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Writers and Society in Contemporary Italy edited by Michael Caesar and Peter Hainsworth

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is in any way "of" our era, or of the twentieth century, or of poetry in every and any age, or even of poetry *per se*. In 1852, Flaubert was already attempting to write "a book about nothing, with no external pretexts." *Tristram Shandy* seems to speak of the silence of lived temporality which has death as its limit and foundation just as much as, for example, Cagnone's *What's Hecuba to Him or He to Hecuba? The Magic Flute* is, as noted by Angus Fletcher in his parodic pastiche, "Letter to Nanni Cagnone" (p. 336), our best work on the range of senses of silence. But perhaps the two main issues raised in *The Favorite Malice*—the paradoxical ontology of the poetic word and the silent groundlessness of language—define neither the essence of aesthetic expression nor the mode of writing of contemporary Italian poetry. Rather, they represent our way of reading and looking at the past; therefore, they constitute only a single episode in the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of Western aesthetics.

This way of reading, which is also a way of writing, takes on a variety of stylistic configurations in this anthology, ranging from the "high" style of epic and tragedy, to the middle style of comedy, common poetry and critical prose, to the "low" style of satire. The most biting piece of satire is confined to the end of the volume: it is an ironic résumé of the symposium by Alain Arias-Misson entitled "From Off-stage," and—in the tradition of Woody Allen—is full of jokes about Heidegger. The long introductory essay in five sections by Thomas Harrison, "Nietzsche, Heidegger and the Language of Contemporary Italian Poetry," is an impeccable example of the "high" style. It is a five-act epic drama which opens, appropriately enough, with a myth of genesis, and then traces the fateful predicament of Writing and Reading in search of Being and Language through the labyrinth of

reference and difference. Harrison's translations appear no less heroic in view of the sometimes extreme difficulty of the original texts. Translation, like poetry, is indeed "subject to a tragic paradox: knowing the frailty of its language, it persists in its quest for disclosure" (Harrison, p. 26).

It is the chief value of this anthology that highly serious and elegant texts such as those by Cagnone, Ballerini, Vattimo and Jacques Garelli ("poetry is an ontology of reference . . . by way of negated and transformed memories") are offset by a number of playful, parodic and nonsensical texts, such as the works by Zanzotto and Giuliani. And it is to the editor's credit (I believe) to have chosen a line from Giuliani, *le vacche mi svaccano*, as the inspiration for the illustration on the cover of the volume, which acts as a counterpoint to its somewhat forbidding title.

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Writers and Society in Contemporary Italy

Michael Caesar and
Peter Hainsworth, eds.

NY: St. Martin's Press, 1984

Writers and Society in Contemporary Italy is an interesting example of a very familiar kind of book. Employing the talents of a number of specialists, usefully equipped with bibliographies and suggestions for further reading, a book of this sort proposes to assume the role of cultural tour guide, introducing its

readers to a more or less unfamiliar region of material and providing everything necessary for their initial orientation in foreign surroundings. In this case, the agenda includes nine of the most well known literary and theatrical figures of contemporary Italy (Eco, Fortini, Zanzotto, Pasolini, Fo, Buzzati, Morante, Sciascia, and Calvino), each of whom is accorded an essay; there is also a piece on the *Gruppo 63* and an introductory chapter entitled "The Transformation of Post-war Italy," which seeks to provide an overview of the country and its literary activity since the war.

All of these essays are intelligently executed and informative, yet the most striking characteristic of the book—especially noticeable in view of the authors' cross-cultural intentions—is its firm grounding in the style and method of English literary and historical studies. This is perhaps to be expected, given that the editors and contributors are all associated with various British universities; however, the typical preferences and tendencies of the English tradition should not be left unmentioned since they are plainly present in these essays, sometimes forming a rather marked contrast with the inclinations of the writers under consideration. The introductory chapter, for example, draws on a variety of sources to put forward an analysis of political and economic developments, the growth of the reading public, and the progress of Italian writing in general since the defeat of the fascists, which leans heavily on statistical estimates and avoids any kind of theoretical reflection on the status of the facts presented. Even more characteristic manifestations of preference for concreteness and experience over abstract or speculative forms of thought are apparent in some of the essays on individual writers, as when David Robey expresses doubts about the project of a general semiotic theory in his chapter

on Umberto Eco while applauding the latter's often brilliant analyses of specific cultural phenomena. In a less neutral vein, one might also mention the tendency of some of the contributors to fall back on a rather easy distinction between fiction and "reality," which often serves as a way of bypassing the complexities of the relationship between literary texts and the world of political power.

Yet this absence of theoretical elaboration is less an example of provinciality than a sign of impatience. For it is not difficult to see that, although the volume strives for objectivity, its approach derives most immediately from the British Marxist tradition, particularly as represented by the group around *New Left Review*, with which at least one of the editors has been associated (Michael Caesar, who translated Della Volpe's *Critica del gusto* for New Left Books in 1978). Indeed, the pairing of literature and society, which sets this book somewhat apart from other collections of introductory essays on literary topics, owes much to the totalizing imperative in Marxist thought, although the editors have wisely refrained from trying to organize the contents of the volume according to the demands of an all-embracing political program. As a result, the book possesses many of the strengths typically associated with independent leftist criticism in England, of which the work of Raymond Williams is the outstanding example. Most of these essays display a sensitive attention to the nuances of literary texts (Peter Hainsworth's piece on Andrea Zanzotto is especially noteworthy in this regard) and a commitment to the study of cultural materials against their social and historical background; moreover, they make a point of taking into account the various political stances of the authors under consideration. When the discussion turns to the political dimensions of the novels and

poems themselves, however, certain gaps appear, as the contributors find themselves relying on varieties of theoretical shorthand, such as the aforementioned opposition between imagined and "real" worlds. It is at moments like these that one becomes aware of the need for a sufficiently subtle theory of mediation in English leftist aesthetics, a need that Williams and others have gone part of the way towards fulfilling, but which nevertheless remains a problem.

It would be a serious distortion, however, to imply that this area of interpretation is problematic solely as a result of the contributors' preference for no-nonsense habits of thought, for there are at least two other significant factors involved. The first of these is the ideological atmosphere that prevailed in Italian literary life after the war. The prominence of the neo-realist aesthetic in leftist circles and its endorsement by the Italian Communist Party reinforced the tendency to classify literature according to whether it "addressed" or "evaded reality." By the late fifties and early sixties, the authority of this distinction was clearly declining, but its ghost continued to haunt the aesthetic pronouncements of writers with leftist sympathies for some time afterward; and as a result the contributors to this volume have had to contend with a certain number of statements and formulations that presuppose some version of this dichotomy. The second and more important factor has to do with the limits imposed by the nature of the volume itself. Although the editors are to be commended for refusing to restrict their project to the purely literary matters with which most collections of this sort content themselves, the space of an introductory essay reviewing an author's entire career is in most cases not sufficient to do more than sketch the preconditions of an interpretation that would seek to understand in detail the

significance of a body of complex literary texts with respect to the social totality. The editors of *Writers and Society in Contemporary Italy* have performed a valuable service in bringing the works of these writers and their social and historical context to the attention of a wider audience. One hopes that the book will stimulate further interest and encourage others to build on this foundation.

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Signs Taken for Wonders

By Franco Moretti

Translated by Susan Fischer,

David Forgacs, and David Miller

London: Verso Editions, 1983

Franco Moretti's volume is a collection of seven previously published essays, preceded by a brand-new methodological introduction. The work undoubtedly represents a rich contribution not only to the discussion of the individual topics dealt with (English baroque drama, nineteenth-century novelistic "monsters"—*Dracula* and *Frankenstein*—the urban personality in Balzac's novels, nineteenth-century detective fiction, the "tearjerker," Joyce's *Ulysses*, Eliot's *Waste Land*), but also to the debate "on the aims and methods of literary historiography." Thus, the manifold subject matter of this volume may perhaps be tackled best by retracing and discussing the theoretical and methodological direction of Moretti's research.

"Literary texts are *historical* products organized according to rhetorical criteria" (p. 9): in Moretti's view, then,