
Since authorial philology was recognized as an autonomous discipline, with its own history and methodologies, and the study of authorial variants has proven to be significant and fruitful for a profound understanding of texts and their genesis, new challenging questions have arisen about the interaction between power and literary creation concerning the outcomes of this conflicting relationship: in what way did the author’s intent have to yield to the demands of censorship, and what visible transformations or mutilations affected the original text? What “creative” strategies were employed to circumvent and limit censorial pressures?

The relationship between power, whether in a political or ideological-moral sense, and the author has indeed produced, over the centuries, two different yet interrelated reactions. The work of conceptual artist Emilio Isgrò, which suggests the title of this volume, perfectly exemplifies the peculiarities of each. The erasure method applied by Isgrò to a series of anastatic copies of the second edition of Promessi Sposi (1840–1841) — which involved two types of excisions, one with black ink and the other with white tempera — precisely recalls the two censorial methods studied in this book: the “violated text”, representing censorship through deletion, resulting from external interventions; and the “white ink”, signifying censorship through rewriting, including a set of strategies adopted to either proactively protect or retrospectively reinterpret texts.

To investigate the complex relationship between these two forces, it is essential to undertake a thorough examination of literary archives as well as to reconstruct the entire tradition of the work under consideration, both manuscript and printed. The effects of power, in fact, leave visible traces throughout the entire course of text genesis, up to the editorial and post-editorial phases, and authorial variants serve as an indispensable key to access the meanings inherent in textual changes and to study the impact of censorial actions on the work.

The studies collected in the volume Varianti politiche d’autore (published in 2019) had already employed the method of variant criticism to examine cases where the author’s differing intentions regarding his own text pertained not to matters of language or style, but to precise political content; however, limiting the scope of investigation to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as was done in that volume, did not allow the systematic nature of the phenomenon throughout literary history to be recognised.
Thus, Paola Italia and Monica Zanardo take a further step by expanding their perspective to inquire whether, in the centuries before and after the eighteenth century, the dynamics of interaction with power and the diversified strategies of resistance in textual correction have changed.

The essays collected in their volume — comprising thirteen contributions — are therefore dedicated to authorial variants, both manuscript and printed, spanning a very wide chronological range from the Renaissance to the last century. They examine all those texts — not just literary — for which an authorial tradition can be documented.

The volume opens with an essay by Dario Brancato, dedicated to the three Florentine histories commissioned by Cosimo I, respectively authored by Benedetto Varchi, Giovan Battista Adriani, and Scipione Ammirato. Brancato immediately underscores the relevance of the historiographical genre in understanding the level of engagement of these works with power. He highlights how instances of “textual violence” occurred at multiple levels and at different stages of these histories’ development: during their conceptualization, in the writing process, and both during and after the editorial phase, due to ecclesiastical censorship. The scholar suggests the necessity for new critical editions of these three works, shedding light on the intricate editorial events that impacted their composition and final textual outcomes.

Margherita De Blasi’s contribution demonstrates how the complex relational dynamics between authors and power can also be intertwined with economic and familial interests. She shows that Pietro Verri kept his Osservazioni sulla tortura in his drawer “out of the necessity not to antagonize the Senate” (41), upon which he depended for financial independence. Aware that his highly critical writing about the use of torture as a legal instrument would jeopardize not only his relationship with the State but also his private interests, Verri practiced a specific form of self-censorship as he conceived the text as consciously posthumous, meant not to be published. This decision, while preemptively self-censoring, actually reveals a profound need to express his views freely, bypassing potential upstream and downstream censorship interventions. Verri thus bequeaths to posterity an unconditioned text, free from Senate approval, and the revision process analyzed by De Blasi between the first and second drafts moves towards intensifying the criticisms rather than mitigating them.

Pietro Verri’s case is not isolated: Vittorio Alfieri, who dedicated the most incisive pages of his treatise Del Principe e delle lettere to the relationship between power and literature, asserting the duty of the writer to emancipate themselves from any compromise with power, also employed
specific strategies of “textual protection” to preserve his corpus from potential manipulation. As the scholar highlights, the author’s archive plays a central role, collecting deliberately posthumous texts — thereby exempting them from censorial interventions — as well as annotations and self-commentaries that help reaffirm the author’s intent and prevent potential later interventions.

The revision process undergone by Vincenzo Monti’s writings, as explored by Claudia Bonsi, was of a different nature, often driven by ideological shifts. Monti’s political opportunism influenced his literary works in various ways, leading to alterations in his texts that aligned with political expediency. In order to safeguard himself in a politically unstable climate, Monti sometimes chose to leave his works incomplete or published different editions of the same work, modified to match the politically opportune stance of the time.

From an operational standpoint, a similar case is presented by Christian Del Vento regarding Ugo Foscolo’s work. Del Vento dedicates his contribution to the analysis of certain passages in Ajace that were subjected to revision by the poet before being incorporated into the Grazie section known as Versi del rito. These passages had aroused the fears of the viceroy to the extent that the tragedy was removed from the stage after its initial performance, thus requiring a revision and a change in tone before they could be published. However, as noted by Del Vento, the corrections made by Foscolo to the text did not entirely eliminate the original meaning, which was preserved even in the recontextualization of the verses: the exhortation to the viceroy to definitively break free from the Napoleonic regime, far from being silenced, is reaffirmed and reasserted.

Continuing with the review of case studies within the twentieth century, Michele Fagotti dedicates his contribution to examining the variations introduced by Curzio Malaparte in the reportages he wrote for the “Corriere” during his tenure as a war correspondent. As the scholar recalls, war correspondents operated under close scrutiny, and many writers had to adhere to forms of self-censorship or employ literary stratagems to convey what could not be explicitly stated. Malaparte himself employed rhetorical and literary devices — such as dialogue, allusion, and semantic ambiguity — with the aim of establishing a secret dialogue with the reader, enabling the perception of those more subversive elements that fascist censorship would not have tolerated if made explicit.

The phenomena of censorship and self-censorship, however, did not automatically vanish with the fall of Fascism; rather, they persisted even in the cultural context immediately following World War II. This is clearly
demonstrated by the case of Ardengo Soffici — explored and examined by Serena Piozzi — whose diary *Sull’orlo dell’abisso*, compiled during the war and initially published in magazines (between 1958 and 1959) and later as a book (in 1962), was not immune to textual alterations imposed by the new post-fascist cultural system. A comparison between the published text and the original diary confirms that Soffici had to rework or wholly eradicate thoughts that were overtly critical of the regime (164) in order to present a more consistent image of his past commitment.

The indirect pressure experienced by Soffici shows that textual violations and censorial impositions are not exclusive to totalitarian regimes; rather, they can also occur in seemingly democratic contexts, not necessarily driven by political reasons.

Among the essays collected here, Alessandro Vuozzo’s contribution illustrates the unfortunate fate that befell the essay Franco Fortini had dedicated to the reception of Lukács in Italy. Fortini’s statements in the essay — differing from the new theoretical and ideological premises of the journal — indeed sparked a conflict with the new demands of militant criticism within the “Officina” editorial team. The essay, initially rejected, was eventually approved with substantial modifications. Fortini himself accepted the compromise, only to realize, after the piece was published, that additional changes had been made without his approval: this constituted full-fledged censorship, violating Fortini’s freedom of expression.

Furthermore, four specific contributions address the issue of power in a “cultural” sense, aiming to censor what is perceived as obscene or morally unacceptable: the works of Pirandello, Testori, Pavese, and Gadda, respectively examined by Chiara Ferrara, Flavia Erbosi, Liborio Pietro Barbarino, and Milena Giuffrida, represent the cases affected by this form of moral censorship.

Balancing between the two poles of the “violated text” and “white ink”, a dual strategic practice guides Pirandello’s revisions. On one hand, he “maintains a submissive attitude [. . .] resulting in more or less coerced authorial variants”, while on the other hand, he reacts through “a creative mechanism aimed at seeking new expressive and communicative forms” (115). This latter case is exemplified by the novella *C’è qualcuno che ride*, which employs allegory to convey the hidden message of discontent towards the regime.

Due to moral censorship reasons, numerous external hands intervened in the scripts of Testori’s *Arialda* to mitigate the more trivial aspects of its portrayal of urban periphery; similarly, four poems from Cesare Pavese’s
Lavorare stanca (Pensieri di Dina, Paternità, Balletto, Il dio-caprone) underwent censorship due to the persistent erotic allusions within the compositions.

In the first case, external pressure led to compliance; in the latter, Pavese proved to be less accommodating towards the censors as he preferred to sacrifice his “masterpiece”, Il dio-caprone, rather than modify one of the flagged verses.

Closing the volume, Milena Giuffrida's study reanalyzes, in light of the categories of “violated text” and “white ink”, the tumultuous revision process of Gadda's Eros e Priapo, which serves as an emblematic case of the wide range of violations to which a text can be subjected, encompassing forms of resistance, self-censorship, and intrusive editing.

The discovery of the original manuscript of Gadda's pamphlet in the Archivio Liberati allowed the scholar to delve into the types of interventions that guided the text from its initial draft to the 1967 Garzanti edition. By examining a selection of variants within Chapter II, the comparison of the original with the final edition and its intermediate stages revealed the trajectory of a process that initially attempts to circumvent self-censorship, then resigns itself to censorial directives, ultimately delivering a mutilated text quite different from the author’s original project and intentions.

Milena Giuffrida's work prompts us to reflect on the relevance of philological reconstruction for the redefinition of the meanings and history of the texts as we know them; it emphasizes the importance of preserving an author's intent, often compromised and concealed from the modern reader by cultural, psychological, political, and editorial factors.

Explored through the dual lens of the “violated text” and the “white ink”, the study of authorial variants conducted in this volume once again proves to be a valuable tool for a deeper and more authentic understanding of texts and their histories. The collected contributions, in addition to providing a comprehensive essay on how the socio-political and cultural context can influence literary production at various stages of its life, bring to light and highlight the inherent creative power within writing itself, which transforms and reinvents itself in response to more or less direct forms of coercion. It becomes evident that institutional power must contend with another form of power, that of the literary text itself.

Asia Stillo
University of Bologna