The Plague Sower by Gesualdo Bufalino

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Recommended Citation
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progressivo” school (Luporini, Binni, Timpanaro, Biral). His Leopardi stands as a titan, as a sarcastic destroyer of every political and philosophical compromise, whose conception of being and existence is fortified only by the experience of desire and the acquaintance with grief. The portrait is impressive and Negri does not lack in rhetorical energy and familiarity with the matter. The abundant footnotes, especially the polemical ones, are among the best and more interesting pages. Of course, Negri never suspects that radical, sensistic materialism could be just another chapter in the history of metaphysics. His hasty remarks on Heidegger demonstrate that Negri is simply not concerned with the issue of ontological difference, accepting the being of beings the way the metaphysical tradition has thought it and handed it down to us. Great skill in analysis is not required to illustrate how much Negri depends on the language and the schemes of the criticized Hegelian dialectic. He rarely tries to match and follow Leopardi’s language. He does not really “listen” to the text. He merely translates the poet into a modern Hegelian left repertoire, of which he has great masters. This makes the book a partially wasted chance. Its “over-philosophy” and massive erudition often turn out to be pedantic, a fault which should be carefully avoided in the revolutionary and provocative perspective that Negri claims. A pamphlet could have served better. The thousands of quotations and references are just a case of overkill, not required by the matter at issue. And, speaking of overphilosophy, when Negri promptly discards every comparison between Leopardi and Kafka to the point that Kafka’s philosophical background is made to belong to neo-Kantism, he just as quickly forgets that “la tesi di Kafka sul pensiero di Mach” (“Kafka’s thesis on Mach’s thought”) that he mentions at page 352 was actually written by Musil.

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The Plague-Sower
By Gesualdo Bufalino
Hygiene, CO: Eridanos, 1988

Gesualdo Bufalino’s The Plague-Sower may be regarded as a heretical interpretation of Judeo-Christianity. Cultures differ in attitudes toward heresy: in predominantly protestant United States, a recent heretical film on Jesus was met with a barrage of hostility; in catholic Italy, where popular beliefs often vary dramatically from established doctrine, Bufalino’s story won the Premio Campiello in 1981 and the Premio Strega in 1988.

The author describes “a flat, ash-colored road, running with a river’s flow between two walls taller than a man . . . jutting over the void.” Beatrice of Dante’s Divina Commedia has been replaced by a tubercular jewess, Marta, who had survived the Holocaust but, as the story begins, lies dying in a sanatorium.

To inmates of this Palermo sanatorium in the summer of 1946, death seems at once angelic and whorish. The trinity has become a doctor who rages in his unbelief/belief, a priest whose despair is nearly bottomless, and Marta, coupled with the protagonist/author.

Dr. Longbones, watching his patients die in pain, shouts: “He exists: there can be no guilt without a guilty party.” In the doctor’s outbursts (which, the author notes, contained as much “anguish as buffoonery”), God
was “a blunderer . . . quacksalver . . .
bungling sorcerer’s apprentice,” and
Christ “just an alibi, a man of straw.”

His own adolescent denial of Jesus,
the protagonist notes, paled alongside
the deep desolation of the sanatorium
priest. Sin, for the priest, was “in­
vented by men so they would deserve
the pain of living, so they would not
be punished without reason.” Prayer,
for this cleric wrestling with belief, was
“another solitary vice.” Jesus? While
trying to save dying inmates, the priest
fights the painful suspicion that “he
came to save himself, more than to save
us.” God was “not just a house of peace.
. . . He’s also a predator, a heavenly
hound who follows us and forces us
and loves us.”

Marta embodies the central enigma
of Bufalino’s tale. She had survived the
holocaust: partisans had shorn her
hair when they caught her with a nazi.
“Every enigma has its mirror,” said
Longbones, and the mirror in this case
may be the protagonist/author who
survived Marta, yet is left with a re­
morse greater than the relief: “I be­
trayed our silent agreement not to
survive.”

Against the mythic blue sea of
Palermo, Marta seemed to be the pagan
“Siren, birdwoman, fishwoman, mer­
maid hidden under the rock.” Yet she
is a Jewish woman and when she died,
“the sluice-gates of God’s flood truly
rumbled, sang in those soiled sheets,
and there was no dove from which sal­
vation might come.”

At the end, the protagonist/author
is left “in the middle of the path: a
squandered seed, deconsecrated sub­
stance, a fistful of earth on which the
rain falls.” And with jumbled emotion:
“what sad days those were, the hap­
piest of my life.”

In this deconsecrated judeo-christianity,
the central figure is a pagan/Jewish
crucified woman and Sanatorium in­
mates waiting to die who are incapable
of belief. Yet “the emotion with which we
learned of others’ deaths, as if they were
our own, was itself love.”

Bufalino’s tale, a significant docu­
ment in the history of belief in the late
twentieth century, has resonances every
where in Italy. Yet it could not have been
written by anyone but a Sicilian,
and could not have been located any­
where but on that Mediterranean isle.

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Inscriptions: Between Phenom­
enology and Structuralism
By Hugh J. Silverman
New York and London:
Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987

“An archeology of knowledge is a
dispersive practice” (320). This phrase
aptly defines the hermeneutical and
semiological practice of Hugh Silver­
man’s Inscriptions. So does the follow­
ing description of what constitutes an
archeology of knowledge:

Instead of tracing a single idea through his­
tory, the archeologist of knowledge looks
for discontinuous formations. Each forma­
tion will have sets of rules and each group­
ing of sets into systems will establish the
epistemological signification which Foucault
regularly calls the epistemé. (320)

This definition sums up very well
what the reader finds in this clear, per­
ceptive and stimulating work. Husserl,
Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre,
Piaget, Barthes, Foucault, Lacan, Der­
idia—these are the names that make
up the groupings that inform Silver­
man’s archeology. The aim, however,
is not the tracing of an idea through
history through an examination of dis­
parate authors or the delineation of