

IL POETA BIZZARRO

Da Ponte's Memorie beyond fiction and facticity

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“As to the merits or defects of my operas, I shall say nothing: but whether you give to my verses the name of poetry, of measured prose, *or of vehicle*, &c. I will only observe [sic], that Mozart must have been pleased with them, because after the first and second of my dramas, he was happy to have the third; that he ennobled them with *a load of delightful notes*, with which you were equally pleased; and that on other words he undoubtedly would have composed another music; better, perhaps: but this is problematic!”¹

These are the closing words of Da Ponte's *Extract from the Life of Lorenzo Da Ponte*, published in New York in 1819. *Extract* contains various narrative parts which Da Ponte was later to include verbatim or in new narrative structure in his *Memorie*.² It appeared the year Da Ponte left Philadelphia and returned to the expanding city on the Hudson River, driven by the impulse to resume his pioneering efforts to educate people in the Italian language and literature that he had initiated in New York in 1807. Unlike the major project of self-reconstruction reflected in *Memorie*, this pamphlet represents a kind of paradox which, needless to say, has an impact on the character of its autobiographical presentation. It is not directed against an attack on Da Ponte as a person but against the “obliteration” of Da Ponte's name from operatic history, and against treating the libretto writer as a negligible entity.

- 1 Lorenzo Da Ponte, *Extract from the Life of Lorenzo da Ponte, with the History of several Dramas written by him, and among others, Il Figaro, Il Don Giovanni, & La Scuola degli Amanti; set to Music by Mozart*, New York: J. Gray & Co. Printers 1819, p. 32. Prior to publication of Da Ponte's *Extract*, a short autobiographical publication appeared in New York: *Storia compendiosa della Vita di Lorenzo Da Ponte, A cui si aggiunge, la prima Letteraria Conversazione, tenuta in sua casa, il giorno 10 di Marzo, dell' anno 1807, in New-York, consistente in alcune composizioni Italiane, si in verso che in prosa, tradotte in Inglese da' suoi allievi*, New York: I. Riley and Co. 1807.
- 2 Lorenzo Da Ponte, *Memorie di Lorenzo Da Ponte, da Ceneda in tre Volumi. Scritte da Esso*, Vol [I], II, III, Nuova Jorca, Gray & Bunce, 1823; La Parte prima del Vol. Ultimo, Gray & Bunce, 1826. Further editions: Lorenzo Da Ponte, *Memorie di Lorenzo Da Ponte, da Ceneda in tre Volumi. Scritte da Esso*. Seconda Edizione Corretta, Ampliata E. Accresciuta] d' un intero Volume. E di Alcune Note. Pubblicate dall' Autore. I. Volume, Parte 1ma, I. Volume, Parte II., II. Volume, Parte Ima, Nuova Jorca: Gray & Bunce 1829; II. Volume, Parte II, Gray & Bunce 1830; III. Volume, Parte Ima, II. Parte del III Volume, *Saggi Poetici di Lorenzo Da Ponte. Libera Traduzione della Profezia di Dante. Di Lord Byron. Terza Editione, con Note Pe' Mie Allievi* Nuova Jorca: John H. Turney 1830.