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## After the Earthquake

### Tim Parks

- *Bitter Spring: A Life of Ignazio Silone* by Stanislao Pugliese. Farrar, Straus, 426 pp., \$35.00, June, ISBN 978 0 374 11348 3

The life story of the Italian writer and political activist Secondino Tranquilli, alias Ignazio Silone, is both disquieting in itself and a serious challenge for anyone who believes that the value of a work of literature can be entirely separated in our minds from the character and behaviour of the person who produced it. Essentially, there are two versions of the Silone story. In the first he is an Orwell-like figure, a man who, following an idealistic commitment to Communism during the 1920s, reacted against its totalitarian inclinations and used his writing to promote freedom and democracy. In the second version, he was a police spy throughout his ten-year involvement with the Communist Party. In this account his repudiation of Communism was not, or not only, a matter of conviction but arose from his need to end a double life that had become too exhausting and too dangerous. The writing that followed allowed him to reconstruct his past and create an impression of courageous moral integrity.

The heroic Silone was the standard figure until 1996, when researchers uncovered documents indicating he had collaborated with the Fascist police. In his new biography, *Bitter Spring*, Stanislao Pugliese clearly wants to believe Silone was not a collaborator; he repeatedly mentions the possibility of a neo-Fascist smear campaign and describes the documents as 'supposedly proving that Silone had been spying for the Fascist police'. Assuring us he will avoid hagiography, Pugliese presents a

generally sympathetic Silone: he frequently praises his political courage and rather oddly delays consideration of evidence about his involvement with the police until the penultimate chapter. Obligated, then, to accept that some of that evidence is hard to refute, Pugliese thinks of every possible reason to doubt the bulk of it, leaving the reader confused and dissatisfied.

Interest aroused, one is more or less obliged to turn to Dario Biocca's *Silone, La doppia vita di un italiano* (2005, not available in translation); here any doubts as to Silone's collaboration are quickly dispelled. Biocca has meticulously researched Silone's early adult life. The difference between the two biographies is the difference between a neutral professional historian and a romantic, politically engaged literary biographer. For those interested in literature, the historian's approach is more useful and, for all Biocca's doggedly dry accumulation of detail, more moving.

Why would a man who always emphasised the importance of morality regularly betray his friends and his cause for so many years? Money may have changed hands, but this is not, in Silone's case, sufficient explanation. All his biographers agree that, in so far as an answer is to be had, it must lie in the aftermath of the earthquake that struck central Italy in 1915.

The third child of small landholders, Secondino Tranquilli was born in 1900 in Pescina, a poor village in the rugged mountains of the Abruzzi, about halfway down the Italian peninsula. In 1911 his father died; two months later his elder brother followed. There had been other deaths. Of the seven children born to his parents, Secondino and his younger brother, Romolo, were the only two still alive when an earthquake destroyed Pescina on 13 January 1915. Secondino, who was living in a seminary close by, saw his family home reduced to rubble. Five days later he dug out his mother's body; Romolo was also buried for some days but survived.

The village had been flattened; in the surrounding countryside thousands were dead. The Tranquilli orphans were taken into state care and sent to separate church boarding schools in Rome. For Secondino, trauma and insecurity were exacerbated by the school's strict regime and classmates who mocked his provincial manners. After trying to run away, he was expelled and eventually placed in the care of Don Orione, a charismatic priest dedicated to rescuing orphans. Don Orione accompanied Secondino on the long train journey north to a new school in San Remo. The fascinating correspondence between the two over the next few years was driven by Secondino's evident need for a parental figure. Don Orione was willing to play that role but required in return that the boy not stray too far from the faith. When Secondino was unhappy in San Remo, Don Orione had him moved to Reggio Calabria. This time Secondino found the atmosphere 'corrupt': his letters speak of a

battle between good and evil; reading between the lines one senses the boy's need to please the priest and at the same time his desire to be loved unconditionally. 'I'm very afraid of myself,' he writes in 1916, 'and would like to be in an isolated environment, but there's an irresistible fire in me that pushes me to do good and I'd like to be out in the midst of the world.'

This conflict between withdrawal and engagement, coupled with a fear that he would not make the grade morally, characterised Tranquilli/Silone's entire life. In 1918, Secondino left school without taking his final exams and wrote to Don Orione explaining that he had lost his faith and become a socialist. But the letter was also an appeal for help and attention: 'In the huge flock you are following, take care of the little sheep who is tottering on the brink.' When he then went to Rome to work for the revolutionary Young Socialist Party, Don Orione broke off the correspondence. Tranquilli was dismayed.

On the extreme left in every debate, Tranquilli rose rapidly through the ranks of first the Socialist, then the Communist Party. Pugliese sums up the early years:

In August 1919 . . . he was elected secretary of the *Unione Giovanile Socialista* . . . two months later, he was elected to the Central Committee of the *Gioventù Socialista Italiana*; a few weeks after that, Silone was named to the Communist Youth International; in January 1920, he assumed direction of the Socialist weekly newspaper *L'Avanguardia*; at the Socialist Party congress a year later, he represented the Socialist youth wing and brought it to the newly formed Communist Party of Italy and was named to the central committee; in June, he participated in the Third International. Almost as soon as he set foot in Rome, a police file had been opened in his name. In September 1919, he was already marked as 'subversive' and 'dangerous'.

According to Biocca, however, 1919 was also the year in which Tranquilli started passing information to a police inspector called Guido Bellone, a courteous, well-respected, unmarried man in his late forties, a possible replacement father figure. This was three years before Mussolini's March on Rome and the formation of the first Fascist government.

It seems that belonging to an extremist political group gave Tranquilli a surrogate family and a purpose. 'I was a cynic,' he later wrote of himself. 'I cared nothing about others or myself, my health, my future, my studies. I had no plans, no ambitions.' Political activism changed that. Tranquilli was good at it: an effective organiser, compulsive conspirator, writer of fiery articles and convincing speaker. But it was a radical and dangerous choice: he had to follow the party line and live in a precarious

milieu in which arrests were frequent and the pressure to inform considerable. As Biocca remarks, Silone's fiction includes various accounts of a young activist being arrested, beaten up, then 'saved' by a parental figure who encourages him to spy, turning his idealistic commitment into a nightmare of duplicity from which it seems impossible to escape.

A word about the evidence for Tranquilli's long collaboration with the police. At its heart is an anguished letter to Bellone dated 1930 and signed with the codename Silvestri; it describes an existential crisis, a return to Christianity and the writer's pressing need to escape from his 'equivocal' position, something he hopes will be permitted if he abandons all political activity. The letter, Pugliese concedes, 'appears to be' in Tranquilli's handwriting. However, the bulk of the communications between informer and policeman, in particular a letter of 1929 which speaks of the impossibility of maintaining the relationship the pair had ten years before, are either not in Tranquilli's hand or are typewritten police transcripts. Nor are they in the first person; Tranquilli is referred to throughout in the third person. As a result Pugliese says it can't be proved that Tranquilli wrote them. But even when communicating with different factions of his own party, Tranquilli sometimes got others to write down sensitive information so that its source could not be recognised, and in his private letters sometimes referred to himself ironically in the third person. Perhaps the habit satisfied a psychological need to split the writing self from the betraying self, as if he were a novelist inventing an unattractive alter ego. Later, in the 1940s, Tranquilli was admired by the American secret services for the extraordinary precautions he took to disguise his identity while collaborating with them. Pugliese's account of his youth, it should be said, is largely drawn from descriptions Tranquilli himself offered much later in life and warned might not be factual. They sometimes seem less reliable than the evidence of collaboration that the biographer doubts.

Countering Pugliese's reluctance and unease is Biocca's painstaking reconstruction of events. During the early years of Fascism, as Tranquilli was given more and more important roles in the Communist Party, he had to go into hiding and then into exile, moving from Berlin to Moscow to Paris to Spain to Switzerland. In every case the information from the spy called Silvestri comes from the place where Tranquilli was. He was frequently separated from his girlfriend, Gabriella Seidenfeld, herself a Communist activist, and there was no single person with him throughout this period who could have given the same information.

On one level Tranquilli was giving the police hard facts: where the party had its bases and printing presses, when and how wanted activists crossed borders. But there is also something exhibitionist about these police reports, as if the young informer

wanted to show how much he knew to impress his older minder with his writerly skills and powers of observation and analysis. Throughout the 1920s the relationship between the Communist parties of Europe was fraught and complicated. The hegemony of the Russian party was not seriously questioned, but things were changing rapidly in the Soviet Union, and Italian Communist leaders had different ideas about how to respond to the situation there and how to deal with the rise and consolidation of Fascism. Often called to negotiate between the different national parties, close to the Italian party leader, in Moscow at key moments and touted as a future leader, Tranquilli clearly enjoyed being at the centre of conspiracy and upheaval. He was extremely active in party infighting and at the same time analysed everything that was going on for the benefit of the police, often very coolly and critically. Indeed, there is an evident continuity between his criticism of the party in these reports and his aggressively anti-Communist journalism years later, as if this secret space in which he could say frankly what he thought (something he couldn't do in party newspapers) had been useful to him. In any event, the unloved orphan was now in urgent demand on both sides of the political divide.

The position was as unsustainable as it was exciting. On a number of occasions other activists were arrested while Tranquilli escaped or was inexplicably released.

Dispatches to Bellone suggest his anxiety about possible exposure. But what must ultimately have made the situation intolerable was his brother's arrest in spring 1928. Secondino and Romolo had spent hardly any time together since 1915. Less talented than his older brother, Romolo had been unable to hold down a job and was acting as a Communist courier on a trip to Como via Milan when a bomb exploded in the city, apparently an attempt to assassinate the king. Arrested and found to be the brother of a Communist leader, Romolo was accused of the bombing. Even when it became clear that he had not been involved, he was detained as a member of an outlawed organisation who had resisted arrest.

Romolo had tuberculosis and his health deteriorated in prison. Secondino worried about his brother's welfare and demanded to be put in touch, but he must have been aware that if Romolo was released it would cast suspicion on him. Over the next two years, while his brother was awaiting trial and he himself was suffering from chronic bronchitis and panic attacks, Tranquilli began to engineer his own expulsion from the Communist Party: he played off factions so clumsily that both became furious with him; he failed to turn up for important meetings, claiming he was ill, a ruse he used throughout his life. In 1929, he went into psychoanalysis and the following year, now living in the relative safety of Switzerland, began the novel *Fontamara* which, published under the pseudonym Ignazio Silone, would change his life.

Pugliese describes *Fontamara* (literally ‘Bitterspring’) as ‘the most powerful and influential work of anti-Fascist literature of the 1930s’; certainly it is hard to separate the immediate international acclaim for Silone’s early novels from an enthusiasm for their political message. But the work is more complex and enigmatic than was generally acknowledged. Fascism is never explicitly mentioned. *Fontamara* is, like *Pescina*, a hilltop village relying on a small stream to irrigate what little land its people farm in the richer plain. Always exploited, the peasant villagers find their position drastically worsened when, after a new government takes over in Rome, a powerful businessman is appointed mayor and, among other abuses, redirects most of the water to his own property. Manipulated by political activists, the peasants finally organise some resistance, only to be slaughtered by government-employed thugs.

Silone prided himself on his depiction of the peasants, whom he determinedly calls *cafoni*, a derogatory term that he insists should be a badge of pride. However, at the centre of the drama is the predicament of a young man, Berardo Viola, who distinguishes himself from the ordinary inhabitants in every way. Most of the villagers are comically ingenuous and fearful, but the courageous Berardo understands at once both the designs of the new mayor and the difficulties of organising effective resistance. He is seen by the peasants as their only hope but, having lost the land he owned in an avalanche, he abandons their cause and heads for Rome to look for work. His obsession is to earn enough to acquire a smallholding and be in a position to marry the girl he loves. But the new government has raised insuperable obstacles to the free movement of labour and Berardo is thwarted at every turn. After he is approached by a left-wing activist, he is arrested and beaten but refuses to betray the man. However, on receiving the news that his beloved has suddenly died (Silone is never embarrassed by the *deus ex machina*), with nothing now to live for, he tells the police that he is the elusive agitator they have been looking for, and that they should punish him. Refusing to give any further information, he dies in prison. A case of suicide, the police insist.

Combining a romantic fantasy of self-sacrifice with deep pessimism, *Fontamara* suggests that only those who have lost everything are likely to sacrifice themselves for a cause. ‘I was born to be an honest landowner in my village,’ Tranquilli had written to Bellone in 1930, hinting that it was the loss of this possibility in the earthquake that led to his adventures in politics. *Fontamara* ends with the words ‘Che fare?’ The phrase is also proposed by one character as the name for an anti-government newspaper. Read positively it means: ‘What’s to be done?’ But the expression is frequently used in Italy as a resigned admission that nothing can be done. Berardo says that he is destined to die a violent death; his struggle to create a

fruitful life for himself is therefore futile. Tranquilli also spoke of himself as fighting against his destiny. 'Life has thrown me down a slope from which I now want to save myself,' he told Bellone. Some months later, however, in the newspaper *Lo Stato Operaio*, he wrote: 'Aside from the struggle for Communism, I can't see any reason for my going on living.' As always, the tension between an active engagement in politics and the desire to retreat from it into a more comfortable private life is unresolved. Perhaps part of the problem was the absence of any friends who might have helped him create that comfortable life. 'He had no talent at all for human relationships,' the woman who married him remarked. In general, Silone had no friends, only admirers and detractors.

It was during the writing, publication and unexpected success of *Fontamara* that Secondino Tranquilli, the Communist activist, effectively became the writer Ignazio Silone. Expelled from the party in 1931, he distanced himself from his Communist friends, including Gabriella Seidenfeld, whom he had been addressing in letters as 'my wife'. In 1933 he moved into the luxurious home of a wealthy Zürich businessman and concentrated on his writing. Years later, on his return to Italy, he changed his legal name to Silone. 'In Switzerland I became a writer,' he remarked, 'but, more importantly, I became a man.' The two were the same and involved a repudiation of his past identity. It's worth noting that this was also the first time he had to support himself without financial assistance from the Communist Party.

Since it could not be published in Italy, *Fontamara* appeared in translation in Germany thanks to the efforts of Aline Valangin, who had become Silone's lover. A musicologist and Jungian psychoanalyst, she was the closest he got to the cultured elite; she was also extremely wealthy and untroubled by traditional sexual mores. His views were more traditional, 'biblical' she would later call them: he made her 'feel like a Madonna' but he would rage against her as a whore when she betrayed him. By the time *Fontamara* was published in 1933 (with money Valangin had helped to raise) the affair was over. From this point on Silone presented himself as a writer of the people, closer to the peasantry than to the literary world, a gloomy, intensely serious loner. Invited to dine with Europe's most prominent intellectuals (Berenson, Koestler), he was capable of sitting silent throughout, or simply opening a newspaper.

While *Fontamara* was a remarkable commercial success, vigorously promoted by those opposed to the spread of Fascism and Nazism (including, during the war, the Allies, who distributed a pirate edition in Italy), Silone's next novel, *Wine and Bread*, is generally considered his finest. Again the setting is a Pescina-like village, Pietrasecca (Drystone), again the book is populated with peasants; but this time the

main character, Pietro Spina, a prominent Communist of Silone's age and background, is more obviously the author's alter ego.

Returning to Italy from an exile that he fears has distanced him from his people, Spina, on the run from the police and suffering from a severe lung complaint, goes to Pietrasecca, where he assumes the identity of a priest; Silone had himself been described as half-revolutionary, half-priest and often conflated the two figures in his books. *Wine and Bread* contains much intelligent discussion about Fascism, some light comedy when the villagers want a reluctant Spina to say Mass and hear confessions, and some half-hearted romance with a young and very pure girl who wants to become a nun but is prevented from doing so by her selfish family, who need her to nurse ageing relatives.

But the central interest of the narrative is Spina's relation to the Communist Party and the direction his life is going to take. Bored in the village, whose inhabitants both he and the author treat with a certain condescension, Spina travels to Rome to re-establish contact with the party. When he gets there, however, he refuses to read a complex brief about developments in Russia and won't submit unquestioningly to party orthodoxy. On his return to Pietrasecca, he meets a young Communist called Luigi Murica, who he had hoped would help him organise anti-Fascist resistance in the area. At last the novel takes on some urgency.

Rather than one alter ego, *Wine and Bread* can be said to offer three versions of Silone. It opens with an elderly priest and teacher celebrating his 75th birthday and lamenting the absence of Spina, his favourite ex-pupil. Despite his saintliness, Don Benedetto has been banned from performing church functions because of his socialist views. Like Spina he is an independent figure who rejects the orthodoxy of the institution that has hijacked his faith. It is Don Benedetto who sends Murica to see Spina at the church in Pietrasecca, with a note announcing: 'Ecce homo . . . a poor man who needs you and perhaps you need him.' Earlier, Murica's girlfriend has remarked how similar Murica and Spina are, born in the same area, resembling each other physically, perhaps thinking the same way and sharing 'the same faults'.

Supposing Spina to be a priest, Murica confesses. Having been arrested as a Communist activist, he says, he has become a police spy. The police gave him enough money to eat properly and even complimented him on the quality of his writing, but fear of discovery, particularly by his girlfriend, led to asthma and panic attacks. Eventually, he abandoned both girlfriend and party and fled to his home village. On hearing Murica's story, Spina shows his sympathy and trust for the younger man by revealing his identity, putting his life in the ex-informer's hands. When Murica leaves the church, word gets round the village that Spina is now willing to hear



confessions and a queue rapidly forms. In the space of a few pages we are given three or four confessions of behaviour so perverse and criminal that Murica's spying pales in comparison; he begins to seem more a victim than a culprit, a young man who just hadn't been ready for the dangers and moral dilemmas involved in political commitment.

As always with Silone, *Wine and Bread* ends with a melodramatic turn. Murica is arrested and dies in prison, no doubt beaten to death for refusing to talk. Presuming the police are at his heels, Spina flees into the mountains at night in heavy snow. Unexpectedly deciding to join him, the would-be nun also sets out, alone, eventually collapsing in the snow as a wolf pack gathers to finish her off. That's where the book ends. The older, wiser Silone alter ego has absolved the younger, who redeems himself through self-sacrifice. The focus is on the predicament of the Silone-like figures, and not on the arrests, beatings and damage to the cause that Murica's spying caused. Both Spina and Murica are more morally complex and interesting than any of the peasants they are fighting for.

Greatly admired in its foreign language editions by the likes of Camus, Bertrand Russell and Graham Greene, Silone's work did not have the same success with Italian critics when published there after the war. Pugliese chides them for short-sightedness, the consequence, he implies, of Communist or Fascist affiliations. Those who did appreciate Silone focused on his attention to peasant life and compared him to Giovanni Verga; but in Verga's finely plotted Sicilian novellas, the peasants are the main actors, not merely a backdrop for the dilemmas of political activists.

Where Silone does fit into an Italian tradition is in his attempt to dramatise the dilemma of the idealist who loses his belief in political progress. From Foscolo's *Last Letters of Jacopo Ortis*, through the writings of Giacomo Leopardi to Pavese's *The House on the Hill*, the tormented idealist who withdraws from action because Italy's political and social situation is beyond remedy, or who commits himself to action from a sense of duty but without believing that anything can be achieved, is a recurring figure. Interestingly, characters who renounce an active role usually find themselves without a sex life either, as if withdrawal led to sterility. Brancati's *Il bell'Antonio*, the tale of a breathtakingly handsome man too sensitive to make a career with the Fascist regime, offers a wonderfully ironic reshuffling of this peculiarly Italian pack: Antonio marries a beautiful woman but then turns out to be impotent, loses his wife and finds himself ostracised by one and all, the Church and the Fascist Party in particular, the two institutions he loathes.

The same entanglement of the sexual and political is evident in *Wine and Bread*. Before he assumes the identity of a priest, Spina is attracted to a girl he meets near

the barn where he is hiding; he invites her to spend the evening with him, but just when it seems certain they will make love, a discussion of his position as an outlaw leads them to spend a chaste evening talking. The following morning Spina is forced to leave, sees no more of the girl, and does not miss her. Withdrawn from the world in his priest's habit, he enjoys a sexless attraction to the would-be nun, Cristina; soon after she realises that he is not a priest and leaves her family for him, she is dead in the snow. Sexual fulfilment seems as improbable as effective political action.

Before meeting Murica, Spina had come across Murica's girlfriend, who told him that, delaying the police one night while Murica hid on the roof, she had been raped. Rather than showing sympathy, Murica wrote her off as a whore. It is as if his guilt as an informer had been transformed into her sexual guilt. Silone left Gabriella Seidenfeld when he left the Communist Party. Unable to accept the relaxed sexual behaviour of the sophisticated Aline Valangin, he eventually married an Irish journalist 17 years his junior. Darina Laracy met Silone in 1941 and stayed with him until his death in 1978. Pugliese reports that Laracy, who died in 2003, told him that the two never had sex. Silone was extremely critical of any manifestation of promiscuity or eroticism. His emphasis on moral behaviour demanded both political and sexual puritanism, perhaps precisely because he had failed on both counts.

If there is something shabby about the absolution Silone pronounces on his fictional self in *Wine and Bread*, one can nevertheless sympathise with his ex-informer's dilemma. What would have been the point of confessing, as the antagonism between Fascism and Communism intensified through the 1930s? In wartime, traitors are dispatched without pity. 'What I want is to *live morally*,' Silone had written to Bellone in 1930. 'The influence and popularity I've acquired in many emigration centres lead me to imagine my future work (as soon as I've got my health back) in the form of a completely independent literary and editorial activity.' His writing was to be a long act of redemption; this resolution was no doubt reinforced in 1932, when Romolo died in prison, a death for which he insisted he was responsible.

Between 1931 and 1940 Silone withdrew from active politics. He published two non-fiction works on Fascism and Italian political history and various articles opposing all forms of totalitarianism. In 1939 he began a third novel, *The Seed beneath the Snow*, which again focuses on Pietro Spina, who is again ill and on the run. This time he is nursed back to health by his grandmother before giving himself up to the Fascist authorities in a by now trademark act of self-sacrifice.

In 1941, Silone's desire for engagement again got the better of him and he accepted an offer to become head of the Italian Socialist Party in exile, insisting, however, that his position remain secret. In 1942 he also began to work with the American secret

services, advising them on how to prevent Italy from falling into Communist hands on the collapse of Fascism. The last thing Silone needed was for his old comrades to take power. In 1944, he and Darina were flown to a liberated Naples on an American military plane.

After the war, Silone oscillated between bursts of energy and fits of lassitude, intense political involvement and withdrawal into writing, which was itself always politically committed. In 1949, in the much acclaimed *Emergency Exit*, he gave an account of his break with the Communist Party, presenting it as the result of his having understood the totalitarian nature of Stalinism. In 1950 he became, together with Koestler, a leading member of the Congress for Cultural Freedom, the American-funded initiative that brought together anti-Communist intellectuals. In 1956, as a spin-off from the congress, he launched the political periodical *Tempo Presente*. In its pages he constantly reminded European intellectuals of the repressive nature of Stalinism and ruthlessly exposed the bad faith of those (Sartre, for example) who failed to denounce Soviet imperialism. This could, of course, be seen as an exercise in self-justification for the damage his spying had caused the party; in that 1930 letter to Bellone he had remarked that ‘the way my thinking is developing has been helped along by the cretinous and criminal direction the Communist Party has been taking.’

What gives Silone’s analysis lasting interest, however, is his perception that every association and organisation, however benign, tends to limit freedom of thought and expression, totalitarianism being only an extreme case of the censorship and repression more subtly at work in Western democracies. To Silone’s mind, the danger for the idealist, whether religious or political, comes when he starts compromising his beliefs through a desire to be more effective in the world. The unspoken subtext is that a clear conscience is possible only if one withdraws entirely.

In 1967 it emerged that American foundations funding the Congress for Cultural Freedom and *Tempo Presente* were CIA fronts. Silone denied prior knowledge of this and closed the magazine. It is hard to believe that he did not have his suspicions. That the Americans appreciated his particular brand of anti-Communism had long been evident; precisely because he was critical of American foreign policy, the CIA felt that Silone would convince the circles they were trying to influence.

Still seeking the approval of a literary world he affected to despise, still the provincial outsider anxious of being mocked by the metropolitan establishment, Silone published his last major literary work in 1968, a play entitled *The Adventure of a Poor Christian*. It tells the story of Pope Celestino, a 13th-century Abruzzo hermit who at the age of 79 was elected to the papacy when the cardinals in Rome were unable to resolve their differences. Celestino soon realised he was the instrument of

a corrupt institution and renounced the papal crown. Arrested for heresy, he died in prison. The story lends itself well to Silone's vision: political and religious idealism are superimposed in the rebel who cannot work within the system; everyone else is evil or ingenuous.

'There is a secret in my life,' Silone remarked in a late interview. 'It's written between the lines of my novels.' Siding with Darina Laracy, Pugliese criticises Biocca for using elements in the novels to support evidence that Silone was a police informer. But this remark and the generally autobiographical nature of his novels invite this kind of attention. It is as if the writer had understood that once the Cold War was over and his political message had lost its urgency, the most interesting aspect of his work would be the way it dealt with commitment and betrayal. Certainly it is difficult, rereading *Fontamara* or *Wine and Bread*, to understand why so many of his contemporaries thought Silone a great novelist. His fiction does not bear comparison with Calvino's, Moravia's or Morante's, let alone the work of Pirandello, Verga or Svevo. The prose is often wooden and the plots clumsy. Yet, if one approaches him with a knowledge of the strangely double life he led – 'his inclination to intrigue . . . seems to be a disease,' one acquaintance wrote – it is fascinating to reflect on the spirit in which he wrote these novels and to savour, in the distance between real-life betrayal and the moral earnestness of his narrative, the disorientation of one's normal critical faculties.

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**Tim Parks's** novels include *Tongues of Flame*, *Loving Roger*, *Europa*, *Rapids* and, most recently, *Dreams of Rivers and Seas*.