

## REPUTATIONS

## THE SPY WHO FAILED

*Did the great anti-Fascist novelist Ignazio Silone betray his cause?*

BY ALEXANDER STILLE

During the summer of 1930, a sick, penniless Italian exile living in Switzerland began writing a novel about peasant life under Fascism in his native region of the Abruzzi. "Since, in the doctors' view, I had only a short time to live, I wrote hurriedly . . . to construct to the best of my ability that village in which I put the quintessence of myself and the district in which I was born, so that at least I might die among my own people," the author, who had adopted the pseudonym Ignazio Silone, later wrote. It took Silone two years to find a publisher: a small Swiss firm, which published the novel, entitled "Fontamara," in 1933, in German translation. It was an immediate sensation, selling more than a million and a half copies, in twenty-seven languages. The novel was published on the eve of the Spanish Civil War, which forced the world to take sides on the Franco regime; it galvanized public opinion against Fascism and influenced an entire generation of American intellectuals, including Edmund Wilson, Malcolm Cowley, Irving Howe, and Alfred Kazin. "In the light of 'Fontamara,' oppression, misery and injustice took on a luminous quality," Kazin wrote in his memoir "Growing Up in the Thirties." Silone's second novel, "Bread and Wine," which is also about the Abruzzi and came out three years after "Fontamara," met with even greater success. When the Allies invaded Italy, in 1943, to push back the Axis forces, they distributed unauthorized editions of both books to the Italians along the front.

In recent years, however, researchers have begun to turn up documents in police archives which strongly suggest that Silone, in the decade before he became a writer, acted as an informant for the Fascist police. To grasp how disturbing and unlikely a development this is, one has to appreciate the fact that Silone, who died in 1978, has long been

regarded not only as an important novelist but also—like Orwell, Camus, and Malraux—as something of a secular saint, a man of rare intellectual and moral courage, who had opposed Fascism from the start and endured years of exile and persecution for his beliefs. He helped create the Italian Communist Party, then defied Stalin in the halls of the Kremlin, and finally, well before the big Moscow show trials, broke with Communism. After the war, Silone won a new set of readers, with a memoir describing his romance and disillusionment with Communism; it appeared in an anthology entitled "The God That Failed," along with essays by Arthur Koestler, André Gide, and Richard Wright, among others. Personal integrity was the central feature of his work. In "Bread and Wine" he wrote, "No word and no gesture can be more persuasive than the life and, if necessary, the death of a man who strives to be free, loyal, just, sincere, disinterested. A man who shows what a man can be."

Many of Silone's friends and supporters have refused even to read the incriminating documents, which were recently published in the book "L'Informatore" ("The Informant"), written by two Italian history professors, Dario Biocca and Mauro Canali. "I wouldn't believe in the truth of these documents even if Silone rose from the tomb and confirmed them," Indro Montanelli, the highly respected editorialist for the Milan newspaper *Corriere della Sera*, has written. Others have accused Biocca and Canali of being publicity-hungry and of rushing their book into print before the material had been thoroughly evaluated.

But the documents—letters and reports—cannot be easily dismissed. Most Silone scholars now acknowledge their authenticity, even as they continue to dispute their meaning. These docu-

ments add a new dimension to Silone's already dramatic story, and, far from negating his work, they help to explain why, in the summer of 1930, he abandoned politics and became a novelist.

Silone once remarked that he would willingly spend his life "writing and rewriting the same book, the single book that every writer has within that is the image of his soul." In Silone's case, this book was about his childhood, in the southern Italian region of the Abruzzi, and about the political odyssey that led him into and out of Communism. He was born in 1900 with the name Secondo Tranquilli, in an area of vast feudal estates where peasants eked out a subsistence living. The town described in "Fontamara" is "about a hundred shapeless one-story houses, battered by the wind and rain," along a "steep street that passes through the whole village." Most of the houses consisted of a single room, where the peasants lived with their chickens, pigs, and donkeys.

Although Silone was the son of a small landowner, he identified from a young age with the peasants, or *cafoni*. As a boy, he saw a local nobleman set his dog on a peasant woman, who was knocked to the ground and bartered. The woman took the nobleman to court, where various paid witnesses testified that she had provoked the attack and no one would speak up on her behalf. She lost the suit and was stuck with the legal costs. The judge, a family friend of the Tranquillis, explained that, while he regretted the injustice, he was required to follow the facts presented at the trial. This, for Silone, exposed the hollow promise of law and democracy in "liberal" pre-Fascist Italy.

Silone's father died when the boy was eleven, and his mother was killed in an earthquake that levelled the area in 1915. Afterward, Silone was horrified to see a relative stealing from a victim buried in the rubble. In "Bread and Wine," the protagonist describes a similar scene and observes, "To grow up requires a whole life, but to become old one night like that is enough."

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In his memoir, entitled "Uscita di Sicurezza" ("Emergency Exit"), Silone quoted a doctor from his village who used to say, "People who are born in this district are really out of luck. There's no halfway house; you've got to either be a rebel or become an accomplice." By the age of sixteen, Silone was already a rebel. Along with two other boys, he led a group of peasants as they stormed the local police barracks to protest the arrest of three residents. For twenty-four hours, before authorities arrived to restore order, this group ruled the town. "Couldn't we take advantage of the fact that the whole village is asleep to make Socialism?" one of the boys suggested.

Not long afterward, Silone moved to Rome and became a full-time activist in the Socialist youth movement. He was part of the radical wing of the Socialist Party, which split from the more cautious, reformist majority in 1921 and formed the Italian Communist Party, hoping to create a revolution in Italy. But in 1922 Mussolini and the Fascists seized power, and, in the political crackdown that followed, the Communists were forced underground. Many of the Party leaders were imprisoned, and the young Silone took on more and more responsibility. He gained a seat on the central committee and was chosen to accompany the head of the Party, Palmiro Togliatti, to meetings at the Kremlin in 1927, at the height of the power struggle between Stalin and Trotsky.

In his memoir, Silone describes how he and Togliatti refused to condemn Trotsky on the basis of evidence that they were not allowed to examine. He was later shocked to read that the Executive of the Communist International had unanimously passed a resolution against Trotsky. "Don't they realize that when they open the archives all their lies will eventually come out?" he asked Togliatti, and the Party leader replied, "If that's what you're worried about, relax: no important decision in the Soviet Union is written down."

Silone should perhaps have worried more about the archives of Mussolini's police. In the last three years, Canali and Biocca have unearthed what appears to be a correspondence between Silone and Guido Bellone, a police official in Rome who was in charge of investigating subversive groups in Italy. The letters are clearly those of an informant to his police handler, and are signed with the code name Silvestri. But the informant's true identity can be deduced from a number of details in the letters that closely correspond to the events of Silone's life in the late nineteen-twenties: his depression, his taking refuge in a clinic in Switzerland, his disillusionment with Communism, and the gradual return of his religious faith.

Moreover, there are government documents that explicitly link Silone to Bellone. A 1928 letter from the chief of the secret police to Mussolini states, "The Inspector General of Public Security Commissioner Guido Bellone has received a telegram from Basle from Tranquilli Secondino—one of the Communist leaders—giving notice of his arrival in Italy. The conversation with him could be interesting."

Silone's defenders have been forced to admit that these documents are genuine. "No one denies that Silone had

some disconcerting contacts with the Fascist security apparatus," the historian Alexander De Grand writes in the current issue of the *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*. Some have tried to argue that Silone must have begun to collaborate with Bellone after his brother, Romolo Tranquilli, was arrested, in 1928, on suspicion of taking part in a terrorist bombing. His motive, according to this theory, was to win Romolo's release.

However, the documents published by Biocca and Canali show that Bellone and Silvestri were in touch in 1924, long before the arrest of Romolo. One police report, dated October 7, 1924, states, "Silvestri has been named the head of the Italian Communist movement for France, Belgium and Luxembourg, and therefore will be moving to Paris at the beginning of October." This precisely describes Silone's circumstances at the time.

Luce d'Eramo, a friend of Silone's who published a critical study of his work in 1971, offers another theory—that Silone was a double agent. "The documents may be authentic," she said, when I telephoned her at her home in Rome, "but Biocca and Canali leave out the most important thing: Silone was acting as an informant with the knowledge and consent of the Italian Communist Party. He was sending the Fascists generic and harmless reports in order to get information from them." D'Eramo claims that a Party official told her this in 1979, after Silone's death. Unfortunately, no evidence to

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support this theory has been found in the archives of the Italian Communist Party, and d'Eramo's source is now dead. And if there was nothing improper about his relationship with the Fascist police why did Silone never mention it during his lifetime?

Furthermore, if one reads the full range of documents that have now been published, it is difficult to see them as "generic and harmless." In one, for example, the informant told the police about a network of Communist railway workers who helped smuggle Party propaganda into Italy; the network was promptly dismantled. From Berlin, he provided information about go-betweens who brought the Communists donations from abroad, giving names, descriptions, and bank information. But the most chilling evidence comes from the period after Silone was made head of the Party's clandestine organization in Italy, in 1927. Bellone's informant, identified here as "T," provided a detailed breakdown of the underground organizations in Italy's main cities, and these groups were systematically rounded up by the police. The only cell that was not raided was Silone's, in Rome. (Silone's supporters dispute the attribution of these letters, while Biocca and Canali insist that "T" stands for "Tranquilli.")

On the other hand, Silone's position in the Party gave him access to far more information than he passed on to Bellone, which suggests that he was a reluctant informant. And Silvestri's growing sense of guilt is evident in a letter he sent to Bellone in July of 1929:

You understandably complain about the infrequency of my letters: our relations can become more regular and frequent only if they change in nature and character. At the point I have reached in my moral and intellectual formation, it is *physically* impossible for me to maintain the same relations with you as ten years ago. . . . The first thing to eliminate, because it leaves me either indifferent or humiliated, is money. But we can speak about this in person with greater ease.

The arrest of his brother (who later died in prison) would have made Silone's position unbearable. Romolo Tranquilli, emulating his older brother, was sacrificing himself for a cause that Silone had lost faith in and appears to have been actively betraying. At the same time,

Silone must have worried that if he tried to sever his ties to the Fascist police they might retaliate against his brother.

Then, in April of 1930, Silvestri, in an extraordinary letter to Bellone, made a final break. In it, one can hear the voice of Ignazio Silone:

My health is terrible but the cause is moral. . . . I find myself at an extremely painful point in my existence. A sense of morality, which has always been strong in me, now overwhelms me completely; it does not permit me to sleep, eat, or have a minute's rest. I am at a crossroads in my life, and there is only one way out: I must abandon militant politics completely (I shall look for some kind of intellectual activity). The only other solution is death. Continuing to live in a state of ambiguity has become impossible, is impossible. I was born to be an honest landowner in my hometown. Life has thrown me along a course that I now want to leave behind. I am conscious of not having done great harm either to my friends or to my country. Within the limits of the possible, I always tried not to do harm. I must say that you, given your position, have always behaved like a gentleman. And so I write you this last letter with hopes that you will not try to prevent my plan, which will be carried out in two phases: first, I will eliminate from my life all falsity, doubleness, ambiguity and mystery; second, I will start a new life, on a new basis, in order to repair the evil that I have done, to redeem myself, to do good for the workers and the peasants (to whom I am bound with every fiber of my heart) and for my country.

If you are a believer, pray to God that he give me the strength to overcome my remorse, to begin a new life, and to live it for the good of the workers and of Italy.

Yours,  
Silvestri

Silone began work on "Fontamara" around this time. The horror of his own betrayals clearly fuelled the moral passion in his novel. The letter adds an important layer of meaning to the central crisis of Silone's life: his break with Communism in 1931. It now appears that this was preceded—and, in a sense, precipitated—by an even more urgent break, with the Fascist police. By announcing his intention to abandon the Party, Silone reduced his usefulness to the police, making it possible for him to slip free.

What remains mysterious is Silone's motive for informing in the first place. He may, however, have left some clues in "Bread and Wine." The book's hero is a sick and disillusioned Communist leader who returns to the Abruzzi and eludes the Fascist police by posing as a priest. The protagonist is clearly an idealized portrait of

the author, but Silone may also have represented himself in a second character, a young Communist who confesses to having acted as a police informant. After he is arrested and beaten by the police, the young man, Luigi Murica, is approached by a kindly policeman, who offers to help him in exchange for a little information. Initially, Murica provides only generic reports, but then he is pressured by the police to give more detailed information. He compensates for his betrayal by working harder than ever for the cause, and this allows him, temporarily, to function on two levels at the same time. "An insuperable abyss opened up between my apparent and my secret life," the young man says. "Sometimes I managed to forget my secret. . . . But I was deceiving myself. When my new comrades admired my courage and my activity they reminded me that in reality I was betraying them."

Explaining his decision not to confess to his comrades, Murica says that "fear of being discovered was stronger in me than remorse. . . . I feared for my threatened reputation, not for the wrong that I was doing." Like Silone, the character overcomes his fear by regaining his religious faith, telling himself that "good is often born of evil, and that I would not have become a man without having passed through the infamies and errors committed."

The recent revelations don't diminish the power of Silone's writing. If anything, his heroic image may have obscured the darkness and complexity of his books. Readers who approached the novels as straightforward denunciations of social injustice may have missed the undercurrents of deceit and betrayal that now come into relief. And if Silone no longer seems a man of moral purity, one marvels at his ability to remake himself. He went on to do exactly what he vowed in his last letter to Bellone, "to start a new life . . . in order to do good," killing off Secondo Tranquilli and becoming Ignazio Silone. ♦

ITALIAN LITERATURE

# Emergency exit

The double life of Ignazio Silone

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Dario Biocca and  
Mauro Canali

L'INFORMATORE  
Silone, i comunisti e la polizia  
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Published in Zurich in April 1933, only weeks after Hitler's rise to power in Germany, Ignazio Silone's extraordinary novel *Fontamara* struck a resonant chord throughout anti-Fascist Europe and beyond. Leon Trotsky wrote to Silone – one exile to another, one enemy of Stalin to another – to say that “the book deserves to be distributed in millions of copies”. Graham Greene, reviewing the novel in the *Spectator* in 1934, declared that “this story of an obscure Italian village ‘about one hundred ragged, shapeless, one-floor hovels’ is the most moving account of Fascist barbarity I have yet read . . . It should be read to its merciless end.”

The success of *Fontamara* was all the more remarkable in that it was Silone's first novel. Born Secondino Tranquilli on May 1, 1900, he had grown up in the impoverished Marsica region of the Abruzzi, near Rome. The peasants, the *cafoni*, of his home were to be the heroes of *Fontamara* and many later works. At the age of fifteen, he lost all his immediate family, apart from his younger brother Romolo, in a massive earthquake that claimed over 30,000 victims. After three years under Catholic tutelage, Silone was drawn to Rome, to the Socialist Party and, in 1921, to the new break-away Communist Party of Togliatti, Gramsci and Bordiga. For a decade afterwards, he was a key figure in the party, editing journals and newspapers, travelling to Spain, France, Germany, Switzerland and Russia, carrying out often dangerous missions – two of which landed him in gaol, and leading the underground Communist network in Italy after the Fascists had banned all opposition in 1926. In 1927, he witnessed Stalin peremptorily ousting Trotsky, Zinoviev and others in Moscow, and from then on his relations with the party were

increasingly fraught and unclear. By 1931, when he was finally expelled, he had already turned away from active politics, *Fontamara* was written, and, with it, Silone had found a new medium to express his convictions.

*Fontamara* launched Silone on to a remarkable second career that would see him become a literary standard-bearer for a certain moral, leftist resistance to totalitarianism, his reputation akin to that of figures such as Camus, Koestler and Orwell. His next novel, *Bread and Wine* (1936), was a masterly exploration of the moral complications of being an anti-Fascist, as embodied in the semi-autobiographical hero Pietro Spina, a Communist in hiding in Italy disguised as a priest. From his exile in Zurich, Silone also wrote one of the most acute of all analyses of Fascism, the satirical dialogues *The School for Dictators* (1938). His international reputation was sealed after the Second World War when his devastating account of his loss of faith in Communism appeared in Richard Crossman's 1950 collection, *The God That Failed*. Despite the increasingly Christian, devotional tenor of Silone's later work and despite the at times ferocious hostility of the Communists, he remained something of a hero and a paragon for many on the European socialist Left. Until now.

In *L'informatore*, Dario Biocca and Mauro Canali offer an overwhelming body of archival evidence to suggest that, for over ten years between 1919 and 1930, Silone was a regular informant to a Roman police official called Guido Bellone. Writing under the pseudonym Silvestri, Silone gave Bellone written details of individuals, institutions and activities in whatever political circle he found himself in and wherever he travelled around Europe. Indeed, it was his mobility that allowed Biocca and Canali to pin Silvestri down, circumstantially at least, since the date, place and mission of every single report of this highly placed informant coincided with Silone's activities. When his brother was arrested for plotting to assassinate the King of Italy in 1928, Silone made efforts to help, but to no great avail, since his brother was tortured, imprisoned and would die in gaol in 1932. Perhaps as a result of this personal crisis and perhaps as an offshoot of the unsustainable tensions in his relations with the Partito Comunista Italiano and Moscow, Silone finally cut all links with Bellone in a

remarkable letter of April 1930:

I find myself at a moment of truth in my life-crisis and I can only see one way out: to abandon active politics altogether (I'll look for intellectual work of some kind). The only other solution was death. I could not, I cannot carry on living ambiguously [nell'equivoco].

Cutting off the supply of information was a dangerous move for an informant; the only way out for Silone was to cut himself off from the information itself and thus render himself useless. His second career as a writer was, then, born of a double decampment or "emergency exit": from Stalin and the Comintern, but also from Bellone and the hypocrisies of a decade of betrayal.

We have grown quite inured to revelations of compromise and complicity emerging after the fall of totalitarian regimes, and Fascist Italy, even over fifty years on, continues to offer its own examples. There were recent spats over a letter from Alberto Moravia to Il Duce, and over Cesare Pavese's pro-Fascist musings in his private diary. But the case against Silone is at once more complicated, more messy and more astonishing than these, cutting across political and cultural fault-lines of both the Fascist period and the 1990s.

The rather clinical book by Biocca and Canali, made up of two essays tracing Silone's activities over the period in question, and more than fifty of Silvestri's reports, is only the latest sally in a debate that has already lasted several years. It had long been suspected that Silone may have tried to contact the regime in 1928, in a noble and desperate attempt to help his brother. When the first suggestions appeared, in 1996, from Biocca and others that there was more to it than that, many were appalled. There followed a drip-feed of claims and counterclaims in conferences, journals and the national press, at times propelled more by the dynamics of media scandal than by serious debate. As new documents emerged, defenders of Silone were forced to change their ground more than once. Several simply refused to countenance the possibility that Silone was an informer. The veteran journalist Indro Montanelli declared that "even if Silone himself rose up from his tomb to tell me these accusations were true, I would still not believe them". The philosopher Norberto Bobbio also defended Silone, more out of loyalty to the man and his ideas than out of an examination of the evidence. Once historians began looking at the material seen by Biocca and Canali, several let loose accusations of manipulation and inaccuracy of transcription. Silone's widow threatened to sue. Meanwhile, mutterings even emerged of an old scandal linking Silone to the CIA, in the 1950s, through the Congress for Cultural Freedom. From Switzerland came evidence of links during the war with the CIA's predecessor, the OSS, including meetings with Allen Dulles. Silone risked being turned into a spy for all seasons and for all sides.

Not least of the ironies thrown up by the case was the fact that the rearguard defensive action was joined by many on the ex-Communist Left, Silone's bitterest enemies during his lifetime. Here 1990s politics came into play: Biocca and Canali published their first academic articles on Silone in the journal of the revisionist historian Renzo De Felice. Evidence of a political attempt to weaken the anti-Fascist legacy and prop up the recently legitimized neo-Fascists, for some; evidence that no other journal would accept their work, for the authors.

The whole case was becoming caught up in the dense atmosphere of confusion in the 1990s, brought about by the crumbling of the anti-Fascist consensus on which post-war Italy had built itself. In literary circles, hagiographical treatment of Silone seemed for a while to continue unabated, but rereading his work provoked a growing sense of anxiety. A climactic chapter of *Bread and Wine* is given over to the confession of a young man, arrested in Rome and seduced into informing on his political companions by a soft-spoken police officer. Silone in 1918 or 1919, perhaps? This same young man was later be the protagonist of a play, *And He Hid Himself* (1944). Caveats about authorial fallacies aside, the prominence of themes of betrayal, disguise and guilt in the oeuvre should at least give pause for thought. As should the fact that Silone the writer emerges from the revelations as a richer and more challenging figure than his more pious champions had ever suggested.

In *L'informatore*, however, Biocca and Canali are interested in historical, not literary fact. After four years of polemic, the book quashes once and for all any attempt to deny that Silone sent these reports to Bellone. The establishment of that fact alone is a substantial achievement, but elements remain unclear. Although a letter of July 1929 talks of "relations" of ten years' standing, direct evidence from the years before 1923-4 (and indeed for the crucial years between 1925 and 1927) is still very thin. Some of the circumstantial questions raised by doubters are still awkwardly unanswered: if Silone was a spy, why, when he became such an important international symbol of the anti-Fascist cause in the 1930s, did the regime not simply reveal his duplicity to the world? And why was the regime still spying on him in the 1930s and 40s? Was Togliatti notified when he was Minister for Justice after the war, with access to most lists of informers and spies, and if so, again, would he not have acted against this traitor to his party and himself? But the most fundamental unanswered question is motivational: what sort of mutual interest bound Silone, and other informers like him, to figures such as Bellone and the regime?



It seems clear that Silone was never a Fascist. Bellone himself, more or less unknown before now, was operating in liberal Italy as a wily official with a gift for collecting information rather than for enforcing any ideology. The two had a strange and obviously intense personal rapport, begun years before Mussolini's rise to power. Bellone had even, according to some, served in the relief efforts after the 1915 Marsica earthquake and might have forged a bond with the young Silone based on this shared past. There is some talk of money changing hands between them, but also of loyalty and mutual respect. Further, Silone states in 1930 that he has not lost his devotion to the workers' and peasants' cause and does not believe he has done "a great deal of wrong to either my friends or my country". Wishful thinking, perhaps, but it is true the vast majority of Silvestri's missives give relatively little away. They contain low-key nuggets of information that the regime would have received from several lesser informers also. Even when he appears to go in for outright betrayal, he does so in a way that some have construed as practically useless to Bellone.

How could such a high-ranking, knowledgeable Communist have inflicted less damage on the anti-Fascist cause in ten years than, say, the foppish socialite Pitigrilli did to the liberal anti-Fascists of Turin, after he turned informer almost on a whim in 1930? There are two conjectural answers to the question, one unlikely and one that chimes with much we now know about the workings of the Fascist secret police, the Opera di vigilanza e di repressione dell'anti-fascismo (OVRA). It is just about possible, as some have claimed, that Silone was playing a double game (no matter what version of the story holds, it is clear that he was a master at this), feeding harmless information, even misinformation, to Bellone to keep tabs on what the regime knew and did not know. Much more likely, Bellone got precisely what he wanted from Silone, which was up-to-date, detailed monitoring, to help him build up a cumulative picture of the Communist movement. And no doubt part of his game was to allow his informant not to feel morally abject.

Hard though the distinction is to draw in moral terms, it is historically crucial: Silone was involved more in informing on than brazenly betraying the Communist cause, as Biocca and Canali have wanted to suggest. Mimmo Franzinelli, the author of an important recent book, *I tentacoli dell'OVRA* (The Tentacles of OVRA), has taken Biocca and Canali quite severely to task for not contextualizing "Silvestri" within the massive network of informers maintained by the regime, and for therefore overblowing the presentation and interpretation of what they have found in precisely this way. Having said that, Silone's information no doubt helped the regime immensely in its damaging assault on the clandestine Communists in the early 1930s.

The research continues. A full-scale biography is planned, and much remains to be said on this most compelling of figures, both as writer and political player. In Bernardo Bertolucci's 1970 film *The Spider's Stratagem*, an anti-Fascist is unmasked by his companions as a traitor. However, he becomes a hero and a martyr when he is assassinated in a way that makes the regime look responsible. Years later, his son unravels the web of deceit, but in the end chooses to honour the simple myth of his father as hero and not the complicated truth. In the past, Silone's rapport with the twin forces of Fascism and Communism had seemed extraordinarily simple and emblematic, verging on the heroic. Now a more complicated truth is beginning to emerge, thanks to the extraordinary efforts of Dario Biocca and Mauro Canali. Abandoning the myth has been a wrench, but the truth of Silone's double life makes him more, not less emblematic of his century.