

# *Il Caso Silone*

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Michael P. McDonald

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**N**EMO PROPHETA *acceptus est in patria sua*. The novels of Ignazio Silone are full of biblical symbols and citations, the latter often appearing in the lapidary cadences of the Vulgate. Reading through the Pléiade-like, two-volume set of Silone's *opera omnia*, which Mondadori released as the centenary of the writer's birth approached last year, one is struck by the extent to which Silone's creative vision sprang from and remained rooted in Scripture.

Of his near contemporaries, perhaps only André Gide matches Silone in the obsessive way he conscripts biblical sayings and stories to serve his fictional needs. But whereas the Bible was a psychological sounding board to Gide, a means to plumb the paradoxes and perversities of human nature, to Silone it was less a means to promote greater individual self-awareness than a hallowed reminder of the perennial want of human solidarity.

For most of his life, Gide was an apostle of aesthetic detachment and hedonistic self-absorption; Silone, in contrast, was one of the most *engagé* of 20<sup>th</sup>-century writers. And yet it is Gide whose recourse

to the Bible sounds more ponderous and trite. That Silone avoids this fate is due, in no small part, to his abiding sense of irony. In his novels, Scripture is more likely to slither approvingly from the mouths of the Pharisees of his day—greedy landowners, spineless prelates, corrupt bureaucrats—than from heroes or truth-seekers. Silone is loath to preach. Curiously, of the many biblical sayings scattered throughout his work, one line—from Luke 24:4, quoted above: “No prophet is accepted in his own country”—is conspicuously missing. More than strange, the absence of this citation is fittingly ironic inasmuch as no other verse is more apposite in defining Silone's own reception as a writer in his native land.

If it were possible to poll Italian intellectuals of the last half century, the reactions one would most likely encounter at the sound of Silone's name are hatred, incomprehension and studied indifference. Silone's early involvement with and apostasy from various revolutionary movements forever branded him as much a political as a literary figure. Inevitably, this meant that anyone with the intellectual wherewithal to shape public opinion—journalists, academics, businessmen, party hacks and parish priests—held strong opinions about him. And excepting a cluster of liberals and democratic socialists—a discrete minority in Italy—it was not favorable. The question is why?

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The hatred Silone provokes in extremist political circles is easiest to explain. With the publication of his first novel, *Fontamara* (published first in German in 1933 and, later that same year, in a truncated Italian version), Silone did more to discredit fascism than any other Italian—and perhaps even European—writer of his day. The book, a searing denunciation of institutional injustice set in his native region of the Abruzzi during the early years of Mussolini's dictatorship, rapidly achieved international celebrity and ended up being translated into 27 languages. The same, *mutatis mutandis*, may be said of Silone's unmasking of communism after the publication of his 1949 essay, *Uscita di sicurezza* ("Emergency Exit"), later included as part of *The God that Failed*, Richard Crossman's famous postwar collection of confessional testimonies by disillusioned ex-communists.

Though they meet under different party labels these days, there remain significant numbers of unreconstructed fascists and communists in Italy whose gray-ing ranks have been bolstered by the addition of younger Italians with no memory of the war and, as a twenty-something bartender made clear to me on my last visit to Rome, no great love of parliamentary democracy. This is particularly true of the neo-fascists who, having relegitimized their political presence under the polished leadership of Gianfranco Fini, gained even greater public acceptance this spring thanks to the impressive electoral success of Fini's free-market front-man and newly installed Italian president, media tycoon Silvio Berlusconi. Neither the fascists nor the communists have forgotten how Silone, an active voice in Italian politics until shortly before his death in 1978, discredited their respective causes. And the vendettas they bear keep the hatred alive.

The incomprehension that other, less ideologically inclined Italians feel toward

Silone is also readily diagnosed. Silone himself provided the best explanation when, in a 1961 interview published in the Parisian magazine *L'Express*, he defined himself, memorably, as "a socialist without a party, a Christian without a church." Postwar Italian politics was (and remains) a *partitocrazia*—and a man without an identifiable political affiliation was a man destined to have his motives questioned.

Silone, in short, was a political loner, a trait which suited his dour temperament. Worse, he never wavered in reminding ordinary Italians of the heavy responsibility they themselves bore first, for having created fascism, and later, for having failed to construct an honest form of democratic socialism after the war. Hence the prevalent attitude of studied indifference to his writings and his life in Italian society at large. Silone could not help but be aware of and affected by the hostility and suspicion he provoked in his fellow countrymen. "When, as occasionally happened, I caught a glimpse of him on the streets of Rome", the novelist Antonio Debenedetti told me recently, "the sense of solitude that clung to him was overpowering." Given the events of his life, it could not have been otherwise.

**S**ILONE WAS born in the town of Pescina dei Marsi, in the hardscrabble Marsica region of the Abruzzi, near Rome, on May 1, 1900. His father, who died when he was eight, owned a small farm in the region, and the boy's life, growing up poor in this provincial backwater, was simple and austere. When Silone was fifteen, a severe earthquake destroyed his native town and left over 30,000 people dead, including his mother. Homeless and virtually destitute, Silone and the sole remaining member of his immediate family, a younger brother named Romolo, were forced to rely upon private charities to survive. Moving about

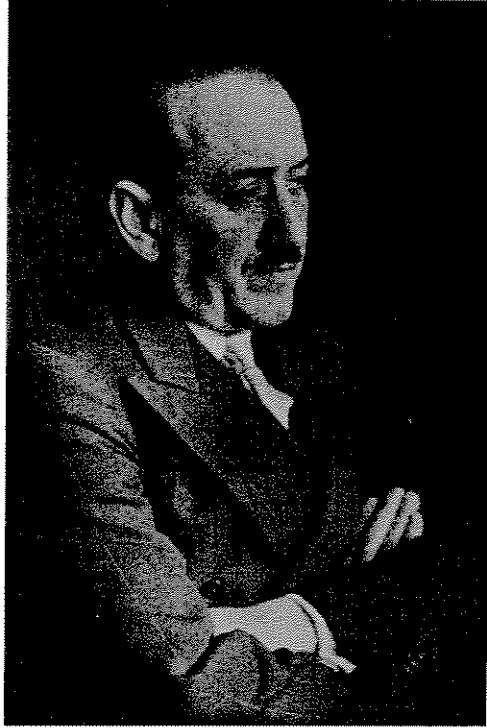
from one religious institution to another, Silone eventually made his way to Rome, where the political agitation that erupted in Italy near the conclusion of the First World War soon captured his imagination. In 1917 he dropped out of school and gravitated to the Socialist Youth Movement. Then, in 1921, having grown increasingly dissatisfied with the Socialist Party's reformist tendencies, the young revolutionary, together with leftist intellectuals Antonio Gramsci and Palmiro Togliatti, broke with it to found the Italian Communist Party. Silone's native intelligence and his talent with a pen quickly made him indispensable to the nascent party's organization,

diffusion and propaganda. As a leading communist intellectual, Silone attended various international conferences on its behalf and often traveled abroad on clandestine missions. When the fascists, who had achieved power in 1922, succeeded in banning opposition parties in 1926, Silone risked imprisonment to stay in Italy to ensure that *l'Unità* and other communist papers continued to circulate clandestinely.

Beginning in 1927, however, Silone began to doubt the virtues and values embodied by the Communist Party. In May of that year, Silone and Togliatti had traveled to Moscow to attend a meeting of the International Communist Executive at the Kremlin, where Stalin sought to have Trotsky condemned on

the basis of secret evidence. As recounted in *Uscita di sicurezza*, Silone refused to serve as an accomplice in Stalin's plan on the basis of blind faith in the higher historical purpose he purportedly served. In succeeding years, Silone's doubts about and refusal to embrace "Communist morality" persisted to the point where the party formally expelled him in 1931.

At that time he was living in Zurich, where he would remain until he returned to Rome in the fall of 1944. During these years of exile, Silone launched a new career as a writer and fastened on the pseudonym of Ignazio Silone to replace his baptismal name of Secondo Tranquilli. It was during this period of exile that he wrote the



Silone in 1946

Abruzzi trilogy of novels *Fontamara*, *Bread and Wine* and *The Seed Beneath the Snow*; an important essay on the origins of fascism, *Der Faschismus*; and a political dialogue entitled *The School for Dictators*. The publication of these books catapulted Silone to the forefront of *engagé* political literature, alongside such prominent figures as George Orwell and Arthur Koestler, who were leading the fight against totalitarianism of both the Left and the Right. They brought Silone an international readership along with fame and admiration—except, that is, in Italy, where his life as an exile and an outlaw inescapably tainted his reception.

More than that, fascism had successfully interposed a barrier of censorship between the Italian reading public and the

rest of the world's appreciation of Silone's originality as a writer. To earn a living, Silone had been forced to publish his first three novels in German. When an integral Italian version of the first of these, *Fontamara*, was finally released in Italy after the war in 1947, the book was nearly two decades old, literary neo-realism was in its heyday, and Silone's mannered use of realist techniques—quite avant-garde in 1930—by then seemed passé. Politically-motivated reviews from both the Right (including the Church) and the Left further ensured that the book would be ill-received. Silone was castigated particularly harshly by the clique of left-wing intellectuals led by men such as Elio Vittorini, whose influence after the Second World War became predominant in Italian culture. The noted critic Emilio Cecchi, commenting on “the disproportion between [Silone's] notoriety and success abroad and the coldness of [his] reception . . . in Italy”, dubbed it, for lack of a better term, an odd situation, a true “*caso Silone*.” Unfortunately for the Abruzzese writer, it was to be the first of many.

In addition to the impediments imposed by the political ramifications of his work, Silone's reception as a novelist in Italy was also hampered by his rough hewn, unadorned literary style. Silone's gifts as a writer were genuine, but he had grown up speaking an Abruzzi dialect. He wielded “proper” Italian well; and yet it would forever remain, as he himself pointed out in a celebrated preface he wrote to *Fontamara*, “a foreign language.” “The Italian language cripples and deforms our thought”, he wrote of both his Abruzzi characters and himself, “and cannot help giving them the flavor of a translation.” It was an honest admission and yet one destined to place his work at odds with a generation of literary critics schooled to venerate the classic literary elegance of a Manzoni or a Leopardi. To them

Silone's writing would always remain patently *infra dignitatem*.

It took Silone 16 years to write his first novel on Italian soil, *A Handful of Blackberries* (1960). In the meantime, he continued to bear witness to what he had experienced by writing countless political and social essays. In 1955, he started the anti-communist socialist magazine *Tempo presente* together with Nicola Chiaromonte, which antagonized potentates of all parties and beliefs in Silone's by-then well-known independent style. In 1965 Mondadori reissued *Fontamara*. That same year Silone came out with his autobiography, *Emergency Exit*, which took its title from the 1949 essay on his disillusionment with communism, which he included in it. Literary and political circles warmed to both books, and for a time it seemed as though Silone was winning over his domestic critics. Indeed, in a 1967 *Atlantic* article, Iris Origo asserted that he was finally receiving his due as a writer and a thinker as pre-war passions over fascism ebbed. For Italian critics “to admire Silone”, she stated, “has now become not only the fashion, but almost a certificate of integrity.”

But almost no sooner had these words been penned than a new *caso Silone* erupted as stories appeared in the press that same year asserting that the CIA had subsidized *Tempo presente* through Silone's connection with the Congress for Cultural Freedom. Silone's longstanding enemies on the Left had a field day with the revelation, vilifying him as a CIA spy. Silone claimed, plausibly enough to many, to have been unaware of the CIA's links to the Congress. But his reputation suffered another blow from which it had only partially recovered when Silone died in a clinic in Geneva on August 22, 1978.

In the two decades following Silone's death a confluence of factors slowly began to restore both his reputation and interest in his work. In part this was due to the

efforts of the *Federazione Ignazio Silone* to promote his work in Italy and abroad. In part, it was also due to the influence of a number of celebrated literary critics—including Geno Pampaloni and Luce d'Eramo, both, sadly, deceased this year—who devoted themselves to advancing Silone's work. The collapse of the Soviet Empire in 1989, too, softened intellectual resistance on the Left to Silone's implacable anti-communism. When both the center-left and the center-right of Italian politics imploded in the early 1990s in the wake of the *Mani pulite* scandals, Silone's lifelong appeal for the creation of a new brand of politics sustained by morality and integrity seemed more timely than ever. When in 1998 and 1999 the Mondadori publishing house decided to induct Silone's *oeuvre* into its canon of great Italian writers by publishing its deluxe, leather-bound, two-volume set of Silone's writing, one could have been forgiven for believing that his hour was at last at hand.

**B**UT WHAT should have been a final, if belated, recognition of Silone's seminal contributions to Italian literature and politics was not to be. Two somewhat obscure historians—Dario Biocca and Mauro Canali—came along to accomplish something the fascists and communists combined had been unable to achieve: level a near death-blow to Silone's reputation through the publication, in March 2000, of a slim volume prosaically entitled *L'informatore: Silone, i comunisti, e la polizia*.<sup>1</sup>

As an initial matter, it is worth noting that Biocca and Canali's book is less a coherent, unified work, than it is a clumsy stitching together of two essays on Silone that the authors had published separately a few years earlier in the revisionist historical journal of the Right, *Nuova storia contemporanea*. A revised version of Canali's 1999 essay appears first in the book and has as its purpose to prove that Silone

spied for the fascists and, as a result, inflicted great damage on the Communist Party in the 1920s. In Part II of the book, Biocca takes over and similarly relies upon his previously published article to retrace in greater detail Silone's alleged movements and reports to the fascist police during this same decade. A new twelve-page introduction precedes these two sections in which the authors jointly state their conclusions in measured, scholarly tones. The "hard" evidence of Silone's collaboration is contained in two separate appendices at the back of the book: fifty pages or so of transcriptions of archival documents culled from the Central State Archive in Rome allegedly sent by Silone. In a brief preface to this entire mélange, Piero Melograni, one of the deans of Italian revisionist history, admirably describes Biocca and Canali as "two daring companions" and praises them for their courage, first in accusing Silone of being a collaborator, and later in sticking to their guns when, as Melograni would have it (revising even the most recent history), "almost no one" in Italy believed them following the publication of their initial magazine revelations in 1998 and 1999.

The authors' indictment of Silone may be summarized as follows: Silone was "a high-profile informer" from the fall of 1919 to the start of 1930. Silone's "handler" was a Roman police inspector by the name of Guido Bellone. The cover name that Silone eventually used to pass information to Bellone was "Silvestri." Throughout this period, Silone belonged to a number of different organizations including, most importantly, the Italian Communist Party and the Comintern.

According to the authors, Silone was "singularly effective" in facilitating repressive measures against Communist

<sup>1</sup>Dario Biocca and Mauro Canali, *L'Informatore: Silone, i comunisti, e la polizia* (Milan: Luni Editrice, 2000).

Party cadres operating clandestinely in Italy. The archival material proves, so they assert, that the contacts between Silone and Bellone were neither extemporaneous nor superficial. Rather, they maintain that there was an ongoing relationship lasting for well over a decade. Indeed, Biocca and Canali assert that Silone was the most intelligent informer that the fascists had at their disposal and that Silone's espionage reports assisted Mussolini's dictatorship immensely in its evisceration of the clandestine Communist movement.

Such, at any rate, are the accusations. Their indictment is serious and their motives notably subtle. At first blush, it may seem strange that right-wing revisionists would seemingly take Silone to task for helping the fascist police when one might think they would instead praise him for it. But this is to misunderstand the authors' method and objective. Biocca and Canali are careful never to express the slightest moral opprobrium at Silone's alleged betrayals. Rather, they strive to maintain a neutral tone of disinterested scholarship. Far from criticizing Silone for his asserted collaboration with the fascists, Biocca and Canali assert that their revelations are intended to cut through the fog of "hagiographical" research that has surrounded Silone and demonstrate how his collaboration was possible in the first place. The unspoken yet inescapable results of the authors' method of proceeding and their findings of "fact" are two: first, Silone is made out to be a badly compromised figure whose heretofore penetrating criticisms of fascism must inevitably be devalued; second, the moral stigma of fascist collaboration (either during the heyday of Mussolini or now) is diminished. After all, if someone of Silone's stature was drawn, for whatever reasons, to support it, who can possibly blame the average Italian citizen who did (or does) likewise?

Accusation is one thing, but substantiation is another matter altogether, and here it consists of a series of questionable suppositions precariously strung together by a morass of unreliable circumstantial evidence. Biocca and Canali assert that the espionage reports in the appendices to their book are the product of a single, highly placed informer inside the upper echelons of the Italian Communist Party who communicated with Mussolini's police throughout the 1920s. They further assert that there is an "absolute coincidence" between the date and the place of each one of these espionage reports and Silone's known whereabouts at the time. Finally, they assert that of all the informers in the pay of the fascist police only Silone had access to the detailed and important information revealed in these reports: *ergo*, Silone was the informer.

Significantly, at no point in their historical reconstruction do Biocca and Canali offer an explanation as to why Silone became an informer. He certainly was not motivated by political sympathy toward Mussolini's noxious regime. Nor do the reports they seek to attribute to Silone indicate that he ever received money in exchange for his services. Further, the authors can cite no eyewitness accounts that the accused ever engaged in espionage. To any reasonable observer, then, the case against Silone seems as thin as the FBI's botched case against Wen Ho Lee: mere circumstantial evidence in the form of access to important data that may have been compromised. But then there is Biocca and Canali's trump card: an extraordinary letter dated April 13, 1930, evidently in Silone's own hand, in which he writes to Bellone to say that he is abandoning militant politics and starting a new life to "repair the evil" he has caused.

The 1930 letter is a dramatic find, most scholars acknowledge its authority, and Biocca and Canali deserve credit for

having located it. But more than a noteworthy discovery, it is the glitter that seemingly establishes the rest of the documentary nuggets assembled in *L'informatore* as unalloyed gold. It is the first letter allegedly from Silone that one reads in the authors' jointly-written introduction. It is the sole letter that the authors reproduce photographically rather than in transcription. Moreover, it is the one letter in the collection of spy reports assembled by Biocca and Canali in which the reader can actually hear something of Silone's mature voice—which perhaps explains why the authors quote it twice in its entirety. Why such lavish attention to establish the authenticity of this single letter? Simple: without it, Biocca and Canali surely realized how insubstantial the other documents they claim are from Silone would seem to a reasonable reader.

They need not have worried. In the scoop-driven age of journalism, the facts are never allowed to stand in the way of a good story. In olden days, as Oscar Wilde remarked, men had the rack; today we have the press. And the press, first in Italy, later in the United States, credulously retailed Biocca and Canali's story to the public as fact, doing its best to see to it that Silone's reputation as a man of uncommon integrity and moral courage would be broken once and for all.

When *L'informatore* first appeared in Italian bookstores last year, Biocca and Canali's allegations had been circulating in the Italian press for months due to the authors' earlier magazine articles and had, of course, been challenged by Silone's defenders. Nevertheless, Biocca and Canali's clever decision to reproduce transcriptions of their archival discoveries in the appendices to their book provided the Italian press with the opportunity to pronounce a "final" verdict on this latest and most disturbing *caso Silone*. A sampling of headlines says it all: from *La Repubblica* (March 23, 2000), "Silone the spy, crushed

by the proof"; from the *Corriere della sera* (March 25, 2000), "Silone: the espionage reports of a 'humble Christian'"; from *Il Manifesto* (May 12, 2000), "Bitter reports" ("*Fonti amare*", a derisive pun on the title of Silone's first novel). In the best tradition of tabloid journalism, most of the Italian press accepted at face value the attribution of these espionage reports to Silone, never thinking to question the authenticity of the documents in the appendices. The guiding assumption appeared to be that if the 1930 letter in Silone's hand was genuine, as seemed to be the case, then the other documents released by Biocca and Canali had to be as well—which meant that Silone had been a long-term informer. Such debate as the Italian press allowed grew out of establishing a motive that would explain Silone's decade-long paper trail of betrayal.

One theory held that Bellone had something to do with the earthquake relief to the Abruzzi in 1915 and, having befriended Silone at that time, was later able to exact repayment in the form of espionage reports. Another was that the first meeting between the two took place in Rome during the militant phase of Silone's adolescence in the immediate aftermath of the First World War. According to this theory, Bellone had probably been in charge of interrogating Silone after one or another of his arrests for political protesting and, in the course of playing the "good cop", had, over time, induced him to collaborate. Still another hypothesis was that Silone wrote to Bellone throughout the 1920s with the knowledge and approval of Togliatti and other high-ranking Communist officials—in other words, had been allowed to maintain these contacts with the fascist police and to provide them with harmless information to see if he could learn what *they* knew about Communist Party activities.

To be sure, there were those who

adamantly rejected the claim that Silone had anything to do with the fascists. The late Indro Montanelli, a highly respected editorial writer for the *Corriere della sera*, said that he "wouldn't believe the truth of these documents if Silone rose from the tomb and confirmed them." But hyperbolic statements such as these tended to make Silone's defenders look too much like true believers in the face of overwhelming documentary proof and, in the end, may have solidified the media-generated impression that Biocca and Canali had the goods on Silone.

The only immediate negative reaction to Biocca and Canali's book came from the historian Mimmo Franzinelli in the June 2000 issue of the literary periodical *L'Indice*.<sup>2</sup> Franzinelli is the author of a book on Mussolini's police entitled *I tentacoli dell'Ovra* ("The OVRA's Tentacles") which is, by all accounts, the most exhaustive historical examination of who spied for the fascists in the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>3</sup>

In his review, Franzinelli criticized Biocca and Canali for failing to define what they mean by "collaboration." He noted that there is no evidence that Silone reported to the OVRA, as a highly placed, long-term political collaborator would inevitably have done. Thus Biocca and Canali's claim of "collaboration" rests on the fact that Silone wrote one or perhaps more letters to a specific person, Guido Bellone, a relatively low-level police functionary. Franzinelli further observed how the authors cleverly isolated and decontextualized the full extent of the information that Silone allegedly provided, with the inevitable result that "Silvestri", as the informer would later identify himself, is made to stand out in sinister solitude in the guise of the most formidable spy hidden in the Italian Communist Party. In fact, however, the police had access to much the same information as Biocca and Canali unearthed from any number of other sources. Franzinelli also faulted the

authors for lack of philological rigor. He noted how their transcriptions of the police reports are full of inexplicable gaps, seem to have been hastily made, and are in some instances simply erroneous. Most important, Franzinelli noted how Biocca's contribution to the book, which touches upon aspects of Silone's life in the 1920s, undervalues the repercussions on Silone of the arrest of his younger brother, Romolo, on April 13, 1928. And yet, these reservations notwithstanding, Franzinelli accepted the assertion that all of the material adduced by Biocca and Canali was ultimately traceable to Silone.

Yet nagging questions remained. If Silone had been, as Biocca and Canali assert, an important spy, then why did he report to an ordinary police official? Why couldn't Silone have used his influence as an important collaborator to save the life of his brother, who died in prison in 1932? Conversely, why didn't the OVRA ever seek to blackmail Silone to force him to reveal much more about the Communist Party's illegal activities? And, after Silone had stopped informing, why didn't the OVRA later react to novels such as *Fontamara*, which utterly discredited Mussolini and fascism, by revealing Silone as a spy and enabling the Italian Communist Party to do the dirty work of liquidating him for them?

Franzinelli raised, but had no answers, to these questions. But at least he asked them. When news of Biocca and Canali's book reached the United States and England, the press hardly bothered to raise a skeptical eyebrow. For example, on May 15, 2000, *The New Yorker* published an article by Alexander Stille, entitled "The Spy Who Failed", that, with minor qualifications, accepted the allegations

<sup>2</sup>Franzinelli, "Silvestri, l'infame", *L'Indice* (June 2000), pp. 10-1.

<sup>3</sup>OVRA stands for *Opera di vigilanza e repressione dell'antifascismo*.



that Silone had spied as true. Similar stories reaching similar conclusions later appeared in *The Nation* and the *Times Literary Supplement*.

Given the dismal state of literary criticism, perhaps it was inevitable that the allegations of fascist collaboration would awaken interest in Silone as a “transgressive” writer, which in fact occurred. A case in point was an article in the February 2001 issue of *La Rivista dei Libri* (the Italian version of the *New York Review of Books*) by Giulio Ferroni. Ferroni reread Silone’s novels looking for proof in them of his collaboration and, as other critics would do, fastened on an episode in *Bread and Wine* in which a character by the name of Luigi Murica confessed to having been an informer.

Silone surely knew about ex-comrades who provided information to the fascists. His experience was not so limited that he could only write about what he himself knew or did. Silone’s novels were not works of thinly-veiled autobiography but rather imaginative transformations of his experiences. But for critics such as Ferroni, Silone suddenly seemed much more interesting now that the heretofore bright boundaries between the “good” and “evil” in his books had been rendered clouded and equivocal by the “proof” of his own collaboration. As Stille counterintuitively noted in his *New Yorker* piece, the allegations of double-dealing added a new dimension to Silone’s work. “The recent revelations don’t diminish the power of Silone’s writing”, Stille wrote. “If anything, his heroic image may have obscured the darkness and complexity of his books.” In other words, now that Silone had been exposed as a moral *poseur* (think of Gide) and could no longer be considered a “simplistic” political icon, he had suddenly become “sexy” to literary critics, who quickly turned him into a kind of thumbnail cliché of equivocalness. And, as Brian Hall has observed, “literary clichés do not

die easily, especially when informed by superficialities.”<sup>4</sup>

FROM THE moment in the late 1990s when they first charged Silone with informing, Biocca and Canali received an enormous amount of favorable press coverage. Far from being adventurous souls who, as Melagrano would have it, courageously took on the Establishment, the Italian media has embraced their accusations with open arms, while the Anglo-American press has made slight pretense of reporting questions as to the accuracy of the story. To those few voices raised in opposition, Biocca and Canali have pointed to the morass of documents appended to their book and dared them to refute what they claim is irrefutable.

Fortunately, for the sake of historical truth, a socialist historian named Giuseppe Tamburrano accepted the challenge. Together with two other researchers, Gionna Granati and Alfonso Isinelli, he set out in the fall of 2000 to put Biocca and Canali’s book under a microscope. He published his conclusions in Italy on April 20 in the form of a 161-page work entitled *Processo a Silone: la disavventura di un povero cristiano* (“Silone on Trial: The Misadventure of a Humble Christian”).<sup>5</sup> Thanks to Tamburrano and his colleagues we are able to see that *L’informatore* is a travesty of scholarship.

Tamburrano’s pugnacious, lawyer-like defense of Silone is based almost exclusively on the police records themselves. As an initial matter he notes that the fascists used every means at their disposal to dig up dirt on their adversaries and were

<sup>4</sup>Hall, *The Impossible Country: A Journey Through the Last Days of Yugoslavia* (New York: Penguin, 1994), p. 68.

<sup>5</sup>Tamburrano, Granati and Isinelli, *Processo a Silone: la disavventura di un povero cristiano* (Taranto: Piero Lacaita Editore, 2001).

only too willing to accept as true whatever malicious slander was spread around against an enemy of the State. Accordingly, the material stored in the Central State Archive is full of unreliable, incomplete and inconsistent material. In the case of police reports on Silone himself, Tamburrano found enormous errors. For example, Silone is identified as a "card-carrying communist" throughout 1935-39 even though the party expelled him in 1931. Some documents in Silone's file say there was no available photograph or handwriting for him; others note the existence of both: the former invaluable for apprehending Silone, who was perpetually on the run from the police; the latter material being quite useful for forging incriminating documents in Silone's "own" hand. This points up the fact that the information contained in the police files has been edited by an endless number of nameless people, and that multiple errors have crept into the record without being the least bit traceable.

With that in mind, Tamburrano and his staff sought to ascertain whether there were espionage reports that could objectively be attributed to Silone; if so, how many; and whether those that could fairly be attributed to him contained any harmful information. Biocca and Canali assert that Silone collaborated with the police as early as 1919 and definitely from 1923 to 1930. For the period between January 1923 and April 1928, they produce about fifty documents that they say demonstrate the existence of a spy relationship between Silone and the political police. But in addition to examining the documents unearthed by Biocca and Canali, Tamburrano and his colleagues also looked through the archives held by the Minister of the Interior and the Central State Archive. They then examined contemporary press reports and memoirs to determine the true importance, if any, of the informa-

tion in the reports allegedly attributable to Silone.

As an initial matter, Tamburrano demonstrates that the documents Biocca and Canali attribute to Silone invariably refer only to information that the police received from a "source." The name, pseudonym and code number of the "source" are never revealed. In other words, there is no way to identify who provided the documents to the police. More precisely, the sequence of documents presented by Biocca and Canali runs from January 12, 1923 to March 3, 1930. The name of "Silvestri", as the informer, appears only beginning in April 30, 1928 (and as "Silvestro", not "Silvestri"). In short, the pseudonym "Silvestri" is only attributable to Silone after the arrest of his brother. *None* of the informational reports attributed by Biocca and Canali to Silone from January 12, 1923 to April 1928 contain any reference to "Silvestri" as their author. Biocca and Canali provide no explanation for this. They do not even pose the question. And because we are dealing with anonymous reports, written by different people, which contain, Tamburrano shows, only the most generic and innocuous information, there is no reason, scholarly or otherwise, to attribute them to Silone.

Second, Tamburrano retained a handwriting expert who routinely provides expert testimony in civil and criminal proceedings in Italy to express an opinion as to whether the one other handwritten document unearthed by the authors, in addition to the April 13, 1930 letter, was indeed penned by Silone. Her conclusion? Absolutely not. At this point, one is left with one most likely genuine letter from Silone (that of April 13, 1930), one false attribution, and a mass of redacted, anonymously re-written reports.

To be sure, with respect to the anonymous, re-written reports, Biocca and Canali say they can prove an absolute

coincidence in terms of the information provided to the police and what Silone would have known at the time, as well as an absolute coincidence between where the espionage reports came from and Silone's whereabouts. Tamburrano examines each of these contentions and dismantles them one by one.

For example, during the period from January 12, 1923 to February 22, 1930, a period of six years and three months, the reports Biocca and Canali attribute to Silone establish that the informer in question attended a mere six meetings. But Silone was an active Communist leader during this period and would have participated in dozens, perhaps hundreds, of meetings. These years were full of epochal events for the Italian Communist Party in which Silone directly participated. Yet there is no trace of these events in the police files. Are we to conclude, Tamburrano rightly asks, that Silone was so inept as an informer that he only sent six reports? It doesn't make sense.

As for Biocca and Canali's assertions that the police received reports from wherever Silone happened to be and that when he departed, the reports from that place ceased, this too, according to Tamburrano, is pure invention.

Consider that, in order to know for certain whether such a coincidence of place held true one would need to know exactly in each instance when Silone arrived and left a country and how long it took a letter to arrive in Rome from Silone's location. But no one knows for sure—certainly not Biocca and Canali—the strict answer to either question. There is not always hard evidence as to where Silone was at any given time, and the places from which the police received reports (e.g., Berlin) were full of hundreds of other spies from whom the police could have received these reports.

Biocca and Canali claim that it took

anywhere from three to five days for a letter sent by Silone when he was abroad to arrive in Rome and to be dated and transmitted to the Minister of Public Safety. But their own documents belie the assertion. For example, one document is transmittal-dated October 7, but refers to demonstrations that were about to be held in France on September 28.

Moreover, it is impossible to tell where many of the police reports relied upon by Biocca and Canali originated. The archival reports may indicate that a report had been sent from France, and Silone may indeed have been in Marseilles at the time. But the report in question may have come from Paris or Lyon. One need bear in mind that the documents do not always contain what the source sent to the Roman police headquarters. Quite often they are composites from different places and sources that have been assembled in a subsequent report. In addition, Tamburrano establishes that these reports were written by different people, as the different forms of address to the recipients (at times the informal *tu*, at times the formal *lei*) suggest. In some instances, the informant writes about Tranquilli—that is, Silone—as a participant in the very events he describes. These reports make little sense if “translated” into the first person and attributed to Silone. Further, they often misidentify Communist leaders whose identities Silone could not possibly have mistaken.

As for Biocca and Canali's claim that the reports they attribute to Silone contained damaging information, this too is false. Tamburrano demonstrates how some of the information in the reports was already available in the press. Other information reported to the police in these documents is simply wrong. The remainder contains generic information about Communist activities of little value to the police.

WHAT IS THE truth? But for the thick clouds of dust kicked up by Biocca and Canali and their dotting press allies there would hardly be a need to strap Occam's razor to see more clearly. On the one hand, we have Biocca and Canali's complicated, motiveless theory that a committed anti-fascist spied for the fascists, with all of the logical loose-ends mentioned above. Seemingly oblivious to this manifest absurdity, Biocca went so far as to refer to Silone in a press interview as "an authentic communist and a convinced [fascist] informer." Yet it is simply passing belief to argue that a communist leader, and an implacable enemy of the fascists, would collaborate with Mussolini's regime freely. Moreover, if Silone had been a "convinced informer", his role was to provide whatever valuable information he had at his disposal. In the decade Silone was supposed to have collaborated, his role in the Italian Communist Party grew ever more important. By the end of the decade he had the means, had he so chosen, to destroy the Communist net of clandestine operatives once and for all. But he did nothing of the kind, this despite the fact that, had he been an informer, the OVRA could have threatened to reveal his collaboration with the regime—a threat that would have destroyed his career and endangered his life. In short, the "narrative" Biocca and Canali provide, so avidly reported in the press, does not hold water.

There is a much simpler competing explanation. We know from the April 13, 1930 letter that Silone clearly knew Bellone and had some relationship with him before the arrest of his brother in 1928, but it is impossible to say what type of relationship existed or for how long. Then, sometime around 1928, Silone renewed contact with Bellone. Why? To help his brother. Silone was very attached to Romolo. Indeed, he told his brother's

wife, shortly before Romolo died in prison, that, as the only other surviving member of the family, he felt it his duty to help and protect him. Moreover, at the time he was arrested, Romolo was traveling to meet Silone. Silone had arranged to get him across the border into Switzerland, but Romolo was caught carrying false documents Silone had enabled him to obtain. When the police discovered that Romolo was Silone's brother, his situation worsened. It is easy to understand why Silone felt responsible for his brother's arrest, and it is more than reasonable to suppose that Silone's sense of guilt led him to do what he could to save his brother from torture and death. But notwithstanding his efforts, including the mobilization of an international aid campaign (which included help from Nobel Prize-winner Romain Rolland), his brother died at the age of 28, on October 28, 1932. Silone's guilt complex may well have included the fact that he had supplied information on the Communist Party—no matter how useless—to a "friend" with the police in Rome: Bellone.

Tamburrano adduced four other facts to prove conclusively that Silone was never a long-term informant. In a 1937 report made by the head of the political police to Mussolini, the report noted that Silone had sent in "generic information... in order that it might help his brother", but that otherwise no compromising information on Silone existed. Two years later in 1939, the fascist Minister of the Interior, alarmed at Silone's work from his Swiss exile to discredit fascism, requested from police headquarters in the Abruzzi "any possible episode from [Silone's] private life that could be used to discredit him abroad." The request similarly found nothing. By 1957 the fascists were no longer in power, but Silone still had enemies. Tamburrano repeats how that year the then-Minister for Internal Affairs also ordered an investigation into Silone's

background in order to gather compromising information on him, with nothing to show for it. And, most recently, Tamburrano queried the head of the Central State Archive to learn whether Silone's name, pseudonym or file code number appeared on any government lists of individuals who had collaborated with the OVRA. The response he received was negative. In short, there is no reliable evidence—none—that Silone ever informed, other than whatever minimal contact he may have had with Bellone while attempting to save his brother's life.

**I**N A REVIEW of Silone's political dialogue, *The School of Dictators*, dated June 8, 1939 and published in the *New English Weekly*, George Orwell described Silone as a "rev-

olutionary and an honest man" and hence "one of those men who are denounced as Communists by Fascists and as Fascists by Communists." It was Orwell's implicit hope that such denunciations would not discourage men and women from reading Silone and discovering the valuable truths he had to tell about justice and politics. The latest *caso Silone* is a further distraction from that goal. But perhaps soon the denunciations of Silone in Italy will cease, and the prophet will be welcome at last in his own land, even in Rome. If Silone could only see it come to pass, no doubt he would again quote Scripture: "Blessed be the Lord; For He hath shown me His wondrous lovingkindness in an entrenched city."<sup>6</sup> □

<sup>6</sup>Psalms, 31:22.

### *Telling Left From Wrong*

I can sum up much of what has been said by Italy's formerly Communist Left in the post-Communist era as follows: "It is true, we were wrong, but we were right to be wrong: the other left was right, but it was wrong to be right." It has never been easy to explain Italian political events to foreign observers.

—Renato Brunetta, *Daedalus*, Summer 2001