The language of gesture in early modern Italy

PETER BURKE

‘Come all’historico sia necessaria la cognitione de’ cenni'
Bonifacio, *L’arte* de’ cenni.

‘Evvi mai cosa piu visibile, piu comune e piu semplice del gestire dell’uomo?
E pure quanto poco si riconosce di esso!!'
De Jorio, *La mimica degli antichì.*

In the last few years the territory of the historian has expanded to include gesture, as well as the history of the body in general. For the practitioners of the so-called 'new history', or 'history of the everyday' (German: *Alltagsgeschichte*), everything has a past and nothing is too unimportant to receive historical attention. Even smells have a history which can be recovered and written.

Opponents of the new history assert that historians of this school trivialize the past. Three responses to this charge seem appropriate. The first is to recognize the danger of trivialization wherever a 'new-historical' topic is pursued for its own sake, without any attempt to show connections with anything else. For an example of this approach one might cite Cândido Cascudo's historical dictionary of Brazilian gestures, a scholarly and fascinating
book (and a good basis for future work) but a study which collects information without raising questions.\(^2\)

A second response might be to argue that the notion of the 'trivial' needs to be problematized and relativized and more specifically that gestures were not taken lightly in early modern Europe. Italy may lack spectacular debates over gesture of the kind to be found in England (the Quaker refusal to observe 'hat-honour'), or in Russia (blessing with two fingers or three), but in the early seventeenth century a Genoese patrician, a crusader for the vanishing ideal of republican equality, claimed that he was imprisoned unjustly on account of his *gesti del corpo* (for example, his proud way of walking into the room and his failure to stand up straight before the Chancellor), gestures regarded by the government as a form of 'dumb insolence'.\(^3\) This phrase, still current in the British Army, reminds us that in some quarters at least, the rules of gesture continue to be taken seriously.

The third response might be to follow Slierlock Holnies, Freud, and Morelli (not to mention Carlo Ginzburg), and to assert the importance of the trivial on the grounds that it provides clues to what is more significant. "We can study gesture as a sub-system within the larger system of communication which we call 'culture'. This assumption is shared by many social historians. It may even seem obvious. So it may be useful to remind ourselves of the existence of a 'universalist' approach to gesture, recently reincarnated in the well-known books of Desmond Morris (despite the unresolved tension in his work between universalizing zoological explanations of the gestures of the naked ape and attempts to map their cultural geography).\(^5\) As an example of more rigorous (indeed, 'scientific') analysis pointing in the opposite direction, we may cite Birdwhistell's famous demonstration that even unconscious gestures, such as modes of walking, are not natural but learned, and so vary from one culture to another."

It is, however, the 'culturalist' approach which I shall attempt to pursue here, in the case of a society in which – according to its northern neighbours, at least – the language of gesture was and is particularly eloquent: Italy.

To follow this road to the end, it would first be necessary to reconstruct the complete repertoire of gestures available in a given culture, the 'langue' from which individuals choose their
particular 'paroles' according to personality or social context. The way would then be clear for a general discussion of the relation between that repertoire and other aspects of the culture – such as the local contrasts between public and private, sacred and profane, decent and indecent, spontaneous and controlled, and so on.

The surviving sources are of course inadequate for these tasks, although they are as rich as an early modern historian has any right to hope. The literary sources range from formal treatises such as L'arte de' cenni (1616) by the lawyer Giovanni Bonifacio or Andrea De Jorio's La mimica degli antichi (1532) – both attempts to compile dictionaries of gestures – to the more casual observations of foreign travellers like John Evelyn, who recorded at least one insulting gesture (biting the finger) which the two lexicographers missed. In the second place, Italian judicial archives often note the gestures of insult leading to cases of assault and battery, and (among other things), confirm Evelyn's hermeneutics. The Inquisition recorded another gesture absent from Bonifacio and De Jorio, the denial of Christianity by pointing the index finger of the right hand heavenwards. In the third place, the art of the period can and must be utilized as a source, despite the difficulty of measuring the distance between painted gestures and gestures in daily life.

The task described above is clearly too ambitious for a short paper. So, instead of attempting to reconstruct the complete repertoire of Italian gestures of greeting, insulting, praying, and so on, or to comment on regional variation (from Venice to Naples), I shall simply offer a few observations on change over time, the time-span being three centuries or so, c.1500–c.1800. Following the available sources, I shall be forced to devote disproportionate attention to upper-class males.

The changes which will be emphasized here are not unique to Italy. They may be summed up in three hypotheses. The first is that of an increasing interest in gestures in the period. The second hypothesis is that a movement which might be called a 'reform' of gesture occurred in much of Europe in this period. The third and last hypothesis attempts to link this reform to the rise of the northern stereotype of the gesticulating Italian.
Jean-Claude Schmitt has noted ‘a new interest in gestures’ in the twelfth century. A similar argument might be sustained in the case of western Europe in the early modern period, more especially in the seventeenth century. In the case of England, for example, this interest can be seen in the work of Bacon; in Bulwer’s guide to hand gestures, the *Chirologia* (1644); and in the observations of travellers abroad, including Thomas Coryate, John Evelyn, and Philip Skippon. In the case of France, one finds penetrating analyses of gesture in the work of Montaigne, Pascal, La Bruyère, and La Rochefoucauld, as well as a full discussion in Courtin’s *Nouveau trait; de la civilité* (1671). The history of gesture and posture attracted the attention of scholars and artists such as Poussin, whose *Last Supper* shows that he knew of the ancient Roman custom of reclining to eat.

In the case of Spain, it may be worth drawing attention to Carlos Garcia’s treatise of 1617, famous in its own day, on the ‘antipathy’ between the French and the Spaniards revealed in the different ways in which they walk, eat, or use their hands. For example: ‘Quand le François a quelque fantaisie et se promene, il met la main sur le pommeau de l’espée, et ne porte son manteau que sur l’une de ses épaules; l’Espagnol va jetant les jambes ça et là comme un coq, se recoquillant et tirant les moustaches. Quand les François vont en troupe par les rues ils rient, sautent, causent et font un bruit si grand, que l’on les entend d’une lieue loing; les Espagnols au contraire, vont droits, gravement et froidement, sans parler ny faire aucune action qui ne soit modeste et retenue’.10

Garcia’s work is not without relevance to Italy. It went through thirteen Italian editions between 1636 and 1702. The influence of this book (or of the commonplaces it articulated with unusual vivacity and detail) can be seen in an anonymous account of the Venetian Republic, written in the late seventeenth century, which divided 100 leading politicians into those with a ‘genio spagnuolo’ (in other words a grave manner), and those with a livelier ‘genio francese’.11

Linguistic evidence points in the same directions. In the first place, towards an increasing interest in gesture, revealed by the
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The development of an increasingly elaborate and subtle language to describe it. In the second place, towards the Spanish model, for this language developed in Italian by borrowing from Spanish such terms as *etichetta*, *complimento*, *crianza* (good manners), *disinvoltura* (negligence), and *sussiego* (gravity)."

The multiplication of texts discussing gesture, confirms the impression of increasing interest. These texts include treatises devoted specifically to the subject, such as Bonifacio's *L'arte de' cenni*, which claimed to be addressed to princes because their dignity required them to gesture rather than to speak, as well as *La mimica degli antichi* of Bonifacio's severe critic de Jorio. The literature of morals and manners, most obviously Castiglione's *Cortegiano* (1528), Della Casa's *Galateo* (c.1555), and Guazzo's *Civile conversatione* (1574), also contains many relevant observations. So does the literature of the dance, including the treatise *Il ballarino* (1551) by Fabrizio Cornazano which discusses not only the various kinds of step but also how to deal with one's cloak and sword, how to make a proper bow, how to take a lady's hand, and so on. It is also worth looking at the literature of the theatre, including G. D. Ottonelli (1661), who discusses 'l'arte gesticolatoria', and A. Perrucci (1699), who is concerned with 'le regole del gestire'. The relation between happenings on and off the stage is not a simple one, but to foreign visitors at least it may appear that actors stylize and perhaps exaggerate the gestures current in a given culture.

In their different ways, the books cited above reveal considerable interest not only in the psychology of gestures, as outward signs of hidden emotions, but also – and this is the innovation – in what we might call their 'sociology'; in other words a concern with the ways in which gestures vary (or ought to vary) according to what might be called the 'domain of gesture' (the family, the court, the church, and so on), and also to the actor (young or old, male or female, respectable or shameless, noble or common, lay or cleric, French or Spanish, and so on). In other words, there was at this time an increase in concern not only with the vocabulary of the language of gesture (exemplified by Bonifacio's attempt to compile a historical dictionary), but also with its 'grammar' (in the sense of the rules for correct *expression*) and with its various dialects (or sociolects). The connections between this interest in gesture, the
contemporary concern with social variations in language and costume, and, more generally, with the study of men and animals in the so-called 'age of observation', deserves emphasis.14

THE REFORM OF GESTURE

A reform of gesture formed part of the moral discipline of the Counter-Reformation. In the Constitutions, which he issued for his diocese of Verona around the year 1527, the model bishop Gianmatteo Giberti ordered the clergy to show gravity 'in their gestures, their walk and their bodily style' (in gestu, incessu et habitu corporis). The term habitus was of course widely known from the Latin translations of Aristotle before Pierre Bourdieu made it his own. San Carlo Borromeo, another model bishop, also recommended gravitas to the clergy of his diocese. San Carlo, however, concerned himself with the laity as well, recommending decorum, dignity and 'moderation' (misura) and warning them against laughing, shouting, dancing, and tumultuous behaviour.15 A little later, the anonymous Discorso contro il Carnevale discussed the need for order, restraint, prudence, and sobriety (ordine, continenza, prudenza, sobrieta) and underlined the dangers of pazzia, a term which might in this context be translated not as 'madness' but as 'loss of self-control'.

Similar recommendations to those just quoted were made on rather different grounds (secular rather than religious, prudential rather than moral) by the authors of a number of treatises intended for members of the nobility, lay or clerical. In the fifteenth century, the humanist Maffeo Vegio had already warned noble boys to concern themselves with the modesty of their movements and gestures (de verecundia motuum gestuumque corporis), while similar recommendations for girls may be found in the treatise Decor puellarum.17 Another clerical humanist, Paolo Cortese, in his treatise De Cardinalatu (1510), warned against ugly movements of the lips, frequent hand movements, and walking quickly, and recommended what he called a senatorial gravity.18 When Baldassare Castiglione, in a famous passage in Il Cortegiano, warned his readers against affected gestures, he was taking his place in a Renaissance tradition. It is also clear from these humanist texts that
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The tradition continued to inspire writers after Castiglione. The physiognomist-dramatist Giovanni Battista della Porta recommended his readers not to make gestures with their hands while speaking (in Italy!). Stefano Guazzo discussed the dignity and the eloquence of the body and the need to find the golden mean, as he put it, between 'the immobility of statues' and the exaggerated movements of monkeys (l'instabilita delle simie). As for Caroso's treatise on dancing, it has been argued that it expresses a more restrained ideal than its predecessors, suggesting that the court dance was diverging more and more from the peasant dance in this period. After reading this corpus of texts, many Renaissance portraits may well appear as translations of their recommendations into images. Whether the portraits express the ideals of the artist, the self-image of the sitter, or the artist's image of the sitter's self-image, the gestures portrayed—which to post-romantic eyes often seem intolerably artificial—may be read as evidence of attempts to create new habits, a second nature.

The most detailed as well as the best-known Italian recommendations for the reform of gesture are to be found in Giovanni della Casa's Il Galateo. The ideal of this Catholic prelate is actually as secular as Castiglione's; it is to be elegant and well-bred (leggiadro, costumato). To achieve elegance, it is necessary, according to Della Casa, to be conscious of one's gestures in order to control them. The hands and legs in particular need discipline. For example, noblemen are advised, in the author's version of the classical topos, not to walk too quickly (like a servant), or too slowly (like a woman), but rather to aim at the mean.**

Della Casa's points are mainly negative; one suspects that this inquisitor kept in mind, if not in his study, an index of forbidden gestures. Yet it would be a mistake to discuss the reform of gesture in purely negative terms, as part of the history of repression. It can be viewed more positively as an art, or as a contribution to the art of living. This is the way in which Castiglione sees it, not to mention the dancing-masters—and in the seventeenth century, if not earlier, dancing formed part of the curriculum in some Italian noble colleges. It was a festive mode of inculcating discipline.**

If the reformers of gesture had a positive ideal in mind, what was
it? It might be (and sometimes was) described as a Spanish model, influential in Italy as in central Europe and including gesture as well as language and clothes. If it had to be summed up in a single word, that word might well be 'gravity'. The contrast made in Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano* between 'quella gravità riposata peculiare dei Spagnoli' and 'la pronta vivacita' of the French was, or was becoming, commonplace. Indeed, Italians frequently perceived Spanish gesture as an absence of gesture. Thus Pedro de Toledo, Viceroy of Naples, surprised the local nobility by the fact that when he gave audience he remained immobile, like a 'marble statue'. The phrase was, or became, a topos. One of Toledo's successors was described as so grave and motionless 'that I should never have known whether he was a man or a figure of wood'.

The Venetian ambassador to Turin in 1588 described the prince's wife, a Spanish Infanta, as 'allevata all'usanza spagnola... stà con gran sussiego, pare immobile'. Guazzo's remark about the need to avoid the immobility of statues, quoted above, must have had a topical ring.

In employing the term 'model', I do not want to suggest that the Italians of the period always idealized the Spaniards. On the contrary, they were much hated and frequently mocked, the mockery extending on occasion to their gestures. Their gravity was sometimes interpreted as the stiffness of arrogance. Think, for example, of the figure of 'Capitano' on the Italian stage and of his stylized bravura; in other words aggressive, macho gestures intended to challenge or provoke his neighbours. Again, an eighteenth-century description, by the nobleman Paolo Matteo Doria, of Naples when it was under Spanish hegemony, gives a highly critical account of the mutual suspicion of the upper nobility, each observing the gestures of the others, and of the gestures themselves, an 'affected negligence' and 'determined, arrogant movements' failing to hide the desire to 'show superiority over others'.

Nor do I want to assert that Spaniards always followed this particular ideal. It was probably restricted to the upper classes, and it may have been restricted to formal situations, especially to rituals (though curiously enough, the stiff rituals of the Spanish court seem to have been brought there from Burgundy only in the mid-sixteenth century). Nor do I want to suggest any facile
The history of that demand has been written by Norbert Elias in his famous study of the 'process of civilisation' (by which he generally means self-control), concentrating on northern Europe but including a few observations on the Italians (who were, after all, pioneers in the use of the fork). More recently, the late Michel Foucault has offered an alternative history of the body, examining the negative aspects in his *Discipline and Punish*, the more positive ones in his *History of Sexuality*, and emphasizing control over the bodies of others as well as over the self. Elias and Foucault were of course concerned with the practice rather than the theory of gesture and the control of the body. It is time to ask whether or not the Italian reformers of gesture succeeded in their aims.

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The gesticulating Italian

The reform discussed in the previous section was not peculiarly Italian, but part of a general Western 'process of civilisation' (there are parallels in other parts of the world, such as China and Japan, but their history remains to be written). The hypothesis I want to present here is that the reform of gesture, if not more rigorous, was at least more successful in the northern Protestant parts of Europe such as Britain and the Netherlands than in the Catholic south; that the stereotype of the gesticulating Italian, still current in the north, came into existence in the early modern period; and that it reflects a contrast between two gestural cultures, associated with two styles of rhetoric (more or less copious) and other differences as well.

The contrast is not between the presence and the absence of gesture, though it was sometimes perceived as such. What we observe in this period – at second hand – is rather the increasing distance between two body languages, which we might call the flamboyant and the disciplined. (I do not mean to imply that one body language is 'natural' and the other 'artificial' or 'civilized'; on the contrary, I assume that all body languages are artificial, in the sense of being learned.)
If the Italians perceived the Spaniards as gesturing too little, the northerners perceived the southerners as gesturing too much. The Dutchman Van Laar's view of the gesticulating Italian is discussed in Herman Roodenburg's contribution in Chapter 7 of this volume. In English, 'gesticulate' is a pejorative term (defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as the use of 'much' or 'foolish' gestures) and it is documented from 1613 onwards, a point which supports the hypothesis of a new interest in gesture at this time. From about this time onwards, if not before, we find British writers commenting with surprise or disdain on what they regard as the excessive gestures of the Italians (or the French, or the Greeks). Thus Thomas Coryate, in Venice in 1608, noted what he called 'an extraordinary custom', 'that when two acquaintances meet ... they give a mutual kiss when they depart from each other.' In the church of San Giorgio, he commented still more explicitly on 'one kind of gesture which seemeth to me both very unseemly and ridiculous', that of people who 'wagge their hands up and downe very often'. Philip Skippon, in Rome in 1663, described a Jesuit preaching on Piazza Navona 'with much action and postures of his body'. Frenchmen as well as Italians came in for this kind of criticism. In 1691 The English Spy mocked the French for 'so many Shrugs and Apish Gestures ... Finger-Talk as if they were conversing with the Deaf'. In Naples, the language of the body was even more apparent than it was elsewhere, at least to the British visitor; to John Moore in 1781, for example, describing the 'great gesticulation' of a story-teller, or to J. J. Blunt observing 'infinite gesticulation' during a reading of Ariosto. In the early nineteenth century, an American, Washington Irving, was still more explicit in his diagnosis of the symptoms of the Italian national character, as he viewed from his café table on Piazza San Marco a conversation conducted 'with Italian vivacity and gesticulation'.

These texts are of course insufficient to support any grand hypothesis, but at least they make an interesting problem more visible. The simple contrast between north and south, Catholic and Protestant will of course have to be refined. Where, for example, does one place Poland? In what ways did Spanish gravity differ from British self-control? To what extent were these stereotypes of national characters, expressing themselves through the language of
the body, generalizations about a single social group, the noble-
men? There is ample scope here for further discussion and also for
comparative research.

NOTES

1 A. Corbin, Le miasme et la jonquille: l'odorat et l'imaginaire social,
xviii–xixe siècles (Paris, 1982).

2 L. de Câmara Cascudo, Historia dos nossos gestos, São Paulo n.d.
(c.1974).

3 'Parve alle serenissime Signorie loro ch’io entrassi nella sala corag-
giosamente, altri dissero con alterigia . . . stavo col corpo e col capo

4 C. Ginzburg, 'Spic: Radici di un paradigma indiziario', in Crisi della
ragione: Nuovi modelli nel rapporto tra sapere e attività umane, ed.
A. Gargani (Turin, 1979), pp. 57–106. Cf. Ginzburg, Myths,

5 D. Morris, Manwatching: A Field Guide to Human Behaviour
(London, 1977) and Morris et al., Gestures: Their Origins and

6 R. L. Birdwhistell, Kinesics and Context: Essays on Body-Motion
Communication (Philadelphia, 1970); cf. M. Mauss, 'Les techniques
du corps', Journal de psychologie normale et pathologique, 39 (1935),
pp. 271–93.

7 The Diary of John Evelyn, ed. E. S. de Beer (Oxford, 1955), Vol. II,
p. 173; cf. Rome, Archivio di Stato. Tribunale del Governatore,
Processi Criminali, '600, busta 50, 'mittendosi la dita in bocca'.

8 B. Bennassar, 'Conversion ou reniement? Modalités d'une adhesion
ambigue des chrétiens à l'Islam (XVIe–XVIIe siècles), Annales E. S. C.,

9 J.-C. Schlimitt, 'Between text and image: the prayer gestures of Saint

10 C. Garcia, La oposicion y conjunci6n de los dos grandes luminares de la
tierra, o la antipatia de franceses y españoles, ed. M. Barea (Edmonton,
1979). Quotation from ch. 14. It is not clear whether this treatise,
produced to justify Louis XIII's marriage to the Infanta, was originally
written in Spanish or French. It went through at least twenty-eight
editions by 1704 (in French, Spanish, Italian, English, and German).
11 Venice, Bibliotheca Marciana, Ms. Gradcnigo 15, 'Esame istorico politico di cento soggetti della repubblica Veneta'.


14 The idea of 'dialects' of gesture goes back to A. De Jorio, *La mimica degli antichi investigata nel gestire Napoletano* (Naples, 1832, repr. 1964), p. ssii: see also Thomas. p. 3 and Graf, p. 36 in this volume.


17 M. Vegio, *De liberorum educatione* (Paris, 1511), Bk 5, ch. 3.

18 P. Cortese, *De cardinalatu* (Rome, 1510), pp. xcvi–viii.

19 *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, s.v. 'Caroso'.


22 B. Castiglione, *Il Cortegiano* (Venice, 1528), Bk 2, ch. 37: Federico is speaking.


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31 The possible link between gestural discipline and Protestantism (especially Calvinism) deserves investigation. It is interesting to find a French Calvinist, Henri Estienne, criticizing the gestures of the Italians. See H. Estienne, Deux dialogues de nouveau langage français italienisé et autrement desguizé, 1st cdn 1578 (Paris, 1980 edn), p. 322.


36 J. Moore, A View of Society and Manners in Italy (Dublin, 1781), Letter 60; J. J. Blunt, Vestiges of Ancient Manners (London, 1823).