



The Bravo: A Venetian Story.

Di James Fenimore Cooper

(Historical Introduction by Kay Seymour House. Edited by Lance F. Schachterle and James A. Sappenfield).

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Recensione di Gordon Poole*.

During his three-month stay in Sorrento starting August 30, 1829, James Fenimore Cooper rented two floors of a sumptuous palazzo at what he saw as a convenient price. Today you can still take up lodgings in this historic building, where Torquato Tasso was born and lived his early years, but at the time of this writing it will cost you upwards of €150.00 (\$195.00) per night for a single room. When beggars thronged outside his gates, Cooper did what he could for them. However, his mind-set as an American was so far from that of his surroundings that, enjoyable as his stay was, he found no inspiration for any specific literary work.

Venice, where he spent a short two weeks in 1830, was a different experience. Naples, which ruled Southern Italy, was a kingdom, but Venice in the early eighteenth century, when *The Bravo* was set, was, at least ostensibly, a republic. As such, it allowed the author to introduce comparisons, whether implicit or explicit, with the society and politics of his mother country. In *The Bravo* Cooper is issuing warning signals about the future of the American republican experiment. It is undeniably a political novel, bringing out both the dangers of and the threats to republicanism. In her Historical Introduction Kay Seymour House quotes Cooper as saying that *The Bravo* was “in spirit, the most American book I ever wrote” (xiii). He penned these words in reaction to nativistically tinged criticisms that he, an American, had culpably forsaken America to sojourn abroad and unpatriotically replaced American themes with foreign ones (xxxvi seq.).

The Bravo is also, to some degree, an experimental novel. Cooper deals with the problem of how to have his Italian cast of characters speak in English as if they were speaking in Italian, a problem Washington Irving had never posed in his tales set abroad; his foreign characters are made to speak perfect English. Cooper’s solution is to give such characters in *The Bravo* a rich, Italianized English, metaphorical, allusive, ironic, subtle, exuberant, the kind of language that, to some degree, Italians did (and do) speak, but opulently overstated in Cooper’s romance, especially when the speakers are of the lower classes.

If the language of the characters, even the commoners, is less than colloquial, their behavior sometimes seems rather over the top. One high point of the romance is a state-organized gondola race on the holiday celebrating Saint Mark, Venice’s patron saint. When one of the gondoliers favored to win realizes, coming into the stretch, that he has been beaten, “he cast himself into the bottom of the gondola, tearing his hair and weeping in agony. His example was followed by those in the rear, though with more governed feelings, for they shot aside among the boats which lined the canal, and were lost to view” (110).

How to represent the language of foreign or foreign-born characters in English is the problem late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century writers of the immigrant experience to the United States would face, resolving it in various ways. Hemingway’s Italians, Steinbeck’s Mexicans, Henry Roth’s Yiddish-speaking Jews, to cite a few examples, speak an English that is clearly meant to mean that they were speaking another language. One way in which Cooper handled the problem was to strew imported Italian words into his dialogues, some of which, as Anna Scannavini

explains in the Introduction to her explanatory notes, have become Italian loanwords although they were not so when Cooper used them. The imported words can be exclamations, epithets, or common adjectives and nouns. As Scannavini explains, they “are particularly thick in the first dialogue between Gino and Stefano, creating a dictionary of sorts for the following chapters” (360). I am reminded of Vickram Chandra’s *Sacred Games*, where the early sections of this novel furnish a quantity of terms in various Indian languages. Many of the terms are vulgar (unlike Cooper’s), but, like Cooper’s, they are left unglossed, thus successfully recreating in the reader a feeling of being in a foreign country, where he can only guess at the meaning of some of what he hears (reads).

Cooper, like some more recent writers recreating the speech of non-Americans, uses ‘thou’ to indicate that his Italian speakers are speaking with the familiar *tu* form. When they speak to another person with ‘you,’ it means that they have passed to the polite form of second person address, as does Violetta, a young woman, while conversing with her Carmelite tutor (45). However, the author does not limit his Italianizing to dialogue; it colors his narrative and descriptive passages as well. Cooper often adopts awkward adjectival phrases with ‘of’ instead of the more fluent English possessive form. A few, typical examples suffice to make the point: wine “had caused a temporary confusion in *the brain of Gino*” (31), or, still more strikingly, “The *oar of Gino* gave a backward sweep” (32) and “The *heart of Gino* beat violently” (35; my emphasis). Often Cooper’s English is grammatically modeled on Italian syntax in a way that is at once stilted and strangely effective.

This critical edition of Cooper’s *The Bravo* is a notable work of scholarship. One may quibble with certain choices, such as *Guidicca* and *Giudecca* on the same page (9), but this may well be a slip that escaped the proof-reader’s notice. In one of Cooper’s manuscripts, his phonetical spelling was *Judicca*. We have mentioned Anna Scannavini’s Introduction to the Notes. She is a scholar specialized in United States literature but is also thoroughly educated in her native Italian culture. Few if any could be better equipped to annotate Cooper’s *The Bravo*, furnishing historical, archeological, and philological information that many readers would be unfamiliar with, identifying places, explaining Italian expressions, and in general guiding the reader discreetly but informatively through the text. Kay Seymour House’s rich “Historical Introduction” is a learned summary of what in Italy would be called the *fortuna* of Cooper’s *The Bravo*, namely a review and discussion of the essays and books that have taken his work as their object.

As we have noted above, Cooper wrote of early-eighteenth-century Venice in the season of its decline as a world power while thinking of his own country. The comparison is especially explicit in “a short digression” (actually it goes on for four full pages), somewhat of a cameo essay on civil government and, more specifically, on how “a narrow, a vulgar, and an exceedingly heartless oligarchy,” one that sends the sons of the poor to the galleys, orders assassinations of indocile citizens, and conducts its high-priority business in hermetic secrecy, can mask its true nature in republican rhetoric, instead of “broadening the base of power.” If, as House reasonably suggests, “Cooper saw some resemblance between what would come to be known as President [Andrew] Jackson’s ‘Kitchen Cabinet’ and the mysterious Council of Ten” (xvii), perhaps the modern reader might be moved to reflect on policies and conditions in the present-day United States, using Cooper’s reflections as a guide.

An interesting aspect of this printed edition is that it is backed-up by an on-line website dedicated to Cooper, with a special section for *The Bravo* (www.wjfc.org). The edition is completed with thirty-eight pages of textual commentary and discussion of authorial manuscripts, followed by fifty-three pages of emendations aimed at fixing a reliable text of Cooper’s *The Bravo* for future study and enjoyment. This is a long overdue critical edition of one of Cooper’s undeservedly lesser read novels, one that will stand the test of time.

Gordon M. Poole, retired from the Università degli Studi l'Orientale, where he taught English and American literature, now does volunteer teaching at Humaniter in Naples. He has written books, articles, translations, and reviews on these literatures, as well as on Italian, German, and Neapolitan literature. *Melville poeta e l'Italia, with facing text and translations, was published in 2011. Nazione guerriera. Il militarismo nella cultura degli Stati Uniti (2002) was awarded the Vittoria Giuliani Sostegni prize in 2003.*