

IGNAZIO SILONE was one of Italy's most respected 20th-century novelists. His best-known work, *Fontamara*, is a dramatic account of peasant life in the Abruzzi, where he was born in 1900. He was always a political, or perhaps an anthropological, novelist, portraying the values of his *cafoni* with a wonderful, sympathetic realism; but he also had a very sharp eye for the way political power was used, and for the impact of the Fascist regime even on remote Southern villages. His early novels, particularly *Bread and Wine*, are centred on an anguished debate about the possibility of maintaining one's integrity in a corrupt, self-seeking society that demands lies and collusion. Written in exile, these books were strongly anti-Fascist in tone, and, when translated, contributed to making Mussolini's regime less popular abroad in the mid-1930s than it had been ten years earlier.

Silone also wrote an overt satire on the subject of Fascism, *The School for Dictators*, and after the war achieved real fame in the English-speaking world with his first-hand account of Communism, published in Richard Crossman's *The God that Failed*. He has often been compared to Orwell, and shared with Orwell a deceptively plain style (in fact, one full of Biblical and historical allusions), a fine sceptical wit, strong sympathy with non-intellectuals, combined with a general aloofness and a total disillusionment with Communism.

Silone had been a significant figure in the underground Italian Communist Party in the 1920s, and, ironically, was in charge of agitprop for some time; he had been entrusted with Party organisation in Spain and France, and had gone on missions to Moscow. He broke with the Party in 1930-31 and spent the rest of his life as an independent-minded Christian Socialist: always rather a loner, but revered – at least by non-Communists – as a novelist, as a robust defender of democratic socialist values and as a man who had fought bravely against both Fascism and Communism.

Dario Biocca and Mauro Canali's book presents a very different picture of Silone. They claim that from 1919 until 1930 he was a police informer who passed on detailed information about, initially, the Socialist Youth Federation and, later, the Communist Party and the Comintern. The information he supplied wasn't routine or trivial: Silone provided first-hand accounts of the Party's policies, factional disputes, personalities and tactical activities, often in loving and extravagant detail – far more than any policeman needed to know. All this is demonstrated with the help of extensive documentation from the Italian police archives, where Silone's reports are now to be found.

This has naturally come as a shock to the Italian literary and even political establishments. Since the 1930s Silone has been an anti-Fascist icon; yet here he is depicted as working for the Fascist police, presumably for money (the authors, assertive and uncompromising on most other issues, are rather coy about this). It is as if Orwell were suddenly shown to have spent his time in Catalonia working for Franco. It hardly seems in character, to say the least; to many of Silone's devoted readers and followers, let alone to those who knew him person-

Who was Silvestri? Martin Clark

L'INFORMATORE: SILONE, I COMUNISTI E LA POLIZIA
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ally (he died in 1978), it seems simply incredible. Even the ex-Communists, who had loathed Silone for decades after 1931, were upset: they, too, had eventually accepted his anti-Fascist status and it was bad news that such a prominent former leader had been betraying the cause all along.

Biocca and Canali have suffered much righteous abuse. But the documents cannot

lie. Or can they? This book certainly shows that somebody in the top ranks of the Communist Party was an informer; but was it Silone? The informant, like everyone else in a clandestine organisation such as the PCI in the 1920s, used a pseudonym. His was 'Silvestri' – not Silone's usual Party name. Indeed, 'Ignazio Silone' was itself a pseudonym, and not a very brilliant one, since it's

not far from being an anagram of the word *silenzio*, and his real name was Secondo Tranquilli. At different times Silone also called himself 'Pasquino' and, after 1924, 'Serenio' – another fairly transparent pseudonym for Tranquilli, one perhaps adopted out of the nostalgia he felt for his time in Madrid in 1923-24 (it's worth noting that the Spanish *serenos*, or 'nightwatchmen', were also, notoriously, police informers). So who was 'Silvestri'? One suspect has been Mauro Scoccimarro, who is known to have used the pseudonym occasionally, but he was imprisoned in 1926 and thus can't have been the informant. Ironically, Silvestri was also the name of one of the *terriere della Sera*'s leading journalists, Carlo Silvestri, who was prominent in the press campaign against Mussolini during the

Matteotti crisis of 1924, but later changed his mind about the Duce, interviewed him several times on Lake Garda in 1944-45, and wrote a couple of apologetic books about him after the war.

Biocca and Canali have tracked the movements and postings of the top Communist officials in the 1920s, and claim that Silvestri's reports come from places – e.g. Madrid, 1923; Paris, 1924 – and institutions where Silone alone of the PCI leaders was working; and that none of the reports comes from a place unconnected with Silone. This evidence is circumstantial, but if true, and if extensive enough, it would be compelling. Unfortunately, it is asserted rather than demonstrated. Either the reader investigates the movements of all the PCI's personnel for himself or he must take Biocca and Canali's word for it. The book should at least have a table of such movements, with cross-references to the key Silvestri reports – an omission which is particularly striking, given how heavily the rest of the text is documented. Since the accusations against Silone are inherently so implausible, Biocca and Canali needed to produce the smoking gun: the fact that Silone was usually in the right place at the right time is not quite enough. The verdict must be 'not proven', at least as yet.

If we assume that Biocca and Canali are right, and Silvestri was indeed Silone, is there a plausible explanation? Any mitigating circumstances? Two theories that have been much discussed in Italy can be dismissed fairly rapidly. The first is that Silone might have been a double agent, feeding the police trivial information, or misinformation,

in order to deceive. But Silvestri's information was high-grade. It included details – addresses, pseudonyms, names on passports, dates of planned frontier crossings into Italy and so on – for all sorts of individuals, not only PCI leaders: a railwayman on the Trent-Innsbruck line, for example, is denounced as a Communist activist and propaganda smuggler. Silvestri didn't inform on everybody, on the other hand. There are few references, and those few unilluminating, to either Antonio Gramsci or Giacinto Serrati, a man whom Silone admired and whose 'Political Testament' he tried to distribute in 1926.

The other theory concerns Silone's younger brother, Romolo, who was arrested in 1928 after a bomb went off in Milan and killed 20 people. Romolo had nothing to do with the incident, but he was kept in prison for being a Communist, and died there in 1932. It has been said that the arrest was a typical secret police manoeuvre, intended to force Silone into informing. But this, too, is unconvincing. Most known anti-Fascists, not just Silone's brother, were rounded up in Milan at that time. Certainly, Silone was greatly concerned about his brother, his one remaining close relative, but by 1928 Silvestri had already been an informer for nine years, so if Silone was Silvestri, he didn't become an informer in order to save his brother. Indeed, he left the Communist Party in 1930-31, and thus ceased to be an informant, while his brother was still in jail. As he later wrote, this was particularly painful since he knew Romolo regarded him as a dedicated militant and had tried to model his own behaviour on Silone's.

Other pleas in mitigation are more convincing. If he was Silvestri, Silone began his informing career after being arrested in 1919, when he was 19 and secretary of the Socialist Youth Federation in Rome. It was not that unusual for arrested Socialists and Communists, like members of other parties, to make 'compromises' with the police in return for more lenient treatment. Fear, or poverty, are strong motives in these circumstances; and Silone was young, poor, friendless and isolated in a big city. The state archives for these years are full of detailed reports and analyses of the Communist Party, as well as of all the other parties and political movements, including the Fascists. This information clearly came from an extensive network of informants. Indeed, we already know of at least four reasonably prominent Communist informants who were providing information, so it is not as if Silone was an informer, he wasn't alone. This makes it impossible to be sure about the effects of Silvestri's activities, but it's clear that the general political situation and the police's need to gain credibility with Mussolini played a far greater part than specific information passed on by Silvestri or anyone else in the successive waves of arrests of Communist leaders in early 1923 and the autumn of 1926.

And, of course, Silvestri wouldn't necessarily have favoured the Fascists. In 1919 they were not yet in power; and even after 1922 it was possible for some years at least to think that little had really changed politically. Moreover, Silvestri reported not to them, nor even to the police in general, but to one trusted policeman, Guido Bellone. Bellone was a senior policeman in Rome, and became famous in 1925 for arresting the Socialist Deputy Zaniboni as he was about to make an attempt on Mussolini's life. Silvestri's relationship with Bellone was a close one, and Bioeca and Canali speculate that Bellone may have acted as a father-figure to the informer. Silone was an orphan who had lost his father early and most of his other relatives, including his mother, in an earthquake in 1915. At any rate, if this book has a hero, it is Bellone the sensitive policeman, establishing a warm personal link with a talented, insecure young man.

The ultimate argument in mitigation, heard on the Right in Italy, is that Silone was perfectly justified. Was it so wrong to inform on the Communists? Did Silone's loyalty really lie with the Party, rather than his country – his country being not that of the Fascist regime but that of the Abruzzi peasants? How else should a sensitive, morally upright man like Silone have behaved? This argument, apart from being tendentious, again relies too much on hindsight. Silone would have needed to be a remarkably precocious anti-Communist to have chosen this path in 1919, before the PCI was even founded.

Silvestri thus started off as a militant young Socialist, telling an intelligent policeman about revolutionary Socialist politics under what was still a Liberal regime. Four or five years later, by this time a prominent Communist, he was supplying information that would be used by Mussolini's regime. He clearly felt uneasy about this, and tried several times to withdraw. But his growing hatred of Communism justified

his role. By 1930, as the Comintern turned left and the collectivisation of agriculture began in the USSR, it was no longer possible to keep up the pretence. In an impressive and revealing letter, he told Bellone in April 1930 how troubled he was by moral difficulties, and unable any longer to eat or sleep. But it was not being an informer that tortured his conscience; it was having to pretend to be a Communist, while loathing the Party. Now it was time to start a new life, 'to repair the evil that I have done, to redeem myself, to do something good for the workers, and for the peasants, to whom I am bound with every fibre of my heart' – and who were suffering so intensely in the Ukraine.

ALTHOUGH, as I've argued, Bioeca and Canali's case is not proven, it is tempting to reread Silone's works in the light of their revelations. In particular, it is difficult now not to see the young Silone in the key figure of Luigi Murica in *Bread and Wine*. Murica is arrested and becomes a police spy out of fear. It is possible that here Silone was providing an explanation of his actions, although an inmodest one: in the novel Murica is redeemed by his martyrdom at the hands of Fascists, and at his funeral bread and wine are eaten, as if at a Mass. Bioeca and Canali's documents also shed light on Silone's ill-health and depression in the late 1920s (he even consulted Jung in Zurich, and Fontamara was written in a clinic at Davos) and on the impetus behind his career as a writer. They also document his estrangement from Communism, and how horrified he was by the Stalinist organisation he served.

By 1931 he had made his choice. He was expelled from the Party, but remained in exile. He had no liking for the Fascist regime either, as Fontamara seems to prove, and he no longer wrote to Bellone. Instead, he wrote his novels, about peasant life and political oppression. Their heroes were men who refused to collaborate with the authorities. They defined, and popularised, an apparently simple moral viewpoint, close to the values and interests of ordinary people. Were they all works of expiation? And if so, for being a police informer, or for having deceived the peasants into backing Communism? It seems, both from Bioeca and Canali's evidence and from the writings themselves, that it was the latter. Should we, then, interpret his literary work as essentially the continuation of his work as an informer, again bearing witness to the abuses of power but in a way that would reach a far wider audience? Fontamara would then be a critique of Communist as much as of Fascist arrogance – which would be a radical rereading.

Italian historians argue about the documents, about who wrote them and how they should be interpreted. Moralists argue about the concepts of 'betrayal', and of 'compromise'; some think that Silone's status is enhanced by the revelations. Literary scholars, after fifty years of relative consensus, have an even greater mystery on their hands: how should they interpret his work now? As anti-Fascism itself declines as an effective ideology, who can claim Italy's most eminent anti-Fascist writer as their own? □