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## The Plague Sower by Gesualdo Bufalino

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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 "invented 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 remorse greater than the relief: "I betrayed our silent agreement not to survive."

Against the mythic blue sea of Palermo, Marta seemed to be the pagan "Siren, birdwoman, fishwoman, mermaid 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 salvation might come."

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

In this *deconsecrated judeo-christianity*, the central figure is a pagan/Jewish crucified woman and sanatorium inmates 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 document 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 anywhere but on that Mediterranean isle.

LUCIA CHIAVOLA BIRNBAUM

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### ***Inscriptions: Between Phenomenology 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 Silverman's *Inscriptions*. So does the following description of what constitutes an archeology of knowledge:

Instead of tracing a single idea through history, the archeologist of knowledge looks for discontinuous formations. Each formation will have sets of rules and each grouping of sets into systems will establish the epistemological signification which Foucault regularly calls the *epistémé*. (320)

This definition sums up very well what the reader finds in this clear, perceptive and stimulating work. Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, Piaget, Barthes, Foucault, Lacan, Derrida—these are the names that make up the groupings that inform Silverman's archeology. The aim, however, is not the tracing of an idea through history through an examination of disparate authors or the delineation of