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The Dark Mirror: Mambrino Roseo's “Utopian” *Speculum Principis*

The great season of Italian Renaissance utopias writings reflected a proliferation of utopias generated, for the most part, after the success and widespread circulation of More's eponymous work. Utopian writers such as Anton Francesco Doni, Francesco Patrizi and Tommaso Campanella drew inspiration both from Thomas More and from More's own model, Plato's *Republic*.

Mambrino Roseo, a lawyer, historian, poet and courtier from Pesaro who lived in the first part of the sixteenth century was the first author to introduce in Italy a literary work that included the description of a utopian society. However, unlike other utopias of the Italian Renaissance, he did not look at England for inspiration, but at Spain. His main source was in fact the Spanish courtier and bishop of Mondoñedo (Galicia) Antonio Guevara, who was born in Santander, Spain, around 1480. In 1529, Guevara published his *Relox de los principes*, which he had written in 1518, a mere two years after the publication of More's *Utopia*. Guevara claimed that the *Relox* was not an original work, but rather his own rendering of a Greek manuscript. The fact that Guevara did not know Greek suggests that, as it was common in the Renaissance, he used this expedient to give the *Relox* a veneer of authority¹. Guevara was himself somewhat of an authority in his own time, and in fact the *Relox* enjoyed great fortune and was widely translated throughout Europe².

Mambrino Roseo, inspired by Guevara's work, published in 1543 an *Instituzione del prencipe cristiano*. Although Roseo did not give complete credit to Guevara, he freely used and embellished Guevara's *Relox*. Like the *Relox*, the *Instituzione* was meant to be a typical Renaissance treatise on the virtues and vices of a Christian prince. The inception of Roseo's treatise, titled *Elogio dei*

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*Garamanti*³, consisted of the fictional description of an encounter between the secluded population of the *Garamants* and Alexander the Great during his journey to India.

Although no historical document of such encounter exists in classical sources, a population with the same name living the Saharan region is often mentioned in classical texts: *Extremi Garamantes*, called them Virgil in the Eclogues, meaning that they lived at the extreme frontier of civilization. From Tacitus we know of their feisty and proud character, while Lucanus mentioned their nudity. Strabo on the other hand, wrote that they had simple clothing, and foods. Travel accounts of the 16th century still describe the Garamants as a handsome people with children and wives in common.

However, the Saharan region where the Garamants were supposed to have lived was not on Alexander's route to India⁴. Roseo's account placed them much more towards the East. Such discrepancy suggests that Roseo's interest in this population was of a didascalical nature. The Garamants represented an *exemplum* of a different social order and lifestyle, based on sources that stressed the simple communal life. In emphasizing their frugality and virtuous life, Roseo tried to make them into a paragon of morality and political virtue.

According to Roseo, Alexander, hearing of these secluded people, sent them his ambassadors, requesting a meeting. Although the Garamants were reluctant to meet anyone outside their community, they sent an elder citizen (un *vecchio garamanta*, as Roseo calls him) to confer with Alexander. During his speech, the Garamant expressed his contempt for Alexander's ascent to power and the many shortcomings of the Greek society. He then proposed an alternative model way of living, by explaining the customs of his people.

The first part of the Garamant's speech is more theoretical, and it offers a series of considerations about politics and the value of good government. It openly addresses the prices of the world, thereby stating its function as *speculum principis*.

"E' costume, Alessando, fra' Garamanti parlarsi poche volte l'un l'altro; e quasi mai parlare con forastieri, specialmente se sono sediziosi o

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scandalosi... quel che noi diremo più servirà ad esempio a' precipi futuri, acciocché sappiano... "5

The message to future princes is based on a philanthropic and rather personal view of power and politics. It is unbecoming of any human being to engage in wars that will produce only widows and poor, and it is immoral to accumulate riches if that will deprive other fellow human beings. Good government consists not in killing the innocent, but in slaying tyrants, punishing criminals, and rewarding good citizens.

"Non e' altro che più abbellisca la maestà del prencipe che nel far grazie, mostrar la sua grandezza, e nel torre, non mostrare avarizia"6.

The Garamant openly accuses Alexander of indiscriminate accumulation of wealth and power, and of being myopic about his country's future. Powers and honors should only go to those princes who are humble enough to think of themselves as undeserving of them, whereas those who aspire to worldly honors and richness should for this very reason be deprived of them. Greed is possibly the greatest evil for the society, and princes should not act as if they were immortal, they should ignore worldly possessions and work at being remembered fondly by their subjects as great human beings.

In delivering his critique of the Western societies and of Alexander's ascent to power, the Garamant embodies two classical *topoi* of political and utopian literature: the noble savage and the traveler-philosopher. As a noble-savage, he exhibits a stronger sense of morality than his Greek interlocutor, Alexander. As a traveler-philosopher, he looks at the Western society with a typically "estranged" eye, and detects with greater clarity its inevitable baseness.

However, Roseo's conceptualization of what constitutes good government does not go past a series of moralistic and rather generic recommendations for future princes. Even his reference to the irrationality and immorality of indiscriminate accumulation, "egli è suprema pazzia far molti poveri per far te solo ricco"7 should be ascribed not to any radical idea of communal life and redistribution of goods, but to a rather tamer idea of Christian generosity and compassion for other human beings.

The second part of the oration, where the Garamant describes life in his village, is much shorter and decidedly more radical. Impracticable mountains surrounded the village of the Garamants, who lived an extremely austere life, they did not speak very much, wore similar clothes made from the same fabric, and owned few worldly possessions.

Their laws were few and strict. The necessity of a simpler *corpus* of laws was a recurrent motif in Renaissance utopias, as it was perceived as a necessary measure to curb the influence of lawyers in the society. Both Thomas More (himself a lawyer) and Tommaso Campanella either lamented the influence of lawyers or proposed solutions destined to limit the number of laws in their utopias.

Most of the utopian part of the Garamant's speech is a description of their seven laws. Roseo takes great care in giving a reason for each of the laws.

1. The promulgation of new laws was prohibited, as new laws prompted people to forget the good old costumes.
2. Only two gods were allowed: one for life, one for death. It was better to worship one god for real than a thousand without faith.
3. People were required to wear the same style of clothes, made with the same fabric, because a variety in clothes led to craziness and scandal.
4. Women were required to abstain from sexual practices after the third child, because a numerous family made men greedy. Any child born after the third was sacrificed to the gods in front of the mother.
5. Telling the truth was mandated by law. Mendacity was punished with decapitation.
6. Heirs inherited money and possessions in the same amount, because desire for riches created envy and scandals in the republic.
7. Women could only live until 40 and men until 50 years of age. After that age they had to be sacrificed to the Gods (because, says the text, the perspective of a long life led men to depravation.)⁸.

Because of such a stern legislation, the Garamants live in complete harmony. They do not worry about overpopulation, and about taking care of the elderly. As in other utopias of the

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Renaissance, women are considered second-class citizens, although they have a somewhat prominent role in the legislation when it comes to matters of reproduction, and in certain cases, of the care for the household and the rearing of children.

Some of the harsh practices of the Garamant community suggest that the social model for Roseo's utopia might have been ancient Sparta. The measure of its harshness is shown in the way its inhabitants live and in what they have to endure in order for the community to function harmoniously. Although in every utopia individuals must assume a certain amount of responsibilities for the sake of a harmonious community, most of these societies offer several advantages, such as extended support from other fellow human beings, limited working hours, and so on. Thomas More, for example, was aware of such balance of advantages and disadvantages, therefore in his *Utopia* he ascribed great importance to the concept of individual pleasure and merriment.

However, there seem to be very few advantages in Roseo's utopia, since the author is mostly interested in this society as a model of virtue, not in the happiness of its inhabitants. The old Garamant, who is soon to face mandatory death because of age, is a highly moral individual, although not necessarily a happy one. Although the Garamants are not Christian, their concept of virtue is deeply intertwined with the concept of abnegation, just like in Christianity. It is only through an embedded concept of abnegation that they can endure the harshness of their life. Although romantic love is discouraged, love for their society, which amounts to a form of self-sacrifice, is what keeps the improbable world of the Garamants together.

Far from being a project for a better society, Roseo's description of the Garamants, who used capital punishment to indiscriminately eradicate old age, mendacity and overpopulation, is more a cry for a simpler way of life, sparked by a preoccupation with famine and the corruption of the world.

It is unusual for a utopian narration of this period to display a utopian dweller who steps into the foreground and tells his story in his own words, without any mediation from the traveller-narrator. The Renaissance did not favour this particular way of describing a utopia, perhaps because, the estranged nature of the utopian dweller,

who is supposed to ignore all about our society and looks at it with a curious and perplexed eye, never sounded quite believable. However, firsthand narration has the advantage of endowing a utopian dweller with a personality, thereby eliminating some of the anthropological uniformity that characterized most Renaissance literary utopias.

In order to achieve the perfect society, most utopists employ a process of separation from the society where they happen to live. Usually, such separation happens through a journey, sometimes through a dream or through physical walls around the utopian community. However, in Roseo's *Elogio dei Garamanti*, such a separation remains incomplete and unidirectional. The reader is separated from the Garamants in the sense that he does not know anything about them except for what the Garamant describes in a few pages. On the other hand the Garamant, although physically and geographically separated from the Greek society, is knowledgeable of it to the point of articulately discussing its shortcomings. He comes across as too civilized, too well informed about Alexander's history to be a plausible savage.

Chronologically, this is the first Italian utopia, and it bears some resemblance to More's *Utopia*. Similarly to Thomas More, Roseo merges two modes of discourse, the *specula principum* with the motif of the journey. In addition, like the *Utopia*, Roseo's is a speech about an imaginary better society. However, it is not placed in the present or a wishful future but in classical past. In addition, it is the first utopia in which a utopian dweller steps on the foreground and speaks about his own life and people.

Roseo's contribution to the history of Italian utopias is a *contaminatio* of the genre of utopia with the genre of *speculum principis*, thereby showing their common roots. In Roseo's narrative, the *speculum principis* motif is more prominent than the utopian motif, while the description of the Garamants functions as a hyperbolic appendix. Nevertheless, while the *speculum principis* part is unoriginal and rather formulaic, the utopian part is highly inventive and radical in its solutions.

Unlike Thomas More, who envisioned an ideal society that emphasized the happiness and serenity of its citizens, Roseo constructed a curiously negative utopia, combining motives from

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ancient Sparta with a very strict monastic life. In this sense, the function of Roseo's utopia is much clearer than Thomas More is. While More represented his *Utopia* both as an imaginary and a perfect society, thereby allowing *de facto* the possibility of its application in the real world, such ambiguity is absent in Roseo. His society may be imaginary, but it is not perfect. While More made his *Utopia* a very attractive place to live, in fact even attractive enough to be applied in the real world⁹, there is no doubt that Roseo's ideal society is not meant to be applied anywhere.

In the twentieth century, John Rawls wrote that a good society is a place where one would choose to live no matter his position in the society¹⁰. Most Utopias of the Renaissance would probably fail this simple test. Mambrino Roseo proposed a society so undesirable that, no matter one's position in it, one would *not* choose to live in it. In presenting his dark *speculum principis*, he introduced the least desirable utopia of all. In so doing, and well ahead of his time, Mambrino Roseo was able to give a different spin to the utopian genre, and created a completely new literary construct, one that will have great fortune in the tormented Twentieth century: the first Italian, and possibly European, dystopia.

¹Introduction // *The Diall of Princes, by Don Anthony Guevara*. Translation by Sir Thomas North and Introduction by K. N. Colvile. - London: Philip Allan, 1919. - P.XIV.

²*Carlo Curcio*. Utopisti italiani del Cinquecento. - Roma: Colombo, 1944. - P.39; *The Diall of Princes, by Don Anthony Guevara*. Translation by Sir Thomas North and Introduction by K.N.Colvile. - London: Philip Allan, 1919.

³Antonio de Guevara (1480-1545 ca.): *Libro llamado relox de lo principes, en qual va incorporado el muy famoso libro de Marco Aurelio*. It contains the story of the Garamants, a population that Alexander the Great was said to have encountered during his trip to India. This story is inspired by the life of Alexander written by Curtius Rufus.

⁴According to Carlo Curcio the historical Garamants "lived in the lands west of Nubia, nowadays called Fezzan" (*ibidem*, 56). The land that they inhabited was called Garama, or Gierma. However, Roseo placed the land of the Garamantes on Alexander the Great's route. Curcio notes that such notion stemmed from a confusion between Garama in Africa and Garamea, a region to the East of the Middle Tigris river, although Alexander's route did not touch that region either.

⁵Mambrino Roseo, "Elogio dei Garamanti", *Carlo Curcio*. Utopisti italiani del Cinquecento - Roma: Colombo, 1944 - P.45.

⁶*Ibidem*. - P.49.

⁷*Ibidem*. - P.47.

⁸Incidentally, such practice would make of "*il vecchio Garamanta*" a man in his late forties. The motif of killing people when they start aging is a recurrent topos present in many literatures even in contemporary times. To give an example, Tom Robbins's *Jitterbug Perfume* takes its inspiration from the story of a king who refused the barbaric practice of his country to execute rulers at the first appearance of a gray hair. In this story, the king runs away from his own people on a quest for immortality. See *Tom Robbins, Jitterbug Perfume*. - New York: Bantam Books, 1984.

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⁹In the seventeenth century, Bishop Vasco de Quiroga used Thomas More's *Utopia* as a blueprint for the foundation of two small communities in Mexico. See *Silvio Zavala*, "Sir Thomas More in New Spain. A Utopian Adventure of the Renaissance." - 1955; *Essential Articles for the Study of Thomas More*. Richard Sylvester and Germaine Marc'Hadoure, eds. - Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1977. - P.302-312 and *Fintan B. Warren*. Vasco de Quiroga and his Pueblo-Hospitals of Santa Fe. - Washington: Academy of American Franciscan History, 1963.

¹⁰See *Ruth Levitas* The concept of Utopia. - Ithaca: Syracuse University Press, 1990. -P.184.