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Prue Shaw, The long production line
ALBERTO ASOR ROSA (Editor)
Letteratura italiana: Volume I, Il letterato e le istituzioni
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Under the general title *Letteratura italiana*, the Turin publishing firm of Einaudi launches an ambitious new series (nine projected volumes in all), of which this bulky tome of over 1000 pages forms the introduction. Although the subject is literature and the approach historical, this is not a literary history in any normal sense: we must wait for volumes Seven and Eight to be given a *Storia e geografia della letteratura italiana* (and then the symptomatic addition of “geography” to the expected “history” points us firmly away from the conventional model). In an already crowded field – every major Italian publishing house seems to have its own history of Italian literature – only some substantial novelty of approach would seem to justify yet another offering. The publishers themselves make large claims on this score, saying “there may be better works than this, but certainly none that resembles it, inside or outside Italy”. On the evidence of this first volume, their claims are justified.

This is a literary history for the 1980s, which has taken on board formalism, structuralism, deconstruction, semiotics, and every fashionable recent development in literary and linguistic theory. It is broadly Marxist in its sympathies, avowedly eclectic in its methods. It does not describe writers, readers, books, but rather producers, consumers, products (Volume Two is to be called simply *Produzione e consumo*). The production/consumption model provides the key to an approach which is sociological, economic, and ultimately political. Literature is no longer a privileged category, but simply a part of the continuum of human activity.

This first volume, whose general title is *Il letterato e le istituzioni*, divides into two lengthy sections, each organized on historical lines, with chapters contributed by experts, many of them historians rather than literary critics. The first section (*Letteratura e potere*) chronicles the relationships between intellectuals and power in Italian society from the medieval courts up to the death of Pasolini in 1975; the second (*Letteratura e istituzioni culturali*) surveys the role played by cultural institutions (universities, religious orders, Academies, journals) in relation to men of letters over the same lengthy period.

There is much here that is interesting, although for scores of pages at a time we lose sight of literature altogether. Of 115 pages on medieval courts in Italy only the second half has much direct bearing on literature

as distinct from literacy, although when we do finally come to the matter of the troubadour immigration into Italian courts, which led to the birth of Italian lyric poetry, the treatment is excellent. But even if Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio have their names at the heads of three consecutive chapters, nevertheless the unwary reader who turns to them expecting some general assessment of their achievement or even a simple list of what they wrote, will be disappointed. The text assumes a familiarity with their lives and works, and on the basis of this shared knowledge hazards some generalizations about intellectuals, society, the commune, and bourgeois power. This proves to be the pattern throughout the first section; in the second section we are taken through, *inter alia*, the history of the Dominican order and the Italian education system, and the connection with literature becomes, if anything, even more attenuated.

The long chapter, particularly vigorous and searching, on the period 1940-75 is by the formidable Marxist critic Alberto Asor Rosa, who also contributed the introduction ("Letteratura, testo, società"), which explicitly outlines the methodological premises on which the whole enterprise is based. Sandwiched between the two main sections on political and cultural power structures is a series of thirty-two illustrations, ranging from Cimabue's Assisi fresco of St Luke at his desk to Pasolini hunched over his typewriter (irritatingly, the photographs are not dated). The introduction and the illustrative material stand in a curious relation to one another: the pictures, richly evocative as they are and evidently intended simply to illustrate "the tools of the man of letters", in fact subtly undermine the theoretical premises of the book.

The jargon which in the text is used with sufficient discipline becomes risible in the pretentious captions to the photographs. Could Sbarbaro, evidently not the tidiest of men, have imagined that the "disturbing presences" in his study ("the old shoes, the chair whose straw seat is unravelling, the cardboard boxes, the flasks, and, on the wretched little table, only folders of dried lichens") symbolized a radical rejection of literature? In Ungaretti's study "the very concept of the ordered display of written products" is absent (i.e. there is no bookcase). (But couldn't there have been a bookcase behind the photographer's back?) Pasolini's "modest biro" apparently underlines both his commitment and his solitude. The captions say too much: they assume a naivety in the "reader" of images which is curiously at odds with the sophistication assumed in the reader of texts. They also say too little, glossing over the question of self-image and self-projection (acknowledged only with the flagrantly posturing D'Annunzio), the question of the choices made by painter or photographer, and, above all, the question of the contradiction inherent in capturing the "solitude" of a sitter. The only illustrations which avoid these complexities are those where no human figure is present, the most moving of all being the juxtaposed pictures of Leopardi's first and last studies: the library in the family home at Recanati and the desolate room of his final years in Torre del Greco, the two poles of an itinerary where the notions of commitment and solitude spring unbidden to mind.

With two exceptions – the pictures of the Accademia dei Pugni, and of Alfieri chatting to the Countess of Albany, early versions respectively of the seminar and the tutorial – all the pictures of writers show writing as a solitary pursuit. The sense of continuity across the centuries in this respect is far more striking than accidental divergences in dress, interior decoration or technology. It forces on the reader a central question: what is it precisely that the writer does? Most histories of literature make Romantic or post-Romantic assumptions about creativity, imagination, genius (or at the least, talent). They assume that writers are gifted, that the value of literature is connected with its genesis in the human psyche and in human experience, and that it is the business of the critic and literary historian to make value-judgments. This book dispenses with such concepts, or uses them very guardedly (“so-called creative literature” being the recurring, off-handedly dismissive phrase). It is almost devoid of value-judgments: any *oggetto letterario* can yield interesting conclusions, the experience of any practitioner, however mediocre, can be instructive.

The overall impression created is that of seeing familiar terrain in an entirely new perspective, a perspective which disconcertingly reduces the peaks to hillocks or removes them from view altogether. In one sense it is refreshing to have one’s expectations thwarted: Dante is treated at precisely the same length as his teacher Brunetto Latini; every nuance in Vittorini’s thinking about literature and politics is examined while Montale scarcely rates a mention. It is in the nature of things that certain writers lend themselves to treatment in these terms while others do not, and that even those writers who do, tend to be discussed in terms of their minor works rather than their major ones (Dante of the *Convivio*, Leopardi of the *Operette morali*). The introduction argues that it is characteristic of Italian men-of-letters to practise, though not necessarily or exclusively or even consecutively in any given case, two extreme and opposite modes of literary production, that of civil-political commitment, and that of the cult of rhetorical formalism. Presumably the second mode and those who favour it will dominate the landscape in Volume Three, *Le forme del testo*, whereupon, one hopes, some of the misgivings this volume arouses will be quelled; just as one hopes that the whole question of value and evaluation may be given an airing in Volume Four (*L’interpretazione*), or perhaps in Volume Six (enigmatically entitled simply *Questioni*). The signs here are good. Asor Rosa rightly dismisses with contempt those who, in the name of “scientificity”, are unable to distinguish between “a wretched sonnet by Serafino Aquilano and a composition of the divine Petrarch”.

In focusing on the relationship of writers to the power structures in the world at large the authors of this volume are examining an aspect of experience which writers share not only with each other but with all men, and ignoring what makes them distinctive as a group (“the mafia of talent”, as it has been called) and unique as individuals – in short, precisely that dimension of their experience we call “literary”. Perhaps

after all the most controversial thing about this book is its title. Certainly it is a book for the converted. The liberal humanist (that dying breed) will find much here to instruct, stimulate, provoke, but nothing to dissuade him from his central conviction that literature, and more generally art, has a unique if problematical value, and that “so-called” creative literature is so called with good reason.