

Elio Vittorini

THE WRITER AND THE WRITTEN



ROUTLEDGE

Guido Bonsaver

ELIO VITTORINI
The Writer and the Written

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ELIO VITTORINI:
The Writer and the Written



Guido Bonsaver

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Manuscript notes by Elio Vittorini
Back cover Courtesy of D. Vittorini

Abbreviations

ARCHIVES

ACSV: Fascicolo Vittorini, Direzione Generale
PS, Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Rome

ACMB: Fascicolo Bompiani, Prefettura,
Archivio dello Stato, Milan

CVFR: Carte Vittorini, Fondo Rodocanachi,
Genoa

FVAM: Fascicolo Vittorini, Fondazione
Arnoldo e Alberto Mondadori, Milan

FVUU: Fondo Vittorini, Archivio Urbinate,
University of Urbino

UCAE: Unpublished Correspondence,
Archivio Einaudi, Turin

TEXTS

Donne1, Donne2: Respectively, the first and second edition of *Le donne di Messina* (Milan, Bompiani, 1949 and 1964). When referring to the narrative project in its entirety, the unabbreviated *Le donne di Messina* will be used.

Erica: Erica e i suoi fratelli, published in *Erica e i suoi fratelli – La garibaldina* (Milan, Bompiani, 1956)

LettArt: Elio Vittorini: Letteratura, arte, società: Articoli e interventi 1926-1937, edited by Raffaella Rodondi (Turin, Einaudi, 1997)

Lettere 1: Elio Vittorini: Gli anni del Politecnico: Lettere 1945-1951, edited by Carlo Minoia (Turin, Einaudi, 1977)

Lettere 2: Elio Vittorini: I libri, la città, il mondo: Lettere 1933-1943, edited by Carlo Minoia (Turin, Einaudi, 1985)

ON1, ON2: Elio Vittorini, Le opere narrative, edited by Raffaella Rodondi, vol. 1 and 2 (Milan, Mondadori, 1974)

Sempione: Elio Vittorini, Il sempione strizza l'occhio al Frejus (Milan, Mondadori, 1946)

For abbreviations of English translations of Vittorini's works see section opposite.

English translations of quotations in Italian

For reasons of consistency, all translations are mine. With regard to Vittorini's works, whenever a published English translation was available, I referred in brackets to the page numbering of the specific passage.

English translations of Vittorini's work:

The Red Carnation [*Il garofano rosso*]

(Wesport, Greenwood, 1952). Translated by Anthony Bower, based on the 1948 edition of the novel. Abbreviated to 'Bower'.

The Dark and the Light [containing *Erica e i suoi fratelli* and *La garibaldina*], (Westport, Greenwood, 1960). Translated by Frances Keene.

Conversation in Sicily [*Conversazione in Sicilia*], (London/New York, Quartet, 1988). Translated by Wilfrid David.

Men and Not Men [*Uomini e no*], (Marlboro, Marlboro Press, 1985). Translated by Sarah Henry, based on the 1965 edition of the novel, apart from the author's postscript, which was present only in the 1945 edition.

The Twilight of the Elephant and Other Novels:

A Vittorini Omnibus [containing *Il sempione strizza l'occhio al Frejus*, *Conversazione in Sicilia* and *La garibaldina*] (New York, New Directions, 1973).

Translated by Cinina Brescia, Frances Keene and Wilfrid David).

Women of Messina [*Le donne di Messina*], (New York, New Directions, 1973).

Translated by Frances Frenaye and Frances Keene, based on the 1964 edition of the novel.

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Introduction

Elio Vittorini was undoubtedly a central figure in Italy's cultural arena from the 1930s to the mid-1960s. During the years of the fascist regime, his shift from enthusiastic support for Mussolini's fascist 'revolution', to disillusionment as a result of the Spanish Civil War and finally to active anti-fascism during the war years, is symbolic of – and to some degree influenced – the choices of an entire generation of young intellectuals. The novel *Conversazione in Sicilia*, published in the late 1930s, was a most accomplished artistic expression of the growing anxiety felt during the last years of fascism. Similarly, his journalistic work bears witness to the intensity and commitment with which he tackled social and political issues. As for the postwar period, it is indicative that the historian Nello Ajello should have coined the expression 'epoca vittoriniana' [the Vittorini era] to refer to the state of Italian literature in the early postwar years.¹ Indeed, the impulsive and unrestrained energy which electrified Italy's culture in those years was an integral part of Vittorini's fictional and editorial work. With all its virtues and naïve defects, the journal *Il Politecnico* represented a most stimulating and vivid image of Italy's struggle to renew its social and cultural parameters. As a fiction writer, Vittorini also continued his quest for a new narrative language. He refused to be straight-jacketed by the ambiguous role of leader of the neorealist movement, immediately sensing both its artistic as well as political limitations. And although he failed to produce a work of fiction comparable in strength to his earlier *Conversazione in Sicilia*, nonetheless the reasons behind this crisis are equally important for a study of the development of Italian culture throughout those years of economic success and social upheaval.

Confronted with such a restless and provocative figure, it is no surprise that critics often responded in equally strong tones. Vittorini's independent position as a left-wing intellectual resulted in a love/hate relationship with the intelligentsia of the Italian Communist Party. His polemical exchanges with the party leader, Togliatti, have by now become an icon of the struggle between political commitment and artistic freedom. Moreover, Vittorini's past as a young fascist weighed on him like a shameful memory, particularly in the period in which a

¹ N. Ajello, 'Letteratura vittoriniana e comunismo', *Il Mulino*, 17 (1953), 122-30 (p. 122). Similarly, the literary critic Geno Pampaloni wrote in 1949: "Tutta, o la più gran parte della letteratura giovanile in Italia si svolge sotto la sua costellazione. E non perché Vittorini "insegna", ma perché paga di persona quello che fa. In questo senso il suo merito è incalcolabile" ['All, or most of the literary works by young Italian authors, unfold and develop under his influence. And not because Vittorini "teaches", but because he lays himself bare. From this perspective, his worth is incalculable']; 'Rileggendo il "Garofano rosso" di Elio Vittorini', *Belfagor*, 2 (1949); also in *I narratori*, edited by L. Russo (Milan-Messina, Principato), 1958, p. 423.

concerted effort was made to create a water-tight barrier between the fascist years and the postwar era. Vittorini himself fell into the trap of distorting biographical facts in order to minimize his youthful experiences. In *Diario in pubblico*, for example, the anthology of his journalistic work published in 1957, Vittorini omitted to insert a representative choice of his pro-fascist writings. It was only in the 1960s that Asor Rosa's ground-breaking study *Scrittori e popolo* began the exploration of the ideological and cultural continuity between revolutionary fascism and postwar left-wing militancy. As a result, Vittorini's early works were subjected to scrutiny in a series of academic studies. The philological discipline of Anna Panicali and Alba Andreini provided an accurate picture of those years, although it was inevitable that the legendary image of Vittorini as the anti-fascist hero of *Conversazione in Sicilia* should emerge partially dented. The lowest point was possibly reached in 1983 when a study by Lorenzo Greco revealed that the young Vittorini had been the 'ghost writer' of a glorifying biography of the fascist leader Cesare Balbo.² However, if those studies gave ammunition to those who wanted to diminish Vittorini's status as a left-wing intellectual, they also opened the way to a more subtle understanding of the complex cultural and ideological background. Other major Italian authors who began their writing in the 1930s, such as Pratolini or Bilenchi, had to be similarly reconsidered. The point of the matter was not so much to prove or disprove the authors' credentials as anti-fascists but rather to understand the common ground which fascism, particularly in its early years, shared with left-wing ideology. Vittorini, among many others, had strongly hoped that fascism would turn into a socialist-oriented, anti-bourgeois revolution. It took Mussolini's decision to support the military coup d'état of General Franco in Spain to open his eyes once and for all.

After this first wave of academic studies, it could be said that Vittorini's works suffered a setback both in terms of popularity and scholarly interest. The publication of his correspondence was halted after only two out of a planned five volumes had appeared, partly as a consequence of the debatable quality of the editorial work.³ By 1986, Franco Fortini denounced the unjustifiably low ebb reached by Vittorini studies with an article aptly entitled 'Ma esisteva Vittorini?' [Did Vittorini exist?].⁴ The balance was significantly redressed in the following decade. Between 1992 and 1998, a considerable number of studies on Vittorini were published. Gian Carlo Ferretti started the ball rolling with a in-depth study of Vittorini's editorial work, followed by Anna Panicali's third and most comprehensive book on Vittorini, published in 1994. There were also three biographical/critical studies by

² A. Asor Rosa, *Scrittori e popolo: Il populismo nella letteratura italiana* (Rome, Samona e Savelli, 1965); A. Panicali, *Il primo Vittorini* (Milan, Celuc, 1974); E. Catalano, *La forma della coscienza: L'ideologia letteraria del primo Vittorini* (Bari, Dedalo, 1977); A. Andreini, *La ragione letteraria: Saggio sul giovane Vittorini* (Pisa, Nistri-Lischi, 1979). L. Greco, 'Vita di Pizzo-di-Ferro: Vittorini e lo pseudo-Malaparte', in *Censura e scrittura* (Milan, Il Saggiatore, 1983), pp. 13-50.

³ The two volumes are *Lettere 1* and *Lettere 2*, both edited by Carlo Minoia. The proofs of the third volume have been held for years by Einaudi and similarly, the fourth volume was completed years ago by the editors (D. Minoia and E. Esposito). The publishing house, however, is currently not planning to proceed with their publication. For some highly critical views about the poor editing of the second volume see: G. Falaschi, 'Vittorini senza lettere', *Belfagor*, 41 (1986), 225-30; and G. Delfini, 'Vittorini e gli anni dei passi di piombo', *Paragone – Letteratura*, 434-436 (1986), 91-112.

⁴ F. Fortini, 'Ma esisteva Vittorini?', *L'Espresso*, 2 February 1986, p. 85.

Massimo Grillo, Anselmo Madeddu and Raffaele Crovi; and although all three were perhaps too eager to defend their author, Grillo and Crovi certainly brought a substantial amount of new material to the attention of critics. Finally, Raffaella Rodondi – who, along with Panicali, is a major Vittorini scholar – edited an extensive anthology of his journalistic writings prior to 1937.⁵

Several of these recent studies were published when I was already at work on this monograph. In a way they confirmed my impression of the need for more critical work on Vittorini. They also convinced me of the urgency to provide the English-reading public with a thorough study of his work. Considering the importance of Vittorini as a twentieth century author, it is surprising to find that only one single monograph in English has ever been published.⁶ Joy Potter's study is certainly a scholarly work and many of her considerations and suggestions are still perfectly relevant. However, there are three main factors which impose limitations on the scope of her book. Firstly, Potter often followed Vittorini's indications and recollections thus accepting as factual various personal 'reconstructions' which critics have later proved to be incorrect. The long preface to *Il garofano rosso* is a good example of how Vittorini sowed confusion in the reconstructions of his literary work of the 1930s, thus leading many critics on to a slippery critical path. Secondly, Potter did not benefit from the vast amount of new material that has been made available to scholars in the last two decades. Only since the late 1980s has it been possible to consult Vittorini's papers at the University of Urbino; similarly, Vittorini's first novel, *Il brigantino del papa* was only published in 1985 after its discovery among Enrico Falqui's papers.⁷ The third factor concerns Potter's methodology: by concentrating mainly on Vittorini's fiction, his great contribution to the cultural debate as journalist, editor and translator was not given the prominence it deserves. It is now generally agreed that, particularly during the postwar years, Vittorini's work as editor of periodicals such *Il Politecnico* and *Il Menabò*, or as advisor to major publishing houses such as Mondadori and Einaudi, left a mark that is comparable to, and probably more influential than his contemporary output of fiction.

The present study aims to approach Vittorini's work from the wider perspective of the literary and social milieu from which it emerged. This methodological slant is most conducive to an author such as Vittorini who was constantly struggling with, and attempting to understand and influence, the history and culture of his country. As Italo Calvino suggested, Vittorini's work contains a utopian ingredient: it is born from the present and it aims to influence it by envisaging its possible future developments.⁸ As a consequence, the first four

⁵ G. C. Ferretti, *L'editore Vittorini* (Turin, Einaudi, 1992); A. Panicali, *Elio Vittorini* (Milan, Mursia, 1994); M. Grillo, *I Vittorini di Sicilia* (Milan, Camunia, 1993); A. Madeddu, *Vittorini: From Robinson to Gulliver* (Caltanissetta, Salvatore Sciascia Editore, 1997); R. Crovi, *Il lungo viaggio di Vittorini* (Venice, Marsilio, 1998). The anthology by Rodondi is *Letteratura, Arte e Società* (Turin, Einaudi, 1997). Two other general introductory studies published in these years are: F. De Nicola, *Introduzione a Vittorini* (Milan, Laterza, 1993); F. Rappazzo, *Vittorini* (Palermo, Palumbo, 1996).

⁶ J. H. Potter, *Elio Vittorini* (Boston, Twayne, 1979).

⁷ E. Vittorini, *Il brigantino del papa* (Milan, Rizzoli, 1985).

⁸ I. Calvino, 'Vittorini: Progettazione e letteratura', *Il Menabò*, 10 (1967); reprinted in *Una pietra sopra* (Turin, Einaudi, 1970), pp. 144-49.

parts of this study open with a chapter outlining the historical and cultural coordinates within which Vittorini operated. The presence of more than a dozen illustrations is partially linked to the similar attempt to convey the 'flavour' of those years. On the other hand, the reproduction of two works of modernist art by Picasso and De Chirico is a reminder that Vittorini was one of the few Italian writers who kept abreast of the avant-garde movements which, between the wars, were opening new avenues to artistic representation. Parts 1 to 4 encompass the whole of Vittorini's literary and editorial production. They aim to provide a detailed picture which is not solely an introduction to the author and his work; equal attention has been given to the critical response throughout the years, and, at the same time, I hope that some of my considerations together with extensive archival research will throw new light on the subject.

The fifth and final part of the book contains a group of essays devoted to some common features in Vittorini's work. Chapter 17, *Narrative Style and Ideology*, outlines the development of his attempts to forge a narrative style capable of transcending the limitations of a purely denotative language. As Geno Pampaloni suggested, 'della sua generazione, Vittorini è stato il più fedele ai compiti dell'innovatore' [among his generation, Vittorini was the most faithful to the role of the innovator].⁹ Tracing the trajectory of his experimentations will help us to understand the reasons – stylistic as well as ideological – why *Conversazione in Sicilia* stands out as his most accomplished work of fiction. The two chapters that follow – *Kings, Queens and Grandfathers* and *Incompleteness as a Working Practice* – examine two aspects of Vittorini's fiction which have so far been overlooked. The first concerns the recurrent, almost obsessive, presence of an imagery related to what could be briefly described as a generational tension involving son, father and grandfather. The second, instead, tackles the issue of Vittorini's unusual tendency to leave many of his works unfinished. Finally, chapter 20 *Vittorini, the 'Cultural Operator'* discusses his contribution as organizer and promoter of the intellectual debate. Here the main thread is provided by the intriguing mixture of editorial pragmatism and utopian optimism which Vittorini displayed throughout years of crumbling ideologies. This last chapter, together with chapter 17, indirectly provides a large scale 'mapping' of, respectively, Vittorini's editorial and fictional production. As a result, the two chapters can be used as alternative 'entry points' for those who have a specific interest in either side of his work.

A final consideration. The general emphasis on the development of Vittorini's ideas rather than on the few peaks of his career stems from my conviction that the most stimulating legacy of his work comes from his painstaking effort always to keep moving. The desire to continue the journey, in other words, is as telling as the places visited.

⁹ G. Pampaloni, *Storia della letteratura italiana* (Milan, Garzanti, 1969), p. 483.

PART ONE

The Years of Literary Apprenticeship





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CHAPTER 1

The Context: Under the Shadow of Malaparte

Elio Vittorini was born in the Sicilian city of Syracuse on 23 July 1908, the son of a station-master. In one of his few autobiographical recollections, he spoke of a childhood passed in solitary railway stations, stranded in the malarial wasteland of the Sicilian countryside. Vittorini also inferred that his background had been working class, his mother's family being peasants and his father's sailors, hence the largely self-taught nature of his cultural upbringing.¹ However, this picture needs some slight re-adjustment if we compare it with the versions provided by relatives together with those of recent biographical studies. Firstly, Vittorini's family could be better defined as *petite-bourgeois* townspeople, since his paternal grandfather ran a café in Syracuse, and the relatives working at sea were proud owners of a small fleet of cargo ships. Secondly, a figure on which more light should be shed is that of Vittorini's father, Sebastiano. In both *Conversazione in Sicilia* and *Le città del mondo*, the protagonists remember their father as an amateur actor reciting Shakespeare on improvised stages in derelict railway buildings. The autobiographical value of these references has always been acknowledged but Sebastiano Vittorini was not only an amateur actor and playwright; he had a teacher's diploma and had withdrawn from his degree course in Humanities to find a job only so that he could get married. Moreover, he was involved in the administration of Syracuse's Classical theatre and had written papers on classical playwrights such as Theocritus and Aeschylus.² It is therefore not surprising that Sebastiano's library should have been well furnished with literary works, and indeed Iole remembers her brother Elio asking for her complicity in order to steal books from his father's study and read them in solitude. In the light of such information, views such as Donald Heiney's that 'Vittorini's education was rudimentary even for the construction worker he became',³ need to be freed from the veil of romanticism in which artists' lives are often wrapped. The self-

¹ E. Vittorini, 'Della mia vita fino a oggi: Raccontata ai miei lettori stranieri', *Pesci rossi*, 3 (1949); also in *Lettere I*, pp. 421-28.

² See I. Vittorini, *Mio fratello Elio* (Siracusa, Ombra, 1989), 1, 10-12, 36; Grillo, *I Vittorini di Sicilia*, pp. 67-112; and Crovi, *Il lungo viaggio di Vittorini*, pp. 11-18.

³ D. Heiney, *Three Italian Novelists: Moravia, Pavese, Vittorini* (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1968), p. 149.

taught element is certainly dominant, but Vittorini's family upbringing was not as uncultured and low-class as is often suggested. One should also take into account the stimulating friendship with Giovanni Calendoli – a future humanities professor at the University of Padua – who provided him with early exposure to the works of contemporary French authors.⁴

Vittorini's relationship with his father was probably a difficult one and some critics have recognized Oedipal resonances which would help to explain Vittorini's later disavowal of his father's influence (this aspect will be examined in chapter 18). The restless and passionate character of Elio's personality brought him to loggerheads with family and institutions from an early age. The paternal imposition of a technical education triggered various flights to Northern Italy – using his father's free train tickets – and led to the abandonment of high school after failing to pass to the third year. Despite the intervention of various relatives, Vittorini's father refused to acknowledge the artistic inclination of his son, insisting on the need for a 'proper' occupation. Vittorini was left with the option of either surrendering to his father's wishes or rebelling and fleeing the family nest.

Vittorini's turbulent adolescence coincided with a turbulent period in Italian history. Episodes such as the fascists' March on Rome, which took place when he was fourteen, and the kidnapping and murder of the socialist MP Giacomo Matteotti two years later, in 1924, were vividly impressed in Vittorini's mind and traces of them can be found in his writing. In his famous preface to *Il garofano rosso*, Vittorini suggested that the protagonists' enthusiasm for the fascist movement should be taken as an example of the painful misunderstanding shared by many young men like himself who identified with fascism because they took it to be a revolutionary, anti-bourgeois movement.⁵ The view that the adolescent Vittorini was an instinctive libertarian and an anarchist more than a committed and well-read fascist supporter is also suggested by the memories of his friend Alfonso Failla, a young anarchist militant at the time. Failla remembers Vittorini being present at the informal meetings of a group of anarchists in Syracuse where the works of Proudhon, Bakunin and Malatesta were passionately discussed.⁶ What seems to emerge is that even in these early years Vittorini showed a fervent interest in political and social issues. It is doubtful, however, whether these interests were matched by an in-depth knowledge of the ideological issues at stake. In fact, his anarchist ideals quickly developed into whole-hearted support for the totalitarian vision of the fascist movement. Vittorini was attracted by fascism as a new political movement which claimed to be able to sweep away all the idiosyncrasies and the outdated privileges of the ruling classes. His father, a reformist socialist, strongly disapproved of his son's radical ideas; and politics was to add yet another source of tension between the two.

⁴ Giovanni Calendoli's mother was French and the family often spent long periods in France. See Madeddu, *Vittorini: Da Robinson a Gulliver*, pp. 52-53.

⁵ E. Vittorini, *Il garofano rosso* (Milan, Mondadori, 1948), in *ONI*, 448-49.

⁶ A. Failla, 'Con gli anarchici a Siracusa', *Il Ponte*, 7/8 (1973), 1068-69; see also Grillo, *I Vittorini di Sicilia*, pp. 171-90, 209-22. It should be mentioned, however, that the young Vittorini tried to join the March on Rome, travelling with other Sicilian fascists in a carriage that was later detached from the train and never reached Rome. Vittorini devoted a short story to this event, 'Il mio ottobre fascista', published on *Il Bargello* in October 1932. Critics have often thought this short story to be a fictional reconstruction, but his son Demetrio assured me that Vittorini always referred to it as a real event in his life.

Literature, however, was Elio Vittorini's main passion, and it was no accident that he chose as mentor a writer who combined literary and journalistic activity with daring political commitment. At the age of seventeen, Vittorini managed to start a correspondence with the flamboyant Curzio Suckert Malaparte, who was then living in Rome. Malaparte might at the time have been defined as a D'Annunzian figure in a minor key. Coincidentally, he attended the same secondary school as D'Annunzio, the famous *Collegio Cicognini* in Prato, and, again like the older writer, he too attempted a late-romantic fusion between life and literature, becoming a starlet of the cultural salons and a revered man of action. He volunteered for WWI where he was wounded, joined the fascist squads at the time of the March on Rome and bravely faced the occasional challenge to a duel resulting from his unrestrained criticism of politicians and intellectuals. His literary work included short stories and later novels, in which he would alternate a propensity to sensual, morbid themes with crystalline descriptions of people and places in the best *prosa d'arte* in fashion at the time. Malaparte was also renowned for his historical and political tracts in which he discussed the contemporary situation with an independence of thought which would eventually earn him three years of *confino* (the police controlled residence imposed by the fascist regime) between 1933 and 1935.

When Vittorini addressed his first letter to him, Malaparte was the editor of the political journal *La Conquista dello stato*, which he had founded in 1924. The journal had become a safe haven for revolutionary fascists – also called 'left-wing fascists' – who insisted on the need for Mussolini to radically change Italian society through the dismantling of middle-class privileges and the creation of a socialist-oriented corporate state. In Malaparte, Vittorini perhaps saw a magnified image of the artist he wanted to be: politically passionate, uncompromising, and gifted with a fine prose style. It is worth mentioning that, in addition, Malaparte showed other traits that may have been shared by the young Vittorini. The first was the vague radicalism in his ideological positions (suffice it to say that Malaparte combined fascist militancy with his collaboration with the anti-fascist journal *Rivoluzione liberale*, edited by Gobetti, later a victim of the fascist squads). The second, from the literary viewpoint, was the tendency to experiment with different prose styles and genres.

Vittorini offered Malaparte his devotion and enthusiasm (he volunteered to distribute the journal in Syracuse) and also submitted various articles of political content. The first article to be published in *La Conquista dello stato*, on 15 December 1926, was entitled 'L'ordine nostro'. Written in the form of a letter to the editor, the article is a glorification of the 'real Italian', seen as a muscular, cynical individualist with strong roots in peasant culture. Such a portrait fitted perfectly with Malaparte's idealization of provincial Italy (and in parallel provincial fascist movements), as a counter to the unappealing reality of bourgeois culture and of the Liberal state. Vittorini's use of a *toscaneggiante* prose style is also a tribute to Malaparte though it gives us some measure of the refined quality of Vittorini's own early prose style too. The content often verges on vulgar arrogance – 'noi siamo immorali – non amorali, perché amorali sono i fessi come atei, francesi, pederasti e simili' [we are immoral, not amoral, because amoral people are fools like atheists, Frenchmen, pederasts and the like] – and open glorification of Mussolini – 'noi pensiamo subito a Mussolini, questo Signore protetto da Dio, che finalmente restaura il costume degli italiani' [we immediately think of Mussolini, this Lord protected by God, who is finally restoring Italian customs].

Vittorini also offered Malaparte some fictional pieces. The first one, an extract from the project of a novel, was ‘Ritratto di Re Gianpiero’, published in the June 1927 issue of *L’Italia letteraria* (of which Malaparte was senior editor in those years). However, Vittorini’s debut as a fiction writer encountered some early difficulties. The following year, when the young writer submitted the manuscript of his first novel, *Il brigantino del papa*, Malaparte considered it unworthy of publication.⁷ The negative opinion of his literary mentor must have come as a shocking blow to Vittorini, particularly since in those months he had decided to leave Sicily to embark on a literary career on the mainland. Moreover, after the traditional Sicilian *fuita* – the flight from the respective families in the company of his *fiancée* – Vittorini had celebrated a rushed marriage with Rosa Quasimodo and had now to support a small family nucleus. His wife’s renowned surname is noteworthy here since Rosa was in fact the sister of the poet-to-be Salvatore Quasimodo. The Quasimodo and Vittorini families shared the same house in Syracuse from 1926 (both fathers being stationmasters) and the friendship between Elio and Salvatore is another example of the far from ‘rudimentary’ nature of Vittorini’s early cultural experiences. At this point, however, it is more useful to mention Rosa and Salvatore’s brother, Enzo, who was then working in Gorizia as a civil engineer. Soon after the marriage, Enzo found his young brother-in-law a job as an accountant in a local construction company and consequently Vittorini and his wife were sent to the North-Eastern Italian town of Gorizia.⁸

The move, in September 1927, certainly did not fulfil the aspirations of the young writer, since Gorizia was as distant as Syracuse from the longed-for cultural centres of Rome and Florence. The correspondence with Malaparte and now with Enrico Falqui, an already well-known literary critic and at the time collaborator of Malaparte, provide vivid evidence of the extent of his frustration. Vittorini was trying to develop his occasional literary and journalistic activities into a full-time occupation, hence his recurrent appeals for an editorial job in either Rome or Florence. The editorial job never came, but through Malaparte Vittorini was able to publish various articles and reviews in *La Conquista dello stato* and in periodicals such as *Il Resto del Carlino*, *Il Mattino*, *La Fiera letteraria*, *Il Lavoro fascista* and *L’Italiano*. His political views remained faithful to the fervent support for revolutionary fascism shown in his debut article. As for his fictional output, Vittorini seemed to be trying to emulate his master. The result was an alternation of two strands: fictional portraits of imaginary characters (a strand that would terminate with the debacle of the novel *Il brigantino del papa*) and exercises in *prosa d’arte* in which the sophisticated description of a scene or, rather, the creation of a written *tableau* is the artist’s main aim. Both strands will be the subject of a brief study in the following chapters.

⁷ Part of the correspondence between Malaparte and Vittorini can be found in C. Quarantotto, ‘Vittorini fascista “integrale”’, *La Destra*, 7 (1972), 69-77. One of the most influential sources for Vittorini’s political and literary ideas at the time is Malaparte’s political tract *Italia barbara*, published in 1925. For a more detailed analysis see A. Panicali, *Il primo Vittorini* (Milan, Celuc, 1974), chapter 1.

⁸ In ‘Della mia vita fino a oggi’, Vittorini also mentioned having worked in 1926 as a worker on the construction of a bridge. It is another late memory that has often been used by critics to underline the working-class background of the writer. However, the episode actually took place in 1927, in the Gorizia area, and Vittorini was not a construction worker but an accountant in charge of the workers’ salaries.

CHAPTER 2

The Burlesque of *Re Gianpiero* and *Il Brigantino del Papa*

Since any outline of the Italian cultural scene in the 1920s would inexorably touch upon the antagonism between *Strapaese* and *Stracittà*, a brief discussion of these two opposing movements will aid our understanding of the climate within which Vittorini made his debut. The antagonism stemmed from political as well as literary roots and Curzio Malaparte was one of its protagonists. The *Strapaese* movement was very closely linked to provincial fascist organizations which denounced what they saw as the betrayal of the fascist revolutionary ideals through an *imborghesimento*, or 'bourgeois-ation' of the fascist regime. Its prime organ of expression was the periodical *Il Selvaggio*, founded in 1924 by a fascist group from the small Tuscan town of Colle Val d'Elsa. From a political viewpoint, *Il Selvaggio* represented the voice of the violent provincial squads who were finding themselves progressively marginalized as a result of the attempt by the regime to gain some public respectability. The cultural correlative to such a position is what might be labelled 'provincial nationalism', aimed at the glorification of the virtues of the 'ordinary' Italian living in the countryside: a man as close to the intellectual refinement of Italy's illustrious past as to the stolid and energetic approach to life that comes from close contact with nature. Whether this Italian 'type' existed or not is another matter; however, it is significant that many of the portraits of such a character published at the time made use of the burlesque *genre*, that is, refrained from a realistic approach to the topic. Vittorini, as we will see, is no exception. But before we move on to Vittorini's contribution to the debate, we must briefly examine the forces behind the *Strapaese* faction. By 1926, the headquarters of *Il Selvaggio* had moved from Colle Val d'Elsa to Florence, thus reflecting the increasing popularity and importance of the periodical. In the very same year, two new journals appeared: the first, *L'Italiano*, published in Bologna by Leo Longanesi, was to become a close ally of *Il Selvaggio*; the second, *900*, was published in Rome, written in French and dedicated to almost everything that the *strapaesani* openly despised: modern urban life, foreign culture, elitist literary values. With *900*, the movement of *Stracittà* was born, and the name of one of the journal's founders was Curzio Malaparte. It might come as a surprise to find Malaparte on the side of the *stracittadini*, as his political views should have placed him on the other side of the debate. Indeed, this is one more exam-

ple of his ambiguity and love of provocation, since the following year Malaparte left 900 and joined the ranks of the *strapaesani*. He later explained his position in the following way:

Se è vero che ho inventato Strapaese, non è men vero che ho inventato anche Stracittà e che la polemica fra Strapaese e Stracittà fu scatenata da me al solo scopo di muover le acque della letteratura italiana, solitamente morte.⁹

[If it is true that I invented *Strapaese*, it also true that I invented Stracittà and provoked the controversy between *Strapaese* and *Stracittà* with the sole aim of stirring up the normally stagnant waters of Italian literature.]

Malaparte's exhibitionistic performances in the cultural arena must have bedazzled the young Vittorini, and his admiration for Malaparte did not seem to be diminished by the ambivalence of the writer's intellectual gymnastics.

The first of Vittorini's *strapaesano* experiments is the already mentioned 'Ritratto di Re Gianpiero' published in 1927. Malaparte placed it in the literary journal *La Fiera letteraria* instead of *Il Selvaggio* or *L'Italiano*, but the content of the short story shows it to be a convincing contribution to the *strapaesani*'s glorification of their 'Italian type'. Here are the opening lines:

Decisamente il Re Gianpiero era troppo un uomo tagliato all'antica, con la sua faccia larga e il suo largo cuore, il suo aspetto chiaro e contegnoso; di stoffa, o costumi troppo buoni per viver bene in tempi cani. Si avvertiva l'uomo di tempi diversi alla sua statura gigantesca, alle spalle ammassate duramente e composte a portare robuste armature, alle mani grossolane che avrebbero agitato grandi spade, e che ora si indugiavano nel contatto delle fredde cose e dei macigni. Si indovinava la gagliarda specie di passione che lo avrebbero macerato ad ogni modo, e di cui egli strascicava brandelli nelle sale di corte come improvvise illuminazioni di un passato glorioso e onnipotente. ('Ritratto di Re Gianpiero', in *ON2*, p. 685)

[Re Gianpiero was definitely too much of an old-fashioned man, with his wide face and his big heart, his simple and reserved appearance; with clothes, or habits which were too fine to live comfortably in such dreadful times. One could sense the presence of a man made for different times, from his immense height, from his rock-hard shoulders made to carry strong armour, from his rough hands that would have brandished long swords, and that now lingered in contact with rocks and cold objects. One could feel the vigorous kind of passion that would have inexorably macerated him, remnants of which he dragged into the court rooms like sudden illuminations of a glorious and omnipotent past.]

Portraits of this kind were quite popular among pro-fascist literary circles and similar ones were produced by writers such as Soffici, Longanesi and others. The aim was the celebration

⁹ Quoted in C. De Michelis, 'Vittorini e l'affermazione della poesia', *Angelus novus*, 20 (1971), 5. The idea that *Strapaese* and *Stracittà* represented to a certain extent complementary movements born within the same pro-Fascist intellectual circles is shared among others by Romano Luperini in *Il Novecento* (Florence, Loescher, 1981), II, 345. For a useful annotated anthology of the three abovementioned periodicals see *Strapaese e Stracittà: Il Selvaggio - L'Italiano - 900*, edited by L. Troisio (Treviso, Canova, 1975).



Fig. 1 Vittorini in 1929. *Courtesy of D. Vittorini*

of a sort of Italian ‘ordinary superhuman’ in which the adjective describes the common traits shared by all (non-bourgeois) Italians and the noun stresses an implicit racist jingoism. One must also add that, in true *macho* fashion, discussions of this sort were concerned solely with Italian *men*, with no mention of their female counterpart.

In her *Il primo Vittorini* (pp. 3-30), Anna Panicali provides us with a detailed study of the close links between Vittorini’s fictional debut and the literary and political issues of the *Selvaggio* milieu. In addition, a long political essay published by Vittorini in *La Conquista dello stato* provides an interesting complement to the short story: it enables us to understand that the uneasiness felt by Re Gianpiero about his life and his degenerate subjects should be read as an allegory of contemporary Italy, in which the liberal bourgeois state of pre-fascist times had poisoned the true nature of Italians. In other words, Re Gianpiero should, like Mussolini, have taken Italians back to their real identity based on rural wisdom, healthy violence and instinctive parochialism.¹⁰

From a stylistic viewpoint, ‘Ritratto di Re Gianpiero’, shows a high degree of complexity. On the one hand, Vittorini followed Malaparte in his use of a very elaborate prose style with frequent concessions to archaisms and Tuscan variations of the language; on the other he

¹⁰ The essay ‘Il sermone dell’ordinarietà’ was published under the title ‘Prolegomeni’ in three issues of *La Conquista dello stato*, between April 1927 and May 1928 (in *LettArt*, pp. 15-22).

indulged in the *strapaesano* use of popular and vulgar expressions, an aspect all too evident in the continuous recurrence of the adjective 'porco'.

On similar lines, in 1929 Vittorini published another literary portrait, 'Il commendatore', this time in the pages of *L'Italiano*. The protagonist of this second portrait was the antithesis of Re Gianpiero, a greedy bourgeois living in the chaotic years of Naples under Bourbon rule.¹¹ The creation of a portrait gallery was meant to be the initial step towards a fully fledged work of narrative which he was never able to finish. Instead, he developed one of its strands into the short novel *Il brigantino del papa*, which he submitted for the attention of Malaparte. Unfortunately, the letters in which Malaparte supposedly argued his negative response to the novel have been lost. The other literary mentor who read the manuscript, Enrico Falqui, limited his comments to stylistic details, with the *imprimatur*, the decision to publish, firmly resting in Malaparte's hands. In any case, the relative speed with which Vittorini accepted the negative verdict and decided to move on to other projects seems to suggest that Vittorini himself was subsequently aware of the limitations of his first novel. Two years later, he attempted a reduction of the manuscript to the size of a short-story (to which he added an apologetic endnote) but finally decided to ditch the whole project, to the extent that he hardly ever mentioned it in his later autobiographical writings. The fact that it is now possible to read the *Il brigantino del papa* in its entirety is only thanks to its recent discovery among the papers left by Enrico Falqui to the Biblioteca Nazionale in Rome.¹²

The protagonist of this short novel, set in a grotesquely described seventeenth century, is Pope Pompilio, who after having been driven away from Rome by the degenerate populace, finds refuge on board of a pirate ship sailing the Mediterranean. The character of Pompilio is of the same lineage as Re Gianpiero: a man with a humble provincial background, an inclination for philosophical broodings, and finally a leader out of step with his times and with his people. An important difference is the religious authority represented by Pompilio. In this respect Vittorini shows no inhibitions in showing Pompilio's situation to be hopeless and irredeemable: he is mocked by the ship's crew and his authority is undermined by that of the more positive figure of the skipper of the ship, Captain Fregoso. Nothing could be more explicit than the final, extremely gruesome ending of the novel, with Pompilio being sodomized to death by a black sailor under the eyes of the entire crew.

Vittorini's initial idea was that Pompilio's portrait would be part of a gallery of about nine other figures – Re Gianpiero being another – and this suggests that the negative light thrown on Pompilio would have been rebalanced by a more positive example of 'ordinary superhuman' hero. Possibly Captain Fregoso could have developed into the leader the Italian people were waiting for (and it is worth bearing in mind the possible relationship between the captain's name and the infamous motto of the fascist squads: 'Me ne frego!' [I don't give a damn!]). Vittorini devoted some space within the narrative to the by now predictable glorification of the Italian character. The allegorical value of the novel is also underlined by pas-

¹¹ E. Vittorini, 'Il commendatore', *L'Italiano*, 12-13 (October 1928), 2 (in *LettArt*, pp. 23-26).

¹² The manuscript was found and edited by Sergio Pautasso and published in 1985 (Milan, Rizzoli). In Vittorini's time, only a fragment was published with the title 'Racconto all'antica' in *Resto del Carlino*, 1 December 1928; also in *ON2*, 706-11.

sages such as the likening of the ship to a microcosm of the Italian nation: 'Il S. *Martino*, che porta nel suo ventre tutta la benedettissima figliolanza d'Italia, ed è fatto a simiglianza di costei, in forma snellissima di stivalone' (p. 34) [The *Saint Martin*, which carries in its belly the blessed progeny of Italy, and is built in a similar shape, an agile boot-like shape]. The ebullient anarchy of the Italian ship is also positively compared to the stilted, democratic-minded British navy.

The novel also contains some rather unpalatable misogyny. To begin with, Pope Pompilio is driven out of Rome because he tried to 'mettere un freno all'inverecondo flagello delle puttane' (p. 25) [put an end to the indecent plague of whoredom], then the crew of the S. Martino lose their moral fibre after a Spanish prostitute is welcomed on board, and finally Pompilio's death is actually prompted by the prostitute spreading the false rumour of Pompilio's intention to turn the crew into a choir of *castrati*.

From a stylistic point of view, the choice of the burlesque *genre* coupled with the use of an archaic *toscaneggiante* prose style constituted a rather fashionable choice in Italian literary circles at the time. Vittorini adds to it *selvaggio* ingredients such as a vulgar, plebeian vocabulary and a politically charged allegory. As a whole, however, *Il brigantino del papa* shows its limitations in the rather fragmentary nature of the plot, and the reader rapidly becomes aware that the portrait of Pompilio is only part of a wider *fresco* that was never finished. Furthermore, Vittorini seemed so intent to emulate, if not surpass, Malaparte's style (whose own burlesque adventure story, *Avventure di un capitano di sventura*, was published in 1927), that the final result is an over-vulgar and over-histrionic piece of literature. By 1929, Vittorini himself had already recognized that such an approach was fast resembling an artistic *cul de sac*.

CHAPTER 3

Narrative as *Prosa d'Arte*

The fictional production that will be considered here belongs entirely to the two years which Vittorini spent in Gorizia, from September 1927 to December 1929. As mentioned earlier, these were the years during which the project of *Il brigantino del papa* had come to a grinding halt. Vittorini then tried his hand at another narrative style, this time a more sophisticated, classicist style which had been introduced by the founders of the influential literary journal, *La Ronda* (1919-23). The *prosa d'arte* – or *rondista* – style – was based on a fine recipe combining stylistic conservatism (the rejection of linguistic experimentalisms and of foreign fashions) and the cult of literature as a superior art freed from the interference of social and political issues. The first issue of *La Ronda* contains some clear examples of the editors' viewpoint. Vincenzo Cardarelli, in his opening prologue, suggested that:

Seguire a servirsi con fiducia di uno stile (classico) defunto non vorrà dire per noi altro che realizzare delle nuove eleganze, perpetuare insomma, insensibilmente, la tradizione della nostra arte. E questo stimeremo essere moderni alla maniera italiana, senza spatriarci.

[Continuing to trust the use of a dead (classical) style does not mean anything to us other than to create a new elegance, to perpetuate, insensibly, the tradition of our art. And by this we mean to be modern in an Italian fashion, without losing our roots]

On similar lines, Aurelio Saffi attacked the use of a colloquial prose style as 'uno dei peggiori intenzionati nemici di ogni esigenza costruttiva e di stile' [one of the most wicked enemies of any constructive exigence and of any style].¹³

The accent on a purist approach to style meant that the *rondisti* preferred to work on short prose works – often descriptive rather than fictional – in which linguistic sophistication was the primary aim, taking priority over questions of content and ideology. According to various scholars, such a preference for short prose works is also one of the reasons why the publication of novels in Italy between the two World Wars was often seen as a debatable concession to popular taste, with only a few successful exceptions such as the novels of Svevo, Pirandello and Tozzi.¹⁴

¹³ V. Cardarelli, 'Prologo in tre parti', *La Ronda*, 1 (April 1919); A. Saffi, 'Un romagnolo', *La Ronda*, 1 (April 1919), both reprinted in the anthology by G. Cassieri, *La Ronda: 1919-1923*, (Roma, ERI, 1969), p. 5, 35. The avant-garde experiments of the Futurists were among the favourite targets of the *rondisti*'s attacks.

In one of his first literary articles, Vittorini outlined the heritage that *La Ronda* had passed on to his generation:

Già dopo la guerra e durante il primo rinnovamento rivoluzionario del Fascismo i nostri giovani eran più volte tornati ai vecchi schemi europei, né sapevan peraltro ove rivolgersi o da chi cavar lume. [...] La parola dei sette savi [*La Ronda's* seven founders] intervenne invece, e giustappunto, a mettere negli animi un po' di soggezione e a chiarire le idee. [...] Ne fiorì una letteratura che, sia pur leggera ed effimera, non si sarebbe mai sperata in Italia dopo D'Annunzio e Pirandello; una letteratura di prosette forbite ed eleganti, di pagine terse, pulite e un po' leziose, di saggi umoristici, di operette morali, di racconti all'antica. Si formò una singolare *jeunesse dorée* non ad altro attenta che a render preziosa la parola, usandola con parsimonia, vagliandola con accortezza, ripulendola con garbo.¹⁵

[After the war and during the early revolutionary renewal under Fascism, our youth had already gone back to the old European approach, and they didn't know who to look up to or to be enlightened by. [...] The words of the seven wise men [*La Ronda's* seven founders] introduced both some necessary awe in people's souls as well as clarity of ideas. [...] The result was the birth of a literature which, although light-weighted and evanescent, was unexpected in Italy after D'Annunzio and Pirandello. It was a literature of brief and elegant prose works, of concise, clean and slightly jocular pages, of humorous essays, of moral prose-poems, of old-time tales. A peculiar *jeunesse dorée* resulted, which strove above all to embellish language, using it with caution, examining it with the utmost attention, stripping it down gently.]

In the late 1920s, Vittorini published about half a dozen short stories which fall, to different extents, into the category of literary *tableaux* in the best *prosa d'arte* tradition. The first, 'Saluto a Bologna' is a description of the Emilian countryside seen on a journey from the Apennines mountains down to the plains around the city of Bologna. The only trace of Vittorini's socio-political preoccupations can be found in the brief description of Bologna as a place enlivened by 'l'operosa plebe che circola entro i suoi viadotti come un benefico corso d'acqua sotteranea' [the industrious lower classes swarming within its viaducts like a generous underground waterway]. The rest of the short story is a virtuoso description of the lush vegetation of the Emilian countryside followed by a slightly surreal portrait of Bologna. The following is a brief passage taken from the *incipit* of the story:

Erano scesi nella pianura bolognese, circondata a settentrione e a oriente dalle paludi, chiusa a occidente dalle montagne. Procedevano attraverso alti vigneti, orti profondi che sembravano foreste. Avevano la sensazione di penetrare sotto suolo e più avanzavano più credevano di sprofondare, sommersi dal fresco fogliame dei frutteti. L'esile fioritura degli alberi formava una volta sottilissima su cui i raggi del sole, brillando, s'impigliavano come tenui ragnatele.¹⁶

¹⁴ See for example Luperini, *Il Novecento*, 1, 284-86; or B. Falchetto, *Storia della narrativa neorealista* (Milan, Mursia, 1992), pp. 11-15.

¹⁵ E. Vittorini, 'La lezione della "Ronda"', *Il Resto del Carlino*, 20 October 1928 (in *LettArt*, 27-31).

¹⁶ E. Vittorini, 'Saluto a Bologna', *Il Carlino della Sera*, 27 September 1928 (in *ON2*, 691-93).