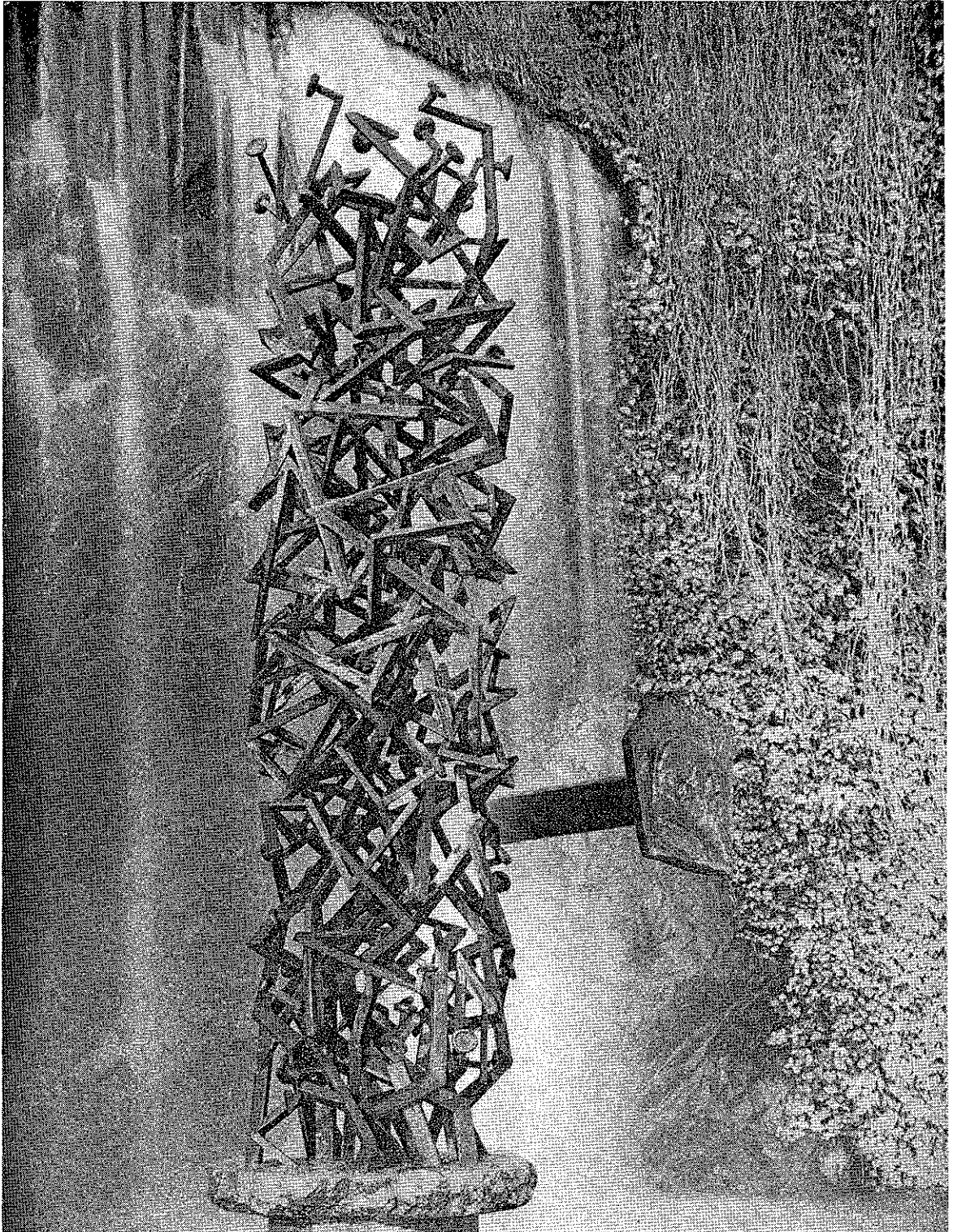


# Cesare Barbieri Courier



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# VITALIANO BRANCATI 1907-1954

by Louis Tenenbaum

Ten years ago, on September 25, 1954, Vitaliano Brancati died during a surgical operation for the removal of a benign tumor in a hospital in Turin at the age of forty-seven. His unexpected departure from the Italian literary scene aroused a tremendous wave of regrets recorded on the third page of newspapers all over Italy, as well as the literary pages of the weeklies and reviews. Testimonials published in the period just following his death reveal that the Sicilian writer was considered one of the most authoritative witnesses of contemporary Italian literature and culture. The few dissident voices, like that of Gina Raya, are noteworthy in their exceptionality. Almost unanimously journalists, writers and critics voiced dismay at the loss suffered by Italian cultural and literary expression in Brancati's passing. Special numbers were dedicated to appreciations in publications such as *L'Italia che scrive* and *La fiera letteraria*. His death was noted regretfully in France, where his well-known devotion to French literary figures of the past and present and a number of his works had earned him critical esteem.

Brancati, who for a number of years had taught Italian literature in the secondary schools, was a novelist, short-story writer, playwright and essayist. He had contributed regularly to the third page of Italian newspapers, as well as to reviews and periodicals

during most of his mature years. In addition, he edited a volume of selections from the works of Leopardi, and was responsible for an abbreviated Italian version of Chateaubriand's *Mémoires d'outre tombe*. In 1946 the Catanian writer was awarded the Vendemmia Prize for his collection of short stories entitled *Il vecchio con gli stivali*, and his novel *Il bell'Antonio* earned for him the Bagutta Prize in 1950. Brancati prepared the scenario for two films, one of which was the widely acclaimed "Anni difficili," directed by Luigi Zampa, based on his novella, *Il vecchio con gli stivali*. His reputation as a critic of Italian life and culture, particularly of the period of the 1940s and the early 1950s, was based on his forthright, conscientious, ironic and often caustic appraisals of all aspects of the contemporary scene published regularly in Rome's *Il Tempo*, the *Corriere della Sera* of Milan and in the weekly *Il Mondo* and *L'Europeo*. As a special correspondent for newspapers at various times he contributed journalistic articles of high literary merit. His publisher, Valentino Bompiani, has already issued five volumes of an *opera omnia*.

Outside of Italy Brancati has been best known and appreciated in France, the country whose literature left a deep imprint on his own cultural and artistic formation. (A full-scale production of his drama, *La governante*, was first presented on a Parisian stage in 1963.)

There has been some, but not extensive, interest in his works expressed in England, Germany and the Scandinavian countries; up to now he has been relatively unknown in the United States, except among students and scholars of contemporary Italian literature. An English version of the novel *Il bell'Antonio* was published in the United States in 1952 (Roy Publishers, New York), but had little critical or popular success, perhaps because the quality of the translation left much to be desired. Marc Slonim's anthology of *Modern Italian Short Stories* (New York, 1954) contains an English translation of "Il cavaliere," and an excerpt from the posthumously published novel *Paolo il caldo* was translated for inclusion in a special number of the *Texas Quarterly* dedicated to Italy which appeared in 1961 (Volume IV, number 2). There have been indications recently that further translations of Brancati works will be published in Austria and possibly the United States.

In Italy itself Brancati's reputation ten years after his death, is not yet secure. Since 1954, among the relatively little critical evaluation of his writings which has been published, the most intelligent and acute study is that by Mario Pomilio which appeared in January 1960 in the regrettably short-lived Neapolitan literary review *Le ragioni narrative*. Even Pomilio, however, is not without his reservations concerning Brancati's novels, and has concluded that his masterpiece is the novella *Il vecchio con gli stivali*. The consensus of Italian critical opinion on Brancati the literary artist is that he was a writer of undeniable talent, limited to a certain extent by his regional preoccupation, who was cut off in the prime of life when it could reasonably be expected that his inspiration would broaden and renew itself, thus enabling him to achieve a greater measure of excellence.

Brancati's reputation as a novelist and short-story writer during his lifetime could hardly escape being influenced by his role as a polemical and courageous critic of Italian culture of the Fascist and early post-war period. While one can separate these two principal interests and activities of his life, both are characterized by a moral dedication of the highest order. The Catanian writer realized that his essay and journalistic writings took time from "serious" literary effort, but was prepared to pay the price because for him "engagement" was a fundamental tenet of the literary and intellectual creed. He was afraid to gamble on the future, a future which the neglect of the present might render impossible for the artist and the intellectual. There was a

special reason for his concern with spiritual and political liberty and with a more rationalistic orientation of Italian culture. Brancati's missionary sense was in compensation for a youthful Fascist enthusiasm which had lasted until he was twenty-eight years old. From 1935 until his death in 1954 his moral life was largely influenced by one consideration: to make up for this early aberration.

Another paradox of Brancati's career is the fact that he has inevitably been classified as a Sicilian writer par excellence, the satirist of a very special Sicilian phenomenon, *gallismo*, when at the same time a closer acquaintance with his work and thought reveals that he is one of the most European of Italian writers. His Europeanism was late-blooming, and came with a kind of desperate intensity after the deep spiritual and moral crisis from which he emerged in 1935, permanently scarred but purged of his enthusiasm for Fascism. The wider intellectual outlook Brancati sought to develop after 1935 was the natural reaction to his awareness of the limitations of his provincialism. After his removal from the editorship of the Fascist periodical *Quadrivio* toward the end of 1935, the action which emphasized most dramatically the climactic point of his crisis, he found Rome and its atmosphere of official culture impossible to live in, and returned to his native island. Except for a brief sojourn in Florence around 1941 where he frequented the literary and artistic group of the Giubbe Rosse Caffè, Brancati continued his self-imposed Sicilian exile until 1943. The stay in Florence, where he made the acquaintance of Eugenio Montale, Carlo Bo, Tommaso Landolfi and others, might be interpreted as Brancati's attempt and failure to establish a fruitful contact with the literati of the silent opposition to the regime. Whether or not this interpretation is strictly accurate, it is abundantly clear that the Catanian writer had convinced himself that the remedy for his provincialism lay in rejoining the mainstream of European, rather than strictly Italian literature and culture. This solution was more than just a personal one; in Brancati's view it was the only way Italian culture could renew itself after the sterilizing influence of Fascism. Later a number of his detractors failed to appreciate the connection he had established between his personal problem as an artist and the general situation of the arts and the life of the intellect in Fascist and post-Fascist Italy. Consequently they could not understand what lay behind the regular references in his writing, some more, some less direct, to his youthful Fascist errors. Notwithstanding their accusations the Sicilian

novelist was not indulging in masochistic breast-beating, but was perfectly sincere in his self-criticism, whose purpose was to provide a salutary lesson to readers of his own and future generations.

As a corollary to his role as a "witness" of the spiritual and moral failings of Italy under Fascism and in the immediate post-war years, Brancati believed passionately in the role of the Italian writer as a goad to and as a voice of the Italian moral conscience. In the disinclination of the Italian people to examine their society critically and honestly he saw his country's most fundamental and serious defect. After 1935 and under the nose of the Fascist censorship he sought courageously to awaken the Italian conscience to the spiritual corruption of the regime and to the intellectual and philosophic dishonesty upon which it was based. His attacks, surprisingly direct at times, were in the form of essays and articles published in newspapers and reviews, in prefaces to books which he edited, and in his own short stories and novels. That he was able to avoid censorship and even imprisonment is testimony to both the obtuseness and the tolerance of the Fascist guardians of the press. The bitter lesson learned by Brancati after the fall of Mussolini was that the Italians' newly regained political liberty was not accompanied by a capacity or even a strong desire for critical self-examination. A reflection of his fundamental optimism (a quality too many of his critics and enemies failed to appreciate or understand) is his taking up the challenge posed by this defect of Italian culture, and continuing even more energetically and courageously in his post-war writing his comic, often satiric portrayal of Italian society and social types. This continuing moral passion produced its fruits in works like *Il vecchio con gli stivali*, a long novella written and first published in 1944, which in its artistic perfection seems destined to remain as the most sublimely comic commentary on the Fascist experience which will ever be written. It added to Brancati's previous critique of the boredom and stupidities of Italian life under Fascism his biting but affectionate ironies on human behaviour when it fell. His lucid and ironic intelligence continued to probe the weaknesses of Italian society in a mixed comic-serious vein in the novel *Il bell'Antonio*, where he achieved his first successful fusion of the theme of exaggerated Sicilian eroticism with a satirical, sometimes caricatural portrait of Sicilian bourgeois society under Fascism. The six most significant comedies of the Catanian writer's theatre, plays whose themes largely

echo those of his novels and short stories, were written in the post-war period. The fact that Brancati found it next to impossible to have them put on an Italian stage is less because of their artistic or theatrical defects than because of a rather widespread reluctance in official and influential circles to permit such a direct mirror to be held up before the face of post-war Italian society. In his last novel, *Paolo il caldo*, which he was completing at the time of his death and was published posthumously, Brancati revealed a changed, more serious approach to character portraiture, although in many respects the work can be considered an updated, post-war-society-centered *Il bell'Antonio*. The novel contains a devastating caricature of artistic and intellectual society in post-war Rome, which perhaps fails as literary art, but which was clearly inspired by the burning moral thirst for sincerity and truth which characterizes Brancati's thought and its literary expression.

\* \* \*

*Don Giovanni in Sicilia*, from which the introductory chapter follows in its first English translation, was published in 1942 and was responsible for Brancati's first large scale success with the Italian reading public and the critics. Its publication established his reputation as an authority on "gallismo" and as a leading comic writer. If "gallismo" can be dismissed as a purely Sicilian social and moral manifestation then the epithet "provincial" used by some of Brancati's critics is justified. However, Italian writers (including Moravia) and film directors in the last twenty years, by the manner in which they have expressed erotic themes, have shown rather persuasively that Brancati was the first to depict, albeit in the somewhat special terms of his native city and island, what they have come to realize is a significant aspect of contemporary Italian manners. Brancati hid the gravity of his charge against Sicilian (and Italian) middle-class society behind the affectionate, baroquely conceived and expressed comicity of his portraits of Giovanni Percolla and his Catanian friends; but the condemnation of the Italians' lack of seriousness and a disciplined moral sense is in the pages of *Don Giovanni in Sicilia* for those who wish to see it.

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(The translator gratefully acknowledges the permission of the Casa Editrice Valentino Bompiani & Co. for this first publication in English of Chapter I of *Don Giovanni in Sicilia*.)

## CHAPTER I

Giovanni Percolla was forty years old, and for ten years had lived with his three sisters, the youngest of whom called herself a "war widow." Each time she made this declaration a pencil and paper would suddenly appear in her hands and she would begin to make calculations, as follows:

"When I was at the right age for marriage, the first World War broke out. There were six hundred thousand dead and three hundred thousand invalided. For the girls of that period a million possibilities of marriage were wiped out. A million is a number not to be sneezed at! I don't think I'm deluding myself in thinking that one of those who died could have been my husband!"

"Right!" her sister would say. "Absolutely right! You were very pretty at the time of the war!"

The sisters' names were Rosa, Barbara and Lucia, and they loved each other tenderly, so much that each one, incapable of even fibbing on her own behalf, would freely make up lies to please the others.

"You, Rosa, would now be a colonel's wife," Barbara would say. All this because one evening in 1915, while the three of them were walking home on a dark street they felt they were being followed by a tall figure who gave off a sound of sabre and spurs.

"No, the captain was going about his own business!" Rosa would suggest modestly.

"Dearest," Barbara would insist, "when you are minding your own business, you don't say: 'Signorina, I'm leaving tomorrow, may I write you?'"

"But perhaps he was saying it to you!"

"No, no, no; no, no, no!"

"He was probably saying it to Lucia!"

"My dear girl!" Lucia would exclaim, "maybe Barbara doesn't remember, because she went into the doorway with you, but I, who stopped to pick up the key, distinctly heard a sigh which said: 'Signorina Rosa!'"

"Perhaps, perhaps! . . . Dear me, how many of those young men who kept the cafés lively and who used to look up as they strolled under the balconies never came back!"

These conversations were not held in Giovanni's presence. When he came through the main doorway of the building, the doorkeeper's wife would shake her little bell through the window and announce: "The master is going up the stairs!" The maid would drag herself to the door, calling out over her shoulder: "Signor Giovanni!"; and the three sisters would begin to run from all directions accompanied by the sound of plates being

shifted, shutters being slammed, matches being struck and chests being closed.

"Are you all sweaty?" Barbara would ask, handing him a long sleeved sweater.

"Oh, I suppose so!" he would say, and putting the sweater under his left armpit, he would go shut himself up in his own room. A half hour later he would come to the table and find his sisters already seated, their eyes glued on the door through which he was to appear, their spoons still empty in their right hands. During dinner few words were exchanged, but all were polite. The three women had never succeeded in freeing themselves from a kind of awe as far as he was concerned: the fact that he spoke little, that he never complained and found everything good, pleasing, not to be criticized, and handed over two thousand lire punctually at the end of each month; that he so strongly resembled papa in the big portrait and grandfather in the little colored statuette, as Barbara insisted, and lastly that he would walk on tiptoes so as not to awaken them when he came home late at night, all this inculcated such a sense of respect in the three women that none of them would have dared to speak of the captain of 1915 in his presence, or about marriage. To this one must add that they had never eaten supper with their brother; because he came home in the dead of the night, and with the same silence and care that he used in coming down the hall, he would remove the hard boiled eggs and the covered plates from the napkins in which they were wrapped, and in leisurely fashion arrange for the disappearance of everything the women had prepared for him in the interval between the Ave Maria and the first noise of the vehicles arriving at the nearby theatre. So strongly ingrained was this habit of not seeing him at supper time that one night Lucia, who had been awakened by stomach cramps, waited an hour in the hall, behind the closed door, for him to finish eating and to leave the dining room where, in one of the cupboards, the bicarbonate bottle was kept.

At times, by means of a question, Barbara had tried to penetrate into her brother's working life: "Giovanni, do a lot of people come to the store?" He would put a finger to the corner of his eye, open his mouth, and in the middle of a yawn, would say: "Eh!"

This increased their respect for the life he led out of their sight; and the enormous depression he left in the bed each afternoon, was evened out by all three of the sisters, as, with an almost religious fervor, they shook out the covers together and stood the mattress on end.



These were the traces of a worker's repose, as tenacious and heavy as his work must have been.

In the morning they limited themselves to walking in the dining room, which was the part of the house farthest from his bedroom, and they did not dare to venture even a step beyond it, for fear that a slipper-squeak might awaken him before nine-thirty. When he appeared, yawning, with ruffled hair and a kindly eye which never found anything displeasing on the already set table, his sisters experienced the moment of their greatest respect for him.

Giovanni would have complained only if he had not found the crockery basin filled with water hot enough to scorch the skin awaiting it. Even in summer he fogged up the bathroom mirror as he dried himself, with the steam coming off his cheeks and shoulders. "Hot water warms you up in January and cools you off in July!" he would say. At ten o'clock he was already on the stairs, and would send the customary greeting from the door: "I'm off to work!" This statement, ending in the verb *to work*, lingered in the semidarkness of the stairwell, and seemed to await his return. . . .

And yet the life of this man was dominated by a preoccupation with women! When, in the valley of Josephat, the three sisters learn what Giovanni was thinking during the long afternoon hours, what he used to talk about with his friends, how his job at the store came to nothing more than observing his uncle and cousins at work, the poor women will look up at God in the way pupils look at a teacher who has played a joke on them. Not Giovanni; not serious, good, respectable Giovanni?

Well, yes! Giovanni's head was full of the word *woman* (and what other words, Heaven help us!). Allow me to tell you a little about his life, even at the risk of my readers saying: "But what other Giovanni are you talking about?"

Little Giovanni was born a day later than expected. For twenty-four hours the glances cast by relations at his mother's figure (she was sixteen years old, and at night so afraid of thieves that her husband had to hold her hand, saying to her every so often: "But you're carrying a man inside you! a cuirassier!") were the glances cast at a baby's tomb. The baby, the "cuirassier" who would not be born, was considered dead, and the paternal grandfather wept for him with dry eyes and certain noises that resembled coughing.

But little Giovanni was not dead, and he came forth suddenly into life, almost like a jack-in-the-box. "He arrived late, but he is beautiful!" said the young woman who took him in her arms. That word "late" with which

he was received by the first woman who saw him, had a sinister influence on his life, but in a way completely the contrary of its meaning. Little Giovanni was precocious, learned things at an early age, and nature had to hurry up to confide her secrets to him. A few years after he was born he learned about women, underneath a wagon whose shafts pointed to the sky. The road was deserted: in the distance seated before a sunken door, there was only a little old woman dressed in black, destined to receive, like the model of a boat during the recounting of a naval battle, all the glances of the boys whenever the subject of the talk was named. Giovanni was silent, every once in a while raising the straw scattered all about on the ground, with the back of his hand. But from that day on the word "woman" never left his mind for a moment. What is she like? What isn't she like? What does she have more of, what does she have less of? The boy, already inclined to laziness, became a real sluggard, overwhelmed as he was by so many questions and such brainracking.

Even though he was still at the age in which the ladies, in a parlor short on chairs, lift us to their knees with a kiss, and the eldest female cousin, in a country house where guests have unexpectedly arrived, permits us to sleep with her, little Giovanni blushed in such a way when a female hand caressed his head that no one dared pay any further attention to him. This ended by making him even more solitary, lazy and silent. Between him and women there was always a certain distance which he filled with his quick, shy glances. His emotion grew as that distance increased. He reached the height of felicity at night, when above a cluster of rooftops, terraces and black towers, almost among the clouds, a red light would be switched on to illuminate a window behind which there moved back and forth the figure of a woman, who, given the lateness of the hour, could reasonably be expected to take off her clothes very soon. (Something that never happened, at least not with the room illuminated and the window open.) But just the sight of a silk skirt rolled up like a snake on the floor, and the shadow of someone probably moving on a bed, located to the right or the left of the visible part of the room, was enough to raise little drops of sweat all over Giovanni's brow.

These emotions preceded by a few years a terrible habit, common to all boys of his age, but which for several months he carried to an extreme.

After those months, fortunately, Giovanni returned to normal, because he found the sweeter, prolonged sensations aroused in him

by discussions of the usual theme preferable to the excessively strong ones. For such discussions he easily found in Catania very gifted companions who became as dear to him as certain inner voices without which it would be hard to live. For example, the "uhuuu!" of Ciccio Muscarà, commenting on a well-built woman, made him exult joyfully; and he would have spent a poor Sunday if during the week he had not heard that deep lament, that visceral groan at least twenty times.

Before having his first experience with a woman he spent long evenings in the darkness of certain streets squatting like a cockroach, together with Ciccio Muscarà and Saretto Scannapieco, in danger of being stepped on by a sailor. Sometimes a sudden beam of light, issuing forth from a door thrown open by a kick, illuminated all three of them and a cavernous voice uttering an affectionate insult made them flee to the center of the city.

One evening when Giovanni was soaked to the skin, with shoes full of water, a big woman drew him inside and closed the door. What followed happened rapidly, insipidly and confusedly. The strongest sensation he felt was in putting his clothes, still wet and cold, back on his body which was burning with fever. He was taken ill that very night and the following day, between fits of coughing, told what had happened to his two friends seated by his pillow. Perhaps the distance between him and women would have been irremediably increased, for all time, if a peasant girl had not taken the trouble to correct the erroneous impression he had first received.

Meanwhile the war had broken out and Ciccio Muscarà made the discovery that the wives, left alone in their large beds, "were cold." There was one, uhuuu! in Decima Street . . . another in a courtyard, uhuuuu! . . . a third on the top floor of a fancy building! . . . It was a matter of discovering, among so many, which ones were "available," and of guessing the right time. This could be discerned by the glance each one threw out from beneath her shawl, as she arose from the prie-dieu.

Giovanni Percolla and Ciccio Muscarà spent a good part of their day in the churches of Catania, under the enormous feet of the statues; their clothes smelled of incense; and the priests lowering their eyes from the chalice raised to the ceiling, seeing them always at the same spot, lifted their eyebrows. But, to tell the truth, they had little luck. Then they became more audacious, moved closer to the confessional, in spite of the fact that, one afternoon, Ciccio Muscarà's nose ended up between the enormous fingers of a confessor, at the

same time that there thundered forth from the box of lacquered wood the word "Rabble!"

What they heard offered them little material for their nightly discussions about the sufferings of wives deprived of their husbands, and still less for their strategy. The confessional grating received words of distress rather than of carnal restlessness. And since they were two nice boys they often found themselves with tears in their eyes. "Father confessor, when I eat bread and cheese in the evening I dream of three footed animals, but when I go to bed without eating I always see my husband as he was at sixteen years of age hanging head down over my window from the floor above. Should I go to bed without eating?" This was the only sentence they heard in its entirety.

Still it was only at the war's end that they agreed they had wasted their time and that their age no longer permitted them to delude themselves with vain hopes. And it was not until the XX Regiment returned to Catania, with its tattered flag and the prefect at its head, that the two friends resigned themselves to abandoning the pleasant habit of frequenting the churches.

They began to visit the ground floor or the first story of some small dwellings, where the head of the family dominated the little rooms from numerous portraits, casting proud glances even as far as the bed, but who, notwithstanding the fears expressed of his unexpected arrival, ("God forbid that he should hear of such a thing!"), was never seen to cross the threshold.

Giovanni's notebook, which had meanwhile left the schools forever, and was now to be found in his Uncle Giuseppe's fabric store, became filled with the word "ruff."<sup>\*</sup>

On almost every page there was a name with the four strange letters beside it: Bonisegna, via del Macello, ruff; Torrisi, via Schettini, ruff; Leonardi, via Decima, ruff . . . Whose names were these? Generally they belonged to coachmen and beggars who agreed to accompany the young gentlemen, or rather, the young studs, as they were called in Catania, to the garrets in which a poorly made-up girl was hiding, with feigned timidity, behind a mother full of false fear and repentance, and who, it always turned out, was not her mother but a neighbor woman.

The most renowned of these guides was Don Procopio Belgiorno. Short, with a single lock of hair in the center of his cranium, with one eye pushing upwards, almost above his eyebrow, always dressed in black, with a tobacco-

<sup>\*</sup> Tr. note: The first four letters of the word "ruffiano" which means "pimp."



colored waistcoat, a dirty stiff collar, a handkerchief sticking out carelessly from a pocket of his jacket, filthy, a dirty flower in his button-hole, and withal not repugnant, resembling one of those statues blackened by the years, Don Procopio Belgiorno would whisper in your ear: "A world of pleasure! Fifteen years old! . . ." Suddenly the young fellow would stammer excitedly: "Don Procopio, let's not have it be an old woman like the last time!"

To tell the truth Don Procopio was un-failingly thrown down the stairs to the top of which he had climbed with a group of young studs; nor did his fifteen-year-old ever fail to be at least thirty. The young gentlemen knew it; but the eloquence of Don Procopio was all powerful in a city like Catania where talking about women gave greater pleasure than women themselves.

"Don't be so stupid as to let the girl undress herself! By the Madonna of the Seggiola! Your excellency should undress her with your own hands!" Don Procopio would say in a low voice, as they walked swiftly through the dark alleys and courtyards. The only delicious moment for the young men was when they were approaching the unknown house with Don Procopio. After that they all knew how it would turn out: Don Procopio, having reached the top landing would back slowly down before the old cracked door was opened; and the boys would take their hands out of their pants pockets. As soon as there was enough light, and the fifteen year old revealed her wrinkles and her warts, Don Procopio would throw himself down headfirst sneezing like a hen, but he would be caught near the door and beaten in the manner one beats his own hat in a moment of anger.

And yet the most beautiful women that the men of Catania saw were those whose voices Don Procopio had them hear, whose necks, dainty feet, and teeth he brought before their eyes during the walk from the center of the city to the dark, dank stairway. One could also say that these men had a bitter destiny: that of having to beat up on the poet of their dreams of love, the man who looked into their eyes and in a low voice promised each one the woman of his dreams, and then gave what life is in the habit of giving in such cases. Once he stood before the broken down door his job was done: they all felt it. But the good-by to the beautiful images and to the one who had conjured them up could have been a little less brutal.

Even Giovanni Percolla, Ciccio Muscarà and Saretto Scannapieco fell into the snares of this eloquence and at the end of the adventure were no less brutal than the others; they too

heard, in the evening darkness, in the narrow streets where the gas lamps were smashed by stones every afternoon, that low voice murmuring: "A honey, uhuuu! . . . Slowly to the bed! You won't mind certainly when . . . do you understand? . . . she acts like a turtle-dove. She has this vice! . . ." and they too, seeing that the turtle-dove was a homing pigeon, broke one of the boils that the poor old fellow always had on his temples.

To tell the truth the march through mud, heaped up street sweepings, black cats and chickens to reach these mirages attracted more than just very ordinary people. The mayor in person was accompanied by the uneasy grumbling of Don Procopio one Sunday evening. "This way, your excellency!" he said finally, pushing the illustrious personage into a doorway. This time the girl to whom Don Procopio had led his client, and then taken to his heels, was not an old woman, but really and truly a girl. The only trouble was that for six days she had been running a mysterious high fever. The mayor was greeted by desperate shouts, because he was mistaken for the doctor.

"Doctor!" the girl's mother cried, seizing his coat collar and shaking him, "Doctor, don't permit it! Doctor, the remedy, the remedy. Don't save the remedy for the rich, Doctor!"

In a double bed, under a wide fan of sacred images, the King, Garibaldi, and a picture of an enormous bride and bridegroom returning from church, lay a small oval face crushed by suffering and fasting. "Barbara," the mother called out to that poor little face, "Barbara, little mother, look at me, dear heart! Here is the doctor! He will give you the medicine! . . . Oh, she can't hear me! . . . Oh, what a plague they are spreading around! The mayor has sold us like broken pots! That dog of a mayor! . . . I beg you, Doctor, take out the remedy!"

"But I am not a doctor!" the mayor hazarded in a faint voice.

There was a pause during which you could hear the light, intermittent humming of breath from the tiny face, like that of wind blowing through a guitar. "And who are you then?"

"But . . . I don't know . . . you're mista . . ."

"You don't know? You don't know, the devil take you. Get out, damned he-goat! Get out!"

The mayor just managed to wriggle out of the situation, and not entirely: three days later, at little Barbara's funeral, one of the children was wearing half of the mayor's overcoat, and resembled a bat, while another piece of the same coat, transformed into a jacket was dragging on the ground, worn by the mother who had put it on the evening before.

This was the first case of Spanish influenza in Catania, and the beginning of a series of misfortunes.

One evening Giovanni Percolla's father came home with a nasty grimace on his face which caused him to hold his pipe crooked. "I'm in a sweat, a real sweat!" he muttered. "I feel like I'm going to be sick!"

"Do you have a fever?" his wife asked him, getting to her feet to feel his forehead.

"Yes, I'm burning!"

They stuck a long thermometer in his mouth, but to the great disappointment of the elder Percolla, the thermometer only registered 97. "You don't have any fever!" said his wife, clapping her hands.

"Maybe not, but I still don't feel well! And this is what I think of your thermometer!" And he broke it into a thousand pieces. "The bed!" he began to shout. "Heat up the bed!"

In a moment a charcoal-burning pressing iron, which they all insisted on blowing into to make it heat up, was slipped into the sheets, and the elder Percolla went to bed.

"I'm not long for this world, damnation!"

He insisted that they carry into his room all the pipes he had ever smoked, his overcoat and his felt hat. In one corner all his walking sticks were collected.

"That one!" he said, pointing to a bamboo cane with a dog's head handle. "That one . . . !"

"Do you want it?" asked his wife in a low voice, beginning to weep.

"That's the one I used to knock on your garden gate with, and you would appear!"

But when they brought him the easy chair in which he had spent long evening hours, he shot up erect in bed. "There I am!" he shouted. "Seated right there. A gentleman, a fine man, a good man used to sit in that chair! By the devil, son of a . . . cuckold of a . . . such a good man has to die!"

The old man had never been a prude in expressing himself; but this time his strong words were so terrible that his wife fled to the farthest corner of the house, stopping up her ears with her fingers, because even there, whenever an intervening door was opened, you could hear "Cuckold of . . ." and what followed after.

That night Commendatore Percolla was seized with the fever, and his enormous eyes were fastened on the door as if he saw something that the others did not. Damned times! Two days later his wife was also taken ill, cry-

ing out in her delirium; "Take care of my husband! He's sensitive to cold!"

This woman, still young, died in the living room, where she had dragged herself, unnoticed by the others, in order to reach her husband's room to see if they had put another blanket on his feet. They found her seated in front of a tall mirror, in a white slip, her face curved forward and covered by her hair. Two days later, after a week's silence, her husband was carried off.

Giovanni, considered by all a cold-hearted, lazy child, was so overcome by grief that, notwithstanding the fear of contagion, a number of neighbors came over to hold his feet and to tear his hands away from his mouth. For two days he talked continuously; and the normally uncommunicative boy left not one unspoken word inside him. Expressing his thoughts out loud, he could be heard muttering: "The sailor cap! . . . My father used to throw it up in the air! . . . like me! . . . a child! . . ." he added with a shriek, throwing himself at a terrified gentleman who took protection behind a chair. "My father was a child like me!" Then he calmed down. "The black cat! . . . Mosquitoes! . . . One is enough! A single mosquito! . . . Child . . . She . . . Cold! Look at that cold man! . . . And she, she, in an armchair! Oh, in an armchair! . . . What heat . . . Reverend Father, tomorrow I'm going to fast on account of my husband's blasphemings! . . . He has more horns than a basket of snails! . . . Oh, don't talk about people like that! . . . And you, Rosina, what do you care about people? . . . They adored each other! Ah, Ah!" And he fainted.

The boy seemed on the verge of falling to pieces. But a week later he returned to being his usual closed and taciturn self; he insisted on remaining alone, at night, in the house which was now empty, wandering amid the divans and beds, stretching himself out on one or the other every so often, sometimes in the dark, sometimes with all the lights on, a book in his hand that he never read and that every so often he hurled in front of him, as an aimless passerby kicks an empty can ahead of him, following it to kick it again. But soon the three sisters, who had always lived with their grandparents, returned home. And Uncle Giuseppe said to him: "And now for you! To work!"

We shall not narrate the events of the following three years, after which Giovanni had been restored entirely to his old habits.

# Notes from the Olivetti Underwood Story

by S. Pizzoni-Ardemani

It is now five years since the Olivetti Company of Italy first acquired control of the Underwood Corporation and embarked upon the task of bringing it back to profitability and prestige. In the course of these five years, the initial investment of Olivetti increased more than ten times. In the process, the original 30% control became full ownership of what is now the Olivetti Underwood Corporation.

A flashback may help evaluate this venture. Underwood activities go back to the year 1894. Olivetti started 14 years later in 1908.

Underwood rapidly climbed to world fame, its name in the minds of many people becoming almost synonymous with typewriters. Olivetti had a slower start, as a result of the environment in which it operated, since in the first decade of the century Italy was only starting on the way toward industrialization. When Olivetti started its operations, the Italian public relied almost exclusively on foreign rather than domestic products.

For many decades the two corporations followed separate and unrelated paths.

By the end of the Second World War, Olivetti leaped to the conquest of foreign markets with a diversified line of products which included typewriters, adding, calculating and accounting machines, as well as office furniture and machine tools. Not only was the excellence of these products recognized and hailed by the public also in the United States, but their design gained a distinctive appreciation all over the world. In fact, the name Olivetti became more and more a symbol for quality and esthetic values in the products of the company, as well as in its advertising and in the buildings in which its industrial and commercial operations were housed.

Most of the dynamism of Olivetti after the war can be ascribed to the driving personality of Adriano Olivetti, son of the founder of the company, who became president after his father's death.

Under him, Olivetti became also known for

a philosophical approach to the general problems of industrial, economic and social organization. Mr. Olivetti and his closest associates believed that in a modern society a corporation is not only a source of earning for thousands of people and an economic power, but also necessarily represents the center of interest and inspiration for a multitude of men and women who spend the best part of their lives in its offices and factories.

Olivetti felt that the relation between the corporation and the people working for it could not be limited to the figures on the payroll. According to this philosophy, the great power that year-after-year of success concentrates in a corporation, has to be used also to press for higher social and cultural values, thus becoming one of the essential factors in the shaping of the contemporary world. The interest in art and beauty shown by Olivetti was just one instance of its determination to exercise a definite influence on contemporary society.

By 1959, Olivetti had expanded its operations practically to all countries of the free world. It had seven factories in Italy, plants in England, Spain, Brazil and Argentina, and assembly operations in South Africa, Colombia and Mexico. Commercial subsidiaries operated in 20 major countries. Agents covered the rest of the free world.

In the same year, 1959, Underwood, having lost its leadership in the last decade, and having been practically unable to renovate its products and to successfully expand into the fields of adding, calculating and accounting machines or computers, found itself in an almost desperate situation. For some time it had looked around for a possible merger, but its situation was no secret and its losses too great to invite a suitor. At best the company could hope to find someone attracted by the millions of tax carry-over. As a last resort, in the fall of 1959, Underwood sent one of its vice presidents to Italy to see whether Olivetti might be willing to enter into some agreement whereby

Underwood could gain a new lease on life, distributing Olivetti office machines in the United States.

This led to Underwood's offering to sell Olivetti 400,000 of its shares, authorized but not issued, because of the general conditions of the company. Olivetti paid those shares at their stock exchange value on the day the deal was signed and gained control of approximately 30% of Underwood. With this Olivetti was also handed the management of Underwood.

There followed months of renewed examination and appraisals of the situation which led to the conclusion that to put Underwood back on its feet, a complete reorganization was necessary, which could not be started on the basis of only a 30% control.

New cash was then offered to Underwood and into it were merged all existing Olivetti assets in the United States and Canada. This, together with credits and the supply of Olivetti machines, of which Underwood became exclusive distributor for the United States and Canada, by June 1960, brought Olivetti's control to 69%, with an investment approaching 80 million dollars.

A few months earlier, Adriano Olivetti had died suddenly on a train while traveling from Milan to Geneva. He had had time to work out only the essential lines of the plan for the Underwood Olivetti operation. Among other things, he had appointed Dr. Ugo Galassi, one of the most outstanding leaders of Olivetti, to be the new president of Underwood.

One of Olivetti's objectives had been to secure what was believed to be the strong commercial organization of Underwood, counting some 120 branches, and more than a thousand agents. As for Underwood's plant in Hartford, the first impression had been that it was almost worthless.

Looking at the situation more closely, the contrary began to appear. In fact, the factory, thanks to new equipment and under vigorous leadership, soon was able to turn out newly designed or redesigned products, which included three electric typewriters, one manual typewriter and a manual adding machine.

Production costs were slashed by discontinuing a host of unprofitable products and by stabilizing production at constant levels, irrespective of momentary fluctuations in market demand. What proved to be a harder and time consuming task was the rebuilding of the sales organization. In fact, when Olivetti took over, this organization existed almost only on paper. Through the years, many able people had left it and those who had remained with the company were demoralized by its steady deteriora-

tion. Consequently, the sales force had practically to be rebuilt from zero. This entailed the recruiting of thousands of salesmen for direct sales, the signing of a thousand contracts with exclusive agents and the starting of working relations with some 7,000 dealers for the sale of portable products throughout the country. To insure the necessary standards, a training center was created in Hartford, on the pattern of Olivetti's training school in Florence, for the instruction of salesmen and repairmen for Underwood branches and for agents on the basis of Olivetti's special methods. This in itself turned out to be a major feat in industrial leadership. The instructors for the center came from Italy and almost all had to learn English in a hurry to be able to teach the new Underwood recruits.

Under Galassi's leadership, the first phase of Underwood reconstruction, characterized by massive and necessarily expensive action, proceeded vigorously.

As this phase progressed, it often attracted the attention of the press, which saw in it a reversal of known and accepted patterns. In this case, a European concern was exporting to the U.S., not only capital, but know-how and management. To be sure, other European industries had previously operated with success in the U.S. However, the prestige of the Olivetti name and the very fact that an Italian company was bold enough to take over an old American company and came to compete in the U.S. in the very specialized field of office machine manufacturing, offering as a principal asset the ability of its management, made this almost a textbook case of the kind of Atlantic partnership then envisaged by President Kennedy as the mighty force to cement together the free nations on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. Some people saw in this venture a sign of the challenge that Europe was posing to American industry and a forerunner of developments and changes expected to take place in the industrial and business relations between Europe and America.

In the past two years, some of the drama which at first surrounded Olivetti's venture was tempered. The challenge of the Common Market does not seem to be so frightening any more and the Atlantic partnership itself has somewhat faded as an immediate objective. Nevertheless, what Olivetti set out to do and accomplished up to this point remains a valid example of trends at work in the free world.

From 1959 to April 1963 vast resources of money, men and technical know-how were poured into Underwood to keep it going. At the time, some 50 executives and highly trained salesmen were sent to the U.S. by Olivetti.



Many of them had limited or no knowledge of the U.S. However, they thoroughly knew all phases of their business from manufacturing to sales. Many of them did not speak English and were given a few weeks in Italy, prior to departure, and in the U.S. to learn it. Like their colleagues who taught at the training center, they did this in an amazingly short time, at least to the point of being able to tend effectively to daily business together with their American Underwood colleagues. This is a particularly interesting point which seems to indicate that, given the right charge of enthusiasm, coupled with the precise knowledge of one's business, the language barrier encountered in setting up operations abroad need not be too frightening.

Under the massive impact of the new policies and methods employed by Olivetti management, by April, 1963, Underwood was presenting to the public the image of a renewed company, although high operating costs still resulted in heavy budgetary losses.

Unfriendly critics still vainly hoped that the effort would prove beyond Olivetti's capacity, but sales had substantially increased and the public was giving wider and wider acceptance to all products offered by Underwood. These sales, which totaled more than 100 million dollars, with an increase of more than 30% in 3 years, were now almost equally divided between products made by Underwood in its Hartford plant and products imported from Olivetti.

In the meantime, through the effort of thousands of salesmen, who had been assigned

also the task of assessing the market and gathering all sorts of valuable information in their areas concerning distribution and use of office machines, the management for the first time had available a mass of data on which to base more sophisticated and precise projections and evaluations of overall company's activities. Thus, the scene was ready for the beginning of a second phase of operations, to be characterized by complete Olivetti control, by the acceptance of the 1962 sales volume as a starting basis for future market penetration and, finally and uppermost, by the goal of achieving profitable operations in the shortest time.

As a leader for this second phase, Olivetti appointed President Dr. Guido Lorenzotti, who had been Galassi's closest associate as executive vice president for three and one-half years. Next to him, as executive vice president and treasurer, was put Dr. Gianluigi Gabetti, who had also cooperated from the start of the Underwood venture, taking charge of particularly delicate financial problems.

At this time, the development of the situation in Italy, where credit was becoming particularly tight, was making it imperative to concentrate on the task of stopping as promptly as possible any further cash outlays on the part of Olivetti. However, a last effort was demanded from Olivetti for the acquisition of total control of Underwood through the purchase of all outstanding minority stock. This complex operation having been carried through successfully, with only some marginal protests from a few stockholders, in October,

1963, Underwood, under the Delaware Corporate law, changed its name to Olivetti Underwood.

In the meantime, on the basis of the more precise information gathered in the first phase of operations, the management made a number of adjustments which resulted in the elimination of some unnecessary expenses, the reduction of unneeded personnel, the closing of some branches that were not and could never be profitable, and altogether established new strict controls over all company's operations. Production schedules also were revised, in tune with the assessed requirements of the market, and inventories which so far had been kept on high levels also in view of providing the public with a massive evidence of Underwood's renewed presence on the market, were reduced to more normal proportions.

By the end of 1963 the company still showed a loss for the year of some eight million dollars, but the trend on the way to profit was visible. In fact, a small profit appeared in March, 1964, the first since February, 1955, well before Olivetti entered the picture. Since March the favorable trend has been maintained and barring any unforeseen events, the entire year 1964 is now expected to show a profit. The attainment of profitability in accordance with the original Olivetti forecast, which assigned five years to the main task of rebuilding Underwood, marks the closing of a difficult uphill climb and the conclusion of a cycle.

What only a few months ago could be judged a costly "dream" must now be considered a reality. The "dream" - and there certainly was one, for no industry or other enterprise can be launched and succeed without that great imponderable which is the leader's intuition or "dream" - now offers itself for analysis and appraisal.

What emerges is a picture of great complexity based on the interchange of Olivetti and Underwood themes. When Olivetti took over Underwood, it set out to do a job on the strength of its own experience, which although basically European and Italian, already reached world dimensions. In the process, however, Olivetti gathered a wealth of U.S. knowledge and experience which inevitably plays an important role in shaping the new reality of Olivetti Underwood. At the same time, this experience is also used to reshape some operations of the parent company in Italy.

The cost of Olivetti's venture in the U.S. has come close to 100 million dollars, a figure which appears staggering only to those who

do not consider all elements of the picture. In fact, with this investment of 100 million dollars, Olivetti gained stable and sizable access to the U.S., which is the greatest and richest market in the whole world. It thus gained access to a ground where techniques and methods successful elsewhere can be further tested, and when necessary adapted and improved, under conditions which are greatly advanced in comparison with those prevailing in any other part of the world. This means that the experience made today in the U.S. anticipates conditions which will exist in other markets in 5, 10 or 15 years. The result is a great enrichment of Olivetti's abilities and of its grasp of the most dynamic marketing and manufacturing conditions. Of all this experience Olivetti is certain to make good use, particularly now that, after a period of changes, a new management is at the helm of the company as the expression of a new grouping of stockholders. Altogether, Olivetti is expected to maintain the essential characteristics that made it known in the world, while at the same time adapting itself to the ever changing realities of the world in which it operates. The experience made through Underwood in the U.S. cannot fail to be of tremendous value for any future development. Furthermore, Olivetti has proven its main point, namely, that a company of world dimensions cannot operate only from one side of the Atlantic, but must have a footing on both sides, particularly in view of being actively present in the greatest competitive market of all, which is the United States. This point is also proven daily by the multitude of U.S. companies which set up operations in Europe or in other continents. This, however, cannot be only a one-way trend and the reverse is essential to maintain the balance necessary to make full use of all methods, experiences and techniques available from various sources.

Olivetti never had a nationalistic inclination. It never saw itself in terms of an old-world firm coming to conquer the new world. Rather it conceived its Underwood venture in terms of the maturing of an experience which could only reach its peak on U.S. soil. As for Olivetti Underwood itself, it obviously must bear the double imprint derived from the parent company's outlook, combined with the stimulating influence of the American market in which it basically operates. In this super-competitive market, profit, which Olivetti Underwood just achieved and will hopefully increase in future years, represents the most eloquent proof of success.



## A POEM BY LIONELLO FIUMI

*Translated by Joseph Tusiani*

### Riso di sonno

Rideva ella nel sonno: a cosa? a chi?  
Quali labili stormi di gaiezze  
Trasmigravano pel suo chiuso buio?  
Da che cieli giungevano, a me ignoti?  
A che lidi perdevansi, a me sordi?

Curvo a origliare, e cauto,  
Io, al cancello d'un mondo proibito,  
Equilibrio d'incanti:  
Simile a quei che vede a fiore d'acqua  
Pullulare di bolle  
E mai saprà che lampi d'ori e argenti  
Sotto l'opaca massa  
L'attrito delle squamme ebbe in quell'attimo,  
Né cos'ebbero a dirsi le meduse  
Con l'agitar voluttuosamente  
Veli di danzatrici.

Ma sulle labbra declinò quel riso  
In un sorridere sì fermo, e pallido,  
Che pensieri mi vennero d'eterno.  
Certo andavan gli stormi con più lento  
Battito adesso; ed a cercar di dove  
Giungessero, il beato nulla udivo  
Della pre-esistenza;  
A interrogare dove si perdessero,  
Quelle labbra di calma,  
Con quel loro sorridere, al beato  
Nulla accennavano del divenire.

### Laughter In Sleep

And in her sleep she laughed: at what or  
whom?  
What tenuous flocks of joy  
Were transmigrating through her alien night?  
And from what firmaments unknown to me  
To what deaf shores did they at random fare?

Eavesdropping cautiously, right there I stood,  
Bent at the gate of a forbidden world –  
The equilibrium of ecstasy –  
Like one who on the water's surface sees  
A myriad bubbles bloom  
And yet knows not what gold or silver flash  
Beneath the lightless weight  
The shaken scales at that one moment made,  
Or what the sirens to each other said  
By fluttering their dancing veils about  
In lustful, happy spree.

Ah, on her lips that laughter soon became  
A smile, so still, so faint  
It made me think of all eternity.  
Surely those flocks were transmigrating now  
More slowly; and while trying to know where  
They came from, I could hear the blissful  
nothing  
Of man's prenatal life;  
Just as while questioning whereto they fared –  
Those lips of quietude  
With that still lingering smile – I could foresee  
The blissful nothing of man's life to be.

## A Note on *I Trapiantati* by Giuseppe Prezzolini

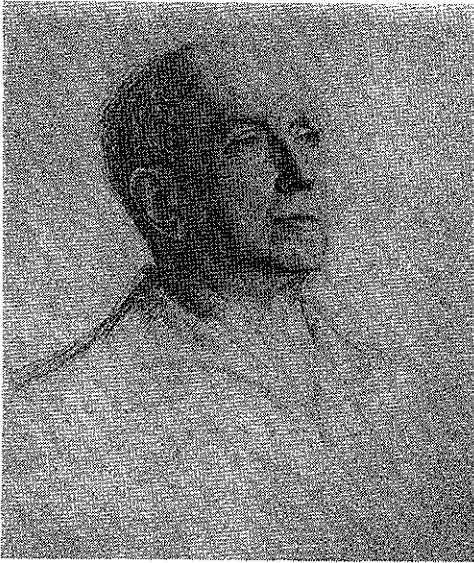
The writing that follows this introductory word is an excerpt from the book *I trapiantati* by Giuseppe Prezzolini. In his preface to *I trapiantati* Giuseppe Prezzolini writes that he has collected a number of essays about Italian emigrants to North America because his observations dissent from those commonly made on the subject. Anyone familiar with the iconoclasm of this writer would hardly expect them to do otherwise. At the outset Professor Prezzolini takes exception to the very term Italo-American because in his judgment it does not correspond to the real nature of these people. In his view the mass of emigrants from Italy who settled in North America were not really "Italians." They were just poor southern provincials who had hardly any notion of an Italian nationality, who lacked a national formation and a consciousness of a national culture. They were familiar only with local traditions and had an allegiance only to their own ethnic group of fellow villagers. Thus, he stresses, they were not creatures of a crossing of races and cultures, but rather the product of an adaptation. In the course of this they lost contact with the people from whom they take their origin without ever fusing with the people among whom they came to live. Accordingly, there never has been a welding of Italian with American attributes. Instead there has been only an intermixture of a few practical customs and the consequent attenuation of two altogether diverse cultures. For Prezzolini the result has been a tragic one. Italo-Americans "are not the sum of two wholes but the remainder of two substractions." They are a "neither-nor" people — transplanted, shallow-rooted, deprived of genuine identity.

One of the distressing consequences of such an adaptation is the injury done to the language of emigrants, which is the equivalent of saying, the injury done to their psyche. Invariably they speak neither Italian nor English well; their vocabulary is limited to a pathetic jargon of a few hundred mongrel words ("grosseria" from grocery for *negozio*

*di commestibili*; "stima" from steam heat for *riscaldamento*; "giobba" from job for *impiego*, etc.). Such a linguistic loss represents for Prezzolini the sacrifice of the deepest part of oneself. The loss of a limb would be less maiming.

At one point Prezzolini states bluntly that the sole purpose of Italian emigrants in coming to these shores was to better themselves economically and that this is all they have ever succeeded in accomplishing. Obviously the uncompromising views of this realistic, disabused observer will not be very endearing. Many will certainly take sharp exception to his conclusions, especially those immigrants who have gained economic success and a measure of cultivation. And many others no doubt will take offense at the unflattering picture of their condition, especially those who are accustomed to the anodyne picture of themselves presented during the course of political campaign oratory in "Little Italy" communities and on the occasion of Columbus Day celebrations. To them the author's observations will indeed be harsh and disconcerting.

*I trapiantati* deals with numerous aspects of Italo-American life in American society: crime, education, the Italian language press, writers, businessmen, politicians. Chosen for translation and publication here is one of the most provocative chapters of the book. The decision to include it in *CBC* is conditioned by the consideration that Italo-Americans must have by now reached that secure stage in assimilation to their new environment which would permit the acceptance of tough-minded judgments. One should bear in mind, moreover, that despite the apparent relentlessness of his argument, Prezzolini does communicate a fundamental admiration for the hapless emigrant sent out as he was so unprepared and uncared for by a neglectful motherland, so rejected by a hostile host society, and so exploited and misled by self-styled leaders of the same origin. At one point the author writes "If the Italian emigrant did not become a criminal or a madman it is a miracle *e di questi miracoli ce ne sono dei milioni.*"



*Giuseppe Prezzolini:*  
**The Italian-American Contribution  
to America**

The narrative writing in English of Italian-Americans has never really succeeded artistically in entering into the current of American taste. In fact, I should say that the writers themselves never even tried to. The narratives which are to be considered as the most important, both from the standpoint of artistic merit and of popular success with the American public, are six in number:

Pasquale D'Angelo, *Pascal D'Angelo, Son of Italy*, 1924

Caribaldi Lapolla, *The Grand Gennaro*, 1935

Guido D'Agostino, *Olives on the Apple Tree*, 1940

John Fante, *Dago Red*, 1940

Jerre Mangione, *Mount Allegro*, 1942

Michael De Capite, *Maria*, 1943

Now that years have passed since their publication it is evident that not one of them has survived; they remain only as *documents*. Except for Lapolla, not one of them attempted to create a great type or character. All, more or less, are concerned with ordinary little folk and bear the imprint of the veristic formula. They seem to be writers who, aware of having hit upon an interesting folkloristic subject matter physically close at hand but spiritually

remote from the American public, have tried to exploit it, in part with a certain affection toward the past, in part with a certain rancor toward the present, but in a narrative manner which, more or less, has assumed the tone of the *interpreter* or of the *authorized guide*. "Here are the Italians," they all seem to say, directing themselves to other Americans as if they were pointing out animals in a zoo. "Look: they are not so bad or so stupid as they seem; in fact, it's really you who have been a little wicked or at least stupid in considering them as such."

In the books of these pseudo-novelists plot is practically non-existent, the succession of exterior scenes is conventional, and the autobiographical element prevails, often in a series of chapters among which there is inevitably one dedicated to the big "Italian dinner" or "feast" in which spaghetti always figures along with the bottle of Chianti. The prevalence of culinary feasts in these folk novels is explained by the poor origins of the families who are the subjects of the books. That which has been said of one of them could well be said of the others: hunger is the principal character. Hunger was

at first endured, then overcome; but once overcome one remembers it by eating and drinking more than is necessary.

Besides hunger the most frequent themes in these autobiographical novels which resemble sociological writings are: the conflict between the emigrant and America, between the first generation having come from Italy and the second educated in America, debts to be paid and travel expenses for relatives yet to come, rivalries between families of the North and those of the South, the predominance of the common family interest to which all is sacrificed, the patriarchal system which the family has imported from Italy, the festive spirit of social gatherings on the occasions of deaths, weddings, and baptisms. A truly Christian sentiment is absent. But there is superstition. No priest puts in his appearance as in Italian veristic novels (but it is necessary to note that Italian-American writers have learned their veristic formula from American and not from Italian writers, that is, they derive from Dreiser and not from Verga). There is in their verism something brittle, flat, detached as one finds in the reading of a catalogue.

When we speak of conflict between the emigrant and America we must not think that America is represented or symbolized by a character. America appears rather like a closed and immense test tube within which the little colony of Italian insects was placed with its fate of being transformed. Here and there America is made incarnate in the figure of a policeman, a judge, a teacher, but it's a matter of fleeting appearances that cannot really be called symbols. The Italian groups who are the substance of these novels, by a couple of generations break up and slowly fade away almost without their being aware of it. In order to be absorbed they must renounce being what they were.

What is assimilation, really? It is not the result of legislation, it is not an exchange, it is not a collection of forces which remain intact and still participate (like the French in Canada). Only in the speeches of professional spokesmen of American assimilation does one hear speak of the "contribution" of Italians to America. I do not say there hasn't been any contribution, but it resembles, more or less, what an Italian fruit vendor who had obtained permission to keep his cart in front of the house of an American banker jokingly defined in this way: "This millionaire and I have come to an agreement; I will not compete with his bank and he has promised not to sell apples here."

Individual Italian energies have certainly

contributed to the wealth and fortune of America, but then it has been the economic progress of all of America and its imperial structure and size that has raised and intensified the individual energies of Italian-Americans. Certainly the banker Giannini gave to America the new conception of the national function of a bank; but this was not an Italian patrimony; it was his personal genius awakened and magnified by the spectacle of America. Thousands of Italian-Americans have become rich simply because, having bought a small piece of land to plant a truck garden near a city which then stretched its tentacles, their land subsequently became valuable real estate. Hundreds of Italian-American doctors today have a wealthy practice only because of the wealth of America itself and its distribution among the middle and lower middle classes.

When mention is made, on occasion of "colonial banquets,"\* of the fact that the railroads were built by Italians, inevitably I think that the Italians made their contribution as beasts of burden working here and there without understanding what their work was all about. Up to the last generation, or until the time when students of Italian origin of American cultural background began to graduate from medical and architectural schools, Italian emigrants in America were public charges or exploited tenants, not scholarly doctors or inventive architects and engineers. We won't go into the subject of the arts where one would expect the Italians to have made a contribution, but let us just consider that about five million people came over from Italy or roughly the population of Lombardy: What have they produced in the field of art? Compare it with the accomplishments of that region between 1880 and 1940. Unfortunately the majority of the monuments which persons of taste would willingly destroy in New York City and elsewhere, was the work of skilled Italian craftsmen without an iota of talent who came from the marble quarries of Carrara and the fine arts academies of Italian provinces. In the musical field, especially in opera, the story would be different. But we must bear in mind that in this area it was not the Italian-American who gave the best singers, violinists, and orchestra conductors to America; it was Italy. Toscanini, who at "colonial banquets" was often flanked by other great names in order to point out how much America owes to Italian-Americans, never learned English well, never took out American citizenship, and was a pure

\*The author refers to large formal dinners at which "prominent" Italian-Americans display their rhetoric and new found wealth.

product of Italian musical culture and technique of the 19th century who resided for a few months or years in America for economic reasons, enclosed within an enclave of Italian culture. As much may be said of the only important Italian name in contemporary music, Gian Carlo Menotti, with the difference that Menotti's artistic command of English is equal to that he possesses in Italian.

Getting back to our Italian-American writers in English, we must acknowledge that they are few in number, that they were not great, and that they have not succeeded in entering into the American tradition (I mean, for example, that not one of them has the importance of the German Dreiser or of the Swedish Sandburg). They are good average American writers who have observed and recorded their families with a certain, at times humorous, at times folkloristic detachment.

The process of assimilation in America never met with a conscious cultural resistance among Italian emigrants, except for a resistance having to do with customs. Although most were unschooled these emigrants were not devoid of a moral and social structure based on age-old family habits, on religious customs observed with reverence (even though superficially), and on a certain body of common knowledge made up of prejudice and folk traditions. The passage from this limited culture confirmed by long tradition to the more complex but more volatile American culture was difficult. The reaction of the first generation of emigrants was that of the banding together of family nuclei into cells of fellow villagers in "little Italy" neighborhoods, or in the solitude of the country. In the second generation there was a rupture or breaking away: their children felt themselves American and even anti-Italian.

It is necessary to add that this break took place in the midst of a no less radical transformation which in America, moreover, occurred more rapidly, namely the changeover in this period from a predominantly agricultural to an industrial nation. The upheaval could not have been greater and must have had a disruptive effect on the masses who had to undergo it. The transition upset all previous social ties making it especially difficult for those involved to form or acquire new ones. . . .

The achievements of Italian emigrants have been excellent; millions of persons from the peasant class have elevated themselves economically and have seen their children become doctors, businessmen, lawyers, building

contractors, magistrates, politicians. If these children had been born in Italy they would be found today for the most part engaged in the struggle against wretched poverty. In America, however, they belong in general to lower-middle or middle classes and some of them even to the higher income brackets.

Their contribution to America, however, has been only in terms of numbers and energy and rarely, in proportion to their numbers, in terms of quality. If we specify the word contribution by saying the influence on the American way of life, our judgment will be in great part negative. Millions of Italo-Americans have brought nothing "Italian" which has remained such in Italy. Most emigrants had no true Italian taste or culture, that is, they possessed no national heritage, but were the product of local traditions.

In the final analysis, all that one can say in a specific way about the contribution of Italian emigrants in America to their land of adoption is that it has been materially important but of little intellectual value. They have been responsible for the growing of vegetables and their appearance on the dinner tables of Americans. This indeed has been a contribution and an Italian merit in having developed among Americans an appreciation for the taste and nutritive qualities of artichokes, zucchini, salads, and string beans even before dieticians instructed us about the value of vitamins. These have been the completely Italian innovations and importations. If the American diet changed from the traditional corned-beef and cabbage, pork and beans, beef-steak and hamburgers, fish and oysters to make way for fruit juices and horticultural products, it is owed to the Italians. It is not a great deal, but it is real. All the rest is the cant of "colonial banquets" and election campaign dinners. . . .

It is true Italians have contributed to the increase of Catholicism in the United States but here too it has been by dint of numbers and not of quality. The masses have been instrumental in it but not the Italian clergy; the clergy is conspicuously of Irish background and in the literary and theological production of Catholicism in the United States no Italian name emerges. There has been an influence of Italy on the United States through Catholicism but not by way of Italo-Americans, but rather by way of Irish and Germans. It is a question of Rome filtered through Dublin and Munich, not through Calabria or Sicily or by way of the seminaries of Naples or Palermo.



## REVIEWS

*Poems.* Carlo Betocchi. Translated by I. L. Salomon. Clark & Way, Inc., New York, 1964.

It is now generally acknowledged that a good portion of the best European poetry of this century has been produced in Italy. Campana, Ungaretti, Montale (especially Montale), and to a great extent Saba and Quasimodo, will continue to gain in stature with the passing of time. Somewhat below them there is a large number of poets who would have attracted an international audience and commanded a place of distinction had they only lived in an era of less exuberant productivity. One of them is Carlo Betocchi, who has now been publishing for more than three decades to considerable critical acclaim. His poetry is of interest for many reasons. It is filled with a deep sense of the transiency of man on earth and of an anguish to which it proposes the comfort of a vivid presence of God and consequently is born of an intense metaphysical yearning. And it achieves valid results through a surprising amalgam of contemporary forms and a literary vocabulary of long, traditional standing. This second characteristic is rather important, for the essence of poetry always resides in the personal creation of images, or in the individual, unrepeatable expression; in fact, a memorable poem becomes a rather trivial affair if its substance is presented in different words. Betocchi never shuns the traditional — such as apparently old and easy rhymes, or even Danteque tones (“incerte, sopra il verde che le ammalia,” p. 52; cfr. *Par.*, xxx, 139), or inflections derived from more recent poets, such

as Carducci, Pascoli, and D’Annunzio. Yet side by side with these forms, he can use such phrases as “La canna del fucile al sol rigava / d’un minuscolo lutto la campagna / che quei sottili canti nevicava” (p. 52), which transforms even the most obvious reminiscences into something entirely new and personal: the expression “minuscolo lutto” (“minute mourning”), spreading over the whole tercet the anguish caused by the presence of death, is enough to perform the metamorphosis.

Betocchi sings of simple things: of sun and shadows, of walls and roofs, of birds (there is in his poetry a constant stream of images that are tightly connected with hunting), of fields, of country roads, waters and winds. But these simple elements, far from being only part of a colorless environment, as happened with the *crepuscolari* during the first part of the century, acquire the validity of symbols, are vehicles to express an anguish and a metaphysical yearning. Betocchi does not always avoid prosaic insertions or definitely inferior lines (“nel condurmi per una vita / di sacrifici e di pazienza,” p. 98), but they are normally redeemed by the tenseness of the rest of the poem to which they belong. And even these have generally disappeared from his mature poetry, which begins approximately with the war experience and culminates in the recent “Diarietto invecchiando.”

Now for the first time a large selection of Betocchi’s poems is available in English. I find it an important event, for it promises a substantial broadening of interest in contemporary Italian poets, beyond the established boundaries set more or less by the translations from those authors I mentioned above. I feel, therefore, that we must be grateful to Mr. I. L. Salomon for having accepted the long and certainly difficult job of translating Betocchi.

Out of some 165 poems collected in the two volumes, *Poesie* (1955) and *L’estate di San Martino* (1961), Mr. Salomon has chosen 62, presenting them with the original text on facing pages. He has done well by taking the bulk of his selections from Betocchi’s post-war period, and in general his choice has been quite judicious, even if I would have liked to see in this book also other selections (the “Soliloquio del figliuol prodigo,” for instance; it is not a very good poem, but it sounds like a distant prologue to the “Diarietto invecchiando”; which makes it important, if the selection is to be representative). In his translations Mr. Salomon seems to have made an effort to be at once literal, in the sense of capturing the images and the sense of the original, and fresh. And he has often managed to be both. This can be proven with two quotes: one from an



early poem and another from a section of the late "Diarietto."

Io, dal mio angolo pigro  
tendo insidiosi agguati,  
dai poveri tetti emigro  
verso quei correnti prati.

I from my slothful corner  
set insidious snares;  
from poor roofs I migrate  
toward those flowing fields. (p. 109)

Here the poet, following the passing clouds from behind a window pane, escapes from everyday reality into a sort of spiritual realm. His language is extremely simple, and yet extraordinarily complex. Mr. Salomon has rendered this complex simplicity unusually well. It seems to me that he owes his success to the fact that he has followed the text transposing the expressive sequence of the work as faithfully as possible.

e riappaiono quivi gli amici  
perduti, tra un vagare  
sonnambulo, nella stupidità  
dell'esistere arreso.

and lost friends reappear here  
within a somnambulant  
wandering as in a stupor  
of surrendered existence. (p. 155)

Now the poet, in the half consciousness of the half sleep characteristic of old age, finds himself wandering among the images of the past, and laments, while accepting it, his inescapable passivity. Again Mr. Salomon gives us the images in the terse denseness of the original (although there may be some question as to whether "in a stupor/ of surrendered existence" really renders "nella stupidità / dell'esistere arreso"). He often succeeds equally well with individual expressions. Here one example will suffice: "Cosi traghetta fra le automobili" presents an old woman who, after a long and difficult life, can still find her way in the midst of innumerable risks. The key word is "traghetta." Mr. Salomon, by adopting the simple method of reproducing the letter (and consequently the spirit, which cannot reside in anything but the letter) as closely as possible, achieves a reading that is as striking in English as in Italian: "So she ferries across among the automobiles" (p. 157).

But he is not always so successful. Often he accepts general approximations of images, with the resulting inaccuracy. For instance, he translates "il cuore dell'aria" with "the core of the air" (p. 81); or, more serious, for "l'anima bambina" he says "childish soul" (p. 105), which is an altogether different thing. Mr. Salomon himself, when he encounters this

latter expression in a considerably new context, on p. 160 - "rifatta bambina / la mia anima . . ." - transposes it correctly: "my soul / made child again." If then he had turned back to p. 105, I am sure he would have changed "childish soul" to "child soul," or something similar.

Through its extensions, approximation causes various kinds of error. Thus "dal focolare del duolo" becomes "from hearth's grief" (p. 109), which has no relation with the original; "non alba né tramonto" becomes "not of daybreak or of sunset" (p. 115), where the preposition "of" indicates that the translator has not perceived the appositive, or qualifying, function of the whole expression. Sometimes the origin of the error is difficult to detect, as in the beginning of "Isernia" (p. 140): "L'hanno pagato quattromila morti / il nuovo respiro della città" ("They paid four thousand dead / for etc.") is given as "Four thousand dead have paid / for the new breath of the city" - which eliminates the concept of the heavy cost paid by the living (not by the dead) for their new post-war city. Other times, Mr. Salomon adds an ambiguity which is not in the original. "Lungo la via Casilina" begins with these lines:

Questa terra cosparsa d'ossa  
di stranieri che soccomberono  
prima dell'ultima preda. . .

The translation reads:

This ground strewn with bones  
of strangers who succumbed  
before the final victims. . . (p. 103)

Whose victims? we may ask. Betocchi is clear: the strangers "succumbed before *their* final victims," or before being able to grab and kill those they still wanted; but the translation states that they succumbed before the last victims in general. Apropos of this poem, "città stellari" does not mean "star-shaped cities," but "star-like cities," or cities that once, before they were destroyed, radiated light, as stars do; and I would also like to suggest that in the note on p. 166, the remark that the Casilina Way "is one of the ancient roads to Rome" gives very little help toward the comprehension of the poem. The Via Casilina is the road from Rome to Capua, through Cassino and the many towns that suffered total destruction during the Italian campaign. It seems to me that without the knowledge of this fact one cannot even grasp the most elementary meaning of a poem that must be rated among the best inspired by the devastations of World War II.

I find in these translations also other short-

comings, such as unwarranted addition, or neglect of the literary tone of some expressions. In connection with the latter, I may quote "il vel notturno" (p. 42), a precious expression of long literary standing; Mr. Salomon's "the mist of the night" does not render it; to find an English equivalent he should have looked into 19th-century English poetry. An interesting thing happens to the word "armenti," which is also quite precious: on p. 53, for "alati armenti," Mr. Salomon adopts "wingèd coveys," which is literary but does not carry the suggestive meaning of "armenti"; and on p. 108 for "fuggitivi armenti," he writes "fugitive droves of sheep." The second time he is much closer to the actual meaning, but restricts it considerably. This might indicate that Mr. Salomon, no matter how subject to discussion his choices may be, has made a substantial effort to find the correct expression in English. Even more interesting is the translation of words that Betocchi takes from a particular segment of the language. In the exquisite XV of "Diarietto invecchiando" we find

"il fagiano  
che rapido pedina alla radura.

It is a magnificent line indeed. Mr. Salomon translates it as follows:

"the pheasant  
that moves rapidly, if gingerly, to the glade  
(p. 163)

"Pedinare" is a descriptive verb derived, in this sense, from the vocabulary of hunting. It is intended to visualize the swift steps taken by birds on the ground. The only English word which carries some of this descriptive quality, when attributed to birds, would be "to tip-toe." In my opinion the line would be more agile, more suggestive, and more accurate, if it read

"the pheasant  
that rapidly tip-toes to the glade.

The foregoing paragraphs are not intended to belittle Mr. Salomon's work, which, I repeat, must be welcomed as very useful, but to take advantage of the examples at hand in order to focus on some of the many problems facing a translator. I like to insist on the fact that translating requires a great familiarity with the linguistic and the poetic characteristics of the original, as well as with those of the new medium. The risks of either betraying or flattening a text are ever present, and it is impossible to overcome them all. This continuous challenge is probably what makes translating so full of fascination.

The bio-bibliographical introduction to

these *Poems* is of interest to the reader who never encountered Betocchi's name. However, that same reader would have profited much more, had he also been offered some analysis and critical appraisal of the poetry in question. Mr. Salomon has avoided making this offer, and, as a result, his introduction, which does not lack general laudatory phrases, is rather limited in scope and usefulness.

But there is something about this book for which I can find no excuse. Mr. Salomon has arranged many of Betocchi's poems in a completely arbitrary fashion, grouping them under titles which in almost half the cases appear to be of his own coinage. Every poetic production — especially one, like Betocchi's that spans decades — has a chronology, which coincides with the history of its inner development and of its significance. This is why modern poets, including Betocchi, carefully arrange their compositions in chronological order, and why scholars often have to labor to reconstruct this order for the works of the poets of the past. Mr. Salomon puts compositions like "Vetri," written in the 1930-1932 period, in the same group as "Un grido," almost certainly one of the most recent poems (possibly 1960), and after a group containing "Rovine" and "Lungo la via casilina," which grew out of the experience of World War II. Mr. Salomon, by arranging the poems so capriciously, does not seem to attribute any weight to the sequence of psychological experiences, which is, after all, at the basis of any poet's work. The Betocchi who shared in the anguish of the war, as he says himself (cfr. *Poesie*, p. 176), is undoubtedly different from the Betocchi of 1930. Breaking, or inverting, the chronological order is tantamount to destroying the true image of the poet. If Mr. Salomon had any reason for adopting such a method, he should have stated it in the "Prefatory note."

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*The Mortal Wound.* Raffaele La Capria. Translated by Marguerite Waldman. Farrar, Straus and Company, 1964.

I first read Raffaele La Capria's *Ferito a morte* before it was awarded the Strega prize, and before its translation into English brought it to the attention of the American public.<sup>1</sup> I read it because almost ten years previously I had been intrigued by its author's first novel, *Un giorno d'impazienza*.<sup>2</sup> In 1952 it was unusual to happen upon a work which was not a document of the neorealistic style, which neither explicitly nor implicitly pleaded for the reform of social evils, and whose author did

not appear convinced that well-being and happiness would become the lot of all, if only the right political party triumphed. It was unusual to happen upon a book which sported as its epigraph these verses of Prévert:

Quand on le laisse seul  
le monde  
mental  
ment  
monumentalement.

Indeed, it was unusual to find a young Italian author turning to a French mentor at all, rather than to an American. And it was a complete surprise to find the problem of adolescence treated not in terms of Freudian complexes, but in the old terms of the *Bildungsroman*.

The protagonist of *Un giorno d'impazienza*, a boy of seventeen, lives through a crucial day in his life. On this day the contrast between the protective, satisfying phantasies of youth and the engrossing but dangerous world of experience is suddenly sharpened, and the boy's carefully constructed system of values collapses. Around the boy and the promiscuous, dissolute Mira – his introduction to the adult world – revolve a number of other characters: Mira's amoral mother, the homosexual painter Hans, Mira's various lovers, her prostitute friend Gisa. They might be mistaken for the stock figures of an exemplary story of moral decay. But it is not their personality, their traits, that matter. They bathe in a kind of haze that forbids the emerging of clear contours, a haze such as fog or drunkenness creates. They are distortions in a mirror each one projected into and refracted by the consciousness of the others. And the broken images are what the author deals with, uninterested in piecing them together again, concerned only with representing them faithfully, whether through the technique of the interior monologue or the direct statement of external reality. A *Bildungsroman*, then, that has filtered through Proust and Joyce, in which subject and object, psychological reality and everyday reality are no longer distinguished, and the reader is often faced by a puzzle. It is the reader who must recognize the voice that speaks, who must give meaning to the disjointed words he hears, to the frantic acts he witnesses.

In *Ferito a morte*, the reader is faced by the same demanding task. The publishers of the English edition were aware of this, and fearing that the difficulty might prove insurmountable, they resorted to two devices. They divided the book into two parts: Part I comprising the first seven chapters of the original,

Part II the last three. And they carefully set off the passages recording the interior monologue from the more properly narrative and descriptive ones by the use of italics. Thus the English edition is filled with typographical road signs which warn and guide the reader. Actually, by dividing the book into two parts, the English publishers were only making what is implicit explicit.<sup>3</sup> But, of course, they also destroyed the unity of the book, and turned the labyrinth attentively and intentionally created by La Capria into a super-highway. As a last act of self-protection, they prefixed the work by a statement purporting to spell out the meaning of the title. "The mortal wound," it is affirmed, is the wound that Naples "inflicts on those who love her: mortal for those whom she lulls to sleep with sun and sea, with wine and idle talk; incurable even for those who succeed in saving themselves from her embrace."

The book opens with a magnificent paragraph, a veritable thematic overture which announces what will later be discovered as its narrative, intellectual, and emotional contents. A bass, its gray shadow appearing against the blue, is swimming towards the protagonist who prepares to shoot it with his underwater gun. A sudden feeling of lassitude, "a cursed indolence" which resembles the draining away of life, prevents him from shooting. The bass swims slowly by. It disappears among the dark reefs. The approaching bass is identified as "The Great Chance"; the protagonist's failure to shoot as "The Feared Thing"; the receding bass as "The Great Chance Missed." But the dream or nightmare is already dissolving. Objects of the living room begin to emerge in the lifeless light; the bass has disappeared behind a chest of drawers or under the bed in the next room. "The Scene" follows upon the dream. The protagonist has returned to consciousness, and he finds his obsession waiting for him. A scene from his past is again acted out before his eyes: Carla sits on the edge of his bed combing her hair, "bionda coda di cavallo oscillante" (blonde, swaying, ponytail).<sup>4</sup> With Carla too he has failed. "The Great Chance" was his; "The Feared Thing" happened; he is left alone with "The Great Chance Missed." Only this time, there is also the presence of the *others*, the chorus of boys with whom he spent his youth, who did not see him struggling deep beneath the surface of the sea, but whom he imagines witnessing his sexual failure and deriding him. Thus La Capria has supplied a first translation of the symbols of the dream sequence, and he has also hinted at the setting – the garrulous group of voyeurs – against which his protagonist will try to reverse fate, take advantage of "The

Great Chance," triumph, and rise to the surface, his wound healed.

But "The Scene" is only an initial explication. The story of unrequited love is only one of the threads that hold the novel together. As, after a brief interruption, the interior monologue continues the protagonist discovers himself in the act of revealing to the curious and intent group around him the details of his affair with Flora. Flora is the "donna dello schermo," the woman behind whom he tries to shield his real love. But even while he is speaking, goaded on by the eyes of the others, those eyes seem to merge into one great, enormous, greedy eye ("quell'unico occhio avido e scomposto"), and he realizes that he is actually talking about Carla, and doing so without reticence, talking to just anyone, to the first man met on the street, "il suo simile, ipocrita e fratello" – as the reminiscence of the famous Baudelairean line suddenly thunders across the page.<sup>5</sup> It is at this point that the image of "The Virgin Forest" is first introduced, "a Virgin Forest more vast than any Gaetano ever theorized about," La Capria writes; a viscous mass that surrounds the protagonist and is on the point of drowning him. Again, he tries to strike out, again "The Feared Thing" intervenes, again he sinks back in defeat.

By this time it must have become clear that the narrative aspect of this novel – whatever is left of the traditional concept of a concatenation of events moving progressively towards a conclusion, "The End" – will be contained completely within the repeated tensions resulting from the protagonist's inability to take advantage of a number of opportunities presented to him. But while his failure in the sports episode and his impotence in the bedroom scene may be considered normal narrative situations requiring little exegesis, his struggle against "The Virgin Forest" can be understood only if the meaning of this private symbol is pierced. The thematic chord "bionda coda di cavallo oscillante" carries its emotional significance with it, and when we encounter it for the last time on the last page of the book, we know that the protagonist is still yearning for the golden time of his youth, that he is still trying to recapture time past. We know this because the regret of youth and the haunting persistence of memory are old and so far ever-renewed literary themes. But the case of "The Virgin Forest" is different. Only in the process of reading the book does the reader become aware that "The Virgin Forest," the place from which luxuriant vegetation shuts off the light of day, the place where the uncontrolled and undirected forces of "Nature" wage everlasting and everlastingly victorious

battle against "Reason" and "History" (p. 24), that the place which "the sea does not reach" (p. 163), is Naples. And there is nothing to aid the reader in this discovery except his close reading of the text, or, if he is informed on this point, his recollection of recent discussions of the intellectual problem of the Italian South – the intellectual, not the economic, problem.

La Capria himself writes of the problem in tracing his development as a writer. He considers both his having been born in 1922 and his having lived in Naples distinct disadvantages. Fascism "lasted long enough to make my education confused and difficult," he writes, "to make me waste years in learning things that elsewhere boys were learning at school." And from an educational point of view, Naples represented a further waste of time, for it is "a city that often seems to exist outside of the world."<sup>6</sup> In *Ferito a morte*, this characteristic of Naples is represented by the *genius loci* "which speaks anonymously through the mouth of the different characters like of the voice of the Sybil," La Capria writes elsewhere.<sup>7</sup>

But I believe that the best source for understanding more fully the symbol of "The Virgin Forest" is Anna Maria Ortese's *Il mare non bagna Napoli*.<sup>8</sup> *Il mare non bagna Napoli* is a collection of five short works, of which two are fiction, and three first-person narratives somewhere between the journalistic report and the personal essay. In the choice of subject matter, Anna Maria Ortese reflects the predominant concern of Italian post-war literature at the time for laying bare the social and economic sores of the nation. But her treatment of this subject matter is not naturalistic, for the data gathered through observation is presented to the reader suffused by the author's own feelings of revulsion and pity. "La città involontaria," for instance, a description of a tremendous slum, an enormous building on the outskirts of Naples that houses hundreds of homeless families, is one of the most horrifying things I have read. Decay, poverty, hopelessness become the terrifying realities they are when presented as "the putrefying limbs of a human entity sick to its heart" (p. 85). Anna Maria Ortese writes of conditions in Naples in the early nineteen fifties (the time when La Capria was writing his first book) with unusual forcefulness and an abundance of figures of speech which raise her pages high above the level of the document.

Thus "Oro a Forcella" sets out by telling of a walk taken by the author through one of the most crowded and squalid sections of old Naples. It is difficult to summarize these few pages: the impression of a mass of humanity, the hundreds of children, the beggars, the

maimed and the dwarfed, the dust, the dirt, the noise, the never-ending movement. On the street corners and in the shop windows, pictures of the Virgin and the Saints, with their soft, sweet expressions, form a sharp contrast to "the savage harshness of the streets." Detail is placed next to detail in a total reconstruction of the experience. But running alongside the description, there is the slow unfolding of a metaphor: "... a race emptied of logic and reason... man had become shadow, weakness, neurosis, resigned fear and impudent cheerfulness. . . . Here the sea did not reach Naples" (p. 75). The sea, as Ortese says elsewhere, along which the great cult of Reason, the wisdom of Greece, had at one time been brought to the city.<sup>9</sup>

A Naples without sea, a Naples without Vesuvius, the "real" Naples, and not the city painted on theatrical back-drops, is also the subject of La Capria's book.<sup>10</sup> It is the subject of Gaetano's exhortations to the protagonist. Gaetano has left Naples for Milan, and it is from there that he writes: "From here you can see every glimmer of light and intelligence that

flares up in the world, the lights that are so difficult to see from Naples" (p. 24). The protagonist finally heeds the words of warning, he listens to the one voice that does not echo the *genius loci*, he emerges from "The Virgin Forest" a thinking man, and he leaves Naples. This time, at least, "The Great Chance" has been grasped. The *Bildungsroman*, if not the *éducation sentimentale*, is completed.

For there is no joy, no triumph in this last step. Inasmuch as the protagonist is the artist, his work is born out of the anguish that accompanied "The Great Chance Missed." His intelligence has been trained to understand the existence of a sea-less Naples; his phantasy has not accepted it. The experiences of his youth remain present to him, and over and over again he descends to the bottom of the sea to transfix the fish. And that is why the book can be read even in a poor translation, and why the reader need not bother too much with its intellectual and historical contents.

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#### NOTES

1. R. La Capria, *Ferito a morte*, Milano, Bompiani, 1961. Trans. *The Mortal Wound*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Company, 1964.
2. R. La Capria, *Un giorno d'impazienza*, Milano, Bompiani, 1952.
3. In a letter to Oreste Del Buono, quoted in the latter's review of *Ferito a morte* (*Quaderni milanesi*, n. 2, Spring 1961, pp. 95-102), La Capria writes: "... You ask about the structure of the book. . . . The first part . . . a long chapter of about a hundred pages . . . each chapter deals with an hour: 'the space of a morning. . . . But . . . each hour belongs to any morning of any year . . . ten years . . . during which probably nothing happened, or rather, we do not know what *may have* happened because we aren't interested. . . . This first part, seen completely from within . . . is followed by a second part, where the same reality is seen from without. . . ."
4. It is not my intention to speak of the quality of the translation, but I cannot help expressing my disappointment here. La Capria's exquisitely wrought narration, his careful selection of words, would have deserved better treatment. Two examples of insufficient sensitivity to the text will, I believe, explain what I mean: the first paragraph is ruined in the English version by an unnecessary change in the basic tense; by rendering "bionda coda di cavallo oscillante" indiscriminately as "a blonde, swinging pony-tail" and "blonde swaying pony-tail," the translator for-

- gets that in a work such as La Capria's the *word* is as important as the *thing*.
5. This is another problem treated by the English editors in an embarrassingly awkward fashion. First, La Capria's Italian version of Baudelaire's line is manipulated so as to resemble the original more closely; then, an identifying footnote is added. These procedures are unacceptable, for the words either awaken an answering echo in the reader or they don't. Literary tradition consists of literary reminiscences, not of footnotes. A line of poetry, another writer's words, may become part of a writer's personal vocabulary, and be used by him with the same lack of self-consciousness with which he uses the common words of the language. The reader either speaks the writer's language or he doesn't. If he doesn't, no mechanical devices will help him. This, of course, applies to writers and readers who are contemporaries. The problem is different for works of the past.
6. Quoted in the introductory note to R. La Capria, "A mezzogiorno da Middleton," *Quaderni milanesi*, n. 1, Autumn 1960.
7. Oreste del Buono, review of *Ferito a morte*, *loc. cit.*
8. A. M. Ortese, *Il mare non bagna Napoli*, Torino, Einaudi, 1953.
9. "Il silenzio della ragione" is the chapter in *Il mare non bagna Napoli* most directly relevant to the description of Neapolitan intellectual circles in the fifties.
10. *Ferito a morte*, p. 163.

## EDITOR'S NOTES

• Despite his long and productive career as a poet and literary critic, Italy's Lionello Fiumi has not been particularly well known in the United States. Recent anthologies and translations of Italian poetry have not included him. He is, nevertheless, widely appreciated abroad, especially in France where he lived for many years as an active ambassador of Italian culture and where he has won several literary prizes. In 1962 an extensive monograph on Fiumi by Roger Clerici along with a generous sampling of his poetry in translation appeared in the "Poètes d'aujourd'hui" series of world poets published by Seghers of Paris. Fiumi has written several books of criticism, founded several journals, edited anthologies, translated much foreign poetry into Italian, and contributed to many international literary magazines. In the heyday of Futurism just before the first World War, he launched his own literary movement called *avanguardia*, which departed from traditional modes of expression as well as from the bombast and extreme novelties of futuristic experiments.

• Joseph Tusiani, born in San Marco in Lamis, Italy, obtained a *summa cum laude* doctorate from the University of Naples at the age of twenty-two. An American citizen since 1956, he is Professor of Italian at the College of Mount Saint Vincent in New York. A vice president of the Poetry Society of America and a director of the Catholic Poetry Society of America, he was awarded the Greenwood Prize by the Poetry Society of England, and has published poems in Latin in several classical journals both in America and Europe. Among his well-known translations are *The Complete Poems of Michelangelo* (Reviewed in *CBC*, III, 1) and *Lust and Liberty: The Poems of Machiavelli*.

• Sergio Pizzoni-Ardemani is special assistant to the president of the Olivetti Underwood Corporation. Previously he served as assistant to the director-general of the Food

and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations in charge of European Affairs and as special assistant to the chief of the Italian Technical Delegation (Italian Embassy). He holds a doctorate in political science from the University of Rome.

• Giuseppe Prezzolini founded, along with Giovanni Papini, the two important Italian journals *Leonardo* and *La Voce*. He has written many provocative books and innumerable articles on literature, philosophy and politics. For a quarter of a century he was to Italians the principal interpreter of America. His perceptive essays on this country have been collected in several books: *America in pantofole*, *America con gli stivali*, *Tutta l'America*, and now, *I trapiantati*. He is Professor Emeritus of Italian at Columbia University and former Director of Casa Italiana where he compiled his *Repertorio bibliografico 1902-32*, one of the richest and best organized bibliographies of Italian literature. Some of his recent publications include *L'italiano inutile* and *Machiavelli, anticristo*. His article "Ponte Santa Trinita" appeared in *CBC*, II, 1 and his translations of poems by John Tagliabue in *CBC*, III, 2.

• Louis Tenenbaum is an Associate Professor of Italian at the University of Colorado. He is a former Fulbright Fellow to Italy and a specialist in Italian and French literatures.

• Olga Ragusa is Professor of Italian at Columbia University and a specialist in Franco-Italian literary questions. She is the author of *Mallarmé in Italy* and *Verga's Milanesi Tales*, both published by Vanni.

• Giovanni Cecchetti is Professor of Italian at Tulane University and a specialist in relations between Italian and American literatures. He has translated Verga's *The She-Wolf and Other Tales* and is author of *Leopardi e Verga*.