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***Benedetta in Guysterland.*
A Liquid Novel**

Giose Rimanelli

Preface by Fred L. Gardaphé

Montréal, Quebec, and Cheek-
towaga, NY: Guernica Editions,
1993

Benedetta in Guysterland. A Liquid Novel is Giose Rimanelli's first book-length prose fiction in English. Written well over twenty years ago, conceived, processed, and finally drafted into manuscript form during the 1961-72 decade, it was published only recently by Guernica Editions of Montréal (incidentally, Guernica is now based in Toronto and New York). While it may not be ironic that this work is published only now—for Rimanelli himself tells us that he wrote it for love, not money—it does seem a bit ironic that it be published by a Canadian house for two diametrically opposed reasons: 1) Rimanelli spent most of his adult life outside Italy in the United States; 2) perhaps a sweeter irony, Rimanelli was born in Italy of a Canadian mother and a United States grandfather. He thus returns not to one or the other of the two North American English-speaking countries—i.e., the United States or Canada—but indeed to the two non-Italian countries that contributed in different ways to his general, adult cultural specificity. *Benedetta in Guysterland. A Liquid Novel*, in this sense, represents the amalgamation of two socio-cultural experiences—the Italian and the North American—which, in turn, constitute Rimanelli's status as true bi-cultural (as well as bi-continental) writer.

To be sure, Rimanelli's Italian/American cultural specificity is an important component of *Benedetta in Guysterland*. Other aspects of the novel also prove to be equally significant. In this review, however, I shall deal more

with the questions of text and textual boundaries as they relate to the structural division of *Benedetta in Guysterland. A Liquid Novel*. Looking at the book's table of contents, we find the following: "Preface" by Fred Gardaphé; a "For-a-word," "Benedetta in Guysterland," and "Post-word" written by Giose Rimanelli; and an "Appendix," a collection of reactions and responses written by many of Rimanelli friends and acquaintances. What we may normally consider the narrative text—i.e., a succession of events which constitute the "story"—is the second section penned by Rimanelli, "Benedetta in Guysterland," the longest of them all. But there is also a "For-a-word" and a "Post-word" written by Rimanelli, or, as he refers to himself, "the Author," that special construct that is/may be Rimanelli, in this instance; and what concludes this succession of internal texts—or better, "microtexts," to borrow from Maria Corti¹—is an "Appendix," those responses to *Benedetta in Guysterland* (31-204) capped by two mini-sections—responses and thanks—written by Rimanelli himself.

Gardaphé's preface is precisely that, an outsider's view of the book intended to lay some foundation for any reader's encounter with the narrative text. Some poststructuralist critics, however, might want to see this, too, as part of the overall text. Indeed, from a hermeneutico-semiotic point of view, the idea is not too far-fetched; after all, any information the reader may gather from Gardaphé's preface will influence her/his reading of Rimanelli's novel. Yet, even if, for argument's sake, we decide to eliminate Gardaphé's preface and the multi-authored "Appendix," we find ourselves nevertheless with three other microtexts, not just "Benedetta in Guysterland," for which the question of textual boundaries persists. Namely,

we still have a similar textual line-up with "For-a-word," "Benedetta in Guysterland," "Post-word." The reader, whoever s/he may be, will most likely consider, at least at his/her first encounter with the book, the central microtext "Benedetta in Guysterland" to be the novel.

What further complicates the matter is that the narrating voices of each of these three microtexts is a different one. The narrator of the "For-a-word" may readily be identified with the actual pen-holder—or, as we might say today, wordprocessor user—whom we know as Giose Rimanelli, "émigré," as he readily defines himself here ("when the Author was still an émigré in U.S.A." [29]), to the United States in 1961. Here, in a somewhat personal way,² Rimanelli offers a few interpretive keys to his reader. We find out that "Benedetta in Guysterland" is, in a very Gozzanoan and Palazzeschian way, "made up by the careful use of famous and infamous quotations, scraps of personal co co rico co co rico lyrics, confessions of country girls with kitsch and poetry pap, advertisements" (28), and so on, as he continues to tell us.³ We also come to know that the "Author" is a lover of words and sees himself here as a

free collector of paper joy and paper anguish instead of a producer of them—in order to attempt a new experiment on verbs and syntax, speech, writing, and paranoia. I stretched my hands out and found what we usually produce: dreams, love, murder, golden charades, lampoons. (28-29)

Two things stand out in the above-cited quotation. First, we see that the Author's intent is to experiment as free collector—again, Gozzanoan/Palazzeschian reverberations come to the fore—not as producer, for which the production of the "paper joy and paper anguish," what we may consid-

er a metaphor for meaning/signification, becomes an act of co-production. Second, such co-production is implicit, I would suggest, in his shift from a singular first-person pronoun to the plural form: "I stretched my hands out and found what we usually produce: dreams, love, murder, golden charades, lampoons." This desire for co-production—the connection between author and reader—is underscored by the physical act of stretching, the Author's literal reaching out to his reader. We see, in fact, that as the I of "I stretch" transforms into the we of "we usually produce," co-production takes place; and what follows—those "dreams, love, murder, golden charades, lampoons"—may easily constitute thematics of an author's work as well as those of a reader's list of desired motifs.

Benedetta's story is not an easy one to recount; or, for that matter, to follow and understand.⁴ Born Clarence Ashfield, she gets her name Benedetta from the mobsters she meets once she enters the underworld. They meet her as Benie, a nickname bestowed upon her by mob lawyer Willie "Holiday Inn" Sinclair, from the Italian adverb *bene*. However, they believe the nickname is a shortened form of Benedetta, whence therefore she gets her name, thus becoming the blessed among "guysters," Rimanelli's idiosyncratic sign for gangster. Leaving her home town of New Wye, in Nabokov County, in Appalachia, U.S.A., Benedetta becomes intricately involved in the underworld of organized crime, falling in love with and, eventually, yearning for the exiled Joe Adonis, Santo "Zip the Thunder" Tristano's nemesis. Through a series of episodes, events, and adventures (some more realistic, others more fantastical), Benedetta does not actually tell her story as we might expect from traditional first-person narrative;

rather, it is in her dialogue with her beloved exiled mobster, Joe Adonis, that Benedetta's story unfolds.

The novel begins in the present, so it seems, with Benedetta, in the first person, directly addressing Joe Adonis: "I love you, Joe Adonis" (33). But we soon find out that she is not actually talking to him; instead, she is writing to him, as we find out in chapter 2: "I am now pounding on the typewriter" (40). Benedetta's letter writing is an obvious act of any author's self-reflexivity, and indeed of Rimanelli's as well. But it is not just Benedetta's act of writing that reflects Rimanelli's writing; to be sure, it is also how and/or what she writes that reflects the Rimanelli we encountered in the "For-a-word." There, we saw Rimanelli's desire for experimentation, his wish to write a novel free of tradition, without a narrative, lacking any sense of logical plot or story-line. Benedetta, in her letters to Joe Adonis, reflects similar hermeneutico-semiotic actions and creative desires early on in the first two chapters. In chapter one we see that she misses "sharing nonsenses" (34) with Joe Adonis. In chapter two, where we find out that she is actually writing to Joe, Rimanelli's "free collector" status is mirrored in Benedetta's description of her own writing:

These thoughts live in my mind as they appear on the paper, muddled and, as I know only too well, unorganized. I feel that if I organize them, they will seem like an essay to me and I would not be writing for myself if I spent time arranging ideas into neat little compartments. Do you understand me, Joe? While I am writing, I am far away; and when I come back, I have already left. I am now pounding on the typewriter, talking to myself and at the same time listening to Zip and the band downstairs . . . (40)

"Muddled" and "unorganized," adjectives that describe Benedetta's

thoughts above, figure as logical metaphors for that which does not adhere to tradition, since tradition is, as implied immediately above, organized and essayistic, ideas and emotions arranged "into neat little compartments" according to, we might add, neat little rules. Binary oppositions of this sort, the sensical versus the non-sensical and the organized versus the unorganized, constantly reappear in Benedetta's story both on a formalistic and contextual level. More significantly, the three central texts—"For-a-word," "Benedetta in Guysterland," and "Post-word"—rely on a very strong dose of irony, be it directed inward—self-parody as writer, thinker, Italian/American—or outward—parody directed toward various cultural phenomena such as the mafia, sexual liberation, and both popular and high cultures of various societies and countries of the western world.

Ultimately, the act of semiosis involved in Rimanelli's *Benedetta in Guysterland* is a restructured and redefined act of sign interpretation dependent on a sign repertoire no longer consonant with that of the literary canon—i.e., the dominant culture. What occurs concomitantly, then, is also the decentralization of the "verbal-ideological world."⁵ Along the lines of sign-functions, one sees that the two functives of expression and content are no longer in mutual correlation. The content, at this point in time with regard to a non-canonical literature, is different from that of the canon. The sign-function realized in this new process of semiosis is now in disaccord with the dominant culture's expectation of the coding correlation.

The resultant non-canonical text that arises from such an unorthodox creative act, that is Rimanelli's, may initially problematize and frustrate a reader's interpretive act. But more

than an attempt to frustrate or block his reader's semiotic iter, I would contend that such problematics in textual boundaries and framing, discussed above, constitute Rimaneli's desire to involve intimately his reader in the co-production of textual signification. That is, the purpose of Rimaneli's sign-system is not to elicit, simply, pleasant and/or unpleasant memories and imagery in his reader's mind. Rather, he attempts to render his reader complicit in an emotional and/or sensorial state as expressed through his prose. Indeed, then, it is expression, not description, that defines Rimaneli's prose. And his reader, in his/her complicity in this polysensorial state, becomes a co-participant in Rimaneli's sign production and signification. Hence, his "liquid" novel, precisely because it acquires its signifying shape from, metaphorically speaking, the form of its reader's hands—like any liquid that takes the shape of the container into which it is poured.

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1. I refer to Maria Corti's essay, "Testi or microtesti? I racconti di Marcovaldo di Italo Calvino" (*Strumenti critici* 27 [June 1975]: 182-93).

2. In a sense, this microtext, as therefore the entire book, throws the reader in medias res. The opening words—"Just after finishing this, I went out in the open . . ." (27; emphasis added)—make reference to a previous act/thing, that being the act of writing and/or the actual finished product. This beginning, however, I would contend, also adds a personal touch in that it simulates an exchange between author and reader, as if the author were handing the book over to the reader.

3. With regard to possible Italian intertexts in Guido Gustavo Gozzano's and Aldo Palazzeschi's poetry, I would point out that Gozzano's borrowings from other European poets are well known and have been studied and examined by a number of Italian critics. Similarly, Palazzeschi also spoke in terms of other poets' work, though differently. In describing his "strofe bis-

betiche," he states: "Sapete cosa sono? / Sono robe avanzate, / non sono grullerie, / sono la . . . spazzatura / delle altre poesie" ("E lasciatemi divertire"; translation: Do you know what they are? / They're leftover things, / they're not silly acts, / they're the . . . garbage / of other poetry [And Let Me Have My Fun]).

4. From the New Americanist perspective, Fred L. Gardaphé, more than he does in his preface to Rimaneli's book, deals with *Benedetta in Guysterland* in his penetrating, forthcoming book-length study, *Italian Signs, American Streets: Cultural Representation in Italian/American Narrative Literature*. Gardaphé offers an excellent analysis of Rimaneli's socio-cultural parody that lies at the base of *Benedetta in Guysterland*.

5. See Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*. Ed. Michael Holquist, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: U of Texas P, 1981): 258ff.

The Noble Savage, Allegory of Freedom

Stelio Cro

Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier
University Press, 1990

The volume represents a first rate intellectual journey into the philosophical significance of the "noble savage" emerging from the "discovery of the new world" and its early chroniclers—Columbus himself, Las Casas, Peter Martyr—up to the Jesuits' Reductions in Paraguay and Rousseau's formulation of "the noble savage" as an allegory of freedom.

The book is divided into two parts. Part I, containing six chapters, yields the basic historical foundation of the "Rise and Fall of the Noble Savage." Part II deals with "Reality, Myth and Allegory of the Noble Savage in the Eighteenth Century."

The author abundantly documents his belief that Peter Martyr's *De Orbo Novo* is a direct source for Montaigne's *Essais*. He also points out how *De Orbo Novo* arises from a humanist tradition