

The Mask and Identity. A Conversation with Alessandro Pizzorno*

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Abstract

An interview with Alessandro Pizzorno by Roberta Sassatelli.

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Roberta Sassatelli (RS): Let us start with the context in which you wrote, more than fifty years ago your *Saggio sulla Maschera* (Pizzorno, 2005). You were in Paris, after a period of study in Austria...

Alessandro Pizzorno (AP): Yes, I wrote it among the books of the *Musée de l'Homme* library, masks in their cabinets. And then I brought it up in a seminar at the *École des hautes études* then directed by Ignace Meyerson, in which I took part regularly together with another seven or eight young scholars, including Jean Pierre Vernant. There were also friends who admired, outside that seminar and quite contrary to Vernant and Meyerson, the whole Parisian phenomenology debate. And I believe that the arrival of Pirandello on the Parisian theatrical scene was quite fundamental...

RS: Please, explain better...

AP: In the years between 1950 and 1953 in Paris, Pirandello was very current and as it gave a lot to the Italian cultural presence. I too saw *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* [Six Characters in Search of an Author] for the first time, in French. At a certain point, the *École's* Italian doctorate students wanted to study Pirandello, and they asked me to do two lessons, also because they knew that I liked theatre, and so I studied Pirandello. At the time, I was part of Meyerson's group, which strangely called itself "Historical psychology," a name which today would not make any sense. However, in this work, there was a strong element of anthropology, or cultural psychology which, in reality, could have called itself anthropology. The *École's* seminars were very good, an experience of sharing ideas and work, which however, was of an intensity I didn't later have, also because they were held once a week and we all had similar interests.

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Vernant was already working on his study of Greek tragedy (see Vernant, 1965), Francès was studying the sociology of music, another was studying dance, another *Gilgamesh*, all interests with different subject matter but methodologically similar, a methodology that was not orthodox but from many points of view innovative. However, above all, before beginning to present our papers on the progress of our research, we would spend a quarter of an hour, twenty minutes talking about what we had read over the week... something real had been created, there was a real exchange... I didn't ever do it again, but I always suggested it to whoever organized this type of seminar, that these were really moments of coming together. I even had in mind to do a paper on the festival but then Meyerson, who was a real killjoy, cut me down... and then there was Vernant and the theatre. In any case, these two occasions together, the seminars at the *École* and Pirandello, were what inspired me to be interested in the mask.

RS: A mix of coincidence or something more?

AP: It was clear that my interest in the mask, in my opinion, had deeper roots. I have always asked myself how, how did I become fixed on this subject? Note that, amongst other things, I was also the Paris correspondent for Radio RAI [the national public broadcasting company of Italy], and I generally sent pieces about the artistic scene, above all exhibitions. At a certain point, I started writing something that was then published somewhere (who knows where!) that was entitled *La danza come verità del corpo* [Dance as Truth of the Body] and which consisted of an interview with Catherine Dunham. I was really struck by this interview! You know that Catherine Dunham was a great dancer, who had however graduated in anthropology. She was originally from the Caribbean and she had graduated with a thesis on Caribbean dance. She had had great success in Paris and I had asked her for an interview. The fact of being able to write for Italian radio went down pretty well and she granted quite a long interview during which for at least half the time she was naked, having had her masseur come, and I did the interview as she prepared herself to go on stage... This is to say that then, my interest for the theatre and dance was very strong, it was an interest for the physical side of culture. This is what really moved me; I was part of a society which called itself *Dance et Culture* in Paris, and thanks to this I had free tickets, invites and so on, and I didn't miss a single dance! Neither a ballet, nor a performance, an ethical dance, with these African and Caribbean dancers. So, as you can imagine, generally this was my mix of interests at that time which were moving in a certain direction and really quite opposed to my very first law studies, which I had left for philosophy. Remember I had graduated in aesthetics with Pareyson.

RS: There was therefore continuity with the studies you had followed with Luigi Pareyson?

AP: Yes, to a certain degree, certainly. Let's say the central idea was strongly anti-Crocian: art was not an expression of sentiment but was rather communication. Art is both communication and a technique of communication for which dance, for example, is found in the technique itself and thus art is performed. The mask comes in here, with added theatrical interest. Not by accident and stirred up by *Sei personaggi...* Pirandello said that characters all present themselves with a mask, Pirandello's mask was one which defined them as certain types, that is they could be the mask of luxury, the mask of a mother, maternity... they were masks which represented their characters. Pirandello's theatre was one of recognition. The six characters are people who are looking for someone that recognizes them: they don't exist until they are recognized. Thinking about it again today, I would say that what I was looking for also had a more general nature. I thought positively about the mask (I believe I said this at the beginning of the work), not only as something which conceals, but also something which reveals...

RS: Like a kit to create an identity?

AP: That's right. The mask hides and reveals at the same time. But it does so differently, according to the situation and at different points during life. To begin with, you find a mask in the family. You think that no one has one. Then, you realize that the others are putting it on. And if they put it on, a little at a time, you begin to understand, above all when they are right in front of you. Thus begins the long and tortuous path of apprenticeship of the mask. You are observer and actor. You try to understand what is behind what the others are wearing and at the same time try to understand which one serves you best to protect yourself from others. And you put it on and you take it off. And when you are an adolescent, and you yourself are unsure of what there is behind the mask you decide to put it on, and you are

unsure of what you are really trying to hide, then you look for the most bristly or scary, or the gayest and ceremonially misleading mask possible to wear. You keep everyone else at a distance, while you watch yourself, little by little grow into the mask, which you have only partially created yourself, but which willingly or not you are forced to wear. The fact that I too, at that time was somewhat uncertain between hiding and revealing, probably played a part in the choice of this research, without being completely aware of it.

RS: In the study, there is much play between revelation and hiding. In the so-called tribal cultures, the mask would have the role of eliminating the person, or rather, of hiding it in order to show something...

AP: If there is something true in what anthropologists say about those cultures, it seems to stem from the institutional functions of their mask. The mask allows its wearer to be recognized. The spiritual role, above all, but also sometimes its political or military role. In our own traditional societies, which we have known about until recently, this role has been carried out by other signals, uniforms, seals, various symbols. In today's individualistic society, the metaphor of the mask refers more purposely to the dialogue of hiding and revelation of the individual.

RS: At a more abstract level then, the mask works as an existential analogy?

AP: Yes. We could be tempted to say that to whoever does not feel capable or strong enough to wear a mask in plain sight, then it serves to hide. Then the possibility of the mask matures in him, as the owner sees others recognizing him, and so for him accepting this recognition is the most obvious thing to do, less tiring, and so he will end up wearing that figure created by the recognition of others as his own choice of mask. But he still treats it a little as a mask. That is, something behind which he imagines he can still conserve a "hidden" place, to use for possible hiding strategies. It is probably in old age that this imaginary internal communication with one's consciousness stops and everything becomes a mask, silent for others, a repeated and apathetic silence for themselves. There are those who also have a death mask, solely for others and in any case useless. So, as they are useless, except of our needs as descendants, the remains that archaeologists bring back from their dig sites.

RS: Here, you are referring to what della Porta, Greco and Szackolczai, (2000, p. XVI) mention, that is identity as the history of recognitions obtained by the subject in the various contexts, he has found himself. Masks can be seen as a metaphor of recognition received or as declination of an identity that is being constructed...

AP: Precisely! This was exactly the point, insistence of the theme of identity, which is a theme which sociology has never really taken seriously, while for anthropologist this theme has always been absolutely central. Sociology, only really began to truly consider it in the 1960s and 1970s... It would be interesting to see precisely a philological history of the use of the term "identity" from Freud to Durkheim and Weber. None of the classics use this term, Why? Sociology starts with roles. Roles really are masks and more precisely, identity. But if we talk of a multitude of roles, then no one has for many years talked about multiple identities, which is a problem which is still of great interest today, that is that of the multiple self, for example in the collection of essays *The Multiple Self* edited by Jon Elster (1985).

RS: The mask hides while it creates, and creates while it hides. It is this dynamic — which lies between identification, fixing an identity in time and space, and fluidity, that is never fixing it — that has creative potential. The mask it seems, is a subjective technique that through fixation, creates the possibility to become, a dynamic which in modernity becomes endemic and daily, and not only in terms of synchronicity (face games or role playing) but also diachronic (construction of the self over time). Indeed, you insist on the temporal dimension. Here it seems that you are indicating "rhythm" — as a collection of practices which create differences in the flow of experience — as the principal technique to stabilize social "time"...

AP: The question of rhythm was important then for me, together with other experiences linked to the theatre and dance. Literature on the theatre in France in that period was very rich in this area, also in the sense of underlining movement, voice and dance. There was a theatrical instruction centre in which

actors rehearsed by acting with a mask. And it was the mask which had to express itself by moving, changing in order to see the light. The mask had to speak, it had to say something for the sole reason of being a mask that was to be seen, quite independent of talking openly... When I spoke of rhythm, or of things that swing, that mask, I was referring to something similar. This capacity on one hand of an actor to have the freedom to become wholly a mask and on the other to continue in reality, to be free compared to others, by means of movement, rhythm.

RS: This brings to mind that in that period, or only a few years later at the end of the 1950s, Goffman's book *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (1959), followed by Anselm Strauss's *Mirrors and Masks* (1959)...

AP: I never read Strauss, I knew it, possibly I didn't want to return to the mask. At that point I already had my own mask! On the other hand, Goffman seemed to assume that the theoretical problem had already been resolved... as such, given that things were as they were, he analyzed it magnificently in everyday life as a matter of ceremonies... In *The Presentation of the Self* (which was the first thing I read), the self is one which is presented but already exists, if you follow? It already has its own strategy, it defends itself, it does impression management, and therefore is someone who already exists as a person. It is not like the problem of the mask, which is a problem of the self that is not there yet! Goffman supposes that the self has already formed, and so he goes around the theoretical problem, which was really what interested me. Certainly, I was more interested in role distance (see Goffman, 1961), but even role distance is a strategy, even here it is a putting on and taking off of the mask, putting it on in one way or another, but the hands which moved it were always the same person! So, role distance was not enough. What is important is how can we distance ourselves from it? How can the self create distance? Goffman's answer is, "there are all these methods here...". The theoretical problem seems to me that of understanding how can we distance ourselves from the danger that a specific negative recognition or some undesirable measure from others humiliates us, depresses us, annulling the faith we have in ourselves. The weapon we have is that of facing down that negative judgement of ourselves with the recognitions, which, so to say, we keep in reserve, which we have stored little by little in our memory, after a process of mythologizing reconstruction, which feeds our self-esteem. If we analyze a person's internal processes, we risk having only a clinical image. But we would understand the same process better if we referred to a collective subject, a nation, or a state, a political party. Modern European states are constructed thanks to a convergent process of recognition. From within, there were the feudal powers, from outside there were the other states, which culminated in the Peace of Westphalia. But they had to feed this recognition, constructing myths made from history, archaeology and literature, the ethnic inventions... And then there were celebratory rituals, ceremonies, monuments and so on. It is more or less the same way that everyone built themselves from the inside. We can conclude that the production of masks is a function of uncertainty that we fell as to our identity. Think about nervous tics, idiosyncrasies, fixations, about the rituality of some of our daily behavior and so on...

RS: So, you are essentially saying that we shall consider a dimension of identity that can be arrived at through the mask and which Goffman does not fully grasp, a dimension which is diachronic and trans-situational — that is, which does not depend directly on the situation and cannot be reduced to it. A sort of biographical embodied identity. Is this so?

AP: I would put it this way; it is a bit like an autobiography that we try to write about ourselves, in order to have a hidden weapon, whenever we meet others so that we can escape the consequences of their judgement on the esteem we have of ourselves...

RS: Goffman also, in a way, hints at this autobiography. Indeed, he talks in precisely these terms in *Stigma* (Goffman, 1963), as it is there, right in front of incorporated signs that you cannot so easily free yourself of identification and its recognition. They cling to you... This is how certain observations in *Stigma* seem to be a bit germane to what you are saying in the essay on the mask. Above all because the mask seems to be a technique, if you like, rather than a strategy, a technique to fix personal identity, however public, over time and within the external circle of recognition. It is this which then is a glimmer of internal identity, as you call it.

AP: Indeed, Stigma is what I like most of Goffman... You have interpreted it precisely. If you like, it is as if I make myself strong at that moment when you put the mask on me with all the other masks that I have worn in my life... this is the case, I have a mask which fixes me, but I also have many other masks that you do not know...

RS: It's as if you are combining a series of things unknown to the bystander that really count! Beyond his supposed situationism, Goffman explicitly wants to look at the subject from outside and tries not to ever look at the possible internal motivations. He tries to put everything down to the specific local situation and almost seems to be afraid to touch on questions that have anything to do with psychology, a terror of going within the subject, also possibly out of respect or discomfort... However, it does not seem that you have this fear or am I wrong?

AP: Absolutely not!

RS: In effect, your writing always seemed to be very open to approaches from other disciplines. On this subject, in this your first work on the mask, which is clearly anthropological, you are not far from the work of the first British Cultural studies, I'm thinking of Hoggart and Williams who began to work precisely in those years...

AP: I skimmed Williams only much later, whereas I knew Hoggart well as he was part of the international work group on leisure time of which I joined a couple of times. He is also a very nice person, a typically working class Englishman, who was able to emerge thanks to the State school system, great company, above all when he drank, and he drank a lot. He had already saved himself from alcohol, and then wrote *The Uses of Literacy* (Hoggart, 1957). He was brilliant and also very good looking. I am talking here of the beginning of the 1960s, after which I lost track of him...

RS: As you were suggesting, you then confronted yourself above all with anthropological literature. In *Saggio sulla maschera*, which in the title sounds like that of Mauss (1925) on the gift — and possibly is closer theoretically to this work than to his work on the person (Mauss, 1938) which you cite with a certain degree of perplexity — you give great importance to what we could call material culture. You go over material details showing how much they are mediated by culture. I believe that the cultural mediation of materiality is one possible fertile lines of interpretation of your work on the mask, and therefore the theme of embodiment as cultural phenomena...

AP: Yes, in retrospect, I see the body as a cultural construction, I am thinking of my interest for dance. It was probably also an anti-intellectual reaction, isn't it?

RS: Indeed, at a certain point in the work, the material and symbolic characteristics of the mask as an object, or rather, to use your own words, as a “thing” capture your interest. You linger on the actual make-up of masks, their colors and also their sacred nature, which is attributed to them thanks to the fact that we are always considering the materials that we can define as being natural and so evoke realities outside the subject... Then, you finish the work talking of two means of creating. And you suggest that these are two forms of communicating of the human being which inevitably go beyond the material/symbolic dichotomy, one through the transformation of the material world and the other through the transformation of oneself. The mask in some ways is the link.

AP: The idea underneath — and I have to say I had not read the work on totemism by Lèvi-Strauss (1962) that came out much later — was that the mask was part of the means by which the individual fixed their identity so as not to think any more about it, so they became what they are, for us, animals, without any individuality. They are there, they are always the same. The mask is there and it's always the same. This then is totemism. I thought of the animal as one of those things that helped the individual see themselves in a definitive way, so as not to think any more about themselves... I do not exclude the fact that this was part of the period of an individual's first maturity, when we are afraid to be alone, always hidden behind the mask and try to understand how those managed when they put on the mask for once and for ever...

RS: You often mix anthropological-theoretical observations with your own experiences... So, the

mask becomes something that can't be taken off again. Above all, also in play, it isn't a fiction, it is a means, in a way genuine of constructing the self, is that so?

AP: Yes, above all, in old age the mask becomes fixed, initially the individual, takes it off, puts it on, on and off... until death it can be taken off, at death it can't be taken off any more. With each movement of the mask, each time the identity of the person is recreated. A few things about origin come to mind that I am writing for another book: I consider there are two essential concepts at the origin of democracy, these are the concepts of contract and of conversion. Contract and conversion are both means by which we are put into contact with each other, both are designed to change our relationship with others, and also to change others. With a contract, you establish a relationship with another person, but both parties change. By definition you change with conversion. What's more, I found something similar in Rawls' introduction, in his last book on political liberalism (Rawls, 1993). Here the problem is to see how we can get a group of people to agree, who for the moment have all gone beyond proselytism, that is the moment in which everything is created... Now, it is true that democracy is impossible if proselytism is forbidden (I'm thinking about certain forms of fundamentalism, which are obviously not democracies, which doesn't mean that this would exclude private happiness). Conversion is basically a change of mask: it is the moment of freedom! Identity can be seen in this view as a moment in which you abstain from converting, and conversion is a moment of final foundation. For this reason, it is not rational in terms of ends, given that ends are always rational in respect to an identity. Certainly, in the work on the mask, I did not talk about conversion and I did not have it absolutely in mind, but it is still a declination of a basic theme which in other ways I had in mind.

RS: Generally speaking, the central idea of your work *Sulla razionalità della scelta democratica* [On the Rationality of Democratic Choice] (Pizzorno, 1993), is that politics is the orientation to the change of needs more than to their realization. Now, what you have just said, brings in mind an aspect of your theory of participation, or rather the role of sacrifice. A great deal of the theory of collective identity tends to see things quite positively, underlining the creative moment, whereas you underline that to be able to create a collective identity, you need to abandon something, to sacrifice something. So we create, amongst others, a concept of time, a past, a present and a future. In other words, to a great extent you underline that collective identities form not in response to needs which are already here, but to propose new ones that de facto also implies sacrifice. This then connects with what occurs in masked rites: the sacrifice of one identity for the imposition of another, by means of the mask, which proposes a different universe of meaning and needs.

AP: In what sense do you mean new needs?

RS: I am thinking of the needs that are associated with a new identity, even collective identity, which are constructed through sacrifice of the previous identities. For example, if I become part of a critical consumption group, I have to give up something to make room for something else, such as fair trade products or recycling or self-production... and it is through these new needs that I fix my new identity as a present quite distinct from the past and as a project that builds the future.

AP: I haven't thought of that, but as you know, I was also interested in the phenomena of consumption... I could certainly see it explicitly in reference to identity, that is consumption as communication thanks to which you can be recognized each time in a different way. You dress in a certain way, then you have to go to a ceremony and change cloths and this change communicates how the new I is different from the others. But rather than consumption in itself, what is important is the changes in consumption...

RS: Yes, and the interesting thing in these changes is to read them not so much as purely cognitive-communicative processes, but rather as performative embodied processes. They are not a caricature of a dramaturgical model or a Veblenian status symbol, but rather as something that passes through more minute practices, both material and symbolic, and therefore which implies...

AP: ...that they self-change, self-reform...

RS: ...a notion of embodied communication in a strong sense, which cannot be separated entirely

from the subject. But maybe we are no longer talking about you!

AP: It would seem that you want to talk about you, but underneath it all you are talking about me... you have put a mask on me!

RS: And I want to talk about what is underneath it all! I would like to ask you also something else, more general. The essay is very elegant linguistically, it is a work that exudes literature, as well as philosophy... What do you think of the relation between sociology and literature? These are paths which have separated as Lepenies (1985) showed, which will remain distant as certain sociological positivism would augur, or are they reconcilable as some contemporary sociologists hope to achieve, in their own way, in cultural studies?

AP: It is certainly not an easy relationship, not so much for me personally, as I have never felt this as being problematic. I remember even among the Italians there were those who wanted to have a sociology which was also literature, and I understood this. I never thought like this but I did understand it. So effectively, when sociological autonomy did not yet exist in Italy, attention to literature was basically a means of seeing certain things and saying certain things. Think of how important it was in Italy, when we began to talk about sociology. Books like *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* [Christ Stopped at Eboli], by Carlo Levi, Dolci's books, Scotellaro's research, and above all Danilo Montaldi's research, who was both sociologist and literary author at the same time. But the link with literature has generally been difficult. Even a sociologist who writes as well as Goffman has not been accepted by institutional sociology and social psychology. For example, when I had just arrived at Harvard, partially to introduce me to discussions, partially because I had just come from Europe, they included me into a committee to hire three or four new people. I had mentioned that in Europe, there was only one American Sociologist who enjoyed undisputed fame and that was Erving Goffman, but he was completely excluded, and I thought he was putting himself on the market. They absolutely did not want him there, as he was not part of mainstream sociology. It was a revelation, at most political bias could be overcome, although there was a certain political line. For example, there was a moment when there was a very respected candidate, very interesting but a declared Marxist. In the department, the person who was most right wing was Harrison White, guru of network analysis in America, yet he was fighting together with me for this Marxist, because he used a certain type of mathematics, do you get it? There was this type of block.

RS: And how did you navigate this type of block?

AP: I was never really in the block... Well I was a little, I also carried out empirical research, surveys, and so on, as indeed you have. But in Harvard, I was completely converted to the opposite, precisely because they needed someone who would deal with these things, a historical sociologist, and so on. You see, they needed this too. It was enough to control the department, and given that all the foreign students who want to do these other things, they were encouraged. In a seminar with Harrison White, which he recalls in his *Identity and Control* (1992), I developed a theory of identity and recognition trying to link it with the methodology of network analysis, of which Harrison was indeed the leader for American sociology.

RS: Let's get back to the mask. In your work, it is presented as an instrument or a technique that a human being can use or rather create to recognize oneself and others. Or better, if I can quote you, "one's only art, to recognize oneself," I am right?

AP: The form is probably wrong, as it is not the self which is recognized. I would say, to recognize someone, to be publicly presented. It is difficult to talk about, "oneself" at this point. For that which is acceptable for others at the end, possibly with difficulty, ends up with being accepted by them, inevitably, without exception, inescapably.

RS: This last passage is very important as it overturns the notion of performance as something which is merely superficial and introduces the question of power, control... It becomes, if not a Nietzschean *mnemotechniques*, then at least a Foucauldian subjectivation technique.

AP: Yes, yes, without doubt... Roberta, may I tell you something? I don't believe I explained it well in the work as I only knew afterwards. There are certain schools for stuttering children, or rather there

are stuttering children in certain schools where they are made to put on a mask. And when they are under the mask, the children stop stuttering. You see! It is something quite extraordinary, I may stutter, but when I put the mask on...

RS: The mask is heavy however... The idea of identity as consolidation over time, through tools that are visible and which can be publicly acknowledged, implies a cost — It is for this reason that we are close to Foucault but also Simmel, who each in his own way show the ambivalence of the imperative to self-construct. The subject feels in some way the weight of this mask that is no longer a tribal mask, no?

AP: I don't recall having thought so at the time. Even if there was a hint, and yet thinking about it... Yes, it is true, it is not excluded that I saw it. At root, this is the double nature of the mask, when it becomes the mask of someone, who wants to insist on their own autonomy and lives in some form of solitude. A mask that also hides continues to work on you until death. With death, certainly you can't hide any more (even if I knew a lady, who was attached to her own young beauty and when she died had put on her tomb a birth date which made her ten years younger), but right up to death, a small piece of this hiding is brought with you. Maybe it is both good and bad at the same time. But for who, at the end?

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Alessandro Pizzorno (Trieste, 1924 – Firenze, 2019), Emeritus Professor of Social Theory at the European University Institute in Florence, has been one of the main Italian sociologists and intellectuals of the Twentieth century. After his studies in Philosophy, Anthropology and Sociology at the University of Turin, Vienna and the EHESS Paris, in 1953–1959 he became Director of the Center of Social Relations at the Olivetti in Ivrea. In his early academic career he held posts in multiple institutions abroad and in Italy, including the University of Tehran from 1959–1960, the University of Urbino from 1960–1973 and the Nuffield College at the University of Oxford from 1973–1975. He worked as the Director of the Department of Sociology at the University of Milan from 1975, before taking up a post at Harvard University in 1976–1985 and at the European University Institute in 1986–1994. Professor Pizzorno was a founding member of the *Accademia Europaea*, and authored many significant studies on social and political theory, collective action and cultural sociology. Among his works are *Le classi sociali* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1959); *Comunità e razionalizzazione* (Torino: Einaudi, 1960); *Lotte operate e sindacato in Italia 1968-1972* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1978); *I soggetti del pluralismo. Classi, partiti, sindacati* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1980); *Le radici della politica assoluta* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1993); *Il potere dei giudici (Il nocciolo)*, Bari: Laterza, 1998); *Il velo della diversità. Studi su razionalità e riconoscimento* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2007); and *Sulla maschera* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2008). In 2004, he won the *Medal of the President of the Republic* and the *Pisa Literary National Award*.