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John Milton: Puritan Tradition and Political Languages in XVIIth Century

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Abstract: *It is not simple to place John Milton in a specific political current of the English historical context of 17th century. In detail, we want to study Milton's prose works to extract the topics of the English civic and political tradition in the First Revolution age. In these terms, we'll analyze the Commonplace Book, a collection of commentaries about texts and authors, and about various subjects: the interpretations of Machiavelli in the Old English tradition of the Modern age, the idea of man's freedom and his relationship with natural law and political authority, according to the general perspective of the Puritan religion, which characterizes Milton's political language.*

Keywords: *Revolution, Machiavelli, Republicanism, Reformation, freedom, religion, classicism.*

Introduction

The variety of thematic and linguistic registers adopted by John Milton during his intense cultural and civil experience could be a fundamental and further instrument to understand the absolute originality of the poet's personality in the complex background of the civil war.

Thinking of including Milton in a renewed canon of authors of the history of political thought, freeing him from the unidirectional interpretation which tends to privilege the figure of the poet over the one of the pamphleteer and political prose

writer – diminishing even his active role in the context of the experience of Cromwell's Protectorate¹ –, not only does it mean reasserting its complete relevance to a way of interpreting and problematizing the crucial themes of the civil literature of the 17th century, but it contributes to propose, once again, the peculiar topicality of the *corpus* of his works, essential to shed light upon a crucial period of English political history.

Considering Milton's work in a new way answers the need to take up again the study of a classic, the fame of which, at this point, is fully admitted in the context of the political

tradition of English republicanism as well. The need to broaden the view even more generously over this author corresponds to the need of offering a thorough interpretation of English history, justified by the happy union between the religious and civil dimension and by the presence, in Milton's work, of fundamental elements of the political lexicon, which constitute, on top of it, decisive historical thresholds.

He embodies the specificity of a context where the result of the strong elements of modern age European conscience could be found, from Calvinism (since it is the rigorous precipitate of the Reformation) to Judaism, to republicanism up to the debate on civil living, as an echo of the humanistic cultural heritage.

Historically, Milton can be considered as the result of a new representation of the *societas*: he fully takes his place within the historiographical context of the period of religious conflicts, he takes part in the only republican "experiment" of English history – embracing the active resistance of the Puritans – and he has all the civil and cultural inclinations of the language of the forms of political conscience, one of which is certainly represented by regicide. The incidence of the religious sphere, in his experience, weighs both on the fact of making the belligerent and liberating act of the regicide topical again and on the historical process of the civil construction, and of the ways of representing it.

More specifically, for the research which is planned to be developed here, it will be interesting to verify to what extent the sense and the writing of the works of an author such as Machiavelli, who embodies the most accomplished essence of the political lexicon of modernity and with whom many exponents of seventeenth-century English republican civil culture, from Harrington to Neville, from Sidney to Nedham, affect Milton's work, in a period of time which goes from the violent fall of the Stuart government to the first years of the Restoration.

However, there is, obviously, no intention of going over the dense and complex chapter of the reception and the circulation of Machiavelli in England during the 17th century; on this topic there is an abundant and rich bibliography². Moreover Milton's biographical sketch allows the organization of a relatively independent disquisition also with regard to the peculiarity of the ways which define his approach to a political tradition immediately preceding or contemporary with a canon of *auctores* considered as classics of the thought, to whom he most frequently refers to as model against which to pit himself and to exploit, in that uninterrupted ethical and aesthetic tension between Judaism and the Hellenizing culture³.

The education of the poet as a Londoner developed starting from an in-depth knowledge of classical literature, an inheritance received since the years of his apprenticeship in

Latin, matured under the direction of the Scottish Thomas Young and was enriched during the years at *Christ's College* at Cambridge. His education was always mediated by an unshakable faith in the puritan cause⁴, along with an uncommon knowledge – even among his contemporaries – of Italian culture and humanistic tradition, obvious even in the unusual attention given to the linguistic element and to the problem of lexical choice.

Due to his strict background – which on one hand urged him to advance proposals of change in the civil culture of his time, and on the other allowed him to be appointed Secretary for Foreign Languages in Crowell's Council of State (1649) – it is important to dwell upon some key concepts such as reformation, education, liberty, law (in the strongly concentrated sense of the Jewish divine law, and moreover in the value of the law considered as a custom and not as positive law) which recur in many of Milton's works written between the 40s and 60s of the 17th century. They are crucial to understand the modality of the dialogue that the writer wants to establish with civil institutions and his idea of the relationship between the individual and the religious authority, in the peculiarity of that political climate uncertain between the mood of "radicalism" and the one of the so-called "elitist republicanism" and in which the circulation of Machiavelli is even more intense.

The background of Milton's experience is an historical landscape which undergoes deep changes and in

which – as documented by Christopher Hill – the issues concerning the decline of the model of the monarchy for divine right can be found in the moment which sees European culture assimilate the lexicon of the doctrine of natural law and of the tradition of natural right, while the need to reread English civil history takes shape, starting from the relationship between revolution, religion and the ruling of the church⁵.

The Reformation and the reforms in Milton's writing

In the specificity of the role played by England during the religious conflicts which took place between the second half of the 16th century and the following, Milton's contribution acquires great value for its connotation in terms of paideia and for the claim of the centrality of liberty and of the responsibility of individuals. This personal need combines with the historical function the English nation has of being a counterpoint as regards to the other European realities, connoting itself, for example, as at an opposite pole from the Catholic-Christian Spanish reality and embracing a clear-cut pluralization and relativization of religious languages, up to speaking about the problem of legitimacy of the sovereign power and the conflict between politics and religion.

The conceptual paradigm from which the entire reflection of the author of *Paradise Lost* originates is

represented by the fundamental thematic heart constituted by the Reformation. Interpreted according to a multi-faceted range of meanings, the Reformation acquires, in the lexicon of Milton's literature, the characteristic of a project of civil and cultural education capable of promoting a *Reformatio*, as a new form around which a hopefully changed society will be organized. Due to this ambitious plan, the Reform which Milton turns his attention to concerns every aspect of social and political life. A first crucial front on which the impact of this theme is measured, obviously is the religious one: the political model of Milton's order, developed theoretically between the writing of *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* (1649) and 1660, the year of the publication of the pamphlet *The ready and easy way to establish a free Commonwealth*, originates from the observation of the political crisis witnessed by England and from an inflamed polemic against the English Episcopal institution, from the refusal of the model of a hierarchized church, widely supported by the policy of the Stuart crown, and so from the debate concerning the function of the binomial religion-liberty.

Published anonymously in 1641, *On Reformation touching church-discipline in England* is the first of a series of prose works by Milton which deal with the age-old issue of the reformation of the English church – intended as a general Reformation of the ecclesiastical discipline – and

originates from the protests which followed the *London Petition* of 1640 and were rooted in the remote anti-Episcopal polemic which dated back to the last decades of the 16th century.

Therefore already from these first reflections, liberty is represented as a ground which fosters religion, considered as a space and discourse on tolerance, the government of God and not of the Church, liberty in the dialogue between God and man on the basis of the claim on the individual's right to directly read the Bible to encourage the "free interpretation" of all people and to challenge the absoluteness of the principle of authority. Milton's extremely political criticism could be combined to this aspiration. His criticism goes to the model of the monarchy of the sovereignty which rejects the assumption of inclusion of civil life in the mesh of religion – established by the terms of the peace of Augsburg (1555) – and outlines the complexity of the new political reality, made up of the popular⁶ component and of a motivated subjectivity which directly communicates with the divinity, by then impossible to represent only through the power of the King.

The protestant Reformation, combining with the lexicon of the puritan revolution, constitutes, in the writing of this puritan poet, the sense of a precise political option as well, which relies on the revolution which acts as a regulating power; in this sense Milton's experience is a result of the culture of the *societas*, where the

religious effect weighs both on the forms of the violent act of regicide, a topic which according to Mario D'Addio makes Milton the follower of a tradition of authors committed to the same theme⁷, and on the more complex dimension of the quality of the civil construction.

When the concept of sovereignty takes on the characteristic of tyranny, the criticism against it emerges with strength already in the pages of the treatise *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* – and afterwards in the anti-royalist *Eikonoklastes* and in the *Defensio secunda Pro Populo Anglicano* – written and published in a period of time between the imprisonment and the beheading of Charles I. With these events, regicide is legitimized and the sovereignty of the people and the right to resist the power of the Crown with arms, when this power neglects the pact with the people, are claimed⁸. At the same time, since the beginning of the *pamphlet*, while dwelling upon the nature itself of men, inclined to move away from the “government” of their own reason and to submit to different forms of tyranny, Milton writes: „If men within themselves would be governed by reason, and not generally give up their understanding to a double tyranny, of custom from without, and blind affections within, they would discern better what it is to favor and uphold the tyrant of a nation”⁹.

The point of the natural equality of men, of the importance of the free exercise of reason, along with the

need to encourage the full expression of all the civil liberties individuals (worship, press, education) can be found already in this work considered a manifesto of the antimonarchical propaganda which goes so far as to even identifying monarchy and tyranny.

According to Milton, the truest sense of the reformation, however originates, of course, from the renewal of the educational system as well. A new organic plan of the reorganization of the civil society is presented in the short pamphlet *On education* (1644), written in letter form following the Isocrates's model and according to the humanistic tradition of the brief treatise of *institution hominis*, and dedicated to Samuel Hartlib, a promulgator, in England, of the cultural activities of the educationalist Comenio.

The *pamphlet* starts from the education of young people, imagining a school and scientific system similar to the one promoted by the humanist Vittorino da Feltre.

The fundamental guidelines which can be drawn by this work concern the religious and therefore civil topic; from the invitation to a direct reading of the Bible in Hebrew, to the wish for a reform of university knowledge still linked to a scholarly model leaning towards aestheticism, in favor of a knowledge system closer to a modern scientific Baconian utilitarianism, up to the great attention reserved to a canon of classical authors spread by the late medieval and humanistic culture,

considered essential to foster the moral virtues of young people and to promote the growth of individual conscience, encouraging a total emancipation of individuals.

Obviously, the path imagined by Milton gives particular value to the primacy of young people's education, which is to be intended as a political act of civic education, an encouragement to the constitution of a free society, made of free men, in the spirit of a judicious perception of human dignity and in the project of a regeneration of the community.

As recently underlined by Rahe – who ascribes Milton to a mode of Republicanism which should be intended as a way of civil life – education acquires a strategic political meaningfulness, in compliance with a canon taken integrally from ancient culture¹⁰.

The historical and universal heart of man's liberty

In the biographical itinerary and in the patrimony of his writing, the acknowledgement of liberty, mainstay of the individuals' lives, embraces, according to John Milton, both the religious belief in the value of free will and in the discovery of privately cultivated faith, and the civil belief in the freest expression of every civil or political human activity.

The transposition of the conflict in religious matters obviously originates from the success of a *totus religiosus* human model, conformed

to the Puritan creed and therefore in contact with a deep Calvinist root, starting from which an ethical dimension is constituted; a dimension which is absolutely intrinsic and unrecognizable because it is determined by religion.

It is this renewed idea of the relationship between individual and reason which inspires a regeneration of the community, the liberty of which, in the pages of Milton and other writers of the time, is not filtered only through the lexicon of the doctrine of natural law; the human prototype outlined by Hobbes in the *Leviathan* – published in 1651 as Milton's most famous monarchomach treatise (*Defensio Pro Populo Anglicano*) – rooted in nature, governed by an ancestral bestiality and forced to the historical legitimization which comes from the doctrine of natural law, is in deep contradiction with Milton's individual who on the contrary embodies the political community and makes a problematizes sovereignty, suggesting a model of society inspired by a ciceronian civil culture.

The choice of a republican paradigm, in this sense, is not averse to a strong impression produced by the study of the *auctores* which still behave as a support for the idea of a society bound to the translation in practical terms of a civil ethics¹¹; in this perspective it is possible to understand the sense of the true claiming to the freedom of the press promoted through *Areopagitica* (1644), an oration written according

to the noble models of classical literature. Through these pages, Milton seals the importance of the precious dialogue with books and ancient culture – so appreciated by Machiavelli in letter to Vettori of 10th December 1513, to mention only private letters. Milton undertakes what Mary Visik has defined a struggle for intellectual freedom¹² and launches an attack against the censorship law passed by the Star Chamber in 1637, abrogated a few years later by the Long Parliament, and reintroduced by the Long Parliament itself on 24th June 1643.

As a clear witness of the value given by Milton to the process of conquest of this liberty – the most authentic expression of the moral responsibility of man – this *pamphlet* confirms the great and universal value of culture, its eternal vitality contained in the exemplarity of the teaching. The celebration of free will, however, and even the defense of the defeat of the free man, later transferred in the pages of *Paradise Lost* – in the verses which bear witness to Satan's disobedience to God – is important for Milton in every aspect of civil life, both if the liberty of man declined in its social and individual reasons is considered, and if the claiming to liberty meets with regicide in its most extreme expression.

The monarchomach tendency of Milton's thought, and the overlapping of tyranny and monarchy, at least on the political front, is not linked to the idea of degeneration of

the monarchic power, but rather to the firm belief that the institution itself of the monarchy necessarily takes sovereignty away from the people going against the idea of equality of all men. Instead, on the religious front, marked by the impact of puritan education, the criticism of sovereignty, completely explained in the *Defensio prima*, addressed to the French royalist Salmasius, combines very effectively with the anti-royalist contents of the Jewish tradition, object of Milton's constant interest. The need to go back to reading the Holy Scriptures in Hebrew goes beyond a learned interest and suggests the terms of the attention the English poet gives to the meaning of God's direct relationship with his people, to the sacredness of the Jewish cult marked by the recognition of the only order established by the celestial divinity, to the importance of the non written law, which defines the terms of a dialogue in which man is an active individual, through his intellect, and is aware that „God uses not to captivat under a perpetuall childhood of prescription, but trusts him with the gift of reason to be his own chooser [...]”¹³.

The category of liberty, a fundamental element of Milton's reflection, keeps together two antithetical historical forms, represented by regicide – as the suspension of the statute of peace – and by civil life, which is to be intended in the complex quality of social life.

From another point of view, according to Milton liberty is the

essence of a republicanism intended in a neoclassical and humanistic way, therefore it is man's full participation to "active" politics, and expresses a level of guarantee stronger than the theme of monarchy, of sovereignty.

In his apology of the *Commonwealth* government typical elements of republican political journalism interfere. These elements originate from the appreciation of Polybius's mixed government model¹⁴, together with the aversion to the hereditary monarchy, and even the possible tyrannical degeneration of monarchy itself.

To these themes, through which the value of the humanistic and renaissance culture is proposed again, one could connect the theme of the presence, in truth limited, of the idea of liberty linked to the appreciation of the Machiavellian model of the *Discorsi*, adopted by a large group of Milton's contemporaries, who followed a republican connotation, but absorbed by the author of *Paradise Lost* as well in a way which is not marginal, especially starting from the text of the *Discorsi*, which dates back to the years 1651-52, a period when, as Armitage notices, „Milton's reading of the *Discorsi* supplied him with positive arguments for a period of constitutional change and realignment in foreign affairs"¹⁵.

The most explicit reference to the work of the Florentine writer, as already underlined by Napoleone Orsini, is present in the *Commonplace Book*, a dense sequence of quotations and aphorisms coming from classi-

cism, medieval and humanistic culture and from contemporary political authors. His collection, discovered only in 1874, in Netherby Hall, is divided according to the topics – grouped in an index divided into three sections *Ethical, Economical or Domestic and Political* – and concerning themes of the individual's civil, political and ethical life, always accompanied by marginal notes, comments and brief considerations written by Milton himself. This is useful to reconstruct the chronology of the poet's studies and to reflect on the canons of present *auctoritates*.

It is interesting to see how authors of the Italian civil culture often support themes considered of great importance according to a modality of collecting sources which are mustered up to underpin the presented arguments. This modality is typical of the humanistic cultural tradition and was also exploited by the Florentine himself.

Within the thematic section entitled *De Religione quatenus ad Rempublicam spectat* belonging to the *Index Politicus*, Milton claims once again the need for religious liberty¹⁶, essential for the profession of religion and to set limits to the civil authority in religious matters, quoting twice the Machiavelli of the *Discorsi*, along with the Dante of the *Purgatory*.

Insisting on the sense of the quotation of *Discorsi I, 10*¹⁷, Milton writes: „Machiavelli declares that the most highly praised of all mortals are those who imbue the minds of man

with true religion; more so even that those who, however admirably, have founded kingdoms and republic by human laws”¹⁸. From what he writes, not only does Milton’s admiration emerge for those who were able to imbue in the *societas* the sense of “true religion”, but the poet, by also declaring the inferiority of those who founded reigns and republics based on the laws of men, establishes the superiority of God’s law, alien to codifications and the basis of every civil community. Another quotation taken from canto XVI of Dante’s *Purgatory* (vv.7-17) follows, here Dante focuses once again on the theme of the “Due Soli” and on the downfall of the Roman Church „per confonder in sé due reggimenti”. In these pages of invocation to the secularization of the State, Milton makes his condemnation of the confusion between political and religious authority clear. He considers it as harmful as the confusion existing between religion and State¹⁹.

To close the section, Milton returns to the passage of the *Discorsi I, 10* on the respect for religious opinions in the life of the State²⁰, paraphrasing it completely and underlines the liberal character of the republican government which opens to a beginning of tolerance: „Machiavelli holds that in a republic the opinions of men about religion should be free, even under good princes. In praising such rulers he says among other good things, “You will see under them the golden age where each man can hold and defend the opinion of his choice”²¹.

The reference to this quotation taken from the *Discorsi* confirms Orsini’s convincing thesis, according to which: „[...] ciò che Milton ritiene dal Machiavelli non è il machiavellismo volgare, l’arte della frode e della violenza, che colpiva soprattutto nel *Principe*, ma l’alto e vigoroso repubblicanesimo che domina i *Discorsi*”²² and represents an important change in the consideration of a republicanism which should be intended as pluralization, that is a multiplication of the principles on which the system is founded: according to this interpretation the political order is the result of a manifold participation. As a matter of fact, Milton establishes a link, not alien to rhetorical suggestions, between the concept of civil liberty, as it filters through some pages of Machiavelli’s *Discorsi*, and his ideal of liberty, already close to the principle of political tolerance.

Machiavellian recurrence in Milton

The path to reading Machiavelli, in the specific period of the English history at issue, imposes the adoption of a twofold criterion of interpretation based on history and philology.

On the one hand, it seems necessary to pit oneself against the question of Machiavellism intended as an attraction-repulsion attitude towards the Florentine’s work, according to the different modes which become popular in Europe between the 16th and 18th century; on

the other hand, verifying the terms and the ways in which the Machiavellian paradigm is considered is necessary to understand its actual impact on Milton's writing and to establish how much the reception of the (historical, political, literary) model is justified and how much is "occasional".

If the issue of Machiavelli's presence in England is a chapter widely examined by critical literature, it is however useful to underline how, especially during the 17th century, the tenor of the various interpretations takes on different tones if compared to the ones which had connoted the post-Tridentine period.

Reginald Pole's invective is distant and Machiavelli is well received by the English as a modern interpreter of the experience of the Republican government. Even though some critics have insisted on the episodic character of Machiavelli's presence in Milton, it is important to go back to study the entire *corpus* of the English poet's works and to dwell upon texts like the oligarchical pamphlet *A ready and easy way to establish a free Commonwealth* (1660). In so doing the thinnest weave of connections with *Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio* – apart from the explicit recurrence – can be noticed supporting the evidence already pointed out by Orsini and Raab and which is corroborated starting from implicit Machiavellian themes, which may have begun to be present in some of Milton's works only from 1550²³.

However, if compared to the tradition of contemporary civil literature, it is not possible to record a systematic and significant presence of Machiavellian quotations such as to draw the impression of the sagacious search of a dialogue or of a comparison between the author of *Paradise Lost* and the Florentine.

A general idea of Milton's reception of some of Machiavelli's passages, taken from the *Discorsi* and from the *Arte della Guerra*, could be drawn more immediately by focusing the attention on the recurrence in the *Book of Commonplace* and gathered from 1639. The quotations of Machiavelli which are present in this sort of "Zibaldone" of thoughts and notes are 19 in all: 2 are from *Arte della Guerra*, 17 from the *Discorsi*.

Not few of these latter concern the religious topic²⁴; others concern the more directly political reasoning in favor of the model of the republican government, some insist upon the theme of war or military practice.

The passages taken from *Discorsi II, 10* are two and one is taken from *Discorsi II, 19*. In these passages Milton recalls Machiavelli's invitation to not consider wealth as the sinew of war. As already pointed out, this recommendation is on the one hand a moral teaching and on the other a military one²⁵; the other three passages are taken from *Discorsi II, 24, II, 12, II, 18* which belong to the section *De disciplina militari* where the uselessness of fortifications and Florentine's explicit preference for infantry are reported²⁶.

The reference to political and religious themes is of major interest: the two passages taken from the *I* and the *II* book of *Arte della Guerra* aim at celebrating the republican government. Reopening Machiavelli's question on the reasons of the superiority of those men who come from republics compared to those coming from kingdoms, Milton writes the quotation from the *II* book: „A Commonwealth is to be preferred to a monarchy. Why do more excellent men come from republics than from kingdoms? Because in the former virtue (force) is honored while in the latter it is feared”²⁷. Two of Machiavelli's meaningful statements on the figure of the sovereign, contained in the section *Rex*, add to that idea.

If from *Discorsi I*, 2 Milton takes the criticism of the model of the hereditary monarchy, guilty of generating the seeds of corruption and of decline²⁸, from the quotation that immediately follows, and which refers to *Discorsi I*, 10, Milton directly takes from Machiavelli the theme of the exemplarity of the lesson coming from the history of Rome to avert the hereditary succession of a kingdom²⁹.

In detail, shortly after, in the section *Varius Reipublicae Status*, to strengthen the theme of the superiority of the Republican regime over the Monarchic one, Milton mentions the 58th chapter of the *I* and the 34th of the *III* book of *Discorsi* stating, „Machiavellus longè praeferet Monarchiae statum popularem,

adductis rationibus haud inscitis toto capite. 58. l. I discors, et l. 3. c. 34. ubi disserit minus errare rempublicam quam principem in eligendis magistratibus suis aut ministriis”³⁰; similarly, recalling *Discorsi I*, 59 Milton states that a republican state at war proves to be a more loyal ally than a monarchic one³¹.

A further reference of great interest to Milton is indicated by the passage taken from *Discorsi III*, 1; from the chapter entitled *A volere che una sètta o una Republica viva lungamente, è necessario ritirla spesso verso il suo principio* the writer of *Paradise Lost* finds a reference in support of the model of the mixed government and of the need of recalling it to its constituent principles, as it is deduced when, speaking about Machiavelli, he writes: „[...] he says that this is very wholesome for a commonwealth as it is for a body of many elements”³².

In the end, going back to the theme of the importance of the conflict in the republic, considered as a source of the true liberty given by the dialectical comparison among the parties, and of the origin itself of “good laws”, Milton writes in English a section taken from the *Discorsi*, starting with the passage which states: „The uprising of a people have often furnished an opportunity to recover liberty”³³.

These quotations, sometimes reported literally in English or Latin, seem to be the most consistent with Milton's questions on the specificity of the political model which the

Commonwealth was trying to embrace during the crucial years of its constitution; however, the echo of a complex political battle still under way could be perceived also through the type of passages chosen from the *Discorsi*. On this point the presence of the umpteenth quotation of Machiavelli in the section *Tyrannus* could appear historically revealing. Among other short references to less known authors, the one which emerges is the one to the Machiavelli of the *Discorsi I*, 58 according to whom: „Ad un principe cattivo non è altro rimedio che il ferro. A curare la malattia del popolo bastano le parole, e a quella del principe bisogna il ferro”. This passage is not followed by any comment, but it is accompanied by Milton’s faithful translation in English and by a note on the right margin of the page which says: *an occidere liceat*. Obviously, the attention given to the theme of regicide and to its connection with the political conflict – fought in the name of liberty – is even stronger in those years, and especially in Milton.

This crucial aspect, however, would have been an issue even for the historiographical tradition which during the Victorian Age had to deal with the problem of the English civil Revolution during the delicate moment of the refusal of the violent political model of the French Revolution.

The timeliness of the assassination of the king was confirmed, in this sense, by the words of Thomas Babington Macaulay who in 1825

wrote on John Milton and on the cause of the tyrannicide: „If men are to wait for liberty till they become wise and good in slavery, they may indeed wait for ever. Therefore it is that we decidedly approve of the conduct of Milton and the other wise and good men who, in spite of much that was ridiculous and hateful in the conduct of their associates, stood firmly by the cause of Public Liberty”³⁴.

The result of the research carried out in these pages is that the passages where the Florentine’s name appears are not so many and, on the whole, Milton’s Machiavelli is recalled for the centrality of the theme of virtue, classically intended as the guiding principle of the republican government, but especially for its antimonarchical role: the quotations taken from the *Discorsi* are interpreted in the light of a visible ideological overtone fomented by such themes as a polemic against hereditary monarchy and the defense of Polybius’s mixed government system.

The reading of this unsystematic framework of recurrence indicates an attitude which does not aim at systematically reconstructing the web of the thought of the Florentine. The type of reference to his works, however does not exactly emerge in terms of a reception which makes Machiavelli’s thought relevant to the outline of a plan of philosophy of history, even though one can sometimes perceive the sensation that Milton finds in the Florentine what is useful to illustrate his cause, not

differently from many experienced experts on Machiavelli.

In any case, in this type of circumstantial selection, the distance between Milton and Machiavelli could be, at least partly, detected: the English poet does not seem set on healing the ethical religious rift present in Machiavelli's work. Dwelling on the style of both authors one can imagine the sign of the distinction which is deeply rooted in an antithetical view of man represented by the opposition between Prince Borgia and the Miltonian man of the downfall and the voluntary alienation from God.

There is a well-founded objection moved by Rahe, which confirms the "ideological" difference, in religious matters, between Milton and Machiavelli. This objection concerns a „glaring omission”³⁵ attributed to the English poet according to whom „The Englishman attended not at all to the Florentine's critique of priestcraft”³⁶.

The theme would require an extensive treatment: however in this circumstance, it is useful to remember how in the anticlerical polemic and even more in the attacks on "false religion" and on superstitious beliefs, Milton actually prefers to refer to other classics of his library, above all Lucretius, even though he shares with Machiavelli and the Italian civil culture (Dante, Petrarch, Ariosto) the sense of discontinuity between history and authority.

The lack of reference to the book *Il Principe* comes as no surprise in

this kind of picture. In May 1641, in the pages of the essay *Of Reformation*, Milton wrote: «[...] there is no art that hath been more cankered in her principles, more soiled and slubbered with aphorisming pedantry, than the art of policy; and that most, where a man would think should least be, in Christian commonwealths»³⁷. The poet seems not to confide in statesmanship, considered as a set of rules useful for the immediacy of political action, expressed in the incisiveness of the style of the brief treatise; in this sense, he refuses the value of effectiveness and timeliness of Machiavelli's political man by putting him in opposition to the *virtus* of the *vir sapiens* with a ciceronian flavor.

Recently Paul Rahe has gone over the theme of the presence of Machiavellian passages in Milton's work³⁸ taking up again the English poet's classical republicanism and has proposed a personal and „un-orthodox" interpretation. Rahe focuses his attention on Milton's analysis of the *Discorsi* upholding an interesting thesis, according to which „[...] the poet who became Secretary of Foreign Tongues for the Commonwealth of England, Scotland, and Ireland was precisely what Machiavelli was not – a genuine classical republican, profoundly indebted to Plato and Aristotle, to Thucydides and Isocrates, to Cicero, Sallust, and Livy – and I try to show that he studied Machiavelli's *Discourses on Livy* with care and that he considered

and in end rejected its argument on rigorously classical republican grounds³⁹.

A few years before Rahe, Martin Dzelzainis, speaking of Milton's republicanism, lingered over his political option, denying a real interest of the poet towards the specificity of institutional forms and insisting on Milton's choice of a sort of virtuous commonwealth of letters founded on Cicero's teachings and admitted: „He of course advocates the ancients as a touchstone of political wisdom, but turns to Cicero and *De Officiis* in particular for specific remedies. He also sees the solution to a political crisis as residing in the cultivation of virtue, the point of which in turn is to ensure that individuals will serve the commonwealth more effectively⁴⁰.

In conclusion, one can share the well-founded impression that Machiavelli, considered as a republican, but rejected as an author of the “techniques” of politics, does not add much to what, in the web of Milton's more mature lexicon, has been gathered with conviction from the inheritance of the authors of classicism, real conceptual paradigm in Milton's works⁴¹.

If culture and the compositional techniques suggest Milton to enrich his works with frequent references to authorities of a more or less recent past, in his writing almost an

unavoidable synopsis between model of pagan classicism and biblical sources are produced, linked both to Patristics and to Jewish tradition. The web of this dense “mosaic” architecture does not only confirm the peculiar methodological care, but also the unceasing effort to reconcile the religious fervor with the intellectual liberty coming from the ancient lay culture, to create a fusion between „il rigore ebraicizzante della coscienza e le esigenze d'equilibrio della ragione pagana⁴² that could become literature and precept for the life of the nation.

It is through the words of the author that it is easier to reconstruct the sense of that search which has been firmly pursued by Milton in order to lay the foundation of a civil culture again, calling for a need to reconcile the languages of classical political ethics with the lexicon of liberty and of the virtues of the *societas* since: „[...] to govern well, is to train up a Nation in true wisdom and virtue, and that which springs from thence, magnanimity, (take heed of that) and that which is our beginning, regeneration, and happiest end, likeness to God, which in one word we call godliness; and that this is the true flourishing of a land, other things follows as the shadow does the substance⁴³.

Notes

¹ Vittorio Gabrieli went back to describing Milton's passionate participation

in the experience of the Protectorate. V. Gabrieli, *Il Paradiso perduto di*

Milton e la Restaurazione, in J. Milton, *Il Paradiso perduto*, ed. by F. Giacomantonio, Pisa-Roma, Fabrizio Serra, 2009, pp. 11-18: p. 15. On similar themes also, see R.Th. Fallon, *Milton in Government*, University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993. Moreover for a reconstruction of Milton's biographical and scientific sketch refer to P. Hammond, B. Worden (eds.), *John Milton: Life, Writing, Reputation*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010.

² On this subject I recall, in short, Mario Praz's precious volume *Machiavelli in Inghilterra ed altri saggi sui rapporti letterari anglo-italiani*, Firenze, Sansoni, 1962. Praz highlighted how, since the Elizabethan age, England as well, with France acknowledged the *vulgata* of a Machiavelli interpreted as «[...] il comune denominatore d'ogni sorta di delitti politici» (M. Praz, *Machiavelli in Inghilterra*, p. 105). The scholar identified harmony between a puritan and Jesuit anti-Machiavellism, recognizing in both the roots of a common «machia-vellismo ribattezzato» in the name of the ideal of the «Principe cristiano politico» (*ivi*, p. 162). In the circumstance, refer only to some of the numerous titles which make up, by now, a well-known and complex bibliography on this theme. More specifically, on the genesis of an English republican Machiavellism, see N. Orsini, *Studi sul Rinascimento italiano in Inghilterra*, Firenze, Sansoni, 1937; M. Praz, *Machiavelli in Inghilterra*; F. Raab, *The English face of Machiavelli: a changing interpretation 1500-1700*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964; J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian*

Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1975¹; J. Macek, *Machiavelli e il machiavellismo*, Firenze, La Nuova Italia, 1980, pp. 227-46; C. Hill, *Intellectual Origins of the English Revolution*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1965; P.S. Donaldson, *John Wolfe, Machiavelli, and the Republican arcana in Sixteenth Century in England*, in Id., *Machiavelli and the mystery of State*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988, pp. 86-110; C. Russell, *Alle origini dell'Inghilterra moderna. La crisi dei Parlamenti, 1509-1660*, Bologna, il Mulino, 1988; V. Kahn, *Revising the History of Machiavellismus. English Machiavellism and the Doctrine of Things Indifferent*, «Rinascimento Quaterly» 46 (1993), pp. 526-61; Ead., *Machiavellian Rhetoric, from the Counter-Reformation to Milton*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1994; G. Procacci, *Aspetti della fortuna inglese del Machiavelli nei secoli XVI e XVII*, in Id., *Machiavelli nella cultura europea dell'età moderna*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1995, pp. 213-51; G. Bock, Q. Skinner, M. Viroli (eds.), *Machiavelli and Republicanism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990; M. Peltonen, *Classical Humanism and Republicanism in English Political Thought, 1570-1640*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995; R. Farneti, *I repubblicani inglesi*, in A. Andreatta, A.E. Baldini (eds.), *Il Pensiero Politico. Idee, Teorie, Dottrine*, Torino, Utet, 1999, pp. 197-214; A. Arienzo, G. Borrelli (eds.), *Anglo-American faces of Machiavelli. Machiavelli e machiavellismi nella cultura anglo-americana (secoli XVI-*

- XX), Monza, Polimetrica, 2009; A. Arienzo, A. Petrina (eds.), *Machiavellian Encounters in Tudor and Stuart England. Literary and Political Influences from the Reformation to Restoration*, Farnham and Burlington, Ashgate, 2013. Moreover on the linguistic modalities of the literary circulation of the Florentine in England, between the 16th and 17th century, refer to A. D'Andrea, *Ambizione e ambiguità. Un tema machiavelliano da Marlowe a Milton*, in Id., *Strutture inquiete. Premesse teoriche e verifiche storico-letterarie*, Firenze, Olschki, 1993, pp. 153-171.
- ³ On the complex relationship between ancient classics and "modern" classics in Milton, I suggest to refer to L. Mitarotondo, *La battaglia per la libertà: John Milton fra tradizione e rivoluzione*, in L. Mitarotondo, S. Suppa, *Lessici della libertà. Cultura e politica fra Milton e Montesquieu*, Bari, Cacucci, 2012, pp. 13-74.
- ⁴ Milton's Puritan education is a crucial trace in the development of his civil culture as well. On the importance of this religious element in the English poet's political reflection and on the republican interpretation it is advisable to refer to W. Haller, *The Rise of Puritanism*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1938; V. Gabrieli, *Puritanesimo e libertà: dibattiti e libelli*, Torino, Einaudi, 1956; C. Hill (ed.), *Saggi sulla rivoluzione inglese del 1640*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 1957; Z.S. Fink, *The Classical Republicans: an Essay in the Recovery of a Pattern of Thought in Seventeenth-Century England*, Illinois, Evanston, 1962; C. Hill, *Milton and the English Revolution*, London, Faber & Faber, 1977; D. Wootton, *Republicanism, Liberty and Commercial Society, 1649-1776*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1994; D. Armitage, A. Himy, Q. Skinner (eds.), *Milton and Republicanism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995; B. Worden, *Literature and Politics in Cromwellian England: John Milton, Andrew Marvell, Marchamont Nedham*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007; P.A. Rahe, *Against Throne and Altar: Machiavelli and Political theory under the English Republic*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- ⁵ With reference to the development of these issues considered from a historiographical point of view refer to C. Hill, *Puritanism and Revolution. Studies in Interpretation of the English Revolution of the 17th Century*, Secker & Warburg, London 1958; Id., *The Word turned upside down: Radical Ideas during the English Revolution*, New York, Viking Press, 1972; Id., *Milton and the English Revolution*.
- ⁶ It is necessary, of course, to underline that Milton was unaware of the modern concept of "people", or at least to a concept close to the meaning taken on by modern representative democracies. He sometimes shows a lack of interest towards the popular individuals, who are unable to consciously take part in civil life. In the first pages of the *pamphlet The Doctrine of Divorce*, he begins: „I seek not to seduce the simple and illiterate: my errand is to find out the choicest and the learnedest, who have this high gift of wisdom to answer solidly, or to be convinced". J. Milton, *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, in Id., *The Prose Works*, vol. I, Philadelphia, J.W. Moore, 1859, p. 197. As reasserted by Rahe:

- „[...] when Milton spoke of “the people”, he quite often had in mind a much smaller and more select body of men”, and again: „For “most men”, even then, Milton had little political use”. P.A. Rahe, *Against Throne and Altar*, p. 109.
- ⁷ M. D’Addio, *John Milton e la giustificazione del regicidio*, in Id., *Il tirannicidio*, in *Storia delle idee politiche, economiche e sociali*, ed. by L. Firpo, vol. III: *Umanesimo e Rinascimento*, Torino, Utet, 1987, pp. 592-98: p. 592. On Milton considered the last witness of monarchomach political journalism, see R. Farneti, *I repubblicani inglesi*, in Andreatta, Baldini (eds.), *Il Pensiero politico. Idee, teorie, dottrine*, vol. II, pp. 197-214.
- ⁸ On this topic see, in particular, V. Kahn, *The metaphorical contract in Milton’s Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, in D. Armitage, A. Himy, Q. Skinner (eds.), *Milton and Republicanism*, pp. 83-105.
- ⁹ J. Milton, *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, in Id., *The Prose Works*, vol. II, London, Henry G. Bohn, York Street, Covent Garden, 1848, pp. 2-47: p. 2.
- ¹⁰ P.A. Rahe, *Against Throne and Altar*, p. 118.
- ¹¹ The strong link established by Milton with the tradition of the humanistic culture should not be forgotten. It has been taken on in the complexity of the educational dimension of a secular conscience. As regards to this topic, Milton’s *Pamphlet* is still of great interest, pamphlet *On Education* (1644).
- ¹² M. Visik, *John Milton e la rivoluzione*, in *Saggi sulla Rivoluzione inglese*, pp. 331-349: p. 332.
- ¹³ J. Milton, *Areopagitica. Discorso per la libertà di stampa*, ed. by M. Gatti and H. Gatti, Milano, Bompiani, 2002, p. 28.
- ¹⁴ Zera S. Fink was among the first to support the centrality of the lesson of Polybius’s model „[...] consisting of a mixture of monarchy, aristocracy and democracy”, in the writing of the essay *Of Reformation* by Milton. See Z.S. Fink *The Classical Republicans*, pp. 95-96.
- ¹⁵ D. Armitage, *Poet against Empire*, in D. Armitage, A. Himy, Q. Skinner (eds.), *Milton and Republicanism*, p. 207.
- ¹⁶ „Chi altri, fuorché Milton, aveva rilevato nel Machiavelli tali espressioni in difesa della religione e della libertà religiosa?” N. Orsini, *Studii sul Rinascimento italiano*, p. 129.
- ¹⁷ „Intra tutti gli uomini laudati sono i laudatissimi quelli che sono stati capi e ordinatori delle religioni. Appresso, dipoi, quelli che hanno fondato o repubbliche o regni”. N. Machiavelli, *Discorsi sopra la prima Deca di Tito Livio*, ed. by C. Vivanti, Torino, Einaudi, 2000, p. 33.
- ¹⁸ J. Milton, *The Commonplace Book*, in Id., *The Works*, vol. XVIII: *The Uncollected Writings*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1938, p. 198.
- ¹⁹ „Ecclesiastici et Politici regiminis confusionem [...] et religioni et reipublicae pariter esse perniciosam ostendit Dantes Poeta Hetruscus in Purgatorio. Cant. 16”. *Ibidem*.
- ²⁰ „Opiniones hominum de Religione, oportere in Republica vel sub bonis principibus liberar esse; [...]”. *Ivi*, p. 199.
- ²¹ *Ibidem*.
- ²² N. Orsini, *Studii sul Rinascimento*, p. 127.

- ²³ N. Orsini, *Gli studi machiavelliani di Milton*, in Id., *Studii sul Rinascimento*, pp. 123-32; F. Raab, *The English Face of Machiavelli*, pp. 175-81.
- ²⁴ Drawing from his great reading about the theme of the polemics against the ecclesiastical institutions, in the pamphlet *Of Reformation* Milton refers to the Italian lyrical and civil tradition, through the verses of Dante, Petrarch and Ariosto to recall the episode of Constantine's Donation.
- ²⁵ N. Orsini, *Studii sul Rinascimento*, p. 129.
- ²⁶ J. Milton, *Commonplace Book*, pp. 210-11.
- ²⁷ *Ivi*, p. 164.
- ²⁸ „No sooner the ruler had begun to be hereditary instead of being elected, than his heirs began to degenerate, and setting aside virtuous deeds they decided that all that princes had to do was to outdo others in luxury, lust, and in every other pleasure-affording quality”. *Ivi*, p. 197.
- ²⁹ *Ibidem*.
- ³⁰ *Ivi*, p. 199.
- ³¹ *Ivi*, p. 215.
- ³² *Ivi*, p. 200.
- ³³ *Ivi*, p. 217.
- ³⁴ T.B. Macaulay, *Essays*, vol. I, London, Longmans, Green & Co., 1866, pp. 19-20.
- ³⁵ P.A. Rahe, *Against Throne and Altar*, p. 139.
- ³⁶ *Ibidem*.
- ³⁷ J. Milton, *Of Reformation in England*, in Id., *The Prose Works*, p. 390.
- ³⁸ P.A. Rahe, *The Classical Republicanism of John Milton*, in Id., *Against Throne and Altar*, pp. 104-138.
- ³⁹ *Ivi*, pp.1-3: p. 2.
- ⁴⁰ M. Dzelzainis, *Defining Milton's Republicanism*, in D. Armitage, A. Himy, Q. Skinner (eds.), *Milton and Republicanism*, pp. 3-24: p. 14.
- ⁴¹ „In none of what he wrote for publication is there the slightest sign that he found anything of value in Machiavelli that was not already present in the classical authors whom he so esteemed”. P.A. Rahe, *Against Throne and Altar*, p. 137. As a matter of fact as recently highlighted by Skinner as well, the English republicans did not necessarily refer to Machiavelli but they preferred other writers, as for example Sallustio, considered the most authoritative source for what concerns the birth and decline of the republican government. See Q. Skinner, *Virtù rinascimentali*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2006, p. 10.
- ⁴² V. Gabrieli, *Puritanesimo e libertà. Dibattiti e libelli*, p. XV.
- ⁴³ J. Milton, *Of Reformation in England*, in Id., *The Prose Works*, pp. 390-91.

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