

# Tintoretto and 'Gino'

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When I came to update my Tintoretto Observed for its Italian edition,<sup>1</sup> it was suggested to me by Carlo Ginzburg, who was presenting the Marsilio volume *Davanti a Tintoretto*, that I should include Woody Allen's *Everyone says 'I love you'* as part of Tintoretto's modern fortuna. It was a film I had not seen, so I acquired the video and watched the protagonist, Jo Berlin (Woody Allen) passing himself off as a Tintoretto expert, in the School of San Rocco, to impress Vonnie Seidel (Julia Roberts), the art historian he had set his heart on.

I decided I would like to use the Venice scenes and so started to transcribe some of the dialogue. The protagonist confesses to his daughter that in fact he knows nothing at all about Tintoretto: 'I cannot tell the difference between his chiaroscuro and his s??? sauce', he says disarmingly. The word that preceded 'sauce' stumped me; it could have been 'spaghetti', but it sounded as if it ended with an '-o'. Could it be 'sughetto'? I made several friends and colleagues (including American ones) watch the video and listen to the mystery word, but no enlightenment came. I rang friends in America to ask if they could check whether any 's??? sauce' was on sale, but no success here either. I wrote to Woody Allen's agent, although I had been warned that very often there was no text of his scripts. I received no answer.

As my quotations had to be in Italian, my Marsilio editor listened to the video of the Italian version and gave me that text: 'Del Tintoretto non so nemmeno la differenza fra il suo chiaroscuro e la sua carpa al burro.' I wondered whether this version had been modified because the original had been as incomprehensible to the dubber as it had been to me. It was a strange culinary choice in Italian; was it dictated by a Roman pronunciation in which 'carpa al buro' with only one 'r' rhymed with 'chiaroscuro'? At any rate, that is what found its way into *Davanti a Tintoretto*.

But a couple of months after the book had come out, one of my San Francisco friends, who is an excellent amateur chef, continued her sleuthing and told me, when I was visiting, that I should try a restaurant called 'Gino' which was evidently frequented by Woody Allen in New York and was famous for a special sauce. So on my stopover in New York I involved more friends. We were dubious as to whether we could track down the right Gino, but in fact there was only one well-known restaurant of that name in Lexington Avenue. The next problem was getting a table, as there was so much demand. A request in English got a regretfully negative answer, but a request in Italian, which explained the strange motive for our visit, obviously intrigued and was immediately successful.

So four of us set off to this Gino and were welcomed by Salvatore Doria, who runs the restaurant now for its elderly founder, the original Gino. Signor Doria enthusiastically gave us four different

kinds of pasta, with a 'segreto sauce' so that we should have a thorough experience of it. He recounted to us Woody Allen's other links with the restaurant, whose very characteristic deep red walls with small zebras prancing across them play a role in one of the first scenes of *Mighty Aphrodite*. And as a memento of our visit he gave me a little zebra brooch which they distribute as a symbol of the restaurant.

### **Differences between what's spoken and what's written**

To end this account I should like to add a more serious comment. The distinction between spoken and written texts is of course common knowledge to linguists. One aspect that is rarely mentioned (although in recent years the study of speech has become increasingly important, and areas such as 'oral history' have similarly attracted greater interest) concerns certain crucial differences between speech and writing, and the implications they have for the very nature of a philological study of evidence.

In a written text we may come across an expression (i.e., a sequence of letters) we do not know - because we have never met it before, because it is a neologism, or even because it was written incorrectly owing to some mechanical or psychological mishap (misspelling, or one of the slips studied by Freud). We are however usually able to recognize the expression as such, but unable to attribute to it a content, or even to accept it as a linguistic sign.

But if the text we are analyzing is a spoken one, as in the case of Woody Allen's sentence mentioned above, we are faced with a word we can't identify, let alone interpret. Not only do we not get its meaning (the signified), but we can't even catch its expression (its signifier) - we do not grasp what the word is which we ought to investigate.

This seems at first to point to a radical dissymmetry between spoken and written language. One might object that paleographers, trying to decipher a manuscript, find themselves in a situation similar to that of the interpreters of spoken texts. But the comparison would be misleading, because in the case of alphabetic signs, printed or handwritten, recourse to a list of discrete symbols is presupposed, irrespective of whether they are written down more or less legibly. In the case of speech instead the relation between a set of discrete phonological units and their phonetic realizations is more complex and problematic.

Philologists are used to dealing with written texts, and linguists tend to start from spoken ones, but even these are mostly presented in a written form (which in the case of phoneticians may be a phonetic transcription rather than ordinary spelling). Both philologists and linguists generally assume that familiarity with the language is essential in dealing with hermeneutic questions. But for the interpretation of a specific message a knowledge of what is being discussed is equally important.

In the word I was trying to interpret it seemed likely that the initial consonant was a sibilant, in the

middle there was a voiced velar stop, and at the end a mid back rounded vowel. Two possibilities which occurred to me were 'sughetto' and 'spaghetto'. But what finally allowed me to decide that the word in question was 'segreto' was simply the discovery that this was in fact the name of a sauce that Woody Allen happened to be familiar with. I suspect that no amount of linguistic knowledge would have provided me with an answer to a question which needed factual information about the topic. And if this is the case with what is uttered today in the communities in which we live and whose language we share, how inordinate must the difficulties be in interpreting messages (written or spoken) produced in contexts far removed from us, in time, space and language.

I am pleased that my encounter with Woody Allen's 'segreto' gave me an opportunity to reflect on these questions as well as to enjoy Gino's pasta sauce.

**Note**

1. Tintoretto Observed. A Documentary Survey of Critical Reactions from the 16th to the 20th Century. Longo Editore: Ravenna, 1983. Published in Italian as Davanti a Tintoretto. Una storia del gusto attraverso i secoli. Prefazione di Carlo Ginzburg. Marsilio: Venice, 1998.

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