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Articles

On cultural transmission. A case study: Condillac and Italy

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Abstract. Étienne Bonnot de Condillac (1715-80) lived in Parma for nine years (1758-67) at the court of Philip and Louise Elizabeth (1758-67), as tutor to their son Ferdinand. His long stay in Italy provides an interesting model for investigating on what specific assumptions the concept of “cultural migrations”, or intellectual transmission, between different philosophical cultures should be considered. In fact, the philosophical innovations that the French philosopher introduced and that met with favor in the rest of Europe were sometimes rejected or neglected in the Duchy of Parma and throughout Italy. The difficulties for the historian of ideas in formulating hypotheses about the relevance and modalities of cultural transmission emerge precisely in a case such as Condillac’s, whose actual presence in Parma and Italy seems to raise some doubts as to whether or not the migration of authors also entailed the migration of their ideas. This essay aims to reconsider the basic assumptions of the method that usually guides research in the particular field of cultural exchanges.

Keywords: modern philosophy, cultural transfer, history of ideas, enlightenment, Étienne Bonnot de Condillac.

A PREMISE ON METHOD

The period that Étienne Bonnot de Condillac (1715-80) spent in Parma at the court of Philip and Louise Elizabeth (1758-67), as tutor to their son Ferdinand¹, offers an interesting model for inquiring under what specific assumptions the concept of “cultural migrations”, or intellectual transmission, between different philosophical cultures should be considered. The difficulties for the historian of ideas in formulating hypotheses about the relevance and modes of cultural transmission are evident even in a case such as Condillac’s, whose actual presence in Parma and Italy seems to support the obvious belief that such transmission necessarily occurred through the philosopher’s direct action: his conversations with local scholars, contacts with other philosophers, intellectual exchanges and so on. However, one may legitimately question this sort of easy conclusion. For the philosophical novelties that the French philosopher introduced and which met with

¹ Condillac and Italy: Pergoli 1903; Benassi 1923; Bédarida 1924; Grillenzoni 1979 e 1985; Biondi 2005.

favor in the rest of Europe were sometimes dismissed or neglected in the Duchy of Parma and throughout Italy, even by scholars less conservative and orthodox in their philosophical positions who were more open to novelty. Moreover, the migration of authors does not entail the migration of their ideas. Given such questions, a preliminary analysis of some of the methodological assumptions underlying this type of inquiry is worthwhile.

Intellectual historiography is a particular and specific genre of historical research². In a broader sense, the latter tends to reconstruct a fact that occurred at a certain time and place on the basis of actually existing documents. While aspiring to reconstructions that are no less faithful and objective, historians of ideas seek knowledge about cultural transmission, and they are compelled to proceed even when documents may be inadequate or do not exist. When Immanuel Kant speaks about the powerful influence that David Hume's thought exerted on his own philosophy (Kant 1994⁵, p. 8), one is led to believe him not only on the basis of his confession, but also because the three *Critiques* actually seek to answer some crucial questions raised by the English philosopher: each of the three *treatises* offer a long and complex reworking of issues that Hume had synthesized in pages of very elegant and simple writing. Likewise, in his *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* (1748) Hume quotes the writer and critic Joseph Addison, commenting that he is likely to be read with satisfaction when Locke is instead completely forgotten³. Furthermore, in his essay *On the Standard of Taste* (1757), Hume takes up similar topics to those that Addison addressed in his papers on the *Pleasures of the Imagination* (1712), particularly those relating to aesthetics, a subject into which Locke never delved. Nevertheless, few would be willing to argue that Addison influenced Hume's philosophy more than Locke.

Reconstructing facts is different from establishing a relationship between them, because such a relationship may sometimes *not* be based on fact. I do not intend to dwell here on issues concerning historiographic practice; nevertheless, I think it is appropriate to question the basic assumptions of the method that should guide research in the particular field of cultural exchanges⁴. For the absolute value of individual documents or

events becomes relative depending on the relationships in which those facts are embedded or observed (Gatti 2001, pp. 157-168). For example, how should one consider the documented collective consciousness-raising that brought about the proliferation of youth movements in the 1960s, and the intense production of literary, figurative, musical and cinematic works that accompanied it? As an expression of the spirit of the age, the Hegelian scholar will say by relating facts; as a deterministic result of a set of socio-historical premises, the positivist will assert on the basis of no less compelling documented relationships among facts; as a profitable business, the follower of the Frankfurt School will argue after a keen analysis of the historical and social developments he witnesses. How much freedom are we willing to accord the historian of ideas in selecting and reading facts before denying our assent to his hypotheses? How can we determine, when objective data are lacking, what the most objective data possible are on which to draw an intellectual historiography? Facts are not unequivocal proofs of a definite state of things: the fact that there are certain books in our libraries in no way supports the hypothesis that their authors influenced our thoughts, nor even that we ever read or studied them. Like any other non-epistemological and object-oriented field of inquiry, the historiography of cultural migration is usually based on assertions that are never self-evident but rather conditional.

Moreover, in intellectual historiography, the production of documents is more often aimed at demonstrating interpretive assumptions. In the Preface to his *Iter italicum* Paul Oskar Kristeller writes: «... the study of any historical area cannot be placed on a solid foundation until the relevant primary sources are more or less fully inventoried, and thus made available for further study» (Kristeller 1965, p. XXI). However, the impressive digest he offers in his work is neither neutral nor merely anthological but instead aims at emphasizing the importance of the Aristotelian tradition, overshadowed by the Platonic, in the humanistic and Renaissance intellectual system. Thus, Kristeller's exposition of documents is objective and impartial, but the purpose is not. On the other hand, an anodyne list of sources would fall into the flaw stigmatized by Johan Huizinga, according to whom the need asserted with the renewal of nineteenth-century historiographical inquiry to always and in every case go back to direct sources «however salutary it was [...], could in time lead to an unnecessary and copious collection of historical sources, without any elaboration of the same sources and a sufficient distinction being

² On general issues concerning intellectual historiography, see Collini 1985; Kelley 1990; Whatmore 2016; Jay 2022; Drake 2022.

³ «The fame of Cicero flourishes at present, but that of Aristotle is utterly decayed. La Bruyere passes the seas, and still maintains his reputation: But the glory of Malebranche is confined to his own nation, and to his own age. And Addison, perhaps, will be read with pleasure, when Locke shall be entirely forgotten» (Hume 2000, p. 6, § 4).

⁴ On cultural exchanges, see Casanova 1999; Thomson *et al.* 2010; Broomans, Van Voorst 2012; Jørgesen, Lüsebrink 2021; Broomans 2021,

Jørgesen 2021.

made between the important things and those almost devoid of value and meaning. Moreover, rigid and conscientious criticism could also easily turn into hypercriticism, which precisely by its excessive concern to obtain fully assured data nullified the most basic norms of historical certainty»⁵.

The study of Condillac's influence in Italy may be exemplary in this sense: it has an implicit premise in the improper idea, already brought forward, that every great scholar who resides more or less permanently in a foreign cultural environment ends up modifying it with his mere presence by directly influencing the mental habits of his foreign colleagues to a greater or lesser extent. However, the hypothesis that the presence of a foreign scholar in a certain place constitutes cultural influence should be accepted only under certain conditions, that is, only in the case where facts of a certain kind occur. It is therefore worth trying to point out such conditions and whether there are sufficient and necessary elements to speak on actual grounds – and not just because it is suggestive to think so – about Condillac's possible influence on Italian culture.

The following elements are generally considered essential for truthful hypotheses about an alleged cultural transmission: 1) popularization of an author's work in foreign cultural circles, which may occur not only through book circulation, but also through reviews, literary notes, and partial translations or summaries; 2) documented acceptance (more or less enthusiastic) by foreign scholars of the main contents of that work; 3) appreciable changes, or strenuous resilience, in coeval and later thought, in terms of theoretical assumptions, as a result of the circulation and knowledge of those contents. The three points are not related to each other; nor does the third necessarily follow from the first two. There are works that circulate in other nations or cultures but do not attract the attention of scholars, and thus remain dead letters in cultural environments other than their original one. Other works, once read, do not exert any fascination on readers or foster any broadening of speculative horizons. The first two elements are therefore necessary conditions, but in themselves they are insufficient to guarantee the transmission of ideas. It is the third element that is essential and worth focusing on for our analysis.

⁵ Huizinga 1946, p. 18: «... per quanto salutare fosse [...], poté col tempo condurre ad un'inutile e copiosa raccolta di fonti storiche, senza che si procedesse ad una elaborazione delle stesse fonti e ad una sufficiente distinzione fra le cose importanti e quelle quasi prive di valore e significato. Inoltre, la critica rigida e coscienziosa poté anche trasformarsi facilmente in una ipercritica che proprio con la sua eccessività di preoccupazione per ottenere dati pienamente assicurati annullava le norme più elementari della certezza storica». (Where not otherwise indicated, the English translation is by the author.)

2. CONDILLAC AND ITALY

By the time he settled in Parma, Condillac was already a highly regarded philosopher of the French Enlightenment and one of the most influential encyclopedists of his time. He had already published his most celebrated works and secured himself a prominent place in 18th-century philosophical literature⁶. In his *Essai sur l'origine des connaissances humaines* (1746), Condillac had addressed Locke-derived topics. These concerns were also taken up in the *Traité des systèmes* (1749), which presents a severe critique of non-empirical forms of gnoseology: from Cartesian hymnatism, to Malebranche's occasionalism, to Leibniz's monadology. Moreover, by 1754 he had already published his most successful work, *Traité des sensations*, in which he moved away from Locke's psychologism towards radical sensationism.

Locke had made all knowledge dependent on the action of two faculties: sensation (i.e., contents provided by the senses) and reflection (mental processing of sensory contents). Proposing a more radical reductionism, Condillac places sensation at the origin of the mental faculties, considering them modifications of sensory experiences. Underlying Condillac's doctrine is the assumption that all sensations are necessarily either pleasant or unpleasant, and that man is by nature inclined to enjoy the former and avoid the latter. It is precisely this natural inclination that suffices to explain the origins of the operations of the intellect and will; for judgment, reflection, desires, and passions are, in his view, but different modes of sensation itself⁷. Overcoming the classical distinction between sensation and cognition, Condillac's theory made him no longer an epigone but a leading figure on the Enlightenment philosophical scene. The concept of interest, or pleasure, gave rise to broader reflections (social, political, ethical, aesthetic) whose echoes reached Italy as well, equaling the attention gained by his metaphysics. Condillac's works do not appear to have been translated before his stay in

⁶ On Condillac's philosophy: Baguenault de Puchesse 1910; Lenoir 1924; Dal Pra 1942; Salvucci 1961; Knight 1968; Nuzzo 1973; Viano 1976 (see also pp. 73-76: *Nota bibliografica*); Derrida 1992; Charrak 2003; Fanari 2009; Marazzi 2010. For a more extensive review of the critical bibliography related to Condillac's thought, see Kreimendahl 1984.

⁷ Bringing the famous example of the statue that through a series of external impressions awakens to life and develops increasingly evolved and complex forms of knowledge, Condillac writes in the *Essai*: «Le principe que détermine le développement de ses facultés, est simple: les sensations mêmes les renferment: car toutes étant nécessairement agréables ou désagréables, la Statue est intéressée à jouir des unes & à se dérober aux autres. Or, on se convaincra que cet intérêt suffit pour donner lieu aux opérations de l'entendement & de la volonté. Le jugement, la réflexion, les desirs, les passions &c. ne sont que la Sensation même qui se transforme différemment» (Condillac 1793, p. 4 f.).

Parma. The *Saggio dell'abate di Condillac accademico di Berlino sopra l'origine delle umane cognizioni* was published in 1784 by the abbot Tommaso Vincenzo Falletti (In Roma, nella Stamp. di G. Zempel). The *Trattato dei sistemi* and the *Trattato delle sensazioni* appeared respectively in the third and fourth volumes of Condillac's *Opere*, both printed in Venice in 1793⁸.

There is an extensive bibliography concerning the cultural and social structure of the Duchy of Parma at the time Condillac resided there (Mora 2005; Fragnito 2009; Tocci 2009). Among the accounts of that time, it is worth mentioning Carlo Denina's *Rivoluzioni d'Italia* (1769-70), which observes that «Parma and Piacenza, which in former times, even when ruled by the Farnese, were never numbered among the first cities of Italy, rose under Bourbon rule to such fame by the cultivation of the sciences, by the concurrence of the *forastieri*, and by the amount of money poured in from abroad, that Parma singularly may have its place among the most prosperous and courteous cities, notwithstanding the smallness of that dominion»⁹.

Along with Condillac, two other eminent foreign scholars resided in Parma at the same time: Auguste de Keralio (1715-1805), who was also entrusted with Ferdinand's education; and Alexandre Deleyre (1726-96), the duke's librarian, who had trained with the Jesuits and later became a collaborator with Enlightenment philosophers. The cosmopolitan cultural fervor and the process of secularization that was taking place in Parma made the small duchy a happy Enlightenment citadel¹⁰.

⁸ *Opere* del sig. ab. di Condillac, trad. dal francese dall'ab. Marco Fassadoni, Presso A. Santini and F. Milli, In Venezia 1793-97, voll. I-XXII

⁹ Denina 1817, p. 281: «Parma e Piacenza, che ne' passati tempi, neppure quando furono governate da' Farnesi, non si contarono mai tra le prime città d'Italia, si sollevarono sotto il governo Borbonico a tanta rinomanza per la coltura delle scienze, per lo concorso de' forastieri, e per la quantità del denaro che vi si versa da paesi stranieri, che Parma singolarmente può aver luogo fra le città più floride e polite, nonostante la picciolezza di quel dominio».

¹⁰ It has been noted that the unique position of the Duchy of Parma and Piacenza makes a specimen for the events of the Italian Enlightenment with all its contradictions, including the issue of cultural migrations: «If we move on from the ancient republics to the duchies of the Po and Apennines, to Parma and Piacenza, to Modena and Reggio, we find there too, albeit in different forms and with different intensity, the relationship and contrast between the circulation and diffusion of Enlightenment ideas, which was very wide, and their effective capacity to penetrate the depths of things and men» (Venturi 1965a, p. XX: «Se dalle antiche repubbliche passiamo ai ducati del Po e dell'Appennino, a Parma e a Piacenza, a Modena e a Reggio, ritroviamo anche là, sia pure in forme differenti e con diversa intensità, il rapporto e il contrasto tra la circolazione, la diffusione delle idee illuministiche, che là fu larghissima, e la loro effettiva capacità di penetrare nell'intimo delle cose e degli uomini»). On Keralio, see Bédarida 1930; while on Deleyre: Venturi 1965b: pp. 803-811 for his presence in Parma. Finally, on young Ferdinand's education see Badinter 2008: pp. 35-86 (II. «L'éducation d'un prince des Lumières [1758-1769]»).

Condillac was brought to Parma by Louise Élisabeth, who was eager for her son to have a tutor with new and open-minded ideas; she was thus able to replace the Jesuit Thomas de Fuméron, who had previously taken the place of Carlo Frugoni (Equini 1920, p. 18, n. 1). In Luisa Elisabetta's opinion, Condillac summed up all the characteristics of the perfect educator: he was an exponent of the most advanced European thought, a «proponent [...] of new and daring principles», without, however, being «neither a materialist nor an atheist»¹¹. Drawing on his experience as an educator, Condillac wrote the *Cours d'étude pour l'instruction du Prince de Parme*, a manual for the education of Prince Ferdinand. It was published in 1782 «Aux Deux-Ponts» (actually, at Giambattista Bodoni's printing house in Parma) in thirteen volumes, at the end of a troubled publishing affair (Dal Pra 1973; Guerci 1966, 1978a, 1978b; Kagdis 1984). Condillac left Paris on March 20, 1758, and arrived in Parma the following April 12, after stopping in Milan. He was received with full honors and was paid an annual sum of 12,000 francs for his position as educator: «a very lavish allowance, which made him an object of envy for poor old Frugoni, who complained about his quite different lot as a servant of the same court!»¹².

The short biography set in Parma by Henri Bédarida – which draws on the recollections of Gustave Baguenault de Puchesse (1843-1922), the philosopher's great-grandson – reveals that Condillac's character was «simple, rude même, désintéressé, fidèle aux amities», but also prone to «sensations épicuriennes»; so much so that upon returning to France he announced to his compatriots: «J'aime mieux quelques bouteilles de vin de plus dans ma cave et moins de magnificence dans mes meubles et mon logement» (Bédarida 1924, p. 232). The historian Umberto Benassi writes: «It is true that even if he was not as fond of solitude as some people liked to picture him, his strict studies did not allow him to live much in society; and this was also opposed by his reserved nature and his love of a simple and modest life, in absolute contrast to contemporary tastes»¹³. Unwilling to exercise the ministry to which he was devoted, Condillac nevertheless knew how to honor the cassock habit

¹¹ Benassi 1923, p. 4 (= p. 4): «un propugnatore [...] di nuovi e arditi principi [...] né materialista né ateo».

¹² Ivi, p. 5 (= p. 5): «... assegno lautissimo, che lo faceva oggetto d'invidia al povero e buon vecchio Frugoni, lagnantesi della sua tanto diversa sorte di servitore della medesima Corte!».

¹³ Ivi, p. 3 f. (= p. 3 ff.): «È vero che, se anche non fu così amante della solitudine come piacque di figurarselo ad alcuni, i suoi studi severi non gli permisero di viver molto nella società; e a ciò opponevasi pure il suo carattere riservato e il suo amore d'una vita semplice e modesta, in assoluto contrasto coi gusti contemporanei».

«with austerity of life, purity of morals, and the virtue of study and meditation»¹⁴.

His austere reserve, however, concealed a background of unyielding determination when it came to achieving his goals. Indeed, he assiduously insisted that a niece of his, Madame de Marsanne, be received into the Royal House of Saint-Cyr, the foundation of Louis XIV and Madame de Maintenon for the rearing of young nobles whose parents had grown old or died in the royal service. He obtained this after long negotiations and repeated entreaties, partly thanks to Du Tillot's good offices. He was equally obstinate in his diplomatic maneuvers for Mureaux Abbey, which he wanted assigned to him upon his return to France. Negotiations with Louis XV lasted about three years. Many difficulties were caused by the hostile plots of the Bishop of Orleans, who harshly opposed Condillac's philosophy (Benassi 1923, pp. 6-9 [= pp. 6-9]). The abbey was eventually awarded to him, but only as a result of a very near escape from death: in November 1764 Condillac had fallen seriously ill in Parma with *petite varole*, a disease that would not spare Don Philippe the following July. Rumors of Condillac's illness spread very soon, so much so that Voltaire, in two letters in December of that year, reported that news of the philosopher's death had reached Paris: «Vous savez, sans doute, que vous avez perdu l'abbé de Condillac, mort de le petit-vérole naturelle, et des médecins de l'Italie [...]. Nous perdons là un bon philosophe, un bon ennemi de la superstition...» (Voltaire 1821a, p. 528 s., nr. 367).

A little later Voltaire would rejoice with the scholar Charles Bordes (1711-81) about the false alarm, writing a letter from Ferney on January 4, 1765: «Vous savez à présent, mon cher monsieur, que l'abbé de Condillac est ressuscité; et ce qui fait qu'il est ressuscité, c'est qu'il n'était pas mort. [...]. Dieu merci, voilà un philosophe que la nature nous a conservé. Il est bon d'avoir un loquiste de plus dans le monde, lorsqu'il y a tant d'asinistes, de jansénistes, etc. etc.» (Voltaire 1821b, p. 1). From July to September Condillac spent his convalescence in Bagni di Lucca. Soon afterwards, he was the guest in Genoa of «a Lomellini of the ancient and noble family that gave several doges to the Republic»¹⁵.

¹⁴ «... con l'austerità della vita, la purezza dei costumi, la virtù dello studio e della meditazione» (*ibidem*).

¹⁵ Benassi 1923, p. 11 (= p. 11): «... un Lomellini dell'antica e nobile famiglia che più dogi diede alla Repubblica». The Lomellini in question is Antonio, doge of Genoa from 1760 to 1762 and Condillac's host. Passionate about literature, Agostino occupied among the poets of Liguria «one of the first places, with great esteem of his contemporaries [...]. His sonnets [...], not many to tell the truth, were sustained and did not bleat, like his contemporaries, sappy verses to nymphs and daphni. He sang the works of Creation, and chiefly the physical attraction

In October Philip died and Condillac's term as preceptor ended. He did not return home with Keralio, but spent the winter in Parma. He then went to Rome on March 22 the following year and to Naples in mid-June; in July he moved to Florence, then Lucca, and finally returned to Parma again on September 18.

Condillac departed for France in March 1767. At Du Tillot's insistence, Ferdinand awarded him an annual pension through a decree in which he lavished words of gratitude for the philosopher. In the Duke's heart, we read, will always be «engraved the memory of Abbot Don Stephen Condillac – to whose exalted merit and indefatigable solicitude are due all his progress in the various sciences»¹⁶. However, it is likely that such words did not flow spontaneously from the heart of the Catholic and reactionary Prince Ferdinand, whose relationship with the French freethinker was never too warm. On Condillac's systems and educational attitude, whose harshness and rigidity have long been the subject of hearsay, there are conflicting versions and accounts. Pezzana's far from benevolent portrait of Condillac seems to corroborate the rumors: «... Condillac [...] in so much dress of austerity showed himself to his pupil that he could never win his affections [...]. Several very trustworthy personages who at that season, or since, conversed with the young Prince, have attested to me that they heard him say not infrequently that so harsh were Condillac's methods towards him, that whenever the tutor came before him, the Prince was seized with trembling and concealed anything that might irritate him. Hence he became timid and deceitful with him»¹⁷. Taking his cue from other testimonies and documents, Benassi defends Condillac, advancing the hypothesis

of the planets and the solar system, as well as philosophical and religious subjects» (De Micheli 2011: p. 161: «... uno dei primi posti, con grande stima dei contemporanei [...]. I suoi sonetti [...], non molti per la verità, erano sostenuti e non belavano, come i suoi contemporanei, versi sdolcinati a ninfe e dafni. Egli cantò le opere della Creazione, e principalmente l'attrazione fisica dei pianeti e il sistema solare, oltre che soggetti filosofici e religiosi»). Lomellini in 1746 was also entrusted by the Republic with «the honorable task of going all the way to Nice to receive the Infante of Spain Don Filippo, later Duke of Parma, to transact important business with him» (ivi, p. 163: «... l'onorevole incarico di andare incontro fino a Nizza a ricevere l'Infante di Spagna Don Filippo, poi Duca di Parma, per trattare con lui importanti affari»).

¹⁶ Benassi 1923, p. 11 (= p. 12): «scolpita nel cuore la memoria dell'abate don Stefano Condillac – al merito esimio e all'inflessa sollecitudine del quale son dovuti tutti i suoi progressi nelle diverse scienze».

¹⁷ [Affò e] Pezzana 1883, p. 558 f.: «... il Condillac [...] in tanto abito di austerità mostravasi al suo alunno che mai poté conquistarsene le affezioni [...]. Più personaggi assai fededegni che in quella stagione, o poscia, conversavano col giovane Principe, mi hanno attestato di averlo udito dire non raramente che duri cotanto procedevano i metodi di Condillac verso lui, che qualunque volta il precettore venivagli dinanzi, era il Principe compreso da tremiti e nascondeva tutto ciò che potesse irritarlo. Ond'è ch'ei fecesi timido e simulato con lui».

that his intransigence was a mere consequence of «the discovery of the prince's petty outbursts of disguised religiosity»¹⁸, and that Condillac's reputation as a stern preceptor was a false legend fueled by an adverse court. However, in *Storia della mia vita* (1770), Duke Ferdinand only briefly mentions Condillac, «showing that he holds dear, far more than the great philosopher from whom he learned so much, the accomplices of his early *bacchettonerie*» (emphasis mine).

Now, what were the effects of Condillac's stay in Parma and Italy in terms of intellectual influence? The philosopher's name and doctrine actually recur in almost every major exponent of the Italian Enlightenment. His work was well known to Pietro Verri – who in 1778 made an open profession of sensationalist faith in his *Discorso sull'indole del piacere e del dolore* – and Cesare Beccaria, among others. In a letter dated January 26, 1766, Beccaria admitted to the economist and *philosophe* André Morellet (1727-1819), translator of *Dei delitti e delle pene* in France, that he had learned many lessons from Condillac's writings: «J'ai puisé aussi beaucoup d'instruction dans les ouvrages de l'abbé de Condillac. Ce sont, à mon avis, des chefs-d'oeuvres de précision, de clarté et de bonne métaphysique», stating further: «J'ai eu en dernier lieu l'honneur de le connaître à Milan, et de me lier d'amitié avec lui» (Beccaria 1984a, pp. 219-228, nr. 68).

But it is especially in Beccaria's *Ricerche intorno alla natura dello stile* (1770) that one hears the echoes of the Frenchman's sensationalist doctrines. These provide the Italian author with the idea that stylistic choices are related to interest, that is, to the need to arouse pleasure or pain. «The celebrated abbot of Condillac», we read in the treatise, «and others too famous and superior to all my praise, whom it is not necessary to name here [*scil.* Diderot, Voltaire, Helvétius, Montesquieu], have been able to bring the light of analysis into this part of the fine letters which has become barren and fruitless by gloomy pedantism and servile imitation. They have begun to search in our faculties, in our manner of understanding and feeling, for the origin and laws of good taste, laws as invariable as human nature can be»¹⁹.

¹⁸ Benassi 1923, p. 12 [= p. 12]: «... alla scoperta di quei meschinissimi sfoghi della religiosità dissimulata del principino», «mostrando d'aver cari, assai più del grande filosofo da cui ha tanto appreso, i complici delle sue prime *bacchettonerie*».

¹⁹ Beccaria 1984b, p. 74: «Il celebre ab. di Condillac ed altri troppo famosi e superiori ad ogni mia lode, che non occorre qui nominare, hanno saputo portare la luce dell'analisi in questa parte delle lettere resa sterile ed infeconda dal fosco pedantismo e dalla servile imitazione. Essi hanno incominciato a ricercar nelle facoltà nostre, nella nostra maniera d'intendere e di sentire, l'origine e le leggi del buon gusto, leggi così invariabili come lo possa essere l'umana natura».

Traces of interest in Condillac's thought can also be detected in Paolo Frisi (1728-84), a mathematician and historian of science, who contributed to the Enlightenment journal «Il Caffè». Frisi was in correspondence with Keralio (as well as Paciaudi), from whom he asked about Condillac, as well as Voltaire and other philosophers of the age. Keralio sent him news, sometimes books, and their epistolary is now a valuable source of information about not only the secularization that was taking place in the Duchy but also the resulting opposition with Rome²⁰.

One of Genovesi's best-known pupils, the philosopher Giuseppe Maria Galanti (1743-1806), planned to write a *Storia filosofica e politica delle nazioni antiche e moderne*. This was an ambitious program to carry out, and he sought guidance from the French abbot and compiler Claude-François Millot (1726-1825), who «had been in Parma at the time when Condillac was also there and had participated with him in the whole little drama of Du Tillot's attempt»²¹. However, the operation soon proved to be exceedingly challenging. Galanti modified the original plan and decided to translate Millot's own *Elements d'histoire generale ancien et moderne*, which published in France in 1772-83. However, Galanti learned that a translation of the work had already begun in Venice as well, so he decided to modify Millot's original text, expanding it and adding «long pages from Condillac»; so much so that he asserted at the end that of two works «he had made one»; he also commented, «to execute this plan we took an inconceivable effort»²². Melchiorre Delfico (1744-1835) was himself a student of Genovesi, but he judged the master's gnoseology as not too firmly grounded: «Fortune [...] delivered into my hands the immortal works of Locke and Condillac, and it seemed that my spirit took on a new modification and a particular taste for moral sentiments»²³. Delfico's effort was to find a scientific and

²⁰ For a bio-bibliography of Frisi, along with a list of Italian libraries that hold his papers, which have been dispersed and stored in different places, see Boffito 1933; Baldini 1998; Venturi 1966.

²¹ Venturi 1962, p. 957 f.: «... era stato a Parma all'epoca in cui vi era anche Condillac ed aveva partecipato insieme a lui a tutto il piccolo dramma del tentativo di Du Tillot».

²² Ivi, p. 959: «... per eseguire questo piano abbiamo durato una fatica niente concepibile». An important part of vol. III of Galanti's *Reflections above the Arts, Literature and Sciences of the Greeks* resounds with echoes from Condillac; again, Galanti refers to the French philosopher in vol. IV where Condillac's *Conghietture sopra gli antichi popoli d'Italia* are found. Galanti himself admits that Condillac had continued to provide him with «the thread for everything concerning the history of ideas» (ivi, p. 961: «il filo conduttore per tutto quel che riguardava la storia delle idee»).

²³ «La fortuna [...] avendomi fatto pervenire nelle mani le immortali opere di Locke e Condillac, pareva che il mio spirito prendesse una nuova modificazione ed un gusto particolare pei morali sentimenti»

physiological basis for Condillac's sensationist principles, so he moved towards a sociological and historical development of those doctrines: «Thus even some of Delfico's conceptions about sociality, primitive peoples, the origin of languages, barbarism and even the Middle Ages, communes and fiefdoms in Italy and Europe, actually derive from Condillac, Diderot, Rousseau and French encyclopedism»²⁴.

Saverio Bettinelli (1718-1808) in his *Discorso sopra la poesia italiana* (1781) protested that the "philosophical century" sought to force the sweetness and richness of the Italian language – manifest in poetry and prose from their origins – within the cold limits of geometric and logical precision. «The gentlemen philosophers», he writes, «make me tremble more and more. Monsieur de Marmontel proposes to create a language philosophical and poetical at once, in which the terms are analogous to things, a language which would have neither the people for inventor, nor use for ruler, nor would be affected by the ignorance of the one or the whims of the other. The lord abbot of Condillac considers nothing but the language of algebra to be perfect, and so also in Italy, by dint of metaphysics, they want to lead us to write everything in figures and hieroglyphics»²⁵.

As for the city of Parma, Francesco Pizzetti (1756-1811), professor of logic and metaphysics, and Francesco Soave (1743-1806), professor of oratory until 1771, devoted themselves to teaching Condillac's doctrines at the University of Parma. Of Swiss origin, a pupil of Bettinelli and master of Manzoni (for a short period), Soave was one of the leading proponents of sensationalism. He wrote a compendium in three volumes of the *Saggio filosofico di Gio. Locke sull'umano intelletto* (1775), where he often refers to Condillac, expressing a certain unease at the Frenchman's reduction of consciousness to sensation. However, it was with his *Istituzioni di Logica*,

(quoted in Venturi 1962, p. 1162).

²⁴ Ivi, p. 1164: «Così anche talune delle concezioni di Delfico sulla socialità, sui popoli primitivi, sull'origine delle lingue, sulla barbarie ed anche sul medioevo, i comuni ed i feudi in Italia e in Europa, derivano in realtà da Condillac, da Diderot, Rousseau e dall'enciclopedismo francese».

²⁵ Bettinelli 1960, p. 1078, n. a: «Mi fan tremare i signori filosofi sempre più. Il signor di Marmontel propone a farsi un linguaggio filosofico e poetico insieme, in cui siano i termini analoghi alle cose, un linguaggio che non avrebbe né il popolo per inventore, né l'uso per arbitro, né risentirebbe l'ignoranza di quello o di questo i capricci. Il signore abate di Condillac non crede perfetto fuor che il linguaggio dell'algebra e così pure anche in Italia, a forza di metafisica, ci voglion condurre a scrivere in cifre e in geroglifici ogni cosa». An 'algebraic' theory of language is addressed by Condillac not only in vol. I (*Grammaire I* 1-14) of *Cours d'étude*, but also in *La logique, ou Les premières développements de l'art de penser* (Chez l'Esprit, libraire, au Palais Royal, À Paris 1780) et in *La langue des calculs*, incomplete and published posthumously in 1798 (De l'imprimerie de Ch. Houel, À Paris, voll. I-II).

Metafisica ed Etica (1791), a textbook in many schools, that Soave most effectively disseminated Condillac's thought by referring to it frequently in his pages. Condillac also appears mentioned in highly laudatory terms in *Ragionamento sulla filosofia del secolo XVIII* (1778) by the poet and literate Carlo Castone Della Torre di Rezzonico (1742-96)²⁶, who succeeded Frugoni in 1768 as secretary of the Accademia di Belle Arti di Parma. The poem *L'origine delle idee* (1778), dedicated by Rezzonico to the French philosopher, was also inspired by contemporary sensationalist doctrines²⁷.

²⁶ DELLA TORRE DI REZZONICO 1830. After celebrating Bacon (and even earlier Descartes, Newton and Locke), Rezzonico observes, «Following in the footsteps of so great a man came afterwards those celebrated metaphysicians, of whom our century is glorious, and of whom only two for testimony of honor it will suffice here to name, namely the Abbot of Condillac and Charles Bonnet. The scrupulous exactitude, mature pondering and careful escape from scholastic obscurity made [...] clear and intelligible the Arcana of Psychology, and this analytical spirit passing to many other thinkers, the principles of every vice and every virtue were placed in open light, and an almost algebraic rigor was introduced into the most relevant research on morals and laws, which to humanity are most suited» (p. 23 ff.: «Dietro l'orme di si grand'uomo vennero poscia que' celebri metafisici, di cui va glorioso il secol nostro, e di cui due soli per testimonianza d'onore qui basterà nominare, cioè l'abate di Condillac e Carlo Bonnet. La scrupolosa esattezza, il maturo ponderamento e l'attenta fuga dalla scolastica oscurità resero [...] chiari ed intelligibili gli Arcani della Psicologia, e questo spirito analitico passando a molti altri pensatori, si posero in aperta luce i principi d'ogni vizio e d'ogni virtù, ed un rigore presso che algebraico venne introdotto nelle più rilevanti ricerche sulla morale e sulle leggi, che all'umanità più si convengono»). And a little further: «So I sometimes imagine myself seeing in the Elysians Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and Tullius, besides the infinite array of the Greek sophists, frowning at the lip of Condillac, and recognizing the sources of their errors in the abuse of terms and analogy, and especially in giving substance to abstractions, and blushing at each other when they listen to the modern metaphysician settle their long and eloquent disputes, awarding none of them a crown» (p. 27: «Quindi mi figuro talvolta di veder negli elisj Socrate, Platone, Aristotele e Tullio, oltre la turba infinita de' greci sofisti, pendere accigliati dal labbro di Condillac, e riconoscere le fonti de' loro errori nell'abuso de' termini e dell'analogia, e segnatamente nel dar corpo alle astrazioni, ed arrossire a vicenda quando ascoltano il moderno metafisico dirimere le loro lunghe ed eloquenti dispute, aggiudicando a nessun d'essi corona»).

²⁷ DELLA TORRE DI REZZONICO 1977. It reads there among other things: «... Crede ciascuno | innato de' suoi sensi il facil uso, | benché di lunga esperienza ei sia | il tardo frutto; e tal error già festi | con lucido discorso altrui palese | tu, che di nostra umanità men carco | al vol ti mostri del sublime ingegno, | o meditante Condillac, maestro | de' pochi ardit che l'aereo albergo | tentan del metafisico sapere, | e di vederti non isdegni al fianco | l'itala musa, che vestir tuo magno | argomento di grazia ama, e di suono | severamente armonioso, e forse | col bel volto virgineo al tuo pensiero, | dolce ad un tempo e flebil ricordanza, | l'amabile Ferrando ella richiama» (p. 99 s., vv. 183-199). In Guagnini 1977, pp. 16-27, it is recalled how Garin saw in this composition «an interesting chapter in the history of Condillac's fortune in Italy» (p. 23: «un interessante capitolo della storia della fortuna del Condillac in Italia»). See Garin 1966, p. 957, and pp. 36-47 for a bio-bibliogr. note on Rezzonico.

ON CULTURAL EXCHANGES

Given these facts, we can now return to the original question and see if the data collected so far allow us to assert on a plausible basis to what extent and in what sense we can talk of migration of ideas in Condillac's case. Now, if widespread knowledge and recurring mention of his name are taken as signs of an author's influence on his own time, then Condillac and his thought meet, as we have seen, such requirements. This is true even if we take into account that empiricism and sensationalism were received in Italy with anything but unconditional favor; and that the names of Locke and Condillac certainly recur until the Unification of Italy, but often as polemical idols. Francesco de Sanctis recalls how still in Gioberti's time «all philosophy, from the negative and polemical point of view, had only one color: it was battle against sensism, later became battle against psychology itself. Mainly were marks to the target Locke and Condillac, later it went as far as Descartes, who became the first sinner, the author of the reform, the father of modern philosophy devoted to sensationalism»²⁸.

From Condillac the Italians derived a non-dogmatic morality adapted to the nature of man, along with an ideal of social justice, as shown in Beccaria's masterpiece, *Dei delitti e delle pene* (1764). Most of all, the sensationalist doctrine promoted the idea of a society in which man lives according to his natural ends, which are self-preservation, spiritual and material well-being, constant progress. Which is no small thing, of course; however, the same author who advocates similar principles, Gian Domenico Romagnosi (1761-1835), is also the one who rejects Condillac's metaphysics by shifting the

focus from sensation (passive appropriation of a content) to perception (active appropriation) (Romagnosi 1827). Antonio Rosmini (1797-1855) in his *Nuovo Saggio sull'origine delle idee* of 1830 makes harsh accusations against Condillac's sensationalism, which «still retains favor in Italy: although it certainly cannot be said to be the most in keeping with the way of thinking of this nation, which has preserved itself, unlike the others, free from a systematic and exaggerated spirit»²⁹. Rosmini calls sensationalism a kind of «lockeanism naturalized in France», recognizing in it a patchwork of «heterogeneous subjects that confuses and misrepresents research on the operations of the soul, enveloping it in medicine, anatomy and chemistry». So much so that «it does not deserve that we point to them, for they give no new explanation of the origin of ideas». He further adds that «In England, lockean philosophy was treated by much sharper spirits than in France, such as Berkeley and Hume, who pushed it with undaunted courage to its ultimate consequences, namely idealism and skepticism»³⁰.

Thus, it is legitimate to assume that the doctrines of Locke and Condillac did not radically change the philosophical frame of mind of Italian scholars in its substance, who, in the face of the proposals of the sensationalists, nevertheless remained anchored in spiritualistic

²⁸ De Sanctis 1931a, p. 287: «Tutta la filosofia, sotto il punto di vista negativo e polemico, aveva un solo colore: era battaglia contro il sensismo, diventò poi lotta contro la stessa psicologia. Principalmente furono segni al bersaglio Locke e Condillac, più tardi si andò fino a Cartesio, che divenne il primo peccatore, l'autore della riforma, il padre della filosofia moderna finita al sensismo». Of the polemic against sensism Leopardi offers a counterpart example. Around the 1920s he wanted to devote himself to philosophical studies «such as they are nowadays», as the poet pointed out, «not such as they were at the time of the innate ideas». However, De Sanctis comments: «This means that he studied the sensists, still in vogue, who did not admit innate ideas. Of course, philosophy was then in open rupture with the sensists, and Locke and Condillac were no longer his last term. He called "nowadays" what in philosophy was already yesterday» (De Sanctis 1931b, pp. 147-157: p. 152 f.: «Posta la base, si rivelano in lui nuovi bisogni intellettuali, e, maestro di sé, comincia i suoi studi filosofici, e, come scrive altrove, "quali sono oggidì, non quali erano al tempo delle idee innate". Ciò vuol dire che studiava i sensisti ancora in voga, i qual non ammettevano le idee innate. Certo, la filosofia era allora in aperta rottura con i sensisti, e Locke e Condillac non erano più l'ultimo suo termine. Chiamava egli "oggi" quel che in filosofia era già ieri»).

²⁹ Rosmini 1851, p. 55: «Ho creduto di dovermi trattenere un po' a lungo sul sistema del Condillac, come quello che conserva ancora in Italia del favore: sebbene non si possa dir certamente il più conforme alla maniera di pensare di questa nazione, che si è conservata, a differenza della altre, esente da uno spirito sistematico ed esagerato» (§ 99).

³⁰ *Ibidem*: «La filosofia condillacchiana non è, a volerla definire, che il lockismo naturalizzato in Francia. Quelle leggiere modificazioni che il lockismo può aver sofferto in Francia dopo il Condillac, quella giunta di materie eterogenee che confonde e travisa le ricerche sulle operazioni dell'anima, inviluppandole di medicina, di anatomia e di chimica, non merita che noi punto ce ne occupiamo, ché non danno nessuna nuova spiegazione dell'origine delle idee. In Inghilterra, la filosofia lockiana venne trattata da spiriti molto più acuti che in Francia, quali furono il Berkeley e l'Hume, che la spinsero con coraggio imperterrito all'ultime sue conseguenze, cioè all'idealismo e allo scetticismo...» (§§ 100-101). In his *Nuovo saggio* Rosmini carries out a severe critic against Condillac to whom he devotes a large section of his book (Rosmini 1851, pp. 28-55), observing among other things, «In the Lombardo-Veneto kingdom, Fr. Soave, with the purest of intentions, has done great harm by spreading Condillacism throughout, and reducing philosophy to a compassionate tenuousness which, while it lures the vulgar with apparent ease, ingenerates the presumption and vain belief of being philosophers in those who nor can be nor will ever be, and gives rise to contempt for great matters superior to their loquacious and sententious mediocrity» (*ibidem*, p. 55, n. 1: «Nel regno Lombardo-Veneto, il P. Soave, colle più pure intenzioni, ha fatto un gran danno diffondendo per tutto il Condillacchismo, e riducendo la filosofia ad una tenuità compassionevole che, mentre adessa il volgo coll'apparente facilità, ingenera la presunzione e la vana credenza di esser filosofi in quelli che nol possono essere né saranno giammai, e fa nascere il disprezzo per le grandi questioni superiori alla loro mediocrità loquace e sentenziosa»).

forms. They hesitated to reduce man to a mere sentient, non-constitutively thinking being, and defended the value of individual consciousness, implementing a prudent eclecticism that somewhat dampens the innovative and disruptive scope of those doctrines. The speculative systems of Condillac and the Empiricists had a major impact on the Italians' method of inquiry and speculative horizon, which is evidenced not by the philosopher's mere presence in a foreign environment, but by the intensity of the countermeasures put in place to neutralize it. These reactions, far from diminishing the value of that influence, offer a remarkable sign of its intensity. Cultural transmission is not only sanctioned by the circulation of works or widespread knowledge of a theory, unless they prompt a real discussion. Nor can we speak in terms of migration of ideas simply when a thought is present in countries far away or different from its place of origin: intellectual influence is not a categorical assertion, but a *question* for which the questioner awaits an answer – to prove that his question has raised interest and deep reflections. One can properly speak of influence, or transmission of ideas, not when there is action of a character or doctrine on a given cultural *milieu*, but only when there is reaction from that *milieu* towards one or the other. Hume praises Addison instead of Locke in terms of admiration: but it is the thought of the latter that he responds to with his own; therefore one is entitled to assume that Locke was a far more influential author on him, whatever his occurrence in the index of names at the end of the book.

The transmission of ideas can be reconstructed only in part by documents. In this particular matter, the work of the historian must at some point yield to that of the specialist (the philosopher, the scholar, the art historian), who alone, when clear evidence or explicit assertions are lacking, can recognize in one author the more or less obvious resumption of the ideas of another, recognize the implicit term of comparison, the unspoken inspirer, the unconfessed polemical idol. In this sense, and on this basis, it is possible to argue for the influence in Italy of Condillac's philosophy, which from the mid-eighteenth century became a benchmark with which coeval intellectuals had to measure themselves. Philosophers such as Descartes, Leibniz, Locke and Condillac himself revolutionized the paths of the metaphysical field, and no one, from then on, could wander around it with the maps of previous generations. In particular, with its devaluation of individual consciousness, Condillac's thought became a kind of sphinx whose riddle needed to be unraveled in order to gain access to the realms of philosophy. In this way, Condillac could give rise to one of the most interesting philosophical experiences of a not short period in Italian intellectual history.

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