

1999

The New Italian Novel edited by Zygmunt G. Baranski and Lino Pertile

Robert Dombroski

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.library.stonybrook.edu/differentia>

Recommended Citation

Dombroski, Robert (1999) "The New Italian Novel edited by Zygmunt G. Baranski and Lino Pertile," *Differentia: Review of Italian Thought*: Vol. 8 , Article 50.

Available at: <https://commons.library.stonybrook.edu/differentia/vol8/iss1/50>

This document is brought to you for free and open access by Academic Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Differentia: Review of Italian Thought* by an authorized editor of Academic Commons. For more information, please contact darren.chase@stonybrook.edu.

issues of Judaism and gender raised in the works of Lombroso and Serao, though is never completely successful.

The discourses raised by both Lombroso and Serao which address crucial concerns of the late nineteenth-century, such as the place and identity of women and Jews in society and the role of science to mediate pressing social issues, have a contemporary relevance. Moreover, Harrowitz's work is an important addition to the increasing number of studies which trace a current of anti-Semitism in Italian culture. By underlining the relationship between beliefs about people and practices marked as different, as well as the logic of the erasure of difference, Harrowitz's study rings with a contemporary relevance as we confront recent recycled racist and misogynist discourses culminating in *The Bell Curve*.

CAROLE C. GALLUCCI
Florence, Italy

The New Italian Novel

*Edited by Zygmunt G. Baranski and
Lino Pertile.
Edinburgh: Edinburgh University
Press, 1994.*

What best characterizes the possibilities of fiction today in Italy is the coming into being of a narrative community distinct from the groups of literary intellectuals for whom in the post-war period the novel was essentially a vehicle for social reform or, at

least, a discrete occasion for reflecting on some aspect of alienated human existence. Italian literary culture once enjoyed relative autonomy; it existed in a space roped off from society and designated as a refuge from commercialization and ideological violence. Then one could read the history of modern Italy in novels that not only spoke to the development of civic consciousness but also programmed the mind of the reader to a totalizing logic. Each fiction answered in some way all the questions that could be asked about life. Writing was indeed a serious matter, the only truly 'serious' and 'authentic' activity in a world devoted to material progress. The task of writing novels was nothing less than to represent society to itself.

It is hard to pinpoint when the novel in Italy ceased being a vehicle of ideological commitment. Nor is it certain that all current writing is in fact post-ideological. Vassalli, Consolo and Pazzi are names that immediately come to mind as proof that commitment (whether on the left or the right) is not a thing of the past. But what these authors lack with respect to such writers as Vittorini, Pasolini or Volponi is a sense of the contradiction between culture and the secular market system. They share no common purpose in this regard, no rational project designed to counter the absence and privation they experience in life. In their world, "culture" has passed completely over to the other side to become a part of society's business.

Another way of looking at this change in context is to view the cultural field as having undergone such

an expansion as to embrace everything, including politics and economics. This universalization of culture, another sign of its disappearance as a semi-autonomous realm, has fostered the creation of a different kind of space, removed from the fusion of society and culture: a retreat distinct from everyday life where the literary intellectual can engage in a new form of autonomy, one achieved through an integral association with the literary product itself. In contrast to the neorealism of the fifties and the experimentalism of the following decade, for which the literary text was a means of forcing the reader to think about the relations of culture and society, the literature of the seventies and eighties believes in itself as an autonomous conceptual field, endowed with its own separate language, whose properties are so unique as to ensure its existence as an independent object.

The New Italian Novel, edited by Zygmunt G. Baranski and Lino Pertile, sustains the arduous burden of presenting and explaining this new Italian narrative order, one that has developed in a world characteristically without foundations. Rarely has a book been so timely, for in spite of some qualitative differences among its components, it illustrates well the way in which the Italian novel presents itself in our time. The titles of the essays united in this volume merge in the general sense that their objects of study are all in some way concerned with anxieties related to the author's experience of mortality: inconstancy, superficiality, disorientation and play. Lino Pertile prepares us well for the call to this new aes-

thetic experience. His lucid introduction provides a comprehensive background to the study of any one, or all, of the writers represented, while at the same time conveying the awareness that a volume of this kind can only at best be provisional, given that its subject matter is still in the process of being defined.

The fifteen writers selected appear alphabetically in essays written mostly by Italianists working in the UK. The essays are largely descriptive, their general purpose being to provide comprehensive introductions, and are intended primarily for classroom use. But this does not prevent the authors from approaching their subjects with mature critical insight. On the whole, the volume offers a judicious balance between description and interpretation. The essays by Peter Hainsworth on Gesualdo Bufalino, Joseph Farrell on Vincenzo Consolo and Zygmunt Baranski on Sebastiano Vassalli are particularly compelling in their exposition of the narrative structures that make the work of their subjects so unique. Chapters on the five women authors included in the volume (Shirley W. Vinall on Francesca Duranti, Sharon Wood on Rosetta Loy, Elvio Guagnini on Giuliana Morandini, Jonathan Usher on Fabrizia Ramondino and Ann Hallamore Caesar on Francesca Sanvitale) explore the underlying questions of female identity addressed by the novels, while offering succinct plot summaries and cogent examples of literary thematics and style. The work of Aldo Busi is elegantly surveyed by Massimo Bacigalupo, while Robert Lumley, Martin McLaughlin and Anna Dolfi

help the reader grasp the originality of Gianni Celati, Andrea De Carlo and Daniele Del Giudice, writers who in different ways have enlarged the narrative perspective created by Calvino into distinctly postmodern variants. Antonio Tabucchi and Roberto Pazzi, writers who have perhaps made the greatest impact on current narrative practices, are competently examined by Anna Laura Lepschy and Philip Cooke respectively. Diego Zancani helps close out the volume with a sensitive assessment of the late Pier Vittorio Tondelli.

It would be of course wrong to assign the authors represented in this volume to a kind of postmodern confraternity, distinguishable from earlier, "modernist" associations by virtue of some thematic dominant. It should also be obvious that the local cultures, with which a number of the authors still identify and which defy any institutionalized collectivization, are themselves enclaves of old world productivity. These worlds reappear in many of the new fictions aesthetically transfigured (think, for example, of the Cefalù of Consolo's *Il sorriso dell'ignoto antico marinaio*) into a historical "moment" existing within an authorial perspective profoundly influenced by consumer society and the economy of international trusts. But unlike the archaic culture in which writers like Pavese and Vittorini sought authenticity and redemption, the old worlds of the new novels offer no means of survival; no Utopian alternative to the perceived horrors of modernity.

If there is anything, beside their common idiom, that unites such diverse writers as those discussed in

his book it is perhaps the depthlessness of their prose; their fictions all seem to register and interrogate the surface of reality. The meaning, essence or utopia, the modern novel was seeking (but never could attain) is perceived as either not being within their grasp or as a distraction that prevents them from focusing on the ambiguities of the here and now. There is also in all of these writers a profound sense of the "variants of human consciousness, the different voices of which the world is made" and, finally, a continual acknowledgement of the institution of literature, within whose boundaries the self is constructed.

The New Italian Novel offers a vast assortment of material for fashioning a typology of the contemporary Italian novel that could be based on the new techniques employed in re-writing older forms of narrative prose. For this reason, the book constitutes an invaluable starting point from which many interesting paths can be taken.

ROBERT DOMBROSKI

CUNY Graduate Center, New York

Antonio Gramsci: Beyond Marxism and Postmodernism

By Renate Holub.

London: Routledge, 1992.

In a letter to Tatiana Schucht, Antonio Gramsci wrote about accomplishing something 'für ewig' (forever) while in prison.¹ Gramsci states: