

## The Mystery of Ignazio Silone

By William Weaver

*La cultura a Torino tra le due guerre (Culture in Turin Between the Two Wars)*  
by Angelo D'Orsi  
Milan: Einaudi, 377 pp., 19.63

*Fascist Modernities: Italy, 1922-1945*  
by Ruth Ben-Ghiat  
University of California Press, 317 pp., \$45.00

*L'informatore: Silone, i comunisti e la Polizia (The Informer: Silone, the Communists, and the Police)*  
by Dario Biocca and Mauro Canali  
Milan: Luni Editrice, 275 pp., 15.49

*Processo a Silone: La disavventura di un povero cristiano (Silone on Trial: The Misadventure of a Poor Christian)*  
by Giuseppe Tamburrano, with Gianna Granati and Alfonso Isinelli  
Manduria: Piero Lacaita, 161 pp., 10.33

### I.

For a country that has produced saints the way other countries produce cars, Italy seems to have an ambiguous attitude toward sainthood. A few years ago, when the Church drastically reduced the number of saints in the calendar, most Italians accepted the exclusions peacefully; the only serious protests were heard in Naples, where San Gennaro was defended not so much for religious reasons as out of local, superstitious affection. But not all saints are religious, and Italy has also been taking a look at some objects of secular worship. The buzz word in Italian intellectual and political circles over the past few years has been *revisionismo*, which could be translated roughly as "reconsidering," but would perhaps be more accurately rendered by phrases like "taking them down a peg" or, simply, "revealing feet of clay."

And here the process of desanctification is anything but smooth. The most bitter polemics in Italy arose from a recent volume by Angelo D'Orsi entitled *La cultura a Torino tra le due guerre (Culture in Turin Between the Two Wars)*. Written after decades of research, D'Orsi's study is, for the most part, a painstaking examination of the worlds of the universities, publishing, fine arts, and literature during the period that coincided with the Fascist regime. Turin in those years was the home of such now well-known writers as Leone and Natalia Ginzburg, Carlo Levi, Primo Levi, Cesare Pavese, Massimo Mila, and later (though he was not a native) Italo Calvino. It was also the seat of the left-wing publishing firm of Giulio Einaudi, and a center for leaders of anti-Fascist thought, like the magistrate and Resistance leader Alessandro Galante Garrone. In the postwar years the city had a high reputation as a model of anti-Fascist behavior.

D'Orsi provides a factual review of intellectual activities during the war period. His work is often boring, with its countless lists and catalogs. But he sometimes departs from his historian's sober objectivity and hands down moral judgments, which have provoked angry political debate. He is particularly skeptical about the veneration of several Turin icons for their anti-Fascism. Even his teacher, the political philosopher Norberto Bobbio, now in his nineties, receives some criticism, as when D'Orsi refers to a well-known admiring letter he wrote to Mussolini when he was a young scholar (revealed by an Italian weekly several years ago). The late Massimo Mila, a distinguished

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musicologist, is criticized for a petition written, after his imprisonment, to the dictator asking for his "paternal pardon." D'Orsi is also critical of Cesare Pavese, who, after returning from *confino*—exile to a remote village—under family pressure joined the Fascist Party in order to obtain a job.

D'Orsi does not question the anti-Fascism of Turin's dissident leaders, but says that they weren't anti-Fascist enough. Perhaps the passage in the book that has aroused the most outrage is a statement to the effect that, despite some notable exceptions, most of Turin's anti-Fascist heroes were "heroes sometimes by chance, sometimes out of necessity, and only in certain situations by choice." Characteristically, he does not specify which writers fit these categories. At another point he judges Carlo Levi's anti-Fascism to have been "superficial," though, as at least one reviewer has pointed out, it was deep enough to send Levi to prison and to *confino*. But—such is Italy's local patriotism—some intellectuals from other regions have betrayed a scarcely concealed satisfaction in D'Orsi's findings (just as during the war the much-bombed Neapolitans derived a kind of satisfaction after Rome's San Lorenzo district was bombed).

Mussolini and many of his henchmen were determined to create a "Fascist culture," offering literary prizes, sponsoring national competitions in the arts, subsidizing films and magazines. But in the opinion of some historians (Bobbio among them), these efforts were fruitless, and no real Fascist culture was achieved. Still, Ruth Ben-Ghiat, of New York University, has recently published a study entitled *Fascist Modernities* (the title of the Italian translation, *La cultura fascista*, is more boldly assertive). In Italy, this work has also provoked headlines and head-shaking. More than a history of Fascist culture, it is a richly documented and thorough chronicle of the relationship between the regime and culture. The Fascist attitude toward the academy, like many other Fascist policies, shifted often and bewilderingly. On the one hand, Mussolini established a record archive, *Discoteca di Stato*, to document the country's many dialects and their expression, much as Alan Lomax in the US did with folk music. On the other hand, the central government instituted a policy to eradicate dialect speech and force Sicilians and Venetians and everyone else to speak standard Italian. This campaign was strictly and politically controlled, although many Italians simply ignored it. All foreign words were officially banned, often with comic effects (try talking about movies without using the word "film" or about boxing without "ring").

Ben-Ghiat seems to harbor a certain animus against Alberto Moravia, one of the few genuine artists who continued to produce work under the regime while remaining staunchly independent of it. Among other things, she suggests that the immense success of his first novel *Gli indifferenti* (*The Time of Indifference*) would not have been possible without Fascist support. Yet it seems more likely that the book's success resulted primarily from the remarkable power of its indictment of the Roman bourgeoisie and their willingness to let sexual pleasure and greed for money dominate their lives—as well as to the book's almost unanimously laudatory reviews, including one by the respected anti-Fascist Giuseppe Borgese in the authoritative *Corriere della sera*. It is true that the head of the book's original publisher, Alpes, was the dictator's brother Arnaldo Mussolini; but it seems unlikely that this collector of sinecures actually read or approved the manuscript (Ben-Ghiat offers no convincing evidence that he did so).

When Moravia's second novel came out, the regime circulated a letter to the newspapers with instructions not to review it; and his third novel was confiscated before it could be distributed. At the time of Italy's anti-Semitic laws of 1938, Moravia, Ben-Ghiat says, was "on vacation" in Mexico. It is true that he went to Mexico and used that country to invent the exotic setting of *La mascherata*. But "on vacation"? From what? In order to escape the intellectually stifling Fascist atmosphere, Moravia traveled constantly for years, always with his typewriter.

2.

The most painful case of *revisionismo* involves the novelist Ignazio Silone (1900–1978), subject of a book that appeared a few weeks before D'Orsi's. The work of two young historians, Dario Biocca and Mauro Canali, *L'informatore: Silone, i comunisti e la Polizia* (*The Informer: Silone, the Communists*,

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*and the Police*) purports to reveal a previously unknown and astonishing aspect of Silone's career. The authors provide documents that, they claim, show that Silone acted as a police informant for roughly a dozen years, from 1919 until 1931. He broke off his police connection at about the same time that he very openly left the Communist Party, in which he had occupied high positions as a leader of the youth movement, and, in that capacity, was a member of the Comintern.

Though it was not a complete surprise—both Canali and Biocca had published anticipatory articles in scholarly journals—*L'informatore* took Italy by storm. A lawsuit was threatened on behalf of the writer's birthplace, the little Abruzzese town of Pescina de' Marsi, which is also the setting of nearly all his fiction; others have declared the documents false. Silone's old friend the writer Gustav Herling organized a conference in Naples to discuss the accusation shortly before his death. And all the leading Italian papers have run articles on the matter. But no one seemed able to refute Biocca's and Canali's scholarship, and the documents they produced were apparently authentic. The Silone case even attracted international attention, including, in the US, an informed, objective report by Alexander Stille in *The New Yorker*.<sup>11</sup>

Detachment has not marked the Italian debate, on either side. Moreover, in the conservative magazine *Liberal*, Canali returned to the attack, producing a new set of documents which he prefaced with a hot-tempered assessment of his and Biocca's critics. He alleges that Silone regularly sent reports to his contact, the Roman police official Guido Bellone. These reports informed the Fascists about the activities, movements, aliases, and aims of his fellow Communists. A typical letter reads, in part:

...Yesterday Mauro Scoccimarro left for Italy, via Switzerland. He carries a passport issued to the Neapolitan Communist Virgili, whose photograph he has replaced. Since I have to regularize my stay in Berlin, about which the police are generally strict, I was told at the Russian Delegation that if I want a passport under another name, with a residence permit already in order, they have here a considerable supply of Italian passports....

This report is dated February 1, 1923. About five weeks later, according to Canali and Biocca, Silone transmitted to Rome the entire contents of a Communist Party program for protecting, outside of Italy, the victims of "Italian reaction and the struggle against Fascism," a document then reserved only to top members of the Berlin group. From Paris, in March of 1924, Silone is said to have transmitted a list of the active Italian Communists there. They included:

Zanardi, who until a month ago was in Berlin, as secretary of Scoccimarro, was arrested in Berlin and found with a passport issued to a nonexistent Italian member of parliament. When he was released, he came to Paris, where—under the name of Macchi—he does propaganda work in the areas where there are many Italian emigrants, especially in the devastated provinces....

Prof. Pozzoli (Cremona) now Secretary of the Red Aid Committee, Pozzoli works at French Communist Party headquarters, Rue Lafayette.

Silone's alleged list also includes a waiter working in a restaurant in Place de la République and a railroad worker on the Gare du Nord line.

There was extended debate about the value of the information that Silone allegedly transmitted to Rome. In some cases, the reports attributed to him seem fairly innocuous; but in other instances, as when he is said to have identified the network smuggling Party propaganda into Italy, the police made significant arrests and broke up the network.

But just as the controversy raised by the Biocca-Canali charge was beginning to fade, when even Silone's supporters were reluctantly accepting the documents as authentic, there was another surprising turn of events: the publication of *Processo a Silone* (*Silone on Trial*) by a socialist

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historian, Giuseppe Tamburrano, with two collaborating researchers, Gianna Granati and Alfonso Isinelli. The authors subjected the Biocca-Canali thesis to close scrutiny and conclude that *L'informatore* is—as the writer Michael P. McDonald has called it—"a travesty of scholarship."

In a thorough and convincing article in *The National Interest*, McDonald summarizes and sustains Tamburrano's position. After reexamining the fifty documents published by Biocca and Canali and after studying other archives that Biocca and Canali ignored, Tamburrano points out, first, that the code name Silvestri does not appear until April 10, 1928, after the arrest of Silone's brother Romolo. This suggests that the argument of some of Silone's defenders—that Silone's connection with the police was intended to help Romolo—could be correct.<sup>11</sup>

With two exceptions, the documents presented by Biocca and Canali are reports prepared by anonymous clerks, summarizing received information (often from "a source"). One of the two exceptions, the crucial "resignation" letter of April 13, 1930, quoted below, is in Silone's hand. The other—according to an authoritative handwriting expert retained by Tamburrano—is not. So the mystery—and the polemics—remain.

**3.**

In the 1930s and 1940s, when his alleged activity as an informant was virtually unknown, Silone was, to Italians and non-Italians, far more than a writer; he was a model. His very life reads like a morality tale. Born Secondino Tranquilli (Silone was a pen name he adopted when he began his writing career) into a family of poor smallholders in a remote region of central Italy, he faced tragedy early in life. His father, a great moral influence, died when Silone was ten; five years later, the calamitous earthquake of 1915 killed his mother and others of his family. He and his younger brother Romolo were then taken in by their grandmother. As he grew up he became disgusted by the blatant corruption of local and national officials, who embezzled much of the funds allocated for post-earthquake reconstruction, and appalled by the daily injustice visited upon the poor peasants—the *cafoni*, as they were, and are still, called—he began writing denunciatory articles. At the same time, he became politically active in the Socialist Party and, after the Socialists broke apart, in the Communist Party, where he rapidly rose to prominence.

Then, after what he later called a moral crisis accompanied by ill health, he turned to writing fiction. With his first novel—*Fontamara*, published originally in German translation in Zurich, then in other translations all over the world—he established himself as a powerful literary voice, a position confirmed by his second novel, *Bread and Wine*, also written in exile. By the time he returned to Italy, at the end of the war, he already had an international reputation.<sup>12</sup>

But to recite baldly the events of Silone's life gives an inadequate notion of his significance. All of us who live among books, who have been readers all our lives, cherish a few writers—perhaps no more than two or three—as if they wrote especially for us. These are the writers who seem to express our thoughts before we ourselves have quite formed them. They introduce us to a world new to us, yet one where we seem always to have lived, where we feel miraculously at home.

For me two such writers have been Thoreau and Silone. I first read Thoreau when I was barely in my teens and was clumsily, instinctively making myself into a pacifist, a conscientious objector. At that time, these ideas of mine were abstractions. But a few years later, when I was a freshman in college, the bombing of Pearl Harbor brought me and my ideas up against concrete reality. With a copy of *Walden* in my musette bag, I joined the American Field Service and went off to Africa to drive an ambulance with the British army: in uniform, yes, but technically a civilian, specifically and happily forbidden to bear arms.

By the time I reached North Africa the fighting there was over; encamped in the Libyan desert, my fellow drivers and I had nothing to do but wait until we were sent somewhere else. The rumors favored Italy. Meanwhile, we lay in the sun and read. Books were in short supply, beyond price. We

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borrowed and—I'm afraid—even stole them. In one of those frequent trades, I acquired Silone's first two books, *Fontamara* and *Bread and Wine*.

Their impact on me was immediate and deep. This was my real introduction to Italy. Though I had then barely heard of the Abruzzo (I remembered a reference to the region as a cold, hard place in an early chapter of Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*), I was struck by Silone's pervasive feeling for the plight of its poor and oppressed. A passage in *Fontamara* that particularly affected me concerned not merely cruelty but the indifference with which that cruelty was marked:

...For twenty years I knew the monotony of the earth, the rain, the wind, the snow, the saints' days, the worries, the troubles and the poverty—the everlasting poverty handed down by fathers who inherited it from grandfathers, and in the face of which honest toil had never been of any use. The hardest injustices were of such long standing that they had acquired the naturalness of the rain, the wind and the snow. The life of men, of the beast of the field, and of the earth itself seemed enclosed in an immovable ring, held in the viselike grip of the mountains and the changes of the season, welded into an unchanging natural cycle as in a kind of never-ending imprisonment.

When I read Silone's words, some inchoate, previously unacknowledged emotions of my own came to the surface and began to take shape. Silone had, since childhood, witnessed the day-to-day injustices of local authorities against the defenseless poor; and, as I learned of these previously unimagined events, I was forcefully reminded of my Southern hometown and the situation of its black inhabitants, treated always with casual offensive superiority, if not often with actual cruelty. My pacifism took on another, broader meaning that was to affect my postwar future.

My company landed at Salerno a week or more after D-Day, so we witnessed no fighting, though we could hear ominous rumblings beyond the hills before us. Our twenty or so ambulances were ordered to reach the main road, and drive north, and then we were to set up camp and await further instructions. We drove the prescribed distance and, when we stopped, found ourselves in a vineyard. It was vintage time, and the inhabitants—minus the males of military age—were picking grapes. They welcomed us with enthusiasm and brought us jugs of raw red wine, while we in turn gladly presented them with cans of bully beef, our daily, detested rations. Thus I met Italy and the *cafoni*, and, while these peasants of Campania would probably have been unable to communicate with their Abruzzesi counterparts, some of them recalled to me the very poor but admirably direct and stoical people in Silone's book. This was the beginning of my lifelong passion for Italy.

Some days later we arrived in the head-spinning city of liberated Naples, where, after a casual encounter in a bookshop, I was befriended by a lively group of young intellectuals, future writers, directors, and filmmakers. Again, there was an exchange of books. I gave them my copies of Eliot, Auden, and Scott Fitzgerald; they gave me the poems of Montale and Ungaretti, and the first novels of Moravia, Vittorini, and Pavese.

Eagerly, I questioned them about Silone. They had barely heard of him, and said they knew only two things about him: he was popular in America and he was a former Communist who had broken with the Party. Neither of these was likely to make him welcome among my thoroughly left-wing, anti-capitalist Italian friends.

In Rome, in the fall of 1947, I found once more an ambiguous attitude toward Silone, whose books had now begun to circulate in Italy. The strongly Communist-influenced literary establishment was still actively opposed to him; yet, because of his past political association with communism, the Catholic center and right were equally hostile. As he was the first to recognize, he was isolated: "a socialist without a party," he wrote, "a Christian without a church." He continued writing and publishing, but, while not wholly ignored, he was supported only by a small circle of friends and by foreign writers. Literary visitors to Rome regularly came to his out-of-the-way apartment, and there in his cramped living room, I met some of the writers I admired, among them Saul Bellow, Edmund

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Wilson, and Mary McCarthy.

Thanks largely to Silone's beautiful, ebullient, bilingual Irish wife, Darina, the conversation was lively, but much of the time Silone remained taciturn. His silence might have been thought morose; but when he did say something—especially if the company was small and Italian-speaking—he revealed that dry humor that informs even his most tragic fiction. And, on rare occasions, he demonstrated his gifts as a raconteur. I remember particularly the story he told about two men from Pescina, a shepherd and his son, who at the end of the war, when Silone briefly occupied an important political post, had journeyed all the way to Rome to ask his intervention in support of a relative in legal trouble. In accord with peasant tradition, they had brought with them half of a freshly slaughtered lamb. Trailing lamb's blood across the marble floor of the lobby of the Hotel Plaza, where the Silones were living, the men came to Silone, stated their case, and offered him the carcass. Silone promised to look into the situation, but rejected their intended bribe. Dismayed, they left, but outside the door of his room, he could hear them arguing, the son insisting that they should have brought the entire lamb. He told the story dryly and amusingly, clearly touched by the visitors from Pescina.

Yet among established Italian critics, and even among my friends, Silone continued to be rejected. "He can't write proper Italian," some said of him. This is a traditional lament, raised by critics against some of the country's most celebrated writers, such as Verga, Pirandello, Svevo, Moravia, and, more recently, Umberto Eco. Many Italians still harbored a secret admiration for the virtuoso bravura of the pro-Fascist d'Annunzio and for the jeweled writing of essayists like Emilio Cecchi and Cesare Brandi. Silone's plain prose, in which the narrative voice reflected the speech rhythms of rural characters, was seen as lacking in elegance. In his last years, however, Silone's reputation underwent a change. One indication was the increasing popularity of his works: two of his novels were adapted for an Italian TV miniseries and, timed to coincide with their appearance, new editions of his books were issued.

Ironically, the charges of Biocca and Canali first began to appear just as Silone was to receive his greatest, posthumous accolade: publication in the prestigious Mondadori series "I Meridiani," Italy's closest equivalent of the Pléiade or the Library of America: a kind of editorial beatification. Prepared by the distinguished scholar Bruno Falchetto, with an impressive critical apparatus, including bibliography, chronology, and ample and accurate notes, these two volumes should have confirmed Silone's high position in the history of Italian literature.

In addition, the Italian-born American scholar Maria Paynter published two years ago the first full-length English-language study of Silone's work: *Ignazio Silone: Beyond the Tragic Vision*,<sup>11</sup> a close examination of the entire corpus of Silone's writing, including his fiction, his essays, and even his two plays. Paynter gives special attention to his novel in the form of a drama: *The Story of a Humble Christian*, inspired by the life of one of Silone's personal heroes, the Abruzzese hermit-pope Celestine V, who was excoriated by Dante for his abdication of the papal throne but later appreciated for his humility and simplicity, and canonized. Particularly interesting is Paynter's examination of Silone's literary fortunes, where she points out that even in America Silone's reception was mixed; she quotes a chilling review by Mark Van Doren—like many Americans at that time an admirer of the Fascist regime—who said in 1934: "That such a novel as this should have become the best seller of fourteen countries of Europe, is powerfully suggestive of the high degree to which Mussolini and his government must be hated beyond the borders of the country which they bless. It is a poor novel by any test, even that of propaganda."

Writing just as the Biocca-Canali scandal was brewing, but before publication of their supposedly incriminating documents, Paynter was one of several commentators who tried to explain his connections with police by the writer's concern for his younger brother, Romolo, who, emulating Silone, began a brief career as an active anti-Fascist and, in 1928, was arrested on a trumped-up charge of plotting the assassination of Victor Emmanuel III and sentenced to death. As has been said, this possibility has been given support by Tamburrano's recent book. It is also true that Silone solicited the help of some of his internationally famous admirers—among them the novelist Romain

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Rolland—to stave off his brother's execution. Still imprisoned on the island of Procida, Romolo died in the autumn of 1932, as Paynter puts it, "of tuberculosis, aggravated by police brutality." He was twenty-eight.

By this time Silone had abandoned the Communist Party. In a singular letter to his contact Bellone, headed "[Locarno], 13 April 1930," he broke off his connection with the Fascist police. He wrote:

Forgive me for not writing. What you were interested in knowing is no longer a mystery (the press is already speaking of it). I do not know what I and my friends will do. My health is very poor, but the cause is moral.... I find myself at a very painful point in my existence. My moral sense, which has always been strong, now dominates me completely, prevents me from sleeping, from eating, does not grant me a moment's repose. I am at the defining point of my existential crisis, which allows only one way out: complete abandonment of militant politics (I will seek for myself some sort of intellectual occupation).

Apart from this solution only death remained. It was—and is—impossible for me to continue an ambiguous life. I was born to be an honest landowner in my village. Life hurled me in a direction from which I now want to rescue myself. My conscience tells me I have done no great harm to my friends or to my country. Within the limits of my possibilities I have always taken care not to do harm. I must say that you, in view of your position, have always treated me honorably. For this reason I am writing you this final letter so that you will not stand in the way of my plan, which will be realized in two stages: first, eliminating from my life all that is false, two-faced, equivocal, mysterious; second, by beginning a new life, to make up for any wrong I have done, to redeem myself, to do good for the workers, the peasants (to whom I am bound with every fiber of my heart) and for my homeland.

Between the first stage and the second, I need some rest, physical, intellectual, and moral. No material consideration of any kind has influenced my decision. Hardships do not frighten me. What I want is to live morally.

The influence and the popularity that I have gained in many centers of emigration lead me to conceive of my future activity (as soon as I have recovered my health) in the form of totally independent literary and editorial activity. I must add that, in this period, some great changes are taking place in my ideology, and I feel drawn again, greatly, toward religion (if not toward the church) and the development of my thought is facilitated by the idiotic and criminal orientation that the Communist Party is assuming. The only thing that causes me to leave it with some regret is the fact that it is a persecuted Party, in which—excepting the present leaders—there are thousands of workers in good faith. In order to exercise an influence on the basic elements, I am still hesitating to announce publicly my break with the Party, and I am waiting for the propitious moment, in the near future.

This letter of mine to you is a testimony of esteem. I want to conclude, definitively, a long period of straightforward relations, with a straightforward act. If you are a believer, pray God to give me the strength to overcome my remorse, to begin a new life, and to spend it wholly for the good of the workers of Italy. Yours,

Silvestri

4.

— In 1929, in a Swiss sanatorium, Silone had already begun writing *Fontamara*, and despite chronic ill health and lack of money, he finished the novel in 1931. He was, then, telling the truth when he wrote

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to Bellone that he was devoting himself to literary work. With *Fontamara*, he staked out his territory, describing the desperate and miserable life of the peasants in a poor mountain village of the Marsica region, evoking their struggle against the injustices inflicted upon them daily by oppressive landowners and their gradual discovery that they could gain some rights of their own. Particularly memorable is his portrait of the laborer Berardo, a giant of a man, who stands up to local officials.

All of Silone's fiction would deal with this remote and unpromising part of Italy, and his constant theme would be the question of morality: How should a man behave in the face of injustice? In *Bread and Wine* the Communist intellectual Pietro Spina clandestinely returns to Fascist Italy and evades arrest by seeking refuge in a remote Abruzzo village disguised as a convalescent priest. He faces the dilemma of how a sophisticated radical can justify involving poor people in the risks of resistance under an oppressive regime. In the later novels, Silone continued to ask these questions, and even when he is writing a historical work like *The Story of a Humble Christian*, his main character, the saintly but tragically unworldly Celestine, ponders the same problems.

Silone's novels are all in some part autobiographical; his characters may change their names and century, but they always reflect his own deepest concerns. In *Bread and Wine*, Pietro Spina has always been seen as Silone's alter ego, but there is another character, Murica, who is almost as important, and as several commentators, including Stille, have pointed out, he may also be the bearer of a veiled confession. Murica is an informer. His own account of his duplicity in betraying his comrades after physical threats and blackmail by Fascists is a central episode in the novel, and one of its most affecting chapters. Stille, among others, quotes from this scene in his *New Yorker* article, and suggests, convincingly, that Murica is as much a self-portrait of Silone as is the less tormented Pietro Spina.

But Stille also asks, "Why did Silone never mention" his Fascist collaboration? No satisfactory answer to this question has emerged. He may simply have been ashamed of his involvement with the regime; but he also must have known that the documents of his activities could have been exposed at any time. Apart from his essay on the illusions of communism in the anthology *The God that Failed* he never wrote an extended, formal autobiography. What seems clear, however, is that in his work Silone explored his past unceasingly, if for the most part indirectly.

Even a largely superficial acquaintance with him—such as mine was—suggested that Silone was a haunted man, a man of sorrows. Not in any self-pitying fashion, but in a far deeper, Christian sense. I remember an occasion when Darina and I had arranged to meet for lunch. At the restaurant, she apologized, unnecessarily, for not inviting me to the house, and explained that Silone was, that day, not up to having company, "because of the newspapers this morning." I had read the newspapers, but hadn't noticed anything in particular—had the government fallen again? I said no more, but on going home, I retrieved the *Messaggero* from the trash and saw the headlines: a disastrous earthquake in North Africa had provoked numerous casualties. For some reason—I can't remember what—I did go to the Silones' that evening, and I saw him, slumped in his usual chair, with a face of doom. He was, it seemed to me, suffering for the anonymous Africans and, at the same time, perhaps, reliving difficult moments of his own life.

In making their case against Silone, Biocca and Canali do not attempt any explanation for his behavior. It is inconceivable to me that Silone was some kind of closet Fascist, although his letter to his police contact suggests he felt he was writing to someone who would understand him, and by the time he wrote his letter he refers to the "idiotic and criminal form" that the Party was assuming in 1930. (It is striking that one day after Silone wrote his letter, Vladimir Mayakovsky committed suicide in Moscow, having recently made clear his disappointment with the Communist regime.) From the documents it seems that the police paid Silone for his reports; and yet he never appeared to have any money, and he was the least grasping of men. In his last letter to Bellone, he seems especially anxious to bring any financial connection to an end.

— The more one looks at the allegations against Silone, the more puzzling they become. During the



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years in question he was imprisoned for Party activities several times in various countries; he was forced into exile; and he had periods of recurring illness. One explanation has been ventured by Luce D'Eramo, author of an early study of Silone. In a telephone conversation with Stille, D'Eramo suggested that Silone was a double agent, supplying the police with trivial or already known information on instructions from the Party. Stille dismisses this explanation on the grounds that it is not supported by any documents in the Party archives. But would such activity necessarily have been recorded? Unlike the bureaucratic Fascist regime, whose officials would feel confident that their secrets would be kept, the underground Communists would have taken a foolish and dangerous risk if they had kept written records of a double agent's activities.

How helpful would Silone's alleged reports have been to the police? The debate about this question seems inconclusive. Some deny that the reports would have added much to what was known from other sources. The Italian historian Mimmo Franzinelli, the author of a book on the Fascist secret police, *I tentacoli dell'OVRA* (The Tentacles of the OVRA),<sup>11</sup> takes Biocca and Canali to task for not "contextualizing" the activity of Silone. There were, Franzinelli writes, many paid informers infiltrating Communist Party ranks abroad, and he argues that Silone had a very minor position among them.

Reading the recent revisionist books by D'Orsi, Ben-Ghiat, and Biocca and Canali is an unpleasant experience. For all their protestations of scholarly detachment, these historians tend to be judgmental. They line up their documents like a card player laying out a game of solitaire. But as anyone who has studied documents knows (I speak now as a sometime biographer), letters, reports, dispatches can be misleading. There is a space between one document and the next and the historian must read that space with imagination and compassion. Tamburrano's book underlines the dangers of drawing conclusions too quickly about how Italians behaved during the Fascist period. To say, for example, that a young writer contributed to this or that regime-sponsored magazine or belonged to, say the Gruppo Universitario Fascista (GUF) means little unless we know who else wrote for those pages or was active in that group. The various GUF organizations were, in fact, notorious for their undisguised opposition to the regime, whose funds they spent on non-Fascist projects. In Naples, for example, the university theater group put on a play by Eugene O'Neill at a time when American literature was severely frowned upon; the students simply identified O'Neill in the program as "Irish," and since Ireland was neutral, they got away with it, outwitting their supposed controllers.

In any case, it seems too easy for writers born after World War II, when Fascism was only a horrid memory, to dictate to the dead, to tell them how they should have behaved when the regime controlled every means of public expression. As for Silone, it seems unlikely that his activities will find a satisfactory explanation. "Behind every secret there is another secret," he once wrote. Silone took his enigmas with him in death, leaving his work to speak for him. Concluding his *New Yorker* article, Stille writes: "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."

When I read those words, I wasn't at first convinced. I was still in shock as if someone had revealed that, throughout his life, Thoreau had been involved with the slave trade. But as I began to think about writing something on the subject myself, I returned first to *Fontamara*, then to *Bread and Wine* and to *Luca's Secret*. Stille was right. Here was the real Silone—a writer who could at the same time make clear moral judgments and be accepting of human weakness—and he spoke to me as he had in my youth. For me, his stories of the simple, brave giant Berardo from *Fontamara*, of the tormented Pietro Spina, and of the loyal and quietly heroic Luca, along with Carlo Levi's great *Christ Stopped at Eboli* and Moravia's *Gli Indifferenti* and *Two Women*, are the documents that tell the true story.

## Notes

<sup>11</sup> Alexander Stille, "The Spy Who Failed," *The New Yorker*, May 15, 2000, pp. 44–48.

<sup>12</sup> Michael P. McDonald, "Il Caso Silone," *The National Interest*, Fall 2001, pp. 77–89.

**The Mystery of Ignazio Silone, by William Weaver**

<sup>(1)</sup> In 2000 Steerforth Press reissued Silone's Abruzzo trilogy, including *Fontamara*, *Bread and Wine*, and *The Seed Beneath the Snow*, translated by Eric Mosbacher and revised by Darina Silone, with an introduction by Alexander Stille.

<sup>(2)</sup> University of Toronto Press, 2000.

<sup>(3)</sup> Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1999.