her disposal, focuses on texts of French and Italian thinkers, although she also touches upon German and English writers, such as Carl Schmitt, Hannah Arendt, and John Stuart Mill. Indeed, towards the conclusion of the book, while summing up its contents and making new observations, Cassina frankly admits that «Nella scelta dei classici su cui soffermarmi ho dovuto *fare i conti* con le mie conoscenze ma anche *tenere conto* dei materiali a disposizione. Ne è risultato un doppio setaccio, la cui azione combinata ha fatto sì che Italia e Francia fossero gli scenari più spesso chiamati in causa» (pp. 182-183). If the French scenario is dominated by both Étienne de La Boétie's *Discours de la servitude volontaire* and Alexis de Tocqueville's *De la démocratie en Amérique*, the Italian one is characterized by what we could call a "Machiavellian watermark".

Besides examining some prefaces to Machiavelli's works, particularly those written by Jacques Gohory and Jean Giono, Cassina leverages the huge reception of these works for widening and softening Genette's interpretative pattern². On the one hand, she refers to Bernardo di Giunta and his letter of dedication, which precedes the Giunta edition of *The Prince* (Florence, 1532), in order to suggest that the dedicatory epistles did perform, for a very long time, the same functions as those performed today by the allographic prefaces. On the other hand, Cassina calls into question Genette's assertions that, at least within the literary field, the nineteenth century is the age of opulence for these prefaces and their writers are often more prominent than the authors of the books. In Cassina's opinion, the copious editions of Machiavelli's writings demonstrate two important facts concerning the history of modern political thought. Firstly, the allographic prefaces reached a peak in the twentieth century, thanks to the attainment of universal suffrage, although some were also published during the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. Secondly, little-known or anonymous authors and translators were the first to write these prefaces and thus to recommend a text. As Cassina writes, «Perché la patente di nobilitazione arrivasse da grandi nomi della politica, della saggistica e delle università dovette passare molto tempo» (p. 25).

By relying on and rethinking Genette's reflections, Cassina looks at the political classics from a quite different angle – an angle that is worth highlighting and exploring, particularly by those scholars who focus on the reception and influence of these classics. Consequently, it is no exaggeration to say that her book may open up a fruitful historiographical path, which should be followed despite the fact that, as Cassina

² On this reception see, at least, S. BERTELLI, P. INNOCENTI, *Bibliografia machiavelliana*, Verona, Valdonega, 1979.

PANICHI

herself points out, not every allographic preface helps understand the reasons why a book, centuries after its first publication, is still being published and read. At any rate, if it is true that the prefatory pages are not equally important, it is also true that their historical development deserves more attention than it has so far received, since it constitutes «una sorta di *archeologia paratestuale*: una sovrapposizione di stati discorsivi che testimoniano il passare (o la permanenza) di culture, idee, interpretazioni, tendenze» (p. 55).