

Discard and Misunderstanding

A Reading of *Don Giovanni in Sicilia*

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Abstract: This article examines the intertextual framework that structures the opening chapters of Vitaliano Brancati's *Don Giovanni in Sicilia*, focusing in particular on the parodic rewriting of the Don Juan myth, the libertine tradition and decadent aesthetics. Starting from the paratextual function of the title, understood as a Genettean threshold, the analysis shows how the name "Giovanni" activates a series of expectations associated with the paradigm of the famous seducer, only to subject them immediately to a systematic process of ironic reversal. In light of Bakhtinian dialogism and subsequent theories of irony, three intertextual nodes prove especially significant: the distorted echo of Da Ponte and Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, the ironic resemanticization of fin-de-siècle atmospheres of d'Annunzian origin, and the references to libertine literature, particularly Jean Galli de Bibiena's *La Poupée*.

Keywords: Vitaliano Brancati, *Don Giovanni in Sicilia*, Gabriele d'Annunzio, Jean Galli de Bibiena, Libertine Literature

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Introduction

The title, as the most immediate of the paratextual thresholds, plays a decisive role in shaping the reader's interpretive horizon from the very outset. In Gérard Genette's terms, it functions as a privileged element of the paratext, a site where meaning begins to take form even before the narrative properly unfolds. This function is all the more significant in light of the question posed by the French critic himself, which opens up a crucial line of reflection: 'how would we read Joyce's *Ulysses* if it were not entitled *Ulysses*?'¹ Thus, when the reader opens *Don Giovanni in Sicilia* by Vitaliano Brancati and encounters a protagonist named Giovanni Percolla, they are almost irresistibly prompted to activate the cultural and literary constellation associated with the archetype of the legendary seducer. It is precisely within this hermeneutic framework that Rocco Familiari's provocative question is situated: 'Cosa sarebbe accaduto se Brancati avesse dato un titolo diverso al Don Giovanni in Sicilia?',² a query that foregrounds the narrative and interpretive consequences generated by the evocation of such a powerful mythical paradigm.

At first glance, one might be inclined to identify the primary referent of this model with Lorenzo Da Ponte's *Don Giovanni* (1787), as will be seen shortly, particularly given the structural and thematic resonances that bind Brancati's novel to this operatic tradition. By contrast, Molière's *Dom Juan* (1665) appears less immediately pertinent, since it lacks both the catalogue scene and the episode, considered too crude and gratuitous even for the sensibilities of the *Grand Siècle*, of the brawl between servants. Yet the genealogical attribution remains far from univocal. Should the origin instead be traced back to Tirso de Molina (1617)? Or does Brancati's protagonist draw upon a more diffuse and stratified network of antecedents within the libertine literature? It is precisely at this juncture that the problem of literary influence becomes theoretically charged. Rather than being reduced to derivation from a single, identifiable model, Giovanni Percolla may be seen as the product of a complex negotiation with a multilayered legacy. Following Harold Bloom's theory of poetic influence,³ Brancati's book can be understood not as a passive imitation but as an agonistic engagement with a dominant precursor, an instance of that creative struggle through which latecomers misread their forebears to clear imaginative space for themselves. Alternatively, following Valeria Giannetti's critical suggestion, the character may be interpreted less as the descendant of a specific Don Juan than as a figure functioning as a 'paradigma del desiderio': not the replication of a literary type, but the crystallization of desire as a symbolic and narrative force.

¹ G. Genette, *Paratexts. Thresholds of Interpretation*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 2.

² R. Familiari, 'L'educazione sentimentale di un libertino', in: supplement of *L'Illuminista* X, 28–29 (2010), p. 4.

³ H. Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence. A Theory of Poetry*, London-Oxford-New York, Oxford University Press, 1975.

⁴ V. Giannetti, *Vitaliano Brancati. Lingua, società e letteratura*, Turin, Aragno, 2018, p. 87.

From this perspective, *Don Giovanni in Sicilia* emerges as a text suspended between recognition and displacement, between the activating power of a well-established myth and its ironic, modern reconfiguration. The title itself, operating as a paratextual signal in Genette's sense, does not merely announce an affiliation with a tradition. Rather, it stages a field of tensions in which inheritance, deviation, and re-semanticization converge, inviting the reader to measure the distance, never purely derivative, between Brancati's Sicilian antihero and the long shadow cast by the great libertine.

(Don) Giovanni Percolla

This initial suggestion, however, is not exhausted in a simple homonymy, nor does it limit itself to an external reference; instead, it is rooted in a complex system of correspondences and allusions that runs deeply through the first four chapters of the book. From the opening pages, in fact, the protagonist is presented to the reader as a figure shrouded in an aura of enigmatic reserve, whose elusive nature manifests in a quiet, measured, and apparently irreproachable demeanor:

Le tre donne non erano mai riuscite a liberarsi da una sorta di soggezione nei riguardi di lui: il fatto ch'egli parlava poco, che non si lamentava mai di nulla e trovava tutto buono [...], e portava puntualmente due mila lire alla fine del mese, e somigliava tanto a papà [...] e a nonno [...], e infine, rincasando a tarda notte, camminava in punta di piedi per non svegliarle, metteva nelle tre donne un senso di tale rispetto.⁵

The observation conducted through the gaze of the three sisters, to whom the first significant description of Giovanni is entrusted, yields a mysterious portrait in which the character's everyday life appears entirely opaque. Guardians of a rigorous and seemingly inviolable domestic order, these women prove to be completely unable to penetrate the mystery that envelops their brother's existence. They also seem incapable of gathering even the slightest information about his habits, especially his evening ones. Indeed, they 'non avevano mai cenato insieme al fratello: perché egli rincasava nel cuore della notte',⁶ and thus remain unaware of his daily occupations. It is precisely this obstinate reserve that traces his figure in dark strokes, suggesting the idea of an equivocal temperament.

In this scenario, a clearer comparison with the Don Juan paradigm becomes possible. As Giovanni Macchia observes, the famous seducer presents himself as a profoundly nocturnal hero: 'di notte si svolgono le macchinazioni amorose, l'assassinio, i balli, il banchetto con l'apparizione e soprattutto i travestimenti, quando le persone non riescono a vedersi e riconoscersi'.⁷ Thus the enigmatic nocturnal wanderings of Percolla acquire an intertextual resonance that brings him closer to the habitus of the

⁵ V. Brancati, *Don Giovanni in Sicilia*, in: idem, *Romanzi e saggi*, M. Dondero (ed.), Milan, Mondadori, 2003, p. 388.

⁶ Ibidem.

⁷ G. Macchia, *Tra Don Giovanni e Don Rodrigo. Scenari secenteschi*, Milan, Adelphi, 2004, p. 156.

celebrated *tombreur de femmes*, allowing the hypothesis of a life marked by secret adventures and carnal intrigues to take shape. However, just when this tension toward the model appears to consolidate, it suddenly reveals itself as illusory. Soon the true tenor of Giovanni's life becomes clear: he spends his nights in idle conviviality with friends, engaged in endless conversations and boasting about conquests as improbable as they are unreal, yet he is incapable even of speaking to a woman. Any remaining semblance of resemblance to the archetype of the great seducer vanishes, leaving the reader with the image of a conscious and ironic subversion of their expectations.

From this shift, one may gauge the subtlety of the narrative device devised by Brancati, who exploits with great skill what Umberto Eco would define as the cooperative process between text and reader. The latter is encouraged to gradually construct a well-defined image of the protagonist, acting in Eco's terms as a 'model reader' guided by carefully placed clues and allusions in the opening pages, only to be abruptly compelled to reconsider their inferences in an ironic twist.⁸ Emblematic in this sense is the beginning of the long biographical digression on the protagonist, this time entrusted to the narrator's voice, which initially seems to confirm the reader's suspicions: 'La testa di Giovanni era piena della parola donna (e di quali altre parole, Dio mio!)'.⁹ Such an opening appears to authorize the idea that the narrative is about to portray a vicious and dissolute man, dominated by an irrepressible erotic impulse. Yet Brancati surprises and disorients, revealing instead his emotional awkwardness and almost childlike timidity. Indeed, between the protagonist and women 'ci fu sempre una certa distanza che egli riempiva dei suoi sguardi bassi e subitanei. La sua emozione era tanto maggiore quanto maggiore diventava quella distanza'.¹⁰ Nor is the account of his first sexual experience flattering: it is with 'un donnone' that he consummates an encounter depicted as 'rapido, insipido e confuso'.¹¹

Yet the intertextual game with the Don Juan model is not abandoned. Rather, it is recast in a comic and distorting key. Consider, for example, the detail of Giovanni's notebook. In Da Ponte's work,¹² Leporello's list constitutes the triumphant proof of

⁸ The notion of the model reader designates the interpretive strategy through which an author delimits the horizon of possible meanings of a text, thereby establishing the conditions of its interpretation. This process involves four figures – the empirical author and reader, and their respective model counterparts – within a chiasmic structure of anticipation and inference (See U. Eco, *Lector in fabula. La cooperazione interpretativa nei testi narrativi*, Milan, Bompiani, 1978, p. 62). For Eco, this presupposition is productive rather than merely hypothetical, since the text actively constructs its own reader. The degree of interpretive openness depends on the complexity of this framework: while dense structures multiply readings, more directive ones restrict semantic dispersion. Further developments appear in U. Eco, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, with R. Rorty, J. Culler and C. Brooke-Rose, S. Collini (ed.), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992.

⁹ V. Brancati, *Don Giovanni in Sicilia*, cit., p. 388.

¹⁰ *Ivi*, p. 389.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² See in particular the celebrated catalogue scene in lines 188–224 of the fifth scene of Act I (cf. L. Da Ponte, *Don Giovanni*, G. Gronda (ed.), Turin, Einaudi, 1995, pp. 15–17), which constitutes one of the most famous and widely studied moments of the opera on account of its list-like structure

his master's irrepressible amorous prowess and a clear sign of a calculating mind, yet in Brancati, it assumes a radically deformed function. Giovanni's notebook is filled with the names 'di cocchieri e mendicanti che si prestavano ad accompagnare i signorini [...] nelle soffitte in cui una ragazza mal dipinta si nascondeva, con finta timidezza, dietro la madre falsamente spaventata e pentita'.¹³ In this case, the list does not present itself as a celebration of daring exploits. It is instead a pitiful inventory, far removed from the liveliness of the famous catalogue of *belle che amò il padron mio* sung by Mozart's Leporello. On the contrary, as Domenica Perrone notes, Brancati 'sfrutta [...] con grande abilità le potenzialità comiche del catalogo, fino a spingerlo al massimo della deformazione, nel dotare Giovanni di un taccuino, dove, vedicaso, questi registra ed enumera, piuttosto che i nomi delle donne conquistate, i nomi dei numerosi ruffiani'.¹⁴ The reader thus realizes that the identification between Giovanni Percola and the canonical Don Juan is nothing more than a refined and openly parodic intertextual construction, shaped as a true *contradictio in adiecto* that deliberately betrays and overturns its conventional expectations. At first, one is led to recognize in Giovanni an epigone of the great seducer, only to discover, through a sudden revelation, his essentially clumsy nature.

Yet the references to the well-known libertine do not generate a system of expectations solely in relation to overt quotations of the works of Mozart and Da Ponte. The field of inquiry is far broader and encompasses many other texts that, for one reason or another, can be considered libertine, understood as expressions of moral and sexual unruliness of which the figure of Don Juan is but a symbol. Returning once more to Macchia's observations, it is hardly surprising that the baroque hero is often attributed 'un senso quasi caricaturale, da giornale illustrato, da operetta, da varietà, e quel personaggio può essere argomento di una vignetta, di un quadro di Boldini, di un romanzo di Brancati'.¹⁵ Indeed, it is precisely this aspect, which Macchia laments as

and its dramaturgical function. This passage is examined in depth in the study by Jean Rousset (*Le mythe de Don Juan*, Paris, Armand Colin, 1978, p. 36 ff.), which analyzes its rhetoric of accumulation and the tension between cataloguing and theatricality, as well as in the contributions by Giovanna Gronda ('Una scena, una pièce: ambiguità comica nel *Don Giovanni* dapontiano', in: G. Ferroni (ed.), *Ambiguità del comico*, Palermo, Sellerio, 1983, pp. 119–134; and 'Da Ponte e l'aria del catalogo', in: idem, *Le passioni della ragione*, Pisa, Pacini, 1984, pp. 157–197), which highlight the metrical and linguistic peculiarities of this section, its dialogic construction, and its importance within the overall economy of the act. To this may be added the surveys by John Platoff ('Catalogue Arias and the "Catalogue" Aria', in: S. Sadie (ed.), *Wolfgang Amadè Mozart. Essays on His Life and His Music*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1996, pp. 296–311) and by Massimo Mila (*Lettura del "Don Giovanni" di Mozart*, Turin, Einaudi, 2000, pp. 93–102). Also useful is the short but dense essay by R. Moseley, 'The Qualities of Quantities: Mozart, "Madamina, il catalogo è questo" (Leporello), *Don Giovanni*, Act I', in: *Cambridge Opera Journal* XXVIII, 2 (2016), pp. 137–140; and that by P. Gallarati, 'L'aria del catalogo' e quella dello 'champagne': modelli alternativi nel *Don Giovanni*', in: *Atti dell'Accademia delle Scienze di Torino* 3 (2024), pp. 261–274.

¹³ V. Brancati, *Don Giovanni in Sicilia*, cit., p. 393.

¹⁴ D. Perrone, 'Brancati e il comico', in: idem, *I sensi e le idee. Brancati, Vittorini, Joppolo*, Palermo, Sellerio, 1985, pp. 35–36.

¹⁵ G. Macchia, *Vita avventure e morte di Don Giovanni*, Milan, Adelphi, 1991, p. 93.

an impoverishment of its original complexity, that paradoxically fuels the narrative success of Brancati's character. What is at stake, in fact, is a process of puppet-like deformation¹⁶ of the character in Brancati's novel in relation to its source: a deformation that much contemporary criticism – most notably Luciano Anceschi's reductive judgment¹⁷ – either failed to grasp or, at times, openly trivialized.

Already in the brief biographical excursus devoted to the protagonist, the narrator does not fail to allude to the 'brutta abitudine',¹⁸ a transparent euphemism for masturbation, to which Giovanni indulged during adolescence and which proves to be a literal echo of the 'mauvaises habitudes' of André Gide.¹⁹ Subsequently, the outbreak of the Great War and the consequent departure for the front of thousands of men, many of them husbands, situate the text within a broad literary constellation structured around the theme of the bold lover who replaces the absent spouse. Indeed, Giovanni soon begins to seek out those women who, 'rimaste sole nei loro letti grandi, "sentivano freddo"'.²⁰ The fact that the protagonist and his friend Muscarà choose to look for them in church, near the confessional, further inscribes the novel within a well-established literary tradition in which the confessional becomes an ambiguous space, at once sacred and profane. The likely founder of this topos is Boccaccio. It suffices to recall several *Decameron* novelle, from I, 4 to IX, 2, in which the sacrament of confession lends itself to obscene revelations, calculated misunderstandings, and covert seductions. The same narrative strategy also resurfaces in the libertine literature of the eighteenth century, where its transgressive and anticlerical charge is further intensified. Emblematic in this regard is *Thérèse philosophe*, traditionally attributed to Jean-Baptiste Boyer.

Brancati seems to draw ironically on this heritage when he describes the two friends eavesdropping on women's confessions in the hope of catching words of 'inquietudine carnale'.²¹ The result, however, falls far short of their expectations: all they

¹⁶ This is, in fact, one of the central nuclei of Brancati's own reflection. In one of his writings that may properly be described as programmatic, he observes that totalitarian regimes reduce man to a 'moltitudine di marionette i cui fili sono in mano, non del fato, ma di un'entità più meschina: il dittatore' (V. Brancati, *Il comico nei regimi totalitari. L'uomo a molla*, in: idem, *Racconti, teatro, scritti giornalistici*, M. Dondero (ed.), Milan, Mondadori, 2003, p. 1763). This motif was later destined to reappear in several characters of Brancati's comedies, as Flavia Erbosi has noted in '«Vomitare» il fascismo. Il comico e la costruzione del personaggio nel teatro di Brancati', in: R. Morace (ed.), *«Strappare di dosso il fascismo»: l'educazione di regime nella «generazione degli anni difficili»*, Naples, La scuola di Pitagora, 2023, pp. 373–384.

¹⁷ L. Anceschi, 'Riflessioni su "Don Giovanni in Sicilia"', in: *Letteratura*, VI, 3 (1942); now in: *L'illuminista*, X, 28/29 (2010), pp. 365–372.

¹⁸ V. Brancati, *Don Giovanni in Sicilia*, cit., p. 309.

¹⁹ A. Gide, *Si le grain ne meurt*, Paris, Gallimard, 1952, p. 10. On the influence of Gide on Brancati's work, see the analysis made by Massimo Schilirò (*Narciso in Sicilia. Lo spazio autobiografico nell'opera di Vitaliano Brancati*, Naples, Liguori, 2001, pp. 70–74), which examines in detail the role of the French writer in shaping the model of autobiographical writing distinctive of the Sicilian author.

²⁰ V. Brancati, *Don Giovanni in Sicilia*, cit., p. 391.

²¹ Ibidem.

manage to glean are sad and distressing accounts, which nevertheless prove sufficient to move them to tears of compassion.

Giovanni's Room

The depiction of Giovanni's bedroom also contributes to bringing *Don Giovanni in Sicilia* into closer dialogue with the libertine tradition. In these pages Brancati deliberately reworks certain stylistic motifs drawn from d'Annunzio's texts,²² subjecting them to subtle and fully conscious variations. The bedroom²³ emerges as a genuine palimpsest of intertextual references, in which furnishings such as armchairs, chairs, and cushions acquire renewed significance when considered in light of their unexpected dialogue with one of the most representative works of Italian fin-de-siècle aestheticism: *Il piacere* by Gabriele d'Annunzio.²⁴

In Brancati's intellectual apprenticeship, the initial phase²⁵ is decisively shaped by a pervasive and almost totalizing attraction to d'Annunzio's model, which functions

²² Starting from Mario Praz's pivotal study *La carne, la morte e il diavolo nella letteratura romantica* (Milan-Rome, Società Editrice «La Cultura», 1930) and continuing with Jacques Goudet's *D'Annunzio romanziere* (Florence, Olschki, 1976), there has been a continuous flourishing of scholarship on the narrative aesthetic of *décadence*, especially with regard to *Il piacere*; see G. Macchia, 'Lirica e mondana Roma del Piacere', in: E. Tiboni (ed.), *Il Piacere. Atti del XII convegno. Pescara–Francavilla al Mare (4–5 maggio 1989)*, Pescara, Centro Nazionale di Studi Dannunziani, 1989, pp. 7–13; E. Borelli, *Giovanni Pascoli, Gabriele d'Annunzio, and the Ethics of Desire: Between Action and Contemplation*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 2017; M. Di Mauro-Jackson, 'D'Annunzio's *Il Piacere*: A Generational Gaze on New Values', in: *Forum Italicum* LI, 2 (2017), pp. 525–548; S. Evangelista, 'Introduction: Decadence and Regeneration in Fin-de-Siècle Culture', in: S. Evangelista, V. Giannantonio & E. Selmi (eds.), *The Poetics of Decadence in Fin-de-Siècle Italy: Degeneration and Regeneration in Literature and the Arts*, Bern, Peter Lang, 2018, pp. 1–21.

²³ A further, near-contemporary point of comparison is offered by Brancati's *Don Giovanni involontario*, first staged in 1943, whose very title inscribes it within the Don Juan tradition and whose dramaturgical construction establishes a close dialogue with Don Giovanni in Sicilia. Particularly relevant in this respect is the central role assigned to Francesco's bachelor apartment in Act III, scene 1 (see 'Don Giovanni involontario', in: idem, *Racconti, teatro, scritti giornalistici*, cit., pp. 967–984), where the domestic interior becomes a privileged space for the theatricalization of masculine desire.

²⁴ On the ambivalent status of *Il piacere* as both a central text of Italian *decadentismo* and a critique of the exhaustion of the decadent model, see Guido Baldi, *Le ambiguità della «decadenza»*. *D'Annunzio romanziere*, Naples, Liguori, 2008; Guylian Nemegeer, 'Decadence and Regeneration in d'Annunzio's *Il piacere* (1889)', in: *Romance Quarterly* 69, 4 (2022), pp. 214–227. On the construction of *decadentismo* as a critical category, see Mario Moroni, 'Sensuous Maladies: The Construction of Italian *Decadentismo*', in Luca Somigli and Mario Moroni (eds.), *Italian Modernism: Italian Culture between Decadentism and Avant-Garde*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2004, pp. 65–85.

²⁵ For an extensive and well-documented survey of d'Annunzio's influence on the "first phase" of Vitaliano Brancati's career, see R. Verdirame, 'Posizioni critiche di Brancati giovane', in: *Quaderni di filologia e letteratura siciliana* III (1976), pp. 75–93; L. Abrugiat, *Il primo tempo di Vitaliano Brancati*, Lanciano, Carabba, 1977, pp. 22, 64–65; R. Verdirame, 'Dal mito all'impegno: primi tentativi teatrali di Vitaliano Brancati', in: P.M. Sipala (ed.), *Vitaliano Brancati fra scena e schermo. Incontri di studio*, Catania, Assessorato regionale ai beni culturali e P.I., 1983, pp. 49–58; P.M. Sipala, 'Il viaggio di Brancati a D'Annunzio e ritorno', in: S. Zappullà Muscarà (ed.), *Vitaliano Brancati. Atti del convegno nazionale di studio (Misterbianco, 30 novembre–2 dicembre 1984)*, Catania, Maimone, 1986, pp. 141–148; R.

at once as a stylistic matrix and as an ethical and existential horizon. This imprint is already evident in his first novel, *L'amico del vincitore*, where the young protagonist, Pietro Dellini, develops within an atmosphere saturated by expectations of an exceptional literary destiny, conceived according to heroic and supra-individual parameters. As Perrone observes, this dynamic reflects 'la celebrazione "dell'uomo attivo sul pensatore", come antidoto alla fallimentare parabola dell'intellettuale primonovecentesco'.²⁶ The narrative thus transposes, within a provincial setting, the myth of singular greatness and elective superiority traditionally associated with the figure of the poet-hero. Yet beneath this aspiration to magnificence latent fractures emerge. The pursuit of an elevated destiny stiffens into theatrical posturing, and the novel implicitly reveals the cognitive inadequacy of a model unable to engage fully with the complexities of individual interiority.²⁷ As Luca Danti observes, the protagonist of Brancati's first novel 'non riesce a liberarsi dall'opera dannunziana, tant'è vero che, non appena si rimette a scrivere, chiama Paolo (Forlinghi) il protagonista di una nuova novella'.²⁸ A name that, in Dellini's ears, is now irreversibly compromised by the legacy of the *Vate*: 'Un personaggio... Paolo, per esempio... No, no. Paolo è troppo dannunziano'.²⁹ With *Singolare avventura di viaggio*, first published in 1934, Brancati's engagement with d'Annunzio undergoes a significant shift. While stylistic echoes persist, the narrative now introduces a first principle of critical distancing. Imitation coexists with an incipient ironic awareness, and aesthetic exaltation begins to appear as a borrowed idiom, no longer embraced uncritically but already observed from a reflective vantage point.

These tensions anticipate the decisive turning point reached with *Singolare avventura di Francesco Maria*, which may be regarded as the true workshop of disengagement. Its protagonist, Francesco Maria Lanteri, a young provincial intellectual who discovers the poetry of d'Annunzio as a total model of life, language, and desire, embodies the adolescent saturation of that poetic universe. He venerates d'Annunzio, molds his gestures and imagery upon that example, and filters experience through a highly stylized and ultimately ridiculous aesthetic lens. Yet the narrative architecture systematically converts this identification into a process of hyperbolic distortion.

Verdirame, 'Un esordio problematico: Vitaliano Brancati tra gli anni Venti e Trenta', in: P.M. Sipala (ed.), *Vitaliano Brancati nella cultura europea. Atti del convegno internazionale di studi (Siracusa-Pachino, 26-28 settembre 1986)*, Siracusa, Ediprint, 1987, pp. 43–51; M. Schilirò, 'L'infinito vaniloquio'. La satira dannunziana in 'Singolare avventura di Francesco Maria' di Brancati', in: *Syculorum Gymnasium*, XLVIII, 1–2 (1995), pp. 477–496; N. Bellassai, 'Un manoscritto inedito di Vitaliano Brancati. La formazione intellettuale di un giovane autore e i suoi modelli', in: *Studi (e testi) italiani*, 53 (2024), pp. 97–137.

²⁶ D. Perrone, *Vitaliano Brancati. Le avventure morali e i 'piaceri' della scrittura*, Milan, Bompiani, 1997, p. 18.

²⁷ For a broader account of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European "isms" as responses to a crisis of intellectual authority and subjectivity, see Luca Somigli, *Legitimizing the Artist: Manifesto Writing and European Modernism, 1885–1915*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2003.

²⁸ L. Danti, 'Brancati e d'Annunzio: i piaceri del Piacere', in: *Otto/Novecento* XL, 1 (2016), p. 162.

²⁹ V. Brancati, *L'amico del vincitore*, Milan, Ceschina, 1932, pp. 296–297.

Lanteri's perception of reality is absorbed into a regime of visionary sensuality that the narrator steadily pushes toward parody. Thus, while contemplating the tapestries in his bedroom, Francesco Maria projects his own eroticized imagination onto ornamental objects that seem to awaken to a subjective and distorted vitality: '[n]ei due arazzi della parete, le fronti delle donne, che pregavano con le mani congiunte, parve che, svuotandosi del pensiero di Dio, scintillassero di un pensiero per lui'.³⁰ This minute and obsessive attention to decorative furnishings, invested with a symbolic and libidinal surplus, already anticipates that privileged role of domestic objects which will later reemerge with greater narrative density in *Don Giovanni in Sicilia*. In both texts, material details are never inert. They function as optical and affective mediators, reflecting a broader aesthetic dialogue with the sensuous imagery of d'Annunzio's *Il piacere*, where interiors, fabrics, and ornamental surfaces act as extensions of erotic consciousness.

Singolare avventura di Francesco Maria and *Don Giovanni in Sicilia* are composed within the same narrow temporal span, between 1940 and 1941, a proximity that marks a crucial phase in which Brancati intensifies his critical scrutiny of d'Annunzio's aesthetic legacy. It is precisely through this shared fascination with objects and material details that the dynamics of transformation become fully legible. What in d'Annunzio remains an instrument of pure aesthetic exaltation is gradually refunctionalized in Brancati as a privileged vehicle of narrative demystification. As I argue in what follows, in this shift, rhetorical emphasis gives way to ethical lucidity, and the pose of the aesthete is progressively dismantled in favour of a renewed capacity to observe both the world and the self with sobriety, irony, and critical distance.

A repertoire of orientalizing objects and softly muted atmospheres is revived by the Sicilian author, who subjects it to a clear semantic reversal. Through a gesture that is at once ironic and disenchanting, he strips this aesthetic of any solemn or self-indulgent aura, returning it as the sign of a grotesque condition, melancholically provincial and irredeemably prosaic. By contrast, the numerous pages devoted to the sumptuous interiors of Palazzo Zuccari, Andrea Sperelli's residence, present domestic space as a veritable treasure chest of refinements, where aesthetic excess and sensory allure converge in the orchestration of an eroticized environment. This logic is already evident in one of the earliest descriptions of his residence:

Sul divano, alla parete, i versi argentei in gloria della donna e del vino, frammisti così armoniosamente agli indefinibili colori serici nel tappeto persiano del XVI secolo, scintillavano percossi dal tramonto, in un angolo schietto disegnato dalla finestra, e rendevano più diafana l'ombra vicina, propagavano un bagliore ai cuscini sottostanti. L'ombra, ovunque, era diafana e ricca, quasi direi animata dalla vaga palpitazione luminosa che hanno i santuarii oscuri ov'è un tesoro occulto.³¹

³⁰ V. Brancati, 'Singolare avventura di Francesco Maria', in: idem, *Racconti, teatro, scritti giornalistici*, cit., p. 248.

³¹ G. d'Annunzio, *Il piacere*, G. Ragone (ed.), Turin, Einaudi, 2014, pp. 18–19.

Comparably, d'Annunzio's narrator lingers over the description of Sperelli's boudoir at the very moment when space itself becomes the theatrical stage of desire, charged with an atmosphere of tense expectation. A similar symbolic intensity emerges in the passage in which Sperelli, reclining on the sofa as he awaits his fateful encounter with Elena Muti, comes to embody the very quintessence of d'Annunzian eroticism. Here, the interior is no longer a neutral backdrop but an active participant in the dramaturgy of seduction. Furnishings, fabrics, and spatial arrangements conspire to amplify erotic tension, transforming the room into an extension of the protagonist's sensuous consciousness and aesthetic self-stylization:

Si adagiò, sopra un largo divano coperto d'un tappeto di Bouckara amaranto su cui languivano i cuscini pallidi e su' cuscini le palme d'oro smorto.³²

On the walls of Sperelli's residence, silvery verses in praise of woman and wine combine with the silky hues of the sixteenth-century Persian carpet, while the twilight produces a vague luminous throbbing capable of rendering even shadow itself diaphanous and dense with suggestion. The entire environment emerges as the intimate sanctuary of the protagonist's sublimated sensuality.

Giovanni Percolla's room, too, is populated by sofas, carpets, and cushions, yet these cease to function as sites of erotic ecstasy or sensual liturgy. They are instead reduced to supports for prosaic abandon, devoid of any aura of preciousness or aesthetic nobility:

egli aveva una grande stanza tutta per sé, nella quale poteva dormire in qualsivoglia positura: o steso sul letto, con la testa fuori del cuscino e del materasso, spenzolata nel vuoto [...]; o sprofondato in una poltrona bassa, coi piedi sopra un tavolino; o in terra, sul tappeto, con le gambe sopra due cuscini dipinti di leoni; o infine in una sedia a dondolo [...]. Qui venivano gli amici, e anch'essi si buttavano, o, come diceva Muscarà, *s'abbiauvunu e sdavacavunu*, sui pagliericci e le ciambelle di cuoio, riempiendo presto la camera di un tale fumo di sigaretta che, dal balcone socchiuso, i passanti vedevano uscire una sorta di lenzuolo grigio palpitante nell'aria. [...] Le sorelle di Giovanni, tenute lontane dalla camera, credevano che i tre amici parlassero di affari... Invece mugolavano sul piacere che dà la donna.³³

The lion-painted cushions emerge as perhaps the most immediately legible residue of an orientalizing lexicon,³⁴ traditionally associated with the aforementioned aestheticism. Yet, in this later reconfiguration, the motif is stripped of its allusive density and

³² Ivi, p. 312.

³³ V. Brancati, *Don Giovanni in Sicilia*, cit., p. 398.

³⁴ This reference to an idealized and exotic East may be read as a comic parody of the colonial revival promoted by the Fascist regime during the years of the Ethiopian War. On this point, see Giovanna Tomasello's *L'Africa tra mito e realtà. Storia della letteratura coloniale italiana*, 2nd ed., Palermo, Sellerio, 2016, pp. 141–176.

reduced to a neutral furnishing detail, thereby exposing the radical divergence between the two interiors. An even more revealing displacement concerns the treatment of light and atmosphere. What in the earlier model appears as a diaphanous and pulsating shadow animated by the glimmer of precious surfaces is here translated into a markedly different register, where the same adjective, *palpitante*, is transferred to cigarette smoke, described as a grayish veil suspended in the air. The shift thus marks a decisive passage from sensuous animation to atmospheric opacity, from erotic vibration to perceptual dulling.

In *Il piacere*, all these elements define Andrea Sperelli's residence as a space of lust and pleasure, the alcove in which the love story with Elena Muti unfolds. In Brancati, by contrast, they acquire an entirely different meaning. The reference to the Orient is transformed into an idea of placid existence, as shown in the short story *La vecchia stampa*,³⁵ which accompanied *Don Giovanni in Sicilia* in its first edition. As a result, Brancati does not merely mimic d'Annunzio's repertoire. He re-semanticizes it. He preserves objects such as carpets, sofas, and exotic cushions, but empties them of symbolic charge, reducing them to signs of a humble and inelegant everyday life, stripped of mystery and of any absolute aesthetic illusion. It is also useful to recall Vanna Gazzola Stacchini's observation regarding the likely exoticism of the scene, which links the cushion decorated with lions to Alphonse Daudet's *Tartarin de Tarascon*. She observes that in these pillows 'c'è tutto il cattivo gusto con cui si erano immaginate scene lontane della propria esistenza, così come il Tartarino di Daudet fantasticava l'esotismo africano',³⁶ and concludes by noting that these lions, animals traditionally emblematic of muscular strength, ultimately end up supporting the feet of an idle layabout.

La poupée en Sicile

In the fourth chapter of *Don Giovanni in Sicilia*, a crucial narrative juncture at which the first signs of Giovanni's transformation within the domestic sphere begin to surface, a doll, the so-called 'pupa',³⁷ makes a brief but significant appearance. This episode, however, does not emerge in isolation. As early as 1938, in *Scandalo per nulla*, one of the *Lettere al direttore*, Brancati had already evoked the agitation stirred among certain distinguished men by 'una donna artificiale composta di una materia che al tatto somiglia, in modo impressionante, alla carne viva'.³⁸ This earlier text thus constitutes the initial nucleus from which the Sicilian writer would later elaborate the episode that appears in the already mentioned fourth chapter of *Don Giovanni in Sicilia*.

The recurrence of this uncanny figure across temporally distinct works reveals, within Brancati's production, a persistent imaginary structured around artificial fem-

³⁵ V. Brancati, 'La vecchia stampa', in: idem, *Racconti, teatro, scritti giornalistici*, cit., pp. 171–178.

³⁶ V. Gazzola Stacchini, *La narrativa di Vitaliano Brancati*, Florence, Olschki, 1970, pp. 75–76.

³⁷ V. Brancati, *Don Giovanni in Sicilia*, cit., p. 415.

³⁸ V. Brancati, 'Scandalo per nulla', in: idem, *Romanzi e saggi*, cit., pp. 1329–1330.

ininity and tactile illusion. Yet it is in the novel that this motif attains its fullest semantic density, acquiring a more stratified and problematic significance. At this stage, the doll no longer functions merely as a narrative curiosity but instead opens onto an implicit intertextual dialogue with one of the most unsettling texts of eighteenth-century French literature: *La Poupée* by Jean Galli de Bibiena.³⁹ Although the relationship between the two texts cannot be reconstructed in terms of direct derivation, it becomes remarkably evident through comparative analysis of the dolls' descriptions, which reveal clear affinities, especially in the articulation of tension between artificiality and desire.

Published in 1747, *La Poupée* presents, through the narrative frame of the abbé Philandre's account to his friend Oronte, the process leading to a profound transformation in the protagonist's conduct. Initially depicted as a vain and mannered libertine, absorbed in self-display and unsuccessful in his relations with women, Philandre enters a merchant's shop, where his attention is captured by a doll displayed in a niche, whose striking verisimilitude generates a response marked by curiosity, attraction, and erotic disturbance. After purchasing it and bringing it to his house, he perceives beneath his hands the sensation of living flesh. The doll subsequently reveals herself as a *sylphide* named Zamire. She explains that *sylphides* may attain immortality only by bringing about the moral reformation of a human being, and she therefore undertakes Philandre's systematic transformation. The abbé is subjected to a sequence of trials designed to dismantle his vanity, social affectation, and narcissism. He is required to confront the ridicule of his former gallantry, to endure repeated moral reproaches, to exercise restraint, and to replace simulation with sincerity. Through this progressive disciplinary process, Philandre is led toward a reconfiguration of desire grounded in moderation, self-knowledge, and ethical control. The *poupée* thus emerges not as an object of illusion, but as the instrument of an exemplary pedagogy.

In Galli de Bibiena's novel, the protagonist Philandre undergoes a sustained oscillation between impulse and inhibition when confronted with the doll: 'Je fus tenté d'avancer le petit doigt, mais je crus entendre que le monde qui était dans la boutique s'en allait'.⁴⁰ This moment of hesitation, marked by a restrained impulse toward contact, produces a brief suspension of agency and anticipates the sensory escalation that will be subsequently developed. The contemplation of the doll gradually leads him into a state of ecstatic rapture:

³⁹ On the figure of this playwright and novelist, see F. Pagani, 'Introduction', in: J. Galli de Bibiena, *Romans*, F. Pagani (ed.), Paris, Garnier, 2014, pp. 21–94. On the Bibiena family, Italian actors and comedians who migrated to France in various waves during the eighteenth century, see D. Lenzi & J. Bentini (eds.), *I Bibiena. Una famiglia europea*, Venice, Marsilio, 2000; and D. Galligani (ed.), *I Bibiena. Una famiglia in scena. Da Bologna all'Europa*, Florence, Alinea, 2002. See also F. Gevrey, 'II. Les ambiguïtés de la morale dans *La Poupée* (1747) de Bibiena', in: C. Deharbe & N. Dion (eds.), *Fiction et morale au siècle des Lumières*, Paris, Hermann, 2023, pp. 121–138.

⁴⁰ J. Galli de Bibiena, *La poupée*, in: idem, *Romans*, cit., p. 722.

Mais ici il ne s'agissait que de forme et de proportion; plus je regardais, plus je me sentais transporté hors de moi-même. [...] Ah! ce fut pour lors que je demeurai ravi en extase. [...] Les beautés que je voyais étaient si parfaites, si pleines d'âme, que ne sachant qu'imaginer, j'aimai mieux ne rien penser que de les croire un ouvrage de l'industrie humaine.⁴¹

In this initial moment of rapture, entirely governed by vision and by the abstract radiance of form, Philandre's astonishment arises from the uncanny vitality that seems to animate the doll's features. The spectacle alone suffices to unsettle him, yet his ecstasy remains suspended within the domain of pure appearance, as though the perfection he contemplates could still be ascribed to an artifice confined to the realm of sight. However, the experience that captivates him visually demands more radical confirmation, one that dissolves the final boundary separating illusion from embodiment. It is only when he dares to approach the figure, allowing sensation to shift from sight to touch, that the admiration which had drawn him outside himself becomes charged with a new and more disquieting intensity, as the artificial begins to approximate the living with an exactitude that destabilizes every remaining certainty:

Mais que devins-je en sentant l'attouchement d'une peau unie, fraîche et délicate? Je fus frappé d'une admiration singulière qui me donna une espèce de frayeur. Je me hasardai à glisser le doigt sur le bras, j'éprouvai la même sensation.⁴²

Desire swells into a lyrical crescendo that culminates in a state of sensory estrangement, in which the doll's almost animate perfection seems to eclipse Philandre's subjectivity. Brancati reformulates this erotic and obsessive tension in the figure of the pupa, describing it as 'fatta d'una materia che, al tatto, somigliava alla carne in modo impressionante',⁴³ and specifying that it 'dava alla mano esattamente le sensazioni della carne'.⁴⁴ The doll thus emerges as a true catalyst of collective desire, exerting a powerful fascination over the entire male community of Catania, which is irresistibly drawn by the promise of an unprecedented tactile experience. The reactions it provokes reproduce the same oscillation between wonder and disturbance that characterizes Galli de Bibiena's work.

The *pupa*, brought directly from Paris by one of Giovanni's friends, unleashes a genuine emotional upheaval among those present, most notably affecting the distinguished professor Martellini, who, despite his refinement and intellectual composure, is nonetheless deeply shaken by direct contact: 'Ricevette una sensazione così forte sulla punta delle dita che fece due passi indietro e si cavò il cappello, avendo trovato nella bambola l'Eterno Femminino'.⁴⁵ This response closely reiterates the scene in the already

⁴¹ *Ivi*, p. 724.

⁴² *Ivi*, p. 736.

⁴³ V. Brancati, *Don Giovanni in Sicilia*, cit., p. 414.

⁴⁴ *Ivi*, p. 415.

⁴⁵ *Ivi*, p. 416.

mentioned *Lettera al direttore*, where the 'vecchio professor M.' is similarly struck, to the point of recognizing 'nella bambola quell'Eterno Femminino al quale aveva dedicato, nel corso della sua lunga vita, centinaia di sonetti e milioni di inchini'.⁴⁶ Giovanni, by contrast, stands as the only figure of open resistance: 'Ricusò di uscire dalle coperte a mezzanotte per andare a curiosare con l'indice, come diceva lui'. Yet even this defiance proves illusory, for the doll's disturbing power infiltrates the realm of dreams: 'Me ne parlate tanto la sera, che non passo una notte senza vederla'.⁴⁷

The comparison brings to light a set of notable correspondences between the two texts, particularly in the recurring tactile motif represented by the "petit doigt" of Philandre, Giovanni's "curiosare con l'indice", and Martellini's "punta delle dita". This network of intertextual resonances suggests that Brancati's narrative may be positioned in a productive relation with the libertine tradition, albeit filtered through an evidently ironic and parodic reworking. In both narratives, moreover, the encounter with the doll appears to precede a moment of incipient awareness and may be read as the first step of a pedagogical trajectory. In Galli de Bibiena, this trajectory leads Philandre to abandon his former condition, while in Brancati the same encounter seems to anticipate Giovanni's subsequent emotional awakening in his love for the beautiful Ninetta dei Marconella. In this perspective, the *pupa* does not seem to provide any form of satisfaction but may be read as an illusory and deceptive configuration of desire, in a manner that recalls certain reflections in Leopardi's *Zibaldone*⁴⁸, where longing is inextricably bound to illusion.

Conclusions

Having reconstructed several of the clues pertaining to the dense network of intertextual references in the opening chapters of *Don Giovanni in Sicilia*, it becomes difficult not to discern what appears to be a recurring methodological principle: each reference seems to be systematically inverted and subjected to parody, thereby modifying its original function. In this sense, the intertextual references may be read as examples of Bakhtinian dialogism, that is, as one of the mechanisms through which another's discourse enters and shapes the authorial one, insofar as 'the author's speech takes it into account and refers to it. Another's discourse in this case is not reproduced with a new intention, but it acts upon, influences, and in one way or another determines the

⁴⁶ V. Brancati, *Scandalo per nulla*, cit., p. 1330.

⁴⁷ Ibidem.

⁴⁸ In this regard, in addition to the seminal pages by L. Sciascia – among the first to highlight the influence of Leopardi's theory of pleasure in Brancati's narrative and thematic construction – see 'Don Giovanni a Catania', in: idem, *Opere 1956–1971*, C. Ambroise (ed.), 2nd ed, Milan, Bompiani, 2000, pp. 1122–1124. See also the analysis by Domenica Perrone, *Vitaliano Brancati. Le avventure morali e i 'piaceri' della scrittura*, cit., pp. 87–94, especially with regard to Brancati's early 1940s production; by M. Dondero, 'Un naso e una gobba (Brancati e Leopardi)', in: idem, *Il gallo non ha cantato. Vitaliano Brancati tra fascismo e dopoguerra*, Rome, Carocci, 2021, pp. 11–37, which examines the influence of the Leopardian anthology edited by Brancati; and by Sabine Verhulst, 'I piaceri di Vitaliano Brancati', in: *Italianistica*, XLVI, 2 (2017), pp. 139–145, which investigates the elaboration of these themes from a comparative perspective, with a stronger focus on Leopardi's *Operette morali*.

author's discourse, while itself remaining outside it'.⁴⁹ Along similar lines, Marina Mizzau emphasizes that the ironic character of a text lies in the specific relationship that develops, in the very act of enunciation, between the expressed statement and the unexpressed but contextually evoked one:

l'ironia e il distanziamento ironico vanno cercati nella specificità del rapporto che si instaura, nell'atto dell'enunciazione, tra l'enunciato espresso e l'enunciato non formulato, evocato dal contesto o da altri indici. Per definire questo rapporto – in sintesi, un distanziamento così radicale che diventa ribaltamento – si deve in effetti ricorrere all'antifrasi, ma intesa in senso molto ampio, come divergenza tra il modello di realtà, o il sistema di valori, evocati dal detto, e ciò che traspare nell'atto di enunciazione. La contraddittorietà di valori, essendo interna allo stesso proferimento, assume carattere di paradossalità.⁵⁰

From this perspective, the dense intertextual fabric, namely the horizon of works that the novel allows the reader to glimpse,⁵¹ emerges as an essential component of Brancati's comic strategy. His prose relies on a continuous play of expectations and reversals. Drawing on the reader's literary competence, the author constructs a system of anticipations and inferences that are promptly overturned and redirected toward parodic ends, thereby destabilizing interpretive certainty and amplifying the narrative's irony. Consequently, references to d'Annunzio and to libertine literature, with Don Juan as its emblem, dissolve into their opposites. Giovanni Percolla, far from embodying the archetypal seducer, becomes the fulcrum of two mirrored mechanisms that intersect and collide, producing outcomes that are both comic and revelatory, marked by an ostensible fidelity to established models and by their persistent subversion.

⁴⁹ M. M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics*, 14th ed., Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2019, p. 195.

⁵⁰ M. Mizzau, *L'ironia. La contraddizione consentita*, Milan, Feltrinelli, 1984, p. 68.

⁵¹ A further contribution along this interpretative line may be drawn from other works by Mizzau, both from the earlier 'Lector in faceta', in: *Versus*, 33 (1982), pp. 29–35, which reconsiders some premises of Eco's theory of interpretative cooperation, and from the later *Ridendo e scherzando* (Bologna, Il Mulino, 2005) and 'Riso facile, riso difficile', in: G. Bateson (ed.), *L'umorismo nella comunicazione umana*, Milan, Raffaello Cortina, 2006, pp. 135–145, which develop a more articulated analysis of the forms and functions of the comic, with particular attention to its rhetorical dimension and to the construction of the communicative pact between author and reader.