

# The Power of Words: Sarpi's Use of Language in Making History

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Paolo Sarpi (1552–1623) – the Servite friar who gained international notoriety for his opposition to the Church and for his anti-papal work the *History of the Council of Trent* (1619), smuggled into England, printed in London and placed on the index of censored books by the ecclesiastic institutions – pioneered a clear and pointed narrative voice in his works, introducing a new way of writing history. Sarpi avoided eccentric redundancy and excessive emphasis, moving away from the so-called baroque style which spread across Europe in the late sixteenth century, influencing the creation of music, art, prose and poetry and popularizing a rhetorical and artificial imagining of words and their meanings (Getto, *Barocco* 11–59). While baroque prose aimed to create “l’illusione della forma,”<sup>1</sup> eliminating the borders between reality and appearances, Sarpi’s writing style eschewed the emptiness of appearances in order to examine the concreteness of reality. Baroque authors sought to produce “effects of wonder,” interrupting the normal course of events with extravagant and whimsical elements (Battistini 53). In contrast, Sarpi rejected material which did not reflect reality or which sent a false and enigmatic message purely to astonish the reader. He adopted a prose designed to unmask deceptions and falsehoods in political and religious discourse, and employed “a rhetoric of the anti-rhetoric” (Burke 105), a prose suited to clear, vigorous, cold and dry objectivity. By describing events and situations with detachment, Sarpi avoided the contemporary tendency to move the reader to an emotional state of drama, tension and exuberance. His clear and sober prose aimed at rationality, not formalism. Sarpi originated a style in which thought and form corresponded completely, without being embedded in artificial expressions. But how did this sober and unadorned writing become

1 “Più di ogni altra categoria stilistica, il barocco ha fatto dono alla modernità di questo acuto cliname (apice e istante, vuoto) della reversibilità e, in essa, dell’illusione della forma” (Ossola xxxiii).

such an efficient means of fulfilling his purpose? How did Sarpi transform written words into weapons, and make of his pen a sharp dagger with which to threaten the clergy of Rome and the Papacy?

### “Guerra delle scritture” (The War of the Writings)

In 1606, the controversy of the interdict between Venice and Rome degenerated into a harsh conflict between the Republic and Pope Paul V. Determined to defend its independence, Venice rebuffed the papal authority and was excommunicated by the Pope. This was not the first time in Venice’s history that relations with the Roman Curia had moved the Pope to impose an interdict on the Republic, but this time the conflict produced a very bitter exchange of writings.<sup>2</sup> During the period of the interdict, pamphlets, polemics, letters and sermons proliferated, along with an outpouring of official treatises as a range of political and religious figures felt compelled to express their opinion either in favor of the Catholic Church or of the Venetian Republic.

Sarpi published the first pamphlet of the controversy and, as in the writings that were to follow, he avoided exposing himself. As legal adviser of the Republic, he ensured that his pamphlets were anonymous and published them with a false date and location (de Vivo, *Patrizi* 90, 93). In the “consulto” *Che cosa importi l’aggravatoria della scomunica*, Sarpi encourages writing pamphlets as

informazioni al mondo con manifesti e scritture così *in iure* come *in facto* della validità delle ragioni proprie e della invalidità di quelle del papa. (Sarpi, *Consulti* 475)<sup>3</sup>

In other words, those opposing the Church of Rome gain strength by publishing their own explanations of events and by disseminating valid opinions about political and religious circumstances in order to refute the information spread by the enemy.

During the interdict, the pitting of words against words and of writings against writings swayed readers’ favor by turns toward the Venetian Republic and the Church of Rome.<sup>4</sup> The term “war of writings” was coined by Sarpi

- 2 From the thirteenth century several popes had imposed an interdict on Venice: Innocent III in 1201, Martin IV in 1282, Clement V in 1309, Sixtus IV in 1482 and Julius II in 1509.
- 3 “the information through published works asserts that the own reasons, by law and by fact, are correct and the Pope’s reasons are false.” All translations are mine.
- 4 The main figures of this exchange of writings were Bishop Bellarmino and Paolo Sarpi. On Bellarmino and his role as a representative of the papal Curia, see Frajese, 139–152. On “The explosion of communication,” during the Interdict see de Vivo, *Information and Communication*, 187–199.

in his role as the main propagandist for the Venetian cause – a war, as he conceived it, in which the Pope was the aggressor against whom the Republic must defend itself (“[...] un'altra sorte di guerra, fatta con scritture, offensiva dal canto del pontefice, e difensiva dal canto della repubblica”: Sarpi, *Istoria dell'Interdetto* 102).<sup>5</sup> Sarpi, opining that “there is strength not only in arms but in words,” (non nelle sole armi sta la forza, ma nelle parole ancora),<sup>6</sup> uses his writing ability to condemn the supremacy of the Church of Rome and the injustices committed by the ecclesiastical authorities.

Fourteen years after the interdict, in his 1621 work *Del Confutar scritture Malediche*, Sarpi resumes his theme of the power of words to overcome the spread of slander and calumny. He advises that mischievous writings should be

Con opporli altre scritture che scuoprino la malignità e falsità insieme, e mettendo le cose in chiaro servino a confonder li malevoli, confermare li ben affetti ed imprimer il vero nelli titubanti. (*Opere* 1173)<sup>7</sup>

For the Servite, the written word had the power to unveil deceit, clarify the facts, and – by drawing attention to the lack of integrity, respectability and credibility of his opponents – sway the minds of the undecided to his cause. Sarpi compares the exchange of writings in a “writing war” to an armed battle fought not only in self-defense but to expose the deficiencies of the foe, ruining his reputation and winning support to one’s own side (“nelle battaglie armate, quanto anche nelle litterarie non c’è maggiore miseria che stare sopra la sola difesa”: Sarpi, *Opere* 1174).<sup>8</sup>

During the interdict of the 1606, the “war of writing” had important political consequences, as it was the first time that so many political and religious figures had participated actively in a dispute with papal authority. The Venetian opposition offered a legal shelter to all those who did not wish to obey the papal injunctions but feared punishment; at the same time, it brought together in a close alliance a number of minor clergy who had long felt oppressed by the ravages of the papacy (de Vivo, “Dall’ imposizione del silenzio” 195). Sarpi above all, as the leader of the “war of writing,” demonstrates that words could become a strong weapon with which to threaten and unsettle the papal authority.

5 “another kind of war, made with writings, with the pontiff on the offensive and the Republic on the defensive.”

6 “Trattato intorno alla Scomunica” in Capasso, xxxii.

7 “[o]pposed with other writings that bring malice and falsehood into the open together, putting the record straight in order to confound the malicious, confirm what is good, and impress the truth upon those who are hesitant.”

8 “In armed battles, as in literary ones, there is no greater misery than being only on the defensive.”

### Logical semanticism in Sarpi's writing

Sarpi's prose is shorn of adornment, repetition and superficial elements and works instead on the basis of logic and effective sequencing. Let us note, however, that Sarpi's seemingly simple, plain language is the product of a careful selection of words with precise meanings. In his effort to offer a clear exposition of the facts, he enhances the power of the literal meaning of words, thereby stripping them of false syllogism (Luisa Cozzi 36–47). Sarpi points out that philosophy's task is "scoprir gl'inganni delle parole e ancor de'concetti" (to discover the deception of words and concepts," *Pensieri* no. 553: 414–415)<sup>9</sup> and praises William of Ockham's enquiry into the difference between words and concepts ("E questa è tutta l'impresa di Ocamo").<sup>10</sup>

Sarpi's semantic arguments on the value of the language recall Ockham's analysis of the concept displayed in *Summa Logicae*.<sup>11</sup> Ockham focused his attention on the meaning, truth and effectiveness of words in language and elaborated his own theory about how language, thought and reality work together to develop reasonable and persuasive arguments. The English philosopher underlined the relation that exists between word (spoken term) and concept (mental content) and explained that words are signs subordinated to mental concepts (1: 9).

Like Ockham, Sarpi believed that the semantic proprieties of an argument depended on the "signification" of the language signs and on the definition of particular idioms that are mental representations called "concepts." Both Sarpi and Ockham focused on the analysis of the relation between words and the concepts that they signified. Sarpi highlighted the importance of the correspondence between concepts and words in order to elaborate a rational discourse, even though in some cases the signs do not represent the concepts.

9 In 1996, Luisa Cozzi e Libero Sosio published 675 *Pensieri* together with *Pensieri sulla religione* and *Arte di Ben Pensare* in *Pensieri naturali, metafisici e matematici*.

10 "This is all Ockham's work." Ockham's influence on Sarpi is easily seen in *Pensieri*. In *Pensieri* no. 419: 317, when he explains the phenomenon of the motion as succession, Sarpi again cites his source: "Ocamo deffinisce (defines): successio est relatio ad non esse praecedens et negatio partis posterioris." In *Pensieri* no. 346: 274, no. 347: 275, no. 374: 287, no. 417: 317, no. 581: 431, even though Sarpi does not cite Ockham, the reference to the British philosopher is explicit. Sarpi holds Ockham in great regard; in a letter to the French Protestant lawyer and writer François Hotman, Sarpi displays his preference for Ockham's philosophy over any other scholastic philosopher (*Lettere ai Gallicani* 173).

11 William of Ockham, scholastic philosopher and theologian, was born between 1280 and 1285, probably in the little town of Ockham, southwest of London, England. He died in 1347 in Munich, Germany. He advocated a reform of Scholasticism both in method and in content. His main work is *Summa Logicae*, written around 1323, published in Paris in 1448, in Bologna in 1498, in Venice in 1508, and in Oxford in 1675. This work contains the account of Ockham's nominalism.

He pointed out that it is not always the case that there is an exact correlation between what we now call the signified and the signifier. He writes,

Le voci sono segni de' concetti e i concetti delle cose. Per altro vi son molte voci alle quali non corrisponde verun concetto, e molti concetti a' quali alcuna cosa non corrisponde. (*Pensieri* no. 347: 275)<sup>12</sup>

But, because ideas and thoughts are represented by language signs, it is not always easy to agree upon what single meaning is expressed by the sign: a sign can refer to different concepts, creating a misunderstanding for the reader. Sarpi asserts,

Vi sono molte voci rappresentative del medesimo concetto e molti concetti la cosa medesima, sotto diversi modi di concepirla, rappresentano. Finalmente una voce figura molti concetti, e più volte un concetto molte cose. (*Pensieri* no. 347: 275)<sup>13</sup>

He is aware of the role of language not only as an instrument of communication but as a means through which human beings can become conscious of their reasoning achievements. Knowledge acquisition is based on language. Concepts are a product of language that allows people to elaborate their own thoughts. Sarpi claims,

Il concetto non viene dalla cosa prodotto, sì come dal sensibile proprio la specie, ma dalla discorsiva causato viene, ond'è che uno è commune a più cose ed una cosa sola molti significano. La nostra conoscitiva è discorsiva: dunque non sappiamo di conoscere se non quello che col discorso conosciamo. (*Pensieri* no. 417: 317)<sup>14</sup>

This claim recalls Ockham's theory of knowledge, where the universals exist only in the human mind. Sarpi supports the idea that language is a product of human beings and argues that as a result, human knowledge starts with the knowledge of individual things for which there are signs in the human mind. Ockham's influence is clear in the following:

Dico autem voces esse signa subordinata conceptibus seu intentionibus animae, non quia proprie accipiendo hoc vocabulum 'signa' ipsae voces

12 "Entries are signs of concepts and concepts are signs of things. Moreover, there are many entries to which there is no corresponding concept, and many concepts to which nothing at all corresponds."

13 "There are many entries that represent the same concept and many concepts that represent the same thing depending on the way each is conceived. In the end, an entry represents many concepts, and even more often, a concept represents many things."

14 "The concept is not the product of a thing in the way that the specie is a product of its own being, but is caused by speech, where one thing is common to other things and one thing has many meanings. Our knowledge is discursive; therefore we acquire knowledge only through speech."

semper significant ipsos conceptus animae primo et proprie, sed quia voces imponuntur ad significandum illa eadem, quae per conceptus mentis significantur, ita quod conceptus primo naturaliter aliquid significat, et secundario vox significant illud idem, in tantum quod voce instituta ad significandum aliquid significatum per conceptum mentis. (*Summa Logicae* 9)<sup>15</sup>

Sarpi also shares Ockham's assertion that a definition of connotative things is a vocal definition, that is, a sign established conventionally (*Opera Philosophica* 505–519). He also points out that the concept is a product of the elaboration of linguistic signs and that human knowledge is based on what can be understood through language. According to Sarpi, learning and reasoning proceed primarily through language because human knowledge is closely tied to what is shaped by language. In the conclusion of the short treatise *Arte di Ben Pensare* (The Art of Thinking Well), Sarpi makes his thoughts about language clear:

Ed il concetto non è imagine della cosa impressa da lei, come da idea, la quale è sempre simile, ma è imagine fabbricata a sua similitudine, la quale non esprime dell'idea se non quanto l'artefice è atto ad imitare. (*Pensieri* 598)<sup>16</sup>

Sarpi's analysis of language was intended to demonstrate that language was a human creation; that words were invented to express the ideas in the mind of the speaker. His conclusion is therefore that words are subjected to misuse and, consequently, become the source of errors and deceits.

### **Sarpi, Locke and the essentiality of words' meaning**

John Locke's later (1689) *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, a treatise devoted to the foundation of human knowledge and to the nature of language, recalls some of Sarpi's claims on language, positing, as the Servite friar did, the central role that language has in human cognition. Even though Locke's biographers and critics do not mention Sarpi's influence on him, there are clear similarities between Sarpi's and Locke's theories of knowledge and philosophy of language. The connection between semantic inquiry and

15 "I say that spoken words are signs subordinated to concepts or intentions of the soul not because they strictly 'signify,' but because they always signify the concepts of the soul primarily and properly and because spoken words intend to signify the things that are signified by concepts of the mind so that a concept primarily and naturally signifies something and a spoken word signifies the same thing secondarily, since a spoken word is used to signify something signified by a concept of the mind."

16 "The concept is not the image of the thing impressed by it so much as it is the pre-determined idea that is always similar, but it is only a manufactured image in its likeness, which does not express the idea so much as it expresses the author's imitation of the thing in itself."

knowledge that has been considered exclusive to Locke by Norman Kretzmann needs to be reevaluated in the light of Sarpi's *Pensieri* and his *Arte di Ben Pensare* (379–380).<sup>17</sup>

In *Della Letteratura Veneziana*, Foscarini argues that Sarpi anticipated Locke's "sensationalism" and explains the way in which Locke's method on language was drawn from Sarpi's theories (330–331n). Foscarini points out that what Sarpi wrote in a clear and concise way in the few pages of the *Arte di Ben Pensare* was further developed by Locke in his thousand-page work *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (331n). Similarly, recalling Foscarini's passage in *Del genio di fra Paolo Sarpi*, Grisellini claims that Locke based his theory of knowledge and language on Sarpi's philosophy (2: 56–58).

In Book 3 of his *Essay*, Locke describes the importance of words with respect to communication between humans. Locke claims that words "signify nothing immediately but the ideas in the mind of the speaker" (2: 32) and adds that

the meaning of words being only the ideas they are made to stand for by him that uses them, the meaning of any term is then showed, or the word is defined, when, by other words, the idea it is made the sign of, and annexed to, in the mind of the speaker, is as it were represented, or set before the view of another. (2: 34)

Sarpi and Locke both believe that words represent ideas and ideas are presumed in turn to represent things. Moreover, like Sarpi, Locke regards words as sources of confusion and error if they are misused or abused. Locke argues that the misuse of language occurs when a speaker or writer uses "words without clear or distinct ideas; or, which is worse, signs without anything signified" (2: 122). He details other linguistic pitfalls: "Another great abuse of words is inconstancy in the use of them" and "an affected obscurity; by either applying old words to new and unusual signification" (2: 125–126). Again, like Sarpi, Locke dislikes the art of rhetoric and prefers order and precision because, he argues,

all the artificial and figurative application of words eloquence hath invented, are for nothing else but to insinuate wrong ideas, move to passions, and thereby mislead the judgment. (2: 146)

Sarpi's analysis of language introduced a new kind of inquiry, followed up by Locke, which was again taken up in the twentieth century with the devel-

17 Kretzmann, in his influential article, "The Main Thesis of Locke's Semantic Theory," claims that Locke was the first to bring a principal innovation in the field of linguistic theory. Beyond Kretzmann, on a new interpretation of Locke's argument about the nature of language, see Ott.

opment of a theory of language as a human activity based on the abstract organization of signs.<sup>18</sup> It aimed to correlate human speech and writing with the essence and signification of words. In his work, he used specific, accurate words to reflect the reality of situations and to describe them as clearly and faithfully as possible. In the beginning of Book 3 of his *History of the Council of Trent*, Sarpi explains that, even though he knows the rules of writing history, nonetheless “ciascuna materia convenga la propria e singular forma” – in other words, his written style had to be appropriate to the topic he engaged, because “questa mia non possi essere formata con le ordinarie regole” (2: 3–4).<sup>19</sup> Similarly, at the beginning of Book 7, Sarpi writes that he did not adopt the received style of writing history but instead adjusted “la forma alla materia, non, come le scole vorrebbero, la materia alla forma” (3: 4).<sup>20</sup>

Sarpi thus introduced a language of historical prose that enhances meanings and descriptions and clarifies the logic of his arguments. Recovering words and their nominal stems, Sarpi was able to elaborate a natural, effective, energetic, precise and clear language. He was not worried about being a purist of the vernacular Italian and ignored the rules of the Accademia della Crusca.<sup>21</sup> He refused to write using the Tuscan dialect exclusively, instead adapting words to express his thought in the most effective way. In this way he was free to choose from the Venetian dialect and from Latin the words that fitted his purpose (Getto, *Paolo Sarpi* 335–336).<sup>22</sup> Sarpi developed a “modern” language, abandoning traditional literary models, and rejected the writing style of his contemporaries. Though he based his studies on humanist culture and demonstrated his familiarity with authors such as Homer, Virgil,

18 On the study of language and its use in communication, see Rossi-Landi, *Significato, comunicazione e parlare comune*; on research about the theory of the meaning in the twentieth century, see Collin and Guldman.

19 “Every topic needs to fit into his own and singular style,” “my [style] cannot follow the ordinary rules.”

20 “The form to the subject, not, as schools would like, the subject to the form.”

21 The Accademia della Crusca was founded in Florence in 1582 and established rules in order to maintain the “purity” of the original Italian language. The Accademia promoted the Florentine language according to the model of vernacular classicism established by Pietro Bembo, who idealized fourteenth-century Italian authors, especially Dante, Boccaccio and Petrarch. The *Vocabolario degli Accademici della Crusca* was printed in Venice in 1612 under the guidance of Leonardo Salviati (1540–1589) and soon became the lexicographic model for other European countries, which sought to edit dictionaries of their respective national languages.

22 Since the *History of the Council of Trent* could not be published in Italy because of its controversial content, it was smuggled into England, turned into a book in London and published in English under the name Pietro Soave Polano (an anagram of Paolo Sarpi Veneto). Many more of Sarpi’s works were translated into English and back again, from English into Italian. Unfortunately, in some editions many dialect expressions have been lost in translation. On the “toscanizzazione” of the *History of the Council of Trent* see Zanon 289.

Ennius, Terence and Horace, he intentionally avoided following the classical models and wrote in a vernacular that could be understood by a wide and varied reading public.

### **Sarpi's fight against deceitful language**

Sarpi frequently showed his disapproval of his contemporaries' use of language, accusing many of using their rhetorical abilities to deceive others by communicating false information and opinion.<sup>23</sup> He argued that unclear and misleading language, produced by an ambiguous lexicon and a complex syntax, deliberately confuses the reader for the express purpose of concealing betrayals and dishonesties. Sarpi's fight against the Jesuits is expressed in his criticism of their doctrines and, above all, of the deceptive language in their teachings. In a letter sent to Jacques Leschassier on September 14, 1610, he writes,

Id quod de regicidio docent, perniciosissimum dogma est, fateor, quia inde rerum publicarum subversio, at id quod docent, licere verborum aequivocatione et mentali reservatione uti absque peccato, qua doctrina omne humanum commercium tollitur, et ars fallendi, qua nihil perniciosius in virtute ponitur, ausim, inquam, dicere hanc doctrinam ea quae de regibus occidentis est perniciosiorem esse. (*Lettere ai Gallicani* 90)<sup>24</sup>

In the same letter, Sarpi again emphasizes the danger of lexical ambiguity and, still referring to the Jesuits, writes, "sed illud magis, neminem posse eorum verbis, licet maxime mellitis, fidere" (90).<sup>25</sup> In *Trattato di pace e accommodamento*, Sarpi claims that the Jesuits have adopted the art of deception in order to further their own interests. He observes that the Jesuits use "[l]'arte d'ingannare gl'uomini con i giuramenti, come li fanciulli con le noci, insegnata già da un professore d'impietà" (*La Repubblica di Venezia, la Casa d'Austria e gli Usocchi* 142).<sup>26</sup> And again, in a letter to Francois Hotman, after expressing his opinion of the value of works written on ecclesiastical history, he points out that in reading the Jesuits' works it is important to "risolvere tutto il contrario di quello che dicono" (*Lettere ai Gallicani* 174).<sup>27</sup>

23 On language as a means to lead "innocents" into false opinions see Kainulainen 106–107.

24 "Their doctrine on regicide is dangerous because it would result in a disaster for the state, but their teaching – which is lawful and [technically] without sin, but uses ambiguous words and mental reservations (limitation of statements), this is the art of deception and is the most dangerous attack on virtue and I repeat that this doctrine is more damaging than the one having to do with regicide."

25 "no one can trust their words, although their words are much softened."

26 "The art of deceiving men with oaths like children [are deceived] with nuts has already been taught by a professor of wickedness."

27 "consider the opposite of what they say."

Sarpi criticizes Jesuit methodology both directly and indirectly and points out that the rich rhetoric embedded in their written prayers leads the reader to misunderstanding and confusion:

la lezione delle parole non rappresenta così facilmente il senso, essendo la contestatura piena di molti e inculcati iperbatî; quali se attentamente non sono separati dalle parti proprie della orazione, distraeno uno dopo l'altro la mente del lettore a diverse considerazioni, che quando è ridotto al fine, non sa che cosa abbia letto. (*Istoria del Concilio Tridentino* 2: 500)<sup>28</sup>

Examining the use of language in religious and political debates, Sarpi emphasizes that speeches lack clarity mainly because words are used incorrectly and thoughts are repetitious, disconnected, random and without discernable point. In his *History of the Council of Trent*, he points out that Pope Leo X's papal bull condemning Luther was so unclear as to be incomprehensible:

Ma gli uomini sensati vedendo la bolla di Leone restarono con meraviglia in più cose: prima quanto alla forma, che con clausule di palazzo il pontefice fosse venuto a dichiarazione di una materia che bisognava trattare con le parole della Scrittura divina [si erano usate] clausule tanto intricate e così lunghe e prolisse, che appena era possibile cavarne senso. (1: 20)<sup>29</sup>

In Book 7 of *History of the Council of Trent*, Sarpi explains that cardinals and bishops were engaged in discussion on the subject of dogmatic dissent without, in fact, aiming at a serious reform of the Church. He writes that Cardinal Seripando,<sup>30</sup> who asked for a second postponement of the session supposed to take place on November 26, remarked that during the council

Molti di loro volevano parlare degl'abusi senza accorgersi che il continuar tanto tempo in disputazioni vanamente senza alcun frutto, era un abuso grandissimo, necessario da levare, volendo veder fine del concilio con edificazione. (3: 86)<sup>31</sup>

28 “[...] the lesson of the words does not so easily define the logical sense because it contains many strained metaphors, which, if they are not carefully separated from the prayers, distract the reader’s mind, drawing it into different considerations and confusing the reader to the point that when he finishes, he does not know what he has read.”

29 “Men of understanding marveled at Leo’s bull, for the Pope’s declaration with respect to the words of the Holy Scripture was written in such an intricate, lengthy and prolix manner that it was scarcely possible to draw out any sense from it.”

30 Girolamo Seripando (1493–1563) was second legate of the Holy See at the Council of Trent and later became first president of the Council. Hubert Jedin, scholar of the sacred science, celebrated Cardinal Seripando as a Catholic reformer in *Papal Legate at the Council of Trent, Cardinal Seripando*, pointing out that even though the Cardinal worked tirelessly to make a Catholic Reform a reality, he did not succeed in determining the crucial difference between the Catholic thought of St Augustine and its Lutheran interpretation.

31 “Many of them wanted to talk about the abuses without noticing that disputing at such length in vain and with no result was itself a great abuse that should be abandoned in order to see the end of the council in an edifying manner.”

Sarpi points out the way in which Seripando defined the uselessness and superfluity of the discussions as having

la troppa libertà d'entrare in quelle questioni e l'ardimento di trattar della potestà del papa, tutto vanamente e soverchiamente, con repetizioni delle medesime cose, dieci e più volte dette e da alcuni anche con raggioni frivole e con modi inetti, indegni di quel consesso. (3: 87)<sup>32</sup>

Recalling Cardinal Seripando's opinion, Sarpi underlines one of the principal reasons that the Council failed. According to him, the discussions among Catholics and between Catholics and Protestants were based on long and fruitless conversations that failed to address the central, vital questions. Unfortunately, words did not correspond to actions, showing the great inefficiency of this method of operating. In *History of the Council of Trent*, Sarpi demonstrates the uselessness of the meetings, describing the Cardinal of Mantua's refusal to return to the Council because the Cardinal "non aveva più faccia di comparir in congregazione per dar solamente parole, come aveva fatto due anni continui" (3: 155).<sup>33</sup>

Moreover, the distorted use of words was another element that contributed to the failure of the Council. In his letters, Sarpi often complains of the misuse of words in juridical and religious contemporary speeches and shows his disappointment in the destruction of the words' original definitions, the result of attempting to create new meanings to achieve private ends. In a letter to Leschassier dated May 13, 1608, Sarpi describes religious arguments from Ancient Rome (402–448), used by the ecclesiastical authorities to defend the freedom of the Catholic Church from secular power. In the same letter, he highlights the complete difference of the situation in his time, as the ecclesiastics, instead of imitating the ecclesiastical authorities of the past, contributed to the subordination of the Church to political intrigues through a misuse of the language. According to Sarpi, this misuse helped the contemporary Church to embrace the secular power and hide its venal actions. He claims that the different meanings attributable to their words compromised the truth of the doctrines, and after citing examples from the origin of the history of the Church, writes

32 "[...] much freedom in entering into such matters, and boldness in negotiating with the pope's authority, all in vain and with repetitions of the same things which have been said ten or more times, and by some with frivolous reasons and in inept ways, unworthy of that assembly."

33 "No longer had the courage to appear in the congregation to offer nothing more than words, as he had continuously done for the prior two years." In 1561, Cardinal Ercole of Mantua (1505–1563) was named legate to the Council of Trent by Pius IV. On his role at the Council of Trent see Murphy 196–244.

Et in hoc arbitror situm esse discrimen inter illius saeculi usum, et huius abusum. Nos enim iisdem vocibus servatis, quod pro tuenda ecclesiae libertate fuerat, vel constitutum vel usu scriptum, ad eam expugnadam defleximus. (*Lettere ai Gallicani* 11)<sup>34</sup>

In another letter to Leschassier written on September 14, 1610, Sarpi again expresses his disappointment with the contemporary situation. He argues that

[o]mnia examinamus ex veterum scriptis ac doctrina, verum significationem omnium vocum illis usitatarum mutavimus. Iam non idem apud nos quod apud illos significant papa, cardinalis, diaconus, ecclesia, catholicus, haereticus, martyr. Quid aliud dicam? Omnia pervertimus, et dum antiquorum monumenta producere profitemur, nostra proferimus. (93)<sup>35</sup>

In his denunciation of the deceptive language of the Jesuits and the ecclesiastical authorities, Sarpi points out the unreliability and falseness of the contemporary Church. In contrast, he presents himself as an alternative to the deceitfulness of his time. And, in the very corrupt clerical environment, Sarpi stands out for his honesty and morality – necessary qualities for gaining respect and credibility. Sarpi, who was persecuted by Pope Paul V and denigrated by the Roman Church, is the perfect example of one who could offer a valid opposition. His entire life had been lived with a consistency and integrity that placed him above the mass of the corrupted clergy.<sup>36</sup>

### The “truth of the facts”

At this point, it is clear that one of Sarpi’s methods of strengthening the “truth of the facts” was the recovery of the original meaning of words to create a clear and syntactically well-organized language and the use of a lexicon suited to accuracy of description. Sarpi developed a unique style. His approach to the historical events is objective and his propensity is to treat history as

34 “And this, I think, is the difference between the use [of words] in that century and their abuse in this one. In fact, we have used the same words to oppress freedom that we did to build the defense of the freedom of the Church.”

35 “We examine all of the ancients’ writings and doctrines but we change the meaning of all of the words they used. For us, the following words do not have the same meaning that they had in their time: pope, cardinal, deacon, church, Catholic, heretic, martyr. What else to say? We have distorted everything, and while we claim to publish the works of the ancients, we have produced our own.”

36 In northern Europe, Sarpi was held in high esteem and was the most frequently translated Italian writer of the era. His writings were interpreted as an invitation to inaugurate a revived religion, purified of sin and corruption. See Wootton 78–104.

scientific subject. Momigliano describes Sarpi as a “scienziato che studia la formazione dei fatti” (103).<sup>37</sup> In *Della Letteratura Veneziana*, Foscarini called Sarpi’s style “geometric,” pointing out that Sarpi arranged his thought with geometric accuracy and recorded only the necessary evidence (102). Giovanni Getto similarly agrees that the term “geometric” best expresses Sarpi’s dry and unadorned prose (*Paolo Sarpi* 334). Mario Pozzi described Sarpi’s technical language as something akin to a mathematical formula (76).

Sarpi is the perfect interpreter of an age in which the spirit of “scientific revolution” was reflected in many aspects of cultural life. Further, Sarpi’s prose is an expression of the influence of the scientific method on literary works. His style is more akin to that of a natural philosopher than to that of a literary scholar; the language is linear, logical and consistent. His writing style has been compared to Galileo’s in his scientific writings, as well as Machiavelli’s style in *Historiae Florentinae* and *The Prince*. Sarpi ranks with Machiavelli as one of the great historical writers of the sixteenth century. His pragmatic view of history resembles Machiavelli’s, but in analyzing historical situations, the Servite friar adopted the same approach that Galileo used to examine phenomena in the natural world. Assessing Sarpi’s concrete and straightforward writing style, Attilio Momigliano writes, “pure scrivendo di materia umana e passionale è molto più geometrico di Galileo” (101).<sup>38</sup> The comparison with Galileo’s writing is very useful in understanding Sarpi’s prose. Sarpi was Galileo’s close friend and admirer, and shared the Pisan physicist’s preference for clear, lucid prose, without stylistic clutter. Galileo followed no literary model, but wrote with real freedom, bringing his material experience into his prose and demonstrating it with natural, logical and precise language. His intention was to translate his analysis of natural and physical phenomena into a written work that would be lively and striking.<sup>39</sup> Galileo used the language that he thought would best and most straightforwardly communicate his discoveries.<sup>40</sup>

In his literary works Sarpi did the same. He uses a language that is concrete and incisive, characterized by logic, exposition and rational thought. His expressions are lively and vigorous; his explanations are clear and straightforward. Sarpi, like Galileo, preferred to adopt the vernacular in order to gain

37 “Scientist who studies the formation of the facts.”

38 “Although he writes about passionate human matters, he is much more geometric than Galileo.”

39 Stillman Drake writes “Galileo saw that what was really required in order to avoid turning the sensible world into a mere world on paper was not the artificial vocabulary of philosophers, rather, it was a certain kind of artistry in the use of the ordinary resources of language” (15).

40 On Galileo and his innovation in writing natural philosophy, see Bellini. On the development of scientific language in the seventeenth century, see Altieri Biagi.

a broader audience and, as a result, he contributed to the development of the Italian language.<sup>41</sup> The similarity is evident between Sarpi and Galileo – both opposed the empty, meaningless and fabricated terminology and pointed out the large misunderstandings that this form of writing could cause. Both writers adopted a linear and precise syntactical structure that focused on the efficacy of communication.<sup>42</sup> They carefully chose the words they used in order to best explain the essential parts of their arguments. Sarpi and Galileo aimed to renew written language, giving it a freshness and naturalness in contrast to the bombastic and artificial baroque prose of the era. Both believed that simple, plain words were the right instruments with which to empirically communicate the truth, even though both acknowledged that language still had some limitations. In the *Dialogue on the World Systems*, in the conversation between Salvati and Simplicio, Galileo writes,

Ed io ancora mi accorgo che voi intendete la cosa, ma non avete i termini proprii da esprimerla: or questi ve gli posso ben insegnar io; insegnarvi, cioè, delle parole, ma non delle verità, che son cose. (*Le Opere* VII: 218)<sup>43</sup>

Galileo points out that words help describe the truth, but because they are only representations of real things, they cannot be substituted for the truth that is in real things. Sarpi shows a similar concern with respect to words as representations of reality:

Convien però andar cauto e non fallare, credendo esser ogni cosa, che si concepisce, o esser uno ciò che rappresentarsi da un concetto. (*Pensieri* no. 348: 275)<sup>44</sup>

According to de Sanctis, Sarpi, Machiavelli and Galileo all successfully experimented with innovative ways in which to address their readers. De Sanctis points out that for those three authors, and also for Campanella and Bruno,

la verità è nella sostanza delle cose non nei loro accidenti e apparenze così come la religione ha la sua essenza nella bontà delle opere, e non nella osservanza delle forme e nelle concessioni e grazie pontificie. (795)<sup>45</sup>

41 For Galileo, the vernacular was “robust and unfussy, flexible and witty” just what he needed to express his thoughts in a clear and convincing way. Galileo claimed that the long and complex syntactic period of Ciceronian Latin was outdated and unsuitable for the demands of the “new science.” Freedberg 192.

42 On Galileo’s syntactical structure, see Petrocelli.

43 “[...] And I still notice that you have understood it, but you do not have the right terms to express it: I can teach them, I can teach you those words but not the truths, because they are things.”

44 “It is worthwhile to tread carefully and avoid the mistake of believing that everything that one conceives can be represented by a concept...”

45 “The truth is in the substance of things, not in how they are manifested and in their appearances, similar to the religion that has its essence in the goodness of the works

De Sanctis fully grasped the main element that distinguished Sarpi's, Machiavelli's and Galileo's prose from others of their age, indicating the way in which each of them cast the content of their work as central, and stylistic form as secondary. All three rejected the conventional, "pleasing," embellished stylistic form of the seventeenth century, which was imbued with inessential decoration and superficial ornamentation. Sarpi's indifference for the style that was in vogue and his disinterest in what was and was not considered beautiful in his own era is very evident. He claims,

il bello e il brutto non hanno esistenza reale, ma son opinioni che gl'uomini prendono; parte perché assuefatti a veder una cosa, lor sembra bella, e brutta sembrerà lor una nuova; parte perché odesi dire dagl'altri e si crede, e poi si abitua. Quanti esser bella dicono la lingua di Cicerone, benché nulla ne sappiano e sol da altri l'abbiano udito? E poi ciò dimostrasì perché il bello si varia non sol da paese a paese, ma da persona a persona, stimando taluno bellissima una cosa, che l'altro bruttissima stimerà. (*Pensieri* no. 468: 352)<sup>46</sup>

Sarpi points out that the definition of beautiful and not beautiful is regulated by people's judgment, which is a product of each person's experience and is also influenced by collective opinion. According to Sarpi, people's tastes are not a result of mental engagement, but rather depend on their inurement to things that they are used to or on their willingness to align their opinions to the normative standard. His writing can be read as an invitation to move away from Renaissance humanistic ideals and an encouragement to embrace a new attitude toward classical rhetoric.

This new approach to classical culture is linked to Sarpi's determination to bring up the "truth of the facts." Sarpi urges historians not to worry about the classical form of their writing at the expense of properly representing concrete situations, the real context of events, and characters.

### **A new way to write history**

Like Galileo, Sarpi stands out for his concise exposition in an age when verbose, redundant language was considered praiseworthy. He stresses the

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and not in the observance of the formalities and papal concessions."

46 "The beautiful and the ugly have no real existence, but are views that men have, partly because when they are accustomed to seeing a thing, it seems beautiful to them and a new thing will seem ugly because they believe what they hear from others and then they get used to it. There are many who say that the language of Cicero is beautiful although they do not know anything and have only heard it from others. This is demonstrated as well by the fact that what is considered beautiful varies not only from country to country, but from person to person; somebody considers something beautiful but another considers the same thing ugly."

importance of avoiding superfluous words in order to bring about tangible outcomes.

In the “consulto” (legal consultation) *Del Confutar Scritture Malediche*, written to defend the Venetian Republic and its political institutions from the hostile libel entitled *Istruzione Secretissima*, Sarpi argues that because the historical works of his age were apologetic and encomiastic, their slow narration dissipated their strength, overshadowing the main aspects of the events.<sup>47</sup> The Servite friar prescribes concise and neat discourses to unveil the truth and advises authors to avoid long and redundant ones:

Un altro avvertimento vien dato, di non pigliar mai impresa di responder a scrittura che con brevità et arguzia dice male, se ben falsamente, quando la difesa abbia bisogno di lunga narrazione o discorso, perché le brevi arguzie imprimono e occupano la mente, la qual poi stancandosi col discorso longo, non può aprir adito alla verità. (*Opere* 1174)<sup>48</sup>

Sarpi underlines the effectiveness of short discourses versus long and rhetorical speeches that can be hardly followed and are unable to succeed. As an example of the superiority of a concise reply, Sarpi directs his readers' attention to Girolamo Donato's elegant, ornate speech in response to the more pointed and clear oration presented at the League of Cambrai by the French ambassador Louis Hélian (Ludovico Eliano), and points out that in contrast to Louis Hélian's oration, which had since been published many times, Girolamo Donato's speech had never been held in regard and had never even been published.<sup>49</sup> Sarpi writes,

47 The libel *Istruzione Secretissima* by an anonymous writer, was first published in 1620 and became one of the writings most widely read in Europe. It was written as pro-Habsburg propaganda, blending together facts and fiction in satirical prose. On *Istruzione Secretissima* see Guaragnella, *Gli occhi della mente*, 30–59.

48 “Another warning is here given: Do not make a long answer to a short and witty writing that speaks evil, even though it may be false, because short, witty remarks take up and fix themselves firmly into the mind, whereas a mind tired by long speeches cannot give rise to the truth.”

49 The League of Cambrai (1508–10) was an alliance formed by Pope Julius II together with the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I, King Louis XII of France, King Ferdinand V of Aragon, and several Italian city-states against the Republic of Venice, in order to control its territorial expansion. The anti-Venetian Latin harangue *Ludovici Heliani Vercellensis Christianissimi Francorum regis senatoris ac oratoris de bello suscipiendo adversus Venetianos* was delivered in 1510 by the French diplomat Louis Hélian at the opening of a Diet at Augsburg, convened by Maximilian. I. In this harangue, Hélian accuses the Venetians of having thwarted the League of Cambrai and thus hindered the war against the Turks, and accordingly calls the Venetians non-Christians who mock the French and Germans and plan to take over Europe. Girolamo Donati (1454–1511) served as the Republic's ambassador to the Holy See for three years before his death. He was an ardent defender of Venice and wrote *Contra Caroli Regis Francorum in Senatam Venetum calumnias apologia* as an answer to the accusations made against the Republic.

Il difetto non viene dall'auttore, né dalla materia, degni ambidoi di eterna memoria, ma dalla forma, per lo svantaggio che hanno le apologie. (*Opere* 1175)<sup>50</sup>

Stating that apologetic writing no longer garners the sympathy of the audience nor meets the expectations of the early modern scholars, Sarpi nonetheless pins his hopes on non-native writers to recount the Italian historical facts in a veracious manner and praises Guicciardini's work because it describes events in an accurate and truthful way, including both pleasant and unpleasant facts:<sup>51</sup>

(Guicciardini) scrive del bene e del male, onora la republica più che altri, quali hanno scritto solo il bene. Più si può sperare dalli scrittori non nativi et abitanti in altre regioni, a' quali si darà maggiore credenza di verità. (*Opere* 1177)<sup>52</sup>

Sarpi reaffirms his opinion about the best way in which to write history, arguing that historians need to find a new method and that their principal concern should be to tell the truth. He discourages the use of apologetic and encomiastic tones in writing historical works and instead invites historians to abandon classical genres and adopt a method that keeps up with the times and reveal the reality of events. Sarpi is committed to abandoning the humanistic cultural model and adopting a new method that reflects the changes of his age. He felt that descriptions of contemporary events could not be written in the style of Livy and Sallust, but should instead be composed with the political and religious arguments that troubled the Counter-Reformation fully in mind.

Sarpi never turned to classical examples and never embraced humanistic values. Even his *juvenilia* show no signs of the Servite's classical background. As Getto points out, Sarpi's attitude is the opposite of Leonardo Da Vinci's, who regretted being an *omo senza lettere* (man without literary education) and studied philology in order to fill in his lack of humanistic background

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50 "The defect does not come from the author nor from the material, both of which are worthy of eternal memory, but from the form because of the disadvantage that the apologies have."

51 According to Cozzi, Sarpi learned from Guicciardini how to do not focus on a topic for too long in order to avoid loading the narration, tiring the reader and losing the overview of the various events and the vision of their contemporarily ("Paolo Sarpi" 441). According to Guaragnella, Sarpi follows Guicciardini in analyzing the important details of the events but failed to write in a fluent prose like the Florentine historian (*Il servita melanconico*, 201)

52 "[...]writes of good and evil, honors the republic more than others who have written only of the good. One can hope for more from non-native writers and inhabitants of other regions whom one can believe more likely to write the truth [...]."

(Paolo Sarpi 338). In contrast, Sarpi never felt the need to refer to the classical texts which he had studied and into which he had carefully inquired, and intentionally avoided the traditional patterns in his writing. He chose not to be restricted by formal boundaries and offered a new way in which to write about history. The strength of Sarpi's personality is shown in his radical decision to represent and narrate historical events in a way that contrasted with the expectations of his era. He did not soften the unpleasantness of events by framing them ornamentally or using rhetorically charming prose. Instead, he depicted these events in their true, bitter reality.

In historiography, as in other disciplines, Sarpi became a promoter of the changes that were taking place on the threshold of the "Age of Reason." Even though turning away from traditional patterns was not easy, Italian historiography slowly progressed throughout the seventeenth century. In Italy, intellectual activity was controlled by the ecclesiastical authorities who strongly opposed contemporary historical writings because they were afraid that these writings might unveil unsavory aspects of the Church of Rome.<sup>53</sup> But Sarpi's defiance of the Church's dictates was frequent. He operated freely and without regard for the attempts of the ecclesiastics who tried to suppress every publication that did not please the papal Curia. Strengthening the meaning of the words, Sarpi used his writing as an efficient weapon to oppose the Pope's political interference and the clergy's corruption, unmasking the deceptions of false statements and beliefs. Disclosing reality and presenting it through a simple and unadorned prose, he offered to the reader not the appearance but the truth of the facts. Such truth of the facts shook the foundations of the papal despotism; Pope and clergy alike were vulnerable to the "stilo" (stylus) of the Servite friar. The writings that caused such discomfort brought their author power and international popularity, and made him into a dangerous enemy of the Roman Curia.<sup>54</sup>

As an intellectual harbinger of the Enlightenment, Sarpi was able to empirically represent the historical events of his age using scientific method and mechanical rigor. His pragmatic, factual view of his era reveals the hollowness of the florid partisan histories written to please and flatter princes of

53 The ecclesiastical authorities were suspicious of people attempting to describe contemporary events by introducing doctrines that were in contrast with the teaching of the Catholic Church based on classical sources. According to Bouwsma, "Expurgation and suppression were also accompanied by an effort to make history 'safe' through its diversion from research into rhetoric, and through the revival of the Ciceronian cliché *historia magistra vitae*, which reduced history to ethics teaching by example" (306).

54 The use of the word "stylus" as a metaphor for "dagger" is Sarpi's. After he survived the murderous attack on October 5 1607, Sarpi explained to his doctors that the wounds were made *Stilo Romanae curiae*. Micanzio 126. On the double meaning of stylus see Guaragnella, *Il servita melanconico*, 164–72.

both the temporal and spiritual realms. Instead, he offers a realistic analysis of historical situations and considers the problems of society from a practical perspective, accepting unflattering facts as realities that must be faced rather than obscured. His refusal to accept false interpretations of events and his insistence on unmasking lies, no matter how lovely they appeared on the surface, ultimately led to a greater understanding of the situations that determined political, religious and juridical development in the era of the Counter-Reformation.

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