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MY FATHER, GIAN POGGI

I know very, very little about sociology. I know there is some bad blood between «quals» and «quants» and also between what Marzio Barbagli calls «empirici» and «teorici» but I know rather less about it than I do about the issue between the Montagues and the Capulets, say, or the Pekes and the Pollicles. On a good day I could give you maybe a couple of paragraphs on Marx, rather less on Weber and Durkheim, and basically nothing on Simmel (he's got something to do with money, I think, and he sounds German). I may make a dutiful attempt to read some of this volume, but I don't expect to get very far.

Marzio is the only person who has ever seemed perturbed by my ignorance, or attempted my sociological education and, although he is one of the more persistent people of my acquaintance, even he was forced to admit that it was lost cause. My father has never seemed to mind my palpable lack of interest in the subject, or made any attempt to talk me out of it. For this reason his intellectual life is a mystery to me. It is a mystery also because, while I have followed him into academia, I have made my home – by choice, and very contentedly – in a much lower echelon of the academic world. By the (preposterously over-inflated, it must be admitted) standards of the Poggi family, I am a shocking underachiever. My father is the sort of academic who goes to conferences because the organizers invite him to give addresses and chair sessions. I am the sort who goes to conferences because it is a convenient way to go drinking with my grad school buddies. He is the sort who gets a *festschrift*. I am the sort who volunteers to act as comic relief in the *festschrifts* of immediate relatives.

So my contribution to this volume – a few reflections on Gian Poggi's influence on his daughter – will be personal in tone, and not one of those grand narratives one occasionally comes across of how the most important ideas of an era develop and mature as they are passed down from one generation to the next in a great intellectual dynasty. But while my life in academia may be a modest affair, it is a happy one, and many of the things that make it so I owe directly to my father.

The first happy one, and many of the things that make it so I owe directly to my father. The first thing I learned from him was a delight in language. At an age when many little girls are learning to get positive attention from

their fathers by shaking their curls and being cute, I was discovering that the shortest route to enthusiastic paternal approval was in the pages of a thesaurus; we delighted in puns, in etymologies, in puzzles. This was never programmatic (or if it was it was done so subtly that I never noticed); he wasn't one of those terrifying educational fathers looming over the dinner table with a dictionary. Words were simply *fun*, in and of themselves. My father's passion for language was scholarly, to be sure, but it was also creative and exuberant and at times bizarre. I have a clear memory of sitting in my bedroom with a friend – we must have been about 14 – when my father came into the room. The conversation proceeded as follows; *verbatim*:

Gian: I'm going to redeem self out of here.

Maria: Bodily fashion?

Gian: Redemption system service.

Maria: Skyrocketwise.

Gian: Zoom zoom.

He left and I turned back to whatever my friend and I had been doing, only to find her staring at me with perplexity bordering on unease. The exchange had been so entirely mundane that it took a while to dawn on me that it might indeed have appeared a trifle eccentric to the uninitiated. What we had said was:

Gian: I'm going out.

Maria: Oh, are you going out?

Gian: Yes, I'm going out.

Maria: Ok, so long, then.

Gian: Yes, bye.

As well as his cavalier sense of semantic entitlement – like Humpty Dumpty we make words mean what we want them to mean – I have also inherited Gian's considerable capacity for the recall of anything that rhymes. This can be something of a psychic liability – I am frequently tormented for days on end by my perfect command of the most inane pop lyrics the 1980s had to offer – but it also has its advantages. There are occasions, although admittedly rather few of them, when it is socially useful to be able to recite all eight Fits of The Hunting of the Snark on demand. And given paper, portfolio, pens and half an hour to myself I can produce quite passable doggerel on any topic and in most any literary style. These abilities, I imagine, date back to the family habit of reading poetry at bedtime. Sometimes the recitals would be dramatic «with *gestions*, Daddy!» and often they would be in Italian, or

French, or German, or Latin or Greek. He never attempted to explain any of it, and I never asked. We were of one mind; regardless of what they mean, words are good things, whether intelligible or not, and the more of them you can lay hands on, the better.

(In the midst of all this glory of words, Gian failed me severely in one important regard. I have berated him about it for years, but as I find my resentment has still not exhausted itself I take this opportunity to air my grievance before a jury of his peers. I was not raised bilingual. He tries, pathetically, to pass the blame for this onto some idiot provincial of a Scottish doctor who reputedly said «oh no, ye shouldna do that, Mr. *Poe-ghee*, it'll confuse the wee bairn» but he *really* should have known better. Barefoot children of illiterate parents in isolated villages the world over are fluent in two or three languages by the time they are three, but this daughter of a large and distinguished Italian dynasty is sentenced to go through life perpetually confused about the genders of nouns, and burdened with a ghastly accent.)

The natural companion of a love for language is a love for books.

There were books everywhere. My principal childhood image of my father is of him sitting at the left side of the sofa in the den, reading. He invariably sat with his legs crossed and while he read he jiggled the top leg, which jiggled his elbow, which rubbed against the arm of the sofa. The frame of the sofa was made of wood, painted white, but in the middle of the left arm, from my earliest memory, was a patch of shiny bare wood where all the paint had been rubbed off and the wood polished to a high gloss by my father's elbow, jiggling and rubbing, hour after hour, through thousands and thousand of pages.

The habit of compulsive reading rubbed off on his daughter as effectively as it rubbed the finish off the furniture. I don't remember ever being encouraged to read, let alone told to read; I simply took it for granted from an early age that reading is what one does when one didn't absolutely have to be doing something else. There were books all over the place, and I would pick things up at random. My parents, wisely, never commented or interfered, except for my father's occasionally removing a book on the grounds that «it's not suitable». This, of course, piqued my curiosity, and on one occasion I remembering reading a forbidden book on the sly. He was quite right; in retrospect I imagine that it was probably John Updike or David Lodge or something of that nature – possibly, at the outside, Philip Roth – but I can't have been much older than nine or ten, and it was indeed tremendously,

deeply unsuitable.

Reading has always been one of the great joys of my life. But more fundamental to my happiness than even the best-loved diversion, and also inherited or learned from my father, is a good-humored willingness to be really really bad at things: in public, if that's the way the cookie crumbles. This also goes back to my childhood. Gian was never much of a one for hobbies, but he gave it a go for my sake, and by cheerful mutual consent we would pick things that threw into high relief certain deep and shared incapacities. We had an electronics phase; we bought a book and a circuit board and some gizmos, worked assiduously for hours and hours on end, and eventually built a device which, if put outside in a heavy downpour and watched assiduously for a long time (this was Scotland, so we did not lack for opportunities to test our many models) would eventually inform us with a very small light that it was raining. My mother, who had built a radio in her bedroom when she was a teenager, smirked, but we were jubilant. Sometime later, when home computers started to become available to people with academic salaries, we bought one and devoted ourselves to mastering it. Months of hard labor later we had produced a program which prompted you (in squarish white letters on the TV screen) to give it a number and then obligingly (and almost always correctly) multiplied it by two. My mother, who some years previously had written a program so complex that there was only one computer in the British Isles powerful enough to run it, struggled valiantly and unsuccessfully to conceal her contempt, but we were exultant.

There is much more. We both have a compulsive need to be at the airport at least three hours before the plane is due to take off. We need, equally compulsively, to know what language the strangers at the next table or across the aisle are speaking. (If we don't recognize it, and can't figure it out by whispered consultation «there are Latin roots in there, aren't there?» «Yes, but it's awfully guttural» we will simply interrupt and ask.) We share a firm belief that things sometimes just disappear. You put them down and then they aren't there anymore. They aren't anywhere. There is no point looking because they are simply and irrevocably gone. This, and a firm belief in the evil eye – there is a sociologist of some importance whose name my father simply refuses to utter because he is widely acknowledged to have the *malocchio* (I hope he doesn't read this) – is, to the best of my knowledge, the only enchantment in Gian's world, although my mother confidently

predicted a deathbed repentance in the style of Waugh's Lord Marchmain: we shall, I suppose, see. I, on the other hand, haven't waited until my deathbed, and have assimilated all manner of metaphysical mumbo-jumbo – the Trinity, the Incarnation, grace and suchlike – into my worldview. I imagine he finds it somewhat embarrassing, perhaps a little disturbing, possibly even contemptible, but if so he has generously avoided telling me so.

Metaphysical orientation aside, these are a few of the characteristics that my father has passed on to me, whether by nature or nurture. He has other qualities that I deliberately try, with what degree of success it is not for me to say, to cultivate in myself. At the heart of them all is humility (which is, of course, the central virtue of Christianity; my perverse adolescent turn to religiosity has only served to reinforce what I learned to admire during my very secular childhood). The simplest form of humility is modesty. Gian stubbornly, and with complete sincerity, refuses to get too big for his boots or even, some might say, to get big enough for them. Once, in my teens, a reviewer or book-jacket blurbster or somesuch referred to him as «one of the world's foremost sociologists». He was appalled; genuinely both indignant and mortified. I believe he actually wrote the offender a letter in protest, and for years and years the event after my mother and I could entertain ourselves by making passing remarks about foremostness and watching his hackles rise. I can only imagine how irritating he will find the existence of this volume.

The pedagogical form of humility is, I think, clarity. Nobody, foremost or otherwise, whose livelihood is in words and ideas can be unacquainted with the lure of obscurantism: the temptation to make yourself look just a little bit cleverer than you actually are by making your ideas sound just a little more difficult than they really are: the urge to use your intelligence to impress or intimidate or even bully your audience rather than to educate them. It is temptation as common as it is deadly; to choose words and frame ideas with a view to establishing one's status rather than with a view to communicating it should be alien to a true lover of ideas and words. Whether or not Gian has ever grappled with the demon of obscurantism I cannot say, but if so the battle was won decisively before I became sentient. Gian is hard to draw out on the subject of his own teaching. All he will really say is, «I always try to be clear». When I have heard him lecture, or when he explains something to me over dinner, he is so splendidly, pellucidly

clear that I feel that what he is explaining is utterly self-evident – «of course», I think «I must have known that already, didn't I?». To teach clearly is to show respect for students and for ideas; to try to bring the two together and get oneself out of the way, so that they leave the classroom entranced with the ideas they have encountered, and excited about their own understanding, rather than impressed with the intelligence of the professor. I have a long way to go with this; when facing a classroom of students I still feel somewhat insecure, somewhat tempted to assert myself, to make it clear that I know more than they do. But I am learning, and every time I talk to my father I am reminded that clarity is not only kinder than obscurity, it is also more and not less intelligent, more challenging and more beautiful.

I understand, although I know less of this than many readers of this book, and have to read between the lines, that this refusal to project his ego onto the world also characterizes Gian as a colleague. He has a knack for getting on with pretty much everyone. This is not to say that he doesn't have commitments. He can become incandescent with fury over matters of principle, but he doesn't treat collegial relationships as strategic alliances, and can retain the friendship and respect of both sides in bitter disputes (we all know what academic politics can be) without sacrificing his integrity.

I first became admiringly aware of my father's startling indifference to strategy and status when I was a teenager. Teenagers, after all, are concerned to the point of obsession with strategy and status; with the minute shifts in allegiances and attitudes that might give them some clue as to who the heck they are, where they stand in the world and whether there is the remotest thing they can do about it. The fact that I had read all of Austen and much of Tolstoy before I was 15 didn't make me one whit less concerned with the nuances of the school pecking order than any other 15-year-old. My mother was equally sensitive to social hierarchies, although her energy was directed to making sure she wasn't a snob. When my father was appointed to a chair at Edinburgh, my mother received a letter inviting her to join the Professors' Wives' Luncheon society – I jest not – and spent a giggly afternoon composing a splendidly haughty response, before heading back to sort and price bags of smelly clothes in the damp basement of the local Oxfam shop. She taught me to resist the lure of snobbery, but we both felt it.

My father, I came to realize, with awe and envy, and with a growing

determination to emulate him, was genuinely and deeply oblivious of such matters. Colonel Pickering treats a flower-girl like a lady, while his Professor Higgins treats a lady like a flower-girl. Both of them are motivated by an acute awareness of their own high status; Colonel Pickering can afford to be gracious to the flower girl because they both know he is her superior. Professor Higgins enjoys being brusque with the lady, because he, if not she, knows himself to be at least her equal. My father would not notice the difference, would not ask the question, and would treat both lady and flower-girl with the same slightly absent-minded cordiality with which he treats his friends, his secretary, his grandchildren, his plumber and his colleagues. Some people find it a little bewildering, some may even find it awkward, but that is their problem; everybody I like finds him immensely charming.

When asked why he went into academia my father would always reply «it beats working». My own professional choices were driven by the same logic. Towards the end of university I toyed briefly with the notion of getting a real job, but as I had no real idea of what a real job might be, or how one might get one, or what one might do once one had got one, I never got up a head of steam in that direction. As all I really knew how to do was read books and write about them, I went off to another university and continued to read books and write papers until I had all the degrees they would give me and I had to change sides and start teaching instead. I love it, in large part because the world of academia allows me to exercise all those things I picked up from my father; to play in the world of words and books, in the company of other nerds who get excited about etymologies. I value it also because it is – or it can be – a school of those qualities of humility, generosity and respect, that I first learned to appreciate by seeing them in my father. To me they require attention and effort and awareness, but I am perpetually encouraged in my pursuit of them by knowing that to my father, with whom I share so many things, they seem to be second nature.